The Breakers
by les16

Summary

After spending 7 years in prison, Edward gets a new start in the fishing village of Corea, Maine. Can a little girl and her mom, Bella, see beyond his past and can they all find love again...or will the ocean swallow them whole?
Prologue

A HUGE thank you to all my girls: Laurel, Kat, Cecile, J'me, Kassiah, Robin, Lianne, and Ayden~ they have all worked so hard to help me get this story up and going and I wouldn't know what to do without them!

This is it, the first chapter of my new story and I'm so excited to see what you all think. Thanks so much for giving it a chance and for coming on another journey with me!

Here we go...

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Prologue

EPOV

"Fuck, I'm tired," I whine to Emmett as he hits the lever to bring up another lobster pot.

We've been out on the water for over a week now and I am ready to get back to Corea … and to my girls.

I've promised Peyton I'll watch the football game she is going to save on the DVR with her and well, what I want to do to Bella after not seeing her, touching her, kissing her for more than seven
days should be pretty damn self-explanatory. The two of them are my life now, my family … my whole world. I never expected to find them, I damn sure know I don't deserve them, but there is no way I am giving them up now. I've promised myself, but more importantly I've promised the two of them that I will work, every fucking day, to make sure I am worthy of them because they deserve nothing less than my very best.

The muscles in my arms ache from the biting cold that seeps into my bones and the wind that rages around us lashes my skin like a whip. I can barely feel my fingers, even though they're covered with the bulky work gloves I have to wear when we're out on the water. My legs and back feel like they are on fire and it's all I can do to stay upright.

I'm so fucking tired.

We've been pulling the traps up for almost twenty-four hours straight now, trying to get the lobsters in the live tank and the traps stowed on the boat before the storm overwhelms us.

The *Isabella Marie* rocks and lurches as a gust of wind swirls around the boat and my legs protest painfully as I try to keep myself from falling on my ass.

"Come on, boys! Get those damn traps up. The storm is breathing down our fucking necks!"
Charlie barks from the wheelhouse.

"Damn, I hate this shit." Emmett grunts as we reel in the next trap.

Another gust of wind whips through the air and this time when the boat violently pitches to the left a wave of water surges up over the side. I let go of the gaff so that I can hang on, losing my balance in the process. It takes me a moment to right myself and I can tell I'm going to have a hell of a bruise on my thigh from being slammed against the side of the boat. I briefly think of how good it will feel when Bella's warm, soft fingertips will trace over it, like she does to every bruise and ache each time we come in.

I let myself smile for a fraction of a second then my stomach clenches so tightly it hurts. Immediately I remember how she was the night before we pulled out … frantic, almost inconsolable. She'd been positive something bad was going to happen during this trip out and no matter how much I tried to convince her otherwise, she just wouldn't listen. In the blink of an eye, she went from sweet and playful to irrational and petrified. I know every time I go out it reminds her of Evan, but I have a job to do. I've made a commitment to Charlie, Wayne, and Carlisle, and I can't let them down. Charlie needed us to go out this one last time and because of that, I felt like I had to say yes.

Leaving, even if it's only for a short time, is always hard, but this time has just been plain brutal. Bella is always so calm and rational, but something about this trip out hasn't set with her well, at all, and hasn't from the get-go. When another clap of thunder rings out overhead and another gust of wind stings my face like hundreds of tiny needles, I think she's probably right.

"Let's go, fellas. We only have three more trawls to get up," Jasper tells us and I grunt in response.

Emmett is working the hauler and it creaks and squeaks from the pressure of pulling the traps up through the crashing waves and the fierce wind.

*Motherfucker, I'm cold.*

Waves continue to batter the hull and creep over the side and the spray from the waves that buffet the boat is freezing almost as fast as it hits the deck.
And we're doing it; we've almost got this bastard of a storm beat when I let my guard down like a damn greenhorn. It only takes a moment; just one flickering loss of concentration and a life can change in the blink of an eye. My life.

A vision of my body curled around Bella's as we lie on the couch in front of the fireplace while Peyton watches TV from the floor flits through my mind and … I never see it coming.

"Edward, watch out!" Emmett yells and I don't even have time to react.

One moment I'm standing on the deck of the boat and the next … I'm in the dark: sinking, frozen in the middle of the icy North Atlantic.

As I struggle to breathe, I realize I'm going to break my promise to both Bella and Peyton … my girls … because there is no way in hell I'm going to make it home to them. The water is so cold. It's like nothing I have ever felt before, nothing I could have even imagined.

Bella …

Peyton …

I try to focus on them but I can't.

Fuck! Bella was right to be worried, I think through a haze of numbing pain.

Because … then … my world turns black.

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I know, I know … it's short! Sorry! Chapter 1 will be up next Sunday, and is definitely not this short, promise, but it takes a bit to get things going so be patient with me!

The Breakers has the most incredible blog thanks to the amazing Laurel, so please go check it out. We add things all the time and each week will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see: pictures of all the characters, story images, there is even a history on lobster fishing and some information about Corea, Maine, too! It's fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think, I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been a nervous wreck waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 1

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A HUGE thank you to all my girls: Laurel, Kat, Cecile, J'me, Kassiah, Robin, Lianne, and Ayden~ they have all worked so hard to help me get this story up and going and I wouldn't know what to do without them!

WOW! I am totally blown away by the response to The Breakers! Thank you all so much for giving this one a chance. Hope you stay with me for the ride.

Now, let's meet Edward, shall we?

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Chapter 1

EPOV

Wfft ... Thwack ... Wfft ... Thwack ... Wfft ... Thwack

"Masen!" I hear as I catch the tennis ball I'm tossing in the air and squeeze it in my hand as I stare up at the ceiling.

I don't move as I lie on my cot, don't even take a fucking breath - too afraid something, anything, can still go wrong. It'll be just my damn luck after I've spent all this time, counting down each and every fucking day. To finally be here, now, is almost more than I can comprehend. I'm shaking I'm so wound up, but I slowly let out the breath I'm holding and turn my head when I hear the heavy footsteps approach.

Closer … closer … closer, until they stop.

"It's time," comes the gruff voice, the same one I've heard day after day after miserable day for fourteen months.

I sit up, swaying just a bit as the implication of what is about to happen overwhelms me. Jesus Christ, I never thought I'd see the day when I would get out of this hellhole. I look around the tiny, cramped space, though why I have no idea. It's not like I want to remember this place. If I think about it ever again it'll be too damn soon. I grab the solitary box of things I want to take with me and wait for the door to open. Hearing the metal clank of the door as it slides from left to right, I take a deep, shaky breath and walk through. I don't look back.

I hear a few shouts and mumbles as I walk toward the end of the row of cells, and I take the time to nod at a few guys I've become acquainted with during my time at the Boston Pre-Release Center. It wasn't easy here but it's fucking Shangri-La compared to Old Colony where I'd spent the beginning part of my sentence. I've kept to myself during my self-inflicted incarceration and in all honesty once I walk out the door, I'll never think of anyone I've met over my years inside ever again. At least I damn well hope not. I want the whole nightmare behind me and I vow, as my footsteps echo against the concrete, that I'll do everything within my power to make it happen and move on. How, I have not one fucking clue, but it will happen … one way or the other.
Going through all the release bullshit is a pain in the ass but I bite my tongue and smile when I'm supposed to, say thank you at the appropriate times, and get all the paperwork I need to turn in to my parole officer … one Wayne Harris. I'm due to check in with him when I leave here I note as I look down at the business card that is attached to the stapled papers. I snort, shaking my head. Motherfucker … I can't even have one damn day without having to report to someone.

After going through the ritual speech about hoping I've learned from my mistakes and all that other crap, I'm led to the window where I pick up the things I had on me when I was incarcerated. I sign my name where the fat man behind the counter points and then he slides a manila envelope toward me. I stare at it, feeling my breathing quicken and I rub my sweaty palm on my leg before I pick it up. With a deep breath, I notice my hands are shaking and I grit my teeth, throwing the envelope on top of the box under my arm. No fucking way am I thinking about what's inside or what it represents. I just can't go there yet; I'm not sure I ever can.

Finally, after what seems like hours, though it's probably only been about an hour total, I leave the Boston Pre-Release Facility a free man … or as free as one can be that has to check in with someone like a little kid at camp for bed-checks.

I stand on the steps, holding one pathetic, banged-up cardboard box filled with the only things I own in the world and tip my face up toward the sun, knowing that no one else is going to tell me to move or order me to the mess hall for dinner, and that I don't have to sleep with one eye open ever again. I'm sure it's a habit that will take some time to break, but I fucking swear right then and there that I will … no matter how long it takes. I take a deep breath and let the fresh air fill my lungs, not even caring that it's laced with exhaust fumes. I start to walk down the stairs, preparing to make my way to the bus stop on the corner when I'm stopped by none other than Ryan Masterson, my lawyer.

"Edward," he says as he warily approaches.

I shift the box onto my hip and run a hand through my hair. "Jesus Christ, Ryan, would you stop looking at me like I'm going to rip your damn head off every time you see me?" I grumble. "Shit."

"Sorry, Edward, I can't help it," he replies as he shifts nervously from foot to foot. "Look, if it wasn't for me, you and I both know you never would have been in there," he bites out disgustedly, tipping his chin in the direction of the concrete and steel building I've just left. "I just wanted to make sure you had everything and give you a ride to the P.O. office. No reason for you to take the bus."

I sigh … again, and pinch the bridge of my nose with my free hand.

He is so full of shit about it being his fault I've spent the last seven years in prison because we both know damn good and well whose fault it is, but I'm not dwelling on that, at least not now, and probably not ever. I just want to forget and move on. But, I'm not stupid, either, so I accept the ride. Riding the bus carrying my pathetic box doesn't sound like my idea of fun.

We drive for a few minutes and I stare out the window, wondering how much has changed since I've been behind bars. Seven years is a long fucking time and the world sure as hell didn't stop turning just because I've been locked up. New president, new music, new technology … a whole bunch of shit I'm going to have to learn and damn quickly if I have any hope of making it.

It isn't like I've been locked away from the world or anything, especially since I'd been transferred to the Pre-Release Center. I read, constantly, and as a result know shit I'm sure I'll never use in my everyday life. Hell, I even managed to pass the bar exam while I served my sentence. I'm not sure what, if anything, I can do with it seeing as how I don't suppose there's much call for an attorney
who also happens to be an ex-con. I figure I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. I bided my time, was a model inmate, and when the opportunity came up for me to be moved to the minimum security prison, I was fucking ecstatic. The time I'd spent at Old Colony before that had been nothing short of a nightmare, though I was luckier than most in that I was left alone - for the most part anyway. The fact that I could help some of my fellow inmates with their legal issues kept me in a pretty good place as far as having to deal with the shit most men did, but there were a few times some new know-it-all dumbass would attempt to make a name for himself by trying to mess with me. I learned long ago how to take care of myself, though. That particular skill definitely came in handy a time or two over the course of the past seven years.

I shake my head to clear it. Dark thoughts threatening to come to the surface are the last damn thing I need right now. Watching as the scenery changes outside the window keeps my mind occupied enough to keep them at bay … at least for now. The trees thin out. The cars are older. There are no flowers planted along sidewalks or in window boxes. Kids play outside, but only when there's someone outside to watch. The people that walk in and out of their houses have a look of resignation, a weariness of a life that has given them more bad than good. The area of Boston we're heading toward isn't the best in the city, but by no means is it the worst, either. It's still a proud, blue-collar, working-class neighborhood. We pull up outside of a wooden two-story blue house. The yard is the only well-maintained one on the block, and the outside of the house looks a bit worse for wear. I've certainly seen worse in my time.

"Edward, Wayne Harris is the best parole officer in the city," Ryan begins slowly as he twists his hands back and forth around the steering wheel. "I know this whole situation is fucked-up but truthfully, man, if anyone can help make this mess any easier, it's Wayne. Listen to what he tells you and you should be fine." I bite my tongue to keep from telling him to stick his well-meaning advice up his fucking ass. I know he means well, but I can't help the fact that all of this has me on edge.

"Thanks for the lift," I tell him in a tone that's completely at odds with my words. I'm grateful for the ride, sure, but I really hate the feeling of owing anyone anything.

Ryan reaches over and grabs my arm then shrinks back in his seat when I glare at him. "Sorry," he mutters and then takes a deep breath before he looks at me again. "Look, I don't know what your plans are once you get settled, but I want you to know that I wish you nothing but the best. I know I fucked up and I know you got a bad deal. Believe me, I know. I think about it every damn day and I'll never forgive myself for what happened."

"I don't know what the hell you want me to say, Ryan," I hiss. "I just want to get on with my life and forget all of this ever happened. I don't blame you for any of this shit." I push open the door and my foot hits the curb but I turn around and finish my thought. "You did the best you could with what you had and got me the best deal you could. It doesn't matter anyway, does it? I did my time, now I just want to put it behind me and move the fuck on."

"Fine … I get it. Just," he begins and then gives a slight shake of his head, "keep in touch, Edward. I mean it. If you need help with anything, you know where to find me," he tells me with a long look and then waits for me to get out of the car.

I watch him drive off, momentarily wondering if I'll ever see him again. Resigned, I turn toward the blue house behind me. Slow and uncertain, I climb the front stairs to the porch and am poised to knock when the door whips open. It takes me a second to realize I'm staring into the face of whom I assume is going to be my parole officer, Wayne.

The man looks to be in his mid-fifties and has a buzz cut. His face is lined with wrinkles and there
isn't any doubt at all that he has seen enough shit already to last more than one or two lifetimes. He definitely won't put up with any bullshit, not that I plan on giving him any trouble to begin with.

"Edward Masen," I tell him. He gives me a once-over and jerks his head to invite me in.

He doesn't say anything as I stand there in the foyer; he just stares. I've learned from my time in prison to keep my face void of expression, though I really fucking hate being stared at.

"You're not what I was expecting," he finally says after a few very uncomfortable moments and his voice is as deep and raspy as I thought it would be.

"Um … sorry?" I choke out and then silently curse myself for sounding like such a fucking pussy.

"Hmph." He grunts then spins on his heel. I follow him feeling like a chastised pre-schooler as we walk down a hallway that is covered with pictures on both walls. I don't have time to look at them though before we enter what I assume is his office. A quick look around confirms my first impression because there's a battered desk with an even rattier chair behind it that practically fills up the whole room. There are a few standard-issue, mismatched filing cabinets behind the cramped desk, every inch of which is haphazardly covered by piles of paperwork and files. On the floor there's an avalanche of paper, looking perilously close to toppling over with one slam of the door.

"Take a seat," he orders and points to chair that has most definitely seen better days.

I sit down carefully, not at all sure the chair will even hold my weight, and then drop my box on the floor beside me. Anxiously I wait for him to tell me … whatever the fuck he needs to before I can get the hell out of here and figure out what my next move is going to be. I assume my next stop is going to be a halfway house of some sort, at least until I can find a job. At this point I'm not even sure if one has already been found for me. I almost hope it has. Ryan hasn't exactly been a font of helpful information in the past weeks and days leading up to my release. It doesn't even fucking matter to me what it is as long as I am free. Hell, digging ditches, picking up trash, anything is better than being in prison and I'll take whatever I can get.

He continues to scrutinize me and I fidget under the intensity of his stare. The man sure has that unreadable look down pat. Hell, he'd give some of the guards from Old Colony a run for their money.

"So, tell me, Masen, what are your plans?" he finally asks. He leans back in his chair, the thing squeaking in protest at the movement. He doesn't notice, or not that I can tell anyway, because he doesn't even flinch from the sound. His chin rests on the tips of his fingers while he waits for me to answer and continues to stare at me like he's just waiting for me to say the wrong fucking thing.

I'm not at all sure how I'm supposed to address him because he never told me. For the life of me I can't remember what Ryan said his last name is, so I clear my throat and say, "Well … ah … I'm not sure."

Jesus fucking Christ, I scathingly berate myself, what the fuck did I say that for?

"So, you don't have any plans at all? What, you think that the good people of Massachusetts are just going to let you live on their dime?" He sneers at me and that really just pisses me the fuck off.

"I never said that!" I shout and my mind kicks into overdrive as I try to figure out what I should say now. I start to stand but when he narrows his eyes at me, I think twice about that and slouch back in my chair, still really fucking pissed. "Look, I did my time, paid a debt that wasn't mine to begin with, and now I just want to get on with my life."
"If you could go anywhere, anywhere at all, where would you go?"

"Corea, Maine," I tell him without a moment's hesitation.

"Why there?" he asks as he leans forward. The chair screeches in protest as it goes back into its upright position but his eyes never leave mine.

He is looking intently at me, like he knows something I don't. I've had a long damn time to think about this, seven years in fact, so I have no trouble answering him.

"When I was a little kid," I begin and take a deep breath, dredging up one of the few good memories I have. Visions of my grandmother and grandfather flit through my mind … walking along the beach looking for clams, fishing with my grandfather, making cookies with my grandmother … memory after memory flashing like a slide show in my mind. "I remember my grandparents taking me there every summer for a month. I don't have any brothers or sisters and I was the only grandchild my grandparents had. It's just this quiet, sleepy little fishing village on the coast and I've always wanted to go back."

"Good answer, kid," I hear right before an envelope with my name on it lands on the desk in front of me.

I reach out slowly for the envelope, irrationally thinking that at any point it will jump up and bite me like a snake. My mind's reeling because I have no idea what's going on. I don't recognize the handwriting, not that I have anyone that would write me a letter in the first damn place. All my family is dead. I don't have any friends, so I don't have one fucking clue who would send me something, and to my parole officer of all people. The only name I can think of makes my blood turn cold but there's no way it can be him I tell myself, and then open the envelope.

I skim the letter that's inside then read it slowly again and again … and again, not believing what I'm seeing. There are words all over the page and I comprehend what I'm reading, but nothing's computing. What I see can't possibly be true.

"Holy shit," I whisper and hear Wayne chuckle from the other side of the desk. "Is this for real?" I question as my heart beats wildly in my chest.

"Sure as hell is."

"Why?" I challenge, still not believing what I'm seeing.

"I think it's fairly obvious why, Edward. The question now is, what are you going to do?" he asks me pointedly.

"Get the hell out of here and start over," I answer with a shaky breath. I don't look up because I'm reading the letter, again. I can't take my eyes off it.

He leans back in his chair, and again an angry squeak fills the air. "You serious about going to Corea?"

I'm nodding before he even finishes the question. "Damn straight I am. It's perfect. Small, quiet, no one knows me from Adam, and it's the only place that has any good memories for me. Hell with this," I say and point to the envelope in my hand, "I don't even have to work now," but as soon as those words leave my mouth, he's shaking his head.

"I'm afraid it doesn't quite work that way, son. One of the conditions of your parole is you have to have a steady job. That doesn't change anything." He nods toward my hands.
"Well, fuck." I groan and throw myself back in my chair. "I can't imagine there are a whole lot of jobs in Corea, especially for someone with a record," I say disgustedly.

He waits a few interminable moments and does that staring thing I am really starting to fucking hate with a passion. In my mind I'm picturing worse case scenarios, so what he says next shocks the hell out of me. "If you're serious about going to Corea, I can help you with that."

I bite my tongue to keep myself from saying hell yes like I want. Something doesn't seem right because shit like this just doesn't happen to people and it sure as hell doesn't happen to people like me.

"What the hell is going on?" I demand as I stand up and begin to pace the small room, feeling like a caged lion. "None of this makes any fucking sense. I get out of prison and not only do I suddenly have a hundred thousand dollars when this morning I didn't have a pot to piss in," I begin to yell as my confusion mounts.

I shake the envelope wildly in the air and then turn and look at him saying, "Now you're telling me that not only can I leave the city, I can leave the whole fucking state and start over? Shit like this doesn't just happen, so tell me what the fuck is going on."

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If you've read any of my other stories, you know I don't give you all your answers at one time. This one isn't any different, so you'll just have to trust me that when you need to know something, I'll tell you, okay? Just sit back and enjoy the ride.

*The Breakers* has the most incredible blog thanks to the amazing Laurel, so please go check it out. We add things all the time and each week will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see: pictures of all the characters, story images, there is even a history on lobster fishing and some information about Corea, Maine, too! It's fabulous, go look!

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For those of you that have followed me from *The Path We Choose* and/or *The Greatest Gift*, the PDF for TPWC is done and available for you to download if you want it. The link is on all the blogs. It's amazing and Laurel worked SO hard on it! I'm so excited to share this with you all, and thanks to her, now I can!

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think, I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 2

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WOW! I am totally blown away by the response to *The Breakers!* Thank you all so much for giving this one a chance. Hope you stay with me for the ride.

How about some more Edward? I'm not going to be alternating POV's but you will hear from both Edward and Bella throughout the story, it just depends on who is talking to me the loudest at the time.

Now, on with the story...

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Chapter 2

EPOV

Once I get done with my tirade, I huff and look at Wayne. He has a shit-eating smirk on his face and leans back in his yard sale chair.

He stares at me for untold moments, scrutinizing me, his face completely undecipherable. My skin crawls from the action but I hold his gaze without flinching. If he's sizing me up to see if I'll say uncle first, he's got another damn thing coming. After seven years of the same kind of shit, I'm used to the routine of being stared at, and had men a hell of a lot scarier than him try to intimidate me. I didn't give into them so I'm damn sure not giving into him, no matter that he can make my life a living hell if he wants to. Backing down … showing fear … I don't do either of those things. Ever.

Finally, it seems like I pass some silent test. The chair squeaks back into its upright position and he slaps his hands on the top of the desk. "All right, kid, I'm hungrier than hell. Let me show you where you'll be staying for the time being and then you can get cleaned up." He points at my chest. "I can't imagine you want to stay in that prison-issue getup any longer than you need to."

Grabbing my box, I follow him, still reeling from everything he's told me since I walked through the front door. My mind wanders as I try to decide what this place is as we walk through a hallway and then up the stairs.

"I run a halfway house, in case you're wondering," he says conversationally like he can tell what I'm thinking and we continue to trudge up the creaky stairs. "Right now, everyone that stays here is working. I'll go over the rules with you when you've cleaned up and before everyone gets back."

The word *rules* automatically gets my hackles up but then I take a deep breath. Realizing that at least I can walk around without someone poking and prodding at me or telling me where to go, I
suppose I should be grateful. Following a few rules is a hell of a lot better than being behind bars. I am grateful, I amend, as we reach the top of the stairs and he turns and stops in front of a closed door.

"This is where you'll stay until we can get you on your way to Corea," he tells me as he opens the door.

Instantly my eyes sweep the room. There's a bare, hardwood floor darkened by age and use. A simple desk with a lamp that looks older than I do sits beside a twin bed that I know is way too fucking small for me. A plain, timeworn, tan comforter covers the bed and I try not to roll my eyes when I spy the lumpy pillow. The corners of the comforter are tucked under perfectly and it's stretched so that there isn't a wrinkle to be found. I can tell the previous occupant had the same teacher as me in the art of making a bed. It's the way we were taught at Old Colony on day one. I glance to the left and notice a utilitarian three-drawer dresser as well as a small closet that's empty but for a few lonely wire hangers. The stark beige wall is devoid of pictures - no hint of any life or color can be found anywhere in the room. I notice there's no television either, though there is a small radio on top of the dresser. A lone window beside the bed is covered with a flimsy white curtain.

To anyone else the room probably barely passes for livable, but to me it's the fucking Presidential Suite of the best five star hotel in the country.

I smile, I can't help it, and Wayne notices. "I take it you approve?" he asks with a sly grin.

I don't answer but walk in and set my pitiful box on the top of the desk. My eyes haven't stopped moving and they keep going back to the bed. It might be small as hell and the pillow looks like it's filled with rocks - but I don't care. I can't wait to fall into it and go to sleep. "There are a few new t-shirts in the top drawer of the dresser as well as some toiletries in the bathroom," he says as he points to the room across the hall.

I practically drool at the thought of a t-shirt. If I never have to wear a long-sleeved, denim shirt again it'll be too fucking soon, and that thought instantly makes my body twitch to feel the soft cotton. He grins at me again and I know he understands what I'm thinking but then he turns serious in a flash. "Look, Masen. I know this is all a bit disconcerting and unsettling, but I'll explain everything over some dinner. I planned it so you'll have a little bit of time to adjust before you have to be around anyone else. Take a shower, change out of that damn shirt, and come find me in the kitchen when you're done. Dinner will be in an hour. Don't be late or you don't eat," he growls and then walks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

I stare at the door for a few seconds … maybe minutes, thinking that he's going to come barreling back through the door and tell me to get the hell out - that this has all been some kind of crazy mistake. When a few more minutes go by and nothing happens, I take a deep breath and the knot I didn't even realize was there loosens just a bit. My eyes immediately track to the envelope and letter sticking out of the box and I close my eyes, wait a few seconds, and then open them again. Yep, I'm still standing in the middle of the room, the letter and unexpected check are still there … and I'm still out of prison.

"Holy mother of fuck," I mutter nonsensically and then have the most ridiculous urge to laugh.

I manage to tamp that down by running my hands through my hair and then pinching the bridge of my nose … really hard.

Get it together, Masen, I think and stare at the window.
A fucking window. I can't help but smile. A big, stupid smile at that. Whoever would've thought that a window would make me as happy as a fat kid standing in front of a never-ending pizza buffet? But it really did. Seven years without being able to look out a window without bars has a way of doing that to a person. My fingers twitch with the desire to open it and feel the spring breeze engulf me for a moment, but I resist. I turn and look at the dresser, striding over to it. Yanking it open I can see there are three plain gray t-shirts folded neatly, the tags still hanging off the arm.

Suddenly, I want to take a shower. The need to remove the stench of prison is overwhelming. I shake as I think about taking my first shower in seven years without having a guard watch my every move.

I kick off my shoes and out of habit, set them neatly beside the bed. Turning, I grab a t-shirt out of the drawer and my fingers clutch it tightly like it's a long-lost treasure I've been searching for and have finally found. Looking around the room, I grab my box and shove it under the bed. I have no idea who any of the men are that live here and I don't trust any of them as far as I can throw them. After plucking the envelope off the top, I put it in my back pocket ... and seriously think about shoving it down my pants. There's no way I'm letting my ticket to freedom out of my fucking sight. Once the box is stowed I cross the hallway to the bathroom and quickly shut the door behind me. I undress and turn the water on, letting it heat up and watch as the small bathroom fills with steam. Depressing the button, I groan in anticipation as I step over the edge of the tub. My groan becomes louder and it echoes off the tiled walls as the shower rains down on me.

Tipping my head back, I let the water sluice through my hair and then turn around, hanging my head so the water beats against the back of my neck and shoulders. Minutes pass and I don't move; I just let the water flow over my body. It's the best damn shower I've had in seven years, and I can't help but grin as I reach for the soap and a washcloth and begin to run my hands over my body. The feel of the water, the realization that I'm finally out of that hellhole swamps me and my mind starts going into overdrive as I imagine all the things I can do now. It doesn't come as a surprise that one of the first things I imagine is the feel of a woman with soft skin, hair... lips. It's more of a vague sensation than a clear picture and when I get to my dick, it's already hard. I don't waste any time taking care of business. After so long behind bars, I've gotten quite used to finding my release quickly and quietly.

The things you learn when you're locked up.

Once I make sure the evidence disappears down the drain, I can tell I feel less tense than before and I finish washing the rest of my body. Still unsure of what tomorrow will bring or if I'll have a chance for another shower, I wait until the last possible moment to turn the water off. Stepping out of the tub, I dry off and quickly dress. I know Wayne told me there won't be anyone in the house except the two of us, but I'm not taking any chances. I've had enough of being naked around other men and watching my back to last me a fucking lifetime. On goes my plain, white underwear and the same pants ... and I sure as hell double-check to make sure the envelope's still there. When I pull the cotton t-shirt over my head, I let out a low moan of appreciation as the soft material touches my freshly-washed skin. Christ, it feels good. I take a moment to hang up the towel - I might have been an inmate for the last seven years but I've never been a slob - and hurry back into my room. As I step into the hallway, I smell the aroma of grilled meat, burgers if the way my mouth is watering is any indication, wafting up the staircase and my stomach immediately growls.

I close the door behind me and my eyes dart around the room, checking to make sure nothing's out of place. It's another habit I know will take a long time to break and I take a deep breath. I have to remind myself I'm not in prison anymore. With an obscene amount of pleasure, I ball up the chambray shirt I'm holding and promptly throw it in the trashcan beside the desk, resisting the urge
to set the damn thing on fire so it's nothing but ash. Three pairs of new white socks are in the
dresser drawer along with the t-shirts. Sliding my shoes on after putting on a pair, I take a deep
breath to calm the nerves that suddenly erupt and head downstairs. I know that what Wayne is
about to tell me is going to change the rest of my life.

I hover in the entrance of the kitchen, not sure what I should be doing.

"You gonna stand there all damn day or do you want to come help?" Wayne asks me without even
turning around.

"Um, yeah … what can I do?" I ask and quickly look around the kitchen.

The house is old; you can tell by the way the wallpaper has faded and the color of the refrigerator.
It's surprisingly clean and the food smells fucking delicious so I really don't care if the room is
painted in olive green and tangerine polka dots. I notice the table has six chairs, but is only set with
two place mats and I shoot him a questioning look.

"The others will be here shortly, but I figured for your first night, it would be best for it to be just
me and you. This conversation needs to be kept between us anyway, so let's eat, and then we'll
talk." The words make my stomach clench but I don't have time to really think about them before
he orders, "Grab the salad dressing out of the fridge, two beers, and come sit and eat while it's hot."
My stomach unclenches and growls again as he slides the burgers onto a plate and sets it on the
table.

I stare at him from where I stand with my hand on the door. Beer - I swear to God he just said the
word beer – and I keep staring at him with my mouth hanging down to the floor.

"Masen," he says sharply and I blink … then flinch. "Open the damn door, get the salad dressing,
and yes, get two," he holds up two fingers and turns them back and forth, "beers and let's eat. I'm
fucking hungry and I get cranky when I don't eat."

I do as I'm told and take everything to the table. I'm salivating so badly it would take a sponge, a
really fucking big one, to sop up all the drool I'm sure is dripping down the side of my mouth.
There are burgers, french fries, a salad and there, looking like manna from heaven, are the two
bottles of beer. It's been more than seven years since I've had a beer. I realize with a start that the
last time I did, I wasn't even legal.

Holy shit …

We both fill our plates and I hover protectively around mine - a habit I've picked up during my time
inside. I start to inhale my food, another reflex, until I look up and see Wayne smirking at me.

"You don't have to worry, kid, I have plenty of my own food. I don't need to take yours, too."

I have to fight the embarrassment that threatens to crawl across my face. The tone could be teasing,
but it isn't. It's obvious he's spent plenty of time around people like me and he could be an ass
about it, but again, he isn't. I sigh and sit up, making a conscious effort to slow down and stop
looking from my left to my right like my food is all of the sudden going to disappear.

The last fourteen months at the Pre-Release center have gone a ways to lowering my guard every
minute of every day, but I never forgot that I was still inside of a cement fortress behind iron bars,
surrounded by razor wire, men with guns … and more often than not, a superiority complex. I'm
not sure I'll ever stop tensing whenever someone looks at me, or that I'll always feel like someone
is just waiting for an opening … to do something.
"It gets easier," Wayne says as he looks at me while tipping his beer bottle to his mouth.

He stares at me and I feel like there are things he's not telling me. I'm not quite sure how to take that. I'm not all that crazy about it the more I think about it, but I know better than to let him know it.

I make some sort of noncommittal groan/grunt sound, which then turns into a moan when I take the first sip of my beer. Closing my eyes, I take another and let the bitter tang of the cold brew fill my mouth before I swallow.

Hell, it's better than I remember.

We finish eating and though I want nothing more than to chug my beer, I savor every drop, taking a few small sips here and there. I have no idea when I'll get another one so I'm milking this one for all it's worth.

Wayne has long since finished his, and a glass of iced tea on top of that. He stares at me for another few moments and I try really fucking hard not to fidget in my chair. I still have no idea what's going on. Now that my stomach is full, it's kind of starting to freak me out and piss me off in equal measure.

I lift my now mostly empty bottle of beer and kind of frown when I tip it to my lips. I don't want this to be the last beer I have for God knows how long. As soon as I feel the liquid in my mouth I hear Wayne say, "You can probably be ready to go to Corea in a few days."

Well that gets my attention and in the process I choke on the last swallow of my beer. Coughing, I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth and stare at him.

"What do you mean a few days?" I question as my mind races to figure out how he can manage something like that so fast.

There's obviously a lot more going on behind the scenes than I even imagine and it makes my heart thump wildly in my chest and my skin prickle. None of this has been normal, and what he's just told me reinforces that fact even more. There's no way I should be allowed to leave so soon, and to another state at that. Having him as my P.O., being allowed to stay here, the money - all of it - leaves me wondering what the fuck is going on. Hell, even I know that it's not normal to have a beer with your P.O. a few hours after having been released. There's nothing in my parole that says I can't have alcohol, but I know for a fact that drinking in a halfway house is something that isn't normally done.

"Just what I said, Masen, a few days." He does that staring/sizing me up thing again. This time I don't even try to hide my annoyance.

When he hears me huff at him, he sits up straight and looks me in the eye. "Look, kid," he starts off and I can't help but bristle at the word. I haven't been anyone's kid in a long fucking time and it's not a reminder I need every time he says something to me.

He must see something in my face because he starts again, "Edward, I know you probably have a lot of questions, so let me tell you what's going on and then we'll see where you are when I'm done. Okay?"

I nod my head at him, figuring he doesn't need anything else but that to get started and he doesn't.

"You're a smart guy so I'm sure you've been able to figure out that your release and your placement here with me is anything but ordinary. A lot of strings have been pulled, a lot of favors have been
"called in, all on your behalf," he begins and though I have a feeling that something like that has to have happened, it throws me to hear him admit it.

For the life of me I can't figure out why he … or anyone else for that matter … wants to help me. I don't know him; up until Ryan dropped me off I'd never even heard the name Wayne Harris, and I'm sure my confusion is clear on my face.

"Look, I know you got a bum rap and got caught up in a web you had no chance of getting out of. You were lucky Masterson got you the deal he did, even though I'm sure it hasn't always looked that way. You were in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong guy and you tried to do the right thing. For that, you're being given a second chance. You did your time. Hopefully you'll learn to pick your 'friends' better," he says with a pointed look at the word friends because he and I both know with friends like who he is referring to, I sure as hell don't need enemies.

His eyes get even more intense as he looks at me. He leans forward to get even closer. The move leaves me uncomfortable but I don't move.

"What you did made an impression on a lot of people, me included. It takes a hell of a lot to impress me and it doesn't happen often. Very few people would have done what you did, Edward," he tells me and this time I can't help but squirm under his knowing gaze.

I shrug my shoulders not ready to talk about the night I was caught up in a clusterfuck. I know at some point I'm going to need to talk about it to someone, though who that'll be I have no idea, but I know it's not Wayne and it's certainly not right now.

The moment of awkwardness passes after he stares at me for another second or two. He leans back in his chair again and I feel myself relax just a bit.

"Every now and then a case comes up that deserves special attention and this time it's yours. Luckily for you, the right people know the right people and you wound up with me. Now I'm going to help you use that second chance you've been given and get you on your way," and with that, I can tell, I'm not getting any other answers for now.

"Now, tell me. I'm sure someone like you, who's passed the bar and all, was smart enough to get, or have your case manager get, all your paperwork in order so we can get you your driver's license so that you can have ID?" He phrases it as a question and cocks one eyebrow at me.

I run a hand through my hair in a nervous gesture, though I'm not sure why, especially because I can tell him yes … thank God.

"Yeah," I tell him and sit back in my chair, crossing my arms. "I've got a copy of my birth certificate upstairs and my Social Security card was in my wallet when I was arrested, so I'm covered there, too. For the past few weeks I've been reading over the DMV manual so I'd be ready to take the written test for my driver's license," I finish and can't help but smile, just a bit, as he nods at me.

I have no idea why, but the fact that he's pleased with my answers makes me sit up taller.

"Good, that's good. What about transportation?" he asks me and this time, my stomach flips, but in excitement. The possibilities are endless considering I can buy just about anything I want, but I tamp down that irrational urge as fast as it appears.

Like I said, I'm not an idiot. I know that money won't last forever.

I close my eyes and think for a minute and then I feel a smile spread across my face as a clear
picture of what I want fills my mind. It's probably not the most practical thing considering where I'm planning on going, but I want it.

Bad.

"A 1953 Harley-Davidson Panhead," I tell him as I open my eyes and smirk when I see his eyes widen in shock. A look of satisfaction settles on his face, not that he lets it linger for long of course.

"Nice," he tells me with a nod. "Why?"

This one's easy to answer. "My granddad. He was a Harley guy through and through and the Pan was his favorite bike."

He says nothing for a moment and then slaps his hands on the table. "I can't imagine it'll be too hard to find a Pan and it shouldn't cost you too much either. We'll head to a few of the bike shops in town tomorrow after we go to the bank and the DMV and see what we can do. The sooner you have transportation, the sooner you can get the hell out of here and become someone else's problem," he says with a grunt.

I cough and try to hide my smirk because he's really not as bad ass as he likes to think, but I'm not letting him know that. I just got out of jail; I'd kind of like to enjoy my freedom for at least twenty-four hours.

I see him check his watch and I know we need to wrap up our conversation before the other residents arrive. I'm planning on keeping to myself as much as possible for however long I have to stay here, so as soon as we're done, I'm going to my room for the rest of the night.

"Okay, well, we have the ID and transportation out of the way. We'll go to the bank tomorrow and get the money situation worked out. All that's left is to figure out what you're going to do when you get to Corea," he tells me and again his tone of voice implies he knows a hell of a lot more than what he's saying.

I lean back in my chair again and stretch my legs out in front of me, crossing them at the ankles. I'm having a hard time with the fact that I don't have any control over any of these decisions but I'll be damned if I'll let him know that. After seven years of having every decision made for me, from what to eat at night, to what to watch on TV during my limited free time, to what time to go to bed, letting him … or someone else … decide where I'm going to sleep every night and what I'm going to do for a living is more than a little agitating.

Wayne can obviously tell I'm getting antsy because he sighs and then leans his elbows on the table. "Masen, you're just going to have to trust me, okay? I'm not stupid enough to think you're just going to follow along and not have any questions, but we only have a short amount of time to get you out of here. If you want to go to Corea, you're just going to have to let me get things done the only way I know how."

It goes against every instinct I've built up over the past seven years, hell even long before that, but I know what he's saying is right. I don't have the first damn clue as to why all of this is happening, but I know enough not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Second chances don't come along often and they certainly don't come along for me. Gritting my teeth and clenching my jaw I nod at him - once, and watch as he relaxes just a bit.

"I have a friend in Corea," he begins and immediately I think 'of course you do' but I keep my mouth closed. "I've already asked if you can stay with him; he runs a boarding house so it'll work out well. He's put some feelers out about a job and I hope to hear from him about that tomorrow.
You were right when you said there probably aren't a lot of jobs available in Corea, but if this works out, you should be set. My friend, Carlisle, is going to arrange to be your liaison between your P.O. up there and me." I snort in disbelief because none of this makes any fucking sense.

"Edward, Carlisle is one of the best men I know. When I asked for a favor, he granted it - no questions asked. There are good people in the world, and he's one of the best. We go back a long way, have a long history, and there's no one you could ask for help from that's more honorable than him. Just … trust me."

It's my turn to stare again and I do, holding his gaze without wavering. He stares back the same way and waits as he lets me decide my own fate. I can be a jackass about this, I can demand answers, I can question everything that's happening, or I can go with my gut and give in and follow his lead. I want a new life, I want a new beginning, and I want to be someone my grandparents would be proud of.

"Fine."

It's the only thing I tell him and then I stand up. I need to be alone and I want to go to my room. Looking at the table I know I should stay and help clean up but Wayne waves me off and I bolt up the stairs. I rest my head against the back of the door when I close it behind me and hope I haven't just made the biggest mistake of my life.

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Waking up in the morning, I stay completely still as I slowly open my eyes. A part of me still feels like I'm living in some sort of alternative reality, but smelling frying bacon and hearing footsteps in the hall, I know I'm not. Everything's slowly sinking in and my heart races as I think about the fact that, in a few short days, I'll be on my way to my new life.

Breakfast isn't as awkward as I assumed it'd be because the other men that live in the house all have jobs they need to be at. I get a few questioning looks when I don't move to leave when they get up.

I could take the time to explain but I figure why bother. Once I leave I won't see any of them ever again and I'd rather not exchange personal information with guys that just got out of the same place I did.

Wayne walks in and hands me a plastic bag. "I'll meet you back here in thirty minutes and take you to the bank. Change into that," he says with a point of his chin. "We need to go to the DMV first and get your license so that you have identification for the bank. Make sure you have all your paperwork with you. I should hear from my friend up in Corea before the day is out. If all goes according to plan, your ass will be headed up North before the end of the week."

I bristle at the way he's just ordering me around and I clench my fingers into tight fists. It doesn't help that I'm still uneasy about his motivations because there are a few things that I just can't wrap my mind around, but I decide to just follow his lead. Things certainly could be a lot worse and I'm smart enough to realize that.

Meeting him back in the kitchen before the thirty minutes are up, I'm already pulling at the collar around my neck and wiping my hands nervously down the legs of my pants. I feel like a damn fool in the dress pants and shirt he's given me to wear, but I know I have to suck it up and deal. Having my picture taken while looking like a stuffed shirt isn't exactly the image I want on my license but I know that I'm already going to be fighting preconceived notions about me when I walk into the bank; not looking like a degenerate can only help matters.
My stomach kind of drops and my breathing picks up when I think about all that money. I've only known about it for less than twenty-four hours but it's become my lifeline, my safety net … my ticket to a new life. A new life I want more than anything.

When we walk outside he leads me to a gorgeous midnight blue 1970 Chevy Chevelle. There are two white racing stripes down the hood and I can't help the way my mouth opens in shock.

He chuckles beside me as I hear the beep to unlock the doors and once I'm settled in my seat complete with seat belt, we're off. I try not to think about how long it's been since I've rode in a car, barring the short ride with Ryan yesterday, or interacted with people that aren't criminals or guards, how long it's been since I was able to do anything … go anywhere.

Luckily for me, I don't have much time to dwell because as soon as we start heading toward downtown Boston, Wayne starts talking. We make small talk. Well, he asks questions and I answer. What kind of jobs I had during my incarceration, did I pass the bar exam on my first try; I am happy to answer that one with a proud hell yes. If I had any cellmates, what kind of books I liked to read - just normal shoot the shit kind of talk.

During a break in the conversation, I decide to turn the tables and ask him something I've been dying to ask since dinner last night. "Tell me about this Carlisle guy you're sending me to. What's he like? How do you know him?"

I watch as Wayne shifts in his seat a bit, like he's trying to get comfortable because this might take a while.

"I've known Carlisle Cullen for almost thirty years now. We met our freshman year in college. We were both on the rowing team and got paired as roommates. We're about as different as night and day, which you'll notice immediately the first time you meet him, but we just clicked. He and his wife, Esme, married during college. I was best man at their wedding," he finishes with a smile and it's obvious how much he cares about this Carlisle and Esme.

For a moment I wonder what it would be like to have a friend for that long. Hell, I wonder what it would be like to have a friend like that at all. Seven years ago I thought I had a friend; it turned out to be the worst mistake I've ever made.

To keep myself from lingering on that unpleasant thought too much, I look at him and ask the question I wanted to ask last night, but didn't. "Why is he helping me?"

I watch as a flash of pain contorts his face but as soon as it appears, it's gone. It's so fast, no longer than a blink of an eye, but I see it. Pain so raw and fierce it takes my breath away but instinctively I know I can't ask what's caused it.

I do see his fingers grip the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turn white and hear as he breathes out through his nose. Once he's loosened his death grip he says, "Like I told you last night - because I asked him to. Carlisle has spent his whole life helping people, some who've deserved it more than others, and now he's going to help you because you do deserve it."

I don't say anything and when he pulls up in the DMV parking lot he turns the car off but he doesn't move. Neither do I.

"Edward," he begins and stares out the window. His voice sounds far away and I can tell he's thinking of whatever it is that's caused that pain on his face from just a moment ago. "I hardly know you, but I can tell you're a good man. I've talked to Masterson, I've read over your case file from prison, I've seen the DA's file, and I've read the notes from your arrest. It isn't often in my line
of work that I see people change their lives for the better, but I believe that I will with you. Carlisle and I can only do so much … you have the hard part. Helping you find a place to live, get a job, get on your feet is the easy part. Learning how to adjust, to become a member of society again, that’s where the hard work comes in."

His words settle heavily in the car. There's a roar in my mind as I think about everything he's just said. My heart pounds as hard and fast as a jackhammer and I can't hear anything else. It's been so long since anyone has talked to me like I was anything more than a number, and to hear it from this man, who, from the very first moment I met him, I could tell is a good man, means more than I can ever tell him.

Somehow, I know he wouldn't want me to tell him, so I say nothing. I just nod my head to let him know I've heard what he's said and we both make our way into the DMV.

A few excruciating hours later, because, really, is there anything more painful than the DMV, I have a temporary license in my hand. Armed with identification our next stop is the bank.

Walking in, it feels like every set of eyes in the place is watching me suspiciously … like they all know there's an ex-con in their midst and they're trying to decide whether or not I'm safe. I roll my shoulders to try to relieve it of the tension I can feel building - as if the knot at the back of my neck isn't enough indication.

Rationally I know there isn't one person, save for Wayne and more than likely the bank officer we'll be meeting with, that knows I've recently been an inmate, but I can't help what I feel. I wonder if it'll always feel this way. A part of me is terrified to think that it might.

After filling out a mountain of paperwork, I walk out of the bank feeling a mixture of fear and excitement boiling just beneath the surface. Fear because I'm carrying a backpack full of cash and excitement because, with said cash, I can get the hell out of here and on my way to Corea.

By the time we make it back to the halfway house, I'm the proud owner of a 1953 Harley-Davidson Panhead as well as a new wardrobe. Dumping my bags on the bed, I can't help but let out what has to sound like a maniacal cackle. I look around for the men in white coats to come take me away because the last twenty-four hours feel like I've been plopped into Wonderland and I'm about have tea with the Mad Hatter. Looking at the backpack and seeing the green bills inside of it, I know I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

Taking a deep breath, I let out one more soft chuckle. I strip out of my clothes and I climb into bed with my arms securely wrapped around the backpack that's the key to my future.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"You have everything?" Wayne asks me five days later as we stand on the front porch.

I nod at him and tighten the straps on the backpack. "Yep, I'm all set."

My bike was delivered the day before. Everything has been arranged with Carlisle, including my new job as a deckhand on a lobster boat. It isn't the job I was expecting, but there's a tinge of excitement that races up my spine when I think about it. I've never done anything like it before. Nothing in my life has prepared me for working on a boat, but since Wayne told me Carlisle had found me a job working as a fisherman, I want it.

Desperately.

The open water, hard work, being a part of … something … it's more than I could have asked for
and I'm grateful beyond belief for the way things are turning out.

"You're not rid of me yet, kid, just so you know. I'll be checking on you from time to time and Carlisle will tell me everything," he warns and I know from the tone of his voice, he's serious.

I don't expect anything less and though I'll never tell him, the fact that he cares enough to check on me means a whole fucking lot.

He slaps me on the back. "Get out of here. It'll be dark soon and you'll want to be at Carlisle and Esme's in time for dinner. Don't forget, he'll help you get in contact with your P.O. up there. Take care of yourself, Edward," he tells me gruffly, then disappears inside.

I stand there for a second when I hear the door click and then walk to my bike, making sure my things are stowed securely. I double-check to make sure my backpack is fastened as tightly as it can be. When the bike rumbles to life beneath me, I can't help but shiver for a moment when I realize I'm … free.

Staring at the house for another moment, I take a deep breath then walk the bike backward to the street. I give the house one last look. I silently thank the man inside for everything he's done for me before revving the engine and leaving him and my old life behind.

A few short hours later as I drive through Gouldsboro I pass a sign that says:

Corea - 20 miles

I hit the gas … I can't wait to get there.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

So … now that you've seen a bit more of Edward, what do you think? I know there are still lots of unanswered questions, and most probably will take some time to get answered, just saying! I hope you enjoy the build-up until we get there! Next chapter we'll meet Bella and Peyton, so I hope you're as excited about that as me!

_The Breakers_ has the most incredible blog thanks to the amazing Laurel, so please go check it out. We add things all the time and each week will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see: pictures of all the characters, story images, there is even a history on lobster fishing and some information about Corea, Maine, too! It's fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

For those of you that have followed me from _The Path We Choose_ and/or _The Greatest Gift_, the PDF's for TPWC and TGG are done and available for you to download if you want them! The links are on all the blogs. They both are so amazing and Laurel worked SO hard on them! I'm so excited to share these with you all, and thanks to her, now I can!

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think, I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week
waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 3

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A HUGE thank you to all my girls: Laurel, Kat, Cecile, J'me, Kassiah, Robin, Lianne, and Ayden~ they have all worked so hard to help me get this story up and going and I wouldn't know what to do without them!

WOW! I am totally blown away by the response to The Breakers! Thank you all so much for giving this one a chance. Hope you stay with me for the ride.

Are you ready to hear from Bella? I'm not going to be alternating POV's but you will hear from both Edward and Bella throughout the story, it just depends on who is talking to me the loudest at the time.

Now, on with the story ...

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 3

BPOV

Wind is whipping all around me, fat raindrops soaking me to the bone. It's pitch black and I can hear thunder rumbling overhead. A flash of lightning illuminates the night sky and the ocean around me. The white-capped waves are rocking the boat so roughly I can barely keep my balance. My fingers grip the railing so tightly I can barely feel them. I look frantically, racing from one side of the boat to the other, searching for any sign of him.

"Bella!" he cries out for me, but I can't see him. "Help me!"

"Where are you?" I yell, trying with all my might to find him in the water.

"Help me, Bella. I can't hang on much longer," I hear and his voice is fading.

Waves come one right after the other and I know I only have seconds to save him.

"I can't see you! Tell me where you are!" I scream and feel my heart race when I still can't find him.

"Please, Bella! Save ... !" he cries out one last time. I strain my ears, desperate for even the faintest sound but there is nothing. The silence that rings out is more deafening than the storm that rages.

All I hear is the wind screaming and the clang of the buoy as it rocks in the distance. I stand there, unmoving.

He's gone and it's all my fault.

Gasping, I sit up and wildly look around my room. It takes me a moment to catch my breath and for
my heart to feel like it's not trying to claw its way out of my throat.

"Jesus," I mutter and run a shaky hand through my riotous hair.

I haven't had that nightmare in forever and it throws me for a second as I wonder why now?

I know there's no chance in hell I'm going back to sleep, so I untangle myself from the sheets and slide out of bed. My legs are rubbery and a small army of angry butterflies is trying to beat its way out of my stomach as I stand up. I wrap a tie around my hair and when the air from the ceiling fan hits my damp skin, I shiver and goosebumps instantly appear. Glancing at my bed, I grab the blanket off the end.

Wrapped up in the blanket, I pad down the hall so I can check on Peyton. Opening her door, I smile as I see my little girl sprawled out in the middle of her bed, the book she was reading still clutched in her hand. Just like her mama, I muse with a proud grin and tiptoe into her room. I slip her knees back beneath the sheet and set the book on the nightstand. Tucking the covers beneath her chin, I bend over and kiss the side of her head before running my hand through her hair.

The moon shines brightly in her room, as if bathing her in its glow. Sighing, I stare at her for a minute or two … she's the very best part of me … before I make my way downstairs.

As soon as I make myself a cup of very strong coffee, I grab my journal and walk out the front door and curl up in my favorite chair in the corner of my porch. I can hear the ocean, the waves rhythmically breaking along the beach. I can smell the brine in the air, the scent as familiar as the way my dad smells after a long day out on the water, and it calms the last bit of my nerves like nothing else can. Funny how the one thing that scares me more than anything also has the power to soothe my soul.

I let my hands warm up by wrapping them around the mug and then fold my legs beneath me, resting my head against the back of the wicker chair. I should write down my nightmare but I know it won't do any good. I've had that same horrible dream off and on over the past seven years and it's always the same.

It's always my fault and I can't ever save him.

Sighing I push those thoughts to the back of my mind, knowing full well they'll be back again, and go over a mental list of things I have to do today. Peyton only has a few days left of school before summer vacation starts and today they're having outdoor game day so I need to make sure she has her tennis shoes and doesn't go to school in her flip-flops. My daughter, seven going on seventeen, would wear flip-flops every day of the year if I let her. For someone as athletic as she is, you'd think she'd live in her tennis shoes as often as she's outside playing soccer, football, or racing all the boys down the beach, but no, flip-flops are her footwear of choice. Figuring there are a lot more pressing things than arguing about her shoes, I usually let her have her way.

Truth be told, Peyton Renée Swan gets her way just about all the time. Between her Pop Charlie, her Nana Renée, and her Uncle Emmett, not to mention Xavier, Rose, Alice, Jasper, and everyone else she comes in contact with, my daughter can probably count on two hands the number of times she's ever been told no in her life. Thankfully for all of us she doesn't use her mega-watt smile or her killer powers of persuasion for evil, because she could in a heartbeat. Instead, my little girl is one of the most outgoing, sweet, and gentle kids you'll ever meet. Admittedly, I'm a bit biased, but I know it's true nonetheless.

As a single mom it's so hard sometimes worrying about whether or not she's missing out on certain things, but watching her every day I know she's as well-adjusted as any other seven-year-old. She
has her moments where she's definitely my daughter and she frustrates me to the point of wanting to pull my hair out, but there isn't a day that goes by that she doesn't know she's loved beyond measure.

I take a sip of my coffee and close my eyes as the hot, strong liquid works its magic. I'm not a huge fan of the stuff, give me a Coke poured over a full glass of ice any day, but I know we're going to be busy at the restaurant today. We're always busy truth be told, so I'll need to be wide awake. The Breakers is the most popular restaurant on the Gouldsboro Peninsula and people come from miles around to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The restaurant has been in my family for generations; my great-grandfather opened it when my grandfather was just a baby.

I love the restaurant; I've grown up in the place, and from the time I could walk, have spent at least a part of everyday inside of it. It's as much home to me as my parents' house or my own is. My mom and I, along with Rose, Alice, and Xavier run it while my dad, Charlie, my brother, Emmett, and Jasper work on the lobster boat, the Isabella Marie, which provides all of the seafood we cook. When you walk into The Breakers and order fresh Maine lobster, chances are it's just been brought in … fresh really means fresh in Corea.

The restaurant, the boat, the water … it's all I've ever known. I might be a girl from a small town that lives a simple life surrounded by family and friends, but I'm not simple nor has my life been easy. Like anyone else, I have hopes and dreams, and though my life hasn't turned out like I imagined it would, I'm content.

I can't say I'm happy because I know there are things missing, things I'm not sure I'll ever have, and I've come to accept that. Since Peyton was born it's been just the two of us. I watch my parents, Em and Rose, Jasper and Alice … even Xavier and Seth, and resign myself to the fact that my chance at the happiness they each share with the one they love might never come along.

My daughter's my sole reason for living and as long as she's happy, then I'm good with that. There are a lot worse ways to go through life than with a daughter you love and a family you wouldn't trade for anything. I'm lucky in so many ways and thinking about what I don't have doesn't do anyone any good.

"Mama," Peyton mumbles through a yawn as she pushes the door open and pokes her head out.

Her cheek has wrinkles from where she's hugged her pillow, her eyes are still sleepy, and her hair is a wild mess in the ponytail that hangs off the side of her head, but she makes my heart leap in my chest. Without saying a word, I scoot over on the oversized chair and pat the spot next to me. She smiles at me and then skips across the porch before she curls up beside me, laying her head on my shoulder. Her presence is the balm to the thoughts of all I've lost and might never have and I gently kiss the top of her head. She smells like fresh air, clean laundry, and the coconut-lime shampoo she makes me buy in bulk every time we go to stock up on supplies. Smiling, I wrap my arm around her shoulder, pull her close to me, and relish the closeness we share. Together we watch the sunrise and I think to myself, things could definitely be a lot worse.

"Peyton, breakfast is ready!" I holler up the stairs and chuckle when I hear her thunder down then huff about halfway before she turns around and goes back up. Once she makes it to the table, I slide a plate of eggs and bacon in front of her, grinning. "Forgot your tennis shoes, didn't you?" I tease and grin even wider when she rolls her eyes at me.

Normally rolling eyes is a big no-no but I let it slide this time because I teased her first and turn around to get my own plate. Right as I'm about to sit down, I hear the banging of the screen door as
it's slammed open. I don't even have to look; I already know who it is.

"Xav, your plate is already fixed," I say loudly and shake my head when he comes barreling into the kitchen like he hasn't already eaten.

I know for a fact that he's been up for hours preparing for the morning rush at the restaurant. In a fishing town, breakfast comes hours before the sun even thinks about rising.

"Thanks, Bell," he says and kisses the top of my head before doing the same to Peyton's.

Just like he's done almost every morning since Peyton was born.

"So, Pipsqueak, how many more days of school do you have left?" he asks around a huge bite of eggs and though I want to tell him to mind his manners, same as I would Peyton, I bite my tongue knowing it'll go in one ear and out the other, just like it does every morning.

She grunts, pretending that she hates the nickname, though everyone knows she secretly loves it, and takes a drink of her juice before she answers him. "Three. Today's Game Day. I'm going to challenge Brody to a race when it's time for the running games. He's so stupid. He keeps telling me girls can't run faster than boys and he calls me a liar when I tell him I can beat Uncle Emmett," she tells him with a scowl on her face. The sound of her flip-flop slapping against her foot as she shakes it indicates just how aggravating she finds the whole situation.

Telling Peyton that girls can't do something boys can do is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. All it does is make her try twice as hard … as evidenced by the fact that she can indeed beat my older brother in a race. He gave up pretending to lose when she turned six; he hasn't been able to beat her since, much to everyone's amusement.

Xavier smirks at me over the top of her head and I have to hide my smile behind my hand. "Just remember what I told you, P. When you run, pump your elbows and time your breathing."

As much as Peyton hates losing, to a boy especially, Xavier hates it for her even more. Competition's a very serious matter in the Swan family and she's been brought up with a very, sometimes too very, healthy amount of it flowing through her veins. She nods her head at him like he's just told her the secret way to find Santa Claus, though for my girl, beating a boy, especially Brody, at anything is way better than Christmas any day.

"Xavier, why are boys so dumb all the time?" she asks and tips her head to the side while she waits for him to impart some great wisdom upon her.

At her question, I clamp my mouth shut, grab the dishes off the table, and hurry into the kitchen. Leaning on the counter I can't help but laugh as I hear my best friend try to explain how little boys sometimes act like they hate you but they really like you to which Peyton reiterates her belief that boys are dumb before going to brush her teeth so we can go to school.

"Jesus, Bella, way to leave me hanging there!" he gripes at me as he leans over the breakfast bar and watches as I load the dishwasher.

"Sorry," I airily tell him, though we both know I'm totally not. "You handled it just fine if it makes you feel any better. So well, in fact, that when she starts asking me why her boobs aren't growing as fast as everyone else's, I'm sending her to you. So thanks, big guy, you totally saved me from having to have that conversation with her," I tell him as I pat him on top of his bald head.

Keeping a straight face is damned near impossible, but somehow I manage - at least until the poor guy looks like he can't decide if he wants to cry or laugh. Not to mention the fact that his eyes have
bugged out of his head so far that I'm surprised they're still in the socket.

"How can you even talk about P getting … boobs?" he whispers and looks around like it's dirty word and no one can hear him say it.

This time I do laugh, laugh until there are tears falling down my face, and it takes me a minute to catch my breath. When I've finally gotten myself under enough control to talk I say, "You've known her since the day she was born, you idiot. You've changed her diaper, bathed her … even taken her to the bathroom with you, and you can't even say the word *boobs*? What the hell are you going to do when it comes time to have 'the talk'?" I ask using air quotes, "or, when she has her period for the first time?"

He's shaking his head before I can even finish and the look on his face is priceless. It's a mixture between the mortification of imagining her old enough to think about either of those things, fear as to what she could ask him when the time comes because the possibilities are endless, and his unconditional love for my daughter.

The bond between Peyton and Xavier is strong and deep. Anyone that doesn't know the circumstances behind it wouldn't understand, but I don't care. There isn't anyone alive, save for my parents and my brother, that I would trust my daughter's well-being with more than the man across from me and that will never change.

Not ever.

I open my mouth to say something totally mushy but I'm saved by Peyton's rush to get to the front door. Grabbing my keys and my purse, I lock up the house and we're off. As we climb into Xavier's Avalanche, I give my bright red 1975 Blazer a longing look. I don't get to drive my baby anywhere near often enough and it makes me sad to think about my gorgeous vehicle parked in my driveway day in and day out. Xavier picks Peyton and me up almost every morning and we drop her off at school before we go to the restaurant. She comes there after school, stays through dinner, and then he brings us back home only to repeat the same process the next day.

"We'll take Cherry out soon so stop your damn pouting," he tells me and I roll my eyes at him … making sure Peyton can't see me from the backseat.

Little Miss loves to catch me doing something I'm not supposed to; it's one of her favorite things to do.

"Bye, Mama. Bye, Xavier," she says as she shoots out of the backseat when we pull up in front of her school. Once she spies Brody and some of the other boys and girls from her class standing outside the front door of her school, she runs toward them only turning around to give me a quick wave.

I sigh and shake my head thinking sometimes it would be nice if she wasn't so independent and then stop that train of thought in its tracks because I realize I'm being selfish. As much as it makes me feel good to be needed by her, and deep down I know she'll always need me, I'm so proud of the person she's growing up to be.

As soon as we take off from the school Xavier says, "You had a nightmare last night."

He doesn't say it like he's not sure, he knows I have, so I don't even try to lie to him. It never works anyway.

I shrug my shoulders, but don't answer him. We've been over this too many times to count and I
don't feel like rehashing it again this morning.

Apparently, he has a different idea because he turns to look at me. "Bella," he says in a tone that's half exasperated and half worried, the way it always is when this topic comes up. "When are you going to let it go?"

Again, I don't say anything, mostly because I don't have an answer to his question though he already knows that, too. I wish I did, Lord knows I do, but I just don't … not yet and probably not ever.

"Don't," I tell him sharply when he sighs at me.

I don't need another lecture. Even though he knows what I'm feeling better than anyone, there are things he won't ever understand.

He doesn't say anything until we pull up in front of the restaurant, and when he parks the car, he doesn't move to get out so I don't either.

"I love you, and I love Peyton as much as if she were my own," he says. As I open my mouth to tell him I already know that, he shuts me up with a look. "You're going to have to learn how to let go of what happened or else you'll never be truly happy. Peyton deserves to have you at your best and though no one could ever accuse you of not putting her needs in front of your own, she's not stupid. One day, whether it's tomorrow, next month, or a year from now, she's going to realize what you're doing and with as smart as she is, she's going to know why … and then she's going to blame herself."

His words are a punch to the stomach. Immediately any fight I have in me disappears and I bend forward at my waist. I've had the same thought before, but to hear it out loud makes my blood grow cold and my stomach twist into a tight knot.

I feel my eyes instantly fill with tears. Normally I'd wipe them away as fast as they appear, because I don't let anyone see me cry, but I can't find the will to brush them away. They fall down my face and the warm, salty water sears my skin.

"Ah, hell," I hear Xavier curse beneath his breath, and the next thing I know his big arms are wrapped tightly around me as I let myself cry the tears that I've held inside since my nightmare.

As I cry and shake in his arms, I wonder when the pain and the guilt will go away. It's always there - every minute of every day. I go through the motions of living; I try for Peyton and Xavier. I try for Em and Rose, my parents and everyone else - but I'm so tired.

Always so damn tired.

I'm tired of the guilt. I'm tired of the nightmares … I'm tired of being alone.

"Shhh, Bell," Xavier says softly and I feel him kiss the top of my head and then rub his cheek against my hair over and over again while he runs his hand up and down my back.

I sniff a few times and like the brat I know I can be, purposely wipe my nose on his shirt. That's what he gets for making me cry first thing in the morning anyway.

Jerk.

I know he worries … more than anyone, but that's just because he knows me better than I know myself most of the time. Sometimes I kind of hate that because it means I can't hide anything …
ever.

With one last deep breath, I decide I've cried long enough and wriggle out of his arms. Climbing out of the truck before he even notices I'm gone, I wait for him to find the snot I've wiped on his shirt.

"Damn it, Bella, that's fucking gross!" he yells at me and follows me into the back door of the restaurant.

I throw my purse down on the counter and casually reach for my apron before turning around to look at him. His arms are crossed over his broad chest, the navy blue t-shirt with the restaurant's logo plastered on the front stretched tight. He stares at me, arching his eyebrow, waiting for an apology that won't ever come.

You'd really think he'd know better by now.

"Don't you have anything to say?"

I hear snickering from beside me and flash Rose and Alice a quick smile before turning back to him. "Yeah, I think you have something on your shirt," I tell him cheekily and then like the twenty-seven year-old mother I am, stick my tongue out at him when he growls at me.

He whips his shirt off without thinking twice about it, and grabs another one from the cabinet, mumbling under his breath the whole time.

"Bella, why does my head cook look like he could make today's lobster with the steam coming out of his ears?" Mom asks me as she walks in and surveys the scene in front of her.

I try to play innocent and shrug my shoulders, but I know she won't buy my act any more than she has the countless times I've tried the same thing before.

"Bella." Mom groans and Rose and Alice take that opportunity to let loose the laughs they've been trying to stifle since Xavier and I walked in.

He humphs behind me and I swear I hear him mutter something about paybacks being a bitch, but I don't pay any attention to his empty threats. We both know our bickering back and forth is just what we do.

"How was the rush this morning?" I turn to my two friends and ask.

Because I have to get Peyton ready in the morning, I don't come in until after she goes to school and then I work through the dinner rush. Like me, she spends as much time at the restaurant as we do at home. She's grown up with it since the day she was born and it'll be the way it is until she's old enough to go on to bigger and better things ... like I was supposed to, until fate had other plans for me.

"Same old, same old," Alice tells me and we begin prepping for lunch.

Alice and Jasper moved to Corea about four years ago and we've been friends since the first day she arrived. They came from Texas saying that they were looking for a change of scenery. It was obvious from the get-go that it was more than that, and once we'd all gotten to know them better, we found out that a bad situation with Jasper's dad was the push they’d needed to get a fresh start in a new place. The second Alice walked into the restaurant, it was as if Rose and I had known her as long as we'd known each other and Jasper had taken to the water like he'd been born and raised on it. He gets along great with my dad and Emmett and I love him as much as if he is my flesh and
blood. They just fit, and it's hard at times to remember they've only lived here a few short years.

Rose grew up in Corea and she and Emmett have been inseparable since they were in kindergarten. They're two years older than me, which as an adult is nothing, but growing up in their shadow, feeling like a third wheel, was hard at times, even though they never made me feel that way. Rose's parents owned the local grocery store until they sold it when she and Emmett got married right after high school. They retired to Florida and only see Rose once a year … if that much, and that's only if Rose meets them while they're in New York City in between visits to the opera and Broadway shows. How they managed to have a daughter like Rose, who is just as comfortable in jeans and tennis shoes as she is in an evening gown and heels, is beyond me.

She's been a part of my family for as long as I can remember, but when she and Emmett got married, she truly became my sister in every way. I love her more than I can ever tell her and when I was pregnant with Peyton at the age of nineteen, she was beside me every step of the way. I don't know what I would've done without her then … and again later when my life changed forever.

Corea is made up of life-longers, like my family, and those that come and never leave, like Jasper, Alice, and Xavier. Small town life, especially along the Atlantic Ocean where the winters can be brutal and your life revolves around the water and the bounty it provides, isn't for everyone, but it's all I've ever known. I know there's a big, wide world out there beyond the rocks and waves and beaches, but Corea will always be home to me.

I'm pulled from my reverie when I hear Rose ask Alice, "So, has Jasper said anything about this guy that Charlie is going to talk to today?"

Alice is filling the ketchup bottles and I listen as she says, "Nope. All Jas told me was that Carlisle called Charlie and asked him if he needed any help because he had someone that needed a job. Seeing as Felix just quit, Charlie told him to send the guy over. I know Jasper hopes whoever Carlisle has can help out, because being a man down on the boat is beginning to take its toll already."

I'm startled for a moment and have to tamp down the urge to get upset that they both know more about what's going on with my dad and the Isabella Marie than I do. I know why that is, so the urge passes as quickly as it comes, even though I wish it didn't have to be that way.

"Neither one of you know who this guy is though?" I ask, immediately wary.

I may not be able to be as active a participant in the fishing part of my family's business as I wish I could be, but that doesn't mean I don't care about it either. Anyone who works as close as you have to when you're out on the water has to be completely trustworthy and someone showing up out of the blue immediately raises my suspicions.

Looking from Alice to Rose with a raised eyebrow, I can feel the hair on the back of my neck raise when they both shake their head no. Oh, hell no, I think, and plan on questioning what the hell my father is thinking as soon as I see him.

Before I know it, the restaurant is packed to capacity with the lunch crowd, and I barely have time to breathe much less worry about talking to my father.

"Bella, can you go out back and bring in some paper towels?" my mom asks me once the lunch rush has passed and I'm waiting for Peyton to get here after school is out.

I head out to the back storage shed and putter around inside. I reorganize the shelves, shaking my head at the fact that Xavier has got to be one of the world's worst people about keeping things in
any kind of order. I wonder, yet again, how someone that can cook the way he does, can be so
darn messy. Loading my arms full of paper towels and a few other things I know we're going to
need before the night is through, I walk back into the kitchen and smile when I notice the clock on
the wall. Peyton should be walking in any moment and as much as I try not to let it show, I can't
wait to hear how badly she beat Brody today.

I'm a Swan through and through. What can I say?

Making my way to the seating area of the restaurant, I'm totally lost in thought until I hear my
daughter's voice ring out through the air as she says, "Don't worry, Pop. That's just Edward."

My head whips in the direction of the front door and all of a sudden the air around me is sucked
away … like one of those vacuum sealer bags. I stare at the man and my entire body tingles the
way it does when I first stand up after sitting too long and my legs have fallen asleep. My stomach
feels like it does after I've just stepped off a roller coaster and I have the most insane urge to grab
Peyton and run … and not look back.

It's not just the way he looks, like a pitbull that's been chained up too long, ready to strike at
anyone that gets too close, that makes me feel this way. It's the way his eyes dart around the room,
like he's scared, that ignites the desire in me to soothe him and tell him everything will be okay. It's
totally irrational of course, but the fact that I feel lightheaded from breathing so fast and my fingers
twitch to touch him tell a different story.

He's tall, taller even than Xavier and Jasper, but lean and his body reminds me of a swimmer's.
Long arms, long legs, long fingers. A vision of all of the above wrapped around me … arms around
my shoulders, legs tangled with mine, fingers in my hair, assails me. I close my eyes to try to stop
the disturbing images … disturbing only because I want to relive each and every image repeatedly
in vivid detail.

Our eyes connect as he scans the room. I sway a bit and reach out to steady myself on the table I'm
standing in front of. His eyes are an odd but mesmerizing mix of blue, gray, and green. The colors
instantly remind me of everything I love - the cloudless sky on a summer day, the rocks along the
beach that Peyton loves to climb, the leaves on the trees that surround my house - and I grip the
edge of the table so hard my fingers ache from the force. I want to keep looking in those eyes and
count each and every shade of blue, gray, and green … even if it takes forever.

There's a jagged scar on his neck that runs from his collarbone to right below his ear and though it's
puckered and angry-looking, it does little to add to the danger that surrounds him. The tattoos I can
see on his arms don't add much either. In fact, all I want to do is step closer and trace over each line
of ink with my fingertip … a thought which makes me clench my fingers even tighter around the
table's edge. When he lifts an arm to run his hand through the hair that's a shade I can't even begin
to describe - a blend of red, brown, and gold - his bicep flexes beneath the tight black t-shirt he has
on and I swallow past the golf ball size lump in my throat.

No, the danger is simply … him.

I don't know his last name; I don't want to know anything about him. I don't know why he looks
lost and alone and afraid and angry all at the same time. I don't want to know why his eyes can't
seem to stop moving from me to Peyton. I don't want to know why I don't ever want him to stop
looking at me.

When he finally moves toward my dad and Peyton, so do I. For some reason the fact that he looks
calmer the closer he gets to her immediately sets off every protective instinct I have. Peyton is
smiling at him, totally oblivious to the danger this Edward possesses, and when I reach the table, I
stand between her and him.

"Peyton, go to the kitchen and get your snack," I tell her, holding her behind me.

"But, Mama, I want to talk to my new friend, Edward. He's here to talk to Pop," she tells me and I squeeze the hand that's not holding her back into a tight fist.

"Now," I tell her as I look down and give her the look that shows I mean business. She huffs and with a casual wave and a cheery, "Bye, Edward," she scampers off to the kitchen.

I turn and follow, knowing everyone's watching me, but I don't care.

I have to get away.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

So … what do you think of our Bella? And Peyton … and Xavier? There are LOTS of things to uncover about Bella and I hope you're excited to find out more about her. You will be seeing a lot of Xavier and the next chapter you will see how Edward reacts to Peyton when he meets her for the first time.

*The Breakers* has the most incredible blog thanks to the amazing Laurel, so please go check it out. We add things all the time and each week will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see: pictures of all the characters, story images, there is even a history on lobster fishing and some information about Corea, Maine, too! It's fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

For those of you that have followed me from *The Path We Choose* and/or *The Greatest Gift*, the PDF's for TPWC and TGG are done and available for you to download if you want them! The links are on all the blogs. They both are so amazing and Laurel worked SO hard on them! I'm so excited to share these with you all, and thanks to her, now I can!

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think, I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 4

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A HUGE thank you to all my girls: Laurel, Kat, Cecile, J'me, Kassiah, Robin, Lianne, and Ayden~ they have all worked so hard to help me get this story up and going and I wouldn't know what to do without them!

WOW! I am totally blown away by the response to *The Breakers*! Thank you all so much for giving this one a chance. Hope you stay with me for the ride.

Are you ready to see how Edward and Peyton meet? I'm not going to be alternating POV's but you will hear from both Edward and Bella throughout the story, it just depends on who is talking to me the loudest at the time.

Now, on with the story ...

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 4

EPOV

"Are you waiting for someone?" the sweetest voice I've ever heard asks and I look around and then down to find the source.

"Ummm." I stammer because the ability to speak seems to have left me for the moment.

I've never been around kids, never had the opportunity to be, but the girl standing beside me, staring up at me with the grayest eyes I've ever seen, has to be, hands down, the most enchanting thing in the world.

Long, dark brown hair that's a wind-blown mess around her face, sun-kissed skin with a nose that has just the tiniest bit of pink tinged to it, freckles on her cheeks, and a smile that, no question about it, will bring grown men to their knees before she even knows how to work her womanly wiles on them.

She looks like she's part sprite, part tomboy, and suddenly I feel warm all over as she keeps smiling at me. If I never have to move, I think I'd be okay with that as long as the pretty little thing beside me keeps looking at me. I feel the corners of my mouth lift in an involuntary smile and I have the most insane urge to pick her up and spin her around in a circle just to see if her laugh sounds as sweet as her voice.

She looks around and then turns back to me, narrowing her eyes. "Are you lost?"

I sigh because I feel like a damn idiot. I shake my head then shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans. I've been standing outside the front door of the restaurant for more than fifteen minutes now trying to muster up the courage to step inside. I know that on the other side of that door is the key to me being able to stay in Corea and I can't help but feel terrified about that.
Carlisle assured me last night and again today before I left the boarding house that Charlie Swan's a fair man and is always inclined to give people the benefit of the doubt, but I'm still nervous as hell. Having someone hold your future in the palm of their hand isn't exactly the easiest thing to deal with; especially when it's a future you want more than anything.

I've had this feeling settle around me … in me … as soon as I passed the wooden sign welcoming me to Corea and I can't explain it even if I tried. It's this sense of calm and belonging and … coming home. Last night, lying in bed in the room that'll be mine for however long, hearing the ocean as the waves brushed up against the beach, I felt more at peace than I can ever remember. In prison there's no such thing as silence, there's always something: men grumbling in their sleep, the guard's shoes thudding against the concrete as they walk up and down the corridor doing spot checks, the clang of metal doors opening and closing … the sounds of men finding the release of their sexual urges that aren't always voluntary. Silence had been an unknown commodity for seven years and while I laid there and watched the sheer curtains flutter from the light breeze outside, the only things I could hear were my own heartbeat, the sound of the waves … and nothing else. It was almost deafening, the absolute silence, and as I drifted off to sleep I wondered if I'd ever get used to it.

"Hey, are you okay?" the little girl asks as she tugs on the hem of my t-shirt.

I shake my head to clear it of the melancholy thoughts creeping in and look down at her. Just gazing at her innocent and trusting face, seeing her lopsided smile, makes every dark thought I'd just had fade away until there is only her.

"Can I tell you something?" I ask and bend down so I'm level with her.

She looks back at me and nods, staring at me with her steely-blue eyes and most of the tension I'm feeling melts away. Taking a deep breath I lower my voice and whisper, "I'm kind of scared to go in there."

Saying the words out loud is like letting all the air out of a balloon so it doesn't pop. I take another deep breath and feel a little bit more of my nerves settle.

"Why are you scared?" she asks me and tips her head to the side as her eyes travel the length of my face. I can tell when she sees the scar on my neck. I wait for her to cringe but she only scrunches up her button nose, and the spot between her eyebrows dips down like she's trying to figure out what happened. I see her shrug her tiny shoulders and the gesture makes my stomach flip-flop. My heart stutters in my chest when she doesn't run away screaming. She continues her perusal and her eyes widen when she sees the ink that curls around my right bicep beneath my t-shirt.

When she looks back up at me, her eyes are warm and inviting and I have the most insane urge to reach out and give her a hug. I refrain, mostly because it's so damn inappropriate, and also because I haven't hugged anyone besides Esme in … hell, more years than I can remember.

She turns from me, plops down on the top step, and with no hesitation whatsoever, pats the spot next to her. I stand, staring at her until she quirks her eyebrow at me. I chuckle a little, then a bit more, when she rolls her eyes before she points again. Dutifully, because there's no way in hell I want this little firecracker angry at me, I sit down beside her. My eyes pretty much bug out of my head when she holds her hand out for me to shake. I slip her tiny but surprisingly strong hand in mine. She smiles and it lights up her whole face. I feel my cheeks lift in the biggest smile I can ever remember.

"Mama and Xavier say I'm not allowed to talk to strangers. My name's Peyton and we're friends now, so that means I can talk to you." I can't help but laugh at how direct she is.
"My name's Edward. It's nice to meet you, Peyton. I could use a friend. I don't have any of those."

There's no earthly reason why I just shared that with her and I sort of regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth. Especially when she gasps, her eyes fill with tears, and her chin quivers as she whispers, "You don't have any friends?"

I have no idea why I'm about to spill my guts to this little girl that can't be any more than six or seven, but I can't help it … mostly because seeing the tears in her eyes is ripping my heart out.

Shrugging my shoulders, I make sure to keep my voice light. "It's okay. I haven't met a lot of people I'd like to be friends with for a while now."

She narrows her eyes at me and stares, keeping her mouth in a tight line. A part of me wants to laugh at how serious she looks, but she kind of scares me. How it's possible that this tiny wisp of a thing that barely comes up to my waist scares the ever-living shit out of me is beyond me, but there's no doubting that she does.

I roll my eyes at myself though and wonder where the hell my balls went and what the fuck I'm doing sitting here talking to a child. Of course neither one of those thoughts is enough to make me get up and leave. Miss Peyton has me wrapped around her little finger already and she doesn't even know it.

She nods her head and I can't help but feel like she's come to some sort of decision. It's one I'm fairly certain is going to change my life. I have no idea why that thought enters my mind, but as sure as I'm sitting here, hiding out like a scared little fucker, I know it's true.

"I'm your best friend now," she tells me succinctly.

Coughing because those words are the last ones I expect, I catch my breath and sputter, "Excuse me?"

Peyton rolls her eyes again, and damn if it's not the cutest thing ever. She starts slowly, as if she's talking to someone that doesn't understand English. "You and me," she motions between us with her hand, "are going to be best friends now. I have a lot of friends, but none of them are better than me. I mean, Brody always thinks he's better than me even though I totally beat him in a race today. Silly boy thinks just 'cause I'm a girl I can't run fast, but Xavier taught me how to run even faster by keeping my elbows tucked in. And I know Brody likes me cause he's mean to me. Xavier told me that, too, but he also told me to kick him in the leg if he tries to kiss me," she goes on without even stopping to take a breath. All I can do is wait until she passes out from lack of oxygen or runs out of things to say … whichever comes first. I'm going with lack of oxygen because she picks right back up again. "I can't tell Mama he said that, though, or else he'll get in trouble and she'll tell him he can't come for breakfast and that'll just make him sad, especially if it's French toast day. And you don't want to be friends with Cade or Andrew … Will might be okay, but I think he'd be scared of you." She stops long enough to squint her eyes and look me over.

I cough again and hide my smile behind my hand as I rub my mouth. Jesus, this girl's killing me.

"Lucy and Madison don't like playing football so they're out, too, because you like football, right?" she asks and gives me a look that lets me know if I answer this wrong I'm in deep shit. I nod slowly and can't help but chuckle when she nods and pats me on the head like I'm a puppy that just went to the bathroom outside for the first time. With one last breath I think she's about to wind down because she says, "So, Edward, we're best friends now and you're not alone anymore. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am." I about lose my shit when she holds her fist up and looks at me like I'm an idiot until
I pound her fist. "Best friends it is."

God only knows why, but every last bit of the nerves I felt when I walked up the steps a few minutes ago are a distant memory. I stand up and Peyton stands with me. She puts her hands on her hips and gives me a good once over before she says, "I'm going inside. You coming?"

I grin at her unable to stop myself and shake my head. I need a minute to recover from the whirlwind known as Peyton before I can even think about approaching Charlie Swan.

"I'll be in in a minute." Before I can say anything else, she zips inside. I'm left staring at the door behind her wondering if I'd just imagined the whole damn encounter.

*Little thing sure can move fast.* After taking one more deep breath, I square my shoulders and go through the same door as Peyton.

As soon as I step foot inside the restaurant, a sense of déjà vu washes over me. Though I haven't been to Corea in more than fifteen years, I vaguely remember this place. When I used to visit, my grandparents always rented the same cabin and we rarely did much besides fish, cook, and play on the beach. I don't remember doing any sightseeing or anything like that, just spending lazy days on the water or in the kitchen with my grandmother. We would always make one special trip out to eat and it was always to this restaurant. I was too wrapped up with being nervous and talking with Peyton before to put two and two together, but now that I'm standing here, bits and pieces are becoming clearer.

The first thing I notice when I pull my head out of my ass is how quiet it is. It literally feels like you can hear a pin drop. The next thing I hear is Peyton's voice saying my name. I'm startled by that and when I finally locate her, she's talking to an older man. I can feel my eyes dart around the room, and my heart races. The walls that I've built to protect myself, the ones that I'd felt becoming less impenetrable over the past few days are suddenly back again … more fortified than ever before. I'm wholly uncomfortable because it feels like there are hundreds of eyes staring at me, judging me, and I know I'm failing some silent test. Of course when I look around the room again, I realize the restaurant is mostly empty.

My eyes are trying to take everything in at once. I tell myself to try to relax, but it's not working. The more I tell myself that, the more I can feel it as I close myself off. Gone is the guy that was outside just a few minutes ago laughing and joking with a little girl. Instead I'm once again the ex-con, the felon … the criminal. In the midst of my inner turmoil, I have the oddest sensation wash over me. I can't really describe it, but there's no denying what I feel. When my eyes connect with hers … I feel it even more.

Calm.

Warmth.

Home.

Of course the way she's looking at me completely contradicts everything I'm feeling. Her eyes are tumultuous and troubled … wary. She looks frightened and my heart slams against my ribcage, disgust seeping from my pores. Risking a glance at her again, I can't help by stare. She's gorgeous, but the way she looks like she's trapped in a minefield, wanting to run but not being able to, makes me sick to my stomach. I look back and forth between her and Peyton and there's no denying the fact that Peyton's her daughter. Both beautiful, both with the same perfect shape of their lips and the same long mahogany hair. The fact that the woman looks like she'd like nothing more than for the floor to open up and swallow me whole sets me on edge more than I care to admit. I run a hand
through my hair, my telltale sign of nerves for as long as I can remember and try to take a deep
breath, but it's painful.

Steeling myself, I begin to walk toward Peyton and the man I'm convinced is Charlie Swan. The
way he's hanging on to Peyton, the way his eyes track her mother, the way they all resemble one
another is a dead giveaway. Before I can even get there, the woman's standing between me and the
table and the anxiety she's feeling is as obvious as the neon signs that light up the strip in Las
Vegas.

"But, Mama, I want to talk to my new friend, Edward," I hear Peyton say and the little whine I hear
in her voice cracks through the façade I've erected.

I open my mouth to tell Peyton I'll see her again, but one glance at her mother stops me dead in my
tracks. The woman is barely holding it together and it's like a punch in the gut. She thinks I'm no
good and doesn't want her daughter anywhere around me. The emptiness I feel at the thought of
never talking to the little sprite ever again damn near brings me to my knees.

There's a roar in my head as I imagine myself screaming no at the top of my lungs but somehow I
manage to hear Peyton's sweet, "Bye, Edward." I watch, helpless, as she and her mother walk back
into the kitchen, and jump when the door swishes closed behind them as they disappear.

"My granddaughter seems rather taken with you," I hear a deep, crusty voice from in front of me
say.

When I turn my head, I'm looking into eyes that are the same color as the ones that had just held
me spellbound, but instead of troubled and wary, these are hard and warning.

The way he's sizing me up and the tone of his voice indicates he expects an answer to what he's
just said. I swallow past the lump that has seemed to take up permanent residence in my throat.
"We … uh … met outside. She, um … talked to me for a minute. Nothing happened though," I'm
quick to point out and then want to curse myself for sounding so fucking nervous.

He grunts and stares at me some more, not indicating whatsoever if what I've just told him is right
or wrong. After a few very uncomfortable moments in which I'm left standing in front of him like a
kid whose been called down to the principal's office, I rock nervously from foot to foot.

"Sit," he orders me and kicks out a chair.

I do as I'm told and look him in the eye. He might hold the key to my future in his hand but I'm not
going to let him know I'm scared of him or what he could do to me if he wants to.

His eyes widen just the slightest when I don't cower from his intense gaze. The corners of his
mouth twitch just the tiniest bit before he schools his features and his face is as impassive as it was
before.

"You're Edward Masen, I presume?"

I nod my head and hold my hand out, saying, "And I take it you're Charlie Swan." He squeezes my
hand so tightly I can feel the bones grind against one another, but I make sure not to give him the
slightest indication that he's hurting me. It hurts like a motherfucker of course, but there is no way
in hell I'm letting him know that … I'd rather take a knee to the balls than give him the satisfaction
of knowing it hurts like hell.

We gaze across the table at each other, neither letting go, until finally he releases my hand. It takes
everything I have in me not to rub my hand to get rid of the throbbing pain in it. I manage to
casually sit back like my hand hasn't just had every bone in it disintegrated into dust and wait for
him to speak.

After one last penetrating look everything about him relaxes. "Let's cut the bullshit, Masen.
Carlisle has told me a bit about your situation, so I know where you've been and I know what
you're doing here in Corea."

I hunch my shoulders as I imagine the worst, but he surprises me when he begins to speak again.
This time his voice has lost just a bit of the bite from before. "If Carlisle didn't trust you, I wouldn't
even give you the time of day, but because he does, I might be willing to give you a chance."

"Tha … " I sputter before he slaps his hand on the table and gives me a look that makes my balls
shrievel to the size of raisins.

"Don't thank me yet," he warns. This time the bite is as sharp as razor blades. "I said might, I didn't
say I would. The fact that Peyton seems to like you says a lot because my granddaughter can smell
bullshit from a mile away and is the best judge of character of anyone I've ever met. That alone
tells me that you deserve a chance." He sits back in his chair and doesn't say anything. The silence
that looms between us is as uncomfortable as any I've ever experienced. My mind's racing, my
nerves are frayed, and though I don't smoke, I can't help but wish for something, anything that
would give me some relief. At this point I'd be willing to settle for numb.

When his eyes meet mine again, there are a hundred emotions flashing in them but they're gone so
fast I can't give any of them a name. "This restaurant has been in my family for as long as anyone
in Corea can remember. There's been a Swan behind that counter … and a Swan that brings in the
food that's cooked here for more years than you and I have been alive, combined. I was born and
raised on the water. Hell, I probably have more seawater flowing through my veins than blood by
now. My family's always lived here. My wife and I have raised our kids here and now we're
watching Bella raise hers. Everything I love, everything that is the reason for my existence is
inside this restaurant right now and in this town and you're asking me to trust you? To trust you
with my livelihood, with everything that matters … with my family?"

His words are harsh. They sting and make me want to leap from my chair and run as far away from
him and his doubts as I can. I understand them; of course I do. The man is obviously no fool. Only
a fool would accept someone like me at face value, based on the good word of a man he doesn't
know and one he does. No one in their right mind would expect any less, and though I wish it
wasn't the case, I know where he's coming from. I know what Wayne and Carlisle have asked of
him, and, if anything, it makes me want to prove myself to him even more.

"I can't make you give me a chance, but I can promise that if you do, I'll never give you a reason to
doubt me. I'll work hard. I'll do whatever I have to, whatever you ask of me. This is my chance, my
one shot to move on and leave the past behind me."

I want to beg him, but there's no way in hell a man as good and proud as Charlie Swan wants to
hear that.

He gaze is deep and penetrating, but I don't dare move. I don't even breathe. Finding out I was
being moved to the Pre-Release Center, hearing that my parole had been granted, discovering that
I'd been given a hundred thousand dollars … none of it made me feel like I have ice in my veins or
makes my chest feel like an elephant is standing on it the way it does as I wait for Charlie to decide
my fate. My life is literally in his hands, and it's fucking terrifying.

The sound of the chair scraping across the floor as he pushes away from the table makes my
stomach drop out of my ass. When he says, "Don't make me regret this. Be at the dock, five A.M.
sharp tomorrow morning," my whole body wants to sag in relief, but I keep still.

He stands up and strides away, not looking back. It's not until he walks through the doors of the kitchen that I take my first breath. I don't move, I can't, as the realization that the second chance I've been so desperate for is now a reality. I want to be here, in Corea, and without this job, the chances of being allowed to stay here were slim to none. The alternative, going back to Boston, working at some dead-end job someplace just to meet the requirements of my parole thankfully hasn't come to fruition.

I replay the conversation in my head and my heart sort of skips a beat when I realize Charlie said his daughter's name. Bella. The name's perfect for her. I wonder if it's short for Isabella or if people ever call her Izzy, and then shake my head at my idiotic brain. I have to shift in my chair because my jeans have suddenly become uncomfortably tight as I picture the way her jeans hugged her perfect ass and the way the sunlight that streamed in through the widows brought out the bits of red in her hair. The woman wants nothing to do with me but I can't help but appreciate the way she looks. It's been more than seven years since I've felt a woman's body and thinking about hers is definitely making that fact painfully clear.

Shaking my head and adjusting myself as unobtrusively as possible, I finally take a look around the restaurant. There are a few people scattered throughout and I watch as a woman with short black hair glances in my direction as she sets down a plate of food. She gives me a brief smile and then leans down and whispers into the ear of a man with shaggy blond hair. When she points in my direction, an action I'm sure I wasn't supposed to be able to see, he turns toward me, not even trying to hide the fact that he's staring at me. His gaze isn't hostile, but it certainly isn't welcoming either.

I resist the urge to glare back at him. I want to, a whole fucking lot, as I wonder what the hell difference it makes to him who I am, but I don't. As much as I fucking hate it, it's just something I'm going to have to get used to. He finally turns back toward the woman when I don't react to whatever the hell he was trying to do and I get up.

I want to find Peyton but know I can't. In all likelihood our brief but very meaningful conversation from before is the only one we'll ever have. Charlie may have given me a job, but that sure as hell doesn't mean that he's going to let me be around his family and certainly not his granddaughter. It surprises me how much that thought … fucking hurts.

With a quick glance at the clock on the wall behind the cash register, I realize it's getting close to dinnertime at the boarding house. When I get outside, I can't help but smile when I see my bike gleaming in the sun. The thing is gorgeous and riding her gives me a feeling I can't even put into words. Exhilarating, exciting … freeing. My grandfather would have loved it and that thought makes my smile grow. Before I start it up, I hear a squeal of laughter float through the air and I know it's Peyton even though I can't see her.

The sound's as sweet as I imagined it would be.

I wonder if I'll ever get to make her laugh that way and I vow as I ride off toward the boarding house that somehow, someway, I will.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Edward, I hope you like fried chicken," Esme Cullen says when I walk into her kitchen a short while later.

To say that I was surprised by her and Carlisle when I arrived last night is an understatement. I have no idea what I was expecting, but the two of them are definitely not it. Carlisle is blond-
haired, blue-eyed and looks like he'd be just as comfortable teaching in an Ivy League school as he
would be working out on the boat with Charlie. Esme has long, light brown hair and the greenest
eyes I've ever seen. She's a small woman but I have no doubt that she can hold her own in any
situation. She has an air about her, one that makes her seem part mom and part lioness at the same
time.

When I roared up on my bike the night before, they were standing on the front porch, welcoming
me with smiles like I was their long-lost son home from being away too long. I'd barely
dismounted before Esme had pulled me into a hug, and without any hesitation whatsoever, I
returned it - even though every cell in my body cringed from her touch. People invading my space
is something I'm definitely not used to. It took all I had not to push her away from me, no matter
that all I wanted to do was stand in her arms indefinitely. There was something that was so
comforting about the way it felt. It had been more years than I could remember since the last time
a hug felt so good … since my grandmother died. Instantly I knew I didn't want to upset her if I
could help it. The feeling was as surprising as it was disconcerting. With the exception of Wayne, I
haven't wanted to please anyone in a long … long time.

Carlisle was just as welcoming as his wife had been, though thankfully not as touchy-feely. A firm
handshake and a pat on the back and we were done with the introductions. Dinner had been a
simple meal of spaghetti, salad, and garlic bread but it was fucking delicious. Again it seemed like
special arrangements had been made because I was the only one at dinner with them. As much as it
made me uncomfortable to realize there were things that had been going on that I didn't know
about, I was relieved just the same.

"Edward, dear, would you like lemonade or iced tea with dinner?" Esme asks me and I give her a
sheepish grin because it's obvious I've spaced out for a few minutes.

"Lemonade will be great, Esme."

I watch as she seamlessly moves around the large kitchen. It's on the tip of my tongue to ask why
she and Carlisle run this place but I don't. Most likely it's a very personal reason, and because I
don't want them asking the same types of questions of me, I keep my mouth shut.

"It smells really good," I tell her instead.

She beams at the compliment and I want to roll my eyes at myself because I have no doubt if I look
in a mirror, the tips of my ears will be bright red from embarrassment. How she makes me feel like
a schoolboy with a crush on his teacher, I have no idea and the thought is pretty damned
discomfiting.

First Esme and now Peyton … I feel like I've turned into a big fucking marshmallow in the span of
less than twenty-four hours.

Apparently she's not done trying to make me feel like a pre-pubescent kid because she smiles at me
once she's done pouring lemonade into iced glasses and says, "You need to be sure to give me a list
of your favorite meals and what things you don't like. I want to make sure you'll eat your dinner.
You're much too thin, dear."

When she pats my arm as she passes me, like it's something she's done hundreds of times before, I
realize just how isolating prison truly is. The more time spent behind bars, the more it eats away at
your soul until you're nothing but a hardened shell that's empty on the inside. Before I got out, I
worried that I'd changed into someone like that. The fact that meeting Peyton and Esme … even
Wayne and Carlisle, has made the impression on me that it has, gives me hope. Hope that someday
I will be known simply as Edward, not Edward the ex-con.
Carlisle walks in, and when he does, both of their faces light up like they haven't seen each other for weeks instead of merely hours. If they weren't so damned cute it would make me cringe, but the love they have for each other is as plain as day.

"Edward, good to see you," Carlisle says after he kisses Esme on the cheek … and pats her on the ass.

_That_ I really could have done without seeing, and I pretty much choke when Carlisle winks at me, showing no shame whatsoever.

Without being asked, he and I help Esme carry the chicken, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and freshly-baked biscuits to the table. From our discussion last night, I remember them telling me that most nights they eat together and then leave the other boarders to eat whenever they are done on the boats. As of right now, there's only me and one other guy staying with them - someone named Seth. So far I haven't seen him and I haven't decided whether I want to keep it that way or just get the introductions over with.

This whole integrating back into society thing sure isn't as easy as it sounds … in fact it's damned tough. Going seven years while trying to keep to myself as much as I could makes having to interact with others almost torturous. I want to stop second-guessing people's actions and looking for ulterior motives every time I meet someone, but I know it'll take some time before that happens.

Once we're seated and our plates are full, we dig in. Burgers, beer, spaghetti, fried chicken … lemonade … I feel like a king at a feast. Every meal I've had since being released tastes fucking delicious. It's amazing what seven years of eating food that's barely more than slop will do to your taste buds. I can't eat as much as I used to, though, so after a few pieces of chicken and a piece of corn, I'm done.

"So, Edward," Carlisle says as he puts down his napkin. "How did your meeting go with Charlie?"

I manage to not blurt out my first thought, which is Charlie Swan is one of the most intimidating men I've ever met in my life. I know Carlisle and Charlie are friends, obviously good ones, and I don't want to disrespect either of them so I merely say, "He's going to give me a chance. I start tomorrow morning."

The fact that I have a job, that I have a reason to stay in Corea, makes me sit up taller in my seat. I have a purpose, something to work toward, and the feeling is heady.

"Oh, Edward!" Esme beams and reaches across the table to pat my hand. "That's such wonderful news!"

It comes as a shock how much it affects me that she's so pleased, and I shift a bit in my chair. All these new feelings I'm having are confusing the fuck out of me and now all I want to do is get some space.

Before I can make my escape though, Carlisle chuckles. "Yes, well, I can imagine Charlie made you squirm a bit before telling you that?" he questions with a raised eyebrow.

"Um, yeah … you could say that." I can't help but cringe as I remember Charlie's words.

Esme scoffs and then smiles at me. "Don't you let Charlie Swan fool you, Edward. That man is a big softy underneath all that huffing and puffing. If you ever see him with his granddaughter, you'll see a completely different side of him."
My lips twitch and my heart does that stuttering thing in my chest again when I think about my self-appointed new best friend. I'm twenty-seven years-old and the fact that my only friend is a little girl should have me questioning my sanity … and my manhood if I'm being honest, but I can't find it in me to mind a whole hell of a lot. There are a lot worse things, I imagine, than having Peyton as a friend.

"Yes … I've met Peyton," I tell them both and I know I have a goofy ass smile on my face but I can't help it.

Carlisle and Esme both laugh and it seems as if the little sprite has more than just me wrapped around her little finger.

Esme claps her hands and practically bounces up and down in her seat at the mention of Peyton's name. "Isn't she just the sweetest thing? And smart as a whip, too, that one. Just like her mama, that's for sure. Bella's done such an amazing job with that little girl. After what happened before Peyton was born, we were all so worried, but Bella's one of the strongest women I know," she trails off. Her entire demeanor shifts with her last statement and her smile is instantly replaced with a frown.

I'm thrown by her words and wonder what in the hell happened to Bella. A flash of glinting brown eyes rips through me and I know at once how strong she is. Somehow I also know that behind the fierce façade is a woman still in pain. Pain from what, I haven't the first damn clue, but I know it's there.

The fact that I realize that, once again has me reeling.

"What's this about Bella?" someone asks and I look up.

The man is staring at me, blatantly so. He gives me the once over and like the blond-haired man from the restaurant earlier, doesn't even try to hide his perusal. His eyes narrow at the scar on my neck, even more so when he gets to the ink on my arms. When our eyes meet once he's through, I can't say that the look he gives me is intimidating but it's not exactly warm and cuddly either.

"Oh, Seth," Esme sweetly says as she gets up. "This is Edward. He's going to be staying here and will be working on the Isabella Marie with Charlie and the guys."

Of course Charlie named the boat after her.

Seth's stance loses a bit of its rigidity and he holds his hand out to me. Apparently if I've passed muster with Charlie, I'm golden, so I take his hand and shake it.

"Nice to meet you," he says and sits down.

"Likewise," I tell him, somewhat awkwardly.

After Seth eats for a few minutes, Esme says, "We were just talking about Peyton. Edward's met her also."

Seth takes a big drink of his lemonade and then sits back in his chair. When he smirks at me, I get an uneasy feeling, though I have no idea why. "Peyton is something else," he tells me, and his voice seems to be laced with some unspoken warning.

"Yes, she is," I tell him levelly. I have no idea what's going on, but I'll be damned if I let him know that.
"You meet Bella?" he asks, not taking his eyes off me.

This time I warily shift in my seat. "In a manner of speaking."

Somehow he's managed to clean his plate in the time we've been talking. He sets his now empty glass beside the empty plate and looks at me, not speaking for a few very tense moments. Suddenly his face breaks out into a huge smile and I frown, wondering what the hell is the matter with him.

"Wait until you meet Xavier," is all he says before thanking Esme for dinner. He takes his dishes to the sink and I watch, dumbfounded, as he puts them in the dishwasher and then leaves the room without looking back.

All I can do is stare at him, slack-jawed, as I wonder what the fuck that was all about … and who the hell Xavier is.

I'm not sure I want to know.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

So … how about that first meeting between Edward and Peyton? She's something else isn't she? And now we've seen Edward's side of seeing Bella for the first time, Edward's got his job on the boat with Charlie and the guys, we've seen Carlisle and Esme, and met Seth … whew! Next chapter we'll be back to Bella - poor girl is all over the place when it comes to Edward, lol!

*The Breakers* has the most incredible blog thanks to the amazing Laurel, so please go check it out. We add things all the time and each week will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see: pictures of all the characters, story images, there is even a history on lobster fishing and some information about Corea, Maine, too! It's fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

*The Greatest Gift* has been nominated for some Shimmer Awards:

Fragile Award - Best All Human

Best Storyteller Aware - Best Author

Best Tearjerker Award

Please vote if you would like and check out all of the other great stories that have been nominated!

Shimmerawards.blogspot.com / p / vote.html – just remove the spaces and brackets.

For those of you that have followed me from *The Path We Choose* and/or *The Greatest Gift*, the PDF's for TPWC and TGG are done and available for you to download if you want them! The links are on all the blogs. They both are so amazing and Laurel worked SO hard on them! I'm so excited to share these with you all, and thanks to her, now I can!
Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think, I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 5

Damn it," I mutter angrily as I reach for the towel to wipe up my mess.

Again.

Jesus, it's been like this ever since yesterday afternoon when I saw … him. My mind's as scattered as the seeds of a dandelion flower that have been carried by the wind and I can't concentrate on anything. Not to mention that every time I close my eyes, I see flashes of ink-covered skin, copper-hued hair, and eyes that change color as fast as I can imagine them. I haven't even heard his voice … but I sure as hell know his name. Peyton hasn't been able to stop talking about him. It's been 'I wonder if Edward likes this' and 'Maybe Edward likes that' practically nonstop now.

Who is he?

Why is he here?

Why does he look afraid one minute and angry the next?

Why does my daughter talk about him like he's the best thing since Tom Brady let his hair grow?

Why can't I stop thinking about him?

Round and round and round my mind keeps skipping from one question to the other without ever getting an answer. I know my dad offered Edward a job on the boat at Carlisle's request and that immediately has me wondering what the hell's going on. It's not like I question my dad's or even Carlisle's judgment, but this whole thing has set me on edge and I don't understand why.
I drape the towel over the edge of the sink and start to fill my glass with water again when I hear, "Bella!" The glass I'm holding clangs in the sink and I turn around, scowling at my brother.

"Damn it, Emmett, what the hell?"

Looking at me like I've clearly lost my mind he says, "Excuse me, sis. I've only been calling your name for like two minutes now. What the hell are you thinking about so hard?"

He approaches warily, squinting his eyes at me. I hate when he does that because more than likely he's trying to figure out what I'm not telling him, so I quickly turn away.

"Bella, what's the matter with you? Rose told me you were spacing out every few minutes at the restaurant today … and that you had to send food back - twice - because you messed up the order. Spill it. What has you jumpier than a jackrabbit?" Emmett asks in his no-nonsense voice.

I slam the glass on the dish rack like the reason I can't seem to even pour myself some water is its fault and not my own and then turn back toward my brother. My arms immediately cross on my chest and my pose is defensive. I hope my attitude will convince him to back the hell off but I'm pretty sure the chances of that happening are slim to none.

"Is Peyton okay? Are you two having problems? Do you need me to talk to her?" he fires at me one after the other and immediately I feel like shit.

"No, Em, Peyton's just fine. As a matter-of-fact she's still floating on cloud nine since she beat Brody yesterday," I tell him, trying not to sound as smug as he looks.

Apparently we're all living vicariously through my seven-year-old daughter. I can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Luckily, the subject of Peyton diverts his attention away from me. I love my brother, but he has a tendency to jump to conclusions about what's best for me without thinking about what he says first. We're close, but I'd be lying if I say he is my go-to person when I need advice. In his eyes, I've always been the little sister that follows him around like a little puppy dog. He's somehow failed to realize that I've grown up, though you would think the fact that I'm a mom would be his first clue. He always means well and most of the time only has my best interest at heart, but he doesn't really know me or what I want. He certainly doesn't know how often I wake up, gasping for breath, from the nightmares that never seem to go away.

A loud groan erupts from the living room and both Em and I head in that direction. Peyton's sitting in my dad's lap watching the baseball game from his favorite recliner. Rose and my mom are looking at a catalog together on the sofa and I watch as Emmett plops down beside her. With barely a second thought, his arm goes around her shoulders and her body molds itself against his. It's almost like her body's a part of his and they've been apart for too long.

You would think that after seeing each other every day for twenty-five years, with the exception of the days Emmett is out on the boat with the crew and our dad, that type of reaction would wane over time. But no, not for my brother and sister-in-law. Much like my parents, their love for each other has only grown. Not gonna lie, it's damn hard most of the time to be around him and Rose … Jasper and Alice, too, for that matter, which is why I spend the majority of my time hanging out with Xavier and Seth.

Even though they're in as a committed relationship as the others, it doesn't bother me as much to see them being affectionate with each other as it does Em and Rose and Jasper and Ali. I have no idea what that says about me … I don't want to know. I hate myself at times for being jealous of
my family and friends because they have something I want, but no matter how hard I try not to be, it doesn't always work. For the most part, I manage to keep those feelings buried deep inside, wishing that they would never see the light of day. There are times the struggle to keep them hidden just becomes too much and they creep up to the surface and poke their heads out just long enough to remind me they are always there.

Kind of like right now.

"Pop, we're gonna lose, aren't we?" Peyton whines with a sad huff.

My gaze flickers to the screen where Derek Jeter has just hit a home run putting the evil Yankees ahead of her beloved Red Sox.

My dad ruffles her hair and kisses her forehead, smirking just a bit. "I'm afraid so, Pumpkin. Good thing they're playing again tomorrow night. We'll get 'em, don't worry."

She leans forward to kiss his cheek then scrambles off his lap to stand in front of him. "Well, we'd better," she says with her hands on her little hips. "Losing sucks."

"Peyton Renée," I scold though it doesn't come out sounding much like one considering I'm trying to keep from laughing.

My little girl is very … VERY passionate about her sports teams. A trait she's most definitely picked up from her grandfather. The one who's trying to not look all proud and shit of her attitude.

"Dad," I warn when I see his mouth twitch beneath his mustache.

My mom snickers and I turn to look at her, not missing at all the fist bump my dad gives Peyton. The only thing I can do is shake my head and say a silent thanks that it isn't football season. You don't want to be within shouting distance of the Swan house during football season … especially if the Patriots are losing. And God help you if you're not a Patriots fan … or a Tom Brady fan.

I lean back on my elbows where I've been sitting on the floor and tell my mom, "You know, you could help do something about him."

As soon as the words leave my mouth I can tell they come out harsher than I mean for them to. I take a deep breath and tip my head back, staring at the ceiling.

The silence that follows is uncomfortable and I know I should apologize for snapping, but I don't. I will later because that's just the way our family works, but it doesn't have to be right now. Between the nightmare the other night, the whole sudden appearance of Edward and the uneasy feeling that gives me, on top of feeling sorry for myself, I know I've been acting out of sorts for the past few days.

"Come on, Peyton," my mom says after another moment. "Let's go in the kitchen and fix dessert. I think we have some apple pie and vanilla ice cream."

I cringe a little from the tone of her voice. Peyton doesn't pay any attention to it because all she heard was the word dessert and she's out of the room like her pants are on fire, but I do. I sheepishly look at Mom and hang my head. Yep, I'm definitely going to have to apologize before we leave.

Rose follows my mom out but not before giving me a look that lets me know my mom isn't the only one expecting something from me. She's been hovering at the restaurant because I know she can sense I'm keeping something from her. As much as I love her, it sucks sometimes that she
knows me so well. Groaning once they leave the room, I flop down on my back and reach up to grab a pillow off the couch to hold over my face. Maybe the lack of oxygen will snuff out all the self-pitying thoughts I have rolling around in my crazy mind.

"Bella," my dad chastises me and I groan even louder.

"Yes, Dad, I know," I say through the pillow, though I'm not at all sure he can understand a word that's come out of my mouth seeing as how my face is still buried.

Apparently both my dad and Emmett decide to let me stew in my fabric-induced cage. I tune them out until I hear Edward's name, which in turn makes my breathing pick up, my skin feel like thousands of caterpillars are crawling all over me, and my stomach does a few hundred annoying somersaults all in a row.

Pulling the pillow from my face, I look up at my dad and try to figure out exactly what he and Emmett are talking about. I kind of lost focus when I heard Edward's name.

"I think he did well for his first day," Charlie's saying and I gather that Emmett has asked about my dad's first impression of Edward.

I'm all ears.

I turn and look at my brother and he shifts on the couch and throws his arm casually along the back of the sofa.

Em nods in agreement and for reasons I don't even want to think about, the fact that both of them have positive things to say about Edward makes my heart skip a beat.

I open my mouth to say something and the words get stuck in my throat. Coughing, I try again. "What do you know about him?"

I hope my question sounds blasé, but I don't think I'm fooling anyone. In fact, when my dad raises his eyebrow at me, I know I haven't, but I don't care. The man looked at my daughter like she was an oasis in the middle of the desert. While it didn't necessarily frighten me like I am afraid he has nefarious intentions or anything, it did … and does make me uneasy. I'd be a fool if it didn't and I don't feel the least bit bad about asking for answers either.

I'm a mom first, always, and Peyton's well-being is more important than anything, even giving people the benefit of the doubt like I've been raised to do.

When it comes to my little girl, niceties and proper behavior can take a flying leap for all I care, and my parents and brother should all be well aware of that fact by now.

I hold my dad's gaze, not backing down. Finally he purses his lips and then sits back in his chair. "From what Carlisle has told me, Edward's from Boston, got into a bit of trouble, and now he's looking for a fresh start."

Well, if that's not … incredibly vague, I think and snort before looking at my dad. "And?"

"And what, Bella? Carlisle asked me to do a favor for him. I need a new guy, so I'm going to see how it all works out. End of story," Charlie tells me and I know I'm staring at him like he's got two heads.

"End of story?" I whisper fiercely when I pop up off the ground. "What the hell, Dad? You don't know this guy from Adam and you're just willing to give him a job on your boat? You trust him
enough to take him out on the water, to have him work with Jasper and Emmett? To let him be around Mom or Rose and Ali … Peyton?" I know my eyes are shooting fire at him.

My hands shake and I take a few deep breaths so that I don't say something totally inappropriate like asking him if he's lost his ever-loving mind. I hear Emmett snicker beside me and I whip around and look at him.

"And you?" I hiss, pointing a trembling finger at him. "You trust him, too, I suppose."

"Bella, would you calm the hell down." Charlie's tone makes me sit down and mash my lips together so my mouth doesn't get me in more trouble than it already has.

He sits up in his chair and leans forward. "Now, if you think you can talk without shrieking like a damn banshee, why don't you tell me what's got you in such a tizzy, hmmm?"

I obviously can't tell my father that just the man's name makes me want to run and hide beneath the covers in my bed. My reactions to Edward aren't normal … even I realize that, but I can't think about them now. Telling myself that I have every right to be concerned and wary, I forge ahead. "I just find it odd that Carlisle calls you up right when you need to find a new deckhand and you hire him on the spot, with nothing more than Carlisle's assurance that he's a good guy. The man could be a serial killer or wanted by the FBI for all you know. I just don't get it." I cringe a little bit because I know I'm sounding more like my seven-year-old than the twenty-seven year-old woman I am, but I can't help it.

There's something more going on. I can feel it. Until I know what it is, I'm keeping my guard up and my eyes open, manners be damned.

"Bella, do you honestly think I'd just hire some yahoo off the street without doing any checking? Give me a break, kid. I've been doing this a hell of a long time you know," he tells me with a pointed look. "Carlisle told me a bit about Edward's story and after watching him, I can tell he's just trying to start over. He worked damn hard today and until he proves otherwise, I'm willing to give him a chance."

His tone is final and I know there isn't anything I can say to sway his opinion, not that I would anyway. My dad isn't easily fooled, so if he sees something in Edward that he's inclined to believe, then I'm just going to have to suck it up and deal with it. I still have every intention of keeping Peyton as far away from him as I can … myself, too. There just isn't any other option.

"I'm going to get dessert." My dad gets up from his chair and walks into the kitchen.

Well, if that isn't a dismissal, I don't know what is. I'm annoyed because I want more answers, but it's fairly obvious either my dad doesn't have them or isn't going to share them. My bet is it's a combination of both.

I start to stand up but Emmett grabs my wrist. When I turn my head toward him, he's looking at me with a mixture of confusion and worry. "Sis, are you going to tell me the real reason you're acting weirder than shit?"

Gently, because I don't want to get into it, especially with him, I pull my hand away. He wouldn't understand anyway … mostly because I don't understand it myself. "It's nothing, Emmett," I tell him and head toward the kitchen.

I hear him sigh behind me and there's something about the way it sounds, sad and heavy, that makes me turn around even though I don't want to.
"Someday, Bella, you're going to have to take down that wall you've been hiding behind." His eyes are filled with so much sadness I have to turn away.

"I wish I could," I whisper and it's so soft it comes out as barely louder than a breath. I don't think Emmett even heard me but when I hear the low groan from behind me, I know he did.

I don't turn around though; I can't, and instead plaster another fake smile on my face and enter the kitchen. The smile turns into a real one at the sight of my daughter sitting with my dad at the table while they discuss the baseball game they just finished watching. I take the opportunity to sidle up next to my mom at the sink and kiss her quickly on the cheek before mumbling a very soft, but no less sincere, "I'm sorry for snapping at you," in her ear.

She immediately covers my hand with hers and gives it a slight squeeze and I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. It's not the first time I've snapped at her, nor will it be the last, but the fact is I'm a Swan and we all have quick tempers. Sometimes they flare up at the worst times.

"You okay?" she asks me and when I nod my head she narrows her hazel eyes at me and gives me the "Mom" look. Knowing me as well as she does, she rubs a small circle on my back and then thankfully leaves me be.

We stay long enough for Peyton to finish her pie and the extra scoop of ice cream my dad sneaks her and then it's time to go. Her last day of school is tomorrow and she needs to go home and get to bed. I tell myself I'm not trying to get out of there so I can be alone, but of course I know better. It's times like this when I'm very thankful that I stuck to my guns when I was pregnant and insisted on getting my own house. I can't lie … it's damn lonely at times, but I need my space.

Of course, the little voice inside my head that always seems to know when I'm lying is tsking her tongue at me and I silently concede that going home to an empty house isn't really what I want at all. When the little voice tells me "that's better," I smile and then realize I'm having a conversation … with myself.

Shaking my head at my idiotic mental ramblings, I usher Peyton out the door with a final wave to our family and we walk the short distance from my parents' house to our own. The night is cool. There's still a hint of warmth in the air and the slight breeze makes Peyton's hair flutter around her face as she skips and bounces beside me. I have half a mind to turn around and leave her with my father so he can tend to her sugar overload right before bed.

"Mom, tomorrow's my last day of school!" she squeals out of nowhere and I chuckle at the sound of her voice.

"Really?" I tease. "I didn't know that."

"Mom," Peyton says, completely exasperated with me and I smirk. "I wonder what Edward's first day was like?" she innocently asks and immediately the calm I'd felt settle around us during our walk completely evaporates. Again I'm consumed with the way he looked as he entered the restaurant yesterday, and though I've convinced myself that I have every right to be wary of him, I worry just a tiny bit about what he thinks of me. Okay, I worry a lot about what he thinks of me. After listening to my father and brother talk, neither of whom hand out praise easily, I know he had to have made a good impression on them because they both complimented how hard he'd worked out on the water today.

In the midst of all my thinking we manage to make it home. Once we get inside, I send Peyton upstairs to take a bath while I lock up the house. I'm tired suddenly, and hope that sleep comes easily tonight. I lie in bed with Peyton while we read together, until her eyes droop so much I can
pull the book from her fingers with no argument. When I scoot off the bed, I stand up and stretch; my muscles are heavy and tense and the idea of a shower seems like heaven. My eyes find Peyton and my heart swells with love. The worries about Edward and all the rest simply fade away. She's the center of my universe and the reason I get up every morning. Kissing her on the forehead, I tuck the covers around her knowing that in a matter of minutes, they'll be in a tangled mess around her little body. I close the window just a bit and then with one last glance, quietly make my way to my room.

Alone … always alone.

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Waking after what has to be the most restless night's sleep in I can't remember how long, I stretch and think about what to make Peyton for breakfast. It's the last day of school so it deserves to be something special. Summer is always such a fun time and ever since she started school, it's been the time of year I look forward to more than any other. I keep the same schedule as I do while she's in school. It gives us time together in the morning before we head to the restaurant. We usually read on the front porch or take a walk on the beach … just something quiet so that we can enjoy each other's company. Now that Peyton's a bit older, she helps during lunchtime rolling silverware and bringing drinks to the tables then usually goes and spends the afternoon with Aggie or with her friends before coming back to The Breakers for dinner before we go home.

It's a simple life but it's all I know and we're happy … well, she is at any rate. That's all that matters to me.

Once my hair is up in its ever-present ponytail and my face is washed, I walk down the hall to wake up Peyton. To say she isn't a morning person is like asking her if she hates the New York Giants. There are very few things in her life she takes as seriously as her hatred for the New York Giants football team, thanks to her Pop Charlie, except for sleeping. The girl enjoys a good night's sleep more than anyone I've ever seen and getting her up in the morning is like waking a bear out of hibernation.

I can't help but smile when I slowly open the door because it never fails that she's spread out all over the bed. This morning she's lying sideways across the mattress, flat on her back, with her mouth hanging open. I stifle a giggle because she's snoring softly and her tongue is hanging out the side and it's about the cutest thing I've ever seen. There's a brief pang of regret when I realize I don't have anyone to share moments like this with, but I shake it off as quickly as it comes. Peyton and I have been just fine for the past seven years by ourselves and we'll continue to be that way.

Gently I sit on the edge of her bed and brush the hair back from her face. Whispering I say, "Baby, it's time to get up," and bend over to kiss her forehead.

She groans and grumbles as she stretches and then finally cracks an eye open to look at me. She's got a scowl on her face and I laugh and tickle her sides. "Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. Today's the last day of school. You should be happy!"

Her eyes grow big. It's obvious she forgot what today is and then a huge smile breaks out on her face. She leaps out of bed, well, more like stumbles and somehow lands on her feet and then pumps her fist in the air. "Yes!" she yells and then spins around in a circle. "Three whole months with no school! Hurry, Mom! Go make breakfast!" she tells me as she pulls me off the bed and pushes me out the door.

"Breakfast will be ready in twenty minutes," I call back as I walk toward the stairs. "Pancakes with strawberries."
I wait for the squeak, which I hear from behind her closed door.

The fact that something as simple as making her favorite breakfast makes her so happy warms my heart and eases those ever-present doubts of not being enough for her.

I make my way to the kitchen and start our special last day of school breakfast. By the time I'm slicing the strawberries to put on top of the pancakes, Peyton is sliding into her seat at the table. She's dressed in her usual shorts and a t-shirt. She's tried to get her hair up into a ponytail but all she's managed to do is make a tangled mess because she's missed half her hair.

"Nice hairdo," I tell her with a grin as I slide her plate in front of her.

She shrugs her shoulders because most of the time my daughter couldn't care less what she looks like. She figures she's doing well if her clothes match and she's brushed her teeth. Sometimes I worry that she spends too much of her time with boys and with adults and needs more female interaction. Even with Alice and Rose doing their best to make sure Peyton learns to appreciate being a girl, she'd much rather be climbing rocks and digging for clams on the beach than getting her nails painted and her hair done.

After we spend a few minutes enjoying our breakfast, she looks up then around as if something is missing. "Where's Xavier?" she asks as it's finally dawned that our regular morning visitor is absent.

"He had to stay at the restaurant this morning, remember? Nana had to go to Gouldsboro to buy some supplies," I tell her as we both continue to demolish our pancakes.

No one can ever say the Swan women don't enjoy their food.

"Does that mean we get to take Cherry to school?" she asks, bouncing up and down in her seat.

I can't help the smile that breaks out across my face at her enthusiasm. Peyton loves riding in my sweet baby as much as I love driving her. When I nod my head she starts shoveling food in her mouth like there's no tomorrow.

"Slow down." I chuckle at her. "We have plenty of time. We should even be able to drive by the dock and look at the boats, too." With that her fork clatters onto the plate.

"I'm done."

Her eyes dance with excitement. Just like me, Peyton loves going to the docks to look at the boats. Dad and the guys will be long gone by now, but there'll be plenty of other ones to look at. Thinking about Dad and the Isabella Marie makes my stomach flutter. Edward. Somehow I've managed to go a whole hour without thinking about him - which is some kind of record since he walked into the restaurant two days before. I have no idea what it is about the man that keeps him in my mind all the damn time, even when I sleep, and I don't want to know.

As soon as I figure out what he's doing here and what he wants, I'll be able to forget him, I adamantly tell myself. I patently ignore the tiny voice in the back of my mind that's singing "Liar, liar, pants on fire" in the most annoying voice ever … one that sounds eerily like Moaning Myrtle from Harry Potter.

Ignoring that little barb as best I can, I clean off the table while Peyton brushes her teeth and hopefully fixes her hair. When she comes back down, her hair's marginally better but I decide it's her hair. It's just going to get messy anyway so I don't say a word as we walk out the door and climb into the Blazer.
I chuckle a bit as she huffs and puffs from the backseat. Luckily for me, Cherry rumbles kind of loudly when I first turn her on so Peyton doesn't hear me.

"Sorry, baby, but you know you aren't old or big enough to sit in the front seat yet," I tell her when I glance at her in the rear view mirror.

She gives me a look that clearly indicates, "duh, Mom," and then we're off. We chatter back and forth about what we want to have for dinner, what movie we want to watch on Saturday night because yes, my dates these days include hanging out with my daughter. More than likely Xavier, Seth, and probably even Emmett and Rose and Jasper and Alice will stop by, too. There isn't much to do in Corea and none of us are ones for hanging out in the only bar in town or going into Ellsworth to go to a club.

We all usually try to go once a month or so … and I'm the one kicking and screaming the whole time. Being surrounded by couples who are madly in love with each other and who aren't afraid to show way more PDA than I'm comfortable with, is not my idea of fun … at all. You'd think they'd all know that by now, but every few weeks, one of them gets a bee up their ass to go to the big city of Ellsworth. How a town with a population of not quite eight thousand is considered the big city I'll never know, but I suppose when compared to a place that has two thousand, it's huge.

Both windows are rolled all the way down, and the closer we get to the docks the calmer I begin to feel. The fresh and briny smell of the ocean, mixed with the sounds of the water as it laps against the boats as they rock in their slips and the chattering seagulls gives me such a feeling of peace. It makes absolutely no sense to me why I'm so utterly affected by it all, especially considering what happened to Evan, but my body reacts instinctively. As we drive along, I see my dad's truck, Emmett's Jeep, and parked between them, is a motorcycle.

Somehow I know it's Edward's; it has to be. It's sleek and powerful-looking … almost menacing as the sunlight bounces off the shiny chrome. It fits him to a 'T' and there's no doubting that the bike was made for him. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from moaning out loud as I picture him straddling the gorgeous machine.

"Mom, look, Uncle Em's Jeep," Peyton says as she points out the window. "I bet that motorcycle is Edward's," she continues on almost absently as we slowly drive past the docks.

"You sure do seem to like him a lot, P." I lift my eyes to look at her in the rear view mirror and I see the sweetest smile blossom on her face. For a moment, I'm horribly jealous that this man … this stranger … can garner such a reaction out of my little girl.

She runs her finger along the window and I can tell she's thinking very carefully about what to say … almost as if she's weighing telling me some secret she really wants to keep to herself. It unsettles me and my fingers curl around the steering wheel.

"He's my best friend," she says barely above a whisper.

The words, spoken so softly, but with such conviction … such truth, rock me to my core and I have to take a few deep breaths before I say something that hurts her. I've always known that Peyton's imagination can run away from her at times. I'm sure this is no different, but there's something about the way she's said the words that has me treading ever so carefully.

"Really?" I ask. "I thought Xavier was." I'm watching her again, looking for just the slightest sign that she's gotten carried away.

"He used to be," Peyton says. She keeps her head facing out the window and her voice is sweet …
quiet, but steady and there's absolutely no hint of anything other than complete honesty. "But, Edward needs me more," she says and for some reason the words bring tears to my eyes.

My heart slams against my chest. When I look down, my fingers are white from clutching the steering wheel so tightly and I can see the fine hairs on my arm standing on end. My scalp tingles and I shiver.

"Peyton … " I splutter, totally at a loss at where this is coming from. "How can you … you just … " I'm trying to talk but I can't form even the simplest of words together.

"Mom." She huffs. "I told him we were best friends 'cause he didn't have any friends … none. Can you believe that? I mean I have lots of friends and I thought about sharing some of mine with him but then I told him I didn't think he'd like any of them as much as me. And he looked so sad, but when I told him we could be best friends, he didn't look sad anymore and you always tell me to be nice to people, so I was nice to him. I think he's really nice and I think Pop and Uncle Emmett think so, too. Do you think he'll give me a ride on his motorcycle?" she asks abruptly.

It takes a moment for my brain to catch up to the auctioneer-type rant she's just finished with but the only thing that really captures my attention is the last question. The rest is going to have to wait until later. Until I have time to think.

"No," I answer her a bit sharply. The thought of Peyton riding a motorcycle in general is enough to make me sick to my stomach, but thinking about her riding off with Edward somewhere makes my blood run cold.

"Mom," she whines and I shake my head, pressing my lips tightly together.

We don't say anything for a few moments and I can't help but be a bit grateful as I turn down the street her school is on. If there's one thing my daughter is excellent at doing it's throwing me for a loop and this one is the Space Mountain of them all.

*Best friends … with Edward,* I wonder with a lot of exasperation.

Only my daughter.

We pull up in front of the school and I turn around to help her get out of the truck. As she crawls out of the backseat she looks over her shoulder at me.

"You're not going to tell me I can't be friends with Edward, are you?"

My vision blurs for a second because I'm staring so hard at her. I want to nod my head yes and then make her swear she'll never talk to him again, but there's something about the way she looks when she talks about him that makes the words die in my throat. Instead, I slowly shake my head.

"Eeek! Thanks, Mom!" she squeals as she throws her arms around my neck and kisses my cheek.

I watch her run toward her friends wondering the whole time if I've just made the biggest mistake of my life.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Hey, Bella," I hear as the little bells jingle on the front door of the restaurant when it opens later in the afternoon.

I pop up from behind the counter where I've squatted down to get something and find myself face
to face with Seth. As always, my breathing stutters a bit when I look at him. It takes just a moment to remind myself that he and my best friend are madly in love with each other. To say that Seth is gorgeous is an understatement if I've ever heard one.

Seth's not extraordinarily tall, but what he lacks in height, he more than makes up for in looks. He's all broad shoulders, muscular chest, and chiseled abs. His dark brown hair is more wavy than curly and his eyes are the palest blue I've ever seen … so light in fact that sometimes when the light hits them just right they look almost translucent. The smile on his face is never as big or as natural as it is when he sees or talks about my best friend and for that reason alone I love him. Seth and I are really the only people Xavier can truly be himself with and it's bonded us in a way nothing else could. He's good friends with Emmett, Rose, Jasper, and Ali, but it's not the same as with Seth and me. The fact that there was also someone else that used to be part of our little group is always in the back of my mind … and of course I'm reminded of it every day when I kiss Peyton good morning.

Seth and Xavier's relationship is old news in our little town of Corea, but during the summer when there's an influx of summer vacationers and part-time fishermen, there are more than a few eyebrows raised. Separate, Seth and Xavier are both easy on the eyes, but seeing them together, once you realize they're together … is almost too much to take in. They aren't ever overly affectionate with each other when they're out in public, mostly out of respect for my parents and for Peyton, but they don't need to be in order for people to know how they feel about each other. It's obvious in the brief touches of a hand on an arm, a quick gaze into the others' eyes, and the small smiles that are meant only for them.

I love them both and there isn't a day that goes by that I'm not thankful for all they've done for me over the past seven years. My parents and Emmett have been great ever since Peyton was born, but it's been the love and support of the two of them and Rose that has really kept my head above water, even when I've wanted nothing more than to sink.

Reaching over the counter, I give him a quick hug and peck on the cheek before fixing him a glass of Orange Crush without him even having to ask. Everyone knows about his addiction to the stuff, even though he likes to pretend we don't.

"How are things on the docks today?" I slide his glass across the counter, smirking at the way his eyes light up like Peyton's do when I give her the brownie from the center of the pan instead of one of the edges.

Seth works at one of the fish processors and has for years.

"Eh, it was fine," he tells me as he chugs his glass of soda. He smacks his lips appreciatively and I can't help but laugh at bit at him.

I turn around to grab the chalk so I can write tonight's special on the chalkboard when he says, "I saw your dad and the guys today."

That really doesn't come as a shock to me, he sees them every day, but then he goes on to say, "Edward was there, too."

And with that, the chalk skips across the board and clatters to the floor. Jesus, just hearing the man's name sets me on edge. I bend over to pick up the chalk, taking time to breathe in and out. By the time I stand up again, I feel more in control … that is until I see Seth grinning at me.

Ass.
I huff at him, leaving him no doubt that he's pissed me off just by looking at me like he knows something … which he doesn't. He can't. I don't even know anything. Well, besides the fact that apparently just the name Edward makes me act like a fool. No reason to let Seth know that, however.

"Interesting guy," he says casually, though there's a hint of a question there. I don't take the bait, even though inside I'm begging him to elaborate.

Something, anything … any piece of information is welcome at this point.

"Hmmm," I mutter and hope like hell I sound as indifferent as I'm trying to pretend I am. I've turned around only because my face is an open book when it comes to lying, always has been. Seth has known me my whole life so there's no possible way I can feign anything but rabid curiosity if I look at him.

He snickers and I know I haven't fooled him in the least but he's sweet enough not to push. He knows better. "Yeah, he is. Quiet, brooding almost, but Esme has him eating out of the palm of her hand."

A vision of inked skin, wild hair, and storm cloud-colored eyes flashes behind my closed eyelids as I picture Edward and Esme together. The woman personifies love and home and warmth and my stomach does that fluttering thing again as I imagine her kissing him on the cheek after giving him milk and cookies. It's not the thought of Esme kissing him that turns my legs to rubber, it's picturing him with a smile on his face. The fact that I've spent less than five minutes in the man's presence doesn't go unrecognized, nor does the fact that I've never even heard him speak, but my brain has a mind of its own and right at the moment … it's on quite the tear.

A deluge of disjointed images flicker and it's not until I blink my eyes in rapid succession that I can focus again. Seth's waving his hand in front of me and the smirk he had a few minutes ago is replaced with the biggest damn shit-eating grin I've ever seen on his know-it-all, pain in the ass face.

If I didn't love him so much, I'd really hate him right now, but seeing as how Xavier would tan my hide if his boyfriend were to turn up … I don't know, maimed maybe, I just roll my eyes and try to glare at him.

Seth tilts his head and regards me for a moment and instead of the teasing I expect, he goes on as if I just haven't flown away to the moon and back. He relays the same information that Dad and Emmett did about Edward. I can feel that knot of tension that's been an ever-present reminder of the uneasiness I've felt since the first time I heard his name unfurl just a bit when the stories match up. At least if he's lying he's telling the same story, though my little voice is back in full force and it's reminding me over and over again to not jump to conclusions. Hearing about Esme's behavior toward him eases my mind a little bit more. I know Carlisle wouldn't let anyone he felt was dangerous around his wife. Everyone seems to want to give him a chance, but I can't risk my daughter being around him until I know what his story is. Dad said he got into some trouble in Boston and I don't want trouble around Peyton. We've been through enough and don't need to invite unwanted complications into our lives.

I'm confused.

My heart tells me one thing, but my mind tells me another.

Our conversation eventually moves from Edward to Peyton and her last day of school. As I'm gesturing about something or other that Peyton has done and said, I knock over his glass of soda.
The liquid is running down the length of the counter and the glass rolls off onto the ground.

"Shit!" I exclaim and bend over to try to clean the mess before it gets any worse.

I'm so focused on what I'm doing that I don't notice the voices from the people standing at the counter … until I hear one that raises the hair on the back of my neck and makes my toes curl in my shoes.

When I lift my head, I find myself staring into the same eyes that have been haunting me for two days now. I feel like I'm frozen in place, like my feet are covered in cement but that same fight or flight instinct is kicking in. I can feel it.

My eyes hold his for a moment longer than I know they're supposed to and though I know I should look away, I can't. I'm mesmerized by the way his eyes change color so quickly, almost like a kaleidoscope … mossy green then pewter gray, to the color of well-worn faded blue jeans … back to green again, all in a matter of seconds and the changes seem to match the emotions behind them. Wariness, surprise … calm then back to guarded.

It's the strangest, most intense encounter I've ever been through and we still haven't said a word.

"Um, Bella," Seth says as he clears his throat from beside us. "This is Edward," he finishes totally unnecessarily.

My fingers twitch. When I drag my eyes away from Edward's to look at them, I suck in a sharp breath and realize why. Edward's held his hand out to shake mine and I watch as I lift my hand slowly until it's taken with a gentleness that leaves me even more breathless than his eyes have.

"It's nice to meet you, Bella. I've heard a lot about you."

The voice that falls from his lips, the ones that are currently smirking at me, is one that I know from now on will fight nightly with the voice that echoes from my nightmares. Honestly, at this point I'm not sure which one makes me dread going to sleep more - the voice of my past or the deep, rich … coarse one of Edward's.

Caramel turtles.

His voice reminds me of my favorite candy. All silky, decadent milk chocolate, covering smooth creamy caramel with pieces of hard, crunchy pecans inside. The best blend of hard and soft, of sweet and salty … of smooth and rough. At least it was until Edward opened his mouth and said my name.

His hand squeezes mine slightly before he lets go. Our fingers stretch so that they can touch as long as possible and the motion is completely reflexive. Noticing what I've done, I snap my hand back and curl it into a tight fist beside my leg.

I'm gaping at him, I know I am, and if I had any doubt, the way Seth is staring at me is all the proof I need. I close my eyes, hoping that when I open them, I can act like the normal, rational woman I am … or I am when Edward isn't standing in front of me.

"It's nice to meet you, too," I say and cringe a bit inside when I hear the way my voice is all breathless-like.

The three of us stand there in what has to be the most uncomfortable silence ever known to man, and it's not until Em and Jasper walk in that I feel like I can finally take a breath.
"Hey, sis." Emmett's loud voice sounds through the restaurant. I take the opportunity to escape without even thinking twice.

I turn away from Seth and Edward and walk toward my brother, hugging him quickly without even breaking a stride as I head straight for the side door. Again, I know they're all watching me, but I can't stop to worry about that now. With my hand on the doorknob, the sense that someone is watching me creeps up my spine and though I tell myself not to look at him, I can't stop myself.

When our eyes meet again, his are troubled … and sad, as is the slight smile he gives me.

I turn around and walk through the door, wondering how in the hell I'm going to face my daughter when I have to tell her she can't be friends with Edward anymore.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

I know, I know, you want to kill me! Will it help if I tell you to just hang in there with me until next week? Bella is kind of all over the place right now, but trust me … you'll LOVE what happens next chapter, I promise! We'll be back to Edward's POV for the next 2 chapters, so lots of things to come. Just wait … you'll see!

_The Breakers_ has the most incredible blog thanks to the amazing Laurel, so please go check it out. We add things all the time and each week will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see! It's fabulous, go look!

www.(.)les16-thebreakers(.)blogspot(.)com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

_The Greatest Gift_ has been nominated for some Shimmer Awards:

Fragile Award - Best All Human

Best Storyteller Aware - Best Author

Best Tearjerker Award

Please vote if you would like and check out all of the other great stories that have been nominated!

Shimmerawards(.)blogspot(.)com / p / vote(.)html – just remove the spaces and brackets.

For those of you that have followed me from _The Path We Choose_ and/or _The Greatest Gift_, the PDF's for TPWC and TGG are done and available for you to download if you want them! The links are on all the blogs. They both are so amazing and Laurel worked SO hard on them! I'm so excited to share these with you all, and thanks to her, now I can!

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think, I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!
See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 6

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A HUGE thank you to all my girls: Laurel, Kat, Cecile, J'me, Kassiah, Robin, Lianne, and Ayden~ they have all worked so hard to help me get this story up and going and I wouldn't know what to do without them!

WOW! I am totally blown away by the response to The Breakers! Thank you all so much for giving this one a chance. Hope you stay with me for the ride.

A HUGE thank you to the amazing jaimearkin and PAWSPeaches for featuring The Breakers as a Featured Fic in the Nursery (stories just starting out) on The Lemonade Stand. Love you both and thanks so much for the honor! Check out the other great stories listed:

telemomadestand . blogspot p / (just remove the spaces)

Thanks also to the Twilight Girls Next Door for the rec of The Breakers this week as well!

Now, on with the story ...

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 6

EPOV

What?
The?
Hell?
Was that?

Seth, Emmett, Jasper, and I are all staring at the door that Bella has just fled out of. I have no idea what looks they have on their faces because I can't take my eyes off the space she just occupied. My hand, the one that moments ago held hers, curls and stretches beside me and I swear I can still feel the warmth of her touch.

Voices are speaking beside me, but the words are muted because every part of my mind is replaying the past few minutes in incredibly vivid detail. She didn't say much, six words in total, but I know I'll be replaying them over and over again.

While I'm working, while I'm sleeping … in the shower.

I wish she would've said my name, then I'd really have something to think about. Hearing her say it, in that breathless, sexy voice she has, would surely give my dreams even more freedom to go places they really shouldn't go.
"What the hell's the matter with Bella?" Jasper asks. I don't wait to hear if either Emmett or Seth answer him. I'm heading toward the door and through it before I can talk myself out of following her.

It's obvious I make her as skittish as a kitten, and the thought that she's afraid of me makes me uneasy.

"Bella, wait!" I holler when I see her heading toward a bright red Blazer.

The fact that she drives a beast of a truck like that is hot … really fucking hot. I know it's not really the time or the place to think about such things, but I can't help it. A hot woman that drives an even hotter car is a surefire way to get any man's blood pumping and I'm no different.

She whips around and her eyes widen as she watches me approach. I'm not running, but I'm walking fast because I want to make sure I catch her before she leaves. Noticing the way her eyes dart around, I purposely slow down.

I try not to let my own eyes wander but I can't help it as I take a good look at her. The first time I saw her I was so overwhelmed from meeting Peyton and worrying about Charlie I couldn't really concentrate. What happened just a few minutes ago is still too confusing to even think about, so that certainly doesn't count.

As I slow my steps, I look her over from head to foot and holy fucking hell is she ever something else to look at. The brown hair I do remember from the other day is even more gorgeous out in the sunlight rather than filtered through a window. I'm not even sure brown is the right color to describe it because it seems to have just as much red in it as anything. Right now it's up, and even though it lets me stare at her neck, I want to see it down. To be really honest, I want it wrapped around my fingers as I pull her head to the side and feast on her skin with my mouth.

She's got the same navy blue t-shirt on as she had the other day, but instead of jeans like the first time I saw her, this time she's in white shorts. White shorts that show off lots of smooth, tanned skin. A mouthwateringly large amount of it. Because she's facing me I can't see her ass, but there's no question that it has to look as good in her tight shorts as it did in a pair of blue jeans.

My eyes travel back up over the shirt. I have to bite my tongue to keep from groaning out loud at the way it pulls just enough across her chest to show off her perfect and perky tits … not to mention that I can see the faintest outline of her nipples.

Jesus.

I pull my gaze away from her chest, though I think I could stare at it for hours, and look at her face. She's fucking beautiful. I already knew that, but standing this close to her gives me a whole different perspective. Eyes that I'd assumed were brown are swirled with gold making them like no shade of brown I've ever seen. Peyton obviously got her freckles from her mother because Bella has the same faint smattering of them across her cheeks. I'd like to say Peyton got her smile from Bella as well, but as she's scowling instead of smiling, I can't really tell. I do know one thing though … if Peyton grows up to look like Bella, she's going to make some man very, very happy.

As soon as that thought enters my mind, I'd like to bleach it from my brain. The kid is seven-years-old for fuck's sake, and I sure as hell don't want to picture her as anything other than the pretty little sprite that's wormed her way into my heart without even trying.

"Well?" Bella snaps and breaks me out of my trance.
"Oh, um," I stammer and mentally hit myself upside the head for sounding like such a fucking pussy.

She huffs and when I step forward, she steps back just a bit. That automatic reaction from her reminds me of why I chased after her in the first place. I take a deep breath. "I just wanted to … I mean … fuck …" I wince and then decide to just spit it out. "I get the feeling you don't like me and I just wanted to tell you I am sorry if I make you uncomfortable."

Her breath hitches in her throat and it's sexy as hell. I know she didn't mean for me to notice it and I'm sure she has no idea that the sound makes me want to step even closer to her just to see if she does it again.

She opens her mouth and then snaps it closed. The space between her eyebrows dips and when she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, my hand shoots into my hair. It's the only thing I can do to keep myself from reaching out and pulling her lip with my thumb. She looks up at me from beneath her eyelashes and I hold in the groan that's just begging to be released.

"I don't even know you, so how can I not like you?" she whispers as her eyes flit around and look at everything but me. Her voice is a mixture of hesitation, wariness, and … surprisingly, something that sounds a lot like excitement. Like maybe, just possibly, she might want to get to know me.

I take a chance and move closer to her. The urge to say something, some sort of lame ass line like 'well, we can fix that problem when you go out with me on Friday night' is on the tip of my tongue, but there's no way in hell I'm letting those words out of my mouth. It's been more than seven years since I've talked to a woman, much less tried to flirt with one, and I'm not starting with Bella … at least not right this moment.

I'd like for the woman to be able to stay in the same room as me for more than two minutes before I start thinking about anything like that.

I chuckle a little bit and her eyes blaze when she looks at me. I raise my hands and try not to let my smirk get me in any more trouble than I'm already in. Peyton most definitely gets her feistiness from her mother. "Well, you could have fooled me," I tease … sort of.

She sure hasn't given any indication that she'd like for anything to happen other than for me to just disappear.

"Hmmm," she says and then I see the corners of her lips lift in what appears to be the beginning of a smile. It's a small one, but I'll take it. She lifts her eyes to mine, and like before, we're stuck in some sort of silent tug of war.

Figuring I don't have anything to lose and because for some reason I don't even want to think about right at the moment, I really want Bella to like me, I try for charming. Holding my hand out, I say, "How about we try this again? I'm Edward Masen and you are?" I quirk my eyebrow and make sure my voice is as teasing as I can make it, while giving her a crooked grin.

I watch as her cheeks flush pink. I haven't made a woman blush in like … well, ever as far as I can remember. The fact that I've made Bella do it makes me give myself a silent fist bump. Pushing my luck, I step a bit closer and wiggle my fingers that are itching to hold her hand again. She makes this sound that's part growl and part groan and even though I'm trying not to give her any more reason not to like me, I let out a groan of my own. I have to shift a bit because my jeans have gotten uncomfortably tight. Christ, I hope and pray she can't see how hard I am, but it's not like I can help it.
I'm concentrating so hard on not letting my dick push its way through my jeans that it startles me when she slips her hand into mine. "Bella Swan," she says and gives me a genuine smile. "It's nice to meet you, Edward."

And … there it is.

My name coming from her lips is definitely going to play on a loop in my brain.

We stand there, kind of holding hands and honestly it's awkward as hell, but it doesn't seem like she wants to let go any more than I do. At least that's what I'm telling myself. She lets out this little squeak when she looks down at our hands and then pulls hers from mine. When she looks at me, the blush is there again and her lip is back between her teeth, too.

This whole conversation has been about the most bizarre, painful, and truthfully downright confusing thing I've ever been through. I clear my throat and say, "Well, I just wanted to … I don't know, say hi or something and hope we could start over. I mean …" I stammer. "Shit. I mean I'm going to be working for your dad and with your brother so we're bound to run into each other and I didn't want it to be awkward or make you feel uncomfortable."

I hear her gasp a little and when she looks at me I can tell her brain is going about a million miles a minute. I have no idea what she's thinking about, but her face is an open book. Surprise, confusion, resignation, and then embarrassment … and that look stuns me the most. What the hell could she possibly be embarrassed about, I wonder, but don't have time to think about it because she sighs and our eyes meet, again.

"You don't make me uncomfortable," she says and I snort; I can't help it.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings or made it seem like I was scared of you or something." Again there's a hint of embarrassment lacing her words and I don't understand it … nor do I like it.

Trying to put her at ease because the agitation she's still feeling is starting to give me a complex, I say, "Well, Peyton's sure as hell not scared of me."

This strangled, squeaky sound comes from her and immediately I'm mentally kicking my ass for bringing up her daughter. For all I know, Peyton hasn't said anything about me and Bella's thinking I'm a kid snatcher or something. I'm shocked when she takes a deep breath and this time when she looks at me, she finally looks calmer, like she's made some kind of decision in the past few seconds.

"She's certainly your biggest fan," she tells me and my face breaks out into a huge smile. So big I can feel it. I know I have to look like a fucking idiot but I don't care.

"Well, she's a great kid," I tell her. "I mean I know I only spent a few minutes with her and honestly she talked and I just listened, but she's something else."

I have no idea if what I'm saying is appropriate or not, but I can't help it. Besides, I'm hoping that if Bella sees that I really don't mean any harm to her or Peyton, she'll let me talk to Peyton from time to time. The fact that I want that as badly as I do is seriously fucking with my mind and I know I should leave her be … both of them if I'm honest … but I can't.

Bella chuckles a bit at my comment and I relax for the first time since we've started talking. "That's usually the way it is with Peyton. You must have some experience with kids if you were able to keep up with her ramblings. When she gets on a roll, you really just have to wait for her to run out
of breath before you can get a word in edgewise."

I can't help but laugh at that because I thought the exact thing. I feel like I should address her passing kid comment though. "Um, no. I haven't ever been around kids."

Her comment makes me uneasy. I realize Charlie hasn't told her anything about me … or at least not where I've been for the last seven years. I can't decide if that's a good thing or not and then I wonder why he didn't tell her and if there's something significant about that. Part of me feels like I'm lying to her by not telling her right here, right now, and the other knows if I do, she'll run so fast my head would spin. The thought of that happening keeps the words from spilling out.

"You obviously did something right if Peyton decided you two were going to be friends," Bella says. Her mouth curves into a smile and her eyes have softened enough so that they aren't pinched. She's even more beautiful when she's relaxed.

Taking complete advantage of the fact that we seem to be having a somewhat normal conversation, I turn and lean my back against her Blazer, crossing my arms over my chest. She stares at me for a few moments and then does the same, only she leans on her shoulder so she can face me. The sun is beating down on us as it's late afternoon and I can see the faintest traces of perspiration that dots across her upper lip. The urge to lean into her and swipe my tongue along the skin flares hot and intense inside me. I pinch the inside of my arm hard enough to break the skin in order to keep myself under control.

It's not easy and I'm going out of my mind standing this close to her … so close I can smell her. She smells a little salty, whether that's from the sea air outside or because she was busy earlier in the restaurant, I have no idea. Beneath that is the subtle scent of citrus. Lemon, tangerine … grapefruit … I don't have the first clue. I just know it smells fucking mouthwatering and is making me crave a big, juicy orange. Between the salty and the tangy mixed with the heat that's bouncing off her truck, I'm in sensory overload, but I can't move, even if I wanted to.

I'm staring at her, I know I am, but for some reason she lets me … probably because she's doing the same to me. That push and pull instinct that has spread from my stomach, and let's be honest, from my dick, is still very much present and accounted for. I don't understand at all what's going on right now, only that I don't want it to stop.

Finally, she opens her mouth, only to close it again.

"What?" I ask because I'm dying to know what she was going to say.

"How are you enjoying working on the boat?" She rolls her eyes at me and I grin. Damn, Peyton looks just like Bella when she does that. I'm not convinced that that is really what she wanted to ask me, but seeing as how we're making casual conversation, I don't hesitate to answer.

"It's tough. It's not what I expected, but I'm really enjoying it." I'm not lying … not exactly.

The work is hard as hell - back-breaking and muscle-aching - and it's about a hundred times more complicated than I ever imagined it would be, but that doesn't mean I'm not happy to be doing it. I've never been afraid of hard work and this is no different. Well, except for the fact that my hands are a mangled mess and it hurts to move them. Between lobster claws, the cold water, and the traps, my fingers feel like they could fall off at any moment. It's only been a few days but I've learned so much … not that I've had much choice.

Charlie, Emmett, and Jasper all have the same sink or swim mentality when it comes to showing me how to do things on the boat. I've definitely had a trial by fire initiation to the ins and outs of
lobster fishing and it's been rather eye-opening to say the least.

"Liar," she taunts.

I chuckle a bit and shake my head. "I do like it," I tell her. "It's been a long time since I've done anything that … feels as satisfying."

I know my words are cryptic, especially when she tips her head at me and her eyes narrow just a bit as she tries to interpret what I mean.

She raises her eyebrows when I don't elaborate. I don't think now is the time to go into what exactly has brought me to Corea - not when we're managing to have a fairly friendly conversation for the first time. I just hope it's the first of many.

I open my mouth to try to say something without getting into much of anything, but am cut off when someone pokes their head out the back door of the restaurant and hollers, "Bella, Peyton's on the phone for you."

Bella sucks in a sharp breath and looks confused as hell for a second before she starts patting her pockets. "Shit, I left my phone in the restaurant," she mumbles and then turns to walk off.

I fall in step beside her and I can tell she's flustered about the fact that she ran off without grabbing her things. When we reach the back door of the kitchen, I walk in front of her and grab the door.

"Sorry I made you run off without your phone," I say as I hold the door open so she can pass through.

She stops and once again her cheeks are pink. "You didn't." When I humph she rolls her eyes. "Fine, you did, but only because I overreacted. That's not on you, that's on me."

I try to figure out what to say to that, but before I can come up with anything, she softly says, "Excuse me," and walks past me to go talk to Peyton.

I follow her into the restaurant a few seconds later and make my way back through the kitchen and into the seating area. Emmett, Jasper, and Seth are sitting at a table with two women, who I assume to be Rose and Alice from the way Emmett and Jasper have described them.

When I approach the table the five of them are looking at me expectantly. I don't say anything, mostly because I don't know what they want me to say, and an uncomfortable silence fills the air. Finally, the woman I assume to be Rose holds her hand out. "We haven't been introduced," she starts and shoots Emmett a pointed look, "but I'm Rosalie Swan. You must be the Edward we've all heard so much about."

I take her hand and answer, "Edward Masen, it's nice to meet you." I purposely don't acknowledge what she said about hearing things because I'm not sure I want to know what she means.

Jasper, not wanting to get looked at like Rose is looking at Emmett, opens his mouth, but his wife is much faster than he is. "I'm Alice Whitlock." Her smile immediately puts me at ease.

"I've heard a lot about both of you," I tell her and then look at her and Rose.

Alice is sitting on Jasper's lap and she turns around and kisses him on the cheek. "It better all be good things," she says and raises an eyebrow in question.

"Of course, darlin'," he tells her.
The familiarity between them all is palpable and it makes me feel awkward and left out. I'm still standing, still unsure of what to do. I followed Jasper and Emmett to The Breakers when we got done on the boat today, only because they asked me to come along.

I'm about to excuse myself when Alice jumps off Jasper's lap like something's bit her on the ass. "Oh, Edward, I'm sorry. Have a seat," she orders me, "and I'll bring you something to drink."

Apparently I'm the only one taken aback by the suddenness of her actions because none of them even bat an eye. She has her hands on her hips and it's not until I do as I'm told and sit that she moves. "What would you like?"

I look around the table and all the guys have beers. As much as I'd like to join them, and though there isn't anything that says I can't, I ask for a Coke instead. I glance quickly around the restaurant and notice that with the exception of a few tables, it's empty. It's late enough in the afternoon that the lunch crowd is gone and early enough that the dinner rush hasn't started yet.

"So, Edward, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself," Rose says once my eyes stop wandering around the room.

"Oh, wait for me!" Alice yells out, hurrying to the table and sets my drink in front of me.

When she pats me on the shoulder in a friendly, casual manner, I'm once again struggling with feelings I’d thought were long gone. To have people go out of their way to be nice, to extend courtesy and be genuinely pleasant, is something I'm still trying to get used to. Living in a house with Esme Cullen is fast-tracking that learning curve, however. The woman epitomizes both genuine and pleasant and from the vibe I'm getting from the others at the table, it seems as they all do as well … even Seth, I think.

Alice is once again perched on Jasper's lap and she waves her hand in my direction and says, "Okay. Go."

I splutter a bit at her bluntness and wipe off my mouth with the back of my hand. I look at Rose and Em. "You better get on with it, Edward," Rose tells me with a grin. "She'll keep us at this table all damn day until you talk."

Clearing my throat and shifting a bit in my seat because they're all looking at me, I grab my glass between my hands and begin. "Um … well … I, ah …" I swallow. I feel as though I'm going to be sick, which is totally ridiculous. Sucking it up, I forge ahead. "I was born and raised in Boston. My parents died when I was just a kid and my grandparents took me in. When I was growing up, we used to come here to visit during the summer but stopped about fifteen years ago. I needed a change and when I thought about where I wanted to come, this was the first place that came to mind."

"What were your grandparents' names? I wonder if I remember them?" Emmett asks me.

"Thomas and Lillian Masen."

Emmett stares off into space as he thinks and then he shakes his head. "Nope, doesn't ring any bells."

"I'm not surprised. We kept pretty much to ourselves," I say. "Though I do remember coming here a few times."

I'm looking around the restaurant seeing how much I remember when Rose asks, "Will your grandparents be coming to visit? Corea has changed if it's been fifteen years since the last time you
were here."

"My … um," I begin, fighting to keep my voice level. "My grandmother died when I was twelve and my grandfather passed away about three years ago." My voice is barely above a whisper and my eyes sting as I finish talking.

"Oh, Edward," Alice says and reaches across the table to rub my hand. "Do you have any other family, any brothers or sisters?"

I shake my head, not looking up at her until I take a deep breath. When I lift my head, all of them are looking at me with a mixture of sadness and sympathy. While normally I'd be pissed as hell at being pitied by anyone, I realize these people are trying to get to know me and the only way they can do that is to ask questions. They have no way of knowing that the fact that the only two people in the world that have ever given two shits about me are dead makes me want to curl up in a ball and cry for days, so I can't be angry at them for asking questions I don't want to think about.

The five of them look back and forth at one another and I want to try to assure them that their questions didn't upset me, but it's pretty fucking obvious they did. I wish that wasn't the case, but it is, and there's not a whole hell of a lot I can do about it. I know I haven't even started coming to grips with the deaths of my grandparents, my grandfather's especially. The fact that I wasn't able to attend his funeral, because he wasn't immediate family according to the assholes at Old Colony, still eats away at my gut.

That was probably the worst day of the entire seven plus years I spent behind bars. I'd never hated him more than I did when that 'no' was given in a cold, unfeeling manner. If I could've gotten my hands on him, I swear I would've killed him. The anger, the bitterness at being in that hellhole because of what he'd done to me was never more out of control than on that day.

I shiver as I remember it all, and it's not until I feel a warm hand on my shoulder that I'm reminded of where I am.

"Edward, are you okay?" Bella asks.

I raise my eyes to hers. For a moment, we're locked in a gaze that I'm sure I don't ever want to break out of. Her eyes are warm and inviting, though there's worry hidden just beneath the depth. A throat clears from across the table, but I have no idea whose it is because I haven't torn my eyes away from Bella's. I give her a small smile and the dip between her eyebrows is gone immediately.

I nod my head at her and when she removes her hand from my shoulder, I want to beg her to put it back. I try to chalk up the flood of need I feel race through me to being inundated with memories of my grandparents, but even I'm not stupid enough to not recognize that there's more to it than just that.

She sits beside me and without looking at anyone else, I lean in and whisper, "Is Peyton okay?"

She trembles when my breath hits her skin and I notice the goosebumps up and down her arms. "She's fine," she tells me and her voice is so soft that I have to lean in even closer so that I can hear her.

"That's good." My voice shakes and though every cell in my body is screaming for me to run my nose down the side of her neck, I very reluctantly pull myself away.

I hear her sigh and when I look up, Alice is staring at me, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. She shoots Bella a look and out of the corner of my eye I see a rush of delicious pink spread across her face.
I chuckle a bit and try to hide it when I take a drink of my Coke. My eyes meet Seth's over my glass and I hold his stare. Again, he's not being hostile but there's some warning there. I'm sure of it. I have no idea what he's warning me about but right at this moment, I'm not sure I care all that much. Especially when Bella glances at me and shoots me a quick but sexy as fuck smile.

Conversation picks up again. Thankfully I'm not the focus any longer and when a few families walk in all at the same time, the girls get up to get back to work. Bella is tying her apron back around her waist as she walks off but suddenly turns around.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Edward," she says, though it sounds more like a question.

"Sure thing, Bella," I tell her and chance flashing her a smile. "Say hi to Peyton for me."

She stares at me for a moment then nods before heading to a table and taking an order. Once I step outside, I can't help but feel things have definitely taken a turn for the better.

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"Morning, Edward," I hear as soon as I turn my bike off.

Turning, I give a half smirk. "Morning, Charlie."

He inhales deeply. "It's going to be a good day; I can feel it," he tells me as he steps beside me.

I don't answer him and neither one of us say anything further. The silence should be uncomfortable, but it isn't. Both of us stare out at the water. It's still early enough in the morning that the sky is dark, though it's changed from inky black to something that resembles burnt charcoal. The air is thick so early in the morning. Even though I've been in Corea only a little more than a week, I already can't remember what air that's not saturated with salt and humidity feels like … smells like. The ocean ebbs and flows as far as my eyes can see and I hear it as it swishes and slaps against the docks.

For the past seven days, I've been the first one here. Sleep doesn't come easily at night, but it's getting better. The tiniest sounds still wake me up and I find myself straining to hear every creak and squeak, every branch that scratches against the side of the house, every leaf that rustles through my open window. I listen for footsteps heading toward Carlisle's office, toward his safe where I've stored my backpack. My mind never calms, no matter how much I wish it would. I know I'm adjusting to my new life and every day that passes I can feel myself settling into a routine: wake up before the first light of day, grab a cup of coffee that Esme always has ready, along with the breakfast she's made the night before, and arrive at the dock before anyone else.

I've found the place I belong, and each day I feel it more and more. From the way my heart rate speeds up the closer I get to the water, to the way the first, deep inhale of moist, salty water invades my senses … I know Corea is home now. I've found a sense of purpose working for Charlie, I've found people in Carlisle and Esme that I want to make proud of me, and in Emmett, Jasper, Rose, Alice, Seth … and, I hope Bella … people that I might someday soon call friends.

Not to mention Peyton … my best friend.

Since apologizing and clearing the air with Bella those few days ago, things are … better. We're not finishing each other's sentences or any shit like that, but at least now when I see her when the guys and I go by the restaurant after we're done working for the day, she doesn't run out of the room like something just jumped up and bit her. I've even managed a few conversations with the effervescent Miss Peyton as well.
She's given me the rundown on all the comings and goings of every seven-year-old in Corea, not to mention a play by play of the now famous Race Heard Round The World … or at least the Gouldsboro Peninsula. Days later and the kid is still talking about beating Brody's ass. She's told me all about the book she and Bella read every night before bed, explained in great detail why Tim Wakefield is a much better pitcher than CC Sabathia, and how sometimes at night, when she can't sleep, she wakes up and hears Bella crying. I had to pinky swear I wouldn't tell anyone that little secret.

Knowing that little tidbit might be one of the main reasons I don't sleep so well at night, either.

I hear myself chuckle a bit and when I cough to try to cover it up, I hear Charlie snicker.

I look at him and his left eyebrow is quirked in a silent question. I throw my leg over my bike and stand up beside him. "Just remembering something Peyton told me yesterday," I tell him as we begin to walk toward where the *Isabella Marie* is moored.

He doesn't say anything but I can sure as hell feel his eyes on me as we continue walking. Once we step on deck, I turn and am not the least bit surprised to find him still staring at me.

"What?" I ask him, fidgeting a little under his scrutiny.

"You really do like my granddaughter, don't you?"

I balk at his question and suddenly the coffee I drank before leaving the boarding house tastes like acid.

"Bella said I could talk to her," I quickly say, trying to figure out what his point is. Does he not want me to talk to Peyton because of what he knows about me? Is he worried I'll hurt her in some way? My mind is conjuring up every worst case scenario imaginable until he laughs and shakes his head.

"Relax, Edward. I didn't mean to give you a heart attack," he tells me. "Forgive me if I find it a bit … odd, that someone like you enjoys the company of a seven-year-old so much."

I feel my lips lift in a smile and I want to be embarrassed but I can't. "She's something else," I say and even I can hear the way my voice changes when I talk about her. "Damnedest thing I've ever seen," I hear Charlie mumble before he turns and walks toward the wheelhouse just as Emmett and Jasper climb aboard.

"Hey, Edward," Jasper says once we're under way and heading toward the open water of the Atlantic Ocean.

"Jasper," I answer him, but don't look up from what I'm doing.

I've been given the totally greenhorn job of getting the bait ready to put in the traps. It sucks ass and smells so rancid that I'm in a constant state of wanting to throw the hell up, but I get it. I've got to prove myself, so I do my job with minimal fuss. Grind, scoop, then start over again, in a continuous loop.

"We're going to drop about a hundred traps today," he tells me and eyes what I've done so far.

It's not like it's rocket science, but there is a certain way it has to be done. Though I kind of hate him looking over my shoulder, I've only been working on the boat for a week, so I get the fact that I need to be supervised. I suppose it's better than the ribbing they gave me the first few days out
when I spent more time hurling over the side of the boat than working because I was so seasick. A week in and though my knees still feel like rubber by the time we're done for the day and my stomach feels like it might never settle again, at least I can manage to eat the dinner Esme cooks every night. The first couple nights, at the first whiff of food, I was running full steam ahead for the toilet.

We work through the morning, setting the bait, lowering the traps, and then marking them with the buoys. I watch everything, knowing that I have to learn as we go. Jasper and Emmett spend the time keeping up a steady stream of conversation and only very rarely do I interject anything. I don't know either one of them well enough to comment on the things that Rose and Alice say and do and honestly … I don't know how to kid and joke around either. I mean, of course I know how to, but when it comes to practical experience … yeah, it's practically nonexistent.

By the time afternoon rolls around, my stomach has somewhat stopped feeling like an alien is going to eat its way out of my guts and we take a short break to drink some water or coffee. Talk is mostly about how the catch is going, what else needs to be done, where the next day's traps are going to be dropped and I soak it all up, trying not to miss a word. Break time allows me to stretch my legs, to try to keep my hands from becoming permanently disfigured, and to relax muscles I didn't even know I had. I can tell that I've already gotten used to my back, arms, and legs being in a perpetual state of aches and pains and I don't really see that letting up anytime soon … at least not until January when lobster season ends.

"Okay, boys, let's finish up for the day," Charlie says and startles me from my reverie.

Emmett and Jasper groan a little; sitting after standing and moving for hours makes getting up the first time more than a little painful. I follow suit and we all make it back to the deck and assume the same positions as before.

I'm putting my gloves back on when I hear, "Edward, son, it's good to see you finally getting your sea legs," in Charlie's gruff and very amused voice.

"Fucking finally." I smirk back at him, taking the good-natured ribbing the way it's supposed to be taken.

"No shit, dude," Emmett throws in his two cents. "I thought we were going to have to throw you overboard just to put you out of your misery."

I laugh as I reach for the tub with the bait in it. "Well, thank Christ it didn't come down to that. I can just see you three leaving my ass in the middle of the ocean and making me swim all the way back to Corea."

"Nah, man, we like you too much to let you swim back. Poor Evan." Emmett laughs heartily. "Dad, do you remember when we actually threw his ass overboard?"

Charlie smiles, but it dies as quickly as it appears. Jasper just coughs and looks anywhere but at me or Emmett and Charlie, and Emmett … fuck, the man looks like he'd like to be the one thrown overboard.

We're in the middle of the ocean, but I swear it feels like the air is suffocating us. The tension is so thick I can feel it slither its way down my shirt and no one says a fucking word for what feels like forever. No one moves, either, until I can't take the uncomfortable silence any longer. I bend down and start attaching the bait to the traps, all the while my mind is replaying every conversation I've ever been privy to so I can try to remember if anyone has ever mentioned someone named Evan.
"Fucking hell," I hear Emmett mumble and he and Charlie share a look that says more than any words ever could.

Jasper doesn't look a whole lot better to be honest, though he sure as hell isn't as haunted in the same way as Emmett and Charlie seem to be.

"Emmett, son," Charlie says and his voice is as soft as a man that's lived so many years breathing salty sea air can manage to make it.

Emmett waves him off and in jerky motions, begins moving the rest of the traps. With each clang of metal as he harshly throws them on top of one another, it looks like he's getting closer and closer to completely fucking losing it.

Charlie gives him one last concerned look and then sighs deeply before turning around and stalking silently back to the wheelhouse.

Jasper and I stare at each other and it's on the tip of my tongue to ask what the fucking hell is going on, but I say nothing. Realizing that it's none of my business, I resign myself to the fact that I'm an outsider and more than likely it will always be that way. It's been such a long damn time since I've had people I consider friends in my life, a little more than seven years to be exact, and that didn't turn out quite the way it was supposed to.

The rest of the day passes by in a blur and by the time we arrive back at the docks, I'm ready to fucking scream and then get the hell out of there. Hell, even going back to the boarding house and helping Esme with dinner is better than what I've had to go through for the past few hours. We get the catch of the day unloaded. When Seth walks up to take the lobsters that will be shipped out back to the processors, the smile he usually greets us with slides off his face as soon as he spies Emmett.

Jasper and I are holding a tub of freshly-caught lobsters and in a strained rasp Seth merely says, "Evan?"

I watch Jasper nod his head quickly one time and they share another one of those damn looks and inside I do scream. Without another word we finish. Charlie passes by me on the way to his truck and leaves me with a simple, "Later, kid."

I straddle my bike, taking a moment to appreciate the way it rumbles beneath my legs. The vibrations shake my body, leaving my stomach in a jumbled mess … only the bike really has nothing to do with why it feels like I might be sick. No, it's the fact that deep in my bones I know that whoever this Evan person is, he's responsible for the ghosts that plague Bella.

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Okay … we've had a real conversation between Edward and Bella now. I think it went pretty well all things considering, yes? They're doing that bob and weave thing, but at least their talking! And how about that whisper in her ear? I have a feeling Bella might spend some time thinking about that! Oh, and we saw Edward on the boat with the guys AND had Evan's name come up again. Lots to think about, huh?

Next chapter will be from Edward's POV again and OMG … you guys are getting so much of what you've been asking for! Xavier, more Peyton and LOTS more Edward/Bella time! You have no idea how excited I am for next week's chapter. Things are definitely moving full steam ahead now.
The Breakers has the most incredible blog thanks to the amazing Laurel, so please go check it out. We add things all the time and each week will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Laurel made a new blinkie for TB and we have SO many pictures to add this week, I'm especially excited about the Pic Tease for Monday! Take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see! It's fabulous, go look!

www(.)les16-thebreakers(.)blogspot(.)com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

For those of you that have followed me from The Path We Choose and/or The Greatest Gift, the PDF's for TPWC and TGG are done and available for you to download if you want them! The links are on all the blogs. They both are so amazing and Laurel worked SO hard on them! I'm so excited to share these with you all, and thanks to her, now I can!

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think, I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 7

EPOV

"Hey, Edward, do you have a minute?" I turn and watch Carlisle approach.

Charlie cut us loose a little early today and after a brief conversation with Bella, I headed back to the boarding house. The talk was short because Peyton was going to the doctor and Bella was on her way out as I was walking into the restaurant. When I heard the word doctor I immediately thought the worst, which must have been plain as day on my face judging from the way Bella laughed at me.

Things between the two of us have relaxed at least tenfold since I chased her down in the parking lot last week. We haven't had much chance to talk except a brief, "Hi, how are you?" but at least that terrified look from before is gone. She's still guarded, still holding back, but we're becoming friends and I can't ask for anymore than that.

"What's up?" I ask Carlisle when he sits down beside me.

Most nights I find myself sitting in their backyard and that's where he finds me now. I'm so out of the loop when it comes to what's hot on TV, with music, too, that most of the time I'd much rather sit outside and read than anything else. I pay attention to ESPN of course, but that's just so I can keep up with Peyton … little thing knows enough about sports to be the next Erin Andrews.

"It's a nice evening," he tells me as he relaxes in an Adirondack chair.

I feel something cold against my hand and smile in thanks when he hands me a beer.
"It is."

We don't say anything as we both enjoy our beers until finally he clears his throat. I glance at him and he looks so uncomfortable, I have to laugh at him. "Carlisle, whatever you need to tell me can't be that bad. Just say it already."

"I talked to Wayne earlier," he begins and then stops. He grimaces a bit and lets out a long breath. "I need to take you to Ellsworth to check in with your new parole officer. You ah ..." His mouth twists and then he takes another drink of his beer. "You need to take your drug test." The last part comes out strained and I can tell how uncomfortable this discussion is making him.

It's not really a picnic for me either, but I don't want to make this any harder on him than it needs to be. The whole idea of having to drive somewhere to piss in a damn cup while some dude watches my every move isn't anywhere close to my idea of a fun time, but it's a part of being a parolee. I don't have any choice but to go, of course, and it's a hell of a lot better than the alternative.

I shudder just thinking about it. Every day that goes by seems to let the nightmare of being behind bars fade a bit more. It will never go away; it's stupid to hope that it will, so I don't even try. All I can really hope for is that I can leave it all in the past.

"I'm sorry, Edward," Carlisle says quietly when I don't say anything for a few minutes.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees and hold the beer bottle loosely in my hands. Staring out over their tree-covered backyard, the faint sounds of the ocean a quiet murmur in the background, I take a deep breath.

"Carlisle." I huff then hang my head. I stare at a spot between my feet, watching as a caterpillar crawls over a leaf and then slips between two blades of grass and disappears. Hidden, but not gone.

Kind of like me when I was in prison, hidden from the world, safely ensconced in cement and steel to keep me away from the unsuspecting citizens of the great state of Massachusetts, but still very much alive at the same time. Surviving - day by day, but not living. All for something I didn't do, because I was brought up to do the right thing, even when it was easier to do the wrong one. I lost my way for a time, after my grandmother died, and the people that found me ... well, person to be specific, didn't give a damn about right and wrong and he sure as hell didn't care about me.

I knew it all along, but when the cold, unyielding steel of the handcuffs rubbed my skin raw, it left no room for doubt. Coming face to face with the reality that you'd pretty much thrown your life away for someone who'd sooner use you than help you was one fucking bitter pill to swallow. In fact, over the past few weeks since I've been out of prison, that bitterness has slowly been eating away at me. I can feel it gnawing and worming its way through me, trying to take up residence in every part of me that has begun to move forward.

"What time do we have to leave?" I ask, still staring at the ground and not acknowledging his apology. It was an unnecessary one to begin with.

He stares at me for a moment. I know he has things he wants to say, questions he wants to ask, but he does neither, he simply says, "Tomorrow as soon as you're done at work. It's only forty-five minutes to get there, so that should give us plenty of time."

"Yeah, okay."

I finish my beer, though honestly, it's lost its appeal. The comfortable silence that surrounded us before is completely gone now, replaced with the weight of so much unsaid.
"Edward, did Wayne ever tell you what I did for a living before Esme and I moved here?" His voice is hesitant, but it's mixed with something else … sadness … and not the 'that movie was so sad' kind either, but the kind that changes you irrevocably and stays with you forever.

I shake my head immediately because Wayne really said next to nothing about Carlisle and Esme before I came up here. Certainly not anything that coincides with the look of agony on Carlisle's face right now.

"I worked at Mass General as a psychologist. I specialized in addictions," he tells me though his voice has trailed off to barely more than a whisper at the end.

I turn to face him but he's staring at the trees. From the way his eyes are unfocused and the frown on his face, I can tell he's not really seeing at them at all. Instead he's a million miles away, or more likely years past, thinking about whatever it is that's caused him to stop doing something that obviously meant a great deal to him.

After another few moments he shakes his head and turns to me. His eyes are still burning with pain that I understand, at least to some degree, because I see that same pain every morning when I look at myself in the mirror. It's not exactly the same, but on some unspoken level, I know that he understands me in a way I thought no one would.

"I don't want to overstep any bounds or imply anything, but if you ever need anyone to talk to, I'm more than willing to listen," he says slowly, as if he didn't think those words would ever pass his lips again.

My first instinct is purely defensive, so I scoff immediately. "You mean like therapy or some shit?" My tone is insulting and I know I sound way more pissed off than I should, especially to someone who's gone so out of his way to help me.

"Edward," he begins and instantly I'm aware of his 'doctor' voice. "I don't mean therapy, or not therapy as you're imagining it at any rate. I just wanted you to know that if there are things you're dealing with … or not, as is more likely the case, and feel the need to talk to someone, I'm here. I won't impose and I can't force you, but you've had a hell of a lot happen to you, some I know about and more I'm sure I don't, and you're trying to adjust to a new life at the same time. It's bound to be overwhelming, it'd be for anyone, so if you want to talk, I'm more than willing to listen."

His words bounce around in my brain and even though everything inside of me wants to tell him to shove his well-meaning offer up his ass, I know I can't. The thoughts and memories that have been steadily plaguing me and making sleep an even more elusive reality are proof enough of that. To say that the thought of talking about everything, even with someone like Carlisle who I know only wants to help, makes my skin crawl but it's going to need to be done.

I wanted to start a new life when I arrived in Corea. I can't do that if the ghosts of my past still rule my life.

"Um … I think … yeah …" I sigh. "I think I might want to do that."

My answer pleases him which in turn makes the whole prospect of talking to him seem not quite so daunting. I still don't want to do it, but even I know it's necessary. "Good. That's real good, Edward," he says. "Anytime you're ready, just let me know."

He blows out a huge breath and I chuckle at him. "How long have you been thinking about bringing that subject up?"
I raise my eyebrow at him and watch as the tips of his ears get red as he runs a hand through his hair. "Hmmm, since before you got here," he tells me and watches as I digest that information.

Honestly, I'm not surprised by the truth, so I nod my head and let him off the hook. I could make him squirm, but he doesn't deserve it, not for trying to help.

The comfortable silence settles once again and the sun has pretty much had its last hoorah for the day by the time we're done. The sound of crickets fills the air and the slight breeze that blows across the yard carries the faintest hint of salt with it. All in all it's my favorite time of the day.

"Car, I ran out of tea bags, so I'm going to run to the store real quick while the rhubarb pie finishes baking. I'll be right back," Esme hollers from the back deck.

I'm out of my seat like a shot. "Esme, let me go for you. Why don't you and Carlisle enjoy the last of the sunset? That way you can keep an eye on my pie," I tell her with a wink.

The woman still makes me as flustered as the captain of the chess team asking the head cheerleader to prom, but the smile she graces me with is all worth it. For anyone else I'd probably never offer, but for her, yeah, I'm totally at her mercy.

She squeals and claps, which reminds me so much of Peyton it's not even funny, and gives me a peck on the cheek before throwing herself in Carlisle's lap. Seeing the two of them together can't help but give one hope that there really is such a thing as happily ever after.

I make sure to grab my phone in case there's something else Esme thinks of that she needs from the store and then I'm on my way. Riding down the tree-lined street, I can't help but wonder if my motorcycle makes too much noise. It seems loud to me, especially in the quaint neighborhood the boarding house is in, but seeing as how neither Carlisle nor Esme have said anything, I try not to worry about it.

The trip takes only a few minutes because, well, Corea is the size of a postage stamp and when I pull into the parking lot of the store, there's a huge, black Chevy Avalanche taking up two spaces. Ass. I hate guys that think their shit doesn't stink or their ride is more important than everyone else's so they need to park so no one can be next to them.

The store isn't big, but for Corea it is. The closest Wal-Mart is in Gouldsboro so the Booze & Bait stocks up on enough so that most needs are met. I take a few minutes, walking up and down the aisles seeing if anything catches my eye when suddenly I hear the voice that never fails to put a smile on my face. I didn't see Bella's Blazer in the parking lot so I wonder if they walked here. I follow the sound of Peyton's voice, listening as she's telling Bella what kind of ice cream is going to go best with dinner.

"Not that kind, this one. See, mint chocolate chip. It totally goes better with chicken strips and macaroni and cheese," Peyton says.

Ah, a girl after my own heart. Mint chocolate chip is my favorite.

"Mint chocolate chip goes better with everything," I say as I walk around the end of the aisle.

"Edward!" Before I'm even all the way clear of the shelves, Peyton has attached herself to my waist. "What are you doing here?"

I notice that she's with a man … a very large, very bald, very muscular, and quite honestly scary-as-fuck-looking man. His skin is the color of coffee that's had a bit of milk added to it and he's wearing a black tank top and a pair of jeans. I have no idea who he is, but if looks could kill, I'd
"Xavier, aren't you going to say hi to Edward?" Her little hand's in mine and she's swinging them back and forth as she looks from me to him.

Needless to say, I know full well who Xavier is having heard Seth and Peyton talk about him so much. He looks nothing like I imagined he would because there's no way in hell I can picture the hulk of a man in front of me with Seth … much less Bella.

"Edward," he says. He tries to keep his voice from sounding anything but friendly. He fails miserably, but thankfully Peyton doesn't pick up on it.

"It's nice to meet you," I tell him smirking just a bit because he hasn't introduced himself at all. If the asshole thinks he can intimidate me, he's got another fucking thing coming. Sure, he's a damn L.L. Cool J clone but that doesn't mean he can scare me off. Dude is delusional if he thinks that icy stare down while flexing his muscles is going to do anything but piss me the fuck off. I've seen way worse than him in my time.

Peyton starts chattering about her first two days of summer vacation and I try and keep up as best I can. I focus all of my attention on her, but I keep an eye on Xavier, too. When he looks at Peyton, he's all smiles, but when he looks my way, well, he's not. The whole time Peyton's ranting, I try to tell myself that he's Bella's best friend and Seth's boyfriend so there must be some redeeming qualities somewhere I'm just not seeing.

So far, I just think he's a prick.

"P," Xavier says once Peyton has stopped talking to take a much-needed breath. "Go get your mom some of those chips she likes and I'll meet you at the front counter."

"'Kay. Bye, Edward," she breezily tells me before she skips off, leaving the two of us alone.

I'm really tempted to walk off, especially when he just stares at me without saying a word, but before I can take a step he says, "I don't know what the fuck you think you're doing, but if you hurt that little girl, I will fucking end you."

I open my mouth to say something back but he keeps going before I have a chance. "Bella's been through enough. She doesn't need someone like you coming in and stirring shit up. Stay away from Bella and you'd sure as shit better stay away from Peyton."

I cross my arms and casually lean back against the shelves behind me. Inside I'm raging … positively livid. If I thought I could get away with it, I'd ask him if he'd like to pee on the both of them to mark his territory, but as much as I hate to admit it, I can see where he's coming from … kind of. His threats don't really scare me; I can handle him if I have to. I've handled way worse than him before and managed to come out fairly unscathed and intact, so I don't hold back because of that. I hold back because of Bella and Peyton. I'm not giving this motherfucker the satisfaction of proving his point for him.

"You know," I begin slowly, "it's not really up to you whether or not I spend time with Peyton." I watch as he curls his fingers into a fist and presses it against his freakishly large bicep. "Bella doesn't mind and I know Peyton doesn't, so until they tell me differently, I think things will continue on just as they have been."

His jaw flexes and I can hear him grind his teeth, but I don't move. "You just don't get it. You have
I'm sure his voice was meant to come out hard and threatening, but instead it's laced with the worry and obvious love he has for both of them.

"Look, you don't know me. I get that you feel like you need to protect them from me, but I'm not here to hurt anybody. I needed a new start and this was the place I wanted to do it in. Charlie gave me a job. I have people that are slowly becoming friends and I'm just ..." I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "I just want to start over. I don't really care if you like me or you don't, but Bella's a grown woman and is capable of making up her own mind about me. As for Peyton," I stop and smile because I hear her sweet voice carrying through the store as she talks to Mr. Norris, "that little girl means more to me than anyone has in a long fucking time and I'd sooner let you kick my ass than hurt her."

The corner of his mouth lifts the tiniest bit before he narrows his eyes at me. "Yeah, well, hurt either one of them and I will kick your ass. Count on it."

I stare at him for a few long seconds. "Point taken," I tell him.

He turns to walk off and I can't help myself so I say, "I'll say hi to Seth for you."

He stops walking and I see his shoulders move and then he goes to find Peyton without looking back.

I take a deep and admittedly shaky breath.

That went better than I thought it would, but I know I haven't seen or heard the last of him.

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"Jesus Christ, Masen, pull yourself together," I mutter as I stare at myself in the mirror. It's just a fucking bonfire.

Only it's not just any old bonfire. It's a bonfire with everyone ... and that means especially ... Bella.

When Emmett mentioned everyone getting together for a bonfire during work today, my insides tied themselves in a knot that progressively got worse during the day. Jasper and Emmett continued to talk about it and every word out of their mouths was like a punch in the gut. I tried not to let it affect me, but after dropping the bait for the third time, Emmett had finally had enough.

"What the hell's the matter with you today, Masen?" he'd asked with a scowl on his face.

Not wanting to answer him because whining that it wasn't nice to talk about things in front of people that weren't invited would make me sound like the world's biggest pussy, I'd muttered only, "nothing," and proceeded to spend the rest of the day in a stony silence.

By the time we'd docked and were done for the day, the only thing I could think of that I'd wanted to do was stop by the store on my way home, grab a six pack of beer - considering Esme, Carlisle, and Seth were all going to the bonfire I wasn't going to - and get drunk. I haven't been drunk since before I was arrested, but I was damn sure going to do it tonight because there wasn't going to be anyone around to stop me.

"See you tonight, Edward," Jasper called out as he climbed into his Z28.

I stood there, mouth hanging open, frozen still, until Emmett slapped me on the shoulder. "Ed?"
I blinked, repeatedly, so much that my vision blurred though when I could focus again, Emmett's face was full of worry. "Dude, are you okay?"

"Tonight?" I squeaked out and then cringed at the way I sounded.

Emmett laughed, a full, tip his head back and let go kind but then turned serious in a heartbeat. "Ah, man, I'm sorry. You thought you weren't invited, didn't you?"

I didn't want to answer that question, not at all, but when I hung my head it gave him all the answer he needed.

"You're one of us now," Emmett told me, "whether you like it or not. So go home, change your clothes, and we'll see you on the beach. Be ready to chow down, man, just saying."

He was gone before I could answer him, though my arm still ached from the not so light punch he gave it. I stared after him, not moving until after he got in his Jeep and peeled out of the parking lot.

One of us now … the words were hammering their way into my brain … and into my heart. I haven't been a part of anything in such a long time, well except as a member of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. The fact that Emmett grouped me with the rest of them, like it was a no-brainer, was more than I could handle. I quickly got on my bike, hoping that I could outrun the sudden influx of emotions that were too much for me to deal with.

I spent about thirty minutes riding, long enough so that I could at least attempt to try to interact with the people that have all welcomed me so graciously … well, all except for the bald-headed, muscle-flexing, Hulk wannabe.

Shaking just a bit when I remember the way Xavier looked at me in the store the other night, I groan and say a quick prayer that he doesn't start any shit with me tonight … for my sake, and for everyone else's as well. A small part of me is a bit, okay a whole fucking lot, nervous about being around Bella and Xavier at the same time.

I finish brushing my teeth while trying to keep up a never-ending stream of positive thoughts about the night to come on a loop in my head. I hate that I'm so nervous, and I can't help but feel like tonight's some kind of test. It is, after all, my first try at this whole having friends and hanging out thing.

Dressing in a pair of jeans and a plain t-shirt, I grab my cell phone, the one I'm required to have but never use, and head downstairs. Remembering how cool the nights can get at times, I run back to my room and grab a hoodie and then make my way to the kitchen to meet up with Carlisle and Esme.

"Edward," Esme looks up and says when she hears me approach. "I was just getting ready to call for you to see if you were ready. Seth's gone ahead to help Xavier get the firewood and I need some help carrying everything to the car."

I look at the island and my eyes grow big. Tinfoil-wrapped ears of corn and potatoes, enough to feed an army from the looks of it, cover the entire top. There's a huge plastic bag filled with what appears to be chocolate chip cookies, and beside that are bags of marshmallows and chocolate bars. S'mores, I think, and my mouth waters immediately. I haven't had a s'more … well, since the last summer my grandparents and I visited Corea. A wave of nostalgia hits me hard. I have to take a few deep breaths to keep myself under control.

One more deep breath and I know that a talk with Carlisle is in my future. My very near future. I
feel like I'm fucking losing it almost on a daily basis now and hopefully he can help me.

Though right now's not the best time to have a panic attack.

"Are you riding with us?" Carlisle asks as he approaches the car … after everything has conveniently been loaded.

It's on the tip of my tongue to say yes, but I shake my head no instead. I run my hand nervously through my hair and pretty much whisper, "I, uh … I'll take my bike." I want it there in case I need to make a break for it and when Carlisle catches my eye, he gives me a small nod. Damn dude knows exactly why I want it there.

The trip to the beach doesn't take anywhere near long enough because I'm more nervous by the time we get there than I was when we left. I see Charlie's truck, Emmett's Jeep … and Bella's beast of a Blazer. My stomach reacts immediately as does my dick when I think about seeing her. It's been a few days since I've seen her, other than a quick wave here and there. I've missed her, which comes as a shock, even though I suppose it shouldn't. Even though we've really only had a few talks that have been more than some casual conversation, I find myself craving any sort of interaction with her.

Navigating the fine line of getting to know her while not telling her too much of my past always leaves me feeling like I'm walking a tightrope with no net beneath me, but it is what it is for the time being.

Once I park my bike, I help Esme carry the food toward the beach all while telling myself to chill the fuck out and just try to have fun. I have a chance to act like a normal twenty-seven year-old guy for a change, hanging out with some friends, and I want to enjoy it as much as I can.

My eyes immediately search for Bella as soon as we crest a dune but before I have time to look, I hear, "Edward!" in my favorite voice.

Peyton's arms are around my waist and it's only because Carlisle grabs the bags out of my hands that I don't bust my ass.

"Wow, that's some hello," I tell her when she looks up at me.

For a second I'm speechless. This little girl has so totally put me under her spell I swear she could tell me to start belting out Lady Gaga songs and I would, in heartbeat, just to keep that beautiful smile on her face.

"I've been waiting forever for you to get here." She pouts and stretches out the forever to emphasize her point.

I laugh at her and when she slips her hand in mine and starts dragging me down the beach, I follow willingly.

"Peyton," I hear and my heart skips a beat.

Bella.

I take a deep breath and turn around, knowing that the moment I see her, I'm really going to wish I'd chosen a different pair of jeans to wear. As soon as I do, I know I should've worn different ones.

Christ Almighty, the woman is really trying to kill me. She has to be. Tiny denim shorts that show off too much skin for me to have any hope of being the slightest bit comfortable at all tonight.
black t-shirt that doesn't show off enough because her chest is completely covered. Her hair is up in a ponytail and for the first time, I notice a glimpse of shiny silver at the top of her ear. Holy fucking hell. I immediately want to feel the metal on my tongue. I shiver just thinking about it and try to clear my throat, which has begun to feel painfully dry. She takes a step forward and I glance down at her feet.

Chuckling, I meet her eyes. "Lime green, interesting choice. Yours or Peyton's?" I tease because they both have the same color on their toenails.

Bella rolls her eyes at me and though dusk has settled around us, I can still see the faintest hint of pink on her cheeks.

Sexy as all get out.

"Look, Edward," Peyton says as she tugs on my hand. I look down and her little foot is wiggling so she can show me her toes. I don't know the first damn thing about the ins and outs of nail polishing besides the fact that lime green has just become my new favorite color. "Mom and I painted them this morning. Aren't they pretty?"

I grin, feeling like the world's biggest sap, but really not minding all that much, and nod my head. "Very. Did you paint them or did your mom do it for you?"

She huffs and the most adorable little scowl appears on her face. "Mom did. I can't ever get it to come out right."

I snort and chance another look at Bella. She's smiling at her daughter and happily it stays in place when she looks at me. "Well, toenail polishing and hair brushing aren't really Peyton's favorite things. Though, if you need to know what Tom Brady's quarterback rating is, she's your girl." She flashes me a quick wink, one that goes straight to my dick, before turning toward Peyton. "And just where do you think you're running off to without telling me, hmmm?"

"Sorry, Mom," Peyton mumbles and I feel bad that she was so happy to see me she forgot to tell Bella where we were going. Of course, inside I might be giving myself a fist bump because she is so excited to see me. "Can I show Edward my secret treasure?"

Bella gasps and when I look at her, she's looking back and forth between me and Peyton with the strangest look on her face, like she can't possibly believe Peyton just asked that question. Not having any idea what Peyton is talking about or why Bella looks the way she does, I start to open my mouth, but before I can say anything Bella nods her head.

"Come on, Edward," Peyton squeals and pulls me, stumbling, down the beach.

I chance one more quick look at Bella, who hasn't moved yet. I see the saddest, but utterly beautiful smile grace her lips. She looks up, gives me a little wave, then turns around.

Peyton's chattering so fast I can't even keep up with what she's saying. All I hear is snippets … can't tell … our secret … only you … and she keeps pulling me toward a jetty.

She squeals again and then lets go of my hand. Faster than should be possible, she climbs up the rocks only to scramble back down the other side. I don't even have time to tell her to be careful before she pops her head up and says, "Here, Edward. Come look."

She's waving with her little hands and bouncing on her feet and I laugh so hard it almost makes my stomach hurt. I don't move with the grace and speed she does, but I manage to make it over without falling face first into the rocks. I barely have time to put my feet on the ground before she's pushing
me down on a rock, one which is wet and seeps immediately through my jeans, and crawls into my lap carrying a beat-up tin box.

Her mood changes in the blink of an eye and I realize that whatever she's about to show me means a great deal to her. I wrap my arm around her, holding her close, and when she wiggles to get even closer, I do what I wanted to the first time I saw her. Leaning my head down, I kiss the top of her head, leaving my lips there for an extra few seconds. In that instant, it feels like we're the only two people for miles and miles. The moment is so precious that I want to wrap it up and keep it in my pocket forever.

How do you thank a child, who with each passing day I'm convinced is the most amazing one ever, for making you feel … human again? For making you feel alive and worthy? For seeing you for who you want to be instead of who people assume you to be? For making you feel important and wanted? I'll never truly be able to make her understand, mostly because I don't understand it myself, but I can't deny what Peyton makes me feel. The fact that she does it just by being herself means even more. No agenda. No hidden meaning. Just Peyton being Peyton.

She moves a little bit so she can balance on my leg and then very slowly and carefully takes the lid off her box. I lose my breath for a second when I look down, only because there are so many colors and shapes that my eyes can't keep up with what I'm seeing.

Sea glass in every color imaginable, big shells, small shells, flat rocks, starfish, and even two sand dollars fill her box. Little things really, but it's obvious they mean a great deal to Peyton and because they do, I listen in rapt attention as she shows me her most favorite pieces of treasure. I have no idea how long we sit there. My legs have lost all sense of feeling. My jeans are soaked from my ass down to my calves but I've loved every minute of it and pout like she does when we hear Bella call her name, popping our little Peyton/Edward bubble.

She reaches in her box and gently takes out a sand dollar and piece of bluish-green sea glass and very carefully puts the lid back on to stow the box back beneath the rocks. It's obvious she's kept it hidden for a long time, but I can't help but worry about someone finding and taking it. I briefly consider standing guard over her little treasure box because I know if anything were to happen to it, she'd be devastated.

I'm about to ask her what she's planning on doing with the sand dollar and piece of glass when she says, "Hold out your hands and close your eyes."

Obediently, because whatever Peyton wants, Peyton gets, I do as she asks. I hold both my hands out, palms up and close my eyes. I hear her giggle and then feel as she drops something into them, though I keep my eyes closed until she tells me I can open them.

"Open," she whispers in a sweet, shaky voice.

When I look down at my hands, I swear I want to cry when I spy the sand dollar and sea glass in each of my hands. I want to tell her she shouldn't have, but I won't because I wouldn't mean it. The fact that she's giving me something so special to her makes it the best present anyone has ever given me.

"Do you like them?" Her hands are behind her back and her face is so expectant that I don't even think before I act.

Kneeling down, I wrap my arms around her and kiss the side of her head. "I love them, sweetheart. Thank you so much."
She giggles and then steps back enough to grab my face in both her hands. "Now when you go out with Pop and Uncle Em and Jasper you can take this with you for good luck," she says when she points to the sea glass. "And at night, if you can't sleep, you can look at this," she says when she points to the sand dollar, "and think about me."

I'm so choked up, I can't talk. All I can do is nod my head. I have to take a deep breath before I can say, "Thank you, Peyton. This is the best present anyone's ever given me."

"You're my best friend, Edward. I'm supposed to give you presents," she says and shrugs her shoulders like it's the simplest concept in the world.

Bella calls for us again and we both stand up.

"Hop on," I tell her turning around and squatting down so she can get on my back.

She does that adorable giggle/squeal combo again and hops on and immediately starts talking about what we're getting ready to eat. By the time we get back to where everyone's set up, I'm so hungry I could eat the ass end of a monkey.

Charlie calls for Peyton so I let her down. She leans in and says, "Thanks." She kisses me on the cheek, scampering off and leaving me looking like a lovesick fool.

Which come to think of it, I am. Totally and completely in love with a little sprite that turns me into a big pile of mush.

"Whatcha got there?" Bella asks and steps closer.

I open my hands, holding them flat and watch her eyes grow wide then fill with tears when she recognizes what Peyton's given me.

"Bella?" I question and my heart, stomach, and brain are all fighting one another when I see the tears spill from her eyes and fall down her cheeks.

Feeling totally helpless, my stomach lurches when I see a drop fall from the tip of her chin. I can sense that there's some deeper meaning to what Peyton's done, but I don't have any idea what it could be.

She sniffs then waves her hand around for a second before she takes a deep breath and stares into my eyes. "You're so good for her," she whispers in a voice filled with confusion and awe.

My heart slams against my chest at her words. Of course my first thought is she's got that completely backward because Peyton is the one that's good for me but before I can say that, Bella's turned away from me to head back. Without thinking, I reach out and grab her hand. I don't want her upset with me; I don't want her upset period. When she sees my hand on hers, she sighs then looks at me.

"Are you okay?" I ask, because it's the only thing I can think to say.

"I'm sorry, Edward. It's just … this is all so …" She huffs then shakes her head. "I'm fine, really," she says then grins when she sees the scowl on my face. "I just got caught off-guard for a minute, that's all."

I'm confused by what she's said but I don't push. I don't want to upset her if I can help it, and I get the feeling that now's not the right time to talk in the first place. When we hear Emmett's loud laugh boom through the air, she obviously comes to the same conclusion because she says, "We'll
She squeezes my hand briefly before pulling hers away and then we walk back toward the fire together. I can feel someone's eyes burning a hole in the back of my head and I know whose they are, but I turn anyway. Sure enough, Xavier's trying to melt me where I stand. I can't help but chuckle when Seth elbows him in the stomach and gives him a look that clearly means to knock it off.

I don't have time to dwell on it though because Esme's shoved a plate piled high with food into my hands. Lobster, clams, corn, potatoes and my mouth waters. She pushes me down on a rock between Alice and Rose and we all dig in. Conversation flows easily and I'm shocked at how comfortable I feel around all these people. Alice and Rose keep up a steady stream of questions, and Renée adds in a few of her own. Most are about Boston and my grandparents and they're easy to answer. I ask a few of my own, just to try to get to know everyone better and I laugh at some of the stories they tell me about Emmett, Jasper, and Charlie. I hear a few about Bella when she was younger and of course plenty about Peyton.

There are other groups of people doing the same thing as we are and I notice some of the guys that work on the other boats as they walk past. Everyone is friendly, shouting hellos and wishes for a nice weekend. I'm suddenly taken aback at just how much I feel at home here.

By the time everyone is done with dinner, I'm relaxed and completely enjoying myself. Xavier keeps shooting me dirty looks but I ignore those as best I can. I can't help that he has a problem with me. I wish it wasn't the case because all in all everyone has welcomed me with open arms, but I can't make him like me.

Bella has spent dinner with Xavier, Seth, and Peyton. Every time I hear her laugh mix with the smoke that billows from the bonfire, I get that nervous, shaky feeling inside. I've caught her staring at me, mostly because I keep staring at her across the fire. The firelight bounces off her hair and her eyes, and the heat has made her cheeks pink ... though I'd like to think I have something to do with that, too. The next time our eyes meet, she bites her bottom lip and I think I probably have a lot to do with it.

The thought makes me extraordinarily happy.

"Nana, is it time for s'mores yet?" Peyton asks and I hear Renée laugh.

"Sure thing, baby. Help me get the marshmallows," Renée tells her and Peyton whoops before jumping up.

"Hell yeah," Emmett says and everyone laughs. How the man can possibly think about eating anything else after the massive amounts of food we've all just consumed I have no idea.

A short while later I find myself in the middle of a conversation with Charlie, Carlisle, and Jasper when a movement catches my eye. Bella is walking toward a secluded part of the beach.

"Here, dear. Why don't you go talk to her?" Esme tells more than asks as she hands me two freshly made s'mores.

I hesitate.

"Go," she says. "It'll be fine, trust me."

This time I don't hesitate because I really wanted to go after her in the first place. By the time I find her, she's sitting on a rock that's on the back edge of the beach, staring out over the water. When
she hears me approach, she turns and rolls her eyes just a bit at me, but I can tell she's not too annoyed when she scoots over to make room for me beside her.

"You left without dessert," I tell her when I sit down.

"Hmmm," is all she says and I set the napkin holding the s'more on her lap. Neither one of us say anything for the longest time until suddenly she breaks the silence. "You know, I've lived in Corea my whole life, been around the water every day, and I haven't been on or in it in more than seven years."

Her words … floor me, leave me completely speechless. I don't even know what to make of that, and the ability to form any sort of response has pretty much checked the fuck out.

I swallow past my tongue that seems to have grown to the size of my fist. "Bella," I force out. "I … I mean I don't …"

She laughs, but it's not the kind that leaves me wanting to hear more, instead it settles like a huge weight in my stomach. "Edward, it's okay. I mean it's not, but I shouldn't have just said that like I did."

She sighs and then turns to face me. The wind has picked up enough to blow the pieces of her hair that have fallen out of her ponytail around her face and when she pushes it back behind her ear, I find myself staring at the little earring in the top of her ear. For some reason, the fact that she has her ear pierced in that spot turns me the fuck on.

"You must think I'm such a flake," she says quietly. Her eyes flit over my face just waiting for me to give her the slightest indication that I agree with her.

I don't move.

"Well, I'll admit to thinking you wanted me to take a long walk off a short pier, but I definitely don't think you're a flake," I tell her. I want to add that I think she's amazing and beautiful and the best mom I've ever seen and whole slew of other things but then she'd think I'm a flake, and I sure as hell don't want that.

"God, I'm so sorry." She snorts and then there's that blush that drives me absolutely insane. "Besides, how could I live with myself if I took away Peyton's best friend?"

I can't help but chuckle at that. She's quiet for a time and has turned back toward the water. The moon reflects off the water and casts the most ethereal glow on her face. My fingers twitch from wanting to run them down her cheek, along her neck, through her hair.

"I was going to make her stay away from you," she admits.

Every ounce of breath I have leaves my body in an instant and I literally feel like I'm going to be sick. It's not as if her confession is really a huge shock considering I had thought the same thing, but to hear it straight from her hurts so much worse than I ever imagined.

"You scare me."

Her words immediately bring forth every feeling of self-loathing and anguish I have. I want to scream, or cry, or run … most likely in that order.

She must feel the fact that every muscle in my body is trembling as I'm about two seconds from bolting because she puts her hand on my arm. Warmth unlike anything I've ever felt before shoots
up my arm and spreads through my body like ink that's been dropped into a bowl of water. Slow and steady, it spreads everywhere.

"Please don't hurt her," she whispers so softly I barely hear her. Her voice shakes and I want to wrap my arm around her and pull her close to me, but I don't move. I can't. Bella's hand is still on my arm and I swear it feels like if she moves it, I'll fucking lose it.

"Bella," I finally manage to say. "I know you don't know me and have absolutely no reason to trust me, but I swear to you I'd never do anything to hurt Peyton. She's the most incredible person I've ever met. I don't care that she's only seven." Bella's eyes are searching my face and then she looks directly into my eyes. I hope she can see how much I mean what I've just said. Taking a deep breath, I hold her gaze. "She makes me feel … worthy," I trail off, unable to keep our eyes connected. I close my mouth and shake my head, knowing if I say anything else, I'll scare her and there is no way in hell I want to do that.

"I've never seen her act with anyone the way she does with you." She takes a deep breath and takes her hand away, leaving a burst of cold in her wake.

Wanting, needing to lighten the mood because if I don't, I'm liable to go mad, I say, "Well, that's because I'm pretty damn awesome. Who can resist the Masen charm?" I bump her shoulder with mine and when I hear her giggle, my heart feels a thousand pounds lighter. There are feelings boiling beneath the surface that I know I need to deal with, but not right now.

"Apparently me because I ran away like a damn fool the first two times I saw you." She blushes again and I wink at her when she looks at me.

"I'm really sorry about that, you know," she tells me, picking at her s'more. She pops a piece in her mouth and when she flicks her tongue out over a spot of melted chocolate on her lip, it's all I can do not to groan.

So fucking sexy and she has no clue.

"It's just been me and Peyton for so long that I tend to be a little protective."

I snort.

"Okay, a lot protective."

She rolls her eyes then she starts talking, just rambling mostly, about little things. She tells me about a family that went into the restaurant that let their little boy run all over the place, taking all the salt and pepper shakers off each table and putting them all on one. Every time Alice tried to put them where they belonged, the boy just took them back.

I tell her about trying to get the rubber bands on the lobster claws for the first time and it slipping off and nailing Jasper right on the end of his nose. Through it all my index finger is making a continuous pattern of circles on her elbow. I tense the moment I touch her but it's such a natural action, I can't help myself. Bella even relaxes her arm so that from her shoulder to her elbow is pressed tightly against mine, not to mention her leg is right up against me, too. She doesn't even notice, or if she does, she obviously doesn't mind, so I keep going, wishing we could stay like this for hours.

Of course my fantasy comes to a screeching halt when Charlie calls her name. She makes that little squeak-groan sound again when she looks down at my finger, but I keep it where it is, even though I've stopped moving it.
"I guess we better go back," she says and she sounds as reluctant to leave as I am.

I like that.

I like it a whole fucking lot.

We both stand and then laugh when we look at each other. "I'm sorry you didn't get to eat your dessert," she says when she sees my uneaten s'more on the rock where I left it.

I shrug, knowing I'd pass up eating the gooey mess any day of the week if I got to spend time with her instead.

"How about you," she starts then clears her throat. My stomach clenches and inside I'm bouncing up and down going please, please ask me what I think you're going to. "Why don't you come over on Sunday and have dinner with me and Peyton? I'll make sure you have dessert; I'll even give you double."

Holy shit.

I smile, and though I want to try to seem cool and smooth, I know I look like a fucking idiot. I don't give a shit. Bella just asked me to come to dinner. Like a date.

A date with Bella.

Inside my heart is racing and I force myself not to dwell on the fact that it's the first date I've had with anyone … ever.

"That would be … yeah, I'd love to."

Fuck, now I'm the one blushing. I can feel it creeping up my neck and onto the tips of my ears.

She blows out a shaky breath and I kind of love the fact she's as nervous as I am. "About five? That way you can hang out with Peyton for a bit before dinner, you know, because you're best friends and all."

I laugh, though it dies almost immediately because Bella wraps her arms around my waist. Mine instantly curl around her and for a second neither us breathe. Hell, neither of us move. I know intuitively she didn't mean to hug me, but she obviously doesn't mind enough to stop. It's not like I'm going to suggest it either. She could stay there forever and it would be all right with me. Because I can't help myself, I lower my head, and the moment my nose touches her hair, I inhale deeply. Salt, citrus, and the smoke from the bonfire fill my senses and I know when I get home, I'll still be able to smell her. Her fingers twist my t-shirt and I smile. I can feel her heart race against my chest, though I'm sure mine feels the same. Slowly, so fucking slowly I think I might die or explode, my lips slide down her hair, over her ear, and come to rest on her cheek. I leave them there, feeling the silky smoothness of her skin, until I'm afraid I'll throw her down on the ground.

"I can't wait until Sunday. Thank you for asking me."

She shivers and I know for a fact it's not because she's cold, especially when I feel the heat of her blush against my mouth.

I kiss her cheek one more time before I have to let her go. When she steps back, she looks a bit dazed and there's no way in hell I can stop the smug smirk that spreads across my face.

She rolls her eyes, a trait that I'm learning to appreciate more and more, which is good as she does
it so often, and then we both start walking back toward the others. I see Peyton sound asleep in Xavier's arms and as much as I kind of fucking hate it, it's incredibly sweet to see. Bella turns to me and smiles, whispering, "I'll see you Sunday."

I watch her walk away and wonder how in the hell these two girls have managed to turn me into such a damn sap.

I'm not sure I mind all that much.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

I think about both of them the whole way back to the boarding house. Carlisle and Esme are going to The Breakers with Charlie and Renée. Seth, well, the way he and Xavier were looking at each other all night, I know exactly where and what they're doing. My bike rumbles as I slow down to turn into the driveway and I park; the silence when I cut off the engine is so abrupt it takes me by surprise. It's more like the fact I've been so lost in thought about Bella, I've nearly forgotten about everything else.

The way her hair glowed in the moonlight.

The way the firelight danced in her eyes.

The heat from her touch.

The feel of her hard nipples against my chest.

The silkiness of her skin beneath my lips.

My dick swells as I walk into the quiet house. Realizing that there is no one home but me, a first I think with a start, I palm my throbbing erection as I head for the shower. Thoughts and visions of Bella are swirling through my mind faster than I can keep up with them. Some are real, most are not. Just my imagination running away from me mixed with the remembrance of the way she looks, smells … feels. The pull to her is undeniable. It's more than the fact that she's a beautiful woman and I haven't had sex in over seven years. It's more than the fact that she's Peyton's mom, though there is no denying how much the two for one special they are makes her even more appealing. No, the pull is simply Bella. Strong, fierce, independent, struggling, scared, heartbroken, gorgeous, sexy Bella.

I'm up the stairs and in my bathroom, my body obviously leading my head. My palm still rests on my cock, though now it's painfully hard. With one hand, I turn on the faucets, making the water as hot as I can. Once I'm naked, I stand beneath the hot spray and close my eyes and give into the feelings I've been trying to fight from the moment I saw her.

Long dark hair. Skin that smells like salt and citrus. A mouth with a bottom lip slightly bigger than the top. A neck pulled taut just begging to be licked and nibbled on. Legs that could wrap around my waist, holding me to her in just the right way. An ass that just begs for my fingers to knead and squeeze. A breathless voice that calls out my name.

My fingers wrap around my cock, stroking up and down in firm, slow movements. My thumb swipes at the drop that seeps from the end and then down, coating me. It's not enough, so almost desperately I squirt some shower gel in the palm of my hand and sigh in relief when my fingers glide with no resistance.

In my mind I can hear her breathing pick up, hear a catch in her throat and I know it's exactly how she'll sound. I imagine how she'd taste when my tongue pressed its way into her mouth - sweet and
tangy. I imagine feeling the rough skin of her nipples as I roll first one then the other between my fingers only to follow with my mouth, licking and sucking … gorging myself on every inch of her skin. In my mind when my hand dips between her legs, sliding through her soft curls to find her slick and hot, she moans low and deep. When my finger pushes inside of her, her mouth opens and out would come only the faintest of whispers, just my name over and over like a plea or a demand for more. I'd give it to her willingly.

I imagine laying her beneath me, hair fanned out over my pillow, eyes shining with want and need, her body open and accepting, aching for me. Guiding my cock into her, I imagine plunging into her wet heat, feeling her completely surround me. Her name falls from my mouth like a prayer. Mine escapes hers on a desperate sob. Fingers grab and pull, lips search for points of pleasure, tongues fight for dominance but taste with reverence, eyes say what words can't, bodies that know how to move to give and get the most pleasure until the ecstasy is so great that we both release, first her, then me, in wave after wave of pure bliss.

My legs tense as I explode in a powerful torrent. I continue pumping, savoring every last moment of my fantasy.

"Fuck," I mutter, banging a fist against the tiled shower. The sound echoes with my panting as I try to catch my breath from the most intense orgasm I've ever experienced.

Minutes later I'm laying in bed, naked, covered with only a light sheet. My heart hasn't stopped racing. I try to tell myself that it's from coming harder than I ever have in my life but I know that's not why.

It's because sooner or later I'm going to have to tell Bella my past. When I do, I'm afraid it will take away my future.

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Soooo? This one had a bit of everything, yes? Did Edward's first meeting with Xavier go the way you thought it would? Our X has his reasons for being so protective, trust me. And Peyton and Edward on the beach? Thanks for that scene goes to the beautiful Kat - she shared a happy, personal memory from her time on the beach with me and from that came Edward and Peyton's moment. That treasure box plays a very important part in the story to come, so you'll see it again. And our girl Bella … she seems to have calmed down enough to invite him over for dinner! How about that kiss, huh? Oh, and what about that ending?

Next chapter will be back to Bella and it's all the dinner. We finally see a good bit of Rose and a hint, a little back story on Bella, too.

Have you checked out The Breakers blog this week? The amazing, incredible, wonderful Laurel made me so many pretty pictures I spent the whole week jumping up and down every time she made a new one! We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Laurel made a new blinkie for TB so take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see! It's fabulous, go look!

www(.)les16-thebreakers(.)blogspot(.)com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the lookout for those.
Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!

Happy Birthday to Inkedupmom … Hope you liked the chapter!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 8

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A HUGE thank you to all my girls: Laurel, Kat, Cecile, J'me, Kassiah, Robin, Lianne, and Ayden~ they have all worked so hard to help me get this story up and going and I wouldn't know what to do without them!

WOW! I am totally blown away by the response to The Breakers! Thank you all so much for giving this one a chance. Hope you stay with me for the ride.

A HUGE thank you to everyone who voted for The Breakers for Fic of the Week on The Lemonade Stand. TB was chosen as one of the top 4 and will be featured on their blog. Be sure to check out the great review the amazing evil nat did. Thanks so much for the kind words, sweetie!

tehlemonadestand . blogspot . com (just remove the spaces)

Now, on with the story ...

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Chapter 8

BPOV

Squawk! Squawk!

I groan and pull a pillow over my head, trying to block out the God-awful sound. When I hear it again, I huff then throw the pillow toward the open window, barely missing having it tumble over the windowsill.

I roll over and open my eyes. As soon as I do, I realize what day it is.

Sunday.

Dinner with Edward Sunday.

Edward coming to my house and spending time Sunday.

A slow smile spreads across my face and my stomach flutters at the thought that in a few hours he'll be here … with me and Peyton.

For over four years, there haven't been many men in my house that weren't friends or family. On a rare occasion, Emmett or Seth will bring a guy with them that works on one of the other boats or someone they've met hanging out in the bar in town, but that's it. I've been on some dates, nothing that led to much of anything, mostly because I've sworn that I'm not risking mine or Peyton's happiness on a fling that has no hopes of going anywhere. I tried dating a couple of times and once pretty seriously with a man that spent the summer in Corea on a mission to find himself. In the end, we wound up going our separate ways when he found himself missing the big city he tried to get
away from way more than he wanted to be with me … and Peyton.

A few make-out sessions, a few orgasms, sex with one guy in the seven years since Evan died is all there's been. Nothing earth-shattering, and always more about feeling desirable and physical release than anything else. It's not the easiest way to go through life by any means. It makes keeping an alternative means of releasing pent-up sexual frustrations in the drawer of my nightstand a necessity, but it's the hand I've been dealt, so I've learned to live with it.

Thinking about Edward and sex at the same time is definitely not the smartest thing to do, so I try to push all thoughts about the latter to the back of my mind. It's not particularly easy, especially with someone that looks the way he does. The man's a walking billboard for all things tall, dark, and handsome, but there's so much more to him than that. I don't know him all that well, in fact, hardly at all, but anyone that can bring out that smile on my daughter the way he does has to be more than just a pretty face.

And Lord in Heaven, what a pretty face it is. From his kaleidoscope eyes, to his sharp, angular jaw, and his nose, that even though it has a slight bump on it, is perfect on him. Eyelashes that any woman would kill for - not to mention his lips, that though are always turned up in a smart-assed smirk whenever he talks to me, make me want to grab his red, gold, and blond-streaked hair and pull him against me. Even the scar on his neck, which on anyone else would be off-putting, on him it just … works.

Everything on him works.

And well.

Squeezing my eyes closed and pressing my thighs tightly together, I run my hands over my stomach hoping it will calm the swarm of butterflies currently trying to make a break for it.

I'd be a fool not to realize that there's obviously an attraction between the two of us; it's been there since the first day I saw him … and ran out of the restaurant like a scared rabbit - the second time, too. Thankfully he came after me and I pulled my head out of my ass. There's still such a mystery surrounding him, so many unanswered questions, but he's making an effort to put himself out there; I figure the least I can do is to dip my pinky toe in the water. Baby steps and all. I know I'm not ready to take the floaties off, but I can at least try to swim in the shallow end.

As scary as it is to think about, I'm kind of excited to imagine what the deep end looks like.

After I go over the menu for dinner for the umpteenth time in my head, I decide it's time to get up and make sure Peyton's awake. We have Mass to get ready for and then I have to come home and get started on dinner. I don't know what possessed me to want to cook such a time-consuming meal, maybe a bit of showing off, but the meal will take the better part of the afternoon to prepare.

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"Mom, how much longer?" Peyton asks, more like whines, after we finish lunch and she looks at the clock … again.

"Baby, I told you. Edward will be here at five, so you're just going to have to find something to keep yourself busy until he gets here."

"Fine. I'm going outside." She mopes and I have to laugh when the back screen door slaps closed behind her.

Once the dishes from our very light lunch are put away, I turn on the iPod on the docking station.
The front door is open, as is the back, along with numerous windows. The temperature today is in the high 60s and the sun's shining brightly. I can't help but giggle just a bit at how utterly perfect everything seems in this moment. Warm summer breeze blowing through the house, Peyton happily playing in the backyard, my favorite music filling the air, and getting ready to spend a few hours in the kitchen.

Because Dad and the guys don't go out in the boat on Sundays, The Breakers is closed for the day. It's always been that way. My mom says it's so we can all enjoy time away from the restaurant; I know it's so she can stay at home during football season and watch my dad. It's quite a sight to behold. I've never minded the free day and never more so than today. For the first time in a very long time, I have something besides movies on Lifetime to keep me occupied.

The soulful, raspy voice of Adele spills from the kitchen and my fingers twitch to get to work. Yesterday morning before I had to be at work, Peyton and I made a quick trip to Ellsworth to get some of the things I needed for today's dinner. I decided to go with a Japanese menu, hoping beyond hope that Edward would appreciate something a bit more exotic. We'll follow dinner with mint chocolate chip ice cream, thanks to Peyton being able to add knowing what his favorite dessert is to her never-ending list of things to remember about him.

Time passes quickly as I chop and slice vegetables and thin strips of beef. I have my head buried in the refrigerator looking for the bottle teriyaki sauce that's been pushed all the way to the back of the second shelf, hidden behind the mayonnaise, when I hear, "Nice view, Bell. Thanks for the ass picture."

The voice startles the shit out of me, especially because I might've been wiggling my hips just a bit to Rolling in the Deep. I bang my head when I jump. Pulling myself out of the fridge I turn around, glaring at the smart ass.

"Don't you know it's rude to just barge into a house without knocking first, Rose?" I'm cradling the marinade in my arm and continue rubbing the sore spot on my head all while scowling at my amused sister-in-law.

"Like you could hear me over the music and from inside the refrigerator anyway." She grins and then cocks her head to the side as she surveys the island and the counters. "I thought dinner was just going to be you, Edward, and Peyton … or did I miss an invitation somehow?"

I snort and then set the bottle on the island. "I might have gone a little overboard," I admit sheepishly.

"A little? Bella, you have enough food to feed half of Corea in here," she says with an indulgent shake of her head.

She's exaggerating … but honestly not by much. If anything, maybe only an eighth of the population of Corea – a quarter, tops.

I huff a bit and turn away from her, suddenly very interested in picking out the perfect carrot to slice for the steamed dumplings I'm making for appetizers.

Really, it's not that much food: Steamed dumplings filled with ground pork, cabbage and carrots mixed with soy sauce and served with dipping sauces. Thinly-sliced beef rolled with scallions then broiled. Vegetable tempura with sweet potatoes, broccoli, and eggplant. Then the main course of braised beef short ribs and salmon teriyaki with sushi rice served with a salad and ginger dressing. And of course, mint chocolate chip ice cream for dessert.
Going through the list, I cringe a bit only because it does seem like a lot of food, especially for just the three of us. I really do want to show off a bit and do something he won't expect. Between the seafood at the restaurant, which really doesn't ever get old, and the dinners Esme feeds him, I want to fix him something he'll remember.

"It's nice to see you so excited about something that doesn't have to do with Peyton for a change," Rose says and her voice has lost all traces of the teasing from just a moment ago.

I slowly turn around and lean against the counter. "It's just dinner, Rose."

"It's more than that and both you and I know it," she answers back immediately.

Rolling my eyes at her very true statement, I say, "Hold off on sending out the invitations to the wedding, sis."

She leans over the counter and rests on her elbows. "Bella," she starts then stops as she weighs her next words. "The fact that you've even invited Edward to come have dinner with you is a huge deal."

"I only asked him to come over for Peyton," I straight up lie to her.

Rose, of course, throws her head back and lets out a very unladylike but totally Rose-like laugh before she stares at me with narrowed eyes and a calculating smirk on her face. Bitch. She knows me way too well. "Yeah, keep trying to sell that line, Bell, because I'm not buying it." After a few seconds of silence she says, "It's okay to be excited."

I shrug my shoulders at her and turn around, but don't say anything. There are too many thoughts racing around in my mind and I know if I open my mouth, things I'd rather not say will come spilling out. Rose has always had an uncanny knack for getting me to talk when I don't want to; it's been that way since I had my first crush on Travis Hughes in the second grade. I made the mistake of trying to hide it from her until she cornered me one day on the playground at recess. By the time we went back to class, Travis knew all about my crush because Rose gave him a bloody nose when I told her he'd been mean to me in gym class.

"Don't do this, Bella." Rose's voice is sad … so very, very sad.

I whip around and throw my hands up in the air. "Rose, stop … just please, stop," I tell her, my voice laced with so much frustration.

"Bell," she begins but I hold my hand up to stop her from saying anything else.

"I know you mean well and I know you love me, but I can't handle this right now." My voice shakes and I have to take a few deep breaths in and out before I can go on. "Just let me do this my way, Rose, okay? I don't need you and Alice interfering and plotting behind my back. I don't need Emmett giving me advice or Jasper breathing down my neck. I barely know Edward, so I don't need you all rushing me into things I'm not ready for before we even spend more than a few minutes together. Hell, for all I know, he really might just want to hang out with Peyton and I'm merely a means to an end."

She snorts at that comment and I roll my eyes at her even though on the inside my stomach is doing a tiny happy dance because I know that's not what's happening as much as she does. Sure, Edward thinks Peyton is the best thing next to mint chocolate chip ice cream, but I'm not blind either.

I may like to live with my head buried in the sand, but I'm not an idiot. I've seen the way he looks at me, as if he's trying to memorize everything about me, like I might disappear in front of his eyes.
I've felt the way my heart stutters then races when he walks into the restaurant. I feel the ache between my legs when I remember what it felt like when I hugged him on the beach the other night. Not my finest moment by any stretch of the imagination, but he sure as hell didn't seem to mind.

It might be longer than I care to admit since I've last been with a man, and certainly not with anyone that looks the way Edward does. My body reacted instantly the moment it was pressed up against his, right down to the surge of moist heat between my legs, the nipples that pebbled against his chest, and to my fingers that practically ached from wanting to touch him anywhere … everywhere.

My physical response to him scares the everliving shit out of me, only because I've never had this reaction to anyone before. Not Evan, not Kyle, my one failed attempt at trying to have a so-called boyfriend in all these years - not to any of the guys that Alice and Rose have tried to set me up with from time to time. Not one of them has made me feel what he does and it's terrifying.

I know next to nothing about him. I can't imagine anyone that can relate to and connect with a seven-year-old the way he has can be all bad. I'm sure there are things he's hiding or running from, there has to be, but I've decided to get to know him before I pass judgment. Hell, what I am trying to move past seems like Mount Doom in *The Lord of the Rings* … whatever he's working through can't be any worse than what I am.

God, please don't let it be worse.

I'm taking a chance on Edward, even if he doesn't know or realize it yet. Peyton is totally enamored with him and she'd be so completely devastated if he all of the sudden up and disappeared. I have to tread so very carefully, taking just the tiniest of baby steps. Her heart is too precious to be careless with and I won't allow anything to hurt her if I can help it. She's all I have, she's what matters most, and Edward will have to accept that if he's at all interested in anything past friendship.

"Rose," I say and this time my voice is soft and calm. "Let me just get to know the man. Let me have a friend that hasn't known me since I was missing my two front teeth or was there when Spencer Kelley kissed me in the middle of the cafeteria in fifth grade, okay? You know how freaked out I was when Edward first got here. I didn't give him a fair chance then so we're starting over. Just … give me some time to figure out what he wants and what I want. Like I said, it's only dinner."

She sighs then looks at me with a scowl on her face, one that quickly morphs into the smile she's been trying to fight. "Fine, Bell, you win. You can't blame me for being excited for you, though."

"Fair enough." I look around at all the food on the counters and start to laugh. "Damn, this really is a lot of food, isn't it?"

"Told you." She snickers. "Tell me what I can do to help. Emmett's with Charlie watching the baseball game on TV so I have a few hours to fill."

I place a pile of sweet potatoes in front of her and hand her a peeler. "I see how it is; I'm just the backup when Em's busy."

I'm totally teasing but Rose's face falls and when she gasps then looks at me, her eyes are wide and fearful. "You don't really feel that way, do you?"

Sighing, I throw my arm over her shoulder and kiss the side of her cheek. I won't lie to her though. I
don't work that way, not even to spare her feelings. "At times," I tell her and then shush her when she opens her mouth. "But, I get it. Em's your husband and your main priority, just like Peyton's mine. I know …" I sigh again and squeeze her to me. "I know I haven't made it easy on the rest of you either to include me when you do things."

"Well," she says as she bumps my hip with hers. "Now that you and Edward are both the single ones, that won't be such an issue anymore. Now will it?"

I growl and then laugh, glad that the heaviness from before is gone.

We spend the next little bit catching up until I've done everything I can do ahead of time. I glance at the clock and my heart starts doing that stutter/race thing it does whenever I think about Edward. Rose chuckles, and as soon as she opens her mouth to no doubt say something totally inappropriate, Peyton comes flying through the back door and flings herself straight toward her aunt.

"Aunt Rose!" Peyton squeals.

She's … a mess. Leaves and twigs in her hair, grass stains on her knees, a smudge of dirt across her cheek. In other words, totally Peyton.

Rose squishes her nose at Peyton though the absolute adoration she has for her is as plain as day on her face. At twenty-nine, she's certainly not too old to have a baby, but all of us wish she'd just get on with it already. It's not that she and Emmett don't want kids, but they're very happy with the way things are right now. I know, because Rose told me, that once her current birth control prescription runs out, she's going off them and then they'll just see what happens. Both of them will make fantastic parents so I'm hoping she gets pregnant right away.

"P, what in the world were you doing out there?" Rose asks as she plucks a leaf from Peyton's rat nest imitation.

I can't help but laugh when Peyton's eyes dance with unbridled glee. Hopping up on the counter, I give Rose a look to let her know she might as well get comfortable … this is liable to take a while.

I'm not wrong. Fifteen minutes later and Rose's eyes have glazed over and she looks like she's just had a brain meltdown.

"You okay there, Rose?" I chuckle as I hop off the counter and onto the floor.

"Shit," I mutter when I look at the clock, then cringe a bit when Peyton grins at me. "Yes, Miss Smarty Pants, that means an extra helping of dessert."

Rose snorts and I turn and give her the stink eye. "Ha, ha. I'm officially running behind schedule now, thank you very much. My daughter looks like she just got done wrestling a bear outside, and I still haven't showered or gotten dressed yet!" By the end of my tirade I've worked myself into such a tizzy my heart is racing and both Rose and Peyton are staring at me … and looking rather afraid of me.

Rose narrows her eyes at me before I see the corner of her mouth twist into a smirk. She grabs me by the shoulders and turns me around, pushing me out of the kitchen. "You leave Peyton to me. Go upstairs, take a nice long, hot shower and try to relax. It's just dinner, remember?" she teases in the most smart ass voice she can muster.

As I'm walking up the stairs, I hear her say, "I expect details, Bella. Lots and lots of details."
An hour later, and I'm clean, smooth all over, and as nervous as I've ever been in my life. I stand in front of the mirror in my bathroom and watch myself as I lift a shaking hand to try to put on my mascara. It'd so be just my damn luck to stab myself in the eyeball with the mascara wand.

Somehow I manage to finish, and as I stare at myself in the mirror, I giggle, then clamp my hand over my mouth so that Rose and Peyton don't hear me. That would just add more fuel to the fire as far as Rose is concerned and I really don't need that right now. I try to take a deep breath but seriously, it feels like my heart is going to beat its way right out of my chest and my stomach is tumbling nonstop. I'm pretty sure there's no way I can eat anything I've made for dinner.

"It's just dinner, Bella," I say out loud to my reflection in the mirror, then roll my eyes at my idiotic self. I wonder if I say those words a few hundred more times, I'll believe them any more than I do this time.

I don't really think so.

I hear Peyton laugh from downstairs and figure it's time to get the ball rolling. At this point, there's no telling where it's going to go, but I'm willing to see which direction it's heading.

"Mom, you look so pretty," Peyton says as soon as I reach the bottom step.

"You, too, baby," I tell her, suddenly a bit overwhelmed by everything. The fact that the two of us dressed up for Edward isn't lost on me and sort of makes this a much bigger deal than I want it to be. I don't want him to be nervous, either; I just want to us to have a nice time and hopefully get to know each other a bit more.

Really, Peyton's not any more dressed up than she would be if we were going out to eat or something. Just a cute pair of plaid shorts and a polo shirt. The fact that her hair is brushed and neatly put up in a ponytail means she's made more of an effort than usual.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rose try to sneak her phone back in her pocket. "Rosalie Swan, did you just take my picture?" I ask with as evil a glare as I can manage, especially when I hear her giggle.

"Sorry, Bell, but this is too good to pass up. Alice will die when she sees you wearing that dress," she tells me and really, there's no hint of an apology anywhere to be found.

If I wasn't so pressed for time, I might have to kill her. Instead, I huff and walk into the kitchen to make sure things are ready to go.

I know I should have just put on a pair of jeans and a tank top or something instead of a sundress. It's nothing too fancy, just a white dress with some bright red flowers with a few hints of black mixed in. It's been sitting in my closet since last summer when Alice informed me on a shopping trip in Bar Harbor that I just had to buy it … even though I had nowhere to wear it. I left my hair down, and spent about thirty minutes making it as straight as I could get it. The pair of flip-flops I'm wearing I hope will make the dress seem less 'dressy' and more comfortable than anything.

I am so out of practice at all this and Rose taking pictures isn't helping things … at all.

"I'm going to head out so that you don't have time to kill me before Edward gets here," Rose says with a grin as she leans on the doorway to the kitchen.

I snort and shoot her a dirty look before I smile. I can't help it. "I'm excited and nervous and I think I might go change my clothes," I spit out.
“Bella, calm down. You look beautiful, dinner is going to be delicious, and you'll have fun. Just sit back and enjoy it. Stop worrying so damn much,” she tells me then kisses me on the cheek. “Besides, Peyton's here to run interference for you if you need it. Call me tomorrow, Bell, first thing, or else I'll come get you for work instead of Xavier. You really don't want that happening.”

And with that, she's out the door before I have a comeback.

"Mom, do you think Edward will want to play Madden Football or FIFA Soccer?” Peyton asks from the living room before I have time to give in to the full-fledged panic attack that's simmering just beneath the surface.

When I walk into the room, she looks so excited, bouncing up and down on her bare feet and waving the game boxes back and forth in the air. Just seeing her so happy immediately puts me at ease and I vow to sit back and let the night go like it's going to go.

"P, video games are your domain, so I'll leave that up to you. Maybe you'll have time to play both if Edward's up to it," I tell her.

"He is,” I hear.

Holy shit.

My heart skids to a stop then races so fast I gasp for a breath.

"Edward!” Peyton squeals and drops the boxes on the floor. In a flash she's skipped across the room, flung the front screen door open, and thrown herself at him before he has time to say another word.

He lifts her up and gives her a hug. Her legs swing around as he moves from side to side and when his eyes find mine over her head, I realize how happy I am that he's here.

"Hey, Bella.” His chocolaty-caramel voice washes over me and my mouth waters. Damn caramel turtles.

"Hi, Edward.” I can feel my cheeks heat up and I pray that damn blush hasn't spread to my chest like I know it probably has.

"And you,” he teases when he looks at Peyton. "What did I hear you say? Something about playing football or soccer?”

She wiggles out of his arms and drags him by the hand toward the television where she has everything all set up and ready to go. "Mom said we'd have time to play before dinner, so what do you want to play first? And do you like Japanese food? Mom's made all this stuff for us to eat but I don't like the eggplant but I promised her I'd try it. Oh, and wait until I tell you what I did today when I was waiting for you to get here. I think I freaked out Aunt Rose.”

Peyton giggles when she stops to take a breath, and well, I laugh, too, but only because the look on Edward's face is almost identical to the one Rose had on hers before.

"Can I get you something to drink?” I ask him when he finally looks like he's regained some sense of equilibrium after Peyton's whirlwind.

"That'd be great. Whatever you're having is fine.” He shuffles a bit and looks so adorkably awkward and nervous I have to tease him just a bit.
"You look like you could use a stiff drink but lemonade is the choice of the moment, unless you'd prefer water?" I smirk at him and feel myself relax when he takes a deep breath and runs a hand through his hair.

A flash of inked skin peeks out from beneath the arm of his gray t-shirt and I have to swallow back the moan that desperately wants to come out. I've never been one to like tattoos, at all, but after seeing them on Edward, well bits and pieces at any rate, it's making me have second thoughts about that.

Of course it's probably just Edward having tattoos that I like.

When I look at him again and see the black ink slip back under his shirt, I know it's definitely because it's Edward.

Our eyes meet and today his are the sea glass green color I love so much. Having spent a bit more time with him, I think I have an idea what the different colors of his eyes mean and I know that the gray-green I see now means he's happy. I couldn't be more grateful about that.

"You're right about the stiff drink, but lemonade sounds great," he tells me.

"Me, too, Mom," Peyton follows with while she's busy getting the XBOX all set up.

"Coming right up. We'll be ready to eat in about an hour. Is that okay?" I ask him.

I can't believe how nervous I am. From the looks of it, he doesn't seem much better. His eyes haven't stopped darting around the room, but he nods almost absentmindedly at my question about dinner. I know for a fact if Peyton wasn't here, it would be a hundred times worse for both of us. Realizing that, I take a deep, shaky breath and force myself to calm down.

Peyton pulls him down on the couch and begins giving him instructions on how to work the controllers. I laugh and shake my head as I head back toward the kitchen. Poor guy, he looks positively clueless, which I find a bit odd because I assume that all guys know how to play video games. I swear I think Em, Jasper, Xavier, and Seth have controllers permanently attached to their hands as often as they play. By the time I set two glasses of lemonade on the coffee table in front of them, the battle to be Ruler of All Things Madden for the day has begun.

Before I even make it back to the kitchen, I hear, "Oh, Edward, you're so going down." He doesn't stand a chance.

I've been in the kitchen for about twenty minutes and I'm taking the rolled beef and scallions out from under the broiler when I hear Peyton and Edward talking.

"Edward," she says softly. The tone of her voice has completely changed and for some reason my stomach twists itself into a pretzel. "Where are your mom and dad?"

I gasp and slap an oven-mitted hand over my mouth. I'm hurrying to the living room to save Peyton or Edward, I'm not sure which, and am about to step out of the kitchen when I hear Edward sigh.

"What do mean?" His voice isn't angry, instead it's patient, even though it's laced with an untold amount of sadness.

"Well, you moved here all by yourself, so I was just wondering where you used to live. I bet it was someplace really cool, wasn't it?"
The sound of him setting his controller on the table floats through the air and my heart feels like it's in my throat as I lean my head against the wall and wait for him to answer. I debate interrupting by bringing the appetizers to them but I want to … need to … hear what his answer is. I feel pretty damn pathetic in all honesty because my daughter is so much braver than me.

"My parents are both dead, Peyton. They died a long time ago."

She gasps loudly while mine is nearly silent. "How did they … I mean what happened?" she asks in a quiet, hesitant voice.

My fingers dig into my leg. I can feel the crescent-shaped indentations my nails have made when I run my fingertips back and forth over the marred skin.

"You know I used to live in Boston, right?" he asks and when there's no answer, I assume Peyton is nodding her head at him. "Well, one night when I was a little younger than you, my parents were coming home from dinner and were in a car accident. It was winter and my dad was driving. He lost control of the car and they slid off the road."

I choke back a sob and close my eyes, hoping to keep the tears that want so badly to fall from leaking out. How he managed to tell Peyton that and keep his voice calm, if a bit uneven, I'll never know. I hear a sniff and I push off the wall to go to her, but before I can take a step Edward's already comforting her.

"Hey, now," he says softly as the sound of rustling fills the air. "Don't cry, pretty girl."

"But, but," she hiccups.

"Shhh, Peyton. It's okay." I take a deep breath and slowly poke my head out. What I see nearly makes me come undone. He's pulled Peyton onto his lap and his arms are wrapped completely around her as if to shield her. Her head is tucked beneath his chin and she's curled up against his chest. It's without a doubt, one of the most touching things I've ever seen and something stirs deep inside of me as I watch this man, one that I barely know, comfort my daughter in a way that I'm not sure even Xavier, Emmett, or my dad have ever done.

"What happened to you? I mean where did you go, you know after?" she asks quietly after she sniffs again. "Who took care of you?"

I watch as he shifts her a bit so that she can look at him. His hand runs through her hair and then up and down her arm in the most familiar of motions. Again, how someone who's admitted to not being around children can be so natural at talking to …. relating to her is astounding. It boggles my mind honestly and if I wasn't so sure of how much he cared about Peyton, it would scare the shit out of me.

He kisses her one more time on the side of the head. "My grandparents took me in and I lived with them."

"So you weren't all alone?" she asks in a soft voice.

"No, sweetheart. My grandparents were amazing people and I was very lucky to have them. I was sad for a while after my mom and dad died, but I don't really remember too much about them now. Bits and pieces mostly."

"My dad died, too, but it was before I was even born," she tells him.

I can tell what she's said has shocked him because his hand stills and his arms tense. His eyes, I can
tell even from where I'm still partially hidden, have changed to the color of thunder clouds, imitating his mood. I've stopped breathing. It's been so long since Peyton has brought up Evan and the fact that she's done it now with Edward, without a moment's hesitation, screams louder than words ever could.

She trusts him. Enough to tell him things she rarely talks about with anyone. It's as shocking as it is sweet and tender and my heart breaks and expands at the same time as I watch the two of them bond in a way I wasn't sure she ever would with anyone.

"I'm so sorry, Peyton," he whispers to her.

She shrugs her shoulders. I can't help but smile a bit when she reaches up with a finger and touches the bit of ink on his arm that's visible. "Mom tells me he's watching me from Heaven and that he loves me and is proud of me. Do you think he is, Edward? I mean, I know I'm not always nice and I tell Mom I eat all my vegetables, even when I don't. And sometimes," she lowers her voice and whispers, well, as much as Peyton can whisper, "I trade my carrot sticks for cookies at school. I mean, who would eat a carrot when you can have a chocolate chip cookie?"

I laugh lightly and it mixes with his louder one, though he hears me anyway. Our eyes meet over Peyton's head, just for the briefest of moments, but it's long enough to spark the ember that's been waiting patiently for even the smallest bit of fuel to grow into something more. I smile, hoping he can understand what's happening. When he smiles back, I know he does.

It's way too soon to talk about it, but the fact we both recognize that it's something is all that's necessary for now.

"No one with any sense," he tells her and tweaks the end of her nose. I turn, leaving them to finish their discussion, safe in the knowledge that my daughter is just fine with her best friend.

"Of course your dad is proud of you, sweetheart, and he loves you, too, even if he can't tell you himself. You're a great kid," he tells her and when I hear her shriek and gasp for breath, I assume he's found out just how ticklish she is.

A loud sound sails through the air because Peyton's obviously given him a raspberry. "Thanks, Edward," she says sweetly. "I think he's proud of me, too.

"Bet he'll be even more proud when he sees me beat you at Monopoly after dinner." She giggles and I hear her race up the stairs.

The beef and dumpling appetizers have been plated and I'm getting ready to cook the vegetable tempura when the hair on my arm rises.

"I hope what I said was okay." His voice is tense as is his posture when I turn around and look at him. He's leaning against the side of the island, but his body is rigid and his eyes are searching for any sign that I'm upset with him.

He won't find any.

I set the slotted spoon on the counter and face him. My hands grip the counter behind me and my fingers curl over the sides.

My body feels electrified, but only because he's standing so close, not because I'm angry or upset. If anything, I'm pretty much blown away at how good he is with Peyton.

"You were wonderful with her. She usually doesn't talk about her father to anyone," I tell him and I
hope the inflection in my voice lets him know how significant it is that she did so with him.

The surprise on his face, followed by the soft smile, lets me know he does.

He pushes off the side of the island then takes a few steps around so that he's facing me with his back against the edge. His legs are so long that they're on either side of me. As he's so much closer now, I'm able to see his eyes, which are now the same color as the blue-green pieces of sea glass that fill the jar on the windowsill above kitchen sink.

"And you?" he asks quietly, his voice hesitant as if he's afraid to upset me. "Do you talk about him … Evan?"

I gasp. Hearing Edward say Evan's name makes my knees buckle and I close my eyes.

"Shit. Bella, I'm so sorry," Edward says urgently. He steps closer and grabs my hand, holding it tightly in his. His thumb is soothingly rubbing back and forth across my knuckles and it only takes me a second to regain my equilibrium thanks to his sweet and very comforting gesture. I can feel the calluses on his fingers, feel the scabs and scrapes from working on the boat, but even with all that, his hand holding mine feels incredible.

Strength and comfort and calm wash over me and I want to bask in it for hours … days even.

"How did you … " I start to ask and my voice is quiet though much steadier than I would expect, all things considered.

He shifts closer still; our bodies are almost touching. His thumb hasn't stopped its sweeping motion. With his other hand, he brushes my hair back over my right shoulder. The motion is so familiar that it should make me question it, but I don't want to. The edge of his finger ghosts across my bare shoulder and it makes me shiver and warm all over at the same time.

"Charlie and Emmett were talking about him the other day and judging from their reactions, I knew he was someone important. Something told me that it had to do with you, too. After what Peyton said, it just seemed to click." He shrugs his shoulders slightly and there's a pronounced dip between his eyebrows. I want to reach up and smooth it out, but that would mean moving, and I definitely don't want to do that … or have him move either.

It's not lost on me that just a few days ago I didn't want to be in the same room as him, let alone be this close.

We sigh at the same time when the silence becomes slightly uncomfortable and thankfully it eases the tension that was beginning to settle around us.

"This is not how I envisioned things going so far," I admit. I blow a piece of hair out of my face and when I look at him, he's smiling.

"Can I tell you something?" I nod, a tiny bit scared at what he could possibly say. His voice is teasing as are his eyes because they're gleaming wickedly. He bends his head down and his breath fans over my ear, his nose barely grazing my jaw. "I've been a nervous fucking wreck since Friday night just thinking about today."

Those goosebumps from before have returned in full force. My heart's doing that stutter step thing and there isn't any possible way he can't hear it. His voice in my ear, the way his nose keeps skimming over my cheek and jaw, has my mind in a jumbled mess. I'm finding it more and more difficult to form even the simplest of coherent thoughts when he's this close to me, so close I can smell the tang of the lemonade he drank earlier in the breath that warms my ear.
"It's all I've been able to think about." Damn that caramel turtle voice. Sinfully smooth and rough at the same time.

"Me, too." My voice is shaky, breathless, and totally unfamiliar.

Damn, what Edward does to me merely by opening his mouth.

He picks his head up and his eyes have somehow darkened but sparkle even more than before. "Yeah?" he asks and quirks his eyebrow, sounding totally pleased with my admission.

I hump and roll my eyes at him, annoyed that I can't help but smile at him. "Yes. Happy now?" I tease.

He lifts his free hand and lightly runs the backs of his fingers down my arm, leaving a wake of molten fire. "Very," he says as he exhales through his nose.

"Edward!" Peyton calls for him and suddenly the mood has changed, which is probably a very good thing considering I feel like I'm about to melt into a puddle of Bella goo right there on the spot.

He doesn't take his eyes off me as he yells, "Be right there." Finally the corner of his mouth lifts and he gives me a lazy, sexy smirk. His hand slips from mine and I'm immediately aware of how much I like him touching me when he's not any longer.

He turns, a bit reluctantly, and picks up one of the dumplings, dipping it in the sauce beside it. "Mmmm," he says in his deep, rough voice. His tongue flicks out and laps up the bit of sauce on his bottom lip. Blue-green eyes flash in my direction again. "Fucking delicious," he murmurs before turning and walking back into the living room.

It's going to be a long night if he keeps that up.

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"Bella, this is so good." Edward moans as he takes another bite of his salmon.

"It is, Mom, but I still don't like eggplant." Peyton pouts as she pops a piece of sweet potato in her mouth.

We've been eating for what feels like hours, and have barely made a dent in all the food that covers the table. Conversation flows fast and furious the entire time we are sitting at the table. Peyton demanded that Edward sit between us so he's spent the meal turning his head back and forth like he's watching a tennis match to pay us equal attention. It's very sweet and pretty funny to watch his head bob from left to right. Every time our eyes meet, or our fingers brush against the other's, mostly on purpose, at least on my part and I'm pretty sure his as well, my stomach flutters. The panties I put on so I could try to feel at least a little sexy get wetter by the minute and I swear on all that's holy if I have dead batteries in my vibrator I will freaking explode … that is if Edward doesn't make me first.

I can't deny that the flirting hasn't been hot as hell and exhilarating as can be, but it's making my body feel like a live wire and my nerves are frayed. Smug, dangerous man knows it, too. His knee has been steadily pressing harder against my leg for the last thirty minutes.

Finally not one of us can eat another bite. I stand to gather the plates when he stops me, laying a warm, strong hand on my arm. "Let me," he says softly. Mutely I nod because I can't really do anything else, not when he looks and sounds like that.
I spend a few minutes in the bathroom washing my hands. Mostly I'm hiding out so that I don't scare the hell out of him when I throw him down on the sofa and climb on top of him so I can kiss him or lick him or touch him the way my body is screaming at me to do.

After I take one deep breath and offer up a quick prayer that I don't spontaneously combust, I make my way back into the living room.

"Mom, hurry," Peyton orders with her hand on the handle of the screen door. "Edward said we could take a walk." She's bouncing up and down and looking back and forth between me and him.

"Oh, he did?" I ask with a raised eyebrow and then giggle when he hangs his head and shrugs his shoulders a bit.

I don't say anything because I'm waiting for him to look at me again. When he does, he admits with a very adorable, very sheepish grin, "She asked. I couldn't say no."

"Hmmm," I answer, not minding the thought of a walk anywhere near as much as I let on.

The three of us go out the front door and I hand Edward the key as we walk down the front steps. It's an absolutely perfect night for a walk. The sun has just begun to set and there is still enough warmth left over from the heat of the day to keep it from being chilly. The moon has just begun to show and the soothing sounds of the ocean fill the air.

It's one of my favorite things about living in the Northeast. I complain, as everyone does from time to time, about wanting to get out of here and go someplace different, but the reality is that Corea is where I belong. That doesn't mean I don't wish to visit new places or see different things, but I'll always come back.

Peyton's chattering a mile a minute as we walk through our neighborhood. The houses are spread out pretty far apart, but I know that tomorrow at work I'll have more than a few people mention this little jaunt. Such is life in a small town, but in this case, I don't really mind all that much.

Especially after we've walked for about ten minutes and Edward slides his fingers between mine like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Is this okay?" he asks when I peek at him out of the corner of my eye.

I duck my head and I can feel myself blush like a little girl instead of acting like a grown woman. The man has me twisted in knots, though it's not the most unpleasant thing in the world. In fact, it's exciting and scary and maddening all at the same time.

"Yes," I answer simply and smile at him when he squeezes my hand and pulls me closer to him as we walk.

Peyton is still talking, totally oblivious that neither Edward nor I are really paying attention to her. "Does she ever run out of things to say?" he whispers when he bends his head down.

I laugh and shake my head. "Um … no. She can be quite … a challenge for her teachers at school sometimes. I have no idea where she gets all that personality from because she's not like me, and Evan sure wasn't like that."

I gasp as Evan's name slips out. I never talk about Evan, not even to Xavier and Seth who were as close to him as I was. The realization of that saddens me … a lot. Evan was a great guy and it's like a punch in the stomach that I've spent the past seven years pretending like he didn't exist.
"Bella," Edward says softly, distress evident in his voice. "Are you all right?"

I nod, not able to speak just yet. So many buried thoughts and feelings are just waiting to push their way out of the door I've kept them hidden behind for such a long time. The time to open that door and let them out is fast approaching, I can feel it, but not yet.

"I'm fine," I tell him as I sigh. His eyebrows dip and he frowns at me. I don't want this to ruin what has been an amazing night so I smile, hoping to make him smile back. It works, thankfully.

"Are you going to be ready for dessert when we get back?" I ask as we turn around and head back toward the house. "You know we're having mint chocolate chip ice cream; a little birdy told me it's your favorite."

I giggle as his eyes light up, leaving no question as to whether or not he'll be eating dessert once we get home.

"She remembered?" he asks, sounding totally shocked which makes me laugh.

Does the man not realize that Peyton thinks he hung the moon? I'm not sure at this point, if given the chance, she wouldn't take down all her Tom Brady posters if she could replace them with pictures of Edward.

I nod my head and tell him, "Edward, Peyton has a running list of all the things she knows about you. It's kind of scary if you want me to be honest. If she wasn't seven I'd be scared if I were you."

His smile is sweet and sexy at the same time; a dangerous combination if I've ever seen one. The fact that it sort of takes my breath away and makes my heart skip a beat is all the proof I need.

"And you, little one, what's this I hear about this list? Should I be worried about what you're writing down?" he teases when he glances down at her and swings their hands between them.

She sputters and stammers, then narrows her eyes at him when she realizes he's just messing with her. "Not nice, Edward. Don't forget, I know things," she warns him in as serious a voice as she can, which is rather difficult because as soon as he winks at her, she laughs uncontrollably.

Watching the two of them is like nothing I could've imagined. I'm more jealous than I'd like to admit that they can be so free and easy with each other, and though I had an inkling about how close they've become, to see it in real time is something else altogether. Edward has no idea of how significant Peyton not only showing him her treasure box, but giving him something from it is. She hasn't shown anyone what's inside, ever. It's causing more than a few problems for Xavier, but that's a crisis for another day.

We finally make it back home and eat our dessert on the sofa. There isn't a lot of talking going on. The scraping of spoons against ceramic mixed with a few mmmms are the only sounds in the room.

After Peyton's eyes have closed and her head has fallen backward against the sofa for the fourth time, I know it's time to get her into bed.

"Baby, say good night to Edward so we can get you into bed," I whisper as I shake her shoulder just a bit.

"No, don't wanna, want Edward to stay," she mumbles. Lord have mercy the girl is pulling out all the stops.

Thankfully, Edward doesn't exacerbate the situation and instead leans over and kisses her gently on
the cheek. "I'll see you soon, sweetheart. You have sweet dreams now, okay?" he says softly as he runs his hand over the back of her head.

"Do you need help getting her upstairs?" he asks once he sits up.

His eyes keep moving from me to Peyton and I can tell as much as he hates saying good night to her, he's as anxious and excited to have some alone time as I am.

I shake my head and tell him, "There's a bottle of wine in the fridge. Why don't you pour us each a glass and I'll be back down once I get her in bed. Come on, P, up you go, sweetie." I nudge her off the sofa and then wrap my arm around her so I can lead her up the stairs.

Getting her into bed is a piece of cake. The day has certainly been a full one and she climbs into bed and snuggles up with her pillow, half asleep before I can even pull the blanket over her. "Edward … best friend … not sad anymore …" she mumbles incoherently but it leaves no room to doubt who and what she's thinking about as she falls asleep.

I have a feeling my dreams won't be much different from hers … if I ever fall asleep that is.

"Night, baby," I whisper against her forehead and smile when her even breathing fills the air. "I love you."

I leave her door open a crack just like always and take a deep breath at the top of the stairs. My hands shake when I lift them to run my fingers through my hair and my legs feel like they do when I get done running on the treadmill for an hour.

"Jesus, Bella, get it together," I mutter to myself.

Music suddenly fills the air and when I reach the bottom step I say, "I never would have picked you for a Snow Patrol guy."

He's standing in front of the bookcase that has most of my pictures on it, holding a glass of wine in one hand and drumming his fingers against his thigh with the other. I can't tell if it's because he's nervous or keeping time with the music. My guess is on the first judging from how fast they're moving. He whips his head around at the sound of my voice and says, "I have no idea who this is; I just liked the name."

"You've never heard of Snow Patrol?" I ask as I pick up the glass of wine he's poured for me.

He takes a drink of wine though I can tell it's so he doesn't have to answer my question right away. I step closer to him and look at the shelf to see if I can figure out which picture caught his attention. When I see the one of Xavier, Seth, Evan, and me, I know.

He looks at me, his eyes changing color again as I stare at him. It's mesmerizing. When I see him raise an arm and nervously push his hand through his hair, I can sense that he's extremely hesitant to answer my question - like if he answers this one it's only the tip of the iceberg.

"I … uh … haven't had much chance to listen to music for a while now," he admits and sounds so afraid that instinctively I reach out and grab his hand.

I have no idea what that means or what could possibly cause that to happen but it's plain to see that just saying that out loud is painful.

"Edward?" I question only because it's the only thing I can think of to say.
He sighs heavily and his shoulders slump as if the weight of the world has just fallen upon him. It makes me ache for him in a deep, sorrowful way. The anguish he's feeling is palpable and I can feel it pressing in on us from all sides.

"Bella, there's so much I need to tell you," he says roughly, his voice sounding more gritty than normal as he battles to keep himself in check.

In an instant I realize that what I say next is the make or break moment for us … if I want there to be an us. I can demand he tell me everything and in turn force things before either of us is ready to talk or hear about the secrets we each have. Or, we can take things each day as they come and take the time to get to know each other.

I want to know more.

"Me, too, but it doesn't have to be right now, Edward. As long as there aren't wanted posters of you hanging in every post office across the country, I don't think we need to tell each other our deepest, darkest secrets after spending a few hours together. We have time," I tell him sounding much more put together and rational than I feel on the inside.

Inside my heart and my brain are having a knock down, drag out over whether I'm being a naïve little girl with her head in the clouds or a woman willing to take a chance on a man that I'm more attracted to than anyone else, ever.

My heart wins the first round, though I'm sure my brain will have plenty to say later.

"I want that," he says so softly I barely hear him.

I swallow past the questions and answer just as softly, "I do, too."

The song changes and this time The Script's *Breakeven* floats from the speakers. I raise my eyebrow at him and he shakes his head. "Nope, not this one either," he says.

"You've really got me curious about the story behind that," I tell him, taking his almost empty glass and setting it on the coffee table along with mine.

Something flashes in his eyes, pain and fear, but it's gone almost as quickly as it came. Thankfully his eyes are back to the sea glass green that I've come to recognize as his normal color. It reminds me of the way the ocean looks when the moon reflects off it, especially when the water is calm, no matter that it has the power to change in a split second to turbulent and ferocious. So much unharnessed power with the ability to destroy.

Much like Edward himself.

It's a power I don't want to give him, but he has it nonetheless. The power to devastate a little girl; the power to shred my heart before I've even decided what to do with it.

His hand reaches out and takes mine, pulling me toward him. I don't resist and instead mold my body completely against his when he wraps his arms around me. My fingers slide up his arms and I can't help but sigh when, at last, I touch the ink that's etched into his biceps.

"Will you tell me what these mean?" I whisper, watching my finger trace the lines of black and red.

"Sometime, yes, if you want to know," he says roughly. His lips are beside my ear and when I feel his tongue flick at my earlobe my entire body reacts. Heat spreads, warmth pools, and my nipples ache as I press myself closer to him.
His tongue finds the sensitive spot behind my ear. His teeth gently scrape the skin and I lose my breath. His hands tighten on my back holding me so close I can feel his heart beat against my chest. "Will you tell me more about Evan?" he asks as he kisses his way along my neck.

"Yes, if you want to know." I moan. My fingers are in his hair, twisting, pulling.

"Fuck, Bella." He groans after my nails scrape along his scalp.

Our breathing is so heavy we're panting. Somehow he's turned us so that my back is flush against the wall. His body towers over mine and it's the hottest thing I've ever seen, looking up into his eyes that have changed to an almost charcoal black and knowing, feeling how much he wants me.

"Kiss me, Edward. Now." The words are barely out before his mouth covers mine.

Our tongues tangle and twist, then taste and explore. The feel of his tongue in my mouth is exquisite and the way he tastes even more so. Sweet from the ice cream, bitter from the wine, mixed with something that is purely him. His hands grip my ass, fingers massaging, testing.

His left hand slides up my back and winds itself in my hair, gently wrapping it around his fingers. "I've wanted to do this since the first moment I saw you," he says huskily as his mouth covers every inch of my neck with slow, wet kisses.

"Oh God," I breathe out as his mouth continues its wicked assault. Neck, jaw, cheek, back to lips. He doesn't stop, barely lets me catch my breath.

His middle grinds against mine, and he's so fucking hard. I can feel the entire length of him against my stomach … against my throbbing core. It feels so good I can't even think straight.

When I feel his hand cover my breast and his thumb brush against a sensitive nipple, I sag against him and almost come right then. I'm shameless as I push myself against his hand, begging for more.

I want him … Lord, I want him. Hard and fast and over and over again.

"Bella, oh Christ," he rasps. He presses his forehead to mine. His breath washes over me, bathing me in warmth and sweet and him. "I want you. Fuck, I want you so damn bad, but we need to stop before we do something we'll both regret."

It takes a moment or two before his words penetrate the haze of white hot lust in my brain, but when they do, I nod my head at him. He's right … as much as I hate it, as badly as I want him, I know without a doubt that going any further would be a huge mistake.

The fact that he recognizes that makes me want him even more. Go figure.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispers and his voice is back to sinfully caramel turtle-like.

I loosen my grip on his hair and lower my arm. My fingertips graze the scar on his neck. "You'll tell me about this, too?" I ask. My voice is uneven but thankfully my heart has mostly slowed down.

"Yes. If you want to know, I'll tell you everything."

The moment passes when I yawn. His grip loosens and when he takes a step backward, I sigh from the loss of contact.
I pout at him, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth. "Damn, woman, are you trying to kill me?" He moans then gently pulls my lip out with his fingers.

"I'd better go before it's too hard to leave at all," he says rather reluctantly. He grabs my hand and pulls me toward the front door. "I had a great time," he whispers looking down at our hands instead of at me.

"Me, too. We should do it again," I softly reply and suck in a deep breath when he looks at me with a drop dead, panty-wetting smile on his face.

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

I yawn again, not able to stop myself.

"Night, Bella." He kisses my forehead. "I'll see you soon, then, okay?"

"For sure. Night, Edward." He walks through the door and I stare at him as he gets on his bike.

It rumbles to life, startling me and when he waves, I wave back, waiting until I can't see him anymore to shut the door.

"Holy hell, girl," I mutter as I lean my back against the door, banging my head lightly over and over again. "You are in so much trouble when Rose and Alice find out about this."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Sooo? Progress, yes? What does everyone think about Rose? I kind of love her myself; you'll see more of her and the others, I promise. We got a bit of information about both Evan and Edward's past. Bella's starting to notice some things which will come in handy very soon. She sure does have it bad though, doesn't she?

Next chapter will be back to Edward. He's got a lot going on, trust me. Carlisle is back as is Charlie and we'll meet Aggie for the first time. I'm really excited about that one!

Have you checked out The Breakers blog this week? The amazing, incredible, wonderful Laurel made more pictures this week, including one of Evan so be sure to take a look! We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! Laurel made a new blinkie for TB so take a few minutes and look around because there is lots to see! It's fabulous, go look! Also, the recipes for dinner at Bella's are posted on the blog if you are interested.

www(les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading and giving my new story a chance!
See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 9

"Son of a bitch," I mutter heatedly when I see the parking lot of The Breakers. It's packed. Cars are parked in every available spot, even in places that are clearly marked as no parking zones. The line to get in is out the door and I huff while kicking a rock across the ground, watching as it skips away.

"Fuck."

It's been four days since I've seen Bella or Peyton. Four long, agonizing, frustrating, fantasy-filled days. Charlie's found a prime fishing spot so we've been out late every day so far this week. By the time we come back to the docks, Bella's so busy at the restaurant that I don't want to bother her. The number of summer vacationers in Corea has seemed to hit its peak which means everyone's busy.

I know it's good for business, but it sucks ass that I haven't been able to see her. I've been able to think about her though; in fact, it's been damn near impossible to do anything but that since the dinner at her house … and that kiss.

Holy fucking hell that kiss.

There have been too many dreams to count of what I imagined being with a woman the first time after I got out of prison would be like, but even the most vivid fail miserably in comparison to the reality of Bella. Of hearing her whimpers and moans, of feeling her nipples beneath my fingers, of tasting her tongue in my mouth. Nothing could have prepared me for the overwhelming desire to take her, claim her, that I find myself constantly wanting to do every time I'm around her. It took all I had, every bit of willpower I somehow found, to stop from going any further the other night. My body screamed in protest. Even the rough jacking-off session in the shower when I got home,
where I came not once but twice, did little to relieve any of the aching need that seems to be my constant companion these days.

It's been keeping the fear of telling Bella about Boston company in my mind.

If I'm not thinking about one thing, it's the other. Over and over. The fact that I haven't seen her in four days is exacerbating the worst case scenario playing in my head - the one where Bella and Peyton tell me they never want to see me ever again.

As much as I know it's a very real possibility that may happen, I hope with all I have that it won't. I haven't known either of them long, but I know I want them both in my life.

With one last regretful glance toward The Breakers, I hop on my bike and head back toward the boarding house. There's a strange car parked in the driveway when I pull up and my stomach immediately tightens. My initial thought, the very first thing that flies through my mind is that somehow I've failed my drug test and someone is here to take me back in. The urge to run is strong because now that I'm out, now that I've met Bella and Peyton, and started making friends, and a home in Corea, there's no fucking way I can go back.

None.

Thankfully, rational thought enters once my initial panic subsides. I realize I'm letting my imagination get the best of me and I take a few deep breaths. I figure it's just someone the State sent to check on me, and though the thought makes my skin crawl, it's better than the previous one. Even though my parole is a special case, I'm still a parolee. I'm still subject to many of the same rules and regulations as any other guy just out of prison and that means random spot checks and drug tests, a la last week's trip to Ellsworth. I hate the idea of subjecting Carlisle and Esme to the invasion of privacy. They were made aware of the possibility before they agreed to let me stay with them, but it doesn't mean I have to like it.

Timidly, I enter the side door into the kitchen, and feel the tension ease when I see Esme sitting with a woman at the table laughing. Knowing Esme, it wouldn't surprise me a bit that she's having a glass of iced tea with someone sent to search their house for contraband, but their discussion is much too familiar for that.

"Oh, Edward," Esme says happily when she sees me walk in. "Come meet someone, dear."

I shuffle my feet, still hating the whole meet and greet thing because I don't know who knows what about me. Honestly, it's really starting to take its toll. It feels like I'm lying to everyone and I fucking hate it. It's not like I need to take an ad out in the Corea Gazette and give everyone a blow by blow of my life, but knowing that the people that are slowly but surely becoming friends don't have any idea about who I am or where I've been weighs like a ton of bricks around my neck.

"Aggie, this is Edward Masen. He's working on the Isabella Marie with Charlie, Jasper, and Emmett," she says and the pride in her voice makes the tips of my ears warm. I'm proud and embarrassed in equal measure.

"Ah, so you're the Edward I've heard so much about." She chuckles. Her voice startles me only because it's deep and raspy, especially coming from someone so tiny.

Seriously, if the woman comes up to my armpit I'll be surprised. Her smile is warm and welcoming. She tips her head to the side and stares at me for a few seconds, looking me over from head to toe. I try not to laugh myself when she has to tilt her head backward to look up. She really is that short. When she looks me in the eye, I swear they twinkle.
"Ummm … yes?" I answer though it comes out more like a pansy ass squeak.

"You look just like Peyton described you," she says and shoots Esme a glance that makes me nervous. It's obvious I've been the topic of conversation between these two before. However, hearing Peyton's name, especially because I haven't seen her for a few days, makes me smile.

"Thank you," I say, rocking a bit from side to side.

Esme hands me a glass of iced tea and pats my shoulder. It calms me immediately and I take a deep breath. "Edward, Aggie runs the Coast Station. She's the one making sure all you boys come home safe every time you go out on the water."

I can tell my face shows my surprise when both women laugh at me. "Trust me, when a Nor'easter comes racing through here, there's no one you want more guiding you back home than Aggie," Esme tells me.

The remark about the storms makes me shiver. I can't even imagine being out on the water in weather like that. So far we've had nothing but bright sunshine and calm winds. The last few nights we've been out later, the wind has blown harder, making the waves a bit rougher, and it was enough to make me want to strap on a life jacket and hide below deck.

Should make for an interesting winter.

I hear both of them laugh and I'm thankfully saved from further embarrassment when Carlisle walks in.

"Aggie, you're not giving Edward too hard a time now are you? Peyton will be very upset with you if you're mean to her best friend," he says as he grabs two beers out of the fridge and hands me one in place of my iced tea.

The four of us visit and again I feel like the walls are pushing in on me from all sides. Aggie's as welcoming as Carlisle and Esme, Rose and Alice, Emmett and Jasper, and pretty much everyone else I've met since coming to Corea. Even Mr. Norris at the Booze & Bait greets me by name every time I walk in. I hear more stories about Bella and Peyton and though they're sweet and funny they … hurt.

Really fucking bad.

For reasons I'm just beginning to understand.

The secrets between us, mine way more so than hers, loom large like a vast canyon. They're eating away at my insides, like termites gnawing on wood. I know before I even think about telling Bella any of that though, there are things I need to deal with first. Things I've buried for a long time, longer even than the seven years I spent in prison. My parents' deaths, my grandmother's, the trouble I got into with Aleksei - even before the night from hell - my grandfather dying without me being able to say goodbye, the seven years of my life I can't ever get back.

You would think that spending all that time behind bars would have given me plenty of opportunity to deal with the plethora of shit, but really, it just made it easier to push it away. When I was first arrested, I was pissed at every fucking thing. My parents and grandmother for dying, my grandfather for not stopping me from throwing my life away, fate for putting me in the middle of all that shit, Aleksei for taking advantage of it, and, most of all, myself for being so weak that I became someone I didn't even recognize.

Staying safe, learning how to survive behind bars, being constantly on guard … those were the
things I had to focus on during my time as an inmate. Once I settled in, if there really is such a thing as settling in inside a prison, the long, endless hours that stretched before me were spent reading, studying for the bar exam, and then helping a few guys with their cases. I worked in the laundry at Old Colony and in the library at the Pre-Release Center. It kept me busy, at least it let me have something to do to keep my mind occupied, even though the work was mind-numbing and monotonous.

Week after week, month after long month, year after never-ending year passed and the only thing I focused on, the only thing that kept me going was what I was going to do with my life once I got out. I had nothing, no one after my grandfather died, except the dream of coming to Corea to start over.

And now, here I am, in the place that truly feels like home, scared out of my fucking mind that the new life I’m slowly but steadily starting to build is going to crumble like a house of cards, leaving me with nothing once again. This time though, that nothing seems infinitely more painful.

I've zoned out so much of the conversation that when Esme and Aggie tell me goodbye, I know I must look like a damn fool, with my mouth hanging open and eyes narrowed in confusion. Esme looks concerned for a moment and then kisses my cheek.

"You've been working too hard, honey. Dinner is in the oven waiting for you. Eat, relax, then go to bed early. You need your rest," she tells me in the sweet but no-nonsense way only Esme Cullen can, making me feel safe and fearful of not doing as she says all at the same time.

She's the gentlest woman I've ever come across, but there is no doubting the lioness that shows her claws when the time calls for it.

Without a word Carlisle gets up and takes our plates from the oven. Roast chicken, red potatoes, and green beans cover the plate and I moan appreciatively. We don't eat lunch while we're out on the boat. A light snack maybe, but eating in the midst of the rocking and swaying of the boat, the moving and pulling, not to mention the stench of the bait makes the thought of eating as unappealing as anything. By the time I make it back to the boarding house, I'm ravenous. Working late makes that even more so.

I dig in, my hunger overriding the foreboding I'd felt earlier. Once my plate is almost empty, my ability to consume large amounts of food back and in full force, I look up to find Carlisle looking at me. The doctor look is readily apparent on his face and my stomach pretty much tells me that scarfing down almost half a chicken probably wasn't the best idea.

"Are you okay?" he asks. His eyes search my face, looking for clues. I'm actually kind of curious as to what he sees.

"What do you mean?" I question, pushing my plate back because all of the sudden, the thought of eating one more bite makes me gag.

He takes a drink of his beer, peering at me over the bottle. I squirm in my seat uncomfortably. It's like being examined under a microscope the way his gaze penetrates. I feel exposed, raw, like a fish that's been flayed open and I haven't even told him anything yet. The secrets, the hiding, the avoiding of things I haven't wanted to think about rush forth and squeeze my chest like a vise. I start breathing in and out faster and faster.

My vision blurs, my head swims, and I can feel myself gasping for breath.

"Shit! Edward, breathe. Come on. Breathe in and out. Slowly now," he tells me and I get the sense
that he's breathing with me but I can't be sure. My own panting and gasping is all I can hear until my vision clears and I'm able to take a deep, albeit shaky, breath.

"What … the fuck … was that?" I question on a jagged breath and rub my chest hoping it will help.

He chuckles a bit while he pats me on the back and then takes his seat once more when it seems like I'm going to survive whatever the fuck just happened to me.

"Carlisle?" I manage to pant, relief coursing through me when the vise squeezing my chest loosens enough so I can take another deep breath.

The frown on his face, the dip between his eyebrows, and the slump of his shoulders lets me know that what he's about to tell me … I'm not going to want to hear.

Sighing he says softly, regretfully, "You just had a panic attack."

I'm shaking my head before the sentence is even fully out of his mouth. "What? No fucking way, Carlisle."

"Yes way. It's not surprising to be honest. I've been worried about this ever since you went to dinner at Bella's. I haven't been able to talk to you because you've been working so hard this week and so tired by the time you get home, but I could tell that things were building. I'd hoped to have a chance to help you before this happened," he says sadly.

"I just … hell, Carlisle … every time I think I have my head above water I just get pulled under again," I mutter, throwing my head back and staring up at the ceiling.

The feelings of helplessness and just abject fear hit me hard, like a sucker punch to the jaw from Mike Tyson and I pinch my eyes closed, hoping to stem the onslaught.

"What's going on? Talk to me, Edward." He's got that doctor voice thing going on again but instead of it pissing me off like before, this time it just makes me want to spill my guts.

So I do.

He listens as I spew, bouncing from one thing to the other. I know I'm not making the least damn bit of sense, but he never moves, never interrupts. He doesn't comment except for a frown or a narrowing of eyes when I say something that either angers or saddens him, but he just lets me keep going.

I tell him everything.

About what it felt like when I went to live with my grandparents, what growing up with them was like … what coming to Corea every summer was like. How hard it was for my grandfather and me when Grandma died so unexpectedly. How that set me on a tailspin, turning me into someone I didn't even recognize any more. The drugs, the fights, the trouble I got into when I ran with Aleksei and his crowd. The disappointment I saw every single day in my grandfather's eyes when I came home drunk or high or beat to shit. The horror of being arrested and put on trial, of listening to the DA as he portrayed me as one person when I knew I was another.

The misery of spending year after year after year behind bars. The isolation I felt, the hopelessness that never seemed to wane. The depression, the anger, the all-consuming bitterness. The fear of starting over, of never being accepted, of always being judged. The hope I've begun to feel since coming to Corea. The dread of being cut out of Bella's and Peyton's lives before I've even gotten a chance to prove myself.
All of it just comes pouring out in what seems like one incredibly long sentence. When I'm done, there's a sort of eerie, awkward silence. I'm not even sure how or if he's been able to catch up but once I look at him, I know he has. His eyes are dazed and they look a bit wild.

"Well," he says slowly. I notice his hands are shaking and he shifts nervously in his chair.

The situation might be kind of funny … seeing Carlisle so flustered … if it wasn't so damn serious.

I blow out a long, shuddering breath and stand up. My body needs to move, to release the pent-up anxiety and tension racing through it. I'd like to go for a run down the beach or hop on my bike and just drive, trying to outrun the sense of drowning … suffocating, that's currently doing a damn fine job of making me feel like I'm three seconds away from completely losing my fucking mind.

In all actuality, what I want in that moment, more than anything, is to be with Bella and Peyton. The other night at dinner was the most normal, the most at peace I've ever felt in my life and I want to feel that again. I crave it.

Badly.

"That was, ah … um …" Carlisle says as he clears his throat. "Holy shit," he mutters as he shakes his head while looking at me.

I snort. "Yeah, tell me about it," I say, pulling at my hair and then resume my pacing.

"Edward, I have to tell you, I'm pretty much speechless."

I come to an abrupt halt and whip around to look at him. "Well, that's just fucking great, Carlisle! Nice of you to tell me I'm so fucked up you can't even say anything. I should have just kept my damn mouth shut," I mutter and flop back down in my chair, suddenly more tired than I can ever remember being.

"What?" Carlisle asks immediately then groans. "Oh, hell, that didn't come out the right way at all. Edward," he says and his voice gets softer, steadier. "I'm just shocked at how you've endured all that you have and managed to not go completely off the deep end."

I can't help but chuckle at that. "Deep end, huh? Is that a technical term I'm not aware of?"

The teasing immediately lifts the oppressive weight that was bearing down on us and from the way his shoulders relax, I can tell Carlisle notices as well.

"Nah, I made that up just for you," he jokes back. We both smile and take a deep breath at the same time. "Edward," he begins slowly after a few moments of silence. "It's no wonder you had a panic attack with all that bubbling beneath the surface."

"So what the hell does that mean? That I'm going to have those again whenever I start to feel overwhelmed? What the fuck am I supposed to do if that happens and I'm in the middle of the fucking ocean?" My heart rate spikes immediately at the thought of that and I grip the table … hard … while I breathe in and out.

"You do just that," he tells me softly. "You have a lot of issues to work through, Edward, and you can't expect them to go away by pretending they don't exist. I'll help you, if you let me. It won't be easy, but I have no doubt you can do it."

"Fuck," I mutter, though it's without anger.
"We'll take it slow," he tells me and that eases a bit of my apprehension. Visions of me lying on a black leather couch for hours at a time while I spill my guts swirls in my head and I pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration.

Damn, I really hate this therapy shit. Carlisle can call it whatever the hell he wants, but a spade's a spade as far as I'm concerned.

"Fine," I grudgingly concede.

"Not tonight though," he tells me and I can't help but laugh a little when he chuckles at me.

I rub my hands on the tops of my thighs, giving them something to do besides pull at my hair. "Thank God."

"How about we plan on talking in my office once or twice a week, whenever you're feeling up to it? No pressure or anything, just when you have time," he tells me.

"I can … yeah, that sounds like it's doable. Can we talk outside though?" The thought of being inside an office seems way too close to therapy for my liking.

He grins at me then nods his head, saying, "Whatever you feel comfortable with, we'll do, Edward."

I feel like I should apologize for my outburst and then thank him for putting up with all my bullshit. I open my mouth to do just that but he holds his hand up, making the words die in my throat before I can get them out. "Don't even think about apologizing," he tells me. I know he must see the surprise on my face because it feels like my eyebrows are on the top of my head.

I huff and nod my head at him, bouncing my knee a mile a minute. I need to get out of here, like yesterday.

He stands up and pats me on the shoulder. "Call Bella, Edward," he tells me and just hearing her name makes things seem better.

"I, uh … what?" I stammer idiotically.

He smirks at me like I'm a child. "You know, like on the phone? You haven't been inside that long. It's amazing," he says like the smart ass he can be. "You can actually call someone up and talk to them when you can't see them."

"Thanks." I scoff, resisting the urge to flip him off. My fingers find my cell phone in my pocket and I grip it tightly, almost as if I can feel Bella through the phone.

"Go," he tells me.

I waste no time and I fly out the back door, practically running toward the beach. Finding a log, I sit down, paying no attention to the rough bark that digs into my legs through my jeans. I inhale the moist, salty air and listen as the waves brush against the sand. It takes a few moments for me to work up my courage to call her. I stare at the phone in my hand like it's a foreign object before the need to hear her voice overrides the fear that I'm going to make an ass out of myself.

My fingers shake as the screen lights up. I bring up my contacts, smiling when I notice hers is the first name on the very short list. We'd exchanged numbers one afternoon at the restaurant, but I've never used it … until now.
It's totally not lost on me that the last time I called up a girl on the phone, I was still a teenager.

"What the fuck am I doing?" I murmur as I listen to the phone ring, half hoping she won't answer and half afraid she will.

"Hello?" I hear when she answers and there's a little catch in her voice as she speaks.

"Bella, um … hey, it's Edward."

My voice quivers a bit when I hear her voice and she does that adorable squeak thing I love so much as soon as I say my name.

If I'm not mistaken, it sure as hell sounds like she's every bit as excited to hear from me as I am to talk to her. That fact makes me blow out a long breath to try to calm the hell down.

"Edward, hi. I'm so glad you called." And … that's all it takes to put a smile on my face.

"Thank Christ," I mutter. When I hear her giggle on the other end, I laugh myself. "I wasn't sure if I should call or not. I mean I know we exchanged numbers and all that, but … ah, damn … I feel like a fucking idiot." My voice trails off and I'm more embarrassed than I can ever remember being before in my life.

I hear her sigh and I hate that I can't see her face. "I'm sorry we keep missing each other this week. It's been so busy at the restaurant and I know Dad has had you guys working like crazy, too."

"I … I am, too, and I um … I do miss you," I say softly. My palms sweat and I have the most insane urge to blurt out something lame like 'I think about you all the time' but before I do, I hear her sigh again.

Worrying I've said too much, or freaked her out by what I said, I get ready to spew the first thing that comes out of my mouth but I clamp my lips closed when I hear her say, "I've missed you, too."

Once we get over the awkwardness of talking on the phone for the first time, we talk for hours. Because it's so late, much later than I realized when I called her, Peyton's already in bed. We talk about nonsense really, just silly things that aren't deep or heavy. Things that don't remind me of the secrets I'm keeping or the painful memories of my past. It's liberating.

"Bella, damn, woman, how in the hell can you even think that The Birds is a creepier movie than Psycho? It's birds, Bella, birds." I snicker then outright laugh when I hear her growl at me from the other end.

Of course the growl makes me think of other things I can do to her to cause that sound which in turn makes my dick hard. Really fucking hard.

"Edward! Have you seen those things? Creepy ass black birds with their beady little black eyes. They totally freak me the hell out," she whines adorably and I can literally hear her shiver.

It makes me want to give her a hug, damn it.

She yawns then squeals almost loud enough to pop my eardrum. "Edward, you need to go to bed. Do you realize we've been talking for two hours?"

I have actually because I've been fighting to keep my eyes open for the past thirty minutes at least. I don't want to say goodbye to her. Hearing her voice is just what I needed to soothe the frayed nerves I'd had from talking to Carlisle.
"Yeah, I know. I just … ah … don't want to say good night yet," I admit quietly.

There isn't a sound around me except for the waves that lap gently against the rocks and the soft sound she makes as she breathes into the phone. I swear I could curl up right there on the sand and sleep, just listening to her breathe. I'm not sure I've ever felt so relaxed.

"I don't either, but you need your rest." Her voice is sweet and soft and I know I'll hear it in my dreams tonight.

I sigh, knowing she's right. Five o'clock is going to come damn early, especially as it's already pushing midnight. "You do, too, you know," I remind her, now worried about how tired she'll be at work tomorrow.

Her light laugh makes my heart kind of feel like it's going a hundred miles an hour. It's a bit disconcerting how important both she and Peyton are to me in such a short period of time, but there's no question that they are.

"I'll be fine. I'm … I'm so glad you called," she says, sounding just as relieved as me at having finally talked after four days of not seeing or talking to each other.

"Well, now that I know you won't think I'm a fucking moron for calling, I'll do it more often." I'd much rather see her than talk to her on the phone, but it's not a bad substitute, either.

"Sounds good. If you're up to it, your best friend has been very mopey this week because she hasn't gotten her Edward time in, so why don't you come to dinner again on Sunday?" she asks. I smile so big I swear my face is going to split in half.

"Hell, yes, I'll be up to it. Thank you. I've missed her," I say with a sigh. Fuck, I really have, too, so much.

"The feeling is completely mutual, I promise. If I don't see you or talk to you until then, same time, okay? I promise not to fix so much food this time." She giggles and I laugh with her.

I wonder for a moment what the hell she did with all that leftover food. "We can have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for all I care," I tell her, totally serious.

The company beats the food, hands down, all day, any day.

Bella's an awesome cook, but I'd eat the shit they served in prison again as long as Bella and Peyton were with me.

She chuckles. "I think I can manage better than that. I'll talk to you tomorrow … well, I guess today, okay?" Her voice is barely above a whisper and I can almost picture her with her knees beneath her chin, her feet bare with that damned sexy lime green toenail polish, and twirling a piece of hair around her finger.

Desire flares hot and fast through me.

Fuck, I want her.

Whatever this is between us, it's obvious we're both still treading carefully. It's also obvious how attracted we are to each other, and for that reason, I know things are going to move slowly. I can wait. I'm not anywhere near close to being ready to take things any further than they are right now. Lord knows my dick will hate me, but there's no way in hell I'm pushing either of us before we're ready.
"Okay, sounds good. Night, Bella. Sweet dreams and all that," I tell her quietly, wondering where in the hell the tatted-up, badass ex-con went to.

"Night, Edward," she answers back just as quietly. I wait until she hangs up the phone before lowering mine from my ear.

I stare at the phone while I turn it over and over in my hands, not moving for a few moments as I absorb everything. I keep hearing Bella's soft breaths in my ear, keep picturing her hair, her eyes, keep replaying that fucking hot kiss from the other night.

Looking out over the water, I mutter, "Masen, you're so fucked."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

The next few weeks pass in blur. Days run together, only broken up by phone calls at night to Bella and now Peyton, who's gotten a hold of Bella's cell phone on more than one occasion. It makes me feel pretty damn lucky that my number is programmed into her phone so that Peyton can call me whenever she wants. Sunday dinner at Bella's has become a regular standing date and it's the highlight of my week.

The work on the boat is kicking my ass. I hate to admit it, but it is. For all his laid back demeanor, Charlie is fucking ruthless as the captain of the boat. We work our asses off from well before sunup to well after dark. I ache in places I didn't know could hurt. I don't have to worry about nightmares keeping me awake because by the time I crawl upstairs, I'm asleep before my head even hits the pillow most nights.

Every day Charlie pushes us to the limit, past the aches and the pains, but it's so fucking worth it. To do something that makes me feel like I'm contributing, earning my keep, means so damn much. The work is brutal but I wouldn't trade it for anything.

I've gotten to know Emmett and Jasper better, too. In fact, I know things about Emmett I'd rather not and I know way more about Jasper and Alice's sex life than I'm all that comfortable with. The first time I saw Alice after one of Jasper's more explicit discussions, which was actually more like bragging to be honest, I about shit my pants. I know I turned the color of the lobster we pull up every day and when I tried to hightail it out of The Breakers, Alice grabbed my hand and told me to stop acting like such a pussy. Direct quote.

She merely shrugged her shoulders and told me if I was going to hang out with them, I'd better get used to it. Then she proceeded to kiss the shit out of her husband in the middle of the restaurant. I'd looked at Bella who shrugged her shoulders like it was an everyday occurrence.

There are still moments I clam up and feel like getting the fuck out of here and not turning back. When Emmett asks a question that hits a little too close for comfort or Jasper makes a comment such as 'it seems like you just dropped out of the sky and landed in Corea,' I'm reminded yet again of how much I'm still hiding, and how much I dread coming clean with everyone.

I've spent some time talking with Carlisle, mostly about my parents and grandmother. We figured it was best to start at the beginning and work forward. There's so much shit, so many buried feelings and things I haven't dealt with that at times, it almost feels like I'd be better off just saying "fuck it" and leave well enough alone, but I won't. I've never backed down from a fight, and this is one I can't afford to lose.

Not if I want to truly move forward and start over.
Which is why I'm standing in front of Charlie's front door on a Sunday afternoon.

About to throw the fuck up.

"Suck it up, Edward," I chastise myself. "You have to do this."

I knock on the door and wait. It feels like fucking forever before the door opens, but really it's only a few seconds.

"Edward!" Renée says warmly, though a bit shocked when she sees it's me standing on her doorstep.

I shift nervously from foot to foot, literally feeling like I'm about to barf all over the numerous flower pots on the front steps. It'd really suck if I did that; they're kind of nice and I'm pretty sure Renée wouldn't appreciate it all that much.

"Um … I was wondering if Charlie was around?" I ask, knowing it comes out like something between a croak and a groan. I call myself a fucking idiot about twenty times, getting more anxious by the second. I know I should have called first or something instead of just showing up out of nowhere.

I'll be lucky if the man doesn't wipe the floor with my ass for interrupting his Sunday. I haven't known him long, but even I know not to come between the man's baseball and beer.

"Née, who's at the door?" I hear his gritty voice from behind her.

Renée opens the door and motions for me to come in. I'm too nervous to spend any time looking around but it's not lost on me that I'm standing inside Bella's childhood home. The place she grew up, the house she and Emmett played hide and seek in, woke each other up in the wee hours of the morning to wait for Santa Claus, the house she sneaked out of to hang out with Seth, Xavier, and Evan.

It feels weird, but in a good kind of way. Before I have too long to dwell on my asinine mental ramblings, Charlie walks into the foyer. I gape, and then wish I could turn back time so I can talk myself out of the ridiculous notion that talking to Charlie is a good idea.

Charlie chuckles at me. "Nice to see you, Edward. Everything okay?"

I try not to stare, I really do. I know I'm failing miserably. I mean seriously, the man is wearing SpongeBob SquarePants sleep pants and a World's Greatest Grandpa t-shirt, not matching in any way, shape, or form. How can I not stare?

"Yeah. I … um … I kind of need to talk to you about something," I manage to stammer out, forgetting all about the absurd outfit as I sober when I remember what I came here for.

He looks at me a moment, his gaze deep and piercing. Nodding without saying a word, he leads me through the house. Obediently I follow, telling myself over and over again to just make some bullshit up and then get the hell out of there. I try to remember what Carlisle has told me, about breathing and trying to stay focused on the task at hand so that I don't make a total ass out of myself and have a panic attack in front of Charlie.

I'm so inside my head that when I hear their back door close behind me and smell the salt in the air, I jump like a firecracker has been lit under my ass. The house isn't on the water, but it's close enough to hear it and smell it … hell, I bet there are times you can almost feel it. The backyard of their property gently slopes down toward a line of trees. There are two chairs set up beneath a
towering ash tree, its branches twisting, reaching up toward the sky, making a canopy of green.

Charlie waves me toward a chair and I drop heavily into it, convinced that I'm about to make a huge fucking mistake by talking to him. It's taken me weeks to work up the courage to do it, and now that I'm sitting here in front of him, like a prisoner in front of a firing squad, the reality of what I'm about to do steals my breath for a few seconds.

"Okay, what brings you here on a Sunday afternoon when I know full well you have a standing date with two of my three favorite girls in just a few hours?" He quirks an eyebrow at me, but other than that, he doesn't move. Nothing. Not a flick of an eye, not a scratch of his nose, not even a finger through his mustache; an action I know from being around him on the boat that he does with regularity.

I fidget in my chair and then decide to just man the fuck up and do what I came here to do. "I need to ask … what I mean is … what have you told people about where I was before I came here?"

My question takes him totally by surprise. I can tell because his fingers immediately scratch through his beard. He clears his throat then opens his mouth, only to immediately snap it close again. After a few seconds, he takes a deep breath and tries again. "Edward," he begins slowly, carefully like he is choosing each word before he says them. "I haven't told anyone anything besides the fact that you got into some trouble in Boston and were looking for a way to start over and decided to come here." I lean forward in my chair, resting my forearms on my legs and hang my head. I open my mouth to say something back, but he keeps going. "Renée, of course, knows everything."

"Oh."

The silence that settles between us is heavy, strained. I'm not sure why his answer surprises me, or upsets me, but it does. I mean it makes total sense he'd tell his wife everything, or everything he knows, which really, I'm not even sure at this point if anyone but me knows the whole story.

"I knew your grandfather," he says suddenly.

Pain, heartache … a profound sense of loss hits me hard, making it almost impossible to breathe. I lean my head back and stare up at the tree above me. The branches of the old ash tree arc and climb, stretching where it wishes to go. I'm struck with a memory from one of our summer visits of me climbing a tree much like this while my grandfather watched from below. In his typical way, he didn't say much, only offering up words of encouragement when I faltered. I'd tried to climb it the entire time we'd been there, but could never reach the top. The wind would blow, or I'd make the mistake of looking down, and I'd freeze, unable to go any farther.

Eventually I'd make my way down, completely frustrated because I didn't make it to the top. Each time, my grandfather would tell me to try again. Nothing more, no hidden secrets, no offers of how best to do it, just the push to keep trying. When I finally made it to the top then back down again without breaking my neck, all he did was pat me on the back and gave me a little half smirk, but it was all I needed to know he was proud of me.

"I miss him every single day," I whisper hoarsely, still staring up through the branches, watching the sun play peek-a-boo with the leaves.

Charlie doesn't say anything for a few more minutes but then gruffly says, "I didn't know him well, but I'd see him from time to time at the American Legion hanging out with the other old guys. He bragged on you something fierce, Edward this and Edward that, until we'd have to tell him to shut the hell up."
My eyes sting and I blink to keep the tears in, to no avail. I swipe at my cheeks, pissed and embarrassed for crying in front of him, then pissed at myself for feeling that way.

"He'd be so disappointed in me," I manage on a strangled breath.

"I beg to differ with you, son," Charlie says slowly, surely. He doesn't say anything else until I look at him. His face is impassive, stoic, in his total Captain Charlie way, but his eyes … his eyes are anything but. They're sad and accepting all at the same time and I have to inhale deeply a few times just to keep myself from falling the fuck apart.

"I don't know everything that's happened to you, but, what I do know is he'd be proud of you for doing what you did. You may have been stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time with undoubtedly the worst person, but you did the right thing for the right reason. There's no way he wouldn't be proud of you for that."

I sigh, not convinced of that in the least, but hoping that what he's said is true. "I don't know about that, but I hope it's true."

"Edward, what's really bothering you?"

I lean forward again and run my hands through my hair, pulling at it in frustration. "I feel like I'm lying to everyone and I fucking hate it. Like if they all really knew what I did and where I've been, none of them would want to have anything to do with me." My words come out harshly and uneven, the admission painful.

"Are you talking about Emmett and Jasper or Bella and Peyton?" he asks pointedly.

It's a fair question of course and one I've given a lot of thought to. "Everyone really … but mostly Bella and Peyton," I answer slowly, watching him carefully for any sign of … what I'm not sure – warning, maybe?

"It's important to you what Bella and Peyton think?" I'm sure he knows my answer is yes, but I nod my head anyway. "Why?"

"They're … fuck, Charlie. They're important to me and I hate feeling like I'm hiding things from both of them. I know when I tell Bella the truth, she's not going to want to have anything to do with me and I damn sure know she's going to tell me to stay away from Peyton." I groan. My insides are a tangled mess just at the thought of Bella telling me to go away. It hurts, badly.

Charlie chuckles and my head snaps in his direction. "You must not know my daughter very well then," he says but sober instantly. "Bella …" He sighs and his shoulders slump, as if a heavy weight has just settled on them. "On the one hand she's the strongest person I've ever seen, but on the other she's still the little girl with the scabs on her knees and missing two front teeth. She'll always be my baby girl, but she needs someone, too. It hasn't been easy on her these past few years."

"Since Evan died?" I say, taking him by surprise.

"She told you about Evan?" He's genuinely shocked and I hold my hands up to keep him from jumping to conclusions. I'm suddenly terrified to find out what happened to Evan judging by Charlie's reaction.

"Not really. Peyton and I were talking one night a few weeks ago and she told me her dad died. I put two and two together and figured out that she was talking about Evan and asked Bella if I was right. That's all she's said really. We've … ah …" I stumble, nerves flaring.
He smirks at me when I finally look in his direction. "You've what?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose before beginning carefully, hoping he doesn't kill me or string me up by my dick from the huge ash tree. "We're kind of taking things slow, getting to know each other," I say, watching him closely.

"And by things, what exactly do you mean?"

Now his tone definitely makes me want to get the fuck out of there, even more so when his arms cross on his chest and his eyes narrow at me. "We're just talking … a lot …"

He snorts. "Just talking?"

I nod, keeping the details of our kiss buried deep inside. I'd like to make it out of here alive … and with my balls still attached.

"I don't interfere in the love lives of my children, but know this, Edward. The fact that Bella has invited you to dinner, lets you spend time with both her and Peyton, is a huge deal. It's been a long time since she's put herself out there and if you're just looking to get 'reacclimated' with my daughter, I'll dump your ass in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and I can promise you, you won't make it back to shore. She's been through way too fucking much for you to play games with her."

I swallow though it hurts like hell because my throat feels like sandpaper. "Do you … you don't mind me spending time with her and Peyton? The two of them mean a great deal to me and I hope you know I'm not playing games. I would never do that." I hate that I sound so pitiful, but I know if Charlie doesn't want me around Bella and Peyton, I won't be. Bella's as stubborn as the day is long, but I also know how much she loves and respects her father.

"As long as you don't hurt either one of them, no. You're not the bad person you think you are, Edward. If you were, you wouldn't be here in the first place. Are you planning on telling her everything? You're going to have to, you know," he tells me.

He actually looks kind of sick just mentioning it.

I nod my head. "Soon. I can't take this not knowing much longer to tell you the truth. I want to tell Emmett and Jasper, too. Even Seth." I shudder imagining how much it will hurt when Xavier really does kick my ass and threatens me … again.

"She's going to be mad at me, too, you know," he tells me sadly. I stare at him until he shakes his head and sighs. "I didn't tell her anything about you except the bare minimum, but I've known all along. That's not liable to go over well."

"Shit," I mutter, feeling really fucking awful.

He shrugs his shoulders. "It's not my story to tell. I hired you to work on my boat, that's it. Whatever you do on your time is your business. If I didn't trust you, if I wasn't willing to give you a chance, we both know you wouldn't be here at all. Bella's a big girl. She can make up her own mind about you. She doesn't need my approval."

"She wants it though," I tell him honestly. That I do know with the utmost certainty.

He nods. "That's because she's my baby girl," he says, his voice conveying just how much he loves her. "She's smiled more in the past month than she has in the past seven years. I'm not stupid enough not to realize that's because of you. If she's willing to give you a chance once you tell her everything, you won't get any arguments from me."
I sag back in my chair, a huge weight lifted from my chest. It won't be easy telling Bella everything, but it has to be done.

"Thanks," I say quietly.

"Don't thank me yet. I love my daughter to the moon and back, but she has a tendency to let her mouth get her in trouble. Be ready for anything." He chuckles and I get the feeling he's going to enjoy watching from the sidelines.

We spend a few more minutes talking about much lighter things before I notice the time.

"Shit, Charlie. I'm sorry I've kept you from the game so long."

"Eh, it's okay. There's always another one. Now, if you don't want to be late, you'd better get the hell out of here. I know Peyton's got a surprise for you," he says and his eyes gleam mischievously.

I can't help but smile just like I always do when the little sprite's name is mentioned. "There's no telling," I tell him, laughing as I try to think of what it could be.

"Peyton's crazy about you. That tells me everything I need to know. It should you, too," he says and stands up. "It takes a lot of guts to admit your mistakes, Edward. None of us are perfect, not even Bella. You paid a heavy price for yours. You deserve a second chance just as much, if not more, than anyone."

With that he slaps me on the back and walks back into the house, leaving me staring at him as he walks away.

I think about our conversation for a few minutes before I make my way around the house and get on my bike to head to Bella's.

The girls are waiting and I don't want to be late.

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Poor Edward! He has a lot to work through, but he's willing to do it all; that's a good thing, yes? Carlisle and Charlie both will be quite instrumental in making sure he has help. Aggie! I've been dying to get her in the story. You'll see more of her coming soon.

Next chapter's Edward again. I don't have the words to tell you how excited I am for the next chapter, so much going on. Jasper, Peyton (I know you missed her this time) Xavier and ... A DATE! EEEK! Trust me, the next one is full of all kinds of goodness (some of the lemony kind, too!)

Have you checked out The Breakers blog this week? The amazing, incredible, wonderful Laurel made more pictures this week, including one of Edward's scar and a picture of the grandparents. Be sure to take a look! We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! It's fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those. Tomorrow's pic tease is my favorite so far!
Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. Thanks so much for reading!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
EPOV

"Morning, Edward," Jasper says as he extricates himself from his car. I have no idea how the man manages to fold himself into the front seat every day, but he loves that car almost as much as he loves Alice. Whenever the very touchy subject comes up of him getting something less ... constrictive, the man practically growls at you.

I tip my chin and raise my travel mug of coffee toward him in greeting. The nice weather seems to have taken a vacation if this morning is any indication. Heavy, dark storm clouds threaten overhead and thunder rumbles from off in the distance. Every now and then a few sprinkles fall and I actually have to wear a long-sleeved t-shirt beneath my hoodie because it's so cold.

"You ready for tomorrow night?" he asks me with a smirk.

I slide off my bike and shrug my shoulders at him, groaning just a bit as a wave of nervousness creeps over me. "Does it make me sound like a pussy if I say no?"

"Yeah, it kinda does," he answers immediately then punches me in the arm. "I don't blame you though."

We start walking toward the docks as a loud clap of thunder rings out. If I didn't know better, I'd swear that someone is telling me to man the fuck up.

He grunts as he steps onto the deck and shivers as a gust of wind rocks the boat from side to side. "Are you nervous about going on a date with Bella or about the fact that Xavier and Seth are coming along, too?"
I'd managed to forget, for a few minutes, that the bald behemoth will be chaperoning our group outing to Finn's Irish Pub in Ellsworth tomorrow night. It's been almost a week since I talked to Charlie and every day that goes by, the weight of what I need to do becomes more difficult to manage. Every time I see Bella, every time we talk on the phone, I know I need to tell her about Boston. No matter that the thought of telling her makes my blood run cold, it has to be done.

I can't keep going, feeling like I'm lying to her. It's killing me. The longer it goes on, the more time we spend together with that unseen pink elephant following me around everywhere, the worse it's going to be.

Somehow - I still have no idea what happened - the day before yesterday we were all sitting in The Breakers, discussing our date and it morphed from a date for just Bella and me to a group date. I'd been thinking, ever since dinner at her house on Sunday, how to ask her out on a real date. I'd rehearsed it in my head about a hundred different ways, each one sounding more idiotic than the one before. I even half thought about practicing in front of the mirror in my bathroom but decided that was just too lame to even attempt.

I wanted to do something nice for her, to show her how much I appreciate … everything. I know I freaked her out at first, a fact of which I have to admit I enjoy teasing her about from time to time - but only when we talk on the phone of course. The woman looks like an angel, albeit a sexy as hell one, but she definitely has a temper to go along with all that fire that's always simmering beneath the surface. No way I'm foolish enough to antagonize her in person. I'm kind of fond of my dick and I damn sure know it's fond of Bella.

Painfully fond of her actually.

Since the kiss from the first dinner at her house, things haven't progressed that far again. I want her, we both know that, and I'm pretty sure she feels the same way in return, but until I tell her everything, I just can't do what my body yearns for every time I'm around her. It makes no difference that it feels like I'm in a constant state of being on the brink of exploding; I know it would be wrong to let anything happen. I can't stop myself from touching her whenever I can: on the small of her back, her arm, her leg, or hold her hand if I'm lucky enough, but that's it. A quick kiss good night is as far as I've let myself go, and it's damn near impossible to stop when I'm that close to her. So close I can hear her breath catch in her throat and feel her nipples harden against my chest.

In the end, I managed to splutter and stammer my way through the world's most awkward moment one night and asked Bella if she wanted to go out. When she said yes, which was preceded by the longest few seconds of silence on record, I literally felt like passing out. My chest was tight, the fingers of the hand not holding the cell phone cut into my skin, and I'd squeezed my eyes closed so tightly I saw stars. The next day we were discussing what we wanted to do and Alice overheard … and now, the eight of us are going out together.

Not exactly what I had in mind for my first date in more than seven years, but I'll take what I can get.

I don my rubber gloves, nodding to Charlie and Emmett as they arrive, and face Jasper again. "Again, both. Hell, Jasper." I lower my voice and look around, relieved that Emmett and Charlie are in the wheelhouse. "I haven't been on a date in a long fucking time. Xavier hates my guts and would like nothing better than to use his freakishly large muscles and kick my ass. It's all just a lot, you know?" I'm sure I sound like I'm whining. I'm positive Jasper is going to call me a chicken-shit and then cackle like a gossiping old bitty to Emmett about how I'm acting like a pussy, but instead
he just looks at me.

He has a frown on his face and his eyes are troubled, sad. A chill walks up my spine but it has nothing to do with the wind that whistles by. Another moment passes and then finally he slowly nods his head. "Yeah, man, actually I do know." His voice is low, shaky, and his mind is obviously on things long ago but definitely not forgotten.

"Ali and I have been here long enough that I forget what it's like to be the new guy," he says slowly. "The stares, the questions, the way you feel like you're being judged every time you turn around … that shit I do remember."

He shakes his head and turns to look at me. "You have a story, Edward. Hell, we all do," he says as his eyes bore into mine. "It's clear that you're," he stutters as he tries to find the right word, "trying to make a new life in Corea. I don't know what brought you here, besides what little you've told us. It's your story to tell, just like mine is."

Neither of us say anything because each of us are lost in our own thoughts. I know enough about Jasper, have picked up on the little things he says here and there, to know that his life before arriving in Corea was the stuff of nightmares. Abusive father, alcoholic mother, so poor he'd go days without eating at times. He and Alice finding each other and getting as far away from Texas as possible was the only way he survived.

"I'm trying, Jasper," I finally whisper when the silence between us stretches uncomfortably.

He nods again. Jasper never says much; he doesn't have to. I've been around men a hell of a lot bigger than him, but honestly, none of them have ever intimidated me the way he does. A bit of an exaggeration of course, but it's not far off. Murderers, drug dealers, armed robbers - I've had contact with them all, but the icy cold, back the fuck off unless I like you vibe Jasper gives off is enough to give anyone pause. He's one smooth, scary motherfucker for sure.

It's easy to forget all that though when he looks at Alice the way he does, or when he jokes around with Peyton or hugs Bella and Renée.

"I know you are, Edward, which is the only reason none of us have said too much about whatever is going on with you and Bella," he tells me. The tone of his voice makes my stomach drop out of my ass and I swallow thickly. "Charlie and Renée are the closest things to parents Ali and I have. Emmett, Rose, Bella, and Peyton are our family. Xavier and Seth, Carlisle and Esme have all welcomed us into their lives without a second thought," he states, though it really sounds more like a warning.

I'm not wrong.

"You'd better be careful with her … with both of them, or else you'll have a lot more than just Xavier to worry about."

He holds my gaze for a moment, staring straight into my eyes until I nod my head. He doesn't move for a few more seconds and then abruptly turns, letting me know that our conversation is over. Good timing, too, because Emmett walks out of the wheelhouse right then. The boat rumbles to life and we pull out slowly, beginning another day on the water.

By the time we make it back to shore, I'm cold, sore, and tired. The day was wretched, so much so that Charlie cut it short because every trap we brought up was empty. It was just a shitty day all the way around. All I want to do is hopefully see Bella for at least a minute or two and if I'm really lucky, Peyton will be in the restaurant, too.
I miss my little thing something fierce. Just the thought of seeing her cuts through the damp chill and my pace unconsciously picks up.

If there's one good thing I can say about the miserable weather, it's that it's kept all but the Corea faithful away from The Breakers for the afternoon. Apparently my presence in the restaurant and in Corea itself is done being front page news because I barely receive a glance from the few patrons as I walk inside. Renée smiles and pats me on the arm as she flits past and heads toward the kitchen. I haven't really had a lot of time to spend with her yet, but she never fails to have a warm smile for me. The fact that she knows as much about me as Charlie does always makes me a bit uneasy, but that's more my problem than anything.

I don't want Bella getting upset with either of them for not telling her what they know. It's going to be hard enough for her to find out the truth; I don't want her to add feeling like she was lied to by them on top of everything else.

Before I can dwell too much on that, I hear my favorite seven-year-old singing along to Taylor Swift as she stares at Bella's phone. I only know who it is because Peyton's told me way more than any grown man wants to know about the girl. I smile as she bobs her head, totally oblivious to everything around her as she concentrates on the screen. I don't even have to guess what she's doing; I already know.

Peyton's obsessed with Angry Birds.

Like, really, really obsessed.

"What level are you on?" I ask as I slide into a chair across from her.

She squeaks when she looks up and sees me, the phone sliding out of her hands as she jumps. Of course, she tries to catch it and in the process, the ear buds for the iPod fall out of her ears. She's a tangled mess of hair and headphone cords by the time she picks the phone up off the floor and I can't help but laugh at her. It's the best I've felt all day.

"Edward," she growls when she blows out a puff of air to get her hair out of her face.

I try, I really do, not to laugh when she gives me the stink eye, which of course winds up looking more like a scrunched up chipmunk face than anything. Fucking adorable.

Holding up my hands, I say, "Sorry, sprite."

I can feel my lips lift and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my smirk from growing into a full-fledged smile. It's hard not to when I'm around Peyton because everything she does seems to have that effect on me.

She huffs and rolls her eyes in her totally endearing Peyton-way, and then grins at me. "Eh, it's okay," she says as she waves her hands around. "I can't ever make it past that level anyway." She glares at the phone in her hand as if to warn it that she'll be back again and ready to dominate. I have no doubt she will.

"So," she says after she stares at me for a few seconds, dragging out the word a good three syllables longer than necessary. Her head's tipped to the side. Her mouth is twisted, lips puckered as she swings her feet back and forth beneath the table, her foot hitting my leg every few times.

My stomach clenches uncomfortably because if I know anything about my best friend, my ass is about to be put to the fire. Shit.
"Yes?" It's my turn to drag out the word while I'm looking around for Bella.

She must feel me looking at her, even though she's a few tables away. When she turns, I have to shift a bit in my seat. She looks at me over her shoulder, the best of both worlds really, because not only do I get to stare at the way her ass fills out her jeans, I also get to look at her gorgeous face. Her hair is half flung over her shoulder and when she smiles at me, I immediately smile back, incredibly turned on right there in the middle of the restaurant. Thank God no one can see. Fuck, tomorrow can't come soon enough.

As much as I'm dreading being around Xavier, I can't wait for some alone, adult time with her.

Bella looks from me to Peyton. She giggles when she spies her daughter giving me the stare down - complete with quirked eyebrow and arms crossed in front of her chest.

"Hmmm, hmmm." Peyton clears her throat and I sit up straighter in my chair. Damn if the little thing doesn't have me whipped into shape.

When she's satisfied she has my full attention, quite the chore, believe me, because when Bella walks by, setting a Coke down on the table for me, I can smell her citrusy scent follow her. It takes all I have not to run after her. I stay in my seat though, and concentrate on Peyton.

"What's up?" I ask.

"You and Mom are going out on a date tomorrow?" I've of course made the mistake of taking a drink of my soda just as she asks her question and spit it out all over the table in front of me.

Kill me now.

Slowly, stupidly, I nod my head, too shocked to say anything.

"Does that mean she's your girlfriend?" she asks. Her gray eyes bore into mine making her seem way older than she is. I've known from the first moment she opened her mouth that she was no ordinary seven-year-old. It doesn't matter that I haven't ever been around another one but her.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, praying for some sort of divine intervention to help me make it through this. I'd take an ass beating from Xavier, take hours of talking to Carlisle, hell, I'd take days out on the boat, working in the pouring rain with just Charlie over having to answer this question.

I fidget. I run my hand through my hair. I stare out the window.

I stall.

Peyton never moves, never makes a sound, just keeps staring at me with those endless steel-blue eyes that sucked me in from the very beginning. The eyes that see me in a way no one ever has. The ones that see me for who I want to be ... who my grandparents always wanted me to be. For that reason alone, I owe the little girl across from me more than she'll ever know. Because of that, I'll always be honest with her.

I shake my head no, echoing my action with words. "No, sweetheart, she's not."

I have no idea what Bella and I are besides friends at this point, and it's way too damn soon to try to pigeonhole it anyway. The only thing I do know is I want her to be in my life in whatever capacity she wishes to be. Until I come clean and tell her everything, it's all I can hope for.
Something passes across Peyton's face and then it's gone in the blink of an eye, but I've spent enough time around her to know what it is.

Putting aside how uncomfortable I am by her question, I focus solely on her. Leaning forward to let her know that she's all I'm concerned about, I say gently, "But she is important to me, just like you are."

"Don't you like her? Don't you want her to be your girlfriend?" she asks so innocently it about breaks my heart.

How to explain without really saying anything? God knows I'd rather cut off my arm than upset her, but I don't want to give her the wrong impression either.

Hoping I'm going to say the right thing, I begin slowly, "P, of course I like her. You and your mom are the best things that have happened to me in a long, long time."

Sufficiently vague, but true.

Apparently my answer isn't quite good enough for the much too perceptive girl across from me, and I practically groan out loud. Damn it all. "Well, if that's true, why isn't she your girlfriend? Last year when Andrew liked me, I was his girlfriend. Why isn't Mom your girlfriend if you like her?"

Her head's tipped to the side and I know that no matter how much I wish that I could bang my head against the side of the table, which really would be preferable to having this conversation, I have to answer her. I hate hearing the doubt in her voice. "It's a bit more complicated for grownups. Trust me, I like your mom a lot, but things aren't that simple."

She frowns and mumbles something that sounds an awful lot like, "Even grownup boys are stupid." I have a feeling there's more to that statement than I know, and I try to hide my smile beneath my hand.

"But if Mom is your girlfriend, you won't leave," she says, her voice small and sad.

I'm out of my chair and beside her, squatting so I'm eye level with her. "Peyton, I'm not going anywhere, okay? This is my home now and nothing would make me want to leave here. We're best friends, remember? We have to stick together," I tell her and tickle her sides, sagging in relief when she laughs.

She looks up when Emmett calls her name and motions for her to go see him. She gives me a quick hug then hops down off the chair, acting like everything is back to normal. I can't, don't, move for a moment as I replay our conversation in my mind, hoping against hope I didn't say anything wrong. I fall forward when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

Giggles alert me to exactly who's standing behind me. I turn around once I've righted myself, and try to glare at her, but of course fail miserably when she smiles at me.

"Are you okay? That looked like a pretty intense conversation," Bella says, her voice is concerned, questioning.

I manage to pull myself up onto the chair and nod at her. I'm totally at a loss as to what I'm supposed to tell her about what Peyton asked. Do I tell her? I sure as hell don't want to upset her, and I know as sure as I'm sitting here if I tell her what her daughter asked me, she'll freak the fuck out. We've been dancing around this subject for weeks now, and the closer we get, the more we avoid it. I think she, like me, is waiting for all the skeletons to come tumbling out of the closet before going any further.
I don't know about her, but I'm getting the point where I'm ready to bring them all out, mine and hers, front and center, and deal with them so that there isn't anything else to worry about but how … and if … we want to go forward.

I know what I want; I just hope she does, too, once she knows everything.

Reaching for her hand, I tug on her fingers until she's standing between my legs. "Just best friend talk," I tell her and shrug my shoulders, really hoping she doesn't press for more.

After a beat, she sighs and nods her head. Wanting to move to a different topic, I pick her hand up to my mouth and brush an open-mouthed kiss along the soft skin of her knuckles. "I can't wait for tomorrow," I tell her quietly, my voice low enough so that only she can hear me.

"Me, either."

Her voice shakes a little bit, just enough for me to know she's as excited as I am. It makes me feel better. I pull her even closer so that my eyes are level with her fantastic tits. It takes all I have not to lean forward and bury my nose between them like I want to. Instead, I place my free hand on her hip, slipping my thumb under her Breakers t-shirt. Her skin is warm … smooth, beneath the circles I make. My fingers curl and squeeze the curve of her ass, and I growl in the back of my throat when she lets a breathy whimper escape her lips.

I inhale a long, steadying breath and utter a harsh, "Fuck, Bella," before removing my hand.

I'm definitely not cold any more.

Neither of us move for a moment until I stand. There are more people braving the horrid weather and the restaurant is filling up. I don't want to go, but I know I need to. She has work to do and I know she'll be eating dinner with Peyton soon. Their mother/daughter moments are too precious to intrude upon.

"I better let you get back to work," I say after I run a hand through my hair, nervous but not sure why.

Tomorrow night suddenly feels very far away.

Her mouth turns down into frown, reminding me again of just how much Bella and Peyton are alike. "Fine. I guess if I have to," she grumbles.

I step forward and lower my head, letting my lips barely ghost her ear. "I'll see you tomorrow night, okay?"

She gasps when she feels my warm breath and I can feel her fingers clutch at my jacket, gripping it tightly in her hands. She nods but doesn't say anything so I decide to ratchet things up even more. Call me a masochist, but Bella's hot as hell and I can't help but enjoy the effect I have on her. It means another long shower when I get home, but it's well worth it.

I run my nose down the side of her cheek and over her jaw. When I reach the spot behind her ear, I flick my tongue out, tasting citrus and salt and Bella. Her fingers twist even more and she inches closer to me. I can hear her heart race, feel her pulse thump wildly beneath my lips. Smiling against her neck, I rasp, "Besides being invited to your house the first time, I haven't been this excited about anything in a long time."

She shivers and her voice is shaky, sultry. "Me, either."
My hand slides beneath her hair, holding the back of her neck. Lingering, I kiss her cheek, then the corner of her mouth. The sounds of silverware scraping against plates and the muffled conversations going on around us manage to penetrate the bubble I always find myself in whenever I'm around her and I groan, knowing I have to go.

Her eyes are a bit dazed when I pull back and look at her. I smirk – I can't help it.

I link our index fingers, holding on as I step away from her. Squeezing one last time I say, "I'll call you later, okay, and say good night," before I let go completely.

She smiles and sighs at the same time, a sexy combination if I've ever seen one.

I wave at Peyton and walk out of the restaurant, counting down the minutes until tomorrow night.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"See you in a few." Emmett waves as he hops into his Jeep.

Nodding, I sit on my bike and take a deep breath to quell the nerves that immediately flare from his words.

Shit.

The ride home passes by quickly and thankfully when I get to the boarding house, I'm able to slip upstairs and into my room without coming across anyone. I'm nervous enough as it is; I don't need the third degree from Esme or God help me, Seth.

He's given me enough crap all week as it is; I sure as hell don't need any more. The fucker is enjoying my impending demise at the hands of his boyfriend way too much. I'm not scared of Xavier, per se, I can handle myself if it comes right down to it, but I know how much he means to both Bella and Peyton so I'd like to avoid any and all confrontations if possible. He hasn't bothered to say more than two words to me since the night we crossed paths at the store, just icy glares anytime he sees me.

It's getting fucking old if you want to know the truth, but I don't want to rock the boat any more than necessary so I just ignore it. For the time being at least. I know that sooner or later we'll have words, but I'd like for that to happen when I'm on a bit surer footing as far as Bella is concerned.

Hey, a man can dream.

My shower is fast, taking care of the necessities only: wash, shave, and jacking off - the latter a must in order to keep my sanity around Bella. It's getting hard to be around her and not give in to how much I want her. Damn hard.

Shutting down those thoughts before I get carried away and have to take care of business … again … I quickly get dressed. Donning a new pair of jeans and a plaid button-up - the finest the Wal-Mart in Ellsworth has to offer - I decide I look halfway decent when I look at myself in the mirror. I hope Bella thinks so at any rate.

I glance at my watch, another purchase I made one Sunday when Esme took me shopping to get some necessities, and my stomach clenches.

Fuck.

I grab my jacket, quickly shove my phone and wallet in my pocket, and pick my keys up. I'm not as
lucky leaving as I was getting home because Esme, Carlisle, and Seth are all sitting in the kitchen, like parents waiting to take pictures before prom … or for their kid to get home after breaking curfew. I don't know which is worse.

"What in the hell are you all looking at?" I grumble as I look around the table at all of their expectant faces.

Esme giggles but then tries to cover it up with a cough. It doesn't work. "Edward, you look so handsome," she tells me and I swear it looks like she has tears in her eyes.

So not what I need.

Embarrassed, I squeeze my eyes closed and stomp toward the refrigerator to grab a bottle of water, hoping that it will alleviate the tension settling on my shoulders. I look at Esme who's practically bouncing up and down in her seat, and no matter how hard I try not to, I feel the corners of my mouth lift in a smile.

The woman is completely irresistible. I can't help myself.

"I feel like I'm going to throw up," I murmur and then roll my eyes for sounding like a melodramatic teenage girl instead of a grown man.

Seth snorts and I shoot him a dirty look. Asshole. I really don't need any of his smirks or innuendos right now, but knowing him, I'm not going to be that lucky.

I'm not.

Casually, he says, "Nice threads, man."

"Whatever," I huff.

We get in some sort of bizarre stare down until he breaks out into a huge smile and starts laughing. Instead of it being contagious, I look at him like he's lost his fucking mind.

Carlisle chuckles then stands up, gazing at me from across the room. "I hope you and Bella have a nice time. Try to relax and enjoy yourself. And you," he says, slapping Seth on the back of the head. "Knock it off. You know this isn't easy for Edward. You're not helping matters at all," he scolds, though it doesn't sound very threatening because he's laughing at the same time.

"Thanks, Carlisle. You sound real convincing there."

There's a long pause filled with heavy silence before Esme's laughter fills the room. Once she starts, the other two join in, and unable to help myself, I do, too. It's weird because Esme and Carlisle know the real reason behind my nervousness; Seth just assumes it's all due to Xavier.

For all his blustering and for all my apprehension about him, Xavier really has very little to do with the fact that I've got a stampede of elephants rumbling inside my stomach.

As much of a pussy as it makes me sound like, I'm just really fucking nervous to be alone with Bella. When I asked her out, like a dumbass I hadn't given much thought to the logistics of going on a date and when I realized I only had my bike to drive to Ellsworth, I'd felt like an idiot. To say I'm excited about the chance to drive her Blazer is an understatement. I've salivated over the thing for a month now, but the fact that we'll be alone with no Peyton to act as a buffer if we need her is freaking me the hell out. I want everything to be perfect.
The three of them finally decide to get their shit together and they stop laughing.

"You'll have a wonderful time. You'll see," Esme tells me.

"I hope so."

She stands up and walks toward me, taking my hands in hers when she stops in front of me. I've gotten used to her hugs and kisses. I'm still not crazy about physical contact, unless it's from Bella or Peyton, but from Esme I endure, even though it still makes me cringe a bit inside. "Just be yourself, honey," she tells me. She raises one eyebrow at me and waits until I nod my head.

She stares at me for another moment before patting me on the cheek and then she leaves the room. Seth hasn't said anything else, but the way he's just sitting there makes me shift from foot to foot.

"Dude, just chill out. It's dinner and some drinks; no big deal."

I scoff at that and shoot Carlisle a look because he knows this is much more than just dinner and drinks.

Seth obviously feels the tension mount in the air because he quickly stands up. "Guess I'll head over to Xavier's. We'll see you at the pub, Edward," he tells me. He stares at me for a moment, and I can tell he's trying to decide if he should say anything else. He looks confused, not that I blame him because even I realize how weird I'm acting. Finally he just nods his head and walks out.

"Fuck," I mutter when I hear the door close.

My chest tightens and my shirt all of the sudden feels two sizes too small. A drop of sweat slides down the side of my face and I swat at it, breathing deeply in and out.

"Breathe, Edward," I hear Carlisle say. My eyes are squeezed shut so I can't see him but I nod at him and inhale and exhale in long breaths.

"I have to tell her soon. This is fucking killing me," I tell him when I catch my breath.

"You do," he agrees immediately. "But not tonight. Tonight just try to have fun spending time with her and your new friends. You can do this."

Frustrated by my body and my inability to handle my shit, I run a hand roughly through my hair. I hate the way I don't feel in control of myself, but I take another deep breath and think about seeing Bella in a few minutes.

It helps.

"Edward, I know it seems like you have this huge, wild animal, following you around, ready to pounce at a moment's notice, but really, it's not as bad as you are imagining. Xavier has his own reasons for being wary of you, but those are his issues, not yours. Bella has allowed herself and Peyton to get to know you. Jasper, Alice, Emmett, and Rose all seem to enjoy your company, and Seth, for all his teasing and instigating, obviously doesn't have a problem with you either. So, just go out tonight and have a good time," Carlisle commands, though not harshly.

"You're right. I'm being an idiot," I say, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"I know I am, and yes, you are." He chuckles when my eyes snap to his. "Now, go get your girl and act like a normal twenty-seven year-old on a date," he tells me, slapping me on the shoulder.
Hearing the words 'your girl' makes my blood rush to my head … and other parts of my body as well.

Instantly, wanting to see her overtakes everything else and I'm itching to get to her house.

"See ya," I tell him, my mind now solely on the woman I'm about to take on our first date.

The ride to her house is over in the blink of an eye, mostly because I'm so focused on seeing her.

I park my bike beside her Blazer and grin as I walk past it. I really can't fucking wait to drive the thing. As I approach the front door I mutter, "Don't fuck this up." I take one more deep breath, studiously ignoring the way my hand shakes when I knock on the door.

I can hear music playing from deep inside, something with a heavy beat, but I don't recognize it. Not surprising, of course, but I make a mental note to ask Bella who it is. I laugh when I hear a thump then a hiss of, "Ouch, damn it," right before the door is flung open.

And there she is, standing in front of me all gorgeous and nervous and sexy and she totally takes my breath away.

She pushes her hair back behind her ear and when I see the flash of silver peek out from beneath the strands, I literally have to bite back a groan. Damn what that earring does to me. She waves me inside, grimacing as she bends over to rub her knee.

"Are you okay?"

There's a bright red splotch on her knee. I immediately bend down to look at it, running my finger lightly over the spot. Her skin is so smooth; it's like touching a seashell that's been warmed by the sun. I want to lean forward and kiss the spot, but I don't, feeling a bit like a perv for even thinking about it. I trace the mark once more before reluctantly removing my finger.

"What did you do?" I ask, grinning when she rolls her eyes and grunts.

"I tripped over Peyton's soccer ball and hit my knee on the edge of the end table."

We both laugh, though it sounds forced and awkward. Jesus, I hope this is not what the rest of the night is going to be like.

Her tongue peeks out of her mouth, darting across her lips just before she pulls her bottom one between her teeth. My dick immediately responds.

"Do you want something to drink before we go?"

Her voice is barely above a whisper, like she's telling me a secret. I step closer to her, brushing her hair back. Mesmerized, I watch as a few strands slide between my fingers, falling in soft waves over her shoulder. I lean in toward her, inhaling the citrus I've come to recognize, anticipate. My heart feels like it's being beat on like a bass drum, but it doesn't stop me from running the backs of my fingers down her cheek until I'm holding the side of her face in my hand. I turn her face toward mine. Our eyes lock. Our breaths catch.

"You're gorgeous." The words are lost in the mix of our breathing, but I know she hears me when that fucking sexy as hell blush appears on her face. Unable to help myself, though I don't try very hard, I crash my lips to hers. She tastes like cinnamon, spicy and fiery. I dip my tongue in her mouth, swirling it all around, reveling in the way her taste explodes, coating my tongue.
Her fingers move into my hair and she pushes herself against me. I drape my free arm across her lower back, letting my hand cup her ass. Our bodies move against each other's, slow and needy, want quickly spiraling out of control.

I slow my kisses down, swiping her mouth one last time before pecking her lips chastely.

"Damn, I've been thinking about that for weeks now," I whisper on a panting breath as I rest my forehead against hers.

"So have I." Her answer shouldn't surprise me but it really kind of does.

It also makes me really fucking happy.

We don't say anything and after a few seconds, she begins to giggle, which in turn makes me laugh as well.

I kiss her on the tip of the nose, and then step back. "We'd better get going if we don't want to be late," I remind her, walking toward the door.

I watch her move around the room, flitting from turning off lights and the music to picking up her coat and purse. She fumbles and drops her jacket. I can tell from across the room how nervous she is and I go to her.

Bending over, I pick it up off the floor and lay it over her arm, pulling on her fingers until she looks at me. "Hey," I say softly. Unable to resist, I lean forward and brush my lips against hers again, whispering, "Don't be nervous; we're going to have a great time."

Where my new found confidence has come from, I have no idea, but seeing her uncomfortable is just … wrong.

She nods and then sighs. When she looks at me she's smiling which makes me feel tons better. "I haven't done this for a long time," she says quietly, leading me toward the front door.

I know that because she's mentioned it in passing a few times, but hearing it again makes my heart happy, my dick, too, if you want to know the truth. Because we're sharing I tell her, "Me, either." I snort. She has no idea how true that is or how long it's been.

I've mentioned my lack of dating experience, though not in detail, so when she looks at me with wide eyes and a quirked eyebrow, I do this weird cough-choke thing. She doesn't hesitate to laugh at my dumb ass and I try to glare at her, which doesn't work. It does lighten the mood though and then we're out the door and walking in the direction of the Blazer.

I hold my hand out, wiggling my fingers and bouncing up and down on my feet while I wait for her to hand over the keys. She enjoys my misery for way too long as she dangles the keys above my twitching palm. I have really, really been looking forward to driving her truck.

"Cherry's my baby, you know," she teases, twirling the key ring around her finger.

I roll my eyes. "Yes, you've mentioned it a time or twenty."

She narrows her eyes at me, tilting her head to the side. "I don't let just anyone drive her," she tells me and it seems like there's a hidden meaning to her words.

Plucking the keys from her finger, I take a step, making it so her back is up against the door. "I don't want to be just anyone, Bella."
My voice is low, rough, and I'm totally serious. Her mouth falls open, her tongue flicks at her top lip. Reaching up around her, I slip the key into the lock. I can hear her breathing, erratic and quick, see as her eyes dart around everywhere but in my direction.

I gently move her out of the way so I can open the door. "Come on. Up you go."

Remembering the good manners my grandmother taught me, I help her up into her monster of a truck. A flash of creamy white thigh appears when her skirt slides up her leg and I quickly say a prayer of thanks to above for the return of summer weather.

I don't know shit about women's clothes, but I know enough to appreciate the way her short black skirt shows off her legs in all the right ways and how her heels make her just the right height to hold against me and feel her in the best places. I know her shirt, some white sheer thing, molds to her chest like a second skin, putting her fantastic breasts even more on display than normal. She smells delicious, like an orange just picked from the tree in the summertime.

She's hotter than fucking hell and all mine … for the rest of the night at least, and hopefully long, long after that.

About five minutes into the drive to Ellsworth and neither one of us have said a word. It's as if we're back at the first time we saw each other and I watched her shrink from me and run away. Not that I'd let her do it again, not now.

"Was Peyton excited about spending the night with your parents?" I ask, grasping for something to talk about to relieve the uncomfortable silence.

She snorts and shakes her head, turning to look at me. "I don't know who's more excited, her or my dad. He loves his one on one time with his granddaughter."

I smile and nod, believing every word. I open my mouth to make another comment when she blurts out, "Can we … um … not talk about Peyton or my dad or anything like that? I'd like for tonight to be about us." Her voice is muffled, almost embarrassed-sounding. I'm not having any of that.

I reach for her hand and pull it up to my mouth. She gasps when I place an open-mouthed kiss to the palm of her hand. "Us? I like the sound of that," I tell her, painting her skin with my tongue.

My voice sounds every bit as sure as hers didn't just a moment ago. I hope the smile on my face lets her know how much that tiny two-lettered word means to me.

"I do, too."

This time her words come out sounding like a sigh and, like always, make me instantly hard.

I lower her hand, setting it on my thigh and cover it up with my own. The rest of the short drive passes quickly and we discuss everything but Peyton. I miss my little thing, but I don't mind focusing every bit of my attention on her gorgeous, sexy mother.

Not at all.

Every time I glance at her out of the corner of my eye, which really feels like every few seconds because I can't keep my eyes off her, she's looking at me, too. For a moment her eyes drift to my neck and I know she's staring at my scar, but her eyes meet mine before I have time to wonder what she thinks when she looks at it.

I find Finn's easily enough, Ellsworth isn't difficult to find your way around in, and as I pull into the
parking lot I groan when I spy Xavier's truck. Bella looks to see what's caught my attention and I can tell she's troubled by my reaction.

"I'm sorry," I tell her, parking the Blazer in an empty spot in the corner of the lot.

She whips around to face me, her hair flying out from how fast she moves. "For what? You're not the one acting like an asshole," she says in a hard voice, complete with growl.

I open my mouth to try to defend him, though I don't know why. Maybe because I don't want to come between them and I know his problem is me, not her or Peyton. "Don't, Edward," she warns and I shut my mouth. Hard. "He might be my best friend, but he's not my father, who knows better than to tell me what to do. Xavier needs to back the hell off."

I turn the truck off and get out, hurrying to her side. When I open her door, she's taking a deep breath and running a hand through her hair. I hold my hand out, linking our fingers together to help her down. Once she's standing in front of me and I can close her door, I pull her to me. Our joined hands are on the small of her back and she has to bend backward just a bit as I lean over her.

"Let's forget about the bald behemoth and just have fun, okay?" I ask against her lips. I don't move as I wait for her to nod her head and when she does, I close my mouth around hers, kissing her to let her know that I don't give a shit what anyone but her thinks about us.

Dinner is … fun … once we move past all the bullshit. It takes a few minutes and a few drinks for some of them, like Xavier, to loosen up, but once the alcohol starts flowing and the food arrives it's nothing but laughs.

"No shit, Edward." Seth laughs, ignoring Bella's attempts to kick him under the table. "You should have seen her; I've never laughed so hard in my life."

The entire table is laughing, even Bella who tries really hard not to.

"Aww, Bell, I forgot about that," Emmett says once he wipes his eyes. He's laughed so hard his eyes have watered.

"I hate all of you," she grumbles.

My arm has been draped across the back of her chair. I pull her toward me, hooking my foot around the leg of her chair to get her as close to me as I can. "Even me?" I whisper, well, it's a bit louder than that due to all the noise. I leave my lips against her ear, taking a moment to just breathe her in. She tips her head, an open invitation. I don't decline. My mouth slides down her neck, teeth skimming her sensitive, heated skin until I reach that delicious junction between her neck and shoulder. I suck, pulling her flesh into my mouth, laving it with my tongue. My fingers squeeze her opposite shoulder, holding her in place. I forget about everything but her. We're not in a crowded bar, surrounded by her friends and family. We're not in the middle of dinner.

The abrupt scrape of a chair across the floor a few seconds later immediately reminds me that we're not alone. I turn my head, and see the unmistakable back of Xavier push its way through the crowd. No one says anything for a few seconds until thankfully Emmett starts the conversation again, ignoring Xavier's outburst. Even Seth doesn't react. Bella scowls for a moment until Rose and Alice pull her into their conversation again.

I watch her, paying little attention to anything else. One of her hands rests on my thigh and the other waves around in huge, animated circles as she talks. Her cheeks are flushed from the alcohol and the stifling air of the pub. I stare, utterly captivated as a bead of sweat slowly slides from the
hair above her ear, down her cheek and over her neck until it disappears beneath her shirt. Her fingers on my leg move back and forth. She's not paying any attention whatsoever to where they go or how she touches me, making it that much harder not to shift in my seat. I twirl her hair around my fingers rubbing the strands with my thumb. She leans back into me, pressing her shoulder against mine.

Damn, I want her.

Once the waitress comes and cleans off the dishes, Emmett and Jasper head for the pool tables. Seth goes to find Xavier, and Alice pulls Bella to the bathroom with her, leaving just me and Rose.

"Are you having fun?" she asks after a few beats.

I nod, taking a drink of my Coke. I had one beer with dinner, my limit because I'm driving. I'm not taking any chances. The very last thing I need is to get pulled over and have alcohol on my breath not to mention the fact I'm not taking any chances with her safety, either.

She stares at me, waiting until I set my glass back on the table. "You don't have to worry about Xavier; he'll come around."

I grunt and then put my arms on the table so I can lean in closer to her. "You know what? I begin, "I don't really give a fuck if he does or not as long he doesn't upset Bella or Peyton. Whenever he pulls the stick out of his ass and wants to have a conversation with me like a grownup, I'll be happy to listen to what he has to say, not that it matters one way or the other where Bella is concerned."

We look at each other until she grins and then starts laughing, throwing her head back and slapping her hands on the table. "Oh shit, I love that," she says when she catches her breath. "Xavier is like a brother to me, but he's acting like a prick right now, so you hold your ground with him. He owes you both an apology."

I wave her words off, neither wanting nor needing one, but she nods her head vigorously back at me. "Yes, Edward, he does. He's watched Bell every day since Evan died just like the rest of us have and for him to begrudge her trying to be happy pisses me the fuck off."

My jaw hangs open and she chuckles, shaking her head at me like I'm a hapless idiot. Which I am. "She's happy, any fool can see that. Usually we have to drag her kicking and screaming to come out with us, but she's laughed and joked around all night. That's because of you," she tells me, her voice serious now. "I know we all honed in on your date with her and while I'd like to apologize for that, I won't. I miss my sister, my friend, and she's been more like herself since you've arrived than she has in a long time. We all just wanted to … be around our Bella again."

Her eyes narrow and she glares at something over my shoulder. I twist around in my chair and am standing up before I even realize it when I feel a hand on my arm. "Sit," she orders.

My eyes are hard, angry, and my fingers have clenched into tight fists. Blood pounds in my ears and I swear everything is bathed in bright red. I'll kill the motherfucker.

"Edward, sit," Rose says again, this time more forcefully.

I sit, but don't take my eyes off Bella as she and Xavier argue. He's pointing and gesturing wildly. He's so much taller than she is that she has to look up at him while he talks but she doesn't back down from him at all. Her arms are locked to her sides, but even from across the pub I can tell she's shooting fire at him with her eyes. He's obviously an idiot because he just keeps going, even going so far as to shake Seth off when he grabs his elbow. I can't read lips, but I don't need to in order to
know what he's saying.
You don't know him.
You can't trust him.
You're going to get hurt.
You're going to let Peyton get hurt.

It's when her shoulders slump that I'm out of my chair and at her side before I have time to think about what I'm doing.

My arm slips around her waist and I hold her close. Bending down to her ear, I ask, "Are you okay?"

She hiccups and I see a tear leak from the corner of her eye.

That fucking does it.

"Look, asshole," I sneer at him, gripping Bella even tighter, "I don't know what you just said to her but if you have a problem with me, then come to me with it. Stop taking it out on Bella."

"You don't … why can't you …" he stammers, unable to talk he's so pissed off.

"Because I'm here to stay. Until she tells me to leave her alone, I plan on being around for a long time." I tell him, not backing down from the death glare he shoots me.

Bella straightens in my arm and I hear her take a deep breath. "I'm going to get a drink. I'll see you by the pool tables, okay?" she asks only me as she turns toward me.

"Are you sure? We can leave if you want," I tell her, wrapping a hand around her neck and running my thumb over her cheek.

She shakes her head. "No, I want to stay. This is my first date in forever. I'm not ready for it to be over yet," she says, loud enough for Xavier to hear because he immediately lowers his head, the fight gone in an instant. She pulls my head closer, kissing me quickly on the cheek before walking toward the bar without looking back.

"Are you happy now?" he asks, sounding sad and hurt.

It just pisses me off.

"Fuck no, I'm not happy, you asshole," I spit back at him, my anger quickly spinning out of control. I take a deep breath, vowing not to do anything else to upset Bella. "Whatever your problem is with me, get over it. I've got a job, a home, and now friends and a woman and a little girl that are becoming the most important people in my life. I'm not going anywhere." I step closer, looking him in the eye. "You don't know shit about me except what you see on the outside, so until you want to know more, fuck you. I get that you were friends with Evan and I get that you've taken care of Bella and Peyton for a long time, but from what I hear, Bella hasn't been a barrel of laughs for a long time. She's happy now. That's all that should matter to you."

I nod at Seth as I pass him, barely registering the argument taking place behind me as I walk away. I make my way back to the pool tables, pushing through the crowd of people.

I find her standing between Rose and Alice. She looks fine, but there's still a dip between her
eyebrows and her arms are crossed tightly over her chest. She looks up when I step closer, immediately coming to me and wrapping her arms around my waist. Her head falls against my chest and I pull her closer to me. Bending over, I kiss the top of her head and run one hand up and down her back until I feel the tension leave her body.

When she looks up, her eyes are shimmering and her smile is genuine.

Thank fuck.

"You're okay?" I ask tipping her chin up with my finger.

"I'm perfect," she tells me, her eyes dark, her tone teasing … promising.

I ghost my lips across hers, flicking my tongue at the drop of liquid there from her drink. "Hmmm, you are. Perfectly delicious," I murmur, the taste of vodka and cranberry juice filling my mouth.

"Okay, Edward, stop playing kissy face with my sister and come play pool with us," Emmett taunts, holding a pool cue beside him.

I kiss her one more time just because I can and then turn toward Emmett and Jasper. "Prepare to get your asses kicked, boys. Rack 'em up."

I get wrapped up in the game, beating first Emmett then Jasper, and am watching the two of them go at it when I feel my body tingle. Looking up, I find Bella staring at me with her bottom lip between her teeth. Instantly I'm hard because there's no doubting she wants me as badly as I want her.

Leaning against the wall, I crook my finger at her. I need her closer.

The few steps it takes her to close the distance between us seems to take a hell of a lot longer than the three or four seconds it really is. Her hips sway, her hair swishes behind her, and she's the only thing I can see. She stops just out of my reach and smirks at me in a challenge.

Oh, little girl, wrong move.

I crook my finger again, smirking at her in return. "Closer."

She doesn't move, but I can see the way her nipples have tightened beneath her shirt. Taking a baby step that barely inches her forward, she looks at me again.

My stomach clenches as I watch her lick her lips. My dick gets even harder when she runs a hand through her hair, lifting the back off her neck. I can see the damp curls of fine hair glistening from sweat. My dick tries to push its way through my jeans. "Come here. I need to kiss you," I whisper hoarsely, grabbing her hand and pulling her out of the room.

I grab our jackets off the table and we're out the door and across the parking lot before a minute even passes. In the next instant, I have her pressed up against the side of her truck, my mouth assaulting hers. The jackets in my hand hit the ground when I let go to reach for her wrists, lifting them over her head. My tongue is ravenous, delving, plunging into her warm, sweet mouth. Teeth clank. Tongues tangle and swirl, pressing forward … pulling back.

I let go of her hands, taking them both in one of mine so I can hold her breast with my free one. She whimpers as soon as my thumb circles her nipple. When I pinch the hardened peak, she arches her back. My mouth moves to her neck, nibbling and licking every inch of skin I can find. I'm crazed.
"I'd worry I was hurting her if I couldn't hear her breathless moans."

"Fuck, Bella, the things I want to do to you." I hiss as I push myself against her thigh, knowing she can feel how hard I am.

I roll her nipple between my fingers, sucking her bottom lip into my mouth when her mouth falls open. I push the shirt to the side, exposing the top of her breast. When I see that pale skin for the first time, I groan. Lowering my head I cover every part of her with my tongue, the silky flesh tasting even more exquisite than that of her neck.

I let go of her breast, looking around to make sure we're alone and no one can see us. Thank God we are and no one can, because I need to touch her. My hand slides beneath her skirt, and I can feel goosebumps spread across her leg. I know she's not cold so I don't stop.

My mouth finds hers again and I lick her lips, and then slowly push my tongue inside her mouth again. "Are you okay? I'm not hurting you am I?" I ask between kisses.

"No, I'm fine," she pants. Her eyes are dilated, almost completely black when I look in them.

My fingers caress her thigh, glancing the edge of what feels like barely there panties.

My dick throbs painfully but I rock my hips against her anyway. She lifts the leg I'm not touching and wraps it around my knee, opening herself wider for me.

"Can I touch you? Fuck, I need to touch you." I breathe against her neck, sucking on the skin that vibrates with her pulse.

She moans, the sound rumbling and deep, and I take that for encouragement. My hand cups her pussy. She's so hot, so wet. I rub the heel of my hand against the spot right above her clit and my fingers spread wide, covering her entirely.

She tugs on the hand above her head and I release her arms. They immediately wrap around my neck and then her mouth is on my jaw, my cheek, my neck, until she reaches my ear. "Touch me, Edward. Please," she pants, warm breath fanning over wet skin. "Let me touch you, too."

"Jesus," I rasp. I lift my hand then push it inside her panties. When my fingers find her wet, slick folds, we both groan. At this point, I'm pretty sure my dick could drill through rocks it's so hard, but I can't even think about that now, especially when I feel her fumble with the belt and zipper on my jeans. Once she's able to, she palms my dick. Fingers grip me through my boxers.

"Bella, oh fuck," I pant when finally I feel her, skin against skin once she holds me firmly in her hand. Her touch is tentative, but it only takes a few seconds before it becomes bolder. Her grip tightens; her thumb swipes through the bead of moisture on the tip. Up and down, twisting, pumping, I thrust into her hand, my body screaming, aching for release.

Our breathing is heavy … wanting, needy.

I circle her clit with my finger, my other arm wrapped around her waist holding her still. Her head's thrown back against the side of the truck and her breathing gets faster.

"Oh, God, oh, God."

My finger circles faster, matching her words and the swivel of her hips against my hand. Our hips move together, mimicking what our bodies want. "Fuck, Bella. That's it, baby, come. You're so fucking close," I whisper before kissing her again.
Her fingers tug on my hair. Her eyes burn with hunger.

"Mmmm, let it go."

I quicken my pace, fingers flying over her, touching, rolling, pressing. Her breath catches. A squeak escapes. Her leg wraps tighter and her head falls back, hair hanging gloriously down her back and then she shatters, exploding in a rush of heat and wet.

She rides my hand, her orgasm making her chest flush bright with pink. She's fucking magnificent as she shakes and shudders until she's done. She sags, almost collapsing except for the fact that I still have her pressed against the door and her hand is still in my pants. I can't help but press myself against her, my dick so hard it hurts. She begins moving her hand again, gliding it up and down my length, squeezing with just the right amount of pressure to make my breath get faster.

I pluck at her nipples, bite at her neck, as she brings me closer and closer to the edge.

"Christ … oh shit." I moan.

"Come, Edward," she breathes, staring straight into my eyes.

I mutter one more incoherent something or other, and let go, coming so hard I only see a flash of white. She doesn't still her hand, making my orgasm last longer than should be humanly possible, until I'm so spent and my legs feel so rubbery I worry about keeping myself upright.

I remove my hand from her panties, feeling my fingers cool as the night air hits them when I smooth her skirt back in place. Her hand shakes as she pulls hers out, too, and neither of us says anything.

My forehead falls heavily against hers and I rub her hips and the tops of her thighs when she lowers her other leg, hoping she's not sore.

"That was," I breathe, squeezing my eyes shut against the swarm of emotions suddenly bursting to life inside of me. What I feel for her scares me. What I need to tell her scares me more.

"Yeah, it was," she whispers, her hands rubbing my biceps.

She shivers and I feel like shit. "Oh, hell, Bella, I'm so sorry. I never meant to do that … like that." I groan. I never should have let things get so far, and up against the side of her truck, too, in the middle of the parking lot of all the damn places. Jesus, thinking about someone seeing us, Xavier, or God help me, Emmett, makes me gulp, loudly.

My hands are awkward, straightening her shirt and her skirt, wondering how to apologize for attacking her like I just did.

I want to kick my own ass.

"Edward, stop," she tells me, giggling and rolling her eyes. My hands still on her shoulders and I hang my head, mortified.

"Hey, it's okay," she tells me, running her fingers through my hair. Her voice soft, gentle and there's absolutely no trace of anything even close to resembling regret.

I feel marginally better.

"It's not," I say, shaking my head. "I really didn't intend to get so carried away. I mean, you've been
driving me insane all damn night, and you look sexy as hell, so … shit." I stop talking before I say something totally wrong and ruin what is, without a doubt, the hottest thing that has ever happened to me.

"Edward?" She waits until I look at her before she grins. She forcefully grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me closer to her, saying, "Shut up." Her eyes gleam from the lights in the parking lot. Her hair's a wild mess from my fingers and the thrashing she did against the side of the truck. Her cheeks are pink, her lips swollen and honestly, she looks like sin and sex all wrapped up in a perfect package of just … her.

The way she sounds, the way her eyes dance, the wicked smirk she gives me when I raise my eyebrow at her tone, makes most of my anxiety melt away. I can barely think, let alone wallow, when she looks at me like that.

"Yes, ma'am."

I can't resist one last kiss, though I know it's only going to leave me wanting more. This time, our kiss is softer, but somehow it means even more than before. When she shivers, I know it's from the chill in the air and I slow down, groaning … and whining … when I have to stop altogether. I can hear voices and realize that we need to either go back inside or go home.

My vote is home, especially when I see her try to hide a yawn behind her hand.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," I whisper, taking her hand and unlocking the door with the key.

There's this sort of awkward but not uncomfortable moment that passes once I get in the driver's seat. We stare at each other, neither saying a word, the electricity between us flowing freely, sizzling … crackling. There are so many things I want to say to her. She looks the same, like it's taking all she has to keep everything inside. It's right there, we both know it, but before either of us has a chance to do anything about it, the sound of her phone vibrating with a text message startles us both.

She reaches for it, her eyes grow big and a half giggle, half squeak escapes her lips as she reads the message. My guess is it's from Rose and there's no telling what she's said. Bella's fingers fly over the screen as she taps out a message, casting me sideways glances every few seconds. I'm dying to know what she's saying because apparently I've turned into a thirteen-year-old girl. Bella snorts and shakes her head while she finishes her message before tucking the phone back in her purse.

Bella puts her seat belt on as I'm backing out of the parking spot. She leans her head back against the headrest and turns to look at me, saying softly, "I told Rose we were going to go ahead and head back."

She yawns again and I reach over, running the backs of my fingers down her cheek before turning onto the street. "You should rest."

She nods and then covers my hand with hers where it still rests on the side of her face. "I had a great time tonight," she says, her voice barely louder than a breath.

"Me, too." My voice shakes, a rush of emotion overwhelming me.

Turning her head slightly, she presses a gentle kiss to the inside of my hand before settling back against the seat. She reaches for my hand and sets it in her lap, winding our fingers together, holding tight as if to keep me from letting go.

Crazy woman, as if that would ever happen. I navigate through the streets and turn to head back
toward Corea. When I look at her once I'm on the highway, she's already sleeping.

"Soon, Bella," I whisper as the tires swish along the road. "I'll tell you everything. I just hope and pray you'll still want me after."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Sooooo? I'm not even sure where to start! Did I tell you or did I tell you this one was full of all kinds of goodness? I know you all were dying for lots of the goings on, so there you go! Jasper, Peyton, LOTS of kissing, Xavier, Rose, then well … the end. Hope you all enjoyed it, lol!

Next chapter, we'll hear from Bella and find out what she thinks about everything. Big things happening next time, mostly Edward will be making his first extended trip out on the boat so we'll see how our girl deals with it. The big talk … it's right around the corner, folks, so hang tight!

Have you checked out The Breakers blog this week? The amazing, incredible, wonderful Laurel made more pictures this week, including one of my Xavier. Be sure to take a look! We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts! It's fabulous, go look!

www.(.)les16-thebreakers(.)blogspot(.)com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! I've been excited all week waiting to post this. You have no idea how much! Thanks so much for reading!

See you next Sunday!

Erin~
Chapter 11

"Mom!"

Chuckling, I set down my journal and poke my head into the kitchen. There is no telling what's going on in there.

"You bellowed?" I tease. I have to turn my head to the side when Peyton snarls at me, but I can't help laughing. "Excuse me," I say in what I hope is an appropriately serious sounding voice, "what's the matter?"

She huffs and glares. "It's not nice to use words I don't know," she grumbles and I immediately feel bad for teasing her. I can tell she's nervous, though she really shouldn't be.

"I know. I'm sorry." I wait as she does what I ask. I can tell she wants to roll her eyes at me, but after the slip from a second ago, she knows she's on thin ice. "First of all, take a deep breath." I wait as she does what I ask. I can tell she wants to roll her eyes at me, but after the slip from a second ago, she knows she's on thin ice. "Second of all, it's a grilled cheese, not a soufflé, so we'll just try again."
She sighs, the sound shaky and still frustrated. "I can't get it to come out right."

I peek at the knob on the burner and say, "Baby, you have the heat too high, that's all. Come on. Let's try again. We have plenty of time before he gets here."

"Let me do it though, you watch. I want to make dinner," she warns, pointing at me, but she smiles so it seems like the crisis has passed.

She chatters on for a few minutes while she carefully butters each slice of bread, making sure to cover them entirely. She talks about her night with Nana and Pop, and I listen with half of one ear, my mind slipping away to thoughts about my own night.

My heart stutter steps and my stomach turns somersaults when I remember what happened … the way it felt when Edward touched me, kissed me. I know he felt bad about letting things get so out of control standing against the Blazer like that, but there was no way in hell I was going to stop him. I wanted him, in whatever way I could get him.

The feelings I have for him, the ones I try to tell to slow the hell down, go haywire whenever he's around. I feel like a damn teeny bopper at a Justin Bieber concert … nervous, giddy, and excited all at the same time. The man has me reeling, but it doesn't scare me as badly as it probably should.

We're still dancing around each other, in that delicious 'I really like you but I'm not sure if you like me as much' phase and as much as it thrills me, it also keeps me up at night, wondering about all the things we have yet to talk about. We haven't labeled what we are, but it's clear we're more than friends … at least I've never stuck my hand down a friend's pants in a parking lot in front of God and anyone who happened to walk by. From the way he acted, it's not something he's ever done either.

Questions, there are so many unanswered ones. I know he has as many as I do. The way he looks at me sometimes, the things he says, and more often than not, doesn't say, lead me to believe that there is a hell of a lot more to his story than just wanting a new start. He's become … important to both me and Peyton, so I owe it to both of us to find out exactly where things stand and get everything out in the open.

I just hope when it happens, we'll both be strong enough to take it.

"Is this better?" Peyton asks, pulling me into the here and now.

I smile, looking at her carefully constructed sandwich. It's definitely not an ordinary grilled cheese, not for her best friend. We had to raid the refrigerator at The Breakers on the way back from my parents' house so that his sandwich had not one, but three different kinds of cheese on it. She was so adorable when she asked, so focused on making Edward something special, that there was no way I could refuse.

I hope he was serious when he mentioned being happy with just sandwiches, even if they are cheddar, Swiss, and American cheese ones. We also grabbed some potato salad and some cut up fresh fruit while we were deciding what to eat with the grilled cheese. No mint chocolate chip ice cream tonight, but we are having strawberry shortcake instead.

My favorite for a change.

My mind definitely wasn't up to thinking about what to cook, not after the amazing time I had last night … minus the ridiculousness of my best friend. I have to bite back a growl just thinking about how asinine Xavier had acted at the pub. He's been acting like a complete ass for weeks now. Last
night was the last straw.

I was awake most of the night, tossing and turning, thinking about him, about Evan … about Edward. I couldn't get my brain to shut off, no matter how long I laid in bed. It's a rare feat for me to be alone in the house and honestly, it took all I had not to ask Edward to stay. It was on the tip of my tongue, but I knew it would be a huge mistake to tempt fate … and each other that way.

Shaking my head to keep my mind from wandering, I bump Peyton's hip, careful not to knock her off the step stool she has to use to be able to see the skillet. "It looks perfect, P. Edward will be so impressed."

Really, she could serve him the mangled mess and I have no doubt he'd eat it with a smile.

She scrunches her nose and wiggles it, then reaches up to scratch it. Crumbs from the sandwiches attach themselves to her nose, making her look utterly adorable and sweet and just … Peyton.

Before she has time to wipe off her face, there's a knock at the door and she's flying off the stool, barely landing on her feet as she races out of the kitchen. I take a deep breath because I really feel like running after her to greet him. I stay where I am though, giving her a few minutes alone with Edward. She wants to make today so special for him, especially because of what happens tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Shuddering, I force myself not to dwell … and to not freak the hell out.

In the morning, Dad is taking the *Isabella Marie* for its first three day trip of the summer. He wants to try and fish in some warmer water and the area is too far away to go and come back every night. He's not allowed to pull traps up at night, but they can leave them in the water until morning. The lobsters can only stay in the hold for three days so that's as long as they'll be gone.

It's long enough.

I'll be a nervous wreck the entire time they're gone, just like always, but this time it will be even more so because Edward will be out as well. I worry about my dad, Emmett, and Jasper, but they've been doing this a long time now. This will be Edward's first extended stay on the boat and I know my dad; the work will be hard, harder than he's used to even. Not that I think he can't handle it because I'm sure he can. I send up a quick prayer, wishing for good weather. I'll never be able to handle it if a storm rolls in while they're gone.

"Penny for your thoughts."

I shiver as his caramel turtle voice washes over me, halting my runaway thoughts in an instant.

"Hi," I say softly, my voice shaky and breathless. I look at him, his eyes burning into mine and I know that like me, he's reliving every moment from last night in rapid succession.

Fingers, tongues, mouths, feelings, words … a rush of sensation … as my skin tingles and my heart races just from being so close to him.

He reaches for me, tugging lightly on my fingers, brushing a quick, sweet kiss across my cheek. "Hi, yourself. You okay? You looked deep in thought."

"I'm fine." I smile at him, slow and flirty.
"Mmmm, yes you are," he teases back, stepping closer. He amps up the heat with just a few words and a sweep of his eyes from my head all the way down to my toes … then back up again. I swear, his gaze is so hot, so intense, it feels like my clothes are melting right off me.

Not that I'd mind all that much.

I also don't mind the flirting, but today's really important to Peyton, so I reluctantly take a step back, hoping the distance cools things off. He blinks a few times then exhales, his nostrils flaring. "Later," he says, his voice full of promise.

Because the sandwiches are already made, Peyton orders us both to wait while she brings the food. The weather is so perfect that we'd decided to sit outside and she even went so far as to put a plastic tablecloth on the picnic table, complete with flowers from the lilac bush for the centerpiece.

Edward stops and stares. "She did this for me?" he turns to me and asks. Why he seems so surprised I have no idea, but it's clear that it's affected him.

I laugh a bit at his reaction. "Of course she did. When I picked her up this morning, she had a list of things we had to do today before you got here, complete with a handwritten menu. She wanted to do something special for you. For … tomorrow," I whisper the last word, choking back the strangled half sob half groan that's fighting its way to come out.

"Damn, she's just … both of you …" He squeezes his eyes closed and then opens them, his eyes reminding me of the rocks that make up the jetty. Bluish gray, changing colors as the waves wash over them then the sun dries them off.

I reach for his hand, leading him to the table so we can sit and wait for Peyton to bring the food. She wanted to do it all, even the drinks. It's incredibly cute really and so sweet.

Our hands are linked, resting on the bench beneath the table. He doesn't say anything for a few minutes. His body beside me is rigid, his shoulders tense, the muscles of his forearm flexing as he twitches.

"Bella," he says softly, and his voice is gritty, hesitant. He swallows and takes a deep breath then squeezes my hand. I watch him, waiting for him to turn and look at me. He finally does and his eyes are worried, searching as he stares at me. "I …" is all he manages to get out before we hear the back door swing open followed by, "It's time to eat!"

We both laugh, instantly dousing whatever that was just before. Peyton is precariously balancing a tray as she walks toward the table. It tips and plates bobble, the drinks slosh over the side of the plastic cups, but she finally makes it, setting the tray down with a proud flourish.

Edward looks properly impressed and well, it really looks like he can't decide whether to burst out laughing or crying.

"Sprite, it looks delicious," he says earnestly and she beams at his genuine enthusiasm.

"I made it all myself, well, the sandwiches. Mom picked up the other stuff at the restaurant." She grumbles the last part, thoroughly annoyed that she wasn't able to make the entire dinner herself.

He reaches for her, pulling her next to him, not letting go of my hand either. For the briefest of moments it's so easy to imagine the three of us being a family, sharing dinners like this every day, instead of only once a week. It frightens me how much the thought of that makes me happy.

"Well, the main dish is most important and grilled cheese happens to be my very favorite, so thank
you, sweetheart."

The pure, unadulterated adoration he expresses turns me into a huge puddle right there beside him. I kind of resemble the cheese oozing from between the slices of toasted, buttery bread.

I sigh, thinking he is … well pretty damn amazing. Untold stories aside, there's no question that things are definitely getting serious between us.

Dinner lasts forever. Peyton keeps up a running commentary on everything from why football is better than baseball to why Neville is the best character in Harry Potter. He looks confused, like he has no idea who or what she's talking about, even when she mentions the movie. Odd. I mean I suppose not all twenty-seven year-old single guys would know who Neville Longbottom is, but everyone on the planet has to have heard of Harry Potter, but no, his face is completely void of any inkling of recognition. Not that Peyton can tell, because she just keeps right on talking away.

When all the food has been demolished, Peyton drags a very stuffed and happy Edward out into the yard to play soccer with her and I take all the dishes into the house. Dinner on paper plates and plastic cups hasn't ever been so enjoyable or so easy to clean up. I watch the two of them through the window over the sink as I wash the bowl from the potato salad, marveling at how much has changed in the span of just a few weeks.

I never expected someone like Edward to suddenly appear, and I sure as hell never imagined having feelings, the ones that keep my panties damp and the butterflies in my stomach in a constant state of excitement. I smile when Peyton's squeal of laughter floats through the window and I look at her, hanging over his shoulder while they run around the lawn. In a million years, I never … ever … imagined there being someone that affects and cares about her the way he does.

Sighing, I tell myself again that Edward and I really need to have a talk … soon.

I grab the plates for dessert just as the two of them come crashing through the back door, breathing heavily and cheeks flushed. A perfect picture if I've ever seen one.

"Who's ready for strawberry shortcake?" I ask and am met with two sets of wide eyes and enthusiastically nodding heads.

I laugh, though I can't help but feel sad knowing the night is almost over. When I turn to bring the plates to the table, Edward is standing in front of me. His eyes sweep over my face and I try to smile at him even though ridiculously, I feel like bursting into tears. He frowns and his eyes immediately change from sea glass green to the storm cloud-colored gray they get when he's worried or troubled.

I've become rather adept at interpreting the ever-changing colors. A good thing because Edward's not exactly a Chatty Cathy.

"What's wrong?"

I shake my head and grin at him, refusing to ruin a great night by acting like an overly emotional girl.

He sighs, breathing out a low, "Bella," but I shake my head again.

"Really, Edward, it's nothing. Come on. I sliced these strawberries all by myself," I tease and it works because he smiles and the dip between his eyebrows goes away.

We're all about two bites into the deliciousness that is the best dessert in the world when Peyton
drops her fork with a clatter and exclaims, "Mom, I almost forgot!" and then slides out of her chair and sprints up the stairs, leaving half her shortcake still uneaten.

"What in the world lit a fire under her?" Edward asks, staring at the stairs.

I lay my fork down, setting my napkin beside it. I close my eyes for a second, because I know exactly what she's doing, but I have no idea how he will take it. "She has something to give you," I tell him softly.

"Something else? Bella, she's done so much. I can't accept anything else," he tells me, shaking his head.

I look at him from across the table. I don't want to spoil her surprise but I don't want what she's going to give him to freak him out either. She'll be devastated if he takes it wrong.

"It's something from her treasure box. She wants you to take it with you tomorrow … to keep you safe." I watch his face as my words register. Eyes widen then close. Breath choppy then slows. A hand through his hair and then his eyes open, burning into mine.

He opens his mouth then shuts it and I can hear his leg bouncing beneath the table. He's nervous or agitated … maybe worried … most likely a combination of all three.

"Edward," I begin and my voice shakes. It startles him because immediately he knows what I'm about to say. He shakes his head and gets up quickly from his chair and sits beside me.

"Don't, Bella. Please, just don't okay?" he begs. In the next instant, he turns sideways in his chair and pulls me toward him, pressing my chest against his. His heart is pounding and his arms wrap around me, squeezing me to him. After a moment he rests his forehead against mine, holding my face in his hands and staring at me with turbulent eyes.

"I know we need to talk, but please not until I get back. I have to go in a little bit and this isn't something we can do in just a few minutes. I'll go insane doing this now and then leaving for three days. When I get back, I promise we'll talk." His voice wavers and I know he's barely holding it together. My stomach sinks at the thought of what we need to talk about, and as much as I want to get everything out in the open, I know he's right.

He doesn't need this now. He needs to stay focused on what he has to do on the boat because one wrong move can be deadly.

I know.

"Okay. When you get back, we'll talk," I say softly. My chin quivers and I know I'm seconds away from crying, worry suddenly rearing its ugly head again.

"I don't want to lose you." His voice is full of so much pain and my heart twists in my chest.

Before I can promise him that he won't, we hear Peyton coming down the stairs. She's taking each one at a time, as if to prolong what she's about to do. I don't blame her. If there was a way to keep tomorrow from getting here, I'd do everything within my power to do it. I know I'm being totally irrational but after Evan, after swearing, vowing to myself, that I would never, ever, get involved with anyone that was going to work on a boat of any kind, ever again, to go against that, to say goodbye to Edward knowing where he's going and what he's going to be doing, is torture.

She walks into the dining room, shuffling her feet, like she's afraid to get too close to him. Edward is still as a statue beside me, gripping my hand tightly in his, and his thumb is making anxious,
nervous circles over my knuckles.

There isn't a sound in the room except for everyone's breathing. If this was a movie, it'd be a killer scene, the perfect climax, except that this is real. Peyton knows what happened to Evan, just the basics, but she knows enough to make saying goodbye to Edward especially difficult. Like me, she's come to accept the fact that Dad, Emmett, and Jasper go out all the time, but the fact that this time it's Edward, makes all the difference in the world.

"I got something for you," she says quietly when she stands beside him with her hands behind her back.

He swallows, and holds his breath for a second before he exhales. "Okay."

She holds out her hand and a seashell rests in the palm of her hand. "You can keep this in your pocket while you're working with Pop and Uncle Emmett and Jasper on the boat. If you get scared, you can hold it and maybe you won't be scared anymore," she whispers.

When she looks at him, her little chin quivers and two big, fat tear drops fall down over her cheeks. It's all it takes before Edward's off the chair and kneeling on the floor beside her, holding her tiny hands in his large ones.

"Sweetheart, nothing will happen to me, but I might get scared, so thank you for giving me something to help," he tells her as he kisses the side of her head.

He might not know everything that happened to Evan, but it's obvious he's figured out enough not to promise her he'd come back. We really need to talk when he gets back, because at this point, there's really no turning back.

"Pop knows everything about boats and the water," she tells him, looking him straight in the eye. "So he'll take good care of you."

"I'm sure he will," Edward says with a smile. He lets go of her hands and holds his out, admiring the shell. "This is awesome, Peyton, thank you. I'll keep it with me the whole time."

She stares at him for a moment, her gray eyes boring straight into his. "You'll be back on Thursday," she states and waits for him to nod, which she answers with one of her own. "That's almost four days," she says, and taps her finger against her chin while she thinks about something. Her face breaks out into a huge smile and then she looks at him, impishly which makes him look at me in question. I shrug my shoulders, I have no idea what's going on in her brain, but there's no telling with her. "When you get back, do you want to get stomped at Monopoly … again?"

"You got it, Sprite," he tells her.

A moment passes, and then Edward groans, looking at his watch. "I don't want to, but I need to get going," he says quietly as he looks back and forth between me and Peyton.

Peyton squeaks and throws her arms around him, kissing him soundly on the cheek. "I'll miss you, Edward," she says squeezing him tight for a second before she lets go and runs up the stairs.

The tension she leaves in her wake is palpable and neither of us moves as we both stare at the stairs.

"Fuck," Edward mutters in an anguished voice.

"She'll be okay," I tell him, standing up.
"Will she? Will you?" he questions as his eyes search my face when he stands and faces me. "I don't know why this feels like such a big deal, but I know it is. I hate that this is hurting you."

I gasp, stepping closer to him and wrap my arms around him. "It is a big deal, but we'll be fine. You'll be fine. When you get back, we'll talk and then we'll just take things from there."

My voice sounds sure, confident, but inside I'm a quivering mess. He doesn't need to see how badly this is scaring me. Once I tell him about Evan, he'll understand.

"I don't like leaving things like this, Bella. There's so much we have to talk about," he says quietly.

"Things have … changed … Edward," I whisper, staring into his eyes as I try to let him know what I want, that he's what I want.

"Ah, hell," he hisses as he crashes his lips against mine. His hands slide into my hair, fingers press into my scalp. My arms reach up, pressing him in the middle of his back as our bodies align. One of his hands travels down over my back and rests on the top of my ass. We kiss deeply, desperate, speaking to each other without saying a word. Finally, when we have to take a breath, he buries his nose in the crook of my neck.

"I want you, Bella, all of you. I want to know everything about you." He breathes against my neck as his lips trail up and down. "I want to know what causes that far away look on your face. I want to know why storms scare the hell out of you. I want to know why when you go to sleep at night, you wake up screaming. I want to know it all," he says when he lifts his head to stare at me. He runs his fingers over my cheek and then leans forward to kiss my forehead.

"I'm scared," I shakily tell him, pressing my forehead against his chest.

"I am, too. I mean, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing, but I'm willing to try if you are. I want you and Peyton in my life. I know we have things to talk about, and we will, when I get back."

I lift my head and nod, and then slowly lead him toward the door.

"Be safe, please," I beg, forcing myself not to cry.

"I'll be fine. It'll be a piece of cake and with my lucky seashell, nothing will happen."

We stare at each other again and then he kisses me once more, a passionate, toe-curling one followed by the sweetest of kisses to my cheek. "I'll be back before you know it and maybe we can go on another date … by ourselves this time, just the two of us."

My stomach flutters and I smile. "I like the sound of that."

"As long as I get to drive Cherry again," he says with a wink. "That thing is a beast, but fun as hell to drive."

"Hmmm, we'll see," I tease, extremely grateful for the respite from the heaviness from before.

"I have to go."

"I'll see you Thursday," I tell him, hanging on to his hand as long as I can as he stretches our arms, before he has to let go. My arm hangs limply beside me and I curl it into a fist and press it into my thigh.

He nods, staring longingly at me before he turns and rushes down the steps and toward his bike.
The sound when he turns it on is loud, but I don't move. He waves one final time and then takes off without looking back. I watch until I can't see the red lights on the back of the motorcycle any longer, saying a quick prayer that the next three days pass quickly and he returns safe and sound.

A gentle breeze swirls around my legs in what I hope is a good omen of things to come.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

I groan when my alarm goes off, glaring at the bright red lights. Six thirty in the morning and I've only been asleep for, at best, three hours. I've tossed and turned most of the night, unable to fall asleep. Every time I closed my eyes all I could see was Edward in the middle of the ocean, waves crashing all around him, hear his voice instead of Evan's calling for me, begging me to save him as I tried frantically to reach him in time. The first time I woke up, gasping for breath, clutching at my chest, it took all I had not to call him just so I could hear his voice. When I finally calmed down enough to try to fall asleep again, I awoke the next time, screaming Edward's name. My throat was raw, my cheeks wet with tears, my tank top and shorts twisted around my body like a tourniquet from thrashing around in my sleep so much.

I couldn't stay in bed another moment after that so I got up and fixed myself a cup of hot chocolate, hoping to alleviate the chill that had seeped into my bones. It marginally helped and I finally fell into a restless sleep about three A.M. I was exhausted, having spent the previous night mostly awake as well.

Stumbling out of bed, I make it to the shower without hurting myself. Quite a feat because my eyelids feel like sandpaper and my head is pounding with a ferocious headache. Flipping the knobs of the shower, I undress, not fully awake until I gasp as the first drops of water rain down on me. Sighing, I hang my head under the shower head, letting the water flow through my hair and over my back. The warm water does wonders for my sore, tense muscles and by the time I've washed my hair and taken care of shaving what needs to be shaved, I feel almost human again.

A quick glance at the clock and a spike of worry flares, igniting and flowing through me as I think about Edward heading for the open water of the Atlantic. I quickly tamp it down before it gets out of control. He'll be fine; he has to be.

Once I'm dressed and ready for the day, I head downstairs, glaring as I pass the front door … without unlocking it. I have no idea if Xavier is coming over like he always does, but I damn sure know he's not making it past the front door without an apology. Maybe not even then.

I sigh. I hate fighting with him, mostly because it hardly ever happens, but his behavior the other night pissed me the hell off. It hurt, too.

A lot.

Shaking my head to keep both the anger and the hurt away, I think about what to fix for breakfast. I'm just getting ready to pour the beaten eggs into the skillet for scrambled eggs when I hear the doorknob shake. I set the bowl on the counter and walk toward the front door. The doorknob shakes again as Xavier jiggles it, testing to make sure the door is really locked. I can only imagine what he's thinking. I don't have to wait long because he knocks right after. I can tell he's angry or frustrated or shocked, probably all three because the raps come in quick succession though I can tell he's tried to keep them quiet enough to not wake up Peyton.

He's early this morning. Hopefully that's a sign that he's here to apologize.

It damn well better be.
I flip the lock and fling the door open. I take him by surprise more so by the fire shooting out of my eyes and my angry, defiant stance than the way I opened the door if the look on his face is any indication.

We stare at each other, neither saying a word. My chest tightens when a few seconds go by and he doesn't move. I don't want to argue with him, but I'm not letting him get away with behaving like an overprotective ass either.

His shoulders slump and he hangs his head. I frown, my heart heavy, aching, but press my lips tightly together when he finally looks back up. His eyes are so sad, haunted and I want to throw my arms around him and make it all better, but I can't give in about this. Not about Edward.

"I'm sorry."

The words are spoken so softly that if I wasn't standing right in front of him, I never would've been able to hear them, but the feeling behind the words comes through loud and clear. I lower my arms, but make no attempt to move closer. I wait until I know I can speak without letting my emotions get the best of me.

"For what exactly?" I sound bitchy, but I have to know. Is he sorry for yelling at me? Is he sorry for embarrassing the both of us in the middle of the pub? Is he sorry for the way he's been treating Edward?

Sighing, he scrubs at his face with his hands. He looks terrible. Dark circles under his eyes, skin ashy, two day's worth of stubble mars his usually smooth face … not Xavier-like at all.

He steps forward but I hold my ground, shaking my head. "Answer me, Xav, or you can turn around and I'll drive myself to work."

"Always so damn stubborn," he mutters as he steps back and leans against the post by the front step.

I follow him out, standing on the porch in my bare feet. The morning is cool, but the sun is out. The calm weather loosens the knot in my stomach and I breathe a sigh of relief that at least Edward's first morning on the water shouldn't be too bad.

We face each other again, but thankfully it seems like at least a bit of the tension has eased.

"I'm sorry about everything, Bell. I had no right to yell at you that way the other night."

I wait for him to continue. What he's said is a start, but it's not all I need from him and he knows it because he groans when he sees my face.

He huffs, though I know it's more from the fact that he hates apologizing than anything else. He's always been that way, even in high school. It was like pulling teeth getting him to apologize for anything. It didn't matter if he'd blatantly been wrong, he'd dig his feet in until Seth, Evan, or I would demand an apology from him.

"Fine, I'm sorry acting like a dick to Edward, too. I shouldn't have said what I did about him to you either." His words come out stilted, forced. I know he has a hard time admitting he's wrong so I don't make a comment about how it doesn't really sound like he's sorry. The fact he's said them is all I need.

My body sags at his words, and I plop down on the top step, wrapping my arms around my knees.
"I'm still really mad at you," I tell him, turning my head and resting it on my knees.

He smiles, though it's a sad one, and nods. "I know. I am really sorry, B."

I sigh and give him a slight smile. "I know." I really do, too. He hates fighting as much as I do.

Neither of us say anything until I can't bite my tongue any longer. "Why, Xavier? You don't even know him. You haven't tried to get to know him at all. Seth likes Edward. Mom, Dad, Carlisle, Esme, too. Hell, even Jasper does and Jas doesn't like hardly anyone. Peyton thinks he can walk on water," I tell him, trying to keep my mouth from riling things back up again. "What's your problem with him?"

He frowns and looks at me for a minute, emotions flashing across his face … so fast they barely have time to register before they morph into something else. The pain I see, because it lasts the longest, twists my insides because I know where it's coming from. I live with it every day.

"I'm jealous," he mumbles.

Props to him, I suppose, for being honest, but I'd seriously like to kick him square in the ass.

I figured that was what the problem was; it's been kind of obvious from day one. I suppose my reaction to Edward when he first arrived then my about-face shortly thereafter has given Xavier a little room for concern, but not much. To be perfectly fair, he and I haven't had a lot of time to talk since Edward and I have started … whatever it is we're doing, dating I suppose, so in that respect I can shoulder some of the blame.

Some.

The fact that Xavier feels like he can bully me and order me to stop seeing Edward is really what I'm upset about.

I sigh when he sits beside me, fighting my first instinct to lay my head on his shoulder. I hate that and I hate that I don't know what to say to him to make him feel better. I won't let Peyton feel bad for being so excited about her relationship with Edward.

"You really like him, don't you?" he asks me after a moment of staring at the trees that line my property.

The neighborhood is quiet, as it always is, and his words though spoken softly, seem to carry on the early morning breeze. The air is crisp and fresh, the grass dewy with moisture the sun hasn't had a chance to burn off yet, making it seem even more green than normal. I turn my face up, fluffy white clouds, a few with hints of gray float by in a robin's egg-colored sky streaked with pink.

The grass, the sky, the shades of gray in the clouds all remind me of Edward and I can feel my lips turn up in a smile just thinking about him.

"Yes, I really do," I tell him, letting the happiness I feel color my words.

"I don't want you to get hurt, Bella, that's all," he says as he shakes his head. "You hardly know him and I see you and Peyton acting like he's the best thing since sliced bread and it scares me. I can't watch you lose someone again … I just can't."

I don't even think about it before I lay my head on his shoulder. "I know that, but I have to try again at some point, Xav. Evan's been dead a long time; it's time to let him go," I whisper, my
throat constricting painfully at the thought of that.

"I miss him," he says gruffly.

"I know you do. I do, too. We all do. He was your best friend, he's Peyton's dad, he'll always be a part of us, but I have to try to let him go if I want to ever move forward. Edward scares me, but he makes me feel alive, like I want to try again, you know?" My voice shakes as I try to keep a hold of my emotions. So many things rushing to the surface all at one time is making that difficult.

He wraps an arm around me and kisses the top of my head. "Just promise me you'll be careful, okay? I can tell he makes you happy which is all fine and good, but if he hurts you, I'll kill him. I swear I will."

I snort, laughing a bit at that, although I have no doubt he'd try if it came right down to it. He's a hell of a lot bigger than Edward, but I wouldn't bet against Edward being able to hold his own against Xavier. Things he's said and done have led me to believe that there's a lot more to him than a guy that likes to hang out on Sunday playing XBOX with a seven-year-old and eating mint chocolate chip ice cream.

"I'm being careful. I promise. We haven't talked much about his past," I tell him as I turn to face him, rushing to finish my sentence when I see Xavier's eyes narrow and his nostrils flare. "He's not hiding anything, so get that look of your face. I told him I wanted to take things slow, so that's on me, not him. I haven't told him anything about Evan either, so if you want to get mad at Edward, get mad at me, too. He knows who Evan is, but he has no idea what happened to him." My voice falters at the end as I remember my nightmares from last night.

Hearing Edward's voice, frantic, screaming for me, battling icy waves in the pitch black ocean … it's like Evan all over again.

He huffs then rubs his chin. "Jesus, Bella, I get that you like the guy but are you sure can handle this? I mean Edward's out there now and while it's not winter or in the middle of a storm, you know anything can happen."

Neither one of us say anything to that comment; there's no need. I've been fighting the same battle since Edward first walked into The Breakers.

"Hell no, I'm not sure I can handle it, but I like him too much not to try," I admit slowly, finally voicing what I really want from Edward for the first time.

There's silence again, but this time it's much more bearable than before. "Fine," he grumbles after a few minutes, but I can tell he's smiling as he says it. "I'll be nicer to the guy, but for the love of God, can you try to keep the PDA down to a minimum? Shit, I thought I was gonna be sick the other night at Finn's."

I laugh. The look on his face is priceless, like he gets when Seth and Emmett have raw clam eating contests. I shake my head, enjoying his discomfort way too much, even though it's nice not to be fighting anymore. "No way. I've had to put up with the rest of you playing tonsil hockey in front of me. You can just suck it up for a change."

The words are funny for a moment or two … until the look on his face turns serious again. "Ah, damn it," he says as he reaches for my hand, holding it between both of his. "B, I've gotten so used to being your go-to guy that it's going to take some time getting used to sharing you, but if Edward is what you want, then I'll support you. You deserve to be happy, even if it means I get replaced," his words are light - the manner he says them isn't.
"Not even close.

"Xav, you're my best friend, no one could ever replace you," I whisper, my eyes suddenly filled with tears. "I love you and I always will, even when you act like an ass. Just be happy for me, okay, and try to get to know him. I think this could be a really good thing."

He lets go with one hand, lifting it so that he can wipe away the tears that have fallen down my cheeks. Leaning forward, he kisses my forehead and says, "I love you, too. Seth and you and P are my family ... I don't ... I can't lose you. I love the others, too - your mom and dad and all the rest, but you guys mean everything to me, and you're all I have. I'm sorry I was a dick to you and to Edward, but I saw what was happening and it scared me."

"Well you were a dick, especially Saturday night. You're lucky I didn't kick your ass." I chuckle, bumping him with my shoulder. After we're quiet for a few minutes I say, "Edward's crazy about Peyton and I'm pretty sure he's just as crazy about me. I hope he's around for a while, a long while, so the sooner you can accept that, the sooner we don't have to have talks like this anymore."

He snorts and shakes his head. "There's no doubt about how Edward feels about you, Bell. The man can't keep his eyes off you and when you leave the room, he looks like someone just stole his puppy. It's kind of pathetic if you want to know the truth," he says, though he laughs while he says it so I know he's teasing. "Just promise me you and Peyton will be okay. That's all I need. I miss Pipsqueak; she spends all her time with or talking about Edward."

I open my mouth to say something but before I can, I hear the pitter-patter of bare feet thump across the porch just before Peyton jumps on his back. "Don't be mad at me, Xav. I'm just trying to make Edward not be so sad. I love you," she tells him, leaning over him and kissing him on the cheek.

He pulls her over his shoulder and holds her on his lap. "I think it's great you're his friend, P. I just miss hanging out with you is all."

She wraps her arms around his neck. I stand up, kissing him on top of the head, and go back inside, leaving the two of them to spend some time catching up. "It's kind of pathetic if you want to know the truth," he says, though he laughs while he says it so I know he's teasing. "Just promise me you and Peyton will be okay. That's all I need. I miss Pipsqueak; she spends all her time with or talking about Edward."

Once we eat breakfast, the mood much lighter thank goodness, we head for the restaurant. Xavier and Peyton tease and joke the whole way there and it really hits home how much she means to so many different people in so many different ways.

"Bella!" Alice shrieks when I walk in the back door of the kitchen. "I've been waiting for you all morning!"

I roll my eyes at her exuberance, but it's nothing I didn't expect. I had text messages from both her and Rose bright and early yesterday morning demanding details before the sun was even up. I'd managed to put them off all day yesterday, but I knew today, I had no chance in hell of escaping the Great Inquisition.

"Good morning, Bella. How are you today, Bella? So nice to see you, Bella," I sing-song as I grab my apron and tie it around my waist.

She huffs, stomps her foot, and waves her hand in the air, saying, "Yeah, yeah. Good morning, Bella. How are you today, Bella? It's so nice to see you, Bella," she parrots. We all laugh at her,
which she totally ignores. I look at Rose who merely shrugs her shoulders as if to say, 'what did you expect.'

"Now," Alice says, totally on a one-tracked mind, "spill."

I splutter and I can feel my cheeks flame when I think about what Edward and I did in the parking lot at Finn's. It's the first time in well … forever it seems like … that I'm the one with the juicy goods to share. As much as thinking about telling them embarrasses the shit out of me, I can't help but squee like a Robert Pattinson fangirl, too.

Xavier's fingers are in his ears and he's chanting 'la la la' over and over again the second my mouth opens. "Uh nuh, not in my kitchen you don't. If you three want to act like a bunch of over-excited teenage girls, you can do it anyplace but here."

"Fine, Mr. Spoilsport. We'll do it at Bella's tonight," Alice says without missing a beat. She turns toward me finishing her thought. "You need to keep your mind off Edward anyway, though as all we'll be talking about is him, that might be hard, but we'll keep you plied with plenty of ice cream and wine to make up for it."

Rose is nodding enthusiastically beside her and the look in her eyes scares me. There's no telling what they'll do to me once they get their claws in me … not to mention a glass or two, or more, of wine. However, as much fun as it sounds like, and it really does, I shake my head. "No can do, girls. Peyton will be home and her ears don't need to hear anything about, well, any of what I have to tell you."

I'm surprised by how disappointed I am about not having a girls' night. It's been way too long since we've done anything like that and I've missed my friends.

"Bell, let me take Peyton for the night. You know I haven't spent much time with her, and I know Seth misses her, too. We'll watch the soccer game and I'll make us some pizza. You girls have fun," he tells me.

The three of us squeal like the hysterical teens he just accused us of being, acting the part to the hilt.

"Thanks, Xav," I tell him quietly, kissing him one last time on the cheek.

He stares at me for a second before kissing the side of my head. "You're happy," he says, not asks. "It's all that matters, plus I get some quality Pipsqueak time, so I win."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Monday night helps me make the next day and night pass quicker. The girls squealed at all the right parts and swooned where appropriate. We had the promised wine and ice cream, and the promised very detailed explanation of what happened in the parking lot. Honestly, Rose and Alice didn't have to push too much for me to spill everything. I've wanted to talk to them for days, weeks now, and getting it all out was … just what I needed.

Alice and I had to physically restrain Rose from rushing out of the house to find Xavier when I told both of them what he said to me in the pub. I was over it, grateful that he and I had come to an understanding, but it took the rest of a bottle of wine before Rose calmed down enough that Alice and I didn't have to worry about her making a break for it.

We talked for hours, about Edward, about Emmett and Jasper, about Evan, and about silly nonsense things that had nothing to do with guys. It was fabulous and I realized as the night wore
on, as the wine continued to flow and I laughed until my sides ached, how much I'd withdrawn and how much I missed my friends.

I vowed that not only would things be changing as far as Edward and I were concerned when he got back, but so would everything else. I'm so damn tired of holding back, of being afraid to live, to try.

I'm ready to peek toward the deep end of the pool. I'm not ready to dive, head first … yet … but I'm getting there.

Walking out of The Breakers on Wednesday night, I have to pull up the collar on my windbreaker as I hurry across the parking lot to get into Cherry. Mom had gone home earlier and taken Peyton with her for some quality Nana/Granddaughter time. My daughter gets passed around like a hot potato it seems like, from one house to another, but I can't complain. For living in such a small town and for having such a small family, there's not a lack of things to do, nor any skimping in the spoiling department. In fact, knowing my mother, she and Peyton made a quick trip to Ellsworth to eat at McDonald's and stopped at Ben and Bill's Chocolate Emporium for a treat.

My mom, the closet McDonald's addict.

She likes to blame having to eat there on Peyton, but we all know it's the other way around. We just love her too much to say anything … well, most of the time. Emmett and Jasper get their digs in from time to time.

Another gust of wind blows, the chill biting through the nylon of my jacket and I increase my pace, shivering as I fumble with the key in the lock. The halyard on the flagpole outside the restaurant rattles against the pole, and a chill makes me hunch my shoulders as I glance at it. The night is eerie, almost foreboding, and I can't stop the tremor that rocks through me. I immediately think about Edward and worry.

It's not storming, though the night air is heavy with moisture. The scent of salt is strong, more so than normal and it just adds to the unease creeping over me.

I throw my purse on the seat beside me and turn the truck on, anxious to get to my parents' house. Cherry rumbles to life and as I back up and the headlights sweep out toward the water, I say a silent prayer that everything on the Isabella Marie is just fine. I don't waste any time getting to the house, though I do give a few seconds thought to stopping at the Coast Station and checking with Aggie to make sure there's nothing to worry about, but decide against it.

I need my mom.

I park beside her car and dash into the house, feeling kind of foolish but not enough to stop me from throwing the door open as I go inside.

My heart's racing and I take a deep breath so I don't scare Peyton, though I'm freaking myself out.

"Mom!" I call out and I hear her and Peyton giggling from the kitchen.

I take another deep breath and this time the scent of fresh from the oven peanut butter cookies finally permeates through the fog of fear and I relax … a little.

"Hey, you two," I say when I walk into the kitchen. Peyton's sitting in front of a plate of cookies holding a glass of milk in her hand, looking as happy as can be. She's kicking the side of the breakfast bar with her big toe, nails still painted lime green because she says it's Edward's favorite color. I watch her nibble on a cookie, crumbs falling everywhere, and I feel better instantly.
"Mom, how many cookies is that for this one?" I ask as I pluck the cookie out of her hand and take a bite.

"Hey!" She laughs when I shove the whole thing in my mouth. "Not cool, Mom."

I ruffle her hair before kissing her cheek. "Whatever, P, I'm the coolest mom you know," I tease.

I look up at my mom and she's staring at me, one of those "Mom" looks on her face and I give her a shaky smile. She knows, just like she always does, just like I know with Peyton. It's a mom thing and now that I am one, I totally get it.

"Peyton, why don't you go pick out one of the new movies we bought today," Mom says, rolling her eyes when I snort, "and let me and your mom talk for a few minutes."

"Are you okay, Mom?" Peyton immediately asks and I nod my head, because really, for the most part, I'm fine.

"Sure, baby. How many movies did you sweet talk Nana into buying for you," I ask but look at my mom … who's looking everywhere but at me.

Peyton giggles and hops off the stool. "Three."

I want to tell my mom to stop spoiling her so badly, but like with everyone else, it'd go in one ear and out the other.

She turns and runs out of the room, telling me she wants popcorn and soda, leaving just me and my mom.

"We need something stronger than milk," she says. She turns and goes to the refrigerator, grabbing two bottles of my dad's beer. I give her the big eyes and she shrugs her shoulders. "I'll just buy him more, like he'll even notice."

We both chuckle at that because I swear, the man counts how many there are every night before he goes to bed.

I poke my head in the living room and find Peyton curled up on the couch, already sound asleep with *Despicable Me* playing on the Blu-ray. I smile and shake my head; she's been dying to get that movie.

I walk back through the kitchen and find my mom curled up on the loveseat in the sunroom. The wind has picked up, rattling the glass. I stop in my tracks and once again that feeling of dread washes over me.

"He's fine, Bella," she says, staring at me.

"How do you do it, Mom? How do you watch Dad go out every day and not spend the entire day just staring at the water for the first sign of him coming back?" I whisper. My eyes burn and my nose tingles, and I struggle to keep from breaking the hell down.

She pats the spot next to her and I slip in beside her, snuggling close. She runs her fingers through my hair and neither of us say anything for a few minutes. "When I first met your dad," she says, her voice sounding faraway and dreamy. "One of the first things he told me was he was a fisherman, through and through and if I couldn't share him with the water, it was best to go our separate ways." She laughs lightly and shakes her head. "As if I could do that," she scoffs. "I was head over heels in love with him the first time I ever laid eyes on him."
My parents met on the beach in Kennebunkport and it's been a love affair ever since.

"It's hard, baby," she says softly. "You've grown up with this as your life so you know what can happen out there; you've lived it firsthand. You've also suffered through the absolute worst when you lost Evan. It's a little different for your dad than it is for Edward though. He's just starting out, he hasn't been born and raised here, he hasn't ever experienced what it's like to live through a storm that you're positive you won't ever escape or felt the biting cold of the water when it crashes up over the sides of the boat. He's never worked for days straight, with little or no sleep, so cold you're sure you'll never be warm again, or have your hands feel like your fingers will surely fall off if you try to move them."

I cuddle closer to her, her words terrifying me to my core.

I can't do this, I immediately tell myself. There's no way I can survive watching Edward leave every day and wonder if he'll come back.

She leans down and kisses the side of my head, rubbing my arm up and down as if to ward off the chill that has suddenly overtaken my body.

"If you have the feelings for Edward that I think you have, you're going to need to make a decision, Bella. Being with Edward means accepting that part of his life and being able to let him do what he needs to do without making him feel guilty for it. Fishing isn't in his blood, but if he's anything like Jasper, he might as well have been born and bred here just like Emmett and your dad and Granddad." We both laugh at that, thinking about my Grandpa Walter.

If there was ever a man alive that epitomizes what a fisherman is, it's him. White hair, craggy face, a cigar or a pipe hanging out of his mouth every waking hour, and a voice that sounds like he's been swallowing glass for fifty years. I love and miss him and my Grandma Joy. Grandma finally decided she'd had enough of the harsh northern winters and they live in Arizona, soaking up as much sun as they possibly can.

"It's a hard life, baby, but Grandma did it, I've done it, Alice and Rose do it, and if you want Edward in your life, you'll have to do it, too. There will be days you'll feel like crying, and be afraid you'll never stop once you start. There will be days you'll beg him not to go and be angry when he does. There will be days that you'll threaten to leave if he does, then regret the words as soon as they leave your mouth. There will be times that you go out of your way to do something nice or romantic, only to have him fall asleep before you have a chance to enjoy the hours you spent getting everything ready." At this, she shakes her head and makes a soft sound letting me know that's happened to her more than a few times.

Turning to face me, she starts again when she grabs my hand in hers. "You'll spend plenty of sleepless nights and plenty of days with your stomach tied in knots, too worried to even eat. You'll probably spend more time apart than together, and as long as Edward works on the water, you'll never leave Corea, at least not for any extended period of time. You need to really think about this, Bella, because having a relationship, loving a fisherman, isn't for the faint of heart."

"I don't love Edward," I whisper, my voice thick with too many feelings to name.

She chuckles and then pushes my hair back over my ear. "Maybe not yet, but you have feelings for him, yes?"

She raises her eyebrows and gives me big eyes along with the tip of her head, staring, until I nod, squeaking out a tiny, "Yes."
"It's nothing to be ashamed of, silly girl. Edward's … well, I'm happily married and think your father's the cat's meow but even I can appreciate a gorgeous man and Edward is definitely that and then some."

I want to be mortified by the fact that my mom thinks my … whatever he is … is hot, but I can't because her words from before are bouncing around in my brain like a pinball, dinging bells and all.

"Baby, if you're this upset by a little wind, in the middle of summer, how in the world can you handle it when it's winter and it's storming?"

My mom never minces words, and this time is no different.

"I'm not sure I can," I say honestly, sadly because the thought of not having Edward in my life … hurts.

She looks at me, her eyes shimmering and troubled. "What happened to Evan wasn't your fault, Bella." I open my mouth to argue with her but she's shaking her head adamantly. "It wasn't. He made his own choices and what happened to him was a terrible accident. You, your father, and Emmett need to stop blaming yourselves and let it go."

Again, there's no sugarcoating.

"I want to, Mom. I'm trying," I tell her. For the first time, I really mean it, the words aren't just placating.

"Are you trying for you or because of Edward?"

I don't answer her, but the question hits home, making the air around us weighted … expectant. I lay my head on her shoulder, absorbing … needing her strong arm around me. I've always looked up to my mom, loved her, but listening to her talk to me woman to woman about the realities of what her life's been like, the sacrifices she's made for my dad, makes me admire her even more. Like my grandmother, she's one of the strongest women I know.

"I don't know anymore. All I do know is that Edward makes me want to try. Try to forgive myself, try to say goodbye, and want to try again." I sigh, wiping my eyes to brush away the few tears that have fallen.

We drink our beers, neither saying a word, while the wind whips through the trees, each keeping to our own thoughts for a few minutes.

"You need to talk to Edward, baby. Tell him about Evan and about what it's done to you. He deserves to know and just like he needs to talk to you and tell you about what brought him here. If you both feel as strongly about each other as it seems like you do, it's the only way things will work." Her voice is calm, but there is most definitely an underlying meaning behind them. It makes me wonder who she's talking about - me … or him.

Before I can spend too much time thinking about it, I yawn.

She kisses me on the side of the head and says, "Go upstairs and sleep in your old room. There's no sense in going home as Peyton's already asleep." I nod before she's even done talking because I don't feel like going home. "Besides, it'll be nice to have company. Being alone when your dad is gone gets old after a while."

"Oh, Mom!" I gasp, feeling like the world's worst daughter for never realizing what she goes
through when Dad is away. I've been so wrapped up in my own guilt and wallowing in my own self-pity that I've ignored her feelings … Rose and Alice's, too.

I suck.

Bad.

"Hush, child," she tells me, shaking her head. "It's been hard, Bella," she starts, twisting her mouth and then sighing, a sign she's thinking as she talks. "Watching you the past few years close yourself off from everyone except Peyton. You're my baby and you'll always be, and it broke my heart to see you so sad all the time, holding back, just going through the motions. What happened to Evan was truly awful, but what it did to you has been every bit as hard to watch. Since Edward's arrived, you've smiled more, laughed more … lived more. I'm sure he has a past, we all do, but I hope for his sake and mostly for yours, that you'll think before you act when he shares with you what that past entails."

This time I know there's more to what she's saying but I also know my mom. She's not going to say anything further. Both of my parents have always been that way with both me and Emmett. Our lives are ours to live as we wish and besides loving us no matter what, they are blessedly uninvolved. They are always there if we need them, but keep the advice giving to minimum.

"Now, off to bed you go, young lady," she orders making us both laugh because it's the same thing she said to me every night before bed when I was little.

After getting Peyton settled in her room, or the one she's made into her home away from home, I lie down in my own childhood bed. The room hasn't been changed that much: the boy band posters and the pictures of Russell Crowe clad in his gladiator outfit and Hugh Jackman as Wolverine interspersed with the plethora of David Beckham pictures showing him all stages of undress and hairstyles still hang on the walls. There are still pictures of Evan, Seth, Xavier, and me thumb-tacked to my bulletin board as well as the invitation to Emmett and Rose's wedding and a picture of Jasper and Alice from their first Christmas in Corea. Staring at them, I'm reminded of the person I was before Evan died, the one that used to play football with the boys and hang out on the beach with Rose.

I fall asleep, dreaming of the person I used to be.

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"Was that Edward?" Xavier asks me the next night, the windshield wipers swishing against the driving rain.

I nod, sighing and lean my head against the window, watching the water coat the windows. A clap of thunder makes me jump and the lightning that zigzags across the sky makes my skin break out in goosebumps. I clutch the phone tightly in my hand, holding it against my chest. My heart's racing but I keep reminding myself that he's back, safe and sound and tucked away at the boarding house.

He sounded so tired, his voice hoarse and choppy, when he called to tell me he was back. I was so happy to hear from him that I didn't even mind he was going to go straight to bed. Until I hung up the phone. Once the screen went dark, it was like he was gone … not just at Carlisle and Esme's, but gone.

I wanted to cry, but felt ridiculous. The storm that is raging outside isn't helping matters at all either. Which is why I am sitting in Xavier's truck going home where he will stay with me until the
storm passes.

Just like he always does.

"He okay?"

I nod, saying, "Exhausted, but yes, he's fine. Thanks for bringing me and Peyton home and for … well for staying with me." I hate being so terrified of storms but no matter how hard I try not to be, I just can't help it.

"Ehhh, Seth needs to help Esme anyway. He mentioned something about moving furniture around." We both laugh, picturing Seth and Esme redecorating, but like most everyone, he can't ever resist Esme's charms.

It's a race to get inside the house before getting soaked. Once we're inside, I make sure that the candles and flashlights are handy in case the power goes out as it's apt to do during strong storms. I jump when the lights flicker and try to take a few deep breaths.

Really, what I want is Edward. I instantly feel bad though, because I know how utterly drained he is.

"Mom, can we watch Tangled?" Peyton asks, snapping me out of my wallowing and I turn to her.

"Sure, baby. Go get yours PJs on and we'll get comfy on the couch. I'll make some popcorn while you're changing." I laugh because she whoops and then runs up the stairs.

"Bell, you go change, too. I'll make the popcorn and get the drinks," Xavier tells me, his voice gentle, soothing … and just what I need. Well, besides Edward.

I giggle when he grimaces as he picks the Blu-ray case up off the couch where Peyton dropped her backpack. "What, Xav, fairy tales aren't your thing?"

He snorts and mumbles something along the lines of 'the things I do for you two' before going into the kitchen to make our snack.

We're well into our second movie, How to Train Your Dragon, Xavier's choice, not mine, when the sound of someone knocking on the door sends my heart racing. I shriek, popcorn flying everywhere. My hands shake and when thunder rumbles outside, it's as if I'm in the middle of a horror movie. There's another knock, this one sounding more insistent than before.

"Bella!" I hear and almost collapse with relief.

Edward.

"Doesn't the guy realize it's pouring rain outside?" Xavier mutters.

I hurry to the door, the bizarreness of the situation finally registering. It is storming, which would explain why I didn't hear him pull up. Then I stumble because I realize he rode his bike in the rain to come over here and that thought makes my body tense.

Grasping the doorknob, I throw the door open, paying no attention the rain blowing in. Standing in front of me is Edward. Gorgeous, dripping wet, panicked Edward.

"What in the world are you doing here?" I ask, paralyzed when he looks at me.

The look on his face makes my blood run cold.
Uh oh! What do you think is wrong with Edward? How do you think Bella handled her first few days without him? All in all, not too badly I'd say, but things are definitely heating up and moving forward.

Okay, that talk that I said was right around the corner? It's here, next time, so be ready for it. It's … yeah.

Have you checked out *The Breakers* blog this week? We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts. It's fabulous, go look!

www(.les16-thebreakers(.)blogspot(.)com

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those. You REALLY don't want to miss this week's teaser or pic tease … just saying!

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! Thanks so much for reading!

See you next Sunday

Erin~
Chapter 12

"God damn it," I hiss, punching my pillow and flopping over in my bed.

I turn toward the window, wincing as another crack of thunder rattles the glass. I'm fucking exhausted. My entire body aches, hell even my hair hurts, but I can't sleep.

All I can think about is Bella.

I've done little else but think about her since I left her house Sunday night. Telling both her and Peyton goodbye was like ripping my heart out and leaving it with them. I hated it. I roll, facing the nightstand beside my bed and grab the seashell Peyton gave me for good luck. Running my fingers over it, I close my eyes, imagining the two of them, alone in their house, listening to the storm as it rages outside.

"Fuck it," I say and hop out of bed.

I pull my jeans on, grab a shirt, and reach for my jacket. I don't even think about calling first; I just have to get there. I'm a fucking idiot for going out in the rain, but the need to see her, to make sure she's okay outweighs the recklessness of my actions. I shove my phone down in my pocket and go out the back door.

The second I step outside, I'm soaked, but I don't care. I run toward the garage and I give half a glance toward Carlisle's Mercedes next to my bike, knowing I could ask him to borrow it and save
myself the hassle of getting drenched, but by the time I think about that, the damage is done. I don't want to waste the time anyway.

I throw my leg over my bike and the sound is deafening inside the enclosed space when I turn it on. I walk it backward and hit the button on the door opener, tapping my fingers anxiously as it rises. As soon as there's enough room for me to fit under, I back up, hunching down into my jacket as I'm pelted with rain. I push the button for the door to go back down, taking off without even looking back to make sure it closed.

Squinting, I try to keep the water out of my eyes as I speed toward her house. There's no traffic on the road; no one else is brave enough to get out in the foul weather. The whole time, all I can picture is her and Peyton, huddled on the couch, both afraid, both hoping and praying the electricity doesn't go out. It's enough to make me rev the engine, pushing my bike even faster. I breathe a sigh of relief when I turn down her road because I can see that the light is on in her living room, but that's really all I can see. Between the wind and the rain, I can hardly see in front of my face.

I barely get the bike stopped before I'm off and running up the front steps. Panting, I bang on the door and shake my head to try to get rid of some of the water. I hear the faint murmur of the television and I try to make myself relax.

She doesn't answer, so I knock again, harder … faster, yelling, "Bella!" as my nerves get the best of me.

Finally, I hear footsteps approach the door and she throws the door open.

I can't move, seeing her, safe and sound, hits me hard and I lean heavily on the door frame.

"What in the world are you doing here?" she asks.

I continue to stare at her. Her eyes are wide, worried. Her hand is over her heart, as if she's trying to slow it down. I can almost hear it beating, wild and out of control, and judging from the look on her face and the way she's breathing deeply, slowly in and out, I know I'm not wrong.

"Are you okay?" I ask, my own breath choppy and my own heart still flying. She nods and her eyes never leave my face. "I was so worried about you. I had to see you."

"Edward." Her voice wavers and her eyes fill with tears.

I don't even think before I step forward and wrap my arms around her. "Fuck, Bella," I rasp. "I couldn't stop thinking about you. I tried to sleep, but the harder it rained and the worse the storm got, I just knew I had to come check on you. I know you hate storms, and the thought of you being here alone was more than I could take."

Her arms have slipped beneath my rain-soaked jacket and she twists my shirt tightly in her fingers. She shivers and I try to step back from her, knowing I'm getting her wet, but she won't let go. Her face is buried in my chest. I kiss the top of her head, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply, letting her citrusy scent work its magic.

She shakes in my arms and I can hear her sniffle. I can't tell if she's crying as my shirt is dripping wet, but it doesn't matter. "Shhh, baby, I've got you. I'm here, it's okay," I murmur softly while running my fingers through her hair.

I have no idea how long we stand there, totally wrapped in each other's arms, but when I hear someone clear their throat, uncomfortably at that, I jump like I've been struck by lightning.
My head whips around and I throw Bella behind me all in one motion, and when I turn, I'm face to face with Xavier.

"I … uh … I'll just leave you two alone," he stammers as he stares at me.

I'm sure I look half crazed, hell, full-out, bat-shit crazy more than likely, because seeing him standing there takes a full ten seconds, at least, to register. When it does, I feel like a damn fool for thinking she needs me when it's obvious she doesn't.

My hands listlessly fall from around her and hang limply beside me. I'm surprised … and confused as hell to see Xavier at her house, especially after how mad and upset Bella was with him Saturday night. I guess a lot can change in four days.

"No, I … it's clear I'm not needed as much as I thought I was. I … I'll just go," I croak.

Upset, hurt … jealous, unable to look Bella in the eye, I turn to leave.

Before I'm able to take more than two steps, Bella grips my hand, pulling until I turn around and look at her.

Her eyes are glassy and filled with tears. Streaks of mascara fall from beneath her eyes and down, the black trails standing out starkly against her pale cheeks. Her chin quivers, and her fingers hold on tighter.

"Please don't go," she whispers, her words broken and afraid.

I'm frozen, the urge to leave and the want to stay fighting within me. I still haven't said another word; too many thoughts and feelings are swirling around to be able to do anything but stand there and stare at her.

"Edward, I'm going to go and leave you two to talk," Xavier says as he steps forward. "She needs you."

His words are weighted. So much unsaid, but the meaning loud and clear. The two of us come to some sort of understanding it seems like, though I'm not entirely clear about what.

He turns toward Bella, the look on his face a mixture of sadness and love. "I'll talk to you later, Bell," he says gently and kisses the side of her head.

Uneasy feelings twist my insides. Tentacles of resentment and dread worm their way around my stomach … my heart … and I close my eyes, trying to fight them off.

Xavier looks back at us one more time before he grabs an umbrella and slips out, shutting the door behind him.

The silence he leaves in his wake is suffocating. I'm totally at a loss as to what I'm supposed to do. I'm pissed, I'm hurt, not to mention soaking wet and cold. I shiver when I shake my head and a drop of water slides over my neck and down my back.

"Oh!" Bella exclaims. She lets go of my hand and looks at me, frowning. "Take off your coat and let me go see if I can find you some dry clothes. I can put yours in the dryer."

Her voice is stilted … awkward. I open my mouth to say something, anything, but when I shiver again and my teeth chatter, all I can think about is getting warm. I shrug out of my jacket and hand it to her. She gasps when she touches my icy hands. She looks from them to my face and then takes
both of my hands in hers, dropping my jacket into a soggy pile at our feet.

She curls her hands around mine. They're so small they don't cover much, but I suppose it's the thought that counts.

"I'm glad you came over," she whispers warily. When she looks at me, I shrug my shoulders and answer her with a grunt and a snort. She winces at my curt reaction. Immediately I want to apologize, but I keep my mouth tightly clamped shut, chilled to the bone.

"Let me go get you a towel and some dry clothes," she says, her voice small and laced with hurt.

I watch her walk away and I take a deep breath. My stomach churns. I don't know why. It's not as if she and Xavier are having some illicit affair for fuck's sake. They've been best friends for years, long before I showed up, but it's the familiarity, the assumption that he knows he's the one that takes care of her when she needs it that feels like there's a white hot poker stabbing my heart.

Rushing over here seemed like the right thing to do about thirty minutes ago, now, it sure as hell seems like I should have just stayed home. I stare at my reflection in the window, thunder and lightning still booming and crackling as the wind and rain continue relentlessly and I rest my head against the glass, confused about what happens next.

I feel vulnerable, unsure, and I fucking hate it.

"Here you go," Bella says quietly and I spin around to face her. I didn't hear her come in, but I walk toward her and take the towel and dry clothes from her.

I scowl when I spy the black sweats and t-shirt, assuming they're Xavier's. I have no idea why I'm acting like a spoiled little brat but my emotions are all over the damn place and I can't help it.

Bella makes this sound that's somewhere between a sigh and a whimper, but I take the clothes from her without looking at her.

"Edward, I … " she starts as I walk past her. I stop for a moment but I don't turn around.

"I'll be out in a minute," I tell her, hating more than anything the tension that's flared up between us.

It doesn't take me long to change and though I hate the fact that I'm sure I'm wearing Xavier's clothes, it feels so much better to have something on that's warm and dry. I stare at myself in the mirror, and snort when I see the logo in the reflection.

'Bald is beautiful'

Yeah, there's no doubt whose shirt I'm wearing. I wonder for a second how long I can hide out in the bathroom and then curse my chicken-shit self.

Not that the idea isn't tempting.

I have no idea what I'm doing as far as Bella is concerned. This is all new territory for me. Not just caring about her and Peyton, which I of course do, but the whole guy/girl thing of talking about feelings and shit. I've never done it, and haven't even been exposed to any sort of 'normal' relationship since my grandmother was alive. Back then, I was just a punk ass kid that thought seeing old people being affectionate was plain gross. Sure I loved and respected them, but I sure as hell didn't like seeing it up close and personal.
Being around Carlisle and Esme, seeing them be openly affectionate, to the extreme at times, as well as Emmett and Rose, Jasper and Alice, and hell even Seth and Xavier, has given me an inkling as to how the whole relationship thing is supposed to work. I might not know shit-all when it comes to what to do and what to say, but even my dumb ass knows hiding out in the bathroom isn't going to solve a damn thing.

"Edward?" Bella says softly after she knocks on the bathroom door. "If you hand me your clothes, I'll put them in the dryer for you."

Her voice is so tentative, so unsure that it starts that whole churning thing in my gut again. I open the door and hand her the clothes. We stare at each other, neither saying a word. I can tell she's leaving the ball in my court for the time being, which I suppose is fair considering I'm the one that's acting like he's suddenly been possessed by the dumb ass gene.

She sighs and starts to walk away, her shoulders slumped and her head hung low. My fingers twitch from wanting to reach out and grab her to pull her against me, but I don't. Instead I say, "Thanks for the dry clothes."

She looks back at me over her shoulder and tries to smile at me. It only serves to make me feel even more like shit. When I don't say anything else, she turns and walks back toward the laundry room leaving me standing in the living room alone. I walk around because I'm too tense to sit, even though it feels as if I could fall asleep standing up I'm so tired. I avoid looking at the bookcase holding all of Bella's pictures, figuring I don't need any other reminders of all the things I don't know about her or all the ways Xavier has been there for her.

Bella startles me when she says, "I thought you might like something warm to drink." In her hands is a mug of hot chocolate, the wisps of steam floating up in the air around her as she holds the cup out toward me. I walk to her, thinking once again that everything just feels so … off.

"Thanks," I tell her sincerely when I take the cup, wrapping my hands around it. I take a sip and close my eyes as the warm liquid falls down my throat, tasting delicious but doing little to relieve the cold that has taken up residence in every part of my body.

She sits on the sofa and I follow suit, unsure of what else to do. We're sitting as far away from each other as is physically possible; a fact of which my body is not at all happy with. I want her next to me. I want to feel her hair between my fingers and feel the weight of her chest against mine. I want her citrusy scent to envelope me and swirl around so that every time I take a breath, she's all I can smell. I want her close enough so that I can hear it every time she does that little half sigh, half squeak thing when I touch her in just the right way.

Plain and simple - I just want her.

She pulls her legs up on the sofa and rests her head on her knees, wrapping her arms around them. Her hair spills down over them, covering them in a sheet of mahogany. I can't help but glance at her feet and my lips curve upward at the sight of her toes curled over the side, lime green toenail polish and all.

"I'm sorry you're mad at me," she says softly.

There's not another sound in the room save for the two of us. No television, no music, nothing. Just the rain that continues to fall and the occasional clap of thunder, mixed with the sound of our breathing, but her words might as well have been shouted through a bullhorn the way I jump when I hear them.
I set my mug down on the coffee table and stand up. I need to move. Pacing back and forth, I run a hand through my hair and then turn and look at her. She's watching me, wary and afraid.

"Fuck, Bella, I'm not mad at you. I just … hell, I don't even know. I wanted to see you so badly, I didn't even think about the fact that you might not be alone. I thought … fuck, I just thought you needed me and I wanted to be here for you and when I saw Xavier, it just, I don't know …" I hesitate, not sure what to say to make this sound any less pathetic than I'm sure it will. "I wanted you to need me and when I got here and realized you didn't, it made me feel like a fool."

"Edward." She sighs. Her head is still resting on her knees and her bottom lip is between her teeth. "I wanted to see you, but I knew you were exhausted. Xavier always stays with me when it storms, so he did this time, too. If I would have known you were going to come over, I would have told him not to bother," she says, sounding a bit frustrated by the time she's done.

"It surprised me to see him here," I admit, pacing again. "You were so mad at him before I left." I'm being such a jackass about him, I know I am, but I can't stop the word vomit. "The guy hates me, Bella, and then I come racing over here like a bat out of hell, storming in here like you're some damsel in distress that needs saving. He's probably going to want to kick my ass … again … for treating you like you're incapable of taking care of yourself." I huff and whip my head around at her when I hear her snicker.

She presses her lips together and waits until she can talk before she says anything. I'm just getting more pissed and more embarrassed by the second. "He doesn't hate you and he's not going to kick your ass. We talked. Things are fine," she tells me as she unfolds her legs and sits up, but really that doesn't help.

At all.

"Yeah, well, wait until he finds out where I've been the last seven years," I mumble.

I turn around and face the fireplace, bits and pieces from our conversation Sunday night flying through my head. I keep hearing Carlisle tell me that I need to tell her. I keep imagining Peyton's disappointment when she finds out her best friend went to prison for armed robbery. I picture Bella's face when I tell her I watched someone get shot right in front of me and left for dead and then she tells me to go and never come back.

She scoffs behind me and when I turn around, she's shaking her head. When our eyes meet, she shrugs her shoulders and says, "You've been in Boston, what's wrong with that?"I stare at her. I open my mouth and shut it. I break out into a sweat and I can feel the half-cup of hot chocolate I just drank try to make a reappearance as my stomach roils and lurches. My chest tightens and my heart slams painfully in my chest.

When I don't say anything Bella just goes on. "I'm sure you were busy working and stuff. Hanging out. I keep hearing Carlisle tell me that I need to tell her. I keep imagining Peyton's disappointment when she finds out her best friend went to prison for armed robbery. I picture Bella's face when I tell her I watched someone get shot right in front of me and left for dead and then she tells me to go and never come back.

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When I don't say anything Bella just goes on. "I'm sure you were busy working and stuff. Hanging out. I know you said you kept to yourself and that you were alone, but I'm sure you had at least a few friends you spent time with. I mean Boston's so big and you lived there for a long time, you had to know some people." She's nervous and getting more so the longer I keep standing there, unable to move. She gets up, and reaches down to pick up our cups, saying, "I don't see what Xavier can be upset about. That all seems pretty normal to me."

"I was in prison for the last seven years," I blurt out, unable to keep it from her any longer.

She freezes.
I watch her as she closes her eyes and stops breathing. The cups clatter in her hands and they shake until she sets them down on the coffee table. I swear to Christ it takes minutes … hours before she looks back at me.

She swallows, once, then again.

"I'm sorry. I thought I heard you say you've been in prison," she whispers, shaking her head the entire time as if that will change the answer she knows I'm going to give her. Her eyes are the size of saucers, and completely black, no hint of the gorgeous brown to be found anywhere.

Every breath of air has been sucked from the room leaving an oppressive weight just hovering … threatening.

I want to stop time. I want to run. I want the floor to open up and swallow me whole … anything but answer her again, but I can't turn back now. I'm all in. The die's been cast, and the only thing to do now is tell her everything and hope that she gives me a chance.

"Fuck. I didn't mean to tell you like that," I mutter and tug on my hair.

We lock eyes again, and hers are searching, probing … begging. Time stands still until I say, "You heard right."

Her knees wobble until she can't stand anymore and she drops onto the sofa like a ragdoll.

I'm rooted to the floor, wanting desperately to go to her but not daring to move until she says something … anything. I'm waiting for her to tell me to get the fuck out of her house, out of her life and wanting to prolong that as long as fucking possible.

She wraps her arms around her stomach and bends over, hidden behind her hair. I hear the faint chanting of, "Oh God, oh God," over and over again as she rocks. I take a step toward her and the floor creaks. Her eyes flash to mine, huge and afraid, and I immediately stop dead in my tracks. It breaks my heart to see the shock and confusion on her face.

"Bella, please let me explain," I choke out, fighting back all the fear and self-loathing that has engulfed me. Bella is all that matters, her and Peyton actually, and I'm prepared to do whatever I have to, to make her understand. I just need a chance to explain.

She watches me as she sits up slowly, uncurling herself. Her eyes never leave my face except when they dart toward the stairs and then back at me. I feel like my heart has been shattered into a million tiny pieces at the thought that she's worried I would hurt her … or Peyton. She doesn't know what happened to me, but she has to know I would never harm her or Peyton.

"Please, Bella," I beg, all the fight gone in an instant. Now I'm just begging. Begging for a chance to make her understand. Begging for a chance to explain that I'm not a bad person. Begging for a chance to hang on to the only two people that have meant anything to me since my grandparents died. If she tells me to leave, not only will I lose her and Peyton, but everyone else as well. I'll lose the people that have become my friends, the people that welcomed me with open arms.

I'll lose everything.

She studies me again, searching, not saying a word. I can't look away even though every part of me wants to fall to my knees and hang my head. I don't know what she sees, but finally she swallows and nods, saying, "Tell me everything."

I let out a painful breath and sit beside her on the couch. I want to reach out to touch her, hold her
hand … something, but I'm terrified she'll pull away and that would fucking kill me, so instead I sit in the corner and rest my head in my hands as I gather the courage to tell her everything. I've waited too long already, and no matter how badly it will hurt when she tells me to go, she deserves to know the truth.

"For the last seven years, I was an inmate at Old Colony and then the Pre-Release center before I got paroled two months ago."

"What did you do?" Her words are so soft and she sounds so frightened that it makes me want to cry.

I can't look at her, can't bear to see the disappointment and fear that I know will be there when I answer her, so my words are spoken to the floor. "I was arrested for armed robbery and attempted murder."

In an instant I'm overcome with all the feelings I've buried since that fateful night. The abject horror, the brutal violence, and the stark reality of what it felt like to have someone's life in my hands. The panic, the confusion … the disillusionment.

All of it rushes over me. It feels like I'm suffocating but I fight it back, focusing on the woman that means more to me than I ever expected, ever hoped for.

She hasn't moved, hell, I'm not sure she's even taken a breath. I turn my head toward her and the look on her face about makes me come undone. So much hurt, so much fear … but it's the confusion that I see most of all.

It's also the fragile thread I grab onto with all I have, hoping if I can make her understand, I have a chance to salvage whatever this is between us.

Taking a deep breath, I dig down deep and bare my soul to her.

"You know my parents died when I was little and I went to live with my grandparents. I had a really happy childhood despite that. My grandparents loved me so much and gave me everything I needed. My grandmother, she was the most giving and compassionate person you could ever meet. My grandfather was wonderful, too. He was totally in love with my grandmother. His world revolved around her. Their world revolved around me.

"When my grandmother died, things really changed," I say sadly, instantly flooded with memories of her. "Grandfather became a different person after that and I did, too. He missed her so much. He tried to keep up with me, but I was twelve when she died, and I started acting out then. Just little things such as talking back to him or not doing what he asked of me. I would go to the park and cause trouble or get into fights with other boys." I shake my head, thinking about all the things I wish I could have done differently back then. My grandfather tried so hard, but he was so lost without her.

"I was so angry because I felt like she left me just like my parents had and I felt like I had lost my grandfather, too. He was there, but not really, and he was all I had. I know I was a disappointment to him with the way I was acting."

I notice movement out of the corner of my eye. Bella lifts her hand and starts to reach for me before she snaps it back. It feels like she's closing me out already, but it's too late to back out now. When I glance at her I can see how tense she is. It makes me want to puke. I push that down and will myself to go on.
Sighing, I keep going, knowing this part will be even harder to get out. "When I was sixteen, I met a new kid at school. His name was Aleksei. I was still being a stupid fucker, getting into trouble, my grades didn't matter to me, I was staying out past my curfew, and I had no respect for anyone, not even my grandfather by that point. Aleksei was just like me. I thought I saw a kindred spirit in him. We started hanging out and became what I thought was friends. Aleksei got me into drinking and doing drugs. I didn't do anything HARD, but I drank a lot and smoked pot. I knew what I was doing was wrong, but just didn't give a shit at the time." I snort and then lift a hand to rub the tattoo on my arm.

So many mistakes. So much self-destruction. I wince, thinking about it all.

"Our Senior year of high school, Aleksei dropped out. He told me he had more important things to do and needed to start getting his future in order. We still hung out and I found out he was dealing drugs. I stayed in school, only because I promised my grandfather that I would graduate at least. I didn't keep many promises, but I wanted to keep that one for some reason. Aleksei would take me with him when he went to make the drug deals. I didn't get involved in it, but he wanted me there in case there was trouble, and there was trouble more times than I can remember."

I think back on all the times that I came home late, beaten to a pulp … bloody and covered in bruises. I can still see the disappointment and heartbreak in my grandfather's face when he would look at me. He tried to tell me to stay away from Aleksei, that he was bad news, but I never listened.

As I sit here telling this beautiful woman my sad and disgusting history, knowing she'll more than likely never want anything to do with me again, I wish I would have listened to him just that once. I chance a glance at Bella again. She's still curled in the corner of the couch and still tense. She hasn't moved and it's almost as if she's a statue. At least she hasn't fled the room screaming or ordered me out of the house. I cling to that, hoping she'll continue to listen. She's so much braver than I am because I can feel her looking right at me the whole time I'm talking, even though I'm unable to look her in the eye as I finally come clean. Taking a deep breath, I continue laying myself at her feet.

I'm at her mercy.

"I found out later that Aleksei was selling drugs for some minor league gangster in Boston. I didn't know it at the time. I just figured he was working for himself and trying to make some money." I was so damned naïve, thinking the world owed me something because people I loved died.

What a fucking fool I was.

"After I graduated from high school, I found a crappy job working in some warehouse and worked there during the day. I didn't want to go to college and it paid for the drugs and the drinking I did at night. I worked during the day, and drank all night. My grandfather finally had enough of my shit. He told me that he loved me, but he couldn't continue watching me destroy myself. He told me I had a choice to make. Either get my shit together and stop throwing my life away, or I needed to get out. I, of course being the know-it-all that I was at nineteen, told him that I was an adult and could make it without him. I moved out and got a place with Aleksei.

"One night, Aleksei asked me to go to his friend's house. He said he had some coke he needed to drop off. I agreed, thinking it was just another night in the life. We got in his car and drove to the rich side of town. This was coke he was delivering and it wouldn't have been the first time we'd been there. We pulled up to this really nice house and we both got out and walked up to the door."
I take a deep breath. It's so hard to relive that night. The night from hell. The night my whole world changed in the blink of an eye. The night Aleksei fucked me over good and nothing would ever be the same. It's the night that sent me to prison and stole my life … and maybe my future.

Aleksei bangs on the door a few times while we stand on the front steps. It's late, and it's fucking cold out, so cold I can see my breath as I blow on my hands to keep them warm.

"Fuck, Aleksei, let's bail. There's no one home," I tell him, pissed that we've wasted time coming out here when we could have just stayed home, getting more fucked up and laid.

He bounces on his feet, looking nervously around and then knocks again. He's agitated, high. His eyes dart up and down the street and he's acting sketchier than normal, especially for a routine drug delivery.

We've done it plenty of times before so I can't figure out what his problem is.

Right when I'm about to go back to the car and wait for his ass, a middle-aged guy answers the door. All hell breaks loose. Aleksei pulls a gun out of his coat pocket and shoves it in the guy's gut.

"Where's the safe?" he screams at him as he pushes the guy into the house.

The house is old, huge, but dark, with only a few sparse lights to permeate the shadows. We're standing in a foyer, aged hardwood on the floor and muted shades of taupe on the wall. It's obvious whoever lives here comes from the oldest of old money.

The guy, the unfortunate object of whatever plan Aleksei has, shakes, frantically whipping his head from side to side. He turns white as a sheet and there's a sheen of sweat that breaks out over his face. "Okay, okay," the guy sobs. "I'll show you. Please, take what you want, just don't hurt me." He winces when Aleksei presses the gun in his side, turning him around.

I'm freaking out. I have no idea what's going on or why we're here. Aleksei's into drugs and shit, but nothing like this. This … this is fucking nuts. I'm frozen to the floor, until Aleksei starts screaming again.

"Asshole, I'll shoot you right here. Show me where that goddamned safe is, right fucking now, or I swear, I'll kill you." He's totally crazed, like he's not even all here. He waves the gun around then, and I can't tell if he has any clue at all about what the fuck he's doing … what any of this means. Drugs are one thing, but guns? Robbery?

I've never been so fucking scared in my life. I just want to get the hell out of here and pretend none of this happened.

"It's this way. Right there," the guy croaks out, pointing, as he leads us down a hallway. He's breathing so heavily it's hard to understand the words. He stumbles as Aleksei harshly pushes him, barely catching himself as he bumps into a desk in what looks to be an office. Two walls are lined with floor to ceiling books. The other wall is completely made of glass. Through the windows, a wide expanse of well-manicured grass goes on as far as I can see.

The shelves are interspersed with picture after picture: smiling faces, young faces, old faces - all of them stare back at me and I feel like I'm going to be sick. What the fuck am I doing here? I think, vows that if I can make it out of this mess, I'm getting as far away from Aleksei as I can.

Aleksei's still pushing the guy around, not caring that he's trying to cooperate as best he can with a gun pointed in his gut. The guy falls heavily on his knees as he bends down to a cabinet behind the desk, opening the doors to reveal a safe.
"Open it. Don't try anything either, dickhead," Aleksei tells him in a cold, robotic voice.

The man's hands shake so badly he has trouble grabbing the bundles of cash, but he empties it completely, handing it all over to Aleksei.

There's not a sound except for the guy's labored breathing. He's struggling to keep himself together, his entire body trembling. There's a grandfather clock against one wall of the office, the chiming as the pendulum swings amplified at least a hundred times in the deafening silence.

I glance to my right. Aleksei steps away from the guy, and before I know what's happening, he shoots him. The smell of the gun firing burns my nostrils as I stare, stupefied by what's just happened.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I scream as I watch the guy fall into a lifeless heap on the floor. Blood oozes out from between his fingers where he's futilely trying to stop the bleeding.

"Sorry, man, no witnesses." He shrugs. "Let's go," he states, not even looking at the man dying at his feet. "I got what I came for."

I don't move. My body is locked tight.

"Edward, move. We have to get the fuck out of here before the cops come," Aleksei says as he walks toward the door. I make the mistake of looking at the man on the floor and our eyes meet. There's a puddle of blood forming beneath his side and he's the color of … well he has no color left because most of his blood is spread out under him.

He's dying in front of my eyes.

Aleksei's screaming, waving his arms around and I can't move, can't take my eyes off the man on the floor. I shake my head. I can't leave the man here to die. I didn't want any part of this; I had no idea what Aleksei was going to do. The man gasps, a sound bubbling from his throat and I rush to his side to see if there's anything I can do. I have to try. I can't just watch him die and do nothing. My life's a fucking mess but I know there's no way I could live with myself if I did nothing.

I whip off my jacket and then tug my shirt over my head, and hold it to the man's side. I'm so focused on what I'm doing that I don't notice Aleksei move toward me until I hear the cock of the gun and feel the barrel, still warm from just being fired, press against the side of my head.

"Stay here if you want to, dude, but I'm getting the fuck out of here. Breathe a word of this to anyone, and I'll fucking kill you … and your grandfather." He's totally unfazed by the man dying below him and when I nod and he lowers the gun, our eyes meet for the briefest of moments.

Empty, cold, evil. They hold no feelings whatsoever. He looks at me one last time before rushing out of the room.

The man coughs and I'm brought out of my stupor. I press again on the wound.

"Shit. I'm so sorry. I didn't know he was going to do that," I mumble, trying desperately to save the man.

The guy grunts, this horrible gurgling sound, as his hands flop around beside him, like he's looking for something. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a cell phone.

"911," he struggles to say.
I stare at the phone in my hand, knowing if I dial that number, my fate will be sealed. I look at him, and I watch as his eyes travel toward the bookcase, and travel over the myriad of pictures. I don't know the people, have no idea what the pictures are of, but it's obvious the people in them are well-loved. When I see a picture of the guy and a woman, arms wound around each other's waist, his wife judging from the rings they both wear and the one he still has on, it reminds me so much of my grandparents that a sob escapes my chest.

I begin to cry in earnest then, knowing what I have to do.

"Okay, okay," I chant, pressing the numbers on the phone, swiping at the tears that fall down my face. I call 911 and when they ask what happened, I can't speak. The guy groans and once again I have to concentrate on just getting through a second at a time.

"By the time the ambulance got there, the guy was barely holding on. I tried to do CPR, but I had no idea if it helped him or not. The cops showed up with the ambulance and I was arrested and charged with attempted murder because I was an accessory and armed robbery as there was a gun involved," I finish on a shuddering breath.

Just remembering the man as he struggled to stay alive while we waited for the ambulance makes me sick.

"But didn't you save him? He lived because of you, right?" Bella whispers. When I turn to look at her, her face is splotchy, the tip of her nose is red, and her shirt is soaked from all the tears she's cried. She started when I mentioned my grandmother dying and hasn't stopped since.

I run both hands through my hair. Leaning my head over the back of the couch I stare at the ceiling, more exhausted than I have ever been in my life. I don't even have anything I can compare it to, it's just an all-encompassing exhaustion, but in a really fucked up way, I feel better getting that all out. Carlisle and I haven't even gotten this far in our talks and I know not even Wayne knows all the details of what went down at the house with Aleksei.

I haven't ever talked about that night to anyone … until now.

I turn my head and nod. "Yeah, he did." I feel my lips lift into a small smile of pride. I may have fucked up my life by putting myself in that situation, but knowing that I saved an innocent man was worth the hell I went through in prison. I have no one to blame for being in that house but myself. It's taken me a long time to come to terms with that, but it's the stark, blunt truth.

No one but me made the choices I made. No one forced me to do drugs and drink. No one forced me to go along when I knew Aleksei was making drug deals. No one forced me to go along with all the shit he did, and no one forced me to go into that house.

That's all on me and there isn't any other way to say it.

Those mistakes cost me everything - not just my freedom for seven years, but all the time I didn't get to spend with my grandfather, too. Now … I can only hope they don't cost me Bella and Peyton as well.

Bella sniffs and I watch as she wipes her eyes with her fingers. She looks at me, her eyes swollen and red, but she's so damn beautiful.

Risking that she may push me away, I slowly inch my hand forward over the cushions of the couch until I cover her hand with mine because I can't take not touching her another second. Just that one small connection with her sets my heart flying. I want to ask her what she's thinking, but I'm
terrified of the answer. The fact that I'm still sitting here, that she hasn't told me to go away, is way more than I expected to begin with. I'm not going to push my luck.

Her hand twitches beneath mine and my breath catches when she slips her hand out from beneath mine and turns it over so that she can lay hers inside of mine. I can't help but sigh, fighting back tears, as she curls her fingers around my hand. It's such a small thing, but to me … it's everything.

"Bella," I manage to force out over the lump in my throat.

She presses her lips together and her head falls forward. I can hear her swallow, trying to stop the soft whimper that escapes anyway. It's fucking killing me not knowing what she's thinking, feeling, but I know I can't push her. Whatever happens, wherever we go from here, whether that's forward together or our separate ways, is solely up to her.

Finally, more minutes pass and the silence is so maddening that I lift my free hand out and tip her chin up so that she looks at me.

"Please tell me what you're thinking," I whisper, staring into her eyes. I see confusion there, wariness, too, but not fear, and my entire body sags in relief at that.

"I … I'm not … there's so …" she stutters. Her fingers squeeze my hand and she takes a deep breath. "I have so many questions," she says as she shakes her head.

I can practically see her mind thinking things over as question after question flips through her mind. It's killing me to watch her struggle to absorb everything, but again, I can't help but let that small glimmer of hope flare a little bigger at the fact she hasn't run upstairs, telling me to get the hell away from her.

It's all I have to cling to, and I am, desperately, with all that I have.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," I breathe out.

She nods but doesn't say anything else. I glance out the window and notice it's stopped raining. The clouds have cleared enough so that the moon is able to shine through the glass. Silvery moonbeams mix with the soft light from the lamp, casting the room in shadows.

Suddenly, she lets go of my hand and gets up, moving toward the fireplace. All the hope I'd had just a moment before plummets, and my heart slams painfully against my chest because I know this is it. She's going to send me away, and tell me she doesn't want to have to do anything to do with me - a felon, an ex-con.

I'll do as she asks of course, even if it kills me in the process.

I brace myself for the worst, feeling like I might get sick right there, especially when she turns around. Her face is almost blank, but her eyes are swimming in emotion. Her eyes are filled with tears and when they spill over her cheeks, it literally takes my breath away.

"I need time to think," she whimpers hoarsely. Her chest heaves when she next says, "I think you should go."

My heart breaks.

Silently, because I'm afraid if I open my mouth, I'll beg her to let me stay, I walk toward the laundry room and take my clothes out of the dryer and change into them. I neatly fold the sweats and t-shirt and leave them on top of it, not even caring anymore that they're Xavier's. It seems like
such a trivial thing now … meaningless.

I'd left my shoes in the bathroom, so I have to cross back through the living room to get them. Bella is standing in front of the bookcase staring at a picture of her and Evan. I stop walking and look at her. Her eyes are unfocused but she looks so heartbroken that it makes my knees go weak, and I stumble and fall against the back of the sofa.

The sound startles her, making her jump. She twists around to look at me, her mouth opens but no sound comes out.

Stupidly, I take a step toward her. She backs up and any hope I had of a chance to still be a part of her life is destroyed … gone.

I turn, hurrying into the bathroom and shove my feet into my boots. I can't stay here another second. I need to get the hell out of there so that I can fall apart … alone.

Like I'll always be from now on.

I walk back into the living room and Bella is still standing in the same spot, still not moving. When she hears my footsteps as I move toward the door, she turns and faces me. Our eyes lock. She's so sad that I can't stop the broken sob that comes when I say, "I'm so sorry."

"Me, too," she hiccups, and mashes her lips together, wrapping her arms around her stomach as if she's trying to hold herself together.

It breaks me all over again to see her that way. Knowing that I'm the cause of that is the crippling blow that forces me to end the torture. I reach for the doorknob, my fingers shaking violently as I grip it. I don't turn around. I can't bear to see the pain I've caused her, though I know I'll never be able to forget.

"Please tell Peyton …" I have to force myself to swallow so that I can speak. "Tell her I'm sorry I'll miss our Monopoly date." The words are like razor blades slicing my throat as I make myself say them. I have to push all thoughts of her down, if I don't, I'll fucking lose it and I won't do that to Bella.

I steel myself, taking a shuddering breath before I turn the knob on the door and open it.

The damp night rushes over me, the familiar bite of salt-scented air filling my nostrils, but instead of the sense of home and comfort it usually brings with it, there is only emptiness and agony.

My feet weigh a hundred pounds apiece as I force myself to step onto the front porch.

I stand for a moment, unable to take another step because I know as soon as I do, everything I never knew I wanted, everything that means anything, will be gone forever.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Everyone still with me? Deep breaths now, okay? I know that was tough, I know you didn't get ALL the answers you need/want, but Bella now knows he's been in prison, and why. Do me a favor … keep in mind that "I need time to think" does NOT mean go away, okay? Bella's up next chapter; I think you'll get a few more of those answers you were hoping for.

Have you checked out The Breakers blog this week? We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts. It's
fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

We've also set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. Join the group and see what everyone has to say … I'm thinking after this chapter and as we move through the next few, there will be plenty to talk about.

www.facebook.com/groups/137144056381565/

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! Thanks so much for reading!

See you next Sunday

Erin~
Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers - they all work so hard to help me and I wouldn't know what to do without them!

WOW! I am totally blown away by the response to *The Breakers*! Thank you all so much for giving this one a chance. Hope you stay with me for the ride.

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, FaceBook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

If you haven't heard, I did an author interview for Luvrofink's blog where I answered some questions about *The Breakers*, what I'm doing next, and a few other things. I was honored to be asked, so thank you so much! If you're interested, you can go here and read it:

luvrofink . blogspot . com

Oh ... I've been told to put a TISSUE WARNING on this ... so you've been warned!

Now, on with the story ...

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 13

BPOV

The door whooshes behind him, closing quietly, but I jump out of my skin as if he's slammed it anyway.

He's gone.

The immediate sense of emptiness I feel takes my breath away and I sway, reaching out to hang on to the arm of the sofa so I don't collapse into a heap on the floor.

I want to though. Lord, do I want to. Just curl up into a ball and cry or go to sleep or ... something.

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to keep it together long enough so I can get into bed, even though there is no chance in hell I'll be sleeping in it. A gust of wind makes me snap my head toward the front door and I hear the wood of the front step creak.

He's still here.

I take a few steps to the right so I'm able to see out the window in the middle of the door, and my hand flies up to my mouth, muffling the sob that wants to come out. I can't see his face, but his head is tipped down and his shoulders shake as he stands there. I move forward and stop, not sure what I'm doing. I want to go to him, but my feet won't take another step.
Prison.
Drugs.
Gun.
Blood.

Words that by themselves are menacing enough, but put them all together and then attach them to
Edward, and I can barely make sense of them.

He takes a step, then another, and I watch until I can't see him any longer, my heart growing
heavier by the second.

I close my eyes and a crystal clear picture of the way Edward looked when I told him to leave
assails me, and this time I do fall against the sofa, unable to catch my breath. Oh my God. What if
he leaves Corea? What if he thinks I don't ever want to see him again?

Without even thinking about it, I slip and stumble over my feet as I run toward the door, yanking it
open.

"Edward!" I scream frantically, tripping down the stairs. My bare feet hit the ground, cold mud
oozes between my toes, but all I can think about is him. "Edward, wait! Please don't go!"

He stops walking and turns around.

We're standing across the front yard, me at the bottom of the stairs and him in the driveway beside
his bike, staring at each other. He's confused, but I don't stop to think about that before I take off
running, throwing myself into his arms as soon as I'm close enough.

"Please … I just … don't … need …" I sob incoherently. I don't even know what I'm trying to tell
him; I just know I can't let him leave the way he did.

"Shhh, Bella," he whispers unevenly.

My legs wrap around his waist and I cling to his neck. I squeeze, afraid to let go. He doesn't speak;
he just holds me as I shake in his arms. His hands run up and down my back, and he presses me
tightly against his chest. I try to take a deep breath and it takes a few attempts before I'm able to do
so without feeling like I'm going to fall apart.

He shifts me in his arms and I lift my head, our eyes both searching, both waiting.

"Better?" he asks, watching me take another breath. His voice is gentle, completely at odds with
the thumping of his heart and the way his fingers grip almost too hard at my sides.

I nod, my throat too tight to be able to speak.

His eyes are the grayest I've ever seen them, the color of the morning fog that rolls in over the
water. They're full of so much pain, so much fear, that I can't help but lay my hand along his cheek.

"Bella." My name is a strangled breath forcing its way out of his mouth.

I shift in his arms and then slowly he sets me down on the ground. I gasp when my bare feet meet
the cold, damp pavement.

We stand in an awkward, tense silence. There aren't any other sounds except for the wind that
rustles through the trees and the occasional hoot of an owl. The front porch light does little to cut through the darkness that surrounds us, but since the storm has passed, the moon's silvery glow is enough to allow us to see each other.

I can tell he's waiting for me to say something, after all, I was the one that chased after him after telling him to leave, so it's no wonder he's afraid to speak. The only problem is now that I've calmed down some, I have no idea what to say to him. Everything is still so confusing but there was just no way I could let him go without telling him … something.

"Don't leave Corea," I whisper. "I know I told you to leave, but I don't want you to go away. I just need some time to think, Edward, to process everything," I say as I wave my hand around. "But please don't go away."

A thousand emotions play out over his face, in his eyes, changing faster than I can even possibly register them. I want to comfort him or offer him some sort of promise, but the words die in my throat when I remember why I asked him to leave in the first place.

"Whatever you need, Bella. I understand," he says sadly, looking so damn exhausted.

Suddenly an image of Edward, distracted and tired, working on the boat, getting hurt or worse yet falling overboard, sears itself to my brain. Frantic, worried, I reach for his hand, gripping it tightly in mine.

"Promise me you'll be careful today," I sob. "Be safe, please. You're already so tired, and now you're upset and I didn't mean to hurt you. I just don't know what to think of everything you told me, but I'll never, ever, forgive myself if something happens to you, too, because of me. Oh God, Edward, please," I wail, trying to catch my breath. I bend over, wrapping my arms around my waist and squeeze my eyes tightly closed.

"Shit. Bella, stop. Take a deep breath, baby," he tries to soothe as he rubs my back, his strong fingers massaging my tight muscles. He keeps doing it until I'm able to finally breathe normally. I stand up, feeling embarrassed and really, kind of like a heartless bitch at the fact he's comforting me when he's the one that has to be up in mere hours to go to work.

"Promise me," I beg, needing him to say the words.

He nods. Slowly he reaches out and grabs my hand. When I don't flinch from his touch, he takes a deep breath and his face immediately relaxes. "I promise."

It's all he says, but it's all I need.

There's no doubt he wants to say more. He keeps swallowing like he's forcing the words back down his throat. I'm grateful. I'm not anywhere close to being able to hear anything else tonight … well, more like this morning. After another moment passes, he squeezes my hand slightly and then lets go.

"Are you going to be okay?" he hesitantly asks.

The question has about a hundred different meanings, but knowing he's asking about the immediate future more so than the more difficult answer of dealing with what he's told me, I can only nod my head and whisper a very unconvincing, "Yes."

The effects of what's happened tonight, and I'm sure reliving what happened in the past, are evident on his drawn face and in his haunted eyes. Without thinking twice, I step forward once more and reach for him.
"Just give me some time," I ask him again. I'm not sure exactly what I need the time for, but I know my mind is spinning off in a hundred different directions, like a spirograph, each thought like the different holes, each changing the final picture.

"As much as you need. I'm not going anywhere," he tells me again.

His voice wavers. I know I'm hurting him but I have more than myself to think about.

A gust of wind makes me shiver. "Go inside, Bella, before you get sick."

I don't want to tell him goodbye because it feels like it means so much more than that, though at the same time I realize I'm being foolish. He has to go to work in a few hours and so do I. It doesn't make it any easier to say the words … so I don't.

"I'll see you soon, okay?" My heart breaks just a little bit more when I see the spark of hope those words give him.

He steps forward and kisses my forehead. He leaves his lips pressed against my skin and all I can feel is a rush of warmth and an instant sense of comfort and home … and love. I swallow a sob, and he whispers in a rough, uneven voice, "I never meant to hurt you, Bella. I never expected to find you and Peyton. If I'd have known you both would be in my life, I would have done so many things differently."

I clutch at his chest burying my nose in his shirt. We stand that way for a few moments before he kisses the top of my head one more time and then takes a step backward. My heart feels like it's shattering in tiny increments and it's on the tip of my tongue to beg him not to leave but I know he has to. He obviously feels the same way, and his gray eyes shimmer beneath his tears. Wordlessly, he steps forward again and takes my face in his hands. His lips close over mine and he kisses me, gently, lovingly, even though his hands shake as he holds me.

He ends the kiss with a swipe of his tongue over my lips and then a whisper in my ear, "You know me, Bella. The real me. Remember that."

And with that, he walks toward his bike, gets on, and then drives off … all without looking back.

I stand unmoving, watching until the sound of his bike fades and I can no longer see the red of his taillights. As soon as the silence envelopes me, I can feel myself falling apart. Tears spill as I make my way back into the house, falling to the floor as soon as the door closes behind me.

He's gone.

I sent him away.

For hours I sit, my mind like a swarm of bees, buzzing and flitting in mindless chaos. Edward, prison, Evan, water, Peyton, smiles, touches, death, blood, fear, hope, new beginnings, goodbyes … love. A hodgepodge of words and feelings without rhyme or reason and that only serve to leave me more confused as each minute passes by.

I stand and stretch when I can no longer sit on the floor and walk toward the window. The sun has just begun to rise and it's raining again. Fitting, I think, because today I want to cry. I rest my fingers against the cool, wet glass, staring out into the gray morning, the gray of Edward's eyes I immediately think, and with that, the tears come again as I wonder where in the hell I go from here.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~
Charlie POV

"Née, are you okay, honey?" I ask, coming to a stop when I see my wife staring out the window in the sunroom.

She doesn't turn around and look at me, which is something that's totally out of the ordinary. From the tilt of her head to the left and not the right, and the way her shoulders are tense, to the fact that the coffee pot isn't even turned on yet, I know that there's something brewing in that gorgeous head of hers. I'm not talking about what today's special at The Breakers is going to be or what to buy Peyton the next time she goes to Ellsworth either, but the kind of thoughts that swirl and howl like the storm last night.

I wait a moment before going to her, my heart expanding and my stomach bouncing around like a damn beach ball; the same as it has every day for over thirty years. Even after all this time, Renée's still the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on. I love her more, standing here in the house we've raised our kids in, than I did on my wedding day when my old man handed me a scotch and cigar and told me if I ever hurt her, he'd stuff me in a lobster pot and throw my ass overboard in the middle of the Atlantic.

Our life hasn't been easy. There have been days when leaving her in the morning feels like I'm ripping my heart right out of my chest and I'm positive when I get home, she won't be there, but the good days far outweigh the bad ones. It hurts like a bitch at times knowing I've put her through hell and back, but she's always there to give me a smile or a swift kick in the ass when I need it.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

I walk up behind her, wrapping my arms around the waist that's barely bigger than it was the day I first laid eyes on her in a tiny blue and white polka-dotted bikini. Every guy on the beach stared at her that day but luckily for me, it was my eyes she looked back at and gave a flirty, sexy smile to. I've never regretted a moment since.

"What's got you all wound up this morning," I whisper against her bare shoulder, kissing right in the middle of the smattering of freckles that always drive me crazy.

She relaxes against me, her body molding against mine, and sighs. She runs her index fingers over the multitude of scars that cover the backs of my hands, and her touch is as soft and gentle as ever. I watch her fingers, the same ones that wiped the tears from Bella's face when she'd fall down and scrape her knees trying to keep up with the boys and the ones that shook the first time she held Emmett after he was born.

The strongest hands I know.

"Do you think she was okay last night?" she asks softly, leaning her head back against my shoulder as I hold her closer.

"Hmmm, I'm sure Xavier stayed with her like he always does. I'm sure she's fine, honey," I tell her, wincing a little. The fact that Bella is still so terrified of storms after all this time weighs heavily, like an anchor. The worst part is knowing there isn't a damn thing I can do about it either.

For all that I adore and cherish her, Bella's as headstrong as the day is long. Until she asks for my help, I'm relegated to the sidelines, watching and waiting. I'd like to say she's just like her mama, but she's even more stubborn than Renée.

"She spent the night over here on Wednesday," Renée says after a few minutes of silence.
That surprises me … a lot. "Is she okay?"

She turns her head to the side and gives me a smile … one of those that lets me know she knows way more than she's telling me. "She will be."

I raise my eyebrows. "Care to elaborate?"

Renée turns back toward the window. I wait. I learned long ago never to rush my wife when she has something she wants to tell me. It's as infuriating as all get-out at times, but it's who she is. I wonder for a moment why she didn't tell me last night about their talk and then fight back a grin as I remember neither of us were up for much talking by the time I made it home. A few days away from my woman always makes coming home worthwhile.

"She had some questions. We had a good talk," she begins and when I snort to let her know she needs to give me more than that, she goes on to tell me what they talked about. Most doesn't surprise me, some does, though, especially the part about Evan.

"Do you really think she's ready to let him go?"

She sighs and shrugs her shoulders. "I know she wants to, but whether she can or will is something only she knows. It's time for all of you to let him go," she says, mincing no words.

I huff and tighten my grip on her. Laying my chin on her head, I close my eyes, fighting back the guilt I still feel whenever I think about Evan. It's a constant battle because every time I see Bella or Peyton, I'm reminded of what I've done.

"Renée," I whisper roughly. I don't want to argue with her about this again. It's truly the only thing we've never seen eye to eye on.

"No, Charlie," she answers back, spinning around to look at me. She reaches up and grabs my face. Her eyes are pained, but determined. "You, Emmett, and Bella have to deal with this once and for all. What happened to Evan was a tragedy, but it was an accident. None of you forced him to be on that boat."

I'm shaking my head before she's even finished, gritting my teeth and clenching my jaw.

"Née," I say brokenly, all the remorse and anguish I carry with me rushing to the surface.

"It. Wasn't. Your. Fault!" she raises her voice and says again, fighting her own internal battles.

Neither of us say anything for a few moments as we let the tension lessen between us. "Charlie, we all have to deal with this; it's way past time. Bella really cares about Edward. Hell, she's half in love with him already, even if she's too scared to admit it. Peyton adores him and they both need him every bit as much as he needs the two of them. It's going to be hard enough when she finds out where he's been the last seven years. She doesn't need to add Evan's ghost following her around on top of it."

"I loved that kid, as much as if he was our own," I murmur.

"We all did and we always will. Without him, we wouldn't have Peyton," she says, her voice instantly soft. "It's even worse because we lost Peter and Kate because of what happened. Peyton only knows one set of grandparents, not the people who used to be our close friends. She doesn't know what an amazing man her father was. It's way past time to let it all go, Charlie; for Bella's sake, for Peyton's, and for yours and Emmett's. If Bella wants any chance to make something with Edward, you all have to do it."
I sigh, knowing she's right and I tell her so. "You're right." I smile at her. She grins and snorts, enjoying my admission way too much. I reach for her again, needing to feel her close to me. "How do you think she'll take it when Edward tells her? That kid's been worrying himself sick about it."

He has, too. Every day I watch him and every day I can see it take its toll on him a bit more, the last three days especially. Something happened between him and Bella on Sunday, I'm sure of it, because when he showed up for work Monday morning, he was a million miles away. All throughout the day as he worked tirelessly beside Emmett and Jasper, he'd reach up and rub his pocket and the goofiest smile would appear on his face. The boys teased him mercilessly about it, but he never answered their questions, no matter how much they nagged him about it. One night while Emmett and Jasper were below deck, I was working on charts in the wheelhouse, plotting out the next day's dropping points, and watched him walk out onto the deck. The wind had picked up so the boat shimmied back and forth quite a bit, but it didn't faze him in the least. The boy definitely has his sea legs. He stood with his hands draped over the side, holding something in the palm of his hand. I couldn't see what it was from where I was sitting, but there was no mistaking the way he looked at whatever it was when he ran his fingers over it. Somehow I knew it was from my little pumpkin and though it made me a little sad to know I've got to share my time with her with one more person, I don't really mind so much.

When we made it back to the docks last night, the storm had just started and from the way Edward kept looking at the sky and then to his phone, I knew he was worried about Bella. He could barely stand up straight he was so tired, but I won't be at all surprised to find out he went to see her last night. He cares about her - there's no question about it. He cares a lot.

Renée hasn't answered my question yet and when she gazes back at me, I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. Her eyes are pinched and her mouth's in a tight line - a sure sign she's about to say something I probably don't want to hear.

Damn it.

She moves to sit on the loveseat and I dutifully follow. Where she goes, I go. It's always been that way, always will, too. Pulling her legs up beneath her, I'm momentarily taken aback at just how much Bella and Peyton act like her, let alone look like her. Bella's been sitting that way since she was younger than Peyton.

Leaning forward, she rests her chin on her knees and looks out over our backyard. Speaking softly, she says, "I've watched Bella since the first day Edward arrived. Each day that's gone by, even those first few days when she was trying to convince herself she didn't want anything to do with him, she smiles a bit more … she laughs. That haunted look that's been there since the day Evan died fades a little bit at a time. I watch Peyton with him, the way her entire face lights up whenever she's talking to him. I watch the way he looks at the two of them, like they're his saving grace, a gift he never expected to find. I watch the way Jasper and Emmett interact with him, like he's their long-lost brother. Even Rose and Alice, I swear, between the two of them, always fawning over him or patting him on the shoulder."

I laugh along with her, and she turns to me, a soft, knowing smile on her face. "And you, Charles Alan Swan, that boy's had your number since before he even got here," she teases as she reaches over and swats my leg. I grab her hand and hold on to it, wondering where she's going with all of this.

I shrug my shoulders, not even bothering to deny what she's said. "It's true. After Carlisle first told me what had happened to him, I was already in his corner. He hasn't done anything since to make
me regret my first impression either."

"Which is why there's so much more at stake now," she answers back immediately. Her voice is … fearful almost and my stomach twists itself into a knot. A chill walks up my spine. "Charlie, I can't watch Bella lose someone else … I just can't. She'd never recover if something were to happen to Edward. You know that's nothing but the truth."

Her words are like a bucket of ice water. I'm looking at her like an idiot with my mouth hanging open and my eyes blinking rapidly. "Née," I choke out, suddenly unable to breathe over the lump in my throat.

"When Edward tells Bella about Boston and if she still decides she wants him in her life, in Peyton's life, are you going to be able to handle the responsibility of making sure he comes home to her every night, safe and sound?" she asks quietly.

It's not like I haven't thought about it before, in passing, but to hear the question in such a concrete manner makes me sag against the back of the loveseat. I have the same responsibility to Rose and Alice as well, of course, hell, to Renée, too, but the fact that Bella has already lost someone to the ocean makes her different.

Not any better, not any more deserving … just different.

"Ah, hell." I groan, closing my eyes as I rest my head against the back of the couch.

She curls up beside me, wrapping her arms around me and laying her head where she's always fit like she was made solely for me. "I know." She sighs, twisting my shirt in her hand. "I was as honest as I could be with her the other night, Charlie, but until Bella decides what she wants as far as Edward's concerned, it's just a waiting game for all of us. I don't think she realizes how much her decision will affect everyone, not just her and Peyton. We all need him as much as he needs us. I don't care that he's been in prison for the past seven years. He's a good man, and he's what she needs. She's scared, and rightly so, and unsure if she can handle watching him leave every day. On top of that, she's going to have to deal with his past, one which has left an indelible mark on him. He's seen things, probably done things in order to survive, to keep himself safe while he was incarcerated … it's just going to be a lot for Bella to deal with."

I take a deep breath again and then bend forward, running my lips along the side of her face. "I'm sorry that who I am makes your life so difficult sometimes," I whisper. I've never had a problem showing affection toward my wife - hugs, kisses … touches that make her squeal in delight, are an everyday occurrence. However, I know I don't tell her with words as often as I should that I understand how hard things are sometimes. Not that she doesn't know that I worship the ground she walks on, because everyone knows that, but I'm not the best at acknowledging the things she's sacrificed so that I can do what I was born to do.

She growls then raises her head, her eyes alight with fire and ice at the same time. Reaching up, she grabs my head firmly in her very strong hands, holding me in place as she stares at me. I try to look away from the anger and the hurt I see shining back at me but she holds me still. "Oh no you don't, Charlie Swan. You don't get to say shit like that then try to hide when I call you on it."

She sits up on her knees and I wrap my arm around her waist, holding her close to me. "You know that from the very first moment we met, or rather your dumbass friends bet you to come talk to me that I've been head over heels in love with you. You told me right away what to expect from you and I've never regretted one second. Sure there are times that are hard, and sure I sometimes wish for vacations in sunny Mexico, or hell even the shore in New Jersey, but I've never, ever had second thoughts about loving you. You and I have made our life here and I couldn't imagine a
better one if you gave me my choice from all the fairy tales ever written." Her voice falters, her eyes shimmer with tears, and my heart thumps in my chest. "Emmett has Rose, Jasper has Alice … Seth has Xavier, and it's time for Bella to have the happiness we all have. Our lives aren't easy, but they're full of love and family and friends. She deserves to enjoy that with someone, Edward if that's who it winds up being, instead of watching from the sidelines. I just want her to be happy. I think Edward will be her Prince Charming if she listens to her heart and not her head."

"Am I your Prince Charming?" I tease, waggling my eyebrows just enough to make her giggle, sounding every bit like Peyton.

She looks at me shrewdly and tries to keep a straight face until she can't help but grin back at me. "Yep." She nods and then kisses me until I see stars. "Always have been, always will be."

I take a breath, feeling lightheaded and punch-drunk, but I need to get moving. It'll be a relatively short and hopefully easy day, just a quick trip out and back today. I know the guys are exhausted and we just need to catch enough for local sale and then we'll be done. I have a sinking feeling that even a short day is going to be too long for Edward and Bella. Between the storm last night, the way Edward looked, and hearing what Renée and Bella talked about while we were gone, it's only a matter of time before everything comes to a head.

"Okay, you sexy woman you, enough of this funny business." I pinch her ass and then lift her off my lap, setting her on her feet. "I need to get to the docks and check on things." I stand up, kissing her one more time because, well, she's my wife and I always want to kiss her. "I'll see you tonight for dinner," I tell her. Even with the dread that's clawing at me, I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face when I see her cheeks flush and can tell she's breathing faster.

Once my coffee is made and I have a breakfast sandwich in my hand, I'm off and heading toward the boat. When I pull up to the docks and Edward's bike isn't anywhere to be found, I groan and mutter a quick, quiet, "ah fuck," because Edward's been here before me since he started working. I don't wait for him, though I'm tempted to, and make my way to the boat. I've been in the wheelhouse a good ten minutes when I hear footsteps on the deck and frown when it's just Emmett and Jasper. I glance at my watch and realize that if Edward's not here in another few minutes, I'll be going without him. Just about that time, I hear his bike and glance in his direction. As soon as he's off the bike and walking toward the boat I can tell that something most definitely happened last night - a feeling that's only magnified when he steps on the boat and walks straight toward the bait table without saying a single word. Jasper and Emmett both look at me like I'm supposed to have all the answers, and I simply shrug my shoulders and go back to the wheelhouse. I don't have time to waste nor the inclination to butt my nose in where it's not needed or certainly not wanted.

I watch Edward all day as he works, rigid and tense. He looks positively haggard: dark circles under his eyes, a somber expression on his face, and an air of total resignation hangs over him like a rain cloud hanging over Eeyore. Emmett and Jasper try to engage him in conversation only to have their attempts fall on deaf ears. Even during our break in the afternoon, he remains in a stony silence. As each hour passes, I watch his insides eat him alive as he fights whatever internal battle he has going on, and my trouble radar is on in full force.

The day is as short as I'd hoped this morning. When we dock, Emmett and Jasper give it one more try to engage Edward, inviting him to grab dinner inside and then go play some pool, but at the mention of The Breakers, Edward looks positively green.

"Shit," I mutter, realizing exactly what happened last night.

Emmett and Jasper give him one last hopeful look but when he doesn't move, they make their way
"Bella knows?" I ask as I step beside him.

The breath he lets out is shaky. It sounds as if just letting the air out of his lungs is painful.

"Yes."

Well that certainly explains a lot. No wonder it looks like he's barely holding it together. Ignoring my usual inclination to let things play out, I ask carefully, "How'd she take it?"

Part of me is bracing myself for him to tell me she freaked the hell out and screamed bloody murder while threatening to call 911, but the other part is holding out hope that she heeded Renée's words and thinks before she acts.

I love my baby girl with a sickness, but damn if she doesn't make me crazy at the same time.

He snorts and then runs his hands through his hair. He turns to look at me and his eyes are haunted, almost desperate. "Better in some ways than I thought she would, worse in others," he trails off, choking on the words.

"What happened?" It makes me a bit uneasy to ask, but I do it anyway.

Knowing what Bella and Renée talked about the other night, the fact that she's trying to move past what happened with Evan is all the incentive I need. If I need to give a little push here and there to help both Edward and Bella deal with the truth of his past, I'm going to do it ... and do it willingly. Ever since he came to my house and laid his cards on the table as far as Bella and Peyton are concerned, I've known his feelings for both of them are strong, stronger even than he's probably admitted to himself. Same as my Bella's for him.

She's made her choice, even if she can't see it yet.

He throws himself down on a flipped-over bait bucket and bangs his head against the railing. I lean against the wheelhouse, arms crossed over my chest, and wait. He picks his head up and shakes it, saying, "I got worried about her and Peyton being alone in the storm, raced over there like a bat out of hell, burst through the front door like a man possessed, turned into an over-dramatic pussy because Xavier was there, then blurted out I'd been in prison for the last seven years, like a complete dumbass."

I stare at him, wide-eyed, and then chuckle. When he glares at me, I hold my hands up. I don't want to piss him off or make him think I'm laughing at him ... even though I am. "I swear between the two of you." I shake my head. "The timing probably wasn't ideal, but it's probably better you told her that way. Lord knows you've been giving yourself ulcers trying to figure out how to tell her. At least this way, it's done."

"I guess," he says, though he doesn't sound terribly convinced.

"What did she do?" Again, I brace myself for the worst because really, the kid looks like utter hell so I can only imagine how Bella might look.

Edward bends over and rests his elbows on his knees, holding his head in his hands. "It was so hard, Charlie," he says quietly, his voice laced with years and years of regret and pain. "She was shocked of course, didn't believe me when I first told her. Then she asked me to tell her everything and I did. I didn't want to tell her because I knew it would hurt her, but I want her to know. She's the first person I've told everything to."
Edward repeats what he told Bella, including what happened the night he was arrested. I knew most of it of course, but hearing the details directly from his mouth is even worse than reading it in black and white. *My God, what the poor boy has been through.* When he's done talking, a heavy, tense silence fills the air for a moment because I have to let Edward wrangle his emotions back under control. I can't imagine it was any easier talking about it all the second time around than the first. As he sits there, breathing in and out, my respect for him grows even more than before. To listen to him accept his fault for what happened, to admit he made horrible, life-altering mistakes … to hear his true remorse for the pain and suffering he caused his grandfather tears me up inside.

He doesn't move as he continues to take deep breaths in and out. I hesitantly ask, "What happened after you told Bella everything?"

"She told me she needed some time and that I should leave."

Hearing that kills me, but in all honesty, it's a good thing because it shows that Bella is going to think before she acts … a huge thing as far as she's concerned.

I tell Edward exactly that. "That's good, Edward." He lifts his eyes to mine; eyebrows raised and looking at me like I'm stark raving mad. I nod. "It is," I reiterate. "Normally Bella would pop off the first thing that she thought of, but in this case, she's taking some time to digest it all. Give her some credit, son," I say, a bit over-protectively. I like the kid, but Bella's my baby … she comes first … always. "It's a lot to take in at one time. Give her a chance to think things through. I'm sure she'll come to you before too long. She really cares about you."

I feel a bit uneasy, like I'm giving him permission for something he hasn't even asked me for yet, but I don't take the words back. I'm not sorry I said them either. I keep hearing Renée's words tumble around in my mind, reminding me that there's a lot more at stake here than just the two of them.

"She ran after me and made sure I wasn't leaving Corea," he says as he stares off into space. "As if I could leave her or Peyton now." He shakes his head and I'm not sure he knows or even meant to say those words out loud.

If I needed any additional proof to show me how he feels about Bella and Peyton, I sure as hell don't anymore.

"Just give her the time she needs, Edward. Things will be okay."

He shrugs his shoulders but I can tell that my words have helped, even if just a little.

I start to stand up straight again but he surprises me when he says, "Bella thinks it's her fault Evan died, doesn't she?" His words are said quietly, but they knock the breath out of me as if I'm a wave crashing into the rocks.

I don't answer him. I can't.

"That's something you'll have to talk to her about, Edward," I tell him when I'm finally able to find my voice. "I didn't tell her your story; I won't tell you hers, either. You two need to talk, tell each other everything. There's more to consider than just the two of you, you know," I warn. I might be overstepping, but there's no way in hell I'll let either of them forget that Peyton has as much at stake as the two of them do. "There's a little girl that lights up brighter than the sun whenever you're around. We all love Peyton. I have not one doubt that you do, too. I also don't doubt that she loves us just as much, but you, Edward, you she loves more than her little body is even capable of holding."
I swipe at my eyes and notice him do the same. Pumpkin tends to bring out the sap in all of us it appears. "You don't have any idea how much you've affected Peyton, changed her since you've been here. You've done the same for Bella, but it's like Peyton has blossomed right before our eyes. She's been waiting for you; we just didn't know it until you got here."

"I … I …" He tries to speak, but can't and I don't force him. I know what he's going to say anyway.

"Be patient, Edward. Bella will come to you once she's had time to process everything. Keep the faith; things will work out." I squeeze his shoulder and then step off the boat, leaving him to his thoughts.

The drive home passes in a blur and I'm surprised when I pull up in the driveway and find Emmett's Jeep parked behind Renée's car.

I walk into the house and am greeted with angry voices, one on top of the other.

"Fuck, Bella, the guy's a damn felon!" Emmett yells. "There's no way in hell you can even think about letting him be around Peyton anymore! Are you out of your damn mind? Hell, when Dad finds out about this, Edward's ass will be on his bike and out of town before it gets dark."

"You were just fine with him playing kissy face with me last weekend, Emmett," Bella yells right back. "And he saved that man's life, or did you forget that important piece of information? Yes, he made a mistake by being there in the first place, but he did the right thing when it mattered and spent seven years in prison for something he didn't even do!"

"Well, yeah, he saved the guy, but still. What else is he hiding, Bella? How do you know there's not more?" he asks and Bella doesn't answer. "It doesn't matter anyway. When Dad hears what he's done and where he's been, Edward's outta here."

I step into the kitchen and find not only Emmett and Bella, but Renée as well.

I walk toward Bella and kiss her on top of the head and then stand beside Renée, turning to face Emmett. "I know everything, Emmett. I have before Edward even got here."

**BPOV**

He knew?

It takes a second for that fact to compute and when it does, I'm not even sure what to think … how to feel.

I watch Emmett's face as Dad's words register. Surprise, confusion … then anger all have a turn, but it's the anger that remains once the others fade.

"What the hell, Dad? You knew and didn't tell me? Didn't tell Bella that the guy she was spending time with, that she let Peyton spend time with, was an ex-con? What in the hell is the matter with you?" Emmett rages.

I watch Dad grit his teeth and take a few deep breaths before he says, "Excuse me, Emmett. I didn't realize that who I hire to work on my boat had to be run past you."

The tone of Dad's voice stops Emmett dead in his tracks, but he's so mad that his face is beet red and I would swear he's seconds away from having steam pour out of his ears. I'm too busy concentrating on the two of them that the sense of shock I feel at hearing Dad say he's known about Edward all along is suppressed. I'm sure it won't be for long.
Emmett splutters and then glares at Dad, arms crossed tightly across his chest. Dad stares back at him, his eyes hard and unyielding, until he looks at me. They turn soft in an instant, and I can feel myself crumbling right in front of him.

"Ah, baby girl," he says gently and then squats down beside me and pushes my hair back behind my ear. "Are you okay?"

I shrug my shoulders at him which just sets Emmett off again. "Fuck no, she's not okay! Edward's lied to her since he got here. He's lied to all of us … well, everyone except you apparently," he snaps.

Dad leaves his hand on my leg, rubbing it back and forth in a soothing motion. He sighs then faces Emmett again. "Son, he hasn't lied to anyone; he just didn't say where he's been."

"Semantics," Emmett waves off petulantly.

"I'm not going to argue with you, Emmett. I had to be told about what happened to Edward when Carlisle asked me to give him a job. I talked it over with your mom," he says and my eyes meet his and then slide over to my mom's. She nods her head and once again I'm reeling.

They both knew.

Emmett opens his mouth and Dad stands and holds his hand out. "Enough," he barks and Emmett mashes his lips closed, though it's done with difficulty.

Emmett stares at the three of us before pushing himself off the counter and stomps toward the back door. "Whatever, Dad," he hisses. "Let's just hope one night none of us wake up and find all our shit gone or a gun in our face," he says as he flings the door open then slams it behind him.

The silence he leaves in his wake is deafening. Unable to stop myself, I say softly, emphatically, "Edward would never do that." I know it, too, believe it with all my heart.

"Of course he wouldn't," Dad says gruffly and then sits down next to me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask, turning to look at him.

"It's not my story to tell, sweetheart. I hired him to work on the boat, nothing more. I had to be told of the circumstances following Edward's parole and the special consideration he was given in order to be able to come to Corea. When I first met him, all I cared about was whether or not I could trust him to work for me, nothing more. If I didn't feel like I could, I never would have given him a job."

I think that over for a moment and feel better knowing that my dad has trusted Edward from the very beginning. Between Peyton and him, I feel like Edward has his very own personal cheering section. A quick glance at my mom, who is nodding in agreement with my dad, makes me feel even better.

"Bella, I'm sure when Edward decided to move here, he never planned on meeting you and Peyton. He just wanted to start over in a place that was familiar and brought back good memories. If it makes you feel better," he reaches for my hand and covers it with his large, strong one, "I know he's really struggled with you not knowing."

My heart flies to my throat. "How do you know that?" I'm relieved to hear it, even if I'm still upset he waited so long.
Dad scrubs his face with the hand that's not holding mine and then purses his lips for a moment before he looks at me again. "He came by the house a few weeks ago, shortly after you had him over for dinner the first time and asked me what everyone knew about him. He was worried because to him it felt like he was lying to the people he's come to care about. He also asked if I minded that he spent time with you and Peyton."

"What did you tell him?" I question, desperate to know.

"Baby, it doesn't matter what I think; what matters is what you think. How do you feel about what happened to him?"

I rub my temple with my free hand. My head is pounding, lack of sleep and crying all night has left me feeling like death warmed over. That immediately has me wondering about Edward and I gasp. "How was he today?" I cry out.

He sits back in his chair and sighs, which pretty much tells me everything I need to know. My heart twists in my chest at the thought of how upset and exhausted he must be.

"He's fine," Dad tells me, but the tone of his voice lets me know he's just trying to make me feel better. It doesn't work; in fact it only makes things worse.

"Dad," I warn and he huffs.

Wincing, he answers slowly, "He's upset, Bella." My eyes fill with tears and he squeezes my hand and looks at me with a mixture of sadness and hurt. "He's worried about you, sweetheart, more than anything else. He knows what he told you wasn't easy to hear, and the way he told you wasn't the best either." He chuckles at that last bit.

I can't help but grin a little, because really blurting it out like he did wasn't ideal, but how he told me doesn't matter at all in the grand scheme of things.

"He told you?"

Dad nods and says, "If it matters, what he told you matches everything I've read and knew already."

I don't realize how much it does matter until the knot in my chest loosens just a bit at his words.

"I don't know what to think," I whisper. I'm not sure I intended to say the words out loud, but it doesn't make them any less true.

Neither of my parents say anything and their silence makes me edgy. I stand up and begin to pace, nervous energy pumping in my veins. Not to mention that the lull in the conversation lets all the thoughts and feelings I've been trying to ignore all day rush up to the surface like a geyser. And like a geyser, I spew.

"I mean, Edward has spent the last seven years in prison … prison!" I screech like neither one of them heard me the first time. "And yeah, I get that he was an accessory and all that, but he didn't do anything wrong. I mean he didn't know that … that piece of shit he thought was a friend was going to shoot anyone. He could've run but he didn't. He stayed and did the right thing. I mean, he saved that man's life and because of that, he'll have to live with being labeled a felon for the rest of his life."

I squeeze my eyes shut so tightly I see splotches of white and my chest feels like it did when Seth and Xavier threw me in the ocean in the dead of winter in high school. Like, I can't catch my breath
and it hurts to even try. "Can you imagine what he went through when he was inside? I've seen movies; I know what happens in there! And that scar on his neck? I know that's where it came from. I can't even picture what caused it, but I know it must have been awful.

"And what the hell kind of lawyer did he have that he had to serve that sentence? Didn't it count for anything that he saved that man's life? I just don't get it," I say, shaking my head.

All the things I thought about during the day keep swirling around. I have so many questions.

I wrap my arms around my stomach and face the windows, letting my mind wander down the dark paths I've tried to keep myself from following since his admission. My heart breaks for Edward when I think about the nightmare he's had to live through the past seven years. That's what scares me almost as much as the fact he's working on the water. What has being in prison done to him? Can I expose Peyton to that? Should I?

I know he adores her. I trust him with her, without question, but is it right to subject her to the aftermath of him dealing with … everything? I have no idea what he was like before he got here or before he went to prison. All I know is the Edward I see now, the one that plays XBOX and is best friends with a seven-year-old. What if he has a horrible temper? What if he starts doing drugs again or drinking just to get drunk? I really have no idea.

I'm a good judge of character … my dad and Peyton even better. Is it possible we're all wrong about him or can I trust myself, and trust him enough to believe in the Edward I know now? The one that makes my heart soar and makes me smile like I haven't ever before just by looking at him? The one that adores my daughter as if she's his very own personal sun?

"Bella, you're going to need to talk to Edward to get those answers," my mom tells me softly after I haven't spoken for a few minutes, too wrapped up in my own mind to even finish our conversation.

I sigh. "I know."

The sound of the chair scraping makes me jump but before I can even turn around my dad has walked over to me. He pulls me into his arms and I … just let everything go. I cry against his chest, for everything Edward has gone through, for Evan, and out of sheer confusion.

"It'll be okay, baby girl," Dad whispers and kisses the top of my head. "Take some time to think and then talk to Edward. Don't let your brain talk your heart out of what it wants, if what it wants is Edward. Give him a chance to explain, listen to what he has to say, ask what you need to know, but don't be afraid to take a leap of faith either, Bella."

"Peyton would kill me if I sent her best friend away." I sniff and smile at him. It falls immediately when he doesn't smile back.

He frowns and pushes my hair over my shoulder. His voice is serious, deadly serious, and he shakes his head and says, "Don't make this decision based on what Peyton wants. There's no reason why Edward can't still be in her life if you decide you don't want him in yours. This is about you, Bella, and what you want and need. Peyton is the most important person in your life, as she should be, but your happiness is every bit as important as hers is."

I let his words hang there and I absorb them. My mind wraps around them like shrink wrap, air tight and impenetrable. They tumble around over and over again until they stop. I deserve to be happy. I do. I wanted Edward yesterday, needed him. That didn't change overnight. He makes me happy and knowing what I do now doesn't change that fact; in fact knowing more about him just makes me feel closer to him. The thought of Edward not being in my life … hurts.
A lot.

For the first time, in a long time, I want to do something for me.

I want Edward.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

So … she's thought, she listened, and she wants him. Do you feel better yet? And how about Charlie and Renée? Gah, I love them! There are still a few issues to get through, the least of which is Bella asking Edward some pretty tough questions as well as telling him about Evan. Can you see that light at the end of the tunnel though? I am NOT a believer in dragging things out, so, there will be lots happening in the next few chapters, I promise. I can't even begin to tell you how much all the reviews for the last chapter meant to me, especially because most of you understood Bella's reaction. Seriously, you guys are the best!

Have you checked out The Breakers blog this week? We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts. It's fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

We've also set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. Join the group and see what everyone has to say … I'm thinking after this chapter and as we move through the next few, there will be plenty to talk about. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www.facebook.com / groups / 137144056381565 /

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! Thanks so much for reading!

See you next Sunday

Erin~
"Do you need more syrup for your pancakes?" I ask Peyton at breakfast on Sunday morning.

As expected, I'm answered with a huff and a quick shake of her head. She hasn't strung more than two sentences together since last night and I don't really expect that to change any time in the near future either. She's apparently not speaking to me because I told her Edward wouldn't be coming to dinner tonight.

It wasn't an easy decision. In fact, I had convinced myself more than a few times to just go ahead and tell him to come like usual, but every time I had my fingers poised to call him, I stopped. I'd actually let the phone ring one time before I hung up. A part of me was hoping he'd answer right away and I'd hear his voice.

I miss him.

So much.

It's only been two days but it feels like it's been so much longer. I'm well aware that it's my fault I haven't seen him, but I also know I've needed some space to work things out in my mind. I was finally able to sleep last night, or rather I passed out from sheer exhaustion. The four or five hours of sleep I did manage to get have gone a long way toward clearing out the cobwebs so to speak so I can focus on Edward and what he's told me. I realize that there are a multitude of questions I have to ask him. I only hope he was serious when he told me he'd tell me anything I wanted to know.

"Mom, is Edward mad at me?" Peyton asks in a sad, subdued voice.

I gasp and then slide off my chair, falling down on my knees beside her. I tried to tell her last night
that he wasn't mad at her, but like her mother, she narrowed her eyes at me and grunted when I attempted to explain. Granted I was pretty much winging it because I couldn't tell her why he wasn't coming to dinner, and I refuse to lie to her. A shading of the truth, maybe, if a situation calls for it, but I haven't ever, and I won't ever, lie to her.

"Baby, no, of course not," I try to soothe as I rub circles on her back.

She's ramrod stiff, not an inch of give in her whatsoever and I know the tension results more from the unknown than from the fact she's really mad at me. She's confused and scared, and rightly so.

I glance toward the door and see the sun shining through the window. "Come on, P, let's go take a walk," I urge her.

Breakfast has been a colossal waste of time because neither one us feel like eating, not even her favorite chocolate chip pancakes. It was a bribe plain and simple, something to try to make her feel better. I know better. My daughter isn't an idiot and I know full well she's been worried about the tension she can feel swirling around us.

Stubbornly she doesn't move until I nudge her off the chair. "Baby, let's go. I want to talk to you."

She huffs and waits a full minute before she moves, just long enough to let me know that she got up when she wanted to, not when I did and then stalks toward the door. I try not to smile at her antics, but it's impossible not to. I know I shouldn't encourage her stubbornness, but I'm actually rather pleased with the fact that she's not afraid to show her displeasure … respectfully of course.

I grab my phone and we head out the door. We walk down our street and then follow the path at the end that leads toward the beach. There's been a slight break in the stormy weather we've had the past few days so it's nice to see the sun shining, even through thin, wispy clouds. The air is heavy with humidity, more so than normal, and there's a slight chill in the air because of all the rain.

We walk down the beach without talking. I'm stalling as I try to get a clear idea of what I want to say to her. She's so smart, not to mention perceptive, and that makes it next to impossible to get anything past her, as uncomfortable as that might be at times. I cringe just thinking about when it's time to have 'the talk' with her … and then chuckle just a bit when I remember what I told Xavier.

The man's a fool if he thinks I'm letting him off the hook when the time comes.

She's kicking a rock down the beach as we walk along and I glance down at her. She still has a scowl on her face and her little nose is scrunched up - classic Peyton signs she's still put-out with me. The girl definitely has learned the fine art of grudge holding. To her, it's practically an art form.

"I'm sorry you haven't seen Edward for a few days," I begin. I figure it's best to just dive right in.

She humphs and crosses her arms. When she looks up at me, she's glaring. "If he's not mad at me, he must be mad at you. He promised we'd play Monopoly when he got back and we haven't yet," she accuses and my stomach drops.

Damn it.

"Come on, let's sit," I tell her and lead her toward a group of rocks.

I find a spot and wince when she sits as far away from me as she can while still sitting where I told her to. I swallow painfully a few times and close my eyes as I try to figure out how to explain
what's going on without telling her everything. Until Edward and I have a chance to talk, there's no way I'm letting Peyton find out about him being in prison. When the time comes to tell her, it will be Edward's decision as to how.

I owe him that.

"Peyton," I begin slowly, carefully. "I know it's hard for you to understand, but Edward isn't mad at either one of us."

"But why isn't he here? He always comes over on Sundays!" she cries out, clearly not happy with my lame attempt to explain.

I imitate her huff from earlier, totally unsure of what to tell her. I can't tell her he told me something that shocked me so much I can't think straight, because if I do that, she'll want to know what it is. I can't tell her we got in a fight, because that's not the truth, either. We aren't fighting, at all. I just need some space to clear my head so that I can figure out what I want to ask Edward, but Peyton won't understand that either. All she knows is for the past almost two months Edward has been at our house for Sunday dinner and now all of a sudden, he's not going to be.

I don't blame her for being confused; I am, too, truth be told. I know I want Edward. The questions I have don't change that fact. I just need to know more. I know we need to talk; I've just needed a few days to think and absorb everything. I know I'm not ready to see him yet, no matter how much I want to.

And, I really, really want to.

Sighing, I run a hand through my hair - a move that causes a catch in my throat because it's something Edward does so often, but I push that thought back to focus on Peyton.

"P, I just need you to trust me, okay? I know it's confusing and I know you have questions, but Edward just couldn't be here today, that's all. It's not your fault; you didn't do anything wrong."

She eyes me. I can tell she's working things out in her little head, and I don't say anything. I relax a bit when I see her lower her arms and huff in frustration because I haven't given her anything else.

"This is one of those grownup things, isn't it?" she questions shrewdly.

Nodding, I chuckle softly because really, she's way too damn smart sometimes. "It is, baby. I know it's unfair, but really, this is between me and Edward. I know it kind of stinks, but it can't be helped right now."

She jumps off the rock she's sitting on and puts her hands on her hips. "Yeah, it really sucks," she tells me succinctly then turns and walks toward the jetty where her box is buried.

I let her go, not even bothering to get upset about her using the word 'suck' … because she's right. I watch her walk away with a mixture of sadness and love and wish, not for the first time, that Evan was still alive to see what an amazing little girl she is. Thinking about Evan always hits me hard, and this time it's no different … but then again it is.

That consuming sense of loss has lessened. I can feel it, even though it's only a little bit. I know it will always be there, as it should be, but whereas before, anytime I thought about Evan I could only see guilt and blame, now I'm able to remember him … my dear friend and Peyton's father.

I know it's because of Edward. Allowing thoughts of him to come forth, I stare out at the water. Like the rising of the tides, the pull toward Edward is undeniable; it's been there from the very
beginning. It's what sent me running out of The Breakers like a scared little mouse, scurrying away from the big, scary cat to its little hidey-hole. Of course, just like a mouse, I couldn't resist poking my head out, just to see if I could.

Knowing what I do now, remembering what he looked like the first time I saw him, makes so much more sense. That air of danger still lingers around him, but the danger isn't because he's a bad person. I know that with all my heart, even if I'm aware of the fact that I don't really know that much about his life, especially his life before he arrived in Corea. No, the danger is because he's seen things, done things … been exposed to things that in my sheltered life I've never had to imagine. Drugs, guns, fighting, shootings … the only reference I have for any of that is what I see on TV or in a movie, or what I've read about in books. Living in Corea all my life, even though I've been to Boston and New York City and to smaller cities like Bar Harbor and Portland, I've still not been exposed to too much.

People drink and get into drunken brawls at the pub in Ellsworth, or there might be an argument that winds up with a few punches being thrown at the American Legion Hall during a wedding reception, but nothing like what Edward's seen and done. Every year there's at least one fisherman that dies out on the boats, but I've never had to make a life or death decision like Edward did. I've never held a dying man in my arms, his blood coating my hands as I fight to keep him alive. How has he lived with that? And how has living with all he's seen and done changed him? He's as gentle as a lamb with Peyton, with me, too, but I can tell there's always a barely contained anger simmering beneath the surface. I saw a flash of it when he talked to Xavier at Finn's, but then he was more concerned about me than getting into a fight with Xavier. What would it take to make the thread that keeps the lid on all that snap and for everything he's kept bottled inside from exploding?

Can I take a chance on Peyton being a witness to that, or worse yet, what if somehow it got directed toward her? It's these few nagging questions that keep popping up that keep my mind in constant motion. I know what my heart believes; it's my head that keeps playing devil's advocate.

So many questions, I think as I sigh. Looking up I see Peyton perched on top of the rocks of the jetty, her battered tin box in her hands and I smile, thinking back to the night on the beach and the bonfire. I'm still so amazed at the fact that Peyton not only showed Edward her box, but she gave him some of her special treasure. Sure to most people they're ordinary things, but to Peyton, they're magical.

I told her once a few years ago when she started asking about her father that her dad was in heaven and that he would leave her special treasures on the beach so she'd always know he was watching over her. That's why she collects things on the beach and keeps them in her box. We've never shared that story with anyone and she's never shown anyone what's inside … until Edward.

I have no doubt that Edward loves Peyton. It doesn't matter that he hasn't said the words; it's evident in everything he does as far as she's concerned. It's in the way he talks to her and about her, reverent and adoring. It's in the way he looks at her, like she's the shiny, new, first bicycle under the Christmas tree. It's in the way he holds her hand like his sole purpose in life is to always stay by her side, ready to swoop in if she needs it.

He loves her … and I think, no I know, I'm okay with that.

My fingers are in my pocket and pulling out my phone before I even have time to think about it. No matter what things Edward and I have to work out or how long it takes us to do so, the fact remains that Edward and Peyton are best friends. It isn't fair to her … or to him … to pretend they aren't.
I tap the screen to call him before I have a chance to chicken out. It rings once then, "Bella." He says my name on a sad, anxious sigh.

Tears burn the second his voice washes over me and I have to close my eyes to keep them from falling down over my cheeks. My heart aches and a sob gets caught in my throat. Oh, this hurts … so fucking bad. I haven't said anything yet because I know as soon as I open my mouth I'll beg him to come and I'm not ready for that … yet.

I hiccup and I immediately hear, "Baby, don't cry. Please don't cry."

"I'm sorry," I manage to say between deep breaths. I'm sorry for lots of things, but they're not what I called about.

"Bella," he whispers my name again. I can just see his eyes, gray and turbulent, like thunderclouds heavy with rain.

I finally find my voice and say, "Edward." His name stings like a paper cut, acute and quick. I breathe through the pain though and keep going. "I know this isn't fair to ask you, but will you talk to Peyton? She doesn't understand why you're not here and I'm afraid my reason didn't meet with her approval."

He laughs once then it dies immediately. "Of course I will. I've been worried and thinking about her all day … about both of you," he adds on softly after a beat.

"I miss you," I tell him, the words honest and true, spill from my lips before I can stop them.

He's silent for a moment then says, "This might sound totally wrong, but I'm really fucking glad to hear it. It means there's still a chance."

I cradle the phone against my ear and rub my chest over my heart with my other one. I don't say anything so he says "Christ, Bella. I shouldn't … I didn't mean to say that."

I can't help but smile a little at how awkward and unsure he sounds, though I sober quickly when I think about why that is. He wasn't kidding when he mentioned not having much experience.

Glancing at Peyton, I watch her pick something up off the beach and place it carefully in her box. "I have so many questions," I tell him, my own voice a question.

"And I'll answer every one of them," he promises immediately, his voice full of conviction. "I won't keep anything from you, Bella. I promise, even if it's hard to tell you or hard for you to hear. I want you to know everything. I hope you know that I wanted to tell you about Boston for a long time. I wasn't trying to keep it from you; I was just waiting for the right time." At that we both laugh and it feels so good to do it together.

"Well, I'm not sure you managed that, but I'm glad it happened when it did."

"Yeah?" he asks sounding surprised and relieved at the same time. "Your dad said the same thing."

I take a deep tension-relieving breath and shift on the rock to find a more comfortable position. Sitting on a cold, wet rock isn't exactly the most ideal thing, but hearing his voice and feeling closer to him makes the fact that my ass is half asleep fade into the background. A rather telling statement I think.

"I know. He told me Friday night," I answer him a little hesitantly.
I hear him blow out a nervous breath and then he asks, "You're not upset I talked to him are you?" His voice is so small and he sounds so … lonely.

It hits me like a tsunami … he *is* alone. He has no one, well, except for the people's he's met since he arrived here. We're all he has and the realization of that takes my breath away.

My voice cracks but I try to keep it soft and even. "No, of course not, Edward. I'm … I'm really happy you feel like you can go to him. You need someone you can talk to."

He's completely silent for what feels like long minutes and then he whispers, "I talk to Carlisle, too."

I'm stunned and utterly speechless as his words register. I know enough about what Carlisle used to do to understand the huge implication of what he's just told me. Holy shit.

"Bella?" he questions almost frantically.

"I … that's really good. I'm sure it helps?" I try to hide the question buried in that statement, but know I haven't done a very good job at it.

He chuckles, and it sounds like a mixture of self-deprecation and relief all at once. "It does. I wasn't sure it would at first, but yeah, it really has. Carlisle's a pain in my ass about it, and he enjoys being right about the fact that I'm more fucked up than I thought I was." His words are harsh, but there is no denying the respect and affection he feels for Carlisle either.

"Edward." I sigh, hating to hear him sound so … lost and bitter.

He sighs as well and I can picture him running a hand through his hair while he flexes his jaw. I hear him move, like he's pacing back and forth, nervous and agitated. "Bella, I'm not going to lie to you. I have a lot of shit to deal with, most of it I've ignored for a long fucking time. Since getting out and coming here, meeting you and Peyton and everyone else, and finding a job that though it kicks my ass from sunup to sundown, I find I really enjoy, I realize just how much I haven't dealt with. I probably shouldn't tell you that, not while you're thinking about everything else, but fuck, baby, I don't want to lose you," he whispers brokenly.

"You won't." The words are out before I can stop them, but once they are it's as if everything that's wrong is suddenly right again. Tears of relief fall. I clutch the phone like it's a life preserver, which I suppose in a way it is. I feel pieces of my heart, pieces I thought were long since broken and gone forever, fuse back together and for the first time in a really long time, I feel as if I'm finally me … or much closer to the me I want to be.

I've known since Edward rode off on his bike that I wanted him … that I needed him. I've known it a lot longer than that, probably since the first moment he walked into the restaurant. I'm tired of living in the past, of carrying around the guilt I feel every day for Evan's death and I'm tired of being alone.

I want Edward in my life and I want him in Peyton's.

I'm sure of it.

"Bella," he croaks and I can tell he's overcome and shocked and probably not sure he heard me right.

I can hardly believe myself, but I know what I told him is nothing but the truth.
Spying Peyton poking at the sand on the beach with a stick, I snort, and roll my eyes at myself. "We sure have a way with timing don't we?" I ask, meaning for it to be rhetorical but he answers anyway.

"Yeah, we really fucking do."

Peyton looks in my direction and I stand up and wave her over. She twists her mouth at me, like she's going to debate whether to come or not, but I wave her over again and she starts walking slowly toward me. I can't tell, but I'm sure she rolled her eyes and more than likely muttered something under her breath before she does.

"Look, I'm exhausted and I know you are, too. If you still want to, why don't you talk to Peyton and then get some rest. Let me spend the day trying to smooth things over with her and then when we both have clearer heads, we'll talk. I um …" I stammer, knowing it's my turn to give him something. "I want to tell you about Evan."

He sucks in a sharp breath and I can almost see him shaking his head at me. "If you aren't ready, Bella, I'm not going to push. I don't want you to think-"

I cut him off. "Edward, it's time and it's right that you know."

"Okay," he answers quietly. "Sprite's not mad at me is she?"

"No, she's mad at me. She told me it had to be my fault you weren't here today," I tell him honestly. I can hear him start to argue with me, but I cut him off again. "It is my fault. I'm not saying that I did anything wrong because I know I needed time to think about everything, but don't say it's not my fault."

He sighs. "I don't want you to feel bad. I understand why you needed some space."

"Yeah, well, try explaining that to a very opinionated seven-year-old who happens to think you walk on water. I swear you could probably tell her you hate Tom Brady's hair and she would still adore you," I tell him with a shake of my head.

"But, Bella, I do hate Tom Brady's hair. The guy had a ponytail for fuck's sake!"

I giggle, and damn does it feel good. "Yes, well, you won't tell Peyton you hate it, that's the point. It's okay, really. She and I will talk when you get done speaking to her, and make up over some chocolate chip cookies and milk. It'll be fine."

"If you're sure," he says still sounding like he doesn't believe me, but giving in just the same.

"Trust me, if you spend enough time with us, you'll learn all the tricks," I tease.

"I plan on doing just that," he answers in a voice laced with so much … just so much that it brings tears to my eyes.

I sniff and smile telling him, "Good. Here she is. I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Absolutely."

I hand Peyton the phone saying, "Someone wants to talk to you."

She takes the phone and looks at me with a frown on her face that disappears as soon as she hears who's on the other end. "Edward!" she squeals. The smile on her face is so big I'm not sure she can
talk and smile at the same time.

I sit down on the beach, and dig my fingers into the warm, damp sand as her voice fades in and out as she talks to Edward. I stare out at the water and a piercing sense of longing washes over me. I miss the water. I miss swimming in it and being on it … and the sense of freedom and exhilaration that comes along with it.

"Edward, I miss you," I hear Peyton tell him with a little whine in her voice.

I feel bad that she does, but I can't but feel happy at the same time. I miss him, too, but the fact that I do, and the fact that I've basically just told Edward that we're going to try, makes my heart do that stutter step thing. I glance at the water again, marveling at how quickly things can change, and wonder, if sooner than I realize, I might not have to miss the water anymore.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Ahmm," I groan as I stretch, not quite fully awake. I lift my arms over my head, my muscles flex then relax. My fingers rub the sleep out of my eyes and they burn from the grittiness beneath my eyelids. Tentatively, slowly, I open them as I sit up. "Damn," I mutter, when I notice the disarray of the sheets and comforter twisted around my legs and on top of the bed.

I'm still for a moment, and a sense of unease settles around me, like a heavy, wet blanket. It's obvious from the soreness in my body and the chaos on my bed that my sleep was anything but easy, but when I close my eyes again and try to think, I can't remember waking up from a nightmare during the night. There's a sour taste in my mouth and my stomach lurches as I wrack my brain but still comes up blank. I remember laying in bed with Peyton for the longest time, reading and talking, and then coming to bed, but after that … nothing. My skin breaks out in goosebumps. I wrap my arms tightly around myself and rub my skin. It doesn't help. I'm still chilled to the bone.

"What the hell?" I mumble again. I need to get in the shower but for some reason, I don't want to get out of bed. It's like if I do, whatever plagued me while I slept is somehow going to manifest itself into some evil incarnation in the light of day. I shake my head at myself and decisively set my feet on the floor. Like a ghost is following me, I scurry to the bathroom and shut the door tightly behind me, barely resisting the urge to lock it.

"Get a grip, you damn baby," I hiss at my reflection in the mirror. I flip the faucets for the shower and quickly undress, yipping loudly when I step under the water and it's not quite hot yet. Even when the water is almost uncomfortably hot, I'm still shivering, though thankfully not as much. It doesn't take long to do what I need to do and by the time I shut the water off, I feel a little better. Stepping out of the shower, I grab a towel and wrap it tightly around me then hurry back to my room so I can get dressed. I'm not sure why, but I grab a pair of jeans instead of the shorts I've been wearing lately, put my Breakers t-shirt on, and slide my cell phone in my pocket. Walking out into the hall, I look toward Peyton's room but I decide to let her sleep in a little bit so I make my way quietly downstairs. When I glance out the front windows, I stop dead in my tracks.

It's no damn wonder I've felt like I just watched a black cat walk under a ladder. Even though it's supposed to be light outside, it's almost black because the storm clouds are so thick, like the smoke from a grease fire, heavy and menacing. I can't tell, but with the wind blowing, it looks like it's the middle of winter instead of the middle of summer and I shudder imagining it just as cold, too. The knock on the door makes me jump out of my skin. When I open the door and Xavier's standing there, my heart feels like it's going to race right out of my chest.
"Jesus, Xav, you scared the bejeebus out of me," I tell him, my skin prickling all over when a gust of wind follows him inside.

He shuts the door behind him and stomps his feet before he looks at me. "Well, good morning to you, too, sunshine," he says as he tips his head to the side. "You look better," he continues and the inflection at the end of his statement lets me know he's hoping I tell him why.

I scared the hell out of him on Friday, when he showed up to take me to work. To say I looked awful is being extremely kind. Eyes almost swollen shut, nose red and running, cheeks splotchy and tear-stained, I was a mess. It was even worse because I wouldn't … couldn't tell him what was wrong. After he threatened Edward for the fifth or sixth time, I exploded and told him to shut the hell up about Edward and that if he said one more bad thing about him, he could damn well leave. After that, he was silent though he watched me like a hawk all day.

I hate keeping things from him, but there was no way I was going to tell him about Edward, not then and not yet either. There are still so many things to ask Edward and understand before I even think about talking to Xavier about it. I imagine everyone will have to know or will find out now that Emmett knows.

I still can't believe he followed Mom and me to our parents' house and listened to us talking before jumping in like a raving lunatic. I don't care that his excuse is he knew there was something wrong and he was just trying to help; he had no right to do that.

Shaking my head, I focus again on Xavier who is still looking at me with his eyebrows raised. "I am better," I answer him simply and giggle when he grunts at me.

"Bell, you never used to keep things from me. What's going on? You looked like death warmed over on Friday morning and it was obvious you'd been crying for hours. If Edward did anything … " he warns.

I hold up my hand, stopping that train of thought right there. I might not be ready or able to tell him about Edward's past, but I won't let him badmouth him either. "Xav, stop. Just stop, okay? I'm a big girl. I don't need you to feel like you need to swoop in and protect me from everything anymore. It's gone on long enough and it's time for all of you to stop sheltering me because you all think I'm going to break at the least little thing."

I huff and turn, looking out the window as I try to get my emotions back under control. I've let everyone baby me for far too long … because it was easier than accepting what happened to Evan and moving past it. I can see that now. I don't know whether it was the talk with my mom last week, or finding out about Edward and realizing how much he's suffered and seeing that he still tries everyday to accept what's happened to him, or if it was listening to Emmett jump to conclusions about Edward and then assume to know what's best for me, but whether it was one thing or a combination of all of them, I know I've not helped myself at all by letting the people around me coddle me as if I was a fragile piece of glass.

Yesterday when I told Edward he wouldn't lose me, it was the first time in years I did something for me … and made a decision based on what I want rather than being too afraid to take a step because I'm suffocated by guilt.

It was … freeing.

Liberating.

And most of all - right.
My feelings for Edward are right. I know they are. I also know we have a ways to go before there are declarations of love and promises made, but that doesn't take away from the fact that he's become someone I can't live without. It seems as if I've ripped the floaties right off and dived straight into the deep end but it's what I want.

He's what I want.

I don't have any idea where the clarity has come from. Maybe it was hearing Edward's voice yesterday, maybe it has something to do with the dreams I can't remember from last night, I don't have any idea, but what I do know is, standing here, in the not so bright light of day, I can see things clearer than I ever have before.

"Bella?" Xavier asks when I haven't said anything for a few minutes.

I turn around and look at him and feel my mouth lift in a smile.

He stares at me but doesn't say anything. He watches, waits, then smiles himself. When he nods at me once before walking toward the kitchen, even the dreary weather outside can't put a damper on the giddiness I feel bubbling inside of me.

We make small talk as I fix our breakfast. He fills me in on the weekend he spent with Seth. They actually spent the night on Saturday in Bar Harbor and didn't get back home until late last night. I love hearing about their time together, only because it's so rare that they venture outside the safety and comfort of Corea together.

"He still won't move in with me." Xavier huffs as he pops a grape from the fruit bowl into his mouth.

I finish whisking the eggs and pour them into the skillet before turning around to face him. This argument has been going on between the two of them for far too long in my opinion and though I have a tendency to side with Seth when it comes to their fights, in this one, I'm firmly in Xavier's corner.

"I'm sorry, Xav," I tell him as I hand him a glass of orange juice and pour one for myself. "I know how much you want him to."

He sighs. "He does, too. That's what's so damn frustrating. It's not like the entire damn town doesn't already know we're together."

"Yeah, but his parents don't know," I remind him, though it's nothing he isn't more than a little aware of.

Seth and Xavier didn't 'come out' until after high school and by then Seth had decided he was staying in Corea to be with Xavier and Seth's parents moved away to be closer to his sister, Kim, and her family. Kim is a few years older than Seth and met her future husband on a mission trip to South America. Since Seth's parents have moved away, they've become much more rigid in their religious beliefs and Seth's relationship with Xavier would certainly be met with much disappointment, not to mention vitriol. Seth isn't close to them, but so far he hasn't been able to tell them he's gay.

It's the one thing that tests their relationship more than anything.

Xavier slams his glass on the counter and shakes his head, muttering, "Well, I wish he'd just tell them, damn it. I want us to live together. It makes no sense for him to keep staying at the boarding house. Hell, he spends more time with me at my place anyway."
I walk around the island and sit on the stool next to him. I reach up and throw my arm around him, though it doesn't go very far because the guy is a freaking giant. "I love you two, but I hate when you fight about this. I know it's hard, but they're his family, Xavier."

He's shaking his head before I'm even done. "No, I am, and you and Peyton are. And Carlisle and Esme and everyone else, here, are his family." He's emphatic and it brings tears to my eyes to hear the hurt in his voice, but also the strength of what he believes.

"I know and you're right." I lean over and lay my head on his shoulder.

"I've missed you, Bell," he says quietly and my heart swells when he kisses the top of my head. "I know you've got this new whatever the fuck you wanna call it going on with Edward, and besides seeing you upset on Friday, you've been happier than you've ever been, but just promise me that you'll still make time for me. I need my best girl to help me keep my boyfriend in line. He's scared of you; he just laughs at me."

I giggle, and cuddle closer to him. "I'll always be here for you," I whisper. Swallowing against the unsurprising lump that's just formed in my throat, I tell him, "I'm going to tell Edward about Evan."

Silence. It stretches for what seems an interminable amount of time before he slips his arm from my grasp and then wraps it tightly around me. "I'm so fucking proud of you," he says and his own voice is thick with emotion. "I can't even begin to tell you how happy I am to hear that. Things must be okay between the two of you if you're taking that step?" he questions and I know he's still wondering about Friday.

I lift my head, not even attempting to hide my smile. "They will be," I answer him cryptically.

He tips his head to the side and he holds my gaze for a moment. "You still aren't going to tell me what Friday was all about?" he asks incredulously.

"Nope."

I hop off the stool and rush to the stove, barely catching the eggs before they burn.

Peyton joins us, sleep rumpled and wearing a mismatched pair of shorts and a t-shirt. She's half asleep through most of breakfast, at least until Xavier asks about Edward and dinner yesterday. Apparently a pan of chocolate chip cookies, a double feature of Tangled (for the hundredth time it seems like) and The Little Mermaid which is both our favorites, hasn't completely absolved me in her eyes because she scowls in my direction. "He didn't come. Mom says it's between her and Edward," she mimics in a totally unflattering way. I don't sound anywhere near as whiny as she's imitating.

"Peyton," I warn. I've allowed her a little leeway where the situation is concerned only because I know it's upsetting and confusing to her, but enough is enough.

I didn't ask her about her phone call with Edward, knowing that whatever they talk about is between them and I trust the fact that he wouldn't say more than just the bare minimum of why he didn't come to dinner.

"Sorry," she mumbles sheepishly.

Xavier is watching the exchange with a bit of a smirk on his face, though he also seems a bit uncomfortable, too.

I clear the dishes and get the dishwasher loaded, purposely not looking at him and not mentioning
anything about what Peyton said. Once she's grabbed her backpack and I grab my purse and phone, we head out the door. A gust of wind swirls around and the wind chimes that hang in the corner of the front porch ring out almost eerily. There are a few stubborn rays of daylight that manage to sneak through the heavy blanket of clouds and somehow they seem more ominous than if it was just overcast.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I grab it, wondering if it's Alice or Rose. I lose my balance as I walk, tripping over an invisible bump in the yard and my phone fumbles in my hand while I right myself. I stick my tongue out at the laughing duo climbing into the truck and when I lift the phone up to look at the text message, I almost drop it again because the message has stunned me stupid.

Edward.

*Just wanted to tell you good morning and I hope you have a good day. I'll be thinking about you! E*

I start bouncing up and down like a kid on a sugar high when the phone vibrates again.

*Shit I hope its ok I sent you a message? Um k bye*

And then once more.

*Oh and tell Sprite I miss her too!* 

And now I'm squealing in such a high pitch I'm sure the neighbor's dog is running around in frantic circles from the noise.

Swoon. I rub my chest, above my heart, and it literally feels like it's trying to reach through my body and grab the phone clear out of my hand so it can place it right next to it. A kind of creepy thought I admit, but true nonetheless. I swear my smile is so big my cheeks hurt and it's in that moment that I'm desperate to see him.

So damn bad.

I'm ready to tell him about Evan, I'm ready to ask the questions I need answers to, and then, I'm ready to be his. I want to be his just like I want him to be mine. No more ghosts of our pasts, no more shadows that hang around like a dark cloud … only the bright, wide-open future, one that's full of endless possibilities.

I snort at myself and shake my head and wonder when the hell I turned into Harlequin Romance novel heroine, wiping my brow with the back of my hand while my voluptuous breasts heave as I proclaim my undying love to the male hero with the unbuttoned down to his navel shirt.

Then I giggle as if I've been given laughing gas at the dentist and slap a hand over my mouth to stifle the ridiculous sound from escaping. I look up and Xavier and Peyton are both looking at me as if I've lost my ever-loving mind and all I can do is shrug my shoulders and walk toward the truck so we can go.

"Do I even need to ask you who that was from?" Xavier teases when I get in my seat. I roll my eyes at him in answer.

Like he doesn't know.

Jerk.
He keeps glancing in my direction then snickering at me. I can only imagine the goofy look on my face, but I don't even care.

"Mom?" Peyton asks quietly from the backseat.

I turn around and wait for her to finish her question. Her face is serious; her slate blue eyes far away as she watches out the window as we pass the trees that go by in a blur of green. Instantly I'm overtaken with a sense of déjà vu, remembering the day she and I drove by the docks and she declared that Edward needed her more than Xavier did. Little did I know how true those words would turn out to be.

Though I realize now that she's needed him just as much.

We both have.

"What is it, baby?" I ask gently. For some reason my heart is beating wildly in my throat and the hair on the back of my neck is standing on end. I don't feel a sense of foreboding exactly, it's more like anticipation.

It's been there since I opened my eyes this morning, this niggling feeling of … something. Actually I think it's been there since I went to sleep last night. This sense of impending change.

She wrings her hands, twisting them around nervously before she asks in a voice that I have to bend closer to be able to hear, "Did Edward send me a message?"

The end of my nose burns and my throat constricts as I swallow slowly. It's not as if I need a reminder of how special the relationship between Edward and Peyton really is, but hearing the hope and the blatant love in her voice for him only serves to reinforce what I already know. I turn my head to the side and blink a few times, hoping to keep the tears I feel in the corners of my eyes from falling. I glance at Xavier and remember our conversation from this morning and I can hear, again, the hurt in his voice that Seth is still holding back from fully committing to him, all because he's scared.

I'm tired of being scared.

Telling Edward about Evan isn't going to be easy. In fact it will be the hardest thing I've ever done, but I can't help but feel a little disappointed in myself, too. What Edward told me wasn't easy for him, but he did it. He'd planned on doing it for a while. I know there were plenty of times over the past few weeks he was ready to talk; I just wasn't ready to listen because that meant me talking about Evan in return.

He's already let me know that he wants me and Peyton in his life. He's made that plain to see. He might have things he needs to work on, demons he needs to face, but he's willing to do what he needs to so that we can be together … he's just waiting on me to do the same.

I'm ready.

Smiling, I hand her the phone and let her pull up his message and laugh lightly when she types something right back to him in response. I have no idea when he'll get it; I'm shocked he was able to send a message this morning in the first place. The only thing I can figure is Dad and the guys got a late start for some reason and he sent it before they headed out. I worry for a moment about Emmett and say a silent prayer that he doesn't do anything stupid as far as Edward is concerned. It will be the first time he's seen Edward since finding out about him being in prison, and on top of that, he doesn't know the whole story so jumping in Edward's face about it will only make things
worse on everyone.

We get to the restaurant just as she's finishing sending her text. I let out a low groan when I see Rose wearing out the pavement in front of the back door. I expected nothing less; in fact I'm more than a little surprised I didn't receive a visit from her or my jackass of a brother yesterday. From the look on her face, I can tell Emmett's told her what he found out and she's none too happy.

Shit.

I mentally try to brace myself for the tongue-lashing she's been itching to give me, judging from the way her eyes narrow once Xavier parks the truck. I immediately bristle though, because for one I'm more than sure Emmett didn't tell her everything because he doesn't even know it all and two, it's really none of her damn business anyway. Peyton races past me, excited to see her Nana because it's been a few days. Friday night I had called her friend, Lucy's, mom and asked for a favor so that Peyton could go over there and spend the night. I knew I wasn't in any shape to have to entertain her all evening, not when I was barely holding it together.

Xavier takes his time walking past, the damn gossip monger, but when I shoot him a look, he twists his mouth and shakes his head, following Peyton inside.

I'm defensive right off the bat. The judgment and preconceived ideas are already shooting off her like static electricity and it's pissed me off before she even utters one word. I cross my arms over my chest and stare at her, eyebrows raised, shoulders straight, and mouth in a tight, thin line.

"What?" I snap, surprising her with the bite of my tone.

She presses her lips together and narrows her eyes at me. "Easy, tiger. I just wanted to make sure you're okay. Emmett, well … he told me about Edward. I'm sorry, Bell."

Oh, now, that just … I grit my teeth.

"For what exactly?" I manage to ask, though I have to force the words out.

She looks at me with a mixture of pity and confusion and I curl my hands into tight fists, my fingernails gouging into my skin. "Well, you obviously can't be around him anymore or let Peyton spend time with him. I know you really liked him, both of you. It's just such a shame; he really seemed like a nice guy."

I take a deep breath and remind myself that she's my sister-in-law, one of my oldest friends, and I love her. I don't like her very much right now, but she is family and it's clear Emmett only told her part of the story. I love my brother, I do, but he better be damn glad he's in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean right now, because I could seriously kill him with my bare hands.

Slowly, painfully … hopefully with plenty of begging for mercy, which I have not one iota of at the present moment in time.

How fucking dare he? I scream in my head.

After another deep breath, I'm pretty sure I can speak without losing my temper. Maybe. Even after Edward told me about being in prison and what happened to him, I didn't believe that he was a bad person. Sure, my first instinct was disbelief, and maybe, for like half a second, I wondered if I'd misjudged him, but that thought was gone faster than I had time to think it.

And for Emmett to rush home and rant to Rose when he doesn't even know everything is just wrong.
"Rose, I love you, but shut the hell up," I hiss at her, angry all over again … or still. My hands are sweating and adrenaline is pumping through my veins. I can feel my breathing getting faster and faster and I concentrate on not screaming until my throat catches on fire out of sheer frustration.

Her eyebrows disappear into her hair and her blue eyes are so big it's a wonder they don't fall clear out of her head. "I don't suppose my darling brother bothered to tell you the entire story, did he?"

"Edward's been in prison for the past seven years for attempted murder and armed robbery. It's kind of a no-brainer, Bella. You're going to send him packing aren't you?" she says like it's assumed that I will just cave and take the easy way out.

That stings.

Badly.

Especially because I can see why she would make that assumption.

Christ, I've been such a fool, but now isn't the time to visit that difficult topic.

"On the contrary, dear sister. If your dumbass husband would have stuck around instead of throwing a temper tantrum and then storming out of the house, he might have gotten the whole story. Now, he just looks like a freaking idiot." I sneer, anger pouring out of me.

She stares, looking very much like she's just swallowed a bug and says, "What are you talking about?"

So I tell her. Not quite everything, because there are details that while I haven't asked Edward, I know he'd rather keep private, or at least I'm keeping them that way until we talk. I imagine my dad knows most if not all of what I know, my mom, too, but somehow I just know we're the only ones.

By the time I'm done Rose has turned positively crimson, fire shooting out of her eyes and her mouth uttering words that would make the saltiest of fisherman blush. "Why that … " she mutters with a mixture of anger and disappointment.

Sighing, I step forward. Most of the anger and tension I felt when I walked up a few minutes ago is gone, leaving in its place a huge sense of relief. It shocks me momentarily that I feel that way, but I am relieved beyond words. After hearing most of Edward's story, Rose has come to the same conclusion I have and my parents and Carlisle and Esme have, too. Edward's a good man that deserves this second chance.

It means so much that she can see that, knowing what she does.

Now if she can just make Emmett realize how unfair he's being.

Neither of us say anything for a moment until she starts chuckling. I look at her, eyebrows quirked in question. She stares intently at me and then smiling she says, "You're not running."

I shake my head and sigh, a bit sadly I suppose, hating that she thought I would do that. I give her a shaky smile and look at her through watery eyes. "The only running I plan on doing is to Edward and not away from him," I tell her softly.

Before I know what's happening, she's wrapped me in a tight hug, and she squeezes the snot out of me. 'I'm so fucking happy for you. You leave Emmett to me, Bella. By the time I'm done with him, he'll wish he was stuck on the boat for a week in the middle of football season." Her tone is
evil and I almost feel sorry for my brother … almost.

I know the time is coming when he and I will need to have a heart to heart. His reaction on Friday solidified that for me. I've felt it was past time, and now I know for sure it is.

Rose kisses me on the cheek saying, "We better get in there before Alice comes and finds us."

I stop her right before we get to the door and tell her, "I hate keeping things from Ali, but until I talk to Edward, please don't tell her anything. He deserves to be able to tell everyone in his own way."

She nods. We put our aprons on and I flash Xavier a quick smile to let him know I'm okay. The breakfast rush has cleared out and we get right to work getting things ready for lunch. I look up and glance out the window, shivering when I notice the sky has gotten even darker than it was when we got here. My skin prickles and I try to shake off the uneasy feeling that has suddenly surrounded me.

As I'm filling up ketchup bottles, Rose stands next to me and whispers, "When are you going to talk to him?"

Now that she's on board the Edward train, apparently she's not wasting anytime butting her nose in, God love her.

I shrug my shoulders and lean closer to her. "I told him yesterday that we'd talk once both of us got some much-needed rest and had clearer heads."

She eyeballs me, doubt radiating out. "What?" I hiss as I try to keep my voice low. "Give me a break, Rose. I'm going to talk to him, I just don't know when."

She snorts and walks away and I glare at her back.

A crack of thunder makes me drop the bottle of ketchup and my hands shake as I bend down to pick it up. I hurry to the window, and my skin breaks out in goosebumps when I look toward the docks. The waves are crashing against the rocks, and now the wind is howling. I can hear the faint sound of the buoys as they rock back and forth in the harbor and my eyes are frantically searching the horizon for any sign of the Isabella Marie.

"He's fine, baby," Mom says softly from beside me.

I shake my head, unable to speak. I have this urgent need to see him, touch him … just hear his voice.

Sheets of rain stream down over the windows, obscuring everything outside. I hear thunder rumble again and it shakes the entire restaurant, or maybe that's just me shaking.

I turn toward the window again, frozen still as my eyes strain to see even the slightest sight of the boat.

"Bella?" Mom questions worriedly.

"I need to see him. I need to tell him. I've waited and I don't want to wait," I ramble. "Xavier and Seth, I don't want that. I … " I breathe deeply in and out.

Mom's phone rings and she picks it up and places it next to her ear. I watch, eager and anxious, my heart pounding faster with each passing second. "They're on their way in," she tells me, getting
word from Aggie.

Without even thinking about it, I race to the kitchen. I grab a pair of rain boots and a raincoat from the closet in the office. Mom and Rose follow me. I have no idea what they've told Alice, but I don't have time to worry about it now.

"Mom, Peyton," I say as I struggle into the boots, not even sure what I'm asking. I'm going on pure instinct now, and every fiber of my being is screaming at me to go to Edward.

"Will be fine with me for the rest of the day. Do what you need to do for you, baby," she tells me kissing me on the forehead before leaving.

I get tangled up in the jacket in all my twisting and turning. Rose swats my hands away and gently helps me get my arms inside. She spins me around and silently ties the coat closed. When she's done, she looks at me, her eyes swimming in tears. "Go to him, Bella."

I smile.

I hug her quickly and run toward the back door, snagging an umbrella as I go. I hear Xavier mutter, "What the hell?" but I don't hear what Rose says back because I'm running.

Running toward my future.

Running toward Edward.

I get to the dock and I'm panting … and soaked because I ran all the way without opening the damn umbrella or putting the hood of my jacket on. I shake my head and squeeze some of the water out of my hair. I don't have any idea what I'm going to say to him when I see him, but I don't have time to think about it because when I look up, the boat is almost to the mooring.

I watch him, moving agilely across the deck and my chest swells with pride. He's learned so much and is trying so hard. The rain thumps against the umbrella and a gust of wind almost rips it out of my hand but I manage to hang on. My body feels electric, I'm just vibrating with so many pent-up emotions. I want to yell for him, but I don't.

I clutch the railing along the dock, my fingers digging into the wet, soft wood. Anything to keep myself in place. Finally the boat stops and I move the umbrella so I can see him. He laughs at something Jasper says and when he shakes his head, drops of water fly everywhere. When his head whips around he sees me. He freezes. He looks shocked for about two seconds and then a blinding smile appears on his face, one that not even the rain can hide.

The boat doesn't even come to a complete stop before he's jumping off and running toward me. I drop the umbrella and run to him, throwing myself into his arms as soon as he's close enough.

"Bella," he says, his voice struggling out of his mouth.

I hold his face in my hands, looking at him through rain and tears.

"I'm ready."

~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

She's ready! I have to tell you, I've had the scene of Bella running to meet Edward on the dock in my head for MONTHS! I'm so glad to finally be here, and I know you are, too! Does anyone feel sorry for Emmett? Rose is going to have a field day with him, don't you think?
Okay, so next chapter will be from Edward's POV and we'll hear all about Evan. I know you all have been dying for that and for some more citrus, that's all the next chapter is.

Have you checked out *The Breakers* blog this week? We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts. It's fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

We've also set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for *The Breakers*. Join the group and see what everyone has to say … I'm thinking after this chapter and as we move through the next few, there will be plenty to talk about. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www.facebook.com/groups/137144056381565/

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! I'm posting this from the road so leave me lots of love to come home to, okay? Oh, and fingers crossed for my son's soccer team, okay? We have huge games this weekend and we need lots of good luck wishes!

Thanks so much for reading!

See you next Sunday...

Erin~
Chapter 15

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers - they all work so hard to help me and I wouldn't know what to do without them!

WOW! I am totally blown away by the response to *The Breakers*! Thank you all so much for giving this one a chance. Hope you stay with me for the ride.

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

An even bigger thank you to everyone that voted and made *The Breakers* the Fic of the Month at The Lemonade Stand! I am so shocked and so, SO grateful and excited … and honored. Truly. Special thanks goes to Nic, Michelle, Tracy, and Jaime for all the incredible support and love! Love you girls XOXO~

tehlemonadestand(.)blogspot(.)com

Now, on with the story ...

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 15

EPOV

"Man, you need to wear a hat or cut off that mop on top of your head," Jasper says loudly as we head toward the dock.

He's right of course, but I don't tell him that. Sure, I've gotten the hang of most things on the boat, but small things, like always making sure I have a hat on or at least in my pocket, still slip my mind from time to time. In my defense, there was a lot running through my head when I rolled out of bed this morning. For one I had the best night's sleep I've had in almost a week. Two, I woke up sporting the biggest damn smile, not to mention a raging hard-on.

As soon as my head hit the pillow last night, I was out like a damn light. The fact that I woke up without a huge weight crushing my chest was, in and of itself, a welcome relief. The fact that my dreams were obviously pleasant ones judging from the attention my dick was demanding, instead of the nightmares of the past few nights, was even more so.

"You won't lose me."

I must have replayed those words a hundred times … hell, a thousand times between yesterday and today. When Bella called yesterday I'd been laying in bed, staring at the ceiling and trying desperately not to think about the fact that it was Sunday and I wasn't going to see my girls. It didn't work because they were all I could think about, wondering what they were doing without me
and if just maybe, possibly, they missed me as much as I missed them.

I'd been a mess to put it bluntly.

Saturday had been absolute hell on the boat. It was even worse than Friday, working on no sleep after days of no sleep for days before. It actually reminded me of my first few days inside Old Colony where every few minutes I was spinning around because it felt like someone was about to jump me. After a few hours of working, I turned once to find Emmett staring daggers at me and I knew, without even asking, that somehow he'd found out about Boston.

He didn't say a word to me, not one, and barely spoke to Jasper or Charlie either. He's still acting like I have the plague, and though it makes things pretty fucking tense on the boat, I can't say it comes as a huge shock, either.

I've figured this whole time that Emmett would be the one I had to worry about more than anyone … even more than Xavier. From the little things that he's said and the not so little things Bella and I have talked about, I've gotten the feeling that Emmett somehow believes that he has a say in what she does and who she does it with - a right that Bella surely hasn't offered him.

I have no idea what he knows or who told him, though instinctively I know it wasn't Bella. I'm not sure how he found out, but in the grand scheme of things, it really doesn't matter. Everyone will know before long, though the only people's feelings I truly care about are Bella's and Peyton's. Charlie and Renée already know as do Carlisle and Esme, and they've accepted me as I am, not for where I've been. I care a lot about Jasper, Alice, Emmett, Rose, Seth, and yes, even Xavier, but if they have a problem with where I've been or what I've done, it doesn't matter as long as Bella doesn't.

She and Peyton are the only things that matter.

I shake my head and wipe water out of my face. A flash of color catches my attention. I turn. I see. I freeze.

Bella.

She's here.

Every fiber of my being comes alive, like a jolt of electricity has just been pumped into me.

Jasper says something. He could have just told me that an orange elephant was standing beside me, and it wouldn't make a difference. She's all I see. I smile and have the most ridiculous urge to wave like Forrest Gump did on his shrimp boat. Charlie slows the boat down as he approaches the dock but I don't even wait until he comes to complete stop before I jump off, unable to wait another second to go to her.

I see her drop her umbrella and then she's running. To me. My feet are moving, each step bringing us closer together. A few more steps, my feet splashing through puddles, but I don't give a shit. I reach out when she's only a few steps away from me and catch her as she throws herself into my arms.

She's soaked, I'm soaked, but I couldn't care less.

Her legs go around my waist and I wrap my arms around her, squeezing her to me. My whole body screams in relief to hold her. Looking up into her eyes, I struggle to breathe.

"Bella," I manage to say, though my voice doesn't sound at all like me. Hoarse from the emotion
threatening to spill out, too many words wanting to come out at one time to be able to say anything but her name.

She grabs my face, holding it firmly between her small hands and I'm graced with a smile that is brighter than the sun. She's crying, the rain is still falling softly around us, but it's as if we're the only two people in the world because everything has faded away but her.

"I'm ready," she says.

My knees wobble. I dig my fingers into her ass to keep her from falling.

I don't need to ask her for what, because I know. The fact that she's here, that she's waiting for me is all the proof I need.

"Oh, Jesus," I say though I should be saying that in thanks to above. "Bella," I struggle to say again.

She leans down and when her lips meet mine, I swear it takes all I have not to throw her down on the ground, rip her clothes off, and take her right there. Unadulterated, all-consuming need rages through me and I kiss her back with all I have. I want to bury my fingers in her hair, but I can't let go of her.

I grunt in frustration because I can't get close enough to her, not standing in the middle of the dock in front of … oh, hell. Charlie, Jasper … Emmett.

Apparently she must get the same idea because she pulls away slightly and looks around. "Let's go home and we'll finish this there. Alone," she emphasizes.

My dick weeps for joy.

I can only hope that when she says alone it means what both my dick and I hope it means. I know we need to talk, I know there's still so much left to tell each other, but I've been fighting my feelings for the gorgeous, sexy woman in my arms for more than two months now, and I can't wait any longer.

God, I hope I don't have to wait any longer.

Reluctantly I set her down on the ground, though I don't let her get too far from me. I take her hand in mine and pull her as close to me as I can get her. We walk toward the parking lot and I look around for Cherry, but don't see Bella's beast of a truck anywhere.

Looks like we're taking the bike, not that I mind that in the least. I've been dying to get Bella on it.

When we approach the motorcycle, she stands beside it and looks at me a bit sheepishly, blushing adorably. And sexy as hell, too.

"I … um … I rode with Xavier," she tells me, though I'd already figured that out.

I reach out and brush her hair back over her shoulder and then use my finger to wipe the raindrops off her cheek. It's mostly stopped raining, just a few intermittent drops here and there, even though the sky is still smoky gray.

Stepping closer to her, I waggle my eyebrows. "I've been hoping for a chance to get you to take a ride with me, now you don't have a choice."

She giggles and then looks at me. Drops of water stick to her eyelashes. There are pieces of her hair
stuck to her cheeks and neck, smudges of black from her mascara pool beneath her eyes, and the tip of her nose is pink, but I have never seen a more beautiful sight.

"I didn't plan on meeting you on the dock," she admits softly.

I stare at her, wordlessly, and my mouth hangs open.

Nervously, she pushes her drenched hair back over her ear. Now that the initial shock of finding her waiting for me has worn off a bit, I do wonder what made her come to me, now, the way she did.

As if she can read my mind she rambles, "Xav came over this morning and told me about a fight he and Seth had, and when we were on the way to work, Peyton asked about you and I remembered her telling me how much you needed her right after you first got here. Then I thought about Seth and Xav not being together all the time even though they both want it, and it started storming and all I wanted … was you."

"Oh, baby," I say on a sigh.

My heart stops then takes off. I'm turned on and so fucking happy I can hardly see straight, and I pull her to me, covering her mouth with mine again. This time I kiss her slowly, now able to hold her like the precious treasure she is. My tongue dips and tastes, in and out, slow and easy. I seriously think I could stay here forever and keep kissing her, but I hear footsteps off in the distance, a car start up, and realize we need to be alone before I get any more carried away.

I really, REALLY want to get carried away.

"Home?" I ask her, peppering her lips, her cheeks, and the end of her nose with kisses.

She nods and I climb on my bike, turning to pat the spot behind me. The seat is soaking wet, but then again so is she, so I don't figure it matters all that much if she gets a little wetter. Thinking that word makes my jeans get a bit more uncomfortable than they already are. I really should try and stop myself from letting my mind go places it shouldn't, at least not until we get to her house and have a chance to talk.

When she slips in behind me and wraps her arms around me, I literally melt against her. "No helmets, Edward?" she says into my ear, and her voice sends chills up my spine.

I shake my head, feeling a bit like a dumbass. "Sorry. When it's just me I don't think anything about it," I tell her looking back over my shoulder at her.

She rubs her hands back and forth across my chest and damn if it's not the best thing I've felt, well, for about the last minute or two, since I last kissed her.

"You need to be more careful." Her voice is gentle with its reprimand and I can't help but smile at her while I hold her hand in place.

"If you promise to ride with me more, I'll buy us both helmets," I tell her, meaning it completely.

I wait until she nods and then lower her hand to my waist. I back up slowly once I get the bike turned on and then pull out of the parking lot and head for her house. As soon as we start going, she lays her head against the middle of my back. Damn, I think in wonder as I cover her hand with mine, it's amazing how quickly things can change. I knew after the phone call yesterday that things would change between Bella and me, but I sure as hell never imagined it would be right away.
Her words, "I'm ready," bounce around inside my head like one of those little rubber bouncy balls as I drive over the wet streets, being careful to not go through any puddles. Ready, I think again. Is she ready to tell me about Evan? Is she ready to be with me … and what exactly does that mean anyway? Something as lame as boyfriend and girlfriend or is it more than that? What is the 'more' if there is more?

I think back to a conversation I had with Carlisle the day before when I'd finally been able to drag my sorry ass out of bed once I'd talked to Bella and Peyton.

I find him sitting on the steps outside their back door and I drop myself beside him with a huff and hand him a beer. He takes it without saying anything, but as is always the case when it comes to him and his damn doctor voodoo shit, all he has to do is tip his head to the side, quirk that one eyebrow, and wait for me to spill like an overflowing bucket.

"So, Bella called," I begin, fighting to keep from breaking out into one of those songs I see on that Hannah Montana show Peyton watches on the Disney Channel.

He takes a drink of his beer, eyeballing me down the bottle.

And waits.

I really hate when he does that shit, though I should be used to it by now.

"She wanted me to talk to Peyton," I tell him, picking at the label of my bottle. I can't help but smile when I think about my Sprite. I reach in my pocket and take out the seashell that has been my constant companion since she gave it to me. I'm shocked I haven't worn out the ridges I've run my thumb over it so much.

"Hmmm," is all he says.

Ass.

I take a drink and stare out over the backyard. The sun is still fighting with the clouds though now it seems to be losing the battle, as a dark cloud bank rolls in from the east. I wonder what Bella and Peyton are going to have for dinner. I think about the fact that I still haven't gotten to play Monopoly with Peyton - a fact of which she reminded me of more than a few times during our phone call. I wonder if Bella has added peanut butter chips to her chocolate chip cookies because Peyton loves peanut butter and chocolate together, but she doesn't like Reese's.

I wonder if she has any idea how I thought I was going to throw up when I heard my phone ring when she called earlier or how just hearing her voice made everything better in an instant. I wonder if she knows how hearing her cry almost broke me all over again.

I wonder if she knows that she and Peyton are the most important people in my life.

"She told me that I won't lose her and that we'll talk soon," I continue on as if I haven't just gotten lost inside my own head for the past few minutes.

Of course he knows exactly what I mean when I say this because since she sent me away Thursday night, I've pretty much talked to him every free moment I've had. I haven't had a panic attack, a fact of which I'm pretty damn glad about, but I came close when I first got home right after. The crushing feeling of leaving her in that front yard stayed with me for hours and it took Carlisle telling me over and over again that 'I need time' didn't mean 'get the fuck out of my life' like I kept trying to convince myself it meant, to get me to calm down.
I turn and look at him when there's a long silence that stretches uncomfortably. "Are you ready for that?" he asks carefully. "You know she's more than likely going to ask you some very difficult questions. What if she asks about your time in prison, about the things you've been through? What if she wants to talk to you about the night you were arrested or how it felt to be denied permission to attend your grandfather's funeral? What if she asks you what your plans are for the future regarding her ... and Peyton? Are you ready to answer her?" he prods.

My first instinct, as usual, is to get pissed off that he's implying I'm not ready, but I take a deep breath and think about what he's asked. All the things he's brought up I've already thought about of course, and even if they're difficult to answer, I'm prepared to answer them all ... except the last one.

What do I want for the future as far as Bella and Peyton are concerned?

I don't answer him and he doesn't push.

"Edward, have you seen that movie Jerry McGuire?" he asks abruptly, startling me with its seeming randomness.

"Sure."

"Let me ask you a question and please, really think about your answer before you just spout off the first thing that comes to your mind or get pissed at me for asking, okay?" His voice is intense, heavy, and makes me feel immediately uneasy.

I nod even though I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin.

"Do you remember the part in the movie, toward the end, when things are falling apart and they're talking in the backyard?" He watches me as I try to remember which part he's talking about. I nod slowly once I have a vague sense of what he's referring to. It's not like I have the movie memorized, but I do think I know which part he means.

He goes on. "Do you remember that line Renée Zellweger says to him? 'On the surface, everything seems fine. I've got this great guy. And he loves my kid. And he sure does like me a lot. And I can't live like that. It's not the way I'm built.'"

"What? Carlisle, no." I'm shaking my head, though what he's said has my head spinning. My skin tingles and my stomach is protesting, vehemently, the beer I just swallowed.

"Edward, just think for a minute. I'm not implying anything, just trying to make a point. You and Peyton met and had this instant connection, then you meet her mother and that didn't go so well, no matter the instant attraction that was there." He chuckles a bit and I can only grunt in agreement. "I just want you to really think about this, okay? Bella is a wonderful woman. She's beautiful, funny, stubborn, and most of all, available. I just want you to think about what you really and truly feel for her, separate it from your feelings for Peyton. We all know you love that little girl, but would you feel the same way that it seems like you do about Bella if there wasn't a Peyton?"

"You don't have a lot of healthy, appropriate sexual experiences to take from and Bella has experienced a trauma that most can't even fathom. It's a lot, Edward, it really is. I'm just trying to make sure you aren't rushing into something because you want Peyton in your life or because Bella is the only single woman available in your age bracket."

We didn't say much after that, there wasn't a need to, and he knew it. He planted the seed, like he always does, and left it to me think about. I laid in bed for hours thinking about what he'd said, but
it always came back to one thing.

Bella.

I love Peyton, I do, but I need Bella.

Thinking back over that conversation makes me pull her arm tighter around me as I turn down her street. I know once we walk inside her house, that things are changing.

I'm ready.

I follow her inside and the energy between us is electric. The need to talk, the need to be close, the need for each other is so prevalent, I swear I can reach out and touch it. She's quiet, but doesn't seem nervous. She walks in ahead of me and I throw my keys down on the end table beside the sofa. I think briefly about the last time I was in this room, listening as she told me to leave.

I shake my head, pushing those thoughts back and focus on the here and now.

She's ready - that's all that matters.

"Here," she says softly as she hands me a towel and a familiar-looking t-shirt and pair of sweats.

I chuckle a bit at the irony and she rolls her eyes at me. "We have a lot to talk about; I figure you might as well be comfortable."

I nod, taking the towel and clothes from her. "Come here," I say, lowering my voice. I reach for her hand and curl my index finger around hers, tugging, though she comes willingly. "There's no pressure here, Bella. None. As long as you want me, that's all I care about. We can talk about how much or how little you want or nothing at all. If you want to just sit on the couch and let me hold you, I'd be all right with that, too. There's just … us," I finish and brush my lips against hers.

She closes her eyes for a few seconds and it seems like she's trying to calm herself down. When she opens them again, pools of coffee brown stare at me, filled with so much emotion that it's like I can hear her speak, even though she hasn't said a word.

"Jesus," I murmur because it's the only word I can form.

So many feelings are swamping me, the need to be inside of her warring with the need to just hold her. I drop the clothes in my hand and plunge my fingers in her hair. My lips crash against hers, and I take. I give. I want.

Tongues, lips, teeth. Noses bump, heads tilt from left to right. Hands reach and pull.

"Edward," she breathes out when I move from her mouth to her neck.

Hearing my name flames the smoldering fire inside of me and my hands drop from her hair to her ass and I press her fully against me. Relief, hope, want … ache all buzz around inside of me. I know we need to talk, I know I just told her there is no pressure, but I can't help how much I want her.

She's obviously fighting the same internal battle because she grips my t-shirt tightly in her hand, but lowers her head and takes a few deep breaths against my chest. I lay my forehead on her shoulder and remove my hands very reluctantly from her ass and wrap my arms around her waist instead.
The sexual tension lessens but doesn't go away.

I run my nose along the hollow of her shoulder and then along her jaw because I just can't help myself and then whisper, "I'm going to go change. Is it okay if I take a quick shower?"

She nods, her head still tipped down but then looks up at me. "Of course. You must be freezing to death."

I waggle my eyebrows at her after I pick my things back up off the floor and tease, "I think I'm plenty warm now. In fact, a cold shower might be just what I need."

She giggles and immediately the atmosphere is lighter.

"Give me a few," I tell her, lingering for just another moment.

I shower quickly, though I enjoy the warm water for longer than I mean to. I make a conscious effort not to get too lost in my own head and tell myself over and over again to follow her lead. Now that we're here … wherever here is … and now that this … whatever this is … is about to happen, I know I'm ready for anything, as long as we're together. I know she's as nervous as I am and I know she's as scared as I am, too, but I know we can handle anything.

I hang up the towel and run my fingers through my hair one time before walking out to find her. I wonder briefly where Peyton is and then assume she's with Renée. I miss her and want to see her, desperately so, but right here, right now, is about me and Bella.

When I walk into the living room, she's standing in front of the bookcase. She's changed her clothes as well. Now she's wearing some black pants that hug every damn curve of her legs and ass and a t-shirt that is way too tight to wear anywhere except inside, where no one but me can see how it shows off how perfect her breasts are.

"Emmett was awful to you, wasn't he?" she asks but she doesn't turn around.

I stop dead in my tracks and lean against the wall.

Here we go.

"Not really. He would have to open his mouth for him to be awful. He's ignored me for the most part; besides thinking about all the ways he'd like to kill me I'm sure."

She sighs and her shoulders droop before she turns around. "I didn't tell him. He overheard Mom and me talking on Friday and he jumped to conclusions. He was upset Dad knew about … about Boston and didn't tell him," she says and shakes her head. "I'm really pissed at him. I'm sorry he's acting like an ass but his behavior is more about me and Evan than you."

I open my mouth, but she holds her hand up. "I'm not excusing his behavior at all. Rose is going to give him a thorough ass kicking before I can get to him, but I know my brother. He's been suffering as much as I have since Evan died. He hasn't dealt with it any better than I have, either, than any of us really. He's not stupid, all evidence to the contrary." She smiles but it's anything but a happy one. "He loves me, but things between me and Emmett haven't ever gone back to like they were before Evan died."

My heart hurts for her, hearing the wistfulness in her voice. I don't move even though I want to go to her.

She reaches a hand out and traces over the glass that covers the picture. I can't see it clearly from
where I'm standing, but I know which one it is anyway. It's one of her, Evan, Seth, Xavier, Rose, Emmett, and a few other people whose names she's told me but I can't remember. All happy and smiling and so young and full of life.

"We're such a mess, all of us," she tells me. "I blame myself for Evan dying. Em blames himself. Dad blames himself. It's like we're in some unspoken game, seeing who can one-up the other two and claim the most blame."

Her voice is sad, so fucking sad, and laced with years and years of guilt and hurt. I'm half tempted to tell her to stop talking, but she hasn't even really started yet. We need to get past this next hurdle if there's any hope of moving forward. She said she was ready; I have to trust that she is.

She stands perfectly still and watches me for a minute, her eyes searching for something, something I'm not even sure she knows. I don't move either as I let her work up to what I have no doubt will be a horribly painful discussion for both of us. I know enough from the things she's said and from the things Charlie and Emmett have said to know that the loss of Evan runs deep, not just with the Swans but with the entire town. Carlisle, Esme, Seth, Xavier, hell even Aggie have all been affected by his death and that terrifies me.

For a whole plethora of reasons I can't even give a name to.

She walks on silent feet to the rocking chair in the corner. I remember the first night I had dinner over here, looking at the chair that seemed so out of place with the rest of the furniture. The living room is full of comfortable, classic furniture – a brown leather sofa and loveseat, a big comfortable chair, a honey-colored wooden coffee table and end tables, lamps with bright-colored shades, pillows in the same bright colors. Warm, lived in ... homey furniture all except the old, worn rocking chair in the corner.

I never asked about it, but watching her pick up the blanket that is laying across the seat and hold it almost reverently in her lap, I know it's more than just a chair. I make a mental note to ask her about later because now is not the time. She does her usual and pulls her legs up beneath her and rests her chin on her knees, wrapping her arms around her legs. The chair is situated in the corner by the window so I take a seat on the couch so I'm sitting facing her. I wait, anxious and a bit afraid, but vow to myself before she says another word that I will help her get through this.

"I rocked Peyton to sleep every night in this chair when she was a baby," she begins, her voice soft and far away. "I've slept sitting up in it more times that I can even count. When Peyton asked for a big girl room, she didn't want the chair in her room, said it messed with the vibe or some such nonsense." She chuckles a little and smiles in my direction when I do the same.

"Evan died before I even found out we were having a girl," she says, watching me.

I swallow painfully and try to clear my throat but there's no way any words are coming out of my mouth.

"He was the golden boy of Corea. Everyone loved him. He was handsome and funny and so damn smart. Even when we were little kids, he was always the smartest person in class. By the time we got to high school, he was even smarter than most of the teachers." She laughs lightly, reliving a silent memory that she doesn't elaborate on. "I'd known him my whole life. Our parents were best friends, and me, Evan, Seth, Emmett, and Rose were inseparable. At school there were a few other people we hung around with, but mostly it was just us. We had sleepovers, went swimming, Dad took us on the boat, Evan's mom took us to the movies every Friday night … it was just a really happy, carefree childhood.
"Things changed a bit once we got older, into junior high and high school. Growing up here, where everyone knows everything about everyone got old. Xavier moved here right before high school started. Rose and Em were already acting like an old married couple and spent most of their time alone rather than with us so once that happened, it was me and the three of them. Emmett always treated Evan like a little brother and really he spent more time with Evan than he did with me. I never thought anything about it; it was just the way it was. I hung out with some girls and did girl stuff, but most of the time I was with them. We did normal high school things with the rest of the kids we grew up with. We'd sneak out and have bonfires on the beach, or play quarters in Angela's basement … we'd even manage to make it to Ellsworth a few times a month. Looking back on it, I'm sure all our parents knew full well what we were doing; they just never said anything as long as we were careful. We all did it, everyone but Evan. From the time he hit high school, everything he did was focused solely on getting him into college … Harvard.

"He was so smart, Edward," she says as she faces me again. Her eyes are glassy and her voice shakes a bit, but so far, she's holding it together. "We always hung out after school, me over at his house or him at the restaurant with me. Most of the girls around here hated me because he never paid any of them any attention. He had no idea how handsome he was, and the more he ignored them, the more they wanted him … and the more they hated me." She sighs and shakes her head slightly. "They didn't understand, no one did, really. It wasn't that he wanted me or anything like that, all he wanted was to get out of Corea and he knew he was safe with me. His parents pushed him, but he craved it. He wanted to get out of here, go to college, and change the world. He wanted to be a doctor, an oncologist.

"I was with him when he got his acceptance letter," she tells me and even all these years later, you can still tell how proud of him she was. "We had our first 'real' kiss that night. It was totally awkward and totally like kissing my brother, but it was still my first kiss, you know?"

I can't help the insane jealousy that flares inside of me hearing her talk about kissing someone else. I mean, obviously, she's had sex but I sure as hell don't want to think about it.

"We'd always been inseparable, but after that kiss became even more so. We were young and didn't know any better. It was easy and comfortable and seemed like the logical thing to do. Xav and Seth were together by then, Rose and Emmett were already married, and we were pretty much all each other had. I was devastated when he left to go to school. I cried for the entire summer, which was totally ridiculous, even then, and so not me." She scoffs and picks at some imaginary lint on her pants. "I was so jealous of him," she whispers, as if she's confessing to some God-awful secret she's worried I'll condemn her for. "He got to leave, go experience the world … or at least Massachusetts and I was stuck here. He promised me he'd write and come back to visit, and he did."

She hugs her legs even tighter and her voice gets softer and more distant. My skin's crawling and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end as a sense of dread creeps up my spine.

"The first year he was away, he came back whenever he could. He hated Harvard, but was too afraid to tell his parents that. Up here, he was the big fish in the tiny pond, but down there, he was just a middle of the road wanna-be that managed to get in to the exclusive club. He didn't come home often but when he did, he spent all his time at my house instead of his own because he just couldn't face his parents. We'd spend the time we weren't hanging out with Seth and Xavier and Emmett and Rose when we all weren't working, together," she says awkwardly.

I cringe a little but I also can't help but smile at how adorable she is trying to explain.

"Yes, Bella, I know," I tell her in a much calmer voice than my insides feel like.

She lets out a long breath and then tells me quietly, "We didn't love each other, at least not the
boyfriend/girlfriend, 'can't live without you' kind of love. Watching Emmett and Rose and my parents, I knew we didn't feel the way that people who are deeply in love were supposed to feel. We were best friends and being together was comfortable and safe. I think for him I was the person who would never judge him. I reminded him of home and all the things he was used to. For me, he was all I'd ever known. I never went out on a date, never had a real boyfriend, there was always just me and Evan.

"One night, we'd had a bit too much to drink at a bonfire. I remember him going on and on about all the girls there and all the people he'd met, the things he was learning, and it scared me. I knew I didn't love him but I didn't want to lose him either. All I kept seeing was some nameless, faceless girl getting her hooks into him and taking him away from me," she says, sounding totally disgusted with herself. "I just always had this dream of him taking me away from here with him, even if it was totally wrong of me to want it. So, instead of being his friend, I acted like a desperate, melodramatic little girl and pushed him until one thing led to another … a few times over his break.

"I was so scared to tell him I was pregnant, but when he found out he was ecstatic. I knew, deep down inside, he was just looking for an excuse to leave Harvard and the baby was the perfect out. I also knew when he promised me he would take care of me, he meant it." She doesn't say anything for a few minutes and I watch her as she struggles to regain her composure.

She lays her chin back down on her knees and looks at me. "His parents were furious and rightly blamed me for ruining his life. I mean I knew he was unhappy at Harvard, but he would have stuck it out and been a wonderful doctor. He was having trouble adjusting to being away from home and everything he knew, but it was getting better. He foolishly dropped out immediately, not even bothering to finish the semester. I told him about the baby, we told my parents then his, and before anyone could even blink, he was back and working for my dad."

At that, my blood turns to ice water, and now I really am tempted to tell her to stop talking. I'm not sure I want to know what happened to him, but I know I have to.

For Bella, I have to.

"He was an awful fisherman," she says solemnly. "He was seasick all the time. He couldn't stomach the smell of the bait … he was miserable. Emmett teased him mercilessly, calling him soft, telling him that he forgot how to be a man down there with all those white collar, blue bloods. He was just joking of course, but Evan took it to heart, especially when my dad and Carl, who worked on the boat with them then, joined in. Evan would just try harder, but the harder he tried, it seemed like the worse it got." She takes a deep breath and I do, too, knowing somehow, what's coming next is going to be especially difficult.

"You know when Emmett threw Evan overboard?" she asks and I nod my head, remembering Emmett mention it. I also remember his reaction, and that of Charlie and Seth, too. This isn't going to be pretty, I think. "It was the final straw. Emmett was just being Emmett, it was all supposed to be in fun, but Evan didn't see it that way. Evan couldn't handle feeling like he was letting my dad and Emmett down, so he begged my dad to find him a job on a different boat. I tried to tell him to work with Seth in the processing plant but he refused, saying he needed to make enough money to take care of me and the baby and he could make more being out on the boat than he could working in the plant."

She takes a deep breath and her voice gets harder, bitter. "His parents refused to help us so we were staying with Mom and Dad until the baby was born and then we were going to figure out what to do." She turns to look at me and now she just seems sad and weary. "We knew we didn't love each
other, but he loved our baby. He was determined we would take care of the baby together. We were so young and didn't have the first clue how to be parents, but we were going to do whatever it took to raise our child as best we could.

"So, my dad found him a job on one of the other boats. Because it was getting closer to the end of the season, it was hard for Dad to find him a job. He tried calling in favors, but no one needed any help. Finally Dad found him one, but he didn't want Evan to take it, even tried to talk him out of it, promising that he'd talk to Emmett and Carl, that things would be better, anything to keep Evan from taking that job." I watch, not moving as she squeezes her eyes closed while she takes a deep, unsteady breath. My stomach clenches painfully and I curl my fingers into a fist, knowing that what's coming next isn't going to be easy to hear. "The captain of the boat had always been an ass, one of those guys that always took unnecessary chances and pushed his crew harder and farther than he should have, but Evan wouldn't listen to reason when we all tried to tell him not to take the job, to keep working for my dad, or even in the restaurant. He was adamant he could handle it, and after the first few weeks, it seemed like he could.

"He was so proud of himself," she says as the tears begin to fall. She doesn't wipe them off, they just glisten on her cheeks and she seems so small and so lost that I have to go to her. I kneel in front of her, forgetting that the floor is hard and that I've just spent twelve hours working outside in the rain. All that matters is her. I reach for her hand and close my hand around hers, squeezing to let her know I'm still with her.

"It was almost the end of the season and everyone was trying to get one last run in. I was about five months along and still helping at the restaurant. It was storming and it was cold, so cold," she whispers and shivers as if she can feel the chill of the air even though it's not the least bit cold in her house. "We're still not a hundred percent sure what happened. From what some people have said, the hauler wasn't working properly, but the captain was too damn cheap to get it fixed until the season was over. He didn't want to miss a chance to make more money, so he took the boat out knowing that something could go wrong."

She begins to cry harder, her breathing getting choppier by the second. I stand, lift her out of the chair, and carry her to the sofa so I can hold her. I wrap my arms around her and kiss the top of her head, wondering how in the hell she managed to survive what I know is coming next. I didn't know Evan, but just hearing what I have so far makes me wish I did.

I feel her fingers clench my shirt, twisting it in her fist, as if just holding onto something will give her the strength to go on. I hope it's me she's pulling strength from because I want to give it to her. "The line for the trawl broke … and … and the pot they were pulling up came loose," she stutters in between trying to catch her breath.

"Shh, Bella, you don't have to say anymore," I tell her, my eyes burning with unshed tears. She takes a deep breath and shakes her head. "No, I want to tell you everything." I can barely understand her she's crying and shaking so much in my arms, but I just hold her tighter. One more deep breath and she starts again, her voice cracking. "He was knocked overboard. The stupid asshole didn't even have a life preserver on the boat so they kept trying to throw the nets so he could grab them, but the water was already so cold that he was in shock almost from the moment he hit the water."

She sniffs and tries to catch her breath. I can feel her heart pounding against my chest, though honestly I can't tell if it's hers or mine that feels like it's beating out of control. I press my nose to her hair, my fingers move against her, hoping that her citrus scent is enough to hold me together so I can hold her together.
I have so many things flying through my mind that I have to close my eyes in hopes I can stem the onslaught and focus on Bella. All I can see is an image of Evan, struggling in the water, knowing he's minutes from dying. In that moment, I'm so angry. Angry at Evan for putting himself in that position. Angry at the men on the boat that couldn't save him. Angry at the captain that was more concerned about money than safety … angry at fate that took away Peyton's dad.

I'm angry that the beautiful woman in my arms has had to live for the past seven years feeling like she was to blame for what happened to him.

"They never found his body," she whispers brokenly once she's able to catch her breath. "His funeral was the worst thing I've ever gone through, though in all honesty, I was in shock myself. Seth and Xavier never left my side and Emmett pulled away from everyone but Rose. My dad was mad at everyone, and no one smiled at all until the day Peyton was born."

She looks up at me and I swear on everything that is holy, I can see straight into her soul. She's so brave, so strong, and she doesn't even realize it. I'm in awe of her. She might not see it, and she might have moments where she needs to lean on someone, but she could have curled up and let what happen destroy her, but she didn't. She needs to let Evan go, I can see that, so they can remember him for the person he was. Hopefully her telling me about him today is her first step.

I'll be with her every step of the way if she wants me to be, if she lets me.

"When Peyton was born, Evan's parents came to the hospital to see her. They refused to see me and once they looked at her, they left and never turned back. They sold the processing plant and we haven't heard from them since. At first I tried to stay in contact them, I mean I loved them, you know? They were like a second set of parents, so I felt like I had to try," she says softly, her voice sounding steadier, thank God. "I had Xavier track them down to California and I mailed them a letter, apologizing, and pictures of Peyton, but they sent it back, unopened. I kept trying until finally the letters I sent got returned saying they'd moved with no forwarding address."

After she says that she stops talking. She sniffs intermittently and she's still stiff in my arms. I'm not sure if I should say anything, or what to say. I want to tell her it's not her fault he died, that she didn't force him to get on that boat when everyone told him not to, but I know now isn't the right time for that. I want to tell her that I'm glad I don't have to fight the ghost of this perfect, all-American guy that she still has feelings for. It might make me sound like a prick, but I can't help it. I get that he's Peyton's dad and he was her best friend so there's a part of her that will always love him, but I'm more relieved than I'd like to admit that her feelings for him didn't go past friendship.

"Do you think Evan is disappointed in me?" she asks quietly, suddenly, as her fingers make nonsensical patterns on my t-shirt. She turns in my arms, small and fragile, and presses her nose in the center of my chest. Her question slays me, especially after everything she's just told me.

*My God, it's no wonder she ran in the opposite direction anytime I was around her at first, I think as my arms tighten around her body holding her as close as possible. I don't have any idea if she's done talking, though, I'm pretty sure I've heard more than enough for one night. However, I know her question isn't rhetorical, so I answer as best I can.*

"Of course not, baby," I say gently with my lips against the top of her head. "Evan's parents are the ones that are missing out, not Peyton. Every person in this town would do anything for that little girl. She's so loved, Bella. You've done an incredible job raising her; don't ever doubt that. Evan has nothing to be disappointed about, trust me."

"Hmmm," she mumbles, the sound muffled by my shirt.
I run my fingers through her hair, smiling just a bit when I realize her hair's still damp from the rain. She came to me, I marvel again. She decided she wanted me and waited in the rain.

For me.

My fingers twitch as emotion surges through my body. It's as if a switch has been flipped. Everything is out in the open now. She knows about prison, I know about Evan. All the cards are on the table; there's nothing left to get in the way. I know what I want.

Bella.

Peyton.

A life with them, a future.

I shift her on my lap, needing her closer. My fingers slip under her t-shirt. The feel of her skin, warm and smooth beneath my fingers, shoots a current of fire, of white hot need and want, through every cell in my body. I haven't had sex in more than seven years but what I'm feeling right now goes so much deeper than just needing to find a release.

It's about Bella, pure and simple.

Like it has a mind of its own, my hand slides to her hip and my fingers curl over her hip bone. They find their way beneath the waistband of her pants and I press, feeling the soft skin give way beneath the pads of my fingers. She turns toward my chest and her hand grips my arm, fingers tentative and curious as they trace the ink that wraps around my bicep.

The air around us is charged, crackling with heightened emotions. I close my eyes and breathe her in. Rain and citrus fills my senses and my heart races.

"Bella," I whisper.

Silently, I lift my hand and bury my fingers in her hair. Cradling her head in my palm, I turn her so that she looks up at me. Our eyes lock.

I can tell she feels the energy flowing between us because her lips part, her little pink tongue darts out and flicks at her bottom lip. Her breath catches. The whimper moan sound she always makes that never fails to go straight to my dick escapes on a sigh.

Her fingers flex and nails dig into my arm. She rubs her thighs together and I can see her pulse beating wildly on her neck. My thumb stretches and I cover the spot with my thumb, reveling in her response to me.

She licks her lips and I'm done.

My mouth finds hers as I maneuver her on my lap. I hold her, one hand on the back of her head, the other around her waist. My tongue plunges into her mouth and I groan low and deep as her taste explodes on my tongue. It's been way too fucking long since I've kissed her, even though it hasn't really. It just feels that way. Her hand moves from my arm to the back of my neck and her fingers twist in my hair, fingernails scraping my scalp. She stretches and turns, while pulling me closer. I pick her up and she straddles my lap, mouths still fused together.

Our tongues swirl and dip. I nibble on her bottom lip; she sucks on my top one. Our breath mingles. Our hands explore.
I wind her hair around my fingers, holding her in place. My lips skate from her mouth to the deliciously soft and irresistible skin of her neck. I let my teeth scrape along the path and follow with my tongue.

"Christ, Bella," I murmur as I release the flesh from my mouth.

She lets her weight settle fully on top of me, her pussy pressed right where I want her the most.

There is no sound in the room except for the pants and sighs from each of us and the rustle of clothing as we move against the other. I untangle my fingers from the mass of mahogany curls and trail them down her back, fingers craving the feel of her skin instead of the soft fabric of her t-shirt. Gripping her hips, I hold her in place. My dick is screaming at me, begging me to rock against her, but I resist. Barely.

She tries to grind against me, and I squeeze her even tighter. Intense, deep pools of brown stare down at me and for a moment, I've lost all semblance of time and space … of being, as I lose myself completely in her. I lift my arms and cradle her face between my hands, letting my thumbs caress her cheeks. Everything hits me at once. The ups and downs of the past week, the terror and the relief from the other night when I told her about what happened all those years ago, the fear and the hurt when she told me to go, the elation and hope I felt when she told me I wouldn't lose her, the surprise and the overwhelming need I felt when she ran to me on the dock, the admiration I feel for her for being such a wonderful mother, the sadness I feel for the loss of Evan … just all of it.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I whisper.

It's not really what I meant to say, even though it's nothing but the honest truth.

Her fingers slide into my hair and her eyes soften as she continues to look at me. The wheels are spinning in her gorgeous head, I can tell.

It's been minutes since she's spoken and I need to hear her voice. "Talk to me," I beg. "Tell me what you're thinking."

I need to know what she wants, because I already know what I want.

Her. Naked. As soon as fucking possible.

And then I want to lose myself in her for days as I learn every inch of her body with my fingers and then my tongue. I want to learn where to touch her to make her sigh and then I want to find out what makes her scream. I want to find out whether the left side of her neck is more sensitive than the right and whether or not her collarbones taste as good as her lips. I want to know how her naked tits feel in my hands and how her nipples feel against my tongue. I want to know how she tastes when she comes. I want to know what it feels like when I'm buried deep inside of her as she falls apart and if she closes her eyes or keeps them open when she climaxes. Does she squeak or moan? Maybe she screams? Do her toes curl; does the blush that turns me on like nothing else spread from her cheeks to her chest?

I want to know it all and then I want to know it over and over and over again.

Her eyes blaze hot and bright and she shakes though there can't be any possible way she's cold with the heat bouncing between us.

"I want you."
Three small words spoken in a voice so strong and so sure they take my breath away.

There's no hesitation, no doubt anywhere to be found as I watch her, looking for the slightest sign that she might second-guess herself. There isn't any. In that instant I know that no matter how difficult and painful the last few days have been, every second has been worth it to be right here, right now. Hell, everything that has happened to me has been worth it. Giving Bella the time she needed to think, to absorb, and then to decide means now, there's no turning back.

"Fuck, Bella," I hiss and pull her lips to mine.

I devour her mouth with mine, kissing her until she's a panting mess on my lap. She writhes against me, her nipples brushing back and forth across my chest. I inhale deeply and my hands fall from her face to her tits. My thumbs find her nipples and she moans into my mouth when I circle them, letting the edges of my thumbnails tease the sensitive peaks.

"Oh, mmmm," she breathes and the warm air fanning over my ear makes me rock my hips against her. "Ahhhh." Squeaks and moans fill the air as my hips keep moving against her and my dick gets harder and harder.

My hands slip beneath her shirt and when I feel her, warm and soft, I can't get her shirt off fast enough.

"Off. Now, Bella, please," I hiss, pushing her shirt up.

She lifts her arms and as each new inch of tantalizingly pale skin is exposed, my tongue is there waiting to taste and discover. She pulls the shirt up over her head and then throws it to the side, leaving her perfect, mouthwatering tits right in my face.

"Holy … so perfect," I whisper leaning forward.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit that picturing Bella's naked tits didn't often have a starring role in my thoughts when I showered. I run my tongue along the edge of her bra, stopping to growl when I spy the black satin bow lying in the perfect valley between each breast.

I am losing control fast, but God damn if I want to speed things up.

I pull the front of her bra down and attack her nipple, circling it with my tongue. The pebbled skin against my tongue feels even better than I imagined. She arches her back and I pull down the other side as well. My eyes take her all in and then I'm making sure that the left nipple feels as good against my tongue as the right one did.

It does.

Her fingers tug and move in my hair. I never would have thought I'd like the way it feels to get my hair pulled, and none too gently either, but every time she does it, I swear my dick gets harder.

"Damn, baby," I murmur after I release a well-loved nipple from my mouth.

The little vixen rolls her hips forward, pressing her pussy right up against me, and I hiss. She meets my gaze and cocks her eyebrow at me. "You know I have a bed upstairs, right?" she asks as she taunts with her hips. Her hands move from my hair down over my shoulders and she wraps them around my forearms. My muscles twitch in response to her touch. How the hell something as simple as her hands on my arms can turn me into a horny pre-teen looking at his first *Playboy* I have no idea, but seriously, all I want is more skin, more places to touch and lick and taste … more her.
I lean forward again, my fingers at her hips, pushing, searching for the silky soft skin beneath her pants. My mouth finds her neck as she leans her head to the side exposing even more skin, teeth and tongue learning what spot is most sensitive and then which one makes her moan in the back of her throat. Her fingers slip beneath my shirt and the moment she touches my back, sparks of red hot want wrap around me, around us, and I'm so close to losing control that I have to take a deep breath to keep from taking her right there.

"Please, Edward. Upstairs," she begs as her mouth covers my ear. Hearing the raw need in her voice has me up and walking in an instant.

She wraps her arms tightly around my neck, her warm breath shallow and quick against me. I can feel her heart beat against my chest. I almost lose my balance when I feel her lips and then her tongue below my ear and then along my jaw but when I hear a muffled whimper, I stop. Turning, I hold her against the wall. My hands cup her ass and her legs are crossed behind my back.

"Hey," I say softly, nuzzling her nose with mine.

It's hard to concentrate. My entire body is flooded with conflicted feelings. One second I want to cradle her against me and simply hold her in my arms, then in the next, I want to rip her clothes off and take her … against the wall, bent over the couch, flat on her back so I can feel all of her beneath me, on top of me so I can watch as she screams my name when she comes.

I want it all.

I want her and I want her more than I've ever wanted anything before in my life.

Our eyes meet once more. If mine look anything like hers, she can feel how badly I want her all the way down to her toes like I can from looking into hers. There are things to tell her, things to ask, but all I want to do is feel.

Soft skin, hard peaks, slick folds, heat.

Her eyes dilate, brown disappearing until all that's left is black. The air around us pulsates and I know she can feel it, too. Her fingers grab, her chest flushes pink, her heels dig into my ass as she pulls herself up and presses herself firmly against my chest.

"Now, Edward. Oh, God, I can't wait." She pants as she attacks my mouth and moves against my cock, making it almost painful to move I'm so hard.

Wet, sloppy kisses are all we can manage as I carry her up the stairs. I haven't ever seen her room but somehow I know which way to go once I reach the top. I stop once we're inside and stand at the end of her bed. I want to look around but I want her naked and in bed even more. I don't wait and lay her in the center of the white comforter, following her down until I'm on top of her, neither one of us taking our eyes off the other.

I feel like I should say something, tell her how much she means to me, how happy I am that she wants to be with me … that I'm pretty sure I'm madly in love with her and never, ever, want to be without her, but all I can manage is, "Bella."

She swallows. I watch her throat move. She takes a deep breath and I watch her breasts rise and fall. She closes her eyes. My fingers trace an invisible line down the side of her neck and over her collarbones. She sighs. She has freckles on her shoulders and I move my mouth from left to right, kissing each and every one. As badly as I want to be inside of her, as hard as I am as I slowly rock against her, I want to take my time, though I know I'll give in to the need that's coiling painfully
I let my tongue make a wet trail across her collarbones, nipping as I go and my hands find her nipples again. I pinch and roll them between my fingers through her bra and then not when I push it down. I tug and pluck, then knead with my fingers. "Damn, you feel so good," I whisper against her lips before I push my tongue in her mouth again. I swipe along the inside of her bottom lip, across her teeth, and then massage her tongue with mine.

With one hand I slide it around and through the beads of sweat that dot up her spine. Somehow I manage and fumble my way through and get her bra unhooked. I push it off her arms and when I see her naked and flushed, slow isn't an option any more.

It isn't for her either because she's grabbing and yanking my shirt and trying to push my sweats down with her feet.

"Edward, oh God," she breathes as she pulls my shirt over my head. Her eyes move across my chest and they grow wide and glassy when she spies the tattoo on my chest for the first time. "It's … you're … I …" she says breathing heavily. Her hands are everywhere at once, in my hair, on my face, my arms, over the ink on my chest.

She squirms beneath me, her hips rising off the bed as she tries to move, to get the friction she wants. I grab the sides of her pants and push them down, my mouth moving in a frantic circle from mouth to shoulder to breast and back to mouth again. She lifts and I pull her pants down over legs and then kick them off the bed. Fingers dive for her hips as I pull her toward me, pushing myself between her legs.

"Pants, off," she gasps in my ear biting at my ear, my neck.

Frenzied fingers, hers and mine, grapple with my sweats and she growls when I have to separate myself from her in order to get the damn things down my legs. Sweats and boxers both come off and when I feel her, warm and wet against my cock, I almost come right there.

"Shit, Bella," I say through gritted teeth. "I want you so fucking bad."

"Want you, too," she says between kisses across my chest.

I push a hand between us and circle her clit through her panties. She throws her head back, her hair fanning out over her pillow. I need to feel her so I slip my fingers inside, gliding through the slick folds. "Holy shit," I mutter, and move back and forth between her legs. I'm so damn hard it hurts.

"Edward, oh God." She moans as she arches off the bed when I push two fingers inside of her.

She's so hot and so tight and feels so fucking good. My thumb presses on her clit as my fingers continue to move in and out of her. I move with her, back and forth and it literally feels like if I'm not inside of her soon, I'm going to explode.

Her breath catches in her throat and I feel her nails scratch down my back. Her pussy squeezes my fingers, her hips lift off the bed, and she spreads her legs wider.

"That's it, baby," I rasp and suck a nipple into my mouth, biting gently.

As soon as my teeth close around flesh, she's coming. "Ahh, oh God, oh, Edward," she says over and over again.

I keep rubbing, keep moving my fingers until there's the slightest relaxing of her legs. At that, her
panties are hastily removed until there's nothing between us. I settle between her legs again, the tip of my cock dancing perilously close to her entrance, begging to be let in.

I want nothing more than to sink into her, but I hold back. "Are you sure?" I have to ask.

"Yes. I want this. I want you."

"Do you, I mean should I get something?" This is obviously a discussion we should have had well before now, and as much as I hate having to stop, I'd never do anything she didn't want no matter how badly I want to feel her with nothing between us.

She shakes her head. "I'm okay; I mean I get a shot."

I nod, swallowing thickly. "Are you? Do you need to use …" she stutters and asks but I place my lips over hers and kiss her quickly.

"I'm clean, I promise," I tell her, kissing her again.

She nods her head and places her hands on the sides of my face. "I trust you. I want you," she tells me again and my hips move immediately.

I press against her entrance, muttering a strangled, "Oh, fuck," when the tip of my cock slips inside of her.

"More, Edward, please," she whispers, wrapping her legs around my waist as she pulls me to her.

"Wait, oh Jesus, just wait, Bella." I stare into her eyes, my arms shaking as I hold myself above her, my cock half in, half out of her. I take a deep breath and then let go, sinking fully inside of her.

We both moan at the same time and then we're moving. Hands everywhere, mine on her hip, in her hair, pinching a nipple. Hers on my ass, around my arm, my neck. Skin slides against skin, legs tangle, mouths seek, and we're both barely hanging on.

My arm moves beneath her leg, cradling her knee as I kiss her again. "Bella, oh, baby," I murmur. Wanting to say more but the way she feels beneath me, the way it feels to be inside of her is making things too hazy to concentrate on anything but just giving in to the need that's been building since I first saw her.

"Edward, oh God, it's … so much … so good, you feel so good," she whispers.

The coil inside my stomach is wound so tight, and I know I'm seconds from coming. My legs burn, the muscles tense and taut, as I try to hold on and wait for her.

When I feel her pussy clench around me, fluttering and pulsing, I know she's as close as I am.

"Yes, Bella, fuck yes." I move faster, sliding in and out, wishing I could keep going, but knowing I can't. She feels too fucking good and it's been so damn long.

"Oh, oh, ahhhh," she moans. She lifts her hips, meeting my thrust and then I'm gone, coming so hard I have to squeeze my eyes shut. It almost hurts as I come in spurts, hissing over and over until I collapse on top of her. I bury my nose in the hollow of her shoulder, letting my lips rest against her damp skin.

Her fingers run lazily through my hair as we both lay there, neither saying a word as the magnitude of what just happened settles around us.
She sighs and her nipples rub against my chest. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you did I?" I ask, hoping I didn't.

When I don't pick my head up, she lifts my face to hers. Her eyes are shining, her cheeks are pink and hair is sticking to her neck and her forehead. Her lips are swollen and I can see the faint traces of scratches along her shoulders from where my jaw rubbed against the soft skin, but she's smiling and it immediately puts me at ease. "I'm perfect. That was perfect … you were perfect," she says gently as her fingers caress my cheeks and my forehead.

"I don't know about perfect, but it was fucking incredible," I say as I lower my mouth to hers. "I'm sorry it was over so fast. It's been … well, a really long fucking time and I've wanted you for so long," I tell her as I bite down gently on her bottom lip.

She moans and closes her eyes, settling back against the pillows. She languidly kisses me back for a few moments until I slip out of her. She growls and opens her eyes and looks at me.

"I never thought … I mean I didn't know if I would ever, and you're just … and I'm," she rambles nervously and I chuckle.

"Bella, hush," I tell her kissing her quickly before I move so I can lie down next to her. I pull her to me, loving the way she feels in my arms almost as much as I love being inside of her. "We still have a lot to talk about, but it doesn't have to be right now. I don't want it to be right now. Right now I just want to be with you."

She sighs and kisses my chest, and then I sigh when I feel her soft fingertips trace the lines of my tattoo. "So sexy," she mumbles sleepily.

I reach out to the side and grab some Kleenex off the nightstand and hand her some so we can clean up. When that's done I wrap my arms around her again and run my fingers up and down her back once she lays her head on my chest. I haven't lain in bed with anyone … well, ever and being with her, here, is almost more than I can comprehend. So many thoughts, so many words and feelings churn inside of me but I don't want to acknowledge any of them, I just want to be with her.

"Thank you," I do say though and wait for her to lift her head and look at me, which she does immediately.

Her eyebrows dip and her head tips to the side as she waits for me to elaborate. I swallow past the lump in my throat and say hoarsely, "For giving me a chance, for not running away from me, for trusting me." I run my fingers down her face and then she rests her cheek in my palm. Turning, she brushes her lips against it, kissing it before she looks at me. Her eyes are shimmering and her chin quivers.

"I need you and I want to be with you. You make me happy," she whispers.

"Oh, Bella," I say thickly and pull her to me so I can kiss her again. We kiss until she yawns, the roller coaster of the past few days finally catching up with her. I lie down on the pillows and she snuggles right up against me, fitting as perfect as if she was made solely for me. I smile at the thought, liking it a whole fucking lot.

"Rest, baby," I say softly, kissing the top of her head.

"Mmmm, this feels so good. You might not ever get to leave," she murmurs sleepily, wrapping her arm around me.

I lie there for a few minutes as her breathing gets softer, even, as she falls asleep. "I don't ever want
to leave," I admit into the silent room.

Sometime later I open my eyes, feeling something warm and soft rub against me. During the night, we've turned on our sides and now her ass is settled right on my very awake cock. Feeling her against me, waking in her bed beside her, sets me on fire.

I hate to wake her up, but there's no way in hell I can wait.

I need her.

Rolling her gently onto her back, I crawl between her legs. I kiss her softly over and over until her eyes open slowly.

"Again, Bella."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Sooooooo? Do I need to ask? And what about poor Evan?

Okay, so next chapter will be from Edward's POV again. There are still a few things to discuss and our best friends are going to have a very special talk. I know you guys miss Peyton. I do, too.

Have you checked out The Breakers blog this week? We add things all the time and will be posting teasers, Wordles, recipes, and so much more so be sure to sign up for email alerts. It's fabulous, go look!

www.les16-thebreakers.blogspot.com

We've also set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. Join the group and see what everyone has to say ... I'm thinking after this chapter and as we move through the next few, there will be plenty to talk about. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www.facebook.com / groups / 137144056381565 /

I will also be submitting teasers to Fictionators every Monday as well as Pic Teases so be on the look out for those.

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all! I have been a nervous wreck all week!

Thanks so much for reading!

See you next Sunday...

Erin~
EPOV

"Again, Bella."

Her eyes open and I can tell it takes her a moment to focus. I don't wait.

"I need you," I whisper. I don't apologize; I'm not the least bit sorry.

I press against her and find her warm and wanting. Her legs wrap easily around my waist and I literally shiver when her soft, small hands grab my arms.

"Edward, oh." She breathes through a smile as I let more of my weight settle on her. Her eyes are focused now, focused totally on me.

I lower my head and drag my tongue down the side of her neck. She tastes fucking delicious and I bite back a groan. All citrusy, salty, and totally Bella. One hand at her waist, the other on a breast. Fingers searching out skin I haven't yet had my fill of. I pinch a nipple, rolling it between my thumb and index finger. Bella throws her head back, her neck stretches, begging for my teeth.

My body is on fucking fire, every inch of skin screaming to feel her against me. I slide a hand down her leg, over her thigh, and then back up again. I want so many things: to kiss her, to touch her, to taste her … to be inside of her again.

"Christ, Bella," I murmur when her heels push me forward. The first time was over so quickly I want this time to be better for her, but as soon as the tip of my cock grazes her clit as I lay on top of her, I'm almost done for right then.

My fingers disappear into her hair and my tongue plunges into her mouth. I groan, the sound vibrating from deep inside of me, when our tongues twirl together. Slow, so fucking slowly we kiss, all tongues and teeth and lips. I learn as I go. She likes to tip her head to the right more than the left. Sucking her tongue into my mouth makes her arch her back and if I use short, fast flicks of my tongue, she lifts her hips and rubs her pussy against me.
I kiss her until my vision blurs and then I slide my mouth down her throat to her breasts.

She cries out a soft, needy, "Edward, God yes," when I suck a nipple into my mouth. I taste and lick and nibble each one, moving back and forth like kid with a lollipop. I can't get enough and each swipe of my tongue, each taste, makes me crave more.

Her nails make a path of searing heat up my arm and then down my back. The room is filled with the sounds that from now on will play on a constant soundtrack in my mind. Soft sighs, quick breaths, low growls, hungry moans, the sound of skin sliding against skin, the quiet slap of hips against hips.

My fingers brush against the swell of her ass, then knead and squeeze. From there they travel over her hip bone and then dive between our bodies.

"Oh, fuck, Bella." I hiss when I find her wet and ready. My fingers circle her clit, I watch her face, mesmerized by each sound and each move she makes. A squeak then a whimper. Eyes squeezed shut then open and glazed when I push two fingers inside of her. Head thrashing against her pillow. Her dark hair a tangled mess against the stark, white pillowcase when I curl my fingers forward and press on the spot that makes her breath catch in her throat. I may not have been with a woman in more than seven years, but learning how to please Bella, what she wants and needs, is a lesson I'm more than willing to spend a lot of time getting right.

"Bella, look at me," I call to her, wanting to watch her but wanting to watch my fingers move in and out of her at the same time.

Her pussy clenches my fingers as I keep up a steady rhythm. Her chest is flushed and the moonlight shimmers from the fine sheen of sweat that covers her body. Her eyes are glossy, her lips red and swollen. Her nipples are hard and her fingers twist the sheets beside her as she writhes on the bed while my fingers continue to move in and out.

She's fucking gorgeous.

She's fucking mine.

"That's it, baby." I murmur as she spreads her legs wider. I've sat up, now on my knees in front of her. I can't help but take my cock in my hand as I bring her closer and closer to the edge.

Her eyes widen when she sees me stroking myself and when she licks her lips, I get even harder in my hand. I ache I'm so hard but I want to feel her come first. My hand is perfectly in sync with my fingers. My hips thrust forward each time I push my fingers inside of her.

"Edward, oh God, I'm so close. Oh please," she cries out.

She lifts up on her elbows and her mouth opens. As if in a trance, she watches my hands, one in her pussy the other on my cock. Her legs begin to shake and her breath sounds like little more than pants.

"I can feel it. Let go. Come, Bella." I hiss as my thumb presses down on the tip of my cock sliding through the liquid that has seeped out.

"Oh God, oh yes." Her hips rise off the bed and her pussy clamps down on my fingers. She shatters, shaking and moaning and damn if it's not the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen in my life. Her climax seems to go on and on and my fingers never stop moving even when my name falls from her lips in little more than a whisper.
I finally have to take my fingers out and my eyes roll back in my head when I bring them to my mouth and taste her for the first time. "So fucking good," I mutter.

My hand is still firmly wrapped around my cock. Before I can open my eyes, Bella is straddling my lap and her fingers squeeze between mine. "So hot, oh God." She breathes against my neck, biting at the spot beneath my ear.

I groan loudly when I grip her ass leaving my cock to her very capable, very strong hand. Her fingers slide up and down my length, squeezing with the absolutely perfect amount of pressure.

"God damn." I'm so hard, and she has no fucking idea how incredible her fingers feel on me.

I twist her hair around my hand and none too gently tug until her head tips to the side. I suck on her neck and then can't help when my teeth bite at the sensitive skin. I growl when I move from her neck to her shoulder. I want to mark her but I won't, at least not where anyone can see it. My fingers dig into her ass and I lift her, pressing her pussy tightly against her hand and my cock.

Her hand twists and her fingers squeeze and I almost come right then.

"I need to be inside of you," I whisper much more gently than I feel.

Without stopping her up and down movement she pushes on my chest with her free hand and I fall backward. She's on top of me immediately, her tongue tracing the lines of ink on my chest before I'm even all the way on the bed.

"So sexy, oh, Edward." She breathes, her warm breath causing me to shiver as it fans the skin where her tongue has been.

"Bella, now, baby." I moan, lifting my hips. "Let me be inside of you."

Wordlessly, she raises her lower body and then her hand is gone, only to be replaced by the searing heat of her pussy as she lowers herself on me. Slowly, oh God, so fucking slow it feels like I'm going to pass out from how good it feels, each inch feeling better than the last. I hiss, a string of words I have no idea what they mean falls from my lips as she takes all of me inside of her.

"Fuck, yes," I cry out when she sits up.

I'm so deep inside of her it feels like I may never come out. Her fingers curl against my chest as she raises and lowers her hips. Her bottom lip is between her teeth and she's making the sexiest sounds I've ever heard. A breath mixed with a growl and a whimper and it makes me even harder inside of her. My fingers hold her hips, thumbs circling her hips bones. My hips thrust against her each time she moves down on me. Our bodies in perfect sync. Up and down, give and take, over and over and over again.

She sits up, erotic and beautiful. When she leans back, stretching her body in the most delicious way, the ends of her hair brush against my thighs and it feels like the softest silk. I lift a hand and find her clit with my fingers.

Her muscles clench, thighs and pussy, and she throws her head forward. Our eyes meet, hers are dark, hungry and I'm sure mine look the same. "So good, Edward." She moans, the sound coming from deep inside of her.

My fingers don't still as she continues to move over me. We're both lost, lost in how good everything feels.
"Come here and kiss me," I say between pants. She lowers her head to mine and our mouths meet once more.

As frenzied as we were just a moment ago, the moment her mouth covers mine, our bodies slow, relishing every dip of a tongue, every stroke of my cock inside of her, every breath we share.

Her arms wrap around my head as she presses her entire upper body against mine. "I'm going to come," she whispers.

"Me, too," I answer back. My legs burn, my stomach tightens, and my chest expands.

"So good, fuck you feel so good on me," I tell her, my hands covering, holding her ass.

She stops breathing and then I feel it. Wet, liquid heat pulsing all around me as she comes. "Edward, oh, God … yes … yes."

Hearing my name fall from her lips as she comes sends me over the edge and I grunt her name over and over as I release inside of her, not as hard as the first time but the feeling is even more intense.

She collapses on my chest and I run my fingers up and down her back. Wanting to feel her beneath me, I hold her close to me and then roll over.

"That was-" I stop and shake my head as I struggle to find adequate words.

"Even better than the first time," she finishes, summing things up perfectly.

I run my fingers silently through her hair and her fingers make trails up and down my arms, but other than that, neither of us make any effort to move. It's stopped raining. The moonlight is shining through the window sending streaks of silvery white across the floor. My eyes sweep around her room and fall on the clock beside the bed.

"Holy shit," I murmur and it sounds much too loud for the intimate moment.

She giggles at my outburst and her hands immediately reach for my face and turn it toward her. The action is so … fluid, so natural, it takes my breath away for a second.

"What's wrong?" she asks, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

I grin. Silly girl, how can she possibly think I am anything but spectacular after what we've just shared?

"Do you know what time it is?" I ask, bending down to kiss the tip of her nose.

"I'm guessing late from that reaction." Her voice is so calm that I can't help but to relax against her. I slip out of her, an action neither of us like, and try to roll off her but her legs grip me tighter and she shakes her head. "Please don't move yet," she whispers.

I nod and our eyes lock. I'm dying to know what she's thinking but just laying with her, feeling her entire body flush with mine, feels too good to let anything take away from it. I'm still watching her and my stomach clenches when I feel her lower her hand from my cheek down over the side of my neck. Her fingertips brush back and forth over my scar and I wait, my eyes burning into hers because I know what's coming next.

"Will you tell me?" Her voice is cautious but determined.

Brushing my lips across hers, I nod before rolling off her and off the bed. When I stand up and put
my boxers on, she pouts. "There is no way in hell I can have this conversation laying in bed with you like that, Bella," I tell her as she sits up. She holds the sheet loosely to her chest and it barely covers anything. I can still see the edges of each of her perfect tits peek out from beneath the sheet, and I swallow.

Jesus, I want her again.

I bend down to pick up the t-shirt I had on earlier to give to her then drop it when I think about whose it is. For some reason, her wearing Xavier's shirt while I try to talk to her just seems wrong. I look around her room, wondering which drawer she keeps her t-shirts in. I walk forward about two steps, then stop, forgetting for a moment what I was going to do.

Images and memories I've struggled and fought to keep buried storm forth like an army advancing on an enemy. They're coming at me from all sides, sounds I've tried to forget, words cried out during the night that still give me chills if I think about them, smells that literally make me wretch and gag to remember, a myriad of things assault every sense at once and I squeeze my eyes closed so tightly it hurts.

The sheets rustle behind me and I hear her footsteps as they pad toward her dresser. I hear a drawer open and then close quickly and I jump when I feel her hand in mine. She says nothing, just waits for me to be ready.

A few moments pass and then I open my eyes and look down at her. The tip of her nose is red, but there aren't any tears in her eyes which is more of a relief than I can articulate. I don't want her pity.

"I should have done this the other night. I'm sorry I didn't."

The words out of her mouth render me stupid because there is no way she just said what I think she did. "Excuse me?" I say after I open and close my mouth at least five times.

She blows out a puff of air and twists her mouth. I wait. I'm so confused because of all the words in the English language, those however many she just said in that sentence would be the last ones I ever would have imagined her saying.

"Let's sit," she offers and pulls me to the bed.

I shake my head to clear it because the last five minutes didn't go anything like I expected them to. Faster than I can almost keep up with, she grabs her phone, checks a message, and with quick, capable fingers sends one back. The whole thing takes no more than a minute. She gets on the left side of the bed and my stomach drops. I sleep on the right. The fact that she sleeps on the left seems like a huge deal to me, though maybe it's not. She fluffs a few pillows behind her back then settles against them while pulling another pillow on her lap. She's nervous. I can tell because her fingers are plucking and pulling at the pillowcase, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles, then bunching the pillow up only to do it again. A deep breath, bottom lip between her teeth, a push of hair behind her ear - I watch each movement with ravenous eyes, committing them to memory. I love learning new things about her, though I've seen her do each of these things when she's been nervous before. Not in this same order however, which makes it new. The fact that she's so adorable at the same time makes it much easier to find a comfortable position on the bed facing her.

She slides her hand across the bed and then turns it over, wiggling her fingers until I lay my hand in hers. I can't hide the smile that spreads across my face when I see her relax even further into her pillows and her shoulders lower a bit. I really fucking love having that kind of effect on her.
"I meant what I said just then. I am sorry about how I acted the other night," she says softly.

"You're going to have to explain that comment a little bit more for me because I still don't really understand what you're apologizing for." I hope my voice doesn't sound as frustrated as I'm beginning to feel. I don't want to make this discussion any more difficult than it needs to be, especially not right from the get-go.

She huffs again and makes a, what I am positive she didn't intend to be sexy but is, groan in the back of her throat. "You were so wonderful with me tonight." I snicker and puff out my chest which makes her squeeze and pull my hand. "Not that, though yes that was," she tries to say and bites her lip, though this time for a totally different reason. The fact that I can tell the difference makes me want to bite my lip … or actually hers. Her eyes flit across my face and when they capture mine, I feel as if I'm melting. They are so warm and full of so much that I begin to move toward her like a moth to a flame.

"No, no, I need to tell you this and we have to talk. There's so much to say …" She trails off, the weight of how true that statement is making it almost impossible to quantify just how much there is.

"Okay," I say as I exhale a deep breath.

"What you told me the other night," she begins and wets her bottom lip with her tongue, "I still have such a hard time imagining what you went through. I can't wrap my head around it all, I mean you're … you and I can't picture you in that place."

I don't know how to answer that or if there's even anything she needs me to say.

"I know it was hard for you to tell me and I feel bad I let you leave the way you did, that I asked you to go without making sure you were okay. I was so selfish," she whispers as she hangs her head.

My stomach twists and I suck in a deep breath. "Bella, no," I tell her immediately, but she shakes her head and looks up. Her eyes are wide, sad.

She nods her head at me. "Yes, Edward. Hearing what happened to you was hard and shocking. I had a million things going through my mind at one time, but hearing about Evan wasn't any easier for you and yet you still tried to comfort me. All I did was let you talk without giving you anything."

I absorb what she says for a moment. "Bella, honestly, it's okay," I tell her sincerely. I have no idea why she's so focused on apologizing but I can see it's something she's really thought about. "You needed time to think. I understood that. It was … hard leaving you not knowing what you were thinking or what was going to happen between us, but I did understand."

She stares at our hands and her index finger moves back and forth across my wrist. "Are you … I mean, are you okay now? About everything?" she asks hesitantly.

"Do you mean about us or about what happened to me? 'Everything' is kind of vague," I tease a bit.

I know we need to have this talk but knowing it doesn't make it any easier to begin. Telling her about being in prison was hard, but even I have to admit that blurring it out without meaning to made it a bit easier.

"Both … more," she tells me as she shrugs her shoulders. "It just seems like there's so much I want to know."
I wrap my fingers around her hand, trapping her finger along my wrist. "Then ask me. I told you I don't want to keep anything from you, that I will tell you anything you want to know."

"What … " she begins in a voice barely louder than a breath, "what was it like in … in there?"

"Isolating," I answer immediately, the word bitter in my mouth.

She gasps and lays her free hand across her chest, covering her heart. I watch as she takes a deep breath, trying to steady herself. This isn't likely to be a pleasant conversation for either of us, but I find myself practically bursting with the need to tell her everything. I know I won't, at least not yet, but I know how significant it is that I want to.

Her mouth opens and closes, a squeak, a half-word that I don't have the first clue what it is, escapes. She's uncomfortable and unsure of what to ask and her unease isn't what I want.

"It was prison, Bella. It's supposed to be that way. Day after day after monotonous day of the same thing. It was never quiet. There wasn't ever a day I felt relaxed. There wasn't ever a day that I didn't feel as though I was going to crawl out of my skin. It was a seven year, two thousand five hundred and fifty-five days long nightmare," I end on an uneven breath.

I can tell my words have shaken her, but I can't hide how horrific it was. If she truly wants me, she's going to have to accept the grim reality that I am … an ex-convict.

Her eyes drop. I can't tell if they're closed or if she's staring at the pillow that still lies across her lap like a protective shield. "How did you manage? I mean …" She gulps audibly. I watch her throat move and wait for her to lift her head again. "Weren't you scared? You were so young when that … when you were … arrested."

"I was young." I scoff and bitter, angry feelings fight their way to the surface but I hold them back. We need to talk about this. I won't be able to if I also have to wrestle with the demons I still carry with me. "And yes, I was scared. And angry and lost and so damned stupid." My voice rises and I pinch the bridge of my nose in an effort to stay in control.

I feel Bella's hand, warm and reassuring beneath mine and it grounds me, reminds me that I'm here now … with her.

"Bella, it was, I don't even know how to describe it," I begin and stare out the window. I know I'm here, in bed with her, but it's like I'm watching a movie play out in the glass as images flicker in the reflection. "It almost seemed like it was happening to someone else, like I was watching someone else have handcuffs tightened so tightly around his wrists that they caused bruises that didn't go away for a week. That it was someone else that heard the words "you've been sentenced to fifteen years for armed robbery." That it was someone else who heard the slam of the heavy, steel door when it closed behind me that first night in Old Colony. Like it was someone else who didn't sleep for days, but instead kept a pillow pressed tightly to his ears to block out sounds that were straight out of a horror movie. That it was someone else that spent day after day after miserable day just trying to make it through, even though at first, he wasn't sure he wanted to."

I hear her sniff and when I look at her, there are tears in the corners of her eyes. I hate upsetting her, but she asked and I told her I would tell her everything. However, there is no way in hell I will ever tell her how truly horrific those first days and weeks were. Living with those particular memories is mine alone to live with.

She breathes slowly in and out and I don't say anything as she digests what I've said and she gathers the courage to ask me her next question. When she glances at the scar along my neck I anticipate
what she says next. "How did that happen?" she whispers, wincing as she lets her eyes stare at my neck. "Were you … someone tried to hurt you, on purpose?"

Her question is so innocent and laced with hurt for me that I have to tear my gaze away from her for a moment. I tip my head up and stare at the ceiling, mesmerized for the briefest a seconds by the way the moonlight stretches across it. I follow the path of one of the slivers of light toward the window and almost instantly I'm brought back to standing in my room at Wayne's house, looking out a window, my window, for the first time in years. I shiver at the memory, something seemingly so innocuous but so profound in its simplicity.

My head falls forward and I nod, not looking at her face. Instead I watch our hands, memorizing the way her pulse feels beneath the tip of my index finger when I press down on it. Its steady, if slightly accelerated, beat is a silent reminder that I'm no longer alone.

"Once I'd … resigned myself that I was in there to stay, that it wasn't a dream, I tried to keep to myself." I push away all the vivid memories and just focus on the fact that I'm in Bella's house and not in that hellhole. "I didn't talk unless I had to. I didn't make eye contact. I did exactly what I was told, when I was told, and tried to be invisible. Once a few months had passed, I sort of fell into the monotonous routine of every day. I still didn't talk much, no more than I absolutely had to, so when we'd have our free time," I scoff at the word free, as if anything was ever free inside that cage, "I would go to the library and read.

"I kept that up for a while and once I kind of established I wasn't going to cause any trouble, my caseworker arranged for me to enroll in some online college classes. I'd always been fascinated with the law." And again I scoff at the irony. Jesus, I was a fucking idiot back then. "And the books I'd been reading up until then only fed that. I started taking criminal justice classes when I could and reading extra books and anything I could lay my hands on that had to do with the law. I don't know what it was," I trail off, still not knowing where that passion came from. Carlisle and I have discussed it at great length and I'm no closer to understanding it than I was seven years ago. I just know it's still there, even if now it's buried beneath rubber gloves and the smell of salt water.

She moves and the pillow falls from her lap, landing on the floor with a soft whoosh. In typical fashion, and I swear one of the things that never fails to stir feelings deep inside of me, she pulls her knees up and rests her chin on them. Her eyes find mine and they pin me in place. They're so warm I feel as if I might melt right where I sit, like my bones have liquefied inside my body.

"The more classes I was able to take, the more I craved to learn as much as I could. I began giving a few guys advice here and there, things they could do for their cases or for family on the outside. Nothing major," I'm quick to point out. "I never helped anyone get off or anything like that," I tell her anxiously.

"Of course not, Edward," she says softly, calmly.

I push my free hand through my hair and then give her a grateful smile. "Well, because I helped some of the guys, I was pretty much left alone. I mean no one really messed with me," I tell her and hope she can interpret my meaning. Her eyes pinch and she bites her bottom lip and I watch as she sighs and rolls her shoulders. "Every now and then some new guy would come along and try to start shit with me, either to prove a point or because I wouldn't help him, or just because." She wraps her free arm tighter around her legs and I can tell it's taking all she has to try to be strong for me.

Unable to stand watching her struggle to understand things that are really outside her realm of reference, I scoot closer and wrap my arm around her knee, still facing her. "The asshole that did this," I hiss as I tip my head to indicate the scar, "had been messing with me for weeks before he
jumped me. I wouldn't help him with some bullshit complaint he had and it pissed him off. He got to me while I was doing my job in the laundry. I felt him behind me as he was leaning over my shoulder and I turned just enough that he stabbed me in the neck. It was a sharpened toothbrush," I tell her, the memory still as crystal clear as if it happened just yesterday. "I was in the infirmary for a couple of weeks. The bastard injured my vocal cords when he stabbed me, thus the not so smooth voice."

"Hey now, I happen to love that not so smooth voice I'll have you know." She slides her hand out from beneath mine and I hold my breath as she lifts her arm and lays her hand along the side of my neck. Her fingers trace over my scar as she watches my face. She leans forward and places one soft, sweet, soul-touching kiss to the damaged skin. During the kisses and touches we've shared thus far I'm sure she's touched it inadvertently, but this, this was her showing me that she wants me faults and flaws and all.

It's the single most poignant moment of my life. When she pulls back I grab her face, holding it as I stare into her eyes. "Bella." It's all I can say.

My mouth covers hers and I pour all the words I can't say out loud into it. Love, gratitude, relief, need … all of it, until we have to pull apart to breathe.

Suddenly it's all too much and I lean my forehead on her knees. Her fingers slip into my hair and she massages my scalp. I'm exhausted. The last week has been so fucking long and it's finally catching up with me. My muscles are heavy and the thought of leaving this bed, of leaving Bella to go back to the boarding house, sucks more than I have words for.

I turn and find her watching, waiting for me.

"Are you okay?" she gently asks.

Her voice is so soothing. I want to curl up beside her and ask her to read me a story, or better yet, sing me to sleep. It totally makes me sound like a damn pussy, but I don't care.

I nod and a huge yawn escapes. "Damn, I'm so tired," I whisper, turning my head to kiss a crescent-shaped scar on her knee.

"Come on then, let's go to bed," she says as if it's something that has happened a hundred times before.

I gape at her; I can't help it. "What? No, Bella, that's not what I was implying," I tell her shaking my head. "I have to get up early and I don't want you to think, I mean it's not that I don't want to stay … fuck," I mutter when my mouth can't keep up with my brain.

"Edward?" Bella asks and waits until I look at her. "Shut up and get into bed." When I still don't move, she leans forward and presses her nose right against mine. "Stay with me, please? I want to wake up with you beside me," she whispers. Her breath washes over me she's so close and I shudder from the intensity.

I open my mouth but she reaches between us and places a finger on my lips. "Mom told me to take tomorrow off and Dad sent a message that if you show up for work, you're fired. So … looks like you're stuck with me tomorrow." She giggles.

I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her down beside me in one quick motion. "I really didn't want to leave," I tell her once we're facing each other on the pillows.

"Today was …" She closes her eyes and shakes her head.
Oh, sweet girl, I know the feeling, I think.

"It was."

Neither one of us say a word for a few minutes as we soak in the intimacy that surrounds us. After a few more minutes pass, she rolls over and gets out of bed. Holding her hand out to me, she pulls me behind her to the bathroom where we get ready for bed. She gives me a new toothbrush and we watch each other in the mirror, neither able to take our eyes off of each other.

When we're done, she takes my hand and leads me back to her bed. Silently we get in, her on the left, me on the right, as simple and easy as putting on a t-shirt. I pull her against me, and wrap my arms around her.

"Thank you for wanting me to stay," I whisper against her shoulder.

"Thank you for saying yes," she answers right back, relaxing in my arms.

I nuzzle her neck and brush my lips back and forth along her neck and the spot behind her ear. "I'm so fucking happy," I tell her between nips and licks.

She doesn't say anything for the longest time and I think she's fallen asleep until I hear her voice, sweet and soft float through the dark. "You deserve to be happy."

Her breathing evens out quickly after that and I lean up on my elbow and watch her sleep for a few minutes until my eyes get so heavy I can't keep them open any longer. I pull her as close to me as I can get her, not wanting to let her go. The last thought I have before falling asleep is, I hope I never have to.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Bella, come on. Let's go!"

I spin her keys around my finger, anxious to leave.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say someone was in a hurry," she teases, walking into the living room as she winds her hair in a ponytail. I almost hate for her to put it up. My fingers have spent an awful lot of time over the past twenty-four hours buried inside of it, but one glance at the creamy white skin of her neck has me not minding so much after all.

I swallow nervously and run a hand through my hair, suddenly afraid of what is about to happen.

"Hey," she says softly. Her hands reach for me, resting comfortably around my forearms. She squeezes and then steps even closer, chest to chest, and wraps her arms tightly around my waist.

I lean down and press my nose into the top of her hair, letting her citrus and fresh from the shower scent work its magic until I feel like I can breathe again.

"I miss her," I whisper. There's a longing in my chest that's been building for days. It's been over a week since I've seen Peyton and it literally feels like a part of my heart has been missing.

Bella's arms tighten and she tips her head up to look at me. "She's missed you, too. So much. I hate that it's been so long."

She lowers her head again and presses her nose to my chest. I hold her there and take a few deep breaths. As far as Bella and I have come already, as much as we've talked about and shared, this
last hurdle seems almost more daunting than anything.

"What if she hates me? What if she's scared of me now?" I ask. My hands still, my heart races, and my body shakes. "Telling you about Boston was so fucking hard. How can I tell her? She'll never understand …" My voice cracks and I have to close my eyes again to stop the images of Peyton running away from me, screaming in terror as she tells me she never wants to see me again, from flooding my mind.

"Edward, she won't," Bella tells me fiercely, her eyes burning with conviction. "She loves you. She'll understand, and if she doesn't, we'll help her to. She'll be fine, trust me."

I take a deep breath and let her words soothe me before nodding my head. "Let's go get our girl."

The words hang there in the air, and she looks at me. I have no idea what she's thinking, but I sure as hell wish I did. I want to ask, but when I open my mouth, I clamp it close and turn toward the front door. She steps beside me and my hand immediately finds hers. Our fingers weave together, and it grounds me, focuses me. We walk to her truck silently. I open her door first and help her up inside, really noticing for the first time that she looks hot as hell in a short, white skirt, a tight, black t-shirt, and a pair of black flip-flops. Her legs look unbelievably long as she pulls them in. I bite back a groan before slowly walking to the driver's side.

My mind is racing.

She's facing out the passenger side window and doesn't even turn to look in my direction when I slide into the seat and turn the truck on. It rumbles to life, shaking and loud. I turn it off though, as quickly as I can. The silence that stretches out between us is heavy with things that need to be said.

"I never should have said that," I start quietly, slowly.

As much as I wish the words I just spoke were true, the fact is they aren't. Peyton isn't mine. I love her, I would do anything for her, but she doesn't belong to me.

"I don't know what I'm doing here, Bella." My admission is hesitant but nothing but the truth. "I feel like things are spinning wildly out of control but the funny thing is I don't want it to stop. So much has changed now." I trail off and look out my own window.

I feel her hand, warm and comfortingly strong cover mine and she squeezes it until I turn my head to face her. Her features are so soft and so full of what my heart recognizes as love even though that word hasn't been said aloud by either of us. It's there, living, breathing, and so strong, if I took a deep breath, it will fill every part of me, but it's too soon for that. Knowing it's there is enough. It was on the tip of my tongue more than a few times last night and again this morning … I wanted to tell her when I held her in my arms after she told me about Evan. I wanted to tell her when I saw her naked for the first time. I barely stopped myself from screaming it out loud when I felt her wrapped around me, hot and pulsing. I wanted to whisper it in her ear when I held her as she slept, but was afraid she'd somehow hear through the haze of sleep. I wanted to breathe it into her mouth when we made love this morning, limbs tangled, bodies arching and straining. I wanted to fall at her feet and tell her when she touched my scar and bravely asked about my time in prison. It threatened to bubble out when we sat at breakfast, eating pancakes off each other's plates in between kisses and looks that set my body on fire.

I love her; I'm just scared as hell about what that means for us.

With her free hand, she pushes her hair behind her ear and the flash of silver at the top of her ear that peeks out makes me swallow painfully. I stare at the little silver ball, remembering how it felt
to flick at it and roll it over my tongue. Pink floods her cheeks as she watches me stare at her and I cough, a bit embarrassed at myself for losing focus so quickly.

Now that I've had her, heard her, felt her ... I only want more.

"Do you ... " she squeaks then swallows. "Are they good changes?"

Hearing the question in her voice, the naked vulnerability eking out, has me leaning over the center console and holding her face between my hands.

"Bella," I say thickly, worried about saying too much. I have so many feelings surging through me. I know I need to talk to Carlisle, soon, because I'm having trouble getting a handle on them all. Her eyes search mine, begging me for reassurance. My thumbs brush across her cheeks and I hold her still so I can kiss her forehead and then the end of her nose before I stare deeply into her eyes.

"They're the best changes," I tell her sincerely. "But I'm being honest when I say I have no idea what I'm doing with you ... with Peyton. I lived such a long time convincing myself I'd never have this, never have a chance to start over and find someone that makes me as happy as you do. I never would've imagined that an almost four foot tall, gray-eyed tiny little wisp of a thing could wrap me so tightly around her finger that it literally hurts not to see her." There's a flash of something in her eyes that's gone as quickly as it appears and I instantly hear Carlisle's words from last week in the back of my mind.

She's not sure how I'd feel about her if there was no Peyton. The thought wrecks me and I suck in a sharp breath.

"But then there's this woman," I begin slowly, dropping my voice as I stare at her lips. I run the pad of my thumb across her bottom one, releasing it from her top teeth, and feel the tiny indentations in her soft skin. "This gorgeous, feisty, stubborn, amazing woman that waited in the rain for me, that knows about the things that haunt me at night when I try to sleep, that trusts me enough with not only her body but her heart, too. She's the one I want; she's what I need to be happy. You're what I need, Bella. You," I whisper roughly, barely holding back the three words that are aching to come out.

I'm new at all this relationship business, but somehow I know that Bella isn't ready to hear them.

She lurches forward and throws her arms around me, pressing her nose tightly against the side of my neck.

I wrap my arms around her and run my fingers through the hair that falls down her back. "You have to help me, baby," I tell her softly, the words mixing with the heavy breaths coming from each of us. "If things move too fast or I say something that's wrong, or if you feel pressured, please promise me you'll tell me. I've never done this before. I don't want to hurt you ... or lose you now that I've just gotten you." I trip over the last few words, unsure if I've said too much.

"O-Okay," she murmurs and I can feel her take a deep breath against my skin.

I feel an easing of tension I wasn't truly aware of lessen at her promise. The past week, especially, the last day, has been one giant roller coaster and it's not over yet. I almost want to just say 'fuck it' and take Peyton to Ellsworth for pizza and ice cream, but I know I can't.

I swear to God I've talked more since I've arrived in Corea, hell in just the last week alone, than I did in the seven years I was in prison. I kiss Bella on the top of her head and then disentangle my arms from around her. "Are you okay?" I ask quietly as I sit back in my seat.
She nods. "I'm scared, too," she admits, staring at me, "but I know I want to be with you. We don't have to figure everything out today." Her eyes seem to darken, and it feels like she can see all the way inside of me. "You have to make the same promise to me, Edward. Please don't feel like you have to be the one with all the answers; we need to find them together. I've never had that ... this." She waves between us, not being able to articulate what we are any better than I can.

Realizing that makes me smile.

"What, you don't want to call me your boyfriend?" I tease, waggling my eyebrows at her. Her sweet giggle fills the confines of the car and it settles me like nothing else could.

Her eyes find mine and she narrows them. Her nostrils flare and she licks her bottom lip. I can hear her breathing come in short, shallow puffs and she rubs her thighs together in the most deliciously, maddening way. "As long as I can call you mine, I don't care what other label you have."

I groan, and shift uncomfortably in my seat. "Bella." Her name comes out almost like a cross between a sob and a prayer. I'm back across the console in an instant, mouth hungry and desperate for hers. "Kiss me," I demand. She complies readily and the second our tongues meet, I lose all sense of everything but her.

"Fuck," I breathe into her mouth. "I am yours, Bella. Tell me you're mine." I need to hear her say it. I didn't realize how badly I needed it until that word floated between us.

"I'm yours," she whispers, nipping at along my jaw. "We're yours."

"Oh ... God. I want that. You don't have any idea how badly I want that." My fingers twitch from wanting to pull her to me even more, needing to get her closer. "You and Peyton are all that matter to me. I don't need anything else if I have the two of you."

"You have us, Edward. She'll still love you as much after you tell her as she does now."

Her words pull a sob from my chest and I cling to her for a moment as I take a few gulps of air to try to settle down enough to drive us to The Breakers. Cherry is a bit on the temperamental side after all, so I need to be able to concentrate. I kiss her quickly, but not chastely, on the lips and then sit back in my seat once more. I'm wrung out already and we haven't even left the driveway yet. I run a hand through my hair and flex my fingers around the steering wheel before I start the truck.

I roll my window down and take a huge breath, filling my lungs with the salty, moist air that represents home to me now. I can feel Bella's eyes on me and I know she's worried that maybe she's said too much so I reach for her hand as soon as we're on our way to the restaurant.

My thumb rubs back and forth across her palm and neither of us speak. I'm digesting and trying not to feel totally overwhelmed by everything that's happened. I feel like I'm on stimulus overload. There have been too many words, too many feelings bombarding me seemingly all at once and as I drive, it weighs on me heavier and heavier. I feel a slight twinge in my chest as it tightens and there's just a faint sense of panic rising inside of me. I squeeze Bella's hand, much harder than I mean to and she gasps.

"Edward?"

"Talk to me, please. Tell me something, anything."

I don't want to have a panic attack so I breathe in and out and listen to Bella tell me some silly story about Xavier and Seth and something about a spatula and a kitchen counter. I'm only half listening;
the sound of her voice is really all I need to keep in control. Bits and pieces of her story flit around in my mind and I'm pretty sure I'm happy I don't know exactly what she's talking about.

By the time she's done talking, I'm pulling into the parking lot at the restaurant. Thank God. However, once I turn the truck off and stare at the front door, I feel the panic rising again. Jesus, I feel like a fucking basket case, and a pussy to boot. Deep down I know it's my own imagination running wild but I can't help it. Bella and Peyton mean so much to me that the thought of being without either one of them terrifies me.

"It will be fine," Bella tells me when she lays her hand on the side of my face.

"Hope so," is all I can manage to say over the tightness in my throat.

We get out and walk hand in hand into the restaurant. I'm a bundle of nerves and not just because of Peyton. Rose and Alice are in there along with Xavier and Renée and I feel like I'm the star attraction at the circus when we walk in and all of them, besides Xavier who's in the kitchen, turn and look our way.

"Welcome to small town life," Bella grumbles adorably beside me and I laugh before leaning down to kiss the side of her head.

"It's a bit like a fishbowl, isn't it?" I whisper grinning a little when Renée catches my eye.

As soon as I stand, my eyes sweep across the restaurant searching for Peyton. She's sitting at a table in the corner rolling silverware in napkins, her little feet swinging back and forth under the chair as she sings quietly to herself. My heart swells just from looking at her. I really could just watch her all day, even though that sounds creepy as hell, but it's the truth. Just being near her somehow pushes all the bullshit and all the unknowns to the back of my mind.

My feet are stuck to the floor. I want to go to her so badly but I know if telling her doesn't go well, she's going to break my heart.

"Go," Bella says quietly.

I nod, squeeze her hand one time for the last bit of strength I can get, and slowly make my way toward Peyton. My heart flies and bangs against my chest, so hard it's tough to breathe. My eyes never move from her, watching her head bob from left to right and I smile as she scrunches her little nose when she rolls a napkin and it's crooked. Such a tiny perfectionist she is, which makes me chuckle softly because the wild child is such a contradiction. Sweet and snarky, independent and needing constant reassurance, funny and more serious than any child I could ever imagine.

She's perfect … she's Peyton.

"Need some help?" I ask softly when I get closer to the table.

She gasps and her eyes go wide and she freezes for a second. A huge dimple-making smile breaks out on her face and she flies off the chair so fast and hard it topples to the ground.

"Edward!" she shrieks and throws herself at me so hard she knocks me into the table behind me. I hear the glass salt and pepper shakers clink as they roll against each other. I know Bella and the others are laughing at us, but as soon as I pick her up and her little arms go around my neck, there isn't anything else I pay attention to but her.

I squeeze her as hard as I dare, though it isn't hard enough. My arms shake and my legs feel like spaghetti I've missed her so much.
"Where have you been?" she asks when she picks her head up and grabs my face, squishing my cheeks together until I'm sure I look like a fish.

"I'm sorry, Sprite," I tell her even though it's not an answer to her question.

She cocks her head to the side and stares at me, her pewter eyes seeing way more than a seven-year-old should be capable of. "Why aren't you working with Pop?"

I swallow and the nerves come racing back. "I didn't have to work today."

Her eyes narrow and I can tell her little mind is going fast and furious because she knows there's not a good reason I'm not at work, at least as far as she knows. The fact I'd spent hours ravishing her mother isn't anything she needs to come close to thinking about.

"Why?" she asks. Her voice drops and her tongue darts out then slips back in her mouth. She fidgets in my arms and when she stares at me again, I know she can tell there's more to what I'm telling her.

"Want to take a walk with me?" I ask her softly.

She nods slowly and I let her down, blowing out a big burst of air when she moves to the table and starts putting everything in a pile.

"I've got it, baby. You go with Edward for a bit," Bella says when she walks up.

Peyton wordlessly walks to her and buries her nose at her stomach. Bella and I exchange a meaningful glance over Peyton's head and when Bella smiles at me and mouths, "It'll be fine," again, I almost believe her.

I know Peyton loves me; I can feel it in everything she does and I know she can tell I feel the same way about her. I might not have any experience at all when it comes to the behavior of kids, but I know this little girl as intuitively as if I'd spent every day of her life with her. I've never, ever, believed in destiny or fate or any of that mystical, spiritual mumbo-jumbo, but there is not one question that someone, somewhere thought it was best if we crossed paths.

It goes without saying how fucking glad I am it happened.

"Let's hit it, sweet P. There's a rock out there calling our name," I tell her as I tug on the bottom of her ponytail.

She flashes me a smile and then runs toward the kitchen, yelling something about snacks and Nana.

This time it's Bella that curls her index finger around mine and she pulls me toward her. We timed our arrival to make sure we missed both the breakfast and the lunch crowd and the restaurant is completely empty for the first time I've ever seen. She giggles when my head whips back and forth.

"You're always working now; it gets like this every day," she tells me as she shakes her head a bit.

She's totally relaxed, eyes shining bright and my jeans get a tad uncomfortable when a beam of sunlight shines on her hair making it explode with deep reds. I fight the urge to sigh like a lovesick fool even though that pretty much sums up how I'm feeling. I also have to fight the urge to throw her down on the table in the middle of the empty restaurant and see how good her naked body looks in the sunlight.
I growl at the thought.

She rolls her eyes at me.

My eyes bounce around, looking at everything, seeing nothing. "Hey," Bella says sharply, but not because she's angry. "Edward, stop," she says in what can only be described as a no-nonsense mom voice. "You need to give her more credit. She might not understand everything, but she can and will understand that you did the right thing when it mattered the most."

I hang my head. "I know you're right, but it doesn't make it any easier," I whine.

She lifts her hands and presses them against my chest. Her fingers brush back and forth and instantly I relax even though the bottom half of my body is up and ready. I have a feeling that will be pretty much a perpetual state from now on. I feel her knee push against mine indicating she wants me to spread my legs so she can get closer.

Yes and please.

"Now, go talk to her and then come back. We still have the rest of the day to spend together. I don't plan on wasting a moment of it," she whispers and plants a big open-mouthed kiss right on my jaw, complete with a swipe of her warm, wet tongue.

"Fucking hell, Bella," I rasp.

She giggles. She's not the only one. I look up and find Rose and Alice ogling the both of us without shame. For a second I cringe, but when Alice winks at me, I relax.

"Okay, you two," Rose says loud enough for us to hear, but not Peyton who is still in the kitchen. "Unless you want to put on a show for P you better cool it," she teases. Our eyes meet and the acceptance I find there shocks me so much my mouth hangs open.

The moment passes because Peyton barrels through the door loaded down with goodies. "Edward, look!" she shrieks as she bounces up and down in front of me holding out a plastic bag full of fresh peanut butter cookies.

"Well, then let's get out of here; we have lots to talk about," I tell her and give Renée a very appreciative smile.

We make our way down to the beach in only a few minutes. During the time it takes us to get there, I decide to just let go of all my worries and just enjoy spending time with my best friend again. She's going on in her usual Peyton way, telling me about everything that flits through her mind. What Lucy wants for her birthday, something about something that has to do with Will and Andrew and something called a Kinnect, then onto what Charlie told her about how to throw a fast ball until she takes a breath and says, "Is Mom your girlfriend now?"

Fuck. Me.

I stop dead in my tracks and stare at her, bug-eyed and I'm sure my jaw is on the sand. She rolls her eyes at me and I swear she looks so much like Bella when she does that it's almost freaky.

"I … we were … Peyton," I stutter, completely out of my element and unable to think of anything to say.

Bella and I tentatively discussed how to tell Peyton about us, but I wanted to wait until after I'd told her about Boston. Seems like I worried for nothing. I have no idea if that's a good thing or a bad
thing, but I do know I wish the sand would open up and swallow me whole … or that Bella was here.

I have no idea what to tell her but when Peyton's slate blue eyes bore into mine, I sigh, and nod my head. I won't lie to her, especially not about this. "Yes, sweetheart, she is. Is … are you okay with that?" My heart slams against my chest and I hold my breath as I wait for her answer.

I don't have to wait long.

"Oh my gosh! Edward! Yes, yes!" she cries out as she jumps up and down in front of me clapping her hands.

I laugh, I can't help it and I'm even more resolved to tell Peyton, make sure she understands, and then move on with the two of them by my side.

"Come on, wild thing, I need to talk to you about something else," I tell her quietly and pull her toward a grouping of rocks. I pick her up and set her down and then find a spot beside her.

Once we're both comfortable, I suddenly lose the ability to form words, let alone whole sentences. Everything I think of to say to her sounds ridiculous or lame or not enough or just plain wrong.

I stare out at the water, remembering everything Bella told me last night about Evan. I purposely keep my mind off the other things that happened last night, though. I definitely don't need that distraction.

I'm not sure how seven-year-olds are supposed to act, but somehow I know most of them don't sit quietly and wait for someone to start talking like Peyton is. She's running her hand back and forth over the rock, scraping off algae with her fingernail.

Taking a deep breath, I jump right in. "Peyton." I say her name slowly, clearing my throat a few times as I choke on the words I have to tell her. "Have you ever wanted to tell one of your friends like Lucy or Will something but were afraid they might not like you afterward?"

Her eyes widen and her little mouth makes a perfect "o" as she stares at me. I can tell she's really thinking about what I asked though because her eyebrows dip like they always do when she's concentrating. She nods her head slowly, and stares at me anxiously waiting to hear what I say next.

I reach out and run the backs of my fingers down her cheek. She smiles at me, so open, so trusting that it twists my heart. I tell myself to trust what Bella has said, to trust Peyton herself to be able to understand and then accept me.

"Sweetheart, there are a few things I need to tell you about me, about where I was and what I did before I moved here. We're best friends; I don't want us to have any secrets," I begin.

"Best friends shouldn't have secrets," she tells me and her mouth puckers a bit in agitation at me. I nod. "I know, that's why I'm talking to you now." I wait for a moment then start again. "I was a pretty bad kid when I was younger. I got into fights, stayed out late, didn't listen to my grandfather. I just got into a lot of trouble." I watch her and she's stopped moving and is focused completely on me. "When I got a little older, I kept doing those bad things."

"Why?" she interrupts, though I shouldn't be surprised by her question.

I shrug my shoulders, knowing how unsatisfying a response that really must seem like. "I don't
know, P. I was sad that my grandmother died and mad at my grandfather because he wasn't able to
take care of me like he used to. I didn't have anyone really I could talk to and it made me feel all
jumbled up inside. Have you ever felt that way? Like you want to yell and cry at the same time?" I
ask her, wondering how in the hell she's ever going to understand what I'm talking about.

It doesn't really surprise me however when she slowly nods her head at me, her eyes deep and
knowing. "Yes," she says so quietly it's almost hard to hear over the sound of the waves brushing
against the sand and rocks of the beach.

"I was sad and mad for a long time and then I made a friend – someone who I thought was a really
good friend," I say slowly, waiting for the question I know is coming.

Her head snaps up. "Like me?"

I chuckle at that, as if there could be anyone else like her. "Of course not, Sprite. I've never had a
friend like you," I tell her with a smile. She huffs and nods her head, pleased with my answer.
"Anyway," I continue. "He was the only person I really talked to and we started hanging out a lot.
My grandfather didn't like him at all and I spent more time with Aleksei than I did at home."

"I bet that made your grandfather sad. I get sad when Lucy wants to spend more time with Madison
than me," Peyton says as if it's the worst thing in the world.

"Yeah, it did. I wish now I would've listened to him because I got into some trouble with Aleksei,"
I say, sighing.

She gasps and I'm again wondering how much and just how to tell her about this. This is Peyton,
and if I know anything about her, I know that she can spot bullshit, so I figure straight and to the
point is the best way.

"Peyton, one night I went somewhere with Aleksei. I didn't realize when we went to the man's
house that he was going to do something bad. He hurt the man. I stayed behind and helped him, but
Aleksei ran away. I had really thought we were friends, but we never really were." The thought that
I'd been so blind and such a fool all those years ago is as painful now as it was then.

I'm watching Peyton and her little face is scrunched up and I can tell she's waiting for me to
continue. Now comes the hard part.

"I had to call the police and ambulance to help the man. See, it wasn't just a scraped knee; he was
hurt very badly and I could only help him so much, and I wanted to help him as much as I could."

Her little lip is quivering as she quietly asks, "Was he going to die?"

Her question doesn't shock me though it really should. Why must she be so smart? I slowly nod my
head. "But he didn't, Sprite. The ambulance came and they saved him." I look down at the rock that
she was brushing her hand against earlier, swallow heavily and continue. "The police came, too,
and … and because I was there and I went there with Aleksei … they arrested me. That is when I
got into trouble. They put me in jail because of that and that's where I have been until I came here."

I can see so much of Bella in Peyton's face while she is thinking about this. Confusion – and then
anger. "That's not fair! I got in trouble at school because Will was talking and he wouldn't be quiet
and I got in trouble, too! It wasn't my fault, but I got sent to the principal's office and I really wasn't
doing anything. That's just like you, Edward. You were just there! You didn't do anything wrong!
Why did you get in trouble? You helped that man! Why didn't dumb Aleksei get into trouble and
not you?" She says all this in her usual Peyton way, not a breath to be taken, and I can't help but
chuckle at her ire.

"Oh, sweetheart, sometimes things just work out that way. I made some bad choices and they led me to where I was, but I don't want to think about those anymore. I want to be here with you and your mom, but I need to know if we are still best friends. I know this is a lot to think about, but I need to know if we are okay."

Peyton gives me an eye roll and says, "You didn't do anything bad, Edward. You aren't bad. You're my best friend ... and ... I love you."

Hearing her utter those words takes my breath away. For what seems like the longest time I just look at this little girl who has stolen my heart and given me something to look forward to, something to aim for in my future. I wrap my arms around her and hug her to me, whispering in her ear, "I love you, too, Peyton."

We sit on that rock together, just hugging each other for a few moments until I release her and look into her sweet face. "Do you want to ask me any questions?"

She just looks back at me, searching my face. "Are you okay now?"

I give her a slow nod and smile. She returns my nod and says, "Good! Now, let's have some cookies."

I just grin at my best friend and agree that it's snack time. I never expected her to take it so well, but if I've learned anything, it's that my girls are full of surprises.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

So, things are slowly coming together for our Edward, Bella, and Peyton. Most everything is out in the open and they can definitely begin to move forward now.

Okay, the next chapter will be from Bella's POV. I'm sure you'd all like to see what she thinks about all the changes, yes? That confrontation between Emmett and Bella, yeah, that is coming in the next chapter as well as a few other things.

We've set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www(.)facebook(.)com / groups / 137144056381565 /

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

*Now for my announcement - I will not be posting a chapter next Sunday. I know, I know, and I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. I've NEVER missed a posting day, and I hate to miss one now, but I promise I'll be back in 2 weeks! No teaser tomorrow, but we'll be back on track next Monday and the Wordle, recipe, and pic teases will all be posted, too! I'm really sorry, don't be too upset with me, okay?*

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all!

Thanks so much for reading!

See you in 2 weeks ...
Chapter 17

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers - they all work so hard to help me and I wouldn't know what to do without them! They all certainly went WAY above and beyond this time and I'll be forever grateful for all the support they give me! You ladies rock my world!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

Now, on with the story … PLEASE be sure to read the bottom A/N, I have a VERY important announcement!

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 17

BPOV

"Bella, stop giving your man googly eyes and get in the damn car or else we are never going to get out of here," Rose snaps at me.

I wave her off behind my back and, accidentally on purpose, lift my middle finger in the middle of my wave.

"Do you want to tell me why on Earth we decided it would be a good idea for me to ride with the guys and you with the girls?" Edward whines adorably. Of course the words are muffled because he's saying them against my neck.

In the background I can hear Jasper, Emmett, Xavier, and Seth snickering and Rose and Alice bitching about being late, but I don't care. Pressed against Edward's hard body while his arms hold me close to him makes it damned hard to care about anything else. Who the hell can really blame me?

"I'm so excited to get to spend the night with you again. It's been way too fucking long." His hands cup my ass and when he lifts and then shifts just so, neither of us can help the groans that escape.

I nod, swallowing past the urge to just drag him into the house and say to hell with the spending time with our friends thing and ravish him, repeatedly, until tomorrow night. Peyton is with Mom and Dad for the night, and really, it would be so easy to do.

I look into his faded denim blue eyes and find the same desire swirling. When my tongue sweeps over my bottom lip, that blue turns downright midnight. His eyes widen and his nostrils flare as he
stares at my mouth. Because teasing him is just as much fun as enjoying him, I do it again. His fingers dig into my ass and I can feel just how much my teasing affects him against my stomach.

As per usual, being this close to him sets my heart flying and everything that has happened in the last month settles around me like a soft, warm, summer mist, coating me entirely. I've never been happier and it's entirely due to the amazing man in front of me.

"How long is this torture going to last?" he mumbles when he releases the skin he has between his teeth.

I kiss along his jaw, his day's worth of scruff rough against my lips and whine almost in perfect replication of Peyton, "About an hour or so." Suddenly the idea of being apart from him for even that short of a time seems like torture … even if there is a room waiting for just the two of us.

He sighs, squeezes my butt one more time for good measure, and then takes a step backward.

We smile at each other, those big, dopey, roll your eyes when you see people look like lovesick fools kind of smiles and say nothing. My heart swells knowing that I get to spend the night with him. It's not just because of the sex, though that is mind-blowing enough all on its own, but more the fact that when I'm with him, everything just feels so right.

"Guess I better go," he says softly as he curls his index finger around mine and swings our hands between us.

"Mmm hmmm."

He leans forward and brushes his lips quickly across mine, soft and sweet and absolutely perfect. "I'll see you soon," he whispers and then pecks the end of my nose before he jogs off.

"Be careful. I love you," I tell him.

He freezes immediately, halfway back to Xavier's truck. He turns around and we stare at each other, eyes locked, bodies still.

*Holy shit.*

I replay the last thirty seconds in my mind. Yep, I most definitely just told Edward I love him. So not the way I envisioned saying those words, but I'm not sorry I said them.

"Say it again," Edward demands. His chest heaves, sea glass eyes blazing as intensely as I've ever seen them.

"I love you." I can feel tears slide down my face, the happiest tears I've cried since the day Peyton was born.

"Bella." My name falls from his lips as reverent as a prayer.

Before I can even take a breath, his arms are around me, lifting me so that my legs can wrap around his waist. His mouth covers mine, kissing me with the same urgency as a man that's been given a glass of water after being in the desert for days on end.

"Oh, God, Bella," he says, laying one hand along the side of my face while the other is splayed across my back, holding me close. "I love you, too, so fucking much."

I gasp once the words penetrate through the haze of happiness swirling around in my mind. "You
"love me?" I squeak, holding his face between my hands, falling captive to the bottomless eyes that stare back at me.

He nods, smiling so big the skin beside his eyes crinkles. "So, so much, baby," he says quietly, but with so much feeling my heart feels like it might just explode out of my chest.

We both sigh at the same time, then laugh intimately even though we're not alone. We could be in the middle of Manhattan during morning rush and it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference. He's all I see.

Rose starts honking the horn of Emmett's Jeep and Xavier follows suit, effectively bursting our little 'I love you' bubble.

"I have to put you down now," he says though he doesn't let go of me.

I nod slowly, but don't move.

"I don't want to." He pouts.

"I know, but you have to. The sooner you let me go, the sooner we can leave and the sooner we can get there and go to our room," I tell him, tangling my fingers in his hair. I don't want him to let me go any more than he does, but I lean forward and peck his lips and then let my legs go. I dangle there for a moment, legs hanging like a marionette, before he lowers me to the ground.

"Ed, man, come on. It's an hour trip. I think you can manage to let Bella go for that long," Jasper hollers.

I hear doors opening and shutting, engines turning on, and still we can't take our eyes off each other.

We're acting like fools … but fools that are in love so I don't really give a damn.

"Be careful," I whisper, walking backward so I don't have to stop looking at him.

He smirks and lowers his sunglasses from the top of his head to cover his eyes. I don't have to see them to know they are following my every move; I can feel them as if they were his hands, ghosting over my entire body.

"You, too," he says and laughs at how ridiculous we are being.

It's an hour for God's sake … sixty freaking minutes and we're acting like it's going to be days.

He gives me one more long look, and then waves before he turns around and jogs back to Xavier's truck, flipping them all off when he gets into the backseat. I shake my head in wonder thinking back to remember that guy I first met, the one that was too afraid to say the wrong thing to anyone. When Xav peels out of my driveway, old school rap blaring out of the open windows, Edward smiles as they take off and I smile back. I hate missing any opportunity to spend time with him, but I love seeing him so comfortable with the guys.

I climb into the backseat of the Jeep and we take off as well. Before we can even make it down the street to the stop sign, my phone vibrates.

"Tell me again," my favorite caramel turtle voice oozes as soon as the phone is beside my ear.

"I love you," I answer with no hesitation whatsoever.
"Fuck, baby." He sighs. "I need you."

Rose catches my eye in the rear view mirror and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep the groan that desperately wants to bubble out from his words. So damn sexy, all low and gruff, and sinfully smooth even though no one could ever accuse Edward of having a velvety voice. It's the voice I hear in my dreams now, and it's the voice that sets my heart flying and my blood racing every time I hear it.

"Me, too," I say as I take an uneven breath.

"Tonight, Bella," is all he says before he's gone.

I close my eyes and hold the phone to my ear as if keeping it there keeps him closer to me. Of course, when I open my eyes both Alice and Rose are gaping at me, their mouths hanging open so wide I actually worry for a second they might stay that way forever.

I hold my hand up and sternly say, "Not one word," and cock my eyebrow at the both of them until they nod. I want to savor this, close my eyes and immerse myself in how damned happy I am right this second. I'll squeal and act like one of those girls on Peyton's TV shows later, but at this moment in time, I want nothing but to think of Edward.

My eyes close again and my mind immediately goes to him.

Kaleidoscope eyes that change into more colors than a rainbow.

A smile that makes me throb between my legs, makes my skin break out in goosebumps, but makes me feel as warm as a mug of hot chocolate on a cold winter's day.

Hands that when they touch me, soothe every ache I've ever had, and at the same time make me feel more alive than ever before. Hands that have touched me in ways I never could have imagined. Hands that hold, hands that caress, and hands that though they are calloused and scarred, can wrap themselves around my daughter's tiny ones with a gentleness that makes my heart soar.

Sighing, I lean my head against the window and smile when I think about him getting in the truck with the guys. They all gave him shit. I could tell from where I was standing; they wouldn't be the idiots I adore if they didn't. They have all accepted Edward so seamlessly now that everything is out in the open, and that makes me absurdly happy. Even Emmett's taunts were done with affection.

Thinking of Emmett sends my mind racing back to a few weeks ago.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Xavier and Seth are spending the day with Edward, Peyton, and me which is weird at first. Sundays are 'our' day, having changed to all day instead of just dinner because it's really the only day Edward can spend a lot of time with us. Today, there's a big soccer game on television. Xavier, Seth, and Peyton are huge Manchester United fans and today they're playing the MLS All-Stars. Edward has been so cute, actually, not that I would ever tell him mind you, wanting to impress both Xavier and Seth with his soccer knowledge. He must have done a ton of research or something, because by the time the game rolls around, he is spouting off everything from Wayne Rooney's height and weight to a history on Sir Alex Ferguson.

When halftime rolls around, Seth, Xavier, and Edward are acting like fools and Peyton is right beside them. Because the game is on later in the day, I've made a huge lunch: roast beef sandwiches, homemade pizza, different kinds of chips, veggies and dip, potato salad, and of course
chocolate chip cookies and mint chocolate chip ice cream for dessert. I’m bringing out a tray of drinks when there’s a knock on the door.

The weather has been so nice lately and the front door is open, leaving just the screen door to let the warm summer breeze waft through the house. When I look up and see Emmett standing there, my stomach drops and the tray I’m carrying tilts.

"Bella, are you okay?" Edward worriedly asks when he hears me squeak.

He walks out of the kitchen behind me and I know the moment he notices who is at the door because he stops walking immediately and sucks in a sharp breath. It's completely rude and my mom would kick my ass if she found out, but instead of walking right to the door to let Emmett in, I turn around and check on Edward instead.

He looks worried, but I know it's more for me than for himself. Ever since I met him at the boat, Edward's told me that things between him and Emmett, while not anywhere close to being back like they were before Em found out Edward had been in prison, are at least calm enough to be able to work together without Edward worrying about Emmett sticking a lobster down his pants.

I hand him the tray and then stand up on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "I'm fine. Will you take these to everyone and let me see what he wants?"

He hesitates only long enough to give Emmett a hard look before he nods then smiles at me. "Tell him what you need, Bella, and if you need me, let me know, okay?"

My heart melts just a bit at his sweet words, but I know it's best to get this over with.

It's time.

I walk to the door and push the screen open. Emmett stands with his arms crossed and his mouth in a thin line. It doesn't seem like he's any more ready to have this discussion than I am, but I suppose I have to give him credit that he's here at all. I'd be willing to bet Rose has something, if not everything, to do with him being here, but it doesn't really matter. He's here and we need to talk. Everyone knows it.

"Uncle Em!" Peyton squeals when Emmett walks past me, kissing me on the top of the head just like he's done for longer than I can remember. It's purely reflex, and my eyes close for a brief second as a huge sense of regret washes over me. He's been doing the same thing for so long it has pretty much lost its significance, especially when you consider how truly far apart we are from each other.

I've never really noticed, not that I'd ever honestly spent a lot of time thinking about it, how distant the two of us are. Watching him hug Peyton and give her a kiss and smile at her almost hurts. I know he loves me, I know he loves Peyton and he would do anything for us if we needed him to, but if I'm being truthful, it almost feels more like obligation than want. I'm probably being too harsh because he really is a wonderful uncle and Peyton adores him unconditionally and I know, even though he makes it so hard sometimes, that if I ever needed him, he'd be there no questions asked. He proved that when I was pregnant with Peyton and has proved it time and time again over the years, but now that I'm finally in a place in my life when I want ... and need ... to do something for me, something that makes me happy, he can't or won't support it.

I sigh and give Edward a small smile when he catches my eye. Emmett has, of course, helped himself and fixed a plate, piling it high with more food than should be possible for him to eat. For a second I wonder why the hell he even bothered to come by if he's going to ignore Edward and
spend all his time stuffing his face instead of talking to me like I thought he'd wanted to.

"Are you okay?" Edward mouths to me and I nod, once, before huffing and walking into the kitchen wondering if I can ask Rose to kick his ass … again.

She didn’t really go into much detail about what happened after the whole Em storming out of Mom and Dad’s house spewing insults tirade, but the gleam in her eye the next morning at work and the evil smirk on her face when I asked if he was okay gave me a pretty good idea that whatever she’d done or said to him had been sufficiently painful.

After I stare out of the kitchen window mumbling over and over about what an idiot my brother is, I hear him amble in. When I turn around, he’s leaning against the counter beside the refrigerator still holding a plate full of food.

"Didn’t Rose feed you before you came over here?" I scoff, shaking my head at him.

He shoves a forkful of potato salad in his mouth before he waves the empty fork in air, saying, "She went to Ellsworth with Mom to pick up an order for the restaurant, so I figured I’d come see what you and P were doing. I didn't realize you were having a party that I wasn't invited to.” The tone of his voice definitely doesn't match the teasing he's trying to pull off.

I resist, barely, the urge to roll my eyes at the not so subtle message. It's been ages since he's spent a Sunday with me and Peyton, probably since the Superbowl in February if I'm not mistaken. There might have been a few family dinners here and there over the past six months but that's it. He spends his Sundays with Rose; I used to spend mine with Peyton, and now I spend them with her and Edward.

When I don't defend myself, he waits a moment before he says, "So it seems like things with Edward are … going swimmingly." His tone is snide and so disrespectful I'd like nothing better than to slap him upside his head.

"Emmett," I sigh and flop down into a bar stool beside the island in the center of the kitchen, "you can't keep doing this." My voice is tight as I try to hold back a lifetime's worth of frustration.

He looks at me, his blue eyes full of questions. This conversation is obviously years overdue.

I reach out and grab an apple from the fruit bowl, not hungry in the least, but needing to do something with my hands so I don't wrap them around his freakishly large neck and strangle him. It's times like these when I truly realize how much of a saint Rose really is.

"I love you. You're my brother and you always will be, but that doesn't mean you know me or know what's best for me," I tell him and feel like shit when my words reach him across the kitchen.

His shoulders slump, he sucks in a sharp breath, and he literally looks like he might be sick. I feel awful for hurting him, but he needs to finally, really hear me for a change.

He opens his mouth but I hold my hand up to stop the words before he can speak them. I know, or I can hazard a damned good guess at what he's going to say, and it will be more of the same. "Bella, I'm only trying to help," or "Bella, what were you thinking?" or even worse, "Bella, I really think you should …" I don't want to hear it anymore and I sure as hell don't want to hear it in regard to Edward.

I'm twenty-seven years-old and it's way past time for him to stop treating me like I'm still that knobby-kneed, pig-tailed, little girl that used to try to keep up with him when he ran down the beach. I haven't been that girl for a long time. He's just refused to acknowledge that.
"You obviously haven't noticed, but I'm not a little girl anymore. I'm more than capable of making my own decisions, even though you seem to have a problem with that."

He scoffs again and sets his now empty plate on the counter beside him. "Could have fooled me, sis. I mean, case in point, Edward is sitting in your living room as we speak, even after you know what he's done and where he's been," he tells me, still stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the facts he knows are true. "What do you think Evan would say about Edward? Do you think he would approve of you and his daughter hanging out and being best friends with an ex-con? An ex-con that was arrested for attempted murder?"

Why that … he knows damn good and well that Edward was never charged with attempted murder, that that charge was dropped when his lawyer accepted the plea bargain! He knows Edward didn't do anything but save that man and sacrificed his own freedom to do the right thing. I rage silently in my head, imagining many different excruciating ways to make him suffer for being such an ass.

I growl and give Emmett a hard glare. "Do you really want to go that route, Emmett? What the hell? Do you want to question what Evan, my best friend, would have thought of Edward or how he would have accepted Edward?"

Emmett just glares back at me and nods his head. Is he really so far gone or did he not know Evan like I thought he did? They weren't best friends and Emmett didn't know Evan the way I did, or even the way that Xavier and Seth did, but I would think that he knew better than to try and make me feel guilty using Evan. He loved Evan like a brother. When he died, a piece of Emmett died that has never recovered, and for him to throw Evan in my face hurts more than I can express.

I cross my arms and take a deep breath. Words are swirling in my head. I try to put them in order so that he truly hears what I'm saying. "Okay, if you really want to know what Evan would think, I'll tell you. He'd be open-minded. He'd listen to EVERYTHING. He'd see that Edward is trying to get his life back on track, after being railroaded into a prison sentence he didn't deserve in the first place. He'd accept that Edward is a good man, because, oh, I don't know, Dad vouches for him and Carlisle has stood up for him. You know, the people he respected most in our town," I spit out angrily as I tick off point after point, still not understanding how he can be so unforgiving and obstinate. I could be wishful thinking as far as Evan is concerned, but I know I'm right. Evan was young when he died, but he wasn't a child. He never would have judged Edward as harshly as Emmett has. Ever.

I push my hair behind my ear and stare at Emmett for a moment before I go on, softer, but even more determined to finish saying what I need to. "He would want me to be happy, which I am. He would be just as accepting of Edward as he was with Xavier and Seth and you know how much he stood up for them when they first came out." I know that every word I say is true. I know that Evan would give Edward a chance to prove himself and would never make assumptions the way Emmett has. I think that is one of the greatest things that Peyton got from Evan.

Emmett is shaking his head. "I don't think you're right, Bella. I think Evan would want Peyton as far away from a felon as possible. He wouldn't want his daughter being around someone like Edward … and he wouldn't want you with him either."

I grit my teeth and have to tell myself over and over a few times that Emmett's my brother and I love him … even though I really don't like him at the moment. At. All. "What makes you think you have the first damn clue you're right? I'm serious, because there are two men out there that knew him WAY better than you ever did, that were his best friends, that confided in him with everything, and they're sitting on the couch, eating lunch and watching a soccer game with him like they've
done it a hundred times. Why can't you just be happy for us that we've found a man that wants to be with us? He's a man who loves Peyton completely. Have you seen them together? She loves him just as much if not more as he loves her. She lights up with him, and you know that she's always been a good judge of character."

I take a deep breath before I start crying or screaming. I'm not even sure which one I'd rather do right now.

“You told Edward he was one of you,” I say quietly, my voice shaking as I try to get through this. The look of shock on Emmett's face is priceless. "Yes, he told me you told him that. Something else you should know, though he's never said it, but I can read it in his face, is how much it hurts him that you took that back. Do you know anything about his time in prison?" I ask, though it's rhetorical because I don't even give him time to answer. "I'm sure you don't because you won't talk to him, but let me tell you, he kept to himself, didn't talk to anyone unless he needed to, and stayed out of trouble. He took college classes, Emmett. Hell, he even passed the bar exam!" I can't help the pride I feel for Edward shine through as I tell Emmett that. I know it's not something Edward wants to broadcast, in fact he seemed almost embarrassed when he'd told me, but Emmett needs to know how wrong he is.

"He didn't trust anyone, until he came here and met you, Dad, Carlisle, and Jasper. He was so afraid to lose the first friends that he truly felt he had, that he was terrified of telling all of us about what happened in his past, but he did it, and then you stomped on what he thought was a friendship. He made a mistake by trusting someone he thought was a friend, and he's paid a mighty high price for that … a price you can't even comprehend," I finish quietly, my entire body shaking from all the emotions raging through me.

My brother is looking at the floor and I don't know what he is thinking, but I'm not quite done yet. I take a calming breath so I can get the rest of what I need to say out on the table.

"As for me, I care about Edward more than I ever thought I'd care about anyone again and I will stand beside him, even if that means standing up to you. I'm an adult and I'm quite capable of making my own choices. I go to work every day. I take care of Peyton every day. I make the choices that I make with her in mind, every ... single ... day. She's most important, and she needs Edward, just as much as he needs her. I need him and want him in my life. You need to realize that I've grown up, Emmett. You need to trust that I'm doing what's right for myself and for Peyton. I'm finally starting to let Evan go and realize that his death was just an accident. I want to move forward, not keep looking back. Edward makes me want to look to the future, Em, not live in the past. I'm tired of the guilt and I'm tired of being alone. He makes me happier than I ever thought I could be."

There is a charged, heavy silence as my words settle around us. The game is still on in the living room and when Peyton and Edward whoop and then laugh together, I can't help but smile and raise my eyebrow at Emmett because they've just proven my point.

"I just don't want either of you to get hurt, Bella. I couldn't stand for you to be hurt anymore than you already have been," Emmett tells me while looking straight into my eyes. I can see the sincerity in them. I can tell how hard it's been for him to let go of his own guilt. It's weighed us all down for way too long and it's time for all of us to try to let it go.

"I know, but I need you to trust me on this," I tell him emphatically. I'm not giving Edward up no matter what he says, but I'd like to try to close the gap that is suddenly so glaringly obvious between us. For years we've pretended it wasn't there, but we can't pretend any longer. "Edward isn't going to hurt us. He cares too much about us to do anything that would harm either me or
Peyton. But even if he does, it's my life, my decision ... not yours and not anyone else's either. Only mine."

Emmett walks over and hugs me tightly. Its been a long time since it felt so right to hug my brother, but I'm cherishing this moment. "I'll try, Bella. I'll try."

He kisses the top of my head and then we both walk back out into the living room. Edward stands up as soon as he spots me and hurries to my side. Peyton throws herself at her uncle and asks if he's staying. I cringe and then instantly feel bad for hoping he tells her no. Even though I feel better airing things that have needed to come out for a long time, I'm not quite ready to pretend like everything is hunky dory. We have some things to mend before I'll be ready for that.

"You okay?" Edward whispers in my ear as he runs his nose down the side of my jaw. His fingers trace lazy circles on the skin just above my hipbone. They dip beneath the elastic waistband of my shorts and everywhere he touches, it feels like he leaves a trail of sparks in their wake.

I nod, swallowing a groan when those wicked, talented, strong fingers curl around my waist and find the swell of my ass. "Evil man," I murmur under my breath and when he nonchalantly shrugs, I elbow him in the side.

"Serves you right." I smirk when he grunts at me.

I hear a throat clear and turn, slightly embarrassed at the fact that as soon as Edward touches me, I have a tendency to forget that we're not alone.

"I'm gonna head out, Bell," Emmett says and then nods at Edward. "See you tomorrow, man," he tells him as he holds his hand out to shake. When Edward takes his hand and gives him that sort of nod, tip of the chin thing guys the world over do, I know everything will be just fine.

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"Bell, are you okay?" Alice asks softly pulling me gently back to the present.

I sigh. I'm not sure Emmett and I will ever be extremely close, but the warm hug and genuine smile he gave me when I first saw him this evening gives me hope that the bridge has definitely been mended.

"I'm fine, Alice," I answer and I am.

Truly and utterly because really, how can I not be? When the car stops at the little bed and breakfast we all decided on spending the night at, Edward will be there.

Edward, who's in love with me and who I love in return, fully and completely.

I giggle. I can't help it and when both Rose and Alice look at me like I've sprouted a second head, I laugh a bit harder, covering my mouth up with a hand while the other flits ridiculously around in the air. I look like a lunatic. I have to judging from the looks the two of them give me ... a mix of amusement and shock, which does nothing but make me laugh harder.

It takes me a few deep breaths before I'm able to get myself under some semblance of control, though it's just barely. That giddy feeling of pure joy at the fact that, from the moment I step out of the Jeep, anytime I want to, I can tell Edward I love him.

It's all I can do to keep from hanging my head out of the window and shouting it at every car that passes by.
"I love Edward," I blurt, the words unable to be contained another moment.

Rose throws her head back and laughs, the sound filling the car. When Alice joins in, it becomes even louder. When I do, the three of us laughing along with the music blaring from the radio practically shakes the windows.

"Really, Bella? I never would have guessed you love him," Rose teases once we each get control of ourselves again. Her smile is radiant and there is nothing but support and happiness shining back at me. I feel a momentary twinge, just a sharp, quick pin prick, as the thought that it would have been really damned nice if Emmett had reacted anywhere near the same, appears then recedes just as fast.

I look back and forth between the two of them and my heart literally grows with how grateful I am to the two of them. Alice has been nothing but a bright ray of sunshine since she and Jasper arrived in Corea, and Rose has been my biggest supporter, even more so than Xavier in some ways, almost my whole life. Even when I make mistakes, and there have been plenty of those, and even when I push her away, she's always been there.

Since Edward walked through the door of The Breakers that first time, I've slowly felt myself letting down the walls I've been hiding behind since Evan died. Buried beneath and behind years of guilt, remorse, and regret those walls began to crumble with that very first flash of heat that spread through my body the moment I stared into Edward's storm cloud-colored eyes and every day since, the walls have crumbled a bit more. They're still tall enough to hide behind if I choose to do so, but they aren't anywhere near as thick or as tall as they used to be.

I've found myself peeking out from behind them way more often than not over the past few weeks, realizing that what I've been hiding from really wasn't as bad as I'd always thought.

I've always had friends that loved me, I've had a family that's supported me and wanted good things for me, but it was Edward … tattooed, broken, alone, brave Edward, who made me realize that you have to take a chance. Even when you're scared out of your mind that it will end in utter failure, taking a chance might end up giving you the best reward.

He has every reason to be bitter and angry and he's not. The two of us have spent hours talking about things I'm sure he's never talked about before. What it was like when his grandmother died, the anguish he felt when he wasn't given permission to attend his grandfather's funeral … severing the last connection to the family that he had. How awful it was that he'd been forced to grieve silently and alone, locked inside a ten by ten cage. My heart broke for him when he tried to keep the tears at bay, his shoulders heaving and breath coming in sharp, raspy gasps. He still hasn't forgiven himself for his behavior before he was arrested, cursing himself over and over again at being such a blind, naïve, stupid fool to follow Aleksei so willingly.

Glancing out the window, I can tell we're getting closer to Bar Harbor, which means closer to the Inn, and closer to being with Edward. I can't wait.

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"Sprite, of course I miss you … even though it's only been like two hours since I've seen you." Edward laughs into his phone as I walk out of the bathroom.

We're supposed to meet everyone else downstairs in ten minutes but there is no way I'm hurrying this conversation. I lean against the door frame watching and listening. I swear it's like my heart just keeps growing and growing. I almost wonder how I'm supposed to keep it all inside.
The sun has set, and the room is dark except for the few lamps spread throughout the suite. He's standing next to the windows and lifts his free hand to run it through his hair. My mouth waters when a tiny sliver of toned stomach peeks out and it's hard to decide if the view is better from where I'm standing or seeing it in the reflection of the window. The soft lights bounce off his hair, streaks of gold and red mix with brown to make a color I still can't adequately describe. Even from across the room I can see his eyes crinkle on the sides as he laughs again as Peyton rambles about God knows what. The next color she wants to paint her toenails, why she thinks cheesburgers are so much better than hotdogs, to informing him she's decided she wants to be a professional surfer when she grows up … and that's just since this morning.

"I'm not sure why green M&M's taste better than all the other ones," he says with a slight shake of his head. His voice is so gentle and as always, as patient as a saint's when it comes to her.

Listening to him talk about the most nonsensical things, but treating each and every one as if they are the most important words he's ever heard just serves to remind me how incredible he truly is … and how alone he's been for so long. Maybe it's the time he spent in prison, trying to survive every day, maybe it's the time he spent in prison, trying to survive every day, maybe it's the fact that there's not one other member of his family anywhere out there in the world, or maybe it's just the fact that he's so different from anyone else I've ever met … whatever it is, it's mine … he's mine, and I couldn't be happier about that.

He turns his head just enough to find me in the windows and holds his hand out behind him. I go to him, wanting to touch him so badly my hands shake. I never want to make him feel like he has to choose between me and Peyton. She needs him every bit as much as I do, so I would never begrudge them their special time.

"You were too far away," he whispers as soon as he slides his fingers between mine.

He leans down and brushes the lightest of kisses across my bare shoulder, nudging the thin strap of my tank top with his nose.

"Mmmm hmmmm. You're right, sweetheart," he murmurs into the phone in a voice that is completely at odds with the heat and intensity blazing out of his eyes as he looks at me in the glass. Neither of us stop looking at the other and when his tongue darts out of his mouth and swirls in the dip between my neck and my shoulder, I can feel my nipples harden beneath my thin shirt.

Teeth follow tongue and never once do his eyes leave mine. A pinch, then a soothing kiss to ease the sting his teeth make.

"Well, I can't wait for you to show me," he says. I can feel the vibration of his voice against my neck, hear Peyton's exuberant voice on the other end of the phone. I have no idea what they're talking about, but it doesn't matter. Hearing her that happy is all I need to know. "I promise. I won't tell her." Edward cocks his eyebrow at me, smirking when I try to glare at him. He smiles, the smile he gets only for her, and lowers his voice, "Night, P. Sweet dreams only, okay?" His smile grows but gets impossibly softer. "I love you, too. I'll see you tomorrow. Here's your mom," he finishes, handing me the phone.

She's so tired, but she chatters for a few minutes and I try to pay attention as best I can, which is a feat unto itself considering Edward stands behind me and holds me tightly against his chest. His hands inch forward from my hips until they rest, stacked on top of each other, right below my bellybutton. Fingers tug and stretch until my shirt is bunched up and I can feel his fingertips dance across my skin.

"Okay, baby," I say in a shaky voice, "be good for Nana and Pop and we'll see you tomorrow. Love you."
As soon as the words leave my lips, he's rocking his hips against mine, driving me completely out of my mind. His hands separate and fingers spread over my stomach making every nerve ending come to life. A thumb barely grazes the underside of my breast and my head suddenly feels like it's too heavy to hold up. Gently we sway back and forth, almost like we're dancing. I melt even more into him when I feel his tongue behind my ear.

A hand reaches out and plucks the phone out of my hand. I hear him slide it into his pocket but his tongue never stops moving, neither does his other hand. I'm about three seconds away from telling him we're skipping dinner and ordering room service when he stills behind me.

"I suppose we have to go, huh? We're already going to be late." He lays his chin on my shoulder and our eyes meet in the glass in front of us.

I nod, not wanting to leave the room any more than it seems like he does. I watch our reflection, the inky black sky beyond the wall of windows glitters with so many stars.

"She was so happy to talk to you."

This time he nods, but I can tell he feels the same way. "She amazes me more every day," he says and then chuckles, the sound vibrating against my back.

"You amaze me with her," I tell him softly, but it's so true. He looks up again and I elaborate. "You have no idea the difference you've made in her. Peyton's always been happy, or at least she's seemed that way, but since she found you outside the restaurant and declared herself your best friend, she is like a walking, talking little ball of light and happiness and sunshine. She was waiting for you and we didn't even know it until you were here. She loves you so much, Edward." I have to swallow a few times to stop myself from crying.

He spins me around so that we're face to face. His eyes are like slate blue windows to his soul and tell me more than words ever could. In them I see relief, pride, fear, and so much love and happiness I feel like I'm drowning in them … in him. Hands lift and hold the sides of my face and then his lips crash against mine. His tongue sweeps across my bottom lip before it enters my mouth, dipping once, twice … a third time. My arms are around his neck and I press myself tightly against him, groaning when my already hard nipples rub across his chest.

"Jesus, Bella." He pants when he rests his forehead against mine. I open my eyes and his are squeezed tightly shut. I can see his eyes move back and forth beneath his eyelids as if he's searching for something. He grimaces as if in pain and whispers, "Do you have any idea what it does to me when you say that to me? It fucking wrecks me, in the best way." He shakes his head and sighs. His hands loosen their grip on my face and his thumbs move gently back and forth over my cheeks. His eyes open, widen when he sees I'm staring at him, and then soften immediately. "I love you, love her so much. If I knew that someday I'd find the two of you … I would have … there's so much different, I just wish," he stammers and grits his teeth, frustrated because he can't find the words he wants to say.

"But you're here now," I answer, squeezing him even tighter around the neck. "We love you, too, Edward. It's all that matters."

"I'm so scared of fucking this up, Bella. I have no idea how to give you and Peyton what you need. There's so much I want to do for you, with you both, and I'm terrified of doing something wrong or hurting either one of you. I don't know how to do this but the thought of being without the two of you kills me. You both deserve someone so much better than me." His words are earnest but make my heart hurt and my eyes burn with tears.
"Stop," I whisper fiercely, placing a finger over his lips. "We deserve you … we need you, Edward. Only you."

I hold his gaze, not wavering the slightest until he takes a deep breath and nods, just once. I can tell he still doesn't fully believe me, but if it's the last thing I do, I'll make him realize what I said is true. It scares me how hard I've fallen for him, how immersed he is in not just my life but in Peyton's as well. I know he's who I want no matter what he thinks or believes.

I glance at the watch on his wrist and groan, knowing if we don't hurry up someone will come find us. My bet's on Alice; she's been dying to talk to Edward.

He glances at the time as well and nods. "We better get down there. The sooner we eat, the sooner we can come back up here," he says in a low, gruff voice.

"No kidding. Did you see that bathroom or the size of that shower?" I ask, grabbing a room key off the table and handing it to him to put in his pocket.

"I did. I'd like to see you in that shower."

His words make me shiver as I picture him naked, standing beneath the water, muscles rippling, tattoos begging to be traced with my fingers … or my tongue.

"Bella, you okay?" he asks with a smirk when I turn and look at him.

Ass.

He knows damn good and well what I was just thinking about. And now that I've started, I know I won't be able to stop thinking about it until we get back here.

"Let's go," I say shakily, hurrying toward the door.

He snickers behind me but I don't turn around, not even when he takes my hand. By the time we make it outside where a picnic table is set up and our friends are already sitting, I've calmed down … a tiny bit. I still want him, naked, wet, and inside of me, desperately so, especially when we take our seats beside Alice and Jasper and the glow from the lanterns that are spaced out down the middle of the long table highlights the planes of his cheekbones, the angle of his nose, and gets lost in the stubble that covers his jaw.

Baskets of bread, glasses of wine and ice water, bowls of salad, and plates of chicken fettuccine cover the table. It all looks delicious and my stomach growls. I'm starving.

"Took you two long enough," Xavier teases as soon as we get situated.

I pick up my glass of wine and take a sip, savoring the sweet, crisp taste as I swallow. "Peyton wanted to talk to Edward and then I had to say good night," I tell him. I don't miss the blink and you'd miss it flash of pain that crosses his face but I don't acknowledge it either. I don't know what to say to him to make it better and honestly, I'm not sure there's anything I can say.

He smiles. It's forced, but it's a smile, an effort just the same, and I smile back, happy that he understands even if it hurts.

The sounds of forks scraping across plates, ice tinkling in glasses, cicadas in the distance, the ocean even farther fill the air, mix with the voices and laughter of my family and friends. Edward and Alice are deep in discussion, their heads bent close to each other. Jasper, Emmett, and Rose laugh at something, most likely something Emmett has said and Seth and Xavier whisper back and forth,
their eyes only on each other. I just watch, enjoying being here with all of them. For so long I punished myself, hid instead of lived, and looking at them all now, smiling and enjoying being together is the most amazing feeling.

Almost as amazing as the feel of Edward's hand on the small of my back. I take another drink of my wine and notice when I move, he moves. I lean to the right, testing, and sure enough he shifts along with me. His thigh stays beside mine, pressing, reminding me he's right next to me. His hand adjusts, settles, never moves off my back. His fingers don't still, they move up and down, around and around, dip beneath the bottom of my shirt. I shiver when a cool breeze floats by, rustling the leaves in the trees and making the flames waver behind the hurricane glass. His arm immediately lifts from my back to my shoulder, his fingers curl around and hold me close.

All without looking in my direction.

And the man thinks he has no idea what he's doing? If he knew any more about what he was doing, I'd be a bumbling, dazed mess twenty-four-seven.

I giggle, which causes him to look in my direction. He looks surprised when he sees where his arm is, like he has no clue how it got there. I sigh and lay my head on his shoulder.

"Are you having fun? You're not too cold are you?" he murmurs after he kisses the top of my head.

I wrap my arm around his waist and snuggle next to him. Ribbons of black and red wind around his bicep. I trace the lines with the tip of my finger and immediately remind myself of wanting him naked and in the shower. I shiver again, but this time it has nothing to do with the wind and everything to do with the overwhelming need I feel between my legs, in my stomach … in my heart.

Discussions go on around me, plans made for tomorrow. A hike, a picnic, a trip to the Farmer's Market, and a dinner cruise before heading home. All of it sounds perfectly wonderful, but all I can concentrate on is Edward next to me and wishing he was in me.

A few minutes later, Edward leans down and whispers, warm breath fanning across my neck. "I can't wait to be inside of you." A brush of his fingertip, no heavier than a wisp of wind is all it takes to push me over the edge.

I'm gone.

I set my napkin down on the table and stand, pulling Edward along with me. "We're going upstairs," I think I say but I'm not sure because I can't take my eyes off of him.

There's snickering, I'm sure there's a fist bump or two in that ridiculous guy code speak, but I couldn't care less.

"Yeah, see you guys in the morning," Edward says, his voice as deep and rough as I've ever heard. I can feel it, between my legs, in the tingles in my stomach, in the way my fingers are already twitching to touch him.

Faster than should be possible, we're standing inside our room, pulling frantically at clothes. I reach for the belt on his pants. He pushes my shirt over my head. The buckle jingles, the sound of the zipper on his jeans so loud in the quiet room. His hands follow mine as I undo my bra and he pushes it down my arms. As soon as my breasts spill out, they're covered with his palms, his thumbs already teasing, exciting.

I push his jeans down over his hips, grabbing a hold of his boxer briefs at the same time so that I
can lower them both. I follow them down and kneel before him, sliding my capri pants and panties down as I go. He's so hard already. I lift a hand, wrapping it firmly around his cock, and feel him pulse beneath my fingers.


I lick my lips and look up. Gone is the gray green I'm so used to, in its place is bottomless black. I don't look away as I lean forward and take him into my mouth. His hips buck, a string of words that make no sense escapes in between gasps of breath, and he winds my hair around his fingers.

I move my mouth up and down, my tongue curls then flattens around and along him.

"So fucking good. Oh my God," he forces out between clenched teeth.

He allows only a few more bobs of my head before he pulls me up and then lifts me into his arms.

"When I come, I want to be inside of you," is all he says before he plunges his tongue into my mouth. Our mouths are fused together, my top lip between both of his as his tongue does wicked, delicious things to me.

He carries me to the bathroom and without setting me down, turns the water on. Steam instantly begins to billow, filling the room. I run my hands through his hair, dragging my nails along his scalp. He lifts his head from my breast and lets go of the nipple he just had in his mouth and says, "I fucking love when you do that. Do it again," before attacking the other nipple with the same fervor.

I do as he asks and scrape my nails along his scalp and feel the vibrations spread through me when he growls against my chest. He steps into the shower and my back is against the cool tile wall before I even realize it. His hands and mouth are everywhere now that he can let go and I can hang onto him. I reciprocate, doing exactly as I envisioned earlier when I dip my head down and run my tongue over the intricate design on his chest. I still have yet to find out what it means, if anything. The tattoo on his chest, the one on his bicep, I trace them both with my tongue then fingers, reveling in the way his muscles twitch and flex beneath my fingers.

"That feels so damn good," he breathes out when I make a line from his chest and up the side of his neck, lapping up water as I go, amazed that it somehow tastes like him. Spicy, woody, with a hint of sweet. It's totally intoxicating. "You feel so fucking good," he says as his hand slides between us and finds my clit with his fingers. He circles. He presses, pinches, until I throw my head back against the wall.

"Oh God, Edward." I moan and the sound bounces off the walls. "Yes. Ahhhh, faster, oh please, faster."

"Mmmmm, that's it, Bella. You're so close already, aren't you?" he taunts darkly.

My legs tense around him and I dig my heels into his ass. I grip his arms as tightly as I can and feel my nails dig into his skin. The coil in my stomach winds, twists, climbs as he continues to work me with his fingers. I cry out when two push inside of me and he covers my clit with his thumb.

"Yes, oh God yes." I pant, undulating against the wall.

"Come. Jesus, just fucking come. Let me feel it so I can fuck you." His words send me over the edge and I ride his fingers as the orgasm rocks through my body.

He slides his fingers out and then grips my hips in his hands. "Tell me, Bella. Say it again," he
demands roughly as he pins me with his eyes. His cock teases at my entrance but he stands perfectly still as he waits. I can feel him vibrate, from his feet all the way to his head, and I know he’s seconds away from fucking me so hard, so good. Taking me, claiming me … needing me.

"I love you," I chant and sob his name when he fills me. My head thrashes against the wall behind me, my back sliding up and down the water-soaked wall.

"Love you. Oh fuck, I love you." The words are choppy, said between thrusts and long, smooth strokes as he moves in and out of me. Over and over again the words spill from his lips, a litany that fills my heart and words that set my whole body aflame.

"Kiss me. Come here and kiss me. I need your lips on mine," he pleads.

In an instant, he’s rolled his hips, and I lift higher. The new angle lets him in deeper still, and I do as he asks and kiss him. Our noses bump, breaths shared through pants and gasps, cries of pleasure swallowed as our tongues give and take.

Higher, closer, we soar. In and out. A press of a thumb. A pull of hair. A dig of fingers into my ass. A whimper of a need so great I feel like it might crush me is all it takes for both of us to fall head first over that edge of pleasure so intense it hurts. I come … hard, flashes of white bursting behind my closed eyelids. I shake as he empties inside of me, hanging on until he finally stops moving.

I bury my nose in the crook of his shoulder and catch my breath. His hands rub up and down my back and over my hips and thighs. "I didn't hurt you did I?" he asks quietly, scooting us back under the stream of water.

The warm shower eases my tense muscles and I lift my head so he doesn't worry. "No. Absolutely not. That was … ah …"

"Fucking amazing," he finishes with a sexy, lazy smirk.

"You could say that," I answer back and unhook my rubbery legs from his waist.

They feel wobbly when I stand on them, and when I look up at him, he looks rather like the cat that swallowed the canary … or like a guy that just fucked his girlfriend into oblivion.

He chuckles and shakes the water out of his hair. "Baby, I did say that," he says, totally serious.

I laugh and shake my head at him, not even bothering to comment any further. The man knows perfectly well what he does to me.

"I love you," he says, voice back to its caramel turtle goodness. He pulls me against him and places a soft kiss to my shoulder.

"I love you, too."

We somehow manage to finish showering before the hot water runs out and once we're wrapped up in fluffy towels, we leave the bathroom and get ready for bed. As soon as hair is dried, teeth are brushed, and pajamas, or in Edward's case nothing at all, are donned, we climb into bed.

"I love being with you like this, holding you while I sleep," he whispers into my ear. I can feel his heartbeat against my back, our feet a tangled mess beneath the covers. I pull his arms tighter around me and weave our fingers together.

"Me, too. I miss you when you're not with me." His breath catches and his arms hold me tighter.
"Bella," he says, and his voice sounds pained.

I press my lips together and inhale and exhale a few times before speaking again. I've had the same thoughts running in the back of my mind for days now, ones that became even more pronounced once those three little words were said. "Things are moving so fast, Edward, and it scares me but excites me at the same time. I'm so happy with you," I tell him once I roll over. I lay my hand on his cheek and my thumb brushes back and forth along his bottom lip. "You're not the only one afraid of messing things up, you know. I've been by myself for a really long time and I'm not used to thinking about anyone but Peyton. I want to be with you all the time, but we need to learn how to be together. This is a lot for you," I say honestly. "I know it is and you're liable to have days where it's too much and you need space. I understand that, even though I can't promise I'll be happy about it. I think it's best if we take things slow and make sure we talk about things when they bother us. We'll learn together. I don't want to mess this up any more than you do and I'm as terrified of losing you as you are of losing me and Peyton. I might not know how to be in a relationship with someone but I know I want you. I love you," I finish quietly and then kiss him to show him how much I want him.

"I love you, too," he whispers, cupping my face in his hands. "We're going to be so great together. I know it."

We lay back down, him wrapped around me and I fall asleep, believing the same thing.

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They said it! Whoo hoo! I've been waiting for that little slip for weeks now, you have no idea how much. Well, it looks like things are on the mend between Emmett and Bella and Edward. It's going to take some time to mend that fence, but they'll get there. Do I need to ask if you all enjoyed shower time?

Okay, coming up. We are moving along for sure. Next time we'll see Wayne and Carlisle again and find out some more about that back story. I'm so excited to share that with you. Of course Miss Peyton makes an appearance, too, and we'll see some best friend time. A lot of you have asked about the Prologue, not sure how close it is ... I can see it on the horizon, but it's still aways off. Hang in there with me, okay? Still a few things to cover before it's time.

We've set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www.facebook.com / groups / 137144056381565 /

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

*Now for my announcement - I will not be posting a chapter next Sunday. I'm so sorry to do this to you again, and believe me, I would NOT do it if I could at all help it. I hate disappointing you all, but it truly can't be helped. If you forgive me, I promise to get things back on track and hopefully will be able to stick to my once a week posting schedule without any more interruptions! I'm REALLY sorry, but I promise I'll be back in 2 weeks! No teaser tomorrow, but we'll be back on track next Monday and the Wordle, recipe, and pic teases will all be posted, too! I'm really sorry, don't be too upset with me, okay?

Let me know what you think. I can't wait to hear from you all!
Thanks so much for reading!

See you in 2 weeks ...

Erin~
Chapter 18

"So is this what you do when you're not working?"

I hear the voice and it takes a second for it to register. The Breakers is packed to capacity for the lobster boat races this weekend. It's Wednesday and all the activities will be starting bright and early on Friday morning and finish up with the lobster dinner on Saturday night.

But until then …

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, stunned to see Wayne standing in front of me.

I immediately tense, thinking the worst, until he laughs when Carlisle and Esme walk up beside him. "I come up every year for the races. Thought I'd surprise you. It looks like these two," he says as he waves back and forth between Carlisle and Esme, "really can keep a secret if they want to."

Esme scoffs and swats him in the arm. Carlisle shakes his head at the two of them, leaving me to feel like I'm in the middle of a Twilight Zone episode. My heart's still pounding and my stomach feels like it's on the floor somewhere between my feet.

"Cute kid." He smirks and tips his head toward the table Peyton and I have been sitting at while we wait for Bella to take a break. "You thinking of getting a new job I don't know about?" The corners of his mouth lift slightly as he looks at the table. It's covered with thread and beads because, yes, I'm making bracelets with Peyton … and key chains, and something that looks eerily like Tom Brady's head.
I snort, rolling my eyes at the same time, and realize it's really good to see him. Standing, I reach out to shake his hand and I tell him so. "It's great to see you, even if you scared the shit out of me."

A giggle beside me. "I'm telling Mom you said a bad word," Peyton says which causes the three of them to laugh at me.

I huff. I've been trying really hard to tone down the language, at least whenever I'm around Peyton. It's not like she'd let me slide anyway; little thing has supersonic hearing when she wants to use it … which is often if it gets me in trouble with her mother. For some reason, Peyton likes to watch Bella get all riled up, especially when it's aimed at me.

Traitor.

Though I can't say I mind too terribly myself … Bella is sexy as hell when she's pissed off.

"Who are you?" Peyton asks bluntly before I have a chance to introduce her to Wayne.

He looks taken aback for just a moment but of course she smiles at him and he's under her spell before he can even blink again. I chuckle. Chalk up one more person she's captivated just by looking in their direction. Like Bella and I have talked about numerous times before, it's a damn good thing Peyton doesn't use her powers for evil … we'd all be in so much trouble if she did.

Wayne sticks his hand out. "My name is Wayne. I'm a friend of Edward's," he tells her. "You're much too pretty to be hanging around with the likes of this one," he teases as he points to me.

She narrows her eyes and scowls at him. My little protector to the rescue. "I'm Peyton, and I'm Edward's best friend," she says as she crosses her arms.

Carlisle and Esme try to keep from laughing but all that does is make them laugh even harder. Poor Wayne can't tell whether to let his mouth hang open or laugh himself as he stares wide-eyed at her. My shoulders shake because I'm laughing but one look at Peyton makes me stop. She's still scowling. Obviously she takes her job as my number one defender very seriously.

I hold my hand out and wait for her to stand up on the chair beside me. Bella will kick my ass if she sees Peyton standing on the furniture, Renée, too, more than likely, but I'll cross that bridge if I come to it. Right now, Peyton's my main concern.

"Sweetheart," I say softly as I wrap an arm around her and hold her close to me. "Remember when we talked about what happened to me when I was in Boston and how I got to come here when I was done having to be in prison?" I ask, looking only at her. I wait until she nods and then I kiss her quickly on the tip of the nose. "Well, Wayne helped me so that I was able to come here, to Corea."

She sucks in a sharp breath as she realizes what I mean. "Well, why didn't he say so?" she questions with a roll of her slate blue eyes as she stares at him, waiting for an answer.

I lean in close to her like I'm going to whisper, but say loud enough for Wayne to hear me, "He's old so he's kind of slow sometimes."

Peyton giggles as Wayne growls, "Watch it, kid," before turning to Peyton once more. "My apologies, Miss Peyton," he says and then gives her an exaggerated bow before he takes her hand and kisses the back of it.

"Come on, dear," Esme says as she holds her hand out to help Peyton off the chair. "Let's go find Nana and see about getting these three silly men something to drink."
Before Peyton gets down, she kisses me quickly on the cheek and then happily skips off with Esme, grinning at Carlisle when he ruffles her hair as she goes past him.

"She's something else," Wayne says, a bit awed, and a bit afraid if the tone of his voice is any indication.

I turn when I hear Peyton's sweet voice as she talks to Esme then face Wayne again when they walk toward the kitchen. "You don't know the half of it," I tell him as I start putting away the mess on the table.

Carlisle and Wayne both take a seat and I look up only to find Wayne studying me. Unlike the first time I was subjected to that hard as nails stare, this time I merely stare back for a few beats and then shrug my shoulders as I continue to put everything away.

"I guess you'll just have to tell me all of it back at Carlisle's and Esme's then, won't you," he comes back with immediately, not missing a beat.

For just a brief moment, no longer than it takes to take a deep breath and let it out, I worry about telling him anything about Bella and Peyton. That ingrained instinct to not trust anyone rears its ugly head, but as soon as the moment passes, I realize I do want him to know. I want him to understand and see that the second chance I've been given hasn't been for naught. I want to show him that I'm making a new life for myself, one that I never imagined having, but one that makes me happier than I ever expected to be.

With a start, I realize I want him to be proud of me.

I glance at Carlisle. He nods his head just once at me and I know he understands where my mind just went. After all, it's nothing he hasn't heard during any one of our numerous conversations over the past few weeks.

My skin tingles. I hold my hand out, sighing just a bit when Bella's fingers slide between mine. It never fails to catch me a little off-guard the way I know when she's close by, even if I can't see her. I've stopped trying to figure it out because it really doesn't matter why it is … it just is.

"Hi," she says with a soft smile.

She was busy when I got in after work so I didn't get a chance to do anything but wave as Peyton pulled me toward the table. I can tell she's curious about who Wayne is, and a bit nervous, too, because she pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. I try not to groan. She knows what seeing that little piece of silver jewelry in the top of her ear does to me. It makes me crazy, like throw her down on the table and fuck the hell out of her crazy.

Vixen.

I smirk at her when she looks at me again. I pull on her hand to get her closer, letting go so I can wrap my arm around her waist. My fingers itch. I want to slip them beneath her tight navy blue t-shirt, knowing how good her skin would feel, but I keep my hand firmly settled on her hip.

"Bella, this is Wayne Harris, the guy from Boston I told you about. Wayne, this is my girlfriend, Bella Swan." I have to admit, my heart pretty much jumps into my throat and makes itself at home at the word 'girlfriend.' Everyone we spend time with already knows Bella so it isn't like I ever have the need to introduce her to anyone. Hearing the word now is actually pretty fucking amazing.

Bella clears her throat, apparently having the same issue with her heart as me, and in a shaky voice says, "I've heard a lot about you. It's really nice to meet you."
Wayne takes her hand, and being the pain in the ass that he is, holds onto it entirely too long. He even kisses the back of it like he's an English gentleman or some shit. "The pleasure is all mine," he drawls and then smirks at me when I growl at him.

"Knock it off, Masen." He laughs heartily. I want to feel bad for acting like a Neanderthal but I really can't find it in me to do so.

Not when it comes to Bella.

"Edward, Esme is going to have dinner ready in about an hour. Will you be joining us?" Carlisle asks as he and Wayne both stand.

I hate missing a chance for quality time with Bella and Peyton, but I also want to spend some time with Wayne. I catch his eye for just a moment while I try to make up my mind. From the way he looks back at me, I can tell there's more to his visit than just coming to spend some time with his old friends.

"Babe, it's okay. You need to go and spend some time with Wayne. Just make sure you call to say good night," Bella says quietly beside me when I hesitate another few seconds.

I dip my head and run my nose around the outside of her ear, and whisper, "As if I would ever miss a chance to say good night to my two girls."

And I won't as long as I can help it. There are times of course, like when Charlie has us out overnight, something that's happened a few times in the last month, when it's impossible to call, but I never go to bed without telling both Bella and Peyton good night first if I can help it. It takes me two phone calls, because when Bella and I say good night it's usually preceded by conversation that's most definitely not suited for seven-year-old ears.

A quick picture blooms in my mind of being able to tuck Peyton into bed every night, wishing her nothing but sweet dreams, before climbing into bed and being able to do the same thing with Bella in my arms. It's way too soon for that, of course, but it doesn't make me want the vision any less.

Slow.

Bella and I both agree that taking things slow is the best course of action. I still believe it's the way to go, but it sure as hell doesn't make it any easier to be away from her every night. The more time we spend together, the harder it is to say goodbye when it's time to go back to the boarding house. I don't spend the night over at Bella's if Peyton is home and I don't spend every night over there after work either. Granted it's only one night, or two at the most, out of the week that I don't go over there, but that little bit of space goes a long way to helping us maintain some sort of balance.

There's nothing I want more than to be completely focused on Bella and have the same reciprocated from her but even someone as relationship-challenged as me knows that will only lead to problems down the road.

Bella had a life before I showed up, a family and friends that she enjoys spending time with, and I would never want her to change who she is for me. She has time that she spends focused solely on Peyton and I am adamant that I won't intrude upon that … ever. Their relationship is beautiful. It's pure and perfect and something that's so strong nothing will ever break it. The fact that the two of them love someone like me is something I'll never take for granted.

I made that mistake, once, with my grandparents. It isn't something I'll ever repeat again.

Wayne slaps me on the back and brings me out of the stupor I'm in and says, "I'll see you back at
Carlisle's. Bella, it was very nice to meet you. I'm sure I'll see you again soon."

She giggles when I growl again because he winks at her. She turns around and lays her hands on my chest when the two of them walk away. "I like him; he seems nice," she says as she looks up at me.

My hands drape loosely at the small of her back. From there it's nothing to let my hands dip farther and cup her ass. We might be standing in the middle of a busy restaurant, and her family's at that, but being this close to her isn't ever anything I can resist.

I want to make a smart ass comment about Wayne, but remembering what I felt just a few minutes ago makes the words die in my throat. "I'm not sure I'll ever know why he tried to help me, but I know I'll never be able to thank him enough. Not only did he get me out of that hellhole, he got me out of that godforsaken city and helped me get here … where I found you and Peyton. There aren't enough words in the dictionary to express how grateful I am to him for that."

"Me, either," Bella answers back softly.

I want to kiss her. I need to kiss her, like really … really kiss her, but standing in the middle of a restaurant, it isn't going to happen. Besides, if I start, I won't stop and I'll miss dinner and upset Esme - two things I definitely don't want to happen.

I settle for leaning down and placing a long, open-mouthed kiss to the spot behind her ear. Her salty-citrus smell wafts around me and I can't help but nip at the sensitive skin. I pay for it when Bella moans low in the back of her throat and she presses herself closer to me. My dick, traitorous thing that it is, stands at attention the moment Bella's knee slides between my legs and she's aligned perfectly with me. She feels so good. I'm about five seconds away from calling Carlisle and telling him I won't be making dinner after all.

Apparently Bella knows exactly how good I think she feels and giggles while taking a small step backward. She doesn't move too far away, but it's enough to keep me from embarrassing the hell out of both of us. I chance a quick look around the crowded restaurant, thankful our little grope session has gone unnoticed by everyone … except Seth who raises both hands and mouths, "I give that a ten," like the fucking idiot he is.

I'm about to make a gesture back to him that's not at all family friendly when I feel a tug on the bottom of my t-shirt.

"Are you coming over later?" Peyton asks with a tip of her head.

Forgetting about Seth, I shake my head and look down at her. "Sorry, sweetheart. I'm going to stay at the boarding house tonight and talk to Wayne."

She tries to kill me with a pout, complete with a bottom lip that she sticks out farther than should be possible and big, watery eyes. "But I want you to come over. We have to finish making our bracelets."

If she stomps her foot or heaven forbid starts with the tears, I'm a goner and she knows it. Very rarely does she use the power over me she and everyone else knows she has to get me to give in, but I can tell she's thinking about it now. I really need to talk to Wayne; the uneasy feeling I had before is still niggling at the back of my mind.

I glance at Bella, who gives me a look that lets me know I'm on my own. Damn woman. She knows how hard it is for me to tell Peyton no. I squat down. I grab a hold of Bella's hand to give
me strength, even though it feels like she's throwing me to the wolves right about now. Just when I'm about to give in, I look up at Bella and smirk because I've just come up with the best damn idea. "How about we go for ice cream tomorrow night, just me and you? Your mom has to help Nana get ready for the weekend. That way we get out of helping and we get ice cream," I tell her conspiratorially.

Bella snorts above me and Peyton giggles while she nods her head. "Yay!" she squeals and claps loud enough to make the people at the table next to us laugh at her.

"Ah hem," Bella clears her throat which causes me and Peyton to look up at her. "And just how, pray tell, do you plan on getting her to Ben and Bill's, hmmm? You sure aren't taking her on the back of your bike, Edward, so unless you have a car hidden someplace that I don't know about, seems like the two of you will be stuck helping me and Nana."

"Cherry of course," I tell her with a smirk.

"You think so, do you?" she quips and I nod, knowing she's trying to play tough, but that she'll cave like a house of cards.

I bring out the big guns. I nudge Peyton and we pout at her at the same time. "Please?"

Bella lasts less than five seconds before she raises her hands. "Okay, okay. I swear between the two of you."

"That's my girl," I tell her with a quick kiss. "I'll call you guys later, okay? I need to run so I'm not late."

After another kiss for each of them, I head to the boarding house.

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"Oh, Edward, dear, you're just in time," Esme exclaims happily as I walk into the kitchen. I grab the platter of shrimp kabobs from her, careful not to drool because they look fucking delicious.

She flashes me a smile that makes me feel like a gooey marshmallow, and then pushes open the back door. The sun has dipped below the horizon, the crickets are out in full force, and the smell of pine and salt mixes with the citronella candles Esme has lit all around the deck. On the picnic table there is a bowl of rice pilaf, a basket of fresh baked rolls, and a pitcher of iced tea. We all help ourselves and sit at the table.

Dinner is … an experience. Stories that I'd never believe if I hadn't been sitting here to watch and listen as they tell them flow fast and furious. Stories that make me look at the three of them in a whole new light … and make me a tiny bit afraid of the lot of them if you want the God's honest truth.

I stand to help Esme clear the dishes, ignoring Wayne's chuckle. "You sure don't look or act much like a hardened criminal, Masen. What do you think the boys from Old Colony would say if they could see you now?"

I stack the plates and scoff. "Like I give a fuck what any of those assholes think. Besides, I'm the one that's out. Guess that makes me the lucky fucker that gets to have the last laugh, doesn't it?"

My words are sharp and my stomach clenches uncomfortably. I take a deep breath and realize that I am the lucky fucker that's out … and I'm never going back.

I know Wayne is just being Wayne by teasing me, but the thought of ever having to go back inside,
of being locked up again, makes my blood run cold. Forcing those thoughts away, I set the dishes on the counter. I make my first good night call of the night and wish Peyton sweet dreams and promise that we'll go have ice cream tomorrow night, no matter what her mom says. I grab three beers out of the fridge, making sure Esme doesn't want one, too, after I hang up the phone.

When I walk back outside, Wayne and Carlisle stop the discussion they're having and each of them gives me the strangest look. I hand them their beers. The sun has set even further and the yard is full of fireflies. I smile as I take my seat around the fire bowl now that we've moved from the deck to the lawn.

"Boy, if your smile got any bigger, I'd have half a mind to make you pee on a stick to make sure you're not high," Wayne says as he tips his beer and takes a drink.

"Wayne, leave him alone. I'd be willing to bet he's thinking about Peyton. That's his Peyton smile," Carlisle teases.

I shrug. I can't dispute what he said; I am thinking about my Sprite. She loves fireflies, like most kids I assume. Of course I don't care about most kids, I only care about her.

"Tell me about them."

Esme has joined us and sits on Carlisle's lap. I swear the two of them act like they're still teenagers. I look off toward the trees, my eyes following one lone flicker of light as a firefly bobs and weaves with the breeze.

"They're everything," I begin, thinking the word pretty much sums up the two of them perfectly.

I expect a smart ass comment from Wayne but instead, when I look at him, he only raises that one damned eyebrow and waves a hand in the air indicating I should keep going … so I do. I tell him about meeting Peyton the first day and what she told me. I tell him about seeing Bella for the first time. I tell him about how my first meeting with Charlie went and how fucking hard my first day on the boat was. I tell him how Bella acted like I had the plague or at least really bad B.O. the first few times I saw her. I tell him that even though she's only seven, Peyton is the most amazing person I've ever met and it kills me that she'll never meet my grandfather. I tell him about what Bella, Charlie, and Emmett have had to deal with in regard to Evan and how terrified she is of the fact that I work on the water. I even tell him that she told me she loved me first and that it was totally an accident when she did it.

That got a laugh out of all of them, even though Carlisle and Esme have heard the story already.

I finish up, saying, "They both know everything and they love me anyway. I don't understand how or why, but I'm sure as hell not about the give them up. I don't deserve either one of them, but I'll be damned if I let that come between us."

Wayne doesn't say anything after I get done talking. The fire crackles inside the clay bowl, plumes of wispy smoke rise and then float away. An owl hoots in the trees off to the side. There's a crack of a downed tree branch and the rustle of leaves as some unseen forest creature scurries away.

"You told Bella what happened the night you were arrested?" he asks pointedly.

I wonder just how much he knows. He's never indicated. I know I didn't tell him much of anything before I came to Corea and I can't imagine the man I saved remembers it all either.

"All of it. Every ugly minute of it, I spelled out for her." My voice lowers and my hands begin to shake. I hate … with the intensity of a thousand suns … talking about that night. A fact of which
Carlisle is well aware. Anytime during our pseudo-therapy sessions, which let's be fucking honest, are exactly therapy sessions, the subject of Aleksei and that night come up, it's almost guaranteed I'll need an extra fifteen minutes, minimum, to get my shit back together after I freak out. It happens every time and I'm pretty fucking positive it will always be that way.

Wayne leans forward in his whitewashed Adirondack chair, his elbows digging into his leg. "Does she know Aleksei has never been caught? That he's still out there somewhere?"

Esme gasps and my head snaps in her direction. Carlisle looks like he's just seen a ghost and Wayne looks like … well, actually he looks like he'd rather be anyplace but right here, right now. Motherfucker.

I stand up and pace. My hand immediately goes into my hair and I squeeze my eyes shut. I try to remember the breathing exercises that Carlisle taught me all those weeks ago, the ones I've hardly had to use, because it seriously feels like Mack truck just rammed into my chest. It's not working.

Pressure spreads. I gasp for breath, struggling to get the oxygen I need. Starbursts of white explode behind my eyelids, followed by flashes of red. Everything is muffled, like I'm underwater. I know Wayne, Carlisle, and Esme are saying my name, but if they're saying anything else, I can't decipher what it is. Every muscle in my body locks in place and I briefly wonder if this is what it feels like to be paralyzed.

Jesus Christ, I scream to myself as I try to get my body under control.

Thoughts of Bella and Peyton swim around in my head. I try to focus on their faces, try to hear Peyton's giggle and Bella's breathy voice when she tells me she loves me. Anything, everything I can concentrate on to keep the other dark, sinister thoughts from becoming any more concrete.

My fingers tingle and I can feel the blood start to flow again. A horrible, raspy sound fills my ears and I look around to find the source only to realize a few seconds later the sound is coming from me.

Fuck.

Carefully, slowly, I open my eyes. I don't look to my left or right because I know when I do, the three of them will be looking at me. I don't want to see the worry or worse yet, the pity, I know will be there. Instead I gaze at the trees and take a few deep breaths, letting the humid, salty air calm me down.

"Edward?" Carlisle asks quietly.

I shake my head, not ready to answer him yet.

An hour ago I didn't think I could be any happier. An hour ago I kissed Bella and told her I loved her. An hour ago, Peyton jumped into my arms and told me that we had a date the following day. An hour ago I thought my past was truly in the past.

Until Wayne reminded me that it wasn't with just one word.

Aleksei.

"You don't think …" I whip my head in Carlisle's direction, hoping that he'll give me the answer I need to hear.
Just the thought of that fucker even breathing air that's in the same state as Bella and Peyton has me seeing red and desperate to get the fuck out of here and go straight to Bella's house.

My heart still pounds in my chest; my skin still feels stretched too tightly over my body but I concentrate on breathing in and out. I reach into my pocket and roll Peyton's seashell between my fingers. I tell myself over and over that they're both safe, that they're at home, probably curled up in Peyton's bed reading together before it's time for Peyton to go to sleep.

In through my nose, out through my mouth I breathe and after a few minutes I feel somewhat calm. I won't be totally okay until I can talk to Bella and hear her voice, but for now, I can manage.

"Better?" Carlisle asks, still standing by my side.

I nod. My jaw aches, the muscles in my shoulders and neck are on fire from locking them down so fast and for so long. I roll my head around then my shoulders and flex my fingers to slowly get the blood flowing through them again.

"That one was shorter than the others. You remembered your breathing exercises."

I nod once more. "It was easier to stop, too," I answer him.

I turn around and Wayne is watching me warily, like at any moment I'll freak the fuck out again. "I'm fine now so stop looking at me like I'm going to fall apart," I snap.

My legs feel like Jell-O so I flop down in my chair. I run a shaking hand through my hair and barely resist the urge to pull on it. Instead, I tip my head back and stare up at the stars. Looking at them reminds me that I'm not stuck inside a prison, that I've started a new life and have friends and people that care about me, that there are two people that love me, even though they know the worst things about me.

"I didn't mean to upset you," Wayne says contritely.

Esme silently stands up and walks past me, stopping long enough to kiss the top of my head, and heads into the house, leaving just the three of us.

I wave off his apology. He had no way of knowing just hearing that name would set me off. "If anything ever happened to Bella or Peyton because of me, I don't know what I would do," I say out loud though it's not directed toward either of them.

"Edward," Wayne says and waits until I turn and look at him. "There isn't any reason to believe that Aleksei even knows you're out of prison, let alone where you went once you were released. No one knows you have a connection to Corea so even if he wanted to look for you for some reason, he'd never think to look here."

"I can't even think about that," I tell him, shaking my head to keep that thought from taking root in my mind. "They're my whole world. I'd die before I let that son of a bitch anywhere close to them."

I mean it, too. With every fiber of my being I mean it. I'd kill him before I let him hurt them in any way.

No one says anything after my vehement outburst. Esme returns with mugs of coffee for each of us, apparently thinking that we might be out here for a while. I have to admit when I told Bella I wanted to catch up with Wayne, I never thought we'd spend time talking about Aleksei of all the damn things. I stare at the coffee in my mug, the steaming, brown liquid reminding me of my
"Carlisle and Esme have told me such good things about your life here now, Edward," Wayne states. I hear the words but I don't look up. I keep staring at the coffee and smile.

"Good things is an understatement," I answer immediately when I look up at him.

He settles back in his chair and crosses one leg over the other. His eyes narrow slightly and his head tips to the side, like he's trying to solve some complicated math equation in his mind. "Yes, I can see that." His voice is wistful almost, or at the very least, contemplative. After a few moments of silence he says, "This is exactly what we all hoped would happen when you got here. Though I suspect no one expected you to fall captive to not one, but two, very feisty, very beautiful females." He stops to laugh lightly at that as do the rest of us. "The fact that you're thriving here is a testament to you and how you didn't let what happened to you affect the way you live the rest of your life."

I don't know what to say to that, so I say nothing for a minute or two. Before I can really think about it, I ask, "Why is it so important to you? Why are you helping me?"

There's a pause, one of those that's so charged and laden with so much history you can feel it, like it's a living, breathing organism. Wayne looks at Carlisle, Esme looks back and forth between the two, and I watch the three of them.

What the hell?

Carlisle grabs Esme's hand and my stomach drops. The same flash of pain I saw all those months ago when Wayne and I were going to the bank that very first time appears on his face then disappears just as quickly and a chill races up my spine. Whatever the history is between them, it's obvious it's complicated and deep.

Wayne clears his throat a few times. The next words out of his mouth rock my world. "My son was murdered."

Son? Murdered? I didn't even know the man had a kid, let alone had something that horrific happen to him.

He lowers his head and breathes deeply a few times before lifting his eyes to mine. Speaking just those four words has aged the man at least ten years. His shoulders slump and he practically curls in on himself.

I'm at a loss. I have no idea how any of this relates to me or why he's sharing such a personal part of himself with me. Esme wipes beneath her eyes with a flick of her finger and Carlisle … the man looks like he's going to be sick. Jesus Christ, I think. I'm pretty fucking sure I want no part of what's to come, but I asked and it's too late to back out now.

"Zach wasn't a bad kid," Wayne begins out of nowhere. "A typical teenager. He had a smart mouth, thought he knew everything and I knew nothing, and thought he was capable of making his own decisions. My ex-wife and I shared custody of him; we've been divorced since Zach was four. Honestly, we never should've gotten married in the first place and we damn sure had no business bringing a baby into the world together." He snorts and shakes his head, lost in some unknown thought for a moment before he looks back up.

"But Angie and I loved that boy with all we had. We weren't cut out to be husband and wife, but we were able to be friends, good friends, and we raised Zach the best we could. We were doing fine,
sharing custody, picking up the slack for each other if we had things come up. Zach was thriving and happy … or as happy as a kid of divorced parents can be I suppose. That all changed about the time Zach turned twelve," he trails off in a shaky voice.

I brace myself and wrap my fingers tightly around the arms of my chair as I wait for Wayne to keep going. I'm still not sure I want to be here, but I can't find it in me to leave either.

"I was a cop before I became a P.O.; did you know that?" he asks me and when I shake my head, dumbfounded because I had no idea, he moves on. "Angie started dating this guy when Zach was about ten, and it was pretty serious right from the get-go. We never let Zach believe we would ever get back together but for some reason when Angie and Derek started dating, he began to act out. Getting in trouble at school, picking fights, his grades fell, he talked back … sound familiar?" He's trying to keep his voice steady, but I can tell it's getting harder. Of course the similarities between Wayne's son and me are obvious, so I nod at him, but don't say anything.

He sighs and then takes a sip of his coffee. My eyes dart toward Esme and Carlisle who are still holding hands. Carlisle's thumb continues to make circles on the back of Esme's hand. Their backs are rigid, neither of them taking their eyes off Wayne. The hair on the back of my neck rises; I know that what's coming next isn't going to be pretty.

"It was when Angie announced she and Derek were getting married that things got really bad. He got expelled from school for fighting, he was sneaking out at night, he was out of control. We sent him to counselors, we tried to talk to him and explain that just because Angie was getting married to someone else didn't mean she didn't love him, but he wouldn't listen. He was mad at her for leaving him, he was mad at me for working all the time, he was just … so angry all the time. Angie even told him she wouldn't marry Derek if it upset him so badly, but I wouldn't let her do that. Instead, I quit the force and became a P.O., thinking a job with more normal hours and less danger would make Zach feel better. Carlisle can tell you, I was a fucking mess. I had an ex-wife getting married to someone else, a kid that was out of control, and a new job that wasn't a walk in the park." He scoffs and looks at Carlisle who nods back with a knowing grin.

"I've never seen a man try so hard to do so much," Carlisle replies without pause while Esme nods enthusiastically beside him.

Wayne waves away the compliment saying, "Well, it wasn't enough, was it?" His voice is so bitter. It surprises me how angry he is after all this time and I wonder, shocked, if that's how I sound when I talk about what happened with my grandfather and Aleksei. I have a feeling it is.

Before I can ponder that too long, Wayne is talking again. "Zach got progressively worse, more out of control every day. He was skipping school, hanging out, getting drunk and high all the time. Do you have any idea what it's like to have guys you used to work with, ones who used to respect you, have to call you up to come pick up your kid because he was caught with drugs?" The question is rhetorical, or at least I assume it is, so I don't answer him when he looks at me with so much pain and anger in his eyes it makes me sit back in my chair.

"By the time he was fifteen, I was out of options. Nothing worked. No matter how much I yelled or talked, or tried to be nice, Zach was out of my reach. I called Carlisle and begged him to try to help him," he trails off and then Carlisle picks up the story.

"I got Zach enrolled in a drug rehab program at Mass General, and we began therapy. It was incredibly slow going, Zach was so angry and so resistant, but finally once he came off the drugs, and we began talking, he seemed to get better," Carlisle says slowly.

"Seemed?"
"Zach did what he needed to do, said the right things he needed to say in order to make it through the program and be released, then he went right back to the drugs before the ink was even dry on his discharge papers," Wayne bites out. "He didn't even try to stay clean. He'd get in trouble, I'd call Carlisle, and we'd start the process over and over again until finally Zach decided he was done even trying to pretend. He disappeared; no one could find him. You would think with my connections on the force someone would have spotted him somewhere, but it was like he was a ghost." His voice is far away, and filled with so much pain.

It hits me square in the chest though, and my head swims. My God, what I must have put my grandfather through, I think, hating myself so much in that instant. The worry, the sense of helplessness he must have felt when I disappeared with Aleksei for days at a time, not caring that he was at home waiting for me, for just one indication that I was okay shames me. The sense of anguish I feel just then takes my breath away. What I wouldn't give to be able to see him, tell him how sorry I am for everything I put him through. The need to be able to tell him I loved him and was grateful to him for taking me in, for giving me a home and love and safety is so strong my hands shake.

I don't have time to wallow in my own self-pity though because Wayne's voice, barely above a whisper, floats through the air like the smoke from the fire. "When he was found, it was too late. He was dead, murdered because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time." With those words, he pins me with a gaze so intense I can't move if I try. "Some gang banger drug dealer felt like he got short-changed from a drug deal and decided to show his displeasure. He killed three other people besides Zach, all over a measly hundred bucks or some such shit."

Esme's soft sniffs and stuttered breaths mix with Carlisle's quiet murmurs as he tries to console her. Wayne sits, frozen, lost in memories too painful for mere offers of condolences. What the hell do you say to that? I'm sorry seems so woefully inadequate.

"When I came across your case, Edward, there wasn't a force that would stop me from trying to help you. I failed my son. I couldn't keep him from being at the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong people, but I could damn sure make sure that you got the second chance you deserve. There are some really shitty people in the world that get away doing the wrong thing and there are people that get punished for doing the right ones. Jack Burleson hasn't ever forgotten what you did for him and his family; that's why he gave you that money. He never stopped trying to plead your case to anyone that would listen, and being who he is, the right people heard him.

"The law is pretty fucking black and white," he tells me and the passion in his voice takes me by surprise. "You do something wrong, you get punished, but there are always cases that come up where the circumstances don't fit into some box, cases like yours. You did force your way into a house with a man that had a loaded gun. You were there when someone was shot in cold blood. The fact that you didn't know what was going to happen or that you didn't mean for anyone to get hurt is irrelevant. Ryan was up against the wall, considering he was not only fighting an over-ambitious Assistant DA when it came time for your trial, but the public outcry over one of Boston's most beloved and well-known public figures getting shot in his own house stacked the deck against you from the very beginning. You were lucky, so damn lucky, that Mr. Burleson was adamant that you were given the lightest sentence you could receive. I know it didn't seem that way at the time, hell it still probably doesn't seem that way, but it's true."

I let those facts tumble around in my mind, disjointed and separate like links of a chain, until they stop and come together. I don't have time to ponder that fact though before he starts again. "You're
also lucky you were arrested," he tells me, looking me straight in the eye. I want to ask him if he's
fucking nuts. I want to scream at him and ask if he has any idea the hell I went through when I was
locked up, or if he can even comprehend what it felt like to be treated as something less than
human, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for seven fucking years. I can't though,
because he says, "Think about it, Edward. If you would have run out of that house with Aleksei,
what would the next step have been? Would the gun be in your hands the next time? What about
the drug dealing and the illegal guns? How long would it have been before you succumbed and
started using the drugs you inevitably would have sold? How long would it have been before you
were forced into a situation where it was you killing someone or being killed yourself? How long
would it have been before you lost yourself completely?"

Silence.

For long moments there is nothing but stark, deafening silence. I don't hear the wind; I don't hear
the snap and crackle of the fire as it burns. I don't even hear the sound of Carlisle's next door
neighbor as he pulls into his driveway and shuts his car door after he gets out of it. There's nothing
as his words churn in my mind, buzzing like a swarm of angry bees.

I look at him then to Carlisle. Carlisle has tried to say the same thing to me, though not anywhere
near as bluntly, and I've always just dismissed the sentiment … until now. Hearing it from Wayne
drives the point home, so harshly, that there's not any way to dispute him. I was headed down a
path of destruction, even though I continually tried to tell myself I wasn't. I was already getting
high and spending more time drunk than sober. It was only a matter of time before the weed turned
to something else - coke, heroin, something, and by that point, my death warrant would have been
sealed. I didn't want to live, I realize with sudden clarity. The thought makes me sick, and I wretch
painfully, bile burning my throat.

I hang my head between my legs and try to catch my breath, try to calm down. Wayne stands up
and waits for me to look up at him. "Getting arrested gave you the chance to set your life back on
track, Edward. I know it was difficult. I know things happened behind those walls that will haunt
you until the day you die, but you survived. Hell, you became a lawyer for fuck's sake. You paid
your dues, and you deserved a second chance. Seeing you with Carlisle and Esme, hearing about
how well you're doing working for Charlie, watching you with Peyton and Bella is why I helped
you, Edward. No man that can have that little girl look at him like he walks on water, or have that
woman look at him with so much love in her eyes you can feel it, is unworthy of a second chance.
Make your life what you want it to be, kid. Fill it with the people you want to be around and leave
the past where it belongs. You made a mistake, you paid the price for it, now it's time to live … to
be happy. My son never got that chance but you do. Don't waste it."

With that he's gone before I can even form a word. I hear his footsteps as he climbs up the stairs of
the deck and I flinch when he shuts the door behind him as he enters the house. The door doesn't
slam, but it might as well have. Esme turns to Carlisle who gives her a slight nod and whispers,
"Go check on him. I'll be right in."

She stands, stopping to kiss the top of my head as she passes by. "You're a good man, Edward. I'm
so happy he sent you to us," is all she says before she, too, goes inside. The words are enough to
make it difficult to breathe, though not because of panic or anything, but because I'm so floored I
don't know what to think.

I lift my head and stare at Carlisle. "Wayne has never been the same since Zach died. I'm not sure
he'll ever get over the fact that he lost his only child, and so senselessly at that. He's good at his
job, he's helped a lot of people trying to make up for not being able to help his own son, but he's
never once tried as hard as he has with you. When he called and asked for my help, after I'd failed
him so horribly with Zach, I agreed immediately. How could I refuse?" he asks with a sad shake of his head.

"I stopped practicing shortly after Zach died; I just couldn't do it anymore," he tells me as he stares at something over my shoulder. "I loved that kid like he was my own; I was there when he was born, and I was devastated and felt so damned guilty that I wasn't able to save him. The doctor in me knows it wasn't my fault, but the man, the best friend of Wayne's, can't help but wish I'd tried just one more time, or tried harder to reach Zach.

"When you got here, I'll admit I was worried. You were so angry, so bitter, and so fucking alone it practically radiated off you in waves. But then you met a little girl, you met her mother, and then you put yourself out there to ask for a job from a man that makes grown men shake in their boots with just one look. I put in a good word for you with Charlie, based on Wayne's recommendation alone, but you know as well as I do, no one makes Charlie Swan do anything he doesn't want to do unless you're Renée, Bella, or Peyton." We share a chuckle at that because that's the God's honest truth if I've ever heard it.

"I've watched you struggle to come to terms with what's happened to you, with the things you've done and were done to you. I've watched you grieve for your grandfather and fall in love with two of the most special people I've ever met. Things haven't been easy, Edward, but you're trying. Don't let one mistake keep you tethered to the past. Let it go, set it free, and move on," he finishes. He takes a deep breath and I do the same.

So many thoughts and profound realizations make me feel like I've just swam for miles. My whole body aches. My arms and legs are so heavy I'm not sure I can lift them. I'm fucking exhausted.

I want Bella.

Thinking her name instantly cuts through all the dark and I feel my heart swell with love for her.

I love her and Peyton so much it hurts, more than I ever thought it was possible to love anyone. I'm still not sure I deserve either one of them, but I won't live without them either. Realizing how lucky I am to be here in the first place makes me want to keep them close and never let go.

"Thank you," I choke out, the words truer than any I've ever spoken, except for telling Bella and Peyton I love them. Two simple words that mean so much … for taking a chance on me, for wanting to help a friend, for having faith in me … for everything he and Wayne both have done for me.

"Seeing you with Bella and Peyton is all the thanks Wayne and I need, Edward. Someday, you might find yourself in a position to help someone and you'll remember what it was like when someone gave you a chance." He stops speaking and gives us both a chance to regroup.

The intensity of the past hour fades just a bit when he chuckles and slaps me on the shoulder. "Call your girl so you can make some of those inappropriate noises Seth and I like to talk about behind your back. You'll feel better."

He walks into the house, muttering something about wishing the house had thicker walls, and leaves me alone in the backyard. I make a concerted effort not to think about his comment and what he and Seth might talk about; the possibilities are fucking scary.

"Holy shit," I breathe out when I hear the back door shut. I pinch the bridge of my nose and will myself to relax. Never in my wildest imagination would I have ever expected to learn everything I did tonight.
I lean back in the chair, hanging my head over the back and pull my phone out of my pocket. For someone that swore up and down he'd never have a use for a cell phone, I've become quite attached like everyone else in America. I've gotten so good at using it, I dial Bella's number without even looking, instead I keep my eyes firmly glued to the inky sky that's sprinkled with glittering stars above me.

"Edward," she answers with a sigh and I swear it's like I can feel her breath wash over me the instant I hear her voice.

My whole body melts like butter and I grip the phone tighter in my hand. "Hey, baby."

I can hear rustling on the other end of the phone and I glance down at my watch. "Shit, I didn't mean to call so late. You're in bed already, aren't you?"

It's a little past eleven, and an hour past the time she usually turns in for the night. Six A.M. comes damn early for her, even though when she wakes up, I've already been up for close to two hours most mornings. My late night is going to wreak havoc on me tomorrow, there's no doubt about that, but I don't give a damn. I need Bella. Sleep can't compare to that.

"I am, but I'm up now. Did you have a good night? How was your visit with Wayne? Was he happy to see you? He seemed happy to see you at The Breakers. Did you talk about me and Peyton?" she rambles, even though she yawns at the same time.

She kills me. She's so fucking adorable sometimes. I hear more rustling and I'm positive if I could see her now, she'd be sitting up and her knees would be pulled up beneath her chin. I can even picture her wiggling her toes … the polish this week is hot pink; it was Peyton's turn to pick. I know she'll rest her cheek on her knees and without a doubt, she'll tuck a strand of hair behind her ear while she sits. I'm not sure if she's wearing one of the few t-shirts I've left over there or one of her own, but I know that's all she has on, besides a pair of panties that I know make her ass look spectacular.

"I love you," I whisper, completely undone by everything I'm feeling right this second. The fact that I know what color nail polish she has on her toes and how she's sitting tells me like nothing else can how totally she's consumed every part of me. I've never been one to say I love you very often, even less so after my grandmother died, but if I could say those three words all day, every day to Bella and Peyton, I still don't think I'd get tired of saying them.

"I love you, too. What's wrong?" she asks, picking up on the slight panic I have in my voice.

I sigh and shift a bit in the chair, still looking up to the sky. I find the Big Dipper overhead and smile. Peyton gets so excited when she can find it without anyone helping her. She's so amazing, so perfect, and it scares the living shit out of me to think that something … or someone from my past could hurt her in any way. "I'm not … I mean … you don't think … you're not ever sorry you let me be a part of yours and Peyton's life are you?" I squeeze my eyes closed and my stomach twists itself into a knot.

"Edward, no! No!" she cries out. "What's going on? Why did you ask me that?"

I don't say anything - I can't. The lump in my throat is the size of a grapefruit and my tongue feels like it's made out of sandpaper.

When the silence stretches, she begs again in a voice that is full of nothing but love for me. "Babe, talk to me, tell me what's going on."
I sit up straight and tell her everything, from what I told Wayne about her and Peyton, to everything Wayne told me about Zach. I tell her what Wayne told me about why he helped me, what he said about me getting arrested, and how Carlisle tried to help Zach, but couldn't. I tell her about the panic attack I had just from thinking about Aleksei being out there somewhere, and what it would do to me if him or anyone else ever hurt her or Peyton because of me. I don't stop talking until I've told her everything, and she never interrupts, never tries to tell me not to worry or that I shouldn't feel what I'm feeling; she just lets me talk until I'm all talked out.

"Oh, Edward," she whispers. I hear a muffled sniff and I chuckle, because I know she tried to cover up the phone so I wouldn't hear her.

I don't handle tears from Bella any better than I do from Peyton. Not at all.

"I heard that," I tell her. I want to hold her. I want to look into her eyes, run my fingers through her hair, and then I want to kiss her until I'm dizzy.

She giggles and I know everything is okay. "Shut up. It's not my fault you're scared of girls crying. Some big, tough, motorcycle-riding, tattooed, felon you are."

I try to not laugh at her, because really, she just called me a felon, but she's too hard to resist. "You are so amazing." I sigh, once I stop laughing. I feel a hundred times better and loads lighter, too.

"You're not a label, Edward. You're the man I love and the one my daughter thinks is her very own personal hero. I know what you heard tonight wasn't easy, but there's not anyone out there that deserves the second chance you were given more than you," she tells me in a strong, fervent voice.

She yawns again which makes me yawn, too. It's so late and I'm fucking spent. "Well, your dad is going to tell me I deserve to get my ass kicked if I'm late for work, so I'd better let you go." I hate telling her goodbye, so fucking much. I lower my voice, even though it's not like anyone can hear me but her. "I'm sorry for freaking out on you. I still get overwhelmed sometimes, you know? I just worry about not being what you and Peyton need is all."

I can feel her eyes roll through the phone at that, but her voice is gentle when she answers back, "We need you, just as you are. Nothing else."

Her words are the balm to every worry I have. "Get some rest, baby. It's late. Sweet dreams only, okay?"

"Okay. I love you."

"Ah, Bella, I love you, too. Good night."

I make my way inside as soon as she hangs up the phone. Carlisle, Esme, and Wayne have all gone to bed and I check to make sure all the doors are locked. It doesn't take any time at all to get undressed and crawl into bed. I fall asleep thinking about my date with my best friend … and wishing that someday soon, there won't be a need for good night phone calls because I'll be able to say them in person every night.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Four and a half hours of sleep is not enough to make Edward a happy camper I realize about mid-morning. Between the glaring sun, Emmett's exuberance for the coming weekend, and then finding out from Charlie that we're heading out on Monday for three days, it feels like the end of the day will never get here.
Of course at the end of the day, I have a date with my favorite seven-year-old. That puts a smile on my face, one that doesn't go unnoticed by Jasper.

"What is that goofy ass grin for?" he asks me as we pull a trap up.

We go through the motions of checking if the lobsters are male or female, putting a v-notch in the females before throwing them back into the water, putting the bands around the males' claws, and then throwing them into the hold. The flow of movement has become like second nature after all these months and as each day passes, I fall in love with being on the water more and more.

Jasper and I work quietly, like always. Since everyone found out about my past, Emmett has been helping Charlie in the wheelhouse more, taking on more of the duties of deciding where to fish, and pouring over maps and weather patterns. It's made things on the boat much less stressful for sure. Emmett and I are back to like it was before, but that doesn't mean I still don't worry from time to time I'm going to find Emmett standing behind me, ready to knock my ass overboard.

My mind wanders for just a second to tonight and I feel a sharp pinch. "Fuck!"

I scowl at the lobster, and ignore Jasper's snickering. "Take that, you little fucker." I laugh as I toss it into the hold, delighting a little more than necessary that the offending creature will soon be in a boiling pot of water.

"Sprite and I have a date tonight," I finally answer him once we get a rhythm going again.

"No wonder you look like a kid on Christmas morning," he teases. We continue to work and then he says a bit hesitantly, "I hear Carlisle and Esme have company in town from Boston. Everything okay?"

I sigh but nod at him. This is Jasper being Jasper - subtle, but letting you know he's knows what's up without coming right out and saying it. "It freaked me out at first when Wayne showed up, but he's just here for the races. We had uh …" I pause and look at him, "a really good talk last night."

He raises his eyebrow and cocks his head to the side, but remains silent. He knows I'll tell him what's going on. I always do. Bella talks to Xavier and Rose, I talk to Jasper and Alice when there are things I need to work out or when things are bothering me. I've never had friends before, at least not the kind you can tell anything to and know they won't judge you … until now.

I tell him, briefly, about some of the revelations from last night, focusing more on me than on divulging any of Wayne's personal information. I know he won't mind me telling Bella, he had too know I'd tell her, but I'm not about to share his story with anyone else. I do tell him about Aleksei, though, just like I told Bella. The fact that he's out there somewhere isn't something I want to dwell on, but I don't want to dismiss it either. I'd never do anything to jeopardize Bella and Peyton's safety and I'm not going to hide the fact that a small part of me is worried about him even after all this time.

"All you can do is live your life, Ed," he tells me. "We're all here for you guys, you know? I agree with Wayne; I don't think you have anything to worry about."

I open my mouth but he holds up a hand to stop me. "Just be happy, man. Things get overwhelming for you sometimes, but you know you deserve to be with Bella and Peyton. Besides, you've ruined P for the rest of us. It's not like any of us can compare to the great and wonderful Edward anymore. It's kind of sickening if you want to know the truth," he teases and I laugh.

Thankfully the rest of the day goes by quicker than the morning and before I know it, I'm holding
my hands out in The Breakers for the keys to Cherry so Peyton and I can head out. I'd rushed back to
the boarding house and taken the world's quickest shower, thankful I had a few extra minutes to
take care of business. It's been days since the last time Bella and I have made love and I'm dying to
be honest. Talking on the phone and making the noises Carlisle and Seth love to tease me about
and the hot and heavy make out sessions at her house at night before I leave to go home are all fine
and dandy, but truly there's nothing that can compare to the feel of being inside of Bella.

Dirty, sexy words whispered in the dark over the phone, quick touches that do little more than set
me on fire are hot as hell, but making love to Bella is in a whole different realm.

Hopefully, sometime over the weekend, I'll get to remember just how good it is.

"Bella, come on. Just hand the keys over," I whine, holding my hand out.

She giggles and shakes her head, closing her hand around the keys and steps backward. "Hmmmm, I
think I need you and Peyton to help tonight. You don't mind, do you?" She tries, she really does, to
pout, even going so far as to bite her bottom lip and looks up at me with eyes that are anything but
innocent, but she fails miserably when I smirk at her.

I'd almost believe she's serious if I didn't already see Peyton and know she's dressed up more than
normal. She's wearing the cutest pair of pants and top with sparkles on it and I can't help but feel
pretty fucking special that she dressed up for me.

Now if I can just get her mother to hand over the damn keys …

"Whatever, baby. Sprite's dressed to the nines … she didn't do that to hang around the restaurant all
night. Besides, I'll make it worth your while. If you hand over the keys, I promise to do that thing
you love so much," I lower my voice and step closer.

I reach out and let the tip of my finger ghost up the side of her arm. I chuckle darkly when I see the
fine hair stand on end and groan lowly in the back of my throat when I see her nipples harden
beneath her shirt. Today she's wearing a black t-shirt that's tight enough to hug every curve and dip
of her chest and the tiniest pair of white shorts I've ever seen. They make her ass look spectacular
and her legs, Jesus, I can't even begin to describe how good they look.

Tan and smooth, and hopefully they're wrapped around my waist at some point in time in the
future. I shift a bit, my cock trying to push its way out of my jeans and make its presence known,
and we both hope it's in the very near future.

I wrap a hand around her neck and rub circles over her pulse point. I pull her closer to me, so close
she can most definitely feel how much being this close turns me on. Lowering my head so that my
lips are right next to her ear, I whisper, "You know what thing I'm talking about, Bella, the one
where I use my tongue and my fingers at the same time."

She squeaks and that turns to a moan when I flick my tongue out at her earlobe. I'm a masochist so
I let my nose run up the shell of her ear and then let my tongue tease the silver ball at the top of her
ear. Christ Almighty, what that damned earring does to me. I'll never understand why I think it's
the sexiest fucking thing ever, but I know if she ever takes it out, I'll cry.

Like literally, throw myself on the floor and have a tantrum, cry.

Because I'm an ass, I pluck the keys out of her hand. She's too focused on my mouth to realize what
I did until I step back, and smile at her with a shit-eating grin firmly plastered on my face.

"You suck."
I nod. I mean it's not like I can disagree, but a guy's got to do what a guy's got to do. And like I've made perfectly clear, pissed off Bella is ten shades of sexy.

I kiss her sweetly on the cheek, but stay far enough away so she can't try to take the keys back.
"And you love me. P and I will be back in a few hours. Do you need anything while I'm out?" I ask, hoping to get back on her good side because I really, really want to see every side of her this weekend - the front, the back, and most especially being inside of her.

"No, but thank you for asking. You two have fun," she tells me and I can't help but kiss her again.

"P, let's roll. I'm ready for some ice cream," I holler, spinning the keys around my finger as I head toward the back door.

She runs to my side and places her tiny hand in mine. I melt. "Me, too. Let's go on our date." She turns and waves at Bella and with one more smile and plea to be careful, me and my girl are off.

"Stop looking at me like that; you know you can't sit in the front." I wink at Peyton as she climbs in the backseat with a huff and scowl. I'm a pushover, everyone knows this, but not when it comes to her safety … and she knows it, too.

The ride is full of nonstop conversation as she tells me all about the festival this weekend. "It's so cool, Edward, wait 'til you see. The boats go so fast … do you think Pop would ever let me drive his boat that fast?" she asks as she bounces in her seat and her slate blue eyes glisten with unbridled glee.

My fingers grip the steering wheel so hard I'm sure I'll leave indentations as I picture Peyton racing over the water, leaving a trail of frothy white waves in her wake.

Oh, hell no.

"I don't think the *Isabella Marie* goes that fast, P." God, please tell me it doesn't go that fast.

I watch her in the rear view mirror and can't help but smile as she taps her chin. There is a dip between her eyebrows and her nose is scrunched up as she thinks for a few seconds. She lifts her eyes to me and they sparkle with untold mischief. Oh, shit.

I know that look … I am terrified of that look. Nothing good ever comes from that look.

"I know!" she exclaims happily, like she's just figured out how to convince Bella to let her have chocolate for breakfast every morning. "I'll drive Uncle Emmett's boat!"

A litany of words I'd never say out loud, at least not where Peyton can hear them, floods my mind but I take a deep breath and decidedly changed the subject. I vow to never, ever let Peyton anywhere near Emmett's boat.

The rest of the ride passes quickly and before I know it, we're in Bar Harbor.

The sun is just beginning to set, streaks of pink mix with fluffy white clouds. The air is getting cooler but thankfully Bella sent Peyton with a light sweater. I find a place to park, and I grin as I turn the truck off. I'm about to add a few more reasons why I'm Peyton's favorite person … just in case I ever need them.

"We're going to the book store, too?" she asks as I help her out of the backseat.

"Yes, ma'am."
We make our way inside the bookstore and Peyton takes off for the children's section without even looking back. I wander around, smiling as I picture Bella looking at all the books. I can vividly imagine her smiling when she spies a book she likes, or scrunching up her nose at the genres she doesn't like … mostly Science Fiction. She'd hold a book, enjoying the way it smells. I love that she's passed on her love of reading to Peyton, and I really love watching them spend quiet time together reading. I keep walking, and make sure Peyton is fine.

After a bit, I make my way through the shop and find Peyton curled up on a chair with a book in her lap. "You found something you want to get?" I ask as I squat down beside her.

She nods and asks quietly, "Can I get both of these?" She holds a book in each hand, and I notice they are part of a series she has at home.

Smiling, I stand up and hold my hand out. "Of course, sweetheart. Anything else you want to look at?" We've been here about an hour already and the sky is dark outside. The gas lamps along the sidewalk are on and I want to walk with her for a little bit before we get our ice cream.

She shakes her head and we make our way to the front counter. An elderly lady, complete with glasses that hang on a chain around her neck and frizzy, curly white hair stands behind the cash register and smiles at us as we approach. Peyton is talking a mile a minute about her books, telling me character names and odds and ends about the stories while we walk.

"Ah, I love to see a young one so in love with reading," the woman says.

Peyton hands the books to her and says, "My mom and I love to read. We take turns picking a book every night before bed."

The woman puts the books in a bag and drops in a bookmark along with them with a wink at Peyton. "And you, Dad, do you love to read, too?"

The question makes my heart stop and my chin drop to the floor. I swallow and try to answer her, but Peyton beats me to it. "Edward's not my dad, he's my best friend," she says simply. She turns to look at me and tips her head. Gasping, she looks back and forth between me and the woman. "If you and Mom get married, you'd be my dad and my best friend! How cool would that be? Edward, wouldn't that be awesome?"

I want to die. Or disappear. Or cry. Or maybe just turn back time and forget about the past two minutes.

I cough a few times and try to clear my throat, though there is no chance in hell I'm touching that comment, not even if I had a ten foot pole. Holy shit.

The woman snickers and turns her head, trying to be nice and not laugh in my face. I'm sure she's dying to see how I get myself out of this so I say the only thing I can. "I'm ready for ice cream. I'll even let you get a double scoop."

Peyton grabs my hand and starts pulling me toward the door. As I pass the counter, the woman whispers, "Nice save."

I nod and smile even though my heart still hasn't started beating yet.

After much deliberation, Peyton decides on cake batter ice cream with sprinkles and I stick with mint chocolate chip. I mean, why mess with perfection? We take our cones, complete with double scoops, and walk down the sidewalk. Thankfully, Peyton is too focused on not letting a drop of ice cream drip off the side of her cone to continue the conversation from the bookstore.
We find a bench and sit. Peyton's little tongue darts out and she swirls it all through the cone. When she hears me laugh at her, she turns, and licks her lips. "Thanks for bringing me for ice cream. This is so much better than helping Mom," she says with a giggle. Her feet swing back and forth and she hums happily as she eats. She shakes her feet, letting her flip-flops dangle as she swings her legs. As a guy, I have no idea how she can do that; it's kind of amazing.

"Well, thanks for coming on a date with me."

"It was my pleasure," she answers and tries to keep a straight face. It only lasts a few seconds before she's laughing so hard she bends over.

I adore the fact that she can be so silly, even when she's laughing at herself.

"Are you spending the night?" she asks after she calms down.

The change of subject is so abrupt, and takes me so totally by surprise, I almost drop my cone. "Um … well, I … " I stammer.

How she can turn me into a bumbling doofus at the drop of a hat is beyond me. It's kind of ridiculous actually. She rolls her eyes. "I know when I go stay at Nana's and Pop's or with Uncle Emmett and Aunt Rose you stay with Mom. I'm not a baby, Edward. I know lots of things," she tells me, and again my mouth hangs open.

I shove the last bite of my ice cream cone in my mouth and wipe my hands nervously on my jeans. "Does it bother you if I stay there?" I ask. I don't want to upset Bella by talking about this with Peyton without her here, but I don't want to ignore her question either.

"Um no. Why would it? I love you. Mom loves you. I think you should stay with us every day," she says with a shrug of her little shoulders.

Ah, the world according to Peyton Renée Swan. I think my new motto is … It's her world, we all just live in it.

"I'm not sure your mom thinks that's such a good idea, P."

She huffs and holds her hand out. "Can I see your phone?" Of course being the idiot I am, I hand it to her. Her fingers tap on the screen and the next thing I hear is, "Mom, can Edward spend the night with us tonight? We're gonna see him first thing tomorrow morning anyway so we can go to the festival."

My eyes widen and I try to take the phone away from Peyton, but she giggles and turns away. When I try again, she stands up and laughs, saying, "Uh huh" and then "yes, I know," followed by, "two books and an ice cream cone." Another roll of her eyes. "Yep, double scoops and sprinkles."

Shit, I'm in so much trouble. Again.

Bella told me before I left only one scoop of ice cream and no sprinkles. Really, she should know better by now. I have no willpower when it comes to ice cream … never mind Peyton and ice cream.

I scowl at the little hellion, who only giggles again. "Mom wants to talk to you," she singsongs before skipping off to look in the Christmas Shop window.

"Hey, baby," I say slowly, cringing as I prepare for the worst.
Instead, there's a soft laugh on the other end of the phone. "Edward Anthony Masen, you are such a sucker, I swear."

"It was a small scoop, Bella, I promise. And there were really weren't that many sprinkles."

"Right, and I bet you didn't even try to tell her no, did you? All she has to do is look at you and you're gone." Her voice is happy, thank goodness.

I sigh as I watch Peyton look at the display in the window. Christmas means presents … I'm in so much trouble. "I am," I admit freely. "I just want to make her happy."

"I know. It's one of the reasons I love you so much," she answers back softly. "Now, let me go so I can get home. Apparently, I'm having company tonight. I have things to do," she says. The tone of her voice has changed. Gone is teasing, sweet Bella and out comes sexy as hell Bella.

Cue the hard-on.

"I swear I didn't tell her to call and ask you that. It's okay isn't it?" I ask as I try to keep myself from getting too excited before I get a green light.

"It is. In fact, stay the whole weekend with us."

Holy shit, three whole days with both my girls.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

LOTS happening in this chapter but I hope you all have a better idea of the relationship between Wayne and Carlisle and how it affects Edward. It WILL come into play again later. Hope you enjoyed date time between our two besties, too! Poor Edward, Peyton sure has his number, doesn't she? He doesn't stand a chance …

Next chapter we'll conclude at the boat races and move forward a bit. There are still a few things to cover before we get to the Prologue. It's coming … soonish.

We've set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www.facebook.com/groups/137144056381565/

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Thanks, everyone, for being so patient with me the last few weeks. I am back on track now so there should be no more interruptions to my schedule. Yay! I'm so anxious and excited to taking you through the rest of the story!

**Don't for get to donate to Fandom4Texas if you haven't done so already! The deadline for donating has been extended until November 7 so you have plenty of time! I've donated the first chapter of my new story, The Fair, for the cause and there are so many great authors donating their work, too.

See you next Sunday! I've missed y'all, so let me hear from you, okay?

Erin~
Chapter 19

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers - they all work so hard to help me and I wouldn't know what to do without them! A very, very special thank you to Laurel for having the patience of a saint these last few weeks with me and to J'me for pushing and helping me stay on track!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

I want to wish my BFF, Amanda, a very Happy Birthday! I miss you, I love you madly, and I hope you have the bestest of days! Mostest … XOXO

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 19

EPOV

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I glance in the rear view mirror. Peyton's been asleep since we left Bar Harbor so I pick up my phone. Bella has a strict no texting while driving policy she's adamant about adhering to, but I can't resist checking the message. I know it's from Bella; I can feel it.

"Holy shit, the woman is trying to kill me," I mutter when I look at the phone.

A picture, just her leg from the knee down, but there are bubbles dripping off it. The skin looks silky smooth, like she's just shaved. It's obvious she's in the bathtub which means she's naked … which immediately makes me wonder what other parts of her delectable body are just as smooth. So many possibilities. So many places to touch with my fingers and my tongue.

The message along with the picture makes me groan. *Bet you're wondering what else I did to get ready for company, aren't you?*

*You bet your fine ass I am. Be home in ten.* I text back.

I toss my phone on the seat beside me and smile when I realize I just said I'd be home, not I'll be at your house. It's way too soon to think about things like moving in together, but I'd be a lying fool if I said the thought never popped up from time to time. I have no idea what the future will bring, especially because I've really just started to get my life moving in a direction that makes me happy. I know I don't want to do anything that doesn't have Bella and Peyton by my side, but in concrete terms, I don't know anything past that.

Moving in together? Getting married? I don't have the first damn clue if Bella wants either of those things and being honest with myself, I don't know what I want either. The moving in together seems like a no-brainer somewhere down the road, but the getting married … well, that's a whole
other ball of wax.

I never imagined finding anyone like Bella, mostly because I never allowed myself to think past getting out of prison and getting the fuck out of Boston. Things like falling in love, settling down, getting married … being happy weren't even on my radar when all I cared about was making it through each day, but now that I'm happy and stupid, crazy in love with two beautiful girls, things have changed.

What that means, I have no idea. I figure I don't have to know right this minute. For now, I'm going to enjoy every moment I get to spend with Bella and Peyton and let things progress like they're supposed to. As I pull into Bella's driveway, I smile and shift in my seat, tingling with anticipation because I definitely plan on enjoying Bella for many … many minutes tonight.

"Did you get her into bed?" I ask as Bella shuts her bedroom door. She leans against it, holding onto the doorknob, and wordlessly nods her head.

She doesn't move. The window in her room is open and the breeze is warm, humid. Silvery moonlight streaks through the window, making patterns along the floor. Her iPod is in the docking station beside the bed and the soft, sultry sounds of John Legend float through the air. I'm leaning against her headboard in nothing but a loose pair of basketball shorts, legs crossed at the ankles. I stare at her, letting my eyes take in every inch of her from her blood red painted toenails to the hair piled on top of her head in a messy ponytail.

Oh, yes. I noticed those sexy as fuck feet the second I carried a sleeping Peyton into the house earlier.

"You planning on standing there all night or are you going to come over here any time soon so I can see just what all this planning for company you did consists of?" I smirk as I cross my arms behind my head.

She, however, most definitely does not smirk. Instead she lets her eyes smolder and in turn sets my entire body on fire. She's wearing a teeny tiny pair of shorts that barely cover her ass, a tank top that leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination and that's it. Her face has been scrubbed clean, and her legs look as smooth as silk, even from across the room.

She's so fucking gorgeous it regularly takes my breath away. In a voice rough with need and want, I say, "You really need to come over here. Now."

Our eyes meet in a silent battle of wills for a few very long, very sexually-charged minutes. I never take my eyes off her, though I do lower them and feel my cock stir in my shorts when I see her nipples harden beneath the thin cotton. Her breath hitches, a mouthwatering flush of pink spreads across her chest, and I know if I was to drag my finger or better yet my tongue across the tinged flesh, it would be warm as well as taste like fucking heaven.

Finally, when I'm about to drag her ass to the bed, she pushes off the door and walks toward me. Actually she swaggers. Her hips sway enticingly and her hair swishes as she moves. She takes a few steps, stopping just short of the end of the bed.

I raise an eyebrow and wait.

She doesn't move.

I chuckle devilishly as a thought enters my mind. Her lips purse, her nostrils flare as I remain silent and keep my thought to myself. If she's lucky, I'll show her rather than tell her … if she behaves.
That's a big if knowing Bella.

Still, I don't make a sound. I wait and have to bite the inside of my cheek when her eyes move from mine down to my chest. I watch as they start on the right side and move slowly to the left, taking in every inch of ink-covered skin. Her eyes blaze. She bites her lip and then she crawls on the bed and into my waiting arms.

My hands cup her ass and I press her firmly against my straining cock. Her shorts are so thin that I can feel her hot and damp as she rubs along my length. My fingers squeeze and knead as I hold her. Her hands are everywhere, and her mouth follows.

"Kiss me. I've been thinking about kissing you all damn night," I tell her as I move my hands to the sides of her face.

The words are barely out of my mouth before her tongue winds its way around my own. She moans and I can feel the vibration everywhere.

"I missed you," she whispers. Her fingers grip my shoulders and she rocks back and forth in my lap. "I thought about you when I took my bath." The words coupled with her warm breath in my ear make my fingers hold her hips, keeping her where she feels so good.

I slide my hands beneath her top and cup her breasts, letting my thumbs circle her pebbled nipples. "And what did you think about all wet and naked, hmmm?" I lower my head and suck a nipple through her shirt.

She throws her head back and stretches above me. I roughly shove her tank top over her head and with one hand on the center of her back I lick up the center of her chest before finding a hardened nipple once more. "Did you think about this?" I ask huskily. Her nails dig into my thighs leaving tiny crescent-shaped indentations. "Or what about this?" My free hand lowers and then dips beneath her panties. She's slick and swollen already which makes my cock swell even more. "Mmmm, you did miss me." I chuckle against the side of her neck.

"Oh God, Edward. Please, shit … I need … ahh." Her breaths come closer together, her legs squeeze mine as she straddles me and when her eyes meet mine, they're almost black with need.

"Tell me," I rasp, circling her clit lightly with my finger. "What do you need, baby?"

She lifts her pussy, trying, searching for more. "You … oh, God, you."

"Mmmm, you already have me, so tell me what you want." I press a little harder, let my finger dip and enter her briefly before withdrawing it again. I know what she wants, but I want to hear her say it.

I know where else is silky smooth. I'm dying to touch her there, but that doesn't mean I won't wait to hear her tell me what she wants before I do.

I circle again. Featherlight touches that do little more than to make her growl and tense above me. "Say it, Bella." My hand glides from the center of her back up until I'm holding the back of her head in my hand and make her look at me. I lean forward, kissing her until I see stars.

"Your mouth. God, put your mouth on me, please."

"Fuck, yes." I hiss. I lower her to the bed and slide her tiny shorts down her legs. I knew she didn't have anything on under those poor excuse for shorts, but to see it makes me want to bury myself deep inside of her and not come out for days. I kneel between her legs and slowly let my fingertips
dance up and down the tops of her thighs … then lower. I raise my eyes to hers and see the same ache, the same pull shining back at me that I know she can see in mine.

"So gorgeous," I murmur as I look down at her all flushed and wanting, with her hair fanned out beneath her.

I lower my head and scoot back, kissing my way down her body. Across her shoulders and then I drag my teeth along her collarbones. I swirl my tongue in the hollow of her throat and let my fingers ghost across heated, creamy skin. Around her breast, into the crook of her elbow, behind the bend of her knee, my mouth and fingers work to drive her crazy.

She moans. She whimpers. She whispers a mix of love and dirty words that make my dick twitch painfully in my shorts.

I lift my head a bit and nuzzle her freshly-shaved pussy. She's not bare, thank God, I want my woman to look like a woman, but I can tell the skin is hyper sensitive because just my breath on her skin makes her eyes roll back in her head. I fucking love that, and love how responsive she is for me. "So, this is what else you did to get ready for company, hmmm?" I blow another warm breath across her and just barely touch her clit with my tongue. "Spread your legs wider for me." I kiss all around, but never where she wants me most. When she does as I ask, I lower my head again and let my tongue move from back to front in one long sweep.

Bella curls her fingers into the sheets on her bed. Her back arches, and her legs open farther. "Ahhh, yes … oh God that feels so good," she says between harsh breaths.

My tongue circles and flicks at her clit. I suck it into my mouth and then flatten my tongue, covering her entirely. I slip a finger, then another inside, and my stomach clenches, my dick throbs as I continue to work her over with my fingers and mouth.

"So close. I'm going to come. Don't stop, oh please, don't stop," she begs.

I don't stop.

I move my fingers in and out of her. I take her clit gently between my teeth. With my free hand I hold her open for me, and I bring her closer and closer to letting go. "That's it. You're almost there." Her walls flutter and her muscles squeeze my fingers. She thrashes her head on the pillow and the sounds coming from deep inside of her make me so hard I can hardly see straight.

"Oh, God. Oh, God," she chants over and over again until there's no sound. She comes in a delicious rush of heat and wet. I don't even give her time to catch her breath once her orgasm begins to subside before I lift her and push my shorts down in one fluid motion. I sit on the edge of the bed and lower her onto my cock, my own eyes rolling back into my head as she takes me fully inside.

I want to love her slowly but feeling her surround me is quickly pushing me to the brink.

Her mouth attacks the side of my neck, none too gently either. Her nails score my back and her hips roll in a rhythm that is sure to drive me insane. I take a nipple in my mouth, and keep my hands firmly on her hips as I move in and out of her.

"Oh, damn, baby. You feel so good around me," I tell her. "I love watching you ride my cock."

Her eyes glaze and her mouth opens. She wraps her arms around my neck and her tits rub up and down my chest as her pace quickens.
I feel her teeth on my shoulder and hear her squeaks and moans as her muscles clench around me.

"I'm coming. Oh God, Edward, yes … " she cries out and throws her head back.

I try to hold off my own release until she's done, but I can't. I let go and pulse inside of her, coming so damn hard.

It takes a few seconds to come back to reality. Both of us are breathing heavily and our chests heave from the effort to calm down. My shoulder stings from where her teeth were, but it feels so fucking good to know I can make her lose control that way.

She leans forward and rests her forehead against mine. We smile at one another, not needing to say anything. I rub up and down her legs because I know they have to be sore from being overworked so thoroughly. I try to lean back and lift her off me so I don't hurt her further, but she shakes her head no.

"Not yet. I don't want to move," she whispers. She rubs her nose against mine and leaves a few soft kisses along my lips. Her entire body is almost boneless she's so relaxed. I love that she's demanding in bed, that she can take as good as she gives, but I love afterward when she's quiet and so blissed out she doesn't even want to speak.

"I love you," she tells me as she molds her lips to mine and kisses me long and deep.

I wrap my arms around her and scoop back on the bed. "Not as much as I love you," I answer back, staring into her eyes.

She rolls her eyes but giggles anyway. "Always with the last word," she says sleepily.

"Damn straight." She doesn't hear me because she's already fallen asleep, though it won't be for long if I have anything to say about it.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Giggle.

Poke.

Giggle … louder this time … and accompanied with a sort of snort/squeal sound.

Another poke, harder this time, right in the middle of my upper arm.

I crack an eye open, cursing the fact that it's Friday, normally a work day and I'm awake at, I turn my head to look at the clock on the nightstand, oh fuck me running, seven A.M.

"P," I croak, my voice thick with sleep. "What in the world are you doing up already?"

"I'm excited. Come on, get up. We can play before we have to go," she tells me as she starts pulling on my arm.

I'm still half asleep, but I'm not so out of it I don't remember I'm also half naked. Bella reminded me last night to put my boxers on before we collapsed into bed after thoroughly tiring each other out - a fact of which I'm extremely thankful for right this moment.

"Peyton Renée," comes a scratchy, not quite awake voice through a mass of brown hair. "What have you been told about one, coming in here without knocking first, and two about waking up Edward to play with you, hmmm?"
"Sorry, Mom. Sorry, Edward," Peyton mumbles apologetically. She lowers her head for a moment and I yawn then shift, making sure everything is covered up the way it's supposed to be.

Peyton may not have a problem with me spending the night with her mother but that damn sure doesn't mean I'm going to parade around in my underwear.

Bella sighs - a movement that certainly does the trick to make me wake up because her breasts rub temptingly along my chest. She lifts her head, flipping her hair back from her face and gives me my first glimpse of her for the day.

Christ Almighty.

Only a few hours of sleep and she still looks amazing. It's a sight I could definitely get used to seeing first thing every morning.

"Baby, go downstairs and put in a movie or take your book to the porch and give us a few minutes. We're not even leaving for a few hours yet. You and Edward will have plenty of time to play before we have to go. Now, scoot," she tells her.

Once Peyton has left the room and has firmly closed the door behind her, Bella huffs then flops back on her pillow. My eyes of course are glued to her chest and I watch in rapt attention as her breasts bounce beneath her shirt.

"Seven freaking A.M.," she whines. The sound is muffled because she's thrown her arm over her face.

I roll over and find my favorite spot between her legs. Dipping my head down, I kiss along her naked shoulder and up the side of her neck. She smells … well, like the perfect blend of her and me and it makes me harden instantly.

I had her only mere hours before but right now it seems like a lifetime ago.

Rocking my hips without a thought I chuckle in her ear. "Baby, you know how she gets when she's excited. Maybe I should've let you go to sleep before round two." I run my tongue around the shell of her ear and shiver when I reach that tiny silver ball at the top.

She arches her back when I swirl my tongue around it. "Ummm, not just no, but hell no," she answers back with a crooked smile.

We lay in bed a bit longer, talking quietly about the day, before she pushes me off of her. I roll onto my back and groan. I'm hard as a fucking rock, but it doesn't look like I'm getting any morning loving … at least not from Bella.

Damn it all.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Come on, you two. Let's hit it," I holler as I stand by the front door jingling the keys for the Blazer in my hand once breakfast is done and it's time to go.

I have no idea what the hell's taking them so long but if they don't hurry up, I'm leaving the both of them here.

"Coming, coming." Peyton yells excitedly, slipping off the bottom step before she rights herself. "Edward, what are you waiting for? Come on!"
She giggles and she grabs my hand to pull me out the door. "Bella, you have about five seconds to get down here before we go without you!"

Finally, I hear the front door close as I climb out of the front seat. Peyton's buckled in her seat and a bag full of sunscreen, hats for Bella and Peyton, and Bella's camera is beside her. I turn and watch Bella walk down her front steps. She puts her sunglasses on, puts her pockets, and then lifts her face up to the sun. It's almost noon, so the sun is high above. White puffs of cotton candy clouds dot the azure blue sky and the warm breeze makes her hair flutter around her face. In the brilliant sunlight, the red in her hair is even more noticeable than normal. I love it. Warm, deep, ever-changing, it's one of my favorite things about her. Up, down, spread across my chest in sleep, or her pillow when I make love to her, it drives me crazy. I could spend hours trying to count every shade of brown and red in her hair, and I'm not sure that would give me enough time.

"You look fucking hot," I growl lowly when she finally gets close enough to hear me.

She's wearing a short sundress with those thin straps that look like little more than pieces of string. It's bright yellow and looks amazing next to her sun-kissed skin. It makes her tits look spectacular; even though the urge to demand she wear a hoodie over top of it is strong, I really don't want them covered up. I know that every guy that walks past her won't be able to keep their eyes off her because she looks so fucking good. I figure I can beat the hell out of anyone that pushes their luck … or at the very least get the bald behemoth to do it for me.

I know Xavier will have no qualms about kicking some ass if he needs to.

She gives me a very pleased smile in thanks for my blunt, but still true, compliment. "You don't look too bad yourself, Masen," she teases, standing on her tiptoes to kiss me. Her fingers curl around the edges of my short-sleeved, button-up, plaid shirt. I feel kind of like a tool or at the very least some minivan-driving soccer dad with the cargo shorts, the shirt, and the black Vans on my feet, but if she thinks I look good, what the fuck do I care about what anyone else thinks?

"Mom, stop kissing Edward so we can go. He promised me funnel cake and cotton candy," Peyton tattles from the backseat, earning her a pointed look and a raised eyebrow when I get into my seat after helping Bella into hers. Sprite really needs to learn not to tell Bella every single thing I tell her.

The short ride to Winter Harbor is full of stories of past boat race weekends and the escapades of Emmett, Jasper, and even Nana Renée. Apparently along with her slight McDonald's addiction it seems as if Renée is also quite fond of corndogs.

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Just … no, I think with a shudder.

Meat by-products surrounded by corn batter and dipped in mustard is all kinds of wrong.

"Did your grandparents ever take you to the races?" Bella asks quietly when there's a break in the story telling. She squeezes my hand, the one that's been firmly and happily attached to hers since we backed out of her driveway.

I smile, a bit sad, a bit wistful and shake my head. "We were never here this late in the summer. My grandfather always needed to get back to Boston by the first of August. I remember hearing about the races a few times when I'd be on the beach playing or something, but I never really made any friends or anything while we were up here. Hearing you guys talk about it though, I know it's something he would have enjoyed."

"I'm sorry you still miss him so much," she says softly. I glance at her quickly and lift our braided
fingers to my mouth, brushing a featherlight kiss across her knuckles.

"I miss him every day, my grandmother, too. They would have loved you and Peyton so much," I tell her honestly and swallow back the flare of hurt and pain and longing that threatens to force its way out of my throat.

She sighs, but says nothing, just cups my cheek for the briefest of seconds, before moving our hands back to the console.

"Edward, you gotta win me a stuffed giraffe. I love giraffes and I don't have one. I have a monkey and a tiger, and a bear from last year, but this year I wanna giraffe. Do you know what kind of sound they make? Or maybe they don't make a sound at all. Have you ever heard of an animal that doesn't make a sound?" Peyton blurts out in probably the most insane, out of nowhere ramble I've heard to date.

I chuckle, grateful for the reprieve from the heaviness that filled the truck at the mention of my grandparents. No one can ever accuse little thing of not knowing the perfect time to lighten a mood.

The mood turns positively giddy the closer we get to the grounds where the festival portion of the weekend will take place. I very carefully park Cherry at the far edge of a makeshift parking lot that's nothing more than a patch of land with some bright orange cones placed in strategic positions so there's some semblance of order. However, as I jump out of the truck and let my eyes adjust to the blazing sunlight, all I see is a bunch of older model sedans and mud-splattered pick-up trucks, along with the occasional minivan and even more rare sports car thrown in just to keep things interesting, parked willy-nilly like someone purposely tried to see how many vehicles they could fit into one space.

As we make our way to the entrance to the big happening, I spot Em's Jeep, Charlie's truck, and of course Jasper's pride and joy, parked in some sort of ridiculous angle so that there's no way anyone can park anywhere close to it.

Fucker.

"I hope a bird flies by and shits right on the hood," I whisper to Bella as we pass it.

She rolls her eyes like she can't believe I just said that, but of course I know better. "I know, right." She giggles behind her hand. "Especially because he just washed it. Alice sent a text this morning and was complaining because it's the first weekday she's had off all summer and instead of being able to watch Good Morning America like she wanted to, Jasper dragged her outside to help him wash his baby."

"He's an idiot." I laugh with her. I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her close so I can whisper in her ear. "There's no way in hell I'd ever give up spending a morning in bed with you." I lower my hand and palm her ass for just a second before straightening up as we approach the front gate.

It doesn't take long for us to meet up with everyone else. Hugs and kisses are spread around, and I'm kissed more times in the span of two minutes than it feels like I've been in the entire time I've been here. Rose, Alice, Renée, Esme, all take turns and then back slaps and handshakes between all the guys. For the briefest of moments I tense, overwhelmed by feeling so much all at once but I look around at everyone and take a deep breath. The atmosphere is full of excitement and I tell myself to let go and enjoy it.

Kids are running everywhere, frazzled parents try to keep up, and the smells of cotton candy and
French fries fill the air. Squeals of delight float around us as we walk around and I take it all in. A day like this, full of sunshine and laughter and a sense of family … of belonging to something outside of just me, is so totally not anything I ever allowed myself to wish for. Night after monotonous night for seven years, I laid on my cot and counted for the umpteenth time the cracks in the ceiling above me as I tried to block out the unnatural sounds around me, and hoped that one day, somehow, I'd be able to get out of that soul-crushing place and make a new life for myself.

With a tug on my right hand by Peyton and my left clasped tightly to Bella's I know without a shadow of a doubt that I got way more than I ever wished for.

"You okay?" Bella asks when I haven't said anything for a few minutes.

"Yep, I'm great," I tell her honestly.

She watches me for a moment, seeing so much behind the tinted lenses of her sunglasses, even looking through the gray-black of my own. The corners of her mouth lift in the sweetest smile. I want to pick her up and twirl her around like someone straight out of those sappy movies I catch her watching from time to time, but instead I settle for a quick, open-mouthed kiss to her bare, sun-warmed shoulder.

We stay in step with the others, though every few steps groups start breaking off. Peyton skips ahead and plants herself firmly between Charlie and Renée. When I see her tug them toward the sno-cones I can only roll my eyes and think better them than me. Bella squeezes my hand once before she's swept up into a conversation with Rose and Emmett. Alice and Jasper hang back and we walk side by side as we weave between the ever increasing crowd.

Alice attaches her arm to mine and says, "So what's this I hear about you and Peyton going on a date last night and leaving poor Bella home by herself?"

"What? I was just taking P for ice cream. It's not my fault it got us out of helping you guys last night," I answer back with a smirk over her head at Jasper, who scowls back at me.

Yeah, he and Emmett, along with Seth and Charlie all had to help last night at the restaurant. Apparently shutting The Breakers down for the weekend involves a lot more than just throwing a closed sign up on the door. Food has to be stored and frozen or wrapped, and whatever couldn't last the weekend was boxed up and sent home with everyone.

"Oh, shut up, fool." I chuckle at him. "Don't tell me you guys minded stuffing your faces with all the leftover food from dinner."

He pats his stomach proudly and gives me a lazy smile. "Hell no, man. There was more for all of us without you there anyway. But next time, you can bet your ass will be the one cleaning out the cooler with all the fish in it. Don't forget, you're still a greenhorn."

I narrow my eyes at him at the word. I hate that fucking word. I hate it even more when it comes out of Jasper, Emmett's or worse - Charlie's mouth. I know they're just teasing and it's a rite of passage or whatever, but still, I've worked damned hard to learn how to pull my own weight on the boat so it kind of pisses me off when they still use it in regard to me, especially when we're at the pub. Whenever Bella, Alice, and Rose declare they are having a girl's night, the guys and I hightail it to Finn's. I'm always amazed at the stories I hear while we're there drinking beer and hanging out. Old fishermen, brand new ones, guys born and raised in the countless postage stamp-sized towns that dot the coast, transplants like me, Jasper, and Xavier all have such different perspectives that sometimes it's impossible to do anything but just soak up every word they say.
Winter is coming, and with it icy black water and wind that I know will feel like a whip lashing at my skin. I'd be a fucking fool if that didn't scare me a little bit, hell it scares me a whole lot, but this is the path I've chosen so there's no backing down, no turning back. I know I'll need to dig deep and face whatever comes, but I have no doubt I'll be ready when it does.

I look up, surprised, when I see Xavier standing beside me and Jasper and Alice walking off in another direction.

"So, that's your former P.O., huh?" Xavier asks as he tips his chin toward Wayne and Bella.

I nod, feeling a strange sense of jealousy/pride when I see her hook her arm with his as we stroll down the street. Their heads are bent, leaning in close. I have no idea what they're talking about. I can hazard a guess but between the two of them, it could be any number of things. Most likely whatever they're saying to each other has to do with me. I shiver at the thought.

"Any particular reason he came to visit?" He tries to make the question sound casual, but with Xavier, anything having to do with Bella or Peyton is anything but a passing interest.

We've managed to call somewhat of a truce after he found out about me being incarcerated. Shockingly, he took the news much better than either Bella or I expected. When Bella asked him, point blank, what the hell he was trying to pull, he'd merely told her that she'd made her choice to be with me and that he'd support her.

I understand Xavier much better than he thinks I do. I suppose it comes from both of us loving Bella and Peyton. Their happiness is all that matters to us both, even though it's for very different reasons. I know the past few months haven't been very easy for him, though there's no way in hell he'd ever admit it, at least not to me. I can't begin to imagine having to give Bella and Peyton up after having been the man in their life, so to speak, for so long. It unhinges me to even think about, but he's had to step aside and let me take over. Bella and Peyton will always love him, just like he will them, but their relationship will never be the same as it once was.

Bella's different. She's not the same scared, closed-off, guilt-ridden woman that I saw that very first day. Now she smiles all the time … except when she's scowling at me … and she laughs and she sings with the radio in the morning while she makes breakfast. She spends more time with her family and friends and it's obvious that the changes mean as much to them as they do to her.

I helped do that.

She's still not over Evan, she probably never will be, but she's much closer to letting go of all the guilt she's carried around for the past seven years.

"I'm not in trouble or anything like that, if that's what you're wondering," I snap at him, answering his question and my back's up immediately.

He holds his hands up. "Whoa. I never said I thought you were. I was just making sure everything was okay," he tells me.

I sigh. It's still a bit hard to get used to the fact that he doesn't want to beat me to a bloody pulp anymore … or if he does, he hides it damn well.

I turn and look at him as we walk. "I think he just wanted to visit some old friends and make sure I was doing okay," I tell him with a shrug, unwilling to delve any deeper.

Telling Bella about Wayne's son, Zach, is one thing, telling anyone else is something altogether different.
"You are, aren't you? I mean Bell comes to work every morning with rainbows shooting out of her ass so it doesn't seem like you've managed to fuck anything up ... yet," he grouses.

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence," I snark back.

We walk for a few steps. Our conversation lulls as we move around a crowd of people standing around a clown making balloon animals. Once we're clear of the throng he picks back up again. "Dude, you've got to admit that Bell is a handful. She's stubborn and opinionated and doesn't listen for shit. On top of that, you have Peyton who knows how to smile at you just right or pout or even tip her head to the side to get what she wants from you. I'm just saying from where I'm watching, it looks like you're doing the right things."

I don't say anything because getting a compliment from him is about the last thing I ever expected. I must look at him like he's sprouted wings or at least hair on that bald head of his because he chuckles and then slaps me on the back ... hard ... hard enough to make me trip over my feet even. He flashes a mouthful of perfect white teeth at me and says, "I know I was an ass when you first got here. I still feel kind of bad about that, but you have to admit, if you were me, you'd have a hard time letting someone like you around people like Bella and Peyton. I've taken care of them for a long time, man, and it's hard to let them go. Seth gives me shit all the time about Bella being a big girl and capable of making her own decisions, but, Edward, before you got here, she was just going through the motions, every damn day."

He shakes his head and stops beside a booth where they are selling homemade kettle corn. While he buys a bag, I look around and try to find Bella and Peyton. I spy them ahead, and hope Xavier is almost done with whatever this is.

"Does she still have nightmares?" His question takes me by surprise, but not as much as the sharp, piercing pang of jealousy that twists my stomach into a painful knot. For a moment, I hate him because he knows that she has them at all.

I hesitate to answer, mostly because I'm too selfish to want to share that private knowledge with him. I want to keep it tucked away, as something only I know because I'm the one she clings to when I'm in bed with her, the one she calls when they wake her up and she's too afraid to go back to sleep ... and lately, the one she's been calling for, the one she's trying to save from the biting cold water, the crashing waves, and the raging wind.

She's been so much better lately about me being out on the water. So much so that she merely gives me a kiss goodbye and asks for a promise to see her later if I leave from her house or a quick phone call just to hear my voice if I'm at the boarding house. Even the overnight trips barely register with her these days. Whether it's because she's come to terms with Evan's death and is slowly learning to let go of her guilt as she realizes what happened wasn't her fault, or if it's because she's decided that loving me is worth the possible chance of being hurt in the future, I'm not sure, but I know that when she's awake, she handles it all with ease. At night, when her mind is free to roam where it wills, her fear is still there, as palpable as ever. When I kiss her back to sleep or whisper soft, soothing words over the phone, a little part of me always worries what would happen to her if anything ever happened to me.

I still don't have an answer.

And because of that I have to nod my head at Bella's best friend, and admit that being with me still might not be the best thing for her. "She does. Not as often anymore according to P, but they haven't stopped completely."

"She'll get there, Edward," he tells me in a momentarily brief show of compassion.
I shrug my shoulders and look at her a few feet in front of me. I need to be close to her. "I hope so," I tell him before walking to her side.

"What have you two been cooking up?" I ask as I slide my hand around her waist and look from her to Wayne. The two of them share a smile full of secrets and hidden meanings before they laugh at the frown on my face.

"Wouldn't you like to know, kid?" Wayne teases before he walks off to find Carlisle and Esme.

Hours pass. Sunscreen is applied, then applied again. I spend a small fortune trying to win Peyton a stuffed giraffe. Truly, the amount of money I spend constitutes enough to buy her at least ten of the damn things at the toy store. I would have given up trying to shoot water from a squirt gun into the mouth of the most bizarre and really quite freaky-looking clown face after the first five dollars … if Emmett hadn't won Rose a stuffed bear on his first try. However, the look on Peyton's face when I hand her the giraffe is worth every damn penny … though I could do without the smug grin from Emmett.

The sun begins to set, and the atmosphere changes from excited to languid. Families huddle together around picnic tables draped with plastic tablecloths. Boys and girls, ones that look much too young to be all starry-eyed and touchy-feely, press their bodies close as they giggle and bend their heads, caught up in the feeling of summer love. Men stand in clusters, drinking beer and forget about everyday trials and tribulations.

I look around from our own table, at the plates piled high with lobsters, potatoes, and corn and at the platters of sun-ripened watermelon, and wonder how in the hell I got here … surrounded by the best people I could ever hope to meet and the two beautiful girls that have changed my life. I watch Charlie and Renée, his arm draped casually, possessively around her shoulders as they laugh with Esme, Carlisle, and Wayne. I watch Peyton hold court like the princess she is between Xavier and Seth, her sweet giggle floating through the nighttime air as she waves her little hands in the air and her smile shines brighter than the twinkle lights hanging over the eating area. Emmett and Rose and Jasper and Alice talk and eat, totally comfortable with one another.

And then, there's the woman beside me.

I turn my head. "You're making a mess," I whisper huskily as I sweep my thumb along her bottom lip, wiping the melted butter that's dripped. I lift my hand to my mouth and lick it off, our eyes locked.

Her pink tongue darts out, flicking at the butter that still coats her lip. I don't even think about stopping myself, not caring that her father is at the other end of the table, or that her brother will probably kick my ass because he thinks I'm disrespecting his sister, or that half the town of Corea is sitting all around us … the only thing I want in that moment is to feel her lips against mine.

"Come here," I order in a voice rough with need.

Her breath catches. The golden white light from above sparkles in her eyes but she leans toward me, the same desire I feel mirrored back. I slide my hand around her neck and let my fingers tangle in her hair. I caress her jaw with my butter-coated thumb and then cover her mouth with mine. My tongue dips into her mouth, tasting, exploring … taking because I want her so much.

"Oh fuck, Bella." I groan and kiss my way from her lips to behind her ear. "I can't wait to get you home so I can take this sexy as hell dress off of you." I suck at her pulse point, feeling her blood pump against my tongue. "I'm going to fuck you so good, baby, all," teeth scrape against red-tinged skin, "night," a flick of my tongue at her earlobe, "long."
"Edward." She moans, squeezing both her eyes and her legs closed. "Oh God," she breathes as I curl my fingers around her hip bone, stretching them toward where she is so hot for me.

"Hey, you two," Seth calls down the table, a veritable bucket of ice water on our quickly escalating hormones. I suppose I should be glad he stopped me from making it so Charlie and Emmett didn't have a choice but to kill me because really, I was seconds from tearing Bella's pretty little sundress to shreds and fucking her senseless on the table.

Not really of course, but thinking it starts the fire burning again.

I really hope we can go home soon. My feet hurt, I'm tired and sunburned, and as nice as it's been to spend the day amongst family and friends, I'm ready to be alone with Bella.

I take a deep breath and allow my body to calm once more before I pull Bella close to me, flipping off Seth discreetly over her shoulder. He chuckles like the pain in the ass he is, and then blows me a kiss.

Idiot.

Bella just shakes her head at our antics and then lays her head on my shoulder. Peyton scrambles off the bench when she spies Bella and quickly crawls into her lap.

We stay that way, in our own little bubble until the crowd starts to thin. After promises of safe trips home and arranging to meet tomorrow to do it all again, I lift Peyton from Bella's lap and we head for the truck.

The hour long ride back home is spent in near silence. Peyton sleeps, Bella drifts, and I just soak up the feeling of pure, unadulterated contentment as we drive toward Corea.

Once Peyton is changed and tucked into bed, I do exactly as I told Bella earlier and strip her out of her dress. However, instead of taking her hard and fast as I had told her earlier, it's slow and gentle. Soft kisses, even softer sighs. Reverent touches meant to adore and love instead of claim and possess, build and climb, delicious in their teasing, seek to give and take. Fingers travel over dips and peaks, lips kiss along ink-stained skin, mouths so close together we share the same breath. We rock, we move. Skin glides along slick, warm skin. My hand over her breast, her heart. Her legs pull me deeper, closer.

"I'm so close, Edward." She pants as her back arches off the bed.

"Wait, not yet. Please. I need more, just like this," I breathe against her glistening neck.

My lips find hers again. I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, and then swirl my tongue with hers. Her heels dig into my ass. Her fingers twist in my hair. "Fuck, Bella." I moan, letting the strokes in and out of her get longer and deeper with every thrust.

"Oh, God. Yes … ah, right there. Oh please, more," she cries out as she pulls her legs back, knees flush with her chest.

"So good, so fucking good like this." I hiss, moving faster, needing more.

I push deeper and her orgasm washes over her. She shakes beneath me, falling apart in the most beautiful of ways. Her mouth opens, but no sound escapes. I release inside of her, over and over and over again. My arms burn, the muscles screaming in protest from holding my weight up for so long.
As soon as the aftershocks calm, I scoop her up and carry her to the shower where we silently wash the day away.

"I love you so fucking much," I whisper to her as I wash her back. I feel so close to her, closer than ever. I let the feeling fill and then settle inside of me.

She turns in my arms and meets my eyes. She doesn't say anything for what seems like the longest time, but I don't really need words to know, down to my toes, that she loves me, too.

The next morning is much like the previous one, though this time when Peyton comes in to wake us up, I shoo her out with a promise to meet her in the kitchen. I slip out of bed and pull on a pair of shorts. Bending over, I leave a light kiss on Bella's forehead and then quietly pull the door closed behind me so I can go make her breakfast.

Or try to anyway. Cooking is most assuredly not my forte – a fact of which I remind Bella of when she snickers at my extremely unsuccessful attempt to make French toast.

"Hey, give me a break. I worked in the laundry, not the kitchen when I was inside," I tease, stunning not only myself, but Bella and Peyton as well with my glib comment.

The morning passes quickly and in no time we are on our way back to Winter Harbor for the boat races. They're as much fun as both Bella and Peyton promised me they would be, even though by the end of the day I have vowed again to keep Peyton and Emmett's boat far … far apart.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

The next few weeks pass by in a blur. There are less visitors in Corea these days because the end of summer is fast approaching. It's kind of weird to notice every day when you drive through town or go to the Booze & Bait and can tell that the season is drawing to a close. The lines are shorter to get into The Breakers, the shelves at the store are fuller, at least Mr. Norris doesn't run out of mint chocolate chip ice cream or Bella's favorite Salt and Vinegar potato chips anymore. The end of summer also means the first day of school is just around the corner as well. Peyton is like a yo-yo when it comes to the big day. Some days she bounces up and down, talking a mile a minute about all the things she's looking forward to now that she's going to be in third grade … things like having more homework and art class. Though there are other days when that little furrow in between her eyebrows seems like it will be there permanently she's so worried about all the changes coming her way.

"So, tell me about this Brody kid," I begin the Sunday before the big day over breakfast. As I ask, I reach for the syrup for the delicious-looking blueberry pancakes Bella made this morning.

Pancakes, bacon, and orange juice almost make up for the fact that she tiptoed out of her room while I was in the shower.

Almost.

Of course if she would have still been in bed, and still enticingly naked when I got out, there's no chance in hell we'd be eating anything but cereal this morning so I suppose I shouldn't complain.

She rolls her eyes at me and I hear Bella snort from the kitchen. Apparently this little punk has been away most of the summer and the fact she'll see him tomorrow at school is causing her loads of distress. Last night when I got here, she dragged me up to her room to help her pick out her first day of school outfit … one that's been changed more times than I can count.

Seeing my Sprite anxious … and about a boy no less, is not sitting well with me at all.
"Edward, hush," Bella tells me as she slides into her seat beside me.

I hold my fork halfway between my plate and my mouth. I look back and forth between the two of them, not caring that there is syrup dripping down off the side. "What?" I ask. "Nobody, especially a boy," I shiver as I say the word, "is going to make my best friend nervous about going to school."

I shovel my fork in my mouth and chew furiously and wonder if there's a way Charlie would let me take Peyton with me to work tomorrow. I bet if I told him there was a boy in the picture, he'd let me.

Peyton giggles. "I can't wait to see his face when I tell him about you," she tells me before she takes a sip of her juice. "He's gonna be so jealous that my best friend has a motorcycle, even if I can't ride on it yet." That part is said with an evil eye directed only at Bella.

I make sure to keep a straight look on my face even though I kind of want to smirk at her.

I'm not stupid. There's a chance for sex later; I'm not about to fuck that up.

"Yeah, in your dreams, baby. You might be going into third grade but there is no way you are riding on that motorcycle so get used to it," Bella tells her and gives her the look to let her know that the subject is closed.

I could watch the two of them for hours.

"You all ready to be a big third-grader tomorrow?" I ask as I push off the doorway and walk toward the bed. I kneel in front of them and hold out my hand. Peyton squeals then slaps a hand over her mouth when she spies the small box resting in my palm.

"Is that for me?" she asks, her voice sweet and breathy.
I look at Bella and wink. I didn't tell her I was buying Peyton a present so I hope she doesn't mind. "It is. Open it."

I watch, anxious and excited as she unwraps the present. Her eyes grow, slate blue eyes as big as I've ever seen and so, so, happy.

With hands that I try to keep steady because I haven't given jewelry to a girl ever before in my life, I lift the delicate charm bracelet out of the box. "You keep giving me reminders of you when I have to go with Pop on the boat, so I wanted to give you something to remind you of me when I can't be with you," I tell her softly as I attach it to her tiny wrist. "I picked these out just for you." I have to clear my throat a few times before I can go on. "See, here's a giraffe, a seashell, a football, and a book. So, whenever you miss me, you can look down and know that I'm always with you."

She doesn't say anything for a moment until she lets out a scream that would scare away dogs and then throws herself at me, wrapping her arms as tightly around my neck as she can get them. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she says. "It's the best thing anyone has ever given me!"

"Well, only the best for my best girl." I smile, helping her get under the covers and kiss her forehead. "Sweet dreams only, okay? I can't wait to hear about your day tomorrow night."

Bella kisses her, too. Both cheeks, then the tip of her nose like she does every night and then we leave together. Bella pulls me down the hall, her hand gripping mine so tightly she almost cuts off the circulation. Once we're in her room, she walks me backward until my knees hit the edge of her bed. She follows me down and her mouth is everywhere leaving hot, wet, open-mouthed kisses wherever she can reach.

"You're going to make a great dad someday."

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So, lots of sweet and sexy times for our favorite people, hope you enjoyed it! I think they deserve some time just being, yes?

Next chapter we'll be moving forward again through Halloween and Edward's first Thanksgiving with Bella and Peyton. That Prologue y'all are worried about, yeah, it's getting closer all the time.

We've set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www.facebook.com/groups/137144056381565/

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Thanks, everyone, for being so patient with me the last few weeks. I am back on track now so there should be no more interruptions to my schedule. Yay! I'm so anxious and excited to taking you through the rest of the story!

For those of you that don't know, I'll be participating in this year's Fandom Gives Back fundraiser. I'll be donating a Peyton POV for this very worthy cause. I will NOT be posting this outtake anywhere until The Breakers is complete so if you want to read it early, you'll have to donate. A donation of $5 will get you a compilation that will include work by some amazing writers. If you need more information, check out the website at:
See you next Sunday! I've missed y'all, so please let me hear from you!

Erin~

*Disclaimer- I've made the boat races into a little bit bigger deal than they really are. I've incorporated the races with a street carnival just for the purposes of the story ... so just go with it, okay?
Chapter 20

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers - they all work so hard to help me and I wouldn't know what to do without them! A very, very special thank you to Laurel for having the patience of a saint these last few weeks with me and to J'me for pushing and helping me stay on track!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

If I don't get another chance this week, I want to wish all who celebrate, a very Happy Thanksgiving! I wish you all a wonderful holiday spent with you and yours. Thank you to all of you who make every day better!

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 20

BPOV

"Bella, be careful going home, you hear?" Mom calls to me as Peyton and I pull our jackets on and get ready to leave The Breakers. It was a blessedly slow night, the dinner rush didn't last long at all, and now all I want to do is go home, put on a pair of sweats and one of Edward's t-shirts, and curl up on the couch with him and a glass of wine.

The whine and huff from my daughter as she fights with her raincoat tells me it's probably going to be a while before I can have that glass of wine. With the way she's been acting lately, one glass isn't going to be enough.

"Baby, stop," I admonish and try to keep the frustration I feel from her behavior from eking out. I help her straighten out the arm of her jacket and she slides her arm inside. Instead of the sweet thank you I'd get on a normal day I get an eye roll and a half-hearted thanks.

I take a deep breath and count to five before I say something I'll regret, but there's no way she's getting away with that attitude. "Young lady," I begin in my no-nonsense voice, "you really need to watch the attitude. It's been two days and I've had enough. Understand?"

"Sorry, Mom," she mumbles, but at least it sounds sincere.

"Mom, we're going home. I'll see you in the morning," I tell her, looking up before we go out the door.

It's my turn to stay until closing, so besides my mom, Peyton and I are the last ones at the restaurant. It's always somewhat eerie to walk into the parking lot and see just Cherry and my mom's Cherokee left. Now that Edward stayed over a few nights a week, Xavier has stopped bringing me to work. He still comes to have breakfast at least once or twice a week, but things have
definitely changed with the start of school.

So much had changed, really.

Looking over at my daughter and noticing the scowl still on her face, I can't help but wonder if things haven't moved too fast. I can't say that I mind, because truthfully, I'm happier than I ever could've imagined being, but that doesn't mean there aren't moments of doubt that creep up from time to time.

I don't doubt my feelings for Edward or his for me and Peyton. I know he loves us. I know he wants to be with me as much as I want to be with him, but it's hard sometimes to keep things in perspective. We haven't been together that long, and honestly, that doesn't really bother me. Time really doesn't mean much when you find the right person. I can't imagine my life without Edward in it. When I imagine Peyton moving from elementary school to middle school, he's there. When I picture my thirtieth birthday, he's by my side celebrating with everyone else. Christmases, Thanksgivings, he's always there.

I don't really even doubt that he's 'The One' or whatever that means. I want him, always. It's been a wonderful, amazing, if scary at times, last few months. The whirlwind, the ups and downs, the discoveries and the sharing of secrets, it's all been so incredible. Things have progressed so naturally but there are times when it seems too good to be true. There are also times I can't help but wonder if it's all too much and too fast. Peyton adores Edward, a feeling he obviously and very proudly more than reciprocates, but it worries me at times if we're confusing her.

He stays, he leaves. He tells us he loves us, but then there are days we see him only briefly and some not at all. As a grown woman I'm okay with that, even if I miss him when it happens, but Peyton's only seven and I know it's hard on her. She misses him and I know she misses the security and comfort she feels when he's in the house.

"Is Edward gonna come over tonight?" Peyton asks when we get on our way.

A crack of thunder and a flash of lightning make me grip the steering wheel so hard my fingers turn white and I let out a deep breath. Storms still scare the everliving shit out of me, but I don't cower in fear anymore the second the first raindrop falls from the sky … I figure I should be happy about the improvement.

I concentrate on the swish of the windshield wipers for a few seconds as I get my bearings and then answer her. "I'm not sure. I haven't gotten a text message saying one way or the other."

She huffs and crosses her arms, staring out the window as we head toward home. We manage to get into the house without getting soaked to the bone. By the time we get changed and Peyton is curled up on the couch watching TV, Edward is knocking on the door before he walks right in.

Peyton is off the couch like a shot as soon as she hears the doorknob, not even giving him a chance to get more than two steps inside the house.

"Hurry, come on, Edward," Peyton whines at him while she pulls on his hand. He stomps his feet to get the mud off his boots and I can tell just by looking at him there's something wrong.

He opens his mouth, then clamps it closed, barely giving her a smile. She doesn't notice that or notice the grimace, the one that appears then disappears so fast it's a wonder I caught it at all. She shakes his arm, wiggling it like it's a piece of limp spaghetti until he flexes the muscles in his arm and holds it still.
"Hey there," I say softly as I approach, a little wary because the tension is utterly shooting off him in every direction.

His eyes are storm cloud gray, as gray as I've ever seen them. He didn't shave this morning, nor when he got back to the boarding house either, leaving him with more scruff than I've seen in some time. He didn't spend the night here last night, and the bags beneath his eyes let me know he didn't sleep well at all. I had a PTA meeting to go to to finalize the plans for the Halloween festival at the end of the month and I knew he was going to spend some time talking to Carlisle. From the looks of him, it wasn't an easy conversation.

He looks like he wants to say something but Peyton is pulling on his arm, clamoring for his attention. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath; I can tell it's to try to relax, but from the way his jaw is clenched, it hasn't helped.

"Edward, I need help with my homework. I waited 'til you got here so you can show me how to do my math; you remember, you helped so good last week. And, after, I want to play Monopoly. Can we make popcorn, too?" She stops pulling but scoots between us and starts pulling on the jacket he hasn't even been able to take off yet.

"P, stop for a second, okay? Please? I just walked in," he tells her. She huffs and he cringes. He runs a hand through his hair and then pinches the bridge of his nose.

He's losing it … fast.

"But, Edward, I want to play Monopoly," Peyton whines again and this time she even stomps her foot at him.

I open my mouth to intervene, but I'm too late.

"I can't do this tonight," he says in a tired, defeated voice. "I'll call you later."

He walks out, slamming the door behind him. He didn't look back, he didn't say when later was, he just … left.

"Mommy?" Peyton's voice shakes. It's been ages since she's called me mommy but hearing her say it now, rattles me.

I look at her and there are tears streaming down her face. She's not sobbing, but her quiet cries break my heart more than if she'd thrown herself down on the ground and was kicking and screaming while she wailed.

I reach out for her and pull her close. I can't do anything except run my hands through her hair and kiss the top of her head. I want to tell her something, anything, but nothing I can think of to say sounds right. I mean, how do you tell a child that the person they want to see most in the world just stormed out of the house without even a second glance.

Finally, when she sniffs, I squat down and push her hair back over her ears. Her face is splotchy and her eyes are rimmed with red. I kiss her forehead and then tell her, "Don't worry, baby. He's not mad at you."

I don't know what's bothering him, but I do know that. I also know he's going to be so upset when he realizes what he's done.

She nods and then goes to the couch and curls up with a blanket. I sigh and then stand up, shaking my head. Oh, Edward, I think. I put the food I'd left out for him away and straighten up the kitchen.
I frown when I spy the blackberry cobbler I brought home from the restaurant specifically for him. I pick up my phone. My hand shakes and I squeeze my eyes closed. I'm so angry at him I could scream, but I'm also very worried about him. His behavior is so out of character for him, it scares me to think of what could have possibly caused him to act that way.

Tapping the phone, I send him a quick text telling him I hope he's okay and we love him. I know he'll call when he calms down, and I can't help but hope he comes back here tonight.

"Mom? Do you think Edward is coming back?" Peyton asks as she sits down beside me on the front steps. Her voice is so sad. As much as I want to tell her yes, I have a feeling the answer is no … at least not tonight. I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her close, rubbing my hand up and down her arm to keep the chill of the early October air away.

I sigh.

I knew he was having a bad day; I could tell the minute he walked in the house and stomped his feet on the doormat. It's been raining, it's cold, he's tired, and Peyton has been, for lack of a better word, a complete pain for the past two days. Add a crabby seven-year-old to a twenty-seven year-old man that has no experience with kids and who's already in a bad mood and it was a disaster waiting to happen.

Not that him slamming the door and leaving is anywhere close to all right.

"I didn't mean to make him so mad," she tells me in a heartbroken voice. She lays her head on my shoulder and we both look toward the driveway as if somehow he's going to magically appear.

Her fingers rub the bracelet that never leaves her wrist. Getting her to take it off for her bath every night is next to impossible. It's her most prized possession - a fact of which she tells anyone and everyone … repeatedly.

I kiss the top of her head and enjoy the sense of comfort the smell of her coconut-lime shampoo gives me. "I know, baby, but you have to learn a no means no. What he did wasn't right, but the fact that you pushed him to the point where he lost his temper wasn't right either."

"He's not going to go away is he? I mean, he still loves me right?" Her eyes fill with tears. She sniffs and it tears my heart open.

I turn and pull her into my lap, wrapping my arms tightly around her. "Of course he does, Peyton. Edward will always love you," I tell her.

"I don't want him to be mad at me anymore." She sniffs once more.

I close my eyes and say a quick prayer that he comes back soon.

We sit outside until there are goosebumps on top of goosebumps. Getting Peyton inside isn't easy, getting her into bed even harder. I have to lay in bed with her a lot longer than normal and she fights closing her eyes with all she has. My phone is between us, her little hand holding it tight and tipping it toward her every few seconds as if just by willing it, he'll call.

"Maybe I should call him again," she says dejectedly, looking at me as if I can somehow see into the future and tell her she should.
"I think it's going to be tomorrow before you can talk to him, baby." She opens her mouth to argue with me but I shake my head. "Enough, Peyton. You have school tomorrow and it's time for bed. He'll call tomorrow. I promise."

I should feel bad for making a promise like that, but I don't. I know whatever is going on with him, he won't intentionally hurt her again.

I kiss her one more time then slowly walk to my room, clutching the phone every bit as hard as Peyton had just done. There is no way I can stomach watching some inane sitcom on TV so I don't even bother going back downstairs when I get changed for bed. Instead, I reach for my journal and start writing, letting the words cover the page.

The phone vibrates, sending a spike of anxiety through me. I throw my journal on the floor and then scramble onto the bed.

"Are you okay?" I ask at the same time I hear him say, "I'm so fucking sorry, Bella."

"Just answer me first, please," I beg him, holding the phone so tight I'm surprised I can't hear it crack.

"No, I'm not okay, but I'm back at the boarding house," he answers. His voice brings tears to my eyes because it's so afraid and so full of self-loathing. I hate it.

I sniff. "Oh, fuck. Bella, baby, please don't cry. I … shit, I didn't mean to walk out like that. I had the shittiest day ever today. I didn't sleep last night because I had a nightmare, I cut my hand, I have a headache, and then Peyton was—" He cuts himself off and takes a deep breath. "I never should have done that; I know I shouldn't have. I promise, I'll never walk out like that again." He sounds frantic and I shush him.

"I won't tell you it's okay, because it's not, but thank for realizing you were wrong. You scared me, Edward, but worse, you scared Peyton. She thought it was her fault you left and was worried you were never coming back," I tell him. I brace for the string of curse words I know is about to fly and I'm not wrong.

The phone is muffled, like he's covering it with his hand or holding it face down, but I hear enough to know if I ever hear him talk like that in front of Peyton, he's getting his ass kicked from here to next week. But, it's what he does when he gets mad, so I wait for him to finish the self-flagellation.

"She hates me, doesn't she? She's got to be so mad at me. It would serve my ass right if she never forgives me," he says sadly.

I get up and walk down the hall, knowing the right thing to do would be to let her sleep, but knowing if I don't wake her up and let him talk to her, he'll worry all night. Not that he doesn't deserve it, but I do have to try to remember he's not used to dealing with issues like this, too.

"Baby," I whisper, ignoring Edward's demand that I let Peyton sleep. "Wake up, P. Edward's on the phone." I shake her a few times but when I repeat his name, she sits straight up. "Here, he wants to talk to you."

I listen to her say his name and the relief she feels from talking to him relaxes the painful twist in my chest. I go to get her a glass of water, giving her some privacy to talk to him. I take a few deep breaths myself and by the time I walk back in her room, she's laying on her pillow with a smile on her face.

"Okay, Edward. Here's Mom. Tomorrow night right?" she asks then smiles even bigger. "I love
you, too. Okay. I know. Night," she finishes then hands the phone back to me.

I tuck her in again and then go back to my room, holding the phone but not speaking until I close my door.

"Thank you for talking to her. She'll sleep much better now," I tell him softly as I sit on the edge of my bed.

"Well at least one of us will. I feel like shit for scaring her, Bella, for scaring both of you."

"I know," I tell him … and I do.

We talk for a long time, about what happened, why he felt so overwhelmed, and what his nightmare was about. We talk about nonsense stuff, too, until we are both too tired to say another word. He does get the last word in though, when he says, "I don't deserve either of you, but I'm never letting you go," before I fall asleep, still holding the phone.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Nine o'clock on the dot, just like every night.

"Hey, baby." His voice … good Lord what just those two words do to me.

I let out a soft sigh and roll over to look out the window. There isn't much light; the moon is mostly hidden behind wispy clouds. I suppose it's fitting as tomorrow night is the Halloween Happening at Peyton's school. I pull my knees toward my chest and tug the blanket around me tighter.

"I wish you were here," I tell him, meaning it completely. "I'm cold and it's always warmer when you're in bed with me."

He chuckles a bit, though not as much as he normally would. "So, you're telling me you just need me there as a human blanket, huh?"

"Awww, damn, you found me out." I giggle but then realize he's not laughing with me. "Are you okay? You had a difficult session with Carlisle, didn't you?"

He doesn't say anything. I can hear him shuffle around in his bed and then he spats a low "fucking hell" when I hear a bump.

"Fuck that hurt," he mumbles.

I wait until I hear him stop moving before I ask, "Do you want to talk about it?"

I had a feeling he would spend some time talking to Carlisle tonight. I spent the evening up at the school helping the other moms and dads set up for the festivities tomorrow night. Xavier and Seth were there like always and Rose and Alice dropped off some food for the chili supper. It was great to hang out with Xav and Seth; I've missed them.

He sighs. "Maybe later. Tell me what you did tonight. How's Peyton? I barely got to talk to her before she fell asleep."

I let him change the subject, knowing full well he'll circle back around to it when he's ready. With Edward, I know it's much better to wait than to push. There are times when a push is necessary; this is not one of them. For all his fear that he doesn't know what he's doing most of the time, he's amazingly adept and surprisingly willing to talk about things when they bother him. He's stumbled,
case in point his little meltdown with Peyton a few weeks ago, but it's rare when he refuses to talk about things.

Aleksei is the topic that takes the most care when bringing it up, not that Edward wants to talk about him much. After Wayne's visit, it took a while for Edward to put that memory back into the cage where it resides most of the time. Wayne's reminder that Aleksei has never been apprehended, that he's still out there somewhere, has really shaken Edward, so much so that he spent a few more nights at the house and when he wasn't here, he was calling at all hours of the night just to make sure we were okay. Seeing him scared was an eye-opener, and one that wasn't particularly pleasant if I'm being honest.

I shake off those thoughts and answer his question. "She's fine, wore herself right out blowing up all the balloons for the games. Xav kept challenging her to see who could blow them up the fastest. I'm surprised the big idiot didn't give himself an aneurism trying to keep up with her. Then she kept trying to sneak all the candy coins buried in the sand for the treasure hunt. I think Seth found more than she did though."

"I'm sorry I missed it," he says and I can tell he really is. "So everything is all ready for the big shindig? I gotta tell you, Bella, you small town people know how to make the biggest production out of things." He laughs a bit and I let the sound ease the knot that appeared the second I heard the tension in his voice.

I tell him a few more stories about the night and he laughs in the right places, even though I can tell he's not fully listening. I finish telling him some nonsense and he's quiet on the other end.

"I told Carlisle I'm nervous about tomorrow night," he says quietly and his voice is terse, underscoring the truth of his words.

"Oh, Edward," I answer back gently. I won't tell him not to be nervous because he's entitled to his feelings. I wish he wasn't, but I'll do everything I can to show him he has no reason to be.

There's rustling on the other end until he stills once more. I can just picture him running his hands through his hair. More than likely, he has the phone cradled against his ear with one hand tugging on his hair and the other holding onto Peyton's seashell. She's shared plenty of things from her treasure box with him over the past few months, but none mean as much as the seashell she gave him for that first overnight trip on the boat. "Are you and Peyton positive you want me to go with you tomorrow night? I can just stay at your house and wait to see you guys when you're done at school."

My heart clenches. I curl my fingers into a fist beside my face, squeezing them so tightly I can feel my fingernails dig into the center of my hand. I want to be frustrated with him, but I can't be. "Of course I want you with us; we both do. I wish you wouldn't worry so much," I tell him, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

"I don't want to embarrass you, Bella. Those people are your friends, and the parents of Peyton's friends. It sucks, but you know what people think about me the first time they see me. It would kill me if anyone said anything to Sprite that was mean because of me. I don't know, I just think it would be better if I didn't go." He sounds so dejected and it just about breaks my heart.

"Fuck them," I say immediately. "Edward," I take a breath and softened my voice, "I love you … the man that is Edward Anthony Masen, not Edward Anthony Masen ex-con. I've told you this before and I know others have, too. Don't let a label define who you are. You make me happy, you make Peyton shine brighter than the star on top of the Christmas tree, and we want you, just the way you are."
"Ah, Bella," he breathes out. "I love you so fucking much, you know that right? I mean I know I
don't always show you or tell you the right way, but I really do. I just … I don't know how."

I giggle, though not enough to hurt his feelings. "Really, Edward?" I tease. "I'm pretty sure the
smile on my face that I sport daily and the bracelet that never comes off a certain little girl's wrist
is a pretty good indication you do."

"Yeah, well, maybe," he hedges, but I can tell he's smiling.

"There is no maybe about it." A gust of wind rattles the window and the bare tree branches scrape
along the side of the house making me huddle inside my blankets even more. I yawn, covering my
mouth with my hand in the hopes he doesn't hear me, which of course he does.

"I should let you go. You had a long day and tomorrow will be just as long, especially because
tomorrow night you won't be sleeping in bed alone." His caramel turtle voice slides over me,
making every inch of my body tingle like I've just touched a doorknob after dragging sock-covered
feet across the carpet.

I moan; I can't help it. I also rub my thighs together to try to ease the ache that's just erupted
between my legs. Damn evil, silky, gritty voice. "You're mean." I pout and the chuckle that floats
through the phone is anything but sweet and silly. Instead it is full of dark promises which only
serve to fan the flames.

"I'll see you tomorrow night. Sweet dreams only, baby. I love you," he says tenderly and I melt.
He's just too much sometimes.

"Love you, too. Be safe." It's what I tell him every time we get off the phone … I won't ever stop.

Sleep finds me quickly which comes as a surprise when I wake the next morning. I figured
between thinking about Aleksei, Edward's real but unnecessary worries, and the anxiousness about
the festival, I would have tossed and turned all night, but I wake wonderfully rested. Getting both
myself and Peyton out the door goes much smoother than I could've hoped; the only meltdown
coming when Peyton can't find the red wristbands Edward bought for her costume. We find them,
finally, and then we're off.

We rush out the front door, past the pumpkin we carved the week before. The air is crisp, and the
leaves that have fallen from the trees crunch beneath our feet as we cross the yard and get into the
Blazer. I really could have used Xavier's help this morning getting a few last minute things in the
truck, most important being Peyton's costume, but he was needed at the restaurant. Edward isn't far
off the mark with his comment of the town making a big production out of this. For a family
friendly fundraiser at school, it's a pretty big damn deal. The entire town is involved in one way or
another. Sue us … Corea is tiny - we have to get our entertainment somehow.

Driving through town toward school, I can't help but feel a little nostalgic. Pumpkins, scarecrows,
hay bales, dried Indian corn, witches, ghosts … a plethora of decorations in front of every house, in
every window of every business, and in every front yard.

I drop Peyton off with a promise that I'll have everything ready for her as soon as she arrives at The
Breakers after school and head toward the restaurant.

"Bell, did you remember to bring the Eye Black?" Xavier asks as I rush in the back door of the
kitchen.

I turn at the sound of his voice and burst out laughing, almost dropping Peyton's costume in the
process. "Nice look you've got going on there, buddy."

"Pshhhh, you just wish you could rock the vampire look like me," he quips.

I roll my eyes at him not admitting that he looks damn good. If I did, I'd never hear the end of it.

The morning speeds by as does the lunch hour. Before I know it, it's almost time for Peyton to be done at school. The plan is she will come here, get dressed, and then we'll head back to the school for the fun to commence. I lay out her costume on a table, smiling when I remember how excited she was the week before when she modeled it for me and Edward.

"She's going to look adorable." Alice giggles next to me.

"Watch it, Ali. You better not let P hear you say that," I tell her seriously.

She looks at me. "Please tell me Edward is dressing up, too?" she asks with raised eyebrows and a hopeful look on her face.

I look back at her like she's lost her damn mind. "You're joking, right? I barely got him to agree to come tonight. There is no way I'd even think about suggesting he dress up in a costume."

She pulls a chair out and calls Rose over. Once they both sit, she gives me a stern look and says simply but quite emphatically, "Spill."

I drum my fingers on the table, letting my thoughts roam for a second or two before looking from Rose to Alice. "He's nervous about tonight," I say with a sigh. "He even asked if he should stay home."

Alice gasps. She narrows her eyes, fire shooting out of them fast and furiously. She's fiercely protective of Edward; she gives Peyton a serious run for her money in the defender department. "Please tell me he's still going," she demands.

I nod. "He is. I'm not sure he's really comfortable about it, but he doesn't want to disappoint Peyton."

"Or you either," Alice replies back immediately.

I nod again. "I know that, Al. He tries so hard and he gets himself all worked up."

"He just wants to fit in," Rose says knowingly. She leans forward and says, "It's important to him to be good for you and Peyton and he's always worried he's not." I open my mouth to say something but she holds up a hand, halting my words instantly. "We know he is, Bella, but this is the first time he's going to put himself out there. Here in the restaurant or at Finn's or even when we were at the races was different. Tonight the entire town will see you three acting like a family, or as close to one as you can get, and he just wants to make you two proud of him."

"Rose, we are proud of him," I tell her, though it's completely unnecessary. It's not like she doesn't know.

"Well, if anyone gives him shit, you just let me know," Alice mutters menacingly. For such a small person, she can be damn scary when she wants to be. "I'll slip some hot pepper sauce in their chili or something. No one messes with my friend and gets away with it." She gets up from the table still grumbling to herself leaving me and Rose to just stare at her retreating back with mouths agape.

"She loves him almost as much as Peyton does." Rose smiles at me from across the table.
"She does," I agree quietly.

It's not surprising, really, that Alice and Edward are as close as they are. Their pasts are quite similar in so many ways. Alice's mom died of pancreatic cancer when she was ten and was taken in by her grandparents. Alice's mom had been their only child and her dad had taken off before she was even born. She met Jasper in high school when his parents, if you could call them that, wound up in the same suburb of Dallas as Alice lived in. By the time they were getting ready to graduate from high school, they were practically living together so that Jasper could escape the beatings his dad would give him for the slightest misdeed. Her grandparents loved Jasper, but sadly they were killed in a car accident during the summer after their senior year.

Wanting to get far away from his parents and her memories, they traveled for a bit, completely alone and living on the small inheritance Alice got from her grandparents. They worked odd jobs here and there, searching for something, someplace that would make them happy and where they could call home. Like a lot of people, Jasper saw a show on TV about being a fisherman. He decided to give it a chance and see if his affinity for the water would translate into him loving being on the water all the time and luckily for all of us it did. He and my dad hit it off immediately, same with him and Emmett, and Alice was just happy to have a place where she felt safe and had people around she could love.

Much like Edward.

I'm really happy they have such a strong bond to each other. They both need that one person that understands them, that has been there, done that. I have my own ghosts, my own issues, but I don't know what it's like to be alone, not like they do. The fact that I've been that way the past few years was by choice, theirs was by fate. Even Jasper, for all he hates his family, still has a mother and father. Alice and Edward don't.

Before I can ruminate on those facts any longer, the front door to the restaurant flies open and Peyton rushes through, bringing a swirl of leaves along with her.

"Mom!" she cries out as she weaves between the tables. "I'm so excited!" She throws her backpack down on the ground and then flings herself at me. I haven't had time to even stand up so we're all off balance, and it's a wonder she doesn't knock me off the chair.

"Really?" I tease with a grin. "I never could have guessed. I'm also betting you've already had more than a few pieces of candy, haven't you?"

She giggles and rocks back and forth on her feet, trying to look as innocent as an angel but looking at the gleam in her eye and the way she bites the inside of her cheek is a dead giveaway. "But, Mom, Gabby's mom brought treat bags and Mrs. Watson told us we could have them after we finished our spelling worksheets, and you know how hard spelling is for me so I wanted a treat when I finished and didn't make any mistakes. When can I get dressed? I don't want to be late and I want to get there before Edward does. Do you think he'll want to do the cake walk with me?" She pants as she tries to catch her breath.

Good Lord the girl is going to make herself pass out one of these days if she doesn't learn how to take a breath while she talks.

"P, relax." I smile at her and pull her close for a hug. "Go ask Xavier to make you a snack, preferably fruit or something to offset the sugar pumping in your blood right now and then we'll get you dressed to go, okay?"

She squeaks and then rushes to the kitchen where I hear a happy shout of "Boo!" followed by
Xavier's unmistakable booming laugh.

The restaurant is dead since everyone is going to be eating at the chili supper and those that aren't know better than to think anyplace in town is going to be open for dinner anyway. I wipe off the tables and arrange a few things behind the front counter until it's time to get Peyton dressed in her costume. Alice and Rose had left a while ago to help in the kitchen at school, and Xavier left to go help Emmett, Jasper, and Seth in the parking lot for the Trunk or Treat.

Like I said, when we do something in Corea, we go all out.

I am brushing Peyton's hair and getting ready to braid it into two braids when the bells over the front door jingle. My skin tingles and the hair on my arms stands up.

"You're here," I say ridiculously since he's standing in front of me.

Oh God, he looks amazing.

Faded jeans, a black, long-sleeved t-shirt and his boots. Dark and dangerous just like the first time I saw him. I know now what lays beneath all that posturing and gruff exterior … and though he's still dark and dangerous, I know he'd never hurt me or Peyton and that's all I need.

"So it seems." He smirks as he swaggers toward Peyton and me.

He takes his time and I can tell he enjoys the way I can't keep my eyes off of him. The brush I'm holding slips out of my hand and the sound of it hitting the floor makes me jump.

He chuckles. I try to glare, but fail horribly. Peyton giggles when he leans down and rubs his nose against hers.

"You look great, Sprite," he tells her as he straddles a chair and drapes his arms over the back.

I humph because he didn't kiss me hello.

Jerk.

He casually bends over and picks up the brush, holding it until I look at him. I wiggle my fingers and this time I do glare at him when he smirks again in that way he has when he drops it into my hands. I finish braiding Peyton's hair.

"Go in the kitchen and get the bag with the wristbands and the Eye Black strips and come back here so we can get you finished up." I nudge her off her chair.

She scampers off without even looking back, too excited to think straight and will more than likely come back out here having forgotten one thing or the other.

I chance a quick peek at Edward. Mistake number one. Mistake number two comes when I lower my eyes to his lips and then subconsciously lick my own. I hear his chest rumble for about half a second before I feel myself yanked forward. He hooks a heavy boot around the leg of my chair and pulls me toward him, reaching out with his hands to hold onto my seat when I get close enough for him to reach.

He leans forward over the back of his chair. "And, hello to you, too," he whispers huskily as he drags his nose down the side of my face. "Mmmm, you always smell so fucking good." He flicks his tongue against my neck and the warm breath makes me shiver when it reaches the spot where his tongue has just been.
I tip my head to the side as his tongue continues to drive me crazy. Thankfully before I do something that scars my poor daughter for all her remaining days, he kisses me sweetly, dialing back the lust level to something much more manageable. I look into his sea glass green eyes and smile, thankful that they are bright and not clouded with worry.

"Did you have a good day?" I ask and rest my forehead against his.

"Hmmm, I did. It's a hell of a lot better now though." He lifts his hands and cradles my head. "I've been thinking about this all day," he says just before his mouth finds mine. I mold my lips to his, wanting everything he gives me. His tongue sweeps across my bottom lip and then he slowly dips it into my mouth. I hear him growl in the back of his throat and the vibration shoots straight through my body … all the way to the tips of my toes.

"God, not again," Peyton wails when she comes out of the kitchen.

Sadly, Edward and I break apart, though not as quickly as my darling daughter would like judging from the way her mouth is puckered like she just ate a lemon and her arms are crossed across her chest. "You look like Pop did when I went out on a date and he caught me kissing Will McNelly." I laugh.

"Who the hell is Will McNelly?" Edward asks in a steely voice. I try, I do, but I laugh so hard at the way he looks like he's about tear the town down trying to find poor Will.

I grab the bag from Peyton and then turn to him. Bending down, I kiss him quickly on the cheek and say, "Easy, now, tiger."

Peyton giggles at him as she sits in the seat I just vacated and swings her legs back and forth. I hold her arm up and slide a wristband on and hand Edward the other one to put on her other wrist.

"Edward," she says in a serious voice, or as serious as she can with her face all squished up while I put the Eye Black strips on her. "Mom only kisses you now, so don't be mad. It's kinda gross if you ask me, but Brody says if a boy likes a girl, they kiss sometimes."

This time the growl is more like a roar. "I really need to meet this Brody punk, Bella. I think it's about time he and I have a talk."

"He'll be there tonight, Edward," Peyton answers thinking she's being helpful when she's pretty much just sealed the poor boy's fate.

"Okay, all done," I tell her.

She hops up and looks from me to Edward. She looks amazing, if I do say so myself. She's dressed in a pair of football pants, and a Tom Brady jersey. We found a pair of Emmett's old shoulder pads at Mom's and with her hair braided, and under her eyes painted black, she's perfect. From the way Edward is staring at her, he feels the same way.

I grab my cell phone out of my pocket and take a quick picture of them looking at each other, totally unaware of everything around them. I smile when I look down at the screen; the picture will look great framed and on the bookshelf in the living room.

We walk to the school, merging with the crowd on the sidewalk. Edward snorts at me as it continues to grow the closer we get to the school. I suppose I'm used to it, but looking at the parking lot full of cars and games, with lines of ghosts, witches, superheroes, and princesses, I can see how it might all look a bit strange.

"Okay, we need a plan of attack here," I tell them as I pull them to the side.
Peyton is barely paying attention and every few seconds someone walks by and says, "Hi, Bella. Hi, Edward," which quite honestly looks like it's freaking him out.

"Do we want to Trunk or Treat, play games, or eat first?" I ask, looking back and forth between them.

Edward's eyes look a bit wild when he glances toward the circle of cars and then to the school where the crowd seems to growing inside the cafeteria. "P, this is your show, what do you want to do first?"

She taps her chin and then smiles hugely. "Trunk or Treat. I see Jasper and Uncle Emmett." She points. We all turn and my eyes about fall out of my head.

"Oh, heavens," I mutter, somewhat in awe and somewhat in embarrassment.

Edward shakes his head and stands between us, taking a hand in each of his. "Don't ever think about asking me to do that, Bella. Not in a million years and not for a million dollars," he says.

I have no doubt he's deadly serious.

"Uncle Emmett," Peyton says as she pulls on the yellow feathers of Emmett's costume. Yes, my brother is dressed like a chicken, complete with a huge head and tail feathers.

He pushes the stuffed head off his own head and looks crestfallen. "How'd you know it was me?"

We all laugh, even the Jack Sparrow wanna-be, Jasper. "You're the only one crazy enough to rent a complete chicken costume for a kids Halloween carnival," I tell him. "And besides, you're standing by Jasper's car. Who else would it be?"

"I can't believe Rose and Alice let you two cook up this game," I scold, cringing when Peyton gleefully picks up a grotesque-looking rubber chicken and tries to toss it into the tiny, sand castle-sized bucket.

"What?" Jasper asks innocently. "The kids love it. We've already gone through a huge bucket of candy," he says proudly.

We spend a few more minutes with them before we give someone else a try and make our way around the parking lot. Edward visits with people as we go, cautious but open. No one has looked twice at him and I can see him relax more with each passing minute. By the time we've made the circuit, Peyton has enough candy to last until next Halloween and we haven't even made it inside yet. Her pumpkin bucket is full of candy, little trinkets that won't make it past the weekend, and more pencils and stickers than she knows what to do with.

The smell of chili lures us inside. It takes a few minutes to navigate the crowded hallway until we get to the cafeteria. I hand our tickets for the dinner over and we follow the line to get our food. Once our trays are full we step into the cafeteria and look for a place to sit. I spy my parents and we head in their direction.

The place is packed, but everyone is having a great time. Peyton is so busy pointing out every single one of her friends, Edward barely has time to eat.

"Did you see Em and Jasper outside?" my dad asks with a shake of his head.

I nod and my mom elbows him in the side. "Don't you sit there and try to look like you're embarrassed, Charlie. If I would've let you, you would have been outside right along side them
dressed in the gorilla costume you asked Emmett to get when he got that ridiculous chicken get-up."

"Mom, can I show Edward my pumpkin picture?" Peyton asks as she leans forward and looks at me.

I nod and she drags him off, not even letting him finish the spoon of chili he had halfway to his mouth. She not only manages to pull Edward behind her, but a few other friends that quite frankly look more interested in Edward than her.

I gather our trash and throw it all away and stop to refill my glass of tea.

"Hello, Bella," I hear the nails on a chalkboard voice of Trisha Davis.

I turn and try to plaster on what I hope is a passable for sincere smile. "Hi, Trisha. Great turnout," I say as I strive to be pleasant.

Trisha Davis in a word … hates me. Always has, always will, ever since we were in high school. She was one of the girls that followed Evan around like a lovesick fool. She was one of the most vocal people to let it be known how it was all my fault after Evan died.

"Hmmm, there were more people here last year when I was in charge," she answers dismissively with a wave of her hand. "I hear you have a new … friend. Edward is it?" Her tone is nasty, condescending.

I don't answer because it's none of her business for one, and for two, she obviously knows what the answer is anyway.

"How can you feel safe with him in the house, Bella? Or worse yet, with Peyton?" she asks in a sickeningly saccharine voice, pretending like she cares one iota when we both know nothing could be further from the truth. However, hearing her say his name immediately puts me on the defensive.

"Edward is an amazing man and Peyton adores him," I answer simply, not wanting to say anymore. She looks across the cafeteria, her watery blue eyes appraising Edward. He's surrounded by a gaggle of giggling little girls dressed as everything from a football player to a ballerina. He smiles fondly at who I assume is Lucy if the bright red hair is any indication and nods his head at her. I can hear his deep laugh from where I'm standing and the sound makes what the hateful, small-minded woman beside me thinks, irrelevant.

"He sure is a fine hunk of a man though, Bella, gotta give you credit for that. First Evan and now Edward. Makes one kind of wonder what poor Edward's fate might be someday. He does know what happened to Evan doesn't he, how you trapped him into taking care of you and then it killed him?" Her tone is neutral, as if we were having a conversation about the weather … her words are anything but.

I want to strangle her with my bare hands … or at the very least dump a bowl of chili on top of her bleach bottle blonde hair for disparaging not only Edward but Evan's memory, too.

"You are such a miserable bitch, Trisha. You've always been the most self-centered person I've ever come across, but you truly are in a class by yourself. The only reason you have a problem with Edward is because he won't even give you the time of day. You don't know anything about him except what you see on the outside." I glance in her direction, getting a sick satisfaction out of seeing her face as red as a tomato and her fingers curled so tight they're white. I lean in close,
making sure that no one but her can hear my next words. "And let me tell you, what's beneath the clothes is to die for. Too bad you'll never know. Have a good night," I end with and walk toward Edward, not bothering to look back.

I'm a raging mess on the inside. I try to imagine all the cruel things I could do to her, but one look at Edward, who never takes his eyes off me as I approach, makes it all just melt away like it never existed. She's not worth the energy to ever think about again, not when I have much more pleasant things to occupy my mind.

"What was that about?" he whispers as he pulls me close to him. His arm slides possessively around my waist and I love it. I hope every person in the cafeteria can see us together because I'd honestly like nothing more than to stand on one of the table tops and announce it to everyone.

I wave it off because Trisha isn't worth expending the breath to explain.

"I'm so happy you're here," I tell him softly and lay my head on his shoulder.

I feel him press his lips to the top of my head and the fingers of his hand spread wide over my hip and the top of my ass. "I can't think of anyplace else I'd rather be."

The rest of the night flies by in a flurry of games and candy and fun. By the time we walk back to the restaurant, Peyton is asleep on her feet. Edward gets her into the Blazer and we head back to my house, holding hands the entire way. He looks at me when he parks the car, and then leans across the console so close our noses touch.

"I had the best time tonight," he says.

"I'm glad." His eyes bore right into mine and my insides tingle in the most delicious of ways.

We don't say anything for a few moments as our eyes have a silent conversation. The corner of his mouth lifts and he whispers, "Bet I can make you gladder in about five minutes."

I want to tell him gladder isn't a word, but the way his eyes are smoldering pretty much makes me incapable of speech at this point.

It actually takes closer to ten minutes, but that's only because Peyton wouldn't take off her jersey for bed. I spent the night being very, very glad.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Mom, hurry. The game's already started," Peyton complains when I park Cherry in front of Carlisle and Esme's house Thanksgiving Day.

"Well, if you'd stop yapping and help me carry some of this in the house, we'll get the car unloaded quicker." I chuckle at her.

We get out of the truck and I load her arms up and shoo her toward the house. My mom and Esme alternate having Thanksgiving at their houses and this year it's Esme's turn. For Edward's sake, I'm glad it is. All week he's been quiet, not withdrawn exactly, but he's certainly been inside his head a lot.

I hear the front door open and Peyton shriek a happy hi as she races past Edward. I watch him walk toward me, and I can't help but appreciate how gorgeous he looks in his dark-washed jeans and white shirt. Dinner is never a dress-up affair, but no one shows up in gym shorts and a ratty t-shirt either.
"Happy Thanksgiving," I tell him as I stand on my tiptoes and kiss him quickly.

"Same to you. I'm so glad you're here. Seth is driving me fucking nuts. I swear he's worse than a hyper puppy." He chuckles as he buries his nose into my hair. "Oh, God, tell me that is what I think it is." He moans when I hand him a tray covered with tinfoil. I smile at him and lift the corner, showing him what's underneath.

"Fuck, I love you," he says in a low, rough voice.

I shut the back door to the Blazer and take a few steps up the sidewalk. "So you just love me because I make you pumpkin squares, huh?"

He blinks twice and then a sexy smile spreads across his face. "Amongst other things," he says slowly. "It also helps that your ass looks fucking amazing in those pants."

Jesus.

He cocks an eyebrow at me when I don't say anything for a few seconds because he's rendered me speechless.

"Bella!" Seth hollers from the front porch, popping my little Edward bubble. Edward rolls his eyes at me as if to say, "see, I told you" before we walk toward the house.

Everyone is already here. Mom and Esme are busy in the kitchen, the guys are already crowded around the television with Peyton happily ensconced on my dad's lap, and Rose and Alice are setting the huge table. Hugs and kisses are given and I go one way and Edward is dragged off the other.

"How's he been this morning?" I ask Esme as we stand around the island. I add another dash of milk to the bowl of steaming mashed potatoes in front of me. Stirring, I look up at her and wait for an answer.

"Quiet, but holding it together." She nods knowingly. "He and Carlisle had their coffee outside this morning."

"Hmmm, that's good," I tell her. "I know today will be hard for him."

"More than likely, but he's doing so well," she says proudly.

I hear him laugh from the other room and my heart swells at the sound. He's doing better than well, at least I think so, but admittedly I'm more than a little biased.

We spend a few hours in the kitchen talking and cooking. I'm laying a linen napkin in a basket for the rolls when my favorite pair of arms slide around my waist. "Is it almost time? I'm starving," he asks against my neck.

"Yep, just about," I tell him, turning my head to kiss him on the cheek. "How are you doing, hanging in there okay?" I ask quietly. I don't want to make a big deal out of things, but I do want to let him know I realize the day, while a happy one, isn't without some sad memories.

"I'm fine. It's … a lot, but having you and Peyton here makes it better," he sighs and says softly in my ear.

"Excuse me," Mom chirps as she sets a casserole dish on the island. Edward stiffens behind me and I can feel his heart hammering in his chest against my back.
I look down at the sweet potatoes, wondering what in the world would cause that reaction from him. I'm about to ask him when he lets go and rushes out of the room, leaving my mom and I staring at each other in confusion.

"What did I do?" she asks, looking crestfallen.

I set the basket I'm holding down and pat the top of her hand. "It's not you, Mom. I'll go check on him."

"Hey," I say quietly, not wanting to startle him, and close the door quietly behind me.

He's staring out the window, not moving. I can hear the sounds of the TV downstairs, groans as someone from one team or the other does something no one likes. The smell of the turkey roasting in the oven mixes with the smell of him that permeates his room. It's the first time I've been here but I don't take the time to look around, instead focusing only on him.

I knew this day was going to be hard for him.

"Do you know," he begins, still looking out the window. "That if I think hard enough, I can still remember how it used to smell in my grandmother's kitchen on Thanksgiving, especially when she made the candied sweet potatoes … you know the kind with the marshmallows on top?" he asks almost absently. He turns and looks at me, his eyes so sad it takes my breath away. "I haven't had them in so long, the shit they served in prison was out of a can and when I saw that Renée had made them it just … " he trails off.

I step closer and slide my fingers between his.

"I miss them so fucking much, Bella, everyday." My eyes burn at the corners, and my heart pounds painfully against my chest, but I just squeeze his hand in mine to let him know that while I know it hurts, he's not alone.

"I know you do, Edward, but you're not alone. I know you'll always love them and you will always miss them but you don't ever have to feel like you don't have anyone ever again. You'll always have me and Peyton." I lift our hands and kiss his calloused knuckles. I brush my lips across every cut and scrape and then tell him, "You have people who love you like Carlisle and Esme, and my parents, and good friends, friends who care so much about you like Alice and Seth, and Jasper and Rose and Emmett and even Xavier. You have Wayne, who you make so proud. You have a family, Edward, full of people who love you." I reach up and hold my hand to his face. "I love you, so, so much. I know it doesn't take away your pain, but you don't have to keep it to yourself anymore either."

He strangles out a very shaky, "Bella," before his mouth is on mine. Hungry, desperate, anguished sounds escape as he kisses me. The muscles in his arms twitch as he holds me close. His heart thunders in his chest and I just hang on and give him what he needs.

"Shhh, it's okay, sweetheart," I whisper as he trembles against me.

"I love you. Christ I love you so fucking much." He rests his forehead against mine and he keeps his eyes closed as he inhales and exhales deeply. I can feel him relax and when he opens his eyes, they are still gray around the edges but my favorite glass bottle green is plenty prevalent.

"Better?" I ask running my fingers though his hair.

He nods and swallows a few times. "I'm going to go help get dinner on the table. Take a few minutes and come down when you're ready, okay?"
I kiss his cheek and lay my hand on his other, taking just a moment to gaze deep into his eyes. I make it to the door before I hear a soft, "Bella?" I turn and look at him, waiting. "Thank you for sharing your family with me."

My eyes burn with tears. It takes everything I have not to throw myself at him, but I know it would be too much for him so I just blow him a kiss and close the door. It takes me a minute to get myself under control and when I do, I head back to the kitchen.

"Bella, is he all right?" Mom asks as soon as she sees me. God, she loves him. I wish he realized how much.

I hug her and then nod. "He's better. It's a hard day for him, you know? He misses his grandparents and feels like he's all alone."

"Nonsense. He's one of us now," she says immediately, making me smile.

"I told him the same thing."

By the time the food is on the table, Edward has come back downstairs and he sits between me and Peyton. The table is covered with food, but what matters is the people sitting around it. I've spent way too long holding myself back, and taking them for granted. Edward had no one. It makes me feel guilty for having so much and not appreciating it while he suffered and no one cared. I find his hand beneath the table and squeeze. He leans over and kisses the side of my head and then does the same to Peyton. I glance across the table at my dad who is watching Edward. When their eyes meet, Charlie nods and lifts his glass in a silent toast.

Edward is definitely one of us now.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Oohh, their first fight! Poor Edward and what about his Sprite? You know she was so upset. Hope you enjoyed this chapter. What did y'all think about Bella's claws coming out? LOL, no one is going to talk bad about her man, that's for sure.

We've set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www(.)facebook(.)com / groups / 137144056381565 /

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

Thanks, everyone, for being so patient with me the last few weeks. I am back on track now so there should be no more interruptions to my schedule. Yay! I'm so anxious and excited to take you through the rest of the story!

See you next Sunday! I've missed y'all, so please let me hear from you!

Erin~
Chapter 21

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers - they all work so hard to help me and I wouldn't know what to do without them! A very, very special thank you to Laurel for having the patience of a saint these last few weeks with me and to J'me for pushing and helping me stay on track!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

I will give you all a tissue warning, only to save myself from getting yelled later if I don't!

Strap in everyone, here we go ...

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 21

BPOV

"Bella!" he cries out for me, but I can't see him. "Help me!"

"Where are you?" I yell, trying with all my might to find him in the water.

"Help me, Bella. I can't hang on much longer," I hear and his voice is fading.

Waves come one right after the other and I know I only have seconds to save him.

"I can't see you! Tell me where you are!" I scream and feel my heart race when I still can't find him.

"Please, Bella! Save … !" he cries out one last time. I strain my ears, desperate for even the faintest sound but there's nothing. The silence that rings out is more deafening than the storm that rages.

All I hear is the wind screaming and the clang of the buoy as it rocks in the distance. I stand there, unmoving.

He's gone and it's all my fault.

Gasping for breath I sit up, ignoring the protest from the aching muscles in my back. Disoriented, I rub my gritty, swollen eyes. I open and close them a few times, ignoring the burn and the fact that my eyelids feel like sandpaper, and let my eyes adjust to the darkness. Sounds begin to penetrate my sleep-fogged mind … a low, constant hiss, an occasional beep, beep, the squeak of a door opening, though it's not close by. My heart rate spikes as confusion gives way to realization.

Storm.
The Isabella Marie.

The sound of someone screaming.

Water.

Edward.

Edward in the water.

I can't breathe. It feels like my chest is being squeezed in a vice, each much-needed breath more painful than the one before. I look around frantically, almost falling out of the chair before my eyes sweep over the still figure on the bed. My breathing finally evens, though it still comes out as more of a rasp than anything. I close my eyes, squeezing them so tightly starbursts of white and red explode behind my eyelids. Steeling myself as a sense of dread slinks up my back, I open them slowly, making my skin break out in painful goosebumps. I start at the end of the bed and take in the thick, heavy blankets that obscure what lies beneath. The body is so still, the only movement coming from breaths in and out. I keep going. Up then up some more over the torso until I collapse against the bed rail when I see Edward's pale, battered face.

A white bandage with spots of blood soaked through covers almost half his forehead and there are cuts along his cheekbones. His head is the only part of his body that's visible and I shudder when I imagine what the rest of his body looks like.

I swallow the sob that's trying to bubble out of my throat and slide my hand beneath the layers of blankets that are still trying to get his body temperature up. I find his hand and sigh when we're skin against skin. I curl my fingers around his hand and lay my head against the rail. A tear splashes on the linoleum beneath me, falling into a pool of white-gray light. I lift our hands and lay my lips against the back of his, blowing a warm breath across the too cold skin. I indulge for only a moment, too afraid to leech whatever warmth his body has managed to build. My eyes unwillingly find the IV tubes sucking out his blood then returning it warmed as his body struggles to regulate itself.

My mind churns as frantic thoughts try to push forth, but I stop them before they can overtake me. There is no time for them.

I stand on wobbly legs and lean over to kiss him, trying to ignore the blue tinge beneath the translucent white.

"You promised you'd come back. I need you to wake up, Edward. Please wake up," I whisper.

This time the sob does escape and I don't try to stop the tears that fall. I collapse in the chair and lay my hand over his beneath the blankets. I rest my head on the edge of the bed and begin to pray.

I won't stop until he's back where he belongs, with me and Peyton.

**EPOV**

Earlier in the day …

"God dammit!" I yell as a heavy, ice-coated lobster pot slides when the boat tilts and it slams into my elbow.

Again.
Jesus, I want to go home, I think as I right the pot and secure it to the others. Thank God it's the last one, at least the last overnight trip of the season. I don't think I'd survive another one, and I'm pretty fucking sure Bella won't. I know this trip isn't normal in that we've been gone so long and went so far out. We left Corea first thing Monday morning and traveled for over a day and from there we spent three days dropping lobster pots on the course Charlie had set. Once they had time to soak, we turned around to head back to port. The work has been ceaseless. If we weren't dropping pots, we were getting them ready to drop and filling the bait bag. It's been a monotonous, miserable week, for sure. The hardest I've ever spent.

I wince as I heave a coil of rope inside the pot and then slip and slide my way across the deck to help Emmett get the rest of the pots up.

"Fuck, I'm tired," I whine to Emmett as he hits the lever to bring up another lobster pot.

We've been out on the water for over a week now and I am ready to get back to Corea … and to my girls.

I've promised Peyton I'll watch the football game she is going to save on the DVR with her and well, what I want to do to Bella after not seeing her, touching her, kissing her for more than seven days should be pretty damn self-explanatory. The two of them are my life now, my family … my whole world. I never expected to find them, I damn sure know I don't deserve them, but there is no way I am giving them up now. I've promised myself, but more importantly I've promised the two of them that I will work, every fucking day, to make sure I am worthy of them because they deserve nothing less than my very best.

The muscles in my arms ache from the biting cold that seeps into my bones and the wind that rages around us lashes my skin like a whip. I can barely feel my fingers, even though they're covered with the bulky work gloves I have to wear when we're out on the water. My legs and back feel like they are on fire and it's all I can do to stay upright.

I'm so fucking tired.

We've been pulling the traps up for almost twenty-four hours straight now, trying to get the lobsters in the live tank and the traps stowed on the boat before the storm overwhelms us.

The Isabella Marie rocks and lurches as a gust of wind swirls around the boat and my legs protest painfully as I try to keep myself from falling on my ass.

"Come on, boys! Get those damn traps up. The storm is breathing down our fucking necks!"

Charlie barks from the wheelhouse.

"Damn, I hate this shit." Emmett grunts as we reel in the next trap.

Another gust of wind whips through the air and this time when the boat violently pitches to the left a wave of water surges up over the side. I let go of the gaff so that I can hang on, losing my balance in the process. It takes me a moment to right myself and I can tell I'm going to have a hell of a bruise on my thigh from being slammed against the side of the boat. I briefly think of how good it will feel when Bella's warm, soft fingertips will trace over it, like she does to every bruise and ache each time we come in.

I let myself smile for a fraction of a second then my stomach clenches so tightly it hurts. Immediately I remember how she was the night before we pulled out … frantic, almost inconsolable. She'd been positive something bad was going to happen during this trip out and no matter how much I tried to convince her otherwise, she just wouldn't listen. In the blink of an eye,
she went from sweet and playful to irrational and petrified. I know every time I go out it reminds her of Evan, but I have a job to do. I've made a commitment to Charlie, Wayne, and Carlisle, and I can't let them down. Charlie needed us to go out this one last time and because of that, I felt like I had to say yes.

Leaving, even if it's only for a short time, is always hard, but this time has just been plain brutal. Bella is always so calm and rational, but something about this trip out hasn't set with her well, at all, and hasn't from the get-go. When another clap of thunder rings out overhead and another gust of wind stings my face like hundreds of tiny needles, I think she's probably right.

"Let's go, fellas. We only have three more trawls to get up," Jasper tells us and I grunt in response.

Emmett is working the hauler and it creaks and squeaks from the pressure of pulling the traps up through the crashing waves and the fierce wind.

_Motherfucker, I'm cold._

Waves continue to batter the hull and creep over the side and the spray from the waves that buffet the boat is freezing almost as fast as it hits the deck.

And we're doing it; we've almost got this bastard of a storm beat when I let my guard down like a damn greenhorn. It only takes a moment; just one flickering loss of concentration and a life can change in the blink of an eye. My life.

A vision of my body curled around Bella's as we lie on the couch in front of the fireplace while Peyton watches TV from the floor flits through my mind and … I never see it coming.

"Edward, watch out!" Emmett yells and I don't even have time to react.

One moment I'm standing on the deck of the boat and the next … I'm in the dark: sinking, frozen in the middle of the icy North Atlantic.

As I struggle to breathe, I realize I'm going to break my promise to both Bella and Peyton … my girls … because there is no way in hell I'm going to make it home to them. The water is so cold. It's like nothing I have ever felt before, nothing I could have even imagined.

Bella …

Peyton …

I try to focus on them but I can't.

_Fuck! Bella was right to be worried_, I think through a haze of numbing pain.

Because … then … my world turns black.

_Jasper POV_

"Edward! Holy fuck, Jasper! Dad!" I hear Emmett scream. "Man overboard!"

I look up, stunned. Time does this freaky stand still thing, only a breath in and out, until everything suddenly moves again, only this time, it's like they're in fast forward. Emmett's waving his arms frantically and I realize … Edward's not standing beside him.

Instinct takes over and pure adrenaline spurs me into motion. I try not to think of the fact that it's Edward in the middle of the icy Atlantic and I grab the life preserver off the hook. My eyes search
frantically for any sign of him. The wind howls, the rain like tiny needles against my face as I look from left to right.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck! Do you see him, Jasper?" Emmett pleads. I can't even look at him because if I do, I'll lose it. Emmett races back and forth, leaning over the side almost to the point I worry we'll have two men in the water if he's not careful.

"Emmett, what the hell happened?" Charlie's voice booms through the speaker as he looks from the wheelhouse.

I can feel the boat turn as Charlie begins to come about. I scan the water, the white-capped waves making it almost impossible to see anything. I glance down at my watch and note the time out loud to Emmett.

"It's four twenty-three. He's been in the water about a minute," I say, and his eyes widen with fear and realization.

We only have a few minutes to find him before it won't matter whether we do or we don't … he'll be dead anyway.

We crest a wave and I spy a flash of neon orange that disappears but then bobs back up to the surface.

"There! He's over there, about forty feet. Ten o'clock," I yell and turn to look at Charlie making sure he knows which direction to go.

"Oh, God." Emmett groans. "Not again, we can't go through this again. Bella won't fucking survive it."

My jaw flexes and every muscle in my body locks down. I don't move my head to look at him; my eyes stay riveted to the speck of orange floating on top of the swirling, gray water. "Shut the fuck up, Em!" I hiss at him and ready the preserver to throw.

Never, ever in all my life have I been so thankful that I grew up in Texas. Of course plucking Edward out of the middle of the ocean is a bit different from roping a calf … and a hell of a lot more important.

A gust of wind knocks me off balance and a crack of thunder rings out. Rain still falls from the smoke gray sky, so heavy it's like it comes down in sheets instead of drops. I can hear Emmett beside me saying something, but between the wind, the rain, and the waves that batter the boat, I can't make out what he's saying. From the look on his face, it's probably better that I don't.

I train my eyes back toward the sea, bouncing on my feet. Nervous energy is pumping through my veins and I'm ready for action. Edward's life is at stake. There isn't any time for indecision … or for a mistake. One wrong move and we could lose him forever.

"Oh, Christ." Emmett moans loudly and immediately I tense.

"Get ready. We've got to get him on the fucking boat." His mouth is set in a grim line and his eyes flash with determination. "We're getting him on the damned boat, Jas."

I nod and steel myself by planting my feet, or as best as I am able to on the ice-covered deck.

BPOV
Meanwhile, back in Corea the night before …

"Baby, what are you doing down here?"

I hear Mom's footsteps behind me as she enters the sunroom, but I can't take my eyes off the window. Safely ensconced inside as the wind howls outside, as the heavy clouds get more threatening by the second, seems so inherently wrong because I know Edward is out there, somewhere. The weather reports have gotten steadily worse throughout the day. I've tried to stay calm, I've tried to focus on the fact that my dad has been through savage winter storms before … I've tried not to think about my nightmares and the fact that I can't bear to lose someone else.

I've prayed.

I've worried.

I've thought about anything but Edward on that boat.

I knew sleep would be a lost cause so instead, I came downstairs where I can hear the scanner. Of course, I hope it stays silent all night, but it makes me feel closer to him somehow to be so near. I clutch my cell phone in my hand, holding it so tightly it's a wonder the sweat from my palm doesn't keep it from slipping and falling to the floor.

"Bella?" Mom asks as she settles into the opposite corner of the loveseat.

I shrug my shoulders, figuring she doesn't really need an answer, but I give her one anyway. "I can't sleep. Plus, I want to be close to the scanner … just in case."

She sighs and then scoots over to throw an arm over my shoulder. "You're going to give yourself an ulcer if you keep this up, Bella." She kisses the side of my head and I know there's more she wants to say, but thankfully she doesn't.

"I can't help it, Mom. I know, I know." I hold my hand up and stop the next words out of her mouth. "I know this is his job and I know it's something I have to learn to live with. This just feels different is all, and I don't know why. Even before they left on Monday I had a bad feeling about this trip and now with the forecast and the storm heading this way, I just can't shake the feeling something terrible is going to happen."

Her arm squeezes me tighter though she doesn't speak. What can she say? She knows as well as everyone else that up until this trip, though I've worried, I've not been afraid. This time, from the moment Edward told me they were going out, I've had a bad feeling. One that has settled deep into my bones and won't let go. No amount of assurances from Edward or my dad, or my mom or Xavier has been able to convince me otherwise and sitting here, huddled in the corner of the couch, the feeling is still there. Until he walks in the door tomorrow night, I know I won't breathe easy.

Mom sits with me a few minutes longer, until she says, "I'm going to bed. Try to get some rest." She kisses my forehead and slips out of the room as quietly as she entered.

I lay my head on the arm of the loveseat and think about the weekend he left. We'd spent the Sunday before picking out a Christmas tree … an outing that took way longer than it should have in all honesty. Edward wanted it to be perfect; it had to look just so, and nothing else would do. No missing branches, no uneven ones either, and it had to be perfectly proportioned. It was as sweet as it had been infuriating, watching him walk up and down the rows of trees dismissing tree after tree until he found the one he wanted.

Getting it home and into the house was a different thing altogether, but I loved every minute of it.
Watching him walk with Peyton sitting on his back as they looked for the tree, giggling about having a better tree than Em and Rose, and arguing over multicolored versus white lights tugged at my heartstrings something fierce.

It was the first Christmas in more than seven years where he could give into the spirit of the season and I planned on making it one to remember. We decorated the tree and the house, inside and out, and the day was wonderful from start to finish, especially when Peyton gave him the ornament we'd bought specifically for him during a sneak trip to Ellsworth one night when he was watching football with the guys. That was nothing compared to the look on his face when he saw the stockings on the mantle and there was one with his name embroidered on it hanging alongside mine and Peyton's.

Yes, things were blissful until it was time for him to tell Peyton good night, then … I lost it.

"How come you have to be gone for a whole week this time?" Peyton asks as Edward tucks her into bed. He sits on the edge of the bed next to her and leans on his arm so he can bend his head close to her.

"Because it's my job, Sprite. Pop says we need to go, so we go. I'll be back before you know it," he tries to placate her but Peyton's just as nervous as I am about this trip it seems because she frowns and shakes her head stubbornly at him.

She stares at him, deep and penetratingly, without moving. Her arms are crossed over her chest and it's taking all I have not to mirror her actions knowing that he couldn't possibly resist the both of us. "I don't want you to go for that long," she whines.

"I'll miss you and your mom, too, P, but I have to go. You know I do," he tells her gently and runs his fingers through her hair before he brushes a sweet kiss across her forehead. "You guys will be busy making cookies for your Christmas party at school anyway. Besides," he smirks when he looks from her to me and tries to keep the mood light, "you can go get my Christmas present and wrap it since I won't be here to see."

I try to smile back at him, but I know I fail when his eyes narrow and he sighs. It does help Peyton though, to hear him laugh, and thankfully she can't tell that he's only doing it for her benefit. I turn and rush out of the room when she sighs at him and says, "Fine. Okay, hold out your hand so I can give you your good luck charm for this trip."

He finds me a few minutes later standing in the living room staring out the window beside the Christmas tree. The lights are reflected in the window panes and the light snow from the night before still covers the ground. There's a fire in the fireplace. The house is warm … peaceful and filled with the scent of fresh pine and cinnamon. The whole thing would be straight out of a sappy Christmas movie if it wasn't for the fact he's getting on a boat in the morning and about to be in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean for a week.

"You didn't wait for me," he says softly as he steps behind me. His arms slide around my waist and he pulls me back to lean against his chest. He's solid in all the right places and in just a t-shirt and a pair of sleep pants, deliciously warm and inviting, but I can't even enjoy the way it feels to be in his arms.

I do lean my head back though and rest it on his shoulder. I can feel his heart beat in a steady rhythm against my back and whereas that usually soothes me, tonight it just seems to reinforce the fact that it will be a week before I can feel it again. I shiver at the thought.

"Hey, what's going on with you?" he asks and turns me around to look at him.
I hang my head and try to decide if I tell him the truth or if I pretend like this trip isn't killing me.

He reaches out when I take too long to answer and lifts my chin. "Talk to me, Bella. What's wrong?"

The worry and confusion in his eyes is enough to make me hesitate, which only makes him groan in frustration.

"Bella," he beseeches.

"I don't want you to go," I finally admit and with that the dam breaks. "I have the worst feeling, Edward. Something is going to happen to you, I know it. I don't know what, or when, but as sure as I'm standing here, I know it. Don't go. Tell Dad you're sick or something. I don't care, just don't get on that boat tomorrow!" I cry out to him.

I know I'm being unfair. I know what I'm asking is impossible, but I ask it anyway.

"Baby, stop," he tries to soothe me and wraps his arms tightly around me. "I'm going to be fine."

He kisses the top of my head over and over again and splays both hands, covering my entire back and making me feel as safe as only he can.

We stand that way for a few minutes until he loosens his grip and then slides his hands up along my arms until he holds my head in his very strong but so gentle hands. He kisses me. His lips are soft, needy and his tongue makes deliberate, sweeping motions along my own. His thumbs brush across my cheekbones and my body melts against his.

My fingers twist in his t-shirt, holding him so tightly. If I could, I'd hold him that way always. The feeling of dread is still there, but I know I have to deal with it. I know he's leaving in the morning, regardless of what I say, and for both our sakes I have to be strong. Even knowing that, I beg for the one thing I've never asked before and the one thing I know he shouldn't promise, but will because I've asked.

"Promise me you'll come back, Edward," I whisper as I look into his eyes.

He doesn't hesitate. "I promise."

We both know the words aren't his to give, but I take a small measure of comfort in hearing them anyway. Until he returns safely, they'll be all I have to hang onto.

I wake up disoriented, sore, and feeling like I didn't really sleep at all. I'm still in the sunroom on the loveseat, I have a crick in my neck from keeping it at such an odd angle for so long, and I'm not sure my fingers will be of use ever again because they are still wrapped around my cell phone. Blinking a few times to try to get my eyes to focus, I gaze out the windows. The sky is gunmetal gray, ominous-looking, and the wind seems to have picked up since I last looked. It's very early in the morning. The only reason I know this is because my mom isn't up yet. For as long as I can remember, she's been awake long before the sun comes up so she can see my dad off, and even when he's not home, her internal clock doesn't let her sleep in … ever.

Gingerly, I stretch my legs out, pointing then flexing my feet. My muscles scream in protest, but after doing it a few times and rolling my head around to try to loosen the knots in my shoulders, I stand up. The feeling of dread I had the night before has seeped deep into my bones which makes even standing feel like an exercise in futility. I take a few steps forward and let my fingertips ghost across the frosty window panes and stare out into the murky horizon.

"Please keep him safe," I whisper before turning to go to the kitchen to start the coffee.
It's going to be a long, long day until I can see for myself that he's okay.

By the time I drop an uncharacteristically subdued Peyton off at school and make it to The Breakers, I feel as though I've just trudged through miles and miles of quicksand. My muscles ache, my heart hurts, and it seriously feels like I can't breathe. If I wasn't so convinced that something was off, I would have no qualms about kicking my own ass for acting like a drama queen, but I can't shake the feeling of unease that keeps spreading through my body. I glance around the parking lot as I climb out of Cherry and the knot inside my chest grows.

There are way more cars here than there normally would be at this time of the morning. That can only mean one thing. Hurrying, I push through the back door, flinging it open and race through the kitchen without acknowledging Xavier, Rose, or Alice.

"Any word?" I ask my mom without preamble, not caring about small talk in the slightest.

I try not to look anywhere but at her. I know Xavier is hovering; I can feel it. I know I should look at Ali and Rose who have every right to be as anxious as I am, but I can't … not yet.

She shakes her head and the slight slump of her shoulders and the pinch at the corner of her eyes tells me all I need to know. She's worried which makes my anxiety skyrocket.

"Oh, Jesus. I can't do this, I can't," I whisper to no one, but unable to keep the words from slipping. I wrap my arms around my waist and squeeze my eyes shut, rocking back and forth.

Strong arms, though not the ones I want, engulf me and without opening my eyes, I know it's Xavier.

"He'll be fine, Bell. They all will. Your dad will get the boat back here ahead of the storm and everything will be just fine. Stay strong now, you'll see." He kisses the side of my head and rubs what he hopes are reassuring circles on my back.

I don't have the heart to tell him it's not helping.

I do try to give him a semblance of a smile before slipping out of his embrace. I want to follow my mom who has fled the kitchen and is trying to act like nothing is wrong by mingling with the others waiting for word just like we are, but I stop and throw my arms around Rose and Alice first. No one speaks; words are only superfluous at this point. When I can't take anymore, I go to my mom.

There are so many people in the restaurant and it shocks me for a moment, even though I knew to expect it from the cars outside. Wives and girlfriends, old-timers, and those who don’t work on the water but are affected by those that do, wait, together, for word. The TV that hangs in the corner is on full blast, and everyone's eyes are glued to the map that shows the worst storm in years heading straight for Corea, with every boat still out on the water in its path.

The *Isabella Marie* isn't the only boat that hasn't made it back to port yet, but it's the one that's the farthest away and in the most danger. I pray Dad heeded the weather warnings as they came in last night and began heading for home sooner rather than later. Edward and the guys will be exhausted. The rush to get home means pushing themselves harder than ever to squeeze in what should be a full day's work into as few hours as possible.

I vow right then and there to pamper Edward for days with massages, warm baths, making all his favorite foods, and even promising myself to watch however many episodes of *The Big Bang Theory* that he wants to watch, no matter how many times we've already watched them.
But first, he has to come home.

I try to stay busy, refilling coffee cups and making sure everyone is comfortable, or as comfortable as they can be in this situation. The morning passes with no word, good or bad, until the front door to the restaurant bursts open and Eric runs in yelling, "The Wind Dancer just pulled in."

My body sags and at once I'm half disgusted with myself, and half relieved when I pat Nicole on the shoulder. "I'm so happy Grant is home," I tell her honestly, knowing at least Lucy's dad is safe.

"I'm sure Edward won't be too far behind, Bella." She hugs me as she stands up. Her mind is already out the door, not that I blame her a bit. I watch her and the wives of the other men on the Wind Dancer get up, hating that I wish it was me and not them.

I look at Mom, then at Rose and Alice, and I can tell they feel the same way. It's probably one of the hardest things about living where we do and loving men that spend the majority of their lives on the water. That dichotomy of being happy when others' loved ones come home, but that gnawing, aching feeling when yours don't.

"Mom, call Aggie, please," I beg a short while later. The rain isn't even coming down in sheets anymore; now it's one steady deluge with no break in sight. The thunder continues to rumble overhead and the wind howls right along side. By the second, the storm gets worse and worse and just looking around the restaurant at the sea of faces, most of whom have been through this time and again, lets me know that this is no ordinary storm.

Alice moves forward and curls her hand around my arm, gripping so tightly I'm sure there will be a bruise. Rose stands on my other side, and her anxiety is palpable. Like my mom, she will keep her nervousness buried behind a wall of calm that will only show a crack when Emmett returns safely. I've seen this same scenario play out many times in the past but never, ever have I felt this oppressive weight that feels like my chest is slowly, painfully crushing me with every breath I take.

"Bella, Aggie will let us know as soon as she hears anything," Mom says slowly, as if by saying the words carefully makes them easier to hear.

I stare at her, knowing that she's right, but wanting so much for her to call anyway. When she holds my gaze long enough for it to feel uncomfortable, I pat Alice on the hand and then pull her hand off my arm. She needs comforting every bit as much as I do, but I know if I open my mouth to her all the emotion I'm holding inside is going to come spewing out in a torrent of tears and words, so to keep that from happening, I walk toward the windows.

Watching the storm does nothing to ease my mind, but at least standing by myself keeps me from falling apart in front of everyone else. I'm trying so hard to be strong, to make Edward proud of me for keeping it together and not letting my fear make me an irrational shrew … he had enough of that before he left. So I stand and pray and tell myself over and over again he'll be just fine and will be back soon. I twist one hand around the other, just trying to release some of the pent-up nervous energy thrumming inside of me and when I wrap my fingers around my wrist, I look down and frown. For a moment, I'm so angry because Peyton has something to always remind her of Edward, something she has no matter where she is and I'm ridiculously jealous of my own daughter. It's just a flash, but it shakes me enough that I have to force myself to take a few deep breaths.

I try to think about having hot chocolate in front of the fireplace sitting next to him while Peyton does her homework. I think about wrapping presents with him late at night after Peyton's gone to sleep, laughing about the fact that we have to double and triple wrap things and camouflage them inside of different-shaped boxes and containers because she guesses everything and spoils the
surprise. I even feel myself smile a tiny bit when I think about how his face lights up at the prospect of building a snowman when we get the first significant snowfall.

It works … for a while at least, until Mom's cell phone rings.

"Oh, God, please," I whisper as I weave between the tables to get to her.

I watch her and every breath that leaves my body is a whoosh of air when I see her face turn white and the phone falls from her hand and skitters across the floor.

Mom looks at me and says, "They've lost contact with the Isabella Marie."

**Jasper POV**

"Em, he's right there! Get the gaff ready! Charlie, get us closer!" This is the first time I've had to use all that I learned from the countless explanations and demonstrations both Charlie and Emmett have drilled me on over the years. After what happened to Evan, there wasn't any way anyone was ever stepping foot on the Isabella Marie that didn't know how to perform a water rescue.

He's been in the water for five minutes. We don't have much longer before it's going to be too late and it can't be too late. I refuse to let myself think about that. I have to concentrate on getting him out of the water. We have to get him out.

Charlie is yelling over the speaker that he can see Edward and I never take my eyes off of him. I can't lose him in the waves. Emmett's standing beside me with the gaff and we're only going to have one chance to snag Edward and get him on this boat … alive.

I can see Edward. He's not moving; he doesn't even lift his head to acknowledge our approach or our voices. I don't think he's actually aware of anything, but I have to hope he's aware enough to grab the life preserver. I send up a quick prayer and get ready to throw.

"Get ready, Em! This is it!" I yell above the crashing of the waves. With all that I have in me, I throw the life preserver and luckily it lands directly on Edward.

"Edward, grab the ring! Edward! You have to grab the ring!" He isn't moving other than with the rise and fall of the waves.

Suddenly I hear Charlie's voice loud and clear as it explodes over the loudspeaker. "Edward Masen, you grab that fucking ring right now! Don't you dare leave Bella and Peyton! You promised you would be okay. They need you and you need them. Grab that fucking ring right this second!"

I'm not sure anyone will ever know what gave him the strength to do it, but slowly he puts his arm through the ring. As soon as I can tell he'll be able to hang on, I start pulling him closer so Em can hook Edward with the gaff. I know it's going to take both of us to pull him on board and with the boat lurching from side to side, we're going to have to time it just right. I pull Edward until he's within reach of the gaff and Emmett hooks him just like he has done a multitude of times with a lobster pot. I drop the rope and grab another part of the gaff to help Emmett pull Edward up.

With all that we have, we both pull as Charlie hollers over the speaker for us to get him up before the next big wave hits us. We both see it coming. What I don't realize at the time is that it will be our saving grace. The wave brings Edward's body up high enough that we can grab his arms.

"Don't let go, Jasper! Don't let go of him!" Emmett yells. As soon as the boat rocks, we pull Edward over the railing of the boat and finally have him on deck. At least he's out of the water.
"We have to get him below deck and get him out of these clothes!" I tell Em as we both grab him and drag him across the deck.

"Fuck! The radio is out! I set off the EPIRB! The Coast Guard should be on its way! Get him warm!" Charlie tells us.

Emmett and I hurriedly get Edward's wet clothes off of him and wrap him in all the blankets we have on hand.

"Edward! Wake up, man! Come on! You need to wake up." Emmett shakes him and tries to get him to respond. His lips are blue and he isn't shivering. This isn't a good sign.

"Shit, man, he's bleeding," I exclaim when I spy a gash across Edward's forehead. I grab the first aid kit and press some gauze to the cut. He's so cold; his body temperature is so low that the blood is little more than a trickle. Normally head wounds bleed like fucking crazy and seeing the blood ooze instead of spew is just one more indication of how serious the situation is. While I tend to the head wound, Emmett covers Edward's hands and feet with socks and gloves to try to stave off any chance of frostbite. I'm not sure it will work, but we have to try.

Emmett groans when he pressed his fingers to the inside of Edward's wrist to check his pulse. "It's low, man, too fucking low." Emmett's voice is barely more than a whisper and he hangs his head.

"We are not losing him, Emmett," I tell him and don't try in the least to temper my voice. "We just have to get him to hang on until the helicopter gets here." I feel so fucking useless, rubbing my hands up and down Edward's arms and legs, but there's nothing else I can do.

He's as still as a board, which is the worst possible thing and between that, the fact the head wound isn't bleeding like it should and his low pulse, every minute it takes for the helicopter to get here is a minute too long. His breathing is shallow, his eyes are unresponsive and I know that for as long as I live, I'll never be able to forget how he looks.

"Emmett, Jasper, how is he?" Charlie calls down to us.

I look at Emmett and say, "Go. Tell him everything and see if there's any indication of how far out the chopper is. He doesn't have long, Em, before he goes into shock. If that happens here, there isn't anything we can do for him."

"Hang in there, Edward. You mean too much to too many people to give up. Fight, damn it. I know you can hear me. Don't you give up," I hiss at him. I close my eyes and pray. I haven't prayed since I was a little kid hiding in my closet so my father wouldn't find me, but for Edward, I'll say a whole rosary if I have to.

I listen as Edward's breathing becomes more labored and he's turned from blue to white. I furiously rub everywhere I can reach, ignoring the fact he's naked beneath the layers of blankets. The storm is right on top of us now, not caring a damn a bit that Edward is hanging on by a thread.

I don't have any idea how long I stay below with Edward and I can only hope that the reason Emmett is still with Charlie is because they are getting ready for the chopper to approach. Finally, what seems like an eternity later, I hear Emmett yell down to me, "They're coming," before he clammers down the few stairs below deck. We hurriedly throw some sweats and a sweatshirt on him and he's every bit as limp as was when we pulled him out of the water.

"Wrap him tight, Em," I tell him, as I put another pair of socks on his feet.

We get ready to pick him up when I spy something on the ground by his leg.
"Aw, hell, Emmett." I point with a shaky hand and then pick up the item off the floor. "It's P's shell. He must've had it in his pocket."

Out of everything that has happened over the past however many minutes, seeing that shell hits Emmett and me harder than anything.

Gently, almost tenderly, Emmett takes the shell from me and tucks it in his pocket. He leans over and kisses Edward on the side of the head and whispers, not even checking to see if I can hear and not caring that there are tears streaming down his cheeks. "I'm going to hang on to this for you, brother, so that when you wake up in the hospital, because you will wake up, I can give it back to you."

I give him a moment to look at Edward before I urge him to help me get him up to the deck. I can hear the helicopter as we step onto the deck and already the line is being lowered. Once they're close enough, the line falls to the deck and a medic repels down the line.

"What's the situation?" the guy asks as he looks around quickly.

We give him the basic information and he relays it to the chopper so they can send down the rescue stretcher. Laying Edward into the basket is probably the hardest thing I've ever done in my life and from the way Emmett hangs on to the side a few beats longer than necessary tells me he feels the same way. We watch as Edward is lifted through the screaming wind and the driving rain, each silently praying that nothing happens for the few minutes he's suspended in the air, epitomizing the phrase hanging by a thread. Letting him go and trusting someone else to keep him safe and alive, even though it's what the Coast Guard is trained to do goes against every protective instinct I have.

I let out a tension-relieving breath once he's inside and I see Emmett do the same. We watch them fly off toward Bar Harbor, and continue to do so until the chopper disappears, leaving us both in a sort of stunned state.

It still hasn't fully hit me yet what's just happened, and when Charlie tells us to move our asses and get the rest of the trawl lines up so we can head back to shore, I know it will be longer still.

BPOV

Silence, interrupted periodically with bouts of static sets every nerve on its end.

I can't feel my fingers because one hand is squeezing Xavier's hand with every ounce of strength I have and the other is having the same done to it by Alice.

"Approaching the Isabella Marie," sounds from the scanner and there is a collective gasp from all of us huddled around it.

No one speaks as we wait for more information. "The crew is on the deck. Preparing to lower a rescuer to assess the situation. Stand by."

The wait is excruciating. I feel like I'm about to come out of my skin and then we hear, "Boat not incapacitated, but there is an injury on board. Sending rescue stretcher. Prepare for further information."

"Oh, God," my mom utters and our eyes meet.

Dad, Jasper, Emmett, or Edward. Who is it? There's not a sound made, save for our breathing and the quiet prayers each of us begin to say. It doesn't matter who it is that's injured, we'll all be
affected.

After what seems like an interminable wait, the staticy voice speaks again. "We have a male on board, mid to late twenties. Patient knocked overboard and spent approximately seven minutes in the water." At this, my heart stops, as I'm sure everyone else's does as well.

The detached voice continues relaying more devastating but pertinent information. "Patient showing signs of severe hypothermia. Male is unconscious, breathing is shallow. Pulse slow and body temperature is eighty-six degrees. Glucose IV started. Patient has head wound but the bleeding is controlled."

I close my eyes and futilely try to stem the flow of tears. A brief look around the table lets me know the others are losing the same battle.

"En route to Mt. Desert Island Hospital, approximately thirty minutes out."

Immediately, I begin to make arrangements in my head for Peyton and calculate how long it will take to get to Bar Harbor. With the storm raging outside, the hour-long trip is liable to take longer than that.

There's a loud sound as the radio is engaged once again and we hear, "Patient is one Edward Masen."

My stomach retches and if I wasn't being held between Xavier and Alice, there's no way I'd still be upright.

Seconds pass then pandemonium erupts. I look at Mom and all she says is, "Go."

Before I even know what's happening, I'm buckled in the front seat of Xavier's truck and we're speeding out of the parking lot with Seth and Alice in the backseat. I don't even remember Seth being at The Breakers.

"Bell?" Xav asks as he grips my hand in his.

I stare out the window, my mind and body in a total state of lock-down. "Mmmm mmm." I shake my head without turning to look at him.

I can't.

"We're here. We're all here," he tells me. I feel Alice lean forward and lay her hand on top of ours, but still I remain silent. I know she's hurting, she adores Edward so much, but I have no comfort to offer her. I feel Seth reach out and rub my shoulder, and a brief sense of déjà vu washes over me and sends my mind racing back to Evan.

No, no, no! I scream silently in my mind. I will not lose Edward. I can't. He promised. He promised me and he promised Peyton he would be okay, that he would come home. I will not lose anyone else.

It's the mantra I repeat the entire agonizing trip. When we pass the Bar Harbor city limit sign, my heart slams in my chest and I break out into a cold sweat. I want to cry, Lord help me I want to cry, but I don't give in. I will keep it together and be strong because it's what Edward would want me to do and it's what he needs.

"Hurry, Xav," I whisper thickly, forcing the words out of my painfully dry, tight throat.
"We're almost there, honey. Just a few more minutes," he tells me. His voice wavers, and I can tell he's trying to be strong for me.

I finally turn around slightly in my seat and look at Alice who gives me a watery smile. Her cheeks are tear-stained, I can tell as we pass under a street lamp.

"He's going to be okay, Bella. He loves you and Peyton too much not to be," she tells me in a fierce, sure voice. Her faith moves me and it gives me strength.

"You're right, Ali. He does."

Xavier lets the three of us out in front of the hospital, barely stopping before he goes to find a parking space. We race to the front desk to ask about Edward and are told he's been taken to ICU. My heart stops and my stomach drops … again, and I wonder how much more I can take. As we go up to the third floor, I tell myself to be strong.

We walk, me between the two of them, and stop at the desk to find out where Edward is.

"Edward Masen," Seth says. "He was brought in by helicopter less than an hour ago."

Xavier steps in behind us and the four of us look at the nurse, waiting for an answer. "Are you family?" she asks as her eyes widen when she looks at Xavier.

"We are," Alice answers with no hesitation whatsoever, but offers no additional explanation.

The nurse looks warily at us but then points to a waiting area. "If you'll have a seat, I'll let the doctor know Mr. Masen's family is here."

I'm frantic with worry so I pace.

And pace.

And pace some more.

"Bell, you're going to drive yourself and the rest of us crazy if you don't sit," Seth tells me.

I grunt at him, and continue pacing. I can't sit still, not when he's right down the hall. Until I see with my own two eyes that he's all right, I won't relax. I chew on my thumbnail, then alternate with my bottom lip.

"Where's Mom and Dad? They should be here by now," I mutter to no one in particular.

"We've only been here twenty minutes, Bella. The boat's not even back yet," Alice says slowly. I look at her then have to turn away when I see the pity in her eyes.

I can't see that, not yet. I'm barely hanging on as it is. I briefly think of Peyton and I have to wrap my arms around my waist to keep from falling completely apart. Oh Jesus. Just thinking of having to tell her Edward is in the hospital wrecks me.

It's blessedly only a few minutes before a doctor dressed in blue scrubs comes to the waiting room. After assuring him that we are indeed Edward's family, a point which Xavier makes quite forcefully and leaves no room for doubt, he tells us Edward's condition. Serious, but stable. Body temperature still in the danger zone but they are doing what they can to raise it. Heart rate still low, but the most serious threat of going into shock has passed. No brain damage from what they can tell since he's still unconscious. He's going to be lethargic, extremely sore, and weak when he
wakes up and he has a slight concussion. All in all, he's by no means unscathed, but it could have been a lot more serious if the guys hadn't gotten him out of the water so quickly and kept him from going into shock before the helicopter arrived.

"Can I see him, please?" I beg.

My whole body aches from wanting to see him so badly. Knowing how close I came to losing him is taking its toll and I'm not sure how much longer I can fight the hysteria that wants to burst forth.

"As soon as the nurse is finished in there, you can go in, but only for a few minutes," he tells me.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

I hear him groan and keep my eyes locked on his face. "Open your eyes, baby. Wake up. Please wake up," I say fervently and squeeze his hand in mine.

His head slowly moves back and forth and he grimaces before he slowly opens his eyes. I gasp, and try not to shout out loud that he's awake. Inch by inch, he turns his head and our eyes meet.

"I kept my promise," he rasps … and I let the tears I've held in for hours and hours, finally fall.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

A few words … For all of you who thought I'd leave you hanging - :P ! As if I would do that! Second, surprisingly enough, I've never plucked anyone out of the icy ocean nor have I ever or been around a helicopter rescue, so give me some leeway. A LOT of research went into this chapter, mostly done by the amazing Laurel, so the events as I've portrayed them are as realistic as I can make them while keeping in line with the story.

For reference: EPIRBs (emergency position-indicating radio beacons) signal maritime distress.

With all that, he's awake and next chapter we'll see how everyone deals with the aftermath. People have asked how many more chapters … my guess is somewhere around 10 or so. There is still much to cover, so I hope you'll stick around til the end!

I'll give y'all fair warning, the next chapter has at least a 50/50 chance of being delayed. If I have to take the out of town trip that is planned as of right now, then I won't have the chapter done in time to post on next Sunday. Sorry, sorry! But, kids come first and mine has a soccer tournament out of town.

We've set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www(.)facebook(.)com / groups / 137144056381565 /

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

One last thing – the review replies were not working this week so I posted a general reply on the blog and on the FB page.

See you soon! I've missed y'all, so please let me hear from you!
Erin~
Chapter 22

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers - they all work so hard to help me and I wouldn't know what to do without them! A very, very special thank you to Laurel for having the patience of a saint these last few weeks with me and to J’mé for pushing and helping me stay on track!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

After the soccer trip from hell and then the flu that wouldn't go away, here is the next chapter! Thanks so much for all the well wishes and for your patience with me. I appreciate it more than I can say!

Now … on we go!

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 22

EPOV

"Edward, please wake up," I hear Bella say, though it sounds like it's from miles away.

I try to move, but the weight of what feels like wet sand presses me down. I can't really move and my body aches all over. I try to open my eyes but the first attempt only winds up with me hissing and muttering a sharp "God damn it" because the white hot poker of pain that flares behind my eyeballs takes my breath away.

Groaning, I think a harsh, fuck, that hurts, and squeeze my eyes to try to keep the pain at bay. The squeezing does little more than make bright white starbursts explode behind my eyelids but along with that comes a rush of hazy, disjointed images.

Water.

Darkness.

Icy water.

Bella.

Icy water everywhere.

Peyton.

A whole lot of fucking icy water, so cold it burns.
After that, an onslaught of pictures flies through my mind and I remember what happened. Vague memories of the way I lost my balance; the sound of Emmett's terrified voice; Charlie screaming at me from the wheelhouse; the feel of the rope through my heavy gloves.

Through it all though, there was always Bella and Peyton.

I feel Bella rub my hand between hers, the tender way she traces over the scrapes and scars. Even though I want nothing more than to fall back asleep and give in to the dark that swirls at the back of my mind, I know I need to tell her one thing, especially when I hear her say, "Open your eyes, baby. Please wake up."

Her voice trembles and is laced with worry and fear and love.

I struggle to open my eyes and slowly move my head from side to side. I hear myself groan again, but the promise I made to her before I left sounds loudly in my mind. With all the strength I can muster, I force my eyes open. My vision blurs and then comes into focus and when it does, all I can see is her.

"I kept my promise," I rasp as the words stick to my shredded throat.

As soon as the words are out, her tears fall in a torrent. Her shoulders shake, her chest heaves, but she doesn't look anywhere but into my eyes.

She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life, the thing that brought me back from the icy water.

"Oh, God! Edward!" she cries as her hands flutter and move above me.

She lays her hand along my cheek and the warmth from her skin seeps into mine, chasing away the slight chill I still feel deep in my bones. I shiver uncontrollably which causes her to gasp and then look at me with wide, watery eyes.

"Are you cold? Let me get the nurse."

"Baby," I manage to spit out. My throat ignites, and I swallow hoping it helps but all it does is make the pain intensify. "Fuck." I close my eyes, tempted to keep them that way but knowing Bella's beside me makes me open them again. It feels like for-fucking-ever since I've seen her.

With a start I realize I have no idea what day it is or even if I'm okay.

My eyes dart wildly around the room and my breaths start coming out in short, choppy puffs of air. Suddenly, my chest hurts, there's a sharp, shooting pain right in my temple, and my body feels like it's been used as a punching bag. I hurt everywhere.

"Shhh. Edward, shhh," she tells me as she leans over the bed. Her fingers run through my hair and the movement calms me like nothing else can. "Let me tell the nurse you're awake, okay?" she asks quietly, slowly and her eyes search mine. Taking a deep, but hesitant breath, I nod.

I lay my head back on the thin, lumpy pillow and close my eyes, unable to keep them open. The visions from before bloom, though they're still as disjointed as before. My head throbs and the sounds of the machines in the room seem extraordinarily loud. Gingerly I try to move my fingers and toes, sighing deeply in relief when they all move. I have no idea why I test them or why I think I need to, but before I can ruminate on it, the door swishes open and a parade of people come through it.
Nurses check the readouts beside me and Bella follows a short, almost bald man dressed in blue scrubs and wearing a white lab coat on top of it. "Mr. Masen, it's good to see you awake. You gave us quite a scare," he says amiably.

Bella slips around him and reaches out for my hand, gripping it tightly.

Her anxiety is palpable; it's in every breath she takes and in every move she makes. I still don't know what's happened to me, but at this moment, it's not important. She is. I'm slowly remembering bits and pieces and as I put them together, all I can think about is the hell she must have gone through.

"Bella," I murmur, slightly frantic as more pieces come together.

I curl my hand. Her slender fingers are tightly ensconced in mine and I turn to look at her. She smiles and the knot in my chest loosens and I feel myself calm almost immediately.

"It's okay, Edward. You're fine, I'm fine, and we'll make it through this," she whispers, not caring that the room is full of other people.

I open my mouth, wanting to say so much but not able to force even one word out.

The doctor clears his throat, intruding on our moment. "Well, yes, Mr. Masen," he begins professionally. "As Ms. Swan just stated, you are going to be just fine. You suffered moderate to extreme hypothermia, but the quick-thinking of your fellow deckhands prevented your injuries from being any more severe. From all accounts, you were submerged in the water for approximately seven minutes before you were pulled onto the boat. You were unconscious and your pulse rate was dangerously low. Your co-workers did what they could to warm your body up and were able to keep you from going into shock. You were very lucky. If they hadn't been able to do that, the outcome might have been very different."

I don't even want to think about what the exact meaning of different is; I remember all too vividly what it came close to being. Too fucking close.

"You suffered a blow to the head which from the statements we've gotten from Emmett and Jasper is what caused you to go overboard," he states and looks at me expectantly.

I wrack my brain, muddling through the foggy thoughts until I find the one I'm searching for. I groan, remembering the icicle that fell from the stack of traps and hit me on the head. I reach up without realizing and rub my forehead, wincing when I touch the gauze that covers the wound.

"Damn icicle nailed me right in the head. I lost my balance when I bent over from the pain and then slid on the ice on the deck. One minute I was standing on the boat, the next I was in the fucking water," I trail off, shivering as I remember the biting sting of the water.

Bella's hand tightens around mine and I can hear her take big gulps of air as she tries to keep herself under control. I watch her while the doctor presses a stethoscope to my back. I jump from the chill of the cool metal, but I can't take my eyes off Bella. I want to be alone with her. I want, I need, to make sure she's okay. I can't even imagine what the last however long it's been since the accident has been like for her. She looks okay, but I know my girl. She's barely holding on. I can tell by the way she's gnawing on her bottom lip and the way her free hand keeps making circles on her thigh.

"Well, your lungs sound good all things considered. You won't have any permanent damage to your extremities and the head wound, while ugly and painful, will heal. You're going to have a pretty bad headache for a few days and your body is going to be sore as all get out, but in a few
weeks you should be good as new," the doctor informs me in a matter-of-fact voice as he makes a few notations on my chart. "Do you have any questions for me?"

I only have about a million but my mind won't cooperate with me and stay focused on any one thing long enough to put a coherent sentence together. Bella takes over though, and in a shaky but determined voice she asks, "So there isn't any permanent damage to his hands or anything? No brain damage? He can go back to work?" She struggles with the last word, choking on it as she forces it out of her mouth like it's physically painful to say it.

If the doctor notices her difficulty, he doesn't let on and merely nods his head. He smiles at her like it's going to soothe her worry when I know it's going to do anything but. "Yes, Ms. Swan. He'll be perfectly fine to go back to work in a few weeks once his body has a chance to recuperate. Being in the water like he was, for even that short of a time period, is extremely taxing to the body. It's a good thing Mr. Masen is in such good shape physically; it will make his recovery that much quicker and get him back on the water in no time," he tells her with a smile and a pat on the knee.

In normal circumstances, his news would be welcome, would be cause for relief and tears of thanks and happiness, but other than finding out I won't have any permanent damage, nothing he's told Bella will put her mind … or her heart at ease.

The effort it's taken just to sit up and interact with the doctor takes its toll on me and all of the sudden I'm exhausted, but there are things I need to know. My heart races as I think about Peyton. About Emmett and Jasper and Charlie and wonder if they made in safely. I need to make sure Bella is okay.

The monitor I'm hooked up to starts to go haywire as my heart rate spikes. I'm urged to lay down, a suggestion I eagerly follow. Finally, the doctor seems satisfied when the annoying beeps are somewhat more evenly spaced out, he leaves with a promise to be back in the morning to check on me again.

Once he's gone, the questions I need to ask come flying out of my mouth. "Are you okay, Bella? Is Peyton? Where is she? Did your dad and the guys make it back okay? How long have I been here?" I ask and gasp for breath. I feel like I'm covered in sweat one second, and the next, I'm shivering like I won't ever be warm again.

The poor excuse for a mattress dips as Bella puts one knee on it and then stretches out over my body. Her hands hold my cheeks, and she kisses me over and over again, whispering, "I love you, Edward. It's okay. Shhh, just take a deep breath and relax." A few minutes pass as we just stare into each other's eyes. I can feel her vibrate above me and I wrap my arms around her. I want to hold her tightly, but my muscles won't cooperate with me. I let out a frustrated huff and then groan when she scoots off me and into the chair beside the bed.

She reaches a hand out and weaves her fingers with mine.

"I'm fine, now that I know you will be. Peyton is with Lucy. Dad and the guys made it in safe and sound. Um … you've been here for about eight hours or so I guess … I don't even know what time it is, " she says wearily and her shoulders slump as if she can't hold them up any longer.

"Oh, baby," I rasp. My throat is on fire and just swallowing hurts like a motherfucker.

"Let me get you some water," she says softly and then picks up a cup off the table. I close my eyes as I listen to her moving around the room as she fills the cup with ice then water. "Can you sit up a little?" she asks. She slides a hand underneath me and helps me sit up. She hands me the cup and I smile when I see the straw as well. I take a few tentative sips, groaning when the cool water
relieves the burn in my throat.

I hand her the cup when I've had enough and then flop back onto the pillow, already frustrated as hell at feeling so incapacitated. I try to open my eyes, but my eyelids feel like they weigh a thousand pounds a piece. I want to talk to Bella, I want to ask about Peyton, but I'm so damned tired. I feel Bella move the blankets around on top of me then I sigh when her fingers run through my hair.

"Feels good," I mumble, barely awake.

"I love you so much, Edward," she whispers. She kisses each of my eyelids then both cheeks before she brushes her lips across mine.

The warmth from her lips spreads through me, and I stop fighting and let sleep claim me, but not before I tell her, "I love you, too. You saved me, baby. You and Peyton."

The last thing I hear before succumbing to the darkness is the sound of her crying softly and her saying, "Thank you," over and over again.

The next morning is a flurry of activity. Tests and more tests to make sure I'm recovering the way I'm supposed to. I'm moved from the ICU into a private room since I'm out of danger. Thank goodness the hospital is small and relatively quiet. I know under normal circumstances Bella never would have been able to stay the night with me in ICU, but that's one of the benefits of small town living I suppose.

"You know once you get situated in your room, you're going to be bombarded right?" Bella asks as she walks beside me. I feel like a fucking freak show being wheeled down the hallway toward the elevator but I'm certainly not going to complain. Things could be be much different right now, I know.

I swallow thickly and then nod at her. Quietly I ask, "They're all still here?"

She nods and then runs the backs of her fingers down the side of my cheek as the door to the elevator shuts. "Of course, Edward. They all saw you while you were still in ICU but you were still unconscious. There hasn't been any time between last night and this morning for anyone to visit. Once I found out you were going to be moved, Ali and Rose went to buy you some clothes and stuff and the others had breakfast. They're all very anxious to see you."

I hang my head and close my eyes. I can feel my eyes burn beneath my eyelids. My stomach churns and I feel like I'm going to hyperventilate as I think about Rose and Ali buying me clothes or Charlie and Carlisle pacing in a waiting room waiting for word on my condition. I picture Esme and Renée holding hands as they whisper back and forth to each other. I can see Emmett and Jasper sprawled out in those horrid plastic chairs, eyes focused on the door just waiting to pounce on the doctor when he walks through the door. Seth and Xavier would be huddled together, sitting as close as possible, neither one saying a word but not needing to. My friends, my family … and I came so fucking close to losing them all.

Jesus Christ.

I shake as we roll toward the door to my new room. Bella lays her hand on my shoulder; I know she can tell I'm about to lose it. It helps to feel the warmth of her skin through the thin cotton hospital gown I have on, but it's not going to stop the emotions that are bubbling beneath the surface. Things have been so hectic since I woke up. I haven't really had a chance to process everything that happened. I feel like total shit when I realize I haven't thought about anyone else
either. Once I opened my eyes and saw Bella, she was all I could think about. I've barely been able to keep my eyes open for any length of time but now that the worst is over, according to the doctor at least, nothing is stopping it all from overwhelming me, much like the waves that threatened to drag me under not too long ago.

"Okay, now, Edward, let's get you all situated and then lunch will be here before too long," the orderly that helped me to my room says happily, completely oblivious to the meltdown that is only moments away from happening.

It doesn't take long to get me back into bed, though the simple movements leave me drained and panting for breath. "Holy shit," I mutter as my new nurse walks in.

"It's going to take some time to get your strength back," she tells me as she sticks a thermometer under my tongue.

I feel horrible. I can hardly keep my eyes open, the gash on my head throbs, and every muscle in my body feels like it's been stretched and twisted in ways that shouldn't be humanly possible. My eyes track Bella as she moves around the room, looking everywhere but at me.

"I'll be right back with your medicine," the nurse says. There's a soft swishing sound as she briskly walks out of the room on practically silent feet.

I close my eyes as my heart thunders in my chest. To me the sound is deafening, and I clench my jaw and curl my fingers into tight fists as I take a few deep breaths. A panic attack looms large on the horizon if I can't get myself under control; I can feel the telltale tightening in my chest with every inhale and exhale.

"Breathe, Edward," Bella whispers and places a gentle kiss on my lips. "I'm here, and you're safe. Just breathe, babe."

After I take a few more deep breaths and the prickling feeling all over recedes just a bit, I crack my eye open and grin at her. "Babe, huh?" I tease.

She giggles and it's about the best damn sound I've ever heard in my life. Immediately I feel lighter, though I know as soon as the nurse comes in and gives me my medicine then leaves the two of us alone again, everything will come rushing back.

Sure enough, once I swallow the tiny Dixie cup full of water with whatever pill she dropped in the palm of my hand, the tremors start again. Subtle at first, but as soon as Bella sits down on the bed beside me, I lose it.

Huge wracking sobs escape and I feel Bella pull me up into her arms. "I've got you, shhh, Edward. It's okay now," she tells me though she's crying every bit as hard as I am.

"Oh God, baby. Are you okay? I can't even imagine … I'm so sorry … I can't believe I put you through this … and Peyton. She must be so scared. She's not mad at me is she?" My words are a jumbled mess. I'm not sure she can even make sense of what I'm saying.

She wraps her arms around me and squeezes with all she has. Her entire body trembles and though I'm the one sitting with my ass hanging out of a hospital gown, she's more important right now. After losing Evan, yesterday must have been an absolute nightmare for her. The fact that she's held it together this long makes me so fucking proud of her.

She's fucking amazing.
"I was so scared," she stammers out between gasps of breath. Her forehead is pressed against mine and our eyes are locked on the other's.

I gulp. "Me, too," I admit, and shake as the sense of being swallowed by icy, churning water assails me.

She presses her head even harder against mine at my admission and I see her swallow a few times before she's able to say anything else. "I almost lost you." Her body sags against mine and I use what little strength I have to hold her tightly against me. It's not close enough. I want to wrap my entire body around hers and never move.

"But you didn't," I answer her and hold her face in my hands. I brush my thumbs under her eyes and wipe her tears away. Even with splotchy cheeks and a red nose, she's still the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen and my heart fills with so much love for her I can hardly breathe.

Now that I'm awake, now that I've had time to process what happened and what could have happened if Em and Jasper hadn't gotten me out of the water so fast, I feel like the luckiest man alive. They saved my life. How do I even begin to deal with that? How do I thank them? How do I go back out there and risk putting Bella and Peyton through this again?

Before either one of us can say anything else there's a soft knock on the door and when I look up, my room fills with everyone.

Alice is first, pushing Charlie and Renée out of the way as she rushes forward. "Oh my God, Edward! You scared us all so bad!" she cries and throws her arms awkwardly around me. Bella is still sitting next to me on the bed because she didn't have time to get out of the way before Alice attacked me and I'm trying to hold my gown closed so I don't flash everyone.

"Sorry, Ali," I mutter and look at Bella pleading for help with my eyes.

Effortlessly, she disentangles Alice from my neck and helps get me situated on the bed so that I don't embarrass myself. As soon as she steps back, I'm overrun by Esme and Renée.

"Edward, dear, we were so worried," Esme tells me as she cups my cheeks.

Renée is on my other side and she squeezes my hand and waits for me to turn and look at her.

"Don't scare us like that again, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," I answer.

All the attention is uncomfortable. All these months later and I'm still not used to being touched and hugged and kissed on by anyone but Bella and Peyton, but as much as it makes me cringe, I soak it up because I know that I'm as important to these people as they are to me.

"How are you feeling, son?" Charlie asks once Renée kisses my cheek and then steps back to let him get closer.

I smirk and huff. "Like my ass was just pulled out of the ocean."

He chuckles and then winces when Renée slaps him on the arm for laughing at me. "Well, you sure look a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you. Glad to see some color back in those cheeks."

"If Ali and Rose don't give him the clothes they bought, we're all liable to see his other cheeks, too," Seth deadpans. Everyone, including me, laughs at that and the tension in the crowded room
I visit with Xavier and Seth for a few minutes, thanking them both profusely for taking such good care of Bella and for driving her to the hospital.

"We're just really glad you're okay, man," Xavier tells me as he punches my arm lightly.

I glance at Bella as she talks with Alice, Rose, and Jasper in the corner and then glance back and forth between Seth and Xavier. "Was it really hard on her?" I ask. I have to know, and I know that they'll be honest with me.

"She was so fucking strong, Ed," Xavier tells me on a sigh. He closes his eyes for a moment and I know he's remembering when Evan died. "She's so much stronger than any of us give her credit for, you know? All she could think about was getting to you. She didn't freak out, she didn't shut down, she just made arrangements for Peyton and we came straight here. Even in the waiting room, even when the doctor told her you were unconscious, she held firm to the belief you'd be okay."

"Have you talked to Peyton? Is she okay? I know she must be worried," I mutter softly.

"P's fine, Edward. She can't wait to see you and she's worried no one is taking good enough care of you, but she seems to be handling things as well as she can. You know her; she's just like her mama. Strong and stubborn. Once she sees you though, you might have a hard time prying yourself away from her." Seth laughs and I can't help but agree.

I'm quiet for a few seconds then say honestly, "I don't think I'd mind that a whole lot."

Seth and Xavier leave after another few minutes to head back to Corea. I hug and kiss Rose and thank her and Alice for being so considerate. I can't wait to get this fucking gown off and into some real clothes. I keep my eyes on Bella and notice the shadows beneath her eyes. She's exhausted but her eyes find mine as often as mine are on hers.

"How are you holding up?" Carlisle asks quietly. Renée and Esme have gone down to the cafeteria to get some coffee before they all head back home.

I swallow thickly, knowing I can't hide anything from him. " Barely by the tips of my fingernails. I started to have a panic attack once they moved me from ICU. I haven't had a lot of time to process everything, you know? It just all kind of hit me at once."

"It's going to take some time, Edward. Don't push it. What happened to you was scary as hell. I'd be worried if you didn't freak out. Just take some time to recover and we'll talk when you get home, okay?" He stares at me intently and waits for me to nod my head.

I have so many feelings coursing through me I can barely even differentiate between them. Guilt for what Bella and Peyton had to go through, relief that I'm going to be okay. Gratitude to Jasper, Emmett, and Charlie for saving me, anger at myself for being so careless in the first place.

"We'll get you through this, Edward. I promise," he tells me fervently.

Another round of hugs and kisses and promises to return the next day from Charlie, Renée, Esme, and Carlisle and then they leave. Rose walks forward as Bella says goodbye to her parents and whispers, "Alice and I are going to take Bella outside for a few minutes and let her get some fresh air. You can talk to Em and Jasper without an audience."

I'm touched by her thoughtfulness and reach out and grab her hand. "Thanks for everything you've
done, Rose. I don't know what we'd do without you."

She leans over and kisses my cheek. "You're one of us, Edward. It's what we do, and besides, we all love you. Now that we've got you, we're not letting you go, not even when you find yourself in the middle of the Atlantic." She winks as she stands up then smiles at Bella as she walks up.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. Will you be okay while I'm gone? Do you need anything?"

I reach for her, slipping my arm around her waist so I can pull her right next to me. My hand cups her ass and I nuzzle her stomach with my nose. Desire to touch her, to kiss her, flares hot and rampant and I groan when she runs her fingers through my hair. I feel gross and grimy, and I'm sure my hair feels dirty, but I won't tell her to stop touching me. I need it. I need to feel her.

She bends over and says quietly, "I know Em and Jas want to talk to you for a few minutes, so let me get out of here so they can say what they need to say and then we'll see about getting you cleaned up and into some clean clothes, okay?"

"Okay. Don't be gone long though," I tell her softly. I want to ask her not to leave at all, but I know I need to talk to the guys.

"It'll be okay, Edward. If it gets to be too much, just tell them. I'm sure they'll understand. They really just want to make sure you're okay, that's all." She presses her lips to mine and kisses me deeply, taking my breath away. "I love you. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Love you, too," I murmur and squeeze her one more time before letting her go.

When the girls leave it's awkward for about thirty seconds until Emmett, in typical Emmett fashion, says, "Thanks for making it so we have the day off, man."

"Jesus, Emmett. You're such an ass." Jasper chuckles and shakes his head at Emmett.

"What? I know you don't want to be out there any more than I do. Eddie's going to be just fine and we get a day off. Win-win if you ask me," he says with a shrug of his shoulders.

He sits down in the chair beside the bed and twists his mouth for a few seconds before he looks at me. "I'm only going to say this one time because getting all emotional and shit is for the birds and ruins my reputation, but I'm really glad you're okay, Edward."

I smirk at him but I can tell by the way his eyes bore into mine how big of a toll what happened has had on him. The shadows that flash across his face hit me right in the gut. I have so much I want to tell him, but no words come out.

"And, I'm really glad those roping lessons I took back in Texas were good for something," Jasper tells me. His ice blue eyes blaze brightly and the same unspoken words pass between us and between me and Emmett.

Don't ever scare us like that again.

We almost lost you.

I'll kick your ass if you ever let it happen again.

I love you.

Emmett clears his throat once the silence in the room becomes uncomfortable and we make small
talk for a few minutes. Jasper tells me that he'll take care of getting my bike over to Bella's and Emmett tells me he'll bring me my iPod when he comes back later on.

"We should probably head back so you can get some rest," Emmett says as he stands up. I feel him press something into my hand and gasp when I look at what it is. He nods silently at me and I'm so overcome I begin to shake.

"Thank you, both of you," I manage to choke out, looking them both in the eye so they can see the sincerity of my words. It's all I can say and I hope it's enough.

"You'd do the same for us," Jasper states simply then bends down and kisses the top of my head. "Get some rest; we'll be back later."

Emmett reaches down and covers my hand with his, squeezing once before he turns around and walks out of the door without looking back.

When the door shuts, I lay my fist over my heart, and close my eyes, thinking, once again, how close I came to losing it all.

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The next morning drags on and on and fucking on. I'm still sore as hell but I refuse all but the mildest of pain killers. I pulled Carlisle to the side when he checked on me yesterday afternoon and made sure the meds they were giving me wouldn't fuck me up or cause any lasting side effects. I'm still subject to random drug tests and it would be just my damned luck to fail one due to something I was prescribed. He assured me that both he and Wayne have been in touch with my P.O. and informed him of what had happened. As far as the Maine penal system is concerned, I'm still all good. It's a huge fucking relief to know that both Wayne and Carlisle have my back; one less thing to worry about.

Bella stays with me through the slop the hospital has the nerve to call lunch and then leaves so she can pick up Peyton from school and bring her back to see me.

"You look nervous," the nurse comments cheerily later in the afternoon as she checks my vitals. I hold my arm out so she can wrap the infernal blood pressure cuff around my arm. My muscles still ache and by the time she's done, my arm limply falls down beside my leg. "I am," I tell her. She fills in the chart and then drops it into the slot at the end of my bed. "I'm about to have a visitor and I'm worried about what her reaction is going to be." I nervously run a hand through my hair, not thinking of the bandage that still covers half of my forehead.

"Well it can't be your girlfriend because she's hardly left your side since you got here yesterday," she teases, and raises her eyebrow for an answer.

My heart stutter steps because I instantly think about Bella, and then smile at the nurse. "It's actually her daughter that's coming. Her name is Peyton. She's seven and the most amazing kid." I shake my head, at a complete loss for words because amazing doesn't even come close to describing Peyton.

"You love them both very much," she observes.

I nod, unable to answer and try to swallow past the golf ball-sized lump that's suddenly taken up residence in my throat.

She smiles fondly at me and then moves to change the bandage on my head. We're making small
talk and I hear the door open and groan because I'm tired of tests.

"Hey, what are you doing to my best friend?" demands the sweetest voice and the one that never fails to bring me to my knees.

The nurse chuckles as she holds some gauze in her hand. "Well, you must be the infamous Miss Peyton," she says with a smile and holds her hand out and waits for Peyton to shake it. "My name is Katie and I'm Edward's nurse for the day. I was just changing his bandage. Did you want to help me?"

Of course, Peyton squeals and then climbs up on a chair. "Hi, Edward." She grins and I can't help but smile back.

"Hi, Sprite. Gimme a kiss," I tell her and tilt my cheek up to her so she can kiss me. I turn my head and glance at her when she doesn't kiss me right away. Her little chin quivers when she sees the wound on my head up close. "I'm okay, sweetheart, I promise. Now kiss me. I've missed you so much." I look at her, falling completely spellbound to her beautiful slate blue eyes.

She places the softest kiss on my cheek and when she does, I'm surrounded by her typical coconut-lime scent. My heart swells, threatening to burst right out of my chest when she places an even gentler kiss to my forehead.

"I missed you," she whispers, her voice barely louder than a breath.

I can feel the burn of unshed tears in my eyes and I squeeze them tightly shut, hoping to keep them from spilling out. I know if I start crying, there's a very good chance I won't ever stop.

I watch in awe and Katie shows Peyton exactly how to change my bandage and I can't help but beam with pride at how smart she is when she does it all by herself.

"Well, Edward, I can see you are going to be in very capable hands when you get out of here," Katie says, sounding somewhat shocked herself.

"I'm going to take really good care of him," Peyton tells her, patting me on the head at the same time. "Mom says he's coming home with us, so I'll be able to keep a real close eye on him. Don't worry, I'm his best friend, I'll make sure he's just fine."

I'm in shock about the going home with them comment but figure that is a discussion for me and Bella to have outside of little ears. "Where is your mom?" I ask her, looking toward the door.

Peyton shrugs her little shoulders before she plops right down beside me on the bed. Her eyes are studying me, roving over every inch of my body. I feel like I'm being dissected, and I try not to cringe. I know she's just trying to convince herself that I'm really okay and if being stared at like I'm under a microscope is what she needs, I'll gladly do it for her.

I've done enough damage to the both of them already.

"You're really okay?" Her voice trembles as she speaks and her eyes dart all over the place.

I won't lie to her so I tell her, "I'm still really sore all over and my head hurts. It's kind of hard for me to stay awake for a long time and I get tired really easy still, but I'm doing much better, P. I'm really sorry I scared you." I reach out and take her tiny hands in mine and run my thumbs back and forth across the backs of them.

"When Mom told me what happened, I was scared I'd never get to see you again." Her words break
my heart and once more I question how I can ever go back on the water.

"I promised you and your mom I'd come back." It's all I can think to tell her. I know she's smart enough to figure out that things don't always go the way you want them to. She's always known how Evan died and Bella has never shied away from the realities of Charlie and Emmett working on the water.

Peyton doesn't say anything for a few minutes. Instead, she keeps her head down and stares at our hands. I don't push. I know she needs time to process. She's like her mom that way.

She lets out a huge sigh, one that lifts her shoulders as high as they can go before she lets them drop. "I really thought my good luck charms would keep you safe," she says quietly as she lifts her head and looks directly at me. "Maybe if I would have given you something else, you wouldn't have gotten hurt." The words spill out, broken and between her taking big gulps of air as tears spill down her flushed cheeks.

"Oh, sweetheart." I groan and pull her onto my lap. I ignore the protests of every muscle in my body and wrap my arms around her. We rock back and forth for a few minutes as I whisper nonsense words against the top of her head. She buries her nose into my chest and just like Bella does, she twists my t-shirt in her little hands so tightly I worry her fingers will permanently stay that way. I get tired holding her while we sit up so I lean us both back on the pillow. She scoots up so our noses are almost touching and I watch her as she tries to catch her breath. I lift a hand and push her hair back off her face, and then lean forward to give her a kiss on her forehead. She still doesn't say anything and I can't help but shiver when I feel the tip of her finger trace over the ink on my arm.

I feel something dig into the side of the leg and slip my hand inside the pocket of the sweats Alice and Rose brought for me. I curl my fingers around the offending item and take it out. Smiling softly I lift it between me and Peyton and hold my hand out so she can see it. "You're wrong, P. Your good luck charm did work," I tell her and show her the shell that rests on the palm of my hand. I look at it, overwhelmed again as I remember Emmett giving it back to me yesterday with tears in his eyes. I'll never forget how he closed my fingers around it and then held my closed fist in his huge hand. No words were spoken, none were needed, but from that moment on, Emmett became my brother in every sense of the word.

Her steel blue eyes widen and more tears fall down her face, dripping off the end of her nose since our heads are sideways. "You still have it?" she asks, her voice reverent. She moves her fingers from my arm to the shell and she touches it as if she can't really believe what she's seeing. "It worked," she breathes out. She smiles at me and her eyes and voice are full of wonder.

"It sure did," I answer, forcing the words past the tightness of emotion in my throat.

She giggles and suddenly everything seems okay again.

"Mmmm hmmm." I hear a throat clear from the doorway and look up to find Bella leaning against the wall. Her eyes are glassy but her smile is radiant and genuine. "Is there room for me in that bed?" she asks and walks up beside us.

"Always." I stare at her for a moment or two before I scoot over. My ass hangs off the edge of the tiny bed and Peyton is almost all the way on top of me, but I don't care. Having my two girls next to me is all I need in the world.
Two days later, and I'm discharged from the hospital. The ride home seems to take forever, but I'm still sore and a bit weak so I give in to the temptation to close my eyes. My stomach flutters right before I nod off as I think about staying with Bella and Peyton through the holidays.

"Babe, we're home," Bella nudges quietly. I feel her fingers dance along the side of my cheek and I can't help but turn my head and press a light kiss to her palm. The simple action shoots a white hot current of need straight to my dick though. It's been way too long since I've been inside of her, since I've felt her come apart, since I've tasted her and a shudder runs through my body as I imagine doing it again … soon.

I move slowly as I get out of the car but standing on my own two legs in the brisk air with the sun shining down on me feels pretty much like heaven. I take a deep breath of the crisp air, letting it fill my lungs and then let it out. I stretch my arms out and then let out a small groan when Bella bends over into the backseat of Renée's Jeep to grab my bag. Her ass looks fucking phenomenal in her jeans and the black boots she's wearing make her legs look long and lean and I want to feel them wrapped around me as soon as fucking possible.

She walks in front of me, through the door, and immediately a sense of home swamps me once we make it inside.

I see the Christmas tree in the corner by the fireplace, see my stocking hanging between Bella's and Peyton's … I even see my tennis shoes at the foot of the stairs. I don't live here, but standing in the living room after not having been here for almost two weeks makes me realize I want to.

I want to a whole fucking lot.

My whole body tingles as that thought spreads and the ache I've felt ever since I woke up and saw her tear-stained face flares.

I need her, right fucking now.

My eyes follow her every movement. She steps toward the stairs and drops my bag on the floor. There are a few strands of hair that have fallen out of her ponytail and they float beside her face, curling and laying against her flushed cheek. She blows out a breath, and then scrunches her nose adorably when the strands fall right back in her eyes.

She's fucking beautiful.

With three long strides, I'm close enough to reach out and grab her hand. When I wrap my fingers around her wrist and then turn her around to face me, her eyes are wide and her mouth is open in a perfect 'o' shape. Before the question that's on the tip of her tongue has a chance to be uttered, I crash my lips against hers. She's stiff in my arms for about three seconds, the amount of time it takes for my tongue to plunge inside of her mouth and for my hands to cup her delectable ass.

"Fuck, Bella. I want you so damn bad," I murmur as my lips slide from her mouth to her neck. Her fingers knead at my back, then climb up to my shoulders where her hands hold on for dear life. She presses her chest firmly against mine and when I feel her wiggle her leg until her knee brushes against my hardening dick, I moan and dig my fingers into her ass even harder.

"Edward, oh God. I've missed you, missed this." She kisses up and down my jaw and when she gets to my Adam's apple and I feel her teeth bite down, I hiss.

"Need you, fuck I need you, baby," I mumble against the sensitive, delicious skin of her neck. My hands slide from her ass to her hips and then dip beneath her tight, soft, pale pink sweater. "I love
this sweater; it looks so fucking good on you," I tell her as my hands travel over her taut stomach. I let my fingers circle her belly button until I can't take it any more and I move up her body until each of my hands cup a full, firm breast. "Christ," I breathe out as I feel her nipples pebble as I brush my thumbs over them.

"You definitely need to wear pink more often," I whisper when my lips find hers again. I pinch and pull … roll and tweak, eliciting the hottest fucking whimpers and moans from her.

"Edward," she breathes out as she pulls her mouth away from mine. Her hands are in my hair. She drags her nails along my scalp and it makes me shiver and makes my dick even harder. I pull her closer to me and search for the friction I need to ease some of the ache that's beginning to throb from between my legs. "More touching, less talking," she orders.

I comply. I use my lips and my tongue and my fingers to tell her all the things I can't possibly put into words. Having her in my arms again, feeling her heart beat against mine, hearing her sexy as hell groans and squeaks when I touch her in just the right way sets my heart flying in a way that takes me by surprise every time.

In no time, I have her sweater pushed up her body and over her head. With a quick pout, I watch it fall to the floor in a fluffy pink pile. I sure as hell hope she wears it again soon; it really looks amazing on her. As soon as I see inches and inches of creamy, pale skin, flushed with a pink reminiscent of the sweater on the floor, all I can think about is touching her everywhere.

She throws her head back, stretching in my arms when I trail my tongue up her pink-tinted chest. My fingers press into her back and I hope that I don't leave any marks. When I suck a hardened nipple through the thin lace of her bra, the sound she makes goes straight to aching cock.

"Feel good?" I ask totally unnecessarily.

"What did I say about more touching and less talking?" she saucily asks with a quirk of her eyebrow. Her eyes are molten fire, blazing bright and with so much desire it makes my heart hammer in my chest.

I'm nothing if not good at following directions, so I move from one nipple to the other. I nibble and lick that one through the lace as well. Once I pay it the proper amount of attention, I'm ready to feel and see all of her. I slide my hands up her back and undo her bra, licking my bottom lip when it falls from her arms.

"Fuck, you're even more gorgeous than I remember," I utter, transfixed by the way her deep breaths make her perfect breasts lift and then gently fall. I can't help but immediately wrap my lips around her nipple now that there's nothing between it and my mouth. I moan when I taste her fully. I'm sure my eyes have rolled back in my head. My body is on fire, every part of me is electrified. My dick feels like it's going to explode through my jeans and my hands shake as I touch her everywhere.

With my hands splayed across her naked back, I bring her closer to me. My mouth fuses with hers, and I dip my tongue deep in her mouth. Once, twice, then a third time, letting her taste fill my mouth. I grip her hip. My thumb finds her hip bone, which is a bit more prominent than it was two weeks ago. The thought whips me through the lust-filled fog and I stare intently into her eyes. "Oh, Bella," I whisper. I brush my lips against hers, gently now that I've calmed down a bit. I still want her. My dick is still throbbing between my legs and I really want nothing more than to rip her jeans off her legs, throw her down on the ground and fuck into next week, but I need to make sure she's okay.
She opens her eyes wide, the beautiful brown I normally see now almost black. "I'm fine, Edward. I just need you. God, please. I need you so much." She twists her hands in my t-shirt and pulls me against her. Her mouth finds mine again, kissing me so hard it hurts. "I need you, Edward. Please," she begs again.

I can't resist. I don't even try. I know we need to talk, but we need this even more. The need to feel each other, to take and give, to reconnect after everything that's happened. She needs to know I'm okay, that I'm here, and I need to show her that she means more to me than anything. That it was her that kept me alive, that it was Charlie saying her name that gave me the strength to fight.

My fingers fumble with the button on her jeans and she mimics my movements. As soon as I have her jeans undone, my hand dives inside and I cup her pussy. She scorches my palm and it's the best fucking feeling ever. Her hand once again copies mine and she shoves it inside of my jeans and wraps her fingers around my cock. I'm so hard it hurts but when she begins to pump me slowly, the pain morphs to pleasure.

I move my hand from between her legs up over her stomach and cover her breasts with my hands. I lean forward and kiss her again. I can't get enough of her, of her taste, of the way her tongue feels against mine, of the way she growls in the back of her throat when I roll her pebbled nipples between my fingers.

"I need to be inside you," I whisper in a rough voice. I rock my hips forward, urging her to move her hand faster.

I walk backward toward the couch and when the backs of my knees hit the edge of the sofa, she pushes my jeans down over my hips. I hate to move my hands from her breasts, but I need her naked and I need to bury my cock so deep inside of her we can't tell where I begin and she ends. I want no space between us. I want her entire body pressed against mine and I don't ever want to let go.

Once she steps out of her jeans and she kicks them out of the way she places her palms on my chest and pushes me backward. She straddles my lap, my cock hard and pulsing between us. I plunge my fingers in her hair and wrap her silky strands around them. I pull her head to the side and lick her in one smooth motion from her collarbone all the way up to the spot behind her ear that always makes her squirm.

"Christ, I've missed the way you taste." I flick my tongue at the silver ball in the top of her ear and then suck it into my mouth.

She rocks back and forth on my lap, brushing her hard nipples against my chest. Her nails score my skin and I hiss, not in pain but in erotic pleasure.

"Do you feel how hard I am, baby?" I ask as I scrape my teeth down her neck and keep going until I reach her breast. "I'm going to bury myself so deep inside of you, it'll take hours to find my way back out." I kiss her hard again, exploring every part of her mouth with my tongue. My fingers dig into the flesh of her ass so hard I'm sure there will be bruises tomorrow.

"I think you have that backward, babe," Bella murmurs in a sexy as fuck whisper. "I'm," she begins and then flicks her tongue at my nipple, "going to fuck you." She bites down and the flattens her tongue against me. I hiss and grip her hips, circling mine beneath her. The head of my dick rubs against her clit which makes her throw her head back. The ends of her hair brush the tops of my thighs and her perfect tits bounce in front of my face as she rolls her hips.

"Then fuck me, Bella. Please," I beg shamelessly.
She snaps her head back up and looks deep into my eyes. She bites her bottom lip and my chest rumbles.

"You know what it does to me when you do that," I warn her, tilting my hips up.

Smirking, she nods her head. She reaches between us and wraps her fingers around me again. Her thumb swipes at the bead of liquid that seeps from the end of my cock and then spreads it over my shaft. With her eyes locked on mine, she lifts her body then lowers herself so slowly onto me that my eyes roll back in my head.

"Oh, fuck." I hiss when I'm totally sheathed inside of her. "So good, you feel so fucking good."

"Mmmm, Edward." Bella moans. She swivels her hips and then her pussy clenches my cock.

I almost come right then it feels so damn good.

I thrust up as she moves down. She curls her fingers against my chest, and her nails dig into my skin. It stings, but I don't care. "That's my girl, fuck me," I grunt. One of my hands pulls on her hair; the other is splayed across her back.

We move together, up and down. I kiss and suck. She scratches and bites. We're totally lost in the moment, reconnecting in the most primal of ways. My heart beats wildly in my chest and the muscles in my legs burn from exertion, but I don't stop. I can't.

She rides me, taking me deep inside then sliding back up before she slams right back down. Over and over and over again. She leans forward, then stretches away from me, bowing her back. Her hair sways, her fingers grip my thighs, and her hips never stop moving. She plays my body expertly, pushing me to my limit but never over the edge.

"Oh, God, Edward. Mmm … You feel so good inside of me. I love feeling you this way, so deep, so full." She moans as she flips her head forward again.

I wrap my arms around her and say, "Kiss me."

Her lips instantly are on mine and our bodies glide against each other. She whimper into my mouth and I swallow the sound. I'm so close. My dick throbs inside of her and my balls tighten. I lower a hand between us and rub her swollen clit with my finger.

"Ah, yes … oh, fuck yes." She groans and I circle faster.

"I love watching you ride me, baby. You're so fucking gorgeous, fucking me, taking me. Come, Bella. Fucking come for me. I need to see you come."

She lifts her eyes to mine and I can tell it's taking a lot of effort to keep them open. "Good girl, eyes on me. You're close. I can feel your pussy pulsating all around my dick."

"More, Edward. Faster," she orders and rolls her hips against my fingers.

I do as she asks and circle faster, pinching and pressing as I go. Her legs shake and her thighs squeeze me tightly. She tugs on my hair and when she lifts up on her knees, I take a nipple into my mouth and swirl my tongue around it. Simultaneously I bite down on it, I press hard on her clit with my thumb, and I thrust deep inside of her.

She immediately falls apart, screaming out my name and a rush of other words that make no sense. Her chest is flushed pink and I lick a bead of sweat that falls between her breasts.
"God, oh yes." She pants, never even breaking the delicious rhythm she's set.

"Close, ah fuck I'm so close. I'm going to come so hard inside of you," I warn her.

"Do it. Now," she orders and I explode, coming so hard I grit my teeth and hiss.

It takes a few moments to come down from the high of our release and when we do, she melts against my chest. She makes no attempt to move, which is just fine with me. Eventually, I feel her shiver and reluctantly, I shift her off my lap.

"Come on. Let's go take a shower and then cuddle in bed before Mom brings Peyton home," she tells me once she stands up. She holds her hand out and when I take it, she pulls me up.

"Ugh, how about a bath instead? I'm fucking sore. You wore me right out, baby." I smirk at her. That quickly turns into a moan of appreciation as I follow her up the stairs, her ass shaking right in my face. I'm exhausted and every part of my body aches, but my cock aches in the best way.

As soon as we hit the top of the stairs, I sweep her up in my arms and whisper, "The bath can wait. I seem to have caught my second wind."

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"Dude, I can not believe Bella is letting you do this." Emmett chuckles and turns to look at me as soon as I close the door to his Jeep.

"No shit." Jasper laughs. He slaps me on the shoulder and then leans forward between us. "The guy almost dies and he's got Bella eating out of the palm of his hand."

I roll my eyes at them both then flip them off for good measure. "I'm just too irresistible and you two sorry sacks of shit are just jealous you can't get your women to let you do the same thing," I say cockily and grin happily when they both scowl at me and mutter "asshole" under their breath. They'd like to disagree with me, I know they would, but too bad for them they can't.

"Seriously, man. Did you just ask my sister or did you have to promise her all kinds of shit to get her to agree?" I don't say anything and wait for him to look in my direction. When he does, I give him a sly smirk and shrug my shoulder at him.

He cringes and shakes his head. "Awww, damn, Ed. That's my baby sister you're promising sexual favors for. I don't need to know that!" He groans.

Jasper is laughing his ass off in the backseat because I haven't even said a word. Emmett's just run off on a tangent and I let him go. When Emmett realizes neither Jasper nor I are saying anything he looks back and forth between the two of us and narrows his eyes. "Jackasses," he mutters.

I slap him on the shoulder and grin. "You're so easy sometimes, man. And for your information, Bella thought it was a great idea when I asked. I just wanted to do something for Peyton to show her how much I love her," I tell them quietly, the mood changing in the car quickly from light to heavy. I sigh. "It's been a hell of a few weeks, you know; I'm just ready for things to be back to normal."

"How's P handling everything?" Emmett asks seriously and Jasper leans forward.

I run a hand through my hair and look out the window for a moment while I take a deep breath. "She seems to be fine, but I don't know, Em, she watches me all the time, like she's afraid I'm going to disappear right in front of her or something. She still laughs and she's still as bossy as ever, but
"Well, man, she adores you so much and what happened was scary as fuck," Emmett answers and then shivers. I notice his hands grip the steering wheel, holding on to it so tightly his knuckles turn white. "P's heard the stories about Evan, Edward, and she's so smart. No matter how little you and Bella or hell any of us tell her, or how much it's sugar-coated, Peyton knows how close we came to losing you."

I look out of the window for a minute then sigh as I face him. "I know. I just hate seeing my little thing so scared. Peyton's not ever afraid of anything. I suppose it will just take time."

"She's a strong little girl, Edward," Jasper reassures as he places his hand on my shoulder. "She'll be fine, you'll see."

"I hope so."

We don't say much the rest of the ride but as we get closer to Ellsworth, I get more excited. I can't wait to see Peyton's face tomorrow when I give her her Christmas present. I think it will be just what she needs to be back to the Peyton I know and love beyond measure.

"You're bouncing up and down in your seat, Eddie. Excited much?" Emmett grins at me.

I shrug my shoulders. "I never had a dog and I always wanted one. I'm fucking excited, sue me."

"Do you think P will let me puppy sit?" Jasper asks a bit wistfully as he taps his fingers against the kennel on the backseat beside him.

"I don't think anyone but Edward will get within an arm's length of it once she gets it tomorrow. Enjoy it tonight, Jas. It'll be the last time you see it," Emmett taunts, but he looks a bit sad at the realization he won't get to play with the puppy either.

We pull up to the house where the owner of the litter of puppies lives. I had mentioned to Seth and Aggie one afternoon a week ago at The Breakers about wanting to buy Peyton a puppy for Christmas and Aggie mentioned that a friend of hers had a dog that had puppies six weeks ago and were for sale. She had her friend email me a picture and once I saw its adorable little face, I was a goner. Bella tried to pretend she wasn't excited, but I caught her yesterday putting some puppy treats away in the pantry where Peyton wouldn't find them. When she turned around and saw me standing there all she did was huff and roll her eyes at me. Of course I got an elbow in the stomach when I laughed at her.

The three of us get out of the car and carry the kennel to the front door.

I introduce myself to Aggie's friend, Lisa, and she tells me to follow her through the house to the back room where all the puppies are.

While I'm being introduced to the Mama dog and given the papers showing the puppy has been neutered and given its shots, Emmett and Jasper are in puppy heaven. I have a feeling Peyton's puppy is going to have little playmates soon. Like maybe by the end of the day tomorrow.

"Dude, you are totally going to win the best present award tomorrow," Emmett tells me once we get back in the car and head for home.

I look on the seat beside me and stick the tip of my finger through the side of the kennel and rub
the little guy's nose. "You bet your ass I am," I tell him happily.

As we drive home, I can't help but feel like adding a puppy to our happy trio is only the beginning.

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So, he's home and Christmas is right around the corner. I think Peyton might be a wee bit excited to get a puppy, what do y'all think? Next chapter we'll hear from Bella and see how she's coping with everything as well as having their first Christmas together.

I still have a few surprises for you all up my sleeve so we're still quite a few chapters away from the end, in case any of you were wondering!

I'm going to post as scheduled over the holidays. I want to stay on track as best I can until the story is done. I realize it's a busy time of year for everyone, but the chapters will be there when y'all are ready for them! I might post on Mondays for the next two weeks just to make it easier on everyone, just a heads up, okay?

I'm going to try to get the teaser and the Wordle and pic teases up on time this week, so be on the lookout for those, too!

We've set up a discussion/fan page on Facebook for The Breakers. I hope you join, the response so far has been amazing and I'm having so much fun with it!

www(.)facebook(.)com / groups / 137144056381565 /

Follow me on Twitter les_sh_16 - I'm on there ALL the time!

See you soon! I've missed y'all, so please let me hear from you!

Erin~
Chapter 23

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A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers – the last few weeks have been a bit bumpy and I don't know what I'd do without them … especially Laurel with her never-ending patience and J'me for always pushing me when I need it. Love you all!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

Happy 2012, all … I hope everyone made it here all safe and sound. I know I'm ready for a new year, how about y'all?

Now … on we go!

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 23

BPOV

"Mom, it's time to get up," Peyton tries to whisper, but it comes out sounding much more like a holler, especially because her cold nose is pressed right up against mine.

I open my eyes and then giggle when her eyes widen and she bounces up and down on her feet, giving me some sort of pseudo Eskimo kiss.

Edward groans and his hand tightens around my waist. "P, it's too early. Come back later," he mumbles against my shoulder. I feel his warm lips, the scruff of his jaw as he places a kiss there, and then he rests his chin so he can look at Peyton. "It's only," and he groans louder when he spies the clock on the nightstand, "it's not even seven yet, Sprite!"

She nods and then leans forward so she can get closer to him. "I know! I let you sleep longer than I wanted to," she squeals and kisses him on the cheek. "I almost woke you and Mom up an hour ago. Now, get up … there's lots of presents down there. I think Santa thought I was a really good girl this year!" She skips out of the room, tripping over her feet as she goes and Edward and I just look at each other when she hollers as she thunders down the stairs, "Five minutes, or else I'm starting without you guys!"

"How can she be so hyper on only a few hours sleep?" Edward mumbles as he rolls over onto his back. He throws his arm over his eyes and the movement causes his t-shirt to rise up, showing off a mouthwatering sliver of skin above his boxers.

No matter how cold it is outside, he refuses to wear sleep pants to bed, not that I mind however. I love feeling his strong, muscular legs tangled with mine under the blankets.

"Are you seriously asking me that question, babe? This is Peyton we're talking about and not just
Peyton, but P and presents. It's a lethal combination," I tell him as I roll over on top of him.

He lowers his arm and twirls a strand of my hair around his finger. With his other hand he holds my hip, pressing against my hip bone with his thumb. His eyes are clear even though he's still sleepy and his hair is a riotous mess. The scruff on his jaw makes me lick my bottom lip and I can't help but sigh as I stare at him.

"Merry Christmas," I whisper softly. My words barely have time to travel the short distance from my mouth to his before he's kissing me like his life depends on it. His fingers plunge into my tangled hair and he cups the back of my head. The low rumble that gurgles in the back of his throat makes me press my mouth harder against his and my hips instinctively rock against his.

"Do you …" He pants as he tries to catch his breath. His nostrils flare for a brief moment and his jaw clenches before his entire face relaxes and he smiles a smile that I feel all the way down to my toes. "… have any idea what it means to me to be here, with you and P, today of all days?" His words are gentle, reverent, as he pushes my hair behind my ear. "I love you so much, Bella. Merry Christmas."

The unmistakable sound of Peyton shaking a present floats up the stairs and we both start laughing when she huffs before she picks up another one and does it again.

I roll off him after kissing him one more time on the lips and sit up on the edge of the bed. "We'd better get down there before she explodes from trying to be good. Why don't you call Jasper and tell him to be here in about thirty minutes? That should give us enough time to get everything opened besides the big reveal."

His face lights up brighter than the house Clark Griswold decorated in *Christmas Vacation* and he giggles … like an actual, full-on, giggle. "I can't wait to see her face!" His voice shakes from excitement and he's trying so hard to whisper, but he's not doing a good job of it. "She's going to love him, don't you think?" He grunts as he hops while trying to put on his sleep pants but he's so excited, his foot keeps getting caught in the leg.

"Edward, good heavens," I say and shake my head. My guy is too much sometimes. Seeing his face light up with a smile, hearing the happiness in his voice, and watching as he acts like a little kid experiencing his first Christmas fills me with equal parts of joy and sorrow. I'm so happy to share this with him, to witness his unadulterated exuberance for everything from making Christmas cookies and hanging lights outside to decorating the tree and wrapping presents has been the ultimate gift. I know him. I know he's gone against my wishes and bought me a present. I catch him smirking often enough to know he's been hiding something … but then again, I didn't follow along either.

Thinking of my gift for him as I finish brushing my teeth so we can go downstairs makes my stomach twist … if only a little bit. I know what I've done for him will mean a lot to him, I just hope it doesn't cause him any pain. I want today to be a day he'll never forget.

Our first Christmas together.

"Mom, Edward, come on," Peyton orders with a not-so-slight huff of exasperation.

"Let's go," Edward says. He waits by the door and wraps an arm around me, pulling me close so he can kiss the side of my head. "I love you," he tells me sweetly right before we reach the bottom step.

My breath catches in my throat and I choke back a soft cry. "I love you, too," I whisper.
The tender moment is of course interrupted as soon as Peyton sees us. "Took you long enough," she grumbles.

Edward laughs when he spies the Santa hat on top of her head. "Nice!" He grins and then gives her a hug.

He starts to sit on the sofa which makes Peyton cry out, "No! We sit on the floor to open our presents." She grabs his hand and pulls him down on the floor. "Now while we look and see all the good stuff Santa left in our stockings," she tells him in a sweet but demanding voice. She takes a breath and then keeps going, "Mom is going to go in the kitchen and fix our hot chocolate and get the monkey bread ready to put in the oven."

Peyton promptly drops his now overflowing stocking unceremoniously in his lap before she digs in. There are times I'm half tempted to think she likes looking through her stocking as much if not more than opening her presents under the tree. Edward looks slightly overwhelmed and when his eyes find mine, they're a bit wild. "What … I mean how … I didn't think," he stammers and I quickly kneel down in front of him.

"Shhhh," I tell him as I place a finger over his lips. "Just do as she says; it's much easier that way."

I kiss him quickly and then hurry into the kitchen to get the hot chocolate started.

"Bella," I hear Edward say sternly a few minutes later. He's obviously found all the little odds and ends I sneaked into his stocking last night at the last minute.

I poke my head out of the kitchen and grin at him. "Hush. Just enjoy it, babe."

He stares at me for a moment and my stomach flutters. He looks so grateful, but beyond that, he's just so happy.

"So much trouble," he mumbles after another beat passes and then turns to give Peyton his attention.

I didn't do much, just got him a few little things: a new set of headphones for his iPod, some cologne that smells absolutely amazing on him, a new pair of gloves for him to wear on the boat, a new pair of Ray-Bans that I'm dying to see on him. Okay, those were a bit on the pricey side, but I couldn't resist. Edward in sunglasses is a sight to behold, sue me. Peyton and I picked out his favorite candy when we were at the candy shop and mixed it with some peppermints and some other sweet treats. Peyton picked out a new key chain for his bike, a New England Patriot helmet, of course.

I carry the mugs out on a tray and sit down next to Edward then hand him his drink. "Bella, you shouldn't have done so much," he says quietly as I tuck my legs underneath me.

I lean over and lay my head on his shoulder. "It's your first Christmas with us; we just wanted to make it special," I tell him.

He takes a deep breath then lets it out slowly. I don't look up at him, but I know if I do, I'd see his eyes glassy and the tip of his nose red. I do feel his lips press a kiss to the top of my head though before he clears his throat. "Okay, so what's next?"

"Presents!" Peyton squeals then bounces up and down. How she manages to NOT spill her hot chocolate I'll never know.

I scoot closer to Edward, so close I'm practically sitting in his lap and then say the words Peyton's
waited 364 days for. "Okay, baby, get to it!"

She lets out another whoop then digs in. We laugh as she unwraps clothes, books, video games, a new backpack she's been asking for, a few movies, and she really squeals when she gets to the small, flat box that houses her new iPad.

"Mom, oh my God! Thank you, thank you!" she exclaims as she throws herself at me.

It's an extravagant gift, but one I know she'll get a lot of use from. With as much time as she spends at the restaurant and driving back and forth to Ellsworth and everywhere else, she'll enjoy all the things she can do on it and I know she'll take really good care of it.

I give her a kiss then crawl toward the tree so I can pick out Edward's present to give to him. We'll be opening more gifts at my parents' house later this morning so the ones we exchange here are for us only. Our family has always gone a little overboard at Christmastime with gift giving. Everyone's thinking being that it's the one time a year we can really splurge. Jasper and Alice don't have any family besides each other and us, Emmett and Rose don't have any kids, neither do Xavier and Seth … same as Carlisle and Esme. Instead of doing the drawing names thing so many families do, we buy what we want. It's never anything too over the top, though last year when Emmett and Jasper bought each other PlayStation3s complete with new game chairs and headsets, they set the bar kind of high.

My hands shake a bit as I pull Edward's carefully, lovingly-wrapped present from beneath the tree. I have no idea how he'll react to what I've done for him. He's liable to be extremely moved … or extremely sad. My hope is obviously for the first, though I know it will be tinged with a bit of the second regardless.

"Merry Christmas," I tell him gently and set the flat box on his lap. He stares at it, as if trying to memorize the deep red paper or the wired gold-ribboned bow it's adorned with, and then finally he sighs and begins to unwrap it.

Peyton scoots over and sits in my lap; she's just as nervous as I am about his present. He carefully unties the bow then slowly slides his finger beneath the tape to take the paper off. Edward is definitely no Emmett when it comes to opening presents. When the paper is removed from the shallow white box he raises his eyes to look at Peyton and me. He waits until I nod my head encouragingly and then he lifts the lid. The present is buried beneath a few protective layers of tissue paper and as soon as he peels them backward and sees what's nestled inside, it's as though every ounce of breath he has in his body is expended in one huge gush of air.

"Oh my God, Bella! How did you … Where did you find … I can't believe you did …" he stutters between trying to catch his breath.

I reach a hand out and take one of his, leaving his other to hold onto the box.

"You've seen the pictures of the families that visit the restaurant that Mom hangs on the big bulletin board behind the cash register, right?" I ask him, waiting until he nods his head. He's not looking at me; his eyes are glued to the picture in the box. "When you were in the hospital and Mom was watching Peyton at home one night, she was putting this year's pictures into the photo album. Well, Peyton was curious and asked how far back they had pictures and Mom couldn't remember so they went up to the attic and pulled out the box with all the old albums in it. Mom dug through the box and noticed that there were albums from as far back as when you and your grandparents used to visit Corea so she pulled it out on a whim just to see if there was a picture of the three of you. Needless to say she was speechless when she stumbled across one."

I laugh lightly and remember how shocked I was when I called home the night she found it to say good night to
Peyton. As soon as Mom told me, I knew exactly what I was giving Edward for Christmas. I'd had it restored and then picked out an elegant, metal frame to put it in. "You were kind of a gangly thing, weren't you?" I tease and bump his knee with mine.

He doesn't laugh out loud, but his shoulders do shake. "I remember this picture being taken," he says so softly we can barely hear him. "It was our last summer here, right before my grandma died. I was twelve and I'd just hit a growth spurt. Gram said that whole summer that there wasn't enough food in Corea to keep me fed, so me and Granddad would need to catch lots of fish." I see a tear splash as it falls onto the glass and as soon as Peyton notices as well, she moves to his side and wriggles beneath his arm. She's seen the picture almost as many times as I have but she hasn't seen the frame yet.

"Your grandma was really pretty, Edward," Peyton tells him.

He sniffs and then looks up at me, giving me the most loving smile I've ever seen, and then turns to Peyton. "She was. My grandfather always said she could give Elizabeth Taylor a run for her money." His voice is thick, almost hoarse, from the emotion he's trying to hold inside.

Peyton scrunches her nose and says, "Who's she?"

Her question lightens the mood immensely and Edward spends a few minutes sharing some of his favorite memories of his grandparents. Once he begins to get choked up again, he carefully, reverently, covers the picture frame with the tissue paper again and then puts the lid on the box.

"Bella, thank you. It's … I don't even have words." He pulls me to him and lays his forehead against mine and then brushes his lips ever so slowly across mine. "I love you."

"Love you, too," I tell him and this time it's me that has a hard time speaking.

I know Edward has other pictures, of his parents, and of his grandparents packed away and in storage. His grandfather sold his house once he started to get ill and moved into an assisted living facility, but left everything inside the house to Edward. So, there are mementos there for Edward to look through and keep when he's ready to do so. He wasn't in a place to do it when he was released from prison, especially since he practically came straight to Corea and he hasn't had time to do it over the past few months, but I think he's getting closer now that he's dealt with so many of his issues.

Until then, though, he has a visual reminder of his grandparents to keep with him always.

"My turn," Peyton chirps. She finds her presents for Edward and hands the first one to him with a flourish.

"Thanks, Sprite." He laughs as he takes the box from her.

"You have to open it before you say thank you, Edward!"

He shakes it back and forth just to tease her and when she huffs, he lowers it and rips the paper off. When he pulls the Tom Brady jersey out of the box, he laughs and then gives her a big hug.

"Put it on now," Peyton orders as she stands up. She yanks the jersey from his hands and the pulls it down over his head before he can open his mouth. "Do you like it? I picked it out myself," she says proudly and nods her head in approval once he slides his arms inside.

"I love it. Can I tell you thanks now?"
"Nope, you still have to open the other one." She grins and then hands him a bright, and messily-wrapped present. Messy because she refused to let me help her and she's not so good with folding the ends yet.

He shakes his head and wisely doesn't say anything about the wrapping job. This present is small, but it will mean a lot to him.

Once the item is free from the paper, he chuckles and then looks at her. "Now can I say it?" She nods happily and when he opens his arms to her, throws herself against his chest. "Thank you, sweetheart. I've wanted one of these for a long time now."

In his hand he's holding a picture of him carrying Peyton on his back. She made the frame herself, painstakingly picking out each bead, every afternoon for a week at the restaurant. There are a few pictures up in my house of the three of us, of the two of them and of him and me, but since he still stays a few nights a week at the boarding house, Peyton wanted him to have a picture of her to keep him company.

She proudly shows him the frame, telling him in no uncertain terms that she made the frame and then kisses his cheek and gives him a long, sweet hug. "Now you won't be by yourself when you have to spend the night alone," she whispers before sitting down beside him.

He and I share a look at that statement, both of us silently agreeing with her. After the New Year, I think it's pretty safe to say that a few changes are on the horizon.

Edward sets both gifts down on the sofa behind him and then claps his hands. "Okay, that means it's my turn, right?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulls a small box out from under the tree and hands it to me. He kneels in front of me and covers my hands with his, stopping me from opening my present. "I've never done this so if this sucks, I'm sorry, okay?" he asks with an adorable scowl on his face.

"Babe, stop. I'm sure I'll love it. Now move; I want to open." I give him a reassuring smile and try to keep my fingers from shaking as I tear the paper off the small box. Yeah, my present opening isn't much different from my brother's … or my daughter's.

Once the paper is off and I hold the black velvet box in hand, my heart starts to thump wildly in my chest. My stomach does a few loop-de-loops and I can't stop the huge smile I feel spread across my face even if I wanted to try, which I don't. I'm so nervous for some reason and I take a deep breath. Edward always thinks he's terrible at all this relationship business, but in all actuality, he's pretty damn perfect. Sure he has his moments where I'd like nothing more than to shake him or kick him in the shins, but those times are very few and far between. Even as great as he is, this is the first gift he's given me and it's kind of a big deal to me. I've never been given a gift by someone that I loved … that wasn't family or friends, and the fact this is from Edward, makes it the most special thing I've ever been given, before I even see what it is.

"Go on, baby, open it," he encourages.

I nod and then watch myself as I slowly lift the lid. "Oh, Edward," I breathe out, and blink away the tears that fill my eyes. I can't take my eyes off the beautiful pendant that's been inlaid with a picture of me and Edward and with one of Peyton as well. It hangs on a simple, but elegant silver necklace and I know when I put it on, I'm never going to want to take it off.

"It seems we all had the same idea with the pictures," he says, sounding somewhat unsure.

"That's because we're all brilliant," I tell him. I look up and when our eyes meet, it takes my breath
away. "And," I whisper, leaning forward and wrapping an arm around his neck, "it's because we always want to keep our family with us."

He doesn't break our gaze; he merely swallows then whispers, "Christ. Bella. I want it. I want that with you and with Peyton."

His hand is warm and so gentle as he cups the side of my face and rubs his thumb across my cheek. There's so much I want to say, so much I feel right at that moment that it feels like my chest is going to explode but before I can do, let alone say anything, our moment is interrupted by Peyton huffing, "Hey, what about me?"

We each turn with our foreheads still connected and laugh at the same time when we see her sitting with her arms crossed and the poorest excuse for a scowl I've ever seen. Edward's phone vibrates in his pocket and I know that means Jasper is here with the puppy. I giggle when he squeaks, even though he tries to cover it up with a cough.

"P, come help me put this on your mom," he sweet talks her and of course the faux scowl is replaced with a mega-watt smile.

I hand Peyton the box and she says in an awed voice, "It's so pretty, Mom. Wow, it has all our pictures on it. Edward, this is so cool." She stands behind me and helps me hold up my hair while Edward attaches the necklace around my neck.

"It looks better than I imagined it would," Edward says, sounding very pleased with himself. As he should be. The necklace is gorgeous and so perfect.

I reach out and grab his hand, pulling him over so I can give him a kiss. "Thank you. I'm never leaving the house without it," I tell him.

We sit back down and I have to bite the inside of my cheek, hard, when Peyton looks at Edward and narrows her eyes. She knows she hasn't gotten her present from him yet and she also knows … there's nothing left under the tree that's not unwrapped. He pretends not to notice her watching him, instead he grabs the box with his picture in it as well as the picture of him and Peyton and places them, quite ridiculously, with the things from his stocking. He grabs a peppermint, undoing the wrapper. The crinkling of the plastic is absurdly loud in the all but silent room and the corners of his mouth lift ever so slightly when Peyton growls at him.

"Hmph," she grunts as she moves from the floor to the sofa.

"Something wrong, Sprite?" he asks, the picture of innocence.

My poor girl, you can see the battle brewing inside of her as plain as day. On one hand, she's been taught to always be gracious about gift giving and to be grateful for what she receives, no matter how big or small. On the other, she desperately wants to ask, or probably demand, Edward tell her where her present is.

The knock on the door startles everyone but Edward who grins like the cat that swallowed the canary, "I think someone's at the door. Why don't you go see who it is?" he prods and she glowers at him before stomping to the front door.

"She's killing me," he murmurs and then stands as she approaches the door.

I hear him hold his breath when she places her hand on the doorknob then he reaches for my hand when she opens it. It's like something out of a movie - Peyton looks out, but not down, completely
missing the little ball of brown and white fur that's sitting on the doormat by her feet … that is until he barks … or yips is more accurate. Her mouth makes a huge 'O' and you can tell she wants to say something, but no sound comes out. Her eyes grow so big, I swear for a moment I worry they'll stay that way. She turns to look at Edward, smiling a smile that she's never given anyone else ever, not even me, and then squeals in such a high pitch, the little puppy has to be the only thing within miles that can hear it.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! A puppy, you got me a puppy! You did get me a puppy right? I mean it didn't just show up here, how did it get here? It's mine though? I can keep it?" she rambles as her head pivots between Edward and the puppy that yips at her again.

When Edward nods his head and says, "Yep, Sprite, he's all yours," she drops down to her knees and scoops the fluffball up.

"I really hated giving him back, even to P," Jasper says forlornly.

"Aww, Jas, you still haven't been able to talk Alice into letting you get a playmate for P's puppy?" Edward taunts and throws an arm around his shoulder. "Thanks for keeping him for a few days and for bringing him over," he whispers to Jasper and to Alice who walks up behind us, carrying a mug of hot chocolate.

"Jasper! Alice! Look what Edward got me!" Peyton cries out when she notices the additions.

"Wow, Peyton. You're one lucky little girl," Jasper tells her, and then gives Alice his best pout. "Just think about, Al. We could get one, too, and then take them both for walks on the beach and stuff. Please," he begs shamelessly.

"Edward, I'm so killing you for this," she hisses under her breath, and then gives Jasper a withering look as she passes him to go talk to Peyton. "He's so cute, P. What do you think you'll name him?"

Peyton picks up the puppy and holds it so their noses are touching. "Hmmmm, I think, I think …" she drags out and looks at the animal with her head tilted to the side. "It's a boy, Edward?" she asks for confirmation. When he nods, she grins. "I think I'll name him Brady."

Like I didn't see that coming from a mile away.

After numerous hugs and kisses are given, to both Edward and the dog, Edward walks outside to the garage and brings in all the necessities for Brady.

I motion to Edward that I'm going to step into the kitchen. As I reach the doorway, I hear Peyton say, "Brady, you and I are going to be great friends, but Edward's always going to be my best friend."

I can't help but smile at that and know without a doubt what she's said is one hundred percent true.

While I'm making some orange juice and coffee, I think back to last night. Midnight Mass, as always, was just beautiful. The candles, the poinsettias on the altar, the nativity set up in the front of the church, all of it. Edward of course looked so handsome all dressed up in a pair of black dress pants, a white dress shirt, and a red tie. We don't have much opportunity to wear such nice clothes, which is such a shame because, really, Edward was made to wear a suit. Peyton looked adorable in her dress … the only time I can get her in one without complaining is for Midnight Mass.

We'd spent the evening at my parents' house, eating dinner and watching Christmas movies, like we do every year. I kept a close eye on Edward, making sure he wasn't feeling overwhelmed by everything, but he was just fine, laughing and joking most of the night with Emmett and Jasper.
There were many times I caught him with his head bent close to Jasper's and I knew they were talking about the puppy. Xavier and Seth were with us this year since Seth's parents had decided to travel for the holiday, which didn't come as too much of a shock to him, no matter how disappointed he was to not see them for either Thanksgiving or Christmas. Xavier's dad was working on an offshore oil rig out in the Gulf of Mexico. Xavier and his dad have a pretty decent relationship considering they're lucky to see each other once a year. Of course Jasper had no desire to be anywhere but with us, the same with Alice, and Rosalie's parents were, as usual, much too busy with hosting parties and being seen at all the right events to make time for their only daughter. Asses.

Sitting in church before Mass started gave me a few minutes to think about everything that's happened over the past few weeks, and really since Edward roared into my life on the back of a classic motorcycle. I thought about it all … from seeing him that very first time in the restaurant, to watching as Peyton sucked him in and wrapped him so tightly around her finger it was done before he even knew what was happening to him. From ignoring the way he'd captured my attention and made my insides feel like jelly to the way it felt the first time he touched me. From finding out about prison and how alone in the world he was to telling him all about Evan. From how it felt the first time we made love to the way my heart hurtled into outer space and then exploded like fireworks when I told him I loved him the first time … and he said it back. Then, of course, I thought about his accident and the fear I'd felt when word came that contact had been lost with the boat.

Even standing at the island, in my house, on Christmas morning, with Christmas carols playing softly in the background, and Edward's laugh floating through the air, does little to stem the chill that I get anytime I let my mind wander back to that day. I'd been so scared, petrified into an almost stupor, when Mom told me Aggie was no longer able to contact the boat. I held it together though, how I'll never be sure, but when I heard Edward's name crackle over that radio as the one that was being medi-vaced to the hospital, I'd never wanted to scream or cry so badly in my life. As difficult as it is to admit, hearing about Evan didn't affect me nearly as much as just the prospect of losing Edward did. Of course, Evan wasn't the love of my life either … no, that's Edward, and Edward alone.

Seeing him in the hospital, unconscious and pale is an image that will never fade, will never go away, not for as long as I live. I came so close to losing him, to losing what our life will be like together … to losing the family that we already are and will be in the future, that just the prospect of him going back out on the water is enough to make me sick to my stomach. But, I know I can't ask him to not go back out. He's a proud man, and the person he is will not go back on his word, and he gave Wayne, Carlisle, and my dad his word that he would work hard, every day, and do his best to live up to the promise he made them.

I've struggled with knowing this, being so proud of him I could cry for continuing to be the person he was meant to be but being scared out of my mind that the next time, because there will be one, he goes in the water, Jasper won't be there to pull him out. The first Sunday he was home from the hospital, I'd tried to get out of bed early in the morning. Since Edward had made it a habit to spend his Sundays with me and Peyton, we had stopped going to Mass. I felt horrible for being so wrapped up in Edward that going to Mass became something that wasn't a priority. It was easy to blame it on the fact that over the summer Peyton didn't have Sunday school, but the fact was I'd gotten lazy and after what happened to Edward, I wasn't about to take my faith for granted again.

"Hey, what are you doing up so early?" he'd asked me in a voice still rough and deep from sleep.

"I was thinking of going to Mass this morning," I'd told him when I sat back down on the bed. I'd brushed his hair back off his forehead, and felt my heart stutter in my chest when my fingertips
brushed across the stitches still in his forehead. The scar he'd have now would always be a reminder of how close we all came to losing him. "I have a lot to be thankful for, you know? I just thought it would be a good time to acknowledge that." I'd shrugged my shoulders, unsure of how to verbalize everything I was feeling.

He'd reached a hand out and linked our fingers together. "Do you think, I mean would you mind … can I go with you?" he'd wondered which made tears pool in my eyes.

"I'd love it," I'd told him.

So we went, and promised each other to keep going every Sunday. It's a promise I don't intend to break.

"Hey, baby, is breakfast almost ready? I'm starving." Edward's voice pulls me from my thoughts and back to the here and now.

I pick my head up and let the sight of him chase away the tiny bits of fear that linger inside. "It is. Has Peyton put him down yet?" I ask as I put a stack of plates on the island and grab some forks out of the drawer.

"Hell no." He chuckles. He pushes off the doorway and walks to me. "I did well, didn't I? She loves him."

I scoff. Turning so I can face him, I lay my hands on his chest. "Of course she loves him. Not only did he come from you, her most favorite person, but she's wanted a puppy for a long time. In her eyes, there couldn't be a better present."

He beams … like he literally lights up from the inside out. "This has been the best Christmas ever, you know that right?" He holds my hips and pulls me flush against him. "I'm so happy. I never imagined this … being here with you and Peyton, with your family and friends."

"You mean with your family and your friends," I whisper.

"It's more than I ever dreamed of, more than I ever let myself hope for." His words fill me … like a balloon inside of my chest, growing and growing until it feels like it might burst from being so full.

And because Edward is as ornery as he is sweet and charming, he just can't help but say, "So about breakfast? I want to hurry and get to your parents' house. I can't wait to rub Charlie's, Emmett's, and Xavier's noses in the fact that I … the newbie, the greenhorn of this group … am the present king this year."  

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"I could stay like this forever," Edward practically purrs a few weeks after Christmas.

"Mmmm, I think I might let you." I lean down and kiss the top of his shoulder and stretch my arms down his naked chest.

I've been massaging his shoulders while he sits in front of me. The TV is on, though I have no idea what we're watching. It's all background noise to me because I'm much more interested in listening to the soft groans and rumbles coming from Edward.

"Remind me to thank Ali for having Peyton and Brady over to spend the night," he murmurs. He leans his head backward and hooks my legs over his shoulders.
I kiss the tip of his nose. My fingers dance across his chest and then I dig my nails in his skin and drag them up. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough so that his jaws clench and his sea glass eyes darken.

God, he looks so good sitting in between my legs.

The fire crackles in the fireplace, and the glow paints his skin in the most delicious gold. When Alice complained, again, about Jasper whining about wanting to get a dog, and then mentioned having Peyton and Brady spend the night, I jumped on the chance to have a night at home, alone, with Edward.

Home … it only feels like home when he's here now.

I circle his nipples and then brush across them with my thumbs. His fingers wrap around my calves and goosebumps break out all over when he turns his head and kisses the side of my knee. It's my turn to groan when I feel his warm, wet tongue run up the inside of my thigh.

"I've missed you," he says softly against my skin, his caramel turtle voice deeper and grittier than normal.

I lean over, letting my hair fall over us in a sheet of dark brown and nuzzle the side of his neck right behind his ear. "I think you need to show me how much," I whisper, biting down gently on his earlobe.

If I have my way, sometime in the very near future we won't have to miss each other at all. Ever since Christmas, well since Edward was given a clean bill of health by his doctor and started spending a few nights a week back at the boarding house, a fact which made all concerned relatively miserable, an idea had taken root in the back of my mind, one that grew and grew more every day.

I'd had every intention of bringing my idea up, subtly of course, until I feel Edward's tongue on my thigh … now I can't form much thought past "yes" and "please."

With those two words in mind, I bend over again and kiss, and lick and nibble my way up and down the side of his neck. I can smell the cologne I gave him for Christmas mixed with the scent of stain and sawdust from spending the day helping Carlisle around the boarding house, layered with just him and it makes me groan. It also makes me turned-on.

My fingers trace over every dip and ripple across his chest. I spread my legs more and stretch my arms even farther so I can reach the soft, dark hair that runs from his navel and dips teasingly below his jeans. I'm on a quest for what lies even lower.

"Ah, fuck … baby." He moans when I waste no time and undo the button on his jeans so I can slide a hand beneath his boxers.

"I hope so," I tell him and suck on the skin behind his ear as I wrap my hand around his cock.

"Jesus Christ," he hisses once he registers my words. His hands wrap around my ass and he scoots me forward, making me lean over so much I'm practically bent in half.

I slowly let my hand glide up and down a few times, but realize quickly that as good as he feels in my hand, I want to feel him someplace else. I move my legs from his shoulders to either side of his body and with my free hand, urge him to sit on the couch. As he lifts from the floor, I throw a pillow between his legs and tug on his jeans hard enough that they fall over his hips. Once I get them to his knees, I push them all the way down and toss them to the side.
"Bella, what are you … ?" he starts to say, but the words are cut off abruptly when press my hand against his even harder erection.

I lean forward and kiss the inside of each of his thighs before I do the same to his cock. His hips buck off the sofa as soon as he feels it and it gives me the perfect opportunity to pull his boxers off as well. So I do. As soon as his cock is free, I lick up its length until I reach the head.

"Oh fucking hell." Edward pants, already needy and so, so hard.

I lock my eyes with his and watch his face morph from need to sweet pleasure as I take him in my mouth. He spreads his legs wider, scoots his ass closer to the edge of the couch, and plunges one hand into my hair. I lap at the head, dipping my tongue in the slit at the top and taste him for the first time in a long time. This is not something I get to indulge in very often. Not that I don't like it, because I damn sure do, but with Peyton at home, even though she's down the hall and in her bed, it's just an act that usually gets left out of the nighttime repertoire.

So, now, I'm going to indulge.

I'm going to enjoy.

I'm going to take my time.

And take my time I do. I lick and suck. I take him deep then tease just the tip. I kiss him up and down, relishing in the dichotomy of hard covered by soft. Of smooth skin and of skin that's wrinkled. I listen to him beg for more, then plead with me to hurry. I feel his fingers wrap my hair tighter and then let go. I watch his eyes squeeze close, then focus so intensely on me that it's a wonder my clothes don't vaporize right off my body.

I enjoy.

"Bella, oh fuck, baby." He groans as he throws his head back. "I want to come, please. Jesus, please, I'm so fucking close."

I groan around his cock when I lean forward and my already hard, aching nipples rub against the couch cushion. My panties are so wet and I want him to come, only so I can crawl on top of him and take him inside of me. I need him so badly.

I speed up, moving up and down even faster, sucking harder, scraping along his length with my teeth. I curl my tongue around him, and take him farther in my mouth, as far as I can go.

"That's it. Oh God, oh fuck … shit, shit." Edward grunts between each up and down of my mouth.

His legs tense, his fingers clench in my hair, his hips lift from the couch. He moans so loud and practically yells, "I'm coming."

I don't stop until he's finished, taking all he gives me. He comes so hard his entire body literally shakes with little aftershocks and I have to admit, I kind of really love that I can make him feel that good.

Edward is not one to ever shy away from anything sexual so it's no surprise when he pulls me up from the floor and into his lap so he can kiss me. Somehow in the course of losing all sense of reality because he kisses me senseless, my clothes are off and I'm laying down on the sofa.

"My turn," he tells me with a sexy as hell smirk.
"So, what are you going to get Edward for Valentine's Day?" Rose asks me. I cradle my cell phone on my shoulder so that I can grab the bowl of popcorn off the counter and my glass of Coke to take into the living room.

Balancing everything precariously, I manage to make it to the sofa without spilling anything or dropping my phone and let out a sigh of satisfaction when I sit down. Once I have the bowl on the table in front of me and my Coke on a coaster, I pick my phone back up and answer Rose. "I have a few ideas," I tell her cryptically.

"Bella," she whines and I smirk while I munch on a handful of popcorn … rather loudly in her ear.

"Nope, not spilling, sister mine," I tell her. "Besides, if I tell you that means Alice will find out and we all know she can't keep a secret, especially from Edward. She thinks it goes against their two peas in a pod thing to not tell him something."

We both chuckle at that, because we both know how true that is. Even before his accident Alice felt a connection with Edward she didn't feel with anyone else, but now, it's like she thinks they are long-lost brother and sister or something. If I didn't trust them both implicitly and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that her entire world is Jasper, I might be tempted to be a tiny bit jealous at how close they are, but instead, I love seeing it. They both give each other something they haven't found in anyone else and it's actually beautiful to see.

Rose huffs. "Fine, fine, be that way. If you're not going to tell me what you're getting for Edward, then I'm not telling you what I'm getting for Emmett," she says as if she's hurting me by not telling me.

I roll my eyes, even though she can't see me. "Rose, knowing you and my brother, you've probably planned some scenario that involves you dressing up like a slutty schoolgirl or something." I snort.

"Nope, that was last year, Bell. This year it's a slutty nurse." She giggles and then out and out laughs when I make a gagging sound. "Hey you started it," she singsongs.

Just then, there's a loud knock on the door, three quick raps against the door frame that startles me so badly I drop the phone on the floor. "Rose, there's someone at the door," I say as I pick the phone up and hold it to my ear. I can see the outline of whoever it is through the glass window in the middle of the door. Whoever it is shifts from foot to foot. It doesn't look like anyone I recognize but I can't really tell through the distortion of the glass. "Let me call you back," I casually tell her before disconnecting the call.

I walk toward the door, curling my fingers tightly around the phone. My heart starts to race and a chill creeps up my spine. A sense of danger washes over me and I shiver involuntarily. I bite my bottom lip. I have an irrational need to hide behind the sofa and call for Edward but I shake my head at my overactive imagination. This is Corea for God's sake, not New York City where an unexpected knock on your door is cause for alarm.

Taking a deep breath, I lift an unsteady hand to the doorknob and open the door slowly. The guy standing in front of me turns to face me and that sense of dread I had not more than a minute ago is back, and waving a big fucking red flag. He's not that tall, no taller than Seth from my first impression, but it's the way his eyes bore straight into mine that makes me shrink back into the doorway. My fingers itch to press the speed dial on my phone for Edward and just as I'm about to give in, the guy opens his mouth.
"I'm looking for Edward Masen. Is he here?" he asks. His eyes still lock onto mine, and I'm powerless to move. My breath catches in my throat and I swallow a few times, unable to answer him. "Are you okay?" The question should be simple to answer, but it's not. For some reason every instinct I have is screaming at me to deny I even know Edward much less where he is.

The man continues to stare at me, his eyes deep, black and most frightening of all, cold and calculating. He smirks. I guess it's supposed to put me at ease when all it does is make me want to slam the door in his face and run upstairs to hide under my bed.

He clears his throat and cocks an eyebrow at me. "Edward, is he here?" he asks again.

I finally find my voice after swallowing a few times and cross my arms in front of my chest in a move that's purely defensive. "I don't know who you're talking about," I tell him, hoping the slight tremble of my voice doesn't give away how scared I truly am.

Brady barks from behind me and then pokes his little head out between my legs which causes the man to gasp and then chuckle. When I hear the sound, I feel a little foolish for thinking him to be some devil incarnate, though the hair on the back of my neck is still standing on end.

"Cute dog. How old?" he questions as he squats. He takes off his gloves and holds his hand out. I can't help but smile when Brady nudges my legs apart and rubs his nose against the man's fingers. The smile fades when I spy a strange-looking tattoo on his hand, right on the web between his thumb and index finger. It startles me, only because it seems like such a strange place for a tattoo. I tell him Brady is almost three months old. He simply nods and then scratched Brady behind the ears. "What's its name?"

Brady yips and then licks the man causing another round of laughter from the man. "Brady," I answer without hesitating.

The man stands once again and Brady ambles down the stairs of the porch, though gravity does most of the work and the little guy is helpless to resist. Once he's sniffing around in the yard, the stranger asks once again, "So, Edward? When is he going to be home?"

Feeling much braver now that we're both standing on the front porch I hold my hand out, "I'm Bella, I don't think you said your name."

His eyes actually widen in embarrassment and pale pink spreads across his cheeks. "Oh, hell, I'm sorry. No wonder you keep looking at me like I'm Freddy Kreuger." He chuckles and then holds his hand out. "Ryan Masterson," he says easily and immediately I relax, thrilled to be able to put a face with the name of the man that helped Edward so long ago.

"Ryan, oh goodness." I smile. "Edward's told me a lot about you! Nothing's wrong is it?" I ask, suddenly nervous. Corea is a hell of a long way from Boston for a surprise visit.

I seem to catch him off-guard because something flashes in his eyes, but it's gone as fast as it comes. Before I have time to question if my eyes are playing tricks on me, he's walking down the stairs. "Just passing through," he says calmly and without a hint of any hesitation, "and thought I'd stop in and see how he was doing, especially after his accident. I got your address from Wayne and Edward's told me all about you and your daughter, Peyton." His top lip curls back, looking so much like a sneer that I gasp and wonder yet again if I'm seeing things, but the goosebumps that break out over my arms and the way I take a step back tells me I indeed saw what I did.

My nails scrape along the screen of my phone, and when the guy sees what I'm doing, he walks a
bit farther out into the yard. I look around for a car, but don't see one, and the absence of one chills me to the bone. I take a deep breath though and remember this is Ryan, this is the guy that helped Edward when it seemed like all the cards were stacked against him, and curse myself for letting my overactive imagination run away from me again … and vow to kick Xavier's ass for making me watch scary movies the last time he was at the house. Deliberately shaking off all sense of the ridiculous, I go down one step and stop, and smile at Ryan.

"Do you want to wait for Edward? He shouldn't be much longer," I tell him, half hoping he decides to just go, but knowing how excited Edward would be to see him.

Since he's been in Corea, with the exception of Wayne, there hasn't been any contact with anyone or anything from his life before he arrived here. Ryan is one of the halfway decent memories he has.

He smirks again. "Nah, I need to hit the road, long trip back to Boston and all. I'll catch him again some other time," he says and heads toward the end of the driveway. "Tell Edward …" he pauses to stare at me again, "that I'll see him soon. Real soon. Take care, Bella, and take care of Peyton. You never know when something might happen," he finishes cryptically … menacingly.

And now … the chills have come racing back.

As if sensing my distress, Brady yips then growls as Ryan walks down the driveway. I don't even wait to see which direction he goes, I just reach down and pick up the puppy and race inside the house, locking the door soundly and quickly behind me. I lean my back against the door, breathing like I've just run to Ellsworth and back, and when I feel Brady's little cold nose against the side of my neck, I giggle.

"Okay, little guy, is it just me, or was that whole thing just weirder than weird?" I ask him as I hold him up in front of my face.

He tilts his head at me and then barks, almost like he agrees with me.

I take a few deep breaths and replay the whole encounter back in my mind. There is no mistaking the sense of something being off, but as I think about it, I can't help but think I've let my imagination run away from me. From everything both Wayne and Edward have told me about Ryan, there is no reason to think that him showing up here, even if unannounced, is anything to be concerned about, so I shake off my uneasiness and concentrate on the fact that Edward and Peyton will be home soon.

I'm putting the dishes away in the kitchen when I hear Cherry rumble up the driveway. Brady hears it, too, because his ears rise and then he slips and slides his way to the front door, barking as soon as he hears the doors to the Blazer close. I wipe my hands on a dishtowel and lean against the doorway, waiting for my two favorite people to walk through the door.

"Brady!" Peyton squeals and drops to her knees the second her feet cross the threshold. Brady wriggles against her, making Peyton laugh so hard she falls over on the floor which gives Brady the perfect opportunity to lick all over her face.

Edward steps in front of me. He reaches a hand out and curls his index finger around mine. His eyes are my favorite sea glass color and from the way they look me over from head to toe, I know that it's a good thing Peyton's going to bed soon. "I think I'm jealous, baby," he whispers and then leans forward and brushes his lips so softly against my lips, it's barely more than a wisp of mouth pressed against mouth. "How come you don't ever act that excited to see me?" He shamelessly sticks his bottom lip out, and it takes all I have not to stand on my tiptoes and bite it.
However, there's nothing wrong with a little teasing, so I hook my free index finger in his belt loop and pull him forward. I purposely slide my knee between his legs and rub it against the erection he's sporting beneath his low-slung jeans. He groans, just loud enough for me to hear it, but not so loud Peyton can. His eyes darken, his nostrils flare just the slightest bit, and when he rolls his hips against my knee, pressing more of his hard cock into my knee, it's my turn to whimper.

"So, you're telling me, you want me to jump on you, knock you down on the ground, and then lick you all over your face?" I ask and try desperately not to smile at him.

He doesn't answer but instead raises one eyebrow and smirks in such a way that if I wasn't hanging on to him, I'd most definitely be a puddle of Bella goo right about now. He leans in close again and places his mouth right beside my ear. I can feel the slight stubble along his angular jaw barely ghost across my cheek but between that and his warm breath fanning across my ear, I'm unable to do anything but pull him closer and hang on for dear life.

"Mmmm, I think that's," and after that word comes out of his sinful mouth, in the caramel turtle voice that makes me lose all reason, he sucks my earlobe slowly into his mouth. He releases it after curling his tongue around it for a few moments and then says, "Exactly what I'm telling you."

Christ on a cracker.

We stare at each other for a few long, sexually-charged seconds before he finally takes a step back, letting some much-needed space between us. He kisses the end of my nose before he walks into the kitchen and gets himself a beer. The next few hours pass with Peyton talking nonstop about her trip to Ellsworth for ice cream and then watching her play with Brady on the floor.

Thankfully, Peyton is ready for bed earlier than normal and goes with no fuss, with Brady happily in his bed beside hers. I barely have time to close the door to her room before Edward grabs my hand, throws me on the bed, and promptly proceeds to show me the proper way to show excitement.

I'll definitely know for next time.

It's while we're brushing our teeth that I remember to mention Ryan's surprising ... and odd visit. I rinse my mouth out with water and then turn to him. "You'll never guess who stopped by while you and Peyton were getting ice cream," I say and then walk out of the bathroom and move toward my dresser.

I hear him rinse and spit, too, before following me into the bedroom. I take off the necklace he gave me for Christmas, pressing my fingers to my lips and then to the picture on the pendant like I do every night, and lay it in my jewelry box. Edward watches me, as he does every night he's here, and then begins pulling the blankets down the bed.

"Bella?" He chuckles because I've stopped mid-sentence and haven't told him the answer.

I shake my head and then climb in on my side of the bed. Once we're laying down, face to face, and nose to nose, he tangles our legs together and then crooks an eyebrow and waits for me to continue.

"Ryan Masterson," I tell him.

His eyes widen, so big they resemble saucers. "What? You're kidding me! What did he say? Is everything okay? Why didn't he tell me? What did he want?" he fires questions in rapid succession.

I open my mouth then close it a few times as I play the conversation back in my mind again, finding it odder and odder with each passing thought. The whole encounter just seemed ... off.
"I don't know," I say slowly and look at Edward. He frowns and quirks his lips to the side. The dip between his eyebrows becomes more pronounced as he watches me. I can tell he sees how confused I am and the frustration he's feeling at my inability to articulate pretty much anything at the point is evident on his face.

My mind races through Ryan's words, actions, and I can picture the way his eyes looked so cold and calculating, but what really gets me, what causes my breath to hitch in my throat is something I barely registered before.

"It's weird Ryan has a tattoo," I tell him.

His hands, the ones that have been constantly in motion through my hair and up and down my arm still … eerily so.

Our eyes lock and his are alight with … surprise, then confusion, then fear.

Pure, unadulterated, abject fear.

"Baby," he croaks, squeezing the breath out me as his arms wrap tightly around me, "Ryan doesn't have a tattoo."

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Ummm … yeah. That's all I have to give you about the end. Hope y'all enjoyed their first Christmas together. Peyton got her puppy, is anyone at all surprised by his name?

Next chapter, well hang on folks, that's all I can say about that.

I am back on track now. That means review replies, (I'm SO sorry for not doing them last chapter!), a Wordle and a new recipe on Wednesday, and some pic teases throughout the week can be expected. Thanks for your patience with me, I know things have been a tad out of character for me recently, but that's all in the past now!

Again, hope everyone had a wonderful holiday season and that your New Year is already off to a fantastic start! Thanks for spending the first day of 2012 with me!

See you next Sunday … let me know what you thought of the chapter, I'm a little nervous about this one!

Erin~
Chapter 24

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers – the last few weeks have been a bit bumpy and I don't know what I'd do without them … especially Laurel with her never-ending patience and J'me for always pushing me when I need it. Love you all!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

Now … on we go!

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Chapter 24

EPOV

"Baby," I squeeze, tight … so fucking tight, "Ryan doesn't have a tattoo."

Holy motherfucking shit.

For the briefest of moments, or maybe it's minutes … hours, everything is bathed in red. I can't think. I can't see. I can't breathe. I can't really hear, but somewhere in the midst of the cacophony sounding in my brain, Bella's voice reaches me.

"Edward. Oh, God, breathe. Please, just breathe."

My chest constricts painfully, each breath I try to take requires more effort than should be necessary. Fingers clench, my head swims, and my lungs feel like I'm breathing fire laced with razor blades. I concentrate on my breathing, forcing each breath in and out until the red recedes and my vision clears.

I open my eyes. Bella looks terrified of course and my stomach twists at that.

Fuck.

As much as I want to press her nose into my shoulder and hold her close, I can't. Not yet. "Bella, everything. Tell me everything that happened."

"Edward, what's the matter? You're scaring me." Her hands reach out and she holds my head, her fingers ice cold. Her coffee-brown eyes are wide with fear and I can see her pulse beat wildly on her neck.

I take another deep breath and try to get control of my quickly escalating emotions. "Shh, baby, I'm sorry. But, tell me, please. All of it, start at the beginning and don't leave anything out."

I don't want to hear the words that are about to come out of her mouth … but I have to know.
"Okay, well, I was talking to Rose on the phone after you and Peyton left to go get ice cream," she begins and then goes on to tell me what transpired while I was gone. With each passing word I get more and more anxious and feel the dread creeping in. "I got a bad feeling, you know," she tells me and I squeeze my eyes shut and groan.

I don't want to yell at her, but Jesus Christ.

"Bella," I begin and she huffs.

"I know, Edward, all right? I knew the second I opened the door that I shouldn't have, but what was I supposed to do? Some guy shows up asking for you and it caught me by surprise. Then Brady got out, and when the guy started playing with him, I was stuck. Of course, when he told me his name was Ryan, I felt a bit like an idiot for being scared in the first place. Now you're telling me you don't think it was Ryan at all. What the hell is going on? If that wasn't Ryan, who was it? Who would know where you were, know about me ... " And then she stops. She swallows convulsively and begins to shake violently in my arms. "Oh, God. Oh my God," she whispers over and over, sounding more frantic by the second.


"The guy … whoever that was, he … he …" she stammers with as terrified a voice as I've ever heard anyone use. "He knew Peyton's name. He told me to take care of Peyton … and that …" She sobs now and I can't help but groan, because I don't want to know what the stranger said, but I know I have to hear it. I squeeze her and tip her head up so I can look at her.

"Tell me the rest," I implore.

Her eyes fill with tears and her breath catches in her throat before she forces out, "He said that you never know when something might happen."

One minute I'm on the bed and the next I'm up, pacing like a caged animal. "What the fuck? Jesus fucking Christ, what in the hell is going on? Who does that? What does that even mean?"

My voice escalates and I know it's bordering on yelling, but I can't help it. I know, with almost absolute certainty that whoever that man was … it wasn't Ryan. I haven't seen him since I left Boston but I know he doesn't have a tattoo. He would never get one; it's just not who he is. He's made enough comments about mine and about them in general for me to know he'd never mark his body in such a way.

I stomp to the nightstand beside my side of the bed and pick up my cell phone, muttering under my breath the whole time. I hit the speed dial and pull my hair with my free hand as I wait for the call to connect. When the person on the other end answers, I don't even bother with a hello.

"Something's happened. I need you to come to Bella's. Bring Emmett."

I cut off Jasper's question and hit the next number. "Seth," I say immediately, "I need you and Xavier at Bella's right away." Again, I hang up without an explanation.

I yank on my jeans, and pull a t-shirt over my head, my mind racing at a million miles an hour as I try to make sense of what Bella's told me.

"Edward, what are you doing? Why did you call all the guys?" Bella asks. She's sitting up in bed with the blankets pulled up protectively around her body. She looks so tiny, afraid, and it breaks my heart.
It breaks even more when she says, "I didn't know it wasn't Ryan," and tears spill down her cheeks.

I crawl across the bed and crush her to my chest. Kissing the top of her head I tell her, "Of course you didn't. How could you? You've never seen him. I'll find out what's going on, don't worry. Nothing will happen to you or Peyton, I promise. No one will ever hurt either of you because of me." I squeeze her even tighter, fighting against the instinct to tell her this is all my fault … even if I have no fucking idea what's going on.

She shakes her head against my chest and her hands clutch at my t-shirt. I can feel her nails through the thin cotton and she wriggles and moves until she's in my lap. "Don't say that. This isn't your fault. We don't even know what any of this means."

I want to believe her, fuck do I want to believe her, but I know whatever this is … it's about me.

I reach for the phone I threw on the bed and bring up Ryan's number. Bella's calmed down some, but she continues to shake and her heart's still beating too damn fast … or maybe it's mine. After four rings, Ryan's voicemail picks up. "Ryan, it's Edward. I need to talk to you. Something's going on and I don't know what it is. Call me back as soon as you get this. It's important."

I huff in frustration. I scroll through my contacts and hit the next number. This time it's Wayne's voicemail. "It's Edward. I have a problem. Call me back."

I hear Jasper's loudass car pull in the driveway so I disentangle myself from Bella and stand up. She follows. I want to tell her to stay upstairs while I talk to the guys, but there's no way in hell she'll listen. I know my girl and I'd like to keep my balls, thank you very much. Not the best time in the world to let my mind stray to the gutter, but eh, I can't help it.

Anything, even if it's for only a few seconds, is better than thinking about what all this means. I need to call Charlie and Carlisle, I know I do, but not until I talk to the guys and not until I hear back from Ryan and Wayne. I need to get my shit together and make sure all my bases are covered, and that means making sure Bella and Peyton have what they need to be safe first and foremost before I do anything.

If anything happened to either one of them … I start to think, then force myself not to go any further. It's a moot point anyway, because I'd die before anyone hurt them. Or kill someone first. In a fucking heartbeat.

"Come on. Jasper and Emmett are here." I hold my hand out to her and grab a hoodie off the chair for her to put on since she's dressed for bed and is wearing a thin tank top and a pair of my boxers. I contemplate for about four seconds asking her to put on a pair of sweats but the beating on the door makes me hurry down the stairs instead.

"It's a good thing Sprite can sleep through a tornado," I mutter as I reach for the doorknob.

"What the hell is going on, Edward? Is Bella okay? Peyton?" Emmett fires off as he barrels through the front door.

Jasper walks in behind him and before I have time to close the door, Xavier's truck screeches to a halt behind Jasper's car. He and Seth run through the door and when I shut the door and turn around, Bella is between Emmett and Xavier, both of them looking ready to kill or attack or protect. It's just what I want. I'd like to tell myself I'm overreacting, but spending seven years in prison taught me to trust my gut, and right now my gut is screaming at me that something's coming … and it's not good.
"Edward, what the fuck?" Xavier asks, his voice steel-hard and his muscles flexing beneath his tight, long-sleeved t-shirt.

I push a hand back in my hair and with the other, pinch the bridge of my nose. I take a few moments to do some deep breathing exercises, gathering myself so that I can do what needs to be done.

"Someone was here at the house today, a strange man, when Peyton and I were in Ellsworth getting ice cream," I begin.

The four guys stare at me, like Sheldon looks at Penny on The Big Bang Theory. I sigh, deciding that they need more explanation.

"Okay, let's sit." I motion them toward the living room and pace while everyone makes themselves comfortable.

Bella's eyes never leave mine. The more I pace, the more worried she looks. Figuring that it's best just to dive in, I start. "I'm not sure what the fuck is going on. I've called Wayne and Ryan and neither one has called me back." I reach for my phone and grunt when still, there's no message, not even a text from either one of them.

"Dude, what the hell do Ryan and Wayne have to do with some asshole showing up at Bella's house?" Jasper asks, his exasperation filters through his words.

"Damn it! Will you just let me talk?" I practically holler. I turn around to face out the window and try to calm down.

I feel Bella's hand, and she wiggles her fingers until they slide between mine. She lays her forehead on my shoulder and whispers, "It's going to be all right, Edward."

I make some sort of sound, a cross between a grunt and a groan. She squeezes my hand, and looks up at me. "It will. Let's figure out what's going on before you go off half-cocked, okay? You have to calm down. You have to breathe, and you have to think before you act. I'm safe, Peyton's safe, and you're here."

I pull her in front of me and bury my nose in her hair, letting her familiar citrus scent work its usual magic. Slowly, my heart returns almost to normal and I feel like I can think … at least somewhat rationally. I run my fingers down the side of her face, taking care to make a special pass over the top of her ear. Feeling that little silver metal ball move beneath my thumb is like a talisman, reminding me in the surest of ways that she's here, that she's safe … that she's still mine.

"Sorry," I murmur and brush my lips across hers. It's not enough, it never is, but it'll do for now.

She leads me back to the others and pulls me down next to her on the sofa. Now that I don't feel like I'm being buried alive, I tell the guys everything, stopping often to let Bella fill in the blanks.

"Wait a God damned minute," Xavier booms and shoves himself up off the sofa. He stomps back and forth in front of us, muttering under his breath. About every third word I understand and it takes all I have not to fling myself at him and try to wrestle him to the ground to beat the shit out of him.

Try being the operative word.

"You mean to tell me …" He whips around and pins Bella with a glare so menacing she cringes beside me. "That you were foolish enough to not only open the door to a stranger, but hold a
fucking conversation with him? That you went outside with him, without anyone around, without a way to call for help if you needed it? Jesus fucking Christ, Bella, what the hell were you thinking? I mean it's obvious you weren't thinking! I can't believe you'd do something so stupid not to mention dangerous!" he thunders.

Bella hiccups beside me, and I feel her shake as I wrap an arm around her.

Xavier scrubs his face with his hands, the muscles of his chest and arms bunched and rippled. He's still muttering, still cursing, and I know it all stems from a place of worry not to mention love, but still, it pisses me the fuck off. I move to stand but before I can, Emmett picks up where Xavier left off.

"Bella, how could you?" Emmett asks quietly, disappointment coloring his voice so plainly he might as well have screamed it. "What if Peyton would have been here? What would you have done then? Invited the guy in for milk and cookies? I wouldn't have ever believed you'd be so stupid."

And now, I've had enough.

Bella is outright sobbing next to me. Each tear is like a lance to my heart and I can't take any more.

"Knock it the fuck off, both of you," I say in a low, deep voice, one I haven't used since I'd been inside. I glare at both of them. I can feel my jaw clench, hear my teeth grind, and I stand up. I might not be the biggest guy in the world, but I can be damn intimidating when I want to be. Right now, I want to be. "If either one of you, ever, and I mean fucking ever, talk to Bella that way again, I promise you, it'll be the last words out of either of your mouths. Are we clear?" I hold their gazes, until they both are forced to look away. "Bella made a mistake, but you don't need to beat her over the head about it. And hell, she's never seen Ryan. How was she supposed to know it wasn't him? Besides, with all the people she sees and comes into contact with at the restaurant, she's used to seeing strangers." I sit back down and wrap an arm around Bella then turn to kiss the side of her head. "It's not your fault."

She furiously nods her head at me and when she opens her mouth to argue with me, I place my fingers over her lips. "It's not, Bella, not at all. You didn't know. No, you shouldn't have gone outside to talk to him, but once he said his name was Ryan, it makes sense you'd let your guard down a bit. At least you were smart enough to pay attention to the bad feeling the guy gave you. If anything, it's my fault. This obviously has something to do with me," I say, hating that all of this is because of me.

"Edward, no!" Bella sits up on her knees and throws herself into my arms. She cries softly as I hold her, the turmoil and the tension of the day finally taking its toll on her.

Jasper clears his throat as he watches us, standing in front of the fireplace. "Okay, I think everyone needs to calm down and take a step backward for a few minutes." He very pointedly looks between Emmett and Xavier before walking forward. Kneeling in front of Bella, he speaks gently. "Bell, Edward's right. Any one of us would have answered the door, even Ali and Rose would have. Now that we know there's some strange guy walking around Corea, we can all be looking out for him. I do think we need to get a better handle on what's going on though, Edward." He looks over to me and I nod.

I slip my phone out of my pocket and dial Ryan once more. "Voice mail," I say sharply and throw my phone on the coffee table in front of us.

"Edward, what do you think is going on?" Seth asks, speaking for the first time.
It's often easy to overlook Seth. He's hardly ever serious, always has a smile on his face, and never has a bad word to say about anyone, but the look on his face right now, as his eyes bore into Bella cowered against my side, lets me know in no uncertain terms he shouldn't be underestimated.

"I don't know, man. I mean no one knows where I am. I went to Wayne's straight out of prison, stayed there a week, then came here. It's not like I made any friends inside that would want to look me up. Sure, I pissed off more than a few guys, but I don't think enough for any of them to track me down." I shake my head, frustrated and with a gnawing, nervous feeling eating away at my insides.

Xavier begins to pace again, though this time looking less like a wild animal and more like a man, a friend, on a mission. "Well, it goes without saying that until we get some answers, neither Peyton nor Bella go anywhere alone. Same goes for you, Edward," he says, startling me with the level of protectiveness he speaks with … and the fact he's as worried about me as P and Bella. He scoffs and waves his hand in the air, blowing off my surprise like flicking lint off his shirt. "Whatever, dude. You're one of us, family, and we're not letting anything happen to any of you."

"I think you need to talk to Carlisle and Charlie," Seth states. When I look at him, he goes on. "You are planning on telling them what's going on, aren't you?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, but nod my head. "Of course."

Suddenly I'm exhausted. It's after midnight so it's no wonder, but my whole body aches. I want nothing more than to crawl into bed with Bella and curl my body around hers. I want to fall asleep with my nose buried in her hair and my fingers touching her soft, warm skin. I want to tangle our legs together beneath the blankets and I want my semi-hard cock to find its favorite spot pressed up against her ass. I want to feel her breath on my arm as I hold her. I want to wake up in the morning and realize that all of this has just been a bad dream, caused by the extra scoop of mint chocolate chip ice cream I begged Peyton not to tell Bella I had.

I want to tell myself that all of this is just some wild misunderstanding, but I can't.

I have no idea what's going on, who showed up here today, but I'm damned sure going to find out.

Jasper claps his hands together and waits for all of us to look in his direction. "Well, we're not going to be able to decide anything until Edward talks to Wayne and Ryan. Xavier will be with Bella at The Breakers tomorrow and Peyton will be at school. Lucky for the rest of us, we still have a few days before we go back to work which should give us plenty of time to get a handle on the situation. I say we plan on meeting tomorrow after Edward's gotten some answers. Who knows," he says as he walks toward the front door, "maybe we're blowing this way out of proportion."

His last sentence falls flat. Not one person in the room believes him anymore than he, himself, does, but we all play along.

Xavier and Emmett both apologize to Bella, hugging her hard and long until they each give her a kiss and walk out of the door. Seth and Jasper follow, all of us promising to catch up with each other later in the morning and I close the door behind them.

Bella looks as exhausted as I feel. Her hair's a tangled mess, half in and out of her ponytail. Her eyes are puffy, the tip of her nose red, and her cheeks splotchy and tear-stained.

She's never been more gorgeous.
"I need you," I whisper fervently as I walk toward her. "I need to touch you, taste you … have you." I kiss her between each word. Her mouth, her neck, her shoulders, memorizing for the umpteenth time the way her skin feels against my lips, my tongue. I bend down, and lift her into my arms, holding her protectively against my body so I can carry her up the stairs. She wraps her arms around my neck, pressing her chest firmly, nipples already hardened peaks, enticingly against mine. Her hands are everywhere, in my hair, then squeezing my arms, until she dips one inside my jeans and the other beneath my t-shirt. My body's on fire and I hiss when the tips of her fingers graze the tip of my cock. I'm hot, hard, and so ready to rip her clothes off and sink into her sweet, tight heat. Once I have her naked and her body is bathed in shimmery, silvery moonlight, I sink. I don't stop until the pale lavender of early morning peeks from behind the blinds.

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"Peyton, you remember what I said, right?" I ask for the forty-seventh time between leaving Bella's and arriving at school.

She huffs but doesn't roll her eyes, sensing that this morning, the tension in the air can't be diffused with a sweet smile or her usual ramblings. "Yes. No walking home today and no leaving unless it's with someone on my ridiculously long list of approved people." She still doesn't roll her eyes, but with that comment, I can tell she so wants to. Instead she unhooks her seat belt and leans forward, poking her head between the seats. She looks back and forth at Bella and me a few times each before she says, "I know something's going on and I know it's bad. You're not sick or anything are you?" Her eyes begin to well with tears and I quickly put my arm around her.

"Of course not, sweetheart. Just do as we ask for today, okay? I promise we'll talk to you later." I look at Bella over Peyton's head. She's biting her bottom lip and I can see the indentations her teeth have made in the already tender skin. Her lip has taken a lot of abuse over the past few weeks. Thank God for strawberry Chapstick.

We each give Peyton a kiss and wait until she's safely inside before driving away. "We have to tell her something, Bella. She's way too smart to hide anything from her. She can tell there's something wrong, anyway."

"I know," is all Bella answers. She reaches out and waits for me to put my hand in hers. I give it to her willingly, always.

By the time I pull up in front of The Breakers, she still hasn't said a word, but I don't push. "You'll call me after you've talked to my dad and Carlisle?" The uncertainty in her voice kills me. I lean across the console and place my fingers beneath her chin, turning her head to face me.

"Of course I will. I'll be back here by lunch, okay?" I hold her head in place and press my lips against hers. "Try not to worry." She scrunches her nose and scoffs, tilting her eyes upward.

She reaches for the door handle but turns before she opens it. "Love you," she tells me, leaving me with one more strawberry-filled kiss before she hurries inside without looking back. I watch the door close behind her, relieved to leave her in Xavier's more than capable care, but worried as hell about talking to Carlisle and Charlie.

The short drive to Carlisle's is full of recriminations sprinkled with a healthy dose of fear. Fear of disappointing the two men I respect more than any other besides Wayne and my grandfather. Fear of Charlie for putting not only his daughter, but his granddaughter in danger … fear of the fact that my past has come back to threaten everything and everyone I hold dear.

When I get to the boarding house, Em's Jeep and Jasper's piece of shit car are both parked out front.
I suppose I should've known they'd be here, but seeing their vehicles surprises me … and makes me feel pretty damn good to be honest. Knowing they have my back means more than I can tell them. One glance at Charlie's truck reminds me they might have their work cut out for them.

I smell the coffee as soon as I open the side door. It's so strange walking into the house that's supposed to be my home. I'll always be grateful to Carlisle and Esme for welcoming me and making me feel like a man instead of an ex-con, but the boarding house isn't my home any longer. My home is wherever Bella and Peyton are. I've known it for a while now. Staying with them while I recovered, being woken up in Bella's bed by Peyton Christmas morning, making love as the clock struck midnight on New Year's on the floor in front of the fireplace just cemented the fact.

Before all this shit happened it was something I'd wanted to talk to Bella about. Now that I'll be staying there until we figure out what's going on, that conversation is going to have to wait. I want to stay there, permanently, but I want it to be because she wants me there, not because I have to be there.

"Morning, sunshine," Seth crows from the kitchen table.

I roll my eyes at him. Why he has to be a smart ass ALL the time, I'll never know. I walk toward the coffee pot, nodding at Emmett and Jasper as I pass them. Once my coffee's fixed, I sit at the table where Carlisle and Charlie are both watching me with expectant, confused looks. I wilt a bit under their heavy gazes, hating that I'm going to disappoint them.

"So, thanks for coming by this morning, Charlie," I begin. I blow a breath across my coffee, watching as the liquid ripples in the mug. I'm trying to buy time, I know it, everyone in the room knows it, but luckily for me, no one calls me on it. After I take a sip and let the warm drink slide down my throat, I take a deep breath.

"There's been a development," I begin evasively.

"Okay, fine." I huff, glaring at Seth before I turn toward Charlie and Carlisle. I lay it all out and repeat the same story Bella and I told the guys last night. Neither one of them move while I speak, which only serves to make the knot in my stomach tighten with each passing word. By the time I finish, the knot's so tight that the coffee I've sipped on sits there, feeling more like rancid milk than the delicious coffee Esme always has ready.

"You still haven't been able to speak with Ryan or Wayne?" Carlisle asks. He's tapping furiously on his phone as he speaks, not looking up at all when I shake my head.

"And you're positive the man wasn't Ryan?" Charlie asks. I look him in the eye and don't see the disappointment I was sure I'd find, instead he looks … almost proud. That realization startles me and I choke on the bitter coffee.

"Not positive, but for one, I can't imagine Ryan ever having a tattoo, and for two, Corea's kind of in the middle of nowhere. I don't see Ryan stopping by just to chat … especially not without telling me first."
"Hmmm." It's all he says, but it's enough to keep me on the edge of my seat. My knee bounces beneath the table. I don't notice how hard or that I'm shaking the entire table until Jasper reaches over and slaps a hand on my leg to still it.

"You're freaking me the hell out with all this nervous energy. Knock it off. We'll figure this shit out and do what we need to do. Cool it," he hisses in my ear when he leans over.

Charlie chuckles softly and then takes a drink of his coffee, not saying a word.

"Okay," Carlisle speaks for the first time. "I've sent a message to Angie asking if she's heard from Wayne. I'm guessing Ryan's just out of town or something; maybe that's why you can't get in touch with him."

I sit back in my chair and look up at the ceiling. That same sense of dread creeps over me again and I blow out a huge puff of air. I run a hand through my hair, tugging on the ends. "I just want to know what the hell's going on. None of this makes any sense." I'm frustrated but more than that, I'm scared out of my fucking mind.

No one should know where I am besides Ryan and Wayne and the fact that someone does, that they actively sought me out, and knew to look at Bella's no less is what's really got me contemplating taking Bella and Peyton far the fuck away from here.

"Son, I'd hunt you down and bury your body where no one could find you if you even think about it," Charlie tells me as he stares at me over his cup. He slurps his coffee, and his mustache twitches. I see the corners of his mouth lift in a semblance of a smile.

"What?" I squeak, I can't help it.

He snickers. "Edward, I can hear the wheels turning from here. You're blaming yourself, aren't you?" He doesn't even wait for me to agree with him before he barrels forward. "Look, I'm not going to lie. This whole thing smells fishier than it does down on the docks, but it's not like we're helpless idiots here. And it's not like we're incapable of protecting Bella and Peyton … and you if it comes down to it, but it won't. I don't have the first damn clue who showed up at Bella's yesterday but I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation. I agree we should all be on our guard and keep an eye on the girls, but I don't think we need to have escape plans in place, or worry about running away." He gives me a pointed look and holds it until I have to look away, shamed that I thought for one second about that very thing.

"Point taken," I mumble, not looking up.

"Edward," he says, his voice full of nothing but calm and strength. He waits for me to look at him before he says, "I admire the fact that you're willing to do whatever needs to be done to protect Bella and Peyton, but let's take a little step back and get some answers before we do anything rash, okay? It hasn't even been a day since you haven't been able to get in touch with Ryan, and knowing Wayne, he's going to get the messages from you and Carlisle and call you both, laughing his ass off about you both worrying about him."

Carlisle grins at me and I can't help but laugh. "Wayne'll do exactly that. Jesus." I groan, feeling a bit better now that Charlie and Carlisle have both indicated that while weird, there doesn't seem to be any reason to expect anything dangerous.

I get up from the table and pour my now cold coffee down the drain. I watch as it swirls in the bottom of the sink, my mind still trying to make sense of everything. Every muscle in my body is fatigued, like I've worked my body to exhaustion. I roll my shoulders and neck, trying to ease some
of the tension when Carlisle steps beside me.

"You okay?" he asks quietly so only I can hear him.

I look back over my shoulder making sure the others are all occupied elsewhere. "Not really, but there's not much I can do until I hear from Ryan. I just wish I knew what the fuck was going on," I say for what feels like the hundredth time.

"I know you do, Edward, but we'll figure it out. Do you have any idea who it was that showed up yesterday?"

I swallow thickly, trying to keep the name that's been floating around in my mind ever since Bella told me what happened, inside, afraid if I speak his name, he'll somehow manifest in person right in front of me. Carlisle must be able to see my fear; I imagine it's rather obvious and when he finally looks me in the eye, he sucks in a sharp breath as he silently connects all the dots.

"It can't be him, Edward. Remember what Wayne told you months ago. Aleksei has no idea where you are. There's no way he could track you down here, none. There has to be some other explanation," he mutters.

"I sure as hell hope you're right, Carlisle. Just the thought of Aleksei being alone with Bella is enough to make me sick, but imagining him knowing much less saying Peyton's name is enough to make me homicidal. It can't be him … it just can't." My heart hammers painfully against my chest and I have to remember to breathe when things get fuzzy for a moment.

"Come on," Carlisle says once he sees I'm back in control. "Let's sit. Maybe Ryan will call soon and all of this worrying will be for naught."

We chat for a while, talking about the upcoming football game this weekend. Emmett decides he'll pick Peyton up from school and take her to Ellsworth to get Brady a new toy … though I think that's more for his benefit than the puppy's. He's such a sucker. God help the man when he and Rose have a kid.

All through the conversation, I can't shake off the feeling that I'm missing something, I just can't figure out what it is.

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Bella and I are cuddling on the couch when there's a knock at the door that evening, making us both jump out of our skins.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter heatedly as I stalk toward the door, my nerves as frayed as the end of a piece of worn yarn.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I open the door, surprised to find Carlisle standing there. "Hey, what brings you by … don't tell me, Esme's on a redecorating kick again, isn't she?" I tease. The smile on my face falls immediately as soon as I realize he's not laughing at me. In fact, he looks like he's barely holding himself together.

"Oh, shit. Carlisle, what's wrong? Are you okay?" I ask, throwing the door open wide and looking him over from head to foot.

Bella hops up off the couch and rushes to him. She wraps an arm around his waist and leads him into the house, looking every bit as confused as I do. She raises an eyebrow in question at me and all I can do is shrug my shoulders in response. Seeing Carlisle so unnerved has my stomach all
twisted like a pretzel and a cold, eerie sense of dread follows him through the door. Whatever is going on with him … isn't good.

"Carlisle, come sit," Bella tells him softly as she leads him toward the couch. She guides him down on the cushions. He looks as if he's about to collapse and I can feel the panic start to bubble beneath the surface.

He's pale.

His eyes are rimmed in red.

His clothes are askew; his shirt is half tucked in and wrinkled and he's not wearing a coat, like he left in such a hurry, he didn't even have time to dress for the cold weather.

Again, my stomach churns and the aftertaste of the dinner we finished not long ago singes my throat.

He hangs his head, running his hands back and forth through his hair. In all the months I've known him, I've never once seen him with his fingers in his hair. The panic is at DEFCON One now and I curl my fingers into tight fists to keep from shaking him until he tells us what's the matter.

"Edward," he chokes, looking up at me. His eyes are glassy, unshed tears sit precariously on the rims of his eyes and when he clenches them tightly shut, a single drop from each eye falls down his cheeks.

Instantly, my heart breaks, though I don't know the cause, but seeing him in pain kills me.

He takes a few deep breaths as he tries to get control of himself. My knees give out and I fall down next to him on the sofa. I lift a trembling hand and put it on his knee.

"Tell me, please. It's not Esme is it?" I ask, her name stuttering out of my mouth. It's the only thing I can think of, that something's happened to Esme, that would cause him to look so distraught.

He shakes his head and I let out a breath of air, though the knot in my chest doesn't loosen in the slightest. Something has deeply upset him.

"I got a phone call about an hour ago," he begins, his voice hoarse and uneven. "It was from Boston." His voice drops to a whisper. The mention of the city that holds so many conflicting memories from me sends a sharp, piercing pain to my heart. "Oh, God." He moans and hangs his head again.

"It's Wayne," he sobs.

I suck in a sharp breath. Every nerve ending in my body ignites, sending sharp, stinging points of fire all over. I sway, my vision blurs, and my heart thunders in my chest.

"What do you mean it's Wayne? What's Wayne? Has he been in an accident? Is he okay? Where is he?" I frantically ask, up on my feet and standing in front of Carlisle without even realizing my body has moved.

He shakes his head at me. I see him swallow. Once. Then again. And again. All the while he looks from me to Bella as if trying to communicate without saying anything, like the words on the tip of
I'm rooted in place. I can't move. A loud roar, like the wind from a tornado fills my head and I hold my hands over my ears, as if I can keep the sound away. Oh my God. Gone … Wayne … is gone.

"I don't understand," I murmur. I close my eyes and then open, hoping against hope that the last five minutes have all been some sort of nightmare. I fell asleep with Bella on the couch and had a nightmare. This isn't real, I try to tell myself. When I open my eyes and see Carlisle, listless and broken and in Bella's arms, I know no amount of wishing will bring him back.

"Who called you? What happened?" I ask and stumble back to the couch. The few steps feel like walking through quicksand and when I sit, it takes a few moments for me to catch my breath.

Christ. This can't possibly be happening.

He wipes his eyes and then sits up. From the looks of him, he won't be upright for long. "The police didn't tell me very much, but what I do know is sometime very early yesterday morning, he was shot multiple times. A neighbor went to go bring him some mail that got delivered to his house by mistake and when he got to the front door, noticed that it was cracked open. He stuck his head in to call for Wayne, and saw his body in the hallway laying in a pool of blood. He called 911 immediately and when the police arrived, Wayne was already dead. I'm listed as his next of kin which is why they called me."

I wrap my arms around my stomach and bend over at the waist. I'm sick. He tried so hard to help guys just out of prison by giving them a place to live as they started over and one of those fucking pieces of shit killed him.

I fly off the sofa, enraged. "The police know who did it though, right? I mean it can't be too hard to figure out which of those ungrateful bastards that live at the halfway house shot him." My voice has risen and even to my own ears I sound like I'm losing it. Knowing that Wayne is … gone … has shaken me.

Fuck … he's really gone.

Carlisle shakes his head again. "No, Edward. Right now Wayne only has two men living at the house and both of them were at work and their whereabouts have been verified. It wasn't either of them." His voice trails off at the end and I can tell he wants to say more, but something is stopping him.

"What? I know there's more. Tell me," I demand. I shiver from the cold sweat that's spread all over my body and my stomach is already coiled, just waiting for the rest of the news.

Bella reaches out to him and rubs her hand soothingly up and down his back and I can't help but feel proud and so thankful for her. She smiles at me, her eyes hidden beneath her own tears. She loved Wayne and spoke of him often. I start to think of seeing him just a few short weeks ago when he drove all the way up to visit me in the hospital. He tried to play it off as just doing his job, but he didn't fool me or anyone. He'd been worried about me and wanted to make sure I was all right. I stop myself from delving any deeper though; I don't have time to indulge right now.

"Edward," Carlisle begins warily and the tone of his voice stops me dead in my tracks. "There is
more, but you have to promise to stay calm."

Of course his words just make the anxiousness I feel spike and I look at him incredulously. "Fuck, Carlisle, you can't say shit like that to me and expect me to not freak the fuck out!" I groan and once again plunge my fingers in my hair.

"Babe," Bella calls to me softly. "This is hard on all of us." She gives a small shake of her head as well as a very pointed look, which immediately makes me hang my head. I'm such an asshole.

I inhale deeply at her reminder and feel like kicking my own ass for talking to Carlisle that way. "I'm sorry," I tell him sincerely. "I'll try to stay calm." I don't promise I will because he knows as well as I do it's a promise I'm more than likely going to break.

"I haven't been told too much. I'll find out more when I go to Boston."

"When we go to Boston," I interrupt succinctly.

He nods, but keeps going. "They did have a few questions for me though, questions about … you," he whispers the last part. My heart stutters in my chest, stopping then starting like a car that's backfired.

"Me?" I cry out. All at once images of cops bursting through Bella's door, guns at the ready while they slap handcuffs on me and drag me kicking and screaming from her house makes me grab my head and groan, mumbling, "No, God no."

"Edward, calm down. They only want to talk to you. When the police arrived at the halfway house, your file was open on his desk. They just need to ask you some questions, that's all. You're not a suspect or anything, okay?" Carlisle's voice is scratchy from his tears and I know he needs Esme.

I know I need Bella, even though she's been in the same room with me this whole time. My mind is full of chaotic thoughts and feelings and I need her calm, her touch, to keep me from falling the fuck apart.

"Esme and I are leaving for Boston in the morning. I need to formally identify the body since I'm the next of kin, even though there are enough of Wayne's friends left on the force to make a positive ID." His voice catches but he waves off both Bella and me when we step forward to support him. He takes a deep breath. "I've talked to Chet and told him what's happened and that you would be out of town for a few days, possibly longer. Wayne never wanted a big funeral or anything like that, so there will be a small service for his closest friends and then a memorial. He wanted to be cremated," and with that the tears start again. None of us even attempt to stop them as the words of finality … of death hang heavy and oppressive in the air, like the dark cloud that will surely follow us all the way to Boston.

"I just can't believe he's gone," Carlisle whispers and then flings himself at me. He sobs against my chest and though I try not to, I let myself cry right along with him. "So senseless," he says brokenly. He straightens his shoulders and swipes at his face, looking so much older than he did since just this morning.

Jesus Christ, has it only been that long?

"We'll see you in the morning, okay? Early. I want to get there and get his body out of the morgue; he doesn't need to be there." He kisses us each on the cheek before rushing out of the house and back to Esme.

Instantly, Bella's arms are around me and she leads me to the sofa. I let go as soon as she holds me,
feeling so lost and alone. First my parents, then my grandmother and grandfather, and now … Wayne. Everyone has been taken from me, plucked away like the petals of a daisy, one by one. Who next? Carlisle? Esme? Charlie? Alice? Bella? Just the thought makes me cling to her, squeezing her so tight as if I can somehow take her inside of me and keep her there forever.

"Promise me you'll never leave me, baby. Please. Everyone leaves me, but I can't lose you. I can't survive without you," I sob into her neck.

She lays down on the sofa, and pulls me on top of her. "Shhh, Edward. I'm never leaving you. I love you," she whispers, kissing me over and over again. I feel her hands everywhere, rubbing my back, then her fingers through my hair, then on my face, reminding me with each touch that, for now, I'm not alone, that she's here with me.

I continue to cry and she continues to comfort until I feel myself drift off into an uneasy sleep.

The next three days pass by in a blur. I was numb for most of it, only going through the motions. I'd been nervous as hell talking to the police, but thankfully as Carlisle promised, they were only looking for answers. Ryan was with me, which helped, sans tattoo as expected. Luckily when I saw him he was able to explain his whereabouts for the past few days before I killed him … then I really would have had something to be worried about concerning the police. He'd been on vacation, a quick trip out of town to a remote cabin in the Adirondacks with his girlfriend, Kim. There was no cell service at all where they were and right before they left to head back to Boston, he'd dropped his phone in the snow so he had to get a new one. By the time he'd gotten his new phone set up and retrieved all his messages, he knew everything that had happened in his absence. Needless to say, he felt like shit for causing so much confusion … even though it was inadvertent. He had no clue who approached Bella. We told the police what little we could about the strange meeting and they agreed that it was something to be concerned about, more so now considering Wayne's murder.

The service after the cremation was difficult. It brought back so many memories, painful ones at that. Not only did I relive burying my grandmother, but it was like saying goodbye to my grandfather and Wayne at the same time. Sitting in the small chapel with Carlisle on one side and Bella beside me, Esme beside Carlisle, I couldn't help but just sort of let go and follow where they led. My head was turned so inside out I could barely form a coherent thought, so much so it took Carlisle two tries to get me to speak to Wayne's ex-wife, Angie. She was just as I'd pictured, big blonde hair, bright blue eyes that looked so much older than she was, and what was once a beautiful smile but was now a permanent frown from the looks of things. I didn't talk to her long, her pain at losing her last connection to their son, Zach, so palpable it was hard to breathe.

The memorial was even more difficult. Cops that used to be on the job with him, police officers he worked with now, men he'd helped by giving them a place to start over, all sang his praises. Over and over again people spoke of his faith in the good in people, of his belief that everyone deserved a second chance, and of his gruff, no holds barred way and the unfailing commitment he made to make those around him strive to be better … to do better.

It was when Mr. Burleson, the man I'd saved, approached me after the service was done, that caused me to truly fall apart. Seeing him alive and healthy, thanking me for what I'd done, shocked me so fully and made everything come full circle. We spoke for a few moments, neither one of us sure what to say. How does one thank you for saving their life, while paying for that sacrifice with their freedom? How do you thank someone for fighting for you when you didn't even know it and ensuring that your second chance wasn't for nothing?

"I knew when I learned more about you that I did the right thing by going to Wayne," Mr. Burleson
had whispered as he hugged me while saying our goodbyes. "Have a good life, Edward. You deserve it."

I was speechless; all I could do was nod before he squeezed me one more time then turned around and walked away. I wasn't sure we'd ever speak again.

"I'm going to let Peyton spend one more night with Mom and Dad," Bella says softly, pulling me from my thoughts. I startle though, when I realize we're already back in Corea.

I run my hands over my face before I turn to look at her. "I miss her, but I think that's probably for the best. I don't know about you, but I'm fucking exhausted. I just want to crawl into our bed and hold you." I reach out and ghost the backs of my fingers down her cheek. "Thank you for being so fucking strong the last few days. You've been my rock. I never would have made it without you. You're amazing, Bella. I love you so much." I run thumb up and down her jaw, wishing there was a way to show her how incredible I think she is.

She smiles, a huge smile that I haven't seen in far too fucking long and it soothes the frayed edges of my tattered heart in a way nothing else can. Well, nothing besides being buried inside of her, which will hopefully be happening as soon as we get home.

"You said our bed," she whispers. When she looks at me, her eyes burn with love, with the same want and need that I feel.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. I lick my lips and stare at her. Luckily she's paying attention to the road that leads to the house because if I was looking into her bottomless brown eyes, I'd never want to look away. I lean across the console of Renée's Jeep and kiss her neck. Placing my lips beside her ear, I tell her, "I want it to be our bed. I want it to be our everything. Our couch, our towels, our TV … our home. I want it. I want you and Peyton … forever."

"Oh, God, Edward," she breathes out. I hear the leather of the steering wheel crack beneath her hands, her fingers white from holding on so tightly.

She pulls into her driveway and slams the car into park so fast that she's out of her seat belt and into my arms before I even have time to take off my own seat belt. "I want that, too, Edward. So much. Always, forever. I love you. I love you. I love you," she cries between kisses. "Take me inside, make love to me in our bed. Please. Right now."

I pull her into my arms and open the door, somehow managing not to drop her as we stumble out of the car. Her legs are wrapped around my waist and my hands cup her ass. I kick the door closed behind me and walk toward the front door. For just a moment, a flash and then it's gone, the most uneasy feeling creeps up my spine and I shiver.

"What is it?" Bella asks as she picks her head up. My neck immediately misses her lips and her tongue on it and I shake my head, wanting nothing more than to feel all of her against all of me.

"Nothing, baby," I answer, pushing away everything but her.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Aleksei POV

I roll my shoulders to try to ease the knot at the base of my neck, once, twice, to no avail. I'm used to sitting still for long periods of time; in my line of work it's sort of a necessity, but even I have my limit, and I passed it a few hours ago. I take another drag of my cigarette, not worried in the least.
that anyone can see me. I've picked my spot well; I've a knack for these things you see.

I'm fucking tired of standing here though, that's for damn sure, but I can't leave. Not when I've waited all this time and not when I'm so close to making my dream come true.

Well, for me it's a dream, for anyone else … anyone with a conscience that is, it'd be more like a nightmare, but what the fuck ever.

Seven long fucking years.

Eighty-four months.

Three hundred sixty-four weeks.

Two thousand five hundred fifty-five days.

If you want, I can count down the minutes and even the seconds for you. Trust me, I know exactly how long it's been since Edward fucking Masen screwed up my life.

Fucking pussy.

All he had to do was run with me, but did he? Hell fucking no. He whined and chickened the fuck out and in the process ruined everything I had going for me. God damn I should have known better, but for some strange reason, we had this instant connection the first time we met in high school. He was this brooding, angry little shit but for some reason, we clicked. The first time I saw him we were at this party and he got into a fight with a guy. I can't even remember what for now, but Edward was literally wailing on the dude. He was so angry, so lost, and honestly, I saw myself in him. The guy he was kicking the shit out of had friends, and when those friends decided to jump into the middle of the fight, well, I jumped in, too. I was never one to shy away from kicking some ass and the fact they were going to make it a four on one fight just pissed me the fuck off.

Needless to say, not one, but four guys got their asses handed to them like a bunch of little pricks and from that moment on, Edward and I were pretty much inseparable. Hanging out with him was cool. He always got his hand on cash when we needed it, even though he whined like a little bitch half the time because he felt bad taking it from his pathetic grandfather. I got him high. I got him drunk. And with Edward around, there was never a shortage of pussy. The chicks dug him … especially after he'd been in a fight. That wounded, brooding, dark thing he had going on was a pussy magnet to the extreme. Not that the motherfucker took advantage like he could have. Sure he got laid, more often than not so wasted he had no idea what the fuck was happening, but he sure as shit didn't fuck anywhere near as often as he could have. I'm not lying; chicks would drop their panties at the sight of him, but all the asshole wanted to do was cry about how much he missed his grandmother.

What a fucking pussy.

I started skipping school more and more until I finally dropped out, and though I could get Edward out at night to party, I couldn't get him to blow off school. It was a fucking drag but the guy wouldn't budge. Finally I got sick of asking and started doing my own thing during the day. I figured I could have the best of both worlds. During the day, I started dealing drugs, getting in good with the right people and at night, I'd let Edward bring us the pussy like lambs to the slaughter. It worked fine, too. Edward graduated and got some crappy job at some warehouse downtown.

His pain in the ass grandfather finally had enough of his bullshit and kicked him out. I pretended to
be sympathetic, at least a little bit, but I was happy as a fucking pig in mud at having Edward so close by all the time. I was angling toward Edward following me into dealing, knowing that with his looks and charisma, we could take over the fucking town. I started bringing him with me, letting him learn the ropes so to speak. I never told him that, of course. I let him think I just needed him for backup. Really, what I was doing was getting him used to being around those kinds of people and letting him learn how to handle himself if shit came down. There were plenty of times when it did, and he learned fast and well how to kick ass. He liked to pretend he was above it all, that he didn't enjoy getting dirty and feeling bones break beneath his knuckles, but I knew better. Edward was going to be my ticket to bigger and better things … which was why I tricked him into coming with me to that house.

Damn, I'd staked that house for weeks before I finally made my move. I'd owed some mafia wannabe some serious cash and I needed money in a hurry. The fucker was breathing down my neck and I knew the only way to get him off my back was to pay him. I did a little bit of research and stumbled upon Mr. Jack Burleson, computer software executive and friend to the current mayor. His house was perfect: set far back from the road, no neighbors, and more importantly, no front gate. His house just begged to be robbed and I was going to give it its wish. Someone like that had to have a safe, probably stashed with cash and jewels. I didn't care so much about the jewels, I was after easy money.

Edward had hemmed and hawed, acting like a complete douche about the whole thing, whining about every fucking thing. I was already nervous as fuck. Sure I'd dealt drugs and even used my knife a time or two, but I'd never shot someone. The gun I'd brought with me was heavy in my pocket, like a weight that I couldn't shake. But, it was do or die time, and I wasn't going to go down, that was for fucking sure.

Pushing our way into the house was easier than I ever imagined, and when the dude started blubbering about taking whatever we wanted and begged me not to hurt him, I knew I'd done it. Once the safe was emptied and the cash was in my hand, shooting him had been as easy as breathing. That was until Edward had to go all Florence Nightingale on me. When he refused to run with me, I almost killed him then and there. I should have.

Seven years I've spent running, hiding, like a fucking cockroach afraid of the light. First I went out to LA, then down to Houston, and even slipped into Mexico for a few years. My connections came in handy, hiding me, getting me ID, and over the years built up my reputation as a ruthless operator. I became proficient in cleaning up messes, finding that I rather enjoyed the feeling of a gun in my hand, not to mention the thrill of using it, of watching the life bleed out of someone right before my eyes.

I never forgot about Edward though. Every mark I took out, every order I fulfilled, it was his face I saw when I pulled the trigger. With each body, the need to make Edward pay grew and grew. Lucky for me, and quite unlucky for Edward, a contact I'd made years ago tracked me down and told me of the most interesting conversation he'd overheard just the day before.

Apparently, my dear Edward was alive and well and doing quite handsomely for himself in some shit fishing village in Maine. It'd rung a vague bell with me. I remembered Edward moaning about his grandmother and the summers they used to spend in Maine when he was younger. My contact went on to tell me how he was at the courthouse with his brother and heard his old parole officer talking to some lawyer about an Edward and how he was recovering from some kind of accident. It wasn't until the lawyer was heard saying, "It's funny. Masen survived seven years in prison, but put him out on the water, and he goes overboard. Edward's a lucky, lucky man. What do you want to bet Bella makes him put that law degree he got inside to good use?" that my contact put two and two together.
I made my contact repeat the conversation three times, my smile growing more and more each time. Finally, I'd be able to have my vengeance. I had Wayne's last name and from there it was easy to track him down. He didn't go down without a fight, I'll give the old fucker that much. He fought like a lion once he realized who I was and who I was after; he even begged me to spare Edward, offering himself up instead. As if that would appease me. Not fucking likely.

I shot him three times, a bit of an overkill, but I wanted to send a message. I was coming for Edward. I found his file easily enough, and read all about how Edward had saved the guy, how he turned on me, how he got a reduced sentence for turning his back on me and everything I'd done for him. How the guy he saved pushed and prodded until Edward was granted parole, and a special one at that, complete with a nice, comfy cushion of a hundred thousand dollars and a new home in Corea.

Getting to Edward's woman was a lot easier than I ever pictured it being. She sure is a delectable thing, all long hair and big eyes, firm tits and a tight ass. It took all I had to leave her, especially after she'd made it so easy. Dropping the lawyer's name on her was a stroke of genius on my part. She'd been suitably wary until then, even denying she knew Edward, but once she heard the name, she was putty in my hands. I could tell there was a tiny part of her that was still unsure, and I couldn't help but taunt her with her daughter's name. Wayne's file on Edward had been a veritable font of information.

Lucky for me.

Unlucky for Edward.

So now, here I sit, staring at the tattoo on my hand, the one I see every time I hold a gun.

Revenge.

It's been all I've thought about for seven long fucking years and now it's so close I can taste it.

I shift when I see an SUV pull up into Edward's girlfriend's driveway. My heart, instead of speeding up, slows down as I watch Edward and Bella fall out of the car, hanging all over each other. Even from where I'm standing I can feel their connection.

My blood turns to ice.

"Enjoy it, Edward, because soon, it's all going to be gone."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

I know lots of you will be really sad about Wayne, but that's been planned from the very beginning. Aleksei … he's a man on a mission for sure.

Next chapter, well hang on folks, that's all I can say about that.

Things are moving along and we still have a few chapters until the end. Not sure how many yet, but there are a few things left to get through before it's over!

Keep checking the Facebook page and the blog. We put lots of goodies on there this week! Lots of you have asked what Brady looks like, there's a picture of him on the blog, and if you've forgotten what Aleksei looks like, he's on there, too!

See you next Sunday … let me know what you thought of the chapter, I'm a little nervous
about this one!

Erin~
Chapter 25

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers especially Laurel with her never-ending patience and support. She's totally gone above and beyond this week. Love you all!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

Strap in, hang on and get ready … it's a bit bumpy!

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 25

EPOV

I watch the clock on the nightstand as the minutes slowly pass, the pale lavender gray of early morning creeping beneath the curtains. I've been awake for over an hour, though I'm still exhausted. My sleep was restless. Visions of Wayne's body lying in a pool of blood, remembering snippets of our conversations, wondering what his last minutes were like kept my mind in a semi-conscious state all night. I'd drift off to sleep, lulled by the feel of Bella's body next to mine, only to be jerked awake by a vision or a thought.

I press a kiss to Bella's naked shoulder and pull her tighter against my chest. Part of me wants to kiss her awake and make love to her again, while the other just wants to hold her, breathe her in. I know she's exhausted. The last few weeks have been so stressful and I know she's worn out. My accident and recovery, Christmas, adjusting to a new puppy, the freak out with the strange man … Wayne's murder; it's been one thing after another.

Sighing, I nuzzle into her hair and inhale deeply. Tangerine and grapefruit, a trace of salt from her sweat … me … all mingle together, coating her skin. I groan softly, hoping I don't wake her up, even though my dick has other ideas.

That of course leads my mind down a path that goes back to yesterday, and last night … and of the things we said to each other. My heart skips a beat as I remember telling her I want her and Peyton, forever. Then it races as I recall her saying the same thing back to me. My fingers skim across her stomach, aching to go higher, go lower, but I let her sleep instead.

That of course leads my mind down a path that goes back to yesterday, and last night … and of the things we said to each other. My heart skips a beat as I remember telling her I want her and Peyton, forever. Then it races as I recall her saying the same thing back to me. My fingers skim across her stomach, aching to go higher, go lower, but I let her sleep instead.

My mind travels back further, to Boston and saying goodbye to yet another person I loved. The whole trip is still pretty much a blur, but I do remember talking to the cops and answering their questions. At first the two detectives I talked to were a bit antagonistic. I suppose talking to a recently paroled ex-con brings that out in people, but once Ryan and I explained, in detail, my relationship with Wayne, they'd changed their tunes pretty damn quickly. Having Bella there didn't hurt either, especially after she told them about the man that showed up in Corea that claimed to be Ryan.
I watched as the wheels turned in their heads, and I could tell when the dots started connecting … the same way they had to me.

I know it was Aleksei. There was no one else it could be; nothing else made any sense. I know I should have voiced my concerns to Bella, but I didn't want to freak her out … anymore than she already was. After saying his name to Carlisle, even though he tried to convince me otherwise, my gut feeling that it was Aleksei, that he was here, back, only intensified. Finding out Wayne had been murdered made that feeling grow to an almost consuming level … though my guilt was keeping it company.

If Wayne died because of his connection to me … I don't know how I'll ever live with myself. My parents dying was a freak accident. My grandmother died suddenly, an aneurism that no one could do anything about and my grandfather's death was due to old age … and a broken heart. I'll forever feel guilty for not being with him when he died, but I know it wasn't my fault he did. But Wayne, if Aleksei murdered him in cold blood, well then, that's something completely different.

If anything happens to either Bella or Peyton because of that motherfucker, not even the fear of going back to prison will be enough to keep me from killing the son of a bitch. I won't think twice. I'll do whatever it takes to keep them safe.

I shift against Bella and align our bodies just so while I fight to keep the dark thoughts at bay. I have no time for them, nor the inclination to spend any more time thinking about things I can't control. Right now I need Bella and then I need my Sprite. My light. My best friend.

The fingers of one hand finally get to roam higher, while the fingers of my other dip lower. I caress and flick, roll and circle until her breathing changes and I'm graced with the soft, knowing … indulgent smile I hope I'm lucky enough to see every day for the rest of my life. She wants it. I want it. I want her.

"I need you, baby," I whisper as I roll her over, settling between her thighs as if I haven't been inside of her for days instead of hours. We make love slowly, climbing then falling gently, together, as if we're the only two people in the world.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Excited much?" Bella asks me as I pull her up the stairs to her parents' front door a few hours later.

"I feel like I haven't seen her in forever." I really do, too. I'm definitely going through Peyton withdrawals.

Bella knocks on the door before opening it and leads us inside. She hangs up her coat on the hall tree and then turns to me. "You might not be so excited when she sees you wearing that," she points at my Brady jersey, "when it's not a game day. You're going to be in so much trouble for messing with the mojo." She giggles when I mutter a "shit" under my breath.

"Edward," Renée says sadly as she greets us in the foyer. Her arms are around me, squeezing tightly before I can even say hello. I let myself get loved on for a few minutes; she needs to give it as much as I need to get it. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. Are you okay? Is there anything you need?" she asks and then sniffs when she finally pulls away.

"Thanks, Renée. I'm okay. Just trying to deal, you know?" I shrug.

She smiles sadly then lays her hand on the side of my face. "He was a good man." She shakes her
head slightly, as if to keep the unwelcome thoughts away. Standing on her tiptoes, she kisses my cheek. "We're all here for you if you need us. Remember that, Edward. We love you and when you hurt, we hurt."

I swallow thickly and take a deep breath, nodding. I hear Peyton giggle from the kitchen and my ears perk up, a smile spreads across my face. "There's fresh coffee and cinnamon rolls in the kitchen. Go help yourself." She shoos me and I give her a grateful smile and hurry toward my favorite laugh.

"Any left for me?" I ask as walk in. Peyton's mouth is open wide, and a gooey cinnamon roll with icing dripping off the side is poised for the taking.

She drops it with a plop onto her plate and flies off her chair. I squat and open my arms, almost falling over backward when she flings herself at me as hard as she can.

"Edward! I missed you!" she shrieks, and gives me the sweetest kisses all over my face. Kisses that mean everything. Kisses that make the pain of losing Wayne fade, just for a moment, while I soak up her unconditional love.

I hold her close. The corners of my eyes sting, but before the tears that are starting to form have a chance to fall she leans back and pokes me square in the chest with her finger. "If you jinx our team, you're in big trouble, mister."

I roll my eyes when Bella giggles and mutters an "I told you so" before she takes a drink of her Coke.

"What? You're telling me your Tom can't overcome me wearing his jersey on a non-game day?" I tease, shifting Peyton on my knee so I can tweak her nose. "Might want to think about switching him out for a different guy then."

I laugh when she scowls at me; she even crosses her arms over her chest. I scoot her off my lap and stand up. "I'm just teasing, P. I'm sure Mr. Brady will be just fine. Now, tell me what you've been up to. How was your spelling test?"

We sit at the table and listen as Peyton fills us in about the goings-on at school and the movie that Charlie and Renée took her to yesterday. Hearing her voice, listening to her ramble and describe things in the way only she can makes the world seem like not such a bad place … or at least my little part of it. Brady pats into the kitchen and circles the table, hoping that someone takes pity on him and gives him a treat. I smirk when I see Renée's hand dip beneath the table with a piece of cinnamon roll she pinched off Charlie's plate.

Once breakfast is done, Bella, Peyton, and Renée go to get Peyton's bags which leaves me some much-needed alone time with Charlie. I need to talk to him.

"So, how are you? I'm sure Renée has already asked you, but you probably didn't get time to answer because she was kissing you all over your face," Charlie asks. He sits back in his chair, legs stretched out in front of him with his arms casually laid across his stomach. His eyes though, his eyes are anything but calm. They're ablaze with worry and concern, for me and for Bella and Peyton, too.

I curl my hands around my mostly empty coffee mug. I tip the cup back and forth, watching the now cold liquid slosh from side to side. "I don't know, Charlie," I begin, blowing out a frustrated breath. "I'm mad as hell that someone did that to Wayne. I mean, all he did was help people, you know? I just don't get why someone would want to hurt him that way. I feel … if this …" I
"What?"

"If Wayne was murdered because of me, what am I going to do?" My words are whispered. I'm so afraid of them being the truth that I'm scared to even say them out loud, but I have to. I'll need to talk to Carlisle soon, but he's grieving. I can't lay this on him while he mourns the loss of his best friend. And if it's true? How do I ever look him in the eyes again?

Charlie sits forward and places his elbows on the table. "What aren't you telling me? What did the police in Boston tell you?" he questions. His voice is intense, demanding.

I run my hands through my hair and relay to him all the questions the police asked me and how I answered them. By the time I'm finished, his entire body is tense, his mouth set in a grim line. I look at him and say, "I know it was him. Aleksei. I feel it … here." I press my fist into my stomach. "He was here in Corea. He talked to Bella. He knows Peyton's name … he killed Wayne. I don't know why and I don't where he is, but I do know if he shows his fucking face, I'll kill him. He won't hurt Bella or Peyton. I promise you, Charlie. I won't let him anywhere near them. I'll die before I allow him to get close enough to either one of them."

My voice shakes, my hands twitch, and I'm having trouble catching my breath. "I promise," I force out once more.

Charlie scrubs his face with hands. He tips his head back. I can hear him inhale then exhale slowly, and I wait for him to look at me. I won't lower my eyes; I'll look him straight in the face and listen to whatever he has to say. I owe him that, even if he tells me to get as far the fuck away from Bella and Peyton as I can.

I won't leave, nothing except for Bella could make me, but we're talking about the man's daughter and granddaughter. Of course he's going to be worried.

"You really think it was him?" His voice is low, menacing … dangerous.

"Yes." My answer is simple, emphatic.

"Well, then we just need to make sure it doesn't come down to a choice between you and him, now don't we?" He holds my gaze, unflinching. His words are final, as if he's already made some kind of decision, but from the looks of him, it's one he won't be sharing with me.

We sit, neither one saying a word for a few moments until I hear Bella and Peyton as they come down the stairs. I huff and rub my hands up and down the top of my legs. I'm not sure if I should say anything else; of course I have no idea what I would say anyway. I'm so conflicted, warring between my intense desire to lock Bella and Peyton away somewhere safe and doing whatever it takes to find Aleksei and end this … whatever this is right the fuck now.

I stand when Bella calls my name and I look at Charlie. "I'm sorry for this, Charlie. If I would have known I was putting Bella and Peyton in danger I never would have …" I choke on the words because as awful as I feel about the possibility of anything happening to either one of them, the thought of not having them at all makes me sick to my stomach.

"Don't even think about finishing that sentence, son. You already paid for your mistake … and his. This, if it is that piece of shit, is most definitely not your fault. Don't worry. Everything will be fine."

He reaches out and pulls me into a hug. I'm so surprised I don't move. He steps back when he hears...
Bella walks into the kitchen and he gives me a meaningful look before he walks away. The goodbyes are short and sweet, and Charlie is all smiles as he kisses Bella and Peyton, ignoring the strange look Bella gives him.

"Everything okay with you and my dad?" Bella asks once we pull out of her parents' driveway. I slip my fingers between hers and lift them to my mouth, kissing the inside of her wrist.

"Just fine, baby." I lay our joined hands on my thigh and squeeze, letting my thumb move back and forth over her smooth, cool skin. She sighs, but it's a happy, content one. The sound washes over me and my fingers relax their death grip on the steering wheel. We're going to be fine, I tell myself over and over as we drive slowly through town.

A day at home with my girls is just what I need, I think happily as I pull into Bella's driveway.

We play a game before we eat lunch. We watch a movie, all snuggled on the couch, Bella on one side, Peyton on my other, with Brady in my lap and I can't imagine anything better. I help Peyton with her homework while Bella gets dinner started. It's a perfect day.

Peyton goes upstairs and I stroll into the kitchen, the aroma in the air making my mouth water.

"You're making stir fry?" I groan in anticipation.

"Yep. No eggplant tempura though." She smiles and my heart sort of dips and dives at the mention of our first dinner together.

"I was so fucking nervous that night," I say with a shake of my head. I step closer to her and curl my index finger around hers. "I had no idea what to say to you, how to act. All I knew was I wanted to be here with you and Peyton more than I'd ever wanted anything." I step between her legs and press my hips against hers, marveling for the umpteenth time how well her body fits against mine. Lowering my face to hers, I slide my free hand around her neck and hold her still as I brush my lips across hers. "With you and Peyton is the only place I'll ever want to be."

While I kiss her, standing in her kitchen with Peyton upstairs and the smells Sunday dinner filling the air, everything else fades away. The pain from losing Wayne, the fear of Aleksei, the guilt over bringing danger right to the doorstep of the people I love most in the world, disappears, leaving just me and Bella in this moment, right here, right now.

"Mmmm, you didn't kiss me like that that night," Bella says with a smile. Her free hand is on my chest and beneath her fingers my heart swells … and so does another part of my anatomy when she swivels her hips just so.

I nip at the sensitive spot behind her ear and chuckle, enjoying when she does the half whimper half breathy squeak she always makes when I do that. "That's because I was too afraid of fucking things up. I did go home and take care of business in the shower though … twice."

We both laugh and it feels so fucking good just to let go and be together. "Well, you don't have to worry about messing things up anymore, you know. You're kind of stuck with us now."

Her cheeks are flushed with the faintest hint of pink, her lips slightly swollen and chapped, and her eyes sparkle in the fading light of early evening. She takes my breath away. Her strength, her belief in me and in us … her love, it's more than I ever expected.

I cradle her head in my hands and we stare at each other, neither saying a word because really, none are needed. We know, without a shadow of a doubt that we're forever.
The timer on the rice cooker goes off, bursting the intimate bubble we've been in. We sigh at the same time when I step back and she slips out from in front of me.

"Will you go tell Peyton dinner will be ready soon?"

I nod, reaching for her hand and hold it loosely, stretching our arms. I need just one more touch, even though it's never enough. "Love you," I tell her gently.

"Love you, too." She flashes me a quick smile as I walk out of the kitchen and go to find Peyton.

"Sprite, dinner's almost ready," I tell Peyton as I lean against her door frame. She's sitting on her bed, legs crossed, tapping away on her iPad. Brady watches from his perch on the end of the bed, his little head tilted to the side as if trying to figure out what his favorite human is doing making all that noise.

Of course, his ears perk up at the mention of the word dinner. The little guy never misses a chance to join us for a meal.

"Okay," she answers without looking up. Whatever she's doing, and it could be anything from reading a book to playing Words With Friends against her Uncle Emmett, has her totally engrossed.

I sigh as I watch her for a few minutes. It feels like forever since our ice cream date and I've missed her. Missed her smile, missed her snark, missed her questions about the most random things imaginable. Even spending the day with her today doesn't feel like enough.

The last few days have been such a whirlwind, such an intense roller coaster of emotions. As soon as Bella and I woke up this morning, I begged her to let us go get Peyton right away. I needed Bella last night; we needed each other, to be able to connect and reaffirm our love. Not that it's in question … it's in every word, every touch, and every look, but we needed time last night to lose ourselves in each other. But this morning, I needed Peyton. I needed her innocence to offset the evil of Wayne's murder. I needed her unwavering loyalty to remind me of what's important in life. I needed her unconditional love to show me that even though I had an awful past, I was still worthy of her and Bella.

I needed my best friend.

"Are you going to watch me all night? You know you can come in if you want to," she tells me as she glances over at me.

I push off the door frame and lay across her bed, scooting Brady in front of me. "Whatcha' doing?"

"Watching a movie."

That's all she says; she doesn't even look up to answer. I get an uneasy feeling when the silence stretches so long it's uncomfortable. I pick at her comforter, wondering what's bothering her. I don't have to wonder for long though.

"Are you and Mom ready to tell me what's going on now?" She finally lifts her head and looks unwaveringly at me. I knew she was going to push for answers. All day I've felt like she's been waiting and her question lets me know she has indeed.

I didn't expect anything less.

"Come on. Mom's got the stir fry almost ready. Let's eat and we'll talk, okay?" I stand up off the
bed and hold my hand out to her.

She drops her iPad on the bed and climbs off, calling for Brady as she slips her hand in mine. As we walk down the stairs she says quietly, "I'm sorry Wayne died, Edward. He was nice man and I know you and him were good friends."

I swallow back the rush of emotion and gently swing our hands. "Thanks, sweetheart. I'm going to miss him a lot."

She looks up at me, and I swear I can see the wheels turning in her head. Sometimes it would be much easier if she wasn't so damned smart.

Once dinner is served and we've all had a chance to eat for a few minutes, I interrupt Peyton's chatter. "All right, P. You know things have been a little weird around here lately and I know you have some questions."

She looks from me to Bella and then nods her head. "I can tell something's wrong. I hear you and Mom whispering and when I've been at the restaurant with Xavier, he always looks worried."

Just hearing that she's been aware, at least on some level, of what's been going on upsets me. I hate the thought of her being confused, but scared to ask questions.

Hate it with a fucking passion.

"I know you're upset that we won't let you walk to the restaurant after school anymore, but there's a reason for it," I tell her and take a deep breath. "Someone came to the house last week."

Peyton scrunches her eyebrows as she looks from Bella to me. "Who came to the house? We didn't have any company."

Bella gives me a look and then tells Peyton, "We aren't sure who he was. He told me his name, but he lied about that, and now we need to be careful until we find out who he really is."

"What did he want?"

Now that's the big question, isn't it? What does he want? "We aren't sure, Sprite, but until we find out, we all need to keep our eyes open. That's why you can't leave with anyone from school that isn't on your 'ridiculously long list' and why we don't want you walking alone after school." I don't want to terrify the girl half to death, but I don't want her taking any chances either. I mean seriously, this is Peyton. She talked to me and made me her best friend within thirty minutes of meeting me … plus, he knows her name.

"We just want and need you to be really smart about this, Peyton. If someone talks to you without your mom, myself, or someone you know around, you need to find someone you know right away. Even if they say they know me and your mom, if you don't know them, you have to promise to find someone you trust." My heart's breaking because I know I'm adding more fuel to the fire in making her scared, but I would rather have her scared than … gone. I cut off that thought immediately. No, that isn't going to happen. I won't let anything happen to my girls.

"O-okay. I'll be careful. I promise," Peyton tells me and I can tell she is worried. I get up from my chair and walk over to her, grabbing her in a hug.

Holding her tightly, I whisper in her ear, "It's okay, sweetheart. I promise it will be okay. We'll get this taken care of. I love you, P."
"I love you, too." She snuggles into my chest for a moment and then looks up at me. I can tell there's something else on her mind, because, just like Bella, she bites her bottom lip and tilts her head to the left. "Um … are you going to be okay? You're going back out on the boat tomorrow," she says, the last few words not any louder than a breath.

*God*, I think, *we all need a fucking vacation.*

I take her small hand in mine. "I have to go back out there. You know that right?" I wait until she nods her head, which she doesn't do immediately.

"Yeah, I guess. I know Pop needs you. Can't you get another job? I don't think Pop would get mad at you if you did." She's so earnest, so innocent, that I have to lay my head down on her leg to collect myself so I can answer her.

"I know what happened to me scared you, sweetheart, but it's my job. I made a commitment to your Pop. Do you know what that is?" I ask. She's so smart sometimes it's easy to forget she's only seven. When she shakes her head I change my word. "I promised him I'd help him. I also promised Wayne and Carlisle I would stay and do my job. Wayne's not here anymore, but that doesn't mean I can break my promise. Do you understand?"

This time she nods quickly and answers with a soft, "Yes."

"I'll be fine. Pop, Uncle Emmett, and Jasper will take care of me and I still have my lucky seashell to keep me safe. Try not to worry, okay? I know this is a lot, P, but we're all here for you. If you get scared or confused or have a question, always know you can come to me or your mom … or anyone else. You've got your pick." I grin and lean forward to kiss her nose.

She giggles and I breathe out a sigh of relief, hoping that soon, this whole mess will behind us all.

~*~OOO~*~OOO~*~

"Edward! No, please don't go! Stay with me!" Bella's voice startles me awake. I sit up, fighting with the blankets and reach for her. My heart hammers in my chest as I wrap my arms around her and pull her close. Her hot tears soak through my t-shirt, and her stuttering breaths fill the air around us.

"Bella, shhh. It's okay. I'm here. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise." My words are rushed and not at all soothing, at least to my own ears.

"Jesus Christ," I mutter, kissing the side of her head over and over again. My own hands shake as badly as hers as she clutches at my damp t-shirt. Between her sleeping almost on top of me, the blankets that she buried us beneath, and the adrenaline rush of waking up so abruptly because of her thrashing and screaming, I need a damn shower.

I hear her take a few stuttering, wheezing breaths. She convulses involuntarily as her body calms. Her hair is a tousled mess and a few strands stick to the side of her face. I tilt her chin so I can look into her eyes. They're still wide with fear; whatever caused her nightmare is still haunting her.

"Are you okay?" I whisper, brushing the pads of my thumb across her warm, tear-stained cheek.

She doesn't answer; she just burrows farther against my chest. I continue to hold her and whisper nonsense until she picks her head up.

"It was the man, the guy that came to the house," she whispers and lays her head on my chest. I scoot backward and lean against the headboard and cradle her across my lap. I can feel her heat
thrum, and her body is rigid, tense, even when I begin to slowly rock her back and forth.

"Tell me, baby," I murmur, kissing her forehead.

She sighs, shifts, and turns so that her head's in the crook of my elbow. "I don't remember much," she begins. "Just flashes of things … you and him fighting. You being on the boat with Dad and the guys only this time when you fall over, they don't get to you in time." Her fingers trace circles on my shirt, leaving trails of warmth in their wake. Even through a layer of cotton, feeling her touch me sets my body on fire. "Then I saw him again, standing out front. You saw him, too, and he ran away, toward the woods. You wanted to follow him, but I begged you not to go. You told me you had to, that it was up to you to save us and you started running into the trees. I tried to follow you. I asked you to stay with me, but you just kept going. When I went into the woods you were … gone. I couldn't find you," she tells me brokenly, her voice getting higher and more spread out as she tries to catch her breath.

I can feel her fear; she starts to shake again in my arms. I'm about to lay her down in the bed so I can wrap myself around her when she says, "The tattoo on his hand, it was letters, not a picture."

I freeze. Now it's my turn to shake. "What do you mean letters?" My voice is tight; my muscles locked in place. "What else, Bella? Is there anything else you remember?" I'm almost afraid to find out the answer, but it's obvious she remembers more than she thought she did.

She closes her eyes. She's quiet for such a long time, I wonder if she's fallen asleep. When she opens her eyes, I'm staring at her, waiting for what feels like the ax to drop. It does. "He had a scar, through his right eyebrow."

Motherfucking son of a bitch to the fiery pits of hell and damnation.

My whole body tenses, from my toes all the way up to my shoulders. I can't breathe. I can't feel. I can't move.

"No, no, no, no," I begin to chant, pant, and I feel like the walls are caving in on me.

Bella sits up and kneels in front of me. Her hands frantically run up and down my arms and then she throws her arms around my neck. "What's wrong? Edward, what is it?"

"It's him," I croak and squeeze my eyes shut.

"Him? Who?" she cries out and when she puts two and two together her eyes grow so big. "It's Aleksei isn't it?"

I don't answer; I just hold her tighter. After a few minutes, I say, "Tell me again what he looks like."

I listen as she tells me. Some of what she says sounds like him, height, build, the scar on the eyebrow, but the rest of it doesn't; the tattoo, the color of his hair, the way he spoke.

"Fuck, I don't know, Bella. My gut tells me yes, but I'm not sure. I mean he's been on the run for seven years. It would make sense he's changed his appearance, so I really can't say without seeing him myself. And if I saw him, I'd never let him live long enough to get a good enough look at him. Whoever the fuck it is, I promise you he won't hurt you or Peyton. I swear it, baby." I cup her cheeks and hold her head so I can look at her. Leaning down, I kiss her to remind myself that she's here and she's safe.

I rest my forehead against hers and we sit, totally wrapped in each other, without saying a word.
Eventually, her grip relaxes on my shirt and her breath evens out. She's not asleep, but she's close, so I lower her to the bed. I turn her on her side and pull her back against my chest, so close that my body is almost completely wrapped around hers. Arms, legs, every part of me that I can use to touch her, I do. I use my body as a shield, ready and willing to protect her with all that I am … whether it's from her nightmares or from something more dangerous.

"I'm not going anywhere, Bella. I promise. I'll keep you safe," I whisper as her breathing evens out.

She lets out a soft sigh and I feel her body melt against mine. "I know you will. I trust you," she whispers and then she falls asleep.

I don't close my eyes at all.

~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Babe, Brady wants to go out," Bella tells me, not looking up from the book she's reading.

I glance over the back of the sofa and sure enough, Brady is walking in a circle in front of the door. As soon as he can tell I'm looking at him, I swear the little guy is actually thinking, Dude, get up and take me out unless you want me to pee all over your shoes.

I throw down the remote, glad, though I won't tell her, to have a chance to get away from the show on the TV that Bella is not watching but won't let me change off of. Storage Wars, really? I shake my head and slip my shoes on, opening the door. When a chilling breeze wafts across the front porch, I grab my hoodie off the rack by the door.

"Keep this locked, baby. I'll take my key," I tell her, grabbing my keys off the table by the door.

"Be right back." I chuckle when Brady wiggles through the door, not even waiting so he doesn't have to squeeze through it.

He obviously needs to go badly because he practically rolls down the stairs. I reach out and double-check the door, not taking any chances, and pull my hood up over my head to ward off the damp, cool air. Brady makes his way over to the other side of Cherry and traipses around in the grass for a few minutes before he does his business. For all he was in a hurry to use the bathroom, he sure does take his time when he wants to. I let him wander a bit and I lean against the side of the Blazer as I watch him. He takes a step, then stops, turning his little head around to see if I'm paying attention. I laugh at him and then turn just a bit, noticing that the right rear tire of Bella's baby looks a little low. A quick glance at Brady to make sure he hasn't run off and then I bend over, inspecting, pressing against the edge of the tire. It definitely gives more than it's supposed to. Worried about the others, I walk slowly around the back to the other side then up, breathing in relief when it appears that it's just the one tire that will need air in the morning. I walk around the front, letting my hand glide over the smooth, cool metal of the hood. It really is a fucking awesome piece of machinery, I muse with a slight shake of my head, palming my cock briefly to adjust when a memory … Bella walking to her pride and joy that very first time we talked in those fuckhot shorts, flashes in my mind.

I close my eyes and allow myself a moment to indulge, remembering long, smooth legs and how that very first inhale of her citrusy scent made it so I'll never be able to look at fruit the same way again. And with that, I'm hard and ready to go back inside and love on my girl. Peyton's spending the night with Xavier and Seth, even though it's a school night. Bella is normally very reluctant to deviate from the routine she's set for Peyton, but they've missed her and she needs a chance to get away from the tension that's always in the air. I look left and right and Brady, of course, is nowhere to be found. I take a few steps, scanning quickly and hear a snap of a twig and the rustle of leaves in the trees that surround Bella's house on all but the front side.
Damn dog, I swear, you take your eyes off him for thirty seconds and poof … he's gone like a thief in the night.

"Brady," I say harshly, walking toward the trees. My steps are careful. There isn't any snow on the ground; the slight warm up of the past few days has let most of it melt away. And by warm up, I mean a sultry 39 degrees … but with the sunshine we've been privy to recently, it's been enough to leave only the snow nestled safely along the edges of buildings and tucked away from the sun to remain.

"I hear you," I mutter again. "You are in so much trouble when I catch you, mister. No treats for you tonight."

There's more rustling, more cursing by me when I slip a little on a patch of mud. I brace my arms on a tree, my body twisted around like a Gumby doll as I try to right myself. I manage to stand up, somehow out of breath, so I bend over at the waist to try to not sound like a wheezing asthmatic.

It takes my eyes just a moment to focus, but when they do, my veins turn to ice. I'm frozen still, rooted to where I stand like the tree I'm desperately trying to hang onto. I blink rapidly, desperately hoping that doing it enough times will make what I've seen not so. When I open them again and look down, it hasn't worked.

Cigarette butts. Footprints. The bright yellow wrappers of banana Laffy Taffy.

Him.

He was here.

Holy motherfucking shit.

I turn and run in a flat out sprint toward the house. My boots slip in the mud, my steps are awkward and uneven, but all I can think about is getting back to Bella. If he's still close by … I stop that thought before it can go any further. I'll kill him, it's as simple as that, if I see him.

It's not far between the Blazer and the house but the few steps I have to take seem like miles rather than feet. I jump the three steps leading to the porch in a single motion.

I stop, dead in my tracks, when my eyes focus in front of me.

Open door.

Splintered wood.

Silence.

"Oh, Jesus, no," I whisper on a haggard breath.

I step into the house, as if in a trance, and what I see makes my heart stop and my head roar.

"Bella! No!"

BPOV

As soon as Edward is out the door, I throw my book down on the floor beside my chair, and then turn off the TV I was neither watching nor listening to … I just like messing with Edward and seeing how frustrated I can get him. All his little grunts and huffs, it was all I could do to pretend to concentrate on my book.
I knew Brady would have to go to the bathroom and I also knew Edward would take him out. I'd been not very patiently counting down the minutes so I could surprise him with a nice, hot, bubble bath. The last few days have been such a … well, they've been pretty damned awful to be honest. The stranger, who we all know was Aleksei, finding out about Wayne, the funeral and watching Edward deal with being in Boston again, talking to Peyton, the nightmare … all of it has taken its toll.

I just want some quiet time with Edward. There's nothing better than feeling his strong legs around me, his chest pressed against my naked back … his hard cock nudging my ass. I make sure to add an extra squeeze of the mint-scented bubble bath and lay out two of the fluffiest towels I can find. While the bathroom fills with delicious mint-scented steam, I grab his iPod and and attach it to the docking station on the counter, turning down the lights, and lighting a few candles. If I had time, I'd go back downstairs and snatch a bottle of wine out of the refrigerator, but he'll be back any minute.

The mint is already working wonders; I feel more relaxed already. I hope it does the same for him. I need to touch him, let my fingers trail through the coarse hair on his thighs, take him in my hand and stroke him until he begs me to make him come.

I just want him.

Just as I'm about to undress, I hear the strangest noise from downstairs. Reaching over, I turn the tub off and poke my head out of the bedroom door. I listen for the sound of Brady and Edward, but hear nothing. My body moves on its own and I take a few steps into the hallway toward the staircase.

"Edward?"

Nothing. No answer, not even a sound.

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end and my skin prickles.

"Babe?"

A few more steps down and still no answer. I can feel a cold draft and wonder if maybe Brady wasn't quite done using the bathroom so Edward rushed him back outside before he could make a mess. It's been known to happen. I reach the bottom of the stairs and my eyes fly toward the door … the broken, splintered door.

I feel a whoosh of air behind me and before I can turn around, a strong arm is wrapped around my neck, squeezing so tightly it's hard to breathe.

"Hello, again, Bella," hisses a voice that is most definitely not Edward's.

My eyes immediately fill with tears. Fear, anger, guilt war inside of me. My fingers scratch and pull at his arm to no avail. He's wearing a denim jacket; my efforts do nothing but make his forearm flex which in turn presses even harder against my throat.

"It's so nice to see you." His voice is accented, unlike the first time I heard it, and even though I have yet to see his face, I know it's him again.
He walks us sideways toward the middle of the living room. His chest is pressed flush against my back and I can feel the cold of his belt buckle seep through the thin jersey knit of my pants. He must have come in from outside. He must have been watching, waiting for this chance to get inside.

As if he can read my mind he whispers, his hot, foul breath in my ear, "I've been watching you and Edward … your little girl, too. Such a nice family. Too bad Edward won't be able to enjoy it after tonight." He chuckles and the sound makes my already labored breathing come out in shorter, faster bursts.

"What do you want?" I manage to force out, my eyes watering from the fear and the pain. My eyes dart around the room, looking for something, anything to use to help me get away from him.

He chuckles and the sound makes my blood run cold. "Why, my sweet, sweet Bella, I want Edward to pay for what he's done to me," he says, confusing me.

I manage to turn my head just enough to get a good look at him. I don't know why I'm surprised to see it's the same man as before, but I am, or maybe it's just knowing this is the man that almost destroyed Edward that makes my stomach twist.

It's that thought that makes me squirm and kick. My elbow connects with his stomach but instead of doing any damage all it does is enrage him.

"Such a little hell cat." He chuckles again, and then I feel the press of the barrel of a gun. His arm is still wrapped tightly around my neck and his other is across my stomach, the metal of the gun hard and heavy through my t-shirt. "Let's see how much fight you have in you after I get through with loverboy."

He drags me so that we're standing right in front of the door; only a few scant minutes have passed. I know it's only seconds until Edward comes back, and there's nothing I can do to warn him. Tears flow even more now, out of frustration at not being able to do anything. My chest heaves and I try not to think about the gun buried in my stomach or the despicable, evil man behind me. I don't think about his hand touching my skin or his fetid breath in my ear. All I can do is pray that somehow, someway, we're able to make it out of this alive.

The sound of Edward's footsteps on the porch makes my heart race. I can feel sweat bead and fall down my chest, between my breasts and down my back. My vision blurs as I try to catch my breath, and when Edward bursts through the mangled door, eyes wild and frantic, my heart breaks.

"Edward, so nice of you to join the party. I was just telling your Bella here all the fun we're going to have together. Well, at least I'm going to have fun. Not so much for you I'd imagine." He cackles maniacally.

Aleksei leans down and I close my eyes, but I feel his disgusting lips on my cheek. Edward lets out a strangled roar, shouting, "If you touch her again, I'm going to fucking kill you!"

"Yeah? I don't fucking think so, Eddie. I'm the one with the fucking gun." Aleksei sneers and lifts the gun from my side and turns it toward Edward.

Knowing the gun is now pointed at Edward makes all coherent thought leave. I start fighting, pulling on his arm. My elbows flail as I twist and turn. I can hear Aleksei grunt and huff as he tries to keep a hold of me. I lower my chin, hoping that I can at least get my teeth close enough to his arm to bite. I try to dig my nails in, but the denim of his jacket is too thick for it to make any difference. My arms are free so I reach up and try to pull his hair, scratch at his face, but he's so
fast, so strong. Every move I make he counters. Edward's screaming, threatening and out of the corner of my eye I see the gun swing from Edward and back toward me.

I manage to catch him along his cheek. I can feel my nail scrape, dig, draw blood.

"You fucking bitch," he snarls, squeezing my throat even tighter. My vision blurs and my head swims as I struggle to get enough oxygen. With the final bit of strength I can feel in my weakened body, I fling myself forward and then back into his chest. His grip loosens from around my neck just enough for me to cry out, "Edward."

EPOV

Aleksei hits her with the butt of the gun and she falls to the ground, unconscious and still. She's not dead, but she looks it with blood trailing down the side of her face and growing paler by the second.

My heart stops.

Everything is bathed in crimson, like her blood.

Rage.

It's all I feel.

I want him dead. I want to kill him, slowly, painfully, and hear him beg for mercy.

I have none.

After everything he's done, after the seven years I paid for his crime, after losing my family, my identity, he still thinks I need to pay … that I owe him?

Fuck that shit to hell and back.

"I'm going to kill you for that," I say and even I'm shocked by the cold, hard edge to my voice.

Aleksei sneers and then shakes his head. "Like I said, Eddie," he spits out my name, "I don't fucking think so." He levels the gun at me and I suppose it should scare me, but it doesn't. I'm not that frightened, misguided kid I was seven years ago. I've seen shit, done shit, heard shit he can't begin to fathom, no matter where the fuck he's been hiding out. Nothing compares to being inside. Nothing.

I laugh. He cocks his head and stares at me like I'm insane, but little does he know that I've never been more in the moment than I am right now. Here, in the home I want to share with the two people I love more than my own life, I'm one hundred percent sure of what's going on.

He's going to pay.

We circle one another. It's all I can do not to look down, even though the pull to go to Bella, to touch her and feel her heartbeat is screaming at me. I can't though. Not until he's gone from our lives.

"Nice set-up you've got going on here, man. I never would have pictured you for fucking the same chick over and over, but I must say, she's a choice piece of ass," he taunts me.

"Why the fuck did you come back? What do you want?"
I try to keep him talking. I'm waiting for just the right moment to take him down, because there's only one of us getting out of here alive and it sure as hell is going to be me.

"To make you pay," he states simply, as if I'm an idiot for not understanding. "Do you know what it's like to always be looking over my shoulder for the cops? To never be able to trust anyone? To never be able to stay in one place long enough to get anywhere?" He glares at me, his beady, black eyes flat and soulless. "Because you couldn't keep your fucking mouth shut, I'll always have to run."

"You never should have shot that man, Aleksei. You already had the cash," I tell him.

I watch as his eyes rove around the room quickly, before settling on me once again. His arm has begun to shake from holding the gun up for so long, but there's no way I'm risking him pulling the trigger … not yet anyway.

"Why the fuck not? I didn't need him anymore. Why not kill him?" he screams.

He's so close to losing it. The gun wavers; his finger twitches. I freeze.

His eyes are all over the place, his pupils huge. "It's all your fault! Why couldn't you just run with me? Why did you have to be such a fucking hero? If you would've just let him die, we'd be living the life. Pussy, drugs, money … we'd have had it all, but no," he hisses. "You had to ruin fucking everything!"

His arm dips and he looks down. I take a step, but he hears me, and lifts the gun, pointing it at Bella.

I halt immediately.

He swings his arm back around and once again I'm looking down the barrel of his gun. I'm only a few steps away from him, close enough to see the sweat that covers his face, the tattoo that Bella remembered. I can smell the scent of the woods on his clothes, see the mud that cakes the side of his shoes.

"You know, it was so fucking easy to find you," he says and tilts his head to the side. "All it took was killing that old, washed-up P.O. you called a friend, and a look through your file, and voila, here I am. I was only looking for you. I didn't know I'd find a whole town full of people you'd come to care about. I didn't expect to find her," he jeers and points with his chin at Bella's still unconscious form on the floor by his feet, "or her little brat. You don't deserve it, you chicken-shit bastard. You deserve to be alone, like me."

Bella groans and he lowers his arm. When she groans again, louder, he glances down at her. I take a chance and lunge at him, hitting him square in the chest. We fall backward, over the end table and it breaks beneath us as we hit the floor. I hear the gun skitter off to the side toward the front door. I'm on him in an instant and swing my fist at his jaw. I feel teeth loosen beneath my knuckles and it feeds the flames of my anger.

"You son of a bitch!" I scream, hitting him again and this time I feel his nose break. Feel the cartilage mesh with bone, watch as blood spews, coating his skin. His eye is next then I move down, landing blow after blow to his ribs. I hear the sickening sound of cracking bones; I can feel them break beneath the skin.

"Seven fucking years! I was locked up for seven, long, fucking years because of you!" I shout. I feel blood spatter across my cheek as I land another punch to his already bruising jaw. "I was
almost killed! I had to fight off motherfuckers hellbent on making me their bitch for years! Every night I'd lay in bed and wonder whether that night would be the night I'd have to kill someone to protect myself!

I'm breathing so hard that it's all I can hear. He lands a few well-placed hits to my stomach, my ribs, probably cracked a few, too, and I can feel a lump forming near my eye, but it's nothing. I barely feel it.

"You fucking killed Wayne, you sorry sack of shit!" I scream, my anger and fear getting the best of me and I feel tears fall down my face. My hands go around his neck, my knees dig into his sides, and all I can think about is ending this … ending him.

A bark from Brady makes me turn my head and in the next instant, I'm sprawled out on the floor, fingers stretching toward the gun that's just out of my reach. Aleksei is on my back and we struggle, both trying to grab the gun. His elbow flies and hits me in the side of the head and it blurs my vision long enough for him to reach the gun first. He rolls me over onto my back and stands up, pointing the gun right at my chest.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance, Edward," he pants.

I don't even have time to think, to blink, because right when I see his finger curl around the trigger, there's two men racing into the house, only one I recognize.

Charlie.

Then there's shouting, a gun goes off. I hear a thud, but I need to get to Bella. I roll over, my cracked ribs making me wince against the pain shooting to every part of my body. I pull myself along the floor the few feet it takes me to get to her.

"Bella, oh shit. Baby, wake up," I beg as I pull myself up. I run my fingers through her hair, ignoring the fact that my fingers are now coated with her blood. She's so pale.

I lift her, ignoring the piercing ache in my chest and side. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry," I tell her over and over again. Tears fall from my face and splash onto hers, mixing with her blood. "I love you. I'm so sorry. I promised you no one would hurt you and I failed. Please, please wake up."

I hear voices, loud and chaotic, but no more gunshots.

I lift my eyes from Bella's when I feel a hand on mine and look up to see Charlie.

"It's over, Edward. He'll never hurt you or Bella again."

Charlie POV

"Honey, Bud's here," Renée tells me. I heard the doorbell and assumed it would be him so I was already up and walking toward the entryway.

I meet him as Renée brings him toward the sunroom. "Can I get you a beer or anything?" I ask him after shaking his hand.

"Nah, I'm good. Let's sit. I have some information for you."

Turning toward Renée, I give her a quick, and what I hope is reassuring smile. She nods and then lets her shoulders droop just slightly. She's as worried as I am and knows full well why Bud is here and what the information more than likely entails.
Once we're seated, he doesn't waste any time. As soon as Edward left the house on Sunday, I called Bud. He's an old friend from my college days so I've known him a hell of a long time. We're not best friends, but close enough that I knew he'd help me if I asked, so I did. He's a detective from Bar Harbor and while not the most advanced police department in the country, he had access to the information I needed.

"You were right, Charlie. This Aleksei Petrov is one piece of work. I called Boston PD and talked to the detectives that are working the case for your friend, Wayne. His rap sheet is longer than my arm," he tells me and then hands me a folder full of information.

I read, getting more and more worried by the sentence. Armed robbery, possession, assault with a deadly weapon, attempted murder … nothing he's been convicted of, only implicated in, but holy shit, the list is daunting.

For just the briefest of moments, I question what the hell Bella is doing with Edward, but shake it off as soon as it comes. This is not who Edward is, he was never like Aleksei, and I cringe at second-guessing him for even a second.

"Damn, Bud." I sigh and close the folder. "If Edward's right and this guy is hanging around Corea, we have to do something. This monster belongs in prison, not wandering around with the freedom to hurt Edward or my family."

"Why don't we go talk with Edward and maybe we can figure something out," Bud says and stands up. I can tell he feels as off as I do about all of this.

I nod and lead him back through the house. "Née, I'm heading over to Bella's with Bud to talk to Edward for a bit. I'll be home soon." I walk over to where she's doing the dishes from dinner and kiss her cheek. "Save some dessert for me." I give her a little swat on her ass and chuckle when she squeaks and then glares at me.

Damn I love that woman.

I climb into his truck and we start toward Bella's. "Nice town," he says as we drive.

"It is. It's small, but it's home, you know? Renée and I raised our family here, and I couldn't imagine living anywhere else."

He flicks the blinker and turns when I tell him to as we pass the Booze & Bait. "Do you think either of your kids will ever move away?" His question is just to make conversation, but it's something I've given a lot of thought to recently, ever since Edward's accident.

I sigh and run a my fingers through my mustache. "Emmett won't leave. He loves the water and working on the boat as much as I do. It's in his blood. Bella," I have to stop and close my eyes. "She loves Edward. I have no doubt that at some point in the future I'll be calling him son and it'll because they're married, not because I'm trying to make a point. I sure as hell don't want her to move away, taking my granddaughter with her, but she doesn't belong here … neither does Edward. He came to Corea to start over, because it was someplace that was familiar and where no one knew who he was. I respect him for that, but working on the water isn't for him. He's great at it, don't get me wrong. He works his ass off and has learned faster than I ever expected, but he doesn't need to be out there."

My jaw clenches and I look out the window, speaking softly but sure. "We almost lost him once, next time we might not be so lucky, and I won't put my daughter through that. If this Aleksei asshole thinks he's going to mess with my family and take away the reason for Bella and Peyton's
happiness, well he's got another fucking thing coming. No one is going to threaten what Edward's worked his ass off to get, not if I can help it."

"We'll figure this out, Charlie," Bud replies after a moment where there's nothing but the sound of my heavy breathing.

"Damn straight we will," I murmur. "I love that boy as much as if he were my own and I'll be damned if he's going to live, looking over his shoulder and wondering if today's the day that piece of shit is going to crawl back out from under whatever rock he's been hiding under and try to take all Edward's worked for away."

We pull into the driveway and park behind Bella's monstrosity of a vehicle. We both get out of the truck and when I see Bud reach for his gun, I freeze.

"Charlie, get back in the car and wait here," he hisses and moves slowly, armed and ready, toward the house.

Of course I follow, no way in hell I'm staying put if my kids are in danger. I walk around the front of the truck and suck in a sharp breath when I see light from inside spill out onto the front porch through the open door. Now that I'm out of the truck, I can hear yelling, Edward's voice screaming over and over again.

I'm almost to the door, right behind Bud, when I hear an eerie, evil voice say, "You should have killed me when the chance, Edward."

Bud doesn't hesitate and I follow right behind, rushing inside the house. Immediately I take in the chaos: splintered wood, broken lamp, a spilled drink on the floor. There's a man, disheveled and bloody holding a gun and pointing it at Edward. I start to cry out, the scene almost too much to understand, when I hear Bud tell the man to drop his weapon.

The man, whom I assume is Aleksei, turns, eyes blank, well the one that's not swollen shut. He cackles and points the gun at Bud who doesn't even blink before firing his gun, shooting the man once in the left side of his chest.

It's like watching a movie in slow motion - the man's eyes go wide then he looks down. His hand loosens its grip on the gun and it drops to the floor with a loud clatter. He's completely still for about a second or two before he falls over, landing with a whoosh.

I can't move; it's like my feet are encased in concrete, until I see Bella … and hear Edward groan as he crawls toward her.

"Oh, shit, Bella!" I cry out and Bud looks up from where he's kneeling beside Aleksei.

He drops his wrist and says succinctly, "He's dead," before he looks in the same direction I am.

He's in motion in an instant, on his feet and whipping out a cell phone. "This is Detective Larson, Bar Harbor PD, calling in with a 10-12. I need back up, CSU, and a rig for two victims to … hang on," he says and then turns to me. "Charlie, I need Bella's address." I tell him and he picks his phone back up, repeating what I say. "There's been a shooting, suspect is presumed dead from GSW to the chest."

I make my way toward Bella and Edward. He's a mess, covered in blood, clothes torn, but it's like he doesn't even notice, all he can do is whisper softly to Bella. I kneel down beside him and touch her, heaving a huge sigh of relief when she's warm. I see the blood on the side of her head and the bruise that's bloomed.
"Bella, I'm so sorry," he tells her, and my heart breaks for him, listening to how devastated he sounds.

I have no idea what's gone on here tonight, but I know whatever it was, they are both lucky to be alive.

I reach out and touch his arm, afraid to startle him. The poor boy is barely holding it together. When he looks at me, I slowly tell him, "It's over, Edward. He'll never hurt you or Bella again."

He starts sobbing, cradling Bella's listless body against his. She groans and my whole body sags in relief. "Oh, thank God," I whisper and bend over and kiss the side of her head. "Daddy's here, baby girl. You're okay. You're safe."

Edward holds her tighter, and continues to talk to her, completely oblivious to anything going on around him.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and jump. "Shit," I mutter when I see Bud standing there.

"Are they okay?" he asks as he looks down at Edward and Bella. I'm holding one of Bella's hands in mine, unable to let go to even stand up and talk to him.

My mind's been numb, frozen in shock, but slowly the last five minutes are catching up to me. I begin to shake as I picture the gun pointed at Edward, hear the sound of the gun as it exploded, remember what Aleksei looked like as the life drained out of him.

"Oh, God." I moan and hang my head. I have to take a few deep breaths to keep my composure. I rub my eyes with my free hand to rid them of the tears that have fallen. Holy hell, I don't think I'll ever forget what it felt like to walk in this house tonight.

"Charlie?" Bud questions and squeezes my shoulder. I wave my free hand and take one more breath before I look up at him.

"Yeah, Bella must have been hit on the head and Edward, well, I have no idea what's happened to him. I don't see any bullet wounds or anything and he's talking so I think he's okay. Besides, there's no way in hell you're getting him to let go of Bella right now."

"I'm going to go make some calls. I need to call my Lieutenant and fill him on what happened, then I need to call Boston PD and tell them Petrov is dead. What a fucking mess," he mumbles.

I look to my left and see the body, still and lifeless in the middle of the floor.

"We need to move outside and clear the scene for CSU. Let me grab some blankets and see if you can get Edward to carry Bella outside," he tells me before he turns around.

"Edward," I say his name softly but sternly so that he hears me. It takes me a few tries but finally he stops talking long enough to look at me. "We need to take Bella outside, son, and wait for the ambulance. They'll be here soon."

He looks at me blankly for a few seconds before he whispers brokenly, "I'm so sorry, Charlie."

"Hush, now, Edward. It's okay. You're safe now, Bella's safe, and so is Peyton. It's over." I stand and urge him to follow by pulling on Bella's arm. "Come on, son. We need to go outside."

He struggles to stand, hissing and moaning with every motion of his body, but he refuses to let go of Bella. She groans again when he finally gets upright and he leans down and says softly, "I've got
you, baby. I'm right here."

I hold his elbow as he tentatively walks toward the front door. He doesn't even look at the body on the floor; his eyes are locked on Bella as he lets me lead him from the house. He's in so much pain, but all he cares about is keeping her still, close.

I guide him to the chair in the corner. When he sits, I drape a blanket across his back. I take a moment to kiss the top of his head and whisper that I love him. I know he hears me because he closes his eyes, but only for a moment. He bends down when Bella moans and I watch, holding my breath, as she slowly opens her eyes.

"Edward," she rasps. She licks her lips, swallows, and her eyes close only to open again. "Aleksei?"

"He's gone, baby. He won't hurt you ever again." Tears stream from his eyes and I have to turn away. His pain, his heartbreak, the sheer relief that she's safe is more than I can handle.

She breathes out and turns toward his chest, twisting her hands in his tattered shirt. "I knew you'd keep us safe, Edward. I love you." Her voice is faint, but her words ring out loud and clear.

"I love you, Bella. Always and forever."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Whew! So glad that's over, how about you? I know lots and lots of you were worried about Edward getting in trouble somehow, so I hope you all like how I handled that! And Charlie, I REALLY love that man, just saying.

Obviously I'm not a police officer, so the call that Larson makes is clichéd … we'll leave it at that.

Okay, now that Aleksei's out of the picture, it's all fluff from here on out, promise! A sweet, sexy, and much needed trip away for Valentine's Day is up next for our couple as well as more Peyton.

How many chapters left? As of right now 4 after today's and that included the Epilogue. It could change, but that's what my plan is.

Keep checking the Facebook page and the blog. We put lots of goodies on there this week! Lots of you have asked what Brady looks like, there's a picture of him on the blog, and if you've forgotten what Aleksei looks like, he's on there, too!

See you next Sunday … let me know what you thought of the chapter, I've been totally worried about this one!

Erin
Chapter 26

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers especially Laurel with her never-ending patience and support. She never fails to go above and beyond. Love you all!

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I’m truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

Lots of important conversations happening in this one, so let's get to it shall we?

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 26

BPOV

"Sir, you're going to have to let go of her. We need to check her vitals and take a look at that head wound. You need to let us do our job," a strange voice floats from somewhere close.

"Don't fucking hurt her," Edward growls. I try to smile, but it hurts, which causes me to groan. "Shit, Bella, I'm sorry." His voice is hoarse, raw and I want so much to reach up and touch him, but my arm feels like it weighs a hundred pounds.

I try to talk but no sound comes out. My throat is so dry; it burns like someone dropped a lit match down it. The throbbing in my head is so intense that it makes my eyes water.

"Baby, oh God, what is it? Why are you crying? What hurts?" His hands flutter over my body but don't touch me, like he's afraid if he does, he'll cause me pain.

It takes a gargantuan effort, but I manage to swallow and then say, "It's my head." This time he groans and the sound cuts right through me. "I'll be okay, Edward. Don't worry."

My eyes fall closed on their own accord even though I try so hard to keep them open. After a few minutes pass, though it seems much longer, I open them again when I feel someone touching me; I know it's not Edward judging by the slightly rough way the hands push and prod at me.

I feel a blood pressure cuff around my arm then something in my ear. The cold of a stethoscope against my chest causes me to hiss, which in turn causes a piercing pain to shoot through my head from one side to the other, like I've just been stabbed with a hot fire poker.

Holy hell I've never felt anything hurt that badly.

I whimper and immediately Edward's face is right by mine, his lips on my cheek pressing gentle, soft kisses everywhere he can reach.

"You're going to be okay. I'm so sorry I wasn't there to protect you. This is all my fault." His voice is so anguished that it takes my breath away for a second.
Fuzzy, out of focus images flit in my mind. The front door splintered and open. Aleksei's face. His cold, soulless eyes. A gun. Edward's face full of rage then fear … then nothing. I vaguely remember hearing my dad's voice, feeling his mustache against my forehead when he gave me a kiss.

"What? I don't remember …" I utter growing more confused and anxious by the moment. "What happened? Where's my dad? Where's Aleksei?" My heart races and I feel like I'm about to fall apart.

"Bella, shhh, you're safe now. Everything's okay," Edward tells me, but his voice is shaking so much. I can't tell if it's because there's things he's not telling me or if, like me, everything is finally catching up to him.

"Miss," the other voice interrupts just as I'm about to try to comfort Edward. I turn away from him and toward the strange voice. A howl of pain escapes when he shines a light in my eyes, and this time there's no stopping the tears that leak from them … nor the growl Edward lets out.

"I'm sorry," the paramedic tells me. "You have a pretty bad bump on your head and I needed to check your pupils." I hear his pen scratch over the paper as he makes his notes and I try to catch my breath.

"Edward, shhhh," I murmur when I hear he's still muttering and threatening under his breath. His fingers are in my hair, soothing with every stroke. When he leans in close and I can hear the faint whistle and wheeze in his breath I pull back and look at him.

Finally able to focus now that some of the cobwebs have cleared from my brain, I look at him … really look. "Oh, Edward." I groan and reach out to run my fingers down the side of his cheek.

He's a mess … split lip with blood still seeping out, the beginnings of a black eye, a dark purple-black bruise on his cheek. His shirt is torn and covered with splatters of dried blood. His hair is more wild than I've ever seen. He's leaning and cradles his arm against his side, and I can see the tight lines of pain in the corners of his mouth.

He closes his eyes and leans into the palm of my hand, lifting his own to cover it. "Oh my God." I sniffle. He opens his eyes and gazes at me. "Your hands," I whisper.

He looks down at his free hand, the one that's still in my hair, and shrugs his shoulders, dismissing my worry. A few more minutes pass. Every time the ambulance hits a bump or a dip and he's jostled, he moans. When we go over a particularly hard bump, he hisses a harsh, "Fuck!"

"Edward, you need to be looked at," I say sadly then turn to look at the paramedic. "Can't you at least give him anything? He's in pain," and now, the tears start again.

I huff, frustrated, aching, and wanting so very badly to go to sleep and wake up and find that everything that's happened tonight has been just a nightmare.

"I'm sorry, Miss," the guy says and he really does sound apologetic. "He's refused treatment and until we can get him to the hospital, get him x-rayed and checked over, there isn't anything I can do."

I snap my head in Edward's direction, ignoring the sharp, shooting pain that flashes in my head and plead. "Edward," is all I manage to get out before he places a finger gently over my mouth. The touch is at complete odds with the chaos I see swimming in his storm cloud-colored eyes and my heart twists at the pain I can feel vibrating through his finger.
"Don't fucking say it, Bella. Once I know you're going to be okay, then I'll let someone take a look at me, but not before." I flinch from the sharp edge of his voice and when he notices the distress on my face, his eyes soften.

"Do you have any idea what it was like to watch him touch you and be powerless to stop him from hurting you? If he would have … I almost …" He pants in between gasps of breath. "I could have lost you." He closes his eyes, but it doesn't matter. I can see, feel, the anguish he's suffering pour off of him. It's in the air. It's in the way he touches me. It's in the way he won't let me go.

I reach for his hand and ask in a tiny voice, "What happened? I don't remember anything after he hit me."

He opens his mouth then snaps it shut. Then does it again. His fingers twitch. He squeezes my hand, harder than I know he means to, then looks apologetically at me when I jiggle our hands so he loosens his grip. "I …" He sighs and shakes his head. "I can't, Bella. Not yet."

I understand how hard this is for him, so I smile at him before turning my head. I stare at the roof of the ambulance, not really seeing it, and let myself drift off to sleep. An awful ruckus yanks me from my sleep and I'm jerked out of the back of the ambulance. Now, everything seems to be going in fast forward. I hear Edward arguing with a nurse about coming with me, and every sound out of his mouth is laced in pain.

"Wait, please," I hoarsely ask the orderly pushing the stretcher. "Edward," I call to him, hoping he can hear me above his ranting. I know he's upset, worried, and that guilt is eating him alive but the man needs to be checked out.

"What do you need?" he immediately asks as he steps up beside me.

"Let them check you out, please? You're hurt and you need attention."

I can tell he's about to argue with me, again, but I can't handle thinking about him in pain for one more second. "Edward, please, for me, let the doctor look at your ribs and your hands and make sure you're okay. Please." I don't mean to cry and I don't do it to make him feel bad, but the tears fall anyway.

The second he sees them, he deflates. With his forehead pressed against mine, he whispers, "Okay. For you, but I'm coming to find you as soon as I'm done." He kisses me quickly on the lips and he winces when he stands up straight. "Please be careful with her," he says, sounding lost and in so much pain.

"Love you," he tells me as he brushes the tip of his finger down my cheek as I'm wheeled away.

I try to hold it together, I really do, but I begin to shake as silent tears stream from my eyes. The whole night comes rushing back, or what I can remember of it … the fear, the anger, the guilt … all of it and I can't handle it.

A short while later, after I've been poked and prodded and asked a million and one questions I hear the unmistakable voice of my mom, which instantly triggers more tears. I feel like a damn basket case, but the second she peeks around the curtain, I'm done.

"Oh, baby girl," she cries and rushes to me. I'm engulfed by her arms and the moment I smell her familiar mom scent - fresh baked cinnamon rolls, coffee, and a hint of clean laundry right from the dryer - I breathe in a huge sigh of relief.

"Mom," is all I manage to get out before my dad slips in beside her.
Seeing him totally wrecks me because suddenly I remember hearing his voice at my house. "Daddy," I sob as he sits on my other side. I haven't called him that since I was ten-years-old, but the word slips out as naturally as breathing.

The next few hours pass by in a blur of tests and tears and threats. A CAT scan to confirm I have a slight concussion, as if the huge bump and shooting pain aren't enough of an indicator. Tears when I beg my dad to go check on Edward but before he can go, Carlisle and a man dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans, but with a badge attached to his hip tell him that the detectives from the Boston PD are there to take his statement. I hear them mention talking to Edward, too, and my mind goes into overdrive, imagining all sorts of worse case scenarios.

No one has told me what happened yet. Every time I ask my dad, he shushes me and just tells me I'm safe and I'll be okay.

When the man who I hear my dad call Bud sees how upset I'm getting he slowly approaches the bed. "Bella, there isn't anything for you to worry about. They just need to ask Edward a few questions and clear up a few things, that's all. I promise," he tells me sincerely.

Bud looks pretty worse for wear, too, and something about the way he looks at me, like he's afraid to say too much, and then looks at my dad and Carlisle makes me narrow my eyes. "You were at my house," I don't ask, I state, knowing there's much they aren't telling me.

He finally nods when I levelly stare at him. "Why?"

I listen, curled against my mom and holding my dad's hand as Bud explains everything. He starts with my dad contacting him for information to when he arrived at my house and found the door open. He finally tells me what happened when he came into the house and saw Edward and Aleksei … and how he shot Aleksei.

"He's dead?" I question, knowing how wrong it is to rejoice in the death of someone else. In this case though, I can't find it in me to feel any remorse. It's a thought I know I'll have to revisit at a later date.

"He is. So, no need to worry about Edward getting in any trouble, okay? He didn't do anything wrong and no one's going to say he did," Bud says and my dad barks out a "That's for damned sure. Over my dead body is anything going to happen to that boy."

I smile through my tears and throw my arms around my dad's neck. "Thank you for coming to our rescue," I whisper and sigh against his chest when he tucks me beneath his chin. Besides Edward, no one on Earth makes me feel as safe as my dad.

I reach out and wrap my fingers around Bud's hand. I can tell it takes him by surprise and makes him slightly uncomfortable, but I have to say something to him. "And thank you for making it so that Edward doesn't have to live with taking someone's life. I'm sorry you had to, but I'm so grateful that he didn't."

The words seem insufficient, but they're all I have.

"Just doing my job," he says gruffly after he clears his throat. "Charlie, what do you say we go get this done and get Edward back to his girl? Bella, I hope the next time I see you it'll be under much better circumstances."

Dad kisses me on the top of the head and then slides off the bed. "I'm sure this will take a little bit, but don't worry, I'll make sure Edward's okay. Love you, Bella," he says through a few heavy
"Love you, too, Daddy. Tell Edward to hurry … and that I love him." He nods once, lays a hand on my mom's shoulder and strides through the curtains.

Esme pops in a few minutes later. "Edward sent me with a message," she says as she smiles at me. I can tell she's been crying; her eyes are rimmed in red and the end of her nose is pink, but I'm so happy he hasn't been alone this whole time. When I look at her she simply leans over and kisses my cheek. "That's all you get until he can do it himself." She giggles and my heart immediately feels a hundred pounds lighter. "He has bruised ribs, a broken finger, and a few cuts that needed stitches, but other than that, he's just fine. Anxious to get to you but once Carlisle and Charlie both assured him you were awake and coherent, he relaxed … a little," she qualifies.

"Mom, where's Peyton?" I ask, needing my little girl. I hate the thought of her seeing me like this … and telling her what happened, but I want to see her, hold her, and tell her I love her.

Mom runs her fingers through my hair, and frowns then sighs when she lightly traces the gash on the side of my head. It's been cleaned and bandaged between the CAT scan and the exam. I'm just thankful my hair didn't need to be shaved. I imagine between Edward and me, we'll look plenty frightening to Peyton; no need to add more on top of it.

"Xavier and Seth are on their way. We told them to wait until you were done with your tests and in a room before they got here. Peyton will be upset enough once she sees the two of you. We all thought it would be better for her to at least see you in a room where it wasn't so chaotic."

I close my eyes and feel the burn of tears that threaten to fall … again. Damn, I'd really like to be able to go more than five minutes without leaking like a freaking sieve.

Thankfully, I am brought to a room shortly thereafter. I'm so tired and my body just aches. All over; even my hair and my toes hurt. At the same time, my stomach is tied in knots and my skin's crawling, like thousands of tiny ants are marching all over my body. I wring my hands. I huff. I kick my legs.

I'm going out of my ever-loving mind.

I need Peyton.

I want Edward.

Now.

My mom has gone down to the cafeteria with Esme; they said to get some coffee, but I think they both could tell I needed a few minutes alone. Now that the adrenaline rush of the ER has faded, my mind is able to put bits and pieces of the night together to give me a better picture of what happened earlier. I'll never forget the look on Edward's face when he saw Aleksei holding the gun against me and I damn sure know I'll never forget the way it felt as he stood behind me and breathed in my ear, either. I shiver just from the thought and wrap my arms around my stomach. Turning on my side, I bring my knees up to my chest and curl into a ball like I used to do when I was a little girl.

I say a quick but heartfelt prayer for the strength to help Edward. I know he's going to have a hard time believing that what happened wasn't his fault. The remorse and the guilt he's already carrying will consume him if he lets it … but if I have anything to say about it, it won't.

I will not let this destroy what he, what we've found with each other.
Not on your damned life.

I look at the clock on the wall and wonder how much longer until the other two pieces of my heart get here.

Just then I hear a creak of the door and then small, light footsteps followed by a tiny, scared whisper. "Mommy?" Just like a little while ago when I used a word for comfort, so, too, does my daughter. And, just like before, hearing it makes the tears fall every bit as much as saying it.

Quickly I sit up and hold my arms to her, pulling her to me as soon as she gets close enough. I ignore the aches in my body and the searing pain in my head and hold her close to me. "Baby. Oh, I love you. Mommy loves you so much," I say over and over again as I rock her in my arms. Just the feel of her against me quiets the storm in my mind and soothes my soul. Again, I say another prayer of thanks that she wasn't home to witness the madness.

"Mommy, what's wrong with your head? Why are you here? Where's Edward?" She sniffs and wipes the end of her nose with the back of her hand and her pretty, slate blue eyes are so sad, so full of questions.

I cup her cheek with one of my hands and with the other reach out to hold her hand. She's still and so, so quiet … not at all like my Peyton, and it breaks my heart to see. I look up and glance at Xavier and Seth, both of whom look worse than they did when Evan died. They're both pale with dark circles under blood shot eyes and every muscle in their bodies is tense. I motion them closer with my head and that opens the floodgates. Peyton and I both are surrounded by arms, all of us mashed together.

"Bell, if you ever do anything to scare me like that again, I swear I'm going to pull out all my hair," Xavier says after lots and lots of kisses and whispers of I love yous are passed around. It's actually quite a beautiful moment, even with the levity.

The only thing missing is Edward.

Peyton giggles when she finally puts together what he's said. "Xavier, you don't have any hair," she tells him and when she smiles, I see most of my Peyton back again.

I breathe a sigh of relief and the relief grows even more when my skin begins to tingle.

"Got room for me in that love fest?" Edward asks. The caramel turtle voice is slightly rougher than normal, but still as sinfully soothing as ever.

"Nah, we're good like this, man," Seth taunts and proceeds to squeeze us all even closer together.

Edward steps closer and when our eyes meet, his whole body practically folds in on itself. Peyton wiggles out from between the tangle of arms and crawls over the bed … and me to get to him. She nearly throws herself off the edge at him before Xavier stops her. She doesn't have to wait for long to get to him though, because he immediately stretches his arms out and brings us both to him, pressed up tightly against his chest.

"Peyton," he breathes out and ever so gently kisses her forehead. His eyes slide closed and I see one tear fall down his battered cheek. Then, I feel his lips against my forehead and in a voice barely louder than the sound of butterfly wings comes, "Bella." There's a hand, then another on the back of my head, on the back of Peyton's then Edward's before there are footsteps retreating then the click of the door as it closes behind Seth and Xavier, leaving just the three of us to heal.

~~~OOO~~~OOO ~~~
"Baby, are you ready to go?" I hang my apron up in the closet in the kitchen at The Breakers and turn to look at her, chuckling when I see she's already nodding her head and bouncing up and down.

"I've been waiting for this all day." She sighs dramatically and then reaches for my hand so she can drag me toward the door. "Bye, Xavier! I'll bring you and Seth back a treat." She waves at him when he looks over at her.

Xav walks over and swoops her up into a big hug and kisses her on the cheek. "Make sure it's a good one, Pipsqueak. Seth hasn't let me have any treats at all lately." He mock pouts.

He's laying it on thick, but of course my daughter promises him an extra special treat, to which he responds with a loud, "Heck yeah!"

I let out a content sigh. It's so, so nice to feel like things are back to normal.

"Up you go." I tickle her as she climbs into the backseat of Cherry. By the time I'm situated behind the steering wheel, she's already buckled in, scowling as always when I look at her in the rear view mirror.

When the day comes that she doesn't have to ride in the back, I swear she's going to want to throw a party … complete with a bonfire so she can watch her booster seat go up in flames.

Once we get on the road and out of Corea, though it only takes a few minutes, two turns and that's all it takes, I find a radio station that we can both listen to. Neither of us say anything for a while, both seeming to just enjoy being in the same space and being able to feel close to each other.

It feels like it's been ages since it's been just the two of us and I miss my little girl.

"Can I get a McFlurry with my dinner?" she asks suddenly.

Nice to see what's important to my daughter. I chuckle and nod my head. "Yep, as long as you eat all your chicken nuggets AND you get apple slices instead of fries," I warn with a lift of my eyebrow.

She huffs but grins. "That's fine. Can I get a large instead of a small?" Such the little wheeler dealer she is.

"No. I'm pretty sure you'll finagle a treat or two while we're at the store."

At this she turns her head to look out the window, though I can see the grin she tries to hide from me.

We spend the short almost hour-long drive talking about absolutely nothing that would make sense to anyone but the two of us. As each mile goes by and each minute passes I can feel our bond strengthen. It's not as if there's been any sort of problem, save for Edward almost dying and a raving maniac stalking us, but I need this alone time with her more than I even realized. Sure we read together every night, but as often as it's just the two of us, there are as many times that Edward joins, too, sprawled out across the foot of her much too small bed for three people … and a puppy. I don't mind sharing her, I really don't, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't crave the abundance of one on one time that we used to spend together.

Being the vivacious little girl she is, she needs everyone else, I realize this, even though there's a tiny part of me that always wants to be the most important person in her life. It was only her and me for such a long time, it's kind of hard to come to terms with the fact I have to share that title …
even if it is with the love of my life. Sure Xavier and Seth have been by my side, Rose and Em and my parents, too, but when I made the decision to get my house and be on my own with my daughter, it was me that stayed up at night pacing when she got sick. It was me that made sure her teeth were brushed, even the back ones she so often tried to skip. It was me that taught her to love losing yourself in a book and letting your imagination take you all the way to Never Neverland.

Though, honestly speaking, if I have to share her, I suppose there could be worse people to share her with than Edward.

I chuckle at my ridiculous thought and shrug my shoulders when Peyton looks at me like I've just sprouted wings. Thankfully I spy Wal-Mart off to the right and her mind immediately focuses on the task at hand. She's been fretting about her class Valentine's Day party for a week now, so much so she even made a list of candy she wanted to pass out … and listed the pros and cons for each.

Who knew a third grade party could cause such distress?

I think it's sweet and cute she's so worried about it; Edward not so much. Especially when he overheard Peyton ask me what kind of candy I thought Brody would like better – Nerds or Peanut M&Ms.

"I don't know which ones to get," Peyton woefully says as we stand in the middle of the Valentine aisle. Pink and red and hearts and cupids and stuffed teddy bears with bellies that say "Be Mine" across the front spill from the shelves. Box after box of cards tempt her and she painstakingly looks at each one, reading the messages on the cards, studying the pictures. She picks each package up, scrunches her nose while she deliberates, then sets it back down only to move on down the line.

I can't hurry her because, Lord help me if she doesn't pick the right one; it would be a travesty of epic proportions. Plague and pestilence, the end of the world epic … at least as far as my seven-year-old is concerned.

Knowing I'm tempting fate but doing it anyway, I pull out a box and show her. "How about this one? It would be good for boys and girls."

She rolls her eyes heavenward and I can see her silently asking above to grant her patience before she looks at me. "Ugh, Mom! I can't give out *Wizard's of Waverly Place* … that's what Madison said she was going to give. I can't do the same as her!"

Like I said, end of the world.

After what seems like hours she's finally satisfied with her choice of Harry Potter for the girls and *Star Wars* for the boys … only because the special Valentine is Yoda and he was Brody's favorite. Apparently what Brody likes is the determining factor of Nerds over M&Ms, too. She informs me that he doesn't like chocolate and thinks Fun Dips are lame. Who knew?

We take a few more minutes while she picks out some goodies for everyone else, including a bright green stuffed frog complete with a rose in its mouth for Xavier and his favorite chocolate covered cherries. She grabs some cards for them all and treats to go along with it. She's making Edward a homemade card, in fact she's been working on it for over a week now, but she did pick out his favorite Junior Mints. I grab a box of caramel turtles for myself … I can't help it.

Once we're done at the store, and Peyton does indeed get a few treats for herself, the little stinker, it's time for dinner at McDonald's. Peyton keeps her word and gets apple slices instead of fries with
her chicken nuggets. I figure I should be a good mom and lead by example so I get a grilled chicken sandwich, an iced tea and well, I get fries, but only because I know I'll share with Peyton.

We find a spot in the back corner of the restaurant, away from the play area that she insists she's way too old for and start eating. I have to admit, sometimes there's nothing better than French fries from McDonald's. No wonder Mom is such an addict.

"When you and Edward get married, do I have to call him dad?" she asks in the middle of crunching on an apple and takes me totally by surprise. I choke on my drink and gape at her.

"Peyton," is all I can manage to say to which she just stares back at me like I'm the one that's dropped a bomb in the middle of dinner.

She cocks her head to the side and huffs when I don't answer. Apparently choking half to death and shocking me so badly my heart's stopped isn't reason enough not to answer her. "Well?" she asks.

"Baby," I say then take a deep breath, thinking that I honestly must have the world's strangest, smartest, most unique daughter. "What on Earth made you ask that question?" I ask, starting there. I can see that this is a talk that's probably well overdue. It's not anything I haven't thought of already, mind you, but I certainly never imagined having it in the middle of a McDonald's of all places … and without talking to Edward first.

She shrugs. "Dunno. Just wondering I guess. I saw all those Valentines at the store and some said to Daddy on them and I just got to thinking. Don't you want to marry Edward?"

I take another deep breath and buy myself a little bit of time by gathering all the trash and piling it on the tray. She holds her McFlurry and takes a sip. I can feel her swing her leg back and forth beneath the table, like she doesn't have a care in the world, or that she hasn't just knocked me for a hell of a loop.

How do I answer her?

Edward and I have used the words forever and always. I know both of us have no intention of being without the other, ever. He loves me, loves Peyton, and we're a family. It's what we all want, even if it hasn't been voiced out loud in concrete terms. After everything that's happened, it doesn't make much sense to wait for the inevitable.

Edward's accident, Wayne's murder, what happened with Aleksei, all of it has taught me that life can change in an instant, most of the time when you least expect it.

"P, you know I love Edward very much," I begin slowly, watching her from across the table. She looks at me expectantly and I can tell it's taking a lot of effort to not wave her hand to indicate I need to keep going. "Marriage is a big deal, but Edward and I haven't known each other very long. There are people that have been together for years and years and still aren't married."

I'm dying, drowning and as irrational as it is, I'm pissed that Edward isn't here with me. At least we'd be going down together.

Peyton just stares at me with a totally blank look on her face as she waits for me to go on. I pick at the napkin between my hands trying to decide how to explain something that up until a few months ago when a man on a motorcycle rumbled into town, I never expected to have.

"Baby, I don't know how to answer you," I forge ahead. I've always been honest with her, no point in changing that now. "I want to spend the rest of my life with Edward and I want us to be a family. We don't have to be married in order for that to happen, but I can't say that I don't want it … and
I'm pretty sure he does, too." At that she blatantly rolls her eyes and then giggles when I try to glare at her. "Fine," I huff, blowing some wayward hair out of my face, "I know he does, too. Just give us some time, Peyton. Things have been kind of crazy lately, you know?" We both laugh at that knowing nothing could be any more of an understatement. The fact that we can laugh about it now seems to lessen the horror of it all.

It's not like we'll ever forget it, but I damn sure am not living, nor allowing Peyton or Edward to live every day dwelling on it all.

"Well, just so you know, I don't think I want to call Edward dad," she states emphatically. She slurps the rest of her McFlurry through her straw, making an obnoxiously loud noise as she tries to get every last drop … like she's never going to have another one.

I try not to let my face show my surprise … or my immediate reaction of disappointment. It's not for me, but for Edward because I know how much he loves Peyton.

"Why's that?" I ask quietly and I really hope she can't tell how upset I am because inside my heart is breaking for him. He'll be devastated.

She looks off and wrinkles her nose while she thinks, obviously unaware that I'm on the brink of breaking down. "Well," she draws the word out, "I think it's really cool that Edward is my best friend and when you guys get married that would mean he's like my step-dad, right, even though my real father is in heaven?" I nod silently and she continues. I shouldn't be so stunned that she can be so blasé while mentioning Evan, but I am.

I swallow and try to force down the emotion I need to keep at bay so I can finish this conversation. Thinking I'll tackle the easy part of her question first, I tell her, "Yes, if Edward and I got married, he would be your step-dad, technically at least." I'm sure to add that qualifier to the end of my statement because there is no doubt in my mind that Edward is Peyton's dad. Evan will always be her father, no matter how much time has passed, but I know from the bottom of my heart he would want me to be happy with Edward and give her the family, the dad, she needs.

She nods her head like she's okay with what I've just said and sits quietly for a few minutes. I know my girl; she's digesting, turning things over and over in her mind while she processes. It's just the way she works. I wait until it looks like I have her attention again and then ask the question that I'm not entirely sure I want the answer to, especially if that answer is going to break Edward's heart. "Peyton," I say softly, "don't you want Edward to be your dad … not a step-dad but just dad?"

Her answer won't change anything, not really. I know she adores him to the moon and back and I know that whatever she tells me now might not be the way she feels next month or next year, and maybe not even tomorrow. But, she started this discussion, so it's apparent it's been on her mind.

"Well, yeah," she answers immediately and looks at me like I just asked her if Tom Brady is her favorite football player. "But," and then she smiles, as if she's remembered a long lost secret, or I just told her she'd never have to eat a vegetable again. "He's also just Edward." She huffs, frustrated, and I can tell she's having trouble getting out what she wants to say.

I reach across the table and take her hand, and right away she turns our hands over so she can draw circles on the palm of my hand like she's done almost her whole life. "It's okay, baby. Just say whatever you want. You know you don't ever have to worry about what you can tell me."

"He's just … I mean … " She sighs then twists her mouth and blows out a puff of air. "Besides you, he's my most favorite person in the whole wide world. And he's mine." She shakes her head and I
squeeze her hand so she'll keep going. My hearts practically bursting from my chest and I really want to scoop her up and kiss her all over her perfect, adorable, sweet face, but I know she needs to get this off her chest.

"I mean, I know he's your boyfriend, though that really sounds kinda dumb if you ask me, but he was mine first. I love Xav and Seth and Jasper and Uncle Emmett and Pop, but Edward is just … well, Edward, and calling him dad, even though I know that's what he'll be doesn't sound right. I don't love Edward more … I just love him different. That's okay, right? You won't tell Xavier and Uncle Emmett Edward's my favorite will you?"

She looks truly worried so instead of laughing like I want to, I simply say, "Of course not. Your secret's safe with me."

I pull her from the booth and wrap my arm around her shoulder. Pulling her close to me, I lean down and kiss the top of her head. "For what it's worth, baby, I think you should always call Edward, Edward. Just now if you want to call him dad sometimes, well, that would be okay, too."

She grins up at me. "You know you just admitted you were going to marry Edward, don't you?"

I don't even dignify that with an answer.

I send Edward a text as soon as we get on the road to go home. I know Peyton and I needed this and I know he needs to spend time with the guys, but I'd be a lying fool if I didn't say I was anxious to get home to him. I miss him.

Things have certainly calmed down and everything is blessedly, thankfully normal. Walking into my house a few days after everything happened had been a test, but it was a test Edward, Peyton, and I all passed with flying colors. Well, for the most part.

Jasper and Alice, once they were able to get inside, had cleaned everything up … including the blood on the floor. For a teeny tiny moment while I was in the hospital, I thought about never returning to my house, but as soon as that thought came, I pushed it away. There was no way in hell I was letting that maniac take away my home, the place that my daughter had grown up and the place where the three of us were becoming a family. No way at all. Jasper and Alice had replaced the broken furniture and door, cleaned up the mess I'd left in the bathroom, and made it so if you didn't know any better, you'd never be able to tell that a gun was fired there … that someone died there. Edward and I watched as Peyton looked around the room, with Brady in her arms, with her nose scrunched up and her head tilted to the side. She spun around in a circle and didn't let one inch go without an intense inspection. After a moment she'd merely grunted and shrugged her shoulder, remarking, "I like that lamp better than the old one."

Edward chuckled beside me and muttered a soft but loving "damn" under his breath before flashing me a sexy, lopsided smirk and very satisfied crook of an eyebrow. "She's fucking amazing," is all he said before pulling me farther inside the living room.

It wasn't quite as easy for me and even less so for Edward to not let being in that room get the best of us, but with every day that passes, it gets a little easier. Mom, Esme, Rose, and Alice descended upon Peyton and me one night after we'd only been home a few days for a "girl's night" when all the guys kidnapped Edward to go to Finn's to watch a football game.

The night was fantastic, even if I had to soak my toes in nail polish remover to get the God-awful mauvey-purple color off them after they left and replaced it with navy blue. We laughed and watched total girl movies, ate popcorn mixed with M&Ms, and drank more than a few bottles of wine … well, everyone but Peyton. We talked and cried a little when I told them how Edward was
coping with Aleksei finally being gone from his life and how much the support of everyone meant to him. Carlisle of course was his rock, but Dad, Jasper, and Seth who was always there to offer much-needed comedic relief, helped him every bit as much. We talked about how I was dealing with it all, which when I really thought about it, was pretty well all things considered. Peyton had moments when she got scared or confused, and those times always brought things rushing back to the surface, but all in all, I think all of us, and I do mean all, were moving on and letting the things that weren't important go.

Rose and Alice cornered me in the kitchen to ask about making Edward a permanent roommate instead of just a most of the time one. It's something we both want. Now that there isn't anything else in our way, I hope it happens sooner rather than later. I think Peyton wants it more than the two of us put together.

I chuckle and look at her in the mirror. Her head's tilted to the side and her little tongue is poking out of her mouth while she sleeps and I feel my heart grow inside my chest. Sighing, I take a moment to silently give thanks that out of all this mess we've only gotten stronger, closer. I know what I want and I know I'll have it.

My phone vibrates right as we enter into town, as if he can feel us getting closer to home. I smile at the thought. Feeling my heart race just a little and between my legs warm a lot I glance at the screen.

I miss you! Hurry home, I'm waiting ...

I don't need to be told twice.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

The next few days fly by. Of course the Valentine's Day party at school is a big hit. Peyton rushes to The Breakers after school, bursting through the door like the building is on fire. She's waving a pink, sparkly, frilly Valentine in the air as if it is sideline passes to the Super Bowl … and she's going to meet Tom Brady.

"Mom! Aunt Rose! Alice," she shrieks as she rushes toward us with Lucy hot on her heels. Her backpack slides down her arm and she flings it onto a table and then skids to a stop in front of us, panting, but with a smile a mile wide. "Look!" Bouncing up and down she thrusts a hot pink envelope toward us.

I take it from her hand and can't help but giggle when I look at the outside. It's decorated with hand-drawn hearts, so lopsided they look more like blobs, but inside the hearts are little messages, mimicking the real thing. "Be Mine" "You're Sweet" "My Girl" cover the envelope.

"Oh God. I'm dying." Rose giggles in my ear and Alice shakes beside me.

"Hurry, open it!" Peyton orders and then whispers excitedly to Lucy beside her.

Inside is a Valentine. It's obviously from the package he got to hand out to everyone else, but because it's bigger than normal, it's definitely the 'special' one. It's just a picture of SpongeBob with some silly saying in a little bubble beside his head, but the fact the Brody gave the card to her in a special envelope he hand-decorated on top of giving her the 'special one' indeed makes this a very big deal.

My little girl's growing up, I think with a sigh and a sad shake of my head.

"Baby, this is so pretty," I tell her and die a little inside when she takes it back with a dreamy look
on her face. She's way too young for this, but first crushes are a big deal in the life of a little girl, even if she is my baby.

"What else did you get?" Rose asks and peeks inside Peyton's goodie bag. I know my sister-in-law; she's on the hunt for chocolate. Rose can sniff out chocolate better than a bloodhound can find a bone.

Her niece apparently knows her aunt very well and reaches inside the bag and drops a few brightly-wrapped Hershey's kisses into her palm before she grabs Lucy and drags her to a table far away in the corner of the restaurant.

Girl talk, from the looks of the hushed whispers and glances in our direction. Us old people, I chuckle as I look at Alice and Rose, are assuredly not welcome.

We keep watching the girls who are completely in their own little world. The restaurant is slow but the dinner rush will be starting soon, which means it's almost time for my favorite dinner companion to walk through the door. Just about the time I think that, two arms slide around my waist and a chin appears on my shoulder.

After a quick but much-welcomed kiss to the side of my neck, he says, "Sprite sure looks happy. Guess she had a good time at the party, huh?"

I chuckle. "Babe, that smile is all due to Brody. He gave P the special Valentine." I emphasize the word special a little more than necessary and then turn when I hear him growl in the back of his throat.

I try not to laugh when I see his face, but I can't help it. He looks so pathetic, complete with a bottom lip that sticks out and a frown on his gorgeous face. "But I wanted to give her the special Valentine," he whines. He huffs and crosses his arms. "I hate that kid."

"Hush, you. Look how happy she is," I say and then step closer to him. I nudge his feet apart and stand between his legs. I'm pressed so close to him he has no choice but to rest against the side of a table which is just fine with me. All the better to get as close as possible. I raise my arms and wrap them around his neck, giggling when he pouts one last time in Peyton's direction before looking at me.

"Shouldn't I be the one that gets your special Valentine?" I ask and turn the tables on him by pouting … and I know from the look on his face that I've got his attention.

Perfect.

I should feel bad for messing with him, but I don't. I won't let him dangle on the hook for too long, but it's so hard sometimes to resist teasing him. He dishes it out like no one's business; he needs to learn how to take it.

"If not, then maybe I need to rethink your Valentine's Day present," I taunt as I smirk at him.

Poor thing, standing there with his mouth hanging wide open and looking like … well, like someone just stole Brady.

He narrows his eyes at me. "You wouldn't." He tries to make it sound like he's all sure of himself, but that little bit of a question that ekes out at the end is a dead giveaway.

I giggle at him and place my hands on his cheeks. "No, I most definitely would not. This weekend is going to be one you won't ever forget," I tell him softly and with much feeling. The air around us
decidedly changes from light and sweet to hot and steamy.

"Christ, I can't fucking wait to have you all to myself for two whole days." He groans right before kissing me until I'm breathless.

Yeah, it's going to be some weekend.

~~~OOO~~~~~OOO~~~~~~

We leave town on Friday afternoon after trading vehicles with my mom and dropping off Peyton and Brady with Jasper and Alice. Every year for Valentine's Day, my dad always arranges it so that he, Emmett, and Jasper get to do something nice for Mom, Rose, and Alice. In the past, one weekend he and whoever else is working on the Isabella Marie at the time takes off and the next he lets Em and Jasper have off. He's always said that Valentine's Day is the one time of year to spoil their wives and girlfriends and to show them how much they appreciate how much they give up to support them. I have to say, it's nice to be a part of the planning for a change.

The four and a half hour trip passes by quickly. I let Edward drive even though I have to give him directions a few times, much to his consternation. I took charge and planned this whole weekend, a fact of which he doesn't seem to mind at all … not knowing exactly how to get where we're going he doesn't like so much.

I follow Edward and John, the owner of Bear Mountain Inn, into our room and breathe out a huge sigh of relief when he turns to look at me and says, "Bella, this place is fucking incredible."

I snicker a little and then peek over at John. I shrug my shoulders, hoping that he's heard much worse than Edward's language. When he grins at me, I know it's all good. I slide his tip in his hand and then close the door behind him.

Edward's standing in front of the wall of windows and I can see his reflection in the glass. The sky is an inky black and there are so many stars out that they look like golden sprinkles. He's taken his jacket off and thrown it on the back of the sofa that's facing the stone fireplace. In the glass I can see his face, thankful that most traces of what happened have faded.

I want this weekend to be about us and only us.

I throw my jacket on top of his and then walk forward. I slide my arms around his waist and press a kiss in the center of his shoulder blades. He places his hands over mine and links our fingers together. "Seriously, baby, this is all so great."

Stepping forward, I lean my hips against his ass and purposely rub my chest against his back. I can feel his chest rumble and it makes my already hardening nipples tighten and peak even more. I move our joined hands down his body and press against the bulge that's already formed beneath his jeans.

Standing up on my tiptoes so I can reach, I whisper in his ear, "Babe, you haven't seen anything yet."

He turns around and drapes his arms across my back. He lets his hands fall over my ass and he pulls until we're chest to chest. "Is that so?" he whispers when he lowers his head. His nose nuzzles along the outside of my ear and when he reaches the top, I feel his teeth gently tug on the silver ball that never, ever, fails to drive him crazy.

My voice catches in my throat when I feel his tongue curl around the earring, not to mention when he slides his knee between mine and his hard cock is pressed against my thigh. "Ah … oh … yes,
that's so …” I pant, unable to keep going when he moves from the stud to my earlobe. He nips with his teeth, hard enough to make me hiss, but in pleasure not pain.

"I still can't believe you did all this," he mumbles. He's moved from my ear to my neck and I tilt my head to give him free reign. I melt against him as his teeth, tongue, and lips feast on the sensitive skin. It feels so damned good and I can't help but rub my nipples across his chest. The sound that escapes from his mouth curls the toes in my boots … rough, deep, and so fucking sexy.

I wind my fingers in his hair and grind my hips against his. "I wanted to do something special for you, to show you how much I love you." I kiss him deeply and hope he can feel, tell, how true my words are.

He spins us and then walks backward until the glass stops us from going any farther. The cold from outside causes me to gasp and my skin to break out in goosebumps. When he lifts my hands above my head, holding them both in one of his, and aligns his body with mine, there isn't any cold to be found.

My body ignites, especially when I see the hunger in his eyes.

"I think I should get right to work on showing my appreciation." He lowers his head. With his free hand he begins unbuttoning my shirt, taking time to show his adoration of every inch of skin that's slowly exposed as he opens one after the other after the other.

"You're so fucking beautiful." He moans when he pushes the shirt down my shoulders. His mouth is everywhere: across my collarbones, the hollow of my throat, the swell of my breast, down to the thin, tender skin right above the waist of my jeans.

Then he moves back up again, taking his time to pay his proper respects to the areas he missed before … and the ones covered by the bra he's now removed.

He stands up, making a hot, wet trail with his tongue up the center of my chest to behind my ear. As the air cools my skin, I shiver, though it might be because he's breathing in my ear and he knows how crazy that makes me. He lowers my hands, placing them on either side of my body and slides his fingers between mine. "Come on," he urges once he releases the sensitive flesh behind my ear. "I've got lots more thanking to do." He smirks, walking backward to the large bedroom.

Once a few hours pass, and after a long, hot shower, we walk back out to the living room, donning the red, fluffy robes that we found hanging on the back of the bathroom door. The suite is spectacular, even more luxurious than the pictures from the website led me to believe. On a glass plate beside a bucket containing a bottle of chilled Champagne are six of the most delectable-looking chocolate covered strawberries I've ever seen in my life.

I went all out for this getaway. Edward would die if he knew how much it cost, but I don't care. He needs this … we need it and I feel no qualms in indulging and splurging on every amenity offered. It's Valentine's Day weekend, so of course the cliché factor is going to be amped up, but what the hell.

Giggling while he struggles to get the top off the Champagne bottle, I take another moment to look around the room. Really, the entire space is so nice it's almost a shame to leave. I have big plans for us though, but make a mental note to myself that at some point during the next two days we will make use of the very plush throw rug on the floor in front of the fireplace.

Most assuredly.
"Here, baby," Edward says, handing me a glass of bubbly Champagne. He tilts his glass toward mine and we toast. "To the first weekend of many, I hope." His normal caramel turtle voice is decidedly gruffer as our glasses clink against the other. Our eyes meet over the flutes and time seems to stand still for a moment while we lose ourselves in each other.

He takes a sip then smacks his lips, clearly enjoying the taste. "I'm so fucking happy to be here with you." Almost shyly, he lowers his eyes, then lifts them. His gray-green eyes are so intense as he stares at me and my breath catches in my throat. "It seems almost like a dream being with you like this, Bella."

"For me, too," I reply back.

He stretches an arm out and curls his index finger around mine. He pulls me with him as he leads us to the snow white-colored couch. Once he sets our flutes down on the rustic, wooden table in front of the sofa, he drags me backward so that his legs and arms completely surround my body.

Sweet then not so sweet kisses begin and then sweet and not so sweet words are interspersed between. By the time the bottle of Champagne is gone, my entire body, and especially the spot between my legs aches in the most delicious of ways.

Tomorrow's treat is sure going to come in handy.

We sleep in late, so late we almost miss the extravagant breakfast in the great room. I make sure and tell Edward to put his boots and heavy socks on because once we eat, I want to go for a walk around the grounds of the inn. As we sip on mimosas, we hold hands across the table while we wait for our food.

"Look how gorgeous it is out there," he whispers in awe and he points toward the ever-present windows with his chin.

He's right though. It looks like a postcard outside. Trees covered with what looks like dollops of whipped cream. The snow sparkles from the sunlight, shooting prisms of color every which way. Every now and then a squirrel bounds across the lawn, marring the almost perfect blanket of white.

"It is beautiful," I agree, without looking at him.

He tightens his hold on my hand and waits until I look at him. "It's not as beautiful as you." His voice is like melted chocolate mixed with little bits of buttery toffee. Smooth, rich, with just enough grit to remind you that it's different.

Honestly, I don't even notice how different Edward's voice sounds anymore, but it always makes me chuckle a bit when someone hears him speak for the first time. It's not an odd sound at all, but when you look at him, the rough, almost scratchy voice that comes out of his mouth is not what you'd expect.

Our food comes and unfortunately eating with one hand is not something either one of us is all too proficient at, so we let go of each other. Breakfast takes a long time only because we don't stop talking. This is just what I wanted … well, besides us being naked for extended periods of time … when I planned this trip. He tells me stories about his grandparents and about growing up in Boston. He tells me about the baseball games his grandpa took him to and the museums he and his grandmother would get lost in for hours and hours. About his parents, the few things he can remember about them, like what his mother used to read to him before he went to bed at night and how he and his dad used to build model airplanes together on the weekends.
With each part of himself that he shares with me, more and more of him becomes part of me. Like those bottles of colored sand. When you first get them, you can see individual colors, but as you tip the bottle back and forth, the colors meld together until it all becomes absorbed. No beginning, no end, nothing separating the colors at all.


I want it and I want to give it all in return.

The walk outside is fantastic … until Edward decides that it's perfectly normal to throw the love of your life in a snowdrift taller than his head. Up until then we walked, talked, and even rode a sled down the huge hills that line the property. The space is so wide open that even though the inn is almost fully booked, it's like we're the only ones here. Once we're both so cold our lips have turned blue we head back inside for hot chocolate by the fireplace in the Gathering Room. Here we do see other couples escaping to the beautiful inn for a romantic weekend, but still, we stay locked inside our Edward/Bella bubble.

"Come on. I have something special planned for us this afternoon," I tell him as I unwrap myself from his side.

Standing up, I grab his hands and pull him up. Luckily for me, he decides to be a good boy and comes willingly. The smirk on his face tells me what he hopes my surprise is; too bad he's wrong.

"It's not that." I giggle when his eyebrows dip from his too adorable frown. "I do promise you'll enjoy your surprise though."

He sighs quite over-dramatically but he lets me lead him to our room. Once we're inside I tell him to strip and have to remind him, again, that what he wants is not what I have planned … at least not until later. We both put our robes on, though it takes a Herculean effort on my part to resist straddling him on the couch and having my way with him. Just when I'm about to give in, there's a knock on the door and I climb off his lap.

The couples massage I arranged is a huge hit judging from the soft moans and long, slow breaths Edward lets out. The soft music playing in the background coupled with the scent of the massage oil and the feel of Edward's pinky wrapped around mine makes the hour-long treat pass in a warm, fuzzy haze.

"That was so amazing," he whispers as he leads us to the shower once the masseuses have gone. "I've never had a massage before," he admits. The warm water flows over us and for the next twenty minutes we don't say very much … but we don't need to.

"Bella, hurry up, we're going to be late," he reminds me, trying to be sweet, a little bit later through the door of the huge bedroom.

I chance a quick glance at the clock and feel my stomach drop all the way to my toes. "Shit," I mutter and take a deep breath. For some reason I'm so nervous about tonight. Not that I think Edward's going to try to be predictably romantic and drop down on one knee or anything, at least he'd damned well better not, but this is the first time he's ever seen me dressed up this much or we've been anywhere this formal.

I squeeze my legs together at the thought of Edward in dress pants and a dress shirt.

"Ugh, Bella, you so don't have time for this," I scold myself and then turn and face the bed where
my red dress is spread out.

I pick it up and let out a soft sigh when the soft, smooth fabric slides down my body. It feels like a cool breeze as it moves around me when I bend over to slip the strappy silver sandals on. I put my earrings in and debate for half a second about taking out the little ball at the top of my ear, before deciding it might send Edward into convulsions if it was gone. A light spray of perfume and quick run of my fingers in my hair, and I'm ready to go … if I don't faint first.

I open the door and step out into the living room, halting my steps the instant I see him. He's facing away from me, dressed in black from head to foot. I take another step and the soft swish of my dress catches his attention and causes him to whip his head around. His eyes widen, his jaw hangs open, he sucks in a huge breath, and his hands curl into tight fists against his thighs.

Exactly the reaction I was hoping for, I think, giving myself a silent high five.

"I've never … fucking hell, Bella, you take my breath away," he whispers after he swallows a few times.

It takes a few minutes to leave the room, only because we can't stop telling the other how good they look, and arrive at the restaurant downstairs with just a few minutes to spare. When our name is called and we follow the maître d' to our table, I can't help but bask in Edward's presence. Not wanting to let go of him at all, I cling to his arm and smile as people glance in our direction as we pass them.

We look so good together.

Dinner is amazing. The wine, the food, the atmosphere … the man. "I love you," I say softly. The words float across the table before I even notice I've said them. They're always on the tip of my tongue, always on my mind, and always in my heart. Sometimes I wonder if I say them too much, worry that they'll lose their meaning and other times I wonder if I don't say them enough, like if don't tell him every hour of every day, he'll forget.

But sometimes, like just now, they're the only words I want to say.

"I love you, too." The candlelight dances across his face, hiding behind the slope of his nose and the stubble that covers his jaw. I haven't been able to take my eyes off him all night. I have noticed, however, that most of the females in the room can't help but stare at him, some longer than is appropriate.

"I was thinking," I begin a little nervously. I didn't get him a gift, well besides the weekend away, but what I'm about to tell him is something I know he wants. Almost as much as Peyton does, and maybe even more than I do. "When we go home tomorrow, how about you don't go back to the boarding house," I say, not being as direct as I probably should be.

He chuckles and takes a sip of his wine. "I kinda planned on spending the night with you, Bella."

I run my finger around the rim of my glass and smile at him. "I mean ever."

It takes a few seconds for my words to register and my heart stops and starts about five times as he blinks, slowly, repeatedly. A slight shake of his head and then a drop dead, heart-stopping smile spreads across his face.

"Yeah?" he breathes.

His nostrils flare as he sucks in large gulps of air when I whisper, "Yes."
"Check please," he says to our waiter.

We fall through the door in a tangle of arms and legs, our lips never leaving the other's. I try to pull away, so I can drag him to the bedroom, or the sofa, or the floor, or even the wall, when he yanks me to a stop.

"Oh no you don't," he says in a silky, deep voice. He spins me around, my back to his chest, and he presses his hips against mine. "I've let you lead all weekend so far. Now it's my turn. You look so fucking gorgeous in this dress but I want to see what you have on underneath. Dress. Off. Now … but leave the shoes," he demands then runs his nose down the column of my neck.

He steps back just enough so I can push the dress off my shoulders. My heart slams against my chest as it falls into a pool of red that swirls by my feet.

"Oh, fuck." I hear him breathe out when he takes in the tiny pair of red silk panties I chose specifically hoping to get that reaction.

Knowing that he's behind me, staring, hungry … hard for me sets me on fire. Heat pools, in my cheeks, my stomach, and most definitely between my legs. I don't turn around, even though my body is screaming for him. My skin prickles with goosebumps from the heat of his gaze as he drinks me in. I hear the rustle of his shirt as he unbuttons it, the sound of his belt as it jingles when it hits the floor, the sound of his shoes as they thump when he kicks them off.

Heat radiates from him when he's behind me once more. He presses warm, open-mouthed kisses from one shoulder to the other, lavishing extra attention to the spot behind each ear. His warm breath fans over my already heated skin and it's almost hard to breathe.

"Do you have any idea how gorgeous and sexy you are? How over dinner it was all I could do not to throw you down on our table and fuck you so hard the table would break beneath us?" His teeth bite into my shoulder, not so hard that it hurts, but hard enough that it will leave a mark. "I love you more than my own life, Bella, but right now, I want to fuck you so badly and make you scream my name until you can't make another sound."

All sense of rational thought immediately leaves my brain and all I'm capable of is a hoarse whisper of, "Oh, God."

He chuckles, dark and sultry, and my knees go weak. I can feel moisture drip down my thighs from his words alone.

"I'm going to make you come so many times. On my fingers," he rasps as his hand covers my pussy. "On my tongue so that even tomorrow I'll still be able to taste you."

He flicks his tongue at my earlobe and when his teeth bite the flesh, my fingers dig into his thighs so hard I worry I draw blood. "And of course on my cock while I fuck you over and over and over again," and with that, two fingers are plunged inside of me.

"Yes, oh God … ah … " I moan as his fingers expertly work me into a writhing, panting mess. "So good, yes." Wantonly, I ride his fingers, rocking and taking until my legs tense and I teeter on the heels I still have on.

"Mmmm, that's it, baby. Fuck my fingers and come." His voice slides over me, saturating my skin like a fine mist. I'm so close. I tremble so much I have to reach an arm up and wrap it around his neck to hang on. "So fucking hot." He groans as he rests his chin on my shoulder, giving him the perfect view to watch his fingers moving in and out of my pussy.
"I'm going to … oh please," I beg, stretching my body against his.

"Open wider. Spread your legs," he commands and nudges the backs of my knees with his. I do as he orders and when he presses his thumb against my swollen, sensitive clit, I breathe his name repeatedly.

He holds me to him with his hand splayed over my stomach. "Good girl," he praises, circling, pushing, teasing me right to the brink. The hand on my stomach lifts and when he pinches my nipple between his fingers, I feel it all the way down to my throbbing pussy. In and out, around, down, and over his fingers move in the most delicious, aching, perfect rhythm. Words fall from his mouth, his tongue warm and wet along my neck, his fingers inside of me all work until I fall completely apart, screaming his name.

The couch, the floor in front of the fireplace, the wall by the bedroom all serve as the perfect backdrop while he makes me come so many times I lose count … until hours later we find ourselves in the deep, claw-footed tub in the bathroom.

"You feel so good like that," he murmurs almost sleepily as he rolls his hips and hits that perfect spot deep inside of me.

He leaves one hand on my hip and with the other takes my hair and lays it all over one shoulder. We gently rock, letting the warm, scented water do most of the work. Slow and gentle this time but every bit as intense as before.

"I can't wait to move in with you, go to bed with you every night, and wake up wrapped around you every morning," he says against the warm skin of my neck.

My head falls forward when he thrusts inside of me. "Me, too," is all I'm able to say as the coil twists tighter in my stomach. "More," I tell him a few moments later as I continue to move up and down along his shaft.

"Like this?" he asks, lifting as he pulls me down, knowing damned good and well just like that.

"Mmmm," I slur, lost in heat and steam and him.

Closer, closer, until the bliss is right … there.

"I'm going to marry you one day, Bella," he whispers.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

EEEP! See, I told y'all fluffy AND lemony, didn't I? So, Edward's moving in, Peyton's got a crush, and Bella, well, she just got semi-proposed to!

Next chapter Edward moves in, goes car shopping, and we'll see some Carlisle/Edward time … oh and definitely some E/P time!

Keep checking the Facebook page and the blog. We put lots of goodies on there this week!

See you next Sunday … I still have a few surprises for y'all!

Erin
Chapter 27

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

A big thank you to all my girls on Team Breakers! I ask a lot of them, and they never fail to deliver. Love you all! Special thanks to J'me (prettykittyartist) for being an extra set of eyes on this one while Laurel's laptop is in the clutches of an evil virus. (Laurel – I miss you!)

A HUGE thank you to all of you for rec'ing, tweeting, and talking about this story on Twitter, Facebook, and everywhere else. I'm truly more grateful than I can express for all the support, encouragement, and excitement.

Some big changes happening in this one, so let's get to it shall we?

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 27

EPOV

"Ouch." I hiss when I trip over a cardboard box sitting on the floor at the end of my bed. I can barely see, my eyes are bleary and unfocused. Not surprising since it's 4:00 in the damn morning.

The sky outside my window is still inky black and there's the faintest sound of the trees waving in the wind. Bare branches scratch and brush against the side of the house. I glance around the room, spinning around in a slow circle, and try to commit the space to memory … why I'm not sure. Probably because it's the first space I've had to call my own since my room at my grandparents' house. My ten by ten cell at Old Colony damn sure wasn't my own, and I stayed at Wayne's for such a short time that I never felt like anything more than just a guy passing through. Even at Bella's, where half my clothes are already in the second drawer of her dresser and my favorite boots stay at the bottom of the stairs more often than not, it won't feel like home until I get to fall asleep there every night and wake up to her next to me in bed every morning or until there's mail in the mailbox addressed to Edward Masen.

I can't fucking wait.

Picking my way more carefully around the boxes that litter the floor so I don't stub my fucking toe again, I head toward the bathroom to get ready for the day. The hot shower feels great but, as per usual, it does little to alleviate the ever-present semi I sport after spending a night dreaming of Bella. By the time I'm dressed and standing in the kitchen, I feel more awake. Not a lot mind you, but at least I don't feel like such a zombie.

I pour some of the coffee that Esme has never once failed to make sure is ready and waiting for me in a travel mug and grab a few of the muffins she left out on a plate. Dropping heavily, I sit at the table and spend a few minutes in the absolute silence of the house … well it's silent until I hear a throat clear.

"Why in the hell are you awake at this ungodly hour?" I ask Carlisle around a mouthful of banana nut muffin.
He shrugs as he pulls a mug from the cabinet and pours himself a cup of my coffee. Lucky for him, there's enough to share. No one, not even him, comes between me and my morning coffee. He sits down and looks at me over the mug he holds between his hands.

"Can't sleep." He shrugs answering my raised eyebrow. "This new case I'm consulting on has my mind going about a million miles an hour. I can't turn it off long enough to sleep so I figured instead of tossing and turning and pissing off Esme, I'd come down and have breakfast with you. God knows if Seth hits the muffins before I do, there won't be any left when he gets done with them."

I snort at the Seth comment because it's nothing but the fucking truth. The dude inhales food faster than a Hoover, and I have no idea where he puts it all. A sudden and very unwelcome image pops in my mind at just how he works off all the calories, and I shiver in response. I stop that shit ASAP. There's no way I'm working today with a picture of Xavier and Seth doing things I have NO business thinking about.

Gross.

Very intentionally, I skip Seth and move on to the other part of his statement. "He'd be really proud of you, you know that right?"

Carlisle sighs and slouches down in his chair so that his legs stretch all the way beneath the table. The kitchen is almost completely dark. I'm so used to getting up and maneuvering around without any light that I don't even notice how murky it looks with just the pale moonlight and the glow from the porch light streaming through the back door window.

"I hope so," he whispers as if between the dark and the early morning hour anything louder doesn't feel right.

I wipe my hands on my jeans and then lean my elbows on the table … both big no nos but Esme's not down here to tell me to mind my manners. "I know so. Wayne never wanted nor expected you to stop practicing."

He makes some sort of muffled non-committal sound and I wait for a few moments before he lifts his head to look at me. It's always him that's trying to make me see reason; it's kind of nice to have the shoe on the other foot for a change.

"Carlisle, you were born to help people. You know this, Esme knows this, I know this, and Wayne for damn sure knew. What happened to Zach wasn't anymore your fault than it was Wayne's. What is it you always tell me when I have one of my meltdowns?" He chuckles and rolls his eyes at the fact that I'm about to use his own words against him.

"You can't control the actions of anyone but yourself," I spout off in what I think is a perfect imitation of his voice, all doctory and smart ass-sounding. I think I hit the nail on the head; he obviously doesn't when his mouth drops open and his eyes bug out of his head.

He huffs and crosses his arms across his chest muttering under his breath, "I do not sound like that, damn it." When I laugh, he glares at me. "I don't," he snaps.

Standing up, I wink at him. "Whatever, Carlisle." I carry my plate to the sink. Elbows and crumbs are one thing, but leaving dishes out is another. I refill my mug, and shoot him a side eye when it barely reaches the top. "You are so lucky," I growl.

"Didn't you ever learn how to share, Edward?" he mocks and takes an extra big slurp of his coffee
just to rile me up. "When you move in with Bella, I think Peyton needs to teach you how to share with others."

And just like that, I'm a lovesick fool again. I can even feel my smile split my face and my insides warm. I feel like such a fucking sap, not that I think there's anything wrong with it. In fact, I feel a lot like Pepé Le Pew, all frolicking through the tulips with hearts coming out of his mouth and shit. I shake that image out of my mind and chalk it up to the Looney Tunes marathon Peyton made me watch late one afternoon last weekend when there wasn't anything else on TV.

Of course, right on the heels of the warmth like the gooey center of one of Esme's chocolate chip cookies, comes the hard as a fucking rock dick because, ever since Valentine's weekend two weeks ago, my mind is almost always, and I do mean always, back in that suite with a very naked, very sexy, and very naughty Bella.

Jesus.

She was everything I ever imagined. Every fantasy I've ever had, every dirty thought, every dream of what sex with a woman that drives me so crazy that I want to sing sappy love songs in the rain or tell her she completes me would be like. It wasn't just the sex though. It was the three A.M. talk whispered while eating cheese and crackers in the huge bed, buried beneath layers of blankets, as she told me about every single one of Peyton's firsts. The first time she rolled over, her first step, tooth, and words. I heard about it all. She told me that Peyton's first smile came when Seth yelled at Xavier for talking too loud and that on her first day of school, she wore her bunny slippers to school because she refused to take them off.

It was also hearing her giggle while we walked around the grounds whenever I told her a joke … admittedly they were awful and lame, but I kept telling them just to hear her laugh. Her eyes sparkled in the sunlight, the tip of her nose would scrunch up just like Peyton's, and her smile, even though she tried not to do it, would light up her entire face so much that it's a wonder she didn't melt the snow all around us.

But mostly, it was the way it felt to walk into that restaurant with her on my arm. I've never felt like more of a man than I did in that instant. In Bella's eyes, Peyton's, too, I'm not an ex-con, I'm just Edward. Barring Bella's very understandable and short-lived wariness of me when we first met, neither one of them have ever made me feel like I should be ashamed or feel unworthy. The fact that I still feel that way from time to time is my own demon to fight, because the two of them do nothing but make me feel like I can scale mountains, or slay dragons, or leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Walking into the restaurant though, with her looking like something straight off a runway, was just really fucking incredible. I could feel how proud she was to be beside me. While I could see and feel everyone look at her and look at the two of us together, I saw what they did. A guy and a girl so in love with each other that no one else and nothing else mattered.

Carlisle clears his throat and when I look at him, he rolls his eyes. "What?" I ask when he smirks at me. "It's not like you don't space out and think about Esme." I have to adjust myself because like I said, thinking about that weekend and that night especially, turns me on in about two seconds flat.

He grins like the smart ass he is when he sees me try to be sly about it and chuckles. "Touché. It must have been some weekend," he remarks. I should be startled and maybe a little embarrassed that he knew exactly what I was thinking about, but I'm not.

"I told Bella I was going to marry her one day," I blurt out, feeling the same sense of flying race through my body, electrifying it, making my heart beat so hard I can feel it in my toes.
He chokes on his coffee, spewing it all over the table … and himself when he tries to catch his breath. "Come again?"

I glance quickly at the clock to make sure I'm not going to be late. I walk back over toward the table and pluck my jacket up off the back and slide my arms in. "Just what I said." I don't tell him that Bella and I were naked at the time and I damn sure don't tell him she was riding me … cowgirl style … in a bathtub and just about to come either.

"Ummm. Wow," he says, sounding excited, afraid, and confused all at the same time.

I know the feeling well.

"Tell me about it." I pick up my mug and pat my pockets to make sure I have my keys. "It's not like I don't mean it, Carlisle, because I do, but well, … yeah," I say with a shrug.

He looks at me, eyes narrowed while he studies me. "Are you going to do the whole ask her father for her hand and everything? Charlie loves you, but you are talking about taking away his baby girl."

For about half a second I think about being a smug prick, but then I get serious. Immediately. "Besides you and Wayne, there isn't another man alive I respect more than Charlie Swan. He gave me a chance when he didn't have to, he's never once made it seem like I wasn't good enough to be with Bella, and he's always encouraged my relationship with Peyton. But," I qualify with a harsher tone than I mean to, but I don't soften what comes next. It's too important. "I won't be asking for his permission to marry Bella when the time comes. Bella's a grown woman who is more than capable of making her own decisions, including if she wants to spend the rest of her life with me. I'll ask for his blessing because that's something I not only want but I need, but I'll be damned if I leave my fate in anyone's hands, not even Charlie's."

Instead of the admonishment I immediately brace for, all I get is a simple, "That's my boy," and a tip of his coffee mug. He waits a beat or two, I'm sure just to let me stew, before he says, "I can't tell you how incredible it is to see you so strong and so sure of yourself, Edward. When you first got here your very first instinct would have been to want to prove yourself to Charlie in order to show him you were good enough for Bella, now you know you always have been."

I shrug. He's right of course, and he knows I realize that. Doesn't mean I'm going to say it out loud though.

"Do I even want to know what Bella's reaction was … or what you were doing at the time you let that little morsel slip out, and on a romantic weekend away, too? I'm shocked, Edward. I thought you'd be more original than that," he comments, lightening the mood and letting the things we didn't say go to wait for another time.

I flip him off muttering "asshole" under my breath, though it's with a smile. Grinning like a little kid that just got an extra scoop of ice cream complete with sprinkles, I tell him, "Don't worry, old man, when the time's right, my proposal will be the stuff they write songs and make movies about."

I hear him snort and mumble "I'm not old" as I shut the door. There's nothing Carlisle hates more than for me to tease him about our age difference. I wouldn't have it any other way, but that doesn't mean I don't like to piss him off about it either.

"God damn this is getting fucking old," I grumble as I lift my leg over my bike, once I've parked by the docks. Rubbing my hands together to get some feeling back into them, I stomp my feet a few
times and look at Charlie as he gets out of his truck.

"You look cold, kid," he tells me with a shake of his head.

"I know, I know," I tell him as we walk toward the boat. "I need a damn car."

He snorts, then grunts as we jump on the boat. Turning toward me, he slaps me on the back, hard enough to make me trip over my feet … only because he catches me by surprise. "Why you bought that bike when you knew you were coming here is beyond me, unless you wanted something so that you could make a break for it if you needed it."

"Whatever," I grumble. I start putting on my gear and once I slip my beanie on, because it's the end of February and it's still fucking cold, I look at him. "If I would've known there was a Bella and a Peyton waiting for me when I got here, I'm pretty fucking sure I'd have decided on something else."

A thump and a tilt of the boat makes me glance sideways. Pointing my thumb toward the noise, I state, "At least I'm not Mr. 'I Love the 80s' like this one." Jasper, the jackass, looks at me with a pleased smile on his face, complete with a puffed up chest like being compared to the likes of Andrew Dice Clay is something to be all proud of.

"You all know you're jealous of my baby," he says with a perfectly straight face.

There truly isn't any comment any of us can make back to him so we continue to get ready for the day. The boat starts to pull out and my legs are sure and steady. It's a nice feeling, I have to admit. The wind is fucking cold, but at least the forecast calls for clear skies. It amazes sometimes how much I've learned and the little things I pay attention to now. Things like jet streams, barometric pressure, and wind speeds.

The morning goes by as it always does, in a constant rhythm of chop, fill, throw, and pull. No longer a greenhorn and having definitely paid my dues, the guys and I came to an agreement; we'll take turns being the bait boy. It's a shit job that none of us want, but it's all a part of being a team. This week it's Emmett's turn, not that he's let us forget for a moment.

"Fuck, I hate this. I'm telling Dad when summer gets here we're getting a new deckhand," Emmett grumbles for at least the fifty-seventh time in last three hours.

"Yeah, good luck with that, man," Jasper tells him with a grunt as he throws a buoy out into the water.

Emmett makes a gagging sound as he fills another bait bag which only makes Jasper and me laugh at him.

I latch a trap and get ready to drop it in the still icy water, wincing when a wave batters the side of the boat and the freezing spray hits my already raw face. My legs and the rest of my body might be used to the grueling work, but I highly doubt there will ever be a time when the water of the frigid Atlantic doesn't feel like thousands of tiny needles when it hits any exposed skin.

During a lull in the rhythm when Charlie moves to the next fishing spot of the day, I lean against the railing, letting my hand rub across the spot where Peyton's shell rests deep in my pocket.

"I can't believe you haven't lost that thing yet," Jasper comments when he glances at my hand. It's such an unconscious movement now, my fingers are constantly on my leg when they're not busy.

Emmett looks quickly in the same direction and his eyes get the same faraway look they always
get when something reminds him of my accident. We don't really talk about it much, in fact hardly at all. The first few times I was back on the boat, we all were a nervous wreck, which on one hand made me feel guilty but on the other, it made me realize how much they mean to me … and how much I mean to them. Not just because of Bella and Peyton either, though that's certainly the most important thing, but they like me, respect me … for me, Edward Masen, not just as Edward, Bella's boyfriend.

I look from Jasper to Emmett and I can tell we're all thinking about that day. I've spent a lot of time thinking about it, talking about it with Bella, Charlie, and Carlisle. I don't have the nightmares I used to have almost nightly right after it first happened any more. Of course, now I have something equally as terrifying to keep it company these days thanks to the Aleksei clusterfuck.

It's a wonder I'm not a basket case with all the shit's that happened in the last few months.

Emmett fidgets and clears his throat a few times, looking everywhere but in my direction. He's obviously trying to get control of himself before he can talk. "You make sure you take damn good care of that shell, Edward," he says, and his eyes coupled with the tone of his voice lets me know that I'm not the only one that suffers from nightmares.

There's kind of an uneasy silence that settles over the three of us, like there's a strange presence hovering in the air around us. The swish of the waves and the squawk of the few gulls that float and fight the steady wind that keeps the boat rocking from side to side are the only sounds, besides the cadence of the engine as it drones on. We lean, adjust … balance as Charlie steers the boat toward our next drop spot. My body, my mind, and as girly as this sounds, my heart all sort of meld together. Each working in perfect sync with the other to make me feel … well pretty fucking perfect.

Without a word, we begin to work once Charlie gets us where we're going, seamlessly and with no mistakes. The day passes quickly. There's teasing and cursing, there's laughs and aching muscles, and by the time we pull back into the docks, I honestly can't remember a better day out on the water. My body's sore and fatigued, but it's the kind that comes from working hard, from doing a good job. I sigh. It's as if all the bad shit, the terror and the pain and the guilt all got dumped in the ocean, churned into nothingness by the heavy, spinning propellers and left in the Isabella Marie's wake to float away to the bottom of the sea.

I jump off the boat before it even has time to come to a complete stop and jog up to The Breakers. The parking lot's dotted with only a few cars, typical for this time of day. I wave at Rose and kiss Renée on the cheek as I slip through the side door of the kitchen. I grab a few French fries off a plate Xavier just put together, causing him to mutter and curse me to the fiery pits of hell, which is a rather common theme even after all this time. Luckily he's mostly kidding … most of the time at any rate.

My skin tingles as soon as I clear the counter where the register sits. Early evening sunlight streams in through the window shining right on my two girls, casting the warmest glow around them. I'm mesmerized by the sight of them, heads bent close together, a mass of brown hair streaked with subtle shades of red covering their faces, their soft giggles floating through the air. A quick glance around the restaurant lets me know that I can steal a few minutes of quality time with Bella before the dinner rush starts.

I cross the room, my feet moving without me even thinking about it. I can feel the smile already on my face and the closer I get, the bigger it gets. They're so engrossed in whatever moment they're sharing that I almost feel bad for intruding. Almost. The bigger part of me, the part that's been filled by the two of them, wants to share the moment with them because everything is always better
with Bella and Peyton.

"Hello, my beautiful girls," I say softly as I step behind them. My arms spread wide and my fingers curve around their shoulders. I squat down between them. I'm greeted with kisses on both cheeks and God damn if it's not the most perfect fucking moment. Time seems to stop. I don't see or hear anyone but them, and it's as if we're surrounded by an invisible force field keeping everyone and everything away.

Bella leans forward and rests her forehead against the side of mine. "You had a good day," she says softly, and I love that she tells and doesn't ask, like she can see it.

I turn slightly and brush my lips across hers, ignoring the snicker from the peanut gallery on my other side. My tongue follows on the next pass and I pull back and smile just for her when I taste her for the first time since last night. She's all sunshine and oranges, and a hint of something that's indescribable but only her.

"I had the best day," I tell her and then lean forward so I can kiss her again, wondering how in the hell I ever got so damn lucky.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

The following weekend finds the three of us sitting in Renée's SUV, and when I say sitting, I mean sitting, as in not moving. At all. I hate being stuck in traffic. Like, it rivals how much Peyton loves Tom Brady, hate. I huff for what must be the hundredth time since we entered the city limits of Boston.

"Oh my God, would you stop already?" Bella says exasperatedly as I tap my fingers on the steering wheel.

I wrap my fingers around the wheel and squeeze tightly before I slowly let go in the hopes of releasing some of the tension currently thrumming in my veins. I do it a few times, all the while feeling Bella staring at me like it's taking all she has not to reach out and hit me upside the head. Luckily for me, Peyton is in the car with us, so I think, I hope, I'm safe.

"Edward, seriously, you need to relax," she tells me as she lays a hand on my leg. "It's just a car." I snort; I can't help it. Just a car, and then I can feel the corners of my mouth lift. "Baby, it's not just a car," I say, emphasizing the 'just' in such a way that she narrows her eyes at me while she tries to decide if I'm insulting her or not.

I'm not, not really, teasing, but maybe I am though … just a little bit.

But seriously – just a car. A shiver races up my spine and I get a nervous, fluttery feeling in the pit of my stomach from thinking about it. All shiny and silver and sleek and sexy. A small groan/cough escapes and I glance at Peyton in the rear view mirror to see if she heard me. The sweet giggle that floats from the backseat lets me know she has.

"Hush, Sprite," I warn, though I imagine my smile doesn't make that warning anywhere near as scary as I try to make it.

"When I ride back home with you, do I have to sit in the backseat?" Good Lord, the child will never give up, I swear.

"Sorry, sweetheart," I tell her and have to turn and look out the window to hide my smile when she
huffs and scowls in annoyance.

I manage to crawl along the highway and get closer to my exit. "Wow," Peyton murmurs as she presses her nose to the window. "There's so many buildings, so many cars." Seeing her so excited makes the fact that I've moved half a mile in ten minutes seem like not such a big deal. Kind of.

I know Peyton's been to Boston before; Bella has brought her a few times. She's been to New York City, too, but this trip, even though we're just staying overnight, is our first trip together, which makes it a whole other ball of wax. The thought of a family trip on top of being excited about my car really has my insides playing pinball.

I think I like it.

"Are you okay?" Bella asks once traffic starts moving again. Apparently someone got a flat tire and everyone that passes by thinks that rubbernecking sounds like a good idea. Assholes. Her question is obviously for a whole other reason besides the fact I'm an impatient bastard when I drive.

I flick the blinker to exit and cover the hand that still rests on my thigh with one of mine. I slide my fingers between hers and curl them against my leg. "It's weird as hell," I answer truthfully. "I never know what to expect when I come back here, you know? I mean, I grew up here and I have some great memories, but honestly, Bella, there are way more bad ones than good. When I was inside, all I thought about was getting out and going away. Boston hasn't felt like home for a really long fucking time."

She stretches her thumb and drags it along the side of my hand. "Well, your home is Corea now so I guess that's a good thing."

My heart stutter steps in my chest, missing a beat then racing until I feel lightheaded. In the very back of my mind I wonder if I shouldn't feel something … guilt, sadness, pain maybe, at the fact that the place I was born and raised no longer holds any pull for me. It's the place both my parents and grandparents are buried, Wayne, too, so it's not like there won't ever be a reason to come back … but I don't need to go to a cemetery to feel close to them. I hear my grandfather any time I try to teach Peyton something new. I hear my grandmother anytime I look at Bella, whispering in my ear and telling me how lovely a girl she is. I hear my mother when Peyton and I read in bed together on the nights that Bella lets me have a turn. I hear my father when Peyton gets a scrape on her knee or a bruise on her arm and I ask if she's okay. I hear Wayne every day I spend on the water. So, no, I definitely don't need to be in Boston to feel close to the ones I love. From now on, I'll just be like anyone else that comes to Boston to visit, and I'm more than all right with that.

"Bella, my home is wherever you and Peyton are," I tell her softly. For a moment I feel a little twinge of embarrassment for saying something so sappy, but it's the truth just the same.

She doesn't say anything because she doesn't need to. I know she feels what I feel. That pull to always touch, to always be close, that no matter how many times we kiss or make love or laugh together, it's never, ever enough.

I look at her for another brief moment before I have to pull my gaze away and concentrate on the road so I can find the dealership. I do not want a repeat of what happened on the drive to Bear Mountain Inn. Finally, I find it after having missed my turn the first time. I don't miss the little snicker coming from the passenger seat when I make a U-turn … or the one from the backseat.

We park Renée's Cherokee and go inside so I can sign all my paperwork and pick up my newest baby.
"Is this the one?" Peyton asks excitedly as she pulls me across the showroom floor toward the bright, shiny, new silver SUV sitting in the middle of the room. "How'd they get it inside?" she asks in wonder as she walks around it, eyes big and brimming with excitement.

I follow her willingly, my excitement matching hers. I run my hand across the gleaming paint. I can't fucking wait to drive home tomorrow … I only hope Bella can keep up. We didn't have any choice but to drive down here then have to drive both cars back. Charlie gave me today off to come down and pick up my car and I wanted to spend the weekend with just Bella and Peyton, so having anyone come along with us wasn't an option. I'm not crazy about not spending the drive back with her, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't really looking forward to getting my new baby out on the open road and seeing what she can do.

"Edward, is this one yours?" Peyton impatiently asks again.

"No, it's not, but his is even nicer," comes the voice of Brett, the sales guy that I've been working with. We've never met in person, only talked on the phone, and he looks as confident as he sounds. "Brett Westbrook," he says as he holds his hand out to shake mine. "You must be Edward Masen."

"Yep, it's nice to meet you." Bella steps beside me and Peyton is still admiring the car.

For the first time, I'm at a loss as to how to introduce Bella and Peyton. Girlfriend seems so … lame and not even close to what she is to me and pronouncing her my everything seems like a little too much information. As for Peyton … I can't even wrap my mind about how to categorize her. My light, my saving grace, my best friend … the daughter of my heart? All true of course, but again, way too much information to impart on a man waiting to get commission on my fifty-thousand dollar car.

Brett looks from me to Bella, and I hear Bella chuckle under her breath before she holds her hand out. "I'm Bella and that's Peyton," she says simply and I give her a sheepish grin.

I'm such a dumbass sometimes.

Signing the paperwork in his office seems to take forever, but really it doesn't. Bella's eyes about fall out of her head when she sees the price of the car but I merely shrug my shoulders. I have the money, so I figure I should spend some of it. I make damned good money working for Charlie and have next to no expenses. Not surprising since I don't own anything except my bike and my clothes. I have a checking account, a debit card, and a credit card Carlisle encouraged me to get for emergencies. I have the bill for my cell phone and the small amount of rent I have to pay at the boarding house. Bella doesn't let me spoil her like I want, and we've already agreed when I move in, we'll split the groceries and the utilities since she owns the house outright. So … until I can put my money to good use, it sits in the bank in Ellsworth. Carlisle is going to help me get some investments set up so I can plan for the future, one that I know with involve taking care of Bella and Peyton for a long time.

Until then, I'm splurging on buying the car and spoiling both my girls this weekend.

After we park the Cherokee at the hotel - because there's no way in hell I'm not driving my new baby any chance I get - we spend the day sightseeing. Peyton is all questions, all day. Some sweet and quirky and totally off the wall, and some hit a little too close to home, though I answer every one, even when she asks me where my house used to be.

"Sweetheart," I answer her slowly as we walk from the parking lot into the restaurant. "If it's okay with you …" I pull her to a stop and look down at her. People pass us on the sidewalk and I ease her toward the side to let them by. "I'd like for this weekend to only be about the three of us. I don't
want you to be afraid to ask me anything, and I promise to always be honest with you, but how about we save all that for the next time we come?" I glance at Bella and squeeze the hand that's still inside of mine. I'm almost afraid we've been fused together I've held onto it so long. "I want to share everything with you two, but not this weekend."

"Okay," she answers and I can tell she's worried she's upset me, which couldn't be further from the truth.

"I'm glad you asked, Peyton, I promise I am," I tell her. I bend down and kiss the top of her head and I smile when I feel her little arms wrap around my waist. "And I promise to show you and tell you everything. I think there's probably even some old pictures in storage buried in a box somewhere. My grandmother was always taking pictures." I smile and my body warms at the memory, though I cringe when I think about what I look like in them.

"You have pictures?" Bella asks, her eyes wide in surprise and what I think is longing.

I pull her forward and kiss the tip of her nose. "Movies, too," I tell her with a wink.

I realize right in that moment that there is nothing I want more than to share every part of me, every memory I have, even the painful ones, with the two of them, day after day after day.

Always.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Sniff.

Hiccup.

Sniff again.

Turning around, I sigh and smile. "Esme, stop. You're killing me with the tears, you know that right? Besides Bella and Sprite, seeing you cry is like the worst thing ever." I chuckle a little bit when she coughs as she tries to hide another sniff.

This has been going on for the last few days while I packed up the few things I still have here.

I did spend the night with Bella when we got home from our amazing and well, life-altering weekend away, but I did have to go back to the boarding house … at least for a little bit. I hated it, she hated it, and Peyton hated it more than the two of us put together, but there are formalities that have to be followed. As much as I hate it, I'm still on parole and there's a process that I have to abide by, paperwork that needed to filed, and approval granted before I could move in with Bella permanently. I probably could have gotten away with it considering how many times I've stayed at Bella's anyway, but I wasn't willing to take that chance. After all Carlisle and Esme have done for me and everything Wayne did, I needed to do things the right way.

Chet had to come and do a walk through of Bella's house, Carlisle still had to agree to be my go between, and I had to go to Ellsworth and do another fucking drug test. The whole process just pissed me off but there wasn't anything I could do about it. Rules are rules and I know me and my case already get special privileges that no one else gets, so I should be, and am, grateful.

At least jumping through all the hoops gets me to Bella's. Nothing matters more than that.

Esme sniffs again. "It's not like I'm moving across the country, you know. You think I can stay away from your rhubarb pie? You're not getting rid of me that easily." I grin at her.
Hugging is still uncomfortable at times, but never with Esme, so I open my arms and wait for her to walk close enough so I can wrap my arms around her. "I'll never be able to thank you and Carlisle enough for all you've done for me," I whisper as I kiss her cheek.

She tips her head back because yes, she's that damned short, and looks up at me. "It's been one of the best things we've ever done. We're so proud of you," she whispers, and damn it all if her tears don't start again. "We love you so much."

And again, because she's Esme, I tell her, "I love you guys, too." I try to duck my head and hide my own sniff in her hair, but she hears me.

"Oh, you." She chuckles and swats my chest before turning to walk out the room, patting Peyton on the head as she passes by.

"Hey, what's taking so long?" Peyton quips as she trips into the door. "Aren't you ready to go home yet?"

Home.

Jesus Christ that sounds so fucking good.

"Yep, I am."

I pick up the last box and tuck it under my arm. An overwhelming sense of déjà vu slams into me as I remember carrying that dilapidated cardboard box into Wayne's house. It held everything I owned - the things I'd accumulated during my time inside. A few books, a change of shoes, three pairs of boxers, two t-shirts and that was the extent of my measly possessions. It was pathetic and just thinking about how desolate I felt walking out of those doors is almost enough to hurl me right back there. I feel a tug on my free hand and a smile spreads across my face, sending the dark, melancholy thoughts far away where they belong.

"Come on, wild child, let's go home," I tell her, nudging her with my hip as we step into the hall when she huffs at my teasing.

The boarding house is actually humming with life for a change. There are two new guys in town, members of one of the other crews. You can tell all around Corea that the seasons are changing, not by the weather of course, but certainly by the calendar. The boats stay out longer, the processing plant has more lobster to get ready to ship, much to Seth's chagrin, the Booze & Bait has more people perusing the aisles, and The Breakers is busier, longer.

I step into the kitchen and even though it's Sunday morning and the kitchen has a few new faces in it, the smell of Esme's coffee still makes my mouth water.

"Here, dear," she tells me softly with another sniff as she hands me my travel mug.

Seth scoffs and shakes his head. "Esme, are you going to be this sad when I leave?"

"What? Where are you going? What do you mean when you leave?" Esme screeches, whipping her head around and staring at him with wide eyes and her mouth hanging open.

Carlisle reaches a hand out and hits him on the side of the head, and Xavier, who is never one to miss a meal he doesn't have to cook, elbows him, nailing him hard, from the other side.

"Don't mess with Esme like that, jackass," he hisses.
Peyton is all giggles beside me, and then skips to the table and wraps her tiny arms around Xavier's neck. "Don't be mean to Seth, Xav. Mom won't like that," she tells him with a stern face.

Seth pokes his head around his boyfriend, giving him an evil eye and shooting one toward Carlisle for good measure. "Listen to P, man. Bell will be mad at you if she finds out you were beating up on me."

I can't help but laugh at the faces of Riley and Marcus, the two new guys, as they take in the banter and teasing. Of course, when they both look at Peyton, they're all smiles and have a sort of dazed look on their faces.

Seems my girl has that effect on everyone she meets.

"You sure you want to leave and be away from all this?" Carlisle asks and shakes his head at Xavier and Seth who are still bickering back and forth while Peyton tries to play peacemaker between them.

I look from Seth to Xavier and nod my head, once. "Ah, hell yes I do," I tell him emphatically. He gets up from the table and walks toward me. I feel Esme slide her arm around my waist and she leads me a few steps closer to the back door. "I'm not going to get all emotional on you because I expect we'll see you as much, if not more, than we do now, but I just wanted to tell you before you walk out of this door that you will always, always have a home here with me and Esme. I don't expect you'll ever have to use it, except maybe as a place to run away to when you're in the dog house … which I do expect will happen from time to time."

We all laugh because well, he's right … not about me ever leaving Bella, but there's no doubt I'm going to fuck up sometimes.

Esme slides a key into my hand. "This is for you to use however, whenever, okay?" She has tears in the corner of her eyes and Carlisle wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her close to his side. "We are so happy you are making a home, a new life with Bella and Peyton, but don't ever forget that we love you, too. So when you come to visit, and you will come to visit often," she tells me with a raise of an eyebrow, "you remember that you don't ever have to knock, understand? You are not visitor in this house, Edward, not ever."

And well, that does it. I don't care that Seth and Xavier are in the room and will never let me live this down. I don't care that Riley and Marcus will see; nothing matters but the two people that put all their trust in me when they didn't even know me. I drop the box on the floor, not caring if everything spills out of it or not, and pull them close.

"I won't ever be able to tell you how much you two mean to me and how much you've helped me. You … I just … I love you both, very much," I stammer because I'm too choked up to say anything else.

Loving them, being around them is so bittersweet. They remind me of the family I don't have any longer, but also reinforce the fact that family doesn't always have to share the same blood.

Silent hugs and kisses are passed around. My heart's so full that I feel a lot like Charlie in Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory when he drank the fizzy soda and started to float away. I had parents that loved me, grandparents that loved me longer, and now Carlisle and Esme that love me in a way that's everything I never knew I'd missed … and wanted.

Peyton giggles and the atmosphere changes with the sound of her sweet, happy voice. "I need to
go," I whisper to the two of them, because my heart and my soul, though it loves Carlisle and Esme, loves and needs Bella and Peyton more.

"Go. We'll see you soon," Esme says through her tears and stands back to let me go.

"P, come on, let's roll. Your mom's making my favorite baked potato soup and roast beef sandwiches for lunch and if we hurry, I bet we can get her to make peanut butter cookies, too." She shoots off of Xavier's lap and stops right in front of me. "Don't even think about it," I warn Xavier when I see him lick his lips and notice that gleam in his eye. "If you come by today I will seriously kick your ass."

He quirks an eyebrow and narrows his eyes. I second-guess myself for a brief moment only because I'm still a tiny bit scared of him … not that I'd fucking ever let him see that. "I mean it. Don't." When I see Seth looking all sneaky and shit, I turn on him, too. "You either."

"But you said Bella was making potato soup. She makes the best potato soup," Seth whines, and even goes so far as to stick his bottom lip out.

"I know she does. We'll save you some, but stay away … just for today," I almost say please, but I can't make myself do it.

Xavier obviously understands my need to be with only Bella and Peyton today because he nods his head, and actually looks kind of proud of me. Weird, but okay. "You guys get settled; we'll descend next Sunday. Make sure you tell Bell she better make us something good, though." He grins.

I decide then and there that I need to come up with some kind of plan for Sundays. I'm not spending every Sunday with Tweedledumb and Tweedledumber.

"Riley, Marcus, you two keep that one in line," I quip, pointing at Seth. "I'm sure I'll see you guys around."

I look down at Peyton. "You ready, sweetheart?" I ask once I pick my box up off the floor.

She nods and we wave one last time before going out to my car. I set my lone box in the back. Everything else has already been moved to Bella's – not that there was that much to begin with. I mean I don't own any furniture, I only wear jeans, t-shirts, and flannels, and my bike is staying here in the garage because Bella's house doesn't have one. There wasn't a lot of shit to move. I wonder if it should bother me that I'm basically moving into Bella's without contributing anything, but dismiss the thought quickly. Mostly because, it's too late now anyway.

Peyton starts chattering the second the car leaves the driveway and doesn't stop until we pull into Bella's. She's scrambling in the backseat, hopping down from inside before I can even lift the back door. "Edward, you can't go inside yet. You gotta wait for me to say it's okay, okay?" She tips her head up at me and she has that look on her face, the one that both terrifies me and makes me agree to anything she asks.

"Ookayyy," I say slowly and in the blink of an eye, she's up the steps and through the front door. Said door opens immediately and out comes a very excited Brady, yipping and waddling. "Mom says to make yourself useful and make sure he goes potty," she orders and then she's gone again.

I shake my head and don't even try to figure out what she's up to because from experience I know, I'll never even come close.

"Well, come on, little guy, let's go do your business so when we're allowed inside, we can go." I ignore the fact I'm conversing with a dog like it can understand me and then look around to make
sure no one can see me. Brady looks up at me when he scampers closer, and I tell him, "Yeah, I know, no neighbors. Get to it." I point. "I've only been here three minutes and already I'm with the dog. Good thing you stay inside and there's no dog house Bella can send me to."

A few minutes later I'm inside and standing in the middle of the living room with Bella's fingers over my eyes and a huge smile on my face.

"Okay, stick your hands out," Peyton says. Her voice is shaking she's so excited and I know if I could see her, she'd be bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, too.

I do as I'm told and wait, and wait … and wait.

Both girls giggle while they watch me huff and puff and I whip my head from side to side and try to get them to get the show on the road.

"Come on," I grouse, and barely stop myself from stomping my foot. Finally, when it feels like I can't take another second of waiting, I feel a small box placed softly and with great care in the center of my hands.

Suddenly Bella's hands are gone and my eyes lower to the present I'm holding. The box is silver and the ribbon is a shiny metallic blue. It almost looks too nice to open. "Open it," Peyton says. Gone is the shaking and the animation, now there's anxiety, wariness … and shining through it all, hope.

I die a little inside, but in the best possible way, when I look into the slate blue eyes that have had me spellbound ever since she pronounced that she was my best friend. She still is, she always will be, and without her, I don't know that I'd be here, with the two of them, spending the day in our house for the first time.

I lower myself to my knees so I'm level with her. I feel Bella as her arm slides around my waist and she presses her entire side against mine. Slowly, I pull the ribbon until it falls away from the box and when it's untangled I stare at the top until Bella urges me to keep going. My heart's thundering in my chest, though I'm not sure why. It's not like it's going to be a bad gift or anything, not from my girls.

Taking a deep breath, I lift the lid. It takes my brain a few seconds to catch up to my eyes, but when it does … I'm speechless. I pick the key chain up off the pillow of white cotton, slide my finger through the metal loop, and hold it up in front of me. I let it dangle, turning it this way and that, and marvel at how something so small can make me feel so much.

"I drew it myself," Peyton whispers.

Closing my fingers around it, I reach for her and bring her to me, kissing the top of her head over and over again. "Oh, sweetheart, it's incredible." And it so is. I shift her around so that I can hold the key chain in front of the three of us and look at it again. She drew a picture of her and I holding hands on a bright, sunshiney yellow key chain and on the back, in her perfectly messy and totally her way handwriting wrote, "Love, Peyton." There are three keys already attached to the ring: my bike, my car, and what I'm assuming is the house.

Our house.

She claps happily. "You really like it?" And there's my Sprite, effervescent and all things right in my world. I nod and she throws her arms around me. "Alice told me you would. We made it one night when I spent the night with her and Jasper." I tell myself to make sure and thank Alice …
I love it. I love you," I tell her between kisses and because kissing Bella is never a bad idea, I make sure to spread the love around.

We laugh. One of *those* moments passes, the kind that we'll remember years from now, and I take the time to let it sink in. Bella pops up off the ground and pulls me up, too. "Lunch is ready, let's eat."

The day is … perfect.

Dinner is … perfect.

Lying in bed with Peyton and reading Harry Potter before bed is … perfect.

Undressing Bella, slowly, piece by piece, and kissing every inch of her delectable, sexy body is perfect.

"I love you so fucking much," I whisper as I slide into her perfect heat, and feel her all around me. Her arms and legs, her warm, sweet breath, the scent of her everywhere, saturating my skin. Her nails up and down my back, the heels of her perfect feet digging into my ass, driving me deeper and deeper until she comes apart … perfectly beneath me.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

"Hi, Edward!" Lucy shrieks as she races past me and flies up the stairs before Nicole even has time to say goodbye.

"Nice to see she's going to miss me." Nicole laughs.

"Come on in. Bella will be back in a few minutes," I tell her and open the door, shooing Brady back because he's trying to squeeze through my legs and make a break for it outside. "Dude, get back. You are not going out there," I tell him. He barks in his annoyance and silently I agree with him. It's absolutely gorgeous outside. Late March, and even though the calendar says it's Springtime, you can't tell it here. However, it's crisp, clear and the sun's shining.

"It looks nice in here," she remarks as she heads toward the living room. She stops and spins in a circle. I catch her smile when she spies my contribution to the room's decor.

I let my eyes sweep from left to right and say, "I think so, too, though Bella might not agree with you about everything." We both laugh when I tip my chin in the direction of what Bella dubs the eyesore from hell. "How about a Coke?" She nods and follows me into the kitchen.

My cell phone rings and I pull it out of my pocket, answering, "Hey, baby, Nicole just dropped off Lucy," before she even has a chance to say anything.

"Edddwarrddd," Bella slurs followed by a hiccup then a snort then a giggle then a burp. A loud one. "Ooops, 'scuse me," she tries to say, though she's giggling again.

Fuck. Me.

Bella's drunk. Or if she's not drunk, she's well on her way.

I chuckle into the phone because I can hear her tell Rose and Alice that she needs to pee. "Bella,
you know I can hear you,” I tell her, rolling my eyes. God, she's fucking adorable when she's tipsy.

"Shhh, Mr. Sexy Schmexy man. Lemme talk Nicole, I gots to ask her something." She giggles at herself.

I shake my head and hand Nicole the phone, and try not to laugh as I watch her face as Bella talks to her. "I'll see you girls in a few minutes. Make sure mine has salt on it." She hands the phone back to me and I hold it up to my ear thinking Bella wants to say goodbye, but frown when I see the call's been ended.

"It seems I've been invited to a girl's night with Bella, Alice, and Rose," she says and looks so happy that I have to push down the fear of being left home alone with two seven-year-old girls. I don't want to make her feel bad when she's obviously excited, but I am freaking the fuck out.

I swallow once then again and it must be loud enough or my eyes must look as terrified as I feel because Nicole gasps just a little and then tries to hide her smile. "Are you going to be okay with the girls by yourself?" Her voice is light, teasing, and I huff at myself for acting like a lunatic.

"How hard can it be?" I ask airily and feel my stomach drop when I see her eyes widen just a bit and a knowing grin on her face.

Just then, there's a squeal followed by a thump from upstairs.

Great.

Nicole moves toward the door and I follow to let her out. "You'll be fine, Edward," she tells me and her willingness to leave Lucy home alone with me takes me by surprise once I realize what she's doing.

"You don't mind leaving Lucy with me?" I blurt before I think about what I'm asking.

She turns and looks at me, her shocked expression written all over her face. "Of course not." She sounds so sure of herself and that helps to ease the flare of doubt. I nod and take a deep breath, feeling better even though I wonder where the momentary panic came from. "You know whatever happened to you before doesn't matter to anyone around here, Edward. Most everyone that comes here has a story and while yours might be a … little more colorful than others," she says diplomatically, "it's by far not the worst one I've heard. I've seen you with Bella and Peyton, and I've seen you with Lucy and all of the other kids. I don't have any reason to worry about leaving Lucy. I'm more afraid for you … there's no telling what sort of mischief those two can get into when they put their minds to it. They're evil geniuses in disguise."

She laughs and opens the door. I get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that it's going to be a long night. A few hours later I realize, I was so right.

"Edward, we're bored." Peyton huffs as she throws herself down on the sofa next to me. Funnily enough, Lucy does the exact same thing on my other side.

"How can you be bored? For the last two hours it's sounded like a pack of elephants up there." I smirk at one then the other.

Peyton rolls her eyes at me, not at all amused with my statement. "It has not sounded like that," she grumps. "Play with us," she demands.

I gulp. Visions of smeared lipstick and neon green nail polish flit in my mind and I shiver at the thought. I wonder how fast I can trick Seth and Xavier into coming over here, then remember
they're having a date night. Shit. I can call Bella and beg her to come home, though from the state she was in when she called earlier, I can't imagine she's in any condition to help now. I know I can call Esme and she'll come over but then she'll tell Carlisle where she's going and why and then he'll never let me live it down.

I rack my brain trying to come up with something to do when a memory pushes its way to the front. My grandmother and me making cookies. She would make these cookies that looked hideous but tasted out of this world good and I would get to help mix it all together.

The memory warms me. I'm remembering more and more of the good times and wallowing less on the bad. In all honesty, up until she died, there were very few bad ones. My grandparents loved me without question, and took such good care of me. I hate the fact that I'm not sure they ever knew how happy I was when I was growing up. How the things they taught me and showed me make it so I can be good for Bella and Peyton now. Make it so I can spend an hour or so destroying the kitchen while Peyton and Lucy talk … nonstop.

I'm not sure they've taken a breath for thirty minutes.

"Edward?" Peyton asks innocently, or she tries to sound that way, which only serves to put me on alert. I love the girl to pieces but sometimes she stupefies even me.

"Hmmm?" I ask warily as we spoon dollops of cookie dough on the pans.

I have no idea how I did it, but when I remembered baking the cookies with my grandmother, I also remembered the recipe. So, here we are, making Monster cookies with extra peanut butter and me shaking in my boots, figuratively since I'm barefoot, waiting for Peyton to ask me God knows what.

She and Lucy share one of those looks and then like the evil duo they are, giggle until Lucy nudges Peyton with her shoulder. "Ask him, he'll know," she whispers behind her hand, like I can't hear every word she's saying.

Peyton nods and they share a secret smile. "Madison's mom is going to have a baby and Madison said it was in her mom's tummy. How do babies get there?"

I feel all the color drain from my face and the pan I'm holding slips from my hands and clatters on the island. "What?" I squeak.

Oh.

My.

God.

I'm going to kill Bella when she gets home. I can NOT believe she left me home by myself to deal with this. I look at both girls who are staring up at me utterly clueless to the freak out I'm having on the inside. Holy shit.

Peyton opens her mouth to ask me again and I slap my hand, gently of course, over her mouth. I do not need to hear those words … ever again … come out of her mouth. Ever. Not even when she's thirty-years-old and married. Oh shit. Married. I can't even think about that without wanting to hurl then hunt down the imaginary husband and rip his dick off and then bury his body for even thinking about putting his hands on my girl.

I take a few deep breaths and push the thoughts of murder and mayhem away. I try to figure out
how the hell to answer her because I promised, like an idiot, to always answer her questions. In hindsight, I probably should have amended that to questions about everything … except this.

Peyton grunts behind my hand, and I slowly remove it, silently hoping that she'll forget what she asked. "Well?" she asks and puts her hands on her hips while she waits, rather impatiently, for me to answer.

My mouth opens and closes at least a dozen times and I keep looking toward the front door hoping, praying Bella walks … or more likely stumbles, through it. When another few minutes pass and she doesn't, I straighten my shoulders, deciding that short and evasive is the way to go. If that doesn't work, I'll offer money, lots of money, for her to ask her mom … or Xavier.

"Ummm," I begin, feeling sick to my stomach. "Well, you see it's like this …" I huff then pinch the bridge of my nose. "Peyton, I think," … *we should wait for your mom*, but then groan when I know I can't **not** answer her question.

Fuck it.

I have no idea what I'm doing but I say the first thing that comes into my mind. "Well, Madison's mom and dad made the baby together and it'll grow inside of her mom until it's ready to come out." I say the words slowly and then breathe a huge sigh of relief thinking that would be all she wrote. She asked, I answered, problem solved.

Lucy and Peyton look at each other and then at me before looking back to each other. Lucy prods Peyton with her elbow and I brace myself, sending up a quick prayer that the next question isn't as bad as the first.

"But how did they make it?" Peyton questions and I want to die.

I reach up and scratch the back of my neck, feeling my face burst into a blush that I'm sure rivals Bella on her worst day. "Umm, well, see, moms have … erm … ah, eggs?"


"Kind of?" I'm so lame and doing this so wrong, I know I am, but God damn … eggs? How the hell do I explain eggs?

"What about the dads? What do they do?"

And now, I want the floor to open up and swallow me whole. I'm really going to kill Bella when she gets home.

I refuse to say the word sperm to Peyton; I just can't do it. "Hmmm, dads have, something special inside of them that helps the egg to become a baby."

I literally feel like I'm going to throw up and am half tempted to promise whoever is watching above that I won't ever put my something special anywhere near Bella ever again if I can make it through the rest of this conversation.

Peyton watches me shift from foot to foot and waits a few seconds before she asks, "How does the special stuff get to the egg?"

I sigh. I know Peyton knows enough about the way things work between a man and a woman. She's not stupid and it's not like the Swans or Jasper and Alice aren't open about everything, even the physical aspect of being together. So, I clench my fingers into two fists and say simply, "They
have sex, Peyton."

She looks at me, aghast, and then she and Lucy start that whispering that's so fast, there's no possible way I can understand a word they're saying to each other. I also have no idea if I've just scarred the two of them forever. I do know, however, that this discussion is over.

"Lucy," I say gently to get her attention. She and Peyton stop talking immediately and both girls look over at me. "Sweetie, I really think if you have questions about this, you should probably ask your mom and dad, okay? I'm glad you both felt like you could ask me, but something like this is better to come from your parents."

I cringe a little on the inside just thinking about having to mention this conversation to Nicole. I just hope what I said was okay with her.

Thankfully, the girls take mercy on me because I'm sure I look pretty fucking pathetic, and move on to a different topic. I hear Brody's name mentioned … a lot, and I'm not sure I like hearing about that anymore than I do answering questions about where babies come from. When I hear Peyton giggle and she gets that dreamy look on her face while she talks about him, I know I don't.

I flop down on the sofa exhausted and strung out like I've been on a three day bender when the girls tell me good night after the movie and race up the stairs. Who the hell knew that spending a few hours with two way too curious for their own good seven-year-olds would wear me out so fucking badly? I lean my head on the back of the couch and look up at the ceiling. "Jesus!" I chuckle to myself remembering Peyton's question though I stoutly refuse to think about my answer.

Bella's going to kill me.

I huff, feeling adrift without her presence. Our nights are usually quiet, but they're spent together. I'm not used to being alone. I don't like it.

Standing up, I make a quick pass around the living room picking up the plates and empty glasses of milk from our Monster cookie pig out. Once the dishes are in the dishwasher, I flick the light off and wonder what the hell to do with myself until Bella comes home.

A knock on the door cuts my pity party short and for once I don't have to race Brady to the door because Peyton and Lucy have him upstairs with them. I open the door, startled for a second by the sight of Bella slumping against Emmett. "I think this belongs to you," he tells me with a roll of his eyes and grunt.

"Ohhhhh … it's Mr. Sexy Schmexy," she babbles, eyes glassy and a lazy smile on her face.

"Are the other ones in the same shape?" I ask as he shifts Bella from his side and into my arms.

She's a mess. With her red-tipped nose, flushed cheeks, and margarita-tinged breath, she's absolutely, fucking adorable.

Emmett shakes his head at Bella again when she tries to kiss my chin … and totally misses. "Yeah, all except Alice. She can drink us all under the table. She's a little tipsy, but by the time Jas and I got to the house, Bella, Rose, and Nicole were busting out all the songs to Mama Mia." He shudders as he remembers and I can't help but laugh when she starts to sing Dancing Queen … and is painfully off-key.

"All right, my little drunken diva, let's get you inside and into bed." She sways in my arms so I bend down and slide my arms beneath her knees and lift her up. Her head lolls over my arm. She tries to lift an arm to, I think, run her fingers through my hair but it only makes it about halfway up
until she lets it fall onto her lap.

She pouts, still looking adorable, and I kiss the tip of her nose which makes her giggle.

"Yeah, good luck with that in the morning." Emmett chuckles and slaps me on the shoulder. "If she's semi-human tomorrow, we'll see you guys at Mom and Dad's for lunch."

Bella mumbles something to Emmett that is totally incoherent and I turn and take her into the house, kicking the door shut behind me. I have to shift her in my arms to lock the door, managing to do it without dropping her which is a feat in and of itself with the way she's wiggling. She's swinging her legs back and forth and singing some song that apparently only she knows the words to while I turn off all the lights, still holding her in my arms.

She sniffs the air and opens her eyes wide as her mouth hangs open. "Did you make cookies without me?"

"The girls were bored; it was all I could come up with," I tell her as I start to climb the stairs.

"You're such a good dad." She sighs, totally oblivious to the fact that my heart just fell out of my ass and dropped onto the steps.

Part of me instantly hopes she doesn't remember saying that, the other part ... well, I can't even think about that yet.

She closes her eyes then and I think she's passed out until I get her to our room. She grumbles and whines as I help her get undressed. It takes me twice as long as it should because I have to bob and weave like a boxer ducking a right hook because she's suddenly got more hands than an octopus has arms. I manage to get her in the bathroom and get her teeth brushed though watching her try to rinse and spit isn't something I'll ever forget.

Even drunk and slightly annoying, she's still as gorgeous as can be.

I lead her to the bed and tuck her in, kissing her forehead. Dreamily, drowsily she looks up at me, her smile is so big, like she has the best secret ever to share with me.

"Edward?" she asks, sounding sleepy and half out of it.

"Hmmm?" I run my fingers through her tangled hair and curl the ends around my finger.

She licks her lips and sighs, closing her eyes for a few seconds before slowly opening them. "You're going to marry me one day," she whispers before closing her eyes again and rolling over on her side. She's out in an instant, her mouth slightly open and her knees pulled up into her chest. My heart is beating about a hundred times a minute, and I get dizzy. Until just then, I didn't even know if she'd heard me. She's never mentioned it and I damn sure wasn't going to if she didn't.

I let out a long breath and bend over, smiling as I kiss her behind her ear and whisper, "You bet your sexy ass I'm going to marry you, Bella Swan."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

EEEP! Who thinks Bella's going to remember any of that? And, how do you think she'll react when Edward tells her about Peyton's questions? Poor guy, can't you just picture him freaking out? LOL!

Okay, one more chapter down, so you know what that means, right? The next chapter is the
last one before the Epilogue. I'm shocked, really, to be here already; it seems like we just got started with these guys.

I just want to say I'm sorry, again, for the lack of review replies this week. The Lovely Laurel isn't the only one that's had computer problems this week. Mine was down for a few days, too, with a virus as well. Just know I appreciate them all, lots more than I'll ever be able to say!

Keep checking the Facebook page and the blog. The pictures for this week are liable to make you guys VERY happy … just saying!

See you next Sunday!

Hugs,

Erin~
Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

This is the last, regular chapter and I need you to indulge me for a moment while I thank some very special people: Eternal gratitude and lots of love goes to: Lianne for giving me a vision, Cecile for being my biggest cheerleader, Kat for loaning her special treasure box to Peyton and for stories about babies, eggs, and chickens, Kassiah for making me smile and telling me lemons are okay no matter where they happen, Robin (primarycolors) for showing me all about sprinkles (the blue ones are still my fave!), Becky (rtgirl) for loving me no matter how many words I use, J'me (prettykittyartist) for pushing me when I wanted to give up and for loving my Bella as much as I do … and most especially to Laurel who is without a doubt my everything and believes in me even when I don't always believe in myself.

Special thanks and hugs also to: Nic, Jaime, Michelle, Kitty, Tracy, and the other amazing girls in TLS. You all have done so much for me and have embraced me and this story right from the very beginning! I appreciate it more than I'll ever be able to say.

And to all of you … who read, review, recommend, post, and talk about this story – THANK YOU! You're the reason I write and the support, encouragement, and excitement you have shown me and this story have humbled me so much. This has truly been an experience I won't ever forget!

Now, how about we end this with a bang shall we?

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Chapter 28

BPOV

"What the?" I pant as I untangle my legs from the sheet … and Edward, and sit up. He groans a little when his arm falls from around me with a thump to the bed, and rolls over, burrowing his head into his pillow.

Breathing heavily, I shake the fog of sleep from my head and rub my eyes. The eerie green glow emanating from the clock on the nightstand lets me know that I'm in for a hell of a long day and I curse a little just thinking about it. I lay my hand over my chest and feel my heart rate drumming beneath my fingers. I swing my legs out from underneath the covers and dangle them off the side of the bed, gasping when my bare feet hit the cool hardwood floor.

I know there's no going back to sleep for me, though the pull to snuggle beside Edward is almost enough to keep me in bed. He still has a little over an hour before he has to wake up and I know the second he senses I'm awake and he feels me moving against him, he'll be up … in more ways than one.

The man is definitely all about starting the day off with a bang, no matter what time it is.
I figure since I'm not going back to sleep, I might as well make the most of the hour of alone time I suddenly find myself with and lean over to take my journal out of the drawer of the nightstand. As quietly as I can, I slip out of bed and pull my ponytail tie off my wrist, wrapping it around my hair as I pad toward the chair beside Edward’s side of the bed. I grab his flannel shirt and slide my arms into it. I can't help but pick up the collar and inhale deeply. He always smells so good … well except for right after he's done on the boat. No matter how long I've been around the ocean, salt, seawater, and raw fish do not make for the most pleasant of odors … not even on Edward. Last night he was at Peyton's school helping to set up for the end of the year Game Day. Luckily for me, the evenings are still cool enough that a light jacket is needed so he wore the flannel shirt to keep warm. I inhale again, smelling pine trees, fresh air, a little sweat, and then that something that is so uniquely him that if I had days, I still wouldn't be able to accurately describe it.

Carefully, softly, I lean down and brush the hair off his forehead. His eyebrows dip and he snuffles into the pillow. The corners of his eyes crinkle from the frown I can't see but know is there. I kiss him as gently as I can, just to let him know I'll be close by. He hates waking up alone in bed.

"Love you," I whisper, the sound barely louder than the softest of breaths, but I know he hears me when he murmurs something unintelligible. From the serene smile on his face, I imagine it is the same thing back to me.

I pull the door mostly closed behind me, leaving it open just a crack. Peyton's door is also slightly ajar and I can see the faint glow from the Winnie the Pooh nightlight she refuses to replace. On bare feet, I walk down the stairs and go into the kitchen. I can't make coffee because the timer's already set to start for Edward in an hour, so I decide that hot tea will have to suffice.

"Hey, little guy." I chuckle softly when I feel a cold nose on my ankle. It's impossible to walk into the kitchen and not find him underfoot, hoping that his cuteness is enough to warrant a treat. He's always right. I grab a doggie biscuit out of the pantry and hand it to him.

"One of these days someone will learn how to say no to you," I tell him when I scratch behind his ears. He licks my hand in a "yeah keep dreaming" way and I giggle at him.

He must be the most spoiled dog in America … or Corea at the very least.

Taking my tea, journal, and the blanket off the back of the couch, I head for the front door.

"You coming?" I ask Brady as I hold the door open. He waddles out and I remind myself to ask the vet if he's supposed to be as roly-poly as he is. I swear he's a big ball of brown and white fur. Cute as all get out, but there isn't a person around that wouldn't be devastated if he was anything but as healthy as can be. "Isn't that right, my little hero?" I ask rhetorically as I sit in the wicker chair in the corner of the porch.

I arrange the soft blanket, leaving enough room to hang down so Brady can curl up and go back to sleep, but still have enough to cover my legs as I fold them beneath me. Absentmindedly I blow on the steaming tea to cool it off enough to take a sip. The warmth of the hot liquid seeps through the ceramic mug and travels from my fingers and up my arms. It's the end of May but the mornings are still so cool, especially when there's a slight breeze as there is right now.

As if on cue, a gust of wind swirls a few dried leaves that have fallen off the neglected and kind of sad-looking fern hanging above me, bringing with it the faintest scent of salt. I relax into the chair, the warmth of the blanket and the tea, the smell of Edward and salt and I'm in heaven, no matter that it's four o'clock in the morning.

From the trees beside the house I can hear the rustling of branches from whatever wildlife is awake
at this ungodly hour with me, then the shrill call of a hawk as it lands in a tree deep in the woods. I take one more sip and let the tea warm me from the inside out before setting it on the small, rickety table beside me and pick my journal up from my lap.

I click the pen, a clack, clack rhythm that would surely drive anyone else crazy but as I flip through the pages, my mind is so lost in the memories scrawled across the cream-colored paper that I don't hear the noise. With a quiet sigh, I begin to read, skimming and catching just bits and pieces …

~May 24, 2011~

I had another nightmare tonight. It's the same one as before, the same one it always is. Evan calling for me, wanting me to save him. I try, but I can't ever reach him in time. It's my fault he's dead. I'm so tired … I hope Xav can't tell, but I know he will. He always does.

~June 5, 2011~

I have a date. I think it's a date … I hope it's a date with Edward. He was at the bonfire tonight. We talked and it was … nice. He's just, I don't even know. He scares me; he makes me feel calm. He's afraid, but he adores Peyton. He's so sexy and mysterious; he's going to break my heart. He's going to change my life …

Just reading those words from a year ago makes my stomach feel like I'm jumping off the high dive in a pool about three sizes too small and the water way too shallow. So much can change in so little time. I run the pendant on my necklace back and forth along the chain and over my lips. I usually take it off before bed, but I was so tired that I forgot. Holding it now as I read my own words only reinforces how prophetic they were.

~July 3, 2011~

Holy shit!

I had an orgasm!

In a parking lot!

From Edward's fingers!

I want to do that again … soon.

I feel myself blush and then I have to squeeze my legs together. The man has insanely talented fingers … and mouth, tongue … and, well …

~July 8, 2011~

Prison.

Edward's been in prison for the last seven years. I still can't wrap my mind around that. I want to say it doesn't make a difference to me, but I can't. I know it doesn't make him different; he's the same Edward today as he was yesterday and the day before that, and the one before that. He's the same man that lets Peyton beat him at Madden Football and the one that blushes when my mom kisses him on the cheek. He's still the same Edward that likes mint chocolate chip ice cream and likes to hold my hand when we take a walk.

He's the same … but he's not.
I don't know what to do, all I know is I can't live without him.

~July 23, 2011~

I told Edward I love him tonight. He loves me, too. I can't stop smiling. I'm so happy. I hope this feeling never goes away ...

I still can't believe I told him that way, but then again it's totally me and totally us. I had wanted to tell him for so long; I knew I loved him days, weeks, before those words spilled out. It was all I could do to keep them inside, but looking back, I have no idea what I was so scared of. I knew he loved me. It was in every kiss, every touch he gave me. I knew he could feel it, too.

~September 20, 2011~

Edward fell asleep reading to Peyton tonight. When I walked in her room and found them sleeping with his arm holding her tightly to his chest and her little hand fisting his shirt as if she was afraid he'd slip away if she let him go, I swear my heart stopped. It's not like I don't know that he loves her, and she thinks he's the sun and the moon and the stars and football and flip-flops and everything in between, but to see them, curled up together filled up every single part of me with so much love and happiness that I could barely breathe.

I used to have nightmares every night ... now I have dreams, the best dreams. I dream of spending forever with Edward ... of making a family with him and Peyton and me.

Sometimes when I'm asleep, I never want to wake up ...

I still feel that way. Every night. And every day. It's going to happen. I just don't when. My hope is that it'll be sooner rather than later. I'm ready.

~December 19, 2011~

Edward's asleep next to me and it's all I can do not to crawl on top of him and keep him in this bed forever.

He almost died.

I would have died with him.

How do I let him go back out there? How do I promise Peyton he'll always come back to us? How can I ask him not to go?

Please, God, keep him safe.

We need him.

Always.

A chill wracks my entire body and I shake as thoughts from that day assail me. It's still extremely difficult and painful to think about that day, especially when I really stop and think about how close we came, I came, to losing him. Losing Evan was tragic, and there isn't one of us that won't always mourn his death, but losing Edward would have been a heartbreak neither Peyton nor I would have ever recovered from.

I'm not going to lie, every morning when he gets up and leaves for work, I worry. I worry all day. I catch myself watching out the windows at the restaurant at all hours of the day, even when I know
there's no way he can be back yet. My heart always does this thing where it skips a beat and then races every time he walks through the door after being gone all day … not to mention that my entire body seems to turn into melted butter in relief.

I've talked with Mom, Alice, and Rose, even Nicole, about how they deal with the fear every day. I know that really the only thing I can do is to put my faith in my dad, Emmett, and Jasper and pray that between them and above that it's enough to keep him safe.

It's all I can do.

~February 2, 2012~

Aleksei was here.

He was going to …

I can't even …

He's dead. I'm not sorry.

My heart starts thundering in my chest and I have to lay my hand over the pages. I guess my breathing is loud enough to wake up Brady because I feel the blanket stir. When I look down he's growling lowly in the back of his throat, as if trying to ward off a danger he can't even see … but he can feel it. Just like that night. Once things calmed down some in the aftermath, Edward was able to remember it was Brady coming through the front door that distracted Aleksei enough to allow Edward to surprise him and knock the gun out of his hand. Of course Bud is the one that shot Aleksei, but without Brady giving Edward those extra few minutes, who knows what would have happened.

It's something I try not to think about … ever.

"Come up here, you." I laugh softly when I feel Brady paw my knees to try to pull himself up. His legs are too short so all he winds up doing is standing up on his hind legs and looking like a pudgy prairie dog.

He kneads my legs with the paws that are much too big for his little body before he finds a comfortable spot and promptly goes back to sleep. I run my hand down his cashmere soft fur. "Some guard dog you are," I tell him and smile when his ears wiggle before I feel the warm air of his breath through his nose on my leg.

I roll my neck, the cool morning air making it stiff from holding it in the same position for so long. The sky has lightened, changing from coal black to charcoal gray with a hint of pale lavender. I listen for a moment, but can't hear if Edward's awake yet. It doesn't feel like it's been an hour since I've been awake, but I've been so lost in my memories I have no idea.

Focusing, I begin again.

~February 16, 2012~

Edward's going to marry me.

I haven't said anything. I don't think I was supposed to hear him. I don't even know if he meant to say it, but he did. He can't take it back now, either, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to.

Mrs. Edward Masen
Isabella Marie Masen
Bella Swan Masen
Bella Masen
Gah ... I'm such a girl!
And I want it sooner rather than later. I'm ready!
There's that fluttery feeling in my stomach again when I read those words. I swear it feels like there's a swarm of butterflies flitting around and around trying to flap their way out every time I think about what he said. I catch him looking at me all the time, sometimes just a quick glance and others like he's trying to etch me into his brain so the image stays there forever. Having him here, permanently, has been the most wonderful thing. It's not like he didn't spend a lot of time here before, but knowing that this is the place he comes home to every night, the place where his dirty clothes are mixed with mine and his favorite cereal - Frosted Mini-Wheats - sits on the shelf in the pantry next to Peyton's Froot Loops, has made all the difference.
I knew I loved Edward before he moved in, but now it's so much more ... deeper, stronger.
Even the little things he does that aggravate me to no end, like the way he never puts the cap back on the toothpaste or the way that the man can't ever remember to check his pockets before he puts his clothes in the wash, don't matter in the grand scheme of things. I've never lived with anyone, and the fact that Edward is the only person I'll share that with means something. It means everything.
I'd been thinking about it for a while when I mentioned it at dinner during our weekend away and the moment I asked, I knew I wanted it. There were a few moments where I panicked, wondering if it was too much, too soon, but the seamless way he's melded into mine and Peyton's everyday life lets me know it most definitely was the right decision and the right time.
~March 10, 2012~
I am never drinking again, no matter how delicious margaritas taste.
Shit ... need the bathroom, again.
~March 10, 2012~
If I ever doubted how much Edward loves me ... and Peyton, (which I never have) I certainly don't now.
My side still hurts from laughing so hard. Poor thing, he still looks kind of green and a bit mortified at Peyton's and Lucy's question last night. I would give anything to go back in time and get that conversation on video.
I can't wait to tell the girls; Alice and Rose will die. I know he's worried about upsetting Nicole and Grant but he doesn't need to be. All day long, every time he looked at me, I laughed. I couldn't help it. He's so freaked out and if I didn't know that a few days from now he'll laugh about this as much as me I'd probably try to stop ... wait, hell no I wouldn't.
Although, just now when I peeked at him while he's trying to watch TV, he caught me. The look he gave me, the one with the arched eyebrow and the lopsided smirk that makes my knees weak and causes me to have to change my panties, makes me wonder.
I hope I didn't do anything last night. I remember drinking and singing. I vaguely remember Emmett bringing me home, threatening me the whole way that if I threw up in his Jeep he'd make me regret it. It's fuzzy, but I think I sang to Edward when I got home. I'm not sure how I got into bed, though I'm sure Edward put me there. I have this funny feeling I might have said something … but I don't know.

I guess he'll tell me.

Or maybe not, oh God I love when he does that … it always feels so good when he touches me there and I know next he'll … damn … yes … there's the tongue …

~April 18, 2012~

Edward and I had our first fight tonight.

It sucked.

I hate fighting with him, especially over something as stupid as whether to watch Storage Wars and DVR the baseball game or the other way around. He's been edgy the last few days which has made me anxious and feeling like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I'm still learning his moods; he's still learning mine.

It's hard some days, harder than I thought it would be, but the good days far, far outweigh the bad.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

We don't argue much, but there are days I want to cover his face with a pillow while he sleeps and I'm sure there are just as many days he'd like nothing more than to wring my neck, but we're learning. It's impossible to think it will always be easy, that nothing will ever go wrong, or I won't snap at him for no reason or he'll brood and not want to tell me what's wrong.

Someday we'll know everything about the other, every secret, every memory.

~May 6, 2012~

I hate Jasper.

I hate Alice.

I really, really don't like Edward.

I went out on the water today, in Jasper's boat. Edward has been encouraging me to try for months now and I finally gave in.

I hated every minute of it.

I'm never going again.

I want to go back out … sometime. When I don't want to throw Edward overboard.

I love him so much for wanting this for me, for trying to help me get over my fear and guilt so that I can once again enjoy something that used to make me so happy.

I'm not there yet, but I hope I will be someday.
I hear the front door open and turn to meet Edward's gaze. "Hey," he says quietly.

He's partially dressed for the day in his jeans and a plain white t-shirt. His feet are bare, his jeans still unbuttoned, and though his hair is wet from his shower, he's still not quite all the way awake. The fact he came to find me before going into the kitchen to get his coffee makes me smile, not that the sight of him walking toward me isn't already enough to put a smile on my face.

"You okay?" he asks as he steps in front of me.

"Yeah, woke up and couldn't sleep," I start to tell him, but stop talking when he silently leans down and scoops me up in his arms then sits down with me in his lap. He's so fast Brady barely moves, just a tiny yip and a one-eyed look at Edward before going back to sleep tucked in his little fur ball on my legs.

He smells so good, all fresh and clean and all him. I turn a bit and snuggle in close to him. Resting my hand on his chest, I can feel he's still warm from the shower. There's a bit of shifting, a lift and a tilt to the right, and then I'm in my most favorite place: my cheek on the spot right above his heart and his chin resting on my head. We sit for a few minutes, not saying a word, but not needing to either.

My journal stays open on my lap. I've never hidden the fact I write in one nor have I ever tried to keep him from looking at it. He's never asked, but if he wants to look at it, I'll show him, so I don't bother to cover what's kept me occupied for the last hour or so.

Silently, his lips move from the top of my head, down to my temple, until I feel the tip of his nose, cool from the early morning chill, against the dip where my shoulder and neck meet. "Mmmm, you're warm and you smell like me," he says quietly right before I feel his soft lips along the skin I make more accessible by tilting my head to the side.

I close my eyes, loving the gentle comfort I feel from just sitting … being with him. It's natural … it's easy … and it's everything right.

His lips form a smile against my neck. "I was so mad at me that day." He points to the pages on my lap.

"I was. I'm not anymore though." I huddle in closer, tucking Brady in between me and Edward's stomach.

"I know, thank goodness. I hate it when you're upset with me," he says with a squeeze. "I only want you to be happy, Bella. I want you to have everything."

His hand curves around my hip and his fingers slip beneath the waistband of my pajama pants. I love the feel of his hands on me, whether it's something as innocent as the ghost of a fingertip on my elbow or when his index finger curls around mine, it never fails to turn my blood into molten fire. Holding hands, every part of every finger touching, palms pressed tightly together, the pad of thumb across my cheek, a knuckle brushing the outside of my thigh … a nipple between his fingers or better yet, when his fingers are buried deep inside of me, touching and stroking in the most delicious of ways … all of it, all the time, I can never get enough.

"I love your hands." I sigh, my inner thoughts spilling forth without a second of hesitation.

He lifts his hand from where it was lightly laid across my stomach and rests it along my cheek. His thumb stretches and I feel it drag from one side of my bottom lip to the other. "I love you," he whispers and then his tongue takes the same path as his thumb just traveled. "But …" He chuckles
and the sound is all things sexy and hot and it makes my toes curl. "I'm really fucking glad you like my hands because, baby, there's nothing I like more than to have my hands and my fingers, touching you everywhere, all the time." He lowers his voice and dips his hand even lower beneath my pajama pants. I groan softly when the edge of his finger touches me there. His tongue swipes along my bottom lip again and then he takes it between his teeth, biting just hard enough to make me squeeze my legs together. Just when the sting of his teeth teeters on the edge of too much, his mouth covers mine and he gives me a kiss so long and so deep, it leaves me panting for breath.

Nothing is said after that. He kisses my forehead and then we sit in the cool, almost light morning until he has to leave for work. I walk him inside, waiting, watching as he gathers his things and then with one more hug and a lingering kiss, wish him a good day, knowing that at the end of it, he'll be here with me.

And the day after that … and the one after that … and the ones that are too far away to even count.

Game Day is a success. Peyton’s record of beating Brody is still intact, much to hers, Xavier’s, and Emmett’s satisfaction. Apparently the Swan name is still one to be reckoned with - a fact of which both she and Emmett like to flaunt as often as possible. The end of school comes once again in a flurry of awards programs, picnics, and shouts of freedom. Our summer routine begins as it always has, with breakfast and then some Mom/Peyton time.

The Friday of the first week of summer vacation finds us taking a walk down the beach. There are very few people out at this time of day, too early for anyone to enjoy the sun, and too late to dig for clams.

"Mom, look at this one," Peyton exclaims as she squats down and picks up a seashell in a perfect fan shape. She holds her palm out, smiling up at me like she’s just found a love note from Brody. It’s a far cry from the one Edward refuses to replace. That poor shell is chipped, cracked, and hanging on by barely a thread it’s been so worn down, but he swears he’s keeping it forever. Considering what he’s been through with it, I don’t blame him, nor do I have the heart to tell him he’s wishful thinking.

We’ve stopped pretty close to the jetty where her box is hidden. She turn and runs toward it, waving wildly once she reaches the rocks, like I’m not thirty feet away from her. I watch her climb over and go to the corner and say a quick prayer her box is still there. I always worry that somehow someone will find it, but in all this time, it’s never happened. She lets out a whoop so I let out the breath I didn’t even know I was holding. I stop about ten feet away and just watch her. Sometimes I worry that I get so caught up in everyday life, and in Edward, that I miss little moments with her, ones that will never come again.

I watch as she opens the lid, the smile that breaks out across her face is like she’s meeting her very best friend after not seeing them for a long time. My heart literally grows inside my chest, expanding like it’s trying to reach out and touch her. A slight breeze stirs the air, and a few strands of her hair escape the already messy ponytail. Her cheeks are the color of cotton candy and her eyes sparkle more than the ocean does when the sun shines on it. I’m stunned speechless when she looks up at me and grins. In her face I can see the girl she’ll grow into one day … smart, stubborn, fiercely loyal, quirky and just her. I want to burst into tears just from the thought, and then in the next instant fall to my knees in thanks for being blessed with the gift of her.

I’m so incredibly lucky.

"Hey, Mom, I think I’m going to take my box back to the house," Peyton tells me like she’s telling me she wants chocolate ice cream instead of vanilla.
I try to say something, but only open my mouth, too shocked to speak. She must see the confused look on my face and she places her new shell in the box and shuts the lid, running her hand over the top reverently, silently before she looks up at me. "I know that my father …" she carefully says the word. I can tell from the twist of her mouth and the slight tilt of her head that that word was chosen for a very specific reason. She purses her lips and then looks at me again, looking determined but apprehensive at the same time. "I know that he's in heaven and I know that he watches over me, but I know that he's not really leaving me the things I find for my treasure box."

"You do?" It's all I can think to ask. She's taken me so by surprise, but really, I should have expected it I suppose.

She nods and hops off the jetty, shielding her eyes with one hand. "I'm not a baby any more." She huffs and rolls her eyes. She bounces on the balls of her feet and looks out over the water then back at me. "I kind of like thinking that I'm the one who finds the good luck charms for Edward, you know? I don't want them to come from anyone but me."

"Well, okay then," I tell her, laying my arm across her shoulder as we head back to the house, thinking the whole way that I don't think there will ever be a day when she doesn't surprise me … at least I hope not.

The next day, I watch the clock all day long. I've been to a hundred, maybe close to a thousand bonfires but I'm so excited about the one tonight I can hardly stand it. My phone vibrates in my pocket and I set the tub full of dishes down on the table so that I can take it out, knowing that it's a message from Edward.

Going to get my bike from Carlisle's, thought we could go for a ride after the bonfire. It's supposed to be a full moon tonight. See you in a bit. E~

I sigh, excited and ready to be done with the bonfire before it even starts. The idea of going for a ride with Edward under the moonlight has me thinking all kinds of things, most of them involve making sure there is a blanket in the saddlebag on his bike so we can find a nice, secluded spot and make use of the fact that Peyton is spending the night with Mom and Dad.

The restaurant clears out in a hurry now that dinner is over and I hurry home to change once we get everything locked up. The first bonfire of the summer is always a big deal and for some reason this one seems even more special. Maybe it's because it was this time last year when Edward and I made our first steps toward becoming the us we are today. I can still remember like it was yesterday the way he looked with Peyton on his back and the way it felt when he kissed my cheek that very first time.

Just as I come down the stairs, he walks in the door. There's something … not off, but definitely different about him. He's practically vibrating and he looks like he's about to burst with a secret so big he can barely contain it. He takes a deep breath and that seems to calm him enough to where he no longer looks like a balloon stretched to its absolute limit and he gives me a sweet, almost heart-stopping smile. For some reason, the corners of my eyes prick with tears but I shake them away. I chalk his mood up to the fact that he's excited about the prospect of riding his bike later and walk toward him.

"Hurry and change your clothes, okay? I told Peyton we'd see her right away. She wants her walk with you before we eat."

He swats my ass and moves to the stairs, turning around before he walks up. "Don't forget a jacket or something. It'll be cold on the back of the bike."
We're out of the house and on our way to the beach in less than fifteen minutes. The ride is over literally in the blink of an eye. I slide off and take my helmet off, shaking my hair. I watch him lift his leg over the seat and I have to bite the inside of my cheek when he does it. He looks so freaking sexy on his bike. He's not wearing a jacket and his navy blue t-shirt is tight in all the right places. Ribbons of ink ripple across his arms. The scar on his neck does nothing to me anymore except make me want to trace it with my tongue. I know where it came from, what he was doing when it happened, but I don't care, it doesn't matter. It doesn't make him who he is, who I love.

"Better close that mouth, Bella, before something flies in there." He smirks knowingly as he sets his helmet on the seat.

"Shut up." I roll my eyes at him but let him take my hand. "You know how good you look on that machine."

"I know how good you think I look on it; that's all I care about."

I'm whisked away by Rose and Alice as soon as they get here, which is fine because as soon as Peyton spies Edward she pulls him down the beach. Time flies, fires dot the beach all up and down. The first warm spell of the season always brings people out in droves and tonight's no different.

When Esme and Mom break out the marshmallows and chocolate, much to Emmett's and Xavier's pleasure, I tap Edward on the leg. "I'm going to walk for a bit, okay?"

A look I can't explain passes across his face and he kisses me softly. "I'll come find you in a few minutes."

I walk off in the direction of the jetty, just needing a few moments to myself. I adore my family and friends and nothing makes me happier than being surrounded by them all, but there's something to be said for peace and quiet, too. After spending so much time with just Peyton, and now with just Edward and Peyton, I find that I need that so much. I smile to myself when I sit on the same log as I did last year, and stare out at the ocean. It still scares me, but not with the same intensity as before. It still has to power to take away my happiness, my future … my everything, but I keep reminding myself to have faith that Edward will stay safe.

I'm so lost in thought I don't notice anything … until I do.

I feel the tip of his finger on my elbow and I turn my head, having to push a few strands of hair off my face. I hold them with one hand and the other, well as soon as I really see Edward, it goes straight to my mouth, muffling the half sob half shriek that comes.

"Oh my God, Edward," I say, my voice shaking and with tears streaming down my face.

He's sitting beside me and I swear the Earth stops moving. There's nothing but me and him and a ring placed inside of the most perfect-looking s'more in the history of the world.

EPOV (the Sunday before he moves in)

"Baby, I'm going to run to Jasper's for a bit. I'll be back in about an hour," I holler up the stairs, knowing she's too busy with Peyton going through her closet that she'll barely pay attention to me.

I'm not wrong. "Okay, see you in a bit," she says, the sound of her voice fading as she buries herself inside Peyton's disaster of a closet. I love the girl to pieces, but a neat freak she most definitely is not.
I chuckle as I quickly walk to my car. When Bella announced after Mass this morning that today they were going through Peyton's spring clothes to see what she'd outgrown, I thought my poor Sprite was going to cry. She looked at me from the backseat of the car as we drove home and I literally have never seen her work the pout as hard as she tried with Bella … and with me. Most days, I probably would have tried to intervene because that pout is shameless and too damned hard to resist, but having Bella occupied today totally works into my plans in the best possible way so I did what any man in my predicament would do - I threw my wingman … er, winggirl, under the proverbial bus. I figure I can make it up to her with a trip to Ellsworth and a double scoop ice cream cone with extra sprinkles.

Besides, when P finds out what I'm doing today, which I most assuredly will not be keeping a secret from her because we are best friends after all, I know all will be forgiven.

Fuck.

Just thinking about where I'm going makes me want to throw up.

I take a few deep breaths and try to ease the panic that's churning in my gut. I tap my fingers against the steering wheel. I puff my cheeks up and then exhale. I whistle. I chew on the inside of my cheek. I roll my head as much as I can and still keep my eyes on the road.

Nothing works.

When I pull up in front of Charlie and Renée's house, I think about turning around and going back to Bella's, but then I think about the reason I'm here, and suddenly, I'm okay. I get out of the car and walk slowly to the front door, feeling cautiously optimistic … and purposely do not think of worst case scenarios.

Renée opens the door before I even have a chance to knock. "Edward, sweetie, what a surprise! Is everything okay?" she asks as she kisses my cheek and ushers me inside all in one fell swoop.

"Née, will you let the boy breathe for a minute? Jeeze, woman, you act like you haven't seen him in weeks," Charlie teases her as he wraps an arm around her waist and looks down at her.

I know the second he glances in my direction he's going to know exactly why I'm here. I'm not wrong. His eyes widen, twinkling mischievously. His mustache twitches and the right corner of his mouth lifts just enough to let me know he's so onto me.

I feel the urge to throw up again rush through me but I take a deep breath and hold his stare. He nods just enough for me to notice before his face is a mask of ease and calm. "If you two have a minute, there's something I need to talk to you about," I say, looking from one to the other.

"Well, let's not stand here like we don't have a place to sit. Edward, would you like coffee?" he asks as he leads us toward the sunroom. I start to shake my head when he says, "Or a trash can?" Again with the smirk.

I do this gulp, snort, choke thing that makes me sound like I just swallowed some of the bait from the boat which just makes him chuckle under his breath. We sit, the two of them side by side, and me, sitting across from them in a chair.

I feel like I'm facing the parole board all over again.

I wonder how soon Ryan can get here.

There's a slightly uncomfortable tension in the air and I can tell Renée feels it when she fidgets
next to Charlie and then opens her mouth to start to say something, only to be stopped when he
squeezes her shoulder. She looks from him to me and then back to him and then once more at me,
her eyes suddenly filling with tears when she realizes what's going on. The smile on her face and
the fact that she lets out this little squeak while she bounces up and down relaxes me in an instant. I
let out a deep breath and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

"I'm sure you both know why I'm here, so I'm not going to beat around the bush. Besides the
longer I sit here the more likely it is that I'll need to take Charlie up on his offer of a trashcan, then
he would laugh at me, and then tell Emmett and Jasper, and worse yet, Seth and Xavier and I'd
never be able to live it down, so I'm just going to say what I need to say, okay?" My word vomit
takes me by surprise to say nothing of Renée and Charlie who look equally shocked and amused.

I look down at the floor between my feet for a few seconds, long enough to rein in my spiraling
emotions and focus on why I'm here in the first place. Bella and Peyton.

Lifting my head, I sit up straight and proud. I know what I want and I know that I'll have it.

"You both know I love Bella and Peyton. They're the most important people in my life and there's
nothing that means more to me than the two of them and their happiness. I might not be what you
want for them," I pause and then hold my hand up when Renée starts to speak, "but I want to spend
the rest of my life being the husband Bella deserves and the father Peyton needs. I'm not ready, yet,
but I wanted you both to know that I do plan on asking Bella to marry me."

"You asking for my permission?" Charlie asks with an impassive face. There's no hint of a smirk or
a smile anywhere to be found. Right now, he's just a father, talking to the guy that wants to replace
him as the most important man in his daughter's life … and maybe trying to intimidate him a little,
too.

I try not to let him see it's working … just a little.

Shaking my head, I hold his weighted, intense gaze. "No, sir, I'm not. With all due respect, I don't
need, nor does Bella, your permission. She's a grown woman who can make her own decisions. I
am hoping to get your blessing though, because that's not just something I want, but I need, too."

Tears are streaming down Renée's face and her hands are clasped so tightly in her lap they're white.
Her smile warms me from the inside out, but we all know it's Charlie's word I'm waiting for.
Renée's was already a given, his not so much. Loving his daughter is one thing, making her mine,
legally as well in every other way, is something different altogether. Peyton might not be mine by
blood, but she's damn sure mine in my heart, and down to the depths of my soul and in every cell of
my body. The thought of someone replacing me as the man in her life is enough to make me want
to build a fortress complete with a moat full of crocodiles … big fucking ones, with really sharp
teeth … and keep her locked inside forever. So I get where Charlie's coming from, I really do.

He laughs when he sees the look of my face change from determination to sheer fright because he
hasn't said anything for so long. "Boy, you should see your face. If you want to be a part of this
family, you need to learn how to handle yourself better."

I let my mouth hang open for a moment then start to speak, though the words are stuck to my
suddenly sandpaper-like throat. I swallow once, then again. "Yeah?" I ask warily, because I could
swear he said part of this family, but I'm not sure.

"Of course, yes. Edward," he says, and his tone is immediately the same one he's used with me too
many times to count over the past few months. It's a mixture of love and patience, mixed in with a
little bit of smart ass because, well, he's Charlie and that's what he is. "I've known since the day
you came to this house and interrupted my baseball game that this conversation would happen. I
know you love my daughter, and I know you'd sooner die than let anything happen to my
granddaughter, so yes, you have my blessing. Welcome to the family, Edward."

And with that, it's done. I smile so big that my cheeks hurt and murmur, "Well, all right then," so
many times that both Renée and Charlie look at me, a little concerned that they've just added a
lunatic to their family.

"You can't possibly have been worried we'd say no, were you?" Renée asks, grinning from ear to
ear while she covers my face with kisses.

"I wasn't sure," I admit honestly. It feels like such a fucking relief to know that they approve. Deep
down I know it would have killed me if they'd somehow thought that dating Bella was fine, but to
let me be a part of their family was something else. "I know we're doing things a little backward
with me moving in and everything next weekend. I just didn't want to do it without you two
knowing that I plan to …" and I stutter because I'm not sure how to explain.

Charlie slaps me on the back, teasing with a waggle of his eyebrows. "Make an honest woman out
of her?" and then he blanches realizing that it's his daughter he's talking about … and what he's
implying.

Not that he's wrong though, because that is exactly why I came over today. It's not like I haven't
thought about it, but I just felt like I needed to talk to them before I moved in.

"I just wanted to reassure you both that I'm committed to Bella and to Peyton. I'm not looking to
just be a roommate. I want them both, forever."

Renée hugs me again. She starts crying again, and there are more kisses … again. I guess the
hugging and kissing's not so bad when I really think about it. It's kind of nice actually. "Thanks,
Renée," I tell her after she tells me how happy she is … again.

Charlie pulls her away and lays his arm across her shoulders, tucking her in nice and tight to his
side. He kisses the top of her head then he faces me. "If you and Bella are as happy as Née and I
have been, then there's nothing better I could ask for my daughter." His words mean so much - in
fact they mean everything.

I don't linger, wanting to get back to Bella … my soon to be fiancée, so I say goodbye and let
Renée hug and kiss me one more time. Charlie slaps me on the back again and I know, I know, that
soon, they'll be more than Charlie and Renée - they'll be Mom and Dad.

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Today's the day.

I can feel it. From the moment I woke up and kissed a still sleeping Bella goodbye I knew. Tonight
at the bonfire I'm going to ask Bella to be mine forever.

The other morning on the porch with Bella it was as if everything had finally fallen into place …
not that I felt like anything was out of order to begin with, but holding her, feeling her next to me, it
was all I could do to make myself get out of that chair. It wasn't even about wanting her in a sexual
way, though I always want Bella that way. In a bed, against a wall, standing in the shower, bent
over the couch, any way and every way and any time of the day. Always. But, in that moment, with
the sun just beginning to think about saying hello to a new day, it was as intimate a moment as any
I've ever had … granted any intimate moment I've had has been with her … but just then, it was as
if she became a part of me. Her breath was my breath, what she saw, I saw through her eyes. What she felt, my heart did, too. It wasn't like I had some grand epiphany or anything; angels didn't start singing Hallelujah, the heavens didn't part to let golden beams of sunlight shine down upon us - no, the moment passed as simply as the hands on a clock silently moving from one minute to the next. In one instant I was merely holding her in my arms, talking softly, and in the next, I'd completely absorbed her.

The feeling stayed with me all day … when I kissed her goodbye, working side by side with Emmett and Jasper, all the way through until I walked into The Breakers at the end of the day. The second I saw Bella, I knew what I'd been feeling was the fact that it was time. Today it was even worse. It was hard to keep it to myself, and I'm surprised that no one said anything about the lovesick smile I sported all day. As we walk toward the restaurant, I sense Charlie behind me.

"You okay there, son? You've looked like you've had your head in the clouds all day." He laughs lightly as he nudges me with his elbow.

I want to tell him, so fucking badly, but I can't. I promised Peyton when the time was right I'd tell her first and I won't break my word. The whole proposal, secret keeping thing has been hard enough on her, though I tried to be as vague and general as I could be. During a walk on the beach after dinner one night when Bella was with Renée in Ellsworth, Peyton asked me if I was ever going to marry Bella, to which I answered a very definite yes. I asked her if that was okay with her to which she looked at me like I'd had stupid pills for dinner. Then she asked me when. I didn't lie, especially because at the time I had no idea when the time would be right, and I told her that. She made me promise to tell her when I was going to do it and I did, knowing that when the time came, I wanted her to be a part of it. I certainly couldn't and didn't expect her to keep a secret of that magnitude. I might be clueless at times but even I know that's way outside the realm of possibility for an eight-year-old.

So, as I walk to the parking lot of the dock and fight the urge to race into The Breakers and propose right then and there, I come up with a different plan. The perfect plan.

I make a phone call then send a text to Bella, my fingers shaking so badly in anticipation I can barely get the words to come out right. I have to delete and start over twice, but finally manage to send it, telling her I want to take the bike out after the bonfire and I'll pick her up at home in a little bit.

I knock when I get to Carlisle and Esme's, but don't wait for anyone to answer. Esme's standing in the kitchen, where I expected her to be. Besides Riley and Marcus, there are two other guys staying in the boarding house, making Esme one very happy woman. She's got more mouths to feed and more boys to mother, though I have to say, it makes me a little gooey inside to know that I'm her favorite … especially because that means I'm ahead of Seth, too.

"Hey, Esme." I sneak a cookie from the plastic container before she can put the lid on it. "Mmmm, peanut butter. You made these just for me didn't you?" I ask, knowing she did.

"Nope," she retorts with a Cheshire cat grin. "I made them for Seth because he was here at breakfast this morning."

I sigh dramatically, placing my hand over my heart. "Ouch, that hurts, Esme. That really, really hurts." I give her a pout. She waves off my antics and then hands me a different container, this one with Monster cookies in it. "These are for you, you big baby."

"Damn, I love you," I say, looking at the cookies, and feel a little drool drip down the side of my mouth.
She giggles. "Are you talking to the cookies or to me, Edward?"

"Both." I shrug, being completely honest.

I hear a noise from deeper inside the house and it reminds me of why I've come. "Is Carlisle here?" I ask as I carefully put the cookies down on the island. She nods and I look at her. "I need him to open the safe for me," I say softly.

She gasps like I knew she would. Tears fill her eyes like I knew they would. Then she throws herself against my chest and kisses me, like I had no doubt she would.

"Tonight?" I nod and she squeaks, the sound so high-pitched I'm sure Brady's ears are standing straight up. "Go, he's in his office." She shoos me only to reach out and grab my wrist. "I'm so incredibly happy for you."

"She has to say yes first," I reply, grinning just a bit.

I turn and walk down the hall and toward Carlisle's office, knocking on the door frame when I get there. "Hey, I was wondering if I can get you to open the safe for me?" I ask him casually as I lean my shoulder against the door.

His eyebrows disappear into his hair. "Yeah?"

"Yep."

"Holy shit," he whispers, his jaw on his desk and his eyes about to fall out of his head.

I chuckle. "Tell me about it."

He stares at me, dumbfounded, for a few seconds before he spins his chair around. He turns the dial left, right, then left again and the safe opens with a click. I walk to his desk and fall down into the chair across from him and when he turns back around, he places the worn, burgundy box in the palm of my outstretched hand. I stare at the box and then slowly flip the lid open. The ring is as beautiful as it was when my grandmother wore it and when I looked at it the first time after it had been cleaned, engraved, and modified … just a bit.

I knew after I got Charlie and Renée's blessing that I wanted to give Bella my grandmother's ring; the only problem was figuring out how to get it. Mentioning it to Carlisle and Esme one night over dinner at The Breakers while Bella was too busy to join us fixed my problem in a hurry. Esme jumped on the chance to do something to help me so they made a trip to Boston for me. She arranged to have the things in the small storage unit shipped back to Corea to stay in their garage until I was ready to go through them. They were also able to meet with the attorney that handled my grandfather's estate - essentially a small amount of money left over after paying for the care he'd had right before he died as well as a few pieces of heirloom jewelry … including my grandmother's engagement ring.

The ring is elegant, classic, and perfect for Bella. A princess cut diamond set on a platinum band surrounded by two smaller diamonds. My grandfather had a thing for rubies so my grandmother chose those to flank the diamond, but my Bella deserves diamonds so I replaced the rubies, intending to save them to give to Peyton as earrings, a pendant, or maybe even on a charm for her bracelet when she gets older.

I close the box softly and stare at it for a few moments.

"She'll love it," Carlisle tells me.
I stand up answering, "I hope so."

We make our way back to the kitchen where Esme has everything just about ready to go. Snatching one more cookie for the road, I tell them, "I'm taking the bike. I want to take Bella for a ride after the bonfire."

"Ohhh, is that when you're going to ask her?" Esme asks, her eyes sparkling and a brilliant smile on her face.

I scoff and shrug my shoulders. "I have no idea. I'm totally winging this. I just feel it today, you know?" I shake my head at myself, suddenly needing to go home to Bella. "I'll see you two in a little bit."

Once I get home, I'm changed and ready to go in no time at all. I don't even have time to think about later or the box that sits deep in my pocket. Thankfully the ride to the beach is so short that Bella doesn't feel it, a miracle in and of itself because Bella's hands like to roam as we ride.

When we first arrive things are chaotic as I'm pulled one way by Peyton who swears she's been waiting for hours for me and Bella's pulled another by Ali and Rose. I watch Bella the whole time, my body buzzing, just waiting for the right moment. It's close, so close, I can feel it.

I'm excited.

I'm scared out of my mind.

I'm ready.

My fingers drum on my leg, and I jump when Bella gets my attention. I watch her walk away, and it honestly feels like half my heart is leaving. Peyton grabs my attention though before I can make a total ass out of myself and throw myself down on the sand in front of her and wrap my arms around her legs while I beg her not to leave me … never mind she's only going a hundred feet away.

Esme hands me a s'more a few minutes later and I look around for Bella. When I see her sitting on the exact same log as last year, I know the moment is here. Motioning Peyton forward I bend down and whisper, "Go stand with Pop and Nana, okay?"

"You're going to ask her now, aren't you?" She reaches up and holds my face. I have no idea how she knows, but I can't say I'm too surprised.

I nod and kiss her cheek, my heart literally trying to beat its way out of my chest. Standing up, I take a deep breath, telling myself that I can do this. With one hand I pat my pocket, worried that somehow the ring fell out and I let out a sigh of relief when I feel it. A glance down at the s'more in my hand and I laugh, suddenly not worried in the least about what's getting ready to happen.

The closer I get to her, the calmer I feel. I know, I know this is right. She wants it. I want it. And we're so, so ready. As I walk, there's this moment of such stark clarity where I see my entire future laid out in front of me. It's fucking amazing. Focusing, I see her sitting there. A few strands of her hair have come loose from her ponytail and as she looks out at the water she brushes them off her face. She's so damn beautiful … she's mine, and with one simple word, she will be forever.

I sit down next to her and touch her elbow with the tip of my finger. "Hey. Last time we were here like this you didn't get to have your dessert." I hand her the s'more, the ring facing her direction … and wait with my heart in throat. That whole not being nervous thing … completely out the window at this point as I watch her.
I slide off the log and land on my knees in front of her, laying my hands on her legs. Tears are streaming down her face and she whispers, "Oh my God, Edward," over and over again.

Her hands are shaking so badly, but her smile, oh God her smile is radiant. I feel myself smile, too, just from looking at her, and just from this moment right here. I'm pretty sure there are tears in my eyes but I'm not positive. I take the s'more from her trembling hand and pluck the ring out of it, wiping off the melted marshmallow. After I set the gooey dessert on her lap, I lay the ring on top so I can hold both of her hands.

Leaning forward, I kiss each hand and then look up into her sparkling eyes. "A little over a year ago, I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I had no place to call home, no family, no friends ... I didn't even have a dog to talk to. Somehow, through some miraculous twist of fate I wound up in this tiny, little, postage stamp size of a town armed with only the hope of a second chance." My voice wavers, but I can't take my eyes off hers. "I soon found myself in the presence of this little wisp of a thing with the prettiest eyes and the biggest heart and within about a minute, she had me for forever." I have to stop and take a breath because it won't matter how long it's been, even ten, twenty years from now ... I will never, ever, forget what I felt the first time I saw Peyton.

Bella's crying softly, hiccuping but trying to not fall apart. I know she's not sad, far from it, and the only thing I want is to see my ring on her finger. I pick it up, holding it between my thumb and index finger. "And then there was this woman." I grin, loving when she tries to huff at me but knowing she can't. "This gorgeous, feisty, and kind of moody woman who knocked me completely on my ass and I haven't looked back since." We laugh a little but then I take a deep breath and slide the ring down her finger. My heart stops and my entire body, from the tips of my toes to the ends of the unruly hair on my head, shivers from the sight of it.

Holy shit it looks so good on her finger.

"Bella," I say, the lump in my throat the size of a grapefruit. My voice shakes but I look her straight in the eyes. "My life didn't start until the moment I walked into the restaurant and I don't want to ever, ever be without you or Peyton. Marry me, please?"

The please is barely out of my mouth before she flings herself at me. She's everywhere, kisses all over my face, hands in my hair, legs around my waist. "Yes! Yes! Yes! A million times yes!"

"Thank God." I laugh or cry. I don't even know. All I know is my ring's on her finger and she said yes.

"Mom! Edward! We're getting married!" Peyton shouts and jumps on the both of us, nearly toppling us all over into the sand.

She wraps an arm around each of us and kisses me then Bella on the cheek. "Now, we can be a real family."

I look back over my shoulder and see them all standing there. Charlie with his arm around Renée. Carlisle standing behind Esme with his chin on her shoulder. Rose and Alice hugging with Emmett and Jasper on either side of them. Seth and Xavier holding hands, watching and smiling.

Then I look at Bella, my gorgeous, brave and loving girl ... my fiancée. "We already are."

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

I hope that this last chapter was all you hoped it would be! I had a lot of fun reliving some of the early moments and I hope you did, too.
This is not the end, there will be an Epilogue posted in 2 weeks, so I hope you will come back to Corea with me for one final time and see what everyone is up to. I think there will be some developments that will make y'all very, very happy.

What's next for me? I have lots of ideas swimming around, at last count … 5 … so please put me on author alert so you'll know when I get things solidified. I'll have some information for you when I post the Epilogue … and probably a few sneak peeks, too!

Thank you again, all of you, for loving this Edward, Bella, and Peyton as much as you have. I've so enjoyed sharing them with you …

See you in 2 weeks!

Erin~
Epilogue

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of Stephenie Meyer. No copyright infringement is intended. The storyline is property of les16.

I don't really have enough words to thank each and every person that has read, reviewed, rec'd, tweeted, posted, and every other thing out there. This story was so much fun to write, but the best thing of all is each of you. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for all the love and support you have shown me and this story right from the very beginning.

*sniff * Here we go … let's say goodbye, shall we?

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

Epilogue

EPOV

"Dad!"

"Your sister sounds rather upset. What do you say we go see what all the fuss is about?" I ask and grin when my son gives me a not-so-toothy, gurgling smile.

At just shy of a year old, there's no doubt that he's the most incredible thing to ever happen to me … outside of his mother and sister of course.

I stand up from the couch, where we've just had a short nap, and hold him with his back against my chest. His little legs kick as we walk, most likely because he thinks he's getting food but it's just as possible that he hears Peyton muttering to herself in the kitchen.

She's not quiet; never has been.

A slam of the refrigerator door makes Sam jump in my arms though like most things, he laughs at Peyton instead of being startled by the noise. A happier baby I'm not sure there has ever been in the history of … well, ever. Seriously, if my boy isn't smiling, I worry. From the moment he made his entrance into the world, eight days early and in the middle of the night, he's always had a smile on his face. Sometimes I wonder what in the world he sees or thinks about … then I wonder if it's just that he knows he's been loved and cherished from the time he was no bigger than a lima bean.

Peyton bangs a glass down on the counter with a huff before she pours some apple juice, mumbling the whole time. I can't help but chuckle when some of it sloshes over the side and splashes on the counter.

She scowls, looking from the spilled liquid to the glass, like it's the glass's fault it can't keep all the juice inside.

"Better stop that. Your face might stay that way … then what will Brody think." I singsong his name, though I'm pretty sure there's a frown on my face, too.

Damn kid. He's like a bad weed, always popping up even when I think we've gotten rid of him.
"Dad." She sighs, rolling her eyes when she turns around.

I will never, ever, as long as I live ever, tire of the way it sounds when she calls me dad, even if like now, she's trying to be annoyed with me. She looks so much like Bella at times it's down right scary, especially when she does that little eyebrow quirk where the middle lifts into a perfect peak. Kind of like she's doing now.

Sam gurgles at her, his little hands reaching for her, while his whole body wriggles in excitement. No one can resist his sweet sounds and his even sweeter face so the scowl on her face is instantly replaced with a smile of her own. Besides me and Bella, there's not another person alive that loves Sam more than his big sister … no matter what Jasper, Rose, or Carlisle think.

Peyton giggles, whatever it is that's bothering her melting away as she walks toward her brother. While Sam might be the happiest baby alive, Peyton's the best big sister in existence.

"Come here, you," she says holding her arms out. She takes him from me and I marvel, for the ten thousand three hundred and twenty-first time how in the hell I ever managed to get so damned lucky.

She walks with him, bouncing him on her hip, talking to him as only a doting big sister can before she takes a seat at the kitchen table. I clean up her mess, then set her juice down in front of her.

"You ready to tell me what has you in such a tizzy this fine Saturday morning? It's not even lunch time, Sprite, and already you're scowling and slamming things." She opens her mouth but I hold up my hand. "But," I say, narrowing my eyes at her, "if this is about a boy, save it until your mother gets home."

"Did you hear that, Sammy? Daddy says no boy talk. You remember that when it's time to talk about girls. Go to Uncle Emmett or Jasper; I'm sure they'll have lots to tell you."

Sam of course presses his little chubby finger into her lips and when she blows a raspberry against it, his happy laugh fills the entire kitchen.

"He most definitely will not be doing any talking of any kind with either of those two fools." I hand Sam one of his toys from the center of the table and watch as it goes immediately into his mouth. As does everything else he gets his little fingers on.

Peyton sets Sam down on the ground and he's off, teetering on wobbly legs as he takes a few steps and then falls onto his well-padded bottom. Of course he laughs at himself and then proceeds to scoot across the floor. He finds his favorite cupboard, the one that Bella filled just for him and knowing he'll keep himself busy for at least fifteen minutes, I give my daughter my full attention.

The word brings an instant smile to my face though it fades a tiny bit when I see the genuine distress on hers.

"Hey, sweetheart, what's upset you? Do you need to call Mom?" I reach out and take her hand, still so small when it's inside my own.

Our relationship has only strengthened over time, grown deeper, stronger, the older she's gotten. She's still the most incredible person, young, old, and everything in between that I've ever met and I'm blessed to know and love the best of the best, but there's still no one like my daughter, my Sprite.

She's not perfect, no matter how much I like to think she is. As any girl on the cusp of transitioning
from little girl status to a moody, hormonal pre-teen she has her moments. Times where she's
difficult just to be difficult and times where she feels like the entire world doesn't understand her,
most of all her mother and me. Her moments never last long, only enough to remind Bella and me
that she's becoming her own person and sometimes she needs to spread her wings a little and fly.

At barely more than eleven since her birthday was just last week, I can already feel those wings
stretching and it makes me want to snip them and keep her in a cage no matter how wrong that
feeling is.

She's mine as much as I'm hers, as much as I've been ever since that first day on the steps outside
of The Breakers. Her name is legally Masen now and a judge in Bangor has told me that I'm
legally her father, but she and I have known what we are to each other long before it became
official. I think she's been mine as long as she's been Bella's. I just didn't know it then.

I'll never be able to replace Evan as her father. I don't want to.

Who I am though is Dad and I'll take that any day of the week and twice on Sundays.

She takes a drink of her juice even though I know she's not thirsty; one of her tell-tale moves when
she's trying to figure out what she wants to say. I watch, knowing the nose scrunch is about to come
… and it does … followed by the twist of her mouth … always to the right and not the left. I fear
the day she realizes how much of an open book she is, but I'm comforted by the fact that she never
feels the need to hide from me.

"Come on, P, spill it."

I glance at Sam who has climbed into the cupboard, his little butt up in the air as he pulls literally
every plastic mixing bowl and container out and throws them onto the floor in a colored heap of
circles, squares, and rectangles. The kid, I swear, is going to be an architect or an engineer when he
grows up the way he gets into everything and then stacks them all up.

"You're going to think I'm being stupid," she mumbles, looking down at her juice.

"Hey," I say and then wait until she lifts her chin to look at me. "There's nothing you could ever
tell me that will make think you're stupid … unless of course you tell me that Tom Brady is cuter
than me."

That makes her smile like I hoped it would. She sighs then says, "Lucy and Brody are both mad at
me that I didn't go with Mom to Corea today and now they're telling me that I must not want to be
friends anymore since I stayed here so I could go to Emma's house last night instead of getting up
early and going with Mom. It's not my fault Emma's sleepover was last night and I wanted to go.
She's my friend, too, and all my other new friends were there and now what if I lose my old best
friends because I wanted to be here with my new best friends. I hate this." She huffs, sucking in a
huge lungful of air, because she has to have run out at least three sentences ago.

Now it's my turn to sigh and fidget. I love Peyton and seeing her get herself all worked up makes
my heart ache. Right now her cheeks are flushed, her pupils huge, and she keeps licking her lips
with her head tilted to the side as she waits with baited breath for me to impart pearls of wisdom.

Too bad for her I'm still as lost as I was the first time something like this happened. It was also the
first time I was "Dad" instead of "Edward". She'd come flying through the front door, it was a day
Bella was in Corea working at the restaurant, and she was in tears. After I'd aged about ten years
and half my hair had started to turn prematurely … very prematurely … gray, and made sure there
were no blood, broken bones, or missing limbs, I took a few deep breaths to calm my racing heart
and asked her what was wrong. The fact that she'd just hollered the word Dad playing on a continuous loop in the back of my mind notwithstanding, I listened as she told me some convoluted story of how normally at lunch she sat between Emma and Abby but that day they were acting weird, her word not mine, and they made her sit on the end … at the very end of the table and then spent the whole lunch period not talking to her. A tragedy of epic proportions apparently judging from the way her tears were falling and the way she kept sniffing and rubbing her nose on my shirt.

"Dad, why don't they like me anymore?" she'd asked me, her little chin quivering and the end of her nose as red as Rudolph's. She had her nose buried in my neck and as I wrapped my arms around her the only thing I could think about was the fact she'd just called me Dad. I'd kissed the side of her head, and tried to keep the tears that were burning the corner of my eyes from spilling over, a feat I didn't manage.

"Oh sweetheart," I'd murmured to her, my heart all at once so full and so hurt for my little girl. "I love you if that helps any." I'd comforted Peyton plenty before that day, but never after she'd called me Dad, which in my mind made the fact she was upset the worst thing in the history of the world.

I held her and talked to her, saying whatever came to mind. I'm sure most of it was sugarcoating and full of clichés but she didn't seem to mind. Once I ran out of things to say, she'd leaned back and kissed me squarely on the cheek saying, "You're kinda good at all this Dad stuff, you know that?" Then she told me she loved me and scurried off to her room, leaving me stunned, speechless, and feeling like a million bucks.

God, I remember how helpless I felt then and it's not any different than I feel right now.

She's a little older … but she's all Peyton.

She still has days I'm Edward. I'm okay with that. They're a lot less than they used to be. There are moments when she gets confused and times when she feels guilty for calling me Dad when she knows Evan is her father. I know she loves me and I am Edward to her, but I'm also Dad, and Dad is who she needs right now.

A kiss and a cuddle isn't always the solution, especially in the life of an eleven-year-old.

"Look, P, I know it's hard sometimes when you want to be in Corea, but you want to be here, too. It's one of the things that makes living in Ellsworth not so fun, but you understand why we have to be here, don't you?" I'm not sure why I'm asking, now, after we've been here for the whole school year.

Hell, when the time came to pack up Bella's house and leave it in the very capable hands of Xavier and Seth, Peyton was the first one to climb into the moving truck. Bella hated the thought of selling her house, the place she and Peyton made a home, where Peyton took her first steps, where they had their first Christmas, where the three of us became a family, and I wasn't too happy about it either. Surprisingly it was Seth who approached Bella with the idea of him and Xavier moving in.

Marcus, Riley and his new girlfriend, Kelly, are happy at the boarding house with Esme and Carlisle and Seth had felt like he was finally ready to move in with Xavier. Bella was over the moon about her two friends finally solidifying their commitment to each other and was thrilled to let them stay in her house.

Peyton was sad to leave the only home she'd ever known. She worried about being so far away from her Pop and Nana and her Uncle Emmett and of course she knew she was going to miss her friends, but like the amazing little girl she is, all she could see was a new adventure. It made
moving much easier on all of us.

The fact that we'd barely had her bed put together before there was a knock on the door and a gaggle of girls and boys were already asking her to go outside and play didn't hurt either. She seemed perfectly at ease right from the get go, even though her iPad and Bella's laptop got quite the workout from all the time she spent on it checking on Facebook and whatever else she did to keep up with her friends in Corea.

It was an adjustment for all of us, but one both Bella and I felt was necessary. We chose Ellsworth because it was still close enough for Bella to get to The Breakers to help at the restaurant and it was about an hour away from Bangor where I had my office set up. We knew we didn't want to go too far, but staying in Corea just really wasn't an option once we decided I wasn't going to work for Charlie anymore.

Back in Corea, most nights Bella and I spent at home alone with Peyton. She worked with the girls all day, I worked with the guys and by the end of the day, all we wanted to do was be alone. Living in Ellsworth kept us close enough to Corea to spend Sundays at Charlie and Renée's and for the steady stream of visitors we seemed to have even living an hour away.

I was most surprised at Bella's excitement about leaving. I thought she'd have second thoughts mostly because I was pretty sure Bella had always thought that she'd never leave Corea. Granted Ellsworth wasn't that big of a switch from Corea but the fact that she couldn't run to Rose's house for a quick chat or Xavier couldn't drop in for breakfast every other morning was a little hard for her to get used to, but she has.

But, there were times, like right now, where living in Ellsworth was probably not high up on Peyton's list of most favorite things.

Peyton lets loose a long-suffering sigh, a full body one where her shoulders lift all the way to her ears and it looks she grows six inches she stretches so much. "Yeah, it just sucks sometimes."

I snort and then try to cover it up with a cough. I have to hide my smile behind my hand because Bella will have my ass if she hears Peyton use that word. "Peyton," I try to say sternly, though it comes out more like a chuckle.

She giggles because she knows as well as I do that I let her get away with way more than Bella does … when it comes to most things anyway. Anything having to do with boys though … um, yeah, that's all Bella's territory.

"What time is Mom going to be home?" I know she's totally trying to distract me, and I let her because sometimes things really do just suck and it's okay to say so … though maybe she shouldn't use that word.

I let her change the subject but not before I stand up and kiss the top of her head. "You know by tomorrow Brody and Lucy will be posting all over your wall or whatever it is you do on the Facebook."

She swats at me. "Facebook, Dad, it's just Facebook." She pats Sam on the head who gives her a big gummy smile and then she heads up to her room.

Crisis averted apparently … and I didn't have to do much or maim any young member of the male population … in my head only of course.

Sam stands up on wobbly legs and shuffles toward me, grabbing onto my leg. I swing him up into
my arms and he lays his head down on my shoulder. The fifteen minute cat nap we had on the couch not cutting it at all apparently. I pat his back as I walk toward his room.

"Okay, little man, time for a nap for you." I kiss the top of his head, his baby soft hair tickling my nose. His bright green eyes widen as he smiles then they slowly close once I lay him down in his crib. He curls up into a little ball, his favorite position, and I rub a few circles on his back and then pat his bottom before walking out of the room. The pull to sit in the rocking chair and just watch him as he sleeps is strong, so strong, but I have a few files to go over before Bella gets home from Corea.

I glance at him one more time before I partially close the door and head toward the living room. I could work in my office but since I'm the only one down here, I'd rather be comfortable on the couch.

My office, I think with a snort and a shake of my head, whoever would have thought?

Being a full-fledged attorney is a hell of a lot different from working on a lobster boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, that's for damn sure. Though to be honest, I'm not sure which work is harder. Both are equally difficult, but different, and both are rewarding, but again, just different. I miss the water. I wasn't sure I would, but I do. I miss the smell, the sound, and I miss working with the guys, Charlie especially.

After I asked Bella to marry me, which is still one of the best nights of my life, we settled into somewhat of a routine. As happy as I was that she said yes, it wasn't like we were in this huge hurry to get married. We took some time to just be … be together, and be a family with Peyton and Brady.

The wedding planning was low key and relaxed, thanks to Bella's insistence that it be such. A few trips to New York City to find dresses for her and the rest of the girls and a trip to Bar Harbor for me and the guys to get fitted for tuxes and that was all she wrote. Invitations went out to the entire town, and to a few others like my P.O., Chet, who was no Wayne, but a nice guy just the same, Bud, and to Bella's grandparents, too. We got married at St. Joseph's Catholic church on a Saturday night, surrounded by candlelight. When she walked down the aisle, proudly on Charlie's arm, and holding Peyton's hand with her other hand, I swear there had never been a moment where I had felt literally like I could fly. Carlisle chuckled beside me, his hand on my shoulder to keep me from sprinting down the aisle to carry both my girls to the altar.

Bella was gorgeous. I always think so, but that night, in that dress, she was beyond description. Her long hair framed her perfect face in soft mahogany waves that positively shimmered in the candlelight, falling over her bare shoulders and down her back. Her diamond engagement ring sparkled, almost as bright as her eyes and certainly as bright as Peyton's. And her eyes, holy hell I can still recall exactly how her eyes looked when Charlie placed her hand in mine, with a smile on his face and a twitch of his mustache when he told me to always take care of his baby. Endless, warm and so full of love and happiness I forgot to breathe.

The ceremony was traditional, complete with a Mass and readings done by Alice, Xavier, and Rose. Our hands never let go of the other's, even when we had to kneel. Our vows were simple but true. We thought about writing our own, but felt like expressing our love for each other was something to share with only each other … not to mention I didn't think there was any way I'd be able to get through saying them in front of so many people without passing out.

When Father McNamara pronounced us husband, wife, and Peyton, the entire church broke out into applause, no one clapping louder than Emmett. The reception that followed at the American Legion Hall was typical for such a small town. Food of all different kinds brought by every person
in attendance lined long metal tables covered with white table cloths. There was a DJ we'd hired from Bangor and the wedding cake Bella picked out from her favorite bakery in Ellsworth. It was simple but it was perfect for us. We danced and ate. We listened to Seth, Emmett and Bella's grandfather, Walter, make toasts that made everyone laugh until there were tears running down our faces and then listened as Xavier, Rose, and Charlie made us cry with words spoken from the heart. During the Bride/Father and Groom/Mother dance, I danced with Esme and tried to keep from breaking completely down. When Renée whispered in my ear as we danced and watched Charlie spin Bella around the dance floor, I lost it when she kissed me and told me that from that day forward she and Charlie were now Mom and Dad. I danced with Peyton on my feet, her looking every bit the sprite I believe her to be. I danced with Bella pressed close while she tempted me with way too much skin.

The whole night was perfect, even if the sight of Seth fighting Aggie for Bella's bouquet is something I won't ever forget.

We spent a week at Bear Mountain Inn for our honeymoon, only this time I paid. Charlie gave me a week off, but neither one of us wanted to go very far … it's not like we left our room much anyway. Staying in our room gave us plenty of time to talk … in between making love to the point of exhaustion. The question of me adopting Peyton was one of the three things we spent the most time discussing. The next one being when to have a baby … as soon as possible was my two cents … and the other was whether or not to keep working for Charlie.

Adopting Peyton was a no-brainer. As far as I was concerned she was already mine; she'd been mine from the very first moment I saw her. We'd already made preliminary inquiries anyway, as soon as we'd gotten engaged. I needed to have a valid driver's license in Maine, which I already had. Bella and I needed to have a permanent residence for at least six months, which we did. Bella would need to give her consent, which she obviously was going to do. I worried there might be at least a tiny bit of hesitation on her part, but there wasn't any. She'd said goodbye to Evan a long time ago, even though she carried the guilt of his death around for a really long time. We decided to present Peyton with the papers at Christmas and then as a family, we'd go file the papers with the court after the first of the year. The whole process was liable to take about six months to finalize, but I knew, as did Bella, that it was all window dressing in the first place. Peyton was mine - there wasn't any other way around it.

The question of whether or not to keep working for Charlie was a bit harder to answer. I loved my job. I loved the water and the camaraderie I had with Emmett, Jasper, and especially Charlie. I loved the smell of the sea water, the lurch and tilt of the boat as it forged through the waves, the pull and ache of my muscles at the end of a productive day. Of course there were days I'd dreaded getting out of bed, days where getting back to the docks couldn't come soon enough. Days when Emmett drove me crazy with his mood swings, days when nothing I did was good enough for Charlie, days when Jasper's gaze never left me as he nit picked over every single thing I did. Days when not even Bella's fingers could ease the aches and pains that were bone deep. There were times when I'd miss something of Peyton's, a program at school, the Spelling Bee, or parent/teacher conferences, and I'd feel like it was a moment I'd never get back. It was different for Charlie and Emmett, even Jasper. Charlie and Emmett were made to be on the water and Jasper had made it his second home, and while I loved it, I didn't love it enough to give up being with Bella and Peyton. My accident and then the mess with Aleksei had taught me and Bella that life could change in the blink of an eye. I would always be grateful to Charlie for giving me a job, a chance at a new life, but I knew once I went back after my accident it would only be a matter of time until I needed to do something else.

When Bella told me she was pregnant, after a few false alarms, I knew it was time. The thought of anything happening to me and leaving Bella alone with Peyton and our baby freaked me out so
badly I had more sleepless nights than I could count. We told everyone she was pregnant in
October, once she got past the first eight weeks. The first words out of Charlie's mouth weren't
'congratulations, Edward', they were "I'm going to miss you on the boat, son." From there, it only
seemed logical to use the knowledge I'd gained in prison and sit for the Bar Exam in Maine. It was
only offered twice a year so January was my first opportunity to take it, and once I found out I'd
passed, things moved quick from there. I found a job with a small firm in Bangor, we decided to
move to Ellsworth, we found a house and we moved … after Sam was born of course. There was
no way I was taking Bella away from her family during that time.

Once he was born and we got settled into our new house, things were so perfect I often found
myself marveling if it was all real. The life I have, the happiness and love and sense of peace is so
opposite what my life was like before Corea that it's hard sometimes to reconcile being in prison
for seven long years to being happily married to the love of my life and having the two most
amazing kids in the world.

I sigh, grabbing a file off the coffee table and make some notes on the case I have to work on next
week, thinking once again that life sure does have the strangest way of working out like you least
expect it.

"Who's that?" I ask Sam with wide eyes when I hear the front door open a few hours later. We're
sitting in the kitchen, and I'm trying, in vain from all appearances, to get him to eat his dinner.
"You better eat this, buddy, or else Mommy's going to think I can't handle being home with you by
myself."

He giggles and starts bouncing in his highchair. Like his daddy, just knowing Bella's in the general
vicinity is enough to get our hearts racing and put a smile on our faces.

"There are my boys," she says cheerily once she walks in the kitchen, her voice happy and light.

God, but I love her.

"Did you have a good day with Daddy?" she coos at Sam, nuzzling his neck amidst his squeals and
wiggles. She artfully dodges the mashed up spaghetti he tries to feed her like only a mom can do.
She kisses the top of his head once more, then mine, on her way to the stove where the spaghetti
sauce still simmers.

I can't cook much, but even I can manage spaghetti, garlic bread, and salad. She pours us each a
glass of wine from the bottle I left on the counter to breathe. Once she sets them on the table in
front of us, my arms are around her waist and my hands are planted firmly on her still very tight,
and very fine ass.

"Kiss me. I haven't seen you all day and I haven't had a kiss in hours and hours." I smirk when I tip
my head back to look at her.

"Well, we can't have that now, can we?" She leans down, her eyes so sparkly and the flecks of gold
in the deep brown more pronounced than normal.

A good sign for me because number one that means she's happy and number two that means sexy,
fun times for us both once Sam goes to bed.

Fuck yes.

I open my mouth to say just that, but before I can say anything, her mouth is on mine. Warm and
soft, tasting fruity like the wine, and so fucking perfect. Her tongue moves slowly in and out of my mouth and it's about all I can do not to pull her onto my lap and show her just how good she tastes and feels. My fingers press into her ass and her hands find their way into my hair. My top lip is in between both of hers and when I feel her teeth bite down just hard enough to sting, I groan.

There's never anything wrong with a little pain, especially not when my tongue is inside her mouth.

Sam slaps the tray of his highchair causing us both to chuckle. The vibration pretty much shoots straight to my dick, a fact of which Bella only acknowledges with a quirk of an eyebrow and a saucy shake of her ass as she turns from me to our son.

I stand up and very much enjoy the sharp intake of her breath when I press my hips against hers. I lean forward and place an open-mouthed kiss right on the spot that never fails to make her tilt her head to the side or causes her teeth to bite on her bottom lip. "I can't wait to have you all to myself later. I hope you didn't work too hard today," I whisper.

"You're so going to pay for that later," she says after she takes a deep breath. I love the way I can get her worked up with just a kiss and by rubbing myself against her.

"Bring it, baby," I taunt and take a huge drink of my wine.

I sit back in my chair and watch her as she talks to Sam and tells him all about the goings on in Corea. And, like his daddy, he soaks up every word and every smile as if they were laced with magical powers or iced in chocolate.

I try to subtly adjust myself because I'm still hard from kissing her moments ago, a move she catches out of the corner of her eye, but thankfully lets go with only a snort. I really can't fucking wait until later.

Not gonna lie, those first few months after he was born are still pretty much a blur, too many sleepless nights that have run together to remember much about that time. Of course there are as many of those nights that are my own fault rather than Sam not sleeping through the night.

I love Peyton as much as if she was my own. When she hurts, I hurt, when she's happy, I feel it deep inside my soul and all the way down to the tips of my toes, but after watching Sam come into this world, all wrinkly and pink and perfect, there were nights, there still are, when I'm still so awed by the fact that he's here, that he's mine, that all I can do is stare at him in wonder. Every little grunt and squeak, every wrinkle in his forehead while he sleeps, every smile that lights up his face is a moment, just a breath of time that will never come again and I find myself not wanting to miss any of them, no matter how small.

When Bella told me she was pregnant, I didn't know there were any better words in the English language besides I and love and you, but I was wrong. Marrying Bella was the best thing I'd ever done, up until the words "We're going to have a baby" rolled off her tongue and sent me skyrocketing to the moon and back.

"So how is Rose feeling?" I ask when Sam's gurgling sounds bring me back to the present.

Bella takes Sam out of his highchair and sets him loose. Brady has joined the party and is sniffing around the floor hoping that he can find a few pieces of food dropped by his second favorite human.

Sam and Brady have a conversation, one that only the two of them understand, and she turns around to face me, smiling like the expectant aunt she is.
"She's huge!" I sputter, shocked at her very true but very blunt statement, choking on a sip of my third, or maybe it's my fourth glass of wine. "And moody, God is she ever moody. Was I ever that way?" she asks and I bite my tongue. I might be just shy of feeling nice and relaxed, but even I'm not stupid enough to answer that question honestly. Not if I want sexy, fun time later … and I really want sexy, fun time later.

To say that the family is excited about the impending arrival of Rose's baby is like asking Charlie if opening day of baseball season is his favorite day of the year. Emmett is so beside himself, he's bought two of everything he can find in blue and pink. Rose refuses to find out the sex of the baby, a fact that is driving everyone but her absolutely insane, but she just sits there, with a raised eyebrow and her hair tossed over her shoulder enjoying everyone's anxiousness. She's healthy and happy, about to pop any day now, and is quite enjoying being the center of attention … at least according to Alice and Emmett.

I snort and Bella smirks, her eyes shining with the laugh she wants to let free, but she just huffs then playfully scowls at me over her own glass of wine. She knows perfectly well there were days I thought I'd have to send her to her mother's when she was pregnant her mood swings were so bad. She put Mariah Carey to shame on more than one occasion, but I wouldn't trade one single minute of the time she was pregnant. She knocked me on my ass the first time I saw her. The next time I saw her when I ran after her out of The Breakers I thought I'd never seen anyone hotter. The first time I saw her completely naked, I wanted to cry she was so perfect. Waking next to her, deliciously sleep rumpled and warm, I wanted to take a picture and sleep with it beneath my pillow for the rest of all time. Dressed in white, there had never been anyone that could compare, but the first time I saw the tiniest of baby bumps, I'd come undone. To know that my baby, our baby, was growing inside of her altered me in such a way that I could honestly feel it as it happened.

The first doctor appointment, when Sam's heartbeat thrummed in the air, I felt it inside of me. When we got the first sonogram pictures, I didn't sleep all night, I just held them in my hand and stared at them, wondering what our baby would look like, who it would take after … if there would be anything to remind me of grandparents – my grandfather's crooked smile or the little bump my grandmother had on her nose. I wondered if he or she would have Bella's eyes or Peyton's heart, or maybe even my unruly hair.

Waiting for him to be born seemed to take forever, but then it was over in the blink of an eye and we were welcoming Samuel Thomas Masen into the world and into our wonderful, crazy lives.

The sun has set. The kitchen, my favorite room in the house, is cozy and bathed in the soft light of dusk. The windows that form a wall between inside and the world beyond reflect back and in them I see my family, complete now that Peyton has come downstairs and has her arm laid across Bella's shoulders.

I am, without a doubt, the luckiest damn bastard on the planet.

I listen with a slight smile on my face as Peyton recounts her turmoil from earlier and am quite pleased with myself when Bella's advice matches my own. It gives me faith that I might just know a thing or two about this dad business.

"Babe, you'll never guess what Mom told me today!" Bella exclaims, startling Sam and making him laugh.

I try not to look smug. The smile on her face is about to go bye-bye … I only hope my sexy, fun times don't as well because I already know what she's about to say. I've known for a while, but I was sworn to secrecy. Keeping a secret from Bella is damned near impossible, but after being threatened in the most horrible of ways, I made sure to keep my mouth shut.
She narrows her eyes at me when I shift in my chair and swallow the rest of my wine in one big gulp. "You already know," she snips and levels me with a withering stare.

Since she already knows that I know I nod and then sheepishly say, "I'm sorry, Bella. Your dad made me promise not to tell you. It was something he wanted to tell you himself. Please don't be mad at me." She snaps her head in Sam's direction, her frown changing to a smile as he squeals when Brady presses his nose against his cheek. I reach out and hook my pinky with hers and tug until she looks at me, all traces of hurt feelings gone, thank goodness.

"What do you think?"

"I'm so happy for him and Mom, and really for Emmett, too. I know Em's wanted to be in charge of the boat for a long time and now he's going to get his chance."

I nod, agreeing completely and silently I give myself a pat on the back. I had a long talk with Charlie when we spent last Sunday at his house for a barbeque. He asked me what I thought about him retiring, or semi-retiring as he qualified, and after picking my jaw up from the ground, I told him that Emmett was more than capable of running things and it was time for him to enjoy his life and his wife. He glared at me and I'll admit, my dick shivered as did my balls under his intense stare until his mustache twitched and he laughed, slapping me on the back. The fact that he knocked the breath clean out of me was definitely not an accident, but I knew he wasn't pissed at me.

"Emmett will be a great captain and now with Marcus and Riley working on the boat with them, I think Charlie can relax." I take another sip of my wine and sigh, staring at Bella. "You're so beautiful," I whisper.

She gasps and I can't help but smile at her when she stares at me. "What? It's true," I say and then stand up, taking our glasses to the sink. I can feel her eyes on my back as I rinse them out and then set them on the counter to dry. I guess thinking about things today has me feeling kind of sentimental, needy … I want my wife.

We do the things we do every night, eat in between playing with Sam and talking to Peyton, then it's bath time for Sam and reading time for Peyton. Like a well-oiled machine the night passes by full of smiles and kisses to the tips of noses, and tickles to tummies that cause the sweetest giggles … unless Bella and Peyton decide like they frequently do that it's my turn to be attacked by the tickle monster. Soon, way sooner than I'll ever be ready for it, Peyton will be too old for cuddles while we read about wizards and magic and golden snitches so I make sure to enjoy every moment with her now.

"Okay, Sprite, your eyelids are drooping and we've got a big day tomorrow," I say softly, closing the book and setting it on the nightstand.

Oh yes, tomorrow. Alice and Jasper are coming to Ellsworth to spend the day with us and bringing their new baby … though it has four legs and not two. Jasper had sweet talked Alice into getting him a puppy shortly after Bella and I had gotten engaged. He was nuts about the thing, like totally head over heels and over his head in love with his baby girl. Jasper loved Brady, almost as much as Peyton did, but he wanted a dog a bit bigger. He talked to Lisa who had a friend in Bangor that bred Alaskan Malamutes and her dog had just had puppies. Peyton and I … and Brady … went with Jasper and Alice one Sunday to look at the puppies and when Jasper saw them he was a goner. Within five minutes he was the proud owner of a gorgeous black and white, bright blue-eyed puppy named Sadie. Up until a few weeks ago, I never thought Jasper would want any other dog besides Sadie, but when Lisa called and informed him that someone had given her a two-month-old Siberian Husky they could no longer take care of, and she couldn't either, Jasper was the first
person she thought to call. It took him even less time to fall in love with Cooper than it did with Sadie. So now, Jasper and Alice were a family of four … but I know it won't be long until the ratio of humans to dogs is three to two. Alice is ready and there is no doubt that Jasper has had plenty of practice with the puppies … and Sam to know he is, too.

About damn time, if you ask me.

I lean down and kiss Peyton on the forehead. "Night, sweetheart. Love you," I whisper and kiss the tip of her nose.

"Love you, Dad. Night," she answers back sleepily, and snuggles down into her pillows. By the time I turn off her light and shut the door, her soft, even breaths fill the room.

The shower is running when I get to our room and I smile. Bella in the shower means lots of warm citrusy-smelling skin for me to enjoy when she comes to bed … and I definitely plan on doing just that. I change my clothes, donning a pair of loose sleep pants and nothing else; it's not like I'll need my clothes for long anyway. I head for the bathroom, needing to brush my teeth, though a sneak peek at a wet, naked Bella is a treat I won't mind at all.

I wipe some of the fog off the mirror - if I'm gonna look, I damn well want to see as much as I can. God bless the inventor of glass shower doors is all I'm saying. She's so gorgeous and if you didn't know she was the mother of two kids, I swear you'd never be able to tell. Her stomach is nearly as flat as it was pre-Sam and though her hips are slightly wider than before, her ass still looks fucking spectacular, especially in a pair of tiny, white shorts. Her breasts are still perfect, and still fit in my hands like they were made specifically just for me.

"You plan on standing there all night?" she asks as she tips her hair back. I watch the white bubbles cascade down through the hair that looks almost black from the water, feeling my dick harden in my pants.

"No. I plan on you hurrying the hell up and coming to bed. I want you naked and beneath me as soon as fucking possible," I tell her and shamelessly palm my growing, hardening erection.

Her eyes widen and even through the blurry glass I can see her breath quicken.

"I'll be waiting," I tell her, holding her gaze for a few moments before I smirk and then turn to leave.

She takes her time … or it seems that way. I can feel myself drifting off to sleep, muscles totally relaxed and my eyes are closed. I hear her move around in the bathroom, hear the water run while she brushes her teeth. I melt even more against the headboard, sagging into the pillows behind me. I smell her before I hear her. I slowly open my eyes to find her crawling across the bed toward me, eyes already dark and with her bottom lip already between her teeth.

Immediately my arms reach for her and I drag her to me. "That took fucking forever," my words muffled against the column of her neck where my lips and tongue are already making up for lost time. "Christ, you taste good."

She hums and her fingers slide into my hair, pulling me closer. As if I mind that. I roll us so that she's beneath me like I wanted, though she's still wearing far too many clothes and yes, barely there panties and a tank top so thin I can see each little pebble of skin that surrounds her already peaked nipples count as too many clothes.

I make quick work of removing both, though I do take time to linger on my favorite spots. The spot
just inside her hip bone where her skin is so soft, so thin that just the barest pressure from my teeth makes her squirm and whimper. I always love that. I move from there, up, over her stomach, nibbling, licking higher, higher until I swirl my tongue around first one nipple then the other. With my mouth covering one, my fingers tug and roll the other.

"God I love the way you feel under me," I whisper against the side of her breast, flattening my tongue to paint her skin.

She arches her back and I nudge her knees wider with my own settling right where I want to be. "Edward, ah … mmmm." She moans when I rub my straining cock against her already wet pussy. "Get up here; come kiss me," she urges pulling on my arms.

Never, ever one to deny my wife anything, especially when it's me, I comply. I let my fingers ghost over her body, starting with her calf, then up along her thigh. I make sure to spread my fingers wide so that my thumb touches, but just barely, her very sensitive clit. I want to leave my thumb where it is because there's little I love more than to feel her slick and hot for me … because of me.

"Edward." She moans again. She lets her legs fall open more and her hands are everywhere. My arms, over my shoulders, in the center of my back, on my ass, grasping, pulling to get me where she wants me.

As much as I want to give her what she wants, and Jesus do I ever, I haven't seen her all day, or had my hands on her so I take my time, slithering up her body achingly, deliciously slow … so, so slow. The tips of my fingers trail up her side, over her rib cage. Her skin is still warm and smells like fucking heaven but I can feel the goosebumps that my gentle touch cause to break out everywhere. Her nipples are hard against my chest and I purposely hover above her just far enough so that I'm barely touching her, but it's enough to make her bite her lip and for her eyes to burn hot and bright. I fucking love that, making her so hot, driving her crazy until with just the slightest of touches, or licks, or thrusts she's completely undone.

"You said something about wanting me to kiss you. You still want that?" I smirk at her and then lean down to brush my lips across her collarbone and then up the side of her neck. I start on the right side of her body because I have a specific destination in mind for my mouth. My tongue curls around her earlobe and then goes higher to one of my most favorite spots. I rub the pretty amethyst stud that now adorns Bella's ear. Not that the little silver ball stopped driving me insane or anything, but I wanted something different, unique for her. I found a set of earrings in the most pure, perfect color of purple I could ever imagine and when I saw them, I knew I had to have them. "Still love the way it feels when I wrap my tongue around this," I rasp.

My hips rock against her, and I smile against her ear when I feel her hands then her feet pushing my pants down my legs. I lift just enough so that I can shimmy them down and kick them off. Now that we're both naked I kiss my way back down and over so I can give my girl what she so sweetly asked for.

"Hi." I smile when my mouth is just above hers, a hair's breadth separating our lips.

She rolls her beautiful brown eyes at me and then quirks that one eyebrow in the way that will never, ever get old. "Are you going to kiss me now? And here I thought you were so anxious to have me naked and beneath you," she teases.

"Oh, believe me, baby, you are exactly where I want you." I frame her head with my hands, letting my fingers slide between the silky strands of her hair. My thumbs brush across the apples of her cheeks and as much as I need to be inside of her, I need to be with her, like this, even more.
I lower my mouth over hers, done with the teasing and ready to get to the loving. Soft, slow, I press my tongue in her mouth, savoring the spicy cinnamon of her toothpaste and the simple taste of just her. Our tongues twist and dip. My hips roll forward, the tip of my cock grazing her entrance. Her hands wrap around and run up and down my back, her knees press against my side.

"Oh … yeah." She moans when I rub against her clit, sliding smooth as silk through the slick wet of her folds.

"Yeah?" I ask then cover her mouth with mine again. My tongue plunges, once, twice, a third time, my cock finding its way home, mimicking my tongue. Effortlessly, we find the perfect rhythm that only comes from being so in tune with each other.

She tips her head backward, stretching her neck in the most tantalizing of ways. I can't ever resist that much skin offered to me and I don't this time, either. Sucking, biting, licking, then kissing, I keep my mouth attached to her neck until she's a panting mess underneath me.

"Faster?"

She nods, heels digging into my ass, fingernails, scraping down my back.

I shift my hips just so, moving my knees forward to give me the leverage I need. "Harder?" I ask as I thrust deep inside of her.

"God, oh, yes!" Her eyes are dark brown pools of love and want and as I move even faster, the pace steady and my strokes long, I feel myself get even harder inside of her.

I'm close, and I know she is, too. "You almost there?"

The muscles deep inside of her clench tightly and I chuckle. "Good girl." I lean down, taking a nipple into my mouth and suck on it. I feel her muscles tense again, and I know with just the right prompt, I can make her fall apart. My hand dips between her legs and I circle her clit with my index finger. "Better?" I ask, probably a rhetorical question, but I ask anyway.

"So, so good," she pants.

"Come on, Bella, let go. You're right there. I can feel it." I need her to come so badly. I want it, the way she looks at me until she can't keep her eyes open any longer, the way her breath catches when I touch that one place deep inside of her … the way her fingers wrap around my biceps and squeeze.

I kiss her once more, knowing her body as well as my own, and that she's seconds from exploding. With one last long, smooth thrust inside of her I still and feel her walls clench and flutter around me as she comes, chanting, "Yes … oh yes, yes!"

I follow right behind in a powerful burst, hard enough to make me see stars behind my eyelids.

"You really did miss me today." Bella giggles once we've both caught our breath.

I kiss her forehead and roll off her and reach for the tissues on the nightstand. I clean myself up the best I can and then turn my head to look at her. "You have no idea how much I miss you when you're not here. Sam and I had fun though, and after Peyton calmed down I got a lot of work done."

She goes into the bathroom and does her own cleaning up and then slips beneath the covers and cuddles next to me and lays her head on my chest. "I missed you, too. I love seeing everyone, but I'd rather be here with you guys."
Her hand runs back and forth over my chest for a bit until it slows as does her breathing. "I love you," she mumbles, almost dead to the world in only a few minutes.

I'm just about to fall asleep when I hear Sam whine from his room. "Love you," I whisper against the side of Bella's head and slip out of bed. I pull my pants on and go to my boy. When I walk in his room, he's laying on his back, looking up just waiting to see which one of his parents is going to come keep him company until he decides to go back to sleep.

"What's the matter, little man, bad dream?" I ask softly as I scoop him up and hold him close.

Yes, I'm totally a sucker for my son, and I'm not too proud to admit it either. We walk for a few minutes in the dark, the silvery white glow of the moon casting long shadows along the floor and up the walls. I kiss the side of his head over and over until I feel him snuggle into his favorite spot right beneath my chin. Not wanting to let him go, I sit down in the rocking chair in the corner.

"One of these days, Sam, I might just leave you in your bed," I whisper and he grunts, pulling his knees up and he lifts his head. He looks at me, all sleepy and sweet and baby boy. "Yeah, yeah, I know, it'll never happen." He yawns and as much as I know I should put him back in bed, I don't. We rock, there's not one sound save for his muffled breath against my chest and the soft creak of the chair as I move up and down.

I look around his room and my gaze stops on the newest picture on his wall. It's of the four of us from Peyton's birthday party a little more than a week ago. We're sitting on the beach, on 'our' log. I'm holding Sam on my lap, Bella's hand is on his back and Peyton is standing behind us with her arms wrapped around each of our shoulders and her cheek pressed up against Bella's. We look happy, like the picture perfect family … which we really are. Right next to that picture is one of the whole family taken at Easter, including all the dogs and even Aggie, Riley, Marcus, and Kelly.

I think about family, the one I had and the one I have, half of which aren't even connected to each other at all except by want and love. I miss my parents, I'll never forget nor stop loving my grandparents, but the people in my life now, the ones that embraced me with open arms and gave me a second chance to be the person, the man I was always meant to be are all the family I'll ever need.

My eyes sweep back to the right and land on the picture Renée took at the hospital right after Sam was born of the four of us - Peyton and me wrapped around Bella and Sam. My heart swells, filling my chest with everything I felt that day. Awe, pride, fear, happiness, love … my God so much love. I still can't believe it didn't just lift up the hospital room and carry us all away.

There next to Sam's bed is my very favorite picture of me and Peyton. It's the same one that graces every room in the house, Charlie and Renée's house as well as everyone else's, Bella's house in Corea and is even behind the register at The Breakers. It was taken on the day we finalized Peyton's adoption in Bangor and looking at it even years later still brings tears to my eyes and lump in my throat the size of a grapefruit.

We were walking down the steps in front of the courthouse and she was behind me, holding my hand. She pulled me to a stop and I was a few steps below her. The most radiant smile I've ever seen on her spread across her face and she let out the most adorable, though high-pitched squeal of absolute and complete joy before she jumped from the step and into my arms. The finalized papers were still clutched in her hand and I spun her around and around, both of us laughing and looking like there was no one else in the world except for the two of us. Bella had snapped the picture just as Peyton leaned forward and kissed me with puckered lips. The love we have for each other radiates from the picture and not once have I ever been able to look at it without smiling or without remembering how happy we were that day.
Bella's the love of my life, my wife, best friend, partner and the best thing that has ever happened to me. She's my everything, every hope and dream I've ever had, even the ones I had when I was too scared to fall asleep at night. Sam's my light. He's the little piece of me, of my Masen family that will carry on for at least another generation.

And then there's Peyton … my heart. I love Bella and Sam, madly, passionately, fiercely … but there's a piece of my heart that will always and only be hers. My daughter, my Sprite. Whoever would have thought that way back when, standing on those steps of The Breakers, that little wisp of a thing would be the first person to love me for me and change me irrevocably just from a tug on a hand and a declaration that we'd be best friends.

Sam coughs in his sleep, and my arms wrap protectively around him. "You are the luckiest little one in the whole wide world, Sam, did you know that? You have the best mommy and big sister there could ever be and I hope one day you'll say I'm the best daddy, too," I whisper.

"You already are," Bella's sleepy, soft voice says from the doorway. She holds her hand out. "Come on, Daddy, let him sleep and come back to bed. I miss my husband."

I don't need to be asked twice.

~~The End~~

~~~~OOO~~~~OOO~~~~

And of course they all lived happily ever after!

That's it, folks, the end, fini, and all that jazz. There is one outtake that I'm posting next Sunday, one from Peyton's POV from earlier on in the story. If you received the FGB compilation, this was included, but I've added a bit to it so check it out again!

Thank you, again, everyone, for making this such an incredible experience for me. I know so many of you by name. We've tweeted and chatted in the FB group and getting to know you has just been wonderful.

Be sure to put me on Author Alert. I'll be starting my next story, Watching Her, the Sunday after next. It's going to be something completely new from me: mostly EPOV, shorter chapters that I'll be updating daily, set in Forks, high school age … just totally new and different for me, but I'm having the absolute best time writing it! I'm so excited to share it with you, so I hope to see you again!

Here's a small teaser for you all:

Drummer Girl.

I don't know her name yet, so that's what I've started calling her in my head.

Pretty apt description I think, since she plays the drums. And when I say plays, the girl fucking rocks. The first night I crept through the dark and saw her, I about came in my pants watching her she was so fucking hot. Sweaty, hair flying everywhere, arms flexing with each up and down movement; I swear it was the most amazing thing I've ever seen. I play the guitar and the piano so I know about getting lost in the music, but her … she wasn't just lost, she was totally immersed. She played with such wild abandon, it was as if she was running, trying to escape
some unseen or maybe even unknown force and wouldn't stop playing until she was safe.

Free.

If I had any thoughts of talking myself out of watching her, after seeing her that first night, after watching the way her chest heaved and her body swayed and moved, after watching the most gorgeous smile I've ever seen grace her face when she was done … any thought of being able to stay away flew right the fuck out the window.

I want to know what makes her play like the devil himself is chasing her.

I want to know what the hell she's doing awake every damn night at two in the morning.

I want to know why she looks so sad when she walks out of her house.

I want to know her.

I want her.

Hope you'll check it out!

Okay, let me hear from you one last time! I hope I gave our favorite family from Corea the HEA you all wanted them to have!

Love you all!

Erin~
The Breakers: An Outtake – Peyton's First Day Back to School

Peyton POV

"Baby, it's time to get up," I hear Mom say softly as she sits on the side of my bed. I squeeze my eyes closed and hope that if I don't move, she'll go away and let me sleep a little longer. It doesn't work because I hear her laugh when she pokes me in the side.

"Not working, little girl, so scoot and get up. You need to get dressed and come down and have breakfast. It's a big day today." She leans forward and brushes my hair out of my face like she's done every morning for as long as I can remember.

I open my eyes and find her so close to me. She's so pretty. All my friends say so … all the time. I get a kind of butterfly feeling in my tummy when people tell me I look like my mom. She's the prettiest person I've ever seen, even prettier than Aunt Rose and Ms. Esme. I hope I'm as pretty as she is when I grow up.

I try to snuggle into my pillow but she tickles my sides and makes me laugh. "Mom, stop it! I'm up, I'm up." I giggle.

I roll to try to get away from her and I kinda have to pee now that I've moved and am standing up. My hair's in my face because I didn't put it in a ponytail last night before I went to bed and when I push my hair back, the charms on my bracelet sparkle. My tummy flip-flops and it's not because I can smell Mom's famous chocolate chip pancakes downstairs either. It really is the best present I've ever been given … ever in my whole life. Even better than the Tom Brady poster Pop gave me for Christmas last year that's autographed.

Lucy is gonna be so jealous when she sees it; I know she is. I lift my arm and shake it, smiling when the giraffe twirls and bumps into the football. Edward is the best friend I could ever have.

"P, stop staring at your bracelet and get a move on. You don't want to be late for your first day of school," Mom says. She stands up and straightens out my bed. I giggle a tiny bit. She always makes my bed even though I'm supposed to do it.
I jump from foot to foot and cross my legs because I really have to pee, but hearing her say the word school makes that jumpy feeling in my stomach feel not so good all of a sudden. Ugh. Stupid Brody. I don't want to see him, but then again, I really do, if only so I can rub it in his face that my best friend can ride on a motorcycle.

Mom pats me on the head before she walks out and then I hurry into the bathroom so I can go. I wash my hands when I'm done and then hurry into my room to get dressed. I can smell the bacon now and my tummy is back to growling because I'm starving to death. I put on the jeans and shirt that Edward helped me pick out and slide my feet into my favorite pair of flip-flops. I grab my sneakers and giggle at myself when I remember how I used to forget them all the time.

I'm a big girl now, in third grade, and I can't be forgetting things anymore.

"Pipsqueak!"

Xavier's here! I let my backpack slide down my arm and I drop my shoes without looking where they go and run into the kitchen. He's standing at the island talking to Mom and I throw myself at him. "You came for breakfast," I say as I squeeze him around the neck.

He lifts me up and spins me around and my heart gets fluttery when he kisses the top of my head. "Of course I did, P. We always have breakfast and you didn't think I'd miss your first day of school did you?"

I feel kinda bad for a second because I did think that.

He sets me down and then nudges me toward the table so we can eat. He and Mom talk about the restaurant and I take a drink of my orange juice, watching the charms on my bracelet jingle.

"Hey, what's that? Is it new? Did your mom buy that for you when you went shopping?" Xavier asks in between bites of pancakes.

"Nope," I answer and sit up straight. I hold my arm out and shake it then shove it toward him. "Edward bought it for me so that I don't miss him too much during the day. See, he got me a football because he knows how much I love football and then the book, well, because I read lots. And then this one ..." I take a breath and stare at the giraffe and I feel myself smile. "This is my favorite. You remember at the carnival during the races, and Edward won me that giraffe, this is for that. And the shell is for," and I stop talking.

I swallow, and get a kind of nervous, shaky feeling. Kind of like when I have to work out a math problem on the chalkboard at school in front of everyone.

"Is that a seashell?" Xav asks. His voice is quiet and it sounds funny. I want to look at him but I keep staring at my bracelet. I nod instead. "What's that one for?"

"It's a secret," I whisper.

Thinking about that makes me sad but happy at the same time. I don't want to be sad though, so I look at the giraffe instead.

"Well, it's a really pretty bracelet," Xavier says after he coughs a few times. I hope he's not getting sick. I hate being sick.

Mom asks him a question about Seth and I take a bite of my pancake. I'm glad; I don't want to talk about my bracelet anymore. I think it made Xavier sad for me to talk about it. Sometimes, when he thinks I don't see him, he looks at me with a really sad look on his face, like he wants to cry. It
makes my tummy feel yucky when that happens but I've never asked him about it.

I have a feeling it's because Edward is my best friend now. I know last year at school when Lucy told me that Madison was going to be her best friend from now on, I felt really bad, like I wanted to cry, but it also made me feel scared and kinda mad, too.

I don't want Xavier to be mad at me but I don't know how to ask him if he is, either.

I sigh. Sometimes being a big girl kind of sucks.

We all finish eating and get ready to leave.

"Do you have your sneakers?" Mom asks with a grin, like she knows I'm gonna say no but instead I hold them up proudly.

"Yes, ma'am," I tell her.

"Guess she showed you, huh, Bell?" Xavier laughs at her.

I climb into the backseat of Xavier's truck with a huff. I hate sitting in the back. When I get big enough, I'm never sitting in the backseat ever again. I'm not sure when that will happen; Mom won't tell me. I kinda think it's because if I knew, I'd probably drive her crazy by asking about it all the time. The closer we get to school, the more excited I get … and the more nervous, too. I don't know why I'm so worried about seeing Brody, but I sorta feel like I do when I'm watching a Patriots game on television with Pop and they're losing, but they have the ball. I get nervous because I don't want them to lose, and then I get excited when I think they might win. It's pretty confusing.

I wish Edward was here. He'd know what to say to make me feel better; he always does.

"Okay, baby, have a good day and make sure you come straight to the restaurant when school is done, okay?" Mom asks and kisses me over and over again.

"Mom," I whine and try to pull away from her. She's so embarrassing sometimes. At least I'm still in the truck and it's not in front of the school like it was last year. Jeesh. That was awful.

I hug Xavier and he squeezes me, almost hard enough that I can't breathe. "Be good, Pipsqueak. Don't worry about Brody, got it?" He kisses my forehead and I nod.

"I won't. Besides, Edward said the same thing already. Bye!"

I climb out of the truck and see Lucy and Madison walking together and hurry to catch up to them. I want to show them my bracelet right away, but I want them to ask to see it. I don't wanna be all braggy and stuff and show them right away. That's just wrong.

"Peyton!" Lucy yells like she hasn't seen me all summer even though I just spent the night at her house the other day. We had lots of fun at her house; her mom made us rice krispy treats and rented us movies and everything. I think I made her a little mad though because she kept wanting to talk about Justin Bieber and all I wanted to talk about was Edward.

He beats Justin Bieber any day.

"Hi, Lucy. Hi, Madison," I tell them as they hug me. Ugh. Why do girls have to hug so much?

Of course Mom and Edward hug all the time … and hold hands … and … kiss.
Gross.

Kind of.

We talk as we walk inside. The school is brand new so it's kind of exciting to see everything, even though we took a tour during Meet Your Teacher night. Me and Lucy are in the same classroom. I'm sad Madison isn't in the same one, but I'm sorta happy about it, too, because she can be annoying sometimes. I hang my backpack up and feel someone push me in the shoulder.

My face gets red when I see it's Brody. I hate when that happens but 'cause it still happens to my mom and she's old, I guess it's something I'm just going to have to live with.

He looks at me kinda funny-like and I worry I have something on my face, but I know I don't, so I just shrug my shoulders. He's so weird sometimes. He makes a strange sound but doesn't even say hi.

The whole morning is kind of like that. My teacher this year is Mrs. Watson. I'm really glad she's my teacher instead of Ms. Briggs like Madison. I shiver just a tiny bit thinking about her. She's old and always wears her hair in a bun. We sit at our desks all morning until it's time to go to art class. I'm so excited to get to take art this year. I love to draw and I start thinking about all the pictures I can make for Edward to hang in his room at the boarding house.

We get to sit at tables in art class and I sit next to Lucy. We're giggling at one of the pictures on the wall when I hear someone pull out the chair beside me. It's Brody.

"Hey," he says and crosses his arms as he looks at me.

"Hi."

We don't have a chance to say anything else because the art teacher, Mr. King, stands up and starts talking. I feel kind of funny, and when I turn to the side, Brody is looking at me … or at my bracelet I guess I should say. I try to pay attention when the teacher is going over the rules because I sure don't want to get in trouble, but I can't really concentrate with Brody staring at me and acting like a weirdo.

Once Mr. King passes out some drawing paper and colored pencils, I get to work. I want to draw Edward a picture of the beach.

Brody pokes my arm and makes me color a blue line through where the sand is supposed to go. I turn and glare at him. I'd call him a stupid head but we're supposed to be quiet while we draw.

He points at my bracelet. "What's that?" he whispers, but it's not very quiet.

"It's a bracelet, stupid," Lucy answers before me.

He looks at it again then at me. "Where'd you get it? And what's on it?"

"Her best friend, Edward, gave it to her. Right, Peyton?" Lucy answers … again.

I swallow and set my blue pencil down on the table. I rub my hand on my jeans 'cause it's all sweaty. I want to say it's because I was coloring, but I kinda think it's because of the way Brody is looking at me.

"Um … yeah, Edward's my best friend," I agree with her.
Lucy leans across the table and holds her hand up beside her mouth. "Well her best friend that's a boy. I'm still her best friend that's a girl."

I giggle when she says that. We had a long talk about that the other night at her house, almost through the whole movie about how it was okay for Edward to be my best friend that was a boy but she still wanted to be my best girl friend.

"Who's Edward?" Brody scowls.

His question should be easy to answer but the more I think about it, it's not. Deciding to just say it the easiest way possible because he can be pretty slow sometimes, I tell him, "He moved here at the beginning of summer and got a job working on my pop's boat. He didn't have any friends so I told him I'd be his friend, and now, we're best friends."

"Yeah, and he even spends the night at her house!" Lucy jumps in and says.

"Your mom lets a grown-up spend the night with you?" Brody asks and he looks really, really mad. I laugh at him because he looks goofy with that look on his face. "He sleeps with her mom, you dummy. He's Ms. Bella's boyfriend … and he drives a motorcycle. But, he is Peyton's best friend, too." I wish Lucy would stop talking for like five seconds so I can say something.

And people say I talk a lot! Jeesh!

Brody doesn't look mad any more for some reason, but he does look kind of sad, and starts coloring his picture again.

"I thought I was your best friend?" Brody's voice is really soft and he doesn't sound as mean as he normally does.

"You were gone all summer," I tell him. I'm not sure that's the right thing to say because he scoots his chair back real fast.

He tells me, "It's a really pretty bracelet, Peyton," and then goes to ask Mr. King something.

He stays up at Mr. King's desk for a long time, so long that it's time for art class to be done. The walk back to Mrs. Watson's class seems like it takes a really long time but I think that's because I can't stop thinking about what Brody said. I feel a little strange, like I did something wrong, but I don't know what it could be.

The rest of the day goes by really fast, even though I really don't like spelling at all. I wonder if I can get Edward to help me. I bet if I pretend to try really hard, he'll do it for me. It seems like it takes forever for the last bell to ring, but when it does, I put all the papers Mom has to sign tonight in my take home folder and then walk outside with Lucy. I see Brody goofing around with Will and Cade but he doesn't wave at me.

That hurts my feelings some, but I try not to let it bother me too much.

I hurry to the restaurant. I can't wait to show Mom and Nana my picture. Plus, I know Xavier will make something really good to eat.

"Mom, look," I holler when I walk inside and it takes a super long time to tell her everything.

"I'm so glad you had a good day, baby," she tells me and then gives me a big hug. "I'm so proud of you."
Xavier fixes me the best snack and I try not to watch the clock. I'm so excited to see Edward so I can tell him Brody didn't make me nervous. I won't tell him he hurt my feelings though. I don't think he'd like that too much. I keep hearing the door open and the bells jingle and it's making me antsy so I put my ear buds in and start playing Angry Birds on Mom's phone.

A little while later, right when I'm about to beat the hardest level ever, someone taps me on my shoulder.

"Edward!" I yell really super loud and climb on my chair.

He holds his arms out and I jump toward him. He hugs me tight, hard like Xavier does. It feels so good, better even than when Xav does. It always makes me feel all warm and tingly when Edward hugs me.

"So, Sprite, did you have a good day?" he asks with a big smile on his face.

I reach up and put my hands on his cheeks and squish his face. He crosses his eyes and it makes me laugh really hard. I kiss his cheek and then tell him, "Yep, I had the best day ever."

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*sigh* It's only been a week and I already miss all of them! I had every intention of adding to this and showing a few things from Peyton's POV as she got a little older and then had a different idea mid-week that I didn't have time to get to. So … that means there is still one more outtake from our little Sprite in the works. I hope you don't mind! I'll have it up as soon as possible!

I need to say a quick thank you for ALL of the reviews from the last chapter. I'm overwhelmed and so grateful to each of you! I'm trying to get through all the review replies slowly but surely!

My next story is well underway and I hope to begin posting soon, 2 weeks from now at the most! Here is another little teaser for you guys from Chapter 2 of my new story, Watching Her. I'm so excited about this one so be sure to have me on alert so you all know when it goes up!

We've been practicing for hours. I'm sweating like a pig, my gray t-shirt long gone, when I hear Jasper whistle. "Nice ride," he drawls as his eyes are fixed on the road behind me.

I turn … and feel all the air leave my body. I sway, dizzily, and not from the sun beating down on me either. "It's her," I murmur, too quietly for either of them to hear me. Thank God.

Her gleaming black Escalade heads in the direction of town and it's about all I can do not to make some excuse to the guys so we can leave and then I can follow her.

"Who the hell is that?" Emmett wonders aloud, juggling the soccer ball as he talks.

For some reason I play it off, wanting … needing to keep her to myself for a little longer.

"Probably just some guy traveling through town on their way to La Push." My tone is casual, indifferent. I'm anything but.

Last night was much the same as all the ones before. Two A.M. on the dot, and she was out the
door like her ass was on fire. Short shorts, a tight t-shirt with Donald Duck emblazoned on the front and her hair up in a high ponytail, my favorite. It's about fifty/fifty whether it's up or down, but my preference is for up ... always up. Watching her from where I do is hard enough; I don't need her hair hiding her face on top of it. Not to mention, when her hair is up, I can imagine what the skin of her neck tastes like on my tongue and what her hair feels like wrapped around my fingers.

Gah, I'm so excited to share this story with you all! There will be some teasers and such going up soon, so check the Facebook page often for news, okay!

www.facebook.com / groups / 137144056381565 /

I have the main blog set up. This will be the only one from now on, so if you want to see the teasers and don't use FB, then you can go here! I will be using this, only, from now on instead of setting up new blogs for each story! Come sign up for emails and teasers! Oh, and the PDF of The Breakers will be ready soon, too ... and the cookbook!

les-16.blogspot.com

See you all soon ... hope you enjoyed this extra little bit of Peyton!

Erin~

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!