



Family swimom7

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Summary

Bella, orphaned at 20, finishes up grad school and finds herself pregnant and alone. Bella meets Dr. Cullen in less than ideal circumstances, but is drawn to him nonetheless.

" alt="Family Banner" />

Chapter 1

I was seriously going to throw up. I hurt everywhere. I pushed the button on the hospital bed, desperate for the nurse to bring me some painkillers, *something*, and fast.

Crap, how did I get myself in this situation?

You know how--you got drunk, got laid, and got pregnant. So cliché.

My inner dialogue wasn't helping.

Gads, where was that nurse? My labor was intensifying, and I was hurting. Where was Alice? I called her an hour ago.

"Hey, sweetie," the nurse with the blonde hair said as she came in. I think she said her name was Tanya; I'd have to sneak a peek at her ID. She picked up the long strip of paper shooting out of the machine that monitored my contractions, reading back over the last ten minutes. "How are you feeling? Your contractions are getting closer together. Do you think you are ready for your epidural?"

"God, am I ever," I managed.

She smiled, and pulled the phone out of her pocket. "Yes, please tell Dr. Cullen we are ready in room 618 . . . thanks."

"Thank you," I gasped as another contraction started. I could feel it beginning in my back, spreading around my hugely swollen tummy, gripping like long fingers. The top of my abdomen was rock hard, like a basketball or watermelon. I tried to remember what the nurses taught me and Alice in the birthing classes.

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"Breathe through the contractions, don't tense up . . . this just makes them worse. Focus."

I tried to think of something happy, but not much had gone right in my life recently. I just finished my graduate degree though, so that was something good. I tried not to think of Mike and how when I told him about the baby, he stuttered out something about not being ready, that he had other plans, and how he would help me, "take care of the problem."

I tried not to remember how I felt when he said those words, how completely wrong they felt to me, that no matter what, I couldn't "take care of the problem" like he wanted me to.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'm sorry that we feel so differently about this," I said to him.

"Yeah, me too," he said, looking awkwardly at his feet, trying to surreptitiously look at his watch as if there were someplace important he needed to be, or at least someplace other than here, with me.

"Go, it's fine. I'll be fine," I said.

And I would be, I knew that. I was pretty good at taking care of myself. When Mom and Dad died in the middle of my sophomore year in college, I was on my own. An orphan at twenty. Thank God there was plenty of money--Mom and Dad had carried hefty life insurance policies. So when I found myself in my 'predicament,' I didn't worry as much as some might. I could take care of my baby on my own, thank you very much.

Alice had been my saving grace, though. Her parents were lawyers, and helped me with the settlement, in addition to handling the lawsuit against the trucking company that caused the accident. That, though, was still ongoing. We had a settlement date at least. She kept me grounded, kept me in school, and went with me to all my baby classes. Right now though, best friend or not, she was late, and I needed her.

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"Sorry!" She breezed in, brisk and business-like, bringing all her good feelings with her. I let out a silent breath. Alice was here. I would be okay. "There was an accident on the North Bridge, the poor cabbie couldn't *wait* to get me here, I gave him such a tongue lashing!" She laughed, and I laughed with her, my latest contraction all but a memory, printed on the little readout. I had about four minutes or so before the next one. Where was that stupid doctor?

"Where's Jasper?" I asked.

"He's at work, but is ready to fill the room with flowers. I just have to give the word." She smiled. Jasper was Alice's fiancé, and my other best friend. I won the lottery with my freshman roommate.

Tanya looked at Alice with her gentle smile. "Are you here as a friend? A coach?"

"I'm her best friend and coach. My name is Alice," she said in her engaging way. It was hard not to love her immediately.

"Good, I'm so glad Bella has someone here. We've called the anesthesiologist, he should be here very soon. He was just finishing up in another room," Tanya told her.

"I'm glad," Alice said, eyeing me warily as I felt another contraction start, my grimace evident on my face.

"Breathe, Bella. You remember what they taught us, focus on something happy. Think about the baby."

I pictured a little face, a little nose, a tiny bow of a mouth. I had no experience with children, so I'm sure my visions were wildly out of proportion, but it was good to think about something besides the pain that was gripping me, and making me want to puke.

"That's it, sweetie, almost done," Alice said soothingly, watching the arc on the digital screen hit its apex.

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The contraction started to abate, and we all looked up as the quick knock on the door sounded through the room. "Oh, thank God," I muttered, anxious to get rid of this pain which was getting worse . . . and more frequent.

I was unprepared for my emotional reaction to the man that walked in the room.

I had sworn off men after making the most classic of mistakes, spending my time exercising, eating right, and studying to finish my Master's degree. I never went out any more, except to dinner with friends and tried to be positive. After I started showing, guys never really paid much attention to me any more anyway, figuring I was more than "off the market."

Whatever, I had more important things to think about.

This doctor looked to be about thirty, with reddish-brownish hair, clipped close to the sides, a strong jaw and eyes like grass after it's been mown. He was my savior in a doctor's coat and I felt my eyes spill over with tears as the emotion of the past twenty-four hours caught up with me. I could swear the light changed when he walked up. The sun streamed through the window as if it tried to follow him, to show his way.

"Don't cry," he said gently, with a beautiful smile. "I'll make the pain go away."

Chapter 2

Tanya gave Alice the option to stay or leave during my epidural. I nodded at her, eyebrows raised, letting her know either way was fine with me. She couldn't really stomach needles and so predictably, she left.

"I'll just go . . . go get you some more ice," she said with a stutter, her eyes growing wide as Dr. Cullen started laying out all his equipment: swabs, catheter, needles.

"Now, Mrs. Swan . . ." he started.

"*Ms.* Swan," I emphasized, "but really, just call me Bella." For some reason, it was important to me that he knew I was unmarried. Of course, this could work against me as well; he might think I was some skank who got herself knocked up. Well, he'd be right for part of it at least, but a skank I was not.

I loved Mike, or I used to; he'd been only the second guy I'd ever slept with. By the end, it took all of this to happen for me to realize that I was just in love with the idea of being in love. As scared shitless as I was about raising a child on my own, I knew that I wouldn't have done it any differently. I was anxious to meet my new family, for this was how I felt about the baby, and I was thankful, not angry that it worked out the way it did. I was better off than most people in my situation, and I was determined to make this work and not feel sorry for myself.

"Bella," he said, my name a caress. I could hear the smile in his voice. Of course, I could have just imagined it, being in a post-pain, surreal haze, but it sounded nice and I closed my eyes in response.

"I need you to slide to the edge of the bed and sit cross-legged. Lean towards Tanya, putting your head down. This helps to spread your spine out." His voice was very soothing, and I found myself relaxing despite my own fear of needles

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and all things hospital. Tanya let me put my head in her soft chest and rubbed my shoulders. "You've got to remain as still as possible."

"Tell me if you feel another contraction coming on, sweetie," she said. "I'll talk you through it since Alice had to leave."

I tensed up, wondering how in the hell I was going to remain still through a contraction. "How long does this take?" I asked, my voice a little shaky and muffled by Tanya's scrubs.

"Total? It takes about eight to ten minutes, and another five to ten after that before all the pain is gone," he said, his hands busy on my back, swabbing it with something cold, and feeling the ridges in my spine with his warm fingers. I tried not to think about what his hands felt like on me as it made me think wildly inappropriate thoughts; it was as if he brought with him his own current. I felt the tell-tale signs of another contraction starting and quickly did the math in my head that concluded I would most likely have to sit through at least two contractions before he was done.

"Here comes one," I squeaked out and immediately felt Tanya's hands rubbing down my back and I concentrated on her soothing voice, telling me to focus on something other than the pain. I changed my mind about my inappropriate thoughts and focused on Dr. Cullen's movements, counting every touch I felt and where I felt it. This was the best distraction I could muster at the moment. I had not seen a wedding ring, but knew that could be indicative of nothing. Honestly, he was too good looking *not* to be taken. Mentally smacking myself again for even venturing down this line of thought, my distraction slipped and all I could think about was the hurt.

The pain was definitely the worst so far, bringing tears to my eyes and vomit to my mouth. It would be such a party foul to throw up in front of him. Not that he probably hadn't seen it before, but I was determined to suffer this without making a fool of myself. He waited until my contraction was almost gone before talking me through the next few crucial steps of actually putting the catheter in place and administering the anesthesia.

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I had to hand it to him, he got through almost everything before the next contraction hit, and I complemented him on his speed.

"Thank you," he chuckled. "After this one, you should feel a significant difference in your pain level." I breathed through the pain as he taped me up and adjusted my gown. I tried not to think about how he'd just spent the last ten minutes looking at my ass crack.

He's a doctor, I told myself. *He sees this twenty times a day at least*. But still, the sooner I could get my bits covered back up and get under a blanket, the better. Tanya fussed, adjusting the monitor belts so that we could once again hear the baby's heartbeat, loud and strong on the monitor. At one point, it sounded like horses galloping. I wondered if it was true what they said about girls having faster heartbeats than boys, and indulged myself in a perfect little girl. I had chosen not to find out the baby's sex, thinking the anticipation would be worth it.

Hearing my child's vitality, I smiled, knowing I was going to get to meet him or her before the day was out.

"I'm going to stay here with you for a few minutes, just to make sure you don't have a reaction. Tanya is going to turn you over every so often so that the medicine evens out," he explained. "How's it going? Another contraction is starting," he said, his eyes on the digital screen that showed the beginning of the bell curve. The drug that Tanya had me on to counteract the effects of the anesthesia had begun to work, and my eyes rounded as I watched what looked like to be a massive contraction happen on the screen.

I felt nothing and in that moment, I was a little more than in love with Dr. Cullen.

"I feel nothing, I could kiss you," I blurted out. He stared at me for a fraction of a second too long and the look we exchanged lingered before he recovered himself with a smile, and I had to turn away with a blush.

"Just doing my job," he said.

Chapter 3

True to his word, he stayed for another fifteen minutes, writing stuff on charts, and monitoring my contraction printout. We talked a little, but not much; Tanya was there and I was, well, pregnant and sort of naked underneath the hospital garb. The whole thing was a little more than awkward.

But there was this pull.

He would walk around the room, and I would try not to stare, but I felt his presence, wherever he would be in the room. Alice came back in after about five minutes and sat down in the chair next to me to hold my hand. It was her turn to be amazed at the size and intensity of the contractions that, thanks to Dr. Cullen, I felt none of.

"You really can't feel that?" she asked wide-eyed as each pulse of the graph passed forward a second and the line of the bell curve stretched higher and higher, and took longer and longer to start coming back down. I was definitely in the third stage of labor, the beginning of the end, as the contractions were coming closer together.

I could feel Dr. Cullen's eyes on me, waiting for my answer. I looked at him, and he looked . . . anxious. It was as if he was concerned that I might be in pain. Well, more concerned than any other doctor would be. At least this was what I told myself.

"Actually, I don't feel any pain per se, but I do feel pressure. I can feel that it is happening, that my body is tightening up, squeezing, but there isn't any more of that vomiting pain, thank God," I said, watching him. He looked relieved.

"Well, I guess that means I can leave," he said, looking at me with a strange face. I smiled.

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"Thank you," I said. He gathered his things and I grasped at the last straw.

"You should come back when it's all over . . . you know, see your handiwork."

He smiled at me again and one side of his mouth went up more than the other. Contraction? What contraction? Thank God it wasn't my heartbeat we were monitoring on the machine just then, because I bet mine was a little like galloping horses, too.

"Maybe I will," he said quietly. "Good luck, Bella." And he left.

Just then the cuff on my arm started squeezing to take my blood pressure.

Tanya just smiled as she noted my numbers. "Your blood pressure went up just a little. Don't worry, he does that to all the girls."

Alice just snorted. "He was definitely hot; I thought they only had doctors like that on TV. Hey, is he married?" she asked Tanya.

"Not as far as I know," Tanya said. "My husband and he play golf together some, and he's a really nice guy. I've never seen him act like that around anyone."

"Bella! Did you hear that? You could totally go for him!" Alice was my number one cheerleader. She never liked Mike--it turns out with good reason--and she was constantly trying to find me someone.

"Yeah, right, because a puking, pregnant, exhausted, and swollen me is the epitome of sexy right now. Oh yeah, and let's not forget that he is now well-acquainted with my ass crack and oh, by the way, will soon have a baby too! If that's not gonna make him want me, I don't know what will!"

Tanya and Alice laughed at my little rant. Laughed! I just rolled my eyes. He had definitely seen me at a low point. It reminded me of dating in high school and college, that first time that I had to wear a bathing suit in front of the guy I happened to like at the time. Not that I didn't have a decent body, but I never had the self-confidence to parade around half-naked. I always wanted to get

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through that part of the relationship as soon as possible. If the guy still wanted to be with me after that, life was good.

Tanya was reading my printouts again and said, "I'm gonna check you right now, your contractions are very close and very strong."

Alice turned around as Tanya did her thing.

"Yep, you are at ten centimeters and fully thinned out. Are you ready to have this baby?" she asked, a smile on her face.

"Now?" I choked out. Panic and excitement leaking out, I reached out for Alice, and she held my hand.

"It's gonna be great, sweetie. You are going to be fine, I'm here." Her eyes were shining and she brushed the hair out of my eyes. "I'm going to go see if Jasper is here yet, and tell him what's going on. I'll be right back."

Tanya had just called Dr. Uley to tell her that I was ready, spending the next few minutes breaking down the bed as two more nurses came in to help. Dr. Uley came in, her long, dark shiny hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was dressed in scrubs and gave me a brilliant smile, calming my nerves immediately. Alice danced back in, unable to control her enthusiasm and excitement.

"We're gonna have a baby! Jasper's here, and Mom and Dad have been called. Emmett and Rosalie are on their way," she said, and I was thrilled. Emmett was Alice's older brother, and so by extension, *my* older brother. Rosalie was his wife and one of the reasons I was willing to do this baby thing on my own. She and Emmett had twins, and she was so good with them. I knew she would be there to help me, and so I wasn't quite as scared as I could have been.

Within minutes, I was surrounded by nurses, Alice was up by my head and Dr. Uley was 'down there.' I had eschewed the offer of the mirror; I got sort of queasy at the sight of blood and didn't figure they needed me passing out in the middle of all of this.

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Pushing took a good hour or more, I lost track, and more than a few times I thanked my lucky stars for Dr. Cullen because towards the end, the epidural had started to wear off and I was feeling some of the pain. He had protected me from the worst of it though, and I was so intensely grateful, I wasn't sure I would ever be able to think of him as less than a god.

"Hang on, I need to clean out the nose and mouth," Dr. Uley said after my most recent push. "Okay, give me one more good one."

"Ugh, I felt that," I panted. Tanya had given Alice a washcloth to wipe my face because I was sweating.

"That was the shoulder, keep pushing," she encouraged.

I did as she said and just like that, I felt my child leave my body. I braced for the cry, and when I heard the whimper, my heart filled with a well-spring of love I never knew could be possible. Where had it come from? It was like my heart had doubled in size.

"It's a girl!" Dr. Uley said triumphantly.

Alice and I were both crying when she wrapped her in a blanket, wiped off the baby's face and handed her to me. Dr. Uley offered the scissors to Alice to cut the umbilical cord, and Alice looked at me, questioning.

"Absolutely, 'Aunt Alice!' Cut it!" I grinned at her, and she started crying again.

~

Mary Renée Swan lay next to me on the hospital bed, sleeping quietly, completely swaddled and wrapped like a football. I had named her after Alice and my mother, and I stared at her, watching her little expressions and twitches. Jasper had fulfilled his end of the bargain, and filled the room with flowers. Everyone had gone home with promises to come in the morning, and bring me a real cup of coffee and something yummy to eat. The contraband, a

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celebratory beer, had already been smuggled in along with take-out sushi from my favorite place, and we had all eaten a feast in honor of my baby.

My baby. My little girl.

I stared at her, her tiny nose, her little mouth, the way her eyes formed half moons on her cheeks. Every now and then, she would twitch again, and I was fascinated. The lights were dim and the television was on, a soft murmur in the background. I almost didn't hear the quiet knock on the door. The nurse would come in every so often to monitor my blood pressure and 'check my bottom,' as they called it, so I didn't bother to say anything or even look up as I heard the door open.

"Hey," he said quietly. "I came to check on my favorite patient, or patients, I should say. Congratulations."

It was Dr. Cullen. I'm sure if the nurse had come to check me then, my blood pressure would be off the charts. I could feel my heartbeat speed up and wondered what it was about him that caused this reaction in me.

"Thanks," I managed to whisper out. He stood awkwardly by the bed, as if he wasn't sure why he was here either. I decided to be generous, because I really was touched that he came back. Plus, I really wanted to see him again.

"Wanna see her?" I asked.

"I saw on your chart that you'd had a girl. What's her name?" he asked.

He was checking up on me. That made me feel all middle-school girly squishy inside.

"Mary Renée," I answered. "Mary is Alice's first name, and Renée was my mother's name."

"Was?" he asked.

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"Yes, she and my father, Charlie, were killed in a car accident a few years ago when I was in undergrad," I explained. It wasn't as hard to talk about now, but I still felt the familiar ache when I thought about them, how they'd never meet their granddaughter.

"So . . . you're on your own?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes . . . well, no, I have Alice and Emmett, and their parents who are like my parents, and Jasper and Rosalie, Alice's fiancé and Emmett's wife." I considered myself to be luckier than most.

"What about . . ." he started, but reddened a little.

"Her father?" I finished and he nodded. I sighed, audibly. "Well, Mike wasn't ready for this, and I wasn't ready for his solution to the, quote, 'problem,' so I cut ties with him. Released him of all obligations." I wasn't really sure why I was telling him all this, but I went on. I needed him to understand. "When my parents died, Alice's parents handled everything--they're lawyers," I explained. "In addition to life insurance, there is a pretty hefty lawsuit against the trucking company that caused the accident. The driver was drunk and they knew it, so you can imagine . . ."

Dr. Cullen let out a slow whistle. "I'm sorry for asking so many personal questions," he said. "I just feel . . . protective of you for some reason. It makes me feel good knowing you are going to be okay."

I smiled. "Dr. Cullen . . ." but he cut me off.

"Edward."

"Edward." His name sounded so good in my mouth. "I'll be fine. I'm better off than most people in my situation, believe me."

"I know, but it still makes me want to go kick, what was his name? Mike? Mike's ass."

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I laughed quietly, momentarily distracted by the thought of Edward running to my rescue. Those kinds of thoughts weren't going to get me anywhere. I needed to rely on myself.

"Meh. He doesn't know what he's missing," I said, looking at Mary.

"He sure doesn't," Edward said, and I looked up to see him staring at me instead of the baby.

I was lost in his gaze for a second, wondering what it was that made me feel so connected to this man. Just then, Mary's face crumpled, and we both looked down to watch her wake up with a tiny cry.

I sat up, and started adjusting the automatic bed. I picked her up to soothe her, and started cooing, "Are you hungry, my love?"

"Can I come back to see you tomorrow?" he asked. "It's getting late, and I should let you take care of her, and yourself," he added.

"I'd like that," I said, getting my pillow ready like the nurse taught me so that I could try and nurse her again.

"Tomorrow then, Bella, try and get some sleep," he said as he quietly left us.

Chapter 4

"Yuck!" she spat. "How in the Hell do you drink this stuff?" Alice asked disgusted, dumping out the little cup of coffee that came with my breakfast. She immediately got on her phone to text.

"What did you tell him?" I asked, knowing she was texting Jasper.

"To hurry up with the coffee and that I love him so he doesn't think I'm being a dramatic, demanding bitch," she laughed.

I snickered at her because she was a dramatic, demanding bitch, and turned back to gaze at Mary. I had her propped up on my knees in my lap. She was wrapped tight like a papoose because the nurses said to do this. 'Swaddling' they called it and while I thought it was a pain to undo her when I had to change her nappy, the tightness of the blanket really did seem to calm her down. I wasn't as good at it as the nurses were and so the blanket kept bunching around her, but I really wanted to touch her everywhere, so I didn't care.

Now though, the nurse had just left after checking us both out, and so she re-swaddled her and gave her to me like a little package. A package of baby.

"The food sucks too, where do you want Jasper to get breakfast?" Alice asked, sliding her phone up to send him another text.

"Wherever he wants, but I could really for a Waffle House waffle, if he doesn't mind," I said with a knowing smile.

Waffle House, Alice and I had a history; all through college, it was where she and I went to celebrate, to commiserate and to feed ourselves when we were too drunk to make it home. It was right in town and open twenty-four hours. I was convinced a waffle from there could solve most of the world's problems.

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Alice laughed and tucked my hair behind my ear. "You've got it, baby."

We heard the knock on the door and both looked up as Dr. Uley came in.

"I'll just be outside," Alice mouthed as she put the phone up to her ear to talk to Jasper. I guess it was too much to text.

"Hey, Bella. How are you feeling this morning?" Dr. Uley asked.

"I'm fine, didn't get much sleep last night though," I answered, although actually that had more to do with a certain pair of green eyes that kept haunting my thoughts rather than Mary, but I let her believe it was the baby.

"Yes, well . . . welcome to parenthood," she laughed. "You'll have sleepless nights for the first six to eight months, then some good years of quality sleep and then six years of no sleep from the time they start dating until they graduate college."

I laughed. "That's probably true, I'd never thought of it like that."

Man, looking at Mary now, it was hard to think that far in the future, but hearing my mom's 'I can't believe you've grown so fast, it seems like only yesterday . . .' speech all the time before she died, I guessed time would fly. Already Mary was almost a day old and she'd changed from what she looked like yesterday.

"Let's look at you so we can spring you from here tomorrow afternoon," she said with a wink.

She checked me out and pronounced me as 'healing nicely,' wrote some stuff down on my chart and slipped out.

I tried to stamp down the panic. Tomorrow afternoon? They were going to set me loose with a baby?

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Oh. My. God. What in the Hell was I thinking? I can't do this . . . I can't raise a baby on my own.

Just then Alice walked back in and saw the look on my face. "What's wrong?" she asked quickly, rushing over to put her hand on my head, like I had a fever or something.

"I can't do this, Alice! They are going to send me home tomorrow! Oh, God, why did I *ever* think I could do this on my own," I wailed, feeling the tears building in my eyes, threatening to spill out every where. I concentrated on Mary's little face, still sleeping peacefully, now beside me in the bed, and I felt my pulse calm just a bit.

"Sweetie, you aren't alone. You have your family . . . me and Jasper, Emmett and Rose, and Mom and Dad, of course. We are all here for you, and we love you." Alice looked down at me and scooped up Mary to give her an Eskimo kiss. Mary's mouth opened, her rooting reflex evident. "She is just so sweet, I want to eat her up."

Jasper walked in, laden with bags from Waffle House. I swear at that moment he was like my knight in shining armor. The thought of food calmed me down. I was famished--who knew having a baby made you so hungry?

~ * ~

It was later that afternoon before I saw him again. Every knock on the door made my heart jump in anticipation, but each time I was disappointed. Well, not disappointed really; I was thrilled to see Emmett and Rose and Claire and Peter, Alice's parents, and they brought Mary almost an entire new wardrobe. I'd have to change her three times a day for her to wear it all before she grew out of it. But eventually, I gave up anticipating that every knock would reveal *him*.

When I heard someone come in, Mary and I were snoozing in the waning afternoon light. We had had visitors all day and promises of dinner for the evening, but were taking advantage of the quiet. I assumed it was the nurse

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coming in to check on us and so didn't stir when I heard the footsteps. Maybe if I pretended to be asleep she'd go away.

I hardly heard anything, just someone sitting down in the chair next to the bed. I didn't *hear* much, but I felt it. The atmosphere in the room charged with electricity and I opened my eyes to stare into the green that had kept me between the state of wakefulness and dreaming all night. He was like an elusive specter. I couldn't tell if he was real or a figment of my imagination. Surely someone so beautiful couldn't be real.

"Hey," he whispered. "I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Hey, no . . . it's okay. I'm glad to see you." And I *was* glad to see him. My whole body settled when he was there, as if I had been holding on to something so tightly and I could let it go and finally relax.

"I wanted to bring you something," he said with a little embarrassed smile. "This is the name of my favorite sushi place in town. They deliver. After you get home, when you are settled, all you have to do is call them up and they will bring you dinner."

He handed me a business card with the name of the restaurant on it. *My* favorite sushi, too. This pleased me in a ridiculous way, it was as though we had found something in common already. On the back was a cell phone number with the name, 'Edward' written above it.

Now he was a lot embarrassed. "I want you to call me, day or night, if you need help," he said. "I'm a doctor, I'm used to weird hours."

I took the card from him and stared at it. "How did you know?" I whispered.

"How did I know what?" he asked, smoothing an errant lock of my hair behind my ear. My skin tingled from the hint of his touch on my temple. It seemed like such a natural thing for him to do and I leaned into his touch. I had never felt so comfortable with someone before. Red flags started flapping in my brain.

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"I almost had a breakdown today, how am I going to raise this baby?" My natural instincts kicked in; I couldn't believe my lack of filter, I must be more exhausted than I thought. Why was I dumping all of my anxieties on an almost stranger? An almost stranger who'd seen my naked back, yes, but still.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be burdening you with my issues," I said quickly, wishing I could take it all back.

"Well, you're gonna take it a day at a time and you're gonna rely on your friends to help, friends like me," he added, sitting up a little straighter in his chair.

"Are you my friend now?" I asked quietly, unable to keep the hope from my voice, my fingers picking at the threads of the thin sheet.

"I very much want to be. I get the impression you are . . . self-reliant, but everyone needs help every now and then." His eyes were so green, they burned into my brown ones as I returned his intense gaze. I felt like he could see to my very soul.

He wanted to be my friend, which meant he wants to be in my life. My heart was beating so quickly, I was sure he would be able to see it through the hospital gown.

"Yes, I have a hard time with that, but I know I'm going to need help." I whispered. "Thank you for your offer . . . and for dinner. Maybe . . . maybe you can come and share it with me when I call?" Gads, did I just ask that?

"I'd like that," he said with a brilliant smile.

"Do you want to hold her?" Was this too much? Was I pushing him?

"I'd love to," he said and he gingerly accepted the bundle of baby that I handed over to him. Mary was sleeping and stretched her face as she was moved from stillness. He held her out in front of him, practiced and I wondered why he looked so natural. My heart flipped over as I watched his face soften and fall in

Family

love. I couldn't really blame him, she was gorgeous, even without my biased opinion, but there was a little bit of pride in my smile as I watched the attachment form.

Chapter 5

So, it was totally awkward, the whole wheelchair thing as I left the hospital. I told them that I could walk, but apparently it was a policy. It was embarrassing though, wheeling through the hospital with Jasper and Alice following afterwards with all the flowers and balloons; we were like a little mini parade of pink and white, and I hated attention like that.

Jasper had pulled the car up to the curb so it was waiting for us, with Mary's new carseat installed in the back. She looked so teeny-tiny in the huge contraption with the bumpers all around her. I was momentarily overcome with the reality of my situation, but Alice put her hand on me knowing I was freaking out on the inside.

"Hey . . . it's okay. Family, remember?" she said with a smile.

I took a deep breath, as my racing heart and thoughts settled, "Yeah, I remember. It's just so weird, you know?"

"Yes, but you are going to be a great momma," and she leaned in and gave me a kiss.

o * o * o

Everyone came over, bringing dinner and stuff for my freezer. I was overwhelmed, but a little pleased knowing I wouldn't have to cook for a month. It was amazing they would do all this for me, and I felt a smidgeon of guilt.

Family.

I thought the word over and over again in my head as they were gathering their stuff to leave.

Family

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" Alice asked. Rosalie had offered the same thing, but I shook my head. I needed to do this on my own, get through my first night just so that I would know I could do it, plus they had busy lives, their own issues to deal with.

"Nah, it's all good, really. Besides, you have to work tomorrow, you need your sleep."

I can do this, I can do this, I chanted to myself as I hugged Alice and sent her out the door, tamping down my urge to call her back.

I shut the door and turned around. My little house was in such disarray; wrapping paper and ribbon were everywhere. Rosalie had brought Mary more clothes--there weren't enough days in the week for her to wear everything. At least I wouldn't have too much laundry to do, if she got something dirty, I'd just put something new on her. I started picking stuff up and tidying; I only got the living room cleaned up before I had rush to the bathroom. Thank God Rose had given me the 411 on the after effects of having a baby, because I never would have known to buy stock in Always with Wings.

I checked on Mary again and dragged her car seat into the bathroom so she could sit there while I took a shower. I let the water cleanse me of the hospital smell and changed into my favorite pajamas, dragging Mary with me everywhere I went, afraid I wouldn't be able to hear her if she cried in my little house. I was thrilled to be home. I hated hospitals; they reminded me of Mom and Dad's accident.

I was exhausted. I laid down on the sofa, closed my eyes and not two minutes later, I heard Mary cry. *At least I got my shower*, I thought to myself getting back up and picking her up.

Thankfully, nursing came easy to me. Rose had been coaching me because she had had such a hard time getting Jared to latch on. She warned me about everything, but Mary and I had gotten the hang of it pretty quickly. I laid back down on the sofa so that Mary could nurse and I could watch some television.

Family

I thought about all the things I had read in the books as I stared at Mary, enjoying the closeness. Who knew that they could develop allergies to stuff if they ate it too soon? Stuff like honey or peanut butter or certain fruits. It was a whole new world and I was determined to do it right and on my own; for now, I was just happy I didn't have to worry too much about what she ate, just how much.

o * o * o

Mary started screaming, waking me up in the process. I was so groggy, and couldn't focus. I had put her back down in her bassinet, having read not to sleep with her and crashed back on the couch taking the 'sleep when the baby sleeps' advice to heart. Now she was screaming and I rushed over to her, picked her up and rocked and rocked. She settled a little bit, but not much. Maybe she was hungry? That didn't seem likely as I had just nursed her a half hour before, but I tried again. She nursed for a little bit, but seemed so uncomfortable, stiffening up and arching her back.

I was freaking out and wanted to call Rosalie, but it was three in the morning. Who the Hell was I gonna call?

Edward.

Where was that damn card? I had put it in my wallet, not wanting to take a chance on losing it. But would he be at work? He'd said to call anytime because he was used to strange hours. I debated, how weird was this, calling him? But honestly, he was a doctor, if something was wrong, he'd be able to tell me, right?

I compromised and texted him. That way, if he was asleep, I hopefully wouldn't wake him, but if he were awake, he'd get it.

911, Mary's screaming and I don't know why. Any advice?

I purposely downplayed it because I didn't want him thinking I didn't know what I was doing. After I'd sent it, I realized he may not recognize the number,

Family

but hopefully he'd remember Mary's name and think of me.

I felt my phone vibrate - good thing because Mary's crying was so loud I couldn't hear it ring - I was beginning to get a little scared and glad I had made the decision to ask him. I slid it open so I could read the message. I was so relieved to see it was him.

Is this Bella? Do you want me to come check her out?

Yes, please. I texted back, and then quickly sent him my address, hoping he had GPS in his car.

Okay, I'm just leaving the hospital. I'll be right there.

Now I felt guilty; he was probably exhausted. Mary let out another cry and I stopped feeling guilty. I just laid her down on the floor and laid with her, trying to talk to her, trying to get her to keep her pacifier in her mouth while I watched her stiffen up. I was almost in tears not knowing what to do.

Thankfully, he got there in less than fifteen minutes. I opened the door before he'd walked in, knowing he might be nervous that he'd gotten the wrong house and he headed straight for the sink to wash his hands. Just like a doctor. He observed her for a little bit, took in her stiffening and picked her up, turned her on her tummy over his knee. She let out a huge burp and instantly stopped crying.

I felt like a complete idiot.

He picked her back up and put her on his shoulder, bouncing lightly as he did and she burped a few more times. He looked so at ease, so natural and I was such a mess. I burst into tears and put my head down on my knees. God, I was so stupid. Why didn't I think to do that? I thought being a mom was a natural thing, a normal thing, something that I would just *know*.

He laid Mary down gently in her bassinet and came over to me.

Family

"Bella, what's wrong?" he asked, sitting on the floor in front of me. He was still wearing his scrubs from work and had hospital smell clinging to him.

"God, I'm sorry. I'm such an idiot." I sniffled.

"Why would you say that? It isn't like they come with directions or anything, you're doing fine," he reassured. He'd put his hand on my knee. It burned. After a few seconds, he took it off awkwardly. I wondered if it burned him too.

"Well, how come you know so much?" I asked. He was an anesthesiologist, not a pediatrician for God's sake.

"I did some of my medical school training at Children's Hospital, so I learned a lot about newborns and babies and kids." He shrugged. "She just had a little gas, and in her tiny tummy, it's really uncomfortable for her."

"Well, I tried to get her to burp, but she wouldn't do it, so I figured she didn't need to. I didn't know you could put them across your knees like that," I said.

"Yeah, that was something I saw one of the older nurses do. It helps to push the air bubble out," he said with a smile. "But you should also be careful about what *you* eat, stuff like broccoli and milk and onions can affect the breast milk and give them colic."

Crap. I'd had all three things at dinner that night. I started crying again, which made me mad. Why was I crying so much?

"What's wrong?" he asked, his face full of concern. He reached out his hand to touch me again, but he pulled it back. I would have loved to feel his hand on my hair, but he seemed torn.

"I'm just not sure I'm cut out for this," I whispered. "I don't even know what I'm doing!"

"You'll be fine; you're doing a great job already, she's perfect," he said, picking her back up and looking at her. "Why don't you go get in bed and I will sit out

Family

here with her. Do you mind if I crash on your couch for a little bit?"

Realistically, I had known Edward for four days. Letting him hold my baby and sleep on my couch was probably not a good judgement call on my part, but honestly, I felt so comfortable with him and I was so exhausted I wanted to say yes. I hesitated though, wavering between the thought of sleep and my good sense.

He sensed my hesitation. "How about you sleep on the couch, and I'll rock her in the chair. Get a few hours and then we can switch places. She'll have to nurse again soon anyway. Is that an okay compromise?"

"Yes," I said. "Thank you." I was unable to explain myself and was relieved that he understood.

I woke up a few hours later and looked over at where Edward was sprawled out in the glider rocker, Mary upright and asleep on his chest; it was almost six in the morning. They looked so peaceful together and my heart flipped over. I began to wonder about the fact that Mary would have no father to speak of, would this be okay in the long run?

My boobs were really uncomfortable, I guessed my milk was coming in; Rosalie said they would get huge. Great. I needed to nurse. I got up, hit the bathroom and came back to them and gently pulled Mary off of Edward, rousing him in the process.

"Hey, go lie on the couch. I'll take over," I whispered.

He stumbled over and crashed, pulling the duvet I'd been using over himself and fell back asleep. Mary latched on without any difficulty and managed to relieve some of the pressure for me. I burped her properly this time and put her back in the bassinet before going to the kitchen to make some breakfast.

I was famished, and I was sure Edward was, too.

Chapter 6

Ch. 6

I stood in the canteen area, dead tired, styrofoam cups and bendy straws stacked up in neat rows, going over the last little bit of my notes when I felt my cell phone vibrate. This was my personal phone, not the hospital one that we carried so that the nurses could contact me. I hoped that it was Bella although it was three in the morning, so my hope died a quick death with that realization.

Then I almost hoped it wasn't Bella because that would mean something might be wrong.

911, Mary's screaming and I don't know why. Any advice?

I didn't recognize the number and I didn't know anyone else with the name Mary. It must be Bella. My heart leapt a little.

Is this Bella? Do you want me to come check her out?

I had spent a lot of time with babies and kids of all ages when I worked at Children's. I was pretty confident with them even though I didn't have any kids myself.

Yes, please.

And then an address showed up on the screen. I recognized it; she was down by the university at least, not too far away.

Okay, I'm just leaving the hospital, I'll be right there.

I headed for the nurses station; thank God Dr. White had just come on, so I was free to go. My car was parked in the Doctor's spots, so it was just an elevator

Family

ride and I was pulling out of the lot onto 115th Street headed south towards the University of Washington and Bella's house.

.....

I woke to the smell of bacon and coffee and, for a minute, I wasn't sure exactly where I was, but as I looked around the room I remembered. I was at Bella's. Mary had some colic, I showed Bella the best way to calm her and then I had fallen asleep with Mary on my chest. I remember the feel of her slight weight on me and how her little hand had fisted underneath her chin, and her head had tucked underneath mine. I was on the couch underneath a duvet that smelled like Bella, and a big smile spread over my sleepy face.

She'd called.

I could hear her singing to herself quietly in the kitchen and so I got up to find the bathroom, guessing it was down the hall, looking around some as I made my way. I liked her little house; I'd have to ask for a tour later. As I came back out, still in my green scrubs from the night shift, she came around the corner with a tray laden with food.

"Oh, you're up!" she said shyly. She was beautiful in the morning: her hair haphazard around her face, her clothes hanging loose, eyes bright with her smile, but showing her lack of sleep.

"Yep, thanks for letting me crash. I'm sort of used to the crazy hours, but it was a particularly long day yesterday," I said, rubbing my fingers over my stubble.

She instantly looked guilty and started to apologize.

"No, no . . . I didn't mean you. I'm glad you called," I stuttered. "I mean . . . Mary . . . she was in so much pain."

"Yeah, dumb me," Bella said, setting the tray down on the coffee table and sitting down in the arm chair. I sat back down on the sofa, absently folding the duvet and resisting the urge to bring it to my nose.

Family

"I should have figured it out. I'm sorry I called you over something so silly," she said.

"Bella, really. I'm glad you called," and I reached across to pick up her hand, just to hold it.

She held my hand for a second and then let go of it awkwardly, but not before flexing her fingers in mine.

"So, are you hungry? When did you eat last?" she said very hostess-like.

"Yeah, I'm actually starving. I didn't get to eat dinner last night. This looks great," I said, picking up my fork. "Thanks."

"Well, Alice and her parents, Claire and Peter actually made most of this, I just heated it up. I honestly have so much food, I'm afraid it's gonna go bad," she laughed. "You may have to come help me eat it all."

"Gladly, if it's all as good as this," I smiled, swallowing. I hoped she was serious.

I had spent the last few days trying to explain to myself why I was feeling the way I was about a girl I had just met. A girl with problems of her own and a baby to raise nonetheless. I had yet to come up with anything tangible other than the fact that my senses came alive when I was around her and I wanted to know her better.

It wasn't that I felt sorry for her, in fact, she seemed pretty level-headed and set financially from what she told me. It was more that I had some inexplicable need to share her issues, her wants, her fears. I wanted to know what made her who she was, and I wanted to understand her decisions and her thoughts. Most importantly, I wanted her to know mine as well.

"Aren't you going to eat?" I asked after swallowing a forkful of blueberry pancake.

Family

"Nah, coffee is good for me I think just now," she said, watching me over her mug held tightly between her hands, balanced on her knees.

Just then we both heard the baby stir and she got up, setting her coffee down next to mine. I looked down into the cup, *Cream* . . . I wondered if she took it sweet or without sugar. I made a note to find out.

She came back with Mary who's eyes were big and round and vacant the way all newborn's eyes were.

"I hope her eyes stay blue," Bella said. "My eyes are brown, not the most interesting color."

"Your eyes are beautiful . . ." I said without thinking. ". . . like chocolate."

Bella just smiled at me and I was happy to see it, happy to see I hadn't overstepped my boundaries. Her skin flushed, bringing a bloom to her cheeks.

Note to self: Bella's blush is entrancing.

"Do you mind if I just . . ." she started, indicating that she wanted to nurse the baby. Now it was my turn to blush.

"Please, Bella. I'm a doctor, but I'll give you some privacy while I go clean up the dishes," I said, covering.

I wasn't sure I was ready to see her breast just then; even though it was for strictly utilitarian reasons, a breast is a breast and I'm just a guy. Plus, it was Bella's breast. I wasn't sure I could put aside my doctor persona with her yet, although I already had her in my mind. Every moment I spent with her increased my need and want to spend all my moments with her. All the more reason to resist ogling her and making her uncomfortable just now.

"Want some more coffee?" I asked, scooping up her cup as I headed into the kitchen with the tray of dirty dishes.

Family

"Yes, please. Cream and one sugar," she said, busying herself with Mary.

"You got it," I repeated.

Cream and one sugar. Sweet, but not too sweet.

Chapter 7

I brought our coffee back in to the living room in time to see Bella tucking herself back in her shirt. My face reddened at the thought . . . my hands twitched at the thought. Then I chastised myself at the thought.

You're a doctor, you idiot. Get a hold of yourself.

But this was Bella, and despite my training, I was having a hard time separating her from the rest of my patients. I was just about to set that whole thing aside and begin my pursuit of her in earnest. I would have to go slowly though, she had to be an emotional bundle of nerves just now and it wouldn't be fair of me to take advantage of that.

Bella stood up, presumably to put Mary down at the same time I rounded the edge of the couch where she was sitting. The coffee table had sort of trapped her, and we did a little dance where she went one way and I, trying to move out of her way, blocked her in instead.

"Uh, sorry," I muttered. Super-smooth doctor I apparently was not. Bella just giggled a little to cover the awkwardness; a laugh escaped me too at the same instant. *Ugh.*

We shuffled around and I finally was able to move out of her way so she could lay a now sleeping Mary in the bassinet. I watched her lean over and where her shirt rode up, and saw the red marks on her back from the tape that I had used to keep her epidural catheter in place. Her skin was apparently very sensitive; that would probably take a few days to heal.

I continued watching her as she stared down into the crib, an indiscernible expression on her face. When she turned back around, there were tears in her eyes.

Family

"Bella, what's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," she sniffled and made her way back over to the couch, accepting her coffee and tucking her legs up under her.

"But why are you crying?" I pressed. I was clearly out of my element here, wondering if I'd done something wrong. I couldn't stand to see her this way.

"I don't know and that's the kicker," she said, sipping from her mug. "I look at Mary and sometimes I'm in awe, and then other times I look at her and I get overwhelmed. Last night was a perfect example, and before that, yesterday there was some stupid commercial on about a school bus and cereal and I lost it."

Realization dawned on me. "It's normal for new mothers to get the baby blues," I said, hoping I could be reassuring and not stress her out more. "Actually, it's normal to get the baby blues before you have the baby too. It's just the over-excess of hormones in your system, don't worry about it too much, but tell me if it gets really bad."

"Seriously?" she said, looking hopeful. "I guess I need to read that book more thoroughly." A teary laugh bubbled out of her as she tried to brighten. "The coffee is perfect, just how I like it."

"I want to look at your back," I said quickly, "you know, just to make sure you're healing okay." I had seen the telltale signs of a bruise when her shirt rode up and I wanted to make sure that there was no infection. I pushed back the other feelings for a second.

"Err . . . really?" she blinked owlishly at me, her blush creeping up her neck.

"I just wanna see, make sure you're fine," I said, rolling my eyes at her. I played the part of the doctor well, but I couldn't deny there was a need to touch her.

Family

I got up and went to kneel by her as she rotated and leaned forward, giving me access to her back. I lifted up her shirt, the color of her skin was gorgeously pale pink, like lit-from-behind alabaster, but I concentrated on the needle mark. I was right, there was a yellowish-purple bruise around where the catheter had gone in and her skin was all marked up with angry red streaks from the tape.

"Does this hurt?" I asked, gently pressing my fingers into her soft flesh. She shook her head as I probed and ran my fingers into the spaces between her spine. I traced the tape marks and felt her shiver. The room was very quiet as I touched her, our connection still vibrating, like a static electricity. She was holding her breath, as was I.

The seconds ticked by like minutes and the tenor of the examination changed, shifted slightly. I was hyper aware of the heat coming off of her skin, the feel of it under mine.

"Sorry," I muttered, pulling her shirt back down slowly and exhaling, feeling the loss of our intimacy. "You've got some tape marks, but they will go away after a while. Your bruise is already healing and I don't see any infection." She turned back around to face me and I scooted back to stand up.

"Good. So what's your plan today?" I asked; the question coming out a little forced as the electricity in the air vanished into a vacuum. I had to put some distance between us quickly, or else my newly made pledge to go slowly would vanish as well. "I need to get home and get showered. I have to go back to the hospital this afternoon around four, but if you need something, I can get it for you."

"No, I think I have everything I need, your cell phone number being at the top of that list," she smiled, seemingly normal, but I could tell her breathing was still uneven. The crisis seemed to have been averted for the time being, our reactions to one another though were still very much up in the air.

"Well, keep it there. Other than my job at the hospital and the occasional dinner with friends or my parents, I'm pretty open."

Family

God, my life sounded a little pathetic when I summed it up like that, but the truth was I was content, happy for the most part. But now that Bella had entered my life, I found the edges weren't quite as defined.

"Are you sure? I feel like I'm taking advantage . . ." she drifted off.

"Bella," I stopped her, putting my hand on her knee, "I *want* you to call me. We're friends now, remember?"

Her skin felt warm under my hand. It rested there for a second before she looked down at it, blushing a gorgeous pink. I resisted the urge to rub my thumb along the softness inside of her knee and picked up my hand, embarrassed that I'd touched her again like that. Although I knew my probing of her back wasn't as innocent as it should have been, my fear was that she'd see right through me.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"No, it's okay," she said, just as embarrassed. "It's nice . . . to have a new friend, someone who cares."

"It's nice for me, too, and I do care," I said truthfully, my heart beating all kinds of staccato. "I'd better get going now, so you can rest. Sleep when the baby sleeps."

Leaving the coffee cups behind on the table, she walked me to the front door, shuffling awkwardly as we got there. She looked at her feet, and then looked up at me, her brown eyes warm and sleepy.

"Thanks, for rescuing me," she said with a smile. "I honestly don't know what I would have done."

"I'm glad you called . . . I'm glad I was the one that could help," I told her earnestly. Her hair was hanging in her eyes and she reached up to push it behind her ear. I thought to myself how much I would like to have done that, but that I'd probably pushed my luck already.

Family

"Do you think you could come by again?" she asked, looking at her feet for the second time. "I mean, you know . . . Mary changes a little every day, I wouldn't want you to miss anything. Now that we're friends and all . . . maybe we could do that sushi dinner you set up?"

"I'd like that," I said quietly, willing her to look me in the eye. She looked up at me and smiled.

.

I pulled into my driveway and garage, closing the door behind me. I was trying to time my afternoon, and when I could work in some sleep. I had a long shift ahead of me and didn't want to take any chances; in my line of work, a steady hand was vitally important. A nap was definitely in the near future. Bella's breakfast had filled me up, so I opted for the shower first and padded into my kitchen afterwards to check my laptop for emails.

Mom and Dad had sent me one, a Saturday night dinner in the future, my mom hinting at how there would be company for me to meet. This was code for her trying to set me up again. Normally, I would go, but now things were . . . different.

Now there was Bella. And Mary.

The hold that these two women had on me after such a short acquaintance was inexplicable. Despite Bella's facts to the contrary, there was a vulnerability about her that I wanted to discover and protect. Why was she so determined to be on her own? Why was she so reluctant to ask for help from Alice and the rest of her "family" as she called them?

And holding Mary all night while she slept. There was a completeness to me when I felt her in my arms. I had always enjoyed my time with the children that I helped, but this was different. Mary was Bella's and she was precious.

The phone rang, interrupting my musings.

Family

"Hello, sweetie," I heard my mother's voice say.

"Hey Mom," I said, checking out my fridge and opting for orange juice as it was otherwise fairly empty. "What's up?"

"Oh, well, I was wondering if you had gotten my email about this weekend," she said airily. My eyes narrowed, I was totally on to her game.

"Yes, Mom. I got your email." I tried not to sigh. "But I think I may actually have plans." I knew this evasive tactic wouldn't work, but I wasn't ready yet to spill details to my mom.

"Really? Tell me," she said. I could almost hear her brain working.

"Nothing to tell just yet."

She was quiet for a bit but I didn't break.

She sighed out her frustration, "Okay, I'll leave you alone . . . for now."

"Mom, I promise, when I have something to tell you, I will."

"I know." She changed subjects. "Do you have to work today?"

"Yeah, gotta go in at four. I have some stuff to do around here and then I need to sleep; I'll be on until around noon tomorrow."

"I have some things to bring over for your living room, since I started redoing the bookshelves, I've found some more accessories. If I promise to be quiet, can I bring them over?"

"Of course," I said. My mother was one of the premiere designers in Seattle, my house was a showpiece because of her. I had a random thought about making it more child-friendly as my mind jumped ahead to a small girl wandering around on unsteady legs, but I reined it in quickly.

Family

Thoughts like that would get me nowhere.

Chapter 8

Ch. 8

Edward left and I shut and locked the door behind him, gathering our coffee cups as I made my way towards the kitchen. Glancing down at Mary in the bassinet as I walked by, I saw her eyes were open again.

"Hang on, lovey, Mommy will be right back."

I put the coffee cups in the empty sink. Edward had washed all the dishes, I noticed, and then I went to scoop her up. My life was so scheduled, I figured I'd better get her on one as quickly as possible.

Our day passed rather uneventfully. I was able to shower and clean up a bit, getting the house in order. I was even able to take a nap and play dress up with Mary, putting her in one of the new outfits that Rosalie bought her.

I heard my phone go off and leaned over Mary to grab it from where we were lying on the sofa, gazing at each other. The name on the screen made my heart splutter.

Edward.

"Hey," I tried to sound nonchalant, like the sight of his name on my caller ID didn't just interrupt the flow of blood to my body.

"Hey, I am about to go on the floor. I just wanted to call and see how your day went."

My heart skipped as it restarted itself.

"Fine, boring, but it went well. I tried to keep her awake for small chunks of

Family

time, trying to get her on a schedule." I wondered what he had done all day.
"How was your day?"

"About the same, except I took a long nap. I'm gonna be here until tomorrow around lunch, so I needed some sleep."

Instantly, I felt guilty.

"I'm sorry about that, that's my fault."

"Bella, stop. That's just my normal schedule, trust me. I'm glad you called me last night, and I want you to call again." He paused for a minute. "I want to see you again."

My heart stopped for the second time. For a fleeting moment, I questioned whether it was wise to encourage this relationship when I didn't have much to offer him and he would no doubt run the other direction, but I definitely wanted to see him again.

"Are you there?" he sounded a little panicked.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'm here," I said in a small voice. "I'd . . . I'd like that too."

"Great. So, would Saturday evening be an okay time? My schedule is off and on overnight the rest of the week, but Saturday I'm done around noon and will need to sleep for a little, but I could come over around five or six."

"That sounds perfect." *It was only four days. I could handle that, right?*

.

Mary went through another round of colic during the night, but this time, I did what Edward did, laying her across my lap and rubbing her back. It seemed to calm her and I felt like I had climbed the Mount Everest of Parenting 101. I sent Edward a text at four in the morning.

Family

Hey! I did it! Mary was screaming like before and I got her to calm down.

See? You are doing fine, you just need a little time and to trust yourself. A bath or shower helps too.

They said that her cord has to fall off before she can have a bath.

That's right, I forgot about that. Soon, then. You should get some rest.

But I'm nursing, trying to get her to go back to sleep.

Oh, okay.

And besides, I wanted to talk to you.

The texts went quiet for a few minutes and I freaked out that I had pushed him. Just when I'd about given up hope, my phone chimed.

Sorry about that, had to talk to one of the other doctors. We have a C-section scheduled for later this morning.

No problem, I thought I'd run you off.

No way, I want to talk to you too. I can't wait til Saturday. I'll bring dinner.

Okay, about six, right?

Right. Now go back to sleep.

Yes, doctor. :)

.....

I heard his knock on the door and smoothed down my shirt. I had exchanged my sweats for yoga pants, seeing as how nothing else fit just yet, and my shirt stretched a little over my huge boobs. I hadn't gotten the supply and demand

Family

thing down yet either. But I was clean at least, and I had taken the time to dry my hair. I felt like I couldn't really escape the smell of spit up, but maybe Edward wouldn't care. We'd spoken a few times on the phone and texted back and forth about everything and nothing. I felt really comfortable with him, but now, that I was actually going to *see* him again, I got really nervous.

Opening the door, I had forgotten how he affected me. I just stared for a second, a second too long obviously because he held up the bags of dinner and shook them at me.

"Hello? Hungry?"

"Sorry," I laughed, stepping aside so he could come in. "I'm just glad to see you, I think."

"You think?"

"Sorry, that's not what I mean." I closed the door and breathed in deeply, leaning back. God, I was fucking this up and the tears threatened again. Damn hormones, I cried at absolutely everything. Why was I about to cry now? I was just so glad he was here, that he hadn't ran, screaming in the other direction. I had an unlimited amount of baggage and yet he kept coming. Kept calling.

"I mean, that's why I was staring."

He set the bags of food on the table and came back to me.

"Hey," he said, lifting my chin up to look at him. My skin burned where he touched me. Did his skin burn too, I wondered?

"It's okay, I know what you meant. I missed you too."

His fingers traced my jawline for a second and his eyes fell to my mouth. I stopped breathing; thinking. . . maybe. Time ticked by and I felt the magnet pull me towards his mouth. His eyes were hooded and dark, his fingers found my ear and began their curl around my head.

Family

Mary cried just then, startling us both. For a second, I wasn't even aware of what the sound was and I blinked, my eyes coming back into focus. Edward smiled at me and stepped back so I could go pick her up.

Cockblocked by a baby, go figure.

"Hey sweet girl," I cooed, dancing around a little with her. I looked up to see Edward fixated on the bundle in my arms. "Do you want to hold her?"

He looked at me with bright eyes and a hopeful tone, "May I?"

"Of course, silly," and I gently handed her over. Her eyes were big and wide and I watched them for a second. "You play with her for a bit and I'll get dinner ready, what'd you bring?"

"Sushi," he said, his lips near Mary's temple, his eyes shut, as if he were making a memory. My heart flipped over.

"How'd you know?"

"How'd I know what?" he asked, walking with Mary over to the front window, whispering to her and pointing outside. Since some of the leaves had begun to fall, the trees were thinning. The way the branches laced together gave the coolest impression of a face, I had pointed it out to him the other morning, and now he was showing Mary.

I smiled to myself because he knew she couldn't really see any of that but he was acting like . . . like a dad. That thought got squashed down immediately. I cleared my throat and my head.

"That I love sushi."

"Because Tanya said that's what everyone brought you for your dinner the night after you had Mary. I was even able to get her to find out your favorites." He winked from across the room.

Family

My jaw dropped as I opened the bags. Sure enough, through the clear plastic to-go boxes were my three favorites, all gorgeously decorated, a feast for the eyes first.

"I don't know what to say . . . wow, you're good," was all I managed to come up with.

He just laughed. "It is the greatest thing to find someone who loves sushi as much as I do, so let me indulge us."

We sat down to dinner with our chopsticks and our wine. Edward didn't want to put Mary down and so he balanced her in the crook of his arm as he ate. Things were easy, natural and I felt the beginnings of hope stirring.

We took turns during dinner, trading Mary back and forth, eventually putting her down in the bassinet when the movement made her fall asleep and we moved to the couch with our wine glasses and our conversation. I wasn't sure what it was about Edward that made him so easy to talk to, but it was as if I had known him for a long time, instead of the short time I actually had.

We compared notes on everything from books to football teams and made a date to watch the college games together the next weekend since Edward didn't have to work. I spoke some about Renee and Charlie and how I was sad that they would never get to meet their granddaughter. Edward told me about his parents, Carlisle, a surgeon and Esme, a designer, and how she had redone his entire house.

I wanted to see this house and procured myself an open invitation as soon as I was able to drive again. The evening wore on and Mary woke up again, ready to nurse, but this time Edward got her, changing her diaper while I cleaned up our dishes. I could hear him talking to her as I was in the kitchen, washing the glasses and throwing away the take out boxes. Mary would coo back the smallest noises and I again wondered what it was that Edward saw in us. He could be out at the swanky bars, drinking expensive cocktails; instead he was here with a single mother, eating take out and changing diapers. If I let him in and he wanted out, I might not survive. I was starting to fall for him and his

Family

gentle ways and electric touches.

"Here's Momma," he said as I walked back in, two glasses of water in my hands.

I set the glasses down and took the bundle of baby in Edward's outstretched hands, our fingertips overlapping and the familiar and electrifying heat coursing through where our skin touched. It was addicting, the way he made me feel.

I sat down to nurse and Edward picked up the remote to turn on the television, his neck and ears reddening and I wondered how he felt about me nursing in front of him. I was surprisingly nonchalant about it, despite the fact that my entire body was tingling with him just sitting adjacent.

"Is this okay with you . . . ? If I nurse her, I mean."

"Of course, Bella. I'm a doctor, after all. Do you need anything?"

But he still looked away and kept his eyes on the screen and I couldn't help thinking he was forcing himself to look away.

"No, I can do it." I didn't want him to feel like he had to wait on me. I had already let him bring me dinner, I didn't want to depend too much.

"You can relax, Edward," I finally said after about ten minutes, laughing at him gently. He was as tense as a cobra.

"It's just . . ."

"What?" I slipped my breast back in my bra and put Mary up on my shoulder to burp. She was like a drunk sailor, her little mouth in a satisfied loll.

"I'm trying hard not to think of you like that," he said.

"Like what?" I asked, confused.

Family

"I'm trying to just let you be a mom," he said, "but it isn't working."

He got up and took Mary from me; she was dead asleep, her belly full of warm milk, and laid her in the crib in the corner of the living room. A minute later he was back in front of me, on his knees and heels in front of my chair, his palms on my thighs and an imploring look on his face.

"I can't keep this up any longer," he said.

He's leaving. I knew it. My heart sank and my eyes watered as I realized I had already started to depend on him. This feeling of nausea is what I deserve for relying on others, for letting hope in; this is why I knew I shouldn't have put any amount of trust into anyone. They leave and they take everything with them. Renee and Charlie left and took my childhood away. I had to grow up and be an adult, when all my friends were still getting to do stupid stuff. Mike left when I needed him most, and now . . . Edward.

The tears fell in earnest as I shook my head back and forth.

"No, no, no," I whispered over and over.

Edward's hands flew to my head, stilling me, his thumbs wiping my cheeks.

"What?" he said, panicked. "What did I say?"

"That you can't keep it up any longer . . . I should have known you would leave. A single mother isn't worth your time."

"Bella, listen, you've got it wrong." His hands became gentle, warm, nurturing on my skin. His fingers traced my mouth hesitantly before he pulled away and sat back on his heels, his head looking down. His hair looked so silky and I didn't, couldn't, resist putting my hands through it. It might be my last chance and I held my breath.

I dragged my fingertips across his scalp, trying to get him to talk, to grunt, anything so that we could communicate. Even if he was going to leave, I still

Family

wanted to hear his voice. His shoulders straightened, determined, resolved, and he looked up at me.

"From that very first night, from the very first moment I saw you, I have felt a pull to you," he said.

Chapter 9

Ch. 9

She thought I was going to leave?

As if that were even possible. The way she had completely consumed me from that first minute that I walked in her hospital room had been overwhelming. It was as if I had found something I'd never known I was searching for; all of a sudden, my life had meaning, reason. The connection I felt to her was a tangible thing and I couldn't let it go.

Working with the patients at the hospital, the obstetric patients and children in particular gave me great satisfaction. But seeing other men ecstatic over the new additions to their families had filled me with a longing that eventually dulled into an ever-present ache. It had ebbed to the point that I almost never noticed it anymore, it was just the way it was. Meeting Bella that night in the least ideal of circumstances had given me a piece to the puzzle of my life that made the picture complete. And now that I found it, I wasn't about to let it, or her go. All of a sudden there was color and vibrancy and a reason to get up in the morning.

She consumed me, for no explainable reason. Mary was a bonus. Nothing about this situation scared me at all; it was so right.

I sat back on my heels, putting my head down as I tried to come up with the magic words. I felt her fingers in my hair and it gave me renewed courage.

"From that very first night, from the very first moment I saw you, I have felt a pull to you."

The tears continued to fall from her eyes, I could see her shutting down and thought about everything she'd told me. Her parents left her, not their fault of

Family

course, but they were gone just the same. Mary's father left her, and now she thought I was leaving her. She was building a wall right in front of me, hammering bricks and planks into place faster than I could even think of what to say that wouldn't freak her out or scare her off.

"Bella, listen to me." I grabbed both of her hands, pushing back up on my knees until my eyes were level with hers. "I'm not leaving, but I can't keep pretending that I don't want to be with you all the time . . . to touch you . . . kiss you. And I know that it's too soon, you have so much to . . . with Mary right now, too much in your life to worry about me and my needs, but I'm not going anywhere. I want to be a part of your life, however you'll let me."

Her eyes focused on me intently, blinking owlshly as if she were seeing me for the first time.

"I will go as slowly as you want me to, but please don't push me away."

"You want . . . you want to be with me? To kiss me?" I laughed to myself that this was what she'd focused on. I desperately wanted to kiss her, to feel her lips on mine and know that she felt the same way I did.

"Very much so." I nodded.

"But why? I have nothing to offer you except sleepless nights and more baggage than any one person deserves."

"I already have sleepless nights," I laughed, "and my place has tons of room for luggage; lots of closets."

"Oh," was her response, and she smiled shyly, looking down.

I let go of one of her hands, thumbing away her fresh tears and pulling her chin back up. Her eyes . . . I needed to see her eyes.

"Don't look away from me, I need to know what you're thinking," I said.

Family

The magnetic pull drew me down, our lips connecting as if it were the most familiar thing in the world instead of our first kiss. She was so soft, so hesitant, but I was patient and was rewarded when I felt her hand slip around my neck, holding me close to her.

As If I would ever want to escape.

She intensified the pressure, tilting her head for a deeper angle and my inner ego rallied, wanting to instinctively lean in to her, push her back into the chair, ravish her, but I knew this would be too much. I backed off a little and touched my forehead to hers, trying to catch my breath.

"I promise," I whispered, my eyes boring into hers, "just don't push me away."

"I never thought I'd hear you say that . . . I'd hoped, but hoping hasn't always worked out so well for me in the past," she said quietly. "I'm sorry I freaked out."

"Shush," I said, touching her lips with my fingertips. "I understand why you did. I'm not like those other people, I'm not leaving. I *can't* leave," I confessed, "you've bewitched me."

"I can't be without you either . . . I've never felt this way about anyone."

My heart raced at her words, and I stood up and pulled her up out of the chair, settling us both down again with her in my lap. She laughed when we were seated, her legs across mine, angled so that I could see her properly, kiss her properly.

"This is better; now I can kiss you," I defended myself. Her hair had fallen in her eyes and I ran my fingers through it, pushing it back so that I could see her face and pull her to me. Her lips were timid, unsure, as if she still didn't quite believe what I was telling her. I gripped her head gently with both hands and unleashed the full force of my emotion on her. Almost my whole life I'd waited for her, for this woman, and I needed her to understand.

Family

I touched my tongue to her lips, begging for permission and she responded, opening her mouth to me, opening her world. She tasted of wine and sweetness and I knew I would never get enough. We stayed thus for a while, exploring, tasting, laughing . . . trusting. It was at times alternately heated and calm, but I was content just to hold her, knowing she had let me in.

Mary stirred after an hour or so and I went to get her. It was getting very late, and Bella was fading.

"What time has she been nursing at night?" I asked, going through the diaper change as Bella watched, an amused smile on her face.

"Well, I try to keep her up as late as I can because it means I get more overnight sleep," she said. "Rose told me that the sooner I can get her on a night and day schedule, the better off."

"So, you've been putting her down around eleven or so?"

"Yeah, but it is really hard sometimes to stay up that late, I'm more of an early morning person."

"Well, what if you nurse her now and then I'll stay up with her. You can go on to bed and I'll bring her to you in a few hours, before I leave. Hopefully, she'll sleep after that," I offered.

Bella's eyes lit up. "Are you sure? You don't mind?"

I snapped Mary's onesie and wrapped her back up, trying not to roll my eyes. Bella's trust issues wouldn't be solved with a few choice kissing sessions, as fun as that may be. Time would be the only thing that would convince her of my intentions. I passed Mary on to her, watching as she got ready to nurse, trying to keep my thoughts in the PG range . . . it wasn't easy. Bella was very modest about nursing but I caught a glimpse of a soft, creamy white swell of skin. Swallowing audibly, I kneeled down in front of her.

Family

"I want to," I said earnestly. "I love holding her . . . rocking her. And I want you to sleep because I'm going to monopolize all of your waking hours."

She grinned and leaned over to kiss me.

"Yes, doctor. And you know, you can stay . . . you know, on the couch if you want."

I smiled back at her. "I may just take you up on that because I really don't want to leave."

I sat back against the sofa, flipping through the channels until I could take Mary again. It was peaceful and for a little bit, it felt like we were a family. My heart seized on that feeling and I tried to keep the smile off my face, knowing it would elicit questions.

"Um, Edward?" Bella asked after a little bit as she switched sides with Mary.

"Yeah?"

"Monday is Mary's two week checkup . . . do you . . . do you want to go with us?"

My heart stirred. I knew what it took for Bella to ask me this, to invite me in to her life this way.

"I would love to. I have to go in to the hospital in the afternoon and work until Tuesday evening. What time is the appointment?"

"It's in the late morning, do you think you could make that?"

"I'll be there, maybe you can come pick me up, since you'll be able to drive by then and can see my place. I can make us some breakfast."

"I'd love that; I'm dying to see what your mom did."

Family

"It's a date then."

I turned my attention back to the television screen, laughing to myself about how our first date out was a trip to the pediatrician's office and what a lucky guy that made me. There would be time for romantic dinners, but for now, we had a baby to take care of.

Chapter 10

Ch. 10

"You know, I can drive now," she said, laughing.

We were on our way to my parent's house to watch the football game. Washington was playing Boise State and my mom had insisted on us coming over to their house so that she could cook. Bella had met them one time at dinner, but Mom and Dad had never met Mary and Mom was practically foaming at the mouth.

After the initial shock had worn off of how I was dating a single mother, and how I had met that single mother, Mom accepted Bella unconditionally, much to Bella's surprise. She had been expecting judgement, but my parents didn't really operate that way.

"Bella, it's so nice to meet you. Edward has told us so much about you that I feel like I already know you," Esme said.

Bella blinked; she looked a little stunned by the kindness spilling forth. I just squeezed her hand and smiled at her blank look.

"Thank you, I'm glad to get to meet you too," she said shyly, shaking Dad's hand and accepting a kiss from my mother.

"Where's little Mary?" Mom had asked. I should have known she was itching to get her hands on the baby.

"We left her with her Aunt Alice for the evening," I told her, wrapping my arm around Bella's waist, pulling her close to my side. I knew she was anxious, both about leaving Mary for the first time and about meeting my parents, but I also knew Bella would feel better if she didn't have to worry about Mary crying in

Family

the middle of dinner. We had gone out a few times, just the three of us and Bella had been a nervous wreck, profusely apologetic to anyone and everyone if Mary even made a peep. So I'd convinced her she'd have a better time if she let Alice and Jasper practice on Mary for a few hours.

"So this is your first time out without her?" Esme asked.

Bella nodded, looking at the floor.

"I understand," she said sympathetically. "The first time we left Edward at home with his grandmother, I thought I was going to have a heart attack imagining everything that might go wrong."

"She made me call home every half hour," Dad laughed. "And you know, we didn't have cell phones then, so it was sort of a pain."

Mom laughed and Bella giggled nervously as we followed the girl to the dark and comfortable booth. I knew that my mom had chosen this restaurant specifically for its warm decor and simple, delicious food; it was one of our favorite restaurants and we'd been coming here since I was young. She wanted Bella to be as relaxed as possible, anxious to set a good impression.

"Of course when we'd gotten home, Edward was in his crib, naked because his grandmother was letting him 'air out,' and he'd doused his entire bed and the wall," Esme laughed.

"Great, Mom. Thanks," I said, red-faced and laughing.

"Oh darling, just pointing out the differences between girls and boys."

I'd just rolled my eyes and listened as Bella laughed, genuine and beautiful.

It had been the beginning of an easy friendship between two of my three favorite women. Mom was dying to meet Mary and had begged and cajoled to get us over to their house.

Family

I pulled my car up the arched driveway and looked over at Bella, she was panicking.

"Are you worried?" I asked.

"No, just a little nervous, I guess," she said. "What if Mary . . ."

"What, acts like a baby?" I said with a smile. "Bella, she will be fine, and it wouldn't matter anyway. Let me get her, she's getting heavy."

Mary was growing. At a little over two months old, she was still small, but she'd lost the sunken look that newborns have; her face had filled in some and was round and rosy and perfect. We'd been through two checkups and she had to get her first round of shots at the last one. It had killed me to watch her face crumple in pain, but I knew it was the best thing for her; the alternative was way worse.

Her eyes would focus now when I got close in and she would make noises back as I spoke to her. I could tell she recognized me when I picked her up and knew the difference between me and Bella. I had fallen for both my girls hard and tried to get to spend as much time as possible with them, sleeping over on the couch or having them stay at my house if I was working late. We had a portable crib over in the corner of my living room and Bella would sleep in my bed. I loved the nights after she stayed because my sheets would smell like her, and there would inevitably be something of Mary's left behind, a sock or a pacifier. It made my otherwise cold house feel warm, lived in.

My relationship with Bella had grown as well. She trusted me, I thought, for the most part. She definitely trusted me with Mary, but with herself, her heart--I thought she was still being cautious though. Sometimes, she would ask me things, ask me to do things and I thought she was waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop. All I had to give her besides myself was time and time was what I intended to ply her with, because it was what she needed more than anything else.

Family

I had just hefted Mary's carrier out of the back of my car when I heard the front door open and looked up to see my mother standing in the doorway, her hands clasped over her face with open excitement.

"So, I guess she's glad Mary's here," I laughed, a little nervous that Bella might feel overwhelmed. I watched her face carefully and the expression I saw confused me. She looked . . . sad.

"Hey, you okay?" I whispered.

She just nodded and looked at the ground as Esme flew down the steps and beckoned for us to come up and into the house. I followed Bella in and went straight for the spot on the floor in front of the fireplace, the large flat screen television over it, the teams already a few minutes in to the first quarter.

"Oh Bella, she's just beautiful. May I hold her?" Mom asked.

"Of course, Esme . . . please," Bella smiled genuinely and I pulled her towards the kitchen.

"Mom, we're just gonna get something to drink," I said to her back as she waved me on absently. My mother was down on her hands and knees unbuckling Mary from the seat belt, the joy on her face reflected in my father's. I'd never seen them like this before and I was stunned to see her eyes flutter closed as Mary was snuggled against her neck as if she were literally drinking her in.

We made it to the kitchen and I rounded on Bella, pushing her into the counter, placing my arms on either side of her, trapping her in.

"Now, tell me what's wrong," I said to her, my lips on the sensitive spot of her cheek just before her ear.

Bella leaned back and brushed some of my hair out of my eyes, smoothing the top and trailing her fingers down to my chin. I turned my head to kiss her fingers as they passed.

Family

"I was just . . . thinking," she said.

"Thinking about what?" I prodded.

She sighed, getting that sad look again. "Just that Charlie or Renee will never get to meet Mary, to spoil her or love her and while it pleases me to no end to see Esme and Carlisle act like that, I can't help wishing . . ."

"That it was your parents doing it," I finished for her. She nodded, and looked at my shirt collar, pressing it back into place, fiddling. Her fingers stroked the hollow at the base of my throat, gently.

"I'm sorry sweetheart, I can't imagine what that must feel like. If you want me to tell Mom and Dad to back off . . ." I started to offer.

"No . . . no! Of course not," she said. "Mary needs lots of people in her life that love her, and I can't think of anyone better."

"I love her," I said, trapping her eyes with mine just as I'd trapped her body. "You know that, right?"

"Yes, I know that," she whispered, "and I love that you love her. I think she loves you too, even though she can't say it."

My heart doubled in size. I had never sought Bella's opinion of my relationship with Mary other than making sure it would be okay with her if spent time with them, but now that she'd given me her unconditional blessing I was overwhelmed with it.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"Just the way she's comfortable with you, the way she calms when you hold her. She doesn't do that with many people."

I smiled, rather proud of myself and I reached out to touch Bella's face, cupping her cheek and running my thumb underneath her eye.

Family

"She's not the only one I love," I said quietly, watching her face carefully.

Her eyes intensified, staring in to mine as if she were looking for the punch line to a joke. I was momentarily hurt that she would doubt my feelings, but then she found what she had been looking for in my gaze, her eyes widened, her mouth opened in a little 'O' and finally smiled, looking more beautiful than anyone had a right to.

"Really?" she whispered, unable to keep the smile off her face even though I could tell she needed more convincing.

"Really."

"Well . . ."

I didn't give her a chance to say what was on her mind, pushing her back against the counter, pressing myself in to her. Bella had been to see Dr. Uley and had been pronounced 'fit and healed.' She'd told me this with considerable embarrassment one night when we were over at my house. We'd had dinner, put Mary down and were making out on the couch. My arousal had been evident and I'd pulled away from her, anxious not to make *her* anxious.

"You don't have to pull away from me," she'd said.

"But I do, you are still healing."

"Dr. Uley said I was fine, that all was well . . . down there . . . " Her face had flamed with her blush. "I went to see her for my checkup the other day."

She had kept this appointment a secret, obviously not comfortable with me knowing. I'd known it was about time though. I wasn't hurt that she hadn't told me. I understood, she was still testing my limits, wondering when I'd run. I'd apparently not done a good job of showing her how impossible that was.

"Bella, I'm sure you've healed physically . . . it's been plenty of time and you had a normal birth. I'm talking about inside . . . all that you've been through." I

Family

didn't want her to jump into a physical relationship so quickly. As much as I wanted her, she needed to know I was in this for the long haul.

"Thank you," she said and kissed me.

"I do, I love you," I told her, breaking our kiss. "And it's okay if you can't tell me back right now; I'm a patient man. I just wanted you to know you are not alone."

Chapter 11

Ch. 11

"Edward . . ." I tried again. His kiss made me weak, as well as his declaration. Could it possibly be true? I just didn't have this kind of luck, that the guy I was hopelessly in love with could love me . . . and my illegitimate daughter back. I mean, I wasn't necessarily about self-flagellation, but we had to call a spade a spade.

"Shh, don't say anything now." He put his arms around me and pulled me close. He sighed, seemingly happy when I wrapped my arms around his back and pulled him in to me, my cheek against his chest. He kissed the top of my head and left his lips there, breathing in and out. I felt protected and was reminded of the way he often looked when he was holding Mary. He always looked . . . like he loved her.

I knew he did, and in that moment, *I believed* he loved me too. I had heard him say it, but that wasn't what convinced me, after all, I'd heard Mike say it too. Many times over. When Edward said the words, I'd felt them to my very bones.

I felt them in the way he looked at me when he thought I wasn't paying attention. I felt them in the way my blood tingled and sped through my veins. I felt them in the way my heart raced and my skin pebbled with his casual touch. I felt them in the way he'd pressed me into the counter, his arousal insistent against my stomach, creating an equal if not more forceful reaction in me. My legs felt like jelly, my head spun. My mouth wanted to sing, but my brain made me stop and think.

"I want to talk to you," I said. "Quit shushing me."

He looked down at me, amused. "Really? What do you want to say, Ms. Swan?"

Family

"Just that . . . I . . . I love you, too," I said, trying to instill the confidence in my voice that I felt in my heart, because I did. He and Mary were my everything, my world. To be separated from him at this point would kill me.

He looked down at me, a skeptical look on his face. "I don't want you to say it just because I did . . ."

"Now it's my turn to shush you," I said with a smile, my fingers tracing his mouth. "I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. You've gotten to me, made me yours; you can't leave me now because I won't let you go."

He stared at me for a full-on minute, smoothing my hair back, cradling my face as if he'd never truly seen it before, his face full of wonder.

"What did I do to deserve such a woman?" he whispered.

"You're my missing piece," I said with a smile and a shrug. "You fit with me, and I love you."

I leaned up and kissed him, chastely, just touching my lips to his. His mouth was a bit more insistent though and he pressed me back again against the counter, devouring me, his hands in my hair, his hardness pressing against me, eliciting feelings I hadn't felt . . . ever. Things had been good with Mike, but it had been nothing like this. Edward brought out a level of passion in me that I never knew existed and I kissed him back, our tongues sliding, lips pressing together like I couldn't get enough.

"Ahem," Carlisle cleared his throat and I felt Edward freeze mid-kiss. I started snickering out of embarrassment, my forehead falling to his chest, Edward started to laugh too.

"Uh . . . sorry, Dad," he said through the laughter.

"No problem, I just came in to tell Bella that Esme is pretty smitten with Mary; I think you have yourself a built-in babysitter any time you may want one."

Family

"Yeah, I understand," Edward said. "I'm pretty smitten with her too."

Except he was looking down at me.

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We got home to my house late from Carlisle and Esme's. I rocked Mary in the chair in her room, and put her down in the crib. She would sleep for five or six hours at a time now, and as long as I put her down late enough, she'd sleep until five in the morning. The first night she'd done that, I woke up three times just to check on her. I freaked out thinking something was wrong, holding my hand close to her nose until I felt her warm breath.

When I came back out to the living room, Edward was stretched out on the couch, his hand behind his head, shoes off, television clicker in hand watching SportsCenter. He looked deliciously comfortable lying there, stubble dusting his chin, his hair a riot of messy locks, his shirt riding up on his stomach where he must have scratched. I could see his bellybutton and ridges of muscle over the top edge of his jeans and boxers. I went over to him and took the clicker out of his hand, laying it on the coffee table.

"Hey," I said, lying down on top of him, my chin at his chest, his buttons undone a little. I began kissing his open neckline, his hair tickling my nose, my fingers working more buttons, exposing more skin. I heard his breathing hitch and smiled to myself, intent on my purpose.

"Hey, yourself," he said back, his breathing uneven.

I felt him harden underneath me and I dragged myself up him a few inches so that I could reach his mouth. He hissed a little under his breath and his lips were soft with mine, his hands around my back, tentatively reaching underneath my shirt. I felt his fingertips on my spine, speculative and timid. Almost as if he were uncertain that he could touch me.

"What's wrong?" I asked in between kisses against his chin, his neck and the corner of his mouth.

Family

"Nothing, I'm just wondering if this is a good idea or not," he said.

"What does *that* mean?" I asked, pushing myself up and off to sit down between the side of his legs and the back of the couch. He'd totally killed the mood.

"Don't be upset," he said, which of course just made me upset. I rolled my eyes, probably not the most mature reaction, but it was all I had and looked away from him.

"Seriously, why wouldn't it be a good idea? Did I not tell you that I love you? I want you, I need you," I whispered. I was putting myself out there for him and he was rejecting me. I turned away from him again, pouting, tears filling my eyes.

This is different . . . this is not the same thing, I kept telling myself. *He is not Mike.*

He sat up, pulling me over and gathering me on his lap. He stroked my hair and I leaned my face into his palm, looking at him, catching his eyes with mine. He owed me an explanation. Did he not want me?

"It's hard to say no to you when you look at me like that," he said, his fingers tracing my face, under my eyes, down the line of my nose, around my lips.

"So why are you saying no? Do you not want this?" I asked, touching my tongue to his finger tip before he could pull it away. He left his finger there, watching my tongue trail up its length and pull it into my mouth. I sucked at the very tip, nipping it with my teeth. His eyes darkened as he watched his finger disappear into my mouth. His lips parted and I could see his chest rise and fall a little faster.

"Bella . . ." he whispered, hesitating for just a second before his mouth came down on mine, his hands gripping my head. My inner goddess rallied as I took everything he gave me, demanding more and more until he had pushed me down on the couch and hovered over me. His weight pushed me into the

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cushions and all I could do was wrap my arms and legs around him, pulling him closer.

"You have no idea how much I want you . . . how long I've wanted you," he said, his voice muffled against my neck. His lips dusted across my collarbone, his hands fumbling between us, pulling my shirt up my stomach and pulling it off of me. I squealed inside, and arched my neck, giving him more access as his mouth traveled down my chest between my breasts.

Thank God I had never gone for the standard nursing bras, I just didn't find them comfortable or attractive. I wore regular bras and was wearing one of my favorites tonight, a white lace with the snap in the front, which made nursing much easier while allowing me to still feel pretty. Of course, I'd had to get all new sizes.

"Beautiful," he murmured. "I can't tell you how many times I've pictured this in my head." He leaned down and licked my nipple through the lace, shooting electricity through me. It was a different sensation to what I was used to and I ran my hands through his hair, pinning his mouth to me, arching my hips up into his.

Oh. My. God. It had been . . . a while. His mouth latched on to me through my bra and the friction was almost unbearable. I wanted more of him, I wanted all of him, but maddeningly, he pulled away.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," he said.

"Edward, don't stop, please," I whispered, looking up at his anguished face. "Why did you stop?"

"Because, I shouldn't be this crazy with you, I should be gentle and loving and take my time, but I can't stop myself." He had pushed himself up on one arm and was still looking down, his palm running down between my breasts, hovering over the latch of my bra.

"I love you . . . touch me," I said. "It's okay."

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His face washed with doubt and I saw his struggle. He wanted me, of that there was no question, but it was warring with his protective instinct. I knew he thought I wasn't ready, that I was rebounding somehow, or unable to accept all of him. I took his hand in mine and guided his, unlatching my bra for him, my breasts spilling out. His eyes darkened hungrily and his mouth found my nipple, making me cry out with the exquisite feeling.

"Uhn . . ." I managed. My hands got the rest of his buttons undone and I dragged his shirt off his shoulders, my fingers digging in to the ridges that defined the different muscles. I was overcome with possession, and I pulled him closer, kissing his neck, his ear, biting the muscle in the top of his shoulder. God, he tasted so good.

Then I heard her. Mary was crying. As my brain registered, I felt Edward's forehead and sigh land on my chest.

"Probably for the best . . ." I heard him mumble.

What in the hell did that mean?

"Let me," he said, pushing off of me and stumbling towards her room.

I sat there for a minute, dazed. *For the best.* What did that mean anyway? I sat up and fixed my bra leaning over to grab my shirt, turning it right side out so I could put it back on.

"She just needed her pacifier," he said, standing there shirtless and sculpted, his hair sticking up where my fingers had been. His jeans were hanging on his hips, just so. All the times we'd made out, I'd never gotten his shirt off of him before and I just stared. I swallowed thickly, but then remembered what he'd said.

For the best.

I turned away, unable to keep my cool when he was there, looking like that, like something to eat. But then there he was, on his knees in front of me, his

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eyes searching for mine. My heart beat unsteadily and my blood raced. I traced his neck from his ear down to his shoulder, across his collarbone to the hollow in his throat. He sat there silently and looked at me.

"Why?" I asked finally, knowing he would know what I meant. "What's wrong with me?"

"There's nothing wrong with you." He grimaced and forced a laugh out, although it sounded more like a frustrated and impatient *humph*. "It's me."

"Very original, Edward. *It's not you, it's me?* Really?"

His eyes rolled. "You don't understand."

"So make me understand, because right now, from where I'm sitting you say you love me, but you don't want to make love to me. Which has me confused because all I want to do is be as close to you as possible."

His eyes darkened, and he hesitated.

"Don't you see? You won. You've broken in, broken through. It's like you spent all this time weaving your way into the fabric that holds me together, but you've left the edges raw and unraveled."

He was quiet for a minute before he answered. I smoothed his hair, my fingers feeling their way through his scalp, feeling the ridges and bumps, the valley down the back of his neck.

"Here's the thing . . ." he paused again. "You aren't ready yet, your heart has been betrayed and I don't want to take this step until I know for sure that you are healed."

"Why do you get to make that decision though? Shouldn't I be the one to tell you if I'm ready or not?" And in that moment, everything came crashing down on me; it was all crystal clear. I realized that *he* wasn't ready. All that he had told me, everything we'd shared, experienced, it was a fantasy. Here I was,

Family

anxious for my ready-made family to be perfect and he had just been playing house with me. I should have known . . . I did know, I knew it from the beginning. A single mother, me, in particular . . . just not worth the full commitment. And why would I be? Knocked up with someone else's kid. My heart ached for Mary and I was angry that he would do that to her.

Everything spun around me as my axis righted itself. Searching through my brain for my old comfort zones, I wrapped myself in my old insecurities and fortified my position. I looked at him, saw his confusion at the look on my face, and braced myself for his pretty words. Words that he was so good at manufacturing.

"I think you should go," I whispered before he could speak.

His eyes widened, panicked almost but I shut down. Everything he'd told me, it was a lie. Well, not a lie, just some sort of made up story. A chapter out of a romance novel. He was too perfect and I was too flawed.

"Bella, don't do this," he said, reaching for me, but I leaned back out of his grasp and stared at an imaginary spot on the wall.

"Just go, please."

Chapter 12

Ch.12

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Shit. Fuck.

This could not be happening.

I felt like she had kicked me in the balls, the pain was unimaginable, doubled over with all the breath leaving my body. She was telling me to leave. Not just leave for the night, leave forever. It was there in her vacant eyes. The old Bella was back and she had crawled on bruised and scabbed hands and knees back into her fortress of self-preservation because I had pushed her . . . no, chased her back.

"Bella . . ." I reached for her, but she shrank away, flinching - as if my touch would hurt her or as if it repulsed her, or worse as if she wanted it, but couldn't have it. A sting instead of a current. Minutes ago, I had been close to having it all, fulfilling the fantasy of her body that had consumed me since that first inappropriate thought in the hospital. She had no idea how much I wanted her.

It scared me almost, how selfish I was really. I wanted only to lose myself in her, over and over, feel the slap of thighs and exchange of the electricity that was ours from the beginning. I ached to touch her even now, as she curled her legs up and away from me, a physical rejection to go along with her words. And even now as she stood up and walked away, leaving me, to go to her bedroom alone, I felt her magnetic pull so much stronger than the planets around the sun.

She was *my* sun and I was dousing her fire with my inept explanations and childish words.

I heard the door close and I sat on the couch, reaching for my shirt, redoing the

Family

buttons with fumbling, shaky hands. My life, my future was falling apart and it was my own doing.

One thing was for sure, I wasn't leaving. I may have fucked up, but I wasn't about to compound it. There was no way I was walking away, not when we were so close, but it was after midnight and I was exhausted. My shift at the hospital started at four and I needed to get some sleep. I laid down on the couch, pulling the Bella-scented comforter around me, closing my eyes, lost in its thoughts and memories, tossing and turning, unable to stop the pain ripping through me.

I needed Bella, not just her comforter.

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I had never slept in her bed before, always sleeping on the couch either here or at my place when she stayed over. I realized as I looked at her small form lying twisted in the sheets as if she were trying to outrun something in her dreams, that she was the only thing I'd ever wanted and I was pushing her away. Apparently, she wasn't the only one with trust issues.

Epiphanies can really suck when they give you the why and how.

I didn't trust her love for me, and that was the inherent problem. I pushed her away telling her what I thought was best for her when in reality, it was me. She had opened up her entire heart and world to me and trusted me with it, and I had betrayed her by not accepting that gift. I had let her do all the work while I sat back and kept myself bridled, dictating the future as I saw it should be, 'playing house' as she had so aptly put it.

The light in the bathroom was on overflowing into the room through the half-shut door and I studied her: her hair dark and tangled on the white pillow like spilled chocolate. Her shoulder exposed, the spaghetti strap of her pajamas the only clothing impairing the line of her collarbone, the curve of her breast evident at the neckline. I remembered back to an hour ago when she had been naked underneath me, the beautiful silken skin a blank canvas for my mouth.

Family

I stripped down quickly, my clothes coming off as well as my fears, to my boxers and climbed into bed behind her, spooning her, wrapping my arms and legs around her. She shuddered into me, the sobs coming out quietly, her hair soaked and crunchy from her tears.

"Shh, Bella," I whispered into her neck, kissing her skin, running my nose up into her hair and inhaling, memorizing her scent again. "I'm here and I'm not leaving you, no matter what you say."

I felt her stomach clench again and again under my hand as her crying continued, her sobs wracking her body.

"I'm not leaving . . . I'm not," I repeated into her neck. "I love you."

She turned in my arms, her hands on my face as if she were making sure I was real and not a figment of her imagination.

"I'm still here," I said unnecessarily, but I didn't want her to think she was dreaming.

"But why?"

"Because, I love you."

"But . . . why?" she said again.

"Because you . . . you and Mary are everything to me," I said, repeating what she'd told me earlier, back at my parents' house. "You were right, I didn't trust you; I thought I knew what was best and tried to make all the decisions."

"I do love you . . . I do," she whispered.

"I know. I believe you."

Unsure and shaky, I leaned in, my lips touching hers, lightly rubbing back and forth. Her mouth was parted and I pulled in her breath, needing to fill my lungs

Family

with Bella air. I touched my tongue to her lips because I wasn't sure what she would allow. I had killed a small part of her and I didn't know if I could resuscitate it. She hesitated as she took a tentative step out towards me on that tightrope of our emotions, afraid that I wouldn't be there to catch her when she fell.

I wanted her to fall because I would always catch her.

I felt the barest hint of her tongue, like it was our first kiss again and I imploded, my hands pulling her small body to mine, wrapping myself around her, an Edward comforter this time. Her mouth was my open exploration and I examined it all, taking and giving until I felt her hands relax, smoothing up my back, mapping me, accepting me.

I pushed her down on the bed, trapping her legs between my thighs, leaving her mouth in favor of her stomach. The sliver of skin like a satin ribbon above her boxer shorts and I kissed up, pulling her tiny pajama top off, her breasts displayed for me heaving and needy. For a minute, I just stared, my fingertips tracing everywhere, around the heaviness, up and over the tips, puckered and tight.

Her face was a sea of emotion and need. Her eyes closed to the sensations.

"Are you . . . sure?" she asked, her eyes still closed but her voice betraying her fears. "You need to be sure." She was asking for my full disclosure, my absolute submission to us.

"Never more so."

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Love with Bella.

Her skin, her lips, her eyes, her mouth, her fingers, her legs, her arms, her stomach.

Family

Touching me, tasting me, watching me, kissing me, stroking me, wrapping me, holding me, pressing me.

Loving me.

Bella gave all of herself to me, letting go so that I could take; taking from me everything I had to give. My fingers skimmed her body, feeling her soft skin, her silken bits, her tense, coiled core. She was warmth incarnate, my long fingers merely the prelude for both of us, stroking her, releasing her from the prison of contained energy that I had put there with my mouth. She came apart as I watched her. My fingers and thumb coaxing her shudders, her sounds. She created a feral monster in me as I desperately fumbled to consume her. I strained, my hips anxious and vehement to meet hers, unable to wait for her to ride out her high completely and I pulled her knees around me, sliding into her without preamble or gentleness.

I really was a selfish creature, but her moan cleared my head.

"I'm sorry," I clenched out, my teeth grinding as I contemplated the feeling of being inside her, wrapped in her vise-like warmth, sensation shooting up my stomach and down my legs. "Are you okay?"

I really should have gone more slowly, making sure she was completely healed despite the doctor's diagnosis, but it was too much. Bella was too much.

"So good . . ." as her torso arched up and her head flew back into her pillow, shaking back and forth as her body took me in, engulfed me.

I pulled out, desperate to experience the plunge again and thus it commenced, my road towards being reborn within Bella's body. Out and in, over and over I continued my journey of redemption with the only girl I'd ever really loved. She loved me back, my flaws, my controlling tendencies, my everything. Her sounds spurred me faster as I felt her reaching the edge again, and I pulled up on her bottom, changing the angle.

Family

"Edward . . . oh . . . oh," her last moan changing in pitch as I hit it . . . just there.

She clenched around me, a vacuum pulling my release. I emptied in to her, pulsing and and thrusting, unwilling to let it go even though I was riding high.

Bella. She was my everything and I loved her. With everything.

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The light was still dark as I heard her cries, soft and whimpering from the other room. I extricated myself from Bella's akimbo limbs grabbing my boxers on the way, tiptoeing to Mary's room and the sounds.

"Shhh . . . I'm here," I whispered. "Hey, sweet girl."

Mary continued to cry but settled as I held her and she gained purchase on her pacifier. I checked the clock in her room, her schedule was right on time with the early morning. I changed her and brought her back to Bella, pausing as I caught sight of her leg outside of the sheet, long and toned and white. Her naked back exposed by the shifted comforter, her arm clutching the pillow instead of me. My insides stirred with want but I tamped them down. Knowing what I knew now, discovering Bella's body as my own, I wasn't sure I would be able to ever stop with her. Now more than ever, sharing took on a whole new meaning.

I stroked her long hair, kissing next to her ear. "Someone wants Mommy," I whispered.

Bella shifted back on her side, smiling up at me with a sleepy face, clutching the comforter against her nakedness, pulling Mary down next to her on the bed to nurse.

"I'll go make coffee," I said and started to get up.

"No, stay," she said, reaching up with her hand to grab mine.

Family

"Are you sure?" I said, already getting back in the bed, a Mary sandwich in the making.

"Yes, you belong here."

I laid on my side, stroking the back of Mary's head watching fascinated as she nursed. Bella dozed off and on and when she rolled over to switch sides, she backed into my chest and I watched Mary's little face over Bella's shoulder. It was such an intimate, quiet moment and I was lost in the beauty of it. I didn't want it to end and I was afraid things might be different in the light of the new day, but they were my girls and I remained hopeful, trusting . . . accepting of Bella's gift.

My girls.

Chapter 13

Ch.13

"Hello?" I cleared my throat and tried again, "Hello?"

"Bella?"

Alice.

"Hey." I sat up, looking around at my empty room, but smelled coffee and heard kitchen noises. My heart calmed its racing; Edward was still here and I was pleasantly sore and warm. Clutching my comforter around me, still warm from Edward and me, I remembered. Alice. "What's up?"

"Hey, sweetie, sorry that I obviously woke you up, but I have news."

I was instantly on alert.

"Is Jasper okay? Did something happen?"

"No, no, honey. It's good news, it's over. They've settled."

"Who's settled for what?"

Coffee. I needed coffee and grabbed my robe, padding into the kitchen to be met with Edward's bare back and boxer shorts standing over the stove, Mary asleep in her swing in the corner.

My life. Beautiful.

"Look alert, Bella," Alice said frustrated. "The trucking company."

Family

"Oh, my God."

Edward turned and looked at me, took in my stunned expression and walked over.

"What?" he mouthed and I just shook my head, handing him the phone and sitting down at the table, staring at the bowl of green apples.

"Hello?" I heard him say, his voice distant, like at the end of a tunnel. I watched Mary. Back and forth and found my ground again. Edward had moved away, and then moved back, coffee appearing in front of me, still swirling from where he'd stirred it.

He was mumbling with Alice, confirming times and saying, "Yes, I'll make sure she's there . . . I'll ask her, but I know my mom would love to . . . okay."

I looked up as the phone went on the counter.

"Hey," he said, sitting down with me, taking my hand and kissing my fingers. "Alice said her mom and dad want you there in an hour and a half. Can I call my mom to babysit?"

I just nodded. He was taking charge, helping me and I was so grateful. This was different from what we had argued about last night; we were a team and he was picking up my slack.

"Go get in the shower, I'll do everything else."

"But, don't you have to work?" *Please say no, please say no.*

"Not until four. I'm going to take you to Brandon and Brandon."

"There are some of your clean clothes in the washer," I said relieved, "if you want to shower too. You left them a while back one night when you had to work the next day."

Family

"Thank God for small miracles." He smiled. "Hey." He grabbed my waist as I walked past him, my coffee wrapped in my hands, focusing on the little things, not the big things: a shower, clean hair.

"I love you." His eyes shone and his mouth twisted in a little smile.

I stopped and set my cup down focusing on him, my emotions about the phone call pushed away for a minute. I stepped in between his legs, my fingers in his hair and his under my robe, under my shirt and up my back.

So warm, so strong, so good.

"I love you, too." My mouth kissing his mouth. He tasted like coffee and bacon, mornings and love and promises. "How long . . . do we have again?"

"How long does it take to get to their office?" His mouth on my stomach now, my shirt fisted in his fingers.

"Only ten minutes." I gasped as his tongue reached my belly button.

"I'll have Mom come over here, so that gives us an hour." His hands were on my ass now, under my boxers, kneading, teasing, his mouth doing illicit things.

"We . . . have time . . . uh." I glanced to Mary, oblivious and peaceful in the swing. "Can we . . . uh . . ." His fingers probed me. ". . . go in the other room?"

"Yeah," he grunted and I felt myself lifted off the ground, my legs wrapped around his hips, his boxers sliding down as he sat on the couch. I stood at first, his fingers hooked into my shorts, his hands stroking down as they hit the floor, and then it was me crawling onto his waiting lap.

Being full of Edward was erotic and amazing and beautiful.

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Family

He grabbed my hand as I stared out the window. I *had* considered what this would feel like, the day I put my parents to rest for good. As I knew it was coming, I was . . . out there. The day the legal stuff was settled finally, but there was always something else to think about, and recently there had been a lot of something else . . . Mary and Edward, and Edward and Mary.

Besides, I always felt that as long as the lawsuit was continuing, the two parties arguing back and forth, a little part of my parents was still around and I knew now that I was holding on to that because I could feel it slipping through my fingers. Slipping away from me like a wet, fluttering ribbon. I was grasping, trying my hardest, but it was being pulled from me in the wind. Today was the day the ribbon would float off; I would never again be tethered to it.

Edward's fingers laced through mine grounding me, tethering me to a different ribbon.

We walked into the cool and sophisticated rooms of Peter and Charlotte's offices. Alice's parents had done well and the light blue on beige color scheme with rich dark wood accents bespoke good taste and quiet refinement. Alice was there, taking our coats, getting us drinks and settling us in the small conference room. Introductions were made, hands were shaken and we all sat down to look over the paperwork.

The numbers were staggering.

Never before would I have dreamed that Charlie and Renée's existence could have price tags put on them, but Charlotte and Peter had fought tooth and nail to make sure that I--and Mary--would never want for anything ever again.

I felt guilty, as if by signing these documents I was accepting money in exchange for them. The tears started to fall before I could even pick up the pen.

"Hey, could you give us a minute?" Edward asked. "Alice, would you stay though?"

Family

Nods and patient smiles and ' *absolutely's*' were given and Alice sat down on my other side, an embroidered handkerchief in hand to give me.

"Sweetie, I know It's a lot to take in," she said, handing over the delicate square of Egyptian cotton. I fingered the embroidered initials in the corner and marveled at my friend who still carried old-fashioned handkerchiefs. I loved that about her.

"Yeah." Sniffles and thick sounds came from me. "Sorry."

"Bella," Edward's fingers braided through mine, "You don't have to sign this, you don't have to accept it, but I want you to consider what Charlie and Renée would want you to do right now. I think if you can for a minute, think about them and what they would want, how they would react."

Taking a deep breath, I considered Edward's words. Thinking back through the day at Carlisle and Esme's yesterday and how sad I was that Charlie and Renée would never get to spend time with Mary, love her, see her grow. This was possibly the way they could help her grow strong and capable and smart, even though they would never be here to see it.

"I know, it's just . . ."

"You feel like maybe this is it?" Alice asked.

"Yeah, like this is my last connection to them, you know?"

"But sweetie, it isn't. Don't you see? Charlie's smile is in Mary's and Renée is in her eyes. I know pieces of them are in her because pieces of them are in you; you will always have them and you will always be able to see them."

My chest rose and fell with breath.

"This way, Mary will have everything, and you can be independent and raise her yourself, no nannies or day care, unless you just want to."

Family

Edward blanched at this suggestion and I heard him mutter, "Day care, my ass."

I laughed, my heart lighter than it had been all morning.

"Edward, we could send her to private school," I said, an excited tone taking over.

He looked at me with a funny, indulgent smile that intrigued me. It looked out of place, but I wasn't sure what it meant.

"Okay . . ." and I signed my name accepting the millions that the lawyers had decided was an acceptable exchange, but I knew in my heart it would never be an even one. I'd gladly give it all back to have my mom and dad in my life.

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"What are you hungry for?" he asked me, as I stared out the restaurant window. We had stopped for an early lunch, happy to be together for a little bit longer. Esme had called and said that Mary was doing fine on the breast milk from the bottle and I thought to myself that Edward might enjoy feeding her occasionally. I'd bring that up later.

"Bella?"

"Oh." I smiled, coming back down to earth and grasping his hand. "I don't care . . . soup."

He frowned and ordered me soup and a sandwich when the server came around and I hid my smile. He'd promised to be less controlling, less *deciding*, but I'd pick my battles. He was probably right anyway, I'd only had coffee for breakfast.

Coffee and him that is, and he'd been delicious.

Family

"So, are you gonna tell me what you're thinking?" I asked directly, once the server was gone.

"What do you mean?" He fiddled with the fork, avoiding my gaze.

"You've been awfully quiet, other than your few words in the conference room. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking you need a money manager and I need to draft some kind of legal document so that no one thinks I'm after you for your money," he mumbled, but I heard every word.

So that was it, the fact that I was an instant millionaire bothered him. I could see that, but I didn't really see why it had to change anything. It didn't change the way I felt, the way I saw the world, the way I loved him, and I'd give back every cent to be able to go back.

"Firstly, it isn't like you are living in some tenement, you make an awesome living and don't tell me that you don't; and secondly, I don't care about the money, other than it will let me send Mary to a good college one day."

He sighed. "You're right, I'm just a little freaked, I guess. It is *a lot* of money . . . but I know it can never replace them, no matter how much it is."

"No, it can't," I said quietly. "Nothing can."

"But you can make it work for you and Mary, and for that, you need a money manager. Do you want some help with that?"

I sat quietly for a second. "You know, its funny . . . I've been on my own for so long now, doing grown up things, acting like a grown up, but I never really felt like a grown up until now."

He smiled. "I think as long as our parents are around we never truly feel grown despite what we do and how old we get, but Alice is right, they are still here in Mary's smile and her eyes. You just have to look for them, find them in the

Family

little things. They'll never be completely gone." He picked up my fingers, lacing them with his, rubbing his thumb in my palm. "And neither will I."

"I love you," I said, leaning across and brushing my lips against his. "Thanks for going with me today, I don't know how I would have gotten through that without you."

His eyes shone, the crisis was behind us, but he was right. I needed some help.

Chapter 14

Ch. 14

"Thank you, Esme."

"Yeah, thanks, Mom."

"Did everything go okay?" she asked. She had been sitting in the rocking chair with Mary asleep in her arms, looking as contented as a cat. Now she stood and gingerly held the bundle of baby over to Bella who took her back to her room.

"Yeah," I said. "It was a little . . . emotional, but otherwise, we got it all worked out and all the paperwork signed."

"I can only imagine."

Bella walked back in. "Thank you, thank you," she said, hugging her. "It was so nice to not have to worry about Mary. Alice is great and loves her and all, but I get a little nervous when she watches her," Bella laughed. "She's not got a lot of experience."

Mom just laughed. "Yes, well, she was an angel. She only cried twice and one of those was because she was hungry. The other time, I think was because she needed a little exercise. We danced a little and she fell right asleep." Esme's face was warm and pink from the memory.

I watched Bella. Her eyes crinkled a little at the corners and I knew she was thinking of her parents and all she'd been through today.

"Hey," I said, my hand rubbing in between her shoulder blades and up into her hair. "We talked about this, remember?"

Family

"I know," she sighed. "It's just hard."

Mom looked between us, her eyes round as though she felt like she'd stirred a pot and poison apples bobbed to the surface.

"Esme, I'm gonna take a shower, but I would love for you and Carlisle to come over for dinner one night soon, so you can play with Mary and I can say thank you," Bella said with a tired voice.

"Oh, sweetie, I'd love that." Bella accepted her kiss and walked towards her room. I heard the water start. "What did I say?"

"Nothing, she's just reeling some from not being able to see her parents with Mary," I said truthfully. "She felt like everything was so final today, with all the paperwork and the signatures."

"Oh, my poor Bella."

I liked how Mom said that. How much they had accepted her and how accountable that made me feel. Bella and Mary were like different colored threads woven into my life; they made the fabric so much more brilliant and strong, impossible to separate. When I thought about how I had almost ripped it in half, I shuddered. Today had been a good day though.

"Okay, please work out with Bella when we can come over. It is entirely unnecessary for her to cook for us of course, but I understand how much it will mean to her and I want to make her happy." She winked at me. "Happy Bella, happy Edward."

I snorted and kissed my mother on the cheek.

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Her skin was pink and damp from the shower. Her hair was pulled up in a knot, but wilted from the steam; one long piece had escaped and curled down her back. I sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for her, not fully expecting a

Family

towel-wrapped Bella, but hoping. She paused in the door way looking at me, her eyes tired and red from crying. I was so proud of her, holding it together for so long. Mary was thriving and loved and we were solid, no thanks to me, but still.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey." She looked down at her feet, drawing the line between the floorboards with her toe. She lifted her head again with purpose, her shoulders settling against her breath, and walked over to me.

"Thank you," she said.

"For?" My fingers toyed with the edge of the towel.

"Just for . . . taking charge today when I was such a basketcase," she said quietly. I knew she was thinking about our argument last night and how my 'take charge' attitude had almost cost us everything.

"Hey, I get it."

"What?" she asked, her hands smoothing my eyebrows.

"Everything that happened yesterday, it was different than today. I understand."

She smiled, two hands on my face now, fingers at my temples.

"So you get that you have to let me in? Let me shoulder some things sometimes? That you have to trust that I know what I'm doing?"

"Yeah, as hard as it is, I get it. My instinct is to just do it all for you, so you don't have to worry." I wrapped my arms around her waist and pressed my cheek to her stomach, the damp towel soft on my skin, smelling like fabric softener and Bella's soap. I felt her fingernails stretch down my back and instinctively settled further into her body, my arms clutching a little more tightly.

Family

She was quiet as I held her. Contemplative.

Arching back a little, I loosened my grip and she cupped my face, tilted my head back and kissed me. My wordless request answered. Rubbing her open mouth back and forth like she was creating static electricity.

"I love you."

I knew I only had a few hours before work, but I needed her and so pulled her down on to the bed, loosening her towel from its tuck and opened it like a present. Her body was indeed my gift and I treated it thus.

We made love slowly and quietly, weaving another row into our homemade fabric, making it strong and beautiful. Shimmering and silky. And afterwards, I fell asleep, waking to the sound of my cell phone's alarm. Reality and work my focus for the next sixteen hours. I left her with a kiss and a promise to text in between patients.

Closing the door behind me, checking again to make sure it was locked, I felt my heart settle. We'd had our first big test and we'd come out the other side stronger.

Chapter 15

Ch.15

"So, wait, do they like spaghetti and meatballs?" Her face was panicked.

"Bella," I sighed, "who *doesn't like* spaghetti and meatballs." She had just come home from the store, bags loaded with meat and tomatoes and bread and parmesan. A feast in the making.

"I know, I know, I just want to be sure, you know? I want this to be perfect."

"Bella, stop." I took her hands, prying the wedge of cheese from them and wrapped them around my waist. "Mom and Dad love you and will eat anything you make them. Don't stress yourself out."

Her cheek settled against my chest and her arms tightened. I felt her relax into me and I ran my hands up into her hair so I could tilt her head back and kiss her. She tasted of promises and love and I moved a little deeper, intent to talk her into adjourning to the bedroom with me.

"Oh no you don't," she laughed, breaking apart. "You have to go get the wine and I have work to do, but maybe if you are really good, I'll meet up with you later." She kissed me again and laughed at my attempts to push her into the counter.

"Ugh, you are mean."

She rolled her eyes at me and finished unpacking the bags of groceries.

"Okay, I'll go check on Mary and then I'll go to the wine store; do you have any preferences?"

Family

"You know I have no idea about that, which is why you are being sent. So, no. Pick something to go with dinner and dessert. I bought a Tiramisu to stay with the theme."

I tried to hide my smile, but it probably came out as more of a smirk and so left her to look in on Mary who was in her crib. Her eyes were wide and open, watching the animals of her mobile sit stationary as though she could will them into a twirl. When she focused on me, however, her eyes lit with recognition and softened with love. I would never tire of that look.

"Hey, baby girl," I said lifting her gently off her back. Her neck was quite strong for an almost four month old, but I still used two hands to hold her. She had proven to be unpredictable in her movements and would lurch at any given moment away from me. We'd had a near miss once or twice, but our reflexes had been quick.

Her clothes were soaked through and I ended up giving her a quick sink bath before dressing her in something warm and bringing her in to Bella so that I could leave for the liquor store. Mom and Dad would be coming in a few hours yet, so I had time to get there and get back to watch the football game with Mary.

It was our favorite pastime.

"Someone's hungry," I said as Bella stirred a red sauce on the stove.

"Okay, I've done all I can with this for now anyway. I'll make the meatballs when you get back." She wiped her hands and reached for Mary who immediately started snuffling and getting fussy.

"Hey, baby. You know your momma, don't you?" Bella cooed and I smiled, grabbing my keys. She smelled her head. "Did you give her a bath? She smells yummy." Bella's eyes closed, her lips and mouth next to Mary's ear. Mary's hair was soft and downy, light blonde and Bella ran her nose through it.

"Yeah, she was soaked through. Her sheets weren't too bad, though."

Family

"I'll change them in a little bit," Bella said, settling in the chair to nurse.

"I'll be back in a few," I said with a grin, watching them get comfortable. I'd never get tired of it. My girls.

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The drive to the wine shop was short. Bella's house was only a few blocks away from a little downtown area of locally owned businesses and stores. A post office, an organic grocery store, and a coffee shop all shouldered along with several small restaurants and a jeweler. I envisioned us being able to walk down here for lunch occasionally in the spring, when the air was warmer.

Mary in her stroller, Bella and me, a family.

I parked the car and walked down the sidewalk towards our favorite place to buy wine. The proprietor was from California and knew everything about the different regions and what was the best value for the money. I had never been disappointed in his recommendations.

I glanced in the window of one of the stores and stopped short. Staring. On display were rings of all shapes and sizes. I knew nothing about jewelry, other than diamonds were the best and platinum was the strongest, but was taken with the sparkle and shine and wondered absently which kind of ring Bella might like. There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to marry her, but we had only known each other for a few months and when I asked her, as I was going to do at some point, I wanted to make sure that she would be receptive. That she would say yes.

I walked on, thoughts of Bella and her wants and needs and how our relationship had grown so strong. She had gone to see the money manager and put most of her windfall into a trust for Mary, reserving out a portion of it to live on. The rest of it had gone to paying off her house and buying a new car. Alice had mentioned putting Mary's name on the waiting list at an exclusive Seattle pre-school saying she had a good chance at getting in since she was still so young. Bella had balked at that, though, declaring the church down the street

Family

ran a perfectly wonderful pre-school that Mary would be just fine in.

I was proud of Bella for sharing her opinion with Alice, and in her defense, Alice had spent years taking care of Bella when there was no one else. Bella was standing on her own these days, though and taking control of her life. It made her beyond beautiful in my eyes. And sexy.

I moved on down the street, the rings in the window tucked away in my mind to be thought of later. Mary was waiting on me to get back to watch football and I had some wine to buy.

.

"Silly, she can't go trick-or-treating, she's far too young."

"But why can't we dress her up and put her in the stroller?"

"You just want the candy." Bella and Esme laughed together. I had been discovered and conspired against.

"Besides, Halloween is tomorrow. All the good costumes will be gone."

Mary was snuggled in the crook of my arm, staring at the ceiling and so I picked her up and laid her on my knees, my feet on the coffee table. She smiled at me and I traced her features, watching her eyes brighten as I hit her tickle spots. She let out a giggle, a chuckle, the best, sweetest belly laugh I had ever heard and we all stopped short to stare.

"Do it again," Bella whispered.

My fingertips found the spot under her neck and she laughed again, entrancing us with her musical sound.

"A milestone," Esme said. "Remember it, remember today."

Chapter 16

Ch. 16

"You are so ridiculous. You know that, right?" I said to him, the smile on my face giving me away. Truthfully, I fell in love with him all over again when he showed up an hour before sunset with a present for Mary. He was so excited, ripping the tags off and putting her in a costume.

A four-month old infant. Dressed like a pink elephant.

I didn't even want to think about how much he'd paid for it, a costume that she would wear one time. For an hour. This didn't bode well for the future. He was totally whipped and she would run circles around him.

The future. I'd said it, I'd thought it, and I wasn't afraid.

She was adorable though, I'd had to admit it. Pink satin ears and a big pink stuffed trunk hanging off her chin. He fussed with her in the stroller, clicking it so she was sitting up as much as possible, propping her with a blanket. At least she'd stay warm because the costume was more like footed pajamas than anything else.

"You stay here and hand out candy with Alice, and Jasper and I will go trick or treating."

He'd rigged a plastic pumpkin off the front of her stroller, so all he would have to do is push her up to the doors of my neighbors. It reminded me of my childhood. The dads would always take the kids, beers in hand, around the in the dark with the flashlights and glow sticks, and the moms would stay home.

"People are going to think you and Jasper are a couple." I giggled. Alice and Jasper were coming up the walk, a grocery bag in hand of miniature candy to

Family

add to the bowl. There were tons of kids in the neighborhood and I'd called Alice in a panic, afraid I hadn't bought enough. I'd made a pot of chili and we had the football game on, content to hang out until Edward showed up with the costume.

"Stop!" Alice yelled, staring at Mary. "Where's my camera? Did I bring it? Oh my goodness, I'm dying!" she squeed.

Jasper just laughed and handed Alice the camera. Good thing because I'd totally forgotten to take pictures. I smiled to myself at how much we'd all grown close because of this tiny, little miracle of Mary. Alice and Jasper's wedding was coming up in January and things were starting to pick up in the partying responsibilities. Alice's parents were well-known and everyone wanted to throw them a shower and there was constantly something that needed to be done, but she always made time for Mary; her 'baby niece,' as she called her.

"Okay, you guys can go now," Alice said as we heard the doorbell ring. The sun had just begun to set and the kids were out.

Jasper grabbed a beer and held his arm out to Edward, "Shall we go, darling?"

Edward snorted and punched him in the arm.

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"And this one is for me, and this one . . . well, it's for me . . . this one is for Mommy," Edward was saying to Mary. He had dumped out her impressive loot on the coffee table and was dutifully looking at it all for open packages, so he said. He was really just cataloging.

Charlie used to do the same thing, picking out all the Snickers and the Baby Ruths for himself as he was "checking" my candy.

Jasper and Alice had left, Alice driving because Jasper and Edward had consumed more than a few beers in their new found couple-dom. It was hilarious as they told us how many mothers had stopped them to admire "their

Family

daughter."

I stood for a little in the doorway, watching him talk to her, watching his face squinch up in smiles and love. I felt something come over me, a peace that it should always be thus. It should always be us.

"So, Daddy, how'd we do?"

I said it instinctively, rashly. It just spilled out before my brain could put a filter on my mouth. He froze and I panicked. What the hell was I thinking? We were together, yes, and I hoped for always, but he'd never even mentioned the future, adoption or, dare I say it as my fantasies ran away with my thoughts, marriage. I was putting expectations and limits, or rather defining borders on our relationship that I had no right to define.

Or maybe I did.

I defiantly stood my ground, waiting for his eyes to meet mine. A challenge.

He stood, stroked Mary's cheek gently and I saw her eyes flutter. She was tired. He walked over to me, grabbing me by the shoulders and pushed me back into the wall, the doorframe aligning with my spine and kissed me.

Hard.

My legs turned to jelly and the liquid in my stomach pooled, my bits all tingling, aching for his touch, his mouth. He had never been this possessive before and I was crazy for him. Mad for him. Dying for him.

But Mary was still awake and still in her costume. She needed a bath and a nurse, a cuddle and a book. *Goodnight Moon*, in board book, was our favorite story to read and I had it memorized. The repetitions and rhymes soothing and calm.

*Goodnight room, goodnight moon, goodnight cow jumping over the moon,
goodnight light and the red balloon . . .*

Family

His tongue was furious with mine and I was slipping down-my legs unable to support me, the wood of the doorframe stroking my back, the friction of his body stroking my front. Nothing like calm.

Mary.

I broke it off, gasping. My hands in his hair. His eyes wild, feral.

"Hold that thought." It came out in a barely discernible whisper. Thready and broken. Needful.

His hands clenched with almost physical pain as my hand slid across his stomach, my hip brushing his arousal, solid rock covered in denim. My mouth watered, but I carried on, moving over to Mary who was stuck in her stroller still, big pink ears flanking her beautiful, tired and peaceful face.

"Hello my darling, are you a sleepy girl?" I picked up Mary, carefully because my hands were shaking, my legs still wobbly, and walked back over to Edward who was breathing more normally, but still lit from behind in his eyes. I kissed him gently. "Meet you in a few?"

He kissed me back, calmer this time, but the energy and passion still reverberated under his lips, sending shocks through my system.

"I'm coming with you."

Chapter 17

Ch.17

Oh can ye sew cushions and can ye sew sheets?

and can ye sing baluloo when the bairn greets?

And hie and baw birdie, and hie and baw lamb,

And hie and baw birdie, my bonnie wee lamb.

I laid in Bella's bed after helping her with Mary's bath, putting out footed pajamas and drying Mary with the towel. I left them alone to read and nurse and Bella was singing.

It was very soft, but I recognized the lullaby from something my mother sang to me when I was very little, an old Scottish song she must have learned from her mother.

She'd called me *Daddy* . . . by mistake from the look on her face, the way all the color had leached out, her skin flushing from underneath. She'd stared me down though, challenging me to cringe away in the wake of her Freudian slip. I was overcome with the satisfaction of the title and the fact that Bella was the one to utter it.

Instinct had taken over. Her kiss, her body, her love was all I needed, and I took. Against the wall. But Mary's needs had to come first and so I acquiesced at Bella's '*hold that thought*,' graciously, gladly. Anything for my little girl, for this is truly how I thought of her most of the time even though I knew she really wasn't mine.

Yet.

Family

It was probably not wise to put myself in this position, knowing that Bella could kick me out of her life if I were to screw up, but I couldn't think about that. Somehow, that little girl had woven herself into my heart where instinctively I thought of her, of them, in almost everything I did. I would make them mine. And now? I could wait for Bella to put her down, we had all night.

"Still awake?"

Bella appeared at the doorway, the nightlight in the hallway glowing behind her, adding gold to her already shimmering appearance. She could have been an angel.

"I am."

"Give me a few minutes."

.

Bella came to me ten minutes later, warm and scented from the shower.

Our love was passionate, slow and full of emotion. We laid in bed facing each other and just kissed at first, hands stroking, gently gripping shoulders and hips and backs. Her lips were soft and pink, and I took from them my life-force, pulling my soul from her mouth, her tongue, for surely she owned me. Her kisses were responsive and well-aimed, her lips torturous and all-encompassing as she moved down my neck, my chest, my stomach seemingly on a mission, all the while her hands kneading, stroking. I had never felt more cherished, adored. Her hair was spread across my stomach, my hands stroking their silky strands while her mouth teased and licked and sucked, bringing me to the brink more than once.

"Bella." My mind tried to make my mouth say, although I couldn't be quite sure I formed the actual word. I might have just grunted, lost in the warm wetness of her mouth.

Family

I dragged her up my length unable to take more and settled her on top, the groan escaping my lips guttural and inarticulate as I slid into her. The way she felt, the way she moved, the way she looked, her breasts in my face as she leaned over me, her hands on the headboard . . . there were no words. My hands on her ribs, my thumbs on her nipples as she rode me, her head falling back in wordless wonder, her hair streaming down her back, brushing across my knuckles. My fingers found her most secret place and stroked her as she rode, her movements becoming less fluid, more choppy as she bucked against me. Her eyes half open, her mouth half closed, her sound wholly beautiful as she came. She shuddered as her release found her, moving my hand away as it was likely too much.

Too many feelings, too many sensations.

I flipped her over, never breaking our connection and thrust in to her, watching her neck arch back, her eyes close, her mouth open again.

"Bella, look at me," I whispered hoarsely, grabbing her hands and pinning them back next to her head. Her eyes flew open at my command and focused for a second. She wrapped her legs around me, changing the angle, making it deeper and her eyes fluttered closed again. I was in exquisite agony, and so close, but I wanted to see her eyes.

"Open them." A command.

She focused on me as I continued to thrust, my climax just out of reach, each movement in and out pushing me closer, closer. The moan coming from her mouth my undoing as I felt her clench around me pulling me into oblivion, both of us adrift in a sea of sensation of the other's making.

"God . . ." for surely someone deserved my praise, my thanks for her love as my hips arched into her, one last thrust shivering through me.

.

Family

Mary's cries came at an unexpected time. Groggy and confused, I stirred, looking at the bedside clock.

3:49.

"I'll check on her," I said, kissing Bella on the temple, the warmth of her arms turning away from me as she clutched the pillow and rolled. I pulled on pajama bottoms and stumbled through the hallway into Mary's room. Alice and Rosalie had gone all out, a nursery fit for a princess done in yellow and cream with hints of pink, the arm chair in the corner my destination after I'd gotten my girl.

She was crying, thready and whimper-y and I was instantly on alert. This was different, not a hungry cry. My hands reached out to touch and she was burning up, a fire surely about to ignite on her soft skin.

"Hey, sweet girl," my voice soothed as my mind raced through the possible reasons for her extreme fever. Bella kept all of the necessary diagnostics under the changing table and my medical training took over. Changing her diaper, I noticed with relief it was wet - no worries yet of dehydration, thankfully. I took her temperature, unwrapping her warm little body from the bunting sack she slept in, changing her into a long-sleeved onesie.

101.9.

Not overly bad, but bad enough to indicate something was brewing inside. Wrapping her loosely in her blanket, I gave her a dose of infant's ibuprofen and we tiptoed to the kitchen to warm a bottle of breast milk.

"Hey," Bella said, her face sleepy and beautiful above her robe, her hair loose around her shoulders, escaping the twist she always did to keep it out of her face. I could see her nipples poking through the dark blue fabric and momentarily thought about how she would feel if I touched her through the silk, but banished it immediately, shaking my head of the lusty cobwebs. Mary was sick.

Focus.

Family

"Hey, she's running a fever." I took the bottle from the warm water and shook it. "Go back to bed, I gave her some medicine and am gonna see if she'll drink this. We'll call the pediatrician when they turn their phones on."

"Are you sure?" Bella's hand was instantly on Mary's cheek, her eyes wide and frightened. Awake and alert. This was the first time Mary had ever been sick.

"Yes, I'm sure." I used my best doctor voice. Soothing, reassuring, confident. "Sleep."

Bella followed us to Mary's room, turning on the classical music station as a hum in the background and I smiled. She knew I listened to the overnight program when I got off work.

"She already feels a little cooler," I told her, taking her temperature again, 101.1. The fever was responding to the medicine, thank God. Bella took her from me as I retrieved my book from the living room and settled myself in the arm chair, bottle at the ready.

"My baby, you'll be okay," Bella murmured in between forehead and face kisses, handing her back to me, sitting on the ottoman as Mary greedily took the bottle. This alone indicated to me that whatever she had wasn't overly serious and that her fever was coming down for the time being. We'd call her doctor first thing.

"Bella, go back to sleep, I've got this."

"I know, it's just . . . she's never been sick before." Her eyes gazed at Mary, but thankfully not with fear, just with resignation, as if another milestone had been passed without our permission.

"I know, but she'll be okay. We'll get her in to see Dr. Ahlstrom and she'll figure it out."

Bella sat for a few more minutes before a yawn escaped her. She stood and kissed me.

Family

"I love you."

"As I love you, and her."

She smiled.

Chapter 18

Ch. 18

Dr. Ahlstrom checked Mary's ears first thing. Double ear infection.

"Would you like to look, Doctor?" She handed me the otoscope and I peered in. Sure enough, red, oozy and bulbous. Raging infections. It's a wonder her fever wasn't higher, but I imagine the pressure on her ears when she was laying flat was excruciating.

"She's cutting a tooth as well," Dr. Ahlstrom said after my examination and she showed Bella Mary's swollen gums.

"My poor baby," Bella said, cooing as she picked her up when the doctor was done. She swayed around the room a little, Mary's cheek pressed under Bella's chin.

"Here is her antibiotic, twice a day for ten days. You will be glad to know this is pretty routine, although some children suffer from ear infections more than others. We'll watch her development and growth to see if this becomes a problem." The paper tore off the pad and she handed it to me.

"Thanks, Doctor," I said, shaking her hand. The petite woman was extremely good at her job; she had just the right level of clinical knowledge and warm and caring bedside manner, something they tried to teach us in medical school but didn't always come naturally to everyone. Bella redressed Mary quickly and we checked out, confirming Mary's next well-appointment and immunization schedule.

We walked out of the building and I wondered for the fiftieth time that morning when Bella and I would get around to discussing the elephant in the room--Bella's 'Daddy' comment after trick-or-treating. Dr. Ahlstrom had been

Family

made aware of . . . our situation during that first checkup. That Mary wasn't mine, that Bella and I weren't married, but that I was in their lives. She had been extremely professional about it, not missing a beat, but with Bella's slip of the tongue the night before and our subsequent avoidance and then *celebration* of the subject, I knew it was something Bella and I needed to discuss, and soon.

"Hungry?" I asked Bella. We'd gotten Mary in first thing and it was still morning. My shift didn't start until three that afternoon, so we had some time to get something to eat, get Mary's prescription filled and talk.

"A little," she said, crouched, snapping Mary's car seat in the back of the SUV. Bella let me drive and I headed straight for the pharmacy, dropping off the script and walking to the Waffle House next door, shifting Mary's carrier to the other hand so I could hold Bella's fingers. I felt like we needed to be on neutral ground for this discussion.

"Aww, she's precious." We had found an empty booth and Bella wedged the carrier in so it couldn't slip. The waitress stood on the other side of the divider, pencil poised.

We all looked down automatically at Mary, asleep, her face peaceful and serene. I felt a sense of pride come over me and I looked up to see Bella's eyes on me, soft and loving.

Maybe this *was* it, maybe it was time to tell Bella everything that I wanted.

"Thanks," Bella said, a smile on her face. The pink-haired girl took our order and went behind the counter to yell in our order of waffles and smothered and covered everything; gotta love Waffle House.

"I want to talk about the subject we've not talked about." I shook the sugar packet, ripping and emptying, stirring and swirling.

Bella fiddled with her silverware, lining them up with precision on the too-small napkin.

Family

"I know," she sighed. "I'm sorry I said that last night, I shouldn't have. It puts way too much pressure on you and it isn't fair of me to put you in that position."

"I'm not . . . I'm not sorry. Not in the slightest, and I definitely don't want you to be sorry."

I grabbed her fingers and pulled them towards me, locking our hands and locking her gaze. I was determined and forceful, never so sure of anything in my life before.

"Bella, I want this. I want us. I want Mary. I want us to be a family."

She opened her mouth and then closed it again, a smile breaking out instead. The waitress showed up with our food just then, interrupting our moment, but I'd gotten it out at least. The future was hazy and the logistics weren't set but she knew what I wanted and that I wasn't going anywhere.

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"That was so good, thank you." She leaned up to kiss me as we stood by the counter waiting for the girl to hand me back my credit card. Mary was still asleep in her carrier looking for all the world like an angel from heaven, complete with an ever-growing halo of white blonde hair.

"Does Mike have blonde hair?" I asked suddenly, randomly, out of the blue. My heart sank, knowing the answer before she said it.

"Um, yes," she responded quietly, searching my face. "Why are you asking this?"

"Just wondering." For some reason, this knowledge defeated me. I knew she wasn't mine, but at the same time, I wanted her to be. I wanted to pretend that she was half Bella and half me and there was no other man involved. No other man that Bella had loved.

Family

"Hey," she said as we made our way outside, back to the drug store to get Mary's medicine. She stopped me and put Mary's carrier on the bench, holding my cheek in her hand. "Hey, look at me."

My eyes met hers and saw love.

"Does it help to know that I was born blonde just like her?" She smiled as she said this, knowing exactly what I was thinking.

I smiled back, turning my face to kiss her palm. "It does help . . . a little."

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"So, what time does your shift start again?" she asked.

"At three, I'm gonna have to go home and shower before." This was another thing I was looking to change, two different houses. I would ask Bella to move in with me in a heartbeat, but I knew how much she loved her little house, and truthfully, so did I. It was warm. It was home. My place seemed cold in comparison, but I couldn't lie and say that Bella's presence in it didn't warm it. My entire being warmed with her near me. This was the least of what we were going to have to figure out, though.

First, I needed to ask her to marry me.

"How about Mary and I come with you and then we can be there when you get home tomorrow?" My heart leapt at that. I would be getting off shift at three or four in the morning; to be able to go home to Bella and Mary made everything right again. I hated having to leave them.

"I think that could be arranged." I smiled broadly, pulling her into my arms and kissing her, concentrating on her mouth and how it felt under mine. I only had an hour and a half before I had to be on shift; I would have to cool my loins until after, and so I broke the kiss with considerable reluctance.

"Lemme just go pack our bag." She smiled, one more kiss, and then one more.

Family

She walked out with a wink and I sat down on the couch, flipping on the flatscreen. ESPN was always on, even at one in the afternoon. The phone rang.

"Would you get that?" Bella called from the other room. Mary started crying at the same time, probably from hearing Bella, as I answered the unfamiliar number.

"Swan residence." I went to pick up Mary to soothe her. She stopped crying when she saw me and I put her pacifier back in her mouth, an immense satisfaction coming over me as she settled. Trusted me, her daddy. I crooked the phone in my shoulder, using both hands to hold her.

"May I . . . speak with Bella, please?" The hesitation in the stranger's voice unsettled me. A feeling of unease began to spread. I'd never heard this guy before. Who could it possibly be, calling randomly in the middle of the afternoon?

"Sure, can I tell her who's calling?"

"Um, yeah. But she may not want to talk to me. It's Mike. Mike Newton."

Bella rounded the corner just then, eyes widening at what must have been a bizarre expression on my face. Fear and dread and anger all in one.

"Who is it?" she mouthed, whispering, setting the two bags down, and reaching for the phone.

I held it out to her, turning away with Mary when she took it from me, my lips on the soft downy head that was tucked under my chin. I inhaled her baby scent, memorizing it. My stomach clenched with an unfamiliar feeling of loss and anxiety, panic rising like bile in my throat.

Stay calm. They are yours.

"It's Mary's father."

Chapter 19

Ch. 19

Holy shit.

Mike. Mike effing Newton.

Why, why, why after all these months does he choose today to call? Today, of all days. The day that Edward and I made the conscious decision to move forward, together, as a family.

"Hello?" My voice was small, angry.

"Bella?" He was tentative.

"What do you want, Mike?" This was absolute bullshit. Why in the world was I even giving him the time of day? He'd made his feelings perfectly clear that day I'd told him about Mary, saying he didn't want her, wasn't ready for her. He was an international journalist and traveled the world; how could he possibly be tied down at the beginning of his career when he was just starting to make a name for himself?

These were all the arguments I'd heard that day and each one had stung, like a well-shot arrow, piercing me, leaving me to bleed out. His suggestion to have an abortion, abhorrent to me at the time, flew all over me again now as I saw Mary, snuggled under Edward's chin, smiling and laughing when he would grab her 'neck sugar,' kissing her, diffusing the tenseness in the room.

"Hey . . . err, listen, I know this is sort of awkward, me calling like this . . ."

"You think, Mike? Because I would go one more step and say it's wildly inappropriate for you to be calling me like this. You made yourself perfectly

Family

clear where you stand."

Edward's tickle cause Mary to giggle. The sound filled the room and my heart. I smiled at Edward and was renewed in his claim over us. Reveled in it.

"Is that . . . him? Her? Shit, Bella, I don't even know what you had, or if you both are okay." I could hear it and damn if it didn't piss me off even more. Remorse. He was sorry.

I was quiet for another minute, trying to get myself under control.

"Her name is Mary, and she's perfectly healthy."

His quiet gasp affected me, I couldn't help it. The wonder in his voice as he said, "I am a father . . . I have a daughter." He said it out loud to himself, trying it on for size. To see if it fit.

It didn't fit, it was all wrong. *Wrong*. I held my breath for a minute, willing my heart to stop racing.

"No, Mike. You are not a father. You fathered a child, but you are by no means a father. A father is someone who is here, who changes diapers, who wakes up in the middle of the night to give bottles, who panics a little when their child is sick."

"Is she sick?" His voiced sounded a little thready.

"No, not really . . . she has a double ear infection."

"Well, have you taken her to the doctor? What did he say . . .?"

"Mike," I stopped his ramblings. "You don't get to know, you don't get to care. You gave her up."

There was silence on the line, and silence from me.

Family

"Listen, Bella."

I stood quietly watching Edward try not to look at me. It hurt my heart to know how much he was hurting inside and I wanted to tell him that it didn't matter one bit what Mike said, Mary was *his* baby.

"What, Mike," I said it through my teeth, every second of watching Edward look at Mary, like he thought it might be the last time he'd ever see her making me more resolved, "what do you want?"

"I want to see you. I want to see her."

"Not gonna happen."

"Bella, she's my child, you can't keep me from her."

Shit. I needed to call Alice and see if he was right.

"Okay, Mike, here's the deal. I am involved with someone and he loves her, he loves me. He's been there from the very beginning, he is the only father she's ever known. I cannot take her away from him."

"She's mine," he said. I could picture the way he was clenching his teeth. I'd seen him talk to photographers and his assistants this way, and I could hear his ego getting rankled.

"This is not a pissing contest, Mike, not some story that you put your name on. She isn't property. She's a child, a child you wanted to get rid of." If he was going to play dirty, so was I.

"I know, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have ever suggested that, but I was about to get a new assignment."

"So, how has that changed? Are you giving up your journalism aspirations? Chaining yourself to a desk? Ready to buy a house, live in the suburbs instead of the rented condo that your secretary pays for you since you're never here?" I

Family

knew in my heart that his answer was no, but I couldn't help the small part of me that was scared he'd say yes. Because I knew, legally, there would more than likely be nothing I could do to keep her from him if he decided to really push it. Edward and I would have her, but we'd be forced into visitation schedules and the like.

"No, of course not, we are on the verge of something really big . . . the chief . . ."

"Mike," I interrupted him, "how is this going to help Mary? You constantly running after the next story." Edward had left the room with her, unable to stomach any more I imagined, and I ached for him. I wanted to get off the stupid phone and hold him, lay with him in the bed with Mary between us and never leave.

"Bella, just let me meet with you, we can talk about this."

"Fine." I was just anxious to get off the phone, go to Edward and reassure him. "I will talk to Edward and we will figure out a time when the three of us can meet."

"I'd rather talk to you alone."

"Sorry, Mike. You don't really get to call the shots. Edward is her father. I'll call you tomorrow."

I hung up the phone and went in search of Edward and Mary.

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I found him, in the overstuffed armchair in her room. His favorite place to sit with her and read books. They were reading *Moo, Baa, La La La*, one of our favorite rhymes. I sat on the ottoman, my knees in his knees waiting for him to finish.

Family

"It's quiet now, what do you say?" he read, closing the book and looked down at Mary, quietly sucking on her pacifier, content just to sit in his arms. Safe and happy, oblivious to the potential pain around her.

This was our job, to protect her.

"Do you think Esme will come over to your house tomorrow during lunch to stay with her?" I asked, my hands on his knees, drawing circles through the denim.

"I'm sure she'd love to . . . why?" His face was innocently curious, but I could see the mask he had carefully in place. He wasn't sure of his footing here. He knew that legally, he had no claim on her and for some reason, I hadn't made it clear enough where we stand. He was unsure and I hated that.

I took the small book from him and set it on the table, crawling into his lap to sit on his other hip. Edward had his lap full of girls as I wrapped my arms around him, leaning over to pick up Mary and settle her more comfortably between us, but never taking her out of his grasp. I nestled my head under his chin and stroked her baby face. We were a family and no one was going to mess it up.

"Mike wants to meet with us tomorrow, and I told him that we would, but I want Mary to stay at home." I felt him tense underneath me. "Look at me," I turned his head towards me, kissing him on the lips. " *You* are her father, no matter what he says. I believe that, I know that. I love you, I *choose* you."

He kissed me back. "I want to marry you, do you know that?" His green eyes bore into mine with his admission.

My heart pounded and my blood raced, "I hoped . . . but I wasn't sure . . ."

He kissed me again, cutting off my words. "Be sure. I *will* ask."

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Family

I was tossing and turning in Edward's bed, unable to sleep until he was with me. Mary was in her crib in the nursery that Esme had designed for her at Edward's house. At the time, I had thought it excessive, but it had made him so happy that I acquiesced, and I had to admit that life was easier when we could travel light, knowing she had everything she needed over here. I hoped and longed for the day that we all lived under one roof, but I knew Edward was waiting for the right time.

There was nothing more that I wanted than to be married to him and never have to leave him. I wanted him to adopt Mary so that she could be Mary Renée Cullen; she could have a mother and father that loved each other and loved her. Mike's phone call had seriously fucked everything up.

I heard him let himself in the door, and I slid out of bed, anxious to see him despite the early hour. He stood in the kitchen, illuminated by the light from the refrigerator, his back to me as he drank straight from the orange juice carton. I hid a smile as I walked up behind him, making enough noise so as not to startle him when I slid my arms around his middle.

"Hey, you." I pulled myself around his front and laid my head on his chest, his scrubs smelling like hospital soap. He'd always change out of what he wore around the patients, coming home clean and showered, having that smell that I associated with when I first met him. It had only been months, but I felt as though I'd known him all my life.

He put the juice back in the fridge and wrapped his arms around me, shutting the door and plunging the room into semi-darkness, the light from the Harvest moon streaming in through the floor to ceiling windows that went across the entire length of the kitchen. We were in our own black and white movie.

"Hey, I missed you. You're up late . . . or up early." He held me for a second, his hands rubbing up my back, his fingertips on my bare shoulders, rolling the spaghetti strap of my tank.

"I missed you, too. I'm glad you're home."

Family

His mouth found my face and he kissed me, gentle at first, down my cheek, towards my mouth. His tongue searched for mine and his hands threaded through my hair, holding me in place, not moving.

His mouth was so insistent on mine; my legs started to wobble, my lungs began protesting lack of air. I broke the kiss, only to feel his lips move across to my ear, down my chin, down my throat.

"Edward . . ." I moaned, sensing his urgency and wanting his touch, wanting to be filled with him and quickly.

"Bella, I need you, I need to be inside you now."

"Yes . . . now."

He groaned, his fingers pushing down my pajama pants without ceremony and lifting me on to the counter. His lips found mine again, his hands stroked my thighs, up higher until I felt him touch me, enter me, checking my readiness with one long finger sending tingles of anticipation outward through my body.

"Edward . . . now . . . please."

I pulled the drawstring of his scrubs and ran my hands down his hips, pushing them and his boxers to the floor. I wrapped my legs around him, bracing against the counter for support, my arms around his neck as he entered me swiftly, my back arching against the intensity of the angle, the way he felt as he pushed all the way in and then pulled all the way out, and then back in, a maddeningly slow rhythm that he surely couldn't keep up much longer. I would die.

"Ungh . . . Bella . . ." he said.

"Faster, Edward . . . please . . ."

"Really?" he grunted. "Like this?" He plunged into me harder, his voice gravelly and rough. His fingers traveled downward, stroking, coaxing. "You

Family

want it harder, baby?"

"Unh . . . Edwardhhh," was about all I could manage, my brain unable to process all of the sensations at once.

"How about this?" His other hand grabbed my bottom and angled me up as he pounded in to me, his fingers still stroking and I came apart, lost in a spiral as my orgasm hit me hard. He grabbed me with both hands, continuing his thrusts, over and over, faster and more uneven as he got closer, finally stilling and shuddering. His gasps and sounds continuing as every ripple of his body emptied into me, his face like an angel in the moonlight. He was beautiful and he was mine.

We stood thus for a minute, the aftershocks still rippling, our skin so sensitive, and his forehead touched mine.

"I love you," I said to him, air settling my body, my lips inches from his. "It will all be okay."

Chapter 20

Ch. 20

I watched her sleep. Her dark hair spilled across the pillow, her face soft in slumber. The feelings coursing through me more potent than any I'd felt before. But despite their intensity, I wasn't afraid. I loved Bella, I loved Mary. All I wanted was for us to be together and be a family, a real family that all shared the same last name, lived in the same house, went out to eat, went on vacation, went to school open houses and admired refrigerator art.

The only thing that I was afraid of was that it would never come to be. That Mary would never take my name and that we would be a blended family, which wasn't a bad thing, but it would mean forever sharing her with the man that shared her DNA and I was selfish enough to want her all to myself. Bella told me I was Mary's father and I felt that way, but unfortunately, without the paperwork to back it up, there would always be the threat hanging over us.

That he could take her away.

She slept on and I watched, glad for her respite. Her chest rising and falling with the work of her lungs and I wished I could tell her that all would be okay; that I would make it all better. But our future as the sole parents of Mary hung in jeopardy. Everything was in Mike's hands and I hoped to God he didn't fully realize that.

I rose quietly and snuck to Mary's room, desperate to feel the connection. She was precious, her pacifier having fallen out, her lips slack, her face rounded and soft. I stared for a long time . . . my baby girl.

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"You've got our cell numbers, right?" I said to my mom, checking my pockets.

Family

Where was my cell phone? Bella held it up in front of me and I grabbed it and put it in my khakis. Her eyes were bright with anxiety and I pulled her into a hug. We'd get through this.

"Edward, of course I do; you are on speed dial. You are an only child." Esme's eyes rolled.

She was very pragmatic, not easily ruffled and saw the situation with Mike as but a mere hurdle to be traversed in one swift running jump. I wish I had her optimism, but I was grateful for it as it led a certain business-like feel to the air and would help me keep my tongue. I planned on being silent through most of the discussion; Bella had said she could handle Mike and I trusted her.

"Let's go," Bella said. "Do you want to drive?"

"I do." I nodded, taking my car keys from her. I needed to feel in control of something, even if it was just a car.

We made it to the restaurant quickly; Bella had decided that we needed to be somewhere neutral where we could discuss and talk rationally without yelling. At least this was the plan, I'd never met this Newton guy before, but given his history of forsaking his pregnant girlfriend, I didn't have much hope for his character or my ability to remain quiet. But whatever . . . if we could get him to go away forever, I didn't much care what he did or where he went.

"Could we have a booth, please?" Bella asked the girl who led us through the crowded restaurant. Her hand squeezed mine as she followed the hostess; she knew I was reeling from the coming conversation.

"I'm just going to try and sit quietly and listen," I said once we were settled. "I don't think me telling him my thoughts will make him feel better, or get us what we want." Nor would it be a good idea to beat the shit out of him, which is what I really wanted to do. Bella ordered us each a beer and I was thankful even though what I really wanted was a shot of Patron.

"He's here."

Family

I looked over and saw a tall man with blonde hair and blue eyes, making his way over to our table. *All-American, like the boy next door*, I thought. I scanned his face searching for any trace of Mary in his features. She was there, in his nose and eyes and I felt sick to my stomach. At that moment, I was more than thrilled that she was safe at home with my mom. My heart settled a little as I thought of her and I held on to the words *my daughter*, bracing against the man who was sitting down across the table from us.

He ordered himself a beer when the server brought ours.

"Mike, this is Edward. Edward, Mike." Bella was concise in her introductions and I really couldn't blame her, there was far too much emotion at the table for much else. We both responded with nods, the tension palpable.

"So, you didn't bring her," Mike said once the waitress had brought his beer and our lunch order had been placed. The mundaneness and ruse of lunch covering the intensity of our discussion. I almost laughed out loud because to others, we could be discussing plans for the upcoming weekend, not the future of my family.

"Of course not, Mike," Bella snapped. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself and I put my hand on her thigh to give her comfort. "The last time I saw you was when you asked me to get an abortion. Why would I bring her?"

Mike's face visibly pained. I was glad to see it, not gonna lie. At least he wasn't a monster, as much as I wanted to think he was.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," he said, running his hand over his face, like he could literally wipe away the spoken words, the expressed sentiments behind them.

"Me too," she said. "But then, I'm almost glad you did, because it told me where you were with everything and where we stood, and I wouldn't have what I have now if you hadn't done that." Her hand rested on top of mine, fingers lacing. She squeezed and I squeezed back.

Family

"I'm glad that you've found someone, Bella, really I am," Mike's eyes softened and shifted to me for a minute, "but she's *my* daughter."

I tensed. I couldn't help it. She was *my* daughter and the urge to hit him came over me again. Bella moved our hands from her thigh to mine and squeezed gently. She knew.

"Mike," she said with a sigh. How could she be so calm? "I understand your thoughts, truly I do, but just because you fathered her, doesn't mean you are her father." Everyone was quiet for a few seconds as she tried to diffuse the escalation. "Why did you call yesterday? Why then, out of the blue? Mary is almost five months old, Mike. *Five. Months* . . . plus the entire pregnancy."

His face visibly blanched and I found immense satisfaction in that.

"I was in Europe on assignment."

"What, and they don't have phones or computers in Europe? My email address hasn't changed, Mike, or my phone number. Are you telling me your laptop doesn't work anymore or you've handed in your Blackberry?"

He was quiet as he shifted in his seat.

"Why did you call?" she asked again, relentless. I was proud of her.

"Because I had just gotten back in the States and I was at the grocery store. I had no food in my place and there was a woman there who reminded me of you and she had a little baby."

Bella was quiet as she processed this information. I could almost hear her brain whirring as she thought through what he wasn't saying. She unlaced her fingers from mine and set them on the table in front of her, like she was holding herself in her seat.

"So . . . let me get this straight," she said calmly. "You have been in Europe all this time, and the first time you even thought of us was . . ." she looked like she

Family

was counting in her head, ". . . almost fourteen months later?"

"No, of course not," Mike said quickly. But the guilt that she and Mary had been out of sight, out of mind was written all over his face.

Our food arrived just then, the server set it down, read the tension at the table and escaped quickly. It was another full minute before anyone spoke, the food remained untouched, unappetizing. I was reeling at the thought of someone fathering a child and not even giving it a second thought. I didn't think Mike was an evil person, Bella had loved him at some point, so he must have some good qualities. Plus Mary was perfect, her personality just starting to show itself. Mike just seemed to be immensely self-centered.

"Mike, don't you see?" was all Bella got out before his cell phone started ringing. She stiffened. "It's Marcus, you'd better get it."

"How do you know that?" Mike asked.

"You think I don't recognize that ringtone? Go, we'll be here."

Mike stood up and walked away, his phone pressed to his ear.

"Who is Marcus?" I asked, picking at the french fries on my plate, but more to give my hands something to do, I didn't really have an appetite.

"His editor . . . his boss." Bella said, leaning back against the seat cushion, drained. "Crap, this is hard."

"Did you really remember the ringtone?" I asked, turning towards her in the seat, pushing her hair back. She looked so tired.

"I heard it no less than eight times a day when we were together. To this day, I freeze up when I hear it on someone else's phone."

"You are doing great," I whispered. "I'm so proud of you."

Family

"So are you, I know this is really hard for you. I can't imagine what you are feeling right now." She had turned to look at me, her palm on my cheek.

"Yeah, it's hard sitting here knowing he's trying to take away the reason for my existence," I said, letting my mask slip for just a bit. Her eyes welled with tears and I put it back in place; I had to be strong for her. For Mary. Mike was walking back, I saw him approach and Bella steeled herself once again.

His face was animated, excited and I was confused. What could possibly be good about this situation?

"That was Marcus," he said unnecessarily since we'd already established that, but his face indicated he was somewhere else, not here with us. "This is it! CNN called and I'm headed to Afghanistan!"

The silence was deafening.

"Really, Afghanistan . . . that's great, Mike. It's what you've always wanted." She waited for him to see, for it all to click. It was so obvious.

He was quiet, his smile slowly sliding off his face as the realization dawned on him. He'd not given one thought to Mary or Bella.

"I see . . ." he said softly, the sadness warring with the excitement in his eyes. "You're right . . . she's better off with you . . . and you." His eyes shifted to me for only the second time since we'd been introduced. I felt sorry for him . . . just a little. To realize that about yourself, that you chose your career over your own flesh and blood must be an eye-opening experience. But I didn't waste my time, I was certain that the second he walked out of the restaurant, on his way back to his apartment to pack, we would be long forgotten.

"Mike, I'm sorry, but you have to see how this is better for Mary. For once, do the right thing and let her go, because it isn't about you, it's about her." Bella grabbed his hands, implored, begged almost.

He closed his eyes.

Family

"I'll have my lawyer draw up the papers and send them to Alice before I leave the country."

Chapter 21

Ch.21

Spinning.

Around and around, my brain whirled trying to comprehend the emotions. To process. Mike had left and Edward and I sat, unable to *really* celebrate until we actually had the papers in hand, signatures in blue or black ink. But we'd at least gotten Mike to see and I was happy about that.

And sad.

Part of me was sad for Mike. He and I used to be content together. Comparing what I had with Mike to what I shared with Edward was laughable, of course. It was like choosing between a gluten-free brownie made with applesauce and carob to a hot fudge sundae on top of a brownie made with Ghirardelli and coffee. No comparison, really, but there was a part of me that wanted Mike to understand just exactly what it was that he was giving up. There was a part of me that hurt for Mary because he chose over her, and that hurt my feelings because I knew at some point in the future, years from now, we would have to have that conversation with her and she would be sad.

Family

And that made me sad.

And then I felt mad for feeling sorry for him. How dare he walk in here after everything that's happened and demand anything from me. I'd had the most emotional year: getting pregnant, breaking up, graduating, having a baby and, finally, putting my parents to rest. Being able to find love in the middle of it all seemed like a gift, a special door down a secret hallway, and I was angry that Mike thought he could stir that pot, sully my happily ever after.

The war of juxtaposition inside me was hard to reconcile; it exhausted me. I did the only thing I knew to do. I leaned on the man at my side. Emotions spent and worn out, wrung and twisted dry, I buried my head in his chest and felt his arms wrap around me.

"Do you want to get out of here?" he whispered in my hair.

I just nodded. Breakdowns at restaurants weren't really my scene.

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"Well?" Esme asked, Mary cradled and asleep in her arms. She was chasing rabbits as she sucked on her pacifier, alternately relaxing and vigorous with it

Family

and I just stared at the small little person that had been the center of all this turmoil and yet had been the source of so much love and happiness for me. It was astounding how someone so tiny could fill me so completely.

She was my gift. She had brought Edward to me, Esme and Carlisle to me. He wanted to marry me; he wanted to give me my family back. Different but complete. I watched as Edward went over and gently picked her up. Watched as her face fluttered, but didn't wake. Watched his lips touch her forehead and linger there, for a second longer than necessary, branding her with his mouth. Watched her mouth stop it's furious sucking when she felt his lips on her. Felt my heart settle into it's proper place, beating strong.

He took her to her room and I knew when I went in there later he'd be sitting in the arm chair reading. Other than watching football with her, that was his favorite thing and I loved that they had established routines and traditions that were entirely separate from me. She had become a part of him and I rejoiced in that bond.

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"Mike finally understood what was going on," I said when it was just Esme and me. "I'm not sure he ever really wanted *her*, I think it was the idea of her, or the sacrifice of something that he thought was his that was the issue. Like she was a house or a car or something."

Family

Mike had always been selfish, I knew that about him. He was an only child, his parents had died separately and of illness when he was in college; we'd had that in common. He'd been raised to think he was important, and he *was* important, as are we all, but he'd never gotten that other bit of the puzzle. He was thirty-four, and focused and going to Afghanistan . . . there was no way things were going to start changing now.

"I know that's hard for you," Esme said. I was quiet because it was unexpected. Unexpected because she understood immediately. I would never tell Edward all of this, he would understand but it would chip at him and I wanted him whole, no cracks or breaks. He deserved that solid and unbreakable foundation.

"It is." I nodded. "It isn't that I don't want Edward to have her, I do, with everything that I am, it's just . . ."

"That you wanted Mike to really want her, for all the reasons that he should have," she finished for me. "And it hurt your feelings that he didn't. I understand . . . I am a mother, too. When our children hurt, we hurt. And even though Mary doesn't understand now, one day she will and you and Edward will have to be the ones to tell her and that will be hard."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I felt traitorous somehow, unfaithful, adulterous almost, like I was bouncing back and forth. Esme moved to sit next to me, pulling me into her, like my mother would have. She stroked my head and I returned the hug, resting my face under her chin like I was twelve.

Family

"My darling girl, don't be sorry. I completely understand." We were quiet for a moment. "Can I just say how wonderful it is to say that? I mean, I know that boys are great and all, but I never had a daughter. I don't mean to step on toes, but I love to think of you like my daughter, and if my son would just get moving . . ."

I laughed. "He told me he wants to marry me."

"Well, I should think so." She smiled at me as I sat back up. "He needs to get on that." She was quiet for another second before she spoke again. "Thank you for giving him what he's been searching for."

"He's given me everything. I love him."

"I know you do and I love you for that." She leaned over and kissed me on the forehead, my eyes welling with tears because it was what my mother would have done and I was grateful to have that.

"Thank you for understanding."

She smiled and stood up. "Now, I'm going home, but I made dinner. It is on the counter cooling in case you want to freeze it for later, because Carlisle and I would love for you all to come over tonight." I opened my mouth to tell her she didn't need to do that, but she held up her hand, "You don't need to tell me now, go talk to Edward and the two of you decide what you need. I will be fine either way."

Family

She went about gathering her things and I walked her to the door, pulling into her hug.

"Thank you, really. We could not have gotten through this today without you. At least four times, I thought to myself how thankful I was that Mary was here, with you."

Esme's eyes brightened, a watery look coming over her. "I love spending time with her." She placed her hand on my cheek and stroked it. "Thank you for that gift."

"We'll call you in a little bit," I said, smiling.

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I felt drained. Tired. Emotionally spent.

When I walked into Mary's room looking for Edward, they were both asleep. Edward's hours at the hospital were erratic and he had a knack for falling asleep anywhere at any time. I went and sat in the rocking chair across from them and picked up my book. Content to just sit with them, quietly, sharing the air with my baby girl and my . . . boyfriend? That seemed so tame, so

Family

inadequate an explanation of what we shared.

He wanted to marry me.

Ours was not a typical courtship, but I still felt the schoolgirl squees as I considered marrying him, imagining him in a suit or a tux . . . no, a suit. Our wedding would be small, quiet, full of heart and emotion with only those that we loved next to us. I would let Alice help me.

"Hey," he whispered.

"Hey, I'm sorry, I just wanted to sit with you guys."

"Did Mom leave?"

"Uh huh." I nodded. "She wants us to maybe come over tonight, but she wanted us to talk about it."

"It's up to you, baby. Whatever you want." Mary stirred then and opened her eyes. Edward looked down. "You heard your mama . . ."

Family

I smiled and stood up to take her from him and get her changed.

"Hey, baby girl, I missed you." She smelled delicious. The spot under her ear, in her neck. If only I could bottle that smell. I changed her and sat back down in the rocking chair, feeling her latch on and watching her eyes focus on me. What I saw in them as they looked back at me . . . Trust. Love. Security.

I would give all those things to her and more, Edward and I would.

"I'll put her back down after she's done and then we can go over to your parents' later. I feel a little like celebrating."

He smiled. "Me too."

Chapter 22

Ch. 22

It was late by the time we finally got home from Esme and Carlisle's but despite the emotion of the day, I was glad that we went. We celebrated, but with caution because until we actually had the papers in hand, our situation wasn't different. But I believed Mike would keep to his end of the bargain. He wasn't a bad guy, just extremely selfish and signing away his rights to Mary would ensure he could keep his lifestyle.

"I'll take her back," Edward said as we bumped our way into the dark house with the unwieldy car seat swinging back and forth. Honestly, Mary could sleep through anything; she must have gotten used to being slung around during the nine months in my stomach where I would jostle her everywhere I walked.

I was tired, but more than that, I wanted our own, private celebration. I went straight to the bedroom to take a shower, changing into my new black slip. It was my 'sure thing' and I was looking to show it off, see what kind of reaction I could garner. Edward was on the couch when I found him in the living room; I was vaguely surprised that he hadn't come looking for me. His eyes were closed and his head was relaxed against the back of the sofa.

My heart stirred as I watched him. I remembered his words from the day before.

I want to marry you. Be sure, I will ask.

I desperately wanted to marry him, call him mine forever and put a ring on his finger to prove it and mark him. I wanted to move forward as a family. As emotional as the day had been for me, thinking about what he had gone through and how he was still here because he loved us, I fell in love with him

Family

even more. Not many men would have fought through so much potential heartache for a single mom and her little girl.

I crawled on to his lap, his sleepy face pulling out of his slumber to look at me, take me, and my black slip of a nightgown-and no underwear, in.

"This is new," he said, his hands coming up to touch my shoulders, trailing down my arms, and then from my waist up my ribcage, stroking the soft cotton. "I like."

Thank you, Victoria's Secret Catalog, I thought to myself, gasping back into the present when I felt the pads of his thumbs pass over my nipples through the thin, stretchy fabric.

"Sorry to wake you, if you'd rather sleep . . ." I teased and made to get off him when he growled and held me firm on his lap, pulling my neck down to his mouth.

Lips on skin, and hands on bodies ensued; I was a ball of roiling nerves within seconds as his fingers went everywhere, cupping me, rubbing me, stroking me as I sat on him, completely trapped under his talented hands. He had me *there* quickly, shaking and shuddering; I felt him pulling down his jeans and lift me up and over him, my limbs still recovering from my climax.

"Bella . . ." he said as his head fell backwards again. He was buried to the hilt and I braced myself, my hands on either side of his head as I moved up and down slowly, watching his expression fall apart as my body took him in. He helped me, holding my waist, stretching his thumbs back up to my breasts and, within a minute, I was back to where I was before, the coil unraveling and me unable to handle anything else, letting him set the pace. Only three more upward thrusts had him unleashing into me, his face beautiful in ecstasy.

My head collapsed on his shoulder as we sat, still joined, on the couch.

God, I loved this man.

Family

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Two weeks had gone by and nothing.

Nothing.

No dinner invitations, no walks in the park together, no morning breakfasts in bed, nothing that gave us an opportunity for him to ask me the question that I'd been waiting for him to ask since he brought it up.

Once or twice over dinner, he'd reach into his pocket for something and my heart would race, my eyes would brighten and I would just know he was going to ask me . . . right then.

But then . . . he wouldn't. He'd get a piece of paper out or he'd say he was looking for a pen, and each time his mouth would suppress a smile. Like he knew exactly what he was doing and getting me all tense so that he could tease me. He was driving me crazy and he knew it.

It was Saturday and the college games were on. I'd made a big chicken enchilada casserole because everyone was coming over to watch Washington play Washington State. I was looking forward to seeing my friends and the twins and was desperate to get to Alice. I wanted to tell her what was going on, or rather, what wasn't going on and see if she'd say something to Jasper so that he could get on Edward. It all felt very seventh grade, but I was going nuts watching and waiting while he strung this out.

"Hey, hon?" he called me from the living room where he was sprawled on the couch, our friends not due for another hour at least.

"Yeah, babe?" I said, poking my head around the door of the kitchen. I was mixing up the guacamole and needed to put it in a container for the fridge.

"Can you come in here a second? I have something to give you."

Family

I froze in mid-mash of the avocados. This was it. He was finally going to ask me to marry him.

I hid the nervous shake in my voice as best as I could and told him I'd, "Be there in a minute; let me finish cleaning up." I needed to get myself under control.

"Hurry, please, this is important."

My mind was racing, my hands were shaking. I just knew this was it, and how much better was this than some fancy dinner? This was us, we were casual and laid back. This would be the perfect proposal, and how silly of me to have been waiting for something more grand.

As nonchalantly as possible, I strolled in to where he was, my hands about to give away my nervousness so I stuck them in the pockets of my jeans.

"Hey, come sit here with me, I have something to give you." He patted the cushion of the couch where his legs had been a minute prior and I sat down, my body posture telling him I knew something was up because he smiled at me, a mischievous glint in his eye.

"I have something," he said again, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small box. Thank God he couldn't hear my heartbeat, the sound surely filled the room like galloping horses.

"What is it?"

"It's just a little something for you to know how much I love you and Mary." There was that smile again as he held the box out on the flat palm of his hand towards me, and indicated that I take it and open it.

My fingers trembled as I eased up the lid on the box and saw the tiniest bracelet inside.

Family

My heart sank. It was beautiful, but it wasn't a ring. My disappointment must have showed on my face because he looked at me strangely.

"Do you not like it?" he asked, a smile playing about his lips. "I thought I would get something for Mary, you know, the first of many, I hope."

"It's beautiful, although you know it's going to be a while before she can wear it," I whispered, not trusting my voice as I felt the tears well up.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" he asked, his face full of concern and love. "I can take it back if you don't like it . . ."

"No, no . . . it's a lovely gesture and I'll save it for her," I said, staring at the bracelet that wasn't a ring and, for the first time ever, feeling a little jealous of my beautiful daughter. Ridiculous. "It's just . . . it's just that . . ."

"It's just what, sweetie?" he said, answering my stuttering.

"It's nothing," I said, looking down and trying to get my treacherous tears under control.

"It's just that it wasn't this?"

I looked up again and he was holding a diamond ring, a solitaire, sparkling and spectacular in all its simplicity. I was speechless. Struck dumb. With all my fretting and anticipating, he'd gotten me anyway. He took my hand and slid the ring on, kissing my fingertips.

"Bella Swan, would you and your beautiful daughter marry me?"

Chapter 23

Ch.23

"Yes, a hundred times."

I just kissed her, thankful that my charade was done . . . and that she'd said *yes*. Leading her on for two weeks had been the hardest, and the most entertaining thing I'd ever done. But she knew I was going to ask--she deserved to be surprised and have a proposal she could tell her friends about. She deserved everything I could possibly give her. Bella and Mary were my life, my everything. And that's what I wanted to give them.

Everything.

She crawled into my lap, running her hands through my hair as I gripped her waist, her lips so soft yet purposeful. She kissed me back, her tongue meeting mine with a passion I'd yet to experience with her. A taste of the Bella I hadn't yet met.

My wife, soon. I couldn't wait.

Mary stirred in the other room and I reluctantly let Bella off of me, so that she could go get her, we sat for just a second with our foreheads touching, letting our breathing come under control. I watched her retreating back and sat and watched the football game, unable to keep the satisfied grin off my face, my future so hopeful and happy. When they emerged, with Mary in different clothes than the ones I'd changed her into before her nap, I looked, and felt like a lovesick idiot.

"You look very pleased with yourself," she said, bring Mary over to my outstretched hands. I propped her up on my bent knees and Bella sat down next to me, her head leaning on my shoulder, just looking at our baby girl, studying

Family

her perfect face, rosy from her nap, her little feet kept warm in her socks, her blonde hair filling out around her head, her mouth furiously working her pacifier, and her eyes taking us in. Mommy and Daddy. I still wished I could be there in her features, but I took pleasure in knowing that I would be there in her personality, in her thoughts and ideas, in her mind.

"Yes, well, I'm about to become a daddy to the most beautiful little girl ever and a husband to the sexiest momma ever. Life is good, I'd say." I leaned over for another kiss. "Why'd you change her clothes?"

"Ugh, you don't wanna know . . . she'd made me a big present, all up her back." Bella's face was so adorably grossed out. "Another bath was a very near thing. As it was, it was a six-wiper."

I barked a laugh so loud, I startled Mary and her eyes got big.

"Uh oh . . ." Bella said, "you did it now."

Sure enough the delayed cry came five seconds later and her face crumpled, her breaths coming in pants and sobs. I snuggled her close to try and get her to stop, but ended up having to pass her off to Bella to nurse before she was fully content again because we were both still laughing so hard.

"Way to go, Dad," Bella teased. "Speaking of way to gos, what was with the two week tease on the proposal? You know you had me in knots forever!"

I just smiled, and then leaned over and kissed her. "Were you surprised?"

"Well, yes, but that's beside the point . . ." I kissed her again, cutting her off, tracing her lips with my tongue and sighing because I couldn't take it any further, our friends would be here soon, and well, there was Mary.

"I wanted you to be surprised. I didn't want it to be any more of a foregone conclusion than it already was."

"Well, it worked. I have been a wreck. I hope you're happy," she huffed.

Family

"I am. Very." I kissed her again.

Just then the doorbell rang and I jumped up to get it, eager to share our news with our friends over beer and enchiladas.

.

We spent all afternoon watching the game, eating and talking about our kids. *Our* kids. It felt amazing to be part of such a group and how far behind me my bachelor days actually were. We watched the twins play with Mary as she lay on the ground, being gentle and loving, like older sisters. For the first time, I thought about the child that Bella and I would create someday and how Mary would be an older sister. My future spread out in front of me like an amazing story yet to be told.

Jasper had brought cigars in the hopes that we would have something to celebrate; he knew I was planning on proposing and how I had planned on doing it. I was by no means a smoker, but every now and then a good cigar was welcome. The girls kicked us out, and like a bunch of teenagers, Emmett and Jasper and I stood around in the front yard as the sun left the sky, drinking beers and smoking. I had never had a lot of friends, med school and my job took up so much of my time, but I loved keeping company with the people I had met through Bella. They truly felt like my family, too.

"Hey, I'm just gonna grab the mail, I'll be in in a sec," I said, taking the last swig of my beer.

"Okay," Jasper said, grinding out his cigar on the tree in the front yard. Bella would've killed him had he done it on the front steps and he knew it.

I'd forgotten to get the mail earlier in my nervousness over the proposal and I didn't want it to sit out all weekend. I knew Bella wouldn't think about it until Monday afternoon.

There was a large Priority Mail envelope folded and stuffed in the small box holding all the other envelopes and ads. I checked the return address and my

Family

heart started to race.

Jason L. Jenks, Esq., Attorney at Law stared back at me. Maybe. *Hopefully.*

It was addressed to Bella and I sprinted inside, finding her in the kitchen refilling the salsa and heating up the casserole she'd made.

"Bella."

She turned and looked at me, her expression changing when she saw my expression.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Her panicked face softened when I smiled and held up the envelope.

She read the return address, and I watched as it all clicked into place. Her eyes widened and she wiped her hands on the dishtowel she had on her shoulder. I handed it over to her and watched her shaky fingers rip open the stiff cardboard. She pulled out the stapled packet of legal documents and began to read.

I was nervous. What if he'd changed his mind? What if he decided to try and take her away from us? He held my future in the signature of his pen.

She looked up at me her eyes bright and her face breaking into the most breathtaking smile.

"Step one. Done," was all she said.

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It was dark when she came to me after putting Mary down and taking her nightly shower. Our friends had left an hour before, after more celebrating, back slapping and hugs and phone calls to Alice's parents and my parents.

Family

She was scented and warm, her hair slightly damp from the water even though she'd put it up. The bed never even shifted as her slim frame slid in next to mine, her limbs entwining with me like a live vine. I felt her lips on my neck, warm and gentle, like butterfly kisses up and down my nerve endings. I wrapped my arms around her and pressed her back into the mattress, pinning her so she couldn't move. My lips on hers so urgent, so needful.

I was afraid of scaring her with my intensity and so backed up, breaking the kiss so that I could tell her what I needed to say. It was dark in her room but I could see her eyes, burning me through the dim light. I stroked her forehead pinning her with my gaze this time, willing her to understand.

"You have given me everything," I whispered. "Everything my heart has ever desired and I wanted to say thank you."

I saw the glistening of the tears reflect and I rubbed the corners of her eyes with my thumbs, wiping them away.

"No, you have given *me* everything and I love you."

I kissed her again, gently this time, moving my lips over her lips, over her cheeks, her eyes, tasting her salty tears. My fingers threaded through her hair as I felt her hands wrap around my back and as I pressed myself into her. Her legs followed, wrapping around my legs, her fingers pulling me free of my sleep pants.

I entered her slowly, the space between our bodies minimal as we rocked, our pace slow. My lips on her neck as her head pressed back into the pillow. We'd had some great sex before, all needy and hot and wanting, but this was different.

We were creating love. Love that was enough to fill the world.

Chapter 24

Ch.24

My wife.

The veil covering her face was symbolic of the separation that was now and forever nonexistent. As I lifted the distance away from her, from us, so went the anxiety that this day would never get here and she would never be truly mine.

Let no man put asunder . . .

Our first kiss as man and wife was like the first kiss all over again, and I treasured it. My blood boiling was in exactly the same way it did that time in her living room over a year ago. Only this time, it wasn't only Mary, but our entire family watching through blurry eyes as I kissed my bride in the backyard of my parent's house, the Seattle sunshine making a rare appearance as though to bless our day. Clapping and guffaws erupted as Emmett and Jasper wolf-whistled.

But I didn't care, and kissed her again. And again.

Reluctantly, I let her go, wiping away her tears with my thumbs, running my fingers over her lips and blinking away my own emotion as we turned to face our family, our hands still entwined as I would only let her go so far.

Triumphant.

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I took in the looks of the people I loved the most in the world from my chair at the head table, absorbing, listening, memorizing. My shoes were off and the

Family

table had been cleared except for the glass of champagne. Other than the day Mary had been born, this was the happiest day of my life, and I considered myself the luckiest woman alive to have not one, but two happiest days. Not everyone gets *one* and here I was with *two*. It felt indulgent, and I relished it; wrapped it up and held it close.

My thoughts strayed to Mike for a second, no doubt living in a tent in the sand or a partially bombed out hotel, and I was nothing but thankful. Thankful that Mary was created, thankful that he'd unselfishly given up his flesh and blood so that I could share her with Edward. Of course, he'd done it to further himself, but whatever his motivations, the outcome far outweighed the means, and I was content and happy with his decision and his actions.

I watched my new mother, for this was how I considered Esme, holding her granddaughter on the dance floor, swinging her around, laughter and unabashed joy emitting from them in waves. Mary was now over a year old and was wobbling everywhere, laughing and into everything. Edward had moved in with us, having sold his place without a second thought, and he'd gone overboard baby-proofing the entire house, so much so that I could hardly get into my cabinets.

Edward. Standing over to the side smoking cigars with Jasper and Emmett, laughing together, and I was proud. Proud to call him my husband. Proud that I had brought joy to his life with friends and extended family, both of which he'd been without for so long. This was really what made life full. Family.

"Hey, sweetie." Alice. Resplendent in her matron-of-honor gown designed to work well in the outdoor garden party situation-she honestly thought of everything. "You okay?"

I grabbed her hand pulling her down into the chair next to me. I wrapped my arms around her neck and pulled her into my chest. We sat there together, taking everyone and everything in.

"Thank you," I said into her ear, for Alice, just home from her own honeymoon threw herself into the planning of my wedding, knowing exactly how much

Family

would make me ecstatically happy. "You have given me the most perfect day, and you are the most perfect friend and sister."

Alice leaned up and swung around to face me, tears in her blue eyes.

"Oh, sweetie, the best thing in the world is seeing you happy after so many years of unhappiness." She grabbed my fingers and squeezed.

"Well, you've pulled it off. I am over the moon."

"Most of that, though, can be attributed to the man standing over there with my husband getting drunker by the second; I think we should go rescue them before they start dancing the Macarena or something." Her eyes rolled as she said it.

I giggled at the thought. "No, leave them be. I've never seen Edward laugh so much." Edward laughing was a beautiful sight indeed.

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"So then, Alice proceeds to make a big show in front of everyone, just to get her point across." Jasper laughed, relating tales from their honeymoon. "The guy, of course, spoke no English and kicked us out of the store."

I snickered into my beer, taking a puff of my celebratory cigar. "Oh man, nice."

"Yeah, let's just say that it'll be a while before I'll take her back to Paris; she's gonna have to earn it."

I was momentarily thoughtful about the honeymoon I had planned for Bella. My mom and dad were going to keep Mary for us as we flew to St. Croix. Bella's only request was that we went somewhere warm and with a beach. It would be hard for both of us to be away from Mary for ten days, but I wanted and needed time alone with her. I wanted to swim naked. I wanted to feed her blindfolded. I wanted to do all those romantic things that we had not been able to do because we were in the throes of parenting.

Family

Not that I would trade a second of it. Now that we were married, the Brandons were going to file the initial papers to begin the adoption process. Six months had passed since Mike sent us the papers and that first hurdle had been jumped. I was hopeful and impatient all at the same time.

I watched Bella and Alice sitting together and was overcome with how my life could change so much in a year. They sat together, huddled and cuddled, and I was thankful.

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"So, Dr. Cullen," I said to him, taking his beer and setting it down next to him on the bar. "Spare a dance with your wife?"

"Absolutely, Mrs. Cullen," he said, his eyes sparkling, his lips soft on mine.

He led me out to the dance floor and pulled me close, his hand splayed on my back, his thumb rubbing the bare skin above the fabric, tracing my spine. Alice had chosen the dress, which looked lovely from behind, all silk-covered buttons and inverted pleats, but my favorite part was that I could feel his touch on my skin as it sent tremors through me.

"I haven't yet told you how absolutely breathtaking you look," he said, my other hand grasped in his and pulled up between us, against his heart. His head was lowered, down next to my ear as he spun us, his breath making me shiver despite the warm September sunshine.

"Thank you, dear sir," I whispered back. "It's only because I love you so much it can't be contained."

"Are you gonna be okay, leaving Mary?" His question was sudden, nervous.

We both looked over to our daughter, who was standing holding on to Carlisle's knees in her unsteady legs, her precious tea-length white dress with the trailing ribbons and puff sleeves making her look like an angel. Her hair was blonde and her eyes greenish-blue, a cherub sent to us from heaven. I

Family

pretended and imagined her eyes were Edward's eyes, recessive genes mixing together to form her particular hue. I wondered if her hair would darken over time and secretly decided that it would. There were already some hints of red in it from me and I pretended that this was because of Edward, too.

"Will *you*?" I knew I would miss my girl, there was no doubt, but I honestly wondered if Edward would be able to be away from her for so long.

"I will definitely miss her, but I'm gonna count on you to keep my mind occupied so I won't think too much." His admission came out in a husky tone that made my insides curl.

"Oh, I think that can be arranged."

.

Our wedding night was spent in our house, with our daughter, as our flight didn't leave until the afternoon of the next day. Mom and Dad were going to come and get her in the morning and take her to their house, emergency phone numbers and her schedule details in hand so that we could take our time getting ready. Neither one of us had finished packing.

The events of the day had been one long euphoric ride. The dancing, the laughter, the way she felt as I held her in my arms all running through my head as I laid in bed, waiting . . . wondering if making love would be different now that she was my wife.

She appeared in the doorway, her filmy white negligee see-through from the nightlight in the hallway behind her. I was stunned into silence at the beauty that was my wife and licked my lips in anticipation, knowing full well this would be different.

"She's well and truly asleep this time," she laughed, walking nervously over towards me. Even on our wedding night we weren't immune to the sounds of Mary stirring in her sleep. "She was chasing rabbits, I think, not really awake. I gave her her paci and rocked her for a bit."

Family

I smiled and held my hand out to her, sitting up in the bed and opening the covers for her. She closed the distance quickly and crawled in on her knees, facing me, sitting back on her heels.

"I love you," I said, sitting up to meet her, grabbing her head and unleashing the full force of that love on her, instantly swirling everywhere with sensation and emotion.

"Edward," she mumbled, and I moved my lips down her neck, my hands down her shoulders and arms, dragging my fingertips across her clavicle and down her breasts, feeling her nipples pebble against the silk.

Her breathing became uneven, and I whispered against her skin, "Do you like that?"

Her moan was her yes and I teased her, the friction stirring her on even more as one hand moved lower, to her legs that were still bent in front of me.

"I like you in this position," I said huskily, my hands moving up her thighs to the hem of her nightgown. "You are . . . accessible." My fingers trailed up, underneath the silk, to the crease where her hips met her thighs, and her head fell back as my lips found her neck again, the moan from her mouth inciting me.

"Touch me, Edward . . ."

"Now, how do we ask?" I grunted, my fingers on the lace of her practically nonexistent panties.

"Please . . ." she moaned.

"Gladly, Mrs. Cullen," I said in between flicks and small bites to her nipples, the silk getting wet under my mouth.

My hand moved down to her secret spot, and I moved aside the scrap of fabric after fisting it for friction, enjoying the sounds she made.

Family

Slick and swollen, she bucked and shuddered almost instantly on my hand, my lips having found her lips, swallowing the sounds as manna.

I could take no more and pushed her back into the bed, pulling her up by her knees. Closing my eyes to still my breathing, willing the moment to last, I pulled off the bit of lace, teasing her entrance, rubbing over her hyper-sensitive warmth until she began to writhe. Her hands reached for me to guide, but I pulled back, leaning down to whisper.

"What do you want?" I licked the outside shell of her ear, feeling her shudder and arch towards me. I could feel her heat, beckoning me, pulling me in, but I wanted her to say it.

"You . . . I want you . . . all of you." Her voice was throaty and thready and it was my undoing.

I plunged into her, both of us arching and hissing at the feeling of completeness and absolute sensation, all of my nerves and thoughts focused on how this woman felt wrapped around me.

My wife, I repeated in my head. *My love. My life.*

I began to move, slowly, back and forth, trying to maintain the slow, torturous pace for as long as I could. She wrapped her legs around me higher, lifted her hips and I was done for. At her blissful cries of "More, Edward," I pounded into her, over and over, unleashing all of my love with every thrust and felt her clench, her climax pulling mine from me as we tumbled over the edge.

Together, forever.

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The clock said eight am when she found me, asleep with Mary in our chair in her room. Mary had stirred at her usual time and I woke up to give her her bottle, letting Bella sleep as I had kept her awake into the early morning hours, satiating myself in her body.

Family

I felt her kiss on my temple and looked up at her, her dark hair spilling around her shoulders, her negligee having been replaced by cotton pajamas pants and a tee shirt. As beautiful as she had been in the silk, I'd never seen her more beautiful than she looked now, thoroughly fucked and loved beyond anything.

Whole.

I opened my arm, adjusting Mary and we sat there together for a while, Bella's head under my chin and Mary in the crook of my arm.

"Your mom will be here in an hour," she whispered.

"I know, but I don't want to move just yet. I'm counting my blessings."

She was quiet, but I felt her hand snake up my neck and rest there content and warm. We sat that way, entwined and content, watching the sun brighten the room. Together, as a family, welcoming the day and the rest of our lives.

Chapter 25

Epilogue

Two and some years later . . .

"Honey . . . could you help me?" I rubbed my distended tummy as I sat the heavy box down on the nearest surface that would support it. Moving boxes was probably not the smartest thing to do being so near my due date, but I just really wanted this finished. I was over the whole moving thing, and honestly, at this point, anything that would help bring on labor was a good thing.

With the new baby coming, we'd decided to buy a new house. I loved my tiny house, with its warm rooms and cozy atmosphere; we had many happy memories there, but we needed more space. We needed house that had enough bedrooms, and a playroom, and a basement. Room for us to spread out, live, grow.

Mary was three, going on four. Her long blonde hair and dark blue eyes gave her the appearance of an angel. Her sometimes three-year old attitude and demand that we cater to her, however, wasn't our favorite part of her personality. On the whole though, she was lovely and engaging, confident and silly, and the absolute joy of our lives.

Thankfully, Edward and I discovered we were of the same mind with parenting, indulging her to a point, but never letting her infringe on us as the adults. I knew Edward secretly gave in to her when he thought I wouldn't find out, though. She was going to give some poor boy a run for his money when she turned eighteen, but she had a beautiful and giving heart, and we loved her immensely.

Edward and I had filed papers for him to gain full custody and adopt Mary as soon as the initial waiting period had expired. The Brandons had referred us to

Family

one of their colleagues who was experienced in adoption law and thus far all had gone off without a hitch, but these things took time. Lots and lots of time. We were waiting on the final papers to be signed by the judge before Edward could truly call Mary his.

Ours.

In the meantime, we were expecting another girl. Mary knew enough to point to my bump and say, "Baby," but we were never sure if she could really understand what was going to happen. She would lay with me in the bed and rub my tummy with her tiny hand as I read to her at night, her blonde curls springing back in between my fingers as I trailed through them.

"Please don't tell me you are lifting that," he said appearing in the room, clucking like a hen, and I resisted the instinct to laugh. Dr. Cullen showed his face way more than Edward did these days, and I was really looking forward to having the baby so that I could have my husband back. I smiled at him, though--he was so adorable when he was being overprotective.

"Well, somebody has to finish unpacking, and you were reading with Mary!" I huffed. But secretly, I had looked in on them snuggled in their chair in her room and they looked so beautiful, so peaceful, and so . . . right, I didn't want to disturb them.

"Well . . ." he sputtered.

"I'm just teasing," I said, my fingers on his lips, gripping his perfect chin and pulling it towards me for a kiss. "But I really do want to finish this unpacking. There's only a couple of boxes left."

"Okay, let's knock it out."

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"She's out. I think the planning of her new room exhausted her," he said, coming back into the bedroom, pulling off his shirt and throwing it in the

Family

hamper in the corner. Not everything was exactly like I wanted it yet because I had spent most of my time getting the nursery ready. Esme had designed it, green and pink this time, and it was my first priority. Now that it was done, I could focus on the rest of the house.

"She'd better get with Grandma on that one because I feel like this baby is coming soon. Well, I hope she's coming soon." I was laying on my side in the bed, in my requisite uniform of a tee shirt and loose pants because everything else felt tight. Honestly, I felt like a beached whale and although I thought I was a pretty agreeable pregnant person, I was past the romance with it.

I wanted the baby out.

I watched as Edward changed his clothes, his strong back and broad shoulders gleaming in the dim light and felt a stirring. I hadn't yet been told no sex, so maybe . . .

"Hey, come be with me," I said, moving my book and patting the mattress.

"Why Mrs. Cullen, are you propositioning me?" he said, his lips turning up at the corners as he pulled on his sleep pants and crawled in next to me.

"You know we will be on hiatus for a while, maybe we should . . . bank some?" I laughed, suddenly embarrassed for some silly reason, my huge tummy not the slightest bit sexy.

"You are the most breathtakingly beautiful woman ever and I count my lucky stars that you are my wife," he said earnestly, interpreting my look. His green eyes glowed with the conviction of his words.

"Yeah, right. I'm as big as a house!" I snorted, looking down, tears welling up in my eyes. I didn't really feel all that beautiful. I felt like a cow.

"Bella, look at me," he said, his fingers stroking down my jawline, pulling my eyes up to look at his again. "You have never been as beautiful as you are in this moment."

Family

His lips replaced his fingers and his fingers moved downward and I was lost to him.

.....

"I'll be at the hospital until four this afternoon, have Tanya or one of the other nurses page me if you need me." Edward kissed me and left our darkened bedroom, resetting the alarm before he walked out to the car. I smiled to myself and stretched out, content and warm under the duvet that smelled like him.

I had been thoroughly loved last night and now my joints felt like jelly, boneless and liquid. Mary would be up soon and I wanted a few more minutes to myself before having to put on my *Mom* hat and so sat up to get moving, a dull ache in my back, and padded to the kitchen to make more coffee.

I stood at the kitchen counter while the coffee dripped and leaned back, trying to stretch out my back a little. When I went into labor with Mary, the contractions were exactly like the books said they would be, an intensifying, traveling tightness from my back to my stomach. Then, my whole body tightened with each new contraction and I knew I was in labor.

This was different, an ache and a few Braxton-Hicks type contractions that originated and stayed central around my belly, and so I dismissed it. It couldn't be real labor because I was still a good eight days before my due date. I had been bang on the dot with Mary.

All through the morning, the ache continued, but I went about my routine, Cheerios and juice and Dora the Explorer for Mary, laundry and the odd box or so to find a place for the contents for me. I found myself walking in to the nursery, cataloging, memorizing. Making sure everything was as it should be, the instinct overwhelming to count diapers and rearrange the onesie drawer. Thankfully, I had kept all of Mary's baby clothes and had been able to salvage most of the sleepers. The white shirts, though, had all had to be completely replaced.

Family

I walked over to the crib and leaned over to straighten the blanket when the first real contraction hit. It came out of the blue and I had to hold on to the side of the crib to keep from doubling over. My eyes watered, and I held my breath until the pain subsided. This was different from Mary's labor.

I checked my watch and went to the kitchen in search of the phone. It was only eleven-thirty in the morning, Edward could be in the middle of a procedure now and I didn't want him to worry just yet. I was sure I had hours to go.

I called Esme. Thank God, she picked up on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Esme, it's me . . . can you come over?" I asked. There must have been something in my voice because she was instantly on alert.

"Yes, I'm on my way, go drink some orange juice and lie down until I get there," she said quickly. I could hear her keys drop and her muttered oath.

"I'm okay, just drive safely," I said, trying not to laugh. I hung up the phone and went to pour the juice, the next contraction hitting me, my laughter instantly gone. This one was stronger than the last and I checked my watch.

Eight minutes. No need to panic.

I took the phone with me, went to lie down on the couch to wait for Esme, and dialed Doctor Uley's office number. The nurse told me to go ahead and head to the hospital when the contractions got to be consistently three to five minutes apart, but that Doctor Uley was already on call so not to worry.

That would be hours from now, I was certain. Mary's labor took forever.

Esme and Carlisle showed up twenty minutes later and I had had three more contractions. They were getting closer together. *Why was this happening so quickly?*

Family

"Hey, sweetie," Esme said. Carlisle went off in search of Mary.

"Mary's in the kitchen . . . " I started to say when another contraction hit, she had come in the living room to stay with me but had wanted her sippy cup. Esme looked at me, concern rife in her eyes.

"How long since . . ." she began.

"Five . . . minutes . . . " the overwhelming urge to vomit against the pain came upon me, but I tried to remember everything they'd taught us four years ago when I went to the classes with Alice.

Breathe with the pain . . . don't hold your breath . . . focus on something . . . go to your happy place.

The difference between this time and last gave me something to focus on. This time I had a real happy place. My honeymoon with Edward in St. Croix, Christmas with my little family, holidays and birthdays, seeing Mary go to preschool for the first time.

The only trouble I had this time was choosing just one.

"But, Mary . . . will Carlisle stay with her?" I asked, the contraction over for the moment. I needed to get my bag, thank God my overprotective husband had already packed it.

"Yes, of course he will. Today is his day off and he's thrilled to spend the day with his granddaughter." Esme smiled as she said that, her eyes softening. They loved my little girl beyond anything and that made me happy. Mary may only have one set of grandparents, but they loved her enough for two.

"Thank you . . . for coming to get me, because I think I need to get to the hospital."

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Family

Esme drove carefully but quickly towards the hospital, as we left Carlisle and Mary ensconced together in the armchair in front of *Finding Nemo*. I texted Edward, rather than call him, knowing he could be in the middle of anything. Since his promotion, he was pulled in different directions throughout his entire shift. I didn't want him to worry just yet like I knew he would. I would see him soon.

Tanya was on duty and got me in a room quickly, having paged Doctor Uley as soon as she saw Esme and I get off the elevator on the Labor and Delivery floor.

"Have you seen Edward?" I asked her as I came out of the bathroom from changing into the hospital gown. Another contraction hit, and I had to hold on to the wall for support.

"Sweetie, walk it out . . . you know this; don't try to tense up against the pain." She helped me get into the bed, my body wracked with the contraction the entire time. She got the belts situated just in time to record the next contraction. They were coming hard and fast now, hardly two minutes in between. Tanya pulled out her phone to call Edward just as Doctor Uley came in.

Two more contractions passed through as Dr. Uley checked me and snapped off her gloves, a satisfied smile on her face.

"You are about ninety percent thinned out and I can feel the baby's head at zero station," she said. "We're gonna have this baby soon."

"Great." I grimaced as another one hit, the bell curve registering on the small digital screen next to the bed. "When can I have my epidural?"

"Oh sweetie, you've passed the window of opportunity on that one," she said, hiding a patronizing smile. "Even if your husband gave it to you, as fast as he is, the medicine wouldn't have time to really help before you'd be pushing."

Of course, I rolled my eyes, the irony not escaping me. Now, even when I was married to the head of Anesthesiology, I couldn't have an epidural. Edward

Family

walked in just then, his eyes anxious and probing until he saw me. He looked between me and Doctor Uley as she explained the situation.

"This is not funny," I wailed as another contraction hit me, the urge to push coming at the same time. "I think I need to push," I whispered.

Seconds later, the bed was broken down, the two doctors were gowned and Tanya had her gloves on, and within thirty minutes, Elizabeth Esme Cullen made her entrance into the world.

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It was dark in the room, and I had an amazing sense of déjà vu as I stared down at the perfect baby lying next to me on the narrow bed. She was tiny and precious, and Mary with all her big girl ways seemed larger than life to me all of a sudden. It seemed like it was only yesterday that Mary was the baby in the bed, and not the little girl asleep on her father's chest across the room, her crib blanket covering her small frame.

"You okay?" I heard him whisper. I should have known he would be awake; he could never resist the times when we were all together and in various stages of sleep to constantly count his blessings and try to make memories.

"I'm perfect. Wanna trade for a bit?" I asked him. Watching his face with his new baby girl wasn't something I would ever get tired of. He was mesmerized, fascinated and reverential all in one.

"Sure," he said, gently sitting up, and bundling Mary, her hair tucked under the blanket as he delivered her to the space that Lizzie had just occupied. I handed the baby to him and he sat back down with her, swaddled up like a papoose.

I pulled Mary close and breathed in her sweet scent and closed my eyes.

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Family

The days went by quickly as Edward and I learned how to balance our schedules and the girls' schedules. He had taken a few weeks off from work, and I thought back to the early days of Mary and wondered how the heck I had done them by myself. Parenting was hard enough with two parents; how I had managed being a single mom was beyond me. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I hadn't been alone. Edward had been there for me from the very beginning along with the rest of my family, and I was so thankful.

I was stirring the sauce in the pot, determined to get all the cooking done for Edward's birthday party that night before he got home from work. He was coming off the night shift and would need sleep before everyone got to the house later on. The phone rang, and I picked up without checking the caller ID.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Cullen?"

I instantly recognized the girl's voice as belonging to Jessica Stanley, the administrative assistant to Jacob Black, our custody attorney.

My heart started beating a million miles an hour. This was it. I could feel it.

"Yes, hello Jessica, this is Bella Cullen." I hoped my voice didn't give away the anxiety in my head.

"Hi, Mrs. Cullen, I hope you are well. I am calling for Mr. Black, would you mind holding for one second?"

"No problem."

Stir. Stir. Stir.

Watching the sauce swirl around in the pot was comforting in that moment, and I mentally went through where everyone was to help calm my nerves. Edward would be coming home in an hour, Mary was at preschool, Lizzie was asleep in her bassinet in the living room and Esme and Carlisle were due any minute to

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help me get everything ready. Touching on all of them in my mind gave me a sense of peace.

"Bella!" Jacob's voice boomed over the phone. He was always so upbeat and positive and Edward and I had liked him immediately.

"Hi, Jacob, how are things going?" I was being meek, almost afraid of his answer.

"I have good news. The judge has signed the papers. Mary is one hundred percent Edward's. Well . . . Edward's and yours, of course." I could hear his smile and I couldn't contain my squeal.

"Really?! Oh, Jacob, thank you so, so much." I was almost literally jumping up and down, but didn't want to be too loud in case I woke Lizzie--her regular schedule would have her awake soon enough.

"I have taken the liberty of preparing the paperwork for her name change, but I wanted to check with you first. Do you want to retain Swan as her middle name or hyphenate it in any way?"

I answered quickly and unequivocally.

"Her name is Mary Renée Cullen."

"Then, we are done. I will have Jessica FedEx the papers to you and I will retain a copy here as well for safekeeping." Jacob really was very kind.

"Thank you, Jacob. So much." My mind had a quick thought. "Jacob, would you mind if I drove down to get the papers? Today is Edward's birthday, and I think this would make the most amazing present."

"So it is! Please tell him happy birthday for me. That would be fine. I'll leave them with Jessica, but please come in when you get here, just to say hello. I don't often have the good cases come across my desk, but this one has just been a real blessing."

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"I will, Jacob, and thank you . . . again, for everything." I hung up the phone just as I heard the knock on the front door. I went to answer it knowing the smile on my face would give away the good news.

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Edward sat in the head chair in our dining room, the cake that I'd baked him, glowing with candles, and illuminating his beautiful face.

"Make a wish, sweetie," I said, holding his hand.

"Yes! Yes! Make wish, Daddy, and then I help," Mary squealed, her face lit with excitement as she sat in his lap, dying to blow out all the candles.

Edward closed his eyes and turned his face towards the ceiling, making a big production of his wish making as Mary bounced on his lap.

"Hurry, Daddy!"

"Okay, are you ready?" he asked her. She nodded and they both began blowing the candles out while Alice snapped pictures with one hand and rubbed her pregnant belly with the other. I looked across at Carlisle as he watched his son, pride and love spilling out everywhere and Esme who was dancing around with Lizzie.

Everyone was there, my whole family, Alice's parents, Emmett and Rosalie and the twins, Jasper, everyone. Even Charlie and Renée were there because Alice had been right all those years ago. My parents lived on the faces and personalities of Mary and Lizzie and I got to see them every day.

"What did you wish, Daddy?" Mary asked as she picked the candles out of the chocolate icing and started licking.

"That you would be mine forever," he said to her and my heart flipped over, knowing what was wrapped up in the box next to him. He wrapped his arms around her and grabbed her neck sugar, her giggle filling the room and making

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everyone laugh.

"Why don't you open your present, love?" I said in a shaky voice, as I pulled the cake over towards me to start the cutting.

"Mommy, can I have first?" Mary jumped out of Edward's lap and stood within the circle of my arms, her eyes on the cake, her blonde ringlets bouncing.

"No, silly, Daddy gets the first piece." I began cutting, my hands too nervous to do anything else, my eyes cocked, watching as he pulled the string on what he must have thought would be a new sweater or shirt.

"I'll take it to him," she said, grabbing the plate with his piece on it, walking very slowly towards Edward as he lifted the lid off the box.

I watched him carefully as his face registered no shirt in the box. My eyes welled up as he read the words, *Jacob Black, Esquire* embossed in gold across the front of the black folder within and looked at me, a hopeful question in his eyes. I nodded, indicating he should open it.

His hands shook as he read the paperwork and the cover letter within, his eyes glassy and watery as he looked up at me again, unmistakeable joy on his face.

"What is it, Daddy? Did you get an art set?" Mary asked, breaking the atmosphere like only three year olds can do.

"Nope, I got my wish. You are mine forever," he said, taking the cake from her little hands and putting it on the table so that he could scoop her up, bury his face in her hair and let the emotion pour out.

"Daddy, you are silly. Of course you're mine. You're my daddy."

Mary's mixed up words put it all in perspective. He was hers just as much as she was his, and now it was official.

We were a family.

Chapter 26

A/N: Thank you so much to Sandy for this lovely idea of Christmas stories and so many thanks to Javamomma0921 for beta'ing. They are both awesome. For those of you who have read it, this is an outtake from my story, Family. If you haven't, it's okay, you'll still know what's going on. :)

Some eight years later . . .

I watched her over the buffet table.

The candles, the twinkle lights, and the flicker from the fireplace were all making her skin glow radiantly and reflecting in her eyes. The rich brown taking on the gold from the sparkling illumination. The years we'd spent together had done nothing but increase my love, my desire. She was beautiful; three children having rounded out her edges. Three children and a husband having made her happy and seemingly complete. We laughed often, argued hotly and made up tenderly. She and my girls were my everything.

I sipped my beer and checked my watch, wondering when in the hell this party would be over so that I could take my wife to bed. She was laughing with her best friend, Alice, and as her head fell back, I studied the column of her throat. My lips twitched as I remembered what the soft skin felt like, tasted like. My eyes traveled downward, the dark blue silk of her blouse unbuttoned just enough so that I could see the swell of her breasts and the outline of her bra through the flimsy fabric. If I looked hard enough, I could see her nipples strain against the blue. I shifted my stance to shift my growing arousal; Bella wouldn't thank me to ravage her in front of our friends and family at my mother's annual Christmas benefit.

Downing my beer, I set it down on the table knowing the servers my mother had hired for the night would get it, and headed towards Bella after Alice set off towards Jasper. Enough was enough, I could only handle so much more. I

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had seen at least five other pairs of eyes that had been watching her as well, despite the ring on her finger. It was time to stake my claim on my wife.

"You look good enough to eat," I whispered in her ear, my hand slipping around her stomach, feeling her belly button through the fabric. I let my pinky finger slide in between the buttons and circle for a second, desperate for some kind of skin contact that wasn't technically allowed in a party full of people. I pulled her back against me as I did and felt her tense up and then relax against me. Her bottom wiggled against my hardness and I hissed in her ear.

"We need to leave. I want you and I can't watch you from across the room anymore."

"Edward," she whispered, "your mom went through a lot of trouble for this party. We can't leave yet; there is still the silent auction."

I groaned, my head falling down on her shoulder. I couldn't wait any longer.

"So . . . we'll improvise. I've got to have you . . . right now. Follow me." I took her wineglass from her and set it on the table, pulling her behind me. As I wove us through the crowd of people, I kept her hand in mine, my thumb rubbing her palm. We smiled and simpered with everyone that we passed, but I had only one destination in mind: my old bedroom.

I ignored the blushing glances as I pulled her through the kitchen where the caterers worked, and up the back stairs to the quiet hallway above. Mom's Christmas decorations never ended with the main part of the house; she wanted it to be festive everywhere and so the hallway was dimly lit with miniature trees that adorned the table, their sparkles reflected in the mirror.

At the top of the stairs, I pressed her back into the wall and kissed her, shamelessly rubbing my hardness against her, aching for friction. The party was in full-swing downstairs, and we heard the laughter and music float up through the main stairwell at the front of the house. Something about us sneaking around made me even more desperate for her.

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"Edward . . ." she moaned into my mouth.

"Like I said, good enough to eat," I groaned out and I kissed her again, dragging my lips down her throat and back up to her lips. I felt like a teenager or a frat boy, out with his girlfriend for an illicit romp, but she was so much more. This was the woman I loved beyond anything in the world. She was the mother of my children; my future and my present all wrapped into one package.

My old room had been cleaned out of most of my stuff. I'm sure it was in an attic somewhere, in the hopes that one day I would have a boy and we could pass it down. As it was though, my three girls were the light of my life. Four, if I counted Bella. I checked my watch as I opened the door, noting to myself that Lauren would be putting them to bed right now, and we still had two hours before we told her we'd be home.

Two hours.

Of course, we'd have to make an appearance back downstairs, but we could be gone for a little while; no one would miss Dr. Cullen and his wife. I locked the door behind me and was on her, my hands running up her back, the silk like water underneath my fingers, gently pulling up so I could get the damn blouse off her without ripping it. I felt her hands groping at my waist, pulling at my shirt as well.

"This is so wrong," she said in between kisses.

"I know . . . but I can't help it. You are too beautiful. I watched you all night and I couldn't take it anymore."

Her lips were soft and urgent, and I felt her fingers fumbling with the buttons, undoing the cufflinks, and sliding down my shoulders as she pushed my shirt off. My lips only broke from hers once as I pulled her blouse up and off. I tried not to mess up her hair, but honestly, I didn't care much if I did.

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"Bella," I groaned as I felt her fingertips rake up my arousal to reach the latch on my dress slacks; she always knew just where to touch me to cause an instant response, and I hardened even more, desperate to be in her.

Two could play this game. I grinned as a moan escaped her mouth when my thumbs rubbed roughly over her nipples, pulling at the lace and the clasp to free her beautiful breasts. My lips were on her hardened peaks immediately sucking, licking, biting. Her hands were in my hair, her head thrown back in wanton acceptance.

I undid the zipper on her skirt and let it fall to the floor. Wrapping my hands around her ass, I lifted her up and sighed as her heat settled over my arousal. I carefully stepped out of my slacks and carried her over to my childhood bed. The squeak and groan were audible as we collapsed on it.

Bella giggled at my curse, "I feel like a teenager, trying to be quiet."

"I know, but this is so much better . . ." I pulled her panties off, tossing them to the floor and kissed my way down the middle of her chest. Her hands fisted in my hair, and she pushed her hips up towards my stomach, my chest, and finally my mouth as I made my way down her body. Her skin tasted delicious, the faint scent of her perfume filling my nose and then essence of what was only Bella on my tongue as I parted her warm center, my focus her nerve endings and the feelings I could produce in her.

"Edward . . ." she moaned and I reached up to put my fingers over her mouth, reminding her to be quiet, that there was half of Seattle's best and brightest milling about downstairs.

My fingers traveled back down her body, her skin like silk, her gentle curves providing dips and swirls, to join my lips in coaxing her towards her release. Her musky taste filled my brain as one, then two fingers slid into her, pumping at a slow pace, pulling her along. I focused all my efforts on the small nub of nerve endings and my fingers as I stroked her inside. She was close, I could tell; her head thrashed around on the pillow, and I ruthlessly continued, more turned on by the second know that *I* was doing this to her, *I* was creating these

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feelings in her. I was desperate for the very instant that she fell over the edge.

"Oh . . . don't stop . . . that's it . . . there," she moaned and then she toppled, her body shuddering around me, her thighs straining.

I felt her muscles clench around me and though she tried to quiet her moan, I could hear her loud and clear; the sound went straight through me, and I couldn't wait another second. She was still riding her tremors when I slid into her quickly and completely, pulling her knees up so that I could go deep. My mouth was on hers, and she drank in her taste that lingered on my lips. I reveled in her moans as I moved within her, pumping over and over again. I had been close all night, just watching her, so it didn't take long for me to climax. I kissed her again, so that she could swallow *my* sounds this time. Coming down from my high, I hoped against everything that the squeaking of the bed couldn't be heard over the general din and music downstairs.

Our breathing slowed and I rolled to her side, still kissing her, still trailing my fingers up and down her body.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" I asked her, my fingers moving up to trace her cheekbone.

"I have an idea." She smiled, turning her head and kissing me. "But we'd better get back downstairs before Alice comes looking for us-or worse, your mom."

I laughed and kissed her again, letting her up off the bed and watching as she fumbled around in the dark looking for her clothes.

"Look what you've done to my hair!"

She'd made her way into the bathroom to make repairs as I pulled on my slacks and redid my shirt buttons and my tie.

"Well, look what you've done to mine," I smirked at her in the mirror. My hair stood up in back where she'd clenched it with her fingers. I washed my hands and smoothed it, repairing the damage instantly. I'd always had messy hair,

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though, so it didn't really look all that different.

She, however, looked thoroughly fucked. Beautiful and all mine. There was a certain perverse satisfaction in knowing that just about every man at that party who'd been eyeing my wife all night would look at her now and be jealous. They would *know* that she was mine, and that I'd taken what was mine.

"Go on ahead downstairs while I try to fix this." She grinned back at me in the mirror. She knew exactly what I was thinking.

"You are beautiful," I said, kissing the side of her neck and palming her ass at the same time. I just narrowly escaped her swat as I walked back out into the bedroom to make my way back to the party.

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"So . . . where's Bella?" Jasper asked me, one eyebrow raised.

"Bathroom, I think," I said evasively, avoiding my best friend's eyes and drinking my beer. I couldn't keep the satisfied grin from my face though.

Merry Christmas indeed.

Jasper just shook his head with a soft snicker and looked towards the doorway, his eyes landing on Alice and taking on a familiar gleam.

"Oh, no, you don't," I said.

"Dude, why not? You set the standards here," he laughed, winking at Alice. I saw her make her way over towards us.

"It's my parents' house," I laughed back at him, rolling my eyes.

"Right, like that stopped you."

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"Stopped him from what?" Alice asked, slipping her arm around her husband and kissing him on the cheek. My lips twisted in a satisfied smirk, and her gaze narrowed. Just then Bella appeared, looking more put together than when I'd left her five minutes prior . . . but still, thoroughly fucked.

"Edward," she hissed. "Tell me you didn't . . ."

"Merry Christmas, Alice." I kissed her cheek and went to claim my wife. I sensed the wolves beginning their descent, the pheromones wafting through the air.

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"You know," she said, staring up at the ceiling, her chest heaving as I rolled off of her, "you are insatiable. What's gotten into you tonight?"

"It's you, all you, baby." I trailed my fingertips up and down, from belly button to throat, feeling the silken skin between her breasts, where her ribcage met her sternum. I was a lucky man.

We'd gotten home on time, but not before she'd made me bid on a long weekend in the mountains. Someone had donated the use of their chalet, and we'd won it. I'd grumbled, but the thought of escaping with my family later in the season, when the doldrums of winter came upon us was exciting. We'd have to work out a time when Mary and Lizzie wouldn't miss too much school. Anna was still very young and only in preschool, so it didn't much matter if she missed two days.

"I love you, and thank you for bidding on the mountain house," she said, turning towards me, pulling the sheet up over herself.

I frowned at the absence of her skin, but leaned in to kiss her mouth instead.

"I love you, too. It will be fun, I think. Let me know when you want to go so I can let the hospital know I'll be gone." I ran my fingers through her hair, watching as her eyelids began to close. It had been a long day and I had worn

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her out twice.

"Go to sleep, I'm just gonna go check on the girls," I told her, kissing her lips, her nose and then her forehead.

"Umm hmm," she mumbled and pulled the pillow close, rolling into her go-to-sleep position. I watched her for another few minutes, marveling at my life and thanking my lucky stars before sliding out of the bed and pulling on my pajama pants so I could go check on the kids.

Lizzie and Anna shared a room even though we had separate rooms available for them. They preferred the intimacy of being together for now, and Bella and I encouraged it, knowing soon enough they would want their own spaces. Privacy and all the issues that came with being teenagers was something we could put off for later; for now, I just relished their love for each other.

I snuck into their room, the colored Christmas lights wrapped around the headboards doing double duty as night lights. Anna had crawled into Lizzie's bed and they were perfectly content despite the odd angles they had twisted their bodies into to fit the twin-sized mattress. My precious girls.

Life was good.

Kissing their foreheads, I left them to dream of sugarplums and went into Mary's room. She was peaceful in sleep. Watching her with her closed eyes and her hands tucked up under her chin, she had become such a part of who I was that no one would suspect she wasn't actually my biological child. I remembered back to the day of my birthday when we'd gotten the papers that gave her to me forever and how I'd felt like I'd been given the most amazing gift of all. She had completed my dream of a family of my own.

We'd told her, of course, about the circumstances of her birth; how I'd fallen in love with both of them the minute she'd been born and how we'd fought to keep her.

How I *chose* to be her daddy.

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She never mentioned wanting to meet Mike Newton or talk to him, but we were prepared for that to happen at any point. I was secure with who I was, though, and the thought of Mike didn't scare me anymore. Bella and I followed his journalist exploits on CNN and now FOX News as he covered the seemingly never-ending war in the Mideast. I wished him well and would always be thankful for his one unselfish act of giving me Mary.

Now, as I watched my almost eleven year old daughter sleep, I found time to be thankful again. Thankful for being the doctor on the floor the night she was born, thankful for meeting her mother, and most of all, thankful for the opportunity to have the privilege of being her dad.

"Hey, Dad," she said, her sleepy eyes looking up at me. I hadn't realized she was awake.

"Hey, sweetheart, I didn't mean to wake you."

"Did you guys have fun at Grandma's party?" she asked, yawning.

"It was fun. Aunt Alice sends her love." I smoothed her long blonde hair, only curly at the ends now. I remember hoping that it would turn darker, and it had a little, but as I ran my fingers through it, I couldn't imagine her any other way.

"We had fun, except that Lizzie wouldn't go to bed when Lauren told her to." Mary frowned, her eyes puckering between her eyebrows like her mother's did. They looked so much alike sometimes.

I chuckled, "Well, you know Lizzie . . . a mind of her own. Besides, she probably put herself to bed anyway." My middle child, stubborn and unruly, but incredibly independent. When she was tired, she'd go to bed, regardless of what was going on.

"She did, just after that. We were going to watch a movie, and I went in to get her, but she was asleep. We'd already put Anna to bed, so Lauren and I watched by ourselves."

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"Well, Anna climbed in with Lizzie at some point. I guess she was lonely."

"What did Mom make you buy?" she asked, changing the subject.

"What do you mean, sweetie?" Mary pulled her hair behind her ear and then tucked her hand under her chin again.

"At Grandma's auction thing, Mom always makes you get something."

"Oh, well, we have a weekend in the mountains at a cabin," I told her.

"Awesome," she said, her eyes fluttering closed for a second.

"Go on back to sleep, baby. I'll see you in the morning. Only one more week til Christmas," I told her, kissing her forehead.

I stood up and turned towards the door.

"Dad?" I heard her call.

"Yeah, baby?"

"I love you."

And just like that, my heart melted and refilled.

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"So, what you're saying is, you don't think it's a good idea?" I asked.

"Edward," she began, patience dripping from her voice like she was talking to Anna, and I had to laugh. "She's ten. Why in the world would you think she needs a new computer for Christmas? Especially when we just bought a family computer last year."

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"Well, she's at the top of her class, she's starting middle school next year . . . she needs a computer of her own." Even to me, my argument sounded ridiculous, I just wanted to get my babies everything, terrified they were growing up and away from me. Starting with Mary.

I was sitting in the kitchen at the table, the oldest two gone on the bus and Anna in the other room watching Dora until it was time to take her to the church where she had preschool. Bella came over and sat in my lap, running her fingers through my hair and kissing my forehead.

"Honey, I know this is about more than what you are telling me. What's wrong?" She put both hands on my face and turned my head so I was looking at her.

"She's growing up, Bella. She's gonna be eleven this summer and going to middle school. It's the beginning of the end."

I felt more than heard Bella sigh. I knew I was being irrational, I still had seven years or so before she left for college, but the first ten had passed so quickly. I felt like I was on a downhill slide. Not just with her, but with all the girls. Anna was three already.

"I know. Believe me, I know." I felt Bella's lips touch my forehead. "But let's focus on our girls now and not what we are going to do when they are gone."

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"Merry Christmas," she whispered as I felt her leg wrap over mine, and her hips turn towards me in the bed. Her arm snaked up my stomach and neck and found its way into my hair as her forehead tucked in under my chin. Her knee rubbed over my morning hardness, and my hands found the soft skin on her waist where her tank top rode up her ribs.

We had been up late, sipping champagne as I struggled to put together the new tricycle we'd gotten for Anna as Bella filled their stockings with the trinkets and candy she'd stockpiled over the past six months. With the lights from the

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Christmas tree throwing colors around the walls, we'd discussed our daughters' futures and the hopes and dreams we had for them, finally going to sleep just before midnight knowing Lizzie would be in our bed bright and early, begging to go downstairs.

I pulled her hips closer, running my hands up her back, my lips on her forehead when we heard the knock on the door.

"Ugh," I groaned as Bella laughed to herself, throwing my head back into the pillow and thinking of all things non-sexual to calm my body down before my three daughters were in here asking all kinds of questions that had nothing to do with Christmas morning.

"Come in . . ." Bella called, and sure enough, all three girls bounded in, the cacophony of their excited chatter breaking the stillness of the morning and deflating me faster than anything *I* could think of.

It was Christmas after all and there were presents to open. I thought of the gift I'd gotten for Bella and decided to wait until later in the day to give it to her. When it could be just the two of us.

Bella sat up in bed and leaned against the headboard to give the girls room to climb in. Anna, still sucking her thumb despite our attempts to get her to stop, pulled herself up on the mattress and laid down with me, her tiny three-year old body nestled in the crook of my arm.

I had everything in the world within my reach, and I was a very rich man.

"So, can we go? Can we?" Lizzie begged.

"You know we have to have our coffee made first," Bella laughed. She loved drawing this out for them, torturing them this way. Their faces twisted in agonizing impatience, and Lizzie and Mary both looked at me, imploring me to get up and get going.

Family

I checked the clock, leaning up, and rolled my eyes. It wasn't even seven yet, and I flopped my head back on the pillow in dramatic fashion.

"DAD!" they both wailed. "Please?"

I just laughed, pulling myself out of the bed and grabbing my robe. "Okay, okay . . . I'll go make the coffee. But you have to stay here, I need to check and see if Santa even came last night."

"Oh, I totally heard him," Mary said and I smiled at her beautiful face, alight with love and trust and childhood.

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The day passed with activity, presents and breakfast, lunch and more presents with my parents at their house. *A Christmas Story* played incessantly on the TV in the background as the sound of the girls' new video games filled the air. My dad sat with Lizzie trying to follow along as she and Mary played MarioKart with each other from opposite sides of the room. Mom had taken Anna upstairs to the master bedroom to try and get her to take a nap. She was tired and had started whining just after lunch, so they went to snuggle in the big bed.

Bella was in my mom's kitchen, getting dinner started. Alice, Jasper, Rosalie and Emmett were coming with all their kids for dinner in a couple of hours, and I still hadn't given my wife her present. Now was the perfect time when everyone was occupied.

"Hey," I said into her neck, my lips finding purchase just under her ear. The perfume I'd bought her for her birthday, the one that smelled like lilies, filled my senses. I couldn't help but press my hips into her bottom.

"Edward," she hissed, looking around quickly. When she saw we were alone she relaxed a bit and tilted her head to the side to give me more room on her neck. "That feels nice . . ."

"Wanna go upstairs again?" I whispered.

Family

"Yes . . . but we can't. No huge party of people to disguise our absence this time, and plus your mom is up there with Anna. She would definitely hear us," she laughed. "But I'll take a rain check for when we get home."

I smiled into her neck, she was right of course. "Okay, well, how about I give you your present now?"

"My present? But I've already gotten that book I wanted and the new sweater I'm wearing." Her hands continued to mix whatever it was that she was making in the bowl on the counter in front of her.

"That's not your Christmas--this is." I picked up her right hand from where it was holding the bowl and slipped a ring on it. It was an anniversary band, a complete circle of diamonds all the way around. It was simple and it was beautiful, just like my wife.

"I know this is for our anniversary, and I should probably wait until then to give it to you, but I want you to know that today, I would do it all over again with you and love it all more than I do now." I took the spatula out of her left hand and turned her towards me, my hips pressing her back into the counter where I'd first told her I loved her all those years ago. Her eyes looked into mine, searching for the source of my emotion.

"You are my life, and you have given me everything my heart desires just by being you and loving me," I told her earnestly.

She smiled and looked down, her eyes filling with tears. I pulled her face back up and kissed her, gently.

"Mom, are you okay?" Mary's voice sounded from the doorway.

"Hey, baby." Bella reached out her arm, beckoning Mary into our little circle. "I'm wonderful." Mary wrapped her arms around us both, and I knew in that minute, that even when our girls grew up and moved out, Bella and I would always have them, just as we would always have each other.

Family

"Why are you crying?" she asked. I could feel her small arms tighten as her anxiety got the best of her.

"Because you have the best, most wonderful daddy in the whole world."

I felt rather proud of myself at that moment, and stood a little straighter. Visions of buying myself a *#1 Dad* shirt at the first opportunity popped into my head. But then I remembered.

I was who I was because of the people in my arms at that moment, and the others scattered about the house. I had been given the best gift of all in the form of my family and I would always treasure them beyond anything.