



The Bigger They Are

LadyExcalibur2010

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Summary

Confirmed bachelor and career soldier, Edward Cullen was perfectly happy with his life. Until a young punk busted his windshield. Suddenly, he finds himself drawn to a beautiful widow with a LOT of baggage- four rambunctious sons. AH/AU - COMPLETE

Chapter 1: Here's to You, Mrs James

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Chapter 1: Here's to You, Mrs. James

I sighed as I slid in behind the wheel of my car. It had been a long week, and while I didn't have anything specific to look forward to this weekend, it was still nice to know that I could sleep in if I wanted to. I probably wouldn't, but having the option was nice - a little luxury. I wondered if I was getting old. I already knew the answer to that question, and the answer was yes. Still, I couldn't conjure up too much guilt about enjoying a bit of extra sleep.

Besides, I was still getting used to being stateside again. It was still an odd feeling not sleeping in a tent or hearing mortar fire at night. I almost...missed it, as strange as it sounded. It had been familiar after a while, and the peace and quiet was taking some getting used to.

It was a beautiful North Carolina day, the sun was shining and there was a gentle breeze cooling things down. Sort of zoning out, I was shocked when I heard something that was definitely larger than a pebble from the road thwack against my windshield. I watched the crack splinter across it like a spider web. Shit. "What the fuck...?" I muttered, looking up at the sky. Nope, still clear and gorgeous - so it wasn't hail. In the rearview mirror I looked at the overpass and that's when I saw him.

"That little fucker," I muttered as I took a quick turn onto a service road and doubled back. "Throw shit at my car, will you?" I had dealt with troublemakers my entire adult life, and this one had just overstepped his boundaries. Big time.

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Payback was a bitch.

To my surprise, the criminal saw me coming and scurried away on a...bicycle? I grinned. "All the easier to catch..." I said under my breath. "Not so smart, are you?"

It took less than two minutes to find the area in the brush where the jerk had tried to find shelter in the woods. That wasn't happening. I had never allowed my quarry to escape me and I wasn't about to start now. I had broken down doors in Baghdad; I wasn't concerned about chasing down some punk in the woods of North Carolina. I jumped out of my car before I could even consider that chasing after the guy might not be the best idea I had ever had. The odds were that he wouldn't have an automatic weapon, so I liked my chances.

I could hear the commotion in the woods and hauled ass in that direction. I might be pushing forty, but I could still run - the military had made damn sure of that. The bike actually slowed him down in the woods and I took advantage of that fact. Another minute and I was grabbing the little shit's shirt and whipping him right the fuck off his bike. He sprawled at my feet and I could only gape at him in surprise.

The body was big, almost as big as me, but the face... Fuck. This was a kid. He probably hadn't even turned fifteen yet. *Old enough to be a delinquent obviously*, I thought. "What the fuck was that about?" I demanded, angry at him for my windshield and angry at myself for letting my temper get the best of me.

The kid struggled to his feet, panting and red in the face. I felt a little out of breath myself but I'll be *damned* if I was going to show it. I expected him to show some fear, maybe even a little fucking remorse. I mean, I was in uniform and I was royally pissed. I'd been known to reduce privates to tears and had once made a corporal almost pee himself. But this boy just narrowed his blue eyes at me and spat at the ground.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he hissed. "Maybe you shouldn't fucking assault strangers!"

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The defiance was overdone and he couldn't pull off the innocent act. I put my hands on my hips and settled my best " *You've just fucked up Private and you're about to reap the consequences*" glare. I had years of practice and it was effective. At least, it had been until now. The kid just blinked at me. "All right then, why don't we call the cops and they can help us settle this little dispute." I pulled my cell from my pocket and held it up.

His posture remained stiff and combative for a moment and then I saw the anger seep out of him. He became a frightened boy then, and I had to fight hard to maintain my hard ass expression. *Never let them see you waver.* "No?" I questioned. "Okay, if you don't like that option, how about we call your parents instead? Then maybe we can all sit down and work out a way for you to pay for the damage you did to my car."

He shook his head.

"How old are you?" I asked.

He pressed his lips together and then hissed, "Fourteen." Just as I'd thought. I sighed. I had seen enough kids just like this one to recognize angry when I saw it. This kid was pissed off at the world in general and *me* in particular. Of course, I was a little pissed off myself.

"Son, you have two choices here...I'm calling the cops or your parents." I gave him a moment to consider the alternatives. "Which one is it going to be?" I wiggled the phone. "Your call, kid."

"Call my mom," he muttered under his breath. Okay, so dad was out of the picture. Figured. When would guys learn that they couldn't make kids and then walk away? How many times had I seen a young man struggle to reach his potential when he'd never had a male figure to look up to - to learn from? I thought of my own father and I realized, yet again, just how lucky I was.

"Her number?" I prompted.

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He murmured some digits and I pressed them into the phone. Before I hit send, I asked, "Her name?"

"It's Mrs. James to you," he snapped. I rolled my eyes at him just to let him know how unimpressed I was. *Stupid little punk...*

"Hello?" A soft, husky voice came over the line and I felt a small tingle run down my spine.

"Uh, Mrs. James?"

"Yes," she replied cautiously. She sounded young, too young to be this behemoth's mother.

"I'm here with your son..." Shit, I didn't know the kid's name.

I looked at him questioningly and he shot back with "Emmett." His tone was surly, his expression even more so.

"Uh, with your son Emmett," I repeated. I wasn't going to let this punk kid make me lose my temper... I wasn't going to let his punk kid-

She heaved a deep sigh. "What did he do this time?" She sounded resigned and weary.

So, the little punk had a history of doing stupid shit. Figured. Someone needed to teach him some manners. I wondered if his dad lived close enough to take care of his responsibilities. Or maybe he just didn't give a shit. Then I realized that I might be wrong. This was a military town, after all, and his father might be deployed. I hoped that was the case. Maybe I'd even give his father a little call to set him straight on what his son was up to. Calling in a military dad was bringing in the big guns, and usually the moms were more than capable of handling kids that got out of control. They were used to it. There was no tougher job in the military than being the spouse - whether it was being the husband or wife. That was one reason I'd never settled down. I knew how unfair it could be to the one waiting at home. Still, something needed to be

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done about *this* kid. I'd see how the meeting with mom went before I considered having a little chat with the father.

"Well, he threw a rock or something off the overpass and cracked my windshield." I heard kids yelling in the background and she covered the phone for a moment and spoke quickly. I couldn't tell what she said, but it was obvious she had her hands full. "Listen, it's not so much the damage, but he could have really hurt someone-"

"No, no, you're absolutely right to call me," she said quickly. "Uh, listen I can't leave right now. Is there any way you could bring him home and we'll settle up the damages?" She paused. "I hate to ask, it's just that-"

"Sure," I agreed, for some reason I was way more eager to see the owner of that sweet, husky voice than I should have been. We said good-bye and I grabbed the boy's bike and put in the trunk. "Get in," I ordered. He got in sullenly but that didn't bother me. "Where to?"

Giving me directions, he tried to put his game face on, but I could see him swallow hard when we pulled into the driveway of a small but beautifully kept home with bright yellow shutters. His nervousness was actually a good sign. He didn't want to make his mother angry, which meant he respected her on some level. How deep that respect went, and how much control his mother actually had of him remained to be seen.

The front door crashed open and three more boys came tumbling out. They all had dark hair, though only the oldest seemed to be sporting the curls. Suddenly I wondered if his mother had curly hair and if it fell down over her shoulders. *Quit it, I reminded myself. She could be married. In fact, she probably is. And to a fellow soldier. No one likes a Jody.** Besides, she could look like Medusa. It might only be her voice that's attractive and then won't you be embarrassed? Lusting after a honey-voiced Medusa isn't your style, Cullen.*

"Ohhhh, Emmett's in trouble!" The youngest crowed. He had to be a little brother. No one gloated like that unless a sibling was in deep shit.

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A boy of about twelve just shook his head as Emmett stepped out of the car. The youngest one looked to be about eight and was jumping around calling Emmett a stupid head. He was laughing a lot and pointing. Emmett scowled at him, but I noticed that the littlest one didn't seem to be worried that Emmett would hit him. That revealed something about the boys and their upbringing. It was a good sign. They knew that hitting wasn't tolerated. I was beginning to feel more optimistic. The fourth boy seemed to be about ten years old and hung back closer to the house, seeming to wait for something - or maybe someone. I recognize the protective stance that some boys get when dad isn't in the picture for whatever reason. He was his mother's guardian, at least as far as *he* was concerned. The door opened again and out stepped...

Fuck me...

Well, well...Medusa she ain't.

***Jody - a guy who steals your girl while you're deployed, or otherwise taken away from home by military obligations.*

Chapter 2: On the Mantle

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Author's Note: Yes, I know I said to only expect an update every two weeks. However, this story seems to be just flowing right now and I can't help it. So here's another update. I hope you enjoy it. Whether you leave a review or not, thank you for reading.

Chapter 2: On the Mantle

There was no way in hell that the angel making her way toward me could possibly have given birth to the four boisterous boys that were currently gathered around my car. The youngest one was pointing to the windshield and I heard him mutter "...deep shit..." I settled a firm glare on him and he flushed and looked away. I could tell already that his mother wouldn't tolerate *that* kind of talk. He shot me a worried glance and I gave him a slight smile to let him know that I'd keep it between us. This time. He grinned and went back to taunting Emmett. Little brothers...they were all the same.

I was desperate to do anything to draw my attention away from the beauty who was scowling at her boys. *Were* they her boys? Or was she just a ridiculously attractive friend? I was in so much trouble... My body was reacting in predictable and inconvenient ways. Suddenly I felt as if I was seventeen again and in Miss Porter's English class. Damn, that woman had had some *fine* legs and I'd spent my senior year hiding the tent I was pitching behind my desk... Not helping.

"Boys," she said softly and all four of them turned toward her. Yep, she was definitely their mother. The oldest one, Emmett, flushed and shifted nervously on his feet.

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She came to stand in front of me and I was assaulted by the tantalizing hint of cinnamon and apples. I felt my mouth watering. Apple pie was my *favorite* dessert. She smelled of sweet confections and another scent that was uniquely feminine and hers alone. She held out her hand and I forced myself to take it without hauling her into my arms and planting a big kiss on her and then grinding myself against her. Deep shit, I reminded myself, echoing the boy's words. Women like Mrs. James were strictly off limits, for many, many reasons.

"I'm Bella James," she said quietly in that husky, sexy voice of hers. Bella. It suited her. She was definitely beautiful. "And I'm terribly sorry about what happened." She scowled at her oldest son. "I can assure you that full reparations will be made." Emmett flushed again and stared at his feet. Maybe there was hope for the boy yet. I had half expected defiance and yelling. Instead there was nothing but shame and apology in the boy's expression. I began to suspect that young Emmett's problem with criminal behavior was a recent one. In which case, something had obviously changed in the boy's life.

But what?

I looked at Bella James more closely and noted the lines of stress, the fatigue in the dark circles under her eyes that did not seem to belong on her lovely face. She was beautiful, but...burdened. Yes, that was it. Something had put a heavy burden on her slender shoulders and I was immediately burning to alleviate her load.

Pump the brakes there, Cullen. You don't do commitment...or burdens. Remember? You're free and answer to no one and you intend to stay that way.

Deep shit indeed. For all I knew, she was a married woman. But if she was, then where was *he*? And why did I care so much? I had way too much respect for my brothers in arms to ever be a Jody, no matter how tempting this brunette beauty was. I needed to get myself squared away and get my shit together. *Now.*

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"Perhaps we should talk inside?" I asked and was rewarded with a lovely blush. Now I knew where her sons got it. Of course on her it was alluring and sexy.

She gave a jerky nod. "You," she said, pointing to Emmett. "To your room." I turned to watch him, anticipating some sort of argument, but instead he nodded and walked quickly into the house. She looked at her other sons. "And none of you bother him either. He's got some serious thinking to do."

"*That* could take a while," the youngest one quipped. One of his brothers snickered but I didn't see which one.

Bella turned back to me and started to speak. There was an interruption.

"But that's my room too!" the second oldest one protested.

His mother quirked one eyebrow at him. "Really, Seth?" The boy's expression fell. "Is that how you want this to go?"

"No ma'am," he muttered, kicking at the ground.

Then she settled a look on the youngest. "And don't think I didn't hear what you said earlier, Jacob Joshua James."

"Sorry," the boy mumbled.

"That's what I thought," she said calmly. "Now, the three of you go into Jake's and Sam's room. You can play X-Box, but if I hear any yelling or any fighting, you'll be weeding the flower beds and cleaning out the garage instead. For two days." The boys grimaced at that. I had a feeling that Mrs. James didn't make threats. She made promises. "Understood?"

There was a quick chorus of "Yes ma'ams" and the boys trooped into the house in single file. This was definitely a military family; I recognized the signs easily enough. And it made sense. But where was Dad? Deployed? Divorced? Just didn't give a shit?

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"Please, come in," Bella said softly. "Uh...?" And I realized that my manners were terrible; I hadn't even introduced myself.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm Edward Cullen." No need for rank, besides I had a feeling she had already figured all of that out with one simple look at my uniform. This lady had the confident air of a woman who was accustomed to dealing with military personnel. Nothing would intimidate her. She might be sad and burdened, but intimidated? Never. I could see her going nose-to-nose with a five star general and not even blink.

She nodded and gestured me toward the house. The inside of the house was as warm and welcoming as the exterior suggested. Signs of the boys were everywhere, from baseballs to X-Box remotes to oversized shoes in the corner. There was an order to the chaos. It wasn't unclean, just lived-in and homey. It reminded me of the house I'd grown up in, when my brother and I had spread our shit all over the house, driving my mom insane.

"Would you like some coffee?" she offered.

"That would be great."

"I'll be right back. Have a seat," she said.

I did. I took a look around and suddenly I knew exactly why Emmett was acting out and why dad wasn't here to take his sons in hand. I knew why Mrs. James looked tired and burdened (and yet still dangerously beautiful). There on the mantle was a flag case - that triangular shaped box that housed the symbol of all that troubled this little family. I had seen too many of those flags in recent years, all of them taken from the coffin of a man or woman who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. Next to the flag was a photograph of a man in an Army uniform. He had dark hair, blue eyes, and the thousand yard stare of a lifer. I had seen his features echoed in those four boys in one way or another. I read the small brass nameplate on the flag box.

McCarty E. James

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November 17, 1968 - July 4, 2006

He had been older than his wife, of that I was sure. She must have been very young when Emmett was born. I noted the date of death. The anniversary was coming up. I wondered how the family handled being in a military town on the fourth of July, which became a huge, patriotic celebration. Perhaps they left and went somewhere quiet. If they didn't, maybe I could suggest it.

Of course, maybe I could *also* remember that none of this was my business and keep my mouth shut.

She came into the room bearing two coffee cups and followed my eyes to the mantle. "Uh yeah..." She said. "Emmett's been having some problems adjusting." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and nibbled at her bottom lip for a brief moment.

"It's a hard thing to adjust to," I said quietly.

"It's been almost two years," she replied. "You'd think we'd all be used to it." Bella shook her head. Her eyes strayed once more to the flag...to the picture. Sorrow was etched on her pretty face. "But you don't get used to it, I don't think." Her smile was sad. "Sorry. Not your problem."

Oh but it could be, Bella.

Wait.

Where the *hell* had that come from?

Taking a sip of her coffee, Bella sighed. "Emmett's a good kid, really." Then she grimaced. "And now I sound like a typical mom, making excuses for her little darling's misbehavior."

"No," I corrected. "You sound like a mother who recognizes the fact that her son misses his father." I shrugged. "It's bound to cause problems."

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"Yes, but that doesn't excuse his behavior." She frowned at her cup. "I'll write you a check today and then I'll make Emmett work to pay me back. He won't learn unless there are consequences for his actions."

It was obvious that Bella was an excellent parent; she was just in a difficult situation. I paused. I had a crazy, wild idea and I was honest enough to admit that it wasn't only for Emmett's benefit. But even as I said the words, I was in shock. "Listen, this may sound...crazy."

Her eyes flew up to meet mine, obviously surprised at my words.

"But...what if Emmett worked off the cost of the windshield by doing chores directly for me?" I hesitated, trying to gauge her reaction. "I just think it will have a bigger impact if he can work and pay *me*, rather than you. He'll see it up close and personal, how his actions have consequences and he's got to live with those consequences. Besides," I added with a grin. "I think he'll be less likely to whine to me than to you when he gets tired of working." *And as an added benefit, I'll be seeing lots and lots of you Mrs. James.*

She laughed and nodded. "Yes, I suspect you're right about the whining." Then her expression sobered. "Are you sure? He can be...a lot." I was quite sure that Emmett had proven to be very challenging lately. But who could blame him? It was terrible to lose a father at any age, but to do so just as he teetered on the edge of that line between childhood and adolescence...? I could not even begin to imagine how it had impacted young Emmett. I could see, beneath the defiance and bluster and bad behavior, the core of the young man - and he was worth my time. If nothing else, to ease the burden of the mother who loved him so much.

"That can happen when a boy loses his father, especially at Emmett's age." I grimaced. "I train soldiers, ma'am, I think I can handle him."

"Yes, well, I'll warn you in advance that Emmett is his father's son," Bella spoke quietly, affectionate frustration in her voice. "And Mac was a hell raiser, born and bred. Emmett comes from a long line of them, so it's only fair I warn you. All of my boys can find trouble without a map or a compass, but deep

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down they're good kids. It's just that Emmett..." She blew out a breath. "He's in a class of his own, just like Mac. Even the military didn't cure my husband of that completely." She looked at me over the rim of her coffee cup. I tried to ignore the surge of...animosity that whipped through me when she referred to her husband. I wasn't even sure where that had come from - or why. "Emmett's just like him - rash and reckless." Bella sighed. "And now he's angry too. Angry at his father for not coming home, angry at me for not stopping it. He's angry at the government for sending his father away to die." She shrugged. "I guess I understand angry."

"I'll consider myself forewarned and forearmed," I told her. The coffee was excellent, with just a hint of cinnamon.

"All right," she murmured. "If you're sure." Bella tilted her head and looked at me, a crooked smile tugging at her stunning lips. "When do you want to put the boy to work?"

"Well, no sense in putting it off," I replied with a grin. "I'd say about 0600 tomorrow would be a great time to start." Who *really* needed to sleep in?

Bella giggled and covered her mouth, as if in disbelief that she'd actually laughed. I wanted to hear the sound again and again. She nodded and rolled her eyes. "He's going to be hating life tomorrow."

"I know," I agreed with a wicked grin.

So, I wouldn't be sleeping in tomorrow. That was all right; I had a feeling it would be worth it.

I got to my feet. "I'll pick him up tomorrow," I said. "And I'll leave my address and phone number and my command information. Just so you know I'm on the up and up."

Bella stood up too. She smiled and shook her head. "Mac taught me to be a pretty good judge of a man's character. I think I can trust you."

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I knew the uniform was familiar to her, and hoped that it would inspire trust. I wanted her to trust me. I wanted a lot of things from Bella James. Oh yes. Many, many things.

But I couldn't ask for them. I wouldn't. I would help Emmett pay for the windshield and I'd be done.

I'd walk away.

Sure. I'd walk away. Right.

Chapter 3: Doing it Wrong

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Author's Note: I will be doing outtakes from this story. The thread will be from Bella's POV and is titled "The Harder They Fall." Thank you for reading.

Chapter 3: Doing it Wrong

When the alarm went off at 0500, I was confused for a moment. I knew it was Saturday. What the hell? And then it all hit me. The rock. The windshield. The punk. The non-Medusa mother...of *four*. Oh yes, I remembered Bella James. Today would be the first day I would have Emmett working off his debt. I wasn't going to make it pleasant or easy or fun, but I would be fair. And I hoped he would find the process rewarding. Well, we might have to wait on that. Maybe in a decade or so he'd look back on this and laugh. Or maybe not. I planned to discuss the terms of his time working for me with Bella, but I had every confidence that she would be on the same page.

Bella James was a force to be reckoned with, and I definitely wanted her on *my* side - especially when it came to her boys. Mama Bear was a term that came to mind, but not in a way that enabled the boys' bad behavior. I just knew she would watch out for her boys. And God help anyone that tried to hurt them.

I knocked on their door at 0555 and it was opened by a sleepy eyed little boy. Jacob? I pretty sure it was Jacob. It was going to take me a little while to get them straight. I hoped I would have the opportunity. I smiled at him and he grinned up at me. "Hi..." he mumbled and I noticed he was dragging a rather sad looking blanket behind him. Taking a closer look, it looked like an old Army issued blanket. It would be scratchy and warm if I remembered correctly.

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"You here to get Em?" the boy asked, looking quite delighted at the prospect. I had forgotten how much little brothers enjoyed it when older brothers were, as Jake said, in deep shit.

"Yes," I replied. "Is your mother up?"

"I'm here," the sultry voice I remembered called out and I heard shuffling. She appeared in the doorway, cradling a steaming mug like it was the ambrosia of the gods. I sniffed. It *was* a gift from the heavens. Coffee.

"Wanna cup?" she offered, holding her mug aloft.

"Most definitely," I almost begged and she chuckled.

"God, I know. Mornings..." she mumbled and then shuffled back into the kitchen, the boy following closely at her heels. "Black okay?"

"Sounds great." Jake looked over his shoulder at me and then tugged at his mother's hand.

"Can I have hot cocoa, Mom?" Jake was asking.

"Just a minute, Jake," Bella replied. She sounded tired. Or maybe she was just sleepy. A moment later she appeared holding a cup of black coffee. I took a sip. Perfection.

"Emmett's got to finish picking up the mess in the bathroom," Bella explained. "I try not to go in there too much." She shuddered. "Four boys, one bathroom...it's a scary place."

"No need to explain," I told her. "I've seen more than my share of less-than-sanitary latrines."

She grimaced. "Don't remind me." Then she sighed and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Listen, this is just really... Well, it's just really decent and way above the call of duty for you to go to all this trouble for Emmett...and for me. I think

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it will do him good to get away from me and his brothers, and of course he needs to pay for -"

"It's all right," I assured her. I could see that she was starting to ramble but that wasn't really why I had interrupted. She just looked too fucking tempting standing there in yoga pants and a tee-shirt, with her hair sleep tousled and no make-up and the steam from the coffee mug giving her face a slight shimmer.

I looked down at the floor, wondering what in the hell was happening to me. Then I almost groaned. Bella had beautiful feet, and had recently had, by the looks of things, a pedicure. Her toenails were painted a rich, lush coral. Everything about this woman was interesting and provocative and... Stop.

I'd only met this woman the day before. She was a widow trying to raise four sons. I didn't know what she did for a living, how she felt about the Army now, how she was dealing with her husband's death, if she was seeing someone, or even if she was *interested* in dating or a relationship... Shit.

Relationship?

What was I *thinking*? First of all, I had never wanted to do more than casually date. Sex was fun, I enjoyed it. It was one of my favorite recreational activities. I liked to think that I was fairly good at it, but it was never, *ever* serious for me. I tried to make sure that my partners enjoyed themselves as much as I did. But I *never* offered more than physical intimacy. The women I took to my bed knew that and they also knew I wasn't about to offer more. Secondly, I preferred women with the same casual attitude I had toward sex and that meant *no baggage*. We had some laughs and then moved on, no hard feelings.

Bella James was nothing *but* baggage it seemed.

And yet...

And yet I wanted her. Badly. I could picture her dark hair splayed out on my pillows, I could easily imagine burying myself in her heat, I could almost hear her moans as I felt her shatter beneath me...over me...around me. But I knew

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that nothing with Bella James could be casual. I had only to look at her interact with her boys to know that. Always, she would put their needs first and she would never allow convenient but casual sex to interfere with her relationship with them. Her husband had died and here I was, battling an erection. I was such a shit.

So Bella was clearly and *obviously* off limits. She was the kind of woman you offered your heart. I only *did* casual, and that just wasn't possible with her.

Why then did I feel my body harden and stiffen at the mere thought of sliding my hands into those tight-fitting pants and cupping her delectable ass as I hauled her up against me?

Luckily, Bella went upstairs to yell at Emmett and get him moving. Unable to help myself, I watched the sway of her hips and the muscles of her ass move beneath the thin yoga pants. I could hear her yelling at Emmett. That gave me time to convince my dick that he really ought to just check out of the conversation for a while. Maybe go on a vacation. After a brief argument, he gave in. Thank goodness.

I felt a tug on my jeans and looked down to see Jacob staring at me. "Can you make hot cocoa?"

"What?"

"Can you make hot cocoa?" he asked again, sounding slightly impatient as if I should have been expecting the question. I could almost hear the 'duh'."

"Uh...yes?" It had been years since I had done so. But really, how hard could it be?

"My mom forgot," Jacob explained. "And I'd really like some hot cocoa." He tugged at my jeans again. "So can you?"

So apparently, Jacob *really* wanted some hot chocolate. Okay. I could handle that, right? "Sure," I said. "Lead the way."

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He gave me a grin, revealing two missing teeth, and I followed him into the kitchen. He pointed to the pantry. "It's in there," he said.

I grabbed the canister of cocoa mix, read the directions, and looked in the cupboards for a mug. I started to fill it with water and happened to glance at Jacob. He frowned slightly and shook his head. "Unh uh," he said. "You're doing it wrong."

I lifted up the canister. "It says right here, add water to cup."

He made a disgusted face. "Not water," he argued. "Milk."

"Are you sure?"

"That's how *Mom* does it," he said with finality. His look was slightly condescending.

"All right then," I said and dumped out the water. I went to the refrigerator and then filled the mug with milk. I was about to put the mug in the microwave when Jacob sighed.

"You're doing it wrong," he said again.

I sighed too. Obviously making hot cocoa was a little more complicated than I anticipated. "What's wrong now?"

"If you do it in the microwave the milk gets all bubbly and goes *everywhere* and then Mom gets mad," he said. He bent down to a cabinet and retrieved a small sauce pan. "You gotta cook the milk in here and then add it the mug." I could tell he was trying to keep from rolling his eyes at me.

"I've already got milk in the mug," I replied.

He shook his head and took the mug from me, pouring the milk into the pan. "On low," Jacob explained, turning the flame. "I can only use the stove 'cause you're here and you're a grown-up." He looked up at me and frowned. "You *do*

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know how to use a stove, don't you?" Jacob sounded doubtful.

"Yes." I was starting to feel insulted. And stupid. The kid's dark eyes seemed to bore into me. I'd met generals who were less intimidating.

"Well, you said you knew how to make hot cocoa too," Jacob reminded me.

"I do," I protested.

He shrugged, as if he was humoring me. He got a spoon and handed it to me. "Now put the mix in the pan and keep stirring," he ordered. "Don't forget to stir - otherwise the milk sticks to the bottom of the pan and mom says bad words while she's scrubbing it." Jacob laughed. "We're not supposed to hear her, but we do," he confided.

"It sounds to me like you know what you're doing," I said, offering him the spoon. Jacob shook his head.

"Nope, you're the grown-up. You gotta do it." I had a feeling the kid was enjoying this a little too much, but I decided to humor *him*.

I looked at the pan. "This is how your mom does it?"

"Yep," he said, climbing onto a bar stool at the breakfast bar. "But you gotta stir," he reminded me, arching one brow. I had stopped stirring for about seven seconds but the kid was sharp.

"Oops," I apologized. "Sorry." And I obediently stirred. Just then Bella appeared in the doorway. She looked at me, stirring a pot of hot cocoa on the stove and then she looked at her son.

"Con artist," she said with a roll of her eyes. "You could have nuked it you know," she told me.

I looked at Jacob, who giggled behind his hands. "Is that so?" I asked.

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Bella nodded and giggled just like her son. "But Jake likes it made this way better so he conned you. I have high hopes he'll be a lawyer or a politician one day." Then she shrugged. "Then again, he just might turn out honest instead. It's hard to say. He's only seven."

Jake giggled some more and Bella ruffled his hair, placing a fond kiss on the top of his dark head. "Emmett will be down in just a second."

I continued to stir the chocolate. "Well, I thought today I'd take Emmett over to a neighbor's house. He's retired and not getting around as easily as usual, so Emmett and I will be weeding his flower gardens, mowing his lawn, stuff like."

Bella's expression was hard to read. "Is that okay?" I asked. I didn't want to take anything for granted. This woman was trusting me with her son.

"That's..." She sighed. "That's more than okay. That's perfect actually."

I nodded. The hot cocoa seemed to be done, so I poured it into the mug and presented it to Jacob. He took a sip and gave a nod of approval, though he seemed surprised I had managed the job. "Good. Now, I'll pay him five dollars an hour, giving him a total at the end of each work day. Once he's paid off the price of the windshield in full, he's off the hook."

"And you'll get that price to me?" Bella asked. "I could go ahead and write you a check so you can go ahead and get it fixed."

"No, actually, I..." I looked up to see Emmett enter the room. He looked subdued, which I imagined wouldn't last long. "Actually, what I planned was to give Emmett cash at the end of every week and then, when he's got enough, he can pay me for the windshield."

"But then you'll be out the money up front - *twice*," Bella protested.

"But I'll be getting some work out of this boy," I reminded her.

"No," Bella argued. "That's not right."

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I took a deep breath and knew that she would either hate what I said next or understand immediately why I said it. "Bella, Emmett here has done something wrong. And it's me he's wronged. This is how men do it. He's messed up and now he's got to make it right. So what I'd like your permission to do is to keep this between me and Emmett. He'll work for me, and I'll pay him for that work. Then when he's earned enough, he can pay for what he's damaged, knowing it was his own sweat that made the money."

Please understand why this is important to Emmett, I pleaded silently.

She considered it for a moment and then nodded. "That sounds fair," she said. "What time should I pick him up?"

"Well, I expect we'll be done by two or so."

Emmett groaned. His hair still damp from his shower, his expression sullen and his shoulders hunched as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

My next words were impulsive and not very well thought out. I should have kept my mouth shut. By opening my mouth I only proved I was an idiot. A *masochistic* idiot at that. "Uh...listen, I've got a pool and I never put it to good use. Why don't you bring the boys and they can take a swim this afternoon? I'm pretty handy with a grill. I could throw some burgers on the grill and the boys could swim."

Jake turned the puppy dog eyes on his mom immediately while Emmett just hunched his shoulders more. Clearly, Emmett James was not a morning person. That would make the first part of our day interesting.

She looked stunned for a moment and then gave a slight nod. "That would be...lovely," she breathed. "Thank you."

I put my coffee cup in the sink and gave Jacob a fist bump on the way out. Jacob laughed and shook his head at me, as if in pity and disbelief at my stupidity or daring - I had no idea which. Behind me, Emmett mumbled and grumbled but I didn't care.

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I had a date.

Date?

Since when did inviting a woman and her four children to swim in your pool constitute a *date*?

Deep shit, my man, you are in deep shit. Ask the kid. He knows.

Chapter 4: Suspicious Minds

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephanie Meyers. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I will be doing outtakes from this story. The thread will be from Bella's POV and is titled "The Harder They Fall." Thank you for reading.

Chapter 4: Suspicious Minds

The ride to my house was silent, but it was not uncomfortable. Emmett just seemed sleepy and rather shy. I decided to let him set the tone for the day, hoping that eventually he would start to open up to me a bit. Exactly *why* I hoped he would do so was a mystery. Or at least that's what I told myself. It was most definitely not because I wanted him to like me, or that I wanted his mother to *know* that he liked me - or at least could talk to me. No, that wasn't it at all. No way. Not going there. No sense to really, in a few weeks this kid would be out of my life completely and this would be nothing more than a funny story to tell my buddies.

Then we were pulling into my driveway and I looked next door to see an older man look up at me and wave. Well that was convenient.

"Hi, Mr. Hoyt," I greeted my neighbor as I got out of the car. I had owned the house for almost two years, but had only spent a several months here before I deployed (and rented it out) and now a few weeks since I had arrived back. Mr. Hoyt was a good neighbor, quiet and helpful, though somewhat sad. I had only begun to delve into what put the sorrow in his dark eyes, and mostly just through hints dropped as we shared some beers in the evenings.

"Hello, Edward," he replied, looking up at me from where he knelt by one of

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his flower beds. His eyes flickered toward Emmett, who fidgeted uncomfortably behind me.

"Well, Mr. Hoyt," I explained. "My friend Emmett and I would like to see if we could help you get your yard in shape."

Mr. Hoyt gazed up at me for a moment in surprise. "What?"

I grinned at him. "Now I know your hearing is just fine," I teased him. "Emmett and I want to get things spiffed up for you."

Mr. Hoyt considered that for a moment, looking at Emmett once more. "That's mighty nice of you boys," he said and I smiled at the thought of being called boy when I was staring my 39th birthday right in the eyes.

Then Mr. Hoyt told me he had got some potting soil in the garage that he wanted to add to the lilies in one of the beds and to his other flowers in the largest bed. I directed Emmett to haul the bags toward the flower beds and he complied without a hint of protest, merely trudging to the garage and hefting the bags up on his shoulder, one by one. I wondered if his mom had given him a lecture about his behavior. Probably, I conceded.

"Quiet kid," Mr. Hoyt observed. I watch Emmett work, satisfied that he couldn't hear us.

"Yeah," I agreed. "He's having a rough time." No need to go into detail about why Emmett's helping me. That was between us, as I had told Bella.

"Army brat?" Mr. Hoyt asked. The Army family was a close-knit one, and the term brat was one of affection and camaraderie.

"Yep," I said, bending down and pretending to look more closely at a plan. "His dad died over there about two years ago."

"Tough break for a kid," Mr. Hoyt said.

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"Tough break for *four* kids," I said, getting to my feet and glancing once more at Emmett. "Four boys, all in stair steps about two years apart. Emmett's the oldest."

"That sucks." Like most men of his age and experience, he was a master of understatement. He was a former military man himself. We had had many late night discussions over beers and cigars. He had seen shit in Vietnam that gave *me* nightmares. He had seen all of *this* before, too - families torn apart, fathers and mothers and lovers who never came home. Mr. Hoyt watched Emmett work. "He's pissed," the man finally said softly. "Angry at the world, scared too..."

"Yeah," I said with a nod. "Got a right to be angry I guess." His father had died in a war thousands of miles away. I was pretty sure I'd be angry too. Dying for your country *sounded* romantic, unless you were the one left at home...alone...forever waiting for someone who would never show up again. Then dying for your country just meant someone you loved was dead. The reasons didn't matter so much anymore once that cold, hard truth settled in. It was hard to take solace in cold, patriotic pride.

It was just one more reason I'd never wanted to share my life with someone. I didn't want to leave a woman or a kid waiting for me to come home. My parents would miss me, but that was different.

"It's good, what you're doing," Mr. Hoyt told me, giving me a slight smile.

I shrugged. "Their mom...she does the best she can. But four of them can be a handful." I bit my lip. "I'm just helping out where I can."

There was a wicked glint in his eyes. "So tell me...what does Mom look like?"

I gaped at him, my mouth hanging open. "What? Who? How?"

"You're a good man, Edward Cullen, but..." He shrugged. "A good looking guy like you attracts the ladies. I've noticed the traffic. And while you're not likely to kick puppies in your free time, I'm not aware of you taking on many 'charity'

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cases as it were. I'm just saying that if I was a betting man, I'd lay odds that young Emmett there has an attractive mom."

My lips twitched and I looked down at the ground. "That's a bet you'd win," I concede. "But this...this is between Emmett and me. He's got some serious work to do for me."

Mr. Hoyt was silent for a long moment. "Just remember, Edward." Then he was quiet.

"Remember what?"

"Remember that those boys have been through enough, and a woman who has lost a husband to war and is trying to raise four sons on her own doesn't need a man who will play with her affections." He was telling me nothing more than I already knew for myself. "You don't play games with a woman like that."

"I'm reminding myself of that all the time," I assured him.

Mr. Hoyt gave me a stern look. "Just make sure you listen to that little voice inside your head." He gave a pointed look down at my crotch. "And don't think with the little *head*. That shit gets you in trouble every time."

And that's why I was laughing so hard when Emmett came to tell me that he'd moved all the bags.

/TBTA

By one-thirty, Emmett and I had weeded five flower beds, mowed and edged the lawn, trimmed the front hedges, and swept the leaves and debris off of Mr. Hoyt's back porch. We were both tired and sweaty and grimy and sore. But one look at Emmett's face revealed that he had the satisfaction of knowing he had put in a good day's work and had earned his money. He'd also said about half a dozen words the whole day. The kid gave new meaning to the word quiet. But I had the feeling that he hadn't always been like that.

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I was just about to count out \$30 to him when I heard a quick beep and turned to see an SUV pulling into my driveway. Before Bella could open her door, Jacob was hurtling out of the vehicle and toward his brother. "Em!" he cried out, and then came to a screeching halt when he got a good look at his filthy brother. "Ewww," Jake said, wrinkling up his nose. "You stink."

I laughed and nodded. "We both do."

"Good thing I brought you some clothes then, huh?" Bella said, handing her son a plastic bag.

"Thanks, Mom," he said sheepishly. "Uh..."

"You can use the shower in the guest room," I offered. He already knew where that was since it was the restroom we'd use while we were working.

"Thanks, Mr. Edward," Emmett said. He had started with Mr. Cullen, but that reminded me of my grandfather. He told me his mother would kill him if he called me Edward. We finally compromised on Mr. Edward, which sort of made me feel like a horse, but I wasn't going to push the issue. He loped toward the house and I turned to Bella. The three other boys were currently running across the lawn like puppies let out of a kennel.

"He worked really hard," I said. "He's a good kid."

Bella's expression was proud and sad. "Yeah, yeah he is."

The second youngest boy, Sam, came up to his mother and slipped his hand into hers. He settled a suspicious look on me. Mom's guardian indeed, and with that innate male sense, he knew he didn't quite trust my intentions. It was a gut reaction, and I was sad to admit that it was correct. I wasn't to be trusted with a woman like his mother and he knew it. Not that I had any dishonorable intentions, more like wishes. But I knew better, oh yes I did. "Mom?" He glanced at me again from beneath long lashes. "Can we go to the pool?"

"Sure," I said, motioning them toward the gate. "It's in the back."

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Sam ignored me and waited for his mom's okay. She gave it and kissed him on top of the head. He seemed somewhat mollified.

Bella flashed me an apologetic smile, obviously recognizing her son's behavior. She called out for Jake and Seth and they ran to beat us to the gate. A few moments later all three boys were cannonballing into the pool, shrieking loudly as their bodies hit the still cool water. In a few weeks, the water would stay warm, but for now the shock of it gave them a reason to yell.

I laughed when all three came up sputtering. Bella shook her head and placed folded towels on a chaise lounge. She was still wearing shorts and a tee-shirt. "Not going to swim?" I asked. I had really been hoping to see her in a bathing suit. Then I reminded myself that Bella James was strictly off limits.

Strictly.

"Maybe later," she replied quietly.

"Okay, well...I...uh...I'm going to go shower," I said. "There are drinks in the refrigerator if you get thirsty. I won't be long."

She nodded and ducked her head. I thought I saw a hint of tantalizing pink on her cheeks.

In the shower, I was suddenly assailed by images of Bella slipping those denim shorts off her slim hips, revealing the firm curve of her ass. She had a great ass and obviously stayed in shape. She had the lean, supple strength of a runner and I was willing to bet she put in a few miles almost every day. Then I imagined her sweaty and hot, coming in from a run and peeling off her sports bra to let her breasts bounce free.

They'd taste like Bella, sweet and with a hint of cinnamon, and I would lavish them with the attention they do richly deserved. I'd suckle and nibble and lick. I groaned as my cock roared to rampant life. Well fuck me if *this* wasn't inconvenient. Still, I couldn't go out there with a huge erection in my board shorts. Gritting my teeth, I let my imagination run free rather than trying to rein

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it in. Go with the flow. My hand curled around my cock. Stroke up, twist, and down. Repeat.

Fuck.

A groan reverberated in my chest and I was very glad that my bathroom was far removed from the backyard and the pool area. Surprisingly few strokes later, my release was splattering against the tiles and my knees were shaking. I quickly got dressed and tried to convince myself that no one would know what I had been doing...in my own bathroom no less. A guy had a right to rub one out in his bathroom. Right?

Still, I was a little uncomfortable when I stepped out onto the patio and saw four boys gazing at me with identical expressions.

They were sizing me up, trying to figure out exactly why I had invited them to swim at my house. They knew the score. They knew that men found their mother attractive. They had to; they were kids, but they were not *stupid*. I couldn't possibly be the first man who had shown a bit of interest in the beautiful widow. Then four pairs of eyes went to Bella, who was reading and seemingly oblivious to the interaction between her sons and me. Then all four sets of eyes came back my way. "Come on guys," Emmett finally said. "Let's swim."

He gave me one last look over his shoulder. *I'm watching you*, it said.

I considered myself warned.

Chapter 5: With Friends Like These

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Chapter 5: With Friends Like These

I didn't know it that first Saturday, but we set a pattern on that day, a pattern we would follow for the next three weeks. Every Saturday morning, I would pick up Emmett. He would still be cleaning his bathroom, having left it a mess during his shower earlier. She would offer me coffee while I waited for Emmett and we would chat about our week.

I saw pictures of Bella and the boys and of Mac of course. I hadn't realized it from looking at the picture on the mantle, but Mac had been absolutely huge. There was a picture of Bella and Mac on a beach somewhere, and he had towered over her. He had to have been six and a half feet tall. At least I could see where Emmett got his size from. It was clear that Emmett was going to be a very big man himself. I saw pictures of the boys as babies. One of my particular favorites was a picture of Mac, surprisingly. He was holding baby Jake and Bella was leaning over to press a kiss to Jake's forehead. I knew it was Jake because there were three small hands touching Jake's blanket. The look on Mac's face said it all. He hadn't been looking at Jake; he had been looking at Bella. If I had ever wondered what kind of relationship they had, one look at that picture put that told me all I needed to know. More actually.

This was a woman who had been deeply loved and she had loved fiercely in return. Any man hoping to engage Bella's heart wouldn't find it easy to look good in comparison. Then I realized I was thinking about winning Bella's heart and I wasn't sure what to think of that startling development. So I pulled a Scarlett O'Hara and decided to think about *that* tomorrow.

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I discovered that Bella taught middle school science and she loved it. I told her that teaching middle school kids was more challenging than teaching young soldiers. She agreed. She told me that she had one brother, but he lived out in California. She missed him, though they talked to each other once a week on the phone without fail. Jake had told me about Uncle Will. He had also mentioned an Uncle Josh, but Bella didn't mention another brother and I wondered if he was her husband's brother. I didn't ask. I was still leery about asking questions regarding Mac.

We talked about our jobs, our families, the weather, Emmett's progress on his debt, and the boys in general. We did not talk about her husband, Mac. It wasn't as if I got the impression she was avoiding the subject with me in particular, just that he wasn't something she cared to discuss with *anyone*. So I followed her lead.

I discovered that her favorite book was *Pride and Prejudice*, followed closely by *Wuthering Heights*. I told her that I could agree with the first choice but not the second. She accused me of being an uneducated cretin. I allowed that this might be true. I told her that my favorite book was *Dune*, my second favorite being *The Stand*. She had read and enjoyed both which was, she insisted, proof that she had better and more eclectic taste than I did. When I told her she was the first woman I had met who had both read and enjoyed the sci-fi classic *Dune*, she snorted and then called me a sexist pig. Somehow, it sounded very sexy coming from her lips. At least, that's what my dick thought.

"I have four boys. I can tell you all about Darth Vader, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Paul Atreides and pretty much any other sci-fi character." She rolled her eyes at me. "I figured it was easier to join them than to fight it." Grinning at me, she also confided that she "pretty handy with a lightsaber." I told her that I'd be happy to make her eat those words any time.

I was getting to know the boys a little better too. Emmett was still the most reticent, and our Saturdays were spent mostly in silence. However, silence was better than outright hostility, though sometimes I wondered if I shouldn't goad Emmett into talking about all of the things he obviously had bottled up inside him. I sensed there was an explosion coming, and I didn't want to be taken by

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surprise when it did.

Sam, who was ten, was the quietest of the group. He had appointed himself as his mother's guardian. He was serious and focused, making straight As in the gifted classes at his school with seemingly little effort. I found out from Bella that he was the one who would make sure the doors were locked at night, that the garage door was down, and that the coffee pot was set on timer so that she could have her coffee first thing in the morning. Sam seemed to be about forty years old most of the time.

Seth was the second oldest and he was the diplomat of the group. He smoothed over the fights that invariably arose between the boys, usually managing to calm things down without involving their mother. As I watched them interact with each other on those Saturday afternoons, I eventually realized that the boys were involved in some sort of unspoken agreement not to trouble their mother too much. They were pissed at Emmett for getting into trouble. He had broken their brotherly code and they weren't about to let him forget it.

Then there was Jake, who had somehow wormed his way into my heart with shocking ease and swiftness. He was funny and cheerful, using his charismatic personality to get his way but not in a malicious sense. One simply *wanted* to please Jake, because he was so open with his gratitude and appreciation. Of all the boys, he seemed to have adjusted to his father's death with the most ease and I wondered if that was because he was younger than the other boys. Jake had only been six when his father died. Mac hadn't been gone long when he died. I had learned that much from Jake, who tended to rattle off little tidbits of information during our Saturday morning hot cocoa endeavors.

As much as I learned about Bella and her boys, I tried to share a bit of myself in the process. She found out that I had a younger brother, Masen, who was an advertising executive in Seattle. Masen was married and had two sons, so my parents dreams of grandchildren were somewhat fulfilled. My father was a doctor and my mother had been a nurse until I had been born. Then she became a full time mom. Now she volunteered at a homeless shelter in Charleston, South Carolina, using her skills to help those who needed her. My parents liked the mild weather and gentle manners of their adopted city.

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I shared the fact that I had joined the Army a year out of high school, bored by my college classes and unsure of what I really wanted to do with my life. I admitted that life was sometimes difficult in the service, but that I found it rewarding. I even told her something I had never shared with anyone else before. I told her what I wanted to do with my life after my service was over.

"I'd like to open a pub or something," I confessed. "You know, just a joint where you can play darts, grab a cold one, and sit back and talk about your glory days."

She laughed. "That's sounds wonderful, Edward." She tilted her head and studied me. "Hmm...you as a barkeep? Yes, I can totally see that."

We fell silent for a moment. "So...do you think you'll be re-enlisting once your time is up?"

I paused, because in all honesty that wasn't a decision I had really made yet. I shrugged. "I don't know. I've got a year left and..." I sighed. "Of course, this is actually the first time I've even considered not re-upping, so I guess that means I'm finally ready to really consider an alternative." I shook my head. "I don't know. We'll see. I'll have my twenty years in and that means I can retire, but..."

"You'll know what to do when the time comes," she said softly and put her hand on mine. Then she quickly removed it and turned to the boys. Whatever that moment had been between us, she had ended it.

My hand tingled for hours.

/TBTA

We talked every weekend on Saturday afternoons while the boys played in the pool. I told her that I was looking forward to getting a dog now that I was done with deployments. She told me not to say that too loud or her boys would be begging for one too. "And I just can't handle cleaning up after one more living thing right now," she said with a sigh. I told her that I'd keep it quiet.

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We talked. We laughed. We joked. And I was the perfect gentleman. It was fucking killing me.

Every Friday night, I found myself tossing and turning in my bed, anticipating my brief time with Bella the next day. I'd started marinating steaks all day so they would make her give that sexy little moan when she took a bite. I even watched fucking cooking shows so that I could offer her more tempting side dishes than macaroni and cheese or chips and dip.

I put more effort into a completely platonic friendship than I had into the only two "relationships" I'd ever been involved in. To be perfectly blunt, I was completely and totally pussy whipped by a woman who didn't have so much as an inkling that I had a Y chromosome. I was a friend, a buddy, a pal for her boys.

And I was getting really fucking tired of it. I wanted more. I wanted to feel her lips open up beneath mine, I wanted her hands to tug at my hair while I licked her sweet essence from between her thighs; I wanted to hear my name leave her lips on a throaty groan or a loud yell, I didn't care which.

I ached for her, literally. I was jerking off so much I was a little worried that one day I was going to yank my dick right the fuck off. And still...I was the perfect gentleman. It was making me cranky. In fact, I was so grouchy that my best friend Jasper even noticed. We had gone through basic training together, twenty years ago, and had kept in touch ever since our first duty stations sent us to opposite ends of the country. I went to Georgia and he went to Washington State. Every now and then, the Army would end up putting us within driving distance of each other, but I had been thrilled and shocked to find Whitlock on the very same base. That had never happened before and we had both been enjoying the unexpected and prolonged reunion.

Now, however, he was giving me crap because of my "shitty attitude" as he called it. "You need to get laid," he advised one evening as we sat by the pool sipping beer. His wife Alice was home with one of the kids, who was sick with an ear infection. They had three, twin girls and a boy. It was one of the twins who were sick. I wasn't sure which one, I still couldn't tell them apart.

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I was surprised at how right it felt to hear Jasper's kids yelling and screeching as they played in the pool. It just seemed like my pool should have kids in it. Jasper's statement, however, reminded me of why I had been spending so much time with kids lately. I grimaced at his words, knowing he was right. Unfortunately, just getting laid wasn't going to solve my problem. My needs - my appetites - seemed to be very specific at the moment. "I'll get right on that," I promised.

Jasper laughed and shook his head. "Oh how the mighty have fallen," he said lowly.

I frowned at him, taking another sip of beer. "What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

He pursed his lips for a moment, obviously trying to repress his grin. He shook his head again. "Nothing, it's supposed to mean nothing."

"Bullshit, Whitlock," I hissed in a whisper. Alice would have my balls if she caught me swearing around the kids. "Spit it out."

He looked over at me, his expression mischievous and full of laughter - at my expense. "I'm just reminded of a saying..."

And he stopped.

The fucker.

"And?" I finally prompted. He remained silent so I reached over and smacked him on the arm, making him spill some of his beer. I took more satisfaction in that little victory than I should have.

Jasper sighed and finished off the beer. "You know that old saying about the bigger they are...?"

"What's the matter, Whitlock, you jealous because I'm packing more heat than you?" I mocked.

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"You wish." Jasper rolled his eyes. "But that's not what I'm talking about anyway, you moron."

"What *are* you talking about then?"

Jasper turned on the chaise and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "The saying goes that 'The bigger they are, the harder they fall.'"

"So?"

He wiped at his face with his hands. "And you, my friend, have fallen." He smirked. "Hard."

"No I haven't." My denial was immediate and instinctual. It was also, I suspected, complete bullshit.

Jasper reclined back on the chaise and shrugged. "Okay, whatever you say." Humoring me, obviously.

"I mean it!"

"Sure, I believe you." Disbelief in every syllable.

"I'm serious. I don't have feelings for Bella James." I was getting pissed. "I'm helping her out by letting her son work off his debt. She's got a lot on her plate, you know. I mean hell, *four* kids - all of them with at least a little hell raiser in their systems."

"And of course you haven't noticed that she's also smoking hot," Jasper murmured. He had caught a glimpse of her one Saturday when he stopped by to borrow my lawnmower while his was in the shop. He and Alice lived only two streets over, a fact which had thrilled me until he started getting pushy and nosey. I considered moving, but I hated moving. All the boxes... Ugh.

"What? Fuck no. I mean yeah, I've *noticed*, I've still got balls, don't I? But that's got nothing to do with anything." Deny, deny, deny.

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"Okay, if you say that's how it is, I believe you." Jasper got to his feet. "I'm going to get another beer. You want one?"

"No," I snapped scowling at the bottle in my hand. "I don't have feelings for her," I muttered.

Jasper patted me on the shoulder, the condescending bastard. "Okay, buddy. Sure you don't."

"I don't," I grumbled again, fully aware of the fact that I sounded like a petulant child. It was only years of military training that kept me from sticking my tongue out at him.

That and humiliation. Yeah, humiliation worked wonders.

Chapter 6: Revelations and Wine

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Chapter 6: Revelations and Wine

It was my fourth Saturday picking up Emmett.

Lately, Bella had started complaining that Emmett was taking showers that lasted much too long. I wasn't quite sure how to clue her in about why teenaged boys take extra long showers. Then one morning, she was bitching about it again while Jake was trying to con me into making him hot cocoa (only Jake wanted hot cocoa during the summer) and she suddenly stopped, gave a strangled bark of laughter and put her hand over her mouth.

I could practically see the light bulb over her head. *Let there be light...*

Looking down, she saw that Jake was preoccupied with scooping the hot cocoa mix (Jake was a nut for hot chocolate) and she looked at me. I could see the question on her lips and the blush that fired up her cheeks. I pursed my lips and nodded and she burst into laughter, causing Jake to spill some cocoa mix.

"Now you made me do it wrong," he grumbled. This only sent Bella off into fresh paroxysms of laughter.

"Uh, Jake, why don't you go watch cartoons and your mom and I will clean this up?" I offered. He sighed and nodded.

I watched as Jake shuffled off, mumbling under his breath. I looked at Bella, only to see that she was still quite red in the face. "Oh. My. God," she breathed. "I should have guessed."

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I grinned and shrugged. "What can I say? He's at that age." I tapped my chin with my finger. "Considering you've got three other boys, I'd like to suggest you invest in a much bigger hot water heater. You're going to need it." Then I gave her a wink.

That had Bella laughing so hard that she was crying, actually crying, from laughing so hard and I felt something inside my chest shift and expand as I watched her. Seeing Bella laugh, and look carefree and happy, was something I had only dreamed of seeing.

And all it had taken was talking about her teenage son's masturbation habits to make it happen. The absurdity of it all hit me. Hard.

Soon I was doubled over, trying very hard not to wet myself. That would not have been cool. At all.

~TBTA~

Then on the fifth weekend, things began to change. Bella gleefully announced that school had ended two days ago. This was a surprise to me because first of all I had no children and tended to lose track of such milestones since they did not apply to me, and second because Emmett hadn't said a word. Of course, Emmett hadn't said much of anything.

The boys jumped in the pool, as was their habit, and Emmett showered. He didn't take long showers at *my* house Bella was quick to note. I told her that according to "guy code" such a thing would be rude. She snorted with laughter but didn't comment. I was planning on grilling some chicken, along with a Cesar salad and some corn on the cob. Bella gave the menu her smiling approval.

Later, after we had eaten, the boys were quietly ensconced in my living room playing the Xbox 360 I had unpacked for their amusement. I had left one unit back in Iraq for those soldiers lucky enough to be at the base, but I had brought the other one home with me. I was a guy. I liked to play video games. And mostly I liked to kick Jasper's ass at them.

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I could hear the taunts and yells of victory coming from the boys and Bella smiled as she heard Jake start singing " *We are the champions...*"

"Jake's having a good night," she observed, taking a sip of the wine I had poured for her just a few moments earlier.

"Jake always has a good night," I mused. "I've never seen a more easy going kid." And it was true.

Bella smiled and nodded. "Even as a baby, he was that way," she said softly. "Mac used to sneak in to his room to make sure he was still breathing." It was the first time she had spoken so casually and easily about her husband. "The other boys were..." She shook her head. "Let's just say that there was no doubt they were breathing...all night long." She shook her head at the memory.

"Ouch," I commented. "I'm not sure I would have been brave enough to have four then."

Bella blushed slightly, something I found delightfully unexpected in the mother of four children. "Well, Jake wasn't exactly...uh...planned."

"Ah," I said. I felt embarrassed, as if I was intruding on private things that were not my business. But she had volunteered the information after all. We fell into a silence that began uncomfortably but soon changed into something approaching familiarity. "Are you glad school's out?" That seemed a safe enough topic.

Bella was pouring her second glass of wine and grinned up at me. "You have no idea!"

"Those middle schoolers getting on your nerves?" I guessed. I thought that her job practically qualified her for sainthood.

She shook her head and leaned back on the chaise. "No, I love my job. That's not to say I don't love vacation time too, but no... That's not why."

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"Then why?" She was being secretive and it piqued my curiosity.

Bella sat up suddenly and leaned toward me, putting her finger to her lips.
"I'm going to tell you a secret that I don't tell many people."

Immediately my thoughts went to dirty little secrets, naughty things that she kept locked away. Then she giggled and suddenly she seemed about ten years old and I felt like a dirty old man. It occurred to me that I didn't even know how old she was. Or her middle name, or maiden name, or favorite color or food. I had a lot of research to do. "Come closer," she beckoned me and her eyes looked a little gaze. Well, I had learned one new thing about Bella James. She was a lightweight when it came to alcohol. "I'm glad school's out because..." She looked around suspiciously. "I like having my boys home with me." Then she sat back and nodded emphatically as if I had argued with her.

"Really?" I asked. "Don't most parents celebrate the start of each new school year and talk about getting away from their kids?"

Bella frowned and sipped at her wine. "That's always seemed a little cruel to me, you know." Taking a deep breath, she continued. "Imagine how we'd feel if our partner repeatedly said they couldn't wait for us to go to work so they didn't have to spend time with us. Its mean, don't you think?"

I had never thought of it that way, but I supposed she was right. Looking back, I could never remember my mother saying how glad she was to send my brother and me back to school. I had never really noticed, but now, thinking about it, it gave me a warm feeling. I looked at Bella and wondered if her sons realized what a treasure their mother was.

No. Boys never do. It's only men who can hopefully look back and see the influence of that first woman in their lives - for better or worse, she sets a tone in a man's life. There is a certain truth to the cliché about men and their mothers. "Your boys are very lucky to have you as their mother." I said the words before I could even think about stopping them and Bella stared at me. Then she smiled, though I saw tears in her eyes.

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"Thank you," she whispered in a choked voice. "That might be the nicest thing that anyone's ever said to me."

"I mean it," I assured her.

"I know you do," she replied. "That's what makes it so sweet." She looked out at the pool. "You don't know what this past month has meant to the boys." There was a swift glance at me from beneath her long lashes. "They've needed to have some time with a man...just hanging out...not doing anything special."

"I've enjoyed it," I admitted, and she must have heard both the surprise and the sincerity in my voice.

"They sort of grow on you, don't they? Like a fungus?" She was making a face, her nose scrunched up adorably.

"Well...yes."

Again a silence fell between us, but there as nothing awkward about it. "Can I ask you a question?" I finally said.

"I suppose," Bella replied dryly. "But I might choose not to answer." Her tone was more serious then.

"Fair enough," I conceded. "Uh...well, was Mac stationed here when he... Well, you know."

Bella shook her head. "No, we were in Texas," she said. "Ft. Hood." I heard her take a deep breath. "Once...everything was taken care of I knew I had to get away from the area. It just held too many bad memories. I'm an Army brat myself - my dad was an MP before he retired and took a position as the chief of police in a little town. But that meant I didn't really have a hometown. I just had places I had liked living in. I had very fond memories of Ft. Bragg, and as surprising as it was to find myself back in an Army town, here I am." Then she laughed. "Of course, I've always lived in Army towns, so maybe I just needed the familiarity of it all."

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"Fond memories?" She had looked a tiny bit guilty as she said that and I just had to ask.

She giggled again. "I got my first kiss on that base, I'll have you know."

"Uh oh," I teased. "Does your father know?"

Bella shook her head and laughed again. "He'd have killed me if he knew I let a soldier kiss me." More giggles and I felt my body hardening in response.

"You naughty girl," I admonished.

She sighed and leaned back on the chaise again. "As first kisses go, it was...magical," she said in a soft, dreamy voice. "I was seventeen and quite impatient to experience more of the world. I was lucky that a very kind young man is the one who ended up giving me a sweet and gentle introduction into things. He was a very good kisser."

"Ah," I said, ignoring the surge of jealousy I felt. "Your first, huh?"

"My first kiss, yes. My first...uh... *first*...no." She giggled again. "That would a topic for another conversation." She narrowed her eyes at me in a playful frown. "Much, much later, of course."

Fair enough. I could wait. "So how old were you when you met Mac?"

"I was nineteen, and in college," she answered. "I was in a coffee shop on base and he showed up one day. He acted like an idiot, but I liked him. A lot. Far more than I let him see. So I gave him a completely outrageous proposal of how I expected him to behave before he could approach me again. And when he went along with it, I knew that I'd met the man I was going to marry."

Jealousy and envy, oh so hot and bitter, rose up within me. I knew I was being foolish but I could not seem to quell the feeling.

"And you did." I tried to sound happy.

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"Well, not right away," she told me with a grin. "I had to make him suffer first."

"If you don't mind me asking, how old were you when Emmett was born?"

Bella arched one brow at me. "Trying to get a lady to tell you her age is not very gentlemanly, you know." Then she laughed. "Well, I was 22 when I had Emmett. Mac and I had only been married a year when he was born." She grinned. "I'll turn 37 just before Emmett turns 15."

"You're *thirty-six*?" I asked in astonishment. Given Emmett's age, I had guessed at least early thirties, but to be honest, she could have passed for her mid-to-late twenties and easily.

"Well...yeah." She wrinkled her nose. "Am I lot older than you?"

I laughed. "No, *baby girl*, you're two years younger." I looked at my watch. "In fact, tomorrow you'll be three years younger."

"Holy crap! Your birthday's tomorrow?"

I shrugged. I hadn't meant to tell her that. It had just come out. Bella snorted with disgust. "Well thanks for the notice, buddy."

"I don't like to make a big deal of my birthday," I muttered.

Bella laughed and shook her head. "Oh you're missing out then!" A large smirk appeared on her face. "In our house we know how to do birthdays *right*!"

"A giant cake perhaps?" I guessed.

"Please, just a cake? That's for amateurs!" She seemed insulted.

"What then?" I was honestly curious.

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"Well," Bella began. "First, the birthday boy - or girl - gets to control the household for the day."

"How does that work?" I could feel the huge smile on my face. Just watching her enthusiasm was contagious.

"They get their favorite meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner."

"What if their birthday's on a weekday and they're at work or school?" Clearly, Bella and her boys had it all worked out; I just wanted the details.

"Then they can claim a weekend day or keep it on their actual birthday. But one day only. Those are the rules."

"You have rules?" This was hilarious, mostly because I could tell she took it very seriously. I could imagine her writing down the rules on the chalkboard in her classroom, discussing each one as she went.

"Oh yes, there are rules. There *have* to be rules," Bella replied solemnly. "So, there are the favorite meals. Then there's television control." She gave a wicked grin. "The boys hate it when it's my turn. I make them watch Lifetime movies."

"You like Lifetime movies?" I asked, surprised.

Shaking her head, she laughed. "No, not really. Mostly I just like to make *them* watch them." She grinned widely. "I usually find stuff to do in other rooms and wander in and out. They're stuck there. Those are the rules." Bella smirked.

"They can read if they want to, but of course they don't usually do that. They'd rather sit there in a coma than actually read. Except for Sam, of course."

"You're diabolical," I told her with a wink.

"That's what Mac used to say," she said softly and then she shook her head. "And the boys love a chance to make their brothers watch or eat something they don't like. It's as much a chance to harass those you love as it is to celebrate your birth. We have gifts and cake, of course, but mostly it's about

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being together - laughing and tormenting...making memories. I love birthdays!" She tossed her hair over her shoulder. "You should try it. You'd like it."

"Alas, I have no one to inflict Lifetime movies on," I admitted with a pout.

She glanced at me sideways and then smiled slowly. "Tell you what, how about you join us tomorrow and I'll make you your three favorite meals - breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And you can control the remote - a gift not given lightly in the James' household, let me tell you!"

I pretended to consider it for a moment even though there was nothing on earth that would stop me from spending the day with Bella. "Can you make French toast?"

"I make the best damned French toast you'll ever put in your mouth," she promised.

Fuck. Good thing I had a towel draped in my lap.

She really, *really* shouldn't talk about putting things in my mouth. I might just give her some suggestions.

Chapter 7: The Birthday Boy

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Author's Note: There just might be a HINT of lemony goodness in this one. Okay, just barely. I know the pace might be agonizing, but I really couldn't see them jumping into bed together. They're both older, more aware of the consequences that every action brings, and let's face it, it's hard to find private time with four kids running around even after you've made the decision! So please have patience with them...and me. And thank you for reading, as always!

Chapter 7: The Birthday Boy

For the first time in years, I woke up on my birthday actually excited about the whole ordeal. I quickly jumped in the shower, rubbed one out just as a precaution against spending the day with Bella (soldiers are like boy scouts and always prepared), and then hopped in my car and drove the short distance to Bella's house.

Jake answered the door, as was his habit. He smiled up at me. "Happy Birthday, Mr. Edward."

"Thank you, Jake," I replied, reaching out to ruffle his hair. He frowned, as he always did, and straightened out his sleek, dark hair. I knew he didn't really mind because once when I had forgotten to ruffle his hair, he reached out and put my hand on his head. I got the hint. I ruffled. He frowned. He straightened. That was how we said hello. We were both happy with the little ritual.

He tugged at my hand, leading me toward the kitchen. I could already smell the delicious aromas wafting throughout the house. Damn. Bella was a great cook.

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He released my hand, clambered up a stool at the breakfast bar and I followed suit. Together, we watched as Bella moved gracefully around the kitchen. In the background, I could hear some music. I smiled. Old school rock...AC/DC - "Let Me Put My Love into You." She was a woman of unexpected tastes and the song was uncomfortably erotic. Of course, watching her drink coffee was erotic too. I suspected that the problem just might be *me*.

She looked at me and smiled and then her eyes went to Jake. "Did you wish Mr. Edward a happy birthday?"

Jake nodded and began toying with the syrup bottle, pouting a little pool on the plate in front of him and then scooping it onto a finger and licking it up. The kid had a serious sweet tooth and he and Bella were usually engaged in a battle of wills to keep him eating fairly healthy.

"Enough," Bella warned, waving the spatula at him. He giggled and ducked his head. Then she looked at me once more. "Happy Birthday, Edward."

Something about hearing my name on her lips, seeing her still all soft and sweet from sleep, made my body react. Again. Hell, I'd spent much of the last month hard for her. I shifted on the stool, glad for the camouflage that the breakfast bar offered. "Thanks," I replied. "And I'm really looking forward to my French toast."

"Coming right up," Bella promised.

A few moments later I was groaning my appreciation for her culinary skills. "Oh...my...God..." It was like heaven in my mouth.

Bella smirked and Jake laughed. "Pretty good stuff, huh?" he asked.

By that time, the smell of the food had drawn the other boys. Emmett scowled at me as he loaded up a plate that might have fed a small country for a day...or a week. Seth was good-naturedly hassling Emmett, who merely grunted in response. They both wished me a happy birthday, though Emmett's was slightly less cheerful. Sam was the last one to arrive. I usually didn't see Sam

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on Saturday mornings. According to Bella, he liked to sleep more than the other boys and six a.m. was just too early for him.

To my surprise, Sam was quite talkative in the morning. It seemed that he got quieter as the day went on. He sat beside Jake and they teased each other, stealing bits of food of each other's plates and playfully pretending to stab at each other's hands with their forks. All of Bella's boys were close, but it was clear that Sam and Jake shared a very special bond. Maybe it was their age, maybe it was their complementary personalities. Jake was exuberant and enthusiastic, and the kid didn't have a shy bone in his body. Sam was quiet, contemplative, and protective. I was beginning to realize that not only had he appointed himself guardian to his mother, but to his younger brother as well.

It sort of reminded me of how I had viewed Masen when we were kids. Masen was only sixteen months younger than me. The age gap between Jake and Sam was slightly bigger, but they were still only about two years apart. In a family that had faced so much, the boys had learned to rely on each other. Each of them tried, in their own ways, to fill in the gap left behind by their father's death.

I sat back and ate my breakfast, watching Bella James and her sons. For the first time, I wondered if I had missed out by not sharing my life with someone.

~TBTA~

After breakfast, Bella insisted on cleaning up the kitchen while I trooped into the living room with the boys. As tempting as it was to insist on Lifetime movies, we found a Bully Beatdown marathon on Spike TV. After getting Bella's approval (which she gave, although she rolled her eyes and muttered something about testosterone poisoning), the boys and I settled in for a few hours of watching bullies get their butts kicked.

Emmett was sprawled on the floor, his big feet crossed and his back leaning against a chair. Seth was in the chair and every now and then he'd reach down and punch Emmett lightly to emphasize an observation about the program. Emmett took the abuse good-naturedly. Sam was curled up on one end of the

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couch. He had a book in his hands and during commercials he'd dip his head down and read. Jake had settled in close to me though there was plenty of room on the couch.

After a few hours of watching the festivities, Jake looked up at me with his signature crooked grin and asked quietly, "Are you having a good birthday, Mr. Edward?"

I leaned in to whisper my answer. "The best I've had in a long, long time, Jake."

Jake nodded, his expression quite pleased. "Yeah, Mom's pretty good at the birthday stuff."

I couldn't have agreed more.

~TBTA~

For lunch, I had expressed a desire earlier for Cuban sandwiches. Bella had agreed and before long I was moaning again as I realized she had found authentic Cuban bread. The cheese was melted just right and the meat was all fresh and full of flavor. She had even manipulated two frying pans, somehow, to press them together, giving them that authentic flavor and feel. "Wow," I said around a mouthful of sandwich. "You're...this is amazing." I corrected myself, but something in her blush told me that she had caught my slip.

Shrugging, she replied quietly, "It's just a sandwich."

"Best fu...best sandwich in the world," I amended hastily. She snorted and shook her head, glancing at the boys.

Sam smirked at me, obviously aware of what I'd almost said.

I winked. "I stopped myself," I whispered quietly to Sam.

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"Good thing," he replied. "Or you'd be washing your mouth out right about now. And let me tell you, that stuff tastes *nasty*."

"Know first hand, do you?" I teased.

Sam shook his head. "No, but Emmett and Jake do." He grinned at me. Sam, at least, was beginning to open up a bit more.

"Good to know." I nudged him with my elbow and he nudged back.

After lunch, I insisted on helping Bella clean the kitchen. When I suggested we go to the local arcade, the boys wore down her protests pretty quickly. She insisted on changing and I almost argued. Who would have guessed that yoga pants would be so sexy? When she came back downstairs, I was glad I hadn't pressed the point.

She was wearing an olive green skirt that came to about three inches above her knees with a soft cream tank top. She wore a pair of feminine little sandals, revealing her pedicure. I liked her feet. They were incredibly sexy with their bright pink toenails.

There was nothing immodest or provocative about her clothing but my body reacted like she was parading around in a corset and stockings, wearing fuck-me heels. It was a good thing I'd taken to wearing looser jeans in her presence. The thicker fabric of denim provided more camouflage, and dress pants were definitely *out*. They left nothing to the imagination.

The boys scattered immediately after we got the arcade, after begging their mom for money for tokens. I pressed some extra cash into each hand, acting like I didn't hear Bella's protests. So did the boys, who exhibited the healthy greed of children to enjoy an unexpected gift. Finally, she threw her hands up in the air and muttered to herself, though I didn't catch what she said. That was probably good, because her tone didn't indicate it would be anything complimentary.

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Every ten minutes or so, Sam would wander back and check on Bella. She would always give him a little smile and wave, which he would return, and then he'd go back to doing whatever it was he was doing. She and I had settled at a small table near the exit of the arcade, just so she could keep an eye out for the boys. Even as we talked, I could see her eyes restlessly roaming, keeping her boys in sight, watching over them.

"I want to thank you for a spectacular day," I said. "It's been the best birthday in... Well, in forever."

Bella smiled shyly and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'm glad. It's the least I could do after all you've done for us. Emmett especially."

"I'm not really sure I'm doing Emmett any good," I replied. "I wish I was."

She put her small hand over mine and something akin to an electric shock zinged through me. Her fingers tightened briefly over mine and her hand was shaking when she withdrew it. "You are," she assured me. "Emmett's a lot like Mac. It takes him a long time to open up. He's got a lot of stuff inside, and he's not quite sure how to let it out. That's why he does stupid shit sometimes."

"Sam said you'll get your mouth washed out if you do that," I reminded her.

"Then it's a good thing they're not here to hear me, isn't it?" She stuck her tongue out at me and I was once again shifting uncomfortably. At least there was a barrier between us so my "reaction" wasn't visible to her.

"What are you planning on doing for the holiday?" I asked, more to distract myself. I didn't make any comment on what else the fourth of July meant to them.

Bella looked down at the table and shrugged. "I don't know," she replied. "It's not a good time for us."

"I know." She looked up at me and her eyes were shimmering with tears I knew she would never let fall - not here, not in public, not in front her sons.

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Not in front of *me*.

"Listen, I was planning on visiting my parents, they're in Charleston...it's not really that far." I paused. Was I really doing this? "How about you and the boys come with me?" Well now I had done it. I couldn't very well show up to my parents' house with Bella and the boys without any warning. And once I called them to tell them, my mom would have a list of questions a mile long to ask me. A part of me hoped that Bella would shoot me down, but a much *larger* part of me was waiting anxiously for her yes.

She was biting at her lower lip again, a habit that never failed to make my body stand up and take notice. Then she met my eyes again. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," I said with a smile. "It'll be fun." I looked over where I saw Jake making fun of Seth. For his part, Seth seemed to take the teasing in stride and responded with his usual patient tolerance. - "I think it would do the boys good to get away...especially then."

Bella's eyes followed mine and she nodded. "Yeah, I think it would do us *all* some good." She smiled at me. "I guess it's my turn to thank *you*. Again."

"My pleasure." And it was.

/TBTAW

Dinner that night was good old fashioned spaghetti and meatballs. It wasn't fancy, but it was homemade and one of my favorite dishes. The boys ate it with satisfied smacks and Jake told me that it was one of his favorite dinners too.

"Good choice," he commended me as he shoveled another forkful into his mouth.

"I'm so glad you approve," I replied.

Later, the boys were in their rooms. As Bella told me, they were supposed to be falling asleep but that wouldn't happen for a few hours yet. "I've learned to

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ignore the thumps and pretend I don't know they're up there wrestling and destroying their rooms." She winked as she said it.

I insisted on helping with the dishes and after a few moments of arguing, Bella gave in. As I handed her the last dish to dry, she sighed and put it in the cupboard. She shook her head and looked at me. "I don't think I've had so much fun since-" Bella blinked. "Well, since..."

And I knew what she meant.

We stood staring at each other for a long moment. I was acutely aware of the quiet sound of her breathing. The pace seemed fast and her face pinked up with a delightful blush. Her hands were wrapping the dish towel around and around her fingers. I took a step closer, moving slowly.

I knew what I wanted to do, but I didn't know how she would feel about it. I decided the only thing to do was to be brutally and completely honest. "I'd like to kiss you," I said, and my voice was husky. To be honest, I wanted to do a hell of a lot more than kiss her, but a kiss was a good place to start.

"Why?" she whispered. She seemed genuinely surprised that I would want to kiss her.

"Because I think you're beautiful."

"Oh." She blinked up at me.

"And you're smart and sexy and funny..."

"Oh." She seemed dazed.

"Can I?" I cradled her jaw in my hand and she nuzzled into it. So far, so good.

"Can you what?"

"Can I kiss you?" Her eyes were wide and locked on mine.

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"Don't you mean ' *may* I kiss you'?"

"Yes, you may," I answered and she smiled. I kissed the corner of her mouth and it was as sweet and soft as I had imagined.

Her hands came up to slide into my hair and she gave a quick tug on the slightly longer hair at the top, the rest was a short brush cut, military style. She closed her eyes as I moved my mouth to center it over hers. "God, Bella..." I moaned. "You have no idea how many times I've thought about doing this."

I groaned as I felt her lips open up to me and her tongue slid tentatively against mine. I returned the movement and soon our tongues were dancing, advancing and retreating and twisting and rubbing. My hands were at her hips then, canting her toward me. I restrained myself from rubbing my erection against her belly, but just barely. "Bella...baby..." I heard a shuddering sigh from her.

"You're driving me crazy," she whimpered. Good, then we were both insane.

"I'm sorry," I apologized even as my mouth moved to her throat where her pulse beat madly. I couldn't keep my lips from her. My tongue wanted to taste every inch of her.

"I'm so...confused," she admitted as I nipped at her earlobe. I licked it in apology.

"So am I," I confessed.

Her head lolled back and she sighed. "Just kiss me. I'm so tired of thinking..."

I've always known how to follow orders.

So I did.

Chapter 8: Kisses and Confessions

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephanie Meyers. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 8: Kisses and Confessions

Her hands were lightly massaging my scalp and she kept giving these fucking sexy little moans. I could only imagine how she would sound if she was underneath me...or over me... Hell, at that point I didn't care. I just wanted her. It was more than the desire, it was *need*.

But I had to handle this carefully. Bella had been broken and she was just putting the pieces back together. I didn't want to blow it by pushing too hard too fast. I had a feeling that we could create something really beautiful if I was just careful. I had to let her take the lead because only she knew what she was ready for and when. I would trust her and earn her trust in return.

Bella would guide us through this.

The kiss was romantically tender and incredibly sexy in turns. One moment it was all soft sighs and pressing of lips, the next our tongues were wildly twisting around each other and I felt her nipples pebble against my chest. Still, I was careful. *Don't push it...*

When I finally pulled away I was breathing like I'd run twenty miles with a drill sergeant on my ass the whole way, yelling in my ear. Fuck. Me. The only thing that salvaged what little bit of pride I had left was that Bella didn't seem to be any better off. In fact, she looked slightly...dazzled. Or that might have been me. I wasn't sure anymore.

What was strange was that the kiss had been, for me at least, relatively chaste.

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My hands had stayed at her hips, my tongue had certainly danced with hers, but I hadn't ground my erection into her belly (I pretty much deserved an award for that), and I hadn't slipped up and told her that I wanted to fuck her over the kitchen counter. Even though I did. A lot.

Never had just a *kiss* affected me so overwhelmingly. I could feel the arousal buzzing through me like a chemical high and as much as I enjoyed, it scared the shit out of me. We had only *kissed*! God help me if I ever actually got inside her. I'd probably die of happiness. It was more than attraction; it was a terrifying feeling of *rightness*.

Bella looked at me and grinned drunkenly. "Wow," she murmured, her fingers going to her lips. "That was just...wow."

"Yeah," I agreed, giving her a loopy smile of my own. Along with the fear and arousal, I was giddy - and it felt good. Great.

Then her expression grew serious. "I...that was wrong of me..."

I brushed my thumb along her lush lower lip. "Why? I enjoyed it, and unless I'm totally misreading the signals, I think you did too."

She looked down and nodded. "Yeah, I did."

"Then why the apology?"

Bella sighed and was silent for so long that I almost thought she wouldn't answer. "Uh...well...to be honest, I'm not sure that I'm ready for...more." Her eyes flickered up to meet mine warily.

"More...as in physically? Or more as in... *more*?"

She bit at her lower lip - killing me in the process. "Both actually. I...I haven't...since Mac..." Bella squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. "I'm just not sure that I'm there yet. And for me to be...intimate... There's got to be something more than attraction there. I'm sorry. It's not fair to you."

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"Again, why the apology?" I brushed back her hair as I pondered her words. Did that mean she felt nothing but physical attraction? That she didn't like me as a *person*? And since when did I care?

Because now I did. Desperately and beyond all logic. I wanted her to want *me* in every way.

My fingers brushed her cheek. Her eyes flew up to meet mine and I smiled, cradling her face in my hands. "Bella, we can take this as slow as you need to. I don't want to fuck things up with you. I have a feeling..." I stopped myself there before I said shit I couldn't back up. Not yet. I wasn't there yet. The terrifying thought was that I actually admitted I might be there one day - with her. "I don't want to mess this up by doing something too soon. Risking this...whatever the hell it is... Rushing it might be physically *very* gratifying," I added with a shaky laugh and a deep groan as she shifted against me. Well, she had to have felt my reaction then but I continued. "But I want *more* than the physical with you, and I'm not willing to risk whatever else we might have by being...reckless or impatient."

She chewed on her lip again. "Are you sure you can just put up with my craziness? That you'll be able to tolerate me moving two steps forward and one step back? Because I will, Edward. I already know that. And I'll be jerking you along for the ride and that's just not fair."

"Why don't you let me decide what's fair for me?" I suggested, smiling at her.

"And spontaneity just isn't in the cards for me," she muttered, almost to herself. "I mean hell, I've got four other people in my life. And I mean *really* in my life."

I laughed and kissed the tip of her nose. "I wouldn't change that," I assured her.

"Even Emmett?" she joked.

"Especially Emmett," I said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Because without him, I never would have met you. I like your kids... *all* of them. And I

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want them to like me too."

She hesitated and then gave a jerky nod. "Okay, but you have to promise to tell me if-"

I placed a sweet, tender kiss on her lips. "Why don't I grab us some beers and we can sit outside on the patio and look for fireflies?" That seemed innocent enough. She probably wouldn't have reacted well to *"Can we go upstairs and take each other's clothes off and then make love all night long?"* I could talk the talk of taking it slow, but actually walking the walk was going to prove challenging.

Giggling, she nodded and walked out the sliding glass door. I opened the fridge and grabbed two bottles and took them outside. Bella popped hers open and took a sip, sighing with satisfaction. She looked up at the sky and then leaned back in the chaise she was sitting on, then she took a deep breath. "You know, once upon a time I actually had my shit together."

I laughed, but my response was completely sincere. "I think you still do. You amaze me, Bella - constantly."

She shrugged and took another sip. "I get by and have managed, for the most part, to keep my meltdowns private."

I reached over and grabbed her hand and squeezed it. She gave mine a brief squeeze in return and then dropped it. I bit off my protest.

"Before Mac left..." Bella took a deep breath. "We were...having problems. Nothing serious... We weren't on the edge of divorce or anything like that. But we had hit a rough patch...like you do. We had sort of drifted apart. I mean, it happens. You get busy taking care of the little, everyday stuff. You put off date nights because one of the kids is sick or work has been horrendous or one of a thousand other little reasons that really don't mean anything but that seem so fucking important at the time." She blinked. "We weren't communicating as well as we should have been, and that was my fault as much as his. The fact that he was gone so much didn't help either."

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"It's hard to maintain a marriage when only one of you is there." Hadn't I seen it a thousand times? The pressure on a military marriage was intense, especially during and immediately after deployments.

"It was more than that, but no, it didn't help." Bella took a sip of beer. "Still, I knew what I was signing up for when I married Mac. I'd been an Army brat. I had seen what my mom went through. So I can't say I was clueless. It was just so much... *harder* than I'd expected. Especially when he was deployed - sometimes gone for more than a year at a time, only one visit home halfway through his tour."

I remained silent, sensing that she needed to get this out. "We finally agreed that, if he didn't get stop-lossed, he'd get out after his twenty was done and consider another career. Maybe even law enforcement like my father. That was the plan, and it was all that kept me holding on. Between working and being a single mom so often, I was just... *done* with the Army. We had two years to go. I could do two years, especially since he wasn't due to deploy in that time. We'd faced the worst of it, and it would all be easier from then on."

"What happened?"

"Then he volunteered to deploy again. He'd already been two times. It wasn't his turn. But he said okay. He told me that he couldn't send his men out there knowing he had the experience they needed to keep them safe, that he couldn't let someone else do his job while he was still capable of doing it." Bella glanced at me. "I told him that was bullshit and that he got off on the adrenalin rush of it all - that he just wanted to go play soldier. He told me I was paranoid and clingy. And those were some of the nicer things we said. We fought about it. *A lot*."

"I imagine you felt betrayed," I ventured. I was guessing, but I could guess how I would feel. He had promised her something and then had broken that promise willfully. But I could understand Mac's point of view as well. The responsibility of men's lives left a heavy burden on a man's heart, one that was not easily set aside.

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Bella grimaced. "It was really...bad just before he left. We barely spoke, and when we did it got ugly-" Bella looked down at her beer. "We were like two strangers living in the same house -roommates that had had a really horrendous fight. I regret that I didn't appreciate the time we had left more." She sighed. "I can't believe I'm telling you this."

"I'm glad," I insisted. "I want to know."

"Now, I just want to kick myself for not treasuring those weeks we had," she said softly.

"You couldn't have known," I said. "Neither did he. I'm sure he felt the same way you did."

"He'd only been there less than a month when..." Bella sighed and shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. "I was so pissed at him when he left. I tried to get over being mad, but I was...not easy to live with..." Then she looked at me. "I was so wrong to let him leave while there was still this *thing* between us. I should have made it right. I mean, you know there's a chance they won't come back but you don't *know* it. You always think that somehow it won't be him, that it won't be you getting that knock on your door. It's always someone else, right?" She smiled sadly. "And then it *was* him and it *was* me and they were at *my* door...and he was gone. And I never got a chance to tell him that I still loved him and that I wanted us to work things out."

"Bella, if Mac was *half* the man I think he must have been after coming to know you and your sons, then he already knew that."

Bella shook her head and closed her eyes. I didn't say anything else, sensing she just needed me to sit there and let her think. After about ten minutes, she heaved a sigh and looked over at me with a rueful smile. "How'd you get so damn smart?"

I grinned at her. "My mom likes to 'talk it out' all the time." I shrugged. "I guess I picked up a few things whether I wanted to or not."

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"You sound like you're really close to your parents," Bella said. "I'd like my boys to feel like that when they're grown and gone."

"I don't think you have to worry about that," I assured her. "Those boys worship the ground you walk on."

She laughed and shook her head. "God! I hope not!"

"Why?" I was genuinely curious. Her mind's inner workings fascinated me.

Shrugging, she put the empty beer bottle down on the patio. "Too much pressure. I screw up with them all the time. But I hope they know that I've always done my best, and even when I've screwed up, I tell them that I'm sorry and I didn't mean to. I don't want them to see me as perfect." She rolled her eyes. "That would make life difficult for whoever they want to share their lives with."

"Good point," I said. "Good thing my mom has some bad habits just so I know she's not perfect."

"Like what?"

"Well, she's a picky eater," I teased.

"You're right, she's a complete bitch," Bella teased. "I don't know how you tolerate her."

"No, I'm serious. She hates salad, calls it rabbit food. What other woman do you know that hates salad? The woman would live on burgers and brownies if my Dad wasn't a doctor and nagged her into eating healthy."

"My mom can't cook to save her life," Bella offered.

"Well my mom has these weird feet; her second toe is longer than her big toe."

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"Now you're pointing out your mother's physical shortcomings?" Bella admonished. "Nice..."

"She calls them her monkey toes," I defended myself. "So it's okay."

"My mom once served guacamole pizza to my girl scout troop."

"No fair concentrating on food," I protested.

"Okay... Well..." Bella took a deep breath. "My mom told me that I needed to start dating again when Mac had been dead six months. She told me I was too old to put it off and if I wasn't careful I'd die alone." She tried to cover up her obvious pain with a sickly smile.

"Ouch." I winced, unable to believe that her mother had actually said that - and even worse, *believed* it.

"She meant well." Bella grimaced. "I win, I guess."

"As much as it pains me to admit it, I concede." I was trying to lighten the mood. I debated my next words for a few moments and then forged ahead. "So...uh...do you think that...one day, possible...in the future...you'll be ready to be in a *relationship*...again?"

She sighed and leaned back on her side so that she was facing me. "Honestly?"

"Please."

Again with the lip nibbling. "Well, I don't think I'm quite... *there* yet." She shrugged. "I guess...maybe...start off... *casually*?"

I turned on my side too. I reached across the small space between us and brushed my knuckles over her cheek, which felt so soft and warm under my touch. "That sounds good to me," I told her. "We'll take this slow."

"Edward, you're a good looking guy," Bella began.

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"So nice of you to think so," I teased. "I was starting to worry that you hadn't noticed that I am, in fact, male."

"I'm serious," Bella insisted. "You don't need to waste your time waiting for a widow with four kids to get her shit together and be ready to be a big girl again."

I smiled at her. "Well it's my time to 'waste' then, isn't it? And actually, I'm sort of looking forward to hanging out with you and the boys, getting to know the five of you." I paused. "If that's all right with you."

Her smile was brilliant...blinding.

This time she reached for me and brushed her hand over my cheek. "I'd like that...a lot."

I laughed. "Good, it's settled then."

I was insane, absolutely and completely insane.

And I was all right with that.

Chapter 9: The Hard Way

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Chapter 9: The Hard Way

"So..." Jasper began as I was eating the meal Alice had prepared. "How's the lovely widow?"

Alice nudged Jasper and rolled her eyes at him. "Really, Jasper? That's the best you can do? I told you to be *subtle*!" She muttered under her breath, "As if anyone with a Y chromosome can do subtle...I should have known...handled it *myself*...can't trust *anyone*..."

I laughed at the look of chagrin on Jasper's face. That boy was whipped and we all knew it. Then I turned to Alice and groaned. Honestly, I hadn't known Alice that well before I moved to Ft. Bragg. Jasper had met her after we parted ways after Basic. I had met her a few times of course, but we'd never interacted on a prolonged basis. After reconnecting with Jasper here, though, I had gotten to know Alice Whitlock quite well. I liked her a lot; she was the perfect woman for Jasper.

That did not change the fact that she scared the hell out of me.

She was like a pit bull on PCP when she wanted something. Right now she wanted information. I could see it in her big blue eyes. If the government could bottle her abilities, there'd be no need for any other sort of interrogation techniques. They could just set the "Alice Factor" loose on them and all their secrets would come tumbling out. "Oh no," I said, shaking my head. "I've got nothing to say."

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Alice made a pouty face and Jasper patted her hand consolingly. "Well..." she sighed. "I didn't want to do this, but you've given me no choice."

Uh oh. I had a bad feeling about this. "What did you do?" I looked at Jasper but he wouldn't meet my eyes. Cowardly little shit. Of course, he *was* married to Alice. I couldn't blame him.

Alice just shrugged. "Never you mind," she said with infuriating nonchalance.

"Alice..." I warned.

She glanced at Jasper, who shrugged at her and held up his hands in surrender. He was staying out of it. Ass. "Okay, then, but just remember you *could* have done this the easy way, but since you didn't, we had to do this the hard way." She scowled at me, as if personally offended.

"When did you join the mob, Mary Alice?" I used her full name because I knew it pissed her off. Her eyes narrowed. "You gonna make me an offer I can't refuse?" I taunted.

"You're just digging yourself in deeper, Cullen," Jasper muttered, shaking his head.

"Sounds like I'm in pretty deep already, Whitlock." I eyed Alice, who merely stared back at me. Damn. She wasn't backing down. "All right, *Mary* Alice, why don't you tell me what you did?"

"If you call me Mary Alice one more time you're going to be very, very sorry, Edward Cullen," Alice said in a low voice. I looked over to see that Adam, their only son, was watching us with avid interest. The twins, Sophie and Sarah, were at a friend's house.

"You're in trouble," Adam said matter-of-factly.

"So it would seem," I replied.

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Adam turned his attention back to his plate. He wasn't going to come to my defense either. He was a smart kid.

"Edward," Alice began. "I've been patient." I snorted. "Really, I have. Ask Jasper." Jasper nodded. "But this is getting beyond ridiculous."

"That's just too bad," I said. "I'm not talking."

"Remember what I said about the easy way or the hard way?" Alice asked.

"Yes." I was getting a very, very bad feeling.

"It turns out that one of the twins was in the same class as Sam James." I groaned and flopped back in my chair. Adam shook his head and grinned at me.

"And?"

Alice smiled innocently. I didn't trust her - not even as far as I could toss her tiny little body. "You know that we're having a party for Adam's birthday next Sunday," Alice said. "It's the last weekend before the 4th of July. I kept waiting for you to tell me that you had invited Bella and her boys. Like I *told* you to." She frowned at me. "But you didn't. And finally I just had to take matters into my own hands." She sighed. "We could have avoided this whole mess, but no...you had to do things the hard way." Alice gave me a smug little smile. "You know what's wonderful about having kids in the same class? At the start of the year, they send out a list of phone numbers for every parent, just so that you can get in touch if you need to."

Fuck. Me.

"Tell me you didn't..."

Alice grinned. "Oh I did, I most definitely did."

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"Maybe Bella is busy." I was grasping at straws. It wasn't that I didn't want to see Bella; I just knew that if Jasper saw me interact with her he would immediately guess I was a horny little shit who couldn't control my dick in Bella's presence. He'd probably also guess that I was - most likely - falling in love.

"She's not," Alice replied smugly. "I've already got her confirmation. Bella James plus four." Alice sniffed. "I haven't decided if I'm inviting *you* or not."

I looked at Jasper. "Traitor."

He looked down at his plate. "I tried to warn you," Jasper said quietly.

Alice clapped her hands. "Don't you just love it when a plan comes together?" Then she smirked at me. "Maybe if you really behave yourself, Bella will let you come with her and the boys."

Yeah. I just freaking loved it when Alice interfered in my life.

"My cousin's coming to visit," Adam informed me. I was desperately grateful for the change of subject.

I looked at Jasper, who shrugged. "One of my sisters' kids..." he explained. I didn't ask which one. Jasper's parents had married, remarried, and procreated with glee and abandon. I couldn't keep all the players straight; Jasper had given up trying.

"Her mom is having chemotherapy and she can't keep an eye on her," Alice supplied. "So she's staying with us this summer."

"Wow, four kids - all summer long?" I was amazed at their generosity in opening their home to a virtual stranger. "That's a lot to handle."

Jasper gave me a sly look. " *Four* kids will just make things...interesting." I would have loved to punch the smirk off his face, but I didn't think Alice would appreciate it. I had already admitted that she terrified me, so that was enough of

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a deterrent. I settled for sulking while I finished my meal.

~TBTA~

Since I was already in deep shit, I decided to go ahead and give my mom a call. Why not call the day a complete disaster and start over tomorrow? After my mom gushed her pleasure at the unexpected phone call, laying on the guilt while she did so, she went in for the kill.

"So...what's going on, Edward?" It *sounded* casual, but I knew my mom and the question was anything but.

"Nothing," I insisted.

She snorted. "Okay." She managed to put a wealth of skepticism in a single word.

"Uh...I was wondering if you'd mind if I brought a friend for the 4th of July weekend." I knew Mom would immediately smell blood in the water and she would be circling. I could practically hear the theme from *Jaws*. I had never brought anyone to a family gathering. You started doing *that* shit and women got the wrong idea. Lilith had already known my family so that didn't count.

"Would this be a female friend or a male friend?" Mom asked. She was going to play this casual. Okay, I could do that. I had a lifetime of experience in playing it casual.

"Female...and male," I amended.

Mom laughed. "Well now this sounds very interesting. I don't think I've ever met someone who was both. How exciting. Wait until the girls at the bridge club hear about this."

"Uh...what I meant was I want to bring a female *friend*, but..." God, this was harder than I expected. "She's got kids." I cleared my throat. "They're boys. So, you know, male and female."

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"Of course, dear, you know any *friend* of yours is welcome in our home." The sarcasm was getting ridiculous.

"She's just a friend, Mom." *Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

"Of *course*, dear." *Dear* was code for "I love you, my moronic son."

"Okay, well thanks." I didn't know where to go from there and I just wanted to figure out how to get off the phone as quickly and painlessly as possible.

"How many sons does she have?" As always, Mom went straight for the question I wasn't ready to answer. I had sort of hoped she wouldn't notice that there were four of them. I mean, the kids moved around a lot. You could lose count, right? I wasn't sure how my parents were going to react. I already knew that Bella had a lot of baggage, but I really didn't want to discuss it.

"Four," I answered and waited for the screaming to begin. I waited for her to tell me to run far, far away. Mom, being Mom, did exactly what I wasn't expecting.

"Oh how wonderful!" The funny thing was that my mom wasn't being sarcastic *now*. She was completely sincere. She had always wanted a big family but after my brother was born, she couldn't have any more. Still, it was one thing to want a large family yourself and quite another to hear that your son was dating a woman with four kids. On the other hand, she was probably just thrilled to death that I was actually dating anyone at *all*. She would probably have introduced the Bride of Frankenstein to her bridge cronies with delight. "So, tell me about her."

That was all it took, my mouth opened and I began talking about Bella and Emmett and Seth and Sam and Jake.

"So, her husband died in the war?" Mom was asking, her voice sad. "How terrible for her."

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"Yeah, but she's handling it better than you would imagine. She's so strong and she's such a good mom. Those boys are so lucky to have her," I said, settling down into my favorite chair and finally relaxing. "Emmett's having the most trouble adjusting."

"Yes, but he probably feels like he's the man of the house," Mom pointed out. "That's got to be hard on him."

"And then there's Jake..." I sighed. "That kid, he drives you crazy, but it's like you *want* him to. He's got me completely wrapped around his little finger and he knows it. He's...he's really a great kid."

"I can't wait to meet them." Mom said. "Wait until I tell your father."

"Dad's going to get the biggest kick out of Sam," I said. I wasn't ready to stop talking about them. "He's smart, like *scary* smart Mom. He'll have a million questions for Dad about science and medicine... Dad will be in his element." I laughed. "He's the most responsible ten-year old on the planet."

"And what about Seth?" Mom asked. I could hear the smile in her voice. It gave me a warm feeling to know that she wanted to know more about Bella, about the boys.

"He's like the diplomat of the group," I told her. "Always smoothing the way, calming the waters... There are a lot of strong personalities there, but he just sort of deals with them all, never losing his cool. Even when Bella is going crazy, he's just sort of sitting back and taking it all in."

"They all sound wonderful, Edward."

"Ah, Mom...thanks," I said. "I really...I can't wait for you to meet them. Especially Bella. She's...she's special Mom."

"I already knew that," Mom said quietly.

"Yeah? And how did you know that?"

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"I could hear it in your voice."

I paused. There was something else they needed to know before we got there, just in case I didn't get a chance to talk to them in private. "Uh...Mom...one more thing."

"What's wrong?"

"Well, it's just that the fourth of July is when it happened," I said. "It's when her husband died."

"Oh my," Mom breathed.

"It'll be two years," I continued. "And to be honest, I'm not really sure how any of them will handle the actual day. So I just wanted to give you a heads up."

"We'll make them welcome," Mom said warmly. "You can be sure of that."

~TBTA~

Then I called Bella, the most pleasant conversation of the day. "Hey you," I greeted her. "I just wanted to confirm our plans for the Fourth."

There was a pause and my heart sank. What if she'd changed her mind about...everything?

"Are you sure your parents are okay with this?" Bella finally asked and I took a deep breath.

"More than okay," I assured her. "My mom's over the moon excited. My brother and his family can't travel that far, so it was just going to be the three of us. My mom absolutely adores kids, so she's really looking forward to having a house full of them for the holiday."

"She might change her mind after we invade," Bella teased.

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"She won't," I assured her.

Another pause. I was getting nervous again. "Are *you* sure?" Bella asked. "About...us?" There was a deep sigh from her. "I know I'm asking a lot. I'm sort of damaged goods and you could do so much better."

"Bella, all I can tell you is that I'm doing what I want to do," I said. "Please don't make the choice for me out of some misguided sense of protecting me. I'm a grown man. I know what I'm getting into."

"But I can't help feeling that I'm being unfair to you. You probably have a thousand women that would fall over themselves to be your girlfriend, and I'm not even ready to label us yet."

"We'll start slow, Bella. We've got all the time in the world," I told her. "Let the boys get used to seeing us together more and more." I lowered my voice. "Maybe let them see us touch...innocently, casually..."

She gave a shaky sigh. "That sounds...perfect actually." Then she paused. "Edward, are you *really* sure about this?"

"I'm willing to wait for however long it takes for this to feel right." I laughed. "Hell, Bella, I'm almost forty years old and I've never, ever felt this way. So what difference does it make if we wait a little while to let things work themselves out?"

"Thank you." Her voice was soft and uncertain. "But promise me that you'll tell me if you change your mind. I don't want you to stick around out of some misguided sense of loyalty and-"

"Bella?"

"Yes?"

"Stop talking. Let's just enjoy this. Okay?"

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Soft laughter and I heard her sigh again. "Okay."

Chapter 10: Pizza and Awkwardness

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

*Author's Notes: I've dated as a single mom, and I'd like to say that the number of kids makes a difference. Believe me. LOL! And not just to potential dates, but to their families. They all like to have their say. :p Also, I've found that as we get older (I'm in my mid-40s), we **tend** to get more patient. So a man of Edward's age in this story (39) is much more likely to be able to keep his pants on in the hopes that something with more depth will develop. He's not going to react to this situation like a 20-something. Or even a guy in his early 30s. When you start staring the big **4-0** in the eyeballs, something happens. You start thinking "Hell! Half my life is probably over. So what do I want to do with the next part of it?" I'm trying to keep him as in character as possible for a man of his age and experience, given his family history of a long and successful marriage for his parents. I hope that makes sense.*

As always, thank you for your interest and support. It means more than you can know!

Chapter 10: Pizza and Awkwardness

On Sunday night I called Bella to wish her a good night's sleep.

I rubbed one out in the shower later, fantasizing about having her in there with me. *Having* her there being the operative phrase.

On Monday I called her in the afternoon and asked her how her day was going. She sounded tired, so I cut the conversation short.

Later that night, I committed a lewd act of self-love.

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Tuesday I was going to play it cool and not call. I was strong. I was a man.

I was also very, very wrong.

A thirty minute conversation and another dirty session of self-abuse and naughty fantasies and I fell asleep.

On Wednesday, I surrendered to the inevitable early on and called Bella on my lunch hour. "Hey stranger," she teased.

"Hello, pretty lady." Playful Bella was fun; I just didn't get to see that side of her very often. "Listen, my favorite pizza joint has a...uh...well, it's like a family special on Wednesdays and since I haven't been back there since I got home, I was hoping that you and the boys would...uh...come with me...?"

I was really nervous. This would be our first foray out into the world with the boys since we had admitted to having feelings for each other. We hadn't even established exactly what those feelings *were*, but I knew I wanted to spend time with her. I even wanted to spend time with the boys, which was scary as hell.

Bella was silent for a long moment. Maybe she had changed her mind. Shit. Then she laughed and my body began reacting in predictable ways. "Oh my God! You have to be talking about Pete's!"

"How'd you know?" Man, I *really* hoped she wasn't a mind reader, because I had a *lot* of dirty thoughts.

"Well, it's only like the best pizza in the universe!" She sounded excited and that had to be good, right?

"Are we going to Pete's, Mom?" I heard Jake asking in the background. Okay, so Jake knew all about Pete's Pizza. No surprise there. Kids knew pizza.

Bella asked softly, "So...are we going to Pete's?"

"I guess we are," I answered, unable to help the big grin on my face.

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"Yes, we're going to Pete's," I heard her say. Then there was a loud whoop of joy and I heard Jake yelling, "Hey Em! Guess what, we're going to Pete's tonight!"

"I take it that Pete's was a good choice?" I couldn't help but ask, though I was grinning like an idiot. I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. Score one for Edward. I'd get this shit figured out in short order.

"You have no idea," Bella said dryly. "But be prepared, for the last year Emmett has been able to eat a whole pizza by himself."

"I'm not afraid of him," I mocked.

"Oh, you will be," Bella retorted.

"Bring it on." I was getting cocky and I knew it.

"All right then, you asked for it."

"I'll pick you all up at six then?"

"We might want to take my vehicle," Bella explained. "I've got more room than you do."

"Uh..."

"What?"

"Well, I hate it when other people drive," I confessed.

She laughed. "Is this a male thing or an Edward thing?"

"Strictly an Edward thing," I assured her.

"Okay then, since you're putting up with my little quirks, I guess I can let you drive my SUV."

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"Sounds great." And it did, God help me, it really did. Pizza and beer and soda and four noisy boys and a restaurant full of kids and their parents. It suddenly sounded like the perfect way to spend the evening.

What had I turned into?

~TBTA~

Dinner with Bella and her boys proved...interesting. For one, I'd never been to Pete's on a family night with an actual family in tow. Usually, if I had a hankering for Pete's on a Wednesday, I'd order it to go. There was no fucking way I had wanted to sit surrounded by a bunch of whiny kids and their shell-shocked parents.

Now, there I was, sitting by Bella and the four boys who were quickly and unobtrusively working their way into my lives. From the outside, I knew that we looked no different than the other families surrounding us. Jake was the comedian and kept us entertained with his sly observations of those around us. Truly, the kid had a knack for both mimicry and cutting humor. Emmett was mostly silent, but his eyes kept darting between his Mom and me. His lips were pressed together most of the night until Jake gave him a not-so-subtle kick under the table and Emmett attempted to be more sociable after that.

Attempted being the important word. The kid would never make a poke player. His unhappiness with my presence radiated from every pore. Emmett was proving to be the most challenging member of the family to get to know. Strangely, that didn't bother me. I had seen his type before. I had trained men who must have been like him at that age. He had been given a heavy burden at a young age and was doing the best he could. Emmett James had a lot of potential. From family photos, I could see that Emmett had been a boisterous boy, usually laughing and enjoying himself. I hoped he could find that person again. I knew if anyone could help him do so, it would be Bella. Still, the kid didn't like me and that was something I was going to have to deal with if I ever wanted to proceed in a relationship with his mother.

That was an intimidating thought.

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Seth, as always, fulfilled the role of diplomat and ambassador. He made a conscious effort to include me in their conversations, explaining any inside jokes that I might not understand. Bella let him take the lead there, though I could see she was anxious to include me as well. There were hidden depths to Seth and I looked forward to learning about him. I finally understood that, in some ways, Seth stood apart from his brothers. Emmett was the oldest, Jake was the baby, and Sam was the 'smart' one. Seth's gifts were more subtle but he didn't seem to mind being slightly out of step from his siblings. He looked after his mother in his own gentle way, was closest to Emmett though they were quite different, and watched over Jake and managed to do so without being bossy. I noticed as Seth moved Sam's drink from the edge of the table and as he warned Jake that the pizza was hot.

Then there was Sam. Every time I interacted with Sam I became more and more impressed not only with his intellect, which was formidable, but with his sense of responsibility. I suspected that this sense had not been conceived on his father's death, but had always been there. Sam was an old soul and could carry on surprisingly mature conversations without seeming arrogant or conceited or obnoxious.

But I found my thoughts always drifting back to Bella. Seeing her there, amidst the noise and the chaos that was Pete's on a Wednesday night, I was only further enchanted. It did not escape my notice that of all the women in Pete's that night, Bella was by far the most beautiful. Last week I had seen a picture of her mother with the boys taken last summer and I could see that Bella had aged like her mother, gently and with great grace. She was beautiful yes, but I had a feeling that even as an old woman, her sweetness and generosity would still make her lovely.

Bella had a tender spirit, bolstered by a core of steel and strength. Her strength was obvious when I looked at this woman who had faced the nightmare of her husband's death and still found the will to give her boys a good life. She existed *for* them, but did not place the burden for making her happy *on* them. It was a rare and difficult balance to strike. I wanted nothing more than to kiss her right there in the middle of the restaurant and tell her how beautiful she was, how much in awe of her I was, and how very much I was looking forward to

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possibly building a relationship with her.

Unfortunately, at the moment we had four chaperones and all of them were watching us closely. Their eyes missed nothing, keeping track of how close my leg was to their mother's and how many times our hands brushed. We had to escalate our relationship slowly, for their sakes as much as Bella's. It would do me no good to win Bella's affections if I alienated her sons in the process.

Clearly, their mother going out to dinner with a man was something new for them. That they had been invited along had not allayed their suspicions at all. They knew *something* was up. Looking around the table, I could read their reactions to that realization. Jake was fine with it. He liked me, for whatever reason, and probably didn't see any reason not to have me around. One for Team Edward. Seth was curious, but about what I couldn't tell. He wasn't committed to "my" side, but he wasn't against me either. He wanted whatever Bella wanted. Since Bella wanted me around for now, I counted him as being on Team Edward too. I'm an optimist, what can I say?

I had to repress a sigh when I studied Sam and Emmett. Sam was...resigned. He had probably figured that, at some point, his mother would date. He wasn't happy about it, but he had decided to accept it. Sort of. He wasn't sure he could trust me yet, and that was okay. He was going to reserve judgment until he could get a better handle on me and my intentions. I had all the time in the world to show him that I wasn't going to hurt his mother so I figured that eventually I would get him to like me. As long as I didn't fuck things up, which I had no intention of doing.

Emmett, however, was a different case altogether. He was openly hostile toward my suspected intentions for his mother. He was older, he had a much better idea of what men and women did together. Obviously, his hormones were raging at this point and he had a better comprehension of the sort of hungers a man had. He had just enough knowledge to realize that my interest in Bella was not purely platonic. However, he didn't have the experience to know that women also had needs and that his mother had been very lonely for too long. Bella was a beautiful woman who was in the prime of her life. It was only natural that men noticed her, that men *wanted* her. And that Bella would have

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desires of her own.

Emmett's problem with me was two-fold. First, he was angry at me for thinking of his mom like that and second, he was angry because he probably felt that the only man who had the right to share that with his mother was his father. I would have to proceed very carefully, not only for Bella's sake, but for his. I didn't want to hurt him, but I also wanted to be as honest as possible.

I vowed then and there to be as forthcoming as I could if he raised the question. Honesty was the best policy. He would understand.

Which proves, beyond all reasonable doubt, that I am a fucking idiot.

~TBTA~

I called Bella on Thursday. I could hear the boys yelling in the background. I had noticed that they yelled a lot. Bella didn't seem to notice at all. I supposed it was one of those things that a parent got used to. I had never realized that kids were so...noisy. Hearing the boys clump down the stairs brought to mind a herd of elephants. They didn't usually have any volume control, and they shouted rather than go looking for whoever they were calling for.

Finally, after ten minutes, she gave up and retreated into her closet. It was a walk-in and one of the reasons she had purchased the house, she told me. I hadn't seen it of course as I had never been inside of Bella's bedroom, which was a damned shame as far as I was concerned. In fact, I had never been upstairs. Nevertheless, Bella's bedroom had featured in more than one dirty fantasy.

Talking to Bella was surprisingly easy. Usually, it was the talking part that left me flummoxed. Kissing, fondling, sex...these were things I understood. It had been a long time since I had simply *talked* to a woman that I was also interested in getting into bed. And over the dining room table. And in the shower. And in the pool.

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Later, I watched the Travel Channel (mostly because I was too lazy to reach all the way over for the remote) and started fantasizing about all the cities I'd like to take her to. I also pictured all of the places I could find to make love to her in those foreign cities.

I make a mental note to never watch "Dirty Jobs" again, for fear of what sort of fantasies I might have.

On Friday I called Bella again. The house was shockingly silent and Bella told me that the boys were playing at a friend's house. For some reason I imagined them playing cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians like Masen and I had done as kids. When I shared that with Bella she snorted with laughter.

"More like Star Wars Unleashed," she informed me. "It's all about video games now, Edward."

"I've got a lot to learn," I admitted with complete honesty. I laughed then, wondering if anyone I knew could give me a quick tutorial in kids. I had Jasper... and my brother. But there was no way in hell I was going to call and ask my brother's advice. He'd never let me live it down. If my mom had been talking to him - and I knew she had - then he'd give me the third degree. I was done with interrogations for a while. I had sort of expected a call before now and was just glad I had dodged that particular bullet.

Friday night, I had a sex dream about Bella and it was a really good one. In my dream she was kneeling at my feet, her plump lips wrapped around my cock. Her tongue was doing things that made my knees tremble and when I came with a shout, she swallowed me with a groan and a sexy little smirk. "Oh, Bella...baby...that...so hot...good..." Even in my dreams I was an incoherent mess.

My dream got even better when I picked her up and put her on the bed. She spread her thighs and I got a look at her wet, pink sex. I kissed her thighs, even gave them a playful nip. Then her fingers were tugging at my hair, putting my mouth where she wanted it to be. I lapped at her juices, licked up and down her slit, and then I slid two fingers inside of her while I sucked at her clit. "More,"

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she ordered.

She came with a shout of her own, a shout that woke me up and left me disoriented and gasping for air. I grimaced when I realized that not only had I had a sex dream about Bella, I had had a *wet* dream. My own sticky mess coated my belly and thighs. I couldn't remember the last time that had happened to me.

What was I? Fourteen?

I grimaced as I got up to wipe off the mess. Ah hell, only a shower would do. As I stood there under the hot spray I pondered the situation in which I now found myself.

I was desperate to get into Bella's bed. No doubt about that. Twenty years ago I wouldn't have had the patience necessary to appreciate a woman like Bella. Hell, even ten years ago I would have definitely blown it by pushing too hard, too fast. It wasn't romantic, but since I wouldn't have been interested in anything else, sex would have been the lynchpin of the "relationship."

Now here I was, aching and ready for her pretty much 24/7. And I was waiting, trying so very hard to hold onto what little control I had left. Age had given me a patience and perspective I wouldn't have had earlier in my life. Maybe that was one of the reasons I hadn't met someone like Bella before.

No, that wasn't right. Maybe that was why I hadn't met *Bella*. I hadn't been ready for her before now.

Because I knew one thing for sure - there was no one else out there *like* Bella.

~TBTA~

On Saturday morning as I drove Emmett to our next work site, I was a little off balance from my extremely vivid dream. It was also a little disconcerting to face Emmett knowing I had been dreaming about his mother's lips around my cock. Talk about awkward.

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Later, I wasn't sure if it was my own guilt that made Emmett suspicious or if he had been working up to the confrontation for a while now. Maybe it was a combination of the two factors, but in the end it didn't matter. We were doing some painting at a tiny little church. Most of the parishioners were older and unable to do much work around the church. Mr. Hoyt had clued me in when I told him I was looking for someplace else for Emmett and I to put in our hours.

Emmett was even more taciturn than usual, giving me grunts instead of his customary one word answers. I decided that I was going to try really hard to connect with Emmett, to make him see that I was basically a decent guy. Well, except for my dirty fantasies about his mother.

"So, Emmett, you have a girlfriend?"

He shrugged. Okay, so the whole 'breaking the ice' thing wasn't going so well. But I'd never let a little hard work stop me.

"How do you like living near Ft. Bragg?" I was bound and determined to get this kid talking.

Another shrug. I felt like I Emmett was a prisoner of war and I was doing my best to break him. I didn't like the feeling.

"Are you looking forward to high school?" I asked, feeling a little desperate.

He just rolled his eyes. I was starting to understand why teenagers had a bad reputation. Kids of Jake's age were much friendlier. I wondered if surliness was a result of all the hormones surging in his ever-changing body. I wondered if there was a cure.

"Hey, your mom told me that your grandparents are coming to visit in August. I'll bet you're looking forward to that."

And that, I figured out later, was the straw that broke the camel's back. I had mentioned his mother, even if it was just in passing. He heaved an irritated sigh and tossed his paintbrush on the drop cloth. Then he turned and stared at me

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with eyes that far too old for his tender years. I flinched at the anger there, but my heart ached for the pain I saw in them.

"Look... Just because you're fucking my mother doesn't mean I have to actually *talk* to you," he said in a flat voice.

Chapter 11: Floodgates

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Chapter 11: Floodgates

At first, I thought maybe I had been out in the sun too long and was hallucinating. One look at the expression on Emmett's face disabused me of *that* notion quickly enough, though it would have been a nice alternative.

Honestly, I wasn't sure what pissed me off more - that Emmett had talked about his mother in such a disrespectful manner or that he had used such a crude term to talk about what he thought we were doing or that he had *assumed* something that wasn't true. I decided to focus on the bigger issues. He had dropped the "F" bomb; I could deal with that later. Really, in the scheme of things it was rather minor. Okay, moving on.

"Excuse me?" I felt my fists clenching at my sides. It was easy when I looked at Emmett's huge size to forget that he was still a kid. He wasn't even fifteen yet, his father had died, and he was having trouble adjusting. I got that. But no one, not even her son, was going to talk about Bella that way. "What did you just say?"

Emmett's eyes narrowed and his chin jerked up. "You heard me."

The urge to just scream at him warred with the urge to pin him in my arms and get him good and pissed off until he finally talked about all the shit he had bottled up inside. Extreme hugging just might work wonders. I took a step closer. "I don't appreciate you talking about your mother that way."

He snorted. "So don't appreciate it then. I don't give a shit."

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I ground my teeth together and wondered that they didn't turn to powder in my mouth. "Emmett James, I'm not even sure where to start with that little remark, but let's start with the biggest point..."

He crossed his arms over his chest and jerked his chin up again, as if daring me to have a go at him. *He's a kid...he's a kid...he's a kid...a **big** kid, but still just a kid...*

"First, and most importantly, I am not, as you so eloquently put it, *fucking* your mother." Emmett blinked at that and I thought I saw remorse pass over his features. Emmett wasn't a bad kid, lost and angry, yes, but deep down I could see that core of goodness in him. Now I just had to tap into it. "You're doing your mother a great disrespect, first of all, to even phrase it like that." I put up my hand. "And before you *rephrase* it, no, we have not been physically intimate. Not that it's any of your business unless your mother chooses to tell you."

He opened his mouth and then closed it and suddenly the boy was back, upset that he'd done something stupid and hurtful. I could imagine the look on Bella's face if she had heard his comment. I was sure he could too. "So...you're not...uh...you know..."

So he could ask if I was fucking his mother thirty seconds ago but now he was suddenly tongue-tied and shy?

Shit. I didn't have a clue what I was doing here. I felt all of my anger fade away and I sank down onto a nearby bench with a sigh, rubbing at my face. What I needed was a fucking instruction manual. Or maybe I could write Miss Manners. "Dear Miss Manners, I totally want to bang this incredibly hot woman. The problem is that she has four sons who *know* I want to bang her. What the protocol for dealing with awkward questions from said sons? And how much honesty is too much?"

Yeah, that wasn't going to work.

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"Sit down," I mumbled. Emmett hesitated a moment and I just rolled my eyes at him. His expression turned sheepish and he sat down beside me. "Listen, Emmett, I'm not going to lie to you. I like your mother...a lot."

Emmett snorted and nodded his head. "Like *that* isn't obvious," he commented.

I sighed and reminded myself that I needed to stay on this kid's good side. And he had a good side. He was Bella's son. Hell, from what I had heard about Mac from the boys and Bella, Mac had been a good man. He would have to have been for Bella to have given him her heart. So I had to find a way to connect with what I knew was underneath the bluster. That part of Emmett was lost right now beneath his pain and anger, both of which were completely justified.

I also needed to remember that *I* was the adult and I needed to act accordingly.

"Listen to what I'm about to say to you, Emmett James," I said. "You're a good looking kid, and you're going to be a good-looking man." Emmett blushed crimson. I ignored that. I knew I was embarrassing him but that was kind of the only way to do this. "So you're going to encounter women who will be interested in you...in *that* way."

Emmett groaned. " *Please* don't tell me this is going to be a sex talk." Gone was the angry man/child. In his place was a boy who desperately wanted to drop the subject. "Really, just...please don't."

Nothing doing.

"Just listen," I told him. "You're going to meet a lot of women and you'll really enjoy your time with some of them without any other real... *connection* of the emotional type being made. If they moved away or told you they didn't want to see you anymore it wouldn't really bother you much because you'd know that there would always someone else out there who could give you the same thing. That doesn't mean you don't have to respect them while you're with them, but there won't be anything real and lasting between you. You'll have your fun and move on. They'll feel the same way, or they *should* if that's what you're doing. No one will get hurt because there aren't a lot of feelings involved." I paused.

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"But sometimes, if you're *really* lucky, you meet a woman you just know is special. And you'll move heaven and earth to be with her. You'll be patient; you'll be her friend before you're her lover because you don't want to blow it by moving too fast...or by treating her in a way that doesn't properly demonstrate your feelings for her." I smirked at him. "Hell, you'll even brave Pete's Pizza on a Wednesday night just because you want to see her and her kids."

Emmett's eyes snapped up to mine.

"Your mom, she's special. You don't need me to tell you that but I'm going to anyway."

Emmett gave a jerky nod.

"And I'm not going to lie and tell you that I'm not attracted to your mother."

"Like I'd believe *that*," Emmett muttered.

"But your mom isn't ready to be anything but friends just yet," I continued.

"And that's okay. Believe me, it's as much a surprise to me as it might be to you, but I actually like hanging out with you boys and your mother."

"But you want more." Emmett's voice was flat.

I shrugged. "Well...yeah...eventually. *If* your mom wants that. I don't know if she ever will and if she doesn't...then I'm okay with being her friend." I paused. "We're just going to let things develop naturally."

Emmett stared at me for a moment, then he snorted and shook his head.

"You've got it bad." I was shocked at this display of humor.

I grimaced and looked down at the ground, anywhere but at those piercing blue eyes. He looked like his father, and in this moment that resemblance made me feel guilty, as if I was admitting to lusting after another man's wife.

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Emmett heaved a sigh and leaned back against the wall of the church. "My Mom's been really lonely since my Dad died," he said quietly. He hunched his shoulders. "I mean, I know things weren't perfect between them, especially before he left, but..."

I had no idea that Emmett had known about the strain on their relationship. I wondered if Bella knew that Emmett had realized what was going on. Emmett sent me a sly look. "Yeah, I knew," he muttered. I remained quiet. Emmett had spoken more words in the past few minutes than he had in all the other time we had spent together. "Some of their fights weren't exactly quiet, if you know what I mean."

I closed my eyes and nodded.

"I was so...pissed at my Dad for going," Emmett went on softly, almost speaking to himself. "He didn't have to go. It wasn't his turn again yet. He put the Army before us. Again."

"He loved you," I felt compelled to say. "He adored your mother."

"I *know* that, I'm not stupid," Emmett hissed. "But it still got him killed didn't it? It still left my Mom alone." Emmett surged to his feet and began pacing. "And I was so...God, I just wanted to punch him. But I couldn't, because he's not here, is he? And I couldn't tell my Mom how angry I was, because she missed him and she was sad. I couldn't add to it by admitting that I *blamed* him. He fucking left her. Now she's got to deal with everything all by herself. And it isn't *fair*!"

The words came out of him in a torrent, as if he was almost unaware of speaking. He paced quickly, his hands tugging at his hair and his expression twisted into lines of anger and grief. This was it; the walls had come tumbling down. I wasn't sure if I was relieved or frightened. I could so easily screw this up. I didn't have a fucking clue what I was doing.

"And how do you feel about it now?" *Ask questions*, I reminded myself. *Don't project your own thoughts, your own opinions, Cullen. This is about Emmett.*

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Not you. Not even Bella. Just Emmett. Focus.

Emmett stopped pacing for a moment and stopped to look at me. "I just don't know. I hate the thought of my Mom being with anyone but my Dad. But my Dad left...and he died. He's not coming back. I don't want my Mom to be alone anymore, but I just don't know if..." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I don't know how I feel about anything anymore... I want her to be happy, but I guess what I really want is for her to be happy with my Dad. Except that's not going to happen, it *can't* happen. And since you came into the picture I see the difference in her. She's...happy again." *I made her happy.* "I'm sort of pissed at my dad all over again, because if *he* was still here, you wouldn't be." I tried not to feel hurt at that, because really, who could blame him? "I don't like it, but I know it would be a shitty thing to do to wish she was unhappy again. So now...here we are." He sounded lost and so very young. I couldn't imagine how difficult all of this was for him, especially knowing some of the circumstances of his father's last deployment.

"Emmett, I didn't know your Dad, but from what I've heard from you boys and your Mom, I think we would have gotten along," I started.

Emmett rolled his eyes. "Yeah, until he saw you checking out her ass. Then he would have pounded you."

I smiled and nodded. "Point taken," I conceded. Then I sighed and stood up as well. "My point is that I think I might be able to understand some of the reasons your father made the decision that he did."

"He decided to leave when he didn't have to," Emmett said flatly.

"Well, it's a bit more complicated than that, don't you think?" He remained silent, but did not walk away so I forged ahead. "From what I know of your Dad, only a very real sense of commitment would have made him volunteer for that deployment."

"He had a commitment to us too," Emmett observed quietly. Shit. There were fences to mend here that weren't mine to fix.

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"He did," I agreed. "But your Dad...he was just a regular guy, Emmett. He did things right and he did things wrong. No one is perfect. We can't be. It's not how we're made. He made mistakes, like *all* of us do. Unfortunately, this one cost him - and your family - a lot." I paused. "He did the best he could, which is all any of us can do."

Emmett was silent for a long moment and then gave a short nod. I could tell that the conversation was over, for the time being. That was fine. A line of communication had been opened and that was more than I could have hoped for. We weren't best buddies by a long shot. But we had talked honestly and openly. It was a start.

"Come on," I said, clapping Emmett on the shoulder. "We've got some work to finish up."

He was still surly and didn't talk, but I figured it was better than outright hostility. I was sure he still didn't particularly like me, but I hoped that at least he knew I wasn't using his mother, that I wouldn't deliberately hurt her.

~TBTA~

Bella drove to my house and from there we all went to the Whitlock house in her SUV. Bella presented Adam with a brightly wrapped gift. I had had to make do with a gift card to a video game store. It was, Bella assured me, the right way to go. Sam already knew Sophie, who was also in some gifted classes. Sarah had informed her parents that she didn't want to "do the gifted thing" and was taking regular classes. That had cracked me up when Alice told me. Apparently, Sarah was a lot like her mother, stubborn and opinionated.

All of the kids jumped into the pool with shrieks of joy. The water stayed warm now that we were in late June, so the yells were just for fun. Adam and Jake were just about the same age I guessed. They were in the same grade, so that was probably right. I realized that I needed to find out when the boys' birthdays were.

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Thought you were out of here as soon as the debt is paid, Cullen. Sucker... It was my snide inner voice. I hated that voice.

The adults gathered by the pool. Jasper shared that his niece had arrived and was currently sulking up in her room.

"Oh leave her alone," Alice said. "Girls just need to sulk sometimes. We get it out of our systems and move on." She stuck her tongue out at Jasper. "Unlike men, who pout *forever...*"

Jasper leaned in close. "Apparently teenage girls sulk...a lot," he confided. "Alice tells me it's good training for when Sophie and Sarah are older." He shuddered. "She says I should also start preparing myself for..." He swallowed hard. "Boys..."

I laughed and shook my head, very glad that I would never have to face those problems. After all, Bella had boys and boys were much more sensible.

Pump the brakes, Cullen. Danger!

The conversation was casual and easy. Bella fit in with my friends quite nicely and she and Alice seemed to be conferring quite a bit in hushed tones. Part of it was "mom talk" though every now and then their eyes darted toward me. They would study me for a moment and then usually laugh quietly. That made me a little nervous, so I turned my attention to the kids in the pool.

Emmett was sitting on the edge of the pool, watching his brothers. Sophie and Sarah were talking with Sam, who seemed a little less shy than usual. They would occasionally splash water at each other, but no one seemed upset by it. Seth was contentedly doing laps. He was a very good swimmer.

About an hour later, a tall blonde teenaged girl sauntered out to the pool. I judged her age to be about sixteen. She greeted Jasper and Alice, gave a nod to me and to Bella. "Edward...Bella," Jasper said. "This is my niece, Rosalie."

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Alice smiled up warmly at the girl and she smiled back. Knowing some of the reasons the girl was here, I couldn't help but feel sorry for her. She seemed a little distant, but who could blame her? She had been sent an uncle she barely knew, thrown in with three other kids, and had been forced to be away from her mother during cancer treatments. It was no wonder she wanted to sulk in her room.

While Rosalie had been polite to the adults, she completely ignored the kids, including Emmett who was close to her age. Emmett, however, had not been able to take his eyes off of her since she walked out. She was older than he was. She was also, I was guessing, *way* out of his league. She looked more like she should be gracing the pages of a fashion magazine than sitting by a pool in a suburban North Carolina neighborhood.

She spread her towel. Emmett stared. She put on some sunglasses. Emmett stared. She put on some sun block. He might have drooled a little. I looked at Jasper but he only rolled his eyes. Apparently he was used to the reaction his niece got. I was very glad it was his problem and not mine to deal with.

Adam was treading water next to Jake as they rested on colorful, blow up floatation rings and the two boys seemed to be hitting it off well. They certainly weren't paying any attention to us adults. I heard them discuss the merits of various video games, the most annoying girls in their classes this past year, which teachers were 'mean' and which were 'nice.' It seemed a fairly typical conversation for two boys of their age. Then Adam asked casually, "So is your dad really dead?"

After I picked my jaw up off the ground, I started to get out of my chair and tell Adam that wasn't a question he should be asking, but a quick look at the three parents in the group stopped me. Jasper just rolled his eyes and pointed at me, shaking his head, Alice shrugged, and Bella gave me a look that clearly told me to keep my butt in the chair.

I kept my butt in the chair.

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As much as Adam's question had surprised me, it was nothing compared to Jake's answer. "Yep," he answered matter-of-factly. "It was scrapnel."

Adam thought that over for a minute. "You mean shrapnel?"

Jake shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"Oh."

And that, for the boys, ended the discussion. Question asked, question answered. I looked at Bella, horrified. She shook her head at me and leaned over to whisper. "Kids are honest. If they want to know something, they'll just ask. It's not a big deal, believe me. All of the boys have been asked questions just like that more than once by kids at school."

I don't know what to say to this, so I let my mouth open - and close. And did it again. Bella laughed and shrugged. "You'd better get used to brutal honesty with kids around." She looked at Alice. "When I was pregnant with Jake, Emmett asked me if the baby was growing in my butt because it was so big."

I wasn't sure whether to laugh at that or not, but since Alice and Jasper did, I figured it was okay. Honestly, it was hard to picture Bella with a big butt, though I thought she might look big and round and pregnant.

Fuck. Me.

Funny. I hadn't felt myself falling.

Excerpt from next chapter:

"Strange how things work out, isn't it?" Bella said softly. "You think the best is behind you and you'll never feel that way again and then..." Her words trailed off and she looked away.

"Yeah, that's how it happens sometimes."

Chapter 12: You Show Me Yours

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

*Author's Note: I want to thank **everyone** who is recommending, reading and/or reviewing this story once again. You've warmed this old heart of mine. I'm now back from a wonderful time and my granddaughter is two years old officially. Expect the next update on Thursday and I have the next update ready for The Harder They Fall as well. Hope to post that between now and Thursday. Edward's rank is Command Sergeant Major, which is mentioned later in the story but I'll be honest and admit that I didn't specify it earlier because I was trying to figure out exactly what I wanted his rank to be. He's still enlisted (as opposed to an officer). We'll be seeing more from Rosalie in the future, as well as Edward's and Bella's brothers - Masen and Will. They won't just be characters mentioned in passing. I hope you enjoy the journey as much as I am. This story is really close to my heart and a lot of fun for me on top of it all!*

Chapter 12: You Show Me Yours

We were back at my house and the kids were playing Xbox. I had noticed that they didn't touch any of the war games, so I had stocked up on some racing and football games, as well as sci-fi and fantasy. I couldn't really blame them for not wanting to see soldiers blown up. I had packed away the other games. I didn't really want to play them either, and I could still kick Jasper's ass in Madden. I owned that bitch.

Bella and I were sharing some wine and sitting out by the pool, which had become one of our favorite places to sit and talk. Hearing Jake talk about Mac's death today made me realize that I didn't know that much about Mac. I wanted to know. I wanted to understand, because he was a part of Bella's and the boys' lives.

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"Do you mind if I ask what...exactly happened to Mac?" I asked quietly. "I heard Jake say it was shrapnel."

"There was an IED, but it wasn't really the explosion that killed him." Bella's voice was quiet and subdued. "A piece of shrapnel entered between his ribs, punctured a lung, bounced off a rib and then went through his heart." She looked at me. "He bled out. Fast." There was soft, bitter laughter. "A dime sized piece of fucking metal..."

"Shit." There were a lot of ways to die over there. None of them were pretty.

"Yeah." She paused. "I saw him, before they buried him. The people at Dover did... Well, he looked like Mac. Just pale." Her eyes closed and I knew she was seeing him in his dress uniform in that casket. I could almost picture it myself. The people at Dover were good, and they gave each man or woman who came through their facility the respect and care they deserved.

We were quiet for a long time. Then she opened her eyes and turned toward me, smiling gently. "Thank you," Bella whispered.

"For what?"

"For asking about him, for...not minding when the boys talk about him."

"He's their father," I replied. I reached across the small space and brushed my fingers over her cheek, where tears had traced a silvery path. "He loved you. He's a part of you. I want to know everything about you, and that includes Mac."

"It's still very...sweet...and it's good for me and the boys to be able to talk about him." She sighed. "It makes some people uncomfortable and I can tell that they just want us to shut up about him. To lock away the memories..." Our eyes met. "But there are so many more *good* memories than bad, and I don't want the end to define what we shared, to overshadow everything else, you know?"

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"You don't want the boys' most important memory of him to be how he died," I mused.

"Exactly!" She seemed pleased and surprised that I got that.

Our hands linked and I caressed the back of her hand with my thumb. "Bella, I know you loved Mac. That you still love him, that he's got a part of your heart that can never be offered to anyone else. I get that. I do." I lifted her hand to my mouth. "But I'd like you to give this...whatever it is between us...a chance. Let's just take it slow and see where it goes. I know your boys are first, and that's the way it should be. But when I say us, I mean all of us...you and the boys. Because you're a package deal...and I like the whole package."

"It's a lot," she said in a worried voice.

"If you're gonna go, go big," I teased. "Besides, I've never done things the easy way."

"I can't imagine why no one has snatched you up before now," she mused.

She knew I had never been married, but we still hadn't had the "ex talk." I knew about Mac, but no one else (well, except for first kiss guy) who might have been in her life. And I sure as hell wasn't anxious to explore the topic. I hoped she'd drop it, but I had a feeling she wouldn't.

"So what about you?" Bella asked with a slight smile. Sometimes I hate it when I'm right. "No near misses, no almost-trips to the altar?"

I shrugged. "Well twice, I guess I at least considered it, for however briefly." Ugh. Not what I wanted to talk about.

"And?" The expression on her face reminded me of Alice. Or my mother when she was on the scent of good gossip. Double ugh.

"Well, the first time I was in my twenties and was nearing the end of my first enlistment," I began. "I went back home on leave - I was stationed close then

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too - and I met a friend of the family."

Bella laughed and wrinkled her nose. "God, when you say it like that it sounds..." She shrugged. "Obviously it didn't end well."

"Not even close," I agreed. "Her name was Lilith."

"She sounds like a bitch," Bella observed with a smirk. "Sorry," she added. "I just can't get the Ice Queen from Cheers out of my head right now."

"That's about right."

"So what happened?"

"See, she wanted me to get out of the Army." I sighed, remembering the fights Lilith and I had had about the subject.

"And that was a deal breaker?" Bella's voice had an uneasy edge.

"Fuck no," I protested. I would never want Bella to think that I would put my own desires ahead those of my wife. *Wife?* Quickly putting aside that unsettling notion, I started talking, probably saying more than I normally would have. "I mean, it wasn't the fact that she wanted me *out* that pissed me off. If she had wanted me out because she didn't want me gone or she was worried about me or she didn't want to raise a family in the military or something like that, I would have walked away from the Army in a heartbeat. We both know that living this life is hard...on everyone in the family."

"But that's wasn't why she wanted you out."

"Not even close," I replied. "But I didn't let that put me off...not for a long time."

"So you kept seeing each other."

I shrugged. "I was young and in lust, so you know, I was pretty much..."

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"Whipped?" Bella giggled. That giggle got me hard every time.

"Not too bad, but still... I stayed with her longer than I would have otherwise. I even contemplated leaving the Army...but for all the wrong reasons. I really just wanted her to shut up about it." I felt compelled to defend my masculinity. "But it was her *reason* for wanting me out of the Army that pissed me off - and eventually convinced me that what we shared wasn't...real." I looked at Bella and grimaced. "She told me that she didn't want to live as a soldier's wife and the only way it was going to work was if I got out and went to medical school because she felt she deserved to be a doctor's wife and it was all for my own good anyway." I could still hear her cool voice telling me all of it as if I was a child who needed to be managed. "The clincher came when she told me that she couldn't believe I thought she'd be content to live on a soldier's salary."

"Shit..." Bella hissed. "That's beyond cold."

"So no, it did not end well," I said dryly. "But on the other hand, at least she was honest about what she wanted." I shrugged. "So I guess I should count it as a bullet dodged, right?"

Bella nodded and grinned at me. "And the other time?"

I shook my head and laughed. "Oh well, that's a bit more straightforward - less painful I guess." I shrugged. "Or maybe more painful, because she wasn't a bad person or anything. It was just lousy timing."

Bella leaned forward and pulled her legs up, wrapping her arms around her knees. I tried very hard to ignore the fact that if she shifted just a tiny bit, I could see what color panties she was wearing. "I met someone just after I turned thirty; she was divorced from some guy that she said she hated. We dated for about three months and we got along. We had a great time and I guess I sort of expected that one day - in the future - we might ease into something else...something more. I mean, I wasn't ready to propose or anything, but for the first time since Lilith I was thinking that maybe it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility." I grinned. "My mom told me that I was full of shit, and just talking that way because I had turned thirty. So of course the

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immature part of me just wanted to prove her wrong."

Bella snorted. "I'm telling you, it's that "Y NOT" chromosome!"

"My mom never said anything bad about her - and she never met Claire - but I could tell she didn't like what she was hearing me say."

"Oh my, this sounds mysterious."

"It was just a comedy of errors and bad timing mostly," I said. "Claire was a good person, but in all honesty, I missed a lot of red flags. It was my own fault. I was kind of oblivious to what was right in my face. So I don't really have anyone to blame but myself."

Bella studied me for a moment. "Let me guess...she wasn't over the ex?"

"How do you do that?" I asked, my lips twitching. I wanted to laugh; she looked so cute and smug.

She tossed her hair over one shoulder. "It's a gift, what can I say?"

"Well, yeah, that was the exactly the problem," I informed her with a rueful smile. "She went back to her ex and I ran into her about five years later and they had two kids and were as happy as they could be."

"Strange how things work out, isn't it?" Bella said softly. "You think the best is behind you and you'll never feel that way again and then..." Her words trailed off and she looked away.

"Yeah, that's how it happens sometimes."

~TBTA~

With the boys safely preoccupied with video games, I held up my finger to my lips and tugged at Bella's hand. She frowned in puzzlement, and I tugged again. "Come with me," I mouthed.

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Her hand covered her mouth and she nodded, giggling like a loon the whole time. Carefully, we snuck out of the house and into the back yard. I had a huge magnolia tree on the back edge of my property and no back neighbors. I leaned against the trunk and pulled her close to me.

"I wanted to do something," I whispered.

"What?"

"This..." I settled my mouth on hers and my tongue slid across the seam of her lips, begging entrance. Hesitantly, her mouth opened and let me in. I groaned at the taste of her...so warm and sweet.

She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me tightly against her. I shifted, trying to keep my ever-present erection from hitting her in the belly, but she shifted right back. Then she very deliberately rolled her hips, providing the most delicious friction. It wasn't enough but it was great.

I groaned into her mouth and she returned the favor. "Bella..." I rasped out the warning. This had been my idea and now I was beginning to see that it might not have been such a good one.

"Remember when you were a teenager?" she whispered. "How thrilling it was to sneak away for a few minutes of frantic groping and making out?"

"Oh...God..." She had hitched one leg around my hip and I could feel the heat of her. Right. Where. I. Wanted. It. I was torn between a desire to hold her still or rip her clothes off. Who was I kidding? I didn't want to hold her still.

"So...?"

"What?" I was stupid with lust. I could barely remember my own name.

"Making out? Groping?" She giggled. She was going to be the death of me.

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"Oh...yeah...love groping...big fan," I muttered as I allowed my mouth to travel up and down her neck. Then her breath was warm against my chest and I realized she had unbuttoned my shirt. "Naughty girl," I teased.

"I can be," she whispered. Fuck. Me. Please.

"Shit baby," I groaned and my hands were on her ass and the feel of it was better than even my dirtiest fantasies. Our tongues twined and rubbed against each other and the sound of cicadas as romantic a soundtrack as I've ever heard. Tentatively, I pulled her against me, cradling my throbbing dick against her. It was heaven. It was hell. I didn't care; I needed it.

She threw her head back a bit and moaned. Loudly. I kissed her to keep her quiet. And because I wanted to. We kept grinding and moving against each other, exactly like horny teenagers.

And it was awesome. I had forgotten how enjoyable it could be to tease and torture each other - that dance you did when sex was not quite an option just yet - and with Bella it was perfection.

I slipped my thigh between her legs to give her a little extra sensation. "God!" she cried out. I was starting to get the impression that Bella was pretty vocal when it came to sex and it was a fucking turn on.

My hands were moving her hips backward and forward and she seemed to like it. "We've gotta stop, baby," I finally rasped. If we didn't, I would embarrass myself and come in my pants like the horny teenager we both seemed to be imitating. Or I'd press her up against the tree and bury myself in her heat - not exactly the romantic first time I'd imagined sharing with her.

"Okay," she agreed breathlessly, but her hips still rocked gently against mine. This woman was going to be the death of me.

"Bella," I growled. "Seriously...I'm in pain here."

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"Suffering is good for the soul," she whispered, settling soft kisses against my throat.

"I'm begging you..."

"Sorry," she muttered, but she didn't sound sorry at all. She sounded amused. She pulled her hips away and my dick began pouting. "I got carried away," Bella said, straightening her hair and looking all embarrassed.

"Feel free to get carried away any time," I offered gallantly. So I'd die. Big deal. It would be worth it. Blue balls wouldn't actually kill me. Would they? They might.

Then Bella laughed and placed a kiss against my chest and I wrapped my arms around her tightly.

"I told you that making out and groping can be fun," she teased.

"Consider me a convert," I managed to get out before I collapsed to the ground, taking her with me.

Chapter 13: Lose My Mind

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Author's Notes: Okay, let's be honest. The kids have been easy on Edward, aside from the whole "are you copulating with my mother" issue. So now it's time for Edward to get a glimpse into the real world of parenting...warts and all. Second, parents quickly become experts at sneaking away for a little "alone" time. We could give ninjas a run for their money because let's face it, our enemies are more insidious. Children are the most effective cock blockers *ever* invented. And third, just so you know and won't be disappointed, I have no plans to suddenly ramp up their physical relationship. These two will eventually hook up, but that's not on the immediate horizon. Just thought I'd warn you.

Chapter 13: Excuse Me While I Lose My Mind

Since July 4th was on a Friday, Bella and I decided to leave for my parents' house on Thursday around eleven in the morning. I figured we would still arrive way before dinner. That was the plan. Of course, I had never really traveled with children.

We would come back on Sunday and eat lunch on the road once again. I had a plan. It would get them all out of town for the whole weekend and my parents had already told me they planned to stay away from any of the more traditional 4th of July celebrations. No fireworks, nothing like that. Mom wanted to take the kids to the beach on Saturday, and if the boys had no objections, she wanted them to stay with her and my dad while Bella and I went out and had a grown up dinner. I was completely on board for that and Bella seemed excited about the prospect, though she said she wanted to see how the boys acted around my parents before mentioning it to them or making definite plans. We

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had to see how all of them handled the 4th before making any final decision.

Even the *possibility* of time alone with Bella was enough to get me excited. Not to mention my dick was practically doing the tango.

It was around two hundred miles away and we figured we'd stop for lunch before we arrived. I drove Bella's SUV, which was really the only vehicle that could carry us all. They settled in to watch a movie that had a lot of noise in it. I'm not sure what it was, but it got their approval if the comments I heard from the back were any indication.

About an hour after we'd been on the road, Bella looked at me and gave me a shy smile. "Uh...do you think we could stop?" She was sort of squirming around in her seat.

"You feeling okay?" I asked.

She nodded. "She's gotta pee," Jake declared loudly and very matter-of-factly and Bella groaned and shook her head.

"Jake...really?" she asked.

He looked at her, surprised at her reaction. "What? You do, don't you?" He looked at her expectantly and Bella just shook her head again, hiding her face with her hands.

I had to stop myself from laughing. He had no clue why his mother was upset. He'd learn. Eventually. Being male it might take him a lifetime, but that was to be expected.

She looked at me and shrugged. "Well, yeah, I have to uh...use the restroom." She looked extremely embarrassed.

I wasn't used to stopping after only an hour but the boys seemed unsurprised by it so I didn't comment. I had a lot to learn. Luckily, it didn't take Bella long, though she was gone long enough for Jake to try and con me into buying him

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some candy. Knowing how Bella would react, I held strong though it was damn hard with those big, dark eyes giving me that puppy dog look. I swear if Bella had taken ninety seconds longer, Jake would have gotten that Butterfinger. I even considered, briefly, asking him to eat fast and not tell his mother. Luckily, I came to my senses in time. Bella would have my admittedly blue balls in a vice if I gave Jake candy on the sly. Besides, it was hard to eat a Butterfinger fast; they got stuck in your teeth.

The trip took a little longer than I'd planned due to frequent stops and trying to gather the boys together after the stops. They seemed to scatter in different directions and as I looked around frantically for Sam, I wondered how Bella did this without going insane. I was starting to realize why parents looked frazzled so often. It was like herding cats, except that these felines asked for candy and sodas and questionable souvenirs.

After their first movie was over, a vigorous debate about which movie to start next escalated into an actual argument so Bella told them "No movies!" and made them turn off the DVD player. I wasn't sure who was unhappier with that proclamation, the boys or me. Because at that point the boys, being bored and being boys, started playing the classic travel game of Sibling Harassment.

The rules are simple and few - any behavior is allowed as long as it will A) annoy your sibling to the point of insanity, and B) won't get *you* in trouble with your parents. The main object of the game was to annoy your sibling so much that *they* acted out and got into trouble while leaving you free and clear. It's a fine line to walk.

My brother Masen and I had been experts at the game, but Bella's boys practically carried it to an art form. If that shit was an Olympic event, they'd all be gold medalists and on every Wheaties box in the nation. After hearing "Stop looking at me" and "Quit breathing on me" and "You're on my side" and the ever classic "I'm not *tooouuccchhhing* you" (which was always accompanied by hands extending just a hair's breadth away from the sibling) about thirty times each, I began tapping the steering wheel with my fingers. I wondered how Bella would react if I pulled the vehicle over and told the boys to give me twenty push ups. It worked with soldiers, why not with the boys? Maybe a

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short, mile run? That would tire them out at least. Bella gave me a little smirk and turned on the radio.

I had been sure that would bring peace, but the boys started arguing about what kind of music to listen to. In desperation, I suggested we stop and eat at McDonald's. If they were eating, they couldn't be arguing. Then I realized I should probably ask Bella if it was okay if the boys ate fast food. She snorted at me when I asked. "Are you kidding? I'm a single, working mom with four boys. They could probably recite the menu."

I felt a little bit better after that. Until I actually got them all inside and Bella had to use the bathroom. Again. Then Jake insisted he was too big for a Happy Meal and wanted a "Grown Up Meal Deal" (whatever that was) instead. Emmett told him that only big kids and grown ups could get those and that Jake would *never* be big enough. So Jake kicked Emmett in the shin - hard. Seth told Jake to behave, so Jake gave Seth a little of the same for good measure. Jake was having a bad day. First no Butterfinger and then his little meltdown over his McDonald's meal. I screwed my eyes shut and wondered if they'd all go away for just five short minutes. I just needed enough time to regain my sanity.

Emmett laughed at Seth, who told him to shut his big trap, which offended Emmett and he had to explain exactly *how* offended he was to his brother. Loudly and in great detail. Seth responded with an eloquent fart noise. At least I hoped it was just a fart *noise*. Then Sam told Jake he could get a "Grown Up Meal Deal" if he wanted and Jake crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue at Emmett, who told him his face would freeze that way if Jake kept it up, but that it might be an improvement. Jake was hauling back to give him another kick in the shin when I pulled him up against me. Jake didn't even look ashamed. He just looked mad that I'd stopped him. I found myself wanting to scream, "Please, for the love of all that's holy! Just stop the madness!" But I didn't. Mostly because I didn't want to call any more attention to us than the boys were already getting and I was sadly certain that it would make no difference anyway.

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All of that happened in the few minutes Bella was gone, and when she got back she could see I was losing it. I was also confused. What had happened to the well behaved boys I had always seen? She placed their orders (when Bella handed it to him, Jake made sure to shove his Grown Up Meal Deal in Emmett's face and tell him to suck it, which earned him *The Look* from his mother), then she asked me what I wanted, and paid for it all while I was still reeling. Bella leaned in close and said, "You know, you should consider this progress."

I looked at her like she was insane. "What do you mean?" How could this behavior *possibly* be considered progress? And how did I get off the ride?

She grinned. "They wouldn't act like hellions if they were on their 'company' behavior."

I wondered if I could go back to being company. Then she put her hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. "You're doing wonderfully," she whispered. "Thank you."

Then I saw Sam shoot a concerned look at his mother and I realized that it was *me* who was being a total shit. For these boys, and for Bella, tomorrow was going to be an extremely difficult day. So what if the boys argued and Bella had to stop every hour? In the long run, it made no difference. The kids wouldn't argue forever and we'd eventually get there, no matter how many times we had to stop.

I was still so very lucky to have them in my life.

It was more than Mac had, more than they had of Mac.

I resolved to act like the grown up I was. But if I heard "I'm not touching you" *one* more time I was seriously going to lose my shit.

~TBTA~

The Bigger They Are

We finally arrived at my parents' house and my Mom was out the door before the last of the boys had even climbed out of the vehicle. She was pulling Bella into a motherly embrace. "Welcome, dear," Mom said. "We're so very happy to have you and your family here. And please, just call us Esme and Carlisle."

No one could doubt the complete sincerity of my mother's words and Bella reacted with a genuine hug and smile of her own. Gone were her worries that my mother wouldn't like her. Mom had a way of making anyone feel welcome. When Masen and I were growing up, our friends practically lived at our house. Another parent had once teased Mom that ours was the "Koolaid" house, meaning everyone knew that they could get drinks and snacks, not to mention a hug, when they came to our house. Well that and my friends told me my mom was good looking, a little observation that usually got them a punch on the arm for bad manners.

The boys found themselves sitting at a table with homemade chocolate chip cookies and milk before they could blink. Emmett even forgot to be grumpy and indulged in the cookies with as much joy as Jake. My dad and I unloaded the bags. Mom had put all four boys in the game room with some air mattresses and the pull-out sofa bed. At their age, they considered sleeping on air mattresses an exciting adventure.

Dad took one look at my face and snickered. "Traveling with kids," he said and shook his head. "A different experience, huh?"

"Unbelievable," I muttered. "Masen and I were never-"

He laughed. "Oh yes you were," he assured me. "You were exactly like that."

"But I didn't even say-"

"You didn't have to," Dad replied with a smirk. "Kids are all the same."

Dad and I deposited the boys' bags and then I grabbed Bella's while he took mine. We stopped at the head of the stairs and Dad leaned in. "We...uh...put you in separate rooms. Is that right?"

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I nodded. "Yeah, that's perfect." It was. And it wasn't. I couldn't imagine how wonderful it would be to wake up next to Bella. I also couldn't imagine the look of horror on the boys' faces if they found us in bed together. Besides, we'd done no more than grind against each other so far. Still, I couldn't help but be a bit sad when I realized that I'd be sleeping in my bed. Alone. Still.

I still wasn't sure how it would all work even when Bella was ready. Did we share a bed openly? Would she want me to spend the night? Was there any way possible she could spend the night at my house ever? Dating a woman with kids was proving to be a logistical challenge.

The boys had disappeared by the time Dad and I got back downstairs. Mom and Bella were sitting on the couch. Bella was crying. I looked at my mother, my concern obvious. She shook her head and indicated I should leave them alone. I did, even though I didn't want to. Dad sort of made me, pulling me along while I tried to nonchalantly hear what they might be saying.

Dad wasn't having it. Traitor.

We went out back and he showed me his new grill. He was extremely proud of it. Apparently, it practically grilled the food by itself. There were a lot of knobs and gauges. He acted like he knew what all of them did. I had my doubts. Emmett wandered out and Dad showed him too. Emmett showed far more appreciation for it than I did. Then Dad mentioned he was restoring an old Jeep and that it was in his garage. Emmett's eyes lit up. Interesting. Cars... Well, next to girls, cars were one of a teenage boy's favorite things. I filed that away for further exploration.

Cars... I could do something with that. I wasn't particularly mechanically inclined, but Mr. Hoyt was. In fact, he had been a mechanic in the Army. Emmett already knew Mr. Hoyt. Things were looking up in the Emmett department. Maybe I could get him on Team Edward yet.

I peeked in on the boys and they were already smack talking about each other's abilities in a video game. They wouldn't come up for air for a while.

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A few minutes later, Mom walked out. "Bella's going to rest for a little while," she said.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

Mom smiled and put her hand in mine. "She's fine...considering."

"The anniversary of his death is tomorrow," I reminded Mom quietly.

"I know," Mom said. "We talked about that."

"Really?" What magic were my parents working on Bella and the boys? Even Emmett liked them. I was a little jealous that they'd made so much headway in such a short time.

Mom smiled that secretive smile I knew so well. "Bella's a lovely young woman," she said. "And her boys are adorable."

"That they are," I agreed proudly, like I had something to do with it. I grinned like an idiot. Mom shook her head.

"Do you remember your brother's wedding?" Mom asked. I frowned. Where was she going with this? And did I really want to know?

"Uh...sort of..." There had been a lot of alcohol involved, I remembered that much. Masen's wife Alyssa had been pretty pissed at all involved, though she had arrived back from her bachelorette party in little better shape. I remember her singing "Can't Touch This" at the top of her lungs. I even had pictures. Somewhere. I'd dig them out if I had to.

Mom rolled her eyes. "I mean before the massive quantities of alcohol came into the picture." She knew me too well.

"Oh, well you've got to be specific about stuff like that," I teased.

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"Do you remember what you said to me when I started giving you a hard time about your little brother settling down before you did?"

"No." I did, of course. My brother had teased me about it often enough.

My mom narrowed her eyes at me. "I think you do, but I'll let that go. In any case, I'll remind you."

I groaned and let my head fall forward. "Mom..."

"You told me that you'd meet the girl of your dreams and finally propose..."

"Mom..."

"Before you turned forty!" Her voice was triumphant as she finished.

"Mom..." Stupid guilt-driven promises. She was supposed to forget that shit. I had been trying to get her off my back about the whole settling down thing. I hadn't meant it, not in a million years.

"So you've got about eleven months, Edward Anthony Cullen," Mom continued. "Not that I'm counting or anything."

"Mom..."

She patted my cheek and kissed my forehead. "Just remember, mothers hate to be disappointed when their son's make promises." She gave an evil little laugh. "It breaks our hearts...and you wouldn't want to break my heart now would you?"

Manipulation, thy name is Mother.

"Kill me," I moaned. "Kill me now."

Mom laughed. "No, I don't think I will." Then her voice turned serious. "But if you mess things up with that lovely young woman and her wonderful boys, I

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just might reconsider."

Excerpt from Chapter 14:

" Yes, just like that," Dad retorted. "Just plain old stupidity..." he muttered. Then he laughed and clapped me on the back.

" What's so funny?"

" I was just thinking about how much trouble you and Masen got into," Dad mused. "And how much trouble four boys could get into." He chuckled again. "I think you're in for an interesting adventure."

It wasn't funny at all.

Chapter 14: Late Night Snacks

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephanie Meyers. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I read this book last year and this man was sort of my "inspiration" for Mac. I sort of pictured Mac looking like this Marine. Not exactly, but it gives you an idea...

[www\(dot\)cigardave\(dot\)com/images/misc/once-a-marine-book-cover\(dot\)jpg](http://www(dot)cigardave(dot)com/images/misc/once-a-marine-book-cover(dot)jpg)

Chapter 14: Late Night Snacks

Bella stayed up in her room for about an hour and when she emerged she looked refreshed and rested. Whatever my mother had done or said had done the trick. Dad offered to get pizza for dinner. The boys were, predictably, enthusiastic about this choice. When I warned my mom how much they could eat (especially Emmett), she just rolled her eyes at me and nudged Bella. "He forgets that I fed him and his brother."

Bella covered her mouth as she giggled. Once again, I wondered why that giggle got me hard. I debated the wisdom of taking a shower to rub one out while we waited for the pizza and then decided that I wouldn't get away with it. Mom was wise to that move my teenage years. She knew all about long showers.

So I went outside where Dad was once again admiring his grill. I was shocked he hadn't wanted to use it that night. When I asked, he shrugged. "Tomorrow maybe, pizza's always a good choice with kids."

"*Food* is pretty much a good choice with Emmett," I observed.

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"He's going to be huge," Dad announced with a smirk. "Taller than you. So you'd better watch it."

"His dad was a beast of a man, so that's no surprise." I looked around to make sure we were alone. "Uh yeah, he's already asked if I was, and I'm quoting here, *fucking* his mother."

Dad was sufficiently old-fashioned to find this a bit shocking, and easy going enough not to make a big deal out of it. He nodded as he wiped down the shiny chrome of the grill before covering it up with one small, regretful sigh. "It's natural that he'd be protective of her."

I nodded, sticking my hands in my pockets. I had about a billion questions for Dad, most of them about being a father and dealing with the intricacies of the adolescent male mind. After a long but comfortable silence, I made my admission. "I'm afraid I'm going to screw this up, Dad."

He turned to me with a smile. "It's because you're afraid of messing up that I think you'll be okay."

I stared at him. "That makes absolutely no sense, you know."

He laughed at me and shrugged. "I'm just making the observation that it's those who don't even allow for the possibility that they'll make a mistake that usually go on to fail in the most spectacular fashion."

"Oh you mean like the 'Bike Incident'?" Masen and I had tried to rig up some sort of propulsion system to our bikes. It has also involved a hill. The details were blurry now, but the pictures of me that summer show the cast on my arm quite clearly. Masen had dislocated his shoulder during the stunt and my mother didn't leave us unsupervised for months. It was almost like she didn't trust us or something.

"Yes, just like that," Dad retorted. "Just plain old stupidity..." he muttered. Then he laughed and clapped me on the back.

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"What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking about how much trouble you and Masen got into," Dad mused. "And how much trouble *four* boys could get into." He chuckled again. "I think you're in for an interesting adventure."

It wasn't funny at all.

~TBTA~

After pizza and sodas, and an impromptu belching contest that Seth won, the boys were showered and were getting ready to retire to the game room. My father had gotten out the Xbox that he kept on hand for my nephews, Kyle and Alex. I was not surprised to see that none of the war games had been brought out; though I knew Kyle and Alex had some. Bella had noticed too and gave my Dad a quick kiss on the cheek, which made the boys hoot and holler. Emmett smirked at me.

Bella and I went into the living room where my mom opened a bottle of wine. It was a lovely way to end a very hectic day. Bella sighed with contentment and fatigue as she sipped at her wine. "I want to thank you for allowing us to invade your home, Esme."

"Oh, this is just how I like it...the sound of kids playing...that rush of testosterone in the air," Mom teased and Bella laughed, wrinkling her nose.

"Yes, it's quite pungent isn't it?" Bella remarked with a side glance at me.

"Hey!" I protested. "I think I'm offended."

"Same here," Dad commented.

Mom shrugged. "I can't help it that you're both the overly sensitive types."

Bella winked at me and took another sip of wine. "'And they call *us* the weaker sex," she murmured.

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I leaned in close and whispered, "You're the strongest person I know, Bella James." She shivered slightly and I thought that was a pretty good sign. I stood up and offered her my hand. "Mom...Dad...Bella and I are going to take a walk."

"We'll keep an eye on the boys," Mom offered.

"Don't let Jake con you," Bella cautioned.

"Oh yes, Edward did warn me about his powers of persuasion," Mom replied.

Bella looked pleased for some odd reason and put her hand in mine. A few moments later we were out in the sultry South Carolina evening. She looked up at the sky, blinking at the bright stars. "It's beautiful here," she said.

"Yes," I agreed. "They've lived here for years, so I guess it *is* home."

Bella smiled. "It's different when you're in the military, isn't it?" she observed quietly. "If you grow up in it, you don't really have a hometown, unless your grandparents have one."

"It seems like you and the boys have put down roots in Fayetteville."

She nodded, her hand still resting comfortably in mine. I felt like I was in high school again, strolling along with my girl's hand in mine, making small talk when all I could really think about was kissing her and running my hands up and down her body. "It feels like home," she said. We came to a huge magnolia tree. I was fast developing a fondness for them. Bella tugged my hand, urging me to stop and she slipped under the sheltering canopy of the broad, dark leaves.

"I can't tell you how much this means to me...to all of us..." she whispered, wrapping her arms around me and burying her face in my chest. I rested my chin on the top of her head, once more struck by how tiny she really was. Bella was so strong and capable, that most of the time I forgot how small and fragile she actually was.

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"You must not realize how much I like having you here," I told her. "All of you." I kissed the fragrant silk of her hair. The sex kitten from the other night was not in evidence at the moment, but that was okay. She was still in my arms, warm and soft and willing. That was enough.

Bella lifted her face and smiled at me. "You're pretty incredible you know."

I kissed the tip of her nose. "I'm so glad you think so."

"In fact..." she murmured, her lips pressing briefly against my chin. I wondered why that was so sexy. "You're pretty much perfect." Leaning back in my arms, she frowned up at me. "And that annoys the shit out of me sometimes."

I laughed. "Far from perfect," I admitted.

"Couldn't prove it by me," Bella retorted. "First, my son smashes your windshield and instead of getting pissed, you pay *him* to work it off to pay you back."

"Oh, I was pissed," I confessed. "Really pissed. Until I saw he was a kid, I was ready to beat his ass." I paused. That might be a dangerous admission. Would Mama Bear make an appearance?

She giggled. "I don't blame you," she said. "But I'm glad you didn't hurt him. I might have taken exception to that."

"Only an asshole would hit a kid." And I had almost been an asshole.

"Granted, but Emmett doesn't look much like a kid." She seemed amused.

"See? Not perfect." My dirty thoughts alone made me as far from perfect as could be. But we didn't need to discuss that. Yet.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I'm still not convinced."

"Okay...." I considered for a moment. "I'm impatient sometimes."

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"Aren't we all?"

"Yeah, but... It's something I work on all the time." Hadn't I almost lost it with the boys in McDonald's? That wasn't cool.

Bella laughed softly and nuzzled her face into my chest. My dick responded accordingly. She had to have felt it, but she didn't mention it. I wasn't sure if I was relieved or disappointed. "You know, even I lose patience with them."

"With who?" I asked. She shifted against me, rubbing me in all the right ways. I tried to concentrate. It was getting more difficult.

"The kids," she answered. Her breath was warm against my chest. One hand slipped up from my waist to rest over my heart. "They make me crazy sometimes. It doesn't make me a bad person...or even a bad mom." She sighed. "It just makes me human."

I tilted her up chin so I could look in her eyes. I knew what she was saying. "I'm sorry," I muttered.

"For what? For feeling like you wanted to scream in the middle of McDonald's?" Her smile was wicked. "I feel like that on a daily basis. I can relate."

I laughed and pressed my lips to hers. "You don't hate me?"

Shaking her head, Bella slid her other hand up and ran her fingers through my hair. "I could never hate you," she said softly. Once more, she moved against me. My dick was very, very happy.

"Bella?"

"Yes, Edward?"

I put my lips to her ear. "You're the sexiest fucking woman I've ever kissed and if you don't stop rubbing that amazing body against me, I'm going to lose my

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mind."

"I wouldn't want that," she murmured and moved away.

My dick began sulking and calling me a cock blocking ass. When she was a few steps away, she held out her hand and pulled me close when her fingers wrapped around mine. She pulled my lips down to hers and opened her mouth. Sweetly, tenderly, her tongue danced with mine. "Edward?" she said softly when she pulled away.

"Yes, baby?"

"I'm going crazy too." She smiled up at me shyly.

"Good to know, baby, good to know."

~TBTA~

It was three in the morning and I couldn't sleep. My dick was exquisitely aware that Bella was sleeping just down the hall. I had passed an hour entertaining thoughts of what she might - or might not - wear to bed. I couldn't sleep and neither could my dick, so I finally just gave up and went downstairs to find something to eat. I refused to jerk off in my parents' house. Well, for now. Another day of this and I might succumb.

I had scrounged up a whole apple pie (my favorite) when I heard movement in the darkness. Half expecting to see Bella, I was surprised to see Emmett standing there. He looked just as surprised to see me.

I pushed the pie tin over and got up to get a plate. Emmett cut himself a generous portion and began eating without saying a word. I went to the refrigerator and pulled out a gallon of milk. I lifted it up, offering him a glass. He nodded and resumed eating. When his plate was empty, his hand moved toward the pie tin again. Emmett looked at me in question.

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I cut him another big slice and placed it on his plate. He grunted his thanks and started eating. I was starting to wonder how Bella afforded feeding him. At last, he seemed sated and sat back, rubbing his belly. "Thanks," he finally said.

"My mom makes great pie," I mused, licking the fork.

"Yeah," Emmett replied. "Pretty good."

I quirked a brow at him. "Pretty good? I'll have you know that this is the best damned pie in the country."

Emmett smirked. "My mom's chocolate silk pie could give it a run for the money."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"We'll see," Emmett said. "You've got to be pretty special to score one of my mom's chocolate pies." He smirked. "They're not just for everybody you know."

"I'll get one," I assured him.

Emmett studied me for a long moment and then sighed. "I guess you will." He sounded resigned.

I paused for a moment. "Are you okay with that?" I felt incredibly nervous, like I was asking a girl's father for permission to date her. This, however, was much, much worse. I was basically asking this kid if he minded me dating his mother.

Emmett shrugged. "Doesn't much matter what I think."

"That's where you're wrong," I said. "And I think you know it. Your mom will always put the four of you first."

"Does that bother you?" His tone was challenging, but curious too.

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I shook my head and smiled. "Not the way your mom does it. She puts you all first in a healthy way, like a mother should. It's one of the things I like best about her." I shrugged. "I don't think I could respect a woman who did whatever she wanted with no thought how it impacted her kids."

Emmett grunted again. "Sure," he said, still sounding skeptical.

"Your mom and I talked...about your dad," I said after a moment's pause.

Emmett looked at me but remained silent.

"We talked about how things were before he left," I continued.

"And?"

"And I think you should tell your mom that you knew about the conditions surrounding your dad's deployment." I had had this on my mind ever since Emmett told me. If anyone could lead the kid through this, it was his mother, but she needed to know all the facts.

"Why?"

"Because she needs to know that you know," I told him. "I think it might help her to have someone to talk to about it, someone who loves your dad as much as she does."

He considered this for a long moment and then shrugged. "I'll think about it," was all he would commit to. Okay, I could live with that. It was progress anyway.

"So...are we good?" I asked.

"That depends," Emmett answered, meeting my eyes. His were ancient and full of pain that he shouldn't know yet. It was so different seeing the pain that losing a father could cause up close. I'd never really gotten to know any of the families I had consoled in the line of duty, the families of men who had fallen

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while they served with me.

"On?" My voice was raspy when I asked.

"On how you treat her," he told me.

I paused, considered his words. Then I smiled. "Then we're good."

"Let's just make sure we stay that way." It was a warning, loud and clear.

"I can do that."

We were silent again for a long moment and then Emmett said, "Is that your guitar I saw?"

I had forgotten that my Dad still had it. Moving as often as I did, it seemed easier to keep it at my parents' house. "Yeah."

"You any good?"

"I'm decent," I answered with a shrug. "Why?"

"Cause Seth wants to play," Emmett told me. "And I was thinking maybe you could teach him." I sensed another challenge.

"If he wants me to, I'd be happy to do that."

He stood up and put his plate and glass in the sink. I smiled at his small thoughtfulness.

Emmett grunted yet again. "Okay then..." He paused. "Will your parents mind if I watch a little television. Until I get sleepy again?"

"No, that's fine," I answered. Of course he'd be restless today of all days. I started toward the stairs. "Hey Emmett?"

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"Yeah?" He turned, the light from the muted television lending shadows to his face that made him look much older.

"Uh...I just wanted to say...well, I'm sorry about what happened to your Dad. I know today will be hard on everyone, so if there's anything I can do..."

"Yeah. Okay." He paused. "Good night."

"Good night, Emmett."

Fic recs: Work of Art by abstract way. If you like tortured Edward you're going to love this one!

How to Win Back the Love of Your Existence by Missypoooh. Snarky, funny as hell, and gets lemony hawt along the way!

Blue Edward by Mrs. Cope - too much fun for words, really. Give it a shot, you won't be disappointed!

You can find links to any of these on my favorites list.

Chapter 15: The Good & Bad of Things

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Chapter 15: The Good and Bad of Things

I had been a little concerned when my parents suggested a beach. After all, the Fourth was a big beach holiday. That morning, however, my mom told me that a friend of theirs owned a house that had a small private beach. They were out of town but had been thrilled to "loan" their beach to us. I never ceased to be amazed at my mother's knack for making arrangements. The woman would give a Mafia boss a run for his money. The important thing was that Bella and the boys would not be subjected to a lot of holiday celebrations. We could observe the day quietly and with as little fanfare as *they* wanted. It would be an unholiday. Honestly, I wasn't sure how Bella and the boys would handle the day, so I decided just to sit back and let Bella guide us all.

Watching Bella get four boys ready for the beach was like watching the preparations for the Normandy Invasion. Bella was counting towels, making sure she had three different kinds of sun block (I wasn't sure why and I was afraid to ask), packing extra tee-shirts and shorts and flip-flops. She and my mother conferred on appropriate snacks, their tones and expression serious as they contemplated what would both withstand the heat and tempt the boys.

I knew the truth. If it was food, they'd eat it. I refrained from making that observation. Frankly, I was a little afraid to draw their attention my way.

Bella was tense, but I had been expecting that. Jake was whiney, which was a surprise since that kid never really whined. Emmett was surly, which was almost a comfort since I was so familiar with that from him. Seth just kept

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darting anxious glances at his mother and brothers, obviously ready to run interference if need be. Sam was...quiet.

The morning had been so hectic that I really hadn't had a chance to speak to Bella privately. I wasn't sure what to say to her, or even if she wanted to talk. It wasn't until we were actually at the beach and my parents were watching the boys as they played in the surf that I got to sit down and talk to her. Our towels were beside each other and she was lying on her back, sunglasses shielding her eyes from the sun. She wore a cute little bathing suit consisting of some sort of short-type bottoms and a halter top. She looked...ravishing. I leaned over her, blocking the sun so that she could open her eyes and look at me.

"How are you doing?" I asked quietly, making sure that the boys were still playing in the water.

Bella shrugged. "Okay, I guess." I could tell she was trying to decide if she wanted to elaborate or not. Then she sighed, removed her sunglasses and blinked up at me. "It's weird though." Her voice was quiet and contemplative.

"What?"

"It doesn't feel like... *that* day. You know?" She looked past my shoulder at the boys. "I just thought it would feel..." Her words trailed off and she shrugged.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" I was genuinely curious and I couldn't tell from her voice.

Her eyes were sad but something else lingered there too. "I don't know actually," she admitted. "What do you think?"

I brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear and restrained the impulse to cradle her cheek in my hand and place a kiss on those soft, plump lips. Barely. "I've never lost anyone I've loved like that," I told her. "But if I had to guess, I would say...both?"

Surprised, she stared at me. "How?"

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I laughed uneasily and shook my head. "I'll just sound stupid if I tell you what my guess is on the subject."

"No you won't," she promised. "Please? Sometimes it's good to hear an...outsider's point of view, if you will. Someone who isn't so damned close to it."

"You're sure?" I had to make certain that my opinions on this subject were welcome. They weren't even educated guesses in any case, just sheer gut instincts.

She nodded emphatically.

"Okay, I would guess that it's good because it feels like maybe you're...healing? Getting to some kind of new normal and you know that's what Mac would have wanted." She nodded, biting her lip.

"You're pretty good at this for not having any experience," Bella remarked. Then she smiled shyly. "And the bad?"

"Well," I said, drawing my fingers down her wrist toward the tips of her fingers. It was an innocent caress but it felt unbelievably erotic to me in my near constant state of arousal. "I guess it might feel bad because I think there might be the fear that you're...forgetting him somehow?"

"I know this sounds..." She blew out a breath. "I don't want to forget him. I owe him more than that, you know?"

"I don't think you *can* forget him, Bella." He was a part of her, even I knew that. And that didn't bother me, as odd as that was to me.

"I think about the boys, especially Jake, and I know that their memories of him will fade." Bella glanced toward the water at the boys. "What if one day he's nothing more than some pictures in a photo album?"

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"You won't let that happen." She wouldn't. Bella would guard their father's memory for her sons.

"I can't let that happen," Bella said. "And yet...I can't...I can't make him the focus of our lives or we'll never find anything else..."

"You'll find the balance, baby," I said softly.

Her emotions were all right there, reflecting in her eyes. So many conflicting feelings. She was as confused by the intensity of it all, just as I was. If anyone had told me a few months ago that I could calmly and willingly discuss a former spouse with a woman I was interested in I would have told them they were crazy. But this wasn't some ex-husband who broke promises to pick up his kids or was late with the child support check. This was the husband that had been torn away from her and her sons, the father of her children. This was a man who had died in a war thousands of miles away. And I knew that I was going to have to find some way to co-exist with his memory. Because his sons deserved to have his memory preserved. So no matter how uncomfortable it might be at times, that's just the way it had to be.

"Bella..." I whispered. I had so much that I wanted to say and yet, I couldn't form the words. Bella looked into my eyes and it seemed like she could read everything there. She could see what I couldn't say. Like her sons, she saw through all the bullshit and directly into the heart of the matter.

My heart was pounding inside my chest. I wanted to hold her close and kiss her. I wanted to comfort her while she mourned the first man she had ever loved even as I admitted to myself at least that I wanted to be the *last* man she ever loved. And this was completely the wrong time to come to that realization.

She took a deep, shaky breath and looked away from me. "You scare me," she said softly.

"I don't want to do that," I replied in a whisper. "That's the last thing I want, Bella."

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Her eyes flickered up to mine. "It scares me how I think I could feel about you."

I smiled, looked out at the water and saw that the boys were all occupied dunking each other under the water, my parents looking on with indulgent amusement. My parents loved kids, and having Bella's boys here had made them very happy. I knew that they missed Masen's boys. I took my eyes away from them and softly kissed Bella's cheek. "That's exactly how I feel," I confessed. "But for once I'm just willing to just let go and grab onto it." My lips ghosted over hers and I heard her gasp. "Will you do that? Do you *want* to do that?"

She nodded, still so close to me that I felt her lips brush across mine with the movement. "I'm glad," I said.

We were silent for a long moment and I felt her shift.

The atmosphere changed and I knew Bella was withdrawing into herself a bit. I didn't push. Time to distract, to focus on other things. I tilted my head to study her. "Do you feel okay with leaving the boys with my parents and going out tomorrow night?"

Bella grinned. "I should warn you, I haven't been out on a date in oh..." She tapped her lip with her finger. "About sixteen years or so." One dark, perfect brow arched. "Are you willing to risk it?"

"You have no idea."

Bella giggled and I cursed the reaction I had to that sound. Again. I rolled over on my belly and tried to be casual about it, but I heard her snort with laughter. "It's not nice to laugh at my dilemma," I said in an injured voice. "You're not the one with a body part ready to drill through to China."

She smirked and replaced her sunglasses, leaving me to try and think disgusting thoughts so I didn't embarrass myself when my parents came back with the boys.

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It was tougher than I had expected, especially with Bella's cinnamon and sweet scent wafting over me in the ocean breeze.

~TBTA~

The rest of the day passed by in a remarkably calm manner. After the excitement and distraction of the beach the boys all seemed subdued, which was understandable. We went back to my parents' house. My dad was anxious to demonstrate his 'mad grilling skills' as he called them. Emmett wandered outside and seemed content to listen to my dad drone on about the perfect grilling techniques for various foods. I was a much more casual grill man myself. If I didn't burn it, I considered it good to go.

Seth was trying to teach Jake how to play poker. They seemed strangely intent on it and I knew there was something beyond amusement going on with that. When I glanced at the deck of cards, I noticed that they were remarkably tattered and worn. I almost offered them a new deck but didn't want to interfere. It was a good thing that Seth was patient, because Jake had a lot of questions. He was like a question machine. But Seth answered each and every one with the same uncomplaining thoroughness.

Sam had found my father's little study and was curled up in a wingback chair perusing a fat medical text. When I opened the door and saw him there, he gave me an uncertain look. "Your dad told me I could be here," he explained.

"Yeah, it's cool," I answered, putting my hands in my pockets and looking at the shelves. I'd spent many hours as a kid looking at these books, mostly to find the grossest pictures I could. I'd once made Masen cry after showing him pictures of various venereal diseases and telling him that his penis was going to rot and fall off too. My mom had not been amused. I think my dad *had* been, but was wise enough to scold me anyway.

I looked up and found one of my favorites and I took it down. "I liked this one a lot when I was a kid," I explained, handing it to Sam. "It's got drawings instead of photographs because it's pretty old."

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His face brightened up as he got a look inside. Truly, the illustrations inside were more art than scientific diagrams. I had been pretty sure Sam would appreciate it, and it looked like I was right.

Sam looked up at me. "Why didn't you become a doctor like your dad?"

I grinned. "I hated school. I was bored senseless." I had been desperately happy to graduate from high school and a year of college had only cemented my opinion that I wasn't made for academia at the time, though I had picked up college credits through the years. "My dad likes being a doctor. It makes him happy. I like being a soldier, so that's what I am."

Sam frowned thoughtfully, his fingers lightly caressing the old book. "So you're going to be a soldier forever?"

I sank down into the other chair and shook my head. "Nah, I don't want to be one *forever*. I'd like to do other things with my life. I'm sure there are other things that could make me just as happy in other ways." I'd been giving that very thing a *lot* of thought lately. Suddenly, old dreams I thought I had tucked away forever were tapping at the lid of the chest, wanting to be heard from again.

He nodded, biting at his lower lip. God, he looked like Bella. He had her dark eyes and dark brown hair. He'd be a heartbreaker when he was older. "Will you be going back over there, Mr. Edward?"

"Over where?" I was trying to follow his line of thought. With Sam, it was sometimes more difficult since his mind was usually ten steps ahead of everyone else.

"To the war," Sam answered, his eyes darting up to meet mine briefly.

"No, I'm done," I answered. "I've got less than a year left in this enlistment. And since I just got back, I'm here to stay."

"Are you going to re-enlist?"

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"I thought about it a while back," I admitted. "But now...I'm thinking I'm going to go with Plan B."

"Plan B?" Sam asked, looking amused. The kid probably had a plan for every letter of the alphabet and then some. He might have moved on to an alpha-numeric system by now.

I leaned in close. "To be honest, Sam, I've always wanted to own a bar."

Sam laughed and shook his head. "Like on Cheers?" He looked intrigued.

"Yeah, like on Cheers," I said. "I just want a place where people meet their friends, watch a ballgame or two, have a beer, and maybe throw some darts....A neighborhood *joint*, you know. Something casual, nothing fancy." I sighed and shook my head. "I don't know. We'll see."

"See about what?"

I shrugged, unwilling to tell him that I had to consider more than myself now. I was barely able to comprehend the idea myself. It had been so long since I had had to think about anyone but me that I'd gotten a little out of practice.

"Things," I answered cryptically.

Sam rolled his eyes and shook his head, but didn't call me on it.

Thank God.

~TBTA~

As the evening wore on, the boys got quieter and quieter. Bella put the boys to bed that night, which was unusual. She stayed in their room a long time. I might have hovered in the hallway a bit. When I finally heard the door open, I looked up to see she had been crying. Okay, was *still* crying. I stood up, prepared to go to her, but she just shook her head.

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It was damned hard to do, but I let her go. I could tell she was hanging onto her control by a thread. The last thing I wanted to do was push her.

This was a difficult day for all of them, but I thought they'd done very well. I wasn't sure what she had said to the boys in there, and really it was none of my business. She needed that time alone with them.

She needed tonight to herself too.

I just had to be strong enough to give her what she needed, even when it wasn't me. It just about killed me, but if that was what Bella needed in that moment, I'd damned well make sure she had it.

I tossed and turned a lot that night. Not a single dirty fantasy came to mind. About three in the morning I heard her crying and I resisted the urge to go to her. Somehow, I sensed that it wasn't the right thing to do.

Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer, couldn't tolerate the sound of her quiet sobs as I tossed in my bed, so I got out of the bed and just stood in the hallway by my door. I listened to the sounds of her grief. A strange atmosphere descended on the house. The only thing I could compare it to was when people had mostly died at home, surrounded by their loved ones. As the dying person struggled through those last hours, I imagined that a similar feeling of anxious expectation would have hovered over the family. This wasn't a death watch, but a vigil for grief...a time to mourn what was lost. Then around dawn, the whole house grew quiet and I went downstairs to make myself some coffee.

When she came downstairs a few hours later, she looked tired but at peace. She gave me a tentative smile and reached for my hand. I squeezed, grateful for the contact.

And I made her some breakfast.

We ate in companionable silence. My parents were out on their patio, enjoying the morning and giving Bella and I some privacy. The boys were still asleep. They were emotionally exhausted. When she was done, I brushed my fingers

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over the shadows under her eyes. "Why don't you go get some more sleep?" I suggested.

She thought about it for a moment and then nodded. "Okay."

I walked her to her room and placed a quick kiss on her forehead. "Go, you're exhausted."

"Yeah," she agreed quietly. "If the boys wake up-"

"I'll tell them you're sleeping," I offered.

She nodded but then paused. "If they seem upset..."

I smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I'll tell them to come and get you if they need you."

"Thanks."

Author's Note: Bella's time alone with the boys will be covered in an outtake soon.

Chapter 16: Dating is for Grown Ups

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's note: I was able to get more chapters written than I anticipated this week, so I decided to go ahead and update one more time. The next eight chapters are completely written and others are outlined and plotted so I don't anticipate any delay in posting. Usually it will be two chapters a week. This week I got crazy. The actual date will be covered in Chapter 17. I'm almost done with the outtake that covers Bella's evening with the boys. Someone had mentioned Edward going back to the warzone. That won't happen. He's done, he's staying stateside. I won't put them through that. I don't think Bella and the boys could take it. Bella's reasons for choosing Fayetteville will be sort of discussed later. Depending on how the chapters divide out I would guess chapter 26-28, maybe? Edward and Bella say thank you for being so welcoming to their siblings. Although Edward would like to add that Masen is a pain in the ass.

I've been blown away by the response to this story, especially after GreenEyedGirl17 was kind enough to recommend it. Again, my thanks.

Chapter 16: Dating is for Grown Ups

The boys slept until about noon, which surprised no one. Jake was, predictably, the first to wake up. I wasn't *completely* helpless in the kitchen, just sort of limited; after all, I'd been on my own for a long time. I made up some pancakes. They were pretty damned good and seemed to be a big hit with Jake, who tried to add *way* too much syrup. He didn't give me too much grief when I shook my head as he started to add another giant pool of mapley goodness, though he did give the Aunt Jemima bottle a regretful glance.

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Emmett woke up next, quickly followed by Seth. They devoured mountains of pancakes. Seth's appetite was starting to pick up and I noticed that even in the few months I had known him that his shoulders had started to broaden just a little. He was going to be a big man too, no surprise considering his father. Just last week I'd heard his voice crack a bit. It wouldn't be long before he was taking extra long showers too, I thought ruefully.

Sam woke up last, he seemed quieter than he usually was in the mornings but that was certainly understandable. They had all asked where their mom was and when I told them she was sleeping, they nodded. None of them asked about waking her.

We all went to the game room and played video games. Emmett crushed me in Madden '08, but I handed him his ass in Star Wars Unleashed. Apparently, I had the Force. Of course, I tried not to gloat too much, but I'm male and that pretty much comes with the territory. In all honesty, he started that shit by actually doing a touch down dance when he won the football game. It involved him contorting his body in scary ways, and banging his knees together like a chicken.

Jake told him he looked like an idiot.

They were pretty much back to normal, however "normal" they could be under the circumstances. I wasn't surprised because even though I didn't know what Bella had said to them the evening before, I knew she would have handled it beautifully. She had an instinct for giving them what they needed when they needed it.

Around three in the afternoon, Bella finally wandered downstairs. She had showered and put on some make-up. She didn't need it, but it did give her some color since she was looking a little pale. I squeezed one hand, always mindful of our audience and she gave me a grateful little smile.

"Mr. Edward made us pancakes," Jake offered. "And then his mom made him clean up the kitchen." Jake had been delighted when my mother scolded me for the state of her kitchen. I should have known he'd tell on me first chance he

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got. I winked at him and he giggled.

"Did you all put your plates in the sink?" Bella asked. All four boys nodded dutifully and then sort of scattered in four different directions. I was pretty sure I saw Emmett heading out toward the garage where he probably intended to confer with my dad over the state of the car renovation. Dad told me that Emmett was surprisingly knowledgeable. I was a little jealous that my dad seemed to be bonding with him so easily, when so far my efforts had yielded nothing but awkward conversations and grunted answers.

I was laboring to remember that I was an adult, however, and not a five year old child. At times, it was difficult.

"Listen," I said to Bella when the boys were all gone. "Are you sure about tonight? I know it's not often we get a babysitter offered to us, but if now isn't a good time-"

She put her fingers over my lips and smiled. "Remember when you told me not to make choices for you out of some misguided attempt to protect you?"

I nodded.

"Okay, right back at you," she said with a small laugh.

"What about the boys? Are they really okay with this?" I was worried. This was our first real date, the first time we wouldn't have them with us, and as much as I was looking forward to being alone with her, I knew the timing could be better.

"They're fine," Bella assured me. "We talked it out last night. James family conference style."

"Okay." I would have to trust her. And I did.

"Let's just enjoy a quiet afternoon and then I'll start trying to clean myself up and see if I remember how to do the girly stuff."

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"You look perfect just as you are," I told her, placing a swift kiss on the tip of her nose. She wrinkled it at me and shook her head.

"Cheesy, Sergeant Major Cullen, cheesy."

"It's my inner romantic, what can I say?" I smirked at her.

Bella rolled her eyes.

~TBTA~

The afternoon passed quickly, probably because so much of it was gone. My dad and Emmett were in the garage most of the afternoon and when they emerged both were covered in sweat, grease, and smiling from ear to ear. Frankly, I was pretty sure that my dad was thrilled to have a male that shared his passion for all things mechanical. I could change a tire and the oil, but wasn't too handy with much beyond that. I knew the repair basics for military vehicles (it is a scary and dangerous thing to be caught in the middle of a desert without a working vehicle), but much preferred to leave those things to the professionals when I could.

While Emmett showed, Bella disappeared into her bedroom to begin her refresher course in 'the girly stuff' as she called it. I had no doubts she would be beautiful. She always was.

While I waited impatiently for her to emerge, my phone rang and I was not surprised to discover that it was my brother Masen. "So...do her kids hate you? Love you? Have they kicked you in the shins yet? Did she fall for that stoic soldier thing you've got going? Does she know you wet the bed until you were four? Can I tell her that you lost your virginity in the middle of a field? Does she realize she got the ugly brother? If she's really pretty do you think she'd go for that whole "Big Love" kinda thing? I mean, I'm willing to branch out, if you get what I'm saying."

"Hello Masen."

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"Well hello big brother," he greeted me. "If I didn't know better, I would say you've been dodging my calls." He laughed.

"Now why would I do that?" I asked, settling down into a chair. This wouldn't be a quick conversation if I knew my brother. And I did. Quite well in fact.

"Hmmm...." He paused. "I'm just going to hazard a guess here, G.I. Edward, and say that perhaps you didn't want to be grilled about a certain *beautiful* woman?"

'Aw, you know that's sweet that you call Mom beautiful," I said. "That must be why you're the favorite."

"I'm the favorite because I'm the smartest, best looking, and absolutely most wonderful son in the world," Masen retorted. "You're just the pancake kid."

I snorted. The pancake kid was a running joke. Once Masen heard my mother say that the first pancake never turned out as good as the rest, and since then he'd called me the 'pancake kid.' Brothers are a trial in general, but Masen is in a category all his own.

"The first is the best, the rest are just imitation," I shot back.

"Are you trying to change the subject, Eddie?"

"Don't call me Eddie." My response was automatic. We both knew he would continue to call me Eddie when he wanted to annoy me - which was most of the time.

"I've already talked to Mom," Masen said. "So it won't do you any good to try and wriggle out of telling me absolutely everything!" I heard Alyssa telling him to calm down in the background. Masen was hyper and loud, and Alyssa was his antidote, despite her memorable rendition of "Can't Touch This." I often told her that I'd give up Masen as my brother if I could adopt her as my sister instead. So far, she had not taken me up on the deal. I remained hopeful.

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"Nothing to tell, Mase," I said, keeping an eye on the staircase for Bella.

"Not the way I hear it," he said. "And Kyle and Alex are excited to meet them." He laughed. "Of course, now they're telling their mom they want two more brothers."

"As if!" I heard Alyssa shout.

"No need to rush," I warned uneasily. I was starting to have another very bad feeling. I wouldn't put it past Mase to have his family on a plane and land in North Carolina only to show up at my door with no warning. Hell, he might even show up at *Bella's* door. Mase didn't know the meaning of personal boundaries. Besides, he'd use Kyle and Alex to get Bella's sympathy - and it would work. He'd be in that door in under two minutes. Bella was a sucker for little boys' puppy dog eyes.

Masen paused for a moment and then he laughed - loud and long. "Oh, I'm not fucking believing this!" He snorted. "Mom hinted, but I've got proof!"

"What?" I knew I'd regret asking.

"My big brother has finally met his match," Masen crowed. "And I lived to see the day. Hallelujah! Miracles do happen. Somebody call the pope!" He paused and I heard paper rustling. "Hey honey? Where's my diary so I can mark this momentous occasion? Oh... and alert the media!"

"Shut it, Masen."

"Un uh," he argued. "No fucking way. This shit is good for *years* of torment." He snickered. "The great and mighty Edward Cullen has fallen for a lovely little lady with four rowdy boys who will make his boring old bachelor life interesting at long last."

"I hate you," I told him.

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"No you don't," Mase replied with perfect assurance. "You're just being a pussy because you don't know quite how to handle actually falling in love."

"I'm hanging up now," I warned.

"I'll just call back."

"I'll turn off my phone."

"I'll call Mom on the home phone and tell her that Kyle wants to talk to his Uncle Edward." For some reason, Kyle had decided that I was the best thing since Little Debbie snack cakes. If he was in my vicinity, he dogged my every step. It was both unsettling and flattering. I wondered if I could bottle that hero worship and give some to Emmett. I'd pay top dollar.

"Way to hit below the belt."

"Aw, cheer up, big brother. It'll only hurt for a minute. It's just your balls and you aren't going to be getting those suckers back for a while yet, my brother." He snorted. "Probably never, if my own state is any indication."

I heard Bella's door open. "Listen, as much as I'd love to continue this illuminating conversation, Bella's ready. We're going out tonight and Mom and Dad are watching the boys."

"Okay. And Edward?"

"Yes?"

"Remember to wrap it before you tap it."

Then he started making sounds like the sound track for a bad 70s porno movie. I hung up my phone with a sigh. Mase was Mase and there was no changing him.

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Bella came down the stairs and my mouth went dry. Other parts of me went hard. She was wearing a red dress that sort of wrapped around her body, showing off more than a hint of cleavage, but still very classy. When she walked, a slit in the dress where the sides met revealed a tantalizing glimpse of her toned legs. And they were some fucking awesome legs.

"Wow..." I breathed.

As she stepped off the last step, she looked up at me and heaved a sigh of relief. "Okay?" she asked, twirling around once and giving me a view of her spectacular ass.

"Uh..." I was reduced to Emmett-like grunting, but thankfully she got the message.

"Okay then," she said with a pleased grin. "I still remember the girly stuff."

"You get an A plus," I told her breathlessly. At that moment Jake came skidding into the living room, his feet sliding on the hardwood floors.

He gaped at his mom. She twirled for his inspection as well. I appreciated the second viewing of her ass.

"Wow, Mom," Jake said. "You look different."

"Thanks, Jake," Bella replied. "I guess that's a good thing?"

Jake shrugged. "You look like a girl." He seemed surprised.

"I am a girl."

"You know what I mean," he said. Jake had looked up at me and asked, "Are you and Mom dating now?"

I knelt down in front of him and looked him straight in the eyes. "How would you feel about that if I said yes?"

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Jake thought about it a minute and then he shrugged. "Whatever," he replied. Then he looked at his Mom. "Can I go play Xbox now?"

"Yeah," she answered, giving me an amused look. "But only for thirty minutes. Then do something that actually requires physical movement."

"Yeah, okay!" Jake yelled over his shoulder.

"Well that was easy," I quipped.

"At his age, video games trump their mother's dating habits," Bella explained.

"Good to know."

The other boys trooped in and silently stared at us both. Sam looked from me to his mom and then gave his mother a kiss on the cheek. He followed Jake into the game room. Emmett had only shrugged and settled sullenly into a chair to gulp down a soda. He wasn't going anywhere. I had a feeling he was just waiting to make sure I kept my hands to myself. Seth had studied his mother's face for a moment and then asked my mom what they were having for dinner.

As farewells went, it was surprisingly anti-climatic. A few moments later I was opening Bella's door. I went around to the driver's side and looked over at her. She took a deep breath and smiled at me. "We're really doing this, huh?"

"If you'd like," I answered.

"You're sure?"

I sighed. "If you ask me that *one* more time, Bella James..."

She giggled. My dick stood up and cheered. She looked at the house for a long moment and then nodded.

"Let's go," she said softly.

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I started up the SUV and pulled out of the driveway, content in the knowledge that I was about to share a romantic evening with the woman I was pretty sure I was falling in love with...hard.

There. That hadn't been so bad. Like Masen said, it only hurt for a moment.

But I was really going to miss my balls.

There Fell a Stillness by HappyInLove - Okay, this story owns me. Edward is in a wheelchair and he's lost his faith. Bella has faith in spades. This story is just beautiful... I don't know how else to say it. I've been checking out other stories by this author and every one is just as good.

A Garment of Brightness by miaokuancha - This is a repeat recommendation. This is the fic that brought me to this site. I "met" this writer in another fandom. No, I'm not saying where. She knows my secrets. :p But I admired her work there, I admire it here. This is a different take on Twilight. Bella is strong, capable, and simply amazing. The writing is elegant and the plot is superb.

Sins of the Piano Man by solareclipses - This has a unique twist that I've not seen before. I won't give it away, but I think it's creative and unique. Edward is a vamp, and Bella is Bella. This is so well written. The portrayal of tortured Edward is particularly good. This one should be getting WAY more attention.

Chapter 17: Parental Misbehavior

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Chapter 17: Parental Misbehavior

"Edward?" Her voice was quiet in the darkened car.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Shit..." She blew out a breath. "I was so nervous that I forgot something. I was just so focused on getting out the door before I screwed things up that I screwed up anyway."

I shifted to look at her. "Do we need to turn around?"

"No," Bella replied and then she smiled. "I just wanted to tell you that you look incredibly handsome. You kind of took my breath away and I was afraid I'd start babbling about how gorgeous you are."

I gulped. "Uh...thank you."

Bella giggled. "Oh come on, you can't be completely unaware of your effect on women in general and me in particular."

"Well, I *hope* you find me attractive," I admitted.

"Edward Cullen, you're absolutely beautiful, and in case I don't mention it again tonight, you're devastatingly handsome in a ratty tee-shirt and jeans. But now...well let's just say I'm glad I remember the girly stuff." She sighed. I smiled to myself thinking that maybe going to the trouble of wearing a tie had

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been worth it. And Mom always said that wearing green brought out my eyes. Behind the zipper of my dress slacks, my dick wondered if Bella would like to touch him - just a little "getting to know you" kind of thing.

Typical.

"Well thank you, now you're making me blush," I murmured. She laughed softly and looked out her window.

I looked at Bella, not surprised to see that she was wringing her hands. "You're not still nervous are you?" I asked with a small smile.

"Guilty," she answered. "Like literally... *guilty*."

"Leaving the boys?" I guessed. I hoped that was it. If she felt guilty about dating that might put a damper on things.

She blew out a breath and nodded. "Am I a terrible mother?" She sounded genuinely worried so I didn't laugh. "What I mean is, that I'm really looking forward to going out and I think I feel guilty for not feeling *more* guilty." She sighed deeply. "Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it makes sense, convoluted as it is." I took her hand in mine and kissed her knuckles. "You're the best mother I know," I told her. Then I laughed. "But if you tell *my* mother I said that I'll call you a dirty, rotten liar."

Bella giggled. The usual festivities occurred south of my belt. I sighed. That was pretty much par for the course. I was getting used to it.

"So...where are we going?" Bella asked curiously.

"I was thinking a nice dinner," I answered, looking at her for a nod of agreement.

She gave it and then looked at me from beneath long lashes. "You mean we're going to eat at a place where the cups aren't plastic and the plates aren't

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"Styrofoam?" She shook her head. "I don't know, Edward. You might be setting a dangerous precedent here."

"I like to live on the edge," I assured her. "I'll be honest, I'm really glad to have you to myself this evening."

"It might make me a bad mother, but I'm very glad too," Bella admitted shyly.

"I don't think it makes you a bad mother," I said. "You're still a woman, and a little balance between the whole mother/woman thing makes you a better mom, I think." I smiled. "At least that's what my mother told me when she'd go off with my father on a date night."

Bella laughed and nodded. "Yes, she's right about that, I suppose."

"So we're going to enjoy ourselves free of guilt?"

"I guess we are." She seemed happy enough about it, so I allowed myself to be pleased too. Actually, I couldn't get the grin off my face. I hoped it didn't look creepy.

"Good," I said. "Then let's get started. Dinner first and then maybe a walk in the old part of the city?" I didn't want to push Bella's boundaries for being away from the boys for the first time, especially when they were with someone she didn't know that well. Which reminded me... "Oh, and this is yours for the evening." I handed her my cell phone.

"A cell phone?" She looked at me curiously. "Is this to call the cops in case you're actually a serial killer who wants to make my skin into a lamp shade?" I blinked. She laughed. My dick did the tango and started reviewing what he thought were his best moves.

"My mom's cell number is the second number programmed into it," I explained. "And the boys are each taking turns holding my mother's phone. You'll be able to reach them directly any time you want. And they can reach you."

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The smile Bella gave to me was blinding. Okay, I had handled that correctly and my mother was a genius. She had whispered her suggestion before Masen called and I had had the good sense to take it. I hoped it would be a good omen for the evening.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I admit I had a selfish motive," I confessed. "I thought you might enjoy yourself more if you knew you could talk to them without any hassle or feeling awkward or anything like that."

"You thought correctly," Bella said. "And it was very thoughtful, selfish reasons or not." Her hands grasped mine. It was a very good feeling.

I pulled up to the Planter's Inn, which was right in the middle of the historic district. Our destination was the Peninsula Grill, a very beautiful restaurant that I hoped Bella would enjoy. According to my mother, the food was "exquisite" the atmosphere was "understatedly elegant." I also had a feeling she would appreciate the historical richness of the Planter's Inn, which was established sometime in the mid-1800s. Any woman who enjoyed the works of Austen and Bronte would probably enjoy learning a bit about Charleston's history.

A valet took care of our vehicle and I tucked Bella's hand in my elbow, making sure every man there knew that she was with me. Our waiter was attentive, almost *too* attentive, and his eyes kept wandering back to Bella. After he left our table, she leaned over and said quietly, "Are you bribing him to make an old mom feel beautiful?" Her tone was teasing, probably because she had seen me glaring at him as we finished our entrees.

"No, but I'm about to remind him of his manners," I almost growled.

Bella laughed and reached across the table to hold my hand. "You're actually kind of adorable when you're jealous."

I lifted her hand and placed a kiss on her palm, looking across the restaurant and catching our waiter's eyes. I smirked a little, I admit. *Yeah, take that your*

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smarmy fucker. Bella shook her head but didn't seem offended. A part of me still wanted to pound the server, but the more civilized part of me realized it would be much more fun to simply remind him that Bella was with me. That, and the fact that I was dying to taste her mouth again.

I leaned over and placed a soft, sweet kiss on her lips, nothing that would embarrass her. "Wow," she said when I pulled away. "I've never seen a 'fuck you' delivered with so much skill and subtlety."

I looked down, chagrined. Bella gave me another sweet kiss as if to tell me that she wasn't upset. I wondered if we could be 'not upset' some more tonight. I certainly hoped so. It seemed that being with Bella brought out the caveman in me, at least to some extent. It was rather eye-opening, this protective feeling.

Dinner was delicious and Bella and I found that the conversation flowed effortlessly. We talked a little about the boys, but mostly about ourselves, our lives as they had been before they intersected. We both shared embarrassing stories about our childhoods. Bella told me about the self-defense classes her father had made her and her brother take. Bella had accidentally broken her brother's nose, a fact he still mentioned. I commiserated with her. I had lived with Masen after all and I had *wanted* to break his nose more than once.

We both decided to skip dessert. I was anxious to be alone with her and I hoped she felt the same way.

I settled the bill and then offered my arm to Bella once again, unable to resist giving the waiter one last triumphant smirk. Bella elbowed me in the side but I took it like a man and didn't grunt, even though it hurt like hell. Bella was a lot stronger than she looked. And her elbow felt like it had been sharpened to a point.

We walked out into the sultry South Carolina night and toward the heart of the historic district, looking in little shops on the way. We shared some fudge and Bella stole the last bite. I whined a little and she told me to quit being a baby. She really enjoyed that fudge though, and the sexy little moans coming from her mouth were more than enough to compensate for losing that little bit of

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chocolate heaven. We admired the old buildings, discussed some of the history in them. We just enjoyed being together, *alone* and together.

I worried that it wasn't exciting enough, but when I expressed my concerns Bella rolled her eyes. "I'm not making sure someone's not spilling their drink right now," she said. "That's pretty much a great evening." Then she stopped and wrapped her arms around my waist. "Not to mention the company of a very, very handsome man."

"Who is he? I'll beat his ass," I teased.

"You're just fishing for compliments," she accused with a laugh.

"It's been known to happen," I admitted. Her beautiful dark eyes were looking up at me. I glanced around. "You know...there's a quiet little bench about one block that way. It's by an old church with beautiful trees surrounding it and a lamp post that's close, but not *too* close." I gave her my best persuasive smile.

"And you would know this how?" Bella asked, one brow arched.

"I once caught my parents making out there," I admitted with a grimace.

"Believe me, it's not a memory I care to dwell on." I winked at her. "So let's make a new one to replace that old horror."

"You caught your parents making out?" Bella seemed to find that incredibly amusing. I didn't share her feelings on the subject. "I'm sure you were horrified," she commiserated. "Kids generally are."

I put my arm around her waist and began leading her to the bench. "Yeah, well, when you're thirty-five it isn't much easier," I told her.

Bella stopped and gaped at me. "Really?" She seemed torn between shock and amusement.

I shrugged. "What can I say? We're a randy lot, we Cullens."

The Bigger They Are

"Like I don't know that," Bella muttered. But her expression was happy so I didn't think she minded that I was... *enthusiastic* about our physical relationship, such as it was.

Then we were at the bench and I brushed my hand over the seat to make sure it wasn't wet or dirty. I patted the space beside me and batted my lashes at her. She laughed and sat down. "You're an incorrigible flirt, Mr. Cullen."

"Guilty," I agreed. "Something in you brings out the worst, or maybe it's the *best*, in me."

"I think it's both," she replied and then she sighed and leaned into me. It was a very nice feeling. I put my arm around her shoulders and hugged her close. I looked up at the sky.

"When I was little I wanted to be an astronaut," I said. "I used to look up at the stars. I decided I was going to rename them all."

"Cocky even then, I see."

I shrugged. "Like I said, if you're gonna go, go big."

"Edward?"

"Yes?"

"Would you please stop talking and kiss me already?"

No needed to ask me twice. My lips were on hers before she had finished the sentence. I tentatively licked at her lips, lightly brushing my tongue over her mouth. She opened her mouth with a little sigh that sounded like contentment and my tongue swept in to take a taste. I groaned at the feel of her mouth, the warmth of her tongue tangling with mine. I angled my body slightly, pressing against her side, careful not to poke her with my - surprise, surprise - erection.

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She sort of shifted too, pressing against me more firmly and I felt her nipples, hard and insistent, against the side of my chest. I wanted nothing more than to slide my hand inside that red dress and tease them, pulling and plucking and caressing until she shattered - or at least moaned my name. I wanted to lick and suck and nibble and worship. But I held that impulse in check. Not here. Not now.

But soon, oh please God soon.

Bella's hands came up and buried themselves in my hair. I moved my mouth to her neck, paying homage to the pulse that beat wildly there. I lightly sucked at it, knowing that I'd better not leave a mark. Emmett would kill me and it would embarrass Bella at this stage. Still, the temptation was strong.

I nibbled at her earlobe, which was apparently a very sensitive spot for Bella because her hips jerked and she groaned loudly. Good to know. I filed that away for future use. "Bella, you feel so good," I rasped.

She moaned something that sounded like my name, one hand fluttering down my chest. The woman was like a fucking ninja when it came to buttons, because beneath my tie, which she had shoved to the side, she had already undone three or four buttons. Her hand slipped inside my shirt to gently tease at my skin, pressing here, sliding there, tickling and exploring. I was very glad I hadn't worn an undershirt.

"Bella," I warned.

"Just getting to know the lay of the land," she said breathlessly. "Think of me as an explorer," she added softly.

I groaned at hearing her say *lay*. My mind didn't need much encouragement at all to travel in dirty directions. I put my hand over hers to still it. I was nearing the end of my endurance, good intentions or not. And discovered more buttons were undone. How did she do that shit?

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She giggled. Fuck me. She wriggled her hand out of my grasp and let it travel lower. Hello happy trail. Happy, happy, *happy* trail. I jumped as her fingers combed through the bit of hair there. Her fingers left little paths of fire. My dick was practically trying to hypnotize her into lowering her hand. Just a little.

"You're jumpy tonight, Edward Cullen." She was laughing at me and I didn't care one bit as long as she didn't stop the delicious torture. I gave up trying to stop her and just decided to go with the flow no matter how painful it would prove to be. One finger dipped into my belly button, which I suddenly discovered was an erogenous zone. Who knew?

"You're a little tipsy I think," I said.

She shook her head, sending her scent wafting over me. My dick celebrated in the usual way and stiffened further. Her fingers danced tantalizingly close to brushing across my erection. Just a little lower...a little lower... Still...no contact. I couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Then her hand was moving up again and I had to groan out a protest/thank you at the same time I repressed the urge to put my hand over hers and lead it back to where I wanted it. Bella leaned up to whisper in my ear. "You're very sexy. Did you know that?"

I couldn't answer, my mouth was busy. I was pressing kisses along her cheek, her temple, finally leading back to her mouth. "You're so beautiful Bella," I told her when I pulled away.

She smiled shyly, dipping her head down. I raised it up and kissed her again just because it felt so damned good. "I dream about you," I told her. Might as well get it all out there in the open. "I dream of holding you in my arms all night long."

She shivered.

"I fantasize about how you'd look in my bed, with your hair spread out on my pillows."

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Bella gave a little moan. I put my mouth by her ear.

"I think about how good it's going to feel when I finally bury myself in you, how it's going to sound when you say my name while I move inside of you."

"Edward..."

"I can't keep those thoughts out of my head. It doesn't matter whether I'm asleep or awake." I could feel her trembling. Or maybe it was me. It was a moot point at this juncture.

"And I know when we finally make love, it's going to change me. It's going to change us...and it's going to be...amazing."

Oh...my...God..." Bella gave a shaky laugh and pushed away, her hands trembling as she brushed back her hair. "Uh...you...I..." She blew out a breath. "That's not fair," she finally settled on.

I groaned and leaned back on the bench. So much for not being an ass. "Oh shit, Bella. I'm sorry," I said.

"What are you sorry for?"

I looked at her fearfully. "For - well, you know."

Bella rolled her eyes and I could just catch the gesture in the dim light. "You're sorry for kissing me? For getting me so turned on with just your words that I don't think I'll sleep for a week?"

I smirked and shook my head, then reached out and rubbed a strand of her hair between my fingers. "A week, huh?"

She sighed and leaned against me again as I tried very hard to will my body into submission. *We will not jump Bella. We will not jump Bella. We will not jump... Fuck. Can we please jump Bella?* "Edward that might have been the sexiest thing I've ever heard." She looked up at me. "And I think it will be

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amazing too..."

"You do?"

She bit her lip and nodded. "I only hope you'll think I was worth the wait.

"Baby, I'm not going anywhere," I promised. "Besides, remember what I said about selfish motivations?"

Bella nodded.

"Then why would I risk my chance at the most amazing experience I'll ever have just to hurry things up a bit?" I grinned at her.

She slapped my arm. "Perv," she teased.

"You know it baby." I stood up and offered her my hand. "Come on; let's get out of here before I do something I shouldn't."

She groaned but gave me her hand and I tugged her to her feet. We walked back to the inn and they brought our car around. "Do you want to call the boys and let them know we're on our way home?"

Bella gave me a little smile and pulled the phone out of her purse. A moment later, her smile widened and she spoke into the phone. "Hey Sam," she said. "We'll be back in about thirty minutes." I heard him say something and Bella laughed. "Yes, yes, I'll remind Emmett he's not the boss of you when there are other adults around." More talking from Sam. Bella sighed. "Okay, I'll deal with Jake and his candy bar habit later." I snorted, knowing that somehow Jake had conned my parents into giving him candy. Sam continued. "Thank you for turning on the porch light." Bella looked at me and shook her head, grinning from ear to ear. "That was very considerate of you, Sam." Another pause. "I love you too. See you all in a bit."

She hung up and reached for my hand. "Thank you for all of it. The dinner...the bench." She giggled. "Even if you were trying to replace a bad memory." Bella

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squeezed my hand. "But most of all, thank you for this." She held up the phone and handed it back to me. "For understanding."

"My pleasure."

And it was. It really was.

Chapter 18: Home Again

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Chapter 18: Home Again

*" Where we love is home,
Home that our feet may leave, but not our hearts."*
~Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr

~~TBTA~~

It was no surprise to see the boys lined up in the foyer. I had seen Jake's face at the window. Mr. Early Warning Device. It was going to be interesting when the older boys began dating. I remembered what a pain in the ass Masen had been, and Jake was a people watcher. Some might call it being nosey. I think he just had an insatiable curiosity about the world. Okay, and he was nosey too.

I didn't imagine that any of his brothers would be able to break curfew without Jake noticing. I remembered bribing Masen once or twice when I had tried to sneak in late. Since he was so close in age to me, I had returned the favor in short order. Somehow, I had a feeling our parents had *still* known what was going on, but they let us keep our little secrets.

As I opened Bella's car door, she gave me her hand to help her out. Then to my surprise, she left her hand in mind as we walked up toward the door. Jake flung open the door and flew at Bella, throwing his arms around her waist like she'd been gone for a year instead of an evening. I tightened my grip on her to keep her from falling, half expecting that she would release my hand.

She didn't. Instead, she gave Jake a one-armed hug. We were both okay with

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that. Of course, my dick wanted to "hold hands" with her too. He's got no sense of the right time and place.

Then we went into the house, still hand in hand. It was weird how intimate it was just holding her hand, especially in front of her boys. It was like we were making some sort of declaration. Emmett took one look at our hands and his lips tightened, and then he looked up at me and shrugged. I guess he was getting used to the idea that I wanted to be around.

Seth and Sam didn't seem particularly thrilled, but neither did they appear unhappy either. I would take what I could get. My mother, however, seemed intent on embarrassing the shit out of me because when she saw us holding hands she clapped her hands with overdone delight and then heaved a sigh while putting one hand over her heart.

Really, Mom? We're just holding hands. Don't send out the wedding invitations just yet.

I rolled my eyes at her and looked up to see my Dad peek around my mother. "Can we go to bed *now*, Esme?" he grumbled. He waved at Bella and me. "See? I told you. Edward's a big boy. He can handle a date without his *mommy*." He grinned at me to let me know he was teasing - both my mother and me. My parents were just intent on mortifying me. They were doing a good job. I wondered if Bella would believe me if I said that they were both heavy drinkers.

Mom gave him a playful swat on the butt, just adding to the list of "Things I don't like to see my parents do." The boys thought my embarrassment was amusing, so good humor was restored among the ranks.

Bella gave my hand a squeeze and then released it. She leaned up on her toes and whispered, "I'm going to get the boys settled. Wait for me in the living room?"

Hell yes.

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I wasn't being abandoned after all. I appreciated the sway of her hips in that red dress as she followed after the boys. I could hear Jake's questions. "What did you eat?" "Where did you go?" "Did you see any ghosts?"

Jake had become convinced that ghosts were just roaming around Charleston, ready to chat with anyone who cared to take the time. Bella answered each question patiently and with good humor.

A moment later, my phone buzzed. I looked at the number and groaned and I hit the button to answer it. "What?" I growled.

Masen laughed. "Mom called to tell me you were home from your big date." What the hell? We'd been home less than three minutes.

"You need to get a life, Mase," I told him. "Put Alyssa on the phone and I'll see what I can do. Maybe Lys will take pity on you."

"Alyssa is making sure that Kyle and Alex don't destroy their bedrooms right now," Masen replied smugly. "Besides, I've got a *great* life, big brother."

"Yeah, yeah, you've got it all," I muttered.

"Yes I do," Masen agreed. "And I'd be happy to see my brother have it all too."

"You and mom need to slow down there, buddy," I said. "It was a *date*. A *first* date I might add."

"Nope," Masen insisted. "You've been actually seeing this lady for months now, Edward. All of that shit counts as dates, you just didn't know it." He laughed. "Of course, she probably didn't either."

"Is there a reason you're harassing me?"

"What's it like to date a woman with four built-in chaperones?" Masen asked. "God, it's hard for Alyssa and I to sneak away to jump each other's bones. We locked ourselves in the walk-in closet once. It was dark and sweaty and... Well,

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let's just say I get a hard on when I go into that closet now."

I groaned. I *really* didn't need to hear this shit.

"Still, totally worth it. But the privacy thing is an issue. You'll see. Alyssa and I are like covert op agents. We find places to do it that no one ever dreamed of. Once, we did it in the garage. Told the kids we were cleaning things up in there so of course they stayed away. Afraid they were going to have to help. Shit like that can work in your favor. Of course, the kids are gonna bust us one day. That's inevitable. The whole cycle of life shit and all that. Remember when we found Dad with his hand up Mom's skirt? I had nightmares for *years* over that shit, believe me. I can't imagine what it's like for you with eight eyes on you every minute of the day, just *waiting* for you to touch their mom's goods."

"Masen..."

He continued on, completely ignoring the warning in my voice. "Have the kids seen you kiss yet? That's going to be a milestone, Eddie my boy. They'll probably freak. Jake's seven right? He might make puking sounds. It's what Kyle does when Alyssa plants one on me." He paused. "Or maybe Kyle just has a strong gag reflex..." he mused aloud.

"I suddenly feel so sorry for your kids," I said dryly.

"Yeah I know, sucks for them to have parents showing affection for each other, huh? They'll be in therapy for years." He laughed. "Just wait, man. Getting some with kids around is an art form. Feel free to call me for suggestions. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve."

"I'm sure you do." I was sorely tempted to hang up but I knew Masen would make me pay for it.

"If you want, I could write you up a little handbook or something. Maybe Dating a Mom for Dummies or something along those lines."

"Your willingness to assist never fails to amaze me."

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"Yeah, I know. I'm just that kind of guy," Masen replies. "I'm a giver, what can I say?"

"Gotta go, Mase. I hear Bella coming," I said.

"Dude, I don't want to hear about that shit. Keep it in the bedroom...or the closet, or wherever I don't have to hear it."

Then he hung up on *me*.

Ass.

I sighed and put my phone in my pocket. "The boys in for the night?" I asked as she settled onto the couch beside me. She leaned into me with a sigh.

"Yes, though Jake is still pretty sure I'm holding out on him about the ghosts," she said. Bella looked up at me. "Tonight was perfect, you know."

"Then we'll have to do it again sometime," I said, brushing my knuckles over her cheek.

"That might be a challenge," she admitted. "I don't mind leaving them alone with Emmett for short periods, but he's at that stage where impulse control is...minimal."

"We'll work something out," I promised.

She flashed me a radiant smile and nodded. Then she closed her eyes and rested against me. It was so peaceful, so perfect. I closed my eyes too, just to savor the feeling of her against me, the quiet sounds of her breathing.

And that was the first night I slept with Bella James.

~TBTA~

"You'd better be glad I got up before the boys," Mom hissed in my ear.

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That was my wake up call. I love you too, Mom. And good morning.

I blinked at her. "What?"

Then I felt Bella stir against me. Oh shit. Mom was right. This wasn't the time for them to find their mother in my arms. On the couch. In my parents' house.

"Bella, babe..." I said, shaking her gently.

Apparently, Bella was a sound sleeper.

"Bella?" I gently nudged her again.

She just muttered something and snuggled in closer. I shot my mom a helpless look. She just laughed at me and left the room.

Way to be helpful, Mom.

"Bella....?" I said in her name in the sing-song tone my mom used to use to wake us up for school.

Bella frowned and burrowed into my side. Okay, she really hated waking up. My dick was giving her his morning salute. I groaned and tried to readjust myself discreetly. Having her so close wasn't helping matters either.

"Bella? The boys will be downstairs soon."

That was all it took. She sat up with a gasp, her hands moving to her hair, which to be honest was messy as hell. I looked at my chest. She had even drooled a little bit on my shirt. At least I still had it on.

Damn it.

"Go take a shower and I'll distract the boys," I said. "I can hear my mom making them breakfast."

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She nodded groggily and stumbled to her feet. I got a little worried about her as I watched try and navigate the stairs. I had never seen the clumsy side of her. It was sort of adorable.

Shit. I had it bad.

I stood up and groaned. My knees popped. My back protested my stationary position during the night. It was hell getting older.

I ran, or rather *hobbled*, up to my room and grabbed some jeans and a tee-shirt. I'd shower after breakfast. First I needed to run interference with the boys and hope like hell that Emmett hadn't gone downstairs for another late night snack.

He'd probably kill me.

~TBTA~

We were back on the road by two - so much for leaving at eleven. The kids had clothes scattered all over the house. Bella seemed to have some sort of bloodhound senses when it came to finding their belongings. I added my old guitar to the luggage stowed in the back. I'd talk to Seth about some lessons later if he was really as interested as Emmett seemed to think he was. My mom and Bella hugged tightly, exchanging phone numbers and email addresses. That worried me. A lot. My mom just gave me a smug smile.

This could be a disaster of epic fucking proportions. My dad told Emmett that he'd send pictures of the restoration of the jeep. Emmett grinned. I rolled my eyes at my father, who just grinned back.

I was somehow not surprised to see Sam with a new book. It wasn't a kid's book, but it wasn't a textbook either. It was sciency, I could tell. I don't know where my dad found shit like that but he did. The man loved books. It seemed he had a kindred spirit in Sam.

Jake was almost in the vehicle, when he ran back to my mom and gave her a hug. That made her cry. It made Bella cry.

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I just wanted to get out of there.

I started up the car and waited to hear, "I'm not *tooouuuuching* you."

It took exactly eleven minutes.

~TBTA~

The trip home was surprisingly easy. Or maybe I was just getting used to traveling with the kids. Yes, they still annoyed each other. Yes, I sometimes wanted to pull over and make them give me twenty. Or a *hundred* and twenty. Yes, Bella still smirked at me when she saw me losing my mind.

But it was okay, because that's just the way it was.

We stopped and got some dinner (pizza, what a surprise) on the way home so that Bella wouldn't worry about the boys being fed or trying to cook anything. To tell the truth, we were all sort of exhausted. The last half-hour of the trip passed in blissful almost silence. All I heard from the back was Jake snoring.

I carried Jake in the house and up to his room. It was the first time I'd been upstairs. Sadly, I was not privy to a glimpse of Bella's bedroom. Sam managed to mumble a thank you and said he was going to brush his teeth. I didn't think Bella would mind Jake crashing without brushing his teeth just this once. He didn't seem inclined to wake up in any case. He just turned over and continued snoring softly when I put him in his bed, grabbing a bit of his covers and cuddling them to his chest. He and his Star Wars comforter looked pretty cozy.

I went back downstairs and Bella was alone in the kitchen. I hugged her tentatively, still not sure of what the "rules" were. I suspected she didn't either. She hugged me back and tilted her head back so that we could kiss. I could live with that rule.

I cradled her face in my hands. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

She nodded, looking tired.

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She walked me to the door and waved to me as I pulled out of the driveway. Strangely, it felt as if I was *leaving* home, not going there.

~TBTA~

I called her Monday at lunch. She said she was catching up on laundry from the trip. I had heard one of the guys talking about a new movie that had come out. He had taken his kids to it, so it was probably kid friendly. I asked Bella if she thought the boys would like it.

She said yes. So I told her I'd look up movie times and pick her and the boys up.

The movie was awful. The boys were well behaved. And Bella was beautiful.

Tuesday found me determined not to monopolize her time with her boys. I had to remember that they needed their time alone. So I called her. But I wasn't going to ask to come over.

Definitely not. I didn't want to be one of those needy, clingy types. I had no time or patience for that shit.

Of course, when she told me she was making spaghetti and meatballs, all bets were off.

Dinner was wonderful. The boys were loud and messy. And Bella was beautiful.

I had to work late Wednesday so I settled for a simple phone call. I heard the boys yelling the background. Funny how that had become familiar so quickly. Then, just as I was about to hang up, Bella whispered, "I've missed you."

"I miss you too, baby," I said.

My dick apparently liked that because later that night I was forced to abuse myself. Twice.

The Bigger They Are

Thursday, Jasper invited me and Bella and the boys over for a cookout on Saturday. So I obviously had to call Bella and get her opinion on the matter. It was *not* an excuse just to talk to her. It was a necessity, plain and simple.

She agreed, though it was obvious that Alice had already called her and they had discussed it. During our conversation, Bella mentioned that Sam was pouting because there was some science thing he wanted to go to in a few weeks but she had a meeting that evening. It was a one-time shot so if he couldn't go *that* night, he'd miss it. Some astronomer was giving a talk.

Before I could stop myself, I was volunteering to take him. It wasn't like I actually wanted to spend time with the boys. I was just trying to help her out. I was being friendly. It was practically the *neighborly* thing to do.

I was full of shit.

She accepted after a short pause. I knew what she was worried about. "Hey, just ask Sam if he minds me taking him. If he doesn't mind, then we'll go. What about the other boys?"

"Emmett and Seth will want to stay home. They'd rather be drawn and quartered than go to a science thing." I laughed. "Jake can go with you, but he'll be bored out of his mind. You'll have to bribe him with ice cream. I'll leave money for you to take them out for ice cream if you don't mind."

"I'm pretty sure I can pay for a few hot fudge sundaes."

"I'm quite sure you can, but this is on me," Bella said. And then she gave a husky laugh.

More self abuse later that night.

Friday at lunch Bella called *me*. I thought that was progress. She told me that she was making lasagna for dinner and asked if I wanted to share it.

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No need to ask. Really, I would have thought my desperation to be with her was obvious.

I brought a bottle of wine and a huge chocolate cake from a little bakery on the way. Jake's eyes lit up at the sight of the cake. Clearly, at least one of them was glad to see me. Bella surprised me by taking the wine from me and giving me a quick kiss as she did so.

Right in front of the boys.

Can I get a hell yeah?

Chapter 19: Angels and Old Friends

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Author's Note: Okay, this is actually one of my favorite moments between Emmett and Edward. It may or may not make sense, but that's okay.

Chapter 19: Angels and Old Friends

" May no soldier go unloved." The creed for Soldiers' Angels

~TBTA~

I picked up Emmett on Saturday morning. This morning was going to be a little different. I had asked Bella how she would feel about Emmett and I helping a local charity that was putting together some care packages that would be shipped over to soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obviously, this was something that could strike close to home for Emmett so I didn't want to assume it would be okay. She said it was fine with her, but that Emmett would have to have the final say. That sounded fair to me. She asked Emmett and he said that would be fine. I was honestly a little surprised, but I figured Emmett would have said so if he didn't want to help.

I made Jake some hot cocoa while Emmett finished getting ready. I didn't do it "wrong" anymore, though he still kept a close eye on me. Sam was up, which was a surprise and he asked me if I really wanted to take him to the exhibit. I told him that when I was little I wanted to visit and rename every star. That seemed to convince him I was actually interested in an astronomy exhibit.

We pulled into the parking lot of a little, nondescript building. I opened the door and all we could see were seven rows of tables, each full of open, empty

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boxes. Janette, my contact person, waved at us as we walked in. There were about a half dozen other volunteers.

"Mr. Cullen!" she said. "I'm so glad you could make it!"

She came over to shake my hand. She was about ten years older than me and during the course of our conversation I had learned that her only son had died over there three years ago. I had told her that Emmett's father had died there too, but I wasn't sure if he'd want her bringing that up. She understood immediately. If he wanted it known, he would mention it himself. I had a feeling he wouldn't.

"And you must be Emmett," she said. "I'm happy to meet you."

She led us over to a long row of containers. "Okay, you take a box from the table, put one item from each of these containers into it, and then take it over there where Nate will tape them up and get them ready to ship." Nate waved his tape gun at all of us.

I looked at the containers. Each held a common, everyday item that would be a real treasure to a deployed soldier, seaman, airman, or Marine. Beef jerky, trail mix, Chex mix, Gatorade powder, coffee, toilet paper (you always ran out, don't ask me how, and the stuff the Army issued was one step above sandpaper), aftershave, deodorant, soap, gum, paperback books, sand scarves, cool scarves, water guns, decks of cards, toothpaste, toothbrushes, hand sanitizer, baby wipes...

Any snack that could be tucked away in a pocket and that wouldn't melt in the heat. Sometimes meals were hit and miss, especially on patrols and eating MREs* constantly was hell. Half the time they tasted like shit and the other half they *smelled* like it. If you got the omelet, it was a pretty good bet you'd rather go hungry. The meatloaf was edible, which was about as much as you could expect. Anything to pass the time like books or small pocket-sized games were invaluable, because the boredom was maddening at times. It was difficult to stay clean in that environment, so personal hygiene products were always a big hit. You could be away from the base, and the showers, for days at a time.

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Baby wipes could at least clean your face and hands, but mostly you'd just stink. I saw small luxuries, even CDs and DVDs. Disposable cameras and razors. Frisbees and Nerf footballs. They had certainly done their homework. I knew just how happy these packages would make each and every person who opened them.

I gave Janette a big grin of approval and she winked.

Emmett and I worked for four hours, filling box after box. There wasn't a cubic inch of wasted space in the box, everything was tucked in nice and neat and after a while we got a system going. Big stuff on the bottom, small stuff packed into the spaces. Anything liquid had the lid taped shut and was put in a Ziploc baggie. My back was aching like a bitch at the end of it, but it was damned gratifying to see the mountain of boxes getting ready to be shipped.

"Well guys!" Janette said later. "That's a day's work well done!" There was a small cheer from us, even Emmett.

Later, we were out in the parking lot and I counted out Emmett's money for his work. He shook his head. "Nah, this one's on me," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets, looking at some point past my shoulder. There was nothing of the boy in him at that moment.

"Well, okay then," I answered. Sometimes you had to let a man, even a very *young* man, do what he felt was right. This was one of those times.

We were in the car on our way to his house when he said quietly, "During my Dad's second deployment he had one of those angels...you know, the Soldiers' Angels?"

I nodded. I knew of the organization.

"We laughed because her name was Angela...you know, an angel named Angela? Dad thought it was funny," Emmett said. "She used to write to him. Send him packages and stuff. We did too, but I think he got a kick out of a stranger caring enough to go to the trouble. You know how it is. Your family

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remembers and cares, but everyone else?" He shrugged. "Not so much. You're over there and out of sight, out of mind pretty much." Another pause. "Then after my dad died, she sent my mom a card." He paused. "Sometimes they still email each other." Another long silence. "I think that's cool you know, that she'd send a card. She didn't know us or anything."

I remained silent, letting him get it out on his own.

"Dad brought home her letters," Emmett said. "She's a funny lady....I like her."

Emmett was quiet for a long time and when we were in the driveway, he turned to me and said, "Today was...that was good."

"Maybe we can do it again sometime?" I asked. He nodded. "Maybe your brothers and your Mom would like to come too?"

Emmett pondered that for a moment and then nodded again.

"All right," I said and we walked toward the house.

~TBTA~

Later that day I pulled up to Alice's and Jasper's house. I could already hear the shouts of kids and there were several running across the lawn. I turned to Bella and smiled. "Ready?"

"I can't wait to see Alice again," Bella said with a wide grin. "We went shopping a few days ago and I think I'm still in awe." She laughed. "She's like a homing device for bargains. It's amazing. She saved me a ton of money." Then Bella gave this little shake of her head and blushed a bit and I had to wonder what that was all about. "I think she made one salesperson cry, haggling with her like she did."

"You went shopping with Alice?" I was a little surprised.

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"Oh yeah," Bella said. "We don't get to hang out too often since we both have kids, but...yeah. Usually, it's just coffee or something but I like her. She's easy to talk to." The boys got out of the vehicle and raced ahead of us. She looked at me and said very quietly, "Besides, Emmett's been talking to Rosalie on the phone quite a bit so we talk about them too."

Now *that* was shocking.

" *Rosalie?* Jasper's niece?"

"The very same," Bella confirmed. She giggled. Shit. I didn't need that just before I walked into a party. "I think my son has quite the crush."

"And Rosalie talks to him too?" I asked. "It seemed like she did nothing but ignore him at the Adam's party."

"They talk for hours," Bella confirmed. "I know she looks like she would have boys falling over themselves to be with her, but honestly, I think she's just lonely. Emmett says she's actually kind of shy, especially around kids her own age. Maybe Emmett being a little younger makes him easier to be around. Not as much pressure to be anything else." She shrugged. "I can't imagine how she feels being away from her mother right now. So I think its good they have each other to talk to. And Emmett certainly doesn't mind." Another soft chuckle. This woman was going to kill me.

"Oh."

We walked to the backyard and sure enough, Emmett and Rosalie were already sitting under a tree, deep in discussion. The reserved young woman I had seen a few weeks ago had been replaced by a girl who acted much more like the sixteen year old girl she was. She laughed at Emmett, playfully slapped at his hand when he tried to steal something off her plate (how had Emmett gotten food *already?*), and looked up at him through her lashes when she thought he wasn't looking.

Well, well. This was quite a development. I had had no idea.

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"There you are!" I heard a voice call out and I saw a red blur as Alice launched herself at Bella. They hugged, admired each other's outfits (they were both in sundresses), and looked over at Emmett and Rosalie and giggled. Ah hell, they probably already had those two walking down the aisle in ten years. I walked away in search of Jasper before I embarrassed myself by reacting to Bella's laughter.

I found him at the grill, of course. "Good thing we don't live far away from the firehouse," I commented.

He turned to me, his eyes watering from the smoke. "Screw you, Cullen."

I glanced at the burgers and hot dogs. "At least they're not charcoal...yet."

"Don't notice you volunteering," Jasper said.

"And you won't," I replied. I got a beer out of the cooler. "I'm just here to make friends and play well with others." I grinned. "I probably won't even run with scissors."

Jasper rolled his eyes. "Ass."

Bella and Alice strolled up to us. Bella looked amazing in a dark blue sundress that highlighted her beautiful skin. Her hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail, but I admired the way it left her neck visible. I imagined nibbling at her earlobe and then licking a path down her throat.

Stop.

Company, remember? My dick sulked but settled down.

"There are a lot of people here," Bella said, looking around.

Alice shrugged. "When I throw a party, I like to throw a party."

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"Tell me about it," Jasper said. He closed the grill. "Okay, those should be good for a few minutes." He looked around. "Got some new guys in the company so I invited them and their families over. When I see them I'll introduce you."

I nodded and smiled when I felt Bella's hand in mine. That never got old, the feel of her slender hand grasping mine. I was just about to tell her how beautiful she looked when we were interrupted.

"*Bella James?*" A big, booming voice called out. Bella turned toward the sound, already smiling. "Megan! I shit you not, it's Bella James!"

Then a tall, beefy guy with arms the size of my thighs was pulling Bella into his embrace. I was about to embarrass myself and go caveman on him (I knew he could beat me to a pulp if he wanted but there was principle to be upheld) when I spotted the tall, willowy blond at his side. She tapped the guy on the shoulder and said, "My turn Thomas."

Then Bella was engulfed in her embrace as well. "Bella," the blond said. "When we heard about Mac..."

Bella nodded and smiled, though it was a bit sad. "I was a little overwhelmed and by the time I figured out I hadn't contacted everybody I couldn't find the address book and..." She shrugged. "I finally found a mutual acquaintance and she said she'd pass on the news."

The blond nodded. "Yes, she called us and told us. We were in Alaska and the funeral was long over and by the time we heard you were already out of Texas." She cradled Bella's face in her hands. "We were so sorry to hear about Mac." Megan hugged her close again. "He was a great guy. The best." Her eyes flickered to me curiously but not with any hostility.

Bella hugged the woman close and then pulled the man into the hug as well. "It's so good to see you both." Then she backed away and reached for my hand, pulling me forward. "Thomas...Megan...this is Edward."

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"Thomas Reynolds...my wife Megan," the guy said.

"Edward Cullen," I returned.

I reached out to shake Thomas' hand. I had expected him to give it a too-hard squeeze, just because he probably wouldn't like me on general principle. This guy had known Mac and was friends with Bella. He wouldn't want me in the picture. To my surprise, however, he gave me nothing more than a friendly, firm handshake. Megan gave me a brief hug.

Megan and Bella were soon discussing their kids, which I had discovered was a favorite topic at every gathering. I was getting to know the boys better with every passing week so sometimes I could actually relate...or even, God help me, *contribute*.

Thomas handed me another beer. "So...you and Bella, huh?"

I cleared my throat and shrugged. "Yeah...uh...yeah."

He laughed. "What? You think I'm gonna kick your ass because I was Mac's friend?"

I looked up at him warily. "Uh...no? Yes?" I heaved a sigh. "Hell, I don't know what the etiquette is for this sort of shit." I took a long swallow of my beer.

Thomas laughed loudly and clapped me on the back. I almost swallowed my beer bottle. Whole. That would have put a damper on the day. "Listen, Mac was a good friend. We went through a lot together." He leaned in close. "Hell, we busted a few noses together, you know what I mean?"

I looked at the behemoth and I thought about how big Mac had been. It would have been a scary sight to those two descending on you. I was really glad that Thomas didn't seem to be pissed at me for wanting to be with Bella. I was 6'2", but I felt short standing next to this guy.

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"She's a great person," Thomas added. "She was good for Mac, kept him straight like Megan does me." He looked at me again. "Mac would want her to be happy. I know that. Just like I'd want Meg to be happy." He snorted and nudged me. I almost toppled over. "Just not as happy as she was with me, if you get my drift." I did. "I sorta feel like she's my little sister or something. So that makes me a little...protective."

"No need to tell me," I replied. I couldn't help it, my eyes went to her. Her dark head was pressed to Megan's blond one, and they looked as if they were eight years old and sharing secrets, whispering about boys. It was cute as hell.

Thomas looked me up and down. "So you've been friends with Whitlock for a while, huh?"

"Went through Basic together," I said.

He nodded, took another sip of beer. "Whitlock's good people."

"The best," I agreed. I had a feeling that my long standing friendship with Jasper had gotten me some points in his book. It only took about thirty seconds to realize that Jasper was a really good guy.

"So...how're Bella's boys doing?" Thomas asked after a long pause.

"Good days and bad," I said quietly. "It's hardest for Emmett."

"Yeah, I figured that," Thomas murmured.

"They're great kids, though."

"Yeah, they're gonna be hellraisers like their daddy, though. Watch out." He looked at me once more as if sizing me up. "I'm going to go collect my wife and say hello to the boys." He grinned. "I'll be seeing you again."

I wasn't sure if it was a threat or a promise, so I decided to accept that it was both.

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Author's Note: Soldiers' Angels is a very real organization. I've been volunteering with them almost two years now. The list of items being sent in those care packages is taken from their website and from personal experience. You can write a one-time letter or adopt a hero or "shero" to support for the length of their deployment. They have different teams of volunteers. I'm a member of the Living Legends team and we send cards and letters to the families of fallen soldiers, seamen, airmen, and Marines. I've also "adopted" four different soldiers and a Marine. They have all sorts of teams, including those that help care for deployed soldiers' pets, give expectant moms baby showers (gifts are sent from all over the country), help out soldiers' families in the event of difficulties at home while the soldier is deployed and many other teams to support the troops and their families. So there's really something for everyone. If you'd like more information on this cause, you can go to their website: [soldiersangels\(.\)org](http://soldiersangels.org)

***MRE - Meal, Ready to Eat. Think of this as the Army equivalent of a frozen dinner. Except not as tasty. And eaten cold and in two minutes.**

Chapter 20: No Blood, No Fire Either

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Let me just say before you read this chapter that there will NOT be a cliff hanger. This isn't that kind of chapter. You'll see what I mean...

Chapter 20: No Blood, No Fire Either

The next two weeks passed in a similar fashion. I would concoct some excuse to drop by Bella's house, or she would invite me over, probably taking pity on me. I was kind of pathetic in my efforts to spend time with her; she was unfailingly gracious. One Thursday evening, I knocked on her door and was greeted by the sight of Sam standing there in a pair of khakis and a button down shirt. Right behind him, Jake was grinning at me.

"Well, don't you look nice," I commented as I walked in. Sam shrugged and the tips of his ears turned bright red.

I looked at Jake, who had opted for a Darth Vader tee-shirt that read "Don't Push My Buttons" and a pair of jeans. Jake liked his comfort. I could relate. "What about me, Mr. Edward? Do I look nice too?" Jake asked.

"You look very handsome, Jake," I assured him. I looked up to see Bella descending the stairs in a pair of black dress slacks and a soft pink blouse. The color made her ivory skin glow. She was putting an earring in as she muttered to herself, watching her feet on the stairs.

Looking up, she saw me and smiled. "Listen, thanks a million for taking Sam to the science thing." She handed me a piece of paper. "Here are the

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directions."

Her handwriting was a little sloppy and I found that...yes, adorable. Sickening I know. Lack of sex will do that to a man. At least, that's what I've heard. She leaned down and gave each boy a kiss. "Now behave for Edward," she said.

"We know, Mom, best behavior," Jake said. "Yeah, yeah, we got it."

"Yes, that's exactly what I expect," Bella replied, giving Jake a pointed look. Apparently, she hadn't appreciated his tone.

"Sorry," he mumbled, shuffling his feet.

"All right," she said, giving him another kiss. Then she handed me an envelope. "Here's money for ice cream, *if* they behave."

Jake was too busy doing a little dance of happiness to catch the conditions of him actually *getting* the ice cream. I was sure Sam would remind him. "And don't let Jake get the Gotta-Have-It size."

"Awwww, mom!"

"He can settle for a Love-It. Right?" Bella asked Jake.

"I guess so," he muttered, his lower lip protruding out.

"Or he can have none at all," Bella warned.

"A Love-It would be great," Jake decided without hesitation. I knew he could practically see that ice cream slipping away. I had to suppress a smile.

Bella nodded. "That's what I thought." Then she smiled at me and I felt a warm tingle run through me at being the focus of her attention at last. She pressed a quick kiss against my cheek and as nice as it was, I would have liked to get more. A little church tongue would have been nice. Still, the boys were staring at us.

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I decided to invite them to my house tomorrow night and maybe I'd get the chance to drag Bella out to that magnolia tree again. I brightened at the prospect. I'd definitely get some tongue out there, safe from the boys' prying eyes. I might even get to grope a little. My dick gave me a mental high five.

"Thank you," Bella said, unaware of my dick's nefarious plans. "This stupid teacher's meeting was planned months ago and there's no way to get out of it. We've got to cover some testing stuff that's probably going to bore me out of my mind." She rolled her eyes and gave a little huff.

My dick, predictably, thought it was adorable.

"Go, don't worry. The boys and I will be fine. Won't we fellas?"

Sam and Jake nodded and then I was leading them out to my car. They chattered away in the back seat. I listened as Sam tried to convince Jake that the exhibit would not be "boring" or "stupid." Jake was dubious but willing to endure just about anything for some ice cream.

The exhibit's topic was astronomy. The speaker was interesting, giving enough detail to bring his topic to life without getting bogged down. Sam surprised me by being quite familiar with the speaker's book (which the good professor quoted quite a bit). Apparently Sam had quite an interest in the topic of astronomy. Jake was making faces the entire time; his attention tended to wander. Mostly he just watched people watching the professor.

After the speech, we roamed through the regular exhibit and I was amazed at Sam's knowledge. I pretty much knew the names of the planets, the basics about the galaxy and that was it. Sam knew every planet, how far they were from the sun. He knew how long it took each of them to orbit the sun or spin on its axis. He knew about black holes and different theories about the origins of the universe. It was better than having a tour guide. Yet, through it all, he never seemed to be anything other than a kid. A very bright kid, grained, but still a kid. He still had an innocent view of the world and the universe that was both refreshing and enlightening. I was starting to realize that in some ways, kids see through all the bullshit and just focus on the important stuff.

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Even Jake was asking Sam questions, and Sam's patience in answering them was a wonderful thing to behold. Though Sam did sometimes look as if he couldn't understand why his brother wasn't a bit more excited about it all. Still, he answered every question Jake threw at him with a smile and no hint of irritation. I wondered if he had gotten that from Bella, who I imagined would be a very good and patient teacher. Her students were lucky.

After the exhibit, I took them to the ice cream place. Jake tried to order the Gotta-Have-It, giving me the full whammy with his big, dark eyes the whole time. I could tell he was trying to see just how far he could push me. I told him no, which just about killed me. It was the " *Please*, Mr. Edward?" that almost did me in. The kid could do puppy dog eyes like no other. Though I think I actually pulled something saying no, I held firm. So he bargained for some extra toppings, which I gave into because Bella hadn't said *anything* about toppings. We were both happy with the compromise. Sam was happy to order a waffle cone of Fudge Brownie ice cream. I ordered strawberry cheesecake ice cream and Jake wrinkled his nose at me.

"If it isn't chocolate, it isn't good," he announced. I hoped I would be able to expand his horizons.

I took the boys back to their house; Jake was already snoozing by the time we arrived. Bella looked like she had just gotten home because she was still dressed in her more formal clothes. I lifted up Jake and told her I'd carry him inside, but he woke up as soon as we hit the doorway. That might have been because Seth and Emmett were arguing - loudly - about something. Then Sam ran up the stairs, his footsteps surprisingly loud.

The sounds of home.

Jake rubbed his eyes and wriggled down to the floor before running up the staircase after his brother. More elephant footsteps. I grinned at Bella. "They were great," I said.

She gave me a relieved smile. I wanted to hang out and see if I could steal a few kisses, but she looked tired, so I settled for a quick kiss on her cheek.

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"Tomorrow? My house? Dinner with you and the boys?"

Nodding, she squeezed my hand and walked me to the door.

My dick called me a loser and pouted all the way home.

Self abuse, as usual.

~TBTA~

Friday just before lunch, my cell went off and I looked at it, a grin soon falling into place. "Bella," I said. "This is an unexpected treat."

"Mr. Edward?" It was Jake and he was upset. Very upset.

"What's up, buddy?" I was trying to remain calm but it wasn't easy. "Hey, where's your mom?"

"Emmett told me to call you and I did because when Mom isn't here, he's the boss of me." There was a pause. "I hate that."

"I know you do, Jake." I tried to laugh but it came out sounding fake and weak, probably because it was. "Why did Emmett tell you to call me, Jake?"

"Are you mad?" Jake asked worriedly. "Mom told me to never call you unless she wasn't home and there was blood and a lot of it." He paused. "Or if the house was on fire. I'm not supposed to touch the stove when she's not here." He stopped. "But we have to call 911 first before we call her or you if there's fire," Jake explained further. My nerves were shot already.

"Are you okay, Jake?" I asked. "Are Emmett and Seth and Sam okay?" I felt like I was going insane and I felt my buddy Masterson shoot me a worried look. I just shrugged.

"We're okay," Jake said. "There's no blood," he added. "No fire either."

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I breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear that, and I'm not mad at you Jake." I paused. "Why did Emmett tell you to call me?"

"Uhm...there's a policeman here and Emmett is downstairs talking to him but he told me to come up here and call you and not to come down again or he was gonna beat my tail," Jake informed. "I don't think he's allowed to say that even if Mom isn't home."

"Jake? What's going on?"

"Mom keeps your number by the phone so I could dial it without asking Emmett."

I felt my heart sink down to my stomach and then rise up to fill my throat. "Uh, Jake buddy, why are there policemen there? And where's your Mom?"

Then Jake started to cry. "Mom went to the grocery store to get the stuff for my birthday cake. I'm gonna be eight on Sunday. That's the day after tomorrow."

"I know," I said as patiently as I could. "Jake...could you do me a favor and take the phone down to Emmett?"

"He told me not to go downstairs and he's the boss of me right now." God help me, I was going to lose it.

"Jake, I'm on my way over," I said. "Tell Emmett I'm on my way over."

Then I heard another voice and a scuffle. "Give me the damned phone Jacob Joshua James!" It was Emmett's voice. Apparently, Emmett had gotten impatient and had gone looking for Jake.

"I'm telling," Jake announced. "You said a bad word and just 'cause you're the boss right now doesn't mean you get to use bad words."

For my sanity, it was a good thing that Emmett didn't waste time arguing with his little brother. "Mr. Edward?" he said quietly. Oh shit, I had a very bad

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feeling.

"What's going on, Em?"

He took a deep breath. "Uh, there's some cops here and they said..." Another deep, shuddering breath. "Uh, my mom's been in a car accident-"

"I'll be there in just a few minutes!"

"She's at the hospital," Emmett continued. Shit, shit, shit.

"I'll pick you all up and we'll go there. Tell the cops that, okay?"

He hesitated and I heard him thumping down the stairs and then the murmur of strange voices. A moment later a man's voice came on the line. "This is Patrolman Weiss," he said.

I quickly introduced myself.

"Are you next of kin?" he asked.

"The closest thing they've got to it here," I muttered. "What's her condition?"

Please God, let her be okay. Please...

"She's stable, sir. Nothing that looks life threatening, but she does need medical treatment. Can you get her kids there? She was *real* agitated wondering how they'd get there."

She was talking; she was pissed and worried. Good. "Yes, yes," I snapped impatiently. "What hospital?"

I hung up the phone and went to see Major Hutchinson. I explained the situation and he sent me on my way after asking if there was anything he could do. Twenty seconds later I was out the door.

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~TBTA~

The drive to Bella's house was endless, but the moment I walked in the door I realized I had to get my shit together because these boys were scared. They had already lost their father and now their mother had been in an accident. "Come on guys," I urged and they were all running toward my car.

None of them spoke a word on the trip to the hospital. I was trying very hard to hold onto the cop's reassuring words. If Bella had been in any real danger, he would have told *me*, at least, even if he didn't tell Emmett. And if she was worried about the boys getting there then she was fully aware and conscious. Right?

Luckily for all of us, I was soon pulling into the ER parking lot and we were rushing through the doors. I was still in uniform and I guess the cop had warned the nurse I'd be on my way with the boys. She looked up and smiled. That was good. It had to be. She'd hardly be grinning away at me if Bella was -

Stop.

"Right this way, sir," she said, getting to her feet. I looked at the boys, who all stared back at me. There was no way I could leave them in the waiting room. I cleared my throat to ask when I saw a grey-haired police officer come through the ER doors.

"Sergeant Major Cullen?" he asked, extending his hand.

"That's me," I said, and then I indicated the boys. "These are Mrs. James' sons."

"Hi, boys," the officer said. "I'll take you back there in just a minute. Your mom is anxious to see you."

The tension radiating in the boys - and in me, to be honest - eased a bit with his words. If Bella was still talking about and asking for the kids then she was probably doing okay. I took my first easy breath in what seemed a lifetime.

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"Thanks for-"

"Former Army myself," the cop interrupted. He grinned at me and I forced myself to smile back, when all I really wanted to do was rush back to see Bella. "She's fine," he said. "Banged up a little bit, but the doc will talk to you about that." He looked at the boys. "You boys take good care of your mama now, you hear me?"

A chorus of "Yes sirs" and we were going through the doors.

The first thing I heard was Bella's voice. She did not sound happy. Neither did she sound as if she was at death's door, so I would easily settle for annoyed and perturbed.

"Just give me a minute," she grumbled. Then she hissed. "And are you aiming for the bone with that needle, pal? If so, you've hit pay dirt."

"That pain medication should start working soon," a male voice said. "The doctor will be in here to get that cast on you."

"Let me see my family before you start torturing me with your cast. Okay?"

"Now, ma'am," a young male voice tried to soothe.

"Don't *ma'am* me," Bella grouched. "My foot is aching like a bitch and you're talking to me like I'm a grandmother." I heard her give a loud humph for emphasis.

She sounded irritable and annoyed. I'd never been so fucking glad to hear a woman complain in my life. I had half-expected to see her broken and pale on a gurney, shattered like the delicate thing she was. Even though her voice reassured me, my hand shook as I moved the curtain aside and there she was, her arms crossed over her chest as she glared at a young man dressed in white. I should have known. Bella might look delicate, but fragile she wasn't. He threw me a look of utter defeat and shook his head.

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"I'll be back," he muttered and escaped.

"Are you making friends already?" I asked. My relief made me giddy; I felt high like I had when I'd taken the pain meds the doctor had given me when I had broken some ribs in a training exercise.

I heard the boys stirring with their own relief beside me. Emmett was even smirking. From terror to amusement in thirty seconds.

She was sitting up in the bed, her hair standing up crazily around her head, her blouse had a spot of blood on it, but I thought that was probably from a nosebleed, as I could see the crusted blood beneath her nostrils. It wasn't bad though, nothing that would scare the kids. They were tough. One leg was immobilized and she had a bandage across her forehead. She looked fragile with that swatch of white across her pale skin. I didn't like it. "Did you know that airbags literally *stink* when they explode?" she asked. Bella made a face. "Like the stench makes you want to vomit."

"Really?" What could I say to that? Especially when all I wanted to do was to pull her into my arms and kiss her until neither one of us could breathe.

Blowing out a breath, she seemed to push away her irritation. "My boys," she said softly, and the way she said it while she looked at me too made me feel that I was included in that. It gave me a warm feeling.

"So...when are they going to spring you?" I forced myself to remain casual, like I hadn't been in full on panic mode since I heard Jake's voice on the phone. I was just Mr. Cool...no worries here...move along, move along.

Scowling, Bella shrugged. "They've got to put a cast on this," she said, pointing to her foot as if it had personally offended her. She was annoyed all right. She wanted out of there. "I broke some stupid bones in my stupid foot." Bella rolled her eyes. "Bastards," she muttered under her breath. I was getting the impression that Bella wasn't fond of hospitals.

"I heard that," Jake told her with a grin.

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A cart was wheeled in with casting supplies. "Listen," I said. "Would you mind if I take the boys to the cafeteria?" I gave her a pointed look. The casting process would probably be uncomfortable and I didn't want the boys to see her in pain.

She made a face at the cart and then sighed resignedly. "Yeah, that would be great."

Emmett started to protest and she gave him a look. Jake tugged at my pants. "Do they have ice cream?"

I laughed, because once Jake saw his mother was all right, the sweet tooth was back in full force. "We'll see what they've got," I promised.

Emmett said he wasn't really hungry, so he settled for a hamburger, an order of fries, and a chocolate shake. I was really glad he wasn't *really* hungry because I didn't have an unlimited amount of cash with me. Sam got an apple juice, his normally darker complexion much paler than usual. The worrier...

Seth and Jake each got ice cream. Jake's was chocolate. Of course. When I thought enough time had passed, we went back to the ER. A short, round man in a white coat was waiting for us when we arrived. After a moment of sheer panic, I noticed he seemed to be in a jovial mood.

Okay, idiot. It looks like they manage to cast Bella's leg and foot without killing her. You, on the other hand, will be admitted for a heart attack if you keep this shit up.

"I'm Dr. Swardson," he said. "I'm Mrs. James' physician. She's ready to go, but I wanted to give you a few last minute instructions."

The boys had hung back when the doctor motioned me forward. I saw Emmett shifting nervously and I turned to him and caught his eyes. "Come here, Emmett," I said. "The doctor wants to talk about taking care of your mom."

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It had only been a hunch, but my instincts seemed to have been correct. A look of relief flashed over Emmett's face and he jogged to my side. I imagined that he had had enough of adults trying to exclude him from things that actually *were* his business. I nodded at the doctor to continue. "She'll need someone...some *adult* to keep an eye on her tonight."

Emmett rolled his eyes. I almost did too. The doctor's condescending tone wasn't sitting well with either of us. "Got it," I said. I looked at Emmett. "I'll spend the night and you and I can take turns looking in on your mom. Sound okay?"

He nodded.

"She'll most likely want to sleep through the night, but you'll need to check on her to make sure she's not in too much pain and give her the pain medication I've prescribed. That foot is going to ache pretty bad for the first few days especially."

"If she's hurt that bad maybe she should stay here," I suggested. Now this guy was making me nervous.

"No, no, just a precaution," the doctor said. "And by tomorrow afternoon or the day after at the latest, she'll probably be fine with Ibuprofen. I've given her a prescription for pain medication only because I'm not sure what her pain tolerance is like." I could guess it would be pretty high, given the fact she had given birth four times, but I didn't make that observation.

He handed us a list of cast care instructions. I tucked them into my uniform pocket along with her prescription. Then they were wheeling Bella out in a wheelchair.

She was high as a fucking kite. She grinned up at me. "You look soooo good in your uniform, so handsome..." she announced loudly. It was only the second time she'd seen me in it. Then she patted Emmett on the cheek. "My baby boy..."

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Emmett rolled his eyes again. "Must be some good meds," he muttered under his breath.

We took her out to the car and between Emmett, the orderly, and I, we somehow got Bella into the passenger seat.

She wasn't very cooperative and it was sort of like trying to put a snake in a sack. We'd get everything tucked in and then her hand would come fluttering out. We'd get that put in the car and she'd stick her head out to tell us how happy she was to see us taking such good care of her. And she kept giggling, which didn't help me focus at all. Luckily, my dick was still too worried about her to get hard.

The boys all piled into my woefully inadequate back seat. I looked at the four boys squeezed into the small space. It reminded me of clowns stuffed into one of those tiny cars. That just wasn't going to do.

Chapter 21: Sweet Destruction

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Author's Note: Someone had asked about Bella not telling them to contact Edward right away. Her thoughts were a bit muddled after the accident, but if you want to know exactly what she was thinking, it's covered in the latest outtake. I've had a few people say that they'd love to know more about Rosalie and Emmett. To my surprise, they sort of started their own story. I won't begin posting that one until this one is completed, because it will cover the later years. But I can tell you that right now the title is "The Art of Persistence" and I'm having fun writing it. We'll see how Emmett and Rose get along in the years to come. :p

Chapter 21: Sweet Destruction

I looked at Bella to ask what pharmacy she usually used, but I could tell by her expression that was useless. She was grinning like a loon and studying her fingers. Good meds indeed. I looked in the rearview mirror and grinned at Emmett. "Uh...your mom's a little bit out of it." He laughed and nodded. "Do you know what pharmacy she usually uses?" I figured they would have her insurance information on file.

Luckily, Emmett did know and I dropped off the scrip. They told me it would be ready in an hour. That gave me time enough to get Bella settled and then come back for it. Emmett could keep an eye on her while I was gone. Which reminded me...I'd have to call my commanding officer and explain that I needed to use a little of my leave time next week.

Luckily, he was a family man too and would understand.

The Bigger They Are

Wait. *Too*? That just sounded... Well, really, really right. Which was scary as hell.

Just as I was starting to get good and panicky, Bella snored. Loudly. The boys burst into giggles and it sounded really good. It also dispelled the last of the tension that had lingered from finding out about Bella's accident.

I grabbed Bella's keys out of the purse the nurse had handed me and tossed them to Emmett. "Can you go open the door?"

I looked at Sam. I knew from training soldiers that if you kept them busy they had less time to worry. These boys needed to get their minds occupied with something they could actually *do*.

"Sam, can you go turn down your Mom's bed?" He nodded and jumped over Seth, kneeling him in the balls in the process. I winced for him. Seth just took a deep breath and covered his goods. "Sorry about that, Seth."

He nodded, unable to speak. Jake looked at me, apparently unconcerned about his brother's difficulty. "What can I do, Mr. Edward?"

"Do you know where your mom keeps the water bottles?" I asked. He nodded eagerly.

"Okay, go get one and then take it upstairs to your Mom's bedroom. Does she have a little table by her bed?" Another nod. "Then just put it on the table. Got it?"

"Got it!" he yelled as he slid out of the car. I glanced at Seth. "You going to live?"

Seth nodded jerkily and then crawled gingerly out of the car. He hobbled into the house and I flinched. My own balls started aching in sympathy. I circled around the car and opened the passenger door.

The Bigger They Are

Bella was still passed out, her mouth open. There was a little drool at the corner of her mouth. I grinned, knowing she wouldn't appreciate it if I took a picture of her with my phone, though I was sorely tempted. I picked her up in my arms and she just sort of sagged against me. Her lack of response made me nervous. I was guessing she had a pretty high tolerance for pain, but not much of one for pain *medication*.

I hoisted her up more securely and carried her in through the open door. I made my way up the stairs and found her room because I could hear the boys arguing over how far the sheets should be turned down. I angled her in through the door, careful not to hit her head. "This is fine, boys," I assured them as I placed her on the bed. I removed her shoe (the other was in a white plastic bag from the hospital). Then I covered her with the comforter because I didn't really feel comfortable taking off any of her clothes, especially not with eight curious eyes focused on us.

I really didn't want the first time I unbuttoned her blouse and slid her pants off her hips to be in front of an audience - *especially* her sons.

"Uh..." I ran my hands through my hair. "I'll go see if your mom's medicine is ready." I looked at Emmett. "Will you sit with her?"

"Yeah, sure," he answered and he settled into a chair I imagined Bella used to read in. For the first time, I took a good look at her room. It wasn't overtly feminine, and I guessed that decades of living with only males was the reason. It was done in greens, soft mossy green, touches of a bolder forest green, and a pale green that almost glowed white.

It was simple and inviting.

I glanced once more at Bella. She snorted and rolled over to her side, wincing as she moved her broken foot.

Just my luck... I'd finally gotten in Bella's bedroom and she was unconscious. And her son was staring at me with a little smirk on his face like he knew what I was thinking.

The Bigger They Are

I just couldn't catch a break.

~TBTA~

I arrived back at the house, Bella's prescriptions in hand. I had been surprised when the pharmacy tech asked me if I wanted to pick up Mrs. James' *other* prescription. Torn between not wanting to invade Bella's privacy and realizing that Bella would be in no shape to pick up it herself for a while, I said okay. After all, it might be a medication she needed now.

When the tech handed me the clear plastic bag with the prescriptions inside, I grinned. It was a shit-eating, maybe one day I'm gonna get lucky kind of grin.

Bella was on birth control. I took a quick glance at the label, my own nosiness astounding even me, and I saw that it was a new prescription and had eleven refills left.

Well, well, well.

~TBTA~

Bella was restless when I got back, so I had Emmett hand me a pain pill while I held her up a little bit. He handed her the water bottle and between the two of us, we managed to coax her to take one. She was out of it again about two seconds after I lowered her to the pillow.

I tucked her in and I motioned to Emmett so that we could talk out in the hallway. I pulled out my wallet and handed him some cash of the cash I'd gotten out of the ATM at the pharmacy. "Why don't you order some pizzas?" I suggested. "Get whatever you and your brothers like."

He nodded.

"I'm going to sit with your mom for just a few minutes, but let me know when the pizza's here and I'll come downstairs and eat with you guys."

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"Okay."

I watched him lope down the stairs, making stampeding elephant noises again. Then I was back in Bella's room. I sat in the chair again and watched her sleep. She muttered and mumbled a little bit, nothing I could make sense of as she snuggled more deeply under the covers. I wondered if she was cold. I got up and looked for a blanket. There was one in the top of her walk-in closet, her little luxury.

Inside her closet was pure chaos. I wondered how she could find anything. Beside the blanket, there were several photo boxes. The urge to go through them was almost irresistible. I'd seen the family photos on the walls, but I felt as if there was some key to understanding Bella inside those boxes, those unseen photos.

I resisted the urge and covered her huddled form with the blanket, brushing back her hair as I did so. I resumed my spot in the chair, listening to the sounds of the boys downstairs. They were loud, as always. Bella didn't seem to be bothered by all the noise. I guessed she was used to it.

I sat there and just listened, taking it all in. The sound of Bella breathing, the rustle of the sheets as she shifted in the bed, finally getting warmer, the soft whimper when I supposed her foot throbbed. I listened to the sounds of the boys' voices, their teasing and taunting of each other, the thump of their giant feet on the stairs, up and down, up and down, thundering back and forth. How many times a day did they go up and down those stairs? I heard the sounds of the television. They were watching something with a lot of explosions.

Closing my eyes, I let the symphony of the sounds of family inundate me. I realized in that moment that *this* was what I wanted. Ten years ago, maybe even five years ago, this desire would have baffled and terrified me. Bella was correct when she said it was a *lot*. But that was sort of the point, wasn't it? Because if it wasn't a lot, it wouldn't be Bella. She would be a different person without all of this baggage. Honestly, the baggage was part of what drew me now.

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There was something freeing in admitting that. It was insane; it made no sense. Right here in this house was everything I hadn't known I wanted. I wanted the chaos and the noise; I wanted to break free of the narrow role I had assigned myself in life. Bella and those boys had shaken my foundations and had started building something new from the rubble.

Destruction had never felt so sweet.

~TBTA~

The pizza was delicious. Emmett managed to put away seven slices all by himself. It was as if the burger, fries, and shake from the hospital had been figments of my imagination. After dinner, Emmett and I went back up to check on Bella, but she was sleeping peacefully - not even snoring.

"I'm going to go pick up some clothes and stuff at my house," I told Emmett. "I'll be back in about an hour."

He nodded and told me he would check on his mother while I was gone. I knew he would. I showered quickly, not even needing to rub one out since the sight of Bella with that bandage on her head and her leg in a cast had, temporarily at least, banished my near-perpetual hard on. I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or not.

I gave Jasper a quick call to tell him what had happened, but he already knew. Apparently, Emmett and Rosalie had already talked. Then I was racing back to Bella's house. Jake was there to open the door, no need to knock with Jake around.

The other boys were in the living room, their eyes glued to the television. I nodded at them as I walked up the stairs. Bella was still sleeping, sprawled out over the bed with her unbroken foot sticking out. I guess she'd gotten hot at some point. I removed the blanket, folded it, and put it back in the closet. I ignored the boxes of pictures.

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When I got back downstairs, I saw that perhaps my good behavior over the pictures was going to be rewarded. It looked like the boys were watching old home movies on an ancient VCR. I hadn't even seen one in a few years.

I looked at the screen and there was Bella. She was pregnant, like *really* pregnant. Seeing her lean over (carefully and slowly) to kiss what had to be about a two year old Emmett, I figured that it was Seth growing inside of her. She grinned at the camera. "Okay, Mac!" she cried. "Enough is enough!"

There was a boom of loud laughter from behind the camera. Mac. I'd never heard his voice. The camera angle spun wildly and there was Mac, his face looming large in the screen. "My beautiful little wife thinks she's *fat*," he told us with a roll of his eyes. It was the first time I'd ever heard his voice. It was big and deep, exactly what I would have expected.

"I *am* fat! And it's all your fault!" I heard Bella call out in the background.

Mac grinned. "Yes it is." He wriggled his eyebrows and I laughed because I had seen Emmett do exactly that same thing. The boys turned to me with guilt written all over their faces, as if they just realized what they were watching. Emmett reached for the remote to turn it off. "No, leave it on," I said quietly. The boys had been through a lot recently. The anniversary of their father's death, Bella's accident, my arrival in their lives. Was it so odd that they would want to reconnect with Mac? I realized in that moment that I could either fight that bond, or I could embrace it. The choice was mine.

I sat down, squeezing in between Jake and Seth. Jake leaned his little head on my chest and sighed. He was tired; it had been a trying day.

We didn't talk about what we were watching. We didn't need to. We just shared the moment.

~TBTA~

After watching almost two hours of home movies, I told Emmett I was going to check on his mom again. We'd been taking turns checking in on her every hour

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or so. She was always sleeping when we peeked in, so we left her alone.

This time, however, she was awake, sitting up in the darkness of her room. I felt like an ass; I had forgotten that she would wake up to a dark room. Quickly, I turned on the bathroom light. It threw golden fingers over her green bed, shimmered in her dark eyes. Even pale and exhausted, her eyes droopy from the pain meds, she was beautiful.

"Edward?" she asked, tilting her head at me. "What are you...?" She frowned.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. The first time I had sat there. My hands were unable to resist the temptation to brush across the sheets that had been wrapped around her. They were soft and smelled faintly of laundry detergent. "I brought you home," I reminded her. "The boys are downstairs. They've been fed and are taking their showers now."

"Oh..."

I glanced at the clock by her bed. "Do you need another pain pill?"

She thought about it for a moment and then shook her head. "No, not really." Bella ran her fingers through her hair. "They make me feel dopey." Shaking her head, she sighed. "I don't like it."

"Yeah, well, it's kind of cute," I told her with a smirk.

She rolled her eyes at me and then looked down and plucked at her blouse. "Uh yeah..." I mumbled. "I didn't want to uh..." I shrugged. "Well you know."

"You didn't want to see me naked?" she teased.

I met her eyes and gave her a wicked smile. "Oh most definitely, but I want you fully aware and awake to enjoy the experience in a mutual sense." *Make what you will of that Bella James...*

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She flopped back on the pillows a bit. "You play unfair." Then she shifted uneasily and I could guess what her problem was.

"Would you like me to grab you some more comfortable clothes and help you to the bathroom?"

"I can get to the bathroom just fine, thank you," Bella replied indignantly. "I'll have you know that I'm no amateur when it comes to getting around with a cast."

"Kind of a klutz are you?" I teased.

"I was," she admitted. "But I outgrew my awkward phase, as my mother likes to call it."

"I hear that happens with swans." Okay, I had teased her about her maiden name. Bella Swan? Really? What were her parents thinking? Beautiful swan? What if she'd been homely? That was just asking for the other kids to tease her. Luckily, she had the looks and the grace to carry off the name otherwise it could have been a cruel joke.

"Just help me get out of this bed and I'll take care of business," she ordered.

"Yes ma'am."

She put her hand in mine and gave a gentle pull. The motion brought her face to face with me, her lips tantalizingly close. She looked up at me, licking her lips. My dick had apparently recovered from his scare earlier and roused up in interest. "I want to thank you," she said. Her voice was soft and breathy, making me wonder how it would sound while I was buried inside of her.

"For what?" I couldn't think. My dick was throbbing, achy and heavy in my pants.

"For bringing the boys to me, for bringing me home...for taking care of me," Bella whispered.

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"I like taking care of you," I confessed softly. Slowly, I lowered my lips to hers. I heard her give a quivering sigh and her mouth opened for me. Clutching at me, she moaned and I suddenly realized that I was in Bella's bedroom, my leg touching her bed, and she was kissing me rather like she had no intention of stopping.

And there were four boys in the house with us. I stifled the groan of protest at what I knew I had to do.

I pulled away. "Go get changed," I said. My voice sounded like I had been smoking three packs a day for a couple of decades. I cleared my throat. "I'll check on the boys."

She nodded. "Are you going home?" Did I imagine the disappointment in her voice?

I smiled and shook my head. "Sorry, you're stuck with me for a few days," I told her. "You don't have a car and you've got a leg in a cast anyway. The doctor wants to see you in a few days and check on that foot."

Bella paused for a moment and then smiled. "It'll be fun having you here," she said softly and then hobbled off to the bathroom, grabbing some clothes from the dresser along the way.

As I watched her disappear into the bathroom I promised myself that I would do absolutely *nothing* to fuck this up.

Fic Rec:

Equal & Opposite by Oh Jasper My Jasper - this is slashy goodness. Jasper and Edward have been best friends forever. I won't go into detail about the plot because this story is both complex and compelling. There's too much to include. You'll get drawn in right away. Needless to say, Edward's a bit of an ass, Jasper is coming to terms with his sexuality and the repercussions of all of it with his best friend. I just finished this story and am currently reading the companion story, Errors & Omissions . As

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always, a link is in my favorites.

Chapter 22: Expectations and Reality

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Chapter 22: Expectations and Reality

I fucked it up.

Looking back it was inevitable. I mean, I'm a *guy*. That's what we do. Every single of us. Eventually. I think women are actually just sort of waiting for that first monumental fuck up so they can see what they've really gotten themselves into. They want to see how we handle ourselves in the guaranteed event of our fuckupedness. We always oblige. They like to get it out of the way and we just keep delaying it as long as humanly possible. More often than not, they get their glimpse of our idiot side sooner rather than later.

Case in point...

The next morning I got the first hint that maybe, just *maybe*, Bella wouldn't be a very good patient. I could understand that; I hated being sick or injured myself and I generally made everyone around me as miserable as I was. I knew this because my mother had informed me of this character flaw...more than once. Even after I left home, I wasn't much better but luckily that sort of behavior is sort of expected when you're in the Army. You're not *supposed* to like being sick or cuddled or pampered or taken care of at all. Unless it's in your own home and you have a pretty woman to cater to your every need and whim. Then it's okay.

So I was expecting Bella to be grumpy and sulky, with a touch of snarky thrown in just for fun.

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What I had not expected was that Bella's tolerance for being even a *semi-invalid* would be so shockingly low. I thought my expectations were pretty realistic. I even fooled myself into thinking that because she was *female*, she would want a bit more down time before she threw herself back into the thick of things. I mean what hardworking single mom wouldn't appreciate a little vacation?

My mother would have ripped me a new one if I said that out loud. Luckily for both my ass and my gonads (I was sure Bella would give me a swift kick in both if she could read my mind), I hadn't ventured to give that opinion out loud. But it was just there, kicking around in the back of my mind. Like poison. My mother would have called it testosterone poisoning.

I had pictured myself taking care of Bella, bringing her up something to eat, maybe sitting in the chair after I fluffed her pillows and we would discuss books and music and the boys. It would be relaxing and enjoyable and we would settle into a comfortable routine. I would prepare special meals and tempt her with them, or order out if my limited culinary skills failed, all while keeping her house in perfect order and the boys completely contented with my care of them.

That was my *expectation*. And then there was *reality*. I had mistaken one for the other. I had foolishly expected that simply because I imagined things one way, that's how they'd be.

I found out quickly that I had no fucking idea of who Bella James actually was. My lust-addled brain had conveniently forgotten that this woman had survived the loss of a husband she loved very much and had been doing a very successful job of raising four rambunctious boys with no help at all from yours truly.

Bella reminded me. And because she was well accustomed to the male mind, she didn't make her lesson subtle. Subtlety is lost on anyone with a penis and testicles. We like things plain and simple, just like us. That's my mother's theory anyway. I know this because she has shared her opinion with my brother and me - and even my father - on numerous occasions, mostly when we didn't

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want her to.

I had passed out on the couch late the night before. I set my phone alarm, determined to get up early so that I could cook her breakfast and serve it to her in bed. I already had the menu planned out in my head. I even took into account Jake's sweet tooth so I was going to make something that required syrup. Might as well kiss up when I could. I figured it might be a long time before I got a chance to pamper her like this again and I intended to take full advantage.

So imagine my surprise when my alarm went off and I woke up.

To the smell of bacon.

What. The. Fuck?

Jake couldn't use the stove without adult supervision, so that left only three possible options for the chef in question. Emmett preferred inhaling food to cooking it; Seth had never shown any interest in cooking, and Sam... Well, he might get up and cook but he hated to wake up early. So which one was it?

I never once considered that it might be Bella. She would *of course* be upstairs, patiently waiting for me to carry her downstairs. She would be suitably impressed by my manly strength and gentlemanly manners, and I would get to hold her in my arms. I figured there was even a chance I'd get a few kisses. I might even get to feel her breasts pressed against me, hopefully before she put a bra on. My dick gave the plan his seal of approval.

Win-win, as far as I could see.

This was expectation.

Reality was that when I walked into the kitchen there was Bella, standing awkwardly in front of the stove, muttering under her breath. To both my horror and amusement, I could see that she was inserting a long, wooden spoon handle into the cast. "Mother fucking itching..." I heard her grumble.

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"What are you doing?" I asked.

She jumped and gave a yelp. "Shit!" she said, trying to set the pan right where she had jerked it when I surprised her. "Don't sneak up on me." Bella frowned at me like *I* was the one who had done something wrong.

And all my plans came crashing down.

"What are you doing, Isabella James?" Without realizing it, I had used the tone I sometimes used with soldiers who were caught doing something they shouldn't be. That was mistake number one and I was about to prove that I was on a roll.

Her eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?" One hand went to her hip. If I had any smarts, my brain would have been shouting, "WARNING! WARNING! Danger ahead!" But I was still sleepy and surprised and laboring under the delusion of my expectations. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

I stalked toward her and grabbed the spatula out of her hand. "What the hell are you doing up? And how did you get the down the stairs without any help? Are you trying to *kill* yourself going down that staircase by yourself?"

I snapped off my questions without listening to see if she'd answer. I was so busy fussing at her that I didn't pick up on her nonverbal cues, which were anything but subtle.

Mistake number *two*.

In my own defense, it was the squashing of my hopes to pamper and spoil her that made me such an ass. I had really been looking forward to waiting on *her* for a change, instead of watching her run around like crazy taking care of everyone around her.

My intentions were good.

My execution was shit.

The Bigger They Are

Expectations.

Reality.

I ran my fingers through my hair in exasperation. "Really, Bella, I would have thought you'd have the sense to wait until someone could help you down those stairs. You could have fallen and killed yourself!" I could all too easily imagine her taking a tumble down the stairs, landing in a bloody heap at the bottom, her neck broken -

Okay, sometimes my imagination is a bit too vivid.

But that was my quota of mistakes. Three was apparently the limit.

She snatched the spatula out of my hand and rapped me lightly on the chest with it. It had a bit of sting to it since I wasn't wearing a shirt. I rubbed at it and frowned at her. "What was *that* for?"

I expected her to back up. I expected her to apologize. I expected her to thank me for being so concerned about her.

Apparently, I needed to alter my expectations.

Again, there was this wide divide between expectations and reality.

Bella took an ungainly step forward. "Listen here, *Caveward...*" I flinched from the look in her eyes. This was reality in Technicolor. "First of all, this is a *walking* cast, indicating it is meant, therefore, by definition and design to be used for *walking*! Second, I'm a grown woman. If I didn't think I could make it down the stairs in *my own* house, I would have waited for someone to help me. I'm not stupid. I realize that I've got four kids who depend on me. I'm all they've got, Edward so don't you think that *ever* leaves my thoughts." Another poke on my chest. Her fingers were pointy. I tried not to flinch because I'm a man. Ouch. I flinched anyway. "I've lived almost thirty-seven years and managed not to cause any lasting damage to myself. I dress myself, work full time and pay my own bills. I can pack up an entire house in two days and

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unpack it one. I've driven a U-Haul across country with a crying newborn and a two year old. All. By. Myself." More poking with the pointy finger. I was going to bruise if she didn't stop that shit. "I've even managed to raise four kids into something resembling civilized human beings. So I would appreciate you not talking to me like I was a *child*." Her finger poked me in the chest. It wasn't by accident that she got the exact same spot. It was like I was wearing a fucking target. "Got it?"

I couldn't do anything but nod weakly.

She pressed the spatula into my hand. "And since you're so damned convinced that I'm helpless, *you* can cook the breakfast I was making to thank you for all you did yesterday." She rolled her eyes at me. "Meanwhile, I going to take a shower." Bella's face scrunched up. "I just hope I don't accidentally drown myself while I'm at it." She stalked off, the cast thumping on the floor every other step.

I saw that Jake was up, blinking at his mother. When we heard her stomping up the stairs, Jake looked at me and shook his head with pity.

"Don't say it," I muttered.

He rolled his eyes. He didn't have to say it.

I knew.

I had fucked up.

~TBTA~

I was suitably chastened while I finished up breakfast. Jake took pity on me and didn't say a word. He even ate his eggs without putting maple syrup on them. It was a hardship I could tell. Manfully, he shoveled them in, though I did see him sneaking some grape jelly out of the jar and slurping it up on a spoon. I had the idea that such an activity wasn't exactly sanitary, but I couldn't find it in myself to correct him.

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He slurped. I sulked.

The morning sucked.

Then Emmett and Seth walked in. I think Emmett had grown over night. I was starting to believe that stuff about growth hormones in the beef and milk causing kids to grow bigger than their parents. God help me if Emmett ended up bigger than Mac. At this rate, that would happen in about...oh, three weeks.

Emmett's eyes darted from me to Jake and back again. Apparently they had some sort of brother code that I wasn't privy to because Emmett snorted as he got himself a plate. "You pissed her off, huh?"

I glared at Jake. *Traitor.*

He shrugged. Okay, so it was bros before wanna-be-male hos. I got it. I saw how it was. I was cutting off the kid's Butterfinger supply. Those puppy dog eyes weren't going to work on *me* anymore.

Jake didn't seem worried.

"I didn't think she should have come down the stairs all by herself," I grumbled. "I was only thinking of her."

Emmett shook his head. So did Seth. Jake joined in and heaved a sigh of pity for me. I huffed. "I'm gonna go shower. Tell Sam there's some food in the microwave."

When I walked out of the kitchen there was a moment of silence and then all three boys started laughing. At me.

Fuck. My. Life.

~TBTA~

The Bigger They Are

I was total chicken shit and just yelled out at the boys that I was going to my house to get some fresh clothes and check on things. *What **things** are you going to check on, Cullen? Checking to see if you can find your balls after Bella handed them to you?*

I alternated between being pissed off and sorry the whole way back to my house.

*Really, what did **she** have to get so pissy about? You were just worried about her!*

Yes, you ass, but you treated her like she was a child. She's a grown woman! A fact that your dick apparently appreciates, and if you have any hope of introducing him to her girly parts, you'd better straighten up! You fucked up, Cullen. Admit it. You're a big fuck up.

She could have at least realized that I was only concerned about her.

Okay, but don't you think she used to doing things for herself? Maybe you should have eased into the whole "protector" thing, asswipe. These things take time. An offer to finish cooking while she sat in the kitchen and talked to you would have gone over a lot better, you idiot.

She didn't have to hit me with the spatula. Even I recognized that I was whining, internally at least.

It was only a tap, you big pussy. Besides, apparently she DID have to hit you to get your attention.

A little appreciation might have been nice.

What? Aw, does little Eddie want his mommy to hug him and tell him that he was a good boy?

I sighed because even my inner voices were conflicted and sarcastic.

The Bigger They Are

I delayed leaving my house. I was honest enough to admit that I was worried about seeing Bella. How angry was she? How badly had I fucked things up? Did the boys hate me now that I had pissed her off?

And when did I become such a pussy about a little disagreement?

A part of me realized that it was only natural that Bella and I would have differences of opinion. It was a part of being in a relationship. I also realized that we couldn't *not* have arguments because I was afraid her sons would hate me. That was both unrealistic and stupid. I knew, from Emmett and Bella both, that she and Mac had had their share of arguments. They were married; it was inevitable. So what made me think that she and I wouldn't disagree? Ever? And what kind of couple *never* disagrees? I realized then I was walking on egg shells, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Stepping into a dead man's shoes, so to speak, was proving to be a bit...challenging.

Awkward as hell at times, too.

If Bella and I were going to have a real relationship, it was inevitable that A) we would argue, and B) the boys would be aware of it. Obviously, that didn't mean we had to have screaming matches in front of them, but it was naïve to think they'd have no clue when Bella and I weren't agreeing on something. As I've said, they weren't stupid.

I knew my parents loved each other - that deep kind of love that just gets stronger with the passing of decades. But I also knew that they were both stubborn and opinionated, which had led to more than one fight. I couldn't keep track of how many times I had seen my mother jerk up her chin and stalk away from my father, while he muttered something about "damned stubborn woman" under his breath.

Invariably, a few hours later, they would be cuddling together, embarrassing the shit out of Masen and me. Once we were old enough, we knew exactly what they were doing when they disappeared into their room for a "nap" after a fight. For a while, we just thought that arguing made them tired.

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So...if I wanted to have any kind of real relationship with Bella I had to recognize this for what it was - the very first of what were probably going to be a lot of disagreements. I could roll over and play dead, and pretty much just let it be known that I wouldn't argue with whatever she said because I was a big pussy. Or...I could be me and tell her that I was only trying to help and that if she couldn't accept my efforts, awkward as they might have been, then that was her problem.

Or I could tell her that I was only trying to help and that she should be more understanding and appreciative. And then beg her forgiveness.

Yeah, I was going with that option.

I'm an ass. I'm not stupid.

Chapter 23: Mr Control Freak

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 23: Mr. Control Freak

Before I went back to Bella's I decided to take a leap of faith and made a call to an old Army buddy. I told him what I wanted, how much I was able to pay, and what sort of time frame I was looking at. After a ten minute search on the computer, he found what seemed to be a perfect solution to my dilemma. I trusted him; we had served together in Afghanistan. He told me he could have it in by Tuesday and I knew he'd make good on that. Okay, I was sort of hoping to offer up my efforts to Bella, and show her how serious I was about making this work. It couldn't hurt, right?

I drove to Bella's house, getting more and more nervous the closer I got. I took a deep breath when I got out of the car, needing a moment to calm myself down, an embarrassment in itself. Then I knocked on the door to Bella's house, expecting to see one of the boys. Probably Jake, who would have seen me pull up in the driveway and would have informed his mother with admirable alacrity. Which would give her time to lock the door if she was so inclined.

Expectations, remember?

Instead, there was Bella, her arms crossed over her delicious boobs (focus, Cullen!), her expression somewhere between pissed off and worried.

Wait.

I recognized that expression. I had seen it in my mirror at my house. I took a deep breath. Okay. So maybe she was as off balance as I was. That was...good.

The Bigger They Are

Right? If we were both feeling unsettled then maybe... Maybe I hadn't fucked it up completely by being - what was it she called me? Oh yeah, *Caveward*. Fear had pushed me past the boundaries I had previously established; anger had goaded her. Neither one of us was completely right, but neither were we absolutely wrong either. What we were was human. We had an argument. It happened. Real relationships meant arguments and disagreements.

Okay, so now we were faced with reality.

Reality was a kick in the teeth. Reality sucked balls.

And reality wasn't always comfortable. It wasn't always neat and happy and rainbows and fluffy clouds that looked like bunnies. It wasn't always polite and soft spoken. Sometimes, hell *most* of the time, life was messy and chaotic and a pain in the ass.

That didn't mean it wasn't totally worth it. Because I didn't want some romantic dream with Bella. I wanted reality, the good, the bad, and the smelly. I knew what I was getting into. I'd seen the boys' bathroom last night. I had *smelled* the boys' bathroom last night. And if that hadn't scared me off, then nothing would.

Now she was staring at me, half challenging, half apologetic. I kind of liked both. The way she looked at me was real. Bella wasn't hiding her feelings; she was putting herself out there, plain and simple. And she wanted the same from me. No games. Fuck I was sick of games. I wanted what she offered simply by being who she was. Bella James.

I hesitated a few steps away from her.

"There's something you should know before you come any further," Bella said by way of greeting.

Oh shit. This was it. She was dumping me. I had realized too late that she was exactly what I wanted.

"What?" I forced the word out of my mouth, steeling myself.

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"I don't think you're so perfect anymore." She sounded disgruntled. "You tipped your pedestal over." Her expression was irritated, but not closed off - she wasn't retreating from me. She was just letting me know how she felt - no games, no hinting. I could take it or leave it, but I wouldn't have to guess.

"Just so *you* know, you scared the shit out of me," I ground out between my teeth; my relief was making me feel almost angry. I felt my jaw clenching and unclenching.

"Well, seeing a car heading straight for you isn't exactly a barrel of laughs either, buddy," Bella hissed.

"You could have fucking been killed!" I wanted to rip out my hair. "Either in the accident or by trying to get down the stairs by yourself!"

"There was no trying about it, Edward," Bella pointed out. "I made it just fine." She gestured up and down her delectable - *stop it and focus Cullen!* - body. "See? Still in one piece."

"You could have fallen," I said with a bit less heat.

"Could have," she agreed. "But I didn't." Her voice was a little less angry too.

"Fine." I was still nurturing a bit of my own anger. I sounded like an ass and I knew it. It was a foregone conclusion that she did too. "So I guess everything's just peachy then, huh?"

Bella sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "Listen, I know I overreacted. You don't need to tell me that much."

"Okay, well...so did I." I looked at her. Give and take.

"The thing is..." Bella paused and chewed at her lower lip for a moment. "The thing is that yesterday...yesterday I got really scared that I wasn't going to make it home to my boys." She looked up at me, and I could see that fear echoing in her eyes. "And I guess that it made me..." She laughed. "Crazy, it made me a

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little insane." She grimaced. "And the crazy spilled over on you, even though I didn't mean for it to."

"Yesterday, I got scared that I had lost you," I admitted. "And it made *me* a little crazy."

"So...we're both insane?" she asked.

"I think we've already established that beyond any reasonable doubt," I conceded.

"You know what?" She took a step forward and I saw the finger getting ready to poke me in the chest. I took a step back which was probably a tactical error. I didn't care.

"What?" I smirked at her as I said it and fire blazed in her eyes.

Her chin jerked up and the arms were back over the boobs; her lips were pulled up in a little smile. *No fair...at least let me see boobs if you're gonna yell at me.*
"You're bossy and pushy and-"

"Yeah, well *you're* stubborn and reckless," I shot back, interrupting her, but I was grinning.

She opened her mouth and then closed it with a huff. "Okay then, neither one of us is perfect. Big surprise. You're bossy and I'm pigheaded." She grinned suddenly. "I can live with that if you can."

My lips twitched. So did something else. Stupid dick.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Piggy," I said, holding out my hand. Her lips pressed together like she was trying to keep from smiling. "Oh, and by the way, you're a shitty patient." I wasn't quite over my annoyance with her over that. I figured I would finally get over it about the time the image my fevered mind had created of her sprawled broken at the bottom of the stairs faded from my mind. So, say about...fifty years?

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She laughed and pulled me close. Then she whispered against my lips, which were still pressed together because damn it, I was *not* a pushover. "Nice to meet you Mr. Control Freak."

"Hey!" I started to protest. But then her lips cut me off. And I proved that I was, indeed, a pushover.

I didn't care.

And just like that, our first fight was over.

She nuzzled into my chest. I sighed and smoothed my hand over her hair. In the interest of peace, I made a quiet confession. "Bella, I might have *possibly* overreacted when I saw you downstairs." Hadn't we already established that? But it wouldn't hurt to make points and to prove that I was trainable at least.

"Hmm..." She sounded distracted.

"It's just that...you scared me - first with the accident and then picturing you plummeting to your death down the stairs."

She looked up and smirked at me. " *Plummeting*? Really? Wouldn't that be more along the lines of jumping off a cliff or something?" Okay, so she now was amused at my overactive imagination. I'd live.

I shrugged, unable to explain my fear. "I find that I'm... well, I'm very... *protective* over you." That was new for me and not entirely comfortable either.

"Protective is good," Bella said. "Being an ass, not so much."

"I will try to keep it to the former rather than the latter." I sighed and shrugged. "But I don't want to make any rash promises."

She rubbed her face on my chest. My dick wondered if she would repeat that action a little lower. "You know, it was *incredibly* sweet of you to take such good care of me." She looked up at me. "Thank you."

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"You're welcome," I said.

"Then we're good?" she asked shyly. I nodded and kissed her, cradling her face in my hands.

I held her close, savoring the feel of her in my arms and the cleansing joy that comes from setting aside anger.

~TBTA~

After I made some lunch for us - grilled cheese sandwiches, take that Wolfgang Puck - Bella was looking a bit tired so I offered to take the boys back to the arcade. I hadn't told her yet that I had made arrangements to take the next week off work. I figured I would need to ease her into that. Tomorrow was Jake's birthday and I wanted to lend a hand. I told her that I could take her shopping later that evening for what she needed. Not only that, I knew she would soon be getting the boys ready for the school year.

I had asked Alice when school started and felt rather pleased with myself for my foresight. Now I only needed to convince Bella that she actually needed my help. Or maybe I should just tell her that it would mean a lot to me to be able to offer my help. Yes, that was probably the way to go.

The boys were glad to get out of the house. They played Dance, Dance Revolution until they were sweaty and smelly. It was my own fault; I had insisted that they do something more active. They could play video games at home. They didn't argue too much, but now I had four smelly boys in the car with me. I hadn't thought that one out.

Then I decided that we had time to take a quick trip to the batting cages. If they got sweatier it couldn't really get any worse smelling in the car. Emmett was the most enthusiastic about that. When I saw him hit, I wondered if he would want to play ball in high school. The kid was talented, and incredibly strong. And he had the timing, the ability to see where the ball was *going* to go. He had the eye.

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When we had been gone three hours, I thought that we had given Bella enough time to get in a nap. I opened the door; the boys went running into the house. Elephants up the stairway. I wandered into the kitchen only to find Bella sitting at the chair. I was trying to keep myself from muttering something about going down the staircase again when I noticed she was crying.

Oh hell.

I knelt in front of her. "Bella? What's wrong baby?"

She sniffed pitifully, her nose runny and red. "It's stupid."

"Not if it upsets you."

She shrugged. "I just got a call from insurance agent."

"And?"

"They totaled the SUV," she said quietly.

"Okay." I still didn't see what the problem was. They would replace it, surely.

Her eyes darted up to mine. "It's just that..." She sighed. "Mac and I bought it just a few months before he left."

Oh. It was just one more piece of Mac that was being ripped away from her. I cradled her face in my hands. "Oh baby, I'm so sorry." I wanted to soothe all the hurts she harbored in her heart; I wanted to take away any pain she might suffer. I knew I couldn't, and sometimes that felt like it was going to kill me.

"It's stupid, I know. It's just a car...a thing. It's not a person. But..."

"But you picked it out together," I said. I kissed her cheek. "And it hurts."

Bella nodded. "Yes, it hurts." Then she smiled at me and brushed her fingers over my hair. "But not as much as it would have a few months ago," she

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admitted quietly. "And that's because of you...I like having you around, you know." She smiled. "A lot."

My heart beat a little faster. Okay, a *lot* faster. "Well, I know it's not going to help, but maybe the boys could go help you pick out a new vehicle and you can make some new memories."

"Will you come with us?" I was surprised but very pleased at the invitation. She was including *me* in this family activity. "I think that would help us make new memories too..." Her confession was quiet, almost unheard.

"I'd love to," I said. "And since you've got that spiffy *walking* cast, which still might make driving awkward for a bit, maybe you'd let me drive you? And I know a guy who could probably make you a deal." I wanted to help, but I didn't want to step on her toes.

I was learning to ask rather than assume. As I said, I'm an ass. I'm not stupid.

She frowned. "Uh...the boys won't all fit."

It was my turn to smile sheepishly. "Well...I have a confession to make."

One dark brow arched at me.

"If you can wait until Tuesday, I'll have a new vehicle too - and it will hold all of us comfortably." That call to an old Army buddy of mine had been productive. He just happened to work at a car dealership in Fayetteville. He had gotten me a sweet deal on an SUV and I was picking it up Tuesday morning. But would my action make Bella uncomfortable? I watched her face warily. Had I presumed too much?

"When did you decide to do that?" I couldn't read anything in her tone. Shit.

I got up from the floor, grimacing as one knee cracked and the other one popped. I felt like a breakfast cereal. It was hell getting older. "The other day when I brought you home from the hospital. You probably don't remember that

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trip, do you?" She shook her head, looking amused. "Yes, well, if you've ever seen your sons squished into a back seat, you'll understand why I thought it might be wise." Her eyes grew wide and she laughed. And my dick was right back to his old tricks.

"You did that...for us?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I mean, you're in my life now, right? All of you. And I should be able to drive us somewhere without it being a safety hazard."

She tilted her head and studied me. "What did you get?"

I grinned at her. "A Suburban - it's a big, red beast of a vehicle." I admitted, I was a little excited. It *was* big, it *was* a beast, and the chest-thumping ape in me was itching to climb behind the wheel.

"Very manly," Bella said approvingly.

I paused and studied her expression. "Is that okay?"

She threw her arms around me and pulled me tight. "It's more than okay. It's wonderful."

Well what do you know? Mr. Control Freak got it right.

~TBTA~

Together, Bella and I put together a dinner of teriyaki chicken, green beans and baked potatoes. Jake asked for pizza. Bella told him no. Jake asked for ice cream. Bella told him she was out. One look at me made it clear I wasn't supposed to offer to go to the store and get him some. Staring at his sad little face made that a difficult thing. Every now and then he'd look up at me and rub his stomach like he was starving.

Bella was right; the kid was a consummate con artist.

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Finally, as we were doing the dishes, I decided to make my other confession. "Uh, Bella, I had some leave coming up and I wondered if you'd mind me taking off the next week so that I could help. You know, take you to get your new vehicle, stuff like that."

"Oh." She looked surprised. Good surprised or bad surprised?

"Really, I need to use some of it and it'll be harder to do once the new training cycle starts."

"Okay," she said rather uncertainly. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure," I replied. "Quite sure."

Bella shrugged. "Sounds great actually." She looked at me. "Tomorrow is Jake's birthday."

"Yeah, he might have told me," I said dryly. "Once or twice."

"Or a dozen," Bella laughed.

"Or a dozen."

Then my phone rang and I saw it was my mother. "Mom," I mouthed to Bella.

"Tell her I said hello."

"Hello, Edward," Mom said. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm good, Mom."

"I tried to call you at home. Are you at Bella's house?"

"Yeah, actually we just finished dinner and Bella had me washing dishes." Bella stuck her tongue out at me. "She's a slave driver."

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"Glad to hear it."

"I didn't get a chance to call you earlier, but we had a bit of excitement around here yesterday."

"Oh?"

Bella rolled her eyes.

"Bella was in a car accident. Some asshole ran a stop sign and hit the driver's side of her SUV." Bella was shaking her head no. Apparently I shouldn't have mentioned it to my mother. Oops. Too late. Bella cringed.

"Oh my! Is she all right?"

"She's fine," I said. "Well, a little crippled up with some broken bones in her foot but she insists it's nothing serious." Bella stuck out her tongue at me. My dick liked that and started coming up with other suggestions on ways she could use that tongue. He had a list. Alphabetized and everything. He was an OCD motherfucker.

"Oh." Mom sounded weird. "Is that so?"

"What's up, Mom?"

"Well, dear, I really wish you would have called me yesterday."

"Why is that?" I was starting to have a very, very bad feeling.

Just then I heard the chime that told me someone else was trying to call me on my cell. "Hey, Mom, let me get this other call okay?"

"I'll just let you go, Edward." Then silence on the other end. And for the first time in my life, my mom hung up on me. I stared at Bella in shock for a moment and then realized I still hadn't answered my other call.

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I clicked. "Hello?"

"Hello big brother! What're you doing? Are you getting lucky? If you are, then what the hell are you doing answering the phone? Did you tell Bella all about me yet? She can't wait to meet me, can she?"

"What do you want, Masen?" I rolled my eyes at Bella.

Masen laughed. I knew that laugh. The sick feeling in the pit of my stomach deepened. "Are you home?" he asked. I walked toward the back porch, not sure I wanted Bella to hear what I was sure I would have to say to my baby brother. Besides, she didn't like me cursing a lot around the boys.

"No." This was bad and I had no idea why yet. "I'm at Bella's."

"Perfect," Masen said smoothly. "So what I need to know is how to get to Bella's house. We're about ten minutes away from your house." He laughed, the fucker. " *Surprise!*"

Oh fuck my life.

Author's Note: There may be some who find Masen rude to just drop in and you may be right. But showing up like this would be pretty much standard behavior in my family. Yeah, we're all nuts.

Chapter 24: The Spawn and the Dark Side

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephanie Meyers. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Notes: I've posted an outtake featuring Alyssa and Bella. I did this because these next two chapters are full of Masen (he's got a thousand jokes about that line) but not much Alyssa. If you're interested, I think it might be fun getting to know her. Also, I'm still making my way through all of the wonderful story recommendations you've given me.

Chapter 24: The Spawn and the Dark Side

Ever heard that saying, when it rains it pours? Well this was a fucking monsoon. A storm seen from space.

This little visit had disaster written all over it in a dozen languages.

Out of habit, I gave Masen the address. I was still stunned, even though this was a classic Masen move. That was the only reason I could give to excuse my weakness. I should have made him Google that shit. It would have served him right. And my sneaky ass mother -

I turned to Bella and asked, "How opposed are you to lying, deception, and sneaking around?"

Bella grinned. "Sounds like a typical Saturday if you ask me." She shrugged. "I'm game."

I returned her smile. "Uh...I don't know how to tell you this, but that was my brother."

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"Okay." She was confused.

I sighed. "That was my brother and he just informed me that he and his family are here...in Fayetteville...coming to see me...us..."

"Oh that's wonderful!" Bella said, sounding genuinely excited. Clearly she had no idea what we were in for; I would have to enlighten her. She really needed to grasp the seriousness of the situation.

"Listen Bella, Masen is...well Masen is a bit... *Masen*." I didn't know how else to describe it. She'd learn. They *all* learned. And she would run screaming. Then I would have to beat his ass. And Mom would get mad at me for beating her baby boy's ass and she would yell. It was going to get ugly.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure he's perfectly wonderful. You're a brother; of course you think he's a bit much." She leaned in close. "I have a little brother too, remember, I understand."

"Baby, please believe me when I say that in the history of little brothers, there's never been another one like Masen Carlisle Cullen."

"Oh he can't be that bad," she scolded. "Oh no! Wait! You're not at your house!"

"I know. Masen wanted your address."

"Well I hope you gave it to him." She didn't sound at all worried that Masen and his wife and their two sons would soon be descending on her home just the day after she'd broken her foot. It was really hard to throw Bella for a loop. Most of the time I liked that, but right now I was desperate for her to realize that having Masen here was going to be like...

Oh hell, I didn't know what. Words failed me. I only knew my brother's propensity for teasing and opening his big mouth. Shit, Bella and I were barely getting ourselves figured out. We had only just reached the point where we were starting to be open about all of our feelings, even the less than happy

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ones. She had figured out I was an anal-retentive control freak and I had finally come to realize that she was a reckless, stubborn, pig-headed woman.

We were perfectly suited for each other, of course, but I anticipated a lot of slamming doors and pouting until we figured out what made each other crazy. Even then, I knew there would be times when we pushed each other's buttons on purpose just for the hell of it and simply because we *could*. I was looking forward to it. And I didn't want my brother interfering with that, damn it. I wanted to slam doors with her and then make up. I wanted to wince as she poked me in the chest with that pointy finger of hers and I wanted to back her into the kitchen counter before I planted a hard kiss on her just to shut her up.

Shit. My dick wanted that too. A lot.

But then it was too late. I had run out of time to persuade Bella to lock the doors and pull down the shades and pretend we weren't home. The doorbell rang and Bella thumped over to it, her cast making noise when she hit the hardwood floor, but she didn't slip. I scurried behind her, hoping to catch her if she did fall. I also hoped to block the door when Masen tried to worm his way in.

But Masen was good...very good.

Because when Bella opened the door, there was Kyle, staring up at her. The kid could do puppy dog eyes as well as Jake. His were dark and slightly slanted, a gift of his mother's unique genetic background. "Hi, my name is Kyle Cullen," he said, holding out his hand like a little gentleman. That had to be Alyssa's doing. Thank God the boys had her or they'd be one step above gorillas.

Bella was charmed, as Masen intended her to be. Kyle looked around Bella to me and launched himself through the door (narrowly missing her casted foot, I noticed with a wince) and then he was hurtling toward me. Before I had a chance to think he was wrapping his wiry little body around mine and screaming in my ear. "Uncle Edward! I'm here! Aren't you excited to see me?"

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It was a good thing that my noise tolerance had increased dramatically over the last few months.

I smiled at Kyle and kissed his forehead. My nephews were great, even if they were the spawn of Satan. That wasn't really *their* fault, after all. "I'm very glad you're here, Kyle." Then I leaned in and whispered loudly, "But couldn't you have talked your mom into leaving your father at home?"

Kyle giggled and shook his head no. I looked over his shoulder at Alyssa. She came and gave me a hug, seemingly oblivious to the stunned look Bella was giving her. I was used to Alyssa's beauty; I didn't think anything of it anymore other than to wonder what the hell she saw in Masen.

Alyssa's mother had been half Ethiopian and half Korean. Her father was of pure Norwegian stock. That unusual mixture of genetic magic had created a woman who stood just under six feet tall and had the long lean body of a runner. Her hair was dark, with shots of bronze glinting in it. Her eyes were almond-shaped and the color of antique gold. Her skin was a burnished golden color. All in all, she could have easily graced the pages of Sports Illustrated - and not just the swimsuit edition. But what really made her beautiful was her sweet, peaceful manner and generous heart. When she was eighty years old and wrinkled and getting around in a walker, she would *still* be beautiful. Alyssa was serenely unaware of her own appeal for the most part. As far as she was concerned her looks were a non-issue, which in fact made her *more* beautiful.

Masen had married up and we all knew it.

The boys resembled her strongly, so they were good-looking kids. Alex had gotten the weird green eyes that littered our family gene pool so liberally. Like Kyle's, his were almond-shaped as well. They both had their mother's high cheekbones and were tall and lanky. Of course, Masen was my height, so he was fairly tall too - we both stood at two inches over six feet.

In fact, we were exactly the same height. We knew this because we measured compulsively through our teen years and right into our early twenties. Once I went into the Army, he tried to claim the advantage of having a lot of messy

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blond hair that stood up and gave him an extra half inch, but I smashed it down when we measured. I wasn't standing for that shit.

I would have loved to say that our heights were all we ever measured and compared, but we were teenaged boys once and when we were 13 and 14 - Yeah, no need to go into that. Let's just say I beat my brother out by seven millimeters. We were like fucking NASA scientists measuring that shit.

Now he here was, with his seven less millimeters, invading my Bella's home and my life. He gave me a sheepish grin from the door, holding Alex in his arms. Probably so I wouldn't punch him. He's an asshole but he's not stupid. I guess that runs in the family.

I gave him a hug that included Alex, who just sort of opened his eyes and gave me a drowsy smile. "Hey Uncle Eddie," he murmured. I gave Masen the stink eye because I knew he had been coaching the kid. *Uncle Eddie* my ass.

All I needed was for Emmett to start picking that shit up. I'd be hearing Mr. Eddie for months.

And speak of the devil... As if thinking about them had conjured them up, all four boys came running down the stairs, yet another stampede. Jake was first, which was a given. If there was someone new Jake wanted to be the first one to meet them. He screeched to a halt in front of Kyle, who was about his age. Kyle had just turned seven in May. Jake was turning eight tomorrow.

"Hi, I'm Jake James," he said. "And that's my mom." He pointed to me. "And that's Mr. Edward."

"That's *Uncle* Edward," Kyle corrected and I breathed a sigh of relief that he'd said Edward and not -

"Eddie," Masen said with a snort. "That's Uncle Eddie." Kyle looked at me doubtfully and I shook my head.

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"Uncle Edward," Kyle insisted. I grinned at my brother. Sometimes hero worship came in handy. Take *that*, little brother.

Masen patted Alex's back and gave me a smug smile as if to remind me that at least he'd brought one of his spawn over the Dark Side.

I moved toward Alyssa. "You couldn't leave him at the kennel?" I asked, pointing to my brother.

She rolled her eyes. "He's been banned. The vet said he's a troublemaker, gets all the other dogs riled up," she explained. "And they won't let me have him neutered so what are you going to do?" Alyssa shrugged. She was quiet, but sharp. She kept Masen on his toes.

I nodded and eyed Masen. Then he was handing Alex to Alyssa and I was crushing him to me in a hug. "You bastard," I hissed in his ear. "This isn't the best timing you know."

"I saw the cast and I know how to behave," he assured me quietly.

I snorted. "Contrary to all evidence, I suppose?"

"And I can promise you that we won't be any trouble." Then he grinned wickedly. "To *her*."

"Fucker," I added for good measure. Then I smiled, because it had been too long since I'd seen him. "I've missed you, you son of a bitch."

"I'm telling Mom you called her a bitch," Masen teased. Our whole conversation was in whispers since we both tended to curse a lot around each other and there were a lot of "little" ears in the room. "But I've missed you too, you uptight Assward."

"I've missed you too you, you little whiny Mama's boy. If you tell anyone, I'll deny it," I continued quietly. "But it's good to see you. Really good."

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"I know." Masen replied with a smirk. "I'm just that wonderful." Then he released me and Alyssa rolled her eyes at us. I had a feeling she spent a lot of her time doing that. She had a good idea of what we had said to each other; she had known us a long time.

Masen turned to Bella, who was just sort standing there in awestruck amazement. This particular Cullen family tended to do that to people. The three older James boys were arranged on the last three steps, staring at the strangers in their home. Only Jake was mingling easily, talking to Alyssa, and then introducing himself to Alex and Kyle. He even tugged on Masen's pants leg and gave me a coy look. "Do you know how to make hot cocoa?" Jake asked in the most innocent voice.

"Uh yeah sure," Masen replied.

Jake nodded, seeming happy with that answer. I couldn't wait for my brother to get suckered in by the cute little con artist named Jake James. I had a feeling that for once, Masen had met his match. I took Bella's hand in my own.

"Alyssa, this is my Bella," I said. Bella's eyes flew up to meet mine and she blushed slightly, biting at her lower lip. Please God, not the giggle - *not* the giggle.

Alyssa bypassed Bella's hand and hugged her instead. "I'm Alyssa Cullen," she said. "And I'm attached to the crazy one over there." She pointed at Masen who gave a little wave.

"Bella James." Then she turned and pointed out each boy. "These are my sons, Jake, Emmett, Sam, and Seth." Each boy waved in turn.

Alyssa didn't seem inclined to move from her spot at Bella's side. She towered over Bella, making Bella appear even more delicate and fragile, which did nothing for my peace of mind. I had finally let my inner control freak loose and he was doing overtime. "Why don't we sit down?" I suggested.

Bella ignored me. So did Masen. Alyssa shot me a sympathetic look (she knew all about Mr. Control Freak) but by then the boys had started to talk the

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international language of video games and even Alex had woken up completely. They wandered off into the kitchen and the boys migrated toward the living room where they would, undoubtedly, discuss and argue the merits of and their abilities in various video games.

Briefly, I wondered if I could hand Masen his ass in Madden.

Masen was eyeing me in return and I saw the smirk tugging at his lips. Oh yeah, it would be on later. Beating Whitlock was enjoyable; beating my brother would downright gratifying. Then I reconsidered. I had a secret weapon that Masen didn't know about.

I had Emmett. And he would have sympathy for the older brother wanting to school the younger one. Hell yes. I was pretty sure that Emmett would be willing to smash Masen into the floor and then do his little chicken dance on top of the cooling corpse. Now *that* would be fun.

Masen and I were alone and I tilted my head to study him. "So whose brilliant idea was this? Yours or mom's?" I knew one of them had to be behind it. Those two were nothing but trouble when they teamed up. My mom *looked* sweet and innocent, but I knew that the heart of a prankster lurked beneath that perfectly groomed exterior.

Masen's lips quirked and he shrugged. "I choose not to incriminate myself - or our mother."

"You're not a lawyer," I shot back. Masen was an advertising executive and he had a long list of big name clients that paid him lots of money to use that sneaky, manipulative little brain of his to convince people to buy their shit. It didn't matter if they didn't need it, or even if they couldn't afford it - they bought whatever Masen was selling. Masen was very, *very* good at his job.

"Thank God!" Masen said with a shudder. "Listen, big brother, we'll hang out at a hotel. Honestly, if we had had any idea about Bella being hurt you know even I would have rescheduled and surprised you at another time that would only have inconvenienced *you*."

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I shrugged. "Yeah well, I didn't call Mom and tell her about the accident. Still, I guess this is still completely your fault."

"You love me and you know it," Masen said, unconcerned.

I wasn't going to respond to that. "Listen, I was going to run to the store to get what Bella needs for Jake's birthday." I put my hands in my pocket. "And that's tomorrow by the way."

"I love birthday cake," Masen observed pointedly.

"I'm not inviting you, Mase. This isn't my house and it isn't my celebration."

Mase batted his eyes at me. "Oh come on now, you *know* Bella will invite me."

I sighed because I knew he was right. "Anyway, I've got to get that done because Jake gets up really early and there won't be time in the morning. So do you want to go with me?"

"Field trip!" Masen yelled. He had always had energy to spare. Even now, when he should have been dragging, he wouldn't miss a beat and would be ready to go anywhere or do anything. Later he would collapse like a five year old.

I sighed again. I did that a lot with my brother around. Alyssa and Bella peeked out of the kitchen. "What are you up to, Masen Cullen?" Alyssa asked with a frown.

"No good," Masen replied immediately.

"All right then, nothing's changed," she said. She looked at Bella. "Are you finding Edward as hard to train as Masen is?"

Bella paused thoughtfully. "Not until recently," she finally answered. "But I find that a firm hand and consistent rules make all the difference. They really just need boundaries, you know."

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Alyssa nodded. "You're right, you're absolutely right." She sent a wicked grin our way. "Maybe you and I should sit down and compare notes," she suggested to Bella. With that, the two women disappeared into the kitchen, laughing at our expense.

Masen looked at me with a pained expression. "We're in deep shit now, buddy."

"Which is all your fault," I reminded him.

Masen shook his head. "Who knew they'd get along so fast?" He frowned.

"Yeah well, Alyssa's great and Bella's wonderful so what did you expect?"

"You're so whipped."

"Am not."

Masen pulled out his best Indiana Jones' moves and whirled around, wielding his imaginary whip. "Eddie boy is whipped like cream."

"Shut up. Let me get the list from Bella and get out of here. I want to beat you where they can't hear your screams."

"Aw...I love you too big brother."

Fic Rec: Edit My Life by djoneal - Bella, after having her life ripped apart, moves to Portland in an attempt to escape her shattered dreams and stalker of an ex. Broken and disillusioned, will she be able to pick up the pieces and start anew? Will she ever trust enough to love again? Read it. Just read it. You won't regret it. I'm shocked that this one isn't getting WAY more reviews.

Author's Note: 7 mm = 0.275590 inches

Chapter 25: Grown Up Boys

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephanie Meyers. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 25: Grown Up Boys

We got in the car and immediately Masen started messing with my radio. He always put it on a country station just to fuck with me. He knew I preferred old school rock, but nooo... It was the grown-up version of "I'm not toouuuching you."

"Stop it," I ordered when he stopped on the twangiest shit I'd ever heard come out of Nashville. I suddenly had a mad desire to rope something - *anything*. Preferably my brother. Then maybe I could brand him for good measure. And *geld* him. I slapped his hands away and turned off the radio altogether.

"Hey!" he protested. "I like that song!" He frowned at me and I was reminded of Jake in a sulk.

"How fucking old are you anyway?" I had to ask.

"Old enough to know that my big brother has a damned near fatal case of blue balls," Masen returned and snorted, looking out the window.

"Shut up," I said tersely. My fingers began tapping out an angry rhythm on the steering wheel.

"You know," Masen said. "It *will* happen and when it does- POW!" He gave a low, long whistle. "Fireworks, man, I'm telling you, *fireworks*."

I gave him a dark look. "Don't talk about shit you know nothing about."

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Masen gave a little humph. "You think Alyssa let me into her panties right away, big brother?"

I sort of gaped at him, because if I remembered correctly, Masen had been bragging about his "ways with the ladies" forever. The embarrassing fact was that Masen had lost his virginity before I did (and it's not like he *ever* let me forget that shit). Then he'd started dating Alyssa and the bragging had become rather more subtle on the rare occasions we talked. But the fact remained that I had no reason to assume that Alyssa hadn't fallen for his bullshit right away like all the others. I mean, I knew they had been friends for about a year before they dated, but I always got the impression that the "friend" status was because Alyssa had been dating someone else. Hmmm...interesting. "What do you mean?"

Masen leaned in close and said softly, "If I tell you and you squeal to *anyone*, I'm gonna have to kill you. Just so we're straight on that."

I snorted. "As if you could," I scoffed. "I'm a highly trained killing machine with all the skills that the United States government could give me."

"Don't get me started on the government," Masen said. "Anyway, that woman had me in a fever. I thought I was gonna lose my fucking mind."

"No great loss," I commented. "And do I need to remind you that I know at least nineteen ways to kill you with my bare hands, little brother."

"You can't kill me," Masen said. "Mom would be pissed. And you *don't* want to piss off Mom. Your *government* skills count for shit against that. Besides, I've got resources you've never even heard of."

"Setting Alyssa on me doesn't count."

"Well fuck, there goes my plan," Masen said with a smirk. "Oh well, it was good while it lasted." He sighed. "Seriously, the sexual tension between you and the lovely Bella is catchy." He wriggled his eyebrows at me. "Hopefully it'll get Alyssa all good and worked up."

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"Oh hell no! You are not doing it my house!"

"If you have kids and you get privacy, the identity of the homeowner doesn't mean jack shit, just so you know," Masen said. Well fuck, I could sympathize with that a *lot* more than I had in the past.

"Just don't do it my bed," I warned him with a grimace. " *Or* my closet."

"How about your kitchen counter?"

"Hell no! I have to eat off that! I'll burn the fucking house down you keep that shit up." I fell silent and so did Mase, which was a fucking miracle. The rest of the drive to the store was blissfully quiet.

We got everything at the store, following Bella's very precise list (she even listed brands, bless her heart). I checked off each item; the last thing to get was a twelve pack of D batteries. I guessed that some of Jake's presents called for batteries. To be on the safe side, I bought a 24 pack. Better to have too many than not enough.

Masen was helpful for once, another miracle. I wondered if he was secretly dying and came here to tell me. Once we loaded everything up into the car, Masen started with the radio again. I growled at him and turned the knob so hard I almost snapped it off.

"You wanna hit me, don't you?" Masen guessed.

"Yes," I snarled.

"You're just horny," Masen observed. "Blue balls," he repeated. "Excess testosterone in your backed up pipes starts rotting your impulse control centers."

"Thanks for the theory."

"You know it's gonna get worse before it gets better, don't you?"

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I groaned. "Please, *please* don't tell me that, Mase. I'm losing my fucking mind." I grimaced. "Not to mention I'm jerking off so much I feel like I'm fifteen again."

"That shit gets old, doesn't it?" There was real empathy in Masen's voice and that made me open up. This was Masen, who was a pain in the ass but still my *brother*. We knew stuff about each other shit that not another living soul knew - like the whole seven millimeters thing.

"I mean, I'm trying Mase, really I am. I know she's not ready and if I push I could just end up ruining a very good thing."

"You're a better man than me, Eddie boy." Masen whistled. "I was fucking climbing the walls, snapping at everyone, and pretty much being an all around dick while I waited to see what Alyssa was hiding in her silky little panties." He sighed in fond memory. "It was *so* worth the wait though..."

I let the "Eddie" go this time. I looked at him. "I know I'm going to really, *really* regret this, but how long did Alyssa uh...well, uh..."

"How long did she keep those gorgeous, long legs of her crossed?" Masen asked.

I cringed. Maybe I should just end this conversation now because once I heard this information, I couldn't *unhear* it. And this was my *brother* and *Alyssa*, who was pretty much my sister by now and there were just some things I didn't need to know. But I was a desperate man, blue balled and cranky. "Yeah." And I braced myself physically.

"Four long and lonely months," Masen answered. "Four fucking months of no fucking, just jerking." He shook his head. "I couldn't even think about her without getting fucking wood. At my desk, in the car, while we were on dates, even around her parents! It was embarrassing as hell!"

I sighed with relief. Okay, I wasn't alone. Bella and I hadn't even known each other for quite three months and she had a lot more baggage coming into this

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thing. So it was only natural that things were proceeding at a slower pace. Right? Besides, there was the little issue of privacy.

"And remember man, you've got a lot more going against you," Masen said.

"Tell me about it," I sighed.

"Any parent will tell you that finding time to just be together is damn near impossible."

"Again, you're not telling me anything I don't already know, Mase."

"And when you add to that the fact that you've got four boys who are going to have be sort of eased into the fact that you're being 'friendly' with their mama's goods, well, that's just another complication, son."

"You've been to Texas or Alabama or some place like that recently, haven't you?"

Masen grinned. "Had a conference in Houston two weeks ago."

I shook my head. "I hate it when you do that shit."

"What shit?"

"Whenever you go someplace where they speak differently, you start picking up the fucking accent."

"Do not." Masen was lying through his teeth. But at least that explained the twangy music. He also tended to pick up on the music of the region.

"Remember when you went to London for a week? When you came back Alyssa was ready to kick you in the balls the next time you said you wanted to *shag* her."

"At least I'm getting shagged," Masen said slyly.

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My mouth snapped shut. Damn it. He was right. He *was* getting shagged. And I was getting jerked by my own damned hand.

Masen heaved a sigh. "Listen Edward, your problem really boils down to two things, one of them is privacy. It's the holy grail of every horny parent's life. You've got to get her alone if you want to get her warmed up. If she's worried about the kids walking in every second, then she's not going to relax. We're pretty much good to go any time. But women...you know...they need to be relaxed most of the time, they need to feel comfortable with their surroundings, their man... They've got to be revved up a little, get their engine going. Yeah, there are women out there just interested in a quick fuck, but that's not who Bella is. Obviously."

"Obviously," I agreed dryly.

"And just as importantly, maybe more so, she's got to feel safe in order to let out her inner sex goddess."

"Safe? Like I'm not going to let anyone hurt her? Because I'm not." I decided to ignore how I felt when I heard Masen refer to Bella and sex goddess in the same breath. I didn't like that shit, even if it *was* my brother.

"Safe, like in you won't hurt her - emotionally I mean. Or more importantly, hurt her kids."

"I wouldn't do that!"

"And she's supposed to know this how? She hasn't known you forever like I have," Masen sighed. "Listen, the thing is, *you* have to know that you want this for the long haul. And until you know it, you won't be able to convince her of that."

"Long haul?"

"Think about it, Edward. Let's say you're in their lives for six months. Then you get tired of playing daddy and walk away. You go back to the same life

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you had before, nothing really lost. But how do you think those boys feel? And how would that make Bella feel? It's *that* scenario that scares her, and until you can reassure her there, then the physical thing probably isn't going to happen. Not because she's playing games, but because she *isn't*."

"So you're saying I should...what?" What *was* Masen saying? I could panic fluttering around in my chest.

"Don't freak out on me, I'm not saying you need to propose." Masen's voice was dry.

"What *are* you saying then?"

"I'm saying you need to think about where you see yourself in two years. And if it isn't with Bella, then you really need to get out now before she - or those boys - gets hurt any more than they already would be." Masen shrugged. "That's just the way it's gonna have to be, because Bella can't play games. She doesn't have that luxury, which means *you* don't either."

I thought about it. I tried to imagine my life without Bella James in it. I tried to picture a life without boys loudly running up and down stairs, good-naturedly harassing each other as they played video games, or yelling at each other in the pool. *My* pool. I tried to imagine how quiet my Saturdays would be and sleeping in on Sundays again. I thought about getting sex on a semi-regular basis with a woman who was uncomplicated and had no baggage - and who *wasn't* Bella. I remembered how it felt to bring home a woman and absolutely know I'd be taking her to bed, no interruptions, no second thoughts, no ghosts of dead husbands lingering between us.

And just imagining that life again felt... *wrong*, like it didn't fit the man I was now.

"I see myself with Bella...and the boys," I finally said, because it was nothing less than the truth.

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Masen smiled and gave a deep breath. "All right then. Now that you've admitted that to yourself, she's going to see that in you. A woman like Bella, her instincts are good, and if you're feeling unsure about what you've got, then she will too. Just show her that you're not going anywhere and she'll start to feel as if she can open up to you, in more ways than one. But honestly, Edward, you're probably going to have to break down and say the words before she says she wants you inside of her." He snorted with laughter.

"Don't go there." I could hear the jokes lurking in Masen's voice.

For once, Masen seemed to heed my warning. "So, you've got to figure out how to give Bella the security she needs if you want to get the shagging *you* need." He nudged me. "Bella probably wants to shag too, just so you know."

"Quit saying shag." I needed to lighten the moment. I needed to think about everything he'd said.

"I like it. It makes me feel like Austin Powers -international man of mystery."

"Well, there is a resemblance."

"I'm still getting shagged and you're still *not*."

"Fuck you."

"I wish *someone* would do you, Edward. You're *way* too uptight. You're gonna explode."

I ignored him for a while. Then I was pushed by my desperation. I couldn't believe I was stooping so low as to ask my baby brother for advice. But he had been in the trenches of this particular war far longer than I had. And as much as it pained me to admit it, he wasn't a complete idiot - just 99%.

"So how do I get privacy?"

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"I'll tell you, but I've got to warn you, my young Padawan, that you won't be getting shagged the very first time that you and the lovely Bella get some 'adult' time." He laughed. "You're going to have to work up to that, you know, play in the minor leagues before you get up to bat in the major leagues."

"I've had plenty of experience, thank you very much."

"You've *fucked* a lot, Edward; this is a whole different ball game. This is making love."

"Enough with the sports analogies. I've already got blue balls." My tone was surly and I knew it. I didn't really care.

Masen laughed. "Anyway, if you really want to start taking things to the next level you do have an advantage for the next five days."

"Why five days?"

"That's how long we're staying. And you're welcome by the way."

"Why the hell would I thank you?"

"Because Alyssa and I are going to watch all the kids while you take Bella back to your house and make a nice romantic dinner for her."

"What makes you think she'll be okay with that?" I asked.

"First, because I'm charming. Second, because those boys are going to love me, and third, because I've got a secret weapon."

"Alyssa?"

"Exactly. So... You're going to give her some wine, maybe massage her feet; you're going to show her just how much you care about her. You have to trust me on this one, big brother. If there's one thing I know it's how to get a mother to remember she's a woman - first and foremost. It's a delicate balancing act,

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but you're lucky because you've got me."

I shook my head, but a part of me knew he was right. It must be incredibly difficult at times for a mother to do things for the woman she had been long before she became a mother. I was starting to get a whole new appreciation for that fact.

"And then maybe she'll feel secure enough to show you exactly how much she cares about you."

I grinned. "You think she cares about me?"

Masen rolled his eyes. "Why else would she date somebody so fucking ugly?"

"Remind me again why I love you?"

"Because I'm awesome, that's why."

I paused. It was painful but it had to be done. "All kidding aside, Masen. Thanks."

"Aw big brother, your gratitude warms my heart. It really does." Then Masen sighed. "Of course, man can not live on gratitude alone."

I realized what he wanted. Hell. No.

"I'm not doing it."

"Yes you will," Masen said smugly. "If you want Lyssa and I to watch those boys so you can put your 'Get into Bella's Panties' plan into effect, you will. And you'll enjoy it."

"Fuck you."

"I'm still waaaiting."

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I heaved a sigh, knowing there was no getting out of this. "Okay, okay. Shit...Thank you, Masen for sharing your wisdom with me. I'm the luckiest brother in the world to have you as my sibling. I'm so grateful for the awesomeness that is you."

Masen sat back and grinned, motioning me to continue.

"I bow before your wisdom and knowledge and I thank you for so generously sharing it with me," I repeated by rote.

"Keep going." He was enjoying this *way* too much.

I made a face and finished off the torture. "And I confess that I just need to get my panties out of my crack and admit that I want to be *just like you*." The last few words were spit out between clenched teeth.

"See? That wasn't so hard."

"I'll get you back," I promised.

"Oh I'm sure you'll try."

"And one more thing," Masen said.

"What?"

"I want you to just answer my question - first instinct kind of answer. No bullshit about thinking things over or any fucking thing like that." Masen paused. I shrugged and nodded. "Okay, are you going to re-up?"

I didn't have to think about that question. Somewhere along the line, somewhere between my windshield getting busted and carrying Bella up to her room after the accident, I had already made that decision. I didn't know *when* exactly I had decided that, I only knew that I had. "No," I said with certainty. "I'm getting out after this tour is done."

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Masen smiled. "That's a very good thing, Edward, because I have a feeling that could be a very important issue with Bella, all things considered."

"Yeah," I agreed, nodding. "Yeah I can see that."

And then we were back at Bella's house and I had to put my plotting on hold - but not for very long.

Chapter 26: Closet Games

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Author's Note: Masen would like you all to know that he's very hurt that no one had faith in him to actually give good advice. He's sulking in the corner right now. He hopes everyone is happy. Edward says "Good call."

Also, there be lemons ahead, maties...

Chapter 26: Closet Games

By the time we got back, all of the boys had scattered and were bunched up in groups that changed as the activity changed. To my surprise, it was Emmett who seemed to take the lead in making Kyle and Alex feel welcome. As I considered the matter, however, I guessed that it made sense. As Army brats, Bella's boys would be used to moving. They would be used to being the "new" kids, but they would also be familiar with the role of welcoming newcomers. You learn that quickly in the military. Everyone is just part of your family that you haven't met yet. That doesn't mean you'll like everyone, but you usually give them a shot. Bella's sons had learned that lesson well, and I couldn't help but feel a little proud as I watched big, hulking Emmett treat the younger Kyle and Alex with so much kindness.

And the snarky part of me couldn't resist giving Masen a smug little look. It wasn't exactly polite, and it wasn't like I had anything to do with Emmett's manners, but still... I'd take what I could get.

Alyssa helped Bella put away the groceries while Masen and I talked about him and his family staying at my house. As much as I hated it, I knew their presence meant I would have to go back to my house at least for tonight, if

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only because there was no way in hell I was giving Masen a key. And it wasn't like I was going to get within breathing distance of Bella's bed even if I stayed. Besides, as my stiff back reminded me, my days of being able to sleep any time, anywhere with no repercussions were long over. There had been a time I would have been able to sleep standing up propped in a corner and felt just fine after a few hours. Getting older is not for the faint of heart, as I was discovering.

Yeah, it would have been easy to give him a key, but I wasn't going to. Mostly because I knew it would annoy him that I wouldn't.

Okay, we weren't that far beyond the "I'm not touching you" game after all.

Masen and I wandered into the kitchen after a few minutes. Bella and Alyssa seemed to have hit it off just fine. Bella was finally sitting down, saving me from trying to persuade her to rest. Alyssa was standing by the counter, a coffee cup in her hands even though it was getting late. I wondered if she would be jumping off the walls like Jake after a sugar high. Oh well, Masen's problem. Not mine. Except.... Fuck, what if they decided to have sex in my house to burn off that excess energy?

I shuddered and tried to put the image out of my head. Delete, delete, delete.

"So Bella," Masen said with a grin, going up to Alyssa and wrapping his arms around her. "What do you think of my big brother here?"

Bella bit her lower lip and shrugged. "I dunno, he's kind of growing on me, you know?"

Masen laughed and shook his head. "He's okay, I guess."

Bella grinned at my brother. " *I'm* really glad you decided to visit," she said. "I've wanted to meet the bane of Edward's existence for a while now."

Masen snorted. "He said that about me?" Masen looked at me and fluttered his eyelashes. "Aw, Edward, you say the sweetest things. I'm touched...really."

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Touched way down deep - in here...in my squishy core and everything." And he tapped his chest over his heart.

Alyssa rolled her eyes. "Do you see what I put up with, Bella?"

Bella shook her head. "I don't know how you do it, Alyssa. I mean, you're probably eligible for sainthood or something." She looked at Masen. "Really, you should look into that. St. Alyssa has a nice ring don't you think?"

Alyssa pretended to consider the matter and finally nodded. "I do believe you're right."

"Of course I am," Bella replied with a shrug.

Masen looked at me. "I like her. She's feisty."

"You have no idea," I muttered. I moved to stand behind Bella's chair. I hadn't planned it that way, but the vantage point *did* give me an awesome view down Bella's shirt.

Bella punched me in the arm. "Watch it, Cullen." I wasn't sure if that was for my remark or my ogling.

"I just have one question, though," Masen said.

I groaned. There was no telling what would come out of Masen's mouth.

He winked at me. Not good. "You do know you got the ugly brother, right?"

Bella looked from Masen to me and then back again. I knew what she was seeing. Masen and I looked almost exactly alike, except that he had our father's blond hair and I had our mother's weird ass red shit. I had heard him call me a "ginger" enough times while we were growing up. But the similarity of our features had led to many people asking is if we were twins.

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Frowning, Bella tapped her lower lip with her finger, and pretended to study us closely. Then she turned to Masen and shook her head. "You're so full of shit that *your* eyes should be brown."

Alyssa snorted and thumped Masen in the belly. He managed to look offended, for about two seconds. Then he shrugged. "Oh well, I guess there's no accounting for taste, Edward. You should be glad that Bella's got none."

Bella surprised me by reaching back and taking my hand. "I think I've got excellent taste in men," she murmured.

My dick starting doing cartwheels. Well, as much as a penis can, the logistics make it kind of difficult. But that was also my cue to get the hell out of Dodge before I embarrassed myself by sporting massive wood in front of my brother and his wife.

I had put it off long enough. Bella was looking tired. It was difficult to believe that it was just yesterday that I'd been scared shitless, wondering what was waiting for us at the hospital. I was fucking exhausted and I hadn't even been hurt.

"All right, Mase," I said. "It's time for Bella to go to bed." And my dick asked if we could join her. *No*.

"Spoil sport," Masen and my dick said the same thing and then they both pouted. That was disturbing on so many levels. Alyssa laughed and gave Masen a kiss on the cheek. My dick wondered if he could get a kiss from Bella. I tried to adjust myself in my pants. No such luck. Thank God I had taken to wearing longer shirts lately. That shit was getting embarrassing.

"You'll survive," she admonished quietly. "Besides, we've got to gather our boys and get them to bed too."

Bella smirked. "Yeah, well, if you can't find them just throw them into the mix. I probably won't notice two more."

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Alyssa rolled her eyes. "Oh you'd notice," she said. "They're just like their father."

"In that case, get them out of my house now," Bella teased with a grin toward Masen. "Quick, before someone feeds them after midnight or spills water on them or something."

"Ha ha," Masen snorted. "I'm leaving. I don't have to take this abuse."

"That's right, leave," I suggested. "As in *go home*."

Masen pressed his lips together. "You sure about that Eddie boy? Are you sure you want us to leave *now*? You sure you want us to leave before-"

Oh fuck me. "I'm just kidding," I said hurriedly. My dick was ready to kick my ass if I kept cock blocking myself.

Masen smirked. "That's what I thought."

Bella must have been truly exhausted because she didn't call me out on the little by play.

Then Emmett was leading Alex outside, carrying Kyle on his hip. Emmett was so big that it didn't appear to be a strain for him. Kyle was snoozing away. Carefully, Emmett handed Kyle to Alyssa. "I think we wore him out," Emmett commented with a smile. "Sorry about that."

"Actually, I might hire you to wear out Alex," Alyssa replied. Then she looked at Masen. "And maybe their father too."

"I'll let *you* wear me out baby," Masen said, causing the two women to groan. I just sighed. I was used to Masen. So was Alyssa. But I wondered what Bella was making of him. I'd have to grill her tomorrow and see if I needed to grovel to make up for Masen. Still, she hadn't seemed offended.

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I would have loved to try and sneak a little tongue action, but Bella just held my hand. I sighed, knowing I was asking for too much. Not only were Alyssa and Masen standing there, but Emmett hadn't moved either. She walked me to my too-small car (even though I told her she didn't need to) and gave me a sleepy kiss good-bye.

~TBTA~

I went over to Bella's house early the next morning to help her get set up for Jake's birthday. I might have been sneaking out my house in order to avoid Masen, but that was beside the point. Jake was waiting for me, opening the door before I even knocked. "Happy Birthday, Jake!" I said. I would give him my gift later.

"Thanks," he said. He looked behind me. "You get me a present?"

I laughed but Bella said, "Jake!" Clearly, she was embarrassed at his question. I kissed her lightly to tell her that there was no need. Jake and I had an understanding. I ruffled his hair. He frowned. He straightened. There, our hellos were complete.

"Of course I bought you a present," I said. "But you have to wait."

"I'm already officially eight years old," Jake said. "Right, Mom?"

"Yeah, babe," she said. "You were born early in the morning."

"You sure?" Jake asked.

Bella rolled her eyes. "I'm sure. I remember. I was there."

Jake shook his head. "No you weren't," Jake insisted. "Daddy said you were out of it when I was born."

"I remember," Bella said. I watched her expression to see if it would change at the mention of Mac, but I saw nothing lurking in her eyes. Her smile was

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genuine and she seemed at ease.

Okay then. All systems were go.

"So, what's for the birthday boy's breakfast?" I asked.

"Spaghetti and meatballs!" Jake yelled.

I looked at Bella in surprise. She shrugged. "It's what he wanted, and those are the rules."

I laughed and picked Jake up to give him a hug. "I like spaghetti for breakfast. It's almost as good as cold pizza."

Jake nodded and squirmed out of my arms. Our "moment" was apparently over. He ran up stairs, probably to wake up Sam. Jake loved waking Sam up, often by tugging him out of the bed. One of these days Sam was going to get too big for Jake to do that.

I followed Bella into the kitchen. Bella had gone all out for Jake's birthday breakfast. There was even garlic bread and a salad. "Smells delicious," I murmured as I moved in behind her. Unable to help myself, I wrapped my arms around her waist and buried my nose in her hair.

Fuck. She smelled good.

My dick thought so too.

I sort of rubbed against her, just waiting for her to jump away from me and call me a pervert. Instead, she leaned back and rested her head on my shoulder. "Hmm..." she murmured. "If I had known that spaghetti was such a turn on in the morning I might have made it weeks ago."

My dick twitched because something in Bella's voice was certainly...interesting. Could it be that those birth control pills were as significant as I hoped they were? I had sort of convinced myself that the

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prescription was nothing special, just a regular, annual refill of something she'd been on forever. But now... Oh my God. My dick gave me a mental high five. I was about to whisper something really dirty into her ear when I heard the boys thundering down the stairs.

I loved the boys, I really did. But they were Grade-A cockblockers at that moment. My dick sulked inside my jeans and my hands literally ached with the need to grab onto her. Though they might ache because I had them clenched into fists. Better that than to throw a temper tantrum because I wasn't getting, as Masen would say, *shagged*. At least not any time soon.

I sighed and moved away from her because if I stayed close to her I was going to be rubbing up against her like a bad dog and I don't think that's something she wants the boys to see. Besides, it would probably ruin Jake's birthday and be the foundation for hefty therapy bills in the future. We might as well save the money and I would put my dick on a leash. Or something like that.

"Alyssa said you invited them over for Jake's party," I murmured. That seemed an innocent enough topic.

Bella looked at me and I was gratified to see that her cheeks were lightly flushed and she was breathing a little fast. Maybe, just maybe, she wanted me as much as I wanted her. I could only hope. "Yeah, I thought it would be fun to have Alex and Kyle over," she said. "Alice and Jasper and their kids are coming over too."

"Should be fun," I said. And would allow absolutely no fucking privacy. I repressed the urge to sulk. My dick did not.

Breakfast was enjoyable, the boys giving Jake some good-natured ribbing about spaghetti being his choice for the morning meal. When I asked what we would be having for lunch, Bella rolled her eyes. "Ice cream," she answered and Jake grinned at me.

It was such a Jake choice that I had to laugh, both surprised and pleased that Bella was going along with it. I knew it was a constant struggle to limit sweets

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in Jake's diet, but apparently on a birthday all the rules were thrown to the wind. I liked it.

After breakfast, I helped Bella clean up the kitchen. We fell into our comfortable routine and I was soon putting the dishes away while Bella wiped off the table and checked her supply of ice cream toppings. All Jake really cared about were the chocolate sprinkles and hot fudge, but she had tried to get a bit of everything so that everyone could find something they liked. She also planned to offer sandwiches because she knew Emmett would never be satisfied with ice cream alone. Later, at the official party, there would be cake and more ice cream.

Jake was going to be buzzing on a sugar high for days.

After the kitchen was done and in order, Bella asked if I would help her bring down some of Jake's gifts from her bedroom. I followed behind her, watching her hips sway as she made her way gracefully up the stairs. When they said a walking cast, they apparently meant it because Bella seemed to have no trouble navigating the stairs. Of course, this made my little temper tantrum yesterday seem even more out of line and stupid.

Luckily, Bella seemed to have a weakness for stupid cavemen.

It was nice to be back in Bella's room. It smelled like her. For some reason, I recalled Masen's words about getting it on with Alyssa in a closet. My dick remembered too. Fuck. Bella was, thankfully, oblivious to my dilemma and my dick's misbehavior. She reached behind me for a second and then we were walking toward the closet.

She beckoned me inside of it and closed the door, only the scant light from a single light bulb illuminating the small space. "It's behind the door," she explained when I gave her a puzzled look. I moved and looked around her.

Sure enough, there was a pretty large box wrapped in Star Wars birthday paper. I bent down to pick it up.

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That's when I felt her hand on my ass. I straightened up and whirled around like I'd been goosed, forgetting about the box altogether. I gaped at her, mouth open and everything. Bella smirked at me and took a step forward. Before I knew it, I was backed up against the wall, my hands falling automatically to her hips.

She rested her head on my chest, her hands going to my buttons. Fuck. Me. Bella and buttons were a bad mix. I should just learn to wear pullovers. I jerked when I felt her long, slender fingers pluck at my nipple. This was new.

"Bella..." I warned. My dick was flexing, showing off his attributes...just in case. *Look at me, pretty lady...You wanna touch me, don't you?*

"Edward," she returned in a similar tone.

"The boys..." I stuttered.

"Busy," she replied with a little smirk.

"They'll walk in." I wasn't sure why I was so dead set on cock blocking myself but it appeared I was.

She shook her head. "I locked the door before we ever came up here." Her smile grew bigger. "And when I closed the door..."

Great, now she was a fucking button *and* door ninja. And she had *planned* this shit.

Wait. She had *planned* this shit.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice husky and strained. My dick joined in with the straining. Apparently, we were a team now. I told him to take a deep breath and that we would get through this.

I was starting to get worried that my dick and I were talking to each other a little too much. It was like there were three uh...people in this relationship.

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"What are *you* doing?" Bella shot back, looking up at me with wide eyes. Then she tilted her head and narrowed her gaze. "Perhaps a better question would be, what *aren't* you doing?"

"I don't know what you mean," I confessed. I was confused. And aroused. Two perpetual states for me since I'd met Bella James.

Bella sighed and then put her hands in my hair, giving a less than gentle tug and pulling my face toward hers. "I mean that I'm getting a complex, Edward Cullen. I'm starting to feel like you find me...less than attractive."

I pulled away at that and I was pretty sure the expression on my face told her how ridiculous *that* idea really was. "You're shitting me, right?" I took a deep breath, trying to calm things down...slow them down. Wait. Was that the problem? " *You* said you wanted to go slow," I reminded her. And I needed the warning too because my dick was starting to get ideas.

"I said I wanted to go *slow*," she agreed. "Not stand *still*. I need...more," she sighed.

"You need *more*?" My dick was practically trying to slap me. I'm pretty sure he called me a cock blocking moron before settling for an angry throb that made me wince. *Let me out to play!* Great. Now even my dick was out to get me.

"Edward, I appreciate the fact that you're not pushing me, I really do, but just because I'm not ready for actual *sex* just yet doesn't mean - in *any* way - that I'm not ready for things to progress." She kissed my jaw before moving to my ear. "There are lots of things we can do... *before*...things that would make both of us feel good." Her breath was hot against my ear. "And I want to feel good again, Edward. I want to make *you* feel good."

The rush of blood to my cock pretty much left me lightheaded. I was starting to understand why Masen got a hard on when he got near a closet now. Stop. No thinking about Masen. Fuck. My dick really was going to kick my ass if I didn't man up.

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"There isn't anything wrong with two consenting adults enjoying themselves, is there?"

Fuck no, my dick said. *In fact, it's a very good thing.*

Bella's hands drifted down my chest and toyed with the - *fuck me* - button of my jeans. "Bella..." I wasn't sure what I wanted. I mean, I knew what I *wanted*, but I wasn't sure how far I should let this go considering where we were. How long would the boys give us actual privacy? How long before they figured it out? But wouldn't Bella be the best judge of that? I was over thinking this and I knew it. But that was how I operated and it was hard -oh so *very* hard - to change the habits of a lifetime.

To my shock and delight, Bella's fingers ghosted over my erection before firmly cupping my dick in her hand. I stopped thinking at all. "I was right," she whispered against my throat. I had no idea what the fuck she was talking about, and I really didn't care at that point.

"Uh," I managed to grunt. Caveward was back.

"You *do* feel good," she said and gave my neck a little nip.

I almost fucking jizzed in my pants. As it was, I jerked against her, grinding my dick into her hand before I could stop myself. "Oh fuck," I muttered.

"Don't you want to touch *me*, Edward?" she asked, sounding all innocent and shy when I knew she was aware of *exactly* what she was doing to me. If it hadn't felt so fucking good I might have been upset at being manipulated like that. Nah, probably not. "Because I certainly like touching you," she said softly. "Wouldn't you like to touch me too?"

"More than anything," I confessed. "But not here...not when..." I sighed.

"Just a little bit?" she prompted softly. "Just so I'll know that you find me as sexy as I find you? It's been such a long time since I felt...wanted, Edward. And I want *you*...so much." She sighed and her breath warmed the skin of my neck.

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"It's only fair that I feel wanted too..."

I gave a groan of surrender (who was I kidding anyway?) and hauled her up against me. For the first time, I let my instincts take over and I cupped her ass in my hands and rubbed her against my cock, letting the delicious friction steal our breath. It was awkward at first and the closet was stuffy, but it was the best fucking feeling in the world to feel her heat gliding over me, her hips easily taking up the rhythm my hands set. She moved with a graceful cant of her hips that made me teeth ache with want.

"Fuck," she whimpered when my one of my hands found a way under her shirt and I palmed one breast. She arched her back, pushing her hard nipple under the thin lace into my hand. I let my thumb flick over her nipple, sort of a test run. "Oh yes, yes...please...just *touch* me...your hands...feel so good...Edward" The sound of my name on her lips...Fuck, it was like my best fantasy. I squeezed her ass with the other hand, enjoying the play of muscles as she moved against me. She kept whispering urgently, telling me how good my hands felt on her and I knew if we didn't stop, I actually would come in my pants. "Don't stop touching me..." she said.

"Bella..." I rasped. "I'm going to...if we don't...fuck!" I yelped because once more her hand found me, her strong slender fingers stroking me in a sure, quick way. Even through the thick layer of denim and the thin cotton of my boxer briefs, her touch was absolutely perfect. Then her hand slipped inside my jeans and I got a glimpse of those fireworks. Months of denial left me trembling on the verge with only this simple touch. She grasped my cock with a little squeeze and then resumed stroking. It was just enough and when her teeth tugged at my earlobe-

I exploded, feeling the heat of my own jizz splashing against my lower belly. Bella's hand stilled its motion and she gently pushed her fingers against me, easy and sure, helping me down from my high, mindful of my sensitive flesh. When the last of the tremors subsided, she kissed my chest then chuckled and pulled away. "Wait..." I panted. "You...not fair..." She pressed her body against mine and reached up past my shoulder to grab something.

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She was smirking as she handed me a wash cloth. "Here," she murmured with a wink. "I think you might need this."

I had sort of expected her to be embarrassed or uncertain, but I saw only smug satisfaction in her expression. I was starting to suspect that my Bella had a very strongly sexual nature. I wondered if I had discovered the wheel or some shit like that in a previous life. Because whatever I had done, I knew I didn't deserve her. That wouldn't stop me from having her, but I knew she was way out of my league.

"Baby..." I gasped. Fuck me. I needed to run more. It took more work to stay in shape now and I had clearly been slacking. I was leaning over, resting my hands on my knees. My legs were still too wobbly to even care about the rapidly cooling mess I could feel dripping down my belly. "Where the fuck did *that* come from?" I finally managed to gasp. I grabbed the washcloth from her and grimaced as I wiped myself clean. "And why don't I get to reciprocate?"

Bella cradled my face in her hands. "To answer the first question, let's just say that two days ago I thought I might never get a chance to do that with you, so I decided to take the opportunity when it presented itself." She gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek. "As for the second..." A wicked gleam came into her eyes. "Uh...I might as well warn you now that I tend to be uh...loud sometimes...and so when you give me the first of what I hope will be many orgasms, I want to know that we're someplace private." She laughed. "And third, I decided that if I waited for you to make the first move we'd be sexually frustrated residents of an old folks' home before we got any action."

My dick twitched.

This woman would kill me, but I couldn't find it in me to be too upset about that fact.

Author's Note: The birthday traditions I've used here are from our own family and the menu described is one that my youngest son requested for his eighth birthday. Yes, we ate spaghetti and meatballs for breakfast.

Chapter 27: Hurts So Good

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 27: Hurts So Good

When I walked back down stairs on my still wobbly legs I was pretty sure I had guilt and "I just came" written all over my face. There wouldn't have been an ounce of shame because I had enjoyed the orgasm more than any that I'd had in the previous months. It had been, to put it mildly, as spectacular as it had been unexpected.

Apparently, I didn't though, because the boys didn't give me a second look. Bella had this sexy little smug smile on her face that just made me relive those moments in the closet and I was soon sporting wood. Again.

I was beginning to sense a pattern here.

Bella wasn't helping that shit either, brushing up against me like it was the most casual thing in the world, letting her hair fall over my arm, her breast lightly and quickly touching my shoulder as she leaned over the table to put more ice cream toppings out. When she was telling me what all the toppings were, she even put her mouth right next to my ear so that her warm breath made me shiver. She was torturing me deliberately, twisting me up into knots I'd never get undone.

I hated it. I loved it. I wanted more. It hurt so good. My dick chimed in. *Come on baby...*

I tried to pay attention to Jake's ice cream luncheon. Jake used a mixing bowl for his ice cream creation, causing Bella to roll her eyes at his extravagance.

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She didn't stop him, however, and to give the kid credit, he ate almost all of it. Chocolate ice cream, crushed Oreos, chocolate sprinkles, hot fudge and bits of frozen Girl Scout Thin Mints were his poison of choice. Even Emmett shook his head and I swear that boy would eat the ass end of a horse if he had a little barbeque sauce.

After our ice cream meal was over and the dishes were washed and put away, Bella starting giving us all orders. She wanted the house straightened up before the party and she took on the role of drill sergeant with what I suspected was more than a little smug satisfaction. What woman *wouldn't* want to order around five males? She sat on the couch and barked out commands, correcting us when we got it wrong, giving us a small smile of feminine appreciation when we got it right. We were all suckers for her anyway, and not one of us grumbled. Well, Jake tried and his brothers put a stop to that shit immediately.

It was really interesting to see the dynamics of the boys involved in their chores. I hadn't really seen the process up close and for an extended period of time. They each knew what they were responsible for, and Bella was taking it easy so she was giving them extra tasks. They worked well together and you could tell that this was a familiar routine to them. I was so happy to see her actually resting that I couldn't help but give her a kiss and tell her so.

"Much better," she murmured approvingly. "So much nicer than old Caveward." She gave me a little bit of tongue as a reward. I hoped to prove to her that I was, at least, trainable. Considering what she had done for me earlier, I was having a pretty perfect day, crusty boxers aside. It was a small price to pay.

Masen and his family were due to arrive at four, as were Alice and Jasper and their crew. Emmett disappeared into the shower at three, having finished all his chores faster than the other boys. Jake had to tease him, and told Emmett that he really needed to allow a lot of extra time if he wanted to look "pretty for Rosalie." Emmett told his mother that Jake was giving him crap. Bella told Jake to stop teasing. Jake stuck out his tongue at Emmett and then made kissing sounds. Emmett threatened to give him an atomic wedgie. I really didn't want to know what that was, but thankfully Bella told Emmett to get into the

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shower and ignore his little brother.

Jake had to give him one last smirk, batting his eyes outrageously, as Emmett trudged up the stairs. If looks could kill, poor Jake would have spontaneously combusted and died on the spot.

The other boys contented themselves with changing into fresh tee-shirts, and they only did that because Bella insisted. "And don't forget deodorant!" she yelled after them. I shot her a questioning look and she shrugged. "Boys tend to forget stuff like that until they want someone to *notice* them - in a good way. In Emmett's case, it's Rosalie."

I nodded and laughed. "So I guess there's no need to remind Emmett?"

"Let's just say that when I took him to the dentist two weeks ago for his cleaning, the hygienist told me he's actually been brushing his teeth," Bella informed me. "And flossing - *twice* a day," she added dryly. "I have a feeling that the need to remind Emmett about good grooming habits is over." She sighed. "Now just three more to go."

"I have a feeling that Sam has that covered."

"Just goes to show you don't know everything, Mr. Control Freak." Was it sad that my dick actually liked it when she called me that? "Sam would stink like the rest of them if I don't remind him too."

~TBTA~

I had warned Masen the night before that he had better be minding his manners and be on his absolute best behavior. Experience had taught me that I shouldn't depend on Masen heeding my warning. Masen was the sort to go full speed ahead (and damn the torpedoes!) without much thought for consequences. I had often told him that it was a good thing that Alyssa was there to think for him. He didn't think that was funny.

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So it was with no little sense of trepidation that I heard Jake open the door and greet my brother, his wife and sons. Masen and family had arrived.

Alyssa and Bella disappeared into the kitchen and I heard Bella telling her, "Wait until you meet Alice. You two will get along just great. I can tell about these things."

Kyle and Alex disappeared with Jake. They went upstairs to do whatever it was that boys do. I probably didn't want to know. As Bella reminded me often, "As long as there's no fire or blood, I don't worry about it too much. Most stuff is easy to clean up." Wise words, and she was the expert after all.

Masen studied me for a long moment and then a smug grin lit up his face. "You got off," he declared.

"What?" I had put on my best innocent expression. Apparently, I sucked at looking nonchalant. How the fuck did he *do* that? "I don't know what you're talking about."

He pointed at me. "I know that face." Masen chuckled and shook his head. "You've got that same look on your face you did when you came home from senior prom and Stacy what's-her-name had given you a blow job in the back seat."

"You're delusional," I snapped. "And it was Stacy Spanetti." Stacy was the very first girl my own age I had had a crush on.

"I know that expression, big brother," Masen insisted. "And that blue balls/constipated face is different. Now you've got the she-finally-did-something-to-get-me-off-face."

"Shut it."

He tapped his chin. "I know you didn't chip your own wood," he mused. "Because that wouldn't relax you this much. You've been there, done that over the past few months." He shook his head. "Nope, I'm betting you had assistance

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from the lovely Bella." He leered at me. "Not sex, not yet, but getting closer my boy." Masen sighed. "I'm so proud. Really. You dream of these moments and to actually be there to experience it first hand." He winked. "Well not actually *there*, because that would just be weird and sick, but you know what I'm saying."

Thank fuck the doorbell rang at that moment and I could excuse myself. It was Jasper and Alice. Jasper must have recognized the absolute desperation in my face because he told Alice to go ahead and find Bella. She smirked at me (what had she and Jasper been talking about anyway?) and made her way to the kitchen. Sarah and Sophie were each holding one of Rosalie's hands. Rosalie gave me a shy smile and ducked her head. I told her quietly that Emmett was somewhere upstairs with the rest of the boys. She gave us one more shy smile and she and the girls were going up the stairs. Adam had already run up there as soon as he cleared the doorway. Apparently, boys could sense that something was going on upstairs and it called to them like a siren's song. I hoped there wouldn't be much repair work to do up there.

"Masen," I said. "This is Jasper."

"We've met before," Masen reminded me. Now I remembered. Years ago, Jasper had gone home with me on a weekend leave. Masen had been home from college for the summer and had tried to follow us to bars. Jasper and I had both been of legal drinking age (barely) and Masen tried to talk me into letting him use my driver's license to get into bars with us. I had my military ID so I didn't really need to use my driver's license.

Being a big brother, I had laughed in his face and told him to bite me. It had been a sweet moment of victory. He had pouted over that shit for months, until he had own - legitimate - ID to go drinking.

"That's right," I said. "I had forgotten."

"Yeah, well *I* still remember how you guys left me at home bored shitless while you two went out drinking and picking up girls."

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"We were proudly serving our country, Mr. Cullen," Jasper drawled. "It was not our fault that you were, by the very laws of that great nation, underage."

Masen turned to me and grinned with admiration. "He really can deliver a 'sucks to be you' with manners, you know?"

Jasper laughed. "Perhaps we should find our lovely ladies before they get too deep into a discussion about our bad little habits?" he suggested.

Masen nudged Jasper. "I think Eddie boy here got lucky."

Jasper's eyes were sharp as he studied me. "Well, well..." he murmured, sounding surprised.

"I did not," I snapped. "And even if I did, I would certainly not cheapen it by discussing it with *you* two."

Jasper looked at Masen. "I think I'm insulted, Masen," he said. "I do believe that my good friend here has just called us cheap."

"I don't know about you, but I'm expensive as hell," Masen commented. "Besides, I think he said he wouldn't cheapen the *experience*. Apparently it involved fireworks and stuff...maybe angels singing?"

I pushed the two of them toward the kitchen, but the women had already gathered on the back porch and were watching some of the kids play Slip-n-Slide. Alyssa and Alice were helping Bella put the finishing touches on the picnic tables. While I had been evading Masen's observations about my expression, the boys had come back downstairs and gone outside. Jake, Adam, Kyle, and Alex were all waiting for turns on the Slip-n-Slide. Sam looked like he was trying to decide if that was something he wanted to do while Seth was nowhere in sight.

At a smaller table, Emmett was sitting with Rosalie and Jasper's twin daughters. The adults all sat down at one of the picnic tables and grabbed a beer or a soda and began quietly talking. Jasper leaned over and at first I

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thought he was going to give me shit about getting lucky, but the expression on his face was not playful.

"Listen," he said. "We got a call from Rosalie's mom yesterday." He looked around to make sure there were no kids within hearing distance.

"Does she want her back?" That would not make Emmett happy, and I was selfish enough to want a happy Emmett and not a pissed off Emmett.

Alice noticed Jasper and I talking and she reached over to touch Jasper's hand. "Her mom..." Alice said softly. "She's not doing well."

"Oh no," Bella said. "Does Rose know?"

Alice and Jasper shared a look of exasperation and then Alice shook her head. "I think we need to tell her," Alice said.

"And I'm not so sure," Jasper returned patiently.

Bella sighed. "I think she needs to be told," she said firmly. "She's probably already guessed. She's a smart girl, and she's got good instincts." It was obvious that Bella knew more about Rosalie Hale than I did. "If you don't tell her, she's going to feel like you're hiding from something her - mostly because you are."

"That's what I say," Alice said with a nod toward Jasper.

"What will happen to Rose?" Bella asked. Of course, that would be her primary focus, as it should be.

Alice and Jasper shared another pointed look, doing that non-verbal communication thing that some married couples just seem to do so effortlessly. I wondered if Bella and I would ever be like that.

I was too far gone to even be surprised at that thought, so I just put it away for later consideration.

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"Well," Alice said carefully. "I'd like her to stay with us. Otherwise she's going to be put into the foster care system. There's no one else in Jasper's family that's capable - or willing." She rolled her eyes. Her opinion, and Jasper's, of his extended family was not flattering - with good reason.

"How do you feel about that?" Masen asked Jasper. Masen had a way of just putting himself into any conversation and most of the time people didn't mind. I didn't get it.

Jasper shrugged. "I'm okay with it, as long as Rosalie is. It would have to be her choice."

"She's got such big plans," Alice said. "And I'm afraid without a support system she won't get the chance to see those plans through."

"She wants to be a social worker," Jasper explained. "I get the feeling that the child protection system kind of...let her down." He glanced once more at Alice and she nodded. "I'm not sure, but I just get the impression that things weren't always what they should have been at home. For the longest time, Rose slept with her bedroom door locked. Like she was used to someone trying to get in."

"Oh my God," Bella whispered, her eyes going to Rosalie.

"So, we want to talk to her about it soon, but that's where we get into the issue of telling her about her mother's prognosis." Jasper's voice was tired.

"You need to tell her," Bella said again.

"Yes and soon," Alyssa added, a tone of motherly concern in her voice. "She already knows if she's half as bright as you say she is. And if she knows then she's probably worried sick about what's going to happen to her if - when - her mom dies."

"See?" Alice said, punching Jasper lightly. "That's what I said."

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Jasper held up his hands in surrender. "All right, all right," he said. "I get it. I'm an idiot."

Alice smiled and leaned into him. "Yeah, but you're my idiot." Then she turned to me and winked. "You'd think someone in military *intelligence* would be a little smarter, wouldn't you?"

"Nah, it's the military," I retorted and we all laughed.

I looked across the yard at Emmett and Rosalie. She really was good with the girls. She reminded me of Emmett in a way, because for a young man of fourteen, he really was quite patient with his brothers (a hard feat) and other children (a little easier).

"You know," Alyssa suggested, looking at Rose entertaining the girls. "Since Rosalie's so good with the kids, maybe you should think about paying her...say one night a week to watch the kids. It would give her a little spending money and give you some kid-free time." She looked at Alice. "Is there something you've wanted to do?"

"You mean besides taking a bubble bath without being disturbed?" Alice asked with a laugh.

"I know, right?" Alyssa sighed with longing.

Bella interjected, "Well you know, it does get a little easier when they get older. You can disappear into your bathroom and tell them that the first person to disturb you without clear proof of an actual emergency gets put on restriction." A light blush stained her cheeks as she said this and my interest was immediately piqued. *Well now, Bella, what have we here?*

I forced myself to pay attention to the discussion.

Alice leaned forward. "Well, you know, there's a charity I've wanted to volunteer with, but between Jasper's outrageous work schedule and the kids' various activities, it's just not happened."

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"What's that Alice?" Bella asked.

"There's an organization that gets donations of business clothes from various sources and they provide interview clothes for women just returning to the work force," Alice said. "A lot of the time they're just coming out of abusive relationships, or they've been homeless. But no matter the reason, they don't have the clothing that's appropriate for the interview, which means they don't get the job and it's just a vicious cycle. But this organization helps them out with that first step and it makes a huge difference." She smiled and hunched her shoulders with excitement. "I've wanted to volunteer but..."

"Well, it sounds like it would be a good way for Rose to earn some extra money and give you the time to do something you're interested in sweetheart," Jasper said with a little smile.

"You're right," Alice said. She looked at Alyssa. "You're pretty smart...for someone married to a Cullen."

"Ouch," Masen said. I laughed at him.

"You're a Cullen too," Bella reminded me.

Oh yeah.

Chapter 28: National Holiday

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: For the next two weeks, I will probably only update on Tuesday and Friday. I start back to school next week and it's been twenty years since I got my degree in Education. So...I'm going to have to see how this old brain adjusts to being back in the classroom as the student. I've got the updates written, but I know that my online time will be limited, at least until I adjust to this new chapter. As always, thanks for reading!

Chapter 28 : National Holiday

I heard the phone ringing inside and Bella looked down at her leg. "Can you get that for me, baby?" she asked.

I stared at her stunned for a moment. She had called me baby in front of everyone. And given me a hand job - all in one day.

I decided right then and there that Jake's birthday was the best day *ever*. I wanted to declare it a national holiday. I was pretty sure though that Congress wouldn't go for a national "Bella Touched Edward's Cock Day."

Bella looked at me. Oh shit, right. I ran for the phone.

"Hello? James' residence," I answered. Mrs. Jordan, who taught us phone etiquette in the third grade, would have been proud.

"Hello?" A man's voice said. "Who is this?"

Unconsciously, I found myself pulling up straight, going to attention. "Uh, this

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is Edward Cullen, sir." The *sir* slipped out but felt natural.

"Uh huh," came his reply. "This is Command Sergeant Major Edward Cullen?"
Shit, this guy knew my name. And my rank. I had two guesses as to this guy's identity and the first one didn't count.

"Yes sir, that's me." I felt ridiculous standing at attention in Bella's kitchen dressed in jeans, a worn, comfortable button up shirt and flip flops. But I wasn't going to go to relax either, damn it. He'd *know*.

"Uh huh," he said again, making it sound more like a grunt. "So you're the young man who has been hanging around my daughter?"

Fuck. Me. This *was* Charles Swan, former Army officer and MP. And he had made the words "hanging around" sound very much like "sniffing around" as if he knew exactly how horny I was. He probably did. He was a man and he'd spent his whole life around men just like me. He knew what darkness lurked in the hearts of men - and their pants.

"Yes, sir," I replied respectfully.

"Uh huh," he said yet again. "Well, I don't suppose I need to tell you that my daughter is precious to me, do I?"

"No, sir." I swallowed hard, really glad that he couldn't actually see me. I had a feeling he could kill a man with a glance. Or maybe turn me into a pillar of salt at the very least.

"And I'm guessing that you're smart enough to figure out that if you hurt her *or* my grandsons in any way, there won't be a corner of the earth remote enough to hide you?"

"Yes, sir, I'm smart enough to figure that out." *And if not, you just made sure I knew.*

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"Well good then, let me speak to Jake and wish him a happy birthday." He sounded pleased with himself. I was glad I amused him.

I called for Jake and handed off the phone.

My knees were wobbly again, but I wasn't enjoying the sensation this time.

Jake nodded. "Yes, Grandpa, he's still here." Jake's eyes went to me. He nodded again. "Yep, he said he bought me a present." More talking from the other side. Jake laughed. "No, he's *nice* Grandpa!"

Uh oh. But thank God for Jake, who actually sounded as if he liked me. I would have to sneak him a Butterfinger on the sly sometime.

"He even made us breakfast yesterday morning when he got up." Really, Jake? No Butterfinger for you, my boy. Throw me under the bus, why don't you? And I didn't even get to do anything to deserve it. *Then*, anyway. My dick was strutting around in my pants, feeling pretty damned smug. Well, he *had* been until Colonel Swan called. Now my dick was sort cowering in a corner, wondering if Colonel Swan still carried a weapon. I could practically feel my balls retreating up into my body.

Fuck. I could just imagine what Bella's father was thinking now.

Jake giggled. "On the couch."

Whew. At least I was off the hook on that one.

"Grandpa..." Jake said with laughing resignation. "He's *nice*," Jake added as if trying to convince his grandfather. Shit.

"Okay, I love you too," Jake said. Then I heard another voice come on the line, this one female. "Hey, Grandma!"

Some talking, more than his grandfather had done. Then at last a break. "No, I haven't opened my presents yet."

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Talking, talking, talking. Jake listening, listening, listening. "Mom's outside with the other grown-ups."

More talking, a *lot* more talking. Poor Jake was shifting from foot to foot, unable to get a word in edgewise. "Yep," he said. "He's right here."

Oh fuck me. NO! But there was Jake, handing me the phone. My wobbly knees threatened to give out as I walked toward Jake and the phone. I should have made my escape while the getting was good.

That fucking phone was huge. Or at least, it was in my mind.

I grabbed it and croaked, "Hello?"

"Hello Edward." It was weird; it was like hearing Bella's voice just a tiny bit distorted, not quite as husky but still very much alike.

"Hello, ma'am," I replied. I cleared my throat and she laughed.

"Oh you military boys, always so polite," she murmured. Boy? I was almost forty years old. But I wasn't going to correct her. No way in hell. I valued my nuts, thank you very much, even if they were crawling into hiding like they were trying to form a vagina.

"Yes, ma'am," I returned. It was better to stick to polite, neutral conversation. I couldn't fuck it up with "Yes, ma'am" could I? Better not ask that. I might not like the answer.

"So...how are my grandsons?" Mrs. Swan asked.

"They're great, ma'am," I replied with genuine enthusiasm. "Jake wanted spaghetti for breakfast this morning."

"And of course Bella made it for him," Mrs. Swan guessed.

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"Yes, ma'am, and it was pretty darned good," I admitted. I had almost slipped and said "fucking delicious" but with my dick still cowering in my crusty underwear, I had saved myself at the last minute. If women only knew how difficult it was to behave when you had a literal dick dictating every word that came out of your mouth and every move you made. They'd probably give us a lot more leeway.

She laughed, almost as if she knew what I had been about to say. "Well, Bella's always been a very good cook," Mrs. Swan observed. "Thank goodness she doesn't cook like me."

"Yes, she's an excellent cook." I thought it better not to comment on Mrs. Swan's cooking. Bella had told me enough horror stories. But there was no way in hell I was going *there*.

"She's blabbed, hasn't she?" Mrs. Swan guessed. "That girl, she'll tell you all the juicy family gossip before I ever get a chance to spill the beans."

Was she kidding? Sometimes getting information out of Bella was like trying to torture secrets out of the enemy - or get chocolate out of Jake's hands. There was just no pretty way to do it. There was guaranteed to be pain and tears involved in the process.

"Uh huh," I respond noncommittally. I don't really want to argue with Bella's mom, especially the very first time I talk to her. Better to keep it neutral, fly under the radar. *Fly casual*, as Han Solo would say.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to dig through old family pictures to come up with something truly monumental for when we visit next month."

Shit. I had forgotten that. Bella had mentioned it a long time ago, back when I was still in denial about my feelings for her and I had filed it under "Don't Care, Not My Business" and promptly forgotten it. Now my stupidity was going to come back and bite me in the ass.

Typical.

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My dick continued to sulk, which was probably a good thing considering I was on the phone with Bella's mother. What I had now was the anti-boner.

"It will be wonderful to finally meet you," I said, being mostly sincere. Actually, I was a little nervous about meeting Bella's parents. I hadn't done much of that beyond high school. Lilith's parents had already been friends of the family, so not much drama there. Claire's parents had lived in Canada, so there hadn't been an opportunity to meet them. Not that I'd particularly cared. The other women I dated were hardly likely to want to parade me around in front of their parents. "Hello Mom and Dad, this is my fuck buddy Edward." Yeah, not happening.

In high school I had met Stacy Spanetti's parents because I had taken her to prom and we had dated for the last two years of high school. Her father had been big enough and cranky enough (the poor guy had three daughters, all of them equally gorgeous and with an urge to be wild) that I had never dared to fuck Stacy. She had given me a blow job on the night of prom, which was the highlight of my life up to that point. But I wasn't *about* to take her virginity. Mr. Spanetti was a scary dude. I was surprised to hear that Stacy had had a baby about fifteen years ago. Yeah, she was married, but still...this was *Mr. Spanetti* we were talking about. I was still shocked that her husband had the balls to actually deflower her. I wasn't sure I would have been as daring, wedding ring or not.

Of course, I was going to meet a man who had retired from the Army and gone straight into being the Chief of Police. I was pretty sure that either of those occupations could prove detrimental to my health if he chose for them to be so. Charles Swan was going to be a scary guy, simply by definition.

The idea of actually having to face Bella's father with all those dirty thoughts of his daughter whirling around in my head was intimidating to say the least. And her mother... Don't even get me started on that one.

"Well, I hope so," Mrs. Swan said with a little laugh. "I'm looking forward to meeting you, Edward. Bella and the boys have told us so much about you."

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Really? Bella had talked about me to her parents? The boys had too? Oh shit, *that* could be good or bad. Emmett was coming around, but what if he's said something like, "So...this joker is fucking my mom..."

And really to be fair, I hadn't. At least, not in real life. Dreams don't count. Jerk fantasies don't count either, or I'd be a dead man. Still, her father was going to take one look at me and know I was having dirty, dirty thoughts about his daughter.

I realized I had been silent for too long when Mrs. Swan asked quietly, "Do you think you could get Bella on the phone?"

"Sure," I replied. I decided to take the phone to Bella rather than calling her to the phone. It was obvious her parents didn't have a clue that she'd been in a car accident, and by some miracle, Jake hadn't blabbed either (no, he just mentioned you spent the night - *much* better). I certainly wasn't going to be the one to tell them.

A few moments later I was handing off the phone with a sigh of relief. Whew.

~TBTA~

I didn't hear what Bella's parents had to say, but after Bella talked to her mom, the phone made its rounds through each of the boys. I heard lots of 'yes, sirs' and 'yes, ma'ams' and each of the boys told their grandparents about their week in their own unique way. Jake promised his Grandpa that he would call him after he had opened all his presents and give him the tally.

Jake had been eyeing the table with presents all day, even trying to peek beneath the wrapping. Luckily, Bella had warned me about his little habit and I had taken precautions. I used about a whole roll of tape on Jake's gift. It wasn't pretty, but no one was getting in that sucker any time soon. Yeah, I was kind of proud of the tape job.

Bella told Jake he would have to wait until after dinner to open his presents. He wanted to pout a little bit about that but Bella quickly set him straight. I

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remembered my mother giving Masen and me that same look and I wondered if they taught it to mothers in some sort of secret ceremony, telling them that it would do double duty with the men in their lives.

I helped Bella in the kitchen. Jake had opted for tacos and corn dogs and little Bagel Bites pizzas for his birthday dinner, all accompanied by chocolate shakes. The kid definitely had unique taste in food. As I popped the tiny little bagels into the oven, I leaned over stole a kiss. "I love your son, but he's got very weird taste in food." She shot me an odd look and then kissed me back, there was even a tiny bit of tongue.

Bella had also put together some other foods for those who didn't have Jake's unique appetite, including a pasta salad, some fruit salad, regular hot dogs, and more sandwiches. There was plenty of food and I lost count of how many times Emmett went back and forth from where he was sitting with Rosalie to the food table. Of course, to be fair, it seemed as if he was fetching food for Rosalie as well.

He gave me a shy smile once when our eyes met. Seeing Emmett like that was sort of an eye-opener. He was growing up and a lot of the anger I had seen in that first meeting was slowly disappearing. As much as I would have liked to have taken credit for that, I had a feeling that it was Rosalie Hale who was responsible. He sort of hovered over her, almost protectively. That was a reaction I could give my whole-hearted approval, though I would never tell Bella that little bit of information. I gave him a nod and he seemed to get it.

Protect the women in your life, but be subtle. Otherwise they will kick your ass.

Later on, I'd approach him about suckering Masen into a game of Madden. I might even let Whitlock watch and learn.

There was more ice cream, of course, and cake. It was a Star Wars' cake, obviously. Jake was mad for all things from a galaxy far, far away. I was pretty proud of my gifts; I hadn't even asked Bella for help. EBay was my friend, and that's all I had revealed to her.

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I was surprised to see that Masen and Alyssa had gotten Jake a gift, even more surprised when I realized it was a living gift. I glanced at Bella as Jake took the small container out of the big box but she just leaned in and whispered, "Alyssa called me earlier to get the okay."

I relaxed then and took a look. It was a hermit crab in a tiny shell. "They make great pets," Masen said. "Pretty easy maintenance and when it gets bigger, Jake can just get it a bigger shell. Mom already said she's going to start collecting shells on the beach there in Charleston and getting them cleaned up for him."

"What are you gonna name him?" Sam asked, fascinated with the tiny creature. I wondered if there would be another hermit crab in the James' household before too long.

"Froot Loop," Jake answered immediately.

I had to laugh. "Froot Loop?" That was really random.

Bella sighed and shook her head. "During his campaigning for a puppy, Jake decided that Froot Loop was the perfect name for a pet." Leave it to Jake to name a pet after a sugary cereal.

Jake grinned at his mom. "This doesn't mean I don't still want a dog."

Bella groaned and distracted him by handing him another present. It was mine. I had retrieved it from my car after the phone call, mostly to have a moment to myself. Knowing that Jake would never get a peek, even at the plain brown box, I had felt confident in leaving it out where he could see it. I had gotten Jake three things, none of them *really* expensive since Bella had made it pretty clear that big, flashy gifts were not her preference for them. Bella was all about the thoughtful gift.

I had found two discontinued Star Wars Unleashed action figures. These were far more detailed than most action figures and still in their boxes. I had found the Obi-Wan and Anakin figures, from their epic battle on Mustafar. Yeah, I had investigated that shit. Yes, I had purchased the DVDs and watched the

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movies a few times to keep up with Jake's knowledge of all things Star Wars. Yes, I might have read a few of the books just to impress Jake with my knowledge.

I had been pleased to find the figures. If Jake left them like that, then they would probably become even more valuable, but I would leave that decision up to him. They were toys and meant to be played with, and Jake was an eight year old boy. I was betting they'd be out of the boxes before he went to bed that night. The third gift was much smaller, just a few inches in height, but it was also still in the box. What made it unique is that it was vintage, having been released in 1977 with the very first movie. It was a little bit of cinematic history and had set me back a little more than I had expected. Not that I was going to tell Bella that, because she was already giving me a speculative look. Shit. Distraction time.

"Here," I said. "Jake you've got one more present."

And that was all it took. I looked up to see Bella shaking her head at me, a little smile tugging at her lips.

She knew me too well.

Then the phone rang again and I couldn't help it - I cringed. "Oh Edward," Bella said sweetly - too sweetly. "Would you get that for me?"

I gave her a narrowed look because I had a pretty good idea she was throwing me to the wolves, so to speak. She could have easily reached it herself. After all, she had been getting around all day with no difficulty. With great trepidation I picked up the phone and answered. "Hello? James' residence." *See, Mrs. Jordan? I remember.*

A man's quiet voice chuckled softly and I heard, "Oh you must be Edward. It's nice to talk to you. This is Will Swan, Bella's brother. I just called to wish Jake a happy birthday, but I have a minute and I'd love to talk to you too."

Fuck. My. Life.

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Fic Rec: How to Seduce a Werewolf by leelator

Three and a half years have passed since Edward left Bella in the forest. She treats her best friend, Jake, like a beloved pair of old jeans. When he takes matters into his own hands, Bella realizes she needs to learn how to seduce a werewolf.

If you love the wolves, you'll adore this fic. They're all here and they are amazing! This Jake is one of my favorites. Ever.

Chapter 29: That Forever Kind of Thing

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I got an extra update written, so there should be three updates this week. Expect the next one on Tuesday. Enjoy your week and thanks for reading!

Chapter 29: That Forever Kind of Thing

"Hi," I replied, trying to sound as if I wasn't about to hurl. Really? I had already talked to her mother *and* her father, and now she was throwing her brother into the mix? I noticed that she was watching me carefully, as if trying to judge my reaction to him.

That made me curious. Bella hadn't been overly talkative about her family. I had gotten the sense that she was protective of her brother, but that made sense to me because he was younger. She had hinted once that her brother and her father had been briefly estranged but that everything was good between them now. I knew that Bella and her brother were very close and had a lot in common. The only other information I had about the elusive Will Swan was that he was a high school math teacher and that Mac hadn't really understood him. Though she made it clear that they had gotten along just fine.

Well, there was no way I was going to let myself fall behind Mac in that category, so I was fully prepared to like Will even if he listened to bubblegum pop and drowned helpless kittens in his spare time. Okay, maybe not the kittens thing. I would try to make him see the error of ways about that. But I was totally up for pretending to like whatever crap music *he* liked. I would laugh at his jokes and watch any movie he preferred. And I would *like* it, damn

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it.

"Well, it's so nice to finally get to actually speak to you, Mc-" Will coughed suddenly and then cleared his throat. "Edward," he continued. "Bella has told us so much about you."

"Yeah?" *Well, she's told me a whole lot less about you, Will Swan. Why is that?*

"Are you enjoying a James family birthday?" Will asked, laughing softly and obviously well acquainted with their birthday traditions. He was soft spoken and very polite.

"We had spaghetti for breakfast," I told him.

"Let me guess, something sweet for lunch?" Will guessed.

"You know him too well and yes, it was ice cream," I replied, laughing. "He's some kid."

"That he is," Will agreed. "And his mom's not bad either."

"Uh...yeah...I'm going to have to agree with you on that one," I admitted, giving Bella another look. She was still watching me with an odd intensity.

"Good, I'm glad to hear you think that," Will replied. He briefly covered the phone and I heard him say something to someone else who must have been in the room with him. I heard another man's voice and then Will laughed in response to whatever the other man had said. "Sorry about that, Edward," Will apologized. "The peanut gallery wanted to be heard from."

"Sure, no problem." I was starting to feel very confused and lost. I was also starting to feel as if Will thought I knew more than I did. Once more, I studied Bella. She was tense, her eyes watchful, as if waiting for...what?

"Well anyway," Will continued. "I was talking to Mom and she said that she and Dad are going to be visiting Bella and the boys next month."

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"Yeah, that's what I heard," I answered. I wondered if I could arrange to be out on training exercises the whole month of August. And how much trouble would that get me in with Bella? Or her parents?

"You'll get to meet them then, I suppose," Will commented.

"I guess that's the plan." I hated that plan but there wasn't much I could actually *do* about it.

"Don't let my dad fool you," Will said. "He's not as mean as he looks." *That wasn't reassuring, Will. But thanks for the thought.*

"I'll try to keep that in mind."

Will laughed. "Sorry about that, it sounded way better in my head."

"That's okay, I do that sort of shit frequently," I confessed. I felt myself relaxing. Will wasn't nearly as scary as his father. I had a feeling I could be friends with Will.

"Good to know, and it makes me feel better," Will told me. "So...before I talk to my lovely sister and one of my four most favorite nephews, I was just wondering you'd feel about meeting the rest of our little family?"

"Uh...okay?" What could I possibly say to that?

Will laughed again. He was easy to like, thank goodness. No acting skills required, which was a good thing because I pretty much sucked at pretending to be something I'm not.

"Don't tell Bella," Will said. "I want to be the one to tell her that her two favorite brothers are coming to visit," he confided.

Okay, now I was *really* confused. *Two* brothers? I looked at Bella and frowned. She shot me a worried look and looked like she was *really* trying to listen in. Well now, Mrs. James, what is the little mystery here? Her mood had gone

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from smug to concerned.

I must have paused too long because Will gave a little snort. "Oh, let me guess," he said. "She didn't tell you." There seems to be no doubt in his voice that I, in fact, completely in the dark at this point.

I felt like I was on *Punked* and expected Ashton Kutcher to walk out any moment. Except I wasn't famous in any way. Do they even *Punk* regular guys? "Tell me what?"

Bella's head whipped around and she hobbled over and grabbed for the phone. *Oh no, I don't think so.* Taking advantage of my non-crippled status, I shot her a grin and ran up the stairs and into her bedroom. I could still bust my hump when I had to, especially when I wasn't burdened by about a hundred pounds of battle rattle*. I guessed it was only Bella who took away my ability to breathe. I locked the door for good measure.

"Okay, talk fast," I ordered Will. "I just had to literally run away from your sister and now I've locked myself in her bedroom. I'm guessing that I've got less than two minutes before she's pounding on this door with her pokey, pointy hands and threatening to cut off my balls."

Will laughed long and hard. "I knew I'd like you." Then his voice grew more serious. "Really, Edward, I'm not sure I should be the one to-"

"Listen, unless you're a serial killer - or listen to the Hannah Montana or something equally horrifying - I'm pretty sure I can handle whatever you say to me. Oh, and I would be opposed to you drowning kittens. That just isn't nice." I heard thumping coming up the stairs and to be honest, I felt a little thrill of anticipation. Pissed off Bella would be hot.

"Well, you need to understand that my sister is a *little*...over protective," Will said. "As in she isn't always reasonable when it comes to her little brother." There was a long-suffering note in his voice, but immense affection as well.

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"Really?" *Very interesting, Mrs. James. You jumped all over my shit for exactly the same thing. Wait 'til I call you on your bullshit. And I will call you on it, baby. Count on it.*

"Okay, the first thing you need to realize is that we grew up on military bases," Will said.

"I really hate to be an ass, but Bella is almost here." I could hear her muttering in the hallway. My dick was trying to decide if Sex-Kitten Bella or Pissed-Off Bella was hotter. He decided that he needed more research. *A lot more.*

"Okay, okay," Will rushed. "I know what she's like so I'll just say it. I was fourteen when I realized that all the girls in my class finally getting boobs really didn't interest me. I figured it out from there. I knew I liked boys, not boobs. I told Bella about a month later. When I was fifteen I came out to my parents. My mom thought it was a phase, my dad was...confused and conflicted, but he tried. Still, it was like he didn't know what to say so he didn't say anything. Only Bella took it in stride, told me it was like being born with brown eyes, either you are or you aren't. I still tried to keep it under wraps, I mean, we lived on an Army base. You get the picture. When I was sixteen some little Army brat saw me off base with a guy...and the shit hit the fan. You can guess what it was like after that."

"Fucked up," I said softly. In some ways, the Army was like a very small town. Everyone eventually knew everything most of the time. And people talked. A lot.

"FUBAR*," Will agreed with a little chuckle. "So Bella's protective of me - being my big sister is just the tip of the iceberg - because growing up gay on military bases wasn't exactly a lot of fun for me, so she's pretty careful about revealing the fact that I'm gay to *anyone* in the military. The thing is that because it's *my* story, she would hesitate even longer. She just tends to avoid the topic with anyone in uniform. It's an old habit and probably very hard for her to break. Still protecting me, see? It took her way longer to even tell Mac, and I'm pretty sure she was gearing up to tell you and-"

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There was a pounding on the door. I could almost hear her growling. My dick liked it. Stupid dick.

"Will, could you hang on just a second?" I put my hand over the phone and yelled at the door. "I'll be out in a minute. Your brother and I are bonding so *go away!* This is boy time!" Okay, that sounded *way* better in my head.

"Quit being an ass and open this door!" Bella yelled.

"No way, you asked me to get the phone and that's what I did. I'll open it when I'm damned good and ready and until then you can just cool your heels - *out there.*" My dick was trying to decide if I had just ruined his chances for more fun in the immediate future. I comforted him with the thought of make-up hand jobs.

I took my hand off the phone. "Okay, Will, I just have to ask... Why the fuck would I care if you're gay?" Truly, the workings of Bella's mind were an infinite mystery that I would never unravel even if we had fifty years together.

Will laughed. "See? I told her she worried about nothing. I had a good feeling about you, McSmoo- Edward." Then he sighed. "You've got to understand, Edward. It's the whole military thing. Honestly, a lot of military guys just aren't that understanding and well...she stood up a lot for me after I realized that I wasn't, in fact, attracted to girls." He paused. "She was the one who patched me up after I'd get into fights; she was the one who tried to stand between me and whatever meathead soldier or marine that decided he hated fags. You get the picture."

I understood. I did. I had been around those guys my whole adult life. Homosexuality and the military was still an uneasy mix. The whole don't-ask-don't-tell thing was a fiasco. Will was absolutely correct when he said that a problem still existed in the military community. Bella would know that, but I would have hoped she would have more faith in *me*, and not be blinded what I did for a living. I was going to have to call her on that too, because it wasn't something I could let slide - especially not knowing how I felt about her. Which might, I admitted, be part of the problem because I hadn't

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actually told Bella how I felt about her. Masen's words came back to me. Bella needed to know; she needed to hear.

"Okay, I get that," I told him. "But honestly, I was my mother's son way before I was a soldier and to be perfectly blunt my mother would kick my sorry ass if I *ever* said or did *anything* to insult someone because of their sexual preferences." And that was the truth, even if I did sound like a pussy when I said it. Esme Cullen didn't mess on things like that. "And frankly, I'm scared to death of my mother. You have no idea."

Will snorted again. "Glad to hear it. You'll love Josh when you meet him. He's scared of his mom too." Now I got it. *Uncle Josh*. Fuck me, I was an idiot. My eyes narrowed. And Bella had a lot to answer for too.

"I'm looking forward to it," I said as I opened the door. Bella almost fell into the bedroom; she had had her ear pressed against the door. "Here's your sister," I told Will. I covered the phone for a moment and leaned in to whisper, "You've got some 'splaining to do, Lucy..." I rolled my eyes at her as I passed her the phone.

Then I walked down the stairs and tried to decide how to approach the talk I sensed coming with Bella.

~TBTA~

I admitted that I was pouting. I was indulging in a full-fledged sulk fest. Bella had shot me a cautious look when she came back downstairs to hand Jake the phone. I listened as Jake talked to his Uncle Will and then his Uncle Josh. There were only two pictures of Will in Bella's home, because apparently Will didn't like having his picture taken. His sister shared that trait. In one of those pictures, Will was with his parents and Bella. In the other, he was standing next to an average looking guy with dark brown hair and blue eyes. I hadn't given it a second thought, figuring they were friends or cousins or something. Now I was willing to bet that man was Josh. Honestly, I was so relieved to finally know the identity of the mysterious Uncle Josh that I really couldn't care less. But I was concerned that Bella had felt the need to hide something like that

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from me.

Had I given her any reason not to trust me? I tried to think of it from her point of view, having been her brother's protector for so many years I knew that wasn't just something she could turn off. The habit of a lifetime wasn't easily set aside. Hell, I was living proof of that little truth. But it hurt to think that she hadn't trusted me enough just to tell me and know it wouldn't be an issue. Yeah, I was in the Army, but I'd never given her one iota of evidence to think that I would give a shit about something like that?

Finally, Bella came over and sat down beside me where I was brooding in the corner. She reached for my hand and grasped it tightly. "It's not a big deal," she said.

I stared at her for a moment. "Your brother being gay? You're right, not a big deal. The fact that you felt you had to hide it from me? *That's* a big deal."

She got a pained expression. "It wasn't that I felt I had to hide it, I just didn't specify," she explained quietly.

I gave her a look that let her know I thought that answer was complete bullshit, in the politest way possible of course. Asshole, not stupid, remember?

"It's that..." Bella took a deep breath. "Honestly, Edward, sometimes the reaction from others, *especially* those in the military, hasn't been very easy to take. Do you know how many times I had to run interference for him just because some asshole G.I. Joe decided that Will was fair game?" Her fingers tightened around me. "And it's one of the reasons I swore I would *never* marry a soldier." I rolled my eyes at her. I wasn't done pouting. Not by a long shot. A delicate snort erupted from her and fuck me, I found that adorable as hell. It was really hard to stay angry with her and that pissed me the hell off. "So, life didn't go exactly according to plan." She leaned into me and I caught a whiff of her cinnamon scent. My dick responded like he always does. I squirmed in my chair and she gave me a knowing look. "It wasn't a reflection on *you*. It was a reflection on hard experience, and you just sort of got painted with the same brush and that was wrong of me. Can you forgive me?" she asked quietly. Aw

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hell, now I knew where Jake got the puppy dog eyes from.

"It's not a question of forgiveness, Bella, because really in the big scheme of things this is nothing," I said. "What really concerns me is that you felt the need to keep this from me."

She looked down and plucked at a stray thread on my jeans. When she looked up at me I couldn't stand the wariness I saw in her eyes so I just pulled her close and put my lips near her ear. "Okay, I realize that maybe if I had been more open and honest about my feelings, we could have avoided this whole situation, and for that *I'm* sorry. Okay?"

"And it's just that my experience has taught me not to trust on this issue," she said quietly. She tried to move to look at me, but I knew I wouldn't be able to finish what I had to say. I kept hearing Masen tell me that I had to just say the words, because Bella needed to hear them. It wasn't just her heart on the line here, and I needed to remember that. "And for letting that happen, well, I'm sorry too." She blew out a breath. "I deliberately had you talk to him and then I panicked..."

"Isabella Marie Swan James..." I breathed in her ear and I felt her relax against me, as if her body already knew the words I was going to say. "I'm not going *anywhere*. I'm in this for the long haul." Bella sighed and leaned against me. "I feel things for you that I've never felt for another woman. Ever." Bella's breath came faster. "So you don't ever need to worry about telling me anything. Even if we don't agree, I think together we can work out some sort of compromise. Yeah, I'm going to get pissed at you. And you're going to get pissed at me. Then we'll talk it out, or *yell* it out, whatever we need to do. That's how these things work." I kissed the tip of her nose. "What we will not do is to hide things or refuse to talk about them or let things get out of hand. A good sulk? Okay. But we don't let it drag on, you understand me? Because that shit just doesn't lead to anything good."

She nodded, smiling slightly.

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I pressed a kiss to her ear. "But I want to be with you, Bella. I'm here because I *want* to be with you and those hellions you call your sons." She gave a shaky laugh. I took a deep breath. Might as well go for broke and pull up my big boy pants and get it all out there, grab my balls and go for the gold. Besides, I needed to know if my instincts were right and she felt the same way about me. There was no way in hell I could try and force her to say it first. She had so much more on the line in this thing than I did, so it was up to me to make that first move. No games, that's what Masen had said. And he was right. For once. "Bella, I'm falling in love with you, you might as well know that up front. The real deal, that forever kind of thing that gets people all twisted up in knots. Yeah, I know it's early and it might seem fast, but we can take it slow. That doesn't change how I feel right *now*. So believe me when I tell you that you're not going to scare me off." I kissed her, and even though this was worlds away from the roses and romantic dinner and soft music I had imagined for this scene, it was *us*. She had taco breath and I had beer breath and I was sporting a completely inappropriate boner, but it felt right.

I nibbled at her earlobe and she gave a tiny moan that had my dick reacting in predictable ways, jerking inside my jeans for good measure. "So I guess what I'm saying is that you're stuck with me as long as you want me around..." I whispered.

I finally loosened my hold on her so that she could pull back and look at me. I was vaguely aware of the others sort of glancing at us, trying to pretend they weren't looking at us - and trying to hear what we were saying. Bella cradled my face in her hands and those hands were trembling. "I'm falling for you too," she admitted quietly. "That forever kind of thing."

And the whole world stopped. I didn't hear the kids screaming. I didn't hear the low murmur of voices from the adults, or the sound of the water on the Slip-N-Slide. None of those comfortable, familiar, mundane sounds even registered.

All I was aware of was the warmth of Bella sitting close to me, the feel of her hands around my face and the fact that her palms were just a tiny bit sweaty. She was nervous. So was I. I smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I

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wanted to do this over a romantic dinner or something like that, but I guess this is more our style, huh?"

She nodded, and her eyes bright with a combination of tears and what I hoped was happiness.

"So...no more secrets?" I prompted.

Bella shook her head. "No more secrets. And I trust you, Edward. I really do. It's just that-"

I kissed her just to shut her up. "It doesn't matter," I said when I finally pulled away. I leaned in close to whisper in her ear again. "And just so you're convinced that you're not getting rid of that easily, you need to remember that I've seen the boys' bathroom. And I'm still here. If that doesn't demonstrate my good intentions, then nothing does."

Bella groaned and laughed all at the same time, and then buried her face in my chest.

Remember that saying when it rains, it pours?

Here's another one: my cup runneth over.

Or, simpler and more me: I'm a lucky motherfucker.

I looked over to see Masen raise his beer bottle in a toast. *Fireworks*, he mouthed. I flicked him the bird.

And kissed my Bella again, just because I could.

* **Battle Rattle** - the equipment a soldier is required to carry, including armor, weapons, etc. Depending on the soldier's job, full battle rattle can weigh anywhere from 80-120 pounds (according to my Army family members).

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***FUBAR** - Military term for fucked up beyond all recognition and/or repair (I've also heard redemption used in place of recognition, but not nearly as often)

This incident, Edward finding out about Bella's brother is LOOSELY based on a real event. It wasn't a phone call but a face-to-face meeting. While it may seem odd, it sort of made sense given the situation (the boyfriend was in the military like Edward). She just sort of had her brother show up with HIS boyfriend. Can you say SURPRISE!

Chapter 30: The Mom Card

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Author's Note: On the gay issue, I must say this one is personal for me. My father was gay and in the military. I can't imagine how difficult his life must have been. My "Dad" was also in the Navy and the prejudice is very real and still prevalent today. Anyway, I wanted to treat Josh and Will just like any other couple. I don't want to resort to stereotypes or put them over the top (though one of my very favorite slash stories is called "Over the Top." I hope that I do justice to Josh and Will. If I don't, please feel free to call me on my bullshit, as Edward would say.

Chapter 30: The Mom Card

The party was winding down a bit. The kids were all inside playing some sort of dancing video game. I could hear the insults being thrown around with joy. Emmett seemed to be taking the brunt of the abuse. Apparently the kid could hit a baseball like a pro but had absolutely no sense of rhythm if what I heard was any indication. I also heard Rosalie's heated defense of his moves, which of course prompted even more catcalls from his brothers.

Jake was especially inventive in his insults. The kid had a real knack. I guess it came from being the youngest of four boys. He had the smallest body, but he had the biggest mouth.

Honestly, I was feeling very relaxed. What Bella and the boys had was a new way of life for me. While I had never been a party animal, usually a Saturday evening would find me in a bar or at a movie if I was feeling bored with the bar scene, and on Sunday I was usually trying to catch up on stuff around the house. I hadn't really had time to establish a new routine when I got home from

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this deployment. Coming home from the battle zone was weird; the adjustment wasn't quick or easy for anyone. And I hadn't been home very long from my deployment when my windshield got busted.

Since coming home from Iraq, I had adjusted to a whole new normal. Saturday mornings were spent with Emmett working on one project or another; Saturday afternoons and evenings were spent with Bella and the boys. Ditto for Sunday. It had been a lazy, relaxing summer and it was all about to end. Not immediately, but it was coming. I didn't want it to; I was enjoying my time with Bella. I liked getting to know the boys. I definitely wanted to advance my relationship with Bella, both physically and emotionally.

I'd be training a new class within the next four weeks, and that would tie up one weekend a month. That was going to suck, especially since our evening time together would be more limited with school starting. The boys would be heading back to their normal routines and obligations. Bella's job as a teacher didn't end when the bell rang; she had put me straight on that right away. Apparently there were a lot of meetings involved, not to mention grading papers and doing lesson plans. And Emmett only had two Saturdays left in his debt - sixty more dollars and the kid would be home free. I could have let him off now, but I had a feeling that he needed to see this thing through. So, there were only two more working weekends with Emmett. Not that I intended to stop seeing Bella and the kids on Saturday, just that Emmett's time would now be his own.

Having watched him and Rose, I was pretty sure I knew how he'd be spending those Saturdays. Rose had a driver's license and access to a car, so I had a feeling that Bella would be seeing a lot of Rosalie Hale. It was a good thing that Rosalie was such a sweet kid, and once she got over her shyness, I discovered that she was both very smart and very compassionate, with a real soft spot for kids. Emmett could do way worse in the object of his first affection.

Now it was getting dark but we were all still sitting around on the porch. We had all slowed down on the drinking because most of us still had to drive. Bella was mellow and quiet, sitting pressed up close to my side.

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It was weird, but somehow, everything that had happened today had shifted our relationship forward. There was a level of security and comfort on both our parts that hadn't been there a few days ago. When I was young, I honestly thought that true love would be all about the - well, the fireworks, as Masen said. And it was, but I was beginning to get the idea that it was so much *more*.

It was sitting beside each other, enjoying a cold beer and the company of friends and family. It was knowing that your lives were about to get very busy and you'd have to consciously *make* time for each other. But it was also the knowledge that you would do it, that what you shared was important enough to make time together a priority. It was getting upset with each other and then kissing and touching to heal the little hurts. It was eating spaghetti for breakfast and ice cream for lunch because that's what the birthday boy wanted. It was sneaking into closets to steal a little alone time; and declaring your feelings over beer and tacos.

A sense of contentment welled up inside of me. I leaned in to Bella and kissed her. She was a tiny bit tipsy, not obnoxious, just sort of silly. She rubbed her face against my stubble and laughed. "You're like a teddy bear," she murmured. "All fuzzy and warm."

"You're just a *little* intoxicated," I countered.

She nodded, biting her lip. "Yep," she agreed. "Sure am."

"I like you like this," I whispered, trailing my finger down the side of her face.

"I'm celebrating," she told me very matter-of-factly.

"Oh?" I couldn't help but smile at her. "What are you celebrating?"

Bella sighed and leaned against me. "Feeling like myself again. I've missed it."

The words were simple but the feeling behind them was not. My heart felt like it was going to slam out of my chest.

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Bella tilted her head back and smiled up at me. "You know, I didn't drink after Mac died. Afraid I'd let it become a crutch. Then when I met you that didn't worry me anymore, and I we had some wine. Remember?" Oh I remembered all right. "And I remembered how much I liked beer...and wine..." She leaned in a licked my ear. Instant wood. "And tequila."

"Oh shit, I'm keeping you the fuck away from tequila," I said with a grin. "You'll kill me."

She winked at me and took another sip of her beer. "I'd sure like to try," she drawled.

"Hey!" Masen called. "Could you two lovebirds pay attention to your guests?"

"No," I said, not taking my eyes from Bella.

"Well, Lys and I have some news," Mase said.

I turned to him with narrowed eyes. "It better be good."

"Oh it is," he assured me.

I nudged Bella. "Shall we give him the floor?"

"By all means," Bella replied.

"Okay," Mase began, reaching for Alyssa's hand. "Well, as you know, I'm incredibly good at my job."

"And so fucking modest too," I noted.

"And that," Masen agreed with an emphatic nod. "Anyway, I'm so fucking modest and fuck awesome at my job that I just got offered a huge promotion." I had a feeling that Alyssa would be driving home.

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I smiled and held up my glass of soda. "Congrats, little brother!" We were all about to take a drink when Masen held up his hand and shook his head.

"No, no. Wait," he insisted. "That's not the good part." He looked at Alyssa and grinned. "Is it, darlin'?"

"No, it's not the good part," she agreed.

"Well, the company is expanding, buying up some smaller mom-n-pop operations, all of them in one region - an area of the country we haven't been in before." He waved his hands around, making a circle. I wondered just how many beers he had had.

"Sounds like a great opportunity," I said.

"Shut it, big brother and let me finish," Masen said, pointing at me. "Okay, okay... Well, because I'm *so* awesome, my boss wants me to be in charge of the region, like the whole fucking thing....four states in all."

"That's great, Masen," Bella said.

"Well, yeah, it's great," Masen said. "Especially since the four states are Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and...North Carolina."

"No shit?" I was surprised.

"No shit," Masen answered. "I'll be doing quite a bit of traveling, especially at first. So really, I'll be all over those four states for a while. But my boss let me pick where I wanted to live in the region and I decided-" He looked at Alyssa. "*We* decided that we wanted to live here...in Fayetteville."

"You're moving?" Bella almost shrieked. Even my new and improved noise tolerance winced.

"We're moving," Alyssa answered with a nod. "Next month."

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"Fuck me..." I muttered.

"That's right, big brother, you'll have access to the Masen Cullen channel all the time."

I looked at Bella. "How do you feel about living in Alaska?" I asked.

"Sounds delightful," she shot back quick as a whip. "Give me a minute to pack a suitcase."

"Hey!" Masen protested. "I'm not feeling the love here."

"There's a reason for that," I told him.

He turned to Lyssa and pouted. "Do you hear how mean they're being to me?"

"I know, baby," she soothed, cradling his face in her hands. "I know. And I'll make it better...later."

"In Edward's bed?" Masen teased, giving me a side look.

"Aw, hell no!" I said, getting ready to stand up. Bella giggled and held me in place.

"Uh, that would be a big *no way*," Alyssa said. "Because if we're going to move here, we have to stay on Edward's good side." She grinned at me. "I mean, we're going to want to trade kid watching duty. Right?" She gave me a meaningful look.

"Yeah, definitely," Bella answered before I could say a word.

Oh my dick liked the sound of *that*. It might even be worth putting up with Masen. Maybe.

"Just so we're clear," I said. "My bed is a no-sex zone."

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Bella burst out laughing and Jasper shook his head at my stupidity.

"Well, that's obvious," Masen drawled.

"Fuck off," I said. Well that hadn't gone the way I wanted. But Bella was smirking at me.

"Don't worry," she whispered softly. "It won't always be a no-sex zone."

My dick started doing his own little touch down dance in my pants.

Alyssa decided to wade into the fray and distract Masen. "So...we've got to see about finding a house."

"Oh!" Bella said. "Let me help. I'm really good at finding houses. Mac and I always found one in a day. Hell, sometimes I found them on my *own* in a day. I'm like a house-finding savant or something." She nodded sagely. "Seriously, I'm just that good."

Tipsy Bella was cocky. I liked it.

"You've got a deal," Alyssa said.

"I've also got a list of things to do to make the move easier. Like things you'll need to arrange, how to get security deposits waived, stuff like that." She gave a proud smile. "You'll have movers, obviously, but I can give you some advice on how to make unpacking easier too."

"You're probably a pro," Masen said.

"Hey, you can't be a military family and not be good at moving," Alice interjected. She had been quietly nursing a Smirnoff Ice. She and Bella shared a nod of understanding.

"Honestly, Lys," I said. "You should let Bella lead you through this. She's driven cross-country with a two year old and newborn. She knows her shit."

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"Aw, Edward," Bella crooned. "You say the sweetest things." She beamed at everyone. "I know my shit!"

Everyone toasted tipsy, cocky Bella. "To knowing her shit," Jasper said.

Alice and Bella were pleasantly boozed up, along with Masen. Alyssa, Jasper, and I had all been much more circumspect in our drinking. It was funny to watch the more inebriated members of our little party.

"Mom said she and Dad were going to drive up here on Tuesday to see Kyle and Alex," Masen said. "I'll tell her then."

"You haven't told Mom yet?" I asked in shock. Oh, he had fucked up big time and I was going to take full advantage of it.

"Uh no, I wanted to surprise you first," Masen said.

I grinned at him. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"You *can't* tell Mom," Masen instructed. There was a note of panic in his voice. *Fucker. I've got you now.* "Please, Eddie...I mean, Edward?"

"I'm *so* telling Mom," I told him with a wide grin. "And you are *so* dead for not telling her first."

"Edward, you can't do that!" Masen said. "She'll rip off my balls and shove them down my throat." He scowled. "Or she'll make me sit by Aunt Geraldine at Thanksgiving. I'm not sure which one is worse."

"Aunt Geraldine," I told him. "She farts and then blames the dog." Jasper snorted. "My parents don't have a dog," I explained to a puzzled Alice. She threw back her head and roared with laughter. "Prepare to lose your nuts then little brother," I said with great satisfaction. I looked at Alyssa. "You didn't want any more kids did you?"

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"With him?" Alyssa asked, jerking her head toward Masen. "Nah, I'm good. But thanks for asking."

"Edward, seriously, you can't do this to me man." Masen was sweating.

"What's it worth to you?" I asked. I had a huge bargaining tool and I was going to make the most of it.

"What do you want?" He sounded...worried. I liked that. I liked that a lot.

"Hmm....I dunno, this is pretty tempting," I mused. "I mean the chance to see Mom's face when she realizes that you told *all of us*-" I gestured at the group of us. "Before you told her - the woman who carried you in her womb, for God's sake, the woman who changed your shitty diapers and kissed your boo-boos - that you're moving home." I sighed. "Well that sort of opportunity just doesn't present itself every day."

"Aw, fuck, Edward, you wouldn't really do that to me would you?" He was pulling out the pouty face. I was unimpressed. I had seen it all before. And Jake had sort of vaccinated me against Masen's lame attempts.

"Oh hell yes I would." Was he kidding?

"Come on, you're my big brother, you're supposed to watch out for me."

"This is *Extreme I'm Not Touching You*," I said. He just blinked at me. Granted, it had sounded more coherent in my head.

"Edward, seriously, no more fucking around," Masen whined.

"Okay, okay, but only because it's fucking embarrassing seeing you beg like this," I finally said. Masen breathed a sigh of relief. "But here are my conditions..."

He grimaced and wiped his hands over his face. He took a deep breath and nodded. "All right, just give it to me straight."

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"Condition number one-"

"There's more than one?"

"I said, *conditions*, remember? As in plural. Keep interrupting and I'll add to the list."

Masen snapped his mouth closed.

"Condition number one: you and Alyssa will watch the boys one night a month for the next six months, starting the month you move here. Night to be at our discretion with Alyssa having the right to veto the night in question. Should you request reciprocity in watching over said children, we shall reserve the right to ask for an extra night, again at Alyssa's discretion as to the particular night." I winked at Alyssa. "Sorry, Lys, you got dragged into his shit."

She shrugged. "It happens."

Masen nodded.

"Condition number two: you will inform your sons that they are not to refer to me as Eddie, Uncle Eddie, or Uncle E."

Masen frowned. "And I was having so much fun with that one," he bitched.

"Alex was really getting into it."

"That's my point," I told him.

"Condition number three: I get to be there when you tell Mom."

"Done," Masen said.

We shook on it because we're guys and we do stuff like that. Then we toasted our little compromise. I smirked at him when he sat down next to Alyssa again, no doubt to try and get her sympathy.

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Bella gave me a high five and whispered, "Well done."

I was pretty fucking pleased with myself. First, I wouldn't *want* to be the one to tell Mom. She'd be pissed at Masen, yeah. Which would be awesome to behold. But the odds of getting caught in the crossfire were too fucking high. I wouldn't have told her anyway. But I'd always been a better poker player than Masen and I had just proved it. Second, I had gotten Bella and me at *least* one date night a month for the next six months. After that, Emmett would be that much older and Bella just might feel comfortable leaving him in charge of the boys. Third, I wouldn't have to hear Eddie again or worry about Emmett picking up that shit. And last, but certainly not least, I'd still get to have a front row seat when Masen told Mom the big news.

It was a win-win situation for me. Humiliating Masen in front of my friends and Bella was just an added bonus.

Never underestimate the power of playing the Mom card.

Never.

Chapter 31: Moving Forward

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Chapter 31: Moving Forward

I had finally caved and left Masen a house key that morning. So when the party came to an end, I told him to go on and head back to my house and I would stay behind to help Bella clean up. Alyssa would have volunteered to help too, but I gave her a look that let her know I wanted some time alone with Bella. Well, as alone as you can be with a mother of four kids.

Jake was already drooping by the time everyone started to leave. Apparently he was experiencing a wicked sugar crash. Bella gave her sleepy son a kiss on the cheek, wished him a happy birthday and told him to go upstairs and brush his teeth. I had a feeling that Jake would be snoring in less than fifteen minutes.

Emmett was picking up stray cups and bottles and cans in the back yard. He also put away the Slip-n-Slide and straightened up the porch. I was suitably impressed that he did all of that without being asked. It was at moments like this that I realized that Emmett had indeed taken on the responsibility of being the man of the house. Bella was careful not to rely on him too much, but she did give him a healthy amount of responsibility. Together, Emmett and I pushed the picnic tables back into the usual spot and stacked up the extra chairs. Between the two of us, it was all quickly accomplished.

Then I caught Emmett yawning and blinking rapidly. Like Bella, he had had an eventful few days. "Go on to bed," I urged. "I'll help your mom with the last of it."

He didn't answer, but gave me a nod and a wave as he headed back inside. Seth

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and Sam had helped Bella in the kitchen while I had wandered through the house picking up cups and other trash, putting away things that were out of place. It was still chaos, but somehow it was a comfortable chaos.

I heard Bella tell Sam and Seth goodnight just as I collapsed onto the couch. The boys were beyond exhausted and I knew that because not one of them protested about going to bed. Not a peep.

I had discovered that giving family birthday parties was kind of draining. How Bella managed to do this four times a year was beyond me. I would probably have tried to convince the boys to combine all their birthdays into one day. Which was just one reason why Bella was such a better parent than I could ever hope to be.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back on the couch, pleased when I felt the couch give as Bella sat down beside me. She leaned into me, resting her head on my chest. The day was ending on a pretty much perfect note. Of course the start of it had been pretty epic too.

I put my arm around her and drew her close. I kissed her hair, inhaling her unique scent. I was pretty sure I'd never get tired of just smelling her. I smiled at the thought, which only proved how far and how hard I had fallen for her. "I think today went well," I said quietly.

She nodded and I watched as she closed her eyes and sighed. "Yeah, it was great."

"So, did my brother scare you off yet?" I asked, not really worried about her answer. We had passed a hurdle today and we both knew it. There was a new assurance to our relationship, a certainty that we were going somewhere important. Eventually. We didn't need to rush; we didn't need to torture ourselves with uncertainty. We could simply enjoy the journey.

It was nice, this feeling. Better than nice. Much, much better.

"I meant what I said you know," I murmured. "About falling for you."

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"I know you did," Bella replied sleepily, her eyes still closed. A small smile tugged at her lips and I couldn't resist the temptation to kiss them. She gave a little moan and opened her mouth to me. My tongue swept in to taste her and I was suddenly the one doing the moaning.

I pulled back and tucked her hair behind her ear. "You're so beautiful," I said and her expression grew radiant.

"You're not so bad yourself, Cullen," she assured me with a small laugh.

I shrugged. "What can I say? I do what I can."

"I'm beginning to understand that Masen isn't the only Cullen who has a problem with being cocky."

Of course, hearing the word cock, even in a slightly altered form, does predictable things to my body and I shook my head at her. "Don't tease," I warned. "We're both dead tired and the boys are upstairs."

Her hands were tugging my face down to meet hers. "I know exactly where the boys are," she said. "And do you honestly think they could walk down those stairs without us hearing them?"

I've never been so grateful for the elephant stampede in my life. Somehow, we ended up horizontal on the couch. It was the very first time I'd ever felt Bella under me, and the feeling was more erotic than I would have anticipated. Obviously, I knew it would feel great, but this was... amazing.

She was massaging my scalp with her fingers and I was shocked at how good it felt. Between the deft touch of her fingers and the tempting little movements of her hips, I was almost drowning. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath and I absolutely did not care. All that mattered was the feeling of her soft warmth beneath me, the way her hips moved, giving me a tantalizing glimpse of how it would be when we finally made love. Bella gave sexy little, breathy moans that made my dick immeasurably harder.

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"Oh Edward," she whispered in my ear. "Do you know how much I want you?"

"I've got a clue," I answered, grinding my erection against her belly.

She laughed and shook her head. "I don't think you do..." Her tongue traced a fiery path up my neck and toward my ear. Shit, the woman had a thing for earlobes I'd noticed. She liked hers licked and nibbled and she liked to return the favor. I could work with that. "You're so tempting," she murmured.

Bella, as I was discovering, liked a little dirty talk. At least, that's what I was getting from how vocal she was getting as things progressed. "You want me baby?" I whispered in her ear. She groaned and ground against me harder, more urgently.

"Oh God yes," she moaned.

Pausing briefly to listen for footsteps, I decided the coast was clear to proceed a little further. Just a little wouldn't hurt, unless you counted the blue balls I'd be sporting. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make.

I slid my hand up from her hip, along her ribcage, and then cupped a breast. She hissed and nipped my earlobe hard. "Mmmm, that feels good," she said very quietly.

I pushed aside the lace cup of her bra and for the very first time, I felt the soft skin of Bella's breast. Her nipple was hard and straining, poking into my palm. I pulled gently at it and was rewarded with a groan. I let myself leisurely investigate Bella's beautiful body, finding the little things that made her hiss or moan or grind against me. She was remarkably responsive, certainly giving my ego a boost. While I explored, she did the same. She found out that I was particularly fond of having my own nipples touched, and that I was slightly ticklish along my ribs. She twirled her finger around in my belly button and I was the one discovering that I had yet another erogenous zone. Who would have guessed that a fucking belly button would be sensitive? I decided to see if she responded the same way, and I lightly touched her navel. She had an innie; it was sensitive too. Suddenly I was having thoughts of whipped cream and

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licking it out of belly buttons.

I let my hands roam back up her body, filing away the belly button thing for future exploration, and once more caressed her breast. I softly squeezed it, brushing my thumb over her nipple at the same time, which was apparently a good move for Bella judging by the sounds she made. I slipped one hand underneath her to give her ass a squeeze, just because I liked the feel of it in my hand. She didn't seem to mind that either, so I did it again.

My dick was throbbing and twitching against her belly and she started rubbing against me, making contented little noises in the back of her throat. Bella was very, very vocal and I enjoyed that shit out of that. I was learning how to touch her, to please her, all the little things that would enhance her pleasure.

When I tugged on her nipple, she whispered to me how good it felt. Then she said, "Harder." I obeyed. When I licked at the hollow near her collar bone, she yelped and then sighed, letting me know she liked it. My teeth on her earlobe got me a shiver, my tongue gently laving her nipple earned me a hard grind of her hips. It was freeing somehow to know that she was just going to tell me what felt good. I wouldn't have to guess or play hit-or-miss. When I touched her, I knew how it felt to her because she told me, either with words or unmistakable reactions. It was the hottest thing I could remember ever having shared with a woman. It took the pressure off in a way, let me feel free to explore and experiment with my hands, my lips, my tongue and even my teeth.

There was something to be said for the slow burn we had both been enduring. Not that I was always hopping into bed with a woman the night I'd met her, but honestly, these months with Bella had been the longest I'd spent with a woman without fucking her. And I had the sneaking suspicion that being with Bella would put those casual encounters to shame.

When I found my hand drifting toward the button of her jeans, I knew I needed to stop before I couldn't. Bella had warned me that she was loud and I was going to take her at her word. I definitely did not want her first orgasm with me to be muffled and hesitant because we feared the boys would discover us. So with a regretful sigh, I leaned up on my arms and let my head hang down, our

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foreheads touching.

"We've got to stop, baby," I said. I leaned back so I could see her.

"I know," she answered with a mournful sigh. Then she smiled up at me, her hair delightfully messy and her cheeks flushed, her lips dark pink and slightly swollen. "But that sure was fun," she whispered.

I leaned down and kissed her softly, chastely, changing the mood. "Amazing," I agreed.

"Thank you," she said.

"For?"

"For moving forward, giving me more," Bella told me. "And still not pressing me past what I'm ready for."

"Bella, I want to give you what you want...what you need, whatever that is," I explained. "So please, always feel free to tell me. I can't read your mind, and I don't want to screw things up by doing what I think you want me to do only to find I've gotten it completely wrong."

"You seem to be holding your own pretty well," Bella teased.

I shrugged and sat up, offering her a hand up to do the same. "I'm motivated, what can I say?" I needed to get us upright or I'd be pressing her into those couch cushions and letting my dick slide up and down her slick folds. And I just *knew* they were slick.

She snuggled up close to me after we both got our clothing back in order.
Fucking button ninja...

We sat there in a comfortable silence for a while and then Bella looked up at me. "So how do you feel about your brother moving here?"

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I couldn't help but grin, still feeling a little smug since I had gotten the advantage over Masen earlier in the evening. "It'll be...interesting."

Bella giggled, which did nothing to help my slowly improving heart rate. "Your brother seems to be pretty much a force of nature."

"You have no idea," I groaned. "Even growing up with him...it was one thing after another."

"What do you mean?"

"I was always the serious one in school, at home. I did my chores and my homework without anyone telling me to."

"That doesn't surprise me somehow," Bella teased gently. "Mr. Responsible."

"Yeah, so I get Sam, I was a lot like him. Just not so freaking smart."

Bella grinned.

"I'm not sure if it was because Masen and I were so close in age or what, but he was always pushing the boundaries. My parents got called into the principal's office more times than I can count. Masen was always acting up; making everyone laugh, stuff like that. Once a teacher called my mom to come pick him up because Masen wouldn't stop talking in a British accent. He kept it up all day. And when my mom asked him why he just didn't stop it, he said that the teacher couldn't show him any rule in the handbook that said he couldn't speak in a British accent. Needless to say, my mom was torn between laughing at him and beating him senseless, so she settled for making him do my chores for a month."

Bella snorted and shook her head. "Okay, *now* I'm nervous. What if he teaches the boys some tricks?" But her expression was merely amused and I was relieved. The last thing I needed was for Bella and Masen to butt heads over her boys, and Bella would most definitely do what she thought was best for the boys no matter whose toes she might step on.

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"Don't worry about it," I assured her with a wink. "We've got a secret weapon - Alyssa keeps him straight."

"I'm telling you, she should be eligible for sainthood by now," Bella mused.

"You won't get any argument from me."

Then Bella yawned but before I could offer to leave, she just snuggled up closer and said drowsily, "Let's just sit here for a while, okay? I like feeling your arms around me..."

And how the hell was I supposed to argue with that?

So I didn't. Bella fell asleep and I wasn't far behind her.

~TBTA~

"You think one of 'em is gonna make us some food?" I heard a voice whisper. I didn't open my eyes. It was too early. I couldn't even sense any daylight in the room. Maybe if I pretended I was still asleep, he would go away and let me actually *b e* asleep. It was Jake. Of course. Damn that kid woke up early.

"Nah," another voice said, much louder than a whisper. Emmett. I had a nagging feeling that I was forgetting something very important. But I was too tired to think. "They're passed out."

Yes, Emmett we are. Thank you for noticing. Now could you just leave us-

Shit.

Us. We are passed out.

We. As in Bella and me. The feeling of her wrapped around me had been so right and natural that I hadn't even realized that we had been caught in a sort of compromising position. Bella mumbled and snuggled up closer and I could only pray that her hand wouldn't start wandering as it had during the night.

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Let's just say that Bella James was a little handsy and leave it at that.

I was torn between pretending to still be asleep (and thus avoid looking into the accusing eyes of her sons) and waking up and getting the hell out of there fast. Besides, I really had to pee. The problem was that I didn't really want to get out of there at all, much less fast. In fact, I was pretty much content to lie there with Bella in my arms, even knowing her sons were probably giving me death glares right now.

I decided to be brave and live up to my reputation as a soldier. I'd faced armed hostiles with less trepidation, however, and I opened my eyes cautiously. I was shocked to find Jake's face about three inches from mine.

"Can you make me something to eat?" he asked. "I can't use the stove and Emmett can't cook anything good."

Okay, so Jake's biggest problem was his stomach. That I could handle. I glanced carefully at Emmett. He just looked at me, still seeming sort of drowsy. "I'm hungry too and Jake's right, I can't cook worth sh- I can't cook."

I blinked at the boys, confused, relieved, and surprised. Carefully, I eased away from Bella, though her grip on my shirt was surprisingly strong. She muttered and complained, then flopped down on the couch, face first. Jake laughed and even Emmett smiled.

All righty then, so I guess finding me on the couch with their mother wasn't as traumatizing as I had feared it would be. Good to know. *Very* good to know. I stumbled into the downstairs bathroom and then into the kitchen. Now there were three expectant faces at the breakfast bar. Emmett, Seth, and Jake all stared at me, not saying a word.

"Uh...wouldn't you guys want Pop Tarts or Froot Loops or something?" I dared to suggest.

Emmett shook his head. "Well yeah, but Mom said yesterday that Jake had to have something that wasn't sugary for breakfast this morning."

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I took that in, my still sleepy brain taking a while to process. It made sense. Jake had had a lot of sugar yesterday. "Okay, then I guess..." I opened the refrigerator. "Eggs? Toast?"

Jake nodded mournfully and I saw him casting longing glances toward the pantry that held all things filled with sugary goodness. He sighed and rested his head on his hands, still staring at me.

As I started scrambling some eggs, I began to wake up and my brain started to function again. I had spent the night even though I hadn't intended to - and the boys hadn't started screaming the moment they found me. Of course, we had been on the couch and not in Bella's bed. But I thought it was progress anyway. I was sort of easing into their lives and they seemed okay with that.

"How's Froot Loop the hermit crab?" I asked Jake, mostly to make conversation.

"I wanna paint his shell," Jake replied. "I want to paint an eyeball on it."

"Make sure you use non-toxic paint," I said.

"What's non-toxic?" Jake asked.

"It means it won't poison him or anything," Emmett said with a roll of his eyes.

"Yeah, toxic means poison," I added for good measure. I was feeling pretty good, giving the kid important information and all.

Jake gave his brother a sidelong glance. "So...Emmett's farts are toxic?" Jake guessed with a snort.

"Hey, I'm not the one who almost gassed Mom to death last week," Emmett retorted. "You even called her over to smell that cloud of death."

Jake looked sheepish and quieted down, which I guessed was Emmett's goal all along. I shook my head. Boys would be boys.

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~TBTA~

I hopped in the shower to get cleaned up. Bella was still on the couch, completely zonked. The last time I looked she was curled up into a tiny ball like she was eight years old or something. The boys were tip-toeing around the house and even managed to be quieter on the stairs. Not that the noise seemed to bother Bella.

I checked my phone to see three messages from Masen.

U B hm. 2nite?

God I hated text speak.

Fireworks?

As if I'd answer that.

Can Bella make ur date 2nite?

Tonight? I paced around the house, just willing Bella to wake up so that I could clear the plans with her. My dick was very, very excited about the idea of having some alone time with Bella. Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore and I went into the kitchen and started making way more noise than necessary.

Bella still slept.

Shit. That was the problem with dating a woman who was used to a high level of noise. It practically took an explosion to wake her up. I considered sending the boys up and down the stairs several times on "errands" but decided to save that for future use.

My phone vibrated again and I saw it was Masen. Deciding that I should probably play nice since he and Alyssa were giving me some privacy with Bella (tonight hopefully) I answered my phone.

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"Oh my God, he's alive Alyssa!" Masen called out. "I *told* you that Bella hadn't chopped him up into itty bitty pieces and put him down the garbage disposal!"

"Ha ha, very funny," I muttered.

"So...tonight good?"

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "Bella's still asleep."

"Did you wear her out? Did the boys catch you? Was it fireworks?"

"No, nothing to catch, and none of your damned business." Okay, it was kind of a lie and kind of the truth. But it was all I was giving him.

"Ouch, someone's cranky this morning." He sighed. "Oh well, proof enough that you didn't get any last night." He paused. "Okay, well, when Bella wakes up, check with her about tonight. She and Alyssa already talked about us coming over to be with the boys. Oh, and don't you dare make the mistake of saying the "B" word around them or you'll never hear the end of that shit."

"B word?" Was that parent code for something? And could I buy a handbook somewhere?

"Baby-sitting," Masen explained. "If you say we're coming over to baby-sit them you'll have some very pissed off boys on your hands and guaranteed they'll do something to keep their mama with them tonight. So consider yourself warned."

"Good to know." And it was, because it sounded exactly like something I'd say.

"Oh, and Edward?"

"Yeah?"

"Alyssa changed the sheets on your bed, just in case."

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"You two didn't-

"Of course not," Masen said, sounding offended. "But you do have a very nice closet - roomy and well ventilated." He laughed. "Not at all stuffy like ours."

And then he hung up.

The fucker.

Author's Note: The British accent incident actually happened with my youngest son last year. This year, he's decided he's going to perfect his New Jersey accent. I've already emailed his teachers and apologized in advance.

Fic Rec: Soulmate by tinaababy

Edward Masen is a single father, ex-con, and an ex drug user. He and his child move to Forks for a fresh start. Bella Swan is a straight edge, young woman. When these two people meet, the attraction is inexplicable. AH/M.

Chapter 32: And So The Night Begins

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 32: And So the Night Begins

Bella finally woke up. I may or may not have encouraged Jake to turn on the television. Jake was getting antsy too, though. He had a lot to tell his mom about what he had done at his party yesterday and the fact that she was still asleep was irritating him. Finally, I just told him that I was sure his mother wouldn't mind him watching television.

Was it my fault that Jake only knows "loud" when it comes to the volume button?

We both managed to look surprised when Bella woke up. She jerked upright after a particularly explosion and blinked at the television. "What time is it?" Her hair was a straight up mess, sticking out wildly around her head. She must have forgotten she was wearing a cast because she flopped her leg down and managed to hit the shin of her other leg with it.

A lot of under the breath cursing resulted as she rubbed the injured leg and scowled at her cast.

"It is 10:14," I answered helpfully. Bella nodded and licked her lips.

"I guess I was tired," she allowed.

I nodded. Maybe it was better that she had slept in. That would give her more energy for tonight. Right?

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Jake looked at his mom. "You look like you did when you had the flu," he supplied helpfully and went back to watching whatever held his interest on the television screen. Bella's hand flew up to her hair and she grimaced.

"Great," I heard her mutter. It was kind of cute actually, seeing her all flustered and sleepy.

She looked at me. "Have the boys eaten?"

"Nothing sugary, as per your orders yesterday," I answered. "Scrambled eggs and toast." I shot a look at Jake. "Though I did allow him to have some grape jelly." Jake grinned at me and his eyes went back to the screen. He had tried to pull the old slurp-it-out-of-the-jar trick and I had put a stop to that. I was going to keep that our little secret. "Hope that was okay."

Bella seemed surprised. "Uh yeah, that's uh...great actually." She frowned. "How did you know about the no sugar thing?"

"Emmett," I told her. "He was quite informative."

She smiled and got to her feet, swaying for a moment. I didn't rush to pick her up. I gave myself a mental pat on the back. Bella looked at me and smirked. It was like she could read my thoughts or something. "I'm going to go up and shower," she told us.

"Oh, before you go up, Masen wondered if tonight would be good for them to come over and watch the boys? If it is, I just want to give them a heads up," I said.

"Uh yeah, sure, that would be great." Then she looked at me and licked her lips again, but this time it was slow and sexy and -

Oh yeah, my dick liked it a lot.

~TBTA~

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I spent the rest of the day just lazing around Bella's house. It was nice to just watch movies with her and the boys. She made popcorn and allowed Jake to put some chocolate chips in his bowl of popcorn. Emmett gagged at the thought of it while Jake told him he didn't know what he was missing. We watched *Lake Placid*, one of my favorites because it kind of made fun of itself and I was a big fan of shit like that. I'm a guy; I like to keep things simple and uncomplicated.

Then Bella chose that *Deep Blue Sea* because she said Thomas Jane was hot - whatever. Jake liked the bird in the movie and Emmett was rooting for the shark. After that one was over, we decided it was time to take a break and Bella wanted the boys to go outside and play for a while. Sam was trying to teach himself how to skateboard because he'd read a book about it and thought he could master it. Bella asked me if I remembered the most direct route to the hospital. I was absolutely no help when it came to skateboarding, but I could help out if he broke a bone. I could get him to the professionals who *could* help, at least. Bella made him wear a helmet and every pad made, which he endured with embarrassment and dismay. Bella didn't budge. I just gave him a helpless shrug when he cast an appealing look my way. I loved the kid, but there was no way in hell I was going toe-to-toe over a safety issue with his mom. Not happening.

Then while I was mentally trying to go over a menu for tonight, Seth approached me and asked if I was still interested in teaching him how to play the guitar. Honestly, I thought he had forgotten about it and I didn't want to push it.

"Yeah, most definitely," I told him. I was pleased because I really liked music. It was one of the things I had missed the most in the war zone. Getting access to music was difficult at best and sometimes pretty much impossible.

"Do you care what kind of music we start off with?" Seth asked.

"No, but I mean, we'll start off with the very basics, like finger placements, reading music, chords, stuff like that," I told him.

The Bigger They Are

"Yeah, I know," Seth said. "But I was wondering when I start to play actual songs if you cared if we used songs that I like."

I realized that I honestly had no idea what kind of music Seth liked. It was the truth that sometimes Seth got shuffled to the side a little bit. He wasn't the oldest or the youngest, and Sam was most definitely smart in a league all his own. Seth didn't seem to mind his place in the family though, and quietly went his own way. He didn't raise a fuss or make waves. I knew I needed to make an effort to get to know Seth individually, not just as one of the four boys. I wondered how Bella would feel about me taking the boys off one at a time. I had a feeling she'd be okay with that. I hoped the boys would feel the same way.

"Sure, what do you like?" I resolved then and there to endure whatever he liked, whether it was bubble gum pop or rap, both of which set my teeth on edge.

Seth looked down and bit his lip, just like his mother did. "Well, I really like the old stuff, you know Bob Dylan, The Beatles...stuff like that."

I grinned at him. That was completely unexpected. "Oh wow, the *good* stuff," I said. Now I was really enthusiastic. Seth had great taste in music. I would really enjoy working with him.

Seth gave me a shy smile. "Yeah, sometimes I feel like I was born a few decades too late."

"That just means you can help educate the unlearned masses about good music. You can start with your brothers," I told him with a grin. "What about groups like Lynyrd Skynyrd?" I had seen some of their CDs on Bella's shelves and I fully approved. Call me old school - I didn't care.

Seth ducked his head. "Uh yeah, I like them." He shrugged. "That was my dad's favorite band."

"Oh, then we don't have to-"

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"No," Seth interrupted quietly. "I'd like to. If you don't mind."

"No, I mean I'd be happy to if that's okay by you, Seth."

"I'd like that," he replied. Then he laughed and shook his head. "Emmett told me about one night when my dad came home a little...uh...drunk..." I had to laugh too. "He was singing "Freebird" at the top of his lungs and didn't understand why Mom wanted him to quiet down. Apparently Skynyrd was his music of choice when he'd had a little too much to drink."

"He had good taste," I said quietly.

Once more, Seth ducked his head shyly, but I saw the smile tugging at his lips. Life was about to get busy, but I would make sure to make time for Seth. Music just might be "our thing" and I wanted to give it a good shot.

"Maybe we can start later this week since I've got the week off. Once the new training cycle starts, things will be busy for a while, but we'll make sure we get together at least once a week, unless I'm out of town on a training exercise, okay?"

Seth gave me a shy smile and nodded. "Thanks," he said.

I sat back, feeling very pleased with myself. I was getting the hang of this family stuff.

~TBTA~

After lunch, I told Bella that I was going to head back to my house and that I'd pick her up at seven. She and Alyssa had already talked and they would be following me over. I'd take Bella on our date, and they would stay at Bella's house with the boys. I was very careful to avoid using the baby-sitting word. Honestly, I could see the point. No fourteen year old boy likes to be told he needs a baby-sitter. Bella and I both focused on the fact that Jake was going to need an adult there, if only to control his sugar cravings.

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Emmett finally just rolled his eyes and stomped upstairs. "He knows he's got a baby-sitter," Bella said.

"Yeah, well, not much we can do about that." I hugged Bella, and I was very, very pleased at how easily she moved into my arms - no hesitation, no stiffening of her muscles as if she was afraid the boys would see us. "Okay, I need to get home before I don't want to leave at all," I murmured with regret. Too late actually, I already didn't want to leave. Ever.

Bella slid from my embrace and turned me around, facing the front door. Then she gave me a smack on the ass to send me on my way. Guess who liked that?

Masen was actually mowing my lawn when I got home and just waved at me as I walked into the house. I could have stopped him and told him that I'd take care of it, but there was no way in hell I was going to pass up free labor from my little brother. Alyssa had done up the little bit of laundry I had and the boys were playing video games in the living room. They had found the Xbox, surprise surprise.

"Hey guys," I said. Kyle dropped the controller and came running at me, throwing his skinny arms around my legs.

"Uncle Edward! I missed you," he said and I immediately felt guilty. I would have to make sure I spent some time with just the two of them before they left on Thursday.

"Hey, Uncle Edward?" Alex turned to me. "Where's World at War?"

"Uh yeah," I muttered, sitting down on the couch and running my hands through my hair. "I put that game up."

"Why?" Alex asked.

"Well, you remember Jake and Sam and his brothers?"

"Yeah, Emmett's cool," Alex said with a grin.

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"Well, World at War is a war game, and their dad was in a war," I explained. "He got killed in the war, so I don't keep war games out when they're over just in case it bothers them." I paused. "But I can get it out for you if you want to play it."

Alex and Kyle considered this for a moment. It was obvious they knew the boys' father was dead, but I was pretty sure the fact that he had died in the war was new to them. Then Alex shrugged. "Maybe later. I just wondered. It's cool. You've got other good stuff." I was impressed by his maturity.

Kyle settled himself on my lap. "So their daddy got shot?"

"Something like that," I answered with a shrug. No need to get into gory details, and shot was a term he would understand without explanation.

"Mom said their dad was dead," Alex said, confirming my suspicions. "She said not to bring it up unless they did."

"Your mom was right," I told the boys. "You should listen to her."

"Their mom is always right," Masen said, coming in from the back and wiping off his sweaty, dirty face. "Unless she says *I'm* wrong," he teased.

Kyle made a face. "You stink, Daddy. Go take a shower."

Masen shook his head. "No respect, I tell you." Then he raised his arm and took a whiff of his pit and made a face. "Okay, point taken." He nodded at me. "I'm gonna go shower."

"Hey, thanks for mowing the lawn," I told him.

Masen shrugged. "Yeah well, I do know how to behave, I just don't like to."

"Go shower," I said with a smirk. "You stink."

~TBTA~

The Bigger They Are

I was surprisingly nervous on the drive to Bella's house. Masen was following behind me and every now and then I looked into my rearview mirror. He would occasionally smile at me or wave. Once I saw Kyle sticking his head between his parents' seats, as much as the seatbelt would allow, and waving frantically at me. I couldn't help but smile at him.

Then I was pulling into Bella's driveway and I heard Jake yell, "They're here!" The next thing I knew, Jake was tumbling out of the door. I thought he was excited to see me, except then he bypassed my car completely and headed for Kyle's door.

It would seem I had been replaced.

Kyle and Jake began discussing weighty matters, if the way their heads were stuck together was any indication. They were both the youngest brother and I was sure they had lots to commiserate with each other about. I wondered if Alex and Emmett were aware that there might be a conspiracy in the works. Kyle and Jake glanced at their older brothers every now and then. Sometimes they laughed. That couldn't be good. I could almost see the wheels spinning in their minds.

Still, not my problem. My only worry tonight is to make my date with Bella as memorable as possible. I had considered taking her to a nice restaurant, doing the whole dinner and a show thing. But honestly, I just wanted to be alone with her. We had never been completely alone for more than a few minutes. Even our little closet adventure hadn't lasted long (yeah, yeah, completely my fault I know!).

Masen seemed to recognize my anxiety and didn't give me any shit. Maybe he was still smarting from having been outfoxed on the moving issue, maybe he was just being sensitive (not fucking likely), but whatever the reason, I was grateful. Alyssa had Alex by the hand and led him inside.

Bella walked down the stairs gracefully, cast or not, and stopped on the bottom step, which put her just about level with me. She had opted for a skirt, to my surprise. It was dark blue and hugged her body from her waist to her thighs.

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Her blouse was cut low enough to make my mouth go dry, but not so low that I felt an urge to put a jacket on her. Perfect. I looked down, hoping I wouldn't see high heels because we were going to argue if I did. I saw instead some sort of ballerina looking thing on her good foot and I looked up to smile at her in approval.

She quirked one brow at me. "Yes?"

"Nothing," I replied. "Nothing at all."

Bella nodded her approval and then turned her attention to the boys. "Okay, listen to Mr. Masen and Miss Alyssa, you hear me?"

There was a chorus of affirmative replies.

"I thought we'd order some pizza," Alyssa said. "If that's all right with the boys."

Was she kidding? Those kids would eat pizza for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if their parents let them and we all knew it. More nods of agreement from all six boys. *Six* boys. Shit, Masen and Alyssa *were* saints. Okay, *Alyssa* was a saint, Masen was...Masen. He was more along the lines of a fallen angel - minus the angel part.

It seemed only a moment later that we were in my car and on my way to my house. "Where are we going?" Bella finally asked. I was getting the feeling that she was as nervous as I was. I wasn't sure if that made me feel better or worse.

"I didn't want to share you tonight...with anyone," I told her. "So we're going to my place and I'm going to cook you dinner and wait on you hand and foot and just enjoy being with you." I looked at her. "If that's all right with you."

The smile on her face was practically radiant, so I was guessing I had done well. She nodded and ducked her head down like she was shy or something. The woman from the closet was nowhere in evidence, but that was okay. I knew she was there, and that was half the fun of it, wondering when she'd

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come out to play again.

I was going for simple with dinner. I had considered lasagna, but I couldn't beat Bella's recipe (even with my mother's secret recipe...shhh, don't tell) and I didn't really want us to have garlic breath. So I went for teriyaki chicken, baked potatoes and corn along with good old Southern biscuits. Not the healthiest meal around but simple and filling and unlikely to give us garlic breath.

We ate first, since I had had dinner cooking while I went to get Bella. I opened a bottle of white wine, nothing fancy. Bella seemed okay with the inexpensive but tasty wine and good conversation. We talked about a lot of things, none of them particularly deep which was okay with both of us.

Then I cleared the table and told her to go into the living room with the rest of the wine. I had a fireplace and because I wanted the ambiance, I lowered the air and lit the fire. Bella was suitably impressed and curled up on the couch with her wine. When I sat down to join her, she leaned over and rested her head on my chest.

It was quiet, blissfully and blessedly quiet, and I just savored it for a moment. I put my wine glass down and wrapped my arms around her. "I meant what I said, you know."

"What? That you liked my skirt?" she asked mockingly.

"Well, yes that too," I answered. "But I meant what I said when I told you that I'm falling in love with you."

Her face tipped up so that our eyes could meet. "I know," she said simply. "So did I."

I laughed softly and kissed her. "Shouldn't we be tormenting each other a bit more? Experiencing painful misunderstandings, fighting our feelings for each other for a while?" It seemed like that was how it always happened in the movies.

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She smiled. "Is that how you *want* to do it?"

"No," I admitted. "I've always wondered why they call it *falling* in love when it seems like such a lot of work." I kissed her again, just because I could. "And falling is the most effortless thing in the world."

"And it's the scariest too," she added. "But yes, when it's right, I think it can be easy."

"It was easy with you," I told her.

"And sometimes that scares me," she whispered. Then she cradled my face in her hands. "But it doesn't scare me off."

"That's good, because I'd come find you."

"It would be hard to run too far or too fast with four kids," she teased.

"Lucky thing for me."

She stroked her hand down my chest and let it rest tantalizingly on my belly. So close and yet so far.

I groaned and moved so that I was lying on the couch and Bella was lying on top of me. She rested her cast on my shin and spilled some of her wine before I grabbed the glass and put it on the end table. She was still laughing when I kissed her. "Bella..." I whispered. "Do you know how much I want you?"

She moaned and opened her mouth to me, her tongue stroking along mine, encouraging and teasing me. "I have an idea," she finally said with a little laugh. Her hips moved against me and once again, I got a glimpse of those fireworks.

I rolled, putting us side by side, facing each other. She hooked one leg over my hip, her casted foot resting securely on the sofa. The move put the hottest part of her against the hardest part of me. I hissed and she giggled, which didn't

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help matters.

"You're so beautiful, Bella," I told her.

"You make me feel beautiful," she whispered. "And that's an amazing thing to me."

"You don't see yourself clearly."

"I like the way you see me. Isn't that enough?" Her smile was gentle.

"It's a start." I cupped the curve of her jaw. "There's something else I want to tell you." I had a feeling that I needed to give her this, to relieve her mind. Now that I had made my decision, it was unfair and unnecessary to keep it to myself. "I'm not going to re-enlist next year. When I'm done with my twenty, I'm done. For good. I'm going to be a civilian."

She blinked and I saw the tears forming. "You aren't re-upping?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "And before you start thinking the whole world revolves around you, I had already considered not re-upping before I met you." I smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. "But I will admit that meeting you tipped the scales quite firmly in the direction of the civilian life."

"Wow," she murmured. "That's huge, Edward."

"Yeah, it is." I knew it was, and I knew it was what she needed. Hell, it was what I needed too.

"And you don't know how much it means to me."

"I think I have an idea," I said, echoing her words back to her.

I saw something ignite in Bella's eyes, like a fire that had been banked had suddenly flared to life. I was telling her that I was willing to be hers and that I wasn't going to leave her and the boys to wait for those two men at the door.

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She wouldn't have to send me off to war and endure that tortuous wait. I couldn't do that to her or to those boys, because the cruelty of that was too much to bear. But mostly because I wanted to spend a long and happy life with her. I didn't want to lose *her*. I was gaining far more than she was, she just didn't know it yet.

I rolled slightly, pulling Bella on top of me again. I liked the feel of her warmth against me. We both groaned. Unable to help myself, I put my hands on her ass and ground her against me. She seemed to like that, because she gave my ear a little lick. "Oh baby..." I moaned. "Do that again."

She laughed softly into my ear and repeated the action. Then she added a nibble and I almost came in my pants. My hands were starting to move her hips against me in a rhythm that was driving me crazy. I didn't care. I wanted it. I *needed* to feel her moving against me.

The button ninja struck again and she was sliding her hands down my chest, moving slightly to the side to give herself room to work. Her slender fingers plucked at a nipple, and then she used her short nails to scratch lightly at it. "You like that," she murmured.

"Unh..."

Bella smiled and lowered her head, sucking on my nipple with easy draws that had my hips bucking and my cock throbbing. My hands on her ass were pressing her against me harder and harder. I was on fire and she hadn't even gotten close to my belt yet. "You *really* like that," she said.

"Oh yeah," I admitted with a throaty groan.

She kept nibbling and sucking and licking, moving from one nipple to another and I was a sweating, heaving mess of lust and pent up need beneath her. I felt her fingers move to my belt and every muscle in my body tensed. Suddenly, I began to wonder if I would perhaps see Bella naked tonight. There might not be sex just yet, but I was determined to give Bella an orgasm.

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And she could be as fucking loud as she wanted to be

Chapter 33: I am Hers, She is Mine

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I am so sorry for the cliffie last time. Actually, I didn't even think of that way. I just knew that this chapter was the longest one yet and I didn't want to combine them OR end it any place except where I ended it. So...here you go. I can guarantee lemons, in fact, it's really nothing but. I hope you don't get bored. Honestly, I'm nervous about this chapter. It's the longest lemon I've ever written and I hope I did right by these two.

And it's even a day early. For the Americans, Happy Labor Day. :p

Chapter 33: I am Hers, She is Mine

I somehow managed to find the strength to put my hands on hers and still her action. "Bella?" I was shocked at the sound of my voice. It didn't even sound like me. This was some raspy, Grizzly Adams voice. "Baby?"

She lifted her head and stuck out her lower lip in a pout. "Why are you stopping me?"

I laughed at her sulky expression and kissed her. "I was just hoping we could move this to a more...comfortable location?"

Her expression turned from sullen to speculative in about two seconds. "And where might this more comfortable location be?" She crossed her arms over my chest and rested her chin on her arms, studying me. Her expression was serene, but her hips kept nudging mine, the little troublemaker.

I tilted my head on the arm of the couch and grinned at her. "Well, before I tell

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you, I want to make it clear that I don't expect us to have sex tonight."

"You don't huh?" She looked amused and I took that as a good sign.

I tugged at her hair lightly, encouraging her lips toward mine. "But my house is big and so is my bed, which would give us lots of room to maneuver..." I licked at her lips. "And you can be as loud as you want here," I reminded her. "No little ears to hear us..." I dangled that bit of temptation in front of her on purpose. "No one to interrupt us or care what we're doing up there."

She groaned and moved, giving my dick some extra action as she sat up. I was pretty sure she did that shit on purpose because she got a very smug look when I moaned really loud and put my hands on her hips to hold her still because if I didn't I was going to embarrass myself like a teenager. Bella liked to play the temptress and she was far too good at it for my peace of mind.

With a sigh, I slid from beneath her and buttoned up my shirt. I admitted that I just wanted to enjoy feeling her unbutton it again. I loved her ninja skills and I wanted to give her a chance to show them off again. Besides, I really liked the idea of her undressing me. I offered her my hand to stand up. Once I got her upright, I surprised her by bending my knees and picking her up, bridal style and moving toward the stairs. She shrieked and buried her face in my shoulder. "I can walk you know," she muttered. "We've had this discussion, remember?"

"Maybe I just want to feel you pressing up against me, ever think of that?" I whispered, kissing her ear for good measure. She had sexy ears and was sporting small diamond studs in her lobes. "So why don't you just enjoy the ride?"

Her head lolled back a bit and she sighed. "Okay," she finally said agreeably.

"See? I told you we could compromise." I smiled at her. And kissed her again.

Then we were at my bedroom door and I hesitated for a moment. I looked down at her and asked, "Are you sure?"

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"Very," she said, rolling her eyes. "Now open the damned door, Edward."

I grinned and nudged it open with my foot. Yeah, I could have gone for the manly kicking down of the door, but it was already a little bit open and I would probably have fallen flat on my face, dropping her and breaking her other foot. Or my twisted a groin muscle, which would have been equally disastrous. So I went with subtle and hopefully graceful.

She looked around and smiled. "Nice...masculine..." Bella pursed her lips. "It's even clean," she noted. I still kept her in my arms as she surveyed the scenery.

I shrugged. "I do what I can." Then I walked her over to the bed with the dark blue comforter and placed her gently on the bed. She looked even better on it than I had fantasized - and I had done a lot of fantasizing. She looked up and me and held her arms up in invitation.

"Please," she said simply.

I climbed on to the bed and snuggled up beside her. I had imagined seeing her in my bed for so long that it hardly seemed possible it was real - at last. I wanted to savor the moment. Right here, with her, was where I most wanted to be. I couldn't imagine anything else - or *anyone* else - in this world making me feel the way I felt in that moment.

I was in no hurry and neither was she apparently. Perhaps like me, she simply wanted to relish the quiet and privacy, the being together. She rested her head on my chest and hooked one leg over mine. "Do you ever think about fate?"

"I didn't," I admitted. "Not until I met you."

She began tracing idle patterns on my chest and before I knew it every single damned button was undone. Again. I swear the woman had superpowers or something, not that I was complaining. "I do," she said in a whisper. "I think about it a lot. Sometimes it seems that the smallest decision has this huge impact on our lives. Sometimes that thought scares me, because sometimes the effect is...bad." She sighed. "And sometimes it gives me hope because that tiny

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little action leads to something...wonderful." Bella leaned up on one elbow and stared down at me, her hair creating a dark curtain around our faces. "I mean look at us. Who would have thought that a juvenile delinquent and a busted windshield would lead to...this?"

I grinned at her and took a strand of her hair in between my fingers, appreciating the softness of it, the way it curled around my fingers. "When I first heard your voice on the phone, I wanted you," I told her. "And then I told myself that you probably looked like Medusa." I grinned. "But even that thought didn't stop me from getting hard for you."

"The snake-haired thing?" She frowned at me.

"The very same," I told her. "And then I saw you and..." I took a deep breath. "I wanted you. So badly, you wouldn't believe. But I kept telling myself that you were off limits. That a woman like you wanted - *deserved* - the whole thing. Hearts, flowers, picket fences and forever."

"It's good to know that you understand my value," she teased. "A woman like me...I'm not for the average guy, you know."

"Good thing I'm better than average," I teased right back. I leaned up and kissed her, just because I could and it felt so very, very good. "And I was convinced I wasn't the guy who could offer you or any other woman that package. I was a loner; I always had been and I had no intentions of changing that status for anyone, least of all a beautiful widow with four sons who were watching me like a hawk just waiting for me to touch their mother inappropriately."

Bella laughed and buried her face in my chest. I was sort of hoping she'd go toward my nipple, but she didn't. She looked up and smiled. "And then what happened?"

"*You* happened," I said softly. "And the boys happened, and don't ask me how, but it wasn't just you, it was *all* of you. I wanted all of you in my life. It wasn't a case of liking the boys because they were a part of you, a part of the package,

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but because I genuinely liked them. And if you and I had just remained friends, I still would have wanted to be around your sons. They sort of wormed their way into my heart, even though I had *no* intention of letting that happen. Because I am Edward Cullen and I just didn't *do* baggage." She rolled her eyes at me. "I just woke up one day and I realized that I was already done...I was a goner. There was no use fighting it because it had already happened and I wasn't going to accomplish anything at all by fighting except hurting someone. And I was afraid I'd hurt you and that's the last thing I wanted. So...I decided that I would just enjoy the ride and give in to what was obviously meant to be. Whatever magic it was that you all had, it had drawn me in and there was no getting out of it." I kissed her again. "Not that I wanted to, you understand. It just seems so odd that something that would have - and I'm being honest here - scared the shit out of me even a few years ago, would suddenly be what I wanted most in the world."

She was blinking back the tears now, but her smile was blinding.

"And yeah, I know we have to take it slow, but you know what? That's okay. Because when something is right... Well, you do what you should to keep it right, to keep it special."

"You're pretty amazing," Bella whispered.

"Right back at you," I said.

"So...now that you've said everything right and swept me off my feet, both literally and figuratively..." Her fingers moved up my chest and began toying with a nipple. Thank fuck. "Can we make out?" Her grin was impish. "Because I really want to show you how loud is *loud*." She smirked at me. "If you're up to the task, that is."

I gave a mock growl and rolled over her, pinning her beneath me. "Was that a challenge I heard Bella James?"

She shrugged. "Take it how you will."

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I moved and kissed a trail up her throat. "I take it as a challenge...and a dare. And I never back down from a dare," I warned her. "That's not in my DNA."

Moving so that her throat was bared to me, Bella smiled seductively. Hell, everything she did was seductive. "Then do your worst, Mr. Cullen."

"Oh no, I intend to do my *best*..."

And because it was cheesy and ridiculous, Bella laughed and somehow that was better than the smoothest, sexiest stuff they write for the movies. We weren't those people, we were *these* people. We laughed at each other and we teased each other; we said cheesy things. We declared our love with taco and beer breath, surrounded by family and friends. We drank inexpensive wine and had dates at pizza joints. We made out on couches that had video game controllers stuck in the cushions. We weren't anything extraordinary, but we were together and that *made* it special.

I moved my hands toward the button of her blouse and displayed some of my own ninja button skills. I heard her breath catch and looked up quickly to make sure it was still okay. She gave me the slightest nod and I knew by the flush on her cheeks that it was very, very good. Besides, I had the feeling if I stopped she would hit me.

I parted the sides of the fabric and got my first look at her breasts. She was wearing some sort of lacy, light purple thing that gave me a clear view of her nipples through the lace cups. I licked my lips and felt my mouth go dry and my dick go titanium. "Oh God, baby..." I breathed. Yes, I had imagined. But I discovered that my imagination left so much to be desired.

Her eyes were nervous as they flickered up toward mine. "Edward?"

I looked at her and gave a little laugh. "Well, I've imagined you like this a million times," I confessed. I shook my head. "But reality..." I took a deep breath. "Fantasy has nothing on the reality, babe."

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She ran her fingers up her belly, above the waist of her skirt, toward the tiny clasp that was nestled between her breasts. Brushing her fingers over it, she gave me an encouraging smile. I took the hint.

One simple movement and the clasp gave way, sliding open. She had made it easy on me. It was a good thing because my hands were shaking. The cups of the bra felt back slightly, but not completely. The lace caught on the hard tips of her nipples and I had to swallow hard. My hand was trembling even more as I reached up to brush the lace away. Her nipples were hard and dark pink and I licked my lips again. Softly, she tugged at my head. "Please," she whispered. "I want to feel your mouth on me."

It was the sexiest thing a woman had ever said to me because it was Bella and she was telling me what she wanted. What she wanted was *my* touch. Me. I took one hard nipple into my mouth and groaned right along with her. Her flesh was soft and warm, delicately scented with her cinnamon/vanilla fragrance. Subtle and understated, much like Bella. I drew on the flesh and her hips jerked up toward mine. "Oh God, yes," she hissed. "More."

I began toying with the other nipple, rolling it, plucking at it, lightly pinching it, keeping my touch gentle. Then I palmed her whole breast and gave a tender squeeze. She moaned. Loudly. I let my mouth continue to torment and tease one breast, while my fingers played with the other. I used the calluses of my palm to tenderly abrade her nipple and she arched into my touch. Her fingers grabbed onto my hair and she held me to her, whispering her approval of my efforts.

I let my free hand slide down her torso until I came to the waistband of her skirt and I skimmed along it, back and forth, back and forth, letting her get used to my touch there too. I kept my touches constant and tender, moving over her body, memorizing dips and swells and the softness of her skin.

Finally, her hips shifted impatiently and she gave a small sound of frustration. I took that as a sign to move forward and slid my hand underneath her, toward the zipper at the back - not that I had been scoping that shit out or anything. She murmured encouragingly as I tugged at the zipper, so I knew all systems

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were go. When I got the zipper undone, she wriggled her hips again and this time her hands were sliding the skirt down her hips. I helped her complete the process, not daring to look just yet. Our hands got in the way of each other, but eventually we got the job done.

Then her hands were at the button of my pants. "Off," she whispered the order.

I swallowed hard and helped her undo the button and slide down the zipper. Then together, our hands fumbled and pushed my pants down my hips, thighs, knees... I kicked them off impatiently and groaned. Now nothing separated us but a thin layer of cotton on my body and an even thinner layer of silk on hers.

Fuck. Me.

Finally, I rolled slightly and looked down at her body. My dick throbbed, giving her his wholehearted approval. I concurred. Her body was slim but rounded, definitely a woman's body, not a girl's. Her hips flared out, as if inviting me to put my hands there to anchor my body to hers as I made love to her. Her belly was softly rounded, a perfect place to rest my head. I imagined lying in a bed with her on a lazy morning before the boys got up and simply resting my head there as we talked about nothing in particular. I would caress the soft skin there, listening to the sound of her breath and the gentle murmur of her voice.

Beneath the light purple silk of her panties, I could barely see a shadow of dark curls. Thank fuck she wasn't bare. That always threw me off, made me feel like a pervert chasing little girls. She was womanly and beautiful and perfect...and mine to touch, to caress.

I traced the lines of her collarbones, down between her breasts. She took in a deep, shaky breath and our eyes met. Bella smiled, letting me know it was still okay.

It was a hell of a lot more than okay. It was fucking perfect, just as she was.

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I trailed my fingers down her torso, circling her belly button and she laughed softly. Ticklish? Perhaps. I put that away for later use. We had plenty of time to play lovers' games with each other. I smiled as I watched the muscles of her belly contract beneath my light touch. I made a path from hipbone to hipbone before gently skimming along the line of her panties. Once more, I looked up at her for agreement. She bucked her hips up into my touch and her head rolled on the pillow, soft, needy moans spilling from her lips.

Good enough for me.

Slowly, torturing myself as much as I tormented her, I slid the panties from her hips and down her legs before I looked. Why I was suddenly so determined to delay my gratification I wasn't sure. Maybe a part of my brain realized that I would never have another "first." Never again would I discover for the first time the secrets of a woman's body, what aroused her and made her feel loved. This was it. *Bella* was it. She was the last woman I'd ever make love to and that thought wasn't frightening or dismaying. It turned me the fuck on. It made every touch and caress that much more intense.

At last the little scrap of purple silk and lace was gone, and I raised my eyes to look. I took a deep breath at the same time Bella did. Her skin was pale, an innocent ivory that glowed. Her curls were dark, trimmed, creating an inviting little V that draws my eyes. I could see a bare glistening of moisture on the inside of her thighs.

The thought that I did that to her was unbearably exciting and I licked my lips. I wanted to lick something else and I would soon.

I reached out and traced the scar that ran just above the dark curls and I knew that was from Jacob's birth. She had told me the story and I kissed the scar, remembering the fear I had seen echoed in her face even years later. Jake had almost died on the day she got that scar and my Bella would have been broken by that. But she was here, and she was mine. She put her hands in my hair and gave a deep sigh of contentment, clearly at ease as I explored her body.

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There are a few small stretch marks scattered low on her belly and I felt her stiffen as I brushed my fingers along one. I looked up at her and smiled. "I have battle scars too," I whispered. She relaxed under my touch.

Unable to help myself, I trailed one finger down between her thighs, not penetrating her, just lightly skimming along her wet folds. Her hips moved in approval and we both moaned quietly. We were both teasing each other with light, barely there touches, just avoiding the direct caress that might send either of us over the edge.

Then she pushed me down on the bed and hovered over me. "My turn," she declared and I shivered at the promise I heard in her voice.

"Just don't forget," I said. "I want to hear you yell before the night is over."

She smiled at me. "I'll insist on it, I promise."

Then she was kissing a blazing path across my chest. *Oh yes, the nipples again.* Yes. I liked that a lot. Then down, pressing kisses here and there, keeping me guessing and the anticipation was killing me. *Where? Where would her lips land next?* My body trembled, waiting for her touch.

I felt her lightly lick at a scar over my ribs. Then she laughed softly as she found the sensitive spot low on my belly, just above where the trail of hair grew wider. Her fingers skim the edge of my boxers as mine had done to her. Promises, promises...

Then she was pushing the boxers down out of her way and my cock sprang free. She licked her lips and I was thinking that was a good thing just before her lips closed over the tip. "Oh fuck, Bella!"

I was the one doing the yelling and she didn't seem to mind at all. A light licking up my shaft as her fingers stroked my balls and I had a feeling that I was going to embarrass myself if she didn't stop soon. Her tongue delved into the slit at my head, teasing, taunting, promising... Then she pulled away, licking her lips, tasting my pre-cum, I knew.

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I couldn't take it any longer so I moved, pinning her beneath me. "No, you first," I ground out. I was on the edge, just barely in control.

Once more I paid attention to her breasts, licking, sucking, nibbling, and teasing until I had her writhing beneath me. Then I allowed myself to move my lips down her body. Kiss. Lick. Suck . I drew some flesh into my mouth and suckled . *A tiny mark just beneath her breast. No one will see it. She's mine. I'm hers. So simple.* It would be our secret.

My tongue circled her navel and her hands flew to my hair, tugging, pulling, soothing. The tiny pain was arousing, titillating. *I am hers. She is mine.*

Down her belly, toward the curls that beckoned me. There were soft against my fingers, springy and silky, welcoming me. I brushed one fingertip over her clit as I kissed the soft flesh of her stomach. She moaned and her hips moved again, insisting on more.

I am hers. She is mine.

Bella's hands were suddenly urging me lower, letting me know that I was moving too slowly. "Please...don't tease..." Her thighs fell apart and I moved between them. For just a moment, I rested my head on her thigh and looked up at her. Her face was beautiful in her need, her cheeks lightly flushed and her lips parted and slightly swollen. *Oh God, I could look at her forever like this.*

Then I nuzzled her folds, inhaling for the very first time her subtle fragrance. Another last first....

My tongue flickered out and I tasted her. It was different and better than I dreamed. Earthy and tangy and undeniably Bella. She cried out and I realized that she was as needy as I was. It had been two years for her, less for me.

Bella has made love before, and I knew that I had not. Not really. I had had sex, but this was a sharing of ourselves on a deeper level. Before I was ever inside of her body, I would be inside her heart. And she in mine. A first, a last first and a *first* first all at the same time... My thoughts were growing jumbled

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and I just gave into the need.

Before I did what I wanted to do most, I slid further down her body, ignoring her little cries of protest. There was something else I'd been dying to do. I kissed down her leg, the one without a cast, and gently licked the top of her foot. She giggled in surprise and tried to yank her foot from me. "No way," I murmured. "You've got beautiful feet, Bella." I smiled. "I really hope you don't mind having your feet touched."

She sort of raised her head to grin at me. "Do you have a foot fetish, Edward Cullen?" She was laughing at me. I didn't care.

I kissed each toe. I liked feet, sexy, feminine feet with painted toes peeking out from shoes to tempt me. "If by fetish you mean that I like beautiful feet, then..." I kissed her instep. "Yeah, kind of," I confessed, looking up at her.

"Oh..." She breathed. She looked a little amused. Then I used my hands to massage her foot, placing tender, soft kisses as I went. Her other foot was in a cast and I vowed to make up for lost time when she had the cast removed.

She groaned. "Okay, the foot thing..." Bella hissed. " *Totally* into that..."

"Good to know," I returned. Then I gave her foot one last kiss and made my way up her legs again, kissing, licking, and nibbling on the way. She responded favorably to every touch, her body arching sensuously, making my dick throb with every little sigh and movement.

Then I was there, inhaling her sweet and earthy scent again, unique and tantalizing. My tongue slid up toward her clit and she latched onto my head again. She was a little bossy in bed and I couldn't have been happier. Give me a woman who knows what she likes any day. I was happy to follow her lead. And lead she did.

My tongue delved into the slick heat of Bella and we both groaned. Bella was right; she was loud. And I loved it. Uninhibited, she moved against my mouth, her hands clutching lightly at my head, subtly directing my movements. I could

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almost hear her saying, " *Right there...* "

In fact, I had not imagined it because then I realized she was whispering the words over and over again. "Right there...so good...oh God!... I'm going to...yes...fuck...just like that..."

Her words were ratcheting up my own excitement and I was sure I would come only from the feeling of having her flesh in my mouth and the sound of her excitement. I slowly inserted a finger into her and curled it up.

Bella gave a small cry, and her hips flew up at me, making my finger go deeper. Two fingers then and I felt the snug embrace of her body around them. Deliberately, she tightened her muscles around my fingers and I could only imagine that move around my cock. It would undo me. I looked forward to being shattered.

I knew I was already close and I was rubbing my dick against the bed, seeking friction, seeking...something. Though I knew I could slide up her body and bury my cock in her, that she was warm and receptive and ready at that moment, I knew it would be wrong. The time was coming yes, but it was not tonight.

Tonight was for making her feel good and wanted and beautiful. We had our whole lives ahead of us now. When the time came, it would be perfect and it would be right and she would have nothing to regret.

"Bella baby...?"

There was a long pause. "What?" She was panting by then, her hips moving insistently against my touch.

"I want to see you come," I whispered. "I want that more than anything in the world. Can you do that for me, baby?" I kissed her thigh. "That would turn me on so much, Bella."

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"Uh." She grunted lightly and then groaned. I saw her reach for a pillow and I just knew she wanted to stifle her cries.

I wasn't having that shit. I reached up and threw the pillow away and then I plunged two fingers deep inside of her as I sucked at her clit. I pushed her up toward the peak. I didn't give her a chance to deny me. I wanted to see her come undone. I wanted to watch her pleasure. "Bella, I want to hear you. I want to see you. You're so beautiful. Don't take that away from me." I was muttering the words against her flesh, hoping she could understand me. "I want to hear what I do to you - what you're feeling."

"Oh God! Edward!" My name on her lips as I felt her flesh clenching around me was unbelievable. I wanted her to come. I *needed* her to come.

Her body got the message and I felt the first rippling contractions start to rip through her, making her clench around my fingers. "That's it baby," I encouraged. "Oh God... So beautiful."

She threw her head aback and gave a scream. It was long and loud and incredibly erotic.

She was right; she's a screamer.

It was the hottest fucking thing I've ever heard. Even as I felt her clutching down on my fingers, tasted her silky response coating my tongue, my lips, I felt my own orgasm beginning in my balls. Tightened, hot, barreling through me... It exploded from me, coating my belly and the bed and it left me shaking.

I collapsed on her, resting my head on her belly, where I knew I was welcomed. Where I belonged.

I am hers. She is mine.

Chapter 34: Naked Time

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 34: Naked Time

We stayed on the bed, though I did reach over and grab my shirt to clean us up a bit. I could endure a wet spot for Bella. She pulled me up the bed until my head was on the pillows and she nuzzled up against me. I had grabbed a blanket from the foot of the bed on my way up and I pulled it over us. "God, that was..." She took a deep breath. "Perfect."

I kissed the top of her head and sighed contentedly. Who would have thought that not having sex could be so fucking sexy? "Better than perfect," I murmured.

"I screamed, didn't I?" she asked in a quiet voice. She didn't sound embarrassed, more resigned than anything else.

"You did," I agreed. "And I loved it." I kissed her again. "Though I must say, appearances are deceptive. I never would have pegged you for a screamer." I couldn't help but tease her. She gave me a disgruntled snort and rolled her eyes at me.

I laughed. And kissed her again. I couldn't seem to keep my lips or my hands off of her. After the kiss ended, I pulled her up tight against me.

Bella blew out a breath and slid her hand up and down my chest, pausing every now and then to circle a nipple. "We're pretty good together, huh?"

"I'd say that's an understatement," I said with a laugh.

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"I'm loud, huh?"

"You're loud." I couldn't help but smile as I said it.

"Does that bother you?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, it was horrible because having a woman scream out your name while you watch her orgasm around your fingers...feel it on your tongue... yeah, that's pretty much a bummer," I said sadly and then sighed. "It might be a deal breaker. I'm just not sure. I think I need to investigate the matter further."

She looked up at me and rolled her eyes. "Sarcasm is the lowest form of humor," she informed me.

"I thought that was the pun," I countered.

"Whatever," she muttered.

I pulled her close. "You can be as loud as you want," I told her. "But I uh..."

"What?"

"Never mind," I said hastily.

"You'd better spill, Cullen, or I'll squeeze your man parts until you beg for mercy."

"I might like that," I admitted with a grin.

"You would, you pervert," she taunted. "Come on. Tell me what you were going to say because if you don't I'll let my very overactive imagination run away with me and I'll imagine the very worst thing possible."

"It isn't important."

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She leaned up and frowned at me. "Remember what you said about not hiding things, or avoiding things. I thought we were going to be grown-ups and talk things out." She poked me in the chest. Ms. Pointy Hands was back with a vengeance.

"Ouch!" I rubbed at my chest. "All right, all right. I surrender. Geez."

She gave me a smug smile and settled back against my chest. "I knew you could be reasonable when you tried."

"Those fucking hands of yours should be registered as dangerous weapons," I grumbled, still rubbing at the spot she had targeted.

"Quit stalling," she ordered.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, I was just wondering... You're loud. You've admitted it. I've experienced it." She giggled. *Must concentrate*. "Uh...how is that going to work if we're...uh...ever...uh..." Wow, this was way more uncomfortable than I had thought it would be. "If we ever you know...do it in a house with the boys there."

"Do it?" she teased. "Do what?"

"Now who's using the lowest form of humor?"

She poked out her lips in a pout but her brown eyes were sparkling with humor. "I *can* be quiet," she informed me. "Believe me, I can. I just didn't want to be."

"The pillow, huh?" I guessed with a grin.

"The pillow," she agreed.

It was a reminder that she had experience in masking the sounds she made because of Mac. Oddly, though I had expected such thoughts to bother me, I suddenly realized that they didn't. While I would never want details of their physical relationship, I was smart enough to realize that the love she had shared

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with Mac had been true and deep. Bella knew how to love with all of her heart - and her body. She was obviously a generous lover. She didn't seem to have any really negative experiences or expectations when it came to lovemaking. She had been with a man who fulfilled her needs; she expected that I would do the same. I would love her; I would take care of her and she would take care of me. She approached sex with the same optimism and sense of joy that she approached life. Yes, she had been hurt. But before that, she had been deeply loved and she knew how good it could be. She knew what she wanted - and she wanted me.

That boded well for our own love life. Her experiences with Mac had been positive; she had no hesitancy when it came to love making; she saw it for what it could be - a beautiful experience for us to share.

I laughed and nuzzled against her. She was soft and warm and fragrant and I never wanted to leave my bed. Or let her leave. I wanted her here forever. "Well, I'll be sure to keep lots of extra pillows around."

"It's not nice to make fun," she pouted.

"Oh baby, I'm not making fun. It was the hottest damned thing I've ever experienced," I assured her.

Bella rolled her eyes at me. "Somehow I doubt that."

I kissed up her neck, took my time across her cheek and then went for her lips. I gave her a good, long kiss before I pulled back and ran a finger down her jaw. "I'll never lie to you, Bella. So take my word for it when I say it was the hottest fucking thing *ever*." I grinned. "You're kind of a hellcat in bed, aren't you?"

She smirked up at me. "I guess you'll have to find out, won't you?"

"I intend to, believe me."

"Good to know," Bella murmured. "Can we just stay here for a while? It feels so good, being next to you." She giggled. "Naked. I like naked."

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I groaned and pulled her close. "I'm a big fan of naked myself." I kissed her shoulder. "I also like nude...in the buff...in your birthday suit...naked as a jaybird..."

"I never got that one," Bella said. "Because all birds are naked. So it doesn't make sense to me."

"I never got it either, but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy it." I kissed her. "The nakedness, that is."

"You're pretty spectacular naked, just so you know," Bella said quietly.

"You're..." I took a deep breath. "Well, you're amazing with clothes or without." I kissed her. "But I prefer you without clothes if I'm going for complete honesty here."

"Good to know."

She trailed her fingers down my belly and I groaned. Bella giggled. "You know..." she glanced at the clock. "We still have a while."

"I hate to burst your bubble," I said with real regret. "But I'm almost forty and to be honest, I'm probably gonna need a little more recovery time."

"Okay," she said agreeably. "Since you satisfied me so thoroughly I guess I can understand that." She smirked. "Though I must say the fact that *you* came too, well, that was really hot. And *very* flattering."

"You've had me worked up for months, you know."

"Right back at you." Bella leaned over and bit my nipple, just hard enough to make me yelp a little bit. Then her hand stroked up and down my thighs, first one and then the other. She skirted just around my balls, not *quite* them touching but making me think she would. Continuing to lick at my ear and my neck and occasionally my nipples, Bella tortured me slowly and without mercy.

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Then, despite my protests about needing more recovery time, my dick called me a liar. Almost forty or not, my dick was ready and reporting for duty. Bella was apparently like my own personal brand of Viagra. A few more minutes of her teasing caresses and it was almost like I hadn't come already.

I rolled over and pinned her to the bed, mostly to keep those devilishly clever hands of hers from tormenting me. That was something I was discovering about Bella. She looked like an angel, a perfectly respectable mother of four and middle school teacher. But underneath that mask, there lurked a sex goddess, sex kitten, temptress who was surely going to be the death of me.

"What are you doing, Bella?" I rasped.

She pursed her lips and patted my cheek. "You really are getting old if you can't remember what I'm doing," she mocked.

"Oh I remember all right," I said, leaning in to whisper in her ear. She shivered beneath me and my dick gave a hell yeah. "You, Bella, are extremely dangerous."

Blinking up at me lazily, like a sated cat, she smiled slowly. It was a predator's smile, sly and confident. "Are you scared?" she asked in a low, husky voice.

"Terrified," I whispered, my lips against hers.

"I'll try to make this as painless as possible," she promised softly.

"Doesn't matter," I answered, my hips already thrusting toward hers. At this angle, I was hitting her hip and my dick decided it was good.

Her hand skimmed down my ribs, teased my hipbone for a moment. *Would she or wouldn't she?* Then her fingers wrapped around my shaft. Oh fuck yes. She *would*. She was. A slow stroke and then her hands cupped my balls, giving them a light tug. Holy fuck. I moaned into her mouth.

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"I want to feel you come, Edward," Bella breathed into my ear. "I want to taste you. You tasted me, it's only fair."

I didn't have any words to express how much that turned me on, but I sure didn't put up a fight when she pushed me on my back and moved over me. Her nude body had a sleek elegance that was both innocent and sensuous. She was comfortable in her skin without being conceited. She knew how to give pleasure, and even more importantly how to take it. With Bella it would always be give and take.

And now, at this moment, she wanted me to give.

Her lips were teasing down my belly and she stopped and sucked some skin into her mouth, drawing hard. When she was done, she looked up at me with a gleam of triumph in her eyes. My temptress had marked me too. "You'll pay for that," I warned her playfully.

"You started it," she retorted. "Payback's a bitch."

I was about to answer but it came out as a grunt when I felt the heat of her mouth close over me. Just the head, with Bella teasing and licking and sucking. Then she lowered her mouth slowly, taking me in just a little bit at a time. I forced myself to stillness, letting her set the pace, the depth. It was one of the hardest things I had ever done.

Like so many things, this was new for us. What would Bella feel comfortable with? Trying to fight the urge to thrust into her mouth, to take what she so generously offered, to demand it and then ask for more, was taking all of my concentration. She must have sensed my distraction because she pulled up slowly, her hands making soothing strokes over my trembling thighs.

"Let go, Edward," she whispered. "Just do what you feel..."

It was all the permission I needed and when her mouth engulfed me again, I was thrusting up into her warmth. It was heaven and hell and she murmured her approval. My hands went to her hair and I anchored myself there, holding

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onto her. The touch of her silky hair kept me sane as my body took over. This was Bella. My Bella.

Her hands and her mouth worked with devastating efficiency. She wasn't letting me fight her; she wasn't letting me deny what my body wanted. I wanted release. I wanted to bury myself in her mouth and let the orgasm that was churning in my balls and spine burst into her.

Her mouth never left me, but her encouraging murmurs and moans let me know that this was okay; it was what she wanted too.

I had to warn her though. If she pulled away, I had no complaints. "Bella..." I hissed. "I'm gonna..."

She nodded, her mouth drawing harder and I was swept away - there was no fighting or delaying it. With a shout of my own, perhaps Bella's volume was contagious, I exploded. Bella's mouth moved over me gently, guiding me down from my peak. When she finally pulled away, I shuddered and pulled her up into my embrace.

My tongue swept in, gathering our combined tastes. I had never done that before. But with Bella...well with Bella, everything was new and right.

It should have scared the shit out of me, but like a drowning man who knows he's going under for the last time, I simply gave in and let the experience take over.

There was no fighting fate.

~TBTA~

Unfortunately, naked time had to end eventually. A glance at the clock by my bed indicated it was almost two in the morning. It was definitely time to get clothes on and head downstairs. I suddenly hated clothes. I wanted to move to a nudist colony with Bella. The only thing that stopped me was that Masen would probably follow us and I'd see him naked - something that would surely

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scar me for life. And there were the boys. I was pretty sure they wouldn't be happy if their mom moved to a nudist colony.

I would just have to file that away in the spank bank. Yeah, I had one. Every guy does. If he says he doesn't, he's a liar.

I sighed and kissed Bella's cheek. She had fallen asleep and muttered when I touched her. "No," she finally grumbled. "Don't wanna..." She sounded like a cranky six year old.

"Baby, we need to get dressed," I told her gently.

She shook her head and buried her face more firmly in my shoulder. I knew how she felt. Naked time was now my favorite time with Bella. I thought it too might deserve a national holiday. Pretty soon we'd have a calendar full of dirty holidays. I hoped so anyway.

"Bella, honey, come on," I urged. "You're killing me. All I want to do is lick you from your head to your toes and then back up again and see if I can make you scream even louder."

Her eyes popped open at that and she grinned slowly.

"We've got a full day," I reminded her. "They're delivering my Suburban tomorrow...uh *today* actually, and I'm taking you and the boys car shopping, remember?"

She scowled and buried her face in the pillow. "Go away, you're no fun."

"I know, I'm a big drag," I told her. "But the fact remains that your sons are probably waiting to hear the sound of the door and they're not hearing it." I expected her to jump to her feet when I said that, instead she giggled and shook her head, her face still buried in a pillow.

"Nope," she countered. "Even Sam will have fallen asleep around midnight." She turned slightly and peeked at me with one eye. "So my coach still hasn't

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turned into a pumpkin and you're still mean." Her face went back into the pillow. If Bella faced similar tactics from the boys when she got them up for school, I felt sorry for her.

"If I promise we'll have naked time again soon will you *please* get out of bed so that I can get you home and your sons don't hate me forever?" I was begging and I knew it. The fact remained that I wanted nothing more than to crawl into that bed, lie down beside her and explore her delicious body all over again. More than once.

She groaned heavily and sat up, her hair a hot mess around her. I noticed with great satisfaction the hickey that I had put just under her left breast. I guess I just looked too full of myself because her eyes narrowed at me and she got up and padded toward the bathroom. I loved watching the sway of her naked ass. I loved the way she was unselfconscious and easy in her own skin. Mostly I just loved that she was naked and she was mine. Life was good.

I watched as she stood in front of the mirror and inspected my love bite. "Really, Edward? Are we in high school now?" She was smirking at me and her tone was amused, so I was guessing I wasn't in too much trouble.

I walked up behind her, wrapping my arms around her. Our reflections made me smile. We looked good together; we looked right. Gently, I reached up and cupped her left breast, covering the mark. I kissed the side of her neck. "I'm yours," I told her. "You're mine." My fingers traced over the mark. "It's going to turn me on, knowing it's there where no one else can see it. A secret..."

She groaned and leaned back against me. "I thought naked time was over," she whispered.

"For now," I agreed and stepped away. "Come on, Cinderella."

She twisted around in my arms and pulled me in for a kiss. "Tonight was perfect, Edward. Thank you."

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I smiled because the night had been perfect. "I love you," I whispered. I wanted to say the words; I wanted them to become familiar on my lips. Her eyes glowed.

"I love you too."

And just like that, we were in love and saying it. Out loud.

~TBTA~

I woke up six hours later, reaching for her out of instinct. When my hand met only cool sheets I realized what I was doing. Bella wasn't here in my bed. She was at *her* home in *her* bed.

It felt absolutely wrong. I hated it.

Sighing, I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow that carried her scent. Sweet, subtle cinnamon and vanilla...Bella. My dick got harder at the fragrance and morning wood became morning titanium. Fuck. I was right back to being a horny teenager.

Last night had been incredible, even better than I had imagined and I had imagined quite a bit. I hadn't showered when I got home. I wanted to savor the scent of Bella on me just a little longer. With a guilty smile, I lifted my fingers up to my mouth and licked. Bella. I'd never forget the taste of her on my tongue, my lips.

A glance at the clock convinced me to get my horny ass in gear and I pushed aside the covers with a resigned sigh. Then I remembered that I would be spending the day with Bella and that sounded better than moping in my Bella-scented bed any day. My shower was quick, even considering I had to rub one out. I didn't want to spend the whole day hiding an erection, though I suspected it would happen at some point in the day anyway. Bella seemed to have that effect on me.

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I didn't hear any stirring so that meant that Masen, Alyssa and their boys were still asleep. Thank goodness. I had almost forgotten them for a little while. I was really glad I hadn't been loud when I came since Masen would never have let me forget that shit. Ever.

Thirty minutes after coming in my shower, I was about to knock on Bella's door, only to find Jake waiting for me. The door opened before I could touch it. "Hey, Jake? How's my favorite eight year old?"

"Good," Jake replied. "We're getting a new car today."

"I know." I walked inside. "But first I'm getting a new car. A friend of mine is actually bringing it here for me." It was one of the perks of having once dodged bullets with your salesman. It was a bonding experience.

"Cool," Jake said. "What color is it?"

"Red," I told him and he gave me an approving nod.

"What color do you want your mom to buy?" I asked him as we made our way to the kitchen.

"Black," Jake said. "Like Darth Vader."

I laughed. "Well, we'll have to see what they've got. Okay?"

He was agreeable but I hardly registered his reply since Bella walked out of the kitchen at that moment, a cup of coffee in each hand. Without a word, she handed me one, stood up on her toes and pressed a kiss onto my lips as my fingers wrapped around the mug.

To be honest, I had been a little worried that this morning would be awkward. I worried even more that she might regret the intimacy of last night. I sure as hell didn't, but Bella was a complex and complicated woman and a lifetime wouldn't be enough to really understand her.

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"Morning," she whispered. "It's not quite as good as naked time, but coffee time is a pretty damned close second." Her voice was so low and quiet that no one else could hear. I grinned at her, but she really needed to stop doing that shit because my dick was pretty much in a perpetual state of arousal. That had to be bad for it. Right?

"Naked time gets my vote by a landslide," I whispered right back. She giggled. I gave a sigh of resignation. I was going to be hard all day, self abuse in the shower or not.

Then I heard the thundering beat of six large feet on the stairs. All of them, even Sam which was a miracle, were dressed and ready to go. "Do you guys need to eat breakfast?"

They all nodded and moved into the kitchen. I checked my watch. It was now just a little after nine and I expected Dewey to drive up with my new Suburban within the next thirty minutes. Paperwork would probably take another thirty and then he'd give me the keys and I could take Bella and the boys looking for their own new vehicle, though our first stop would be at the dealership Dewey worked at since he promised to treat Bella right. It was just a question of whether they had anything she would like.

I listened to the boys as they ate, unable to help the smile that seemed to have taken up permanent residence on my face. Jake had conned his mom into hot cocoa. What a shock. Sam was picking at his food; he wasn't a big fan of eating in the morning. Emmett inhaled his cereal and was currently slathering peanut butter on some toast. Seth was now eating almost as much as Emmett and I idly wondered what her grocery bill was like. I shuddered at the thought.

I guessed I would have to get used to it.

Chapter 35: That M Word

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Author's Note: Once Masen's visit is over, the story will move along at a faster pace for a while. I just wanted to fully explore the dynamics of the family that seems to be forming here. As for when the story will end, I can tell you I've got chapters written for two years down the road, but the story won't be going along at the same pace. Some chapters will cover weeks or months at a time, and some will cover only a day. If you've read outtake #20, you noticed that it featured Charlie. Yes, Charlie is coming up. Someone mentioned how the stories tend to go along hand-in-hand and that's true. As I'm writing chapters for this, I get ideas for outtakes and go with them. I'm working on chapters right now with Charlie in them, but they are several chapters down the road. He's got a promise to make good on, after all. As always, thank you, thank you, THANK YOU for reading. Though Masen says he isn't surprised since he's in the story after all. Edward apologizes in advance for his sibling and is now offering Masen up for auction. Shhh...don't tell Alyssa.

Chapter 35: That "M" Word

While the boys were eating, there was a knock at the door and Jake shot off his stool and was already at the door by the time I had turned around. The kid was fast. Jake opened the door and I saw Dewey. He was about four inches shorter than I was and looked like he should have been a professor at MIT or something. Or maybe an accountant. Slim and mild looking, his face was...average. He had the kind of face you forgot. It was only if you really looked into his eyes that you got a glimpse of what we'd gone through together. We'd been in a few very tight spots together and there was no man I'd trust at my back more than Dewey, except perhaps Jasper Whitlock. I knew that there

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was a lot more to Whitlock than his mild manner betrayed. Like Dewey, Whit was a wolf in sheep's clothing. But for now, this particular wolf was contented and here to do me a favor.

"Cullen," he said. "It's been too damned long." He pulled me into a guy hug, short and only shoulders touching, a hug you heard with a smack to the back. "You look good, well, as good as you can look anyway." He looked down at Jake. "And who are you, young man?"

"I'm Jake James." He held out his hand and Dewey shook it.

By that time Bella was by my side and smiling at Dewey. I saw Dewey's eyes go wide for a minute as he took in the boys arranged around us. I had told him a little bit about Bella and he knew she had four sons. But honestly, the sight of them, big hulking Emmett especially, was a bit much. Their numbers sort of overwhelmed you at first sight. There were a lot of them, and sometimes if felt and looked and sounded like much more than four.

He looked at me and gave me smile that said, "It's your funeral buddy."

Then we went outside to admire my new Suburban and it was like a fucking tank. Seriously, when Jake slammed the door it had a solid, metal sound to it that most cars didn't now. There were two after-factory DVD screens installed and a nice sound system. The seats were leather and should withstand four boys climbing in and out of them. As I sat inside the beast, I admitted that I liked the feel of the huge vehicle. It was big and, for most people, unnecessary, but with Bella's boys I had a good excuse to indulge. Besides, with gas prices being so high a lot of people were trading in their gas guzzlers and I had gotten a very sweet price on an SUV that was only a year old and had less than ten thousand miles.

"It's exactly what you said, Dew," I said.

He rolled his eyes at me. "Like I'd mess with you." I grinned and nodded.

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I looked at the boys. "Well, who wants to take a ride?" I looked at Dewey. "You mind if we do the paperwork at the dealership?" I handed him the keys to my car without a single bit of regret. "You can drive my car."

"Done," Dewey replied.

"I'm going to go get my purse," Bella said and she walked back inside the house. The boys piled into the Suburban and Dewey turned to me.

"Never thought I'd see the day when Edward Cullen settled down," he said softly.

I shrugged and stuck my hands in my pockets. "When it's right, it's right." I shook my head. "Can't fight it when it's right."

"No, you sure can't," Dewey agreed. Dewey had been married about ten years and his wife was the reason he was no longer in the Army. On our last tour together, Dewey had been hurt. It was serious enough that for two days they couldn't tell his wife whether he'd make it or not. The irony of it was that it hadn't been an IED or a bullet that had almost killed him; it had been a vehicle rollover. A new driver, kid fresh from the states and he had panicked. The driver had died and Dewey had come really close.

Dewey's wife Serena had arrived at Landstuhl just in time to see him being taken into surgery. The surgery last four hours and when it was over, his wife said she had come to a realization. She had had enough.

She couldn't take the separation or the danger anymore and rather than fight about it, she had simply told him that it was her or the Army. His injury was severe enough that he could take medical retirement. So he did. Dewey was smarter than he looked, as he liked to say, and he had chosen Serena. He had never looked back.

"I'm getting out next year," I said suddenly. Dewey nodded.

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"That's good," he said softly. "She'll need that." He knew about Mac. "We're getting too old for this shit anyway," he muttered. "Playing soldier is a young man's game." He sounded both tired and regretful and I knew exactly how he felt. It was a demanding job, sometimes terrifying, usually satisfying, but in the end it could be exhausting - especially in a war zone. The plain fact was that we *were* getting too old for that shit. Yeah, there was a touch of regret at a chapter of my life being over, but mostly I was just relieved.

I grinned at him. "But we were damned good at it, weren't we?" We had had our glory days and we had lived to tell our tales.

"The best," he agreed. "We were the mother fucking best."

~TBTA~

Dewey did right by Bella and had four vehicles lined up in quick order for her to look at. The used bigger SUVs were pretty cheap because of skyrocketing gas prices and if Bella hadn't needed a bigger vehicle I was sure she would have gone for something with better gas mileage. She decided that she didn't need to go to another dealership; she trusted Dewey almost as much as I did. He was good people. It turned out that he and Mac had been on the same base at the same time but they hadn't known each other. The Army was a small world sometimes.

She looked and I talked her into letting me test drive. I knew I was still going to face a battle about her driving it home. I saved my energy for that. She was surprisingly agreeable to letting me put the vehicles through their paces. As it was, she ended up with a Suburban just like me. I could already hear Masen's jokes about matching vehicles.

Jake, of course, thought it was cool. Theirs was black, so he dubbed it the Vader-Mobile. I was starting to think the kid would have a future in advertising and wondered if I should give Masen a heads up that we had a budding advertising genius on our hands.

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Dewey gave Bella a very fair price and even contacted her insurance company to take care of that paperwork. Bella didn't have to pay anything up front and was going to have her new vehicle delivered. I had begged her not to drive just yet. I asked for at least a few days so she could get used to the cast. She had rolled her eyes at me and insisted that the doctor had told her it was fine, but I copied a move from Jake's playbook and did the puppy dog eyes. I must have gotten it right because she sighed and nodded. "Okay, you big baby."

I hugged her close and kissed her, happy to have gotten what I wanted without much of a fuss. Jake was a little disappointed that they wouldn't be driving the Vader-Mobile home, but I assured him that it would be in his driveway later that day. He settled for that.

I had sort of expected that shopping for a new vehicle would be emotionally trying for Bella. I remembered her crying just a few days ago over the loss of the one she and Mac had picked out together. I did see her press her lips together when she signed the papers and I guessed that it was the first time she had purchased a car without Mac signing some papers too. She had once told me that the house in Fayetteville was the first she'd bought on her own and how odd it had felt to sign the endless papers all alone.

Still, she seemed in a good mood on the way to her house.

Regretfully, I told her that I wanted to go home and shower. I also wanted to spend some time with Kyle and Alex. I didn't want them to feel neglected. Later on, we'd get all the boys together again, but I thought it was important to spend some time alone with them. Of course, once they moved here that would be even easier to arrange.

When I got home, Alyssa and Masen were on my couch watching a movie. "Hey guys," I said, sitting down in a chair.

"He lives," Masen muttered. "It's a miracle."

"Got a new Suburban," I said, tossing the keys up in the air and catching them. I grinned at him. "And you can't drive it."

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He narrowed his eyes at me. "What color?"

"Red," I told him. His favorite color. "Bella got one too." Might as well get that shit over with.

"A red Suburban?" he asked skeptically.

"Suburban? Yeah. Red? No. She got black." I smirked. "Jake's already started calling it the Vader-Mobile."

"That kid's a Star Wars nut," Alyssa observed. "I like it. He's got good taste."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "I know, right?" Like I had anything to do with it. "Listen, I thought I'd take the boys to the batting cages or the arcade or something. Give you two some time alone."

Masen sat up straight. "Really? Like for real? You're not just yanking my balls?"

I grimaced at the image his words conjured up. "Well first, I would never want to *touch* your balls, much less yank them," I said. "And second, I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for Alyssa. So yeah...for real."

Masen was up off the couch and halfway up the stairs before I could draw my next breath. "Boys! Get ready! Uncle Edward is taking you to the arcade!"

I looked at Alyssa and grinned. "I think my brother is eager to have you to himself."

She held up her hand and said quietly, "I solemnly swear that although we will be up to no good, we will not use your bed or your closet for nefarious purposes."

"Good enough," I laughed. "Now, where are my nephews?"

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I wanted to get out of the house before Masen decided I was taking too long. The last thing I needed was to see his naked ass or something. Luckily, the boys were stoked about getting out of the house. They love the new vehicle and their only complaint was that I hadn't informed them that there was a DVD player so they didn't bring a movie. When I told them that their dad and I used to have to *read* on long trips they looked at me like I had sprouted a second head. I guessed that was one divide that our generations would never cross.

Like a good uncle, I gave them enough cash to get plenty of tokens at the arcade. I played air hockey with them, the two of them against me. They beat me without even breaking a sweat. I would love to say I threw the game but not so much. They wanted some of that crap they called pizza so I get them each one slice. They wanted two slices each but I knew Alyssa would kill me if I completely ruined their dinner. I wanted Alyssa on my side, so I held fast. There was a brief moment of pouting and then the boys gave in - they knew their mother would be unhappy too.

While Kyle and Alex were eating their faux pizza, Kyle looked up at me. He got this sly look on his face. "Are you gonna marry Bella?"

There it was. The "M" word. Not that I hadn't thought about it; I had. And I hadn't even hyperventilated when I did, which was huge progress. Still, I found myself gulping down a mouthful of soda that went down the wrong way and I choked. Literally.

"Uh..." I was finally getting my breath back. "I uh...I don't know, Kyle."

"I think you should," Kyle told me solemnly. "I like her. She's pretty and makes good cakes."

Well, that was pretty much all any man needed, right? "You think so, huh?"

Alex gave me a speculative look. "If you marry her, then she'll be our Aunt Bella, right?"

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"Yeah, that's generally how these things work," I answered with a smile. Aunt Bella...I liked the sound of that. "What would you guys think of having an aunt?"

Kyle shrugged. "An aunt's okay, but I think I'd like an *Aunt Bella* better." Oh the kid was dangerous. I didn't miss the sly look on his face and I had every expectation that this conversation would be repeated verbatim to his father - who would use it to his advantage.

"You do, huh?" I was amused, when I should have been running and screaming if my past history was any indication. Instead, I was sitting here calmly discussing marriage and my pulse rate hadn't even gone up. What the hell had happened to me and why didn't I feel terrified?

Kyle nodded. "I like Bella," he said again. He laughed and looked down at his plate. I recognized the signs of puppy love well enough and it seemed like Kyle was developing quite a case. "She's nice to us. She lets us play video games and run around the yard and play on the Slip-n-Slide." He nudged Alex. "Isn't she nice?"

"She's nice," Alex replied, rolling his eyes a little bit at me. *Younger brothers*, he seemed to be saying. *What can you do?*

"She's *very* nice," Kyle insisted.

"She's very nice," Alex agreed.

"And she's *very* pretty," Kyle continued.

"She's very pretty," I said.

"So are you gonna marry her?" Kyle asked. "And make an honest woman out of her?"

Soda came spurting out of my nose. I swore the kid was out to kill me. "What?" I wiped my face. "Where did you hear that?"

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Kyle shrugged. "I mighta heard Dad say it."

"Oh really?" Masen had some answering to do. "What else did he say?"

"He said you needed to settle your ass down already," Kyle replied seriously. Then he put his hand over his mouth. "Oops, I'm not supposed to say ass."

"You just did it again," Alex pointed out.

"Dad said it first," Kyle countered. "So it doesn't count."

"Yes, your father said it first," I said. "But that doesn't mean you can repeat it, and if your mother hears that..." I arched one brow at him and Kyle squirmed in his seat.

"Yeah, I know, big trouble," Kyle replied morosely. He looked at Alex. "You aren't gonna tell are you?" Clearly, Kyle thought Alex was the weakest link here.

Alex let him worry for a moment and then shook his head. "Not if Uncle Edward doesn't."

Apparently Masen had taken our agreement to heart and told Alex to stop calling me Uncle Eddie.

"I'm not even going there," I assured Kyle. He flashed me a smile of gratitude. "Besides, it's really your Dad's fault, huh?"

Kyle nodded his agreement. "Yep." He finished off his pizza and the two of them went off to play more games.

The "M" word. Huh.

~TBTA~

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I took the boys back to their parents, yelling out that we were back. I didn't want to see any bare backsides or anything. Yuck. But Alyssa and Masen were sitting innocently on the couch. *Oh please tell me they didn't do it on my couch...*

They looked up and said hi quite casually, but I recognized the look on Masen's face well enough. He had been well and truly satisfied. Alyssa's face gave much less away, but I got the picture. Gross. There were just some images I didn't need in my head.

Alex and Kyle began telling their parents all about their time at the arcade. I was just waiting for Kyle to relate our conversation about Bella and the "M" word. I didn't have to wait long.

"I told Uncle Edward that he should marry Bella," Kyle told his mother. Fuck. My. Life.

Alyssa looked at me and laughed. "Really? You did? And what did Uncle Edward say?"

Kyle sat down and sighed, obviously getting ready to launch into a detailed explanation of what had been said. "Well, he said if he married her then she would be our Aunt Bella."

"That's true," Alyssa answered. Masen was just about to bust something trying to keep quiet. His face got red first and then purple, but I think he was laughing too hard to actually talk. Thank God for small favors. "She would," Alyssa added, frowning at Masen.

He just snorted so hard that stuff came out his nose. Ugh.

"And he said she was really pretty," Kyle continued. "No, he said she was *very* pretty." Kyle looked at me. "Isn't that right, Uncle Edward?"

I nodded, trying not to get any more involved in the discussion than I already was by default. I pretended to study my fingernails.

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"And he said he would make an honest woman out of her," Kyle said glibly.

"Hey!" I protested. "That wasn't what I said!" Shit. Kyle had pretty much just put words into my mouth.

Alyssa smiled at me. "So you're saying you *wouldn't* make an honest woman out of her?"

Oh this just got worse and worse. Masen was practically having a fit by now, I expected to see his head turn all the way around on his neck or something. He was trying to bury his face in a couch cushion and slapping his hand on his thigh. Honestly, it wasn't *that* funny, was it?

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "I didn't say that, Lys."

"So you would marry her?" Alyssa pressed.

Masen started sort of howling with laughter and I wondered if the dogs in the neighborhood were going to start raising hell. I decided to ignore him. "Lys, I didn't say that either."

"Well, it's a yes or no question, Edward. Either you would marry her or you wouldn't. You can't kind of be married. It's like being kind of pregnant. It's just not doable."

Pregnant? Shit! I was barely ready to think of the "M" word and suddenly Lys was throwing the "P" word into the mix? There was a whole fucking alphabet of stuff out there waiting to trip me up.

Masen was, by that time, trying to get himself under control but not doing a very good job of it. Fucker. I looked at Alyssa. "Lys, please, please, *please*, I'm begging you. Can we drop the subject?"

She blew out a breath and shook her head. "Honestly, Edward. You'd think I had asked you to donate your left nut to science or something." She jumped to her feet, muttering about males and their own unique brand of stupidity and

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stubbornness. "Fine, sit down here and get yourself all worked up over *words*, you big baby." She gave Masen and me a disdainful look. "I'm going upstairs to have a bubble bath and I don't expect to be disturbed." With that, she actually flounced away, leaving us both to stare after her. The boys took one look at their mother, then looked at their father and uncle and played it smart. They went outside.

"Uh oh," Masen finally said.

"What?" I knew that this was more of that marriage stuff that I just didn't get. "What's wrong?"

Masen wiped his face. "You are in deep shit, buddy."

"Why? What did I do?" Seriously, I couldn't catch a break.

Masen looked at me and shook his head. "We're done for, you and me." He pointed in the direction his wife had gone. "My wife has decided that she likes Bella, like *really* likes her. I think she's sort of already claimed her as a sister-in-law." I swallowed hard. "And God help us both if you don't deliver."

"Isn't a little soon to be picking out flowers and shit?" I asked. It was, right?

"In guy time, yeah," Masen agreed. "In Alyssa time, not so much."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Throw me a fucking lifeline here, buddy.

Masen sighed. "Alyssa has decided that you two are destined for each other," he said. "And while she won't interfere, she can certainly make you wish you had just given in and accepted the inevitable in a timely manner."

I didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Mase, Bella and I still don't know each other all that well," I felt compelled to point out. "We're still figuring each other out."

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"You're preaching to the choir, brother, but you've got to remember that the night Lyssa met me I was on a date with another woman and she *still* called up her best friend and told her that she'd met the man she was going to marry. It's tough to fight that sort of determination and commitment."

I had nothing at all to say to that so I just shut my mouth. Too little, too late.

Masen gave me a pitying look. "Seriously, she won't change her mind about it. So just get ready for plenty of broad hints and sly looks."

"Aw, Mase..."

"Don't 'aw Mase' me, there's not a damn thing I can do about it."

"Can't you control her? She's *your* wife," I pointed out.

Mase laughed long and hard until tears were streaming down his cheeks. "Oh man, you have *so* much to learn, big brother, so much..." He shook his head and his expression grew solemn. "But seriously, don't ever say anything like that around any woman. *Ever*. Swear to me."

I rolled my eyes at him but I knew I'd take his advice.

Then my doorbell rang and some part of me knew that this couldn't be good. I went to the door and opened it, already knowing what - or rather whom - I would find.

"What are you doing here?" I asked before I could think about it. Then I corrected myself. "Hi, Mom," I said much more appropriately as I hugged her. "Hi, Dad."

I was right. I couldn't catch a break.

Chapter 36: Always

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: While I have chapters written two years into the future, I want to reassure everyone that it isn't going to take nearly that long to resolve anything. These are two mature people who know what they want and who know how to communicate. I don't have any huge, dramatic turns planned. I love well written angst, but this just isn't that kind of story. This is a simple love story between two people who never really thought they'd find love at this point in their lives. It's the story of a family and how they find a way to go on after losing someone they loved. Really, it all comes down to love - finding it, dealing with losing it, and finding it again, against all odds and expectations..

Chapter 36: Always

"Hello dear," Mom said. "It's so nice to see you too."

"You just surprised me, that's all," I muttered as I opened the door wide. Alex and Kyle must have heard the trumpets heralding their grandparents' arrival because they came racing to the door and threw their arms around my parents' knees, each boy taking one of them. In fact, Kyle almost took down my mom. He was a little exuberant and my mom was kind of small.

"Easy there," I admonished and he shot Mom a sheepish look.

"Grandma!" Kyle said. "What did you bring me?"

I laughed and my mom did too. Alyssa walked up at that moment and hung her head. "I'm so sorry, but I really have to blame your son," Lys said as she

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embraced my mother.

"Oh darling, I know it's all his fault," Mom commiserated. "Believe me, I'm just grateful that my grandsons don't throw excrement like little monkeys. And I know I have you to thank for that."

Alyssa snorted. "You've been watching the Discovery Channel again, haven't you, Es?"

Mom shrugged. "I can neither confirm nor deny," she said breezily. "And where is that miscreant son of mine?" she asked, looking around Alyssa.

"He's right there," Masen called out, pointing at me. "He answered the door. Remember?" He kissed Mom's cheek, and hugged her, and then turned to Dad. "How long has she been senile?" he asked.

"Since the day you were born," Dad shot back.

"Uh oh, Dad's got game today," I teased Masen.

"Shut it," Mase growled.

"Now Masen, you know you are glad Mom and Dad are here," I said. "You always get so... *talkative* when they're here." I said pointedly and then I gave him a wicked smile. That's right, Masen, I still have the upper hand. He swallowed hard and then distracted my parents by asking Alex and Kyle to fill them in on what they'd been doing. Kids were great at redirection.

Of course, Kyle did nothing but talk about Jake. Jake said this, Jake did that. Jake, Jake, Jake. Mom winked at me when Kyle launched into a story of the fun they had had while Bella and I had been on our date.

"A date, huh?" Mom asked.

Kyle nodded. "And I told Uncle Edward he should marry Bella because she's really pretty and nice and then Jake could be my cousin. *Forever*," he added in

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a solemn voice.

"Is that so?" Mom asked and I knew the interrogation wasn't going to be long in coming. "I think you're right, though, Kyle. It would be just wonderful for you to have Jake as a cousin." She kissed his cheeks. "And just think, you'd have *four* instant cousins if your uncle would just do what everyone knows he should and marries Bella."

Kyle nodded happily and went running after Alex.

"Mom," I warned. "Seriously, don't encourage him. He's been spouting the 'M' word left and right."

"He's a kid," Mom tried to soothe me. "That's what kids do. They take things at face value and speak their minds."

"Mom, really? Bella and I just said 'I love you' and everyone's got us walking down the aisle already," I muttered. "We aren't there yet. We aren't close to there yet. Everyone needs to chill."

"You've said 'I love you' to her?" Mom asked, her nostrils practically flaring like a dog hot on a scent trail. Fuck me, of course she would be all over that little slip of the tongue like Jake on a Butterfinger.

"Yes, but Mom..." I almost growled in frustration. I had to make her see reason. I leaned in close and whispered. "And if all this talk about marriage gets thrown right and left with Bella's boys around..." I let my voice trail off but Mom got the picture.

"Sorry," she said with a grimace. "Oh, you're right, Edward." Mom sighed. "I just got excited. She's just so perfect for you. And I want to see you happy, son. That's all."

I hugged her close. "You'll see me happy, in fact you'll see me freaking delirious, but you've gotta have patience and I don't want to scare her off by making her boys upset. So..." I settled a stern look on my mother. I had learned

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from the best. Her. "Keep the "M" word talk down. Deal?"

"Deal," Mom agreed. Then she drew Kyle off and I was sure she'd be talking to him about *not* talking about the "M" word. Mom was good at that shit, and she'd have Kyle mum about the topic in no time.

I hoped.

I helped my dad unload their bags. My house was starting to strain at the seams and I wondered if I could palm Masen off on Bella...or Jasper. Just Masen. I wanted to keep the boys and Alyssa around. I amused myself by imagining Masen's face if I told him that *he* had to go to a hotel. We decided that the boys would crash on the couch, my parents would take the good guest room and Masen and Alyssa would be stuck in the room with just a double bed. I snickered at the thought of Masen trying to get comfortable on that thing, though I felt a bit of remorse that Lys would have to suffer with him. Oh well, nothing to be done about it now.

I was shocked by the sound of someone knocking on my door about an hour later and when I opened it to find a grinning Bella I wasn't sure what to think. Then Jake was pushing his way past her and Sam was asking me if my father was here like his mom had said. I could do nothing more than nod and point and Sam was gone.

"Hey, baby" I said, kissing her cheek. Then I frowned at her. "Did you drive here?"

She shook her head. "Nope, we let Jake drive. Figured it would be good practice and hey, the kid's gotta learn sometime." Then Bella rolled her eyes at me. "Of course I drove here, silly." Pointing to her cast, she grinned. "It's a driving-slash-walking cast." Before I could express my concerns to her, Alyssa was there, hugging Bella like they had known each other forever.

"Wow," Lys said. "You made good time." The two women turned to look at me like I was the intruder.

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"You called her?" I asked Alyssa.

Lys shrugged. "Why wouldn't I?"

Then they were gone, discussing whatever it was they discussed when there were no men around. I probably didn't want to know. I nodded at Emmett and Seth as they walked in behind their mom. Alex immediately approached Emmett and began talking. As he usually was with the kids, Emmett was polite and kind. For all his bulk, Emmett was just as good with kids as was Rose. It was interesting that the two of them had formed a connection.

Seth saw my guitar standing in a corner and gave me a quick grin. When he did so, I got an idea. If Seth wanted to play the guitar, he needed his own. He'd want to practice and he might feel odd using mine. Besides, I was probably a bit rusty and I would need to practice myself. Yeah, that was probably a good idea.

I wandered into the kitchen and saw Bella chatting away effortlessly with my mother and Alyssa. As I watched the three of them, I was struck by the realization of how easily Bella had fit in with everyone. It was almost as if her place had been there, just waiting for her to claim it. I smiled at the thought. My mom caught my eye and winked almost as if she knew what I was thinking. She probably did; Mom was scary that way.

I went to find Masen and Dad. Masen was playing video games with Emmett and Alex. I nodded to Seth when he made a move for the guitar and he sat down, just sort of playing around with it. I found Sam sitting down with my father, talking about, of all things, pandemics. Most ten year olds wouldn't know the word, much less be able to talk about it, but Sam was holding his own. Apparently, he had seen a documentary on the Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918 and wanted to discuss it with my father. Dad was thrilled of course, as only he could be about discussing a disease. Frankly, I didn't see the allure of the topic so I moved on.

Jake and Kyle were playing with some Star Wars figures that I guessed Jake had had stuck in his pockets. He looked up and gave me a smile. Kyle followed

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suit. "We're playing Star Wars, Uncle Edward," Kyle explained. "Wanna play?"

And because it had been forever since I sat on a floor and played with action figures, I smiled and nodded. So it was that I was holding a tiny Darth Vader when I looked up to see Bella staring at me, her face alight with something that was a mixture of tenderness and amusement.

"Well, Lord Vader," she said. "I realize that you're busy conquering the galaxy and all that, but your mom wants to know if you want to go out to dinner."

Embarrassed, but not really too much because I had been amusing the kids after all, I stood up, still clutching Darth Vader. It was too late now to pretend she hadn't caught me red-handed. "All of us?" I asked.

Bella nodded. "All of us."

"Yeah, I'm hungry," I said. "How about you boys?"

Like I needed to ask. Jake and Kyle were already jumping to their feet and heading for the door. All they needed to hear was the word 'food' and they were game. I turned to Bella. "I think that's a yes."

"I'm guessing so," she agreed. Then she took my hand and we joined my family. It was the most natural thing in the world to feel her hand in mine. And one of the best.

~TBTA~

I pouted until Bella agreed to let me drive her and the boys. My parents took their car, and Masen and Alyssa took theirs. Kyle and Alex opted to go with my parents. They weren't stupid, grandparents were prime targets for goodies and they knew it. Being alone with them would give them good time to get in their wish lists.

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We chose a family place, which was a pretty good thing since we practically invaded. I saw the hostess' eyes get big when we walked in with twelve of us - including six kids. My Dad insisted on paying for all of us; I guess retirement paid better than I expected. I leaned over and told Emmett to order whatever he wanted and he gave me a wicked grin. I had noticed, from taking Bella's boys out over the months that they were careful to never order the most expensive thing on a menu, and they always looked to their mother for approval before ordering. She had raised them to be considerate and thoughtful and I was pretty damned proud of all of them.

Once our orders had been placed, Masen tapped on his glass and all eyes turned to him. "Mom," he said. Then he turned to my father. "Dad...Alyssa and I have some news to share-"

"Are you pregnant?" Mom asked eagerly and Masen rolled his eyes.

"Uh no..." He looked at Alyssa as if it to ask if there was anything he didn't know. She laughed and shook her head. "No, Mom, definitely not pregnant."

I looked at Kyle, hoping he wouldn't say the "M" word. Not here, not with all of Bella's boys looking on. That was a shit storm I did not need. Kyle seemed content to wait for his parents to announce the news he already knew.

"Well, you know how awesome I am at my job." It my turn to roll my eyes. He was going to give the same speech he had given at Jake's party, minus the curse words. "In fact, my boss has given me a promotion."

"That's wonderful, dear," Mom said. "Isn't that wonderful, Carlisle?"

My dad shot me a look that told me he was suspicious of me, but I was trying very hard to maintain an innocent and clueless expression. My father, however, can sniff out a falsehood at twenty paces. "Yes, Esme, I'm very proud of him," Dad said politely.

"And my promotion calls for us to move," Masen continued. He looked at Alyssa once more and she took his hand. "So..." He paused for the dramatic

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effect, because he was, after all Masen Cullen and drama was his game. "We're moving here to Fayetteville."

Mom started getting teary and Alyssa did too. Bella decided to join in just for shits and giggles so Masen, Dad, and I were all left wondering what the hell to do. Then Dad put his arm around Mom and gave her a kiss, I guess subtly trying to show his sons how to handle the situation. Masen and I followed suit with Lys and Bella, though all six boys made gagging noises or muttered, "Gross."

Mom and Alyssa started chatting away about the move. Bella jumped right in without any hesitation and my brother and father, not to mention the boys, just sort of sat there and watched. There was no getting a word in edgewise, and we were pretty much rendered redundant at that point. When the server brought our food, we all dug in while the ladies continued to mostly talk and sometimes eat.

It was interesting watching the dynamics at the table. I had sort of expected that Bella's boys would segregate themselves when they sat down, but no, they were sort of sandwiched in-between Masen's boys. Emmett sat next to Alex, who sat next to Seth. Then there was Sam and Jake. Jake was sitting by Kyle, of course.

I noticed Kyle and Jake whispering together, glancing at Emmett and Alex. It would be interesting to see what those two got into once Masen and his family moved here. I had a feeling that Jake and Kyle would stay pretty close. I sat back and watched all of them interact, Bella's boys and Masen's, my parents, Alyssa and Bella. An outsider would have never guessed that we hadn't all been a family for years. They never would have known that it had just been a matter of months since I had entered Bella's life, that I hadn't even known her or these boys at the start of the year.

It was a good feeling, just watching them, listening to them, and knowing that this time next year, things would be even better.

~TBTA~

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After dinner, we went back to my house and we all just relaxed for a little while. I was tired of trying to find some privacy with Bella and Jake was drooping, so I told her that I'd follow her home. I sort of let her know that I wouldn't mind a little alone time with her. She seemed agreeable and gave me a kiss to seal the deal. Good times.

I made my excuses to my parents and Masen and followed the Vader-Mobile home. As much as I loved my parents, and even Masen, that pain in the ass, I just wanted to be with Bella. It felt like we had come so far in the past few days and I just wanted to savor that feeling, to walk around in this new dimension we had to our relationship. While I knew I had left my "family" at my house, in reality, it felt like my true family was at Bella's house and that's where I wanted to be.

I breathed a sigh of relief when we pulled up into her driveway. It wasn't the house that made this place seem like home, it was the people who lived there. The boys tumbled and ran from her vehicle and in just a few moments there was only the two of us. I held out my hand as she stepped out. She slid against me in the most tantalizing way.

I leaned down and kissed her. "I missed you," I said.

"We haven't been apart for very long," she whispered. Then she smiled. "But I know what you mean."

When we get inside, the boys have scattered and we are still alone. I wondered if the earth has come to a stand still because that shit just doesn't happen for us. I looked around and whispered, "Do you think they're still alive?" I had to ask. It was the responsible thing to do.

Bella giggled. My dick, which had actually been quiet and complacent, was roused from his slumber and was looking around for...well, for Bella obviously. Just wonderful.

"Come here, you," she said as she tugged on my hand. Like the sex kitten she could be, she rubbed up against me.

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"You keep doing that then we're going to be making an unscheduled trip to your closet," I warned.

Her mouth was on my nipple. How the fuck had she gotten the buttons undone? I didn't even feel her hands. Maybe because most of my blood supply was in my pants. She pulled away with a sucking sound that was way sexier than it should have been. "You say that like's a bad thing."

Sex kitten, goddess, temptress Bella had come out to play. Good thing I had always played well with others and didn't run with scissors. "Bella..." I felt compelled to warn her one last time

She leaned up and whispered, "I have something I need moved in my closet and it's really too big for me to handle." She moved back and actually batted her fucking lashes at me and ran her hand up my arm. "Do you think you could...give me a hand?"

The innuendos were flying fast and thick and I was struggling to keep up. Did she realize what her words were doing to me? When she laughed softly and pushed her hips toward mine, I knew she had a pretty good idea. I grabbed her hand and was stalking up the stairs, making sure my pace wasn't too fast for her cast. She kept up with no problem. We were both laughing on the way up like naughty kids who were skipping school.

Another miracle happened and we didn't see any of the boys before we slipped into Bella's room and locked the door behind us. Smiling seductively, she took my hand and led me toward the closet.

I had kind of been kidding about the closet thing. Okay, not really. I bit my lip as she opened the door and walked in, flicking on the dim light. Once I was inside, she closed the door behind me and pushed my back against the door. She took a step back and tapped her lips with her index finger.

She looked me up and down. "Well now that I've got you here, whatever will I do with you?" Pursing her lips, Bella continued to study me. "It's a dilemma, for sure."

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I swallowed hard and shifted on my feet, just waiting. I felt a shiver of anticipation run through me. God, the suspense was killing me. I licked my lips. And waited. She moved forward and placed her mouth over the place in my chest where my heart was beating wildly. "I love the way you smell," she murmured. "It's clean and masculine..." Bella breathed in deep, closing her eyes. "Just the scent of you makes me feel warm and safe and...wanted." Her eyes flickered up to mine. "You want me." The words were so simple.

"Yeah," I agreed in a husky voice. "All the time. I ache for you, Bella." I took her hand in mine and laced our fingers. "I want you. I need you like I need to breathe."

Her eyes were big and ageless, taking in everything I was saying - and everything I wasn't. Some things didn't need to be articulated. "I want you too, Edward."

I smiled and lifted our clasped hands, putting them between us so that we could both feel our hearts beating. I leaned down to kiss her. It was a chaste kiss, despite the need I felt thrumming through both of us. It was as if that night in my bed had destroyed a dam and all of the love and need was now surging in between us, barely under control. Like a river overflowing, the hunger was crashing against the edges of our restraint. We were holding on by a margin. How long could we last?

"When I finally get inside of you Bella, I have a feeling I won't ever want to leave," I told her.

Her lips quirked. "Might make it difficult to go to work," she quipped. And I laughed because there was no one like Bella.

"I'm willing to risk it," I assured her. "Maybe I'll just lock you in a bedroom with me somewhere and never let you go."

She tilted her head as she considered my proposition. "Maybe I'll be the one doing the locking."

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"I'd let you," I said. "Forever."

Her expression grew shy and she dipped her head so that I couldn't look into her eyes. Modest Bella was back, the one who didn't recognize her own beauty, the appeal she had, the woman who was just a bit shy. I tilted up her head. I wanted to see her eyes; they were so expressive and honest, giving away the secrets of her heart. I wanted her to see the same vulnerability in mine.

"Bella?"

"Yeah?"

"In case you haven't figured it out, babe, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me," I said quietly. "You and the boys? You're my life now. You need to know that."

She trembled against me, relaxing her body so that we were pressed to each other from toes to where her cheek was resting against my chest. I caressed her hair, smoothing it, touching it. "Edward?" she finally whispered.

"Yeah, baby?" I smiled because I was happy. Bella was soft and warm in my arms, what more could I ask?

"You mean everything to me too, you and the boys," she confessed in a very soft voice. "I didn't think I'd ever feel this way again, and then..." Bella laughed and she looked up at me. "You happened. And I didn't mean to let you into my heart because I was done with all that." She was echoing my own words back at me, letting me know she felt this connection between us as deeply as I did. "Because I'm Bella James and I had enough baggage." I smiled. "But when I saw you standing in my driveway, something inside of me...hungered." I swallowed hard again. "Something that I thought was dead forever came to life and I've...I've fought it. Or tried to, but it just doesn't seem to make a difference. So I decided to open my heart to you and you sort of slipped inside and I know it's because..." She took a deep breath. "It's where you're supposed to be...and where I'm supposed to be."

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"Exactly," I agreed. Once more, my lips met hers. "So relax, my Bella. We've got this. We're not going to screw it up."

"Okay," she murmured.

Our kisses were slow and easy and tender, nothing like what I had anticipated when we were laughing our way up the stairs. But they were perfect for the moment, for us. I breathed in deep and whispered in her ear, "I love you Bella. Always."

Her face was buried in my neck then and I felt her breath fan against my flesh, warming it, igniting it in fire. "I love you too, Edward. Always..."

Fic rec: Evermore Experience by deJean Smith

Bella Swan receives an invitation to the exclusive Evermore Experience, an in-depth immersion summer program where she plans to fully explore 19th century England, but fate has other plans for her once she arrives.

You won't find another story like this, and that's a very, very good thing. Read it. Please. It deserves WAY more attention.

Chapter 37: My Ninja Temptress

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Okay, we're all suffering from blue balls. I get it, LOL! Unfortunately, Bella and Edward are now facing the very mundane but cock blocking problem of privacy. As a parent, it's hard to find time alone. Their situation is compounded by the fact that Bella probably isn't ready to have Edward spend the night. And I have a feeling they're going to want the whole night when they finally, FINALLY go all the way. And you know, with Bella being a screamer and all... So, they're going to have to find a way to do that. Hmm... I think that maybe Edward's dick will be giving this matter his undivided attention to come up with a solution.

Chapter 37: My Ninja Temptress

I really didn't want to leave Bella's house. Actually, I just didn't want to leave Bella. Every time we had to be apart it got more and more difficult. And I knew with school starting the training cycles gearing up, it was only going to get worse. So we only had a few weeks left before our schedules suddenly got crammed with shit. And some of those precious days were now being taken up by my family. Normally, I would have been okay with that. It was great to see my parents, even though it hadn't been that long. I expected that the next time we saw them would be Thanksgiving, unless Bella had different plans. *Note to self: Beg Bella to spend Thanksgiving with me.*

I loved my family. Really. I did. But enough was enough. I left Bella and the boys reluctantly - very reluctantly. I headed toward my house, which somehow didn't seem much like a home anymore. I had stayed so long at Bella's house that everyone was asleep when I got there. Well, except my dad. He was sitting on the back porch by the pool and I might not have even seen except for the

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glint of the moonlight on the bottle of beer he was holding.

He looked up when I stepped outside and gave me a smile. "Hey there, Edward." He sounded mellow and relaxed, as he always did after just a few beers. He couldn't handle much alcohol, no matter what form it came in. My mother could drink him under the table every time. "I thought you got lost," he teased.

"No, I was just hanging out with Bella and the boys." I couldn't help but smile when I talked about them. It was like a reflex now. Bella and boys equaled smiling.

I sat down beside him and sighed, looking up at the night sky. My dad was silent for a long moment, but I sensed him studying me. "You love her, don't you son?"

"Yes," I answered simply. This was my father; I never could lie to him. He'd seen it on my face every single time I had tried.

Dad smiled. "It's a scary thing to meet that one woman who totally undoes you, and yet she completes you and makes you whole at the same time." He laughed softly. "It's an interesting dichotomy." Dad sighed. "A conundrum, if you will."

When Dad got tipsy he tended to use big words. It was kind of endearing.

"That about sums it up," I agreed dryly.

"She's an amazing woman, your Bella."

Something warm bloomed inside of me at hearing my father refer to her as *my* Bella. Not a sense of possession, but something much more intimate and real. We belonged to each other. Simple. Easy. Life-altering.

"Yeah, she is," I had to agree. "I'm going to marry her one day." The words were out there and I couldn't take them back. I found I didn't want to. It was Kyle's fault; he was the one who had started spouting that "M" word in the first

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place. "But we're not there yet," I felt forced to add.

"Yes, I had guessed that already, on both counts actually," Dad replied. "Can't say that I'm displeased and if you take a while to get there that will only make your relationship stronger. You'll get there, of that I have no doubt. You'll be good for Bella and those boys. But they'll be good for you too, you know."

"They already are," I told him, smiling up at the sky. It was a beautiful night, full of promise. We fell into a comfortable silence once again. "Dad? Can I ask you something?"

"You know you can."

"Well, do you think it's weird that I uh... Well, that I'm not jealous of Mac or anything?" I turned to look at him and my dad just had this funny expression on his face. This had been bothering me lately. I had wondered why I wasn't more...territorial or something.

"Do you think you should be?" he asked softly.

I thought about that. "Well yeah, sometimes I get the feeling that talking about Mac *should* make me uncomfortable, you know?" I sighed. "But it doesn't, and I just wondered if that was weird."

"No, Edward, it isn't weird," my father replied with a touch of laughter. "Mac was a huge part of Bella's life...of the boys' lives, right?"

"Well yeah," I answered. Perhaps my father was drunker than I had imagined.

"Then don't you think it's only natural that you accept his role in their lives? How miserable would you *all* be if you got upset and tense every time they mentioned Mac's name? You'd *all* be wretched and you know it." He shook his head. "No, if you're really going to be a part of their lives then you have to accept that Mac is too. And I'm glad to know that you have."

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"I guess...I just expected that it would feel different," I finally said. "That I'd worry more about...I don't know...how she felt about him." I paused. "But it almost feels like, well this is going to sound silly, but just humor me." I took a deep breath. "Well it almost feels like it was somehow meant to be. Almost like Mac knew he wouldn't be there to see this part of their lives and somehow trusts me to watch out for them." I glanced at my dad. "That's completely weird, isn't it?"

"Do you remember when you were in college and you pestered me and pestered me until I read *Dune*?" I was confused at the change in topic, but I just went with it. I nodded.

"Well I remember this line in there. It was something about if the gods decreed that a man should die on a certain day, then fate would direct his footsteps to that place where he died."

I thought about that. "So...Mac's death was *his* fate?"

"I don't know, Edward," Dad replied. "That is for better minds than mine to ponder. But I do know that, from all I've heard about Mac from those boys and from you and from Bella, that he would be relieved to know that Bella and his sons are being loved and cared for - he'd be *very* happy to know that." Dad smiled at me. "Because if he couldn't be there for them, then he'd want to know that someone will be there, that someone will love them. And that someone is you, Edward."

"So you're saying Mac and I are like a team?" I laughed.

Dad shrugged. "Think of it how you will," he answered. "Maybe you were both destined to love Bella, and she was destined to love both of you in return."

I liked the thought of that. "Yeah, that makes sense."

"Or maybe I'm just a little drunk and throwing out ideas that may or may not make sense in the morning."

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"Thanks, Dad," I said. We were silent again.

After a while, I looked over at him. "I don't know if Masen told you, but I'm not re-enlisting when my time's up."

Dad considered that for a moment. "No, Masen didn't say anything but I think it's a good choice," he finally said. "If you're going to make your life with Bella, then staying in the Army probably isn't the best choice."

"I couldn't do that to her and the boys," I said softly.

"Well, your mother will be pleased," Dad observed.

That kind of surprised me. "Really?" I hadn't realized that my service was something that bothered her. She had never said anything about it. "She doesn't like me being in the Army?" Even when I had first joined, the only thing my mom had asked me was if I was sure. When I answered yes, I never heard another word about the subject. She had been in my corner completely from that day on.

Dad smiled and shrugged. "It's not that she doesn't like you serving. She just worries, son. That's what mothers do." He looked at me. "She's not the only one who worries, though."

"But I-"

Dad must have seen my confusion. "Do you think that spouses and children are the only ones who worry about that knock on the door? Every time you're over there, your mom and I are basket cases. Every time a delivery guy knocks on the door your mother turns pale and grabs my hand." He smiled. "And it will be nice not to have to worry about that again."

I was shocked. I honestly hadn't thought about how worried they must be when I was deployed. But how would I feel if Jake was over there? Or Sam or Kyle? Any one of the boys being over there would make me crazy with worry. How could I have been so stupid not to realize? I had always been sort of arrogantly

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proud that I wasn't leaving anyone to mourn me really if something happened. But I was wrong, of course. Wrong, wrong, wrong. I decided then that I would encourage my nephews and Bella's boys to be accountants or teachers or dog groomers - something that wasn't dangerous.

"Dad I never realized," I said. "I'm sorry." I grimaced. "I mean, I knew you'd be worried, but not really upset."

"It's part of being a parent, Edward," Dad said. "You don't stop worrying just because your kids are older. It doesn't work that way."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I agreed.

"But that's over now," Dad said. "So all's well that ends well, yes?"

"Yeah."

"So...eight months left?"

I grinned. "Yeah, it's almost August, and my date comes up in April." I felt lighter. Eight months? That was nothing. I'd be out of the Army before the school year ended. Wow. *I'd be out of the Army before the school year ended.* That put it all in perspective.

My dad sighed and got to his feet, taking his empty beer bottle with him. "I'm going to bed, son." He smiled down at me. "Sweet dreams." It was what he had told me every night he was home when I went to bed.

"You too, Dad," I replied.

He stopped at the door. "Oh Edward?"

"Yeah?"

"Just so you know, you really didn't look surprised enough when Masen said they were moving," Dad said in an amused voice.

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"Aw, shit, Dad, you didn't mention anything to Mom did you?"

"No."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Good, because I got a really sweet deal out of Masen for keeping my mouth shut."

Dad chuckled, shaking his head. "Don't worry, son, your secret is safe with me."

~TBTA~

The next day Masen and Alyssa decided that they would try to go house hunting. Apparently, Bella had scouted out some possibilities for them and emailed them to Alyssa, who printed them up on my computer. Bella had emailed just five and I wondered if that was enough. But Alyssa was looking through them when I said something along those lines and she just looked at me and shook her head. "Bella's picks are...perfect," Alyssa breathed. "I'd be happy to call any one of them home."

Masen's company was going to help him sell their current house, and with the real estate market being so bad that took a load off their minds. It also meant that they could afford pretty much any house they wanted because prices were going lower any day. When I questioned Alyssa about what they wanted, she just shrugged. "Something good for the kids. We don't care about fancy."

Truthfully, Masen made about eight times what I did. We both knew that, but neither one of us cared. We both were doing something we loved. Masen and Alyssa had never lived beyond their means, finding contentment in raising their sons and being together. The thought of seeing Alex and Kyle on a very regular basis was really starting to grow on me. I finally felt like I might understand them better. I was even willing to endure Masen, because he came as part and parcel with the boys.

God, I had turned into such a pussy.

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I tried to be upset about that, but couldn't muster up the energy. Fuck it. I was a big pussy. So be it.

~TBTA~

Bella and Alyssa had gotten together and decided that Bella and I would watch all the boys - all six of them - at my house while Masen and Alyssa looked at houses. I was not consulted. I pouted for a bit until Masen reminded me that he and Alyssa had watched all six of them so I could get a little action. I shut up after that, because I definitely didn't want to mess up that little arrangement. Not stupid, remember?

Mom and Dad decided that they were going shopping. I supposed that six boys were best handled in small doses. And Mom *had* put in her time, having raised Masen and all. That couldn't have been a job for the faint of heart.

Bella kept the boys busy baking cookies, having brought all of the ingredients and equipment with her. When I asked why she wanted to bake cookies, she shrugged. "Well, if it involves something to eat they're more likely to just go along with it. And if I don't give them something specific to do, they'll just play video games all day."

"Okay," I replied. Now I knew. Maybe I should start taking notes and put all of my observations in a binder titled, "Things I Need to Know About Parenting" and carry it with me everywhere.

After making both chocolate chip and peanut butter cookies - and eating at least half of what they baked - the boys went to swim in the pool while I helped Bella clean up the kitchen. Honestly, it looked like a war zone in there. And I should know. I've seen war zones. It took us a while, mostly because we'd stop every few minutes and kiss.

Once, I sort of backed her up against the counter and she put her arms around my neck. I wasn't wearing a button shirt so I didn't have to worry about her mad ninja button skills. I had tucked in a tee-shirt since my dick was a little bit more under control since our night together. I still woke up hard as fuck, but

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honestly, having gotten off twice in one night had made my dick a happy camper. And I haven't done that since I was in my late twenties, so I was feeling pretty fucking proud of myself.

I kissed up and down Bella's throat. "God, baby...I want you so much," I had to whisper. And just like that, I woke my dick the fuck up. I'm a moron.

She felt it too and laughed, pressing up against me so I would know she felt it. Temptress. "I can see that you do," she teased.

I had to content myself with putting my hands on her ass and giving it a squeeze. Then I made myself move away.

I looked down. Somehow she had managed to get my tee-shirt untucked *and* my belt undone. Fucking ninja temptress.

~TBTA~

Masen and Alyssa surprised me by calling about two o'clock and letting me know they had found "the" house. They wanted to pick up the boys to take a look at it. They also invited Bella, her sons, and me along to check it out.

Thirty minutes later, I was standing in the driveway of a nice, two-story house. It was more modest than I had expected them to buy, something even I could afford. In fact, I knew I could afford it because it was in my neighborhood. I looked at Masen and frowned.

"Okay, before you get mad," Masen started. "Alyssa and I talked this over for a long time."

Alyssa nodded and I decided that I would hear him out before I said, "Hell no!"

"First, we like the school district here, and Kyle and Alex will go to the same schools with Bella's boys." Jake and Kyle cheered and gave each other high-fives. Bella smiled smugly and I figured it was one of the reasons she had included this particular house on their list. Sneaky, conniving little temptress...

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I glanced at her and arched one brow.

She ignored me.

"Second, it will make it easier when Mom and Dad visit," Masen continued. "They won't be driving all over town trying to see both families." *Families*, Masen had said. I felt myself getting more okay with it.

"Go on," I said, motioning for him to continue.

"And third, when we trade kid duties, this will make things so much more convenient," Masen finished in a triumphant rush. "In fact, Kyle can even walk to your house if Alex goes with him. I figure if Bella's boys are over there visiting then it will make it that much easier for them to go back and forth." Masen sent me an arch look and motioned with his hands. *Back and forth, dummy*, his expression seemed to say.

Back and forth. Back and forth. Ohhhh....

I grinned at him. "Sounds like the perfect house for you guys," I agreed immediately. "Let's go inside and look."

Masen snorted, knowing exactly where my dirty little mind had gone. I was determined to get an overnight visit with Bella and soon. I had a feeling that full-on sex wasn't going to happen as long as she had a "curfew." And I wanted her to myself for a full evening so that we wouldn't have to interrupt naked time.

Ahh...naked time. It beat out Miller time any day of the week.

Bella glanced at me and snorted, reading my naughty intentions without any effort at all. Hopefully it was because she had similar plans. She winked slowly at me and I sent up a little prayer of thanks for dirty-minded hell cats who screamed in bed.

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Suddenly, I was wondering if I should ask her about condoms. I was clean. I always used a condom and I had been tested before I deployed. For once, I hadn't gotten laid as soon as I got back. Then just a few weeks after my return, a certain someone had busted my windshield and my dick had been pretty much useless except for Bella-inspired self abuse sessions.

I expected that Bella was clean too and I knew for a fact she was protected against pregnancy. I liked to be prepared though, and I had purchased condoms a few months ago. Just in case. Be prepared. Always. If I was going to be caught with my pants down - and oh I hoped I would - then I wanted to be ready.

The fact of the matter was though that I wanted nothing more than to slide into Bella bare. I wanted to feel her silky heat clamp around me, feel the play of the muscles as she milked me.

Great. I just had to go there while I was around other people.

Bella looked down, she had an uncanny instinct, my ninja temptress. Quietly, without a word or gesture, she moved to stand in front of me while Alyssa and Masen showed us around the house. I put my hands on her shoulders and leaned down to whisper in her ear while Alyssa showed us the kitchen.

"Thank you, baby," I said. Then I nipped at her earlobe. "But since it's all your fucking fault, it's only fair."

Bella gave a little moan that didn't help my situation at all. Seriously. The. Death. Of. Me.

Chapter 38: Seeing is Believing

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I'd like to thank my soldier buddy who helped me out. I've corrected Edward's rank to Sergeant Major, which is still an E-9, but more appropriate for Edward's position. He also helped me correct the scene in which Edward is informed of Bella's accident. I confess, I can't really "consult" my own military "experts" as none of them know I write fan fiction. It's my dirty little secret, LOL! So your help, Billy, is most appreciated. I've told him to holler if I get anything else wrong because I very much want this to be realistic and accurate.

The next update should be on Sunday. Again, thank you for reading. You all put a smile on my face.

Chapter 38: Seeing is Believing

We all headed back to my house after Masen and Alyssa let the real estate agent know their decision. Mom and Dad were back by the time we got back and my mom had bags of stuff for the boys - all six of them. Each one of them had been remembered and I saw Bella's smile when Esme handed Seth a bag. I looked at my mom over Bella's hand and gave her a wink. My mom acted like she didn't see me and just continued handing out little gifts to the boys like that was standard operating procedure.

She had always said that spoiling grandchildren was the biggest benefit of being a grandparent and she usually did a very good job. I suspected that she was going to have a ball figuring out what Bella's boys liked. I'd have to warn Bella about my mother, in the nicest way possible of course. And I had a feeling that Bella wouldn't care. She would know that whatever my mother did

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was motivated out of love and generosity.

Then the women retreated to the kitchen and somehow whipped up a spaghetti and meatball dinner. I didn't know I had all the ingredients necessary in my kitchen and frankly it was a little scary that they put it all together like that. We male types gathered in the living room to watch Spike TV. Bully Beatdown was on and not one of us suggested changing the channel. It was a fact of life that most males liked seeing a little brutality, especially when it involved some punk bully getting his ass handed to him.

Alyssa came out to see what we were watching and then rolled her eyes. Masen ignored her. Mom peeked out and gave my father "the look." He ignored her. Bella sauntered out and studied the nine of us and shook her head. I ignored that. Sometimes you just have to give into the testosterone surge.

After a while they called us to dinner and told us that we would be responsible for clean up since they'd done all the cooking. My dad and brother and I bitched about it for a bit but then settled down after each one of the women bestowed "the look" on us. Dinner was great; the conversations were loud and punctuated by a lot of laughter. Once again, I was struck by how easily we all sort of fit in together.

We cleaned up the kitchen like we'd been told. None of us were stupid, though we all had our moments. The boys pitched in, though there was more grumbling from their ranks than from ours. The rest of the evening passed quickly and then Bella said it was time to get the boys home and ready for bed.

My stomach felt sort of sick when I saw her stand up and I knew she was getting ready to go. I hated it when she left or I left her; I hated it more and more every day. It just felt *wrong* watching her walk away from me. I wanted to know that when I crawled into bed, she would be there to snuggle up against. I wanted to hear the boys running up and down the stairs, to hear them yelling for each other. When I was alone in my house, it was too damned quiet and empty.

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I kissed her goodnight, hoping that the shadows I saw in her eyes were a similar reluctance to be apart from me. My family would be leaving first thing in the morning and I was actually looking forward to spending a few days with Bella and the boys by ourselves. I still had four days left of leave and I wanted to make the most of them.

My parents got up early and decided to accompany Masen and his family to the airport. Masen told me not to worry about it since they'd be back soon anyway. They had put an offer in on the house and it had been accepted. Alyssa was already mentally packing up their house, armed with Bella's list of helpful hints. I hadn't been lying when I said Bella knew her shit about moving a family.

Early the next morning, I got up and kissed everyone good bye. Masen and Alyssa and the boys piled into their rental car and mom and dad pulled out of the driveway right behind them. By 0630, I was alone.

And lonely.

I went back into the house and straightened up a bit. It was too early to bother Bella but the urge was there. Then my phone vibrated and I saw there was a text.

All by yourself yet?

I grinned. Bella had great timing.

Yep.

Poor baby.

Maybe someone should invite me over? I suggested.

Maybe.

I waited. It didn't take long.

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Wanna come over? I have coffee.

Coffee? I'll be right over.

I was smiling like an idiot as I climbed into my Suburban. I drove a little faster than I should have, which was a bad habit of mine. But in the tank of a vehicle I had purchased I pretty much invincible. Honestly, the beast could have run down the smaller cars on the road and not even been slowed down. I would have been picking out Prius parts from the grill. I would have been lying if I said I didn't like the feeling.

By the time I got to Bella's it was a little after seven. To my surprise, even Jake wasn't up yet so when Bella opened the door I just stared at her for a moment. "Where's Jake?" I asked.

Bella shook her head. "Still sleeping, can you imagine?" she said dryly. Jake never slept in. Ever.

"Are you sure he's alive?" I teased as I pulled her into my arms.

"Pretty sure," Bella answered breathlessly. "He was snoring away ten minutes ago."

"Good to know," I whispered against her cheek, on my way toward that earlobe. Oh yeah, the ear. She liked that shit. I nibbled and then sucked her lobe into my mouth. She moaned and pressed up against me.

"You play dirty, Cullen," she accused.

"Very dirty," I agreed. "I'm a dirty, dirty boy." I pulled back to wink at her.

She playfully slapped my arm and pulled me inside. "Before we give the neighbors a show," she admonished. "I'm fairly sure they're already gossiping about the widow and her pretty boy."

"You think I'm pretty?" I batted my lashes at her and she laughed.

The Bigger They Are

"Oh, I was talking about my other pretty boy," Bella answered. "You're my ruggedly handsome manly man." Then she made a face at me.

I pouted. "But I wanted to be the pretty boy for once."

She sighed and shook her head. "You men, so high maintenance. I swear."

"At least give me some coffee," I pleaded. "We ruggedly handsome, manly men need our coffee."

"Come on, Mr. Brawny Paper Towel man," she mocked.

"I thought I'd at least rate a Mr. Clean," I grumbled.

She sent me an arch look. "You gonna shave your head?"

I rubbed my hand over my very short hair. "What? This isn't close enough for you?"

"You aren't bald," she pointed out. Then she wrinkled up her nose. "Not yet anyway."

"We Cullen men don't go bald," I informed her arrogantly. Then I grabbed her and began tickling her, and she buried her face in my neck and snorted. Loudly. Then she groaned. "Shit..." she muttered. I laughed.

I tilted up her face and kissed her. "I think it's cute," I assured her. Then I nuzzled her neck. "Besides, we've already established that you're *pig-headed*." Bella laughed and turned her head so that my lips were pressed to hers. I liked the way my girl was thinking. Our tongues slid against each other, slow and easy. There was nothing hurried or urgent about it. "Hmmm...Bella," I whispered, feeling that familiar response in my lower region.

She sort of pushed against me with her hips, and it was the sweetest kind of torture. Because I knew that there wasn't a damned thing I could do to alleviate the ache. I whispered in her ear, "You're gonna pay for that Bella."

The Bigger They Are

"Promises, promises..." She pulled away slightly and gave me a slightly less passionate kiss. My dick and I sulked together. She laughed at me, but didn't move away from my embrace so I couldn't be too upset. I kissed her.

"Ewww, gross," I heard a voice mutter. I turned to see Jake who was shuffling by us on his way to the kitchen.

"We've been busted," I murmured, but I didn't move away from her. I gave Jake a wink.

He shook his head at me. Apparently it was too early in the morning to see your mother kissing someone. *Anyone*.

Luckily, we hadn't been doing too much more than standing really close and kissing. Thank God we hadn't been groping each other. Thank God it hadn't been Emmett who saw us. Thank God she had untucked (and when the *hell* had she actually done that?) my shirt so that it fell below my belt and hid my all-too-obvious erection. She had even left my shirt buttoned, which sort of threw me.

Bella tugged my hand and dragged me to the kitchen. "Come on, you big manly man, we need to make Jake some breakfast."

Soon Bella and I were making French toast and giving each other little innocent kisses every now and then while Jake looked on with amused resignation. He wasn't really upset with us and Bella knew it. It seemed that we were going to ease the boys into accepting our physical relationship, kiss by kiss and touch by touch. Slow and easy, we'd allow the boys to see that we were getting more serious about each other. It had worked between the two of us; I only hoped the boys would be as receptive.

Before too long, Seth ambled down, followed closely by Emmett. Sam was the last to shuffle down. Once the boys and Bella were eating and I had indulged in one or two servings of the same, I asked Bella what was on the agenda for the day.

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She sighed. "Well, I have to go get some supplies for the school year," she said. "Not just stuff for the boys, but for my classroom too."

The four boys groaned. Apparently they were familiar with this routine. "Aw, Mom," Emmett said. "I hate school shopping."

I thought about it before I made the offer. I really did. For once. "Uh...I could go with you and uh...help?" I had no clue what one did for school shopping, or even what Bella needed to buy. But I was willing to help, especially if it meant I could spend the day with Bella. And it couldn't be *too* involved, could it? It was just shopping after all.

The grin on her face told me she had been hoping I would offer. Sucker. "Okay," she said. "When I have to get stuff for my classroom maybe you could take the boys to the arcade or something?"

This suggestion got the full approval of the boys and Emmett jumped up to claim the shower first. "Don't take forever!" Bella yelled after him and then she looked at me. I started laughing. I couldn't help it.

~TBTA~

School shopping for four boys proved to be...interesting. Honestly, I was a little overwhelmed. Bella didn't even have a list in her hand, yet I could see her mentally checking off things as she went. Of course, she had a lot of practice. Boxers for four boys. Check, check, check, and check. Socks enough for an Army? Done. And the boys each had to have their own special kind. When I asked if it wouldn't be easier to just buy a bunch of the same, Bella made a face. "Yeah, it would be easier now, but down the road it would just make things harder."

She must have seen the confusion on my face and she laughed. "Okay, when I buy them each a different kind, it makes it very easy to tell which socks go in which dresser just at a glance. Emmett has low cut white socks, Sam prefers crew socks, Jake likes ones with a band of color and Seth likes a special brand with gold toes." She shrugged.

The Bigger They Are

Oh. It seemed there was an art to even just buying socks for a large family. I admit, I was impressed at how effortless Bella made it seem. Then there were shorts and jeans and tee-shirts. Dozens of tee-shirts. Jake liked bright colors, unless it was a Star Wars tee, which tended to come in black. Sam preferred earth tones like green and brown. Seth liked anything red or yellow. And Emmett liked blue. A few dress shirts, though each of the boys groaned when Bella made them pick out two each. "I'm not wearing it," Emmett muttered.

"I think Rosalie will like this color on you," Bella murmured casually. Emmett then volunteered to buy *four* of the nicer shirts and Bella hid her grin. Bella James was a dangerous adversary.

Shoe shopping was a trip. Emmett was already wearing a size 14 and that made buying shoes a bit challenging. Jake insisted that he'd only wear Star Wars shoes and so Bella trekked through three stores to find them in his size. She had the patience of a saint. Sam only wanted shoes that tied, no Velcro thank you very much. Seth just asked for black shoes, which seemed to make Bella's shoulder slump with relief.

We got all of that done before we stopped for lunch, though admittedly lunch was a bit late. I don't think any of us had the energy to look for anything healthier, so McDonald's it was. Jake got his special meal and once again he had to shove it in Emmett's face. Seth distracted him by reminding him of the arcade we were going to later in the day and discussing what games they wanted to play.

Then Bella announced it was time for her to hit the office supply place. The boys cheered because they knew they were on their way to the arcade. It was decided that I would drop Bella off and then take the boys. She would text me when she was close to being done and the boys and I would go get her and help her load her purchases. Through it all, the cast hadn't slowed her down one bit. I wondered what next year would be like, especially considering she wouldn't be encumbered by the cast. I was beginning to feel like I should have worked out in preparation. Bella could teach a drill sergeant a trick or two about reducing a man to exhausted tears. I was ready to beg for mercy.

The Bigger They Are

Honestly, it was a relief to take the boys to the arcade. All I had to do there was hand out some cash and sit down. I guess the boys were as tired as I was because after about thirty minutes, all four returned to the table where I was sitting. They each had drinks and they sucked them down in about two minutes. I looked at Seth. "So...is it like this every year?" I had to ask. I had to know.

Seth grimaced. "Sometimes it's worse," he admitted.

"No way," I said, shaking my head. "Not possible."

"Just wait until we get the school supplies she won't find at the office store for the price she wants," Sam piped up. "She's not going pay more than she has to."

Emmett sighed. "That means..."

"Comparison shopping," all four boys said together with loud groans.

I had to laugh. They all wore identical, morose expressions.

"Yeah, but at least this year we got to come to the arcade while Mom was at the office store," Jake reminded them.

"And not enough energy to really enjoy it," Emmett muttered.

"Yeah, but still..." Jake mumbled. I ruffled his hair and then my phone vibrated. It was Bella. She was in line to pay for her stuff.

"Wow, that was fast," I said as the boys got their feet. "She must not have had much to buy." The boys exchanged looks and started snickering.

"What?" I looked at them. "What's so funny?"

Seth shook his head. "You'll see."

Sam snorted. "You've gotta see it to believe it." All four boys nodded.

The Bigger They Are

~TBTA~

I saw. I believed.

I knew my jaw dropped when I pulled up to the store and saw Bella standing there with her cart absolutely *full* of bags. Others must have had the same idea because there were two other carts near her. I turned off the engine and jumped out, the four boys following me. I opened up the back of the Suburban, very glad I had all of the extra cargo room. I pushed her cart to the back so I could load up her purchases.

Then I noticed Emmett and Seth pushing the other two carts my way. "Hey boys, those aren't-"

Bella nodded. "Oh yes they are," she said and she slid into the front seat, leaning down. I suspected she might be rubbing at her leg. Walking around with that heavy cast must get tiring.

I looked at Emmett. "Really?" I asked quietly, indicating the dozens of bags.

"Really," he confirmed. "It's like this every year."

"You guys go through this much stuff?" I didn't even want to think about how much money this stuff cost.

He shrugged, loading up the bags his brothers were passing to us. "Some of it's for us, sure. But it's for her class mostly. She's gotta have a lot of stuff to make her classroom run and she's gotta buy it."

That blew my mind. Bella was not only expected to teach them, but to supply her classroom out of her own pocket? I looked in some of the bags. Hand sanitizer. Tissues. Pencils. Paper. There was a lot more that went into teaching than I had suspected and I suddenly respected Bella even more.

When we finally got it all loaded, Bella turned to me and sighed. "I'll finish up later," she said. "I'm beat."

The Bigger They Are

"Us too," Sam said.

Bella smiled back at him. "What do you say, Edward? Can we go to your house for a swim after we unload all this crap at my house?"

"I thought you'd never ask," I answered with a grin.

Fic Rec: There Fell a Stillness is back up. Read it. Now. Please. It's SO good you won't believe it. It's by HappyInLove and is listed in my favorites.

Chapter 39 Love at First Sight

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 39: Love at First Sight

The evening was lazy and quiet with the boys playing in the background. Bella and I watched them swim. We listened to them tease each other. And through it all, we talked and laughed. We had known each other long enough that we had our own little inside jokes, and I liked the intimacy that seemed to deepen between us. I was getting to know her and the boys better and better. I knew that Jake tugged on his ear when he was tired and that Emmett sometimes flushed because he was shy. I knew that Seth was the gentlest of the boys and that he despised white chocolate, preferring dark chocolate instead. I knew that Sam was interested in all things scientific, but most especially astronomy and anything to do with animals. And I knew that Bella loved me.

I put some chicken on the grill and Bella somehow came up with homemade macaroni and cheese and some sort of green bean casserole type of thing. Apparently, my pantry was like some sort of wardrobe from Narnia or something. Or maybe it was just Bella who was working the magic. We ate. We talked some more and laughed a lot. Bella was funny. The boys were in rare form.

It was a comfortable, homey feeling to be sitting there with her, the sounds of four kids filling up the background. I liked it. A lot.

So when I saw Bella drooping with fatigue, I hated the thought of taking her home. But I also didn't like seeing the exhaustion in her face, the smudges under her eyes. "Hey, babe," I murmured. "You look tired. Let me take you and the boys home."

The Bigger They Are

I knew she must have been just about to drop because she did nothing more than give me a nod. I collected the boys, helped them find their stuff (though how they managed to spread it all over the house in just a few hours was beyond me), and got them ready to go.

When I walked away from Bella's house, it felt wrong. And when I saw her house growing smaller in the rearview mirror, I was struck by an almost irresistible urge to turn around and beg to sleep on her couch.

The next morning I woke up in my bed alone. Again. It was funny; I was *used* to sleeping alone, even more accustomed to waking up alone. Not that I'd ever kicked women out after we'd had sex, just that usually I was alone in my bed. While I had had casual sex, I hadn't been having it in great quantities. So waking up alone should have been the norm for me, comfortable and familiar.

And it had been - until Bella.

Now when I woke up hugging nothing more than my pillow I felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness. When I had my solitary breakfast of toast and coffee, I wanted noise and conversation and the thunder of feet on the stairs. I wanted to see Bella's sleepy face across from mine as she sipped her coffee and slowly became human. I wanted to wake up beside her and laugh about morning breath and the urgent need to pee. None of it was particularly *romantic*, but it was *intimate*, and I wanted that with her.

I wanted to build a life with her eventually. I wanted to stress out over school shopping and help her get her classroom set up for the coming year. I wanted to discuss my plans for our future with her. I wanted to share with her the dream I had had for a while now of opening my own little joint where guys just like me could enjoy a beer and a baseball game on the television.

On my way to Bella's house, I realized that we had never really discussed me coming over today. It had just sort of been assumed that I would. I liked that; I liked the fact that we were both thinking that we wanted to spend our time together. But when I had left Bella's house last night, she had kissed me and said quietly, "I'll see you in the morning. I'll have coffee ready for you." There

The Bigger They Are

had been no question in her voice, just the simple expectation that I would be there.

When I got to Bella's house, the door opened before I even turned off the engine. Jake came running out and screeched to a halt by my door, barely giving me enough room to open it and climb out. "Hey," he said. "I've been waiting *forever*," he complained.

I ruffled his hair. He frowned. He straightened. Routine complete. "Sorry about that," I apologized, though I hadn't been aware we were on a schedule. "I guess I slept in."

"You sound like Sam," Jake observed as he took my hand and led me inside. "He loves to sleep. I don't get it. Sleeping is boring."

I laughed. "You won't think so when you're a grown-up," I assured him.

Jake frowned up at me. "Oh yes I will."

"Okay, if you say so," I replied. "Is your mom up?"

"Yep," he told me. "She's on her second cup of coffee so we can talk to her now." I smirked at that. Bella really wasn't exactly a morning person. Before her first cup of coffee most communication was carried out in the form of grunts. *Before* the second cup, you got one word answers. As soon as she finished that second cup, she was her normal, sarcastic and funny self. I resolved then and there to make sure we never ran out of coffee.

I gave Bella a quick kiss when she shuffled out of the kitchen. Bare feet. My favorite. Dark blue nail polish this time. Interesting choice. New. I liked it. She saw where my gaze was and wiggled her toes for me. Tease.

The boys, with the exception of Sam, were eating cereal for breakfast. Of course, Emmett's portion was in something approaching the size of a mixing bowl. Then he had some peanut butter toast, four slices in fact. "For protein," he remarked as I watched him slather peanut butter on the bread.

The Bigger They Are

I slid up beside Bella and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, mostly as an excuse to touch her. "Hey, I was wondering if you'd mind if I took Seth off for an hour or two this morning?"

She frowned and shook her head. "No, of course not. Why?"

I just smiled at her and shrugged. "Guy stuff," I answered.

Bella rolled her eyes at me. "Hey Seth? You want to go out with Edward for a while this morning?"

Seth shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

I had to smile at his immediate acceptance, and unlike his mother he didn't even ask why. Jake frowned at me though.

"How come you're taking him and not me?" Jake asked. Uh oh. I had to do some damage control.

I sat down beside him. "I have something I want to do with Seth," I explained. "And I promise that I'll take you someplace by yourself."

"When?" He sensed weakness like any good predator.

"This weekend," I answered.

"Which day this weekend?"

"Uh...tomorrow morning?" I looked at Bella and she nodded, not even trying to hide her smile.

Jake's eyes narrowed. "What are we gonna do?"

"What do you *want* to do?" I asked.

"You're the grown-up," he pointed out.

The Bigger They Are

"But you're the Jake," I said with a wink. "And what the Jake says, goes."

Bella groaned. "Oh don't tell him that! We'll never hear the end of it around here."

Emmett nodded. "Seriously, Edward, you can't just tell him that stuff. He'll get ideas."

I ignored them and watched as Jake's expression grew sly. "Okay, let me think about it and I'll let you know."

I had a feeling that I might regret giving Jake carte blanche, but I wasn't going to back down now. There was the principle of the matter to uphold. Besides, I didn't want to look like an ass in front of Emmett or Bella. Seth just shook his head at me. I could almost hear his thoughts. *Deep shit, my man. Deeeeeeep shit.*

~TBTA~

Half an hour later, Seth and I were driving toward our destination. It was a fact of life that surrounding any military base, there were a lot of pawn shops. Along with tattoo parlors and strip bars, pawn shops were a staple of military life. It might have been a cliché, but they *all* got a lot of business from those serving our country. I had been in my share of pawn shops, not so much the tattoo places. I had no comment on the strip bars. Let's just say those days are over. Today I was taking Seth to a pawn shop, several in fact if we didn't find what I was looking for at the first one. We would take our time. We could afford to be picky.

Of course, Seth had no idea where we were going or what we were doing. In typical Seth fashion, however, he just went along for the ride, enjoying the experience. When I pulled into the parking lot of the first one, he looked at me with curiosity.

"Trust me," I said with a grin.

The Bigger They Are

Seth shrugged and got out of the Suburban, following me inside. I immediately went to the section of the store where the musical instruments were displayed. "Uh...can I ask...?"

I looked at Seth. "Sure, we're here to get you your own guitar," I said. "See anything that makes you drool?"

Seth's eyes got wide, and then a huge grin spread across his face. "For real? A guitar? For me?"

"That's the general idea," I said. "You didn't think I was gonna let you use *mine* all the time, did you?"

"I guess I never really thought about it," he answered honestly.

"Well, if you want to play the guitar, then you need to own one," I said, turning back to the display. "I figure we'll start out with an acoustic, like I have. Then later on if you decide you really like it maybe we can talk to your mom about an electric guitar and an amplifier." He grinned even wider and I knew he was having visions of being a rock star in his head. Yeah, we all did it.

Seth picked up a few and tried them out, seeing how they felt in his hands. Nothing clicked, but that was okay. There were a lot of pawnshops to try. I told him we would try another place and he nodded.

It was in the third shop that his eyes locked in on one hanging up on the top row of hooks. It was kind of dusty and a little battered. It had seen better days, but I could imagine that it had made a lot of music in its time. "You want to give it a try?" I asked when his eyes kept darting away from the newer, shinier guitars to the relic in the top corner.

He licked his lips and finally nodded. "Yeah," he said.

The owner, sensing a possible sale, approached us and offered to get it down for us. A few moments later, he was handing it to Seth. After a moment's pause, Seth reached for it with reverent hands. He had that look on his face that

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a boy gets when he gets his first car or kisses his first girl. It was like watching someone fall in love.

The object of Seth's affection was a sadly out of tune Taylor guitar, but that little flaw was easily remedied. Seth strummed a few discordant notes on it, not seeming to hear anything wrong. He looked up at me and grinned. That smile told me all that I needed to know.

"Okay then," I said. "I think we've got a winner." Seth looked relieved that I wasn't going to try and talk him into a different instrument. But I knew better than to argue with fate, and that particular guitar just seemed right in his hands. Sometimes you just knew.

The owner looked at me and then at Seth. "Going to teach your boy how to play the guitar?" It was an innocent question, but I didn't know how Seth would respond, so I let him answer.

Seth was still looking down at the guitar, mesmerized by the feel and look of the somewhat shabby guitar. "Yeah," he answered absently.

"That's the plan," I added with a grin, trying to ignore the way my heart felt like it had grown in my chest. "We'll take it."

~TBTA~

We arrived home triumphant. A quick stop at a music store to buy new strings and a case and some picks and other little odds and ends, as well as to get it tuned, and Seth had a decent guitar to his name. It was old enough that some of the gloss had worn off the finish in places, but Seth insisted that just gave it character. I had to agree with him. He had gotten himself a nice instrument and had done so through sheer instinct.

Jake raced to meet us in the driveway. He must have radar in his head. Seth proudly showed his mother the guitar and she looked at me in question. "If he wants to learn to play it, he's got to have one to practice on," I explained. "Besides, I need to get some practice in myself. I've gotten rusty, I'm sure."

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Emmett grabbed it and struck a "chord" and then began warbling dreadfully. It was clear that he could neither dance *nor* sing, but he did both with great enthusiasm. Seth grabbed it back and petted it like a frightened animal. It was clear that this was love at first sight. I left Seth with his new love.

~TBTA~

There was a calendar in Bella's kitchen and looking at it, I realized that we were into August already. That meant that Bella had a birthday coming up. I wanted to do it right, even if I did set the bar high for later celebrations. I glanced ahead at September and saw that her birthday fell on a Saturday. Perfect.

Now, what to get her?

I tried to think of what a busy mother of four would want. Then Bella was stepping into the kitchen behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. "That was very sweet of you," she whispered into my back.

I turned around and kissed her forehead. "Well, it was really the only practical solution if he really wants to learn to play."

"Yes, but what you did, that went above and beyond the call of duty," she said softly. Her eyes were shining. I knew that the way to Bella's hearts was through her boys. It was a good thing that I honestly loved them because I knew she would be able to tell the difference between a good show and genuine emotion.

"It was my pleasure," I assured her. I smiled. "Besides, there's nothing like seeing a boy fall in love."

"Kind of like the lightning bolt, huh?" she guessed. So she had seen it too. Of course she had. She was an exceptionally observant woman.

"He would have done Michael Corleone proud," I said. She grinned and I knew she got it. That was the other thing I had noticed about us - our minds were often in sync, sometimes in scary ways.

The Bigger They Are

"Well, I just wanted to let you know how much it meant to me that you'd go out of your way to-

"Whoa stop right there," I interrupted. "It wasn't out of my way, Bella. I want to be here, I want to be in your life, and those boys' lives. So what I did..." I shrugged. "That's just what I *should* do. You shouldn't expect anything less of me." I settled a stern look on her and she giggled. God help me. "Got it?"

She saluted me smartly, "Yes sir, Sergeant Major Cullen, sir."

"Smart ass," I mumbled as I moved in for a kiss.

""That's Colonel Smart Ass to you," she retorted.

"I seem to remember a salute," I reminded her.

She pushed her hips against mine. "I seem to remember a whole *different* kind of salute," Bella whispered.

I groaned. "Cheesy, babe, cheesy."

"Kiss me and shut up," she commanded.

I did. She outranked me after all.

~TBTA~

Later, we were sitting on the couch watching whatever it was the boys had left on the television when they scattered to different directions in the house. I could hear Seth upstairs getting acquainted with his Taylor. Jake was outside running and yelling. I wasn't sure what he found enjoyable in that, but he sounded happy. He was like a big puppy, just sort of running around for the hell of it. Emmett was upstairs on the phone. When Rosalie called he disappeared, often for an hour at a time Bella told me with a roll of her eyes. And Sam was sitting out back with a new book that had come in the mail for him from his grandmother. All four boys were happily occupied, which left me

The Bigger They Are

kind of alone with their mother.

Life was good.

Bella looked a little tired, so I encouraged her to lie down on the couch and put her feet in my lap so I could massage one and let the casted one rest on my legs. I began rubbing her foot and she gave a little groan. There was a predictable reaction from my dick, but I ignored that for the moment.

"Oh God, Edward," she moaned. "That feels soooooo good."

I smiled, even though her eyes were closed and she couldn't see me. "I like the new color," I said as I pulled lightly on her toes. I knew from experience how good that felt when your feet were tired. And besides, her feet were so pretty.

"Hmmm..."

An idea for a birthday gift came to me. Any single mom of four would love a little pampering, right? "Where do you go to get your pedicures?" I knew from experience that women liked to go and indulge in a little bit of pampering. Almost every woman I had dated had blathered on and on about spa days and pedicures and manicures and, God help me, waxing. I had tried to block a lot of it out with polite nods and murmured responses, but now I was glad that some of it had actually seeped into my brain.

Then Bella laughed and looked at me like I was crazy. "You're kidding, right?"

I didn't get what was so funny. "No." She must have seen the confusion on my face. I had stopped massaging, so she gave me a poke with her toes and I got back on the job. "You, Mr. Cullen, live in a fantasy world if you think that I have time to go to a spa and get a pedicure on a weekly, or hell, even a *monthly* basis!" She moaned as I hit a particularly sensitive spot. "A spa would be a treat that I could only indulge in once a decade or so." She sighed. "Maybe when all the boys are out of the house."

The Bigger They Are

"Oh." Of course she didn't have that kind of time. And I should have realized that I had never heard of her speak of any appointments. "So you...?"

She snorted. "I'm a 'do-it-yourself' kind of girl, Edward." Then she closed her eyes and poked me with her toes again. "Hey, I didn't say you could stop, you know."

"Yes, ma'am," I said and began rubbing.

Hmmm....what to do, what to do?

I looked down at Bella's feet in my lap. I remembered how scared I had been when she got that stupid cast. The accident...how the boys had reacted...how we had worked together that day to take care of her...

Take care of her.

What we had done that day while she slept.

Suddenly, I knew the perfect gift for Bella's birthday. It would require some help and cooperation from the boys, but I had a feeling that they would like the gift as much as Bella would. And if things went the way I expected that they would between Bella and me, then the boys would need the reassurance that their father was still their father. Mac still had his place in this family.

Bella and I continued talking quietly, but my mind was racing a mile a minute. And for once it wasn't how to get Bella alone so I could put my hands and mouth all over her. When her eyes started to droop, I lifted her foot, placed one kiss on her instep. "Why don't you sleep for a little while? The last few days have been pretty busy. I'll keep an eye on the boys."

I knew she was exhausted when she did no more than give me a sleepy nod and roll over, tucking her hands beneath her face like a little girl. As soon as I thought she was good and asleep, I carefully removed her feet from my lap and placed them on couch, being mindful of the cast.

The Bigger They Are

Then I searched out Emmett. I'd need some cooperation if this idea was going to work.

Ch 40: Keeping Places, Making Places

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Chapter 40: Keeping Places, Making Places

Emmett was conveniently tromping down the stairs when I started up them. "Shhh..." I whispered, putting my finger to my lips. "Your mom is taking a nap." Emmett looked surprised and then nodded. I already knew enough to know that Bella wasn't the napping kind. She must have really been worn out.

I motioned him outside because there was less chance of Bella waking and sneaking up on us as I made my plans. If I could pull this off, it would be the perfect birthday present. It wouldn't be just for Bella, but for the boys too. It would set a tone for the future, a future I desperately wanted to share with them.

Emmett's expression was priceless and I closed the sliding glass door behind me. "Your mom has a birthday coming up next month."

He nodded. "Yeah, she does that every year." He gave me a wicked grin and I ignored the sarcasm because I was getting really excited over my idea. I just hoped that he would share my enthusiasm, because if he didn't, if the boys didn't, then the idea was pretty much a bust. So I had to get their approval first.

"I want to run something by you first, and then I want to ask your brothers," I said. "But I wanted to start with you." Emmett was sometimes a bit prickly, but I knew he needed to be reassured of his place. He was still the oldest James son. He remembered the most about his father. He had been looking out for Bella for two years. It wouldn't go well if I came in like I owned the place and

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tried to shove him over. Not to mention the fact that Bella would poke me with those pointy hands of hers. Ouch.

"Okay," he said uncertainly.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure that Bella wasn't standing at the glass door. She could probably read lips or had supersonic hearing or some shit like that, and I wanted to at least *try* and keep this a surprise. "Well, remember when your mom was sleeping off the drugs they gave her at the hospital?"

Emmett nodded.

"Do you remember when I went back to my house and I came back and you guys were watching home movies?" I looked in his face for any clue where I was going with this. He nodded again but looked sort of like people do when they're humoring a crazy person. I sighed and ran my hands through my hair. "Well, those movies, they're all on VHS video tapes, right?"

Emmett shrugged. "Yeah."

"Okay, what I'd like to do, if you and your brothers are okay with it, is have those home movies transferred to DVDs. That way you won't have to worry about the tapes breaking one day, or not being able to find a dinosaur VHS player to play them on." Emmett snorted and gave a nod.

He looked thoughtful for a long moment and then his eyes locked with mine. "You do know that almost all of them have my dad in them, right?" He sounded like he thought I didn't realize that. Did he forget that I had actually *seen* a few of them?

I nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"And you want to transfer them to DVD to make it easier for Mom to have them to watch?" He sounded skeptical and I guess I couldn't blame him. Maybe I was supposed to hate Mac on general principle. But how could I? Bella had loved him. The boys had loved him. They still did, and that was a good thing

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because he had been a huge part of their lives. If it had been me, I wouldn't have wanted them to forget *me*. And Mac deserved better than that, and so did Bella and the boys.

I didn't have a rule book for how this was supposed to go, but it seemed like accepting that Mac was, and always would be, a part of them would be the wisest, and kindest, way to go. My father had often told Masen and I that we should start off as we meant to continue. I thought that this might do that. Perhaps it would reassure the boys that I wasn't trying to take their father's place. I was just trying to make my *own* place in their family. Before we took our relationship to the next level, it might help them to see that Mac was still important. He was important to them, and that meant he was important to me. He was, in a strange way, responsible for my happiness. How empty had my life been before that broken windshield and a non-Medusa with four boys hurtled their way into it?

"I think it would mean a lot to your mom," I explained. "And then you boys wouldn't have to worry about losing all of that." I shrugged. "Eventually, we could even make copies for each one of you to have your own. It's a lot easier with DVDs."

Emmett was silent for so long that I thought he absolutely hated the idea and was just trying to figure out how to tell me how stupid it was. Then he looked up at me and smiled. "Yeah, I think that would be cool."

High praise from Emmett. I'd get him on Team Edward yet. I smiled in return. "Good, I mean, great."

"Let's go upstairs and let the others know," Emmett said, already opening the door to go inside.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Wait...I mean...you really do think it's a decent idea right? You're not just trying to make me feel better?"

A look of amusement flashed across his face. "Yeah, because I'm all about worrying about your tender feelings."

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"Yeah, I see your point," I replied dryly.

He nodded and motioned inside. "Sometime today would be good," he said. "Mom won't sleep forever and with your luck, Jake will come tearing down those stairs yelling for her to look at something."

Emmett had a point.

A few moments later, we were both walking quietly up the stairs and I had a revelation. Emmett *could* walk quietly. I knew it. I always suspected. And now I had proof. He was *so* busted.

Emmett told his brothers to meet him in his and Seth's room and it didn't take long. They all moved quickly to what I was guessing were their usual places. I had a feeling that they gathered like this often, probably to discuss problem situations like yours truly. In any case, no one seemed upset at the moment. Good. They probably just wondered what the hell was up.

"Okay, we all know Mom's birthday is coming up next month," Emmett began. I had thought it best to let him lead off this little meeting.

"Yeah, just like last year and the year before that and the year before that and the-" Seth said. Apparently, sarcasm ran in the family.

"Yeah, I got it," Emmett said with a sigh. "Anyway, Edward - *Mr.* Edward here has an idea for a gift."

I was really going to have to talk to Bella about the whole "Mr. Edward" thing. Even the kids knew it was getting cumbersome.

Emmett looked at each of his brothers. "He wants to put all our old home movies on DVD so they won't get ruined and mom will have them forever." Emmett wasn't one for long, drawn out explanations.

I saw all the boys exchange looks. It was easy enough to read their expressions. Mostly, it boiled down to two things. One, "What's in this for *him*?" and two,

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"Why would he want our home movies of Dad?"

I decided to address both issues and perhaps lay the groundwork for the future. I had to think long term here.

I cleared my throat and four pairs of eyes turned my way. "I know all of your movies are on VHS. One day soon that ancient player of yours is going to break and it's gonna be a helluva chore to find another one that works." The boys all nodded. They shared the male propensity to adore gadgets. If it was new and shiny, we wanted it. "So, your mom is going to be upset when that happens and I don't like to see your mom upset." Four heads nodded again. No one liked for Bella to be upset. No one. "So if we put all the movies on DVD, then she'll have them. Forever. And each of you could have your own set eventually. We'd just make copies and then you'd all have them."

I let that settle.

"Uh...why would you care?" Seth asked quietly. "I'm not asking to be rude, I'm just curious." He looked at his brothers. Jake and Sam nodded. Emmett shrugged. He had made it clear that this was now my show.

"I care because I care about your mother," I said. I took a deep breath. There was no way of telling how this was going to go over. "And I care about you guys. And what *you* care about, *I* care about. These movies are important to all of you, so they're important to me. But most of all, I think your mom would really like it if we could do this for her."

Sam was the one who answered. "I think it's a great idea," he said simply. "Mom will love it. And I've been thinking we should transfer them to DVD too." Of course Sam would be thinking that way. I had to smile at him and shake my head ruefully. He was always fifteen steps ahead of everyone else. I could only be grateful that he wasn't a conceited little snout. That brain with a bratty personality would have been a horrifying combination.

"Okay," Jake said agreeably. If his brothers and I thought it would make his mom happy, then Jake was all for it.

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"Though you know..." Sam mused. He looked at me. "We could really do it right. Not just transfer the movies."

I met his eyes and I nodded. I could see exactly where he was going with this and it was true, the kid was a fucking genius. "Right," I said.

"Mind letting us normal folks in on the conversation?" Emmett asked dryly. "We don't all speak brainiac."

Sam looked at his brother. "We could add pictures." He shrugged. "You can put a lot of pictures on a DVD."

"We should call Grandma," Jake added. "She's got *tons* of pictures."

"Good idea, Jake," Sam said with a grin. "Seth?"

"She'd like it," he agreed. "Who is going to work all this magic?" Seth asked, looking at me.

"I've got a buddy," I answered. That was the great thing about the Army. You *always* had a buddy. I shrugged. "He's good at that sh...stuff." The boys all smirked at me. "He can even add music to the still pictures, so maybe you guys should let me know what your mom would like."

Their faces lit up at that suggestion, though I had a sneaking feeling that Jake would suggest the Imperial March from Star Wars. Yeah, I had looked that shit up too.

"Great idea," Jake said and then slid off Seth's bed. The phone was still in Emmett's room from his talk with Rosalie and the next thing I knew, Jake had dialed the phone. Then before I could even ask who he was talking to, he said, "Hey, Grandma?"

I groaned and sank down on the bed. The kid was seriously going to kill me. *Now* he picks as the time not to procrastinate? I had envisioned working up my courage over the space of a few days before I called Renee Swan. But maybe it

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was better this way. Jake could soften her up, ease into the conversation for me. Then the little traitor struck again.

"Here, Edward wants to talk to you," he said, handing me the phone immediately.

I sighed in resignation. I motioned for Sam to watch the door to make sure Bella didn't find us or hear us.

"Hello, Mrs. Swan?" I asked politely.

"Oh call me Renee," she replied.

"Uh, sure, ma'am," I answered, shifting on my feet and swallowing hard. This made the boys laugh and I rolled my eyes at them and turned my back to them. If I was going to make faces or blush I didn't want an audience. "Listen, the boys and I were talking about Bella's birthday and we thought that maybe she'd like it if we transferred all of their old home movies to DVD."

"The old home movies with Mac?" she asked, obviously surprised. What *was* it with people? Did they honestly think I'd do myself any good by ignoring Mac's existence? I wasn't stupid. That would have been relationship suicide with Bella, but mostly with these boys.

"Yes, all of them," I answered, "I think Bella would appreciate having them on a more durable format."

"Well, yes, I suppose she would," Renee answered with a little laugh. "How considerate of you to think of that."

"I just want to make her birthday special, ma'am."

"Well that would do it," Renee agreed.

"Sam thought maybe we could put some family pictures on DVD for her too," I added. "You know of Bella and Will as kids, that sort of stuff."

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"I'm sure she'd love that," Renee's growing enthusiasm was clear and I felt myself relaxing.

"Do you think I could borrow some of your family pictures to do that?"

"We'll be in town in ten days, I'll bring them with me then so I don't to worry about mailing them. If you aren't finished up with them by the time we leave, I'll just have you hold onto them until our next visit. How does that sound?"

Besides the fact that I now know there's a next visit? "Perfect. Thank you," I said. "This will really mean a lot to Bella." I cleared my throat. "And to me."

"You know I think we have some of them scanned if you want to get started now. If you'll just give me your email address I'll have Charlie send what we've got."

Wonderful. Now the Colonel would have my email address. Of course, he probably had it already. Along with my blood type, shoe size, and the name of the woman I'd given my virginity to when I was nineteen years old. An old-timer like him would have buddies too, right? And those buddies probably had some very interesting connections.

"Edward," Renee murmured. "I must say I'm impressed."

"Uh, excuse me, ma'am?" Once more I was shifting and swallowing and probably turning red. Stupid red-head's skin.

"I'm just impressed that you realize that Mac can't be forgotten," Renee said. "Not if you want to make a real life with Bella or those boys." She paused and then said gently. "And you do want that, don't you?"

I paused and cleared my throat. "Yes, ma'am." There. It was out. Simple. "When the time is right," I added.

I could feel the boys' eyes boring into my back. I had to be very careful. I cleared my throat again. "So...if you have a pen and paper I'll give you my

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email address and I would be very grateful if the Colonel - er, your husband - could send me those."

Renee laughed softly. "I'll make sure to get *the Colonel* on that right away," she teased.

"Yes, ma'am, thank you ma'am." I gave her my email address.

"Thank *you*, Edward," Renee replied. "Thank you very much."

I had survived yet another conversation with Bella's Mom. I rocked the mom thing, yes I did.

~TBTA~

I put the boys on home movie detail. I was going to have them sneak one a day to me. Then Sam came up with the brilliant idea (surprise, surprise) of just taking the tapes out of the cases and leaving the cases in their usual spots. They promised to take care of it. They were completely on board with the idea and would do whatever it took. I had a feeling that Jake would be assigned to distraction duty when they filched the tapes. Nobody could distract like Jake.

Then I'd take the movies to my buddy and he'd put them on DVD for us. He could add music and special little touches that would really make the whole thing that much more unique. My guy, Thor, was good. I had seen some of the work he had done when a friend had gotten married. Thor and I ran into each other all the time; this was the third time we had been stationed on the same base.

I also had the boys coming up with music suggestions. It would be interesting to see what they presented me with. Seth would go old school rock, I already knew that. Jake was the wild card. He could come up with anything and probably would. God that kid owned me and he knew it, the little stinker.

Before Bella woke up, I had the Emmett and Sam sneak into her room and sneak some pictures out of the boxes in her closet. I didn't want to go in there

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in case I had a "reaction" to being in her closet like I did the last time. That shit would be embarrassing with her kids around. And it wasn't like I could really explain it either. So...better to let them get the pictures.

I stowed the contraband photos in my vehicle and was back sitting on the couch, looking as innocent as I could by the time Bella woke up. She blinked sleepily at me. "Hey you," she murmured. She was always pretty confused when she first woke up; it was really cute. I had to repress the urge to really mess with her head. That would come later, when she knew me a little better. Masen wasn't the only pain in the ass in the family.

The boys and I decided to do some hot dogs on the grill while Bella made some potato salad. Then I rummaged through her cabinets and found all the ingredients I needed for my special baked bean recipe. The boys liked spicy foods, even Jake, so I only cut the spices in half. Normally I would have left most of them out, but these kids had a Cajun's palate.

By the time we got dinner together, it was twilight and the cicadas were singing. The boys were good-naturedly giving each other shit while we ate. I just sat back and listened. Honestly, this was one of my favorite things about her boys. They were typical brothers, and that meant that harassed each other on a daily basis. But I could tell that if anyone *else* bothered one of them, there would be three others just standing there, waiting to step in. That's what brothers did and these kids knew that.

Bella told me my beans were too hot and all the boys snorted at her, manfully shoveling it in with big spoonfuls. Honestly, I think Emmett found them a little too hot and I caught sneaking some from the separate batch I had made for Bella. Jake had the best tolerance, though Sam wasn't far behind. Sam then told us about the heat index or something of different peppers. He said one day he wanted to try a ghost pepper, which apparently had a heat index of one million or something. I told him I thought I'd pass on that. Jake said he'd like to try it too. Bella rolled her eyes at both of them.

After dinner, Jake announced that he had a craving for ice cream. Bella looked like she would enjoy some too. For once, however, there was no ice cream to

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be found in the James' household. I looked at Bella. "It looks like we need to go get ice cream."

Jake and Sam cheered.

We all piled into my Suburban, though Jake expressed his disappointment that we weren't in the Vader-Mobile. I told him he would have to name mine, though I shuddered to think what his inventive little mind would come up with. He promised to give it a lot of thought, which did nothing to reassure me. I caught Seth's eyes in the mirror and he snorted. Yeah, he knew. *De eep shit.*

We all ordered ice cream, Jake finally conning his Mom into a Gotta-Have-It. All of the boys followed suit. Bella and I were more responsible and mature and ordered Love-It sizes, but we did add about six extra toppings. Hey, we paid our own dental bills so it was our wallets we were putting at risk. Bella enjoyed her ice cream a little too much, licking her spoon, licking her lips, even licking the rim of the cone (there was a lot of licking going on is what I'm saying), and even groaning.

And she laughed at my very natural reaction to all of the gratuitous licking and moaning. I just knew she was doing that shit on purpose. I decided that I should demon to her ever-growing list of titles.

On our way out to the car, I took advantage of the kids rushing ahead of us to grab her ass just a little bit, just to remind her that her actions had repercussions. She giggled but didn't look at all worried. Figured.

It started raining on the way back to Bella's house, one of those downpours that make you glad to be inside. I was anxious to get us home. Well, to Bella's home. That's when I heard Sam cry out, "Stop!"

I eased off the gas. "What's wrong?" I asked, looking back in the mirror. He was gesturing frantically.

"Stop, right up ahead!" He was pointing and practically jumping up and down in his seat, seatbelt or not.

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I looked. I saw.

Well shit.

Chapter 41: Roadside Assistance

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I honestly didn't think I was leaving an evil cliffie. I meant it when I said no dramatic left turns, LOL! I love angst; I love that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach I get when I read something really angsty and heartbreaking. But this isn't that story. So because I now feel guilty, here is the update a day early. No worries, nothing terrible has happened and the question is answered right away. And some of you guessed correctly. My apologies. I really didn't mean to make anyone worry.

Chapter 41: Roadside Assistance

I slowed down to a crawl and then pulled off to the shoulder of the road. I paused, looking at the side of the road. I would have liked to say that I was trying to make a decision, but in actuality, I'd made up my mind as soon as I'd seen what Sam was pointing out to us. One look at Bella's face told me she knew exactly what I was thinking. Busted. *So* busted.

"Stay inside," I told the boys, who all had their hands on their seatbelts. They had seen it too. Bella closed her eyes briefly and when I looked at her she just shrugged. *What are you gonna do? Just go and get the damned thing.* I could read her thoughts in her expression.

With a sigh, I got out of the truck and made my way slowly to the shivering bundle of fur and bones huddled at the side of the road. It didn't even move when I approached it, just sort of hunched over in misery and shivered some more. If I was going to do it harm, it didn't look like it would have put up much of a fight. I felt a twinge in my gut as I took in the mutt's emaciated condition. I looked at Bella through the windshield. She nodded. It was inevitable at that

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point and we both knew it.

"Hey there," I soothed. We had always had dogs growing up. It was one of the things I missed most about being in the military and single, it just made owning a pet more difficult. I was gone so much that it would have been unfair to a pet.

Slowly, the big, shaggy head lifted. Huge brown eyes looked up at me with way more trust than I would have expected. When I cautiously reached out, I got a tentative lick on the hand. The warm tongue swiped over my hand, as if asking me to be gentle and making me a promise to be a good dog.

A quick look confirmed it was a female. I could only *pray* she wasn't pregnant. She looked too skinny and her belly was too sunken to be pregnant. I could only hope I was right.

"Hey girl," I said, looking for a collar. Nothing. Judging by her wasted state, she had been on her own for a while. Her fur was full of burrs and small twigs and the pads of her feet were cracked and bleeding. Her black fur was matted and dirty and smelly. I had a feeling that she would be a beautiful dog once she'd been fattened up and groomed and...loved. She looked like she was a black lab, though it was difficult to tell if she was just mostly black lab or all black lab under the filth and rain. Whatever her particular mix, it was mostly lab. My favorite dog had been a Labrador retriever named Mrs. Beasley. Masen had named her and I had pouted for two days over that. Mrs. Beasley had died while I was at Basic. My mom told me when I came home on leave because she hadn't wanted to put the news in a letter or tell me over the phone. I still missed Mrs. Beasley at the oddest moments. She had been a good dog, the kind that stories are written about.

"Come on, then," I said, patting my leg as I stood up. She understood that well enough and sort of shuffled along beside me, seemingly ready to follow wherever I might lead her. No one trusted like a good dog.

I went around to the back of the Suburban and opened it. She'd never make the jump but I wasn't sure if she'd let me pick her up. Only one way to find out. I bent down and put one arm under her butt and the other around her chest. She

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gave a small whine and shuddered, but didn't make any aggressive moves. She sort of leaned against me as if so tired she couldn't even think of protesting.

Gingerly, I put her inside and covered her up with an old blanket I kept in there. I met Bella's eyes over the backseat. We both knew the score.

It seemed that we had just gotten ourselves a dog.

Sam was pretty much vibrating with excitement and only a sharp reprimand from his mother kept him from crawling over the seat and settling in with our new, furry little friend. He even tried the puppy dog eyes but Bella held firm. He looked at me. *Oh no, you don't.* I gave a minute shake of my head and Sam heaved a sigh, intent on sulking the rest of the way home.

About five minutes later, however, I heard him give a little chuckle. Somehow, the dog had found that small open space beside Sam's seat and I caught a glimpse of a long, pink tongue flickering out to taste him. She had apparently decided that he was her savior, and in a way he was.

I looked at him. I looked at Bella. I saw the knowledge in her eyes. There was no way in *hell* she was going to be able to get rid of the dog. Sam had appointed himself as guardian and champion of all things canine, and that canine in particular. Sam was easy going, but I knew the stubborn streak in him ran as true as it did in his mother and his brothers. I could already see the wheels turning in his head as he formulated his arguments for keeping the dog. They'd be logical, well thought out and absolutely formidable. Bella wouldn't stand a chance. That was the problem with having a kid as smart as Sam; he was always outthinking you.

Bella looked at me. "Doesn't Jasper's daughter Sarah own a cat?" She sounded resigned but not unhappy.

It took me a moment to think. "Yeah, I think so."

Bella looked back at her son - and the dog that seemed intent on expressing her affection with swipes of a wet tongue sneaking through the small, available

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space. "Do you think you could call up Jasper and ask him the name of their vet?" She sighed. "I have a feeling we're going to need one."

I knew I was grinning because Bella reached over and pinched my thigh. Ms. Pointy, pokey hands could pinch too. I scowled and rubbed at the sting. "You think I'm going to be taking care of that thing alone?" she asked softly. I only shook my head and laughed. I knew I was now part owner of a black lab. She snorted and crossed her arms over her chest. "Get ready, Cullen. Your ass is on dog grooming duty."

"Okay," I said. I had wanted a dog and now here was this mangled, scruffy dog who had stolen Sam's heart. Divine intervention if you asked me.

"Sam, you and Edward can give him...her?" Bella looked at me.

"Her," I said.

"You can give her a bath when we get home, but I expect you to scrub the tub when you're done because there's going to be a lot of dirt." She scowled at me. "And I mean you too, Edward."

"Yes, ma'am," Sam and I said together. Sam giggled. The sulky expression was gone, replaced by sheer happiness. If Sam could have flown at that moment, he would have been airborne.

When we got to Bella's house, I told the boys to let me get the dog out. Sam went around to the back of the truck with me, shifting anxiously on his feet. He looked like an expectant father or something as I opened up the back and patted the bumper. "Come on, girl," I encouraged in a soothing voice. "It's all right. No one's going to hurt you."

A weak wag of her tail and she moved forward slowly. She licked my hand once and gave me a flash of dark brown eyes before looking down at the ground. She submitted to me picking her up with patience, though her eyes did roll toward Sam. Apparently, it was a mutual love affair. Sam was practically in my shoes as he followed behind me, murmuring to the dog as I carried her

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inside.

"The boys' bathroom," Bella said after she opened the door. I carried the dog up the stairs. She didn't weigh enough and I could feel her bones through the matted fur. She was seriously malnourished.

Sam was right there with me as I took her into the bathroom. "Sam, run some warm water will you?"

He looked relieved to have something to do. I looked over my shoulder and saw the other three boys gathered there with Bella. Jake looked longingly at the dog, but something made him hold back. I saw his eyes flicker toward Sam and I got it. This was Sam's deal and Jake was letting him have it. How many kids his age would have the patience or perception to do that? I smiled at Jake, just to let him know that I was proud of him. He flushed bright red, even his ears went red.

Sam kept testing the water like we were getting ready to wash a newborn baby. Finally, I said it was fine and I lowered the dog into it. She settled on her haunches, still looking miserable, but at least now she wasn't shivering.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Sam asked anxiously.

"Yeah, I think we just need to fatten her up and keep her warm," I said. I wanted to laugh when I heard four relieved sighs from the doorway. I looked over at Bella. "Do you have any old towels I can use on her?"

"Just use what's there," Bella answered. "They'll wash."

Sam and I gave the dog a bath and ended up rinsing her three times before we could see her dark coat was free and clear of dirt and debris. The tub was a mess and we would have a job cleaning it. The look on Sam's face made it all worth it, however. Carefully, I lifted her out and Sam and I towed her off before backing away and waiting for the inevitable shaking. The dog didn't disappoint and splashed water everywhere. Jake laughed when it hit him in the face.

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"Jake, I think I remember some left over hamburgers in your refrigerator. Do you think you could bring two of them up here and we'll see if she's hungry?" I knew she was hungry, but I felt like Jake needed something to do.

"Actually, we'll go downstairs and find a bowl for her to use, maybe warm up the hamburger a little bit so it's not cold," Bella suggested, taking Jake's hand.

"Right, thanks," I said and turned to Sam. "Okay, Sam, do you see anything seeping out of her eyes?"

He looked and the dog wagged her tail with more energy now.

"No," he answered and then peeked into her ears. "Her ears look fine too, no sign of irritation or anything."

Trust Sam to know what to check for. I smiled and nodded. "Okay." I stood up and gazed down at the dog. She looked up at me as if to ask what was on the agenda now. Her big brown eyes were ageless with that unique canine wisdom. God I had missed having a dog, and I hadn't realized how much until just now.

"Let's see if she'll follow you downstairs," I told Sam. I walked to the door and Sam was right behind me. When the dog simply stared at us, Sam gave a low whistle.

"Come on, girl," he prodded and she loped after him like she had been doing so for years. The warmth of the bath had gone a long way toward reviving her and her tongue lolled comically as she trotted down the stairs, apparently making herself perfectly at home.

When we got downstairs, she went to the sliding glass door and scratched at it, looking back at us expectantly. Bella walked in drying her hands on a dish towel. "Do I dare hope she's already housebroken?" she asked with a grin.

"I don't know, let's see," I said, opening the door. Bella's yard was fenced, so there was no worry that the dog would wander away.

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Immediately, the dog squatted and took care of business. I grinned at Bella. "I think we're in the clear on that."

Sam tugged at his mother's hand. "See, Mom? She's already housebroken. Can we keep her, can we?"

Those magical words. *Can we keep her, Mom?* How often had those words been used by a hopeful child? I had said them myself more than once when I was a kid. I'd been expecting to hear them since we'd seen the dog on the side of the road. I knew that Bella had too. She smiled and brushed her hand over Sam's dark hair. "Well, I think she's picked *us*, hasn't she?"

Sam gave a cheer and went to tell his brothers the good news.

"I'll help take care of her," I offered.

"You're as bad as one of the kids," Bella teased, coming to stand beside me. We watched as the dog wandered around the yard, sniffing and getting familiar with things.

"Aw, come on, can we keep her? Can we, can we? Huh? Huh?" I said in her ear. " *Puhleeze?*"

"What is it about boys and dogs?" she asked, shaking her head.

"We're both hairy, have been known to pass gas in public, and have humped things we shouldn't have," I told her. "It's only natural that we'd have an affinity for each other."

"Bet you wish you could lick your own balls," Bella shot back and her words went straight to my dick.

"I'd much rather have you lick them," I said before I could think about it. I drew back. Had I offended her? I should have known better. Bella didn't offend easily and certainly not over anything sexual. She was a demon, temptress, ninja after all. Such creatures are not faint of heart. I heard her snort with

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laughter and she stood on her toes to give me a kiss, and then leaned in to whisper in my ear.

"I'm sure we can arrange that."

Bella gave me a wicked grin and walked back into the house, leaving me alone with our new dog and an evil boner. Demon ninja temptress.

~~TBTA~~

An hour later, we had used an old hairbrush to brush out the dog's dark coat until it started to gleam just a little bit. It would take time and good food to really restore her to her true beauty, but she'd get all of those things that she needed. I got the vet's name from Jasper, though I did have to endure a bit of teasing about having gotten a family dog before I actually got the family. I told him to kiss my ass and hung up.

Sam just watched the dog, his eyes never leaving her. "You know, Sam, she's going to need a name. We can't just call her dog or girl all the time."

Finally, Sam's eyes flickered up to his mom. "Can I name her?"

Bella smiled and shrugged. "If you'd like."

He grinned and then his expression grew thoughtful. I could tell he would be giving it serious consideration. I wondered how long it would take him. But only a moment later he looked up. "I want to name her Emily."

"Emily?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yep, Emily."

"Okay, Emily it is," Bella said. Then she patted her thigh. "Come here, Emily." The dog trotted over obediently, as if she had been waiting for us to name her. She sat back and looked up at Bella, licking her chops.

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"You know, Sam, my favorite dog was named Mrs. Beasley," I told him. "She just showed up on our doorstep one day, looking a lot like Emily here. She was skinny and dirty and scared." I smiled at the memory. "She was a black lab too, and one of the sweetest dogs to ever walk this earth."

I had begged my mom to keep her too. We were between dogs at the time, which was rare for us. Later my mom said it was like we were keeping Mrs. Beasley's place ready for her. It took Mrs. Beasley about two seconds to steal my heart. I had been just about Sam's age too, maybe a year older. And I'd never gotten it back from her either. She had been *my* dog until the day she died, whether I lived at home or not.

Jake wrapped his arms around Emily and squeezed tightly and I was almost afraid she would react badly and snap at him. Instead, she looked over at me with canine patience and understanding, her dark eyes full of contentment.

Isn't it wonderful to have a family, her eyes seemed to ask.

I had to agree. It was.

I looked at the dog and wondered why this one little detail - this scruffy, skinny dog -made us seem so much more like a family. But it did. Weird, but true. I liked the feeling. "You know, Bella, I've been meaning to talk to you about something." Emmett's slip of the tongue earlier made me remember as I stood there thinking about families.

"What's up?"

"Well, I know that originally you told the boys to call me Mr. Edward, but it's....kind of awkward for us if you want to know the truth," I confessed.

"I heard Emmett call you Edward earlier," she said. "And I guessed it didn't bother you. I suppose it is rather formal for...for what we are," she finished quietly.

"So, it's cool if they just call me...Edward?"

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"If it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me," Bella told me with a shy little smile. Ah, shy Bella was back. I liked her. Not that demon, ninja, sex kitten temptress Bella was anything to sneeze at. I liked her a lot too.

"Good, that's settled, no more feeling like a horse."

"Ah yes, reruns are wonderful things, aren't they?" she teased. Bella moved toward me hugged me and then stepped back quickly, wrinkling her nose.

"Whew! You smell like dog funk," she said bluntly.

I lifted my arm and took a whiff. Yep. Pungent. "Well, I'll go home and shower then." I knew my disappointment was in my voice. That meant leaving Bella.

Bella nudged. "I have a perfectly good shower here, you know."

"No fresh clothes," I pointed out. *Though I'm perfectly willing to indulge in naked time again. I'll get naked. You'll get naked. And we'll see where we go from there.*

"I'll bet Emmett has some shorts and a tee-shirt," she said, wrinkling her nose in disgust again.

"Okay," I said, mostly because I didn't want to leave. Hopefully Emmett wouldn't be too pissed at loaning me some clothes. Thank goodness the boy was a beast or nothing would fit me.

"Come on, dog funk boy," Bella said, tugging at my hand. "Keep an eye on Emily. I don't want any accidents!"

We were ignored in favor of the canine, which was fine with me. Still holding Bella's hand, I followed her up the stairs. Toward the shower. Where I would be naked. I would be naked in the same place where Bella was naked so often. It was almost like we'd be naked together.

Okay, not so much. But a guy could dream, couldn't he?

Ch 42: Close Encounters of the Odd Kind

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I had to throw the dog in there. Edward said he wanted a dog, and I got him one, darn it! I'm a long time fan of the rescued pup (or kitty or bird or whatever). At the present moment we have three dogs, three cats, a parrot, and a snake. All rescues. We're that house that has the big neon sign above us flashing "Suckers!" No fears, Miss Emily is going to the vet. That's why Bella asked Edward to get the name of their vet. But since they find the dog at about nine o'clock on a Friday night, they really can't get it to one RIGHT THEN. Give them until Monday at least. They fed it hamburger because that's what they had on hand. If Bella is the kind of mom I think she is, she'd buy the really lean stuff anyway. So, they are doing right by the dog in a what I think is a believable way for a woman who has never owned a dog and a man who hasn't owned a dog his whole entire adult life. Believe me, I take the rescue of animals seriously. I grew up with rescued Dobermans and I've always owned at least two rescued dogs. And since I'm pretty damned old, that's a lot of dogs!

Chapter 42: Close Encounters of the Odd Kind

Bella opened her door and grinned at me. She leaned in close. "You know I love you, right?" My heart started stampeding in my chest like the boys on the staircase. "But that doesn't mean there's going to be naked time in that shower," she warned, half serious, half joking.

"I know," I assured her. And I did. That didn't keep both my dick and me from pouting. We had big dreams, my dick and me.

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We had dreamed. The big, impossible, wet dream. And it was gooooood.

So I admit that I was sulking just a little bit when Bella showed me into the bathroom. "There's shampoo and everything in there," she said casually. "I'll grab some clothes from Em's room." She looked at me again and this time I could tell she was nervous. "Okay?"

All right then, time to rein in the fantasy factory. Bella was feeling unsettled, probably because her boys were downstairs and I was sending off "*I wanna do it in the shower!*" pheromones like crazy. I gave her a quick, chaste kiss and moved back. I watched as her shoulders relaxed.

"Thank you," I said simply. "I'm very grateful that I don't have to marinate in my own doggy flavored funk."

She smiled and stood up on her toes and pressed a more lingering kiss to my mouth. It was a silent thank you for understanding. I smiled at her one more time and turned to go into the bathroom before my dick exploded. That might have upset her. I know it would have upset me.

I stripped off my nasty, doggy clothes and turned on the shower. Either Bella had installed it or the house had come with it, but the shower had one of those huge shower heads and the stream of water from it was strong. I could almost feel it on my aching muscles. I stepped under it with a sigh of relief.

Oh. My. God. That felt so good.

I rolled my shoulders and closed my eyes, letting the hot water soothe away the ache and fatigue. If I hadn't loved her before, I think I would have fallen in love with her for that fucking shower. I wanted one of those shower heads. I was going to *have* one of those shower heads. Maybe tomorrow when I took Jake off with me I could stop at the hardware store and buy one. I would install it tomorrow evening.

Oh yes, that's exactly what I would do.

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I grabbed some of Bella's shampoo. I sniffed. Lightly scented with vanilla and something else that smelled like Bella. It wasn't the cinnamon scent I associated with her, but it was delicious. She smelled like my favorite foods. And there went my dick again.

I ignored him. There was no way I was going to rub one out in Bella's shower. That just seemed...wrong. No way. My dick throbbed. I wasn't some sort of beast, so I could deal with it, right? My dick wanted to argue that we were exactly that kind of beast.

I quickly finished up my shower before the temptation proved too great. There was no way I could face Bella if I'd come all over her shower. That shit was just bad manners. I stepped out, grabbed a towel. I sniffed again. It was the clean, springy scent that permeated all of their clothes. I liked that too. The towel was soft and fluffy, obviously one small indulgence that Bella allowed herself. I wondered if her sheets were just as nice.

God I hoped I would find out soon.

I wrapped the towel around my waist and walked out into Bella's bedroom. She had probably put the clothes in there, not wanting to disturb me in the shower. *See why it's a good idea not to masturbate in your girlfriend's shower?* I asked my dick. *She could walk in on you and how embarrassing would that be?* My dick didn't care and called me a wimp.

I was looking around for the clothes when the door opened and Bella stepped in, not really looking at me, but inspecting something on the tee-shirt in her hands. When she closed the door behind her, she happened to look up and her eyes went wide. Apparently I had finished sooner than she expected me to. That's what happens when you refrain from touching yourself inappropriately. You get shit done way faster.

We stared at each other for a moment. Then Bella's eyes went from my face down my chest, lingering on my stomach and then following the line of the towel to my hips. They stayed there for a moment and then she moved her gaze again. Down.

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Then she licked her lips and I almost lost it. My dick began preening for her, doing a little manly flexing for her entertainment.

After a moment, her eyes went down again, taking in my legs and then moving down to my feet. I guess she wanted another look at the main attraction because those big, brown eyes went up again. Knees. Thighs. Dick. Yep, the dick. She bit her lower lip.

And my dick responded some more. She gave a little sigh and looked up rapidly to meet my eyes with a rueful smile. "God you're pretty," she breathed.

I laughed because there was something funny about this beautiful woman calling *me* pretty. I should have been offended. Guys aren't pretty. They're good looking or handsome. But I'd settle for pretty any day as long as it came from her.

I liked the fact that she wasn't embarrassed that she'd basically been caught ogling me. In fact, her eyes drifted over my torso yet again, making her appreciation clear. It was a good thing I was across the room from her or I might have been humping her leg or something else inappropriate.

"Uh...here are some clothes," she finally said, holding out the bundle in her arms. "They're clean and should fit okay."

"Thanks," I said. Not surprisingly, my voice was husky and raspy. Grizzly Adams was back.

"I'll put them on the dresser," she offered. It was probably a good thing that she didn't let herself get within my arms' reach. I would probably grab her and do wicked, dirty things to her. And the boys were downstairs.

The boys are downstairs, you big dick. RIGHT downstairs and they could walk up any minute. Do you hear me? ANY minute?

My dick remained unconvinced because he's, well, he's a *dick*. He was too busy being smug over being called big.

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She gave one last lick of her lips (she really was trying to kill me) and put the things on the dresser before whipping around and opening the door so fast that she almost brained herself. Then the door was closing before I could say anything.

~TBTA~

Before I went downstairs, I peeked into the boys' bathroom and the chaos in there prompted me to make an executive decision. The good thing about being a grown up and having a job was that I could pay people to do shit I didn't want to do. Like clean that bathroom. Emmett still owed me two work days and I'll be damned if I wasn't going to take advantage of that. It would be worth every penny of the thirty dollars I usually paid him to palm that particular job off on someone else. Besides, I was feeling stiff and sore and there was no way I wanted to kneel down and scrub that tub.

When I got to the living room, Emily was curled up beside the couch and Sam was sitting beside her. I don't think his hands left her fur, though he seemed to be paying attention to whatever Emmett and Seth were doing. Looking closer I saw that they were playing *Battleship*. Finally a game I recognized. Except this one came with sound effects. I guess someone had brought *Battleship* into this decade. Still, the rudiments of the game were the same.

Em was beating Seth's ass. I mean, he was winning.

"Hey Em?" I asked as I settled on the couch beside Bella.

He looked up. "Yeah?" I could tell he was distracted by the ships on his grid.

"You know how you owe me a workday?"

He smiled. "Only two. I've been counting."

"Yeah, so that bathroom upstairs is..." I shuddered. "Well you know what it looks like after bathing Emily here."

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"I get you," he said with a nod, getting to his feet. "So how much is that good for?" His eyes were gleaming as he prepared himself to strike a deal.

"The whole amount for a day's work," I answered him and Emmett nodded with satisfaction.

"Fair enough," he answered. Looking at Seth, he offered, "I'll split the money with you if you'll help." He looked at me. "I guess I owe you another half day."

"Tell you what," I offered. "Take care of that and I'll consider it tax. You only owe me one day. I'd pay just about anything to avoid that catastrophe." I settled a stern look on Emmett. "But it's got to pass your mother's inspection, so no rushing through it or no deal. Got me?"

"Got you." Emmett said and jerked his chin at his brother.

Seth jumped to his feet, the game forgotten. Bella watched them run up the stairs and turned to me. "You just offered to pay them to clean their own bathroom?" I couldn't tell from her tone what she was thinking.

"Well, I wouldn't normally," I said carefully. "But this was a special circumstance. Miss Emily down there was rather rank." She wagged her tail sleepily, so apparently she had gotten used to her name pretty quickly. "And I'm lazy and sore and getting old." I grinned at her. "I call it a wise use of resources."

She laughed then. "I give you credit, Cullen. You're smarter than you look."

"That's what they tell me, Colonel Smart Ass, that's what they tell me."

~TBTA~

Later, the boys were in bed and actually asleep. The excitement of the dog had zonked them. Bella informed me that Emily was curled up on Sam's bed, trying to remain inconspicuous. She had given Bella a quick, guilty wag of her tail and then closed her eyes as if to pretend she didn't see Bella. "So I guess Emily

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is sleeping on Sam's bed for good, huh?"

Bella rolled her eyes at me and sat down on the couch, pulling me down beside her. "I guess so," she whispered, her hands moving up my chest. No buttons to undo, but she was managing a good job of shoving the tee-shirt out of her way. She circled one of my nipples with her fingertips, her light touch almost, but not quite, tickling me. I was torn between putting my hand over hers and either stopping or guiding her torture and just letting her have her way with me. I decided to let her take the lead because I'll be damned if it didn't feel great.

I sighed/groaned/kinda growled as she continued on her merry way. First one nipple and then the other, back and forth, back and forth until I felt like I was sporting titanium in my borrowed shorts. Was it morally wrong to allow myself to get a boner while wearing her son's shorts? Probably.

Then I was unable to ponder my moral dilemma any longer because of her hands. Oh fuck me, her hands.

Finally, her hands began moving down my chest. I'm pretty sure I could hear angels signing "Hallelujah" or something when her lips and tongue began following the path of her hands. The way she had pinned me against the couch, I was helpless to do much more than give her quick caresses as the opportunity presented itself. Her hair, her cheek, the indentation of her waist, the sweet curve of her ass (that was one of my favorites), but when she moved I had more access.

The feeling of her soft, silky hair moving across my chest and belly as she placed tender kisses on my skin made me want to flip her onto the couch and bury myself inside of her. Hell, I'd flip her *over* the couch and count myself a lucky man. Oh God, I wanted that. Whatever the fuck it took to get inside of her. She gave me a sharp nip just under my belly button as if she had read my mind.

Demon ninja temptress.

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Then her hands were delving under the waistband of the shorts. More celestial singing from up above...or down below. Who could tell at that point? Fuck yes. She was a tease. Circling, dipping, and sliding just short of where I want her touch the most. "Bella..." My voice was a raspy demand and she just laughed softly. She slid off the couch and knelt beside it, which gave her - *HALLELUJAH* - much better access to all my parts.

My hands dropped to her hair, winding some strands easily around my fingers. "Baby..." I croaked.

She ignored me and pushed the shorts down all the way. My cock popped free like a jack-in-the-box and came damn close to taking her eye out. Or that's what I liked to think anyway.

Looking up at me with an innocent expression, it was almost as if she didn't know it was her tongue sweeping across the head of my dick. "Holy. Fuck."

I felt her fingers tug sharply at some hairs on my thigh. I wasn't sure if she was telling me to shut up, not curse, or talk dirty some more. I decided to go with more dirty talk because that's the kind of guy I am.

"Oh baby..." I hissed when her tongue rasped up and down my shaft. "Fuck that feels good."

One of her hands began lightly stroking my balls, touches that were almost not there. The effect on them was to set me throbbing and groaning and shaking. Sexual tension will do that to a man. My ninja temptress could give a blow job that was for damned sure. While one hand tortured my balls, one slipped up my chest and plucked at my nipples, Tug, pull, pinch, soothe. She set up an easy pattern that had my orgasm building up from what felt like my toes on up to my cock.

Lick. Suck. Tease the head. Lick. Suck. Tease the head. She tortured and I was sweating. She teased and I was cursing. She touched and I groaned. Endlessly working me, drawing my orgasm from me whether I was ready or not. Then she plunged her mouth down so that I was tickling the back of her throat for a

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tantalizing moment. She moaned at the same time and that was all it took. I had barely time to bark out a warning and I was pulsing into her mouth. Her fingers pinched my left nipple sharply at the same time her other hand tugged lightly on my balls. Together the feel of her mouth, the vibration of her moan, and the combination of fierce and gentle touches had me trembling and swearing and gasping all over again.

After a long moment, she leaned back on her heels, staring at me with sly satisfaction. Damn if my little ninja temptress didn't look pleased with herself. I moaned and pulled her up on top of me, kissing her hard and deep even as my hands cupped her ass.

"It's not naked time," she finally said. "But I think you enjoyed yourself anyway."

I couldn't do anymore than grunt at that point and she giggled, resting her head on my chest. "Just give me a minute and I'll return the favor," I murmured.

Bella groaned and buried her face in my chest. "Uh, yeah, I'm gonna take a rain check on that one." She sounded embarrassed and I urged her chin up so I could look into her eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she insisted. "Just...can I uh...can I ask you to owe me one?"

I studied her. "Okay," I said. "Can I ask why?"

She chewed on her lower lip for a minute. "Can't you just let it go?" She sounded aggravated.

"I could," I teased. "But it's not very often I see you hesitant about much of anything. So now you've got me curious."

She rolled her eyes at me and looked down. "Let's just say it's not a good time of the month for you to return the favor."

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Oh. Well that explained it. I laughed and kissed her. "Consider yourself owed."

Bella smiled then, good mood restored. "Thank you," she said. "Though I'd be thanking you more if you would have just dropped the subject when I first told you to."

"Would you forgive me if I brought you chocolate tomorrow?"

"Maybe," she said. "It would depend on what kind of chocolate."

~TBTA~

The next morning I arrived at Bella's house early. I owed Jake some time alone and I knew I had better make good on my promise. I wasn't able to get the jump on Jake, however. He opened the door for me like always. He grinned up at me, clearly happy to still be the early bird of the family.

"Hey you," I said. Ruffle. Frown. Fix. Done.

"Hey!" he said, tugging at my hand again and pulling me inside. I guessed that I moved too slowly for Jake's satisfaction. "Mom's having coffee." He leaned in close. "It's only her first cup," he warned.

I nodded. I would be careful.

She looked at me and smiled. Sort of. Then she took another sip of coffee and closed her eyes, perhaps trying to center herself for the day ahead. I sat quietly with Jake while she finished off that cup and poured another. I could pretty much see her waking up as she drank the second cup. Finally, about halfway through, she opened her eyes fully and gave me a real smile. "So, what are you boys up to today?"

I looked at Jake. "I don't know. What are we up to today?"

He pursed his lips. "I think we should go to Cracker Barrel for breakfast," he suggested. "And then...the toy store?"

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"I think that sounds like a plan," I agreed.

"The toy store doesn't open until ten today," Bella reminded him.

"We can eat breakfast and then maybe go to a park while we wait for the store to open?" I suggested.

Jake grinned and hopped up from his seat. "I'm gonna go change!"

Bella shook her head indulgently as she watched Jake scramble up the stairs. "Promise me that he'll eat something with some protein in it along with the French toast and gallons of syrup I know that he's going to order."

"I do hereby solemnly swear that it shall be so," I promised her, holding up my hand like a good Boy Scout.

She rolled her eyes at me and then stepped closer to press her lips to mine. "You're good with them," she said when she pulled back.

"They're good with me," I answered with a smile. "So it works out."

"Tomorrow is Sunday," she said. "I was thinking we could do a picnic or something before the hell starts." I looked at her, puzzled. "Hell...you know...work, school, schedules." She shrugged. "Hell." Then she sighed. "Or may just want to play slug and lay around all day. We'll play it by ear."

"Sounds good," I agreed.

Then Jake was there, dressed in a fresh Star Wars tee that featured Darth Vader (of course) and the sentiment that "Sith Happens." The kid was one of a kind.

A few minutes later and Jake and I were on our way to Cracker Barrel. He told me that he was going to finally beat the wooden triangle game they keep on the tables there. Apparently, Sam figured it out the first time he played it and his brother's quick success has been eating at him. I tried to gently remind him that Sam was sort of in a class of his own when it came to stuff like that. "I can

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never leave less than four pegs," I told him.

Jake laughed at me, but hopefully now if he couldn't beat the game he'd be satisfied with leaving less than four pegs. I hoped so anyway. Then we were at the restaurant and the hostess smiled at Jake like he was the cutest thing she'd ever seen. Or maybe she thought the two of us together were the cutest thing she'd ever seen. Anyway, the cuteness factor was apparently off the scale.

Jake perused the menu almost as if he hadn't already made up his mind. Then he looked at me and nodded. "French toast," he said decidedly.

"Good choice," I replied. "Bacon?" I remembered my promise to Bella. Protein. The kid needed it to grow muscles, though if Emmett was any indication, he really didn't need anything more than oxygen to grow into a muscle bound giant.

"Nope," Jake said, shaking his head. "I don't want my butt to get too big for my pants."

I almost snorted hot coffee all over the table. "What?" I asked, after I wiped my chin.

Jake nodded sagely. "I heard Grandma talking."

I knew that I was going to hell for being nosey, but I couldn't help myself. "What did she say?" *I will use this knowledge for good*, I promised myself.

Jake shrugged, his attention already on the wooden triangle game. He was doing well so far. I wondered if I could sneak a peg away but decided that would be like lying to the kid. Besides, he'd probably catch me. "She said when she ate too much bacon that her butt wouldn't fit in her pants," Jake said distractedly.

"Oh." What could I really say to that?

"Then how about some sausage?"

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"Okay," he said agreeably. "She didn't say nothing about sausage making her butt big."

I found that I was forced to bite my lip in order to keep from laughing. Jake's dark brows were drawn together as he studied the wooden triangle. He pulled a Bella and began chewing on his lip. He looked up to see me watching him and grinned. "I'm gonna get it," he said.

"I think you are."

I placed our orders with the waitress, who was about ten years older than my mother and who also thought that Jake was adorable. She ruffled his hair, which earned me a long suffering glance from Jake. However, he wasn't rude and let her walk away before he straightened his hair. I drank some coffee to hide my grin.

We were waiting for our food when I suddenly heard my name called. I turned to see almost the last person in the world that I would have expected. I stood up, the manners my mother had instilled in me making me move though I knew my mouth was hanging open. Jake stood up beside me.

"Lilith?" I asked as I hugged her automatically.

She looked good...different. "Edward," she said pleasantly. Then her eyes went to Jake. He grinned up at her. The adorable factor increased dramatically when he put some real effort into it. "Lilith this is Jake, my girlfriend's son." The "G" word just slipped out. Another letter of the alphabet that had changed my life.

I was surprised when Lilith shook his hand pleasantly and gave him a genuine smile. The Lilith I had known had never really been fond of children, or maybe it was more that she didn't precisely know what to do with them exactly. I knew the feeling.

What surprised me was that I felt Jake tensing up beside me and pressing into my side. His hand came up and wrapped around mine - tightly. If I hadn't known better, I might have said Jake was jealous.

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"Edward, it's so good to see you," Lilith said with a wide smile. "You look very good, very happy."

I nodded. "Thank you, so do you." And she did. Her eyes were warmer, her smile sweeter. She looked happy.

She looked down at Jake. He was still eyeing her somewhat suspiciously. "I've known Edward a long time," she told him easily.

"Did you know him when he was a kid?"

Lilith smiled slightly. "Kind of." Her eyes flickered toward me. "I think we've both grown up quite a bit since then." There were a lot of things unsaid with that statement, but I couldn't disagree.

"I think we have," I agreed.

"My husband is parking the car," she explained. I felt Jake relax beside me. Hmmm.... Interesting. "I'm so happy to run into you. I'd love to introduce you to Mark." She smiled so widely that I thought it might hurt.

Jake relaxed completely and his grasp loosened, but he didn't let go of my hand.

I had all sorts of ideas about what this Mark would look like. And as usual, all of my preconceptions were wrong. He was rather short and a little pudgy. He had long hair and tattoos running up both arms. Never, in a million years, would he have been the man I pictured being with Lilith. I could see grease and oil under his fingernails and I knew that this man worked hard for a living, probably with engines. The calluses and cuts covering his hands told the same story. Whatever this guy did for a living, he wasn't a doctor.

"Mark, this is Edward Cullen," Lilith said. "Edward, this is my husband, Mark." The look they exchanged was almost comical because it was so obviously filled with love and respect that I felt rather like I was intruding on a private moment.

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"Hey there, Edward," Mark said pleasantly. He put an arm around Lilith. "So you know my girl here from way back, right?"

"Yes," I said. Jake's eyes were darting back and forth between Lilith and Mark and me. He seemed amused. "Our families were old friends."

"Are your parents well?" Lilith asked.

"Doing great," I said. "Masen's married and has two sons now." Lilith's parents had moved to Chicago shortly after we parted ways. Slowly, our parents had drifted out of touch. I guessed that it had been somewhat awkward for a while and I was sorry for that now.

"That's wonderful, though it's hard to picture Masen settled down," Lilith said with a laugh.

"Yeah well, it happens to the best of us," I agreed. I couldn't help putting the idea out there. My hand went to Jake's shoulder.

"Mark and I have a daughter; she's eight," Lilith said. That explained her comfort around kids. And her daughter was just Jake's age. "She's away at cheerleading camp." Mark beamed, obviously a very proud father. I was kind of getting familiar with that feeling.

"She's as beautiful as her mama," Mark added and Lilith actually giggled. I felt like I was seeing a stranger in Lilith's skin. Apparently falling in love had worked all sorts of miracles and I was very, very happy for her. "Of course, she's only eight now, I'm not sure what I'll do once she's sixteen," he added with a shudder. She gave him an elbow in the side and rolled her eyes. It reminded me strangely of Bella.

"Mark and I are on our way down to Daytona," Lilith explained. "Mark's a mechanic and is taking a look at a job down there." I had been right; he was definitely not a doctor. Thank God that Lilith had turned me down, but I was genuinely glad she had found someone to make her happy. "He might be working for a NASCAR team."

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"You must know your stuff," I remarked.

Mark shrugged. "I've been known to find my way around an engine or two," he said modestly.

"He's a genius," Lilith said fondly.

Mark just sort of shrugged, clearly too modest to be comfortable with her bragging. He grinned down at Jake. "I see you only left two pegs," he observed.

Jake grinned. "Yeah, my brother Sam is way better at it, but my brother Emmett sucks at it."

I could see Lilith's eyes go wide as she started keeping count. "How many brothers do you have, Jake?"

"Three," Jake answered, already bored by the conversation. He sat back down and studied the wooden triangle.

Lilith looked at me and smiled. "I guess Mark and I should be going," she said quietly. "But it really was so wonderful seeing you again. I'm glad..." she paused and tilted her head. "I'm glad you seem so happy."

"I *am* happy, really happy," I replied with a big grin. "I'm getting out of the Army in April and..." I looked at Jake. "Yeah, I've got plans."

Lilith understood what I wasn't saying and she smiled once more.

"It was good seeing you, Lilith, and I'm happy to meet you, Mark," I said with a nod. "Take care of her, she's a special lady."

"She sure is," Mark said with a wink.

She gave Jake a soft little pinch on his cheek. "Bye, Jake. You sure are a cutie. It was nice to meet you."

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They moved away and I sat down and looked at Jake. He looked back at me and sighed. "Women," he muttered.

Chapter 43: Finders, Keepers

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Yes, it's a long one. Feel free to skip it. Thank you for your patience if you decide to read it. Please have faith in Bella. She wouldn't have jumped Edward's bones on the couch if she thought the boys would see. She's got a secret weapon, which will come up in a later discussion about the benefits/disadvantages of her home and Edward's home. As a mom, that's the last thing I would want my kids to see.

After reading the reviews for the last chapter I went on a long run and had a chat with my muse. She's always got her Nikes on and was ready to go. After much discussion, we came to the conclusion that the story is being told the way it is supposed to be told - for these characters at this time in their lives. As long as I listen to my characters (and my muse who can kick my ass) and I do justice to the real life Bella (yes, there is one) then I am okay with any constructive criticism directed my way. I think it's important to remember that Edward isn't falling in love with *one* person, he's building a relationship with *five* of them and I think that is a process, not something accomplished in one "AH HA!" moment. As I was writing, it became clear to me that Edward couldn't just step into Mac's shoes. "Hey, I bought you a guitar. I'm gonna be your dad now, okay?" That wasn't going to work. As for not knowing where and when to end it, all I can say is that the ending chapters were completed soon after I wrote chapter three so the ending has been a clear and definite destination in my mind since that point.

This just may not be your type of story and that's absolutely OKAY with me. If you have enjoyed it up to this point and no longer feel it is your cup of tea, then thank you for your time and consideration so far. It is

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appreciated. If you'd like to see it out for a little longer, then I am grateful for that as well. That's the wonderful thing about this fandom; there is something out there for every taste.

Chapter 43: Finders, Keepers

After the very interesting breakfast, Jake and I went for a drive while we waited for the toy store to open. Now I had always known that Jake was the chatty one of the group. Jake was the friendliest kid I've ever met, and not in a pushy obnoxious way. He was charming, which meant he usually got his way. He was happy, so you had to be happy around him. You couldn't help it. So I wasn't surprised that he kept chattering away while I drove. He talked about a lot of things, even his dad which was kind of unusual. He talked about some of his favorite memories of his father, which were Mac reading to him or just sitting around being a dad. He talked about the days immediately following his father's death and how Will and Josh and flown out to be with Bella that very day. He talked about barfing on his Uncle Josh and how his uncle cleaned it up.

Then he moved on to his brothers. He talked about Sam and Emily. "Sam's always wanted a dog," he told me. "Almost as much as me." He looked at me from beneath long, dark lashes. "You think I can get a dog too?"

I had to laugh. "Uh, I think we shouldn't push it, buddy. It's going to be hard enough for your mom to get used to one dog," I warned him.

He shrugged, accepting the logic of that. "Besides," he said. "I've got Froot Loop."

"How's Loop doing?"

"Good," Jake answered. "I painted his shell. It looks cool."

"I can have my mom look at the beach near their house for more shells for Loop. She's always finding some interesting shells when she goes for walks earlier in the morning," I said.

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"Thanks." Jake was looking out the window. "Emmett told me that Mr. Jasper and Miss Alice are keeping Rosalie." He looked at me. "Is that true?"

"Well, yeah, I guess it is," I answered with a nod.

He was silent for a moment. "Em says her mom is gonna die."

I gave him a quick glance, trying to gauge his mood. "Yeah, her mom is really sick. The doctors say they can't make her better." Honesty was best.

He nodded and began tracing idle patterns on the window. "So she'll live with Mr. Jasper now?"

"Yes."

"So they're just keeping her, just like that?" Jake sounded curious.

"Yeah." I smiled at his turn of phrase. "They love her and want to make her a part of their family. Rose needs a family and they want to be that family, so everybody's happy."

Jake was silent for so long that I thought the subject was dropped. Then he looked at me and that familiar sly expression slipped into place. "So you can just keep people when you want them to be a part of your family?"

"Well, if they want to be a part of your family, I guess you can," I answered, not sure of where he was going. "That's what happens when people adopt kids. The kids need a family and the family needs a kid." I shrugged. "So everybody wins." *Please God, don't let the kid ask for a little brother or sister. Bella will freak.*

"Does it have to be kids?"

"Uh...I don't guess so." I was completely lost.

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Jake frowned down at his hands, biting at his lip. Once more his dark eyes slid my way, shuttered by long lashes. "So..." He sighed and hunched his shoulders up. "Can I keep *you*?"

I swallowed hard. What to say to that? I wanted to scream yes. I wanted to pull over and hug him so tight that he squeaked like a dog toy. But what *should* I do?

"Uh...well, to be honest, Jake, that's kind of up to your mom and me," I said. "That's sort of a grown up decision."

"I'm not saying *Mom* has to keep you," Jake pointed out. *Ouch*. "I just want to keep you." He frowned at me. "You don't have a family and I don't have a dad. So everybody wins." Oh to have my own words thrown right back at me. Maybe Sam wasn't the only genius in the James family.

"Uh..." I tapped the steering wheel with my fingers. "Well, Jake, how about we think about this for a while and then make a decision."

"That's what grown ups always say when the answer is no," Jake observed morosely.

"No, buddy, I promise you, I'm not saying no," I assured him. "I'm just saying let's think about this. Who knows? Once you get to know me you might not want to keep me. Ever think about that?"

"I don't think that will happen," Jake answered with certainty.

"Well, you never know."

"I know," Jake told me.

I smiled. "You're a pretty great kid, you know?"

He grinned and shrugged. "Yeah. I know."

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Before I took Jake to the toy store, I decided to make a quick stop at the hardware store. I wasn't kidding when I said I wanted one of those shower heads. I found what I wanted and walked out a happy man. Jake was patient only because he knew the toy store wasn't opened yet.

When we *finally* (as Jake moaned) made our way to the toy store, and waited at the doors for them to open, Jake headed straight for the Star Wars' section. No one was surprised, least of all me, when Jake walked out of there the proud new owner of an Obi-Wan Kenobi (Phantom Menace Obi) and Han Solo figures. On the way home, we discussed the merits of the original trilogy vs. the prequel trilogy and Jake declared them all golden. If it had to do with a galaxy far, far away then Jake liked it. Sometimes kids were easier to please than grown-ups. I also stopped to get Bella a chocolate bar. I had promised, after all, and it was the very least I could do after the blow job. Blow job vs. chocolate bar wasn't even a close contest.

Luckily, Jake didn't ask why I was buying her a chocolate bar. I bought him one too to keep his mouth occupied with something other than asking questions. And Bella hadn't specifically *said* 'no candy' right?

He practically jumped out of the Suburban before I could turn off the engine, though he did take the time to grab his booty before he ran in the house. Jake did everything on the run. Always. I wondered if it was the sugar.

Inside, Bella was giving his purchases the proper amount of respect, nodding as he told her all about young Obi-Wan and the trials he had faced in the movie. She looked at me above Jake's head and her eyes seemed to ask why Jake had gotten toys. I shrugged. We had gone to a toy store and Jake had big, brown eyes just like hers. What the hell had she expected?

"And then in Cracker Barrel," Jake started.

"Hey, I'll tell your mom that one, buddy," I said with a grin. "Why don't you go upstairs and add these to your collection?"

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I sat down on a stool by the breakfast bar and pulled her into my arms, closing my eyes as I breathed in her scent. I brushed her hair over her shoulder. I kissed her softly and then pulled back. "You'll never guess who I - we - ran into at the restaurant."

Bella tapped her lips and pretended to think about it. "Darth Vader?" she guessed.

I snorted. "Like I would have been able to get Jake away," I scoffed.

"True," she allowed. "So just tell me."

"Lilith," I answered.

She frowned for a moment and then her expression cleared. "Lilith, as in *the* Lilith. The ice queen Lilith?"

I laughed and nuzzled her throat. God, she smelled good. "Yes, except she's the ice queen no longer." Bella laughed because I guessed I was tickling her with my scruffy face. I leaned back. "Lilith is now the happy wife - of a *mechanic*, I might add - and mother."

Bella's expression turned soft. She really was a romantic; she was just a demon, ninja, sex-kitten, temptress, too. But at the heart of all of it, there was the romantic that believed in Mr. Darcy's true love and devotion. "Really?"

"Yep, really," I said. "I met her husband. Nice guy, kinda short, a little pudgy, but very polite."

Bella snorted with laughter.

"What's so funny?"

She shook her head and looked at me, heaving a sigh. "Well, imagine having *you*," she said and she motioned up and down the length of my body. "And ending up with pudgy and polite." Bella grinned. "I'll take tall, slim, and

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perverted any day of the week."

I smiled and then pulled her very close, close enough so that my dick was pretty much jumping up and down saying "Pick me! Pick me!" like he was afraid of being the last kid being picked for a kickball team. I nuzzled her neck again and from the way she moved against me, she didn't hate it. Our tongues brushed against each other and the heat exploded. I tried very hard to remember that I had no idea where the boys were and that they could bust us at any moment. Bella seemed to be having a difficult time remembering that too.

I groaned and put my hands on her ass, urging her closer. Oh yeah, right there. My dick sighed in contentment. I did too. Or maybe I moaned. Anyway, sounds came out of my mouth.

There was a bang from somewhere upstairs and we both pulled apart like someone had shot us. She covered her mouth for a moment and looked sheepish and guilty. I imagined I had a similar expression on my face. Of course, I also had a throbbing in my pants. I hoped she had a throbbing in her pants too, but if she didn't, I was certainly willing to put mine in there and share. I'm a giver, what can I say?

A light stain of color lit up her cheeks and she looked down. Shy Bella was back, but I had a feeling she wouldn't hang out very long. Then Bella moved close again and loosely wrapped her arms around my neck. "Listen, I've been thinking..."

"Yeah?" I kissed her temple.

"Stop, I can't think when you do that," she complained, but not very convincingly I had to say. My dick didn't buy it at all.

"Okay," I said, but I rubbed the side of my face against the side of her face. Softly, of course, I didn't want to give her stubble burn. That would be hard to explain.

"Anyway, the uh...weekend after my birthday, I was uh...wondering..."

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The hesitation I heard in her voice was so unlike her that I leaned back and looked at her. "What's wrong?" I was ready to fix it whatever it was. If there was a dragon to slay, sign me up. An appliance that needed fixed? I could look at it and mutter for an hour or so and then call a repairman who could fix that sucker without breaking a sweat. Something on a shelf up high that needed to be brought down? I could do that too. I was a man of many talents and I knew how to use a stepladder like nobody's business.

She moved her hands along the buttons of my shirt. The first three were undone. Color me surprised. Looking up at me from beneath her lashes, she nibbled her lower lip. I wanted to offer to do that for her. "I was wondering if maybe you wanted to...uh...go someplace...together...overnight...?"

Honestly, I was so shocked that I thought maybe I had died and gone to pervert heaven. Or I had had a stroke and was hearing things. Or maybe I was sleeping and dreaming up my usual fantasies. So I pinched myself and nope, I was awake. And apparently not dead or hallucinating.

"Too soon?" She asked. *Was she fucking kidding me?* "Too unexpected?" she added when I didn't answer. *Hell yes, but in a very, very good way.* "Too-?"

I kissed her. Hard. I went all caveman on her, I admit it. When I finally pulled back, I found myself unable to resist the temptation to place one more kiss, soft this time, a gentleman's kiss, a *Mr. Darcy* kiss, on her lips. "Yes, a thousand times yes." Then I thought of something. "Let me check my work schedule, but yes. I'll beg, bribe, or threaten to get that weekend off."

She smiled then and my dick literally wept with joy. You know what I'm talking about.

I was going to get laid. In seven weeks. In seven weeks and zero days. In seven weeks - forty-nine nights. Then a thought occurred to me. "Um...Bella, are we talking about what I think we're talking about?" Because what if I was wrong? My dick would kick my ass if I set him up like that and nothing happened.

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"What do you think I'm talking about?" Uh oh. Playful Bella was back and she was planning on having a good time toying with me, I could just tell. Her look was pure evil, or utterly sexy, depending on what her answer was.

I cleared my throat. I wish I could have cleared my balls too, but that option wasn't on the table. "Are we talking about the two of us...going away overnight so that we can..." I couldn't say the words, not because I was shy but because I was almost afraid if I said them - out loud - I'd jinx the whole damned thing.

Her lips tugged up in a grin and I knew I was in trouble. Her fingers ran down my chest - and another button was miraculously undone. "If you can't say the words, then I'm not sure you're ready to do the deed," she whispered in my ear.

My dick was screaming. *"Tell her! Tell her you want to do it! Tell you want to have sex! Right now! Tell you want to bury me deep inside of her over and over and over again! Say it now, you dipshit! Say it before she changes her mind!"*

"We're talking about..." I bit my lower lip and tried to decide which words to use. Intercourse? No, too clinical? Fuck? Nope, too crude at this juncture, though I completely planned on whispering the "F" word into her ear while I moved inside of her. Another letter of the alphabet to look forward to. "Make love?" The words slipped out before I could reconsider. Did I sound like a pussy? But the expression on her face told me that I had done okay.

She leaned in and pressed her lips to mine. No tongue, just the fresh warmth of her breath slipping into my mouth, my lungs, my being. I sighed and gave her some of my breath back. "Yes, I want to make love with you Edward. But I want to feel completely comfortable and not have any time constraints. So I've made reservations for us. Just the two of us."

My dick tried to give me a high five. No hands. Oh well. I got the picture.

I swallowed hard. A lot of things were hard.

She nudged me with her cast. "And I want this thing off my foot," she explained further. "I don't feel very sexy with it."

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"You look sexy all the time," I said, taking advantage of the opportunity to get points. Masen had been very clear on the need to rack up "atta boy" points with your lady. Most of the time, Masen was full of shit. But I had a feeling I ought to trust him in this area. He'd kept Alyssa seemingly happy for a long time, despite all expectations to the contrary.

So here we were, making plans to have actual, full-on, my dick inside of her sex. Me. *Inside of her.*

"What about the boys?" Hello Grizzly Adams.

Bella smiled. "Emmett's going to stay with Jasper and Alice," she told me. "He'll be thrilled about a weekend with no brothers and being around Rosalie."

"And Seth and Sam and Jake?" Geez, there were a lot of them sometimes. How the hell were we ever going to keep track of them?

Her smile grew sly. "I've already cleared it with Alyssa. They'll stay with the boys, either at my house or theirs; depending on how settled they are at that point."

"Wow," I murmured, kissing her collarbone. "You think of everything."

She shrugged. "It's what I do." Then she kissed the top of my head and I laughed because I felt, just for a moment, like one of her boys. Then she tilted my chin up and planted a kiss on me that wasn't maternal in the least. Thank fuck. "It was probably presumptuous of me to assume that you'd be okay with me making plans to take advantage of you." Her words were almost an apology but her eyes didn't follow up. They looked wise and knowing.

"Feel free to presume or assume anytime," I assured her.

"Okay," she agreed easily.

Seven weeks. Forty-nine days. Forty-nine nights. I could do this. I could wait. There was a light at the end of the tunnel and my dick and I were crawling

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toward it.

~TBTA~

Later on that night, I turned on my computer to see if there was anything urgent. An email from Masen. I could read that later. One from my mother. Later. Junk mail. Never. Then one name made me sit up straight. Well shit that didn't take long at all. I should have known.

From: Charles Swan

To: Edward Cullen

Subject: My Daughter's Birthday

My wife tells me that you plan to put all of Bella's old home movies on DVDs for her and the boys. She also said you have requested family pictures to add to some DVDs as well. I think that is a fine idea. The boys will enjoy the gift as much as Bella, but I'm guessing you've figured that much out already.

By the way, the boys don't know this but Bella's favorite song when she was a little girl was Yellow Submarine by The Beatles. I would suggest it for one of your selections for the DVD - especially the one with her baby pictures.

I have attached some of her baby pictures with this email. I hope you know that I'm going to pay for this with lots of sulking and pouting on the part of my daughter. In fact, I'm not sure she's going to forgive me.

Just warning you that you'd better do a hell of a bang up job on those DVDs son. Just saying.

Sincerely,

Charles Swan, Retired United States Army

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I smiled because his emails were kind of formal and more like a letter. I clicked open the attachments to find a grinning baby Bella. She had one tooth and was drooling like a fountain. Her hair was sticking up in wild curls all around her head and I was pretty sure she had been eating spaghetti when the picture was taken. Whatever it was, it was all over her face and tomato red in color.

Charlie was right; he was going to pay. Of course, so was I. It was worth it though. I'd just have to make sure I warned Mom not to return the favor. She was just the kind who would be sharing shit like that all over the globe.

There were several shots of baby Bella, toddler Bella, and even one of Bella at about four or five years old, wearing a tutu, a tiara, and a scowl. Apparently, her mother had put her into some sort of dance class and my ninja temptress had not been happy about it. Her little, chubby arms were crossed over her chest as she glared into the camera. Her big dark eyes promised retribution as soon as she was big enough to pull it off. There would be hell to pay. Instantly, it was one of my favorites.

From: Edward Cullen

To: Charles Swan

Subject: Bella's Birthday

Sir,

First, let me thank you for the pictures of Bella. I particularly liked the ballerina picture, though I'm not sure I've got the courage to admit that to Bella. Would you mind sending me Will's phone number or email address so I can ask him if he has any pictures he would be willing to share with me?

Emmett, Seth, Sam, and Jake assure me that Bella will like this idea. However, if you don't agree I would like to know because I don't want to make Bella unhappy on her birthday. That would sort of defeat the purpose. I'll be doing something else too, but I'm going to enlist the help of

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a friend of Bella's (Alice) for that. She seems to have a knack for stuff like that.

Anyway, thank you once again for so generously sharing the pictures with me. I've got a good friend taking care of the actual transferring process and I've seen his work. I think Bella will be happy with the results. I hope so at least.

Thank you again, sir.

Edward Cullen

Yeah, I called him sir (twice) in an email. I had a feeling he was going to be reading that fucker over and over again, looking for clues that I wasn't good enough for his baby girl and I wasn't going to make it easy for him.

I printed up the picture of the scowling ballerina Bella and tacked it up on the corkboard in my office/study/library. Okay, it wasn't really much beyond a computer desk, a few bookshelves, and a comfortable old sofa that I liked to sit on while I read. Or napped. I confess that more than one nap had taken place on that couch.

Luckily, Bella never came in here. Or she'd definitely kill me when she saw that picture. I smiled at the unhappy little ballerina.

My ninja temptress, sex-kitten, demon, reluctant ballerina. Of course, I went all pervy by imagining her as a grown up Bella, wearing nothing *but* the tutu. And maybe the tiara.

Chapter 44: Discussions Before Dawn

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Author's Note: Honestly, you are all the best. My muse thanks you for your words of support because she was going to kick my butt. She doesn't mess around either. Though Edward says we could move up the sexing schedule by about...six and a half weeks or so. :p

Chapter 44: Discussions Before Dawn

Masen called me so early that he woke up me up. And he was in an earlier time zone than me. That meant only one thing. "You set your fucking alarm, didn't you?" I accused after I blinked the sleep away from my eyes and brain.

"Aw, don't be such a grump," Masen shot back. "Honestly, I have a good reason. I wanted to talk to you without Lyssa listening in."

"I don't want to hear any of your deep, dark confessions little brother."

"Will you shut it?" Masen sounded sincere for once in his life.

I sighed and sat up, trying to see the clock on my nightstand. "Christ, Mase, it's five thirty in the fucking morning."

"I thought all you soldier types were up at the butt crack of dawn?" Masen mocked.

"First, it's not dawn yet, you asshole," I said, glancing out the window.

"Second, it's Sunday, you dickwad. I was hoping to sleep in." Not to mention

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the fact that I had been enjoying a very nice and naughty dream about my ninja temptress. Now I was up and awake and sexually frustrated *and* it was way too early to arrive on Bella's doorstep.

"Who pissed in your cornflakes, buddy?" Masen snapped. I immediately stopped talking because snappy and irritable was not Masen. Irrit *ating*? Hell and yes. All the time. Irritable? Never.

"Sorry," I muttered, wiping my hand over my face. "I'm sexually frustrated and exhausted. I'm also an ass. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, I just..." Masen's words kind of trailed off. "Listen, I know you had to be kind of pissed that Lys and I bought a house so close to you and-

"Whoa, wait a second," I interrupted. "I wasn't pissed. Surprised maybe, but not pissed."

There was a moment of silence from the other end of the phone.

"So...you're really cool with us living so close?" Masen sounded uncharacteristically unsure of himself. I kind of liked this new off-balanced Masen. It was refreshing.

"Yeah, I mean..." I sighed and decided to get my lazy ass out of bed and hunt down some coffee. I wasn't equipped for such serious discussions with my little brother this early in the morning. "Honestly, Masen, it'll be fine. You'll be traveling so much it's not like you can drop by and annoy the shit out of me *all* the time."

"Ah, if only," Masen gave a longing sigh. "No, seriously Edward, if this is going to cause problems let me know now because tomorrow Lys and I meet with the attorney to sign the papers and shit. I'm giving you one last 'get out of jail free' card."

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"Nah, I mean, it'll be good for the boys," I said. "Kyle and Jake seem like they're gonna be best buds."

Masen laughed. "You and I are in for a world of shit with those two, Edward. Mark my words. They are trouble just waiting to happen."

"Tell me something I don't know." I laughed and leaned against the counter and waiting for the coffee to brew. I ran my hand through my hair, finally feeling a little more awake. "And it will be like having a nanny live five minutes away." I couldn't help but tease him.

"Right back at you," Masen countered.

"Bella and I get priority, you and Lys have had sex." I sighed. "Bella and I haven't."

"I heard we're watching the kids the weekend after Bella's birthday," Masen said. "Does this mean what I think it means?"

"What do you think it means?" Give away nothing.

"I think it means that my big brother's finally gonna get lucky."

I laughed, but didn't confirm or deny.

"So...we're cool then, right?" Masen asked after a few moments.

"We're cool," I assured him.

"One more thing," Masen said.

"You still can't do it in my bed."

"Shut up."

"I'm serious," I muttered.

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"So am I," Masen replied. "Listen, you know the new job will require a lot of travel, especially at the start."

"Yeah."

"So I'd like you to check on Lys and the boys," Masen said. "Make sure they're okay. Make sure Lyssa's not too lonely. She's got a lot of friends and stuff here and she's picking up and moving across the country for me and my job and she's not bitched once about it. I want to make sure she's happy. So watch out for them, will you?"

"You know you don't need to ask, Masen." I sighed. "And I'm sure Bella will be as thick as thieves with her before too long. Which could spell problems for us."

"Yeah, I know, on *both* counts, but I thought I'd do the polite thing for once in my life and actually say the words." Masen was back to being Masen and all was right with the world.

I yawned and poured myself a cup of coffee.

"All right," I said. "Listen, go to bed and try to get some sleep. Sorry to say I can't do the same, but some annoying little shit interrupted my beauty sleep."

"And you need all you can get," Mase commiserated.

"Bite me," I ordered.

"That's both illegal and immoral," Masen said. "Not to mention gross."

And he hung up.

No one liked to get the last word like Masen Cullen.

~TBTA~

The Bigger They Are

When I turned on my computer, there was an email from Charlie Swan waiting. He simply gave me Will's email address and told me that he'd be sending more pictures shortly. As I had expected, Charlie was mostly a man of few words. I found that reassuring because he reminded me of a lot of men I had come to respect in the military. Bella was a lot like him in many ways. She was open and loving, but not overly emotional. She didn't wear her heart on her sleeve, but kept her love tucked quietly against her heart. Or maybe I had just been watching too many movies. That was always a possibility.

I composed a quick email to Will, letting him know what I was doing and what I was hoping to find. I wasn't sure how he'd feel about the project but I thought it was a good idea and so did the boys, so that was good enough.

I looked at the clock. Still way too early to show up at Bella's door, especially if I wanted to keep my balls attached to my body. And I did. I desperately did. Because I now had six weeks and six days until... And that was all it took.

I groaned and looked down at my crotch. Of course. Nothing less than what I expected. Well, at least I had something to do now. With a sigh, I got up and went to my bathroom where I turned on the shower. Hot water? Check. Body wash for lazy man's lube? Check. Boner? Helluva check mark there. Lewd thoughts? Check and double check.

All systems were go.

And so began another cycle of self-abuse.

~TBTA~

When I finally deemed it a reasonable hour to show up at Bella's door, I was not surprised to find Jake waiting for me. "Do you sleep *all* the time?" he asked, clearly disgruntled.

"Do you *ever* sleep?" I countered. Ruffle. Frown. Straighten.

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"Only when my eyes won't stay open anymore," Jake answered with more honesty than I expected.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

He tugged at my hand and pulled me inside. "Mom told me I could have Pop-Tarts for breakfast," Jake said proudly. I was guessing that Pop-Tarts for breakfast were a good thing in Jake's book. "Want some?"

"I had some toast at home," I explained as we got near the kitchen. Pop-tarts actually sounded kind of gross to me, but to each his own.

Bella appeared in the doorway, obviously already showered and fully caffeinated. She gave me a kiss on the cheek and a quick hug. Jake grinned at me and shook his head.

He sat down on a stool at the breakfast bar while his mom reviewed his options for Pop-tarty goodness. "Brown sugar cinnamon, blueberry, S'mores, cookies n' cream, or chocolate?" Bella said. I had no idea there were so many varieties. I remembered chocolate and strawberry and that was pretty much it.

Jake thought it over carefully. "Can I have two kinds?" He was in full bargaining mode.

Bella proved to be stronger than I would have been because she shook her head firmly. "Two pop-tars, not two kinds. I'm not opening two packages," she told him.

He scowled for a moment, obviously trying to decide whether to push the issue or not. Bella started to put the boxes back in the pantry. "S'mores!" Jake called out quickly.

She put the "pastries" into the toaster and walked over to give me another kiss. I thought she tasted better than Pop-tarts possibly could. Jake's expression begged to differ.

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~TBTA~

We spent another lazy day. Tomorrow the insanity would start to go into high gear and we both knew it. We watched stupid movies on television. The boys ran around outside and up and down the stairs about a million times. They ate. And they ate some more. Bella and I fell asleep on the couch. I woke up to find her sprawled on top of me. My dick liked that. Then she accidentally kneed me in the balls when she woke up. My dick didn't like that and retreated to pout for a while.

Bella blushed and apologized. I tried to pretend like it didn't hurt and that my balls weren't aching like a bitch. I don't think I convinced her. She felt bad and *I* felt bad that *she* felt bad. There was a lot of feeling bad going around at any rate.

We must have been really tired because we fell asleep again, still on the couch. I woke up to hot breath in my face. I would like to have pretended it was Bella, but she didn't have doggy breath. At least, not that I'd ever noticed. I opened my eyes to see Emily staring at me.

"Hey, girl," I muttered, reaching out to pet her.

She nuzzled into my hand. Good dog. I was about to drift off again when I heard the boys start running down the stairs. They were heading toward the kitchen. They were probably hungry. Again. Sometimes it felt like throwing meat into a lion pit. And Emily was giving me that expectant look that told me she wanted fed too.

Bella had taken Sam to get all the supplies Emily needed while I had Jake out at breakfast. So after Sam instructed me in how much to feed Emily, I poured the correct amount into her shiny new bowl and watched her bolt it down even faster than Emmett ate.

I was impressed.

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Then she needed out. And the boys starting asking what was for dinner. They kind of looked at me like they were hungry lion cubs and I was either going to provide a lamb or risk losing a limb. Bella was still sleeping and I had four pairs of eyes on *me*. I knew I could take the easy way out and order pizza, but part of me kind of wanted to show off. Yeah, I had a few skills in the kitchen and maybe it was time to step up my game a little bit.

"Does your mom like meatloaf?" I asked. Even I could do meatloaf.

Emmett shrugged. "I dunno, she makes it. She eats it. I guess she likes it."

Seth and Sam nodded, but Jake had his head buried in the pantry and was kneeling on the floor. "Jake? What are you doing?"

He looked up at me, his hair wild around his head. He needed a hair cut. "Mom hides the good stuff behind the cans of veggies on the bottom shelf." He grinned at me. "She's pretty good. That's the third hiding place this month."

"Do you like meatloaf?" I asked.

"Not as much as a Butterfinger," he answered seriously. "But yeah."

"Good," I said with a nod. "Sam, go check the freezer for hamburger meat."

"We'll have some," he assured me and the other three boys nodded. Well two of them nodded and Jake yelled his agreement from the pantry.

An hour later, I had managed to defrost the hamburger and put together a decent meatloaf, which was in the oven. Jake dragged out the offending cans of vegetables in his search for sugar and I grabbed some. There were some red potatoes in the pantry too and Seth and I washed them and cut them, leaving the skins on, and then boiled them. Mashed potatoes were a big favorite with the boys. Canned gravy completed the meal.

All of it was cooking away when Bella wandered into the kitchen and took a whiff. "Hey," she murmured, wiping at her eyes. She really was exhausted.

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"You cooked." She sounded surprised, but pleased.

I kissed her. "Yeah, but don't get too impressed. I know how to cook about four dishes. And meatloaf is one of them."

"I like a man who knows his limitations," Bella assured me. Then her voice lowered and she asked. "You okay...down there?"

"Temporary setback," I told her. "But I'll be happy to let you make your apologies to the boys in person at some later date."

"You're so perverted," she whispered.

"That's something you need to know now," I said. "So consider yourself warned."

"Warned and ready."

Dinner was surprisingly good, though Jake did tell me that his mom's meatloaf was just a little bit better. Still, he seemed surprised that I had managed as well as I had. His faith in me was a little insulting. I told him so. He shrugged. Clearly, he wasn't going to stroke my ego.

The boys and I cleaned up the kitchen and then Bella told them to take Emily for a walk. "And take bags with you in case she poops!" she called out. Jake giggled and Sam pulled the plastic bag out of his pocket.

"Already thought of that," he said. Then the four of them walked out the door, leaving us alone.

I sighed and pulled her onto the couch again. I was starting to feel like a slug, but I knew that this would be my last day of blissful, sloth-like behavior. We cuddled and kissed for a few minutes, but I could tell she was tired. Regretfully, I knew I needed to go home or I'd end up keeping her up late by encouraging her ninja button skills.

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So I was home by ten o'clock and feeling very lonely. My bed was big and empty. I tossed and turned, hoping to fall asleep and thwarted at every turn.

~TBTA~

On Monday at lunch time I called Bella to see how the visit to the vet went. I caught her just as she got home and I heard Emily barking in the background. "So I guess she's really a keeper, huh?"

"Apparently so," Bella replied. "Hey, Sam! Take her out back okay?" She sighed and gave her attention back to me. "Sorry about that."

"So, how'd it go?"

"Let's just say that Sam was waiting for me downstairs when I got up this morning, Emily's leash was on and he was standing by the door," Bella told me.

"Sam was up *first*?" That had to be something precedent setting.

"Not only that, he tried to deny me my *coffee*," Bella continued in disbelief. "Told me we didn't *have time*." She snorted. "Who doesn't have time for *coffee*? Who wouldn't *make* time? And what kind of person would try to deny me my coffee?"

"Outrageous," I said.

"I know. Right? That's just dangerous, subversive stuff," Bella muttered. "Then he pouted when I told him that I had to take a shower and make sure the vet could actually see us."

"You mothers, always doing silly things like taking showers and making appointments. Boys have things to *do*, you know."

"Don't encourage him," Bella said. "Next time, you're taking them *both*."

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"Okay." I was actually looking forward to it.

"Then as soon as the vet walked in, Sam asked her exactly what her qualifications were and what kind of grades she got," Bella told me dryly.

I tried not to laugh at that, I really did. But it was impossible because I could totally picture Sam's earnest expression as he began grilling the vet. "And was she qualified?"

Bella sighed. "You think it's funny, but you should have seen her face when Sam asked her why she went to veterinary school at North Carolina instead of Cornell. Cornell, in case you were wondering, has the number one rated veterinary school in the country, and North Carolina State is only at number five, so you can see the cause for his concern."

I did laugh then, out loud. "Well, you can't fault him for being careful."

"Next time, you'll be the one embarrassed so just remember that," she countered. "Eventually, once she got over her surprise, she did a good job of convincing Sam that she was, indeed, qualified to treat his precious Emily," Bella said. "She gave Emily a clean bill of health, other than being malnourished. She had a mild case of ear mites, so we got some medicine for that. She wasn't chipped, so no owners to find." That was a relief. "She was spayed at some point, so no worries there. And now she's up to date on her shots, too." Bella laughed. "I swear, it's like having another kid. But I liked her, the vet that is, Sam did too." She snickered. "Emily, however, remains unconvinced."

"Yeah, I don't remember any of our dogs being particularly fond of the vet," I said.

"Oh, and this vet is really cute, so if I hear you flirted with her, I'm going to see if I can get you neutered too. Just warning you."

"I'll behave myself," I promised.

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"Thought that might make you pay attention."

I glanced at my watch and sighed. "Listen, I'm going to be stuck here late. Really late. So I won't get a chance to stop by tonight."

"Oh," Bella said. Then she sighed. "I guess I've gotten used to having you around, Cullen. I'm going to miss you."

"No more than I'm gonna miss you guys," I admitted. "But hopefully tomorrow."

"Hopefully," Bella said softly.

"Listen, I've got to go, but I'll call you later if that's okay," I said.

"You'd better."

"Yes ma'am."

Our phone call that evening was quick and unsatisfying. I had people breathing down my neck at work and I could hear the boys in the background. They seemed to be in rare form and for once I was almost glad I wasn't there. Honestly, I never knew that kids were so loud or had so much energy. And Bella's boys were *good* kids. What about the brats? How could anyone stand to be around *them*?

She asked if I had had dinner and I sort of fudged on my answer. I said yes. And it was true I had had something to eat. I just didn't think that Bella would consider pretzels, a Twix bar, and a diet coke a proper dinner.

When I finally got home just before midnight, I had just enough energy to fall into my bed after removing my boots and uniform. I slept in my dirty tee-shirt and boxers and didn't even care.

Tuesday was more of the same, though I thought I would get out early enough to sneak over to Bella's. I called her at lunch and confirmed. It was spaghetti

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and meatballs night, so I had something to look forward to. The boys were rowdy at dinner and Bella must have seen my confusion.

"They always get this way just before school starts," she told me.

"Ah, they know their freedom's coming to an end," I observed.

"Something like that."

After dinner we sat on the couch and watched television. Nothing special. Kind of boring probably. But I liked it. Bella was snuggled up against me and Jake sat on my other side. Emmett was sprawled on the floor as usual. Seth stayed up stairs practicing his guitar, using some of the DVDs and books my parents had bought him. Sam played with Emily. When she fell asleep, he leaned against her, using her side as a pillow and quietly read his book.

We were a boring and typical American family.

And I loved it.

I had had an exciting life. I had seen places that most people would never see. I had been terrified and thrilled by new experiences that most people would never have. And I had enjoyed it. A lot. I could honestly say that I was glad I had spent two decades traveling the world and doing what I did.

But like everything else, that time of my life had been a season and that season was now past. Now was the time to set down roots, to settle into a family life, a comfortable routine with people I loved and who loved me in return. I wanted more than new experiences and new places. I wanted all that "boring" stuff I had never wanted before.

I wanted a home.

I wanted Bella.

God help me, I even wanted the boys.

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Not to mention the dog.

And that tiara. I liked the idea of that tiara.

Fic Rec: This is Who I Am: A Twilight Fan Fic by pattyrose.

Edward Cullen, successful business exec/playboy/all around bad boy. Bella Swan, divorced mom/graphic artist/unwilling to trust her heart to the likes of someone like Edward again. Will she give him a chance? Does he even deserve one? AH, AU ExB.

I just started reading this but I'm falling in love with this Edward. I think you will too.

Chapter 45: Runaway Moments

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Yes, there's a real Bella. No, I'm not that Bella. The real Bella is a friend from way back. Fifteen years ago, she lost her Navy husband in a training accident. Two years later she married another man in the Navy. Their story is a little different. She was left with five kids (all girls!) and he also had kids when they married. So this story is obviously not sticking strictly to theirs. She didn't have a Jake; her girls are all well behaved and as beautiful and quiet as their mother. But I am more familiar with boys and I like their stinky, sneaky, funny, reckless ways. So that's why I gave Bella boys. I've only got one daughter and she's tougher than her brothers and all ten male cousins - combined. Just ask the guy who touched her butt without permission and got a broken finger for his trouble. :p So it's just easier for me to "get" boys and the way they think. And I have a Jake. He is my youngest son and they have a lot in common. My youngest is a charmer and a con artist. He'll be sixteen next month. Funny how they do that, grow up on you when you aren't looking.

Chapter 45: Runaway Moments

"A good snapshot stops a moment from running away." ~Eudora Welty

~TBTA~

I felt a little refreshed when I woke up on Wednesday since I had spent the evening before with Bella and the kids. I took a quick three mile run, knowing that I had let my physical fitness slide and that just wouldn't do. I didn't want to allow myself to get fat and lazy, especially not now when I had so much to stay in shape for.

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Sex. Oh my God. Six weeks and three days, give or take a few hours. It would be an embarrassment of epic proportions to wait that long to have sex only to wheeze and pant my way through it, and not in a good way. Having gotten a glimpse of Bella's libido and skills, I was pretty sure I needed to be in Lance Armstrong kind of shape. I needed both speed and endurance. Ninja tempresses are not easily satisfied. I wanted to make sure I could keep up with her.

After my run, I decided to check my email and I was not surprised to find one of particular interest. That morning there was an email from Will waiting for me.

From: W. Swan

To: Edward Cullen

Hey! Dad told me what you've got planned for Bella's birthday. Wonderful idea, btw. It's obvious you're a romantic at heart, and I mean that in the best possible way. I'm not much of a photographer, but Josh has gotten some great shots of Bella and the boys over the years. I also had some older family photos around the house. Dad said it was okay if Mac was in the pictures, so some of them include him. I'm glad you're not being weird over Mac, because that just wouldn't work. But I'm guessing you've figured that out on your own. Which is a point in your favor, obviously. Anyway, I won't go all "that's my sister and if you hurt her, I'll hunt you down." I figure my dad has taken care of that already. Maybe you and Josh can compare "Charlie Horror Stories" or something. If Bella likes you, then I like you too.

We'll be in town soon. Decided to go ahead and combine our visit with Mom and Dad. Kind of like a band-aid, just rip it off and get it over with. So that's what we're doing for you. You're welcome. I'll fly in by myself. I called Bella this morning, but I think I got her before her second cup of coffee. You might want to make sure she actually remembers the conversation. She's a trip before she's caffeinated, huh? Josh has a consultation in Georgia, so he'll just rent a car and drive up after he's

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done. I'll actually get there on Saturday, two days before Mom and Dad. So I guess you can kind of ease into the Swan Experience. That's what Josh calls it. Then you can get the whole thing over with at one time. We don't bite. I promise. Or at least not too hard. Though I can't vouch for Bella.

Bella said that they got a dog. Or maybe the dog got them. Anyway, Emily is all Sam talks about apparently. And you're all JAKE talks about. Isn't that kid the best? Talk about a con artist. You've noticed that right? Been swindled a time or two? I'm betting you have. I swear I want to smuggle Butterfingers in to him, like he was in a prison or something.

Anyway, I need to get my ass in gear. I've been appreciating my last few mornings of sleeping in. One of the benefits of teaching. I added my phone number too. You never know.

See you soon,

Will

I smiled as I read the email. In some ways, Will reminded me of Charlie, certain phrases he used and the way he said some things. But I could definitely detect a lot of similarities with Bella too. It would be interesting to meet him and Josh. I wondered what Masen would think of them. He'd probably tease them as mercilessly as he did me, which would mean they were practically family.

Then I clicked on the attachments and looked.

Bella, about twelve years old with braces. Will was standing beside her. They looked like they were dressed for Easter or something. Will was touching his bow tie with a look of distaste (had to be his mother's idea) while Bella was tugging at the collar of her dress like it was choking her.

Bella and Will again, this time they looked to be in their late twenties. Bella was pregnant, but not too far along from the size of her belly. Will was making

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a face for the camera. Or maybe he was making a face at Josh, if that was who had taken the picture.

Bella and Mac and the four boys at Christmas. Looking at the boys, I would guess it was Mac's last Christmas because Jake looked to be at least five. Seth and Sam were standing in front of Mac, while Mac was holding Jake. Emmet stood next to Bella, already dwarfing her. It was a typical family portrait, except the family would soon be shattered.

Bella and Mac and her parents. Mac towered over all of them, even Charlie Swan. They looked happy and I could see mountains in the background. Some sort of family vacation?

Bella and Mac and the boys with the same mountains in the background. Jake was hamming it up, and he looked around three years old. Emmett was grinning from ear to ear, a happy-go-lucky kid without a real care in the world. Seth and Sam were putting up fingers behind Jake's head, being typical brothers.

Bella and the boys and Will, same mountains. Definitely a family thing. Will was holding Sam, who had his head leaning on his uncle's shoulder. Jake wasn't looking up at the camera, instead he was looking off to the side and I wondered if Mac had said something to him and he was looking at his father.

Will and Bella and the man I'd seen in that picture with Will, so I was guessing that was Josh. Clean cut, handsome I guess, in a quiet, guy-next-door way. Will looked a lot like Bella with the same deep, dark eyes and wavy brown hair. He wore his hair slightly longer in this picture, almost long enough to brush his shoulders. They all looked happy and comfortable with each other.

Bella and her mom, with Bella in her wedding dress. I could see why Will had included it. Renee was fixing Bella's veil, the smile on her face so proud that I could almost feel it even now. It was a beautiful moment between mother and daughter and I definitely wanted to include it on the DVD.

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Bella and Mac, he was in uniform. It looked like he had just come home from a deployment, because there were still tears on Bella's cheeks and they were surrounded by others - some in uniform, some in civvies, all of them hugging or holding each other in some way. Yeah, definitely a reunion of sorts. Not a single unhappy face in the crowd. That was the difference in the saying good-byes and the thank-God-you're-homes. There were no drawn and fearful faces in that picture. Everyone was happy and smiling and relieved. Sam stood by his Dad and from the angle I was guessing that maybe Seth or Emmett had taken the picture.

Bella and her dad. This was seemed very recent, because I saw the weariness and grief that had been on Bella's face that first time I'd seen her. It was another Christmas, but even in the pictures you could tell it was different. Someone was missing.

One last picture - Bella and the boys, the same Christmas tree in the background. The boys' faces were solemn despite the holiday. Jake had his face sort of buried in Bella's leg, Emmett's mouth was drawn in a tight line. Seth had the familiar strain of worry in his eyes, and Sam just looked overwhelmed. There was an empty spot behind Bella that seemed to take up the picture. Weird but true.

Will was right. They weren't the same family now. I wasn't the same guy either.

And it was a very good thing for all of us.

~TBTA~

Bella called me at lunch to tell me that her brother and Josh were going to be arriving later in the week. I almost told her that I knew, but then I realized I would have to explain *how* I knew and she couldn't know I had Will's email address. Or could she? Crap. I wasn't much good at this covert op stuff. Not when it came to my personal life anyway. I was more of a "kick down the damned door" kind of guy. This sneaking around was more problematic than I thought it would be.

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Last night, Sam had slipped me a large envelope full of pictures, slick as you please. It was like he was a miniature James Bond or some shit like that. His expression never changed either. It was kind of scary. The other boys kept Bella's attention elsewhere.

I had given my buddy Thor the first of the video tapes on Monday. Thor wasn't his real name, but anyone who caught a glimpse of the blond giant had no problem figuring out why we called him that. His last name was Thorenson, and that's probably where his nickname came from, but honestly, Thor suited him perfectly. Thor looked like he should have been raiding and pillaging his way down a coastline. Instead, he was soft spoken and quite graceful for his size. Not to mention very creative. If I hadn't been scared to death of him, I might have called him sensitive. But he could have pounded me into the ground without breaking a sweat so I just handed him the tapes and the pictures, gave him a brief overview of what I was looking for and left it at that. I told him I'd have a list of music for him soon.

Wednesday, he gave that first batch of pictures and tapes back. I was going to have one of the boys sneak them out of my vehicle and into the house while I "distracted" Bella. My dick had been volunteering for that duty all day. I wasn't sure that was the way to go, but I was keeping my options open at that point.

I got out of work late on Wednesday, but not too late. I stopped by Bella's house for a quick snuggle and some ice cream. Honestly, I could have by passed the ice cream for more snuggling time but the boys were up and wired due to the sugar. And there was no way in hell that Jake was going to go to bed without ice cream once the magic words were uttered. Even Emily was running around barking, excited because her boys were excited. I had to warn Jake about giving her chocolate. His eyes got real big when I told that him that chocolate could hurt her. He looked at me like that was the worst thing in the world and then he dropped to his knees and hugged Emily close. He told her, "I'm *so* sorry, Emily." For Jake, I imagined that no chocolate *would* be a fate worse than death. Emily, however, didn't seem to care much one way or the other.

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Even with all of the chaos, I did notice that Jake was a little quieter than usual. For him anyway. I wondered if he was getting sick. I would have felt his forehead like Mom used to do for us, but I didn't have a clue what I'd be looking for. How hot was too hot? And was there such thing as too cold? And what would it mean anyway? Besides, Bella would know if something was wrong with Jake. She didn't look worried, so I pretended I wasn't either.

Thursday morning arrived and I realized I only had forty-eight hours before I met Bella's brother. Next to meeting her dad, I figured this was about as nerve-wracking as it got. I was sort of glad that Josh would be delayed by a day just so that I could sort of ease into knowing one brother before the other one showed up. Charlie and Renee were due to arrive on Monday evening.

I had no way of knowing if I would see them then since I didn't know how late I would be working. I'd see how all of that panned out. I was trying to ignore it though, and channeling my inner Scarlett O'Hara. "I'll think about that tomorrow" was my new motto. My mom had made me watch that movie once a year almost every year while I was living at home and too young to escape. Sad to say, I could probably quote lines and lines of dialogue. It was a dirty little secret that I didn't share with many people. I hadn't even told Bella yet.

I was waiting until we had already done it so she could be sure of my manliness. Or hopefully sure. Shit. The pressure was on, wasn't it?

Thursday was another long, shitty day. Or at least that's what I was thinking. I had called Bella early on to let her know that I probably wouldn't get away until late again. That meant I wouldn't see them until tomorrow, which sucked. However, I couldn't really complain after having had the last week off. Besides, I didn't really want my buddies to know how love sick I actually was.

I was Edward Cullen and I had baggage now. But that was my business and not theirs.

Around noon, I heard some really soft, low whistles and shook my head. Guys were pigs. I knew this. I knew this because I was a bit of a pig myself. I heard the sounds of masculine appreciation and I wasn't going to play that game.

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Whoever was there could just turn other heads. Okay, I might take a quick peek. I turned and saw a pair of familiar brown eyes.

"Bella?" I asked in surprise. She was holding up a large paper bag and the most amazing smells were wafting out of it. I sniffed.

"Shit, is that a Philly Cheese Steak?" I asked, my mouth already watering. She giggled. *Shit. No. Don't do that, Bella. Not here. My dick and I can't take it. And I will never hear the end of it.*

"Yep," she confirmed with a nod. "So greasy that it's a heart attack waiting to happen." She frowned. "So I expect you to eat semi-healthy for dinner because I want to keep you healthy. Understand?" While she was kind of joking, I could see the very real concern behind the words. Ignoring the curious looks of my buddies, I kissed her quick and hard and snatched the bag. They could bite my ass.

"I'll eat a salad for dinner. Promise," I assured her.

She gave a little nod and then kissed me again. I should have stopped her because one kiss would have been understandable, but two was going to earn me no end of shit from the guys I could feel staring at us even now. I turned to look at them all, and having the highest rank in the room was a good thing. "Excuse me boys? Don't you have something to do?"

They all smirked and nodded and turned away, but I noticed all of the nudging that was going on. I heard the words "hottie" "Cullen?" and "getting some" being bandied about. I didn't want to know exactly what they were saying.

We went into my office and I closed the door. I debated locking it too but that would send the wrong message. I quickly opened up the greasy wrapped and took a big bite. Bella unwrapped a smaller and probably much healthier sandwich for herself. She ate neatly while I pretty much wolfed my down. I had skipped breakfast since I woke up late. I had slept late because I had been restless. I had been restless due to Bella-inspired, extremely naughty fantasies. So actually it was her fault that I was so hungry.

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"Thish...ish shooo good," I mumbled around a mouthful.

"Could you at least swallow before you try and talk?" she asked.

I swallowed hard and nodded. "Sure, since *you* do." I winked at her and she shook her head like she was exasperated with my dirty mind, but I saw the little smile she tried to hide behind her sandwich. Her mind was as dirty and perverted as mine.

Thank goodness.

I reached over and squeezed her hand. "This was a great surprise," I said. "I never expected to see you here."

She shrugged. "I was lonely," Bella said softly, her eyes meeting mine. "So I took a chance I'd get to spend a few minutes with you." Then she snickered. "And I brought you sustenance to keep up your stamina."

"I'm all about staying in shape," I assured her. "I've started running again to keep up with you."

"Well, I am younger than you," she said thoughtfully.

"So, how does it feel to date an older man?"

Bella smiled slyly and looked at me from beneath her lashes. Shit. That look reminded me of her giving me a blow job and my dick responded accordingly. "It feels...good," she said quietly. And the mood changed, but that wasn't a bad thing. I leaned over and kissed her again, because no one else could see and that meant it wouldn't count.

We chatted for a while and I dragged out eating the last of my sandwich. Technically, I had time allotted for lunch, but everyone knew that the needs of the Army came before a lunch hour. However, in this case, I figured it was all right to put off moving those supplies until I had enjoyed some time with my lady.

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Suddenly, Bella started laughing and shaking her head. "What's so funny?"

She bit her lip and tried to school her features into more serious lines - and failed miserably. "Uh, nothing, really." She sighed and shook her head. "I was just remembering something Jake said."

"Oh no, you can't just leave me hanging like that," I said. Whatever it was, it had to be hilarious.

But then she was looking less amused and more...nervous. And I didn't like that, not one little bit. I reached over and took her hand, twining my fingers with hers. If one of the guys walked in and saw that I would never hear the end of it. But luckily they knew better than to just barge into my cubby hole of an office.

"Babe?" I prompted.

She looked up at me and tilted her head to the side. "So, I uh...I had a little talk with Jake this morning."

"And?" There was no telling where this was going if Jake was involved. I had given up trying to predict that kid months ago.

"Yeah, well, actually we were talking about Emmett...and Rosalie," she began, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear like she usually did when she was nervous. I was starting to think that her little visit had to do with something more than missing me and bringing me a sandwich.

"You're killing me here," I told her, half joking, half not.

"Well, he told me that," she sighed again. "He told me that he told you he wanted to keep *you* like Jasper and Alice are keeping Rose."

I laughed and shook my head in admiration. That kid didn't give up and I loved him for it. "He did, did he?"

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"Yeah," Bella said and gave a little half smile. I didn't like it because she looked like she was trying too hard. Had Jake's words freaked her out? "And Jake was a little worried that he made you mad or something."

"No, why would he think that?" I was starting to get a bad feeling. Even worse than Bella freaking would be one of the boys. Even worse than that would be Jake feeling bad. Jake was my buddy, my champion. Somehow, I had probably managed to screw things up.

"Well, I mean *I* know why you haven't been around as much this week," Bella said quietly. "Last week was a fluke. I understand that, but Jake thinks..." She pressed her lips together briefly. "I know you've come back to work and work's been busy and I tried to explain that to him..."

I touched her hand. "But Jake thinks I haven't been coming around because I'm mad at him? For saying he wants to keep me?"

She nodded. Well shit. I had handled that badly. "I think Jake thinks that you don't...that you don't want to 'keep' him, as he says."

"No, God no," I said. I shook my head. "Well now I feel like a total shit." I had messed up. I had made Jake think that the answer really was no. I should have gone with my first instinct and done the squeaky toy routine, and hugged the kid.

She gave a relieved sigh. "Okay, I didn't think you were mad, but I was wondering if...uh...I was wondering if that, I don't know, maybe freaked you out or something?" she seemed hesitant, cautious. I wasn't going to have that. "By what Jake said?"

I scooted my chair forward until our noses were almost touching. "Do I look freaked out to you?" I whispered, keeping my lips just barely away from hers.

She looked into my eyes and then shook her head. "No."

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I kissed her lightly, tenderly, cradling her head in my hands. Then I pulled back and smiled. "Do I *act* freaked out to you?"

A smile started spreading across her face and she shook her head again. "No."

"Then please believe me when I say that I'm not freaked out," I said quietly. "Not at all." My lips found hers again of their own volition. Like my dick, they had a mind of their own so to speak. I leaned back. "In fact, I liked it when Jake told me he wanted to keep me." Another kiss and I knew I really should stop because this wasn't the time or place. "I liked it a lot. And the first thing I thought of was that I wanted to keep him too. I want to keep *all* of you. And I'll call Jake tonight and tell him that, plain and simple. I feel really bad that he's been worried. I didn't mention it to you, well because I didn't want to freak *you* out." I kissed her. I had stopped counting how many kisses that made. "So if you don't mind, I'd like to call Jake tonight and tell him that yeah, I'd like to keep him." I couldn't help but smile as I said it. And even though I knew I was making a huge commitment with those simple words, a promise not just to Bella but to Jake, I couldn't find anything close to fear inside of me. There was just...happiness. It felt right.

"Are you sure?" She was asking a lot with three words.

"Yes," I answered, saying even more with one.

"You can tell him," Bella whispered.

Those few, simple words felt like vows. They were crazy and probably not romantic at all, there was nothing flowery or poetic about them, but they were right.

She nuzzled closer to me. My mouth was at her ear. "But you've got to know, Bella...I want to keep *you* most of all...forever. I mean it. I'm too old to play games or be coy. I don't want to ever let go and I'm a pretty stubborn guy. So you should know that too."

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Bella took a shaky breath and turned just slightly so that our eyes met. "So don't let go," she whispered.

I heaved a breath. "Okay, I won't."

Promises made. Promises that would be kept.

Chapter 46: Arrivals and Inspections

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 46: Arrivals and Inspections

"If you want to know how your girl will treat you after marriage, just listen to her talking to her little brother." ~Sam Levenson

~TBTA~

I called that evening even though I was still at work. I had promised and even if I had to call from the latrine, I was going to make good on that promise. I talked to Bella for a few minutes and then asked to speak to Jake. "Jake?" she called out. "The phone - for you."

"Who is it?" I heard him ask as he got closer.

"It's Edward," Bella explained. "He wants to talk to you."

"He does?" Jake sounded shocked. A knife right through my fucking heart, I swear.

"Edward?" Jake's voice was soft.

"Hey buddy," I said. "Thanks for talking to me."

"Edward?" He asked again, and he sounded uncertain and shy, certainly not the Jake I knew. I felt even worse.

"Man, I miss you guys," I said. "Work's been crazy lately, but I sure wish I was

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there with all of you."

"You do?" Jake sounded doubtful and that really, really bothered me.

"Yeah, I do." I took a deep breath. "Jake, I messed up."

"How?"

"Yeah, listen, you know that thing we talked about the other day? The day we went to breakfast?"

"What thing?"

"That thing about keeping people?" There was a long pause.

"Yeah, I remember," Jake said softly.

"Well, when you asked, I told you I had to think about it. Remember?" Another long pause.

"Yeah, I know." He sounded dejected and I wanted to kick my own ass. "That's okay." I was a moron.

"Well, I called to tell you that I've thought about it Jake," I told him. "And I've talked to your mom and she told me it was okay to call you and tell you. So if you still want me around, I'd like to keep you too."

I could practically hear the wheels turning in his head. "Really?" he finally asked.

"Yeah, I mean, you know if you still want me. I made a mistake, Jake. I was wrong. I'm still trying to get the hang of all of this, so sometimes you're going to have to be patient with me," I said. "Actually Jake, I didn't have to think about it. I was wrong to have said that I did and I apologize. I wanted to tell you that I wanted to keep you too. I wanted to tell you right there. And I should have said that. But instead I said something I didn't mean and that was wrong. I

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guess that I just didn't want to...I don't know...make your mom uncomfortable?" I sighed. "But really, I should have just said what I felt. Because we have to be honest with each other, right?"

"Yeah." He sounded happier now.

"So no matter what, I think you and me - we're going to keep each other. Right?" I knew exactly what I was doing, because a promise made to a kid was big stuff. I had made promises to my nephews - I had promised that I'd visit or I'd get them a certain toy for their birthday. But this was...this was huge and I knew it. And yet there wasn't a part of me that didn't want to make this promise to Jake - or to Bella.

"Yeah," Jake said, finally sounding like the Jake I knew. "We'll keep each other no matter what." I felt myself relaxing. I had messed up, but I had fixed it. That was the great thing about kids too, they forgave you. They saw through all the bullshit and right to the truth of what you were saying.

"Good, well I feel better now, Jake. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Jake said quietly. "Edward?"

"Yeah Jake?"

I heard a giggle. "I think Mom wants to keep you too," he confided.

I laughed. "I hope so, buddy, I really do. That would be great."

"I'll see what I can do," Jake promised.

"You do that."

"Okay."

~TBTA~

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The next thing I knew it was Friday afternoon and I was getting out of work early enough to go to Bella's. I felt like I had bailed on them all week so I asked her if I could take them all out for wings. I got no arguments. Her brother was arriving tomorrow. She asked me to go the airport to pick him up with her and the boys. I was a little nervous because that was kind of a big deal. Meeting her brother was huge. What if he hated me? It was one thing to be polite in an email or over the phone. What if, face to face, we just didn't get along? What if I said something stupid? Lately, I seemed to have been having trouble with that shit. I had to put it all out of my mind to enjoy the evening. Whatever happened, happened. I would deal with it.

Anything fried was always a good choice and I didn't think Bella would mind just this once. So wings it was. We got all sorts of flavors, even some obnoxiously hot ones that the boys took turns daring each other to eat. Bella just shook her head at us all. Yeah, I might have been a part of it too. I noticed that Seth was definitely starting to eat as much as Emmett. His voice was cracking a bit now, which made his brothers just howl with laughter. Seth didn't think it was funny. He was going to turn thirteen in two months. In fact, all of the boys had birthday between July and February.

We ate almost the whole mountain of wings and onion rings we had ordered between us, with Seth and Emmett packing away almost a whole platter each. Even the waitresses were impressed. Jake insisted on sitting beside me, much to Bella's amusement. He frowned when Seth asked about a guitar lesson before going to the airport the following morning. Jake had, it seemed, really decided to claim me. Now I just had to convince him that it was good to share.

The boys went to bed early, exhausted by their excitement over Uncle Will's imminent arrival. Though, as Jake confessed to me, Uncle Josh always gave them presents when he visited. Bella and I were pretty tired too, so we ended up sitting on the couch and watching the news (not really paying attention) and doing a little old fashioned making out. Strictly clothes on, though our hands tended to wander a bit. Okay, more than a bit. Bella got pretty handsy, while I was a perfect gentleman. Or close. Okay, I tried but Bella's pretty pushy. And my dick is a pushover. He's like an air traffic controller and tends to direct the action of the rest of my body.

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Finally, around midnight I knew I needed to go. We both needed our sleep and tomorrow was going to be a big day. We were at the door then, my least favorite part of the day. "My parents are going to be here in a few days," she said.

I smiled, trying to pretend that inside I wasn't going into panic mode. "Yeah, that's gonna be great," I lied.

She looked at me like she saw right through me and she probably did. "Well, I don't have that much extra room and I was wondering, if it isn't too much of an imposition, if you'd be willing to take either Will and Josh or my parents."

"Will and Josh can stay with me," I offered lightning fast. There was no way in hell I wanted the Colonel at my house, watching my every move, waiting for me to rub one out in my shower to lewd fantasies of his daughter. Much better that it was Will and Josh. "No imposition at all. I should have offered. I've just been beat with work and all - not thinking clearly." I kissed her.

She smiled at me and then pulled me down for a much longer kiss. Her tongue teased mine. The grown up Bella tutu/tiara fantasy danced in my head. God, I really was a pervert. We both pulled away with a groan. Six weeks, one day. Six weeks, one day. Six weeks, one day...

In that weird way she had of reading my thoughts, she leaned in and whispered, "Just over six weeks."

I moaned and adjusted myself. Pressing up against a zipper hurt. "Yeah, I know, believe me, I know."

She giggled. More torture.

"I'd better go before I press you up against that wall and say to hell with six weeks and one day," I told her.

She gave me a light quick kiss that wasn't nearly as much fun as playing with our tongues, but it was better than nothing. "Go, I'll see you in the morning."

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She playfully tapped me on the chest. "Just don't show up before I've had my second cup of coffee."

"You're actually kind of cute before the caffeine rush hits," I told her.

"Go. Now."

~TBTA~

I was a little early but I chalked that up to nerves. I knocked on the door and Jake informed me that she was currently sipping at cup number two, but had just started. We agreed to make a quiet entrance. He took my hand, apparently renewing his claim.

Bella was still a little groggy and it shouldn't have been attractive, but it was. Six weeks. My dick had reminded me of that when I woke up. Six weeks. Forty-two days.

I could see the light. Barely, but at least I knew it was there. I realized that I still had no idea where we were going to stay. I also realized that I didn't care. I'd be with Bella. I'd be with Bella in a room with a bed and no boys in the vicinity to care how loud she yelled or why. Good enough for me.

I let her finish her second cup of coffee then I gave her a kiss. She nuzzled against me all soft and warm, still a tiny bit sleepy. Jake poured a bowl of cereal and asked if he could add sugar. Bella told him no so he decided to sulk for a minute. I could see him eyeing me, trying to decide if he should try to ask me. I just grinned at him and shook my head. No way in hell was I getting involved in that.

He sighed and ate his cereal, which probably had quite a bit of sugar in it already.

Soon the other boys were tromping down the stairs, with Emily leading the way. She ran right up to me and wriggled her butt as she wagged her tail, licking my hands and then nudging me. She already looked much better,

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having gained a little weight and a little gloss to her coat. But most of all, I think it was just being loved that had transformed her. I knew how that worked. Sam let her out before he sat down to eat. Then when she came back inside, he fed her. No surprise that he would take the responsibilities of pet ownership seriously.

After breakfast, Seth and I went into his room and worked on the guitar a little. He surprised me by actually playing a little. It seemed he had watched the DVDs and been paying attention. We worked on reading music a little but Seth hated that and it didn't seem to click for him. There was time to work on that. He had a surprisingly good ear and though he wasn't skilled, he was good at mimicking what he saw me do. He had a feel for it, and that was something you either had or you didn't. Skill and practice went a long way, but I was starting to think that Seth was going to have a natural talent for it. By the end of the hour, he was working out a few chords and was confident of the names of some of the notes and chords. His finger placement was coming along nicely.

We dawdled a little because it wasn't time to leave for the airport. Will had offered to get a rental car but Bella had shot him down. Then it was time to go since we had a bit of a drive ahead of us. The closest major airport was Raleigh-Durham and that was about eighty miles away. We took Bella's vehicle since Jake wanted to show Uncle Will the Vader-Mobile.

Bella let me drive, which made my inner control freak a very happy man.

The boys were too excited about seeing their uncle to indulge in too much of the Sibling Harassment game. I decided that I would love Will for that alone. Then before it seemed possible, we were parking at the airport and going into the terminal to wait for Will Swan's plane to land.

And that's when the nerves started to hit me.

I was about to meet Bella's brother. The same brother she had grown up protecting. The brother whose cause she had championed. The brother she loved as much as she loved her sons, though in a different way. If Will didn't

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like me, my pursuit of her could be dead in the water. I knew I was working myself up over nothing. Will had seemed very friendly on the phone. He had never said anything to indicate that he wasn't happy about my relationship with Bella. But the nerves were there, logical or not. I was having my hissy fit, even if it was internal and silent.

Then Jake started jumping up and down, tugging at my hand. He'd been watching the board that tells you when flights arrived. He pointed and shrieked. "His plane landed!" A few people started smiling at his enthusiasm, because the kid was over the moon excited about seeing his uncle.

That made me feel a little better. Jake liked me. He even wanted to keep me. I was sure he'd tell Will that because the kid was a talker. We all gathered at the entrance to the terminal, and honestly with all those boys we made up quite a group. I had my arm around Bella, and Jake was holding my free hand. Emmett was almost as excited as Jake and Seth and Sam had huge grins on their faces. Uncle Will was an extremely popular guy with this group.

Then Jake was yelling and letting go of my hand and launching himself toward a slender man who stopped, dropped his bag, and picked Jake up to hug him tightly. Will and Jake hugged for a long moment and then the rest of the boys crowded around, each of them hugging and patting and giving kisses on the cheek, even Emmett.

Finally, the boys gave Will some breathing room and he walked toward us. He was of average height, maybe five ten, and slender of build. His hair was brushing the top of his collar and was slightly curly. His eyes were deep brown and almost identical to Bella's. There was definitely a family resemblance. Bella tugged me forward and then let go to hug her brother. She buried her face in his chest for a moment. "I'm so glad you're here," I heard her whisper.

"I've missed you," he told her. Then he released her and turned to me. I offered him my hand but he ignored it and pulled me into a hug. "So you're Edward."

"That's me," I said, shifting on my feet.

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He looked me up and down. "You're taller than I imagined." He nudged Bella. "She always did like tall and handsome."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. So I went with the obvious. "You look more like Bella than I expected," I told him.

By then Jake had taken my hand again, and Will's, forming a little chain. Will looked down at Jake. "I see you've done okay with the boys."

I nodded. "Getting there."

And then the boys grew impatient and we were heading down to baggage claim to get Will's suitcase. A little while later we were in the Suburban, with Will sitting behind Bella. She was turned around and talking to him. "You look good," she said. "You're letting your hair grow again."

He touched it, and in the rearview mirror I could see him smile. "Yeah, well, Josh likes it longer."

Bella laughed. "And you're a pushover," she teased.

Will pouted and stuck his tongue out at her. I could imagine the two of them growing up. I imagined that they had run Charlie and Renee ragged. Then the boys all started talking at once and Will turned his attention to them.

~TBTA~

We got to Bella's house and I grabbed Will's suitcase while he and Bella and the boys walked into the house in one big group. She had decided that Will would stay with her until her parents arrived. I only had one problem with that plan. What if the Colonel arrived and decided that they would stay with me since Will was already settled into Bella's place? I decided that I would encourage Will to move his stuff the morning of their expected arrival. It was best to anticipate the enemy's actions.

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I watched as the boys all swarmed around Will, all of them trying to talk at once. Will and Emily fell in love and Will got on the ground and played with her, much to Sam's delight. Emmett talked about starting high school. I thought he was starting to get nervous about it. Will seemed to think so too and tried to be encouraging. I imagined that Will's high school experience might have been a little rough from listening to Bella.

Seth told Will that I was teaching him to play the guitar. Will gave me an approving little wink. Jake showed off Froot Loop and Will admired him as well. By then it was time for dinner and I volunteered to run up and pick up some pizza. Bella was tired, and so was I. Besides, I didn't want to test my limited culinary skills with Will just yet. What if he was a fan of gourmet food?

Then Will surprised me by telling me he'd go with me. When the boys said they wanted to go too, Bella told them they had stuff to do at home. I looked at her. Traitor. She was throwing me to the wolves. Or her brother. Whatever. I gave her a little nod to let her know that I saw what was going down. There would be repercussions. Just so she knew. She grinned at me, not at all intimidated. That was sexy as hell and she knew it, damn it.

I took my vehicle then, just so I'd feel like I was on my own territory - sort of. Will was quiet for a moment then he laughed softly. "You can't outmaneuver her, just so you know."

"Tell me about it," I muttered.

Will smiled and shook his head. "Believe me, I gave up years ago. She wanted us to have some time alone and it was easier to go along with it."

"She's kind of pushy sometimes," I said. *And handsy*. I really liked handsy.

"That's Bella," Will agreed. "But that can't be a surprise. She wouldn't have survived if she wasn't determined."

"That's true," I agreed.

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"I'm not sure what you're expecting, but I'm not here to bust your chops or anything."

I felt myself relaxing and I nodded. "Good to know."

"I mean, I'm curious about you, because honestly Josh and I never thought that Bella would open herself up to a relationship again, you know?" He sighed and leaned back in his seat. "After Mac died, she was a mess. But she kept it together for those boys. They kept her sane."

"They're great kids."

"Yeah," he said with a smile. "They are. But they've got a great mom." He paused. "Mac was a great dad too, you know."

"I know." I looked at him. "The boys, well they'll talk about him sometimes."

"That's good for them," Will said.

"Yeah, I think it is too."

"You know, I wasn't really worried about you because Bella's a great judge of character, but hearing about this DVD project of yours. Well..." He grinned at me. "That sort of sealed the deal."

"You think it's a good idea?"

"I think it's a *great* idea," Will said. "But not just for Bella. The boys too, they need to know that they aren't going to be forced to ignore Mac, to forget the memories they have of him. That would be unfair, but unfortunately, a lot of guys would want that. They'd feel threatened by Mac's memory."

"I'm not most guys."

He nodded. "I agree, you're not."

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My mouth ran away with me again. "I love her."

"Yeah, I know." He sounded amused.

I kind of shrugged. "No hiding it I guess." Will wasn't the only pushover in love.

Will laughed. "Nope, no hiding it."

I grinned at him. "That broken windshield was the best thing that ever happened to me, you know?"

"Funny how these things happen," Will agreed. "It sort of sneaks up on you when you least expect it. One morning you wake up and you're just living your life and everything is the same as it always was, and then suddenly, that night when you go to bed everything is upside down and twirling around in your head like some sort of terrifying amusement park ride. And you're torn between barfing with terror and screaming with sheer exhilaration because the thrill isn't like anything you've felt before."

I nodded. It was a perfect description.

Will glanced at me. "You know, she called your commanding officer or whatever he's called before she let you take Emmett off that first day," Will told me. Now that was interesting. He'd never let on, and Bella had never said anything about it either. "She was just checking that you were who you said you were."

I had to laugh and shake my head. "That sounds like Bella. She's not going to trust her boys to just anyone is she?"

Will shook his head. "No, she checked you out before you took her baby off anywhere." He glanced at me. "And that doesn't surprise you?"

"Hell no, it doesn't surprise me," I said. "You know Bella. She'd give her life for those boys. She's protective without smothering them. She's a great mother,

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able to find that balance." I shrugged. "It's one of the things I like best about her."

"Four boys...that's a lot," Will observed.

"Yeah, but like I told Bella, if you go, go big."

Will laughed. "Oh you've gone big all right."

"It wasn't what I expected when my windshield got busted, but I wouldn't change any of it."

Will was silent for a moment. "Oh, just in case you're wondering, you've already gotten the seal of approval. This little chat was just a formality."

"Uh...okay. Thanks," I said.

"You can breathe now," Will teased.

"Thanks, will do." I took a deep breath. What do you know? It worked.

Chapter 47: Soft and Goopy Center

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Author's Note: Someone mentioned Edward's dick and "his" commentary. I don't have a guy I ask about that stuff. My observations come only from a lifetime of being around men and boys. Honestly, I've always been fascinated with the way men think and how it differs from women. I like the way they think and how they react. I like the noise and the sweat and the oversized shoes they bring with them. I'm comfortable around them because I'm surrounded by them. So I guess I just draw on years and years of living amidst the testosterone surge. :p

Chapter 47: Soft and Goopy Center

We picked up the four pizzas. I had to laugh at the expression on Will's face when he realized all four pies were for us. "Shit, I guess Emmett's eating a little bit more these days?" He shook his head. "It's been six months since we've seen the boys and he was eating like a horse then."

"He eats like a Tyrannosaurus now," I said. "Seth's eating like a horse. I'm not sure how Bella affords to feed them."

He looked at me, his eyes wide. "And there're two more to go."

"Yeah," I said. "Scary, huh?"

He grinned at me. "And you're sure you want to take this on?"

I shrugged. "It's just food." But it was a lot more than that and we both knew it.

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Will laughed and shook his head. "You've got it *so* bad for my big sister."

"So I've been told," I said dryly.

"Come on, let's get this food home before Emmett starts eating the carpeting," Will said.

"He'd do it if he had a little ketchup," I told him.

Will snorted.

We got back in my vehicle and I was feeling relaxed because I was pretty sure that the "talking" portion of the evening was done. Will, however, proved he was Bella's brother and did the unexpected. Out of the blue, I heard him say, "You know, Josh will tease you about Charlie, but honestly, my Dad's more understanding than you'd think."

I grunted. I didn't care what anyone said. I was intimidated by Charlie Swan and I wasn't ashamed to admit it.

Will sighed and turned down the radio. "All I'm saying is that don't get all twisted up in knots. Dad likes to come off as a hard ass, but Bella's had him wrapped around her little finger since the day she born."

I laughed and shook my head. "She tends to do that."

"I guess Bella's told you a little bit about when I figured out I was gay?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Yeah, I mean, not really any details, but I got the gist of things." I looked at him. "She said it was hard for you, especially living on bases."

Will's eyes looked just like Bella's as he studied me, taking my measure. "Well see, the thing is that I made it harder on myself."

"How?"

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"Dad was shocked when I told him I was gay," Will said. "I mean he just wasn't brought up to expect that, you know? In his generation, you weren't gay; you were a confirmed bachelor who just hadn't found the right woman yet to make you settle down."

I nodded. I could understand that. I remembered the Thanksgiving that Aunt Geraldine had whispered to me, "We'll love you, Edward, even if you don't like girls." I had laughed it off because I didn't really care what she thought. But I got what Will was saying. Different generations had a different view of things.

"But I didn't realize that my Dad was so much more than the way he'd been raised," Will continued. "Yes, he was shocked. But what I saw as shame was really more confusion. He wasn't quite sure how to handle it, and in typical Charlie fashion, he didn't talk about it."

"Yeah, Bella does that sometimes," I admitted. "The more important it is, the less likely she is to bring it up."

"It's like she's got to fuss over it in her mind for a while first. It used to drive my mother crazy," Will said. "I'm more like my mom. If I've got something on my mind I'm just going to say it. Bella's more like Dad. Sometimes you need a crow bar to get two syllables out of her."

"I've noticed."

Will laughed and nodded. "She can make small talk and be polite, but to get to the real stuff, to the soft, gooey center, you have to be patient."

Of course his choice of words conjured up all sorts of dirty fantasies. I told my dick to behave and pay attention.

"Dad has that same center." Problem solved. My dick retreated, and I'm pretty sure he was whimpering. "Anyway, I hid a lot of stuff from my Dad when I started getting hassled about being gay." He sighed and kind of tucked his hair behind his ear. "I was afraid that Dad would be more ashamed of me, you know, having to defend his queer son or something."

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"But he wouldn't have felt that way," I guessed.

"No, but I didn't give him enough credit," Will admitted. "Later, when he found out some of the shit I'd been going through, he was pissed. I mean really, *really* pissed off. My Dad doesn't lose his temper very often, but when he does..." Will gave a long, low whistle. "It is a sight to see."

"He would have stopped it."

"He would have *stomped* it," Will corrected with a grin. Then the smile faded. "But more than pissed off, Dad was hurt that I hadn't trusted him enough to tell him what was going on. By that time, Bella was gone to college. So my guardian angel was away and things escalated. I finally escaped by going to college too. And it wasn't until after I left that someone let Dad in on what had been going on."

"Does Bella know about this?"

"Oh yeah, I mean, we tell each other almost everything," Will answered. "We *both* had some kissing up to do to Dad when he found out that we'd both been hiding shit from him." Will paused for a moment. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that for all his bluster, Dad is a softie at heart."

I snorted. Sorry, but I couldn't picture Colonel Swan with a soft and gooey center.

"No, I'm serious," Will insisted. "He's all gruff and soldiery on the outside. But inside, he's just a guy who loves his family. He just doesn't often say the words out loud."

"Soldiery?" I asked with a smirk.

"It's a word," Will said. "Look it up. I'm a teacher. I know these things."

"I don't believe you, but I'll let it pass in the interests of family harmony and all."

The Bigger They Are

"The upshot of all of this is that if you make Bella and those boys happy, then Charlie will like you. Hell, he'll even love you one day."

"Yeah, I'm not gonna hold my breath for that one." Because Colonel Swan had probably guessed at some of dirty fantasies about his baby girl. He was a guy, of course he knew.

"I'm serious," Will said. "When Mac died...hell, it hurt all of us. Not just losing Mac, which was hard enough because we all loved him, but because we saw how much it hurt Bella. I don't think you realize how much you coming into their lives has changed them - all of them."

I looked at him and then looked back at the road. "I don't think you realize how much they've changed me," I said quietly.

Will laughed. "And that's exactly what I'm talking about, Edward. That's what makes you so perfect for her...for them." He squirmed in his seat and I was reminded of Jake when he got excited about something. "You love her, but not just *her*. You love them all. And you appreciate what they all bring with them, and that's what they needed. Someone to love and appreciate them all. Someone who wouldn't see those boys as a necessary burden, but just another wonderful part of the package. Bella sees that, and that gives her the courage to embrace what you have."

"Just so you know, Jake's already told me he's keeping me," I told him with a smirk.

"So I've heard," Will answered with a nod.

"Truth?"

"Yeah," Will said. "Truth."

"Was Bella freaked out by what Jake said?" I had to know. And if she had told anyone, it would have been Will.

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Will laughed a little. "I'll tell you a little secret. Bella wanted me to ask you the same thing."

"For real?"

"For real," Will assured me. "And the answer to your question is no, not the way you were thinking anyway. She was freaking that you might be...unsettled by Jake's bluntness. Make sense?"

"Yeah, that's kind of what she said," I murmured. "And I know exactly how she felt."

"That's typical Bella. It takes an act of congress to get her to open up, but when she does, she's dead honest. Whether you like it or not."

"I like it, even when it hurts," I said.

"At least you'll always know where you stand with Bella," Will said. "She's never been one to play games. And now that she's got those boys? Games aren't even on her roster."

"I'm too old for games," I muttered. "Plus, I'm a really sore loser."

Will laughed. "Aren't we all?" He leaned back and rubbed his eyes. He was probably exhausted after the full day of traveling. "Well, you've got to be strong to belong to Bella. She looks all sweet and fragile and delicate-"

I snorted.

"Exactly," Will agreed. "But you know that's just window dressing. The real Bella has a spine of steel and the heart of a lioness. Sometimes I think that's why Mac felt it was okay to go back that last time. That even if the worst happened, he knew his boys would be safe with Bella. And that she'd be okay...one day."

I was quiet for a moment. "So...you're okay with...Bella and me...?"

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"Would it stop you if I said no?" He sounded amused.

"Well, I would try harder to get on your good side, but...no. It wouldn't stop me." It would, however, complicate things.

"And that's why I'm okay with it. You love her. You love my nephews. And I love them. You make them all happy, so...you make me happy."

Just then Will's phone rang and he answered it with a grin. It had to be Josh. I knew that lovesick grin all too well. I'd seen it in my own damned mirror for months now. "Yes, I'm glad you got my text telling you I'd landed." Will laughed. "How's the consult going?" Talking from the other end. "That's wonderful! We'll see you tomorrow. I'll borrow Bella's-" Talking and more talking. "No, I-" Will sighed. "Fine, just be careful." Talking from Josh; he sounded animated. Will's eyes slid toward me. "Yeah, actually I'm with him right now."

I gulped.

Will chuckled. "Yes, just as good as I expected." That was good news. Right? I hoped so. Josh said something. "No, don't start with me. I'll slip up and-" Will sighed. "Well I'm blaming you if it happens." Talking from Josh, smiling from Will. "Okay, I'll tell them." Something short. "I love you too." And he hung up. He turned to me.

"Josh says if you've passed my inspection you've passed his." Will grinned at me. "So...welcome to the family?"

"Yeah? Cool."

"Now all you have to do is meet Mom and Dad," Will said, ruining my good mood.

"Don't remind me," I grumbled.

~TBTA~

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The boys swarmed around us - or maybe it was more accurate to say that they swarmed around the pizza. Before Will and I had even poured our drinks, one of the pizzas was gone. It was like magic.

The boys ate. And ate. And ate. Not that Bella was any slouch. She could eat as much as I could when she wanted to, and she wasn't shy about it. Will ate, but spent more time talking with Bella and the boys...and me. He was funny but much quieter than Masen. I envied Bella having grown up with Will rather than Masen. I wondered if she'd be amenable to switching siblings.

Of course, I fully intended to make Masen her brother too, so there really wouldn't be any point. The thought was entertaining though. I envisioned sending some sort of legal notice to Masen letting him know that he had been downsized or something. The conversation was good and loud and boisterous. It was obvious that the boys adored their Uncle Will, and the way they asked after Josh made it clear that he was no less loved.

Still, as enjoyable as the evening was, I thought it might be nice for Bella and her brother to spend some time together, without me hanging around. They probably had things to talk about (like me, for instance) and I didn't want to intrude on all of their time together. So as hard as it was, I bid them all goodnight and Bella walked me to the door.

"Thank you," she whispered as she leaned up to kiss me. It was a nice kiss, a halfway between getting me turned on and kissing in front the boys kind of kiss. I appreciated the extra effort.

"You're welcome," I said. "I love you. Have fun with your brother."

"Just think," Bella said with a smile. "Soon you can hang out with your brother too."

"Don't remind me!"

~TBTA~

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The next morning was Sunday and I dawdled at my house, trying to give Bella and Will some more alone time. It practically killed me. Every time I looked at the clock it had only been about two minutes since the last time I looked. Then Jake called.

"Hey, where are you?" he complained instead of saying hello. "I've been waiting *forever*..."

"I'll be right there." That was all I needed.

A short time later I was raising my hand to knock on the door. I should have known better when it was flung open and Jake stood there, frowning at me. "Took you long enough," he grumbled.

I ruffled. He frowned and straightened, but there was a little smile tugging at his lips. "I'm so sorry, Master Jake," I said in a very bad British accent. "I shall endeavor to do better."

Jake tugged at my hand and I went stumbling along behind him. Will was walking out of the kitchen with a mug of coffee in his hands. "Here," he said. "Jake told us you drove up." He looked at Jake. "Actually, he yelled it."

Jake did manage to look a little chagrined, but not much. He just couldn't quite pull it off. Then he let go of my hand and went racing up the stairs. Will looked after him, shaking his head. "Oh to have that much energy," he said.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the key I had gotten made earlier. "Here," I said, handing it to him. "Uh...I wasn't sure what time you and Josh would want to come to my house so I figured it would just be easier to you know...give you a key." I shoved my hands in my pockets and let my fingers run over the contours of the other key I had there.

Will took the key with wide eyes. "Yeah, uh...thanks," he said. Then he looked at me and smiled widely. "Wow, Bella was right. You're pretty much perfect."

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Just like that, the stupid skin that went along with my God-awful hair betrayed me and I knew my cheeks were flushed. That shit was cute on Bella and the boys, *not* on a man who was almost forty years old. Then it was just embarrassing. I ducked my head and prayed it would pass - quickly.

Will chuckled and tucked the key into his pocket. "I'm done embarrassing you in case you were wondering."

I hid my face behind the coffee mug as much as I was able. "Where's Bella?"

"She's upstairs trying to hurry Emmett out of the shower." Something in Will's face made me smirk and when our eyes met, we both burst into laughter. Yeah. We remembered being Emmett's age and long showers. Of course, I was right back there. He just didn't need to know that.

"So...what's on the agenda for today?" I asked. I hadn't bothered to find out before. Once Jake pretty much ordered me over to his house, I hadn't done anything more than grab my keys and get out the door.

"Well, Josh will be here this afternoon," Will said. I could sense his excitement. It was obvious how much he loved Josh. One thing I had noticed was that Bella and her family seemed to form strong, permanent attachments. In some strange way, her clear love for Mac was reassuring. When Bella loved, she did so with all of her heart and forever. I expected that she would give me the same gift. I certainly planned on giving it to her.

"I'm looking forward to meeting him," I murmured.

"You won't be able to help liking him," Will assured me.

"I'm not worried about liking him," I said. "I'm worried about him liking *me*."

Will shrugged. "Once the boys said they liked you, that was all Josh needed."

Then Bella was walking down the stairs, muttering to herself and shaking her head. "That boy," she grumbled.

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"Uh, still in the shower?" I asked.

"I've told him that we've got stuff to do today," she said with a frown. "He can, for once, just shower and get out of there." Will started to snort with laughter. She poked him in the chest and I gave an empathetic wince of my own. "Stop it. Both of you." Her eyes flickered to me, "You're a bad influence." But her lips were pulling up in a reluctant smile. We both started laughing. Rolling her eyes at us, she went into the kitchen, still grumbling about males the whole way.

Will looked at me, his lips quirking. "I think we're on her shit list."

"I seem to stay there," I conceded. "But I'm pretty good at groveling too, so it works."

Will laughed and nodded his head. "Yeah, that would work."

We all end up out on the porch, watching the boys run around like little mad men in the yard. Bella had nixed the idea of video games, saying that they needed to get their blood pumping in the morning. Seth tried to convince her that video games would do the trick, but Bella just said no. All it took was that one word in that tone of voice and the boys all turned to go outside.

Will turned to me and winked. "Kind of scary, huh?"

I shuddered and put my hand over my heart. "You can see why I just do what she tells me."

"Asses," Bella mocked and followed the boys outside.

Conversation was easy and relaxed and around lunch time, Bella got up and went into the kitchen. I followed after her to offer my services while Will stayed outside with the boys. They were all throwing around the football and Will had a very good arm. I came up behind Bella and kissed the side of her neck. "Hey beautiful," I whispered.

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She turned in my arms. "Beautiful?" she murmured. "That's a new one."

I kissed her, a slow lingering kiss that allowed our tongues to stroke against each other languidly. "Yeah," I finally said. "But it's true."

Pulling my lips back toward hers, Bella licked at mouth, starting at the corners, which tickled a bit, and then moving toward the center. There, she lapped at the seam of my lips and I opened my mouth for her. She didn't need to ask twice.

She stood up on her toes and kissed my ear. "I think I need something out of my closet."

I pulled back, surprised. "Now?"

She nodded eagerly. "I already told Will to keep the boys distracted for a bit." When the hell had she done that? Did she have some sort of secret language with her brother? She was a woman of many talents. Ninja assassin type skills.

I swallowed hard. "Are you sure?"

Arching one brow at me, she threw me a challenging look. "What's the matter, Edward? Not sure you want to play?"

That was all it took. I was moving toward the stairs, taking her hand in mine. I was really grateful that she could really move even with that cast. The next thing I knew, we were closing her bedroom door and engaging the lock. Then she pushed me back against it and I was breathing hard. She leaned against me, and I felt the softness of her breasts pressing into me.

My dick expressed his appreciation of the move.

Bella nibbled her lower lip and it had nothing to do with being nervous. In fact, the way she was eyeing me should have made *me* nervous. Instead it just made my mouth go dry and my heart beat faster. It was like she was trying to decide where to start. Then she was backing away from me, tugging at my hand and heading toward the promised land.

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The closet.

Our closet.

My dick throbbed, already sensing what was coming. Coming. Oh yeah. The "C" word. Another favorite. "Bella," I said softly, my voice doing the raspy, husky thing it tended to do when sex kitten Bella came out to play.

"Yes Edward?" Her voice was a soft challenge.

"You're going to kill me," I told her, both of us still moving back toward that closet.

"No," she said with a slow wink. "I'm just going to use you." I wasn't sure whether that was a promise or a threat but I didn't much care either way.

I groaned at that and then we were in the closet.

Once more, she shoved me up against the door. She liked pushing me against doors, I'd noticed. She really was a hellcat. I happened to catch the glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye. My ninja temptress had added a sliding bolt to inside of her closet door. Fuck me, that was really hot. Both that she had thought of it and that she had done it all on her own. My demon had skills.

Giving me one hot look from beneath her lashes, she slid down my body, her hands making trails of heat in their wake. "Fuck," I muttered when she came to a halt on her knees. Her hot breath washed over my dick.

"Not yet," she whispered. "Soon."

"Five weeks..." I hissed when she tugged at the button of my jeans. "And six days."

She snickered as she lowered the zipper. Then she was pushing the denim out of her way and sliding the cotton of my boxer briefs down. She didn't mess around when she wanted to mess around. One long, slow lick of my cock and I

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felt my knees tremble. "Fuck Bella..."

"You've got a dirty mouth," she admonished. "Maybe I should punish you."

"Fuck yeah," I said, already thrusting toward face. My dick was pretty much calling the shots at that point.

Her mouth closed over me and I leaned heavily against the door. Fuck. Me. This woman's mouth was going to destroy me. Then her hands were cupping my balls, lightly pulling and then rolling, caressing and stroking. Sometimes women forgot to include the boys when they gave a blow job, but Bella knew exactly what she was doing. She worked me - in all the right ways.

"Bella," I warned and the little ninja temptress pulled away.

I stared at her, shocked. Panicky. Desperate. Just how she wanted me.

She grinned up at me. "I told you I was going to punish you."

I slid down the door until I was on my knees on front of her. "You. Are. Cruel." Then I finished the job and sprawled on the floor. Nothing worked except my dick.

Shrugging, she moved so that she was sort of lying on top of me. "I did warn you," she whispered. And just when I was beginning to think I should add cock tease to her list of talents, she slid down some more. And then up. And then down. And up.

Oh fuck.

The friction was... oh God so good.

Then her hands joined in on the act and my hips were thrusting against hers. Our movements made us slide all the way down until we were lying on the floor and I was pushing my dick up against her belly, her hand, anything of Bella's that it could touch. Then she moved against me and I was pressing

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against her heat. That was the best thing to touch, even through the layers of her clothing.

She moaned. Loudly. My hellcat. Maybe we should soundproof the closet.

I slipped my hand down her shorts and inside the silk that covered her. She was wet and hot. Groaning, she moved against me, letting my finger slide inside of her. We both moaned and our hips moved in erratic rhythms until we got the hang of it.

Yeah. Right there.

Her fingers wrapped around me, strong and delicate at the same time. I let my thumb play over her clit and she murmured her appreciation of it. "Right there," she whispered urgently. "Don't stop."

Like I would. Like I *could*. I kept my hand just where she told me to keep it. I moved it when and how she told me to. Her hand moved over me with swift, sure strokes. There was no denying the orgasm that had coiled inside of me. I felt her trembling against me.

"I'm gonna come," she finally murmured.

"Me too," I gasped.

I had just enough presence of mind to turn slightly so I didn't get jizz all over her clothes. Her fingers tightened just a bit and I thrust hard into her grasp at the same time I felt her muscles clamping down on my fingers. "Oh fuck," I moaned.

Then she collapsed on me. "Sorry," she muttered after a moment.

"For what?" For almost killing me? For making me realize that I really needed to get in better shape?

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She leaned up on my chest and looked like a naughty kid. "Well, I should warn you. After my period I get..."

"Horny as hell?" I guessed.

"Something like that," she agreed.

I kissed her, still breathing hard damn it. "Well, feel free to use me any time sweetheart."

We were silent for a moment.

"Uh, does Will know what we...?"

Bella laughed and buried her face in my chest, sort of rubbing her nose against me. "He's probably guessed by now."

"Oh shit," I said. "He's probably ready to kick my ass."

Bella laughed and kissed my nose. "Actually, he told me I was grumpy this morning and that maybe I should get a little action so I'd loosen up and leave him the hell alone."

"Oh." I grinned at her. "I like the way he thinks."

She blew out a breath and sat up, straightening her clothing as she went. My dick pouted. He had been kind of hoping for round two. He's such a dick.

"Come on, big boy," she said, giving me a hand after she stood up. I was sad to say that I kind of was glad for her help. "Let's get cleaned up and get downstairs before Josh gets here."

"Shit, that's right."

A few minutes later we were walking downstairs, only the flush of our cheeks betraying us. We had both brushed our hair and tried to fix our clothing. Bella

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got to the bottom step and stopped dead.

I looked. Uh oh.

Josh stood up from the couch, smirking and nudging Will who just shook his head. "Hi," Josh said, walking toward us and holding out his hand. "I'm Josh Galloway." We shook hands. He looked at Bella. "And I really hope *he's* Edward Cullen." He grinned. "Or you've got some explaining to do."

Bella blushed. I fidgeted.

Busted. *So* busted.

Ch 48: Charlie Swan Stamp of Approval?

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Just to make it clear on the time line. Next week we'll be at Bella's birthday. After the Swans' visit, things will move right along. The chapters written two years out will be isolated, just snapshots at how their lives turned out. We won't follow them along for two years. We'll jump ahead and peek in. So a big jump after this visit to September - Bella's birthday and - finally - consummation. :p Both of those chapters should be posted next week.

Chapter 48: Charlie Swan Stamp of Approval?

Okay, there was something intimidating about meeting someone important in the life of the one you loved when you know you might still smell like your own jizz and you had that "I just came - hard" face still lingering. Luckily, Josh didn't say anything, probably because the boys were in attendance as well. He just gave me a quick wink and then hugged Bella close, whispering something in her hear. She gave him a playful slap on the arm. It sounded like "McSmoo" but that didn't make any sense at all. I tried to pretend like I hadn't been attempting to eavesdrop. They both turned to me and gave me big smiles.

I didn't trust them for a second.

"It's nice to meet you, Josh," I said politely. "So, Will tells me that you can prepare for the Charlie Swan experience. I put myself at your mercy."

Josh stared at me for a moment and then laughed. "I like him, Bella, I really do." He looked me up and down. "Yes, you'll do quite nicely for our Bella and

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our boys."

Funny, from some people I might have been looking for sarcasm, but it was clear that Josh said exactly what he meant, and meant exactly what he said. I knew he was a very well-to-do plastic surgeon, a philanthropist who not only donated his money but his time. But he just came off as a down-to-earth, regular kind of guy. I liked him immediately.

Then the boys rushed forward and started trying to get his attention, he gave me one last nod and then turned to the boys. Jake was practically vibrating in his excitement. If Bella and I had been distracted during his arrival, apparently we'd only missed it by minutes. Will leaned in and whispered, "Just so you know, it's getting more difficult to distract those boys." He nudged me. "Next time you're on your own."

"Aw, come on," I whispered back. "Give a guy a break."

He smirked. "I think my sister did that." Then he shuddered. "Never mind, that's not an image I need lurking around in my head."

The next thing I knew we were all sitting down and Josh was joining in with the discussion like he'd been there forever. Of course, I was the newcomer, but neither Josh nor Will ever made me feel like it. They were quietly welcoming, accepting my place in Bella's life with no fuss. I could only hope that Charlie Swan would follow their example.

"By the way, Edward," Josh said. "Will told me that you're letting us stay with you when Charlie and Renee arrive." He smiled. "Thanks, that was nice."

I shrugged. "It's no big deal."

Will smirked. "I think it's a very big deal," he said. "And very nice." Then he nudged Josh. "It also means that he'll be having us stay with him and not Dad."

"Hmm...yeah," I said. "I guess you're right. I hadn't really thought of it that way." Bella snorted and shook her head. Ninjas know when someone is lying.

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"So, Edward," Josh said. "Bella tells me that you'll be getting out of the Army in April."

"Yeah," I said with a nod.

"Do you have any plans?" Josh asked with genuine interest.

"Yeah, actually I do," I admitted. "I'd like to open a bar, you know, just a regular joint where you can catch a baseball game and argue with your buddies over beers, maybe play some pool or darts or something." I shrugged. "I've been thinking about it for a while."

The boys were watching me closely. Emmett looked at his brothers and then back at me. "So you're really not going to stay in?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nope, I'm out in April," I told him. I nodded toward Bella. "I promised your mom and I meant it."

Emmett absorbed that for a moment. "You want to open a bar?"

I nodded again.

"Here in Fayetteville?" he pressed.

"Yeah, here in Fayetteville," I said with a smile. "Your mom's here. You boys are here." I shrugged. "I wouldn't want to go anywhere else."

I noticed that Josh and Will gave each other a look. It was one of those looks that couples give each other when they go into mind-reading mode. Josh smiled at me then. "That's great, Edward. I think you'll do well at it."

I felt everyone's eyes on me. I guessed that it was time to share a little more news. "Yeah, I've been starting to put together a list of properties and trying to get an idea of just how much I'll need in start up costs."

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Bella gaped at me. "Really? You've gone that far with the idea?" She seemed surprised and I was feeling pretty good that I'd finally surprised *her*, instead of the other way around.

I grinned at her. "I'm not just a pretty face you know."

Will hooted with laughter. "Oh Bells, you have to keep him. He's perfect for you."

Jake stood up, his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face. "No! I'm keeping him. He's mine!" And he marched right over to me and took my hand out of his mother's grasp. Bella looked at me, one brow arching as if asking what I was going to do about it.

I looked at Jake and nodded. "Yeah," I said, looking back at Bella. "I'm Jake's. So there."

And even though his brothers started giving him a hard time, telling him he couldn't "keep" a person, he just shook his head at them. The James/Swan stubborn streak was being displayed in full and living color.

"Mr. Jasper kept Rosalie," he told Emmett. "I'm keeping Edward. And there's nothing you can say about it 'cuz you're not the boss of me. So there!"

I put my arm around him and we nodded together, which just set off his brothers into laughing even harder. I leaned in close and whispered in Jake's ear, "Just ignore them, Jake. You and I both know you get to keep me." I squeezed him hard and I swear he almost squeaked. "Just like I get to keep you."

Jake turned and stuck out his tongue at his brothers, crossing his eyes at the same time.

Bella just rolled her eyes and tried very hard not to smile. I could tell it was a job for her. I put Jake on my lap and we presented a united front. We had made our stand and we were sticking to it. I noticed that Josh and Will kept glancing

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over at Jake in my lap, giving a little smile each time they noticed Jake leaning back to rest his head on my chest or playing with my fingers. He liked to see if he could crack my knuckles by pulling hard.

Emmett leaned over and offered up his hand. "Here, Jake, pull my finger."

Bella snatched his hand away. "I don't think so."

Emmett just grinned.

"Listen," Josh finally said. "I was hoping I could take everyone out to dinner." He looked at me. "Bella's told us that your work schedule is going to be rather hectic for a while so I wanted to make sure we got a chance to spend some time together before you're tied up."

"Uh..." I looked at Bella, she just shrugged. "Yeah, that'd be great." I looked down at my jeans and button up shirt. I'd developed a fondness for them in the past months and hardly ever wore a tee-shirt now. I was always hoping that Bella would want to demonstrate her mad ninja button skills. "Do I need to go home and change?"

"No, we won't do anything fancy," he said. "I don't want the boys to explode from having to be too quiet." Then he winked at Jake, who hid his face in my shoulder, suddenly overtaken with a case of shyness. Like I believed that.

After a while, Jake slid off my lap, apparently having decided that his claim had been staked and sufficiently acknowledged. Then, just as he was getting ready to run outside to play with his brothers (the adults' conversation was getting boring for him), he leaned in and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. He was gone before I could say a word.

My hand went up to my cheek, where I felt the wet imprint of his lips. I had seen the boys give their mother kisses a hundred times, especially Jake and Sam. But not once had I been the recipient - until now. I looked at Bella and I probably had the world's goofiest grin on my face but I didn't care.

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Josh gave me a wink and Will leaned in to whisper something to Josh. Bella just leaned over and kissed my other cheek. Really, I didn't care what we did now. I was just basking in the moment.

~TBTA~

Later that evening, we were all seated at a huge table in a nice, family style restaurant. I was already dreading tomorrow when I was going to be thrust back into my work world. It had been a long time since I had dreaded doing my job. I realized that Bella and the boys and I couldn't exist in a little bubble where nothing else intruded. But that didn't mean I couldn't *wish* we could.

Josh and Will were very warm and welcoming. Josh told us some amusing stories of his travels. I think he had been to even more places than I had. I was amazed at how committed he was to donating his time and skills to people around the world who would never have access to corrective surgery without someone like him. It was obvious that Will was extremely proud of his partner's achievements and dedication.

Dinner was boisterous and fun. Jake insisted on sitting by me. Then Sam decided that it wasn't fair that Jake always got to sit by me. Suddenly, I was popular with the James' boys and I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel good. Even Emmett seemed to have warmed up quite a bit, asking me more about my plans for the bar.

After dinner, we all returned to Bella's house and I regretfully said my farewells. But before I left, I pulled Bella upstairs and we went into her room. I stayed clear of the closet because if I got her near that little space I'd be jumping her bones and dry humping her before I could second guess myself. She smirked when I stayed firmly by her bedroom door.

I just stared at her for a moment, then cradled her face in my hands. "Thank you," I said.

She smiled slowly. "For what?"

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"For everything. For making space for my in your lives. For letting me tell Jake I wanted to keep him. For...being you."

"You're welcome," she replied simply.

Suddenly, I felt nervous. I had never done what I was going to do. But honestly, it was just one small step on the journey we were going to take together. When I thought of it that way, the nerves went away. I dug around in my pocket and retrieved the key I had had made for her. I held it up. "Listen, I want you to have this." Her fingers wrapped around it and I started fantasizing about other things I'd like her to wrap her fingers around. "I gave Will a key so he and Josh can come and go. But I want you to keep this one. Okay?"

She nodded. Then she frowned. "I should have thought of that," she muttered.

I kissed her. "Remember...I'm a planner," I told her. "I like to think long term." And I was thinking about as long term as a man could about her.

Bella got that gleam in her eye, the one that both thrilled and terrified me at the same time. She shoved me against the door and planted a kiss on me that had my toes curling and my dick throbbing. "You, Edward Cullen, are an incredible man," she whispered when she finally pulled away. "Come on," she said. "Let's go downstairs."

I leaned over and panted. I'm not ashamed of it. I had to fight to catch my breath. I finally looked up at her and grimaced. "Gimme a minute here, okay?"

She looked confused.

I pointed to my crotch where my dick was making his presence known. She giggled. Fuck me, that wasn't helping. "You go on downstairs," I told her. "I'll be right down."

Kissing my cheek, she said softly, "Poor baby, soon I'll make it all better."

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Then she slid around me and opened the door leaving me behind. Her words hadn't made it all better at all. In fact, my problem was now worse. I shook my head. That woman was dangerous, plain and simple.

After a good five minutes and a stern talking to, my dick decided to behave himself and I went downstairs.

~TBTA~

Work the next day was endless and at the same time, flew by in a flash. At lunchtime I got a text from Bella telling me that Will and Josh had gone ahead and taken their stuff to my house. I breathed a sigh of relief because that meant the Colonel wouldn't be staying with me. I had outsmarted the Colonel. Crisis averted.

I was grumpy with my men and I knew it. I heard a few of them muttering that I needed to get laid, but the moment I turned to look at them, they were all busy working. Smart of them. The thing was that I agreed with them. One hundred percent. I needed to get laid. I had five weeks and five days left on my sentence though, not that I was counting it down or anything. Okay, I was counting it down. Almost to the hour.

But God, it was sex and best of all it was sex with Bella and my dick was pretty damned excited about it.

Then around two in the afternoon I got another text from Bella letting me know her parents were there. I smiled, mostly because I was safely at work. The other thing that made me smile was that Bella was always so considerate of my work space. There were some guys, and I felt for them, whose wives or girlfriends were always calling them up. It was an easy way to get your ass chewed out and embarrassing to boot. But Bella, aside from the lunchtime visit, was very low key. Texts were an easy way to keep in touch and she never had to worry that she was interrupting me. Not that I would mind, but I also didn't want teeth marks on my ass.

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I could tell that I would probably get out early enough to join Bella for dinner. Then I was left with a decision. Take my leave and enjoy an evening with my lady, but also endure the company of the Colonel - or stay late and avoid him altogether? Decisions, decisions.

Around five, I decided that, for good or bad, I had better go to Bella's house. I couldn't lie to her for shit and I knew she'd figure out that I was ducking her father one way or the other. Might as well face the music without having to worry about a cover up. It just wasn't worth it.

At fifteen minutes after five, I felt this strange tingling on the back of my neck. It was that creepy, someone's watching me feeling. I turned. I blinked. I blinked again. No. Fucking. Way.

Apparently, the ninja didn't fall far from the tree. Or whatever.

Standing there in the doorway was Charlie Swan.

I recognized the gray hair, the square set of his shoulders, the stiff spine, and the dark eyes beneath still dark brows. Bella's eyes. Will's eyes. *Jake's* eyes. I would have laughed at the men around me. They were, by that strange instinct you develop when you're in the military, starting to realize that we had in our midst an officer. Maybe not in uniform, but the look in his eye gave him away. He glanced around at my guys and then honed in on me. I wasn't surprised to see them all scurry away, like rats deserting a sinking ship. Cowards. My own fears were well founded and personal. It wasn't like he was going to kill *them*.

"Cullen?" He was walking toward me. The theme from Jaws started going through my head. Or maybe it was Vader's theme. It was something ominous whatever it was.

"Sir," I said, holding out my hand. The Colonel took it, shook it, released it. Then he looked me up and down. Twice. There was a little grunt and my caveman was rusty enough that I wasn't sure if that meant "He'll do" or "God help me what was my daughter thinking?"

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It might have been a combination of both.

"I guess I surprised you," Charlie Swan said. *No shit. You think?*

"Yes sir," I said.

"Good," he said with a nod. "I think you can tell a lot about a man when you put him off balance."

"Yes sir." I wasn't going to disagree with anything this man said. He could tell me that the earth was flat and I'd do nothing but nod and ask if he'd seen all the edges.

He smiled at me and I felt fear fluttering at my insides. Or maybe that was my lunch. Whatever it was, it had wings. Big, flapping wings that brushed against my spine and tried to crawl up my throat.

"So..." He looked around. "Will says you're all right."

"Thank you sir," I said.

He looked at me. "I didn't say *I* thought you were all right. I said my *son* said that."

I really hoped I didn't whimper out loud. I was kind of afraid I did. I clenched my hands into fists. The better to hide the trembling. I swallowed hard. He saw it. I had a feeling he saw a lot of things.

"Yes sir."

He grunted again. I was pretty sure it meant "*Dear God what was my daughter thinking?*" this time.

Once more those brown eyes pinned me. Why did Bella have to have his eyes? Why God, why? Didn't I have enough to worry about?

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"You love my daughter, son?" The eyes. That was the problem, his eyes. You couldn't escape them. They looked right through me into my deepest darkest sex fantasies starring his daughter. Oh shit, I just thought the "S" word in front of the Colonel! I got distracted then because the "S" word was one of my favorites. Shit. No, not that one. The other one. *Sex*. I had to force myself to think innocent thoughts. Flowers, rainbows, and kittens - nice boy stuff. Because he could probably see straight through to my soul. And he wasn't going to be pleased with what he saw. Visions of Bella in that locked closet wearing nothing but a tiara and a tutu, kneeling in front of me with my - WHOA. Stop.

I was going to go to hell and he was going to send me there.

"Yes sir," I kind of squeaked.

"And those boys? You love those boys, son?"

I thought of Jake then, and that kiss on my cheek. I thought of Emmett's surly façade, and of the generous loving heart he hid behind it. I thought of Seth and his gentle nature, the way he smoothed the waters. And of Sam, that brilliant mind and tender heart. I couldn't help but smile. "Yes sir. I do. More than I can say."

He stared at me again and I felt my heart beating wildly. It was almost funny how much this man intimidated me. Almost.

Another grunt. "Well then..." he muttered. "Okay."

And just like Bella, he said a lot with very little.

I thought that maybe I had gotten the Charlie Swan stamp of approval. I would celebrate - as soon as I stopped feeling like I was going to hurl.

Chapter 49: That Kind of Dumb

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 49: That Kind of Dumb

We walked outside and I waited for Charlie to move to his vehicle. Instead, he looked at me and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Took a cab," he explained. "Figured you could give me a ride back to Bells' house."

Well of course you did, Colonel. I guess you've planned this all out. And yes, I'd love to be stuck inside a vehicle with you. Alone. And no place to run. Obediently, I pointed toward my Suburban and we made our way toward it. He looked at my new vehicle and nodded. "Bella told me you bought something bigger to haul the boys around," he said quietly.

I shrugged. "Yeah, it seemed like a good idea," I explained. I shook my head. "You should have seen all four boys crammed into the back seat of my old car."

He smiled at that and then he opened his door when I disengaged the locks. I slid into the driver's seat and glanced over at him. "It's nice," Charlie said.

"I like it."

"I'll bet your gas mileage is shit though," he added.

"Uh...not as bad as I expected." What answer would be better? Do I tell him that I almost cried when I pulled up to the pump so he would know that I'm a fiscally responsible adult and well aware of the ramifications of my decisions? Or do I downplay it, so that he'll know I don't mind spending more money on

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gas so that I can have a safe vehicle for his grandsons?

Decisions, decisions.

He grunted and I decided to let it drop. I had lost my English/Caveman dictionary and I gave up trying to decipher what it all meant. Charlie Swan was on a whole different level than me.

I started the engine and we were pulling out of the parking lot. He was still quiet beside me, but I figured I'd better get used to that with the Colonel. He was a man of few words. "How was your trip?" I asked. I could be polite. I could display my manners as well as the next guy. I could pretend I wasn't trying to swallow my heart right at this very minute.

"Good," Charlie replied. "Long," he added with a shrug. Okay, I had gotten two more words out of him. At this rate, Jake would graduate college before I could get a full thousand out of him.

"Will and Josh are staying at my house," I said. He already knew this, I was sure. But I was nervous and my mouth seemed to be saying stuff without my permission.

"Yep," Charlie responded. One more word - three whole letters. Whew. This was tougher than I imagined.

"Will seems great," I added inanely. "Josh too."

"They are," Charlie agreed. This was getting painful. It reminded me of the early days with Emmett. *Please God, don't let him ask if I'm fucking his daughter. I'll try to rein in the dirtiest fantasies for a whole week if you'll just give me that small mercy.*

"Bella was thrilled to have Will in town," I observed. I was starting to feel desperate.

"They're close," Charlie observed.

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I decided to press my lips together to keep any other bizarre sentences from slipping out of my mouth. Charlie glanced at me, and he seemed amused. Glad to know I was funny. The drive to Bella's house was quiet. Very, *very* quiet. For some reason, I couldn't even bring myself to turn on the radio. The silence swelled up between us, taking up spaces I hadn't even known existed.

"You looked a little nervous when you saw me back there," Charlie said. That was a lot of words, comparatively speaking of course.

"Yeah, uh..." I laughed and shook my head.

"You had that deer in the headlights look," Charlie continued. "I've seen that look a lot in my time." He didn't sound displeased with that observation.

"I'm sure you have." I could only imagine how intimidating the Colonel would be in uniform. Unfortunately I had a very vivid imagination.

"You scared of me son?" *Well, nothing like asking the million dollar question thirty minutes after I meet you, Colonel. Why yes, I'm scared of you. I felt my balls try to crawl up into my body cavity the moment I realized you were there. And that doesn't do good things for a man's ego, sir. But I'm sure you know that.*

"Uh...let's just say I have a healthy respect for you as Bella's father." That seemed a safe enough answer. "The fact that you were also an officer..." I shrugged and decided to take it one step farther. "Sir, I'll be honest. It reminded me of a time in Basic." He grinned, obviously ready to savor how much he had scared me. All right then, I'd give him the satisfaction. It had been well earned. "It was about five weeks in, you know, when you start to think you know something?"

Charlie nodded. "You're too dumb to realize you're still dumb as fuck," he observed bluntly.

"Yeah, that kind of dumb. You know just enough to be dangerous - to yourself and other around you." I looked back on the memory that still had the ability to

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make me squirm a little. "Anyway, Whitlock and I had been told to sweep the barracks. So we did. And we did a good job of it if I do say so myself."

Charlie snorted but he was smiling.

"We were kind of starting to adjust to the life, the physical activity, the way that the drill sergeants fuck with your mind, the realization that there's no getting out of it now. Mom and your home are a million miles away and you've gone and done it and joined the fucking Army. Which seemed like a really good idea at the time, but then reality sets in and you start thinking that you lost your ever lovin' mind. You know, the typical stuff." He nodded. "Anyway, we finished up the job and in our exhausted/terrified/but cocky state, we decided that we'd use the 'free' time to sing a few tunes. You know, relieve some of the stress."

Charlie gave a low whistle and shook his head.

"Exactly," I continued. "Now we hadn't learned enough yet to realize that when your drill sergeant tells you to sweep, he means for you to keep sweeping until he gives you orders telling you otherwise. So we figured the job was done and we were free to do what we wanted." I laughed at the memory, but still remembered that feeling of sheer terror when we'd heard that throat clearing and whirled around to see him standing there staring at us with a tight smile and look of incredulous amusement on his face as he took in our impromptu little show. "It was Drill Sergeant Bjorn that found us."

"Henry Bjorn?" Of course he would probably know every damn man in the Army.

I shrugged. "As far as I knew, Drill Sergeant Bjorn didn't have a first name other than Drill."

Charlie grinned.

"We always figured that was one of the reasons he was so cranky. Going through school with a name like Drill must have difficult."

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Charlie slapped his knee and snorted with real, actual laughter. I had made the Colonel laugh. I felt a glow settle inside of me. It might have been heartburn, but I was going to go with satisfaction.

"Whitlock was belting out "Blue Suede Shoes" - he was always a fool for Elvis, when Drill Sergeant Bjorn walked in on us. He called us the sorriest sight he'd ever had the misfortunate to lay his eyes on."

"I'll bet you swept a lot after that, didn't you?" Charlie said.

"I felt like I had a broom permanently attached to my palms," I confirmed. "I think I fucking swept in my sleep. Whitlock and I swept for the rest of Basic. It didn't matter how clean it was, or that it had just been swept thirty minutes ago, Whitlock and I were his go-to guys. Hell, I saw him dropping shit on the floor just to give us something to sweep up, only to do the same an hour later."

"Bet you never did anything like that again, though, did you?"

I shook my head. "Never did. Never even tempted," I agreed. "To this day."

Charlie gave a nod. "Then he did his job."

"I suppose he did."

We fell silent then, but it was slightly less uncomfortable. We had something in common now, something besides loving Bella. Of course, I wanted to love her in all sorts of naughty ways that would cause her father to want to shove a broomstick up my ass. So I was going to keep my mouth shut. Yes I was.

We were pulling into Bella's neighborhood when Charlie finally broke the silence. "Bella feels quite strongly about you," he said, still looking straight ahead. He sounded a little puzzled. He was probably wondering what she saw in me. Sometimes I wondered the same thing.

"I feel strongly about her too," I assured him.

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Another glance, this one obviously tinged with laughter. "I figured you might," he said with a quirk of his lips. "Not every man would be willing to take on four boys."

"They're great kids," I said. I seemed to have been saying that a lot lately. But I'd meant it every time I did and that had to count for something.

"Yes, they are." Wow, the words were flowing fast from the Colonel now.

I swallowed hard and turned onto Bella's street. I felt myself relaxing. Bella was close. She would protect me. I was not above hiding behind her. A real man knows when he's beaten. I pulled up into the driveway and turned off the engine. Charlie turned to me. "Take good care of them, son." That was all, just that. But I knew if I disregarded those words I would be in for a world of hurt, courtesy of Colonel Swan.

I nodded. "I plan on it."

He returned the nod and opened his door. I kind of stared after him for a moment, wondering what the hell had just happened. Charlie glanced back at me. "You plan on sitting out here all night, son?"

I quickly got out of the vehicle and joined him on the driveway, keeping a careful distance between us. No need to appear too pushy. He eyed the space between us. "I don't bite, Cullen," he told me with a quirk of his brow.

I grinned at him, feeling reckless and brave. "That's not what I hear, sir."

He laughed then, throwing back his head and giving a bark of genuine amusement. He clapped me on the shoulder and the old man still had a hell of a lot of power in that arm of his. "You'll fit in just fine around here, Cullen." He shook his head. "Just fine."

So I followed him into the house, feeling like I was following orders.

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Once we were inside, Jake launched himself across the room, approaching me with such speed and determination that I had no other option than to pick him up. Or end up on the floor. Jake surprised me by putting his hands on either side of my face and squishing my cheeks together. "Isn't Grandpa the *best*?" His voice held the excitement of a boy sharing his favorite toy.

"Uh yeah...the best," I agreed cautiously.

Bella came to us then, laughing and shaking her head. "Sorry about the sneak attack," she murmured with a look of indulgent frustration at her father. "It's sort of a family tradition." She leaned in closer. "We're forbidden to tell."

"No worries," I told her, and I almost believed it. It sounded convincing anyway. I leaned down and kissed her cheek. Then she turned her face and offered me her lips. Never one to turn down an offer like that, I took her up on it. No tongue. I didn't have a death wish.

Then I felt soft, warm arms embracing me - and Bella and Jake. We were all just sort of huddled together. "It's so nice to meet you, Edward," Renee said when she pulled away. She was a hugger, apparently. She was even more attractive in person than she was in her pictures. If Bella aged like her mother, I was going to be a very, very lucky man. Renee's expression was as open and welcoming as her hug.

"It's nice to meet you too, Mrs. C - Swan." I had almost called her Mrs. Colonel. The look in her face told me she had guessed, and that it wouldn't have been the first time.

Jake began wriggling so I guessed that he wanted me to put him down. Once more, the kid surprised me by giving me a big wet kiss on the cheek before he ran off to join his brothers, who were exclaiming over the gifts their uncles and grandparents had brought them. They never arrived empty-handed it seemed.

Renee gave me a delighted smile and then stepped back to give me on the once over. I must have passed inspection because she turned to Bella and gave her a thumbs-up. Bella laughed and shook her head, looking slightly embarrassed at

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her mother's enthusiasm. "You're right, Bella," her mother murmured. "He is deliciously handsome."

I could feel the fire creeping up my neck and it was visible especially since the bit of a tan I had acquired while deployed had now faded to my more natural pallor. Perfect, just fucking perfect.

Renee caught hold of Charlie's arm and nudged him. "Oh Charlie bear, I think we've embarrassed him."

Then "Charlie Bear" did a little flushing of his own. I gave him a look and his eyes warned me not to ever, *ever* even *consider* using the term Charlie Bear with him. Josh snorted and then looked away like he was completely innocent. Apparently, Charlie Bear was nothing new to him. Renee didn't seem to notice the amusement that her endearment caused, or maybe she didn't care.

Where the Colonel was taciturn and somewhat abrupt, Renee was easy going and chatty, though Bella had told me her mother was rather flighty at times. It seemed that Charlie's stolid strength was a good balance for Renee's impractical enthusiasm because they had been happily married for over forty years. They had lived in three different countries, raised two kids, and been partners in every way since the day they took their vows. Just listening to Bella's stories of them had made their love and devotion to each other very clear. Like me, Bella had grown up with a good example of how a good marriage could work.

We all settled down and Renee brought out coffee, fussing at Bella for trying to do too much while wearing a cast. I was thinking that Renee and I would get along just fine because I thought Bella should rest more too.

"You should have seen her," Renee said. "Even when she was nine months pregnant and out to here, she'd be running around like a crazy woman!"

"Mom," Bella muttered.

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Renee waved her objections away. "Wasn't she, Charlie? Wasn't she still just a whirlwind even with her belly poking way out."

"Yes, Renee, she was," Charlie agreed. Wow, she got four words just by asking a simple question. I was impressed.

"Mom," Bella said again, under her breath. "I'm sure Edward doesn't want to hear stories about when I was pregnant."

"I'd love to hear stories about when she was pregnant," I assured Renee. "And when she was a little girl. I'll bet she was a handful." *That's right, sweetheart. Sic your father on me? Throw me to the wolves so your brother can talk to me alone? All right. I see how it is. Just remember payback's a bitch.* I grinned at Bella and she narrowed her eyes at me. Oh I'd pay for it later, I could tell. But I was still going to enjoy my little slice of revenge.

"Oh Bella was quiet," Renee said. "But that just meant I never knew when she misbehaved. She never gave herself away like William over there."

"Hey!" Will protested and Josh contributed.

"It's true, Will can't lie. He's absolutely terrible at it." Josh looked at Bella.

"Miss Bells here on the other hand..." He arched a brow at her and Bella wagged her finger at him.

"Just remember I know where the bodies are hidden for you too, Dr. Galloway," Bella warned.

"Never mind," Josh shot back with a wink.

"That's what I thought," Bella replied.

Then Renee shared stories. Apparently Bella had been a bit of a daredevil, but she never wanted to try things alone. So she had always talked Will into doing them with her, except she had him perform the most dangerous stunts *first*. I looked at her and she shrugged. "Well, he was younger," she conceded. "But I

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told him that boys had to do it first to make sure it was safe for girls." She grinned at her brother. "And the dork fell for it every time."

"I was chivalrous," he insisted. "Even as a child."

"You were gullible," Bella told him. "Even as an adult."

"I was a *gentleman*," Will grumbled under his breath.

"Now kids," Renee interrupted. "Not this same old song again."

"She started it!" Will said, pointing at Bella.

"Actually," Bella said with a big grin. " *Mom* started it."

Renee ignored them both and I was reminded of my mother. It was interesting watching the dynamics of it all. Charlie was mostly silent, but Renee kept him in her view, sort of shifting around him. Her eyes sought him out, as his did her. It was almost like they were constantly touching each other, but not with their hands. The gruff, intimidating Colonel became someone else when Renee was with him. Renee's topics of conversations flitted from one subject to another, but Charlie and her children and Josh never seemed to lose the thread of it. I supposed that it came with practice.

The boys had all reemerged with satisfied smiles on their faces. I was guessing they had gotten quite a haul from their relatives. Renee got a hug from each boy and a kiss from them too. Then Sam and Seth went and sat on the floor next to Charlie, while Emmett gravitated toward Will and Josh. Jake took up his post by me, I was pleased to note. One down, three to go.

We talked and laughed and I felt myself relaxing. Finally, Bella and her mom shared a look and I wanted to laugh at how similar their expressions were. "We're going to go ahead and get dinner out of the oven," Bella explained. "Boys," she said, turning to them and they all paid attention. "Emmett and Sam, you set the table. Seth, make sure everyone has a napkin and put out the parmesan cheese and then carry the bread to the table. Jake, you make sure

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everyone's got a glass. Okay?"

The boys all nodded and went scurrying to do their appointed tasks. The women retreated into the kitchen. Charlie followed them, moving with a lot of energy and speed for a man his age.

"He's going to sneak bites," Will said as he watched his father walk away.

"He'll get away with that?"

Josh nodded. "Oh yeah, those women are fools for him." He studied me for a moment. "So...how's the Colonel treating you so far?"

"You mean besides showing up on the base and scaring the shit out of me?" I asked. Josh grinned. "Actually, he hasn't really threatened me."

"Just sort of made promises?" Josh guessed with a smirk.

"Something along those lines."

"Well, you did fine," Josh promised me.

"Yeah, how do you know?" I was genuinely curious.

Josh shrugged. "He didn't call you a damned fool when he was talking to Renee."

"Okay then. Good enough for me."

Then they were calling us to the table, and though it was a bit of a crowd we somehow all managed to cram in. Jake was next to me (at his insistence) and Bella was on my other side. It was no surprise to see the Colonel at the head of the table. It kind of crowded at the table with all of the extra chairs tucked in. Jake and I finally got tired of hitting elbows and I leaned down to whisper. "Do you just want to sit on my lap, Jake?"

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He beamed happily and nodded. Renee did a little beaming of her own when I pulled Jake onto my lap. Charlie gave Jake a wink. Bella just took it all in, but a little smile played along her beautiful lips. We finished dinner and I noticed that Jake had managed to get marinara on me, the table, and his own face. Even on his ears, though I wasn't sure how he'd accomplished that.

Then the evening was winding down and I could see Will yawning. Right. I had to play the good host. I supposed it was time to get my houseguests settled and sleeping. Besides, Bella would want to spend some time with her parents. I stood up and Bella did too, obviously clear on my plans. I hated the night to end; even the Colonel wasn't as scary now, especially since I'd heard him called Charlie Bear.

But I had to be to work early, which made for a good excuse. Might as well get out before I embarrassed myself with Charlie...Bear. I snickered to myself at that thought. Everyone wished me a good night, though Renee did ask if they'd be seeing much of my during their visit.

I shook my head. "No ma'am," I told her. "Work is going to be pretty busy this week."

Charlie nodded. "Yeah, that's what Barty told me," he concurred.

Barty. Barty? Barty as in Barty Hutchinson? Barty Hutchinson as in *Major* Bartholomew Hutchinson?

I looked at Charlie. "You know Major Hutchinson?" *God, if you've ever loved me. If you've ever said, "Hey that Cullen guy isn't a total screw up!" then please, please don't let this be true.*

Apparently God wasn't in a merciful mood. Or I *was* a total screw up.

"Barty?" Charlie said as if surprised that I was asking. He smiled at me slow and wide, like a shark. "Barty and I might have run into each other a few times."

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Fuck. My. Life.

Chapter 50: An Unexpected Visitor

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Author's Note: There were a few questions about Barty. One of my favorite authors is Dean Koontz. I recently read From the Corner of His Eye - again, it's one of my favorites from this author - and the lead character's name is Bartholomew. So that was just the name that popped into my head. There is an upcoming outtake of the initial conversation between Bella and Major Hutchinson. This chapter is a bit longer than most of them but I didn't want to break it up. My apologies.

Chapter 50: An Unexpected Visitor

Will and Josh disappeared into the guest room soon after we got to my house. I crashed and woke up at the butt crack of dawn, as Masen liked to call it. I went for a run. I had some ninja temptress sex to get in shape for and I wasn't getting any younger. I wondered if I should hire a trainer. Or track down an old school, retired drill sergeant and have him ride my ass for the next month. Nah, even I was *that* desperate.

Will and Josh still weren't up by the time I left for work, so I left them a note telling them to make themselves at home and headed into work.

Work sucked. Nothing seemed to go right, nothing was where it was supposed to be and my buddies were giving me no end of shit about the Colonel's impromptu visit. Major Hutchinson didn't help with that one bit when he asked how "Old Charlie" was doing. The rest of the day was spent deflecting or ignoring questions about dating "Old Charlie's" daughter and speculation about if the Colonel knew what a ladies' man I was - or had been. Past tense definitely applied.

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I got out of work so late that I had to call Bella and tell her that I wouldn't be able to make it. She made my night worse by telling me that her mother had decided that they should all take a trip to Charleston tomorrow, which meant no matter what time I got out of work, I wouldn't be seeing any of them. They wouldn't be back until the following day. I told her to bring Emily to my house and to leave my back door unlocked. Then I called Mr. Hoyt and asked him to let Emily out at least once while I was at work. He was thrilled to know I had gotten a dog, even a part-time one. "And I expect it'll be full time before too long." Apparently I didn't have much of a poker face.

A little while later I got a text from her. **Sam wants to know if Emily will be okay alone at your house.**

I grinned and texted back. **Hoyt will be letting her out and checking in on her.**

A few minutes later. **Sam says thanks. :)**

My houseguests were already in bed by the time I got home, but the kitchen was immaculate and a pot of coffee was ready to go for the morning. I even noticed a clean stack of towels on my dryer, folded and everything.

Will and Josh were gone by the time I got up the next morning and I realized that I hadn't even seen them the day before. As houseguests they were pretty damned perfect. A quick peek into their room revealed the bed made and their belongings all tucked away. I swear it looked like one of them might have vacuumed.

I got texts from Bella off and on throughout the day, telling me that they were enjoying the day. I wished I was with them. A lot. I snapped at a couple of guys, generally making a pain in the ass of myself. If I was going to be miserable, so were they. Besides, I outranked them.

The day passed but not quickly. When I finally got home, Emily was at the door to greet me. I had forgotten how great it was to have a dog. They were just so completely happy to see you, never holding anything back. Mr. Hoyt

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left me a note and told me that he had taken Emily for two walks. She certainly looked happy. Emily and I watched television and I talked to her about how great Bella and the boys were. She seemed to agree.

I went to bed and let Emily up on the bed with me. Emily, as sweet as she was, wasn't even close to being a substitute for Bella but there wasn't much I could do about it. I went to work and left a note for Will and Josh, welcoming them back. They would all be leaving tomorrow. Their visit had passed in a rush, mostly because my ass was at the base all day.

I was sulking just a bit.

I got a text from Bella at lunch time. **We are home. Have Emily. Thank you.**

You are welcome. I love you.

There, I had put it in a text. The first time I had done so. I wondered if it would scare her. Then I smiled. No way. Nothing scared Bella.

My phone buzzed. **Love you too. Dinner tonight?**

I considered what was left to do for the day. I could swing it. Besides, I had a feeling that Major Hutchinson would love to know I was squirming under the Colonel's eagle eye once again.

Yes. And I'll be hungry.

Then someone yelled my name and I was back to business.

~TBTA~

I arrived at Bella's house a little after six, which was a minor miracle. Jake answered the door, which was not. I could smell something delicious when I walked in. Renee walked out of the kitchen along with Bella. I was pleasantly surprised to find Bella sliding into my embrace and giving me a kiss just like I had been coming home to her for years. Jake hugged my leg, pulled on my

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uniform sleeve and when I leaned down, he gave me a kiss. Then he ran off, the mushy stuff accomplished.

"Dad's out back grilling some steaks," Bella said. "Mom and I are responsible for the salad and baked potatoes and macaroni and cheese." She leaned in and whispered. "Not too much we can do to mess those up." I kissed her ear. I didn't really care about the food.

Bella handed me a beer (and it tasted really good) and I went outside to chat with Charlie. Will and Josh were there too. Charlie had the grilling under control and the steaks looked good. There was probably more than a hundred dollars' worth of beef on the grill. I guess Charlie had seen his grandsons eat.

Charlie looked over his shoulder and murmured. "So how's that little video project of yours coming along?"

I had talked to Thor this week and it was coming along just fine. "Ahead of schedule actually. He's already transferred all of the movies and now he's editing and adding music and a few more snapshots."

"Good," Charlie said. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet sized picture. It was of him, holding a tiny, newborn baby. It had to be Bella. He smiled as he looked at it. "I didn't want to mail this one," he said gruffly after a moment. "It's my favorite. The first time I held her." He handed it to me. "I'll want it back the next time we visit."

"Yes sir." I thought that I'd get this one blown up and framed for Charlie. Yeah, it was sucking up. No, that didn't bother me.

Dinner was enjoyable and as always the evening flew by too fast. I finally bid my good-byes to everyone. Renee hugged me and told me that she was looking forward to meeting me again. Then she kissed me on the cheek and the boys laughed at my expression.

The boys had said good-bye too, though there were some unhappy faces. Will and Josh went home with me to pack up their stuff. They had an early flight,

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but they had Josh's rental car so no one was going to have to drive them to the airport. I expected one last talk with Will before we went to bed, but he just gave me a hug and told me that I made his sister very happy. Josh did the same thing. It was all very...relaxed.

~TBTA~

The next day all of the Swans were gone. I had to work late, no visit to Bella's even now that she had more privacy. Life sucked. Friday passed in a similar fashion except I made it out in time to go see Bella. We snuck in a little closet time, though mostly it was just making out. My dick reminded me that I needed a little "alone time" when I got home. It did the job but wasn't a lot of fun - sort of like eating one of those sandwiches from the vending machine. It filled you up, but wasn't really satisfying.

The weekend was lazy and relaxed. We all went to a movie. We went out for pizza. The boys argued. Bella and I made out in the closet. We were both about as sexually frustrated as humans could be without spontaneously combusting. Honestly, I expected to start seeing smoke coming from one or the other of us.

Then it was Monday again. I had a new routine. Get up and run. Go to work. Stare at my phone and wait for a text from Bella. Watch the clock and hope I'd get out in time to see her. I only made it over two evenings that week. Bella had gone back to work, getting her classroom set up and going to "endless, stupid meetings that accomplished nothing" as she said. The boys were still out of school and sleeping as late as they could while they could. She went home at lunch time to check on them.

Another weekend - the last before school started for the boys.

I saw the backpacks lined up on the dining room table. Bella had their individual lists in hand and directed them while they put in their supplies. "No, Emmett, you'll need a calculator *every* day. Just leave it in there." Or "Jake, you'll like colored pencils. I promise. They're even better than crayons." Jake wasn't taking the transition from crayons to colored pencils well, apparently. He was still pouting as his mother put the pencils in his Star Wars backpack.

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Emmett had refused to buy a lunch box and would be brown bagging it. Jake, predictably, had a Star Wars lunch box. Sam and Seth went the generic route. I could only imagine Bella making four school lunches until she told me that the boys were responsible for making at least part of their lunches themselves. "I don't have that kind of time," she muttered.

The stress was beginning to show. The start of a school year was busy for Bella both at home and at work. There wasn't much making out that weekend. My dick pouted. I tried to pretend I wasn't feeling neglected because Bella had enough on her plate. I knew I was just getting a good look at the reality of our lives together and I tried to man up and be a grown up. It was difficult at times. I had to resist the urge to whine. I had a feeling that Bella would have put the smack down on that just like she did with the boys - swiftly and with little tolerance.

I wished each of the boys good luck for tomorrow's first day of school. Jake asked me if I would go to his Open House to meet his teachers when the time came. I said I would if I could get out of work on time. I knew I would make every effort to do so. He seemed satisfied. Then Sam said I could meet his teachers too. Emmett didn't make an offer and Seth was distracted with his guitar at the moment and I knew he didn't even hear what we were talking about. Seth had the ability to block everything out when he was "with" his music.

On Monday, I was restless, wondering how the boys' first day of school went. And Bella's. She would be meeting her class today, all of the hormonally charged tweenagers and teenagers. I shuddered at the thought.

When I got there that evening, the boys were full of stories about their teachers and classes. Emmett seemed to think that high school was going to be "awesome" and he had been thrilled to see that Rosalie was in his lunch period. Sam said his classes were going to be fun, which meant a lot of hard work in Sam speak. Seth thought that the girls in his grade had gotten a lot prettier over the summer and he had already gotten two girls' phone numbers. Bella sighed. I grinned at her and shrugged. Yes, males were pigs. That was nothing new to her. Jake was just happy to announce that his teacher was pretty and nice and

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smelled good.

The rest of the week flew by between work and school and Bella and I were finally falling into a routine again. It was a different, hectic routine, but we were getting the hang of it.

It seemed like the next thing I knew, the school year was two weeks old and Bella's birthday was around the corner. Thor had given me the DVDs and I had watched them all. There was some footage of Bella and Mac at their wedding, dancing. He had been surprisingly light on his feet. Their wedding had been simple and traditional.

There was Bella pregnant, and then holding a newborn Emmett. He had scowled even as a baby and it looked just the same as it did now. I watched each of the boys grow inside of her and then grow up. It was strange to watch them. A part of me was jealous that I had missed that, but they had had Mac. It was a weird feeling.

Masen called me and told me that their move had been delayed a few weeks. They would be here the Tuesday *after* Bella's birthday. "Don't worry, we're still up for watching the boys, but it will probably have to be at Bella's house."

"That's fine," I said, feeling guilty that my first thoughts had, indeed, been of my dick and our plans for Bella. "Don't sweat it, man."

Masen laughed, probably reading my mind. "Yeah, don't sweat it. Like you weren't thinking about what's finally going to happen that weekend."

I sighed. "Okay, guilty as charged, but I'm a guy. What do you expect?"

"I'm just giving you shit, big brother," Masen said. "And now I've got to go calm down Alyssa. She's going crazy with the delays. This will only be our third move since college and I don't know how people do this all the time. I hate it. I hate it a lot."

"Welcome to my world," I reminded him. "I do that shit all the time."

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"Yeah, but never with a family in tow," Masen observed. "Of course, that's changing now."

"Yeah, but I don't have any plans to move us across country." It felt good to talk about a future with Bella as a done deal.

"Smart, man, really smart." I heard Alyssa yelling in the background. Masen hadn't been exaggerating. She sounded very upset.

"Go calm down your wife," I advised him. "Give her some good loving and then a foot massage."

"I'm telling you, the foot massage is golden." Masen laughed. "And you're welcome for that."

Soon after that it was the Labor Day weekend. Neither of us really felt like going anywhere, so I gently refused my mother's invitation, telling her that we were still a bit tired from all the company. Mom understood, though I knew she was disappointed.

Then came the first weekend I had to work - *all* weekend. I wasn't going to see Bella and the boys at all. It was possibly one of the most miserable weekends of my life. I had gotten used to our groping sessions in the closet and my dick was wondering where his playmate was. We both sulked. I finally got to see her on Sunday night, but not for long. The boys had to go to bed early now that school was back in session and Bella was looking tired. We were down to two weeks now before we would be going away for the weekend.

Two weeks - well actually thirteen days. And when I woke up tomorrow it would be twelve days. I could make it. I tried to convince my dick that we were strong. We were men. We could do this. We *had* to do this. He wasn't convinced.

Monday at work was the usual. I actually had Tuesday off since I had worked all weekend and we had a bit of downtime. But Bella had to work and the boys were in school so I was left to my own devices. I texted Bella letting her know

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that I'd be over for dinner and I would bring pizza or wings or something else of little nutritional value and high fat content. I definitely needed to get a run in if I was going to eat like that at dinner. So far I hadn't heard from her, but I guessed she was in class.

I was going to go for my run but then I heard the thunder. I looked out and the clouds were dark and ominous in the sky. So...no run today. I debated changing out of my ratty running clothes but I was feeling lazy. I wished I at least had Emily with me. I could always use the key that Bella had given me just after Charlie left, but I'd wait until I heard from Bella and just let her know.

The sound of the rain was relaxing. It was coming down hard and I found myself dozing off on the couch. A knocking on my door woke me up. Eleven in the morning. Who the hell? Well, I wasn't buying anything.

I didn't even look out the peep hole. When I opened the door, Bella was standing there in a raincoat/trench coat thing, her hair soaked and hanging around her face in drenched tails. I stared at her in shock for a moment. Her eyes were wide, rain drops were gathered on her lashes and mascara was smudged beneath them. "What's wrong? Are you okay? Are the boys okay?" I asked as I brought her inside. Her teeth were chattering and she looked upset.

She threw her arms around me and hugged me tight. "It's ruined," she said.

"What? What's ruined? Bella? Talk to me. You're scaring me." I was searching her face, looking for the cause of whatever had upset her. "Babe?"

She sniffed and water dripped off her nose. "Let's get you warm and dry," I said.

But she held her coat tight and shook her head. "I went to the doctor today."

I felt my stomach clench. "What's wrong?"

Her eyes went down to her feet. Her *feet*. No cast.

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"Bella! That's great, you got your cast off," I said. "And a week early."

She nodded, wiping at her eyes. "I had it all planned out and now it's ruined."

I ushered her to the couch and once again tried to take her coat from her. But she latched her fingers onto it and wouldn't let go. Okay. She liked the coat. Maybe she was just cold.

She sat down and ran her fingers through her soaked hair. "I started thinking about our weekend." Shit. She was going to cancel. "And the more I thought about it, the more nervous I got."

"Hey, we don't have to-" My dick told me to shut my mouth and to kiss her if I thought I was going to say anything stupid.

"No, that's not what I mean," Bella interrupted me. She sighed. "I just started thinking about it and I realized that this deadline looming in front of us was putting a lot of pressure on me. And maybe you. I don't know."

"And?" I gave up trying to guess where this conversation was heading.

"And I realized that I wanted to do something spontaneous," she said quietly.

"Like what?" Put it off? I would, but dear Lord in heaven I didn't want to.

She stood up. "The doctor took off my cast and I already had the whole day off. I called Alice and she's going to keep an eye on the boys after school...and this evening." I was still clueless. "So I went home after I got the cast off and I let Emily out and shaved my leg because it looked really nasty and I put on make up and even took the time to actually *do* something with my hair - and it looked good...for once." She tugged at the sodden strands.

I was bemused by her rambling speech. I wanted to touch her, reassure her. I wanted to tell her that she always looked good, even when her hair was pulled back into a simple pony tail and she hadn't yet had time to put on make up. But she had something to say, so I let her go on. "And I stood there, looking at

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myself in the mirror, and thinking about our weekend..." She took a deep breath. "I decided..." Her fingers were shaking as she untied the belt of her coat. "I decided that it was all getting to be too much. That something would happen that night - like I'd eat something at dinner and end up with food poisoning or you'd throw out your back or one of the boys would get sick or we'd be attacked by aliens or any one of a hundred thousand other things and all of our plans would be ruined. And when that happened I was afraid that I would actually spontaneously *combust*. So..."

She let the coat slide from her shoulders.

Fuck. Me.

Dark blue bra, lacy and see through. Lacy dark blue panties, revealing more than they concealed. And that was it. Nothing else. Bella had driven over here in a coat and bra and panties. We were alone. In my house. With hours of free time ahead of us. And Bella was already half naked.

I looked at her. "Are you sure?" My voice was husky and raspy and I sounded like I smoked three packs a day.

"I was," she said. What? No! "But now look at me," she said. "I look like a drowned rat." Briefly, she closed her eyes and shook her head. "This isn't how I imagined it."

"Me either," I admitted. "But somehow...it's perfect. *You're* perfect." I pulled her close, felt her shivering against me. "You look incredible and I've never been more turned on my life," I whispered. My mouth found hers and I knew in that instant she was right. It was better this way, this spontaneous decision to do what we'd both been dreaming of for months now. It hardly seemed possible that the moment had arrived.

I picked her up and carried her up the stairs. I was going to do this right. We had waited long enough. We had denied ourselves and been responsible adults. But it was time and it was right. I shoved open my bedroom door and carried her to the bed. I wasn't sure whether to take my clothes off now or wait. Would

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she want to undress me? She held up her arms. "I want to feel your skin against me."

Okay, clothes off now. She sounded as impatient as I felt. Stripping out of my tee shirt and shorts and boxers only took about thirty seconds. I stared at her, some part of my mind wondering if this was just another fevered fantasy. I was almost scared that I would reach for her and she would disappear in a poof of smoke. I was more nervous than I could ever remember being since that first time a woman had welcomed me into her body. This was like that, but worse, because I knew how good - or how bad - it could be. What if we sucked together? And not in a good way, but in that awkward "*Uh...yeah...I've gotta go home*" kind of way? What if all that fire and heat between us just sort of...sputtered and stalled once we got to the big game?

Then Bella smiled and reached for me and I knew that we'd be okay, even if this first time was less than spectacular and the fireworks fizzled. We'd get the hang of it because we loved each other. Everything else would fall into place. The raw chemistry was there and we could work with that. Oh hell yes, we could work with that.

Then I was in the bed, pressing up against her. Her skin was cool from the rain. My hands were shaking as I brushed back the mess of her hair and wiped away the traces of mascara. Her cheeks began to pinken and a smile appeared on her lips. I groaned as I felt my dick rub against her belly, her hip. I moved so that I was over her, feeling every inch of her against me.

Nothing had ever felt better in my life.

I let my mouth trail over her shoulder to the delicate lines of her collarbone. She arched against me, urging me lower. I undid the front clasp of her bra and breathed in. Fuck, she was so beautiful. I tossed the bra to the floor. As alluring as it was - dark lace against pale flesh - I didn't want anything to cover her. I licked at a nipple, lightly nipping at it with my teeth. She moaned and buried her fingers in my hair, tugging.

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I shifted so that I was on top of her, and I hissed at the feeling of her pressed against me, head to toe. Her nipples burrowed into my chest and she arched up against me. "Fuck yes, Bella," I breathed. Because I knew where this was going to end, I let the feelings expand inside of me. The sensations rushing through my body felt like they were intensified a hundred times over. I felt every shift of her ribs with her breaths; I savored the hard pebbles of her nipples digging into my chest; I swore I could feel the pulse in her belly resonating through my dick.

It was almost overwhelming and I could only pray I wouldn't mess it up. She was right. If we had waited, my nerves would have been shot. Much better like this, to take the plunge when want and need were driving us to the edge. *Don't overthink this, Cullen. Bella has it right. Just go with it.*

I cradled her face with one hand, letting the other one trail down her side to her hip. The thin line of her panties there taunted me. Teased me. "You never fail to amaze me, Bella," I told her. "You're right...this is how it should be."

I felt the tension leave her, and in its wake there was only subtle trembling that ran through her. But I knew it wasn't from nerves. It was anticipation, simple and utterly consuming. I knew because the same eager expectations were flooding through me too. It was adrenalin and desire all mixed into one.

We kissed, our tongues languid and lazy one moment, fierce and demanding the next. Our hips moved against each other in the rhythm that echoed what was to come. I shifted so that the head of my dick rubbed against her clit and she wrapped her legs around me, demanding more, giving it in return. Finally, I had to stop or it would all be over. That's what she reduced me to - a bumbling, sweaty coil of nerves and need.

I moved again, gently disentangling her legs from around me. She murmured in protest, lightly pulling on my hair to try and keep me in place. I just smiled up at her and continued my downward path. I pressed open mouthed kisses against her breasts, licking and gently sucking at her nipples. First one, then the other. Then I continued on, kissing the space between her breasts, licking. Her belly next, tongue swirling in her belly button and Bella hissed, arching up against

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me and then giving a sharp cry when my mouth moved down even further.

Through the silk of her panties, I breathed against her, letting my breath warm her. I could see the moisture of her response dampening the dark blue fabric. I knew the flesh beneath would be even softer...and wetter than the silk and lace. Tenderly, I slid my finger under the elastic at her leg, letting my finger play over the skin where the toned flesh of her legs became the softer, paler flesh of her lower belly.

"You're so beautiful," I whispered. " *So* beautiful." I repeated it so that she would always know how I saw her.

"Edward," she murmured. "I can't wait..." She arched against me, asking, begging, demanding. "Later...we'll take our time..." She panted. "But now, please God now...I can't wait."

I slid up her body and she hissed at the friction between us. I kissed her face, tender light kisses that teased, before I finally found her lips again. Her tongue stroked against mine, showing me a rhythm that pleased her. *Like this*, her tongue seemed to say. *I want you to take me like this*. It was fast and hard, giving or asking no mercy just yet.

Groaning, I reached down and slid the panties from her body. The scrap of dark blue lace and silk hit the floor silently. And Bella was nude beneath me. I could feel her wet heat. My dick throbbed and my balls tightened.

"Bella," I whispered, kissing up her throat. "Do I need a condom?"

She shook her head. "No. I want to feel you - all of you. But hurry....please."

I wanted to shout with joy. Bare. Inside Bella. Heaven. Paradise. Fuck, I couldn't wait any longer. Her legs opened wider, inviting me in. I leaned up on my arm, grasping my dick with the other hand and guided it to her entrance. I didn't ask if she was sure because I knew she was. We had both been waiting. So long...

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I nudged against her and she moaned and then I was sliding inside of her, a long slow glide into heat and silk. She was tight around me, gripping me. It had been more than two years for her and it took a moment for her body to adjust. I heard her take a deep breath and her body's hold on me eased just a bit. Just enough for me to draw back and push back in.

Fuck.

I groaned again, loudly, and dropped my forehead to hers. "Bella...so good..." My arms were shaking, threatening to dump me on top of her. *Holy shit...*

"Oh God," she cried out loudly. My ninja temptress hellcat was back. "Harder." She arched against me. "Please."

"Just give me...a minute," I had to beg. If I gave her harder I would come and this would be over. "Too good." It was all I could articulate. She laughed then and brushed the hair back from my face. It was a gesture so tender and intimate that it was almost my undoing in spite of my good intentions. I almost spilled inside of her right then; instead I pulled back once more and took another deep breath. *Come on, dick. Don't fail me now.* Another slow glide inside of her.

Then Bella's hips took up a rhythm, and I caught it. My strokes were long but quick, pumping into her and savoring the push of her hips against me. Yes. That was it. Nothing awkward now, just the motion of two bodies that are completely in sync.

One of us was grunting with every stroke and it was a primal sound. It might have been me, or her. It didn't matter. This was a claiming, a marking of each other. We were making promises with our bodies.

It was tender and sweet, but it was hot and sexy. We were making love and we were fucking and it was the best of both of them. It was months of need and want coming to fruition. The long, slow burn had suddenly erupted into flames.

Then Bella shoved me back and I rolled instinctively. She followed, my dick still buried inside of her. Her legs never lost their grip on me but suddenly she

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was on top, with her kneeling on either side of my legs. Bella rode me, her breasts bouncing with every movement. Her hair was wild around her, a chocolate cloud and her eyes were dark with need and I wanted to lick her, knowing how sweet she tasted. I wanted to be in her and on her and under her all at the same time. Instead, I watched her, my hands on her hips, guiding her, following her, steadying her, as *she* took *me*. She needed this as much as I did, and I knew she had been as frustrated as I had been.

I held up one hand she latched on to it, our fingers lacing with each others. I looked at our hands and then at her face. Her eyes were half-closed now, her mouth slightly open as she gasped and panted and moaned. She had never looked more beautiful to me.

I felt my orgasm tightening up my balls, coiling in my lower spine, making my dick throb and pulse and I wanted to be over her when I came, I wanted to feel her warm and soft and responsive beneath me, under me, mine.

I gave a short moan and flipped us over, never losing the rhythm she had set. And I was thrusting into her, hard and deep and finally my movements became erratic. I reached down between us and pressed her clit, just hard enough and caressing it until I felt her start to clench down on me. "I'm coming," she whispered.

I had expected a shout but it was her whisper, so throaty and raw, that threw me over the edge. I cried out, my voice loud even with the rain and the thunder that roared outside. It felt endless, like I'd never stop. Her body shivered and trembled under me and I had never felt anything so absolutely perfect in all my life. I collapsed on her, careful to keep my weight on my own arms, though they were shaky at best. I guessed I needed to add weights to my workout. This woman was going to push me to my limits in every way. I couldn't wait.

When I could breathe again, I moved slightly so that only half my body was resting on hers, my face nuzzled into her throat. I breathed in her scent, licked at the light sheen of sweat that made her skin shimmer and glisten. "I love you, Bella." I kissed her, right where her pulse still raced. "God, I love you so much."

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Her arms were strong and warm around me. "I love you too, Edward." I felt her lips press against my temple. "Let's sleep," she suggested. "Together." I really liked the sound of that.

I curled up behind her, her body fitting perfectly into the curve of mine. She reached for the hand I had placed on her hip and pulled it up, so that our hands rested over her heart.

We slept.

Author's Note, part B: Yeah, I pulled a fast one on you. Sorry about that. This is how I've always envisioned it happening. Spontaneously and not perfect at all, but somehow just right for these two. I promised that consummation and her birthday would be posted this week. That much is true; I just did them in a different order. Blame Bella. She just couldn't wait. Not that I can blame her.

Chapter 51: Cullen Called Out

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Bella's birthday is up next. This ended up being just a bit longer than I anticipated and I didn't want to rush through Bella's birthday.

Chapter 51: Cullen Called Out

When I woke up the rain had ended, but the light coming in from the window was still dim. I looked at the clock. It was only one in the afternoon. Beside me, Bella stirred. We had had ourselves a nice little nap. I savored the feeling of waking up with her beside me, her hair attacking me and curling around my nose, making me want to sneeze. I reveled in her sweet, cinnamon-vanilla scent, the sound of her breathing.

Suddenly, big brown eyes opened and she gave me a smug little grin. Then she stretched and I was reminded of a cat, lazily rousing to wakefulness after a satisfying doze in the sun. "Hey, handsome," she whispered. Her hand came out and caressed my face and I turned into her touch.

"Hey, beautiful," I replied. I kissed the palm of her hand and her fingers curled around my jaw.

"Just so you know," Bella murmured. "That was..." She giggled and buried her face in my chest.

"That bad, huh?" I teased.

She looked up and rolled her eyes at me. "Fishing for compliments?"

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"Only if you're biting," I answered. I kissed her and it was lingering and sweet with none of the urgency of earlier. I felt a quick nip on my lips.

"I always bite," she warned. Then she sucked my lip into her mouth, soothing the tiny hurt. "But I'll kiss it better."

I laughed at her and pulled her close. "You're a genius, you know," I murmured into her hair.

"Well obviously," Bella teased. "But what, specifically, brought that on?"

I kissed the top of her head. "The whole spontaneous, sexy lingerie under a coat thing," I said. "Sheer and utter fucking genius."

"Fucking genius, huh?" Bella smirked. "Literally."

I groaned at hearing the "F" word come from her mouth. Yet another favorite letter of the alphabet.

"You were right," I said. "I think I might have had a heart attack just from nerves if we'd gone with the original plan. As it was, I worried about passing out when I got undressed. I think the performance anxiety would have done me in."

"Uh, I've seen the equipment, Cullen," she mocked. "No worries there. To quote Sookie Stackhouse, you've got a gracious plenty."

"Sookie who?" I had never met this Sookie person.

"Never mind," Bella laughed. "She's a character...in a book."

"Oh." I kissed her. That never got old. "No, I mean, yeah, every guy worries that he won't have what it takes to please his woman, but that wasn't what had me terrified."

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"Your skills?" Bella asked. "Because I've got to tell you, you've got some mad skills in between the sheets, baby." Then her fingers curled around my dick. Surprise, surprise, he woke up from his nap too. He was nothing if not predictable.

"Stop," I said in an entirely unconvincing voice. "No, I..." I took a deep breath. "I started worrying that we'd actually get to the nitty gritty and-"

"Nitty gritty?" she asked, obviously amused at my word choice. "Wow, you really know how to romance a girl, Mr. Smooth."

"Will you let me get this out?" I said sternly, narrowing my eyes. She just kissed me, obviously humoring me. Then she assumed a solemn expression.

"Go on, I'm listening."

"Okay..." I traced my fingers down her temple, her cheekbone, her jaw. "I had this fear that maybe we'd finally do it and it wouldn't...it wouldn't be the fireworks, this huge spectacular... *thing*...we'd built it up to be. That, somehow, our chemistry would fizzle instead of pop."

"And now?" Bella asked quietly.

"And now..." I kissed her. I couldn't stop. "Now I know that what I imagined was nothing compared to what we really have." I shrugged. "Yeah, we'll get to know each other's bodies better. We'll figure out the little tells and quirks we both have, but the raw chemistry? That's there and it's...well it's sizzling." I laughed. "There...does *sizzling* make up for saying nitty gritty?"

She pursed her lips. "I don't know. I'll have to give this some serious consideration." Bella slid on top of me and my dick let her know he was ready to party. She shifted her hips and we both groaned at the new friction. "Maybe you should make it up to me."

"Maybe I should," I agreed and pulled her down for a kiss.

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My ninja temptress showed me just how to make it up to her.

And I did.

~TBTA~

After we made love again, and this time it was slow and languid and very, very satisfying, we fell asleep again. When we woke up it was close to dinner time and I heard her stomach growling. "Time to feed the ninja," I murmured.

"What did you call me?" Bella asked, sitting up and blinking sleepily.

"Nothing," I said. "Come on, sleepyhead, let's get you some sustenance." I grinned at her. "And I think I need some Gatorade."

I gave her ass a friendly little whack when she walked past me to go to the bathroom. Her hands flew to her butt and she gave me a surprised look. "Just remember, payback's a bitch, Edward," she said sweetly, batting her eyes.

I was counting on it.

She came out of the bathroom, still nude and walked right in front of me without appearing self-conscious at all. Her confidence and ease was sexy as hell. Walking over to my dresser, she rummaged through a few drawers until she found a tee-shirt and then she slipped it over her head and opened my bedroom door.

To my surprise, my dick got hard at the thought of her walking around my house with no panties. I would have thought he'd still be snoozing. But no, he liked to think of her in my shirt and no panties. I liked the idea too. I followed her, like she had my dick on a leash.

She probably did. I wasn't going to fight it.

We searched through my pantry and refrigerator and freezer. We really *did* need sustenance. Finally, Bella just decided that we could make some omelets.

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That sounded perfect. I chopped some vegetables and the last of the ham I had in the fridge. She found my pan and began preparing the eggs and got the cheese. I watched her deft, quick movements in my kitchen with a sense of wonder.

As I watched her work, moving quickly and silently, her hips swaying slightly to the beat of some music only she could hear, I knew that I wanted to see her doing this every day. And I didn't want to wait forever to make that happen.

Yes, on some level things had moved quickly. But neither of us were kids who had no idea about how the world worked, or the obstacles we still faced. It wouldn't be easy, making myself a permanent part of her family. I could never be their *father*, even if I was the father figure. They had a father. Jake, and perhaps Sam, might see me in the role of father more than the older boys.

I was okay with that. Mac was their father, their dad, the man who had loved them every moment of their existence until he was cruelly taken away from them. He was a huge part of their past. But what Bella and I shared...well, that was the future. I wanted to start creating that future with all of them. Sooner rather than later.

The road would not always be smooth. Nothing in life was. I didn't care. It was what I wanted, what I hoped we both wanted.

"You look really good in my kitchen," I murmured, my voice doing that raspy thing again. Maybe I should get it checked out. Then again, maybe it was just Bella. She just smiled at me, and that smile pierced me through to my core.

Bella seemed to strip away the façade; she had the ability to get straight through to the heart of the matter - to the heart of me. No games, no power plays, no lies. It was strange how comfortable the honesty felt.

She would drive me crazy. She would dig in her heels and stubbornly refuse to give in. She would probably make me swear and tear my hair out and throw things while I sulked out in the garage. But she would never, ever lie to me. It might take her a while to tell me something, but that core of honesty and

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strength in her called to me. Bella was exactly the kind of woman to cherish as a partner, a lover, a friend.

For some reason, I remembered a sermon from my childhood, from the days when my mother had insisted that we go to church. Masen and I had obediently done so until we were old enough to rebel and get away with it. I remembered the preacher saying something about a woman being a helpmate for a man, his *partner*. A mate, an equal. He had emphasized that a marriage was a partnership in which one person supported the other, giving strength when one felt weak, giving compassion and forgiveness with an open heart, giving of yourself so completely that love endured, no matter what trials you face. I wanted that kind of marriage. I wanted to help Bella. I knew that she would help me as much as I would help her. I wanted to feel her arms around me, comforting me when troubles came. I wanted to soothe her fears and let her soothe mine. Whatever came, we would face it together.

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore and I moved toward her. I wrapped my fingers around hers and we stood at my stove. I moved my lips up and down her neck. "I don't want to let you go," I whispered. "I want you here...every night. I want to hear you moving around in the kitchen, knowing I can kiss you, smell your hair. I want to hear the boys arguing upstairs. I want to tell them to keep it down and ask them not to run so hard on the stairs. I want to hear them splashing around in the pool. Bella, I want you all... *here*...in my life...in my house...or your house. I don't care where. I just want us all to be together. Please, tell me we won't have to wait too long." I was begging and I didn't care who knew it. All that mattered was that she knew how much I wanted her - wanted them. I was putting my heart on the line and I knew it.

She turned off the burner and then twirled around in my arms. "Not too long," she promised. "We'll work it out." Bella stood on her toes and kissed me, softly, tenderly. With the same sense of awe that I knew was in my eyes. "I want that too, more than you know."

I closed my eyes and hugged her close. It was enough, for now, to know that she wanted it too.

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~TBTA~

We spent the rest of our time just sort of sprawled in my bed. I knew that when I crawled into it that night, alone, it would smell like Bella...and sex. I wondered if I could talk her into coming over once every few days at least to let that combination of scents permeate my sheets. Better yet, I wondered how long it would be before I could have her in my bed on a permanent basis.

I sighed as I held her, knowing that I would have to be patient for a while longer. I could do it. Look how long we had waited to have sex - and *that* had certainly been worth the wait. I leaned in and kissed her. "If I had known how good it was going to feel to be inside of you, I'm not sure I would have let you put me off so long."

She laughed and rubbed her nose on my chest. "Right back at you, sweet cheeks." I groaned at the nickname and then my groan turned into a moan when she reached around and grabbed my ass. " *Very* sweet cheeks." I decided then and there that she could call me sweet cheeks anytime she wanted, as long as she accompanied the name with a little grab ass.

Compromise was what it was all about, after all. Besides, I already knew she was handsy. It was one of her best qualities as far as I was concerned.

We made love again. A third time in one day. That had to be some sort of record for a man of my age, I thought, at least any normal guy and not a Hugh Hefner kind of guy. Anyway, it was nothing to be ashamed of, that was for sure. It was just getting better. We were barely hitting our stride as yet. I looked forward to learning all of her little cues and likes and dislikes. I wanted to know what got her revved up right away and what brought her to a slow burn. I wanted to tease and be teased.

Finally, around eight she looked at the clock and sighed and I knew our little interlude was at an end. "You have to go, huh?" I asked. The thought of her leaving was a physical pain inside my chest. I wanted her with me, always. I didn't want to share her, not even with the boys at this moment. I felt selfish, but that didn't change what I was thinking.

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She kissed me and I could sense her own regret. "This is going to be complicated, isn't it?"

"What?" She was changing her mind about us? My mouth went dry and my palms were sweaty, but not in a good way.

"Having time alone," she whispered.

"Oh," I breathed in relief. This was a logistics problem, not a feeling problem. Those I could deal with. "Well..." I said, tracing my fingers up her back. "We're two fairly intelligent people, so I suppose we'll figure something out. Between us, I'm sure we've got at least one good brain."

Bella giggled but even *my* dick was too tired to appreciate the sound. He had decided to take a well deserved little snooze. I gave him my thanks for living up to all his boasting and bid him a good night.

"Uh how would you feel about me spending the night at your house?" I asked. It would have to be her house, obviously.

She was silent for a long moment and then looked up at me with wide eyes. "I don't think the boys are quite ready for that," she finally said. And though I wanted to sleep beside her all night more than almost anything, I knew she was right. It was too soon. There was too much left unsaid between us and the boys and we were going to have to ease them in. Jake, bless his little Star Wars loving heart, had done a lot to start the process, but it was up to us in the end.

I kissed her softly, my tongue caressing hers, just to let her know that I understood. "Yeah, you're right," I said quietly. "Can't blame a guy for trying, though." She smiled widely and pulled me tight.

"Thank you," she murmured. "For understanding." She let her fingers play with the bit of hair on my chest and then down to my happy trail. "But the time will come. I want to wake up with you more than you know."

"It's good to know that we're on the same page here," I said.

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"Oh we are, Mr. Cullen, we most definitely are."

~TBTA~

Bella had insisted on driving herself home, saying it only made sense otherwise one of us would be left without a car. I understood her logic, I just didn't like it. She kissed me, making the little hurt a bit better.

I went to bed that night in Bella scented sheets. I had no dirty dreams or fantasies, maybe because the reality had been so much better. Apparently, my imagination was not as vivid or creative as I had thought. I was okay with that.

Wednesday was another late day which meant I wouldn't be seeing Bella or the boys. That felt wrong, considering the gift she had given me yesterday. But Bella, being Bella, understood and whispered that I shouldn't feel bad. I did, but it was nice to know I hadn't pissed her off. Sometimes it was easy to forget that Bella "got" the life. She knew that being in the Army wasn't like an office job where I could just decide to leave early for the hell of it. Though I had less than a year left it was nice to know she understood.

On Thursday, I was shocked to hear Emmett's voice when I picked up my cell phone. "Hey," he said quietly.

"Is something wrong?" Always my first thought.

"No, I just wanted to make sure that everything was still on for Mom's birthday," he said. He was whispering.

"Emmett where are you?"

"Oh, I borrowed a friend's cell phone to call so Mom won't hear me."

"So why are you whispering?" I asked with a smile.

"Oh," he whispered. Then he laughed. "Yeah, I guess that's kind of stupid, huh?" His voice was back to normal - booming.

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"And to answer your question, yes, everything's ready for your mom's birthday," I told him.

"Good, good," Emmett answered. "About the cake...are you baking it?" He sounded skeptical. I couldn't blame him.

"Uh, that would be a no," I admitted. "If I baked it, it would taste all right but it would look like crap. So I'll be doing us all a favor and buying a cake from a little bakery near the base."

Emmett gave a relieved sigh. I was a little insulted. "Okay, good." Then he paused. "What flavor?" Like I didn't know what her favorite kind of cake was.

"White cake with dark chocolate buttercream frosting."

"Huh...okay then." Charlie Swan was alive and well in his grandson.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Uh no, that was it," Emmett said. "I just wanted to make sure that everything was cool."

"Everything's cool," I assured him.

"Okay...bye." Emmett James was a man/boy of few words.

~TBTA~

The rest of the week flew by, though I only made it Bella's house on Thursday. Jake let me know that I needed to step up my game. "You and me have to see each other more," he said.

I smiled and accepted his kiss on the cheek. Then I surprised us both by returning the kiss - putting one right on the apple of his left cheek. He blinked at me and then grinned. "I will, and soon," I promised. "But work is going to be crazy for the next few weeks. I wish I could be here more, but..." I shrugged.

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Jake thought it over and then shrugged. "Okay, as long as you promise that you'll come over when you can."

"You've got it," I said. I stood back and took a look at his shirt. It was always a trip to see what he came up with from the Star Wars universe. This time he sported a grey tee with Vader (of course) and it read "Vader Was Framed."

"I like it," I said, indicating his shirt.

"Yeah, it's cool," Jake agreed. Then he tugged me toward the kitchen, his favorite room in the house.

We passed by Seth, who was plucking out some chords on his guitar. "Sounding good, Seth!" I called as Jake pulled me along in his wake.

"Thanks!" Seth replied.

Bella was putting the finishing touches on a meatloaf and later on I discovered that hers was actually much better than mine. I was surprised she had eaten my creation at all. The boys and I cleaned up while Bella graded some papers. Then I helped Emmett with some math homework after he had refused Sam's help.

"I don't want my *little* brother helping me with homework," he muttered under his breath as we started. I could relate.

"Tell me about it," I replied just as quietly. He looked at me and grinned and then we got down to work. I leaned in close. "And if I get it wrong, *please* don't tell Sam."

Emmett grinned and nodded his agreement.

Sam drifted in after we were done and explained what they were doing in science. I almost understood it. Okay, I had a fairly good grasp but I was pretty shocked that kids his age actually understood that stuff. Well, Sam did at any rate, and he was enthusiastic.

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Then it was time for the boys to go to bed and there was the usual whining and complaining, especially since Jake had to take his shower first. "I *hate* being the littlest," he grumbled as he stomped up the stairs. Then he stopped abruptly and turned to look down the stairs at his Mom and me. I had a bad feeling about it all. His expression turned speculative. "Will I *always* be the littlest?"

And there it was. That little brother/baby sister talk I had been dreading somewhere in the back of my mind had reared its ugly head. Just like that.

Bella shot me an amused glance. The looks from the other boys weren't quite as pleased but there wasn't any overt hostility either. I swallowed hard, waiting for her to take this one. She was the expert after all. She just looked at me.

Well shit.

Nothing like being called out.

"I dunno, buddy," I finally said with as much honesty as I could. I knew my voice was gruff and raspy but that was fear not lust. Well, not *all* lust. Because thoughts of babies brought to mind thoughts of making babies, and that was pretty much all that my dick needed to get him going. He was easily led astray.

Finally Bella took mercy on me. "Get on upstairs and take your shower Jake. Enough stalling."

I took a deep breath and turned to Bella. The boys went back to their own activities. "That wasn't nice," I muttered.

Bella giggled and nodded. "I know," she admitted. "But honestly, there's just something hot about seeing a grown man squirm that appeals to my inner bitch." She sighed. "I'm bad, so very, very bad."

And my dick liked the thought of Bad Bella - very much. I glanced at the boys and I could see there was no chance I was going to get a private good-bye and my dick would have to behave, there was just no other option.

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"I'd better go," I grumbled. I was sulking. My dick was sulking. We were a pouty pair.

She walked me to the door. "I love you, even when you squirm," Bella whispered.

"And I love you, even when you make me squirm," I replied. Then I leaned in close. "Maybe especially then."

"Pervert," she murmured.

"And you love it," I retorted.

Her eyes were heated. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes I do. Now go before I carry you up to my room and have my perverted way with you."

"You can't carry me, baby," I said. "I'm too big."

Her eyes narrowed and she clucked her tongue. "Don't be too sure about that, Mr. Cullen. I'm stronger than I look."

"Yes you are, baby," I said. "Yes you are." I kissed her. "Goodnight."

Chapter 52: The Birthday Girl

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Edward's brain won't shut off in the first part of this post. A lot of questions might be answered. Or maybe not. Anyway, the poor man is exhausted, so I finally let him fall asleep. He's still traumatized by the last post in Harder They Fall. He mumbled something about needing therapy. Men. Go figure. :p

Chapter 52: The Birthday Girl

That night, as I tossed and turned in my bed, I thought about Jake's question. The "B" word. Bella had brought all sorts of wonderful luggage and awkward questions into my life.

A baby. Honestly, I hadn't ever really considered it in more than abstract form. I guess, when I had been younger, I had had vague day dreams about finding the right woman, settling down and producing two mini-mes. Or mini-hers. I wasn't picky.

Then I had gotten older...and older still. And it hadn't happened. I was okay with that, or at least I thought I was. I had kind of figured that I wasn't that kind of guy; I wasn't father or husband material. Then Bella and four boys had come into my life and I had started to think differently. I wanted to be that kind of man to them.

But a baby?

I couldn't say that I wanted one. Of course, I couldn't say that I *didn't* want one either. Bella and I would have four kids to raise. Four was a lot. Five

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was...well, it was even more. I could count.

Bella and I weren't in our twenties. I was staring forty right in the eyeballs and Bella wasn't that far behind me. Besides, she'd been there, done that and she had four tee-shirts to show for it. One of them had Darth Vader on it.

When Jake asked the million dollar "B" question, Bella hadn't said anything one way or the other. I was getting used to that with her. She had to think about the big stuff, mull it over and consider it from every angle before she was willing to say what she thought about it all.

So would Bella *want* us to have a baby? I wasn't sure. I thought about it some more, thinking about showing up at the kid's high school graduation with grey hair and a stoop. We'd be the age of some of the grandparents there. Could my ego handle it when someone asked me how old my grandson was and I was holding my own kid?

Of course, I thought about my parents and they were still going strong. They actually *were* grandparents, but that hadn't slowed them down. There wasn't a stoop between them, though they did have some grey hair. Still, I wouldn't consider them *old*. Just old *er*. Bella and I would be younger than that when a kid of ours graduated, because obviously the window of opportunity, even if we decided we *wanted* one, was slim and closing fast. Biology was working against us at this point.

But that still didn't answer the question. Did I *want* a baby? More importantly, did Bella?

While I wouldn't mind having a baby, I certainly didn't *need* one to make me happy. Bella and the boys, they made me happy. I definitely didn't want a baby if it compromised Bella's health or happiness. Who knew? Maybe even conceiving would be difficult. All of this worry could be a moot point. We might not have the choice to make. I didn't want to chase down some fuzzy, unformed dream and, in the process, compromise the already very good thing we shared. Jake's safe arrival had been a miracle. What if we didn't get another miracle? It didn't always turn out perfect, with a healthy mother and baby. The

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last thing I wanted was to bring more sorrow into Bella's life. I only wanted to bring good things to her. I didn't want to risk that, any of what we had. Much better to appreciate the blessings we had than to greedily chase after more.

We'd already have our hands full; there would be nothing missing from our lives if we *didn't* have a baby.

All I really wanted - or needed - was Bella...and the boys. They were my life. I didn't need anything else to complete it. I decided that perhaps it would be best to let Bella have the final say. After all, she would be the one carrying the baby. It would be her body that would go through the stress of a pregnancy. I would be content either way. Yes, I had had hazy, vague thoughts when I saw her pregnant in some of the home movies. Not a longing so much as a curiosity. I had already been given so much more than I ever thought possible. So whatever she wanted was fine.

I set aside the baby issue with a sigh of relief.

I was just about to close my eyes when I realized something else. When I had been talking to Bella in the kitchen, I had talked about us being together forever. I had told her that I wanted her in my life, my home, my future. But I hadn't been specific, too wrapped up in my post-orgasmic bliss to form coherent words for the most part. She might have thought I just intended for us to live together. And while that might be fine for some couples, I didn't feel it was right for *us*. Yes, it might be old-fashioned and antiquated, but I thought any couple who had children in the house should actually be married. It might be just a piece of paper to some people, but I felt it was...important.

For me, it was the "M" word. That's what I wanted. I had been *thinking* that, but I hadn't *said* that. And how many times had she reminded me that she wasn't a mind reader? I had to make sure she knew. I had to make sure that she knew I was talking the ring, the preacher, the piece of paper, the flowers, the whole traditional thing. Well, at least the paper. If she wanted to go to the courthouse I was fine with that too. The trimmings didn't matter much to me. As soon as I could, I would tell her, plain and outright.

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Our weekend would be the perfect time to spell it out. I finally fell asleep, thinking about rings and preachers...and Bella in white...walking toward me...the four boys in line behind her.

~TBTA~

Honestly, you would think I had never thrown a birthday party before. Okay, I hadn't. But that was beside the point. By the time I left work, I had no fewer than six messages asking me if I had it all under control. One was from Emmett. He borrowed a friend's cell phone again. He also let me know that all of this would be much more convenient if he had his *own* cell phone. That was a thought for another day. One was from Sam. Apparently he called while his mom was in the shower. Then Jake called - twice. Once to remind me of his favorite flavor of ice cream and once to tell me not to forget to pick up the cake. Apparently Seth was the only one who trusted me to not screw it up. Alice called and left a long rambling message that I ended up deleting before I listened to the whole thing. Then I spent two hours worrying that I had deleted something important. Oh well, too late. Even my mother got in on the act, leaving a message with last minute suggestions and telling me she was sure I would do a "lovely job" of things but had I considered...?

I put my phone on silent and decided to ignore it.

I was able to leave work by six, a miracle in itself. Unfortunately, I couldn't sneak over to Bella's house for a little closet grope. Instead, I had to run around getting things ready for her party. Bella had suggested having it at her house, but honestly how much could she relax and enjoy it if she was worried about getting the house ready for company or cleaning up afterward, even if she had help. No, I thought she'd relax a lot more when all she had to do was show up. I had expressly forbidden her to do *anything* else. And then I begged and pleaded with her not to do anything else and she gave in. I was proving that I was trainable at least.

The cake turned out great. I had been tempted to put the picture of my sullen little Bella ballerina on it, but good sense prevailed (I valued my balls after all) and just got some flowers put on it. It was big. I had seen those boys eat. Jake

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would be in sugar heaven - and then in a sugar coma. I picked up balloons and some flowers to put around the house. Alice had said she'd drop in and help, at least I thought that's what she had said. Really, at some point I had started tuning her out. I could only follow so many changes in topic before my brain scrambled.

Then I went to the grocery store and spent enough to feed a small country. I was going to throw some steaks and wings on the grill, heat up some bread sticks, make a homemade macaroni and some corn on the cob along with a tossed salad and some beans, both spicy and non-spicy varieties. It was all simple, easy to prepare ahead of time, and I had purchased vast quantities, so hopefully all would go well. I made sure to pick up four different flavors of ice cream, as each boy had given me a hint. Jake's was chocolate, of course. But I went one step further and got something with chunks of brownie in it. I was still not above bribery. Seth picked Bella's favorite, which was vanilla bean. Sam wanted strawberry and Emmett wanted pecan walnut. There was something for everyone in any case.

When I finally got home just after nine I put away the groceries, texted Bella to let her know I was home, and then collapsed into bed. I didn't remember anything until I woke up to the sound of the phone. I looked at the time. Seven o'clock. I picked up my cell phone, already smiling.

"Hello, Jake," I said.

He was whispering. "Didya get everything?"

"Yes, Jacob," I said, already getting out of bed and heading downstairs to get coffee. I would be on the move for the rest of the day.

"*Everything?*"

"Absolutely everything, including four kinds of ice cream."

There was a moment of awed silence on the other end. "Okay," Jake said. "That's good."

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"I'll be over in about 45 minutes, okay?"

"Okay," he said quietly. "Mom is still sleeping. Emmett is gonna make her coffee and we're letting her sleep in."

"That's very considerate."

Jake sighed, clearly ready to wake his mother up - now. "Yeah, that's what Seth said." He didn't sound convinced.

"Well it is," I assured him. "Your mother will be very happy to get the extra sleep."

"I still don't see why someone would *want* to sleep," Jake muttered.

"You'll understand when you're older," I said.

"No I won't," Jake replied with certainty. Maybe he was right. That sweet tooth wasn't going anywhere. Wait until the kid discovered energy drinks. I shuddered to think of it.

"Whatever you say," I replied with a grin. "Okay, let me get ready and I'll be right over."

"Hurry," Jake urged.

I pulled up in their driveway 42 minutes later. Jake flung open the door and ran toward me. He pulled me inside. It was now part of our routine. He would just tug at my hand and put me where he wanted me to be. It was an efficient system.

"Is your mom awake yet?" I asked.

Jake shook his head.

"How about we make her breakfast for a change?" I offered.

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Jake looked up at me doubtfully. "Can you make breakfast like she does?"

"Well, close anyway."

He shrugged, clearly skeptical but willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. So he helped me find all of the ingredients to make French toast. It wasn't going to be as good as Bella's but she wouldn't have to lift a finger to make it, so that had to count for something. After making a mountain of French toast I was starting the clean up when I heard Bella's voice behind me.

"Now that's what I like to see," she murmured. "My men, working hard in the kitchen."

Jake whooped and ran to her, hugging her fiercely. "Happy Birthday, Mom!"

By then the other boys had gathered around too. Emmett offered her the coffee mug with a proud flourish, admitting shyly to having made it by himself. I had already had a cup and it was surprisingly good. Sam directed her to sit down at the breakfast bar while Seth got out the syrup and plates and cups and milk while Jake gathered the silverware. Even though she hadn't had her second cup of coffee yet, Bella talked quietly with them, letting them know she appreciated their efforts. Then she leaned over and gave me a quick coffee flavored kiss. "This is perfect," she whispered. "Thank you."

~TBTA~

A while later, we were at my house and the boys were in the pool. Pool season was almost over so they wanted to make the most of it. The guests were due to arrive any moment. We had had sandwiches for lunch since the evening meal would be kind of heavy. I had all of the DVDs in a big box. I had wrapped it all by myself. I hadn't even used duct tape, though I still thought that would have been a better bet. Seth convinced me not to, which was probably a good call, thinking on it a little bit.

Of course, the closer we got to Bella opening her gifts, the more nervous I got. What if all I accomplished with this was to make her sad? Then I would have

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ruined her birthday, the first birthday we would spend together. I think Sam noticed me fidgeting because he stopped and gave me a little reassuring pat on my shoulder when he got out of the pool. Great, even the boys knew I was a wreck.

Then Alice and Jasper and their crew arrived. I knew we wouldn't see much of Emmett until food was involved. He and Rosalie went onto the front porch for a little privacy. I had to stop Jake from following them. He sulked for a bit and then jumped back in the pool. He and Adam began splashing Adam's sisters, which earned them both a warning from their mothers. They went right back to it when Bella and Alice went inside.

I was headed into the kitchen to get some more beer for the cooler when I realized I could hear what they were saying. It was wrong. It was unethical. It was sneaky. I did it anyway. I listened.

"So...how was it?" Alice asked. "I didn't get a chance to get all the dirty details from you."

How was *what*?

Bella giggled. Shit. Board shorts did *not* hide boners.

"It was...amazing," Bella whispered. "Thank you for keeping an eye on the boys. I know I was rushed when I got home and the boys were there, so..." Another giggle from Bella.

Alice giggled too. My dick didn't notice.

"I knew you looked more relaxed," Alice murmured. "And I knew it had to be some really awesome sex that put that glow on your face, Miss Bella."

Sex? They were talking about sex? Unethical or not, I wasn't budging.

"It was...everything I thought it would be," Bella said. "Even though I thought the stupid rain ruined it all."

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Alice sighed. "Don't you hate it when Mother Nature doesn't cooperate?"

"But Edward didn't even seem to notice that my hair was a wreck or that my mascara was running," Bella told Alice.

Oh I had noticed. I just didn't care.

Alice laughed. "Oh Bella, men don't care about that kind of stuff if they think they're going to have sex. Nothing else matters at that point. You could have painted yourself blue and the only thing he'd be worried about was if the paint was edible or not."

I shrugged. Alice had a point. And then I got distracted by the thought of licking edible paint off of Bella.

"So...it was good?" Alice asked.

Bella gave a little squeal. My dick joined in as much as possible. He volunteered to take one for the team.

"I can't wait to do it again," Bella confessed.

My dick seconded the motion.

~TBTA~

We had eaten. We had had a few beers. The kids had guzzled gallons of lemonade and some sodas. There had been cake and ice cream, vast quantities of it. We went through it all like a Viking raiding party. But now we were to the gift portion of the evening and I felt my heart pounding behind my ribs. Earlier, I had consulted with Alice about the other portion of my gift to Bella. And Jasper. He had a role to play too. All of that was in place. No, what was really ramping up my anxiety were the DVDs, or, more specifically, Bella's reaction to the DVDs.

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Even the boys hadn't seen the finished product. There just hadn't been time or privacy to give them a screening. But I already had Thor making each boy their own set. I was putting them aside for gifts later. I had taken their music recommendations and added just a few of my own, having gotten some input from both Will and Charlie via emails. We obviously wouldn't sit down and watch them all tonight, but I had picked out one that I thought we could sample. If nothing else, it could play in the background while we sat around and chatted. I had even purchased one of those projection machines that would put the image on a blank wall of the house in the back, so that we could still sit around outside. I also figured the darkness would give Bella some cover if she cried and didn't want anyone to notice.

"Okay, Mom," Emmett said. "Now it's time for presents."

I wasn't ready, but Emmett was right. We had to do this. Each of the boys had purchased or made something for her. I had gotten the message from my time with them that it wasn't the size of the gift or its cost that mattered, it was the thought behind it. Bella and Mac had raised their boys that way, and Bella carried it on.

Emmett had given his mom a framed picture of her four boys. It read "World's Best Mom" on the silver frame. She declared it perfect and gave him a big kiss for it.

Seth gave her a CD of some of her favorite music that he had burned. He had also added some of his favorites, mostly The Beatles and Bob Dylan, with a tune by Buddy Holly thrown in. The kid had been born decades too late for his musical tastes.

Sam went a more traditional route and gave her a basket filled with all of the girly things that women adore. He leaned in and whispered to me, "Rosalie helped me." Leave it to Sam to consult an expert. He usually had more money than the other boys. If I didn't know better I would have said he invested his allowance and played the stock market. It was a mystery.

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That left Jake. It was no surprise to anyone that Jake went his own direction. He gave his mother a Star Wars watch so she could "tell when it was time for the bell to ring." Bella put it on right then and there.

Alice and Jasper gave her some more frou-frou stuff, with Alice going on and on about some "body scrub" or something which just sounded painful to me. But Bella oohed and ahed over all of it.

Then it was my turn.

I nodded to Emmett, who got the box with the DVDs. I cleared my throat as I took it and turned to Bella. "The first thing you should know is that this is from all of us," I said, pointing to the boys. They all gave her a wide grin and Bella looked pleased but confused. "Even Charlie and your mother and Will and Josh helped me out." I swallowed hard. "So really it wouldn't have been possible without them."

I handed her the box. I whispered in her ear when she reached for it. "I hope it's okay that I did this."

She shot me a curious look and then unwrapped the box. Thor had done right by me and even made inserts to use as covers for each DVD case. Each insert featured a photo from that particular DVD. He had pretty much done them in chronological order, though the DVD I thought I'd put on was actually a compilation of all the stuff I'd given him, bits and pieces of Bella's life, from her baby pictures to the picture of Mac's last Christmas. It was sort of like a highlights reel.

When the paper was removed, Bella opened the box and gasped. She looked at me. "You did this...for me?" She knew exactly what the DVDs were. I couldn't tell from her voice or her face what she was thinking.

I nodded, and then I shrugged. "Well, not just for you." I looked at the boys, who were eyeing their mother anxiously. "For them too." My throat felt too thick.

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She blinked. And then blinked again.

Then she picked up the DVD I had put on top. It was a picture of Mac and Bella and their boys. Not that last Christmas, but Jake still looked to be at least four years old. They looked exactly like what they had been - a normal, happy family.

I noticed her hands were shaking. "All of our home movies...?"

I nodded. "And some pictures too." I grinned. "I have your parents and brother to thank for those." Her eyes shot to mine once again. I shrugged. "I might have had the boys sneak some out of your closet too." She blushed and I knew exactly where her dirty mind had headed.

She took a deep breath as she studied the contents of the box. "They sent you pictures?" She tilted her head and studied me.

"Some of you and Mac and the boys, even some of you and Will as kids, growing up, that sort of thing."

Give me a clue Bella. Have I fucked up royally or come up with the best fucking gift ever in the history of boyfriends trying to be something more?

She hesitated a moment and then took a look at the other cases, all of them featuring a picture of her life before me. Then she looked at me again. "You really *do* love us all," she whispered.

I blew out a relieved sigh. "Yeah, I thought I made that clear." I had to smile at the dazed look on her face. It wasn't often that I could surprise her.

"Yes," she answered. "But this..." She took a deep, shaky breath. "This is, beyond any shadow of doubt, the best and most perfect gift I have ever gotten in my entire life, Edward Cullen."

A kiss sealed it and there was a little bit of whooping and even some applause from our audience. I held out my hand. "Can I play one?" I motioned to Sam,

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who moved to where I had hidden the project equipment. He pulled it out and turned it on. Bella gasped as the big, illuminated square hit the wall.

She nodded wordlessly and I took the DVD from her hand. "Here, Sam," I said. "This one."

The image flickered for a moment. Thor had intentionally made the start of it to look like one of those old fashioned home movies that flickered and stalled. There was the sound of static, and then The Beatles came through the speaker. Bella clapped her hands when the first strains of "Yellow Submarine" started up.

Charlie's favorite picture of her as a baby came up, the one he had handed me during their visit. Charlie's proud smile as he held his baby daughter struck a note in me, especially considering Jake's recent query.

More images flickered up on the wall. When it came to my personal favorite, the sullen little ballerina, Bella hit my arm and tried to hide her face. The boys laughed and told her she was cute. She whispered, "I'll get back at whoever sent you that picture."

"It's my favorite," I confessed quietly, brushing back her hair. "My little sullen ballerina."

Then it came to the first shots of Mac. Their wedding day, with him in uniform and her in her simple white dress. Emmett's jaw went tight but he gave me a reassuring smile. Mac and Bella, her belly big with Emmett I would guess. Mac holding newborn Emmett. More pictures, flashing through a life that hadn't lasted a lifetime. More babies, more proud smiles, holidays, birthdays, silly pictures, goofy faces, different houses, different places, different bases. Mac got a little heavier but it looked good on him. Emmett got taller...and taller. Taller than his mom.

Thor had ended it with a picture of Mac and Bella and the boys. No sad endings, no missing fathers, no grieving faces. It was perfect and I knew I could never repay Thor no matter how much cash or beer I gave him.

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Bella leaned into me, hiding her face. When I lifted her to look at her, there *were* tears in her eyes, but she didn't look sad. "That was...perfect," she finally said. "Absolutely perfect in every way."

Bella stood up and wiped at her cheek. "I'll be right back," she said.

No one followed her. I wanted to, but I sensed that she needed to be alone. Sam came up to me, his little face anxious. "Is she okay?"

I nodded and hugged him. "She just misses your dad right now."

Sam nodded. "I miss him too." I was reminded that even though Sam was the smartest person I would probably ever know, he was still just a kid. A kid who missed his father.

"And seeing the movies, well that made her miss him more, but it made her happy too," I explained.

"So she's not mad?"

"No," I assured him. "Sometimes, even when you really like something, it hits you deep." I touched his chest. "Right here. And it's a good thing but powerful, and it huts a little too."

Sam nodded. "So she liked it?"

I smiled. "She liked it...a lot."

Sam smiled back at me. "You did good then?"

" *We* did good."

Chapter 53: Called Out, the Encore

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 53: Called Out, the Encore

It actually didn't take Bella long to regain her composure. Eventually, she emerged from the bathroom, saw Sam standing anxiously next to me and gave him a big hug. "Thank you," she said, kissing his cheek.

Then she gave me a hug too, and a kiss, on the mouth and not the cheek. "And thank *you*," she added. She leaned in close. "I love you." Simple words, really. Not such a simple feeling.

No one said anything about Bella disappearing, though I did notice that other boys giving her some concerned looks. Eventually, though, they saw that she really was okay and we resumed watching the movie, sort of. I let it play in the background while I presented Bella with her other gift.

I had come to the conclusion that buying gifts for a woman like Bella was both a relief and a challenge. It was a relief because I knew she would truly appreciate any gift that was given to her. She wasn't picky or demanding. It was a challenge because Bella didn't have a lot of "stuff" that she wanted. She was a very contented person who didn't seem to need *things* to make her happy.

So, what to buy for the woman who didn't have everything but really didn't care if she did or not? I could only come up with one answer, and that was a little pampering. Bella didn't want stuff, but surely she deserved a little pampering. I nudged Seth and gave him the envelope. Alice started beaming because she knew the contents of the envelope.

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"And there's one last thing, Bella," I said, motioning Seth forward. He handed it to her and gave her a quick hug.

She looked at me and I just shrugged, like my heart wasn't pounding away. It felt good to give her things. I wasn't a rich man, but I had enough to make sure she got spoiled just a little.

Opening the envelope, she read the piece of paper inside. "Bella James and two guests....?" She looked at me.

"I figured that Alyssa will be here by that time and you seemed to hit it off with her," I answered. "But you're free to take Masen if you want." I grinned at her.

She laughed and shook her head. "A full day? At the spa?" Bella asked.

"Massages, facials, pedicures, manicures, the works," I replied with a nod. "Alice gave me a list and I followed it." Alice grinned at Bella. "Alice is going with you too."

"Unless you'd rather take me," Jasper offered, batting his lashes.

"Tempting, Whitlock, but no thanks," Bella answered.

"Yeah, you don't want to see Whitlock waxed," I said with a shudder.

"A limo?" Bella asked.

"Well, a driver anyway, not sure if it's an actual limo or not," I said. "But that way you ladies can have all the champagne you want."

"And lunch out?"

"Actually, lunch in," I said. "It's being delivered so you don't have to leave the spa."

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"And the boys?" Bella's expression was amused and impressed. *That's right, Bella. I want to take care of you, baby. Let me do this. You don't have to do it all alone anymore.*

"Well, Jasper and I will watch the kids. Oh, and Masen too." I had to smile at that. "He just doesn't know it yet."

Bella laughed and shook her head. "Well look at you, multitasking and everything. Giving me a wonderful day out and getting back at your brother in one fell swoop."

I shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a multitasking kind of guy."

She threw her arms around me. "You're a perfect kind of guy is what you are," she whispered.

The party started to wind down. I told Bella to sit down while the boys and I started to clean up. Alice and Jasper helped. Then Jasper told Alice to sit down and talk to Bella and the rest of us finished the job. The kids disappeared but it didn't matter. We had it under control.

Jasper and I were in the kitchen and I was wiping off the counters while he put stuff up in the refrigerator. "So...you and Bella are pretty serious, huh?" he asked out of the blue.

I turned to look at him in surprise. Not because he'd guessed, but because I had thought that much was pretty obvious. I shrugged. "Yeah," I answered. "Very serious. I want to marry her." There I was, throwing around the "M" word again and it didn't even make my stomach clench. Then I wanted to kick myself. I should have said that to *Bella* first, not Jasper. Oh well, I'd make that right soon.

"Yeah, I figured," Jasper drawled. "You've got that look all over your face. You've been separated from the herd and there's a brand on your ass."

"Nice," I muttered.

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Jasper shrugged. "You know what I mean, you belong to that little lady like you were gift-wrapped and delivered."

I couldn't very well argue with the truth.

"I always figured you for the marrying kind," Whitlock continued. Now that *did* surprise me.

"What?"

He grinned at me. "You heard me. You were just waiting for the right woman," he said. "Though you didn't have to search quite so much," Whitlock teased.

I shrugged, not really wanting to talk about my past exploits. I wasn't ashamed exactly, but I certainly wasn't proud.

"And you're really leaving the Army in April?" Jasper pressed.

"Yep," I told him with an emphatic nod. "I can't put her through that. Besides, I'd already been thinking that way. Meeting Bella just solidified it for me."

"Bella told Alice that you were thinking about opening a bar?" Jasper asked. It sounded like more than idle curiosity.

"Yeah, I mean, that's the plan," I said. "I've been putting together a list of properties and taking a look at my cash situation." I finished wiping off the counter and gave him my full attention. "I'm not rich, but I've been very careful with my money over the years."

Jasper looked kind of fidgety, which was unusual. Jasper was the poster child for "calm, cool, and collected." When he wasn't belting out Elvis tunes that was. "Alice and I have been talking too," he said.

"Oh yeah? About what?"

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Jasper looked at me. "She wants me out too," he said in a low voice. "I'm due to deploy if I re-up and Alice..." He shook his head. "She's not happy about it, says she's had enough." He had already deployed twice.

"So...how do you feel about that?" Jasper's dream, even as a teenager growing up in Texas, had been to join the military. It had been his ticket out of a messy existence, a way into what he saw as normalcy and a respectable life. I had figured him for a thirty-year man.

He sighed and shook his head, sticking his hands in pockets. "If you had asked me that a year ago I would have said I couldn't picture myself living any other way."

"And now?"

"Well now..." He shrugged. "Now I'm thinking that a forty year old man needs to be home with his family and not off tromping around a desert getting his ass shot at." He grinned at me. "Besides, I can't run as fast as I used to, so I make an easier target." He sighed. "And with my luck I'd get my nuts shot off and then Alice really *would* be pissed."

I had to laugh because Jasper had always had a colorful way of phrasing things.

"So where does that leave you?"

"My time runs out in the spring, same as yours," Jasper said.

"What do you want to do?"

He shook his head. "I dunno," he admitted. "Alice likes it here, so we'll probably put down permanent roots if I can find work." Neither one of them had any family to go back to. Alice's parents were dead and Jasper's were useless. He grimaced. "I hate the thought of a cubicle, man. I've done that shit for the Army and I want something...more." He tapped at his chest and I knew what he was looking for.

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"I thought you quit," I reminded him. He had been a two pack a day smoker until two years ago when a persistent case of pneumonia had scared Alice. She had read him the riot act until he quit. His emails had been bitchy and whiny for six months. I was glad when he finally seemed to kick the habit for good.

Jasper grimaced. "Yeah, sonuva bitch, I did." His Texas was showing through more, as it usually did when he was drunk or stressed. He wasn't drunk. "I just hate the thought of some office job."

I nodded. It wasn't what I wanted either. That's why the bar had appealed to me so much. Being my own boss after twenty years of taking orders? Nothing wrong with that as far as I could see. Yeah, it would mean everything rested on my shoulders, but that was okay. It wasn't like I had many options that I liked as far as that was concerned. That was part of being my own boss, being the place where the buck stopped. I looked at Jasper. Or maybe I did have another option. A wild idea came to me, a wild and crazy idea that seemed like it just might work.

"Okay, I'm going to put something out there, Whitlock. You can take it or leave it, and I fully expect that you'll want to sit down with Alice and hash it out so don't feel like you need to give me an answer now," I said. Jasper gave me a curious look. "Well, I want to open a bar, right? I want it to be a place where guys like you and me would be comfortable. You know the kind of place." He nodded. We had been to hundreds of just such places during the years we had known each other. "So...what if we opened it together...as partners?"

"Partners?"

"Well, we'll both have retirement coming in to offset not getting an income for a while," I said. "And I know how tight you are with a buck, Whitlock. You can make Scrooge look like a drunken sailor on leave when it comes to spending money." He didn't deny it. "So I'm sure you've got some savings just like I do. You said yourself you don't want an office job. A bar is about as far from an office as you can get." The more I thought about it, the more enthusiastic I became. "You're smart, despite all general appearances." He shot me the bird. "I can email you a list of the properties I'm looking it, the list of

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projected start up costs, licensing and all that shit. Take a look at it, talk it over with Alice and think about it. If the answer's no, then no hard feelings, man. I'm just putting it out there."

Jasper was about to say something when we heard a female voice say, "Send it over and I'll take a look at it." Alice was looking at us expectantly; Bella was beside her. Alice must have seen the surprise on my face and she rolled her eyes. "What? I do have a business degree you idiot. I'd like to see the numbers." She shrugged. "For now, it sounds....really good. Great actually." She looked at Jasper. "It might be just the opportunity we've been looking for, and Cullen will probably manage not to bankrupt us."

"Thanks," I said dryly.

"Isn't your brother some sort of advertising genius?" Bella asked, looking at Alice. I had a feeling that they were already ten steps ahead of me.

"Yeah," I answered carefully. "Something like that."

Alice and Bella looked at each other again. Whitlock and I just sort of stood there like lumps. Finally, Alice sighed. "Well...don't you think a brand new business trying to get a good start would benefit from some really great advertising?" she asked pointedly.

Oh. Yeah. She was right. Strangely, it hadn't occurred to me to ask my brother for help. I guessed I just wasn't used to the idea of him living close by just yet. But in three days, he'd be here - for good. Alice was right. I had a built-in advertising genius. I would never tell him that I knew he was an advertising genius, but I recognized his talent. It was just wrapped up in a very annoying little brother.

"You're right," I murmured. Now I just had to think of way to ask Masen for a favor that didn't seem like I was actually asking him for a favor. That was easier said than done, damn it.

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Whitlock opened my fridge and grabbed four beers, handing them out. When we all just stared at him, he grinned at us and held up his bottle. "To possibilities," he said. We all toasted that.

I looked at Bella and saw her eyes were on me. A secretive little smile tugged at her lips. I knew that the toast meant a lot more than just business opportunities. We were toasting a very bright future.

~TBTA~

Since Bella had not been able to claim her TRCC (total remote control control) power on her actual birthday, the boys and I decided that it would only be fair to let her control the television on Sunday. She told us graciously that yesterday had counted for her food choices, but that there was no way she was giving up TRCC. With much muttering and scowling, the boys settled on the couch for a day of Lifetime movies.

Bella did not disappoint.

I had no idea that so many movies had been made about women being abused by men. I didn't really see why a channel "for women" would show so many depressing movies showing women as victims. Bella just laughed at me when I asked her about it.

Then we snuck off to the closet for a little clandestine groping and Bella got handsy. My dick and I celebrated. I worried that the boys might have noticed were gone, but they were still in a Lifetime induced coma when we came back downstairs, flushed but satisfied.

~TBTA~

Tuesday morning, I drove by Masen's house on my way to work. I wasn't sure what time they would arrive, but I knew it would be late. I wasn't taking any time off of work just yet, but I'd be there when I could to help. Alyssa had already assured me that she would rather do the unpacking herself. "I want to be able to find my things," she had said.

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I could understand that. Really, who wanted a bunch of people pawing through your stuff anyway?

They still weren't there.

On Saturday morning, Bella and I were heading off for our weekend. I still didn't know where we were going. That was a closely guarded secret. I was still as excited about the idea of getting away as I had been. It might not be our first time having sex (or even our third) but we would have sex. We would be alone. I had already decided that I would make my intentions crystal clear with Bella during our weekend. I would tell her that I wanted marriage, a mortgage, and Xbox controllers in my couch cushions.

So this weekend would be an important one, even aside from the sex.

Truthfully, I was dying to get reacquainted with Bella's body. My dick concurred.

I just had to get through the next four days, including this one. I saw a lot of cold showers in my future, though I had to admit that the case of blue balls was much improved. I hadn't even had to abuse myself in...two days. Yep, two days. Another record.

Around five in the evening, I got a text from Masen telling me that they were in the new house but that they were just going to order some pizza and crash. I texted him back, letting him know I'd catch up with him later.

I got out of work fairly early that night and I went to Bella's house. To my surprise, Emmett pulled me aside and asked if he could talk to me. Feeling a bit anxious, I agreed.

We went out back and he firmly closed the sliding glass doors against prying ears. He shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders, typical Emmett posture when he had something to say. I just waited.

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"I...I uh wanted to say thanks for doing the movie thing for my mom," he finally said, not looking up. "It was good."

"Yeah, I thought so too," I agreed with a smile.

Emmett didn't move. He didn't speak. I stayed where I was. Something else was coming, but I just wasn't sure what. "Sam and Seth and I talked about it and..." he sighed and the shoulders hunched more. A little scowl appeared on his face and he seemed to struggle with whatever was coming next. "We wanted you to know that we appreciate how you're handling uh...well, how you don't mind us talking about Dad or stuff like that." The scowl deepened and he sort of kicked at the ground. I noticed that Jake hadn't been included in their discussion and that was bad news for me. He was my champion.

Finally, blue eyes flashed up to meet mine. God, the kid looked like his father.

"Yeah, well, you should know I appreciate how you're letting me become a part of the family."

Emmett nodded thoughtfully, biting at his lower lip, still frowning at his feet. "So...uh...we were kind of wondering if..." He stopped and ran a hand through his hair, the curls sticking up like crazy around his head. His hair was dark like Mac's, but curled like Bella's. "We were wondering if you were going to do that? Be a member of the family, I mean." Instead of a fleeting glance, the blue eyes locked with mine. He was waiting, and he would weigh my answer.

I mirrored his stance, one hand in my pocket. I took my time answering, mostly so I didn't screw it up. I was startled by the sliding glass door sliding open and Bella stepped out, glancing curiously between us.

"What's up guys?"

"Emmett and I were talking," I answered. I was leaving the question of allowing his mother into this conversation up to him. He had some things to say and he wanted some answers. "Emmett?"

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He looked at his mom and nodded. "Yeah. I just was asking some questions."

"Oh," Bella answered. "Do you want me to leave you two alone?"

There it was again, one of the reasons I loved Bella so much. She gave her boys space when they needed it. She held them close when that was what was called for too. She walked that fine line between loving and smothering.

"Nah, it's cool," Emmett said. Then he took a deep breath. "So..." Emmett began and then looked at me. "I know you said you're 'keeping' Jake." He looked at his mother and then back at me. "What does that mean... *exactly*?"

I swallowed hard and looked at Bella like this was a pop quiz and I didn't have the answers. She just stared back at me, wide-eyed. We had been expecting it, I guess, but not now. Not yet. Not today.

Then the door slid open again and there was Jake. Well it was just a party now.

To stall, I repeated Emmett's question. "You want to know what I mean when I say I'm keeping Jake?" Oldest delay technique in the book, but it was a classic for a reason. It worked. Jake looked up at me, grabbing my hand. Emmett nodded impatiently.

"So what does that mean?" Emmett pressed.

"It means he's keeping me," Jake answered for me with an emphatic nod. The "duh" remained unspoken.

"But what does that mean about us?" Emmett persisted.

Jake shook his head. "We didn't say nothing about him keeping you."

Emmett ignored his brother and kept his eyes on me. "So... what exactly are you saying when you tell Jake you're going to keep him?"

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I cleared my throat. We had just been talking about this a week ago. But I wouldn't say anything without her permission. Besides, I had kind of wanted to start my "M" word discussion with her alone. However, it seemed like I was going to have to take the plunge now. Okay then.

I looked at Bella and she nodded. I had noticed we were starting to get the hang of that silent communication thing that couples do. "Well, Emmett, it means that I've made a promise to stay in his life - and yours."

Emmett nodded. "And my mom?"

I reached out and took her hand. "And your mom's life."

"In what way?" Emmett pressed. Shit, the kid should be a reporter. "Specifically," he added pointedly.

"It means that eventually..." Bella cleared her throat and shot a glance at me. I nodded. "It means that eventually we'll be a family...the six of us."

"So, you're talking marriage?" Emmett asked me, crossing his thick arms over his massive chest. I was starting to think the kid could take me in a fight if he could catch me off guard.

I paused a moment. Might as well go for it, it was where we were heading anyway. Not yet, but the destination was inevitable - not that I minded in the least. Yes, I had wanted to talk about this with Bella first, to tell her what I hoped for our future. Instead, I had been called out yet again. It was one of the hazards of dating a woman with kids who were old enough to know the score. Maybe it was better this way. "Yes, Emmett, we're talking marriage." Bella's hand closed around mine. Somehow, it felt like I had proposed and Bella had said yes. I was still going to give her that proposal, and make it as romantic as I could, but I felt a weight lifted off my shoulders.

Just then Sam and Seth walked out and I figured it was better to get it all out in the open with all of them at once. They needed to know the truth. No more guessing, no more games. Wasn't that one of the things I loved so much about

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my relationship with Bella? Did the boys deserve any less? I looked at Sam and Seth. "Yes, I want to marry your mother."

There. I couldn't be any plainer than that.

"So you're talking marriage?" Emmett wanted to confirm. I repressed a sigh. Hadn't I just said that?

"Not literally *talking* marriage just yet. We haven't set a date or anything. Haven't really thought that are ahead yet. If we had, we would have told you. However, I think it's fair to say that Edward and I both understand that that's where we're going," Bella said quietly. "Edward and I are at a point in our lives when we'd like to have some happiness." She smiled at her boys. "Not that all of you don't make me happy. You do, but one day you'll be gone and off leading your own lives. And that's how it should be. That's what I want for you, and it's my job to prepare you for that." She squeezed my hand. "But Edward, he'll be part of me leading *my* own life. And that means we'll all be a family."

I expected complains and protests. Instead, Emmett just looked at Sam and Seth. After a moment's pause, they both nodded at him. "Okay then," Emmett said. "Just so we're clear." I was reminded of Charlie. Then he narrowed his eyes. "But when you two *are* actually talking about doing this, we think we should be the first to know."

"I think so too," I told him. "And I promise you will be. We won't throw any surprises your way."

Emmett sort of smirked. "Yeah well, too late for that," he said and a flash of the man he would one day be came through. Once more he studied his brothers. "All right then, that's all we wanted to know."

I found myself taking a deep breath. I stood there on shaky knees. The boys gave us all one last look and nodded, then went inside, leaving me alone with Bella. I grabbed her and I did a little pushing against the wall this time once I figured the boys were out of sight. If the little moan she gave was any indication, she didn't mind a bit. I kissed her, long and hard and there was

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plenty of tongue. I cupped her ass and ground her against my dick just a little.

"I'm incredibly turned on right now," I confessed when we came up for air.

"Me too," she admitted, just as breathless. That did my ego good.

I laughed and cupped her face in my hands. "And here I thought the biggest thing to happen to day would be my brother moving into town."

She giggled. "Just goes to show you, we can always surprise you."

"Oh baby, you've surprised the hell out of me since the day I first laid eyes on you."

Chapter 54: All Jacked Up

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 54: All Jacked Up

It was not a surprise when Masen knocked on my door *first* thing Wednesday morning. When I opened the door and blinked at him, he gave me a wide grin. "Howdy neighbor! Can I borrow a cup of sugar?"

I scowled at him. "You can borrow a cup of shut the hell up if you'd like," I grumbled. I looked at my watch. "It's not even five fucking thirty."

"Five *fucking* thirty?" Masen asked. "Is that military time? I still get confused by that. Do you have six *damn it* fifteen and eleven *nut sac* forty five? Or how about seven *bite me* o' clock?"

I rolled my eyes at him. "I'm getting coffee," I said. He followed me into the kitchen. Like a bad puppy. Except I actually liked puppies. I poured my coffee and refused to look at him until I had taken a couple of sips.

"What are you doing up so early?" I finally asked. Masen was practically vibrating where he stood.

He shook his head. "Didn't get up. Haven't slept," he explained in a really fast voice. "Been up all night. The time change screwed me over big time." He sighed and his hands were tapping against the sides of his legs. "Of course the six Red Bulls I chugged probably have something to do with my current state of agitation."

"You think?" I asked dryly. He moved toward the coffee pot and I put my hand

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on his chest. "Step away from the caffeine, buddy."

"Aw come on, big brother!" Mase whined. "Just this once? I can stop any time, I swear I can."

"Consider this tough love," I told him and gave him a little shove away from the coffee.

Masen pouted and leaned against the counter, one foot bouncing away. He made me tired looking at him. "Could you stop twitching?" I asked. "You're making my head ache."

"Alyssa told me to get out of the house or she'd castrate me," Masen admitted. "I think she meant it."

"Tell Alyssa to keep you on a leash or I'll move and not leave a forwarding address," I replied. "Seriously? Before six in the morning? That's against the law or something. Or it should be."

I took another sip of my coffee and regarded my brother. He studied me for a minute and then he gave a loud whoop of sound that made me flinch.

"You got laid!" he declared. "You dirty boy. You got some. You had sex. Did the dirty. Made the beast with two backs. I know you did."

"What?" I asked, pretending confusion. I turned away from him to refill my coffee cup. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You got laid," Masen insisted. "You did the nasty. You shagged Bella. You-"

"Shut the fuck up, Masen," I said in a casual voice. "I don't have time for your shit today." I looked at my watch. "Huh...you've lived here about eight hours and already I'm tired of you." I smirked at him. "Gotta be record, even for you, bro."

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Masen sighed and jumped up on the counter, so he was sitting there with his head leaning back on the cabinets. "I feel like that kid in that Will Ferrell movie. I'm all jacked up on Mountain Dew." He grimaced. "Or Red Bull." He blew out a breath. "Sorry, big brother. But I'm scared of Alyssa and you were the only person I knew in town, aside from Bella. And I want her to have a good opinion of me. I figure it's already too late with you."

"When you're right, you're right."

He pouted. "You're so mean."

"And you're such a pain in the ass." I couldn't help but smile at him. After all, I had "done the dirty" as he had put it. And that put me in sort of a mellow mood.

I shook my head at him. As annoying as he was, it was nice to have him living close. Of course, I retained the option to change my mind about that at any time. We were silent for a long time and then Masen slid down off the counter. Something was on his mind. "I have to go out of town in two weeks," he finally said.

I nodded. "You want me to check on the Alyssa and the boys? You know I will," I told him.

"Yeah, I know." Masen shrugged. "I guess I'm just worried. Feeling guilty because here I've moved her across the country and two weeks later I'm flying down to Florida, leaving her here to deal with everything."

I smiled at him. "You might be surprised to hear this, but they really can get along without us," I admitted. "In fact, I think they just humor us."

Masen grinned and I could see the old spark back in his eyes. Oh hell. I just had to go and make him feel better, didn't I? "Yeah, I kind of figured that out on my own, thanks."

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Then I remembered something. It might just calm his ass down too. "Oh, by the way, on a Saturday or Sunday of mutual agreement, Bella, Alice, and Lys are taking a spa day, compliments of yours truly."

"Spa day, huh?" He grunted. "What's the occasion?"

"Bella's birthday," I reminded him.

"Oh shit! That's right," Masen said. "How'd it go?"

I grinned at him. "Perfection."

He was smiling back at me. I watched as his smile slowly faded. Masen was a pain, but he wasn't stupid. *That's right, think it over, buddy. I just got you back.* "Uh...who will be watching all the kids?" *Like you need to ask, Masen.*

"We will, of course," I told him with a straight face.

"We?" He squeaked a little bit. Life was sweet.

"We...me, Jasper...and you, of course." I grinned at him then. His expression fell.

"That's...that's just cold," Mase finally said.

I shrugged. "One of the hazards of living close," I reminded him.

Masen nodded. "Nicely played, I admit."

"Yeah, I know."

"I'll remember that," Masen promised.

"You do that. I'm counting on it."

The Bigger They Are

Masen nodded again, obviously already plotting. "So...how is that you got laid before the big weekend?" That was a Masen Cullen specialty, changing the topic.

The gentleman in me told me to shut the hell up. The regular guy in me had to brag a bit. "She showed up at my door last week."

"And?"

"Wearing a raincoat and some sexy little panties and a lacy bra...oh, and a big smile," I told him.

Masen whistled. "I love it when they do stuff like that." I didn't want to know. I prepared to start reciting the Soldiers' Creed - anything to keep from hearing any confidences Masen might feel compelled to share. "Yeah one time Alyssa-" And cue the Creed.

I am an American Soldier.

I am a Warrior and a member of a team.

I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army Values.

I will always place the mission first.

I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

I will never leave a fallen comrade.

Masen finally stopped talking. I looked at him. It seemed to be safe. He smirked. "So..." he asked. "Fireworks?"

I didn't answer, but my face must have given me away. "Nice," Masen observed. "Very nice."

The Bigger They Are

I shrugged. I was done giving away secrets for the day.

~TBTA~

The days between Bella's birthday and our Saturday departure passed by in a blur. Not because they went so fast (they didn't), but because I sort of checked out mentally. Even Major Hutchinson noticed my distraction. Finally, Friday at lunch he called me into his office. That was never a good thing. I expected an ass chewing, but instead he motioned me to sit down. The look on his face wasn't his "I'm about to rip you a new one" expression. I wasn't sure what it was, but I expected that I was going to find out real soon.

"Something going on with you, Cullen?" Major Hutchinson asked. "You seem...distracted." *Oh nothing sir. Just sex fantasies. Oh, and I pretty much told four boys that I wanted to marry their mother. And I should be nervous about that and I'm not. Which kind of makes me nervous, because that means my whole life has turned upside down and I seem to be okay with that. Just the usual sir.*

I shook my head. "No, sir."

He leaned back in his chair and swiped his hand over his jaw. "Really?" *He* seemed skeptical. Not that I could blame him. He was right on the money. I was distracted as hell.

"Really, sir." I squirmed in my seat just a little bit and his eyes narrowed.

"You sure about that, son?" It was like having Charlie Swan interrogating me.

I squirmed again. "Everything's fine, sir." It was fine; it was better than fine.

His expression changed again, going from suspicion to amusement. "Anything you want to tell me, Cullen?" *Nope, nothing I want to talk about sir. My dick is titanium and all I want to do is to get inside my girlfriend/almost fiancée again. But thanks for asking.*

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"No, sir."

The Major steepled his hands on his desk and tapped his lips with his fingers. "Let me rephrase that, Cullen. Is there anything you *should* tell me?"

"No, sir." What was going on was private. What was going on was that I was existing in some sort of dream world thinking about the future that Bella and I had committed ourselves to during the past week. What was going on was that I was about to lose my mind with anticipation for our upcoming weekend, which started in... I glanced at the clock. Which started in about sixteen hours. None of that was anything I wanted or needed to share with Major Hutchinson.

I expected him to press; instead he chuckled and shook his head. "You look like you're all tied up in knots, Sergeant Major."

I didn't really have a good response to that, so I kept my mouth shut. He studied me and laughed again. "Man to man, I'd say you have the look of a man who has found the woman he's going to share his life with and he's still just a bit confused how it all happened. One moment you're going along and everything's fine and you're having fun and without a care in the world." He rubbed at his jaw again. "And then you meet a woman and you don't know which way is up or how it happened, but you're thinking in terms of forever." He leaned in closer to me. "You have that look."

"If you say so, sir."

He grunted and sat back. "Just remember, Cullen, that Charlie Swan knows all, *sees* all." As if I needed that warning. "You treat his baby girl right, and you'll be okay." He gave a low whistle. "But if you treat her wrong..." He let that threat dangle in the air.

"Yes, sir." I knew. I knew! Geez. I wasn't completely stupid, was I?

"You're going to treat her right, aren't you, Cullen?"

"Yes, sir."

The Bigger They Are

"You're going to treat those boys of her right, aren't you, Cullen?"

Yes, yes, yes, for God's sake yes. "Yes, sir."

He hesitated and shook his head. "Aw, hell, Cullen, you aren't worth two dead flies at the moment. Get your ass out of here and go see that little gal of yours."

I jumped up. "Yes, sir." *Happy to follow orders, sir.* "I'll do that." And I was out of there before he could change his mind.

~TBTA~

I dashed home, showered, and made sure I had packed everything I wanted to take. I had no idea what I might need, but I had tried to cover all the bases. A nice dinner out? Check. Swimming or hot tub? Check. Casual dining or walking around taking in the sights? Covered. Playing in bed and worshipping each other's bodies over and over again? I looked down at my dick. Check and double check.

I would be fine with just that last activity, though I suspected at some point Bella might want to leave our...room? I assumed it would be a room. As long as it had a big bed (and maybe a tub - I had a hankering for some good old-fashioned tub sex) and a shower (ditto on the shower sex), then I was good. My dick agreed. He was excited as I was, acting like he was seventeen again and seeing Stacy Spanetti's boobs for the first time.

We could still recall them in perfect detail. You don't forget those first boobs.

I sighed and shook my head, knowing that being with Bella left every other woman in the dust. We were meant to be together, it was just as simple and as complicated as that. While I might have messed up making my intentions clear, her boys had called me on it. As awkward as it had been, I was kind of glad they did it. They had a right to know, after all, because whatever decisions we made affected them.

The Bigger They Are

And it was just one more thing I didn't have to worry about screwing up this weekend.

~TBTA~

We had decided that I would just hang out at her house that evening. I had rented a movie which Bella deemed fit for all of the boys. She was pretty lenient when it came to most of that stuff, but I had learned to check with her. I was also getting pretty good at anticipating what would pass muster with her and what wouldn't.

She and I made tacos, stealing kisses while we cooked. I was also getting better at the kitchen stuff too. After dinner I spent over an hour with Seth and his guitar. Reading music still frustrated him. He was getting better but he didn't like that part. I had noticed, however, that his skills at mimicking what I did were getting much better. The ear was definitely there. I was starting to show him a simple Beatles tune and he followed along just fine.

I asked if he sang too and he just turned bright red and gave me a shake of his head.

~TBTA~

After the movie was over, I carried Jake up to bed. He had crashed an hour into it. The kid snored. Loudly. It was kind of cute. Jake woke up when I got to his room and I set him on his feet, half afraid he'd fall over, he looked so sleepy. Emmett steered him toward the bathroom. "I'll make sure he brushes his teeth," he assured me.

Emily slipped past me and hopped up onto Sam's bed. I took a moment to give her a good scratch behind the ears. She gave me a doggy grin in return, her tail thumping.

I passed the other boys on their way to bed, wished them a goodnight and then went downstairs to tell Bella good-bye. This good-bye stuff was getting old.

The Bigger They Are

~TBTA~

When I woke up the next morning my first thought was, "Bella and I are going away today." I didn't need a moment to process the thought. My dick had been marking off the calendar for me.

I checked my bags. Again. Okay, it was a little much. But I had to do something to pass the time, didn't I? I didn't think Bella would really want me to show up at her door at five in the morning. Then I went for a run. My stamina had improved with my renewed commitment to physical fitness, which was a good thing because Bella was a hellcat.

Then I showered, decided against jerking off because I didn't want to "waste" an orgasm, stuffed my boner into my jeans and got ready to go to Bella's.

When I got to Bella's house it was...chaos. Bella was running up and down the stairs, yelling out instructions on her way up and down. Masen and Alyssa were already standing there with dazed looks on their faces. I really hadn't seen much of them. I was working late and they were busy unpacking most evenings. Aside from Masen's obnoxiously early morning visit, of course.

Alyssa gave me a hug. Jake ran up to me and grabbed me around my legs before running off to chase Kyle. I heard a lot of yelling and whooping and thumping and bumping. Masen and Alyssa really were saints. Well, Alyssa was. Masen was...Masen.

"Thanks, Mase," I said when he came to stand beside me. He gave me a sort of panicked look.

"There're a lot of them," he muttered.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"No, like *way* more than six," Masen insisted. "It's like they're gremlins or something and multiply when you're not looking."

The Bigger They Are

"Tell me about it," I said with a nod.

There was a long pause. "So what the fuck are we gonna do when the women go off to the spa and there's three more of them?"

I sighed. "Hell if I know."

He rolled his eyes at me. "Good to know you've got a plan big brother."

"You're the expert," I reminded him. "I'm still a rookie."

Masen just frowned.

~TBTA~

A half hour later, after a flurry of instructions and kisses good-bye, we were in my vehicle. "Well?" I asked.

"Here, put the address in your GPS," Bella said, handing me a piece of paper. I snorted to show my disdain for GPS.

"Bella, I'm a guy. We don't *do* GPS. We do hunt and seek."

Bella just stared at me and then she gave a slow nod. "Okay, if that's how you want to play it," she said casually. "Just remember, the faster we get there, the faster you and I are in a bed."

I grabbed the paper from her and plugged in the address.

~TBTA~

The address turned out to be one of the nicer hotels downtown. Bella insisted that she was paying. The only reason I didn't argue was because I honestly couldn't wait to get her to the room. It felt kind of like we had snuck away from everything, which I supposed we had in a way.

The Bigger They Are

We were close enough to the boys that we could get home within an hour, which was necessary for Bella to be able to relax. I got that. I felt better knowing we could get home quickly too. Masen and Alyssa had every single phone number they needed to reach us and then some. Alyssa had looked amused when I asked her four times if she was sure I had written down my cell number correctly. Honestly, you can't be too careful, right?

The room was probably very nice, but I didn't notice much beyond the big, king-sized bed. There was also a huge shower and I decided I wanted to christen it. I had a feeling Bella would be up for it.

We put our bags on the bed and sort of stared at each other for a moment. It was eleven o'clock in the morning and we weren't quite sure what we should do. I knew what *I* wanted to do, but was it gentlemanly to jump her two minutes after we walked in the door?

Bella took care of my moral dilemma by wrapping her arms around me and kissing me. "I'm going to go clean up."

Clean up? I looked at her and she gave me a little mischievous smile. *Ohhh....clean up. Slip into something more comfortable. Slip into something sexy and almost there. Gotcha.*

"Okay," I rasped. I cleared my throat.

She winked at me and turned to grab her small bag before going into the bathroom.

I put my bag in the closet and pulled down the comforter on the bed, folding it neatly and everything. I fluffed the pillows and fiddled with the blankets. Then I realized that I was still completely dressed. I slipped off my shoes and unbuttoned my shirt. My hands were shaking. I was all jacked up on lust and anticipation. I had unbuttoned my jeans and was about to slide them off and get into bed when the bathroom door opened.

The Bigger They Are

She came out of the bathroom wearing a nightgown that, if I had seen it hanging up in a store, I probably wouldn't have given a second glance. It wasn't quite see-through and it wasn't tight. It had tiny straps of pink that skimmed her shoulders, and then it hugged her breasts before flowing out loosely from there. It was pink and off-white and it shouldn't have been sexy or alluring. It *shouldn't* have been. But it was. It was tricky sexy, something that snuck on up on me and made me hard. Hard *er*.

I swallowed loudly.

The pink parts of it were a darker shade and it reminded me of all the pink parts of Bella's body that I loved. Her full, soft lips. Her hard nipples that peaked up when I touched them or kissed them or even looked at them - just like they did now. And oh yes, other pink parts of her that were slick and warm and tangy in my mouth. Other lips that plumped up and got pinker when I licked and teased and -

I took a deep breath.

"God, baby..." I didn't know what else to say.

Bella gave a little laugh and twirled around. "I know I should have gone with red or black but..." She shrugged. "This just felt right." Her hand worried at one side of the little gown. Suddenly the pink and off-white combo was pretty much my favorite. "Is it okay?"

"On a scale of one to ten..." I took a step closer. "I'd say it's a fifteen," I finally said as I pulled her into my arms. "Or maybe a sixteen," I added as I kissed the corner of her mouth. "Or a seventeen..." I kissed her collarbone, set off so nicely by the dark pink of the strap. I pushed the strap aside. "I'm sorry...what were we talking about?"

She laughed. "I'm nervous," she admitted quietly. "How weird is that?"

I kissed her other shoulder. "Yeah," I confessed. "Me too."

The Bigger They Are

"This is why I ambushed you the other day," Bella whispered. "Nerves."

"Feel free to ambush me any time," I said. "So why are we nervous?" I teased her. I kissed a trail up her throat. Her pulse was beating quickly and I licked at it. She tasted delicious.

"I dunno," she murmured. I gathered her hair into my hands, appreciating the soft, silky feel of it around my fingers. I gently tilted her head out of the way and she cooperated with a groan. "Oh God..." Her breathy little moan made my dick throb.

"I love you," I whispered. "I love you so much."

Then I kissed lower, while Bella arched her back and gave me free rein. Her hands were clutching at my hair then, tugging and pulling where she could get a grasp. It felt like heaven. When I kissed along the edge of the gown and then nudged it aside and down with my nose to close my lips over a pink nipple, she gasped and hitched one leg around my hip. She was limber. I liked it. I helped her by holding onto her thigh, letting my thumb trace little circles on her soft skin.

I wanted to kiss every inch of her and standing up wasn't the way to do that. So I picked her up and carried her to the bed. We tumbled onto it together, not at all graceful, but I didn't care because we were where I wanted to be. She laughed when I groaned and thrust against her.

Then her fingers were slipping inside my open jeans and circling around my dick. "Hmmm..." She made a sound of appreciation.

I shook my head and moved down. I slid the gown up her body, revealing more soft skin. I kissed and licked. Bella moved against me, restless and wanting. I knew how she felt. Her hands pushed my shirt off my shoulders and I shrugged it to the floor. I kissed down her stomach and then licked a line from her belly button down...

Her hands tugged at my hair again. "Edward..." she breathed.

The Bigger They Are

I looked up to see her cheeks flushed and her lips parted. She was so fucking sexy. Her legs moved apart and I pressed a soft kiss on each inner thigh. I gave a tentative lick at her warm, slick folds and she arched against me hard. I let my finger play at her entrance, teasing just a little as my mouth closed over her clit.

She didn't speak, she just moved against me over and over again, letting me know that she liked what I was doing. I wanted to make her come. I wanted to watch her face and feel her around my fingers. I wanted to taste her.

"Oh baby..." I whispered.

I pushed two fingers inside of her and she gave a loud, short cry. My hellcat was back. I sucked softly at her clit, moving my fingers in tandem with my mouth. Bella's breath hitched and she moaned.

"Oh God..." She gave a little groan. I looked up her body and the sight of her breasts above the fabric of the sneaky-sexy little nightgown, the nipples still dark pink and hard and moist from my mouth, made me groan.

I returned my attention to her beautiful slick heat and gave a little flick of my thumb over her nub before my mouth closed over it once more. That was all it took because with the next thrust of my fingers, Bella's body clamped down and I felt the flutter of her release as she cried out. I gentled my touch but didn't move away. Finally, she shuddered one last time and then relaxed against the bed.

I finally crawled my way back up her body and kissed her. I knew she wouldn't mind kissing me after what I'd done. That was just another one of the things I loved so much about her. She had an open sensuality that was both inviting and sexy as hell because she didn't try too hard. She simply gave herself with a generosity that she expected in return. It was refreshing and alluring.

Bella sighed. "You're wearing too many clothes," she whispered. I had to laugh at the disgruntled tone of her voice.

The Bigger They Are

"Why don't you help me out with that little problem?" I suggested.

"I would," Bella explained. "But I've got no bones left, so I'm afraid you're on your own for a few minutes."

I kissed her and got up, shoving my jeans and my underwear down in one motion. I stood by the bed, my dick waving proudly in the breeze. He was pretty much showing off at that point. "There," I announced. "Problem solved."

She looked at me and giggled, then motioned with her finger for me to come closer. "Come here, you," Bella murmured. "Bring that fine ass over here where I can touch it." She licked her lips and my dick jerked. She arched one brow at me. "It would seem that your dick approves of my plan." She had no idea.

"Yeah," I agreed as I crawled back onto the bed. "But remember, he's a dick." She laughed and then wrapped her hands around me and I pretty much lost the ability to think or form a coherent sentence at that point. I groaned and thrust into her touch. She had great hands and seemed to know just how to touch me. She knew when to speed up and slow down, when to reach down and caress my balls and make me arch into her hands. Fuck. I had to stop this or I was going to -

I slid the gown down further, pushing it completely out of the way. Then I slid it down her hips and legs. She finished the job with her feet, though I wasn't quite sure how she accomplished that. It had to be some sort of ninja thing.

"Edward?" Bella whispered. I had my hands on her breasts. My mouth joined the party and her nipple was hard against my tongue. I looked at her.

"Yeah?" I asked when I pulled away.

"I want you inside of me." She kissed my jaw. "Now."

I moved just a little and slid into her without any preamble. She was so wet and ready. She arched and I grunted. "Yeah, just like that," Bella hissed.

The Bigger They Are

God, the feel of her. I leaned up on my elbows and pulled back before thrusting back inside.

Her legs came up and wrapped around my hips while her lips found mine. It was slow and easy, despite the abrupt start. We moved together, and each thrust inside of her made the pressure build for both of us. I could see her chest start to flush just slightly; I heard the hitch in her breath. Soon, with every push inside of her, I was giving a little grunt of sound. Bella seemed to like it, giving a little moan every time I did. We were both pretty loud.

I licked her lips and then her tongue was playing with mine, echoing the rhythm of our hips. "Oh baby," I whispered. "You feel so good."

And that was all I could say because our bodies took over. I lost myself in the feel of her. I drank in her little cries, the way she swiveled her hips to add a little extra sensation to the push and pull. Her heels drummed against the back of my thighs, my back, and my knees. She moved against me and along me.

"Bella," I finally warned with a gasp. But she had beaten me and her body had already tightened around me. That was all I needed and I came with shout. Loud was definitely catchy.

I collapsed on her as gracefully as possible, still trying to keep most of my weight off of her. She tugged me closer and then nudged my arm, encouraging me to rest against her. I did so with a sigh of gratitude. I didn't want to crush her but it felt so good to feel her like this.

Her feet caressed the back of my legs and the simple intimacy of it made me smile. This was what I wanted. Forever.

Somehow, still tangled up with each other, we fell asleep.

Chapter 55: When All is Said and Done

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: This chapter and the next one deal with the weekend. Bella and Edward have some things to discuss while they have some privacy so that's why these chapters are broken up. They're important. Then the chapter after that will take us through to Christmas Eve so there will be quite a jump.

Edward also wanted to point out that while he shared what Bella wore (panties, bra, a coat, and a smile) Masen is known for sharing such things as sexual positions, sounds that were made, and how awesome he is in bed. That is why he recited the Soldiers' Creed - out of self-defense. He won't apologize for it either. He mumbled something about "TMI." He's kind of stubborn about it too.

Chapter 55: When All is Said and Done

We could have pretended that we weren't there to have sex and just be alone and at least *attempted* to do a little "sight-seeing." It seemed silly, though, to waste our time. Instead, we just sort of hid out in our room. We did order some room service around two in the afternoon, mostly to give ourselves strength for round two. And three. And twelve. Okay, twelve might have been a little overly optimistic.

We ate our fried shrimp and drank some wine. I had put on my boxers and Bella had slipped on a little pink robe that was as sneaky sexy as the nightgown. We talked about different things, the boys, her work, my plans for the bar. Then we put the dishes outside the room door and crawled back into bed, minus the boxers and robe, of course.

The Bigger They Are

We didn't make love though. By some unspoken agreement, we just sort of cuddled up with each other. The television remained off and I had a feeling we wouldn't turn it on at all during our time there. We were enjoying the simple luxury of hard-earned privacy too much to squander it on something like television.

Bella snuggled up against me had to be my second favorite feeling in the world. My first favorite was being inside of her, but snuggling was a very close second. I could feel all of the best parts of her pressed against me.-

We linked our fingers and did all the little romantic things that lovers are supposed to. I realized then why a lot of those things are so prevalent in the movies. It's because they felt good and right and I wanted to touch her and kiss her and murmur sweet little nothings that made her giggle or gasp or give me a look that promised I would soon find out just how much she liked what I had said.

"Well, it seems like you were wrong, you know," I said.

"About what?"

I grinned at her. "Well, none of the boys got sick. You didn't get food poisoning and I didn't throw out my back." I kissed her. "And no alien attack either."

Bella shrugged. "I took care of that when I made sure we did it before this weekend." She sounded very sure of herself.

"*Did* it?" I asked. "And how is that different from nitty gritty, I ask? You gave me no end of shit about my word choice and now here you are just spouting off about *doing* it."

"It's different because I said it, not you," she explained casually with a little smirk.

"I'm detecting a bit of a double standard here," I complained.

The Bigger They Are

"Yeah," she agreed without hesitation. "There is."

"That's not exactly fair," I pointed out.

She rolled her eyes. "You're a big boy. You know life isn't fair by now."

I considered that and then got distracted when Bella began kissing her way down my chest. And lower...

I decided I could live with a double standard.

~TBTA~

We were sprawled in the bed. I could almost breathe again, which was progress. Bella was cuddled up next to me with a very satisfied grin on her face. Yeah, she had made me beg. I wasn't ashamed to admit it.

Our hands linked as I tried to get my heart rate under control. "Damn woman," I muttered. "Are you trying to kill me?"

I was only half-kidding.

"Of course not," Bella replied. "At least not yet. I intend to use you and abuse you first."

"Good to know." I curled up against her. "Can't say it's a bad way to go."

"Hmmm..." she breathed, kissing at my throat. She liked to lick at my Adam's apple.

We were quiet for a long time, just sort of enjoying the peace and quiet. Finally, she shifted against me and I figured she'd be heading to the bathroom soon. I was getting to know her habits better. Instead, she sort of cleared her throat and sighed.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

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"Nothing's the matter; I just wanted to talk to you about..." Her voice trailed off and I knew I would have to encourage her to speak. Either that or get out the crowbar her brother had mentioned, but I'd go with soft and easy first.

"You can talk to me about anything you know," I said. "Well, I guess there *are* limits, but for the life of me, I can't think of what they'd be. But I would imagine that they would be far and few."

She laughed and buried her face in my chest. Such a Bella move.

"Bella?" I murmured.

"Yeah?"

"I'm waiting," I reminded her.

"I know," she said with a sigh. "Just let me organize my thoughts. Okay?"

"Okay."

We fell back into silence, but this one was expectant rather than just comfortable. "Okay," she finally said softly. "I'm ready."

"Thank God," I mumbled.

She leaned up and rested her arms on my chest and her chin on her arms, staring at me. "All right, well..." She took a deep breath. "First, let me preface this conversation by saying I'm not in a hurry. I'm not pushing here, okay?"

"Okay..." I said cautiously.

Bella grimaced at my expression, which I was sure was wary. "Well, that just didn't set the right tone at all," she muttered.

"Baby?" I tucked her hair behind one ear. "Just blurt it out, you know, like I do." She grinned at that.

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"Well, I was wondering what kind of timetable you were thinking of on the whole marriage thing."

"Oh," I said. Part of me had been sort of expecting the "B" word talk. This was a welcome surprise. I hadn't made up my mind at all about the baby thing. But marriage? I was absolutely sure of that letter of the alphabet. I had even given the timing some thought, which meant that I had a ready answer - for once. "Well," I began. "I get out of the Army in April and I would kind of like to be free of that obligation when we get married. I would just feel better knowing it's a done deal."

She nodded. "Yeah, I like that too."

"So, I guess as for the timing, I would say anytime after that."

"School is out at the beginning of June," Bella murmured. "It might be easier to get married after school is out."

"Yeah, but I don't want to wait too long after that," I said. "Honestly, if we're going to be combining households and all, it would be better to have as much of the summer to do that as possible."

She smiled shyly and nodded. Bella didn't do shy very often, but she was adorable when she did. I couldn't help but kiss her again.

"So maybe...mid-June?" Bella said.

I nodded. "Yeah, that sounds good." I winked at her. "Very traditional."

Bella laughed and kissed my nipple, then gave it a little bite. Okay, sex kitten was back. My head might be in a continuous spin, but at least I would never be bored. "So, the timing is settled," she said. Then she gave me a very sly look from beneath her long lashes. "What kind of wedding were you thinking?"

That gave me pause. I knew what I preferred, but what would she want? Her first wedding had been very traditional but not really big. Mac had had no

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family and Bella's family wasn't very large. Besides, being the military had meant she was far from her extended family anyway. That didn't help me now, though.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Just tell me what you think and then I'll tell you what I think. If our ideas are worlds apart, then we'll have to..."

"Compromise?" I suggested with a smile.

"Hell no, I was thinking naked Twister or something."

"Twister?"

"Or naked rock, paper, scissors...whatever."

"I'm seeing a pattern here," I observed.

"Yeah, I guess there is," she admitted with a grin.

Well, if we were talking naked games, then all bets were off. "I want a thousand people there and I want our wedding to make society news," I teased. I was up for naked Twister any day. I'd even be happy to lose.

"Me too," she dead panned. "So it's settled. Huge, ostentatious wedding, right?"

"Exactly," I agreed. "Just what I've always dreamed of."

She giggled and buried her face. "Okay, I promise, one day we'll play naked Twister, but what do you *really* want?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, something fairly traditional," I said. "But not too big, just our families and close friends." I thought about it. "Though I'm sure quite a few guys from the base will want an invite."

"And if you're opening a bar and they're your target customer base you don't want to alienate them," Bella suggested. "So yeah, I can see us having a bunch

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of your buddies there."

"Which still won't mean a huge crowd," I pointed out.

"Funny, your ideas and mine line up," Bella said. Then she pouted. "So I guess no naked Twister?" Then she laughed at my obviously disappointed expression.

"You can laugh now, but don't be surprised when you find a Twister game under the Christmas tree," I warned her.

"Don't *you* be surprised when I show up at your house with that trench coat and the Twister game either," Bella retorted.

My dick gave me a sleepy little nod of approval at that plan.

"So...we have a smallish wedding in the middle of June," I summarized. "Shit, we're good at this, baby." I was still going to give her that traditional and romantic proposal. But I would have to do it when she least expected it. I'd have to show her that she wasn't the only ninja in town.

"Yeah," she agreed. "We are."

"Well now, that's not all we have to discuss you know," I reminded her.

"What else?"

"Uh...how about living arrangements?" I wasn't sure if this was the time to broach the "B" word. She hadn't said a word since Jake's impromptu question. Was that her way of telling me no without actually saying it?

She frowned thoughtfully. "Your house has four bedrooms and the pool," she observed. It had seemed an extravagance when I bought it, now it seemed like fate.

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"But I know you love your house," I countered. "And it's not like I'll need another bedroom. I fully intend on sleeping beside you every night for the rest of our lives." Well, once we're actually together, I amended in my thoughts. Tomorrow night I would be alone again and that sucked.

"Yeah, but you've got the pool," she insisted. "The boys will kill me if I don't go for the pool."

"Well, no one said it has to be one or the other," I said. "We could sell both houses and look for one together."

She thought that over for a moment and then shook her head. "No, the housing market's bad right now. We'll be lucky to sell one house, much less two." Bella kissed my chest and then rested her head over my heart, her fingers idly and gently tugging at my chest hair. "And besides, if we're going to be opening a bar, we don't want to strain our finances."

"True," I said. Then I laughed. "So, *we're* opening a bar, huh?"

She nodded. "Well yeah, it'll be your baby, but I want to help as much as I can. Besides, I'll have most of the summer free so whatever you need me to do, I'll do." I felt Bella smile. "We're in this together, Cullen. Get used to it."

I played with her hair, winding and unwinding it around my fingers.

"So...my house... will be *our* house?"

"Yeah," Bella agreed. Then she giggled. "Though we might have to booby trap it."

"Sorry?"

She leaned up again and gave me a little smirk. "Well, you've probably never noticed it, but the first and third steps from the top of my stair case squeak. Loudly." She winked. "It's my early detection device for keeping track of the boys."

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"Oh..." I thought about it. Then I remembered the blow job on the couch. "*Ohhh....*"

"Yeah, very handy," Bella remarked. "You just can't usually hear it because of the thunder of big feet."

"I wonder if you can *add* a squeak to stairs?"

"Google it," Bella suggested.

"Yes, ma'am."

We fell silent again. It was growing darker outside with the evening. I somehow suspected we'd end up with room service again once we worked up enough of an appetite. That sounded perfect as far as I was concerned.

"Edward?" Bella's voice was quiet and sleepy.

"Yeah, babe?"

"Do you remember what Jake asked us?"

Since Jake asked us questions pretty much non-stop that left a lot of territory open. But I had a feeling I knew which question in particular she was talking about. I cleared my throat. Yeah, I had been big and bad while we talked about the "M" word. But now that we had moved on to the "B" word I felt my stomach trying to crawl up my throat.

"About whether he was always going to be the youngest?" I didn't even try to play coy.

"That's the one," she agreed dryly.

"Yeah, I remember."

There was a long pause. "Any thoughts on that issue?" she finally asked.

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"Some thoughts, yeah." It was a sneaky response and she let me know that with a deep sigh and a poke from her pointy hands.

"What kind of thoughts?" she prompted. She wasn't sounding sleepy any more.

I paused. "Before I answer, can I just say first that..." She looked up at me curiously. "Well, I have thoughts on the matter. I even have actual opinions." Her lips quirked. "But I don't want you to feel pressured either way."

"So just tell me what you're thinking and then we'll see if we need to track down a Twister game or not," she suggested.

"Evil little temptress," I accused. "Now you're just trying to distract me."

"Not me. I'm pure innocence."

"Pure trouble," I countered.

"Whatever," she said breezily. Then she shifted so that she could kiss me. Such a heavy topic of conversation could only be improved by a kiss as far as I could tell. "So spill the proverbial beans, Cullen."

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're pushy?"

"Yep."

I grunted.

Then I felt her hands sliding up my sides toward my arm pits. She *knew* I was ticklish there. "Okay! Okay!" I grabbed her hands before she could torture me. "Well, I can't say that I have a mad desire to have a baby." I felt her stiffen against me. Interesting. "But I can't say that I *don't* want one either." She relaxed a bit. "I guess what I'm saying is that while I would love to have a baby with you, I don't need another child to make us complete. We're pretty damned complete as it is, don't you think?"

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She nodded.

"But honestly, with four of them, what's one more?" I asked and she grinned. "But I understand that the biggest burden would be for you. Having another baby...at our age-"

"Watch who you're calling old, mister," she warned playfully.

"You know what I mean," I said solemnly. "I know that Jake's birth was scary and I guess I worry that everything won't turn out okay and then you'll have something else sad in your life. And I don't want that for you, Bella. I only want to bring you good things." There it was, my biggest fear laid out for her to see.

She was silent for a long time and I could practically see the smoke coming out of her ears as she thought furiously and hard about the topic. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. "What are *your* thoughts on the subject?"

Bella paused and took a deep breath. "Well, you know that Jake was a surprise package." I nodded. "But once I got used to the idea, I was very, very happy about having another baby." She smiled softly. "I was always lucky. My pregnancies were easy, both physically and emotionally. The only annoying thing was that I was constantly horny."

I had to laugh because she looked so disgruntled. "Oh, I think I can handle that," I assured her.

Bella rolled her eyes at me. "Focus, would you?"

"I'm trying, but you have no one to blame but yourself. You said horny and you're naked in this bed with me and it's only natural that..." I shook my head. "I'm just saying..."

"Do you want to hear my thoughts on the subject?" she challenged.

"Yes, I do," I replied. "Please...go on."

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She gave a little humph to let me know she wasn't convinced of my sincerity. "Well, we'll get married in June, right?" I felt a thrill run through me at hearing her say those words. "And I'll turn 38 soon after that."

"Honey, I'll be forty in June, so I've still got you beat."

"Yeah, I get it. You're old."

"Ouch. That one hurt, baby."

"I've got something else that's gonna hurt," she threatened.

I wriggled my eyebrows at her. "I might like it."

She tried to keep from laughing, but in the end she gave in. "Stop it," she chastised, giving me a playful slap on the chest.

"Oh, that's it baby!" I cried out, throwing my head back. "Just like that! Hit me again. Do it baby. I like it! I've been a *bad* boy."

She moved as if she was going to get out of bed and I pulled her close, nuzzling her neck in apology. "Sorry," I muttered. "The 'B' word makes me nervous," I confessed.

She looked incredulous. "The 'B' word?" Bella snorted. "You can't even say it?" But beneath the humor, I detected a note of hurt.

"Baby," I said softly. "I can it. *Baby*. It's just this weird thing I do since you came into my life. It's the letters of the alphabet you brought with you."

She looked clueless and I sighed. I sat up against the headboard and tugged her into my arms. "I'll try to explain but it might sound stupid, but I'd rather sound stupid than make you think something that isn't true."

"The alphabet?"

The Bigger They Are

"Okay, since I met you, I've sort of categorized all the changes that have come into my life by the alphabet," I tried to explain. "Like "L" for love." I kissed her. "That's a big favorite." She sighed and snuggled closer and I could tell that she knew where this was going.

"What else?" she prompted.

"Well, there's been the "S" word," I suggested.

"For socks?" She teased. "Never underestimate the value of nice, warm socks."

"Exactly," I answered. "And then the day Jake and I ran into Lilith I realized that the "G" word - which is girlfriend, by the way - had come into my life.

"Then there was the "M" word, which we've been discussing." I shrugged. "So a baby just sort of became the "B" word. Not because I can't say it, just because I'm...weird."

"Not weird," she argued. Then she giggled. "Okay, maybe a little weird. But I like your kind of weird."

"So I can say baby, I can *think* baby," I told her. "And if you want to give me a baby, then I want that more than I can tell you. But I don't *need* a baby to make me happy, Bella. If that's not the right choice for you, then we can drop the subject. Hell, I'll go get a vasectomy and we won't have to worry about it ever again. Just say the "V" word. But don't make a choice based on what you think I don't want because I'm an idiot when it comes to expressing myself."

She sighed. "Okay, I get it."

"So...?"

"Actually, I haven't been able to stop thinking about it since Jake brought it up," she confessed.

"Have you come to any conclusions?"

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She nodded. "Well, sort of," she amended.

"Okay, that makes no sense at all, you know that, right?"

She shrugged. "Promise not to laugh?"

"I promise," I said. "Besides, I just told you that I think of our relationship by the alphabet. How much worse could it be?"

"True," she allowed. "Okay...so here's the thing..." Bella frowned and pursed her lips. "I don't want to have a baby after I'm forty. I don't mind having one *while* I'm forty, but not after, which leaves us a fairly small time frame to do this." It didn't make much sense to me, but hey, it was her body. So what she felt comfortable with was what mattered.

"And?"

"I guess I just..." Bella chewed on her lower lip. "I guess I just thought that fate has been pretty damned good to us lately and maybe we should just see what happens when we just let nature take its course."

I still didn't understand. She must have seen my confusion. "Well, I was thinking that maybe after we'd been married for six months or so, I could go off birth control. We'd give it about a year and if it happens, it happens. But when I turn forty..."

"How about I get a vasectomy when you turn forty?" She met my eyes. "No matter what, pregnant or not. We trust it to fate one more time and if happens, then that's great. If it doesn't, then we raise our four boys and enjoy our lives."

She blinked at me. "You called them our boys," she said quietly.

"Is that okay?"

"It's more than okay," Bella said. "It's...perfect."

The Bigger They Are

I pulled her close. "Are we done with all of the heavy discussions for now?"

"Yes, why?"

I nuzzled her neck. "I'd like to get down to the nitty gritty again."

She groaned and started to laugh, but when my lips closed over her nipple she wasn't laughing any more.

~TBTA~

Show the love! If you choose to leave a review, why not mention that great story you're reading that isn't getting the love and attention it so richly deserves? If you don't want to leave a review, feel free to PM me a story rec. I'll try to just add them to the next post and maybe someone out there will find their new favorite story. Let's get everybody reading!

Chapter 56: Ass Backwards, But it Works

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 56: Ass Backwards, But it Works

I woke up curled around Bella's side. She was sprawled on her stomach, her face buried beneath the pillow and one arm flung out to the side. I kissed her shoulder and she gave an agreeable little murmur and shifted closer to me. That was all the encouragement I needed. I moved so that I was hovering over her and rained soft kisses over her shoulders, her neck, her back.

She reached around and gave a little tug on my hair. "Hmmm...." She whispered. "Feels good, don't stop."

I laughed and began kissing lower, until I had reached her ass. I gave each cheek a little kiss and then nipped at one. She gave a little shriek and wriggled in protest. I put my hands on her hips and held her still, kissing and nipping and licking from hip to hip, taking little detours along the flesh of her butt. She had a beautiful ass and it invited my lips. The way she kept wiggling it didn't help either.

"Edward," she finally protested. "Stop teasing."

"It's not teasing if you intend to follow through," I murmured. I slid up her body, covering hers with mine. My dick was pressed into the small of her back while my lips traveled up her neck to her ear. I suckled at her ear lobe and she jerked beneath me. I slipped my thigh in between hers and urged her to spread her legs.

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She complied with a groan and surged back against me. My fingers found her, hot and moist and ready for me. Would I ever get enough of her? No, I already accepted that. I was hers, in every single way.

Bella moved again, bringing her hips off of the bed so that she was on her hands and knees in front of me. Fuck yeah. One of my favorites....

I was sliding into her before I could take another breath. Shit. She was tight this way, clutching at me, stealing my sanity along with my control. "Bella..." I groaned. "So good."

She moved forward a bit and then thrust herself backward, causing me to slide into the hilt. I clutched at her hips then, stilling her. I just wanted to savor the sensation of being so deeply inside of her. The subtle play of her thighs against mine, rubbing at the hair on my legs with her softness, was electrifying.

"Put your weight on your elbows," I managed to grunt out. Immediately, her arms bent and I was buried even further inside. The lines of her back were sexy as fuck, sleek feminine muscle under soft, ivory skin.

My balls felt heavy and tight as they moved against her with each thrust. Fuck. My hands tightened on her hips and she murmured her approval. It wasn't gentle or easy. "Fuck...Bella..."

I wasn't going to last. I tried to warn her but then she was crying out. She was loud again and the sound made my orgasm slam into me like a sledgehammer. I couldn't do anything more than ride it out. I couldn't hold it off or slow it down. It was a done deal. Hopefully, what it lacked in longevity, it had made up for in enthusiasm.

When I collapsed, I had just enough presence of mind to roll off to the side of her. Barely. We could only lie there, panting, hearts pounding. Bella somehow found the strength to crawl into my arms and snuggle up against me before we both fell back asleep, sticky but satisfied.

~TBTA~

The Bigger They Are

We had left the bed long enough to stuff some food in our faces, croissants, eggs, bacon (she stole the last piece ninja style and it was gone before I noticed the theft). Then we brushed our teeth and declared ourselves fit to kiss again. Not going to lie, we both had pretty impressive dragon breath first thing in the morning.

Then we were all cuddled up in the sheets again, our fingers interlocking like they do in the movies. We probably looked like an advertisement for Viagra or something. She looked sated and smug. I was sure that I just looked...awed. Or dazed. Or maybe just very, very happy.

We talked about our future. We discussed our pasts, our lives before that broken windshield.

"So..." Bella said. "Here I am, having agreed to marry you in a smallish ceremony in June and yet..." She kissed my ribs. "I still don't know who your first lover was."

I groaned. "Really? Is it important?"

She giggled and nodded. "Yes, I want to know." Bella leaned up and made a pouty face. "Is it something you're ashamed of, Mr. Cullen?"

I made a face back at her. "No, not at all. It just doesn't matter." I really hated these talks, and we had avoided it for the most part. I was guessing my reprieve was at an end.

"Then just satisfy my idle curiosity," she said.

"Okay, but this goes both ways you know."

She rolled her eyes a little. "Spill it, Edward."

"Anyone ever tell you that you're pushy?" I asked her.

"All the time. I consider it one of my best qualities," Bella replied with a smirk.

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"You would," I mocked.

"You're not going to be able to distract me you know," Bella told me.

I sighed deeply. "Okay, okay, you pushy little nin..." Her eyes narrowed but she let it pass, mostly because she was feeling so damned nosey about my "first."

I kissed the corner of her mouth. "Well, let's see...her name was Tanya. She was about ten years older than I was. She was divorced."

"Man eater? Chasing after a boy toy?" Bella teased.

"Actually, no," I said. I kissed Bella again. I just liked doing that whenever the mood struck. "She was lonely, and she kind of took pity on me. I was fresh out of boot camp, nineteen years old and lonely as fuck, and it was my first time away from home aside from boot camp. I was just starting to realize that I was - supposedly - a grown up. It scared the crap out of me. But she sort of took me under her wing and watched out for me. Eventually it turned into something physical."

Bella smiled softly. "I'm glad she was a nice person."

"She *was* nice, and patient...and understanding." I had to laugh. "Especially considering that our first time took about three minutes."

Bella giggled. "Don't feel bad. It's pretty much the norm for a teenaged male."

"Yeah, well, it embarrassed the hell out of me," I admitted. "But she let me know it wasn't a big deal and then told me that the upside of being nineteen years old that my powers of recovery were going to be impressive."

"And were they?" Bella asking teasingly.

"Hell yes." I couldn't help but brag.

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"Show off."

"Ain't showing off if it's true," I assured her. I shrugged. "Anyway, it lasted about six months and when it was over, we both went our separate ways without any hard feelings." I shook my head. "I guess I was lucky. I heard some of my friends' horror stories."

Bella nodded, pressing another kiss to my ribs. She liked my ribs for some reason, finding odd reasons to trace them with her lips or fingers. Whatever appealed to her, I thought. "What about you?" Bella hid her face in my ribs. "Oh no, my pushy little "G" word."

She looked up at me with a frown. "Not fair. You were supposed to forget."

"Spill it, babe."

"Uh...okay it was Mac. End of story."

"Oh hell no," I said, shaking my head. "I just told you that my first time took all of three minutes. You are *not* leaving it at "It was Mac" and getting away with it."

"Please?" she asked. I was reminded of where Jake got the puppy dog eyes.

"Nope," I said. "Your turn."

"Meanie," she muttered.

"I'm waiting."

"It was Mac, it was awkward. It got better," she said. "That is all."

I digested that for a moment. "Was it your wedding night?"

Bella snorted. "Really? You think we waited?"

The Bigger They Are

I shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just trying to imagine any man working up the nerve to get into your panties when your daddy the Colonel was around."

"Well, it took a while, but I finally talked him into it," Bella admitted.

"Now why am I not surprised that you were the instigator?"

"I was a very bad girl," she admitted softly. My dick wanted to express his appreciation for Bad Bella, but the poor guy was tuckered out. Instead, he made a mental note. *Must tell Bella to be bad more often.*

"Hmm...should I consider myself warned?"

"You should," Bella answered.

"Okay, so Mac was your first," I murmured. I let my fingers trail up and down her arm. "And I know your first kiss was at Ft. Bragg. Anything else I should know?"

"Well, there was a boy in college," Bella said. Her hand was moving up and down my belly, which was distracting as hell. That was probably her intention. "We kissed, messed around, but that was about all."

"Hmm..." I murmured. My lips found that sweet spot just behind her ear. I licked at it and she shivered.

"What about you?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Edward isn't here right now. You can leave a message at the beep." There was no way in hell I wanted to get into a discussion of my "romantic" past in any detail. "Besides, you know about the two main women."

"Avoiding the subject?" she teased.

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I kissed her collarbone and then looked up at her. "The first pair of boobs I saw belonged to my high school girlfriend, Stacy Spanetti. Stacy gave me my first blow job. Tanya was the first woman I made love to. I thought I was serious about Clair and Lilith, but I was wrong." I kissed the tip of her nose. "And that's about all that's important."

Bella pursed her lips. "That's not what Thomas Reynolds said."

What. The. Fuck? "Who?"

"Thomas...you met him at Jasper's party, remember?" She tilted her head. "And he did some asking around." Of course he did.

Well that wasn't good. "Yeah, big dude. Looked like he could crush small cars as a hobby?" Bella nodded, her expression impish and boding no good at all for me. "What did Thomas have to say?" And how did he know anything at all about my...past.

"He saw you with me and wanted to know if you could be trusted. So he started talking to guys about you." More bad news. She kissed my chest, right over my heart, and then moved to give my left nipple a sharp little bite. "Oh Edward," she said teasingly. "You and I both know that guys talk even more than women. And they show less loyalty, especially when it comes to talking to another guy." Another nibble and a little lick. I was starting to care less and less about whatever what's-his-face said. "And you seem to be something of a legend..."

I threaded my fingers through her hair and nudged her back to my right nipple. It was feeling neglected. "Uh huh..."

She obliged me and licked. Then bit. Then licked again. Fuck. She was sucking it, twirling her tongue around like I was a fucking lollipop. She pulled away with a little pop of sound. *No. Go back.*

"You were a very busy boy, weren't you, Edward Cullen?" she asked suddenly, staring up at me with big, brown eyes.

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"Maybe," I allowed with a shrug. "A lifetime ago." I pulled her up so that she was lying on top of me, her hard little nipples pressed into my chest, my dick cradled against her soft belly, her legs tangled up with mine. "But you know what they say about reformed playboys, don't you?"

She smiled and shook her head.

"They make the very best husbands," I whispered.

She giggled and kissed me. The kissing led to more touching. More touching led to certain parts being reintroduced to other parts. It was a very satisfying conversation, despite its inauspicious beginning.

~TBTA~

Around eleven we decided that it might be time to finally shower and get dressed. Our plan was to have lunch and then get back to the lives we had escaped from for our little holiday. I was determined to get Bella away for another night as soon as I could, though I realized I might have to be more patient than I wanted. We had the boys to think about, and I was determined that she would see I could be a good father to them.

I knew that someone looking at us might think that they needed *me*, but the truth of the matter was that I needed *them* much more. I wouldn't have believed it a year ago, but I was actually looking forward to coming home every night to the chaos that was a family.

Still, I liked having Bella to myself too. And I wanted to make sure that we got time to ourselves every now and then. My parents had taught me the importance of that, and I had a feeling that Bella would be okay with it.

"Should we go downstairs and eat in a restaurant?" Bella asked after our shower. We had showered together, all in the interests of conserving energy of course. We had to do something to make up for the gas hogs we both drove. She had finished blow-drying her hair, trying to tame it, as she said.

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I liked watching her go about her little routines - putting on make-up, brushing her hair, slipping into pink panties that reminded me of the sneaky-sexy little gown she had worn. I liked the fact that I knew one day I would almost be able to predict what her next move would be when she got ready in the mornings. I would know if she brushed her teeth first all the time. Or did she do that after she showered? Would she want a lot of hair products in the shower? Shower gel or soap? Would she try to steal my razor or protect her own like a mother bear? I wanted to know.

"If you want," I finally answered when she gave me an impatient look in the mirror as she finished brushing her hair.

She thought about it and shrugged. "Yeah, let's at least see daylight while we're here." She winked at me in the mirror and that was all I needed to move in behind her and start kissing up her neck. "Pervert," Bella whispered, but it sounded like an endearment and not an insult.

"Always," I admitted. I wrapped my arms around her and stared at our reflections in the mirror. "We do everything ass backwards, you do realize that don't you?"

"In what way?" She was smiling tenderly at me, and I hoped that she liked the look of us together as much as I did.

"Well, our first date included four kids and-"

"You've got that wrong," she said with a shake of her head. "Our first date was in Charleston."

I smiled and shook my head right back at her. "Nope, that first time I had you bring the boys over to my pool? That was our first date."

"Was not," she countered.

"Was too," I insisted, and then I turned her around and kissed her. "That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

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"Okay, okay, geez," Bella muttered. "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

"Not thoughts of you, believe me," I grumbled.

She chuckled and buried her face in my chest. "Yeah, I know the feeling." She looked at up me. "Oh, and you owe me about three hundred dollars for batteries, you know." She held out her hand. "Pay up, buddy."

I just stared at her, confused as hell.

Bella rolled her eyes. "Batteries, you know for BOB?" I was still at a loss. "BOB - battery operated boyfriend?" One brow quirked up. "You get the picture?" I was still distracted by the idea of Bella with a vibrator. Holy shit.

"I'm sorry, what?" Where was that vibrator and would I ever get to see it? In action hopefully?

"You'd get me all hot and bothered and then give me a brotherly kiss on the cheek and walk away, you fucker."

I must have still looked clueless- mostly because I was.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "And I would have to alleviate the tension with BOB." She poked me in the chest. "You had some pretty... *stiff*...competition for a while there, buddy." And she snorted at her own lame little joke.

"I'm sorry, I'm still trying to wrap my head around the image of you with a vibrator." I turned and made as if to walk to the bathroom. "Be right back," I teased.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me up against her. She kissed the line of my jaw and nuzzled my throat. "I very much prefer the real thing," she whispered.

"Me too."

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~TBTA~

We were eating lunch, our hands clutched together on the table like some romantic cliché. Eating with one hand wasn't too difficult for me, but Bella seemed to have it down to art. She must have sensed my admiration because she shrugged. "I got used to eating while I had a baby on my hip and one hand occupied."

Something about the way she said the words just struck me. I hadn't particularly wanted a baby in a long time. And honestly, I still meant what I said about not needing a baby to complete our lives. But the image of Bella with a baby on her hip - my baby - held a strange fascination for me. I supposed that I was finding out that I really was that kind of guy.

I leaned over and kissed her. She returned the kiss. "Let me finish eating," she chided. "You wore me out." She pretended to pout.

"Who did the wearing out?" I questioned. "I think I'm the one who needs to replace his electrolytes."

"Should I have taken it easier on you...considering your age?"

"Ouch, that one hurt, baby. It really did."

We smiled at each other and continued eating. Then she looked at me. "What did you mean when you said we do everything backwards?"

"I think I said ass backwards," I corrected.

"Ass backwards, then."

I shrugged. "I dunno, I guess sometimes I just think that we got it out of order, but that it works for us in some strange way."

"Examples please," she said and she sounded like the teacher she was. Immediately, dirty fantasies of Strict Teacher/ Naughty Student came to mind.

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I really *was* a pervert.

"Well, Emmett sort of outed me on the marriage thing. Jake was the one who brought up the baby issue. Our first date included the boys. And we sorted out when we're getting married before I actually presented you with an engagement ring. So...ass backwards." I smiled at her.

"I don't need an engagement ring," Bella said.

"Didn't say you *needed* one," I told her. "That doesn't mean you're not getting one."

She sighed in that way that women have when they think the men they love are being foolish. I had a feeling that she would sigh a lot around me. I knew she had worn a wedding and engagement ring from Mac. I had seen them in the photos.

"If you don't mind me asking...when did you take off your ring from Mac?" She hadn't been wearing it when I met her.

She shrugged. "When I moved here, I had them on," Bella explained. "I thought it would..." She sighed and shook her head. "Some of the other widows in the grief counseling group said it hurt too much to put them away." Bella looked at our hands. "But after that first year, I decided that the rings just led to more awkward questions that I didn't want to answer. So I took them off." Her fingers tightened briefly around mine. "It didn't mean I remembered him any less and I just accepted that everyone grieves differently. I dealt with it in my own way."

"How long did you go to meetings?" I asked.

"Not for long," Bella said. "It just wasn't my style. I'm sure it helps a lot of people. I just wasn't one of them." She looked at me. "Even the boys saw a counselor for a while and it was good. But the time came when it was okay to stop...so we did."

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I was silent for a moment. "I'd still like to get you a ring." And I would, no matter what she said. She was traditional enough to appreciate the sentiment of it. Will and Josh wore matching bands, very subtle and elegant. I imagined that Bella would appreciate something along those lines, nothing too ostentatious or over the top. In fact, I could even ask Will for some advice, though I felt I had a pretty good idea of what would appeal to her.

"It's an expense," Bella noted. "And with opening the bar we might want to conserve our cash."

I would never, in a million years, forego a ring because of that. But the fact that she offered, well, that just made me fall in love with her even more. I rolled my eyes at her. "I'm sure I can come up with enough money to give the woman I love a ring that expresses my honorable intentions." That phrase had been repeating in my head ever since Emmett had called me out on my plans.

"Wow," she breathed. "You're really good at that." Her eyes were shining.

"At what?"

"At sweeping a woman off her feet."

She had no idea that I was the one who had been brought to my knees months ago.

~TBTA~

We packed our bags and looked around the room. Bella gave a small sigh at the same moment I did and we laughed. We hated to leave. Yes, we had great lives waiting for us out there, but the time in this room had been exactly what we needed. Not only did I feel as if we had settled a lot of the questions between us, my body felt sated and satisfied.

I had finally found the solution to the unauthorized boners that had plagued me since I met Bella and found my body was more out of control than the year of "Hot for Teacher" and Stacy Spanetti's boobs.

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I just had to be naked with her 24/7.

Simple.

~TBTA~

Masen and Alyssa looked half out of their minds when we arrived at Bella's house, as was to be expected. Bella took one look at them and gave Alyssa a big hug. "I owe you one," she promised. "We owe you one."

I shook Masen's hand. "Seriously...we do."

Then the boys found out we were home and all hell broke loose - in a good way. Bella and I told Masen and Alyssa that we'd watch their boys one night so they could go out to dinner and explore their new home city. Masen looked a little happier after that.

I told Bella to spend some time with the boys and I made us some grilled cheese sandwiches and French fries. Jake asked if he could come with us the next time. I said that would depend on where we were going. He seemed okay with that answer. Emmett was a little friendlier than I had expected.

Obviously the boys knew what their mother and I had been doing. There was no way in hell to pretend we hadn't been having sex all weekend. But they seemed content with ignoring it and I was right on board with that little plan. It wasn't something that was up for discussion anyway.

I helped Bella get caught up on their laundry as the upcoming week would be a busy one. Jake and Sam had their open house at school the same night that Bella had hers at the middle school. She had to be there for that. We made plans for me to step in for Jake's and Seth's, going between their teachers. I liked the idea of being there for that. It was just one small way to show them that I really had meant what I said.

I was keeping them all.

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Finally, the laundry was put away, the boys were in bed, their lunches were made, and it was time for me to go back to my house.

Our little escape from reality was over.

Chapter 57: Daddy Bear

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 57: Daddy Bear

We sat down that evening with the boys and told them that we had, tentatively, made plans to get married in June. Emmett asked where we'd all live and I told him that right now we were thinking my house. He nodded, accepting that. Jake asked if he'd get his own room. We told him no. Seth asked if he could have his own room once Emmett went away to college. We told him yes. Sam asked if Emily could still sleep on his bed. We told him yes.

And that was the extent of our discussion. I had a feeling it was a topic we would be revisiting as the boys came up with questions, but that was okay. Bella and I were sort of in the same boat.

Our first week after our little escape went by fast. Monday was a bust. I had to work late. I also had another weekend of duty coming up, which meant no play time with Bella. Tuesday I got out early enough to take the boys to their Open House and had just enough time to give Bella a kiss at the door as she dashed out to her own school. She told me thank you and asked me to make sure I got the boys' teachers' email addresses so that she could keep in touch.

I met their teachers, fielded an awkward question from the mother of a girl in Jake's class about my "role" in Jake's life. Sam just shook his head and rolled his eyes at me, while Jake seemed oblivious. I just politely answered that I was going to be marrying their mother. Sam told me later that Mrs. Lawrence hit on all the fathers, married or not. She had a daughter in his grade too. I made a note to avoid Mrs. Lawrence (there was no Mr. Lawrence) at all costs. The only other interesting thing was that I heard Sam call the little girl who sat next

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to him Emily. I gave him a pointed look and he just frowned. I wondered if it had been a bit of puppy love that had prompted the naming of the canine Emily. I knew better than to ask.

As I walked around with the boys, talking to their teachers, seeing their work, listening to them talk about their classes and classmates, I actually *felt* like a father. I really liked the feeling. Bella told me that she had added me to the list of the boys' emergency contacts at their school and I knew how big that was. I was listed as having some responsibility for them and I liked it. More and more, I was actually becoming a member of their family. They would always be the James boys, but I had an actual place in their lives.

I started to wonder more and more about the baby that Bella and I might have. Not because I felt like the boys were any less mine, but because I was sad that I had missed out on so much of their lives. I was getting to know them better with each passing day, but I'd never see their first step or hear their first word, or know what it felt like to be called "Daddy."

They had a dad. I was Edward, not Dad. I was important to them, and they were my life, but I wasn't Daddy. I finally decided that if the baby did happen, I wouldn't let anything mar the experience for me. I wouldn't worry. I wouldn't fuss. I would be the calmest expectant father ever in the history of mankind and trust Bella to know what was best for her and the baby. I would simply enjoy the experience if I was given that privilege. I would leash my inner control freak - even if it killed me.

~TBTA~

With things being so hectic, the women had decided to put off their spa day until October. Emmett's birthday was also in October, which meant that he would be turning fifteen and getting his driving permit. Bella was a nervous wreck.

"I can't teach him how to drive, Edward," she said one day as she clutched at me with a look of desperation. It was the first time I'd seen her so frazzled. Was it wrong of me to kind of like it? I did, wrong or right. It made me want to

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pound my chest and yell like a gorilla. *Me big man, me take care of little woman.* However, big man or not, I didn't say that to Bella. Big man could lose his balls that way.

"What?"

"I just can't." She was still clutched at my shirt.

"Do you want me to ask him if he'll let me teach him?" I suggested.

A look of relief swept over her face and she nodded. It was even funnier when Emmett got the exact same look when I asked if he'd allow me to teach him to drive instead of his mother. "I just can't do it," he muttered. "She'll make me so nervous that I'll crash."

So it was decided that I would teach Emmett how to drive.

As I thought about that, and tried to remember my father teaching me how to drive, I started thinking about a car for Emmett. I wasn't sure how Bella would feel about it, but next year it might make our lives a little less hectic if Emmett had a car of his own. Nothing new or fancy, just something that would get him from point A to point B. He could take his younger brothers places that they needed to go. He wouldn't *want* to do that, but it would be part of getting the car. Even Jasper had remarked how helpful Rosalie was in getting the girls to their scout meetings and taking Adam to practice.

I filed that thought away under "Things to Discuss with Bella."

The list was long and getting longer.

~TBTA~

The week before Emmett's birthday was no less busy than usual. His birthday was on October 20th, which was a Monday. He opted to celebrate the Sunday before. That worked out well because Bella and Alyssa and Alice had picked Saturday, October 25th, as their "girls' day out."

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Since Masen's first business trip had gone smoothly, he was getting a little more relaxed. Alyssa teased him by telling him that she hadn't even noticed he was gone. Masen didn't think that was funny, but I did. Between the three of us, we had started coming up with a list of things to do with the kids while the women enjoyed their day free of men and children.

Bella had surprised me by asking if she could invite Rose, at her own expense as she pointed out. I had no problems with the invitation, though I did have problems with Bella footing the bill. Bella told me to get over myself. At first, Rose refused, saying she wanted to help take care of the kids. Then Emmett talked to her on the phone for a while and convinced her to go. So it was going to be the four of them and I had convinced her to let me pay the additional cost. Later, Jasper confided in me that her mother had just a few weeks left and would probably be gone before Christmas. Bella had even said that Rose might not feel comfortable being surrounded by them, so had arranged a few solitary things for Rose so she could just be alone and quiet. Since Rose seemed to be a pretty quiet girl, I thought it would suit her.

So, we had reached the middle of October, and lots of stuff was waiting for us. Our first Halloween, our first Thanksgiving, our first Christmas and then... And then the proposal that I had been plotting. I was going to pop the question officially on New Year's Eve. Kind of cliché but I didn't care. I wasn't going to let anyone or anything ruin it. I had a plan and I was sticking to it, come hell or high water or four boys determined to mess it up.

Then on the Thursday morning before Emmett's birthday, my cell went off. I was due in a classroom in about fifteen minutes, but when I saw it was the high school. I gave my fellow instructor a heads up and took the call.

"Hello? Mr. Cullen?" an unfamiliar female voice said.

"Yes?" I felt my stomach clench.

"Would it be possible for you to come and pick up Emmett James.

Immediately?" She didn't sound happy. I needed to know what I was getting into. The only thing I knew is that I was pretty sure I didn't like this lady. She

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said Emmett's name like he was a punk. Aside from a broken windshield, which the kid had paid for, Emmett wasn't a punk. He was a good kid who had had his world broken into little pieces. And this lady had better remember that when she talked about him.

"Uh, can I talk to Emmett first? Is he hurt?" I asked. Gimme something, gimme *anything*.

"Certainly you may speak to Mr. James, and no, he is not hurt," she replied in a clipped voice. "Emmett?"

Then Emmett was on the phone. "Edward? Can you come pick me up?" As always, Em was a man of few words.

"What's going on?"

He sighed heavily. "Listen, I *know* I'm going to have to tell my mother, but I *really* don't want her to be the one picking me up."

"Emmett, if I'm going to risk my balls, you need to give me more than that."

He gave a short bark of laughter. "Okay, okay." Another deep sigh. "I got into a fight."

"A fight?"

"Yeah," he mumbled.

"Do you mind telling me what it was about?" I asked. "Are you hurt?"

Emmett snorted. "I'm not hurt," he assured me, sounding cocky. Then his voice lowered. "Some kid was giving me shit about..." He stopped, took a deep breath. "He was saying crap about the war...and...the people who are fighting it."

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Okay, now *I* was pissed. I could well imagine what that little snot nosed fucker had had to say. I didn't give a shit about what people said about the war because everyone was entitled to their own opinion. I *did* give a shit when they said it about the people fighting it, especially the ones like Mac James who died in a desert a world away. Agree or disagree, there was some respect that was owed. "I'll be right there. And yes, you're right; you're going to have to tell your mother. But I'll be there when you do if you want me to be."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I gotta tell her." He paused again.

"And...uh...yeah...thanks...that might help."

If Mama Bears were scary, then Daddy Bears were downright terrifying, and for the first time in my life, I was about to become one. I had never felt like that before, even the time when Masen had been in the fourth grade and a sixth grader hadn't liked Masen's big mouth. Yeah, Masen had probably deserved it, but no one was going to pick on him except me and I had shown the bully the error of his ways. Of course, I had gotten myself grounded for a week in the process.

I groaned, remembering my mother's reaction at the time. And my father's observation that women saw such things differently. I knew I might have a bit of an issue with Bella. I would have to wait and see how it played out. But this time, I was on Emmett's side.

I knocked on Major Hutchinson's office and waited for his okay. Then I was standing in front of his desk and giving him a brief explanation of the situation. He gave a low, muttered curse that was most definitely not befitting an officer *or* a gentleman, but was completely justified.

"Go on, Cullen," he said, his jaw bulging as he clenched his teeth. I considered asking *him* to go and explain the facts to that little fucker just for shits and giggles, but I was kind of looking forward to it myself.

~TBTA~

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I signed Emmett out after showing some identification. I got a brief explanation from the lady in the office, an outline of the events. The principle was busy with the other kid, who had a bloody nose. I could hear him howling and whining in the nurse's office. It was probably a good thing that I didn't see the punk at the moment. Emmett was silent as he got into my vehicle.

"You want to talk about it?" I asked.

Emmett paused a moment and then launched into a quiet explanation. As he spoke, I could feel my hands tightening around the steering wheel. Daddy Bear was alive and well. Who knew?

~TBTA~

Later that evening, Emmett and Bella and I were sitting in the kitchen. The other boys had been sent upstairs and they must have seen something in our faces because they left without a word of protest, even Jake.

I explained briefly why I had gone to pick up Emmett after his call. I emphasized that I had told Emmett he would have to explain the situation to his mother and she nodded, accepting my reasoning. So far, so good. Then it was Emmett's turn.

His voice cracked a little as he told his mother what happened, and he swallowed hard several times. The kid was nervous as fuck, but he met his mother's eyes and didn't falter when he recounted the incident. Everything he said lined up with what the lady in the office had told me when I picked up Emmett. I noticed, however, that he kind of glossed over what the other kid had said. Why? His mother would understand the situation better if she knew all the facts.

"And then I punched him back," Emmett concluded.

Bella sat down at the breakfast bar. "Em....you can't make people change their minds with your fists."

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Emmett's jaw bulged stubbornly. "Yeah, but I'm not gonna let him hit me and think that's okay either."

She sighed and looked at me. "Did the school say there would be any punishment?"

"Emmett's suspended for one day," I explained. "The other kid got three days for throwing the first punch."

"You realize you're on restriction now?" Bella asked Emmett.

He shrugged. "Yeah, I kind of thought I would be." He didn't seem concerned. At least the kid wasn't bitching about doing his time. He was taking it like a stand up guy. I could also tell that he wasn't sorry. Hell, I wasn't either.

I could see Bella was at a loss, and worried about Emmett. She probably felt like we were right back where we had been in May, when Emmett threw a rock. I didn't think that was the case, and maybe it was time to step up my Dad game. If I was going to help raise these boys then I needed to grow a set and say what I thought.

"Bella, I have to admit that I'm impressed by Emmett's restraint. If that little fucker had said that shit in front of me, I'm not sure I would have been able to wait for him to throw the first punch." Okay, I could probably have said that without the foul language.

"Edward, you're not helping matters," Bella said tightly.

"Bella, if I'm going to help raise Emmett, if I'm going to be a part of this family, then I need to have a say. Is my role going to be limited to taking the boys to the arcade and teaching Emmett how to drive? Do I only get to do the easy stuff because you don't trust me to do the harder stuff?" I felt hurt. She looked shocked. But I knew I had to make a stand. I wanted to be a part of this family and shutting me out now would set a bad precedent. "Is that what you're saying?"

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"That's not what I'm saying," she insisted. "But Emmett is my son..." Her voice trailed off.

"I understand that he's your son, Bella," I said. "Like I could forget that. But Bella, if you're going to make me a part of this family that means you should at least *listen* to what I have to say. I'm not saying it's got to be my way, but I'd at least like the courtesy of feeling like you're going to listen with an open mind." *Please, baby, let me in. Let me help. Give me a say in how this thing is going to work. Because I need that.*

She took a deep breath. "You're right," she admitted.

I was? I sighed. I was. And Bella was fair enough to admit it. She took my hand. "I don't think Emmett should have punched the kid back," she explained to me, and giving him a pointed look. "It was wrong and someone could have really gotten hurt."

"I understand that, I do," I agreed. "But sometimes you have to sand up for yourself or other people are going to think you're a convenient target. At least now, if someone wants to start shit with Emmett, they'll know he's not going to just sit back and take it."

"Sometimes just taking it is the best way to react," Bella said. It was like hearing my mother's voice all over again when I'd punched Mase's bully.

"Bella, I hate to break this to you, but Emmett's a guy. We think differently than woman and that's just the God's honest truth." I shook my head. "And if Mac were here he'd be taking Emmett's side too, and you know it."

"Maybe," she said. "But that doesn't mean we wouldn't be having this very same discussion."

"Granted," I replied, and honestly that made me feel better. This wasn't a case of Bella vs. Edward, but of female vs. male. "I'm not saying that what Emmett did was one hundred percent right, but you've got to admit that hearing some little cocksucker tell you that your daddy did nothing but shoot kids on the

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streets of Baghdad might just make you want to punch shit."

Bella shot Emmett a horrified glance. "Is that what he said?"

Emmett looked at me helplessly and I shrugged. I could see in his face that he hadn't wanted to tell his mother that because he wanted to protect her. It was a good instinct, one I approved of in general, but he would have to learn (as I did) that his mother was much stronger than he might have believed. She could handle the truth, in fact, she needed the truth.

Bella's lips pressed together and she nodded. "Yes, well, that doesn't change the fact that you're on restriction." Emmett didn't protest. She looked at him. "Go on up to your room, Em. Tell the other boys to stay up there for awhile."

Emmett gave her a stiff nod. Her head was bowed and he turned to me and mouthed, "Thanks." I nodded and he left.

Bella turned around and flung her arms around my neck. I wasn't surprised when she began crying. I could tell it was a pissed off cry, so I just let her get it out. She wasn't mad at me. She was mad at the little fucker who had tried to tarnish Mac's memory. I wanted to reassure her that Em knew better, that they all did. But she didn't need words at the moment, she just needed to be held.

So I held her.

~TBTA~

Emmett's birthday was a rather subdued affair. We did the family thing and he was going to go to a movie with Rose, but that had to be delayed until after Bella's spa day since he was grounded. He was still sulking a bit over being grounded. I understood Bella's point, but I also could see things from Emmett's view. It was all very confusing. While he was rather short with his mother, as much as he could be without getting into trouble, and kind of cranky with his brothers, he was much more talkative with me, which was surely a first.

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I started to feel bad about that and even went to Bella to apologize. She surprised me by laughing and then dragged me off to the closet. While I was always happy to be there, I was still confused as hell.

"Edward?" she said softly. "Do you think I'm going to crumble into little tiny pieces because my son is mad at me?"

I shook my head.

"I love Emmett, I do. And I understand his point, much better than he thinks." She poked me in the chest. "Still, I can't have him thinking that his fists are a way to solve problems." Actually, I thought that sometimes they *were* the way to solve problems but I knew better than to say that. She must have seen something in my face because she sat down on the floor of the closet and pulled me down beside her. "I know what you're thinking, Edward. I do." Her lips quirked. "I don't want Emmett to allow people to run over him, but Emmett is going to find that people will actually want to start something with him *because* of his size."

I was starting to understand.

"Mac was a hell raiser, and out of all the boys, Emmett's the most like him," Bella continued. "Too much testosterone or something." I made a face. "But the truth is that Emmett's going to be a target for guys who want to show how big and bad they are, and I want Emmett to recognize those games for what they are."

Okay, I could see how that made sense.

"He's going to be bigger and stronger than a lot of the guys he'll run into, so he's got more responsibility to keep things safe...and sane."

"Like Spiderman," I couldn't help but observe. Bella snorted and nodded.

"Yeah, kind of like that." She sighed and cradled my face in her hands. "So yes, I understand exactly why Emmett threw a punch back in that little fucker's

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face." I was getting a glimpse of Mama Bear. "But he needs to know that his fists aren't the way to make things better. He needs to understand that in general, his fists are just going to complicate things." She kissed me. "So maybe the next time, he'll hesitate before he returns a punch. Maybe not, but I hope so."

"I can see your point," I said. "I just hate the thought of what that kid said to Emmett."

"Well, he's going to have to develop a thicker skin," Bella observed. "Life is full of assholes, everyone's got one. Haven't you heard?" She winked at me.

"Yeah, but-"

She put her fingers on my lips. "Why don't you just enjoy your new bond with Emmett?"

I gasped. "You did that on purpose?"

Bella shook her head. "No, I wish I could say I was that devious." Then she shrugged. "Let's just say that I figured out he was opening up to you more the madder he was at me."

"But I feel bad..."

"Don't," she assured me. "I've got broad shoulders. Making them mad at you is part of a parent's job description. If they never get pissed at you, then you're doing something wrong. You'll get used to it, believe me."

I sighed and pulled her close. "You're wrong about one thing, though."

"What's that?"

I kissed her neck and moved to her shoulders. "Your shoulders aren't broad at all, they're beautiful..." And then I got distracted by boobs. What can I say? I'm a guy.

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~TBTA~

I don't remember much about Bella's spa weekend. I do recall that Jasper and I finally got tired of Emmett and Alex harassing the younger kids and we made them drop and give us twenty push-ups. But the younger boys thought that looked like fun, so they joined in and soon we just had a mass of bodies going up and down on the floor. Discipline completely fell apart at that point. Thank God that Jasper's girls were well behaved. They mostly just stood back and rolled their eyes at all things male - including us.

The women arrived back just a little tipsy from the champagne and we were treated to an encore of "Can't Touch This" with Alyssa, Bella, and Alice all joining in. Rose just shook her head, but she looked happy and relaxed. Bella was obviously *very* relaxed and I kind of poured her into bed.

"That was the second best birthday present ever," she muttered just before she fell asleep. I kissed her forehead, feeling very virtuous and proper. Then her hand whipped out from beneath the covers and she groped me briefly before falling asleep.

Handsy Bella was still one of my favorites.

~TBTA~

Emmett and I had our first driving lesson. We both emerged from the Suburban pale and sweaty and shaky. When we finally wobbled our way into the house, we lied through our teeth.

"How'd it go?" Bella asked eagerly.

"Great!" I nodded a lot to show my sincerity. Emmett even gave me a fake punch on the arm. Maybe he should be an actor. "The kid's a natural." A *natural born killer...*

"Yeah, it was great," Emmett said. He nodded a lot too. We looked like those dogs that some people put in the back of their cars.

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"Uh huh..." Bella said, looking at us suspiciously. "So it went that well?"

"Yeah, I can't wait for our next lesson," I lied.

"Me either," Emmett added, just as sincere as I was.

She smirked at us, and probably wasn't fooled in the least. "Good to know."

She left us alone and Emmett and I stared at each other for a moment before we collapsed onto the couch and tried to slow down our hearts.

~TBTA~

Halloween was Jake's favorite holiday, which didn't surprise me at all. Bella tried to watch his sugar intake and finally gave up. She tried to ration out his candy, but he'd keep finding it and gobbling it up. The kid was wired for weeks. The Darth Vader costume had worked wonders and the kid had enough candy to power a small country for a decade.

Two days before Mac's birthday, Jasper called me. Rose's mom had passed away. They were taking her home briefly to get any belongings she might want, but they would be bringing her body home to bury here in Fayetteville. "That way Rose can visit her if she wants."

I promised that we'd be at the funeral. It was a difficult time for Emmett. He was concerned about Rose and remembering his father's birthday all at the same time. Bella and the boys and I had discussed it, and we decided that we should continue the James' Family Birthday Tradition in Mac's honor. Masen didn't get it, but Alyssa did and gave me a big hug. We "celebrated" Mac's birthday on the 16th, since the 17th fell on a Monday. It was surprisingly enjoyable and we watched a DVD of one of his past birthdays.

Emmett seemed a little happier after that, which made it all worth it. Rose's mom's funeral was scheduled for November 18th, and it was a cold and dreary day. Emmett never ventured far from Rose's side and afterwards, Bella had everyone over to her house. It was a small gathering, with just Jasper's family,

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and ours, and Masen and Alyssa and their boys. I had been both surprised and pleased when Masen told me they'd be there for Rose. They had come to like Rose as much as I did.

~TBTA~

My parents decided to come to Fayetteville for Thanksgiving. It was decided that we'd have dinner at Masen's house this year, mine the next. Of course, next year, Bella would be hosting it. We never did get to make a big announcement because once we told the boys it was all over. So Thanksgiving was busy and hectic and relaxed all at the same time.

Then we were getting ready for Christmas and I got my first glimpse of what shopping would be like with four kids.

If I had thought that school shopping was exhausting, clearly I had been mistaken. That was amateur stuff compared to holiday shopping. And it wasn't just the shopping. Bella had ninja wrapping skills too. We were in her bedroom and while normally my dick and I would have been really excited about that, Bella was a woman on a mission and that mission was not to play with my dick.

It was to wrap presents, which wasn't nearly as much fun.

She didn't wrap things the normal way. Oh no. She put tiny things in big boxes and then added bags of rice or weights or books to weigh them down so no one could guess what was in them. She put things inside of boxes and then put those boxes inside of boxes. She padded things with towels and sheets or tee-shirts. She was a fucking genius. No one would ever shake a present she wrapped and guess what it was. No one.

I did my own shopping, armed with a list of suggestions for the boys' gifts that Bella had provided and my own ideas. I shopped for Bella, keeping mind all of stuff that Alice and my mother and Alyssa had suggested. I found some cool antique books that I knew Bella would love, as well as the traditional clothing, perfume, frou-frou stuff. But my big purchase wasn't even for Christmas.

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I bought Bella an engagement ring. It was simple and elegant and when I sent a picture of it to Will with my phone I got a text back almost immediately.

Absolutely perfect. Buy it now.

That was good enough for me.

I tucked it away in my closet and started rehearsing what I would say on New Year's Eve.

~TBTA~

Bella and I had decided that my first sleep over would be on Christmas Eve. It made sense to have me there first thing in the morning and it was kind of a way to ease the boys into me being there at night sometimes. I was nervous as fuck to be honest. They knew we had sex. It just wasn't something anyone acknowledged because it was sex, which meant it was private and they were kids.

That afternoon, Jake helped me wrap some of Bella's presents. We took her gifts out of my closet, where she had been forbidden to go, and put them on my bed. Jake actually *liked* wrapping presents. What he lacked in skill, he made up for in enthusiasm. He had inherited Bella's ninja present wrapping skills, so it was an amusing afternoon. My phone rang and I had to run downstairs. "Finish wrapping everything up," I told him.

It was Masen. Our parents were having Christmas Eve at his house and then tomorrow they would all gather at Bella's house. Masen talked forever, like always. "You'll see me tomorrow," I reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah, go on," he grumbled.

I ran back upstairs and noticed that Jake had finished wrapping the presents and all of the odd-sized boxes I had gathered for the job were used. Shoe boxes, cereal boxes, anything that could be sealed up and have paper wrapped around it. Jake had learned at his mother's side and he had learned the lesson well. Then we packed it up in my vehicle and headed back to his house where I

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would be for the next two days.

Not only was it Christmas Eve, I was going to have sex that night so my dick and I were in a celebratory mood.

Fic Recs: First, may I say WOW! I got so many great recs for fics that I'm still trying to catch up. So for now, I'll just mention some I've actually had a chance to sit down and read more than one chapter of, and hope you find a new favorite story.

First up: "Cotton Creek" by rtgirl: Bella is a travel nurse who moves every six months. Edward is a music teacher in a small southern town who gave up his Nashville dreams to return home. She never knew what a home was...until he gave her one. Fun/Fluff/Romance/No angst. Some citrus. *May I just add that I have absolutely fallen in LOVE with this story! I think you will too. Bella is...well, I just want to hug her. And the whole Cullen clan is there. Besides, I'm a Southern gal, so you know...I gotta show the love to this little "bless your heart" tale. Don't hesitate. Go read this one now. It's only eight chapters in and it will reach out and grab you!*

"Branching Inward" by LifeInTheSnow: Once the dashing golden boy of the contemporary art world, he's a shell of his former self, haunted by the memory of a body face down on the ice...and blood, spreading. She's a shrewd historian, content to observe from a distance--until now. AH AU.

"The Piano Man" by .hello This is a story that is beautifully written and the characters are caring and thoughtful but there is some hurt and heartfail too and some violence in the beginning between Bella and her abusive husband James. The author describes what happens but with tact and distance so don't worry too much. Anyways this is a story about Bella who is abused by her husband so in the middle of the night flees town with her daughter and they go to visit her sister and husband and she meets Edward who is a music teacher at the local school and he is wonderful to her and her daughter. He is not without his own baggage too having a failed relationship and a little daughter of his own. Heart wrenching and beautiful story.

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" The Cube" by sdfreeze: Bella is a unique girl, to say the least, and meets Edward when he needs to learn a different way to live. She helps him look at the world in a whole new way and find true love. *This one makes me LOL - literally. You won't ever forget this Bella.*

" Change of Heart" by LuvCullens: Bella has been gone from Forks for ten years. She returns when Charlie becomes ill. Which man will win her heart? Dr. Black or Edward Cullen? *Note: This story is complete, so no waiting!*

Chapter 58: So We're Not Filet Mignon

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: As for the discussion between Edward and Bella about him being a part of the decision making, yes it was in front of Emmett. Was that the wrong way to do it? Absolutely. But I did it that way on purpose. Edward is smart and he's really doing a great job, but he's going to make mistakes. Hell, so is Bella. And this is one of them. This very issue will be addressed in another incident later on. It's not a major thing so no worries. Just showing their adjustment to their new parenting roles (Bella sharing and Edward taking on). I don't expect that this chapter will be a surprise, but here you go...

Chapter 58: So We're Not Filet Mignon

When we had started discussing our holiday plans, I told Bella that it had been a tradition in my family for each person to open one gift on Christmas Eve. "Well, then," she replied. "We should do that too."

I had breathed a sigh of relief. Honestly, sometimes it was a bit difficult to make my place in a family that was so well established. They already had their own way of doing things, which was only natural. And I didn't want to change that, but I did want to *add* something.

Bella's immediate acceptance made me feel better, like I actually had something to contribute to the family traditions. Luckily, this was one change that the boys supported whole-heartedly. The gift choice was up to the giver. My parents had done it that way so Masen and I couldn't open our "big" gifts on Christmas Eve. Bella and I had picked out smaller gifts for each of the boys

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to open and I had picked something for her while she chose a gift for me to open.

Originally, we had planned to spend Christmas Eve with my parents and Masen's family. But we had eventually decided that the boys needed to have some adjustment time with just the six of us. They had reacted favorably when we put the idea forth, though I could tell that Jake and Kyle were especially looking forward to spending much of the day together. We had even decided to keep some gifts aside so that, as a large family group, we'd all have some opening to do. It was another tradition from my family. The boys weren't quite as enthusiastic about that. Finally, I told them that they only had to put one aside and that soothed ruffled feathers. I knew my parents and Masen and Alyssa would be bringing them gifts as well, which would probably make it all better.

For Christmas Eve, I tried to help Bella make her famous Christmas Eve chili. When she had first told me the menu, I had thought she was kidding. "Chili?" I asked. "On Christmas Eve?"

She shrugged. "That's just what we've always had," Bella explained. "My mom started it." Then she laughed. "Maybe because it was the only thing she could make when my parents first got married so she decided to save the best for Christmas Eve. Anyway, the boys will bitch if I don't make it."

Okay, so we were having chili on Christmas Eve. Compromise, remember?

Luckily, Bella's chili was superb; she even made a pot of extra spicy for me and some of the boys. Jake liked the extra spicy and ate three bowls. I wasn't sure I'd want to be around the kid that night. I ate sparingly because the last thing I needed was to have a gas attack on the first night I spent at Bella's house. The boys might enjoy fart jokes; I did not. Well, not in front of Bella anyway. Around Masen was a different matter.

It didn't take long for the boys to get ready for bed. They knew the faster they got to sleep, the "sooner" that Christmas would be here. They had each opened something small. Emmett had wanted an old, classic video game that Bella had

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found online. Seth got some new guitar strings and a cool pick, along with some music books. Sam had gotten a book on black labs. Emily wagged her approval as she munched on her new doggie treats. And Jake had gotten something to do with Star Wars. Yeah, I was as shocked as everyone else. I had given Bella a little pedicure kit, along with my favorite color nail polish. Coral. I remembered that name; it was the stuff that looked like brains under the ocean.

Bella had gotten me a mirrored sign for the bar that featured a blue parrot and a quote from a Jimmy Buffet song. I declared that it would have a place of honor in our new business venture. Then we had cleaned up the mess while the boys got ready for bed. I had a few things to put together, nothing major since most of their gifts seemed to be electronics. It did feel very "Dad" to do that stuff.

Then Bella and I were free to go to bed and once we were up there I got...nervous.

This would be the first time Bella and I would share a bed with the boys in the house. What if she didn't want to have sex? What if it was only me who assumed we'd be having sex? It had been two weeks since we'd found the time or privacy to actually make love and I was ready for more.

When Bella locked the door I relaxed a little. Then she swallowed hard and I knew...she was nervous too. "Hey," I said. "It's okay." Yeah, I wanted to have sex. A lot. But not if she was freaking out about it. Of course, eventually we'd have to get used to that because there was no way in hell I was going to live with Bella and be married to her and not have sex with her.

"It's just weird," she admitted. She pulled me toward the bathroom. "Let's take a shower."

"Okay," I agreed as I let her lead me.

We helped each other out of our clothes. We didn't speak, and our touches were tentative. Finally, as I pushed her bra off her shoulder I gave it a little kiss and she shivered, and then turned in my arms. "Edward?" she whispered.

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"Yeah babe?"

"I should have thought of this before, but..." she stopped. "Is it going to be weird for you?"

"What?"

"Sleeping in my bed," she said. "It was...I never replaced the bed after Mac..." She frowned up at me.

"Is it going to be weird for you?" I asked. I brushed my knuckles over her cheek.

Bella thought about it a moment and then shook her head. "No, but..." She kissed my throat. "I think we'll need to buy a new bed...or use yours."

"New bed," I decided. "Why not make it a fresh start for both of us?"

Her smile was brilliant. "Yeah, that sounds good. But tonight, we'll be just fine."

Our shower wasn't about groping; it was about gentle touches, a brushing of hands and lips over slick, wet skin. I helped her wash her hair and she tried to help me. She complained I was too tall, so I bent down, which put my mouth near her boobs and the temptation was damned near irresistible, but the timing didn't seem right so I kept my lips to myself.

Then we were clean and I stepped out first and grabbed a towel. I insisted on drying her off and any other time I would have been grabbing at her boobs or sliding a hand between her legs. Instead, I just dried her off and wrapped her in a dry towel before I got myself dried off, though I was halfway there already. Luckily the heat was up or I'd have shriveled myself into shame.

I pulled on some boxers and Bella grabbed one of my tee-shirts that she kept in my dresser now. I had some clothes I kept here and I liked it. I couldn't wait until all of our stuff was combined in one house.

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We crawled into bed and I pulled her into my arms. Now that we were here, sex didn't seem like a given. I kissed her, and tried to keep my boner away from her. That shit had started the minute Bella drew back the sheets. It was like a starting gun for my dick.

And he's off...

So I angled that fucker away from her, not wanting to press - literally.

She was quiet for a while and then sighed and snuggled up closer, pressing against the very last - and first - place I wanted her pressing. Soft kisses started on my chest and her hand slipped down my side to play with my hip bone, another favorite of spot of hers. It didn't take long for her hand to move around to my ass, where she gave a little squeeze. This wasn't sex kitten Bella, this was shy, sweet Bella. It had been a while since that Bella made an appearance.

I wondered if this was such a good idea, making love to her in a bed that she'd shared with Mac.

"I love you," she whispered.

I smiled. "I love you too." I watched her eyes, wanting to know if this was something we should do. "Bella...babe...if this isn't-"

"Make love to me, Edward...please..." she said softly. "We're becoming a family. I want to feel like we are."

"If...if it doesn't feel right, promise me you'll stop it," I said. I had this weird feeling that we were balanced on a precipice, that we could go either way.

She nodded. "Okay."

I kissed her then, leaning over her and resting my weight on my forearms. Her lips were soft and still smelled of the toothpaste we'd used. She groaned softly when I slipped my tongue between her lips and teeth to caress the inside of her mouth. Again, our kisses were tentative and soft, like this was the first time

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we'd made love.

Slowly, I started touching her. Sweeping my hands over her shoulders and down her torso, lightly skimming her belly, the inside of her thighs. I never touched in one place for too long and I kept my touch light. My mouth remained on hers, moving away only to let us breathe and to place small kisses on her cheek, her temple, her throat.

When her hips started canting toward mine in a gentle rhythm I knew I could move onto something more. I reached for the tee-shirt and easily drew it up over her body and then tossed it to the floor. I kept my boxers on for the moment. I resumed my soft touches and added my lips. I kissed her breasts, lightly suckled at her nipples, placed open-mouthed kisses on her shoulders, her chest, her belly, on each hip bone. I wriggled until I got my boxers off and resumed my journey.

Bella's hands went to my hair and tugged, urging me to something more so I pressed a kiss on her scar and then moved down to lightly lick at her clit. She moaned and moved against me. It was slow and easy and very quiet, just the sound of kisses and little moans and the brush of sheets moving on flesh.

When I saw the trace of moisture on her thighs, I licked at her and slid a finger inside of her, then two. She was ready for me, eager if the whispered words tumbling out of her mouth were any indication. I moved up and over her, lining up with her entrance. "Bella baby...so beautiful," I whispered as I slid easily into her.

We kept that same gentle rhythm, taking our time, moving easily with each other. Her hands moved up and down my back, her feet caressed the back of my legs and my ass. She whispered my name over and over again as she arched against me. I could feel her struggling. For once, the orgasm lingered just out of her reach.

"Bella?" I whispered. "It's okay, babe..."

"Will you come for me, Edward?" she whispered. "I want to feel you."

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"Yeah, babe." That was one promise that was easy to keep. I closed my eyes and thrust hard and she jerked against me.

"Yeah," she encouraged. "That feels good."

I was thrusting harder, grunting a little though I couldn't help but be aware that if I was too loud the boys would hear me. Shit. This was more complicated than I'd thought. I felt Bella clenching her muscles around me and then she was licking at my ear and that sent me over the edge. But there was no answering flutter in her body. I came anyway, unable to hold it off any longer.

I reached down and gently rubbed at her clit while I continued to move, trying to give her whatever it was she needed. "I love you, Bella," I whispered. "So much...forever..."

Finally, with a little sigh, she came gently. I could tell she was still frustrated. I collapsed against her and she sighed again. "I'm sorry," she said.

I gaped at her. "For what?"

"For...well, for that." She looked embarrassed.

"Babe?" She looked at me. "You do know that sometimes it's not gonna be fireworks, right? It's just gonna be sparklers." I smiled. "Because if I could get you to admit that it would sure as hell take a lot of pressure off of me."

"Don't be silly," she retorted, though her expression eased.

I kissed her. "So maybe it wasn't quite what we expected," I admitted. "Maybe it is just too weird...in this bed..." I leaned in close and whispered in her ear. "And knowing we've got four sets of ears that could hear us. But we'll get a new bed and we'll adjust to our potential audience and we'll be fine..."

She snuggled up into my arms. "Do you know how much I love you, Edward?"

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"I think I do," I said. "Go to sleep. The boys will have us up early in the morning."

"Door's locked," she mumbled. Then she sat up. "Shit! We can't sleep naked."

"Gotcha." I found my boxers. I threw Bella's tee-shirt toward her.

"And panties," she giggled. I groaned as I rummaged through her panty drawer. I felt like a pervert, imagining some of them on her. It was weirdly intimate to be going through her panty drawer.

"Here," I said, throwing a pair of shorts her way too. They were soft and cotton, much like boxers. "Wear these too. For my sanity." I unlocked the door too.

She giggled and nodded. I climbed back into bed, decently covered with a tee-shirt and boxers. It wasn't as much fun as sleeping naked but I would wake up with Bella so it was totally worth it.

~ TBTA~

I woke up to the sound of voices. "You think they'll wake up soon?" That was Sam. I wanted to groan. There wasn't even daylight coming in through the window.

"Yeah," Emmett said. "If we're loud enough." I heard some snickers.

"Maybe they're tired," Jake offered.

Emmett snorted and I heard Seth say, "Don't go there, Em."

Fuck. Busted. Like they wouldn't have any idea what we did when we got the chance. I sighed and opened one eye to find Jake about three inches away. Right beside him was Emily, who gave me a blast of dog breath. Well, it woke me up anyway.

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"Hey guys," I said.

"It's Christmas," Jake said. "Time to get up."

Sam yawned sleepily. "If I have to be up, so do you," he added.

Jake hopped up on the bed and missed by balls by centimeters. Emily took that as her invitation too. Suddenly, I had about sixty pounds of lab on my lap and she didn't *miss* my balls. Emmett snorted when he heard me grunt and then grab my abused package. I glared at Emily who just grinned back at me.

Bella woke up immediately of course. It might have been because I was writhing in pain next to her. "Good morning guys," she said quietly. She looked at me and frowned. "You okay?"

I couldn't do anything more than nod. Jake was too busy talking to his mother to notice that I was quietly dying, but Em offered me a hand up out of bed. Thank God Bella had remembered that we needed clothes on. I hobbled into the bathroom, just remembering to close the door. It was going to take some getting used to, living with other people.

A few minutes later we were downstairs and watching the boys tear through their gifts. Jake helped me put aside one of Bella's and she put aside one gift for each of the boys and one for me. We were ready for the Cullen invasion later. For about ten minutes there was nothing but the sound of ripping paper and "Thanks!"

Bella liked the antique books and the hand crafted picture frames I had found for her. I got her some CDs she wanted and some movies. There was the typical girly stuff. I had also purchased, at the same time I bought her engagement ring, a necklace with a vertical bar that had all of the boys' birthstones on it. She cried a little when she opened that. I tried to think of what gift she had left to open but then the boys were jumping up and asking for breakfast. I had never experienced a busier or louder Christmas, except maybe when I was a kid.

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And it was absolutely perfect.

~TBTA~

My parents and Masen and Alyssa and the boys arrived and the chaos just grew. The women had gotten together and decided that they would cook a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Bella had put the turkey in to cook when we got up, so she and my mom and Alyssa went into the kitchen to attend to the rest of it. We offered to help and were shot down. "How can we talk about you if you're in the room?" Bella explained solemnly.

We left. And then we heard them laughing. That couldn't be good.

Soon the women came out, their expressions guilty and their faces a little flushed, I wondered if they had already sampled the wines Bella had chosen for the meal. It was time to open our presents, according to the kids.

Alex went first, opening the gift that Bella and I had gotten him. Video games were always a hit. Then Jake went. The boys all took turns and there was some good-natured teasing about trading gifts and who had gotten what they wanted and who hadn't. I was pretty sure that everyone had gotten everything they wanted.

Then a kitchen timer went off and Bella hopped to her feet. "Be right back!" It would be time for the adults to unwrap their presents as soon as she got back. Jake came to stand beside me.

"You're lucky you had me to help you wrap the gifts," he said.

I hugged him. "Yeah, I was, Jake. Thanks."

We watched the other kids for a moment. "You forgot one, you know."

"Yeah?" I wasn't really paying attention. My father and brother were arguing over who had gotten their wife the best present. Masen insisted that Dad lose points because he had had longer to get to know Mom's taste. Dad insisted that

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a woman as complex as my mother could never be fully understood by a mere male mind, which got him extra points with Alyssa and Mom both. Masen was sulking.

"Yep," Jake said nodding.

I started to think about. "No, I don't think we forgot anything."

"Yes you did," Jake insisted. "But I found it and I wrapped it."

Masen started hassling Dad again and that distracted me for a moment. Then a horrible, awful thought occurred to me. "Where did you find the present Jake?"

I knew. I already knew what had happened. It just made perfect and horrible sense.

He shrugged. "In the closet where the rest of them were."

I swallowed hard. "Uh, what did the gift look like?"

He was distracted too. I was losing my mind and Jake was having trouble focusing. "Uh...it was in that little box. The box had soft stuff on it." Velvet, that's what it had on it.

My expression must have given my panic away because Dad turned toward me. "What's wrong?"

By now, everyone was looking at me. Bella was still in the kitchen and all of my plans were in ruins around me. Again. Someone up there was trying to teach me a lesson. Adults made plans, kids blew them to pieces.

"Uh..." I sighed. "I uh...bought Bella a ring."

"A ring?" Masen asked too loudly and I had to hush him.

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"A *ring*," I said pointedly. I looked around. Bella was still out of sight. "I was going to give it to her on New Year's Eve, but I put it with the rest of her gifts and it got wrapped." My eyes darted to the lone present for Bella that was left under the tree, the present Jake had chosen for her to open now...in front of everyone. Why hadn't I put that ring in my dresser drawer as I originally intended? Because I'm a dumb ass.

"Oh," Mom said.

By now, everyone had gathered in close. It was like a car accident, everyone wanted to get a peek.

I got to my feet and began pacing. What I really wanted to do was grab that gift and run. I'd tell Bella I was sick or I wanted to exchange the gift or I was an alien. It didn't matter. I just had to get that box out of there.

"Edward?" Jake asked. His eyes were big and upset. "Did I do something wrong?"

Okay, Cullen. Get your shit together. Don't let the kid feel bad for an honest mistake. Maybe it's better this way. Every time you try and plan out this shit it never works out anyway. You and Bella do better with the impulse stuff. This is no different.

I stopped and knelt down in front of him. "No, Jake, you didn't do something wrong." I smiled at him. "In fact, I think you fixed something." He grinned at me.

"So why don't you give me your Mom's present over there, okay?" He nodded and ran to get it. He placed it in my hands just as Bella walked out, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

"Well, that's one bird that won't burn," she announced with satisfaction.

Then she got a good look at our faces. We all looked guilty. "What?" Bella asked. She put her hands to her face. "Do I have something on my face? I only

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took a taste," she muttered.

I nodded at everyone and they sat down. I felt my palms getting sweaty and my stomach felt a little off. Yeah, I was completely cool.

"Bella?" I asked quietly.

"Yes?" She was confused. Rightly so. I was acting like a crazy man. I wanted to hyperventilate, not because I was nervous about marrying her or even asking her. I just hadn't counted on an audience and suddenly every single word of the beautiful proposal I had planned flew out of my head. And I'd stayed up one night until three in the morning watching romantic movies, trying to get a handle of the ultimate romantic proposal. I had had it too. Until now.

I swallowed again. Maybe if I did that enough times, I could regurgitate the words.

I motioned Bella to her chair. "Uh...this wasn't quite what I planned," I admitted. I smiled at Jake. "But somehow...yeah, it's us."

She looked at Jake, still clueless.

"I had something really...nice and romantic and cliché planned, but that's not us, is it?" She just stared at me. "We're tacos and beers, not filet mignon and champagne." Bella laughed and nodded. "So I could trot out some really great movie lines, like 'You're the best thing I never knew I always wanted' or 'You complete me' or something else like that." I knelt down in front of her. "But instead, I'll just do what's worked for us so far - straight forward and brutally honest." I took her hand. "Bella, will you marry me? I want to spend the rest of my life with you and those boys over there. And if you don't say yes, they'll never let me live it down. So what do you say?"

Bella laughed and cried and nodded all at the same time.

Together, we ripped open the box. Jake had really taped it well. Inside the Pop-Tart box he had stuffed a pair of my boxers. The boxers had lips all over

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them and said, "Kiss Me." Bella snorted as she plucked the black velvet jewelry box from the boxers. She opened it and smiled. Emerald cut diamond, not big enough to make her worry about money, but big enough not to embarrass *me*, on a simple gold band. We'd pick out our wedding rings together later. It was classic and understated; it was Bella.

"It's perfect," she whispered.

I slid the ring on her finger and it was the perfect size since I had "borrowed" one her rings from her jewelry box. Like I said, she wasn't the only ninja act in town. I leaned in close. "So could I get an official yes...out loud and everything?"

Bella grabbed me tight. "Yes!" she cried out and everyone started cheering. Even Emmett. It was a Christmas miracle.

Recs: Correction from last post, The Piano Man is by (rainsoakedhello). Check it out. It's on my favorites.

Also: Days Like This » by Soft Ragoo

Bella and her newborn adjust to their life together but it seems everywhere they go, they encounter the same man with the captivating eyes and sexy smile. Edward's life lacks something he desires. Has he been handed a challenge or a reward? All human. You'll love this Edward, he's tender and loving and soooo sweet.

Chapter 59: Beds, Babies, and Boys

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I had a family emergency come up so there might be a slight delay in the next chapter. Things could end up going very smoothly and life will return to normal or it could be crazy around here for a while. We'll have to see how it all plays out. Anyway, a new chapter will definitely be posted next week, but not sure if I'll be posting another one this week. My apologies.

Chapter 59: Beds, Babies, and Boys

I shouldn't have been surprised that I ended Christmas day by being an engaged man. Nothing had gone as I had planned in our relationship, and I would have probably felt strange now if something *did* go as planned. I had a feeling that, for the rest of my life, these boys and Bella would surprise me.

So even though the proposal hadn't gone as planned - at all - it had been perfect for us in all our imperfections.

By this time next year, we'd be married and just starting to try for a baby probably. The Christmas after that? Well, who knew? Bella might be pregnant at that point, or maybe there'd be a new member of the family already. I knew that such optimism might lead to disappointment, but fate had already been so kind, I felt reckless and decided to hope anyway.

As I watched the boys interact with their soon-to-be cousins, I felt a new sense of contentment wash over me. Bella and Alyssa and my mother had their heads pressed together, giggling like loons and admiring her ring. Bella fit in with them so easily it was as if they'd been holding her place for her. I couldn't imagine any other woman I had dated becoming a part of the family with such

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ease. Not that they hadn't been nice, they just hadn't been Bella.

Emmett was patiently showing Kyle and Jake how to play a video game he'd gotten for Christmas. Alex and Sam were discussing something with a great deal of interest. Seth was showing Masen some new chords I had taught him and the two of them laughed when Seth screwed it up at first. My dad came up to stand by me. "It's amazing the difference a year can make, isn't it?"

Last Christmas I had been in a tent, hoping against hope that I'd be able to put a call in to my parents. Fate and the phone lines hadn't cooperated that day. I had to smile because I was just so damned happy that I wanted to burst out into song or something girly like that. I didn't even bother to try and hide my dopey grin.

"Yeah, it is," I agreed.

"You've got yourself a wonderful family there," Dad observed. He nodded at Emmett. "He's really good with kids, isn't he?"

I nodded. "Yeah, you wouldn't think it to look at him. He's kind of a beast, but he's a great kid."

"They all are," Dad said with a little smile.

"Yeah, they are," I said. I looked at Bella. "And that's because of her...and Mac. He was a great dad." I had some very large shoes, both literally and figuratively, to step into and I knew it. Mac had been a huge presence in their lives in every way.

In that strange way my dad has sometimes, he seemed to look into my mind. "You'll find your own way to be a father, Edward. You'll make mistakes, we all do. It's part of parenting. But overall you'll do just fine."

"That's what Bella says."

"Then listen to her," Dad advised. "She's not going to steer you wrong."

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"No, she's pretty much got a handle on this parenting thing," I said.

"I'm glad to see you so happy, Edward." There was a great deal of contentment in my father's voice and I realized that he had been far more worried than I realized about my future.

"Worried you'd never see me settle down?" I guessed with a wink.

"Something like that," Dad admitted. "And when you settle down, Edward, you *really* settle down." He got that zinger in with a wink of his own. That was the thing about Dad, he was sneaky when he wanted to be. Then he sighed. "Of course, you never did do anything by half measures, even when you were a baby."

"Uh oh," I said. "Let's not share any Edward-as-a-kid stories with Bella or the boys, please."

Dad smirked. "Too late," he said and pointed at my mother. And Bella. And Alyssa. All three of them were still talking - and laughing. Uh oh. Not good. "Consider it a rite of passage, son." They sensed our eyes on them and stopped talking for a moment and then all three of them burst into laughter.

"One I could do without," I sighed. Their heads were pressed together again. It was like looking at a group of girls on the playground, who were pointing and laughing at the stinky, cooty-ridden boys.

He hid his smile behind his coffee cup. We were silent for a bit but it was comfortable, both of us just taking in the sounds of family. I leaned in close and whispered, "Bella and I decided that we'd try for a baby about six months after we get married." So far, we hadn't revealed that we planned to get married in June. I was pretty sure one of the boys would make that announcement for us. Maybe they'd plan the wedding for us, too, I thought with a rueful smile.

"Why wait?" he asked. "You're not getting any younger."

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I rolled my eyes at him. "Thanks, Dad. I didn't realize that." I shrugged. "We don't want to give the boys too much to adjust to at one time." Bella and I had talked about it at greater length in the months since our weekend getaway. I could honestly say now that the "B" word was becoming a comfortable topic for us.

Though I tried to downplay my excitement with Bella, just in case nature didn't cooperate and it didn't happen, I was getting more and more attached to the idea of a baby. I imagined that Jake would be perfectly all right with the idea. It was Emmett's reaction that had me a little worried.

The phone rang and Jake was, predictably, the first to reach it. Jake was talking away and I probably should have been paying more attention. Shoulda, woulda, coulda. I finally started listening and I thought I would swallow my damned tongue.

"And I helped, Grandpa!" Jake announced. "Edward had the box hidden, but I found it. And I wrapped it. And he told me that I hadn't ruined anything. I made it better." Jake listened and then nodded. "Yep, that's what he said. And he got down on his knees and they made a creaking sound and then he said a bunch of stuff but Mom said yes, so I guess-" More nodding on Jake's part. "Yeah, uh huh...I guess...Mom is...no? Okay..." Then he marched up to me and handed me the phone.

I put it to my ear and swallowed hard. "Hello?"

"So..." It was Charlie Swan. Of course it was. What grandparent doesn't call their grandchildren on Christmas Day? "I take it that you proposed to my daughter today? If I made any sense out of what Jake was saying."

"Yes, sir," I answered. I could see my dad smirking out of the corner of my eye. So I was standing at attention. So what?

"Uh huh..."

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I waited. And waited. Bella looked over and quirked one brow. "My father?" she mouthed.

"No shit. You knew he'd call the boys on Christmas," I mouthed right back at her. Her eyes grew wide and then went to the ring on her hand.

"Oh..." Yeah, oh.

I nodded and pointed to the phone. A little help would be most appreciated. Bella walked quickly to my side and took the phone.

"Hi, Dad," she said brightly. There was some talking from his end but I was too busy heaving sighs of relief. Then Bella was frowning. "Dad..." She huffed. "I'm a grown woman, Dad. Don't forget that." More talking from the Colonel and Bella rolled her eyes. "Oh my God! I've got four kids of my own and you're-" She thrust the phone into my hand and scowled. "Here... apparently this has to be discussed *man-to-man*." And then she stomped off. Great. Now she was pissed off at me for something her father said.

Charlie Swan was laughing when I got back on the line. The fucker. "Whew! I see the firecracker is making an appearance."

"Yes, sir." I knew I sounded resigned and tired.

"Aw, come on son, it isn't that bad." Sure, sir. Whatever you say, sir. Not that bad. I'll make a memo of that, sir.

"Yes, sir."

Another chuckle. The bastard. "Well, can't say that I'm surprised. Emmett gave us a heads up a while back and Bella told us to expect the news someday."

So why was he giving me shit about it? Oh right...because he could.

"Well, so how does it feel to have it all official like?" the Colonel asked.

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"Good, sir, really good." Great actually, because I had sex with your daughter last night. In her bed. It was kind of weird but it was still sex. So, you know, even slightly weird sex is good when it's with Bella. Shit. He could probably read minds or something. Stop all sex thoughts. Then I got distracted by sex thoughts. It was a catch-22.

Charles Swan laughed again. "That's good to hear, Edward. Very good to hear," he added. "I'll just congratulations and leave it that. Her mother and I are very pleased."

What. The. Fuck?

Was that approval? From Colonel Charles Swan? Really and truly? I checked my pulse. Nope, still alive.

"Thank you, sir." There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

"Well hand the phone to one of my grandsons, boy!" the Colonel finally ordered. "I haven't got all day to jaw with you."

"Yes, sir." *Gladly, sir. Right away, sir.*

And I just handed off the phone to the nearest kid I saw and hoped it was one of Bella's boys. Then I collapsed into my chair. Bella laughed, but it wasn't funny. Not at all.

~TBTA~

The day after Christmas, Bella and I decided that we would do some shopping. She deemed the boys capable of watching out for themselves for a few hours, distracted as they would be by their new video games and other gifts. It was all part of her plan to trust Emmett with more responsibility. She had left them alone with Emmett before, but only for quick trips to the grocery store and stuff. I could tell she was nervous. I gave Emmett a look over her head that clearly told him not to screw this up. I got a "trust me!" look in return, which made me nervous.

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While most people were trying to hit the post-Christmas sales, Bella had suggested that we go bed shopping. Apparently, the "weird" factor of doing it in her old bed was a little higher than I'd thought. I wasn't about to argue. I didn't mind keeping Mac's memory alive, just not in our bedroom. Even I had my limits. So we found ourselves in a furniture store, sitting on beds and giving them a little test bounce. I really liked the idea of picking out the bed that we'd be starting out our married life - and not to mention the fact that we'd be making love on it.

I noticed that every now and then Bella would give that ring on her finger a look and then give a little smile. I found myself wanting to hold her left hand, where I could let my own fingers trace over the shape of the ring. It was a good feeling, to know that we'd made an official commitment to each other. We were actually going to do this thing.

In the end, our shopping paid off and **we** were soon the proud new owner of a king-sized bed with a pillow top. I insisted on paying for it, since within six months it was going to be going into my house - our house - and that only seemed right. At first, she started to protest but then I kissed her into submission and she gave in. She made the arrangements to have it delivered while she was still on holiday from school. I asked her how she thought Emmett would handle it.

"Actually, I'll just treat it casually," Bella replied with a shrug. "If we don't make a big deal out of it, the odds are he won't either." She kissed my cheek. "You're very sweet to worry, but to a fifteen year old kid, it's probably just going to be furniture."

Bella was right again, which was no surprise.

Now that Bella was wearing my ring, New Year's Eve didn't loom in my mind. I was looking forward to it. Everything was suddenly much more relaxed. The decision had been made, long ago, the ring was finally on Bella's finger, we had a time frame, and the boys were adjusting. We celebrated 2009 quietly, kissing at the stroke of midnight - at home with the boys. The boys endured our kiss, even teasing us a little bit. Then they were sent off to their beds. Soon

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after that I tumbled into *our* bed, a new one, and we made love slowly - and very, very quietly. It was more of a challenge for Bella than for me. But the weird factor was gone and the only thing we worried about was not making too much noise.

I watched the boys, getting to know them on an even deeper level. We gently broached the subject of a baby, letting them know that it was a possibility. None of the boys made much comment, though I did see Jake get a speculative look in his eyes. I had a feeling we'd be fielding questions from him later.

Something in Emmett had changed. Bella and I talked about it. It was a combination of things, she guessed. There was Rose, and his care of her. He hovered over her like a muscle-bound guardian angel, helping her negotiate the rough waters of her grief. There was his growing acceptance of me and my role in their lives. The fight at school had been a turning point for us. He would always miss Mac, but he was starting to see that I wanted to act as a father to him and his brothers since his own father could not. Most of all, however, Bella noted that Emmett was rediscovering joy. The Emmett I had met so many months ago had been surly and taciturn. The new Emmett, or as Bella told me - the *old* Emmett - was funny and boisterous and a prankster at heart. He laughed loudly like his father; he teased with a good-natured lack of mercy, and he found humor in almost every situation. Bella ventured the guess that Emmett had learned that it was okay to be happy, even though he still grieved for Mac.

Seth had blossomed in the last months. It wasn't me, I knew that. But seeing Seth as he discovered music was a revelation. It was like watching someone fall in love and knowing it would be a forever thing. His voice was still cracking and rebelling, but I had snuck up on him one day, inadvertently, and heard him singing. Once his voice settled down, he would have a fine voice, deep and rough and soulful. When he played the guitar, he wasn't Seth the middle son, the peacemaker, the quiet one - he was just Seth, unique and special in his own right.

Sam, who was perhaps the most protective of Bella, seemed to relax a bit once I finally started stepping up into my new role in the family. At first, he reminded me of little things, like locking doors and making sure Bella

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remembered to do this or that. But in the weeks after our official engagement, Sam learned to let go a bit, showing more trust in me to be what Bella needed me to be. Luckily, Bella wasn't shy in revealing her needs in any capacity. If she needed me to be or do something, she simply told me her wants and expectations. Sam was finally able to stop trying to be the man of the house and be a kid. It wouldn't stop him completely, of course, because that was part of who he was, but it was nice to see him let go a bit.

And then there was Jake, my heart. It felt odd to think of him like that, but that was nothing less than the truth. Jake had stolen away a part of me without my permission and I was absolutely okay with that. No less than his mother, I had fallen in love with Jake too. Of all the boys, Jake was the most open. He confessed his little hurts to me, his fears, and his hopes. Because Jake was a talker, because he observed, and because he was a happy kid, I found myself learning about the family through his innocent but attentive eyes.

I learned how much Emmett changed after Mac's death and how unhappy that change made everyone, especially Jake. He told me how good it was to see Emmett smiling again, and laughing his big, booming Mac laugh. Jake told me that Seth often played his guitar, softly, late into the night. "So quiet you almost can't hear," he confided. "But I hear him." He grinned as he told me that his mother hummed while she made dinner again, like she had done a long time ago. "And she dances around too," Jake admitted with a rueful shake of his head. "I hope none of my friends see her doing that." He told me that Sam smiled more now, simply because their mother did.

It was through Jake that I finally felt comfortable in offering what I had to give. I continued Emmett's driving lessons and both of us finally reached a point where we didn't feel like we were going to pass out. He was learning to pay attention to his surroundings and I was learning to relax. They were hard lessons for both of us.

Strangely, it was Emmett who seemed to adjust to me occasionally spending the night with the most ease. Jake wanted to know why I didn't just sleep in his room and it took some delicate explanation to make him understand that, as much as I loved him, I preferred sleeping with his mother. Sam just appeared a

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bit embarrassed by it, while Seth didn't seem to care much one way or the other. I did try to lessen the impact by always dressing in sweat pants and a tee-shirt before I went downstairs.

Still, we were settling into new routines. I had driven the boys to school a few times, even gone in and picked up Sam when he got sick one day. I learned to make school lunches, which was more complicated than it sounded. Jake only ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at school. "Peanut butter on both sides of the sandwich," Bella instructed me with a smirk. "And only grape jelly." I paid attention because Jake would definitely tell me if I was "doing it wrong."

Seth and Emmett made their own lunches or bought them at school. Sam tended to forget some things. Bella called it the "absent-minded professor" syndrome. So Bella had to remind him to put a drink in his lunchbox or to grab a bag of chips. She took more control of Jake's lunch, or he'd pack Pop-Tarts and soda and cookies and consider it done.

Then the day came when Jake looked at me with his wide, dark eyes. "So...are you and Mom really gonna have a baby?"

It was always Jake who threw me. It was always his innocent but perceptive voice that cut through all of the bullshit and made us do the same. Bella was with us; we were shopping for Seth's birthday, which was at the end of January and just a week away. A month later and it would be Sam's turn - and I would have celebrated a birthday with all of them.

Bella looked at me and smirked and I just rolled my eyes at her. "Well, I don't know, Jake," I said. I was finally starting to feel more confident and was willing to wade into the deep and mysterious waters there were family life. I shrugged. "It's not completely up to us."

Jake blinked. "If you want a baby then you have a baby," he announced with all of the certainty of his eight years of life.

Bella snorted and gestured for me to continue. I could almost hear the unspoken challenge. *Yeah, let's hear how you're going to explain this, Cullen.*

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I looked at Jake. "Well, that's not always the way it happens, Jake. Sometimes people really, really want a baby but they can't have one."

He thought about this a moment. "And sometimes they don't want them and they have them anyway?" he guessed.

I nodded. "Yes, I guess that's true too."

Jake pondered that for a little while longer. "So...even if you and Mom want a baby, you might not have one?"

"Yeah, I mean, we don't know how things will work out. And I don't want to promise you something that maybe won't happen." I looked at Bella and gave her a little smirk of my own. See? I could do this. I had Dad skills.

Jake finally sighed and shook his head. "I really don't want to be the youngest forever," he told me. I could hear the unspoken admonition. *Get cracking, Cullen. And do your part.*

Unable to help herself any longer, Bella gave a little laugh and rescued me, distracting Jake with a discussion of what to buy Seth for his birthday.

~TBTA~

Alice had liked the numbers I sent her so now she and Bella spent time doing an Internet search for properties. They would weed out the ones that definitely wouldn't work for us and then give Jasper and me a short list. We spent what little free time we had going to different properties. We were on a first name basis with at least three realtors. It was getting frustrating.

"I just have this feeling that I'll know it when I see it," I told Bella one night. It was a sleepover night, my favorite. It was getting more and more difficult to return to my cold, lonely bed and listen to nothing but silence in the morning.

We were huddled under the covers, enjoying each other's warmth on a cold night.

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"You'll find it," Bella assured me. Then she smiled and kissed my ribs. "You found me, didn't you?"

I snorted. "Maybe I should have Emmett walk around and pick a window."

She gave me a playful slap. "Well, you know you owe him, right?"

"Yeah, I know," I admitted, kissing her temple. "He brought me to the best thing that ever happened to me, so yeah...I owe him."

She pulled me in close for another kiss and sleepover night became sex night too, which was the best kind there was. Bella slid over me so that she was straddling me. I watched, my mouth dry and my hands (and other parts) twitching as she tugged her tee-shirt over her head. While she did have some very sexy lingerie, most of the time she ended up wearing one of my tee-shirts and some panties. I thought that was her sexiest look anyway, so I had no complaints. I liked it when my shirts still smelled faintly of Bella. I liked the way her nipples poked out from beneath soft cotton, and the way the hem of the shirt just brushed the crease of her ass. She had a way of making a tee-shirt look very sexy.

She sat there, her breasts revealed to me, licking her lips. Impatiently, she pulled my shirt off too and ran her fingers along the band of my boxers teasingly. Then she closed her fingers over my dick and gave a little squeeze. She was going to be in charge tonight; I could see how it would be.

"What do you have in mind, Bella?" I asked in a low voice. She smirked when she heard the raspy note in my voice. That always meant she had turned me on.

Instead of speaking, she tugged my boxers down and I lifted my ass to assist in the effort. She was still straddling me so there was some laughter as she struggled not to fall off me. I held her steady, my thumb caressing the curve of her hip.

Leaning down, she kissed me, her breasts a warm, heavy weight on my chest. I groaned at the feel of her and she shifted her hips, putting my dick right at her

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entrance. Then she moved again and I was inside of her. "Fuck..." I hissed.

"That's the general idea," she teased and sat up.

She rode me then, fast and hard, and there wasn't damned thing I could do to slow down my orgasm. If it had been our first time together I might have died of shame. When Bella wanted something, she made damn sure she got it. I exploded with a muffled cry, gritting my teeth against the effort to be quiet. Her hand slid down her belly until she was fingering her clit, rubbing gentle circles on it and then she arched her back and came too, her body gripping at mine and making me shudder.

When it was over, she collapsed against me and yawned. "Now I can sleep..." she muttered.

"Nice to know I'm handy like that," I teased as I covered us up. She giggled and snuggled close.

Chapter 60: What Goes Around

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Author's Note: Thank you all for your good wishes. Early this week my mother went to the ER for severe pain in her leg. The next thing we knew, she was in an operating room where they removed it at mid-thigh. Needless to say, it's been an interesting week. For the next three weeks, I'm only going to promise updates twice a week. I have the project from hell due, a presentation to give, a mother to visit, and a granddaughter coming to visit me! But there will still be updates, just not QUITE as frequent. Thank you for your patience.

Chapter 60: What Goes Around

Seth turned thirteen at the end of January. Though Bella had protested at first, I finally convinced her that I should take him to the pawn shop and start looking at electric guitars. He got cash from his grandparents and his uncles and he wanted to see about an electric guitar. I told her that my gift to him would be the amplifier and to make up the cost of the guitar if he was short.

"He's really good, Bella," I told her. "Especially for not having played that long."

"I don't know..."

I went in for the kill. "You know he's getting to that age," I said.

"What age?"

I shrugged, playing it nonchalant. "The age for girls," I said briefly.

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Bella was one of those mothers who worried about her boys meeting the wrong girls with the same level of anxiety that most fathers save for attractive teenaged daughters. I thought it was adorable, until I realized that she was right. The wrong girl could get a boy into as much trouble as the wrong boy could get a girl into. That realization only gave me a whole new set of worries, though I was willing to milk it in this one instance. Seth was good and music, it was plain, was his "thing." For a middle kid, one of *four*, that was something important - having something that was just his. The fact that it was an interest we *s hared* was just as important.

"What's that got to do with guitars?" She sounded suspicious. She had *great* instincts.

"Well..." I shrugged again. "I'm just saying. I was so big into music that I really didn't have much time for girls when I was in high school...not for a while anyway." Then Stacy Spanetti and her big boobs had walked into my life and I was worried about finger placement on things other than a guitar. "And there are studies that say that kids who play an instrument do better in math." That was true. I'd read it somewhere.

Her eyes narrowed. "I'd love to call bullshit, but I read that too." She laughed and threw her arms around my neck. "Okay, but when I'm ready to tear my hair out because of the noise, I expect you to buy me ear plugs and give me foot massages."

A chance to touch her feet? Hell and yes. "Done," I agreed with a kiss of my own. "But you have to paint them my favorite color."

"Deal," she said with another kiss. It was a win/win as far as I could see.

So Seth ended up with a nice, gently used electric guitar and medium-sized amplifier. For the most part, he still preferred the acoustic, but he liked to play around with the electric one. When his brothers threatened to cut the chord to the amplifier, I set it up in the garage for him and told him he could do the same once we all lived at my house. Peace was restored.

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By the time Valentine's Day rolled around, I knew that I would have to confess one of my darkest secrets to her. I absolutely loathed Valentine's Day. In typical guy fashion, I balked a little at the forced nature of it all. But if "V" Day happened to be one of her favorites, then I would gladly assume the burden. Well, maybe not gladly, but I'd do it all the same.

Mase, the ass, went all out and showered Alyssa with bouquets of roses, wheelbarrows of chocolates, and cards that would have made a serial killer weep with sentiment. With them living in town, that meant that Bella would have something to compare my own pitiful efforts against. I knew I would come up wanting. I considered asking Masen to tone it down this year, but I honestly didn't want to give him the satisfaction. So I worried and fretted and listened to the guys at work, trying to decide how much was enough.

I was torn between blowing her away and the realization that if I set the bar too high I would be expected to do the same every year. Again, I would if I had to, but I really didn't want to. It was three days before the dreaded holiday when I finally just admitted that I needed to ask Bella what she expected and wanted. As my luck would have it, Valentine's Day fell on a Saturday.

On Wednesday, I arrived at Bella's house with four large pizzas, some beer and some soda. I was not above bribery. I wanted Bella in a soft mood when I broached the topic. The boys devoured the pizza, and it was a good thing I had put aside half a pie for Bella and me to share. She had three slices, I had two. Then I had two beers and she had one. She declared us even. The boys had homework or were otherwise occupied. They weren't nearly as vigilant in their efforts to chaperone us any more, and I had thoroughly enjoyed three more sleepovers since New Year's Eve.

We were sitting on the couch, kind of watching television. The house was never really completely quiet unless the boys were asleep, but the noise was minimal, for the boys anyway. "So...this Saturday," I began casually. I was the prince of cool when I had to be.

"Yeah?" Bella said, not really paying attention to me.

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"What are our plans?" Okay, I probably should have made plans and asked if they were okay with her. I rubbed my finger over her engagement ring. Shit. We probably needed to start making plans. Like serious, concrete plans.

"For what?" she asked.

"Uh...for Valentine's Day." To my shock, Bella made a face. I *knew* that face. It was the same face I made when the topic came up.

"Do we have to?" she asked, sitting up a bit.

"Uh...." The prince of cool had left the building.

"Why can't we just sort of hide out here that night?" Bella asked. "I'll make spaghetti or tacos or something." She frowned. "The restaurants will be crazy anyway."

"Okay?" I was at a loss. Didn't women live for that shit?

Bella rolled her eyes at me and settled down beside me again. She took my hand and twined her fingers with mine. "I'm not big into Valentine's Day," she admitted quietly. "My birthday? Yeah, shower me with presents." She grinned and brought my palm up to her lips. "Christmas?" She looked at her ring, glinting where our fingers were intertwined. "Well, it'll be hard to match this, but I expect you to give it a shot." She kissed me. "And on our anniversary, we will spoil each other absolutely rotten." Another kiss, this one on my jaw. "But Saturday? Let's eat in, send the boys to bed early, and eat chocolates off of each other in bed because chocolates are the only part of the holiday I like."

"Oh, baby," I muttered and sort of pinned her underneath me on the couch before I remembered that the boys were still awake and I had no business trying to get into her panties given our location. "Have I told you how much I love you? And how incredibly hot you are?"

She giggled. "Yes, but feel free to tell me again."

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And we shared our very first "Day That Shall Not Be Named" exactly as Bella had dictated - chocolate and all. And it was perfect, even if she did make me help her change the sheets before we fell asleep.

~TBTA~

Sam's birthday was February 28th. I had wanted to do something special for him, and I finally got an idea. With Bella's approval, I made the arrangements. He wouldn't be able to actually collect on his gift until the summer, but I had a feeling he would consider it worth the wait. We'd make a family vacation out of it.

We also set a date for the wedding. When we looked at our calendars, it became clear that mid-June would be pushing it. So it was decided that June 27th would be the date. I felt a small thrill when Bella circled the date on the calendar that hung in her kitchen. Then we called the boys down and told them the news. Em gave his mom a hug and shook my hand. Em was at that age where he found hugs to be awkward for the most part and Bella was as surprised as I was. Jake jumped up and down and asked if he could be in the wedding.

"You'll all be in the wedding," I said with a nod at Bella. "It won't be big, but everyone's in the wedding."

"Whose your best man gonna be?" Em asked.

"My brother, because if I don't make him the best man, he'll whine for the next decade." I nudged Emmett. "You know how little brothers are."

Emmett smirked. "Oh yeah, I feel your pain, believe me."

So by the time Sam's birthday rolled around, we had a lot to do and celebrate. He didn't get too much beyond the gift Bella and I had arranged. But when he opened up the envelope, he gaped for a moment and then looked at us. "I'm going to space camp? In Florida?"

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I nodded. "If you want, you don't have to go."

Sam just grinned. "Oh I'm going," he announced.

Masen shook his head. "Take Eddie with you," he told Sam. "He's always been into that kind of stuff. He's a big dork."

I gave Mase a quick tap on the back of the head. Alyssa did the same thing two seconds later. Masen rubbed his head and shot us both an injured look.

"I kind of like dorks," Bella admitted, giving me a kiss.

The boys all groaned. Masen made kissing noises, which earned him another tap from Alyssa. Jasper gave Alice a loud kiss just because. She laughed and their kids groaned. Even Rose rolled her eyes and she and Emmett shared a look of *"What are you going to do with them?"*

And life was good.

~TBTA~

The week after Christmas, I had put a picture of Bella and me and the boys by the Christmas tree on my desk. It hadn't taken long for word to travel that I'd gotten myself engaged over the holidays. Major Hutchinson said congratulations and then muttered something about "damned womanly intuition" that left me puzzled.

At first, there had been no end of ribbing from my buddies. "And another one bites the dust..." was the common refrain. I had heard that tune more times than I cared to count.

Even Thomas Reynolds stopped in, took a look at the picture, and grinned. "So it's true."

"What's true?" I still wasn't sure I had forgiven him for checking up on me or sharing what he'd learned with Bella. That guy - the one who had had casual

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sex -had been someone else and I didn't want him messing up things with Bella. Of course, even Bella had told me to get over myself and that, at our ages, it would have been pretty impossible not to come to the relationship with history. She told me that if I hadn't had a history, there would have been something wrong with me.

"Besides, I've got way more baggage than you," she teased.

"Yes, but at least yours means something," I muttered. Then she kissed me and told me to quit being a baby.

Still, this guy had caused me some uncomfortable moments. I frowned at him.

"You're going to marry Bella," Thomas said.

"Yes," I answered with a nod toward the picture.

"You love her?" Thomas asked and I rolled my eyes at him.

"No, I just thought I'd do something different and marry a woman with four kids for shits and giggles."

Thomas laughed. "Still sore because I checked you out?"

"No." *Yes.*

"Yes you are," he said. "But that's okay. I'd do it again because Megan and I care about Bella. I owe it to Mac to make sure that she's okay."

He sat down; making himself at home and I repressed a sigh. "And is she, according to you? Okay, I mean."

Thomas nodded. "Yes, she's okay, and so are the boys." He shrugged. "And that's all I was worried about."

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I leaned back in my chair. "I know you were watching out for her and I appreciate that." I grimaced. "As uncomfortable as it was."

"You're welcome," Thomas said with a grin.

"I didn't say thank you," I pointed out.

"You were getting ready to," Thomas ventured. "So I just saved us some time."

"You're a pain in the ass, did you know that?"

"Yeah, so my wife tells me," Thomas agreed with a grin.

"You remind me of my little brother," I said.

"Thanks," Thomas said.

"That *wasn't* a compliment," I told him with a smirk.

"I know," Thomas replied. "Besides, I don't just owe Mac, you know. I owe Bella. She saved my marriage."

He didn't sound like he was kidding and he must have seen my curiosity. You couldn't make a statement like that and expect not to follow it up with *something*.

"When my oldest son was born, he had colic," Thomas said. "Like really bad. He cried all night...and all day too it seemed. I was out on training missions for most of the first three months. It sucked for me, but it was way worse for Megan."

I had heard of colic - vaguely.

Thomas sighed. "Megan was losing her mind and the strain was starting to show in our marriage. I didn't blame her but there wasn't anything I could really *do*." He smiled at me. "Then when he was about three weeks old, Bella

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told Megan to bring him over and visit for a while. The next thing Megan knew she was settled into a bed, taking a nap, and Bella was taking care of Travis."

That sounded like Bella.

"And at least four days a week for the next five months, Bella bullied Megan into visiting and then she'd tuck her into bed for a nice three or four hour nap. Honestly, I think it saved Meg's sanity, and our marriage in the process. I've never forgotten what she did for us. I know for damned sure we'd never have had another one if Bella hadn't helped us out." Then he smiled. "Two years ago, Megan had a chance to pay it forward. One of the guys I was deployed with, his wife had a baby, and it was colicky. So Megan did what Bella had done for her. So you see, Bella didn't just help us, she helped that couple, too." He met my eyes. "Bella James is good people."

"I know." I did.

He got to his feet and I breathed a sigh of relief. "Hey, Megan works at a florist, and she might have mentioned Bella to her boss." I arched one brow at him. "Women do talk about shit like that, you know."

"Go on."

"Anyway, her boss said she'd do the flowers for your wedding at cost," Thomas said. "Her brother's jarhead, and as much as it pains her to help out someone in the Army, she's willing to overlook it."

I grinned at him. "I'll tell Bella," I promised.

"Good," Thomas said. He gave me a wave. "I'm sure I'll be seeing you again."

I repressed the moan that threatened at that thought. "Great." *Liar*. Then I thought of something. "Hey, Reynolds?"

"Yeah?"

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"Uh...do most...do most babies have colic?"

He looked startled for a moment and then gave a long, low whistle, shaking his head. "Damn boy...you've got it so fucking bad..."

I blew out an impatient breath. "Just answer the question."

"No," he answered with a grin. "No, they don't. Just remember, we owe Bella one, so... Well, let's just say if Bella had a problem with a crying kid then you'd probably find there are people out there willing to help her."

"Oh."

He walked over and clapped me on the back. "Just remember, it's only temporary, the crying thing."

"Okay." I really wanted him out of my office before he started prying. He gave me one pointed look and left.

We didn't know it then, but that offer of help from Thomas was only the start.

~TBTA~

The next thing I knew, Major Hutchinson's wife was setting a basket of muffins down on my desk. "Hello Sergeant Major Cullen," she said. I had always liked Mrs. Hutchinson. The sad truth was that some officers' wives were... Well, they were bitches. It was the whole big fish, little pond thing. Their husbands had some power so they liked to wield it. The good ones were great, a real credit to their spouses and the Army. They were the type of women who worked hard, didn't expect anything in return, and watched out for the younger women around them. There were those, however, that seemed to delight in showing everyone around them just how important they were. I hadn't really run into that from a female officer's husband. They pretty much stayed out of sight. It wasn't a comfortable truth, but there it was.

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Mrs. Hutchinson, however, represented everything good. She was kind and caring, and had a real knack for knowing when and where help was needed and when to butt out. Rumor had it that she'd cornered a sergeant one time whose wife had shown up to a function with some bruises that Mrs. Hutchinson didn't like. Three days later, that wife was back with her family in Oklahoma and her husband was facing charges. You didn't mess with Mrs. Hutchinson.

Still, I'd never known her to drop in for a visit with me. I'd met her, but she didn't show up very often, and never for very long - usually just to stop off something for the Major and then she was gone again.

"So... Barty tells me that you're engaged," Mrs. Hutchinson said.

I stared at her for a moment, shocked that my engagement was even a topic of conversation at their home. "Yes, ma'am," I agreed. "On Christmas Day."

"Oh, how romantic," she murmured with a pleased smile.

I returned the smile. "Thank you, Mrs. Hutchinson."

"Oh call me Carolyn," she insisted.

I hesitated. "All right then, Carolyn." Not a chance in hell. She'd remain Mrs. Hutchinson.

She gave me another pleased look, as if I was a dog who had just learned a particularly amusing trick. "So when's the big day?"

"June 27th," I told her.

"Where will you have the wedding?"

"Uh...I don't think we've picked a place yet." We had been lucky to settle on a date.

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She frowned at that and I figured I had given the wrong answer. "So you still need a venue then?" Another frown. "Aren't you cutting it close?"

A *venue*? Was a wedding even an occasion for a venue? Wasn't that sort of shit reserved for concerts and stuff? "Uh yes, ma'am." I guess we did and we were. Were we? Suddenly I felt very lost.

Her expression cleared. "Why don't you give me your Bella's phone number?" she asked. "I have some ideas I'd love to share with her." She smiled at me. "I'd tell you but if you're anything like Barty it would all be Greek to you." I smiled in relief. *Yes please. Let's not confuse my male mind with things like venues.*

I wrote it down and handed it to her, along with Bella's email address. Carolyn smiled at me and tucked it into her purse. "I had a very good feeling about you and your girl, you know." My surprise must have shown on my face because she laughed. "Never mind, it's not important," she said. She was at the door when she turned and gave me a very big grin. "By the way, I'll be ordering some pizza for you and your friends here."

"Uh thank you...?"

She shrugged. "I just won a bet, so you know... Found money and all that." Then she laughed and was gone and I had no idea what had happened, but I texted Bella and told her to expect a call from Mrs. Hutchinson.

Bella could handle it from there.

Chapter 61: A Bar by Any Other Name

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Thank you all so much for your good wishes. My mother is doing better than expected, though life remains a tad hectic. Thank you all so much for your care and concern. It made a rough week so much easier!

Chapter 61: A Bar by Any Other Name

Something about Bella's story must have touched a lot of lives. After Mrs. Hutchinson, it seemed that every week someone stopped by to see me and to tell me about something that someone wanted to do to help us with the wedding. I hadn't realized that our little love affair would appeal to so many. As Jasper said, "It's not often that a widow with four kids finds a guy willing to take them all on."

I supposed that I could understand that, because before Bella the idea would have boggled my mind too. But having lived it, I could only think that perhaps there were a lot of guys who were missing out on something wonderful. Jasper said that only proved I was a goner.

In some ways, the military family was hurting. The war was still dragging on and there were more and more of those triangular cases, more kids left without a parent, more spouses left at home, knowing that the one they loved wasn't going to walk in the front door ever again. There were more parents who were standing beside flag-draped coffins. And Bella had been one of the unlucky ones. Somehow, she had allowed me into her life and our story was kind of optimistic, at least that's what Jasper told me. It was kind of like a happily-ever-after that no one - not even us - had expected.

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I had less than two months left in the military and I was starting to get worried. I wanted to find "the" place for the bar and soon because I didn't like the idea of having nothing to do. I knew that I would quickly become a pain in the ass and I was afraid Bella might call the whole thing off if she saw how obnoxious I got when I was bored.

Then the first weekend in March, Jasper and I were staring at a storefront and it was like a light shone down from heaven to spotlight this particular hole in the wall. On the surface, it wasn't promising. But I sensed something...

Jasper looked at me and grinned. Alice and Bella were behind us, chattering away about the wedding.

"What do you think?" I asked Jasper. His grin just got wider.

"I think..." He shook his head. "I think we need to see the inside."

I sighed because I knew he was right. We couldn't make our decision based solely on the way the outside looked. I nodded at the real estate agent and she unlocked the doors. She had been the soul of patience with us, never once trying to hurry us into a decision. I had a feeling that we were finally going to reward her for that patience. I had a good feeling about this...

The inside was sort of a mess. It had been a bar, that much was obvious. So there wasn't a lot we'd have to do as far as outfitting it, which was a plus. But it had been neglected for a while. "As you can see, it's been sort of allowed to run down," our agent, Karen, said. "I actually used to come here when I was younger," she added with a slight smile.

"Small world, huh?" I asked.

She shrugged. "The guy who ran it was hilarious...older guy...used to watch out for the 'young ladies' as he said and make sure that the guys behaved themselves."

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Bella came up and held my hand. "It feels...right," she said with a shrug that told me she didn't know how else to explain it. I shared the feeling though. It was going to take a lot of elbow grease, but we had a lot of elbows.

Karen smiled. "It would be nice to think that this place wasn't empty anymore," she mused. "My friends and I had some good times here."

"What kind of bar was it?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Just a regular little joint, sort of an Irish pub kind of thing," she replied. "Much like what you've described to me."

Jasper and I had explained our plans to Karen in order to expedite our search. Between her efforts and those of Alice and Bella, Jasper and I had culled the list of properties rather efficiently.

We looked around, Alice taking notes the whole time. I had been a little shocked to discover what a sharp business brain was hidden behind the pretty face. She was insightful and assertive, and seemed to have an instinct for knowing just what questions to ask. It was a little intimidating, but I was very glad that Alice was on our side.

"We'll let you know," I finally told Karen. Jasper and Alice and Bella and I would have to discuss it in private, but I had a feeling we were all on the same page. I also wanted to consult with Masen on the location and how he felt it would impact our target customer base. It was odd seeing Masen in full-on business mode. He wasn't at all like the annoying little brother I knew. It was easy to see why his talents were so highly regarded. A little scary too.

We were all silent on the way back to Bella's house. All of the kids were at Bella's house with Emmett and Rose in charge. Rosalie and Emmett had been instructed that they were not to leave the younger kids alone even for a moment. As Bella told me, it wasn't so much that the younger kids would get into trouble but that Emmett and Rose would. Jake would keep an eye on them and he was a tattler and Emmett knew it. Thank God.

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We all pitched in to make some dinner, hamburgers on the grill along with some corn on the cob and potato salad. It was still cold outside, but Jasper and I told the girls we were tough. Then we went outside and froze our nuts off, but we'd never admit that.

The kids were loud at dinner, especially considering that there were eight of them. Then after dinner, Masen and Alyssa showed up with their two. Sheer chaos. The kids scattered to the four winds and the adults retreated to the back porch. It was cold but we all huddled in our jackets and made do. It was the only place that was semi-quiet, so we'd freeze and willingly.

"So...tell me about the property," Masen said.

Soon Jasper and I were telling Masen about the place we'd found and, for the first time, revealing our own thoughts about it. Alice and Bella chimed in every now and then, their comments different from ours but even more perceptive. They'd been giving this a lot of thought too.

The consensus? We all loved the property, for our own reasons.

"It sounds like you've found your place," Alyssa noted, taking a sip of wine and smiling at us.

I looked at Jasper. He paused for a moment and then shrugged and nodded at the same time. Alice clapped her hands like a little kid and then kissed Jasper on the cheek. Finally, I looked at Bella and she gave me a huge grin. I looked at Alyssa and Masen. "Yeah, I think we have."

Masen rubbed his hands together, pretty much looking like an evil genius with an agenda. "Okay, that's what I wanted to hear," he said. "I'll want to take a look at it to get a feel for how we want to do the marketing, but I've had some ideas..."

It was really the first time I'd seen Masen in advertising genius mode. He was impressive, very impressive. If Darth Vader had been in advertising, he would have been a lot like Masen Cullen. Galaxy domination and all.

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"Just a minute," Masen said and jogged into the house.

I looked at Alyssa and she just gave me a sly little smile. Clearly, she wasn't going to give anything away. A few minutes later, Masen ran back onto the porch, holding a huge portfolio under his arm. "Okay," he muttered as he placed it on the table around which most of us were seated. He unzipped it and opened it, spreading out a few large sheets of paper. "I've been thinking about the things you and Jasper have said about what kind of place you want the bar to be."

I looked at some of the drawings, and noticed Jasper picking up one. Masen had sketched the exterior of a bar on one of them. It looked like a "joint" - and it was exactly what I had had in my mind when I had allowed myself to dream of opening my own place. Jasper had a stunned look on his face and I expected that I didn't look any better. It was sort of like Masen could read minds or something - and it was scary as hell.

Masen glanced at us and rolled his eyes. "What? This is what I do, you morons. I'm good at it. I keep telling you that," he reminded me. "I have to be able to know that the client wants even when they can't tell me...or sometimes when they don't know themselves."

He was right. And he was good, very, very good.

"Okay, so you want a joint, a place that guys like you can come and enjoy a beer and watch a game, maybe play some pool or darts, right?"

Jasper and I nodded.

I heard the sliding glass doors open and I noticed that Emmett and Seth had joined us. I looked into the house and saw Rosalie and the twins approaching. Em peered over the table to look at the drawings Masen had done.

"So..." Masen continued after nodding at the boys. "We need to make sure that your target customer base knows what you are so that we can get them in the door. They'll come back because you'll serve cold beers at a fair price and

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they'll be comfortable there, but we need to get them in first. Right?"

Jasper nodded. I nodded.

Rose and the girls pulled up chairs and sat down behind Alice.

"The first thing we need is a name that will make them comfortable," Masen went on. "Nothing girly or ambiguous. We need something manly, masculine, and kind of simple - testosterone laden."

"Hey!" I protested and Masen just shook his head.

"No, you know what I mean. Don't get your panties in a wad," he admonished. Emmett chuckled.

And the rest of the kids found us, with Sam, Jake, Kyle, Alex, and Adam shuffling outside too. So much for trying to find a quiet place to do this. Well, that was okay too, and something I would have to get used to. Jake came to stand by me while Sam settled in beside his mother.

"I'd like you guys to think of a name for the bar first, and then I'll start doing some preliminary sketches of logos and shit like that." Alyssa nudged him. "*Stuff* like that," he amended with a quick look at the kids. Kyle and Alex just grinned, obviously used to his slips of the tongue.

"Any ideas?" I asked Jasper, who just shook his head.

"So something simple," I said with a pointed look at Masen. "Something simple for simple Joes like Jasper and me."

"Yeah, you're getting the idea."

"Joes?" Jasper suggested.

Masen immediately shook his head. "No, too cliché. I want something simple but not that simple. Besides, I had an idea to link some of the charities that go

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along with the military stuff to some of your menu items. Like for every "cup of joe" you order, so much money goes to this fund...whatever." He shrugged. "Anyway, you get the picture. Sort of paying it forward a little bit to a cause that obviously means a lot to all of you." He looked around the table. Jasper, Alice, Bella and I all nodded. Then Emmett did too. I remembered his work when we had volunteered to put together care packages. We needed to do that again. We had been slacking, letting life get in the way.

"Wait...menu items?" I asked, finally picking up on what he'd said.

Masen grinned. "Nothing fancy, just real simple fare. I figure if you do that you'll get some guys right after work. They'll come to have a sandwich or a burger, and hopefully they'll stay to have a few beers later on." He picked up another drawing. "And I was thinking about having some military memorabilia scattered around, even some pictures of real guys like you two... You know, *real* soldier stuff. The genuine article, not some staged Hollywood crap." He gestured toward me. "Like some of those pictures you used to send Mom and Dad of you and your buddies acting like morons."

"How much more money are we talking to set up a small kitchen?" Alice asked.

"I've got some ideas for that, but let me get back to you. I don't anticipate that it'll be a problem," Masen said evasively. "For now, let's get back to the name thing."

"Tell us what you think we need," I said, knowing I would never live down those words later.

Masen grinned at me. "Okay, I think a one syllable name will work best. Something masculine, nothing that's gender neutral. We could go with Ed's Place, which would kind of be perfect."

"No way," I said.

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Masen held up his hand. "Let me finish. It would be perfect except for two things...it would sort of shut out Jasper here." Jasper shrugged. "And...I know my brother would be called Ed all the time and he'd get cranky. I don't care to have him cranky all the time and I'm sure Bella doesn't either." Bella nudged me. I rolled my eyes and shut up.

"So.... It should be simple and straight forward and something that guys like you would feel comfortable with - something like Joe, but not. If you know what I mean." Masen looked around at us all expectantly, like we should have the perfect idea floating around in our heads.

Jasper tapped his lip with his finger while Bella and Alice frowned thoughtfully. Then Emmett gave a huge sneeze. Crap, was he getting sick? Did he look flushed? I looked at Bella but she was preoccupied. Then Emmett rubbed the back of his neck and I was reminded of seeing Mac in one of their home movies. He looked a lot like his father all the time, but he had several of Mac's mannerisms too, and that always heightened the resemblance.

Suddenly, I had an idea. I cleared my throat.

"Uh...so something short and clearly masculine that makes soldiers feel comfortable?" I reiterated.

"Well, not just soldiers," Masen said. "But yeah, regular guys. You're not looking to target the caviar crowd."

I looked at Emmett. I motioned him close and he moved toward me, clearly puzzled. He leaned down when I quirked my finger. I whispered my idea in his ear and he looked surprised. He paused for a moment and then nodded. I looked at Bella who had obviously guessed my intention.

Then I was locking eyes with Masen. "How about 'Mac's Place'?"

He blinked at me. I looked at Jasper, who was just smiling and nodding like he had been expecting that all along.

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"Well..." Masen said, clearing his throat and glancing at my boys. "Uh..."

"What do you say, boys?" I asked them. "How would you feel about that?"

They all shared a look that meant they were doing that silent-brother-communication thing. Then as one, they all nodded.

"I'd say that's a yes," I observed.

Masen nodded. "Well actually yeah, 'Mac's Place' would work perfectly for what you have in mind."

So it was that our new business venture had a name. It would be 'Mac's Place.' Jasper and I grinned at each other. Then Alice piped up. "So...what were you saying about the cost of a kitchen and financing that?"

Masen twitched, shifting from super cool advertising superhero to little brother in the link of an eye. "Well..." he looked at Alyssa. "Lys and I have discussed this, so it's all up to you two." He pointed to Jasper and me. "Well, here's the thing... When we moved here, my salary went up but our living expenses went way down. We bought a smaller house so that the kids could be close to each other, and the cost of living is just lower here, much lower."

I had a feeling that I knew where this was going.

"So, what I propose is this..." He pulled out some other papers from his back pocket, just a few, and unfolded them, pointing to some numbers. "If I was a minority partner, say...twenty percent...then that cash - put in up front - could finance the addition of a kitchen. You wouldn't lose control of Mac's Place and I'd be an official partner."

"Masen, that's really nice, but-"

Masen shook his head. "I know...you think I'm doing this just to help you out, right big brother?" He tapped the sheets of paper again. "And yeah, if I thought you needed it, I would help out just because you're my brother and you've

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always watched out for me. But I'd honestly like to think we could make this work. One of the biggest problems with starting a new business is a lack of start up capital. People usually underestimate just how much cash it takes to get a business running, they don't take into account unexpected expenses - and there are *always* unexpected expenses - they even forget that they'll need money to live on." He pointed to me and then to Jasper. "But you guys seem to have all of that in mind when coming up with your plans." He smiled at Alice. "And what *you* don't remember, Mrs. Whitlock seems to see. So I've got a good feeling about this. A really good feeling, and it's that little itch that I've learned to listen to over the years. Trust me...I'm good at what I do, and I've got damned good instincts for this kind of stuff."

Jasper gave me a look and all I could do was shrug. The numbers I had glanced at were impressive, of course I didn't get a very long look before Alice had snatched them up and was inspecting them. She finally gave a nod of approval. I held out my hand to Masen, and then Jasper did the same.

"Welcome to Mac's, partner," I said.

~TBTA~

Later that evening, I wandered up to Emmett's and Seth's room. I was not surprised to find all four boys gathered there. I knocked on the door and a chorus of voices told me to "Come on in!"

Jake was sitting by Seth on his bed while Sam was curled up with Emily on Emmett's bed. Emmett was leaning on his desk, as was his habit. "Hey guys," I said. I stuck my hands in my pocket, unsure how to broach the subject.

Seth smirked. "Yeah, it really is okay to name the bar after our Dad. It's kind of cool, actually."

My eyes shot up to his and then each of the other boys. They all nodded, seeming amused at my situation. "How'd you-"

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"Dude, you check with us on everything to do with Dad," Emmett observed. "We've noticed."

I frowned. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No," Emmett replied. "Just letting you know that you don't need to...freak out so much." He looked at his brothers and got three nods in return. "We're not going to break down into tears every time you mention him."

Jake stuck his tongue out at Emmett, who ignored him.

"What Emmett is trying to say, and failing so miserably at, is that while we appreciate you being careful, we really are capable of hearing our father mentioned in conversation without a complete mental breakdown," Sam offered in his usual manner. Sam was polite, always, but he didn't beat around the bush.

"Oh..." I looked down at my feet. "Okay." Emmett and Sam had inherited Bella's blunt streak. It was one of the best *and*, at the same time, one of the most disconcerting things about her. If she opened her mouth, I never had to wonder if she was telling me what she really thought about anything. Sometimes it was just getting her to open up in the first place. I, on the other hand, seemed unable to shut up at times.

It was just one of the reasons we made such a great team. One of many, many reasons.

"Okay then," I said and turned to go.

"Could we ask you a question?" Emmett's voice stopped me.

I turned around. "Sure, you know you can."

He looked at his brothers again and got the nod. Whatever it was, they had already talked about it. That was their habit. I thought they had learned to hash things out between them first so that they didn't burden Bella too much. And

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that was just one of the many, many reasons I loved them. They were, despite all the racket and the reckless streaks, really good kids.

"Uh...are you spending the night again?"

I swallowed hard, wondering if I was about to hear all of their reasons why my overnight visits weren't such a good idea. And I wondered what I'd say in return. I didn't have a damned clue. "I had planned on it..."

Emmett's eyes shot to Seth, some sort of message passing between them. "It seems like you're here most Saturdays." There was no clue how they felt about that. They were channeling their Charlie Swan at the moment.

"Yeah..."

"So..." Emmett sighed. "We were just wondering when you and mom were going to make it official and move in together already." His words were blunt, but his tone wasn't hostile.

I could only stare in shock.

Damn. Called out again.

"Uh..." I cleared my throat. "To be honest, we hadn't really planned on that."

It was Emmett's turn to be shocked. "Really?"

"Yeah," I answered with a shrug. "We didn't feel it was...appropriate... you know...with you boys..."

Emmett snorted and shook his head, crossing his arms over his massive chest. Shit, the kid was bigger than me in the chest already. "Uh...I hate to break it to you, but this is 2009, you know."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Yeah, I know."

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"So...I think it's safe to say that we wouldn't be exactly..."

"Scandalized," Sam piped up.

Em nodded. "Yeah, we wouldn't be *scandalized* if you two decided to like actually live in the same house before the wedding."

I felt my face grow warm...and then hot. "Okay..."

Emmett shook his head. "Anyway, run it by Mom," he said. "We just wanted you to know that if you were holding back because you were afraid it would piss us off then you don't need to worry."

I frowned at him. "This is...unexpected."

"Yeah, what can I say? I'm a product of my times." He smirked at Seth who just shook his head. "We kind of expect people to live together before they're married. We're weird like that."

I walked out of that room not quite sure of what had just happened, and equally unsure of how I would bring up the subject with Bella. But I was completely certain that I wanted to.

Chapter 62: Good Cop Bad Cop

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: It seems everyone is divided on whether it was a good idea to name the bar after Mac. I like that actually, because it means you care enough to let me know how you're feeling about what I've written. I can tell you this, the bar name was decided back in the first few chapters when Edward first mentioned opening a bar. I'll also tell you that the bar will figure quite heavily in one of the boys' lives, but that is included in Emmett's and Rosalie's story because we'll still be seeing these same characters. And yes, that story line is all worked out - for all of these characters plus a few more. My own personal view is that it is a nice way to make the boys feel involved and to honor the memory of the man who created the family you've come to love. I'll just add that you need have no fear that Edward will fade into the background and suffer in comparison to Mac's memory. Our boy is about to step up his game all around.

Chapter 62: Good Cop/Bad Cop

It was Sunday, the morning after the boys had asked me why we weren't living together already. It was a good question. Why *weren't* we living together? I wanted us to. I could admit that, even though I'd never said so to Bella.

At first, I had discounted the idea, no matter what the boys said. If Bella had wanted us to live together, surely she would have said something. After some consideration, however, I had to rethink that. It was entirely possible that Bella, like me, had been reluctant to put it on the table because she was afraid of what the boys would think.

They had been right, however, when they said that living together before

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marriage was nothing "scandalous" any more. It made sense in a lot of ways, both practical and not. On the practical side, we could put the house on the market sooner, giving us more time to sell it. I knew that spring was the best season to sell a house. I had dated a real estate agent for a while and she had shared that little tidbit with me. We were heading straight into spring, so it would be a good time. I would also have to help her get it ready to sell. There would be painting to be done, small repairs, stuff like that.

Moving in together now would also give the boys time to adjust to a new house, a new routine. It would give Bella and me the opportunity to learn all of each other's little quirks and habits. My yard was fenced, so it was ready for Emily. I had four bedrooms. I could easily convert my now office into another bedroom for one of the boys. They were getting to an age, especially Emmett and Seth, that they might appreciate their own rooms. As it was now, Emmett and Seth could have their own rooms, while Jake and Sam would continue to share. I toyed with the idea of converting half of the garage into a bedroom. Eventually, Emmett might like having his own space, somewhat removed from the chaos of the other boys.

Far from practical, but even more important, was the fact that my house wouldn't be empty any more. It would go from "my house" to "our home." I wanted that, and I wanted it now. So I decided just to put my cards on the table and let Bella think about it. She wasn't going to jump on it, no matter how she felt about it. She'd have to consider it from every angle first. That was okay. I could wait. Well, I *would* wait.

We were just cuddled up on the couch, watching some real life crime documentary. Bella was scary smart when it came to figuring out who "did it" when we watched these shows. She knew more about forensics than I was entirely comfortable with, as I had teased her many times. "You could kill me, hide my body, and no one would ever know."

"Just remember that," she warned me with a kiss.

So now I wanted to bring up the moving in thing and I tried to figure out how to do it. Just go for it, my inner voice said. My dick agreed, mostly because it

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would give him a lot more access to Bella's girly parts.

"The boys said something interesting last night," I finally murmured, feeling like a teenager asking his parents to stay out past curfew.

"Yeah?" She was distracted, sifting through the clues the narrator was giving. She was getting close to figuring it out; I could tell by the look on her face.

"They uh..." I cleared my throat and Bella turned to look at me, her detective work forgotten for the moment. "They asked why we weren't living together yet."

Her eyes grew wide. "Really?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I said. "They told me that they were okay with it and that they were kind of surprised *we* hadn't brought it up."

"Huh," she murmured. I could see that brain of hers working at a feverish pace, and I had a feeling she wasn't trying to figure out who had done it any more.

~TBTA~

The next Saturday found us at Mrs. Hutchinson's Garden Club. It was the "venue" that she had offered to us. I could tell, by the remarks of other people, that everyone felt that Bella and I were cutting it close. When I asked her about it, she just shrugged and kissed me. "These things have a way of working themselves out," she said quietly. "As long as I have you and the boys and our families and someone to make it legal...I'm good."

Even Alyssa, who didn't seem to often lose her cool, was amazed at Bella's composure. Since I was completely out my depth anyway, I just bowed to Bella in the matter.

Then this week, after a discussion with "Carolyn," Bella had declared that it was time to start making some decisions. I felt pretty much like Bella did about the matter, give us our friends and families and a legal document and I'd

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consider the wedding a success.

I was therefore surprised when I actually found myself asking questions about the place as we walked through it. There was a garden that Mrs. Hutchinson said could accommodate about sixty guests and there a banquet room for the reception. There was a small stage and dance floor as well as a well equipped kitchen.

Bella fell in love with the garden and we decided that, unless the weather didn't cooperate, we'd have an outdoor wedding. There was no need to look any further because, as Mrs. Hutchinson had told us, it was perfect.

Mrs. Hutchinson had met us there, showing us around and chatting with Bella. It was obvious that those two had been in contact more than once from their conversation. I wondered if the Major knew.

When Bella excused herself to find the restroom, Mrs. Hutchinson turned to me and gave me a wide smile. "She's beautiful, your Bella," she said.

I nodded and couldn't help but smile back. "Yeah."

"You've made her very happy," Mrs. Hutchinson noted.

"She's done the same for me," I admitted with a shrug.

"You know, you two are the talk of the base," Mrs. Hutchinson leaned in a whispered.

"Really?" That was a surprise. Not that I was completely unfamiliar with the grapevine, but I hadn't expected our relationship to even make a blip on the radar.

Mrs. Hutchinson laughed and shook her head. "You really have no idea how romantic all of this is, do you?"

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"Aren't all marriages supposed to be romantic?" I asked, feeling slightly confused.

She patted my arm, reminding me of my mother when she knew I just didn't quite get what she was saying. "Yes, dear, they are, but yours..." She gave a little sigh and touched her heart. "Let's just say that yours is special."

Then Bella returned and our conversation was over.

We had a venue. We had a florist. We had a date. We even, thanks to my buddy Dewey, had a caterer. He knew a guy who knew a guy who owned a restaurant. Things were finally coming together.

~TBTA~

Three days later, Bella texted me. **Can you come by tonight?**

Like she could stop me. **Sure. What's up?**

Nothing serious. Just need to talk to you.

Every man knows that nothing good ever came of those words, so I spent the rest of the day anxious and nervous and cranky. One of the younger guys told me that I was turning into Bridezilla. I wasn't amused.

It seemed an eternity before I was pulling up into Bella's driveway. I waited in the truck for a second, expecting to see Jake's face as he opened the door. Huh...no Jake. I got out, feeling concerned. What if he was sick?

Well, if he was sick you moron then Bella would have taken him to the doctor.

Still...

I opened the door and the house was strangely quiet. Not silent, the house was never silent really, not with four boys. But I could only hear the muffled sounds of the boys upstairs and Emily was nowhere in sight, so Sam had to be

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up there. I guessed that the others were there too, by the sounds of things. I was just about to call for Bella when she walked out of the kitchen, looking tired.

"Is something the matter?" I asked as I pulled her close. I leaned down and gave her a kiss and felt my body stirring in response. *Down boy*, I reminded my dick. Bella had something on her mind and there would be no sexual escapades until we'd dealt with it. I had learned that months ago.

"No," she said and then she sighed. "Kind of, nothing serious, but..."

I walked over to the couch and pulled her into my lap and let her just snuggle against me for a moment. Finally, she sighed again and reached into her pocket and pulled out a note. "What's this?"

"Read it," she said.

I was starting to feel really, really nervous but I unfolded the paper.

When I read what it was I wanted to laugh with relief. One look at Bella's face told me that was the wrong reaction. "So...we just fix this, right?"

She sighed a little and pulled the paper from my hand. "It says right here that Jake isn't paying attention in class, he's talking too much, he's being disruptive, and he's daydreaming."

"So...we don't fix it?" I was unsure of what she wanted me to say - or do.

Her expression gentled. "Sorry, I should have led into this. *We* can't fix it. *Jake* has to fix it. But *we* need to find out what's going on and why it's going on."

"So he can fix it?"

She smiled and kissed me. "Yes, so he can fix it. So...our job is to find out what sort of bug is up Jake's ass and figure out what the hell is going on."

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"That's a lot of cussing," I teased. "I'm not quite sure we should phrase it that way when we talk to Jake." I started to stand up, expecting her to slide off my lap. At her look I sat back down. This was way more complicated than I had anticipated, but I did feel kind of warm and gooey that she'd included me.

"Slow down there, cowboy," she mocked. "We have to decide what we're going to say and what his punishment should be."

"Punishment?" I didn't like the sound of *that* at all. This was Jake. Shit. Why couldn't it have been Emmett? He didn't do puppy dog eyes. He did surly, cranky, and added some eye rolling. That I could handle. But the puppy dog eyes? I had a feeling that this was going to be more painful for me than for him.

"He can't behave like this in school," Bella noted.

I thought about that and as much as I wanted to say that Jake could act any damned way he wanted in school as long as he didn't hit me with the puppy dog eyes, I didn't. I sighed. "Okay, you're right."

"But most of all we need to find out why it's happening," Bella reminded me.

I paused. I had a horrible thought. "You don't think it's... *us*, do you?"

Bella immediately shook her head. "No, I've heard him talking to my dad and brother and the little guy is over the moon excited about us." She frowned. "It's something else."

She had deadly accurate mothering instincts. She could sniff out a lie at fifty paces and see through walls. I trusted her on this one. Bella looked at me. "I think a week with no video games should do the trick, unless it's just downright rebellion." She tapped at her lip. "In which case, we'll have to be more drastic."

Please, God, not anything worse than a week without video games. I won't be able to stand it. "He's gonna hate that," I muttered. A sad Jake was a pitiful sight. It was kind of like seeing an abused Basset Hound puppy, nothing

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sadder in the world.

I tried to use my own puppy dog eyes but Bella just ignored them. Damn, she was good.

Bella laughed. "Yes, he will. And that's the point. He needs a little reminder when he's tempted to goof off or cause problems in class; he needs to remember why that's not a good idea."

"Okay," I grumbled. I really didn't want to do this. But I knew I had to. This was all part of the parenting deal. The sucky part, but unavoidable. I knew Bella wouldn't let me wriggle out of this by not talking. She would expect me to be an active participant and for us to present a "united front."

I wasn't looking forward to it.

Then we went up to Jake's room and she knocked on the door. "Come in," I heard Jake say. He even *sounded* sad. I steeled myself for the eyes.

When I peeked in, it was even worse than I expected. The kid had been crying! I was done for. I gave Bella a look that pleaded for a stay of execution but she only gave me a tiny shake of her head. I could practically see her thoughts.
Man up, Cullen.

I didn't want to man up. I wanted to curl up with Jake and tell him that we'd change his teacher and get him out of that mean old biddy's class. I almost did it, too. Then I got a look at Bella's face and I knew this was my moment to step up to the plate or spend the rest of our lives in the dug out. I took a deep breath.

Don't get sucked in by the eyes. Don't get sucked in by the eyes. Don't get sucked -

Shit. The eyes were like an Imperial tractor beam.

"Jake," Bella began gently. I had a feeling that her tone was as much for my benefit as for Jake's. I appreciated the effort. "What's going on in school,

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sweetie?"

*The teacher is a bitch and doesn't deserve the honor of teaching our Jake.
Okay, that might be a bit extreme.*

Jake looked at me. I smiled at him encouragingly. "I dunno," he finally answered with a shrug. Then he looked away from us. He hated me. I should go down to that school and tell her to leave Jake alone, that's what I should do.

"Jake," Bella warned quietly. "How do we feel about lies in this family?"

His dark eyes flickered up toward hers and then to me. "Don't like 'em," he said.

"That's right," Bella said. "Even when something is going to get us in trouble, or maybe hurt, we have to tell the truth, right?"

He shrugged. Clearly, he wasn't sure about that. Neither was I. I tried to look wise and certain and absolutely in agreement.

Bella pulled him into her arms. If we were doing good cop/bad cop, then I was getting stuck with bad cop. I didn't like that. I looked at Bella. She just kissed the top of Jake's head so I reached out and ruffled his hair. He buried his face in Bella's shoulder.

Shit, I really *was* the bad cop.

Then a small, grimy hand came out and patted my arm as if he knew I was losing my mind. That teacher was going *down*.

"Jakey," Bella whispered. "Talk to me...talk to *us*..."

"I don't like school," Jake said.

So we'd homeschool him. Other families did it. Right? We'd homeschool straight through to college. Problem solved.

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"Jake, why don't you like school?"

I don't know, because it's school? I kept that observation to myself.

"It's..." He sighed and lifted his head up, giving his mother the fully whammy with the eyes. Bella was stronger than the Hulk though when it came to stuff like that. She gave him a warning look. "It's boring," Jake finally said with a frown. "I get all my work done and then I have to wait for the other kids and they take *forever*..." His frown got deeper. "I get bored so I just..." He shrugged. "I just do stuff because I'm bored. I *hate* being bored."

It was true. He did hate being bored. I wondered if I should remind Bella of that, but one look at her face had me keeping my mouth shut. I paused for a moment and decided that I needed to jump into the fray in a constructive way. "Jake?" I asked quietly. "Why are you bored?"

"It's all stuff we learned last year, or the year before..." Jake replied. "We're just doing the same old stuff...over and over again."

Bella's expression grew thoughtful. "Okay, Jake, I tell you what," she said. "I'll talk to your teacher about you being bored." Jake grinned. So did I. "But..."

His smile fell away. Mine did too.

"You can't disrupt the class, no matter how bored you are," Bella told him, cradling his sad, little face in her hands. "How would you feel if one of my students was making my job harder?"

He thought about that for a moment. "I wouldn't like it," he admitted quietly.

Bella smiled. "I know you wouldn't," she said. "So...to help you remember that you have to be well behaved in class, Edward and I have discussed it." His dark eyes flashed to mine and I tried to mimic Bella's firm but loving expression. I probably looked constipated instead, but I gave it a shot. "We're taking away your video games for a week."

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I'll be honest, I had expected an explosion of protests and pouting. Instead, Jake heaved a sigh and his little shoulders sagged. I reminded myself that this was a lesson Jake had to learn. There would be lots of time in his life when he wouldn't particularly want to do something, but that didn't mean he could just not do it. I had seen the effects of no discipline often in the Army. Parents handed over kids who had never known true discipline or consequences, and then were surprised when their babies had a hard time adjusting to the structure, routine, and obedience that the military life required. I didn't want that rude awakening for Jake, no matter what he chose to do in life. I had seen those kids floundering when it came to being out in the real world.

Suddenly, I got it. I got why Bella was having this talk with Jake, and why she was taking away his video games. I understood why she was willing to endure the sad little face and the inevitable sulking. It really *was* for his own good. I remembered my mother saying that, and I had kind of blown it off. But now, trying to be this kid's father - for all intents and purposes - I got it.

And that made it so much easier. I was going to be his father, and I was going to do it right. I had been given a huge responsibility, but I was up to it. They needed me and I needed them, and sometimes they would need me to do what was right even when it wasn't easy on either of us. These weren't just Mac's kids anymore, they were mine too, and I had a responsibility to them and to myself to do the job. I had to step up my game. I had to make my place in this family. It was both my right and my obligation. I had shouldered it willingly and now it was time get in the game.

I patted his shoulder. "Your mom is right, Jake. We both know that you're a smart kid, and we love you. Nothing will ever change that. But you need to behave for your teacher. Do you understand?" I channeled my dad, making my expression mirror his when he had talked to Masen and I about one screw up or another. I let him know that I loved him, but that we wouldn't be moved on the issue.

He studied my expression and then his mother's, and finally gave a little nod. "Okay," he muttered morosely.

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Bella gave him a hug and then I did too. "I love you, buddy," I whispered.

When we closed the bedroom door behind us, Bella breathed a sigh of relief. For the first time I saw the strain appear on her face. She looked at me. "Yeah, in case you're wondering, it never gets easier."

I shook my head and leaned in to kiss her. "You're a magnificent mother, Bella. I'm so very, very grateful that I've got you to teach me how to do this. Because if I was left to my own devices, I'd be a complete and utter failure."

She smiled and drew me in for a kiss. "Nah...you'd figure it out. You're a smart guy. You picked us, didn't you?"

I laughed. "Best choice I ever made," I affirmed.

"Come here," she said. "And kiss me again."

So I did.

We had survived my first bout of real parenting, and it felt pretty damned good.

~TBTA~

The next day I got a text. It was one of those little messages that changes your life, though it seems pretty casual on the surface.

Met with real estate agent. Putting house on market. Want some roommates?

It was so typical of Bella to make a joke of such a momentous decision. I loved that about her, even when it made me crazy and threw me off center. I grinned and gave a whoop. The guys just looked at me like I was an idiot. I didn't care. My baby was moving in with me.

Chapter 63: For Sale

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Chapter 63: For Sale

It probably wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that I raced out of work that day. My days had gotten shorter since I was so damned close to my separation date. I could smell freedom and it was sweet. I had loved my life in the Army. It had been good to me, given me skills and experience that nothing else could equal.

But its season was done and the civilian life beckoned. Soon, very soon, I wouldn't be driving home to an empty house at the end of the day. I would open that door and be assaulted by the sounds and sights and smells of a family. I couldn't fucking wait.

My tires might have screeched when I pulled up into Bella's driveway. I stood there for a moment, looking at the sign in the yard.

" For Sale"

It was real. We were really doing this. I was going to have Bella in my bed every night. I was going to hear the sounds of the boys tromping up and down my stairs every day. I would take Emily for walks around the neighborhood. We'd stop in and visit with Mr. Hoyt. He'd chat with Bella over the fence and laugh at the boys' antics in the backyard. Emmett and the other boys would join me when the warmer weather came in helping Mr. Hoyt keep his yard up. This summer, the boys could walk out into the back yard and jump in the pool.

We'd have cook outs and invite our friends and family. The boys would have

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their crap spread all over the house and Bella would pick out some curtains that I really couldn't stand but I'd put up with them because she liked them. We'd argue over the toilet seat and who was hogging the covers. We'd battle for control of the remote and I'd trip over Star Wars toys in the middle of the night, stubbing my toe and cursing a blue streak.

It was going to be fucking perfect in its imperfection.

Then the front door opened and Jake flew out, his small face bright and a big grin making me smile in return. He had been handling his punishment well, making my own resolve that much easier. He launched himself at me and I barely caught him in time. I swung him around for a moment and then put him on his feet. He pointed to the sign.

"Look! We're gonna move in with you!" he announced.

"Yeah, I'm really glad, buddy," I said, ruffling his hair.

"Me too," Jake said, tugging at my hand. Bella was the doorway. I pulled her into my arms and gave her the kind of kiss I usually reserved for our private time. This was a moment of celebration after all. When I finally pulled away, we were both breathing a little hard and Jake had gone into the house ahead of us, trying to give us some privacy I suspected. God, I loved that kid.

"You've made me a very, very happy man," I whispered.

"So I see," she teased and shoved her hips against mine just a little bit. A tiny taste of what we'd share later that evening.

"You always surprise me," I said with a smile.

She shrugged. "Yeah, well, that wasn't actually how it was supposed to go down, but..."

"Plans have a way of getting derailed around here," I noted.

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She rolled her eyes. "Tell me about it." She giggled and kissed me lightly on the cheek. I pouted for a moment and she kissed me on the lips, a chaste kiss but a move in the right direction anyway. "So Karen came over and we were talking and she said it would be better to get a move on things and hit the season for buying. People want to get settled into their new houses and be ready for the new school year." Bella smiled. "I can understand that, and it made sense. And since the boys had already given us a kick in the ass to get us moving..." She shrugged again. "I figured why not?"

"Why not, indeed," I agreed. I wrapped some of her hair around one hand, letting it slide between my fingers. I concentrated hard on what she was saying and tried to ignore the image of my hands buried in her hair while her mouth - Okay, stop it.

"Then I got excited that we were actually doing this and I sent the text, and after I sent the text I started to worry that I'd pushed too far too fast and-"

"Bella?" I interrupted.

"What?"

"I'm thrilled, and if I wasn't, I never would have brought it up. Okay?"

She sighed and rested her head against my chest. "Okay."

I laughed and kissed the top of her head. "All right, now that that's settled, let's go in and see our boys."

Her eyes were shining when she looked up at me. "Okay."

We walked into the house, my arm around her waist and saw the boys standing on the stairs. "About time," Emmett muttered. "I thought you guys were gonna kiss out there until tomorrow morning."

Bella sighed and gave me a long-suffering look. "Do you see what you're going to live with?"

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I looked at the boys, their faces so familiar now, and I smiled. "Yeah," I said. "Yeah I do."

~TBTA~

At dinner that evening, the boys launched into what I could only describe as a strategy meeting. They wanted to know when they were moving. Would it be soon? Yes. Was Emily safe around the pool? Yes, she was a Lab. She was made for water. Would they have to switch schools? Happily, no. Would Kyle and Alex be over a lot? Yes. Would Masen. Yes, unfortunately. Okay, it wasn't bad. It was just habit. Emmett gave me a nod of commiseration. He understood my pain.

But first and foremost on their minds was the assignment of rooms. I had given Bella a heads up earlier, letting her know my thoughts on the matter, and she had agreed. Now, I just had to make my proposal to the boys. I had a feeling they'd be on board, but they had surprised me before. I was quite sure that they were capable of doing so again.

"So..." Emmett began the talk as was appropriate given his position as spokesman for the boys as a group. They all deferred to him when it came to moments like this, and it wasn't just because he was the oldest. "We'd like to know some of the details on the move, but most of all, we want to know who gets which room." His brothers all nodded at the same moment, as if on cue. I had to keep from laughing.

I leaned forward, putting my elbows on the table and ignoring all the years of my mother's instruction that bad habit. "Okay, here are my thoughts on the subject." I looked at Emmett. "I was thinking you could take the room that's my office now." Emmett frowned.

"But that's the second smallest room," he protested. "Seth and I will be crammed in there like sardines."

I smirked. "I said *you*, Emmett, not you and Seth."

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"My *own* room?" Emmett asked in disbelief. For a kid that was one of four, having your own room was kind of like...a fucking miracle. Especially when your folks were just regular people who couldn't afford to buy a mansion.

I nodded, pleased that I had thought to offer it. For now, Emmett and Seth would be the only ones to get their own room. We had decided to delay bringing up finishing off part of the garage. We'd see how the boys handled the new living arrangements first. And, as Bella had pointed out, she wasn't quite sure she *wanted* Emmett having his own space isolated from the family. "Boys get in trouble with too much privacy," she noted dryly.

I could vouch for that. We did all sorts of inappropriate things when given free rein.

"Seth," I said and glanced at him. "Sorry buddy, you got stuck with the smallest room." And it was small, but to a kid used to sharing his space, it would probably be a welcomed change.

"That's entirely cool by me," he said.

"And I'll be setting up some practice room in the garage," I said.

I turned to Sam and Jake. "So, that kind of leaves us with one bedroom, so for now, you two will still have to share." I nodded at Emmett. "Though I expect that your brother will be going off to college in about four years, so it wouldn't be forever." I shrugged. "How do you feel about that?"

They were a little disappointed, I could tell. But they'd been brought up to realize that you didn't always get what you wanted. Besides, the bedroom they were getting was bigger than the one they shared now and they'd each have their own small, walk-in closet. When I pointed that out to them, they were a little happier - mostly because it would give them more space to put stuff that wasn't clothing; especially when I told Jake we could add shelves anywhere he wanted for him to display his Star Wars stuff. I told Sam we'd add some bookshelves that would be his alone. Harmony was reestablished.

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And I gave myself an A minus on my parenting report card. There was always room for improvement.

~TBTA~

Bella had arranged for a parent/teacher conference with Jake's teacher. Even though I got why we had to discipline Jake, that didn't mean I had to like it. And that didn't mean I had to like his teacher. I remembered her from the Open House. Mrs. MacDonald. Old MacDonald. She had appeared to be one foot away from the grave when I'd met her. She had been masquerading as a sweet, little old lady too. Bella had already told me that we needed to express our concerns, listen to hers, and together we would work out something that would restore order in the classroom and help Jake.

I still thought that homeschooling Jake should be an option. Bella just rolled her eyes.

So I had taken an afternoon off, and Bella had done the same, so we could meet with Jake's teacher. When we arrived at the classroom, the kids were already gone (Jake was with Emmett), and an older kid was writing stuff on the board. Old MacDonald had probably decided to torture that poor girl too.

Then the girl turned around and gave us a welcoming smile. "Hello," she said. "I'm Nicole Ericson. I'm Jake's teacher."

I looked at Bella. What had happened to Old MacDonald? This girl was... she was a *girl*! She wasn't a teacher. Bella frowned at me. "Didn't I tell you?" she asked. She was doing that mind reading thing again.

"No," I whispered. "What happened to Old...what happened to Mrs. MacDonald?"

"Her husband got ill and she retired," Bella answered, casting a quick glance at Miss Ericson. I wondered if her mother knew that she pretending to be a teacher. "This is Jake's new teacher, Miss Ericson."

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I nodded toward the girl...er, teacher.

She shook Bella's hand and then mine. "This is Edward Cullen," Bella introduced me.

Miss Ericson smiled. "I've heard a lot about you from Jake."

That's right, Miss Ericson. I'm here to stay and I've got Jake's back. You need to remember that. Nobody hurts my little buddy...nobody.

Bella sat down on a small chair; I chose to perch on top of a desk. There was no way I was folding my body into a kid's desk. This was not a moment to give up any power. She had to know that Jake had adults who cared about him and there was no way-

"First, let me say that Jake is an absolute joy," Miss Ericson said.

Okay, maybe we could work with this.

"He's bright and funny and caring," she continued with a slight smile.

I nodded. Jake was all those things and a bag of chips.

She sighed. "May I first just share what I think is happening and then get your input?"

Bella and I nodded.

"At the start of the school year, Jake's reading scores were...average," she said. "I wouldn't have put him in the slower group, but I probably wouldn't have put him in the advanced group." She put some papers on Bella's desk and pointed to some numbers that meant nothing to me. Bella nodded though like they meant something to her.

"Then," Miss Ericson continued. "About halfway through the year, it was like something clicked for Jake and his reading scores took off. It often happens

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that way, especially in boys." More pointing, more numbers. Bella looked surprised. "And that's when Jake got bored. It wasn't just in reading, but his newfound reading skills made all of his subjects easier, especially math and science, which are his particular favorites."

"He's pretty smart, huh?" I couldn't help but ask.

I half expected a snarky response, instead she gave me a delighted grin. "He sure is," she agreed. "What I'd like to propose is that Jake be taken out of the regular classroom for two subjects - math and science. I want to see him challenged. I can accommodate his reading abilities here in this class, but I just think it would be unfair to slow him down in math and science and I just can't challenge him enough in those areas and still give the other kids what they need. I think it's important to nurture his abilities. Being advanced in those areas could really open up a lot of opportunities for him in the future."

Wait. So she was saying Jake was super smart and she *wanted* him to be challenged? She wasn't saying Jake was a bad kid? She wasn't out to make our lives - or Jake's - miserable? I looked at Bella, who just gave me a little smirk and shook her head, like she was reading my mind. Which she probably was. I took a deep breath. Miss Nicole Ericson might even be worthy of our Jake. Maybe. I'd give her the benefit of the doubt...for now.

"I agree," Bella said. She looked at me. "What do you think, Edward?"

"That sounds good," I said.

"So...I'll put that into action and we'll see how it goes from there," Miss Ericson said. "I will say that Jake's behavior has greatly improved since I sent home the note." You mean the note that broke Jake's heart? Yeah, I remember that note. "Thank you for addressing my concerns so quickly," she added. "Jake's very lucky to have such concerned parents. It certainly makes my job easier."

And I forgave her right then and there. She'd called me Jake's parent.

~TBTA~

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We spent the next two weeks packing up Bella's and the boys' stuff. We painted rooms as we emptied them. Emmett and I did small repairs. He was good with his hands and I had picked up a few things over the years, so we made a good team.

We had one awkward moment when Bella took down Mac's picture and flag case. To be honest, I didn't really want it displayed on *our* mantle. I didn't mind it being in the house, of course, but it would just be too weird to have it right *there* on prominent display in our living room. We were making a fresh start and I wanted the house to be *ours* in every sense of the word. I wondered how to broach the subject with Bella without looking like a complete douche bag, but, like she usually did, she took the lead in that particular conversation.

She ran her fingers over the line of the flag case. "I uh..." She looked at me. "I've talked to Emmett and he said he wants the flag case and his Dad's picture in his room if that's okay?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat because I had a feeling I knew exactly why Emmett had asked. He was looking out not only for his mom, but for me. It was a good compromise, really, and he had been smart to think of it. Maybe Sam wasn't the only genius in the James family. "Yeah, that would be good," I said, knowing that my voice sounded husky.

Bella nodded silently, and wrapped the flag case in bubble wrap, then did the same with Mac's picture. When she had taped up the box and labeled it, she came over to me. "One thing I would like to run by you..." she whispered.

"Yeah?" I brushed back her hair. It wasn't often I saw Bella this tentative and I kind of liked it. I loved her strength too, but something about this vulnerability called out to me and made me want to jump tall buildings for her, or at least wrestle a broken washing machine into submission or something.

"Uhm...I'd like to keep some of our family pictures up on the wall of the hallway like I have here," she said. "Not all of them, but the ones with the boys at least, and I was wondering how you felt about that." Her eyes darted up to mine and she looked anxious. "The ones of Mac and I....I think the boys might

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want to divide those up or something. And some I'll put away for them."

"I think that's a great idea," I said. "The boys need to see pictures of them with their dad, babe. I get that. I want to make our own memories too, though."

She laughed a little, obviously relieved. "Okay then," she said and looked around the room. "Just the kitchen to go."

Karen had told us that if we could leave some furniture in Bella's house that it would help it to sell. So for the time being, we had only moved essentials. We had switched out the beds, bringing my old mattress to Bella's house and moving the new one to ours. We had purchased a new bed to go with it, a four poster deal that was *us*. The bed was important; it was our little space.

We had had to negotiate on some of the furniture. There was no way I was getting rid of my recliner. That was my football-watching throne. I loved her, but there were some things a man had to stand firm on, like the recliner. Bella had rolled her eyes but given in with more grace than I would have, if the situations were reversed. Luckily, our tastes were mostly similar. Bella didn't care for floral prints, which was a relief. My mother liked to put flowers everywhere. We both liked simple, clean lines and a more subdued range of colors.

It hadn't been too difficult to decide what stayed and what went.

Mr. Hoyt had been beyond delighted when I told him what was going on. He and Emmett had hit it off quite well, and every evening when we moved boxes from Bella's house to our house, Mr. Hoyt was there to chat with us. Often, he and Emmett would be deep in discussion and I'd have to remind Emmett to bust his hump and get to moving boxes. But I did it, and he responded just as if I was his father, telling him to get a move on.

Then the day came, three weeks after the sign went up, that the last box of stuff that was going over immediately was taped shut. Bella and the boys were moved out...officially. We stood there for a moment, looking at the rooms that still held some furniture but seemed empty because the family that had lived

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here had moved on.

She sighed and ran her hands down the banister. "I'll always have fond memories of this house," she said finally, looking at me with a little smile. "This is where I healed, where I figured out that I was strong enough...where I fell in love again...when I least expected it."

I held her close and we just enjoyed the moment. Then one of the boys honked the horn and we laughed a little. They were telling us it was time to get going.

As usual, they were right.

~TBTA~

Emily was the first one in the door. She apparently approved of the new house and ran up and down the stairs behind the boys as they hauled up the last of the boxes to their respective locations. I had been a little surprised at how smoothly it all went, but then again I'd never had so many hands willing to help.

I helped Bella carry some boxes into the kitchen. My pantry had been well stocked for months now since I never knew when the boys would be over. My refrigerator held stuff I'd never thought I'd see in there.

There was Bella's favorite brand of yogurt - she only liked strawberry. There was chocolate milk for Jake, which had to be strictly rationed out. There was some protein mix thing for Emmett, who had decided he wanted to pursue football next year. Sam liked to munch on raw carrots, so there was a big bag of those. And Seth liked grape juice, so there was a big bottle of that. It wasn't unusual to see four gallons of milk in there now either. Two gallons of skim milk for Emmett and me and Bella. Whole milk for the other boys because apparently they were crazy for milk, which was just weird. I figured it might be cheaper to buy a cow.

It was startling to see those changes when I opened the door to my refrigerator, but I liked it.

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There were Pop-Tarts and Frosted Flakes and Froot Loops in the pantry, along with bran and other healthy cereals. Loaves and loaves of bread, massive amounts of meat in the freezer. I had gone from grocery shopping for one to feeding an army of six. When Bella and I had done our first actual, full on grocery shopping trip for all of us, even she had groaned.

It had been that little shopping trip that had prompted the financial discussion. I had been prepared for some argument on that score, but once again I had been surprised. In the end, we had decided that we'd pool our finances just like we'd do after we were married. The life insurance money from Mac was to be kept separate and available for the boys' future, as was appropriate. Her salary, as well as mine, and in a few months, my retirement, would be the money from which we'd run the household. Since neither one of us was exactly a big spender, we didn't anticipate many problems in that area. Both of us had learned to live within a budget and would just stay in that habit. My retirement would be my "salary" until the bar took off, and my savings was going to be the money I invested in it.

Finally, when the last box of Pop-Tarts had been put away and we had devoured a half dozen pizzas (Seth's appetite had tripled it seemed), we told the boys goodnight. They were each spending their first night in their new rooms and I hoped that it would go well.

Then we closed the door to *our* bedroom and fell into *our* bed. By some unspoken agreement, we had saved spending the first night in the new bed for now. I rolled and tucked Bella under me, enjoying the way her dark hair spread out on the new soft green comforter. Another compromise, but now I was glad I had given in because the contrast between her dark hair and the much lighter green was sexy as hell.

"I'm so glad you're here," I whispered just before I lowered my mouth to hers.

She moaned into my mouth and shifted her hips, putting my dick right where I wanted it to be most. Well, *almost* right there...

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Wordlessly, she removed my shirt and then kissed a hot trail down my chest, paying particular attention to my nipples. She knew that was one of my "spots" and she exploited it without mercy.

"Make love to me," she said. "In our bed...in our house...right now."

I didn't need any further urging, and it was with a lot of fumbling and giggling that we got the rest of our clothes removed. At one point, her arm got stuck in her shirt and she almost took out my eye when I tugged it off of her, because her arm went flying. I realized then that I had never laughed so much with a woman in bed. Bella had a fine sense of the ridiculous, and she let me be the goofball I sometimes was. I didn't always need to be cool and calm and in control with her. That freedom was exhilarating.

I tickled her and she snorted loudly as she laughed, trying to muffle her shrieks. Luckily, our bedroom was farther away from the boys' rooms in this house, so I licked up her arm pit, which always sent her off into paroxysm of laughter. "Ewwwww," she said. "Why do you do that?"

I looked at her and shrugged. "I have no idea, really," I admitted. "But it's kind of like your feet." I wriggled my eyebrows at her. "You're sexy there."

"You're so weird," she whispered. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Love me," I answered. "Forever and always."

She sighed and pulled me close. "I can manage that."

I nibbled lightly at her neck, using my tongue to tease her. Then I breathed in her ear which always gave her goose bumps. I trailed my fingers behind her knee, which was one of *her* spots.

When I finally slid inside of her, we were both laughing, which made *staying* inside of her somewhat of a challenge. We managed.

Chapter 64: A Month of Firsts

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: On the armpit thing, I feel you. But I based it on my husband's firm assertion that if you lick up the side of the armpit at the end of a day, the deodorant is gone. I know, I know...TMI. But that's what he says. I'm gonna trust him on that one. I'm not going to do the research. And the grocery trip? I don't know about you, but grocery shopping with my husband can still SHOCK me. He just throws stuff into a cart and doesn't really look at the prices. I won't let him grocery shop with me anymore. I figured that Edward would do the same thing but that Bella would be a careful shopper. So I think they were both in for an unpleasant surprise. Also, this will probably be the only update this week. My granddaughter arrives Thursday and I plan to spend four days spoiling her absolutely ROTTEN.

Chapter 64: A Month of Firsts

When I woke up on April first, there were two things that jumped out at me. One, I had Bella in my arms and two, this was April. That meant I was getting out of the military *this* month. In a few short weeks, I'd be a civilian. Major Hutchinson said he was sorry to lose me, but that he completely understood my decision. He told me that I was a fine soldier, but an even better man. I got a little choked up about that, but we didn't hug or anything because well...you just don't hug. We gave each other a firm handshake and called it good.

I looked at Bella and smiled. I still got an incredible rush knowing that every morning when I woke up, she'd be there. Then I heard some of the boys thundering down the stairs, and then back up again, and I heard Emmett banging on the bathroom door and then some yelling.

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Ah...the sounds of home.

I nudged Bella. It was a Wednesday and that meant the boys had school and Bella and I had work. I didn't mind as much now, since we were together every evening. She mumbled sleepily and burrowed closer, hiding her head under her pillow in a signature Bella move.

"Oh no, sleeping beauty," I told her, pulling the pillow off her head. "Come on. We have to get the boys ready for school and unless I'm mistaken, World War III is currently threatening over the bathroom. Again." I wondered if I should look into having another full bath installed somewhere. Anywhere. It wasn't going to get any better, that was for sure.

She groaned and shook her head. We did this every morning. I wondered what she had done without me. "No," she mumbled. "I'm not getting up."

I sighed and got out of bed. Then I went to the foot of the bed and whipped up the sheet and comforter and grabbed her feet. I watched as her toes curled and she gave a little shriek. "Last chance, Bella..." I sang out.

She giggled and shook her head again. Okay, so that's how we were going to play it. I was game. I wrapped my hands around her ankles and gave a little tug. "Do I need to pull you completely out of the bed?" I squeezed her feet. "I'll do it, you know." I got a peek of bright red nail polish. Nice...

Bella heaved a sigh and sat up, trying to get her wild bird's nest hair out of her face. She was a mess, an adorable, grumpy mess. "No," she muttered, giving me the stink eye. "You're mean," she added as she got out of the bed and stomped toward the bathroom. She would take her time in there, and in the meantime I would be doing the "pee-pee dance" (as Alyssa called it) waiting for her to get out. There was no way I'd be able to go to the boy's bathroom. I sighed, knowing that I'd be heading for the half-bath downstairs, if I wanted to alleviate the ache in my bladder.

After taking care of that, I poured myself a large cup of coffee and then poured another one for Bella. Emmett appeared in the kitchen, his hair still wet from

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his shower but dressed for school. Seth followed in behind him. They got some frozen waffles out of the freezer and put some in the brand new, four slice toaster, which still got a workout every morning.

They were pretty self-sufficient in the mornings, thank goodness. Seth even threw a waffle on a plate for me and handed it to me before he sat down to eat. Then Sam and Jake shuffled in. Jake looked happy, as usual. Sam did not. As usual.

Then there was Bella, already reaching for the mug of coffee she knew I'd have ready for her.

Another day had begun.

~TBTA~

There were a lot of firsts for me in April.

I told Seth to turn down the music, when his need for volume finally outstripped my ability to endure it. It was at that moment that I knew I was getting old.

I reminded Emmett that he had to take out the trash. To my surprise, he jumped right to his feet and got the job done.

I reminded Emmett that he had homework. *Not* to my surprise, he muttered and mumbled and delayed as long as possible. He even volunteered to help Sam put away the dishes in order to put off doing his homework even longer.

I pretended that I *understood* Sam's homework.

I yelled up at the boys to quiet down.

I told the boys that they needed to go to bed and then heaved a sigh of relief once they were in their rooms.

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I signed a permission slip for Sam to go on a field trip.

I signed four progress reports (after Bella had seen them) and congratulated all the boys on good grades. Even Jake's conduct marks were good. Sam made straight As, no surprise there. But so did Jake. He got teased by his brothers and called a brainiac. He endured it all with good cheer. And then he called Emmett a dummy and had to apologize. He wasn't so cheery about that.

I packed Bella's lunch.

I packed Jake's lunch, after detailed instruction and some correction from Jake. The boy really did take his food seriously.

I collapsed into bed one Sunday night and realized that having the boys around 24/7 was sometimes exhausting.

I told Jake to clean his room and he did it with only a flash of the eyes, yeah *those* eyes, the canine variety.

I tripped over Emmett's shoes and cursed a lot.

I tripped over an Obi-Wan Kenobi action figure and cursed a lot.

Bella told me to put the lid down.

I told her to put the cap on the toothpaste. Three days later, there was one of those pump toothpaste dispensers on our bathroom counter.

I called Charlie of my own volition and talked to him for eleven minutes without breaking into a sweat.

I talked to Renee (not of my own volition) and allowed her to call me "dear boy" even though I hated it.

I told Bella that I loved the "throw" (it looked like a blanket to me) she put on the back of the couch when I really didn't. But it wasn't a hill I was prepared to

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die on, so I endured the thing and ignored it. And it was kind of warm and soft.

I remembered what it was like to have other people living in the house when the last fudge pop disappeared and I knew I hadn't eaten it. I looked for places to hide my favorite treats.

I watched NCIS because Bella liked it. Personally, I think she had a thing for that Gibbs character, but I didn't mention it.

I bought tampons for the first time.

Later that day I went back to the store for a candy bar - king sized.

I took the boys grocery shopping when Bella had a meeting and discovered that all of my military training was absolutely useless when it came to organizing four growing boys in a store with food.

I picked up Sam and Jake from school and took them to get new shoes because they'd both outgrown the new ones that Bella had bought for them just a few months ago.

I saw Seth washing his sheets - which was not one of his chores - and then found a moment to explain a little bit about "wet dreams" to him. He knew about them, of course, as Emmett had been pretty forthcoming and Mac had had that talk with Emmett before he left on that last deployment. But I thought another perspective might help. It was a necessary evil. We were both mortified and greatly relieved when the moment was over, but I gave myself a B minus on that one. I would have given myself a solid B except that I kept flushing and stumbling over my words.

And I signed some papers that made me a civilian for the first time in twenty years - the whole of my adult life.

~TBTA~

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In a lot of ways, signing those papers had been anticlimactic. I was given a form to sign that outlined the Army's financial obligations to me, my obligations to them should the need arise, and then I signed the papers that separated me from the Army.

When I walked out of that office, I was a retiree at the age of thirty-nine.

Bella had taken the day off and we met at a little café to have a private celebration lunch together. We met outside and I kissed her, long and hard. "That's my first kiss as a civilian in....oh twenty years or so."

She laughed. "That's my first time kissing a civilian in almost as long."

I had worn civvies to the base, so I was dressed in jeans and a button up shirt. I had an idea how we could celebrate my new status and I didn't want Bella's mad ninja button skills getting rusty.

We ordered some sandwiches and I watched Bella. She seemed lighthearted, almost giddy. We kissed and laughed and talked like teenagers playing hooky. I brushed my knuckles over her cheek. "You know...there's something I've *never* done as a civilian."

"Gone bowling?" she teased. I shook my head and grinned at her.

"Guess again."

She pretended to give the matter some consideration.

"Played a video game?"

"No," I said. "You're really bad at this."

She sighed and shook her head. "Well, if it's not bowling and it's not video games, then I'm at a loss."

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"Then I guess I'll just have to show you, since a gentleman doesn't talk about such things."

Her eyes went warm and soft. "You know what?" she whispered.

"What?"

"There's something I've never done *with* a civilian either." She smirked at me. "Maybe we should make sure the equipment still works...out of uniform, so to speak."

I nodded. "Maybe we can help each other out," I suggested.

"I love a man with a plan," she murmured.

"Hurry up and eat and let's get out of here and enjoy the nice, empty house while we can."

Bella motioned to the waitress. "We'd like to change our order - we'd like it to go."

"I love a woman with a plan," I said.

~TBTA~

We both exceeded the speed limit a bit. Both of us kind of screeched into the driveway and before we knew it, we were kissing at the front door. We sort of fell into the house when one of us, I'm still not sure who, managed to get keys in the door and unlock it.

Leaving behind a trail of jackets and shoes, we made our way to the living room. We had about two hours before the boys started arriving home from school and I intended to make full use of each of those 120 minutes.

We hadn't had the run of the house, or complete privacy, since we'd moved in together. I decided that the couch needed to be christened. I twirled her around

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and bent her over the back of it and she gave a little yelp when I gave her ass a playful swat. She wriggled it at me and I felt my arousal shoot into the stratosphere.

This was going to be hot and fast and dirty.

"Your ass is beautiful," I told her.

"Yours isn't bad either," she said, giving her ass another little shake. She started to say something else but I was tugging at her skirt. I moved it up and out of the way. Then I hooked my fingers in her panties and dragged them down her legs, taking the time to press kisses at the back of her knees. She groaned and pushed her butt back to hurry me up.

"Be patient, baby," I soothed.

In answer, she moved her hips and rotated her ass against my dick. Okay, we'd be patient later. I unzipped my pants and let my dick out. I'm pretty sure he breathed a sigh of relief. In about two seconds, I was buried to the hilt in her and we were both yelling. It was really amazing to know we didn't have to worry about being too loud or getting caught or -

Oh shit. She felt so good.

We were both moving our hips like jackhammers. It wasn't sweet or soft or dignified. It was just...awesome. I knew I wouldn't last long, so I snaked my hand around to her front and gave her clit a few gentle pinches and swirls, just enough to set her off. It was the least I could do, being the gentleman I am.

I felt her clenching around me and that was all I needed. I grabbed her hips and pulled her toward me hard, shuddering as I came deep inside of her. We stayed like that for a few moments, both of us shaky and sweaty and unsteady on our feet. Finally, I sighed and put my arms around her, holding her up against me. I kissed her neck, still buried inside of her but that wasn't going to last. Damned gravity. With a sigh, I slipped from her and she sagged against me.

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"Well..." she breathed. "It's nice to know the equipment still works even though it's civilian now."

"Hell yeah it is," I panted.

She laughed and turned in my arms, her skirt still rucked up around her waist and her panties hanging around one ankle. Her blouse was kind of unbuttoned and my cock and balls were peeking out from above my boxers, which had stopped around mid-thigh. My jeans were just a little lower. I'd barely had enough presence of mind to push them out of the way. Elegant I wasn't.

"So...civilian sex is great," she whispered.

"We should probably investigate further," I said solemnly.

"Absolutely," she agreed. "Race you up to the bedroom!" And with that, she took off like a shot, losing her panties in the process. I was at a disadvantage, since my jeans were currently hobbling me.

"No fair!" I called out after her.

"Don't be a baby," she goaded. "Come up here and show me what you're made of."

I shucked off my jeans and ran up after her, praying that my dick would cooperate and let me provide Bella with an encore.

He did. I did. It was still fucking great. Civilian sex was definitely amazing.

~TBTA~

Later on, when the boys got home, Bella and I were fully dressed and looked respectable. We had gathered our clothes, taken a shower, and were downstairs waiting for them. Emmett asked to see my new ID card. I think he was making sure I had actually done it. I showed it off with a great deal of pride.

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Jake told me I looked funny in the picture. He was right, but I didn't care. Bella and I could start our future without the worry of deployment hanging over us. I had done my service, but now it was time to dedicate myself to my family.

We went to Pete's that night and I recalled our first night there. I had been an outsider. They had been separate from me, still largely unknown and mysterious. Now I belonged, and they were mine as much as I was theirs.

This time I got the little inside jokes. I could ask them intelligent questions about school or their friends. They talked to me, even Emmett. I found myself automatically making sure that Jake's drink wasn't too close to the edge or that he actually chewed before he tried to swallow. Seth and I discussed music. Emmett talked about his hopes for the football team, and maybe the wrestling team as well. Sam told me that my dad had sent him a DVD about a dog that had been rescued much like Emily and how she had saved her boy's life when she barked at the first sign of smoke when their house caught on fire. Bella's leg was pressed close against mine, and every now and then her fingers would brush against my thigh or my arm or my shoulder.

I don't think I've ever enjoyed a pizza that much.

~TBTA~

Then reality set in and I realized that I was pretty much at loose ends. The first few days after I left the military went by fast. I worked on Bella's house a bit and got things squared away there. Then it was the weekend and we took the boys to a movie on Saturday and to the arcade on Sunday. Weekends were always busy.

Then it was Monday again and Bella and the boys went off to school, leaving me home alone. Jasper and I had made our offer on the bar and it was accepted, but we wouldn't sign the papers for another week. So I couldn't even get in there and start cleaning or doing any repairs.

I was bored and cranky and just that close to being obnoxious. Luckily, Mr. Hoyt decided that I was probably moping and the first Monday after my

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retirement, he knocked on the door a while after Bella and the boys left.

It was weird being alone in the house again. It felt wrong. And empty. And silent. The silence was oppressive. I had decided to make myself useful by doing the laundry and getting some chicken out of the freezer to defrost. I decided that I'd fire up the grill. The weather was getting better and chicken and corn on the cob sounded tempting. It was a meal even I could manage. Then I made our bed and vacuumed the living room. Emily kept looking at me like I was insane, maybe because I kept up a running commentary with her, telling her what I was doing and asking her questions.

I let her out. Then in. Then out again. Finally she came in yet again and I told her to stay put. She wagged her tail and curled up in front of the fireplace, even though there wasn't a fire going. Then I mopped the kitchen. But by ten that morning, I had run out of things to do. Well, I had run out of things I *wanted* to do. Retirement was kind of boring.

Then I heard the knock on the door and I was grateful, even if it had been a salesman, I probably would have talked to him just for something to do. Instead, it was Mr. Hoyt.

"Come on, boy," he said. "We're going to some restaurant supply places," he announced.

"What?"

"You're bored out of your skull and getting antsy, so I'm taking you out to do something useful." Mr. Hoyt shrugged.

I thought about arguing the point and saying I wasn't bored. But I was. *Really* bored. So I just grinned and grabbed my keys. "I'll drive," I offered.

"Hell yes, you will," Mr. Hoyt said.

So for the rest of the day, Mr. Hoyt dragged me all over the city. We looked at pots, pans, plates, napkins, silverware, mugs, cups, those little plastic baskets

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you put fries in - we looked at it all. I didn't buy a damned thing. Hell, I didn't even make any decisions. But I did get a good idea of what was out there and how much things cost. I'd have a lot to discuss with Jasper and my brother.

More importantly, I had been interested and involved in something and the hours had sped by. It was late in the afternoon when I pulled up in my driveway. "Hey, I'm going to throw some chicken on the grill. Why don't you join us for dinner?"

He looked surprised at the invitation, which made me feel ashamed that I hadn't invited him before. The boys would be thrilled to see him, and he flirted harmlessly with Bella, making her laugh and slap at his arm and call him a "rogue" which made him turn red like a tomato. It was kind of cute to watch.

"Well, thank you," he finally said. "Should I bring anything?"

"Nope, just yourself," I said.

He nodded. "Okay, then, I'll be over in...?"

"Let's say an hour and a half or so? Dinner might not be ready, but we'll be well on the way." I glanced at my watch. "Bella will be home in about an hour. The boys'll be home sooner." Emmett might already be home; he rode the bus and had a key.

"That sounds wonderful," Mr. Hoyt said. Then he gave me a happy smile and slowly made his way over to his house. I had forgotten how much I liked the old guy. We should hang out more often, I thought.

Author's Note and Apology: I screwed up. I messed up big time by not giving Edward a retirement ceremony and not doing some other things. A soldier who is reading my story clued me in. SO....that being said I offer my apologies and this promise that I'll correct those issues. Thanks, Billy, as always, for hauling my cookies out of the fire. I'm going to write a retirement ceremony for Edward, trying to do the occasion justice. I will post it with the next chapter. Yes, it will be out of order and for that I apologize. But I'd

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rather get this right even if it out of order, which was entirely my own fault. So...my apologies. I'll correct the timeline later, after the next chapter is posted, but I wanted to let you know what I did. And I'll get writing!

Chapter 65: Perfectly Imperfect

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I'm baaacckkkk.... Okay, the retirement ceremony is still coming, but I'm going to take Billy's advice and make it an outtake. Billy is so smart and that made sense to me. So, back to the main story. I had a great time with my granddaughter and she's talking up a storm now.

Chapter 65: Perfectly Imperfect

I was in the middle of getting stuff ready in the kitchen. The boys were upstairs or in the dining room getting their homework done. They had started to fuss when I told them to get started right away, but then I told them Mr. Hoyt was coming for dinner and all of them marched off to get the dirty deed out of the way. They liked the guy, and he had some of the greatest stories. He was a widower, his wife having passed away a few years ago. They didn't have any kids, but he did have a nephew who lived about an hour away.

When I bought the house, he had kind of adopted me as his own.

I had the chicken marinating and it was about to go on the grill, the corn was ready to go on the grill too, and I was putting together a salad. "Well now, this is what I call a homecoming." I turned to see Bella looking at me. A little smirk played on her lips. I moved toward her and pulled her into my arms, giving a little kiss on her collarbone, then her throat, and finally her lips. No need to rush the main course.

"Hmm...." I murmured, inhaling her scent. Even at the end of a long day she smelled wonderful. "I invited Mr. Hoyt over for dinner, I hope you don't mind."

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"Not at all," she answered, wrapping her arms around my neck. "You're quite handy in the kitchen, Mr. Cullen."

"Even better in the bedroom," I teased.

"I think I should be the judge of that," Bella informed me. "And I have to warn you...it will require *exhaustive* research."

"I am looking forward to displaying my skills."

"I'm sure you are." She laughed and gave a little push on my chest. "Move, I'm starving. You'd better have something over there to hold me over or there's going to be a problem."

"I'm sure we can come up with something to sustain you until dinner," I promised. She started rummaging through the refrigerator.

"So how did your day go?" she asked.

I went back to chopping up some vegetables for the salad. "Good, I mean, it got better." I looked over my shoulder and Bella was staring at me expectantly. I shrugged. "I was kind of bored and at loose ends when Mr. Hoyt came over and he told me to quit moping. We went and looked at some restaurant supply places. It was...good."

Bella grinned and shook her head, giving a little laugh.

"What?" I asked.

She pursed her lips. "I was wondering how long it would take you to get bored out of your skull," she admitted. "I gave you another day at least, so I guess I was wrong. You're less able to entertain yourself than I thought," she added, teasing. "So male..."

I had to kiss her again after that, just to show her who was boss. So I did. And I knew exactly who was boss - *she* was.

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She rested her head on my chest. "You know, if you get completely bored, you can always volunteer at one of the boys' schools or something."

I hadn't thought of that, but it was a good idea. As we got closer to opening the bar, I would have less and less free time - thank God - but right now I did have the chance to get more involved with the boys' lives. "Good idea," I said, kissing her forehead. "You, madam, are a genius."

"Yeah, I know," she sighed heavily. "It's my burden to bear."

I shook my head at her. "Go get changed and then get that beautiful ass down here to help me get dinner ready."

She sauntered away from me, throwing a look over her shoulder. "I'll get my beautiful ass down here, but only for decorative purposes. You look like you've got the dinner thing under control."

~TBTA~

We were gathered around the table, finishing off dinner. The boys were all talking at once, as they usually did. Mr. Hoyt was leaning forward to discuss something with Bella. Emily was curled up near the table, not begging and minding her manners. Then there was a knock on the door and Emily jumped to her feet, barking to let us know that there was something that needed our immediate attention.

"I'll get it," I said.

It was Karen, our real estate agent. At first I was worried that something had gone wrong on the deal with the bar, but she just smiled. "No, nothing like that. I had some paperwork to drop off for Bella and I was in the neighborhood so I thought I'd just swing by."

I ushered her inside and introduced her to Mr. Hoyt. She already knew the boys from having helped Bella put the house on the market. Since Karen usually handled commercial properties, she had kind of done Bella a favor by listing

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the house. She gave Bella the papers and then said good-bye. I walked her to the door.

When we got there, she hesitated. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

She looked toward the dining room, where we could hear the boys. "Is Mr. Hoyt...single?" She looked a little embarrassed, but more determined than anything else.

Now that shocked me. Karen was easily thirty years his junior. She must have seen the look on my face because she laughed and shook her head. "No, nothing like that." She sighed and grimaced. "It's just that...my mother recently moved to the area. My father died several years ago and she got tired of the winters in Illinois, so she moved closer to me so she could be around her grandkids. Anyway, she's kind of...lonely, and I was just wondering...I mean, they might have some things in common or something..."

"Oh," I said. Then the light bulb clicked. " *Oh.*" I grinned. "Yes, he's single, and a very nice man."

Karen grinned back at me. "Good to know. Well, you may be hearing from me."

"We might need to celebrate signing the papers on the bar or something," I suggested pointedly.

"Yeah," she agreed with a nod. "You just might need to do that."

"Have a little get together?" I added.

She laughed. "Yes, something like that."

"Let me know," I told her.

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"Oh, I will."

~TBTA~

A week later, Jasper, Alice, Bella, Masen, Alyssa, and I were sitting in an attorney's office. Karen was there with us. We were about to make the bar ours. I grabbed Bella's hand and gave it a squeeze. She looked excited and a little scared. I was thrilled and terrified and nauseated. This was a huge step and I knew it. Masen looked at me and leaned in. "This'll work, big brother. Trust me. I know these things." He tapped the side of his skull. I felt myself relax a little bit. As much as I liked to yank Masen's chain, he really did know his shit. While there were no guarantees, I thought we had a good shot at making this work. We had three partners and more capital than I had expected when I first formulated my plans.

Alice and Jasper were quietly talking. Alice seemed as excited as Jasper was. She had announced earlier that she was going back to work. "It's time," she explained. "We're settling here, so now it's time for me to pursue *my* career. And the kids are older now and Rose has been a godsend. Honestly, I don't know how I survived without her. She's like the best big sister in the universe or something." Alice grinned. "She actually loves the little hellions." She had found an entry level position that would still challenge her. The salary wasn't stupendous, but between it and Jasper's retirement, they'd have enough to live on while we waited for the bar to start providing us with incomes.

Then the attorney was handing me a stack of papers. I signed and passed to Jasper. He signed and passed to Masen. On and on it went. Finally, I signed the last paper and watched as Jasper and Masen did as well. The attorney stood up and shook our hands. "Congratulations and good luck," he said.

We walked out and Jasper and Masen and I looked at each other. "So...I guess we own a bar now," Jasper drawled.

I started laughing. I turned to see Karen coming out of the building. "Thank you, Karen, for all of your help and patience," I said, shaking her hand. "Oh, and we're having a little get together this Saturday, nothing fancy, you

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know...to celebrate."

Bella gave her a little wink. "Maybe you should bring your mom," she suggested. The two of them shared a conspiratorial look. It was enough to make me very glad that I wasn't the object of their plotting. They'd be deadly with their forces combined - sort of like a coven of super heroes or something.

Karen grinned. "Thanks, I will. Let me know what time and what to bring."

"I'll text you," Bella promised.

~TBTA~

Later that evening in bed I was cuddle up with Bella. She had gotten quiet as the evening progressed and I was starting to get worried. Did she think the bar was a mistake? It was going to take a lot of time and effort and money, especially in the beginning. I didn't want it to drive a wedge between us.

I rolled so that I was hovering over her and kissed her. "What's the matter, babe?"

She didn't try to deny it, which was always a good sign. That meant she must have worked it - whatever *it* was - out in her head. She was probably ready to talk.

"Well...while we were in the attorney's office, I started thinking," she finally said softly.

I brushed back her hair and nuzzled at her throat, trying to keep it more comforting than "*can we do it now?*" Not that I didn't want to do it, but I wasn't an animal. I could wait five minutes...probably.

"Yeah? What about?"

She moved so that she lying on top of me, resting her chin on her forearms. It was one of her favorite positions when she wanted to talk. I liked it because it

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gave me full and easy access to her amazing ass. It was a win/win as far as I could see. "I want you to be honest with me," she said.

"Okay," I agreed. "I will."

She smiled slightly. "Yeah, I know you will. I just wanted to put that out there."

"Should I be worried?" I asked her, frowning. She didn't seem angry or upset, just...thoughtful and distracted. Okay, so we'd work it out.

"No," she answered. "Not really. I just was thinking..." Bella sighed and shifted again. She really had to stop that if she wanted me to concentrate on her words.

"Bella..." I urged. "You're killing me here." *In more ways than one.*

"You say that a lot," she said with a laugh.

"Because you *do* it a lot," I reminded her. "Talk to me. Honesty, remember?"

"You're right," she said with a slight nod. "Okay, I was thinking that after we're married, I should make a new Will."

"The money goes to the boys, right?" I asked. "That shouldn't change."

"Yes, and you're right, it shouldn't change." She looked at me. "But I've got something much bigger than money to worry about. Actually, *we* have something much bigger. We have the boys."

And I got it. I knew where we were going with this. "What are your thoughts on that?" I knew what I wanted, but they were *her* boys when it came down to it. They were mine too, but...

She frowned. Maybe I should be more proactive with this, because this was huge. This was bigger than her promise to marry me. This was even more important than the vows we'd be taking in a few months. This was commitment

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on a whole different level. For a moment, I was overwhelmed by the trust she was showing in me. Giving me her heart had been life-altering. But by trusting me with the boys, she was handing over her soul and I knew it.

I put my hands on the small of her back. Business before pleasure, I reminded myself. She needed to know that *I* knew how important this was. "How about I tell you how I feel about it first?" She smiled with what looked like relief.

"Well, as much as I hate the thought of not having you, I know that we need to discuss this. It's the responsible thing to do...for them." Bella leaned in and gave me a quick, approving kiss. Pleasure soon enough. "I'd be very... *honored* if you'd consider letting me raise them if something happened to you."

"I was hoping you'd say that," she murmured. "Right now, they're set to go to my parents, and if they aren't around or are unable, Will and Josh get them. But honestly, I think it would be less traumatic for them now if they had you...and you had them." The thought of losing Bella - *and* the boys - was enough to make my stomach clench.

"If the boys are okay with it, then yeah... I'd do my best for them, you know that," I promised. "So, maybe it is time for a new Will - for both of us." I would have to change mine too. I wanted Bella to have everything, obviously.

"There's one more thing," Bella said. "You haven't brought it up and neither have I, but in case one of the boys-"

We looked at each other. "Jake," we both said together and then laughed.

"In case one of the boys brings it up, I wanted us to have already discussed it," Bella continued.

"What's that?"

"Adoption," she said. "I'm going to tell you what I think about that and why. I get the impression that you feel the same way, so I don't think there's going to be a problem but I figure it's better to have it all out in the open."

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"Can I go first?" I asked. "I don't know if the boys will even ask, but... Yeah, I have some thoughts on it."

She looked surprised but nodded her agreement.

"Okay, here's what I think..." I took a deep breath. "I love those boys with all of my heart. I always will. I'll be their father in every way that I can for the rest of their lives. But I think it would be wrong to make them sort of 'give up' Mac as their father - even in just a legal sense. He earned that; he was there for them and he loved them." I touched the tip of her nose and smiled. "Their last name won't matter. We'll be the Cullen/James clan no matter what. But I promise you that I'll take good care of them if something does, God forbid, ever happen to you." I kissed her. "They'll have both of us - Mac and me." I chuckled. "Sounds kind of like a cartoon, doesn't it?"

Bella laughed and buried her face in my chest, giving a little nip that told me she was relieved and happy and at peace. "You're absolutely brilliant," she said. Then she looked up at me, her eyes shining. "You said exactly what I was feeling, but much more eloquently. So yeah, I think that's exactly what we should do."

"Wonderful," I told her. "Now can we seal the deal?" I wriggled my eyebrows at her.

She rolled her eyes. "Is this anything like the nitty gritty?"

"It's pretty damned close," I admitted as my lips moved up her throat and I used the heel of my foot to tease the soft skin at the back of her knee. That was my go-to move with her. She was a sucker for a little behind-the-knee action.

She giggled and then gasped when I swiveled my hips against her, pressing my erection firmly against her. "Okay, okay," she muttered. "Sealing the deal...geez...so pushy...."

And we did.

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~TBTA~

The first weekday after signing the papers, I was hip deep in dirt and grime at the bar. Jasper still had a week to go in the Army and Masen was at work. So while Jasper was busy getting poked and prodded by Army docs and going to endless, boring appointments, I was happily filthy and exhausted, but I'd gotten a lot done. The bar area gleamed and the men's bathroom was actually shiny - out of date, but shiny. We'd address that at some point.

We had hired someone to come by the following week and put the logo that Masen had designed on the window and we'd ordered a sign with the same logo. It was officially "Mac's Place." Jasper and I had even started gathering military memorabilia. Mr. Hoyt had shocked me by bringing by some stuff from his Vietnam days. "Don't have any kids to pass it on to, and my nephew wouldn't appreciate it," he'd said dismissively when I had thanked him.

"Well, you have to promise to come by often and see them up," I had told him. "And drinks are on the house...always."

Mr. Hoyt had given a grunt. "You must not realize how much I drink, boy," he had teased.

Things were definitely coming together nicely and I finally had something to *do*. We were getting close to May, and then it would be June, and Bella and I would finally be married. Her parents had offered to come and stay with the boys while Bella and I took a short honeymoon. We weren't staying away too long because we wanted to get back in time to take a family trip to Florida for Sam's space camp.

It was sort of like we were having two honeymoons, one by ourselves and one with the boys. Somehow, it suited us. We did arrange, however, for adjoining rooms. I wanted *some* privacy with Bella, but we'd be close enough to keep an eye on the boys.

I came home every afternoon, grimy and dirty and reeking. Then I'd shower and start dinner so that Bella could come home and relax. As the school year

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neared the end, her work load increased dramatically. I gave her foot rubs almost nightly. Our sex life slowed down just a bit since Bella was tired and I was exhausted and we had a lot of things happening at once. Still, we managed to get in some serious cuddling time.

The wedding plans were moving forward with little fuss. Bella asked for my approval on a few things. We didn't argue about anything wedding related. We fussed about the little stuff, like normal couples do.

It was perfectly imperfect.

Fic Rec: Parenthetical Love by LyricalKris

Bella wasn't interested in finding a father for her baby-to-be. Edward wasn't interested in being a father at all. The accidents that can make a parent don't always happen between the sheets, but will they make the best of it?

These characters are real and complex, their situation is confusing and their reactions to it are human. You won't be disappointed in this one. I've devoured this one... All of our favorite people are here, just related to each other in different and interesting ways. This story takes a fresh look at the ways families are made. You can find it on my favorites, naturally, LOL!

Chapter 66: Call Me

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Someone had mentioned Edward having "the talk" with Emmett. Oddly enough, that's kind of on tap for the future, you'll see what I mean. There's Rosalie around, and we all know how Emmett can be in his vampire incarnation, right? Yeah, this Emmett has those tendencies too, LOL.

Chapter 66: Call Me

We celebrated our official ownership of the bar with an elegant little soiree, featuring caviar and the finest champagne ... Okay, what we *really* did was throw some burgers and dogs on the grill, pop open a few cold brews, and argue over our favorite sports teams. It was elegant enough for us. Mr. Hoyt had just given me a pleased little smile when Emmett invited him. I had been standing there with them as he and Emmett discussed cars. It seemed that Mr. Hoyt was a bit of a gear head and Emmett was in his element.

On Saturday morning I had the boys cleaning up the yard - and Mr. Hoyt's yard as well. Emmett had already mowed his yard and Seth was going to start on ours. Jake was pulling weeds (well, mostly weeds, a few flowers gave their lives in the process) out of a flower bed for Mr. Hoyt while Sam was setting out chairs for our expected guests. It wasn't quite warm enough for the pool, but it was nice outside and the skies were clear. Of course, the warmer weather meant more yard work, but I had way more help this time around. Bella insisted on the boys doing their chores and I wasn't too reluctant to share the work load. Masen and I had done our fair share of chores growing up. It hadn't killed us, though we liked to bitch about it enough back then.

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So we had a busy day, all of us. Bella was mostly inside getting together stuff for the party. The boys and I concentrated our work outside, getting the yard spiffed up and ready. It was Seth's job to keep the pool clean, even during the cooler weather. Sam was in charge of all Emily-related chores, and that included picking up poop. He never complained. Jake was the laundry guy - he put everyone's clean, folded laundry on their bed, and from there, each person was responsible for putting it away. Usually, the laundry stayed on the bed, and from there it made its way to the floor. Emmett had a clean pile and a "who knows" pile. I'd seen him sniff stuff before putting it on. Febreze was his friend and was useful in place of a washing as far as Emmett was concerned. Jake also made sure that clean towels were in the bathrooms and fresh linens in the closets. Bella firmly believed in the old adage, "Many hands make light work."

Jasper and their entourage arrived first, even beating Masen and Alyssa. Rose sort of disappeared with Emmett. I noticed that Bella sent Jake after them. He was a great little chaperone, mostly because he tattled fully and promptly. I went to stand by Bella and she gave a little sigh.

"Is it crazy that I'm worried about Emmett and Rose...?"

"No," I said. "He's a teenaged boy and she's a beautiful girl."

Bella winced. "I can't believe they're old enough for me to worry about that yet."

"That's what happens," I reminded her.

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," she sniffed. "I feel *old*..."

I pulled her close and kissed her hair. "You're still gorgeous and sexy and very, very hot."

She wasn't mollified yet. "Go on."

"Fishing for compliments?" I teased.

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"Always."

"Well, I'm happy to oblige," I assured her. "You just get more beautiful with every passing day."

"Go on," she urged again, her voice soft and sweet. "You can do even better...I know you can."

And then I whispered more sweet - and some that were incredibly naughty - things in her ear. She giggled and nuzzled me, though we kept it pretty family friendly, given our potential audience.

Then Masen and his family arrived. Kyle and Alex disappeared upstairs. Emmett was now being chaperoned by three young boys and I was sure he'd be livid. Better to be angry than a teenaged father. I sighed as I thought about that. That was another discussion that loomed, as if the wet dream talk with Seth hadn't been bad enough. I knew that all of the boys knew the basics. I had heard enough of their conversations to know that. Emmett was definitely at the age to notice girls, and Seth was right behind them.

My father had given us the "mechanics of sex" talk, but then he'd followed it up with something *much* more important, and too often neglected - the "emotions of sex" talk. At the time, I had kind of dismissed his wisdom, and even though I hadn't jumped into sexual intercourse, I had "played" quite a bit in high school once Stacy Spanetti had shown some interest. Still, I hadn't really had a clue what it all meant for a long time - decades even. Now that I had Bella, though, I could understand more of where my father had been coming from. I knew that Emmett would roll his eyes at a lot of what I'd have to say, but I hoped that one day, he would remember. Relentless repetition worked wonders; look at the Grand Canyon.

God, I appreciated my parents so much more now that I was one. It was one of life's little jokes, I guessed. And it was probably the way things were meant to be.

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Then the doorbell rang again and I happily set aside thoughts of having "the talk" with Emmett. I could concentrate on happier thoughts, like having a prostate exam.

I opened the door to see Karen and an attractive older woman, perhaps in her late sixties, standing there. "Karen," I said, ushering them inside. I turned to the other woman. Karen introduced her. "This is my mother, Elizabeth Cameron," she said. Then Karen looked over my shoulder. "Is...everyone here?"

"Not quite," I replied, but at that very moment, the doorbell rang again. Talk about timing.

I opened it to see Mr. Hoyt standing there. He had a bouquet of flowers - Gerber daisies if my mother's chatter was to be believed- and a bottle of wine. He was trying to class up the party. I turned to Karen and Elizabeth.

"Karen Bennett and Elizabeth Cameron, please meet Mr. Jedidiah Hoyt."

"Call me Jed, please..." he said as he shook Elizabeth's hand. She gave him a sweet smile. He had told me to call him Jed when we first met, but I was still unable to bring myself to do so. He'd always be Mr. Hoyt as far as I was concerned. I didn't think Elizabeth Cameron was going to share my problem.

"Oh, Jed, I love Gerber daisies," she murmured. Ah ha! Got it on my first try. "So beautiful and simple...yet timeless and elegant in their own way. Don't you think?" she asked. She gave him a smile that him blinking. I was sure it was the same stupid look I sometimes got when Bella went out of her way to dazzle me.

Though I was sure that the flowers had been meant for Bella, Mr. Hoyt pressed them into Elizabeth's hand like he'd just been waiting for her to notice them - and him.

"Well then, these must be yours," he said gallantly.

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She nodded graciously and then tucked her hand into his arm. Karen and I watched them walk off together, our faces identical studies in stunned bemusement. She looked at me. "What just happened here?"

I shrugged. "Hell if I know," I admitted. "But I think it's safe to say that we're no longer needed here."

She stared at me for a moment and then we burst into laughter.

Dinner was loud and chaotic. Some of the boys, I wasn't even sure which ones, had a food fight which led to them cleaning up their mess plus clearing off the tables. There was so much complaining that they almost got themselves sent to their rooms. Attitudes improved after that, even if their expressions did not.

Mr. Hoyt - call me Jed - had been attentive to Elizabeth - please call me Liz, you dear man - the entire evening. They were off in their own little world in a corner, pretty much ignoring us all. Bella thought it was adorable, as did Lys and Alice. Masen said he didn't like to think about old people having sex, an opinion which made Karen spit out her beer. I thought it was...odd. They hit it off like they'd been long lost loves or something.

We toasted being debt, working long, thankless hours, patient real-estate agents, being retired, kids who threw food, and getting married - not necessarily in that order.

~TBTA~

Jasper, Masen, and I stood back to get a look at the window. It was official. The little hole in the wall was now "Mac's Place" and it was ours - to make a go of or not. I looked at the words, surprised at the lump I felt in my throat. Seeing it there, those two simple words, made it much more real - all of it.

The bar, my retirement, Bella, the boys...our impending marriage and my ready-made family. I tried to think back to my life a year ago - just before I'd met Bella. I had had no idea how completely my life was getting ready to change. I was struck by the notion that if I'd left work five minutes earlier - or

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later - I wouldn't be standing here now. I would be a different man, the same guy I had been for so many years - and my life would be empty and I wouldn't even know it.

As he usually did, Jasper seemed to sense my feelings and I felt his hand clamp down on my shoulder. It was the guy equivalent of a hug. He squeezed hard and then let go. "Kind of blows your mind, huh?"

I nodded. He had no idea. Or maybe he did. Jasper was pretty deep, and far more perceptive than most people knew. They got fooled by his lazy drawl and relaxed Southern manners. I knew better.

I had already discussed my plans with Jasper and Masen. Inside the bar was everything I would need for a sort of picnic dinner. I was heading home, where I'd pick up Bella and the boys. We would return here to the bar for a little quiet celebration. I wanted them to see the sign for the first time without an audience - except for me, of course.

Jasper and Masen gave it one last look. "You do good work, man," Jasper told Masen.

Masen just shrugged. He knew he was talented, but for once he wasn't rubbing it in our faces. Somehow, seeing Masen on a regular basis had lessened our need to push each other's buttons constantly. We still liked to do that, of course. We always would. We would probably still be giving each other hell when we were both getting around with walkers and looking forward to Bingo night. Some things would never change completely.

But having Masen nearby had proven to be enjoyable - for the most part. I saw Kyle and Alex a lot, and I enjoyed getting to know them better. I could finally relate to them in ways that wouldn't have been possible before the boys. If Kyle and Alex weren't at our house, then some of our boys were at *their* house. They had found a short cut that took them through six yards, over one fence, and over a ditch. This, of course, was as exciting as getting there faster. Bella told them to make sure it was okay to cross the neighbors' lawns, to help each other over the fence, to be mindful of snakes near the ditch, and to never go alone.

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They humored her with barely hidden eye rolls and boyish smirks. I added my own stern warning and they stood up straight and said, "Yes, sir." Bella told me it was all in the voice and that a deep, male voice could work wonders with stubborn little male types. I kissed her and ended the "discussion."

The boys had taken to calling them Aunt Alyssa and Uncle Masen, while Kyle and Alex had had no problem adopting Bella as Aunt Bella. As close as we were all getting, I had a feeling that soon it would be Uncle Jasper and Aunt Alice as well.

Again, life was changing in unexpected and wonderful ways.

"Well, guys, I'm heading home. I want to get Bella and the boys," I said.

"Call me tomorrow and let me know how it goes," Masen called out as he got to his car.

"Will do!"

"Yeah, we want details," Jasper added with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes at them both, but I was grinning like an idiot when I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror. Life was good...hell no, scratch that. It was great.

~TBTA~

I had asked them all to close their eyes before we rounded the corner to the point on the sidewalk where they would be able to see the window with the "Mac's Place" logo proudly displayed. We held hands, a human chain. Emmett grumbled a bit about holding Seth's hand. "It's sweaty," he complained.

"Better than what's been on yours," Seth shot back. Bella shushed them both and blushed a bit.

I had to bite back my laughter while Bella just groaned, her eyes still closed.

The Bigger They Are

Life was not only great; I knew that it would never be boring with this crew around.

I lined them all up so that they were facing the window. Jake squirmed and wiggled, ready to get it over with already. "Okay...you can open your eyes..."

I watched their faces as they took it in. The logo was simple, clean, and almost stark. There were no curlicues or elaborate markings. Mac's Place....the colors were green and black, deep and dark against the window. It was a joint, exactly what I wanted.

Bella's hand went to her mouth and she looked a little misty-eyed. But it was in a good way; I knew her well enough to know that by now. Emmett swallowed hard and blinked, his lips pressed together. But again, I knew his reaction was a positive one. Emmett was getting easier to read and understand. We had both come a long way in a year. He met my eyes and gave one short nod. That was good enough for me.

Seth walked up and touched the letting reverently. "It looks...good," he finally said.

Sam nodded and took Jake up to the sign, holding his hand like they were crossing the street.

Jake read the words, "Mac's Place..." He looked over his shoulder at me. "Our place..." His smile was big and bright.

And it was.

I nodded and then unlocked the door. The boys laughed when they saw the blanket spread out on the floor. Bella smiled. "A picnic?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Yeah, nothing fancy," I admitted. "Just vast quantities of unhealthy comfort foods."

"You sure know the way to a woman's heart," she said.

The Bigger They Are

"I do what I can."

She hugged me tightly and then we kissed...in Mac's Place... *our* place.

~TBTA~

As I shaved, I got a good look at my hair. It was longer than it had been in about twenty years. Since I'd joined the Army, I had gotten a haircut every two weeks, like clockwork. So for two decades, my hair had been pretty much the same length. But I had skipped out on my last one before retirement in a fit of childish rebellion. Now, a month or so after signing that last paper, I was looking at a man with hair much longer than he was used to.

I turned this way and that, trying to get used to this new guy...this *civilian* in my mirror. My hair looked redder the longer it got, which was a point in the negative column. However, Bella seemed to like having the extra length to tug on, so that was definitely a point in the positive column. She said it gave her more leverage and ability to "steer" me. She looked awfully naughty and adorable when she said it. My dick reacted accordingly, and that had led to a demonstration.

I stared at the guy in the mirror. He looked...happy. There were lines in that face, but he wasn't hideous. It wasn't a face to scare small children. He looked like a guy who mowed his lawn on Saturday, drank a few beers with friends while they watched their kids play. He was a guy who bitched about the price of gas and hoped his kids wouldn't need braces because sometimes the budget was stretched thin.

And he had long hair. Well, long by military standards. It was weird. *He* was weird. He was a stranger. He wasn't the guy he had been a year before.

And I was talking about myself in the third person now. I grinned at myself. "You're one lucky son of a bitch, you know that?"

He nodded. He did know.

The Bigger They Are

~TBTA~

It was May and Jasper and I were both civilians. It was an odd feeling, not to have to report for duty at the base each day. If I hadn't had the bar to keep my busy I would have been insane. Every morning we met at the bar and cleaned and planned and argued (or discussed) what to do next. The disagreements were never serious, but it was inevitable that our visions wouldn't mesh completely.

Still, we worked it out.

We asked Mr. Hoyt to go with us to the restaurant supply places. He had been a bar tender for a few years after he retired, and then he had helped his brother run a restaurant for a while because he had been, like me, bored out of his skull. That was something he hadn't shared with me before. I did know that his brother had died several years ago but I hadn't realized that they had kind of been in business together.

He had some good ideas, and still knew a few people. While we didn't get any discounts, we did at least get honest advice on what to buy and what not to buy. Jasper and I could use all the help we could get. Dewey called me to say he had heard I was opening a bar. I had no idea who had told him, but I knew the Army grapevine didn't stop working just because I was no longer in the Army.

"Hey, you ever need a relief bar-tender just remember that I got my credentials and experience. Okay?" he offered at the end of our conversation. I had to laugh, because it made sense. If there was one thing guys like us knew, it was how to drink.

"Yeah, you never know," I assured him.

The thing was that I had started to look toward the following year. Bella and I were getting married next month, but my mind was already fast forwarding to next year. Next year...when I hoped, more than I would have thought possible, that we might have a baby on the way.

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It was strange how I had started to notice babies. In the past, I had pretty much just ignored them. They weren't on my radar and weren't my concern. They were noisy and smelly and entirely someone else's problem. So where had this new - God, I could almost call it an obsession - come from? It didn't make sense.

I had discovered that there were pregnant women and babies everywhere. I had never noticed, or there was a sudden boom in the population, but everywhere I looked, there they were.

There were cute babies and not-so-cute babies; there were even a few downright homely babies, which were still cute in their own way. Babies with tons of hair and bald babies that looked like Charlie Brown. There were cranky babies and happy babies, brown babies and pink ones. There were blue eyes and brown eyes, big round eyes and exotic almond shaped eyes that reminded me of my nephews. Babies surrounded me. They were in every freaking direction I turned.

It didn't help that Jake seemed to have caught whatever brain fever it was that I had.

He pointed out the few babies that I missed. He was fascinated with them. He liked to watch them. He wanted to know at what age they walked and talked and ran and danced. He liked to try and figure out what they were thinking. He even "talked" *for* them, carrying on hilarious conversations about what he thought they might say if they could actually speak.

An unhappy little boy wearing a frog hat, complete with legs that dangled around his shoulders? "Dude...really...you're making me wear this stupid hat? I'm pretty sure this is child abuse."

A mother playfully making her baby "fly" through the air? "Mom, I swear, if you jiggle me one more time I'm gonna hurl. Watch out down below!"

A tiny baby girl buried in layers and layers of billowy pink lace with a ridiculously huge bow wrapped around her tiny head? "I hate bows. I hate pink.

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You wear the pink. You wear the bows. I want a Darth Vader tee-shirt."

A baby being fed mashed up something-green? "I'd really rather have McDonald's, thanks. Don't skimp on the fries."

The kid cracked me up. But his little habit didn't help *me* at all. The truth was, I really hoped that fate would be kind and give us another baby. Not because I wanted one of "my own" but because I wanted to be there from the beginning. I wanted to know what it was like to tuck a little body up against me and know that it was my job to keep them safe and happy and protected. I wanted to see that first smile and first step. It wasn't about passing on genetics, because adoption would have suited me fine, but it *was* about watching a child from the very start, seeing them grow and change and become the person that they were meant to be. It was about feeling like I'd been there to see and experience it all.

Those longings had snuck up on me, much like my feelings for Bella and the boys. I hadn't known that they were exactly what I wanted until fate had stepped in and made me see that. Once more, something I hadn't even realized was missing was calling out to me.

The plain and simple fact was that I wanted to be called Daddy.

Chapter 67: Not for the Faint of Heart

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Not much of one... I turn in the anatomy project from hell today, and I'm excited. For better or worse, I am DONE! Finals are this week and next. Yuck. But my last day of classes is December 8, so I guess I'll survive.

Chapter 67: Not for the Faint of Heart

Bella and Alice and Alyssa went shopping one Saturday. Bella wanted to buy a wedding dress. Not a long, white deal with a train and veil, but something more casual and suited to our more casual wedding. Alice had been bugging her for more than a month to get her ass in gear, but Bella had wiggled out of every lecture, every plea, and every threat. Now, of course, payment was due and Bella was with the two of them for the whole day. I was glad that all I had to do was buy a suit, which was done, altered, and put away. I might have gloated a bit over that with Bella. She had just stuck out her tongue at me and told me that braggarts weren't attractive.

So she was gone for the day. The *whole* day.

That meant I was left at home with the boys, while Masen entertained his two hellions at his house. Jasper had taken the girls and Adam to a movie. I had done that on purpose. I wanted to be alone with the boys, to get a feel for how it was going to be to be a real father to them - all day, no safety nets, completely on my own.

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In my saner moments, I realized that this might be my only shot at fatherhood. And I was really okay with that. It didn't change how I felt about having a baby - I still wanted that if it happened. But having the boys was enough and I was content. Being a father to four was a big job in itself, and sometimes I wondered if we were being selfish in wanting to have another one.

Strangely, it was Masen who eased my mind on that score. We were watching the kids play outside one day, sitting on the back porch, and I had asked if he and Alyssa were going to have any more kids. He shrugged and then shook his head. "Probably not," he admitted. "Two felt right for us." He paused. "But I mean...if it happened, we'd be okay with it. It's not what we planned, but sometimes you can't plan out your life. You know that now, of course." He looked at me. "You and Bella are gonna try, right?"

It was my turn to shrug. "Yeah," I said. "That's the *plan*," I answered with a smirk.

Masen laughed a little. "Kids and plans...natural enemies if you ask me."

Since I had a little experience with that of my own, I nodded. "Tell me about it." I sighed and rubbed at the back of my neck. "You think we're too old?"

"I worked with two people who didn't even have their *first* kids until they were in their early forties," he said. "People are waiting longer now....getting their careers established and shit. Or they have second families. Things are different now. Don't let the age thing make the decision for you."

"Yeah," I said. "I know. Still..."

"Still what?" Masen asked.

I turned to look at him. "Do you think it's... *selfish* to want another kid with Bella?"

"Does Bella want that too?" he asked.

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I nodded. "Yeah, she does. At least we want to give it a shot."

"Let me ask you this... Is your life going to be unhappy if it doesn't happen? Is it going to cause problems between the two of you if things don't work out? Is it going to ruin what you have with the boys? Make you resentful?"

"No," I answered immediately and with full honesty. "I want it, yeah. A lot. But Bella and the boys make me happy, so no...I wouldn't be unhappy if it didn't happen. I don't know how else to explain it." I shrugged. "Hell, I never expected to find Bella, much less those boys. So a baby.... Well, it would kind of be like the cherry on top of an already great hot fudge sundae." I didn't know how else to explain it, so I went for simple.

Masen smiled. "I don't think you're being selfish...either one of you. I think you're being *hopeful*, and that's okay. That's what life is about, isn't it? Hoping we'll get the things we want and dealing with it if we don't?"

I thought about that a moment. "That actually makes sense."

"See? I told you I was a fucking genius." Masen snorted at my doubt.

Now, being the one solely in charge of keeping the boys in one piece, I had a new appreciation for Bella's skills as a parent. Because these kids were in fucking twenty different directions at one time. What the hell would I do if there was a baby added to the mix?

I'd lose my mind, that's what.

~TBTA~

Later that afternoon, my phone rang. I was pleased to see Bella's number and kind of hoping she was coming home. I was exhausted. I needed a nap. I wasn't as young as I used to be and the boys were...well, they were a full time job. They were *four* full time jobs. It was drizzly outside so the boys were kind of stuck inside. With me.

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"Hey, beautiful," I greeted her. I would not whine about being tired. I would not whine about -

"You have to rescue me," Bella whispered urgently.

"What?" I could hear a loud thump and I wondered who had jumped off of furniture *this* time. Probably Jake, the kid was part monkey. And the other part was bottled mischief, leaving only a tiny part for angel. Mostly mischief and monkey, though.

"You. Have. To. Rescue. Me...." She repeated the words slowly, like I wasn't all that bright.

"You're not making any sense," I told her.

"This whole *thing* doesn't make sense," Bella shot back. It was her annoyed voice and I knew I'd better tread carefully.

"What's the matter, babe?" I asked gently.

I heard her blow out a breath. There was a long pause. "What do you say we pack up the boys and run away to Vegas?"

I wanted to laugh. I didn't. I valued my balls. "You'd hate me if I agreed to that."

"No I wouldn't," she insisted. "In fact, you'd have my everlasting gratitude."

"I don't think so." Besides, I tried to imagine keeping an eye on four boys...in Vegas. No thank you.

"You're mean."

Her voice was so soft that I could barely hear her. "Where are you?"

"I'm hiding in a dressing room," she answered just as quietly.

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I laughed, which was probably a mistake but I couldn't help it. It slipped out.
"Why are you doing that?"

"I'm scared," she replied. "They're very...determined."

"Who?"

"Them. Both of them, Alyssa and Alice together, it's like Aliens and Predators combining forces. Mankind - or a poor little bride like me - doesn't stand a chance."

I had to choke back the laughter at that. "Giving you fits, huh?"

"Seriously, Edward, they're frightening. I want my mommy," Bella all but whimpered. "This isn't a shopping trip, it's like an expedition into the forests of the Amazon or something. Alyssa had diagrams of the mall... *diagrams*, Edward."

"Yeah, I probably should have warned you about Alyssa...." I had heard the horror stories from Masen often enough. Alyssa could cut a path through a mall like Sherman through Atlanta and not even break a sweat.

There was some yelling from upstairs and I tried to determine if it was something that needed my attention. Then I heard some loud laughter and decided that I probably had a few minutes left before disaster struck. Again. Seriously, how did Bella keep track of them all, much less keep them from killing each other?

"She's...Edward...really, call the president. Just tell him to send these two over to Iraq and Afghanistan and the war will be *over*....just like that." Then she gave a little laugh that sounded kind of hysterical. I knew she was teetering because the war was something she didn't joke about, understandably.

"Bella," I whispered her name like I did when we were in our big, new bed and I was just about to slide into her.

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"Yeah?" Her voice was still shaky but better. She wasn't teetering any more; she just needed to find her center.

"Just don't look in their eyes," I advised. "Pick a dress *you* want and then pretend that they're the boys...pouting about not getting ice cream or something. You can ignore *them* all day. You don't cave. You don't give in. You never surrender. You're Bella Swan James Almost Cullen and you don't know the meaning of defeat."

"You're right," she whispered, sounding more like the Bella I knew. "If I can hold out against Jake's puppy dog eyes, then I can do this. They're nothing compared to Jake. Their powers pale against the power of the puppy dog eyes."

"Go get 'em, tiger," I urged. "Go show them who's the boss."

She gave a small growl and I laughed. "They're going down."

"That's my girl," I teased.

"That's my *boy*," she shot back and I knew she'd be okay. "I gotta go and kick some ass with my well pedicured feet."

"Ah hell, you just *had* to tell me you got a pedicure." Now I was the one growling but she hung up on me and I was left to my naughty fantasies of toes with fresh polish.

Then I heard another crash upstairs and fantasy time was interrupted.

Again.

Damn it.

~TBTA~

An hour and a half later, Bella marched in, triumphantly bearing one of those garment bags. Her smile said it all. I gestured toward the bag. "Yeah?"

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She nodded and winked. "Hell yeah," she agreed.

"Come give me a kiss, my conquering hero," I pleaded.

Bella shook her head and rolled her eyes, but laid a good one on me anyway. It was probably a good thing I got my kiss before she saw upstairs.

Let's just say that there was damage, there was *frequently* damage. And even more frequently than damage, there were messes. And sometimes there were both.

~TBTA~

The month of May seemed to rush by. I did manage to fit in two days of volunteering. One at Jake's and Sam's school and one at Seth's. Emmett made it clear that I wasn't to embarrass him by showing my face there. Of course, he'd said the same thing to Bella so my feelings weren't too hurt. It was the age and I knew it. Bella, of course, began scheming. "The boy needs to realize that it's my *job* to embarrass him," she muttered. She would settle down. The wedding was - finally - making her a little crazy.

The flowers went off without a hitch. The florist was able to get exactly what Bella wanted and at a great price. She decided she wanted to do a little dancing at the reception and I found a band of which she approved. I knew a guy who had a little brother who had a band. Yeah, it was that kind of grapevine thing. But the kids were actually good, even if he and his friends were actually only a little older than Emmett.

Things were going along fine, even with Bella's small breakdowns. She'd mutter and pace and gesture for about three minutes, then stop, sigh, and close her eyes and take a deep breath. Crisis over. It was kind of cute actually, as long as I was smart and stayed out of the way and kept my fucking mouth shut. I learned that lesson the hard way when I tried to soothe her over meatballs or something. I spoke when I shouldn't have and I got the eyes that were usually reserved for misbehaving sons.

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I shut my mouth and sat down with my hands in my pockets. I made damned sure I didn't roll my eyes either.

Then we had Jasper and his family over for dinner and the kids scattered to the four winds like they usually did and Jake came tumbling down the stairs a while later, almost literally. That was enough to get our attention. He was practically vibrating with excitement, dancing in place.

"I saw 'em!" he declared. "I saw 'em and they were... *kissing*." The last word was said with an equal combination of disgust and awe. His brothers would never get away with anything with Jake James on the job.

Bella's lips went white and she pressed them together. It wasn't just that Jake had seen Emmett kissing Rosalie (that was my guess anyway, I was pretty sure he hadn't caught Seth laying one on Alex or Sam getting fresh with Sophie). Bella suddenly saw the boys growing up, taking a big leap forward. I could recognize the signs well enough now. The wedding planning had taught me well. Soon there would be muttering and pacing and probably some swearing and then she'd come down hard on Emmett.

It was time for Edward Cullen to step in and be a father. Man to man.

I put my hand on Bella's shoulder before she got to the pacing part. "Bella, honey?"

She turned to look at me. Uh oh. I was male and I was the enemy right now. I swallowed hard and forged ahead. "Bella?"

"What?"

"Let me talk to him, okay?"

"Why?"

"Because the way you're feeling right now, you might kill the boy. And I have a feeling you'd be unhappy with yourself for that later." Go with humor. She

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liked to laugh. I saw amusement flash through her eyes but she wasn't a pushover. Instead, she grunted.

"Maybe....maybe not," she answered.

"Can I just talk to him, please?" I begged. "My dad...he's really good at those talks. And I remember a few things."

She considered that for a moment. "You're dad *is* pretty smart."

Whatever I might have said was interrupted by the somewhat sheepish arrival of Rose and Emmett. They were holding hands. Okay. So it was out in the open now. I glanced at Emmett when he started to open his mouth and gave him a tiny shake of my head. He gulped and shut his mouth. Good boy. *Smart* boy.

I saw Alice moving in toward Rosalie, a determined look on her face. Rose gave Em an apologetic look and let go of his hand. He looked like he wanted to protest, but instead he looked at his mother and shoved his hands in his pockets. Smart move #2.

I looked at Emmett and then at Bella, who gave me a nod. I took a look at Jasper, who had this sort sick, stunned look on his face. *That's right, buddy. We've both entered a whole new realm of parenting and it sucks hard.* "Excuse me, Jasper," I said quietly. "Em? A moment, please?"

He swallowed hard again but moved in behind me. I didn't give him a chance to refuse, just kept moving like I had an idea of what the hell I was doing. We went upstairs, passed Seth's room where some of the boys were gathered, moved past the scene of the crime (Emmett's room) and then all the way to the end of the long hallway and went into the bedroom Bella and I shared. I closed the door behind me after Emmett preceded me into the room. I took a deep breath. So did he.

We were both nervous as fuck.

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I waited a second, waited for "You're not my father." There was nothing but uncomfortable silence.

Okay then. So we would proceed.

"Emmett?"

"Yeah?"

"What Jake saw...is that as far as it's gone?" Kissing was okay. Kissing could be handled and was actually age appropriate. As long as they kept their clothes on and their hands to themselves for the most part.

He flushed red and then nodded. "Yeah."

Okay. We were still okay.

I nodded and put my hands in my pockets. This really was more awkward than I'd thought it would be. I suddenly felt a flare of sympathy for my father. "You know you two are too young to go any further, don't you?"

Emmett gave me a look that told me I was stupid. "Yeah, I know that." Impatience rang in his voice, and that was the Emmett I knew and loved and felt comfortable with. I felt myself relaxing. I could deal with hostile and sullen. I tried not to smile.

I sat down on the chair we kept near the bed and tried not to think of the things that Bella and I had done in that chair just two nights before. Emmett sat down on the edge of our bed, looking uncomfortable. Good.

"Your mother and I are worried," I finally said.

He arched one brow at me. "You and my mother are *worried*?"

"We're concerned that you and Rose are going to...go beyond the point you should."

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He looked amused then. Oh no, that wouldn't do. "Huh."

I met his eyes and narrowed mine. I had seen Bella do it a thousand times. I was a fast learner. It wasn't so different from giving orders. "Yes, Emmett, we're worried. I know that your body is telling you you're ready to do things, but in reality, you're not. Either one of you."

He flushed again and his jaw clenched. I knew I needed to change my tactics. Emmett had a protective personality; I needed to tap into that. I sighed deliberately and clasped my hands in front of me, leaning my elbows on my knees. "Emmett, you need to realize that Rose is...vulnerable right now."

That got his attention and his head whipped up. "What do you mean?"

I tried to think about how to phrase it and then decided that I'd never be as good as Bella at this shit, so I just said it. "Remember how confusing and unsettled it felt after your father died?"

He nodded after a moment's hesitation.

"Well multiply that about a thousand times for Rose," I said. "She's never had a father, so when her mother died, she lost everyone. Now she's in a new city with a new family and a new school and a new home. Her life has been...uprooted in every way. Add to that, finding a boy she likes...a lot...and you can guess that she....well, she's vulnerable right now."

"I love her."

That took the wind out of my sails. My first instinct was to tell him that he didn't know what love was yet. That there was no way he *could* know. But something kept my mouth shut and I just nodded. "Yeah...I kinda thought that." And I had, somewhere in the back of my mind. What Emmett felt for Rosalie went beyond "I want to nail her."

He grunted in surprise.

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"But Emmett, it's because you love her that I *really* need you to listen to me," I insisted. "Kissing, that's fine. But you need to be very, very careful about how far you let things go."

"We are," he objected, but his eyes slid away from mine. It hadn't happened yet, but they were getting closer and closer to that slippery slope. Only adult vigilance and sibling supervision had kept them from going too far. Intercourse wasn't the only destination that was too far at this point, and I needed him to understand that.

I stood up and began pacing. I understood why Bella liked to pace when she was thinking about something.

"Emmett...it's only natural that kissing leads to some touching, and that touching leads to more intimate touching-"

"Oh God," he moaned. " *Really?*"

I forged ahead. "And that more intimate touching leads to...well, it leads to sex, Emmett. That's how we're built. It's a human thing and I get that." I sat down on the bed, not quite beside him. "But you're not ready. Your body is ready, sure. But your heart...your mind...neither one of you is there yet."

He looked at me and I could see he wanted to argue. "I love her," he said again.

I nodded. "I know you do, and that's exactly why you'll wait."

He blinked, obviously confused. "When it happens, Emmett, you'll want it to be perfect, right?"

Pausing for a moment, Emmett finally gave a jerky nod.

"Listen, the right time isn't a certain number of weeks or dates. It's a feeling. In your heart...your head. It's not a feeling in your *dick*, Emmett, because a dick is ready to go way before any other part of you is. There's a reason we call someone a dick when they're acting like a jerk," I added. Been there, done that,

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my boy. "When you wait for when your heart and head tell you it's right... What you get is so much better."

"Like you and my mom did?" he snorted. I hadn't planned on going there because of the ick factor, but the kid had opened that can of worms.

"Yeah, exactly like that," I confirmed. No way in hell I was going into detail, but he needed to know some of it. "If I had pushed, or she had pushed, and we weren't ready, we would have probably screwed up what turned out to be a very wonderful thing. And there wouldn't be a wedding coming up. I wouldn't have her or you guys in my life. So yeah, I'm glad we waited. It was too important to screw up."

He made a face but didn't jump to his feet and tell me to shut the hell up, so I pushed a little bit more.

"If you give into those feelings right now, it won't feel right...it'll be a hell of a long way from perfect. And eventually, maybe sooner than you think, one or both of you will come to regret it and you just might ruin whatever it is that you could have had."

My father's words were coming back to me now in a rush and I remembered the mixture of mortification and fear that I'd felt when he had had a similar talk with me. Of course, I had ignored his words and wisdom when Stacy had come bouncing into my life.

"Em, it's *so* much better when the time is right," I finally said. "If you love her-" He opened his mouth and I held up my hand. "If you love her like I think you do, then you'll wait. You'll wait because it's the right thing, and deep down in your heart you know that. You'll wait because when it finally happens, you know you want it to be perfect and right and something you can both look back on without any regrets."

He was silent.

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"You and Rose started out as friends, and moving beyond that too soon or too far could ruin that friendship forever, Em. You could lose her *forever* if you two let things go too far, too soon. And I know you want to have Rose as your friend always."

He nodded.

"So, for the sake of what you feel for her, slow it down, dial it down a notch or six." His lips pulled up in a quick half-smile. "You won't regret that. I promise you. The only thing you'll regret is if you push too hard, too fast and end up doing something you're not ready to do."

He rubbed at his neck and I recognized my own "under stress" gesture. That touched me in a way I hadn't expected. He was mine in a way. And I was his too. So I couldn't screw this up.

"And when you *are* ready, you'll remember to keep her safe in every way, right?" I prodded. *That's right, boy. I'm talking about condoms.*

He closed his eyes and groaned. "God... Yeah, yeah, I got the safe sex talk at school like a billion times."

"I'm just checking, because believe me when I say that being a parent is really, really hard work." Exhausting and back-breaking work, I thought.

He shook his head. "You don't think I know that." He jerked his head toward the other bedrooms. "I've got three little brothers. I've got a clue."

I had to smile at that, because I had thought I had a clue too. Then they had moved in and I realized that I hadn't even known enough to know I didn't know jack shit. "Yeah, well, there's more to it than you think. So please...for your mother's sake, just be....be mindful that your actions always have consequences. Watch out for your Rose."

I saw his face soften at my words. He did love her, with all of the passion and determination that was in his fifteen-year-old heart. It wasn't the same thing

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he'd feel at twenty or thirty, but for where he was now, it was real and it was strong. And he had a protective and nurturing personality. He had been born that way, and then life's circumstances had only made that instinct stronger. Emmett James was going to be a hell of a man one day. I just wanted him to have the chance to grow up like he should and not be rushed because of a stupid mistake.

He paused, nodded, and then stood up. "Are we done?"

I met his gaze for a moment. "Yeah, we are, but if you ever need to talk..."

He was already moving toward the door, his hand on the knob. He looked back at me. "Yeah, you're there for me. I got it." The words were brusque but his tone was soft - accepting even, so I took it at face value.

"Okay," I agreed. "I'll be down in a minute."

The door closed behind him and I flopped back on the bed, trying to ignore the cold sweat that trickled down my back.

Holy. Shit.

This parenting stuff was not for the faint of heart. At all.

Chapter 68: So This is Magic

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 68: So This is Magic

"There is no surprise more magical than the surprise of being loved."

Charles Morgan

~TBTA~

The boys were home from school and I was in the garage trying to find a drill bit to do a little bit of home repair so that I could dazzle Bella with my handyman skills. Besides, there were some things that needed done at the bar, so I wanted to get my gear together. And practice. I was a tad bit rusty.

Since moving Bella and the boys in, some things had gotten moved around and - subsequently - lost. Or misplaced rather. We were all still making adjustments. So it was in the garage that Seth found me.

He watched me silently for a few moments. I turned to look at him while I rummaged through the little drawers on the third shelf of the far set of shelves - where my drill bits should have been.

"Hey, Seth," I said after a short pause. "How was school?"

It was the standard question at the end of the day. Emmett usually just said, "Fine." Jake would give me a minute-by-minute rundown, and Seth's and Sam's responses were somewhere in-between.

"Good," he said, chewing at his lower lip just like his mother. He had

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something on his mind.

"Yeah?" I nodded. "School year's almost over."

"Thank goodness!" Seth breathed. "I'm so ready for summer."

"Yeah, me too." But for very different reasons.

I went back to looking. Okay, now I was getting somewhere. I found drill bits, just not the right size. I kept digging. Ah ha, there it was the slippery little fucker.

"Uh...Edward?" I turned.

"Yeah? Something up, Seth?"

He shrugged. "You know I've been practicing a lot, right? The guitar..."

"You sound great, Seth. It's hard to believe you haven't been playing longer."

"Uh, thanks...the thing is...I was wondering..."

I waited. Seth didn't like to be pushed. He, like Bella, needed to open up on his own terms and in his own way. I leaned against my workbench and examined the drill bit to give me something to do.

"I was wondering if it would be all right if I played a song for Mom...and you...at the reception?"

Now that surprised me. I had heard him singing a few times. He was good. His voice had calmed down lately and he had a rough, husky voice that seemed too old for his body. But even if he'd sucked, I would have said yes because it would please both Seth and Bella.

"I think that would be great. Any ideas about which song you'd like to play?"

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He nodded and smiled shyly. Then he explained exactly what he wanted to do and why. I was not ashamed to say that I got a little choked up. At least no one else saw.

~TBTA~

The school year came to an end - finally. I think I was as relieved as the boys were. For me, the end of school meant we were just that much closer to the wedding. It also meant that Bella had more free time. Jasper and I were now waiting on paperwork with the city to clear. Opening a business was proving to be a bit of a pain in some areas. Luckily, it was an area in which we were both accustomed to the "hurry up and wait" mentality. The military had prepared us well in that regard.

In any case, we had decided to delay the opening of the bar until after the wedding, the honeymoon, and Sam's space camp. We weren't in too big a rush. The summer was already quite full.

On the last day of school, I picked up each of the boys at their respective establishment of learning (Sam's turn of phrase) and then we went to the arcade to celebrate their upcoming months of freedom. Emmett was the most excited, I thought. He was looking forward to spending more time with Rosalie. He had accepted the fact that they would always have someone (probably a sibling) with them.

While we trusted them, we also realized that we didn't need to tempt them. Besides, little brothers made amazing chaperones, and Jake was absolutely not to be bribed. He liked telling tales too much. Bella had made me repeat, word for word, what I had told Emmett. I could only hope my memory had been good enough. When I had recited my little talk with him, she paused, frowned thoughtfully, and then gave me a kiss. "For a novice, you're really good at the parenting stuff. Just thought you should know."

I had basked in her praise for hours. Then later that night she had *demonstrated* her appreciation for my efforts. That was even better than the kind words.

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When Bella arrived home, I insisted on us going to Pete's for dinner. Pizza was always a good choice with the boys, and besides, my limited repertoire of dinners was getting rather strained. Bella had even hinted that she'd like to start cooking more once school ended. I was only too happy to share the chore. The sad truth was, I wasn't all that fond of cooking. Grilling was different, but even Bella's patience would be strained by burgers and hot dogs six nights a week, leaving one night a week free for pizza.

Yeah, I was kind of looking forward to her spaghetti and meatballs again.

Pete's was noisy and crowded. I guessed that other families had had the same idea we had about celebrating the end of the school year. We ran into Mr. Hoyt -Jed- and his new "friend" Liz. They were enjoying a pizza and some beer. We went to their table and said hello but left them alone rather quickly. The looks they were shooting at each other had me cringing. Bella just snickered, saying it was cute.

No. It wasn't cute. It was...disturbing. It was like thinking of my father or grandfather getting - No, best to stop right there.

Later that night, Bella and I tumbled into bed. She snuggled up close. "I talked to my mother today," she said, letting her hands roam over my chest and belly. I liked it.

"Yeah? How are she and Charlie?" I had gotten used to calling him Charlie, at least when it was just us. I wasn't sure I'd even move beyond calling him "sir" to his face or over the phone.

"Good," Bella answered. "They said they want to get here three days, maybe four, before the wedding."

"That'll work," I said. Bella's parents were going to watch the boys while Bella and I took a short honeymoon. I was in charge of the honeymoon. I had a few things up my sleeve. It wouldn't be Paris or Honolulu, but I was pretty sure we'd enjoy ourselves. "When will your brother and Josh get here?" I asked as I shifted. I had sort of tucked her underneath me and put my leg over hers. She

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wiggled and moved, which of course, made my dick stand up and pay attention. At least the non-stop boners and relentless urge to commit lewd acts of self-abuse had let up.

Bella pressed a kiss to my chest. "Uh..." She kissed me again and then took a moment to give my nipple a little nibble. Temptress ninja sex kitten was making an appearance. "They said..." She hissed when my lips closed over her nipple in retaliation. "Uh...two days before..." Arching against me, Bella's fingers started grabbing onto my longer hair. A tug, a tiny pain, and then, oh yeah, right there.

"Good," I muttered as I slid her panties off. Sometimes I thought she wore them only to tease me and give me something to do.

We wouldn't be needing *those*.

She was slick when my fingers found her, welcoming my touch. I leaned over her, making enough room between our bodies to urge her tee-shirt over her head. My tee-shirt, actually. They seemed to disappear into her drawer all the time and somehow seeing her in them was sexier than lingerie. Not that I had anything against lingerie.

I licked at her collarbone. "We should celebrate," I whispered.

"What?" Her leg was rubbing between mine, her knee brushing softly against my balls in a caress. She knew I liked that.

"School's out for summer," I sang softly and she giggled.

"More like hot for teacher," she retorted, cupping my erection.

"Maybe you should keep me after class," I suggested.

Whatever she might have said back was lost in a groan as I slid inside of her. I joined her in the moaning and groaning. We were a loud pair. I reached down and hooked her knee over one of my arms, changing the angle. We got louder.

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"Oh yeah," she encouraged. "Harder..."

Happy to oblige.

~TBTA~

The weeks after school ended and before the wedding sped by. There were last minute decisions, last minute mistakes, but no catastrophes. It was a good thing the wedding was soon, or Emmett would outgrow his suit. He was now my height, two inches over six feet, and didn't show any signs of slowing down. It was hard to believe how much he'd grown in the little more than a year since I'd first met them.

Of course then he'd been in eighth grade. At the end of this summer, he would be starting his sophomore year of high school. Bella didn't appreciate that little observation and accused me of making her feel old. I reminded her that I was still older than she was. We kissed and made up.

The next thing I knew it was time to go to the airport to pick up her parents. We had decided that, despite the cramped conditions of the Suburban on the trip home, we would all go to pick them up. We'd manage.

I was somewhat nervous about seeing her parents again, but it wasn't too bad. We'd talked quite a bit since our last meeting, and they seemed fine with us getting married. Mostly, I think they were fine with it because I seemed to make Bella happy and the boys had given me their stamps of approval - though those stamps varied in their enthusiasm.

Renee gave me a big hug and kiss when she saw me standing there at the terminal. While Charlie was busy hugging the boys, even Emmett seemed to appreciate a hug from his grandfather, Renee cradled my face and called me a "handsome boy." I kind of blushed, which made Bella snort. "It's so hard to believe that you're getting married in three days," Renee said.

And it hit me.

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We were getting married in three days.

Three days.

THREE DAYS. And I would be a married man.

~TBTA~

It was funny how it had snuck up on me. I was still a little shaky as I drove us all back to the house. It wasn't nerves exactly, and it definitely wasn't cold feet. It was...excitement mostly. Yeah, there was a touch of anxiety. I knew we were both taking on a lot with this marriage. She was taking on a guy who hadn't really expected to ever settle down, and I was taking on a ready made family.

I got that. I had gotten that a long time ago.

No, what really hit me was that this was real. We were actually doing this. We were tying the knot, making it legal, making it *forever*. I would never be alone again. Those boys, they were my family now too. They would grow up and probably get married and maybe have kids of their own. All of those people waiting in their future would be part of my future too. We were all connected now. I was connected to Bella and the boys, and they were connected to Charlie and Renee and Will and Josh. I was connected to Mom and Dad and Masen and Alyssa and Kyle and Alex and they were all now connected to Bella and the boys and Charlie and Renee and Will and Josh.

Somehow, we were *all* a family now. Even Jasper and Alice and their kids - in a way they were family too. The friendship that had started in basic training two decades ago had become closer and had more depth now. We had more in common. We had similar fears and hopes. We were in a business together, trusting our families' finances to each other in a way. That was a lot of trust.

A year and a half ago, I'd been on a desert. Alone. I loved my parents and my brother and his wife and their sons, but I wasn't really a part of their everyday lives. If I had died there, they would have mourned, but no one would have missed my daily presence.

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It was amazing how much difference just a handful of months could make.

I grabbed Bella's hand as I drove, giving it a squeeze. I wanted to pull over and kiss her and say thank you. Instead, I just drove, trying to pay attention to the road. It was Bella who had given me that, Bella who had saved me.

~TBTA~

"Nice house," Charlie commented as we carted the suitcases inside. Later on, we'd be joining Masen and Alyssa at their house for dinner. Alyssa insisted that we wouldn't want to cook and they wanted to get to know Bella's family.

"Thanks," I said. "We put you in Emmett's room. It's got the biggest bed and it's closer to the bathroom," I said.

"Is he bunking with Seth?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah, and bitching about the air mattress," I confided with a grin.

"How'd they decide that?"

"Rock, paper, scissors," I replied. "Best three out of five. Emmett lost in the fifth round. He wasn't happy."

Charlie laughed and shook his head. "As big as that kid's getting, I'm not surprised they don't arm wrestle anymore."

"Seth's catching up," I noted.

"Hell yeah, he is," Charlie agreed. He paused as we put the suitcases on the bed. "Bella looks good," he said.

"Yeah."

"No, I mean...she looks good," Charlie insisted. "That look is gone from her eyes. The look that broke my heart."

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I shrugged and shoved my hands in my pockets, feeling uncomfortable. Charlie didn't say anything else, both because that wasn't his way and because he didn't need to. I understood what he was saying, and not saying. He knew how I felt. We didn't need to verbalize it.

~TBTA~

Dinner with Masen and the crew was great. Masen was on his best behavior and Alyssa charmed Charlie and Renee like always. Even the boys were polite and quiet and subdued - for about ten minutes. And then they went right back to being themselves, thank God. They made me nervous when they were too quiet. As Bella said, "Quiet boys are usually up to no good." How true that was.

When Bella and I crawled into bed that night, but unspoken agreement we knew that there would be no sex. First, her father and mother were sleeping down the hall. Second, we were kind of putting the sex stuff on hold these last few days before the wedding. And third, her father and mother were sleeping down the hall. Fourth...well, you get the picture.

Will and Josh flew in the next day, but they rented a car and drove to our house. Josh clapped me on the back and welcomed me - officially - to the family. Will hugged me and ruffled my hair and then gave Jake the same treatment.

My parents arrived. My mother was weepy and emotional, but in a very good way. "My baby," she kept murmuring as she kissed me and hugged me and generally just made a big show of how surprised she was that I'd actually found someone to put up with me on a permanent basis. *Yeah, Mom thanks for the vote of confidence.*

My Dad called Bella his daughter, which made her blink and then blush and then smile brilliantly. He and Renee hit it off right away and she declared him "a charmer." My mother and Charlie seemed to find a lot to talk about, which made me a little nervous. This was my mother, who knew some of my most embarrassing secrets, and *Charlie*.

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Jasper and Alice and their kids stopped by when everyone else was at the house too, which meant the house was full to bursting. Emmett ran over to invite Mr. Hoyt to a little impromptu party. Liz was there, so he invited her as well.

We somehow managed to put together a meal for everyone, with Alyssa, Bella, and Alice conspiring with Renee and Mom to feed the invading masses. Liz jumped right in and made some delicious cookies with whatever she found in the kitchen. I didn't question; I just ate. Seriously, those were some amazing cookies.

At the end of the night, after all of the good-byes were said, Bella and I collapsed. Tomorrow would be our rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. And the day after that was the wedding.

The wedding was now just two days away. I kept waiting for cold feet to set in. But nothing even approaching chilly so far. I cuddled up against Bella. "We're getting close," I murmured.

"Yeah." Her voice was a sleepy murmur.

"Are you getting nervous yet?" I had to ask. I felt like something was wrong with me because I wasn't nervous yet, not really, not in that stomach-clenching way.

"Nope," she said, her breath warm against my neck. "You?"

"No," I admitted. "And I think that's weird, don't you?"

She laughed and shifted against me. Bad move. We were trying to be "good." My dick thought that plan was stupid.

"Since when have we ever done things in the usual way?" Bella asked pointedly, still sounding drowsy.

"Yeah," I said, placing a kiss on top of her head. "Yeah, you're right."

The Bigger They Are

"I usually am," she muttered.

"That's why I'm marrying you," I teased.

"Keep that up, and I'm going to do naughty, naughty things to your body and watch you try and be quiet with my father just a few doors down."

"You're a cruel, cruel woman," I said with a shudder.

"You'd do well to remember that," she whispered as her hand skimmed over my belly.

Ah hell, ninja demon temptress wanted to play.

"Bella," I warned. I wanted to play too. But we couldn't. Could we?

She ignored me and kissed a path down my chest toward my -

"Oh fuck," I hissed.

She laughed as she licked at my lower belly, just skirting around the place where I most - and least - wanted her to be. "Bella..." I groaned. "This isn't....oh fuck me...funny."

"You're right," she said as she licked my dick, just the head. "It's hot."

Unable to help myself, and knowing that I'd die if Charlie and Renee figured out what we were up to, I thrust into her mouth. Bella had her way with me for a few minutes and then crawled up my body, rubbing against me in all the right ways as she did so. Then she settled her body over mine and I was surrounded by her heat and her hips were moving and mine joined in. I never stood a chance.

"Bella..." I couldn't get much more than that out of my mouth, but she wasn't in much better shape so I didn't let it bother me too much.

The Bigger They Are

We had sex. And it was really, really great.

It was also really, *really* quiet.

~TBTA~

I woke up and I smiled as I saw that she was already awake and staring at the ceiling with a sappy smile on her face. "Hey you," I whispered.

She turned to me with a wide grin. "Guess what we're doing tomorrow?" she asked softly.

I frowned. "Going shopping?"

Bella stuck out her tongue. "Better."

"Better than shopping?" I said with obvious skepticism. Then I pulled her close. "Oh...that's right...I'm marrying the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Cheesy, Cullen, really cheesy," she admonished. "But I'll let it pass."

"And that's why I love you."

~TBTA~

The rehearsal went smoothly. I had Masen as my best man. Bella chose Alyssa to be her attendant. We decided to keep it small so it was just the two of them, though we did want the boys standing up with us, two on each side. Jake had claimed his spot by me. Seth would stand by Jake. Emmett and Sam would stand with their mother.

Bella had also asked each of the boys to walk behind her and her father up the aisle. I thought it was a nice touch. I wasn't just taking Bella as my wife; I was taking those boys as my family. I wanted everyone to know that.

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My parents insisted on paying for the rehearsal dinner and we went to a very nice restaurant. The hostess' face when she realized that all four boys belonged to us - the soon-to-be-newlyweds - was priceless. Emmett threw his arm around me and shook his head, saying right in front of the hostess, "Yeah, they finally decided to make it legal. Parents these days..." He sighed with exasperation.

I thought the poor woman's jaw was going to drop to the floor. I shouldn't have laughed, honestly, but I did.

Charlie stood up and toasted us. "To Edward, who will take good care of my daughter and love my grandsons as if they were his own..." Then he leveled a stern look at me. "Right?"

"Yes, sir, that's affirmative," I agreed with an emphatic nod of my head.

My mom got choked up. Again. I thought it was a little unflattering that she was *so* shocked I was getting married. I told her so. She just patted my cheek and called me her dear boy again. I think she had had a little too much wine, because she patted Charlie's cheek and said exactly the same thing to him.

Jasper and Alice had joined us for the rehearsal dinner. Rose and Emmett sat with each other, throwing glances at each other the whole time. Bella was still keeping an eagle on them, and had actually paid Jake to help her. I didn't blame her.

We all got to bed late, but our wedding wasn't until two in the afternoon, so we didn't have to wake up early. Bella was going to Alyssa's house to get dressed. Alice had arranged for someone to come by and do Bella's hair. The mystery dress was safely hidden in the garment bag and I had been a good boy and not peeked.

I had, however, snuck a look at the lingerie Bella had bought for our wedding night. I approved. A lot. Not that it was going to stay on her long.

I hugged Bella close and enjoyed our last night of single life...together.

Chapter 69: Here Comes the Sun

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Author's Note: My muse and I have fussed and wrangled with each other over this chapter. BTW, she's a hair-puller and she bites. Anyway, this isn't quite what I wanted, but it's what my muse gave me and apparently, she's not in a mood to negotiate.

Chapter 69: Here Comes the Sun

Bella and I seemed to wake up at the same moment. I smiled. She did too. It was sort of shy, but in a nice way. We both realized that by the end of this day, we'd be married, and that was a very, *very* good thing. "Good morning soon-to-be Mrs. Cullen," I finally said.

"Good morning to you too, Mr. Cullen," she whispered. She brushed back my hair. "I love you."

"That's why we're here," I reminded her with a little grin.

Her eyes flickered toward the window, where we could just see the morning sky through the blinds. The sun was just rising. "Here comes the sun," she murmured. I smiled because that seemed appropriate for today. "It's going to be a beautiful day," she finally said with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Yeah it is," I agreed.

Bella glanced at the clock. "I should probably get my ass in gear," she noted with regret.

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"And a very nice ass it is," I remarked, giving it a little squeeze to emphasize my words.

"Well, in a few hours it'll be all yours, legal and everything," she teased as she got up out of bed and wriggled that ass at me.

"Tease." She was doing it on purpose, knowing I wasn't about to make a move when Charlie or one of the boys could knock on our door at any moment.

She looked over her shoulder at me. "It's not teasing if I intend to follow through."

"Now that's just cruel," I told her, but I was laughing.

I leaned back in the bed and listened to her moving around our bedroom and bathroom. I knew her routine by now, and she knew mine. It wasn't boring. Far from it, I liked the comfort of knowing what to expect.

I liked knowing that this was just the beginning.

~TBTA~

The morning was hectic. The boys were frantically searching for ties and black socks and new dress shoes when Alice and Alyssa came to collect Bella and Renee. My father had dropped my mother off at Alice's house already on his way to ours. I told her to go on and I'd help the boys find all of their stuff. She gave me a hurried kiss on the cheek and I was too busy sulking to notice her run back to the front door. Then she was pressed against me and giving me a much nicer kiss on the lips, even slipping me a bit of tongue. I was smiling when they pulled out of the driveway. Renee gave me a big thumbs up. She was a hoot, different from her daughter in so many ways, yet a lot alike in others. We were going to get along just fine.

The men had decided to gather at our house. Well, the men and the kids. Somehow, we got elected to baby-sitting duty, okay, *boy*-sitting duty. Rose and the twins stayed with their mother. Bella said it was because being a girl took

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more maintenance and that it took them longer to get ready. Masen said it was because they liked the idea of us trying to keep seven boys in line.

No matter the motivation behind the decision, Emmett was a lifesaver in keeping them all somewhat contained and under control. Of course, "control" was a relative term when it came to that many boys.

Charlie, Jasper, Masen and I had helped them find all of their dress clothes. My dad mostly supervised. Masen had his boys' clothes in a garment bag, explaining that if they had more than six minutes of unsupervised time after getting dressed up that something was bound to happen to ruin their clothes.

Masen and my Dad commiserated with all of them over the discomfort of ties and squeaky new dress shoes. Charlie said he hated wearing ties too and the boys all nodded in agreement. We had a little bitch session about it, though I had the fleeting thought that ties were better than high-heeled shoes any day. We showed all of them how to tie their own ties, which might have been a mistake because they kept undoing them so they could practice again. Jake wanted to wear his around his head. Between showering and eating and then finally getting dressed, the morning passed quickly.

While the boys each retreated to their rooms, along with Kyle and Alex, to get dressed, Masen and I were alone in my bedroom. He was dressed; his hair was brushed and, for once, tamed into submission. He walked up to me with a little smile and began adjusting my tie for me. "There," he finally said. "Good enough for your Bella."

I looked in the mirror and tugged at my cuffs. Masen caught my glance in the mirror. "Are you nervous?" he asked.

I thought about it for a moment and shrugged. "I'm not sure that nervous is the word I'd use."

"Terrified?" he guessed.

We grinned at each other. "There are moments..."

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There was a knock on the door. My father had gotten dressed too. He smiled at me. "You look...great, son."

We stood there for a moment, a father and sons. Now I realized how important that bond was, and I could guess at some of the feelings my father must have. I could imagine how I would feel when it was one of my boys getting married. Of course, if they waited as long as I had, it would be a long time coming.

"So..." Dad said. "This is it."

"This is it," I agreed.

"I won't ask if you're sure," Dad said.

"I am."

He nodded. "I know." He looked at Masen. "Remember when you got married, Mase?"

"Vaguely," he replied with a grin. He had had a hangover the size of Texas. I had been smarter than that, refusing anything that even resembled a bachelor party. At forty years old, officially, it was time to leave those days behind. We had decided to celebrate my birthday after we got back from the honeymoon when things were more relaxed. I would get the meals of my choice and have complete and total control over the television then. I was looking forward to it. Besides, Bella and I had had a little "private" celebration on the actual day of my birthday already. And it had been very, very nice - my nicest birthday to date.

Dad laughed and shook his head. "I don't have any magical advice to give you, Edward. I'll just tell you to love her with all of your heart. Be patient and kind, be generous and compassionate. Just do your best, and that will get you through the rough times."

"I will," I promised.

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"I know," he said again and clapped me on the back. Then he glanced at his watch. "Well...it looks like it's getting time to leave. Your Bella is already there."

I took a deep breath and we went downstairs. All of the boys, all six of them, were gathered there. My boys were in black suits that matched mine and Masen's, his boys were in dark grey suits. All of us wore dark blue ties and white shirts. Jasper and his son were in lighter grey suits. Charlie was wearing a dark blue suit. We weren't a very colorful group, but I had a feeling that our women wouldn't have any complaints. Will and Josh had peeked in earlier and then gone to meet Bella. They had opted to stay in a hotel, mostly because we were running out of beds. I felt like I hadn't really had a chance to sit down and talk with them. Maybe later today, at the reception.

Then Jake was sighing impatiently. "We look good, huh?" he asked.

I nodded, unable to speak for a moment. Something about seeing them all there, dressed up and looking so grown up, made a lump rise in my throat. I cleared my throat and took a breath. "So...we're ready to go?"

The boys all nodded as one.

We had not wanted to bother with limousines, so I choose the Vader-mobile to take us to the church. Charlie drove my Suburban, taking Jasper and Adam and Kyle and Alex. I had my dad and Masen and my boys with me. There were a lot of us, I thought as I drove.

Then we were there and I was waiting for it to be time to go stand in my place. Masen was at my side, leaning in every now and then to whisper something funny or something to soothe my nerves. It was starting to hit me. Not cold feet, but nerves and anticipation, definitely.

This was it.

I looked at my watch. She'd be walking down that short aisle in thirteen...no twelve minutes.

The Bigger They Are

It seemed like the longest twelve minutes of my life.

Then Masen was nudging me into place. Will gave me a wink and Josh just smiled happily. I met my parents' eyes as they were seated. I nodded at Renee. Charlie was waiting to escort Bella down the aisle. Our boys were with them. I could hear Jake's laughter and the deep rumble of Emmett's voice. I wondered what they were saying to each other and to Bella.

Then the music started and the world stopped. The light breeze faded for a moment, and even the leaves seemed to stop rustling. There was nothing but Bella and me.

Alyssa came gliding down the aisle, tall and beautiful I was sure, but I only vaguely noted her presence. My eyes were focused behind her, where Bella was standing with Charlie. They were at the French doors of the club, ready to step outside. Later, after looking at the pictures, I could see the expression on my face as I waited for her and knew that everyone there saw just how much I loved her.

But at the moment, I could only concentrate on breathing and staying upright. Her dress was a cream-colored blur to me. I registered that it was long, but fitted, and everything was discreetly covered across her chest. I allowed myself a moment of disappointment at not seeing any cleavage. Then she turned to say something to one of the boys and my mouth probably dropped open a little bit. While the front was modest, the back plunged down... *way* down it seemed. I remembered how much I liked her back...and her front...and... Shit, get it under control, Cullen. Then she was looking my way again, her smile sure and steady.

Some new music started and Bella was moving toward me. Her hair was piled up, revealing the lines of her throat and I wanted to kiss her there. And everywhere else too, for that matter. She wasn't wearing a veil or anything, nothing to hide her from me. She met my eyes and smiled tenderly. There were some pearls or something stuck in the darkness of her hair and I imagined pulling them out, one by one, to let her hair tumble over her shoulders.

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Even at the moment, in a place surrounded by family and friends, I wanted her. She was achingly beautiful and we belonged to each other.

Charlie put her hand in mine and I looked around her to the boys, who were moving into place. Jake and Seth came to stand by me and Masen. Emmett and Sam moved into place by Alyssa. I heard people murmuring and I knew that they liked seeing us all together like that. As Mrs. Hutchinson had said, our story had touched a lot of lives. We were betting on hope.

We had chosen the traditional vows because they said what we wanted to say. I repeated the words the chaplain told us to say. My voice was clear and firm. Bella's voice was softer, but no less certain. We didn't have any doubts.

I had her hand in mine. As I placed the ring on her finger, I smiled because this was it. This was the moment that had been inevitable since the first time I saw her, the non-Medusa mother of four. We had all been lost and wandering in our own way, but that was over now.

I'll take care of her and the boys, Mac. No worries.

I heard the wind pick up and saw it play through the loose coils of Bella's hair. I could almost hear him reply, *Thanks*.

It was my imagination, I knew. But I also felt certain that if he could have, Mac would have said just that. I would make good on my promise. I looked at my ring on her finger. I looked at my hand, where her ring now laid claim.

Bella and I kissed and it was chaste and over too quickly, but it felt absolutely perfect.

She was mine. I was hers.

We turned and the chaplain introduced us as Mr. and Mrs. Edward Cullen. That made me grin and my heart beat faster all at the same time. The boys started clapping, which surprised me. I turned to look at Emmett and he smiled, shrugging those huge shoulders of his. Then I reached out and took Jake's

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hand, and he took Seth's. Bella grasped Sam's hand and he took Emmett's. We formed a "V" like a flock of geese, and walked back down that aisle - as a family.

~TBTA~

The band was playing in the background. They were good, mostly doing covers of older music. Seth was thrilled. I could see him getting more and more nervous as time went on. But he settled down enough to eat. Masen, being my best man, was going to give us our first toast.

When he stood up and clinked his fork against his glass, I kissed Bella's ear and then gave my attention to my brother. I wasn't nervous about what he'd say, because Masen knew there was a time and place for everything. He wouldn't ruin our day, but I hoped he wouldn't make me get all emotional and shit either. I'd never live it down.

"Well, I guess you all know that there were some of us who thought this day would *never* come," Masen began with a wink at my mother.

Mom blushed and shook her head, denying what we all knew.

"However, it became clear last year that my brother was only waiting to find the perfect woman before he took the plunge. And like any typical Cullen, he was stubborn enough to wait for the very best." Masen nodded at Bella. "And also like most of the men in our family, he's married up."

Masen winked at Alyssa, who called out, "And how!"

Everyone laughed. Then Masen's expression grew more serious and he raised his glass.

"Only my big brother could find the love of his life because of a broken windshield." Emmett looked chagrined but raised his glass anyway. "So here's to Bella and Edward and finding love when and where you least expect it."

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I thought the toast was perfect and apparently Bella did too because she got a little teary eyed. There were more toasts, but my attention was on Seth. When all of the adults had had their say, Seth stood up and cleared his throat. Everyone turned to look at him and I watched as the nervousness faded away.

He looked at his mother and then at me. "My brothers and I...well, we have a little something for the happy couple."

Then he moved toward the stage, where his guitar - and mine - were tucked away. I gave Bella a little kiss and told her that I loved her. Then the band brought out two stools for Seth and me and handed us our guitars. We had practiced this; we were ready. Yes it was corny and cliché, but it was important to Seth, so it was important to me. And besides, I'd never gotten to sing to Bella, so this would be a first for us.

Seth tapped the microphone. "Uh...I've been learning this song for my mom. And my brothers and I want to tell Edward 'welcome to the family' and all that." I swallowed hard. I wouldn't be able to sing shit if he kept that up. He seemed to sense my difficulty because he grinned and shook his head.

"So...this is for my mom and..." He paused and took a deep breath. "This is for Mom and Pops."

I felt my heart lodge in my throat, but in a very good way. It wasn't what I had expected, and if you had asked me yesterday if I wanted to be called Pops I would have told you hell no. But I could see from the boys' faces that they had given this some thought, and suddenly Pops sounded like the best damned thing in the world.

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down and nodded. Then we began picking out the notes on our guitars. I took over the more complex parts of the melody, but Seth more than held his own. I could see from Bella's face that she recognized the tune, and knowing Seth's love for The Beatles, I don't think she was surprised.

He started in after the intro.

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*Here comes the sun,
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's alright*

I came in where Seth had asked me to. He had said he'd feel weird calling his mother Little Darling.

*Little darling,
It's been a long, cold, lonely winter.
Little darling
It feels like years since it's been here*

Seth's voice rang out clear and deep and true, a man's voice in a kid's body.

*Here comes the sun
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's alright*

My eyes met Bella's as I joined in with Seth again.

*Little darling,
The smiles returning to the faces
Little darling
It seems like years since it's been here.*

*Here comes the sun.
Here comes the sun, and I say
It's alright.*

The band behind us came in on the chorus.

*Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes
Sun, sun, sun, here it comes*

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*Little darling
I see the ice is slowly melting
Little darling
It seems like years since it's been clear*

*Here comes the sun, here comes the sun and I say,
It's alright.*

Bella was openly crying when we sang the last note and after we were done, I gave Seth a hug that might have cracked a few ribs. The song had been Seth's choice, and it wasn't really a love song in the most traditional sense. But it was right for all of us. He had told me that he picked that song because he liked seeing his mom smile again.

What I don't think Seth realized that my own "winter" was over now too. I had been cold and hadn't even known it, and all of them had taken me in and given me warmth and love and everything that I hadn't known I was missing.

Somehow, Bella ended up in my arms and we were all hugging and laughing and crying and there wasn't a damned thing that was dignified about it. Emmett teased Seth about wanting to be a rock star. Jake pouted because he hadn't been invited to sing too. He started to say something and Emmett gave him a sharp nudge in the ribs. Jake started to pout but then Sam leaned in and whispered in his ear and Jake's expression cleared.

The rest of the day was a blur of food and cake and visiting with people that had come to wish us well. There was Major Hutchinson and his wife, who both urged Bella to keep in touch. Dewey and his wife exclaimed over Seth's talent and how beautiful the bride was. Thomas and Megan Reynolds were there. Even Thor was there with his date. She was tiny and as blond as he was. Jed and Liz danced almost every dance, though they did take time to congratulate us. Karen was there too and she rolled her eyes when I said that Liz and Jed seemed to have hit it off. "You have no idea," she teased.

My Dad and Mom danced and then my father danced with Bella.

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I danced with my mother and Lys and then Renee, who was pretty much glowing with happiness and champagne. Will and Bella danced, while Josh twirled Lys around the dance floor. I got a lump in my throat again when Bella danced with Charlie. Suddenly, I wondered how I'd feel when the boys got married. It was a scary thought.

Then Bella and I were dancing again but the music stopped. I turned to look at the stage and when I saw Masen there I knew something was up. To my surprise, Emmett, Seth, Sam, Jake, Jasper, Kyle, Alex, and Adam also climbed up on the stage.

"Uh oh," I whispered to Bella. "Did you know about this?"

She shook her head, laughing a little.

Emmett looked embarrassed but resigned. I saw Rose give him a little encouraging nod. Seth looked like he was in his element. Jake seemed amused by it all. Masen was grinning from ear to ear. I wondered if I should be worried.

"Okay, this is for my big brother and his beautiful new wife," he said into the microphone.

A familiar strain of music started and I had to laugh. Once, a long, long time ago, Masen and I had "performed" this song for our parents as an anniversary present. We must have been about seven or eight. Mom had cried and Dad had almost busted a gut laughing.

There was only one thing missing...

Ah hell.

As one, all of them turned to grab at something that was behind them. Then they turned back and in sync, they all put black fedoras on their heads. Masen leaned into the microphone. "You know I look good, big brother." Everyone started laughing and clapping and hollering. The alcohol that had been flowing

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would certainly enhance their appreciation of what was coming.

They had obviously been practicing on the sly, because they all moved into roughly the same dance moves. Some of them were more graceful than others.

They started singing and some of them were really, *really* bad.

(Love, love, love)

(Love, love, love)

(Love, love, love)

The guys in the band chimed in with the lyrics and it sounded a little better. Of course, it couldn't sound much worse, I conceded.

There's nothing you can do that can't be done

Nothing you can sing that can't be sung

Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game

It's easy

There's nothing you can make that can't be made

No one you can save that can't be saved

Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you in time

It's easy

All you need is love

All you need is love

All you need is love, love

Love is all you need

What they lacked in talent, they made up for in enthusiasm, and by the time they got to the chorus again, Jake was pretty much yelling.

(Love, love, love)

(Love, love, love)

(Love, love, love)

The Bigger They Are

*All you need is love
All you need is love
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need.*

Bella started laughing, because their "dance" moves were getting more and more out of step. Emmett was turned right when everyone else turned left and came face to face with Seth. Then he quickly whipped around and almost fell of the tiny stage. Sam's hand caught Kyle in the face. Jasper almost backed over the drums behind him and only just caught himself before it was too late.

Masen's hat fell off and he stepped on it before he could correct his step. Jake had obviously forgotten the words and was just making stuff up that sounded right to him.

*There's nothing you can know that isn't known
Nothing you can see that isn't shown
There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be
It's easy*

*All you need is love
All you need is love
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need.*

Jake ended the song on his knees, his arms spread wide and "singing" at the top of his lungs, finally picking up the right words. Then he doffed his hat to his mother and me and jumped to his feet to take his bows.

It was off-key and out of sync and completely bizarre and unexpected. It was also absolutely right for us. I leaned in and whispered, "Well we've got love, so I guess that's all we need."

"Damn straight," she murmured, and pulled me in for a kiss. My wife was pretty damned amazing.

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Note: Both "Here Comes the Sun" and "All You Need is Love" are by The Beatles. Just a little nod to The Beatles fan I live with, my youngest son.

Chapter 70: Betting on Life

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I just wanted to say thank you to anyone who has read and/or reviewed this story. I know that there are thousands and thousands of amazing stories out there, and the fact that you give some of your time to my efforts means more than you can know. So...thank you.

Chapter 70: Betting on Life

"Admit it," Bella's voice was quiet in the vehicle.

"I'll admit to a lot of things in general," I replied. "But what am I admitting to in particular?" I shot her an amused glance.

"You didn't want to leave them." She sounded like she was trying to keep from laughing and carefully didn't meet my eyes.

"Leave who?" *Play dumb. Save your pride.*

She snorted softly, letting me know that she saw right through me, just as she always did. "The boys, you big doofus."

"Which boys?" Now I couldn't let it go and I allowed a smirk to appear.

"Our boys," she clarified, and a smile played about her lips. I allowed myself a quick look and then put my eyes back on the road. Safety first.

"I like the sound of that," I observed in a murmur. She heard me, of course.

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"Yeah," she said. "Me too."

Her hand found mine and we fell into a companionable silence for a time. "Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Well...tonight, we'll stay in a hotel," I said. "Tomorrow, we'll get to our destination."

"Care to share what that destination might be?"

I started to get nervous. What had seemed like a good, romantic idea at the time now began to sound really stupid and selfish. What if Bella had wanted to do the whole tourist thing on our honeymoon? I should have picked some place exciting like San Francisco or New York City - or even Las Vegas. Those places would have pushed the budget, but they would have been doable. Now, instead, I was offering her nothing more than privacy and solitude - with me - the guy she was already stuck with for the rest of her life. Before I could slip into full panic mode, Bella squeezed my hand.

"Edward?" she prompted.

I took a deep breath. "Sorry, I was just..."

"Having an attack of the worries?" she teased gently.

"Something like that," I admitted. "Listen, when I tell you where we're going for our honeymoon, please keep in mind that I had the best of intentions. Honestly, I just wanted to be alone with you."

"And now you *don't* want to be alone with me?" I heard the laughter lurking in her voice.

"Oh I do," I said. "More than anything." I lifted her hand to my lips and placed a kiss there.

"Okay, so why don't you tell me where we're going?"

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"Well, the thing is..." I sighed. "The place we're going takes about 6, maybe 7 hours to drive there. So tonight I made reservations at a little place about an hour out of town. And tomorrow..."

"And tomorrow?"

"Well, I rented a cabin for us, near the Smoky Mountains," I said the words in a rush, hoping they'd sound better that way. No such luck. "I've already arranged for groceries and stuff. I'll do all the cooking if we decide to eat there. I'm not asking you to cook on our honeymoon and I'd never-"

"Edward?" Bella's voice interrupted me.

"Yeah?"

"Stop apologizing," she instructed me. She lifted my hand now, and kissed each knuckle. "It sounds...perfect actually. I just want to enjoy time with my new *husband*."

"Okay then," I said with a sigh of relief. "All right...to the mountains it is."

She giggled and shook her head. "You're so silly, but I love you so much."

Suddenly, our honeymoon was romantic again.

~TBTA~

We had been too exhausted by the day's events to do more than some serious making out before I felt Bella going slack against me. The hotel was nice, but I was glad we were only going to be there one night. If the pictures of the cabin were accurate, our little nest was going to be both comfortable and conducive to romance.

Bella was warm and cuddled up close. Knowing her, I had a feeling that I would get woken up in the early morning, her hands roaming all over me and her voice whispering naughty things to me. It was always a great way to wake

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up.

I could feel the fatigue dragging at me insistently, but my mind wouldn't shut down.

I kept replaying the moments before we left for our honeymoon. The boys had gathered to say their good-byes away from the prying eyes of the guests. Charlie and Renee and Will and Josh had already said their private good-byes to us both, with extra hugs to Bella. My mom and dad had welcomed Bella and the boys to the family once again. Masen and Alyssa had given kisses all around, much to Emmett's chagrin.

But now it was just the boys and me, waiting for Bella to come out of the room where she was changing into traveling clothes. "So...you guys are gonna be okay?" I asked.

Four nods from dark heads.

"And you'll call us once a day?" I prodded.

Four more nods, and one pair of eyes rolling. Emmett. I looked at him and he just grinned.

"And you won't give your grandparents too much trouble?" I asked.

"Geez, you're pretty good at this," Emmett noted.

"At what?" I asked, feeling alarmed.

Emmett's grin widened. "At the whole fussy parenting thing." Though his words were mocking, there was nothing disrespectful in his voice.

"Yeah, well, I had a great teacher," I told him. "Your mom...she could give lessons on that stuff."

Seth rolled his eyes openly now. "Tell me about it."

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Jake pushed his way through his brothers and linked his hand through mine. "Where you taking her, Pops?"

This was the fourth time he had called me Pops in fifteen minutes. It was like he was getting it in as many times as he possibly could. If it hadn't made my throat lock up, I might have laughed. As it was, I was still blinking away tears. Stupid tears. "That's a secret," I said, ruffling his hair.

"Yeah, but you can tell *us*," Jake insisted. "We won't tell her."

"We'll tell you tomorrow," I assured him. He frowned for a moment and then brightened.

"Will you bring us something home, Pops?" he asked, looking up at me through his lashes.

"I'm sure we can manage that," I replied and he gave a whoop.

Then the door opened and Bella was standing there in a simple black skirt and white blouse, looking good enough to eat. Or at least lick repeatedly.

Sam was the first one to approach his mother and get his hug. She whispered something in each boys' ear in turn. Emmett's ears turned bright red and he nodded. Seth just smiled, Sam had given her cheek a kiss and then hugged her tightly. Jake's eyes turned back to me after his mother spoke and then he grinned widely. "Yeah, me too," he replied to her.

They lined up at the curb to watch us leave. Emmett would make sure they all got back inside, but I found myself appreciating these moments alone with them. It was more difficult than I would have imagined to get in that car and drive away from them. I knew it would only be five days until we saw them again. We wanted to be back in town in plenty of time for the 4th of July, for a lot of reasons.

I was getting ready to climb into the driver's seat when Emmett called out, "Drive safe...Pops!"

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It was the first time he'd called me that and I was surprised I could breathe past the giant lump in my throat. I coughed and nodded. *No need to get all emotional, Cullen.* I waved. "Love you all," I replied. "We'll be home soon."

And then Bella and I were driving away. Me fighting the tears, Bella seemingly giddy with excitement. Maybe it would get easier with time, I assured myself. Maybe. But right now, I already missed them.

~TBTA~

I woke up with a groan. Then I felt warm lips moving over my chest. Ah yes, my ninja temptress had had enough rest to recharge her batteries. I put my hand in her hair as she moved down my chest and belly - straight toward the promised land. Hallelujah.

"Fuck..." I hissed when her lips closed over me. I got a little laugh from her, but the vibrations only made me arch into her mouth.

And she wondered why I was a morning person...

~TBTA~

I pulled up into the driveway of the cabin. We had retrieved the keys from the real estate agent and she had given us clear directions. She had also promised that we wouldn't have to leave for anything and that the kitchen was fully stocked.

Bella got out of the car and I decided that I might as well do the whole traditional bridal thing. Instead of giving her chance to walk up the few steps to the porch, I swept her into my arms and thanked the powers that be that I had been faithfully hitting the gym since retirement. I only gave a small grunt, which was mostly for effect. She smacked me on the arm in retaliation. "Don't even," she warned.

I got us to the door and realized I still had the keys tucked into my pocket. So much for smooth and suave. "Uh...Bella?"

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"Yes?" I could tell by her voice that she knew exactly what the problem was.

"Uh...could you get the keys out of my right front pocket?"

"Keys to what?"

"Bella," I warned. "Hurry, or I'll drop you."

"Are you saying I'm fat?" she asked. She tilted her head to study me as if I was a curious science specimen.

"Never, not in a million years," I answered quickly and then I heard her snort with laughter. "Bella, seriously, I'm an old man. I can't stand here forever holding you... even if you are a delicate flower."

Another snort from her, this one of amused disgust. "Delicate flower?"

"Bella..."

"Okay, okay," she muttered and I felt her hand slipping in between us and then digging into my pocket. She took an unauthorized detour and I ground my teeth together. "Oops," she snickered. "Not the keys."

"Not even close," I muttered. And then I felt her fingers close around them - the keys.

She held them up with a little squeal of victory. She looked at me and then leaned over to unlock the door. As a team, we were pretty unbeatable.

I shoved aside the door and carried her inside. I managed to hold onto her for another thirty seconds or so, just for show. Then I put her down and repressed my sigh of relief. Hitting the gym or not, it was more difficult than it would have been ten years ago to carry a woman, even one as little as Bella. Getting older, I mused yet again, was not for the faint of heart.

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She took a good look around and then moved to the French doors that led to a deck out back. Opening the doors, Bella stepped outside. "Wow..." she breathed as I joined her.

"Wow..." I agreed. There was a fairly wide creek babbling about ten feet below us. A little bridge extended over the creek, leading to a path on the other side. Woods stretched out from the path in all directions. From here, we couldn't even hear the traffic that had to be just a few miles away. It was as if we were utterly alone in the world. It seemed like the perfect place to start our married life.

She snuggled up close to me. "This is perfect." Her words mirrored my own thoughts and I held her tightly.

"After I made the plans, it hit me that maybe you would have wanted to do the vacation kind of thing, you know...hit the tourist spots and stuff."

"We'll be doing that stuff with the boys next month in Florida," she pointed out.

"Yeah," I agreed. "But this is your honeymoon and I-"

"Edward?"

"Yeah?"

"You're doing it again," Bella said softly.

"What?"

"The worry bear thing again."

"Sorry, I've never been a husband before and I'm worried that I'm going to screw it up," I admitted.

"Take it from me, you've got this husband thing down," Bella assured me.

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~TBTA~

We were lying in bed, having spent a very satisfactory afternoon lazily making love and just talking. Bella's slender fingers were linked with mine as we cuddled in the big bed. It wasn't round or heart-shaped or anything, but it was a perfect honeymoon bed. It was big and welcoming and had the softest sheets I'd ever felt against my skin. Bella felt softer, of course, and warmer.

"Edward?" she said during a short lull in the conversation.

"Yeah?" I was feeling sort of drowsy and very sated.

"Uh...can we talk?" I was too tired to feel alarmed, but I gave her a little frown anyway.

"What? We've been married for twenty four hours and already we need to have a *talk*?" She just smiled and snuggled closer. "That's got to be some kind of record."

"Yeah," Bella said. "Nothing bad, I just want to get your thoughts on something."

"I'm not having *any* thoughts right now," I drawled. "You sucked them out of me...literally."

She giggled and bit down on my nipple, her go-to move when she wanted me to pay attention and get my mind out of the gutter. Of course, it was also her go-to move when she wanted to put my mind *in* the gutter, too. I'd never understand her, not if we had a thousand years together. I was okay with that.

"I'm serious," she chided.

"So am I," I told her. "My brain...it's mush. Nothing there. Come back tomorrow when I've regained my senses."

"Edward..."

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I sighed and tried to wake up. "Okay, okay..." I muttered. I opened my eyes wide and stared at her. "There...are you happy now?"

"I'm always happy," she murmured.

"Uh oh, you're kissing up. This can't be good."

"Just listen, will you?"

"Listening," I said and gave her a salute.

She shifted so that she was sort of straddling me as I sat back against the headboard. Of course that position brought to mind all sorts of naughty thoughts and it wasn't only my brain that was stirring back to life.

Looking down at my dick, she laughed and shook her head. "Hold that thought," she instructed me.

"Okay," I grumbled.

Leaning in close, she kissed me. "I want to talk about birth control."

"Wow, I didn't see that coming," I admitted.

"Well, what are your thoughts?"

"Uh...it's good when you don't want a baby and unnecessary when you do?" I guessed.

She rolled her eyes. "No...okay, I'm going about this wrong." Bella took a deep breath. "I want to quit taking the pill in four months instead of six."

"Okay," I agreed and pulled her in for a kiss.

She pushed against me. "Wait, what? We aren't going to talk about this?"

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"We just did," I told her, and pulled her in for a kiss. "Four months. I got it."

Our lips were touching then and I went back to the thought I was holding. Bella, however, pushed away again. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," I said with a nod.

She sat all the way back, which put her girl parts on my guy parts and didn't help the situation at all. Then her eyes narrowed. "Okay, what if I said I wanted to stop taking the pill in *three* months?"

Like I was going to argue over four short weeks?

"Okay," I agreed with a shrug. "Three months."

"Shouldn't we discuss this?"

"We just did," I said. "So...three months?"

"I suppose so." She sounded doubtful. Well then, maybe I could shake things up a little further.

"I'll see your three months and raise you one," I offered. *Two could play at this game, Mrs. Cullen.*

"Okay." Then she frowned. "Wait...does that mean I go off the pill *earlier* or later?"

"Earlier, of course," I replied. "We wait two months." There. Take that. It was just a matter of weeks. What difference would it make?

Her expression grew sly. "So, what if I said, I'd raise *you* a month?" Weren't we out of months already? I wasn't sure. I didn't think Bella knew either.

"I'd say...okay." It didn't matter. My mind wasn't on math. I had lost count of the months anyway.

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Her eyes were warm and her lips were too. "Well, if we're going to reduce our waiting time by...five months, is it?" I nodded. "Then why don't we go for broke and just do away with the waiting period all together?"

"Done," I said.

"Really?"

"It's a done deal," I affirmed. I reached over to the bedside table where her birth control pills were. I picked them up and showed them to her before tossing them into the trash can a few feet away. "There. Taken care of."

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you Cullen?"

"You should just be careful Bella, I could knock you up first try," I teased. I grabbed my package. "This is a dangerous weapon." I gave my dick a little shake.

She snorted. "So typically male," she mocked.

"Let me demonstrate," I offered.

I moved just a little bit so that I could glide up into her. She hissed as I arched up and gave her the hip swivel thing that she loved. Her eyes rolled back in her head. "First...there's the surprise attack," I murmured, moving up into her slowly but steadily.

"Uh huh..."

I held onto her hips. "Then you make sure your weapons are in place." I thrust up hard.

"Sounds out of order," she whispered, her eyes still closed.

"Whatever," I muttered. "God, I love being inside of you." All clever thoughts went out the window and there was only the sensation of being inside of her.

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And though I knew that our "fertility" status hadn't changed at all since we'd made love earlier in the day, this felt different.

It felt like we were actually *trying* to make a baby.

That wasn't how it worked, but that's how it felt.

I forced myself to open my eyes and watch her as I moved. I loved the way her chest flushed as she got closer to orgasm. I liked the way she nibbled at her lip when she was trying to hold off coming. I loved the little gasps and sighs she gave as I moved. I loved the way she'd wriggle her hips when she wanted me to pick up the pace and the little pout she'd give when I refused and kept things slow and steady.

Then her eyes popped open and they were practically glowing and I knew that she felt that difference too. We had made a decision and it was big. The whole idea of making a baby lent a new dimension to our lovemaking. It was new and more serious in a way that it hadn't been before.

It felt almost...sacred. That was a strong word, but it fit.

We didn't have the luxury of time at our ages, so we were betting on life. Arbitrary time-tables meant nothing. We wanted to make a baby, plain and simple.

Then her body tightened around me and I felt the orgasm barreling through me and into her. I wondered if one day I'd do that and somehow, a part of me would find part of her and...

And there'd be a whole new human being.

Part Bella, part Edward. Us.

~TBTA~

The Bigger They Are

Once again, we were lazing around in bed. Bella's fingers were tracing idle patterns on my chest, but even my dick was out for the count. He was enjoying a well deserved nap. I planned on joining him very soon.

"You never asked me why I wanted to change our schedule," Bella finally murmured. She sounded as sleepy as I felt.

I shrugged. "Whatever your reasons, I'm sure they're good ones." I felt my eyes close and sleep was knocking on the door.

Bella kept talking, however, so I tried to stay awake. It was hard when my eyes kept slamming shut. "I just...I talked to my doctor and she said it might take longer to get pregnant because of my age."

"Yeah?" One syllable, that was about all I was capable of.

"Like my eggs are getting stale or something," Bella said with a little sniff.

"Silly girl," I teased. "Everything about you is fresh."

"No seriously," Bella insisted. I forced my eyes open because if I didn't I was going to crash. "She said it might take longer and I didn't want to miss our window of opportunity."

"Okay." We had discussed this and come to a decision. Wasn't it time for sleep now?

She sighed. "You're half asleep, aren't you?"

"Heading toward all the way," I agreed drowsily. I nuzzled at her throat and pulled her even closer, which meant trying to put her inside of my skin. "Just so you know, I'm going to love trying to make a baby with you."

Bella laughed and relaxed against me. There were no more words, so I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep - at last.

The Bigger They Are

Fic Rec: The Geheime Vernietiging by amoredjenaue .

AKA The Secret Destruction. FBI Agent Cullen returns to NY to take down the Draconi crime family. But will his return bring more than he bargained for? Or something he never knew he always wanted. Secret missions, love & family secrets abound...& destroy.

I just found this, thanks to PennyLane123. It's REALLY good and deserves FAR more reviews than it is getting. This is by the same writer who crafted the beautifully done "The Senator's Son." Honestly, this is a "don't miss" story.

Chapter 71: Not There Yet

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 71: Not There Yet

The honeymoon was over, but it had been absolutely perfect. I looked over at Bella and she was glancing back at the cabin in the side view mirror. Then she turned and looked at me. "Thank you," she said quietly. "It was just what I wanted."

"Me too," I admitted.

We had made love, of course, because that's what honeymoons were all about. We had made sweet tender love in the middle of the big bed and on faux fur rug in front of the fireplace with a fire crackling merrily (June temperatures be damned). Then we had fucked over the back of the couch and on the kitchen counter (after Bella had scrubbed it because she said that honeymooners were perverted fuckers and we were a perfect example). The kitchen counter episode hadn't been any less hot just because the scent of Mr. Clean lingered in the air. In fact, I was afraid that now the smell of the cleaner was going to cause problems in the region below the waist for me for months to come. Oh well. It was a small price to pay.

But now it was time to go home and I was excited. A year ago, I had barely known the boys. This year, I didn't feel right without them around me. Yes, I had loved being alone with Bella, but I could already tell that we'd never be those kind of parents who were always leaving their kids to run off on a vacation or something. We liked our boys and we liked spending time with them. They'd be grown and gone before we knew it, and I wanted to cram everything I could into our time together.

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That thought made me sad, and like she usually did, Bella sensed my mood. Her hand closed over mine, offering silent comfort even though she didn't know what ailed me. The "what" didn't matter; she'd always be there for me.

"You look like a man with deep thoughts," she teased gently.

I shrugged and squeezed her hand. "I've missed them," I said simply.

"Yeah, me too," she admitted with a sigh. Then she laughed. "Though I'm pretty sure I'd never have the courage to use a kitchen counter in quite that way if the boys were around."

And just like that, there was nothing but happiness left.

~TBTA~

Jake was the first one to fling open the door, of course. He had probably been on sentry duty for a while. Nothing and no one got by Jake James. He was already at the door of the vehicle by the time his brothers and Emily were walking outside. And he was already asking what we had brought him by the time Charlie and Renee made it to the front door.

Bella and I had made one single trip out into the "real" world during our stay in the cabin. We had stocked up on a few items we were both suddenly craving and bought some gifts for family members. The closest town had been Gatlinburg, which was unashamedly touristy and kitschy. We ate fudge until we felt sick, bought overpriced air-brushed tee-shirts, and lost ourselves in the crowd of what seemed to be mostly honeymooners and young families.

We had found Jake a Darth Vader tee that read, "Join the Empire, See the Galaxy." It featured Vader in a pose reminiscent of the Uncle Sam recruiting posters popular during previous wars. It was a surefire hit. We had gotten Seth a guitar strap of hand tooled leather with his name on it. But instead of a country/western motif it was tooled with musical notes and tiny little skulls. For Sam, we had found rock collection featuring some of the most common rocks of the region all polished up. We had added a rock tumbling kit to the

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deal and, of course, a book. Emmett was more difficult and in the end we just bought him a hoodie with "Gatlinburg, TN" embroidered on the chest. The only challenge there had been finding one big enough. Bella also found him a baseball cap with the Tasmanian Devil on it. She explained that the cartoon character had always been his favorite and for a while during his toddler years, Taz had been his nickname. It was, she admitted, mostly due to the destruction that seemed to follow him for a while.

Bella and I had timed our arrival home for Friday, July 3rd. Charlie and Renee were flying out on the fifth, so we had almost the whole family there. Will and Josh had had to fly back because Josh had some surgeries lined up with his charity. They planned to come back at Christmas time.

We had asked the boys how they wanted to remember their father on the 4th, and to our surprise, they had been okay with just spending the day much like any other day. None of them were ready for the typical holiday celebrations, but I noticed that there was a much different atmosphere this year than last. We hung out at the house, watched some movies, and Charlie and the boys and I played some poker. Seth allowed us to use the battered old deck of cards that had belonged to his father. Charlie won almost every hand, and kept whispering suggestions to Emmett.

We cooked out and ate way too much. Charlie made his special hot wings, which pretty much burned away part of my stomach lining. He seemed to eat them like potato chips. I wasn't sure if I was envious or scared.

I did notice that every now and then one of the boys would disappear and I knew that they were going to talk to Bella. Every time, they would come back and look at ease. Bella had worked her magic once again. All in all, it was easy to see that this was a family who was healing and we all had a lot to look forward to.

Bella surprised me by not being particularly sad, just mostly introspective. I allowed her some time and space, but she didn't seem to need it. "I love you," she whispered as she hugged me. We were in the kitchen and I was looking for more snacks for the boys, a never ending process. "It's okay you know. The

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boys and I...we're okay."

I tilted her chin up so that I could look at her. I studied her eyes, which were clear and honest. "All right, then," I finally said.

The day wasn't quite normal, but it was much closer than I would have expected.

~TBTA~

We celebrated my birthday on Monday, the day after Charlie and Renee left. I got French toast for breakfast, Cuban sandwiches for lunch, and spaghetti and meatballs for dinner. My cake was chocolate with butter cream frosting. Jake expressed the opinion that the spaghetti would have made a better breakfast than dinner. I told him he could do as he pleased on his birthday, which wasn't far away.

I spent a few days at the bar, finishing up some last minute things. Jasper had made a lot of progress while Bella and I were on our honeymoon, so there wasn't too much left to accomplish.

Sam's space camp was scheduled to begin on Sunday, so we left for Florida on Thursday. On Friday, we went to Orlando and took the boys to Disney World. We spent Friday and Saturday there.

On Sunday afternoon, Sam checked in at space camp. There were a lot of activities that he would be doing, including a Mars mission and astronaut simulator. Each day that Sam was in space camp, Bella and I took the boys off to keep them from going stir crazy in the hotel rooms.

At the end of the week, Sam was happily exhausted and quite pleased with his birthday gift. It had been expensive, but well worth the money.

The only slightly sour note, and it was to be expected if I was being realistic, was that Bella's period arrived right on schedule. Though I told myself that it had been foolish to hope for something already, I experienced a pang of

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disappointment when she told me.

It would seem that we would have to be patient.

~TBTA~

July passed quickly, culminating with Jake's ninth birthday. We had spaghetti for breakfast and ice cream for lunch. The cake was chocolate/chocolate, of course. He got a lot of stuff with Darth Vader on it, including a new comforter and sheet set. Bella even found him Darth Vader socks, which he declared "wizard."

At the start of August, Bella and I left the boys at home and we did all of her back-to-school shopping. This year, I wasn't an outsider looking in, I was a part of the process. I blanched at the cost however, and even Bella was upset at how high prices seemed to be. I supposed that it was just one of those things I would get used to since it was part of Bella's job, no matter how unfair it seemed to me.

The following weekend, it was time to take the *boys* shopping. Finding shoes for Emmett was ever a challenge and we ended up at an outlet mall. Clothing for four boys was never cheap. Seth had also gotten picky during the last year, not so much for name brands but for the styles he preferred. Emmett told him he was a pain and Seth replied that Emmett shouldn't knock style just because *he* didn't have any. Such was life with four boys.

And Bella's period arrived, just a day late. Just late enough to make me hopeful. Just enough to add an edge to the disappointment.

~TBTA~

School started and the opening of the bar was imminent, scheduled to take place at the end of September. The final paperwork had all been filed and our licenses were pending, but on the fast track to approval. We had hired a relief bar-tender, former Army of course. Jasper and I passed the time by learning how to be decent bar tenders ourselves. We had already decided that we would

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alternate working three nights a week and four nights a week, so that neither of us was away from home every night. One week I'd put in four nights and the next week, it would be Jasper's turn. The relief barkeep would be there for those busy nights, instead of both of *us* working.

This year I was listed on all the boys' school forms as "Father." I had all the rights that Bella had with them, at least as far as their schools were concerned. Bella and I drafted new Wills, and then she signed papers making me their legal guardian as well as their stepfather. We celebrated by taking the boys to Pete's for pizza.

I went to Jake's classroom on career day and talked about being in the Army. I got a little tight in the throat when I heard Jake tell his friend very matter-of-factly, "Yeah, both my dads were in the Army."

I might have even blinked away a few tears when I told Bella about it later that night while we were in bed and the boys couldn't see me getting all stupid with emotion.

I tried to ignore the calendar for the most part. I was getting more and more depressed every month. We'd only been trying three months, but it seemed like an eternity. Bella never seemed too upset when her period started, and I knew I was the one being unrealistic.

I couldn't help it. Everything had gone so smoothly up to that point that I felt almost cheated when we didn't get pregnant right away. Three times I had dared to allow myself to hope, and three times I had been disappointed.

Then about halfway through September we got some bad news about the bar. Our opening was delayed for a month. We'd open the night before Halloween, on a Friday.

~TBTA~

Bella was getting dressed. It was Friday and we were all ready for the weekend. Bella was cranky, as she always was at the end of the week. The

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boys were cranky, ditto. Even Jake had been sent to his room last night for throwing green beans at Emmett after being warned to stop. Then he'd sulked the rest of the evening after he'd been told he could leave his room. I was out of sorts and bored because everything I could do at the bar had been done and I was at loose ends. We were a grumpy household.

Because I was ignoring the calendar, I was not even aware that her period was due. Right. I didn't notice. Not me.

Something I'd never realized before was that some of the symptoms of a woman's period are really similar to the symptoms of early pregnancy. I didn't think that was a good system. It was unfair. It got a man's hopes up.

Sore boobs? Could go either way.

Cranky? See above.

I was at the point where I had honestly tried to stop paying attention. I was only making myself - and Bella - crazy in the process.

Finally, even Masen had had enough of my moping and dropped by one evening while Bella had a meeting after school. He helped himself to a beer, made sure the boys were otherwise occupied, and then whacked me on the backside of my head.

"You need to chill the fuck out, Edward Cullen," he said as I rubbed at my head.

"What the fuck was that for?"

"For being an ass, and just because it felt good," Masen replied with a shrug.

"How am I being an ass?" Masen hit harder than you'd think he could just by looking at him.

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"You're making Bella tense with this baby thing," Masen told me, pointing at me like I was one of the boys who hadn't done a chore.

"She hasn't said anything," I muttered.

Masen rolled his eyes. "Well of course she hasn't," he said. " *She's* sweet and kind and - for some odd reason - completely in love with you, you ass."

I sighed and rubbed at the back of my neck. Between the imminent opening of the bar and no good news on the baby front, I was a wreck. "I know, I know," I said. "I try not to watch her like a hawk. I really do, Mase. But I...I want this, way more than I thought I would. And knowing it could happen at any time..." I sighed again. "I'm a mess, man."

Masen snorted. "Tell me something I *don't* know."

"I know I don't have any right to be anxious yet, it's only been three months...going on four but now I'm starting to get nervous."

"About what?"

I shook my head. "What if it never happens, Mase?"

"And what's the worst that will happen?" he prompted. "Will you love Bella any less?"

"Fuck no," I objected, feeling a little insulted. I glanced around again, making sure that the boys weren't in earshot as I tried to screw up the courage to reveal my deepest, darkest fear. "The thing is, Masen..." I took a deep breath. "The thing is that obviously *Bella's* equipment is working just fine. She's got four boys that prove that without a doubt."

Masen stared at me for a moment. "And you're worried that *you're* the reason that the baby hasn't happened yet," he guessed.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and nodded. "Yeah, it's occurred to me."

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Masen nodded thoughtfully and put his hands in his pockets too after placing his beer on the counter. "Uh...any reason in particular that you'd think that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, in your dissolute youth did you play games without protection and just thought maybe you were the luckiest son of a bitch in history and never got caught?" Masen asked, his expression torn between amusement and concern.

"No, I mean, I was always careful. Even the first time." I wanted to crawl under a rock and die. "I've never...you know...without...until..."

"Made love? Had sex? With Bella?" Masen teased. Then he must have seen something in my face because he sighed and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Sorry, buddy. That was out of line."

I shrugged. "Forget it."

"No, I guess I'm just not used to seeing you this invested in a relationship," Masen admitted dryly.

"She's my *wife*, Masen," I reminded him pointedly. "Investment in the relationship is sort of part of the whole marriage deal."

Masen chuckled and shook his head. "Yeah, I know, sometimes it just sneaks up on me and surprises me all over again."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I shot back.

"Don't get your panties in a twist, big brother," Masen said. "Listen, it's only been three months."

"Going on four," I pointed out.

He nodded. "Going on four," he conceded. "But in the big scheme of things, that isn't that long."

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"Granted, but we don't have that long, Masen. We're not in our twenties anymore, in case you haven't noticed."

"You're hardly over the hill, Edward. Close," he added with a wink. "But not there yet."

"Thanks, I feel so much better now that we've had this little chat," I said.

"Shut up and let me finish," Masen said. "Listen, one of the guys I work with, he and his wife had a tough go of it. They wanted a baby and it just wasn't happening."

"How long?"

"They tried for a year," Masen said quietly.

"Fuck," I muttered. We didn't really *have* a year if we stuck to the timetable.

"Just listen, will you?"

I nodded. "Anyway, he was saying that they went to this doctor and it took a little doing, but she had a baby just a few weeks ago."

I shook my head. "See, that's the thing, Masen. We agreed that we wouldn't put ourselves through all of that."

"All of what?"

"The infertility treatments, the expense, the physical toll," I replied. "And it would be Bella who had to go through most of it. Even if the problem was mine, it'd be her that had to get...well, whatever the hell it is they do to make babies."

"See, that might be your first problem. What happens is that when a man loves a woman, he puts a special part of him-

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"Fuck you," I said, but couldn't help but laugh. He could always make me laugh, even when I didn't want to.

"Seriously, man, just chill out. For Bella's sake if not your own. She's starting to get tense."

"How do you know?"

"Haven't you noticed how often Bella and Alyssa are conspiring together?" He snorted and picked up his beer, finishing it off in one gulp. "They're dangerous as shit together, and what's worse, they actually *like* each other!"

"Bad news," I teased.

Masen shook his head. "I know, right? Anyway, Bella's starting to feel like she's...I don't know... *disappointing* you isn't the right way to say it, but you get the picture."

Fuck.

"You're right, Masen, for once in your life, you're right," I said, taking a deep breath. "I'll fix this." Somehow.

~TBTA~

That night in bed, I snuggled up close to Bella. We talked for a while, discussing our day. I told her about some possible hires at the bar, servers that Jasper and I had interviewed. She told me about the meeting and how it still caught her off guard sometimes when her students called her Mrs. Cullen.

"But I love the sound of it," she whispered. I did too, and I told her so.

Then I rolled her over on her stomach and began rubbing her back after sneaking some lotion from the bedside table. "Oh God..." she moaned.

Her muscles were tight and tense.

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"That feels..." She sighed. " *Soooo* good."

I laughed and placed a tender kiss on her shoulder blade. "I love you, Bella."

"Keep doing that and I'll declare my undying devotion," she teased.

"I thought you did that when we got married," I reminded her.

"Whatever," she muttered, giving another guttural groan. "Just don't stop."

I continued massaging her shoulders, then moved to her arms, moving down toward her hands. I gave each finger individual attention, gently rolling them between my own fingers, using my knuckles on her palms, circling her wrists and elbows.

Then my hands moved to her back again and pressed against the dimples just above her ass. Her butt cheeks were tempting, but I had another goal first. My hands slipped down her legs, moving firmly over the skin, watching with appreciation as the blood flow made her flesh glow.

Then her feet. That was purely selfish on my part, but I spent quite a bit of time there, paying homage to each toe in turn, then the arches of her feet, before moving back to her ankles and up her legs again.

That perfect ass.

She groaned as my hands moved over her. Bella was limp and relaxed, a puddle of beautiful woman on the mattress.

Slowly, I rolled her over again and she blinked up at me. "Do you know how much I love you, Bella Cullen?"

I kissed her temple, then her forehead, before moving down to the tip of her nose. "You're perfect to me...in every way."

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I tucked her hair behind her ear. "You make me happier than I knew any man could be. I love you. I love our boys. I love our *life*..."

"Really?" she asked with a little smile.

"I should probably find that little hint of doubt in your voice insulting," I teased. "But instead, I'll just take it as a challenge and make sure I prove my point to you."

"You never could resist a dare," she mocked.

"Never," I agreed.

I felt her legs slide open beneath me, inviting me in. Her hand closed around my dick, guiding me toward her heat. I gave a little grunt as I thrust inside of her. "Oh Bella," I breathed. "It's always so good."

"Always," she murmured, canting her hips up to meet mine. "I love you."

"Always," I said.

Our hands linked as I moved inside of her. We whispered little words to each other. We laughed and sighed and moaned. And I realized that this was all I needed. No matter what happened, this was it. *Bella* was it. And my life was perfect.

I was the luckiest bastard in the world and I finally knew it.

Chapter 72: Guys Like Us

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Chapter 72: Guys Like Us

In a fairy tale world, we would have made a baby that night. But we didn't. Bella's period arrived right on schedule. But we dealt with it. Was there a little bit of disappointment? Sure. Did I mope and sulk? Hell no, because Masen would have kicked my ass. And Alyssa would have helped him.

I took Bella by the bar instead, and showed her some of the last minute things that Jasper and I had done. We talked about the plans for the bar, our hopes. We discussed the boys and how things were going for them. We looked forward toward the things we knew were going to happen, things that were kind of under our control.

She looked around, getting an impression of the place. When she looked behind the bar, she smiled and walked around to touch what we had mounted on the wall. Behind the bar was a picture of Jasper and I on the day we graduated boot camp. I was nineteen, Jasper was twenty, and we were totally clueless about what it really meant to be a soldier *or* a man. Time would teach us those lessons and sometimes in ways that would prove painful.

There were six booths lined up against the far wall facing the bar, with one them curving in a little bit to provide shelter from the front door. In each booth, we featured a picture of a soldier or marine or sailor along with some little artifact of his era in the service. In one booth, we had a picture of a buddy of Mr. Hoyt's - a kid who hadn't made it home from the jungles of Vietnam. He was skinny and dirty and soaking wet like a drowned rat. He was also grinning at the camera, forever smiling. Under his photo, Mr. Hoyt had simply written

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"Jimmy O'Donnell". It was a memorial of sorts, one that guys like us could relate to. One booth had a World War II sailor, a relative of Major Hutchinson's. He had been after me to call him Barty but that was going to take a while. Some of the guys in the pictures were related to us, some of them weren't.

Then in the largest booth, the one by the door, we had put Mac's picture, the one of him holding up Sam's drawing. In the glass case by that picture were a few things of Mac's that the boys had picked out to be displayed. I had gone straight to them to ask their permission to put up Mac's picture. They had not only given it, but had been quite excited. Jake asked if that meant their father was famous. "Sort of," I said, ruffling his hair. Jake turned around and gave Emmett a high five. Alice had suggested that Jasper and I add a few of our things to that display and we did. After all, we had all fought in the same war.

And the bar was going to be a place for guys like us.

~TBTA~

In September we did have a lot of good things happen. Bella celebrated her birthday, a bit late but still a cause for lots of cake and a dinner put together by, God help her, the boys and me. Still, the cake was quite tasty, even if it was a little ugly. Bella declared it the most beautiful cake in the world and Emmett reminded her about the family rule concerning lying. She amended her statement to, "It's delicious."

Emmett was part of his high school football team, so we spent many Friday nights huddled in the stands, cheering him on. He was on the Varsity team, but wasn't a starter. Still, he got plenty of playing time for a sophomore. Rosalie usually sat with us. We got to know her quite well during the autumn months.

Seth continued to play his music. It had become his passion. He had never really gotten to the point where he liked reading music, but his ear continued to make up the difference when it came to learning new music.

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Sam and Jake commiserated with each other over the demands of advanced classes. Jake was only in advanced math and science, while Sam had all advanced classes. Sam still took his school work more seriously than Jake did, but they both managed to make excellent grades. Jake still sometimes had a problem with talking too much in class. He was very much the social animal and I had a feeling he always would be.

Emmett turned sixteen in October. Jake teased him about being "unsweet sixteen" and he appeared embarrassed by the singing this year. It might have had something to do with the fact that Rosalie was there, though she was singing louder than anyone else. Luckily, she had a decent voice, so between her and Seth, we didn't sound too bad.

The opening of the bar loomed and Bella was getting more excited. Jasper and I decided to have a little private party for our families and few close friends the night before the official opening. Major Hutchinson was there, along with Mr. Hoyt and Liz. Karen made an appearance and declared it a winner. Thomas and his wife Megan showed up, as did Dewey as his wife. I saw faces I hadn't seen in a while, even some that hadn't made it to the wedding.

Masen said we had done a great job and that he looked forward to us making him a lot of money. I wasn't sure about *that*, but I thought we stood a good chance at making a living. That's all I wanted. I wanted to give my family the things they needed and some of the things they wanted. I didn't need a mansion, but it would be nice to know that I could Bella a new vehicle every five years or so.

The kitchen was small but well equipped. We would be able to serve up sandwiches and fries and onion rings, along with some wings and a soup of the day. There would be nothing fancy on the menu, but the food would be tasty and plentiful, though nothing would really make the American Heart Association's list of healthy foods. Bella had already warned me that I wasn't to eat dinner there every night I worked. "I want you around for a long, long time so don't clog your arteries."

It felt kind of good to hear her fuss at me but I pretended to sulk anyway.

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When we finally made it home, the boys were exhausted and stumbled into their beds without any prompting. Then I undressed Bella as she tried not to laugh loud enough to wake up the boys. She was still pretty loud and seemed in a very good mood. Since we had stopped stressing so much about the baby, things had been more relaxed. She had had two periods since I realized that I needed to back off, but neither one of them had caused the same feelings that previous months had.

Still, it was a challenge to remain calm when we both wanted it so badly. We were doing better, however, and I supposed that was something else to be grateful for.

We fell onto the bed, wrapping our limbs around each other and rubbing all the appropriate parts against their corresponding parts on each other. Bella laughed and nuzzled my neck. "I've always wanted to have a hot, torrid affair with a bartender, you know."

"Hmmm," I said. "Should I be worried?" Then I started sucking on her earlobe, knowing exactly what it did to her.

"Yeah, you should," she teased, then hissed as I nipped lightly.

"Good to know," I said. "I'll beat the fucker up if he touches you."

"You're going to kick your own ass?" she said.

"If I have to."

She rolled her eyes at me and then rolled us both over on the bed so that she was straddling me. She did love to take control of the situation. Since we were both already naked, that expedited things a bit. Bella wrapped her hand around my dick and then licked her lips.

Fuck. Me. Then she pretended to think about what she wanted to do. Or maybe she wasn't pretending.

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"Baby," I whined.

She gave a few tentative strokes of her hand and then removed it. My dick and I sulked. Then I was gliding up into her and the sulk fest was over. I locked my hands on her hips and let her have her way with me. Bella moved slowly, languidly on top of me.

She didn't say anything, but she didn't have to. We were celebrating a lot of things, but most of all, we were enjoying each other and the life that we, so improbably, built together.

We didn't make a baby that night either.

~TBTA~

The opening of the bar went smoothly. Bella had stopped by for an hour or so and then went back home with the boys. Alice and Alyssa and Masen all stopped by too. Jasper and I were kept busy, and even with the extra bartender, we didn't even have time to pee. We had no idea if we could keep the momentum going, but it was a promising first night.

Word of mouth, and Masen's clever ad campaign which had been designed for the maximum impact on what we thought of as our market, had done their jobs. I estimated that fully eighty percent of our business that night was military. Guys that Jasper and I served with would have given us a good night's business by themselves. But they brought their friends, and those friends brought friends. The Army grapevine was alive and well.

The kitchen was kept hopping and we decided that if things kept up at this pace, we'd have to keep more food on hand. I asked Masen about expanding the menu and he advised against it for the time being. "Keep it simple, keep it good, keep the portions generous and you'll be fine," he said.

He hadn't steered us wrong so far, so we agreed.

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The next night was Halloween, and as much as I hated to miss spending it with the boys, I had to work. Actually, it felt really good to say those words again. It had been six months since I had anything approaching regular hours and I hated it. One more month of it and I might have lost my mind.

Jasper was working too and we expected it to be a long night. Only Sam and Jake were actually trick-or-treating. Alice came over with the twins and Adam while Alyssa brought Alex and Kyle. They decided to take the kids out together. Jake was dressed as Darth Vader, which was a given. Sam went as Albert Einstein.

Halloween night was even busier than opening night. Things went on in the same way for the next six weeks, with Thanksgiving breaking up the boys' and Bella's schedules and giving us family time during the day at least. Bella and I were getting ready for our first married Christmas. I realized then that, if things had gone according to our original plan, we would just be stopping birth control *this* month.

I tried to decide if that meant we would have had six months less of disappointment or missed out on six months of trying. In the spirit of appreciating what I had, I decided to look on the whole thing as having had six more months of opportunity. As the holidays, and the brand new year, approached, I made myself a New Year's resolution. If we hadn't made a baby by Valentine's Day, I was going to get myself checked out. That way we'd know the facts and deal with it, no matter what. I decided that I would tell Bella, but only if it got down to actually finding out if my little soldiers were in operational order or not. I wasn't embarrassed exactly, but it certainly wasn't something I was proud of.

Even given Bella's age and her supposedly "aging" eggs, I didn't feel the "fault" was with her. The issue of patience aside, if we had been trying for eight months with no success, it was time to find out if I was even *capable* of fathering a child. And if I wasn't, then at least we'd know and Bella and I could both stop making ourselves crazy with worry. If I couldn't, then we'd put aside that hope and concentrate on all of the other dreams that were coming true for us. I reminded myself of all of the unexpected blessings that had come into my

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life during the past few years.

We had four amazing boys, and I was pretty sure they could keep us busy for years to come. A baby would be...well, it would be that last perfect note to a perfect symphony. But sometimes you don't get perfect; you get wonderful, unexpected, messy happiness instead. Either way, I didn't really have any regrets. We were giving it a shot, but there were no guarantees.

Oddly, once I made that decision, I felt calmer.

For Christmas I had gotten Bella a charm bracelet with something to represent each of us on it. For Seth, I had gotten a music note. For Emmett, I had found a tiny Tasmanian Devil, for Jake I had ordered a little Millennium Falcon, for Sam a dog charm. For me, I simply put a heart on the bracelet. It was trite, but true. She had my heart, along with all my other parts. But I didn't really feel that I should put a dick on her bracelet. I could show *some* class when I had to.

We stayed up half the night wrapping presents, interrupted by the need to kiss. Bella was tired but happy. Then when the last gift had been wrapped and put under the tree while Emily guarded us sleepily, we climbed up the stairs and went to bed.

There we celebrated the holiday in our own, unique way. It might have been quiet and somewhat sleepy, but it was still good.

All was right in my world.

~TBTA~

Christmas had been everything we hoped it would be. Will and Josh arrived the day before Christmas and had taken over Emmett's room, which he gladly gave up. Charlie and Renee had wanted to spend the holidays with us too, but he had been fighting a respiratory infection for a few weeks. His doctor told him that unless he wanted to end up in the hospital with a case of pneumonia, he shouldn't be crammed into a plane full of germs. The doctor should have left it that, but he added the insulting, "A case of pneumonia at your age, Charles

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Swan, can be serious." Charlie was still fuming over that. My parents spent Christmas morning with Masen and Alyssa, then came over for a big lunch at our house and spent the rest of the day with us.

Bella was tired, exhausted by the day's events.

It was only later that night, when I held her as she softly snored, that I realized I had gotten better at ignoring the calendar than I thought.

Bella's period was five days late.

Five days.

FIVE days.

It had never been that late. Maybe a day or so. But that was it. Never had it... *Five* days? I didn't sleep much that night. I also didn't have the heart to wake her up and question her. Besides, I was afraid she'd punch me in what I hoped was my baby-making junk for disturbing her sleep.

~TBTA~

That morning, I was awake and waiting impatiently for her to wake up. When she *finally* opened her eyes, she took one look at my face and giggled, hiding her face in my chest. "I see you figured something out, huh?"

"You *knew*?" I asked. I wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or amused.

She looked up at me and rolled her eyes. "You think I don't know when my period is supposed to start?"

"Yeah, I mean, of course, but you would have... said...something... at least warned me... Wait..." I felt like someone had tossed me in a blender and was giving it a whirl.

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She cradled my face in her hands. "You're really adorable when you're confused and befuddled," she whispered.

I shot out of bed, looking for my jeans and trying to figure out what store would be best. "I'll go get a test," I offered. I had to know. Now. "You...stay there. Rest." I threw out that order like she'd actually listen.

I got to the bedroom door before I heard her laugh again. I turned to look at her. "I've already got a test," she said quietly. Bella jerked her head toward the bathroom. "I bought it a week ago."

"A week ago?" I was really confused now. Her period was only five days late. Well six days late today. "But..."

She shrugged. "I had a good feeling," Bella said softly. Then her eyes met mine and I felt the breath leave me. She got out of bed and held out her hand. "Come on," she said. "They're more accurate if you do them first thing in the morning."

I followed her obediently, feeling a bit like a lost puppy.

The next thing I knew, we were sitting in the bathroom staring at a pregnancy test, waiting for the minute hand to move to seven on my watch. Never had a watch moved so slowly in my life. I put my arm around her and pulled her close. "Nervous?" I asked. I hoped she said yes because I most definitely was nervous.

She smiled serenely and shrugged. "Not really," Bella whispered.

"Oh." Crap. Did that mean I was going to be a bad father? I mean, I'd gotten some practice with the boys but I still screwed up on a daily basis. Bella told me that all parents did, but that didn't make me feel better sometimes. Would the fact that I was so nervous mean I wasn't cut out to be a Dad? What if-?

I looked at her again, ready to open my mouth and spew stupidity, when she rolled her eyes. "I'm terrified, you idiot!" Then she punched me in my arm, but

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at least it wasn't in my baby-making junk. "I mean, what am I *thinking*? I'm *old*! They're going to think I'm this kid's grandmother at parent/teacher night!"

"You're younger than me," I pointed out. "So what are you saying?"

"It's not the same thing. You're a man."

"Nice of you to notice *and* the reason we're waiting to find to find out if you're pregnant." And then it hit me. I was feeling a little smug. I might have knocked her up. Dangerous weapon indeed. I might have smirked a little.

Then I looked at my watch. Seven minutes after seven. I nodded at Bella and she handed the stick to me. "You look." Then she closed her eyes. "I can't. I'm too nervous."

I closed my hand around it and shook my head. "No way. *You* look. You've done this before. I'm a virgin."

"You're a chicken shit."

"Guilty," I agreed. Then I sighed. "Okay, on the count of three I open my hand and we look...together. Okay?"

"Okay," she said. "One," we said together.

"Two," I muttered.

"Three," Bella whispered.

I opened my hand.

We both stared and then she smiled and looked up at me. "Congratulations, Daddy."

Never had a word sounded so sweet. I pulled her so close that I made myself nervous and loosened my grip a bit.

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"We're going to have a baby," I murmured in her ear. I had to say the words; I had to make them real.

"Yes, we're going to have a baby," she whispered back.

"Holy shit," I muttered.

"Holy shit indeed." Then she laughed.

It was going to be all right. I was sure of it. And then I realized. We were going to have a baby.

I wondered if she'd think less of me if I barfed.

Probably.

Play it cool, Cullen. Play it cool.

So I settled for swallowing hard and ignoring the churning in my stomach.

~TBTA~

Before we went downstairs, we talked about how to break the news. I tried to sell her on the idea of waiting a few weeks. Now that we had achieved the "P" word, I was worried about the other "M" word - miscarriage. We weren't home safe yet. But Bella took one good look at my face and shook her head.

"No, you'll never pull it off," she told me dryly. "You've got 'I have a secret' written all over your pretty face."

"Do not," I protested. Was it wrong to like it when she called me pretty? Why was I so distracted?

She just snorted. "No, let's just tell everyone. If...if something happens, it's not like it'll hurt less if they know. Besides, the boys are going to know something's up when I start hurling every few hours."

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"Oh God," I muttered.

She patted my arm. "Don't worry. It's really not so bad. I throw up and then feel much better. Until the next bout starts," Bella added matter-of-factly.

"Oh God."

"Oh, and I might get strange food cravings...like for barbeque or stuff like that. You may get called upon to make a midnight run for pulled pork or something." She shrugged when I just stared at her. "Just trying to give you a realistic view of what's coming."

"Oh God."

"And I'll probably cry at stupid stuff," Bella continued blithely. I was picturing eight months of a crying, puking Bella shoveling barbequed pork into her mouth. "You're lucky, because I've always had pretty easy pregnancies."

"Oh God." *That* was considered easy? Crying, barfing...bingeing. I wasn't equipped for this. At all. I had thought I was, but obviously I was mistaken. *Gravely* mistaken.

Then she laughed and kissed me until I finally came out of my daze.

"Edward?" she whispered.

"Uh huh?"

She cradled my face and kissed me again. "Breathe, baby," she advised.

"I'm trying," I mumbled.

"Try harder."

I closed my eyes and took a deep, deep breath. And then another. Okay.

"Better?" she asked. I nodded.

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"Better." I opened my eyes. "I love you."

"That's why we're here," she teased.

And that was how Bella talked me back from the edge.

~TBTA~

We decided that since most of our families were in town, we'd throw an impromptu party that evening and share our news. That afternoon, she called her parents and told them that they were going to have a new grandchild, but to hold off on saying anything until we had a chance to tell everyone else. Renee called me "dear boy" seven times and cried twice. Bella joined in both times and then tapped me on the arm when I asked her if the crying phase of pregnancy had commenced.

We ate dinner, something simple because Bella didn't feel up to braving the stores. Alyssa brought over some steaks they had in the freezer, Bella added baked potatoes and a green bean casserole. Lys had wanted Bella to hit the after-Christmas sales with her and Alice, but she had pleaded exhaustion. Alyssa had been eying Bella closely all evening and I knew that she was going to guess soon, even if we didn't tell them. Bella did look different. I wasn't sure "glowing" was the term I would use, but there was a new sense of peacefulness about her. Our serenity levels seemed to be directly oppositional to each other. The calmer she got, the more panicked I got. It was going to be a very long pregnancy for at least one of us.

So immediately after the boys cleared the table, I walked into the kitchen, making sure my parents and Will and Josh and Alyssa and Masen and their boys were still occupied at the table. I motioned to Emmett. "Your mom and I are going to make an announcement," I whispered.

The other boys gathered closely and I looked over my shoulder at Bella. She gave me a nod, well aware of what I was doing.

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"Mom's pregnant?" Emmett guessed. That was the thing about this family - there were no secrets. Not for long anyway.

Jake started jumping up and down and fist pumping. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Hold on, Jake. Yes, your mom and I are having a baby." Jake gave a little victory wiggle and started for the dining room. I stopped him. "Whoa...hold on there, buddy."

"What?" he asked impatiently, rolling his eyes. "Let's go tell them!"

"Wait," I said again. I looked at each of the boys. "Your mom and I are going to tell them, but we wanted to tell you all first."

"Yeah, yeah," Jake muttered. "I got it. Mom's having a baby." Once more, he moved toward the dining room, but this time it was Seth who grabbed his arm.

"Chill, Jake," Seth advised.

Jake crossed his arms over his chest and gave us all a sulky look. "What are we waiting for?" he asked.

"Give me two minutes, Jake," I bargained. "And I'll tell them. I just didn't want to spring the news on all of you. You're the big brothers, after all." Emmett gave a little groan and shook his head.

"Yeah, like I need another one of these monsters," he said as he tugged at Jake's hair. But his expression didn't look like he was really unhappy. He seemed more amused than anything else.

Sam smiled and shrugged. "It's not like we haven't been expecting it, Pops." As always, the word sent a small thrill through me. "So...congrats."

"Thanks," I said, shoving my hands in my pockets.

"Can we go *now*?" Jake pressed.

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I laughed and shook my head. "Okay, we can go now." I gave Jake a stern look. "Just hold it in for a few more minutes."

"Whatever," he muttered, clearly disgruntled.

Emmett surprised me by giving me a very swift, one-armed hug and then he moved quickly into the dining room. Seth and Sam gave me more enthusiastic hugs, but Jake just dashed into the dining room, obviously impatient to spread the word.

Jake settled in his chair but was so restless and flushed that Josh asked him if he felt okay. "I feel great!" Jake said, nodding emphatically and grinning. He looked guilty as hell. Smug too. That's my boy.

Josh appeared amused and gave me a look. I just shrugged. I waited a moment and then stood up. I cleared my throat and all eyes turned my way. I grabbed Bella's hand. "Bella and I have some news to share," I began. She winked at me. "We're -"

"We're having a baby!" Jake yelled, jumping up from his seat. "I'm gonna be a big brother!" Then he threw his hands up in the air. " *Finally!*"

Chapter 73: The Bean and I

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Someone had mentioned Mac's picture being up in the bar and that it seemed wrong. I can understand that, but I'd like to explain that decision just a little. For me, Mac's picture is up there because he represents every man and woman lost in the Iraq/Afghanistan wars. He's not there so much as the boys' father, but as a soldier who lost his life serving his nation. Every picture displayed in the bar is of a man who died for his country in various wars. Unfortunately, men and women are still dying. In the past six weeks, I've sent off five cards to families who have lost a loved one in the war. There was another notification waiting for me this morning. And I only volunteer for one state. There are still a lot of Americans serving our country and putting themselves in harm's way. I never considered putting a stranger's picture up to represent those lost in this particular war. Mac stands for all of them. I hope that helps. Second, I consider this story the equivalent of fan fic comfort food. That means that I know it's light and fluffy and has no nutritional value but hopefully makes you feel warm and fuzzy. It won't change the world and I'm absolutely okay with that. So don't expect any big, angsty dramatic developments. I don't plan to pull the rug out from anyone's feet. This story is meant to be fun and hopeful. We are approaching a natural stopping point for this story, but don't be surprised if little vignettes pop up every now and then in the companion thread, "The Harder They Fall". You can get some peeks into the Cullen/James clan with one-shots there, rather than trying to keep the story going and going. Also, the Emmett/Rose story is coming along and I plan to start posting that next year sometime, probably within a few weeks of concluding this one. I will say that the Emmett and Rose story is different from this one, not full of angst and woe, but definitely they will deal with some difficult issues. Because I've got an epilogue all written out that details the lives of the James boys and

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their younger sibling, I will probably go ahead and post it, with the understanding that reading it will give away key plot points of the Emmett and Rose story, which is still entitled "The Art of Persistence". That way, you don't have to invest in another story in order to find out what happened to the family, or if epilogues just aren't your thing you can skip it. Thanks for your time so far! Lastly, I apologize for this too long author's note, but apparently I have a lot to say today. Sorry!

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Sheer chaos greeted Jake's announcement of course. My mother started crying, so Bella had to join in. I was beginning to sense a pattern. My dad got up from his chair, clapped me on the back and then gave Masen a celebratory whack too, as if Masen had had anything to do with it. Then Will and Josh were hugging Bella, who was in turn embraced by Masen and Alyssa. There was a lot of hugging going on. Kyle and Alex looked mildly interested, as if trying to figure out what all the fuss was about.

Then Masen was on the hunt for something suitably alcoholic to toast the good news, while Alyssa began rummaging around in the kitchen for something for Bella to drink. I, on the other hand, restrained myself from reminding Bella to rest and perhaps suggesting that she put her feet up. I had a feeling that my advice wouldn't be particularly welcomed at the moment. Besides, she looked very, very happy - and healthy enough, too. So I let it be. For the moment.

After everyone had calmed down, and the news had been toasted as Masen insisted it must be, Mom and Dad clanked on their glasses and smiled expectantly at all of us. "Your mother and I have a little announcement of our own."

"If you knocked up Mom, I think *I'm* gonna hurl," Masen announced.

Emmett muttered, "Here, here."

Dad sighed a little and shook his head. "Now, Masen, let us have our moment."

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"My apologies, Dad," Masen said with a quick look at me. "It's just that Edward's got me seeing babies in every direction." Somehow, once again, he had put the blame neatly on my shoulders. My brother had a knack.

"Yes, well..." Dad looked momentarily at a loss. Masen tended to do that to people. He looked at my mother once more. "Actually, before we make our announcement, I would like to thank Josh." Josh looked as surprised as we all felt. My father held up his glass. "To Dr. Joshua Galloway, and how he inspired *us* to give more." We all drank to that, well aware of Josh's generosity when it came to giving to those less fortunate than he was. "Your mother and I are leaving in two weeks for a six-month tour with a traveling medical caravan. We'll be serving the needs of those in the Appalachian region."

"You're joining the doctor circus?" Masen asked with a wink. Then his expression grew more solemn. "Seriously, Dad, that's awesome. I read an article about something like that a few months ago and they're doing amazing work."

Dad nodded. "Your mother and I think so too." He grasped Mom's hand. "She's kept her nursing license, and I'm still licensed to practice medicine. All of the paperwork has finally been completed and we're ready to embark on our new adventure.

"Wow, Dad," I murmured. "That's..." I shook my head. "I'm so proud of you. I think that's amazing."

"And we'll be home in late June. I'm guessing that'll be in plenty of time for my seventh grandchild's arrival." I gave Mom a warm smile for so casually including our boys in our grandchild tally. Bella started to cry a little. Again. Yep, there really was a pattern here.

There was another round of hugs, and then Dad and Josh began conferring and speaking in doctorese. It was all a lot of jargon as far I was concerned. I lost track of that conversation and decided to snag Masen and get him to help me serve dessert. He whined a little but Alyssa gave him "the look" and he was soon trudging along at my side, muttering under his breath as he did so. I

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ignored his whining. The boys had trained me well.

We sliced the huge chocolate cake that Alyssa had baked and carried out slices to everyone. If we just sliced the cake at the table then the boys would have argued over how we cut it, how big we cut it, and who was getting the biggest slice. As it was, they would still argue over the size of the pieces. I would ignore them.

Bella took a few bites, suddenly stopped, and then dashed for the bathroom. I was torn between jumping to my feet, remaining where I was, and indulging in a moment of pure panic when I realized what she was probably doing in there. Finally, I got to my feet, excused myself politely and went and knocked on the bathroom door. "Bella?"

"I'm fine. I'll be right out. Go away." That was my Bella, succinct and blunt as always.

"I'll wait," I told her.

"Please don't." Then I heard a fresh round of retching.

When it ended, I knocked again. I heard the toilet flushing and then the sound of the faucet running. A moment later, the door opened and Bella stepped out, her face damp and a little pale, but a fairly convincing smile on her lips. She tucked her arm in mine and whispered, "Come on, I want to finish my cake." She rolled her eyes and gave a little moan. "Alyssa's a genius, I tell you."

I let her lead me back to the table. I watched in shock and awe as she proceeded to eat the rest of her slice and then finish off mine when I made no protest. Mom and Alyssa didn't seem to see anything wrong with Bella's actions, so I pretended to take it all in stride too.

~TBTA~

Later that evening I called Jasper and gave him the news. I heard Alice and Rose squealing in the background when he told them. I suspected that Emmett

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had already told Rosalie, but she must have kept it to herself, or they were very good fakers. Jasper gave me some fathering advice, this time focused on living with a pregnant woman. He felt compelled to add the thought, "Hope there's only one in there." And then hung up. I did not appreciate this as it gave me a whole new realm of things to panic about.

Jasper was taking the shift at the bar that night so I had the evening to be with Bella and the boys. My parents were leaving for home first thing in the morning, so we had already said our good-byes.

Will and Josh were also leaving the next day, but later in the day. I would be working by the time they left for the airport, so I had been hugged within an inch of my life already. Will called me Daddy McSmoothie, which had apparently been my nickname for a while, without the Daddy part, of course. I pretended to take *that* in stride too, while Josh chided Will for embarrassing me.

Bella pretty much fell into a coma that night instead of falling asleep. I'd never seen her pass out so quickly. We had had a big day, and by all rights I should have been exhausted too. Instead, I watched television for a while, unable to sleep. Then I amused myself by considering absolutely ridiculous names that I would never dream of saddling a child with in real life. I combined family names, made up nonsense names, used every day words like funnel and came up with names such as Funnelia and Funnius. I finally fell asleep and dreamed of being in a court because our child was suing us for naming him something horrendous. It wasn't the best dream I'd ever had.

The next night, I was wiping down the bar and looked up to see Thomas Reynolds standing there, grinning at me. "So," he drawled by way of greeting. "What's this I hear about you and Bella having a baby?"

I just gaped at him. I was well acquainted with the Army grapevine, of course, especially now. But really, how in the hell had it become so public so fast?

He shook his head and pointed at the tap. "Give me one of those."

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I filled the mug and passed it to him. "Congratulations," he said after he took a sip.

"Thanks," I said, mindlessly wiping at the bar. "It's on the house," I added, pointing at the beer in his huge hand.

"Even better," Thomas commented.

I restrained myself from asking exactly how he heard the news, but Reynolds was in a talkative mood and began explaining the process. "Well first of all, my Megan and your buddy Jasper's wife, Alice, have hit it off. Megan tells me that they're going to be good friends for a long, long time." He shrugged. "So when you called, Alice got on the phone with Megan. Megan told a few friends this morning and they told a few friends... And the next thing I know someone is asking me if I heard the news."

"Wait, you didn't hear it from Megan?"

He rolled his eyes. "You would think, right? Anyway, one of the friends Megan told is married to one of the guys I work with and... You know how it goes."

I nodded, because I did.

"So congratulations, man," he said, reaching over the bar and giving me a whack on the shoulder that threatened to put me on the floor. "Oh, and it won't be any time at all before everyone on the damned base knows, so be prepared to have your ability to impregnate a woman toasted, roasted, congratulated, and commiserated with a lot during the next few days."

"Great," I muttered. Then I smiled. Because in all actuality it was, in fact, great.

~TBTA~

Because Bella was still on Christmas holiday, she went ahead and scheduled her first doctor's appointment just to check on things. I was all for that plan.

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Since I worked nights, it was no inconvenience at all for me to go with her. I was excited and nervous by turns as we made the relatively short drive to the physician's office.

Dr. Hardin was a middle-aged woman with a brisk, no-nonsense but somehow absolutely reassuring manner about her. I instantly liked and trusted her. I felt better knowing that Bella and the baby were in her expert hands. She looked over Bella's information, did a quick vaginal exam (I had never been in the room when one was done before and I had never been so grateful to be a *man* in my life - that speculum thing looked positively medieval), and pronounced Bella pregnant. I heaved a sigh of relief at having it confirmed by an expert. I wasn't quite so happy when she informed us that Bella's pregnancy was "somewhat" high risk due to her age. I didn't think a doctor should throw out a term like "high risk" and expect me to remain calm, but Bella apparently did because she just nodded and made a little face. So I nodded and made the same face.

Dr. Hardin told us that our baby was due August third, but that given Bella's history of having given birth early three out of four times, that we should be on alert from mid-July on. I was already on alert, so that was an unneeded warning. She handed me a booklet called "Making a Decision about Amniocentesis" and told us to talk it over and give it some serious consideration. She told us that she could talk with us about it at the next appointment. I took one look inside the booklet, saw the diagram of the needle going into a belly and promptly closed the booklet. Then Dr. Hardin suggested we take a quick detour and get a sonogram done. I knew what that was, so I gave myself one mental father point.

They had a sonogram tech and machine there in the office, so they gave Bella a large bottle of water, instructed her to drink it, and told us that they'd come and get us in half an hour. Bella fretted and fidgeted, casting longing glances at the restroom. I fidgeted in empathy and because it seemed like a way to encourage solidarity. Then pretty soon I wasn't just faking it, I had to pee too. But I didn't. If Bella couldn't pee, then I wouldn't pee.

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Then the tech was motioning us into the room, giving only a quick glance at the name at the top of the chart but not really looking at it. Bella, who had gotten dressed again, pulled up her shirt, yanked down her slacks, and then the tech put some gooey stuff on her belly. There was nothing to reveal that there was an actual human being growing in there yet, but I liked the view anyway.

The tech flipped a few switches, then passed a wand looking thing over Bella's belly. "Is this your first?" she asked.

I was busy looking at the screen and trying to decipher the light and shadows - and coming up with exactly nothing useful. "Uh no..." I said absently. Was that a head? "Our fifth." I was thinking of how much Sam would have liked seeing this. The kid got off on anything to do with science.

There was a moment of silence and I looked at the tech. She was gaping at us. "Oh?" She sounded kind of dazed. Wasn't that our job? "So what do you have?"

"Four boys," Bella answered.

"Wow," the tech replied. "You guys are really brave to have another go at it." Then she grinned brightly and pointed. "There's your baby," she said, pointing to a bean shaped object in the middle of the screen. The bean appeared to have no arms or legs and I wondered if I should be alarmed. However, the technician didn't seem to feel that anything was out of the ordinary, and Bella didn't look upset, so I let that go. They were the experts after all. Then the tech pointed out some movement in the middle of the bean. "And there's the baby's heart."

It was beating. Really beating. The bean had a heart and it was working. Our bean was alive and well.

The tech smiled again, bright and cheery and absolutely unconcerned that I was having an epiphany as I sat there gaping at the little screen. "Everything looks great, right on schedule."

The Bigger They Are

"There's only *one* bean - I mean baby, right?" I had to ask. Jasper's words had shaken me more than I expected.

The tech laughed, but Bella looked alarmed. "Yeah, only one in there."

Bella and I both breathed a sigh of relief. One bean at a time. As Bella righted her clothing, the tech pressed some more buttons and then handed me a piece of paper with our bean in the middle. "Here's baby's first picture."

"Thanks," I said. I wanted to run my fingers over the image, but figured that would look pretty stupid, so I shoved it in the middle of the booklet about the amnio thing. I'd look at it later. A lot. The bean and I were going to have some serious conversations.

"I'll be the one doing your sonogram in a few months to tell the sex of the baby if you decide to find out," the tech continued. "I'll bet you guys want a girl finally, huh?"

I looked at Bella, confused. Honestly, I hadn't given a thought to the baby's gender beyond wondering what we might have in there. I shrugged. "I don't know," I admitted. "We're used to boys." I got boys. I understood the way they thought, and the way they sometimes *didn't* think. I was just starting to get the hang of fathering boys; I wasn't sure I was ready to up the ante and take on a girl too. "At least with boys, if you ask what they're up to, they tell you straight out that they're shaving the cat." I shuddered, remembering some of the stories Jasper had told me. "With girls, if you ask that question and they're doing the same thing, they just tell you that they aren't doing anything." Okay, that was probably more information than she wanted or needed.

The tech's smile faltered. "Oh," she said, almost at a loss that we weren't expressing our fervent desire for a daughter.

Bella laughed and hugged me close. "Boy or girl," she said. "We don't care. We'll be grateful for healthy."

~TBTA~

The Bigger They Are

The technician's casual question, however, had stirred up random thoughts. Did I have a preference? That evening as I worked the bar again, I thought about it. I searched my deepest heart and explored the most secret wishes that I might never share with anybody. I wanted Bella and our baby to come through it all healthy and happy. Above all, that was my most sincere wish. I came to the conclusion that I honestly didn't care.

I had never expected to become a father. Then the boys had stomped into my life and I was. I had never expected to become a Daddy, and then we had been given a miracle and that was happening too. I imagined a little girl that looked like Bella. Yeah, that would be great. I saw her just learning to walk, riding a tricycle, playing dress up. Then in my mind she was playing dress up again, but this time she was sixteen years old and a boy was picking her up from the house. He was riding a Harley and had tattoos of naked girls on his arms. His lip and eyebrow were pierced and he called me "Old Man." He also leered at my daughter when she came down the stairs dressed in something that would make a stripper blush.

Then the young man nudged me and told me not to worry, that he had plenty of sperm and he'd been saving it for my daughter. My daughter giggled and said she was looking forward to finding out for herself.

I abruptly halted that little day dream.

Yes, another boy would be great. Perfect in fact. Absolutely perfect.

~TBTA~

The next few weeks passed by with surprising quickness. Bella continued to be plagued by nausea. Whoever termed it "morning sickness" must have never actually lived with a pregnant woman. It could strike at any moment. The only positive thing was that Bella had been absolutely correct when she said she felt much better after actually vomiting. It was rather difficult to get used to, hearing her retching in the bathroom only to emerge two minutes later asking what kind of cookies we had on hand. So far, no cravings for barbeque. Instead, it had been sweets.

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The nausea made working a bit challenging for her, but she was lucky enough to have a bathroom right outside her classroom door. Of course, it also meant that there was no delaying in sharing the news of the pregnancy. She was outed the first week back.

The night before her second doctor's appointment, week 9 of the pregnancy according to the book, she snuggled up in bed with me. Sex was still a hit or miss. She was horny - pretty much all the time. She had the will. She had the desire. But between the barf sessions and the fatigue, we had to work quickly sometimes. It wasn't uncommon for Bella to fall asleep before I even pulled the covers up. I was really trying not to take it personally when she began snoring almost before I pulled out of her.

She had snuck in a nap while I made dinner and I was off work, so we had the whole evening together. She had even slept a little while the boys and I watched television, though she denied it. Of course, we had all heard her giving little snores so we knew the truth. We didn't call her on it. We didn't want to make her angry - or worse, make her cry.

"Edward?" she asked quietly. "Can we talk?"

Those words didn't quite make me panic anymore, but they never made me feel really good either.

"Sure," I said, wondering if she would stay awake long enough to renew her acquaintance with my dick. We were both hopeful that she would.

"The baby's due in August," she said. "So taking off six weeks won't be a problem, since a few of those weeks will be part of my summer vacation."

"Uh huh," I murmured, noticing that her boobs really *were* bigger. I brushed my knuckles across one nipple and she hissed. And more sensitive too. I probably leered at her then.

"Just hold on there, buddy," she said sternly and pulled the cover up over her breasts. Yep, definitely leered.

The Bigger They Are

But I had a very vivid imagination and I knew what lurked under there. And I wanted them. I snuggled up close and began kissing her neck. "Yeah...?"

She sighed and gave me a little push. "I swear, you have a one track mind and it's derailed," she muttered.

I leaned back with a sigh and made the pouty face that usually got me out of trouble. "Sorry," I whispered. "I'm listening."

Bella gave me one more good frown and then yanked the covers up to her chin. "Well, I was wondering if you thought that we could afford for me to take a school year off after the baby's born."

She seemed anxious about my reply, but I was thrilled. I had wanted to ask her if she'd consider it, but I knew how much she loved her job. And I knew the financial sacrifices it would take on all our parts to make that happen. For the most part, I could stay home with the baby during the day and she could take over at night when I worked and then I'd pull the night shift when I was off, or at least that's what I'd been thinking. But the idea of being home with Bella *and* the baby during the days for a whole year? Absolutely amazing.

"We'll make it work," I promised. I still had some savings left that hadn't been tapped by opening the bar, and the bar was well on its way to being self-sustaining. In addition, we still had my retirement. If we were careful, we could do it. Hell, I'd take a second job if I had to.

"Are you sure?" she asked, playing with my hair and pressing those wonderfully soft boobs against my chest.

"I'm sure," I said. "I wanted to suggest it, but wasn't sure how to bring it up."

Bella giggled. "You're usually pretty sure about bringing things *up*," she whispered and the sex kitten was back. Before she curled up and snoozed, I hoped I would get a chance to express my appreciation.

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I pushed my erection against her hip. So far, I hadn't been worried about hurting the baby during sex. When she got bigger and actually *looked* pregnant, it might be a different story, but right now everything seemed so well protected that all I knew was that it still felt really, really good to be inside of her.

And I wanted to be there right now.

"Oh yeah," I whispered as I tugged up her tee shirt and plucked at her nipples. Then I was sliding her panties down and sure enough...she was more than ready for me.

I rolled so that she was on top and she settled over me with a sigh. I liked the view a lot. Her breasts swayed with her movements and my hands found their way unerringly to her new curves.

She managed to stay awake long enough for us both to enjoy ourselves.

Chapter 74: And the Winner Is

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: I'll try to make this one shorter. I'd like to say that I must take the responsibility for the confusion about Mac's picture. As a writer, it's my job to make sure I explain myself. If a reader is confused, that's my fault. Honestly, I'm thrilled that anyone cares enough to give their opinion or ask a question. So I'm never insulted or offended. In fact, I'm flattered. I think it makes me a better writer to step back and take an objective look at what I've written and make sure I've done my job. So...no worries there. Second, this chapter is a bit shorter than most but it said everything I wanted it to say and I didn't to drag it out just to up the word count. I hope you like it anyway.

Chapter 74: And the Winner Is...

I was whistling a little bit as I made breakfast. Today marked week number thirteen of Bella's pregnancy, and according to everything I had read, some of her more unpleasant symptoms should be abating around this time. I hadn't worked the night before, so I decided to get up before Bella and the boys and make breakfast for everyone.

Emmett and Jake were the first ones up, no surprise there. They shoveled in the pancakes with grunts of gratitude and then ran upstairs. Both of them liked some free, quiet time before their brothers were up and about. Then Bella stumbled down the stairs, searching blindly for the coffee. Then she looked at the coffee pot and sighed, remembering that Bean had changed the rules. Grudgingly, she poured a glass of orange juice. I had a cup of coffee when I first woke up, and then washed and put my cup and the pot away. The coffee grinds were safely in the outside garbage can. I refused to think that I was *sneaking* coffee, more that I was trying not to make things more difficult for

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Bella. That was my story and I was sticking to it.

I put my arms around Bella and then rested my hands on her belly. In the past few weeks, I had listened to her grumble about clothes becoming tight, and then her belly had started to round out. She didn't precisely look pregnant, "just fat" as she put it. Since she wasn't bigger anywhere else except her boobs, I thought she looked like a woman in the early stages of pregnancy, but Bella thought otherwise. I had learned not to argue.

"How's Bean doing this morning?" I whispered. The baby had gone from "the bean" to simply "Bean" sometime during the last month.

Bella scowled. "Bean says he would sure love some coffee," she muttered darkly.

I laughed and kissed Bella. Then she pulled back suspiciously. "What?" I asked.

"You *cheater!*" she accused. "You had coffee!" Okay, I knew I had forgotten something. I should have brushed my teeth. I was busted.

"It isn't what you think," I said hurriedly. "It was just a one time thing. It doesn't mean anything! I swear. I was drunk. I was lonely." Then I batted my eyelashes. "It'll never happen again. Forgive me?"

She shoved against my chest and laughed, even though I could tell she didn't want to. "No, I don't forgive you. In fact, I should find your secret coffee stash and put it down the garbage disposal." I winced, thinking of the Starbucks I had hidden behind the frozen lima beans. She had developed an aversion for the things and I knew my stash was safe there. I tried to look innocent and unconcerned. Bella shook her head. "You're rotten, you know that right?"

I nodded my agreement. "I know I am. But I love you." I offered up the words just like Jake did when he had done something wrong.

Bella sighed. "What is it about bad boys that gets to me every time?"

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This, of course, roused up horrific memories of my day dream of the sperm toting, Harley riding, bad boy that wanted to do unspeakable things to my daughter.

Bella went to the stairs to yell up at Sam that he'd better be out of bed while I prayed very hard for a boy.

It couldn't hurt, right?

~TBTA~

I had kind of expected that all of Bella's pregnancy symptoms would just magically disappear once she hit the thirteenth week. Of course, that wasn't how it worked. But now she was only barfing once a day, or even once every few days. She was even managing to stay awake past eight thirty. That alone was cause for celebration. But I also breathed in a sigh of relief when Bella passed the time frame that held the most risk for a miscarriage. There were no guarantees, but we had certainly passed a milestone when she hit thirteen weeks.

The weeks seemed to go even faster now that she was feeling a bit more like herself. The tears could still strike at any moment. One day in the grocery store, she started getting teary because I asked her why she was buying beans. I only wanted to know if she was making her famous chili. She slammed the can back on the shelf and told me that if I thought I could do any better then I could finish the shopping myself.

I didn't think I should have to apologize for such an innocent question but I did. Honestly some hills just weren't worth dying for, and this was one of them. Then I explained that I had really been craving her chili and I begged her to make some. Somewhat mollified, she agreed and the crisis was averted.

But living with a pregnant Bella was sometimes...interesting. And that's all I was going to say about that. I was Forrest Gump.

~TBTA~

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Then came the morning that I walked in to see Bella crying. She had a blouse on, but not buttoned. Her pants were pulled up around her hips, but not zipped. I sensed a wardrobe crisis.

I put my arms around her and kissed her ear. "What's the matter, babe?"

"Bean has made me fat," she stated bluntly.

I hid my smile behind her hair because I had the sneaking suspicion that she wasn't really amused at the moment. "You look beautiful," I offered.

Then she scowled. "This is all your fault," she accused.

"I know," I soothed. "My apologies." I smiled. "I'd carry Bean for you if I could."

"Yeah, right," she muttered. "No one would have more than one kid if men had to be pregnant." Since she was probably right, I didn't make any comment. Finally, she sighed and turned around to look at the mirror. "Nothing fits," she said morosely.

"I guess you need to go shopping," I commented as I moved toward her side of the closet. I flipped through the pants. Pants were out. I looked at her chest. Most of her blouses wouldn't fit either. The boob fairy had been more than generous. Then I got to the dresses. A few of them might work since they were kind of loose on her before. I held up two possibilities. "Would one of these work for today?"

She still looked unhappy, but finally pointed to one. Once again, I didn't smile. Grumpy Bella was kind of cute, but she'd kick me in the baby maker if I said so. I handed her the dress without a word.

After she dressed, she twirled around and gave me a little show. Since the dress wasn't gathered at the waist or anything, it had room for Bean. She looked beautiful. She also looked...pregnant.

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"Listen, I don't work tonight," I said. "Why don't you and Alyssa go shopping? Masen and I will watch the boys. We can order them a pizza and maybe you and Alyssa can catch dinner out?"

She hesitated a moment and then nodded. After another moment, she stood on her tip-toes and pressed a kiss to my cheek. "Sorry I was cranky."

I turned and kissed her lips, keeping my tongue to myself in an effort to prove I was a gentleman. "As you said, it's my fault," I replied. "Well, mine and Bean's."

Her lips quirked. "Well, I love you both, you and Bean."

"And we love you back."

~TBTA~

I wasn't sure how it was for other guys who were expecting a baby, but Bella's pregnancy was... *enhanced* by the boys. Jake had long conversations with Bean, mostly about how awesome it was going to be to have four older brothers in general and Jake in particular. He had compiled a list of possible names for the baby. Top on his list of boy names? Luke. Of course. Though he still insisted that the baby was a girl because he and God had had a talk and God was going to give Jake James what Jake James asked for. Emmett insisted it was a boy, mostly to annoy Jake. For a girl, which he insisted it was, he favored the name Leia. Was anyone surprised by that choice? No.

Then, because brothers are brothers, Emmett had to tell Jake that his mother and I were going to name a boy Jabba and a girl Galaxy. Jake came to me very upset before I convinced him that Emmett had been teasing him. Again. Jake had pretty much claimed the baby as his. He had claimed me and now he was figuratively planting his flag on his younger sibling. Bella once asked if I thought he'd pee on the baby once it was born, marking his territory as it were. I could only say fervently that I hoped not.

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But Jake's little list of names did start Bella and I talking about it. Bean would need a name. I knew the state would allow us to call the baby Bean on the birth certificate, but I figured that was probably cruel and showed a lack of imagination. Or maybe too *much* imagination. Either way, it wouldn't work.

One night, we were sprawled on the couch, taking advantage of Bella's new energy by not going to bed at eight thirty. The boys were upstairs in their rooms, doing homework or *pretending* to do homework. Either way, we were alone.

I had my hand on her belly, appreciating the new curves that Bean had added. She was sixteen weeks along now and definitely looked pregnant all the time. Just last month, she had only looked pregnant in certain outfits. Now, the belly was poking out and Bean was making his presence known to the world at large.

Next month, we had a sonogram scheduled and the doctor had told us that if the baby cooperated, we might be able to find out if it was a girl Bean or a boy Bean in there. After a short discussion, we had decided to go ahead and find out the sex if we could. We were already surprised, and finding out if it was a boy or girl wasn't going to take away any of the anticipation we felt about the baby's arrival.

"So..." I said. "Have you given any thought to names?"

Bella smirked. "You mean beyond Luke or Leia?"

"Yes, beyond those," I answered. "Though Luke isn't a bad choice."

"Luke Cullen..." she said. It was weird, but hearing that name made something inside of me twist up and then release. This baby would be a *Cullen*. She shrugged. "It's okay," she allowed.

"We'll keep looking," I said. "Should we do boys' names or girls' names first?"

"Boys," Bella answered.

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"Do you think it's a boy?" I asked.

"No clue," she replied with a grimace. She looked at her belly. "Hey, Bean...look between your legs and tell me what you see."

"That's just weird," I told her.

"You think I haven't heard *you* talking to Bean?" Bella mocked.

"You were supposed to be asleep!" I protested. Busted again.

"Focus, Cullen, focus," she admonished. "We need names - of the male variety."

"Luke," I offered. She rolled her eyes. "Uh..."

"Edward Junior?" she said.

I shuddered. "God no. That's just mean. I'd rather name the baby Bean."

"After your father?"

"No way, also cruel and unusual punishment." I didn't want to name the baby after anyone, certainly not me or my father.

"What about your middle name?" Bella suggested. "Anthony is a very nice name."

I considered that. "I could live with it, but let's keep thinking."

She looked thoughtful. "What about Michael?"

"It's got potential," I admitted. "Michael Cullen."

"Michael *Anthony* Cullen," Bella elaborated. Then she made a face. "No, then his initials would be MAC."

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I snorted because that was actually kind of funny. "Maybe Anthony Michael Cullen?"

"Short list it," Bella suggested.

"I like Daniel," I said. "Daniel Anthony Cullen has a certain ring to it."

She tilted her head. "Yeah, I like it too."

"You're pretty sure you want to put Anthony in there somewhere aren't you?" I asked.

Bella smirked. "Yeah, pretty sure."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. "Joseph is a good name. Joe Cullen sounds strong." I paused. "Or Logan. I like Logan."

"Both good choices," Bella agreed. "So we'll probably use Anthony as a middle name and we've got Daniel, Joseph, and Logan on our short list. Right?"

"Sounds good to me," I agreed. "Can we go to girls' names now?" Then I pointed at her. "And no Antonias or anything."

"Spoilsport," she muttered.

"Do you want to name a girl after you?" I asked.

Bella grimaced. "Hell and no."

"Your mother? My mother?"

"No and only if you want to," Bella replied.

"Okay, so something new and fresh for the latest Cullen," I agreed with a nod.

"Madeline is a pretty name," Bella said thoughtfully.

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"It's pretty," I said.

"But not your favorite?" Bella guessed.

"Let's keep thinking," I suggested.

"What about Chloe?"

I shuddered. "That brings to mind Kardashian. No thank you."

Bella giggled. "Okay...Britney?"

"As in Spears? No." I shook my head.

"Alexis is pretty," Bella said.

"Yes, but she'll have a cousin named Alex. That might get confusing," I pointed out.

"Good thinking." Bella frowned. "Riley is a good name. I like it for a girl especially. It's unusual."

"I'd consider it," I said.

"I've always thought that Danika was a pretty name." Then she laughed. "The boys would call her Dani."

"Well, a Dani would fit right in with the rest of them," I said with a grin. "We'd have Em and Seth and Sam and Jake and Dani." I drew in a deep breath as if I had run out of air. Bella laughed.

"Dani Cullen," Bella mused. "I like it. It sounds strong, which any little girl will have to be to put up with four big brothers and *you*." She poked at my chest. She still had some lethal hands. "But what about a middle name?"

"Elizabeth?" I offered. "It would work with either Riley or Danika."

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"You know, we could just name her Dani and be done with it. If we think that's what she'll end up getting called anyway."

"Let's think about it," I said. "We've got time."

Just then Bella sat up and gave a little startled gasp. "Feel!" she said, putting my hand over her belly.

"What?" I asked.

"The baby...he moved," Bella said with a grin.

I pressed a little harder, but then Bella really pressed my hand into her. I still felt nothing and had to fight the disappointment. Bella must have seen it though, because she kissed me. "It'll take a little longer for you to feel it." Her smile was wide. "Just remember, I'm feeling all of this from the inside."

"What does it feel like?" I had to ask. I couldn't imagine having a whole other human being growing inside of me. I didn't really want to.

She tilted her head and closed her eyes. "At first, it feels like bubbles popping," she said, keeping my hand pressed to her belly. "Then later, you can actually feel little arms and legs and the head - all moving around inside. You can feel the baby turning somersaults in there. Then when the baby gets bigger, the movements are smaller...more like us as we get more comfortable in a chair or something."

I didn't have words, so I kissed her instead.

Three days later, I had my hand up against Bean again. This time, Bean took pity on me and gave my hand a tiny nudge.

And just like that, I fell in love.

~TBTA~

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It was week twenty. When the boys found out that we might find out if they were having a brother or sister at the sonogram scheduled for today, they had staged a little mutiny and insisted on being there. As one, they had pleaded their case and waited for Bella and me to decide. It had taken us about thirty seconds, but only because it was kind of fun to torture them every now and then.

I met her eyes. She looked at me. And we did that sneaky, married people, silent communication thing. We had gotten pretty good at it.

"All right," she said. "But you're going to school as soon as the appointment's over." No one but Emmett argued over that, but Bella shot him down with "The Look" and that argument was soon quashed.

We all piled into the Vader-mobile and I drove us to the doctor's office. I was nervous. I wasn't sure why, but I was. It wasn't that I would be unhappy with either gender. But I knew that finding out the baby's sex was going to change things in a way. "Bean" was going to be a son or a daughter, and that made things a lot more real.

Bella had been drinking water the whole way there and by the time we arrived, she was fidgeting and uncomfortable. It was kind of funny to troop in with four boys and watch everyone's eyes go wide. There was Emmett - huge and hulking and looking older than he was. Then came Seth, who was quickly catching up with his brother. Sam and Jake brought up the rear. Sam was telling Jake all about how sonograms worked and Jake was just practically buzzing with excitement.

"It's gonna be a girl," he told me with great confidence. That was when I started to feel nauseous.

Before I knew it, they were calling Bella's name and we were all filing into the small room. It hadn't seemed small at all until the boys filled it up. The tech, the same one who had been confused by our lack of desire for a girl specifically, took one look at all the boys and just grinned. "Well now..." she said. I wasn't sure what that meant, but she seemed to find the sight of all of us

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somewhat amusing.

The boys looked away when Bella hitched up her shirt and the tech tucked one of those paper things in the waistband of Bella's new maternity pants (the ugliest things ever invented, according to Bella). Then came the goop and the wand and the flipping of switches. Sam's eyes never left the screen.

The tech passed the wand over and over Bella's belly. This time when I looked at the screen, I was quite proud to realize that I could identify limbs. And a face. Whoa. That was our baby's profile. He...or she had a small little nose and a cute little chin.

"Your baby is sucking its thumb," the tech said, pointing to the screen. Emmett's eyes went wide.

More adjustments of the switches and the wand and some pressing on the belly and the tech stopped and looked at us with a wide smile. "Do you want to know the sex?"

I was too busy trying not to cry and look like an idiot but luckily Jake stepped in. "Yes, yes, we want to know!" He almost squealed. "We *have* to know!"

The tech laughed but looked at Bella and then at me. "Well, Mommy and Daddy...?"

I took a deep breath, met Bella's eyes and she nodded. "We want to know," I replied.

The tech nodded and pointed to the screen. "Here are the baby's legs," she said.

Emmett pointed too. "Is that a...uh...penis?" he asked.

The tech shook her head and smiled. "Nope, that's the umbilical cord," she told him and she traced the cord on the screen. "Here's the heart, which is beating at a perfectly normal 150 beats per minute." She was dragging it out on purpose, I just knew it. Once more, she was pointing at the screen. I felt everyone in the

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room holding their breath. "And this...well this is what tells us that your baby is a girl."

And Jake started his little victory dance. He looked at Emmett and began crowing in triumph. "Who called it? *Who* said it was a girl?" Jake held up his hand. "I did, that's right, *I* did!" He hooted. "You all are losers! I'm the best. I'm the most awesome big brother alive and you all suck!"

Bella just sort of looked stunned. I knew how she felt.

I could have sworn I saw a Harley riding, sperm-filled, smirking young man giving me the thumbs up. I resolved then and there to hunt him down and castrate him.

I was going to have a daughter.

I *would* not cry. I would *not* cry.

Oh hell.

75 Mr Control Freak's Encore Performance

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Note: This is a longer chapter, but I didn't want to break it up.

Chapter 75: Mr. Control Freak's Encore Performance

The rest of the day kind of passed by in a daze. We took the boys to Pete's for pizza and told them that we'd let them take the day off. There was much cheering over that decision. I looked at the boys and at Bella. I realized that for a while now, my whole life had been "Bella and the boys." Well that was about to change. Now it was all about "Bella and the kids." It was strange and wonderful and terrifying all at the same time.

Bella seemed as shell-shocked as I was. When we got back home, the boys disappeared and she clutched at me.

"Help," she whimpered.

"What's wrong?" I asked. She looked okay, a little pale maybe, but nothing alarming.

"I don't know how to raise a girl," she whispered, desperation in her voice.

I leaned in close. "I'll let you in on a little secret..." I whispered into her ear. "Me either."

She humphed and leaned back. "That's not helping," Bella muttered.

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"I know," I admitted. "But I don't know what else to tell you."

"Boys," she muttered. "Boys I know. I'm used to boys. I understand boys. I'm a pro with boys." Then she trembled. "But a little girl?" She clutched at me. "I don't know how to French braid hair, Edward. I just don't."

"I'll ask Alyssa to teach *me*, okay?" Her expression didn't lighten, so I pulled her close again. "Bella Cullen, you are, without a doubt, the best mother it's ever been my honor to know. And that's saying something because I think my own mother did a damned good job. But I'm not sure even *she* could have done such a good job with those boys as you've done even in the best of circumstances." I tilted up her chin and kissed her lips. "So I am quite sure that you'll be able to handle the differences that come with having a daughter." She still looked doubtful. "Think of the boys. They've all got very different personalities. Right?" She nodded. "And you've had to adjust your parenting for each of them. This baby will have her own personality. And you'll adjust to it. And so will I. And the boys will, too." I kissed her again. "Because that's what we do. We compromise, adjust, communicate, and..." I put my hands on her ass. "We make wild monkey love."

"One track mind," she muttered. But then she smiled. "You're also a very smooth-tongued devil. So if you play your cards right, you just might get lucky tonight."

I laughed. "I'll play my cards right," I promised her. "Now..." I held up my cell phone. "You and I have some calls to make."

Bella looked surprised for a moment and then laughed. "My mother is going to have a fit. She's been convinced that she'd never, *ever* have a granddaughter. She's even been convinced that Bean here was a boy." She reached for my phone. "Me first!"

I held the phone just out of reach. "What if *I* want to make the first call?"

"I don't think this is considered playing your cards right," Bella warned with a sly smile. "Do you?"

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I frowned as I handed her the phone. "You don't play fair."

She was humming a little bit as she punched in the number for her parents. "And you should never forget that."

I watched as she talked. Bella walked around the room, restless and excited by the news. Her face was glowing, her belly quite round now. There was no mistaking the presence of Bean. At night, I could feel her moving around in there, getting stronger every day.

"...so we found out what we're having today," I heard Bella saying.

A pause and then Bella looked at me and smiled. "It's a *girl*, Mom. We're having a girl."

Bella pulled the phone away from her ear and I could hear Renee squealing from across the bedroom. Bella put her hand over the phone and rolled her eyes. "She's a little excited."

I nodded. "So I hear."

After a few moments, Bella put the phone to her ear and began nodding. "Yeah, we've got a few names picked out." I looked at her and winked. "Uh yeah...well, we'll let you know when we've picked one for sure." I bit my lip, trying not to laugh. "Okay, Mom. Well, tell Dad when he gets home from work." Bella nodded. "We love you too, I'll tell him." A pause and some talking on the other end. "Yes, he's thrilled." Laughter. "The boys are excited too, especially Jake." Bella said good-bye and then handed me the phone.

"Thank you," I said and dialed my Dad's cell phone number. He picked up on the first ring.

"Edward? Is everything okay?" He sounded concerned and I heard a lot of voices in the background.

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"Everything's fine, Dad. Did I call at a bad time?" My parents had been staying busy with their volunteer work. They were exhausted but very, very happy and fulfilled.

"No, I have a few minutes," Dad said. "Bella and the boys are okay, aren't they?"

"They're fine, Dad. We're all fine," I assured him. I could feel his curiosity. "Uh...we found out the baby's sex today."

Dad laughed. "I was wondering when that would happen," he said. We hadn't really told anyone what was going on today except the boys. We didn't want the added pressure. "And?" Dad prompted when I didn't say anything else.

"Well...we're having a girl," I told him.

"I'm going to tell your mother," Dad said after a moment of shocked silence. "She's with a patient, but I have to tell her now." I could hear my Dad walking and then I heard him knock on a door. "Esme?" he asked. "It's Edward. They found out what the baby is."

"Edward?" I heard Mom asking.

"It's a girl, Mom. Bella and I are having a girl." I couldn't keep the news in any longer. It exploded out of me in a rush of sound.

Mom started laughing. Or crying. Or some combination of the two. "Oh, Edward, that's wonderful. A boy would have been wonderful news too, but I'm so happy for you. How do the boys feel?"

"They're happy, especially Jake. He's been telling us the whole time it's a girl, so he's pretty thrilled to be proven right." I had to laugh as I remembered his little victory dance.

Mom laughed too. "That would be Jake," she agreed. "You tell that young man that I had faith in him."

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"I will."

"Have you told Masen yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," I told her.

Mom laughed again. "Well, I'll let you go so you can call him and give him the news. Just be prepared, Edward."

"Prepared? For what?"

"For Masen," she answered. "You know how he is." Then she sighed. "Tell Bella we love her and congratulations."

"Will do, Mom." I heard someone calling her name. "I'll let you go. We'll call you tomorrow when I'm off and we'll talk more."

"Okay. Give that baby girl a kiss for me."

"I will." But then I got distracted because thoughts of giving Bean a kiss degenerated into thoughts of kissing Bella's belly. And then moving lower...

One track mind, remember?

~TBTA~

In the end, I was a chicken shit (Bella's words) and called Alyssa at home and gave her the news. I used the excuse that I didn't want to bother Mase at work, but Alyssa's snort let me know how *that* particular argument was. She congratulated us and then said, "You know I'm going to have to call Masen and tell him, right?"

I sighed, but had already resigned myself to the inevitability of it all. Of course, I brightened when I looked at the clock. I'd be leaving for work in an hour and I couldn't answer my phone there just to chat. "Lys, could you do me a huge favor and just give me an hour's head start?"

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Alyssa laughed. "All right, you big baby."

"Thanks, you're the best sister-in-law ever."

"I know, that's my burden and my gift," she teased.

I got ready for work, and gave Bella an enthusiastic kiss before I left. After I made sure the boys weren't around, I got on my knees and gave the baby a kiss too. "I love you, Bean." Until we made a final decision on the name, she would still be Bean to me. Then another kiss for Bella and I was in the vehicle on my way to the bar.

I got about two blocks away from the house before my cell went off. I looked at the number. Masen. Not happening. So I ignored it and drove to work.

The rest of the afternoon was busy. I knew that Bella was calling her brother and Alice to tell them about the baby being a girl. I fully expected a call from Jasper later on, but he'd make it short and sweet. By seven, I was surprised that Masen hadn't blown up my phone trying to tease me about having a daughter. By seven thirty, I was starting to feel a little put out. Fine. If Masen didn't care enough to harass me, then...

I looked up.

There was my brother.

And Jasper.

And Thomas Reynolds and Major Hutchinson and Mr. Hoyt.

I grinned at all of them. "Drinks on the house," I told them. As they each got their mug of beer, they lifted them up and Masen made the toast.

"To my brother...who won't know what hit him," he said.

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I had to drink to that. Jasper shook his head after taking a gulp. "So...a girl, huh?"

I nodded. "Yep, a girl."

Thomas snorted. "This changes everything, you know."

"Tell me about it," I said with an answering snort of my own.

"A girl?" Masen asked again. "It's hard to believe." He looked at me. "What are we going to do with a girl?"

"Keep her away from boys?" I guessed.

Masen nodded and lifted his beer again. "To keeping the Cullen princess away from all things male except those related to her."

I drank to that with no hesitation.

Mr. Hoyt laughed and shook his head. "Good luck with that, my boy." Major Hutchinson just looked as if I said something spectacularly stupid. I remembered that he had daughters and that recollection made me nervous.

Jasper nodded. "Good luck with that," he repeated. "Now you're getting an inkling how I feel every time Emmett picks up Rosalie to take her out."

I winced. I could only imagine. "I'll apologize in advance for my son's behavior. I'll also agree to help you restrain the boy if the need arises."

Jasper just rolled his eyes. "He's a sixteen year old boy; the *need* arises hourly."

And with that, we all dissolved into laughter. But after a moment's reflection, I decided that it wasn't funny, not funny at all.

~TBTA~

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Later that night, actually early the next morning, I slid into bed behind Bella. I put my hands on her belly and waited. Usually, Bean woke up when I came home. I allowed myself to imagine a little girl with Bella's dark hair and eyes waiting for me at the door. She'd shyly hug me, giving me a little kiss on the cheek. She'd say, "I missed you, Daddy." She would be my princess and have her mother's gentle strength and sarcastic sense of humor.

She would be perfect in every way. She would listen to me when I told her something. She would look up to me and never argue. She would adore her brothers and her brothers would adore her in return. She would have me wrapped around her little finger. I imagined that one day she'd grow up to be a teacher like her mother. Or perhaps a doctor. Or maybe she'd be an advertising genius like Masen. I didn't care - as long as she was happy and safe.

Then Bean woke up and began nudging my hand. Between my whispered words to Bean and her movements, Bella woke up and turned sleepily in my arms. She smiled against my chest. "Did you play your cards right this evening, Mr. Cullen?"

"I believe I did," I replied.

Then she moved against me, the mound of her belly firm against me. "Then I think you should get your reward."

"Me too," I agreed and began kissing her. Our tongues rubbed against each other, igniting fires lower down. Her leg came up to wrap around my waist and the change in angle let my dick rub against her wet heat. I moaned to let her know how much I appreciated the gesture. She laughed softly and began kissing down my neck before detouring to nip at my earlobe.

Quietly, I urged her to turn in my arms so that her back was against my chest. Then I lifted her leg again and rested it on top of mine while my hand moved around her belly so that I could rub gently on her clit. She was more sensitive there now and I had had to learn to touch her all over again. I had enjoyed the learning process. The more you know and all that shit.

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She murmured her approval and began moving her hips against my hand. Forward, into my touch, backward, rubbing against my dick. I couldn't decide which was my favorite. I decided it was a tie. Then I guided my dick to her entrance and gave a gentle push inside of her. We both moaned at the sensations and I stilled for a moment, just wanting to savor the heat and slickness of her welcome. She felt so full and soft there now.

Then slowly, I began moving inside of her, keeping up the movement of my fingers. Bella reached back and grabbed my hair as I licked along her neck, her ear. I nibbled and nipped gently, telling her how beautiful she was, how hot she made me, how much I loved the feeling of her body around me.

I felt the tension knotting in my spine. My balls tightened up and I couldn't hold it off any longer. I muttered an apology to Bella and let loose, my hand clamping down on her hip as I shuddered and moaned and sweated. Then I moved my hand back to her clit and touched her in the way I knew she needed. I was enough of a gentleman to make sure I did right by my wife and a few minutes later, she exploded around me, her body tightening around me and making me shake all over again.

Then I slipped from her body and tightened my arms around her, cradling Bean in my hands because she had been rocked to sleep by the commotion.

~TBTA~

We were having a great week. The next day, Karen called Bella to let her know that there was an offer on her house. It had taken about a year, but even Karen said that wasn't unusual with the economy in the state it was. The offer was good; their financing already in place, and Bella accepted it on the spot. Two weeks later, Bella put the check in the bank. She had put a hefty down payment on the house when she moved in, so was able to actually walk away with some cash. Knowing that money was in the bank went a long way toward relieving our minds about finances during Bella's year off of work.

Then Alyssa and Alice gave Bella a baby shower and our house was covered in an explosion of pink. I had no idea how one tiny human could need so much

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stuff, but Bella and Alyssa assured me that she would. For the moment, we stored all of the baby stuff in various closets and some of it went to Alyssa's house. We hired a contractor for the room in the garage and he seemed to be reliable. It helped my peace of mind that he was former Army and a friend of Dewey's. He told us that the room should be done by the last week of June.

Before we knew it, the school year was once again winding down. The first year, I hadn't even been aware of when the school year ended. Last year, it had been another milestone just before the wedding. This year, it meant even more. Emmett would be halfway done with his high school career, as hard as that was to believe. Rose was going to be a senior and her talk of college had started to depress Emmett a bit. In the fall, he would turn seventeen. He wanted to play football again and I thought about bundling up Bean and taking her to the games.

My parents were due home at the end of June and the baby was due just five weeks after that. Things started moving in fast motion again. The school year ended and Bella cried a little bit that night, knowing she wasn't returning in the fall. I didn't know how else to comfort her, so I made love to her. It seemed to do the trick. *I* felt better anyway.

My parents were thrilled to see us, having come to Fayetteville before returning home to Charleston. They spent three days with us, dividing their time between Masen's house and ours. My mom painted Emmett's new room, which was completed right on schedule and a miracle in itself, getting Alyssa to help her. They refused to let Bella paint. Then they moved all of his stuff into his new room and moved Seth's stuff into Emmett's old room. Masen and my Dad and I put together the crib in what had been Seth's room. We don't need to talk about that, but eventually it was set up and the women took over putting all of the other baby stuff in there. By the time my parents left, Seth's old had been transformed into a pink wonderland of baby paraphernalia.

With only five weeks to go, Bella's belly was pretty much a conversation stopper. Even having seen her pregnant belly in the home movies, I was still shocked. While some pregnant women looked like they had swallowed a basketball, Bella looked more like she was smuggling an oversized beach ball

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in there - or maybe one of those huge exercise balls. From the back, she still didn't look that different. Yes, a little more rounded than usual, but she carried it well. Then she would turn and from the *side*, Bean was awe-inspiring. Finally, the day after my parents left town, I had to ask the doctor when we went for what would now be Bella's weekly appointments.

"Uh...is...the baby growing at the rate she should?" Bella just made a face at me, knowing exactly what I meant. Seriously, the kid had to be about twelve pounds now, if Bella's bulge was any indication.

The doctor just smiled and nodded. "Everything's going according to schedule." She turned to Bella. "You're at a little more than thirty-five weeks now, and given your age, the circumstances of Jake's birth, and the fact that this is your fifth child, I want you to be on the look out for signs of labor."

I swallowed hard. I was counting on those five weeks, but I hadn't realized how much until I heard the doctor telling us that we might not get those five weeks. Surely, the doctor would realize that I *needed* those five weeks and do everything possible to make sure we got them? But the doc and my wife just looked as if that was to be expected. Bella nodded and reached for my hand. It was a struggle for her so sit up now, and she had had to lie down for the doctor to measure the mountain...er, the belly.

~TBTA~

My parents made me promise that I would call them when Bella went into labor. They figured they might even make it before the baby arrived, depending on how quickly things progressed. I found all of that talk a little disconcerting. I had remained remarkably calm during Bella's pregnancy. Mr. Control Freak had made only infrequent appearances and had always been quickly and efficiently reassured. Even Bella had commented on how unexpectedly composed I had been.

When June officially turned into July, however, I felt my carefully cultivated calm begin to crumble. Dr. Hardin had made it clear that she did not expect Bella to make it to her due date. She had pretty much told us to count on a July

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arrival. That meant that our daughter would probably be born *this* month.

When I mentioned this to Bella, she only groaned and patted the side of her belly. "God, I hope so," she muttered.

I didn't think Bella grasped the seriousness of the situation. *This month*. As in the month that was currently displayed on the calendar in the kitchen.

I wasn't ready.

We had gone from waiting month to month, and then week to week. But now, now we - and by that I meant *I* - were on edge every day. Any day that I woke up could be *the* day. My forty-one year old heart just wasn't cut out for that shit.

For the first time, I really started to grasp the fact that by the time Bean graduated from high school, I would be almost sixty. By the time she graduated from college, I would be heading toward sixty-five, not quite but close enough.

Then, when she wanted to start dating *after* college, I really would have a heart attack. There would be no dating before then, of that I would make certain. Bella didn't understand. She was too uncomfortable to think about twenty years down the road. She just didn't *get* it.

And Mr. Control Freak started to freak the fuck out.

I was so useless that Jasper finally arranged for either Mr. Hoyt or Dewey or one of the other relief bar tenders to be there, even when I was working. He gave me some bullshit about having someone there in case Bella went into labor, but I knew it was because I was a blubbering mass of fear and insecurity.

I kept it together in front of Bella and the boys, but both Jasper and Masen had had front row seats to my meltdowns. I barely remembered the fourth of July, and luckily this year the boys and Bella had so much on their minds that they didn't seem too sad. Bella was too uncomfortable and the boys were watching her too closely to get depressed. Then it was the second week of July and Jake

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started pestering us to make sure we had gotten him what he wanted for his birthday. Luckily, Bella had done our shopping online and all I had had to do was to hide the stuff in our closet. We wrapped it together because Jake was a snoop and if it wasn't wrapped, he would see it.

The bar was running smoothly, even if I wasn't on top of my game. Bella had started "nesting" which meant that glasses were washed before we were done drinking out of them, closets were cleaned out on a weekly basis, and the house smelled of Lysol and Mr. Clean. She was cooking vast amounts and freezing dinners. When I asked why, she just said she didn't want us to starve while she was in the hospital. When I tried to tell her that I could be responsible for feeding us all for a few days, she snapped at me and told me that pizza wasn't a viable option for more than one night a week. Emily and I tucked our tails between our legs and went outside, where we both stayed until we deemed it was safe to go inside.

~TBTA~

Unable to tolerate me any longer, Jasper had told me to work the weekend of July 24th and then to just work every other night. We worked out a schedule with the others that still allowed Jasper to be home with his family too. I didn't want to stop working entirely because I wanted to take at least a month off when the baby was born. Masen had told us that as their gift to us, he was paying the wages for the relief bartender who would work my hours after the baby was born. It was both incredibly generous and completely typical of Masen.

So, I got dressed to work my last full weekend. I told Jasper that I would take Friday, Saturday and Sunday night, giving him the full weekend with Alice and the kids. It only seemed fair. I gave Bella a happy kiss good-bye, content in the knowledge that after that weekend I'd be home a lot more and pretty well sated since we had snuck in a little lunch-time sex because the boys were all at Masen's house. I was starting to think that our daughter was going to fool us all and arrive in August after all. Kids and plans were natural enemies after all.

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The evening was pretty busy, which was only to be expected since it was a Friday night. About eight o'clock, I looked up to see Masen standing there. At his side was Dewey. "Hey guys, what can I do you for?"

I expected Masen to give me his order and was a little surprised when instead Dewey moved behind the bar and shoved me out of the way. "Come on, Edward," Masen said, moving me along. "Let's go."

"What?" I laughed at him. "What's going on?"

Masen stopped, grinned, and rubbed at the back of his neck. "You, big brother, are about to become a father."

He stared at me for a moment as I concentrated on his words, putting them in order and trying to make sense of them. Then Mr. Control Freak took over. It was his encore performance and he was going to make it good.

"Shit!" I yelled it loud enough that the patrons of the bar turned to look at me and conversations died down, leaving only the music. "Is Bella in labor?" My voice was still apparently pretty loud because I noticed some of the regulars start nudging each other.

Masen smiled widely and nodded. "Come on, she's in the car."

That was all I needed. I was rushing toward the door, barely aware of the many wishes of "Congrats!" and "Good luck, man!"

The next thing I knew, I was flinging open the door to the Vader-Mobile and climbing into the driver's seat. Bella sat there in the passenger seat, looking a little pale but otherwise just fine. I started up the vehicle, but Bella's hand on my arm stopped me. "Maybe we should wait for your brother?" she suggested.

"Oh, yeah...right." My Control Freak wanted Bella in the hospital and in the hands of professionals. Right the fuck now. But I took a deep breath and waited. I would give him thirty seconds and then he was on his own.

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A few seconds later, luckily for him, he was climbing into the back seat. It was only then that I turned around and saw four other smiling faces. "Hey, Pops," Jake said. "We wouldn't miss this for the world."

Four dark heads nodded in agreement.

Then I was merging with traffic and making the well rehearsed drive to the hospital, trying desperately to ignore the little huffing breaths that Bella would give every now and then. I felt her hand reach out and clamp down on my thigh. Hard. I started huffing and puffing too. I began feeling a little light-headed.

Then we were finally there and I was easing Bella out of the passenger seat and into the wheelchair that was miraculously waiting for us. A few moments later we were in the elevator and on our way up to the maternity floor.

Dr. Hardin walked in just as Bella was getting all of the equipment hooked up and a moment later, the sounds of Bean's heart filled the birthing room. Dr. Hardin did an exam and I winced when Bella grabbed my hand. Those pointy hands of hers were still incredibly strong.

"Wow," Dr. Hardin said.

"Wow," I asked, feeling panicked. "Good wow or bad wow? What's wow?" I rubbed at the back of my neck. "You can't just say wow and leave it at that. It's almost as bad as *oops*."

She just smiled and patted Bella's thigh. "You're already at six centimeters, Bella, so things should move very quickly."

I wasn't sure if that was good news or bad news, but it was definitely wow news so I just nodded.

In fact, things moved very quickly indeed after that. The boys were safely settled into the waiting room with Masen. He had had time to tell me that Mom and Dad were on their way and that Alyssa would be arriving soon. She was

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taking the boys to Alice's house, where Rose could keep an eye on them and then coming to the hospital.

Dr. Hardin came in a half hour later and told Bella that it wouldn't be too much longer. Things were moving along so quickly that I barely had time to freak out. Dr. Hardin had told Bella that sometimes if there was a big time gap in pregnancies, that labor could more closely resemble the first time and take longer. But Bella's body, apparently, had a very good "memory" and was just moving right along.

An hour after we got to the hospital, Dr. Hardin told us that it wouldn't be long before Bella could push. She didn't leave the room after that exam, which told me that we were getting very close. Then they wheeled in a little baby bed and a scale and they started putting out little blankets and hats and other stuff. I felt my heart thundering in my chest.

Holy. Shit.

"Okay, Bella," Dr. Hardin said. "It's time."

Time? Time for what? I needed specifics. Then Bella began pushing and I realized what it was time for - it was time to meet our daughter. Bella sounded like a weight lifter, grunting with the effort of pushing our baby out into the world and tucking her chin on her chest like they told her to. I felt myself tightening up and grunting in sympathy. I didn't even have time to panic because it seemed like everything was on fast-forward. I didn't even have time to keep Masen updated on Bella's progress.

Then Dr. Hardin was telling me to look and I saw what looked like a wet, hairy wrinkled *something* trying to make its way out of Bella's body. What. The. Fuck?

A few more pushes and it became clear that the something was our baby's head. My brain finally put two and two together and came up with an actual number. It was all happening too fast and I wasn't sure what to do or feel or think.

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Bella gave a loud moan and then it seemed like Bean shot out into Dr. Hardin's waiting hands, yelling her protests on the way. It seemed to me that I hadn't taken a real breath since I had seen Masen standing in the bar.

I felt something warm and wet on my cheeks as Dr. Hardin lifted up the baby for Bella and I to get a good look. Then she was in Bella's arms and I found myself gravitating toward her like the moon toward the earth. She was an irresistible force.

My fingers touched her fuzzy little head and I could see the glint of red in the wet mass. Bella and I were soaking in the reality of the baby and were barely aware of all the stuff that comes after. There was only us and Bean.

Only our Danica Elizabeth Cullen.

Author's Note: Yes, I spelled it differently. That's not a mistake. The reasoning will be explained in the next chapter. There has been a Dani Cullen in my mind since the first few chapters of this story. I already know what she's going to do for a living, what her personality is like, and who she will fall in love with. So I hope you like meeting her. We've been good friends for quite a while now.

Chapter 76: The Missing Piece

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: For those who might have read ch. 41 in Harder, I will say that Dani will not be a NASCAR driver. However, her need for speed will never go away and her future career will reflect that. I don't follow NASCAR, and it was only after I named her that I made the connection. Duh... Sometimes I'm slow on the uptake. By that point, Dani had already made it clear that she had a burning desire to go fast and she was irrevocably a Dani, so I just let it be. I blame Ricky Bobby, really I do. We're getting very close to the end now; there is one more kind of short chapter and the epilogue. But we'll be seeing these characters in one-shots on the "Harder" thread and they will definitely make their presence known in "The Art of Persistence." If you choose to follow them there, thank you. If not, then thank you for coming on the journey so far. Your interest and support has meant more than you can know.

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Bella held Danica for a few minutes and then she looked up at me. I must have been drooling or sitting there like an idiot with my mouth open or something because Bella gave a tired little laugh and shook her head. "I can see you're dying to get your hands on her," she said. "So here, Daddy."

Then the tiniest human being I'd ever held was in my hands. She was warm and heavy and impossibly light at the same time. The weight came from her significance in my life, but her size made her fragile. I noticed that she was trying to open her eyes to look at me, but the lights seemed to bother her. So I shaded her eyes and was rewarded with a look into my daughter's eyes for the first time. They were bluish grey with flecks of dark green and quite

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unfocused. They were the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen, though Bella's gave them a run for their money.

Her cheek was plump and rounded and pink. Her ears were tiny and pressed up against her damp skull. As her hair dried, I saw more and more red peeking through. And not just peeking, this was blazing. The drier it got, the *redder* it got.

We weren't talking auburn or copper colored or even strawberry blond. This was full on *red*. A red head. I hadn't been expecting that. I wondered if her eyes would turn brown like Bella's or green like mine, or maybe some color we weren't expecting because it was hidden way back on the family tree.

Then Dani turned and began rooting around at my chest and I knew exactly what she was looking for and I kind of held her away from me, unsure what to do. Bella asked quietly, "Would you mind if I nursed her?" I shook my head, unsure what I was supposed to do now. Did I leave? Did I stare? Did I pretend my wife didn't have her boob hanging out? What was proper breastfeeding protocol?

Bella slipped down the arm of her gown and cradled Dani under her arm like a freaking football, sliding a pillow underneath her head. I must have stared again because Bella shrugged. "This is the most comfortable position for me in a hospital bed."

The next thing I knew, she was gently brushing along Dani's cheek with her finger, making Dani turn toward her breast. I felt myself relaxing because it was more than obvious that Bella had this shit down.

Then Dani's pink mouth was closing over Bella breast. I would have been howling if it had been my nipple, but Bella just flinched and then relaxed. "She looks like a baby bird," Bella whispered. I thought Dani looked more like a piranha at that moment than anything else, but I didn't think Bella would appreciate that observation so I kept my mouth shut. Then Dani closed her eyes, tucked her little fists under her chin, and went to town.

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Bella had told me that there was no actual milk there yet, but Dani apparently liked whatever it was she was getting. A few minutes later, she pulled away with a little sigh of contentment and Bella gave me a huge grin. "The kid's a natural," she announced and I breathed a sigh of relief and pride like I had personally had something to do with it. "I don't think we're going to have any problems."

There was a soft knock on the door and it was the nurse. "Uh...you have some very anxious visitors out here," she said.

I could hear them in the hallway.

"Quit pushing."

"I swear, if you sneeze on her, I'll-"

"Make sure Mom's all covered up."

"She's gonna like me best."

I looked at Bella and laughed, asking her silently if it was okay. "I'm only surprised they lasted this long," she said. I nodded at the nurse.

The door opened and in they came - Emmett, Seth, Sam, and Jake. It was funny how often they lined themselves up by age.

I took Dani from Bella's hands. I heard Jake say, "Me first." Then I saw Emmett's head whip around and whatever was in his face made Jake pipe down fast.

"Boys, meet your sister, Danica Elizabeth Cullen," I said, holding her up a little bit. Emmett's eyes never left the little blanketed bundle.

"Did you spell it the way I said?" Jake asked.

"Yes, with a C," I assured him.

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"Then we match," he said with a nod. He wanted the name spelled with a C to match the C in Jacob. I had pointed out to him that spelling her name with a K would match "Jake" but he insisted on the C. Having forced him to give in on the name Leia, we figured a little spelling concession was only fair.

"I'm holding her first," Emmett said. I was sort of surprised. Out of all the boys, he had been the one who seemed least excited about the prospect of a baby. He hadn't been hostile by any means, but had never seemed particularly enthusiastic. I had always figured that the whole pregnancy was more of an embarrassment to him than anything else.

"All right," I said. I was going to ask him to sit down when he surprised me by sinking into the chair by Bella's bed without any prompting on my part.

I placed her in his big hands and he leaned back and put one huge mitt on her little chest. His hand was bigger than she was. Then she reached up and wrapped a little hand around one of his big fingers. She couldn't quite make it, but her grip seemed strong. Emmett didn't say a word. He didn't have to.

The oldest and the youngest, with everyone in between looking on.

I looked over and saw that Bella was wiping away a tear. It was like Dani had somehow completed us as a family. She belonged to all of us, by blood and bond. The blood didn't matter, but the bond... Well that's why we were here. She was the piece we didn't know we were missing.

It took some doing to get Dani out of Em's arms. Only some pretty persistent bitching by his brothers did the trick. Jake was next, though he made me a bit nervous when he hopped into the "baby holding" chair and held out his hands, still wriggling around.

"You have to sit still," his mother told him.

Stillness and Jake were opposing concepts, but I could see that he was going to give it a try.

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One by one, they held their new sister. One by one, they fell in love. Of course, I had loved her first.

Then Masen stuck his head in. "Sorry, I can't stand it any more."

Over the next hour, we had a parade of people including my parents who had arrived about thirty minutes after Danica was born. Alice and Jasper peeked in. Alyssa arrived and declared Dani the prettiest baby ever born. Like I needed anyone to tell me that.

Usually, the nurses would have been running out visitors with the party we had going in there. But like the wedding, something about our little - or not so little - family had touched everyone. Maybe it was the sight of big, hulking Emmett fighting for another chance to hold the tiny little girl. Or maybe it was the way the boys called me Pops. Or how Jake kissed Dani's cheek. Or maybe it was just the way it was clear to everyone that we were a family - big and loud and obnoxious - but a *family*.

Finally, I had to call an end to it because I could see Bella losing steam. My parents volunteered to stay at our house with the boys. Alyssa had picked me up some fresh clothes and toiletries and the nurses showed me how the love seat folded out into the most uncomfortable bed ever created. Fortunately, I could sleep almost anywhere. I had fallen asleep standing up more than once while I was in the Army. *Unfortunately*, I had gotten soft in the months I'd been out of the Army. Of course, it might have been pure excitement that kept me awake.

That, and the realization that every time I opened my eyes, I could see Dani, snoozing away in her little bassinet thing. She was here. She was real. She was ours.

~TBTA~

I quickly discovered a few things about babies. I figured out that it wasn't putting the fresh diaper on that was so tricky, it was getting off the dirty one without getting it everywhere that was the trick. And those wipes? They should

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come on paper towel dispensers instead of those little pop-up boxes.

Bella knew I wanted to do as many things as possible, so she told me to have at it when that first dirty diaper arrived. I was expecting the thick, tarry whatever it was in her diaper. What I wasn't expecting is that Dani wouldn't hold still while I changed her. I mean, those little legs went everywhere. And I'm pretty sure she had more than two of them. Her heels got in the gunk and she wriggled and moved during the entire process. All in all, it was exhausting.

Luckily, Bella never interfered. She could tell I wanted to muddle through on my own. If I asked a question, she gave me an answer without making me feel stupid. I was getting the best of both worlds - a wife who knew exactly what she was doing and was willing to share her experience without being condescending.

Have I mentioned that I loved that woman?

I also figured out that Bella was still a horrible patient. She pouted when she was told we had to wait until Sunday morning to leave. She wanted out and she wanted out now. I was grateful for the reprieve, just because I wanted a chance to sort of get my bearings.

Before I knew it, we were strapping Dani into her car seat and on our way home. Now we used every single seatbelt in the Suburban. Our vehicles, and our lives, were full. I looked back and saw that all four boys had their eyes trained on Dani's car seat. I had to smile; I hoped Dani liked an audience.

We arrived home to find a huge pink banner stretched across the front of the house. "Welcome home, Danica!" Mr. Hoyt gave Bella a quick hug and kiss and then left. "No need to tire out the new mother," he muttered. Actually, I think he was just afraid he'd have to hold Dani.

My parents and Masen and Alyssa were there, along with Kyle and Alex. Kyle said she was cute, but Alex wasn't very impressed. My mother held her for a good long while and then had my Dad pull out a picture from her wallet. To my chagrin, it was one of me as a baby. She held the picture up to Dani's face.

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"She looks just like you," Bella said with satisfaction. I wasn't sure that was a good thing, but I felt a twinge of pride anyway.

It was odd seeing those four dark heads pressed in close against Dani's bright fuzz. Then Bella insisted on a picture of them all together and we sort of recreated one of my favorite pictures, but this time there were four hands on the baby's blanket.

We were home. Bella and Dani were healthy.

Life didn't get any better.

~TBTA~

I woke up to the sound of snuffling. It was always Dani's first sign of wakefulness. She rooted around like a little piglet. Her bassinet was on my side of the bed at my insistence. Bella said we were lucky because Dani only woke up every three hours or so. She was ten days old now and we had worked out a system. Dani would wake up and I would get her out of the bassinet. Sometimes, she would fall back asleep on my chest, but most of the time she wanted to eat. So I would nudge Bella and held her get situated. Then she would nurse Dani. After that, I'd take over and change her and put her back down.

During the day, the boys made sure that Bella had everything she needed. They happily fetched diapers and wipes and bottles of water for their mom. They would be going back to school soon and our lives were going to get even busier. For the first time, I had done the back to school shopping all by myself. I needed a list, but we got it all done. The boys took it easy on me and it helped that they were older now.

I had even taken charge of Jake's birthday. Of course, serving up ice cream wasn't that much of a challenge. Dani had arrived on the 23rd, just four days before Jake's birthday. So we had to postpone his celebration until the following weekend. Bella insisted she was fine and feeling great. I decided to trust her on that, even though my inner Control Freak was pacing and

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worrying.

Masen had surprised us by telling us that he had arranged for help at the bar for two months, so I had two solid months home with my girls.

On the day the boys started school, Bella and I loaded up Dani in her car seat and dropped each of the boys off at their respective schools. Not one of them looked happy about it; though I knew Sam was excited about starting school again. That boy sucked up learning like a vacuum.

So Bella and I went home with Dani and began a new daytime routine, one with just the three of us, which was very, very weird. Nice, but weird.

~TBTA~

One year later...

"Da Da Da Da..." I could hear Dani's little voice calling me over the baby monitor. "Fatter, Da Da... fatter..."

Her first word had been faster, but it still came out as fatter. Bella teased me that Dani was calling *me* fatter. Jake still insisted she was trying to say Vader. I carefully climbed out of bed and went to Dani's room. Dani was standing up in her crib and bouncing up and down on her chubby little legs. She gave me a wide grin with all four teeth showing.

Dani held up her arms. "Fatter, Da Da, fatter!" She was wriggling in her excitement.

"Good morning, birthday girl," I whispered as I breathed in her baby scent. Her hair had grown a lot in the last year and now she had a halo of fiery curls. Her eyes were bright green, a little lighter than mine, but shaped like Bella's. She had her mother's beautiful lips and heart-shaped face. Everything else, as everyone assured me, was all me. I would apologize to her later. "You're a year old today, princess."

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She giggled and began wriggling. She wanted down. She wanted to walk. She wanted to run. Thank God she slept through the night because once she woke up, she was off and running, literally, most of the day. Once I put her on her feet, she was padding off to our bedroom door, her little diapered butt wagging from side to side. She was getting ready to push open the door when I scooped her up and kissed her.

"Let's let Mommy sleep, okay?" Dani nodded, her curls bouncing around her head. She had a serious case of bed head. I balanced her over my shoulder so that her head was hanging down my back. She giggled and laughed and patted my back in approval.

I looked and saw Sam's door open and Emily's furry face peek out. This was also part of our morning routine. We walked down the stairs together, Dani squealing when I gave a little extra bounce. Before I got my coffee, I grabbed some diapers and wipes and gave the princess some fresh pants. I let Emily out and settled Dani into her high chair and then poured a cup of coffee. Dani was up earlier than Jake usually.

Soon, Bella was going back to work and we would be working out new routines and schedules, but I had a feeling it would all be okay. I dropped some Cheerios on Dani's tray and watched as she shoveled them in. She preferred feeding herself. "Do it self," as she said. I cut up some banana and added it to the tray. Both the high chair and Dani would be a mess after it was all over, but they were both washable.

I pulled up my chair so that I was close to her. She laughed and offered me a soggy Cheerio. It was a sign of my love for her that I actually ate it.

Today, we were having a birthday party. Jake had consented to sharing his party with his little sister. He was kind of outgrowing the parties anyway, he said. He just wanted to claim his day of household control later on. We'd be having a Star Wars movie marathon and eating nothing but sweets, I was sure. It was a good compromise.

The day would be full and busy.

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We had arranged for the relief bar tender to take the bar for the night. During the last year, the bar had finally become self-sufficient. So Jasper and I were finally drawing a salary. It had eased our finances and made us happy entrepreneurs. Masen was even seeing a return on his investment and that was a relief for me. We weren't rich by any means, but our families were happy and healthy. It was all good.

Dani and I shared a breakfast of moist Cheerios and mashed bananas. Then I made myself a bagel and she insisted on having a few bites. It was only fair after she'd been so generous in sharing her own. I was just wiping her face when I looked up to see Bella. I poured her a cup of coffee and then resumed clean up duty.

Bella leaned in and rubbed noses with Dani. "Happy birthday, beautiful girl," she said.

"Fatter," Dani responded.

"One track mind, little girl," Bella told her. "Just like your father, only a different track." She smirked at me.

I sat down on my chair and patted my lap and Bella plopped down, carefully guarding her mug. After she finished that cup, I reached over and grabbed the pot, which was conveniently within reach, and poured her another cup.

Bella took a sip and sighed, closing her eyes. Dani watched it all with avid eyes. Then Dani decided she had been quiet and still long enough and began tugging at the straps keeping her contained. She grunted with the effort to rip them apart.

"You'd better let her out of there," Bella said without opening her eyes.

"Then you're going to have to get up," I reminded her, placing a kiss on that spot below her ear. Dani shrieked with a combination of frustration and eagerness to get going.

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I sighed and urged Bella off my lap. She took my chair while I got Dani out of her high chair. The moment her little feet touched the floor, she was off like a shot. I watched her running away from us, curls bouncing, exuberant giggles, and chubby little legs working hard. It was a guarantee that we'd all be exhausted at the end of the day. I wouldn't change a minute of it for anything.

"You know, I always thought girls would be quieter somehow," I observed as we listened to Dani wreaking havoc. From the sounds of it, every toy in the toy box was now being thrown around the living room.

"Yeah, well, they're not...apparently," Bella said with a little smirk. "Not our little girl anyway."

I grunted and took another sip of coffee.

"Emmett has his senior pictures next week," Bella reminded me.

"I'm off that day," I told her. "I can stay home with Dani."

"Good," Bella said. The image of Dani let loose in a photographer's studio was scary. We both gave a little shudder. "That'll help."

"I love you," I said out of nowhere. It hit me like that sometimes. I just had to say it.

Bella gave me a slow, sexy smile. "I love you right back," she said. Then she grimaced when we heard a crash and a giggle from the living room. "Even if you did father the hellion out there."

"Guilty," I said with no remorse. "Besides, a meek quiet little girl would get run over by the boys," I pointed out.

"No chance of that," Bella agreed. If anything, it was the boys who got run over and twisted around Dani's tiny little finger. From hulking, tender hearted Emmett to con-artist Jake, they were all her slaves - and she knew it.

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"Hard to believe that she's a year old already," I said. Dani came running back in, her cheeks pink and her eyes lit up with laughter. She ran up to me and hugged my legs.

"Da Da..." she said, batting her long lashes at me and pursing her little lips. The little flirt.

"Uh oh, I'd better go see what she's done."

Bella laughed and picked Dani up, blowing raspberries on her belly. "You go do that, see what our little destructor has been up to." Dani laughed and buried her face in Bella's hair, a sure sign that she'd been up to mischief.

~TBTA~

Dani had finally fallen asleep, more like collapsed, as usual. The party had been a success. It had been great to have everyone at the house and just as wonderful to see them all leave, I admitted. Thomas Reynolds and his wife had been there along with their kids. Mr. Hoyt and Liz stopped in. They had been seeing each other quite a bit and I was pretty sure she'd be moving in with him soon. Dewey was out of town, but he'd sent along a gift for both Dani and Jake. Charlie and Renee were due to arrive in two weeks and they were staying for ten days. Charlie was a fool for Dani, which made him just like every other male in the family. Even Major Hutchinson and Carolyn had showed up. Alyssa and Masen and their boys, Jasper and Alice and their gang had been there too, obviously.

Emmett and Rose had been awkward with each other. Rose was leaving for college in a few weeks and Emmett wasn't happy about it. He had hoped she'd go locally, at least until he graduated and could join her. But Rose wanted to go now. There was something else going on there, but Em wasn't volunteering any information and I wouldn't push.

Like Bella, eventually he would open up if it was something he wanted to discuss. I would wait. Jasper and Alice weren't in the know either, so together we all just kind of waited and worried. But they were young, and these things

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had a way of working themselves out - one way or the other.

I checked on the other boys. Seth was picking out some notes on his guitar. He was quiet, but it wouldn't have made any difference. Dani could sleep through mortar fire once she was out. Sam was reading with Emily on his bed. She gave me a quick tail wag when I opened the door. "Night, Pops," Sam murmured, still engrossed in his book.

"Night, Sam," I said and pulled the door, leaving a space for Emily to open it.

Jake was on the phone. He had discovered girls this past year. He gave me a quick grin and kept talking. I wasn't sure I was ready for this. Since when did eleven year old boys need to talk to girls?

Bella assured me that it was normal. I assured *her* that it was just one more way to give me grey hair.

I peeked in on Dani one more time. She was on her stomach, her butt up in the air, her little feet twitching. Even in her sleep, she was on the move. Unable to help myself, I walked over to her crib and brushed my hand over her hair. She gave a little sigh and curled up tighter. I covered her up and then pulled her door almost closed.

Then I climbed into bed with Bella and pulled her up next to me. I still loved the feeling of having her beside me all night. I loved the way noise filled the house. I found comfort in the sounds of big feet clomping up and down the stairs, the slamming of doors, the clutter of stinky sneakers and baseball gloves. I appreciated tripping over baby toys and the smell of baby powder.

This was my life now, and it was everything I hadn't known that I wanted and needed to make me happy.

Bella moved against me, pressing her warm curves even closer. And this was the best part of the day, these moments when it was just the two of us in the dark and quiet. Then Bella shifted, so that she was straddling me and I laughed at myself. No, *this* was definitely the best part of the day, I thought.

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"Well, Mrs. Cullen," I whispered. "Do you mean to have your way with me?"

She laughed and tossed her hair over her shoulder. "I most definitely do, Mr. Cullen."

I grabbed her hips and encouraged her in her naughtiness, because that's the kind of guy I was.

"Have at it, ninja," I said.

And she laughed.

And she did.

Chapter 77: Against the Odds

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Chapter 77: Against the Odds

"Look, Mommy!" It was Dani and she was twirling around, wearing a tiara. *The* tiara. Fuck. I knew where I had left that. I knew exactly when it had last been used. Last night. I grinned. Stop it. Got to get your mind out of the gutter. I wiped that smile off my face.

What else had she found? Oh God, suddenly I felt like such a perv when I catalogued some of the things she might have found. Try explaining some of *that* shit away. A toothbrush holder? Would she buy that?

Focus, Cullen.

"Mommy's making some cookies right now, princess," I said. "What do you have there?"

Dani grinned up at me. "It's my crown," she said, patting it.

Note to self: do not leave sex role play items within easy reach of a curious monkey girl.

"Uh...yeah..." Logic said I should just give it up and let Dani have it. But it really was one of my favorites. I didn't even need the tutu, just that damned tiara was enough. "That's Mommy's," I finally said.

Dani frowned at me. "I never seen her wear it."

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Why did we have a smart kid? It seemed like such a good idea at the time.

"That's because..." I searched for inspiration. "Mommy gets embarrassed and she's not sure if she looks good in a crown..." That was all I had. Damn it. I should have prepared for this eventuality. *Toothbrush* holder? Really? That was the best I could do?

"Can I have it?" Dani asked. It looked wrong on her bright little head. It belonged on dark hair that was tumbling down over shoulders and covering... Damn it.

Now I had visions of the times Bella had worn the fucking thing - and nothing else - dancing through my head. Sugar plum fairies it wasn't.

What it was was wrong. Just...wrong.

Then brilliance struck. "You won't be able to fit your helmet on if you wear that." Dani loved her "motorcycle" helmet. She would wear it to bed if we let her.

Dani's frown grew deeper and I could see her pondering that. "I still like it." Her chubby little fingers stroked the crown again. Uh oh. What if she liked the tiara more than the helmet? That could be bad.

Okay, so we were going to have to bargain. "How about we put this one up?" And never speak of it again. "And then next week we'll go buy you your own tiara?"

She considered that for a moment. "Not next week, at *Christmas*." I recognized that face. There'd be no budging her on that demand. My daughter, the tiny, adorable blackmailer.

I wanted to groan. Christmas was two days away and that meant braving the stores and looking for a fucking - frigging- tiara. I didn't even know where to start. Tiaras-R-Us? Bella had surprised me one night after I revealed my reluctant ballerina fantasy. I could always ask Bella where she got it, but...

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Fuck. Damn it. Fudge. Shit. I gave up.

And this was not a conversation I wanted to have.

"Okay," I said quickly. I would figure it out. I *hoped* I would figure it out.

"And let's not tell Mommy you found her crown," I muttered as I practically snatched it off her head. "She might get jealous."

Dani's eyes narrowed at me. Asking her to keep quiet about something was an unusual request. Kind of. There *was* that time that Dani was with me when I got a speeding ticket. That sign hadn't been very visible. Just saying.

"Okay..." she said suspiciously.

"Why don't you go help Mommy make cookies?" I suggested. If anything would distract Dani, it was the thought of helping her mom in the kitchen. Add sugar to the mix and I was golden. Dani ran down the stairs so fast that I had to close my eyes, afraid I'd see her tumble down to the bottom.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I tucked the tiara up on the top shelf of the closet. We really should have remembered to move it from the bedside drawer. I snickered. Thank God Dani hadn't found the "Naughty Nurse" outfit.

Bella was a terrible patient, but she was an *incredible* nurse. Shit. And now I had an inappropriate pre-Christmas boner. Being in the closet hadn't helped. At all.

Focus, Cullen. *You're supposed to be helping to make Christmas cookies. The Colonel will be here any minute.*

I looked down. Yeah, that did the trick.

~TBTA~

After hiding the tiara, I made my way down to the kitchen. Bella sensed something was up because she threw me a curious look after she kissed me.

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She had flour on her nose and cheek and some sort of red sugary substance on her hands. Christmas cookie production was in full swing. Dani had managed to get icing in her hair in like five minutes. I was only surprised it took her so long.

"What's up, handsome?" Bella asked.

"I'll tell you later." I decided to come clean. Hopefully, Bella would find it funny. Eventually. And maybe she'd tell me where to find a damned tiara two days before Christmas.

She paused, studied me for a moment, and then nodded. She went back to directing Dani with the cookies. Honestly, I don't know where she got the patience, but she did. Without any hint of frustration, she led a three and a half year old through the process of rolling out the dough, pressing the cookie cutters into the dough, carefully lifting the dough out and placing it on the pan. Then she and Dani put on their chosen decorations.

I would be bat shit crazy after one round, but Bella has been doing this for days. Well, years actually. For some reason, the kitchen was where Dani and Bella have always bonded. As much as Dani loved engines, she loved cooking.

My daughter was weird. And I loved her so much that sometimes it physically hurt. Like that time she punched me in the junk accidentally. Yeah, sometimes it hurt to love Dani, but mostly in a good way.

I leaned back against the doorway and watched as my girls moved around the kitchen. Dani mimicked Bella as she blew her breath up, moving her hair from out of her eyes without using her sticky little hands. Her green eyes were fixed on Bella, watching her every move. Every now and then, Bella leaned over and rubbed flour-covered noses with our daughter. They both laughed when Dani put a bit of green frosting on Bella's cheek. Then Bella returned the favor with red.

Then I turned to see Jake at my side. While Emmett and Dani have a special relationship, closer than I would have ever thought possible, Jake was her

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partner in crime. He was old enough to keep her out of most major trouble, but young enough to still encourage Dani in her mischief. He grinned at his little sister and moved toward her with his mouth open and his hands hooked into claws, growling as he went.

"I want a cookie!" he yelled, making Dani squeal with delight. He was thirteen now and already close to six feet tall. In another few months, he'd be taller than Sam, which was not going over well with Sam at all. Sam seemed to have stalled at five feet eleven inches and wasn't happy about it. Bella tried to tell him that his Uncle Will had been a late bloomer and didn't reach his full height until he was nineteen or so. Sam was not reassured, probably because he was about the same height as his Uncle Will already.

Jake grabbed up Dani and whirled her around until she informed him that she was going to "bark." That was Dani speak for barf. Jake quickly put her back on the stool she had been using to get to the counter.

He leaned on the counter and helped Dani line up the cookie cutters, accepting little bits of dough in return for his help. "Yum," he said. "You make the best cookies in the world, Dani girl."

She giggled and accepted his praise as her due.

"Jake, why don't you take Seth up some lunch," Bella suggested.

"Sure," he agreed.

I sat back and watched Bella and Dani work. I listened to all of the kind things Bella said, watched how easily and patiently she showed Dani what to do. Bella was truly an incredible teacher, and I realized how lucky I was that she was the woman I'd fallen in love with, the woman I had made a family with. Bella looked up to see me staring at her with goo-goo eyes and I wasn't even embarrassed. Well...not much. She winked at me and then resumed teaching our daughter how to make the best cookies in the world.

~TBTA~

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Okay, so finding a tiara two days before Christmas was not as easy as it sounds. Or maybe it didn't sound easy at all, which would be more accurate. First, there had been the confession to Bella. After she stopped laughing long enough to get her breath, she told me that my best bet was either Wal-Mart (I started hyperventilating) or, God help me, the mall. Either option represented grave danger.

When I had asked Bella when she wanted to go, she had only shaken her head. "No way. I already finished *my* shopping and I'm not the one who left the tiara in the drawer where curious little hands could find it."

"Bella..." I tried the pouty lips, but Bella proved immune. I had to admit that braving the stores on December 23rd would be good incentive for resisting.

So I found myself at the mall, searching for a tiara because my daughter had found the one her mother and I used when we wanted to role play. Even the best marriages can use a little extra seasoning, after all. I wondered what a clerk would say if I gave exactly that explanation? I had searched a few stores, been jostled and pushed and shoved and even, I was pretty sure, felt up. Apparently, Bella wasn't the only handsy woman in Fayetteville. At least, I *hoped* it had been a woman.

Then I passed the Disney store and that seemed like a good bet.

Disney meant princesses. And princesses meant crowns. Or tiaras. Or whatever. Yes, this tiara would definitely be Dani's. It seemed wrong to use a Disney crown for sex games. Call me a prude, but even I had standards.

What would a three year old girl like? Surely anything sparkly and gaudy would do the trick? I hoped so.

I told the frazzled clerk that I needed a crown for a little girl. Frazzled or not, the woman knew her shit and thirty seconds later I had tiara in my hot, grubby hands. As I stood in the line waiting to pay for my purchase, I used the thirty minutes to ponder exactly how far a man will go for love.

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Apparently, he'll go to the mall on December 23rd.

~TBTA~

It was Christmas Eve and the whole frigging gang was at our house. I had really made an effort in the past three years to quit dropping the "F" bomb so much, even in my head. "Little ears," and all that, as Bella said. It was still a difficult adjustment. And I slipped. A lot. You can take the man out of uniform, but you can't take the soldier out of the man. Or at least, that was Jasper's theory.

Bella and Alyssa were in the kitchen, apparently comparing some recipe that Alyssa told Bella was an "orgasm in her mouth." Somehow, I doubted it would be as good as the genuine article.

My parents were conferring with Charlie and Renee on the brilliance of their grandchildren, while Masen teased all four of them. My parents had gone from Papa Carlisle and Nana Esme to just Papa and Nana at some point over the past few years. It was probably Jake that started it. Jake was the only one of the boys who sometimes called me Dad, and that was okay; I had grown rather fond of my "Pops" title. Masen and Alyssa were Uncle and Aunt now. There was no distinction between James or Cullen; there was no need.

Will was traveling with Josh this holiday season. He had taken a month off for Christmas and the two of them had decided to see some of the world. Of course, those two didn't go to tourist spots like London and Paris. No, they were seeing some of the poorest nations in the world. Will said he wanted to get a feeling for what it was Josh saw when he went on his trips.

Emmett was talking quietly to Seth and Alex. Emmett was quieter these days and had matured greatly in the past year. I knew it was a combination of things, but I felt like I was getting a glimpse of the troubled kid who had put a rock through my windshield. Except these days, Emmett had much more constructive ways of dealing with the frustrations in his life. He told me just a few days ago that he had figured out what he wanted to do with his life. He was going to be a cop.

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That decision sent Charlie Swan over the moon with pride when he'd told him yesterday. The only thing that might have had the same effect would be Emmett going into the Army. But I knew that wasn't an option for Emmett. We had discussed it many times, and in the end, Emmett could never forget his father's death or how it had impacted his family. He asked me once if I thought his father would mind that he didn't want to join the military. I told him that I thought his father would want him to be happy. We left it at that, though there was a manly clap on the back as we parted. We didn't feel any need to hug it out.

Jake was entertaining Dani, making funny faces and talking in Star Wars voices. He was pretty good at Yoda and Dani was his biggest fan. Sometimes, if we couldn't find Dani in her room, we'd just look in Jake's room and she'd be snuggled up in his bed. They both would have fallen asleep while he read to her. I had taken a few pictures of it, mostly for blackmail purposes when Jake was older. It was pretty damned cute too.

Kyle was laughing along with Dani. We called those three the "Three Musketeers." Dani plus Jake was scary. Dani plus Jake plus Kyle? Think Godzilla and Tokyo. Yeah, that kind of scary.

Sam was waiting for my father to be done talking with Charlie. He had some ideas about a new scientific discovery that he wanted to run by Dad. They'd be absorbed in that discussion all evening if past history was any indication. Sam was already taking some college classes and handling those along with his high school workload with seemingly no extra effort. The kid's brain still had the ability to shock the hell out of me.

My eyes went to Seth. He looked tired and drawn. He was still too thin, but Bella would have him fattened up soon. She'd taken off from work since March to take care of him. She still wasn't sure if she was going back in the fall. That decision had derailed an almost certain promotion for her, but neither of us cared much. Our priority was our family. The bar was doing very well, and since the economy had improved in general, our business was doing even better in particular. I hadn't even felt too guilty when I took time off to be with Seth too. Jasper had understood. I was back now, and things were going well.

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Dani walked up to Seth and patted his cheek. "You want a cookie, Seth?" she asked. Like Jake, she was sure that all ills could be cured if only there was enough sugar involved.

He smiled and ruffled her bright curls. "No, princess, I'm fine." He shifted uncomfortably in the chair and I wondered if his leg was bothering him. The latest surgery had only been a few weeks ago. He came through it like a trooper, just as he had the others. The kid was strong and stoic, sometimes too stoic.

Dani squeezed into the chair on Seth's good side and rested her head on his chest when he put his arm around her. They sat there quietly for a few moments. The only time Dani knew the meaning of the words still and quiet were in the kitchen...and at Seth's side.

Bella walked into the room and caught my eye and she smiled. She felt it too. She knew that I was realizing again how very lucky we were. Yes, the past year had been tough. We had learned that we weren't charmed after all. Or maybe we were; we were all here. Against the odds, we were all here. I had discovered that while families were a joy in good times, they were the strength in bad.

We had weathered the bad and we were looking forward to the good. That was how life worked.

She came to stand beside me and kissed the top of my head. I put my arm around her waist and pulled her close. "They're quite a bunch, aren't they?" I whispered.

"Indeed they are," she agreed. She made herself at home on my lap. "It's hard to believe that it started with a rock and a windshield."

I laughed. "Hey, it worked for us."

"It most certainly did," she whispered. She twined her fingers with mine, her gaze flickering toward Seth, as it did so often these days. "You know...I think this has been our best Christmas yet."

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I knew exactly how she felt.

"I have you and the kids," I said. "So yeah, having *all* of you makes it the best." I could feel her sigh and knew she was experiencing that moment of remembered fear like I did sometimes.

Then she laughed and I knew she was setting aside the worries of the past year. "You know, Mr. Cullen..." Then she gave my earlobe a subtle nip. "I still have that tiara...and I'd be willing to model it for you."

I turned and kissed her, ignoring our vast audience for a moment. "That, Mrs. Cullen, is an offer I plan to take advantage of - as soon as we're in our room."

We kissed again, surrounded by the noise of our family, the one we had created against all odds and expectations. I was home, and there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

~TBTA~

Author's Note: Okay, not quite all flowers and hearts at the end, but as you can see everyone is there and accounted for. I didn't do that to change the tone of the story, but to reflect and continue what I hoped were the themes of hope and recovery. Even in the best happily-ever-afters there are less than perfect moments. Seth's story is explained in the epilogue. Needless to say, he's alive and well, so no worries. It is not a recurring health issue, so there will be no life-threatening illness to contend with in Emmett's story.

Confession time: the toothbrush holder debacle? May or may not be based on a real life event. 'Nuf said.

First, I have to say...WOW! All of the support and kind words that I've gotten have blown me away. I'm hoping to start posting Emmett's and Rose's story later this month. I want to get more of it written before I do. I seem to be wallowing in angst a bit and another short story is my outlet for that. I want to get it out of my system before I tackle Emmett and Rose.

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The outtakes will continue but they won't be in chronological order. I'll write them as the characters tell me to, or harass me as the case may be.

Second, it's been an amazing journey for me, and I can't believe I'm done with this story, even if I'm not done with these characters. The epilogue is written and should be posted in a few days. And then we'll be done...

Chapter 78: Who's Who, What's What

I don't own these characters. They are the sole property of Stephenie Meyer. I only borrow them. No humans are permanently harmed through my actions, though I do confess to harassing, annoying, torturing, and exasperating them - just because it's fun. I make no money from my little stories, sad day. I only play in the sandbox, I didn't build it.

Author's Note: Well, I can't believe this is it. Even though I'm not done with these characters, I'm a little sad. The epilogue contains spoilers for the Rose/Emmett story, so you may want to skip it if you intend to follow "The Art of Persistence". If this is the end of the journey for you too, then thank you....so much. You have made this story a very special experience for me. To those of you who let me know you had checked out Soldiers' Angels as a result of this story, words cannot convey my appreciation. Even now, there are thousands of American troops still in danger, still far away from their families. Sadly, some of them won't come home. As you can tell, this is a cause close to my heart.

Also, for those who might be interested, the story of Seth's injury is in outtake #44 of the "Harder" thread. Don't feel as if you need to leave a review, but if you want further explanation, then it is there. I'm going to finish up a few of my stories in the next few weeks hopefully, or at least get close to it. I start classes again next week and I'm told that Pathology is going to kick my butt. So I probably won't update the Em/Rose story quite as often, maybe once a week. I did manage all As in my classes last semester, so maybe writing fan fiction helps me stay focused and relaxed? We shall see.

Again, my sincere thanks. You can't know how much it means.

Epilogue:

After Rose got her degree, she returned to Fayetteville. The first time she ran into Emmett it was awkward. Emmett told her that he would eventually annoy

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her so much that she'd go out with him. She told him that day would come when pigs flew.

Emmett finally talked Rosalie Hale into going on a date again. He called Pops and told him it was cloudy with a chance of pork. Just over a year later, he was still smiling when Rose walked down the aisle toward him and he was able to tack James onto her name.

Emmett found that being a cop suited him. Rose got a job with the county as a social worker and she was very good at her job. They both knew that they wanted a family and wanted a family right away. So they got to work on that.

They had two daughters, Mackenzie and Bailey. Mackenzie (or Mac as she was sometimes called) arrived early on a Thanksgiving morning in the arms of her new mother. Their flight from China was delayed and everyone was anxiously waiting to see her. Josh Galloway had used his contacts to speed up the adoption process. He had even accompanied Rose to China. Without his help, it would have been another few months before Mackenzie came home.

Emmett finally met his daughter and cried, right there in the airport. He didn't care who saw him either. No one teased him about it, mostly because it would have been like kicking a puppy. Thanksgiving dinner was delayed as well, but nobody seemed to mind. Mackenzie was home and that was all that mattered.

Bailey joined the family three and a half years later when she was six months old. Mackenzie was not impressed when the judge signed the papers making Bailey her sister. She cried and had to be escorted from the judge's chambers by her ever-patient grandfather. He bought her some pretzels and tried to convince her that being the oldest was a good thing. Mackenzie was still not convinced.

Little Bailey had been born deaf and it didn't take long for everyone in the James/Cullen clan to become fluent with sign language, though Edward did struggle with it the most. The boys teased him mercilessly. Dani patted his cheek and told him it was okay he wasn't as smart as the rest of them.

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Edward endured it all with patience and resigned good humor.

Several years after he donned the badge, he stopped a distinguished looking gentleman going fifteen miles over the speed limit. "License and registration?" Emmett asked with a grin.

Edward Cullen looked at Emmett and grimaced, handing over the requested documents.

"Excuse me sir, but do you know how fast you were going?" Emmett asked, smirking.

"Yeah, I know, Emmett," Edward grumbled.

Emmett stared at Edward for a long moment, his laughter just waiting to burst forth. "You know, Mom's gonna kill you for getting another ticket."

Edward made a face. "You could just give me a warning this time. You know, in the interest of marital harmony and all." He sounded hopeful.

"Or I could give you the ticket you deserve," Emmett countered.

"Yes, you could," Edward said. "But then marital disharmony is going to be all over the place." He grinned up at Emmett. "Rose likes me. A lot."

Emmett groaned and shook his head. "I'll never understand it."

"It's the eyes," Edward told him with a smirk, batting his lashes outrageously. "The green eyes get them every time."

Emmett sighed and handed back the license and registration. "Watch it, or the next time I'm giving you the ticket."

"You won't catch me next time," Edward said with a laugh. "Oh, by the way, your mom and I will be there early for the girls' birthday party." The girls had been born three years and two days apart on different continents to different

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women. Now they were sisters.

"Good," Emmett said. "And just so you know, both of them want pony rides from their Pops."

Edward groaned. "My back isn't what it used to be."

"Then give them the big green eyes and see if you can sucker them into something else," Emmett suggested.

"I just might do that." Emmett gave him the sign for 'asshole' which was a particular favorite of them both. He wiped at the back of his neck. "Rose and I are going to announce it at the party tonight, but a friend of Rose's at work... Well, she gave us a call."

"Yeah?" Edward was excited. That could only mean one thing. "You two planning on adding to your family?"

Emmett sort of grinned. "Hadn't really planned on it, but... Well, see, there's this little boy and he kind of...well, he kind of sounds perfect for us."

"No shit?"

"No shit," Emmett said. And then he gave a snort of laughter. "You'll never guess what his name is." He paused. "His name is Jimmy."

Edward's eyes went wide and he burst into laughter. "So let me get this straight...he'll be Jimmy James?"

Emmett nodded. "Fate, huh?"

"I'm glad for you son," Edward said, patting Emmett's arm.

Then Emmett pounded on the roof of Edward's car. "Go on; get out of here before I change my mind." He paused. "And tell Mom I said hi."

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Edward shook his head. "No way that I'm telling her I let you stop me for speeding."

And with that, he drove off. Going the speed limit. At least for a while.

~TBTA~

When Seth was seventeen, he was hit by a drunk driver. For two days, he struggled to live while everyone who loved him surrounded him and gave him their faith and courage. Finally, 47 hours and three minutes after Bella and Edward had opened the door to see two officers standing there, Seth had opened his eyes. He could not speak because of the ventilator, but let them know he recognized them. On that night, Edward Cullen cried. He knew beyond all doubt that even though Mac James was Seth's father, so was he. Never again could he doubt that simple fact of his existence.

Seth graduated from high school (three months late due to the accident) with decent grades and from college with honors. Until the start of his junior year of university, he still wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. In the end, he majored in business. Eventually, he joined Edward with an eye toward expanding "Mac's Place" beyond the Fayetteville area. He was the one who negotiated the deal to open a "Mac's Place" in the city of Charleston, South Carolina. He moved there to manage it, and to scout out a location for yet another Mac's. The real estate agent who helped him purchase his Charleston home was a lovely redhead named Abigail Harrison.

When Abby saw the big, handsome man who walked into her office, she called her mother and told her that she'd met the man she was going to marry. Her predictions were proven right just over a year later. She thought the scar on the left side of his face gave him a romantic air and that his slight limp was rather endearing. She told him that she had the irresistible urge to pamper him the first time she saw him. He was somewhat shy, but Abby was not. Seth James never stood a chance, a fact that Edward reminded him of in his wedding toast.

Seth laughed, even as he acknowledged the truth of it.

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Seth and Abby had two sons, both of them named after her father. Abby, it turned out, was also an Army brat. Her mother's home had a triangular-shaped flag case too, and a picture of a young man who had died long before his time. Her father, Sergeant Michael Harrison, had died in Afghanistan just a few months after Mac James. She didn't really remember him; she had only been four when he died. Like Seth, she sort of adopted Edward as a surrogate father. And like him, she called him Pops.

Edward got used to it.

When his second son was born, Seth called Edward to tell him the news. "It's a boy," he said. "Again." They hadn't wanted to know the baby's gender, so it was a surprise for everyone.

"Already?" Edward asked, surprised. "We were going to drive down next weekend, closer to her due date."

Seth laughed. "You know Abby, impatient as always," Seth said.

"Mom and baby doing fine?" Edward asked. Seth heard his mother in the background, asking for details.

"Yes, both great," Seth replied. "Tell Mom he was seven pounds, two ounces, twenty two inches long. Born at 5:23 this morning."

"Got it," Edward said. "Tell Abby we love her and we'll see you all next weekend if she's up to it."

"She'll kill me if I said no, so we'll see you next weekend," Seth answered. "Tell Mom I'll call her later. I want to go to Abby's mom's house and pick up Michael so he can meet Harrison."

"Good luck with that," Edward said.

"Yeah, tell me about it." Seth laughed. "Oh, and Pops? We've got another redhead."

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"God help you." Edward was snorting, thinking of all the trouble that his grandson Michael got into with his fiery temper and stubborn nature. He had ended up with two redheads for grandsons by some odd quirk of fate and the help of Abby James.

"I know, right?" Seth already sounded tired and elated at the same time.

"Don't let him near Harrison's feet," Edward reminded him. Emmett had never been able to live down taking a bite out of Seth's foot when he was first born.

"Good idea." He wiggled his toes. " *Very* good idea."

~TBTA~

Sam graduated with honors from Cornell and became a veterinarian. He didn't marry until he was thirty-five years old. Edward told him that sometimes the good ones take a while to find. Emmett insisted he was just having too much fun "banging hot chicks." That earned him an elbow in the ribs from his wife. And another from his sister. Then his mother reached up and pulled on his ear for good measure. Emmett grumbled, but still stood by his assessment of the situation.

Eventually, everyone had become convinced that Sam would never marry. Sam was pretty sure that was the case too. He dated, but only casually. He was kind but distant with his lovers. He never made promises; he never asked for any in return. He did some traveling, his practice was flexible enough and his partner, a vet school buddy, didn't mind Sam traveling and getting the name of their practice out there. Sam had a natural charisma that made him an excellent public speaker, and he had published several important papers which led to conferences around the country. No matter what city Sam found himself in, it was a rare night when he spent it alone in his hotel room. His mother despaired, his brothers secretly high-fived, and his sister called him a pig.

Then one day Sam was called out to treat one of the dogs in a search and rescue team that was in the area for training. The woman who led that search and rescue team was named Mary Lang. She was not Victoria's Secret material. She

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was tall and curvy, and her features were more strong than delicate. She wore glasses that habitually slid to the end of her nose and her hair was as black as Sam's. It was usually pulled into a messy bun and she wasn't wearing any make-up the first time Sam saw her. But there was something about her...

When Sam saw the dog he had been called out to treat, a young black lab named Tippy, he fell in love - with the dog, not the woman. The woman held the dog while he stitched up Tippy's leg and she smiled when he whispered sweet nothings into the furry black ear. A few weeks later, Sam was whispering sweet nothings into a very pretty *human* ear. Both females were receptive to what he had to say.

Though they lived an hour apart, somehow they found themselves "in the area" with surprising regularity even after the training session was over.

Mary snuck up on him. He hadn't expected her, certainly not at that point in his life. But as Pops always said, life never went according to plan, and thank God for it. But he could pinpoint the moment he fell absolutely and irrevocably in love with her. He had been perusing her bookshelves while she put together some snacks in the kitchen. It was their first "official" date and they had both just finally admitted to having an interest in each other beyond matters of the canine variety or mere fleeting attraction.

He stopped as he came to a rather intimidating tome on forensic pathology. He looked at the title because the topic interested him. Then he looked at the author's name. Huh. He was just about to open up the book and begin browsing through it when he heard a sound.

When Mary entered the room, carrying a small tray with a little tea pot, he held up the book. "Any relation to you?" he asked.

Mary gave him a shy smile and nodded.

"Really?" He had not expected that answer. If Dr. M. L. Lang was related, that might make for some very interesting discussions. "An uncle? A brother?"

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Mary rolled her eyes. "You're so sexist," she muttered, clearly amused at his faux pas.

"A sister? An aunt?" he prodded. He knew that she had both a sister and a brother, as well as numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins. Her parents were alive and well and living in Encino, California.

Mary plucked the book from his hands and opened the cover. There on the back fly leaf was a small picture. Of her. "Self," she answered and then pushed the book back into his hands.

"You're *Dr. Lang*?" Sam asked.

She tilted her head and stared at him. " *Dr. James*, Why are you so surprised?" She made a face. "I think I should be insulted."

Sam knew he had some back peddling to do. "Honestly, it's not because I don't think you're brilliant, Mary. It's just..." He stopped and rubbed at the back of his neck. In time she would recognize that sign of tension. "It's just that most people can't *wait* to throw the title around left and right." He smiled slowly. "I've been listening very carefully to everything you say for a month and you've never once even hinted at it."

Mai returned his smile. "As answers go, that's a good one." She shrugged. "Actually, I started out as a forensic pathologist. I got called in as part of a research team to help with some remains found in a mudslide and there was a rescue/cadaver team there, trying to find bodies and survivors. I got to know the team and..." She shrugged. "I figured out that I wanted to help save people *before* my services as a pathologist were needed and I found a woman in Georgia to train me and help me start my own rescue team."

And it was in that moment that Sam James fell in love. He didn't love Mary because she was beautiful in a quiet way or because her I.Q. was seven points higher than his. No, what Sam adored about Mary was her sweet, gentle nature when she wasn't on a rescue. He admired her absolutely steely determination when she *was* on a job, and her modesty about something that had been

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achieved only through extremely hard work and dedication.

They were married six months later. As Sam told Pops, there was no need to delay when he already knew that what they had was a forever kind of thing.

Sam and Mary decided not to have children. They enjoyed their lives just as they were, traveling and pursuing their many interests. Mary's job with the search and rescue team took her all over the world. Sometimes Sam volunteered his time. Eventually, a grant enabled him to be appointed the full-time, dedicated veterinarian to the whole rescue team, which grew in both size and reputation. So he and Mary traveled everywhere together, their beloved and life-saving dogs going with them.

While they did not become parents, they did however, become the most beloved aunt and uncle in history. They were completely content to share their lives with each other and enjoy their nieces and nephews.

As Emmett once said, Sam had found the only other human being in the world that was smarter than he was and had the good sense to snatch her up immediately. Sam and Mary continued to rescue dogs in the name of the long dead Emily. Both of them volunteered their time and considerable financial resources to the causes of abandoned animals.

~TBTA~

Jake surprised everyone and became a physician. He worked in the ER and was on duty one night when a young woman and her three year old daughter were brought in from the scene of a car accident. He was struck by the young woman's beauty and obvious love for her daughter. He found himself drawn to her, checking in on her long after she was no longer his responsibility.

It proved to be a mutual attraction.

Gabriella was a single mother. The father of her daughter, Rebecca, had left her before Rebecca was even born, so the little girl had never even seen him. Jake and Gabriella married two years after that visit to the ER. Once, someone

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looked at Rebecca, who had her mother's rich coffee colored skin and riotously curly black hair and who was obviously not Caucasian *or* Native American, and asked Jake if he was Rebecca's "real" father. Jake turned to the person and smiled and then simply said, "As real as it gets."

Then Jake and Gabriella decided to add to their little family. There wasn't a Cullen or a James who wasn't thrilled. They had a son and named his Edward McCarty James. As Jake said, "He's named after *both* of my dads."

When Bella and Edward visited them in the hospital, Edward looked at his family assembled in the little room. There was Jake, tall and solid, much like his father. He had his father's high cheekbones and black hair, but he had Bella's big brown eyes and skin that was closer to peach than to russet. Then there was Bella, still lovely with an alluring streak of silver in her hair now. His own hair had gone silver years ago, but at least he still had it, he thought with smug satisfaction.

Gabriella looked tired, but satisfied. Young Edward reflected the rich genetics that had created him. His hair was curly against his scalp, his skin almost golden brown. He would, much to Edward's chagrin, be known as Eddie.

Rebecca was staring at her baby brother, her big dark eyes wide with wonder. She was seven now, just the age Jake had been when he had met him. He called Rebecca to him and she settled on his lap, resting her dark head against his shoulder. Something was troubling her and Edward had a feeling he knew what I was.

"What do you think of your new brother, Rebecca?" She shrugged.

"He's okay," she said. "Kinda small."

"Yes," Edward agreed. "It'll be a long time before we can do stuff with him. Won't it?"

Rebecca nodded solemnly. "Papa?" she finally asked.

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"Yes, sweetheart?"

She bit her lower lip, a habit she'd picked up from her new grandmother. "Do you think...do you think Dad will love him more?"

"Why would he love him more?"

Rebecca shrugged again. Then she sighed and began toying with one of the buttons on Edward's shirt. "Well, one of the kids at school said that Dad'll love the baby best because the baby's *his*."

Edward smiled and kissed her soft cheek. "Well, that kid isn't very smart," he said. Then he tilted his head and studied her. "You know, when I met your grandmother, your Dad was just your age."

"Really?" While nothing had ever been hidden from Rebecca, Edward wondered if she had really grasped the similarities between her life and Jake's. Kids saw things differently.

"Really," Edward said. "So I guess some people would say your father isn't *mine*." He smiled and tugged at a bit of her hair. "But I don't think that. And neither does your Dad. So..." He hugged her. "No, your Dad won't love your brother more than he loves you. Ever."

Rebecca gave him a wide grin and settled against his chest, content and comforted.

Edward smiled at her slight weight, liking the symmetry of it. He smiled at Gabriella. They shared a special bond. Having been the "new" one in an already established family, he helped her understand some of what Jake might be feeling when they had difficulties. Gabriella had just finished up her degree in social work last month, timing everything perfectly as she always did. Rose had been her mentor and example and the two of them were close friends, a fact which terrified both Emmett and Jake alike.

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She had been wary when Jake had first introduced her to the family. Bella had explained it to him later, and once again he had been struck by her wisdom.

They were snuggled in their bed, warm and satisfied from making love. "It's difficult for a woman with a child to date." She laughed softly. God, it still affected him after all these years. "You never know how the man's family is going to react. And in Gabriella's case, she was probably worried that the race issue would bother us."

"Nonsense," he muttered, though admittedly he was still a tad distracted by the fact he was trying to get his breath back.

"Yes, but she couldn't be sure, could she?" Bella asked.

"Well then," he said as he tightened his arms around Bella. "We'll just have to make sure that she and Rebecca feel very, very welcome, won't we?"

"No one can do that better than you, Cullen."

Now, seeing them assembled together, he was overcome with a sense of gratitude that they had let him in all those years ago, made him a part of this exasperating, wonderful, infuriating, inspiring mix of people he called his family.

~TBTA~

Dani proved to be a handful growing up, and having four older brothers did nothing more than hone her skills as a troublemaker. She inherited a need for speed from her father, but she took it one step further. Upon graduating from college, she surprised the whole family by joining the Navy as a pilot. Apparently, speeding on land wasn't enough for her. Her mother struggled between blinding pride and absolute terror the first time she watched her daughter climb into the cockpit of a jet.

Edward pretended not to be worried, but he felt as if he was going to have a heart attack. Luckily, he didn't and Dani continued to fly "balls the wall" as

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Emmett liked to say. When Dani informed her big brother that she did not, in fact, possess balls, he snorted and shook his head. "I wouldn't be so sure about that," he told her.

He earned himself a smack on the back of the head from Rose for that. And then got an additional one from Dani for his trouble. No more was said about the possibility of possession of testicles after that.

Dani told her mother, when her mother asked, that she didn't have the time for dating. There were a few casual relationships in her life, but nothing that stuck. She was able to walk away without regret because no one could ever touch her heart. She was her father's daughter in many ways. But like him, even she couldn't avoid destiny forever.

One day she was walking her puppy, an adorable young mixed breed that she had just adopted from one of the shelters that Sam supported. The poor thing had been mauled by another dog and had had surgery, so he was wearing a ridiculous collar around his neck. Dani had written in big black letters, "Hello! My name is Trouble" just because it amused her.

Trouble was well named.

On this particular day, Dani released Trouble from his leash to run around an enclosed area of the dog park. Trouble immediately took advantage of his new found freedom and rushed over to a man standing by a tree (watching his own dog) lifted a leg and peed on the man's shoe.

During her stammered apologies, Dani looked up into the bluest pair of eyes she had ever seen. She stuck out her hand. "Hi, I'm Dani Cullen," she said.

"I'm Eli Alexander," he answered.

"You have two first names," Dani observed.

"My dad is to blame for the last one; my mom is to blame for the first."

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"It could be worse," Dani noted.

"I'm sure it could," Eli agreed in a soft drawl.

"You're from the South," Dani guessed.

"The accent gives me away every time," Eli replied with a shrug.

"I was born and raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina," Dani explained. "So to me, you sound just right."

"I'm a proud son of *South* Carolina," Eli said with a grin.

"Well, South Carolina, It's very nice to meet you, even if it did have to involve urine," Dani quipped.

"Maybe I should let you take me out to dinner to make it up to me," he returned. "You know, without the furry little fiends." He pointed toward the two dogs that were chasing each other with looks of sheer canine joy on their faces.

"And then maybe you could buy me some drinks?" Dani suggested.

"Sounds like a plan," Eli replied. "Do you live around here?"

"I live on the base," Dani answered.

He arched a brow at her. "What do you do?"

"I'm a pilot," she said. "Does that intimidate you?"

Eli paused and then he laughed. "Actually, Dani Cullen, I find it incredibly sexy."

"Good answer, Mr. Alexander...good answer."

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"My mama always said I needed a strong woman to keep me in line." The man was a flirt, she decided. She also decided that she liked it.

"Your mother sounds like a very smart woman," Dani murmured. Then she sighed. "I should probably warn you that I have four older brothers who are convinced that there's not a man in the universe who is worthy of me."

Eli laughed. "Then, in the interest of full disclosure, I should probably tell you that I have three little sisters who are equally sure that there's not a woman who exists who is good enough for their big brother."

"We could always have a secret, torrid love affair and keep them out of it," Dani suggested.

"And then run off to Vegas and do the deed before they ever find out?" Eli added.

Dani nodded. "Sounds like a plan, Eli." Then she tilted her head. "What do you do?" Her smile was quick. "I figure I ought to know what my future husband does for a living."

"I own a nursery," he replied.

"As in little kids?"

"As in plants," he answered with a smirk. He held up his hands. "Apparently, I not only have a green thumb, but green hands as well." He wiggled his fingers. "I'm very good at what I do." He shrugged. "I also do a little landscape design."

"I'm pretty good at what I do, too," Dani told him.

He smiled slowly. "Oh, I have no doubt about that."

Later that evening, Dani called her father and told him that she'd finally met *him*.

The Bigger They Are

Edward Cullen felt a little sad - but just a little. Then he got himself together and asked, "Does he ride a Harley?"