

Master of the Universe II

by Snowqueens Icedragon

MOTU II – Chapter errr... 88 or 1 *shrugs*

I stare up through gaps in the seagrass parasol at the bluest of skies, Mediterranean blue... I can't help my contented sigh. Edward is beside me, stretched out on a sun lounger. My husband – my hot, beautiful husband, shirtless and in cut-off jeans – is reading a book predicting the collapse of the Western banking system. By all accounts it's a page-turner... I haven't seen him sit this still, ever. He looks more like a student than the hotshot CEO of one the US's top privately owned companies.

We laze on the beach of the Fairmont Monte Carlo in Monaco, on the final leg of our honeymoon, although we're not actually staying here... I open my eyes and gaze out at The Fair Lady anchored in the harbor. We are staying, of course, on board a luxury motor yacht. Built in 1928, she floats majestically on the water, queen of the all the yachts in the harbor. She looks like a child's wind-up toy. Edward loves her – I suspect he's tempted to buy her. Honestly, boys and their toys...

I sit back, listening to the Edward Cullen mix on my iPod, and doze in the late afternoon sun, idly remembering his proposal... hmmm...

"Can we marry tomorrow?" Edward murmurs softly in my ear. I am sprawled on his chest in our flowery bower in the boathouse, sated from his passionate lovemaking.

"Hmmm," I murmur.

"Is that a yes?" I can hear his surprise.

"Hmmm."

"A no?"

"Hmmm."

I can feel his grin.

"Miss Swan, are you incoherent?"

I grin.

"Hmmm."

He laughs and hugs me tightly, kissing the top of my head.

"Vegas, tomorrow, it is then."

Sleepily I raise my head.

"I don't think my parents would be very happy with that."

He thrums his fingertips up and down my naked back, caressing me gently.

"What do you want, Isabella? Vegas? A big wedding with all the trimmings? Tell me."

"Not big... Just friends and family." I gaze up at him searching his glowing green eyes. What does he

want?

“Okay,” he nods. “Where?”

I shrug.

“Could we do it here?” he asks tentatively.

“Your folks’ place? Would they mind?”

He snorts.

“My mother would be in seventh heaven.”

“Okay, here,” I agree. “I’m sure my Mom and Dad would prefer that.”

He strokes my hair tenderly. Could I be any happier?

“So, we’ve established where... Now the when.”

“Surely you should ask your mother.”

“Hmmm.” Edward’s mouth dips. “She can have a month, that’s it. I want you too much to wait any longer.”

“Edward, you have me. You’ve had me for a while. But okay – a month it is.” I kiss his chest, a soft chaste kiss, and smile up at him.

“You’ll burn.”

Edward whispers in my ear, startling me from my doze.

“Only for you,” I smile shyly at him, though the late afternoon sun has shifted and I am under its full glare. He smirks at me and in one swift move pulls my sun lounger into the shade of the parasol.

“Out of the Mediterranean sun, Mrs Cullen. I don’t want you to burn,” he breathes.

Oh! That would not be good.

“Thank you for your altruism, Mr Cullen.”

“My pleasure, Mrs Cullen... and I’m not being altruistic at all. If you burn, I won’t be able to touch you.” He raises an eyebrow at me, his green eyes shining with mirth, and my heart expands. “But I suspect you know that and you’re laughing at me,” he adds.

“Would I?” I gasp feigning innocence.

“Yes you would, and you do. Often. It’s one of the many things I love about you.” He leans down and kisses me, biting my lower lip playfully.

“I was hoping you’d slather me in sun tan lotion.” I pout against his lips.

“Oh Mrs Cullen... it’s a dirty job – but that’s an offer I can’t refuse. Sit up,” he orders softly, his voice husky. I do as I’m bid and very slowly, very meticulously, his fingers strong and supple as always, he gently coats me in sun lotion...

“You really are very lovely. I’m a lucky man,” he murmurs as his fingers skim over my breasts, spreading the lotion.

“Hmmm... yes you are, Mr Cullen,” I breathe gazing up at him through my lashes.

“Modesty becomes you, Mrs Cullen. Turn over. I want to do your back.”

Smiling, I do as I'm told, and he gently undoes the back strap of my hideously expensive bikini.

"How would you feel if I went topless, like the other women here?" I ask.

"Displeased," he says immediately. "I'm not very happy about you wearing so little right now." He leans down and whispers in my ear. "Don't push your luck."

"Is that a challenge, Mr Cullen?"

"No. It's a statement of fact, Mrs Cullen."

I sigh and shake my head. Oh Edward... my possessive, jealous, control-freak Edward.

When he's finished he slaps my behind.

"You'll do, wench."

His ever-present, ever-active BlackBerry buzzes. I frown at him and he smirks at me.

"My eyes only, Mrs Cullen." He raises his eyebrow in playful warning, slaps my backside once more, and sits back down on his lounge to take the call.

My inner goddess purrs. Maybe tonight we could do some kind of floorshow... for his eyes only, she smirks knowingly. I grin at the thought and drift back into my afternoon reverie...

"Look at this!" squeals Alice.

We are seated around the Cullen kitchen table enjoying a leisurely breakfast of pancakes, bacon and scrambled eggs, the day after Edward's birthday. Edward and I spent the night in his childhood bedroom. After his lengthy conversation with Carlisle last night, an introspective and taciturn Edward had felt inclined to drink a very large brandy, so Esme insisted we stay. Emmett and Rose have spent the night too. Now Emmett, Rose, Esme and I are debating the merits of bacon versus sausages, while Carlisle and Edward read the Sunday papers.

We all turn expectantly towards Alice, who has her netbook open on the table.

"There's a gossip item on the Seattle Nooz Website – about you being engaged, Edward."

"Already?" Esme says in surprise. Then her mouth purses as some obviously unpleasant thought crosses her mind. Edward frowns.

Alice reads out loud:

"Word has reached us here at The Nooz that Seattle's most eligible bachelor the Edward Cullen has finally been snapped up, and wedding bells are in the air. But who is the lucky, lucky lady? The Nooz is on the hunt. Bet she's reading one helluva pre-nup. Let's hope she's got one smartass lawyer."

Alice giggles... then stops abruptly as Edward glares at her. Silence descends and the atmosphere in the Cullen kitchen is suddenly thick and heavy with tension.

Oh No! A pre-nup?

The thought hadn't even crossed my mind. I swallow, feeling all the blood drain from my face... please, ground, swallow me up now! Edward shifts uncomfortably in his chair as I glance apprehensively at him.

No, he mouths at me.

"Edward..." Carlisle says gently.

"I'm not discussing this again," Edward snaps at Carlisle.

Carlisle glances at me nervously and goes to say something.

"No pre-nup!" Edward almost shouts at him, and broodingly goes back to reading his paper, ignoring everyone else at the table. They look alternately at me then him... then anywhere but at the two of us.

"Edward," I murmur. "I'll sign anything you and Dr Cullen want." Jeez, it wouldn't be the first time he's made me sign something.

Edward looks up and glares angrily at me.

"No!" he snaps.

I blanch once more.

"It's to protect you," I mutter, acknowledging the elephant in the room.

"Edward, Bella – I think you should discuss this in private," Esme admonishes us quietly. She glares at Carlisle and Alice... Oh dear, looks like they're in trouble too.

"Bella, this is not about you," Carlisle murmurs reassuringly. "And please call me Carlisle."

Edward narrows cold green eyes at Carlisle and my heart sinks. Hell... he's really mad.

Everyone erupts into animated conversation apart from Alice and Rose who leap up to clear the table.

"I definitely prefer sausages," exclaims Emmett.

I stare down at my knotted fingers... Holy crap. I hope Mr and Mrs Cullen don't think I'm some kind of gold digger. Edward reaches across and grasps both my hands gently in one of his.

"Stop it," he warns.

Crap! How does he know what I'm thinking?

"Mom," he says. "Can we have the wedding here?"

"Here?" Esme squeaks, going slightly pink. Her eyes are suddenly shining with delight.

"Yeah," Edward smiles at her, his sour mood forgotten, just like that. My sweet, mercurial Fifty.

"Of course! Oh Edward, Bella... we'd be delighted. Wouldn't we, Carlisle?"

Carlisle smiles indulgently at his wife and the mood around the whole table lifts.

"We would. We'd be honored," he says, his voice ringing with kind sincerity.

Edward barely smiles at Carlisle – I suspect that he's still smarting from 'the talk' they had last night – and he turns back to Esme.

"You have a month," he says.

"Two," Esme counters, grinning.

"Five weeks," Edward responds, his eyes shining wickedly at his Mom.

"Seven."

"Six weeks, or it's Vegas."

"Done!" Esme claps her hands, and Alice and Rose turn and grin at each other. Emmett rolls his eyes... oh, it's a family trait.

"I hope you're going to let me be maid of honor," Rose smiles warmly at me... and I think she's

embarrassed for me, given the previous topic of conversation. I smile gratefully at her.

“Please,” I whisper. She lights up.

And just like that, the date is set for August 1st.

Later, in the car as we head back to Escala, Edward is quiet and thoughtful. I am plucking up the courage to mention the pre-nup.

“Ignore my Dad,” Edward says suddenly. “He’s really pissed about Irina. That stuff was all aimed at me... I wish my Mom had kept her mouth shut,” he mutters darkly.

Oh! This is news. Edward had been so tight-lipped after his talk with Carlisle – I knew it hadn’t gone well. I want to make some comment about married people not keeping secrets from each other and sharing their problems, but now doesn’t seem the right time... but on the other hand – carpe diem.

“He has a point, Edward. You’re very wealthy, and I’m bringing nothing to our marriage but my student debt.”

Edward glances at me, his brow furrowed, his green eyes cold.

“Isabella, if you leave me, you might as well take everything,” he says simply, his expression bleak. “You left me once before. I know how that feels.”

Holy Fuck!

“That was different,” I whisper, moved by his intensity. “But... you might want to leave me.” The thought makes me feel sick.

He snorts.

“Yeah, right.” He shakes his head with mock disgust.

“Edward, you know... I might do something exceptionally stupid – and you...” I glance down at my knotted hands, pain lancing through me. Losing Edward... fuck.

“Stop. Stop now. This subject is closed, Isabella. We’re not discussing it any more. No pre-nup. Not now – not ever.”

Edward puts his foot down on the gas and I’m momentarily thrown back in my seat. And just like that, the words pre and nup are not mentioned again in his presence.

Jeez – he’s so stubborn and bossy...

“Mam’selle? Un Perrier pour moi, un Coca-Cola light pour ma femme, s’il vous plait. Et de quoi manger... faites-moi voir la carte?”

Hmm... Edward speaking fluent French wakes me, dragging me back to the now. My eyelashes flutter in the glare of the sun and I find Edward watching me while a liveried young woman walks away, her tray held aloft, her high blond ponytail swinging provocatively.

“Thirsty?” he asks.

“Yes,” I mutter sleepily.

“I could watch you all day. Tired?”

I flush.

“Well... I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Me neither.” He grins, puts down his BlackBerry and stands. His shorts fall a little and hang... in that way... so I can see his trunks beneath. Very slowly, and slightly distracted for some reason, Edward takes his shorts off, stepping out of his flip-flops. I lose my train of thought.

“Come for a swim with me.” He holds out his hand while I gaze up at him, dazed.

“Swim?” he says again, cocking his head to one side, a bemused look on his face. When I don’t respond he shakes his head slowly.

“Looks like you need a wake-up.” And suddenly he pounces, reaching down and lifting me into his arms, while I shriek, more from surprise than alarm.

“Edward! Put Me Down!” I choke out, laughing and squealing.

He chuckles.

“Only in the sea, baby.”

Several sunbathers on the beach watch – with that bemused disinterest so typical of the French – as Edward carries me to the sea, laughing, and wades in, my arms clasped around his neck.

“You wouldn’t?” I ask breathlessly, trying to stifle my giggling.

He grins down at me.

“Oh Bella, baby... have you learned nothing in the short time we’ve known each other?” He leans down and kisses me, and I seize my opportunity, running my fingers through his hair, grasping two handfuls and kissing him back, invading his mouth with my tongue. I feel his sharp intake of breath and he pulls back, green eyes wide and wild.

“I know your game,” he whispers and he slowly sinks into the cool, clear water, his lips finding mine once more. The chill of the Mediterranean is soon forgotten as I wrap myself around my husband.

“I thought you wanted to swim,” I murmur against his mouth.

“You’re very distracting.” Edward runs his nose along my jaw. “But I’m not sure I want to give the good people of Monte Carlo a peepshow.” I run my teeth along his jaw, his stubble tickly against my tongue.

“Bella,” he groans. He wraps his wrist around my ponytail and tugs gently, tilting my head right back, exposing my neck... He trails kisses from my ear down to my throat.

“Shall I take you in the sea?” he breathes.

“Yes...” I whisper. My inner goddess is beside herself.

Edward pulls away and gazes down at me, his green eyes warm, wanting and amused.

“Mrs Cullen, you’re insatiable – and so... brazen. What sort of monster have I created?”

“A monster fit for you,” I murmur. “Would you have me any other way?”

“I’ll take you any way I can get you. But not right now. Not with an audience.” He jerks his head towards the shore.

What?

Sure enough, several sunbathers on the beach have abandoned their indifference and now regard us with interest. Suddenly Edward grabs me around my waist and launches me into the air, letting me fall into the water and sink to the soft sand below. I surface, coughing, spluttering and giggling... and I’d thought we were going to...

“Edward!” I scold, putting my hands on my hips and glaring at him. He bites his lower lip to stifle his amusement. I splash him, and he splashes me right back.

“We have all night,” he says, grinning like a fool. “Later, baby.” He dives beneath the sea and surfaces three feet away from me, then in a fluid, graceful crawl swims away from the shore, away from me.

Gah! Playful, tantalizing Fifty! I shield my eyes from the sun as I watch him go. He’s such a tease... what can I do to get him back? I swim back to the shore and wade out of the sea, hopping across the hot sand to our sun loungers. Our drinks have arrived and I take a quick sip of Coke. Edward is a faint speck in the distance.

Hmmm... I lie down, take my bikini top off, and toss it casually onto Edward’s sun lounger. There... see how brazen I can be, Mr Cullen? Put this in your pipe and smoke it. I shut my eyes and drift away under the heat of the sun...

“You may kiss the bride,” Reverend Walsh gushes.

I beam up at my husband.

“Finally, you’re mine,” he whispers, and he pulls me into his arms, and kisses me chastely on the lips.

I am married. I am Mrs Edward Cullen. I am giddy with joy.

“You look beautiful, Bella,” he murmurs appreciatively, smiling warmly down at me. “Don’t let anyone take that dress off but me, understand?” His smile heats a hundred degrees and his green eyes glow as his fingertips trail down my cheek, igniting my blood. Holy crap... How does he do this?

I flush, and nod mutely. Jeez, I hope no one can hear us... luckily Reverend Walsh has discreetly stepped back. I glance at the throng gathered in their wedding finery... My Mom, Charlie, Phil, and the Cullens are all applauding – even maid of honor Rose, looking stunning in pale pink as she stands beside Emmett, Edward’s best man. Who knew Emmett could scrub up so well? All wear huge, beaming smiles – except Esme, who weeps graciously into a dainty white handkerchief.

“Ready to party, Mrs Cullen?” Edward murmurs, giving me his shy smile. I melt. He looks dazzling, in a simple black tux with silver waistcoat and tie. He’s so... dashing.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I grin, a totally goofy smile on my face.

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I gaze at the wedding party in full swing... Carlisle and Esme have gone to town. They have the marquee set up again, beautifully decorated in pale pink, silver and ivory, its sides open facing the bay. We have been blessed with fine weather, and the late afternoon sun shines over the water. There’s a dance floor at one end of the marquee, a lavish buffet at the other. Charlie and my mother are dancing and laughing with each other. I feel bittersweet watching them together... I hope Edward and I last longer. I don’t know what I’d do if he left me. Marry in Haste, Repent in Leisure... the saying haunts me. Rose is beside me, looking so beautiful in her long pale rose silk gown. She glances at me and frowns.

“Hey, this is supposed to be the happiest day of your life,” she scolds.

“It is.” I whisper.

“Oh Bella, what’s wrong? Are you watching your parents?”

I nod at her sadly.

“They’re happy,” she says kindly.

“Happier apart.”

“You’re having doubts?” Rose asks, alarmed.

“No... not at all... it’s just... I love him so much...” I freeze, unable or unwilling to articulate my fears.

“Bella, it’s obvious he adores you. I know you had an... unconventional start to your relationship, but I can see how happy you’ve both been over the past month.” She grasps my hands, squeezing them.

“Besides, it’s too late now!” she adds, grinning at me.

I giggle. Trust Rose to point out the obvious. She pulls me into a Rosalie Hale Special Hug.

“Bella, you’ll be fine. And if he does hurt one hair on your head, he’ll have me to answer to.” Releasing me, she grins at whoever is behind me.

“Hi baby.” Edward puts his arms around me, surprising me, and nuzzles my neck. “Rose,” he acknowledges. He’s still cool towards her, even after six weeks.

“Hello again, Edward. I’m off to find your best man... who happens to be my best man too.” With a smile to us both she heads over to Emmett, who is drinking with Jasper and Jake.

“Time to go,” Edward murmurs.

“Already? This is the first party I’ve been to where I don’t mind being the centre of attention,” I murmur, turning in his arms to face him.

“You deserve to be. You look stunning, Isabella.”

“So do you.”

He smiles down at me... his expression heating.

“This beautiful dress becomes you.”

“This old thing?” I flush shyly and pull at the fine chiffon over-skirt of the wedding dress designed for me by Rose’s mother.

He bends and kisses me gently.

“Let’s go. I don’t want to share you with all these people any more.”

“Can we leave our own wedding?”

“Baby, it’s our party – we can do what we want. We’ve cut the cake. And right now, I’d like to whisk you away and have you all to myself.”

I giggle.

“You have me for a lifetime, Mr Cullen.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, Mrs Cullen.”

“Oh there you two are! Such lovebirds.”

I groan inwardly... Esme’s mother has found us.

“Edward, darling – one more dance with your grandma?”

Edward’s lips purse slightly.

“Of course, Grandmother.”

“And you, beautiful Isabella, go and make an old man happy – dance with Grandpa Platt.”

“It’ll be my pleasure, Mrs Platt.”

“Oh, I think you can call me Grandma. Now, you two seriously need to get working on my great grandkids. I won’t last too much longer.” She twinkles at us both. Edward blinks at her in horror.

“Come, Grandmother,” he says, hurriedly taking her hand and leading her towards the dance floor. He glances back at me and rolls his eyes. “Later, baby,” he practically pouts.

As I make my way to Grandpa Platt Jake accosts me.

“I won’t ask you for another dance. I think I monopolized too much of your time on the dance floor as it is... but I’m serious, Bells. I’ll be here... If you need me.”

Shit... he’s had too much to drink.

I know Jake means well, but his attention is unwelcome.

“Jake, thank you. I’ll bear your kind words in mind... I think they’re serving coffee in the marquee.”

His mouth twists.

“I mean it,” he says, his dark eyes burning with an emotion I don’t want to name.

“I know you do. Thank you, Jake. But please excuse me – I have a date with an old man.”

He blinks at me in incomprehension.

“Edward’s grandfather,” I clarify.

He grins.

“Good luck with that Bells. Good luck with everything.”

“Thanks, Jake.”

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I stand by the French doors watching the sun sink slowly over Seattle, casting bright orange and aquamarine shadows across the bay.

“Let’s go,” Edward urges.

“I have to change.” I grasp his hand, meaning to pull him through the French windows and upstairs with me. He frowns, not understanding, and tugs gently on my hand, halting me.

“I thought you wanted to be the one to take this dress off,” I explain. His eyes light up.

“Correct.” He grins lasciviously at me. “But I’m not undressing you here. We wouldn’t leave until... I don’t know...” He waves his long-fingered hand, leaving his sentence unfinished but his meaning quite clear.

Oh... I flush and let go of his hand.

“And don’t take your hair down either,” he murmurs darkly.

“But...”

“No buts, Isabella. You look beautiful. And I want to be the one to undress you.”

Oh... I frown.

“Pack your going-away clothes,” he orders softly. “You’ll need them. Taylor has your main suitcase.”

“Ok.” What has he got planned? He hasn’t told me where we’re going. In fact I don’t think anyone knows where we’re going. Even Alice hasn’t managed to inveigle the information out of him. I turn to where Rose and my mother are hovering nearby.

“I’m not changing.”

“What?” says my mother.

“Edward doesn’t want me to.” I shrug as if this should explain everything. Her brow furrows briefly.

“You didn’t promise to obey,” she reminds me tactfully. Rose tries to disguise her snort as a cough. I narrow my eyes at her. Neither she nor my mother have any idea of the row Edward and I had about that! I so don’t want to rehash that argument. Jeez, can my Fifty Shades sulk... I sigh at the memory.

“I know Mom, but he likes this dress, and I want to please him.” I blush.

Her expression softens. Rose rolls her eyes and tactfully moves away to leave me alone with my mother.

“You look so lovely, darling.” Renee gently tugs at a loose tendril of my hair and strokes my chin. “I am so proud of you, honey. You’re going to make Edward a very happy man.” She pulls me into a hug... oh Mom! “I can’t believe how grown-up you look right now. Beginning a new life... Just remember that men are from a different planet, and you’ll be fine.”

I giggle. Edward is from a different universe... if only she knew.

“Thanks Mom.”

Charlie joins us, smiling sweetly at both Mom and me.

“We did good, eh Renee?” he says, his eyes glowing with pride. He looks so dapper in his black tux and pale pink waistcoat. Tears prick the back of my eyes. Oh no... so far I have managed not to cry.

“We sure did, Charlie,” Renee replies.

“You make one hell of a bride, Bells,” Charlie tucks the same loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“Oh Dad...” I stifle a sob and he hugs me, briefly.

“You’ll make one hell of a wife too, baby,” he whispers, his voice hoarse.

When he releases me Edward is back at my side. Charlie shakes his hand warmly.

“Look after my baby girl, Edward.”

“I fully intend to, Charlie. Renee.” He shakes hands with my Dad and kisses my Mom. The rest of the wedding guests have formed a human arch for us to travel through, leading round to the front of the house.

“Ready?” Edward says.

“Yes.”

Taking my hand he leads me through while our guests shout good luck and congratulations, and shower us with rice. At the end of the arch Esme and Carlisle are waiting, and they hug and kiss us both. We bid them hasty goodbyes, and I toss my bouquet of white and pink roses into the crowd of young women that has hastily gathered. Alice triumphantly holds it aloft, grinning from ear to ear.

Taylor is waiting to whisk us away in the Merc.

Edward holds the car door open and bends to help me with the hem of my dress as I climb in. Taylor holds the door open for Edward.

“Congratulations, Sir,” Taylor murmurs.

“Thank you,” Edward replies as he seats himself beside me.

As Taylor pulls away the car is showered with rice from behind us. Edward grasps my hand and kisses my knuckles.

“So far so good, Mrs Cullen?”

“So far so wonderful, Mr Cullen. Where are we going?”

“Sea Tac,” he says simply, and smiles a sphinx-like smile. Hmm... what is he planning?

Taylor does not head for the departure terminal, but towards a part of the airport I have never been to... through a security gate and on to the tarmac... What? And then I see her – Edward’s jet...

Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc in large blue lettering across her fuselage.

“Don’t tell me you’re misusing company property again?” I exclaim.

“Oh, I hope so, Isabella.” Edward grins.

Taylor halts at the foot of the steps leading up to the plane, and leaps out of the Merc to open Edward’s door. They have a brief discussion, then Edward opens my door – and rather than stepping back to give me room to step out, he leans in and lifts me...

Whoa!

“What are you doing?” I squeak.

“Carrying you over the threshold,” he says.

“Oh...” Isn’t that supposed to be at home?

He carries me effortlessly up the steps, and Taylor follows with my small suitcase. He leaves it on the threshold of the plane before disappearing back down to the Merc. Inside the cabin I recognize Stephan in his pilot’s uniform.

“Welcome aboard, Sir, Mrs Cullen.” He grins at us both.

Edward puts me down and shakes Stephan’s hand. Beside Stephan stands a dark-haired woman in her what? Early thirties? Also in uniform.

“Congratulations to you both,” Stephan continues.

“Thank you, Stephan. Isabella, you know Stephan. He’s our Captain today, and this is First Officer Beighley.”

She flushes as Edward introduces her and blinks rapidly. I want to roll my eyes. Another female completely captivated by my too-handsome-for-his-own-good husband.

“Delighted to meet you,” gushes Beighley, and blushes some more. I smile kindly at her. After all – he is mine.

“All preparations complete?” Edward asks them both as I glance around the cabin. The interior is all pale maple wood and pale cream leather... it’s lovely. Another young woman in uniform stands at the other end of the cabin... a very pretty brunette. Who the hell is that?

“We have the all-clear. Weather is good from here to Boston.”

Boston?

“Turbulence?”

“Not before Boston. There’s a weather front over Shannon which might give us a rough ride.”

Shannon? Ireland?

“I see. Well, I hope to sleep through it all,” says Edward matter-of-factly.

Sleep?

“We’ll get underway sir,” Stephan says. “We’ll leave you in the capable care of Natalia, your flight attendant.” Edward glances in her direction and frowns slightly, but turns to Stephan with a smile.

“Excellent,” he says. Taking my hand he leads me to one of the sumptuous leather seats. There must be about twelve of them in total.

“Sit,” he says.

We sit in two single seats facing each other with a small, highly polished table between us.

“Welcome aboard sir, ma’am, and congratulations.” Natalia is at our side, offering us both a glass of pink champagne.

“Thank you,” Edward says coolly, scrutinizing her, but she for a change seems immune to his charms. She smiles politely at us and retreats to the galley.

“Here’s to a happy married life, Isabella.” Edward raises his glass to mine, and we chink. The champagne is delicious.

“Bollinger?” I ask.

“The same.”

Last time I drank this it was out of teacups. I grin at him.

“Where are we going?” I ask, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

“Boston. To refuel,” Edward teases, his eyes alight with excitement. He looks like a small boy.

“Then?” I prompt.

“Shannon. To refuel.”

“Edward!”

“London,” he says softly, gazing intently at me, trying to gauge my reaction.

I gasp. Holy Crow... I thought idly maybe we’d be going to Aspen or New York. I can hardly believe it. My lifetime ambition has been to visit England. I feel lit up from within... incandescent with happiness.

“Then Paris,” he adds.

What?

“Then the South of France.”

Whoa!

“I know you’ve always dreamed of going to Europe,” he says softly. “I want to make your dreams come true, Isabella.”

“You are my dreams come true, Edward.”

“Back at you, Mrs Cullen,” he whispers.

Oh my...

“Buckle up.”

I grin and do as I’m told, as the plane taxis out on to the runway.

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We have eaten a delicious wedding feast – smoked salmon, followed by roast partridge with a green bean salad and dauphinoise potatoes, all cooked and served by the ever-efficient Natalia.

“Dessert, Mr Cullen?” she asks.

He shakes his head and runs his finger across his bottom lip as he looks questioningly at me, his green eyes dark and unreadable.

“No, thank you,” I murmur, unable to break eye contact with him. He smiles slightly and Natalia retreats.

“Good,” he murmurs. “I’d rather planned on having you for dessert.”

Oh... here?

“Come,” he says, rising from the table and offering me his hand. He leads me to the end of the cabin.

“There’s a bathroom here...” He points to a small door, then leads me on down a short corridor and through a door at the end.

Jeez... a bedroom. The cabin is cream and maple wood and the small double bed is covered in gold and taupe cushions. It looks... very comfortable.

Edward turns and pulls me into his arms, gazing down at me.

“I thought we’d spend our wedding night at 35,000 feet, Isabella. It’s something I’ve never done.”

Holy Cow... another first. I gape up at him, my heart pumping.

“But first I have to get you out of this dress.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Edward shouts, waking me.

He’s standing at the end of my sun lounger, glaring down at me, all wet and beautiful. He’s mad. Shit... He’s really mad.

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I blink up at him, suddenly very awake after my sleep.

“No tan lines...” I whisper weakly in my defense.

His green eyes blaze. He reaches down, scoops up my bikini top from his sun lounger and tosses it at me.

“Put this on!” he hisses.

“Edward, no one is looking.”

“Trust me. They’re looking. I’m sure Taylor and the security crew are enjoying the show!” he snarls.

Holy Shit! Why do I keep forgetting about them? I grasp my breasts in panic, hiding them. Ever since

Echo Charlie's sabotaged demise we are constantly shadowed by damned security.

"Yes!" Edward hisses. "Not forgetting some sleazy fucking pap could get a shot of you too. Do you want to be all over the National Enquirer again? Naked this time?"

Shit! The paps! Fuck! As I hurriedly scramble into my top, all fingers and thumbs, I can feel the color draining from my face. I shudder. The paparazzi... again. The unpleasant memory of being besieged outside SIP after our engagement was leaked comes unwelcome to my mind – all part of the Edward Cullen package.

"L'addition!" Edward snaps at the passing waitress. "We're going," he says to me.

"Now?"

"Yes. Now."

Oh... shit... he's not to be argued with.

He pulls on his shorts, even though his trunks are dripping wet, then his grey t-shirt. The waitress is back in a moment with his credit card and the check. Reluctantly I wriggle into my turquoise sundress and step into my flip-flops. Once the waitress has left Edward snatches up his book and masks his angry expression behind mirrored aviator specs. He's bristling with tension and anger. My heart sinks... Every other woman on the beach is topless – I just wanted to fit in. I look odd with my top on. I sigh inwardly, my spirits sinking. I thought Edward would see the funny side... sort of... but his sense of humor seems to have evaporated.

"Please don't be mad at me," I whisper, taking his book and BlackBerry from him and placing them into my backpack.

"Too late for that," he says quietly – too quietly. "Come." Taking my hand he signals up to Taylor and his two sidekicks, the French security officers Philippe and Gaston. Weirdly, they are identical twins. They have been patiently watching us, and everyone else on the beach, from the verandah. Why do I keep forgetting about them? How? Taylor is stony-faced behind his dark glasses, though I am still not used to seeing him so casually dressed in shorts and black polo shirt.

Edward leads me back into the hotel, through the lobby and out onto the street. He remains silent, brooding, and bad-tempered, and it's all my fault. Taylor and his team shadow us.

"Where are we going?" I ask tentatively, gazing up at him.

"Back to the boat." He doesn't look at me.

I have no idea of the time... must be about five or six in the afternoon. When we reach the quayside Edward leads me onto the pontoon where the motorboat and jet ski belonging to the Fair Lady are moored. As Edward unties the jet ski, I hand my backpack to Taylor. I glance nervously up at him, but like Edward, his expression gives nothing away. I flush, thinking about what he's seen on the beach.

"Here you go, Mrs Cullen." Taylor passes me a life vest from the motorboat and I dutifully put it on. Why am I the only one who has to wear a life jacket? Edward and Taylor exchange some kind of look... jeez, is he angry with Taylor too? Edward then checks the straps on my life jacket, cinching the middle one tightly. "You'll do," he mutters sullenly, still not looking me in the eye. Shit.

He climbs gracefully on to the Jet Ski and holds out his hand for me to join him. Grasping it tightly I manage to throw my leg over the seat behind him without falling into the sea, while Taylor and the twins clamber into the motorboat. Edward kicks the jet ski away from the quay, and it floats gently into the marina.

“Hold on!” he orders, and I put my arms around him. This is my favorite part of traveling by jet ski. I hug him tightly, my nose nuzzling into his back... marvelling that there was a time when he would not have tolerated me touching him this way. He smells good... of Edward and the sea. Forgive me, Edward, please? I can feel him stiffen slightly.

“Steady,” he says, his tone softer. I kiss his back and rest my cheek lightly against him, looking back towards the quay, where a few holidaymakers have gathered to watch the show.

Edward turns the key and the motor roars into life. With one twist of the accelerator the jet ski bucks forward and speeds across the cool dark water, through the marina and out to the center of the harbor towards the Fair Lady. I hold him tighter... I love this – it’s so exciting. I can feel every muscle in Edward’s lean frame as I press myself against him, clinging to him.

Taylor draws up alongside us in the motorboat. Edward glances at him, then accelerates again, and we shoot forward, skimming over the top of the water like an expertly tossed pebble. Taylor shakes his head in resigned exasperation and heads straight to the yacht, while Edward shoots past the Fair Lady, heading out towards the open sea.

The sea spray is splashing us, the warm wind buffeting my face and whipping my ponytail crazily around me. This is so much fun. Maybe the thrill of this ride will dispel Edward’s bad mood. I can’t see his face, but I can tell he’s enjoying himself – carefree, acting his age for a change.

He steers in a huge semi-circle and I can see the shoreline – the boats in the marina, the mosaic of yellow, white and sand colored offices and apartments, and the craggy mountains behind. It looks so disorganized – not the regimented blocks that I am used to – but so picturesque. Edward glances down at me, and I can see the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

“Again?” he shouts over the noise of the engine.

I nod enthusiastically. His answering grin is dazzling, and he opens the throttle and speeds round the Fair Lady and on out to sea once more... and I think I’m forgiven.

-

“You’ve caught the sun,” Edward says mildly as he undoes my life vest. I gaze up at him, anxiously trying to assess his mood. We are on deck aboard the yacht, and one of the stewards is standing quietly nearby, waiting for my life vest. Edward passes it to him.

“Will that be all sir?” the young man asks. I love his French accent.

Edward glances at me, takes off his shades, and slips them into the collar of his t-shirt, letting them hang.

“Would you like a drink?” he asks me.

“Do I need one?”

He cocks his head to one side.

“Why would you say that?” His voice is soft.

“You know why.”

He gazes down at me as if weighing something up in his mind. Oh, what is he thinking?

“Two gin and tonics please. And some nuts and olives,” he says to the steward, who nods and quickly vanishes.

“You think I’m going to punish you?” Edward’s voice is silky.

“Do you want to?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I’ll think of something. Maybe when you’ve had your drink.” And it’s a sensual threat. I swallow. Oh my... My inner goddess blinks up from her sun lounger where she’s trying to catch rays with a silver reflector fanned out at her neck.

Edward’s brow furrows momentarily.

“You want to be?”

How does he know?

“Depends,” I mutter, flushing.

“On what?” And I see that ghost of a smile on his lips.

“If you want to hurt me or not.”

His mouth presses into a hard line, humor forgotten. He leans forward and kisses my forehead.

“Isabella, you’re my wife, not my sub. I don’t ever want to hurt you. You should know that by now. Just... just don’t take your clothes off in public. I don’t want you naked all over Star magazine. You don’t want that, and I’m sure Charlie doesn’t want that either.”

Oh! Charlie. Holy shit, he’d have a coronary. What was I thinking? I mentally castigate myself...

The steward appears with our drinks and nibbles and places them on the teak table.

“Sit,” Edward commands me softly. I do as I am bid, and settle into a director’s chair. Edward takes a seat beside me and passes me a gin and tonic.

“Cheers, Mrs Cullen.”

“Cheers, Mr Cullen.”

I take a welcome sip. It’s thirst-quenchingly cold and delicious. When I gaze at him he’s watching me carefully, his mood unreadable. It’s very frustrating... I don’t know if he’s still mad at me. I deploy my patented distraction technique.

“Who owns this boat?” I ask.

“A British knight. Sir Somebody-Or-Other. His great-grandfather started a grocery store. His daughter’s married to one of the Crown Princes of Europe.”

Oh...

“Super-rich?”

Edward looks suddenly wary.

“Yes.”

“Like you,” I murmur.

“Yes.”

Oh...

“And like you,” Edward whispers, and pops an olive into his mouth. I blink rapidly... a vision of him in his tux and silver waistcoat comes to mind... his green eyes burning with sincerity as he gazes down

at me during our wedding ceremony.

“All that is mine is now yours...” he says, his voice ringing out clearly, reciting his vows from memory.

All mine? Holy crow.

“It’s odd. Going from nothing, to...” I wave my hand to indicate our opulent surroundings. “To everything.”

“You’ll get used to it,” he says reassuringly.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it, Edward.” I shudder as I recall the crazy shopping fest Edward demanded I go on with Caroline Acton – the personal shopper from Niemans – in preparation for this honeymoon. My bikini alone cost \$540. I mean, it’s nice, but really – that’s a ridiculous amount of money for four triangular scraps of material.

“You will,” he says and grins at me.

Oh Fifty... maybe with time. I push the small dish of salted almonds and cashews towards him.

“Your nuts, sir,” I say with as straight a face as I can manage.

He smirks at me.

“Why thank you, Mrs Cullen. I don’t mind if I do.” He takes an almond. “I am nuts about you,” he says, his eyes shining wickedly, sparkling with humor as he enjoys my little joke. He licks his lips.

“Drink up. We’re going to bed.”

What?

Drink, he mouths at me, his eyes darkening. Holy cow... the look he gives me could be solely responsible for global warming. I pick up my gin and drain the glass, not taking my eyes off him. His mouth drops open slightly... I can see the tip of his tongue between his teeth, and he smiles... lewdly at me. In one fluid move, he gets up and bends over me, resting his hands on the arms of my chair.

“I’m going to make an example of you. Come. No peeing,” he whispers in my ear.

I gasp. No peeing? My subconscious looks up from her book – the collected works of Charles Dickens, Vol. 1 – with alarm.

“It’s not what you think,” Edward smirks, holding his hand out to me. “Trust me.” He looks so sexy and sincere. How can I resist?

“Okay...” I place my hand in his, because quite simply, I’d trust him with my life. Jeez – what has he got planned? My heart starts pounding in anticipation.

He leads me across the deck and through the doors into the plush, beautifully appointed main salon, along a narrow corridor, through the dining room, and down the stairs to the main master cabin. Our room.

The cabin has been cleaned since this morning and the bed made. It’s a lovely room. With two portholes on both the starboard and port sides, it’s elegantly decorated in dark walnut furniture, with cream walls and soft furnishings in gold and red.

Edward releases my hand. Taking his sunglasses from the collar of his t-shirt, he places them on his bedside, then pulls his t-shirt off over his head and tosses it onto a chair. He steps out of this flip-flops and removes his shorts and trunks in one graceful move, so that he’s naked. Oh My... Will I ever tire of looking at him naked? He is utterly glorious, and all mine. His skin glows... he’s caught the sun too,

and his hair is longer, flopping over his forehead. I am one lucky, lucky girl.

He reaches forward and grasps my chin, pulling slightly so that I stop biting my lip. He runs his thumb along my released lower lip.

“That’s better,” he whispers. He turns and heads over to the impressive armoire that houses his clothes. From the bottom drawer he produces two pairs of metal handcuffs and an airline mask. Handcuffs! We’ve never used handcuffs. I glance quickly and nervously at the bed. Where the hell is he going to attach those? He turns and gazes steadily at me, his eyes dark and luminous.

“These can be quite painful. They can bite into the skin if you pull too hard.” He holds up one pair. “But I really want to use them on you now.”

Holy fuck... my mouth goes dry.

“Here.” He stalks gracefully forward and hands me a set. “Do you want to try them first?”

They feel solid, the metal cold. Vaguely I hope I never have to wear a pair of these for real.

Edward is watching me intently.

“Where are the keys?” I whisper. He holds out his palm, and in it there’s a small metallic key.

“This does both sets. In fact, all sets,” he says softly. How many sets does he have? I don’t remember seeing any in the museum chest. Reaching up he strokes my cheek with his index finger, trailing it down to my mouth. He leans in, as if to kiss me.

“Do you want to play?” he whispers, and everything in my body heads south, as desire floods and tightens deep in my belly.

“Yes,” I whisper.

He smiles.

“Good.” He runs his nose up along mine and plants feather-light kisses along my brow. “We’re going to need a safe word,” he breathes.

What?

“Stop won’t be enough, because you will probably say that, but you won’t mean it.” He runs his nose back down mine... the only contact between us. Oh my.

What does he mean? I can hear my heart pounding in my ears. Shit... how can he do this with just words...?

“This is not going to hurt. It will be intense. Very intense, because I am not going to let you move. Okay?”

Oh my. This sounds so... hot. I can hear my breathing – fuck, I am panting already. My inner goddess has her sequins on and is warming up to dance the Rumba. Thank heavens I’m married to this man, otherwise this would be embarrassing. My eyes flick down to his arousal. Holy Crow!

“Okay...” My voice is barely a whisper.

“Choose a word, Bella.”

Oh...

“A safe word,” he says softly.

“Popsicle...”

“Popsicle?” I can hear the amusement in Edward’s voice.

“Yes.”

He grins as he leans back to gaze down at me.

“Interesting choice. Lift up your arms.”

I do as I’m told, and Edward grasps the hem of my sundress, lifts it over my head and tosses it on the floor. He holds out his hand, and I give him back the handcuffs. He places both sets on the bedside table along with the blindfold, and yanks the quilt off the bed, letting it fall to the floor.

“Turn round.”

I turn, and he undoes my bikini top, so that it falls to the floor.

“Tomorrow, I will staple this to you,” he mutters and reaches up, tugging at my hair tie, freeing my hair. He gathers it into one hand and yanks gently so I step back against him... against his chest... against his erection. I gasp as he pulls my head to one side and kisses my neck.

“You’re very disobedient,” he whispers in my ear, sending delicious shivers through me.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Hmmm... what are we going to do about that?”

“Learn to live with it...” I breathe. Holy Crow, his soft languid kisses are driving me wild. He grins against my neck.

“Ah, Mrs Cullen. You are ever the optimist.”

He straightens. Taking my hair he carefully parts it into three strands, braids it slowly, then fastens my hair tie to the end. He tugs my braid gently and leans down to my ear.

“I am going to teach you a lesson,” he murmurs – then moves suddenly, grabbing me by the waist, sitting down on the bed, twisting me round and yanking me across his knee, so that I can feel his erection at my belly. He smacks my backside once, hard. I yelp, then I’m on my back on the bed, and he’s gazing down at me, his eyes molten green. I am going to combust.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” he whispers, trailing his fingertips up my thigh so that I tingle... everywhere. Getting up from the bed, without taking his eyes off me, he gathers both sets of handcuffs, reaches down, grasps my left leg and snaps one cuff around my ankle.

Oh!

Lifting my right leg he repeats the process, so I have a pair of handcuffs attached to each ankle. I still have no idea where he’s going to attach them.

“Sit up,” he orders softly and I do as I’m bid.

“Now hug your knees.”

I blink at him, then draw my legs up so they are bent in front of me, and wrap my arms around them. He reaches down, lifts my chin, and plants a soft wet kiss on my lips... then slips the blindfold over my eyes. I can see nothing... all I can hear is my rapid breathing, and the sound of the water lapping against the sides of the yacht as she sways gently on the sea.

Oh my... What is he going to do? I am so aroused... already.

“What’s the safe word, Isabella?” he murmurs.

“Popsicle,” I breathe.

“Good,” he says, and taking my left hand he snaps a cuff around my wrist, then repeats the process with my right. My left hand is tied to my left ankle, my right hand to the right leg. I cannot straighten my legs. Holy Fuck...

“Now,” Edward breathes. “I’m going to fuck you till you scream.”

What? I gasp as all the air leaves my body. He grasps both of my heels and tips me back so that I fall backwards on to the bed. I have no choice but to keep my legs bent. The cuffs tighten slightly as I pull against them. He’s right... they are only just not painful. This feels so weird – being trussed up and helpless. He pulls my ankles apart, and I groan.

He kisses my inner thigh, and I want to squirm beneath him, but I can’t. I have no purchase to move my hips... my feet are suspended. I cannot move. Holy Crow.

“You’re going to have to absorb all the pleasure, Isabella. No moving,” he murmurs, as he crawls up my body, kissing me along the edge of my bikini bottoms. He pulls the strings on each side, and the scraps of material fall away. I’m now naked, at his mercy. He kisses my belly, dipping his tongue into my navel, nipping me with his teeth.

“Ah...” I sigh. This is going to be tough... I had no idea. He traces soft sucky kisses and bites up to my breasts.

“Shhh...” he soothes. “You are so beautiful, Bella.”

I groan, frustrated. Normally I’d be grinding my hips, responding to his touch with a rhythm of my own. But I cannot move. I moan, pulling on my restraints. The metal bites into my skin.

“Argh!” I whimper softly. But I really don’t care.

“You drive me crazy,” he whispers. “So I am going to drive you crazy.” He’s resting on me now, his weight on his elbows, and he turns his attention to my breasts. Biting, sucking, rolling my nipples between his fingers and thumbs, driving me wild. He doesn’t stop. I can feel his erection pushing against me.

“Please,” I whisper.

I can feel his triumphant smile against my skin.

“Shall I make you come this way?” he breathes against my nipple so that it hardens some more. “You know I can.” He suckles me hard and I cry out, pleasure lancing from my chest directly to my groin. I pull helplessly on the cuffs, swamped by the sensation.

“Yes,” I breathe desperately.

“Oh baby... that would be too easy,” he murmurs.

“Oh – please...”

“Shhh.” His teeth scrape my chin as he trails soft kisses to my mouth, and I gasp. He kisses me. His skilled tongue invading my mouth, tasting, exploring, dominating, but my tongue meets his challenge, writhing against his. He tastes of cool gin and Edward Cullen and he smells of the sea... oh my. He grasps my chin, holding my head in place.

“Still, baby. I want you still,” he whispers against my mouth.

“I want to see you,” I pant.

“Oh no, Bella. You’ll feel more this way.” And agonizingly slowly he flexes his hips and pushes himself part way into me. I would normally tilt my pelvis up to meet him... but I can’t move. He

withdraws.

“Ah! Edward, please!” I gasp.

“Again?” he teases, his voice hoarse.

“Edward!” I shout.

He pushes fractionally into me again, then withdraws while kissing me, his fingers tugging at my nipple. It’s pleasure overload.

“No!” I cry.

“Do you want me, Isabella?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I beg.

“Tell me,” he murmurs, his breathing harsh, and he teases me once more – in... and out.

“I want you,” I whimper. “Please.”

I hear his soft sigh against my ear.

“And have me you will, Isabella.”

He rears up and slams into me. I scream, tilting my head back, pulling on the restraints as he hits my sweet spot, and I am all sensation, everywhere.... a sweet, sweet agony, and I cannot move. He stills, then circles his hips, and the motion radiates deep inside me.

“Why do you defy me, Bella?”

“Edward, stop...”

He circles deep inside me again, ignoring my plea, easing out slowly and then slamming into me again.

“Tell me. Why?” he hisses, and I’m vaguely aware that it’s through gritted teeth.

“Arrgh!” I cry out in an incoherent wail... this is too much.

“Tell me.”

“Edward...”

“Bella, I need to know.”

He slams into me again, thrusting so deep, and I can feel myself building, and the feeling is so intense – it swamps me, spiraling out from deep within my belly, to each limb, to each biting metal restraint.

“I don’t know!” I cry out. “Because I can! Because I love you! Please, Edward...”

He groans loudly and thrusts deep, again and again, over and over, and I am lost, trying to absorb the pleasure. It’s mind blowing.... body blowing... I long to straighten my legs, to control my imminent orgasm, but I can’t... I am helpless. I’m his, just his, to do as he wills... Tears spring to my eyes. This is so intense. I can’t stop him. I don’t want to stop him... I want... I want... oh no, oh no... this is too...

“That’s it,” Edward growls. “Feel it, baby!”

I detonate around him... again and again, round and round... screaming loudly as my orgasm rips me apart, scorching through me like wild fire, consuming everything, consuming me so I am wrung ragged, tears streaming down my face... my body left pulsing and shaking.

And I’m aware that Edward kneels, still inside me, pulling me upright onto his lap... he clutches my

head with one hand and my back with another, and he comes... violently, inside me... while my insides continue to pulse and quake with after-shocks. It's draining, it's exhausting, it's hell... it's heaven. It's hedonism gone wild.

Edwards tears off the blindfold and kisses me. He kisses my eyes, my nose, my cheeks. He kisses away the tears, clutching my face in between his hands.

"I love you, Mrs Cullen," he breathes. "Even though you make me so mad – I feel so alive with you." I don't have the energy to open either my eyes or my mouth to respond. Very gently he lays me back on the bed and eases out of me.

"Ah!" I mouth some wordless protest. He gets off the bed and undoes the handcuffs. When I am free he gently rubs my wrists and ankles, then lies down beside me again, pulling me into his arms. I stretch out my legs... oh my, that feels good... I feel good. Holy shit... that was, without doubt, the most intense climax I have ever endured. Hmmm... an Edward Cullen, fifty shades punishment fuck.

I really must misbehave more often...

-

A pressing need from my bladder wakes me. When I open my eyes I am disorientated. Where am I? London? Paris? Oh – the boat. I can feel her pitch and roll, and hear the hum of the engines. We're on the move... How odd. Edward is beside me, working on his laptop, casually dressed in a white linen shirt and chino trousers, his feet bare. His hair is still wet, I presume from a shower. I can smell his body wash, and his Edward smell... Hmmm.

"Hi," he murmurs, gazing down at me, his eyes warm.

"Hi," I smile, feeling suddenly shy. "We're moving?"

"I figured since we ate out last night, and went to the ballet and the Casino, that we'd dine on board tonight. A quiet night à deux."

I grin at him.

"Where are we going?"

"Cannes."

"Okay." I stretch, feeling stiff. No amount of training with Laurent could have prepared me for this afternoon. I rise gingerly, needing the bathroom. Grabbing my silk robe I hastily put it on. Why do I feel so shy? I can feel Edward's eyes on me... when I glance at him he returns to his laptop, his brow furrowed. Why's he frowning?

As I absentmindedly wash my hands at the vanity unit, recalling last night at the Casino, my robe falls open. I stare at myself in the mirror, shocked.

Holy Fuck! What has he done to me?

—

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I gaze in horror at the red marks all over my breasts. Hickeys! I have hickeys... I am married to one of the most respected businessmen in the U.S. and he's given me goddamn hickeys. How did I not feel him doing this to me? I flush... fact is I know exactly why – Mr Orgasmic was using his fine-motor sexing skills on me. My subconscious peers over her half moon specs and tuts disapprovingly, while

my inner goddess slumbers on her chaise longue, out for the count. I gape at my reflection. My wrists have a red welt around them from the handcuffs. No doubt they'll bruise... I examine my ankles – more welts. Holy hell, I look like I've been in some sort of accident. I gaze at myself, trying to absorb how I look. My body is so different these days. It's changed subtly since I've known him... I've become leaner and fitter, and my hair is glossy and well cut. My nails are manicured, my feet pedicured, my eyebrows threaded and beautifully shaped. For the first time in my life I'm well groomed – except for these hideous love bites. And of course, I no longer have pubic hair... I flush at that memory.

~oOo~

"This is the only meeting I have scheduled the entire time we're on our honeymoon," Edward coos apologetically into my ear. I grumble, not wanting to be woken. We are in the Hellenic suite in Browns Hotel, in the heart of London, and I'm exhausted. I have spent three days walking around old buildings, art galleries and museums, and three nights entertaining and being thoroughly entertained by my priapic husband.

Edward nuzzles my ear. He smells of fresh body wash and clean linen and Edward. My favorite scent in the whole wide world.

"I shouldn't be more than three hours."

"Hmmm."

"Don't forget to order breakfast."

"Hmmm."

"If you go out, take Taylor with you."

"Hmmm."

"No kiss for your husband, Mrs Cullen?"

"No rest for the wicked, Mr Cullen?" I groan sleepily, reluctantly opening my eyes.

"I like you wicked," he whispers. I can hear the smile in his voice and it makes me smile. Nothing makes me happier than making Edward smile. I turn over to face him as he sits on the side of the bed. He gazes down at me, his green eyes soft and warm. He's freshly shaved, wearing a crisp white shirt and a dark navy suit, no tie. He looks edible. Leaning down he runs his nose along mine and plants a soft kiss on my lips.

"Later, baby," he murmurs. "Now go back to sleep." Rising he heads out of the bedroom and I hear the click as the door to the suite shuts behind him. Back to sleep? I'm awake now. I pout at the high ceiling. Three hours on my own – what am I to do?

In the shower I wash my hair, contemplating my empty morning. Edward's been gone fifteen minutes and I miss him already. These first few days of our honeymoon have been bliss, in spite of all the sight-seeing. He's been attentive, funny, knowledgeable... sexy... Edward. We've come so far in the last few months. His rules spring unbidden to my mind as I rinse my hair. Mentally I tick them off: eight hours' sleep... well, he never lets me sleep that long. The food list – I roll my eyes at the memory. So glad I fought that. The clothes... yes, he won on that, I suppose. I now have a wardrobe to rival Rose's.

I start shaving my legs. The exercise... Laurent is great fun – a complete utter tyrant, but very good at his job. Between him and Edward I have never felt so fit. The waxing – hmmm. Perhaps that's what Edward likes – no hair, anywhere. I stare at my razor. Well... here goes nothing.

~oOo~

I don't want to think about Edward's reaction to me shaving myself at the moment. I am too mad. How dare he mark me like this, like some teenager? In all the time we've been together, he's never given me hickeys. I look like hell. I know why he's done this. Damn control freak. Right! My subconscious folds her arms beneath her small bosom – he's gone too far this time. I stalk out of the ensuite and into the walk-in closet opposite the bathroom, carefully avoiding even a glance in his direction. Slipping out of my robe I pull on my sweatpants and a camisole. I undo the braid, and picking up a hairbrush from the small vanity unit, brush out my tangles.

"Isabella," Edward calls. I can hear his anxiety. "Are you okay?"

I ignore him. Am I okay? No, I am not okay. After what he's done to me I doubt I'll be able to wear a swimsuit, let alone one of my ridiculously expensive bikinis, for the rest of our honeymoon. The thought is suddenly so infuriating. How dare he? I'll give him are-you-okay, I seethe, as fury spikes through me. I can behave like an adolescent too! Stepping back into the bedroom I hurl the hairbrush at him, turn and leave – though not before I've seen his shocked expression and his lightning reaction, lifting his arms to protect his head so that the brush bounces ineffectively off his forearm and onto the bed.

I storm out of our cabin, head upstairs and out on deck, stomping towards the bow. I need some space to try and calm down. It's dark and the air is balmy. The warm breeze carries the smell of the Mediterranean and the scent of jasmine and bougainvillea from the shore. The Fair Lady glides effortlessly through the calm cobalt sea as I rest my elbows on the wooden railing, gazing at the distant shore where tiny lights wink and twinkle. I take a deep healing breath and slowly begin to calm. I'm aware of him behind me before I hear him.

"You're mad at me," he whispers.

"You noticed!" I snap.

"How mad?"

"Scale of one to ten, I think I'm at fifty. Apt, huh?"

"That mad." He sounds surprised and impressed at once.

"Yes. Pushed to violence mad," I say through my gritted teeth.

He stays silent as I turn and scowl at him, watching me with wide unreadable eyes. Except I know from that expression that he's out of his depth. He makes no move to touch me.

"Edward, you have to stop unilaterally trying to bring me to heel. You made your point on the beach. Very effectively, as I recall."

He shrugs minutely.

"Well, you won't take your top off again," he murmurs petulantly.

What? And this justifies what he's done to me? I glare at him.

"I don't like you leaving marks on me. Well, not this many anyway! Hard limit." I spit at him.

"I don't like you taking your clothes off in public. That's a hard limit for me," he growls.

"I think we've established that," I hiss through my teeth. "Look at me!" I pull down my camisole to reveal the top of my breasts. Edward gazes at me, his eyes not leaving my face. His expression is so wary and uncertain. He's not used to seeing me this mad. Can't he see what he's done? Can't he see how ridiculous he is? I want to shout at him, but I refrain – I don't want to push him too far. Heaven

knows what he'd do. Eventually he blinks and holds his palms up in a resigned, conciliatory gesture.

"Okay," he says his voice placating. "I get it."

Alleluia!

"Good!" I snap.

He runs his hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at me," he breathes. Finally he looks contrite – using my own words back at me.

"You are so adolescent at times," I mutter mulishly, but the fight has gone out of my voice, and he knows it. He steps closer and tentatively raises his hand to tuck my hair behind my ear.

"I know," he acknowledges softly. "I have a lot to learn."

Dr Banner's words come back to me... Emotionally, Edward is an adolescent, Bella. He bypassed that phase in his life totally. He's channeled all his energies into succeeding in the business world, and he has, beyond all expectations. His emotional world has to play catch-up.

My heart thaws slightly.

"We both do," I sigh, and cautiously raising my hand, place it over his heart. He doesn't flinch like he used to, but I feel him stiffen slightly. He puts his hand over mine and smiles his shy smile.

"I've just learnt that you've a good arm and a good aim, Mrs Cullen. I would never have figured that, but then I constantly underestimate you. You always surprise me," he murmurs. I arch my eyebrow at him.

"Target practice with my father. I can throw and shoot straight, Mr Cullen and you'd do well to remember that."

"I will endeavor to do that Mrs Cullen, or ensure that all potential projectile objects are nailed down and that you don't have access to a gun." He smirks at me.

I smirk back at him, narrowing my eyes.

"I am resourceful," I whisper.

"That you are," he whispers back, and releases my hand, circling his arms around me. Pulling me into an embrace he buries his nose in my hair. I wrap my arms around him, holding him close, and feel the tension leave his body as he nuzzles me.

"Am I forgiven?" he whispers.

"Am I?"

I feel his smile.

"Yes," he answers.

"Ditto."

We stand holding each other, my pique forgotten. He does smell good, adolescent or not. How can I resist him?

"Hungry?" he says after a while. I have my eyes closed and my head against his chest.

"Yes. Famished. All the ... err... activity has given me an appetite." I raise my head to gaze up into his green eyes. "But I'm not dressed for dinner." I'm sure my sweatpants and camisole would be

frowned upon in the dining room.

“You look good to me, Isabella. Besides, it’s our boat for the week, we can dress how we like. Think of it as dress down Tuesday on the Cote D’Azur. Anyway, I thought we’d eat on deck.”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

He leans down and kisses me, an earnest, forgive-me kiss then we wander hand in hand towards the bow where our gazpacho soup awaits.

~o~

The steward serves our crème brulée and discreetly retires.

“Why do you always braid my hair?” I ask Edward out of curiosity. We’re sitting at right angles to each other at the table, my lower leg curled around his. He pauses as he’s about to pick up his dessertspoon, and frowns slightly.

“I don’t want your hair catching in anything,” he says quietly, and for a moment he’s lost in thought. “Habit, I think,” he adds, and shrugs. He frowns again, more deeply this time, and his eyes dart immediately to mine, his pupils dilating suddenly with alarm.

Holy shit – what’s he remembered? It’s something painful, some early childhood memory, I guess. I don’t want to remind him of that! Leaning over I put my index finger over his lips.

“No, it doesn’t matter. I don’t need to know. I was just curious,” I murmur, and give him a warm reassuring smile. His look is wary, but after a moment he visibly relaxes, his relief evident. I lean over to kiss the corner of his mouth.

“I love you,” I murmur, and he smiles his heart-achingly shy smile, and I melt.

“I will always love you, Edward.”

“And I you...” he says softly.

“In spite of my disobedience?” I raise my eyebrow.

“Because of your disobedience, Isabella.” He grins at me.

I crack my spoon through the burnt sugar crust of my dessert, and shake my head. Will I ever understand this man? Hmm – this crème brulée is delicious.

~o~

“What’s with the no-peeing thing?” I ask, once the steward has cleared our dessert plates and is out of earshot. Edward reaches for the bottle of rosé and refills my glass.

“You really want to know?” he half smiles at me, his eyes alight with a salacious gleam.

“Do I?” I gaze at him through my lashes as I take a sip of my wine.

“The fuller your bladder, the more intense your orgasm, Bella.”

I flush.

“Oh. I see.” Holy cow, that explains a lot.

He grins at me, looking far too knowing. Will I always be on the back foot with Mr Sexpertise?

“Yes. Well...” I desperately hunt around for a change of subject. He takes pity on me.

“What do you want to do for the rest of the evening?” He cocks his head to one side and gives me his lopsided grin. Whatever you want, Edward. Put your theory to the test again? I shrug.

"I know," he murmurs. Grabbing his glass of wine, he rises and holds his hand out to me. "Come," he says. I take it, and he leads me into the main salon.

His iPod is in the speaker dock on the bureau. He switches it on and selects a song.

"Dance with me." He pulls me into his arms.

"If you insist."

"I insist, Mrs Cullen."

Dancing with Edward makes me believe I can dance. A slinky, cheesy melody starts. What's this? A Latin rhythm... Edward grins down at me and starts to move, sweeping me off my feet, taking me with him round the salon.

You'll never find

As long as you live

Someone who loves you, tender like I do

And you'll never find, no matter where you search

Someone who cares about you the way I do

A man with a voice like warm melted caramel croons. Edward dips me low, and I yelp in surprise and giggle. He smiles down at me, his eyes filled with humor, then scoops me up and spins me under his arm.

"You dance so well," I whisper. "It's like I can dance."

He gives me a Sphinx-like smile but says nothing, and I wonder if it's because he's thinking of her... Mrs Robinson, the woman who taught him how to dance – and how to fuck. She hasn't crossed my mind for a while. Edward has not mentioned her since his birthday, and as far as I'm aware their business relationship is over. Reluctantly though, I have to admit – she's some teacher.

You'll never find – it'll take the end of all time

Someone to understand you like I do

No I'm not trying to make you stay babe

Cos I'm the one who loves you

And there is no one else

He dips me low again and plants a swift kiss on my lips.

You're gonna miss my love

You're gonna miss my love

Miss my love

"I'd miss your love," I murmur.

"I'd more than miss your love," he says, and spins me once more.

You'll never find – another love like mine

Someone who needs you like I do

Edward sings the words softly in my ear.

But I'm the one who loves you

And there is no one else

No – there's just no one else

You're gonna miss my love

I'm gonna miss your love

The track ends and Edward gazes down at me, his eyes dark and luminous, all humor gone, and I'm suddenly breathless.

"Come to bed with me," he breathes.

Edward, you had me at 'I do' – two and half weeks ago. But I know this is his way of apologizing, and making sure all is well between us after our spat.

~o~

When I wake the sun shining through the portholes and the water reflects shimmering patterns onto the cabin ceiling. Edward is nowhere to be seen. I stretch out and smile. Hmmm... I'll take a punishment fuck followed by make-up sex any day. I marvel what it is to go to bed with two different men – angry Edward and sweet let-me-make-it-up-to-you-in-any-way-I-can Edward. It's tricky to decide which of them I like the best. I rise and head for the bathroom. Opening the door I find Edward inside shaving, naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist. He turns and beams at me, not fazed that I am interrupting him. I have discovered that Edward will never lock the door if he is the only person in the room... the reason why is sobering, and not one I want to dwell on.

"Good morning, Mrs Cullen," he says brightly, radiating his good mood.

"Good morning yourself," I grin back at him as I watch him shave. I love watching him shave. He pulls up his chin and shaves beneath, taking long deliberate strokes, and I find myself unconsciously mirroring his actions. Pulling my upper lip down just as he does, to shave his filtrum. He turns and smirks at me, one half of his face still covered in shaving soap.

"Enjoying the show?" he asks.

Oh Edward, I could watch you for hours.

"One of my all-time favorites," I murmur, and he leans down and kisses me quickly, smearing shaving soap on my face.

"Shall I do this to you again?" he whispers wickedly, and holds up the razor.

I flush and purse my lips at him.

"No," I mutter, pretending to sulk. "I'll wax next time."

~oOo~

"What the hell have you done?" Edward exclaims. He cannot keep his horrified amusement to himself. He sits up in bed in our suite at Browns Hotel, switches on the bedside light and gazes down at me, his mouth a startled 'o'. It must be midnight. I blush the color of the sheets in the playroom, and try to pull down my satin nightdress so he can't see. He grabs my hand to stop me.

"Bella!"

"I – err... shaved," I squeak.

"I can see that! Why?" He's grinning from ear to ear. I cover my face with my hands. Why am I so embarrassed?

“Hey,” he says softly, and pulls my hand away. “Don’t hide.” He’s biting his lip so that he won’t laugh. “Tell me. Why?” His eyes dance with merriment. Why does he find this so funny?

“Stop laughing at me.”

“I’m not laughing at you. I’m sorry. I’m... delighted,” he says.

“Oh...”

“Tell me. Why?”

I take a deep breath.

“This morning, after you left for your meeting, I took a shower, and was remembering all your rules.”

He blinks. The humor in his expression has vanished and he regards me cautiously. His brow furrows, but he doesn’t interrupt me.

“And I was ticking them off one by one, and how I felt about them, and I remembered the beauty salon, and I thought... this is what you’d like. I wasn’t brave enough to go and wax.” My voice disappears into a whisper.

He stares at me, his green eyes glowing – this time not with mirth at my folly, but with love.

“Oh Bella,” he breathes. He leans down and kisses me tenderly. “You beguile me,” he whispers against my lips, and kisses me once more, clasping my face in both his hands. “I have never been so happy.”

“Because I shaved?” I gasp.

“No! Because you’re here with me and you’re mine.”

Oh... Edward. I wrap my arms around him and kiss him back.

After a breathless moment he pulls back and leans up on one elbow. The humor is back.

“I think I should do a thorough inspection of your handiwork, Mrs Cullen.”

“What? No.” He has to be kidding! I cover myself, protecting the very recently deforested area.

“Oh no you don’t, Isabella.” He grasps my hands and prises them away, moving nimbly so he’s between my legs, pinning my hands to my sides. He gives me a burning look that could light dry tinder, but before I combust he bends and skims his lips down my naked belly directly to my sex. I squirm beneath him, reluctantly resigned to my fate.

“Well, what have we here?” Edward plants a kiss where, until this morning, I had pubic hair – then scrapes his bristly chin across me.

“Ah!” I exclaim. Wow... that’s sensitive.

Edward’s eyes dart to mine, full of salacious longing.

“I think you missed a bit,” he mutters and tugs gently, right underneath.

“Oh... Damn,” I mutter, hoping this will put an end to his frankly intrusive scrutiny.

“I have an idea.” He leaps naked out of bed and heads to the bathroom.

What on earth is he doing? He returns moments later, carrying a glass of water, a mug, my razor, his shaving brush, soap and a towel. He puts the water, brush, soap and razor on the bedside table and gazes down at me, holding the towel.

Oh no! My subconscious slams down her collected works of Charles Dickens, leaps up from her

armchair and puts her hands on her hips.

“No. No. No,” I squeak.

“Mrs Cullen, if a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well. Lift your hips.” His eyes glow, fresh forest green. Holy Cow.

“Edward – you are not shaving me.”

He cocks his head to one side.

“Whyever not?” he asks softly.

I flush... isn’t it obvious?

“Because... It’s just too...” I stutter.

“Intimate?” he whispers. “Bella, I’ve removed your tampon – don’t get all squeamish on me now. Besides, I know this part of your body better than you do.”

I gape at him – of all the arrogant... true, he does – but still.

“It’s just wrong! It’s... humiliating.” My voice is prissy and whiney.

“I don’t want to humiliate you, Bella. That’s the last thing I want to do. This isn’t wrong – this is hot,” he breathes.

Hot? Really?

“This turns you on?” I can’t keep the astonishment out of my voice.

He snorts.

“Can’t you tell?”

I blush scarlet at the evidence of his arousal.

“Please,” he whispers. “I want to.”

Oh, what the hell. I lie back, throwing my arm over my face so I don’t have to watch.

“Edward, you are so kinky,” I mutter, as I lift my hips and he slips the towel beneath me. He kisses my inner thigh.

“Oh baby, how right you are.”

I hear rather than see the slosh of water as he dips the shaving brush in the glass of water, then the soft swirl of the brush in the mug. The bed dips slightly as he kneels down and, grasping my left ankle, parts my legs.

“I’d really like to tie you up right now,” he murmurs.

“Don’t push your luck. I promise to keep still.”

“Good.”

I gasp as he runs the lathered brush between my legs to the apex of my thighs. It’s warm. The water in the glass must be hot. I squirm a little. It tickles... but in a good way.

“Keep still,” Edward admonishes and applies the brush again. “Or I will tie you down,” he adds darkly, and a delicious shiver runs down my spine.

“Have you done this before?” I ask tentatively when he reaches for the razor.

“No.”

“Oh. Good.” I grin.

“Another first, Mrs Cullen.”

“Hmmm. I like firsts.”

“Me too. Here goes.”

And with a gentleness that surprises me, he runs the razor over my sensitive flesh.

“Keep still,” he breathes distractedly and I know he’s concentrating hard.

It only takes a matter of minutes before he grabs the towel and wipes all the excess lather off me.

“There – that’s more like it,” he muses, and I finally lift my arm to look at him as he sits back to admire his handiwork.

“Happy?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

“Very.” He grins wickedly and slowly eases a finger inside me.

I groan.

~oOo~

“But that was fun,” he says his eyes gently mocking.

“For you. Not me.”

“I seem to recall the aftermath was very satisfying.” Edward returns to finishing his shave. I glance quickly down at my fingers. Yes – it was. I had no idea that the absence of pubic hair could make such a difference.

“Hey, I’m just teasing. Isn’t that what husbands who are hopelessly in love with their wives meant to do?” Edward tips my chin up and gazes at me, his eyes suddenly filled with apprehension as he endeavors to read my expression.

Hmmm... payback time.

“Sit,” I mutter.

He blinks at me, not understanding. I push him gently towards the lone white stool in the bathroom. He sits down, gazing at me with a puzzled expression, and I take the razor from him.

“Bella...” he warns as he realizes my intention. I lean down and kiss him.

“Head back,” I whisper.

He hesitates.

“Tit for tat, Mr Cullen.”

He stares at me with wary, amused disbelief.

“You know what you’re doing?” he asks, his voice low.

I shake my head slowly, deliberately, trying to look as serious as possible. He closes his eyes and shakes his head minutely then tilts his head back in surrender.

Holy shit, he’s going to let me shave him. My inner goddess flexes and stretches her arms outwards, her fingers interlocked, palms out, limbering up. Tentatively I slide my hand into the damp hair at his forehead, gripping tightly to hold him still. He clenches his eyes closed and his lips part as he inhales. Very gently I stroke his razor up from his neck to his chin, revealing a path of skin beneath the lather.

Edward exhales.

“Did you think I was going to hurt you?”

“I never know what you’re going to do Bella, but no – not intentionally.”

I run the razor up his neck again, clearing a wider path in the lather.

“I would never intentionally hurt you, Edward.”

He opens his eyes and circles his arms around me as I gently drag the razor down his cheek from the bottom of his sideburn.

“I know,” he breathes, angling his face so I can shave the rest of his cheek. Two more strokes and I’ve finished.

“All done, and not a drop of blood spilt.” I grin proudly.

He runs his hand up my leg so that my nightdress rides up my thigh, and pulls me on to his lap so that I’m astride him. I steady myself with my hands on his upper arms. He’s really very muscular. He rubs his nose along mine.

“Can I take you somewhere today?”

“No sunbathing?” I arch a caustic brow at him.

He licks his lips nervously.

“No. No sunbathing today. I thought you might prefer that.”

“Well since you’ve covered me in hickeys and effectively put the kibosh on that, sure, why not?”

Wisely he chooses to ignore my tone.

“It’s a drive, but it’s worth a visit from what I’ve read. A little village called Saint Paul de Vence. There are some galleries there. I thought we could pick out some paintings or sculptures for the new house, if we find anything we like.”

Holy crap. I lean back and gaze at him. Art... he wants to buy art. How can I buy art?

“What?” he asks.

“I know nothing about art, Edward.”

He shrugs and smiles at me indulgently.

“We’ll only buy what we like. This isn’t about investment.”

Investment? Jeez.

“What?” he says again.

I shake my head.

“Look, I know we only got the architect’s drawings the other day – but there’s no harm in looking, and the town is an ancient, medieval place.”

Oh – the architect, he had to remind me of her... a good friend of Emmett’s, Tanya Denali. During our meetings she’s been all over Edward like a rash.

“What now?” Edward exclaims. I shake my head.

“Tell me,” he urges.

How can I tell him that I don’t like Tanya? My dislike is irrational.

“You’re not still mad about what I did yesterday?” He sighs and nuzzles his face between my breasts.
“No. I’m hungry,” I mutter, knowing full well that this will distract him from this line of questioning.
“Why didn’t you say?” He eases me off his lap and stands.

~o~

Saint Paul de Vence is a medieval fortified hilltop village, one of the most picturesque places I have ever seen. I stroll arm in arm with Edward through the narrow cobbled streets, my hand in the back pocket of his shorts. Taylor and either Gaston or Philippe – I can’t tell the difference between them – trail behind us. We pass a tree-covered square where three old men, one wearing a traditional beret in spite of the heat, are playing boules. It’s quite crowded with tourists, but I feel comfortable tucked under Edward’s arm. There is so much to see: little alleys and passageways leading to courtyards with intricate stone fountains, ancient and modern sculptures, and fascinating little boutiques and shops.

In the first gallery Edward gazes distractedly at the erotic photographs in front of us, sucking gently on the arm of his aviator specs. They are the work of Florence D’elle – naked women in various poses.

“Not quite what I had in mind,” I mumble disapprovingly. They make me think of the box of photographs I found in his closet... our closet. I wonder if he ever did destroy them.

“Me neither,” Edward says, grinning down at me, and taking my hand to lead me to the next display. Idly I wonder if I should let him take photos of me after all. My inner goddess nods frantically with approval.

The next display is by a female painter who specializes in figurative art – fruit and vegetables in super close-up and rich glorious color.

“I like those,” I point to three paintings of peppers. “They remind me of you chopping vegetables in my apartment,” I giggle.

Edward’s mouth twists as he tries, and fails, to hide his amusement.

“I thought I managed that quite competently,” he mutters petulantly. “I was just a bit slow, and anyway,” he pulls me into an embrace, “You were distracting me. Where would you put them?”

“What...?” Edward is nuzzling my ear.

“The paintings – where would you put them?” He bites my ear lobe and I feel it in my groin.

“Kitchen,” I murmur.

“Hmmm. Nice idea, Mrs Cullen.”

I find squint at the price. €5,000. Holy shit!

“They’re really expensive!” I gasp.

“So?” he says, nuzzling me again. “Get used to it, Bella.” He releases me and saunters over to the desk where a young woman dressed entirely in white is standing gaping at him. I want to roll my eyes, but turn my attention back to the paintings. Five thousand euros... jeez.

~o~

We have finished lunch and are relaxing over coffee at the Saint Paul hotel. The view of the surrounding countryside is stunning. Vineyards and fields of sunflowers form a patchwork across the plain, interspersed here and there with neat little French farmhouses. It’s such a clear, beautiful day we can see all the way to the sea, glinting faintly on the horizon. Edward interrupts my reverie.

“You asked me why I braid your hair,” he murmurs. His tone alarms me. He looks... guilty. Shit.

“Yes.”

“The crack whore used to let me play with her hair, I think. I don’t know if it’s a memory or a dream.”

Whoa!

He gazes at me, his expression unreadable. My heart leaps into my mouth. What do I say when he says things like this...?

“I like you playing with my hair.” My voice is soft, hesitant, as if I’m talking to a child. He blinks at me, his green eyes wide, fearful.

“Do you?”

“Yes.” It’s the truth. I reach over and grasp his hand. “I think you loved your birth mother, Edward.” His eyes widen even more and he gazes at me impassively, saying nothing.

Holy shit. Have I gone too far?

You’ll Never Find Another Love Like Mine/Es Gibt Nur Eine Liebe

by Kenneth Gamble/Leon A Huff

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBstEoAxFD8>

MOTU II 91/4

Say something, Fifty – please I beg him with my expression, but he remains resolutely mute, gazing at me with fathomless green eyes, while the silence stretches between us.

What are you thinking, husband of mine? He looks so lost. He stares down at my hand on his and his brow furrows slightly.

“Say something,” I whisper, because I cannot bear the silence any longer.

He blinks and then shakes his head, exhaling deeply.

“Let’s go,” he says releasing my hand and standing. His expression remains guarded. Have I overstepped the mark? I have no idea. My heart sinks and I don’t know whether to say anything else or just let it go. I decide on the latter and follow him dutifully out of the restaurant.

In the pretty, narrow street he takes my hand.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks.

He speaks! And he’s not mad at me – thank heavens. I exhale, relieved. I shrug.

“I am just glad you’re still speaking to me.”

“You know I don’t like talking about all that shit. It’s done. Finished,” he says quietly. No, Edward, it isn’t... The thought saddens me, and for the first time I wonder if it will ever be ‘finished’, and I realize it probably won’t. He’ll always be fifty shades... my fifty shades. But do I want to change him? No I don’t – only insofar as I want him to feel loved. I peek up at him. He’s so beautiful – captivating even – and he’s mine. And it’s not just the allure of his fine, fine face and his body that has me spellbound – it’s what’s behind the perfection that draws me, that calls to me on every level... his beautiful, fragile, damaged soul. He gives me that look, down his nose, half amused, half wary, wholly sexy. Then he

tucks me under his arm and we make our way through the tourists towards the spot where one identical twin has parked the roomy Audi. I slip my hand into the back pocket of Edward's shorts, grateful that he isn't mad at my presumption... but what four-year-old child doesn't love his Mom, no matter how bad a mom she is? I sigh heavily and hug him closer. I know behind us the security team lurk, and I wonder idly if they've eaten.

Edward stops outside a small boutique selling fine jewelry, gazes in the window, then down at me. He reaches across, grasps my free hand and runs his thumb across the faded red line of the handcuff mark, inspecting it.

"It's not sore," I mutter quickly.

He twists so that my other hand is freed from his pocket. He clasps that hand too, turning it gently over to examine my wrist. The red line is obscured by the platinum Omega watch he gave me at breakfast on our first morning in London. The inscription still makes me swoon.

Isabella
You are my More
My Love, My Life
Edward

In spite of everything, all his fiftyness, my husband can be so romantic. I gaze down at the faint marks on my wrist... then again, he can be savage sometimes. Releasing my left hand he tilts my chin up with his fingers and scrutinizes my expression, his eyes wide and troubled.

"They don't hurt," I repeat. He pulls my hand to his lips and plants a soft apologetic kiss on the inside of my wrist.

"Come," he says and leads me into the shop.

~o~

"Here," Edward holds open the filigree platinum bracelet he's just purchased. It's exquisite, so delicately crafted, the filigree in the shape of small abstract flowers with small diamonds at their heart. He fastens it around my wrist. It's wide and cuff-like and hides the red marks. It is also cost around 45,000 euros, I think, though I couldn't really follow the conversation in French with the sales assistant. I have never worn anything so expensive.

"There, that's better," he murmurs.

"Better?" I whisper, gazing into his burning green eyes, conscious that the stick-thin sales assistant is staring at us with a jealous and disapproving look on her face.

"You know why," Edward says uncertainly.

"I don't need this." I shake my wrist and the cuff moves. The afternoon light streaming through the boutique window dances off the platinum and diamonds, sprinkling small rainbows over the store.

"I do," he says with utter sincerity.

Why? Why does he need this? Does he feel guilty? About what? The marks? His birth mother? Not confiding in me? Oh Fifty.

"No, Edward, you don't," I shake my head at him, "You've given me so much already: a magical honeymoon, a beautiful ancient village... and you. I am a very lucky girl," I whisper and his eyes soften.

"No Isabella, I'm a very lucky man."

“Thank you.” Stretching up on tiptoes I put my arms around his neck and kiss him... not for giving me the bracelet, but for being mine.

Back in the car he’s quiet, gazing out at the fields of bright sunflowers, their heads following and basking in the afternoon sun. One of the twins – I think it’s Gaston – is driving and Taylor is beside him up front. Edward is brooding about something. Reaching over I clasp his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. He turns to look at me, before releasing my hand and stretching his out to caress my knee. I’m wearing a short, full, blue and white skirt, and a blue fitted sleeveless shirt. Edward’s hand hesitates and I don’t know if it’s going to travel up my thigh or down my leg. I tense with anticipation at the gentle touch of his fingers and my breath catches. What’s he going to do? He chooses down, suddenly grasps my ankle and pulls my foot on to his lap. I swivel my backside so I am facing him in the back of the car.

“I want the other one too,” he murmurs authoritatively.

Oh! Why? I glance nervously towards Taylor and Gaston, whose eyes are resolutely on the road ahead, and place my other foot cautiously on his lap. His eyes cool, he reaches over and presses a button located in his door. In front of us, a lightly tinted privacy screen slides out of a panel, and ten seconds later we are effectively on our own. Wow... no wonder the back of this car has so much legroom.

“I want to look at your ankles,” Edward offers quietly by way of explanation. His green eyes are anxious. What now? The cuff marks? Jeez... I thought we were going to have some fun. If there are marks they are hidden by the sandal straps. I don’t recall seeing any this morning. Very gently he strokes his thumb up my right instep, making me wriggle. I can see a smile play on his lips. Deftly he undoes one strap, and his smile fades as he’s confronted with the darker red marks.

“Doesn’t hurt,” I murmur. He glances at me, his expression sad and his mouth a thin line. He nods once, as if he’s taking me at my word, while I shake my sandal loose so it falls to the floor... but I know I’ve lost him. He’s distracted and brooding again, mechanically caressing my foot while he turns away to gaze out of the car window once more.

“Hey. What did you expect?” I breathe softly. He glances at me, and shrugs, bewildered.

“I didn’t expect to feel like I do looking at these marks,” he says softly.

What? Reticent one minute and forthcoming the next? How... Fifty! How can I keep up with him?

“How do you feel?” I ask gently.

He gazes at me, his eyes glowing a luminous emerald. He’s like a deer caught in a flashlight.

“Uncomfortable,” he murmurs.

Oh no. I unbuckle my seatbelt and scoot closer to him, leaving my feet in his lap. I want to crawl into his lap and hold him, and I would, if it were just Taylor in the front. But knowing Gaston is there cramps my style, in spite of the glass. If only it were darker. I clutch his hands.

“It’s the hickeys I don’t like,” I whisper. “Everything else... what you did,” – I lower my voice even further – “the cuffs. I enjoyed that... well, more than enjoyed. It was mind-blowing. You can do that to me again.”

He blinks at me and shifts slightly in his seat. Maybe he’s remembering what he did to me yesterday. My inner goddess looks up startled from her Jackie Collins. I flex my toes into his hardening crotch and see rather than hear his sharp intake of breath, his lips parting slightly. He raises his eyebrows and bites his lower lip. He’s learnt that from me, surely.

“You should really be wearing your seat belt, Mrs Cullen.” His voice is low, and I curl my toes around

him. He gasps and his eyes darken, and he clasps my ankle in warning. Does he want me stop? Continue? He pauses and frowns deeply.

What now?

He fishes his ever-present BlackBerry out of his pocket to take an incoming call and glances at his watch. His frown deepens.

“Barney,” he snaps.

Crap. Work again interrupting us. I try to remove my feet but his hand tightens on my ankle.

“In the server room?” he says in disbelief. “Did it activate the fire suppression system?”

Fire! I take my feet off his lap and this time he lets me. I sit back in my seat, buckle my seat belt, and fiddle nervously with the forty-five-thousand-euro bracelet. Edward presses the button in his door armrest again and the privacy glass slides down. I realize that this is for Taylor’s benefit.

“Anyone injured? ... Damage? ... I see ... When?” Edward glances at his watch again, frowning, then runs his hand through his hair. “No. Not the fire department, or the police. Not yet anyway.”

Holy crap! A fire? At Edward’s office? I gape at him, my mind racing. Taylor shifts so he can hear Edward’s conversation.

“Has he? Good ... Okay. I want a detailed damage report. And a complete rundown of everyone who had access over the last five days, including the cleaning staff ... Get hold of Angela and get her to call me ... Yeah, sounds like the argon is just as effective, worth its weight in gold.”

Damage report? Argon? What the hell? It rings a distant bell from chemistry class – an element, I think.

“I realize it’s early... Email me in two hours... No, I need to know. Thank you for calling me.” Edward hangs up, then immediately punches a number into the BlackBerry.

“Jenks ... Good ... When?” Edward glances at his watch yet again, “An hour then ... yes ... Twenty-four-seven at the off-site data store ... good.” He hangs up.

“Philippe, I need to be onboard within the hour.”

“Monsieur.”

Shit, it’s Philippe, not Gaston. The car surges forward.

Edward glances at me, his expression unreadable.

“Anyone hurt?” I ask quietly.

Edward shakes his head.

“Very little damage.” He reaches over and clasps my hand, squeezing it reassuringly, mirroring my actions from earlier. “Don’t worry about this. My team is on it.” And there he is, the CEO, in command, in control and not flustered at all.

“Where was the fire?”

“Server room.”

“Cullen House?”

“Yes.”

His responses are clipped, so I know he doesn’t want to talk about it. Why not?

“Why so little damage?”

“The server room is fitted with a state-of-the-art fire suppression system.”

Of course it is.

“Bella, please – don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” I lie.

“We don’t know for sure that it was arson,” he says, cutting to the heart of my anxiety.

Echo Charlie, and now this? Holy crap.

“Please, don’t,” he whispers, and leaning over kisses my knuckles one by one.

~o~

I am restless. Edward has been holed up in the on-board study for over an hour. I have tried reading, watching TV, sunbathing – fully dressed sunbathing! – but I can’t relax... I feel edgy. I change into shorts and a t-shirt, remove the ludicrously expensive bangle and go to find Taylor.

“Mrs Cullen,” he says, startled from his Anthony Burgess novel. He’s sitting in the small salon outside Edward’s study.

“I’d like to go shopping.”

“Yes ma’am.” He stands.

“I’d like to take the Jet Ski.”

His mouth drops open slightly.

“Erm.” He frowns, lost for words.

“I don’t want to bother Edward with this.”

He flushes.

“Mrs Cullen... Um,” he stammers, “I don’t think Mr Cullen would be very comfortable with that – and I’d like to keep my job.”

Oh, for heavens sake! I want to roll my eyes at him, but narrow them instead, sighing heavily and expressing, I think, the right amount of frustrated indignation that I am not mistress of my own destiny. Then again I don’t want Edward mad at Taylor – or me, for that matter. Striding confidently past him I knock on the study door and enter. Edward is on his BlackBerry, leaning against the mahogany desk. He gazes at me.

“Angela, hold please,” he mutters down the phone, his expression serious, then at me, politely expectant. Shit... why do I feel like I’ve entered the principal’s office? This man had me in handcuffs yesterday. I clear my throat. I refuse to be intimidated by him... and in that moment I realize that this feeling comes from me, not him.

“I’m going shopping. I’ll take security with me.”

“Sure, take one of the twins, and Taylor too,” he says. And I know that whatever’s happening is serious, because he doesn’t question me further. I stand staring at him, wondering if I can help.

“Anything else?” he asks. He wants me gone. Crap.

“Can I get you anything?” I ask.

He smiles, his sweet shy smile.

“No, baby, I’m good,” he says. “The crew will look after me.”

“Okay.” I want to kiss him. Hell, I can – he’s my husband. Strolling purposefully forward I plant a kiss on his lips, surprising him.

“Angela, I’ll call you back,” he mutters. He puts the BlackBerry down on the desk behind him, pulls me into his embrace and kisses me passionately. I am breathless when he releases me. His eyes are dark and needy.

“You’re distracting me. I need to sort this, so I can get back to my honeymoon.” He runs an index finger down my face and caresses my chin, tilting my face up.

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t apologize, Mrs Cullen. I love your distractions.” He kisses the corner of my mouth.

“Go spend some money,” he breathes and releases me.

“Will do,” I smirk at him and head out of his study. My sub conscious shakes her head and purses her lips. You didn’t tell him you were going on the Jet Ski, she admonishes in her sing-song voice. I ignore her... Harpy.

Taylor is patiently waiting.

“That’s all cleared with Headquarters... can we go?” I smile, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. Taylor can’t hide his admiring smile.

“Mrs Cullen, after you.”

~o~

Taylor patiently talks me through the controls on the Jet Ski and how to ride it. He has a calm, gentle authority about him – he’s a good teacher. We are in the motor launch, bobbing and weaving on the calm waters of the harbor beside the Fair Lady. Gaston looks on, his expression hidden by his shades, and one of the Fair Lady’s crew is at the controls of the motor launch. Jeez – three people with me, just because I want to go shopping. I can hardly believe it.

Zippering up my life jacket I give Taylor a beaming grin. He holds out his hand to assist me as I climb on to the Jet Ski.

“Fasten the strap of the ignition key around your wrist, Mrs Cullen. If you fall off, the engine will cut out automatically,” he explains.

“Okay.”

“Ready?”

I nod enthusiastically.

“Press the ignition when you’ve drifted about four feet away from the boat. We’ll follow you.”

“Okay.”

He pushes the Jet Ski away from the launch and it floats gently into the main harbor. When he gives me the ‘okay’ sign with his fingers I press the ignition button and the engine roars into life.

“Okay Mrs Cullen, easy does it!” Taylor shouts. I squeeze the accelerator. The Jet Ski lurches forward, then stalls.

Crap! How does Edward make it look so easy? I try again, and once again I stall. Double crap!

“Just steady on the gas, Mrs Cullen,” Taylor calls.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I mutter under my breath. I try once more, very gently squeezing the lever, and the Jet Ski lurches forward – but this time it keeps going... Yes! It goes some more. Ha ha! It still keeps going! I want to shout and squeal in excitement, but I resist. I cruise gently away from the yacht into the main harbor. Behind me I can hear the roar of the motor launch. When I squeeze the gas further the Jet Ski leaps forward, skating across the water. With the warm breeze in my hair and a fine sea spray on either side of me I feel free. This rocks! No wonder Edward never lets me drive.

Rather than heading for the shore and curtailing the fun, I veer round to do a circuit of the stately Fair Lady. Wow – this is so much fun. I ignore Taylor and the crew behind me and speed round the yacht for a second time. As I complete the circuit I spot Edward on deck. I think he's gaping at me, though it's difficult to tell. Bravely I lift one hand from the handlebars and wave enthusiastically at him. He looks like he's made of stone – but finally he raises his hand in the semblance of a stiff wave. I can't work out his expression, and something tells me I don't want to – so I head to the marina, speeding across the bluest of blue water that shimmers in the late afternoon sun.

At the quay I wait and let Taylor pull up ahead of me. His expression is bleak, and my heart sinks, though Gaston looks vaguely amused. I wonder briefly if something has happened to chill Gallic-American relations, but deep down I suspect the problem is probably me. Gaston leaps out of the motorboat and ties it to the moorings while Taylor directs me to come alongside. Very gently I ease the Jet Ski into position beside the boat and line up beside him. His expression softens a little.

"Just switch off the ignition, Mrs Cullen," he says calmly, reaching for the handlebars and holding out a hand to help me into the motorboat. I nimbly climb aboard, impressed that I don't fall in.

"Mrs Cullen," Taylor blinks nervously, his cheeks pink once more. "Mr Cullen is not entirely comfortable with you riding on the Jet Ski." He's practically squirming with embarrassment, and I realize he's had an irate Edward on his cell phone. Oh my poor, pathologically over-protective husband, what am I going to do with you?

I smile at Taylor serenely.

"I see. Well Taylor, Mr Cullen is not here, and if he's not entirely comfortable he can have the courtesy to tell me himself when I'm back on board."

Taylor winces slightly.

"Very good, Mrs Cullen," he says quietly, handing me my purse. As I turn to clamber out of the boat I catch a glimpse of his reluctant but admiring smile, and it makes me want to smile too. I cannot believe how fond I am of Taylor, but I really don't appreciate being scolded by him – he's not my father or my husband.

Crap, Edward's mad – and he has enough to worry about at the moment. What was I thinking? As I stand on the quay waiting for Taylor to climb up I feel my BlackBerry vibrating in my purse, and fish it out. Sadé's 'Your Love is King' is my ring tone for Edward... only for Edward.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi," he says.

"I'll come back on the boat. Don't be mad."

I can hear his small gasp of surprise.

"Um..."

"It was fun though," I whisper.

He sighs.

“Well, far be it for me to curtail your fun, Mrs Cullen. Just be careful. Please.”

Oh my! Permission to have fun!

“I will. Anything you want from town?”

“Just you, back in one piece.”

“I’ll make my best endeavors, Mr Cullen”

“I’m glad to hear it, Mrs Cullen.”

“We aim to please,” I giggle.

I hear his smile.

“I have another call – later, baby.”

“Later, Edward.”

He hangs up. Jet Ski crisis averted, I think. The car is waiting, and Taylor holds the door open for me. I wink at him as I climb in and he can’t help himself – he nods and grins at me.

In the car I fire up the email on my BlackBerry.

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: Thank you

Date: 19 August 2009: 16.55

To: Edward Cullen

For not being too grouchy.

Your loving wife.

xxx

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Trying to stay Calm

Date: 19 August 2009: 16.59

To: Isabella Cullen

You’re welcome.

Come back in one piece.

This is not a request.

x

Edward Cullen

Over Protective Husband & CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

His response makes me smile. My control freak.

Why did I want to come shopping? I hate shopping. But deep down I know why, and I walk determinedly past Chanel, Gucci, Dior and the other designer boutiques, and eventually find the antidote to what ails me in a small, overstocked, touristy store. It’s a little silver ankle bracelet with small hearts and little bells. It tinkles sweetly and it costs five euros. As soon as I’ve bought it I put it on. This is me – this is what I like. Immediately I feel more comfortable. I don’t want to lose touch with the girl who likes this, ever. Deep down I know that I am not only overwhelmed by Edward himself, but also by his wealth. Will I ever get used to it?

Taylor and Gaston follow me dutifully through the late afternoon crowds and I soon forget they are there. I want to buy something for Edward, something to take his mind off what’s happening in

Seattle. But what do I buy for the man who has everything? I pause in a small modern square, surrounded by stores, and gaze at each one in turn. When I spy an electronic goods store our visit to the gallery earlier today, and our visit to the Louvre, come back to me. It gives me an idea... a daring idea. My inner goddess throws her Jackie Collins over her shoulder and sits up to pay attention. But I need help – and there's only one person who can help me. I wrestle my BlackBerry out of my purse and call Jake.

"Who..." he mumbles sleepily.

"Jake, it's Bella."

"Bella? Do you have any idea what time it is?" he says grumpily.

Holy crap – time zones.

"Sorry."

"Where are you? You okay?" He sounds more alert now, concerned.

"I'm in Cannes, in the South of France, and I'm fine."

"South of France huh? You in some fancy hotel?"

"Um... no. We're staying on a boat."

"A boat?"

"A big boat," I clarify, sighing.

"Sure." His tone turns sarcastic. Shit... I don't need this right now.

"Jake, I need your advice."

"My advice?" He's stunned. "Sure," he says, and this time he's much more friendly.

I tell him my plan.

Two hours later Taylor helps me out of the motor launch on to the steps up to the deck. Gaston is helping Louis with the Jet Ski. Edward is not on deck and I scurry down to our cabin to wrap his present, feeling a childish sense of delight.

"You were gone some time." Edward startles me just as I am applying the last piece of scotch tape. I turn to find him standing in the doorway to the cabin, watching me intently. Holy shit – am I still in trouble over the Jet Ski? Or is it the fire at his office?

"Everything in control at your office?" I ask tentatively.

"More or less," he breathes, an annoyed frown flitting across his face.

"I did a little shopping," I murmur, hoping to lighten his mood, and praying his annoyance is not directed at me. He smiles warmly, and I know we're okay.

"What did you buy?"

"This," I put my foot up on the bed and show him my ankle chain.

"Very nice," he says. He steps over to me and fondles the tiny bells so that they jingle sweetly round my ankle. He frowns again at the mark left by the cuffs and runs his fingers lightly along the line, sending tingles up my leg.

"And this." I hold out the box, hoping to distract him.

"For me?" he asks in surprise. I nod shyly. He takes the box and shakes it slightly, trying to guess the

contents. He grins his boyish, dazzling smile and sits down beside me on the bed. Leaning over he grasps my chin and kisses me.

“Thank you,” he breathes.

“You haven’t opened it yet.”

“I’ll love it, whatever it is.” He gazes down at me, his green eyes glowing. “I don’t get many presents.”

“It’s hard to buy you things. You have everything.”

“I have you.”

“You do,” I grin at him, flushing slightly. Oh you so do, Edward.

He makes short work of the wrapping paper.

“A Nikon!” He glances up at me, slightly puzzled.

“I know you have your compact digital camera but this is for... um... portraits and the like. It comes with two lenses.”

He blinks at me, still not understanding.

“Today in the gallery you liked the Florence D’Elle photographs. And I remember what you said in the Louvre. And of course, there were those other photographs...” I swallow, trying my best not to recall the image I found in his closet.

He stops breathing, his eyes widening as realization dawns, and I continue hurriedly before I lose my nerve.

“I thought you might, um... like to take pictures of ... me.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kgri30aKuX4>

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“It’s much smaller than I expected,” I murmur in a hushed tone to Edward. He smirks down at me.

“She reminds me of you.”

I gaze at the Mona Lisa, again and even though she’s behind protective glass, I can clearly see her notorious smile.

“My smirk?” I glance up at Edward, smirking into glorious green eyes that are alight with mischief.

“Maybe,” he teases.

“She reminds me of all your Madonnas.”

He blinks for a moment, his impossibly long dark lashes fluttering hesitantly.

“Yes, I suppose she does,” he says frowning. He rakes his hand through his hair as he gazes with a puzzled look at Leonardo de Vinci’s masterpiece. It’s quite crowded in the Louvre, and curious tourists and art lovers alike are jostling to get nearer the famous portrait.

“Shall we move on?” he asks, effectively changing the subject. He takes my hand, giving me very little choice but to follow him towards the Grande Gallerie and the exit of the Denon wing.

~

“What is it with men and naked ladies?” I muse, then realise that the words have popped unbidden out of my mouth. Both Edward and I are admiring the Venus de Milo who stands staring impassively into the distance through the gallery windows towards the Seine, and towards where Taylor is waiting, looking self-conscious. Edward stands behind me, his hand lightly caressing my shoulder.

“The naked female form? We all love to look, Mrs Cullen,” he breathes in a low voice. “We can all appreciate the female form, whether in marble, or oils, or film, or satin,” he murmurs silkily.

Film... oh no. The unwelcome memory of that photograph fills my head.

“I like looking at and appreciating your mighty fine form,” he whispers softly against my ear, distracting me from my dark thoughts. He circles his arms around me, pulling me close, my back to his chest. “I look forward to doing some looking and appreciating later.” He lightly nips my earlobe, making me squeak, while Aphrodite’s statue looks on passively, neutral... armless.

~oOo~

“Pictures. Of you?” he breathes, gaping at me and ignoring the box on his lap.

I nod tentatively, desperately trying to gauge his reaction. Finally he gazes back down at the box, his fingers tracing over the illustration of the camera on the front with fascinated reverence.

What is he thinking? Oh, this is not the reaction I was expecting... and my sub-conscious glares at me like I am some kind of dumb domesticated farm animal, rebuking me that Edward never reacts the way I expect. He looks back up at me, his eyes filled with... what, pain?

Shit... what now?

“Why do you think I want this?” he asks, bemused.

No, no, no! You said you’d love it...

“Don’t you?” I ask, refusing to acknowledge my sub-conscious who is muttering, barely audibly, why anyone would want erotic photographs of me. Edward swallows and runs a hand through his hair, and he looks so lost, so confused. He takes a deep breath.

“For me, photos like those have usually been an insurance policy, Bella. I know I’ve objectified women for so long,” he says, and pauses awkwardly.

What? Holy cow... where the fuck is this going?

“And you think taking pictures of me is... um, objectifying me? Oh,” I mutter. All the air leaves my body, and the blood drains from my face.

He scrunches up his eyes.

“I am so confused,” he whispers. When he opens his eyes again, they are wide and wary, full of some raw emotion.

Shit. What has brought this on – Me? My questions earlier about his birth Mom? The fire at his office?

“Why do you say that?” I whisper, panic rising in my throat. I thought he was happy... I thought we were happy... I thought I made him happy. I don’t want to confuse him. Do I? My mind starts racing. What’s brought about this sea-change? He hasn’t seen Banner in nearly three weeks... is that it? Is that the reason he’s unraveling? Shit, should I call Banner? And in a possibly unique moment of extraordinary depth and clarity, I think I understand – the fire, Echo Charlie, the Jet Ski... He’s

scared, he's scared for me, and seeing these marks on my skin must bring that home. He's been fussing about them all day, confusing himself because he's not used to feeling uncomfortable about inflicting pain... the thought chills me.

He shrugs and once more his eyes move down to my wrist where the bangle he brought me this afternoon used to be. Bingo!

"Edward, these don't matter," I hold up my wrist, revealing the fading welt. "You gave me a safe word. Shit – yesterday was fun. I enjoyed it. Stop brooding on it – I like rough sex, I've told you that before." I flush scarlet as I try to quash my rising panic.

He gazes at me intently and I have no idea what he's thinking. Maybe he's measuring my words ... I stumble on.

"Is this about the fire? Do you think it's connected somehow to Echo Charlie? Is this why you're worried? Talk to me, Edward – please."

He stares at me, saying nothing... and the silence expands between us again, like it did this afternoon.

Holy fucking crap! He's not going to talk to me, I know.

"Don't over-think this Edward," I scold quietly, and the words echo, disturbing a memory from the recent past – his words to me about his stupid contract. I reach over, take the box from his lap and open it. He watches me passively as if I were a fascinating alien creature. Knowing that the camera is prepped and ready to go, I fish it out of the box and remove the lens cap. I point the camera at him, so his beautiful anxious face fills the frame. I press the button, and keep it pressed, and ten pictures of Edward's alarmed expression are captured digitally for posterity.

"I'll objectify you then," I murmur, pressing the shutter again. On the final still his lips twitch almost imperceptibly. I press again, and this time he smiles... a small smile, but a smile nevertheless. I hold down the button once more and see him physically relax in front of me, and pout – a full-on, posed, ridiculous 'blue steel' pout, and it makes me grin. Oh thank heavens. Mr Mercurial is back – and I've never been so pleased to see him.

"I thought it was my present," he mutters sulkily, but I think he's teasing.

"Well, it was supposed to be fun, but it's ended up a symbol of women's oppression." I snap away, taking more pictures of him, and watch the amusement growing on his face, in super close-up. Then his eyes darken, and his expression changes... to predatory.

"You want to be oppressed?" he murmurs silkily.

"Not oppressed. No." I murmur back, snapping again.

"I could oppress you big time, Mrs Cullen," he threatens, his voice husky.

"I know you can, Mr Cullen. And you do, frequently," I tease.

He blinks at me.

Shit. I lower the camera and stare at him.

"What's wrong, Edward?" My voice oozes frustration. Tell me!

He says nothing.

Gah! He's so infuriating. I lift the camera to my eye again.

"Tell me," I insist.

"Nothing," he says, and abruptly disappears from the viewfinder.

In one swift smooth move he reaches over, sweeps the camera box onto the cabin floor and grabs me, pushing me down on to the bed. He sits astride me.

“Hey!” I exclaim, and take more photographs of him, smiling down at me with dark intent. He grabs the camera by the lens, and from photographer I become subject, as he points the Nikon at me and presses the shutter down.

“So, you want me to take pictures of you, Mrs Cullen?” he breathes. All I can see of his face is his unruly hair and his sculptured mouth grinning a wicked grin.

“Well, for a start, I think you should be laughing,” he says, and with his free hand he tickles me ruthlessly under my ribs, making me squeal and giggle and squirm beneath him, until I grasp his wrist in a vain attempt to make him stop. His grin widens and he renews his efforts, all the while snapping away.

“No! Stop!” I scream.

“Are you kidding?” he growls, and puts the camera down beside us so that he can torture me with both hands.

“Edward!” I splutter, and gasp my laughing protest. He has never, ever tickled me before... Fuck – stop! I thrash my head from side to side, trying to wiggle out from under him, giggling and laughing pushing at both of his hands, but he’s unrelenting – grinning down at me, enjoying my torment.

“EDWARD, STOP!” I plead and he stops suddenly. Grabbing both of my hands, he holds them down on either side of my head while looming over me. I am panting and breathless with laughter. His breathing mirrors mine, and he gazes down at me with ... what? My lungs stop functioning. Wonder? Love? Reverence? Holy Cow... That look!

“You. Are. So. Beautiful,” he breathes.

I stare up at him, at his dear, dear divine face – I’m bathed in the intensity of his gaze, and it’s as if he’s seeing me for the first time. Leaning slowly down he kisses me, closing his eyes, enraptured. His response is a wake-up call to my libido... seeing him like this, undone, by me. Oh my. He releases my hands and curls his fingers round my head, holding me gently in place, while my fingers slide into his hair and my body rises and fills, responding to his kiss. And all of a sudden the nature of his kiss alters, no longer sweet and reverential and admiring, but carnal, deep and devouring – his tongue invading my mouth, taking not giving, his kiss possessing a desperate needy edge. As desire courses through my blood, awakening every muscle and sinew in its wake, I feel a frisson of alarm.

Oh Fifty, what’s wrong?

He inhales sharply and groans.

“Oh, what you do to me,” he murmurs, lost and raw. He moves suddenly, lying down on top of me, pressing me into the mattress – one hand cupping my chin, the other skimming over my body, my breast, my waist, my hip and round my behind. He kisses me again, pushing his leg between mine, raising my knee and grinding against me, his erection straining against our clothes and my sex. I gasp and moan against his lips, losing myself to his fervent passion. I dismiss the distant alarm bells in the back of my mind, knowing that he wants me, that he needs me, and that when it comes to communicating with me, this is his favorite form of self-expression. I kiss him with renewed abandon, running my hands through his hair, fisting my fingers, holding tight. He tastes so good and smells of Edward, my Edward.

Abruptly he stops, stands up and pulls me off the bed, so that I am standing in front of him, dazed. He undoes the button on my shorts and kneels quickly, yanking them and my panties down, and before I

can breath again I am back on the bed beneath him and he's unbuttoning his flies. Holy cow, he's not taking off his clothes or my t-shirt. He holds my head and with no preamble whatsoever he thrusts himself inside me, making me cry out – more in surprise than anything else – but I can still hear the hiss of his breath forced through his clenched teeth.

"Yessss..." he sighs close to my ear. He stills, then swivels his hips once, pushing deeper, making me groan.

"I need you," he growls, his voice low and husky. He runs his teeth along my jaw, nipping and sucking, and then he's kissing me again, hard. I wrap my legs and arms around him, cradling and holding him hard against me, determined to wipe out whatever's worrying him, and he starts to move... move like he's trying to climb inside me. Over and over, frantic, primal, desperate, and before I lose myself in the insane rhythm and pace he's setting I briefly wonder once more what's driving him... worrying him... But my body takes over, obliterating the thought, climbing and building so I am awash with sensation, meeting him thrust for thrust. Listening to his harsh breathing, labored and fierce at my ear. Knowing that he's lost in me... I groan loudly, panting, it's so erotic... his need, his need for me. I am reaching... reaching... and he's driving me higher, overwhelming me, taking me... and I want this, I want this so much... for me and for him.

"Come with me," he gasps, and he rears up over me so I have to break my hold around him.

"Open your eyes," he orders. "I need to see you." His voice is urgent, implacable. My eyes flicker open momentarily and the sight of him above me, his face taut with ardor, his eyes raw and glowing with need, his passion and his love, is my undoing, and on cue I come, throwing my head back as my body pulses around him.

"Oh Bella," he cries and he joins my climax, driving into me, then stilling and collapsing onto me. He rolls over so that I am on top of him, sprawled over him, and he's still inside me. As I surface from my orgasm and my body steadies and calms, I want to make some quip about being objectified and oppressed... but wisely, I think, I hold my tongue. I glance up from Edward's chest to examine his face. His eyes are closed and his arms are wrapped around me, clinging... I kiss his chest through the thin fabric of his linen shirt.

"Tell me Edward, what's wrong?" I ask softly and wait anxiously to see if even now, sated by sex, he'll tell me. I feel his arms tighten around me further but it's his only response. He's not going to talk.

Inspiration hits me.

"I give you my solemn vow to be your faithful partner in sickness and in health, to stand by your side in good times and in bad, to share your joy as well as your sorrow," I murmur.

He freezes. His only movement is to open wide his fathomless green eyes and gaze at me as I continue my wedding vows.

"I promise to love you unconditionally, to support you in your goals and dreams, to honor and respect you, to laugh with you and cry with you, to share my hopes and dreams with you and bring you solace in times of need." I pause, willing him to talk to me. He watches me, his lips slightly parted, but says nothing.

"And to cherish you for as long as we both shall live," I sigh.

"Oh, Bella," he whispers, and he moves again, breaking our precious contact so that we're lying side by side. He strokes my face with the back of his knuckles.

"I solemnly vow that I will safeguard and hold dear and deep in my heart our union and you," he whispers, his voice hoarse. "I promise to love you faithfully forsaking all others, through the good

times and the bad, in sickness or in health, regardless of where life takes us. I will protect you, trust you and respect you. I will share your joys and sorrows and comfort you in times of need. I promise to cherish you and uphold your hopes and dreams and keep you safe at my side. All that is mine is now yours. I give you my hand, my heart, and my love, from this moment on for as long as we both shall live.”

Tears spring to my eyes. His face softens as he gazes at me.

“Don’t cry,” he murmurs, his thumb catching and dispatching a stray tear.

“Why won’t you talk to me? Please, Edward.”

He closes his eyes as if in pain.

“I vowed I would bring you solace in times of need. Please don’t make me break my vows.”

He sighs and opens his eyes, his expression bleak.

“It’s arson,” he says simply and he looks suddenly so young and vulnerable.

Oh fuck.

“And my biggest worry,” he continues, “Is that they are after me. And if they are after me – ” He stops, unable to continue.

“Whoever they are – they might get me,” I whisper.

He blanches and I know that I have finally uncovered the root of his anxiety. Reaching up I caress his face.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

He frowns.

“What for?”

“For telling me.”

He shakes his head and a ghost of a smile touches his lips.

“You can be very persuasive, Mrs Cullen,” he smirks.

“And you can brood and internalize all your feelings and worry yourself to death. You’ll probably die of a heart attack before you’re forty, and I want you around far longer than that.”

“Mrs Cullen, you’ll be the death of me. The sight of you on the Jet Ski – I nearly had a coronary.” He flops back on the bed and puts his hand over his eyes, and I feel him shudder.

“Edward, it’s a Jet Ski. Even kids ride Jet Skis. Can you imagine what you’ll be like when we visit your place in Aspen, and I go skiing for the first time?”

He gasps and turns to face me, and I want to laugh at the horror on his face.

“Our place,” he says firmly. I ignore him.

“I’m a grown-up, Edward – and much tougher than I look. When are you going to learn this?”

He shrugs, and his mouth thins slightly. I decide to change the subject.

“So, the fire. Do the police know about the arson?”

“Yes,” he says his expression serious.

“Good,” I mutter.

“Security is going to get tighter,” he adds matter-of-factly.

“I understand.”

I glance down his body. He’s still wearing his shorts and his shirt, and I still have my t-shirt on. Jeez – talk about wham bam thank you ma’am. The thought makes me giggle.

“What?” Edward asks, bemused.

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You. Still dressed.”

“Oh.” He glances down at himself, then back at me, and his face erupts into an enormous smile.

“Well, you know how hard it is for me to keep my hands off you, Mrs Cullen – especially when you’re giggling like a school girl.”

Oh yes – the tickling. Gah! The Tickling. I move quickly so that I am sitting astride him, but immediately understanding my evil intent he grabs both of my wrists.

“No,” he says, and he means it.

I pout at him, but decide that he’s not ready for this.

“Please don’t,” he whispers. “I couldn’t bear it. I was never tickled as a child.” He pauses and I relax my hands so he doesn’t have to restrain me.

“I used to watch Carlisle with Emmett and Alice... tickling them... and it looked like such fun, but I... I...”

I place my index finger on his lips.

“Hush... I know,” I murmur, and bending down plant a soft kiss on his lips where my finger has just been, then curl up on his chest. Inside me the familiar painful ache swells and the profound sadness that I hold in my heart for Edward as a little boy seizes me once more, and I know I would do anything for this man, because I love him so.

He puts his arms around me and presses his nose into my hair, inhaling deeply, as he gently strokes one hand rhythmically down my back. I don’t know how long we lie there... but eventually I break the comfortable silence between us.

“What is the longest you’ve gone without seeing Dr Banner?”

“Two weeks. Why? Do you have an incorrigible urge to tickle me?”

“No,” I chuckle. “I think he helps you.”

Edward snorts

“He should do, I pay him enough.”

He pulls my hair softly, turning my face to look up at him. I lift my head and he gazes at me.

“Are you concerned for my well-being, Mrs Cullen?” he asks softly.

“Every good wife is concerned for her beloved husband’s well-being, Mr Cullen,” I admonish him teasingly.

“Beloved?” he whispers, and it’s a poignant question hanging between us.

“Very much beloved.” I scoot up to kiss him, and he smiles his shy smile.

“Do you want to go ashore to eat, Mrs Cullen?”

“I want to eat wherever you’re happiest.”

“Good,” he grins. “Aboard it is, where I can keep you safe. Thank you for my present.” He reaches over and grabs the camera, and holding it at arm’s length he snaps the two of us in our post-tickling, post-coital, post-confessional embrace.

“The pleasure is all mine,” I smile and his eyes light up.

~oOo~

We wander through the opulent gilt splendour of the eighteenth century Palace of Versailles. Once a humble hunting lodge, it was transformed by the Roi Soleil into a magnificent, lavish seat of power, but even before the eighteenth century ended it saw the last of those absolute monarchs.

The most stunning room by far is the Hall of Mirrors. The early afternoon light floods through windows to the west, lighting up the mirrors that line the east wall, illuminating the gold leaf décor and the enormous crystal chandeliers. It’s breathtaking.

“Interesting to see what becomes of a despotic autocrat who isolates himself in such splendour,” I murmur to Edward as he stands at my side. He gazes down and cocks his head to one side, regarding me with humor.

“Your point, Mrs Cullen?”

“Oh, merely an observation, Mr Cullen.” I wave my hand airily at the surroundings. Smirking he follows me to the centre of the room where I stand and gawp at the view – the spectacular gardens reflected in the looking-glass and the spectacular Edward Cullen, my husband, reflected back at me, his gaze bold and green.

“I would build this for you,” he whispers, “Just to see the way the light burnishes your hair, right here, right now.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “You look like an angel.” He kisses me just below my earlobe, takes my hand in his and murmurs, “We despots do that, for the women we love.”

I flush at his compliment, smiling shyly, and follow him through the vast room.

~oOo~

“What are you thinking about?” Edward asks softly, taking a sip of his after-dinner coffee.

“Versailles.”

“Ostentatious, wasn’t it?” He grins.

I glance around the more understated grandeur of the Fair Lady’s dining room and purse my lips.

“This is hardly ostentatious,” Edward says, a tad defensively.

“I know. It’s lovely. The best honeymoon a girl could want.”

“Really?” he says, genuinely surprised. And he smiles his shy smile.

“Of course it is.”

“We’ve only got two more days – is there anything you’d like to see? Anything you’d like to do?”

“Just be with you,” I murmur.

Rising from the table he comes round to me and kisses me on the forehead.

“Well, can you do without me for about an hour? I need to check my emails, find out what’s happening at home.”

“Sure,” I say brightly, trying to hide my disappointment. Is it freaky that I want to be with him all the time? My subconscious presses her lips into a narrow, unattractive line and nods vigorously.

“Thank you for the camera,” he murmurs, and heads for the study.

Back in our cabin I decide to catch up on my correspondence and open my laptop. There are emails from my Mom and from Rose, giving me the latest gossip from home and asking how the honeymoon is going. Well, great, until someone decided to burn down CEH inc... jeez. As I finish my response to my Mom, an email from Rose hits my inbox.

From: Rosalie L Hale
Date: 19 August 2009 11.45 PST
To: Isabella Cullen
Subject: OMG!!!!

Bella, just heard about the fire at Edward’s office.
Do you think it’s arson?
R xox

Rose is online! I jump on to my new found toy – Skype messaging – and see that she’s available. I quickly type a message.

Bella: Hey are you there?

Rosie: YES BELLA! How are you? How’s the Honeymoon? Did you see my email? Does Edward know about the fire?

Bella: I’m good. Honeymoon’s great. Yes I saw your email. Yes Edward knows.

Rosie: I thought he would. News is sketchy on what happened. And Emmett won’t tell me anything. :(

Bella: Are you fishing for a story?

Rosie: You know me too well.

Bella: Edward hasn’t told me much.

Rosie: Emmett heard from Esme!

Oh no – I’m sure Edward doesn’t want this broadcast all over Seattle. I try my patented distract-tenacious-Hale technique.

Bella: How’s Emmett and Jasper?

Rosie: Jasper has been accepted on to the psyche masters course at Seattle. Emmett is adorable.

Bella: Way to go Jasper.

Rosie: How’s our favourite ex-dom?

Bella: ROSE!

Rosie: What?

Bella: YOU KNOW WHAT!

Rosie: K. Sorry

Bella: He’s fine. More than fine. :)

Rosie: Well as long as you’re happy I’m happy.

Bella: I’m blissfully happy.

Rosie: J I have to run. Can we talk later?

Bella: Not sure. See if I am online. Time zones suck!

Rosie: They do. Love you Bella.

Bella: Love you too, Later. x

Rosie: Later. <3

Trust Rose to be on it. I roll my eyes at the screen and shut Skype down before Edward sees the chat. He wouldn't appreciate the ex-dom comment – and I'm not sure he's entirely ex...

I sigh loudly. Rose knows everything, since our tipsy evening three weeks before the wedding, when I finally succumbed to the Hale inquisition... and it was a relief to finally talk to someone. I glance at my watch. It's been about an hour since dinner, and I am missing my husband. I head back on deck to see if he's finished his work.

~o~

I am in the Hall of Mirrors and Edward is standing beside me, smiling down at me with love and affection. You look like an angel. I beam back at him, but when I glance into the looking glass I'm standing on my own and the room is grey and drab. No! My head whips back to his face, to find his smile is sad and wistful. Reaching up he tucks my hair behind my ear. Then he turns wordlessly and walks away slowly, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the mirrors, as he paces the enormous room to the ornate double doors at the end... a man on his own, a man with no reflection... and I wake, gasping for air, as panic seizes me.

"Hey," he whispers from beside me in the darkness, his voice filled with concern.

Oh, he's here. He's safe. Relief courses through me.

"Oh, Edward," I mumble, trying to bring my pounding heartbeat under control. He wraps me in his arms and it's only then that I realize I have tears streaming down my face.

"Bella, what is it?" He strokes my cheek, wiping away my tears, and I can hear his anguish.

"Nothing," I stutter. "A silly nightmare."

He kisses my forehead and my tearstained cheeks, comforting me.

"Just a bad dream, baby," he murmurs. "I've got you. I'll keep you safe."

Drinking in his scent I curl around him, trying to ignore the loss and devastation I felt in my dream... and in that moment I know that my deepest, darkest fear would be losing him.

~oooOOOOOooo~

MOTU II 93/6

I stir, instinctively reaching over to Edward's side of the bed only to feel his absence. Shit! I wake instantly and look anxiously round the cabin. Edward is sitting in the small upholstered armchair by the bed watching me. Stooping down he places something on the floor, then lies down on the bed beside me. He's dressed in his cut-offs and a grey t-shirt.

"Hey, don't panic. Everything's fine," he says, his voice gentle and soothing – like he's talking to a cornered wild animal. Tenderly he smooths the hair back from my face and I calm immediately. I see him trying and failing to hide his own concern.

"You've been so jumpy these last couple of days," he murmurs, his eyes wide and serious.

"I'm okay, Edward. Good morning." I give him my brightest smile because I don't want him to know how worried I am about the whole arson incident. The painful recollection of how I felt when Echo Charlie was sabotaged and Edward went missing – the hollow emptiness, the indescribable pain – continually re-surfaces and nags me, gnawing at my heart. Keeping the smile fixed on my face I try to

repress the memory.

“Were you watching me sleep?”

“Yes,” he says gazing at me steadily, studying me. “You were talking.”

“Oh?” Shit! What was I saying?

“You’re worried,” he adds.

I blink at him. Is there nothing I can keep from this man? He leans forward and kisses me between my brows.

“When you frown a little v forms just here,” he breathes. “It’s very soft to kiss. Don’t worry baby, I’ll look after you.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about – it’s you,” I grumble. “Who’s looking after you?”

He smiles indulgently at my tone.

“I’m big enough and ugly enough to look after myself. Come. Get up. There’s one thing I’d like to do before we head home.” He grins at me, a big boyish yes-I’m-really-only-twenty-eight grin, and swats my behind. I yelp, startled, and realize that today we’re going back to Seattle... and my melancholy blossoms. I don’t want to leave. I’ve relished being with him 24/7... I’m not ready to share him with his Company and his family. We’ve had a blissful honeymoon. With a few ups and downs, I admit, but that’s normal for a newly married couple... surely.

But Edward cannot contain his boyish excitement, and despite my dark thoughts it’s infectious. When he rises gracefully off the bed I follow, intrigued. What has he got in mind?

~o~

Edward straps the key to my wrist.

“You want me to drive?”

“Yes.” Edward grins. “That’s not too tight?”

“It’s fine. Is that why you’re wearing a lifejacket?” I arch my eyebrow.

“Yes.”

I can’t help my giggle.

“Such confidence in my driving capabilities, Mr Cullen.”

“As ever, Mrs Cullen.”

“Well, don’t lecture me,” I warn.

Edward holds his hands up in a defensive gesture, but he’s smiling.

“Would I dare?”

“Yes you would, and yes you do, and we can’t pull over and argue on the sidewalk here.”

“Point taken, Mrs Cullen. Are we going to stand on this platform all day debating your driving skills, or are we going to have some fun?”

“Point taken, Mr Cullen.” I grasp the handlebars of the Jet Ski and climb on. Edward climbs on behind me and kicks us away from the yacht. Taylor and two of the deck hands look on in amusement. Sliding forward Edward wraps his arms around me and snuggles his thighs tightly against mine. Yes, this is what I like about this form of transport. I plug in the ignition key and push the start button, and

the engine roars into life.

“Ready?” I shout to Edward over the noise.

“As I’ll ever be,” he says, his mouth close to my ear.

Gently I pull on the lever and the Jet Ski moves away from the Fair Lady, far too sedately for my liking. Edward tightens his embrace. I pull on the gas some more and we shoot forward. I am beyond delighted that we don’t stall.

“Whoa!” Edward calls from behind, but I can hear the exhilaration in his voice. I speed past the Fair Lady towards the open sea. We’re anchored outside the Port de Plaisance de Saint-Laurent-du-Var, Nice airport nestling in the distance, built into the Mediterranean, or so it seems. I’ve heard the odd plane landing since we arrived last night. We need to take a closer look, I decide.

We shoot towards it, skipping rapidly over the waves. I love this, and I’m thrilled Edward’s letting me drive. All the worry I’ve felt over the past two days melts away as we skim towards the airport.

“Next time we do this we’ll have two Jet Skis,” Edward shouts. I can’t help my grin – the thought of racing him is thrilling.

As we zoom over the cool blue sea towards what looks like the end of the runway, I’m startled suddenly by the thundering roar of a jet overhead as it comes in to land. It’s so loud I panic, swerving and hitting the throttle at the same time, mistaking it for a brake.

“BELLA!” Edward shouts, but it’s too late. I am catapulted off the side of the Jet Ski, arms and legs flailing, taking Edward with me in a very spectacular splash.

Screaming I plunge into the crystal blue sea and swallow a nasty mouthful of the Mediterranean. The water is cold this far from the shore, but I surface within a split second, courtesy of my life jacket. Coughing and spluttering I wipe the seawater from my eyes and look around for Edward. He’s already swimming towards me. The Jet Ski floats inoffensively a few feet away from us, its engine silent.

“You okay?” Edward gasps as he reaches me.

“Yes,” I croak, but I cannot contain my elation. See Edward? That’s the worst that can happen on a Jet Ski!

He pulls me into his embrace, then grabs my head between his hands, examining my face closely.

“See, that wasn’t so bad!” I grin as we tread water.

Eventually he smirks at me, obviously relieved.

“No, I guess it wasn’t. Except I’m wet,” he grumbles, but his tone is playful.

“I’m wet too.”

“I like you wet.” He leers at me.

“Edward!” I scold, but can’t help my giggle.

He grins, looking gorgeous, then leans in and kisses me, hard. When he pulls away I’m breathless. His eyes are darker, hooded and heated, and I’m warm in spite of the cold water.

“Come. Let’s head back. Now we have to shower. I’ll drive.”

~o~

We laze in the British Airways first class lounge at Heathrow in London, waiting for our connecting flight to Seattle. Edward is engrossed in the Financial Times of London. I reach over for his camera,

wanting to take some photographs of him. He looks so sexy in his trademark white linen shirt and jeans, and his aviator specs tucked into the v of his open shirt. The flash disturbs him. He blinks up at me and smiles his shy smile.

“How are you, Mrs Cullen?” he asks.

“Sad to be going home,” I murmur. “I like having you to myself.”

He reaches out and clasps my hand, and lifting it to his lips, grazes my knuckles with a sweet kiss.

“Me too,” he says.

“...But?” I ask, hearing that small word unsaid at the end of his simple statement.

He frowns slightly.

“But?” he says disingenuously.

I cock my head to one side, gazing at him with the TELL ME! expression I have been perfecting over the last couple of days. He sighs, putting the newspaper down.

“I want this arsonist caught and out of our lives,” he says with surprising bluntness.

“Oh.” That seems fair enough.

“I’ll have Jenks’ balls on a platter if he lets anything like that happen again,” Edward says, and a shiver runs down my spine at his menacing tone. He gazes at me impassively, and I don’t know if he’s daring me to be flippant or what. I do the only thing I can think of to ease the sudden tension between us, and raise the camera and snap another photograph.

~o~

“Hey, sleepyhead, we’re home,” Edward murmurs.

“Hmmm,” I mumble, reluctant to leave my tantalizing dream of Edward and I on a picnic blanket at Kew Gardens. I am so tired. Travelling is exhausting, even in first class. We’ve been up for eighteen or more hours straight, I think – in my fatigue I’ve lost track. I hear my door open, and Edward is leaning over me. He unbuckles my seat belt and lifts me into his arms, waking me.

“Hey, I can walk!” I protest sleepily.

He snorts.

“I need to carry you over the threshold.”

I put my arms around his neck.

“Up all sixty floors?” I quirk my lips up in a challenging smile.

“Mrs Cullen, I am very pleased to announce that you’ve put on some weight.”

“What?”

He grins.

“So if you don’t mind, we’ll use the elevator.” He narrows his eyes at me, though I can tell he’s teasing. Taylor opens the doors to the Escala lobby for us.

“Welcome home Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen,” he says smiling at both of us.

“Thanks Taylor,” says Edward. I give Taylor the briefest of smiles and watch him head back to the Mercedes where Stuart waits at the wheel.

“What do you mean I’ve put on weight?” I glare at Edward. His grin broadens and he clasps me closer to his chest as he carries me across the lobby.

“Not much,” he assures me but his face darkens suddenly, disturbing me.

Oh No... what now?

“What is it?” I breathe, trying to control the alarm I hear in my own voice.

“You’ve put on some of the weight you lost when you left me,” he explains quietly as he summons the elevator. A bleak expression crosses his face.

No! His sudden, surprising anguish tugs at my heart.

“Hey,” I snap. I curl my fingers around his face and into his hair, pulling him towards me. He comes willingly.

“If I hadn’t gone, would you be standing here, like this, now?” I whisper. His eyes melt, the colour of soft moss, and he smiles his shy smile... my favourite smile.

“No,” he breathes and steps into the elevator still holding me. He leans down and kisses me gently.

“No, Mrs Cullen, I wouldn’t.” He runs his nose down mine. “But I would know I could keep you safe, because you wouldn’t defy me.”

He sounds slightly regretful... shit.

“I like defying you.” I test the waters.

“I know. And it’s made me so... happy,” he says, smiling down at me through his bemusement.

Oh thank heavens.

“Even though I’m fat?” I whisper.

He laughs.

“Even though you’re fat.” He kisses me again, more heated this time, and my fingers fist in his hair holding him against me, our tongues twisting and turning in a slow sensual dance with each other. When the elevator pings to a halt at the penthouse we are both breathless.

“Very happy,” he breathes. His smile is darker now, his eyes hooded and full of salacious promise. He shakes his head as if to recover himself, and turning walks into the foyer.

“Welcome home, Mrs Cullen,” he murmurs. He kisses me again, more chastely this time, and gives me the full-gigawatt-patented-Edward-Cullen smile, his eyes dancing with joy.

“Welcome home, Mr Cullen,” I beam up at him, my heart answering his call, brimming with my own joy. I think Edward’s going to put me down, but he doesn’t. He carries me through the foyer across the corridor and into the great room, and deposits me on the kitchen island where I sit with my legs hanging down. Opening a kitchen cupboard he pulls out two champagne flutes, then takes a bottle of chilled champagne from the fridge... our favorite Bollinger. Placing the glasses beside me he deftly opens the bottle with a practised flourish, not spilling a drop. He pours the pale pink champagne into each glass, puts the bottle down, picks up one glass and hands it to me. Taking up the other, he gently parts my legs, and moves forward to stand between them.

“Here’s to us, Mrs Cullen,” he breathes.

“To us, Mr Cullen,” I whisper and smile shyly. We clink glasses and take a sip.

“I know you’re tired,” he whispers, rubbing his nose against mine, “But I’d really like to go to bed, and

not to sleep.” He kisses the corner of my mouth. “It’s our first night back here, and you’re really mine...” His voice drifts off as he plants soft kisses down my throat. It’s only early evening in Seattle, and I am dog-tired, but deep inside desire blooms deep in my belly and my inner goddess purrs...

~o~

Edward is slumbering peacefully beside me as I stare at the pale pink and golden streaks of the new dawn through the vast windows. His arm is draped loosely over me, and I try to match his breathing in an effort to get back to sleep, but it’s hopeless. I am wide-awake, my body clock on Greenwich Mean Time, my mind racing.

So much has happened in the last three weeks – who am I kidding, the last three months – I feel that my feet haven’t touched the ground. And now here I am, Bella Swan – Mrs Isabella Cullen – married to the most delicious, sexy, philanthropic, absurdly wealthy, fucked-up mogul a woman could meet. How did this all happen so fast?

I shift carefully onto my side to gaze at him, appraising his beauty. I know he watches me sleeping, and I rarely get the opportunity to repay the compliment. He looks so young and carefree in his sleep, his long lashes fanned against his cheek, a light smattering of stubble covering his jaw, and his sculptured lips slightly parted, relaxed as he breathes deeply. I want to kiss him, to push my tongue between his lips, run my fingers over his soft yet prickly stubble. I really have to fight the urge not to touch him, not to disturb him. Hmm... I could just tease his earlobe with my teeth and suck... My subconscious glares up at me over her half-moon spectacles, distracted from Volume Two of the Collected Works of Charles Dickens, and mentally chastises me – Leave the poor man alone, Bella.

I have to go back to work on Monday. We have today to reacclimatise, then we’re back into our routine. It will be odd not seeing Edward for a whole day, after spending almost every minute together for the last three weeks. I lie back and stare at the ceiling. One would think that spending so much time together would be suffocating, but that’s just not the case. I’ve loved each and every minute, even our fighting. Every minute... except the news of the fire at Cullen House.

My blood chills. Who could want to harm Edward? My mind gnaws at this mystery again. Someone in his business? An ex? A disgruntled employee? I have no idea, and Edward remains tight-lipped about it all, drip-feeding me the minimum information he can get away with, in a bid to protect me. I sigh. My shining white and dark knight, always trying to protect me. What am I going to do with him to make him open up more?

He stirs, and I still, not wanting to wake him, but it has the opposite effect. Damn! Two bright green eyes gaze at me, blinking.

“What’s wrong?” he asks immediately.

“Nothing. Go back to sleep.” I try my reassuring smile.

He stretches his fine long body next to mine, rubs his face then grins at me.

“Jet lag?” he asks.

“Is that what this is? I can’t sleep.”

“I have the universal panacea right here, just for you, baby.” He grins like a schoolboy, making me roll my eyes and giggle at the same time... and just like that my dark thoughts are swept aside and my teeth find his earlobe.

~o~

Edward and I cruise north on the I-5 towards the 520 bridge in the Audi R8. We are going to have

lunch at his parents', a welcome-home Sunday lunch. All the family will be there, plus Rose and Jasper. It will be strange to be in so much company when we've been on our own for so long. I haven't had an opportunity to talk to Edward most of the morning – he was holed up in his study while I unpacked. He said I didn't have to, that Mrs Cope would do it. That's something else I need to get a handle on – having domestic help. I run my fingers absentmindedly over the leather upholstery of the door to distract my wondering thoughts. I feel out of sorts. Is it the jet lag? The arson?

"Would you let me drive this?" I ask half to myself, surprised that I say the words out loud.

"Of course," Edward replies, smiling. "What's mine is yours. If you dent it though, I will take you into the red room of pain." He glances swiftly at me with a malicious grin.

Shit! I gape at him. Is this a joke?

"You're kidding. You'd punish me for denting your car. You love your car more than you love me?" I tease.

"It's close," he says and reaches across to squeeze my knee. "But she doesn't keep me warm at night."

"I'm sure it could be arranged. You could sleep in her," I snap tartly.

Edward laughs.

"We haven't been home one day and you're kicking me out already?" He seems delighted. I gaze at him and he grins a face-splitting grin... and although I want to be mad at him, it's impossible when he's in this kind of mood. Now that I think about it he's been in a better frame of mind ever since he left his study this morning. And it dawns on me that I'm being petulant because we have to go back to reality, and I don't know if he's going to revert to the more closed pre-honeymoon Edward, or if I'll get to keep the new improved version.

"Why are you so pleased?" I ask.

He flashes yet another grin at me.

"Because this conversation is so... normal."

"Normal!" I snort. "Not after three weeks of marriage! Surely."

His smile slips slightly.

"I'm kidding, Edward," I mutter quickly, not wanting to kill his mood. It strikes me how unsure he is of himself sometimes. I suspect that he's always been like this, but has just hidden his uncertainty beneath an intimidating exterior. He's very easy to tease, probably because he's not used to it. It's a revelation, and I marvel again that we still have so much to learn about each other.

"Don't worry, I'll stick to the Saab," I mutter, and turn to stare out of the window, trying to shake off my bad mood.

"Hey," he says. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're so frustrating sometimes, Bella. Tell me."

I turn and smirk at him.

"Back at you, Cullen."

He frowns.

"I'm trying," he says softly.

"I know. Me too." I smile at him and my mood brightens slightly.

~o~

Carlisle looks frankly ridiculous in his chef's hat and "Licensed to Grill" apron as he stands at the BBQ. Every time I look at him it makes me smile. In fact, my spirits have lifted considerably. We are all sitting around the table on the terrace of the Cullen family home, enjoying the late summer sun.

Esme and Alice are setting various salads out on the table, while Emmett and Edward trade friendly insults and discuss plans for the new house, and Jasper and Rose grill me about our honeymoon. Edward keeps hold of my hand, his fingers toying with my wedding and engagement rings.

"So if you can get the plans finalized with Tanya, I have a window September through to mid November," says Emmett. "I can get the whole crew on it." He stretches and drops an arm around Rose's shoulder, making her smile.

"Tanya is due tomorrow evening," replies Edward. "I hope we can finalize everything then." He turns and looks expectantly at me.

Oh... this is news.

"Sure." I smile at him, mostly for the benefit of his family, but my spirit take a nosedive again. Why does he make these decisions without telling me? Or is it the thought of Tanya – all lush hips and full breasts and expensive designer clothes and perfume – smiling too provocatively at my husband? My subconscious glares at me. He's given you no reason to be jealous. Shit, I am up and down today. What's wrong with me?

"Bella," Rose exclaims, snapping me out of my reverie. "You still in the South of France?"

"Yes," I smile.

"You look so well," she says, though she frowns as she says it.

"You both do," Esme beams. Emmett refills our glasses.

"To the happy couple." Carlisle grins and raises his glass, and the sentiment is echoed round the table.

"And congratulations to Jasper for getting on the psych course at Seattle," chips in Alice proudly. She smiles at him and Jasper gives her a quick, heated smile back. Oh... I flush, seeing what passes between them. I recognize that look.

"Congratulations," we say in unison, and I grin at the pair of them, knowing full well what they have been up to.

I listen to the banter round the table. Edward is running through our extensive itinerary over our last three weeks, embellishing here and there. He sounds relaxed and in control, the worry of the arsonist forgotten. I on the other hand don't seem to be able to shake my mood. I pick at my food. Edward said I was fat yesterday. He was joking! My subconscious glares at me again. Emmett accidentally knocks his glass onto the terrace, startling everyone, and there's a sudden flurry of activity to get it cleaned up.

"I am going to take you to the boathouse and finally spank you in there, if you don't snap out of this mood," Edward whispers to me.

I gasp with shock, turn and gape at him. What? Is he teasing me?

"You wouldn't dare!" I growl at him and from deep inside I feel a familiar, welcome excitement. He cocks an eyebrow at me. Of course he would. I glance quickly at Rose across the table. She's watching us with interest. I turn back to Edward, narrowing my eyes at him.

“You’d have to catch me first – and I’m wearing flats,” I hiss.

“I’d have fun trying,” he breathes, smiling warmly at me and I think he’s joking.

I flush. Confusingly, I feel better.

As we finish our dessert of strawberries and cream the heavens open, unexpectedly soaking us. We all leap up to clear the plates and glasses from the table, depositing them in the kitchen.

“Good thing the weather held off till we finished,” Esme says pleased, as we drift into the back room den. Edward sits down at the shining black upright piano, presses the quiet pedal and starts to play a familiar tune that I can’t immediately place.

Esme asks me for my impressions of Saint Paul de Vence. She and Carlisle went years ago during their honeymoon, and it occurs to me that this is a good omen, seeing how happy they are together now. Rose and Emmett are cuddling on the one of the large overstuffed couches, while Jasper, Alice and Carlisle are deep in conversation, about psychology, I think.

Suddenly, as one, all the Cullens stop talking, and gape at Edward.

What?

Edward is singing softly to himself at the piano. Silence descends on us all as we strain to hear his soft, lyrical voice. I’ve heard him sing before... haven’t they? He stops, suddenly conscious of the deathly hush that’s fallen over the room. Rose glances questioningly at me and I shrug. Edward turns on the stool and flushes, embarrassed to realize he’s become the centre of attention.

“Go on,” Esme urges softly. “I’ve never heard you sing, Edward. Ever.” She gazes in wonder at him. He sits on the piano stool blinking absently at her, and after a beat he shrugs slightly. His eyes flicker nervously towards me, then over to the French windows. The rest of the room suddenly erupts in self-conscious chatter, and I’m left gazing at Edward.

Esme distracts me, grasping my hands and suddenly folding me in her arms.

“Oh darling girl! Thank you, thank you,” she breathes, so only I can hear. It brings a lump to my throat.

“Um...” I hug her back, not really sure why I am being thanked. Esme smiles down at me, her eyes shining, and kisses my cheek.

Oh my... What have I done?

“I am going to make some tea,” she says, her voice soft with unshed tears.

I amble over to Edward who is now standing staring out through the French windows.

“Hi,” I murmur.

“Hi,” he says. He puts his arm around my waist, pulling me to him, and I slip my hand into his back jeans pocket. We gaze out at the rain.

“Feeling better?” he asks.

I nod.

“Good.”

“You certainly know how to silence a room.”

“I do it all the time,” he whispers, and he grins down at me.

“At work, yes, but not here.”

“True, not here.”

“No-one’s ever heard you sing? Ever?”

“It appears not,” he says dryly. “Shall we go?”

I gaze up at him, trying to gauge his mood. His eyes are soft and warm, and slightly bemused. I decide to change the subject.

“You going to spank me?” I breathe.

He gazes down at me, his eyes darkening.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m more than happy to play,” he murmurs.

“Oh.” I glance nervously round the large room, but we are out of earshot.

“Only if you misbehave, Mrs Cullen,” he whispers softly in my ear.

How can he put some much sensual promise into six words?

“I’ll see what I can do,” I grin.

Once we’ve said our goodbyes we walk over to the car.

“Here.” Edward throws me the keys to the R8. “Don’t bend it!” he adds in all seriousness, shaking his head. “Or I will be fucking pissed.”

My mouth goes dry. He’s letting me drive his car? My inner goddess whips on her leather driving gloves and flat shoes. Oh yes! She cries.

“Are you sure?” I mouth, stunned.

“Before I change my mind. Yes.”

I don’t think I have ever grinned so hard. He rolls his eyes and opens the driver’s door so that I can climb in. I start the engine before he’s even reached the passenger side, and he jumps in quickly.

“Keen, Mrs Cullen?” he asks with a wry smile.

“Very.”

Slowly I ease the car backwards and turn it in the driveway. I manage not to stall it, surprising myself. Boy, is the clutch sensitive. Slowly navigating the driveway, I glance in my rear view mirror to see Stuart and Ryan – our security for the day – climb into the Merc. I had no idea that they’d followed us here. I pause before I set out on to the main road.

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yes,” Edward says tightly, telling me he’s not sure about this at all. Oh my poor, poor Fifty. I want to laugh, at both him and myself, because I’m so nervous and excited. A small part of me wants to lose Stuart and Ryan, just for the kicks. I check for traffic then inch the R8 out slowly on to the road. I can feel Edward curl up with tension beside me and I can’t resist. The road is clear. I put my foot down on the gas and we shoot forward.

“Whoa! Bella!” Edward shouts. “Slow down – you’ll kill us both.”

I immediately ease off on the gas. Wow, can this car move!

“Sorry,” I mutter, trying to sound contrite and failing miserably. Edward smirks at me, to hide his relief, I think..

“Well, that counts as misbehaving,” he says casually and I slow right down.

I glance in the rear view mirror. No sign of the Merc, just a solitary dark car with tinted windows behind us. I imagine Stuart and Ryan flustered, frantic to catch up, and for some reason this gives me a thrill. But I decide to behave and I drive steadily, with growing confidence, back towards the 520 bridge. I don't want to give my husband a coronary.

Suddenly Edward swears and struggles to pull his BlackBerry from his jeans pocket.

"What?" he snaps angrily at whoever it is on the other end of the line. "No." he says, and glances quickly behind us. "Yes. She is."

What? Briefly checking the rear view mirror I can't see anything odd, just a few cars behind us. The Merc is about four cars back and we're all cruising steadily.

"I see." Edward sighs long and hard, pinching the bridge of his nose. I can feel the tension radiating off him.

Something's wrong.

"Yes... I don't know." He glances at me and lowers the phone from his ear. "We're fine. Keep going," he says calmly, smiling at me, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes.

Shit! Adrenaline spikes through my system.

He picks the phone up again.

"Okay on the 520. As soon as we hit it... Yes... I will."

He slots the phone into the speaker cradle, putting it on hands-free.

"What's wrong, Edward?"

"Just look where you're going, baby," he says softly.

I am heading for the on-ramp of the 520 in the direction of Seattle. When I glance at Edward he's staring straight ahead.

"I don't want you to panic, baby," he says calmly. "But as soon as we're on the 520 proper, I want you to really step on the gas. We're being followed."

~oooOOOooo~

MOTU II 94/7

Followed! My heart lurches into my mouth, pounding, my scalp prickles and my throat constricts with panic. Followed by whom? My eyes dart to the rear view mirror and sure enough the dark car I saw earlier is still behind us. Fuck! Is that it? I try and squint through the tinted windshield to see who's driving – but I can see nothing.

"Keep your eyes on the road, baby," Edward says gently, not in the truculent tone he normally uses where my driving is concerned. Get a grip! I mentally slap myself and try to subdue the dread that's threatening to swamp me. Supposing whoever's following us is armed? Armed and after Edward! Shit! I feel suddenly nauseous.

"How do we know we're being followed?" My voice is a breathy, squeaky, terrified whisper.

"The Dodge behind us has false licence plates."

How does he know that?

I indicate as we approach the 520 from the on-ramp. It's late afternoon, and although the rain has stopped the roadway is wet. Fortunately the traffic is reasonably light. My Dad's voice echoes around my head from one of his many self-defence lectures. It's the panic that's gonna kill you or get you seriously hurt, Bells. I take a deep breath, trying to bring my breathing under control. Whoever is following us is after Edward. As I take another deep steadying breath my mind begins to clear and my stomach settles. I have to keep Edward safe. I wanted to drive this car, and I wanted to drive it fast. Well, here's my chance. I grip the steering wheel tightly and take a final quick glance in my rear view mirror. The Dodge is closing on us. I slow right down, ignoring Edward's sudden panicked glance at me, and time my entrance on to the 520 so that the Dodge has to slow and stop to wait for a gap in the traffic. I drop a gear and floor the gas, and the R8 shoots forward, slamming us both into the backs of our seats. The speedometer needle glides up to 70 mph.

"Steady, baby," Edward says calmly, though I'm sure he's anything but calm inside.

I weave between the two lines of traffic, like a black counter in a game of checkers, effectively jumping the cars and trucks. Jeez, we're so close to the lake on this bridge, it's like we're driving on the water. I studiously ignore the angry disapproving looks from other drivers. Edward clutches his hands together in his lap, keeping as still as possible, and in spite of my fevered thoughts I wonder vaguely if he's doing it in order not to distract me.

"Good girl," he breathes in encouragement. He glances behind him. "I can't see the Dodge."

"We're right behind the unsub, Mr Cullen." Stuart's voice comes through the hands free. "He's trying to catch up with you, sir. We're going to try and come alongside, put ourselves between your car and the Dodge."

Unsub? What does that mean?

"Good. Mrs Cullen is doing well. At this rate, provided the traffic remains light – and from what I can see it is – we'll be off the bridge in a few minutes."

"Sir."

We flash past the bridge control tower, and I know we're half way across Lake Washington. When I check my speed I'm doing 75 mph.

"You're doing really well, Bella," Edward murmurs again as he gazes out of the back of the R8. For a fleeting moment his tone reminds me of our first encounter in his playroom, when he patiently encouraged me through our first scene. The thought is distracting, and I dismiss it immediately.

"Where am I headed?" I ask, moderately calmer, even under these terrifying circumstances. I have the feel of the car now. It's a joy to drive, so quiet and easy to handle it's hard to believe how fast we are going. Driving at this speed in this car... is easy.

"Mrs Cullen, head for I-5 and then south. We want to see if the Dodge follows you all the way," Stuart says over the hands-free. The traffic lights on the bridge are green – thank heavens – and I race onwards.

I glance nervously at Edward, and he smiles reassuringly. Then his face falls.

"Shit!" he swears softly.

There is a line of traffic ahead as we come off the bridge and I have to slow. Glancing anxiously in the mirror once more I think I spot the Dodge.

"Ten or so cars back?"

“Yeah, I see it.” Edward says, peering through the narrow rear window. “I wonder who the fuck it is?”

“Me too. Do we know if it’s a man driving?” I blurt out towards the cradled BlackBerry.

“No, Mrs Cullen. Could be a man or woman. The tint is too dark.”

Edward glances at me.

“A woman?” he says.

I shrug.

“Your Mrs Robinson?” I ask, not taking my eyes off the road.

Edward stiffens and lifts the BlackBerry out of its cradle.

“She’s not my Mrs Robinson,” he growls. “I haven’t spoken to her since my birthday. And Irina wouldn’t do this. It’s not her style.”

“Lauren?”

“She’s in Connecticut with her parents. I told you.”

“Are you sure?”

He pauses.

“No. But if she’d absconded I’m sure her folks would have let Banner know. Let’s discuss this when we’re home. Concentrate on what you’re doing,” he adds, his voice firm.

“But it might just be some random car.”

“I’m not taking any risks. Not where you’re concerned,” he snaps. He replaces the BlackBerry in its cradle, so we’re back in contact with our security team. Oh shit. I don’t want to rattle Edward right now... later maybe. I hold my tongue.

Fortunately the traffic is thinning a little. I am able to speed over the Mountlake intersection towards the I-5, weaving through the cars again.

“What if we get stopped by the cops?” I ask.

“That would be a good thing.”

“Not for my license.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he says. Unexpectedly I hear humor in his voice. I put my foot down again, and hit 75. Boy, this car can move. I love it – she’s so easy. I touch 85 mph. I don’t think I have ever driven this fast. I was lucky if my truck ever hit 45 mph.

“He’s cleared the traffic and picked up speed.” Stuart’s disembodied voice is calm and informative.

“He’s doing 90.”

Shit! Faster! I press down further on the gas and the car purrs to 95 mph as we approach the I-5 intersection.

“Keep it up, Bella,” Edward murmurs. I slow momentarily as we glide onto the I-5.

The interstate is fairly quiet, and I’m able to cross straight over to the fast lane in a split second. As I put my foot down and the glorious R8 zooms forward we tear down the fast lane, lesser mortals pulling over to let us pass. If I wasn’t so frightened I might really enjoy this.

“He’s hit 100 mph, sir.”

“Stay with him, Ethan.” Edward barks at Stuart.

Ethan?

A truck lurches into the fast lane – Shit! And I have to slam on the brakes.

“Fucking idiot!” Edward curses the driver as we lurch forward in our seats. I am grateful for our seatbelts.

“Go round him, baby,” Edward says through clenched teeth. I check my mirrors and cut right across three lanes. We speed past the slower vehicles and then cut back to the fast lane.

“Nice move, Mrs Cullen,” Edward murmurs appreciatively. “Where are the WSP when you need them?”

“I don’t want to get stopped by the police, Edward,” I mutter, concentrating on the highway ahead.

“Have you ever earned a speeding ticket driving this?”

“No,” he says, but glancing quickly at him I can see his smirk.

“Have you been stopped?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Charm, Mrs Cullen. It all comes down to charm. Now concentrate. Where’s the Dodge, Stuart?”

“He’s just hit 110, sir. We’re about 4 minutes behind you,” Stuart says.

Holy fuck! My heart leaps once more into my mouth. Can I go any faster? I push my foot down once more, and streak past the traffic.

“Flash the headlights,” Edward orders when a Ford Mustang won’t move.

“But that would make me an asshole.”

“So be an asshole!” he snaps.

Jeez. Okay!

“Um, where are the headlights?”

“The indicator. Pull it towards you.”

I do as I’m told and the Mustang moves aside, though not before the driver waves his finger at me in a none-too-complimentary manner. I zoom past him.

“He’s the asshole,” Edward says under his breath, then barks at me, “Take the 166 exit.”

Yes sir!

“We’re coming off at the 166.” Edward informs Stuart.

“Head straight to Escala, sir.”

I slow, check my mirrors, indicate then move with surprising ease across four lanes of the highway and down the off ramp. Merging onto Stewart Street we head south. The street is quiet, with few vehicles. Where is everyone?

“We’ve been damned lucky with the traffic. But that means the Dodge has too. Don’t slow up, Bella. Get us home.”

“I can’t remember the way,” I mutter, panicked by the fact the Dodge is still on our tail.

“Head south on Stewart. Keep going until I tell you when.” Edward sounds anxious again. I zoom past three blocks but the lights change to yellow on Yale Avenue.

“Run them, Bella,” Edward shouts. I jump so hard I floor the gas pedal, throwing us both back in our seats, speeding through the now red light.

“He’s taking exit 166,” Stuart says.

“Stay with him Ethan.”

“Ethan?”

“That’s his name.” A quick glance and I can see Edward glaring at me as if I’m mad.

“Eyes on the fucking road!”

I ignore his tone.

“Ethan Stuart.”

“Yes!” He sounds exasperated.

“Ah.” How did I not know this? The man has been following me to work for the last six weeks and I didn’t even know his first name.

“That’s me, ma’am,” Stuart says, startling me, though he’s speaking in the calm, monotone voice he always uses. “The unsub is heading down Stewart, sir. He’s really picking up speed.”

“Go Bella. Less of the fucking chit-chat,” Edward growls.

“We’re stopped at the first lights on Stewart.”

“Bella – quick – in here,” Edward shouts, pointing to a parking lot on the south side of Boren Avenue. I turn, the tires screeching in protest as I swerve into the crowded lot.

“Drive round. Quick,” Edward orders. I drive as fast I as I can to the back, out of sight of the street.

“In there.” Edward points to a space. Shit! He wants me to park it. Crap!

“Just fucking do it,” he says. So I do... perfectly. Probably the only time I have ever parked perfectly.

“We’re hidden in the parking lot between Stewart and Boren,” Edward says into the BlackBerry.

“Will do, sir.” Stuart sounds slightly irritated. “Stay where you are we’ll follow the unsub.”

Edward turns to me, his eyes searching my face.

“You okay?”

“Sure,” I whisper.

Edward smirks.

“Whoever’s driving that Dodge can’t hear us, you know.”

And I laugh.

“We’re passing Stewart and Boren now sir. I see the lot. He’s gone straight past you, sir.”

Both of us sag simultaneously with relief.

“Well done, Mrs Cullen. Good driving.” Edward gently strokes my face with his fingertips and I jump at the contact, inhaling deeply. I had no idea I was holding my breath.

“Does this mean you’ll stop complaining about my driving?” I ask.

He laughs – a loud cathartic laugh.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that.”

“Thank you for letting me drive your car. Under such exciting circumstances, too.” I try desperately to keep my voice light.

“Maybe I should drive now.”

“To be honest, I don’t think I can climb out right now to let you sit here. My legs feel like jello.” I can feel myself shuddering and shaking suddenly.

“It’s the adrenaline baby,” he says softly. “You did amazingly well, as usual. You blow me away, Bella. You never let me down.” He touches my cheek softly with the back of his hand, his face full of love, fear, regret – so many emotions at once – and his words are my undoing. Overwhelmed, a strangled sob escapes from my constricting throat, and I start to cry.

“No, baby, no. Please don’t cry.”

Reaching over he grabs me and, in spite of the limited space we have, pulls me over the handbrake console to cradle me in his lap. Smoothing my hair off my face he kisses my eyes, then my cheeks, and I curl my arms around him and sob quietly into his neck. Oh he smells so good, so comforting. He buries his nose in my hair and wraps me in his arms, holding me tightly and we sit, neither of us saying anything, just holding each other.

Stuart’s voice startles us.

“The unsub has slowed outside Escala. He’s casing the joint.”

“Follow him,” Edward snaps.

I wipe my nose on the back of my hand and take a deep steadying breath.

“Use my shirt.” Edward kisses my temple.

“Sorry,” I mutter, embarrassed by my crying.

“What for? Don’t be.”

I wipe my nose again. He tips my chin up and plants a gentle kiss on my lips.

“Your lips are so soft when you cry, my beautiful brave girl,” he whispers.

“Kiss me again.”

Edward stills, one hand on my back, the other on my behind.

“Kiss me,” I breathe, and I watch his mouth pop open slightly as he gasps. Leaning across me he takes the BlackBerry out of its cradle and tosses it on to the drivers seat beside my sandaled feet. Then his mouth is on me, as he moves his right hand into my hair, holding me in place, and lifts his left to cradle my face. His tongue invades my mouth, and I welcome it. Our tongues wrestle wildly with each other. Adrenaline turns to lust streaking through my body. I clasp his face, running my fingers over his sideburns, relishing the taste of him. He groans at my fevered response, low and deep in his throat, and my belly tightens swift and hard with carnal desire. His hand moves down my body, brushing my breast, my waist and down to my backside. I shift fractionally.

“Ah!” he says, and breaks away from me, breathless.

“What?” I mutter against his lips.

“Bella, we’re in a car lot in Seattle.”

“So?”

“Well, right now I want to fuck you, and you’re shifting about on me... it’s uncomfortable.”

My craving spirals out of control at his words, tightening my belly once more.

“Fuck me then,” I mutter and kiss the corner of his mouth. Jeez, I want him. Now. Holy fuck, that car-chase was exciting. Too exciting. Terrifying... and the fear has jump-started my libido.

He leans back to gaze at me, his eyes dark and hooded.

“Here?” His voice is husky. My mouth goes dry. How can he turn me on with one word?

“Yes. I want you. Now.”

He cocks his head to one side and stares at me for a few moments.

“Mrs Cullen, how very brazen,” he whispers, after what feels like an eternity. His hand tightens around my hair at my nape, holding me firmly in place, and his mouth is on mine again, more forcefully this time. His other hand skims down my body, down over my behind and lower still, to my mid thigh... My fingers curl into his over-long hair.

“I’m so glad you’re wearing a skirt,” he murmurs as he slips his hand beneath my blue and white patterned skirt to caress my thigh. I squirm once more on his lap and the air hisses between his teeth.

“Keep still,” he growls. He cups my sex with his hand, and I still immediately. His thumb brushes over my clitoris and my breath catches in my throat as pleasure jolts like electricity deep, deep, deep in my belly.

“Still,” he whispers. He kisses me once more as his thumb circles gently around me through the sheer fine lace of my designer panties. Slowly he eases two fingers inside me.

I groan and flex my hips towards his hand.

“Please,” I whisper.

“Oh, Mrs Cullen. You’re so ready,” he says sliding his fingers in and out, tortuously slowly. “Do car-chases turn you on?”

“You turn me on.”

He smiles a wolfish grin and withdraws his fingers suddenly, leaving me wanting. He scoops his arm under my knees, and taking me by surprise, he lifts me and swings me round to face the windshield.

“Place your legs either side of mine,” he orders, putting his legs together in the middle of the foot-well. I do as I’m told. He runs his hands down my thighs, then back up, pulling up my skirt.

“Hands on my knees, baby, lean forward. Lift that glorious ass in the air. Mind your head.”

Shit! We really are going to do this, in a public parking lot. I quickly scan the area in front of us and see no one – but feel a thrill coursing through me. I’m in a public lot! That’s so... hot! I feel Edward shift beneath me and hear the telltale sound of his zipper. Putting one arm around my waist and with his other hand tugging my lacy panties sideways, he impales me in one swift move.

“Ah!” I groan, grinding down on him, and his breath hisses through his teeth. His arm moves up to my neck and grasps me under my chin. His hand spreads across my neck, pulling me back and tilting my head to one side so he can kiss my throat. His other hand grips my hip and together we start to move.

I push up with my feet, and he tilts himself into me... in and out... the sensation is... I groan loudly. It’s so deep this way. My left hand curls around the hand brake, my right hand braced against my door. His teeth graze my earlobe and he tugs – it’s almost painful. He bucks again and again into me. I rise

and fall, and as we establish a rhythm he moves his hand round beneath my skirt to the apex of my thighs, and his fingers gently tease my clitoris through the sheer finery of my panties.

“Ah!”

“Be. Quick,” he breathes into my ear through gritted teeth, his hand still curled around my neck beneath my chin. “We need to do this quick, Bella.” And he increases the pressure of his fingers against my sex.

“AH!” I feel the familiar build of pleasure, bunching deep and thick inside me.

“Come on, baby,” he breathes at my ear. “I want to hear you.”

I moan again... and I am all sensation, my eyes tightly closed. His voice at my ear, his breath on my neck, pleasure radiating out from where his fingers tease my body and where he slams deep inside me – and I am lost. My body takes control, craving my release.

“Yes,” Edward hisses in my ear and I open my eyes briefly, staring wildly at the cloth roof of the R8, and I scrunch them closed again as I come around him.

“Oh Bella,” he murmurs in awe, and he wraps his arms around me and rams into me one last time and stills as he climaxes deep inside.

He runs his nose along my jaw and softly kisses my throat, my cheek, my temple as I lie on him, my head lolling against his neck.

“Tension relieved, Mrs Cullen?”

Edward closes his teeth around my earlobe again and tugs. My body is drained, totally exhausted, and I mewl. I can feel his smile against me.

“Certainly helped with mine,” he adds, shifting me off him. “Lost your voice?”

“Yes,” I murmur.

“Well aren’t you the wanton creature? I had no idea you were such an exhibitionist.”

I sit up immediately, alarmed. He tenses.

“No one’s watching are they?” I glance anxiously round the car lot.

“Do you think I’d let anyone watch my wife come?” He strokes his hand down my back reassuringly, but the tone of his voice sends shivers down my spine. I turn to gaze at him and grin impishly.

“Car sex!” I exclaim.

He grins and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Let’s head back. I’ll drive.”

He opens the side door to let me climb off his lap and out into the parking lot. When I glance down he’s quickly doing up his flies. He follows me out, then holds the door open for me to climb back in. Strolling quickly round to the driver’s side he climbs in beside me, retrieves the BlackBerry and makes a call.

“Where’s Stuart?” he snaps. “...And the Dodge? ... How come Stuart’s not with you?”

He listens intently, to Ryan I assume.

“Her?” he gasps. “Stick with her.” Edward hangs up and gazes at me.

Her! The driver of the car? Who could that be – Irina? Lauren?

“The driver of the Dodge is female?”

“So it would appear,” he says quietly. His mouth presses into a thin angry line.

“Let’s get you home,” he mutters. He starts up the R8 with a roar and reverses smoothly out of the space.

“Where’s the, err... unsub? What does that mean by the way? Sounds very BDSM.”

Edward smiles briefly as he eases the car out of the lot and back onto Stewart Street.

“It stands for Unknown Subject. Ryan is ex-FBI.”

“Ex-FBI?”

“Don’t ask.” Edward shakes his head. It’s obvious he’s deep in contemplation.

“Well, where is this female unsub?”

“On the I-5, heading towards Portland.”

He glances at me, his eyes grim. Jeez – from passionate, to calm, to anxious, in the space of a few moments. I reach over and caress his thigh, running my fingers leisurely up the inside seam of his jeans, hoping to improve his mood. He takes his hand off the steering wheel and stops the slow ascent of my hand.

“No,” he says. “We’ve made it this far. You don’t want me to have an accident three blocks from home.” He raises my hand to his lips and plants a cool kiss on my index finger. Cool, calm, authoritative... My Fifty. And for the first time in a while he makes me feel like a wayward child. I withdraw my hand and sit quietly for a moment.

“Female?”

“Apparently so,” he sighs.

He turns into the underground garage at Escala, and punches the access code into the security keypad. The gate swings open and he drives on, smoothly parking the R8 in its designated space.

“I really like this car,” I murmur.

“Me too. And I really like how you handled it – and how you managed not to break it.”

“You can buy me one for my birthday,” I smirk at him.

Edward’s mouth drops open as I climb out of the car.

“A white one I think,” I add leaning down and gazing at him behind the wheel.

He smiles.

“Isabella Cullen, you never cease to amaze me.” I shut the door and walk to the end of the car to wait for him. Gracefully he climbs out, gazing at me with that look... that look that calls to something deep inside me. I know this look well. Briefly an image crosses my mind, of the one that passed between Alice and Jasper at lunch. Edward strolls casually towards me, and stands in front of me, not touching me. Leaning down he whispers,

“You like the car. I like the car. I’ve fucked you in it... perhaps I should fuck you on it.”

I gasp.

And a sleek silver BMW pulls into the garage. Edward glances at it anxiously, then relaxes, and smirks down at me.

“But it looks like we have company. Come.” He grabs my hand and heads for the garage elevator. He pushes the call button and as we wait the driver of the BMW joins us. He’s young, casually dressed, with long layered dark hair. He looks like he works in the media.

“Hi,” he says, smiling warmly at us.

Edward puts his arm around me and nods politely.

“I’ve just moved in. Apartment 32.”

“Hello.” I return his smile. He has kind, soft blue eyes.

The elevator arrives and we all walk in. Edward glances down at me, his expression unreadable.

“You’re Edward Cullen,” the young man says.

Edward gives him a tight smile.

“Paul Johnson.” He holds out his hand. Reluctantly Edward takes it and shakes. “Which floor?” Paul asks.

“I have to input a code.”

“Oh.”

“Penthouse.”

“Oh.” Paul smiles broadly. “Of course.”

Paul presses the button for the 16th floor and the doors close.

“Mrs Cullen, I presume.”

“Yes.” I smile politely and we shake hands. Paul flushes slightly as he gazes at me... a fraction too long. Oh no. I mirror his flush and Edward’s arm tightens around me.

“When did you move in?” I ask, to be polite.

“Last weekend. I love the place.”

There’s an awkward pause before the elevator stops at Paul’s floor.

“Great to meet you both,” he says, relieved, and steps out. The doors close silently behind him. Edward taps in the entry code and the elevator moves upwards again.

“He seemed nice,” I murmur. “I’ve never met any of the neighbors before.”

Edward scowls.

“I prefer it that way.”

“That’s because you’re a hermit. I thought he was pleasant enough.”

“A hermit?”

“Hermit. Stuck in your ivory tower.” I state matter-of-factly.

Edward’s lips twitch with amusement.

“Our ivory tower. And I think you have another name to add to the list of your admirers, Mrs Cullen.”

I roll my eyes.

“Edward, you think everyone is an admirer.”

“Did you just roll your eyes at me?”

My pulse quickens.

“I sure did,” I whisper, my breath catching in my throat.

He cocks his head to one side, wearing his smouldering, arrogant, amused expression.

“What shall we do about that?”

“Something rough.”

He blinks to hide his surprise.

“Rough?”

“Please.”

“You want more?”

I nod slowly.

The doors to the elevator open and we’re home.

“How rough?” he breathes, his eyes darkening.

I gaze at him, saying nothing. He closes his eyes for a moment, and then grabs my hand and hauls me into the foyer.

When we burst through the double doors Stuart is standing in the hallway, looking expectantly at the pair of us.

“Stuart, I’d like to be debriefed in an hour,” Edward says.

“Yes sir.”

Turning Stuart heads back into Taylor’s office.

We have an hour!

Edward glances down at me.

“Rough?”

I nod.

“Well, Mrs Cullen, you’re in luck. I’m taking requests today.”

~oooOOOooo~

MOTU II 95/8

“Do you have anything in mind?” Edward murmurs, pinning me with a bold green gaze. I shrug, flushing, and I don’t know if it’s the chase, the adrenaline, my earlier bad mood – I don’t really understand, but I want this... badly. I watch a puzzled expression flit briefly across Edward’s face.

“Kinky fuckery?” he asks softly.

I nod, feeling my face flame. Why am I embarrassed by this? I have done all manner of kinky fuckery with this man. He’s my husband, damn it! Am I embarrassed because I want this and I’m ashamed to admit it? My subconscious glares at me... stop over-thinking.

“Carte blanche?” He whispers the question, eyeing me speculatively. It feels like he’s trying to read my mind.

Carte blanche? Holy Fuck – what will that entail?

“Yes,” I murmur nervously, aware that I am biting my lower lip. He smiles a slow sexy smile.

“Come,” he says and tugs me towards the stairs. His intention is clear.

Playroom! My inner goddess wakes from her post-R8-sex slumber, wide-eyed and raring to go.

At the top of the stairs he releases my hand and unlocks the playroom door. The key is on the Yes Seattle key chain that I gave him not so long ago.

“After you, Mrs Cullen,” he says softly, and swings the door open.

The playroom smells familiar, of leather and wood and fresh polish. I flush to think that Mrs Cope must have been in here cleaning while we have been away. As we enter Edward switches on the lights and the dark red walls are illuminated with soft, diffused light. I stand gazing at him, anticipation running thick and heavy through my veins. What is he going to do to me? He locks the door and turns. Cocking his head to one side he regards me thoughtfully, then shakes his head, slightly amused.

“What do you want, Isabella?” he asks gently.

“You.” My response is breathy.

He smirks.

“You’ve got me. You’ve had me since you fell into my office, Mrs Cullen.”

“Surprise me then, Mr Cullen.”

His mouth twists slightly with repressed humor and carnal promise.

“As you wish, Mrs Cullen.” He folds his arms and raises one long index finger to his lips while he appraises me. “I think we’ll start by ridding you of your clothes.” He steps forward. Grasping the front of my short denim jacket he opens it and pushes it over my shoulders so it falls to the floor. He grasps the hem of my black camisole.

“Lift your arms.”

I obey, and he peels it off over my head. Leaning down he plants a soft kiss on my lips, his green eyes glowing with an alluring mix of lust and love. The camisole joins my jacket on the floor.

“Here,” I whisper nervously, removing the hair tie from round my wrist. I hold it up for him. He stills, and his eyes widen, gazing inscrutably at me. Finally he takes the small band.

“Turn round,” he orders softly.

Relieved, I smile to myself and oblige immediately. Looks like we’ve overcome that little hurdle. He gathers my hair, and braids it quickly and efficiently before fastening it with the tie. He tugs the braid slightly, pulling my head back.

“Good thinking, Mrs Cullen,” he breathes in my ear, then nips my earlobe. “Now turn round and take your skirt off. Let it fall to the floor.” He releases me and steps back, and I turn to face him. Not taking my eyes off his, I slowly unbutton the waistband of my skirt and ease the zipper down. The full skirt fans out and falls to the floor, pooling at my feet.

“Step out from your skirt,” he murmurs. As I step towards him he kneels swiftly down in front of me and grasps my right ankle. Deftly he unbuckles my sandals one at a time while I lean forward, balancing myself with a hand on the wall, under the pegs that used to hold all his whips, crops and paddles. The flogger and the riding crop are the only implements that remain. I eye them with curiosity. Will he use those? Having removed my shoes Edward sits back on his heels gazing up at me.

“You are a fine sight, Mrs Cullen,” he murmurs, as I stand staring back at him dressed only in my lacy bra and panties. Suddenly he kneels up, grabs my hips and pulls me forward, burying his nose at the apex of my thighs.

“And you smell of me and you and sex,” he breathes, inhaling sharply. “It’s intoxicating.” He kisses me through my lace panties, while I flush, and gasp at his words – my insides liquefying. He’s just so... naughty. Gathering up my clothes and sandals, he stands in one swift graceful move, like an athlete.

“Go and stand beside the table,” he says calmly, pointing with his chin. Turning he strides over to the museum chest of wonder.

What is he going to do to me? He glances back and smirks at me.

“Turn round, face the wall,” he admonishes. “That way you won’t know what I’m planning. We aim to please, Mrs Cullen, and you wanted a surprise.”

I face the wall, listening, my ears suddenly sensitive to the slightest sound. He’s good at this – building my expectations, stoking my desire... making me wait. I hear him put my shoes on the floor and, I think, my clothes on the chest... followed by the telltale clatter of his shoes as they drop to the floor, one at a time. Hmmm... love barefoot Edward. A moment later I hear him pull open a drawer.

Toys! What the hell is he going to do? Oh I love, love, love this anticipation. The drawer closes and my breathing spikes. How can the sound of a drawer render me a quivering mess... it makes no sense. The subtle hiss of the sound system coming to life tells me it’s going to be a musical interlude. A lone piano starts, muted and soft, and mournful chords fill the room. It’s not a tune I know. The piano is joined by an electric guitar. What is this?

A man’s voice speaks and I can just make out the words.

And I am not frightened of dying.

Edward pads leisurely towards me, his bare feet slapping softly on the wooden floor. I can sense him behind me, as a woman starts to sing... wail... sing...?

“Rough, you say, Mrs Cullen?” he breathes at my left ear.

“Hmmm.”

“You must tell me to stop if it’s too much. If you say stop, I will stop immediately. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“I need your promise.”

I inhale sharply. Shit, what is he going to do?

“I promise,” I murmur, recalling his words from earlier: I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m more than happy to play.

“Good girl.” Leaning down he plants a kiss on my naked shoulder. “I think we’ll keep this on, for now.” He hooks a finger beneath my bra strap and traces a line across my back beneath the strap. I want to moan. How does he make the slightest touch so erotic? He removes his finger, then hooks both of his thumbs into my panties, and slides them down my legs.

“Step,” he orders. Once more I do as I’m told, stepping out of my panties. He plants a kiss on my backside and stands.

"I am going to blindfold you so that everything will be more intense." He slips an airline eye-mask over my eyes, and my world is plunged into the darkness. The woman singing moans incoherently... a haunting, heartfelt melody.

"Bend down and lie flat on the table." His words are softly spoken. "Now."

Without hesitation I bend over the side of the table and rest my torso on the highly polished wood, my face flush against the hard surface. It's cool against my skin and it smells vaguely of beeswax, with a citrus tang.

"Stretch your arms up and hold on to the edge."

Okay... Reaching forward I clutch the far edge of the table. It's quite wide, so my arms are fully extended.

"If you let go, I will spank you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to spank you, Isabella?"

Everything south of my waist tightens deliciously. I realise I've wanted this since he threatened me during lunch, and neither the car chase nor our subsequent intimate encounter has sated this need.

"Yes." My voice is a hoarse whisper.

"Why?" he breathes.

Oh... do I have to have a reason? Jeez. I shrug.

"Tell me," he coaxes.

"Um..."

And from out of nowhere he smacks me hard.

"Ah!" I cry out.

"Hush now."

He gently rubs my behind where he's hit me. Then he leans over me, his hips pressing into my backside, plants a kiss between my shoulder blades and trails kisses across my back. He's taken his shirt off, so his chest hair tickles my back, and I can feel his erection against me through the rough fabric of his jeans.

"Open your legs," he murmurs.

I move my legs apart.

"Wider."

I groan and spread my legs wider immediately.

"Good girl," he breathes. He traces his finger down my back, along the crack between my buttocks, and over my anus, which shrinks instinctively at his touch.

"We're going to have some fun with this," he whispers.

What? Fuck!

His finger continues down over my perineum and slowly slides into me.

"I see you're very wet, Isabella. From earlier, or from now?"

I groan and he eases his finger in and out of me, over and over. I push back on his hand, relishing the intrusion.

“Oh Bella, I think it’s both. I think you love being here, like this. Mine.”

I do – oh I do.

He withdraws his finger and smacks me hard once more.

“Tell me,” he whispers, his voice hoarse and urgent.

“Yes, I do,” I whimper.

He smacks me once more, then sticks two fingers inside me. He withdraws them immediately, spreading the moisture up over and around my anus.

“What are you going to do?” I ask, breathless.

Oh My... is he going to fuck my ass?

“It’s not what you think,” he murmurs reassuringly. “I told you, one step at time with this, baby.” I hear the quiet spurt of some liquid, presumably from a tube, then his fingers are massaging me there again. Making me wet... there! I squirm... my fear colliding with my excitement of the unknown. He smacks me once more, lower, so he hits my sex. I groan. It feels... so good.

“Keep still,” he says. “And don’t let go.”

“Ah...”

“This is lube.”

He spreads some more on me. I try not to wriggle beneath him, but my heart is pounding, my pulse haywire, as desire and anxiety pump through me.

“I have wanted to do this to you for some time now, Bella.”

I groan. And I feel something cool, metallically cool, run down my spine.

“I have a small present for you here,” Edward whispers.

What is it? An image from our show-and-tell springs immediately to mind. Holy cow. A butt plug. Edward runs it down the parting between my buttocks.

Oh My.

“I am going to push this inside you, very slowly.”

I gasp... anticipation and anxiety charging through me.

“Will it hurt?”

“No baby. It’s small. Once it’s inside you, I’m going to fuck you real hard.”

I practically convulse. Bending over me he kisses me once more between my shoulder blades.

“Ready?” he whispers.

Ready? Am I ready for this?

“Yes,” I mutter quietly, my mouth dry. He runs another finger down from my ass and slips it inside me. Fuck, it’s his thumb. He cups my sex and his fingers gently caress my clitoris. I moan... it’s heavenly. And gently, while his fingers and thumb work their magic, he pushes the cold plug slowly into me.

“Ah!” I groan loudly at the unfamiliar sensation, my muscles protesting at the intrusion. He circles his

thumb inside me and pushes the plug harder, and it slips in easily, and I don't know if it's because I'm so turned on or if he's distracted me with his expert fingers, but my body seems to accept it. It's heavy... and strange... there!

"Oh baby," he breathes.

And I can feel it... where his thumb swirls inside me... and the plug presses against ... oh ah...

He slowly twists the plug, eliciting a long drawn-out moan from me.

"Edward" I mumble, his name a garbled mantra, as I adjust to the sensation.

"Good girl," he breathes. He runs his free hand down my side until it reaches my hip. Slowly he withdraws his thumb and I hear the telltale sound of his zipper opening. Grasping my other hip he pulls me back and parts my legs further, his foot pushing against mine.

"Don't let go of the table, Bella," he warns.

"No," I gasp.

"Something rough? Tell me if I'm too rough. Understand?"

"Yes," I whisper, and he slams into me and pulls me onto him at the same time, jolting the plug forward, deeper...

"Fuck!" I cry out.

He stills, his breathing harsher, and my panting matches his. I try to assimilate all the sensations: the delicious fullness, the tantalizing feeling that I am doing something forbidden, the erotic pleasure that spirals outward from deep within me. He pulls slightly on the plug.

Oh jeez... I moan, and I hear his sharp intake of breath – a gasp of pure, unadulterated pleasure. It heats my blood. Have I ever felt so wanton... so...

"Again?" he whispers.

"Yes."

"Stay flat," he orders. He eases out of me and rams into me again.

Oh... I wanted this.

"Yes," I hiss.

And he picks up the pace, his breathing more labored, matching my own as he thrashes into me.

"Oh Bella," he gasps. He moves one of his hands from my hips and twists the plug again, tugging at it slightly, pulling it out and pushing it back in. The feeling is indescribable and I think I am going to pass out on the table. And he never misses a beat as he takes me, again and again, moving strong and hard inside me. I can feel my insides tightening and quivering...

"Oh fuck," I moan. This is going to rip me apart.

"Yes, baby," he hisses.

"Please," I beg him and I don't know what for – to stop, to never stop, to twist the plug again. I can feel myself tightening around him and the plug...

"That's right," he breathes, and he slaps me hard on my right buttock, and I come... again and again, falling, falling, spinning, pulsing round and round... and Edward gently pulls the plug out.

"FUCK!" I scream and Edward grabs my hips and climaxes loudly, holding me still.

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The woman is still singing. Edward always puts songs on repeat in here... strange. I am curled in his arms, in his lap, my head resting against his chest. We're on the floor of the playroom, by the table.

"Welcome back," he says, peeling the blindfold off me. I blink as my eyes adjust to the muted light. Tipping my chin back he plants a soft kiss on my lips, his eyes focused on and anxiously searching mine. I reach up to caress his face. He smiles.

"Well, did I fulfill the brief?" he asks, amused.

I frown.

"Brief?"

"You wanted rough," he says gently.

I grin, because I just can't help it.

"Don't tell me you have performance anxiety, Edward."

He raises his eyebrows and grins back at me.

"No, Mrs Cullen, I do not have performance anxiety. Well, not right now. You look thoroughly well-fucked and beautiful at this moment." He caresses my face, his long fingers stroking my cheek.

"I feel it," I purr.

He reaches down and kisses me tenderly, his lips soft and warm and giving against mine.

"You never disappoint," he murmurs. He leans back to gaze down at me. "How do you feel?" He can't hide the concern in his voice.

"Good," I murmur, feeling a flush creep across my face. "Thoroughly well-fucked." I smile shyly.

"Why Mrs Cullen, you have a dirty, dirty mouth. I'm shocked, shocked I tell you." Edward feigns an offended expression but I can hear his amusement.

"That's because I'm married to a dirty, dirty boy, Mr Cullen."

He grins a ridiculously stupid grin and it's infectious.

"I'm glad you're married to him." He gently takes hold of my braid, lifts it to his lips and kisses the end softly, his eyes green and glowing with love. Oh my... did I ever have a chance of resisting this man? I reach for his left hand and plant a kiss on his wedding ring, a plain platinum band matching my own.

"Mine," I whisper.

"Yours," he responds. He curls his arms around me tightly and presses his nose into my hair. "Shall I run you a bath?"

"Hmmm. Only if you join me in it."

"Okay," he says. He sets me onto my feet and stands up beside me. He's still wearing his jeans.

"Will you wear your... err... other jeans?"

He frowns down at me.

"Other jeans?"

"The ones you used to wear in here."

He blinks down at me.

“Those jeans?” he murmurs with perplexed surprise.

“You look very hot in them.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah... I mean, really hot.”

He smiles, shyly.

“Well... for you, Mrs Cullen, maybe I will.” He bends to kiss me, then grabs the small bowl on the table that contains the butt plug, the tube of lubricant, the blindfold and my panties.

“Who cleans these toys?” I ask as I follow him over to the chest.

He frowns at me, as if not understanding the question.

“Me. Mrs Cope.”

“What?”

He nods, amused... and embarrassed, I think. He switches off the music.

“Well – um...”

“Your subs used to do it?” I finish his sentence. He gives me an apologetic shrug.

“Here.” He hands me his shirt and I put it on, wrapping it around myself. It smells of him, and my chagrin at butt-plug-washing is forgotten. He leaves the items on the chest. Taking my hand, he unlocks the playroom door then leads me out and downstairs. I follow him meekly. The anxiety, the bad mood, the thrill, fear and excitement of the car chase have all gone. I feel beyond relaxed – finally sated and calm. As we enter our ensuite I yawn loudly and stretch... so at ease with myself for a change.

“What is it?” Edward asks as he turns on the faucet.

I shake my head.

“Tell me,” he asks softly. He spills jasmine bath oil into the running water, filling the room with its sweet, sensual scent.

I flush slightly.

“I just feel better.”

He smiles.

“Yes, you’ve been in a strange mood today, Mrs Cullen.” Standing he pulls me into his arms. “I know you’re worrying about these recent events. I’m sorry you’re caught up in them. I don’t know if it’s a vendetta, an ex-employee, or a business rival. If anything were to happen to you because of me...” His voice drops to a pained whisper. I curl my arms around him.

“What if something happens to you, Edward?” I finally voice my fear. He gazes down at me.

“We’ll figure this out. Now let’s get you out of this shirt and into this bath.”

“Shouldn’t you talk to Stuart?”

“He can wait,” his mouth hardens and for a moment I feel a sudden pang of pity for Stuart. What’s he done to upset Edward?

Edward helps me out of his shirt, unhooks my bra and slips it off. He frowns as I turn to him. My breasts still bear faded bruises from the love bites he gave me during our honeymoon. But I decide not to tease him about them.

“I wonder if Ryan has caught up with the Dodge?” I muse.

“We’ll see, after this bath. Get in.” He holds his hand out for me. I climb into the hot, fragrant water and sit tentatively.

“Ow.” My ass is tender, and the hot water makes me wince.

“Easy, baby,” Edward warns, but as he says it the uncomfortable sensation melts away.

Edwards strips and climbs in behind me, pulling me against his chest. I nestle between his legs and we lie idle and content in the hot water. I run my fingers down his legs and he twirls my braid between his fingers.

“We need to go over the plans for the new house. Later this evening?”

“Sure.” That woman is coming back again. My subconscious gazes up from Volume 3 of The Collected Works of Charles Dickens and glowers. I’m with my subconscious. I sigh... unfortunately Tanya Denali’s designs are breathtaking.

“I must get my things ready for work,” I whisper.

He stills.

“You know you don’t have to go back to work,” he murmurs.

Oh no... not this again.

“Edward, we’ve been through this. Please don’t resurrect that argument.”

He tugs my braid so my face tilts up and back.

“Just saying...” He plants a soft kiss on my lips.

~o~

I pull on sweats and a vest and decide to go fetch my clothes from the playroom. As I make my way across the hallway I hear Edward’s raised voice from his study. I freeze.

“Where the fuck were you?”

Oh shit. He’s shouting at Stuart. Cringing inwardly I dash upstairs to the playroom. I really don’t want to hear what he has to say to him – I still find shouty Edward intimidating. Poor Stuart. At least I get to shout back.

I gather up my clothes and Edward’s shoes, then notice the small porcelain bowl with the butt plug still on top of the museum chest. Well... I suppose I should clean it. I add it to the pile and make my way back downstairs. I glance nervously through the great room, but all is quiet... thank heavens. Taylor will be back tomorrow evening, and Edward is generally calmer when he’s around. Taylor is spending some quality time today and tomorrow with his daughter. I wonder idly if I’ll ever get to meet her.

Mrs Cope comes out of the utility room. We startle each other.

“Mrs Cullen – I didn’t see you there.” Oh, I’m Mrs Cullen now!

“Hello, Mrs Cope.”

“Welcome home.” She beams at me.

"Please call me Bella."

"Mrs Cullen, I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that."

Why must everything change, just because I have a ring on my finger?

"Would you like to run through the menus for the week?" she asks, looking at me expectantly.

Menus?

"Um..." This is not a question I have ever anticipated being asked.

She smiles.

"When I first worked for Mr Cullen, every Sunday evening I would run through the week's menus with him, and list anything he might need from the grocery store."

"I see."

"Shall I take those for you?"

She holds out her hands for my clothes.

"Oh...um. Actually I haven't finished with these." And they are hiding the bowl with the butt plug in! I can feel myself blush crimson. It's a wonder I can look Mrs Cope in the face. She knows what we do – she cleans the room. Jeez, will I ever get used to this?

"When you're ready, Mrs Cullen. I'd be more than happy to run through things with you."

"Thank you," I breathe. We are interrupted by an ashen-faced Stuart who stalks out of Edward's study and briskly crosses the great room. He gives us both a brief nod, not looking either of us in the eye, and slinks into Taylor's study. I am grateful for his intervention, as I don't wish to discuss menus or butt plugs with Mrs Cope right now. Offering her a brief smile I scuttle back to the bedroom. Will I ever get used to having domestic staff at my beck and call? I shake my head... one day, maybe.

I dump Edward's shoes on the floor and my clothes on the bed, and take the bowl with the butt plug into the bathroom. I eye it suspiciously. It looks innocuous enough, and surprisingly clean. I don't want to dwell on that, and I wash it quickly with soap and water. Will that be enough? I'll have to ask Mr Sexpert if it should be sterilized or something. I shudder at the thought.

~o~

I like that Edward has turned over the library to me. It now houses an attractive white wooden desk I can work at. I put the four manuscripts I read on honeymoon into my briefcase and check my desk. Yep, I have everything I need. Part of me dreads going back to work, but I can never tell Edward that – he'd seize the opportunity to make me quit. My husband is everyone's boss, even mine. I remember Roach's apoplectic reaction when I told him... and how, shortly afterwards, my position was confirmed. I realise now it was because of whom I was marrying, and the thought is unwelcome. But I am no longer Acting Commissioning Editor – I am Isabella Swan, Commissioning Editor.

I haven't yet plucked up the courage to tell Edward that I am not going to change my name at work. I think my reasons are solid – I need some distance from him – but I know there will be a row when he finally realizes that. Guess I shall face it then.

Sitting back in my chair I start my final chore of the day. My laptop says it's seven in the evening. Edward still hasn't emerged from his study, so I have time. Taking the memory card out of the Nikon camera I load it into the laptop to transfer the photographs. As the pictures upload I reflect on the day. Is Ryan back? Or is still on his way to Portland? Has he caught up with the mystery woman? Has Edward heard from him? I want some answers. I don't care that he's busy, I want to know what's

going on, and I suddenly feel a tad resentful that he's keeping me in the dark. I rise, intending to go and confront him in his study, but as I do the photos taken on the last few days of our honeymoon pop up onscreen.

Holy crap!

Picture after picture of me. Asleep, so many of me asleep, my hair over my face or fanned out across the pillow, lips parted... shit – sucking my thumb. I haven't sucked my thumb for years! So many photos... I had no idea he'd taken these. There are a few candid long shots, including one of me leaning over the rail of the yacht, staring moodily into the distance. How did I not notice him taking this? I smile at the photos of me curled up and laughing – my hair flying as I struggle, fighting his tickling tormenting fingers. And there's the one of him and me on the bed in the master cabin that he took at arm's length. I am cuddled on his chest and he gazes at the camera, young, wide-eyed... in love. His other hand cups my head and I am smiling like a love-struck fool... but it's Edward I cannot take my eyes off. Oh my. My beautiful man, his ruffled just-fucked hair, his green eyes glowing, his lips... My beautiful man who cannot bear to be tickled, who could not bear to be touched just a short while ago... yet now he tolerates my touch. I must ask him if he likes it, or whether he lets me touch him for my pleasure rather than his.

I frown, gazing down at his image, suddenly overwhelmed by my feelings for this man. Someone out there wants to harm him – first Echo Charlie, then the fire at CEH, and that damned car chase... I gasp, putting my hand to my mouth as an involuntary sob escapes. Abandoning my computer I leap up to find Edward – not to confront him now, just to check that he's safe.

Not bothering to knock I barge in to his study. Edward is at his desk, on the phone. He looks up in surprised annoyance but the irritation on his face disappears when he sees it's me.

"So you can't enhance it further?" he says down the phone, though he doesn't take his eyes off me. Without hesitation I walk round his desk and he turns in his chair to face me, frowning up. I can tell he's thinking, what does she want? When I crawl onto his lap his eyebrows shoot up in surprise. I put my arms around his neck and cuddle into him. Gingerly he puts his arm around me.

"Um... yes, Barney. Could you hold one moment?" He cups the phone against his shoulder.

"Bella, what's wrong?"

I shake my head. Tipping my chin up he gazes into my eyes. I pull my head free from his hold, tuck it beneath his chin and curl up smaller on his lap. He smells heavenly... so comforting. He wraps his free arm more tightly around me and kisses the top of my head. I can tell he's bemused.

"Ok Barney, what were you saying?" he continues. Wedging the phone between his ear and his shoulder he taps a key on his laptop. A grainy black and white CCTV image appears on the screen... a man with dark hair, in pale coveralls. Edward presses another key, and the man walks towards the camera, but with his head bowed. When the man is closer to the camera Edward freezes the frame. He's standing in a bright white room with what looks like a long line of tall black cabinets to his left. This must be CEH's server room.

"Okay Barney, one more time."

The screen springs to life. A box appears around the head of the man in the CCTV footage and suddenly we zoom in. I sit up, fascinated.

"Is Barney doing this?" I ask quietly.

"Yes," Edward answers. "Can you sharpen the picture at all?" he continues down the phone to Barney. The picture blurs, then refocuses, moderately sharper. The man is consciously gazing down, avoiding

the CCTV camera. As I stare at him a chill sweeps over me. There is something familiar in the line of his jaw... or something. He has scruffy short black hair that looks odd and ill kempt... and in the newly sharpened picture I can see he's wearing an earring, a small hoop. Holy crap! I know who it is.

"Edward," I breathe. "That's James Smith."

~oooOOOooo~

Music in the playroom – The Great Gig in the Sky – Pink Floyd

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAyдж4OJnwQ>

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"You think?" Edward asks, surprised.

I nod.

"It's the line of his jaw." I point at the screen. "And the earrings, and the shape of his shoulders. He's the right build too. He must be wearing a wig – or he's cut and dyed his hair."

"Barney, are you getting this?" Edward puts the phone down on his desk and switches to hands-free.

"You seem to have studied him in some detail, Mrs Cullen," Edward whispers for my benefit. I scowl at him, but I'm saved by Barney.

"Yes, sir. I heard Mrs Cullen. I'm now running face recognition software on all the digitized CCTV footage. See where else this asshole – I'm sorry, this man – has been within the organization."

I glance nervously at Edward, who ignores Barney's expletive. He's studying the CCTV picture closely.

"Why would he do this?" I ask Edward.

"Revenge, perhaps. I don't know. Some people, you can't fathom why they behave the way they do. I'm just angry that you ever worked so closely with him." Edward's mouth presses into a hard, thin line and his arm encircles my waist protectively.

"We have the contents of his hard drive too sir," Barney interjects.

What?

"Yes, I remember. Do you have an address for Mr Smith?" he barks at Barney.

"Yes sir, I do."

"Alert Jenks."

"Sure will. I'm also going to scan the city CCTV, and see if I can track his movements."

"Check what vehicle he owns."

"Sir."

"Barney can do all this?" I whisper.

Edward grins at me.

“What was on his hard drive?” I whisper.

Edward’s face hardens and he shakes his head.

“Nothing much,” he says, tight-lipped.

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“Was it about you, or me?”

“Me,” he sighs.

“What sort of things? About your lifestyle?”

Edward shakes his head and puts his index finger against my lips to silence me.

I scowl at him. But his eyes narrow, two sharp emeralds, and it’s such a clear warning that I stop.

“It’s a 2006 Camaro. I’ll send the license details to Jenks too,” Barney squawks excitedly from the phone.

“Good. Let me know where else that fucker has been in my building. And check this image against the one from his SIP personnel file.” Edward gazes at me skeptically. “I want to be sure we have a match.”

“Already across that sir, and Mrs Cullen is correct. This is James Smith.”

I grin at Edward. See? I can be useful. Edward rubs his hand down my back.

“Well done, Mrs Cullen,” he smiles at me, his earlier rancor forgotten. He says to Barney, “Let me know when you’ve tracked all his movements at HQ. Also check out any other CEH property he may have had access to, and let the security teams know, so they can make another sweep of all those buildings.”

“Sir.”

“Thanks Barney.” Edward hangs up.

“Well, Mrs Cullen, it seems that you are not only decorative, but useful too.” Edward’s eyes light up with wicked amusement. I know he’s teasing.

“Decorative?” I scoff, teasing him back.

“Very,” he says softly, and he kisses me lightly.

“You’re much more decorative than I am, Mr Cullen,” I smile against his lips. He grins and kisses me more forcefully, winding my braid around his wrist and wrapping his arms around me tightly. When we come up for air we are both breathless.

“Hungry?” he asks.

“No.”

“I am.”

“What for?”

He blinks down at me.

“Well – food actually, Mrs Cullen.”

“I’ll make you something,” I giggle.

“I love that sound.”

“Of me offering you food?”

“You giggling.” He kisses my hair. I hug him once more, then shift and stand.

“So what would you like to eat, sir?” I ask sweetly.

He narrows his eyes at me.

“Are you being cute, Mrs Cullen?”

“Always, Mr Cullen... sir.”

He smiles a sphinx-like smile.

“I can still put you over my knee,” he murmurs seductively.

“I know.” I grin down at him. Putting my hands on the arms of his office chair I lean down and kiss him. “That’s one of the things I like about you. But stow your twitching palm – you’re hungry,” I breathe.

He smiles his shy smile and my heart clenches.

“Oh Mrs Cullen, what am I going to do with you?”

“You’re going to answer my question. What would like to eat?”

“Something light. Surprise me,” he says, and I flush slightly, remembering my words in the playroom earlier.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

I sashay out of his study and into the kitchen. My heart sinks slightly when I see Mrs Cope is there.

“Hello, Mrs Cope.”

“Mrs Cullen. Are you ready for something to eat?”

“Um...”

She is stirring something in a pot on the stove that smells delicious.

“I was going to make subs for Mr Cullen and me.”

She blinks, and pauses for a heartbeat.

“Sure,” she says. “Mr Cullen likes French bread – there is some in the freezer cut to sub length. I’d be happy to make it for you, ma’am.”

“I know. But I’d like to do this.”

“I understand. I’ll give you some room.”

“What are you cooking?”

“This a bolognaise sauce. It can be eaten anytime. I’ll freeze it.” She smiles warmly at me and turns the heat right down.

“Um – so what does Edward like in a, um... sub?” I frown, struck by the connotation of what I’ve just said. Does Mrs Cope understand the inference?

“Mrs Cullen, you could put just about anything in a sandwich, and as long as it’s in French bread he’ll eat it.” She grins at me and I grin back at her.

“Okay, thank you.” I skip to the fridge. In the freezer compartment I find the French bread cut to size in zip-lock bags. Taking out two I place them on a plate, pop them into the microwave and set it to defrost.

Mrs Cope has disappeared. I frown as I return to the fridge to search for ingredients. I suppose it will be down to me to set the parameters by which Mrs Cope and I will work together. I like the idea of cooking for myself and Edward at the weekends... Mrs Cope is more than welcome to do it during the week – the last thing I’ll want to do when I come home from work is cook. Hmmm... a bit like Edward’s routine with his submissives. I shake my head. I mustn’t over-think this. I find some ham in the fridge, and in the salad chiller a perfectly ripe avocado.

Edward emerges from his study as I am adding a touch of salt and lemon to the mashed avocado, the plans for the new house in his hands. He puts them on the breakfast bar, walks round and wraps his arms around me, kissing my neck.

“Barefoot and in the kitchen,” he murmurs.

“Shouldn’t that be barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen?” I smirk.

He stills, his whole body tensing against me.

“Not yet,” he breathes, and I can hear the apprehension in his voice.

“No,” I agree, horrified. “Not yet!”

He relaxes.

“On that we can agree, Mrs Cullen.”

“You do want kids though, don’t you?” I ask, suddenly nervous.

“Eventually, sure, yes. But I’m not ready to share you yet.” He kisses my neck again.

Oh... share?

“What are you making? Smells good,” he adds, kissing me behind my ear. I know it’s to distract me. I shiver as a delicious tingle travels down my spine.

“Subs.” I smirk, recovering my sense of humor. I can feel his smile against my neck.

“My favorite,” he teases, nipping my earlobe.

I poke him with my elbow.

“Mrs Cullen, you wound me.” He clutches his side.

“Wimp,” I mutter disapprovingly.

“Wimp?” he gasps in disbelief.

He slaps my behind, making me yelp.

“Hurry up with my food, wench. And later I’ll show you how wimpy I can be.” He slaps me playfully once more and goes to the fridge.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” he asks.

“Please.”

~o~

Edward spreads the architectural plans out over the breakfast bar. Tanya really has some spectacular ideas.

"I love her proposal to make the whole of the downstairs back wall glass, but..."

"What?" Edward says.

I sigh.

"But I don't want to take all the old world character out of the house."

He blinks at me.

"Character?"

"Yes. What Tanya is proposing is quite radical, but... well... I fell in love with the house as it was... warts and all."

Edward's brow furrows, as if this is anathema to him.

"I kind of like it the way it is," I whisper. Is this going to make him mad?

He regards me steadily.

"I want this house to be the way you want," he says simply. "Whatever you want. It's yours."

Oh my...

"I want you to like it too. To be happy in it too."

"I'll be happy wherever you are. It's that simple, Bella."

His green gaze holds mine. He is utterly, utterly sincere. I blink at him as my heart expands... Holy cow – he really does love me.

"Well," I swallow, fighting the small knot of emotion that catches in my throat. "I like the glass wall. Maybe we could ask her to incorporate it into the house a little more sympathetically."

Edward grins.

"Sure. Whatever you want. What about the plans for upstairs and the basement?"

"I'm cool with those."

"Good."

Okay... now the million-dollar question. I steel myself to ask.

"Do you want to put in a playroom?" I feel the oh-so-familiar flush creeping up my face as I ask. Edward's eyebrows shoot up.

"Do you?" he replies, surprised and amused at once.

I shrug.

"Um... if you want."

He regards me for a moment.

"Let's leave our options open for the moment. After all, this will be a family home."

I can't help the slight stab of disappointment I feel. I guess he's right... although when are we going to have a family? It could be years.

"Besides, we can improvise." He smirks at me.

"I like improvising," I whisper.

He grins.

“There’s something I want to discuss.” Edward points to the master bedroom and we start a detailed discussion on bathrooms and separate walk-in closets.

~o~

When we finish it’s 9.30 in the evening.

“Are you going back to work?” I ask as Edward rolls up the plans.

“Not if you don’t want me to.” He smiles. “What would you like to do?”

“We could watch TV,” I suggest. I don’t want to read, and I don’t want to go to bed... yet.

“Okay,” Edward agrees willingly, and I follow him into the TV room.

We have sat here three, maybe four times, and Edward usually reads a book. He’s not interested in television at all. I curl up beside him on the couch, tucking my legs beneath me and resting my head against his shoulder. He switches on the flat screen with the remote and flicks mindlessly through the channels.

“Any specific drivel you want to see?”

“You don’t like TV much, do you?” I mutter sardonically.

He shakes his head.

“Waste of time,” he mumbles. “But I’ll sit and watch something with you.”

“I thought we could make out.”

His face whips to mine.

“Make out?” he gasps, gazing at me as if I’ve grown two heads. He stops the endless flicking, leaving the TV on an over-lit Spanish soap opera.

“Yes.” Why is he so horrified?

“We could go to bed and make out.”

“We do that all the time. When was the last time you made out in front of the TV?” I ask, shy and teasing at the same time. He blinks at me, then shrugs and shakes his head. Pressing the remote again he flicks through another few channels before settling on an old episode of the X Files.

“Edward?”

“I’ve never done that,” he says quietly.

Oh!

“Never?”

“No.”

“Not even with Mrs Robinson?”

He snorts.

“Baby, I did a lot of things with Mrs Robinson. Making out was not one of them,” he smirks at me. Then his eyes narrow with amused curiosity.

“Have you?” he asks.

I flush.

“Of course.”

“What? Who with?”

Oh no... I do not want to have this discussion.

“Tell me,” he persists.

I gaze down at my knotted fingers. He gently covers my hands with one of his. When I glance up at him he’s smiling at me.

“I want to know. So I can go and beat whoever it was to a pulp.”

I giggle.

“Well, the first time...”

“The first time! There’s more than one fucker?” he growls.

I giggle again.

“Why so surprised, Mr Cullen?”

He frowns briefly, running a hand through his hair, and looks at me as if seeing me in a completely different light. He shrugs.

“I just am. I mean – given your lack of experience.”

I flush.

“Well, I’ve certainly made up for that since I met you,” I whisper.

“You have.” He grins. “Tell me. I want to know.”

I gaze into patient green eyes, trying to gauge his mood. Is this going to make him mad, or does he genuinely want to know? I don’t want him sulking... he’s impossible when he’s sulking.

“You really want me to tell you?”

He nods slowly once, and his lips twitch with an amused, arrogant smile.

“I was still in Phoenix with my Mom. I was in 10th grade. His name was Peter, and he was my lab partner in science.”

“How old were you?”

“Fifteen.”

“And what’s he doing now?”

“I don’t know.”

“What base did he get to?”

“Edward!” I scold – and suddenly he grabs my knees, then my ankles, and tips me up so I fall back on to the couch. He slides smoothly on top of me, trapping me beneath him, one leg between mine. It’s so sudden that I cry out in surprise. He grabs my hands and raises them above my head.

“So, this Peter – did he get to first base?” he murmurs, running his nose down the length of mine. He plants soft kisses at the corner of my mouth.

“Yes,” I murmur against his lips. He releases one of his hands so that he can clasp my chin and hold me still while his tongue invades my mouth. Oh my... my mind flees and I surrender myself to his ardent kissing... holy guacamole.

“Like this?” Edward breathes when he comes up for air.

“No... nothing like that,” I manage, as all the blood in my body heads south.

Releasing my chin he runs his hand down over my body and back up to my breast.

“Did he do this? Touch you like this?” His thumb skims over my nipple, through my vest, softly, repeatedly, and I can feel it harden under his expert touch.

“No,” I breathe, writhing beneath him.

“Did he get to second base?” he murmurs in my ear. His hand moves down across my ribs, past my waist to my hip. He takes my earlobe between his teeth and gently tugs.

“No,” I breathe.

Mulder blurts from the TV.

A good forensic scientist would know that there is not only a shoe print but also an impact point from inside the shoe. An indepth analysis of Tooms’ injury would show that my foot was not inside the shoe at the time of impact.

Edward pauses, leans up, and presses mute on the remote. He gazes down again at me.

“What about Joe Schmo number two? Did he make it past second base?”

His eyes are smoldering hot... angry? Turned on? It’s difficult to say which. He shifts to my side and slides his hand beneath my sweatpants.

“No...” I breathe, gazing up at him, trapped in his carnal green gaze. Edward smiles, wickedly.

“Good. No underwear, Mrs Cullen? I approve.” His hand cups my sex and he kisses me again, as his fingers weave more magic, his thumb skimming over my clitoris, tantalizing me, as he pushes his index finger inside me with exquisite slowness.

I groan.

“We’re supposed to be making out,” I gasp.

Edward stills.

“I thought we were?”

“No, no sex.”

“What?”

“No sex...”

“No sex, huh?” He withdraws his hand from my sweatpants. “Here.” He traces my lips with his index finger, and I can taste me. He pushes his finger into my mouth, mirroring what he was doing a moment earlier. It tastes slick and salty. He shifts so he’s between my legs, and I feel his erection pushing against me. He thrusts, once, twice, and again. I gasp, as the material of my sweatpants rubs in just the right way. He pushes once more, grinding into me.

“This what you want?” he breathes. He moves his hips rhythmically rocking against me.

“Yes.” I moan.

His hand moves back to concentrate on my nipple once more and his teeth scrape along my jaw.

“Do you know how hot you are, Bella?” he whispers hoarsely as he rocks against me harder. I open my mouth to articulate a response, and fail miserably, groaning loudly. He captures my mouth once more, tugging at my bottom lip with his teeth before plunging into my mouth again. He releases my other

wrist and my hands travel greedily up his shoulders and into his hair as he kisses me. When I pull on his hair he groans and he raises his eyes to mine.

“Ah...”

“Do you like me touching you?” I whisper.

His brow furrows briefly as if he doesn’t understand the question. He stops grinding against me and he blinks once.

“Of course I do. I love you touching me, Bella. I’m like a starving man at a banquet when it comes to your touch,” he murmurs with burning sincerity.

Holy crow...

He kneels between my legs and pulls me up to haul off my vest. I am naked beneath. Grabbing the hem of his shirt he yanks it over his head and tosses it on the floor, then pulls me onto his kneeling lap, his arms clasped just above my behind.

“Touch me,” he breathes.

Oh my... Tentatively I reach up and brush the tips of my fingers through the smattering of chest hair over his sternum, over his burn scars. He inhales sharply, and his pupils dilate – but it’s not with fear, it’s a sensual response to my touch. He watches me intently as my fingers float delicately over his skin, first to one then the other nipple. I watch them pucker beneath my caress. Leaning forward I plant soft kisses on his chest, and my hands move to his shoulders, feeling the hard, sculptured lines of sinew and muscle. Jeez... he’s in good shape.

“I want you,” he breathes and it’s a green light to my libido. My fingers are in his hair, pulling his head back so I can claim his mouth, fire licking hot and high in my belly. He groans and pushes me back onto the couch. He sits up and rips off my sweatpants, undoing his flies at the same time.

“Home run,” he murmurs triumphantly, and in one swift move he eases into me.

“Ah...” I groan and he stills, grabbing my face between his hands.

“I love you, Mrs Cullen,” he breathes and very slowly, very gently, he makes love to me... until I come apart at the seams, calling his name and wrapping myself around him, never wanting to let him go.

~o~

I lay sprawled on his chest. We’re on the floor of the TV room.

“You know, we completely bypassed third base,” I speculate mildly, my fingers tracing the line of his pectoral muscles.

He laughs.

“Next time, Mrs Cullen.” He bends and kisses the top of my head.

I look up to stare at the TV screen where the end credits for the X Files play. Edward reaches for the remote and switches the sound back on.

“Wonder what those two would make of us?” I murmur.

“Mulder and Scully? Did they ever fuck?”

“I don’t think so,” I giggle. “I don’t know. Before my time.”

“They don’t know what they were missing.” Edward grins down at me. “I like making out with you, Mrs Cullen.”

“Likewise, Mr Cullen.” I kiss his chest and we lie silently watching as the X Files finish and the commercials come on.

“It’s been a heavenly three weeks. Car chases and fires and psycho ex-bosses notwithstanding. Like being in our own private bubble,” I mutter dreamily.

“Hmmm,” Edward hums deep in his throat. “I’m not sure I’m ready to share you with the rest of the world yet.”

“Back to reality tomorrow,” I breathe.

Edward sighs and runs the hand that is not holding me through his hair.

“Security will be tight – ” I put my finger over his lips. I don’t want to hear this lecture again.

“I know. I’ll be good. I promise.” Which reminds me... I shift, propping myself up on my elbows to see him better. “Why were you shouting at Stuart?”

He stiffens immediately. Oh shit.

“Because we were followed.”

“That wasn’t Stuart’s fault.”

He gazes at me levelly.

“They should never have let you get so far in front. They know that.”

I flush, and resume my position, resting on his chest. It was my fault. I wanted to get away from them.

“That wasn’t – ”

“Enough!” Edward is suddenly curt. “This is not up for discussion, Isabella. It’s a fact – and they won’t let it happen again.”

Isabella! I am Isabella when I am in trouble... just like at home with my mother.

“Okay,” I mutter, placating him. I don’t want to fight. “Did Ryan catch up with the woman in the Dodge?”

“No. And I’m not convinced it was a woman.”

“Oh?” I look up again.

“Stuart saw someone with their hair tied back, but it was a brief look. He assumed it was a woman. Now, given that you’ve identified that fucker, maybe it was him. He wore his hair like that.” The disgust in Edward’s voice is palpable.

I don’t know what to make of this news. Edward runs his hand down my naked back, distracting me.

“If anything happened to you...” he murmurs.

I glance up at him and his eyes are wide and serious.

“I know,” I whisper. I feel the same about you.” I shiver at the thought.

“Come. You’re getting cold,” he says, sitting up. “Let’s go to bed. We can cover third base there.” He smiles a lascivious smile, as mercurial as ever, passionate, angry, anxious, sexy... my Fifty Shades. I take his hand and he pulls me to my feet, and without a stitch on, I follow him through the great room to the bedroom.

~o~

The following morning, Edward squeezes my hand as we pull up outside SIP. He looks very much the powerful executive in his dark navy suit and matching tie. He's not been this smart since... since the Ballet in Monaco. I smile at the memory.

"You know you don't have to do this?" Edward murmurs. I am tempted to roll my eyes at him.

"I know," I whisper, not wanting to be overheard by Stuart and Ryan in the front of the Merc. He frowns and I smile.

"But I want to," I continue. "You know this." I lean up and kiss him. His frown doesn't disappear.

"What's wrong?"

He glances uncertainly at Ryan as Stuart clambers out of the car.

"I'll miss having you to myself."

I reach up to caress his face.

"Me too." I kiss him. "It was a wonderful honeymoon. Thank you."

"Go to work, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs.

"You too, Mr Cullen."

Stuart opens the door. I squeeze Edward's hand once more before I climb out onto the sidewalk. Giving him a little wave I head into the building. Stuart holds open the door and follows me in.

"Hi Bella," Claire beams from behind the reception desk.

"Claire, hello," I smile back.

"You look so well. Good honeymoon?"

"The best, thank you. How's it been here?"

"Old man Roach is the same, but security has been stepped up and our server room is being overhauled. But Hanna will tell you."

Sure she will. I give Claire a friendly smile and head to my office.

Hanna is my assistant. She is tall, slim and ruthlessly efficient, to the point where I sometimes find her a little intimidating. But she's sweet to me, in spite of the fact that she's a couple of years older. She has my latte waiting – the only coffee I let her get for me.

"Hi Hanna," I say warmly.

"Bella, how was your honeymoon?"

"Fantastic. Here – for you." I pop the small bottle of perfume I bought for her onto her desk, and she claps her hands with glee.

"Oh thank you!" she says enthusiastically. "Your urgent correspondence is on your desk, and Roach would like to see you at 10.00. That's all I have to report for now."

"Good. Thank you. And thanks for the coffee." Wandering into my office I put my briefcase on my desk and gaze at the letters piled up there. I realize I have a lot to do.

Just before ten there's a timid tap on my door.

"Come in."

Victoria looks round the door.

“Hi, Bella. I just wanted to say welcome back.”

“Hey Victoria. I have to say, reading through all this correspondence, I wish I was back in the South of France.”

Victoria laughs, but her laughter is off... forced. I find myself cocking my head to one side and gazing at her, just like Edward does to me.

“Glad you’re back safely,” she says. “I’ll see you in a few minutes, at the meeting with Roach.”

“Okay,” I murmur, and she shuts the door behind her. I frown at the closed door. What was that about? I shrug it off. My email pings – it’s a message from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Errant Wives
Date: 24 August 2009: 09.56
To: Isabella Swan

Wife

I sent the email below and it bounced.
And it’s because you haven’t changed your name.
Something you want to tell me?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Attachment:

From: Edward Cullen
FW Subject: Bubble
Date: 24 August 2009: 09.32
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
Love covering all the bases with you.
Have a great first day back.
Miss our bubble.

x

Edward Cullen
Back in the Real World CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Shit. I hit reply immediately.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Don’t Burst the Bubble
Date: 24 August 2009: 09.58
To: Edward Cullen

Husband

I am all for a baseball metaphor with you, Mr Cullen.
I want to keep my name here.
I’ll explain this evening.
I am going in to a meeting now.
Miss our bubble too...

PS: Thought I had to use my Blackberry?

Isabella Swan
Commissioning Editor, SIP

This is going to be such a row. I can feel it. Sighing I gather up my papers for the meeting.

~o~

The meeting lasts for two hours. All the commissioning editors are there, plus Roach and Victoria. We discuss personnel, strategy, marketing, security and year-end. As the meeting progresses I grow more and more uncomfortable. There's a subtle change in how my colleagues are treating me... a distance and deference that wasn't there before I left for my honeymoon. And from Charlotte, who heads up the non-fiction division, there's downright hostility. Maybe I'm just being paranoid... but it goes some way to explaining Victoria's odd greeting this morning. My mind drifts back to the yacht, then to the playroom, then to the R8 speeding away from the mystery Dodge on I-5. Perhaps Edward's right... perhaps I can't do this any more. The thought is depressing – this is all I've ever wanted to do. If I can't do this, what will I do? As I walk back to my office I try to dismiss these dark thoughts.

When I sit down at my desk I quickly check my emails. Nothing from Edward. I check my BlackBerry... Still nothing. Good. At least there's been no adverse reaction to my email. Perhaps we'll discuss this tonight as per my request. I find that hard to believe, but ignoring my uneasy feeling I open the marketing plan I was given at the meeting.

~o~

As is our ritual on a Monday, Hanna comes into my office with a plate for my pre-packed lunch and we sit and eat our lunches together, discussing what we want to achieve during the week. She brings me up to date with the office gossip too, which I have to say – considering I've been away for three weeks – is pretty thin on the ground. As we're chatting there's a knock on the door.

"Come in."

Roach opens the door, and standing beside him is Edward. I am momentarily struck dumb. Edward shoots me a blazing look and stalks in, before smiling politely at Hanna.

"Hello, you must be Hanna. I'm Edward Cullen," he says. Hanna scrambles to her feet and holds out her hand.

"Mr Cullen. How nice to meet you," she stutters and they shake hands. "Can I fetch you a coffee?"

"Please," he says warmly. With a quick puzzled glance at me she scuttles out of the office past Roach, who stands as dumbstruck as me on the threshold of my office.

"If you'll excuse me Roach, I'd like a word with Ms Swan." Edward hisses the S's sibilantly... sarcastically.

This is why he's here... Oh shit.

"Of course, Mr Cullen. Bella," Roach mutters shutting the door to my office as he departs. I recover my power of speech.

"Mr Cullen, how nice to see you," I smile, far too sweetly.

"Ms Swan, may I sit down?"

"It's your company." I wave at the chair Hanna vacated.

"Yes, it is." He smiles wolfishly at me, the smile not reaching his eyes. His tone is clipped. He's

bristling with tension – I can feel it. Fuck. My heart sinks.

“Your office is very small,” he mutters as he sits down facing my desk.

“It suits me,” I mutter.

He regards me neutrally, but I know he’s mad. I take a deep breath. This is not going to be fun.

“So what can I do for you, Edward?”

“ I am just looking over my assets.”

“Your assets? All of them?”

“All of them. Some of them need re-branding.”

“Re-branding? In what way?”

“I think you know.” His voice is menacingly quiet.

“Please – don’t tell me you have interrupted your day to come and row with me about my name.” I am not a freaking asset!

He shifts and crosses his legs.

“Not exactly row. No.”

“Edward, I’m working.”

“Looked like you were gossiping with your assistant to me.”

I flush.

“We were going through our schedules,” I snap. “And you haven’t answered my question.”

There’s a knock on the door.

“Come in!” I shout, too loudly.

Hanna opens the door and brings in a small tray. Milk jug, sugar bowl, coffee in a cafetiere – she’s gone all out. She places the tray on my desk.

“Thank you Hanna,” I mutter. Embarrassed that I have just shouted so loudly.

“Do you need anything else Mr Cullen?” she asks, all breathless. I want to roll my eyes at her.

“No, thank you. That’s all.” He smiles his dazzling, panty-dropping smile at her. She flushes, and exits simpering. Edward turns his attention back to me.

“Now, Miss Swan. Where were we?”

~oooOOOooo~

MOTU II 97/10

“You were rudely interrupting my work day to come and fight with me about my name,” I mutter angrily. Edward blinks rapidly – surprised, I think, by the vehemence in my voice. Deftly he picks at an invisible piece of lint on his knee with long skilled fingers. It’s distracting. He’s doing it on purpose. I narrow my eyes at him.

“I like to make the odd impromptu visit. It keeps management on their toes, wives in their place. You

know.” He shrugs, his mouth set in an arrogant line.

Wives in their place!

“I had no idea you could spare the time,” I snap.

His eyes frost.

“Why don’t you want to change your name here?” he asks, his voice deathly quiet.

“Edward, do we have to discuss this now?”

“I’m here. Don’t see why not.”

“I have a ton of work to do, having been away for the last three weeks.”

He gazes at me, his green eyes cool and assessing... distant even. I marvel that he can appear so cold after last night... after the last three weeks. Oh no. He must be so mad – really mad. When will he learn not to over-react?

“Are you ashamed of me?” he asks, his voice deceptively soft.

What?

“No! Edward, of course not.” I scowl at him. “This is about me – not you!” Jeez, he’s exasperating sometimes. Silly overbearing megalomaniac.

“How is this not about me?” he whispers. He cocks his head to one side, genuinely perplexed, some of his detachment slipping as he stares at me with wide green eyes... and I realise in that moment that he’s hurt. Holy Fuck. I’ve hurt his feelings. Oh no... he’s the last person I want to hurt.

“Edward,” I try for patience. “When I took this job, I’d only just met you.” I shrug, struggling to find the words to explain. “I didn’t know you were going to buy the company –” I stop. What can I say about that event in our brief history? His frankly deranged reasons for doing so – his control freakery, his stalker tendencies gone mad, given completely free rein because he is so wealthy – all that’s over and done with. I know he wants to keep me safe... but really, his ownership of SIP is the fundamental problem here. If he’d never interfered, I could continue as normal, and not have to face the disgruntled and whispered recriminations of my colleagues. I put my head in my hands, just to break eye contact with him.

“Why is it so important to you?” I breathe. I look up at his impassive stare... his green eyes glowing, giving nothing away, his earlier hurt now hidden. But even as I ask the question, deep down I know the answer before he says it.

“I want everyone to know that you’re mine.”

“I am yours – look.” I hold up my left hand, showing my wedding and engagement rings.

“It’s not enough.”

“Not enough that I married you?” My voice is barely a whisper.

He blinks at me, registering the horror on my face. Where can I go from here? What else can I do?

“That’s not what I mean,” he mutters, and runs a hand through his overlong hair so that it flops onto his forehead.

“What do you mean?”

He swallows.

“I want your world to begin and end with me,” he says, his expression raw. His comment completely

derails me. It's like he's punched me hard in the stomach, winding me, wounding me. And the vision comes to mind of a small, frightened, copper-haired green-eyed boy in dirty, mismatched, ill-fitting clothes.

"It does," I murmur, because it's the truth. "I'm just trying to establish a career, and I don't want to trade on your name. I have to do something, Edward. I can't stay imprisoned at Escala or the new house with nothing to do. I'll go crazy. I'll suffocate. I've always worked – and I enjoy this. I really enjoy what I do. This is my dream job, it's all I've ever wanted. But doing this doesn't mean I love you less. You are the world to me." I can feel my throat swell and tears prick the back of my eyes. I must not cry... not here. I repeat it over and over in my head. I must not cry. I must not cry.

He stares at me, saying nothing. Oh, what is he thinking? Then a frown briefly crosses his face, as if he's considering what I've said.

"I suffocate you?" His voice is bleak, and it's an echo of a question he's asked me before.

"No... yes... no." This is such an exasperating conversation – not one that I want to have here, now. I close my eyes and rub my forehead, trying to fathom how we got to this.

"Look, we were talking about my name. I want to keep my name here because I want to put some distance between you and me, that's all. You know everyone thinks I got the job because of you, when the reality is – " I stop, and his eyes widen slightly.

"Do you want to know why you got the job, Isabella?"

Oh no... Isabella?

"What? What do you mean?"

He shifts in his chair as if steeling himself. Shit! Do I want to know?

"The management here gave you Smith's job to babysit. They didn't want the expense of hiring a senior executive when the company was mid-sale. They had no idea what the new owner would do with it once it passed into his ownership, and wisely, they didn't want an expensive redundancy. So they gave you Smith's job to caretake until the new owner – " He pauses, and his lips twitch in an ironic smile – "Namely me, took over."

Holy crap!

"What are you saying?" I breathe. So it was because of him. Fuck! Well – in a roundabout way. I am horrified.

He smiles slightly at my alarm.

"Relax. You've more than risen to the challenge. You've done very well." I can hear the tiniest hint of pride in his voice, and it's almost my undoing.

"Oh..." I murmur incoherently, reeling from this news. I sit right back in my chair, open-mouthed, staring at him. He shifts again.

"I don't want to suffocate you, Bella. I don't want to put you in a gilded cage. Well..." he pauses, his face darkening. "Well, the rational part of me doesn't." He strokes his chin thoughtfully, and I can almost hear his mind concocting something.

Oh, what is he thinking? It plagues me again. Edward looks up suddenly, as if he's had a Eureka moment.

"So one of the reasons I'm here – apart from dealing with my errant wife..." He narrows his eyes, "Is to discuss what I am going to do with this company."

Errant wife! I am not errant, and I'm not an asset! My subconscious tosses her book down in disgust and leaps to her feet from the comfort of her armchair, fisting her hands on her hips. I scowl at Edward again and the threat of tears subsides.

"What are you going to do?" I cock my head to one side, mirroring him, and I can't help my sarcastic tone. His lips twitch with the hint of a smile. Jeez – change of mood, again! How can I ever keep up with Mr Mercurial?

"I'm renaming the company – to Cullen Publishing."

Holy shit.

"And in a year's time, it will be yours."

What? My mouth drops open once more – wider this time.

"This is my wedding present to you."

I shut my mouth, then open it, trying to articulate something – but there's nothing there. My mind is blank.

"So, do I need to change the name to Swan Publishing?" he adds sarcastically.

He's serious. Holy fuck...

"Edward," I whisper, when my brain finally reconnects with my mouth. "I can't run a business."

He cocks his head to one side again and gives me a censorious frown.

"I ran my own business from the age of 21."

"But you're... you. Control freak and whiz-kid extraordinaire. Jesus, Edward – you majored in Economics at Harvard, before you dropped out. At least you have some idea. I sold maps and camping stoves for three years, for heaven's sake. I've seen so little of the world, and I know next to nothing!" My voice rises, growing louder and higher, as I complete my tirade.

"You're also the most well-read person I know," Edward counters earnestly. "You love a good book. You couldn't leave your job while we were on our honeymoon. You read how many manuscripts? Three?"

"Four," I whisper.

"And you wrote full reports on all of them. You're a very bright girl, Isabella. I'm sure you'll manage."

"Edward, are you crazy?"

"Crazy for you," he whispers.

What? And I snort... because it's the only expression my body can make. He narrows his eyes at me.

"You'll be a laughing stock, Edward. Buying a company for the little woman, who's been working for approximately two months of her adult life."

"Do you think I give a fuck what people think? Besides, you won't be on your own."

I gape at him. He really has lost his marbles this time.

"Edward, I..." I put my head in my hands. I feel like my emotions have been through a wringer. What is he thinking? And from somewhere dark and deep inside I have the sudden, inappropriate need to laugh. When I look up at him again his eyes widen.

"Something amusing you, Miss Swan?"

“Yes. You.”

His eyes widen further, shocked but also amused.

“Laughing at your husband? That will never do. And you’re biting your lip.” His eyes darken... in that way. Oh no – I know that look. Sultry, seductive, salacious... No, no, no! Not here.

“Don’t even think about it,” I warn, alarm clear in my voice.

“Think about what, Isabella?”

“I know that look. We’re at work.”

He leans forward, his eyes glued to mine, molten green and hungry. Holy Crow! I swallow instinctively.

“We’re in a small, reasonably sound-proofed office, with a lockable door,” he breathes.

“Gross Moral Turpitude.” I enunciate each word carefully.

“Not with your husband.”

“With my boss’s boss’s boss.” I hiss.

“You’re my wife.”

“Edward, no. I mean it. You can fuck me seven shades of Sunday this evening. But not now! Not here!”

He blinks, narrows his eyes once more. Then unexpectedly he laughs.

“Seven shades of Sunday?” he arches an eyebrow, intrigued. “I may hold you to that, Miss Swan.”

“Oh, stop with the Miss Swan!” I snap, and thump the desk, surprising us both. “For heaven’s sake Edward – if it means so much to you I’ll change my name!”

His mouth pops open as he inhales sharply. And then he grins, a dazzling, all-teeth-showing, joyous grin. Wow...

“Good.” He claps his hands, and all of a sudden he stands. What now?

“Mission accomplished. Now, I have work to do. If you’ll excuse me, Mrs Cullen.”

What? Gah – this man is so maddening!

“But – ” I stutter.

“But what, Mrs Cullen?”

I sag.

“Just go.”

“I intend to. I’ll see you this evening. I’m looking forward to seven shades of Sunday.”

I flush.

“Oh – and I have a stack of business-related social engagements coming up, and I’d like you to accompany me.”

I gape at him. Will you just go?

“I’ll have Angela call Hanna to put the dates in your calendar. There are some people you need to meet.”

“Okay,” I mumble, completely bemused, bewildered and shellshocked.

He leans over my desk. What now? I am caught in his hypnotic gaze.

“Love doing business with you, Mrs Cullen,” he breathes. He leans in closer as I sit paralyzed and very gently plants a soft tender kiss on my lips.

“Later, baby,” he murmurs. He stands abruptly, winks at me, and leaves.

I lay my head on my desk. I feel like I’ve been run over by a freight train – the freight train that is my beloved husband. He has to be the most frustrating, annoying, contrary man on the planet. I sit up and frantically rub my eyes. What have I just agreed to?

Okay... Bella Cullen running SIP – I mean, Cullen Publishing. The man is mad. There’s a knock on the door, and Hanna pokes her head round.

“You okay?” she asks.

I just stare at her.

She frowns.

“I know you don’t like me doing this – but can I make you some tea?”

I nod.

“Twinings English Breakfast, weak and black?”

I nod.

“Coming right up, Bella.”

I stare blankly at my computer screen, still in shock. How can I make him understand?

Email!

From: Isabella Swan

Subject: NOT AN ASSET!

Date: 24 August 2009: 14.23

To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen

Next time you come and see me – make an appointment – so I can at least have some prior warning of your adolescent overbearing megalomania.

Yours

Isabella Cullen<—please note name.

Commissioning Editor, SIP

I don’t have to wait long for his reply.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Seven Shades of Sunday

Date: 24 August 2009: 14.34

To: Isabella Swan

My Dear Mrs Cullen (emphasis on My)

What can I say in my defense? I was in the neighborhood.

And no, you are not an asset, you are my beloved wife.

As ever, you make my day.

Edward Cullen

CEO & Overbearing Megalomaniac, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

He's trying to be funny, but I am in no mood to laugh. I take a deep breath and go back to my correspondence.

~o~

Edward is quiet when I climb into the car that evening.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi," he responds, warily – as he should.

"Disrupted anyone else's work today?" I ask, too sweetly.

The ghost of a smile crosses his face.

"Only Banner's."

Oh.

"Next time you go to see him, can I give you a list of topics I want covered?" I hiss at him.

"You seem out of sorts, Mrs Cullen."

I glare steadily in front of me, at the back of Ryan and Stuart's heads. Edward shifts beside me.

"Hey," he says softly and reaches for my hand. All afternoon, when I should have been concentrating on work, I have been trying to figure out what to say to him – and I've become angrier and angrier with each passing hour. I've had enough of his cavalier, petulant, and frankly childish behavior. I snatch my hand out of his... in a cavalier, petulant and childish manner.

"You're mad at me?" he whispers.

"Yes," I hiss. Folding my arms protectively across my body I gaze out of my window. I feel him shift beside me once more but I will myself not to look at him. I don't understand why I'm so mad at him – but I am. Really fucking mad.

As soon as we pull up outside Escala I break protocol and leap out of the car with my briefcase. I make my way into the building, not checking to see who is following. Ryan scuttles into the foyer quickly behind me and dashes to the elevator to press the call button.

"What?" I snap when I'm alongside him. He flushes.

"Apologies, ma'am," he mutters.

Edward comes and stands beside me to wait for the elevator, and Ryan retreats.

"So it's not just me you're mad at?" Edward murmurs dryly.

I glare up at him and I can see a trace of a smile on his face.

"Are you laughing at me?" I narrow my eyes.

"I wouldn't dare," he says, holding his hands up like I'm threatening him at gunpoint. He's in his navy suit, looking crisp and clean, with floppy sex-hair and burning sincere green eyes.

"You need a haircut," I mutter. I turn away from him and step into the elevator.

"Do I?" he says. Brushing his hair off his forehead with his hand he follows me into the elevator.

"Yes." I tap the code for our apartment into the keypad.

“So you’re talking to me now?”

“Just.”

“What exactly are you mad about? I need an indication,” he asks cautiously.

I turn and gape at him.

“Do you really have no idea? Surely, for someone so bright, you must have an inkling? I can’t believe you’re that obtuse.”

He gasps and takes a step back.

“You really are mad. I thought we had sorted all this in your office,” he breathes, perplexed.

“Edward, I just capitulated to your petulant demands. That’s all.”

The elevator doors open and I storm out. Taylor is standing in the hallway. He takes a step back and quickly shuts his mouth as I steam past him.

“Hi Taylor,” I mutter.

“Mrs Cullen,” he murmurs.

Dropping my briefcase in the hallway I head into the great room. Mrs Cope is at the stove.

“Good evening, Mrs Cullen.”

“Hi, Mrs Cope,” I mutter once more. I head straight to the fridge and pull out a bottle of white wine.

Edward follows me into the kitchen and watches me like a hawk as I take a glass down from the cupboard. He removes his jacket and casually places it on the countertop.

“Do you want a drink?” I ask, super sweetly.

“No thanks,” he says, not taking his eyes off me, and I know that he’s helpless. He does not know what to do with me. It’s comical on one level, and tragic on another. Well, screw him! I am having trouble locating my compassionate self since our meeting this afternoon. Slowly he removes his tie, then opens the top button of his shirt. I pour myself a large glass of Sauvignon Blanc and Edward runs a hand through his hair. When I turn around Mrs Cope has disappeared. Shit! She’s my human shield. I take a slug of wine. Hmmm. It tastes good.

“Stop this,” Edward whispers. He takes the two steps between us so he’s standing in front of me. Gently he tucks my hair behind my ear and caresses the shell of my ear tenderly with his fingertips. It sends a shiver through me... is this what I’ve missed all day? His touch? I shake my head and gaze up at him.

“Talk to me,” he murmurs.

“Edward, what’s the point? You don’t listen to me.”

“Yes I do. You’re one of the few people I do listen to.”

I take another swig of wine.

“Is this about your name?”

“Yes and no. It’s how you dealt with the fact that I disagreed with you.” I gaze up at him, expecting him to be angered.

His brow furrows.

“Bella, you know I have... issues. It’s hard for me to let go where you’re concerned. You know that.”

"I'm not a child, and I'm not an asset, Edward."

"I know," he sighs.

"Stop treating me as though I were," I whisper, imploring him with my eyes.

Softly he brushes the back of his fingers down my cheek and runs the tip of this thumb across my bottom lip.

"Please don't be mad. You're so precious to me. Like a priceless asset... like a child," he whispers, a somber, reverent expression on his face. I am distracted by his words. Like a child? Precious like a child... a child would be precious to him! Oh my... Good. But this is still messed up.

"I'm neither of those things, Edward. I'm your wife. If you were hurt that I wasn't going to take your name, you should have said."

"Hurt?" he asks. He frowns deeply, and I can tell that he's exploring the possibility in his mind. He blinks and straightens suddenly, still frowning, and glances quickly at his wristwatch.

"The architect will be here in just under an hour. We should eat."

Oh no... I groan inwardly. Tanya Denali. My shitty day just got shittier. I scowl at Edward.

"This discussion isn't finished," I mutter.

"What else is there to discuss?"

"You could sell the company."

Edward's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"What?" he exclaims.

"Sell it."

"You think I'd find a buyer in today's market?" he exclaims.

"How much did it cost you?"

"It was relatively cheap." His tone is wary.

"So if it folds?"

He smirks.

"We'll survive. But I won't let it fold, Isabella. Not while you're there."

"And if I leave?"

"And do what?" Edward shrugs.

"I don't know. Something else."

"You've already said this is your dream job. And forgive me if I'm wrong, but I promised before God, Reverend Walsh and a congregation of our nearest and dearest to cherish you, and uphold your hopes and dreams, and keep you safe at my side."

"Quoting your wedding vows at me is not playing fair."

"When did I ever promise to play fair where you're concerned?" he asks, amused. "Besides," he adds.

"You've wielded your vows at me like a weapon before."

I scowl at him. This is true.

"Isabella, if you're still angry with me, take it out on me in bed later," he murmurs. His voice is

suddenly low and full of sensual longing, his emerald eyes heated.

What? Bed? How?

He smiles indulgently down at my expression. Is he expecting me to tie him up? Holy crap! My inner goddess removes her iPod earbuds and starts listening with rapt attention.

“Seven shades of Sunday,” he whispers. “Looking forward to it.”

Whoa!

“Gail!” he shouts abruptly, and four seconds later, Mrs Cope appears. Where was she? Taylor’s office? Listening? Oh jeez.

“Mr Cullen?”

“We’d like to eat now, please.”

“Very good, sir.”

Edward doesn’t take his eyes off me. He watches me warily, like I’m some exotic creature about to bolt. I take a sip of my wine.

“I think I’ll join you,” he says. He runs a hand through his hair again, signaling his exasperation, and lets out a long sigh.

~o~

“You’re not going to finish?”

“No.” I gaze down at my barely-touched plate of fettuccini.

Edward’s expression darkens... and not in a good way. Before he can say anything I stand and clear our plates from the dining table.

“Tanya will be with us shortly,” I mutter. Edward’s mouth twists in an unhappy scowl, but he says nothing.

“I’ll take those, Mrs Cullen,” says Mrs Cope as I walk into the kitchen.

“Thank you.”

“You didn’t like it?” she asks, concerned.

“It was fine. I’m just not hungry.”

Giving me a small sympathetic smile she turns to clear my plate and put everything in the dishwasher.

“I’m going to make a couple of calls,” Edward announces, giving me a last assessing look before he disappears into his study.

I let out a sigh of relief and head off to our bedroom. Dinner was awkward. I am still mad at Edward and he doesn’t seem to think he’s done anything wrong. Has he? My subconscious cocks an eyebrow at me and gazes benignly over her half-moon glasses. Yes – he has. He’s made it even more awkward for me at work. He didn’t wait to discuss this issue with me when we were in the relative privacy of our own home. Jeez – how would he feel if I came barging into his office, laying down the law? And to cap it all – he wants to give me SIP! How the hell could I run a company? I know so little.

I gaze out at the Seattle skyline bathed in the pearly pink light of dusk. And as usual he wants to solve our differences in the bedroom... um... foyer... playroom... TV room... kitchen countertop... Stop! It always comes back to sex with him. Sex is his coping mechanism.

I wander into the bathroom and scowl at my reflection in the mirror. Coming back into the real world is hard. We managed to skate over all our differences while we were in our bubble, because we were so wrapped up in each other. But now... Briefly I am dragged back to my wedding, remembering my concerns that day – marry in haste... No, I mustn't think like this. I knew he was Fifty Shades when I married him. I just have to hang in there.

I squint at myself in the mirror. I look pale... and now I have that woman to deal with.

I'm wearing my grey pencil skirt and a sleeveless blouse. Right! My inner goddess gets out her harlot-red nail polish. I undo two buttons, exposing a little cleavage. I wash my face, then carefully reapply my make-up, applying more mascara than usual and putting extra gloss on my lips. Bending down I brush my hair vigorously from root to tip. When I stand my hair is a chestnut cloud around me. I tuck it artfully behind my ears and go in search of my pumps, rather than my flats.

When I re-emerge into the great room, Edward has the house plans spread out on the dining table. He has some music playing through the sound system. It stops me in my tracks.

"Mrs Cullen," he says warmly. He furrows his brow slightly as he gazes at me.

"What's this?" I ask. The music is stunning.

"Fauré. A requiem. You look different," he says, distracted.

"Oh. I've not heard it before."

"It's very calming, relaxing," he says and raises an eyebrow. "Have you done something to your hair?"

"Brushed it," I mutter. I am transported by the haunting voices. Abandoning the plans on the table he walks towards me, a slow saunter in time to the music.

"Dance with me?" he murmurs.

"To this? It's a requiem." I squeak.

"Yes." He pulls me into his arms and holds me, burying his nose in my hair and swaying gently from side to side. He smells his heavenly self. Oh... I've missed him. I wrap my arms around him and fight the urge to cry. Why are you so infuriating?

"I hate fighting with you," he whispers.

"Well, stop being such an arse."

He chuckles and I can feel the captivating sound reverberate through his chest. He tightens his hold on me.

"Arse?"

"Ass."

"I prefer Arse."

"You should. It suits you."

He laughs once more and kisses the top of my head.

"A requiem?" I murmur.

He shrugs.

"It's just a lovely piece of music, Bella."

Taylor coughs discreetly at the entranceway, and Edward releases me.

“Miss Denali is here,” he says.

Oh joy!

“Show her in,” Edward says. He reaches over and clasps my hand as Miss Tanya Denali enters the room.

~oooOOOooo~

On Fifty's iPod: Requiem in Paradisium By Georges Fauré

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIQTlxaC_Zc

MOTU II 98/11

Tanya Denali is a good-looking woman – a tall, good-looking woman. Her long, blond, perfectly-coiffed hair hangs like a shimmering veil down her back. She's wearing a pale grey pant suit – the slacks and fitted jacket hug her lush curves. The clothes look expensive. At her throat a solitary diamond glints, matching the single-carat studs in her ears. She is well groomed – one of those women who grew up with money and breeding... though her breeding seems to be lacking this evening. Her blouse is palest blue, and undone too far. Like mine. I flush.

“Edward. Bella.” She beams, showing perfect white teeth, and holds out a manicured hand to shake first Edward's, then my hand. It means I have to release Edward's hand to reciprocate. She's a fraction shorter than Edward, but then she's in killer heels.

“Tanya,” Edward says politely. I smile, coolly, I think.

“You both look so well from your honeymoon,” she says smoothly, her grey eyes gazing up at Edward through long dark tinted lashes. Edward puts his arm around me and pulls me close.

“We had a wonderful time, thank you.” He brushes his lips against my temple, taking by surprise. Oh my. See... he's mine. Annoying – infuriating even – but mine. I grin up at him. Right now I really love you, Edward Cullen. I slip my hand around his waist then into his rear pants pocket and I squeeze his behind.

Tanya smiles thinly.

“Have you managed to look over the plans?”

“We have,” I murmur. I gaze up at Edward, who grins down at me, one eyebrow raised in wry amusement. Amused at what? My reaction to Tanya or me squeezing his butt?

“Please,” Edward says. “The plans are here.” He gestures towards the dining table. Taking my hand he leads me over towards it, Tanya following in our wake. I finally remember my manners.

“Would you like something to drink?” I ask. “A glass of wine?”

“That would be lovely,” Tanya says. “Dry white.”

Shit! Sauvignon Blanc – that's a dry white, isn't it? Reluctantly leaving my husband's side I head over to the kitchen. I hear the iPod hiss as Edward switches off the music.

“Would you like some more wine, Edward?” I call.

“Please baby,” he croons, grinning at me. Wow – he can be so swoon-worthy at times, and so infuriating at others. But mostly he’s swoon-worthy... and suddenly I feel Edward and I are putting on a show, playing a game together – but this time we’re on the same side. Does he know? Does he know that she’s attracted to him, and being too obvious about it? It gives me a small rush of pleasure when I realize maybe he’s trying to reassure me. Or maybe he’s just sending a message loud and clear to this woman – that he’s taken. Mine. Yeah, bitch – mine. My inner goddess is wearing her gladiatrix outfit, and she’s taking no prisoners. Smiling to myself I collect three glasses from the cupboard, take the opened bottle of Sauvignon Blanc from the fridge, and place them all on the breakfast bar. Tanya is leaning over the table while Edward, standing beside her, points at something on the plans.

“I think Bella has some opinions on the glass wall. But generally we’re both very pleased with the ideas you’ve come up with.”

“Oh I’m so glad,” Tanya gushes, obviously relieved – and as she says it she reaches out to briefly touch his arm in a small, flirty gesture. Edward stiffens subtly but immediately. She doesn’t even seem to notice. Leave him the fuck alone, lady. He doesn’t like to be touched.

Stepping casually aside, so he’s out of her reach, Edward turns to me.

“Thirsty here,” he says.

“Coming right up.” He is playing the game. She makes him uncomfortable – why didn’t I see that before? That’s why I don’t like her. He’s used to how women react to him – I’ve seen it often enough – and usually he thinks nothing of it. Touching is something else. Well, Mrs Cullen to the rescue.

I quickly pour the wine, gather all three glasses in my hands and hurry back to my knight in distress.

I offer a glass to Tanya, positioning myself deliberately between them. She smiles courteously as she accepts it. I hand the second to Edward, who takes it eagerly, his expression one of amused gratitude.

“Cheers,” Edward says to us both, but looking at me. Tanya and I raise our glasses and answer in unison. I take a welcome sip of wine.

“Bella, you have some issues with the glass wall?” Tanya asks.

“Yes. I love it – don’t get me wrong. But I was hoping that we could incorporate it more sympathetically into the house. After all, I fell in love with house as it was, and I don’t want to make any radical changes.”

“I see.”

“I just want it to be more sympathetic. More in keeping with the original house.” I glance up at Edward, who is gazing at me thoughtfully.

“No major renovations?” he murmurs.

“No,” I breathe back.

“You like it as it is?”

“Mostly, yes.”

Edward’s eyes glow warmly. Tanya glances at the pair of us, and her cheeks flush.

“Okay,” she says. “I think I get where you’re coming from, Bella. How about if we retain the glass wall, but have it open out on to a larger deck that’s in keeping with the Mediterranean style. We have the stone terrace there already. We can put in pillars in matching stone, widely spaced so you’ll still have the view. Add a glass roof, or tile it as per the rest of the house. It’ll also make a sheltered al fresco dining and seated area.”

Holy crow. Got to give the woman her due – she’s good.

“Or instead of the deck, we could incorporate a wood color of your choice into the glass doors – that might help to keep the Mediterranean spirit,” she continues.

“Like the bright blue shutters in the South of France,” I murmur to Edward, who is watching me intently. He takes a sip of wine and shrugs, very non-committal. Hmmm. He doesn’t like that idea.

Interestingly he doesn’t overrule me, shout me down or make me feel stupid... God, this man is a mass of contradictions. His words from yesterday come to mind: “I want this house to be the way you want. Whatever you want. It’s yours.” He wants me to be happy – happy in everything I do. Deep down I think I know this. It’s just – I stop myself. Don’t think about our argument now. My subconscious glares at me.

Tanya is looking at Edward, waiting for him to make the decision. I watch as her pupils dilate slightly and her glossed lips part. Her tongue darts quickly over her top lip, then she takes a sip of her wine. When I turn to Edward he’s still looking at me – not at her at all. Yes! My inner goddess’ fist pumps the air. I am going to have words with Miss Denali.

“Bella, what do you want to do?” Edward murmurs, very clearly deferring to me.

“I like the deck idea.”

“Me too.”

I turn back to Tanya. Hey lady – look at me, not him. I’m the one making the decisions on this.

“I think I’d like to see revised drawings showing the bigger deck and pillars that are in keeping with the house.”

Reluctantly Tanya drags her greedy eyes away from the fine form that is my husband, and smiles down at me. Does she think I’m not going to notice?

“Sure,” she acquiesces pleasantly. “Any other issues?”

Other than you eye-fucking my husband?

“Edward wants to remodel the master suite,” I murmur. There’s a cough from the entrance to the great room. We three turn as one to find Taylor standing there.

“Taylor?” Edward asks.

“I need to confer with you on an urgent matter, Mr Cullen,” Taylor explains, very formally. Edward clasps my shoulders from behind and addresses Tanya.

“Mrs Cullen is in charge of this project. She has absolute carte blanche. Whatever she wants, it’s hers. I completely trust her instincts – she’s very shrewd.” His voice changes fractionally... in it I hear pride, and a subtle warning. A warning to Tanya?

He trusts my instincts? Oh, this man’s exasperating. My instincts let him run roughshod over my feelings this afternoon. I shake my head slightly in frustration... but I’m grateful that he’s telling Miss Provocative-but-unfortunately-Good-at-her-Job just who is in charge. Reaching up I caress his hand as it rests on my shoulder.

“If you’ll excuse me.” Edward squeezes my shoulders, then turns to follow Taylor, presumably to Taylor’s study. I wonder idly what all that’s about.

“So – the master suite?” Tanya asks nervously.

I gaze up at her, pausing for a moment to ensure that Edward and Taylor are out of earshot. Then

calling on all my inner strength, and the fact that I've been seriously piqued for the last five hours, I let her have it.

"You're right to be nervous, Tanya, because right now your work on this project hangs in the balance. But I'm sure we'll be fine – as long as you keep your hands off my husband."

She gasps.

"Otherwise, you're fired. Understand?" I enunciate each word very clearly.

She blinks at me rapidly, utterly stunned. She cannot believe what I've said. I cannot believe what I've just said. But I hold my ground, gazing impassively into her widening grey eyes. Don't back down. Don't back down! I've learnt this maddening impassive look from Edward, who does impassive like no-one else. I know that renovating The Cullen's main residence is a hugely prestigious project for Tanya's architectural firm – a resplendent feather in her cap. She can't lose this commission. And right now I don't give a hoot that she's Emmett's friend.

"Bella – Mrs Cullen – I – I'm so sorry. I never..." She flushes, unsure what else she can say.

"Let me be clear. My husband is not interested in you."

"Of course," she murmurs, the blood now draining from her face.

"As I said, I just wanted to be clear."

"Mrs Cullen, I sincerely apologize if you think... I have ..." She stops, still floundering for something to say.

"Good. As long as we understand each other, we'll be fine. Now – I'll let you know what we have in mind for the master suite, then I'd like a run down on all the materials you intend to use. As you know, Edward and I are determined that this house should be ecologically sustainable, and I'd like to reassure him as to where all the materials are coming from and what they are."

"Of course," she stutters, wide-eyed, and frankly a little bit intimidated by me. This is a first. My inner goddess runs round the arena, waving to the frenzied crowd.

Tanya pats her hair into place, and I realize this is a nervous gesture.

"The master suite?" she prompts anxiously, her voice a breathless whisper. Now that I have her on the back foot, I feel myself relax for the first time since my meeting with Edward this afternoon. I can do this. My inner goddess is celebrating her inner bitch.

~o~

Edward joins us just as we are finishing up.

"All done?" he asks. He puts his arm around my waist and turns to Tanya.

"Yes, Mr Cullen," Tanya smiles brightly – though to me her smile looks brittle. "I'll have the new plans with you in a couple of days."

"Excellent. You're happy?" he asks me directly, his green eyes warm and probing.

I nod, and blush for some reason I don't understand.

"Well, I'd better be going," Tanya says, again too brightly. She offers her hand – to me first this time, then to Edward.

"Until next time, Tanya," I murmur.

"Yes, Mrs Cullen. Mr Cullen."

Taylor has appeared at the entrance of the great room.

“Taylor will see you out,” I say, loud enough for him to hear.

“Revised plans later this week.” Patting her hair once more she turns on her high heels and heads out of the great room, followed closely by Taylor.

“She was noticeably cooler,” Edward says, looking quizzically at me.

“Was she? I didn’t notice.” I shrug, trying to remain neutral. “What did Taylor want?” I ask, partly because I’m curious and partly because I want to change the subject. Frowning Edward releases me, and begins to roll up the plans on the table.

“It was about Smith.”

Shit! Has he done something else?

“What about Smith?” I whisper. I can feel my face pale.

“It’s nothing to worry about, Bella.” Putting the plans down Edward draws me into his arms. “It turns out he hasn’t been in his apartment for weeks, that’s all.” He kisses my hair, then releases me and finishes rolling up the plans.

Oh...

“So what did you decide on?” he asks, and I know it’s because he doesn’t want me to pursue the Smith line of enquiry.

“Only what you and I had discussed. I think she likes you.” I add, quietly.

He snorts.

“Did you say something to her?” he asks.

I flush. How does he know? I stare down at my fingers.

“We were Edward and Bella when she arrived, and Mr and Mrs Cullen when she left,” he continues, his tone dry.

“I may have said something...” I mumble.

When I peek up at him he’s regarding me warmly, and for an unguarded moment, he looks... pleased. He drops his gaze, shaking his head, and his expression changes.

“She’s only reacting to the way I look.” He sounds vaguely bitter – disgusted, even. Why? I gaze at him, perplexed.

“What?” He’s bemused by my expression. Then his eyes grow wide in alarm. “You’re not jealous, are you?” he whispers in horrified surprise. I flush, and swallow, and stare down at my knotted fingers.

“Bella, she’s a sexual predator – not my type at all.” He cocks his head to one side. “How can you be jealous of her? Of anyone? Nothing about her interests me.” When I look up at him he’s gaping at me as if I’d grown an additional limb. He runs a hand through his hair.

But she’s older and a... a sexual predator. Hasn’t he fallen for one of those already? The specter of Mrs Robinson rises and haunts my mind.

“It’s only you, Bella,” Edward says quietly. “It will only ever be you.”

I gasp as all the air leaves my lungs. Abandoning the plans once more Edward moves towards me and clasps my chin between his thumb and forefinger.

“How can you think otherwise? Have I ever given you any indication that I could be remotely interested in anyone else?” His eyes suddenly blaze with green fire, staring into mine.

“No,” I whisper. “It’s just... I don’t know. She’s older.” I flush, and he knows exactly to whom I’m referring. I hurry on, “And she’s worldly and sophisticated and talented. Seriously talented. It’s obvious she got her job on her own merits.”

“Bella, how can you think like that? You’re young – we both are.” He skims his thumb across my bottom lip. “When you’re her age, you will be all those things – and more.”

What? His faith in my abilities is astounding... and confusing. Only this morning he was telling me I didn’t have to go to work. Oh, this is so complicated. I feel my eyes stinging from unshed tears.

“Have faith. Have faith in me and yourself, Bella.” His quiet plea almost overwhelms me.

“Oh, Edward,” I breathe, and my bottom lip trembles. “It’s just... I’m trying to adapt to this new life that I had never imagined for myself. Everything is being handed to me on a plate – the job – you, my beautiful man... who I never... I never knew I’d love this way, this hard, this fast, this... indelibly.” I take a deep steadying breath, as Edward’s mouth drops open.

“But you’re like a freight train, Edward... and I just don’t want to get railroaded, because the girl you fell in love with will be crushed. And what’ll be left? For a while now I’ve been thinking... all that would be left is a vacuous social x-ray of a woman.” I pause once more, struggling to find the words to convey how I feel. “And now you want me to be a company CEO – which has never even been on my radar. I’m bouncing between all these ideas, struggling...” I stop, tears threatening, and I force back a sob.

“You’ve got to let me take my own decisions, my own risks, make my own mistakes... and let me learn from them.” Holy cow. There... that’s what I wanted to say this afternoon.

“You feel suffocated?” he whispers, alarmed.

I nod. He closes his eyes.

“Fair point, well made, Mrs Cullen.” He runs his hand through his hair in agitation. “I just want to give you the world – everything and anything you want. And save you from it too, and keep you safe. You are so much more than the girl I fell in love with Bella. You’re strong, independent, witty, warm... Oh Bella, you’re everything I could ever want, and more. Don’t doubt me. Never doubt me.”

“I don’t. I don’t,” I whisper. “But earlier today, I was so unprepared for your – ” Again I struggle for the right words.

“Fifty shades,” he says.

“Yes.” And in spite of the fact that I feel like crying, I can’t help a small smile. “Your fifty shades.”

“I panicked,” he whispers. “Why didn’t you tell me about your name?”

“To be honest... I only thought about it while we were on our honeymoon, and well... I didn’t want to burst the bubble. And then James... you know, it was distracting. I only remembered yesterday evening. I’m sorry, I should have told you, or discussed it with you... but I could never seem to find the right time.” I flush, shamefaced.

Edward’s intense gaze is unnerving. It’s like he’s trying to will his way into my skull. Oh, what is he thinking?

“Why did you panic?” I ask, as his earlier words come to mind.

“I don’t know. I just don’t want you to slip through my fingers.”

“Oh Edward, for heaven’s sake,” I cry. “I’m not going anywhere. When are you going to get that through your incredibly thick skull?” My voice calms. “I. Love. You. More than... eyesight, space or liberty.”

His eyes widen, and he half smiles.

“A daughter’s love?” He quirks an amused eyebrow at me.

“No,” I laugh, despite myself. “It’s the only quote that came to mind.”

“Mad King Lear?”

“Dear, dear mad King Lear.” I reach up and caress his face, and he leans into my touch, closing his eyes.

“Would you change your name to Edward Swan, so everyone would know that you belong to me?”

Edward’s eyes fly open, and he gazes at me as if I’d just said the world is flat. He frowns.

“Belong to you?” he murmurs, testing the words.

“Mine.”

“Yours...” he says, repeating the words we spoke in the playroom only yesterday. “Yes, I would. If it meant that much to you.”

Oh my...

“Does it mean that much to you?” I breathe.

“Yes.” He is unequivocal.

“Okay,” I breathe.

He cocks his head to one side.

“I thought you’d already agreed to this.”

“Yes I have, but now we’ve discussed it further, I’m happier about my decision.”

“Oh,” he mutters, surprised. Then he smiles his beautiful, boyish yes-I-am-really-kinda-young smile, and he takes my breath away. Grabbing me by my waist he swings me round. I squeal and start to giggle, and I don’t know if he’s just happy, or relieved, or... what?

“Mrs Cullen, do you know what this means to me?”

“Yes, I do now.”

He leans down and kisses me, his fingers moving into my hair, holding me tightly in place.

“It means seven shades of Sunday,” he murmurs against my lips, and he runs his nose along mine.

Whoa!

“You think?” I lean back to gaze at him.

“Certain promises were made. An offer extended, a deal brokered,” he whispers, his green eyes sparkling with wicked delight. I cock my head to one side and gaze up at him, marveling at this sudden change of mood. His temperament shifts as smoothly as the R8 gears.

“You renegeing on me?” he asks uncertainly.

“Um...” I am still reeling, trying to follow his mood.

A speculative look crosses his face.

"I have an idea," he murmurs.

Oh... what kinky fuckery is this?

"A really important matter to attend to," he continues, suddenly all serious. No... what now?

"Yes, Mrs Cullen. A matter of the gravest importance."

Hang on – he's laughing at me.

"What?" I breathe.

"I need you to cut my hair. Apparently it's over-long, and my wife doesn't like it."

I gasp.

"I can't cut your hair!"

"Yes you can," Edward grins, and he blows up at the floppy hair hanging down over his forehead.

"Well... if Mrs Cope has a pudding bowl," I giggle.

He laughs.

"Okay, good point well made. I'll get Franco to do it."

I feel a stab of disappointment. Hmm... and doesn't Franco work for her? Maybe I could give him a trim. After all, I cut Charlie's hair for years, and he never complained.

"Come." I grab his hand. His eyes widen. I pull him after me, all the way to our bathroom, where I release his hand and grab the white wooden chair that stands in the corner. I place it in front of the sink. When I look at Edward he's gazing at me with ill-disguised amusement, thumbs tucked into the belt-loops at the front of his pants... but his eyes are smoking hot.

"Sit," I gesture to the empty chair, trying to maintain the upper hand.

"Are you going to wash my hair?" he asks, his voice husky.

I nod slowly. He arches one brow in surprise, and for a moment I think he's going to back down.

"Okay" he says softly. Reaching up he slowly begins to undo each button of his white shirt, starting with the one beneath his throat.

Oh my... My inner goddess pauses in her jaunt around the arena.

Nimble, deft fingers move to each button in turn until his shirt hangs open. Edward holds out a cuff and his mouth twitches in that challenging sexy way he has. Undo this now!

Oh... Cufflinks. I move towards him until I'm standing directly in front of him, without breaking eye contact. Then, with shaking fingers, I take his proffered wrist and remove the first one – a platinum disc with his initials engraved in a simple italic script. With that cufflink in my hand I reach for his second cuff, and with more assurance this time remove its matching twin. As I finish I glance at him, and his amused expression is gone, to be replaced by something hotter... much hotter. I reach up and push his shirt off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor.

"Ready?" I whisper.

"For whatever you want, Bella."

My eyes stray from his eyes to his lips. Parted so that he can inhale more deeply. Sculptured, chiseled, whatever, it is a beautiful mouth and he knows exactly what to do with it. I find myself leaning up to kiss him.

“No,” he breathes, and places both of his hands on my shoulders. “Don’t. If you do that, I’ll never get my hair cut.”

Oh!

“I want this,” he continues. And his eyes are round and raw for some inexplicable reason. It’s so disarming.

“Why?” I whisper.

He stares at me for a beat, and his eyes grow wider.

“Because it’ll make me feel cherished.”

My heart practically lurches to a halt. Oh Edward... my Fifty. And before I know it I’ve circled him in my arms, and I kiss his chest before nuzzling my cheek into his tickly chest hair.

“Bella,” he breathes. He wraps his arms around me, and we stand immobile, holding each other in our bathroom. Oh, how I love to be in his arms. Even if he is an overbearing, megalomaniac arse, he’s my overbearing megalomaniac arse... in need of a lifetime dose of TLC. I lean back, without releasing him.

“You really want me to do this?”

He nods and gives me his shy smile. I grin back at him and step out of his embrace. Taking his hand I lead him to the chair.

“Sit,” I repeat.

He dutifully does so, sitting with his back to the sink. I take off my shoes and kick them over to where his shirt lies pooled on the bathroom floor. From the shower I retrieve his shampoo, Chanel. We bought it in France.

“Would sir like this?” I hold it up in both hands like I’m selling it on QVC. “Hand-delivered from the South of France. I like the smell of this... it smells of you,” I add in a whisper, slipping out of my TV presenter mode.

“Okay.” He grins.

I grab a small towel off the shelf above the radiator. Mrs Cope sure knows how to keep the towels super-soft.

“Lean forward,” I order quietly. Edward complies, and I drape the towel around his shoulders, then turn on the taps and fill the sink with a mix of warm water.

“Lean back.” Hmmm... I like being in charge. Edward leans back, but he’s too tall. He shifts the seat forward, then tilts back the entire chair until the top rests against the sink. Perfect distance. He tips back his head. Bold green eyes gaze up at me and I can’t help but smile down at him. Taking one of drinking glasses we keep on the vanity unity I dip it into the water, then tip it over Edward’s head, soaking his hair. I repeat the process, leaning over him.

“You smell so good, Mrs Cullen,” he breathes, and closes his eyes.

As I methodically wet his hair I can freely gaze at him. Holy Crow. Will I ever tire of this? Long dark lashes fanning across his cheeks, his mouth slightly parted, creating a small dark diamond shape, and I can hear him softly inhale. Hmmm... how I long to poke my tongue –

I splash water into his eyes. Shit!

“Sorry!”

He grabs the corner of the towel and laughs as he wipes the water out of his eyes.

“Hey, I know I’m an arse, but don’t drown me.”

I lean down and kiss his forehead, giggling.

“Don’t tempt me.”

Reaching up he curls his hand behind my head and shifts so that he captures my lips with his and he kisses me briefly making a low contented sound in his throat. The noise connects to the muscles deep in my belly. It’s a very seductive sound. He releases me and lies back obediently, gazing up at me with expectation. For a moment he looks so vulnerable, like a child. It tugs at my heart.

His hair is now thoroughly wet, so I squirt some shampoo into my palm and start to massage it into his scalp, beginning at his temples and working over the top of his head then down the sides, circling my fingers rhythmically. He closes his eyes again and makes the low humming sound.

“That feels good,” he breathes after a moment, and I can almost feel him relax beneath the strong, firm touch of my fingers.

“Yes it does,” I agree, and I kiss his forehead once more.

“I like it when you scratch my scalp with your fingernails,” he says, his eyes still closed. He looks so content – no longer vulnerable. Jeez, how much his expression has changed. It’s subtle... but the vulnerability is gone.

“Head up,” I command, and he obeys. Hmmm – a girl could get used to this. I rub the suds into the back of his hair, scraping my nails into his scalp.

“Back.”

He leans back, and I rinse off the lather, using the glass. This time I manage not to splash him.

“Once more?” I ask.

“Please.” His eyes flutter open and his contented green gaze finds mine. I grin down at him.

“Coming right up, Mr Cullen.”

I turn to the sink that Edward normally uses and fill with warm water.

“For rinsing,” I clarify, when his look turns quizzical.

I repeat the process with the shampoo, listening to his even deep breaths. Once he’s all lathered up, I take another moment to appreciate the fine face of my husband. I cannot resist him. Tenderly I caress his cheek, and his eyes open slightly, watching me almost sleepily through his long lashes. Holy cow!

I lean forward and plant a soft, chaste kiss on his lips. He smiles, closes his eyes, and breathes out a sigh of utter contentment.

Jeez. Who would have thought after our argument this afternoon he could be this relaxed? Without sex? My subconscious purses her lips and glances up from a Bronte classic. I lean right over him.

“Hmmm,” he murmurs appreciatively as my breasts brush his face. Resisting the urge to shimmy I pull the plug so the sudsy water drains away. His hands move to my hips and round to my behind.

“No fondling the staff,” I murmur with fake disapproval.

“Don’t forget I’m deaf,” he breathes, keeping his eyes closed, as he runs his hands down past my behind and starts to hitch up my skirt. I swat his arm. I’m enjoying playing hairdresser. He grins, big and boyish, like I’ve caught him doing something illicit that he’s secretly proud of.

I reach for the glass again, but this time use the water from the neighboring sink to carefully rinse all the shampoo from his hair. I continue to lean over him, and he keeps his hands on my backside, thrumming his fingers back and forward, up and down... back and forth... hmmm. I wiggle. He growls low in his throat.

“There. All rinsed.”

“Good,” he breathes, and his fingers tighten around me, and all at once he sits up, his hair soaking and dripping all over him. He pulls me down onto his lap, his hands moving from my behind up to the nape of my neck, then to my chin, holding me in place. I gasp with surprise and his lips are on mine, his tongue hot and hard in my mouth. My fingers curl around his wet hair and I can feel the drips running down my arms to his chest and on to my face, as he deepens the kiss, and his hand moves from my chin down to the top button of my blouse.

“Enough of this primping,” he murmurs. “I want to fuck you seven shades of Sunday, and we can do it in here, or in the bedroom. You decide.”

~oooOOooo~

MOTU II 99/12

Edward’s green eyes blaze into mine, hot and full of promise, his hair dripping water on to us both. My mouth goes dry.

“What’s it to be, Isabella?” he breathes as he holds me seated across his lap.

“You’re wet,” I respond.

He bends his head suddenly, running his dripping hair all down the front of my blouse. I squeal and try to wriggle off him. He tightens his grip around me.

“Oh no you don’t, baby,” he murmurs. When he raises his head he’s grinning salaciously at me and I am Miss Wet Blouse 2009. My top is soaked and now totally see-through. I am wet... everywhere.

“Now you’re wet too. Love the view,” he murmurs. And he leans down and runs his nose round and round one wet nipple. I squirm.

“Answer me, Bella. Here or the bedroom?”

“Here,” I whisper frantically. To hell with the haircut – I’ll do it later.

He smiles slowly, his lips curling into a sensuous smile full of licentious promise.

“Good choice, Mrs Cullen,” he breathes against my lips. He releases my chin and his hand moves to my knee. It glides smoothly up my leg, lifting my skirt and skating over my skin, making me tingle. His lips trail soft kisses from the base of my ear along my jaw.

“Oh, what shall I do to you?” he whispers. His fingers halt at my stocking tops. “I like these,” he murmurs. He runs a finger underneath the top and skims it round to my inner thigh. I gasp and squirm once more in his lap.

He groans, low in his throat.

“If I’m going to fuck you seven shades of Sunday, I want you to keep still,” he scolds me mildly.

“Make me,” I challenge, my voice soft and breathy.

Edward inhales sharply. He narrows his eyes and regards me with a hot, hooded expression.

“Oh, Mrs Cullen. You have only to ask.” His hand moves from my stocking tops up to my panties. “Let’s divest you of these.” He pulls gently and I shift to help him. His breath hisses through his teeth as I do.

“Keep still,” he grumbles.

“I’m helping,” I pout, and he seizes my lower lip gently between his teeth.

“Still,” he growls. He slides my panties down my legs. Tugging my skirt up so that it’s bunched around my hips, he moves both hands to my waist and lifts me slightly. He still has my panties in his hand.

“Sit. Astride me,” he orders softly, staring intently into my eyes.

I do as I’m told and move my leg, regarding him provocatively. Bring it on Fifty!

“Mrs Cullen,” he breathes. “Are you goading me?” He gazes at me, amused but aroused, and it’s a seductive combination.

“Yes,” I breathe. “What are you going to do about it?”

His eyes light up in surprised delight at my challenge and I can feel his arousal beneath me.

“Clasp your hands together behind your back,” he murmurs.

Oh! I comply obediently and deftly he binds my wrists together with my panties. He fastens them tight.

“My panties? Mr Cullen, you have no shame,” I admonish, softly.

“Not where you’re concerned, Mrs Cullen, but you know that.” His look is intense and hot. Putting his hands around my waist he shifts me so I am sitting slightly further back on his lap. Water still drips down his neck and over his chest. I want to bend forward and lick the drips off but it’s harder now that I am restrained.

Edward caresses both of my thighs and skims his hands down to my knees. Gently he pushes them further apart, and widens his own legs, holding me in that position. His fingers move to the buttons of my blouse.

“I don’t think we need this,” he says. He starts methodically undoing each button on my clinging wet blouse, his eyes never leaving mine. They get darker and darker as he finishes the task, taking his own sweet time about it. My pulse quickens and my breathing shallows. I can’t believe it – he’s hardly touched me and I feel like this – hot, bothered... ready. I want to squirm. He leaves my damp blouse hanging open and his hands move to my face, both hands, his fingers caressing my cheek, a thumb skimming across my bottom lip. Suddenly he thrusts his thumb into my mouth.

“Suck,” he orders softly, stressing the ‘s’. I close my mouth around him and do exactly that. Hmmm... he tastes good. What else would I like to suck? The muscles in my belly clench at the thought. His lips part when I scrape my teeth and bite the soft pad of his thumb.

“Ah,” he breathes. Slowly he extracts his thumb and trails it wet down my chin, down my throat, over my sternum. He hooks it into the cup of my bra and yanks the cup down, freeing my breast. Edward’s eyes never leave mine. He’s watching each reaction that his touch elicits from me, and I’m watching him. It’s so hot. Consuming. Possessive. I love it. He mirrors his actions with his other hand, so both my breasts are free, and cupping them gently he skims each thumb over each nipple, circling slowly, teasing and taunting each one, so that they harden and lengthen beneath his skillful touch. I try, I really

try not to move, but my nipples are hotwired to my groin. I moan and throw my head back and close my eyes, surrendering to the sweet, sweet torture.

“Shh,” Edward soothes, his voice at odds with the teasing even-tempo’d rhythm of his wicked fingers. “Still, baby, still.” Releasing one breast he reaches up behind me and splays his hand around the nape of my neck. Leaning forward he takes my now bereft nipple into his mouth and sucks, hard, his wet hair tickling me. At the same time his thumb stops skimming across my other elongated nipple. Instead he takes it between his thumb and forefinger, and tugs and twists it gently.

“Ah! Edward!” I groan and buck forward on his lap. But he doesn’t stop. He continues the slow, leisurely, agonizing tease. And my body is burning as the pleasure takes a darker turn.

“Edward, please,” I whimper.

“Hmmm,” he hums low in his chest. “I want you to come like this.” My nipple gets a brief respite as he breathes the words and it’s like he’s calling to a deep, dark part of myself that only he knows. When he resumes, with his teeth this time, it’s only just not painful. Moaning loudly I writhe on his lap, trying to find some precious friction against his pants. I pull uselessly against my restraining panties, itching to touch him, but I’m lost, lost in this treacherous sensation.

“Please,” I whisper, pleading, and I can feel the pleasure straining through my body, from my neck, right down to my legs, to my toes, tightening all in its wake.

“You have such beautiful breasts, Bella,” he breathes. “One day I’ll fuck them.”

What? Gah! What the hell does that mean? Opening my eyes I gape down at him as he suckles me and my skin sings under his touch. I can’t feel my sodden blouse, his wet hair... nothing except the burn. And it burns deliciously hot and low, deep in my belly, and all thought is obliterated as I can feel my body tightening and clenching... ready, reaching... pining for release. And he doesn’t stop – teasing, pulling, driving me wild. I want... I want...

“Let go,” he breathes – and I do, loudly, my orgasm convulsing through my body, and he stops his sweet torture and wraps his arms around me, clutching me to him as my body spirals down from my climax. When I open my eyes, he is gazing down at me where I rest against his chest.

“God, I love to watch you come, Bella,” he says.

“That was...” Words fail me.

“I know.” He leans forward and kisses me, his hand still at the nape of my neck, holding me just so, angling my head so he can kiss me deeply – with love, with reverence. Oh my. I am lost in his kiss.

He pulls away to draw breath, his eyes dark jade.

“Now I’m going to fuck you, hard,” he breathes.

Holy cow. Grabbing me round the waist he lifts me from his thighs down to the edge of his knees, and reaches with his right hand for the button on the waistband of his navy pants. He runs the fingers of his left hand up and down my thigh, stopping at my stocking tops each time. When I glance up at him he’s watching me intently. We’re face to face and I’m helpless, trussed up by my bra and my panties, and this has to be one of the most intimate times we’ve had – me sitting on his lap, staring into his beautiful green eyes. It makes me feel so wanton, but also so connected to him – I am not embarrassed or shy. This is Edward, my husband, my lover, my overbearing megalomaniac, my Fifty... the love of my life. He reaches for his zipper, and my mouth goes dry as his erection springs free.

He smirks at me.

“You like?” he whispers.

“Hmm,” I murmur appreciatively. He wraps his hand around himself and moves it up and down... Holy Fuck! I gaze up at him through my lashes. Fuck he’s so sexy.

“You’re biting your lip, Mrs Cullen.”

“That’s because I’m hungry.”

“Hungry?” His mouth opens in surprise and his eyes widen a fraction.

“Hmm...” I agree, and lick my lips.

He gives me his enigmatic smile and cocks his head to one side as he continues to stroke himself. Why is the sight of my husband pleasuring himself such a turn-on?

“I see. You should have eaten your dinner.” His tone is mocking and censorious at once. “But maybe I can oblige.” He puts his hands on my waist.

“Stand,” he says softly, and I know what he’s going to do. I get to my feet, my legs no longer shaking.

“Kneel.”

I do as I’m told and kneel down on the cool tiled floor of the bathroom. He slides forward on the seat of the chair.

“Kiss me,” he breathes, holding his erection. I glance up at him, and he runs his tongue over his top teeth. It’s arousing, very arousing, to see his desire, his naked desire for me and my mouth. Leaning forward, my eyes on his, I kiss the tip of his erection. I watch him inhale sharply and clench his teeth. My inner goddess strips off her gladiatrix costume and kneels, licking her harlot-red lips. Edward cups the side of my head and I run my tongue over the tip, tasting the small bead of dew on the end. Hmm... he tastes good. His mouth drops open further as he gasps and I pounce, pulling him into my mouth and sucking hard.

“Ah – ” The air hisses through his teeth and he flexes his hips forward, thrusting into my mouth. But I don’t stop. Sheathing my teeth behind my lips I push down and then pull up on him. He moves both hands so that he fully cups my head, burying his fingers in my hair, and slowly eases himself in and out of my mouth, his breathing quickening, growing harsher. I twirl my tongue around his tip and push down again in perfect counterpoint to him. We’re moving as one.

“Jesus, Bella,” he sighs, and screws his eyes tightly... he’s lost, and it’s heady, his response to me. Me. My inner goddess could light up Escala she’s so thrilled. And very slowly I draw my lips back, so it’s just my teeth.

“Ah!” Edward stops moving. Leaning forward he grabs me and pulls me up onto his lap.

“Enough!” he growls. Reaching behind me he frees my hands with one tug on my panties. I flex my wrists and stare from under my lashes into scorching green eyes that gaze back at me with love and longing and awe... And I realize, in that moment, it’s me that wants to fuck him seven shades of Sunday. I want him badly. I want to watch him come apart beneath me. I grab his erection and scoot over him. Placing my other hand on his shoulder, very gently and slowly, I ease myself on to him. He makes a guttural, feral noise deep in his throat, and reaching up pulls my blouse off and lets it fall to the floor. His hands move to my hips.

“Still!” he rasps, his hands digging into my flesh. “Please, let me savor this. Savor you.”

I stop. Oh my... he feels so good inside me. He caresses my face, his eyes wide and wild, his lips parted as he breathes. He flexes beneath me and I moan, closing my eyes.

“This is my favorite place,” he breathes. “Inside you. Inside my wife.”

Oh fuck. Edward. I cannot hold back. I reach for him, my fingers gliding into his wet hair, my lips seeking his, and I start to move. Up and down on my toes, savoring him, savoring me. He groans loudly, and his hands are in my hair and around my back, and his tongue invades my mouth greedily taking all that I willingly give. After all our arguing today, my frustration with him, his with me... we still have this – we will always have this. I love him so much, it's almost overwhelming... like him. His hands move to my backside and he controls me, moving up and down, again and again, at his pace – his hot, slick tempo.

“Ah,” I groan helplessly into his mouth as I’m carried away.

“Yes. Yes, Bella,” he hisses, and I rain kisses on his face, his chin, his jaw, his neck.

“Baby,” he breathes, capturing my mouth once more.

“Oh Edward, I love you. I will always love you,” I gush breathlessly, wanting him to know, wanting him to be sure of me. He moans loudly and wraps his arms around me tightly as he climaxes, with a mournful sob... and it's enough – enough to push me over the brink once more. I clutch my arms around his head and let go, and I come around him, tears springing to my eyes because I love him so.

~

“Hey,” he whispers, tipping my chin back and gazing at me with quiet concern. “Why are you crying? Did I hurt you?”

“No,” I mutter reassuringly. He smooths my hair off my face, wipes away a lone tear with this thumb and tenderly kisses my lips. He is still inside me. He shifts and I wince as he pulls out of me.

“What’s wrong, Bella? Tell me.”

I sniff.

“It’s just... it’s just sometimes I’m overwhelmed by how much I love you,” I whisper.

He blinks down at me, green eyes surprised and light, the color of a forest in spring.

“Oh,” he says. Then he smiles his special shy smile – reserved for me I think. “You have the same effect on me,” he whispers, and kisses me once more. I smile up at him, and inside my joy unfurls and stretches lazily.

“Do I?”

He smirks.

“You know you do.”

“Sometimes I know. Not all the time.”

“Back at you, Mrs Cullen,” he whispers.

I grin and gently place feather-light kisses over his chest. I nuzzle his chest hair. Edward caresses my hair and runs a hand down my back. He unclasps my bra and pulls the strap down one arm. I shift, and he tugs the strap down the other arm, and drops my bra on the floor.

“Hmm. Skin on skin,” he murmurs appreciatively and folds me in his arms again. He kisses my shoulder and runs his nose up to my ear. “You smell like heaven, Mrs Cullen.”

“Back at you, Mr Cullen.” I nuzzle him again and inhale his Edward smell... now mixed with the heady scent of sex. I could stay wrapped in his arms like this, sated and happy, forever. It’s just what I need after a fraught day of back-to-work, of arguing, of bitch-slapping... this is where I want to be. In spite of his control freakery, his uncontrolled megalomania, this is where I belong. Edward buries his

nose in my hair and inhales deeply. I let out a contented sigh, and I can feel his smile... oh my... and we sit, arms clasped around each other, saying nothing.

Eventually reality intrudes.

"It's late," Edward says, his fingers methodically stroking my back.

"Your hair still needs cutting."

He chuckles.

"That it does, Mrs Cullen. Do you have the energy to finish the job you started?"

"For you Mr Cullen, anything." I kiss his chest once more and reluctantly stand.

"Don't go." Clasp my hand he turns me round. He straightens then undoes my skirt, letting it drop to the floor. He holds his hand out to me. I take it and step out of my skirt. Now I am dressed solely in stockings and garter belt.

"You are a mighty fine sight, Mrs Cullen," he says softly. He sits back in the chair and crosses his arms, giving me a full and frank appraisal. I hold out my hands and twirl for him.

"God, I'm a lucky son of a bitch," he says admiringly.

"Yes you are," I tease.

He grins.

"Put my shirt on and you can cut my hair. Like this you'll distract me – and we'll never get to bed."

I can't help my answering smile. Knowing that he's watching my every move I sashay over to where we left my shoes and his shirt. Bending slowly I reach down, pick up his shirt, smell it – hmmm – then shrug it on.

"Do we have any scissors?" I ask innocently.

Edward blinks at me, his eyes round. He's redone his flies and is sitting watching me intently.

"My study?" he croaks.

"I'll go search."

Leaving him I walk into our bedroom. I grab my comb from the dressing table, then head for his study. As I enter the main corridor I notice the door to Taylor's office is open. Mrs Cope is standing just beyond the door. I stop, rooted to the spot.

Taylor is running his fingers down her face and smiling sweetly at her. Then he leans down and kisses her.

Holy Crow! Taylor and Mrs Cope? I gape in astonishment – I mean, I thought... well, I kind of suspected. But obviously they are together! I flush, feeling like a voyeur, and finally manage to get my feet to move. I scamper across the great room and into Edward's study. Switching on the light I make my way over to his desk. Taylor and Mrs Cope... Wow! I'm reeling. It's like catching your parents at it! I always thought think Mrs Cope was older than Taylor. Oh, I have to get my head around this. I open the top drawer, and am immediately distracted when I find a gun. Edward has a gun!

A revolver. Holy Fuck! I had no idea Edward owned a gun. I take it out, slip the release and check the cylinder. It's fully loaded. What does Edward want with a gun? Jeez, I hope he knows how to use it. Charlie's perpetual warnings about handguns run quickly through my mind. These will kill you, Bella. You need to know what you're doing when you're handling a firearm. I put the gun back and find the

scissors. Retrieving them quickly I head back to Edward, my head buzzing. Taylor and Mrs Cope... the revolver...

At the entrance to the great room I run into Taylor.

"Mrs Cullen, excuse me." He flushes as he quickly takes in my attire.

Holy shit!

"Um, Taylor, hi... um. I'm cutting Edward's hair," I blurt out, embarrassed. Taylor is as mortified as I am. He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it quickly and stands aside.

"After you ma'am," he says formally. I think I'm the color of my old truck. Jeez. Could this be more embarrassing?

"Thank you," I mutter and dash down the hallway. Crap! Will I ever get used to the fact that we're not alone? I bolt into the bathroom, breathless.

"What's wrong?" Edward asks. He's standing in front of the mirror holding my shoes. All of my scattered clothes are now neatly piled beside the sinks.

"I just ran into Taylor."

"Oh." Edward frowns. "Dressed like that."

Oh Shit!

"That's not Taylor's fault." I leap to Taylor's defense.

Edward's frown deepens.

"No. But still."

"I'm dressed."

"Barely."

"I don't know who was more embarrassed, me or him." I try my distraction technique. "Did you know he and Gail are... well – together?"

Edward blinks at me, then laughs.

"Yes, of course I knew."

"And you never told me?"

"I thought you knew too."

"No."

"Bella, they're adults. They live under the same roof. Both unattached. Both attractive."

I flush.

"Well, if you put it like that... I just thought Gail was older than Taylor," I huff.

"She is, but not by much." He gazes at me, perplexed. "Some men like older women." He stops abruptly, and his eyes widen.

I scowl at him.

"I know that!" I snap. Edward looks contrite. He smiles fondly at me. Yes! Distraction technique successful! My subconscious rolls her eyes at me – but at what cost? Now the unmentionable Mrs Robinson is looming over us.

"That reminds me," he says, brightly.

"What?" I mutter petulantly. Grabbing the chair I turn it to face the mirror above the sinks. "Sit," I order. Edward regards me with indulgent amusement, but does as he's told, and sits back down in the chair. I start to comb through his now merely damp hair.

"I was thinking we could convert the rooms over the garages for them. Make it a home. Then maybe Taylor's daughter could come and stay with him more often." Edward watches me carefully through the mirror.

Oh!

"Why doesn't she stay here?"

"Taylor's never asked me."

"Perhaps you should offer. But we'd have to behave ourselves."

Edward's brow furrows.

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Perhaps that's why Taylor hasn't asked. Have you met her?"

"Yes. She's a sweet thing. Shy. Very pretty. I pay for her schooling."

Oh! I stop combing and stare at him in the mirror.

"I had no idea."

He shrugs.

"Seemed the least I could do. Also it means he won't quit."

"I'm sure he likes working for you."

Edward stares at me blankly, then shrugs.

"I don't know."

"I think he's very fond of you, Edward," I mutter and resume combing. I glance at him, and he's watching me intently.

"You think?"

"Yes. I do."

He snorts, a contented sound.

"Good," he says. "Will you talk to Tanya about the rooms over the garage?"

"Yes, of course." I don't feel the same irritation I did before at the mention of her name. My subconscious nods sagely at me. Yes... we done good today, as far as Tanya was concerned. My inner goddess gloats.

I am ready to cut Edward's hair.

"You sure about this?" I whisper. "Your last chance to duck out."

"Do your worst, Mrs Cullen. I don't have to look at me, you do."

I grin.

"Edward, I could look at you all day."

He shakes his head slightly, as if exasperated.

“It’s just a pretty face, baby.”

“And behind it is a very pretty man.” I kiss his temple. “My man.”

He grins shyly.

I have mentally divided Edward’s head of hair into eight sections. Lifting a lock from the first section I comb it upwards and snare it between my index and middle finger. I put the comb in my mouth, take the scissors and make the first snip, cutting an inch off the length. Edward closes his eyes and sits like a statue, sighing contentedly as I continue. Occasionally he opens his eyes and I catch him watching me intently. He doesn’t touch me while I work, and I’m grateful... His touch is so distracting.

~

Fifteen minutes later, I’m done.

“Finished,” I mutter. And I’m pleased with the result. He looks as hot as ever, his hair still floppy and sexy... just a bit shorter. Edward gazes at himself in the mirror, looking pleasantly surprised. He grins.

“Great job, Mrs Cullen.” He turns his head from side to side and snakes his arm around me. Pulling me to him he kisses and nuzzles my belly.

“Thank you,” he breathes.

“My pleasure.” I bend and kiss him briefly.

“It’s late. Bed.” He gives my behind a playful slap.

“Ah! I should clean up in here,” I protest. There is hair all over the floor.

Edward frowns, as if the thought would never have occurred to him.

“Okay, I’ll get the broom,” he says wryly. “I don’t want you embarrassing the staff with your lack of appropriate attire.”

“Do you know where the broom is?” I ask innocently. This stops Edward in his tracks.

“Um... no.”

I laugh.

“I’ll go.”

~o~

As I clamber into bed and wait for Edward to join me, I reflect on how differently this day could have ended. I was so mad at him earlier, and he with me. How am I going to deal with this running-a-company nonsense? I have no desire to run my own company. I am not him. I need to head this off at the pass. Perhaps I should have a safe word for when he’s being overbearing and domineering... for when he’s being an arse. I giggle. Perhaps the safe word should be ‘arse’. I find the thought very appealing.

“What?” he says, as he climbs into bed beside me wearing only his pj pants.

“Nothing,” I murmur. “Just an idea.”

“What idea?” he asks, stretching out beside me.

Here goes nothing...

“Edward, I don’t think I want to run a company.”

He props himself up on his elbow and gazes down at me.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it’s not something that has ever appealed to me.”

“You’re more than capable, Isabella.”

I shrug, flushing.

“I like to read books, Edward. Running a company will take me away from that.”

“You could be the Creative Head.”

I frown.

“You see,” he continues, “Running a successful company is all about embracing the talent of the individuals you have at your disposal. If that’s where your talents and your interests lie, then you structure the company to enable that.”

What?

“Don’t dismiss it out of hand, Isabella. You are a very capable woman.”

Again I am floored by his simple faith in my abilities. How can he possibly know that I’d be any good at this?

“I’m also worried it will take up too much of my time.”

Edward frowns.

“Time I could devote to you,” I whisper, deploying my secret weapon. His gaze darkens.

“I know what you’re doing,” he murmurs, amused.

Damn it!

“What?” I feign innocence.

“You’re trying to distract me from the issue at hand. You always do that. Just don’t dismiss the idea, Bella. Think about it. That’s all I ask.” He leans down and kisses me chastely, then skims his thumb down my cheek. I can see that this argument is going to run and run. I smile up at him – and something he said earlier today pops unbidden into my mind.

“Can I ask you something?” My voice is soft, tentative.

“Of course.”

“Earlier today you said if I was angry with you I should take it out on you in bed. What did you mean?”

He stills.

“What did you think I meant?” he asks, his brow furrowed.

Holy shit... I should just say it.

“That you wanted me to tie you up.”

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“Um... no. That’s not what I meant at all.”

“Oh.” I can’t help a small stab of disappointment.

“You want to tie me up?” he gasps, obviously reading my expression correctly. He sounds shocked. I blush.

“Well...”

“Bella, I...” he stops, and something dark crosses his face. Oh no.

“Edward,” I whisper, alarmed. I move so that I am lying on my side, propped up on my elbow like him. Reaching over I caress his face. His eyes are large and fearful. He shakes his head sadly.

Shit!

“Edward, hush. Stop. It doesn’t matter. I thought that’s what you meant.”

He takes my hand and places it on his pounding heart. Fuck! What is it?

“Bella, I don’t know how I’d feel about you touching me if I was restrained,” he whispers.

My scalp prickles. It’s like he’s confessing something deep and dark.

“This is still too new.” His voice is low and raw.

Fuck. It was just a question... and in that moment I realize that he’s come a long way, but he still has a long way to go. Oh, Fifty, Fifty, Fifty. Anxiety grips my heart. I lean over and he freezes, but I plant a soft kiss at the corner of his mouth.

“Edward, I got the wrong idea. Please don’t worry about it. Please don’t think about it.” I kiss him. He closes his eyes and groans and reciprocates, pushing me down into the mattress, his hands clasping my chin. And soon we’re lost... lost in each other again.

~oooOOOooo~

MOTU II 100

When I wake before the alarm the following morning Edward is wrapped around me like ivy, his head on my chest, his arm around my waist and his leg between mine – and he’s on my side of the bed. It’s always the same – provided I wake first, of course. If we argue the night before, this is how he ends up, coiled around me, making me hot... and bothered. Oh, Fifty. He is so needy on some level. Who would have thought? The familiar vision haunts me, of Edward as a dirty, wretched little boy. Gently I stroke his hair, and smile, my melancholy receding. It’s shorter now. He stirs, and sleepy, clear, bright green eyes meet mine. He blinks a couple of times as he fully wakes.

“Hi,” he murmurs, and smiles.

“Hi.” I beam back at him. I love waking to that smile.

He nuzzles my breasts and hums appreciatively deep in his throat. His hand travels down from my waist, skimming over the cool satin of my nightgown.

“What a tempting morsel you are,” he breathes. “But, tempting though you are –” he glances at the alarm – “I have to get up.” He stretches out, untangling himself from me, and rises. I lie back and enjoy the show – Edward stripping for his shower. He is perfect. I wouldn’t change a hair on his head... well, except when his hair gets too long.

I put my hands behind my head.

“Admiring the view, Mrs Cullen?” Edward arches a sardonic brow at me.

“It’s a mighty fine view, Mr Cullen.”

He grins and throws his PJs at me so they almost land on my face, but I catch them in time, giggling like a schoolgirl. With a wicked grin on his face he reaches down, pulls the duvet off me, puts one knee on the bed and grabs my ankles, pulling me towards him so that my nightdress rides up. I squeal, and he crawls up my body, trailing his nose and dropping little kisses, at my knee, my thigh... my... oh... Edward!

~o~

“Good morning, Mrs Cullen,” Mrs Cope greets me. I flush, remembering her tryst with Taylor the night before.

“Good morning,” I mutter, as she hands me a cup of tea. I’m hoping she’ll think nothing of my blush. The breakfast bar is set for two, and I scoot up onto the bar stool beside my delicious husband, who just looks radiant; freshly showered, his hair damp, wearing a crisp white shirt and that grey tie... my favorite tie. I have fond memories of that tie.

“How are you, Mrs Cullen?” he asks softly, his eyes warm.

“I think you know, Mr Cullen.” I gaze up at him through my lashes.

He smirks at me.

“Eat,” he orders. “You didn’t eat yesterday.”

Oh, bossy Fifty!

“That’s because you were being an arse.”

Mrs Cope drops something that clatters into the sink, making me jump. Edward seems oblivious to the noise. Ignoring her he gazes at me impassively.

“Arse or not. Eat.” His tone is very serious. No arguing with him.

“Okay! Picking up spoon, eating granola,” I mutter, like a petulant teenager. I reach for the Greek yoghurt and spoon some onto my cereal, followed by a handful of blueberries. I glance at Mrs Cope and she catches my eye. I smile, and she responds with a warm smile of her own. She got the yoghurt for me – it was my breakfast of choice on our honeymoon. I tuck into my food. I am famished – Jeez, if he just could keep his hands off me I’m sure I wouldn’t be this hungry. My subconscious raises a skeptical eyebrow. Okay, okay – so I can’t keep my hands off him either. I glance at him. Can you blame me? My inner goddess shakes her head emphatically.

“I may have to go to New York later in the week.” Edward interrupts my reverie.

“Oh.”

“It’ll mean an overnight. I want you to come with me.”

Oh no...

“Edward, I won’t get the time off.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. I sigh.

“I know you own the company, but I’ve been away for three weeks, Edward. Please. How can you expect me to run the business if I’m never there? I’ll be fine here. I’m assuming you’ll take Taylor with you – but Stuart and Ryan will be here.”

I stop, because Edward is grinning at me.

“What?” I snap.

“Nothing. Just you,” he says.

I frown at him. Is he laughing at me? Then a nasty thought pops into my mind.

“How are you getting to New York?” I whisper.

“The company jet, why?” His brow is furrowed – he’s derailed by my question.

“I just wanted to check if you were taking Echo Charlie.” My voice is quiet, and a shiver runs down my spine. I remember the last time he flew his helicopter. A wave of nausea hits me as I recall the anxious hours I spent waiting for news. That was possibly the lowest point in my life. I notice Mrs Cope has stilled too. I try and dismiss the idea.

“I wouldn’t fly to New York in Echo Charlie. She’s doesn’t have that kind of range. Besides, she won’t be back from the engineers for another two weeks.”

Oh... thank heavens. I can’t help my smile. It’s partly relief, but also the knowledge that the demise of Echo Charlie has occupied a great deal of Edward’s thoughts and time over the last few weeks.

“Well I’m glad she’s nearly fixed, but –” I stop. Can I tell him how nervous I’ll be when he flies next time?

“What?” he asks, as he finishes his omelet.

I shrug.

“Bella?” he says, more sternly.

“I just... you know. Last time you flew in her – I thought, we thought, you’d...” I can’t finish the sentence, and Edward’s expression softens.

“Hey.” He reaches up to caress my face with the back of his knuckles. “That was sabotage.” A dark expression crosses his face and for a moment I wonder if he knows who was responsible.

“I couldn’t bear to lose you,” I murmur.

“Five people have been fired because of that, Bella. It won’t happen again.”

“Five?”

He nods, his face serious.

Holy Crow!

“That reminds me. There’s a gun in your desk.”

He frowns at my non sequitur, and probably at my accusatory tone, though I don’t mean it that way.

“It’s Lauren’s,” he says finally, his eyes growing wide and wary.

“It’s fully loaded.”

“How do you know?” His frown deepens.

“I checked it yesterday.”

He scowls at me.

“I don’t know how I feel about you messing with guns. I hope you put the safety back on.”

I blink at him, momentarily stupefied.

“Edward, there’s no safety on that revolver. Don’t you know anything about guns?”

His eyes widen.

“Um... no.”

Taylor coughs discreetly from the entrance. Edward nods at him.

“We have to go,” Edward says. He stands, distracted, and slips on his grey jacket. I follow him into the hallway. He has Lauren’s gun. I am reeling from this news... and briefly I wonder what’s happened to her. Is she still in – where is it? East somewhere. New Hampshire? I can’t remember.

“Good morning, Taylor,” Edward says.

“Good morning Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen.” He nods at us both, but he’s careful not to look me in the eye. I’m grateful, recalling my state of deshabelle when we bumped into each other last night.

“I am just going to do my teeth,” I mutter. Edward always brushes his teeth before breakfast. I don’t understand why.

-

“You should ask Taylor to teach you how to shoot,” I say as we travel down in the elevator. Edward gazes down at me, amused.

“Should I?” he says dryly.

“Yes.”

“Isabella, I despise guns. My Dad has patched up so many victims of gun crime – I grew up with his anti-gun ethos. I support at least two gun control initiatives here in Washington.”

“Oh. Does Taylor carry a gun?”

Edward’s lips press into a hard line.

“Sometimes.”

The elevator doors open and we’re on the ground floor.

“You don’t approve?” I ask, as Edward ushers me out of the elevator.

“No,” he says, tight-lipped. “Let’s just say that Taylor and I hold very different views with regard to gun control.” I arch my brow at him. I am with Taylor on this.

Edward holds the foyer door open for me and I head out to the car. He has not let me drive alone to SIP since Echo Charlie’s demise was discovered to be sabotage. Stuart smiles pleasantly, holding the door open for me as Edward and I climb into the car.

“Please.” I reach across and grasp Edward’s hand.

“Please what?”

“Learn how to shoot.”

He rolls his eyes at me.

“No. End of discussion, Isabella.”

And I am a child again, to be scolded. I open my mouth to say something cutting, but decide I don’t want to start my workday in a bad mood. I fold my arms instead, and glimpse Taylor regarding me in the rear view mirror. He looks away, concentrating on the road in front, but shakes his head slightly, in obvious frustration. Hmm... Edward drives him crazy too, sometimes. The thought makes me smile, and my mood is saved.

“Where is Lauren?” I ask, as Edward gazes out of his window.

“I told you. She’s in Connecticut with her folks.” He glances at me.

“Did you check? After all, she does have long hair. It could have been her driving the Dodge.”

“Yes, I checked. She’s enrolled at an art school in Hamden. She started this week.”

On no! My world falls away.

“You’ve spoken to her?” I whisper, all the blood draining from my face.

Edward’s head whips round at the tone of my voice.

“No. Banner has,” he says. He gazes intently at me, searching my face for a clue to my thoughts.

“I see,” I murmur, relieved.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Edward sighs.

“Bella. What is it?”

I shrug, not wanting to admit to my irrational jealousy. Edward continues,

“I’m keeping tabs on her, checking that she stays on her side of the continent. She’s better, Bella. Banner has referred her to a psych in New Haven, and all the reports are very positive. She’s always been interested in art – so...” He stops, his face still searching mine. And in that moment I suspect that he is paying for her art classes. Do I want to know? Should I ask him? I mean it’s not like he can’t afford it – but why does he feel the obligation? I sigh. Edward’s baggage... it hardly compares to Peter Paton from biology class, and his half-assed attempts to kiss me. Edward reaches for my hand.

“Don’t sweat this, Isabella,” he murmurs, and I return his reassuring squeeze. I know he’s doing what he thinks is right.

Taylor pulls up outside SIP, and Stuart leaps out of the car to open my door. Edward pulls me towards him and kisses me quickly.

“Have a great day at work,” he breathes.

“You too. And if you are going to come and throw your weight around here today, please call ahead so I can prepare myself.” I smile sweetly at him.

Edward smirks.

“I’ll see what I can do, Mrs Cullen. Think of me.”

I blink at him.

“Always, Mr Cullen,” I smile shyly at him, and he grins back. Jeez, he’s adorable sometimes. I scramble out of the car and into the building, Stuart at my heels.

~o~

Mid morning I have a break in meetings. As I pick up the phone to call Rose I notice an email from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Flattery

Date: 25 August 2009: 09.54

To: Isabella Swan

Mrs Cullen

I have received three compliments on my new haircut. Compliments from my staff are new. It must be the ridiculous smile I'm wearing whenever I think about last night. You are indeed a wonderful, talented, beautiful woman.

And all mine.

Edward Cullen

CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I melt reading it.

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: Trying to concentrate here

Date: 25 August 2009: 10.48

To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen

I am trying to work and don't want to be distracted by delicious memories. Is now the time to confess that I used to cut my father's hair regularly? I had no idea it would stand me in such good stead.

And yes I am yours and you, my dear over-bearing husband who refuses to exercise his constitutional right under the second amendment to bear arms, are mine. But don't worry because I shall protect you. Always.

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Annie Oakley

Date: 25 August 2009: 10.53

To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen

I am delighted to see you have spoken to the IT dept and changed your name. :D
I shall sleep safe in my bed knowing that my gun-toting wife sleeps beside me.

Edward Cullen

CEO & Hoplophobe, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Hoplophobe? What the hell is that?

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: Long words

Date: 25 August 2009: 10.58

To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen

Once more you dazzle me with your linguistic prowess.

In fact your prowess in general, and I think you know what I'm referring to.

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Gasp!
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.01
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
Are you flirting with me?

Edward Cullen
Shocked CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Would you rather...
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.04
To: Edward Cullen

I flirted with someone else?

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Grrrrr
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.09
To: Isabella Cullen

NO!

Edward Cullen
Possessive CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: !
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.14
To: Edward Cullen

Are you growling at me? Cos that's kinda hot.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Beware
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.16
To: Isabella Cullen

Flirting and toying with me Mrs Cullen?
I may pay you a visit this afternoon.

Edward Cullen
Priapic CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Oh No!
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.20
To: Edward Cullen

I'll behave. I wouldn't want my boss's boss's boss getting on top of me at work.
Now let me get on with my job. My boss's boss's boss may fire my ass.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: &*%\$&*%&*%
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.23
To: Isabella Cullen

Believe me when I say there are a great many things he'd like to do to your ass right now. Firing it and you is not one of them.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Go Away!
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.26
To: Edward Cullen

Don't you have an empire to run?
Stop bothering me.
My next appointment is here.
Think about my ass, and I'll think about yours.
ILY x

Isabella Cullen
Now Moist Commissioning Editor, SIP

~ooo0O0ooo~

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Miss you already
Date: 27 August 2009: 04.32
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
You were adorable this morning.
Behave while I'm away.
I love you.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Edward's email is waiting for me when I arrive at work on Thursday. His threatened business trip to

New York has happened, and this will be the first night we've slept apart since the night before our wedding. I intend to have a few cocktails with Rose – that should help me sleep. Impulsively I email him back, although I know that he's still flying.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Behave Yourself!
Date: 27 August 2009: 09.03
To: Edward Cullen

Let me know when you land – I'll worry until you do.
And I shall behave. I mean how much trouble can I get into with Rose?

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

I hit send and sip my latte, courtesy of Hanna. Who knew I'd grow to love coffee? In spite of the fact that I'm going out this evening with Rose, I feel like a chunk of me is missing. It's somewhere in American air space at the moment, en route to New York. I didn't know I could feel this unsettled and anxious just because Edward's away. Surely over time I won't feel this loss and uncertainty... will I? I let out a heavy sigh and continue with my work.

Around lunchtime I start manically checking my email and my BlackBerry for a text. Where is he? Has he landed safely? Hanna asks if I want lunch but I'm too apprehensive and I wave her away. I know it's irrational, but I need to be sure he's arrived safely.

My office phone rings, startling me.

"Bella Sw– Cullen," I answer, stumbling over my name again.

"Hi." Edward's voice is warm, with a trace of amusement. Relief floods through me.

"Hi," I respond, grinning from ear to ear. "How was your flight?"

"Long. What are you doing with Rose?"

Oh no.

"We're just going out for a quiet drink."

Edward says nothing.

"Stuart and the new girl – Jones – are coming, to watch over us," I offer, trying to placate him.

"I thought Rose was coming to the apartment."

"She is, after a quick drink." Please let me go out!

Edward sighs heavily.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he says quietly. Too quietly.

I mentally kick myself.

"Edward, we'll be fine. I have Ryan, Stuart and Jones here. It's only a quick drink."

Edward remains resolutely silent, and I know he's not happy.

"I've only seen her three times since you and I met. Please. She's my best friend."

"Bella, I don't want to keep you from your friends. But I thought she was coming back to the apartment."

“Okay,” I acquiesce. “We’ll stay in.”

“Only while this lunatic is out there. Please.”

“I’ve said okay,” I mutter in exasperation, rolling my eyes.

Edward snorts softly down the phone.

“I always know when you’re rolling your eyes at me.”

I scowl at the receiver.

“Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. I’ll tell Rose.”

“Good,” he breathes, and I can hear his relief. I feel like a complete heel for worrying him.

“Where are you?”

“On the tarmac at JFK.”

“Oh, so you just landed.”

“Yes. You asked me to call the moment I landed.”

I smile. My subconscious glares at me – See? He does what he says he’s going to do.

“Well Mr Cullen, I’m glad one of us is punctilious.”

He laughs.

“Mrs Cullen, your gift for hyperbole knows no bounds. What am I going to do with you?”

“I am sure you’ll think of something imaginative. You usually do.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Yes.”

I sense his grin.

“I’d better go. Bella, do as you’re told, please. The security team knows what they’re doing.”

“Yes, Edward, I will.” I sound exasperated again – but Jeez, I get the message.

“I’ll see you tomorrow evening. I’ll call you later.”

“To check up on me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh Edward!” I scold him.

“Au revoir, Mrs Cullen.”

“Au revoir, Edward. I love you.”

He inhales sharply.

“And I you, Bella.”

Neither of us hang up.

“Hang up, Edward,” I whisper.

“You’re a bossy little thing aren’t you?”

“Your bossy little thing.”

“Mine,” he breathes. “Do as you’re told. Hang up.”

“Yes, sir.” I hang up and grin stupidly at the phone.

A few moments later an email appears in my in box.

-

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Twitching Palms

Date: 27 August 2009: 13.42 EST

To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen

You are as entertaining as ever on the phone.

I mean it. Do as you’re told.

I need to know you’re safe.

I love you.

Edward Cullen

CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Honestly, he’s the bossy one. But one phone call and all my anxiety has disappeared. He’s arrived safely and he’s fussing about me as usual. I hug myself momentarily. God, I love my man. Hanna knocks on my door, distracting me, and I land back with a thump in my office.

~o~

Rose looks gorgeous. In her tight white jeans and red camisole she’s ready to rock the town. She’s chatting animatedly to Claire in reception when I make my entrance.

“Bella!” she cries, scooping me up in a Rose hug. She holds me at arm’s length.

“Don’t you look the mogul’s wife?” she breathes. “Who would have thought, little Bella Swan? You look so... sophisticated!” She grins. I flush and roll my eyes at her. I am wearing a pale cream shift dress with a navy belt and navy pumps.

“It’s good to see you, Rose.” I hug her back.

“So, where are we going?”

“Edward wants us to go back to the apartment.”

“Aw, really? Can’t we sneak a quick cocktail at the Zig Zag Cafe? I’ve booked us a table.”

I open my mouth to protest.

“Please?” she whines and pouts prettily. She must be picking this up from Alice – she never pouts, normally. I’d really like a cocktail at the Zig Zag. We had such fun the last time we went there, and it’s close to Rose’s apartment...

I hold up my index finger.

“One.”

She grins.

“One,” she agrees, beaming at me. She links her arm in mine and we make our way out to the car, which is parked at the curb, Stuart at the wheel. We’re followed out by Miss Samantha Jones. She’s

new to the security team – a tall African-American with a no-nonsense attitude. I’ve yet to warm to her, maybe because she’s too cool and professional. The jury’s definitely out, but like the rest of the team she’s been hand-picked by Taylor. She’s dressed like Stuart, in a dark somber pant suit.

“Can you take us to the Zig Zag, please Stuart?”

Stuart turns to look at me, and I know he wants to say something. He’s obviously been given his orders. He hesitates.

“The Zig Zag Café. We’ll only have one.”

I give Rose a sideways glance and she’s glaring at Stuart. Poor man.

“As you wish, ma’am.”

“Mr Cullen requested you go back to the apartment,” Jones pipes up.

“Mr Cullen isn’t here,” I snap. “The Zig Zag, please.”

“Ma’am,” Stuart replies, with a sideways glance at Jones, who wisely holds her tongue.

Rose gapes at me as if she can’t believe her eyes and ears. I flush and shrug. Okay, so I’m a little more assertive than I used to be. Rose nods in approval as Stuart pulls out into the early evening traffic.

“You know the additional security is driving Esme and Alice crazy,” Rose says casually.

What? I gawk at her, baffled.

“You didn’t know?” She seems incredulous.

“Know what?”

“Security for all of the Cullens has been tripled. Gazillioned, even.”

“Really?”

“He hasn’t told you?”

I flush.

“No.” Why wouldn’t Edward tell me? “Do you know why?”

“James Smith,” says Rose, by way of explanation.

“What about James? I thought he was just after Edward,” I breathe. Jeez – why hasn’t he told me?

“Since Monday,” Rose says.

Last Monday? Hmm... we identified James on Sunday. But why all the Cullens? I am reeling. What’s going on?

“How do you know all this?”

“Emmett.”

Of course.

“Edward hasn’t told you any of this, has he?”

I flush once more.

“No.”

“Oh Bella, how annoying.”

I sigh. As ever, Rose has hit the nail squarely on the head – in her usual sledgehammer style.

“Do you know why?” I ask. If Edward’s not going to tell me, then maybe Rose will.

“Emmett said it’s something to do with information stored on James Smith’s computer when he was at SIP.”

Holy Crap.

“You’re kidding.” And I feel a surge of anger pulse through me. How does Rose know about this when I don’t?

I glance up to see Stuart eyeing me from the rear view mirror. The red light turns to green and he surges forward, focusing on the road ahead. I hold my finger up to my lips and Rose nods. Stuart probably knows, and I don’t.

“How’s Emmett?” I ask. Rose grins, stupidly, telling me all I need to know, and I grin with her.

Stuart pulls up at the end of the passageway that leads down to the Zig Zag Café and Jones opens my door. I scoot out and Rose scrambles out after me. We link arms and stroll down the passage, followed by Jones, who’s wearing a thunderous expression on her face. Oh for heaven’s sake – it’s just a drink. Stuart heads off to park the car.

~o~

“So how does Emmett know Tanya?” I ask, taking a sip of my second cosmopolitan. The bar is intimate and cozy, and I don’t want to leave. Rose and I have not stopped talking. I had forgotten how much I like hanging with her. It’s so liberating to be out, relaxing, enjoying Rose’s company. I contemplate texting Edward, then dismiss the idea. He’ll just be mad, and make me go home like an errant child.

“Don’t talk to me about that bitch!” Rose splutters.

I can’t help it. Rose’s reaction makes me laugh.

“What’s so funny, Swan?” she snaps, but not seriously.

“I feel the same way.”

“You do?”

“Yes. She was all over Edward.”

“She had a fling with Emmett.” Rose pouts.

“No!” I gasp.

She nods, her lips pressed together in the patented Rosalie Hale scowl.

“It was brief. Last year, I think. She’s a social climber. No wonder she has her sights set on Edward.”

“Edward is taken. I told her to leave him alone or I would fire her.”

Rose gapes at me once more, stunned. I nod proudly, and she lifts her glass to salute me, impressed and beaming.

“Mrs Isabella Cullen! Way to go!” We clink.

~o~

“Does Emmett own a gun?”

“No. He’s very anti-gun.” Rose stirs her third drink.

“Edward too. I think it was Carlisle’s influence,” I mutter.

I'm feeling a little tipsy.

"Carlisle's a good man." Rose mutters.

"He wanted a pre-nup," I mutter sadly.

"Oh, Bella." She reaches across and grasps my arm. "He was only looking out for his boy. As we both know, you have gold-digger tattooed on your forehead." She smiles at me, and I poke my tongue out at her.

"Mature, Mrs Cullen," she says grinning. She sounds like Edward. "You'll do the same for your son one day."

"My son?" I blink at her. It hadn't even crossed my mind that my kids will be rich. Holy crap... They'll want for nothing. I mean... nothing. This needs further thought – but not right now. I glance at Jones and Stuart, seated nearby, watching us and the evening crowd from a side table, each nursing a glass of sparkling mineral water.

"Do you think we should eat?" I ask.

"No. We should drink," Rose says.

"Why are you in such a drinking mood?"

"Because I don't see you enough anymore. I didn't know you'd up and marry the first guy who turned your head." She pouts again. "Honestly, you married with such indecent haste, I thought you were pregnant."

I giggle.

"Everyone thought I was pregnant," I mutter. "Let's not rehash that conversation again. Please! And I have to use the restroom."

Jones accompanies me. She says nothing. She doesn't have to. Disapproval radiates off her like a lethal isotope.

"I haven't been out on my own since I got married," I mutter wordlessly at the closed toilet door. I make a face, knowing that she's standing on the other side of the door, waiting, while I pee. What precisely is Smith going to do in a bar anyway? Edward is just over-reacting as usual.

~o~

"Rose, it's late. We should go."

It's 10.15 and I have sunk my fourth cosmopolitan. I am definitely feeling the effects of the alcohol... warm and fuzzy. Edward will be fine... Eventually. I know.

"Sure, Bella. It's been so good to see you. You just seem so much more... I don't know... Confident. Marriage obviously agrees with you."

I flush. Coming from Miss Rosalie Hale, this is indeed a compliment.

"It does," I whisper, and because I've probably had too much to drink, tears prick the back of my eyes. Could I be any happier? In spite of all his baggage, his nature, his Fiftyness, I have met and married the man of my dreams. I quickly change the subject to stem my sentimental thoughts, because I know I will cry otherwise.

"I have really enjoyed this evening." I grasp Rose's hand. "Thank you for dragging me out!" We hug. As she releases me I nod at Stuart, and he hands Jones the keys to the car. She leaves to fetch it.

"I'm sure Miss Goody-Two-Shoes Jones has told Edward I'm not at home. He'll be mad," I mutter to

Rose. And maybe he'll think of some delicious way to punish me... hopefully.

"Why are you grinning like a loon, Bella? You like making Edward mad?"

"No. Not really. But it's hard not to. He's very controlling sometimes." Most of the time.

"I've noticed," Rose says wryly.

~o~

We pull up outside Rose's apartment. She hugs me hard.

"Don't be a stranger," she whispers, and kisses my cheek. Then she's out of the car. I wave at her, feeling strangely homesick. I have missed this. Girl talk. It's fun and relaxing, and it makes me feel young and carefree. I must make more of an effort to see Rose... but the truth is, I love being in my bubble with Edward. Last night we attended a charity dinner together. There were so many men in suits and well-groomed elegant women talking about real estate prices, and sub prime mortgages, and toxic debt... I mean it was dull, really dull. It's refreshing to let my hair down with someone my own age.

My stomach rumbles. Jeez, I still haven't eaten. Shit – Edward! I scramble through my purse and fish out my BlackBerry. Holy crap – five missed calls! One text...

WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?

And one email...

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Angry. You've not seen angry
Date: 28 August 2009: 00.42 EST
To: Isabella Cullen

Isabella

Stuart tells me that you are drinking cocktails in a bar when you said you wouldn't.

Do you have any idea how mad I am at the moment?

I'll see you tomorrow.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

My heart sinks. Oh shit! I really am in trouble. My subconscious glares at me, then shrugs, wearing her you-made-your-bed-you-lie-in-it face. What did I expect? I contemplate calling him, but it's late and he's probably asleep... or pacing. I decide a quick text may be enough.

STILL IN ONE PIECE. MISSING YOU – PLEASE DON'T BE MAD

I gaze at my BlackBerry, willing him to respond, but it's ominously silent. I sigh.

Jones pulls up outside Escala and Stuart clambers out to hold the door open for me. As we stand waiting for the elevator I take the opportunity to quiz him.

"What time did Edward call you?"

Stuart flushes slightly.

"About 9:30, ma'am."

I nod.

“Why didn’t you interrupt my conversation with Rose so I could speak with him?”

“Mr Cullen told me not to.”

I purse my lips. The elevator arrives, and we ride up in silence. I am suddenly grateful that Edward has a whole night to recover from his snit – and that he’s on the other side of America. It gives me some time.

The doors to the elevator open, and for a split second I stare at the foyer table, wondering – what is wrong with this picture? The vase of flowers lies smashed into fragments all over the floor of the foyer, water and flowers and chunks of china are strewn everywhere, and the table is overturned. Stuart grabs my arm and pulls me back into the elevator.

“Stay there!” he hisses, drawing a gun. He steps into the foyer and disappears from my field of vision.

Oh no! I cower in the back of the elevator. What’s going on?

“Ethan!” I hear Ryan call from inside the great room. “Code Blue!”

Code blue?

“You have the perp?” Stuart calls back. “Jesus H Christ!”

I flatten myself against the elevator wall. What the hell is happening? Adrenaline spikes through my body, and my heart leaps into my throat. I can hear talking – soft voices – and a moment later Stuart reappears in the foyer, standing in the puddle of water. He is re-holstering his gun.

“You can come in, Mrs Cullen,” he says gently.

“What’s happened, Ethan?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“We’ve had a visitor.” He takes my elbow, and I’m grateful for the support – my legs have turned to jelly. I walk with him through the open double doors.

Ryan is standing at the entrance of the great room. A cut above his eye is bleeding, and there’s another on his mouth. He looks roughed up, his clothes disheveled. But more shockingly, slumped at his feet is Mr James Smith.

~ooo0O0ooo~

MOTU II 101/14

“Is he–?” I gasp, unable to finish the sentence, as I gaze wide-eyed and terrified at Ryan. I can barely bring myself to look at the prone figure on the floor. My heart is pounding and I can hear the blood pulse in my eardrums. The alcohol flowing through my system enhances the sound.

“No ma’am, just knocked out cold.”

Relief floods through me. Oh thank God.

“And you?” I ask, gazing at Ryan. I realize I don’t know his first name. He’s panting as if he’s run a marathon. He wipes the corner of his mouth, removing the trace of blood, and a faint bruise is forming on his cheek.

“He put up one hell of a fight, but I’m good, Mrs Cullen.” He smiles reassuringly at me. If I knew him

better I'd say he looks a trifle smug.

"And Gail? Mrs Cope?" Oh no... is she okay? Has she been harmed?

"I'm here, Bella," says Mrs Cope, behind me. Glancing quickly back, I see she's in a nightdress and robe, her hair loose, her face ashen and her eyes wide... like mine, I imagine.

"Ryan woke me. Insisted I come in here." She points behind her into Taylor's office. "I'm fine. Are you okay?" she breathes.

I nod briskly, and I realize she's probably just come out of the panic room, built adjoining Taylor's office. Who knew we'd need it so soon? Edward had insisted on its installation shortly after our engagement – and I had rolled my eyes at him. Now, seeing Gail standing in the doorway, I feel grateful for his foresight.

A creak from the door to the foyer distracts me. It's hanging off its hinges. What the hell happened to that?

"Was he alone?" I ask Ryan.

"Yes ma'am. You wouldn't be standing here if he wasn't, I can assure you." Ryan sounds vaguely affronted.

"How did he get in?" I ask, ignoring his tone.

"Through the service elevator. Bold as brass, ma'am."

I stare down at James's slumped figure. He's wearing a uniform of sorts – coveralls, I think.

"When?"

"About ten minutes ago. I caught him on the CCTV. He was wearing gloves... kinda strange in August, ma'am. I recognized him and decided to give him access. That way I knew we'd have him. You weren't here ma'am, and Gail was safe, so I figured it was now or never." Ryan looks very pleased with himself once more, and Stuart scowls at him in disapproval.

Gloves? The thought distracts me, and I glance once more at James. Yes, he's wearing brown leather gloves. Creepy.

"What now?" I breathe, trying to dismiss the ramifications from my mind.

"Time to call the police and the paramedics, let them do their thing. I want to secure him first," Ryan replies.

"Secure him?"

"In case he wakes." Ryan glances anxiously at Stuart.

"What do you need?" asks Mrs Cope, stepping forward. She's recovered her composure.

"Something to restrain him – cord, or rope," Ryan replies.

Cable ties. I flush as memories of the previous night invade my mind. Reflexively I rub my wrists and glance quickly down at them. No, no bruising. Good.

"I have something. Cable ties. Will they do?"

All eyes turn to me.

"Yes ma'am. Perfect," Stuart says, serious and straight-faced.

I want the floor to swallow me up, but I turn and head for our bedroom. Sometimes you just have to

brazen things out... perhaps it's the combination of fear and alcohol making me audacious.

When I return Mrs Cope is surveying the mess in the foyer, and Miss Jones has joined the security team. I hand the cable ties to Stuart, who slowly and with frankly unnecessary care ties Smith's hands behind his back. Mrs Cope disappears into the kitchen and returns with a small first aid kit. She takes Ryan's arm, leads him into the doorway of the great room and starts tending to the cut above his eye. He flinches as she dabs it with an antiseptic wipe. Then I notice the Glock on the floor... with a silencer attached. Holy Shit! James was armed? Bile rises in my throat and I fight it down.

"Don't touch, Mrs Cullen," says Jones, when I bend to pick it up. Stuart emerges from Taylor's office wearing latex gloves.

"I'll take care of that, Mrs Cullen," he says.

"It's his?" I ask.

"Yes ma'am," says Ryan, wincing once more from Mrs Cope's ministrations. Holy crap. Ryan fought an armed man, in my home. I shudder at the thought. Stuart bends and picks up the Glock. Charlie has one, I remember, and I think I snort. Yes – snorting is good. Removing the silencer Stuart slides it and the gun into a zip-lock bag, then squats to pat down James. He pauses, and out of James' pocket he pulls a roll of duct tape. Stuart blanches, and places the tape into another zip-lock bag. Why duct tape? I think idly, watching the proceedings with fascination and an odd detachment. Then bile rises to my throat again at the implications. I rapidly dismiss them from my head. Don't go there, Bella!

"Should we call the police?" I mutter, trying to hide my fear. I want Smith out of my home, sooner rather than later.

Ryan and Stuart glance nervously at each other.

"I think we should call the police," I say rather more forcefully, wondering why Ryan and Stuart look suddenly nervous.

"I've just tried Taylor and he's not answering his cell. Maybe he's asleep." Stuart checks his watch. "It's 1:45 am on the East Coast."

Oh no.

"Have you called Edward?" I whisper.

"No ma'am."

"Were you calling Taylor for instructions?"

Stuart looks momentarily embarrassed.

"Yes ma'am."

Part of me bristles. This man – I glance down at Smith again – has invaded my house, and he needs to be removed by the police. As a cop's daughter I don't understand their ambivalence. But looking at the four of them, into their anxious eyes, I decide I should call Edward. My scalp prickles. I know he's mad at me – really, really mad at me – and I quail at the thought of what he'll say. And how he'll stress because he's not here, and can't be here until tomorrow evening. Part of me feels I've worried him enough this evening. Perhaps I shouldn't call him. And then it occurs to me: Shit – If I'd been here? I pale at the thought. Thank heavens I was out. Maybe I won't be in so much trouble after all.

"Is he okay?" I ask, pointing at James.

"He'll have an aching skull when he wakes," Ryan says, gazing down at James with contempt. "But we need paramedics here to make sure."

I reach into my purse and pull out my BlackBerry, and before I can give too much thought to the extent of Edward's anger, I dial his number. It goes straight to voice mail – he must have switched it off because he's so mad. I cannot think what to say. Turning away I walk down the hallway a little, away from everyone.

"Hi. It's me. Please don't be mad. We've had an incident at the apartment. But it's under control, so don't worry. No one is hurt. Call me." I hang up.

"Call the police." I tell Stuart. He nods, takes out his cell, and makes the call.

~o~

Officer Skinner is deep in conversation with Ryan at the dining room table. Officer Walker is with Stuart in Taylor's office. I don't know where Jones is... perhaps in Taylor's office. Detective Clark is barking questions at me as we sit on the couch in the great room. He's tall, blond and would be good looking if it wasn't for his permanent scowl. I suspect he's been woken and dragged from his warm bed because the home of one of Seattle's most influential and wealthy businessmen has been breached.

"He used to be your boss?" Clark asks tersely.

"Yes."

I am tired – beyond tired – and I want to go to bed. I still haven't heard from Edward. On the plus side, Smith has been taken away by the paramedics, accompanied by Skinner's colleague Officer Lee. Mrs Cope hands me and Detective Clark each a cup of tea.

"Thanks," grunts Clark, and turns back to me. "And where is Mr Cullen?"

"New York. On business. He'll be back tomorrow evening... I mean this evening." It's after midnight.

"Smith is known to us," Detective Clark murmurs. "I'll need you to come down to the station house to make a statement. But that can wait. It's late and there are a couple of reporters camped out on the sidewalk. Do you mind if I look around?"

"Of course not," I offer, relieved his questioning is finished. I shudder at the thought of the paps outside. Well, they won't be a problem until tomorrow. I remind myself to call my Mom and Charlie, just in case they hear anything and worry.

"Mrs Cullen, may I suggest you go to bed?" Mrs Cope asks softly.

I look up at Gail, into her warm, kind eyes, and suddenly feel an overwhelming need to cry. She reaches over and rubs my shoulder.

"We're safe now," she murmurs. "This will all look better in the morning, once you've had some sleep. And Mr Cullen will be back tomorrow evening," she continues. I glance nervously up at her, keeping my tears at bay. Edward is going to be so mad.

"Can I get you anything before you go to bed?" she asks.

What? And in that moment, I realize how hungry I am.

"I'd love something to eat," I whisper.

She smiles broadly.

"Sandwich and some milk?"

I nod in gratitude and she heads towards the kitchen. Ryan is still with Officer Skinner. Beyond the door to the foyer that still hangs off its hinges I can see Detective Clark examining the mess outside the

elevator. He looks thoughtful, in spite of his scowl. And suddenly I feel homesick – homesick for Edward. I wish he were here. I put my head in my hands. What an evening. I want to crawl into Edward's lap, to have him hold me and tell me that he loves me, even though I don't do as I'm told – but that won't be possible until this evening. Inwardly I roll my eyes... Why didn't he tell me about the Cullens' increased security? What exactly is on James's computer? Right now, I just don't care. I want my husband. I miss him.

"Here you are, Bella dear." Mrs Cope interrupts my inner turmoil. When I glance up at her she hands me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, her eyes twinkling, her smile benign. I haven't had one of these for years. I smile shyly at her, and tuck in.

When I finally crawl into bed I curl up on Edward's side, dressed in his T-shirt. Both his pillow and his T smell of him, and as I drift off I silently wish him safe passage home... and a good mood.

~o~

I wake with a start. It's light and my head is aching, throbbing gently. Oh no. I hope I don't have a hangover. Cautiously I open my eyes, and as they flutter open I notice the bedroom chair has moved, and Edward is seated in it. He's wearing his tux, and the end of his bowtie is peeping out of the breast pocket. Briefly I wonder if I'm dreaming. His left arm is draped over the chair, and in his hand he holds a cut glass tumbler of amber liquid... Brandy? Whiskey? I have no idea. One long leg is crossed at the ankle over his knee. He's wearing black socks and dress shoes. His right elbow rests on the arm of the chair, his hand at his chin, and he's slowly running his index finger rhythmically back and forth over his lower lip. His green eyes burn intensely in the early morning light, but his general expression is completely unreadable.

My heart almost stops. He's here. How did he get here? He must have left New York last night. How long has he been here... watching me sleep?

"Hi," I whisper.

He regards me coolly, and my stuttering heart stutters once more. Oh no. He moves his long fingers away from his mouth, tosses the remainder of his drink down his throat, reaches over and places the glass on the bedside table. I half expect him to kiss me, but he doesn't. He sits back, continuing to regard me, his expression impassive.

"Hello," he says finally, his voice hushed. And I know he's still mad. Really mad.

"You're back."

"It would appear so."

Slowly I pull myself up into a sitting position, not taking my eyes off him. My mouth is so dry.

"How long have you been sitting there watching me sleep?"

"Long enough."

"You're still mad." I can hardly speak the words.

He gazes at me, as if considering his response.

"Mad," he says, as if testing the word, weighing up its nuances, its meaning. "No, Bella. I am far, far beyond mad."

Holy crap. I try to swallow, but it's hard with such a dry mouth.

"Far beyond mad... that doesn't sound good," I breathe.

He gazes at me, completely impassive, and doesn't respond. A stark silence stretches between us. I reach over to my glass of no-longer-quite-so-sparkling water and take a welcome sip, trying to bring my erratic heart rate under control.

"Ryan caught James." I try a different tack and to give myself a moment of time, place my glass beside his on the bedside table.

"I know," he says icily.

Of course he knows.

"Are you going to be monosyllabic for long?"

He blinks at me, as if he hadn't expected this question.

"Yes," he says finally.

Oh... okay. What to do? Defense – the best form of attack.

"I'm sorry I stayed out."

"Are you?"

"No," I mutter after a pause, because it's true.

"Why say it then?"

"Because I missed you, and I'm glad you're back."

He sighs heavily, as if he's been holding this tension for a thousand hours, and runs his hand through his hair. He looks beautiful. Mad, but beautiful. I drink him in, and it's as if my prayers have been answered, and my dreams have come true. Edward's back – angry, but here, in one piece.

"I think Detective Clark wants to talk to you."

"I'm sure he does."

"Edward, please..."

"Please what?"

"Don't be so cold."

His eyebrows rise slightly in surprise.

"Isabella, cold is not what I'm feeling at the moment. Red-hot. That might be close. Burning enraged hot might be closer still. I don't know how to deal with these..." He waves his hand as if grasping for the word. "Feelings."

Oh. His honesty disarms me. All I want to do is crawl into his lap. It's all I've wanted to do since I came home last night. But right now, I don't think it's a good idea. Is it? To hell with this. I move, taking him completely by surprise, and clambering awkwardly into his lap, I curl up. He doesn't push me away, which is what I'd feared. After a beat he folds his arms around me and buries his nose in my hair. He smells of whiskey. Jeez, has he drunk a lot? He smells of bodywash too... he smells of Edward. I wrap my arms around his neck and nuzzle his throat, and he sighs once more, more deeply this time.

"Oh, Mrs Cullen. What am I going to do with you?" He kisses the top of my head. I close my eyes, relishing the contact with him.

"How much have you had to drink?"

He stills.

“Why?”

“You don’t normally drink hard liquor.”

“This is my second glass. I’ve had a trying night, Isabella. Give a man a break.”

I smile.

“If you insist, Mr Cullen,” I breathe into his neck. “You smell heavenly. I slept on your side of the bed because your pillow smells of you.”

He nuzzles my hair.

“Did you now? I wondered why you were on this side. I’m still mad at you.”

“I know.”

His hand rhythmically strokes my back.

“And I’m mad at you,” I whisper.

He pauses.

“And what, pray, have I done to deserve your ire?”

“I’ll tell you later when you’re no longer burning enraged hot.” I kiss his throat. He closes his eyes and leans into my kiss, but makes no move to kiss me back. His arms tighten around me, squeezing me.

“When I think of what might have happened...” His voice is barely a whisper. Broken, raw.

“I’m okay,” I murmur against his throat.

“Oh, Bella.” It’s almost a sob.

“I’m okay. We’re all okay. A bit shaken. But Gail is fine. Ryan is fine. And James is gone.”

He shakes his head.

“No thanks to you,” he breathes.

What?

I push away, and glare at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to argue about it right now, Bella.”

I blink. Well, maybe I do... but I decide against it. At least he’s talking to me.

I nestle into him once more. His fingers move to my hair and start playing with it.

“I want to beat the shit out of you,” he says matter-of-factly after a while.

My heart leaps into my mouth. Fuck.

“I know,” I whisper.

“Maybe I will.”

“I hope not.”

He hugs me tighter.

“Bella, Bella, Bella. You’d try the patience of a saint.”

"I could accuse you of many things, Mr Cullen, but being a saint isn't one of them," I murmur. And finally I am blessed with his reluctant chuckle.

"Good point well made, as ever, Mrs Cullen." He kisses my forehead and shifts.

"Back into bed. You had a late night too." He moves quickly, picking me up and depositing me back on the bed.

"Will you come and lie down with me?"

"No. I have things to do." He reaches down and collects the glass. "Go back to sleep. I'll wake you in a couple of hours."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"Yes."

"I'll go back to sleep, then."

"Good." He pulls the duvet over me and kisses my forehead once more. "Sleep," he says.

And because I feel so groggy from the night before, and relieved that he's back, and because I'm emotionally fatigued by our early-morning encounter, I do exactly as I'm told. As I drift off I'm curious, though grateful, given my arid mouth, to know why he hasn't leapt on me and had his wicked way.

~o~

"There's some orange juice for you here," says Edward softly, and my eyes flutter open again. I have just had the most restful two hours of sleep I can remember, and I wake refreshed, my head no longer throbbing. The orange juice is a welcome sight – as is my husband. He's in his sweats. And I'm momentarily zapped back to the Heathman Hotel, and the first time I ever woke up with him. Either he's been working out in the basement gym or he's been for a run, but his grey tank top is covered in sweat. He shouldn't look this good after a workout.

"I'm going to take a shower," he murmurs, and disappears to the bathroom. I frown. He's still so distant. He's either distracted by all that's happened, or still mad, or... what? I sit up and reach for the orange juice, swigging it down far too quickly. It's delicious, ice-cold, and it makes my mouth a much better place. Climbing out of bed I am anxious to close the distance – real and metaphysical – between me and my husband. I glance quickly at the alarm. It's 8.00 am. I strip off Edward's t-shirt and follow him into the bathroom. He's in the shower, washing his hair, and I don't hesitate. I clamber in behind him and wrap my arms around him – my front to his wet, muscular back. He stiffens immediately, but I ignore his reaction. Holding him tightly I press my cheek flat against him, closing my eyes. After a moment he shifts slightly so we are both under the cascade of hot water, and carries on washing his hair. I let the water wash over me as I cradle the man I love. I think of all the times he's fucked me, and all the times he's made love to me, in here. I frown. He's never been this quiet. Turning my head I start to trail kisses across his back. His body stiffens again.

"Bella," he warns.

"Hmmm."

My hands travel slowly down over his taut stomach to his belly. He places both his hands on mine and brings them to an abrupt halt. He shakes his head.

"Not now," he breathes.

Oh. I release him, immediately. He's saying no? My mind goes into freefall – has this ever happened

before? My subconscious shakes her head, her lips pursed. She glares at me over her half-moon glasses, wearing her you've-really-fucked-this-up look. I feel like I've been slapped, hard. Rejected. And a lifetime of insecurity spawns the ugly thought: He doesn't want me anymore. Oh no...

I gasp as the pain sears through me. Edward turns, and I'm relieved to see he's not completely oblivious to my charms. Grasping my chin he tilts my head back and I find myself gazing into his wary, beautiful green eyes.

"I don't trust myself," he says, his voice quiet and serious.

Trust himself? With what? Leaning down he rests his forehead against mine, closing his eyes. Oh, Edward – what do you mean? I reach up and caress his face.

"I think you're over-reacting," I whisper.

He straightens, blanching, and gapes at me. And because he's moved, I drop my hand. Holy Crap.

"Over-reacting?," he gasps. "Some fucking lunatic gets into my apartment to kidnap my wife, and you think I'm over-reacting!?" The restrained menace in his voice is frightening, and his eyes blaze as he stares at me like I'm the fucking lunatic.

"No... um. That's not what I was referring to. I thought this was about me staying out."

He closes his eyes once more, as if in pain, and shakes his head.

"Edward, I wasn't here," I breathe, trying to appease and reassure him.

"I know," he whispers opening his eyes. "And all because you can't follow a simple, fucking request." His tone is bitter and it's my turn to blanch. "I don't want to discuss this now, in the shower. I am still fucking mad at you Isabella. You're making me question my judgment." He turns and promptly leaves the shower, grabbing a towel and stalking out of the bathroom, leaving me bereft under the shower..

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Then the significance of what he's just said dawns on me. Kidnap? Fuck. James wanted to kidnap me? I recall the duct tape, and not wanting to think too deeply about why James carried it. Does Edward have more information? Hurriedly I wash myself, then shampoo and rinse my hair. I want to know. I need to know. I am not going to let him keep me in the dark about this.

Edward's not in the bedroom when I come out. Jeez, he dresses quickly. I do the same, throwing on my favorite plum dress and black sandals, and I'm conscious that I've chosen this outfit because Edward likes it. I vigorously towel-dry my hair, then braid it and wind it into a bun. Fitting diamond studs into my ears, I dash to the bathroom to apply a little mascara. A quick glance in the mirror... I am pale. Jeez – I'm always pale. I take a deep steadying breath. I need to face the consequences of my rather rash decision to actually enjoy myself with my friend. I sigh... knowing that Edward won't see it that way.

Edward is nowhere to be seen in the great room. Mrs Cope is busying herself in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Bella," she says sweetly.

"Morning," I smile broadly at her. I am Bella again!

"Tea?"

"Please."

"Anything to eat?"

"Please. I'd like an omelet this morning."

“With mushrooms and spinach?”

“And cheese?”

“Coming up.”

“Where’s Edward?”

“Mr Cullen’s in his study.”

“Has he had breakfast?” I glance at the two places set on the breakfast bar.

“No, ma’am.”

“Thanks.”

Edward is on the phone, dressed in a white shirt with no tie, looking like a very relaxed CEO. How deceptive appearances can be. Perhaps he’s not going into the office after all. He glances up when I appear in the doorway but shakes his head at me, indicating that I am not welcome. Shit... I turn and wander dejectedly back to the breakfast bar. Taylor appears, snappily dressed, looking like he’s had eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

“Morning, Taylor,” I murmur, trying to gauge his mood, and to see if he’ll offer me any visual cues about what has been going on.

“Good morning, Mrs Cullen,” he replies, and I can hear the sympathy in those four words. I smile compassionately back at him, knowing he had to endure an angry frustrated Edward returning to Seattle way ahead of schedule.

“How was the flight?” I dare to ask.

“Long, Mrs Cullen.” His brevity speaks volumes. “May I ask how you are?” he adds, his tone softening.

“I’m good,” I breathe.

He nods.

“If you’ll excuse me.” He heads towards Edward’s study.

Hmmm. Taylor’s allowed in, but not me.

“Here you go.” Mrs Cope places my breakfast in front of me. My appetite has vanished, but I eat anyway, not wishing to offend her.

By the time I have eaten as much of my breakfast as I can manage, Edward has still not emerged from his study. Is he avoiding me?

“Thanks, Mrs Cope,” I murmur, sliding off the bar stool and heading to the bathroom to clean my teeth. As I brush them I am reminded of Edward’s sulk over the wedding vows. He holed up in his study then too. Is that what this is? We really need to talk. I need to know about James, and about the increased security for the Cullens – all the details that have been kept from me, but not from Rose. Obviously Emmett talks to her.

I glance at my watch. It’s 8.50 – I’m late for work. I finish brushing my teeth, apply a little lip gloss, grab my lightweight black jacket and head back to the great room.

I am relieved to see Edward there, eating his breakfast.

“You’re going?” he says when he sees me.

“To work? Yes, of course.” Bravely I walk towards him and rest my hands on the edge of the breakfast

bar. He gazes at me blankly.

“Edward, we’ve hardly been back a week. I have to go to work.”

“But—” He stops, and rakes his hand through his hair.

Mrs Cope walks quietly out of the room. Discreet, Gail, discreet.

“I know we have a great deal to talk about, Edward. Perhaps if you’ve calmed down, we can do it this evening.”

His mouth pops open slightly with shocked surprise.

“Calmed down?” His voice is eerily soft.

I flush.

“You know what I mean.”

“No, Isabella, I don’t know what you mean.”

“I don’t want a fight. I was coming to ask you if I could take my car.”

“No. You can’t,” he snaps.

“Okay.” I acquiesce immediately.

He blinks. He was obviously expecting a fight.

“Jones will accompany you.” His tone is slightly less belligerent.

Dammit, not Jones. I want to pout and protest, but decide against it. Surely now James has been caught we can cut back on our security. I remember my Mom’s ‘words of wisdom’ talk the day before my wedding. Bella honey, you really have to choose your battles. It’ll be the same with your kids when you have them. Well, at least he’s letting me go to work.

“Okay,” I murmur. And because I don’t want to leave him like this – with so much unresolved and so much tension between us – I step tentatively towards him. He stiffens, his eyes widening, and for a moment he looks so vulnerable it pulls at some deep, dark place in my heart – or is it my soul? Oh Edward, I am so sorry. I kiss him chastely on the side of his mouth. He closes his eyes, as if relishing my touch.

“Don’t hate me,” I whisper.

He grabs my hand.

“I don’t hate you,” he says, his eyes suddenly wide and wary.

“You haven’t kissed me,” I whisper.

He seems to sag slightly with relief.

“I know,” he mutters.

I am desperate to ask him why, but I’m not sure I want to know the answer. He stands suddenly and grabs my face between his hands, and in a flash his lips are hard on mine. I gasp with surprise, inadvertently granting his tongue access. He takes full advantage, invading my mouth, claiming me... and just as I’m beginning to respond he releases me again, his breathing quickening.

“Taylor will take you and Jones to SIP,” he says. His bold green eyes never leaving mine and flaring with need. “Taylor!” he calls. Whoa –that look. I know that look. I flush, trying to recover some composure.

“Sir.” Taylor is standing in the doorway.

“Tell Jones Mrs Cullen is going to work. Can you drive them, please?”

“Certainly.” Turning on his heel Taylor disappears.

“If you could try to stay out of trouble today, I would appreciate it,” Edward mutters.

“I’ll see what I can do.” I smile sweetly.

A reluctant half smile tugs at Edward’s lips, but he doesn’t give in to it.

“I’ll see you later, then,” he says coolly.

“Later,” I whisper.

Jones and I take the service elevator down to the basement garage in order to avoid the media outside. James’s arrest, and the fact he was apprehended in our apartment, is now public knowledge. As I clamber into the Merc I wonder if there will be more paparazzi waiting at SIP, like the day our engagement was announced.

We drive a while in silence, until I remember to call first Charlie and then my Mom to reassure them Edward and I are safe. Mercifully both calls are short and I hang up just as we arrive outside SIP. As I feared there’s a small crowd of reporters and photographers lying in wait. They turn as one, alerted to the Merc.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Mrs Cullen?” Taylor asks.

Part of me just wants to go home –but that means spending the day with Mr Burning Enraged. Hopefully, with a little time he will gain some perspective. James is in police custody, so Fifty should be happy –but he’s not... and part of me understands why. Too much of this is out of his control... including me.

I don’t have time to think about this now.

“Take me round to the delivery entrance, please Taylor.”

“Yes ma’am.”

There’s no one round the back. I am sure the pack of hounds will be here within seconds, but Jones and I make it in through the double-doored entrance at the rear with no bother. I head straight to my office while Jones heads to Reception to do whatever she does when she’s here.

Hanna hands me my latte, saying nothing.

“Thanks, Hanna.”

“Anything else you need, Bella?”

“Could I get a copy of the Seattle Times? I’d like to see what it says.”

“Sure thing.”

I sit down at my desk and call Rose. She’ll be anxious if she heard the news this morning.

~o~

It’s one o’clock. I’ve immersed myself in work all morning. There’s a knock on the door and Victoria pops her head round.

“Can I have a moment?” she asks brightly.

“Sure,” I mutter, surprised at her unscheduled appearance.

She enters and sits down, tossing her long red hair over her shoulder.

“I just wanted to check you’re okay. Roach asked me to pay you a visit,” she adds hurriedly. Flushing slightly, she continues, “I mean, with all that went on last night.”

James Smith’s arrest is all over the newspapers, but no-one seems to have made the connection yet with the fire at CEH.

“I’m fine,” I answer, trying not to think too deeply about how I feel. James wanted to do me harm.

Well, that’s not news – he’s tried before. It’s Edward I’m more concerned about. I glance quickly at my email. There’s still nothing from him. I don’t know if I send him an email if I’d just be poking Mr Enraged further.

“Good,” Victoria answers, and her smile actually touches her eyes for a change. “If there’s anything I can do – anything you need – let me know.”

“Will do.”

Victoria stands.

“I know how busy you are, Bella. I’ll let you get on.”

“Um... thanks.”

She leaves.

That has to have been the briefest meeting in the Western Hemisphere today. Perhaps Roach sent her in here. Perhaps he’s worried, given I’m his boss’s wife. I shake off the dark thoughts and reach for my BlackBerry, in the hope that there might be a message from Edward. I hear my work email ping.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Statement

Date: 28 August 2009: 13.04

To: Isabella Cullen

Isabella

Detective Clark will be visiting your office today at 3 pm to take your statement.

I have insisted that he should come to you, as I don’t want you going to the police station.

Edward Cullen

CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I gaze at his email for a full five minutes, trying to think of a light and witty response to lift his mood. I draw a complete blank, and opt for brevity instead.

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: Statement

Date: 28 August 2009: 13.12

To: Edward Cullen

Okay.

Bx

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

I stare at the screen for another five minutes, anxious for his response... but there’s nothing. Edward is not in the mood to play today.

I sit back. Can I blame him? My poor Fifty was probably frantic, back in the early hours of this morning. Then a thought occurs to me. He was in his tux when I woke this morning. What time did he decide to come back from New York? He normally leaves functions between ten and eleven. Last night at that hour I was still at large with Rose.

Did Edward come home because I was out, or because of the James incident? If he left because I was out having a good time, he would have had no idea about James, about the police – nothing... until he landed in Seattle. It's suddenly very important to me to find out. If Edward came back merely because I was out then he was over-reacting. My subconscious sucks her teeth, wearing her harpy face. Okay, I am glad he's back, so maybe it's irrelevant. But still – Edward must have had one hell of a shock when he landed. No wonder he's so confused today. His earlier words come back to me: I am still fucking mad at you, Isabella. You're making me question my judgment.

I have to know – did he come back because of Cocktailgate, or because of the fucking lunatic?

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Your Flight
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.24
To: Edward Cullen

What time did you decide to come back to Seattle yesterday?

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your flight
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.26
To: Isabella Cullen

Why?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Your Flight
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.29
To: Edward Cullen

Call it curiosity.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your flight
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.32
To: Isabella Cullen

Curiosity killed the cat.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Huh?

Date: 28 August 2009: 13.35

To: Edward Cullen

What is that oblique reference to?

You know where I am going with this don't you?

Did you decide to return because I went out for a drink with my friend after you asked me not to or did you return because a madman was in your apartment?

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

I stare at my screen. There's no response. I glance at the clock on my computer – 13.45 and still no response.

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: Here's the thing...

Date: 28 August 2009: 13.47

To: Edward Cullen

I will take your silence as an admission that you did indeed return to Seattle because I CHANGED MY MIND. I am an adult female and went for a drink with my friend. I did not understand the security ramifications of CHANGING MY MIND because YOU NEVER TELL ME ANYTHING. I found out from Rose that security has in fact been stepped up for all the Cullens, not just us. I think you generally over-react where my safety is concerned, and I understand why – but it's like the boy crying wolf. I never have a clue about what is a real concern or merely something that is perceived as a concern by you. I had two of the security detail with me. I thought both Rose and I would be safe. Fact is, we were safer in that bar than at the apartment. Had I been FULLY INFORMED of the situation I would have taken a different course of action. I understand your concerns are something to do with the material that was on James's computer here – or so Rose believes. Do you know how annoying it is to find out my best friend knows more about what's going on with you than I do? And I am your WIFE. So are you going to tell me? Or will you continue to treat me like a child, guaranteeing that I continue to behave like one?

You are not the only one who is fucking pissed. Okay?

Bella

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

I hit send. There – stick that in your pipe and smoke it, Cullen.

I take a deep breath. I have worked myself up into quite a rage. Here was I feeling all sorry and guilty and badly behaved – well, he's just as much to blame for that.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Here's the thing...

Date: 28 August 2009: 13.58

To: Isabella Cullen

As ever Mrs Cullen you are forthright and challenging in email.

Perhaps we can discuss this when you get home.

I am still fucking pissed too.

Edward Cullen

CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I scowl at my computer, realising this is getting me nowhere. I don't respond, but pick up a manuscript recently received from a promising new author and begin to read.

~0~

My meeting with Detective Clark is uneventful. He is less growly than the night before, maybe because he's managed some sleep. Or maybe he just prefers working during the day.

"Thank you for your statement, Mrs Cullen."

"Your welcome, Detective. Is Smith in police custody yet?"

"Yes ma'am. He was released from hospital earlier this morning. With what he's charged with, he should be with us for a while." He smiles, his blue eyes crinkling in the corner.

"Good. This has been an anxious time for me and my husband."

"I spoke at length with Mr Cullen this morning. He's very relieved. Interesting man your husband."

You have no idea.

"Yes, I think so." I offer him a polite smile and he knows he's being dismissed.

"If you think of anything you can call me. Here's my card."

He wrestles a card out of his wallet and hands it to me.

"Thank you detective. I'll do that."

"Good day to you Mrs Cullen."

"Good day."

As he leaves I wonder exactly what Smith has been charged with... no doubt Edward won't tell me. I purse my lips.

~0~

We ride in silence to Escala. Stuart is driving this time, Jones at his side, and my heart grows heavier and heavier as we head back. I know Edward and I are going to have an almighty fight... and I don't know if I have the energy.

As I ride in the elevator from the garage with Jones beside me, I try to marshal my thoughts. What do I want to say? I think I said it all in my email... perhaps he'll give me some answers. I hope so. I can't help my nerves... my heart is pounding, my mouth dry and my palms are sweaty. I don't want to fight. But sometimes he's so difficult and I need to stand my ground.

The elevator doors slide open revealing the foyer and it's once more neat and tidy. The table is upright and a new vase is in place, with a gorgeous array of pale pink and white peonies. I quickly check the paintings as we wander through – the Madonnas all look to be intact. The broken foyer door is fixed and operational once more and Jones kindly opens it for me. She's been so quiet today... I think I prefer her this way.

I drop my briefcase in the hall and head into the great room. I stop. Holy Fuck.

"Hello, Mrs Cullen," Edward says softly. He's standing by the piano and he's dressed in a tight black t-shirt and he's wearing jeans...those jeans – the ones he wore in the playroom. Oh my. They are over-washed pale blue denim, snug, ripped at the knee and hot... He's saunters over to me, his feet bare, the top button of the jeans undone, his smoldering green eyes never leaving mine.

"I've been waiting for you," he says.

~oooOOOooo~

MOTU II 102/15

“Have you now?” I whisper. My mouth goes drier still, my heart pounding in my chest. Why’s he dressed like this? What does it mean? Is he still sulking?

“I have, Mrs Cullen,” he says softly, smirking as he strolls closer to me.

Holy crap he looks hot – his jeans hanging, that way, from his hips... Oh no. I’m not going to be distracted by Mr Sex-on-legs. I try to gauge his mood as he stalks me. Angry? Playful? Lustful? Gah! It’s impossible to tell.

“I like your jeans,” I murmur.

He grins, a disarming wolfish grin that doesn’t reach his eyes. Shit – he’s still mad. He stands in front of me, gazing down, wide unreadable eyes burning into mine. I swallow.

“I understand you have issues, Mrs Cullen,” he says, and he pulls something from the back pocket of his jeans. I can’t tear my gaze from his, but hear him unfold a piece of paper. He holds it up, and glancing briefly at it I immediately recognize my email. My gaze returns to his, as his eyes blaze green and bright with anger.

“Yes, I do have issues,” I mutter. I need distance if we’re going to discuss this. But before I can step back, he leans down and runs his nose along mine. My eyes flutter to a close as I welcome his unexpected, gentle touch.

“So do I,” he whispers against my skin and my eyes flicker open again at his words. He straightens and gazes intently at me once more.

“I think I’m familiar with your issues, Edward.” My voice is wry and he narrows his eyes, suppressing the amusement that sparks there momentarily. Are we going to fight? I take a precautionary step back. I must physically distance myself from him – from his smell, his look, his distracting body in those hot jeans. His brow furrows as I move away.

“Why did you fly back?” I whisper. Let’s get this over and done with.

“You know why.” He cocks his head to one side as if in warning.

“Because I went out with Rose?”

“Because you went back on your word and you defied me – putting yourself at unnecessary risk,” he hisses.

Holy Crap!

“Went back on my word? Is that how you see it?” I gasp, ignoring the rest of his sentence.

“Yes.”

Talk about over-reaction! I start to roll my eyes but stop when he scowls at me.

“Edward. I changed my mind,” I explain, slowly, patiently – as if he’s a child. “I’m a woman. We’re renowned for it. That’s what we do.”

He blinks at me as if he doesn’t comprehend this.

"If I had thought for one minute that you would cancel your business trip – " Words fail me. I realize I don't know what to say – I am momentarily catapulted back to the argument over our vows. I never promised to obey you, Edward. But I hold my tongue, because deep down I'm glad he came back. In spite of his fury, I'm glad he's here in one piece, angry and smoldering in front of me.

"You changed your mind?" he whispers contemptuously.

"Yes."

"And you didn't think to call me?" He gazes at me, incredulous, before continuing, "What's more, you left the security detail short here and put Ryan at risk."

Oh. I hadn't thought about that.

"I should have called. I'm sorry. Having said that, I'm sure you would have told me off and not let me go – and I really wanted to go out, just for a change. I've missed Rose. Besides – it kept me out of the way when James was here. Ryan shouldn't have let him in," I add, petulantly. This is so confusing. Jeez – if Ryan hadn't, James would still be at large.

Edward's eyes gleam wildly, then shut, his face tightening as if in pain. Oh no. What's he going to do? He shakes his head, and before I know it he has folded me in his arms, pulling me hard against him.

"Thank Christ you weren't here," he murmurs into my hair.

What?

"You just told me off for not being here," I stutter, beyond confused.

"I know."

"Edward, make up your damned mind," I breathe, putting my arms around him. Oh he feels good.

"I can't – that's the problem. You've made me question my judgment, over and over again."

"Why can't you just trust me?"

"Trust you?"

I can feel his incomprehension.

"Of course I trust you, baby." He pulls back, gaping at me as if I'm crazy.

My heart soars at the endearment.

"It's others I don't trust. It's just – " He stops and his arms wrap around me once more, like he's clinging to me for dear life. I can barely breathe, he's holding me so tightly.

"If something were to happen to you – " His voice is barely a whisper.

"It didn't," I manage to speak.

"But it could have. I've died a thousand deaths today, thinking about what might have happened to you. I was so mad, Bella. Mad at you. Mad at myself. Mad at everyone. I can't remember ever being this angry... except – " He stops again.

Oh?

"Except?" I prompt.

"Once. In your old apartment. When Lauren was there."

Oh. Then. I don't want to think about that.

“You were so cold this morning,” I murmur. My voice cracks on the last word as I remember the hideous feeling of rejection in the shower.

“Cold?”

His hands move to the nape of my neck, loosening their grip on me, and I take a deep breath. He pulls my head back.

“I never want to hurt you,” he says, his eyes wide and wary. “This morning –” He stops, lost for words I think, or too afraid to say them.

“You were worried you’d hurt me?” I finish his sentence for him, not believing that he’d hurt me for a minute, but relieved too. A small vicious part of me feared it was because he didn’t want me any more.

“Yes. I didn’t trust myself,” he says quietly, and I can hear the shame in his voice.

“Edward, I know you’d never hurt me. Not physically, anyway.” I clasp his head between my hands.

“Do you?” he asks, and I can hear the skepticism in his voice.

“Yes. I knew what you said was an empty, idle threat. I know you’re not going to beat the shit out of me.”

“I wanted to.”

“No you didn’t. You just thought you did.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” he murmurs.

“Think about it,” I urge, wrapping my arms around him once more and nuzzling his chest through the black t-shirt. “About how you felt when I left. You’ve told me often enough what that did to you. How it changed you. I know what you’ve given up for me.”

He stills, and I know he’s processing this information. I hold him tightly, my hands on this back, feeling his taut toned muscles beneath his t-shirt. Gradually he relaxes in my arms, and I can physically feel the tension slowly leave him. Is this what’s been worrying him? That he’ll hurt me? Why do I have more faith in him than he has in himself? I don’t understand. He’s normally so strong, so in control, but without that, he’s lost. Oh Fifty, Fifty, Fifty – I’m sorry. He kisses my hair, and I turn my face up to his, and his lips find mine, searching, taking, giving, begging – for what, I don’t know. I just want to feel his mouth on mine, and I return his kiss passionately. I groan.

“You have such faith in me,” he whispers, when he breaks away.

“I do,” I murmur softly.

He strokes my face with the back of his knuckles and the tip of his thumb, gazing intently into my eyes, and his anger has gone. My Fifty is back from wherever he’s been. It’s good to see him. I glance shyly up and smirk.

“Besides,” I whisper, “You don’t have my permission.”

His mouth drops open in amused shock, and he pulls me to his chest again, clasping me tightly once more.

“You’re right. I don’t,” he laughs. We stand in the middle of the great room, locked in our embrace, just holding each other.

“Come to bed,” he whispers, after heaven knows how long.

Oh my...

“Edward, we need to talk.”

“Later,” he urges softly.

“Edward, please. Talk to me.”

He sighs.

“About what?”

“You know. You keep me in the dark.”

“I want to protect you.”

“I’m not a child.”

“I am fully aware you’re not a child, Mrs Cullen.” He runs his hands down my body, and cups my backside. “Especially right now.” He flexes his hips towards me, and I can feel his erection.

“Edward!” I scold. “Talk to me.”

He sighs once more, with exasperation.

“What do you want to know?” His voice is resigned, and he releases me. I baulk – I didn’t mean you had to let me go. Taking my hand he reaches down to pick up my email, which has ended up on the floor.

“Lots of things,” I mutter, as I let him lead me to the grey couch.

“Sit,” he orders.

Some things never change, I muse, doing as I’m told. Edward sits beside me, and leaning forward, puts his head in his hands.

Oh no. Is this too hard for him? Then he sits up and rakes both hands through his hair, and turns to me, at once expectant and reconciled to his fate.

“Ask me,” he says simply.

Oh. Well, that was easier than I thought.

“Why the additional security for your family?”

“Smith was a threat to them.”

“How do you know?”

“From his computer. It held personal details, about me and the rest of my family. Especially Carlisle.”

“Carlisle? Why him?”

“I don’t know yet. Let’s go to bed.”

“Edward, tell me!”

“Tell you what?”

“You are so – exasperating.”

“So are you.” He glares at me.

“You didn’t ramp up the security when you first found out there was information about your family on the computer. So what happened? Why now?”

Edward narrows his eyes at me.

"I didn't know he was going to attempt to burn down my building, or – " He stops. "We thought it was an unwelcome obsession, but you know," he shrugs, "When you're in the public eye, people are interested. It was random stuff: news reports on me from when I was at Harvard, my rowing, reports on Carlisle – following his career, Emmett too – and to some extent, Alice and Mom."

How strange.

"You said 'Or'," I prompt.

"Or what?"

"You said, 'attempt to burn down my building, or...' like you were going to say something else."

"Are you hungry?"

What? I frown at him, but my stomach rumbles, betraying my hunger.

"Um, yes." I blink.

"Good. So am I. Let me feed you."

And the way he says it makes everything south of my navel liquefy.

"Feed me?" I whisper.

"Come," he says. He stands and holds out his hand.

This is such a typically mercurial diversion from what we've been discussing. Is that it? Is that all I'm getting out of him for now? Leading me over to the kitchen Edward grabs a bar stool and hefts it around to the other side of the island.

"Sit," he says.

"Where's Mrs Cope?" I ask, distracted, as I perch on the stool.

"I've given her the night off."

Oh.

"Why?"

He gazes at me for a beat.

"Because I can."

"So you're going to cook?" I can't contain my incredulous smirk.

"Oh ye of little faith, Mrs Cullen. Close your eyes."

I blink at him, marveling. I thought we were going to have a full on fight – and here we are, playing in the kitchen.

"Close them," he says.

I roll them first, then oblige.

"Hmmm. Not good enough," he mutters.

I open one eye and see him take a plum colored silk scarf out of the back pocket of his jeans. It matches my dress. Holy cow. I look quizzically at him.

"Close," he orders again. "No peeking."

"You're going to blindfold me?" I mutter, shocked. All of a sudden I'm breathless.

“Yes.”

“Edward – ” He places a finger upon my lips, silencing me.

I want to talk.

“We’ll talk later. I want you to eat now. You said you were hungry.” Leaning over he lightly kisses my lips. He smells so good. I feel the soft silk of the scarf against my eyelids as he ties it tightly at the back of my head.

“Can you see?” he asks.

“No,” I mutter, figuratively rolling my eyes.

He chuckles softly.

“I can tell when you’re rolling your eyes, you know.”

I purse my lips.

“Can we just get this over and done with?” I snap.

He gasps in mock horror.

“Such impatience, Mrs Cullen. So eager to talk.”

“Yes!”

“I must feed you first,” he says, determined.

I hear the fridge door open and various dishes being placed on the counter top behind me. Edward pads over to the microwave, pops something in and switches it on. My curiosity is piqued. I hear the toaster lever drop, the turn of the control and the quiet tick of the timer. Hmmm – toast?

“Yes. I am eager to talk,” I murmur, distracted. I can smell an assortment of exotic, spicy aromas. Holy crow – what is he doing? I shift in my chair.

“Be still, Isabella,” he murmurs, and he’s close to me again.

Hmmm. My inner goddess freezes, not even blinking.

“And don’t bite your lip.” Gently he pulls my bottom lip free of my teeth, and I can’t help my smile.

Next I hear the soft pop of a cork being drawn from a bottle and the gentle glug of wine being poured into a glass. I feel him lean across behind me, then hear a soft click, and the quiet white noise of the surround sound speakers hissing to life. A loud twang of a guitar begins a song I don’t know. Edward turns the volume down so it’s in the background. A man with a deep, low voice sings:

The world was on fire and no one could save me but you.
Strange what desire will make foolish lovers do

“A drink first, I think,” Edward whispers. “Head back.”

I tip my head back.

“Further.” I oblige, and his lips are on mine, and cool crisp wine flows into my mouth. I swallow reflexively. Oh my... and memories flood back, of not so long ago – me trussed up on my bed in Vancouver, before I graduated, with a hot, angry Edward not appreciating my email. Hmmm... have times changed? Not much. Except now I recognize the wine. Edward’s favorite – a Sancerre.

“Hmmm,” I murmur.

“You like the wine?” he whispers. I can feel his breath on my cheek, feel his proximity – the vitality,

the heat radiating from his body. He doesn't touch me.

"Yes," I breathe.

"More?"

"I always want more, with you."

I can almost hear his grin. It makes me grin too.

"Mrs Cullen, are you flirting with me?"

"Yes."

I hear his wedding ring clink against the glass as he takes another sip of wine. This time he pulls my head right back. Cradling the back of my head, he kisses me once more, and greedily I swallow the wine he gives me. I can feel his smile as he kisses me again.

"Hungry?"

"I think we've already established that, Mr Cullen."

What a wicked game to play, to make me feel this way

What a wicked thing to do, to let me dream of you

The microwave pings, and Edward releases me. I sit up. I can smell something spicy: garlic, mint, oregano, rosemary, and... lamb, I think. What is he cooking? I hear the door to the microwave open, and the appetizing smell grows stronger.

"Shit! Christ!" Edward curses, and a dish clatters onto the countertop.

Oh no.

"You okay?"

"Yes!" he snaps, his voice tight. A moment later he's standing beside me once more.

"I just burnt myself. Here." He eases his index finger into my mouth. "Maybe you could suck it better."

"Oh." Clasp his hand I draw his finger slowly from my mouth. "There, there," I soothe, and leaning forward I blow – cooling his finger, I hope – then kiss it gently, twice. He stops breathing. I re-insert it into my mouth, and suck, gently. I hear his sharp intake of breath, and the sound travels straight to my groin. Oh my... what happened to talking? He tastes delicious as ever, and I realize that this is his game – the slow seduction of his wife. I thought he was mad, and now... My subconscious gapes at me, then shrugs and returns to her game of Scrabble. This man, my husband, is so confusing. But right now this is how I like him. Playful. Fun. Sexy as hell. He's given me some answers, but I'm greedy. I want more – but I want to play too. After the anxiety and tension of today, and the nightmare of last night with James, this is a welcome relief.

"What are you thinking?" Edward murmurs, stopping my thoughts in their tracks as he pulls his finger out of my mouth.

"How mercurial you are."

He stills beside me.

"Fifty Shades baby," he says eventually, and he plants a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth.

"My Fifty Shades," I whisper. Grabbing his t-shirt I pull him back to me.

"Oh no you don't, Mrs Cullen. No molesting the staff." He takes my hand, prises it off his t-shirt, and

kisses each finger in turn.

“Sit up,” he commands softly.

I pout.

“I will spank you if you pout. Now open wide.”

Oh shit. I open my mouth and he pops in a forkful of... spicy lamb, covered in a cool, minty, yogurty sauce. Hmmm. I chew.

“You like?”

“Yes.”

He makes an appreciative noise, and I know he’s eating and enjoying too.

“More?”

I nod. He gives me another forkful and I chew it gratefully. I hear him putting the fork down and he tears... bread, I think.

“Open,” he orders.

This time it’s pita bread and hummus. I realize Mrs Cope – or maybe even Edward –has been shopping at the delicatessen I discovered about five weeks ago, only two blocks from Escala. I chew gratefully. Edward in a playful mood increases my appetite. It occurs to me I haven’t eaten much all day.

“More?” he asks.

I nod.

“More of everything. Please. I’m starving.”

Slowly and patiently he feeds me, occasionally kissing a morsel of food from the corner of my mouth or wiping it off with his fingers. Intermittently he offers me a sip of wine in his unique way.

“Open wide, then bite,” he murmurs.

I follow his command. Hmmm – one of my favorites, stuffed vine leaves. Even cold they are delicious, though I prefer them heated up... but I don’t want to risk Edward burning himself again. He feeds it to me slowly, and when I’ve finished I lick his fingers clean.

“More?” he asks, his voice low and husky.

I shake my head. I’m full.

“Good. You’re dessert.”

What? He scoops me up in his arms, surprising me so much I squeal.

“Can I take the blindfold off?”

“No.”

I almost pout, then remember his threat and think better of it.

“Playroom,” he whispers.

Oh – I don’t know if that’s a good idea.

“You up for the challenge?” he asks. And because he’s used the word challenge I can’t say no.

“Bring it on,” I murmur, desire and something that I don’t want to name thrumming through my body. He carries me through the door, then up the stairs to the second floor.

“I think you’ve lost weight,” he mutters disapprovingly.

I have? Good. I remember his comment when we arrived back from our honeymoon, and how much it smarted. Jeez – was that just a week ago?

Outside the playroom he slides me down his body and sets me on my feet, but keeps his arm wrapped around my waist. Briskly he unlocks the door.

It always smells the same: polished wood and citrus. It’s actually become a comforting smell.

Releasing me Edward turns me round so I’m facing away from him. He undoes the scarf, and I blink in the soft light. Gently he pulls the hairpins from my updo, and my braid falls free. He grasps it and tugs gently, so I have to step back against him.

“I have a plan,” he whispers in my ear, sending delicious shivers down my spine.

“I thought you might,” I answer. He kisses me beneath my ear.

“Oh Mrs Cullen, I do.” His voice is soft, mesmerizing. He tugs my braid to the side and plants a trail of soft kisses down my throat.

“First we have to get you naked.” His voice hums low in his throat and resonates through my body. I want this – whatever this turns out to be. I want to connect the way we know how. He turns me around to face him. I glance down at his jeans, the top button still undone, and I can’t help myself. Reaching out I brush my index finger around the waistband, feeling the hairs in his happy trail tickle my knuckle. He inhales sharply, and my eyes whip up to meet his. I stop at the unfastened button. His green eyes darken to a deeper jade... oh my.

“You should keep these on,” I whisper.

“I fully intend to, Isabella.”

And he moves, grabbing me, one hand to the back of my neck, the other around my backside. He pulls me against him, then his mouth is on mine and he’s kissing me like his life depends on it.

Whoa!

He walks me backwards, our tongues entwined, one hand on my head the other firmly on my behind, until I feel the wooden cross behind me. He leans into me, so that I feel the contours of his body pressing into mine.

“Let’s get rid of this dress,” he says. Reaching down with both hands he slowly peels my dress up and off my body, over my thighs, my hips, my belly... slowly, the material skimming over my skin, skimming over my breasts.

“Lean forward,” he says.

I comply, and he pulls my dress over my head and discards it on the floor, leaving me standing in my sandals, panties and bra. His eyes blaze as he grasps both my hands and raises them over my head. He blinks once and tilts his head to one side, and I know he’s asking for my permission. What the fuck is he going to do to me? I swallow, then nod, and a trace of an admiring – almost proud – smile touches his lips. He clips my wrists into the leather cuffs on the bar above and produces the scarf once more.

“Think you’ve seen enough,” he murmurs. He wraps it around my head, blindfolding me again, and I feel a frisson run through me as all my other senses heighten: the sound of his soft breathing, my own excited response, the blood pulsating in my ears, Edward’s scent mixed with the citrus and polish in the room – all are brought into sharper focus because I can’t see. His nose touches mine.

“I’m going to drive you wild,” he whispers. His hands grasp my hips, and he moves down, removing

my panties as his hands glide down my legs. Jeez... is this a good idea?

"Lift your feet, one at a time," he says. I oblige and he removes first my panties, then each sandal in turn. Gently grasping my ankle he tugs my leg gently to the right.

"Step," he says. He cuffs my right ankle to the cross, then proceeds to do the same with my left. I am helpless and practically spread-eagled on the cross. Standing Edward steps towards me, and I can feel his warmth, though he doesn't touch me. He grasps my chin, tilts my head up and kisses me chastely.

"Some music and toys I think. You look beautiful like this, Mrs Cullen. I may take a moment to admire the view." His voice is soft. Everything clenches, deep in my belly. Oh my. What is he going to do?

After a moment I hear him pad quietly to the museum chest and open one of the drawers. The butt drawer? I have no idea. He takes something out and places it on the top, followed by... something else. What? The speakers spring to life, and after a moment the strains of single piano playing a soft lilting melody fill the room. It's familiar – Bach I think – but I don't know what piece it is. Something about the music makes me apprehensive. I frown, trying to grasp why – but Edward is in front of me once more. He grasps my chin, startling me, and tugs gently so that I release my bottom lip. I smile slightly – I can't believe I'm still unaware of when I bite my lip – but also to reassure myself. Why do I feel uneasy? Is it the music?

Edward runs his hand from my chin along my throat and down my chest to my breast. Using his thumb he pulls at the cup, freeing my breast from the restraint of my bra. He makes a low, soft, appreciative humming noise in his throat, and leaning down kisses my neck. His lips follow the path of his fingers to my breast, kissing and sucking all the way. His fingers move to my left breast, and that too is released from my bra. I moan as he skates his thumb across my left nipple and his lips close round my right, tugging and teasing gently until both nipples are long and hard.

"Ah."

He doesn't stop. Slowly, with exquisite care, he increases the intensity on each, and I pull against my restraints fruitlessly, and sharp pleasure spikes from my nipples to my groin. I try to squirm but I can hardly move, and it makes the torture all the more delicious.

"Edward," I breathe, and it's some sort of plea.

"I know," he breathes. "This is what you make me feel."

What? I groan, and he begins again, subjecting my nipples to his sweet agonizing touch, over and over... taking me closer.

"Please," I mewl.

He hums low in his throat – a primal sound – then stands, leaving me bereft, breathless and squirming against my restraints. He runs his hands down my sides, one pausing on my hip, while the other travels down my belly.

"Let's see how you're doing," he croons softly. Gently he cups my sex, brushing his thumb across my clitoris and making me cry out. Slowly he inserts one, then two fingers inside me. I groan and thrust my hips forward, eager to meet his fingers and the palm of his hand.

"Oh Isabella, you're so ready," he breathes.

He circles his fingers inside me, round and round, while his thumb strokes my clitoris, back and forth, once more. It's the only point on my body where he's touching me, and all the tension, all the anxiety of the day, is concentrated on this one part of my anatomy. Holy crow... it's intense... and strange...

the music... I can feel myself building... oh boy... Edward shifts, his hand still moving against and in me, and I hear a low buzzing noise.

“What?” I gasp.

“Hush,” he soothes, and his lips are on mine, effectively silencing me. I welcome the warmer, more intimate contact, kissing him voraciously. He breaks the contact and the buzzing noise gets nearer.

“This is a wand, baby,” he murmurs. “It vibrates.”

He holds it against my chest, and it feels like a large ball-like object vibrating against me. I shiver as it moves across my skin, down between my breasts, across to first one, then the other nipple... and I’m awash with sensation, tingling everywhere, synapses firing as dark, dark need pools at the base of my belly.

“Ah,” I groan, while Edward’s fingers continue to move inside me. I’m close... all this stimulation... Tilting my head back I moan loudly, and Edward stills his fingers. All sensation stops.

“No!” I mutter wordlessly. “Edward,” I plead, trying to thrust my hips forward for some friction.

“Still, baby,” he says.

And my impending orgasm melts away. Oh no... He leans forward once more, and kisses me.

“Frustrating, isn’t it?” he murmurs.

Oh no! Suddenly I understand his game.

“Edward, please.”

“Hush,” he says, and kisses me.

And he starts to move again... wand, fingers, thumb... a lethal combination of sensual torture. He shifts so his body brushes against mine. He’s still dressed – I feel soft denim against my leg, his erection at my hip... so tantalizingly close. He brings me to the brink again, my body singing with need, and stops.

“No,” I mewl loudly.

He plants soft wet kisses on my shoulder as he withdraws his fingers from me, and moves the wand down. It oscillates over my stomach, my belly, onto my sex, against my clitoris. Fuck it’s intense.

“Ah!” I cry out, pulling hard on the restraints.

My body is so sensitized I feel I am going to explode – and just as I am, Edward stops again.

“Edward, no!” I cry out.

“Frustrating, yes?” he murmurs against my throat. “Just like you. Promising one thing, and then...” His voice trails off.

“Edward, please!” I beg.

He pushes the wand against me again.

“Each time I stop, it feels more intense when I start again. Right?”

“Please,” I whimper. My nerve endings are screaming for release.

The buzzing stops and Edward kisses me. He runs his nose down mine.

“You are the most frustrating woman I have ever met.”

No, No, No.

“Edward, I never promised to obey you. Please, please – ”

He moves in front of me, grabs my behind and pushes his hips against me, making me gasp – his groin rubbing into mine, the buttons of his jeans pressing into me, barely containing his erection. With one hand he pulls off the blindfold and grasps my chin, and I blink up into his scorching emerald eyes.

“You drive me crazy,” he whispers, flexing his hips against me once, twice, three times more, causing my body to light up – ready to burn. And again he denies me... I want him so badly. I need him so badly. I close my eyes and mutter some prayer. I can’t help but feel I’m being punished. I’m helpless and he’s ruthless. Tears spring to my eyes. I don’t know how far he’s going to take this.

“Please,” I whisper once more.

But he gazes down at me, implacable. He’s just going to continue. For how long? No. No. No – I can’t do this. And the dam bursts – all the apprehension, the anxiety, and the fear from the last couple of days overwhelming me anew, as tears course down my face and I turn away from him.

“Red,” I whimper. “Red. Red.”

He stills.

“No,” he gasps, stunned. “Jesus Christ, no.”

He moves quickly, unclipping my hands, clasping me around my waist and leaning down to unclip my ankles, while I put my head in my hands and weep.

“No, no, no. Bella, please. No.”

Picking me up he moves to the bed, sitting down and cradling me in his lap while I sob inconsolably. He reaches behind him, drags the satin sheet off the four-poster bed and drapes it round me. The cool sheets feel alien and unwelcome against my sensitized skin. He wraps his arms around me and clasps me to him, rocking gently backwards and forwards.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Edward murmurs, his voice raw and full of sorrow. He kisses my hair over and over again. “Bella, forgive me, please.”

Turning my face into his neck I continue to cry, and it’s a cathartic release. So much has happened over the last few days – fires in computer rooms, car chases, careers planned out for me, trollopey architects, armed lunatics in the apartment, arguments – and Edward has been away. I hate Edward going away... and he smells so good, so comforting. I use the corner of the sheet to wipe my nose, and gradually become aware that the cool, almost clinical tones of Bach are still echoing softly round the room.

“Please switch the music off,” I sniff.

“Yes, of course.” Edward shifts, not letting me go, and pulls the remote out of his back pocket. He presses a button and the piano music ceases. “Better?” he asks.

I nod, my crying easing. Edward wipes my tears away gently with his thumb.

“Not a Bach fan?” he asks.

“Not that piece. If you were playing it would be different.”

He gazes down at me, his eyes wide and wary, trying and failing to hide his shame.

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

“Why did you do that?” My voice is barely audible.

He shakes his head sadly and closes his eyes as if in pain.

"I'm just angry, Bella. You never –" He stops. I shift in his lap, and he winces.

Oh.

I flush.

"Sorry," I mutter.

He rolls his eyes, then leans back suddenly, taking me with him, so that we're both lying on the bed, me in his arms. My bra is uncomfortable, and I adjust it.

"Need a hand?" he asks quietly.

I shake my head. He shifts so he's looking down at me, and tentatively raising his hand he strokes his fingers softly down my face. Tears pool in my eyes again.

"Please don't cry," he whispers.

I blink, trying to hold back my tears, as I gaze into the harrowed eyes of the man I love. I take a shuddering breath, my eyes not leaving his. What am I going to do with this controlling man? Learn to be controlled?

"I never what?" I ask.

"Do as you're told. You changed your mind you didn't tell me where you were. Bella, I was in New York, powerless and livid. If I'd been in Seattle I'd have come and fetched you home."

"So you're punishing me?"

He swallows, his eyes widening. He doesn't have to answer, and I know that punishing me was his exact intention.

"You have to stop doing this," I murmur.

His brow furrows as he processes my words.

"For a start, you only end up feeling more shitty about yourself," I continue.

He snorts softly.

"That's true," he mutters. "I don't like to see you like this."

"And I don't like being like this." I reach up and stroke his cheek. "I'm sorry I didn't call you. I won't be so selfish again. I know you worry about me."

He nods.

"Okay. Good," he says. He leans down, but pauses before his lips touch mine, silently asking if it's allowed. I raise my face to his, and he kisses me tenderly.

"Your lips are always so soft when you've been crying," he murmurs.

"I never promised to obey you, Edward," I whisper.

"I know."

"Deal with it, please. For both of us. And I will try and be more considerate of your... controlling tendencies."

He blinks, looking lost and vulnerable, completely at sea.

"I'll try," he murmurs.

I sigh, a long shuddering sigh.

“Besides, if I had been here...”

“I know,” he says, and blanches. Lying back he puts the arm that is not wrapped around me over his face. I curl around him and lay my head on his chest. We both lie silent for a few moments. His hand moves to the end of my braid. He pulls the tie from it, freeing my hair, and gently, rhythmically, combs his fingers through it.

“What did you mean earlier, when you said, ‘or’?”

“Or?”

“Something about James.”

He peers down at me.

“You don’t give up, do you?”

I rest my chin on his sternum, enjoying the soothing caress of his fingers in my hair.

“Tell me. I don’t like being kept in the dark. You seem to have some overblown idea that I need protecting. You don’t even know how to shoot – I do.

“Do you think I can’t handle whatever it is you won’t tell me? Edward, I’ve had your stalker ex-sub pull a gun on me, your pedophile ex-lover harass me – and don’t look at me like that,” I snap when he scowls at me. “Your mother feels the same way about her.”

“You talked to my mother about Irina?” Edward gasps.

“Yes, Esme and I talked about her.”

He gapes at me.

“She’s very upset about it. Blames herself.”

“I can’t believe you spoke to my mother. Shit!” He lies down and puts his arm over his face again.

“I didn’t go into any specifics.”

“I should hope not. Esme doesn’t need all the gory details. Christ, Bella. My Dad too?”

“No!” I shake my head vehemently. I so don’t have that kind of relationship with Carlisle. His comments about the pre-nup still haunt me. “Anyway, you’re trying to distract me – again. James. What about him?”

Edward lifts his arm briefly and gazes at me, his expression unreadable. Sighing he puts his arm back over his face.

“Smith is implicated in Echo Charlie’s sabotage. The investigators found a partial print – just partial so they couldn’t make a match. But then you recognized Smith in the server room. He has convictions as a minor in Detroit, and the prints matched his.”

My mind reels as I try to absorb this information. James brought down Echo Charlie?

But Edward is on a roll.

“This morning a cargo van was found in the garage here. Smith was the driver. Yesterday he delivered some shit to that new guy who’s moved in – the guy we met in the elevator.”

“I don’t remember his name.”

“Me neither.” Edward says. “But that’s how Smith managed to get into the building legitimately. He

was working for a delivery company.” He stops.

“And? What’s so important about the van?”

Edward says nothing.

“Edward, tell me.”

“The cops found... things in the van.” He stops again and tightens his hold around me.

“What things?”

He’s quiet for several moments and I open my mouth to prompt him again, but he speaks.

“A mattress, a bottle of chloroform and a note.” His voice has softened to barely a whisper, and I can feel the horror and revulsion rolling off him.

Holy Fuck.

“Note?” I breathe.

“Addressed to me.”

“What did it say?”

“I don’t know. Clark wouldn’t tell me.”

Oh.

“Smith came here last night with the intention of kidnapping you.” Edward freezes, his face taut with tension. As he says those words I recall the duct tape, and a shudder runs through me. But deep, deep down, this is not news to me.

“Shit,” I mutter.

“Quite,” Edward says tightly.

I try and remember James in the office. Was he always insane? How did he think he could get away with this? I mean he was pretty creepy – but this unhinged?

“I don’t understand why,” I murmur. “It doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I know. The police are digging further, and so is Jenks. But we think Detroit is the connection.”

“Detroit?” I gaze at him, confused.

“Yeah. There’s something there.”

“I still don’t understand.”

Edward lifts his face and gazes at me, his expression unreadable.

“Bella, I was born in Detroit.”

~ooo000ooo~

Playing in the Kitchen: Wicked Game <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4SYYQ18xE4>

In the Playroom: Goldberg Variations by Bach – Aria <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcXXkcZ2jWM>

I blink at him and frown as the information sinks in.

“I thought you were born here in Seattle,” I murmur. My mind is racing. What does this have to do with James? Edward raises the arm that was covering his face, reaches behind him and grabs one of the pillows. Placing it under his head he settles back and gazes at me, his expression wary. After a moment he shakes his head.

“No. Emmett and I were both adopted in Detroit. We moved here shortly after my adoption. Esme wanted to be on the West Coast, away from the urban sprawl, and Dad got a job at Northwest Hospital. I have very little memory of that time. Alice was adopted here.”

“So James is from Detroit?”

“Yes.”

Oh...

“How do you know?”

“I ran a background check when you went to work for him.”

Of course he did.

“Do you have a manila file on him too?” I smirk up at him.

Edward’s mouth twists as he hides his amusement.

“I think it’s pale blue, actually,” he says. His fingers continue to run through my hair. It’s soothing.

“What does it say in his file?”

Edward blinks. Reaching down he strokes my cheek.

“You really want to know?”

“Is it that bad?”

He shrugs.

“I’ve known worse,” he whispers.

Oh no! Is he referring to himself? And the image I hold of Edward as a small, dirty, fearful lost boy comes to mind. I curl around him, holding him tighter, pulling the sheet over him, and I lay my cheek against his chest.

“What?” he asks, puzzled by my reaction.

“Nothing,” I murmur.

“No, no. This works both ways, Mrs Cullen. What is it?”

I glance up at him and gaze momentarily at his apprehensive expression. I rest my cheek upon his chest once more.

“Sometimes I picture you as a child... before you came to live with the Cullens.”

Edward stiffens.

“I wasn’t talking about me. I don’t want your pity, Isabella. That part of my life is done. Gone.”

“It’s not pity,” I whisper, appalled. “It’s sympathy, and sorrow – sorrow that anyone could do that to a

child.” I take a deep steadying breath, as my stomach twists and tears prick my eyes anew. I don’t want to cry any more. Edward is resolutely silent and tense beneath me.

“And that part of your life is not done, Edward – how can you say that? You live every day with your past. You told me yourself – Fifty Shades, remember?”

Edward snorts and runs his free hand through his hair. His body relaxes slightly.

“I know it’s why you feel the need to control me. Keep me safe,” I add, contritely.

“And yet you choose to defy me,” he says softly, baffled.

I frown. Holy crow! Do I do that deliberately? My subconscious removes her half-moon glasses and chews the end, nodding and smirking at me. I ignore her. This is so confusing – I’m his wife, not his submissive, not some company that he’s acquired. I’m not the crack-whore who was his mother...

Fuck. The thought is sickening. Dr Banners’ words come back to me:

“Emotionally Edward is an adolescent, Bella. He bypassed that phase in his life totally. He’s channeled all his energies into succeeding in the business world, and he has, beyond all expectations. His emotional world... has to play catch-up.

“Just keep doing what you’re doing. Edward is head over heels... It’s a delight to see.”

That’s it. I’m just doing what I’ve always done. Isn’t that what Edward found attractive in the first place?

“You make me look at the world differently, Isabella. You don’t want me for my money. You give me... hope.

“And you’re right. I am used to women doing exactly what I say, when I say... doing exactly what I want. It gets old quickly. There’s something about you, Isabella... that calls to me, on some deep level that I don’t understand. It’s a siren’s call... I can’t resist you and I don’t want to lose you.”

Oh, this man is so confusing.

“Dr Banner said I should give you the benefit of the doubt. I think I do – I’m not sure. Perhaps it’s my way of bringing you to the here and now – away from your past.” I shrug, apologetically. “I don’t know. I just can’t seem to get a handle on how far you’ll over-react.”

His hand stills in my hair, and he’s silent for a moment.

“Fucking Banner,” he mutters quietly to himself.

“He said I should continue to behave the way I’ve always behaved with you.”

“Did he now?” Edward mutters dryly.

Okay. Here goes nothing.

“Edward, I know you loved your mom, and you couldn’t save her. It wasn’t your job to do that. But I’m not her.”

He freezes again.

“Don’t,” he whispers.

“No, listen. Please.” I raise my head to gaze at him and he stares back at me, green eyes paralyzed with fear. He’s holding his breath. Oh, Edward... my heart twists. “I’m not her. I am much stronger than she was. I have you, and you’re so much stronger now, and I know you love me. I love you too,” I whisper.

His brow creases as if my words were not what he expected.

“Do you still love me?” he asks.

“Of course I do. Edward, I will always love you. No matter what you do to me.” Is this the reassurance he wants?

He exhales and closes his eyes, placing his arm over his face again, but hugging me closer too.

“Don’t hide from me,” I murmur. Reaching up I grasp his hand and pull his arm away from his face.

“You’ve spent your life hiding. Please don’t, not from me.”

He blinks down at me and frowns.

“Hiding?” I hear the incredulity in his voice.

“Yes.”

He shifts suddenly, rolling over onto his side and moving me so that I am lying beside him on the bed. He reaches up, smooths my hair off my face and tucks it behind my ear.

“You asked me earlier today if I hated you. I didn’t understand why, and now...” He stops, staring down at me as if I’m a complete conundrum.

“You think I hate you?” Now my voice is incredulous.

“No,” he shakes his head. “Not now.” He looks relieved. “But I need to know – why did you safe-word, Bella?”

I blanch. What can I tell him? That he frightened me. That I didn’t know if he’d stop. That I begged him – and he didn’t stop. That I didn’t want things to escalate... like – like that one time in here. I shudder as I recall him whipping me with his belt.

I swallow.

“Because... because you were so angry, and distant, and – cold. I didn’t know how far you’d go.”

His expression is unreadable.

“Were you going to let me come?” My voice is barely a whisper, and I can feel a blush steal over my cheeks, but I hold his gaze.

“No,” he says eventually.

I can’t help my shocked gasp. Holy crap.

“That’s... harsh.”

He reaches across and his knuckle grazes softly down my cheek.

“But effective,” he murmurs. He gazes down at me as if he’s trying to see through to my soul, his eyes darkening. After an eternity he murmurs,

“I’m glad you did.”

Oh!

“Really?” I don’t understand.

His lips twist in a sad smile.

“Yes. I don’t want to hurt you. I got carried away.” He reaches down and kisses me. “Lost in the moment.” He kisses me again. “Happens a lot with you.”

Oh? And for some unknown reason the thought pleases me... greatly. I grin. Why does that make me happy? He grins too.

"I don't know why you're grinning, Mrs Cullen."

"Me neither."

He wraps himself around me and places his head on my chest. We are a tangle of naked and denimed limbs and satin red sheets. I stroke his back with one hand and run the fingers of my other hand through his hair. He sighs, and I can feel him relax in my arms.

"I never want to hurt you," he murmurs. "I need..." he stops.

"You need what?"

"I need control, Bella. Like I need you. It's the only way I can function. I can't let go of it. I can't. And yet, with you..." He shakes his head slightly.

I swallow. This is the heart of our dilemma – his need for control and his need for me. I refuse to believe these are mutually exclusive.

"I need you too," I whisper, hugging him tighter. "I'll try, Edward. I'll try to be more considerate."

"I want you to need me," he murmurs.

"I do." My voice is impassioned. I need him so much. I love him so much.

"I want to look after you."

"You do," I exclaim reassuringly. "I missed you so much while you were away."

"You did?" He sounds so surprised.

"Yes, of course. I hate you going away."

I feel rather than see his smile.

"You could have come with me."

"Edward, please. Let's not rehash that argument. I want to work."

He sighs and I work my fingers through his hair, stroking and stroking.

"I love you, Bella."

"I love you too, Edward. I will always love you."

We lie tangled together. I listen to the steady beat of his heart and drift exhausted into sleep.

~o~

I wake with a start, disorientated. Where am I? The playroom. The lights are still on, softly illuminating the blood-red walls.

Edward moans again, loudly, and I realize this is what woke me.

"No," he groans.

He's sprawled out beside me, his head back, his eyes screwed shut, his face contorted in anguish.

Holy shit. He's having a nightmare.

"No!" he cries out again.

"Edward, wake up," I call, and struggle to sit up, kicking off the sheet. Kneeling beside him I grab his

shoulders and shake him, as tears spring to my eyes.

“Edward, please. Wake up!”

His eyes spring open, green and wild, his pupils enlarged with fear. He stares unseeingly up at me.

“Edward,” I breathe. “You’re having a nightmare. You’re home. You’re safe.”

He blinks, looks around wildly, and frowns as he takes in our surroundings. Then his eyes are back on mine.

“Bella,” he breathes, and with no preamble whatsoever he reaches up with both hands, grabbing my face, and pulls me down onto his chest and kisses me. Hard. His tongue invades my mouth and I can taste his desperation and need. Barely giving me a chance to breathe he rolls over, his lips locked to mine, so that he’s pressing me into the four-poster’s hard mattress. One of his hands clasps my jaw, the other spreads out on top of my head, keeping me still as his knee parts my legs and he nestles, still clothed in his jeans, between my thighs.

“Bella,” he gasps, as if he can’t believe I’m there with him. He gazes down at me for a split second, allowing me a moment to breathe. Then his lips are on mine again, plundering my mouth, taking all I have to give. He groans loudly, flexing his hips into me. His erection sheathed in denim pushing into my soft flesh. Oh... I moan, and all the pent-up sexual tension of earlier erupts, resurfacing with a vengeance, flushing my system with desire and need. Driven by his demons he urgently kisses my face, my eyes, my cheeks, along my jaw.

“I’m here,” I whisper, trying to calm him, our heated, panting breath mingling. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, as unconsciously I grind my pelvis against his.

“Oh, Bella,” he pants, his voice rough and low. “I need you.”

“Me too,” I whisper urgently, my body desperate for his touch. I want him. I want him now. I want to heal him. I want to reconnect. His hand reaches down and tugs at the buttons on his fly, fumbling momentarily, then freeing his erection.

Holy shit.

My heart lurches, as I fleetingly think I was asleep less than a minute ago. He shifts, staring down at me for a split second, suspended above me.

“Yes. Please,” I breathe, my voice hoarse and needy.

And in one swift move he buries himself inside me.

“Ah!” I cry out, not from any pain, but from surprise at the suddenness of his lunge. He moans loudly and his lips find mine again as he pushes into me, over and over, his tongue possessing me too. He moves frantically, compelled by his fear, his lust, his desire, his – love, I don’t know, but I meet him thrust for thrust, welcoming him.

“Bella,” he growls almost inarticulately, and he comes powerfully, pouring himself into me, his face strained, his body rigid, before he collapses with his full weight onto me, panting, and he leaves me hanging... again.

Holy shit. This is not my night. My inner goddess is preparing to disembowel herself. I hold him, drawing in a lungful of air and practically writhing with need beneath him. He shakes his head and leans up on his elbows, taking some of his weight. He gazes down at me as if seeing me for the first time.

“Oh Bella. Jesus.” He bends and kisses me tenderly.

“You okay?” I breathe, reaching up and caressing his lovely face.

He blinks at me and nods. He looks shaken and most definitely stirred; my own lost boy. He frowns and gazes intently into my eyes, as if finally registering where he is.

“You?” he asks, concern evident in his voice.

“Um...” I wriggle beneath him and after a moment he smiles, a slow carnal smile.

“Mrs Cullen, you have needs,” he murmurs. He kisses me swiftly, then moves, withdrawing from me so that I wince. He scoots off the bed.

What?

Kneeling on the floor at the end of the bed he reaches up, grabs me just above the knees, and pulls me towards him so my behind is on the edge of the bed.

“Sit up,” he murmurs. I struggle into a sitting position, my hair falling like a cloud around me, down to my breasts. His green gaze holds mine as he gently pushes my legs apart as far as they’ll go. I lean back on my hands – knowing full well what he’s going to do.

“You are so fucking beautiful, Bella,” he breathes and I watch his copper haired head dip and plant a trail of kisses up my right thigh, heading north. My whole body clenches in anticipation. He glances up at me, his eyes darkening jade through long dark lashes.

“Watch,” he breathes, then his mouth is on me.

Oh my. I cry out as the world is concentrated at the apex of my thighs, and it’s so erotic – Fuck – watching him. Watching his tongue against what feels like the most sensitive part of my body. And he shows no mercy, teasing and taunting, worshipping me. My body tenses and my arms start to tremble from the strain of staying upright.

“No... ah,” I murmur. Gently he eases one long finger inside me and I can bear no more, collapsing back onto the bed, relishing this mouth and fingers on and in me. Slowly and gently he massages that sweet, sweet spot, deep inside me. And that’s it – I’m gone. I explode around him, crying out an incoherent rendition of his name, as my intense orgasm arches my back off the bed. I think I see stars. Such a visceral primal feeling... Vaguely I’m aware that he’s nuzzling my belly, giving me soft, sweet kisses. Reaching down I caress his hair.

“I’m not finished with you yet,” he murmurs. And before I’ve fully come back to Seattle, Planet Earth, he’s reaching for me, gasping my hips and pulling me down off the bed.

What?

Kneeling at the foot of the bed he pulls me into his arms, into his waiting lap, and on to his waiting erection.

I gasp as he fills me. Holy Cow...

“Oh baby,” he breathes, as he wraps his arms around me and stills, cradling my head and kissing my face. Very slightly he flexes his hips, and pleasure spikes hot and hard from deep within me. He reaches for my behind and lifts me, rocking his groin upwards.

“Ah...” I breathe, and his lips are on mine again as he slowly, oh so slowly, lifts and rocks... lifts and rocks. I throw my arms around his neck and moan, surrendering to his gentle rhythm and to wherever he’ll take me. Oh, it’s deep this way. I flex my thighs, riding him... he feels so good. I lean backwards and tilt my head back, my mouth open wide in a silent expression of my pleasure, reveling in his sweet possession.

“Bella,” he breathes, and he leans down, kissing my throat. Holding me tight, slowly easing in and out, pushing me... higher and higher... so exquisitely timed – a fluid carnal force. Blissful pleasure radiates outwards from deep, deep inside me as he holds me so intimately.

“I love you, Bella,” he whispers close to my ear, his voice low and harsh, and he lifts me again, up, down, up down. I curl my hands back around his neck into his hair.

“I love you too, Edward.” Opening my eyes I find he’s gazing at me, and all I can see is his love, shining bright and bold in the soft glow of the playroom light, his nightmare seemingly forgotten. And as I feel my body build towards my release, I realize this is what I wanted – this connection, this demonstration of our love.

“Come for me, baby,” he breathes. I screw my eyes shut as my body tightens at the low sound of his voice, and I come loudly, spiraling into an intense climax, and he stills, his forehead against mine, as he softly whispers my name, wraps his arms around me and finds his own release.

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He lifts me gently and lays me on the bed. I lie in his arms, wrung out and finally sated.

He nuzzles my neck.

“Better now?” he whispers.

“Hmmm.”

“Shall we go to bed, or do you want to sleep here?”

“Hmmm.”

I can feel his grin.

“Mrs Cullen, talk to me.”

“Hmmm.”

“Is that the best you can do?”

“Hmmm.”

“Come. Let me put you to bed. I don’t like sleeping here.”

Reluctantly, I shift and turn to face him.

“Wait,” I whisper.

He blinks at me, looking all wide-eyed and innocent, and at the same time thoroughly fucked and pleased with himself. How can he be so adorable sometimes?

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He nods, smiling smugly like an adolescent boy.

“I am now.”

“Oh Edward,” I scold, and reach up to gently stroke his lovely face. “I was talking about your nightmare.”

His expression freezes momentarily, then he closes his eyes and tightens his arms around me, burying his face in my neck.

“Don’t,” he whispers, his voice hoarse and raw.

My heart lurches and twists once more in my chest, and I clutch him tightly, running my hands down his back and through his hair.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, alarmed by his reaction. Holy Fuck – how can I keep up with these mood swings? What the hell was his nightmare about? I don’t want to cause him any more pain by making him relive the details. “It’s okay,” I murmur softly, desperate to bring him back to the playful boy of a moment ago. “It’s okay,” I repeat over and over, soothingly.

“Let’s go to bed,” he says quietly after a while, and he pulls away from me, leaving me empty and aching as he rises from the bed. I scramble after him, keeping the satin sheet wrapped around me, and bend to pick up my clothes.

“Leave those,” he says and before I know it he scoops me up in his arms. “I don’t want you to trip over this sheet and break your neck,” he explains when I gape at him. I put my arms around his neck, marveling that he’s recovered his composure, and nuzzle him as he carries me downstairs to our bedroom.

~o~

My eyes spring open. Something is wrong. Edward is not in bed, though it’s still dark. Glancing at the radio alarm I can see it’s 3.20 in the morning. Where’s Edward? Then I hear the piano.

Quickly clambering out of bed I grab my robe and run down the hallway to the great room. The tune he’s playing is so sad – a mournful lament. I pause in the doorway and watch him, in his pool of light, the achingly sorrowful music filling the room. He finishes, then starts the piece again. Why such a plaintive tune? I wrap my arms around myself and listen spellbound as he plays. But my heart aches – oh Edward, why so sad? Is it because of me? Did I do this? When he finishes, only to start a third time, I can bear it no longer. Slowly I make my way towards him. He doesn’t look up as I near the piano, but shifts to one side so I can sit beside him on the piano stool. He continues to play, and I put my head on his shoulder. He kisses my hair, but doesn’t stop playing until he’s finished the piece.

I glance up at him and he’s staring down at me, warily.

“Did I wake you?” he asks.

“Only because you were gone. What’s that piece called?”

“It’s Chopin. It’s one of his preludes in E minor,” Edward pauses. “It’s called Suffocation...”

I blink at him and reach over and take his hand. “You’re really shaken by all this, aren’t you?”

He snorts.

“A deranged asshole gets into my apartment to kidnap my wife. She won’t do as she’s told. She drives me crazy. She safewords on me.” He closes his eyes briefly and when he opens them again, they are stark and cool. “Yeah, I’m pretty shaken up.”

I squeeze his hand.

“I’m sorry.”

He bends and presses his forehead against mine.

“I dreamt you were dead,” he whispers.

What?

“Lying on the floor – so cold – and you wouldn’t wake up.”

Oh, Fifty.

“Hey – it was just a bad dream.” Reaching up I clasp his head in my hands. His eyes burn into mine, and the anguish in them is sobering. “I’m here – and I’m cold without you in the bed. Come back to bed, please.” I take his hand and stand, waiting to see if he’ll follow me. Finally he stands too. He’s wearing his pj bottoms, and they hang in that way he has, and I want to run my fingers along the inside of his waistband... but I resist and lead him back to the bedroom.

~o~

When I wake he’s curled around me sleeping peacefully. I relax and enjoy his heat against me, being enveloped by him, feeling his skin on my skin. I lie very still, not wanting to disturb him.

Boy, what an evening. I feel like I’ve been run over by a train – the freight train that is my husband. Hard to believe that the man lying beside me, looking so serene and young in his sleep, was so tortured last night... and so tortured me last night. I gaze up at the ceiling, and it occurs to me that I always think of Edward as strong and dominating – yet the reality is he’s so fragile, my lost boy. And the irony is that he looks upon me as fragile – and I don’t think I am. Compared to him I feel strong. But am I strong enough for both of us? Strong enough to do what I’m told, and give him some peace of mind? I sigh. He’s not asking that much of me. I flit through our conversation of last night. Did we decide anything, other than to both try harder? The bottom line is that I love this man – my beautiful man, beautiful inside and out – and I need to chart a course for both of us. One that lets me keep my integrity and independence, but still be more for him. I am his more, and he is mine. I resolve to make a special effort this weekend not to give him cause for concern.

Edward stirs, and lifts his head off my chest, blinking sleepily at me.

“Good morning, Mr Cullen.” I smile at him.

“Good morning, Mrs Cullen. Did you sleep well?” He stretches out beside me.

“Once my husband stopped making that terrible racket on the piano, yes I did.”

He smiles his shy smile, and I melt.

“Terrible racket? I’ll be sure to email Miss Kathie and let her know.”

“Miss Kathie?”

“My piano teacher.”

I giggle.

“That’s a lovely sound,” he breathes. “Shall we have a better day today?”

“Okay,” I agree. “What do you want to do?”

“After I have made love to my wife, and she’s cooked me breakfast, I’d like to take her to Aspen.”

I gape at him.

“Aspen?”

“Yes.”

“Aspen, Colorado?”

“The very same. Unless they’ve moved it.”

I grin at him.

“You want me to cook you breakfast?”

“Oh yes.”

“And you want to make love to me?”

“Can’t you tell?”

I blush and giggle again.

“Won’t it take hours to get to Colorado?”

“Not by jet,” he says silkily, as his hand runs teasingly up my thigh.

Of course – my husband has a jet. How could I forget? His hand continues to skim up my body, lifting my night dress as it goes, and soon I’ve forgotten everything.

~o~

Taylor drives us on to the tarmac at Sea Tac and round to where the CEH jet is waiting. It’s a grey day in Seattle, but I refuse to let the weather dampen my spirits. Edward is in a much better mood today – he’s excited about something, I can tell. He’s lit up like Christmas, and twitching like a small boy with a big secret. I wonder what scheme he’s dreamt up. He looks dreamy – all tousled hair, white t-shirt and black jeans – not CEO-like at all today. He takes my hand as Taylor glides to a stop at foot of the jet steps.

“I have a surprise for you,” he murmurs, and he kisses my knuckles.

I grin at him.

“Good surprise?”

“I hope so,” he smiles warmly.

Hmmm... what can it be?

Stuart leaps out from the front and opens my door. Taylor opens Edward’s, then retrieves our cases from the trunk. Edward takes my hand and leads me up the stairs to where Stephan is waiting. I glance into the cockpit to see First Officer Beighley flipping switches on the imposing instrument panel.

Edward and Stephan shake hands.

“Good morning sir,” Stephan beams at Edward.

“Thanks for doing this at such short notice,” Edward grins back at him. “Our guests here?”

“Yes sir,” Stephan replies.

Guests?

I turn and gasp. Rose, Emmett, Alice and Jasper are all seated in the cream leather seats, beaming at us.

Holy Cow! My eyes whip to Edward’s.

“Surprise!” he says softly.

“How? When? Who?” I mumble inarticulately, trying to contain my delight and elation.

“You said you didn’t see enough of your friends.” He shrugs and gives me a lopsided, apologetic smile.

“Oh Edward – thank you.” I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him hard, in front of everyone. He puts his hands on my hips, hooking his thumbs into the belt loops of my jeans, and deepens the kiss.

Oh my.

“Keep this up and I’ll drag you into the bedroom,” he murmurs.

“You wouldn’t dare,” I whisper against his lips.

“Oh, Isabella,” he grins, shaking his head. He releases me, and without any further preamble stoops down, grabs my thighs, and lifts me over his shoulder.

I scream.

“Edward, put me down!” I smack his behind.

I briefly catch Stephan’s smile as he turns and heads into the cockpit. Taylor is standing at the doorway trying to stifle his grin. Ignoring my pleas and my futile struggles Edward strides through the cabin past where Emmett is whooping like a demented gibbon.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he says to our four guests, “I need to have a word with my wife in private.”

“Edward!” I shout. “Put me down!”

“All in good time, baby.”

I have a brief view of Alice, Rose and Emmett all laughing. Dammit! This is not funny, it’s embarrassing. Jasper gawks at us, mouth open and utterly shocked, as we disappear into the cabin.

~ooo000ooo~

Chopin – Prelude – Opus 28 – No 4 in E minor <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef-4Bv5Ng0w>

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Edward closes the cabin door behind him and releases me, letting me slide down his body – slowly, so I can feel every hard sinew and muscle. He grins down at me boyishly, pleased with himself.

“That was quite a show, Mr Cullen,” I murmur, crossing my arms and regarding him with faux indignation.

“That was fun, Mrs Cullen.” And his grin widens... oh boy. He looks so young.

“Are you going to follow through?” I arch a brow, unsure how I feel about this. I mean – the others will hear us, for heaven’s sake. And I suddenly feel shy. Glancing anxiously at the bed I feel a blush steal across my cheeks, as I recall our wedding night. We talked so much yesterday, did so much yesterday... I feel as if we leapt some unknown hurdle – but that’s the problem. It’s unknown. My eyes find Edward’s intense but amused gaze, and I’m unable to keep a straight face – his grin is too infectious.

“I think it might be rude to keep our guests waiting,” he says silkily as he steps towards me. Oh... when did he start to care what people think? I step back against the cabin wall and he imprisons me, the heat from his body holding me in place. He leans down and runs his nose along mine.

“Good surprise?” he whispers, and there’s a hint of anxiety in his voice.

“Oh Edward, fantastic surprise.” I run my hands up his chest, curl them around his neck and kiss him.

“When did you organize this?” I ask shyly when I pull away from him, softly stroking his hair.

“Last night, when I couldn’t sleep. I emailed Em and Alice, and here they are.”

“It’s very thoughtful – thank you. I’m sure we’ll have a great time.”

“I hope so. I thought it would be easier to avoid the press in Aspen than at home.”

The paps! He’s right. If we’d stayed in Escala we’d have been imprisoned. A shiver runs down my spine as I recollect the snapping cameras and dazzling flashguns of the swarming photographers Taylor sped through this morning.

“Come. We’d better take our seats – Stephan will be taking off shortly.” He offers me his hand and together we walk back into the cabin.

Emmett cheers as we enter.

“That sure was speedy in-flight service!” he calls mockingly.

Edward ignores him.

“Please be seated, ladies and gentlemen, as we’ll shortly be taxiing for take-off.” Stephan’s voice echoes calmly and authoritatively around the cabin. The brunette woman – um... Natalie? who was on the flight for our wedding night – appears from the galley and gathers up the discarded coffee cups. Natalia... Her name’s Natalia.

“Good morning Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen,” she purrs. Why does she make me uncomfortable? Maybe it’s that she’s a brunette. By his own admission Edward doesn’t usually employ brunettes, because he finds them attractive. He gives Natalia a polite smile as he sits down opposite Emmett and Rose. I swiftly hug Rose and Alice and give Jasper and Emmett a wave before sitting down and buckling up beside Edward. He puts his hand on my knee and gives it an affectionate squeeze. He seems relaxed and happy, even though we’re in company. Idly I wonder why he can’t always be like this – not controlling at all.

“Hope you packed your hiking boots,” he says, his voice warm.

“We’re not going ski-ing?”

“That would be a challenge, in August,” he says, amused.

Oh – of course.

“Do you ski, Bella?” Emmett interrupts us.

“No.”

Edward moves his hand from my knee to clasp my hand.

“I’m sure my little brother can teach you.” Emmett winks at me. “He’s pretty fast on the slopes, too.”

And I can’t help my blush. When I glance up at Edward he’s gazing impassively at Emmett, but I think he’s trying to suppress his mirth. The plane surges forward and starts taxiing towards the runway.

Quickly and efficiently Natalia runs through the plane’s safety procedures in a clear ringing voice. She’s dressed in a navy blue short-sleeved shirt and matching pencil skirt. Her make-up is immaculate – she really is quite pretty. My subconscious raises a plucked-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life eyebrow at me.

“You okay?” Rose asks me pointedly. “I mean, following the Smith business?”

I nod. I don’t want to think or talk about Smith, but Rose seems to have other plans.

“So why did he go postal?” she asks, cutting to the heart of the matter in her inimitable style. She tosses her long blond hair behind her as she prepares to investigate the matter. Eyeing her coolly, Edward shrugs.

“I fired his ass,” he says bluntly.

“Oh? Why?” Rose tilts her head to one side, and I know she’s in full Nancy Drew mode.

“He made at pass at me,” I mutter. I try to kick Rose’s ankle beneath the table, and miss. Shit!

“When?” Rose glares at me.

“Ages ago.”

“You never told me he made a pass at you!” she splutters.

I shrug, apologetically.

“It can’t just be a grudge about that, surely. I mean his reaction is way too extreme,” Rose continues, but now she directs her questions at Edward. “Is he mentally stable? What about all the information he has on you Cullens?” Her grilling Edward this way makes my hackles rise, but she’s already established I know nothing. The thought is momentarily annoying.

“We think there’s a connection with Detroit,” Edward says mildly. Too mildly. Oh no... Rose – please give it up for now.

“Smith is from Detroit too?” she persists.

Edward nods.

The plane accelerates, and I tighten my grip on Edward’s hand. He glances at me anxiously. He knows I hate take-offs and landings, especially in the Gulfstream jet. He squeezes my hand and his thumb strokes my knuckles reassuringly.

“What do you know about him?” Emmett asks, oblivious to the fact we are hurtling down the runway in a small jet about to launch itself into the sky, and equally oblivious to Edward’s growing exasperation with Rose. Rose leans forward, listening attentively.

“This is off the record,” Edward says directly to her. Rose’s mouth sets in a subtle but thin line. I swallow. Oh shit.

“We know a little about him,” Edward continues. “His dad died in a brawl in a bar. His mother drank herself into oblivion. He was in and out of foster homes as a kid, in and out of trouble too – mainly boosting cars. Spent time in juvie. His mom got back on track through some outreach program, and Smith turned himself around. Won a scholarship to Princeton.”

“Princeton?” Rose’s curiosity is piqued.

“Yep. He’s a bright boy.” Edward shrugs.

“Not that bright. He got caught,” Emmett mutters.

“But surely he can’t have pulled this stunt alone?” Rose asks.

Edward stiffens beside me.

“We don’t know yet.” His voice is very quiet.

Holy crap. There could be someone working with him? I turn and gape in horror at Edward. He squeezes my hand once more, but doesn’t look me in the eye. The plane lifts smoothly into the air, and I get that horrible sinking feeling... Most of me wishes I was still on the ground.

“How old is he?” I ask Edward, leaning close so only he can hear. Much as I’d like to know what’s going on, I don’t want to encourage Rose’s questions. I know they’re irritating Edward, and I’m sure she’s on his shit-list since Cocktailgate.

“Thirty-two. Why?”

“Curious, that’s all.”

Edward’s jaw tightens.

“Don’t be curious about Smith. I’m just glad the fucker’s locked up.” It’s almost a reprimand, but I choose to ignore his tone.

“Do you think he’s working with someone?” I ask. The thought that someone else might be involved makes me sick. It would mean this isn’t over.

“I don’t know,” Edward answers, and his jaw tightens once more.

“Maybe someone who has a grudge against you?” I suggest. Holy shit – I hope it’s not the bitch troll. “Like Irina?” I whisper. I realize I’ve muttered her name out loud – but only he can hear. I glance anxiously at Rose, but she’s deep in conversation with Emmett. Emmett looks pissed at her. Hmmm...

“You do like to demonize her, don’t you?” Edward rolls his eyes and shakes his head in disgust. “She may hold a grudge, but she wouldn’t do this kind of thing.” He pins me with a steady green gaze. “Let’s not discuss her. I know she’s not your favorite topic of conversation.”

“Have you confronted her?” I whisper, not sure if I really want to know.

“Bella, I haven’t spoken to her since my birthday party. Please, drop it. I don’t want to talk about her.” He raises my hand and brushes my knuckles with his lips. His green eyes burn into mine and I know this is not a line of questioning I should pursue right now.

“Get a room,” Emmett teases. “Oh right – you already have, but you didn’t need it for long.” He smirks.

Edward glances up and pins Emmett with a cool glare.

“Fuck off, Em,” he says without malice.

“Dude, just telling you how it is.” Emmett’s eyes light up with mirth.

“Like you’d know,” Edward murmurs sardonically, raising an eyebrow.

Emmett grins, enjoying the banter.

“You married your first girlfriend.” Emmett gestures at me.

Oh shit. Where is this going? I flush.

“Can you blame me?” Edward kisses my hand again.

“No,” Emmett laughs and shakes his head.

I flush, and Rose slaps Emmett’s thigh.

“Stop being an ass,” she scolds him.

“Listen to your girlfriend,” Edward says to Emmett, grinning, his earlier concern no longer evident. My ears pop as we gain altitude, and the tension between all of us dissipates as the plane levels out. Rose scowls at Emmett. Hmmm... something up between them? I’m not sure.

But Emmett is right. I snort at the irony. I am – was – Edward’s first girlfriend, and now I’m his wife. The fifteen, and the evil Mrs Robinson – they don’t count. But then Emmett doesn’t know about them, and clearly Rose hasn’t told him. I smile at her, and she gives me a conspiratorial wink. My secrets are safe with Rose.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen, we’ll be cruising at an altitude of approximately 32,000 feet, and our estimated flight time is 1 hour and 56 minutes,” Stephan announces. “You are now free to move about

the cabin.”

Alice immediately unbuckles her belt and comes bounding down to join us. She perches on the walnut storage cabinet opposite our seats. Looking down the cabin I see Jasper is engrossed in the Seattle Times, and further to the front Taylor sitting reading his book – Machiavelli’s The Prince. He really has the most eclectic and unexpected literary taste. Glancing up Taylor catches me staring at him, and offers me his avuncular smile. I’m instantly reassured because he’s here with us... I wonder if Mrs Cope minds. I smile back, then turn to face Alice.

“This is going to be so much fun!” She claps her hands in glee. “Are you okay, Bella? Ugh, that horrible guy – what the hell was he thinking? Edward, do you have anything planned? I wonder who’s playing at Belly Up? Or maybe we could go to the Lava Lounge – oh, please? That would be so much fun. What do you think?” Alice bats her long lashes at her brother.

“Alice,” Edward mutters, exasperated anew, “I haven’t made any plans – apart from lunch when we arrive.” He turns to look at me. “I thought we might go for a hike. Depending on the weather.” He shrugs. “But it’s up to you. What do you want to do?”

“Bella doesn’t know what’s there. You want to go clubbing don’t you?” Alice looks at me, big brown eyes pleading, and I can’t help but giggle. Her enthusiasm knows no bounds.

“Whatever,” I grin.

Natalia appears from the galley.

“Can I offer anyone coffee?” she asks.

~o~

We land smoothly at Sardy Field at 12.25 MST. Stephan brings the plane to a halt a little way from the main terminal, and through the windows I can see a large VW minivan waiting for us.

Edward shakes Stephan’s hand as we get ready to file out of the jet.

“Good landing,” he grins.

“Thank you sir. It’s all about the density altitude,” Stephan smiles back. “Beighley here is good at math.”

Edward nods at Stephan’s first officer.

“You obviously got it spot on, Beighley – smooth landing,” Edward says.

She beams at us both, and I beam back, though I have no idea what they’re talking about.

“Enjoy your weekend sir, Mrs Cullen. We’ll see you tomorrow.” Stephan steps aside to let us disembark. Taking my hand Edward leads me down the aircraft steps to the waiting bus. Taylor precedes us and slides open the door.

“Minivan?” says Edward in surprise to Taylor.

Taylor gives him a tight contrite smile and a slight shrug.

“Last minute, I know,” Edward says, immediately placated. Taylor returns to the plane to retrieve our luggage.

“Want to make out in the back of the bus?” Edward murmurs to me.

I giggle. Who is this man, and what has he done with Mr Unbelievably Angry of the last few days?

“Are we going?” Alice says from behind us, oozing impatience. She’s hand in hand with Jasper. We

clamber in and make our way to the double seat at the back. We sit down and I snuggle against Edward. He puts his arm around the back of my seat. In spite of being crammed into a minivan he looks carefree and at ease.

“Comfortable?” he murmurs to me as Alice and Jasper take the seat in front of us.

“Yes.” I smile up at him and he kisses my forehead. I don’t understand why I feel so shy with him today.

Emmett and Rose clamber in last as Taylor opens the tailgate to load the luggage. Five minutes later we are on our way. Jasper turns and asks,

“Have you been to Aspen before, Bella?”

“No, first time. You?”

“Rose and I used to come here a lot when we were teens. Dad’s a keen skier. Mom less so.”

“Maybe Edward will teach me how to ski,” I smile shyly up at my husband.

“Don’t bet on it,” Edward mutters, shuddering in mock horror. “The thought of you on skis.”

“I won’t be that bad!” I try to look affronted.

“You might break your neck,” he whispers, his grin gone.

Oh...

“Maybe if I just stick to the bunny slopes?” I don’t want to argue and sour his good mood, so I change the subject. “How long have you had this place?”

“Nearly two years. It’s yours now too,” he says softly.

I lean up and kiss his jaw. Hmm, he smells so good. I nestle against him, listening to him laugh and joke with Jasper and Emmett. They are discussing fishing. I shake my head at the coincidence... I married a man who likes fishing – just like my Dad. Alice chimes in occasionally, but Rose is quiet, and I wonder if she’s brooding about James Smith – or something else. Then I remember. Aspen... Edward’s house here was redesigned – or rebuilt, I can’t remember which – by Tanya Denali. Edward mentioned it in passing, before we met her to discuss plans for the new house. I wonder if that’s what’s preoccupying Rose – but I don’t want to ask her in front of Emmett, given his history with Tanya. Does Rose even know about her connection to the house?

As we head towards Aspen I glance out of the window. The trees are green, though a whisper of the coming Fall is evident here and there in the yellowing tips of the leaves. The sky is a clear crystal blue, though there are darkening clouds to the west of us. All around us in the distance loom the Rockies, the highest peak directly ahead of us. They’re lush and green, and the furthest ones are capped with snow, like a child’s drawing of what mountains should be. The winter playground of the rich and famous... and I own a house here. I can barely believe it. And unbidden, from deep within, rises the familiar unease I always feel when I try to wrap my head around Edward’s wealth. For some reason it makes me feel guilty. What have I done to deserve this lifestyle? I shake my head, not wanting to dwell on this ever-present anxiety.

We drive along Aspen’s main street. It’s an eclectic mix –squat buildings of mostly red brick, Swiss-style chalets, and lots of little turn of the century houses painted in fun colors. Plenty of banks and designer shops too, betraying the affluence of the local populace. Of course Edward fits in here.

“Why did you choose Aspen?” I ask.

“What?” he asks, cocking his head to one side.

“To buy a place.”

“Mom and Dad used to bring us here when we were kids. I learned to ski here. I like the place. I hope you do too – otherwise we’ll sell the house and choose somewhere else.”

Oh! Simple as that. I blink at him and he tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“You look lovely today,” he says softly.

I flush. I’m just in jeans and t-shirt, with a lightweight navy blue jacket – my traveling gear. Why does he make me feel shy? He leans down and kisses me, a soft sweet loving kiss.

Taylor takes us on out of town and we start to climb the other side of the valley, twisting along a mountain road. As we continue to climb I get more and more excited, and I feel Edward tensing beside me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as we round a bend.

“I hope you like it,” he says quietly, his green eyes wide. “We’re here.”

Taylor slows, indicates and turns through a gateway of rough, grey, sandy and red stones. He heads down the driveway and finally pulls up outside the impressively sized house. Double fronted, with high-pitched roofs, built of the same mixed stone as the gateway and dark, dark wood – it’s stunning. Modern and stark, very much Edward’s style.

“Home,” he mouths at me as our guests start piling out of the van.

“Looks good,” I murmur.

“Come. See,” he says, an excited though anxious gleam in his eyes – like he’s about to show me his science project, or something.

Alice runs up the steps to where an older, raven-haired woman stands in the doorway. She’s tiny and her hair is dusted with gray. Alice flings her arms around her neck and hugs her tightly.

“Who’s that?” I ask as Edward helps me out of the van.

“Mrs Bentley. She lives here with her husband. They look after the place.”

Holy cow... more staff?

Alice is making introductions – Jasper, then Rose. Emmett too hugs Mrs Bentley. As Taylor unloads the van Edward takes my hand and leads me to the front door.

“Welcome back, Mr Cullen,” Mrs Bentley beams.

“Carmella, this is my wife, Isabella,” Edward says proudly. His tongue caresses my name, making my heart stutter.

“Mrs Cullen,” Mrs Bentley – um, Carmella – nods a respectful greeting at me. I hold out my hand and we shake. She’s much more formal with Edward than the rest of the family. This does not surprise me.

“I hope you had a pleasant flight. The weather is supposed to be fine all weekend, though I’m not sure.” She eyes the graying clouds behind us. “Lunch is ready for whenever you want,” she smiles, her dark eyes twinkling. I warm to her immediately.

“Here – ” Edward grabs me and lifts me off my feet.

“What are you doing?” I squeal.

“Carrying you over yet another threshold, Mrs Cullen.”

I grin at him as he carries me into the wide hallway, and after a brief kiss, sets me gently down onto the hardwood floor. The interior décor is stark and reminds me of the great room at Escala – all white walls, dark wood, and contemporary abstract art. The hallway opens out on to a large sitting area where three off-white leather couches surround a stone fireplace that dominates the room. The only color is from the soft cushions scattered on the couches. Alice grabs Jasper's hand and drags him out of the communal room, further into the house. Edward narrows his eyes at their departing figures, his mouth settling into a hard line. He shakes his head then turns to me.

Rose whistles loudly.

"Nice place," she says to Edward. I glance round to see Emmett helping Taylor with our luggage. I wonder again if she knows that Tanya had a hand in this place.

"Tour?" Edward asks me, and whatever was going through his mind about Alice and Jasper seems to have been forgotten. He's radiating excitement – or is it anxiety? It's difficult to tell.

"Sure," I murmur. Once again I'm overwhelmed by the wealth I am facing. How much did this place cost? It makes me feel small and insignificant, aware that I have contributed nothing to this... and briefly I'm brought back to the first time Edward took me to Escala. I was overwhelmed then. You got used to it, my subconscious hisses at me.

Edward frowns but takes my hand, leading me through the various rooms. The state-of-the-art kitchen is all pale marble countertops and black cupboards. There's an impressive wine cellar, and an expansive den downstairs, complete with large plasma screen, soft couches... and a billiard table. I stare at it, and flush when Edward catches me.

"Fancy a game?" he asks, a wicked gleam in his eye. I shake my head, and his brow furrows once more. Taking my hand again, he leads me up to the first floor. There are four bedrooms upstairs, each with an ensuite bathroom.

The master suite is something else – the bed is huge, bigger than the bed at home, and faces an enormous picture window looking out over Aspen and towards the verdant mountains.

"That's Ajax Mountain... or Aspen Mountain, if you like." Edward says, eyeing me warily. He's standing in the doorway, his thumbs hooked through the belt loops on his black jeans.

I nod.

"You're very quiet," he murmurs.

"It's lovely, Edward," I reply. And suddenly I'm aching to be back at Escala.

In five long strides he's standing in front of me, reaching up and tugging at my chin, releasing my lower lip from the grip of my teeth.

"What is it?" he asks, his eyes searching mine.

"You're very rich," I murmur.

"Yes," he says.

"Sometimes – it just takes me by surprise, how wealthy you are."

"We are," he corrects me.

"We are," I mutter automatically.

"Don't stress this, Bella, please. It's just a house."

"And what did Tanya do here, exactly?"

He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“Tanya?”

“Yes. She remodeled this place?” I prompt.

“She did. She put the den in downstairs.” He rakes his hand through his hair and frowns at me. “Why are we talking about Tanya? You’ve dealt with her.”

“Did you know she had a fling with Emmett?”

Edward gazes at me for a moment.

“Emmett’s fucked most of Seattle, Bella.”

I gasp.

“Mainly women, I understand,” Edward whispers jokingly. I think he’s amused by my expression.

“No!”

Edward nods.

“But it’s none of my business.” He holds his palms up.

“I don’t think Rose knows,” I breathe.

“I’m not sure he broadcasts that information. Rose seems to be holding her own.”

I am shocked. Sweet, unassuming, curly-haired, blue-eyed Emmett? I stare in disbelief. Edward tilts his head to one side, scrutinizing me.

“This can’t just be about Tanya, or Emmett’s promiscuity.”

“I know. I’m sorry. After all that’s happened this week, it’s just...” I shrug, feeling tearful all of a sudden. Edward seems to sag with relief. Pulling me into his arms he holds me tightly, his nose in my hair.

“I know. I’m sorry too. Let’s relax and enjoy ourselves, okay? You can stay here and read, watch god-awful TV, shop, come hiking – fishing even. Whatever you want to do,” he murmurs. “And forget what I said about Emmett. That was indiscreet of me.”

“Goes some way to explain why he’s always teasing you,” I murmur, nuzzling his chest.

“He really has no idea about my past. I told you, my family assumed I was gay. Celibate, but gay.”

I giggle, and begin to relax in his arms.

“I thought you were celibate. How wrong we were.” I wrap my arms around him, marveling at the ridiculousness of gay Edward.

“Mrs Cullen, are you smirking at me?”

“Maybe a little,” I acquiesce. “You know, the thing I can’t get my head round is – why do you have this place?”

“What do you mean?” He kisses my hair.

“You have the boat, which I understand, you have the place in New York for business – but why here? It’s not like you shared it with anyone.”

Edward stills, and is silent for several beats.

“I was waiting for you,” he says softly.

I gaze up at him, and his eyes are dark green and burning with sincerity.

“Edward,” I breathe, “that’s... that’s such a lovely thing to say.”

“It’s true. I didn’t know it at the time.” He smiles his shy smile.

“I’m glad you waited.”

“You are worth waiting for, Mrs Cullen.” He tips my chin back with his finger, leans down and kisses me tenderly.

“So are you,” I breathe, smiling up at him. “Though I feel I like I cheated. I didn’t have to wait long for you at all.”

He grins.

“Am I that much of a prize?”

“Edward, you are the state lottery, the cure for cancer and the three wishes from Aladdin’s lamp all rolled into one.”

He raises a brow.

“When will you realize this?” I scold him. “You were a very eligible bachelor. And I don’t mean all this – ” I wave dismissingly at our plush surroundings. “I mean in here.” I place my hand over his heart, and his eyes widen. My confident, sexy husband has gone and I’m facing my lost boy. “Believe me Edward, please,” I whisper, and reach up to clasp his face, pulling his lips to mine. He groans softly, and I don’t know if it’s the pain of hearing what I have to say, or his usual primal response. I claim him, my lips moving against his, my tongue invading his mouth.

When we’re both breathless he pulls away, eyeing me doubtfully.

“When are you going to get in through you exceptionally thick skull that I love you?” I ask, exasperated.

He swallows.

“One day,” he says. I gaze at him... this is progress. I smile, and am rewarded with his answering shy smile.

“Come. Let’s have some lunch – the others will be wondering where we are. We can discuss what we all want to do.”

~o~

Mrs Bentley has served up an Italian feast – a mixed antipasto, consisting of a platter of cold meats, roasted halved peppers filled with pesto, fresh green bean salad with mint, caponata, oven-roasted tomatoes, buffalo mozzarella, artichokes and olives served with warm focaccia bread – and we have consumed it. Yet in spite of the fact I have eaten so much, I feel lighter. Happier. This is my home too. All I have to remember is one simple rule – my home is wherever Edward is.

The banter around the large dark wood table has been light and funny. Over the last hour or so I have laughed a lot and drunk two large glasses of Frascati. Just Edward and I are drinking white wine – the others favor red. My only concern is Rose and Emmett. Something’s going on between them. They are relaxed with all of us, but not with each other. I glance at my husband. They’re a little like Edward and me, tiptoeing around each other. I smile at Edward and he gives me a questioning look. Hmm... I am definitely feeling the effects of this wine.

“Thank you Mrs B, that was delicious.” Emmett raises his glass of Californian Shiraz to Mrs Bentley as

she clears the table.

“You are most welcome, Emmett,” Mrs B smiles.

Edward too raises his glass to her, and she flushes under his warm approval.

“Oh no!” Rose says suddenly.

All eyes turn to her.

“Look,” she says pointing to the picture window. Outside rain has started pouring down.

“There goes our hike,” Emmett mutters, sounding vaguely relieved.

“We could go into town,” Alice pipes up.

“Perfect weather for fishing,” Edward says.

What is it with him and fishing?

“I’ll go fish,” Jasper responds.

“Let’s split up.” Alice claps her hands. “Girls, shopping – boys, outdoor boring stuff.”

I glance at Rose, who regards Alice indulgently. Fishing or shopping – Jeez, what a choice.

“Bella, what do you want to do?” Edward asks.

“I don’t mind,” I lie. Alice catches my eye, and presses her hands together in a silent plea. “But I’m more than happy to go shopping,” I add, smiling wryly at Alice. Edward smirks. He knows I hate shopping.

“I can stay here with you, if you’d like,” he murmurs and something dark unfurls in my belly at his tone.

“No, you go fish,” I answer. Edward needs boy time.

“Sounds like a plan,” Rose says, rising from the table.

Emmett frowns briefly.

“I’ll take you girls into town. I need to pick something up... a battery for my watch.” He glances very quickly at Rose, and I see him flush, ever so slightly. She doesn’t notice.

“Taylor will accompany you,” Edward says, and it’s a given – not up for discussion.

“We don’t need babysitting,” Rose retorts bluntly, as direct as ever.

I put my hand on Rose’s arm.

“Rose, Taylor should come,” I murmur. She frowns at me, then shrugs, and for once in her life holds her tongue. I smile timidly at Edward. His expression remains impassive. Oh, I hope he’s not mad at Rose.

“Take the Merc, Em. When you can come back we can go fishing,” Edward says.

“Yeah!” Emmett mutters, but he seems distracted. “Good plan.”

~o~

“In here.” Grabbing my hand Alice hauls me into a designer boutique that’s all pink silk and faux-French distressed rustic furniture. Rose follows us while Taylor waits outside, sheltering under the awning from the rain. During our drive into town Rose tried to engage Taylor in conversation, but much to my amusement he remained polite but tight-lipped. Rose seems to have relaxed, and I wonder

once more what's up with her and Emmett. Aretha is belting out Say A Little Prayer over the store's hi-fi system... I love this song. I should put it on Edward's iPod.

"This will look wonderful on you, Bella." Alice holds up a scrap of silver material. "Here, try it on."

"Um... it's a bit short."

"You'll look fantastic in it. Edward will love it."

"You think?"

Alice beams at me.

"Bella, you have legs to die for, and if we go clubbing tonight – " she smiles, sensing an easy kill " – You'll look hot for your husband."

I blink at her, slightly shocked. However, she has a point. I don't think I've bought anything to go 'clubbing' in. I don't go clubbing.

"Go try it on," Alice orders, and reluctantly I head for the changing room.

~o~

While I wait for Rose and Alice to emerge from the changing rooms I stroll to the shop window and look out, unseeing, across the main street. The soul compilation continues: Dionne Warwick is singing Walk On By. Another great song – one of my mother's favorites. I glance down at The Dress in my hand. 'Dress' is perhaps an overstatement. It's backless, and very short, but Alice has declared it a winner, perfect for dancing the night away. Apparently I need shoes too, and a large chunky necklace, which we'll source next. I roll my eyes, reflecting once more on how lucky I am to have Caroline Acton.

I'm distracted by the sight of Emmett. He has appeared on the other side of the leafy main street, climbing out of a large Mercedes, not unlike the one Taylor usually drives. Emmett dives into a store, as if to duck out of the rain. Looks like a jewelry store... maybe he's looking for that watch battery. He emerges a few minutes later, and not alone – with a woman.

Fuck! He's talking to Tanya!

What the hell is she doing here? As I watch they hug briefly, and she holds her head back, laughing animatedly at something he says. He kisses her cheek, then runs to the waiting car. She turns and heads down the street, and I gape after her. What was that about? I turn anxiously towards the changing rooms, but there's still no sign of Rose or Alice.

I glance at Taylor, noticing him waiting outside the storefront. He catches my eye, then shrugs – he witnessed Emmett's little encounter too. I flush, embarrassed to have been caught snooping. Turning back I see Alice and Rose emerge from the dressing rooms, both of them laughing. Rose looks at me quizzically.

"What's wrong, Bella?" she asks. "You gone cold on the dress? You look sensational in it."

"Um, no."

"Are you okay?" Rose's eyes widen.

"I'm fine. Shall we pay?"

I head to the cashier's desk, joining Alice who has chosen two skirts.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." The young sales assistant – who has more gloss coating her lips than I have ever seen in one place – smiles at me. "That'll be eight hundred and fifty dollars."

What? For this scrap of material! I blink at her, and meekly hand over my black Amex.

“Mrs Cullen,” Ms Lip-Gloss purrs.

I follow Rose and Alice in a daze for the next two hours, warring with myself. Should I tell Rose? My subconscious firmly shakes her head. Yes, I should tell her. No I shouldn’t. It could just have been an innocent meeting... Shit. What should I do?

“Well, do you like the shoes, Bella?” Alice has her fists on her hips.

“Um... yeah, sure.”

I end up with a pair of unfeasibly high Manolo Blahniks with straps that look like they are made from mirrors. They match the dress perfectly, and they set Edward back just over a thousand dollars. Also a long silver chain – a bargain at eighty-four dollars.

“Getting used to having money?” Rose asks, not unkindly, as we walk back to the car. Alice has skipped ahead.

“You know this isn’t me, Rose. I’m kind of uncomfortable about all this. But I’m reliably informed it’s part of the package.” I purse my lips at her, and she puts her arm around me.

“You’ll get used to it Bella,” she says sympathetically. “You’ll look great.”

“Rose, how are you and Em getting along?” I ask. Her wide blue eyes dart to mine.

Oh no.

She shakes her head.

“I don’t want to talk about it now.” She motions with her mouth towards Alice. “But things are – ” She doesn’t finish her sentence. This is unlike my tenacious Rose. Shit. Do I tell her? Tell her I saw – what? Emmett and Miss Well-Groomed-Sexual-Predator talking, hugging... and that kiss on the cheek. Surely they are just old friends? No, I won’t tell her. Not right now. I give her my I-completely-understand-and-will-respect-your-privacy nod. She reaches for my hand and gives it a grateful squeeze, and there it is – a swift glimpse of pain and hurt in her eyes, that she quickly stifles with a blink. In that moment I feel a surge of protectiveness for my dear friend. What the fuck is Emmett Manwhore Cullen playing at?

~o~

Alice has finally sensed the atmosphere in the car.

“You guys okay?”

“Sure,” I grin, and catch Taylor’s glance at me in the review mirror.

“Yes, fine,” says Rose, with forced brightness. “So, let’s have a cocktail when we get in. After all this shopping I think we deserve it.”

We arrive back at the house we find we’re alone except for Mrs Bentley, who lets us in. When she discovers we want cocktails she offers to mix us drinks. Rose refuses, but lets Mrs Bentley hand her the makings for strawberry daiquiris. Then she disappears, leaving the three of us in the kitchen area. Rose mixes one mother of a cocktail, and while Alice goes to put away her purchases we curl up on the couches in front of the fire.

“Emmett has just been a little distant lately,” Rose murmurs, gazing into the flames.

“Oh?”

“I think I’m in trouble, for getting you into trouble,” she adds.

“You heard about that?”

“Yes. Edward called Emmett, Emmett called me.”

I roll my eyes. Oh Fifty, Fifty, Fifty.

“I’m sorry. Edward is... protective. You haven’t been with Emmett since the infamous cosmopolitan evening?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“I really like him, Bella,” she whispers. And for one dreadful minute I think she’s going to cry. Oh no... does this mean the return of the pink pajamas? She turns to gaze at me.

“I’ve fallen in love with him.”

Oh.

“At first I thought it was just the great sex. But he’s charming, and kind, and warm, and funny. I could see us growing old together – grand-kids and everything.”

“Your happy ever after,” I whisper.

She nods sadly.

“Maybe you should talk to him. Try and find some alone time here. Find out what’s eating him.”

Who’s eating him, my subconscious snarls. I slap her down, shocked at the waywardness of my own thoughts.

“Perhaps you guys could go for a walk tomorrow morning?”

“We’ll see.”

“Rose, I hate seeing you like this.”

She smiles weakly, and I lean over to hug her. I resolve not to mention Tanya... though I might mention it to the Manwhore himself. How can he fuck with my friend’s affections like this?

Alice returns, and we move on to safer territory.

~o~

I notice that the fire is dying down, and we’re almost out of wood. Even though it’s summer, the fire is very welcome on this wet day.

“Alice, do you know where the wood for the fire is kept?” I ask.

“I think it’s in the garage.”

“I’ll go fetch some. It’ll give me an opportunity to explore.”

The rain has eased off when I venture outside and head to the three-car garage adjoining the house. The side door is unlocked and I enter, switching on the light to fight the gloom. The fluorescent strips ping noisily into life.

There’s a car in the garage, another Mercedes, and I realize it’s the same car I saw Emmett clambering out of this afternoon. There are also two snowmobiles. But the things that really grab my attention are the two trail bikes, both 125 cc. Memories of Jake, bravely endeavoring to teach me how to ride, flash through my mind. Unconsciously I rub my arm where I badly bruised it in a fall.

“You ride?” says Emmett behind me.

I whirl round.

“You’re back.”

“It would appear so,” he grins, and I realize that Edward might say the same thing to me – but without the huge, heart-melting grin. “Well?” he asks. Manwhore!

“Sort of.”

“Do you want a go?”

I snort.

“Um, no... I don’t think Edward would be very happy if I did.”

“Edward’s not here.” Emmett smirks – oh, it’s a family trait – and waves his arm to indicate we’re alone. He strolls towards the nearest bike and swings a long leg over the saddle, sitting astride and grabbing the handlebars.

“Edward has um... issues about my safety. I shouldn’t.”

“You always do what he says?” Emmett breathes, a wicked sparkle in his baby-blue eyes. I can see a glimmer of the bad boy... the bad boy Rose has fallen in love with. The bad boy from Detroit.

“No.” I arch an admonishing brow at him. “But I’m trying to put that right. He has enough to worry about without adding me to the mix. Is he back?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t go fishing?”

Emmett shakes his head.

“I had some business to deal with in town.”

Business! Holy Shit – Strawberry blond business! I inhale sharply and gape at him.

“There you are. Oh Em – you’re back.” Rose joins us.

“Hey baby.” He smiles broadly.

“Catch anything?”

I scrutinize Emmett’s reaction.

“No. I had a few things to take care of in town.” And for one brief moment I see a flash of uncertainty cross his face.

Oh Shit.

“I came out to see what was keeping Bella.” Rose looks at each of us, confused.

“What are you looking for in here?” Emmett asks me, and suddenly I sense it – the tension between them. We all pause as we hear a car pull up outside. Oh – Edward’s back. Thank heavens. The hoist for the garage door whirrs loudly into action, startling us all, and the door slowly lifts to reveal Edward and Jasper unloading a black flat bed truck. Edward stops when he sees us all standing in the garage.

“Garage band?” he asks sardonically as he wanders in, heading straight for me.

I grin. I am relieved to see him. He’s wearing a rainproof jacket and navy pants... Ha! The ones he bought in Newtons. He puts his arm around me.

“Hi,” he says looking quizzically at me, ignoring both Rose and Emmett.

“Hi,” I answer. “Nice pants.”

“I have it on good authority that they’re lightweight and breathable. Prevent chafing.” His voice is soft and seductive, for my ears only, and when he gazes down at me his expression is hot.

I flush, and he smiles a huge, no-holds-barred, all-for-me smile.

“You’re wet,” I murmur.

“It was raining. What are you guys doing in the garage?” Finally he acknowledges that we are not alone.

“Bella came to fetch some wood,” Emmett smirks. Somehow he manages to make that sentence sound smutty. “I tried to tempt her to take a ride. On the bike.” Master of the double entendre.

Edward’s face falls, and my heart stills.

“She said no. That you wouldn’t like it,” Emmett adds kindly – and innuendo-free.

Edward’s green gaze swings back to me.

“Did she now?” he murmurs.

“Listen, I’m all for standing around discussing what Bella did next, but shall we go back inside?” Rose snaps. She stoops down, snatches up two logs, and turns on her heel, heading for the door. Oh shit. Rose is mad – but I know it’s not at me. Emmett sighs, and without a word to us follows her out of the garage door. I gaze after them, but Edward distracts me.

“You can ride a motorcycle?” he asks, his voice laced with disbelief.

“Not very well. Jake taught me.”

His eyes frost immediately.

“You made the right decision,” he says, his voice much cooler. “The ground’s very hard at the moment and the rain’s made it very slippery.”

“Where do you want the fishing gear?” Jasper calls from outside.

“Leave it, Jasper – Taylor will take care of it.”

“What about the fish?” Jasper continues, his voice vaguely taunting.

“You caught a fish?” I ask, surprised.

“Not me. Hale did.” And Edward pouts... prettily.

I burst out laughing.

“Mrs Bentley will deal with that,” he calls back. Jasper grins and heads into the house.

“Am I amusing you, Mrs Cullen?”

“Very much so. You’re wet... Let me run you a bath.”

“As long as you join me.” He leans down and kisses me.

-

I fill the large egg-shaped tub in the ensuite bathroom, and pour in some expensive bath oil, which starts to foam immediately. The aroma is heavenly... jasmine I think. I head back into the bedroom while the bath fills and start to hang The Dress.

“Did you have a good time?” Edward asks as he enters the room. He’s just in t-shirt and navy pants, his feet bare. He closes the door behind him.

“Yes,” I murmur, drinking him in. I have missed him. Ridiculous – it’s only been what, a few hours? He cocks his head to one side and gazes at me.

“What is it?”

“I was thinking how much I’d missed you.”

“You sound smitten, Mrs Cullen,” he whispers.

“I am, Mr Cullen.”

He strolls towards me until he’s standing in front of me.

“What did you buy?” he whispers, and I know it’s to change the topic of conversation.

“A dress, some shoes, a necklace. I spent a great deal of your money.” I glance up at him, guiltily.

He’s amused.

“Good,” he breathes, and his hand reaches up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear. “And for the four billionth time, our money.” Reaching down he releases my lip from my teeth and runs his index finger down the front of my t-shirt, down my sternum, between my breasts, down my stomach and over my belly to the hem.

“You won’t be needing this in the bath,” he murmurs, and gripping the hem of my t-shirt in both hands he slowly pulls it off me.

“Lift your arms,” he orders.

I comply, not taking my eyes off his, and he drops my t-shirt on the floor.

“I thought we were just having a bath,” I breathe as my pulse quickens.

“I want to make you good and dirty first. I’ve missed you too.” He leans down and kisses me...

~o~

“Shit, the water!” I struggle to sit up, all post-orgasmic and dazed.

Edward doesn’t release me.

“Edward, the bath!” I gaze down at him from my prone position across his chest.

He laughs.

“Relax – it’s a wet room.” He rolls over and kisses me quickly. “I’ll switch off the faucet.”

He climbs gracefully off the bed and strolls into the ensuite. My eyes greedily follow him all the way. Hmm... my husband, naked and soon to be wet. My inner goddess licks her lips salaciously and I bound out of bed.

We sit at opposite ends of the bath, which is very full – so full that whenever we move water laps over the side and splashes to the floor. It’s very decadent. Even more decadent is Edward washing my feet, massaging the soles, pulling gently on my toes. He kisses each toe. He gently bites my little toe...

“Aaah!” I feel it... there, in my groin.

“Like that?” he breathes.

“Hmmm,” I mumble incoherently.

He goes back to just the massage. Oh this feels good. I close my eyes.

"I saw Tanya in town," I murmur.

"Really? I think she has a place here," he says dismissively. He's not interested in the slightest.

"She was with Emmett."

Edward stops massaging. That got his attention. When I open my eyes his head is cocked to one side, like he doesn't understand.

"What do you mean, with Emmett?" he asks, perplexed rather than concerned.

I explain what I saw.

"Bella, they're just friends. I think Emmett is pretty stuck on Rose." He pauses, then adds more quietly, "In fact I know he's pretty stuck on her." And he gives me his I-have-no-idea-why look.

"Rose is gorgeous," I bristle, standing up for my friend.

He snorts.

"Still glad it was you that fell into my office." He kisses my big toe, releases my left foot and picks up my right, beginning the massage process again. His fingers are so strong and supple... I relax again. I do not want to fight about Rose. I close my eyes and let his fingers work their magic on my feet.

I gape at myself in the full-length mirror, not recognizing the vixen that stares back at me. Alice has played Barbie with me this evening, styling my hair and make-up. My hair is full and straight, my eyes ringed with kohl, my lips scarlet red. I look... hot. I am all legs, especially in the high-heeled Manolos and my frankly indecent short dress. I need Edward to approve, though I have a horrible feeling he won't like so much of my flesh exposed. In view of our entente cordiale, I decide I should ask him. I pick up my BlackBerry, as I doubt he'll hear me from upstairs.

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: Does My Butt Look Big In This?

Date: 29 August 2009: 18.53 MST

To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen

I need your sartorial advice.

Yours

Mrs C x

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Peachy

Date: 29 August 2009: 18.55 MST

To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen

I seriously doubt it.

But I will come and give your butt a thorough examination just to make sure.

Yours in anticipation

Mr C x

Edward Cullen, CEO

Cullen Enterprises Holdings and Butt Inspectorate Inc

As I read his email, the bedroom door opens and Edward freezes on the threshold. His mouth pops

open and his eyes widen.

Holy crap... this could go either way.

“Well?” I whisper

“Bella, you look... Wow.”

“You like it?”

“Yes, I guess so.” He’s a little hoarse. Slowly he steps into the room and closes the door. He’s in his black jeans and a white shirt, but with a black jacket... he looks divine. He stalks slowly towards me, but as soon as he reaches me, he puts his hands on my shoulders and turns me round to face the mirror, while he stands behind me. My gaze finds his in the glass, then he glances down, fascinated by my naked back. His finger glides down my spine and reaches the edge of my dress at the small of my back, where pale flesh meets silver cloth.

“This is very revealing,” he murmurs.

His hand skims lower, over my backside and down to my naked thigh. He pauses, green eyes burning intently into brown. Then slowly he trails his fingers back up to the hem of my skirt.

Watching his long fingers move lightly, teasingly across my skin, feeling the tingles they leave in their wake... my mouth forms a perfect o.

“It’s not far from here.” He touches the hem, then moves his fingers higher. “To here,” he whispers.

I gasp as his fingers stroke my sex, moving tantalizingly over my panties, feeling me, teasing me.

“And your point is?” I whisper.

“My point is... it’s not far from here – ” His fingers glide over my panties, then one is inside, against my soft dampened flesh. “– to here. And then to here.” He slips a finger inside me.

I gasp, a soft mewling sound.

“This is mine,” he murmurs in my ear. He closes his eyes as he moves his finger, slowly in and out of me. “I don’t want anyone else to see this.”

My breath stutters, my panting matching the rhythm of his finger. Watching him in the mirror, doing this... it’s beyond erotic.

“So be a good girl, and don’t bend down, and you should be fine.”

“You approve?” I whisper.

“No, but I’m not going to stop you wearing it. You look stunning, Isabella.” Abruptly he withdraws his finger, leaving me wanting more, and he moves round to face me. He places the tip of his invading finger on my lower lip. Instinctively I pucker my lips and kiss it and I’m rewarded with a wicked grin. He puts his finger in his mouth and his expression informs me that I taste good, real good.

I flush. Will it always shock me when he does that? He grasps my hand.

“Come.” he orders softly. I want to retort that I was about to, but in light of what happened in the playroom yesterday, I decide against it.

~o~

We are in a plush, exclusive restaurant in town, waiting for dessert. It’s been a lively evening so far, and Alice is determined it should continue, and that we must go clubbing. Right now she’s sitting silently – for once – hanging on Jasper’s every word as he and Edward talk. Alice is smitten too, with

Jasper, and Jasper with her – it's so obvious.

Edward seems more at ease. He's been talking animatedly with Jasper – they obviously bonded over the fly-fishing. They're talking about psychology mainly. Ironically it's Edward who sounds the more knowledgeable. I snort softly as I half- listen to their conversation, sadly acknowledging that his expertise is the result of seeing so many shrinks.

You're the best therapy. His words, whispered long ago while we were making love, echo in my head. Am I? Oh Edward, I hope so.

I glance over at Rose. She looks beautiful, but then she always does. She and Emmett are less lively. Emmett seems nervous, his jokes slightly too loud, his laugh off. What's getting to him? Is it that woman? My heart sinks at the thought that he might hurt my best friend. I glance round at the entrance, half expecting to see Tanya calmly saunter her well-groomed ass across the restaurant to us. My mind is playing tricks – I suspect it's the amount of alcohol I've had. My head is beginning to ache.

Abruptly Emmett startles us all by standing and pulling his chair back so it scrapes across the tile floor. All eyes turn to him. He gazes down at Rose for one moment, then drops to one knee beside her.

Oh My God.

He reaches for her hand, and silence settles like a blanket over the entire restaurant, as everyone stops eating, stops talking, stops walking and stares.

“My beautiful Rose, I love you. Your grace, your beauty and your fiery spirit have no equal, and you have captured my heart. Spend your life with me. Marry me.”

Holy Shit!

~ooo000ooo

The incomparable Aretha Franklin... http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pct_VxchJZ8

And the gorgeous Dionne Warwick http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzchQ_ydowk

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The attention of the entire restaurant is trained on Rose and Emmett, waiting as one with baited breath. The anticipation is unbearable. Silence stretches like a taut rubber band. The atmosphere is oppressive, apprehensive and yet hopeful throughout the room.

Rose stares blankly at Emmett as he gazes up at her, his bluest of blue eyes wide with longing – fear even. Holy crap, Rose! Put him out of his misery. Please. Jeez – he could have asked her privately.

A single tear trickles down her cheek, though she remains expressionless. Fuck! Rose – crying? Then she smiles, a slow disbelieving I-think-I've-discovered-the-fabled-lost-city-of-El-Dorado smile.

“Yes,” she whispers, a breathy, sweet acceptance – not Rose like at all. For one nanosecond there's a pause as the entire restaurant exhales a collective sigh of relief – and then the noise is deafening. Spontaneous applause, cheering, cat-calls, whooping – and suddenly I have tears rolling down my face, smudging my Barbie-meets-Joan-Jett make up.

Oblivious to the commotion around them, the two are locked in their own bubble. From his pocket Emmett produces a small box, opens it and presents it to Rose. A ring... and from what I can see, an exquisite ring, but I need a closer look. Oh no – is that what he bought with Tanya? Why Tanya? Oh, I'm so glad I didn't tell Rose.

Rose looks from the ring to Emmett, then throws her arms around his neck. They kiss, remarkably chastely for them, and the crowd goes wild. Emmett stands and acknowledges the approbation with a surprisingly graceful bow, then, wearing a huge self-satisfied, joyous grin, sits back down. I can't take my eyes off them. Taking the ring out of its box Emmett gently slides it onto Rose's finger, and they kiss once more.

Edward squeezes my hand – I didn't realize I'd been gripping his so tightly. I release him, a little embarrassed, and he shakes his hand, mouthing "Ow".

"Sorry. Did you know about this?" I whisper.

Edward smiles, and I know that he did. He summons the waiter.

"Two bottles of the Cristal please. The 2002 if you have it," he murmurs.

I smirk at him.

"What?" he asks.

"Because the 2002 is so much better than the 2003," I tease.

He laughs.

"To the discerning palate, Isabella," he says, grinning.

"You have a very discerning palate, Mr Cullen, and singular interests," I smile.

He cocks his head to one side.

"That I do, Mrs Cullen." He leans in close. "You taste better," he whispers, and he kisses a certain spot beside my ear, sending little shivers down my spine. I flush scarlet, fondly remembering his demonstration of the quite literal shortcomings of my dress.

Alice is the first up to hug Rose and Emmett, and after her we all take turns congratulating the happy couple.

I clutch Rose in a fierce hug.

"See? He was just worried about his proposal," I whisper.

"Oh Bella," she giggle-sobs.

"Rose, I am so happy for you. Congratulations."

Edward is behind me. He shakes Emmett's hand, then – surprising both Emmett and me – pulls him into a hug. I can only just catch what he says.

"Way to go, Memet," he murmurs. Emmett says nothing – for once stunned into silence – then cautiously returns his brother's hug.

Memet?

"Thanks, Edward," Emmett chokes out.

Edward gives Rose a brief, if awkward, almost arm's-length hug. I know that Edward's attitude to Rose is tolerant at best, and ambivalent most of the time, so... this is progress. Releasing her he says so quietly only she and I can hear,

“I hope you are as happy in your marriage as I am in mine.”

“Thank you, Edward. I hope so too,” she says graciously.

The waiter has returned with the champagne, which he proceeds to open with an understated flourish.

Edward holds his champagne flute aloft.

“To Rose and my brother Emmett – congratulations.”

We all sip... well, I glug. Hmmm – Cristal tastes so good... and I’m reminded of the first time I drank it, when we ate at Edward’s club... and later, our eventful elevator journey to the first floor.

Edward frowns at me.

“What are you thinking about?” he whispers.

“The first time I drank this champagne.”

He frowns.

“We were at your club,” I prompt.

He grins.

“Oh yes. I remember.” He winks at me.

“Emmett, have you set a date?” Alice pipes up. Jasper beams at her.

Emmett gives his sister an exasperated stare.

“I’ve only just asked Rose, so we’ll come back to you on that. K?”

“Oh, make it a Christmas wedding. That would be so romantic – and you’d have no trouble remembering your anniversary.” Alice claps her hands.

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Emmett smirks at her.

“After the champagne, please can we go clubbing?” Alice turns and gives Edward her biggest, brown-eyed look.

“I think we should ask Emmett and Rose what they’d like to do.”

As one we turn expectantly to them. Emmett shrugs, and Rose turns puce. Her carnal intent towards her fiancé is so clear I nearly spit four-hundred dollar champagne all over the table.

~o~

Zax is the most exclusive nightclub in Aspen – or so says Alice. Edward strolls, his arm wrapped around my waist, to the front of the short line and is immediately granted access. I wonder briefly if he owns the place. I glance at my watch – eleven thirty in the evening, and I’m feeling fuzzy. The two glasses of champagne and several glasses of Pouilly-Fumé during our meal are starting to have an effect... I’m grateful Edward has his arm around me.

“Mr Cullen, welcome back,” says a very attractive, leggy blond in black satin hot pants, matching sleeveless shirt, and a little red bowtie. She smiles broadly, revealing perfect all-American teeth between scarlet lips that match her bowtie. “Max will take your coat.”

A young man dressed entirely in black, fortunately not satin, smiles as he offers to take my coat. His dark eyes are warm and inviting. I am the only one wearing a coat – Edward insisted I take Alice’s trench coat to cover my behind – so Max only has to deal with me.

“Nice coat,” he says, gazing at me intently.

Beside me Edward bristles and fixes Max with a back-off-now glare. He flushes and quickly hands Edward my coat check ticket.

“Let me show you to your table.” Miss Satin Hot Pants flutters her eyelashes at my husband, flicks her long blond hair behind her and sashays through the entryway. I tighten my grip around Edward, and he gazes down at me questioningly for a moment, then smirks at me, as we follow Miss Impossibly Long Legs into the bar.

The lighting is muted. The walls are black, I think, the furnishings all deep, deep red. There are booths flanking two sides of the walls and a large U-shaped bar in the middle. It’s busy, given that we’re here off-season, but not too crowded, with the well-heeled of Aspen out for a good time on a Saturday night. The dress code is relaxed, and for the first time I feel a little over... um, under-dressed. I’m not sure which. The floor and walls vibrate with the music pulsing from the dance floor behind the bar. Lights are whirling, strobing and flashing on and off... in my heady state I idly think it’s an epileptic’s nightmare.

Hot Pants leads us to a corner booth that’s been roped off. It’s near the bar, with access to the dance floor. Clearly the best spot in the place.

“There’ll be someone along to take your order shortly.” She gives us all her megawatt smile, and with a final flutter of eyelashes at my husband sashays back from where she came. Alice is already jiggling from foot to foot, itching to get on to the dance floor. Jasper takes pity on her.

“Champagne?” Edward asks as they head off hand in hand towards the throbbing music. Jasper gives him a thumbs-up and Alice nods enthusiastically. Jeez, Alice does everything enthusiastically.

Rose and Emmett sit back on the soft velvet seating, hand in hand. They look so happy, their features soft and radiant in the glow from the tea-lights flickering in crystal holders on the low table. Edward gestures for me to sit, and I scoot in beside Rose. He takes a seat beside me and anxiously scans the room.

“Show me your ring,” I ask Rose, raising my voice over the music. I will be hoarse by the time we leave. Rose beams at me. Her ring is exquisite – a single solitaire in a fine elaborate claw with tiny diamonds on either side. It has a retro Victorian feel to it.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe.

She nods in delight and reaching over squeezes Emmett’s thigh. He leans down and kisses her.

“Get a room,” I call out.

Emmett grins.

A young woman with short dark hair and a wicked smile, wearing regulation black satin hot pants, comes to take our order.

“What do you want to drink?” Edward asks us.

“You’re not picking up the tab for this too,” Emmett grumbles.

“Em, don’t start that shit,” Edward says mildly.

Despite the objections of Rose, Emmett and Jasper, Edward has, of course, paid for the meal we just consumed. He simply waved them aside and would not hear of anyone else paying. I gaze at him lovingly. My Fifty Shades... always in control.

Emmett opens his mouth to say something but, wisely perhaps, closes it again.

“I’ll have a beer,” he says.

“Rose?” Edward asks.

“More champagne please. The Cristal is delicious. But I’m sure Jasper would prefer a beer.” She smiles sweetly – yes, sweetly – at Edward. She is incandescent with happiness. I can feel it radiating off her, and it’s a pleasure to bask in her joy.

“Bella?”

“Champagne, please.”

“Bottle of Cristal, three bottles of Corona, and a bottle of iced mineral water, six glasses,” he says in his usual authoritative, no-nonsense manner. It’s kinda hot.

“Thank you, sir. Coming right up.” Miss Hot Pants Number two gives him a gracious smile but he’s spared the fluttering of eyelashes, though her cheeks redden slightly.

“What?” he asks me.

“She didn’t flutter her eyelashes at you.” I smirk.

He blinks at me.

“Oh. Was she supposed to?” he asks, and I can tell he’s amused.

“Women usually do,” I mutter tartly.

He grins.

“Mrs Cullen, are you jealous?”

“Not in the slightest,” I pout at him. And I realize in that moment that I am beginning to tolerate women ogling my husband. Almost. Edward clasps my hand and kisses my knuckles.

“You have nothing to be jealous of, Mrs Cullen,” he murmurs close to my ear, his breath tickling me.

“I know.”

“Good.”

The waitress returns, and moments later I’m sipping another glass of champagne.

“Here.” Edward hands me a glass of water. “Drink this.”

I blink at him and I can see, though not hear, his sigh.

“Three large glasses of white wine at dinner and two of champagne, after a strawberry daiquiri and two glasses of Frascati at lunchtime. Drink. Now, Bella.”

How does he know about the cocktails this afternoon? I scowl at him. But actually he does have a point. Taking the glass of water I down it in a most unladylike manner to register my protest at being told what to do... again. I wipe my hand across the back of my mouth.

“Good girl,” he says, smirking. “You’ve vomited on me once already. I don’t wish to experience that again in a hurry.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about. You got to sleep with me.”

He smiles and his eyes soften.

“Yes. I did.”

Jasper and Alice are back.

“Jasper’s had enough, for now. Come on girls – let’s hit the floor. Strike a pose, throw some shapes,

work off the calories from the chocolate mousse.”

Hmmm. Alice makes a good case. Rose obviously agrees, and she stands immediately.

“Coming?” she asks Emmett.

“Let me watch you,” he says. And I have to look away quickly, blushing at the look he gives her. She grins as I stand.

“I’m going to burn some calories,” I say, and leaning down I whisper in Edward’s ear, “You can watch me.”

Edward scowls at me.

“Don’t bend over,” he growls.

“Okay.” I stand abruptly. Whoa... head rush. I clutch Edward’s shoulder, as the room shifts slightly.

“Perhaps you should have some more water,” Edward murmurs, and I hear the warning in his voice.

“I’m fine. These seats are low and my heels are high,” I mutter.

Reaching out Rose takes my hand, and I take a deep breath as I follow her and Alice, perfectly poised, onto the dance floor.

The music is pulsing a techno beat with a thumping bass line. The dance floor isn’t crowded, which means we have some space, but fortunately we’re not the only ones there. The mix is eclectic – young and old alike dancing the night away. I have never been a good dancer. In fact it’s only since I’ve been with Edward that I dance at all. Rose hugs me.

“I’m so happy,” she shouts over the music, and she starts to dance. Alice is doing what Alice does, grinning at the pair of us, throwing herself around... jeez, for someone so small she’s taking up a lot of room on the dance floor. I glance back towards the table. Our men are watching us. I start to move. It’s a pulsing rhythm. I close my eyes and surrender to it...

Yes, I can see her
'cause every girl in here wanna be her
Oh! She’s a Diva...

I open my eyes to find the dance floor filling up. Rose, Alice and I are forced closer together. I am actually enjoying myself. I begin to move a little more... a little more bravely... Rose gives me two thumbs up. I find myself beaming back at her.

I feel the same, and I wanna meet her
They say: “She low down...”
It’s just a rumor I don’t believe ‘em
They say: “She needs to slow down...”
The baddest thing around town

I close my eyes. Why did I spend the first twenty years of my life not doing this? I chose reading over dancing. Jane Austen didn’t have great music to move to... and Thomas Hardy... jeez, he’d have felt guilty as sin that he wasn’t dancing with his first wife... I giggle at the thought.

She’s nothing like a girl you’ve ever seen before
Nothing you can compare to your neighborhood whore
I’m trying to find the words to describe this girl without being disrespectful

It’s Edward. Edward has given me this confidence in my body and how I can move it...

The way, that booty movin' – I can't take no more
Have to stop what I'm doin', so I can pull up her close
I'm trying to find the words to describe this girl without being disrespectful

Suddenly I feel two hands on my hips. I grin. Edward has joined me. I wiggle and his hands move to my behind and back to my hips.

Damn Girl. Damn, you's a sexy bitch, sexy bitch
Damn, you's a sexy bitch

I open my eyes. And Alice is gaping at me in horror. Shit... Am I that bad? I reach down to hold Edward's hands. They're hairy. FUCK! They're not his. I whirl round, and towering over me is a blond giant with more teeth than is natural and a leering smile to showcase them looming over me.

"Get your hands off me!" I scream over the pounding music, apoplectic with rage.

"Come on sugar, it's just some fun," he smiles, holding his ape-like hands up, his blue eyes gleaming under the ultra violet lights.

Damn Girl. Damn, you's a sexy bitch, sexy bitch
Damn, you's a sexy bitch

Before I know what I'm doing I punch him, hard, on the corner of his mouth. Fuck... my hand. It throbs. Ow...

Damn Girl. Damn, you's a sexy bitch, sexy bitch
Damn, you's a sexy bitch

"Get away from me!" I shout.

He gazes down at me, shielding the corner of his mouth. I thrust my uninjured hand in front of his face, spreading my fingers to show him my rings.

"I'm married, you asshole!"

He shrugs rather arrogantly and gives me a half-hearted apologetic smile.

Damn Girl. Damn, you's a sexy bitch, sexy bitch
Damn, you's a sexy bitch

I glance round frantically. Alice is at my right, glaring at Blond Giant. Rose is lost in the moment doing her thing. Edward is not at the table... oh I hope he's gone to the rest room. I step back – oh shit – into a front I know well. Edward puts his arm around my waist and moves me to his side.

"Keep your fucking hands off my wife," he says. He's not shouting but somehow he can be heard over the music.

Holy shit!

"She can take care of herself," Blond Giant mutters. His hand moves from his mouth where I have split his lip... and Edward hits him. It's like I'm watching it in slow motion – a perfectly timed punch to the chin that moves at such speed, but with so little wasted energy, Blond Giant doesn't see it coming. He crumples to the floor like the bag of manure he is.

Fuck.

"Edward, no!" I gasp in panic, standing in front of him to hold him back. Shit, he'll kill him. "I already hit him," I shout over the music. Edward doesn't look at me – he's glaring at my assailant with a malevolence I've not seen before flaring in his eyes. Well, maybe once before... outside SIP after

James Smith's pass at me.

The other dancers move outwards like a ripple in a pond, clearing space around us, keeping a safe distance. Blond Giant scrambles to his feet as Emmett joins us. Oh no! Rose is with me, gaping at all of us. Emmett grasps Edward's arm, as Jasper appears too.

"Take it easy, okay? Didn't mean any harm." Blond Giant holds his hands up in defeat, beating a hasty retreat. Edward's eyes follow him off the dance floor. He does not look at me.

The song changes. Emmett looks down at me, then across at Edward, and takes his hand off Edward's arm. Jasper pulls Alice into his arms. I put my arms around Edward's neck until he finally gazes down at me, his eyes still blazing – primal and feral, a glimpse of a brawling adolescent. Holy shit. He gazes at me, scrutinizing my face. What is he thinking?

"Are you okay?" he says finally.

"Yes." I flex my fingers unconsciously as I bring my hands down to his chest. My hand is throbbing... I have never punched anyone before. What possessed me? Touching me wasn't the worst crime against humanity. Was it?

Yet deep down I know why I hit him. It's because I instinctively knew how Edward would react, seeing some stranger pawing me. I knew he'd lose his precious self-control. And the thought that some stupid nobody could derail my Fifty... my love... Well, it makes me mad. Real mad.

"Do you want to sit down?" Edward asks, warily.

Oh, come back to me, please...

"No. Dance with me."

You will always be my baby
I'm always thinking of you baby, yeah
Touch me in the morning
And last thing at night

"Dance with me." He's still mad. "Dance. Edward, please." I take his hands. Edward glares after the guy, but I start to move against him, rubbing myself against him, weaving myself around him.

Keep my body warm baby
You know it feels right
Take a little higher
I'm thinking it too (too)
Tell me what you're feeling
I feel it with you

The throng of dancers has circled us again, although there is now a 2ft exclusion zone around us.

"You hit him?" Edward asks. He stands stock-still as I take his fisted hands.

"Of course I did. I thought it was you, but his hands were hairier. Please dance with me."

We can only understand what we are shown
How was I supposed to know our love would grow

As Edward gazes at me the fire in his eyes slowly changes, evolves into something else... something darker, something hotter. Suddenly he grabs my wrists and pulls me flush against him, pinning my hands behind my back.

"You wanna dance? Let's dance," he growls close to my ear... and as he rolls his hips around into me,

I can do nothing but follow, his hands holding mine against my backside.

Come a little closer
Things sure are looking up
Heal me with your loving
I need you so much, I need you so much, I need you so much
We can only understand what we are shown

Edward can move. Boy can he move. He keeps me close, not letting me go, but his hands gradually relax on mine, freeing me. My hands creep round, up his arms, feeling his bunched muscles through his jacket, up to his shoulders. He presses me against him, and I follow his moves, as he slowly, sensually dances with me, in time to the pulsing beat of the club music.

How was I supposed to know our love would grow
We can only understand what we are shown
You touch my mind in special place
My heart races with you

The moment he grabs my hand and spins me first one way, then the other, I know he's back with me. I grin. He grins.

I'll take your love and I'll take my chances
I'll take them with you

We dance together and it's so liberating, so much fun. His anger forgotten, or suppressed, he throws me around with consummate skill in our small space on the dance floor, never letting me go. He makes me graceful, that's his skill. He makes me sexy, because that's what he is. He makes me feel loved – really loved. In spite of his fifty shades he has a wealth of love to give. Granted, it's clouded with issues of over-protectiveness and control... but deep down, how could I ever doubt that this beautiful man loves me?

We can only understand what we are shown
How was I supposed to know our love would grow
You touch my mind in special places
My heart races with you

I am breathless, and the song morphs to another.

"Can we sit?" I gasp.

"Sure," he says, and taking my hand leads me off the dance floor.

"You've made me rather hot and sweaty," I whisper as we return to the table.

He pulls me into his arms.

"I like you hot and sweaty. Though I prefer to make you hot and sweaty in private," he purrs. I flush, and a lascivious smile tugs at his lips.

I sit. It's as if the incident on the dance floor never happened. I'm vaguely surprised we haven't been thrown out. I glance around the bar... no one is looking at us, and I can't see Blond Giant. Maybe he left – or maybe he's been thrown out. Rose and Emmett are being indecent on the dance floor, Jasper and Alice less so. I take another sip of champagne.

"Here." Edward puts another glass of water before me and regards me intently, his expression saying, drink it. Drink it now. I do as I'm told. Besides, I'm thirsty. Reaching over he lifts a bottle of Corona from the ice bucket on the table and takes a long drink.

“What if there had been press here?” I ask.

Edward knows immediately that I’m referring to him knocking Blonde Giant on his ass.

“I have expensive lawyers,” he says coolly. I frown at him. All at once he’s arrogance personified.

“But you’re not above the law, Edward. I did have the situation under control,” I reply, as softly as the music allows.

His eyes frost.

“No one touches what’s mine,” he says with chilling finality, gazing at me as if I’m missing the obvious.

I gape at him, then take another sip of my champagne. All of a sudden I feel overwhelmed. The music is loud, pounding... my head is aching... and I feel woozy.

He grasps my hand.

“Come, let’s go. I want to get you home,” he says. Rose and Emmett join us.

“You going?” Rose asks, and her voice is hopeful.

“Yes,” Edward says.

“Good, we’ll come with you.”

.

As we wait at the coat check for Edward to retrieve my trench-coat, Rose quizzes me.

“What happened with that guy on the dance floor?”

“He was feeling me up.”

“I opened my eyes and you’d hit him.”

I shrug.

“Well. I knew Edward would go thermo-nuclear, and that could potentially ruin your evening.” I haven’t really processed how I feel about Edward’s behaviour. I was worried that it would be worse.

“Our evening,” she clarifies. “He is rather hot-headed isn’t he?” Rose adds dryly, staring at Edward as he collects my coat.

I snort and smile.

“You could say that.”

“I think you handle him well.”

“Handle?” I frown. Do I handle Edward?

“Here,” Edward says, holding my coat open for me so that I can put it on.

.

The minivan is outside and Taylor is sliding open the door as we come out. There are no paps – what a relief.

“Good evening, sir,” says Taylor.

“Alice and Jasper are still here. Will you drop us off, then come back and get them?” Edward asks.

“Of course,” Taylor says, expressionless, though he frowns when he looks at me. Holy crap. I stare

down at my feet, and for some reason I don't want Taylor to know about the fracas on the dance floor. Edward steps aside to allow Rose and Emmett into the back.

"After you, Mrs Cullen," he says when it's my turn to clamber in. Emmett and Rose are now being indecent in the back. I sit in the first available seat, leaving a row of seats between us to afford them some privacy. Edward slides in beside me, putting his arm around me, and I snuggle up against him. He kisses my hair, and Taylor sets off home.

~o~

"Wake up, Bella." Edward is shaking me gently. We're back at the house. Reluctantly I open my eyes and stagger down from the minivan. Rose and Emmett have disappeared, and Taylor is standing patiently beside the vehicle.

"Do I need to carry you?" Edward asks.

I shake my head.

"I'll fetch Miss Cullen and Mr Hale," Taylor says.

Edward nods, then leads me to the front door. My feet are throbbing and I stumble after him. At the front door he bends down, grasps my ankle, and gently prises off first one shoe, then the other. Oh... the relief. He stands and gazes down at me, holding my Manolos.

"Better?" he asks, amused.

I nod.

"I had visions of these round my ears," he murmurs staring down wistfully at my shoes. He shakes his head, and taking my hand once more leads me through the darkened house, up the stairs to our bedroom.

"You're shattered aren't you?" he asks softly, staring down at me.

I nod. He starts to unbuckle the belt on my trench coat.

"I'll do it," I mutter, making a half-hearted attempt to brush him off.

"Let me," he says quietly.

I sigh. I had no idea I was this tired.

"It's the altitude. You're not used to it. And the drinking," he smirks. He pulls the coat off me and throws it on one of the bedroom chairs. Taking my hand he leads me into the bathroom. What? Why are we going in here?

"Sit," he says.

I sit on the chair. I can barely keep my eyes open. I hear him messing around with bottles on the vanity unit. What is he doing? I am too tired to open my eyes to find out. A moment later he tips my head back. Now I open my eyes, in surprise.

"Eyes closed," Edward says. Holy crap, he's holding a cotton ball! Gently he wipes it over my right eye. I sit stunned and immobilized as he methodically removes my make-up.

"Ah. There's the woman I married," he says after a few wipes.

"You don't like make-up?" I mumble.

"I like it well enough, but I prefer what's beneath it." He kisses my forehead.

“Here. Take these.”

He puts some Advil into my palm and hands me a glass of water. I blink up at him.

“Take them,” he orders.

I roll my eyes, but do as I’m told.

“Good. Do you need a private moment?” he asks sardonically.

I snort.

“So coy, Mr Cullen. Yes, I need to pee.”

He laughs.

“You expect me to leave?”

I giggle.

“You want to stay?”

He cocks his head to one side, his expression amused.

“You are one kinky son-of-a-bitch. Out.” I stand and wave him out of the bathroom.

.

When I emerge from the bathroom he’s changed into his pj bottoms. Hmm... Edward in pjs. I gaze mesmerised at his abdomen... his muscles... his happy trail. It’s distracting. He strides over to me.

“Enjoying the view?” he asks wryly.

“Always,” I reply.

“I think you are slightly drunk, Mrs Cullen.”

“I think for once I agree with you, Mr Cullen.”

“Let me help you out of what little there is of this dress. It really should come with a health warning.” He turns me round and undoes the single button at the neck.

“You were so mad,” I murmur.

“Yes. I was.”

“At me?”

“No. Not at you.” He kisses my shoulder. “For once.”

I smile. Not mad at me. This is progress.

“Makes a nice change.”

“Yes. It does.” He kisses my other shoulder, then pulls my dress down over my backside and onto the floor. He removes my panties at the same time, leaving me naked. Reaching up he takes my hand.

“Step,” he commands, and I step out of the dress, holding his hand for balance.

He stands, and my dress and panties join Alice’s trench coat on the chair.

“Arms up,” he says softly. He slips his t-shirt over me and pulls it down, covering me up. I am ready for bed.

He pulls me into his arms and kisses me, my minty breath mingling with his.

“As much as I’d love to bury myself in you, Mrs Cullen – you’ve had too much to drink, you’re at nearly 8000 feet, and you didn’t sleep well yesterday. Come. Get into bed.” He pulls back the duvet and I climb in. He covers me up, bends down and kisses my forehead once more.

“Close your eyes,” he murmurs. “When I come back to bed I’ll expect you to be asleep.” It’s a threat, a command... it’s Edward.

“Don’t go,” I plead.

“I have some calls to make, Bella.”

“It’s Saturday. It’s late. Please.”

He runs his hands through his hair.

“Bella, if I come to bed with you now, you won’t get any rest. Sleep.” He’s adamant. I close my eyes. Images of the day flash through my mind... Edward hauling me over his shoulder in the plane, his anxiety as to whether or not I’d like the house, making love this afternoon, the bath, his reaction to my dress. Decking Blond Giant. My hand throbs at the memory. And then Edward putting me to bed. Who would have thought? I grin, widely... the word progress running round my brain as I drift.

~ooo000ooo~

Playing at the Club: Sexy Bitch –

David Guetta Featuring Akon

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xo_7bhk1UzA

Touch Me – DJ Rui Da Silva

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3msPoqqCNo>

MOTU II 106/19

I am too warm. Edward warm. His head is on my shoulder, and he is breathing softly on my neck while he sleeps, his legs threaded through mine, his arm around my waist. I linger on the edge of consciousness, aware that if I wake fully I’ll wake him too, and he doesn’t sleep enough. Hazily my mind wanders through the events of yesterday evening. I drank too much – boy did I drink too much. I’m amazed Edward let me. I smile as I remember him putting me to bed. That was sweet – real sweet, and unexpected. I conduct a quick mental inventory of how I’m feeling. Stomach? Fine. Head? Surprisingly, fine, but Fuzzy. There’s a dull ache in my hand... is that what woke me? I stretch my fingers, and wince – Ow. Edward wakes.

“What’s wrong?” Sleepy green eyes search mine.

“Nothing,” I murmur. “Good morning.” Reaching up I run the fingers of my uninjured hand through his hair.

“Mrs Cullen, you look lovely this morning,” he says softly, kissing my cheek.

I feel a warm glow within.

“Thank you for taking care of me last night.”

“I like taking care of you,” he says, smiling – but his eyes widen briefly, as delirious triumph flares in their green depths. It’s like he’s won the World Series or the Super Bowl. Oh, my Fifty.

“You make me feel cherished,” I murmur, because it’s true.

He swallows, and suddenly he looks vulnerable.

“That’s because you are,” he whispers. I hear the love in his voice, and my heart clenches. He reaches up to clasp my aching hand.

“Ah!” I yelp. Edward releases me immediately, alarmed.

“The punch?” he asks after a moment. His eyes frost as he scrutinizes mine, and his voice is laced with sudden anger. I nod uncertainly.

“That fucker!” he snarls.

Holy crap. I thought we’d dealt with this last night.

“I can’t bear that he touched you.”

“He didn’t hurt me, he was just inappropriate. Edward, I’m okay. My hand’s a little stiff, that’s all.” I stroke his face with the injured hand, my fingers caressing his side-burn. Gently I tug the little hairs. It works. He calms, and the pain in my hand eases as I use it.

“Why didn’t you tell me last night?” he mutters, not quite petulantly.

“Um... I didn’t really feel it last night. It’s okay now.”

His eyes soften and his mouth twists.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better than I deserve.”

“That’s quite a right hook you have there, Mrs Cullen.” He gently kisses my bruised knuckles.

“You’d do well to remember that, Mr Cullen.”

He raises his brows in amused surprise.

“Oh really?” He rolls suddenly so that he’s fully on top of me, pressing me into the mattress, holding my wrists above my head. He gazes down at me.

“I’d fight you any day, Mrs Cullen,” he purrs. “In fact, subduing you in bed is a fantasy of mine.” He kisses my throat.

What?

“I thought you subdued me all the time,” I gasp, as he nibbles my earlobe.

“Hmm... but I’d like some resistance,” he murmurs, his nose skirting my jaw.

Resistance? I still.

He stops, releasing my hands, and leans up on his elbows, gazing anxiously down at me.

“You want me to fight you? Here?” I whisper, trying to contain my surprise. Okay – my shock.

He nods. His eyes are hooded but wary as he gauges my reaction.

“Now?”

He shrugs, and I see the idea flit through his mind. He gives me his shy smile and nods again, slowly.

Oh my... He’s tensed, lying on top of me, his growing erection digging tantalizingly into my soft, willing flesh, distracting me. What’s this about? Brawling? Fantasy? Will he hurt me? My inner goddess shakes her head – Never. She’s got her karate suit on and she’s limbering up. Laurent would

be pleased.

“Is this what you meant about coming to bed angry?” I ask.

He nods once more, his eyes still wary.

Oh. My Fifty wants to rumble.

“Don’t bite your lip,” he warns.

Compliantly I release my lip.

“I think you have me at a disadvantage, Mr Cullen,” I murmur, gazing up at him through my lashes, and squirming provocatively beneath him. This could be fun.

“Disadvantage?”

“Surely you’ve already got me where you want me?”

He smirks down at me, pressing his groin into mine once more.

“Good point, well made, Mrs Cullen,” he whispers, and quickly kisses my lips. Abruptly he shifts, taking me with him, rolling over so I end up astride him. I grab his hands, pinning them to the side of his head, ignoring the ache of protest from my punching hand. My hair falls in a chestnut veil around us. I move my head so that the strands tickle his face. He jerks his face away, but doesn’t try to stop me.

“So, you want to play rough?” I ask, skimming my crotch over his.

His mouth opens and he inhales sharply.

“Yes,” he hisses.

I release him.

“Wait,” I murmur, and reach over for the glass of water beside the bed. Edward must have left it here. It’s cool and sparkling – too cool to have been sitting here for long. Briefly I wonder when he came to bed. As I take a long draught Edward reaches forward and runs his hands up from my knees. His fingers trail in small circles over my thighs, leaving tingling skin in their wake as they travel up to my naked behind. He cups and squeezes me. Hmmm. Taking a leaf from his impressive repertoire I lean forward and kiss him, pouring clear cool water into his mouth. He drinks.

“Very tasty, Mrs Cullen,” he murmurs, and grins up at me, boyish and playful.

Placing the glass back on the bedside table I remove his hands from my backside and pin them by his head once more.

“So I’m supposed to be unwilling?” I smirk.

“Yes.”

“I’m not much of an actress.”

He grins.

“Try,” he mouths. I lean down and kiss him chastely.

“Okay, I’ll play,” I whisper, trailing my teeth along his jaw, feeling his prickly stubble beneath my teeth and my tongue. Edward makes a low, sexy sound in his throat and moves, tossing me onto the bed beside him. I cry out in surprise, then he’s on top of me, and I start to struggle as he makes a grab for my hands. Roughly I place my hands on his chest, pushing with all my might, trying to shift him, while he endeavors to prise my legs apart with his knee. I keep on pushing at his chest – jeez he’s

heavy – but he doesn't flinch, doesn't freeze as he once might have... he's enjoying this! He attempts to grab my wrists, and finally captures one, despite my valiant attempts to twist it free. It's my sore hand, so I surrender it to him – but grab his hair with my other hand and pull, hard.

"Ah!" he rasps, yanking his head free and gazing down at me, his eyes wild with carnal excitement.

"Savage," he whispers. I can hear his awe and delight. In response to this one whispered word my libido explodes, and I stop acting. Again I struggle in vain to wrest my hand out of his hold, at the same time trying to hook my ankles together, and attempting to buck him off me. He's too heavy. Gah – it's frustrating... and hot.

With a groan Edward captures my other hand. He holds both my wrists in his left hand, and his right travels leisurely – insolently, almost – down my body, fondling and feeling as it goes, tweaking my nipple on the way. I yelp in response, pleasure spiking short, sharp and hot from my nipple to my groin. I make another fruitless attempt to buck him off, but he's just too on-me!

When he tries to kiss me I jerk my head to the side so he can't. Promptly his insolent hand moves from the hem of my t-shirt up to my chin, holding me in place as he runs his teeth along my jaw, mirroring what I did to him earlier.

"Oh baby, fight me," he murmurs.

I twist and writhe, trying to free myself from his merciless hold, but it's hopeless. He's much stronger than me. He's gently biting at my lower lip as his tongue tries to invade my mouth. And I realize I don't want to resist him. I want him – I want him now. I stop fighting and fervently return his kiss. I don't care that I haven't brushed my teeth. I don't care that we're supposed to be playing some game. Desire hot and hard surges through my bloodstream, and I am lost, lost to him. Unhooking my ankles I wrap my legs around his hips and use my heels to push his pjs down over his behind.

"Bella," he breathes, and he kisses me everywhere. And we're no longer wrestling, but we're quick and urgent, all hands and tongues and touch and taste.

"Skin," he murmurs hoarsely, his breathing labored. He drags me up and pulls off my t-shirt in one swift move.

"You," I whisper, while I'm upright, because it's all I can think of to say. I seize his pjs and yank them down, freeing his erection. I grab and squeeze him – jeez he's so hard. I hear the air whistle through his teeth as he inhales sharply, and I revel in his response.

"Fuck," he murmurs. He leans back, lifting my thighs, tipping me down onto the bed, as I pull and squeeze him tightly, running my hand up and down him. Feeling a bead of moisture on his tip I swirl it round with my thumb. As he lowers me to the mattress I slip my thumb in my mouth to taste him, while his hands travel up my body, caressing my hips, my stomach, my breasts.

"Taste good?" he breathes, as he hovers over me, eyes blazing.

"Yes. Here." I push my thumb into his mouth. He sucks and bites the pad, his eyes burning into mine. I groan, grasp his head and pull him down to me so I can kiss him, as I wrap my legs around him and push his pjs off his legs with my feet. Once he's free of them, I wrap my legs around his waist, wanting him. His lips trail from across my jaw to my chin, nipping softly.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, as he dips his head lower, to the base of my throat.

"Such beautiful skin," he breathes, as his lips glide on, down to my breasts.

What? I am panting, confused – wanting, now waiting. I thought this was going to be quick.

"Edward," I breathe. I hear the plea in my voice, and reach down, fisting my hands in his hair.

"Hush," he breathes, and circles my nipple with his tongue, before pulling it into his mouth and tugging hard.

"Ah!" I moan and squirm, tilting my pelvis up to tempt him. He grins against my skin and turns his attention to my other breast.

"Impatient, Mrs Cullen?" he whispers. Then sucks hard on my nipple.

I tug his hair. He groans and peers up.

"I'll restrain you," he warns.

"Take me," I beg.

"All in good time," he murmurs against my skin.

His hand travels down at an infuriatingly slow speed to my hip as he worships my nipple with his mouth. I moan loudly, my breath short and shallow, and try once more to entice him into me, rocking against him. I can feel him, thick and heavy and close... But he's taking his own sweet leisurely time with me.

Fuck this. I struggle and twist, determined to buck him off me again.

"What the –"

Grabbing my hands Edward pins them down on the bed, my arms spread wide, and rests his full bodyweight on me, completely subduing me. I am breathless, wild.

"You wanted resistance," I pant.

He rears up over me and gazes down, his hands still locked around my wrists. I place my heels under his behind and push... He doesn't move. Gah!

"You don't want to play nice?" he asks astonished, his eyes alight with excitement.

"I just want you to make love to me, Edward," I whisper. Could he be any more obtuse? First we're fighting and wrestling, then he's all tender and sweet. It's confusing – I'm in bed with Mr Mercurial.

"Please," I breathe, pressing my heels against his backside once more. Burning green eyes search mine. Oh, what is he thinking? He looks momentarily bewildered and confused. He releases my hands and kneels up, pulling me into his lap.

"Okay Mrs Cullen, we'll do this your way," he murmurs. Reaching around my waist he lifts and slowly lowers me on to him so I am astride.

I moan loudly. This is it. This is what I want. This is what I need. I wrap my arms around his neck and twist my fingers in his hair, glorying in the feeling of him inside me. I start to move. Taking control, taking him at my pace, at my speed. He moans, and his lips find mine.

.

I trail my fingers through the hair on Edward's chest. He lies on his back, still and quiet beside me as we both catch our breath. His hand thrums rhythmically down my back.

"You're quiet," I whisper, and kiss his shoulder.

He turns and looks down at me, his expression giving nothing away.

"That was fun," I add, blinking up at him. Shit, is something wrong?

"You confound me, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs.

“Confound you?”

He shifts so that we’re face to face.

“Yes. You. Calling the shots. It’s... different.”

“Good different? Or bad different?” I reach up and trail a finger over his lips. His brow furrows, as if he doesn’t quite understand the question. Absentmindedly he purses his lip to kiss my finger.

“Good different,” he says, but he doesn’t sound convinced.

“You’ve never indulged this little fantasy before?” I flush as I say it. Do I really want to know any more about my husband’s colorful... um, kaleidoscopic, sex life before me? My subconscious eyes me warily over her tortoiseshell half-moon specs. Do you really want to go there?

“No, Isabella,” he murmurs. “You can touch me.” It’s a simple explanation that speaks volumes. Oh... of course, the fifteen couldn’t.

“Mrs Robinson could touch you.” I murmur the words before my brain registers that they’ve left my mouth. Shit.

He stills. His eyes widen with his oh-no-where’s-she-going-with-this expression.

“That was different,” he whispers.

Suddenly I want to know.

“Good different or bad different?”

He gazes at me. Doubt and possibly pain flit across his face, and fleetingly he looks like a man drowning. Oh crap – what have I done?

“Bad, I think.” His words are barely audible.

Holy shit!

“I thought you liked it,” I whisper.

“I did. At the time.”

“Not now?”

He gazes at me, eyes wide, then slowly shakes his head.

Oh my...

“Oh Edward,” I mumble, and I’m overwhelmed by the feelings that flood my system. My lost boy. I launch myself at him, kissing his face, his throat, his chest, his little round scars. He groans, pulls me to him, and kisses me passionately. And very slowly, and tenderly, at his pace, he makes love to me once more.

~o~

“Bella Tyson. Punching above your weight!” Jasper applauds as I head into the kitchen for breakfast. He, Alice and Rose are sitting at the breakfast bar while Mrs Bentley cooks waffles. Edward is nowhere to be seen.

“Good Morning, Mrs Cullen,” Mrs Bentley beams at me. “What would you like for breakfast?”

“Morning all. Whatever, thank you, Mrs Bentley. Where’s Edward?”

“Outside.” Rose gestures with her head towards the back yard. I wander over to the window that looks out onto the yard and the mountains behind. It’s a clear, powder-blue summer day, and my beautiful

husband is in deep discussion with some guy.

“That’s Mr Bentley he’s talking to,” calls Alice from the breakfast bar.

Mrs Bentley’s husband is fair-haired, blue eyed and wiry, dressed in work pants and an Aspen Fire department t-shirt. Edward is dressed in his black jeans and t-shirt. As the two men stroll across the lawn, lost in conversation, Edward casually bends to pick up what looks like a bamboo cane that must have been blown over or discarded in the flowerbed. Pausing, Edward absentmindedly holds out the cane at arm’s length, as if weighing it carefully, and swipes it through the air, just once.

Oh...

Mr Bentley appears to see nothing odd in his behavior. They continue their tour of the backyard, then pause once more, and Edward repeats the gesture. This time the tip of the cane hits the ground. Glancing up Edward sees me standing at the window. Suddenly I feel as if I’m intruding, spying on him. He blinks. I give him an embarrassed wave, then turn and head back to the breakfast bar.

“What were you doing?” asks Rose.

“Just watching Edward.”

“You have got it bad,” she snorts.

“And you don’t, oh soon-to-be sister-in-law?” I reply, beaming at her – trying to bury the disquieting visual of Edward wielding a cane. I am startled when Rose leaps up and hugs me.

“Sister!” she exclaims, and it’s hard not to be swept up in her joy.

~o~

“Hey, sleepyhead.” Edward wakes me. “We’re coming in to land. Buckle up.”

I fumble sleepily for my seat belt, but Edward leans over and fastens it for me. He kisses my forehead before settling back into his seat. I lean my head on his shoulder again and close my eyes. An impossibly long walk, followed by a picnic lunch on top of a spectacular mountain, has exhausted me. The rest of our party is quiet too – even Alice. I peek through my lashes. Edward is working on a contract or something – reading it through and annotating the margins. But he seems relaxed. Emmett is snoring softly beside Rose. Before I fell asleep Edward was taking great delight in filming the dozing Emmett on his BlackBerry, no doubt in order to blackmail him later. It was odd seeing Edward behaving so childishly – but heartwarming too.

I have yet to corner Emmett to quiz him about Tanya, but it’s been impossible to prise him away from Rose. Edward isn’t interested enough to ask, which is irritating, but I haven’t pressed him – we’ve been enjoying ourselves too much. Emmett rests his hand possessively on Rose’s knee. She’s looking radiant... and to think that only yesterday afternoon she was so unsure of him. What did Edward call him? Memet. That was sweet – better than Manwhore. Abruptly Emmett opens his eyes and gazes straight at me. I flush, caught staring.

He grins.

“I sure love your blush, Bella,” he teases, stretching. Rose gives me her self-satisfied, cat-got-the-cream smile.

“Now who has it bad?” I tease, and roll my eyes.

She laughs, turns to Emmett and kisses him. Jeez, do they ever leave each other alone? I glance at Edward, who puts the document back into his black leather portfolio and places it on the table in front of him. He eyes Rose and Emmett, then turns to me amused.

“We should have given them the on-board bedroom,” he whispers, making me giggle. Officer Beighley announces our approach to Sea Tac, and Edward clasps my hand.

~o~

“How was your weekend, Mrs Cullen?” Edward asks me once we’re in the Merc, heading back to Escala. Taylor and Ryan are up front.

“Good, thank you.” I smile, feeling shy all of a sudden.

“We can go anytime,” he adds. “Take anyone you wish to take.”

“We should take my Dad. He’d like the fishing.”

“Yes. We will. That’s a good idea.”

“How was it for you?” I ask, and he blinks at me, surprised by my question.

“Good,” he says after a moment. “Real good.”

“You seemed to relax.”

He shrugs.

“I felt you were safe,” he says simply.

I frown.

“Edward, I’m safe most of the time. I’ve told you before, you’ll keel over at forty if you keep up this level of anxiety. And I want to grow old and grey with you.” I reach over and grasp his hand. He blinks at me, as if he can’t comprehend what I’m saying. Gently taking my sore hand he kisses my knuckles, and changes the subject.

“How’s your hand?”

“It’s okay. Still stiff. I think I just bruised it,” I reassure him.

“We should get a doctor to have a look at it.”

“No. It’s fine. Just take me home. And stop worrying, please.”

He smiles.

“Very well, Mrs Cullen. You ready to face Tanya again?”

Oh crap. I’d forgotten we were seeing her this evening to go over the final plans. I roll my eyes.

“I might want to keep you out of the way, keep you safe.” I smirk.

He grins.

“Protecting me?” Edward is laughing at me.

“As ever, Mr Cullen. From all sexual predators,” I whisper.

~o~

Edward is brushing his teeth when I clamber into bed. Tomorrow we go back to reality... back to work, and paps, and to James in custody – but with the possibility that he has an accomplice. Hmm... Edward was vague about that. Does he know? And if he did know, would he tell me? I sigh. Getting information out of Edward is like pulling teeth... and we’ve had such a lovely weekend. Do I want to ruin the feel-good moment by trying to drag the information out of him?

It’s been a revelation to see him out of his normal environment, outside this apartment, relaxed and

happy with his family. I wonder vaguely if it's because we're here, in this apartment – with all its memories and associations – that he gets wound up. Maybe we should move.

I snort. We are moving – we're having a huge house refurbished on the coast. Tanya's plans are complete and approved, and Emmett's team starts building next week. I chuckle as I recall Tanya's shocked expression when I told her that I'd seen her in Aspen. Who would have thought that her brother was part of a gold and silversmiths' collective there? Emmett had had the engagement ring couriered to his gallery/jewelry store on Saturday for safekeeping. Tanya had merely smoothed the way. For one awful moment I'd thought she'd had a hand in choosing the ring, but apparently not. I still don't trust Tanya... I want to hear the same story from Emmett. At least she kept her distance from Edward this time.

I look out at the night sky. I will miss this view. This panoramic vista... Seattle at our feet, so full of possibilities, yet so far removed. Maybe that's Edward's problem – he was too isolated from real life for too long, thanks to his self-imposed exile. Yet with his family around him, he is less controlling, less anxious... freer, happier. I wonder what Banner would make of all that. Holy crap, maybe that's the answer. Maybe he needs his own family. I shake my head in denial – we're too young. And at that moment Edward strides into the room, looking his usual gorgeous but pensive self.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He nods distractedly as he climbs into bed.

"I'm not looking forward to going back to reality," I murmur.

"No?" he says as he faces me, surprised.

I shake my head and reach up to caress his lovely face.

"I had a wonderful weekend. Thank you."

He smiles softly.

"You're my reality, Bella," he breathes, and leaning forward he kisses me.

"Do you miss it?" I whisper.

"Miss what?" he asks, perplexed.

"You know. The caning... and-" I shrug, embarrassed.

He stares at me, his gaze impassive. Then doubt crosses his face, his where-is-she-going-with-this look. Reaching up he caresses my cheek.

"No Isabella, I don't." His voice is steady and quiet. "Dr Banner said something to me when you left, something that's stayed with me. He said I couldn't be that way, if you weren't so inclined. It was a revelation." He stops, and frowns. "I didn't know any other way, Bella. Now I do. It's been educational."

"Me, educate you?" I scoff.

His eyes soften.

"Do you miss it?" he asks.

Oh!

"I don't want you to hurt me. But I like to play, Edward, you know that. If you wanted to do something..." I shrug, gazing at him.

"Something?"

“You know, with a flogger, or your crop...” I stop, flushing.

He raises his brow, surprised.

“Well... we’ll see,” he says. “Right now, I’d like some good old-fashioned vanilla.” His thumb skirts my bottom lip, and he kisses me once more.

~o0o~

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Good Morning
Date: 31 August 2009: 09.14
To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen
I just wanted to tell you that I love you.
That is all.
Yours Always
B x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Banishing Monday Blues
Date: 31 August 2009: 09.18
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
What gratifying words to hear from one’s wife (errant or not) on a Monday morning.
Let me assure you that I feel exactly the same way.
Sorry about the dinner this evening, I hope it won’t be too tedious for you.
x

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Oh yes. The American Shipbuilding Association dinner. I roll my eyes... more stuffed shirts. Edward really does take me to the most fascinating functions.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Ships that pass in the night
Date: 31 August 2009: 09.26
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr Cullen
I am sure you can think of a way to spice up the dinner...
Yours in anticipation
Mrs C x

Isabella (non-errant) Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Variety is the Spice of Life

Date: 31 August 2009: 09.35

To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen

I have a few ideas...

x

Edward Cullen, CEO

Cullen Enterprises Holdings Now Impatient for the ASA Dinner Inc

All the muscles in my belly clench tightly. Hmm... I wonder what he'll dream up. Hanna knocks on the door, interrupting my reverie.

"Ready to go through your schedule for this week, Bella?" she asks.

"Sure. Sit." I smile, recovering my equilibrium, and minimize my email program.

"I've had to move a couple of appointments. Mr Fox next week and Dr --"

My phone rings, interrupting her. It's Roach. He asks me up to his office.

"Can we pick this up in twenty minutes?"

"Of course."

~oOo~

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Last night

Date: 1 September 2009: 09.24

To: Isabella Cullen

Was... fun.

Who would have thought the ASA annual dinner could be so stimulating?

As ever, you never disappoint, Mrs Cullen.

I love you.

x

Edward Cullen in awe, CEO

Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

.

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: I love a good ball game...

Date: 1 September 2009: 09.33

To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr Cullen

I have missed the silver balls.

You never disappoint.

That is all.

Mrs C x

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

~o~

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Smith
Date: 1 September 2009: 15.24
To: Isabella Cullen

Isabella

For your information: Smith has been refused bail and remanded in custody. He's charged with attempted kidnap and arson.

As yet no date has been set for the trial.

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Smith
Date: 1 September 2009: 15.53
To: Edward Cullen

That's good news.

Does this mean you'll lighten up on security?

I really don't see eye to eye with Jones.

Bella x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Smith
Date: 1 September 2009: 15.59
To: Isabella Cullen

No. Security will remain in place. No arguments.

What's wrong with Jones? If you don't like her, we'll get rid of her.

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I scowl at his high-handed email. Jones isn't that bad, I suppose.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Keep your hair on!
Date: 1 September 2009: 16.03
To: Edward Cullen

I was just asking (rolls eyes). And I'll think about Jones.

Stow that twitchy palm!

Bella x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Don't tempt me
Date: 1 September 2009: 16.11
To: Isabella Cullen

I can assure you Mrs Cullen that my hair is very firmly attached – has this not been demonstrated often enough when you pull it?

My palm however is twitching.

I might do something about that tonight.

x

Edward Cullen, Not bald yet CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

.
From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Squirm
Date: 1 September 2009: 16.19
To: Edward Cullen

Promises, promises...

Now stop pestering me. I am trying to work.

B x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

~o0o~

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Sailing & Soaring
Date: 7 September 2009: 09.18
To: Edward Cullen

Husband

You sure know how to show a girl a good time.

I shall of course be expecting this kind of treatment every weekend.

You are spoiling me. I love it.

Your loving wife

xox

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.
From: Edward Cullen
Subject: My life's mission...
Date: 7 September 2009: 09.25
To: Isabella Cullen

Is to spoil you Mrs Cullen.

And keep you safe because I love you.

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Oh my. Could he be any more romantic?

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: My life's mission...

Date: 7 September 2009: 09.33

To: Edward Cullen

Is to let you – because I love you too.

Now stop being so sappy.

You are making me cry.

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

~o0o~

The following day I gaze at the calendar on my desk. Only five days until Saturday 12 – my birthday. I know we are driving out to the house to see how Emmett and his crew are progressing. Hmm... I wonder if Edward has any other plans? I smile at the thought. Hanna taps on my door.

“Come in.”

Jones is hovering outside. Odd...

“Hi, Bella,” says Hanna. “There’s a Lauren Elliot here to see you? She says it’s personal.”

“Lauren Elliot? I don’t know a ...” My mouth goes dry, and Hanna’s eyes widen at my expression.

Lauren? Fuck. What does she want?

~ooo000ooo~

MOTU II – 107/20

“Do you want me to send her away?” Hanna asks, alarmed at my expression.

“Um, no. Where is she?”

“In reception. She’s not alone.”

Oh!

“And Miss Jones wants to talk to you,” Hanna adds.

I’m sure she does.

“Send her in.”

Hanna stands aside and Jones enters my office. She’s on a mission, bristling with professional security-conscious efficiency.

“Give me a moment, Hanna. Jones, take a seat.”

Hanna closes the door, leaving Jones and me alone.

“Mrs Cullen, Lauren Elliot is on your proscribed list of visitors.”

I have a proscribed list?

“On our watch list, ma’am,” Jones continues. “Taylor and Jenks have been quite specific about not letting her come into contact with you.”

I frown, not understanding.

“Is she dangerous?”

“I can’t say, ma’am.”

“Why do I even know that she’s here?”

Jones swallows, and for a moment looks awkward.

“I was on a comfort break. She came in, spoke directly to Claire, and Claire called Hanna.”

“Oh. I see.” I realize that even Jones has to pee, and I laugh. “Oh dear.”

“Yes ma’am.” Jones gives me an embarrassed grin, and it’s the first time I’ve seen a chink in her armor. She has a lovely smile.

“I need to talk to Claire about protocol, again,” she says, her tone weary.

“Sure. Does Taylor know she’s here?” I cross my fingers unconsciously, hoping she hasn’t told Edward.

“I left a brief voice-message for him.”

Oh.

“Then I only have a short time. I’d like to know what she wants.”

Jones gazes at me for a moment.

“I must advise against it, ma’am.”

“She’s here to see me for a reason.”

“I’m supposed to prevent that, ma’am.” Her voice is soft, but resigned.

“I really want to hear what she has to say.” My tone is more forceful than I intended.

Jones stifles her sigh.

“I’d like to search them both before you do.”

“Okay. Can you do that?”

“I’m here to protect you, Mrs Cullen, so yes I can. I’d also like to stay with you while you talk.”

“Okay.” I’ll grant her this concession. Besides, last time I met Lauren she was armed. “Go ahead.”

Jones rises.

“Hanna,” I call.

Hanna opens the door, rather too quickly. She must have been hovering outside.

“Can you check to see if the meeting room is free, please?”

“I already have, and it’s good to go.”

“Jones, can you search them in there? Is it private enough?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes, then. Hanna, show Mrs Elliot and whoever she’s with into the meeting

room.

“Will do.” Hanna looks anxiously from Jones to me. “Shall I cancel your next meeting? It’s at 4.00 but it’s across town.”

“Yes,” I murmur, distracted. Hanna nods, then leaves.

What the hell does Lauren want? I don’t think she’s here to do me any harm. She didn’t in the past, when she had ample opportunity. Edward is going to go nuts. My subconscious purses her lips, primly crosses her legs and nods. I need to tell him that I am doing this. I type a quick email, then pause, checking the time. I feel a momentary pang of regret. We’ve been getting along so well since Aspen. I press send.

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: Visitors

Date: 8 September 2009: 15.27

To: Edward Cullen

Lauren is here to see me. I will see her with Jones.

I’ll use my newly acquired punching skills with my now healed hand should I need to.

Try, and I mean try, not to worry.

I am a big girl.

Will call once we’ve spoken.

Bx

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

Hurriedly I hide my BlackBerry in my desk drawer. I stand, smoothing my grey pencil skirt over my hips, pinch my cheeks to give them some color, and undo the next button on my grey silk blouse.

Okay, I’m ready. Taking a deep breath I head out of my office to meet Mrs Lauren Elliot, ignoring ‘Your Love is King’ humming gently from inside my desk.

Lauren looks much better. More than better – she’s very attractive. There’s a rosy bloom to her cheeks and her hazel eyes are bright, her hair clean and shiny. She’s dressed in a pale pink blouse and white pants. She stands as soon as I enter the meeting room, as does her friend – another dark-haired young woman with soft brown eyes, the color of brandy. Jones hovers in the corner, not taking her eyes off Lauren.

“Mrs Cullen, thank you so much for seeing me,” says Lauren, her voice soft but clear.

“Um... Sorry about the security,” I mutter, because I cannot think what else to say. I wave a hand distractedly at Jones.

“This is my friend Susie,” Lauren continues.

“Hi.” I nod at Susie. She looks like Lauren. She looks like me. Oh no. Another one.

“Yes,” Lauren says, as if reading my thoughts. “Susie knows Mr Cullen too.”

What the fuck am I supposed to say to that? I give her a polite smile.

“Please, sit,” I murmur.

There’s a knock on the door. It’s Hanna. I motion her in, knowing full well why she’s disturbing us.

“Sorry to interrupt, Bella. I have Mr Cullen on the line?”

“Tell him I’m busy.”

“He was quite insistent,” she says fearfully.

“I am sure he was. Would you apologize to him, and say I’ll call him back very shortly?”

Hanna hesitates.

“Hanna, please.”

She nods and scuttles out of the room. I turn back to the two women sitting in front of me. They are both staring at me in awe. It’s uncomfortable.

“What can I do for you?” I ask.

Susie speaks.

“I know this is all kinds of weird, but I wanted to meet you too. The woman who captured Edw—”

I hold up my hand, stopping her in mid-flow. I do not want to hear this.

“Um... I get the picture,” I mutter.

“We call ourselves the sub-club.” She grins at me, her eyes shining with mirth.

Oh My God.

Lauren gasps and gapes at Susie, at once amused and appalled. Susie winces. I think Lauren’s kicked her under the table.

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? I glance nervously at Jones, who remains impassive, her eyes never leaving Lauren.

Susie seems to remember herself. She flushes, then nods and stands.

“I’ll wait in reception. This is Lulu’s show,” she says, and I can tell she’s embarrassed.

Lulu?

“You’ll be okay?” she asks Lauren. Lauren smiles up at her. Susie gives me a large, open, genuine smile, and exits the room.

Susie and Edward... it’s not a thought I wish to dwell on.

Jones takes her phone out of her pocket and answers it. I didn’t hear it ring.

“Mr Cullen,” she says. Lauren and I turn to look at her. Jones closes her eyes as if in pain.

“Yes, sir,” she says, and stepping forward hands me the phone.

I roll my eyes.

“Edward,” I murmur, trying to contain my exasperation. I stand and stride briskly out of the room.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” he shouts. He’s seething.

“Don’t shout at me.”

“What do you mean don’t shout at you?” he shouts, louder this time. “I gave specific instructions which you have completely disregarded – again. Hell, Bella, I am fucking furious.”

“When you are calmer, we will talk about this.”

“Don’t you hang up on me,” he hisses.

“Goodbye, Edward.” I hang up and switch off Jones’s phone.

Holy shit. I don’t have long with Lauren. Taking a deep breath I re-enter the meeting room. Both

Lauren and Jones look up at me expectantly.

“Where were we?” I ask Lauren as I sit back down opposite her. Her eyes widen slightly.

Yes – apparently I handle him, I want to say to her. But I don’t think she wants to hear that.

Lauren fiddles nervously with the ends of her hair.

“Firstly, I wanted to apologize,” she says softly.

Oh... She glances up and registers my surprise.

“Yes,” she says quickly. “And to thank you for not pressing charges. You know – for your car, and in your apartment.”

“I know you weren’t... um, well,” I murmur, reeling. I hadn’t expected an apology.

“No,” she agrees. “I wasn’t.”

“You’re feeling better now?” I ask gently.

“Much. Thank you.”

“Does your doctor know you’re here?”

She shakes her head.

Oh.

She nods, looking suitably guilty.

“I know I’ll have to deal with the fall-out from that later. But I had to get some things, and I wanted to see Susie, and you, and... Mr Cullen.”

“You want to see Edward?” My stomach free-falls to the floor. That’s why she’s here.

“Yes. I wanted to ask you if that would be okay.”

Holy fuck. I gape at her, and I want to tell her that it’s not okay. I don’t want her anywhere near my husband. Why is she here? To assess the opposition? To unsettle me? Or perhaps she needs this as some sort of closure?

“Lauren,” I shrug, feeling lost. “It’s not up to me, it’s up to Edward. You’ll need to ask him. He doesn’t need my permission. He’s a grown man... most of the time.”

She gazes at me for a fraction of a beat, as if surprised by my reaction, then laughs softly, nervously twiddling the end of her hair.

“He’s repeatedly refused all my requests to see him,” she says quietly.

Oh shit. I’m in more trouble than I thought.

“Why is it so important for you to see him?” I ask gently.

She blinks at me, wide-eyed.

“To thank him,” she murmurs. “I’d be rotting in a stinking prison psychiatric facility, if it wasn’t for him. I know that.” She glances down, and runs her finger along the edge of the table. “I suffered a serious psychotic episode, and without Mr Cullen and John – Dr Banner...” She shrugs, and gazes up at me once more, her face full of gratitude.

Once more I’m speechless. What does she expect me to say? Surely she should be saying these things to Edward, not me.

“And for art school. I can’t thank him enough for that.”

I knew it! Edward is funding her classes. I remain expressionless, exploring my feelings for this woman, now that she’s confirmed my suspicions about Edward’s generosity. To my surprise I feel no ill-will towards her. It’s a revelation – I’m glad she’s better. Now, hopefully, she can move on with her life and out of ours.

“Are you missing classes being here?” I ask, because I’m interested.

“Only two. I head home tomorrow.”

Oh good.

“What are your plans?”

“Pick up my belongings from Susie, return to Hamden. Continue painting and learning. Mr Cullen already has a couple of my paintings.”

What? My stomach plunges into the basement once more. What the hell... are they hanging in my living room? I bridle at the thought.

“What sort of painting do you do?”

“Abstracts, mainly.”

“I see.” My mind flits through the now-familiar paintings in the great room. Two by Mrs Lauren Elliot... possibly. Jeez.

“Mrs Cullen, can I speak frankly?” she asks, completely oblivious to my warring emotions.

“By all means,” I mutter, glancing at Jones, who looks like she’s relaxed a little. Lauren leans forward as if to impart a long-held secret.

“I loved Geoff, my boyfriend who died earlier this year.” Her voice drops to a sad whisper.

Holy fuck, she’s getting personal.

“I’m so sorry,” I mutter automatically, but she continues as if she hasn’t heard me.

“I loved my husband... and one other,” she murmurs.

“My husband,” I whisper. The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Yes.” She mouths the word.

This is not news to me. When she lifts her hazel eyes to mine they are wide with conflicting emotions, and the overriding one seems to be fear. Fear of my reaction, perhaps? But my overwhelming response to this poor young woman is... compassion. Mentally I run through all the classical literature I can think of that deals with unrequited love. Swallowing hard, I clutch the moral high ground.

“I know. He’s very easy to love,” I whisper.

Her wide eyes widen further in surprise, and she smiles.

“Yes. He is. Was,” she corrects herself quickly, and blushes. Then she giggles so sweetly that I can’t help myself. I giggle too. Yes, Edward Cullen makes us giggle. My subconscious rolls her eyes at me in despair and goes back to reading her dog-eared copy of Jane Eyre. I glance at my watch. Deep down I know Edward will be here soon.

“You’ll get your chance to see Edward.”

“I thought I would. I know how protective he can be,” she smiles.

So this is her scheme. She's very shrewd. Or manipulative, whispers my subconscious.

"This is why you're here to see me?"

"Yes."

"I see." And Edward is playing into her hands. Reluctantly I have to acknowledge that she knows him well.

"He seemed very happy. With you," she says.

What?

"How would you know?"

"From when I was in the apartment," she adds cautiously.

Oh hell... how could I forget that!

"Were you there often?"

"No. But he was very different with you."

Do I want to hear this? A shudder runs through me. My scalp prickles as I recall my fear when she was the unseen shadow in our apartment.

"You know it's against the law. Trespassing."

She nods, gazing down at the table. She runs a fingernail along the edge.

"It was only a few times, and I was lucky not to get caught. Again, I need to thank Mr Cullen for that. He could have had me thrown in jail."

"I don't think he'd do that," I murmur.

Suddenly there is a flurry of activity outside the meeting room, and instinctively I know that Edward is in the building. A moment later he bursts through the door and before he closes it I catch Taylor's eye as he stands patiently outside. Taylor's mouth is set in a grim line, and he doesn't return my tight smile. Oh hell, even he's mad at me.

Edward's burning green gaze pins first me, then Lauren to our chairs. His demeanor is quietly determined, but I know better, and I suspect Lauren does too. The menacing emerald glint in his eyes reveals the truth – he's emanating rage, though he hides it well. In his grey suit, with his dark tie loosened and the top button of his white shirt undone, he looks at once businesslike and casual... and, frankly, hot. His hair is in disarray – no doubt because he's been running his hands through it in exasperation.

Lauren looks nervously down at the edge of the table, running her index finger along the edge again, as Edward looks from me to her and then to Jones.

"You," he says to Jones in a soft tone. "You're fired. Get out now."

I blanch. Oh no – this isn't fair.

"Edward –" I make to stand up.

He holds his index finger up at me in warning.

"Don't," he says, his voice so ominously quiet that I'm immediately silenced, rooted to my seat. Bowing her head Jones walks briskly out of the room to join Taylor. Edward shuts the door behind her and walks to the edge of the table. Holy Crap! That was my fault – and I still have her cell. Edward stands opposite Lauren, and placing both hands on the wooden surface, leans forward.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he growls at her.

“Edward!” I gasp.

Edward ignores me.

“Well?” he demands.

Lauren peeks up at him through long lashes, her eyes wide, her face ashen, her rosy glow gone.

“I wanted to see you, and you wouldn’t let me,” she whispers.

“So you came here to harass my wife?” His voice is so quiet.

Lauren looks down at the table again. Edward stands glowering at her.

“Lauren, if you come anywhere near my wife again I will cut off all support. Doctors, art school, medical insurance for your folks, all of it – gone. Do you understand?”

Holy crap.

“Edward –” I try again. But he silences me with a chilling look. Holy shit, he’s being so unreasonable... My compassion for this sad woman blooms.

“Yes,” she breathes.

“What’s Susannah doing in reception?”

“She came with me.”

He runs a hand through his hair, glaring at her.

“Edward, please,” I beg him. “Lauren just wants to say thank you. That’s all.”

He ignores me, concentrating his wrath on Lauren.

“Did you stay with Susannah while you were sick?”

“Yes.”

“Did she know what you were doing, while you were staying with her?”

“No. She was away on vacation.”

He strokes his index finger over his lower lip.

“Why do you need to see me? You know you should route any requests through Banner. Do you need something?” His tone has softened, maybe by a fraction of a decibel.

Lauren runs her finger along the edge of the table, again.

Stop bullying her, Edward!

“I had to know,” she says. And for the first time she looks up directly at him.

“Had to know what?” he snaps.

“That you’re okay.”

He blinks at her.

“That I’m okay?” he scoffs.

“Yes.”

“I’m fine. There, question answered. Now Taylor will run you to Sea Tac so you can go back to the

East Coast. And if you take one step west of the Mississippi it's all gone. Understand?"

Holy Fuck... Edward! I gape at him. What the fuck is eating him? He cannot confine her to one side of the country.

"Yes. I understand," Lauren says quietly.

"Good." Edward's tone is more conciliatory.

"It might not be convenient for Lauren to go back now. She has plans," I object, outraged on her behalf.

Edward glares at me.

"Isabella," he warns, his voice icy, "This does not concern you."

I scowl at him. Of course it concerns me – she's in my office. There must be more to this than I know. He's not being rational. Fifty shades, my subconscious hisses at me.

"Lauren came to see me, not you," I murmur petulantly.

Lauren turns to me, her eyes impossibly wide.

"I had my instructions, Mrs Cullen. I disobeyed them." She glances nervously at my husband, then back at me.

"This is the Edward Cullen I know," she says, her tone sad and wistful. Edward frowns at her, while all the breath evaporates from my lungs. I can't breathe. Oh my... Was Edward like this with her all the time? Was he like this with me, at first? I find it hard to remember. Giving me a forlorn smile Lauren rises from the table.

"I'd like to stay until tomorrow. My flight is at noon," she says quietly to Edward.

"I'll have someone collect you at ten to take you to the airport."

"Thank you."

"You're at Susannah's?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

I glare at Edward. He can't dictate to her like this... and how does he know where Susannah lives?

"Goodbye Mrs Cullen. Thank you for seeing me."

I stand and hold out my hand. She takes it gratefully and we shake.

"Um... Goodbye. Good luck," I mutter, because I'm not sure what the protocol is for saying farewell to my husband's ex-submissive. She nods, and turns to him.

"Goodbye... Edward," she says.

Edward's eyes soften a little.

"Goodbye, Lauren." His voice low. "Dr Banner, remember."

"Yes, sir," she says.

He opens the door to usher her out, but she halts in front of him and looks up. He stills, watching her warily.

"I'm glad you're happy. You deserve to be," she says, and leaves before he can reply. He frowns after

her, bemused, then nods to Taylor, who follows Lauren towards the reception area. Closing the door Edward gazes uncertainly at me.

“Don’t even think about being angry with me,” I hiss. “Call Bastille and kick the shit out of him, or go and see Banner.”

His mouth drops open, surprised by my outburst, and his brow creases once more.

“You promised you wouldn’t do this.” Now his tone is accusatory.

“Do what?”

“Defy me.”

“No I didn’t. I said I’d be more considerate. I told you she was here. I had Jones search her, and your other little friend too, and Jones was with me the entire time. Now you’ve fired the poor woman, when she was only doing what I asked. I told you not to worry, yet here you are. I don’t remember receiving your papal bull decreeing that I couldn’t see Lauren. I didn’t know that my visitors were subject to a proscribed list.” My voice rises with indignation as I warm to my cause. Edward blinks at me, bemused once more. After a moment his mouth twists.

“Papal bull?” he says, amused, and he visibly relaxes. I wasn’t aiming to lighten our conversation, yet here he is smirking at me, and that makes me madder. The exchange between him and his ex was painful to witness – how could he be so cold with her?

“What?” he asks, exasperated, as my face remains resolutely straight.

“You. Why were you so callous towards her?”

He sighs and shifts, stepping towards me and perching on the table.

“Isabella,” he says as if to a child. “You don’t understand. Lauren, Susannah – all of them – they were a pleasant, diverting pastime. But that’s all. You are the center of my universe. And the last time you two were in a room together she had you at gunpoint. I don’t want her anywhere near you.”

“But Edward, she was ill.”

“I know that, and I know she’s better now, but I’m not giving her the benefit of the doubt any more. What she did was unforgivable.”

“But you’ve just played right into her hands. She wanted to see you again, and she knew you’d come running if she came to see me.”

Edward shrugs as if he doesn’t care.

“I don’t want you tainted with my old life.”

What?

“Edward... you are who you are because of your old life, your new life, whatever. What touches you touches me. I accepted that when I agreed to marry you, because I love you.”

He stills, green eyes widening. I know he finds it hard to hear this.

“She didn’t hurt me. She loves you too,” I murmur.

“I don’t give a fuck.”

I blink at him, shocked. And I’m shocked that he still has the capacity to shock me.

This is the Edward Cullen I know. Lauren’s words rattle round my head. His reaction to her is so cold, so much at odds with the man I’ve come to know and love. I frown, recalling the remorse he felt when

she had her breakdown, when he thought he might in some way be responsible for her pain. I swallow, remembering too that he bathed her. My stomach twists painfully at the thought and bile rises in my throat. How can he say he doesn't care about her? He did back then. What's changed? Sometimes, like now, I just don't understand him. He operates on a level far, far removed from mine.

"Why are you championing her cause all of a sudden?" he asks, mystified and irritable.

"Look Edward, I don't think Lauren and I will be swapping recipes and knitting patterns anytime soon. But I didn't think you'd be so heartless to her."

His green eyes frost.

"I told you once, I don't have a heart," he mutters.

I roll my eyes – oh, now he is being adolescent.

"That's just not true, Edward. You're being ridiculous. You do care about her. You wouldn't be paying for art classes and the rest of that stuff if you didn't."

Suddenly it's my lifetime ambition to make him realize this. It's painstakingly obvious that he cares. Why does he deny it? It's like his feelings for his birth mother. Oh shit – of course. His feelings for Lauren and his other submissives are tangled up with his feelings for his mother. I like to whip little brown-haired girls like you because you all look like the crack whore. No wonder he's so mad. I sigh and shake my head. Paging Dr Banner, please. How can he not see this?

My heart swells for him momentarily. My lost boy... Why is it so hard for him to get back in touch with the humanity, the compassion he showed Lauren when she had her breakdown?

He glares at me, his eyes glittering with anger.

"This discussion is over. Let's go home."

I glance at my watch. It's 4.23. I have work to do.

"It's too early," I mutter.

"Home," he insists.

Oh no.

"Edward," I say, my voice weary. "I am tired of having the same argument with you."

He frowns as if he doesn't understand.

"You know," I elucidate. "I do something you don't like and you think of some way to get back at me. Usually involving some of your kinky fuckery which is either mind-blowing or cruel." I shrug, resigned. This is exhausting and confusing.

"Mind-blowing?" he asks.

What?

"Usually, yes."

"What was mind-blowing?" he asks, his eyes now shimmering with amused sensual curiosity. And I know he's trying to distract me.

Crap! I do not want to discuss this in SIP's meeting room. My subconscious examines her finely manicured nails with disdain. Shouldn't have bought the subject up then.

"You know," I flush, irritated with both him and myself.

"I can guess," he whispers.

Holy crap. I'm trying to castigate him and he's confounding me.

"Edward, I –"

"I like to please you."

Reaching up he delicately traces his thumb over my bottom lip.

"You do," I acknowledge, my voice a whisper.

"I know," he says softly. He leans forward and whispers in my ear, "It's the one thing I do know." Oh, he smells good. He leans back and gazes down at me, his lips curled in an arrogant, I-so-own-you smile. Pursing my lips I strive to appear unaffected by his touch, strive to ignore the dark yearning that unfurls deep in my belly. He is so artful at diverting me from anything painful, or anything he doesn't want to address.

"What was mind-blowing, Isabella?" he prompts, a wicked gleam in his eye.

"You want the list?" I ask.

"There's a list?" He's pleased.

Oh, this man is exhausting.

"Well, the handcuffs," I mumble, my mind catapulted back to our honeymoon.

His brow furrows. Grasping my hand his thumb traces the pulse point on my wrist.

"I don't want to mark you."

Oh...

His lips curl in a slow carnal smile.

"Come home," he breathes.

"I have work to do."

"Home," he says, insistent.

We gaze at each other, green eyes into brown, testing each other, testing our boundaries and our wills. I search his eyes for some understanding, trying to fathom how this man can go from raging control freak to seductive lover in one breath. His eyes grow larger and darker, his intention clear. Softly he caresses my cheek.

"We could stay here," he breathes, his voice low and husky.

Oh no. My inner goddess gazes longingly down at the wooden table. No. No. No. Not in the office.

"Edward, I don't want to have sex here. Your mistress has just been in this room."

"She was never my mistress," he growls, his mouth flattening into a grim line.

"That's just semantics, Edward."

He frowns, his expression puzzled. The seductive lover has gone.

"Don't over-think this, Bella. She's history," he says dismissively.

I sigh... maybe he's right. I just want him to admit to himself that he cares for her. A chill grips my heart – Oh no. This is why it's important to me. Supposing I do something unforgivable. Suppose I don't conform. Will I be history too? If he can turn like this... could he turn against me? I gasp,

recalling the fragments of a dream: gilt mirrors, and the sound of his heels clicking on the marbled floor, as he leaves me standing alone in opulent splendor.

“No...” I breathe.

“Yes,” he whispers, and grasping my chin he leans down and plants a tender kiss on my lips.

“Oh Edward, don’t leave me,” I murmur, reaching up to grasp his head in my hands, twisting my fingers into his hair and pulling his lips to mine. He stills for a moment as his arms fold around me.

“I have no intention of leaving you, Bella. What’s brought this on?”

“Nothing. Kiss me. Take me home,” I plead. And as his lips touch mine, I am lost.

~o~

“Oh please,” I beg, as Edward blows gently on my sex.

“All in good time,” he murmurs.

I pull on my restraints and groan loudly in protest at his carnal assault. I am trussed up in soft leather cuffs, each elbow bound to each knee, and Edward’s head bobs and weaves between my legs, his masterful tongue teasing me, relentless. I open my eyes and gaze unseeing at our bedroom ceiling bathed in the soft late afternoon light. His tongue moves round and round, swirling and curling over and around the center of my universe. I want to straighten my legs and struggle in a vain attempt to control the pleasure. But I can’t. My fingers fist in his hair and I pull hard to fight his sublime torture.

“Don’t come,” he murmurs against me, his soft breath on my warm, wet flesh as he resists my fingers. “I will spank you if you come.”

I moan.

“Control, Bella. It’s all about control.” His tongue renews its erotic incursion... oh, he knows what he’s doing. I am helpless to resist or stop my slavish reaction and I try – really try – but my body detonates under his merciless ministrations, and his tongue doesn’t stop, as he wrings every last ounce of debilitating pleasure from me.

“Oh Bella,” he scolds. “You came.” His voice is soft with his triumphant reprimand. He flips me onto my front and I shakily support myself on my forearms. He smacks me hard on my behind.

“Ah!” I cry out.

“Control,” he breathes, and grabbing my hips he thrusts himself into me. I cry out again, my flesh still quivering from the aftershocks of my orgasm. He stills while deep inside me and leaning over unclips first one, then the second cuff. He wraps his arm around me and pulls me into his lap, his front to my back, and his hand curls beneath my chin around my throat. I revel in the feeling of fullness.

“Move,” he orders.

I moan and rise up and down on his lap.

“Faster,” he whispers.

And I move faster, and faster. He groans and his hand tips my head back as he nibbles my neck. His other hand traveling leisurely across my body, from my hip, down to my sex, down to my clitoris... still sensitive from his earlier lavish attention. I whimper as his fingers close around me, teasing me once more.

“Yes, Bella,” he rasps softly in my ear. “You are mine. Only you.”

“Yes,” I breathe as my body tightens again, closing around him, cradling him in the most intimate way.

“Come for me,” he demands.

And I let go, as my body obediently follows his command. He holds me still as my climax rips through me and call out his name.

“Oh Bella, I love you,” he breathes and follows my lead as he bucks into me, finding his own release.

~o~

He kisses my shoulder and smooths my hair from my face.

“Does that make the list, Mrs Cullen?” he murmurs.

I am lying, barely conscious, flat on my belly on our bed. Edward gently kneads my backside. He’s propped up beside me on one elbow.

“Hmmm.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Hmmm.” I grin.

He grins and kisses me again, and reluctantly I roll on my side to face him.

“Well?” he asks.

“Yes. It makes the list. But it’s a long list.”

His face nearly splits in two and he leans forward to kiss me gently.

“Good. Shall we have dinner, Mrs Cullen?” His eyes glow with love and humor.

I nod. I am famished. I reach over to gently pull the little hairs on his chest.

“I want you to tell me something,” I whisper.

“What?”

“Don’t get mad.”

“What is it, Bella?”

“You do care.”

His eyes widen, and all trace of his good humor vanishes.

“I want you to admit that you care. Because the Edward I know and love would care.”

He stills, his eyes not leaving mine, and I’m witness to his internal struggle – as if he’s about to make the judgment of Solomon. He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it again, as some fleeting emotion flits across his face... pain, maybe.

Say it, I will him.

“Yes. Yes, I care. Happy?” His voice is barely a whisper.

Oh, thank fuck for that. It’s a relief.

“Yes. Very.”

He frowns.

“I cannot believe I am talking to you now, here in our bed, about – ” I put my finger to his lips.

“We’re not,” I murmur. “Let’s eat. I’m hungry.”

He sighs and shakes his head.

“You beguile and bewilder me, Mrs Cullen.”

“Good.” I lean up and kiss him.

~o0o~

From: Isabella Cullen

Subject: The List

Date: 10 September 2009: 09.33

To: Edward Cullen

That’s definitely at the top.

:D

B x

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Tell Me Something New

Date: 10 September 2009: 09.42

To: Isabella Cullen

You’ve said that for the last three days.

Make your mind up.

Or... we could try something else.

;))

Edward Cullen, CEO

Enjoying this Game, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I grin at my screen. The last few evenings have been... entertaining. We have relaxed again, Lauren’s brief interruption forgotten. I haven’t quite worked up the courage to ask if any of her paintings hang on the walls – and frankly, I don’t really care. My BlackBerry buzzes and I answer, expecting Edward.

“Bella?”

Who is this?

“Yes?”

“Bella, honey. It’s Billy.”

“Billy! Hi!” My scalp prickles. What does Charlie’s best friend want with me?

“Honey, I’m sorry to call you at work. It’s Charlie.” His voice falters.

Oh No...

“What is it? What’s happened?” My heart leaps into my throat.

“Charlie’s been in an accident.”

Oh No. Daddy. I stop breathing.

“He’s in the hospital. You’d better get here quick.”

MOTU II – 108/21

“Billy, what’s happened?” My voice is hoarse and thick with unshed tears. Daddy!

“He’s been in a car accident.”

“Okay, I’ll come... I’ll come now.” Adrenaline has flooded my bloodstream, leaving panic in its wake. I’m finding it difficult to breathe. I clutch the edge of my chair.

“They’ve transferred him to Portland.”

Portland? What the hell is he doing in Portland?

“They airlifted him, Bella. I’m heading there now. OHSU. Oh Bella, I didn’t see the car. I just didn’t see it...” his voice cracks.

Billy – no!

“I’ll see you there.” Billy chokes and the line goes dead.

A dark dread seizes me by the throat, overwhelming me. Charlie. No. No. I take a deep steadying breath, pick up the office phone and call Roach. He answers on the second ring.

“Bella?”

“Jerry. It’s my father.”

“Shit, Bella – what’s happened?”

I explain quickly, barely pausing to breathe.

“Go – of course you must go. I hope your father’s okay.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep you informed.” Inadvertently I slam the phone down, but frankly right now couldn’t care less.

“Hanna!” I call, aware of the anxiety in my voice. Moments later she pokes her head around the door to find me packing my purse and grabbing papers to stuff into my briefcase.

“Yes, Bella?” She frowns.

“My father has been in an accident. I have to go.”

“Oh no – ”

“Cancel all my appointments today. And Monday. You’ll have to finish prepping the ebook presentation – notes are in the shared file. Get Charlotte to help if you have to.”

“Yes,” Hanna whispers. “I hope he’s okay. Don’t worry about anything here. We’ll muddle through.”

“I have my BlackBerry.”

The concern etched on her pinched, pale face is almost my undoing.

Daddy.

I grab my jacket, purse and briefcase and head to the door.

“I’ll call you if I need anything.”

“Do, please. Good luck, Bella. Hope he’s okay.”

I give her a small tight smile, fighting to maintain my composure, and exit my office. I try hard not to run all the way to reception. Stuart leaps to his feet when I arrive.

“Mrs Cullen?” he asks, confused by my sudden appearance.

“We’re going to Portland, now.”

“Okay, ma’am,” he says, frowning at me but opening the door.

“Mrs Cullen,” Stuart asks as we head towards the parking lot. “Can I ask why we’re making this unscheduled trip?”

“It’s my Dad.”

“I see. Does Mr Cullen know?”

“I’ll call him from the car.”

Stuart nods and opens the rear door to the Volvo SUV and I climb in. My shaking fingers find my BlackBerry, and I dial Edward’s cell.

“Mrs Cullen.” Angela answers, her voice is crisp and business-like.

“Is Edward there?” I breathe.

“Um... he’s somewhere in the building ma’am.”

Oh. I groan silently with frustration.

“Can you tell him I called, and that I need to speak with him? It’s urgent.”

“I could try and track him down. He does have a habit of wandering off sometimes.”

“Just get him to call me, please,” I beg.

“Certainly, Mrs Cullen.” She hesitates. “Is everything all right?”

“No,” I sigh. “Please, just get him to call me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she says softly, exuding concern. I hang up. I cannot bear it any longer. Pulling my knees up to my chest I curl up on the rear seat and tears ooze, unwelcome, down my cheeks.

“Where in Portland, Mrs Cullen?” Stuart asks gently.

“OHSU,” I choke out. “The big hospital.”

Stuart pulls out into the street and heads for the I-5, while I keen softly in the back of the car, muttering wordless prayers. Please let him be okay – Please let him be okay.

My phone rings, ‘Your Love Is King’ startling me from my mantra.

“Edward,” I gasp.

“Christ, Bella. What’s wrong?”

“It’s Charlie – he’s been in an accident.”

“Shit!”

“Yes. I am on my way to Portland.”

“Portland? Please tell me Stuart is with you.”

“Yes, he’s driving.”

“Where is Charlie?”

“In OHSU.”

I hear a muffled voice in the background.

“Yes Kate,” Edward snaps angrily. “I know! Sorry baby – I can be there in about three hours. I have business I need to finish here. I’ll fly down.”

Oh shit. Echo Charlie is back in commission.

“I have a meeting with some guys over from Taiwan. I can’t blow them off. It’s a deal we’ve been hammering out for a few months.”

Oh. Why do I know nothing about this?

“I’ll leave as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” I whisper. And I want to say that it’s okay, he can stay in Seattle and sort out his business... but the truth is – I want him with me.

“Oh baby,” he whispers, and I feel his anguish through the phone.

“I’ll be okay, Edward. Take your time. Don’t rush. I don’t want to worry about you too. Fly safely.”

“I will.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too, baby. He’ll be fine. I’ll be with you as soon as I can. Keep Ethan close.”

“Yes. I will.”

“Later.”

“Later.”

I hang up and hug my knees once more. I know nothing about Edward’s business. What the hell is he doing with the Taiwanese? I gaze out of the window as we pass Boeing Field-King airport. I hope he flies safely... my stomach knots anew and nausea threatens. Charlie and Edward. I don’t think my heart could take that. I lean back and start my mantra again: Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay.

~o~

“Mrs Cullen.” Stuart’s voice wakes me. “We’re in the hospital grounds. I just have to find the ER.”

“I know where it is,” I mumble, blinking awake. My mind briefly flits back to my last visit to OHSU, with a twisted ankle from falling off a stepladder at Newtons on my second day there. Mike Newton hovering over me. I shudder at the memory.

Stuart pulls up at the drop-off point and leaps out to open my door.

“I’ll go park, ma’am and come and find you. Leave your briefcase, I’ll bring it.”

“Sure. Thank you... Ethan.”

He nods, and I walk briskly into the buzzing ER reception area.

The receptionist at the desk gives me a polite smile. Her hair has been permed and set to within an inch of its life. Not one strand moves independently.

“I’m looking for Charlie Swan? He was airlifted here. He’s been in a car accident.”

Her expression changes to one of somber concern.

“Let me check the computer,” she says kindly.

I scan the waiting area, trying to suppress my anxiety.

“He’s been taken to the OR. Number 4, on the third floor. Take the elevators over there.”

O.R? Fuck!

“Thank you,” I mutter, trying to focus on her directions. My stomach lurches as I make my way over to the elevators.

Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay.

The elevator is agonizingly slow, stopping at each floor. Come on... Come on! I will it to move faster, scowling at the people strolling in and out and preventing me from getting to my Dad.

Finally the doors open on the third floor and I head to another reception desk, this one staffed by nurses in navy uniforms.

“Can I help you?” asks one officious nurse with a myopic stare.

“My father, Charlie Swan. He’s just been admitted. He’s in OR 4, I think?” Even as I say the words I am willing them not to be true.

“Let me check, Miss Swan.”

I nod, not bothering to correct her, as she gazes intently at her computer screen.

“Yes. He’s been in a couple of hours. If you’d like to wait I’ll let them know that you’re here. The waiting room’s just through there.” She points towards a large white door, helpfully labeled WAITING ROOM in bold blue lettering.

“Is he okay?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

“You’ll have to wait for one of the attending doctors to brief you, ma’am.”

“Thank you,” I mutter – but inside I am screaming, I WANT TO KNOW NOW!

I open the door to reveal a functional, austere waiting room, where Billy and Jake are seated. Holy fuck.

“Bella!” Billy gasps. He’s wearing a neck brace, his arm is in plaster, and his face is badly bruised on one side. He’s in his wheelchair, and for a moment I have to remember that he’s always been in a wheelchair, and that this is not a result of the accident. I lurch forward and gingerly wrap my arms around him.

“Oh Billy,” I sob.

“Bella, honey.” His voice is hoarse. Raising his uninjured arm he pats my back.

“I’m so sorry,” he mumbles, his voice cracking.

Oh no...

“Hey, Dad...” Jake says softly in admonishment, as he hovers behind me. When I turn he pulls me into his arms and holds me.

“Jake,” I mutter. And I am lost – tears falling as all the tension, fear and heartache of the last three hours surface.

“Hey, Bells. Don’t cry.” Jake gently strokes my hair. I wrap my arms around his neck and softly weep. We stand like that for ages, and I’m so grateful that my best friend is here. We pull apart when Stuart joins us in the waiting room. Billy hands me a tissue from a conveniently-placed box and I dry my tears.

“This is Mr Stuart. Security,” I murmur as Stuart looks at us.

Stuart nods politely to Jake and Billy. Jake frowns at him but nods in response, while Billy stares at him blankly. Stuart moves away to take a seat in a far corner.

“Sit down, Bells,” says Jake, ushering me towards one of the vinyl-covered armchairs.

“What happened?” I ask. “Do we know how he is? What are they doing?”

Jake holds up his hands to halt my barrage of questions and sits down beside me.

“We don’t have any news. Charlie, Dad and I were on a fishing trip to Astoria. We were hit by some stupid fucking drunk – ”

Billy tries to interrupt, stammering an apology.

“Don’t, Dad!” Jake snaps. “I don’t have a mark on me,” he continues. “Just a couple of bruised ribs and a knock on the head. Dad... well, Dad broke his wrist. But the car hit the passenger side. And Charlie...”

Oh no... no... Panic swamps my limbic system again. No, no, no. My whole body shudders and freezes with a creeping cold.

“He’s in surgery. We were taken to the community hospital in Astoria, but they soon airlifted Charlie here. We don’t know what they’re doing. We’re waiting for news.”

I start to shake.

“Hey Bells – you cold?”

I nod. I’m in my white sleeveless shirt and black summer jacket, and they provide no warmth. Gingerly Jake pulls off his leather jacket and wraps it around my shoulders.

“Shall I get you some tea, ma’am?” Stuart is by my side.

I nod gratefully at him, and he disappears from the room.

“Why were you fishing in Astoria?” I ask.

Jake shrugs.

“It’s supposed to be good there. You know... We were having a boys’ get-together. Some bonding time with my old man, before academia heats up for my final year.” Jake gazes at me, his dark eyes large and luminous with fear and regret.

“Oh Jake. You could have been hurt too. And Billy... worse.” I gulp at the thought. My body temperature drops further and I shudder again. Jake takes my hand.

“Hell, Bella – you’re freezing.”

Billy inches forward and takes my other hand in his one good hand.

“Bella, I am so sorry.”

“Mr Black, please. It was an accident...” My voice fades to a whisper.

“Billy,” he corrects me. I give him a weak smile, because that’s all I can manage. I shiver once more.

“The police took the asshole into custody. Seven in the morning and the guy was out of his skull,” Jake hisses in disgust.

Stuart re-enters bearing a paper cup of hot water and a separate teabag. He knows how I take my tea! I’m surprised, and glad of the distraction. Billy and Jake release my hands as I take the cup gratefully

from Stuart.

“Do you...?” Stuart asks Billy and Jake. They both shake their heads, and Stuart resumes his seat in the corner. I dunk my teabag in the water and rising shakily dispose of the used bag in a small trashcan.

“What’s taking them so long?” I mutter to no one in particular, as I take a sip.

Daddy... Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay.

“We’ll know soon enough, Bells,” Jake says gently.

I nod and take another sip. I take my seat again beside him.

We wait...

And wait. Billy with his eyes closed, praying I think. Jake holding my hand and squeezing it every now and then. I slowly sip my tea. It’s not Twinings, but some cheap and nasty brand, and it tastes disgusting.

I remember the last time I waited for news. The last time I thought all was lost... when Echo Charlie went missing. Closing my eyes I offer up a silent prayer for the safe passage of my husband. I glance at my watch: Two-fifteen. He should be here soon. My tea is cold... ugh.

I stand up and pace. Then sit down again. Why haven’t the doctors been to see me? I take Jake’s hand, and he gives mine another reassuring squeeze. Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay.

Time crawls. Crawls so slowly.

Suddenly the door opens, and we all glance up expectantly, my stomach knotting. Is this it?

Edward strides in. His face darkens momentarily when he notices my hand in Jake’s.

“Edward,” I gasp, and I leap up, thanking God he’s arrived safely. Then I’m in his arms and they’re wrapped around me. His nose is in my hair, and I’m inhaling his scent, his warmth... his love. And a small part of me feels calmer, stronger and more resilient. Edward is here, with me... oh, the difference his presence makes to my peace of mind.

“What news?” he asks into my hair.

I shake my head, unable to speak. He nods a greeting at Jake.

“Jake,” he says.

“Edward,” Jake responds. “This is my father, Billy Black.”

“Mr Black – we met at the wedding. I take it you were in the accident too?”

Jake briefly retells the story.

“Are you both well enough to be here?” Edward asks.

“We don’t want to be anywhere else,” Billy says, his voice quiet and laced with pain. Edward nods. Taking my hand he sits me down, then takes a seat beside me.

“Have you eaten?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“Are you hungry?”

I shake my head.

“But you’re cold?” he asks, eyeing Jake’s jacket.

I nod. He shifts in his chair, but wisely says nothing.

The door opens again, and a young doctor in bright blue scrubs enters. He looks exhausted and harrowed.

Oh no... All the blood seems to disappear from my head as I stumble to my feet.

"Charlie Swan," I whisper as Edward stands beside me, putting his arm around my waist.

"You're his next of kin?" the doctor asks. His bright blue eyes almost match his scrubs, and under any other circumstances I would say he was attractive.

"I'm his daughter Bella."

"Miss Swan –"

"Mrs Cullen," Edward interrupts him.

"My apologies," the doctor stammers, and for a moment I want to kick Edward. "I'm Doctor Crowe. Your father is stable, but in a critical condition."

Oh fuck... what does that mean? My knees buckle beneath me, and only Edward's supporting arm prevents me from falling to the floor.

"He suffered severe internal injuries," Doctor Crowe continues, "Primarily to his diaphragm, but we've managed to repair them, and we were able to save his spleen. Unfortunately he suffered a cardiac arrest during the operation because of the blood loss. We managed to get his heart going again, but this remains a concern. However, our gravest concern is that he suffered severe contusions to the head, and the MRI shows that he has swelling in his brain. We've induced a coma to keep him quiet and still. We need to continue monitoring the brain swelling."

Brain damage? No...

"It's standard procedure in these cases. For now, we just have to wait and see."

"And what's the prognosis?" Edward asks coolly.

"Mr Cullen, it's difficult to say at the moment. It's possible he could make a complete recovery, but that's in God's hands now."

"How long will you keep him in a coma?"

"That depends on how his brain responds. Usually 72 to 96 hours."

Oh no... so long!

"Can I see him?" I whisper.

"He's been taken up to the ICU on the sixth floor. Yes, you should be able to see him in about half an hour."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Doctor Crowe nods, turns and leaves us.

"Well, he's alive," I whisper to Edward. And the tears start to roll down my face once more.

"Sit down," Edward orders gently, and leads me back to my seat.

"Dad, I think we should go," Jake murmurs to Billy. "You need to rest. We won't know anything for a while."

Billy gazes blankly at his son.

“We can come back this evening, after you’ve rested. That’s okay, isn’t it, Bells?” Jake turns, imploring me.

“Of course.”

“Are you staying in Portland?” Edward asks.

Jake nods.

“Do you need a ride home?”

Jake’s brow furrows.

“I was going to order a cab.”

“Ethan can take you.”

Stuart stands, and Jake looks momentarily confused.

“Ethan Stuart,” I murmur, in clarification.

“Oh... Sure. Yeah, we’d appreciate it. Thanks, Edward.”

I stand up shakily, and hug Billy and Jake in quick succession.

“Stay strong, Bells,” Jake whispers in my ear. “He’s a fit and healthy man. The odds are in his favor.”

“Oh Jake, I hope so.” I hug him hard. Then, releasing him, I shrug off his jacket and hand it back to him.

“Keep it, if you’re still cold.”

“No, I’m okay. Thanks.” Glancing nervously up at Edward I see that he’s regarding us impassively. Edward takes my hand.

“If there’s any change I’ll let you know right away,” I add to Jake.

He pushes his father’s wheelchair towards the door, which Stuart holds open. Billy raises his hand and they pause in the doorway.

“He’s in my prayers, Bella,” Billy says, his voice wavering. “He’s my best friend.”

“I know.”

And with that they leave.

Edward and I are alone. Reaching up he caresses my cheek.

“You’re pale,” he whispers. “Come here.” He sits down on the chair and pulls me on to his lap, folding me into his arms again, and I go willingly. I snuggle up against him, feeling oppressed by my father’s misfortune, but grateful that my husband is here to comfort me. Edward smells so good... He gently strokes my hair and holds my hand.

“How was Echo Charlie?” I breathe.

He grins.

“Oh, she was yar,” he says, quiet pride in his voice.

It makes me smile properly for the first time in several hours, and I glance at him, puzzled.

“Yar?”

“It’s a line from ‘The Philadelphia Story’. Esme’s favorite film.”

“I don’t know it.”

"I think I have it on blu-ray. We can watch it, and make out." He kisses my hair and I smile once more.

"Can I persuade you to eat something?" he asks.

My smile disappears.

"Not now. I want to see Charlie first."

His shoulders slump, but he doesn't push me.

"How were the Taiwanese?"

"Amenable," he says.

"Amenable how?"

"They let me buy their shipyard at the price I wanted to pay."

Oh. He's bought a shipyard?

"That's good?"

I feel his smile.

"Yes. That's good."

"But I thought you had a shipyard, over here."

"I do. We're going to use that to do the fitting-out. Build the hulls in the Far East. It's cheaper."

Oh.

"What about the workforce at the shipyard here?"

"We'll redeploy. We should be able to keep redundancies to a minimum." He kisses my hair.

"Shall we go?" he asks, his voice soft.

I don't want to move. I want to enjoy this moment with Edward, and not face the grim reality of my father broken and in pain... but part of me wants to check that Charlie's still with us, still alive.

"Yes," I breathe.

~o~

The ICU on the sixth floor is an extraordinary place, a stark, sterile but functional ward. Four patients are each housed in their own separate area, attached to hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of hi-tech equipment. Charlie is at the far end.

Daddy.

He looks so small in his large bed, surrounded by all this technology. It's a shock: my Dad has never been small. There's a tube in his mouth, and various lines pass through drips into a needle in each arm. A small clamp is attached to his finger. I wonder vaguely what that's for. His leg is on top of the sheets, encased in a blue plastic cast. A monitor blips his heart rate: Blip, blip, blip. Strong and steady. Charlie's heart is strong. This I know. I move slowly towards him. His chest is naked, and a large livid scar, crudely stapled together, runs down his chest and disappears beneath the thin sheet that protects his modesty.

Daddy.

I realize that the tube pulling at the right corner of his mouth leads to a ventilator. Its noise is weaving

with the blip, blip, blip of his heart monitor into a percussive rhythmic beat. Sucking, expelling, sucking, expelling, sucking, expelling... in time with the blips. There are four lines on the screen of his heart monitor, each moving steadily across, demonstrating clearly that Charlie is still with us.

Oh Daddy...

Tentatively I reach for his hand. Even though his mouth is distorted by the ventilator tube he looks so peaceful, lying there fast asleep.

A petite young nurse stands to one side, checking his monitors.

"Can I touch him?" I ask her.

"Yes," she smiles kindly. 'Christie RN', it says on her badge. She must be in her twenties. She's blond, with dark, dark eyes.

Edward stands at the end of the bed, watching me carefully as I clasp Charlie's hand. It's surprisingly warm, and that's my undoing. I sink on to the chair by the bed, place my head gently against Charlie's arm, and I start to sob.

"Oh Daddy. Please get better," I whisper. "Please."

Edward is at my side. He puts his hand on my shoulder and gives it a reassuring squeeze.

"All Mr Swan's vitals are good," Nurse Christie says quietly.

"Thank you," Edward murmurs. I glance up in time to see her flush and gape. She's finally gotten a good look at my husband. I don't care... She can gape at Edward all she likes, as long as she makes my father well again.

"Can he hear me?" I ask.

"He's deeply asleep, ma'am. But who knows?"

"Can I sit for a while?"

"Sure thing," she smiles at me, her cheeks still pink from her telltale blush. Incongruously I find myself thinking blond is not her true color.

Edward gazes down at me, ignoring her.

"I need to make a call. I'll be outside. I'll give you some alone time with your Dad."

I nod. He bends, kisses my hair, and stalks out of the ward. I sit and hold Charlie's hand, marveling at the irony that it's only now, when he's unconscious and can't hear me, that I really want to tell him how much I love him. Very quietly, so as not to disturb anyone, I tell him about our weekend in Aspen, and about last weekend, when we were soaring and sailing aboard the Esme. I tell him about our new house, our plans, about how we hope to make it ecologically sustainable. I promise to take him with us to Aspen so he can go fishing with Edward, and assure him that Billy and Jake will both be welcome too... Please be here to do that, Daddy, please.

Charlie remains immobile, the ventilator sucking and expelling, and the monotonous but reassuring blip, blip, blip of his heart monitor his only response.

When I look up Edward is sitting quietly at the end of the bed. I don't know how long he's been there.

"Hi," he says, his green eyes glowing with compassion and concern.

"Hi."

"So, I'm going fishing with your Dad, Billy and Jake?" he says softly, amused yet wary.

I nod.

“Okay. Let’s go eat. Let your Dad sleep in peace.”

I frown. I don’t want to leave him.

“Bella, he’s in a coma. I’ve given our cell numbers to the nurses here. If there’s any change they’ll call us. We’ll eat, check into a hotel, rest up, then come back this evening.”

~o~

The suite at the Heathman looks just as I remember it. How often I’ve thought about that first night and morning I spent with Edward Cullen... now my husband. I stand in the entrance to the suite, paralyzed. Jeez, it all started here.

“Home away from home,” says Edward softly, putting my briefcase down beside one of the overstuffed couches.

“Do you want a shower? A bath? What do you need, Bella?” Edward gazes at me, and I can tell he’s lost. My lost boy, events beyond his control. He’s been quiet, withdrawn and contemplative all afternoon. This is a situation he cannot manipulate and predict. This is real life in the raw, and he’s kept himself from that for so long, he’s exposed and helpless now. My sweet Fifty Shades.

“A bath. I’d like a bath.” I murmur, aware that keeping him busy will make him feel better, make him feel useful. Oh Edward – I’m numb and I’m cold and I’m scared – but I’m so glad you’re here with me.

“Bath. Good. Yes.” He strides into the bedroom and onwards out of sight into the palatial ensuite. A few moments later I hear the roar of water gushing to fill the tub.

Finally I galvanize myself to move, and follow him into the bedroom. I’m dismayed to see several bags from Nordstum on the bed. Edward re-enters, sleeves rolled up, tie and jacket discarded.

“I sent Taylor to get some things. Nightwear. You know,” he says, eyeing me warily.

Of course he did. I nod my approval... Where is Taylor?

“Oh Bella,” Edward murmurs. “I’ve not seen you like this. You’re normally so brave and strong.”

I don’t know what to say. I merely gaze wide-eyed at him. I have nothing, nothing to give right now... I think I’m in shock. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to keep the pervading cold at bay, even though I know it’s a fruitless task, as this cold comes from within. Edward pulls me into his arms.

“Baby, he’s alive. His vital signs are good. We just have to be patient,” he murmurs. “Come.” Releasing me he takes my hand and leads me into the bathroom. Gently he slips my jacket off my shoulders and places it on the bathroom chair, then turning back he starts undoing the buttons on my shirt.

~o~

The water is deliciously warm and fragrant, the smell of lotus blossom heavy in the warm, sultry air of the bathroom. I lie between Edward’s legs, my back to his front, my feet resting on top of his. We’re both quiet and introspective, and I’m finally feeling warm. Intermittently Edward kisses my hair as I absentmindedly pop the bubbles in the foam.

“You didn’t get into the bath with Lauren, did you? That time you bathed her?” I ask.

He stiffens, then snorts, his hands tightening on his knees where they rest.

“Um... No.” He sounds astounded.

“I thought so. Good.”

Lifting his hand he tugs gently at my hair, knotted in a crude bun at the back of my head, tilting my head round so he can see my face.

“Why do you ask?”

I shrug.

“Morbid curiosity. I don’t know... seeing her this week.”

His face hardens.

“I see. Less of the morbid, please.” His tone is reproachful.

“How long are you going to support her?”

He shrugs.

“Until she’s on her feet. I don’t know. Why?”

“Are there others?”

“Others?”

“Exes that you support.”

“There was one, yes. No longer though.”

“Oh?”

“She was studying to be a doctor. She’s qualified now and has... someone else.”

“A dominant?”

“Yes.”

“Lauren says you have two of her paintings,” I whisper.

“I used to. I wasn’t keen on them. They had technical merit, but they were too colorful for me. I think Emmett has them. As we know, he has no taste.”

I giggle, and he wraps his arms around me, sloshing water over the side of the bath.

“That’s better,” he breathes and kisses my temple.

“He’s marrying my best friend.”

“Then I’d better shut my mouth,” he says.

~o~

I feel more relaxed after our bath. Wrapped in my soft Heathman robe I gaze at the various bags on the bed. Jeez... this must be more than nightwear. Tentatively I peek into one. A pair of jeans and a pale blue hooded sweatshirt, my size. Holy Crow... Taylor’s bought a whole weekend’s worth of clothes.

“Apart from harassing me at Newtons, have you ever actually gone into a store and just bought stuff?”

“Harassing you?”

“Yes. Harassing me.”

“You were very flustered, if I recall. And that young boy was all over you. What was his name?”

“Mike.”

“One of your many admirers.”

I roll my eyes at him and he smiles – a relieved, genuine smile. He leans over and kisses me.

“That’s my girl,” he whispers. “Get dressed. I don’t want you getting cold again.”

~o~

“Ready,” I murmur. Edward is working on the Mac in the study area of the suite. He’s dressed in black jeans and a grey cable-knit sweater, and I’m wearing the jeans, the hoodie and a white t-shirt.

“You look so young,” Edward says softly, glancing up, his eyes glowing. “And to think you’ll be a whole year older tomorrow.” His voice is wistful.

I give him a crooked smile.

“I don’t feel much like celebrating. Can we go see Charlie now?”

“Sure. I wish you’d eat something. You barely touched your lunch.”

“Edward, please. I’m just not hungry. Maybe after we’ve seen Charlie. I want to wish him goodnight.”

~o~

As we arrive at the ICU we meet Jake leaving. He’s alone.

“Bella, Edward, hi,” he says.

“Where’s Billy?”

“He was too tired to come back. He was in a car accident this morning,” Jake grins ruefully. “And his painkilling meds have kicked in. He was out for the count. I had to fight to get into see Charlie, since I’m not next of kin.”

“And?” I ask anxiously.

“He’s good, Bella. Same... but all good.”

Relief floods my system. No news is good news.

“See you tomorrow, birthday girl?”

“Sure. We’ll be here.”

Jake eyes Edward quickly, then pulls me into a brief hug.

“Mañana.”

“Goodnight, Jake.”

“Goodbye, Jake,” Edward says.

Jake nods and heads on down the corridor.

“He’s still nuts about you,” Edward says quietly.

“No he’s not. And even if he is, who cares?”

Edward gives me a tight smile, and my heart melts.

“Well done,” I murmur.

He frowns.

“For not frothing at the mouth.”

He gapes at me, wounded – but amused too.

“I’ve never frothed. Let’s see your Dad. I have a surprise for you.”

“Surprise?” My eyes widen in alarm.

“Come.” Edward takes my hand and we head through the double doors into the ICU.

Standing at the end of Charlie’s bed is Carlisle, in deep discussion with Crowe and a second doctor, a woman I’ve not seen before. Seeing us, Carlisle beams. Oh, thank heavens.

“Edward.” He shakes Edward’s hand, then turns to me and folds me in his warm embrace, taking me by surprise.

“Bella. How are you bearing up?”

“I’m fine. It’s my father I’m worried about.”

“He’s in good hands. Doctor Sluder is an expert in her field. We trained together in Detroit.”

Oh...

“Mrs Cullen,” Doctor Sluder greets me very formally. She’s short-haired and elfin, with a shy smile and a soft southern accent “As the lead physician for your father, I’m pleased to tell you that all is on track. His vital signs are stable and strong. We have every faith that he’ll make a complete recovery. The brain swelling has stopped, and shows signs of decreasing. This is very encouraging after such a short time.”

“That’s good news,” I breathe. She smiles warmly at me. “It is, Mrs Cullen. We’re taking real good care of him.”

“Great to see you again, Carlisle.” She smiles at him... oh... and I suspect that they were once more than friends.

Carlisle grins back.

“Likewise, Lorraina.”

“Doctor Crowe, let’s leave these good people to visit with Mr Swan.” Crowe follows in Doctor Sluder’s wake towards the exit.

I glance over at Charlie, and for the first time I feel more hopeful. Doctor Sluder and Carlisle’s kind words have given me hope. Carlisle gently puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Bella, sweetheart, sit with him. Talk to him. It’s all good. I’ll visit with Edward in the waiting room.”

I nod my assent. Edward smiles at me, and he and Carlisle leave me with my beloved father, sleeping peacefully to the gentle lullaby of his ventilator and heart monitor.

~o~

I slip Edward’s white t-shirt on and clamber into bed.

“You seem brighter,” Edward says cautiously as he pulls on his pjs.

“Yes. I think talking to Doctor Sluder and your Dad made a big difference. Did you ask Carlisle to come here?”

Edward slides into bed and pulls me into his arms, turning me to face away from him.

“No,” he breathes against my ear. “He wanted to come and check on your Dad himself.”

“How did he know?”

“I called him this morning.”

Oh.

“Baby, you’re exhausted. You should sleep.”

“Hmm,” I murmur in agreement. He’s right... I am so tired. It’s been an emotional day, and I’m a tiny bit relieved that he hasn’t jumped on me. In fact, he’s had a totally hands-off approach to me all day... Is this a first? I wonder if I should be alarmed by this turn of events... but since my inner goddess has left the building and taken my libido with her, I’ll think about it in the morning. I turn over and snuggle against Edward, wrapping my leg over his.

“Promise me something,” he says softly.

“Hmm?” It’s a question that I am too tired to articulate.

“Promise me you’ll eat something tomorrow. You wearing another man’s jacket, I can just about tolerate without frothing at the mouth. But Bella... you must eat. Please.”

“Hmm,” I acquiesce.

I feel his smile as he kisses my hair.

“Thank you for being here,” I mumble and sleepily kiss his chest.

“Where else would I be? Home is wherever you are, Bella. Being here makes me think of how far we’ve come. And the night I first slept with you. What a night that was. You were just... yar,” he breathes.

I smile against his chest.

“Sleep,” he murmurs, and it’s a command. I close my eyes and drift.

~ooo000ooo~

She was Yar from The Philadelphia Story – 1940 – Directed by George Cukor

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HBUgdY9UNw>

MOTU II 109/22

I stir, opening my eyes to a bright September morning. Warm and comfortable between clean, crisp sheets, I take a moment to orientate myself, and am overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu. Of course – I’m at the Heathman.

“Shit! Daddy!” I gasp out loud recalling, with a gut-wrenching surge of apprehension that twists my heart and starts it pounding, why I’m in Portland.

“Hey.” Edward is sitting on the edge of the bed. He strokes my cheek with his knuckles, instantly calming me. “I called the ICU this morning. He spent a comfortable night. It’s all good,” he says reassuringly.

“Oh. Good. Thank you,” I mutter, turning over to gaze wide-eyed at him. He bends and kisses my forehead.

“Good morning, Bella,” he whispers, and kisses my temple.

“Hi,” I breathe. He’s up and dressed, in black t-shirt and blue jeans.

“Hi,” he replies, his eyes soft and warm – oh he looks delicious... my beautiful husband.

“I want to wish you happy birthday,” he murmurs. “Is that okay?”

I offer him a tentative smile, and reach up to caress his cheek.

“Yes, of course,” I reply. “Thank you. For everything.”

His brow furrows.

“Everything?”

I nod.

“Everything.”

He looks momentarily confused, but it’s fleeting. His eyes widen with anticipation.

“Here.” He hands me a small, exquisitely wrapped box with a tiny gift card. I sit up. In spite of the worry I feel about my father, I sense Edward’s anxiety and excitement, and it’s infectious. I read the card.

For all our firsts on your first birthday as my beloved wife.

I love you.

E x

Oh my... how sweet is that?

“I love you too,” I murmur, smiling at him.

He grins.

“Open it,” he breathes. I do as I’m bid. Unwrapping the paper carefully so it doesn’t tear, I find a beautiful red leather box. Cartier, I know – thanks to my second-chance earrings. Cautiously I open the box to discover a delicate charm bracelet of silver, or platinum or white gold – I don’t know, but it’s absolutely enchanting. Attached to it are several charms: the Eiffel Tower, a London black cab, a helicopter – Echo Charlie! – a glider – the soaring... a catamaran – The Esme. A bed! And... an ice cream cone? I look up at him, bemused.

“Vanilla?” He shrugs apologetically. I can’t help but laugh. Of course.

“Edward, this is beautiful. Thank you. It’s yar.”

He grins. My favorite is the heart. It’s like a locket, and I can open it.

“You can put a picture or whatever in that,” he mutters.

“A picture of you,” I murmur, glancing up at him through my lashes. “Always in my heart.”

He smiles his lovely, heart-aching, shy smile. Gazing down I fondle the last two charms: a letter E – oh yes, I was his first girlfriend – or whatever – to use his given name... I smile at the thought. And finally, there’s a key.

“To my heart and soul,” he whispers. Tears prick my eyes. I launch myself at him, curling my arms around his neck and settling into his lap.

“It’s such a thoughtful present. I love it. Thank you,” I murmur against his ear. Oh, he smells so good – clean, and wholesome, of fresh linen and body wash and Edward. Like home, my home. I recall his words from last night: Home is wherever you are, Bella. My threatened tears begin to fall.

He groans softly and enfolds me in his embrace.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," I whisper, my voice cracking as I try to hold back my overwhelming swell of emotion. He swallows hard, and tightens his hold on me.

"Please don't cry," he whispers into my hair.

I sniff in rather unladylike way.

"I'm sorry. I'm just so happy, and sad, and anxious at the same time."

"Hey." His voice is feather soft. Tipping my head back he plants a gentle kiss on my lips. "I understand," he murmurs.

Oh.

"I know," I whisper, and I'm rewarded with his shy smile again.

"I wish we were in happier circumstances and at home. But we're here." He shrugs apologetically once more. "Come, up you get. After breakfast, we'll check on Charlie." He kisses me gently once more, releases me and stands up.

~

My appetite makes a brief but welcome return during breakfast in our suite. I know Edward is pleased to see me eating my granola and Greek yogurt.

"Thank you for ordering my favorite breakfast."

"It's your birthday," Edward says softly. "And you have to stop thanking me." He rolls his eyes in exasperation, but fondly, I think.

"I just want you to know that I appreciate it."

"Isabella, it's what I do." He gazes at me, green eyes wide and serious. Of course, Edward in command and control. How could I forget... and would I want him any other way? I smile at him.

"Yes, it is," I agree.

He gives me a puzzled look, then shakes his hand.

"Shall we go?"

"I'll just brush my teeth."

He smirks.

"Okay."

Why is he smirking? The thought nags me as I head into the ensuite. A memory springs unbidden to my mind: that I used his toothbrush when I first spent the night with him. I smirk into the mirror, and grab his toothbrush, in homage to that first time. Gazing at myself in the mirror I take a quick inventory: in my summer jacket, clean white t-shirt and jeans, I look my usual pale self. My hair is artfully tied in a ponytail high on my head that swings down behind me, soft tendrils escaping around my face. I'm twenty-two – getting old. Briefly I marvel at how much has happened to me since I graduated. What a journey I've been on... and now here I am, back in Portland. I need to clear my head, and to distract myself I put on a little mascara and some lip-gloss. There, that will do.

I hold up my wrist and shake it, and the charms on my bracelet give a satisfying rattle. How does my sweet Fifty always know exactly the right thing to give me? I blink rapidly, attempting to stem the emotion still lurking in my system, and gaze down at the bracelet once more. I bet it cost a fortune... ah well. He can afford it.

As we walk to the elevators Edward takes my hand and kisses my knuckles, his thumb brushing over Echo Charlie on my bracelet.

“You like?”

“More than like. I love it. Very much. Like you.”

He smiles and kisses my knuckles once more. I feel lighter than I did yesterday. Perhaps because it’s morning, and the world always seems a more hopeful place in the morning than in the dead of night. Or maybe it’s my husband’s sweet wake-up. Or maybe it’s knowing that Charlie is no worse.

As we step into the empty elevator I glance up at Edward. His eyes flicker quickly down to mine, and he smirks again.

“Don’t,” he whispers as the doors shut.

“Don’t what?”

“Look at me like that.”

“Fuck the paperwork,” I mutter softly, grinning. He laughs, and it’s such a carefree, boyish sound. He tugs me into his arms and tilts my head up.

“Someday I’ll rent this elevator, for a whole afternoon.”

“Just the afternoon?” I arch my brow.

“Mrs Cullen, you are greedy.”

“When it comes to you, I am.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.” He kisses me gently, a chaste kiss. And I don’t know if it’s because we are in this elevator, or because he’s not touched me in over twenty-four hours, or if he’s just the most intoxicating man I have ever met... but desire unwinds and stretches, deep in my belly. I run my fingers into his hair and deepen the kiss, pushing him against the wall, bringing my body flush against his. He groans into my mouth and cups my head, cradling me as we kiss – really kiss, our tongues exploring the oh-so-familiar, oh-so new, oh-so exciting territory that is the other’s mouth. My inner goddess swoons, bringing my libido back from purdah. I caress his dear, dear face in my hands.

“Bella,” he breathes.

“I love you, Edward Cullen. Don’t forget that,” I whisper as I gaze into darkening green eyes.

The elevator comes smoothly to a halt and the doors open.

“Let’s go and see your father before I decide to rent this today,” he murmurs. He kisses me quickly, takes my hand and leads me into the lobby.

As we walk past the concierge Edward gives a discreet signal to the kindly middle-aged man standing behind the desk. He nods and picks up his phone. I glance questioningly at Edward and he gives me his secret smile. Oh no... what’s this? I frown at him, and for a moment he looks nervous.

“Where’s Taylor?” I ask.

“We’ll see him shortly.”

Of course, he’s probably fetching the car.

“Stuart?”

“Running errands.”

What errands?

Edward avoids the revolving door, and I know it's so he doesn't have to release my hand. The thought warms me. Outside it's a mild late-summer morning: the air is clear but I can smell the coming fall in the breeze. I glance round, looking for the Mercedes SUV and Taylor. No sign. Edward's hand tightens around mine and I look up at him. He seems anxious.

"What is it?"

He shrugs. The hum of an approaching car engine distracts me. It's throaty... familiar. As I turn to find the source of the noise it stops suddenly. Taylor is clambering out of a sleek white sports car parked in front of us. What?

Oh shit! It's an R8. My head whips back to Edward, who's watching me warily. You can buy me one for my birthday... a white one I think.

"Happy birthday," he says quietly. I know he's gauging my reaction. I gape at him, because that's all I can do. He holds out a key.

"You are completely over the top," I whisper. He's bought me a fucking Audi R8! Holy Shit. Like I asked! My face splits in a huge grin and my inner goddess does a back flip off the high diving board. I jump up and down on the spot in a moment of unguarded, unbridled, unparalleled over-excitement. Edward's expression mirrors mine and I dance forward into his waiting arms. He swings me round.

"You have more money than sense," I whoop. "I love it! Thank you!" He stops and dips me low suddenly, startling me, so that I have to grasp his upper arms.

"Anything for you, Mrs Cullen," he grins down at me. Oh my. What a very public display of affection. He bends and kisses me, and I wind my fingers into his hair.

"Let's go see your Dad."

"Yes. And I get to drive?"

He grins down at me.

"Of course. It's yours."

He stands me up and releases me, and I hurry round to the driver's door. Taylor opens it for me, smiling broadly.

"Happy Birthday, Mrs Cullen."

"Thank you, Taylor." I startle him by giving him a swift hug, which he returns awkwardly. He's still blushing when I climb into the car, and he closes the door promptly once I'm inside.

"Drive safe, Mrs Cullen," he says gruffly. I beam up at him, barely able to contain my excitement.

"Will do," I promise.

I put the key in the ignition as Edward stretches out beside me.

"Take it easy. Nobody chasing us now," he warns. When I turn the key the engine thunders into life. I check the rearview mirror and the side mirror, and spotting a rare moment of clear traffic execute a huge perfect u-turn and roar off in the direction of OSHU.

"Whoa!" Edward exclaims, alarmed.

"What?"

"I don't want you in the ICU beside your father. Slow down."

He's not to be argued with. I ease off the accelerator and grin at him.

"Better?"

"Much," he mutters, trying hard to look stern – and failing miserably.

~

Charlie's condition is the same. Seeing him grounds me after the heady road trip here... I really should drive more carefully. You can't legislate for every drunk driver in this world. I must ask Edward what's become of the asshole who hit Charlie – I'm sure he knows. In spite of the tubes my father looks comfortable, and I think he has little more color in his cheeks. While I sit beside my Dad and tell him about my morning, Edward wanders off to the waiting room to take a phone call. I tell my father about my bracelet, explain some of the charms but not all of them, and of course, extol the virtues of the R8. Oh Daddy, you'd love the car! Nurse Christie hovers over him, checking his lines and making notes on his graph. She smiles kindly at me.

"All his signs are good, Mrs Cullen," she murmurs.

"That's very encouraging."

Dr Crowe appears with two nursing assistants.

"Mrs Cullen," he greets me warmly. "Time to take your father up to radiology. We're giving him a CT scan. To see how his brain is doing."

"Will you be long?"

"Up to an hour."

"I'll wait. I'd like to know."

"Sure thing, Mrs Cullen. Take a seat in the waiting room."

Edward is pacing in the waiting room, talking on the phone, which is otherwise thankfully empty. As he speaks he gazes out of the window, enjoying the panoramic view of Portland. He turns to me when I shut the door, and he looks angry.

"How many units above the limit? ... I see ... All charges, everything. My wife's father is in the ICU – I want you to throw the fucking book at him ... Good. Keep me informed." He hangs up.

"The other driver?"

He nods.

"Some drunken trailer trash from Southeast Portland," he sneers, and I'm shocked by his terminology and his derisory tone. He walks over to me, and his tone softens.

"Finished with Charlie? Do you want to go?"

"Um... no." I blink up at him, still reeling at his display of contempt.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Charlie's being taken to radiology for a CT scan, to check the swelling in his brain. I'd like to wait for the results."

"Okay. We'll wait." He sits down and holds out his hands. As we're alone, I go willing and curl up in his lap.

"This is not how I envisaged spending today," Edward murmurs into my hair.

“Me neither, but I’m feeling more positive now. Carlisle was very reassuring. It was kind of him to come last night.”

Edward strokes my back soothingly, resting his chin on my head.

“My father is a good man,” he murmurs.

“He is. I should call Mom. Tell her about Charlie.”

Edward stiffens slightly.

“I’m surprised she hasn’t called me,” I murmur, puzzled. In fact I’m slightly hurt. It’s my birthday, after all, and she was there when I was born. Why hasn’t she called?

“Maybe she did,” Edward says. I fish my BlackBerry out of my pocket. It shows no missed calls, but quite a few texts: happy birthdays from Rose, Jake, Alice and Jasper. Nothing from my mother. I shake my head despondently.

“Call her now,” he says softly.

I do, but there’s no reply, just the answering machine. I don’t leave a message. How can my own mother forget my birthday? I roll my eyes.

“She’s not there. I’ll call later. When I know the result of the brain scan.”

Edward tightens his arms around me, nuzzling my hair once more, and wisely makes no comment on my mother’s lack of maternal concern.

I feel rather than hear the buzz of his BlackBerry. He doesn’t let me stand up, but fishes it awkwardly out of his pocket.

“Angela,” he snaps, businesslike again. I make another move to stand and he stops me, frowning, holding me tightly round my waist. I nestle back against his chest and listen to the one-sided conversation.

“Good ... ETA is what time? ... And the other um... packages?” Edward glances at his watch. “Does the Heathman have all the details? ... Good ... Yes. It can hold until Monday morning, but email just in case – I’ll print, sign and scan it back to you ... They can wait. Go home Angela ... No we’re good, thank you.” He hangs up.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes.”

“Is this your Taiwan thing?”

“Yes.”

He shifts slightly beneath me.

“Am I too heavy?”

He snorts.

“No, baby.”

“Are you worried about the Taiwan thing?”

“No.”

“I thought it was important.”

“It is. The shipyard here depends on it. There are lots of jobs at stake.”

Oh!

“We just have to sell it the unions. That’s Sam and Kate’s job. But the way the economy’s heading none of us have a lot of choice.”

I yawn.

“Am I boring you, Mrs Cullen?” He nuzzles my hair again, amused.

“No! Never... I’m just very comfortable on your lap. I like hearing about your business.”

“You do?” He sounds surprised.

“Of course.” I lean back to gaze directly at him. “I like hearing any bit of information you deign to share with me,” I smirk.

He regards me with amusement and shakes his head.

“Always hungry for more information, Mrs Cullen.”

“Tell me.” I urge him as I snuggle up against his chest again.

“Tell you what?”

“Why you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Work the way you do.”

“A guy’s got to earn a living.” He’s amused.

“Edward, you earn more than a living.”

He frowns and is quiet for a moment. I think he’s not going to divulge any secrets. But he surprises me.

“I don’t want to be poor,” he says, his voice low. “I’ve done that. I’m not going back there again. Besides... it’s a game,” he murmurs. “It’s about winning. A game I’ve always found very easy.”

“Unlike life,” I murmur to myself. Then I realize I said the words out loud.

“Yes, I suppose.” He frowns. “Though it’s easier with you.”

Oh. Easier with me? I hug him tightly.

“It can’t all be a game.” I query. “You’re very philanthropic.”

He shrugs, and I know he’s growing uncomfortable.

“About some things, maybe,” he says quietly.

“I love philanthropic Edward,” I murmur.

“Just him?”

“Oh, I love megalomaniac Edward too, and control-freak Edward, sexpertise Edward, romantic Edward, shy Edward... the list is endless.”

“That’s a whole lot of Edwards.”

“I’d say at least fifty.”

He laughs.

“Fifty Shades,” he murmurs into my hair.

“My Fifty Shades.”

He shifts, tipping my head back, and kisses me.

“Well Mrs Shades, let’s see how your Dad is doing.”

“Okay.”

~

“Can we go for a drive?”

Edward and I are back in the R8 and I’m feeling giddily buoyant. Charlie’s brain is back to normal – all swelling gone. Dr Sluder has decided to wake him from his coma tomorrow. She says she’s pleased with his progress.

“Sure.” Edward grins at me. “It’s your birthday – we can do anything you want.”

Oh... his tone makes me turn and gaze at him. His eyes are dark.

“Anything?” I breathe.

“Anything.”

How much promise can he load into one word?

“Well, I want to drive.”

“Then drive, baby,” he grins. I grin back and we head towards I-5.

My car handles like a dream, and as we hit the I-5 I subtly put my foot down, forcing us both back in our seats.

“Steady, baby,” Edward warns.

~

As we head back into Portland an idea occurs to me.

“Have you planned lunch?” I ask Edward tentatively.

“No. You’re hungry?” He sounds hopeful.

“Yes.”

“Where do you want to go? It’s your day, Bella.”

“I know just the place.”

~

I pull up near the gallery where Jake exhibited his work and park right outside the Le Picotin restaurant, where we went after Jake’s show. Edward grins at me.

“For one minute I thought you were going to take me to that dreadful bar you drunk dialed me from.”

“Why would I do that?”

“To check the azaleas are still alive.” He arches a sardonic brow.

I flush.

“Don’t remind me! Besides... you still took me to your hotel room.” I smirk.

“Best decision I ever made,” he says softly, his green eyes warm.

“Yes. It was.” I lean over and kiss him.

“Do you think that supercilious fucker is still waiting tables?” Edward asks.

“Supercilious? I thought he was fine.”

“He was trying to impress you.”

“Well, he succeeded.”

Edward’s mouth twists in amused disgust.

“Shall we go see?” I offer.

“Lead on, Mrs Cullen.”

We climb out of the car.

~

After lunch, and a quick detour to the Heathman to pick up Edward’s laptop, we return to the hospital. I spend the afternoon with Charlie, reading aloud from one of the manuscripts I’ve been sent. My only accompaniment is the sound of the machinery keeping him alive... keeping him with me. Now that I know he’s making progress I can breathe a little easier and relax.

I’m hopeful. He just needs time to get well. I’ve got time – I can give him that. I wonder idly if I should try calling Mom again, but decide to do it later. I hold Charlie’s hand loosely as I read to him, squeezing it occasionally, willing him to be well. His fingers feel soft and warm beneath my touch. He still has the indentation on his finger where he wore his wedding ring – even after all this time.

He looks better, or at least I think he does, though he’s taken on a rather unkempt appearance, as he’s desperately in need of a shave. I wonder if they’ll let me shave him.

When nurse Christie appears I ask her.

“It’s not our top priority, Mrs Cullen. It’s not something we do.”

“Could I do it then? Dad likes to be clean-shaven.”

She shakes her head.

“Sorry, ma’am.”

I glance up to see Edward standing at the end of Charlie’s bed, laptop in hand.

“It’s time to go, Bella.”

Oh.

“I want to feed you. Come. It’s late.” Edward sounds insistent.

“I’m about to give Mr Swan a sponge bath,” nurse Christie adds.

“Okay,” I concede. “We’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

I bend and kiss Charlie on his cheek, feeling his unfamiliar stubble beneath my lips. I don’t like it. Keep getting better, Daddy. I love you.

~

“I thought we’d dine downstairs. In a private room,” Edward says, a gleam in his eye, as he opens the door to our suite.

“Really? Finish what you started a few months ago?”

He smirks.

“If you’re very lucky, Mrs Cullen.”

I laugh.

“Edward, I don’t have anything dressy to wear.”

He smiles, holds out his hand, and leads me into the bedroom. He opens the wardrobe to reveal a large plain white dress bag hanging inside.

“Taylor?” I ask.

“Edward,” Edward replies, forceful and wounded at once. His tone makes me laugh. Unzipping the bag I find a navy satin dress and ease it out. Oh, it’s gorgeous – fitted, with thin straps. It looks small.

“It’s lovely. Thank you. I hope it fits.”

“It will,” he says confidently. “And here – ” Bending down he picks up a shoebox. “Shoes to match.” He gives me a wolfish smile.

“You think of everything. Thank you.” I stretch up and kiss him.

“I do,” he says, and hands me yet another bag. I gaze at him quizzically.

Inside is a black strapless bodysuit, with a central panel of lace. He caresses my face, tilts my chin, and kisses me.

“I look forward to taking this off you later.”

~

Fresh out of my bath, washed, shaved and feeling pampered, I sit on the edge of the bed and start up the hair dryer. Edward wanders into the bedroom. I think he’s been working.

“Here, let me,” he says, pointing to the chair in front of the dressing table.

“Dry my hair?”

He nods. I blink at him.

“Come,” he says, regarding me intently. I know that expression, and I know better than to disobey.

Slowly and methodically he dries my hair, one lock at a time. He’s obviously done this before... often.

“You’re no stranger to this,” I murmur.

He smiles, but says nothing, and continues to brush through my hair. Hmm... it’s very relaxing.

~

When we step into the elevator on our way to dinner we are unfortunately not alone. Edward looks delicious in his signature white linen shirt, black jeans and jacket. No tie. The two women inside shoot admiring glances at him, and less generous ones at me. I hide my smile. Yes ladies, he’s mine. Edward takes my hand and pulls me close as we travel in silence down to the mezzanine level.

It’s busy, full of people dressed up for the evening, sitting around chatting and drinking, starting their Saturday night. I am grateful that I fit in. The dress hugs me, skimming over my curves and holding everything in place. I have to say, I feel... attractive wearing it. I know Edward approves.

I think at first we’re headed for the private dining room where we first discussed the contract, but I’m wrong. He leads me past that doorway and on to the far end, where he opens the door to another wood-paneled room.

“SURPRISE!”

Oh my. Rose, Emmett, Alice and Jasper, Carlisle and Esme – Billy and Jake – my mother and Phil... I stand gaping at them, speechless. How? When? I turn in consternation to Edward, and he squeezes my hand.

My Mom steps forward and wraps her arms around me.

Oh Mom!

“Darling, you look beautiful. Happy Birthday.”

“Mom!” I sob, embracing her. Oh Mommy, Mommy, Mommy – Tears stream down my face, in spite of the audience, and I bury my face in her neck.

“Honey, darling, don’t cry. Charlie will be okay. He’s such a strong man. Don’t cry. Not on your birthday.” Her voice cracks, but she maintains her composure. She grasps my face in her hands and with her thumbs wipes away my tears.

“I thought you’d forgotten.”

“Oh Bella! How could I? Honey, seventeen hours of labor is not something you easily forget.”

I giggle through my tears. She smiles.

“Dry your eyes, darling. Lots of people here to share your special day.”

I sniff, not wanting to look at anyone else in the room, embarrassed and thrilled that everyone has made such an effort to come and see me.

“How did you get here? When did you arrive?”

“Your husband sent his plane, darling.” She grins, impressed.

And I laugh.

“Thank you, Mom.” I smile and she wipes my nose with a tissue – as only a mother would. “Mom!” I scold, composing myself.

“That’s better. Happy birthday, darling.” She steps aside while everyone lines up to hug me.

“Happy Birthday, Bella!”

“Bella, you look so hot! Happy Birthday.”

“Hey Bells. No snot-sobbing on your birthday.”

“Bella honey, you sure scrub up lovely on your birthday.”

“Bella. Gorgeous dress. D&G right? Oh, and Happy Birthday.”

“He’s doing well Bella, Dr Sluder is the one of the best in the country. Happy Birthday, darling.”

“Happy Birthday Angel.” Esme smiles radiantly at me, cupping my face.

“You cry all you want to, Bella – it’s your party.”

“S’up babe? Your old man will be fine.” Emmett enfolds me in his arms. My goodness he’s big.

“Happy birthday.”

“Okay,” Taking my hand Edward pulls me from Emmett’s embrace. “Enough fondling my wife. Go fondle your own.”

Emmett grins wickedly at him, and winks at Rose.

A waiter I hadn't noticed before presents Edward and me with glasses of pink champagne. I realize everyone has a glass. Edward clears his throat.

"This would be a perfect day if my father-in-law were here with us. But he's not far away – he's doing well, and I know he'd like you to enjoy yourself, Bella. To all of you – thank you for coming to share with me my beautiful wife's birthday, the first of many to come. Happy birthday, my love." Edward raises his glass to me amid a chorus of Happy Birthdays, and I have to fight again to keep my tears at bay.

~

I watch the animated conversations around the dinner table. It's strange to be cocooned in the bosom of my family, knowing my father is on a life support machine in the cold clinical environs of the ICU. I feel slightly detached from all the proceedings, but grateful that they're all here. Watching the sparring between Emmett and Edward, Alice's excitement and enthusiasm for everything... Jasper's indulgent and fond regard for her. Jake's ready warm wit. Billy sitting back, like me, enjoying the conversations. He looks better. Rested. Jake is very attentive to him, cutting his food, keeping his glass filled. Having his surviving parent come so close to death has made Jake appreciate Billy more... I know.

I gaze at my Mom. She's in her element, charming, witty and warm – I love her so. I must remember to tell her. Life is so precious. I realize that now.

"You okay?" Rose asks, in an uncharacteristically gentle voice.

I nod, and reach out to clasp her hand.

"Yes. Thanks for coming."

"You think Mr Megabucks could keep me away from you on your birthday? We got to fly in the helicopter!" She grins.

"Really?"

"Yes. All of us. And you say Edward can fly it?"

I nod.

"That's hot."

"Yeah, I think so."

We grin.

"Are you staying here tonight?" I ask.

"Yes. We all are, I think. You knew nothing about this?"

I shake my head.

"Smooth, isn't he?"

I nod.

"What did he get you for your birthday?"

"This." I hold up my bracelet.

"Oh cute!"

"Yes."

“London, Paris... ice cream?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I can guess.”

We laugh, and I flush, recalling Ben & Jerry’s & Bella.

“Oh... and an R8.”

Rose spits her wine rather unattractively down her chin, making us both laugh some more.

“Over the top bastard, isn’t he?”

“That’s what I said.”

For dessert I am presented with a sumptuous chocolate cake blazing with 22 silver candles, and a rousing chorus of Happy Birthday. Esme watches Edward singing with the rest of my friends and family, and her eyes shine with love. Catching my eye she blows me a kiss.

“Make a wish,” Edward whispers to me.

In one breath I blow out all the candles, fervently willing my father better. Daddy get well. Please get well. I love you so.

~

At midnight Billy and Jake leave.

“Thank you so much for coming.” I hug Jake tightly.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Bells. Glad Charlie’s heading in the right direction.”

“Yes. You, Billy and Charlie have to come fishing with Edward in Aspen.”

“Yeah? Sounds cool,” Jake grins. He goes to fetch his father’s coat, and I crouch down to say goodbye to Billy.

“You know Bella, there was a time... well, I thought you and Jake...” His voice fades, and he gazes at me, his dark gaze intense but loving.

Oh no.

“I know, Billy. I love Jake, but... he’s like a brother.”

“You would have made one fine daughter-in-law. And you do. To the Cullens.” He smiles wistfully and I flush.

“I hope you’ll settle for friend.”

“Of course. Your husband is a fine man. You chose well, Bella.”

I flush some more.

“I think so,” I whisper. “I love him so.” I reach up and hug Billy.

“Treat him good, Bella.”

“I will,” I promise.

~

Edward closes the door to our suite.

“Alone at last,” he murmurs, leaning back against the door, watching me. I step towards him and run

my fingers over the lapels of his jacket.

“Thank you for a wonderful birthday. You really are the most thoughtful, considerate, generous husband...”

“My pleasure,” he says.

“Yes... your pleasure. Let’s do something about that,” I whisper. Tightening my hands around his lapels I pull his lips to mine.

~o~

When I wake I’m wrapped around my husband. He’s awake too, tousled, green-eyed and beautiful.

“Good morning, Mrs Cullen.”

“Mr Cullen, good morning. I trust you slept well?”

“I did, thank you. Very pleasant dreams.” He smiles suggestively.

“Any you want to tell me about?”

“I think I’d rather show you.”

I giggle, but I’m soon lost in his spell once more.

~

After a communal breakfast when I open all my presents and a series of cheery goodbyes to all the Cullens, My Mom, Edward and I head up to the hospital – Taylor driving, since the three of us would not fit into my R8. Phil has declined to visit, and I’m secretly glad. It’d be just too weird... and I’m sure Charlie wouldn’t appreciate Phil seeing him at anything less than his best.

Charlie looks much the same. Hairier. Mom is shocked when she sees him, and together we cry a little more.

“Oh Charlie...” She squeezes his hand and gently strokes his face, and I’m moved to see her love for her ex-husband. I’m glad I have tissues in my purse. We sit beside him, me holding her hand while she holds his.

“Bella, there was a time when this man was the center of my world. The sun rose and set around him. I’ll always love him. He gave me you.”

“Mom,” I choke. She strokes my face and tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear.

“You know I’ll always love your father. I just couldn’t live with him.”

“I know.” I dry my eyes. “They are going to bring him out of his coma today.”

“Good. I’m sure he’ll be fine. He’s so stubborn. Like you.”

I smile.

“Have you been talking to Edward?”

“Does he think you’re stubborn?”

“I believe so.”

“I’ll tell him it’s a family trait. You look so good together, Bella. So happy.”

“We are, I think. Getting there, anyway. I love him. He’s the center of my world. The sun rises and sets with him, for me too.”

“He obviously adores you, darling.”

“And I adore him.”

“Make sure you tell him. Men need to hear that stuff, just like we do.”

~

I insist on going to the airport with Phil and my Mom to say goodbye. Taylor follows in the R8 and Edward drives the SUV. I’m sorry they can’t stay longer, but they have to get back to Jacksonville. It’s a tearful goodbye.

“Take good care of her, Phil,” I whisper as he hugs me.

“Sure will, Bella. And you look after yourself.”

“Will do.” I turn to my mother. “Goodbye, Mom. Thank you for coming,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “I love you so much.”

“Oh my darling girl, I love you too. And your Dad will be fine. He’s not ready to shuffle of his mortal coil just yet. There’s probably a Mariners game he couldn’t miss.”

I giggle. She’s right. I resolve to read the sports pages of the Sunday newspaper to Charlie that evening.

I watch her and Phil climb the steps into the Cullen Enterprises Holdings jet. She gives me a tearful wave, then she’s gone.

Edward wraps his arm around my shoulder.

“Let’s head back, baby,” he breathes.

“Will you drive?”

“Sure.”

~

When we return to the hospital that evening Charlie looks different. It takes me a moment to realize that the suck and push of the ventilator has vanished. Charlie is breathing on his own. Oh my goodness. Go Daddy! I stroke his stubbly face, and taking out a tissue gently wipe his mouth.

Daddy.

Edward stalks off to find Dr Sluder or Dr Crow for an update, while I take my familiar seat beside his bed, to keep a watchful vigil.

I unfold the sports section of the Sunday Oregonian and conscientiously begin reading out the report from the Mariners game against the Texas Rangers. By all accounts it was an exciting match, thanks to a Japanese player called Suzuki. I hold Charlie’s hand firmly in mine as I read it through.

“And the final score – Mariners 8, Rangers 3.”

“Hey Bells, we won?” Charlie rasps. And he squeezes my hand.

Oh Daddy, Daddy, Daddy –

~ooo000ooo~

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Tears stream down my face. He's back, my Daddy is back.

"Don't cry, Bells," Charlie's voice is hoarse. "What's happening?"

I take up his hand in both of mine and cradle it against my face.

"You've been in an accident. You're in the hospital in Portland."

Charlie frowns, and I don't know if it's because he's uncomfortable with my uncharacteristic display of affection, or that he can't remember the accident.

"Do you want some water?" I ask, not sure if I am allowed to give him any.

He nods, bewildered.

Oh Daddy. My heart swells.

I stand up and lean over him, kissing his forehead.

"I love you, Daddy. Welcome back."

He waves his hand, embarrassed.

"Me too, Bells. Water."

I run the short distance to the nurses' station.

"My Dad – he's awake!" I beam at Nurse Christie, who beams back at me.

"Page Dr Sluder," she says to her colleague, and hurriedly makes her way round the desk.

"He wants water."

"I'll bring him some."

I practically skip back to my father's bed, I feel so light-hearted. His eyes are closed when I reach him, and I immediately worry that he's slipped back into a coma.

"Daddy?"

"I'm here," he mutters.

Nurse Christie appears with a jug of ice chips and a glass.

"Hello, Mr Swan. I'm Nurse Christie. Your daughter tells me you're thirsty."

~

In the waiting room Edward is staring fixedly at his laptop, deep in concentration. He glances up when I close the door, and his eyes widen.

"He's awake," I announce.

He smiles, and the tension around his eyes vanishes. Oh... I hadn't noticed before. Has he been tense for long? He sets his laptop aside, stands and embraces me.

"How is he?" he asks into my hair.

"Talking, thirsty, bewildered. He doesn't remember the accident at all." It is so comfortable in this man's arms. I wrap my arms around him.

"That's understandable. Now that he's awake I want to get him moved to Seattle. Then we can go home, and my dad can keep an eye on your dad."

Oh.

“I’m not sure he’s well enough to be moved.”

“I’ll talk to Dr Sluder. Get her opinion.”

“You miss home?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

~o~

“You haven’t stopped smiling,” Edward says as I pull up outside the Heathman.

“I’m very relieved. And happy.”

Edward grins.

“Good.”

The light is fading, and I shiver as I step out into the cool, crisp evening, handing my key to the parking valet. He’s eyeing my car with lust, and frankly I don’t blame him. Edward puts his arm around me.

“Shall we celebrate?” he asks as we enter the foyer.

“Celebrate?”

“Your Dad.”

I giggle.

“Oh, him.”

“I’ve missed that sound,” Edward breathes, and kisses my hair.

“Can we just eat in our room? You know, have a quiet night in?”

“Sure. Come.” Taking my hand he leads me to the elevators.

~

“That was delicious,” I murmur with satisfaction as I push my plate away, replete. “They sure know how to make a fine Tarte Tatin here.” I am freshly bathed, and wearing only Edward’s t-shirt and my panties. In the background Edward’s iPod is on shuffle, and Dido is warbling on about white flags.

Edward eyes me speculatively. His hair is still damp from our bath, and he’s wearing just his black t-shirt and jeans.

“That’s the most I’ve seen you eat the entire time we’ve been here,” he says.

“I was hungry.”

He leans back in his chair with a self-satisfied smirk and takes a sip of his white wine.

“What would you like to do now?” His voice is soft.

“What do you want to do?”

He raises an eyebrow, amused.

“What I always want to do.”

“And that is?”

“Mrs Cullen, don’t be coy.”

Reaching across the dining table I grasp his hand, turn it over and skim my index finger over his palm.

“I’d like you to touch me with this.” I run my finger up his index finger. He shifts in his chair.

“Just that?” he breathes, his eyes darkening and heating at once.

“Maybe this?” I run my finger up his middle finger and back to his palm. “And this...” My nail traces his ring finger. “Definitely this.” My finger stops at his wedding ring. “This is very sexy.”

“Is it now?”

“It sure is. It says ‘this man is mine.’” And I softly skim the small callous that has already formed on his palm beneath the ring. He leans forward and cups my chin with his other hand.

“Mrs Cullen, are you seducing me?”

“I hope so.”

“Isabella, I’m a given.” His voice is low. “Come here.” He tugs my hand so that I rise from my seat, then fall into his lap.

“I like having unfettered access to you,” he whispers, as he runs a hand up my thigh to my behind. His other hand grasps the nape of my neck and he kisses me, holding me firmly in place. He tastes of white wine and apple pie and Edward. I run my fingers through his hair, holding him to me while our tongues explore and curl and twist around each other, my blood heating in my veins. We’re breathless when Edward pulls away.

“Let’s go to bed,” he murmurs against my lips.

“Bed?”

He pulls back further and tugs my hair so I am looking up at him.

“Where would you prefer, Mrs Cullen?”

My inner goddess stops stuffing her face with Tarte Tatin.

I shrug, feigning indifference.

“Surprise me.”

He smirks.

“You’re feisty this evening.” He runs his nose along mine.

“Maybe I need to be restrained.”

“Maybe you do. You’re getting mighty bossy in your old age.” He narrows his eyes at me, but can’t disguise the latent humor there.

“What are you going to do about it?” I challenge.

His eyes glitter.

“I know what I’d like to do about it. Depends if you’re up to it,” he murmurs.

“Oh Mr Cullen, you’ve been very gentle with me these last couple of days,” I breathe.

“You don’t like gentle?”

“With you, of course. But you know... Variety is the spice of life.” I bat my lashes at him.

“You’re after something less gentle?”

“Something life-affirming.”

He raises his brows in surprise.

“Life-affirming,” he repeats, and I hear the astonished humor in his voice.

I nod. He gazes at me for a moment.

“Don’t bite your lip,” he whispers, and rises suddenly with me in his arms. I gasp and grab his biceps, fearful that he’ll drop me. He walks over to the smallest of the three couches and drops me on to it, gazing down at me.

“Wait here. Don’t move,” he orders, green eyes hot and intense. He turns on his heel and stalks towards the bedroom. Oh... Edward, barefoot. Why are his feet so hot? He’s back a few moments later, taking me by surprise as he leans over me, from behind.

“I think we’ll dispense with this.” Grabbing the hem of my t-shirt he pulls it over my head, leaving me naked except for my panties. He pulls my ponytail back and kisses me.

“Stand up,” he orders against my lips, and releases me. I comply immediately.

He lays a towel out on the sofa.

Towel?

“Take your panties off.”

Oh. I swallow, but do as I’m told, discarding them by the sofa.

“Sit.” He grabs my ponytail again and pulls my head back. “You’ll tell me to stop if this gets too much, yes?”

I nod.

“Say it.”

“Yes.”

“So, Mrs Cullen... by popular demand, I’m going to restrain you,” he whispers.

Desire streaks through my body like lightning, simply at those words. Oh my sweet Fifty – on the sofa? What are you going to do?

“Bring your knees up,” he commands softly. “And sit right back.”

I rest my feet on the edge of the sofa, my knees up in front of me. He reaches for my left leg, and taking the belt from one of the bathroom robes, ties one end above my knee.

“Bathrobes?”

He smirks.

“I’m improvising.” He fastens the slipknot above my knee and ties the other end of the soft belt round the finial at the back corner of the sofa, effectively parting my legs.

“Don’t move,” he warns. Deliberately He repeats the process with my right leg, tying the second cord to the other finial.

Oh my... I am sitting up, splayed out on the sofa, legs spread wide.

“Okay?” Edward asks softly, gazing down at me from behind the sofa.

I nod, expecting him to tie my hands too. But he refrains. He bends and kisses me.

"You have no idea how hot you look right now," he breathes and he rubs his nose against mine.
"Change of music I think." He stands and strolls, casually and unhurriedly, over to the iPod dock.

How does he do this? Here I am, trussed up and horny as hell, while he's so cool and calm. He's just in my field of vision, and I watch the flex and pull of the muscles in his back under his t-shirt as he reaches down and changes the song. Immediately a sweet, almost childlike, female voice starts to sing.

Ooh watching me,
Hanging by
A string this time

Oh, I like this song.

Edward turns and gazes at me, his eyes locked on mine as he moves round to the front of the sofa and sinks gracefully to his knees in front of me.

Suddenly, I feel very exposed.

"Exposed? Vulnerable?" he asks, with his uncanny ability to voice my unspoken words. His hands are on his knees.

I nod. Why doesn't he touch me?

"Good," he murmurs. "Hold out your hands." I can't look away from his mesmerizing green eyes. I hold my hands out, palms up. Edward produces a small bottle of clear liquid, unscrews the lid and pours a little into each palm. It's scented oil... a rich, musky, sensuous scent that I can't place.

"Rub your hands," he bids, and I squirm beneath his hot, heavy gaze.

"Keep still," he warns, narrowing his eyes.

Oh my.

"Now, Isabella, I want you to touch yourself."

Holy cow.

"Start at your throat, and work down."

Oh... I hesitate.

"Don't be shy Bella. Come. Do it."

I can see the humor and the challenge in his expression, and also the desire.

Sweet about me
Nothing sweet
About me yeah

I place my hands against my throat and let them slide down to the top of my breasts. The oil makes them glide effortlessly over my skin. My hands are warm.

"Lower," Edward murmurs, his eyes darkening. He doesn't touch me.

My hands cup my breasts.

"Tease yourself."

Oh my. I tug gently on my nipples.

"Harder," Edward breathes. He sits immobile between my thighs, just watching me.

"Like I would." His eyes shine darkly.

My muscles clench deep in my belly. I groan in response and pull harder on my nipples, feeling them lengthen and stiffen beneath my touch.

“Yes. Like that. Again.”

I close my eyes and pull hard, rolling and twisting them between my fingers. I moan.

“Open your eyes.”

I blink up at him.

“Again,” he whispers. “I want to see you. See you enjoy your touch.”

Oh fuck. I repeat the process. This is so... erotic.

“Hands. Lower.”

Sweet about me

Nothing sweet

About me yeah

I squirm.

“Keep still Bella. Absorb the pleasure. Lower.” His voice is low and husky, tempting and beguiling at once.

“You do it,” I whisper.

“Oh, I will. Soon. You do it. Lower. Now.” He runs his tongue along his teeth, oozing sensuality. Holy fuck... I writhe, pulling on the restraints.

He shakes his head, slowly, from side to side.

“Still,” he warns, and rests his hands on my knees, holding me in place.

“Come on, Bella – lower,” he coaxes.

My hands glide over stomach down over my belly.

“Lower,” he mouths, and he is carnality personified.

Shit... he’s so hot.

“Edward, please.”

His hands glide down from my knees, skimming my thighs, towards my sex.

“Come on, Bella. Touch yourself.”

My left hand skims over my sex and I rub in a slow circle, my mouth an O as I pant.

“Again,” he whispers.

I groan louder and repeat the move, and tip my head back, gasping.

“Again,” he urges.

I moan loudly, and Edward inhales sharply. Grabbing my hands he bends down, running his nose then his tongue back and forth at the apex of my thighs.

“Ah!”

I want to touch him, but when I try to move my hands his fingers tighten around my wrists.

“I’ll restrain these too. Keep still.”

I groan. He releases me, then eases his middle two fingers inside me, the heel of his hand resting against my clitoris.

“I’m going to make you come quickly, Bella. Ready?”

“Yes,” I pant.

He starts to move his fingers, his hand, up and down, rapidly, assaulting both that sweet spot inside me and my clitoris at the same time. Ah! HOLY FUCK!

The feeling is intense – really intense. Pleasure builds and spikes throughout the lower half of my body. I want to stretch my legs, but I can’t. My hands claw at the towel beneath me.

“Surrender,” Edward whispers.

I explode around his fingers, crying out incoherently. He presses the heel of his hand against my clitoris as the aftershocks run through my body, prolonging the delicious agony.

Vaguely I’m aware that he’s untying my legs.

“My turn,” he murmurs, and flips me over so I am face down on the sofa with my knees on the floor. He spreads my legs and slaps me hard across my behind.

“Ah!” And in one swift move with no preamble whatsoever he’s inside me.

“Oh Bella,” he hisses through clenched teeth, as he starts to move. His fingers grip me hard around my hips as he grinds into me, over and over. And I’m building again... no... ah...

“Come on, Bella,” Edward shouts, and I shatter once more, pulsing around him and crying out as I come.

Sweet about me
Nothing sweet
About me yeah

“Life-affirming enough for you?” Edward kisses my hair.

“Oh, yes,” I murmur, gazing up at the ceiling. I am lying on my husband, my back to his front, both of us on the floor beside the sofa. He’s still dressed.

“I think we should go again. No clothes for you this time.”

“Christ, Bella. Give a man a chance.”

I giggle, and he chuckles.

“I’m glad Charlie’s conscious. Seems all your appetites are back,” he says, and I hear the smile in his voice. I turn over and scowl at him.

“Are you forgetting about last night and this morning?” I pout.

“Nothing forgettable about either of those,” he grins. He looks so young and carefree and happy. He cups my behind. “You have a fantastic ass, Mrs Cullen.”

“So do you.” I arch a brow at him. “Though yours is still under cover.”

“And what are you going to do about that, Mrs Cullen?”

“Why, I’m going to undress you, Mr Cullen. All of you.”

He grins.

“And I think there’s a lot that’s sweet about you,” I murmur, referring to the song still playing on

repeat.

His smile fades.

Oh no.

“You are,” I whisper. I lean down and kiss the corner of his mouth. He closes his eyes and tightens his arms around me.

“Edward, you are. You made this weekend so special – in spite of what happened to Charlie. Thank you.”

He blinks at me with large serious green eyes that tug at my heart.

“Because I love you,” he murmurs.

“I know. I love you too.” I reach up and caress his face. “And you’re precious to me too. You do know that, don’t you?”

His eyes widen and he looks lost.

Oh Edward... My sweet Fifty.

“Believe me,” I whisper.

“It’s not easy.” His voice is almost inaudible.

“Try. Try hard, because it’s true.” I stroke his face once more, my fingers brushing against his sideburns.

He gazes at me, his eyes still wide, green oceans of loss and hurt and pain. I want to climb into his body and hold him. Anything to stop that look. When will he realize that he means the world to me? That he’s more than worthy of my love, his parents’ love – his siblings’? I have told him so over and over – and yet... here we are – his lost, abandoned look. Time. It will just take time.

“You’ll get cold. Come,” he says shifting. He rises gracefully to his feet, and pulls me up to stand beside him. I slip my arm around his waist as we wander back into the bedroom. I won’t push him, but since Charlie’s accident it’s become more important to me that he knows, knows how much I love him.

As we enter the bedroom I frown, desperate to recover the very welcome lighthearted mood of only a few moments ago.

“Shall we watch TV?” I ask.

Edward snorts.

“I was rather hoping for round two.” And my mercurial Fifty is back.

I arch my brow and stop by the bed.

“Well, in that case – I think I’ll be in charge.”

He gapes at me. I push him on to the bed and quickly straddle him, pinning his hands down beside his head. He grins up at me.

“Well, Mrs Cullen, now you’ve got me. What are you going to do with me?”

I lean down and whisper in his ear.

“I am going to fuck you with my mouth.”

He closes his eyes, inhaling sharply, and I run my teeth gently along his jaw.

~o~

Edward is working at the computer. It's a bright early morning and he's tapping out an email, I think.

"Good morning," I murmur shyly from the doorway.

He turns and beams at me.

"Mrs Cullen. You're up early." He holds open his arms. I make my way across the suite and curl into his lap.

"As are you."

"I was just working." He shifts as he kisses my hair.

"What?" I ask, sensing something wrong.

He sighs.

"I got an email from Detective Clark. He wants to talk to you about that fucker Smith."

"Really?" I sit back to gaze at Edward.

"Yes. I told him you're in Portland for the time being so he'll have to wait. But he says he'd like to interview you here."

"He's coming here?"

"Apparently so." Edward looks bemused.

I frown.

"What's so important that can't wait?"

"Exactly."

"When's he coming?"

"Today, I think. I'll email him back."

"I have nothing to hide. I wonder what he wants to know?"

"We'll find out when he gets here. I'm as intrigued as you."

Edward shifts again.

"Breakfast will be here shortly. Let's eat, then we can go and see your dad."

I nod.

"You can stay here if you want. I can see you're busy."

"No," he scowls at me. "I want to come with you."

"Okay." I grin, and wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

~o~

Charlie is bad-tempered. It's a joy. He's itchy and scratchy and impatient and uncomfortable.

"Dad, you've been in a major car accident. It will take time to heal. Edward and I want to move you to Seattle."

"I don't know why you're bothering with me. I'll be fine here on my own."

"Dad, don't be ridiculous." I squeeze his hand fondly and he has the grace to smile at me.

“Do you need anything?”

“I could murder a doughnut, Bells.”

I grin indulgently at him.

“I’ll get you a doughnut or two. Krispy Kreme or Dunkin Donuts?”

“Either.”

“Decent coffee?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Okay, I’ll go get some.”

~

Edward is once more in the waiting room, talking on the phone. He really should set up office in here. Weirdly he’s on his own, although the other ICU beds are occupied. Briefly I wonder if Edward’s frightened off the other visitors. He hangs up.

“Clark will be here at four this afternoon.”

I frown. What could be so urgent?

“Okay. Charlie wants coffee and doughnuts – could he be any more of a cliché?”

Edward laughs.

“Ask Taylor to go.”

“No, I’ll go.”

“Take Taylor with you.” His voice is stern.

“Okay.” I roll my eyes at him, and he narrows his eyes at me. Then smirks, and cocks his head to one side.

“There’s no one here,” he says, his voice deliciously low, and I know he’s threatening to spank me. I am about to dare him, when a young couple enters the room. She is weeping softly.

Oh no.

I shrug apologetically at Edward, and he nods. Picking up his laptop he takes my hand and leads me out of the room. “They need privacy more than we do,” Edward murmurs. “We’ll have our fun later.”

Outside Taylor is waiting patiently. “Let’s all go get coffee and doughnuts.”

~o~

At 4pm precisely there’s a knock on the suite door. Taylor ushers in Detective Clark, who looks bad-tempered. He always seems to look bad-tempered – perhaps it’s the way his face is set.

“Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen, thank you for seeing me.”

“Detective Clark.” Edward shakes his hand and directs him to a seat. I sit down on the sofa where I enjoyed myself so much last night. The thought makes me flush.

“It’s Mrs Cullen I wish to see,” Clark says pointedly at Edward, and at Taylor, stationed beside the door. Taylor glances at Edward. Edward nods slightly, and Taylor abruptly leaves, shutting the door behind him.

“Anything you wish to say to my wife you can say in front of me.” Edward’s voice is cool and

business-like. Detective Clark turns to me.

“Are you sure you’re happy for your husband to be present?”

I frown at him.

“Of course. I have nothing to hide. You are just interviewing me?” I clarify.

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’d like my husband to stay.”

Edward sits beside me, and I can tell he’s tense.

“As you wish,” murmurs Detective Clark, resigned. He clears his throat.

“Mrs Cullen, Mr Smith maintains that you sexually harassed him and made several lewd advances to him.”

Oh! I almost burst out laughing, but put my hand out to restrain Edward as he shifts forward in his seat.

“That’s preposterous,” Edward splutters.

I squeeze Edward’s wrist to silence him.

“That’s not true.” I state calmly and matter-of-factly to Clark. “In fact it was the other way round. He propositioned me in a very aggressive manner, and he was fired.”

Detective Clark mouth flattens briefly into a thin line before he continues.

“Smith alleges that you fabricated a tale about sexual harassment in order to get him fired. He says that you did this because he refused your advances, and because you wanted his job.”

I frown. Holy crap – James is even more delusional than I thought.

“That’s not true.” I shake my head.

“Detective, please don’t tell me you have driven all this way to harass my wife with these ridiculous accusations.”

Detective Clark turns his steely blue glare on Edward.

“I need to hear this from Mrs Cullen, sir,” he says with quiet force. I squeeze Edward’s wrist once more, silently imploring him to keep his cool.

“You don’t have to listen to this shit, Bella.”

“I think I should let Detective Clark know what happened.”

Edward gazes at me impassively for a beat, then waves his hand in a gesture of defeat, letting me continue.

“What Smith says is simply not true.” My voice sounds calm, although I feel anything but. I’m bewildered by these accusations, and nervous that Edward might explode. What is James’s game?

“James Smith accosted me in the office kitchen one evening. He told me that it was thanks to him that I had been hired, and that he expected sexual favors in return. He tried to blackmail me, using emails that I’d sent to Edward, who wasn’t my husband then. I didn’t know Smith had been monitoring my emails. Smith’s delusional – he even accused me of being a spy sent by Edward, presumably to help him take over the company. He didn’t know that Edward had already bought SIP.” I shake my head as I recall my weird, tense encounter with Smith.

“In the end I – I took him down.”

Clark’s eyebrows rise in surprise.

“Took him down?”

“I’m a cop’s daughter. He, um, touched me, and I know how to defend myself.”

Edward glances at me with a brief look of pride.

“I see.” Clark says, and leans back on the sofa sighing heavily.

“Have you spoken to any of Smith’s former PAs?” Edward asks, almost genially.

“Yes, we have. But the truth is, we can’t get any of his assistants to talk to us. They all say he was an exemplary boss, even though none of them lasted more than three months.”

“We’ve had that problem too,” Edward murmurs.

Oh? I gape at Edward.

Detective Clark looks quizzically at Edward.

“My security chief. He’s interviewed Smith’s past five PAs.”

“And why’s that?”

Edward gives him a steely glare.

“Because my wife worked for him, and I run security checks on anyone my wife works with.”

Detective Clark flushes. I shrug apologetically and give him a welcome-to-my-world smile.

“I see,” Clark murmurs. “I think there’s more to this than meets the eye, Mr Cullen. We are conducting a more thorough search of his apartment tomorrow, so maybe something will present itself then. Though by all accounts he hasn’t lived there for some time.”

“You’ve searched already?”

“Yes. We’re doing it again. A fingertip search this time.”

“You’ve still not charged him with the attempted murder of Kate Massey and myself?” Edward says softly.

What?

“We’re hoping to find more evidence in regard to the sabotage of your aircraft, Mr Cullen. We need more than a partial print, and while he’s in custody we can build a case.”

“Is this all you came down here for?”

Clark bristles.

“Yes, Mr Cullen it is.”

“I don’t see why we couldn’t have done this over the phone.”

“I prefer a hands-on approach. And, I’m visiting my great-aunt who lives here in Portland.”

Oh!

“Well, if we’re all done, I have work to attend to.” Edward stands and Detective Clark follows his cue.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs Cullen,” he says politely to me.

I nod.

“Mr Cullen.”

Edward opens the door and Detective Clark leaves.

I sag into the sofa.

“Can you believe that asshole?”

“Clark?”

“No. That fucker, Smith.”

“No, I can’t.”

“What’s his fucking game?” Edward frowns thoughtfully.

“I don’t know. Do you think Clark believed me?”

“Of course he did. He knows Smith is a fucked-up asshole.”

“You’re very swearsy.”

“Swearsy?” Edward smirks. “Is that a word?”

“It is now.”

He grins and sits down beside me, pulling me into his arms.

“Don’t think about that fucker. Let’s go see your Dad and try and talk about the move tomorrow.”

“He was adamant that he wanted to stay in Portland and not be a bother.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“I want to travel with him,” I murmur.

Edward gazes at me, and for a moment I think he’s going to say no.

“Okay. I’ll come too. Stuart and Taylor can take the cars. I’ll let Stuart drive your R8 tonight.”

~oOo~

The following day Charlie is examining his new surroundings – an airy, light, room in the rehabilitation centre of the Northwest Hospital in Seattle. It’s noon, and he looks sleepy. I think the journey has tired him.

“Tell Edward I appreciate this,” he says quietly.

“You can tell him yourself. He’ll be along this evening.”

“Aren’t you going to go to work?”

“Probably. I just want to make sure you’re settled in here.”

“You get along. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I like worrying about you.”

My BlackBerry buzzes. I check the number – it’s not one I recognize.

“You going to answer that?” Charlie asks.

“No. I don’t know who it is. The voice mail can take it for me. I bought you some magazines.” I indicate the pile of sporting periodicals on his bedside table.

“Thanks, Bells.”

“You’re tired, aren’t you?”

He nods.

“I’ll let you get some sleep.” I lean over and kiss his forehead. “Later, Daddy,” I murmur.

“I’ll see you later, honey. And thank you.” Charlie reaches out and catches my hand, squeezing it gently.

Oh Daddy. I return his squeeze and turn to leave.

~

As I head out of the main doors towards the SUV where Stuart is waiting, I hear my name being called.

“Mrs Cullen! Mrs Cullen!”

Turning I see Dr Greene hurry towards me, looking her usual immaculate self, if a little flustered.

“Mrs Cullen, how are you? Did you get my message? I called earlier.”

“No, Dr Greene.” My scalp prickles.

“Well, I was wondering why you’d cancelled four appointments.”

Four appointments? I gape at her. I’ve missed four appointments! How?

“Perhaps we should talk about this in my office. I was just off for lunch – do you have time right now?”

I nod meekly.

“Sure. I...” Words fail me. I’ve missed four appointments? I’m late for my shot. Shit.

I follow her in a daze back into the hospital and up to her office. How did I miss four appointments? I vaguely remember one being moved – Hanna mentioned it – but four? How could I miss four?

Dr Greene’s office is spacious, minimalist, and well appointed.

“I’m so grateful you caught me before I left,” I mumble, still she**ll-shocked. “My father’s been in a car accident, and we’ve just moved him here from Portland.”

“Oh I’m so sorry. How’s he doing?”

“He’s doing okay, thank you. On the mend.”

“That’s good. And it explains why you cancelled yesterday.”

Dr Greene wiggles the mouse on her desk and her computer comes to life.

“Yes... it’s been over thirteen weeks. You’re cutting it a bit fine. We’d better do a test before we give you another shot.”

“A test?” I whisper, all the blood rushing from my head.

“A pregnancy test.”

Oh no. She reaches into the drawer of her desk.

“You know what to do with this.” She hands me a small container. “The restroom is just outside my office.”

I get up as if in a trance, my whole body robotic, operating on automatic pilot, and make my way to the restroom.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit. How could I have let this happen... again? I suddenly feel sick, and offer a silent prayer while I pee. Please no. Please no. It's too soon. It's too soon. It's too soon.

When I re-enter Dr Greene's office she gives me a tight smile and waves me to the seat in front of her desk. I sit down and wordlessly hand her my sample. She dips a small white stick into it and watches. She raises her eyebrows as it turns pale blue.

"What does that mean? The blue?" The tension is almost choking me.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide.

"Well, Mrs Cullen, it means you're pregnant."

What? No. No. No.

Fuck.

~ooo000ooo~

Sweet About me by Gabriella Cilmi <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvuyYj5ROmk>

MOTU II 111/24

I gape at Dr Greene, my world collapsing around me. A baby. A baby. I don't want a baby... yet. Fuck. Deep down I know Edward is going to freak.

"Mrs Cullen, you're very pale. Would you like a glass of water?"

"Please." My voice is a whisper. My mind is racing. Pregnant? When?

"I take it you're surprised."

I nod mutely at the good Doctor as she hands me a glass of water from her conveniently placed water-cooler. I take a welcome sip.

"Shocked." My voice is barely audible.

"We could do an ultrasound to see how advanced the pregnancy is. Judging by your reaction, I suspect you're just a week or so from conception. I take it you haven't been suffering any other symptoms?"

I shake my head mutely. Symptoms? I don't think so.

"I thought... I thought this was a reliable form of contraceptive," I whisper.

Dr Greene arches a brow.

"It normally is, when you remember to have the shot," she says coolly.

I flush.

"I must have lost track of time." Edward is going to freak. I know it.

"Have you been bleeding at all?"

I frown.

"No."

"That's normal for the Depo. Shall we have a look at you? I have time."

I nod, bewildered, and Dr Greene directs me towards a black leather couch behind a screen.

“If you’ll just slip off your skirt and panties, we’ll go from there,” she says briskly.

Panties? I was expecting an ultrasound-scan over my belly. Why do I need to remove my panties? I shrug in consternation, then quickly do as she says and lie down beneath the soft white blanket.

“That’s good.” Dr Greene appears at the end of the couch, pulling the ultra-sound machine closer. It’s a hi-tech stack of computers. Sitting down she positions the screen so that we can both see it and jogs the trackball on the keyboard. The screen pings into life.

“If you could lift and bend your knees, then part them wide,” she says matter-of-factly. What? I blink at her, confused.

“This is a transvaginal ultrasound. If you’re only just pregnant, we should be able to find the baby with this.” She holds up a long white probe. Oh – you have got to be kidding!

“Okay,” I mutter, mortified, and do as she says. Greene pulls a condom over the wand and lubricates it with clear gel.

“Right, Mrs Cullen, if you could relax,” she murmurs.

Relax? I’m pregnant, damn it! How do you expect me to relax? I flush, and endeavor to find my happy place... which is somewhere near the lost city of Eldorado. Slowly and gently she inserts the probe. Holy Fuck.

All I can see on the screen is the visual equivalent of white noise – although it’s more sepia in color. Slowly Dr Greene moves the probe about, and it’s very disconcerting.

“There,” she murmurs. She presses a button, freezing the picture on the screen, and points to a tiny blip in the sepia storm. It’s a little blip. Oh my. There’s a tiny little blip in my belly. Tiny. Wow. I forget my discomfort as I stare shellshocked at the blip.

“It’s too early to see the heartbeat, but yes, you’re definitely pregnant. Four or five weeks, I would say.”

I am too stunned to say anything. The little blip is a baby. A real honest to goodness baby. Edward’s baby. My baby. Holy cow. A baby.

“Would you like me to print out a picture for you?”

I nod, still unable to speak, and Dr Greene presses a button. Then she gently removes the wand and hands me a paper towel to clean myself.

“Congratulations, Mrs Cullen,” she says as I sit up. “We’ll need to make another appointment, I suggest in four weeks’ time. Then we can ascertain the exact age of your baby and set a likely due date. You can get dressed now.”

“Okay,” I mutter, reeling. I have a blip, a little blip. Hurriedly I dress.

When I emerge from behind the screen Dr Greene is back at her desk.

“In the meantime I’d like you to start this course of folic acid and multivitamins. Here’s a leaflet of do’s and don’ts.” As she hands me a package of pills and a leaflet she continues to talk at me, but I’m not listening. I’m in shock. Overwhelmed. Surely I should be happy. Surely I should be thirty... at least. This is too soon – far too soon. I try to quell my rising sense of panic.

Wishing Dr Greene a polite goodbye I head in a daze back down to the exit and out of into the cool Fall afternoon. I’m gripped suddenly by a creeping cold and deep sense of foreboding. Edward is going to

freak, I know, but how much and how far, I have no idea. His words haunt me: ‘I’m not ready to share you yet.’

I pull my jacket tighter around me, trying to shake off the cold.

Stuart leaps out of the SUV and holds open the door. He frowns when he sees my face, but I ignore his concerned expression.

“Where to, Mrs Cullen?” he asks gently.

“SIP.”

I nestle into the back of the car, closing my eyes and resting my head on the back seat. I should be happy. I know I should be happy. But I’m not. This is too early. What about my job? What about SIP? What about Edward and me? No. No. No. We’ll be fine. He’ll be fine. He loved baby Alice – I remember Carlisle telling me – he dotes on her now. Perhaps I should warn Banner... Perhaps I shouldn’t tell Edward. Perhaps I... perhaps I should end this. I halt my thoughts on that dark path, alarmed at the direction they’re taking. Instinctively my hand sweeps down to rest protectively over my belly. No. My little Blip. Tears spring to my eyes. What am I going to do?

A vision of a little boy with copper-colored hair and bright green eyes running through the meadow at the new house invades my thoughts, teasing and tantalizing me with possibilities. He’s giggling and squealing with delight as Edward and I chase him. Edward swings him high in his arms and carries him on his hip as we walk hand in hand back to the house.

My vision morphs into Edward turning away from me in disgust. I am fat and awkward, heavy with child. He paces the long hall of mirrors, away from me, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the silvered glass, walls and floor. Edward...

I jerk awake. No. He’s going to freak out.

When Stuart pulls up outside SIP I leap out and head into the building.

“Bella, great to see you. How’s your Dad?” Hanna asks as soon as I reach my office.

I regard her coolly.

“He’s better, thank you. Can I see you in my office?”

She blinks at me, surprised.

“Sure.” She follows me in. “Is everything okay?”

“I need to know if you’ve moved or cancelled any appointments with Dr Greene.”

“Dr Greene? Yes, I have. About three or four of them. Mostly because you were in other meetings, or over-running. Why?”

BECAUSE NOW I’M FUCKING PREGNANT! I scream at her in my head. I take a deep steadying breath.

“If you move any appointments can you make sure I know? I don’t always check my calendar.”

“Sure,” Hanna says quietly. “I’m sorry. Have I done something wrong?”

I shake my head and sigh loudly.

“Can you make me some tea? Then let’s discuss what’s been happening while I’ve been away.”

“Sure. I’ll jump to it.” Brightening she heads out of the office.

I gaze after her departing figure.

“You see that woman?” I talk quietly to the Blip. “She’s responsible for you.” I pat my belly, then feel like a complete idiot, because I am talking to my Blip. My tiny little Blip. I shake my head, exasperated at myself and at Hanna, and switch on my computer. There’s an email from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 15 September 2009: 13.58
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen

I’ve been back in the office for only 3 hours and I am missing you already.

Hope Charlie has settled in okay at the Northwest. Carlisle is going to see him this afternoon and check up on him.

I’ll collect you around 6.00 this evening and we can go and see him before heading home.

Sound good?

Your loving husband

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I type a quick response.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 15 September 2009: 14:10
To: Edward Cullen

Sure.

x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 15 September 2009: 14.14
To: Isabella Cullen

Are you okay?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

No Edward I’m not. I’m freaking out about you freaking out. I don’t know what to do. But I am not going to tell you via email.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 15 September 2009: 14:17
To: Edward Cullen

Fine. Just busy.

See you at 6.00

x

Isabella Cullen

Commissioning Editor, SIP

When will I tell him? Tonight? Maybe after sex? Maybe during sex. No, that might be dangerous for both of us. When he's asleep? I put my head in my hands. What the hell am I going to do?

~

"Hi," Edward says warily as I clamber into the SUV.

"Hi," I murmur back.

"What's wrong?" he asks, his brow furrowing.

I shake my head as Taylor sets off towards the hospital.

"Nothing."

Maybe now? I could tell him now, when we're in a contained space and Taylor is with us.

"Is work all right?" Edward continues to probe.

"Yes. Fine. Thanks."

"Bella, what's wrong?" His tone is a little more forceful. I chicken out.

"I've just missed you, that's all. And I've been worried about Charlie."

Edward visibly relaxes.

"Charlie's good. I spoke to Dad this afternoon and he's impressed with his progress." Reaching across Edward grasps my hand. "Boy, your hand is cold. Have you eaten today?"

I flush.

"Bella," Edward scolds me, and he's annoyed.

Well, I haven't eaten because I know you're going to go bat shit crazy when I tell you I'm pregnant.

"I'll eat this evening. I haven't really had time."

He shakes his head in frustration.

"Do you want me to add 'feed my wife' to the security detail's list of duties?"

"I'm sorry. I'll eat. It's just been a weird day. You know, moving Dad and all."

His lips press into a hard line, but he says nothing. I gaze out of the window. Tell him! my subconscious hisses. No. I am a coward.

Edward interrupts my reverie. "I may have to go to Taiwan."

"Oh. When?"

"Later this week. Maybe next week."

"Okay."

"I want you to come with me."

I swallow.

"Edward, please. I have my job. Let's not rehash this argument again."

He sighs and pouts like a sulky teenager.

"Thought I'd ask," he mutters petulantly.

“How long will you go for?”

“Not more than a couple of days. I wish you’d tell me what’s bothering you.”

How can he tell? Holy fuck.

“Well, now that my beloved husband is going away...”

Edward kisses my knuckles.

“I won’t be away for long.”

“Good.” I smile weakly at him.

~

Charlie is much brighter and a lot less grumpy when we see him. I’m touched by his quiet gratitude to Edward, and for a moment I forget about my impending news as I sit and listen to them talk fishing and the Mariners. But he tires easily.

“Daddy, we’ll leave you to sleep.”

“Thanks Bella honey. I like that you drop by. Saw your Dad today too, Edward. He was very reassuring. And he’s a Mariners fan.”

“He’s not crazy about fishing, though,” Edward says wryly as he rises.

“Well, no one’s perfect, eh?” Charlie grins.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” I lean over and kiss him. My subconscious purses her lips. That’s provided Edward hasn’t locked you away... or worse. My spirits take a nosedive. Oh yes – I’m pregnant with my little Blip. I blanch as I remember.

“Come.” Edward holds out his hand, frowning at me. I take it and we head out of the hospital.

~

I pick at my food. It’s Mrs Cope’s chicken chasseur, but I’m just not hungry. My stomach is knotted in a tight ball of anxiety.

“Damn it! Bella, will you tell me what’s wrong?” Edward pushes his empty plate away, irritated. I gaze at him.

“Please. You’re driving me crazy.”

I swallow, and try to subdue the panic rising in my throat. I take a deep steadying breath. It’s now or never.

“I’m pregnant.”

He stills, and very slowly all the color drains from his face.

“What?” he whispers, ashen.

“I’m pregnant.”

His brow furrows, as if he’s not comprehending at all.

“How?”

I blink at him. How... how? What sort of ridiculous question is that? I flush, and give him a quizzical how-do-you-think look. His stance changes immediately, his eyes hardening to flint.

“Your shot?” he barks.

Oh shit.

“Did you forget your shot?”

I just gaze at him unable to speak. Jeez, he’s mad – really mad.

“Christ, Bella!” He bangs his fist on the table, making me jump, and stands so abruptly he almost knocks the dining chair over. “You have one thing, one thing to remember. Shit! I don’t fucking believe it. How could you be so stupid?”

Stupid! I gasp. Shit. I contemplate lying to him, telling him the shot was ineffective... but then he might call Dr Greene. I gaze down at my fingers.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Sorry? Fuck!” he says again.

“I know the timing’s not very good.”

“Not Very Good?” he shouts. “We’ve known each other five fucking minutes. I wanted to show you the fucking world and now... Fuck. Diapers and vomit and shit!” He closes his eyes. I think he’s trying to contain his temper, and losing the battle.

“Did you forget? Tell me. Or did you do this on purpose?” His eyes blaze and anger emanates off him like a force field.

“No,” I whisper. I can’t tell him about Hanna, he’d fire her. I know.

“I thought we’d agreed on this,” he shouts.

“I know. We had. I’m sorry.”

He ignores me.

“This is why. This is why I like control. So things like this don’t come along and fuck everything up.”

Thing... my little Blip is not a thing.

“Edward, please don’t shout at me.” Tears start to slip down my face.

“Don’t start with waterworks now,” he snaps. “Fuck.” He runs a hand through his hair, pulling at it as he does.

“You think I’m ready to be a father?” His voice catches, and it’s a mixture of rage and panic.

And it all becomes clear, the fear and loathing writ large in his eyes – his rage is that of a powerless adolescent. Oh Fifty, I am so sorry. It’s a shock for me too.

“I know neither one of us is ready for this, but I think you’ll make a wonderful father,” I choke. “We’ll muddle through.”

“How the fuck do you know?” he shouts, louder this time. “Tell me how!” His green eyes burn, and so many emotions cross his face... fear... fear being the most prominent.

“Oh, fuck this!” Edward says dismissively, and holds his hands up in a gesture of defeat. He turns on his heel and stalks towards the foyer, grabbing his jacket as he leaves the great room. His footsteps echo off the wooden floor, and he disappears through the double doors into the foyer, slamming the door behind him and making me jump once more.

All I am left with is the silence... the still, silent emptiness of the great room. I shudder involuntarily as I gaze numbly at the closed doors. He’s walked out on me. Shit! His reaction is worse than I could ever have imagined. I push my plate away and fold my arms on the table, letting my head sink into

them while I weep.

“Bella, dear.” Mrs Cope is hovering beside me.

Oh. I sit up quickly, dashing the tears from my face.

“I heard. I’m sorry,” she says gently. “Would you like a herbal tea or something?”

“I’d like a glass of white wine.”

Mrs Cope pauses for a fraction of a second, and I remember my Blip. Now I can’t drink alcohol. Can I? I must study the do’s and don’ts Dr Greene gave me.

“I’ll get you a glass.”

“Actually, I’ll have a cup of tea please.” I wipe my nose.

She smiles kindly.

“Cup of tea coming up.” She clears our plates and heads over to the kitchen area. I follow her and perch on a stool, watching her prepare my tea.

She places a steaming mug in front of me.

“Is there anything else I can get for you, Bella?”

“No, this is fine, thank you.”

“Are you sure? You didn’t eat much.”

I gaze up at her.

“I’m just not hungry.”

“Bella, you should eat. It’s not just you anymore. Please let me fix you something. What would you like?” She looks so hopefully at me. But really, I can’t face anything. My husband has just walked out on me because I’m pregnant, my father has been in a major car accident, and then there’s James Smith the head-case trying to make out that I sexually harassed him. I suddenly have an uncontrollable urge to giggle. See what you’ve done to me, little Blip! I caress my belly.

Mrs Cope smiles indulgently at me.

“Do you know how far you are?” she asks softly.

“Very newly pregnant. Four or five weeks, the Doctor isn’t sure.”

“If you won’t eat, then at least you should rest.”

I nod, and taking my tea I head into the library. It’s my refuge. I dig my BlackBerry out of my purse and contemplate calling Edward. I know it’s a shock for him – but he really did over-react. When does he not over-react? My subconscious arches a finely plucked brow at me. I sigh. Fifty Shades of fucked up.

“Yes, that’s your daddy, little Blip. Hopefully he’ll cool off and come back... soon.”

I pull out the leaflet of Do’s and Don’ts and sit down to read.

I can’t concentrate. Edward’s never walked out on me before. Suppose he never comes back? Shit! Perhaps I should call Banner. I don’t know what to do. I’m at a loss. He’s so fragile, in so many ways, and deep down I knew this wasn’t going to go down well with him. He was so sweet this weekend. All those circumstances way beyond his control, yet he managed fine. But this news was too much.

Ever since I've met him my life has been so complicated. Is it him? Is it the two of us together? Suppose he doesn't get past this? My mother and father never managed to. Suppose he wants a divorce? Bile rises in my throat. No. I mustn't think this way. He'll be back. He will. I know he will. I know in spite of all the shouting and his harsh words he loves me... yes. And he'll love you too, little Blip.

Leaning back in my chair, I doze.

I wake, cold and disorientated, and shiver as I check my watch. Eleven in the evening. Oh yes... You. I hug my belly. Where's Edward? Is he back? Stiffly I clamber out of the armchair and go in search of my husband.

Five minutes later, I realize he's not home. Oh no... I hope nothing's happened to him. Memories of the long wait when Echo Charlie went missing flood back. No no no. Stop thinking like this. He's probably gone to... where? Who would he go and see? Emmett? Or maybe he's with Banner. I hope so. I find my BlackBerry back in the library, and I text him.

Where are you?

I head into the bathroom and run myself a bath. I am so cold.

He still hasn't returned when I climb out of the bath. I change into one of my 1930s style satin nightdresses and my robe, and head for the great room. On the way I pop into the spare bedroom... perhaps this could be little Blip's room. I am startled by the thought, and stand in the doorway contemplating this reality. Will we paint it blue or pink? The sweet thought is soured by the fact that my husband is so pissed off at the idea, and absent. Grabbing the duvet from the spare bed I head into the great room to keep vigil.

~

Something wakes me. A sound.

"Shit!" It's Edward in the foyer. I hear the table scrape across the floor again. "Shit!" he repeats, more muffled this time. I scramble up in time to see him stagger through the double doors.

Fuck. He's drunk. My scalp prickles. Shit, Edward drunk? I know how much he hates drunks. Oh no. I leap up and run towards him.

"Edward, are you okay?"

He leans against the jamb of the foyer doors.

"Mrs Cullen," he slurs.

Oh no. He's very drunk. I don't know what to do.

"Oh... you look mighty fine, Isabella."

"Where have you been?"

He puts his fingers to his lips and smiles crookedly at me.

"Shh! Not telling."

"I think you'd better come to bed."

"With you..." he giggles. Giggling!

Frowning at him I gently put my arm around his waist, because he can hardly stand, let alone walk. Shit! Where has he been? How did he get home?

“Let me help you to bed. Lean on me,” I murmur.

“You are so beautiful, Bella,” he says. He leans onto me and sniffs my hair, almost knocking both of us over.

“Edward, walk. I am going to put you to bed.”

“Okay,” he says, as if he’s trying to concentrate. We stumble down the corridor and finally make it into the bedroom.

“Bed,” he says, grinning.

“Yes, bed.” I maneuver him to the edge, but he holds me.

“Join me,” he says.

“Edward, I think you need some sleep.”

“And so it begins. I’ve heard about this.”

I frown.

“Heard about what?”

“Babies mean no sex.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. Otherwise we’d all come from one-child families.”

He gazes down at me.

“You’re funny.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Yes.” He smiles, but his smile changes as he thinks about it, and a haunted expression crosses his face, a look that chills me to the bone.

“Come on, Edward,” I say gently. I hate his expression. It speaks of horrid, ugly memories that no child should see. “Let’s get you into bed.”

I push him gently and he flops down on to the mattress, sprawling in all directions, grinning up at me, his haunted expression gone.

“Join me,” he slurs.

“Let’s get you undressed first.”

He grins widely, drunkenly.

“Now you’re talking,” he says.

Holy cow. Drunk Edward can be cute and playful. I’ll take him over mad-as-hell Edward anytime.

“Sit up. Let me take your jacket off.”

“The room is spinning.”

Shit... is he going to throw up?

“Edward, sit up!”

He smirks up at me.

“Mrs Cullen, you are a bossy little thing...”

“Yes. Do as you’re told and sit up.” I put my hands on my hips. He grins again, struggles up onto his

elbows, then sits up in a most un-Edward, gawky fashion. Sheesh!

Before he can flop down again, I grab his tie and wrestle him out of his grey jacket, one arm at a time.

“You smell good,” he says.

“You smell of hard liquor.”

“Yes... bourbon.” He pronounces the syllables with such exaggeration that I have to stifle a giggle. Discarding his jacket on the floor beside me I make a start on his tie. He rests his hands on my hips.

“I like the feel of this fabric on you, Isabella,” he says, slurring his words. “You should always be in satin.” He runs his hand up and down my hips, then jerks me forward, pressing his mouth against my belly.

“And we have an invader in here.”

I stop breathing. Holy Crow. He’s talking to little Blip.

“You’re going to keep me awake, aren’t you?” he says to my belly.

Oh my. Edward looks up at me, green eyes blurred and cloudy. My heart constricts.

“You’ll choose him over me,” he says sadly.

“Edward, you don’t know what you’re talking about. Don’t be ridiculous – I am not choosing anyone over anyone. And he might be a she.”

He frowns.

“A she... Oh God.” He flops back down on to the bed and covers his eyes with his arm. I have managed to loosen his tie. I bend, undo one shoelace and yank off his shoe and sock. I make a start on the other and succeed in no time. When I stand I see why I met no resistance – Edward has passed out completely. He’s asleep and snoring slightly.

I stand staring at him. He’s so goddamned beautiful, even drunk and snoring. His sculptured lips parted, he snores gently, one arm above his head ruffling his messy hair, his face relaxed. He looks young – but then he is young. My young, stressed out, drunk, unhappy husband. The thought lies heavy in my heart. Well, at least he’s home. I wonder where he went? I’m not sure I have the energy or the strength to move him or undress him any further. He’s on top of the duvet, too. Heading back into the great room I pick up the duvet I was using and bring it back to our bedroom.

He’s still lying there, fast asleep, still wearing his tie and his belt. I climb on to the bed beside him, loosen his tie further then remove it altogether, and gently undo the top button of his shirt. He mumbles something incoherent in his sleep, but he doesn’t wake. Carefully I unbuckle his belt and pull it through the belt loops... after some difficulty it’s off. His shirt has come dislodged from his pants, revealing a hint of his happy trail. I can’t resist. I bend and kiss it. He shifts, flexing his hips forward, but stays asleep.

I sit up and gaze at him again. Oh Fifty, Fifty, Fifty... what am I going to do with you? Reaching up I brush my fingers through his hair. It’s so soft. I lean down and kiss his temple.

“I love you, Edward. Even when you’re drunk and you’ve been out God knows where, I love you. I’ll always love you.”

“Hmmm,” he murmurs. I kiss his temple once more, then clamber off the bed and cover him up with the spare duvet. I can sleep beside him, sideways across the bed... yes, I’ll do that.

First I’ll sort out his clothes though. I shake my head and pick up his socks and tie and fold his jacket

over my arm. As I do his BlackBerry falls to the floor. I pick it up and inadvertently unlock it. It opens on the texts screen.

I can see my text, and above it, another.

Fuck. My scalp prickles.

*It was good to see you. I understand now.
Don't fret. You'll make a wonderful father.*

It's from her. Mrs Irina Bitch Troll Robinson.

Shit. That's where he went.

He's been to see her.

~ooo000ooo~

MOTU II 112/25

I gape at the text, then look up at the sleeping form of my husband. He's been out until 1.30 in the morning drinking – with her! He snores softly, sleeping the sleep of a seemingly innocent, oblivious drunk. He looks so serene. Oh no, no, no.

My legs turn to jelly, and I sink slowly to the chair beside the bed in disbelief. Raw, bitter humiliating betrayal lances through me. How could he? How could he go to her? Scalding angry tears ooze down my cheeks. His wrath and fear, his need to lash out at me I can understand, and forgive – just. But this... this treachery is too much. I pull my knees up against my chest and wrap my arms around them, protecting me and protecting my little Blip. I rock to and fro, weeping softly.

Was it ever thus? What did I expect? I married this man too quickly. I knew it – I knew it would come to this. Why. Why. Why? How could he do this to me?

He knows how I feel about that woman. How could he turn to her? How? The knife twists slow and painfully deep in my heart, lacerating me. Will it always be this way?

The tears flow and his prostrate figure blurs and shimmers through my tears. Oh Edward. I married him because I love him, and deep down I know that he loves me.

I know he does. His achingly sweet birthday present comes to mind.

For all our firsts on your first birthday as my beloved wife. I love you. E x

No, no, no – I can't believe that it will always be this way, two steps forward

and three steps back. But that's how it's always been with him. After each setback we move forward, inch by inch. He will come around... he will. But will I? Will I recover from this treachery? I think about how he's been this last, horrible, wonderful weekend. His quiet strength while my father lay broken and comatose in the ICU... my surprise party, bringing my family and friends together... dipping me down low outside the Heathman and kissing me in full public view. Oh Edward, you strain all my credulity, all my faith... but I love you. And it's not just me now.

I place my hand on my belly. No, I will not let him do this to me and our Blip.

Dr Banner said I should give him the benefit of the doubt – well, not this time. I dash the tears from my eyes and wipe my nose with the back of my hand. Edward stirs and rolls over, pulling his legs up from the side of the bed, and curls up beneath the duvet. He stretches out a hand, as if searching for something, then grumbles and frowns, but settles back to sleep, his arm outstretched. Oh Fifty. What am I going to do with you? And what the hell were you doing with the Bitch Troll? I need to know.

I glance once more at the offending text and quickly hatch a plan. Taking a deep breath I forward the text to my BlackBerry. Step one complete. I quickly check the other recent texts, but can only see messages from Emmett, Angela, Taylor, Kate and me. None from Irina. Good, I think. I exit the text screen, relieved that he hasn't been texting her... and my heart lurches into my throat. Oh my. The wallpaper on his phone is photograph upon photograph of me, a patchwork of tiny Isabellas in various poses... from our honeymoon, from our recent weekend sailing and soaring, and a few of Jake's photos too. When did he do this? It must have been recently.

I notice his email icon, and an idea slithers enticingly into my mind... I could read Edward's emails. See if he's been talking to her? Should I? Sheathed in jade green silk my inner goddess nods emphatically, her mouth set in a scowl. Before I can stop myself I am invading his privacy.

There are hundreds and hundreds of emails. I spin down through them, and they look dull as dishwater... mostly from Kate, Angela and me, and various executives in his company. None from the Bitch Troll. While I'm at it, I'm relieved to see there are none from Lauren either.

One email catches my eye. It's from Barney Sullivan, Edward's IT guy, and the

subject line is: James Smith. I glance guiltily at Edward, but he's still snoring gently. I've never heard him snore. I open the email.

From: Barney Sullivan

Subject: James Smith

Date: 15 September 2009 14:09

To: Edward Cullen

CCTV around Seattle tracks the white van from South Irving Street. Before that I can find no trace so Smith must have been based in that area.

As Jenks has told you the unsub car was rented under a false license by an unknown female, nothing that ties up to the South Irving Street area.

Details of known CEH and SIP employees who live in the area are in the attached file, which I have forwarded to Jenks too.

There was nothing on Smith's SIP computer about his former PAs.

As a reminder here is a list of what was retrieved from Smith's SIP computer.

Cullens' Home Addresses

Five properties in Seattle

Two properties in Detroit

Resumés for:

Dr Carlisle Cullen

Emmett Cullen

Edward Cullen

Esme Cullen

Isabella Swan

Alice Cullen

Newspaper and online articles relating to:

Dr Carlisle Cullen

Edward Cullen

Emmett Cullen

Photographs

Dr Carlisle Cullen

Esme Cullen

Edward Cullen

Emmett Cullen

Alice Cullen

I'll carry on, see what else I can find.

B Sullivan

Head of IT, CEH.

This odd email momentarily sidetracks me from my night of woe. I click on the attachment to check through the names on the list, but it's obviously huge, too big to open on the BlackBerry.

What am I doing? It's late. I've had a tiring day. There are no emails from the Bitch Troll or Lauren Elliot, and I take some cold comfort from that. I glance quickly at the alarm clock: it's just after 2.00 am. Today has been a day of revelations. I am to be a mother, and my husband has been fraternizing with the enemy. Well, let him stew. I am not sleeping here with him – he can wake up alone tomorrow. Placing his BlackBerry on his bedside table I retrieve my purse from beside the bed and after one last look at my angelic, sleeping Judas, head into the great room.

I fetch the playroom key from the cabinet in the utility room and make my way upstairs. From the linen closet I retrieve a pillow, duvet and sheet, then unlock the playroom door and enter. I switch on the lights, then dim them. Odd that I find the smell and ambience of this room so comforting, considering I safe-worded the last time we were in here. I lock the door behind me, leaving the key in the lock. I know that tomorrow morning Edward will be frantic to find me, and I don't think he'll look in here if the door's locked. Well, it will serve him right.

I curl up on the Chesterfield couch, wrap myself in the duvet and drag my BlackBerry from my purse. Checking my texts I find the one from the evil Bitch Troll that I forwarded from Edward's phone. I press 'Forward' and type:

*WOULD YOU LIKE MRS LINCOLN TO JOIN US WHEN WE EVENTUALLY DISCUSS THIS TEXT SHE

SENT TO YOU? IT WILL SAVE YOU RUNNING TO HER AFTERWARDS. YOUR WIFE*

– and press 'Send'. I switch the volume to mute.

I curl up smaller under my duvet. For all my bravado I am overwhelmed by the enormity of Edward's deceit. This should be a happy time – jeez, we're going to be parents. Briefly I fantasize about me telling Edward that I'm pregnant and him falling to his knees in front of me with joy and pulling me into his arms

and telling me how much he loves me and our Little Blip. Yet here I am, alone and cold in a BDSM fantasy room. Suddenly I feel old... older than my years. Taking on Edward was always going to be a challenge, but he really has surpassed himself this time. But in my heart of hearts I know I am stronger than he is, and if he wants a fight, I'll give him a fight. No way am I going to let him get away with running off to see that heinous whore whenever we have a problem. He's going to have to choose – her, or me and our little Blip. I sniffle softly, but because I'm so exhausted I soon fall asleep.

~

I wake with a start, momentarily disorientated... oh yes – I'm in the playroom. Because there are no windows, I have no idea what time it is. The door handle rattles.

“BELLA!” Edward shouts from outside. I freeze... but he doesn't come in. I hear muffled voices outside, but they move away. I exhale, and check the time on my BlackBerry. It's 7.50 am, and I have four missed calls and two voice messages. The missed calls are mostly from Edward, but there's also one from Rose. Oh no – he must have called her. I don't have time to listen to them – I don't want to be late for work. Pulling the duvet around me and picking up my purse I make my way to the door. Unlocking it slowly I peek outside. No sign of anyone. Oh shit... perhaps this is a bit melodramatic. I roll my eyes at myself, take a deep breath and head downstairs.

Taylor, Stuart, Ryan, Mrs Cope and Edward are all standing in entrance to the great room, Edward issuing rapid-fire instructions. As one they all turn and gape at me. Edward is still wearing the clothes he slept in last night. He looks disheveled, pale and heartstoppingly beautiful. His large green eyes are wide and I don't know if he's fearful or angry. It's difficult to tell.

“Stuart, I'll be ready to leave in about twenty minutes,” I mutter, wrapping the duvet tighter around me for protection. He nods, and all eyes turn to Edward, who is still staring intensely at me.

“Would you like some breakfast, Mrs Cullen?” Mrs Cope asks. I shake my head.

“I'm not hungry, thank you.” She purses her lips but says nothing.

“Where were you?” Edward asks, his voice low and husky. Suddenly Stuart, Taylor, Ryan and Mrs Cope scatter, scuttling into Taylor's office, into the foyer and into the kitchen like terrified rats from a sinking ship.

I ignore Edward and head towards our bedroom.

“Bella,” he calls after me. “Answer me.” I hear his footsteps behind me as I walk into the bedroom and continue into our bathroom. Quickly I turn and lock the door.

“Bella!” Edward knocks on the door. I turn on the shower. The door rattles.

“Bella, open the damned door.”

“Go away!”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Bella, please.”

I climb into the shower, effectively blocking him out. Oh it’s warm. The healing water cascades over me, cleansing the exhaustion of the night off my skin. Oh my. This feels so good. For a moment, for one short moment, I can pretend all is well. I wash my hair... I’m gonna wash that man... I snort. By the time I have finished I feel better, stronger, ready to face the freight train that is Edward Cullen. I wrap my hair in a towel, briskly dry myself and wrap the towel around me.

I unlock the door and open it. Edward is leaning against the wall opposite, his hands behind his back. His expression is wary, that of a hunted predator. I ignore him, striding into our walk-in closet.

“Are you ignoring me?” Edward asks in disbelief as he stands on the threshold of the closet.

“Perceptive, aren’t you?” I murmur absentmindedly as I search for something to wear. Ah yes – my plum dress. I slide it off the hanger, choose my high black stiletto boots and head for the bedroom. I pause for Edward to step out of my way, which he does, eventually – his intrinsic good manners taking over. I feel his eyes boring into me as I head over to my chest of drawers. I can see him in the mirror, standing motionless in the doorway, watching me. In an act worthy of an Oscar winner I let my towel fall to the floor and pretend that I am oblivious to my naked body. I hear his restrained gasp, and ignore it.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks. His voice is low.

“I’m too stupid to know.” My voice is velvet soft as I pull out a pretty pair of black lace La Perla panties.

“Bella – ” He stops as I shimmy into them.

“Go ask your Mrs Robinson. I’m sure she’ll have an explanation for you,” I mutter as I search for the matching bra.

“Bella I’ve told you before, she’s not my –”

“I don’t want to hear it, Edward.” I wave my hand dismissively. “The time for talking was yesterday, but instead you decided to rant, and go get drunk with the woman who abused you for years. Well, give her a call. I am sure she’ll be more than willing to listen to you now.” I find the matching bra at last, slowly pull it on and fasten it. Edward walks further into the bedroom and places his hands on his hips.

“So you’ve been snooping on me?” he says.

In spite of my resolve I flush.

“That’s not the point, Edward,” I snap at him. “Fact is, going gets tough and you run to her.”

His mouth settles into a grim line.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“I’m not interested.” Picking a pair of black thigh highs with lacey tops I retreat to the bed. I sit, point my toe and gently ease the gossamer material up to my thigh.

“Where were you?” he asks, his eyes following my hands up my legs, but I continue to ignore him as I slowly roll on the other stocking. Standing, I bend to towel-dry my hair. Through my parted thighs I can see his bare feet, and I sense him watching me intensely. When I’ve finished I stand and step back to the chest of drawers where I grab my hairdryer.

“Answer me.” Edwards murmurs, his voice low and husky.

I switch on the hairdryer so I can no longer hear him, and watch him in the mirror through my lashes as I finger dry my hair. He gazes at me, green eyes narrow and cool, chilling even. I look away, focusing on the task in hand and trying to suppress the shiver that runs through me. I swallow hard and concentrate on drying my hair. He’s still mad. He goes out with that damned woman, and he’s mad at me? How dare he? When my hair looks wild and untamed I stop. Yes... I like it. I switch off the hairdryer.

“Where were you?” he whispers, his tone arctic.

“What do you care?”

“Bella, stop this. Now.”

I shrug, and Edward moves quickly across the room towards me. I whirl round, stepping back as he reaches out.

“Don’t touch me,” I hiss, and he freezes.

“Where were you?” he demands. His hands fist at his side.

“I wasn’t out getting drunk with my ex,” I seethe. “Did you sleep with her?”

He gasps.

“What? No!” He gapes at me, and has the gall to look wounded and angry at the same time. My subconscious breathes a small welcome sigh of relief.

“You think I’d cheat on you?” He’s disgusted.

“You did,” I snarl. “By taking our very private life and spilling your spineless guts to that woman.”

His mouth drops open.

“Spineless. That’s what you think?” His eyes blaze.

“Edward, I saw the text. That’s what I know.”

“That text was not meant for you,” he growls.

“Well, fact is I saw it when your BlackBerry fell out of your jacket. While I was undressing you because you were too drunk to undress yourself. Do you have any idea how much you’ve hurt me, going to see that woman?”

He pales momentarily but I’m on a roll, my inner bitch unleashed.

“Do you remember last night when you came home? Remember what you said?”

He gazes at me, green eyes blazing hot, the rest of his face frozen.

“Well, you were right. I do choose this defenseless baby over you. That’s what any loving parent does. That’s what your mother should have done for you. And I am sorry that she didn’t – because we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now if she had. But you’re an adult now – you need to grow up and smell the fucking coffee and stop behaving like a petulant adolescent.

“You may not be happy about this baby. I’m not ecstatic, given the timing and your less-than-lukewarm reception to this new life, this flesh of your flesh. But you can either do this with me, or I’ll do it on my own. The decision is yours.

“While you wallow in your pit of self-pity and self-loathing I’m going to work. And when I return I’ll be moving my belongings to the room upstairs.”

He blinks at me, shocked.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to finish getting dressed.” I am breathing

hard. Very slowly Edward retreats one step, his demeanor hardening.

“Is that what you want?” he whispers.

“I don’t know what I want any more.” My tone mirrors his, and it takes a monumental effort to feign disinterest while I casually dip the tips of my fingers into my moisturizer and smooth it gently over my skin. I peer at myself in the mirror. Brown eyes wide, face pale, but cheeks flushed. You’re doing great. Don’t back down now. Don’t back down now.

“You don’t want me?” he breathes.

Oh – no... oh no you don’t, Cullen.

“I’m still here aren’t I?” I mutter dismissively. Taking my mascara I apply some first to my right eye.

“You’ve thought about leaving?” His words are barely audible.

“It crossed my mind. When one’s husband prefers the company of his ex-mistress it’s usually not a good sign.” I pitch the disdain at just the right level.

Lip-gloss now. I pout my shiny lips at the image in the mirror. Stay strong Swan... um – Cullen. Holy Fuck, I can’t even get my name right. Reaching down I pick up my boots, make my way to the bed once more and quickly put them on, tugging them up over my knees. Yep. I look hot just in underwear and boots. I know. I stand and gaze dispassionately at him. He blinks at me, and his eyes travel swiftly and greedily down my body.

“I know what you’re doing here,” he murmurs, and his voice has acquired a warm, seductive edge.

“Do you?” And my voice cracks. No, Bella... hold on.

He swallows and takes a step forward. I step back and hold my hands up.

“Don’t even think about it, Cullen,” I whisper menacingly.

“You’re my wife,” he says softly, threateningly.

“I’m the pregnant woman you abandoned yesterday, and if you touch me I will scream the place down.”

His eyebrows rise slightly in disbelief.

“You’d scream?”

“Bloody murder.” I narrow my eyes.

“No one would hear you,” he murmurs, his gaze intense, and briefly I’m reminded of our morning in Aspen. No. No. No.

“Are you trying to frighten me?” I mutter breathless, deliberately trying to

derail him. It works. He stills and swallows.

“That wasn’t my intention.” His eyes narrow. I can barely breathe. If he touches me, I will succumb. I know the power he wields over me, and over my traitorous body. I know.

“I had a drink with an old friend. We cleared the air. I am not going to see her again.”

“You sought her out?”

“Not at first. I tried to see Banner. But I found myself at the salon.”

Fuck.

“And you expect me to believe you’re not going to see her again?” I cannot contain my fury as I hiss at him. “What about the next time I step across some imaginary line? This is the same argument we have over and over again. Like we’re on some Ixion wheel. If I fuck up again, are you going to run back to her?”

“I am not going to see her again,” he says with a chilling finality. “She finally understands how I feel.”

I blink at him.

“What does that mean?”

He straightens and runs a hand through his hair, exasperated and angry and mute.

I try a different tack.

“Why can you talk to her and not to me?”

“I was mad at you. Like I am now.”

“You don’t say,” I snap. “Well I am mad at you right now. Mad at you for being so cold and callous yesterday when I needed you. Mad at you for saying I got knocked up deliberately. Mad at you for betraying me.” I manage to suppress a sob. His mouth drops open in shock, and he closes his eyes briefly, as if I’d slapped him. I swallow. Calm down Isabella.

“I was stupid,” I mutter petulantly, trying for a modicum of civility. “I should have kept better track of my shots. But I didn’t do it on purpose .

This pregnancy is a shock to me too.”

He glares at me, silent.

“You really fucked up yesterday,” I whisper. “I’ve had a lot to deal with over the last few weeks.”

“You really fucked up three weeks ago. Or whenever you forgot your shot.”

“God forbid I should be perfect like you.”

Oh stop, stop, stop. We stand glowering at each other.

“This is quite a performance, Mrs Cullen,” he whispers.

“Well, I’m glad that even knocked-up I’m so entertaining.”

He blinks and gazes at me.

“I need a shower,” he murmurs.

“And I’ve provided enough of a floorshow.”

“It’s a mighty fine floor show,” he whispers. He steps forward, and I step back again.

“Don’t.”

“I hate that you won’t let me touch you,” he breathes.

“Irony, huh?”

His eyes narrow once more.

“We haven’t resolved much, have we?”

“I’d say not. Except that I’m moving out of this bedroom.”

His eyes flare and widen briefly.

“She doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Except when you need her.”

“I don’t need her. I need you.”

“You didn’t yesterday. That woman is a hard limit for me, Edward.”

“She’s out of my life.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“For fuck’s sake, Bella.”

“Please let me get dressed.”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair once more.

“I’ll see you this evening,” he says, his voice bleak and devoid of feeling.

And for a moment I want to take him in my arms and soothe his tormented soul...

but I resist, and he turns and heads for the bathroom. I stand frozen until I hear the door close.

I stagger to the bed and flop down on to it. My inner goddess and my subconscious are both giving me a standing ovation. I did not succumb to sexpertise, tears, shouting, or murder. I deserve a Congressional Medal of Honor. But why do I feel so low? Shit. We resolved nothing. We’re on the edge of a precipice. Our marriage is at stake here – why can’t he see what a

complete and utter arse he's been, running to that woman? And what does he mean when he says he'll never see her again? How on earth am I supposed to believe that? I glance at the radio alarm – it's 8.45. Shit! I'll be late. I take a deep breath.

"Round Two was a stalemate, Little Blip," I whisper, patting my belly. "Daddy may be a lost cause. Oh I hope not. Why oh why did you come so early, Little Blip? Things were just getting good." My lip trembles, but I take a deep cleansing breath and bring my rolling emotions under control.

"Come on. Let's go kick ass at work."

I don't say goodbye to Edward. He's still in the shower when Stuart and I leave. As I gaze out of the darkened windows of the SUV my composure slips and my eyes water. My mood is reflected in the grey, dreary sky and I feel a strange sense of foreboding. We didn't actually discuss the baby. I have had less than twenty-four hours to assimilate the news of Little Blip – Edward has had even less time. "He doesn't even know your name." I caress my belly and wipe tears from my face.

"Mrs Cullen." Stuart interrupts my reverie. "We're here."

"Oh. Thanks Stuart."

"I'm going to make a run to the deli, ma'am. Can I get you anything?"

"No. Thank you, no. I'm not hungry."

Hanna has my latte waiting for me. I take one sniff of it and my stomach roils.

"Um – Can I have tea, please?" I mutter, embarrassed. I knew there was a reason I never really liked coffee. Jeez, it smells foul.

"You okay, Bella?"

I nod and scurry into the safety of my office.

My BlackBerry buzzes. It's Rose.

"Why was Edward looking for you?" she asks with no preamble at all.

"Good morning, Rose. How are you?"

"Cut the crap, Swan. What gives?"

The Rosalie Hale Inquisition begins.

"Edward and I had a fight, that's all."

"Did he hurt you?"

I roll my eyes.

"Yes, but not the way you're thinking." I cannot deal with Rose at the moment.

I know I will cry – and right now I am so proud of myself for not breaking down this morning.

“Rose, I have a meeting. I’ll call you back.”

“Good. You’re all right?”

“Yes.” No. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay Bella, have it your own way. I’m here for you.”

Oh no...

“I know,” I whisper. and fight the backlash of emotion at her kind words. I am not going to cry. I am not going to cry.

“Charlie okay?”

“Yes,” I whisper the word.

“Oh Bella,” she whispers.

“Don’t.”

“Okay. Talk later.”

“Yes.”

~

During the course of the morning I sporadically check my emails, hoping for word from Edward. But there’s nothing. As the day wears on I realize he’s not going to contact me at all, and that he’s still mad. Well, I’m still mad too. I throw myself into my work, pausing only at lunchtime for a cream cheese and salmon bagel. It’s extraordinary how much better I feel once I’ve eaten something.

~

At 5pm Stuart and I set off for the hospital to see Charlie. Stuart is extra vigilant, and even over-solicitous. It’s irritating. As we approach Charlie’s room he hovers over me.

“Shall I get you some tea while you visit with your father?” he asks.

“No thanks, Stuart. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll wait outside.” He opens the door for me, and I’m grateful to get away from him for a moment. Charlie is sitting up in bed reading a magazine. He’s shaved, wearing a smart pj top – he looks like his old self.

“Hey, Bells,” he grins. And his face falls.

“Oh Daddy...” I rush to his side, and in a very uncharacteristic move he opens his arms wide and hugs me.

“Bells,” he whispers, “What is it?” He holds me tight and kisses my hair. As

I'm in his arms I realize how rare these moments between us have been. Why is that? Is that why I like to crawl into Edward's lap? After a moment I pull away from him and sit down in the chair beside the bed. Charlie's brow is furrowed with concern.

"Tell your old man."

I shake my head. He doesn't need my problems right now.

"It's nothing Dad. You look well." I reach over and clasp his hand.

"Feeling more like myself. Though this leg in a cast is bitchin'."

"Bitchin'?" His word prompts my smile.

He smiles back at me.

"Bitchin'."

"Oh Daddy, I am so glad you're okay."

"Me too, Bells. I'd like to bounce some grandchildren on this bitchin' knee one day. Wouldn't want to miss that for the world."

I blink at him. Shit. Does he know?

"You and Edward getting along?"

I flush.

"We had a fight. We'll work it out."

He nods.

"He's a fine man, your husband," Charlie says reassuringly.

"He has his moments. What did the doctors say?"

~

Back at Escala, Edward is not home.

"Bella? Edward called and said that he'd be working late." Mrs Cope informs me apologetically.

"Oh. Thanks for letting me know." Why couldn't he tell me? Jeez, he really is taking his sulk to a whole new level. I am briefly reminded of the fight over our wedding vows and the major strop he had then. But I'm the aggrieved one here.

"What would you like to eat?" Mrs Cope has a determined, steely glint in her eye.

"Pasta."

She smiles.

"Spaghetti, penne, fusilli?"

“Spaghetti, your bolognese.”

“Coming up. And Bella... you should know, Mr Cullen was frantic this morning when he thought you’d left. He was beside himself.” She smiles fondly at me.

Oh...

~

He’s still not home by 9.00. I am sitting at my desk in the library, wondering where he is. I call him.

“Bella,” he says, his voice cool.

“Hi,” I murmur.

He inhales softly.

“Hi,” he says, his voice lower.

“Are you coming home?”

“Later.”

“Are you in the office?”

“Yes. Where did you expect me to be?”

With her.

“I’ll let you get on.”

We both hang on the line, the silence stretching and tightening between us.

“Goodnight, Bella,” he says eventually.

Oh!

“Goodnight, Edward.”

He hangs up.

Oh shit. I gaze at my BlackBerry. I don’t know what he expects me to do. I’m not going to let him walk all over me. Yes, he’s mad, fair enough. I’m mad.

But we are where we are. I haven’t run off loose-lipped to my ex-paedo lover.

I want him to acknowledge that that is not an acceptable way to behave.

I sit back in my chair, gazing at the billiard table in the library, and recall fun times playing snooker. Is this what my arrival did to my parents? Drove them apart? I place my hand on my belly. Maybe it’s just too early. Maybe this is not meant to be... And even as I think that, my subconscious is screaming no! If I terminate this pregnancy I will never forgive myself – or Edward. “Oh Blip... what have you done to us?” I can’t face talking to Rose. I can’t face talking to anyone. I text her, promising to call soon.

By eleven I can no longer keep my eyelids open. Resigned I head up to my old

room. Curling up beneath the duvet I finally let myself go, sobbing into my pillow, great heaving unladylike sobs of grief...

~

My head is heavy when I wake. Crisp fall light shines through the great windows of my room. Glancing at my alarm I see it's 7.30 am. My immediate thought is, where's Edward? I sit up and swing my legs out of bed. On the floor beside the bed is Edward's silver-grey tie, my favorite. It wasn't there when I went to bed last night. Reaching down I pick it up. I stare at it, caressing the silky material between my thumbs and forefingers, and hug it against my cheek. He was here, watching me sleep. And a glimmer of hope sparks deep inside me.

Mrs Cope is busy in the kitchen when I arrive downstairs.

"Good morning," she says brightly.

"Morning. Edward?" I ask.

Her face falls.

"He's already left."

"So he did come home?" I need to check, even though I have his tie as evidence.

"He did." She pauses. "Bella, please forgive me for speaking out of turn, but don't give up on him. He's a stubborn man."

I nod, and she stops. I'm sure my expression tells her I do not want to discuss my errant husband right now.

~

When I arrive at work, I check my emails. My heart leaps into overdrive when I see there's one from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Portland

Date: 17 September 2009: 06.45

To: Isabella Cullen

Bella,

I am flying down to Portland today.

I have some business to conclude with WSU.

I thought you would want to know.

Edward Cullen

CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Oh. Tears prick my eyes. That's it? My stomach flips. Shit! I am going to be sick. I race to the powder room and make it just in time, depositing my breakfast into the toilet. I sink to the floor of the cubicle and put my head in my hands. Could I be any more miserable? After a while, there's a gentle knock on the door.

"Bella?" It's Hanna.

Fuck.

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be out in a moment."

"Mr Fox is here to see you."

Shit.

"Show him into the meeting room. I'll be there in a minute."

"Do you want some tea?"

"Please."

~

After my lunch – another cream cheese and salmon bagel, which I manage to keep down – I sit staring listlessly at my computer, looking for inspiration and wondering how Edward and I are going to resolve this huge problem.

My BlackBerry buzzes, making me jump. I glance at the screen – it's Alice.

Jeez, that's all I need, her gushing and enthusiasm. I hesitate, wondering if I could just ignore it... but courtesy wins out.

"Alice," I answer brightly.

"Well hello there, Bella – long time no speak." The male voice is familiar, and my world stops spinning.

Fuck! My scalp prickles and all the hair on my body stands to attention, as adrenaline floods through my system.

It's James Smith.

~ooo000ooo~

MOTU II 113/26

"James." My voice has disappeared, choked by fear. What does he want? How is

he out of jail? Why does he have Alice's phone? The blood drains from my face and I feel dizzy.

"You do remember me," he says, his tone soft. I sense his bitter smile.

"Yes. Of course." My answer is automatic as my mind races.

"You're probably wondering why I called you."

"Yes."

Hang up.

"Don't hang up. I've been having a chat with your little sister-in-law."

WHAT? Alice! NO!

"What have you done?" I whisper, trying to quell my fear. Alice... No...

"Listen here, you prick teasing, gold digging whore. You fucked up my life.

Cullen fucked up my life. You owe me. I have the little bitch with me now.

And you, that shit you married, and his whole fucking family are going to pay."

Smith's contempt and bile takes me by surprise. What the hell? What has the

Cullen family got to do with Edward and me?

"James, what do you want?"

"I want his money. I really want his fucking money. If things had been different, it could have been me. So you're going to get it for me. I want five million dollars, today."

"James, I don't have access to that kind of money."

He snorts his derision.

"You have two hours to get it. That's it – two hours. Tell no one or this little bitch gets it. Not the cops, not your prick of a husband, not his security team. I will know if you do. Understand?" He pauses and I try to respond, but my mouth is so dry I can't.

"You understand?" he shouts.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Or I will kill her."

I gasp.

"Keep your phone with you. Tell no-one or I'll fuck her up before I kill her. You have two hours."

"James. I need longer. Three hours. How do I know that you have her?"

The line goes dead. I gape in horror at the phone, as my mouth dries, leaving the nasty metallic taste of terror. Alice, he has Alice. Or does he? My mind

whirrs at the obscene possibility and my stomach roils again. I think I'm going to be sick, but I inhale deeply, trying to steady my panic, and the nausea passes. My mind rockets through the possibilities. Tell Edward? Tell Taylor? Call the police? How will James know? Does he actually have Alice? Oh no. I need time, time to think – but I can only accomplish that by following his instructions. I grab my purse and head out of my office.

“Hanna, I have to go out. I am not sure how long I'll be. Cancel my appointments this afternoon. Let Victoria know I have to deal with an emergency.”

“Sure, Bella. Everything okay?” Hanna frowns, concern etched on her face.

“Yes,” I murmur distractedly, heading towards reception where Stuart is waiting.

“Stuart.” He leaps up from the armchair at the sound of my voice, and frowns when he sees my face.

“I'm not feeling well. Please take me home.”

“Sure, ma'am. Do you want me to get the car?”

“No I'll come with you. I'm in a hurry to get home.”

-

I gaze out of the window in stark terror, running through my plan. Get home. Change. Find checkbook. Escape from Ryan and Stuart somehow. Go to bank. Hell, how much room does five million dollars take up? What will it weigh? Will I need a suitcase? Should I telephone the bank in advance? Alice. Alice. What if he doesn't have Alice? How can I check? If I call Esme it will raise her suspicions, and possibly endanger Alice. He said he would know. I glance out of the back of the SUV. Am I being followed? My heart races as I examine the cars following us. They look innocuous enough. Oh Stuart, drive faster. Please. My eyes flicker to meet his in the rearview mirror and his brow creases.

Stuart presses a button on his Bluetooth headset to answer a call. “T... I wanted to let you know – Mrs Cullen is with me.” Stuart's eyes are on me once more. Who is he talking to?

He continues.

“She's unwell. I'm taking her back to Escala... I see... Sir.” Stuart's eyes flick from the road to mine in the rearview mirror. “Yes,” he agrees, and hangs up. “Taylor?” I whisper.

He nods.

“He’s with Mr Cullen?”

“Yes ma’am.” Stuart’s look softens in sympathy.

“Are they still in Portland?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Good. I have to keep Edward safe. My hand strays down to my belly and I rub it consciously. And you, little Blip. Keep you both safe.

“Can we hurry please? I’m not feeling well.”

“Yes ma’am.” Stuart presses the accelerator and our car glides through the traffic.

-

Mrs Cope is nowhere to be seen when Stuart and I arrive in the flat. Since her car is missing from the garage I assume she’s running errands with Ryan.

Stuart heads for Taylor’s office while I bolt to Edward’s study. Scuttling in panic around his desk I wrench open the drawer to find the checkbooks. Lauren’s gun slides forward into view. I feel an incongruous twinge of annoyance that Edward did not secure this weapon. He knows nothing about guns – jeez, he could get hurt. After a moment’s hesitation I grab the pistol, check to ensure it’s loaded and tuck it into the waistband of my black slacks. I might need it.

I swallow at the thought. I’ve only ever practiced on targets – I’ve never fired a gun at anyone. Forgive me, Charlie. I turn my attention to tracking down the right checkbook. There are five, and only one is in the names of E Cullen and Mrs I Cullen. I have about fifty four thousand dollars in my own account – I have no idea how much money is in this one. But Edward must be good for five million dollars, surely.

I take a deep breath, and in a more composed manner head to our bedroom. The bed has been made, and for a moment I feel a pang. Perhaps I should have slept here last night. What is the point of arguing with someone who by their own admission is fifty shades? He’s not even talking to me now. No – I do not have time to think about this.

Quickly I change out of my slacks, pulling on jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and a pair of sneakers. From the closet I fish out a large soft duffle bag. Will five million dollars fit into this? Edward’s gym bag is lying there on the floor. I open it, expecting to find it full of dirty laundry, but no – his gym

kit is clean and fresh. Mrs Cope does indeed get everywhere. I dump the contents onto the floor and stuff his gym bag into my duffel. There, that should do it. I check I have my driver's license as ID for the bank, and check the time. It's been thirty-one minutes since James called. Now I just have to get out of Escala without Stuart seeing me.

I make my way slowly and quietly to the foyer, aware of the CCTV camera in there trained on the elevator. I think Stuart's still in Taylor's office. Cautiously I open the foyer door, making as little noise as possible. Shutting it softly behind me I stand on the very threshold, up against the door, out of the view of the CCTV lens. I fish my cell phone out of my purse and call Stuart.

"Mrs Cullen."

"Stuart, I'm in the room upstairs, can you give me a hand with something?" I keep my voice low, knowing he's just down the hallway on the other side of this door.

"I'll be right with you ma'am," he says, and I can hear his confusion. I've never telephoned him for help before. My heart is in my throat, pounding in a jarring frenetic rhythm. Will this work? I hang up and listen to his footsteps cross the hallway and go up the stairs. I take another deep steadying breath, and briefly contemplate the irony of escaping from my own home like a felon.

Once Stuart's reached the upstairs landing, I race to the elevator and punch the call button. The doors slide open – with the too-loud ping that announces the elevator is ready. I dash inside and frantically stab the button for the basement garage. After an agonizing pause the doors slowly start to slide shut, and as they do I hear Stuart's cries.

"Mrs Cullen!" As the lift doors shut I see him skid into the foyer. "Bella!" he shouts in disbelief. But he's too late, and he disappears from view.

The elevator sinks smoothly down to the garage level. I have a couple of minutes' start on Stuart, and I know he'll try to stop me. I glance longingly at my R8 as I rush to the Saab, open the door, toss the duffel bag onto the passenger seat and slide into the driving seat.

The Saab starts at the first try. The tires squeal as I race to the entrance and wait eleven agonizing seconds for the barrier to lift. The instant it's clear I drive out, catching sight of Stuart in my rearview mirror as he dashes

out of service elevator into the garage. His bewildered, injured expression haunts me as I turn off the ramp into 4th Avenue.

I calm slightly. He will call Edward or Taylor, but I'll deal with that when I have to – I don't have time to dwell on it now. But I squirm uncomfortably in my seat, knowing, in my heart of hearts, that Stuart's probably lost his job. Don't dwell. I have to save Alice. I have to get to the bank and collect five million dollars. I glance in the rearview mirror, nervously anticipating the sight of the SUV bursting forth from the garage, but as I drive away there's no sign of Stuart.

-

The bank is sleek, modern and understated. There are hushed tones, echoing floors and pale green etched glass everywhere. I head straight to the Information desk.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" The young woman gives me a bright, insincere smile, and for a moment I regret changing into jeans.

"I'd like to withdraw a large amount of money."

Insincere Smile arches an even more insincere eyebrow.

"You have an account with us?" She fails to hide her sarcasm.

"Yes," I snap. "My husband and I have several accounts here. His name is Edward Cullen."

Her eyes widen fractionally and insincerity gives way to shock. Her eyes sweep up and down me once more, this time with a combination of disbelief and awe.

"This way, ma'am," she whispers, and leads me to a small, sparsely furnished office walled with more green-etched glass.

"Please take a seat." She gestures to a black leather chair by a glass desk bearing a state-of-the-art computer and phone. "How much will you be withdrawing today, Mrs Cullen?" she asks pleasantly.

"Five million dollars." I look her straight in the eye, like I ask for this amount of cash every day.

She blanches.

"I see. I'll fetch the manager. Oh – forgive me for asking, but do you have ID?"

"I do. But I'd like to speak to the manager."

"Of course, Mrs Cullen." She scuttles out. I sink into the seat, and a wave of

nausea washes over me. Oh no – not now. I take a deep cleansing breath, and the wave passes. Nervously I check my watch. Twenty-five past two.

A middle-aged man enters the room. He has a receding hairline, but wears a sharp, expensive charcoal suit and matching tie. He holds out his hand.

“Mrs Cullen,” he beams, “I’m Troy Whelan.” We shake, and he sits down at the desk, opposite me.

“My colleague tells me you’d like to withdraw a large amount of money.”

“That’s correct. Five million dollars.”

He turns to his sleek computer and taps in a few numbers.

“We normally ask some notice for large amounts of money.” He pauses, and flashes me a reassuring but supercilious smile. “Fortunately, however, we hold the cash reserve for the entire Pacific Northwest,” he boasts. Jeez – is he trying to impress me?

“Mr Whelan, I’m in a hurry. What do I need to do? I have my driver’s license, and our joint account check book. Do I just write a check?”

“First things first, Mrs Cullen. Can I see the ID?” He switches from jovial show-off to serious banker.

“Here.” I hand over my license.

“Mrs Cullen... this says Isabella Swan.”

Oh shit.

“Oh... yes. Um.”

“I’ll call Mr Cullen.”

“Oh – no, that won’t be necessary.”

Shit!

“I must have something with my married name.” I rifle through my purse. What do I have with my name on it? I pull out my wallet, open it and find a photograph of Edward and me, on the bed in the Fair Lady’s cabin. I can’t show him that! I dig out my black Amex.

“Here.”

“Mrs Isabella Cullen,” Whelan reads. “Yes, that should do.” He frowns.

“You’ll need to write a check.”

“Sure. This account?” I show him my checkbook.

“That’ll be fine. I’ll also need you to complete some additional paperwork. If you’ll excuse me for a moment.”

I nod, and he rises and stalks out of the office. Again I release my held breath. I had no idea this would be so difficult. Clumsily I open my checkbook and pull a pen out of my purse. Do I just make it out to cash? I have no idea.

With shaking fingers I write
Five million dollars. \$5,000,000

Oh God, I hope I'm doing the right thing. Alice, think of Alice. I can't tell anyone.

Tell no one or I'll fuck her up before I kill her. James's chilling, repugnant words haunt me.

Mr Whelan returns, pale-faced and sheepish.

"Mrs Cullen? Your husband wants to speak with you," he murmurs, and points to the phone on the glass table between us.

What? No.

"He's on line one. Just press the button. I'll be outside." He has the grace to look embarrassed. Benedict Arnold has nothing on Whelan. I scowl at him, feeling the blood drain from my face again, as he shuffles out of the office.

Shit! Shit! Shit! What am I going to say to Edward? He'll know. He'll intervene. He's a danger to his sister. My hand trembles as I reach for the phone. I hold it against my ear, trying to calm my erratic breathing, and press the button for line one.

"Hi," I murmur, trying in vain to steady my nerves.

"You're leaving me?" Edward's words are an agonized, breathless whisper.

What?

"No!" My voice mirrors his. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no – how can he think that? The money? He thinks I'm going because of the money? And in moment of horrific clarity, I realize the only way I'm going to keep Edward at arm's length, out of harm's way, and to save his sister... is to lie.

"Yes," I whisper. And searing pain lances through me, tears springing to my eyes.

He gasps, almost a sob.

"Bella, I –" he chokes.

NO! My hand clutches my mouth as I stifle my warring emotions.

"Edward, please. Don't." I fight back tears.

"You're going?" he says.

“Yes.”

“But why the cash? Was it always the money?” His tortured voice is barely audible.

NO! Tears roll down my face.

“No,” I whisper.

“Is five million enough?”

Oh please, stop!

“Yes.”

“And the baby?” His voice is a breathless echo.

What? My hand moves from my mouth to my belly.

“I’ll take care of the baby,” I murmur. My little Blip... our little Blip.

“This is what you want?”

No!

“Yes.”

He inhales sharply.

“Take it all,” he hisses.

“Edward,” I sob. “It’s for you. For your family. Please. Don’t.”

“Take it all, Isabella.”

“Edward...” And I nearly cave. Nearly tell him, about James, about Alice, about the ransom. Just trust me, please! I silently beg him.

“I’ll always love you.” His voice is hoarse. He hangs up.

“Edward! No... I love you too.” And all the stupid, stupid shit that we put each other through over the last few days fades into insignificance. I promised I’d never leave him. I am not leaving you. I am saving your sister. I slump into the chair weeping copiously into my hands.

I am interrupted by a timid knock on the door. Whelan enters, though I haven’t acknowledged him. He looks everywhere but at me. He’s mortified. You called him, you bastard! I glare at him.

“You have carte blanche, Mrs Cullen,” he says. “Mr Cullen says whatever you need.”

“I just need five million dollars,” I mutter through gritted teeth.

“Yes ma’am. Are you all right?”

“Do I look all right?” I snap.

“I’m sorry ma’am. Some water?”

I nod, sullenly. I have just left my husband. Well, Edward thinks I have. My subconscious purses her lips: because you told him so. But I don't want to leave him. I love him.

"I'll have my colleague bring you some, while I prepare the money. If you could just sign here, ma'am... and make the check out to cash, and sign that too."

He places a form on the table. I scrawl my signature along the dotted line of the check, then the form. Isabella Cullen. Teardrops fall on the desk, narrowly missing the paperwork.

"I'll take those, ma'am. It will take us about half an hour to prepare the money."

I quickly check my watch. James said two hours – that should take us to two hours. I nod at Whelan and he tiptoes out of the office, leaving me to my misery.

A few moments, minutes, hours later – I don't know – Miss Insincere Smile re-enters with a carafe of water and a glass.

"Mrs Cullen," she says softly, sincerely, places the glass on the desk and fills it.

"Thank you," I mutter. I take the glass and drink gratefully.

She exits, leaving me with my jumbled, frightened thoughts. I will fix things with Edward somehow... if it's not too late. At least he's out of the picture.

Right now I have to concentrate on Alice. Suppose James is lying? Suppose he doesn't have her? Surely I should call the police.

Tell no-one or I'll fuck her up before I kill her. I can't. I sit back in the chair, feeling the reassuring presence of Lauren's pistol at my waist digging into my back. Who would have thought I'd ever feel grateful that Lauren once pulled a gun on me? Oh Charlie, I'm so glad you taught me how to shoot.

Charlie! I gasp. He'll be expecting me to visit this evening. Perhaps I can simply dump the money with James. He can run, while I take Alice home... Oh, this sounds absurd.

My BlackBerry jumps to life, 'Your Love is King' filling the room. Oh no. It's Edward. What does he want? To twist the knife in my wounds?

Was it always the money?

Oh Edward – how could you think that? Anger flares in my gut. Yes, anger. It helps. I send the call to voicemail. I'll deal with my husband later.

There's a knock on the door.

"Mrs Cullen." It's Whelan. "The money is ready."

Oh no.

"Thank you," I murmur, and slowly stand up. The room spins momentarily, and I clutch the chair.

"Mrs Cullen, are you feeling okay?"

I nod, and give him a back-off-now-mister stare. Another deep calming breath.

I have to do this. I have to do this. I must save Alice. I pull the hem of my hooded sweatshirt down, concealing the butt of the pistol in the back of my jeans.

Mr Whelan frowns, but holds open the door, and I propel myself forward on my shaking limbs out of the little office.

Stuart is waiting at the entrance, scanning the public area. Shit! How the hell did he find me? Our eyes meet, and he frowns at me, gauging my reaction.

Oh, he's mad. Shit. I hold up my index finger in a with-you-in-a-minute gesture. He nods, and answers a call on his cell phone. Shit! I bet that's Edward. I turn abruptly, almost colliding with Whelan right behind me, and bolt into the little office.

"Mrs Cullen?" Whelan sounds confused as he follows me back in.

Stuart could blow this whole plan. Alice – No! I gaze up at Whelan.

"There's someone out there I don't want to see. Someone following me."

Whelan's eyes widen.

"Do you want me to call the Police?"

"No!" Holy Fuck, no. What am I going to do? I glance at my watch. It's nearly 3.15. James will call any moment. Think Bella, think! Whelan gazes at me in growing desperation and bewilderment. He must think I'm crazy. You are crazy, my subconscious snaps.

"I need to make a call. Could you give me some privacy please?"

"Certainly," Whelan answers – grateful, I think, to leave the room. When he's closed the door, I call Alice's cell phone with trembling fingers.

"Well, if it isn't my paycheck," James answers scornfully.

I don't have time for his bullshit.

"I have a problem."

"I know. Your security followed you to the bank."

What? How the hell does he know?"

"You'll have to lose him. I have a car waiting at the back of the bank. Black SUV, the Toyota. You have three minutes to get there."

"It may take longer than three minutes." My heart leaps into my throat once more.

"You're bright, for a gold-digging whore, Cullen. You figure it out. And dump your cell phone once you reach the vehicle. Got it, bitch?"

"Yes."

"Say it!" he snaps.

"I've got it."

He hangs up.

Shit! I open the door to find Whelan waiting patiently outside.

"Mr Whelan, I'll need some help taking the bags to my car. It's parked outside, at the back of the bank. Do you have an exit at the rear?"

He frowns.

"We do, yes. For staff."

"Can we leave that way? I can avoid the unwelcome attention at the door."

"As you wish, Mrs Cullen. I'll have two clerks help with the bags, and two security guards to supervise. If you could follow me?"

"I have one more favor to ask you."

"By all means, Mrs Cullen."

-

Two minutes later my entourage and I are out on the street, heading over to the Toyota. Its windows are blacked out, and I can't tell who's at the wheel. But as we approach, the driver's door swings open and a figure clad in black, with a black cap pulled low over her face, climbs gracefully out of the car. Shit!

It's Victoria. She moves to the rear of the SUV and opens the trunk. The two young bank clerks carrying the money sling the heavy bags into the back.

"Mrs Cullen." She has the nerve to smile as if we are off on a friendly jaunt.

"Victoria." My greeting is arctic. "Nice to see you outside work."

Mr Whelan clears this throat.

"Well, it's been an interesting afternoon, Mrs Cullen," he says. And I am forced to observe the social niceties, shaking his hand and thanking him, while my mind is reeling. Victoria? What the hell? Why is she mixed up with James?

Whelan and his team disappear back into the bank, leaving me alone with the head of personnel at SIP. Who is involved in kidnapping, extortion and very possibly other felonies. Why?

Victoria opens the rear passenger door and ushers me in.

“Your cell, Mrs Cullen?” she asks, watching me warily. I hand her the phone I’m carrying and she tosses it into a nearby trashcan.

“That will throw the dogs off the scent,” she says smugly.

Who is this woman? Victoria slams my door shut and climbs into the driving seat. I glance anxiously behind me as she pulls out into the traffic. Stuart is nowhere to be seen.

“Victoria, you have the money. Call James. Tell him to let Alice go.”

“I think he wants to thank you in person, Bella,” she murmurs. Shit! I glare at her stonily in the rearview mirror. She flushes slightly and an anxious scowl mars her otherwise lovely face.

She’s heading east. Where is she taking me?

“Why are you doing this, Victoria? I thought you didn’t like James.”

She glances at me again briefly in the mirror, and I see a fleeting look of pain in her eyes.

“Bella, we’ll get along just fine if you keep your mouth shut,” she mutters.

“But you can’t do this. This is so wrong.”

“Quiet, Bella,” she says, but I can sense her unease.

“Does he have some kind of hold on you?” I ask. Her eyes shoot to mine and she slams on the brakes, throwing me forward so hard I hit my face against the headrest of the front seat.

“I said be quiet,” she snarls. “And I suggest you put on your seatbelt.”

And in that moment I know that he does. Something so awful that she’s prepared to do this for him. I wonder briefly what that could be. Theft from the company? Something from her private life? Something sexual? I shudder at the thought. Edward said that none of James’s PAs would talk. Perhaps it’s the same story with all of them. That’s why he wanted to fuck me too. Bile rises in my throat with revulsion at the thought.

Victoria heads away from downtown Seattle and up into the hills to the east.

Before long we’re driving through residential streets. I catch sight of one of the street signs: South Irving Street. She turns sharp left at a junction into

a deserted street, with a dilapidated children's playground on one side and on the other a large concrete parking lot flanked by a row of squat, empty brick buildings. Victoria pulls into the parking lot and stops outside the last of the brick units.

She turns to me.

"Showtime," she murmurs. My scalp prickles as fear and adrenaline course through my body.

"You don't have to do this," I whisper back. Her mouth presses into a flat line, and she climbs out of the car. This is for Alice. This is for Alice. I quickly pray, Please let her be okay, please let her be okay.

"Get out," Victoria barks, yanking the rear passenger door open.

Shit.

As I clamber out my legs are shaking so hard I wonder if I can stand. The cool late-afternoon breeze carries the scent of the coming fall and the chalky, dusty smell of derelict buildings.

"Well, looky here." James emerges from a small, boarded-up door on the left of the building. His hair is short. He's removed his earrings, and he's wearing a suit. A suit? He ambles towards me, oozing arrogance and hate. My heart rate spikes.

"Where's Alice?" I stammer, my mouth so dry I can hardly form the words.

"First things first, bitch," James sneers, coming to a halt in front of me. I can practically taste his contempt. "The money?"

Victoria is checking the bags in the trunk.

"There's a helluvalot of cash here," she says in awe, zipping and unzipping each bag.

"And her cell?"

"In the trash."

"Good," James snarls, and from nowhere he lashes out, backhanding me hard across the face. The ferocious, unprovoked blow knocks me to the ground, and my head bounces with a sickening thud off the concrete. Pain explodes in my head, my eyes fill with tears, and my vision blurs as the shock of the impact resonates, unleashing agony that pulses through my skull.

I scream a silent cry of suffering and shocked terror. Oh no. Oh no – Little Blip. James follows through with a swift, vicious kick to my ribs, and my breath

is blasted from my lungs by force of the blow. Scrunching my eyes tightly, I try to fight the nausea and pain, to fight for a precious breath. Little Blip, little Blip, oh my little Blip –

“That’s for SIP, you fucking bitch,” James screams.

I pull my legs up, huddling into a ball, anticipating the next blow. No. No. No.

“JAMES!” Victoria screeches, “Not here. Not in broad daylight. for fuck’s sake!”

He pauses.

“The bitch deserves it!” he gloats to Victoria. And it gives me one precious second to reach round and pull the gun from the waistband of my jeans.

I squeeze the trigger and fire.

The bullet hits him just above the knee, and he collapses in front of me, crying out in agony, clutching his thigh as his fingers redden with his blood.

“FUCK!” James bellows. I turn to face Victoria, and she’s gaping at me in horror, and raising her hands above her head. She blurs... darkness closes in. Shit... She’s at the end of a tunnel. Darkness, consuming her. Consuming me. From far away all hell breaks loose. Cars screeching... brakes... doors... shouting... running... footsteps. The gun drops from my hand.

“BELLA!”

Edward’s voice... Edward’s voice... Edward’s agonized voice. Alice... save Alice.

“Bella!”

Darkness... peace.

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There is only pain. My head, my chest... burning pain. My side, my arm. Pain. Pain, and whispered words in the darkness. Where am I? I cannot open my eyes. The whispered words become clearer... a beacon in the darkness.

“Her ribs are bruised, Mr Cullen, and she has a hairline fracture to her skull.

We need to keep her here for observation.”

“And the baby?” Breathless words. Breathless, anguished words.

“The baby’s fine, Mr Cullen.”

“Oh, thank God.” Whisped breathless words. A litany... a prayer. “Oh thank

God.”

Oh my.

He’s worried about the baby... Little Blip.

And the baby?... Oh thank God.

Little Blip is safe.

And the baby?... Oh thank God.

He cares about the baby.

And the baby?... Oh thank God.

He wants this baby. I relax, and unconsciousness claims me once more, stealing me away from the pain.

~ooo000ooo~

MOTU II 114/27

Everything is heavy and aching: limbs, head, eyelids, nothing will move. I cannot open my eyes or my mouth. I am blind and mute and aching. As I surface from the fog, consciousness hovers, a seductive siren, just out of reach.

Sounds become voices.

“I’m not leaving her.” It’s Edward! He’s here... I will myself to wake – his voice is strained, a breathless whisper.

“Edward, you should sleep.”

“No, Dad. I want to be here when she wakes up.”

“I’ll sit with her. It’s the least I can do after she saved my daughter.”

Alice! The fog closes in.

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The fog is light.

“How’s Alice?”

“She’s groggy, and scared, and angry. It’ll be a few hours before the rohypnol is completely out of her system.”

“Christ.”

“I know. I’m feeling seven kinds of foolish for relenting on her security. You warned me, but Alice is so stubborn. If it wasn’t for Bella here...”

“We all thought Smith was out of the picture. And this crazy, stupid wife of

mine – Why didn't she tell me?" Edward's voice is full of anguish.

"Edward, calm down. Bella was incredibly brave."

"Brave and headstrong and stubborn and stupid." His voice cracks.

Oh no... Consciousness skips away, laughing, into the fog.

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I have no sense of time.

"If you don't take her across your knee, I sure as hell will. What the hell was she thinking?"

"Trust me, Charlie, I just might do that."

Daddy! He's here. I fight the fog... fight... but I spiral down once more into oblivion. No...

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"Detective, as you can see, my wife is no state to answer any of your questions." Edward is angry.

"She's a headstrong young woman, Mr Cullen."

"I wish she'd killed the fucker."

"That would have been more paperwork for me, Mr Cullen..."

"Miss Morgan is singing like the proverbial. Smith's a real twisted son of a bitch. He has a serious grudge against your father and you..."

I slip away. NO!

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"What do you mean you weren't talking?" It's Esme. My mother-in-law. She sounds angry. I try to move my head, but I'm met with a resounding, listless silence from my body.

"What did you do?"

"Mom – "

"Edward! What did you do?"

"I was so angry." It's almost a sob... No.

"Hey..."

The world dips and blurs and I'm gone.

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I hear soft voices.

"You told me you'd cut all ties." Esme is talking. Her voice is quiet, admonishing.

"I know." Edward sounds resigned. "But seeing her finally put it all in perspective for me. You know... with the child. For the first time I felt... repulsed."

"...Children will do that to you, darling. Make you look at the world in a different light."

"She got the message."

"Good."

"I hurt Bella," he whispers.

"We always hurt the ones we love, darling. You'll have to tell her you're sorry. And mean it, and give her time."

"She said she was leaving me."

No. No. NO!

"Did you believe her?"

Oh... the darkness closes in. No –

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"...I'm glad we talked."

"Me too, darling. I'm always here."

"I know, Mom."

"I can't believe I'm going to be a grandmother."

Grandma! Oh my little Blip. Sweet oblivion beckons.

Hmm. His stubble softly scrapes the back of my hand as he squeezes my fingers.

"Oh baby, please come back to me. I'm sorry. Sorry for everything. Just wake up. I miss you. I love you..."

I try. I try. I want to see him. But my body disobeys me and I fall asleep once more.

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I have a pressing need, a pressing need to pee. I open my eyes. I'm in the clean sterile environment of a hospital room. It's dark, except for a sidelight, and all is quiet. My head and my chest aches but more than that my bladder is bursting. I need to pee. I test my limbs and they all move slightly. My right arm smarts and I notice the IV needle inserted. I shut my eyes quickly. Turning my head – I'm pleased that it responds to my will – I open my eyes again and see Edward there, asleep, leaning on my bed, his head on his folded arms. I reach up, grateful once more that my body responds, and my

fingers find his soft hair.

He's startled awake, raising his head so suddenly my hand falls weakly back onto the bed.

"Hi," I croak.

"Oh, Bella," he chokes, green eyes wide. He grasps my hand, squeezing it tightly and holding it up against his rough-stubbed cheek.

"I need to pee," I whisper.

He gapes at me for a moment.

"Okay," he says, blinking.

I start to move and struggle to sit.

"Bella, stay still. I'll call a nurse." He quickly stands, alarmed, and reaches for a buzzer on the bedside, but I distract him before he can press it.

"No. I need to get up."

Jeez, I feel so weak.

"Will you do as you're told for once?" he snaps, exasperated.

"I really need to pee," I rasp. My throat and mouth is so dry.

"Dammit. I'll take you myself." He strides round the bed and moves the IV stand back. Leaning down he pulls back the blankets and sheets. I'm wearing a thin hospital gown. I don't remember being stripped. Gently he lifts me out of the bed, and I wrap my arms around his neck. My body protests. Jeez, I ache everywhere. Edward carries me, towing the IV, to the ensuite bathroom.

"Mrs Cullen, you're too light," he mutters disapprovingly as he sets me gently on my feet. I sway. My legs feel like Jell-O. Edward flips the light switch and I'm momentarily blinded by the fluorescent lamp that pings on.

"Sit before you fall," he snaps, still holding me.

Tentatively I sit down on the toilet.

"Go." I try to wave him out.

"No. Just pee, Bella."

Could this be any more embarrassing?

"I can't, not with you here."

"You might fall."

"Please," I beg.

He raises his hands in defeat.

"I'll stand outside, door open." He takes a couple of paces back until he's

standing just outside the door.

“Turn around, please,” I ask. Why do I feel so ridiculously shy with this man? He rolls his eyes, but complies, and when his back is turned I let go... and savor the relief.

I take stock of my injuries. My head hurts, my chest aches where James kicked me and my side throbs where he pushed me to the ground. Plus I’m thirsty and hungry. Jeez, really hungry. I finish up, thankful that I don’t have to get up to wash my hands, as the sink is close. I just don’t have the strength to stand.

“I’m done,” I call, drying my hands on the towel.

Edward turns and comes back in, and before I know it I’m in his arms again. I have missed these arms... A nurse appears as he’s putting me back into bed, and he releases me – reluctantly, I think. I hope.

“Mrs Cullen, you’re awake,” she says, surprised. She must be in her fifties, though her hair is jet black. She wears overlarge pearl earrings.

“Do you need anything? I’ll let Doctor Bartley know you’ve woken up.”

Bustling over she props me expertly up on my pillows.

“I’m thirsty.”

“I’ll fetch you some water. My name’s Eleanor, and if there’s anything I can do for you just let me know.” With that she leaves. I glance anxiously up at Edward. He looks dreadful – haunted, even – like he hasn’t slept for days. His hair is more disheveled than usual, he hasn’t shaved for a long time and his shirt is badly creased. I frown.

“How are you feeling?” he whispers, sitting down on the bed out of arm’s reach.

“Confused. Achy. Hungry.”

“Hungry?” He blinks in surprise.

I nod.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Anything. Soup.”

He eases his BlackBerry out of his pants pocket and presses a number.

“Bella wants chicken soup... Good ... Thank you.” He hangs up.

“Taylor?”

Edward nods. He looks wide-eyed and wary, like I’m some kind of exotic beast about to flee. Eleanor returns with a pitcher of water and we both fall

silent, gazing at each other as she pours out a glass and hands it to me.

“Small sips now,” she warns.

“Yes ma’am,” I mutter and take a welcome sip of cool water. Oh my. It tastes perfect. I take another, Edward watching me intently.

“Alice?” I ask.

“She’s safe. Thanks to you.”

“They did have her?”

“Yes.”

All the madness was for a reason. Relief spirals through my body. Thank God, thank God, thank God she’s okay. I frown.

“How did they get her?”

“Victoria,” he says simply.

“No!”

He nods.

“She picked her up at Alice’s gym.”

I frown, still not understanding.

“Bella, I’ll fill you in on the details later. Alice is fine, all things considered. She was drugged. She’s groggy now and shaken up, but by some miracle she wasn’t harmed.” Edward’s jaw clenches.

“What you did...” He runs his hand through his hair. “Was incredibly brave and incredibly stupid. You could have been killed.” His eyes blaze a bleak forest green and I know he’s restraining his anger.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” I whisper.

“You could have told me!” he says vehemently, his hands fisting in his lap.

“He said he’d kill her if I told anyone. I couldn’t take that risk.”

Edward closes his eyes, dread etched in his face.

“I have died a thousand deaths since Thursday.”

Thursday?

“What day is it?”

“It’s only just Saturday, nearly one in the morning.” He checks his watch.

“You’ve been unconscious for over twenty-four hours.”

Oh.

“And James and Victoria?”

“In police custody. Although Smith is here, under guard. They had to remove

the bullet you left in him,” Edward says bitterly. “I don’t know where in this hospital he is, fortunately, or I’d probably kill him myself.” His face darkens.

Oh shit. James is here? ‘That’s for SIP you fucking bitch!’

I pale. My empty stomach convulses, tears prick my eyes, and a deep shudder runs through me.

“Hey.” Edward scoots forward, his voice filled with concern. Taking the glass from my hand he tenderly folds me into his arms. “You’re safe now,” he murmurs against my hair, his voice hoarse.

“Edward, I’m so sorry.” My tears start to fall.

“Hush.” He strokes my hair, and I weep into his neck.

“And what I said. I was never going to leave you.”

“Hush baby, I know.”

“You do?” I gasp. This admission halts my tears.

“I worked it out. Eventually. Honestly Bella, what were you thinking?” His tone is restrained.

“You took me by surprise,” I mutter into his shirt collar. “When we spoke at the bank. Thinking I was leaving you. I thought you knew me better. I’ve said to you over and over I would never leave.”

“But after the way I’ve behaved – ” His voice is barely audible, and his arms tighten around me. “I thought for a short time that I’d lost you.”

“No, Edward. Never. I didn’t want you to come and interfere.”

He sighs, and I don’t know if it’s from anger, exasperation or hurt.

“How did you work it out?” I ask quickly, to distract him from his line of thought. I lean back to gaze at him. Reaching up he tucks my hair behind me ear.

“I’d just touched down in Seattle when the bank called. Last I’d heard you were ill and going home.”

“So you were in Portland when Stuart called you?”

“We were just about to take off. I was worried about you,” he says softly.

“You were?”

He frowns.

“Of course I was.” He skirts his thumb over my bottom lip. “I spend my life worrying about you, you know that.”

Oh Edward!

“James called me at the office,” I murmur. “He gave me two hours to get the money.” I shrug. “I had to leave, and it just seemed the best excuse.”

Edward’s mouth presses into a hard line.

“And you gave Stuart the slip. He’s mad at you as well.”

“As well?”

“As well as me.”

I reach up and tentatively touch his face, running my fingers over his stubble.

He closes his eyes, leaning into my fingers.

“Don’t be mad at me – please,” I whisper.

“I am so mad at you, Bella,” he murmurs. “What you did was monumentally stupid. Bordering on insane.”

“I told you, I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You don’t seem to have any regard for your personal safety. And it’s not just you now,” he adds angrily. My lip trembles. He’s thinking about our little Blip.

The door opens, startling us both, and a young African-American woman in a white coat over green scrubs strides in.

“Good evening, Mrs Cullen. I’m Doctor Bartley.”

She starts to examine me thoroughly, shining a light in my eyes, making me touch her fingers, then my nose with first one eye then the other closed, and checking all my reflexes. But her voice is soft and her touch gentle; she has a warm bedside manner. Nurse Eleanor joins her to take my blood pressure and when she’s finished, removes my IV. Edward wanders to the corner of the room while the two of them tend to me and makes some calls. It’s hard to concentrate on Dr Bartley, Nurse Eleanor and Edward at the same time, but I hear him call his father, my mother and Rose to say I’m awake. Finally he leaves a message for Charlie.

Charlie. Oh shit... a vague memory of his voice comes back to me. He was here – yes, while I was still unconscious.

Dr Bartley checks around my ribs, her fingers probing gently but firmly.

I wince.

“These are bruised, not cracked or broken. You were very lucky, Mrs Cullen.”

I scowl. Lucky? Not the word I would have chosen.

Edward scowls at her too. He mouths something at me... I think it's 'foolhardy' but I'm not sure.

"I'll prescribe you some painkillers. You'll need them for this and for the headache you must have. But all's looking as it should, Mrs Cullen. I suggest you get some sleep. Depending on how you feel in the morning, we may let you go home. My colleague Dr Singh will be attending you then."

"Okay. Thank you."

There's a knock on the door, and Taylor enters bearing a black cardboard box with 'Fairmont Olympic' emblazoned in cream on the side.

Holy cow!

Dr Bartley smiles and exits the room with Nurse Eleanor.

Edward pulls the wheeled tray over to me and Taylor places the box on it.

"Welcome back, Mrs Cullen," says Taylor.

"Hello, Taylor. Thank you."

"You're most welcome, ma'am." I think he wants to say more, but he holds fire.

Edward is unpacking the box, producing a thermos, soup bowl, side plate, linen napkin, soup spoon, a small basket of bread rolls, silver salt and pepper shakers... The Olympic has gone all-out.

"This is great, Taylor." My stomach is rumbling. I am famished.

"Will that be all?" he asks.

"Yes, thanks," Edward dismisses him.

Taylor nods.

"Taylor, thank you."

"Anything else I can get you, Mrs Cullen?"

I glance at Edward.

"Just some clean clothes for Edward."

Taylor smiles.

"Yes ma'am."

Edward glances down at his shirt, bemused.

"How long have you been wearing that shirt?" I ask.

"Since Thursday morning." He gives me crooked smile.

Taylor exits.

"Taylor's real pissed at you too," Edward adds casually, unscrewing the lid of the thermos and pouring creamy chicken soup into the bowl.

Oh no – not Taylor too! But I don't dwell on that, as my chicken soup is distracting me. It smells delicious, and steam curls invitingly from its surface. I take a taste... It's everything it promised to be.

"Good?" Edward asks, perching on the bed again.

I nod enthusiastically, and don't stop. My hunger feels primal. I pause only to wipe my mouth on the linen napkin.

"Tell me what happened. After you realized what was going on," I prompt him. Edward runs his hand through his hair and shakes his head.

"Oh Bella, it's good to see you eat."

"I'm hungry. Tell me."

He frowns, recalling the painful memory.

"Well, after the bank called, and I thought my world had completely fallen apart – " He can't hide the pain in his voice.

I stop eating. Oh shit.

"Don't stop eating, or I'll stop talking," he whispers, his tone adamant. When I peek up at him he's glaring at me. Tentatively I continue with my soup.

Okay, okay... Damn, it tastes good. Edward's gaze softens and after a beat he resumes.

"Anyway, shortly after you and I had finished our conversation, Taylor informed me that Smith had been granted bail. How, I don't know – I thought we'd managed to scupper that. So I thought about what you'd said... and I knew something was seriously wrong."

I blink at him.

"It was never about the money," I snap suddenly, an expected surge of anger flaring in my belly. My voice rises. "How could you even think that? It's never been about your fucking money!" My head starts to pound, and I wince. Edward gapes at me for a split second, surprised by my vehemence. He narrows his eyes.

"Mind your language," he growls. "Calm down and eat."

I glare mutinously at him.

"Bella," he warns.

"That hurt me more than anything, Edward," I whisper. "Almost as much as you seeing that woman."

He inhales sharply and his eyes widen, as if I've slapped him. He suddenly

looks very tired. Closing his eyes briefly he shakes his head, resigned.

“I know,” he sighs. “And I’m sorry. More than you know.” His eyes are luminous with contrition. “Please, eat. While your soup is still hot.” His voice is soft and compelling, and I do as he asks, although I want to talk more about her and him. He breathes a sigh of relief.

“Go on,” I whisper, between bites of the fresh white breadroll.

“We didn’t know Alice was missing. I thought maybe he was blackmailing you or something. I called you back, but you didn’t answer.” He scowls. “I left you a message, then called Stuart. Taylor started tracking your cell. I knew you were at the bank so we headed straight there.”

“I don’t know how Stuart found me. Was he tracking my cell too?”

“The Saab is fitted with a tracking device. All our cars are.”

Oh!

“By the time we got near the bank we saw you were already on the move – and we just followed. Why are you smiling?”

“On some level I knew you’d be stalking me.”

“And that is amusing because?” he asks, appalled.

“James had instructed me to get rid of my cell. So I borrowed Whelan’s cell, and that’s the one I threw away. I put mine into one of the duffle bags so you could track your money.”

Edward sighs.

“Our money, Bella,” he says quietly. “Eat.”

I wipe my soup bowl with the last of my bread and pop it into my mouth. For the first time in a long while I feel replete, in spite of our conversation.

“Finished,” I murmur.

“Good girl.”

There’s a knock on the door and nurse Eleanor enters once more, carrying a small paper cup. Edward stands and clears away my plate, and starts putting all the items back into the box.

“Pain relief,” smiles Eleanor, showing me the white pill in the paper cup.

“Is this okay to take? You know – with the baby?”

“Yes Mrs Cullen. It’s Lortab – it’s fine, it won’t affect the baby.”

I nod gratefully. My head really is pounding. I swallow it down with a sip of water.

“You ought to rest, Mrs Cullen,” says Eleanor, looking pointedly at Edward.

He nods.

No!

“You’re going?” I breathe. Panic is setting in. Don’t go – we’ve just started talking!

Edward snorts.

“If you think for one moment I’m going to let you out of my sight, Mrs Cullen, you are very much mistaken.”

Eleanor huffs slightly, but hovers over me and readjusts my pillows so that I have to lie down.

“Good night, Mrs Cullen,” she says, and with one last censorious glance at Edward she leaves.

Edward raises an eyebrow as she closes the door.

“I don’t think nurse Eleanor approves of me.”

He walks over to me, but he looks tired, and I know I should try and persuade him to go home.

“You need to rest too, Edward. Go home. You look exhausted.”

“I’m not leaving you. I’ll doze in this armchair.”

I scowl at him, then shift onto my side, grateful that the IV drip has gone.

“Sleep with me.”

He frowns.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me. Please, Edward.”

He gazes at me, and I can tell he’s tempted.

“Please.” I lift up the blankets, inviting him into the bed.

“Fuck it,” he mutters. He slips off his shoes and socks and gingerly clambers in beside me. Gently he wraps his arm around me, and I lay my head on his chest. He kisses my hair.

“I don’t think Nurse Eleanor will be very happy with this arrangement,” he whispers conspiratorially.

I giggle, then stop sharply as pain lances through my chest.

“Don’t make me laugh. It hurts.”

“Oh, but I love that sound,” he says a little sadly, his voice low. “I’m sorry,” he adds. He kisses my hair again and inhales deeply, and I don’t know what he’s apologizing for... making me laugh? Or the mess we’re in? I rest my hand over his heart, and he places his hand on mine.

“You will tell me, won’t you?” I breathe.

“Tell you what?”

“Why you went to see that woman.”

“Oh Bella, can’t we drop this? I regret it, okay?”

“I need to know.”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” he mutters, irritated. “Oh – and Detective Clark wants to talk to you. Just routine. Now go to sleep.”

He kisses my hair. I sigh heavily. I need to know why. At least he says he regrets it. That’s something, my subconscious agrees. She’s in an agreeable mood today, it seems. Ugh, Detective Clark. I shudder at the thought of reliving Thursday’s events for him.

“Do we know why James was doing all this?” I murmur.

“Hmm,” Edward murmurs. I’m soothed by the slowing fall and rise of his chest, gently rocking my head, lulling me to sleep as his breathing slows. And as I drift I try to make sense of the fragments of conversations I heard while I was on the edge of consciousness, but they slip and slide through my mind, remaining steadfastly elusive, taunting me from the edges of my memory. Oh, it’s frustrating and exhausting... and in moments I’m asleep.

.

Nurse Eleanor’s mouth is pursed and her arms folded in hostility. I hold my finger up to my lips.

“Please let him sleep,” I whisper, blinking in the early morning light.

“This is your bed. Not his,” she hisses sternly.

“I slept better because he was here.” I insist, rushing to my husband’s defense. Besides, it’s true. Edward stirs, and Nurse Eleanor and I freeze. He mumbles in his sleep.

“Don’t touch me. No more. Only Bella.”

I frown. I have never heard Edward talk in his sleep. Admittedly that might be because he sleeps less than I do. I’ve only ever heard his nightmares. His arms tighten around me, squeezing me, and I wince.

“Mrs Cullen – ” Nurse Eleanor glowers.

“Please,” I beg.

She shakes her head, turns on her heel and leaves, and I snuggle up against Edward again.

.

When I wake, I’m alone. Edward is nowhere to be seen. The sun is blazing through the windows, and now I can really appreciate the room. I have flowers! I didn’t notice them the night before. Several bouquets. I wonder idly who they’re from.

A soft knock distracts me, and Carlisle peeks round the door. He beams when he sees that I’m awake.

“Can I come in?” he asks.

“Of course.” I blink at him. He strides into the room and over to me, his soft gentle blue eyes assessing me shrewdly. He’s wearing his white coat – he must be working. He surprises me by leaning down and kissing my forehead.

“May I sit?”

I nod, and he perches on the edge of the bed and takes my hand.

“I don’t know how to thank you for my daughter, you crazy, brave, darling girl. What you did probably saved her life. I will be forever in your debt.” His voice almost cracks, filled with gratitude and compassion.

Oh... I don’t know what to say. I squeeze his hand but remain mute.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better. Sore,” I add, for honesty’s sake.

“Have they given you meds for the pain?”

“Lor... something.”

“Lortab. Good. Where’s Edward?”

“I don’t know. When I woke he was gone.”

“He won’t be far away, I’m sure. He wouldn’t leave you while you were unconscious.”

“I know,” I breathe.

“He’s a little mad at you, as he should be,” Carlisle smirks. Ah, this is where Edward gets it from.

“Edward is always mad at me.”

“Is he?” Carlisle smiles, pleased, as if this is a good thing. His smile is

infectious.

“How’s Alice?”

His eyes cloud and he loses his smile.

“She’s better. Mad as hell. I think anger is a healthy reaction to what happened to her.”

“Is she here?”

“No, she’s back at home. I don’t think Esme will let her out of her sight.”

“I know how that feels.”

“You need watching too,” he admonishes.

“Have you seen Charlie?” I change the subject.

“Yes. He’s good. He’s mad at you too. And I should be mad at you as well, but I’m not. I’ll be forever grateful. But really, don’t take any more silly risks with your life, or the life of my grandchild.”

I flush. He knows!

“I read your chart, Bella. Congratulations.”

“Um... thank you.”

He gazes down at me, and his eyes soften, though he frowns at my expression.

“Edward will come round,” he says gently. “This will be the best thing for him. Just – give him some time.”

I nod. Oh... they’ve spoken.

“I’d better go, start my rounds. Instill the fear of God in my interns.” He grins wickedly, and rises. “I’ll check in on you later. Doctor Singh knows what she’s doing.”

He leans down and kisses me once more.

“I mean it, Bella. I can never repay what you’ve done for us. Thank you.”

I blink up at him, suddenly overwhelmed, and he strokes my cheek affectionately.

Then he turns on his heels and leaves.

Oh my. I’m reeling from his gratitude. Perhaps now I can let the pre-nup debacle go. My subconscious nods sagely, in agreement with me yet again. I shake my head, and gingerly clamber out of bed. I’m relieved to find that I am much steadier on my feet than yesterday. In spite of Edward sharing the bed I have slept well and feel refreshed. My head still aches, but it’s a dull nagging pain, nothing like the pounding yesterday. I’m stiff and sore, but I just need a bath. I feel grimy. I head into the ensuite.

“BELLA!” Edward shouts.

“I’m in the ensuite,” I call as I finish brushing my teeth. That feels better.

I ignore my reflection in the mirror – Jeez, I look a mess. When I open the door Edward is by the bed, holding a tray of food. He’s transformed. Dressed entirely in black, he’s shaved, showered and looks well rested.

“Good morning, Mrs Cullen,” he says brightly. “I have your breakfast.”

He looks so boyish and young. Wow. I can’t help smiling broadly at him as I clamber back into bed. He pulls over the tray on wheels and lifts the cover to reveal my breakfast; oatmeal with dried fruits, pancakes with bacon and maple syrup, orange juice and Twinings breakfast tea. My mouth waters – I am so hungry. I down the orange juice in a few gulps and tuck into the oatmeal.

Edward sits down on the edge of the bed to watch. He smirks at me.

“What?” I ask, with my mouth full.

“I like to see you eat,” he says. But I don’t think that’s what he’s smirking about. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. Sore,” I mutter between mouthfuls.

“I’ve never seen you eat like this.”

I glance up at him, and my heart sinks. We have to address the very tiny elephant in the room.

“It’s because I’m pregnant, Edward.”

He snorts, and his mouth twists into an ironic smile.

“If I knew getting you knocked up was going to make you eat, I might have done it earlier.”

“Edward Cullen!” I gasp and push the oatmeal away.

“Don’t stop eating,” he warns.

“Edward, we need to talk about this.” His eyes widen and he stills.

“What’s there to say? We’re going to be parents.” He shrugs, desperately trying to look nonchalant, but all I can see is his fear. Pushing the tray aside I crawl over the bed to him and take his hands in mine.

“You’re scared,” I whisper. “I get it.”

He nods almost imperceptibly, his eyes impossibly wide, all his earlier boyishness stripped away.

“I am too. That’s normal.” My voice is soft and cajoling.

“What kind of father could I possibly be?” His voice is hoarse, barely audible.

“Oh Edward,” I stifle a sob. “One that tries his best. That’s all any of us can do.”

“Bella – I don’t know if I can...”

“Of course you can. You’re loving, you’re fun, you’re strong, you’ll set boundaries. Our child will want for nothing.”

He’s frozen, gazing at me, doubt etched on his beautiful face.

“Yes, it would have been ideal to have waited. To have longer, just the two of us. But we’ll be three of us, and we’ll all grow up together. We’ll be a family. Our own family. And your child will love you unconditionally, like I do.” Tears spring to my eyes.

“Oh Bella,” Edward whispers, his voice anguished and pained. “I thought I’d lost you. Then I thought I’d lost you again. Seeing you lying on the ground, pale and cold and unconscious – it was all my worst fears realized. And now here you are – brave and strong... giving me hope. Loving me, after all that I’ve done.”

“Yes I do love you, Edward, desperately. I always will.”

Gently taking my head between his hands he wipes my tears away with his thumbs. He gazes into my eyes, green to brown, and all I see is his fear and wonder and love.

“I love you too,” he breathes. And he bends and kisses me, sweetly, tenderly, like a man who adores his wife.

“I’ll try,” he whispers against my lips.

“You’ll try, and you’ll succeed. And let’s face it, you don’t have much choice in the matter, because Blip and I are not going anywhere.”

“Blip?”

“Blip.”

He raises his eyebrows.

“I’m more partial to Junior.”

“Junior it is, then.”

He smiles his shy smile, and kisses me once more.

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“Much as I’d like to kiss you all day, your breakfast is getting cold,” Edward murmurs against my lips. He gazes down at me, now amused, except his eyes are darker... sensual. Holy cow, he’s switched again. My Mr Mercurial.

“Eat,” he orders, his voice soft. I swallow, a reaction to his smoldering look, and crawl back into bed. He pushes the tray in front of me. The oatmeal is cold, but the pancakes under the cover are fine – in fact they’re mouthwatering.

“You know,” I mutter between mouthfuls, “Junior might be a girl.”

Edward’s eyes widen and he runs his hand through his hair.

“Two women, eh?” Alarm flashes across his face, and his dark look vanishes.

Oh crap.

“Do you have a preference?”

“Preference?”

“Boy or Girl.”

He frowns.

“Healthy will do,” he says, but he’s disconcerted by the question. “Eat,” he snaps, and I know he’s trying to avoid the subject.

“I’m eating, I’m eating... Jeez, keep your hair on, Cullen.” I watch him carefully. The corners of his eyes are crinkled with worry. He’s said he’ll try, but I know he’s still freaked out by the baby. Oh Edward, so am I. I’m sorry. He sits down in the armchair beside me, picking up the Seattle Times.

“You made the papers again, Mrs Cullen,” he mutters, his tone bitter.

“Again? No!”

“The hacks are just rehashing yesterday’s story, but it seems factually accurate. You want to read it?”

I shake my head.

“Read it to me. I’m eating.”

He smirks and proceeds to read the article aloud. It’s a report on James and Victoria depicting them as a modern-day Bonnie and Clyde. It briefly covers Alice’s kidnap, my involvement in Alice’s rescue, and the fact that both James and I are in the same hospital. How does the press get all this information? I must ask Rose. Edward finishes. Like he said, the article reveals nothing new.

“Please read something else. I like listening to you.”

He obliges, and reads me a report about the Microsoft CEO taking a pay hike when the company's profits have declined. Edward is obviously disgusted. But listening to his soothing voice as I eat, secure in the knowledge that I am fine, Alice is fine, and Blip – um, Junior – is fine, I feel a precious moment of peace... in spite of all that has happened over the last few days.

I understand that Edward is scared about the baby, but I don't understand the depth of his fear. I resolve to try and talk to him some more about this. See if I can put his mind to rest. What puzzles me is that he hasn't lacked for positive role models as parents. Both Esme and Carlisle are exemplary parents, or so they seem. Maybe it was the bitch troll's interference that damaged him so badly. I'd like to think so. But in truth I think it goes back to his birth mom, though I'm sure Mrs Robinson didn't help. I halt my thoughts as I nearly recall a whispered conversation. Damn! It hovers on the edge of my memory, from when I was unconscious... Edward talking with Esme. It melts away into the shadows of my mind. Oh, it's so frustrating. Damn.

I wonder if Edward will ever volunteer the reason he went to see her, or if I'll have to push him. I'm about to ask, when there's a knock on the door.

Detective Clark makes an apologetic entry into the room. He's right to be apologetic – my heart sinks when I see him.

"Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen. Am I interrupting?"

"Yes," snaps Edward.

Clark ignores him.

"Glad to see you're awake, Mrs Cullen. I need to ask you a few questions about Thursday afternoon. Just routine. Is now a convenient time?"

"Sure," I mumble. I do not want to relive Thursday's events.

"My wife should be resting." Edward bristles.

"I'll be brief, Mr Cullen, it won't take long. And it means I'll be out of your hair sooner rather than later."

Edward stands and offers Clark his chair, then sits down beside me on the bed and takes my hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

.

Half an hour later, Clark is done. I've learned nothing new, but I have recounted the events of Thursday to him in a halting, quiet voice, watching Edward go pale and grimace at some parts.

"I wish she'd aimed higher."

"Might have done womankind a service if Mrs Cullen had," Clark agrees.

What?

"Thank you, Mrs Cullen, that's all for now."

"You won't let him out again, will you?"

"I don't think he'll make bail this time, ma'am."

"Do we know who posted his bail last time?" Edward asks.

"No sir. It was anonymous."

Edward frowns, but I think he has his suspicions.

Clark rises to leave just as Dr Singh and two interns enter the room.

.

After a thorough examination, Dr Singh declares me fit to go home. Edward sags with relief.

"Mrs Cullen, you'll have to watch for worsening headaches and blurry vision. If anything like that happens you must return to the hospital immediately."

I nod, trying to contain my delight at going home.

As Dr Singh leaves Edward asks her for a quick word in the corridor. He keeps the door ajar as he asks her a question. She smiles up at him.

"Yes, Mr Cullen, that's fine."

He grins, and returns to the room a happier man.

"What was all that about?" I ask, perplexed.

"Sex," he says, flashing me a wicked grin.

Oh. I flush.

"And?"

"You're good to go." He smirks.

Oh Edward!

"I have a headache." I smirk right back at him.

"I know. You'll be safe for a while. I was just checking."

Safe? I frown at the momentary stab of disappointment I feel. I'm not sure I want to be safe.

"Shall I take you home?"

"I'd like to see Charlie first."

"Sure."

"Does he know about the baby?"

“I thought you’d want to be the one to tell him. I haven’t told your Mom either.”

“Thank you.” I smile up at him, grateful that he hasn’t stolen my thunder.

“My dad knows,” Edward adds. “He saw your chart. I told my Mom, but no one else. Mom said couples normally wait for twelve weeks or so... to be sure.” He shrugs.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to tell Charlie.”

“I should warn you, he’s mad as hell. Said I should spank you.”

What? Edward laughs at my appalled expression.

“I told him I’d be only too willing to oblige.”

“You didn’t!” I gasp.

He winks at me.

“Here, Taylor bought you some clean clothes. I’ll help you dress.”

.

As Edward predicted, Charlie is furious. I don’t remember him ever being this mad. Edward has wisely decided to leave us alone together. For such a taciturn man Charlie does not let me say a word in my defense, but continues to berate me for my irresponsible behavior.

Oh Daddy, please calm down – your blood pressure is not up to this.

“And I’ve had to deal with your mother,” he growls with fury, waving both of his hands in exasperation. I feel twelve years old again.

Oh Jeez... I must call her.

“Dad, I’m sorry.”

“And poor Edward! I’ve never seen him like that. He’s aged. We’ve both aged years over the last couple of days.”

“Charlie, I’m sorry.”

“You should call your mother.”

I lean over and kiss his cheek, and he finally relents in his tirade.

“I really am sorry. But thank you for teaching me to shoot,” I whisper. For a moment he regards me with ill-concealed paternal pride.

“I’m glad you can shoot straight,” he says, his voice gruff. “Now go on home and get some rest.”

“You look well, Dad.” I try to change the subject.

“You look pale.” His fear is suddenly evident. His look mirrors Edward’s from

last night, and I grasp his hand.

“I’m okay. I promise I won’t do that again.”

He squeezes my hand and pulls me into a tight hug.

“If anything happened to you...” he whispers, his voice hoarse and low. Tears prick my eyes. I am not used to displays of emotion from my father.

“Dad, I’m good. Nothing that a hot shower won’t cure.”

.

We head out of the hospital’s rear exit to avoid the paps gathered at the entrance. Taylor leads the way to where Stuart is waiting in the SUV.

Edward is quiet as Stuart drives us home. I avoid Stuart’s gaze in the rear view mirror, embarrassed that the last time I saw him was at the bank – when I gave him the slip. I call my Mom, who sobs down the phone at me.

“Mom! I’m fine.”

“Edward told me you were unconscious,” she wails.

“Briefly. Mom, really – it’s all good.”

“What were you thinking? You shot someone! Edward says you saved his sister.”

“I’m not sure I’d put it quite like that, but Alice is safe.” It takes most of the journey home to calm her down, but I succeed, by promising that we’ll visit soon. Throughout my conversation with her Edward holds my hand, brushing his thumb across my knuckles. He’s nervous... something’s happened.

“What’s wrong?” I ask when I’m finally free from my mother.

“Jenks wants to see me.”

“Jenks? Your security guy?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He’s found something out about that fucker Smith.” Edward’s lip curls into a snarl, and a frisson of fear passes through me. “He didn’t want to tell me on the phone.”

“Oh.”

“He’s coming here this afternoon, from Detroit.”

“You think he’s found a connection?”

Edward nods.

“What do you think it is?”

“I have no idea.” Edward’s brow furrows, perplexed.

Taylor draws up outside the entrance to Escala, and Edward ushers me out of the car. Keeping his arm around my waist he leads me to the waiting elevator.

“Glad to be home?” he asks.

“Yes,” I whisper. But as I stand in the familiar surroundings of the elevator the enormity of what I’ve been through crashes over me, and I start to shake.

“Hey – ” Edward wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. “You’re home. You’re safe,” he breathes, kissing my hair.

“Oh Edward,” I sob. And a dam I didn’t even know was in place bursts, and I start to sob.

“Hush now,” Edward whispers, cradling my head against his chest. But it’s too late – I sob, overwhelmed, into his t-shirt, recalling James’s vicious attack – ‘That’s for SIP, you fucking bitch!’ Telling Edward I was leaving – ‘You’re leaving me?’ And my fear, my gut-wrenching fear for Alice, for myself... and for Blip.

When the doors of the elevator slide open Edward picks me up like a child and carries me into the foyer. I wrap my arms around his neck and cling to him, weeping.

He carries me through to our bathroom and deposits me on the chair.

“Bath?” he asks. I shake my head. No... no... not like Lauren. “Shower?” His voice is choked with concern. Through my tears I nod. I want to wash away the grime of the last few days, wash away the memory of James’s attack. ‘You gold digging whore – ’

I sob into my hands as the sound of the water cascading from the shower echoes off the walls.

“Hey,” Edward croons. Kneeling in front of me he pulls my hands away from my tear-stained cheeks and cups his hands around my face. I gaze at him, blinking away my tears.

“You’re safe. You both are,” he whispers.

Blip and me. My eyes brim with tears again.

“Stop, now. I can’t bear it when you cry.” His voice is hoarse. His thumbs wipe my cheeks, but my tears still flow.

“I’m sorry, Edward. Just sorry, for everything. For making you worry, for risking everything – for the things I said.”

“Hush, baby, please.” He kisses my forehead. “It takes two to tango, Bella.”

He gives me a crooked smile. “Well that’s what my mom always says. I said things and did things I’m not proud of.” His green eyes blaze contritely.

“Let’s get you undressed.” His voice is soft. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand and he kisses my forehead once more.

Briskly he strips me, taking particular care as he pulls my t-shirt over my head. But my head is not too sore. Leading me to the shower he peels off his own clothing in record time, allowing him to step into the welcome hot water with me. He pulls me into his arms and holds me, holds me for the longest time, as the water gushes over us, soothing us both. He lets me cry into his chest. Occasionally he kisses my hair, but he doesn’t let go, he just rocks me gently beneath the shower. To feel his skin against mine, his chest hair against my cheek... this man I love, this flawed, beautiful man, the man I could have lost through my own recklessness. I feel empty and aching at the thought. But he’s here, still here – in spite of all that’s happened. He has some explaining to do, but right now I want to revel in the feel of his comforting, protective arms around me. And in that moment it occurs to me... any explanations on his part have to come from him. I can’t force him – he’s got to want to tell me. I don’t want to be cast as the nagging wife, constantly trying to wheedle information out of her husband. It’s just exhausting. I know he loves me. I know he loves me more than he’s ever loved anyone, and for now, that’s enough. The realization is liberating. I stop crying and step back.

“Better?” he asks.

I nod.

“Good. Let me look at you,” he breathes and for a moment I don’t know what he means. But he takes my hand and examines the arm I fell on when James hit me. There are bruises on my shoulder and at my elbow and wrist. He kisses each of them. Reaching up he grabs a washcloth and body wash from the rack, and the sweet familiar scent of jasmine fills my nostrils.

“Turn around,” he whispers. Gently he proceeds to wash my injured arm. Then he moves on to my neck, my shoulders, my back and my other arm. He stops, moves me sideways, and traces his long fingers down my side. I wince as they skate over the large bruise at my hip. Edward’s eyes harden and his lips thin. His anger is palpable. He whistles through his teeth.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I whisper, to reassure him.

Blazing green eyes meet mine.

“I want to kill him. I nearly did,” he adds cryptically. I frown. His expression makes me shiver. He reaches up for the body wash once more, and with tender, aching gentleness, he washes my side, then my behind, then kneeling moves down my legs. He pauses to examine my bruised knee. His lips brush over the bruise before he returns to washing my legs and my feet. Reaching down I caress his head, running my fingers through his wet hair. He stands up again, and his fingers trace the outline of the bruise on my ribs where James kicked me.

“Oh baby,” he groans, his voice filled with anguish, his eyes bleak with fury.

“I’m okay,” I whisper. Leaning up I pull his lips to mine and kiss him. He’s hesitant to reciprocate, but as my tongue meets his, his body stirs against me.

“No,” he whispers against my lips, and he pulls back. “Let’s get you clean.”

His face is serious. Damn... he means it. I pout, and the atmosphere between us lightens in an instant. He grins and kisses me briefly.

“Clean,” he emphasizes. “Not dirty.”

“I like dirty.”

“Me too, Mrs Cullen. But not now, not here.” He grabs the shampoo, and before I can persuade him otherwise he’s washing my hair.

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Actually I love clean too. I feel refreshed and reinvigorated, and I don’t know if it’s from the shower, the crying or my decision to stop hassling Edward about everything. He wraps me in a large towel, and drapes one around his hips while I gingerly dry my hair. My head aches, but it’s a dull persistent pain that is more than manageable – in fact I hardly notice it. I have some painkillers from Dr Singh, but she’s asked me not to use them unless I have to.

As I dry my hair I think about Victoria.

“I still don’t understand why Victoria was involved with James.”

“I do,” Edward mutters darkly.

Oh! This is news. I gaze up at him, but I’m distracted. He’s drying his hair with a towel, his chest and shoulders still wet with beads of water that glint beneath the halogens. He pauses and smirks at me.

“Enjoying the view?”

“How do you know?” I ask, flushing. Caught staring at my own husband.

“That you’re enjoying the view?” he teases.

“No.” My cheeks heat. “About Victoria.”

“Detective Clark hinted at it.”

I give him my tell-me-more expression, and another nagging memory from when I was unconscious resurfaces. Yes... Clark was in my room. I wish I could remember what he said.

“Smith has tapes. Tapes of all of them,” Edward says.

What? I frown, my clean skin tightening across my forehead.

“Videotapes, of him fucking her. Fucking all his PAs.”

Oh! I blink in shock.

“Exactly. Blackmail material. He likes it rough.” Edward frowns and I watch confusion followed by disgust cross his face. I flush. Of course – Edward likes it rough too. He pales as his disgust turns to self-loathing.

“Don’t.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. His frown deepens.

“Don’t what?” He stills and regards me with... fear?

“Don’t think you’re anything like him.”

Edward’s eyes widen, but he says nothing – confirming that’s exactly what he was thinking.

“You’re not.” My voice is adamant.

“We’re cut from the same cloth,” he murmurs.

“No you’re not,” I snap, though I understand why he might think so. I remember the information Edward revealed on the plane to Aspen: ‘His dad died in a brawl in a bar. His mother drank herself into oblivion. He was in and out of foster homes as a kid, in and out of trouble too – mainly boosting cars. Spent time in juvie.’

“You both have troubled pasts, and you were both born in Detroit. That’s it, Edward.” I fist my hands on my hips.

“Bella, your faith in me is touching, in spite of the last few days. We’ll know more when Jenks is here.” He’s dismissing the subject.

“Edward – ” He stops me with a kiss, and I recall the promise I made to myself not to hassle him for information.

“Enough,” he breathes. “And don’t pout,” he adds. “Come. Let me dry your hair.” I know the conversation is over.

I sit between Edward's legs in sweatpants and t-shirt as he dries my hair.

"So did Clark tell you anything else while I was unconscious?"

"Not that I recall."

"I heard a few of your conversations."

The hairbrush stills in my hair.

"Did you?" he asks, his tone nonchalant.

"Yes. My dad, your dad, Detective Clark... your mom."

"And Rose?"

"Rose was there?"

"Briefly, yes. She's mad at you too."

I turn in his lap.

"Stop with the 'everyone is mad at Bella' crap, okay?"

"Just telling you the truth." Edward blinks, bemused by my outburst.

"Yes it was reckless, but you know – your sister was in danger."

His face falls.

"Yes. She was." Switching off the hairdryer he puts it down on the bed beside him. He grasps my chin.

"Thank you," he says, surprising me. "But no more recklessness. Because next time, I will spank the living shit out of you."

I gasp.

"You wouldn't!"

"I would." He's serious. Holy cow. Deadly serious. "I have your father's permission," he smirks. He's teasing me! When I launch myself at him he twists, so that I fall onto the bed and into his arms. I wince as I land at the stab of pain from my ribs. Edward pales.

"Behave!" he admonishes, and for a moment he's angry.

"Sorry," I mumble, reaching up to caress his cheek. He nuzzles my hand and kisses it gently.

"Honestly Bella, you really have no regard for your own safety." His hand tugs up the hem of my t-shirt, then rests on my belly. I stop breathing.

"It's not just you anymore," he whispers. His fingertips trail along the waistband of my sweats. Desire explodes, unexpected, hot and heavy in my blood.

I gasp and Edward tenses, halting his fingers and gazing down at me. He moves

his hand up to tuck a stray lock of my hair behind my ear.

“No,” he whispers.

What?

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ve seen the state you’re in. And the answer’s no.” His voice is firm, and he kisses my forehead. I squirm.

“Edward,” I whine.

“No. Get into bed.” He sits up.

“Bed?”

“You need rest.”

“I need you,” I whisper.

He closes his eyes and shakes his head, as if it’s a great effort of will. When he opens them again his eyes are glowing with resolve.

“Just do as you’re told, Bella.”

I’m tempted to take off all my clothes, but then I remember the bruises, and know I won’t win that way. Reluctantly I nod.

“Okay.” I deliberately give him an exaggerated pout.

He grins, amused.

“I’ll bring you some lunch.”

“You’re going to cook?” I nearly expire. He has the grace to laugh.

“I’m going to heat something up. Mrs Cope has been working overtime.”

“Edward, I’ll do it. I’m fine. Jeez, I want sex – I can certainly cook.” I sit up awkwardly, trying to hide my flinch from my smarting ribs.

“BED!” Edward’s eyes flash and he points to the pillow.

“Join me,” I murmur, wishing I was wearing something a little more alluring than sweatpants and t-shirt.

“Bella, get into bed. Now.”

I scowl, stand up and drop my pants. He pulls the duvet back, and I slip into bed, abandoning my sweat pants on the floor.

“You heard Dr Singh. She said rest.” His voice is gentler. I fold my arms in frustration, and he smirks. “Stay,” he warns.

.

Mrs Cope’s chicken stew is, without doubt, one of my favorite dishes. Edward eats with me, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed.

“That was very well heated.” I smirk at him and he grins. I’m replete and

sleepy. Was this his plan?

“You look tired,” he says, picking up my tray.

“I am.”

“Good. Sleep.” He leans down and kisses me. “I have some work I need to do.

I’ll do it in here if that’s okay with you.”

I nod... fighting a losing battle with my eyelids. I had no idea chicken stew could be so exhausting.

.

It’s dusk when I wake. Pale pink light floods the room. Edward is sitting in the armchair, watching me, green eyes luminous in the ambient light. He’s clutching some papers. His face is ashen.

Holy cow!

“What’s wrong?” I ask immediately, sitting up.

“Jenks has just left,” he says.

Oh shit.

“And?”

“I lived with the fucker,” he whispers.

“Lived? With James?”

He nods, eyes wide. I shuffle over and pull the duvet back, inviting him into bed beside me – and to my surprise he doesn’t hesitate. He kicks off his shoes and slides in alongside me. Wrapping one arm around me he curls up, resting his head in my lap. I’m stunned. What’s this?

“I don’t understand,” I murmur, running my fingers through his hair, gazing down at him. Edward closes his eyes, and his brow furrows, as if he’s straining to remember.

“After I was found with the crack whore, before I went to live with Carlisle and Esme, I was in the care of Michigan State. I lived in a foster home. But I can’t remember anything about that time.”

My mind is reeling. A foster home? This is news to both of us.

“For how long?” I whisper.

“Two months or so. I have no recollection.”

“Have you spoken to your Mom and Dad about it?”

“No.”

“Perhaps you should. Maybe they could fill in the blanks.”

He hugs me tightly.

“Here.” He hands me the papers, which turn out to be two photographs. Reaching over I switch on the bedside light to examine them in detail. The first photo is of a shabby house with a yellow front door and a large gabled window in the roof. It has a porch, but the best that can be said of it is that it’s unremarkable. The second photo is of a family – at first glance, an ordinary family – a man and his wife, I think, and their children. The couple are both dressed in dowdy, over-washed blue t-shirts. They must be in their forties. The woman has pulled-back blonde hair and the man a severe buzz-cut, and they are both smiling warmly at the camera. The man has his hand draped over the shoulders of a sullen teenage girl. I gaze at each of the children: two boys – twins, about twelve, I think – both with sandy blond hair, grinning broadly at the camera; another boy, smaller, blonder, scowling; and hiding behind him, a copper-haired green-eyed little boy. Wide-eyed and scared, dressed in mismatched clothes, and clutching a child’s dirty blanket. Fuck. It’s Edward. “This is you,” I whisper, my heart lurching into my throat. I know Edward was four when his mother died. But this child looks so much younger. He must have been severely malnourished. I stifle a sob as tears spring to my eyes. Oh, my sweet Fifty.

Edward nods.

“That’s me.”

“Jenks brought these photos?”

“Yes. I don’t remember any of this.” His voice is flat and lifeless.

“Remember being with foster parents? Why should you? Edward, it was a long time ago. Is this what’s worrying you?”

“I remember other things, from before and after. When I met my Mom and Dad. But this... It’s like there’s a huge chasm.”

My heart twists, and understanding dawns. My darling control freak likes everything in its place – and now he’s learned he’s missing part of the jigsaw.

“Is James in this picture?”

“Yes, he’s the older kid.” Edward’s eyes are still screwed shut, and he’s clinging to me like I’m a life raft. I run my fingers through his hair while I gaze at the older boy glaring, defiant and arrogant, at the camera. I can see it’s James. But he’s just a kid, a sad eight or nine year old, hiding his fear

behind his hostility. A thought occurs to me.

“When James called to tell me had Alice – he said if things had been different, it could have been him.”

Edward closes his eyes and shudders.

“That fucker!” he growls.

“You think he did all this because the Cullens adopted you instead of him?”

“Who knows?” Edward’s tone is bitter. “I don’t give a fuck about him.”

“Perhaps he knew we were seeing each other, when I went for that job interview.

Perhaps he planned to seduce me all along.” Bile rises in my throat.

“I don’t think so,” Edward mutters, his eyes now open. “The searches he did on my family didn’t start until a week or so after you began your job at SIP.

Barney knows the exact dates. And Bella, he fucked all his assistants and taped them.” Edward closes his eyes and tightens his grip on me once more.

Suppressing the tremor that runs through me I try to recall my various conversations with James when I first started at SIP. I knew deep down he was bad news, yet I ignored all my instincts. Edward’s right – I have no regard for my own safety. I remember the fight we had about me going to New York with James. Jeez – I could have ended up on some sordid sex tape. The thought is nauseating. And in that moment I recall the photographs Edward kept of his submissives. Oh shit. ‘We’re cut from the same cloth.’ No, Edward, you’re not, you’re nothing like him. He’s still curled around me, like a small boy.

“Edward, I think you should talk to your Mom and Dad.” I am reluctant to move him, so I shift and slide back into the bed until we are eye to eye.

A bewildered green gaze meets mine, reminding me of the child in the photograph.

“Let me call them,” I whisper. He shakes his head. “Please,” I beg. Edward stares at me, pain and self-doubt reflected in his eyes, as he considers my request. Oh Edward, please!

“I’ll call them,” he whispers.

“Good. We can go and see them together, or you can go. Whichever you prefer.”

“No. They can come here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want you going anywhere.”

“Edward, I’m up for a car journey.”

“No.” His voice is firm, but he gives me an ironic smile. “Anyway it’s Saturday

night, they're probably at some function."

"Call them. This news has obviously upset you. They might be able to shed some light." I glance at the radio alarm. It's coming up to seven in the evening.

He regards me impassively for a moment.

"Okay," he says, as if I've issued him with a challenge. Sitting up he reaches for the bedside phone. I wrap my arm around him and rest my head on his chest as he makes the call.

"Dad?" I register his surprise that Carlisle has answered the phone. "Bella's good. We're home. Jenks has just left. He found out the connection... the foster home in Detroit... I don't remember any of that." Edward's voice is almost inaudible as he mutters the last sentence. My heart constricts once more. I hug him, and he squeezes my shoulder.

"Yeah... You will? ... Great." He hangs up.

"They're on their way." He sounds surprised, and I realize in that moment that he's probably never asked them for help.

"Good. I should get dressed."

Edward's arm tightens around me.

"Don't go," he murmurs.

"Okay," I whisper. I snuggle into his side again, stunned by the fact that he's just told me a great deal about himself – entirely voluntarily.

.

As we stand at the threshold to the great room Esme wraps me in her arms.

"Bella, Bella, darling Bella," she whispers. "Saving two of my children – how can I ever thank you?"

I flush, touched and embarrassed in equal measure by her words. Carlisle hugs me too, kissing my forehead. Then Alice grabs me, crushing my ribs. I wince and gasp, but she doesn't notice.

"Thank you for saving me from those assholes."

Edward scowls at her.

"Alice! Let her go – she's sore."

"Oh! Sorry," she mumbles.

"I'm good," I mutter, relieved when she releases me. She looks fine. Impeccably dressed as usual, in tight black jeans and a pale pink frilly blouse. I'm glad I'm wearing my comfortable wrap dress and flats – at least I look reasonably

presentable.

Dancing over to Edward Alice curls her arm around his waist. Wordlessly he hands Esme the photo. She gasps, her hand flying to her mouth to contain her emotion, as she instantly recognizes Edward. Carlisle wraps his arm around her shoulder as he too examines it.

“Oh darling,” Esme breathes, reaching up to caress Edward’s cheek.

Taylor appears.

“Mr Cullen? Miss Hale, her brother and your brother are heading up, sir.”

Edward frowns.

“Thank you, Taylor” he mutters, bemused.

“I called Jasper and told him we were coming over.” Alice grins. “It’s a party.” I sneak a sympathetic glance at my poor husband as both Esme and Carlisle glare at Alice in exasperation.

“We’d better get some food together,” I declare. “Alice, will you give me a hand?” I usher her towards the kitchen area as Edward leads his parents into his study.

.

Rose is apoplectic with righteous indignation that’s aimed at me, Edward and most of all James and Victoria.

“What were you thinking, Bella?” she shouts as she confronts me in the kitchen, causing all eyes in the room to turn and stare.

“Rose, please – I’ve had the same lecture from everyone!” I snap back. She glowers at me, and for one minute I think I’m going to be subjected to a Rosalie Hale how-not-to-succumb-to-kidnappers lecture, but instead she folds me into her arms.

“Jeez – sometimes you don’t have the brains you were born with, Swan,” she whispers. As she kisses my cheek there are tears in her eyes. Rose! “I’ve been so worried about you.”

“Don’t cry. You’ll set me off.”

She stands back and wipes her eyes, embarrassed. Then takes a deep breath and composes herself.

“On a more positive note,” she says shifting gear. “We’ve set a date for our wedding. I thought next May? And of course I want you to be my matron of honor.”

“Oh... Rose... Wow. Congratulations!”

Crap – Li'l Blip... Junior!

“What is it?” she asks, misinterpreting my alarm.

“Um... I'm just so happy for you. Some good news for a change.” I wrap my arms around her and pull her into a hug. Shit, shit, shit. When is Blip due?

Mentally I calculate my due date. Dr Greene said I was four or five weeks. So – sometime in May? Shit.

Emmett hands me a glass of champagne.

Oh. Shit.

Edward emerges from his study, looking ashen, and follows his parents into the great room. His eyes widen when he sees the glass in my hand.

“Rose,” he greets her coolly.

“Edward.” She is equally cool.

I sigh.

“Your meds, Mrs Cullen,” he warns, eyeing the glass in my hand. I narrow my eyes. Dammit. I want a drink. Carlisle smiles gently as he joins me in the kitchen, collecting a glass from Emmett on the way.

“A few sips will be fine,” he whispers with a conspiratorial wink at me, and lifts his glass to clink mine. I grin at him – I have gained an ally. Edward scowls at both of us, until Emmett distracts him with news of the Mariners' 3-2 victory over the Yankees.

“How is he?” I whisper to Carlisle, as he and I stand in the kitchen watching the Cullens lounge on the sofa – Alice and Jasper and Rose and Emmett together side by side, Edward taking a seat beside Emmett while Esme sits down beside Alice and takes her hand.

“Shaken,” Carlisle murmurs to me, his brow furrowing, his face serious. “He remembers so much of his life with his birth mother – many things I wish he didn't. But this...” He stops. “I hope we've helped. I'm glad he called us. He said you told him to.” Carlisle's gaze softens. I shrug and take a hasty sip of champagne.

“You're very good for him. He doesn't listen to anyone else.”

I blink up at Carlisle, frowning. I don't think that's true. The unwelcome specter of the bitch troll looms into my mind. I know Edward talks to Esme too – I heard him. Again I feel a moment's frustration, as I try to grasp their

conversation in the hospital, but it still eludes me.

“Come and sit down, Bella. You look tired. I’m sure you weren’t expecting all of us here this evening.”

“It’s great to see everyone,” I smile. Because it’s true – it’s great. I’m an only child who has married into a large and gregarious family, and I love it. I snuggle up next to Edward.

“One glass,” he hisses at me.

“Yes sir.” I bat my lashes, disarming him completely. He puts his arm around my shoulders and returns to his baseball conversation with Emmett and Jasper.

.

“My parents think you walk on water,” Edward mutters as he drags off his t-shirt.

I’m curled up in bed watching the floorshow.

“Good thing you know differently.” I snort.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he murmurs, as he slips out of his jeans.

“Did they fill in the gaps for you?”

“Some. I lived with the Sangsters for three months while Mom and Dad waited for the adoption to go through. They were already approved adopters because of Emmett, but the wait’s required by law. To see if I had any living relatives who wanted to claim me.”

Oh.

“How do you feel about that?” I whisper.

He frowns.

“About having no living relatives? Fuck that. If they were anything like the crack-whore...” He shakes his head in disgust.

Oh Edward! You were a child... you loved your mom.

He slides on his pjs, climbs into bed and gently pulls me into his arms.

“It’s coming back to me. I remember the food. I think Mrs Sangster could cook. And at least we know now why that fucker is so hung up on my family.” He runs his free hand through his hair.

“Will you tell the police?”

“Already have. Christ knows what Clark will do with that information. Anyway, thank you for this evening.”

“Thank you? For what?”

“Catering for my family at a moment’s notice.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Mrs Cope. She keeps the pantry well-stocked.”

He shakes his head as if in exasperation. At me? Why?

“How are you feeling, Mrs Cullen?”

Oh!

“Good.” I trail my fingers down his stomach to his oh-so happy trail.

He laughs and grabs my hand.

“Oh no. Don’t get any ideas.”

I pout, and he sighs.

“Bella, Bella, Bella, what am I going to do with you?” He kisses my hair.

“I have some ideas.” I squirm beside him, and wince as pain radiates through my upper body from my bruised ribs.

“Baby, you’ve been through enough. Besides, I have a bedtime story for you.”

Oh?

“You wanted to know...” He tails off, closes his eyes and swallows. All of the hair on my body stands on end. Shit.

“Picture this,” he begins, his voice soft. “An adolescent boy looking to earn some extra money so he can continue his secret drinking habit.” He shifts onto his side so that we’re lying facing each other and he’s gazing into my eyes.

“So I was in the back yard at the Lincoln’s, clearing some rubble and trash from the extension Mr Lincoln had just added to their place...”

Holy fuck... he’s talking.

~ooo000ooo~

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I can barely breathe. Do I want to hear this? Edward closes his eyes and swallows. When he opens them again they are bright but diffident, full of disquieting memories.

“It was a hot summer day. I was working hard.” He snorts and shakes his head, suddenly amused. “It was back-breaking work shifting that rubble. I was on my own, and Iri – Mrs Lincoln appeared out of nowhere and brought me some lemonade.

We exchanged small talk, and I made some smartass remark... and she slapped me. She slapped me so hard.” Unconsciously his hand moves to his face and he caresses his cheek, his eyes clouding at the memory. Holy shit!

“But then she kissed me. And when she finished she slapped me again.” He

blinks, seemingly still confounded, even after all this time.

"I'd never been kissed before, or slapped like that."

Oh. She pounced. On a kid.

"Do you want to hear this?" Edwards asks.

Yes... No...

"Only if you want to tell me." My voice is small, as I lie facing him, reeling.

"I'm trying to give you some context."

I nod in what I hope is an encouraging manner. But I suspect I may look like a statue, frozen and wide-eyed with shock, my head remaining immobile.

He frowns, his eyes searching mine, trying to gauge my reaction. Then he turns onto his back and stares up at the ceiling.

"Well, naturally I was confused, and angry, and horny as hell. I mean a hot older woman comes on to you like that – " He shakes his head as if he still can't believe it. Hot? I feel queasy.

"She went back into the house, leaving me in the back yard. She acted as if nothing had happened. I was at a total loss. So I went back to work, loading the rubble into the dumpster. When I left that evening she asked me to come back the next day. She didn't mention what had happened. So the next day I went back. I couldn't wait," he whispers as if it's a dark confession... and frankly it is.

"She didn't touch me, when she kissed me," he murmurs. He turns his head and gazes at me. "You have to understand – my life was hell on earth. I was a walking hard-on, fifteen years old, tall for my age, hormones raging. The girls at school – " He stops, but I've got the picture: a scared, lonely, but attractive adolescent. My heart twists.

"I was angry, so fucking angry at everyone; at myself, my folks. I had no friends. My therapist at the time was a total asshole, my folks – they kept me on a tight leash, they didn't understand." He stares back up at the ceiling and runs a hand through his hair. I itch to run my fingers through his hair too.

But I stay still.

"I just couldn't bear anyone to touch me. I couldn't. Couldn't bear anyone near me. I used to fight... fuck did I fight. I'd get into some god-awful brawls. I was expelled from a couple of schools. But it was a way to let off steam. To tolerate some kind of physical contact." He stops again. "Well, you get the idea. And when she kissed me, she only grabbed my face. She didn't touch me." His voice is barely audible.

She must have known. Perhaps Esme had told her. Oh, my poor Fifty. I have to fold my hands beneath my pillow and rest my head on it in order to resist the urge to hold him. He needs this bedtime story, this confession... I need it.

It's a precious insight into the man I love.

"Well, the next day I went back to the house, not knowing what to expect. And I'll spare you the gory details, but there was more of the same. And that's how our relationship started."

Oh fuck, this is painful to hear.

He shifts again onto his side so he's facing me.

"And you know something, Bella? My world came into focus. Sharp and clear. Everything. It was exactly what I needed. She was a breath of fresh air. Making the decisions, taking all that shit away from me, letting me breathe."

Holy shit.

“And even when it all finished, my world stayed in focus, because of her. And it stayed that way until I met you.”

Oh no. What the hell am I supposed to say to that? Tentatively he reaches up and smooths a stray lock of my hair behind my ear.

“You turned my world on its head.” He closes his eyes and when he opens them again, they are raw. “My world was ordered, calm and controlled, then you came into my life with your smart mouth, your innocence, your beauty and your – quiet temerity... and everything before you was just dull, empty, mediocre... it was nothing.

Oh my.

“I fell in love,” he whispers.

I stop breathing.

“So did I,” I murmur, with the little breath I have left.

His eyes soften.

“I know,” he mouths.

“You do?”

“Yes.”

Hallelujah! I smile shyly at him. He knows!

“Finally,” I whisper.

He nods.

“And it’s put everything into perspective for me.”

I blink.

“When I was younger, Irina was the centre of my world. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for her. And she did a lot for me. She stopped me drinking. Made me work hard at school... you know. She gave me a coping mechanism, allowed me to experience things that I never thought I could.”

Oh!

“Touch,” I whisper.

He nods, wide eyed.

“After a fashion.”

I frown, wondering what he means.

He blinks at my reaction and hesitates.

Tell me! I will him.

“If you grow up with a wholly negative self-image, thinking you’re some kind of reject, an unlovable savage – you think you deserve to be beaten.” He stops.

Oh shit... you are none of those things.

“She channeled my anger.” His mouth presses together in a bleak line. “Mostly inwards, towards myself, I realize now. Dr Banner’s been on and on about this for some time. It was only recently that I saw our relationship for what it was. You know – on my birthday.”

I shudder as the unwelcome memory of Irina and Edward verbally disemboweling each other at Edward’s birthday party surfaces in my mind.

“For her it was about sex, and control, and a lonely woman finding some kind of comfort with her toy-boy.”

Oh.

“But you like control,” I whisper.

“Yes. I do. I always will, Bella. It’s who I am. I surrendered it for a brief while. Let someone make all my decisions for me. I couldn’t do it myself – I wasn’t in a fit state.”

“So dropping out of Harvard?”

“That was my decision. We were no longer together. It was the best decision I ever made, until I met you.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

His lips quirk up in a soft smile.

“The best decision I ever made was marrying you.”

I blink at him.

“Not starting your company?”

He shakes his head.

“Not learning to fly?”

He shakes his head.

“You,” he mouths. He tucks an errant hair behind my ear again. “She knew,” he whispers.

I frown, not understanding.

“She knew what?”

“That I was head over heels in love with you.”

Oh.

“She encouraged me to go down to Florida to see you, and I’m glad she did. She thought you’d freak out and leave. Which you did.”

I flush. I’d rather not think about that.

“She thought I needed all the trappings of the lifestyle I enjoyed.”

“The Dom?” I whisper.

He nods.

“It enabled me to keep everyone at arm’s length. You know why,” he adds softly.

“Your birth mom?”

“I didn’t want to be hurt again. And then you left me.” His words are barely audible. “And I was a mess.”

Oh no.

“I’ve avoided intimacy for so long – I don’t know how to do this.”

“You’re doing fine,” I murmur. Reaching up with my index finger I trace his lips. He purses them into a kiss.

You’re talking to me.

“Do you miss it?” I whisper.

“Miss it?”

“That lifestyle.”

“Yes. But only insofar as I miss the control it brings. And frankly, your stupid stunt –” He stops. “That saved my sister. That’s how I know.”

“Know?”

“That you love me.”

I frown.

“What?”

“Because you risked so much... for me, for my family. And you’re still here.”

My frown deepens. He reaches over and traces his finger over the middle of my eyebrows.

“You have a v here when you frown,” he whispers. “It’s very soft to kiss.”

“Why are you surprised I’m still here? I told you I wasn’t going to leave you.”

“Because of the way that I behaved when you told me you were pregnant.”

I blink at him and his finger runs down my cheek.

"You were right," he murmurs. "I am an adolescent."

Oh shit... I said that. My subconscious glares at me – his doctor said that!

"Edward, I said some awful things." He puts his index finger over my lips.

"Hush. This is my bedtime story," he breathes.

He shifts on to his back again to stare up at the ceiling.

"When you told me you were pregnant –" He stops. "I'd thought it would be just you and me for a while. I had thought about children, but in the abstract. I had this vague idea we'd have a child, sometime in the future."

Just one? No... Not an only child. Not like me. Perhaps now's not the best time to bring that up.

"You are still so young, and I know you're quietly ambitious."

Ambitious? Me? Am I?

"Well, you pulled the rug from under me. Christ, was that unexpected. Never in a million years, when I asked you what was wrong, did I expect you to be pregnant." He sighs. "I was so mad. Mad at you. Mad at myself. Mad at everyone. And it took me back, that feeling of nothing being in my control. I had to get out. I went to see Banner, but he was at some school parents' evening." Edward pauses and arches an eyebrow.

"Ironical," I whisper. Edward smirks in agreement.

"So I walked and walked and walked, and I just... found myself at the salon.

Irina was leaving. She was surprised to see me. And, truth be told, I was surprised to find myself there. She could tell I was mad. Asked me if I wanted a drink."

Oh shit. We've cut to the chase. My heart doubles in speed. Do I really want to know this? My subconscious glares at me, a plucked eyebrow raised in warning.

"We went to a quiet bar I know, and had a bottle of wine. She apologized for the way she behaved the last time she saw us. She's hurt that my Mom will have nothing to do with her any more – it's narrowed her social circle – but she understands. We talked about the business, which is doing fine, in spite of the recession... I mentioned that you wanted kids."

I frown. What?

"I thought you let her know I was pregnant."

He blinks at me.

"No, I didn't."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

He shrugs.

"I never got the chance."

"Yes you did."

"I couldn't find you the next morning, Bella. And when I did, you were so mad at me..."

I flush.

"I was."

"Anyway, at some point in the evening – about halfway through the second bottle – she leaned over to touch me. And I froze," he whispers, throwing his arm over his eyes.

My scalp tingles. What's this?

"She saw that I recoiled from her. It shocked both of us." His voice is low, too low. Why won't he look at me? I tug at his arm and he lowers it, turning

to gaze into my eyes.

Shit. His face is pale, his eyes wide.

“What?” I breathe.

He frowns, and swallows.

Oh... what isn't he telling me? Do I want to know?

“She made a pass at me.” He's shocked, I can tell.

All the breath is sucked from my body. I feel winded, and I think my heart has stopped.

That fucking bitch troll!

“It was a moment, suspended in time. She didn't say anything, as such, but she saw my expression, and she realized how far she'd crossed the line. I said... no.

I haven't thought of her like that for years, and besides,” he swallows. “I love you. I told her, I love my wife.”

I gaze at him. I don't know what to say.

“She backed right off. Apologized again, made it seem like a joke. I mean, she said she's happy with Seth, and with the business, and she doesn't bear either of us any ill will. She said she missed my friendship, but she could see that my life was with you now. And how awkward that was, given what happened last time we were all in the same room. I couldn't have agreed with her more.

We said our goodbyes – our final goodbyes, and she went on her way.”

I swallow, fear gripping my heart.

“Did you kiss?”

“No. We shook hands. It was very amicable.”

Oh. Good.

“I was miserable. I wanted to come home to you. But... I knew I'd behaved badly.

I stayed and finished the bottle, then started on the bourbon. While I was drinking, I remember you saying to me, ‘If that was my son...’ And I got to thinking about Junior, and thinking about how Irina and I started. And it made me feel – uncomfortable.”

A memory blossoms in my mind – a whispered conversation. Edward's voice:

“But seeing her finally put it all in perspective for me. You know – with the child. For the first time, I felt repulsed.”

He'd been speaking to Esme. Repulsed, eh?

“That's it?”

“Pretty much.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“I'm sorry,” I mutter.

He frowns.

“What for?”

“Being so angry the next day.”

He snorts.

“Baby, I understand angry.” He pauses, then sighs. “You see, Bella, I want you to myself. I don't want to share. What we have, I've never had before. I want to be the centre of your universe – you know. Your sun to rise and set with me.”

Oh, Edward.

“It does. That's not going to change.”

He gives me an indulgent, sad, resigned smile.

"Bella," he whispers. "That's just not true."

Tears prick my eyes.

"How can it be?" he murmurs.

Oh no.

"Shit – don't cry, Bella. Shit. Please, don't cry." He caresses my face.

"I'm sorry." My lower lip trembles and his thumb brushes it, soothing me.

"No, Bella, no. Don't be sorry. You'll have someone else to love as well. And you're right. That's how it should be."

"Blip will love you too. You'll be the centre of Blip's – Junior's world," I whisper. "Children love their parents unconditionally, Edward. That's how they come into the world. Programmed to love. Think about it."

His eyes widen as he realizes to whom I'm referring. He withdraws his hand, fisting it at against his chin.

"No," he whispers, and freezes.

"Yes. You did." My tears flow freely now. "Of course you did. It wasn't an option. That's why you're so hurt..."

He stares at me, pale, green eyes wide and raw. He looks so vulnerable.

"That's why you're able to love me," I breathe. "Forgive her. She had her own world of pain to deal with. She was a shit mother, and you loved her."

He gazes at me, saying nothing, green eyes wide and haunted – by memories I can't begin to fathom.

Oh Edward, please don't stop talking.

"I used to brush her hair," he whispers.

Oh my...

"She was pretty."

"One look at you and no one would doubt that," I murmur.

"She was a shit mother."

I nod and he closes his eyes.

"I am so scared I'll be a shit father."

I reach up and caress his face. Oh my Fifty, Fifty, Fifty.

"Edward, do you think for one minute I'd let you be a shit father?"

He blinks, then smiles, as relief slowly lights up his face.

"No, I don't think you would," he breathes. He caresses my face with the back of his knuckles, gazing at me in wonder. "God you're strong, Mrs Cullen. I love you so much." Leaning forward he kisses my forehead. "Now, that's the end of your bedtime story. How's your head?"

"My head?"

Frankly it's about to explode with all you've told me!

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"Good. I think you should sleep now."

I blink at him.

"I have one question."

"Oh? What?" He eyes me warily.

"Why have you suddenly become all... forthcoming, for want of a better word?"

He frowns.

"You're telling me all this, when getting information out of you is normally a pretty harrowing and trying experience."

"It is?"

“You know it is.”

“Why am I being forthcoming? I can’t say. Seeing you practically dead on cold concrete, maybe. The fact I’m going to be a father. I don’t know. You said you wanted to know, and I don’t want Irina to come between us. She can’t. She’s the past – and I’ve said that to you so many times.”

“If she hadn’t made a pass at you... would you still be friends?”

“That’s more than one question.” He arches a brow at me.

“Sorry. You don’t have to tell me.” I flush. “You’ve already volunteered more than I ever thought you would.”

His gaze softens.

“Probably. But her making that pass was a step too far for me. Please, believe me. I’m not going to see her again. You said she’s a hard limit for you.

That’s a term I understand,” he says with quiet sincerity.

Okay. I’m going to let this go now. My subconscious sags into her armchair – Finally!

“Goodnight, Edward. Thank you for the enlightening bedtime story.” I lean over to kiss him, and our lips touch briefly, but he pulls back when I try to deepen the kiss.

“Don’t,” he whispers. “I am desperate to make love to you.”

“Then do.”

“No, you need to rest, and it’s late. Go to sleep.” He leans over and switches off the bedside light, plunging us into darkness.

“I love you, Edward,” I murmur as I cuddle into his side.

“I know,” he whispers, and I sense his shy smile.

~o0o~

I wake with a start. Light is flooding the room, and Edward is not in bed. I glance at the clock and see it’s 7:53. I take a deep breath, and wince as my ribs smart – though not as badly as yesterday. I think I could go to work. Work – Yes. I want to go to work. It’s Monday, and I spent all of yesterday lounging about in bed. Edward only let me go out briefly, to see Charlie. Honestly, he’s still such a control freak. I smile fondly. My control freak. He’s been attentive and loving and chatty and... hands-off since I arrived home. I scowl. I am going to have to do something about this. My head doesn’t hurt, the pain around my ribs has eased – though admittedly laughing has to be undertaken with caution – but frankly, I’m frustrated. I think this is the longest I’ve gone without sex since... well, since the first time.

I think we’ve both recovered our equilibrium. Edward is much more relaxed; his long bedtime story seems to have laid some ghosts to rest, for him and for me. We’ll see.

I shower quickly, and once I’m dry browse carefully through my clothes. I want something... sexy. Something that might galvanize Edward into action. Who would have thought such an insatiable man could actually exercise so much self-control? I don’t really want to dwell on how Edward learned such discipline over his body... We haven’t spoken of the bitch troll once since his confessional. I hope we never do. To me she’s dead and buried.

I choose an almost indecently short black skirt, and a white silk blouse with a frill. I slide on thigh-highs with lacy tops, and my black Louboutin pumps. A little mascara and lip-gloss for a natural look, and after a ferocious brushing I leave my hair loose... Yes. This should do it.

Edward is eating at the breakfast bar. His forkful of omelet stops in mid air when he sees me. He frowns.

“Good morning, Mrs Cullen. Going anywhere?”

“Work,” I smile sweetly.

“I don’t think so,” Edward snorts with amused derision. “Dr Singh said a week off.”

“Edward, I am not spending the day lounging in bed. On my own. So I may as well go to work. Good morning, Gail.”

“Mrs Cullen.” Mrs Cope tries to hide a smile. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“Please.”

“Granola?”

“I’d prefer scrambled eggs with whole-wheat toast.”

Mrs Cope beams and Edward registers his surprise.

“Very good, Mrs Cullen.” Mrs Cope says.

“Bella, you are not going to work.”

“But – “

“No. It’s simple. Don’t argue.” Edward is adamant. I glare at him, and only then do I notice that Edward is in the same PJ bottoms and t-shirt he was wearing last night.

“Are you going to work?” I ask.

“No.”

Am I going crazy?

“It is Monday, right?”

He smiles.

“Last time I looked.”

I narrow my eyes.

“Are you playing hooky?”

“I’m not leaving you here on your own to get into trouble. And Dr Singh said it would be a week before you could go back to work. Remember?”

Oh.

I slide on to a bar stool beside him, and Mrs Cope places a cup of tea in front of me.

“You look good,” Edward says.

I cross my legs.

“Very good. Especially here.” He traces a finger over the bare flesh that shows above my thigh-highs. My pulse quickens as his finger runs across my skin.

“This skirt is very short,” he murmurs, vague disapproval in his voice, as his eyes follow his finger.

“Is it? I hadn’t noticed.”

Edward gazes at me, mouth twisted in an amused yet exasperated smirk.

“Really, Mrs Cullen?”

I flush.

“I’m not sure this look is suitable for the workplace,” he murmurs.

“Well, since I’m not going to work, that’s a moot point.”

“Moot?”

“Moot,” I mouth.

Edward smirks again and resumes eating his omelet.

“I have a better idea,” he murmurs.

“You do?”

He glances at me through long dark lashes, green eyes darkening. I inhale sharply. Oh my. About time.

“We can go see how Emmett’s getting on with the house.”

What? Oh! Tease! I vaguely remember we were supposed to do that before Charlie was injured.

“I’d love to.”

“Good,” he grins.

“Don’t you have to work?”

“No. Kate’s back from Taiwan. That all went well. Today, everything’s fine.”

“I thought you were going to Taiwan.”

He snorts again.

“Bella, you were in the hospital.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah – oh. So today, I’m spending some quality time with my wife.” He smacks his lips together as he takes a sip of coffee.

“Quality time?” I can’t disguise the hope in my voice.

Mrs Cope places my scrambled eggs in front of me, again failing to hide her smile.

Edward smirks.

“Quality time.” He nods.

I am too hungry to flirt any more with my husband.

“It’s good to see you eat,” he murmurs. Rising he kisses my hair. “I’m going to shower.”

“Um... can I come and scrub your back?” I mumble through a mouth full of toast and scrambled egg.

“No. Eat.”

Leaving the breakfast bar he tugs his t-shirt over his head, treating me to the sight of his finely sculptured shoulders and his naked back as he heads out of the great room. I stop mid-chew. He’s doing this on purpose. Why?

Charlie is in good spirits. Billy is visiting too, and they’ve both settled down in front of the large new flat-screen TV in Charlie’s room. I suspect Edward had something to do with that. We leave them waiting for re-runs of the Mariners games from the previous weekend.

Edward is relaxed on the drive North. He’s been this way ever since ‘the talk’.

It’s like a weight has been lifted; Mrs Robinson’s shadow no longer looms so large over us, maybe because I’ve decided to let it go – or because he has, I don’t know. But I feel closer to him now than I ever have before. Perhaps because he’s confided in me. I hope he continues to do so. And he’s more accepting of the baby, too. He hasn’t gone out and bought a crib yet, but I have high hopes.

I gaze at him as he drives, drinking him in. He looks casual, cool... sexy.

Tousled hair, Ray-Bans, pin stripe jacket, white linen shirt and jeans.

He glances across at me, reaches over and clasps my leg above the knee, his fingers stroking gently.

“I’m glad you didn’t change,” he says.

I did slip on a denim jacket and change to flats, but I’m still wearing the short skirt. His hand lingers above my knee. I put my hand on his.

“Are you going to continue to tease me?”

“Maybe,” Edward smiles.

“Why?”

“Because I can.” He grins, boyish as ever.

“Two can play at that game,” I whisper.

His fingers move tantalizingly up my thigh.

“Bring it on, Mrs Cullen,” he challenges, his grin broadening.

I pick up his hand and put it back on his knee.

“Well, you can keep your hands to yourself.”

He smirks.

“As you wish, Mrs Cullen.”

Dammit. This game is going to backfire on me.

Edward turns into the driveway of our new house. He stops at the keypad and punches in a number, and the ornate white metal gates swing open. We roar up the tree-lined lane, under leaves that are a mixture of green and yellow and burnished copper. The tall grass in the meadow is turning from green to gold, but there are still a few yellow wildflowers dotted amongst the grass. It’s a beautiful warm day. The sun is shining, but the smell of fall is in the air; the smell of fall, and the salty scent of the Sound. This is such a tranquil place, tranquil and beautiful... and to think we’re going to make our home here. The lane curves round, and our house comes into view. Several large trucks, sides emblazoned with ‘Cullen Construction’, are parked out front. The house is decked in scaffolding and several workmen in hard hats are busy on the roof. Edward pulls up outside the portico and switches off the engine. I can sense his excitement.

“Let’s go find Emmett.”

“Is he here?”

“I hope so. I’m paying him enough.”

I snort, and Edward grins as we clamber out of the car.

“Yo, Bro!” Emmett shouts from somewhere. We both glance around. “Up here!”

He’s up on the roof, waving down at us, beaming from ear to ear. “About time we saw you here. Stay where you are. I’ll be right down.”

I glance at Edward, who shrugs. A few minutes later Emmett appears at the front door.

“Hey, Bro.” He shakes Edward’s hand. “And how are you, little lady?” He picks me up and swings me round.

“Better, thanks,” I giggle breathlessly, my ribs protesting. Edward frowns at him, but Emmett is oblivious.

“Let’s head over to the site office. You’ll need one of these.” He taps his hard hat.

The house is a shell. The floors are covered in a hard fibrous material that looks like burlap; some of the original walls have disappeared, and new ones have appeared. Emmett leads us through, explaining what’s happening, while men – and a few women – work everywhere around us. I’m relieved to see the stone staircase with its intricate iron balustrade is still in place, and draped completely in white dustsheets.

In the main living area the back wall has been removed to make way for Tanya’s

glass wall, and work is beginning on the terrace. In spite of the mess, the view is still stunning. The new work is sympathetic and in keeping with the old-world charm of the house... Tanya's done well. Emmett patiently explains the processes and gives us a rough timeframe for each of them. He's hoping we can be in by Christmas, although Edward thinks this is optimistic.

Holy crow – Christmas overlooking the Sound... I can't wait. A bubble of excitement blooms inside me... I have visions of us trimming an enormous tree, while copper-haired little boy looks on in wonder...

Emmett finishes our tour in the kitchen.

"I'll leave you two to roam. Be careful. This is a building site."

"Sure. Thanks, Em," Edward murmurs, taking my hand. "Happy?" he asks, once Emmett has left us alone. I am gazing at this empty shell of a room and wondering where I will hang the pepper pictures that we bought in France.

"Very. I love it. You?"

"Ditto." He grins.

"Good. I was thinking of the pepper pictures in here."

Edward nods his approval.

"I want to put Jake's portraits of you up in this house. You need to decide where they should go."

I flush.

"Somewhere I won't see them often."

"Don't be like that," he scolds, reaching up and brushing his thumb across my bottom lip. "They're my favorite pictures. I love the one in my office."

"I have no idea why," I murmur, and kiss the pad of his thumb.

"Worse things to do than look at your beautiful smiling face all day. Hungry?" he asks.

"Hungry for what?" I whisper.

He smirks, his eyes darkening. Hope and desire unfurl in my veins.

"Food, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs, and he plants a swift kiss on my lips. I give him my faux pout and sigh.

"Yes. These days I'm always hungry."

"I brought all three of us a picnic."

"Three of us? Is someone joining us?"

Edward cocks his head at me.

"In about seven or eight months' time."

Oh... Blip. I grin goofily at him.

"I thought you might like to eat al fresco."

"In the meadow?" I ask.

He nods.

"Sure," I grin.

"This will be a great place to raise a family," he murmurs, gazing down at me. Family! More than one? Dare I mention this now?

Reaching down he spreads his fingers over my belly. Holy shit. I hold my breath, and place my hand over his.

"It's hard to believe," he whispers, and for the first time I hear wonder in his voice.

"I know. Oh – here, I have evidence. A picture."

"You do? Baby's first smile?"

From my wallet I pull out the ultrasound of Blip.

“See?”

Edward examines it closely, staring for several seconds.

“Oh... Blip. Yeah, I see.” He sounds distracted... awed.

“Your child,” I whisper.

“Our child,” he counters.

“First of many.”

“Many?” Edward’s eyes widen with alarm.

“At least two.”

“Two?” He tests the word. “Can we just take this steady? You know, one child at a time?”

I grin.

“Sure.”

We head back outside into the warm fall afternoon.

“When are you going to tell your folks?” Edward asks.

“Soon,” I murmur. “I thought about telling my dad this morning, but Billy was there.” I shrug.

Edward nods in understanding, and opens the hood of the R8. Inside is a wicker picnic basket and the tartan blanket we bought in London.

“Come,” he says, taking the basket and blanket in one hand, and holding the other out to me. Together we walk into the meadow.

“Sure, Kate, go for it.” Edward hangs up. That’s the third call he’s taken during our picnic. He’s kicked off his shoes and socks, and is sitting watching me, arms on his raised knees. His jacket lies discarded on top of mine, as we’re so warm in the sun. I lie beside him, stretched out on the tartan picnic blanket, both of us surrounded by tall golden and green grass, hidden from view in our own bucolic haven. He feeds me another strawberry, and I chew and suck it gratefully, gazing at his darkening eyes.

“Tasty?” he whispers.

“Very.”

“Had enough?”

“Of strawberries, yes.”

His eyes glitter dangerously, and he grins down at me.

“Mrs Cope packs a mighty fine picnic,” he says.

“That she does,” I whisper.

Shifting suddenly he lies down so his head is resting on my belly. He closes his eyes, and seems momentarily content. I reach down and my fingers tangle in his hair.

He sighs heavily, then scowls, and checks the number on the screen of his silently buzzing BlackBerry. He rolls his eyes, and takes the call.

“Jenks,” he snaps. He tenses, listens for a minute or two, then suddenly sits bolt upright.

“24/7... Thanks,” he says through gritted teeth, and hangs up. The change in his mood is instant. Gone is my teasing flirtatious husband, to be replaced by a cold, calculating, angry master of the universe. He narrows his eyes for a moment, then gives me a cool, chilling smile. A shiver runs down my back. He picks up his BlackBerry and presses a speed dial.

“Kate, how much stock do we own in Lincoln Timber?” He kneels up.

My scalp prickles. Oh no, what’s this?

Edward continues, "So I thought... Consolidate the shares into CEH, then fire the board... except the CEO. ...I don't give a fuck... I hear you, just do it... thank you." He hangs up, and gazes at me impassively for a moment.

Holy shit! Edward is mad.

"What's happened?"

"Linc," he murmurs.

"Linc? Irina's ex?"

"The same. He's the one who posted Smith's bail."

What? Why? I gape at Edward in shock. His mouth is pressed in a hard line.

"Well – he'll look an idiot," I murmur, dismayed. "I mean, Smith committed another crime while out on bail."

Edward's eyes narrow and he smirks.

"Fair point, well made, Mrs Cullen."

"What did you just do?" I kneel up, facing him.

"I fucked him over."

Oh!

"Um... that seems a little impulsive," I murmur.

"I'm an in-the-moment kind of guy," he counters.

"I'm aware of that."

His eyes narrow and his lips thin.

"I've had this plan in my back pocket for a while," he says dryly.

I frown.

"Oh?"

He pauses, seeming to weigh up something in his mind, then takes a deep breath.

"Several years ago – I was twenty-one – Linc beat his wife to a pulp. He broke her jaw, her left arm and four of her ribs, because she was fucking me." His eyes harden. "And now I learn he posted bail for a man who tried to kill me, kidnapped my sister and fractured my wife's skull. I think it's payback time."

I blanch. Holy shit.

"Fair point, well made, Mr Cullen," I whisper.

"Bella, this is what I do. I'm not usually motivated by revenge, but I cannot let him get away with this. What he did to Irina – well, she should have pressed charges, but she didn't – that's her deal. But he's seriously crossed the line with Smith. Linc's made this personal by going after my family. I'm going to crush him. Break up his company right under his nose and sell the pieces to the highest bidder."

Oh...

"Besides," Edward smirks. "We'll make good money out of the deal."

I stare into blazing green eyes... that soften suddenly.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he whispers.

"You didn't," I lie.

He arches a brow, amused.

"You just took me by surprise," I whisper, then swallow. Edward is really quite scary sometimes.

Leaning down he brushes my lips with his.

"I will do anything to keep you safe. Keep my family safe. Keep this little one safe," he murmurs, and reaching down splay his hand out over my belly in a gentle caress.

Oh... I stop breathing. Will I ever get used to this? Him touching me there?

Touching Blip? Edward gazes down at me, his eyes widening, darkening. His lips part as he inhales and in a deliberate move the tips of his fingers brush against my sex. Holy shit. Desire detonates like an incendiary device igniting my bloodstream. I grasp his head, my fingers weaving into his hair, and tug hard so my lips find his. He gasps, surprised by my assault, giving my tongue free and safe passage into his mouth. He groans and kisses me back, his lips and tongue hungry for mine, and for a moment we consume each other, lost in tongues and lips and breaths and sweet, sweet sensation as we rediscover each other.

Oh, I want this man. It's been too long. I want him here, now, in the open air, in our meadow.

"Bella," he breathes, entranced, and his hand skims over my backside to the hem of my skirt. I scramble to unbutton his shirt, all fingers and thumbs.

"Whoa, Bella – stop." He pulls back, his jaw clenched, and grabs my hands.

"No." My teeth clamp gently around his lower lip and I tug. "No," I murmur again, gazing at him. I release him. "I want you."

He inhales sharply. He's torn, his indecision writ large in luminous green eyes.

"Please," I whisper. "I need you." Every pore of my being is begging. This is what we do.

He groans in defeat as his mouth finds mine, molding my lips to his. One hand cradles my head, while the other skims down my body to my waist, and he eases me on to my back and stretches out beside me, never breaking contact with my mouth.

He pulls back, hovering over me, gazing down at me.

"You are so beautiful, Mrs Cullen."

I reach up to caress his lovely face.

"So are you, Mr Cullen. Inside and out."

He frowns, and my fingers trace the furrow in his brow.

"Don't frown. You are to me, even when you're angry," I whisper.

He groans once more, and his mouth captures mine, pushing me into the soft grass beneath the blanket.

"I've missed you," he whispers, and his teeth graze my jaw. My heart soars.

"I've missed you too. Oh, Edward." I fist one hand in his hair and clutch his shoulder with the other.

His lips move to my throat, leaving tender kisses in their wake, and his fingers follow, deftly undoing each button of my blouse. Tugging my blouse apart he kisses the soft swell of my breasts. He murmurs appreciatively, low in his throat, and the sound echoes through my body to my deep dark places.

"You're body's changing," he whispers. His thumb teases my nipple until its erect and straining against my bra. "I like," he adds. I watch his tongue taste and trace the line between my bra and my breast... Tantalizing and teasing me... Taking my bra cup delicately between his teeth he pulls it down, freeing my breast and nuzzling my nipple with his nose in the process. It puckers at his touch and from the chill of the gentle fall breeze. His lips close around me and he sucks long and hard.

"Ah!" I groan, inhaling sharply, then wincing as pain radiates outwards from my bruised ribs.

"Bella!" Edward gasps, and gazes down at me, concern etched on his face. "This is what I'm talking about," he admonishes. "Your lack of self-preservation. I

don't want to hurt you."

"No... don't stop," I whimper. He stares down at me, warring with himself.

"Please," I whisper.

"Here." Abruptly he moves, and I'm sitting astride him, my short skirt now bunched up around my hips. His hands glide over the top of my thigh-highs.

"There. That's better, and I can enjoy the view." He reaches up and hooks his long index finger into my other bra cup, freeing that breast too. Reaching up he grasps both of my breasts, and I throw my head back, pushing them into his welcome expert hands. He teases me, tugging and rolling my nipples as I cry out, then sits up so we're nose to nose, his greedy green eyes on mine. He kisses me, his fingers still teasing me. I scramble for his shirt, undoing the first two buttons, and it's like sensory overload – I want to be kissing him everywhere, undressing him, making love with him all at once.

"Hey – " he grasps my head and sits back, green eyes dark and full of sensual promise. "There's no rush. Take it slow. I want to savor you."

"Edward, it's been so long." I'm panting.

"Slow," he whispers, a command, and he kisses the right corner of my mouth.

"Slow." He kisses the left corner. "Slow, baby." He tugs my bottom lip with his teeth. "Slow. Let's take this slow." He unfurls his fingers in my hair, keeping me in place as his tongue invades my mouth, seeking, tasting, calming... inflaming. Oh, my man can kiss.

Oh, Edward. I caress his face, my fingers moving tentatively down to his chin to his throat, and I start again on the buttons of his shirt, taking my time, as he continues to kiss me. Slowly I pull his shirt apart, my fingers trailing over his clavicles, feeling their way across his warm, silky skin. I push him gently back until he's lying beneath me. Sitting up I gaze down at him, aware that I'm squirming against his growing erection. Hmmm. I trace my fingers across his lips, to his jaw then down his neck, over his Adam's apple to that little dip at the base of his throat. My beautiful man. I lean down, and my kisses follow the tips of my fingers. My teeth graze his jaw and kiss his throat. He closes his eyes.

"Ah," he breathes, and tilts his head back, giving me easier access to the base of his throat, his mouth slack and open in silent veneration. Edward lost and aroused is just so exhilarating... so arousing for me.

My tongue trails down his sternum, twirling through his chest hair. Hmmm. He tastes so good. He smells so good. Intoxicating. I kiss first one, then two of his small round scars, and he grasps my hips, my fingers still on his chest as I gaze down at him. His breathing is harsh.

"You want this? Here?" he breathes, his eyes hooded with a heady combination of love and lust.

"Hmmm." I murmur my assent, and my lips and tongue graze across his chest to his nipple. I pull and roll it gently with my teeth.

"Oh Bella," he breathes, and circling my waist he lifts me, tugging at his button fly so he springs free. He sits me down again, and he's hot and hard, and I push against him, delighting in the feel of him beneath me. He runs his hands up my thighs, pausing where my thigh-highs stop and my flesh begins, his thumbs running small teasing circles at the top of my thighs so that the tips of his thumbs touch me... touch me where I want to be touched. I gasp.

"I hope you're not attached to your underwear," he murmurs, his eyes wild and

bright. His fingers trace the elastic along my belly then slide inside, teasing me, before grabbing my panties tightly and pushing his thumbs through the delicate material. My panties disintegrate. His hands splay out on my thighs and his thumbs brush against my sex once more. He flexes his hips so his erection rubs against me.

"I can feel how wet you are... no hands," he whispers, his voice tinged with carnal appreciation, and he suddenly sits up, his arm around my waist again, so we're nose to nose. He rubs his nose against mine.

"We're going to take this slow, Mrs Cullen," he breathes, "I want to feel all of you." He lifts me, and with exquisite, frustrating, slow ease, lowers me onto him. I feel each blessed inch of him fill me...

"Ah – " I groan incoherently as I reach out to clasp his arms. I try to lift myself off him for some welcome friction, but he holds me in place.

"All of me," he whispers, and tilts his pelvis, pushing himself into me all the way. I tilt my head back and let out a strangled cry of pure pleasure.

"Let me hear you," he murmurs. "No – don't move, just feel."

I open my eyes, my mouth frozen in a silent Ah! and he's gazing at me... hooded licentious green eyes into dazed brown. He shifts, rolling his hips, but holds me in place.

I groan. His lips are at my throat, kissing me.

"This is my favorite place. Buried in you," he murmurs against my skin.

"Please, move," I plead.

"Slow, Mrs Cullen." He flexes his hips again and pleasure radiates through me.

I cup his face and kiss him, consuming him.

"Love me," I breathe. "Please, Edward."

His teeth skim my jaw up to my ear.

"Go," he whispers and he lifts me up and down. My inner goddess is unleashed and I push him down on the ground and start to move, savoring the feeling of him inside me... riding him... riding him hard. With his hands around my waist he matches my rhythm. I have missed this... the heady feeling of him beneath me, inside me... the sun on my back, the sweet smell of fall in the air, the gentle autumnal breeze – it's a heady fusion of senses: touch, taste, smell... and the sight of my beloved husband beneath me.

"Oh Bella," he groans. Eyes closed, head back, mouth open... ah... I love this.

And inside, I'm building... building... climbing... higher. Edward's hands move to my thighs, and delicately his thumbs press at their apex, and I explode around him... over and over and over and over... and I collapse, sprawled on his chest, as he cries out in turn, letting go, calling out my name, with love and joy.

He cuddles me against his chest, cradling my head. Hmmm. Closing my eyes I savor the feel of his arms around me. My hand is on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart as it slows and calms. I kiss and nuzzle him, and marvel briefly that not long ago he would not have let me do this.

"Better?" he whispers. I raise my head. He's grinning broadly at me.

"Much. You?" My answering grin reflects his.

"I've missed you, Mrs Cullen," he breathes, serious for a moment.

"Me too."

"No more heroics, eh?"

"No," I promise.

"You should always talk to me," he whispers.

"Back at you, Cullen."

He smirks.

"Fair point, well made. I'll try." He kisses my hair.

"I think we're going to be happy here," I whisper, closing my eyes again.

"Yep. You, me and ... Blip. How do you feel, incidentally?"

"Fine. Relaxed. Happy."

"Good."

"You?"

"Yeah, all those things," he murmurs.

I look up at him, trying to gauge his expression.

"What?" he asks.

"You know, you're very bossy when we have sex."

"Are you complaining?"

"No. I'm just wondering... if you miss it?"

He stills, gazing at me.

"Sometimes," he whispers.

Oh.

"Well, we'll have to see what we can do about that," I murmur, and kiss him lightly on his lips, curling around him like a vine. Images of us together, in the playroom, at the Heathman, in the elevator, in the R8... I love his kinky fuckery – our kinky fuckery. Yes. I can do that stuff. I can do that for him, with him. I can do that for me. My skin tingles as I remember the riding crop.

"I like to play too," I murmur, and glancing up I'm treated to his shy smile.

"Well, maybe when we get home," he whispers, leaving that promise hanging between us.

I nuzzle him once more. I love him so.

~oOo~

It's been two days since our picnic. Two days since the promise of 'well, maybe when we get home' was made. Edward is still treating me like I'm made of glass.

I put the stack of query letters I've been reading aside on my desk and sigh.

Edward and I haven't been back in the playroom since I safeworded. And he's said he misses it sometimes. Frankly, so do I. My thoughts are interrupted by soft, lyrical music that fills the apartment. Edward is playing the piano; not one of his usual laments... a sweet melody, a hopeful melody – one that I recognize, but have never heard him play. Whoa!

I tiptoe to the archway of the great room and watch Edward at the piano. It's dusk. The sky is an opulent pink, and the light is reflected off his burnished copper hair. He looks his beautiful breathtaking self, concentrating as he plays, unaware of my presence. He's been so forthcoming over the last few days, so attentive – offering small insights into his day, his thoughts, his plans.

It's like he's breached a dam, and started talking.

I know he'll come to check on me in a few minutes... and it gives me an idea.

Excited I steal away, hoping that he still hasn't noticed me, and race to our room, quickly stripping off my clothes on the way, until I'm wearing nothing but the pale blue lace panties that Taylor bought. I find a pale blue camisole and slip into it quickly. It will hide my bruise. Diving into the closet I pull out from the drawer Edward's faded jeans – his playroom jeans, my favorite jeans. I fold them neatly, kneel by the bedroom door and wait. The door is

ajar, and I can hear the strains of another piece, one I don't know. But it's another hopeful tune... it's lovely.

The music stops abruptly. I begin to count... and thirty-seven seconds later the door opens. I look down at his bare feet as they pause on the threshold. Hmm. He says nothing... for ages he says nothing. Oh shit. I resist the urge to look up at him, and keep my eyes downcast.

Finally he reaches down and picks up his jeans. He says nothing, but heads into the walk-in closet, while I remain stock still. Oh my... this is it. My heart starts thundering and I relish the rush of adrenaline that spikes through my body. I squirm as my excitement builds. What will he do to me? A few moments later he's back, wearing the jeans.

"So you want to play?" he murmurs.

"Yes."

He says nothing, and I risk a quick glance... up his jeans, his denim clad thighs, the soft bulge at his fly, the open button at the waist, his happy trail, his navel, his chiseled abdomen, his chest hair... his green eyes blazing, and his head cocked to one side. He's arching an eyebrow. Oh shit.

"Yes what?" he whispers.

Oh.

"Yes, Sir."

His eyes darken and my breath hitches.

"Good girl," he murmurs, and he caresses my head. "I think we'd better get you upstairs, now," he adds. My insides liquefy and my belly clenches in that delicious way.

Oh I love this man: my husband, my lover, father of my child, my sometimes Dominant... my Fifty Shades.

The End

~ooo000ooo~

Epilogue

The Big House, May 2012

I lie on our tartan picnic blanket and gaze up at the clear blue summer sky, my view framed by meadow flowers and tall green grasses. The heat of the afternoon summer sun warms my skin, my bones and my belly, and I relax, my body turning to jelly. This is comfortable. Hell no... this is wonderful. I savor the moment, a moment of peace, a moment of pure and utter contentment. I should feel guilty for feeling this joy, this completeness, but I don't. Life right here, right now, is good, and I've learned to appreciate it and live in the moment, like my husband. I smile and my mind drifts to last night. At home in Escala...

The tip of the riding crop traces across my swollen belly at an aching, languorous pace.

"Have you had enough yet, Bella?" Edward whispers in my ear.

"Oh please," I beg, pulling on the restraints above my head, as I stand blindfolded and tethered to the grid in the playroom.

The crop bites my behind.

"Please what?"

I gasp.

“Please, Sir.”

Edward places his hand over my ringing skin and rubs gently.

“There. There. There.” His words are soft. His hand moves south and round, and his fingers slide inside me.

I groan.

“Mrs Cullen,” he breathes, and his teeth pull at my earlobe. “You’re so ready.”

His fingers slide in and out of me, hitting that spot, that sweet, sweet spot again. The crop clatters onto the floor and his hand moves over my belly and up, up to my breasts. I tense. My breasts are sensitive.

“Hush,” Edward breathes, cupping one, and he gently brushes his thumb over my nipple.

“Ah.”

His fingers are gentle and enticing, pleasure spiraling out from my breast, down, down... deep down. I tilt my head back, pushing my nipple into his palm, and moan once more.

“I like to hear you,” Edward whispers. His erection is at my hip, the buttons of his fly pressing into my flesh as his fingers continue their relentless assault; in, out, in, out – keeping a rhythm. “Shall I make you come like this?” he asks.

“No.”

His fingers stop moving inside me.

“Really, Mrs Cullen?” His fingers tighten around my nipple.

“Ah. Please,” I beg.

“What do want, Isabella?”

“You. Always.”

He inhales sharply.

“All of you,” I add, breathless.

He eases his fingers out of me, pulls me round to face him and removes the blindfold. I blink up into darkening green eyes that burn into mine. His index fingers trace my bottom lip, and he pushes his index and middle fingers into my mouth letting me taste the salty tang of my arousal.

“Suck,” he whispers. I swirl my tongue around and between his fingers. Hmm... even I taste good on his fingers.

His hands skim up my arms to the cuffs above my head and he unclips them, freeing me. Turning me around so I’m facing the wall he tugs at my braid, pulling me into his arms. He angles my head to one side and skims his lips up my throat to my ear, while holding me flush against him.

“I want in your mouth.” His voice is soft and seductive. My body, ripe and ready, clenches deep inside. The pleasure is sweet and sharp.

I moan. Turning to face him, I pull his head down to mine and kiss him hard, my tongue invading his mouth, tasting and savoring him. He groans, places his hands on my behind and tugs me against him, but only my pregnant belly touches him. I bite his jaw and trail kisses down his throat, and run my fingers down to his jeans. He tilts his head back, exposing more of his throat to me, and I run my tongue down to his chest and through his chest hair.

“Ah.”

I tug the waistband of his jeans, the buttons popping, and he grasps my shoulders as I sink to my knees in front of him.

As I gaze up at him through my lashes, he stares down at me. His eyes are dark,

his lips parted, and he inhales deeply when I free him and ensnare him with my mouth. I love doing this to Edward. Watching him come apart, hearing his breath hitch, and the soft moans he makes deep in his throat. I close my eyes and suck hard, pressing down on him, relishing his taste and the breathless gasp I hear.

He grasps my head, stilling me, and I sheath my teeth with my lips and push him deeper into my mouth.

“Open your eyes and look at me,” he orders, his voice low.

Blazing green eyes meet mine and he flexes his hips, filling my mouth to the back of my throat, then withdrawing quickly. He pushes into me again and I reach up to grasp him. He stops and holds me in place.

“Don’t touch or I’ll cuff you again. I just want your mouth,” he growls.

Oh my. Like that is it? I put my hands behind my back and gaze up at him innocently, his cock in my mouth.

He smirks down at me.

“Good girl.” His voice is hoarse.

He eases back, and holding me gently but firmly, he pushes into me again.

“You have such a fuckable mouth, Mrs Cullen.” He closes his eyes and eases into my mouth as I squeeze him between my lips, running my tongue over and around him. I take him deeper, and withdraw, again, and again, and again, the air hissing between his teeth.

“Ah! Stop,” he says, and he pulls out of me, leaving me wanting more. He grasps my shoulders and pulls me to my feet. Grabbing my braid he kisses me hard, his persistent tongue, grateful and giving at once. Suddenly he releases me, and before I know it he’s lifted me into his arms and moved over to the four-poster.

Gently he lays me down so that my behind is just on the edge of the bed.

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he orders. I do as I’m bid, and pull him towards me. He leans down, hands either side of my head, and still standing, very slowly eases himself into me.

Oh, that feels so good. I close my eyes and revel in his slow possession.

“Okay?” he whispers, gazing down at me, concern etched in the tight lines around his eyes.

“Oh God, Edward, Yes. Yes. Please.” I tighten my legs around him and push against him.

He groans. I clasp his arms and he flexes his hips, slowly at first, in, out...

“Edward, please. Harder – I won’t break.”

He groans and starts to move, really move, pounding into me again and again. Oh it’s heavenly –

“Yes,” I gasp, tightening my hold on him as I start to build... he moans, grinding into me with renewed determination... and I’m close. Oh please. Don’t stop.

“Come on Bella,” he groans through gritted teeth, and I explode around him, my orgasm going on and on and on. I call out his name and Edward stills, groaning loudly, as he climaxes inside me.

“Bella,” he breathes.

Edward lies beside me, his hand caressing my belly, his long fingers splayed out wide.

“How’s my daughter?”

“She’s dancing.” I laugh.

“Dancing? Oh yes! Wow. I can feel her.” He grins as Blip Two somersaults inside me.

“I think she likes sex already.”

Edward frowns.

“Really?” he says dryly. He moves so his lips are against my bump. “There’ll be none of that until you’re thirty, young lady.”

I giggle.

“Oh Edward, you are such a hypocrite.”

“No, I’m an anxious father.” He gazes up at me and all at once his expression is raw and helpless.

“You’re a wonderful father, as I knew you would be.” Reaching down I caress his lovely face. He kisses my belly.

“I like this,” he breathes, stroking my belly. “There’s more of you.”

I pout.

“I don’t like more of me.”

“It’s great when you come.”

“Edward!”

“And I’m looking forward to the taste of breast milk again.”

“Edward! You are such a kinky –” He swoops on me suddenly, kissing me hard, his leg thrown over mine, grabbing my hands so they are above my head.

“You love the kinky fuckery,” he whispers, and he runs his nose down mine.

I grin up at him, caught in his infectious, wicked smile.

“Yes, I love the kinky fuckery. And I love you. Very much.”

I jerk awake, woken by a high-pitched squeal of delight from my son, and even though I can’t see him or Edward, my face splits in two with glee. Ted has woken from his nap and he and Edward are romping nearby. I lie quietly, still marveling at Edward’s capacity for play. His patience with Ted is extraordinary – much more so than with me. I snort. But then, that’s how it should be. And my beautiful little boy, the apple of his mother’s eye, knows no fear. Edward, on the other hand, is still so overprotective – of both of us. My sweet, mercurial, controlling Fifty.

“Let’s find Mommy. She’s here in the meadow somewhere.”

Teddy says something I don’t hear and Edward laughs: freely, happily. It’s a magical sound, filled with his paternal joy. I can’t resist. I struggle up on to my elbows to peek at them from my hide in the long grass.

Edward is swinging Teddy round and round, making him squeal once more in delight. He stops, launches him high into the air, and catches him. Teddy shrieks with childish abandon. My little man, my darling little man, always on the go.

“Gain, Daddy!” he squeals. Edward obliges, and my heart leaps into my mouth as he tosses Ted into the air once more. But again Edward catches him, and clutches Ted close, and kisses his copper-colored hair, and blows a kiss on his cheek. Teddy is oblivious. He squirms, pushing Edward’s chest, wanting out of his arms. Grinning, Edward sets him on the ground.

“Let’s find Mommy. She’s hiding in the grass.”

Teddy beams, enjoying the game, and looks around the meadow. Grasping Edward’s hand he points to somewhere I’m not. I can’t help my giggle, and I lie back down quickly.

“Ted, I heard Mommy. Did you hear her?”

“MOMMY!”

I giggle-snort at Teddy’s imperious tone. Jeez – so like his dad, and he’s only two.

“Teddy!” I call back, gazing up the sky with a ridiculous grin on my face.

“Mommy!”

All too soon their footsteps trample through the long grass, and first Ted, then Edward appears.

“Mommy!” Teddy screeches – as if he’s found the lost treasure of the Sierra Madre – and he leaps onto me.

“Hey! Baby boy!” I cradle him against me and kiss his chubby cheek. He giggles and kisses me in return, then struggles out of my arms.

“Hello, Mommy.” Edward smiles down at me.

“Hello, Daddy.” I grin up at him. He leans down, picks Ted up, and sits down beside me with our son in his lap.

“Gently with Mommy,” he admonishes Ted. I smirk – the irony is not lost on me. From his pocket Edward produces his BlackBerry and gives it to Ted. This will probably win us five minutes’ peace, maximum. Teddy studies it, his little brow furrowed. He looks so serious, blue eyes concentrating hard, just like his daddy does when he reads his emails. Edward nuzzles Ted’s hair, and my heart swells to look at them both. Two peas in a pod: my son sitting quietly – for a few moments at least – in my husband’s lap. My two favorite men in the whole world.

Of course Teddy is the most beautiful and talented child on the planet, but then I am his mother, so I would think that. And Edward is... well, Edward is just beautiful. In white t-shirt and jeans, he looks his usual hot self. What did I do to win such a prize?

“You look well, Mrs Cullen.”

“As do you, Mr Cullen.”

“Isn’t Mommy pretty?” Edward whispers in Teddy’s ear. Teddy swats him away, more interested in Daddy’s BlackBerry. I giggle.

“You can’t get around him.”

“I know.” Edward grins and kisses Teddy’s hair. “I can’t believe he’ll be two tomorrow.” His tone is wistful. Reaching across he spreads his hand over my bump.

“Let’s have lots of children,” he says.

“One more at least.” I grin, and he caresses my belly.

“How is my daughter?”

“She’s good. Asleep, I think.”

“Hi, Mr Cullen. Hello, Bella.”

We both turn to see Sophie, Taylor’s twelve-year-old daughter, appear out of the long grass.

“Soeee,” Teddy squeals with delighted recognition. He struggles out of Edward’s lap, discarding the BlackBerry.

“I have some popsicles from Gail.” Sophie says. “Can I give one to Teddy?”

“Sure.” I say. Oh dear, this is going to be messy.

“Pop!” Teddy holds out his hands and Sophie passes one to him. It’s dripping already.

“Here – Let Mommy see.” I sit up, take the popsicle from Teddy, and quickly slip

it into my mouth, licking off the excess juice. Hmm... cranberry, cool and delicious.

"Mine!" Teddy protests, his voice ringing with indignation.

"Here you go." I hand him back a slightly-less-runny popsicle, and it goes straight into his mouth. He grins at me.

"Can Teddy and I go for a walk?" Sophie asks.

"Sure."

"Don't go too far," Edward interjects.

"No, Mr Cullen." Sophie's hazel eyes are wide and serious. I think she's a little frightened of Edward. She holds her hand out, and Teddy takes it willingly. They trudge away together through the long grass.

Edward watches them.

"They'll be fine, Edward. What harm could come to them here?"

He scowls at me momentarily, and I crawl over and into his lap.

"Besides, Ted is completely smitten with Sophie."

Edward snorts and nuzzles my hair.

"She's a delightful child."

"She is. So pretty, too. A blonde angel."

Edward stills and places his hands on my belly.

"Girls eh?" he whispers, and there's a hint of trepidation in his voice. I reach up and curl my hand behind his head.

"You don't have to worry about your daughter for at least another three months. I have her covered here. Okay?"

He kisses me behind my ear and his teeth scrape around the edge to the lobe.

"Whatever you say, Mrs Cullen." Then he bites me.

I yelp.

"I enjoyed last night," he says. "We should do that more often."

"Me too."

"And we could, if you stopped working..."

"Edward," I warn.

He tightens his arms around me and grins into my neck.

"I know, I know, I'm like a stuck CD."

"We have an author in the New York Times bestsellers – Mr Fox's sales are phenomenal, the ebook side of our business has exploded, and I finally have the team I want around me."

"And you're making money," Edward adds, his voice reflecting his pride. "But... I like you barefoot and pregnant and in my kitchen."

I lean back so I can see his face. He gazes down at me, green eyes bright.

"I like that too," I murmur. Leaning down he kisses, me his hands still spread across my bump. Seeing he's in a good mood, I decide to broach a delicate subject.

"Have you thought any more about my suggestion?" I ask. He stills.

"Bella, the answer is no."

"But Beth is such a lovely name."

"I am not calling my daughter after my mother. No. End of discussion."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Grasping my chin he gazes earnestly down at me, radiating his exasperation. "Bella, give it up. I don't want my daughter tainted by my past."

"Okay. I'm sorry." Shit... I don't want to anger him.

"That's better. Stop trying to fix it," he mutters. "You got me to admit I loved her, you dragged me to her grave. Enough."

Oh no. I twist in his lap to straddle him and grasp his head in my hands.

"I'm sorry. Really. Don't be angry with me, please." Leaning forward I kiss him. Then kiss the corner of his mouth. He points to the other corner, and I smile and kiss it. He points to his nose. I kiss that. He grins and places his hands on my backside.

"Oh Mrs Cullen – what am I going to do with you?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something," I murmur.

Suddenly there's a high-pitched cry from Teddy. Edward pushes me onto my feet and is up in a nanosecond. He races towards the source of the sound, and I follow. Secretly I'm not nearly as concerned as Edward – it was not a cry that would make me take stairs two at a time to find out what's wrong.

Edward swings Teddy up into his arms. Our little boy is crying inconsolably and pointing to the ground, where the remains of his popsicle lie in a soggy mess, melting into the grass.

"He dropped it." Sophie says, sadly. "He could have mine, but I've finished it."

"Oh Sophie darling, don't worry."

"Mommy!" Teddy wails, holding his hands out to me. Edward reluctantly lets him go as I reach for him.

"There, there." I murmur.

"Pop," he sobs.

"I know, baby boy. We'll go see Mrs Cope and get another one." I kiss his head... oh, he smells so good. He smells of my baby boy.

"Pop," he sniffs.

I take his hand and kiss his sticky fingers.

"I can taste your popsicle here, on your fingers."

Teddy stops crying and examines his hand.

"Put your fingers in your mouth."

He does.

"Pop!"

"Yes. Popsicle."

He grins at me. My mercurial little boy, just like his dad. Well, at least he has an excuse – he's not yet two.

"Shall we go see Mrs Cope?"

He nods, smiling his beautiful baby smile.

"Will you let Daddy carry you?" He shakes his head and wraps his arms around my neck, hugging me tightly, his face pressed against my throat.

"I think Daddy wants to taste popsicle too," I whisper in Teddy's little ear.

Ted frowns at me, then looks at his hand and holds it out to Edward. Edward smiles and puts Teddy's fingers in his mouth.

"Hmm... tasty."

Teddy giggles and reaches up, wanting Edward to hold him. Edward grins at me and takes Teddy in his arms, settling him on his hip.

"Sophie, where's Gail?"

"She was in the big house."

I glance at Edward. His smile has turned bittersweet, and I wonder what he's thinking.

"You're so good with him," he murmurs.

“This little one?” I ruffle Ted’s hair. “It’s only because I have the measure of Cullen men.” I smirk at my husband.

He laughs.

“Yes, you so do, Mrs Cullen.”

Teddy squirms out of Edward’s hold. Now he wants to walk, my stubborn little man. I take one of his hands and his dad takes the other, and together we swing Teddy between us, all the way back to the house, Sophie skipping along in front of us.

~

I pause outside the door to Teddy’s room and listen as Edward reads to Ted.

I am the Lorax! I speak for the trees,

Which you seem to be chopping as fast as you please;

But I also speak for the brown Barbaloots,

Who frolicked and played in their Barbaloot suits,

Happily eating Truffula fruits.

Now, since you’ve chopped the trees to the ground

There’s not enough Truffula fruit to go ’round!

And my poor Barbaloots are all feeling the crummies

Because they have gas, and no food, in their tummies.

When I peek in, Teddy is fast asleep, while Edward continues to read. He glances up when I open the door and closes the book. He puts his finger to his lip, tiptoes over and switches on the baby monitor beside Teddy’s crib. Leaning over the crib he adjusts Teddy’s bedclothes, strokes his cheek, then straightens up and tiptoes over to me, without making a sound. It’s hard not to giggle at him.

Out in the hallway Edward pulls me into his embrace.

“God, I love him, but it’s great when he’s asleep,” he murmurs against my lips.

“I couldn’t agree with you more.”

He gazes down at me, green eyes soft.

“I can hardly believe he’s been with us for two years.”

“I know.” I reach up and kiss him; and for a moment I’m transported back to Teddy’s birth: the emergency caesarian, Edward’s crippling anxiety, Dr Greene’s no-nonsense calm when my little Blip was in distress. I shudder inwardly at the memory.

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“Mrs Cullen, you’ve been in labor for 36 hours now. Your contractions have slowed, in spite of the pitocin. We need to do a C-Section – the baby is in distress.” Dr Greene is adamant.

“About fucking time!” Edward growls at her. Dr Greene ignores him.

“Edward, quiet.” I squeeze his hand. My voice is low and weak and everything is fuzzy – the walls, the machines, the green-gowned people... I just want to go to sleep. But I have something important to do first... Oh yes. “I wanted to push him out myself.”

“Mrs Cullen, please. C-Section.”

“Please, Bella,” Edward pleads.

“Can I sleep then?”

“Yes, baby, yes.” It’s almost a sob, and Edward kisses my forehead.

“I want to see the lil’ Blip.”

“You will.”

"Okay," I whisper.

"Finally." Dr Greene mutters. "Nurse, page the anesthesiologist. Dr Nathan, prep for a C-section. Mrs Cullen, do you want to be conscious or unconscious?"

"Conscious – "

"Conscious – " Edward and I speak at once.

The nurse is setting up a screen across my chest... The door opens and closes, and there's someone else in the room. It's so loud... So many people... I want to go home.

"Edward," I breathe, clutching Edward's hand. "I'm frightened."

"No, baby, no. I'm here. Don't be frightened. Not my strong Bella." He kisses my forehead, and I can tell by the tone of his voice that something's wrong.

"What is it?"

"What?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Everything's fine. Baby, you're just exhausted." Green eyes burn with fear.

"Mrs Cullen, the anesthesiologist is here. He's going to numb you from your chest down."

"She's having another contraction."

Everything tightens, like a steel band around my belly. Shit! I crush Edward's hand as I ride it out. This is what's tiring – enduring this pain. I am so tired... I can feel a sharp point, a needle, but I concentrate on Edward's face.

On the furrow between his brows. He's tense. He's worried. Why is he worried?

James is in prison. Gone. Victoria is in prison. Gone. For years. Edward, don't worry. He can't get you now. He can't get me.

"Can you feel this, Mrs Cullen?" Dr Greene's disembodied voice is coming from behind the curtain.

"Feel what?"

"You can't feel it."

"No."

"Good. Dr Nathan, let's go."

"You're doing well, Bella."

Edward is pale. There is sweat on his brow. He's scared. Don't be scared, Edward. Don't be scared.

"I love you," I whisper.

"Oh Bella," he sobs. "I love you too, so much."

I feel a strange pulling deep inside. Like nothing I've felt before. Edward looks over the screen and blanches, but stares, fascinated.

"What's happening?"

"Suction! Good..."

Suddenly there's a piercing angry cry.

"You have a boy, Mrs Cullen. Check his apgar."

"Apgar is nine."

"Can I see him?" I gasp.

Edward disappears from view for a second, and re-appears a moment later, holding my son, swathed in blue. His face is pink, and covered in white mush and blood.

My baby. My Blip... Thomas Edward Cullen.

When I glance up at Edward there are tears in his eyes.

"Here's your son, Mrs Cullen," he whispers, his voice strained and hoarse.

"Our son," I breathe. "He's beautiful."

"He is," Edward says, and he plants a kiss on our beautiful boy's forehead, beneath a shock of dark hair. Thomas Edward Cullen is oblivious. Eyes closed, his earlier crying forgotten, he's asleep. He is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen. So beautiful, I begin to weep.

"Thank you, Bella," Edward whispers, and tears roll down his face too.

"What is it?" Edward tilts my chin back.

"I was just remembering Teddy's birth."

Edward blanches and cups my belly.

"I am not going through that again. Elective caesarian this time."

"Edward, I –"

"No, Bella. You nearly fucking died last time. No."

"I did not nearly die."

"No."

He's not to be argued with, but as he gazes down at me, his eyes soften.

"I like the name Phoebe," he whispers, and runs his nose down mine.

"Phoebe Cullen? Phoebe... Yes. I like that too." I grin up at him.

"Good. I want to set up Teddy's present." He takes my hand and we head downstairs. I can feel his excitement. Edward has been waiting for this moment all day.

"Do you think he'll like it?" Green eyes gaze apprehensively into mine.

"He'll love it. For about two minutes. Edward, he's only two."

Edward has finished setting up the wooden train set he bought Teddy for his birthday. He's had Barney at the office convert two of the little engines to run on solar power, like the helicopter I gave Edward a few years ago. Edward seems anxious for the sun to rise... I suspect that's because he wants to play with the train set himself. The layout covers most of the stone floor of our outdoor room.

I gaze up at the view as the sun sinks behind the Olympic Peninsula. It's everything Edward promised it would be, and I get the same joyful thrill seeing it now as I did the first time. It's simply stunning; Twilight over the Sound.

Edward pulls me into his arms.

"It's quite a view," I murmur.

"It is," Edward answers, and when I turn to look at him, he's gazing down at me.

He leans down and plants a soft kiss on my lips.

"It's a beautiful view," he murmurs. "My favorite."

"It's home."

He grins and kisses me again.

"I love you, Mrs Cullen."

"I love you too, Edward. Always."

~ooo000ooo~

OUTTAKES

It's the second chapter of MOTU from Edward's POV.

"Tomorrow," I say dismissively as Laurent exits my office.

"Golf? Definitely, Cullen."

My trainer's parting words rub salt into my wounds. In spite of my heroic attempts he's kicked my butt around the gym this morning – the only one who can beat me... and now he wants his pound of flesh on the golf course. I hate golf. But so much business is done on the golf course, and though I hate to admit it, he does improve my game.

Staring out at the Seattle skyline the all-too-familiar ennui seeps into my consciousness. I need a diversion, otherwise it's more of the same... the only thing to vaguely excite me this week has been my decision to send two freighters of food to Darfur. Which reminds me – Kate, she's supposed to come back to me with numbers and logistics – what the hell is keeping her? And right now I have to endure a dull interview with the persistent Miss Hale from WSU, for their student magazine. Why the fuck did I agree to this? I loathe interviews... inane questions from inane ill-informed vacuous idiots. The phone buzzes.

"Yes," I snap irritably.

"Miss Isabella Swan is here to see you, Mr Cullen."

"Swan? I was expecting Rosalie Hale."

"It's Miss Isabella Swan who's here, Sir."

"Show her in."

Well, well... Miss Hale unavailable. I know her father Alec, owner of Hale Media –we do business together occasionally. He seems a shrewd businessman and a rational human being. This is my favour to him. I'm vaguely curious about his daughter, to see if the apple has fallen far from the tree. A commotion at the door distracts me as a whirl of long chestnut hair, pale limbs and brown boots dives head first into my office. I have to repress my natural urge to laugh as I hastily make my way over to the poor girl on the floor and help her to her feet.

Warm, brown, embarrassed eyes meet mine – and stop me in my tracks. They are the most extraordinary color... eyes with dark hidden depths... and my curiosity is piqued instantaneously – what secrets do they hold? She flushes, an innocent

pale rose, and I wonder briefly if all her skin is like that – flawless – and what it would look like pink and warmed from the bite of a cane... Fuck. I halt my wayward thoughts, alarmed at their direction – she’s way too young. She gapes at me, and I have to repress the urge to roll my eyes. Yeah, yeah, beauty is just skin-deep, baby. You really don’t want to go deeper than that with me. Showtime, Edward – but let’s have some fun...

“Miss Hale? I’m Edward Cullen. Are you all right? Would you like to sit?”

There’s that flush again. She’s really quite attractive in a gauche way – slight, pale, with a mane of glorious hair barely contained by that hair tie.

What would it look like loose around her slim, naked shoulders...? Cullen! Where exactly are you going with that thought? I extend a hand. She stutters an apology and places her small hand in mine... contact. Her skin is cool and soft, but her handshake surprisingly firm.

“Miss Hale is err... indisposed, so she sent me. I hope you don’t mind, Mr Cullen.” Her voice is quiet with a hesitant musicality and she blinks at me erratically, long lashes fluttering over those dark, dark eyes. Unable to keep the amusement from my voice as I recall her less than decorous entrance into my office, I ask who she is.

“Isabella Swan. I’m studying English with Rose... err Rosalie... err Miss Hale at Washington State.”

Nervous, bashful, bookish type eh? She looks it. She’s dressed appallingly. Hiding all her curves beneath that plain sweater. How can this young woman be a journalist? She doesn’t have an assertive bone in her body. She’s all charmingly flustered, meek, mild... submissive. What an intriguing thought.... Cullen! I shake my head slightly, vaguely amused at my inappropriate thoughts, traveling a well-worn but unwelcome path. I am puzzled by the effect she has on me. Muttering some platitude I ask her to sit, and notice her dark gaze appraising my office paintings. Before I can stop myself, I am explaining them.

“A local artist. Trouton,” I murmur.

“They’re lovely. Raising the ordinary to extraordinary,” she says dreamily, lost in the paintings’ exquisite fine artistry. Her profile is so delicate – an upturned nose, soft, full lips – and her words... She mirrors my sentiments exactly – the ordinary to extraordinary. And it’s a keen observation on a first glance... she’s bright. I mutter my agreement as I sit down opposite her.

She proceeds to fish a crumpled sheaf of paper and a minidisk recorder out of her overlarge bag, and then she's all fingers and thumbs, dropping the damned thing twice on my Bauhaus coffee table. She's obviously never done this before.

For some reason I can't fathom, I find it... amusing. Normally this kind of fumbling maladroitness would irritate the fuck out of me but I have to bite my lip not to laugh, and resist the urge not to set it up for her myself. She's becoming more and more flustered and it occurs to me that I could refine her motor skills – with the aid of a riding crop. Aptly used it can bring even the most skittish to heel. The thought makes me shift slightly in my chair. Steady boy... stop this.

She peeks up at me and bites down on her full bottom lip. Fuck! That mouth! How did I not notice that before? The bottom lip plump and full... yes, I'd like to bite it too.

"Sorry," she stutters. "I'm not used to this."

I can tell, baby – my thought is ironic – but right now I can't take my eyes off your mouth.

"Take all the time you need, Miss Swan." I need some time here to marshal my squalid, wayward, completely unprofessional thoughts. What is it about this girl?

"Do you mind if I record your answers?" she asks, oh-so innocently.

I want to laugh. Oh, thank fuck.

"After you've taken so much trouble to set up the recorder... you ask me now?" I can't help but tease her. She blinks at me, those dark doe-eyes lost and wary for a moment. Stop being such a shit, Cullen.

"No, I don't mind," I mutter, chastened by her look.

"Did Rose... I mean Miss Hale, explain what the interview was for?"

"Yes – your student newspaper, WSU Eyewitness. To appear in the graduation issue, as I shall be conferring the degrees at this year's graduation ceremony."

And why the fuck I agreed to do that I don't know. Sam in PR would tell me it's because it's an honor, and because the research program with the environmental science department in Vancouver needs publicity to attract additional funding to match my own donation.

Miss Flushing Swan blinks at me once more, as if what I've just said is some surprise, and looks vaguely disapproving. Surely she's done some background

work for this interview? She should know this... but it appears not. The thought cools my blood – it's displeasing, not what I would expect from her or anyone I've donated my time to. Cullen, you don't know her! And I'm left with the irritating thought that I'd like to know her, and know her well... know her intimately.

"Good... well, I have some questions... Mr Cullen." She smoothes a stray lock of hair behind her ear, distracting me from my annoyance.

"I thought you might," I mutter dryly. Let's make her squirm.

She squirms obligingly, then seems to pull herself together. Leaning forward she presses the start button on the minidisk and glances down at her crumpled notes.

"You're very young to have amassed such an empire. To what do you owe your success?" I have to resist the urge to sigh heavily and scold her – she can do better than this, surely? What a dull question – very disappointing, not one iota of originality. I trot out my usual response which, if she'd done her homework, she would know.

Quite simply, I have some exceptional people working for me. People I trust – in as far as I trust anyone – and whom I pay well, but the fact is, I'm a fucking genius at what I do – it's like falling off a log. I buy ailing, mismanaged companies, and fix them – or if they're really broken, strip them like a locust and sell off the assets. It's simply a question of knowing the difference between the two – and it always comes down to the people running them. You need good people, and I can judge a person, better than most.

"Maybe you're just lucky," she says quietly.

Lucky? No luck involved here, Miss Swan. I feel a brief frisson of annoyance and my interest is piqued again. She looks unassuming and quiet... but this question... No one's ever asked me if I'm lucky. Hard work, and bringing people with me – keeping a close watch on them, second-guessing them if need be – and if they're not up to the task, ditching them quickly – that's what I do, and I do it well. Flaunting my erudition, I quote my favorite American industrialist:

"I think it was Harvey Firestone who said "the growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership."

"You sound like a control freak."

Again she catches me off guard, and I want to snort with laughter. She really

has no idea – Control is my middle name. I gaze at her. What I'd do to control you, baby...

"Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss Swan," I answer darkly.

Her eyes widen, her face flushes, and she bites down on that fucking lip again. It's – arousing. Why? What is it about this girl? I try and keep my thoughts on track – continuing my thoughts on control.

"Besides, immense power is acquired by assuring yourself, in your secret reveries, that you were born to control things." Like I want to control you.

For fuck's sake Cullen! You've known her all of two minutes!

"Do you feel that you have immense power?"

My annoyance grows. Deep down I can pretend it's her persistent questions to which she should already know the answers. But really... it's my own, unwelcome, response to her that's annoying me.

"I employ over fifty thousand people Miss Swan. That gives me a certain... sense of responsibility. Of power, if you will. If I were to decide I was no longer interested in the telecommunications business and sell up, twenty five thousand people would struggle to make their mortgage payments after a month or so..."

Her mouth pops open at my response. Suck it up, Miss Swan... I feel my equilibrium returning.

"Don't you have a board to answer to?"

I respond quickly. Another one she should know, and I raise my eyebrow at her.

"And do you have any interests outside of your work?" she continues, hastily, gauging my reaction... she's flustered again. I want to snort with laughter.

"I have varied interests, Miss Swan." And I cannot help my smile. Oh, I would like to acquaint you with my interests, baby... somehow I don't think you'd be impressed. Images of her in varying positions in my playroom come unbidden to my mind... shackled on the cross, spread-eagled on the four-poster, splayed over the whipping bench. Fuck... Cullen, control yourself! Fuck. There's the flush again – it's like a defense mechanism.

"But if you work so hard, what do you do to chill out?"

"Chill out?" I grin at her. What an expression! Does she have any idea of the number of companies I'm running? And then it occurs to me: what do I do to chill out? Sailing... flying... fucking... and beating the shit out of brown-haired girls like you. I answer her smoothly, omitting my two favorite hobbies.

“You invest in manufacturing... why, specifically?”

Her question drags me back to the present.

“I like to build things. I like to know how things work, what makes things tick... how to construct and deconstruct. And I have a love of ships... what can I say? They distribute food round the planet. What’s not to like?”

“That sounds like your heart talking, rather than logic and facts.”

Heart? Me? My heart was savaged beyond recognition a long time ago.

“Possibly... though some people I know would say I don’t have a heart.”

“Why would they say that?”

“Because they know me well,” I smile at her wryly. No-one knows me well – except Irina of course. I wonder what she’d make of little Miss Swan here. The girl’s a mass of contradictions – shy, uneasy, obviously bright... and arousing as hell. Yes, okay, I admit it – I’d like to truss her up, flay her and fuck her.

But it’s not going to happen.

“Would your friends say that you are easy to get to know?”

“I’m a very private person, Miss Swan, and I’ll go a long way to protect my privacy. I don’t often give interviews...” Doing what I do, I have no choice.

“Why did you agree to do this interview?”

“Because I’m a benefactor of the university, and I couldn’t get Miss Hale off my back. She badgered and badgered my PR people... and I admire that kind of tenacity.” And now I’m so glad that you’ve turned up, and not Alec Hale’s daughter.

“You also invest in farming technologies... Why are you interested in this area?”

“We can’t eat money, Miss Swan, and there are too many people on this planet who don’t have enough to eat.” I stare at her impassively. No way am I going into this dark area of my life.

“That sounds very philanthropic. Is that something you feel passionately about? Feeding the world’s poor?”

I shrug. Better bluff your way out of this, Cullen. “It’s shrewd business.”

Frowning at me skeptically, a little v forms on her brow. I’d like to kiss it... after I’ve fucked that mouth... yes. That mouth needs training.

“Do you have a philosophy? If so, what is it?”

“I don’t have a philosophy as such... maybe a guiding principle, Carnegie’s: ‘A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his own mind may take

possession of anything else to which he is justly entitled.' I'm very singular – driven. I like control... of myself and those around me."

"So you want to possess things..."

Yes I do, baby. You, for one. The thought is very appealing. I imagine her on her knees before me... Cullen! Not Going To Happen.

"I want to deserve to possess them... but yes, bottom line... I do."

I could really take care of you.

"You sound like the ultimate consumer."

I know what I'd like to consume. Shit, I need a new sub... it's been what? Three weeks since Annette left? And look at me – I'm a mess, over this brown-haired girl. I try a smile and agree with her.

"You were adopted... how far do you think that's shaped the way you are?"

What the fuck has this got to do with the price of oil? I can feel my frown.

What a ridiculous question... if I'd stayed with the crack-whore I'd probably be dead. I fob her off with a non-answer answer, trying to keep my voice level.

But she pushes me on the subject, wanting to know my age. Shut her down, Cullen...

"This is all a matter of public record, Miss Swan." My voice is stern... she looks contrite. Good.

"You've had to sacrifice a family life for your work."

"That's not a question," I snap, and glower at her. Fucking hell...!

She flushes again, and bites down on that damned lip. Now I'd really like to fuck her mouth – that would shut her up. She has the grace to apologize.

"Have you had to sacrifice a family life for your work?"

What would I want with fucking family?

"I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I'm not interested in extending my family beyond that."

"Are you gay, Mr Cullen?"

I inhale sharply – I cannot believe she's asked me that... the unspoken question that hovers over me where my family are concerned – much to my amusement. How dare she? I want to drag her out of her seat, bend her across my knee and spank the living shit out of her, then fuck her over my desk, with her hands tied tightly behind her back – that would answer her question. How frustrating is this female? I take a deep calming breath... and notice that she's acutely

embarrassed by her own question. I feel a vindictive delight.

“No Isabella, I’m not.” I raise my eyebrows at her but keep my expression impassive. Isabella... it’s a lovely name. I like the way my tongue rolls round it.

“I apologize... it’s, err... written here...” Hastily, nervously, she tucks her hair behind her ear.

She doesn’t know her own questions...? Perhaps they’re not hers. I ask her, drinking her in... she really is very attractive. Beautiful even.

“Err... no... Rose... Miss Hale – she compiled the questions.”

“Are you colleagues on the student paper?”

“No... she’s my room-mate.”

I have to resist the urge to laugh. No wonder she’s all over the place. I scratch my chin as I debate whether or not to give her a really, really hard time.

“Did you volunteer to do this interview?”

And I’m rewarded with her submissive look, all dark eyes and wary, nervous about my reaction. Good to know I unnerve her too.

“I was drafted... She’s not well,” she says softly.

“That explains a great deal.”

There’s a knock at the door, and Angela interrupts us.

“Mr Cullen – forgive me for interrupting, but your next meeting is in two minutes.”

“We’re not finished here, Angela. Please cancel my next meeting.”

Angela hesitates, gazing at me. She’s stunned. I stare at her – Out! Now! She flushes scarlet. Shit... I don’t want another one reduced to tears and off. But she seems to recover herself.

“Very well, Mr Cullen,” she mutters, and exits.

I turn my attention back to the intriguing creature on my couch.

“Where were we, Miss Swan?”

“Err... please don’t let me keep you from anything.”

But it’s my turn now... see if I can uncover any of the secrets hidden in her dark eyes.

“I want to know about you, Miss Swan. I think that’s only fair.” As I lean forward her eyes widen slightly. Oh yes – the usual effect. Nice to know she’s

not oblivious to my charms.

“There’s not much to know,” she says, flushing again. Lord, I intimidate her.

“What are your plans after you graduate?”

She shrugs slightly. “I haven’t made any plans Mr Cullen, I just need to get through my final exams.”

“We run an excellent internship program here.”

Fuck. Where are you going with this Cullen? Breaking a golden rule – never, ever fuck with the staff. She looks surprised, and her teeth sink into that lip again. It’s so arousing... Why? I shift uncomfortably.

“Oh... I’ll bear that in mind,” she murmurs quietly, adding as an afterthought,

“Though I’m not sure I’d fit in here...”

Why the hell not? What’s wrong with my company? I ask straight out.

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“Not to me,” I murmur – lost in her dark gaze. She’s all flustered again and she reaches for the minidisk. Shit, she’s going...

“Would you like me to show you round?”

Mentally I run through my schedule for this afternoon, nothing that won’t keep.

“I’m sure you’re far too busy, Mr Cullen, and I do have a long drive.”

What? She’s come all the way from Portland? She should be staying the night...

I could certainly find a place for her to sleep.

“You’re driving back to Portland?” I glance quickly out of the window. It’s one hell of a drive and it’s raining. “Well, you’d better drive carefully.” Why the fuck should I care? She wants out – and quite right too. What the hell could I offer her?

“Did you get everything you need?” I add in an effort to prolong her stay.

“Yes sir...” she says quietly. Her response floors me – the way those words sound, coming out of that smart mouth. Briefly the image of what I’d like to do to that mouth flits through my mind, annoying and angering me. It ain’t gonna happen, Cullen!

“Thank you for letting me interview you, Mr Cullen.”

“The pleasure’s been all mine,” I respond truthfully. I haven’t felt this fascinated by anyone in a long while, or this aroused – ever. The thought is unsettling, and the tempting image of her, bound and wanting, intrudes on my consciousness again.

She stands. Mirroring her actions I hold out my hand, eager for the contact with her skin.

“Until we meet again, Miss Swan,” I murmur, my voice low, and she places her small hand in mine. This time, I feel a weird connection... Yes – I want this girl – preferably in my playroom. I swallow quickly, trying to suppress my very physical reaction to her touch.

“Mr Cullen.” She nods at me, and I break the hold, moving to open the door. Shit... I cannot let her leave with the upper hand. It’s obvious that she wants out as quickly as possible. Irritation and inspiration hits me simultaneously.

“I’m just ensuring you make it through the door, Miss Swan.”

On cue she flushes her delicious rosy pink – and again I wonder what her skin would look like heated from the harsh sting of a cane.

“Well, that’s very considerate,” she snaps at me.

Miss Swan has teeth! As she exits I grin behind her, and follow in her wake.

Both Angela and Jessica look up in shock. Yeah, yeah – I’m just seeing the girl out.

“Did you have a coat?” I ask.

“Yes.”

I glare at Jessica who immediately leaps up and retrieves a navy coat. Lord... this woman should be better dressed. I take the coat from Jessica, surprising her again, and giving her my ‘I’ve got this’ look. I hold it up for Miss Swan – though if I had my choice, I’d be undressing rather than dressing her. As I pull it over her slim shoulders, I touch her skin briefly, and she stills at the contact. Yes... she’s affected by me – I am ridiculously pleased by the thought. Strolling over to the elevator I press the call button, while she stands fidgeting beside me. Oh, I could so stop you fidgeting, baby. The doors open and in she shoots, turning to face me.

“Isabella,” I murmur in farewell.

“Edward,” she replies, and the elevator doors close... and my name on her lips, sounds odd – unfamiliar – but sexy as hell... Well, fuck me. What was that? I need to know more about this girl.

“Angela,” I snap as I head back into my office. “Get me Jenks on the line, now.”

As I sit at my desk waiting for the call I gaze at the office paintings. And

Miss Swan's words drift back to me: 'Raising the ordinary to extraordinary'.

She could so easily have been talking about herself.

My phone buzzes.

"Jenks, I need a background check."

Fifty's First Christmas

My sweater is scratchy and smells of new. Everything is new. I have a new Mommy. She is kind and smiles. She smiles all the time. Her teeth are small and white.

"Do you want to help me decorate the tree, Edward?"

There is a big tree in the room with the big couches. A big tree. I have seen these before. But in stores. Not inside where the couches are. My new house has lots of couches. Not one couch. Not one brown sticky couch.

"Here, look."

My new Mommy shows me a box and it's full of balls. Lots of pretty shiny balls.

"These are ornaments for the tree."

Orn-a-ments. Orn-a-ments. My head says the word. Orn-a-ments.

"And these..." She stops and pulls out a string with little flowers on them. "These are the lights. Lights first, and then we can trim the tree." She reaches down and puts her fingers in my hair. I go very still. But I like her fingers in my hair. I like to be near new Mommy. She smells good. Clean. And she only touches my hair.

"MOM!"

He's calling. Memet. He's big and loud. Very loud. He talks. All the time. I don't talk at all. I have no words. I have words in my head.

"Emmett Darling. We're in the sitting room."

He runs in. He has been to school. He has a picture. A picture he has drawn for my New Mommy. She is Memet's Mommy too. She kneels down and hugs him and looks at the picture. It is a house with a mommy and a daddy and a Memet and an Edward. Edward is very small in Memet's picture. Memet is big. He has a big smile and Edward has a sad face.

Doctor Daddy is here too. He walks towards Mommy. I hold my blanky tight. He kisses New Mommy and New Mommy isn't frightened. She smiles. She kisses him back. I squeeze my blanky.

"Hello Edward." Doctor Daddy has a deep soft voice. I like his voice. He is never loud. He does not shout. He does not shout like... He reads books to me when I go to bed. He reads about a cat and a hat and green eggs and ham. I have never seen green eggs. Doctor Daddy bends down so he is small.

"What did you do today?"

I show him the tree.

"You bought a tree? A Christmas tree?"

I say yes with my head.

"It's a beautiful tree. You and Mommy chose very well. It's an important job choosing the right tree."

He pats my hair too and I go very still and hold my blanky tightly. Doctor Daddy doesn't hurt me.

"Daddy, look at my picture." Memet is mad when Doctor Daddy talks to me. Memet is mad with me. I smack Memet when he is mad with me. New Mommy is mad with me if I do. Memet does not smack me. Memet is scared of me.

The lights on the tree are pretty.

"Here, let me show you. The hook goes through the little eye and then you can hang it on the tree." Mommy puts the red orn-a... orn-a-ment on the tree.

"You try, with this little bell."

The little bell rings. I shake it. The sound is a happy sound. I shake it again.

Mommy smiles. A big smile. A special smile for me.

"You like the bell, Edward?"

I say yes with my head and shake the bell once more and it tinkles happily.

"You have a lovely smile, darling boy." Mommy blinks and quickly wipes her hand over her eyes and she strokes my hair.

"I love to see your smile." Her hand moves to my shoulder. No. I step back and squeeze my blanky. Mommy looks sad and then happy. She strokes my hair.

"Shall we put the bell on the tree?"

My head says yes.

"Edward, you must tell me when you're hungry. You can do that. You can take Mommy's hand and lead Mommy to the kitchen and point." She points her long finger at me. Her nail is shiny and pink. It is pretty. But I don't know if my New Mommy is mad or not. I have finished all my dinner. Macaroni and cheese. It tastes good.

"I don't want you to be hungry, darling. Okay? Now would you like some ice-cream?"

My head says YES!

Mommy smiles at me. I like her smiles. They are better than macaroni and cheese.

The tree is pretty. I stand and look at it and hug my blanky. The lights twinkle and are all different colors and the orn-a-ments are all different colors. I like the blue ones. And on the top of the tree is a big star. Doctor Daddy held Memet up and Memet put the star on the tree. Memet likes putting the star on the tree. I want to put the star on the tree... but I don't want Doctor Daddy to hold me up high. I don't want him to hold me. The star is sparkly and bright.

Beside the tree is the piano. My New Mommy lets me touch the black and the white on the piano. Black and white. I like the white sounds. The black sound is wrong. But I like the black sound too. I go white to black. White to black. Black to white. White, white, white, white. Black, black, black, black. I like the sound. I really like the sound.

"Do you want me to play for you, Edward?"

My New Mommy sits down. She touches the white and the black and the songs come. She presses the pedals underneath. Sometimes it's loud and sometimes it's quiet. The song is happy. Memet likes Mommy to sing too.

New Mommy sings.

There once was an ugly duckling With feathers all stubby and brown And the other birds said in so many words Quack, Quack Get out of town Quack Quack Get out Quack Quack Get out Quack Quack Get out of town

Mommy makes a funny quacking noise. Memet makes the funny quacking noise and he makes his arms like wings and flaps them up and down like a bird. Memet is funny.

Mommy laughs. Memet laughs. I laugh.

“You like this song, Edward?” And New Mommy has her sad-happy face.

I have a stock-ing. It is red and it has a picture of a man with a red hat and a big white beard. He is Santa. Santa brings presents. I have seen pictures of Santa. But Santa never bought me presents before. I was bad. Santa doesn’t bring presents to boys who are bad. Now I am good. My New Mommy says I am good, very good. New Mommy doesn’t know. I must never tell New Mommy... but I am bad. I don’t want New Mommy to know that.

Doctor Daddy hangs the stock-ing over the fireplace. Memet has a stocking too. Memet can read the word on his stock-ing. It says Memet. There is a word on my stock-ing. Edward. New Mommy spells it out.

E D W A R D

Doctor Daddy sits on my bed. He reads to me. I hold my blanky. I have a big room. Sometimes the room is dark and I have bad dreams. Bad dreams about before. My New Mommy comes to bed with me when I have the bad dreams. She lies down and she sings soft songs and I go to sleep. She smells of soft and new and lovely. My New Mommy is not cold. Not like... not like... And my bad dreams go when she is there asleep with me.

Santa has been. Santa does not know I have been bad. I am glad Santa does not know.

I have a train and a plane, and a helicopter, and a car and a helicopter. My helicopter can fly. My helicopter is blue. It flies round the Christmas tree. It flies over the piano and lands in the middle of the white. It flies over Mommy and flies over Daddy and flies over Memet as he plays with the Lego. The helicopter flies through the house, through the dining room, through the kitchen. He flies past the door to Daddy’s study and upstairs in my bedroom, in Memet’s bedroom, Mommy and Daddy’s bedroom. He flies through the house, because it’s my house. My house, where I live.

~ooo000o oo~

Fifty’s POV for the Fandom for Tsunami

Chapter 25

It’s cold. Irina circles around me as I lie bound and gagged, her spiked red heels clicking on the stone floor. The sound echoes off the walls of her basement. I brace myself, digging deep. What next from you? Where will you strike? My body’s stiff and cold and it hums with pain from the lash. She stops at my head and places her shoe on my face, her heel at my temple. She smiles and presses down on her heel.

Fuck! I’m startled awake. Shit – my head, my throbbing, aching head. I open my eyes and wince, closing them immediately, as pain lances through my skull from the light. Fuck.

I’m at home, thank Christ, and it’s early morning. I’m lying on top of my bed, uncovered and cold, with the vague sense that something is seriously amiss grating on

my conscience. My dream? Ugh – Irina. No... *Bella!* I sit up quickly, and my head swims. Shit. I'm in yesterday's clothes, and I stink. Fuck. Where's Bella? My head is killing me. I rub my temples, trying to expurgate that dream from my brain. What the hell was that about? As I rub my head, vague images of last night flash fuzzy and malformed through my mind. Oh shit... the baby. A fucking baby! Irina... Shit. My mouth is dry and tastes like Emmett's jock strap. Bourbon and white wine – What the fuck was I thinking? Where's Bella?

I'm barefoot and there's an additional duvet on the bed... what time is it? Glancing at the alarm I see it's 7:25 in the morning. It's obvious Bella's not slept here. Where is she? Unease spawns in my gut, mingling with a sense of guilt. What did I do? My BlackBerry is on the bedside. I reach for it as I stand up, determined to hunt down Bella. She's not in the bathroom. Staggering next door I glance around the guest room. The duvet is missing. That'll be the extra one on our bed. No Bella. Mrs Cope is in the kitchen. She greets me with an icy stare. Shit. Last night.

"Good morning Gail. Bella?" I ask her.

"I haven't seen her, Mr Cullen," she says, her voice clipped and cold, matching her expression. Ignoring her tone I dart into the library. No sign. There must be a logical explanation for this. I push the ache in my head to one side as I stride across the drawing room, and running through the possibilities of where my wife might be. Don't panic. She's gone running. No – she never runs unless she's with Laurent, and he's on vacation until this afternoon. She's not in the TV room. Fuck. Or my study. I bolt across the drawing room, ignoring Mrs Cope, and head upstairs to check both guest rooms. Panic blooms large as life in my chest as I burst into her former bedroom... she's not there. She's fucking gone. *No.* I run downstairs, ignoring the stabbing pain in my head, ignoring my nausea.

Taylor is in his office.

"Bella?"

He gazes up at me, his face impassive.

"I haven't seen her, sir."

"Did she go out?"

He checks the journal on his desk.

"There's nothing logged by Ryan."

"I can't find her."

He turns and checks the CCTV monitors.

"All the vehicles are accounted for. No one can get in, sir." He stands.

Shit! Kidnapped. I hadn't considered that. I can only think that she's left me.

Kidnap? No... that fucker's in custody. I glower at Taylor.

"Unless you're Lauren Elliot or James Smith. They got in," I snap.

Taylor blanches.

"Mrs Elliot had a key to the fire escape, and Ryan let Smith in," Taylor says evenly. "I'll check the apartment, Mr Cullen."

I nod, and he heads out into the hallway.

No. She wouldn't leave. In spite of my pounding head I glimpse a memory from last night – Bella in soft satin, fragrant, beautiful, smiling down at me. I glance down at my phone. I could call her. Just to check. I notice there's a text:

***WOULD YOU LIKE MRS LINCOLN TO JOIN US WHEN WE
EVENTUALLY DISCUSS THIS TEXT SHE SENT TO YOU? IT WILL SAVE
YOU RUNNING TO HER AFTERWARDS. YOUR WIFE***

What the fuck is this? She's been reading my texts! Shit – *what* text? I press

call... and her phone rings and rings and rings. Fuck it. Eventually it diverts to voicemail.

"Where the hell are you?" I snap, and hang up. I call again. Nothing. Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*. I hang up once more, trying to quell the fear that threatens to choke me. Where could she be? With Rose? Reluctantly I call the tenacious Miss Hale.

"Hello," her voice is thick with sleep.

"Rose, it's Edward."

"Edward?"

Christ, could this woman be any more irritating?

"Cullen," I seethe through gritted teeth. Your soon-to-be brother-in-law.

"Bella, is she okay?" says Rose. I have her full attention.

"She's not with you?"

"No. Should she be? Edward, what did you do?"

"If she calls, let me know."

"Ed –"

I hang up. I cannot deal with her irritating questions while I have a thumping head and a missing wife. I call Bella's phone again, and again it diverts to voicemail. Shit. Back in the kitchen Gail is making coffee.

"Can you get me some Advil, please?" I ask, as graciously as I can manage. She stifles a small smile. Christ! She's glad I'm suffering. I scowl at her, but she ignores me. I head upstairs and check all the rooms again.

Taylor is coming down the corridor as I try the playroom door.

"BELLA!" I shout, and regret it immediately, as pain lances round my head. The playroom is locked.

"Any luck?"

"No, sir."

"Get the others. We need to come up with a plan."

"Yes, sir."

Downstairs Mrs Cope has placed two tablets and a glass of water on the breakfast bar. I swallow them gratefully.

Ryan and Stuart appear. Ryan looks like he's had less sleep than me.

"Mrs Cullen is missing. Stuart, check the CCTV footage. Ryan, Taylor, search the apartment again."

A movement from the corner of my eye catches my attention.

Fuck. She's here.

The world rights itself on its axis once more. Oh thank Christ. Relief floods through me, calming everything in its path, but it's shortlived. A creeping sense of foreboding travels up my spine, raising all the hair on the back of my head, as I stare at her.

Bella gazes at us all. Cool and distant. Brown eyes wide, haunted, dark circles beneath them. She's mad – mad as hell and wrapped in a duvet, small, pale and utterly beautiful. Where the hell was she?

"Stuart, I'll be ready to leave in about twenty minutes," she mutters, hugging the duvet tighter around herself and raising her stubborn little chin in defiance. From behind me Mrs Cope steps forward.

"Would you like some breakfast, Mrs Cullen?" she asks.

Bella shakes her head.

"I'm not hungry, thank you." Her voice is soft and clear but implacable. Thank Christ she's still here. She didn't go. But she's not going to eat – maybe to punish

me? Where was she hiding? Unwelcome visions of the elusive Lauren Elliot come to mind.

“Where were you?” I mutter, bemused.

There is a sudden burst of activity as my staff disappear, distracting me. Bella turns and heads to our bedroom. Shit, she's ignoring me! Fuck. Why?

“Bella. Answer me.” Don't fucking ignore me, dammit! I follow her down the hallway as she waltzes into the bathroom, shuts the door and locks it.

Shit!

“Bella!” I thump my fist on the door in impotent exasperation. Why is she doing this? Because I walked out last night? I check the door to see if my ears deceived me. Yes, she's locked it.

“Bella, open the damned door.”

“Go away!”

“I'm not going anywhere,” I growl, trying to contain my burgeoning anger.

“Suit yourself.”

“Bella, please.” Why is she so mad?

I hear the shower gush, and anger turns to helpless fury that surges through my blood stream. How dare she lock the fucking door? It takes all my pain-addled selfcontrol not to break it down.

Think, Cullen, think. Why is she so mad? Is it because I walked out? Fuck.

After the ten-fingered, ten-toed bombshell she dropped on me last night, she's mad at *me*? Or is it because I came home drunk? I don't get it. I lean back against the wall and close my eyes, trying to calm down.

Focus on the feeling you have when gliding. Banner's sonorous voice invades my thoughts. Where the hell was he last night, when I needed him?

My wife is mad at me. Really fucking mad. And from nowhere, the thought brings a reluctant smile to my face. Wives get mad at their husbands all the time. This is normal. And I seize the crumb of comfort this random thought offers me.

Christ, my head is pounding. What do I do? I gaze at the locked bathroom door, bemused. I'm mad at her, she's mad at me. Is it because of what I said last night?

Shit. Her text. What was that about? I check my phone, rereading her text and scrolling through the rest of mine. There's a text from Irina – fuck. Why the fuck is Bella searching through my texts? And why the hell can't Irina keep her fucking thoughts to herself? Oh shit – That's what this is about, Bella's *bête noir*. No wonder she's mad.

I sigh, running my hand through my hair to soothe my aching head. Why did I see Irina last night? And all of a sudden that sense of unease is back. What did we discuss? I wrack my brain, trying to remember. Through the alcoholic haze I recall talking about her business... about Seth... about fatherhood. Shit – did I tell her about Bella and the fucking baby? No... no. Why did I get so trashed? I loathe this feeling. I shudder as an earlier, darker memory surfaces. Someone drunk. Angry and drunk. A cold sweat breaks out all over my skin. Fuck this. I lean against the wall, close my eyes, and take a deep steadying breath to dampen the rising panic. That was long ago... Calm down. Just wait, Cullen. She'll be out in a moment.

The door lock clicks, and I open my eyes to see Bella, wrapped in towels, emerge and head into the closet. She doesn't look at me. How long is she going to keep this up? I follow her to the threshold of the closet and watch as she oh-so- casually selects her clothing for the day.

“Are you ignoring me?” The disbelief is evident in my voice.

“Perceptive, aren’t you?” she mutters, as if I am some kind of afterthought. Fuck. What do I do? She turns and halts in front of me, finally looking me in the eye. She cocks her head to one side, with a get-out-of-my-way-asshole expression on her face. Fuck, I really am in deep shit. I have never seen her this mad... although there was that time she threw the hairbrush at me on the Fair Lady. I step out of her way when really all I want to do is grab her, press against the wall and kiss her, kiss her senseless. Then bury myself inside her. But I follow her like a fucking lapdog into the bedroom and watch her saunter over to her chest of drawers. How can she be so fucking casual? Look at me!

She lets her towel drop to the floor. My body stirs in response, making me angrier. Christ, but she’s beautiful. Slim, pale flawless skin, the soft flare of her hips, the swell of her behind and long, long legs that I want wrapped around me. Her body shows no sign of the invader yet. How long will it take me to get her into bed?

Cullen, no – get a grip. She’s still not looking at me.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask. I need to know how deep in shit I am.

“I’m too stupid to know.” Her voice is saccharine sweet as she fishes some panties out of a drawer. Oh shit. My words come back to haunt me. Fuck.

“Bella –” My breath catches in my throat as she bends and pulls on her panties, wiggling that glorious ass.

She’s doing this on purpose. And in spite of my aching head, my filthy mood, I want to fuck her. Now. Just to make sure we’re okay. My cock agrees.

“Go ask your Mrs Robinson. I’m sure she’ll have an explanation for you,” she says distractedly, as if I’m some fucking lackey. That’s it. Me seeing Irina has made her mad.

“Bella, I’ve told you before, she’s not my –” She interrupts me, waving her hand.

“I don’t want to hear it, Edward. The time for talking was yesterday, but instead you decided to rant, and go get drunk with the woman who abused you for years. Well, give her a call. I am sure she’ll be more than willing to listen to you now.”

Okay, she’s stepping over the fucking line here. I stride further into the room and glare at her as she does up her bra.

“So you’ve been snooping on me?” I can’t believe it.

“That’s not the point, Edward,” she snaps. “Fact is, going gets tough, and you run to her.”

That’s just not true.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“I’m not interested.”

She stalks over to the bed. Who is this woman that is my wife? I gaze at her, lost. She sits down, points her toes and pulls her stockings slowly up her long legs. My arid mouth goes from parched to desert.

“Where were you?” I ask, because it’s the only coherent sentence I can form.

She pulls on the other stocking then stands with her back to me. She bends down to dry her hair, her back a perfect curve. Fuck. It takes every shred of my self-control not to grab her and toss her on to the bed. She stands up straight again, flicking her thick wet mane of chestnut hair into the air. I am drowning man.

“Answer me,” I murmur, as she stalks once more to the chest of drawers. She picks up her hairdryer and switches it on, wielding it like a weapon. The noise grates on my nerves. I am at a loss. What do you do when your wife ignores you?

Her fingers rake through her hair as she dries it and I fist my hands to stop my fingers from joining hers. I want to touch her. I want to end this nonsense, but a

vision – her hissing at me, after that one incident in the playroom when she left – prevents me. I don't want to see that expression again, ever. And I have a feeling I might, if I touch her now. She finishes with a flourish, her hair a riotous cascading crown of chestnut and gold. She *is* doing this on purpose. The thought makes me angrier.

"Where were you?" I whisper.

"What do you care?"

"Bella, stop this. Now."

She shrugs, like she doesn't care. Fuck that. I move quickly – I am not sure what I'm going to do – but she whirls and steps back.

"Don't touch me," she snarls through clenched teeth, and I'm catapulted back to that day in my playroom when she left. It's paralyzing.

"Where were you?" I clench my fists to stop my hands from shaking.

"I wasn't out getting drunk with my ex," she snaps. "Did you sleep with her?"

It's like she's punched me. I drag air into my lungs in shock.

"*What?* No!" How could she think that? Sleep with Irina? No! A knot twists in my gut.

"You think I'd cheat on you?" Christ, she thinks so little of me.

"You did. By taking our very private life and spilling your spineless guts to that woman."

Fuck. I've been called a lot of things – but spineless? By my own wife?

"Spineless. That's what you think?" I'm drowning. This is so much worse than I thought.

"Edward, I saw the text. That's what I know."

"That text was not meant for you!"

"Well, fact is I saw it, when your BlackBerry fell out of your jacket while I was undressing you because you were too drunk to undress yourself. Do you have any idea how much you've hurt me, going to see that woman?"

She's hurt? Shit. No. No. I was just mad at you, Bella. Shocked by your revelation.

"Do you remember last night when you came home? Remember what you said?"

She doesn't pause for breath. She's on a roll. What did I say last night?

"Well, you were right. I do choose this defenseless baby over you."

My world stops.

"That's what any loving parent does."

I frown, gaping at her. She's naked except for her sensational underwear, her hair a chestnut cloud spilling over her shoulders down to her breasts, dark eyes wounded and wide. Even though she's so angry with me, she's stunning, and I am utterly lost.

"That's what your mother should have done for you. And I am sorry that she didn't – because we wouldn't be having this conversation right now if she had. But you're an adult now. You need to grow up and smell the fucking coffee, and stop behaving like a petulant adolescent.

"You may not be happy about this baby. I'm not ecstatic, given the timing and your less-than-lukewarm reception to this new life, this flesh of your flesh. But you can either do this with me, or I'll do it on my own. The decision is yours.

"While you wallow in your pit of self-pity and self-loathing I'm going to work.

And when I return, I'll be moving my belongings to the room upstairs."

She's moving out. She's leaving. She is choosing the baby over me. I knew it.

Panic overwhelms me.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to finish getting dressed."

My scalp prickles as a shiver runs up my spine. She's leaving. I step back.

"Is that what you want?" My voice is a shocked whisper.

She gazes at me, her dark eyes impossibly wide. Shit.

"I don't know what I want any more," she says quietly as she spreads cream on her face.

Shit. Me?

"You don't want me?"

"I'm still here, aren't I?" she says as she applies her mascara.

"You've thought about leaving." I can barely form the words. The abyss opens and yawns in front of me.

"It crossed my mind. When one's husband prefers the company of his exmistress, it's usually not a good sign."

Is she joking? Is she serious? She reaches for her boots, strides to the bed, and sits down. I watch her, helpless. Don't push me into the abyss, Bella. Please.

She pulls on her boots and stands to face me, gazing at me dispassionately. A woman to tame. A Dom's wet dream. My wet dream. My only dream. Hell – I want her. I want her to free me from the abyss. I want her to tell me that she loves me.

Like I love her. Seduce her. It's my only weapon.

"I know what you're doing here," I murmur, pitching my voice lower.

"Do you?" Her voice cracks. Yes! Hope flares briefly in my gut. *She feels*. I can do this. I step forward.

She steps back and holds up her hands, palms up.

"Don't even think about it, Cullen," she says softly.

Shit.

"You're my wife," I murmur.

"I'm the pregnant woman you abandoned yesterday, and if you touch me I will scream the place down."

What the fuck? No!

"You'd scream?"

"Bloody murder."

This is too much. Maybe she wants to play. Maybe this is what she wants.

"No one would hear you," I murmur.

"Are you trying to frighten me?" Her voice is a breathless whisper.

Fuck. No. No. Never.

"That wasn't my intention."

Just tell her. I can't remember. We had a drink. Oh shit.

Do you miss it, Edward? Irina leans across and runs her nails from my shoulder down the length of my arm, cool blue eyes beseeching me. I freeze. Her eyes widen.

"I had a drink with an old friend. We cleared the air. I am not going to see her again." *Believe me.*

"You sought her out?"

"Not at first. I tried to see Banner. But I found myself at the salon."

Bella's eyes narrow, fury blazing in their depths. Shit.

"And you expect me to believe you're not going to see her again?" She raises her voice. "What about the next time I step across some imaginary line? This is the same argument we have over and over again. Like we're on some Ixion wheel. If I fuck up again, are you going to run back to her?"

It's not like that!

"I am not going to see her again. She finally understands how I feel." She saw me recoil. I don't want her.

"What does that mean?"

If I tell her Irina made a pass at me, Bella will go into meltdown. Fucking hell. I gaze at my furious, beautiful wife. What can I say?

"Why can you talk to her and not to me?"

Fuck, fuck, fuck. It wasn't like that. Don't you understand? She was my only friend. Why the fuck did I go to see her? I feel backed into a corner.

"I was mad at you. Like I am now."

"You don't say. Well *I* am mad at you right now. Mad at you for being so cold and callous yesterday, when I needed you. Mad at you for saying I got knocked up deliberately. Mad at you for betraying me."

Bella! I was mad at you. A baby. How can I look after a baby?

"I was stupid. I should have kept better track of my shots. But I didn't do it on purpose. This pregnancy is a shock to me too."

It's nothing on what I feel right now. I mean, fuck. A child. A fucking child.

How could I love a child? How could I care for a child? How could I be a good father? How? Panic threatens to overwhelm me.

"You really fucked up yesterday," she whispers. "I've had a lot to deal with over the last few weeks."

Me? I fucked up? What about you? I feel penned, panic choking me. I lash out.

"You really fucked up three weeks ago. Or whenever you forgot your shot."

"God forbid I should be perfect like you."

Fuck! Touché Isabella. This is getting us nowhere.

"This is quite a performance, Mrs Cullen."

"Well, I'm glad that even knocked-up I'm entertaining."

Fuck this.

"I need a shower," I murmur.

"And I've provided enough of a floorshow."

"It's a mighty fine floor show," I whisper, stepping forward. One more try. She steps back. No dice.

"Don't."

"I hate that you won't let me touch you."

"Irony, huh?"

Fuck. Her words slice through me. Who knew she could be such a bitch? My sweet Bella, hurt and aching, unleashing her claws. This is what I've driven her to?

"We haven't resolved much, have we?" My voice is bleak and flat. I don't know what else to say. I have failed to turn her around.

"I'd say not. Except that I'm moving out of this bedroom."

At least she's not leaving. I grasp on to this hope as I hover over the abyss. I try once more to explain.

"She doesn't mean anything to me."

"Except when you need her."

"I don't need her. I need you."

"You didn't yesterday. That woman is a hard limit for me, Edward."

"She's out of my life."

"I wish I could believe you."

"For fuck's sake, Bella."

"Please let me get dressed."

What can I do? She won't let me touch her. She's too mad. I need to regroup. Come up with a different strategy. I need to put some distance between us, before I do something I regret.

"I'll see you this evening." Turning I stalk into the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I lock it. Protecting myself. That woman has the power to wound me like no other. Standing against the door, I tip my head back and close my eyes. I have really fucked up. The last time I really fucked up she left me.

"You don't want me?"

"I'm still here aren't I?"

Christ. What am I going to do? Have a shower, get last night's stink off me and think.

The water is blisteringly hot. The way I like it. I tilt my face into the welcome stream as it cascades over me. Christ, I'm confused. Nothing is simple where Bella is concerned. I should know that by now. She's mad because I shouted at her and left, and she's mad because I saw Irina.

That woman is a hard limit for me, Edward.

Irina has been a thorn in Bella's side since the beginning. And now... and now, because of that careless fucking text, she's a thorn in mine.

You don't seem very happy. Maybe I could make it better? Do you miss it, Edward? Irina leans across and runs her nails from my shoulder down the length of my arm, cool blue eyes beseeching me. I freeze, and gape at her. What the fuck is she doing? Don't touch me – ever. Her eyes widen in shock.

I shudder at the memory. Shit, what a mess.

~

I stare out of the car window as Taylor drives at a stately pace through the morning rush hour traffic. Bella didn't even say goodbye. She just fucking left, with Stuart.

"Taylor, tell Stuart I want him to stick to Mrs Cullen like glue. I need to know if she's eating."

"I'll tell him, sir."

She's moving upstairs to punish me. It's a novel experience. She fucks up her contraception, we get saddled with a kid before we're ready, before we've done anything – and *I'm* in the fucking doghouse. I don't even know how pregnant she is. I resolve to call Dr Greene when I get to the office. Maybe she can tell me why my wife is pregnant.

My BlackBerry buzzes and my heart starts pounding. Bella? Shit, it's Kate.

"Cullen," I snap.

"You're bright and breezy this morning, Edward."

"What is it, Kate?"

"Hansell from the shipyard wants a meeting. And Senator Blandino too."

Fuck. The unions and the politicians. Could this day get any better?

"Sure, this afternoon. Set it up. I want you there too."

"Will do, Edward."

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"Good." I hang up.

What am I going to do about my wife? Truth is, I'm still smarting from angry Isabella. Who knew she had so much gumption? I don't think anyone's bawled me out like that since... forever. Apart from my mother, at my own birthday party, no

less. That was because of fucking Irina as well. I snort at the irony. Yeah, fucking Irina.

I shake my head in disgust. Why did I seek her out? Why?

I run both my hands through my hair. The Advil has kicked in, and Mrs Cope's fried breakfast is helping. I feel almost human.

What is Bella doing now? I picture her in her tiny office, wearing her plum dress. Perhaps she's sent me an email... I check my BlackBerry. Nothing. Is she thinking about me like I'm thinking about her? I hope so. I want to be in her thoughts, always.

Taylor pulls up outside CEH and I prepare myself for a long day.

~

"Good morning, Mr Cullen." Angela smiles as I step out of the elevator. Her face falls when she sees my expression.

"Get me Dr Greene on the line, and tell Debra to bring me some coffee."

"Yes, sir."

Her smile has disappeared, and I don't give a shit.

"After I've finished with Dr Greene, I want to talk to Banner. Then you can bring in my schedule for the day. Has Kate spoken to you about Hansell and Blandino?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Dr Banner left for a conference in New York early this morning."

"Oh. Yes." Fuck.

"I'll get your coffee."

"Where is Debra?"

Angela looks uncomfortable.

"She's in the rest room."

"Again? Christ, what's wrong with that woman? She spends her life in there."

I don't wait for an answer but stalk into my office, and sit down under the watchful gaze of my beautifully smiling wife. I snort, wondering if her photographer friend ever saw her the way she was this morning. A siren. A scolding, angry, alluring siren.

My phone buzzes.

"I have Dr Greene for you, and I've arranged for the private physio for Mr Swan that you requested yesterday."

"Thanks, Angela. Dr Greene?"

"Mr Cullen. I believe congratulations are in order."

"I thought the shot was a reliable form of contraceptive."

There's a prolonged silence on the other end of the line.

"Dr Greene?"

"Mr Cullen, no form of contraception is one hundred percent effective. That would be abstinence, or sterilization for yourself or your wife." Her tone is icy. "I take it that you're not best pleased with your impending fatherhood. Are you calling to arrange a termination?"

Fuck! No – fuck.

"No, Dr Greene I'm not. I would like you to tell me how pregnant my wife is?"

"Can't Mrs Cullen tell you herself?"

What is this? Just answer the fucking question.

"I'm asking you, Dr Greene. That's what I pay you for."

"My patient is Mrs Cullen. I suggest you talk to your wife, and she can give you the details. Is there anything else you need?"

Fucking hell.

"A clue, please," I ask, trying to bury my irritation.

She sighs.

"It's too early to tell. But based on the ultrasound, she's consistent with 4-5 weeks."

"Thank you, Doctor." My tone is arctic. See? That wasn't so difficult.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Then good day."

She hangs up. I gape at the phone. Some bedside manner she has.

There's a knock at my door and Debra appears with my coffee. She's out of the john – thank Christ.

"Angela says she can try and reach Dr Banner by phone."

"No, it's fine." I wave her away and she hastens out the door.

~

I can't shake the sense of unease, even after my kickboxing session with Laurent. I allow myself a brief victorious smile; I knocked him on his ass a few times. The thought cheers me briefly. It's 4:30, and I've heard nothing from my wife. Stuart has checked in, so I know she's eaten a bagel. I mean, it's not much, but it's something. I have fifteen minutes before showtime with Kit Hansell, head of the shipbuilders' union from the yard. He's with Blandino. This is going to be tough. I'm briefed and ready... but staring at my computer, willing an email to arrive from my wife. I've can't believe I've heard nothing from Bella all day. Nothing. I don't like this. I don't like being the object of her anger. I put my head in my hands. Perhaps I should apologize... The idea is novel. Quickly I type out an email.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: I'm Sorry

Date: 16 September 2009 16:45

To: Isabella Cullen

I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry.

I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry.

I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry.

I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry.

I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry. I'm Sorry.

Edward Cullen

CEO & Penitent Husband, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I don't want to go home to face her anger again. I want her smiles, her laughter, her love. I glance up at her smiling face in the photo. I want her to look at me like that. I gaze at the email, wondering whether to hit send. This meeting could go on for a while. I call Mrs Cope.

"Mr Cullen."

"I may not be home for dinner. Please make sure Mrs Cullen eats."

"Yes, sir."

"Cook her something nice."

"I will."

"Thank you, Gail." I hang up. I delete the email – it's not going to be enough.

Jewelry? Flowers? My phone buzzes.

“Yes, Angela.”

“Mr Hansell, Senator Blandino and their teams are here.”

“Thank you. Call Kate.”

“Yes sir.”

Okay, this will be a fight about redundancies. I grit my teeth. Shit. Sometimes I hate my job.

~

Blandino is appealing for calm.

“These are the realities of the economy in the US in 2009,” she’s saying to Hansell, who sits stony-faced on the other side of my boardroom table.

My Blackberry buzzes, and my heart spikes. Fuck. My errant wife.

“Excuse me.” I rise from the table, and seven pairs of eyes follow me out of the door.

“Bella.” She’s called! My whole body feels lighter.

“Hi,” she says.

It’s so good to hear her voice.

“Hi.” I can’t think what else to say. Please don’t be mad at me anymore. I’m sorry.

“Are you coming home?” she asks.

“Later.”

“Are you in the office?”

I frown.

“Yes. Where did you expect me to be?”

“I’ll let you get on.”

There’s so much I want to say, but neither of us speaks, the silence a chasm between us... and I have a boardroom of people locked in crisis talks waiting for me.

“Goodnight, Bella.” I love you.

“Goodnight, Edward.”

I stare despondently at my phone. Well, at least she’s asking if I’m coming home. Perhaps she misses me. A small ember of hope glows deep in my heart. I need to wrap this meeting up and get home to my wife.

~

It’s late. We have a deal, and I leave Kate to sort out the details. Taylor is outside waiting for me.

The apartment is dark when I get home. Bella must be in bed. I head into our bedroom and my heart sinks when I find she’s not there. Stifling my panic I head upstairs.

In the dim light from the hallway I can see her curled up beneath the duvet in her old bedroom. I snort at that description... she’s slept in it what, twice?

She looks so small. I flick the dimmer switch on to see her better, but keep the lights low, and drag the armchair over so I can sit down and gaze at her.

Her skin is pale, translucent almost. She’s been crying. Her eyelids and lips are swollen. My heart free falls through my body. Oh baby – I’m sorry. I know how soft her lips are to kiss when she’s been crying... when I make her cry. I want to climb in beside her, to pull her into my arms and hold her... but she’s asleep. She needs sleep.

I match my breathing to hers. In, out, in, out, softly through her parted lips. It soothes me – the rhythm, and my proximity to her – and for the first time since I woke up this morning, I feel calmer.

Last time I did this she'd been out with Rose, and that fucker had gotten into the apartment. I was mad then.

Why do I spend my life being mad at my wife? I love her. Even though she never does as she's told. That's why...

God grant me the serenity

to accept the things I cannot change;

the courage to change the things I can;

and the wisdom to know the difference.

I roll my eyes at Dr Banner as his oft-quoted serenity prayer pops into my head.

A prayer for alcoholics and fucked-up businessmen. I check my watch, knowing it's far too late in New York to call him. Tomorrow maybe. I can discuss my impending fatherhood with him.

I shake my head. *Me, a dad.* What could I possibly offer a child? I pull off my tie and undo the top button of my shirt. I suppose there's the material wealth. At least he won't go hungry... Fuck. The thought makes me nauseous. No – not on my fucking watch. Not my child. She says she'll do this on her own. How could she?

Look at her. She's too – and I want to say fragile, because sometimes she looks fragile, but she's not. She's the strongest woman I know. More so even than Esme.

Shit. I was out of line. Just gazing at her as she lies here, sleeping the sleep of the innocent, I realize what an asshole I was yesterday. She's never backed down from a challenge, ever. She was hurt by what I said and what I did. I can see that. She knew I'd overreact when she told me about the baby. How long had she known? She couldn't have known in Portland – she would have told me. Or I would have guessed. She must have found out yesterday. And then she told me... and everything turned to shit. Fuck. How am I going to make it up to her?

"I'm sorry, Bella. Forgive me," I whisper. "You scared the living shit out of me yesterday." Leaning forward I kiss her forehead. She stirs and frowns.

"Edward," she murmurs, her voice wistful and full of longing, and the hope kindled by her earlier call ignites into a blaze.

"I'm here," I whisper.

But she turns, and sighing falls back into a deep slumber.

"I love you, Isabella Cullen. I'll see you in the morning."

Shit. No I won't. Fuck it. I have to fly down and see the finance committee at WSU in Vancouver. That means leaving early. I place my tie beside her on the pillow so she'll know I've been here. I snort. This is my favorite tie for so many reasons. I recall the first time I tied her hands... and the thought travels straight to my cock. Fuck. I wore it to tease her at her graduation. Shit, I am turning into a sentimental fool.

"Tomorrow baby," I whisper. "Sleep well."

~

Sitting at the piano I play the Chopin over and over again. She usually wakes when I play late at night... unfortunately, not this time. I half-hoped she would, but she must be exhausted. I'll have to think of some grand gesture to say sorry. The answer as to what that might be, eludes me. I must sleep. But as I head alone into my bedroom I feel more hopeful. She whispered my name. Yes. There's hope for us yet.

~0~

As Taylor and I head up in the elevator to the helipad next morning I type a quick email to Bella.

From: Edward Cullen

Subject: Portland

Date: 17 September 2009: 06.45

To: Isabella Cullen

Bella

I am flying down to Portland today.

I have some business to conclude with WSU.

I thought you would want to know.

Edward Cullen

CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

"You've instructed Ethan to stay close?" I ask Taylor.

"Yes, sir." He remains stoic.

"Good."

The elevator reaches the roof, and we head out to where Stephan is waiting in Echo Charlie. I climb aboard and strap myself in beside him.

"Morning Stephan. Conditions look good."

"Good morning, Mr Cullen. Yes, should be a smooth flight down to Portland today."

"Excellent. I'm going to try and catch some sleep."

"Very good, sir. I'll take it gently."

He lifts off, and I close my eyes and rest my head on the back of the seat. I've tossed and turned all night, dreaming of things I don't want to dream about and missing my Bella. What can I do to make it up to her? I hate leaving her when things between us are so unsettled. I doze.

Bella is running through the meadow at the new house. She's laughing as I chase her. I'm laughing. I catch her and pull her down into the long grass. She giggles and I kiss her. Her lips are soft, because she's been crying. No. Don't cry. Baby don't cry. Please don't cry. She closes her eyes. Closes her eyes and doesn't open them. Shit. Beneath me she's cold. Cold, her eyes still closed. Bella wake up. Bella wake up –
Fuck. Startled awake, I'm momentarily disorientated. Where am I?

"Mr Cullen, we've landed."

"Thanks. Thanks, Stephan," I mutter. Shit. I shudder, and a sense of foreboding brought on by my dream kills the earlier hope I felt. Unbuckling my harness I climb out of my seat and follow Taylor out onto the helipad. It's a crisp morning in Portland, brighter than Seattle, but the chill of the coming fall is in the air. I don't know if it's the cold or my dream that makes me shiver. I call Stuart.

"Mr Cullen."

"Is Bella okay?"

"I believe she's having breakfast, sir."

"Good. Stay close to her."

"Yes sir. Will do."

I hang up.

"The car should be outside." Taylor distracts me.

"Good. Let's get this done. Stephan, we'll be back after 12:30 this afternoon."

"We'll be ready and waiting, Mr Cullen." He frowns, and his concern is briefly evident on his face.

Fucking hell. I hope that's not directed at me.

"Good," I mutter, and follow Taylor to the elevator. There's no sign of Joe.

Maybe it's too early, or an omen, or some shit... Get a fucking grip, Cullen. You've got to nail this additional funding – the environmental science department needs it. I shake off the gnawing fear in my gut and head out of the heliport building to the waiting car.

~

Taylor and I are sitting in the rear of BMW. The meeting was a success – we've secured an additional million dollars from the USDA. Seems feeding the world is quite high on Uncle Sam's agenda too. Now I am anxious to get home. I check my watch: nearly 1:30. I hope Bella's eaten. Taylor answers his phone as we pull up outside the helipad building.

"Ethan," Taylor murmurs, and listens to whatever Stuart is telling him. Bella? Is she okay? Once we're out of the car Taylor turns to face me.

"Mrs Cullen is unwell. Ethan is taking her back to the apartment."

Shit! Is Bella okay? Is it the baby? I check my watch again.

"We'll be there in a little over an hour," I tell him.

Taylor relays this information to Stuart. Christ – change of plan. I need to fly directly to Escala, not Sea Tac.

"Text me if the situation changes," Taylor finishes, and hangs up. "I don't think it's serious, sir," Taylor says, his voice calm and reassuring, as we head into the building.

"I hope not. I'll ask Stephan to step on the gas."

My earlier sense of foreboding returns. Maybe I should call my dad, ask him to go and check on Bella. Or even Dr Greene. Shit. This is what I hate – impotence. I'm at least an hour away from her, and I need to know she's okay. I contemplate calling her but I can't get a signal in the elevator.

When the elevator doors open Echo Charlie and Stephan are waiting. Fuck this – I want to fly her. At least I'll have that to concentrate on, instead of what's happening at Escala. I hope she's gone to bed. Our bed. If it were serious she would have a contacted me, surely?

"Stephan, I'll fly her back," I say as we reach Echo Charlie. "And we need a new course to Escala."

"Yes, sir." The surprise is evident in his voice, but I ignore it, climb aboard and sit in the pilot's seat. I buckle up and begin the final pre-flight checks.

"All checks done?" I ask Stephan as he sits down beside me.

"Just the transponder."

"Oh yes, I can see. I need to get home to my wife. Taylor, you buckled in?"

"Yes, sir." His disembodied voice is loud and clear in my cans.

"Right gentlemen, let's get home."

I increase the engine revs and pull back on the throttle, and like the beautiful bird she is, Echo Charlie rises smoothly into the air.

~

As we cut through the air at speed, I know I've made the right decision to pilot. I have to focus on keeping us airborne, but deep down my anxiety gnaws at my guts. Fuck. I hope she's okay.

We touch down right on schedule at 2:30.

"Good flying, Mr Cullen," Stephan smiles.

"You can take her back to Sea Tac."

"Wilko." He grins. He loves flying as much as I do.

I unbuckle my harness, switch on my phone and follow Taylor out onto Escala's

rooftop. Taylor frowns down at his phone. I halt as he listens to a message.

"It's from Ethan, Mr Cullen. Mrs Cullen is at the bank," Taylor has to shout to be heard over the wind that whips around us on the roof.

I freeze. What? I thought she was ill. What the fuck is she doing at the bank?

"Ethan followed her there. She tried to give him the slip."

My guts tighten. Shit. My rebooted phone beeps and there's a text from Angela, sent five minutes ago.

Troy Whelan at your bank needs to speak with you urgently

What the fuck? I press my speed dial.

"Troy Whelan," he answers immediately.

"Whelan, it's Edward Cullen. What's going on?" I shout.

"Mr Cullen, good afternoon. Um... your wife is here requesting to withdraw five million dollars."

The abyss opens, yawning and calling for me, as my guts twist in pain.

"Five million?" What does she need five million for? Fuck. *She's leaving me.*

"Yes sir. As you know, under current banking legislation I can't cash five million."

"Yes of course. Let me talk to Mrs Cullen."

"Certainly, sir. If you'll hold for a minute."

This is agony. I head to shelter beside the elevator, and stand quietly waiting to hear from my wife, dreading to hear from my wife. Panic overwhelms me. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. She's going. She's leaving me. What will I do if she goes? The phone clicks.

"Hi." Bella's voice is breathy and sweet.

"You're leaving me?" The words are out before I can stop them.

"No!" she whispers, and it sounds like an agonized appeal.

Oh thank fuck. She's not leaving me! But my relief is short-lived.

"Yes," she whispers.

What? What the fuck? No. No. NO. I fall, tumbling headlong into the abyss, falling, falling, falling. Reaching out I splay my hand against the wall supporting myself as I'm disemboweled. Shit. Shit. Shit. This isn't happening.

"Bella, I – " I don't know what to say. I want to beg her to stay.

"Edward, please. Don't."

"You're going?" You're really going. Don't leave me.

"Yes."

Why? Shit, was this always going to happen? My fucking money?

"But why the cash? Was it always the money?" Tell me it wasn't the money.

Please. The pain is indescribable.

"No," she whispers, and her voice sounds emphatic. Fuck, do I believe her? Is it because I saw Irina? Please no! I don't want her – and in this moment, I loathe Irina. It's never been her.

"Is five million enough?" How will I live without my Bella?

"Yes."

"And the baby?" You'll take away my baby? The knife twists in my guts.

"I'll take care of the baby."

"This is what you want?"

"Yes."

The pain is crippling. She wants me off the phone – I can tell. She wants done. She wants away from me.

"Take it all," I hiss.

"Edward," she sobs. "It's for you. For your family. Please. Don't."

"Take it all, Isabella," I snarl at her. I tilt my head back and silently howl at the gray sky above me.

"Edward..." she whispers, her voice desperate. I can't bear to hear her.

"I'll always love you," I murmur, because it's true. And I hang up. My life is over. I am hollow. I take a deep steadying breath.

"Mr Cullen?" It's Taylor. I ignore him, still facing the wall, and I call Whelan again.

"Troy Whelan."

"It's Edward Cullen. Give my wife the money. Whatever she wants."

"Mr Cullen, I can't..."

"Liquidate five million of my assets. Off the top of my head: Georges, PKC, Atlantis Corps, Ferris and Umatic. A million from each."

"Mr Cullen, this is highly irregular. I'll have to consult with Mr Forelines."

"I'm playing golf with him next week," I hiss. "Just fucking do it, Whelan. Find a way, or I'll close all the accounts and move CEH's business elsewhere. Understand?"

He's silent on the end of the phone.

"We'll sort the fucking paperwork out later," I add, more conciliatory.

"Yes, Mr Cullen."

"Just give her whatever she wants."

"Yes Mr Cullen."

I hang up.

Taylor's eyes widen as I turn to face him. Shit. I don't want his pity.

"Mr Cullen, Mr Smith has been granted bail. He's free."

I gape at him. Not this too! Fuck. Smith is free? How? I thought we'd dealt with that.

"You're leaving me?"

"No!"

"It's for you. For your family. Please. Don't"

Oh shit! I run my hands through my hair as overwhelming despair turns to fear. Fear for my wife.

"Bella!"

Taylor nods, alarmed.

"Fuck!" I hit the elevator call button as a different panic assaults me. What the fuck is she doing? "Where's Stuart?"

"He's at the bank. He tracked her car." Taylor replies as both leap into the elevator.

"We'd better head straight to the basement." I press the button. "You have the car keys?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let's head for the bank. Do we know where Smith is?"

"No."

"Shit."

The elevator drops with speed to the garage. What the fuck is Bella playing at? Why can't she tell me if she's in trouble? Fear wraps around my heart and my guts, squeezing tightly. What could be worse than Bella leaving me? The unwelcome image of my earlier dream comes to mind, drawing on older – much older – insidious

memories: Bella lifeless on the floor. I close my eyes. No. Please. No.

"We'll find her," Taylor says with grim determination.

"We have to."

"I'll track her cell."

"Good."

The doors fly open and Taylor tosses me his keys. Get a grip, Cullen. You have to save your wife from whatever mess she's in. Perhaps that fucker is blackmailing her. We climb into the car and I switch on the ignition. I speed up to the garage entrance, and wait agonizing seconds for the barrier to lift.

"Come on. Come on. Come on. Come On."

The barrier lifts, and I roar out onto 4th Avenue and head for the bank.

Taylor puts his phone on the dash, waiting for a signal.

"She's still at the bank," he says eventually.

"Good."

Why does she do this? Keep this shit to herself? Doesn't she trust me? I think about my behavior over the last couple of days. Okay – it hasn't been exemplary, by any means, but she takes this shit on herself. Why can't she ask for help?

"Bella Cullen," I shout into the phone Bluetooth system. After a few moments her phone starts to ring, and ring, and ring.

My heart sinks as her voicemail message plays.

"Hi, you've reached Bella. I can't take your call at the moment but please leave a message after the beep, and I'll call you straight back."

Christ!

"Bella. What the fuck is going on? I'm coming to get you. Call me. Talk to me." I hang up.

"She's still at the bank," Taylor says.

The traffic is heavier than I expected. Come on, come on, come *on*!

"Stuart's still there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ethan Stuart!" I shout into the hands-free, and moments later his cell phone is ringing.

"Mr Cullen," he answers.

"Where's Bella?"

"She's just turned around and gone back into one of the offices."

"Go and get her."

"Sir, I'm armed. I can't go through the detectors. I'm standing by the entrance watching Bel – Mrs Cullen, and looking very suspicious. If I go back to the car to stow my gun, I may lose sight of her."

Fucking firearms.

"How the hell did she give you the slip?"

"She's a very resourceful woman, Mr Cullen." He sounds like he's speaking through gritted teeth. I recognize his frustration. She has that effect on me too.

"Well, I want a thorough briefing when we have her back. Has Taylor filled you in on Smith?"

"He has."

"Good. We're about five minutes away. Don't let her go again, Ethan."

"Sir."

I hang up.

Taylor and I sit in silence as I ease through the traffic. What are you up to, Bella

Cullen? What am I going to do to you when I get you back? Various scenarios cross my mind. I shift in my seat. For fuck's sake, Cullen – get a grip. Now is not the time.

Taylor startles me.

“She’s on the move.”

“What?” My heart jump-starts as adrenaline sweeps through my body.

“She’s heading North, up Cherry Street.”

“Ethan Stuart!” I shout. Moments later his cell rings again.

“Mr Cullen,” he answers immediately.

“She’s on the move.”

“Shit! She hasn’t come out through the main entrance.”

“She’s heading North, up Cherry Street,” Taylor interjects.

“I’m on it. I’ll call from the car.” Stuart is obviously running. “She’s not in her car. It’s still here.”

“Shit!” I curse.

“Still heading North on Cherry Street,” Taylor says.

“That’s two blocks, then north?” I ask him.

“Yes, sir.” And for the billionth time I am grateful to have Taylor with me. He knows this city like the back of his hand. It’s odd, given he’s from some godforsaken town in Texas.

Two minutes later I’m heading up Cherry Street.

“She’s turned right on to 8th. That’s four blocks from here.”

“I’m right behind you,” Stuart pipes up through the hands-free.

“Stay close. I’m going to try and weave through this traffic. I wish you were driving,” I add as an afterthought, glancing at Taylor.

“You’re doing fine, sir.”

Where the fuck is she going? And who with?

We’re silent for several minutes. Taylor occasionally calls out directions, but we’re heading east and keep heading east.

“She’s turned south down 30th.”

We follow for several blocks.

“It’s stopped. About three minutes ahead. South Day Street. Two more blocks.”

Dread spawns in my gut and I race through the residential area.

Three minutes later I swing into South Day Street.

“Slow down,” Taylor orders, surprising me, but I do as he says. “She’s here somewhere.” He leans forward, and we both check each side of the road. There is a row of derelict buildings on one side.

FUCK! That woman – Victoria from SIP – is standing with her hands in the air by an anonymous looking Toyota SUV.

I swing into the parking lot – and there she is. On the ground. Lifeless. My Bella... no! All the air seems to escape from my body. Fuck.

We screech to a halt and Taylor is out of the car before I’ve come to a stop. I follow him.

“BELLA!” I shout. Please God. Please God. Please God...

Bella is lifeless on the concrete. In front of her that fucker Smith is rolling on the ground, screaming in agony as he clutches his upper leg. Blood seeps through his fingers. Victoria still stands with her hands in the air.

But it’s Bella that I concentrate on. She’s lying lifeless on the cold hard ground. No! All my worst fears crystallize into this one moment. Shit. I kneel beside her,

scared to touch her. Taylor picks up the gun lying beside her and motions Victoria to lie face down on the ground. Stuart is suddenly with us, and he roughly cuffs Victoria. We ignore Smith in his agony.

Taylor bends and checks the pulse point beneath Bella's jaw.

"She's alive. Strong pulse," he says to me. "Ethan, call 911 now," he adds.

He quickly and gently runs his hands over her, checking for injuries.

"I don't think she's bleeding."

"Can I touch her?"

"She may have broken something. Best leave it to the paramedics."

I stroke her hair and gently tuck a strand behind her ear. She looks like she's asleep. Did he do this to you? Fuck. My attention turns to Smith as a fresh shot of adrenaline streams into my system. The Fuck. She shot him. My God, my Bella shot him. I stand and tower over him as he writhes in suffering on the ground. I kick him in the belly, hard. Twice.

He screams.

"You do this to my wife, you fucker?!" I shout.

He drags his hands up to protect his stomach and I stamp with all my weight on the seeping wound on his thigh. He screams again – a different, louder, feral cry of agony. Leaning down I grab the lapels of his jacket and bounce his head off the ground. Once. Twice. His eyes are wide and wild with fear as he grips my hands, smearing his blood on me.

"I'm going to fucking kill you, you twisted, sick motherfucker!"

From the end of the tunnel, I hear the voices.

"Mr Cullen – Mr Cullen. Edward! Edward, stop!"

It's Taylor. He and Stuart are pulling me away – pulling me off the vermin that is that fucker Smith. Taylor grabs me by both shoulders and shakes me.

"Stop!" he says and shakes me once more. I blink at him and shrug him off.

Don't touch me.

Taylor puts himself between Smith and me, watching me like I'm an exotic predator ready to strike. I take a breath while the murderous red mist clears.

"I'm okay," I whisper.

"Look after your wife, sir," Taylor says.

I nod. And take one more look at the fucker on the ground. He's rocking gently, weeping like a fucking girl and clutching his thigh. He's pissed himself. He disgusts me.

"Let him bleed to death," I mutter to Taylor and turn away. I kneel beside Bella.

I lean right down to hear her breathing, but I hear nothing. Panic swamps me once more.

"Is she still breathing?" I gaze up at Taylor.

"Look at her chest, rising and falling."

Taylor leans down again and checks her pulse.

"Still strong."

Oh Bella. What were you thinking? Tears prick my eyes. I hate this feeling of helplessness. I want to fold her into my arms and sob into her hair – but I can't touch her. Fuck. This is agony. Why isn't the ambulance here?

"Ethan, check inside." I hear Taylor's quiet command.

In the distance sirens approach. Thank Fuck!

"TAYLOR!"

When I turn Stuart is standing in the doorway.

“They have Miss Cullen in here.”

“Stay here, Edward!” Taylor raises a warning finger at me.

Fuck – Alice? My baby sister? Fear blooms in my guts. What has that fucker done to my sister? I watch, helpless, as Taylor disappears into the building.

“It’s for you. For your family. Please. Don’t...”

And it all becomes clear. I gaze down at Bella, and I know in this moment that she could have been killed. Nausea sweeps through me. Fuck.

Taylor comes back out of the building. I stop breathing.

“She’s okay. I think. She’s drugged. Asleep. No obvious signs of injury. She’s fully dressed.”

I gape at him.

“Alice?”

He nods. His mouth set in a grim line.

The sirens are louder.

Fuck. I feel nauseous. What the fuck was he going to do my sister? I turn and look at him once more, and I want to kill him, slowly, painfully. But now two ambulances and two police patrol vehicles pull up in blaze of flashing lights and a cacophony of sirens, shattering the peace of the neighborhood, and I suppress my murderous thoughts. About fucking time!

~

I am in a waking nightmare. Sitting between Alice and Bella in the ambulance as we speed through Seattle. My head is in my hands, my heart in my mouth as I pray for both of them. I am not a religious man, but right now I need something – something to let me know my wife and my sister will be okay.

“Vital signs are good, Mr Cullen, for both your wife and your sister.”

“Then why is she unconscious?” My voice is a whisper.

“The doctors should be able to determine that when we arrive.”

My sister and my wife. I should have killed him, that fucker. Impotent rage crashes through me again and I screw up my eyes, trying to dispel it. I want to weep. I want to howl loudly just to release this pain, but I resist. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I am wrung out. The last words I exchanged with Bella... I thought she was leaving. And she said she wasn’t.

“You’re leaving me?”

“No!”

“It’s for you. For your family. Please. Don’t.”

I take some comfort in the fact that I told I would always love her.

Please wake up, Bella.

And nagging me, deep down inside, is concern for the baby. Is the baby okay? Was Bella really ill, or did she make that up? This... stress – oh fuck. It can’t be good for the baby.

Finally we’re at A&E. And once more I’m sidelined, as the paramedics swing into action.

Mom and Dad are there, waiting. They rush to the gurney carrying my unconscious sister. Esme takes one look at Alice and tears spring to her eyes. She takes her hand.

“I love you, baby,” she says, as the paramedics whisk her through double doors where Esme cannot follow. With a quick anxious glance at me, Dad follows them. I release Bella’s hand and the paramedics take her through after my dad.

“Oh Edward!” Esme sobs, and she throws her arms around my neck.

“Mom.” My voice cracks and I cling to her like I never have before. “Make it okay,” I whisper, through unshed tears.

She releases me and grabs my face in both her hands.

“They are going to be fine. Both of them,” she says, with a mother’s unerring conviction.

I swallow as once more tears threaten.

“Okay,” I whisper. She gives me a small smile.

“Edward, I love you so much,” she breathes.

“Me too, Mom.”

She takes my hand, still stained with that fucker’s blood, and leads me into the waiting room.

~

Bella is pale, her eyes closed as if asleep, but I know she’s still unconscious. She looks heartbreakingly young and small. Various tubes wind into and out of her body. My guts clench and twist in fear, but Doctor Bartley is calm as she gazes down at my broken wife.

“Her ribs are bruised, Mr Cullen, and she has a hairline fracture to her skull. We need to keep her here for observation.”

“And the baby?” I whisper.

“The baby’s fine, Mr Cullen.”

“Oh, thank God.” Unexpected relief floods through me. “Why is Bella unconscious?”

“Mrs Cullen’s had a major contusion to her head. But her brain activity is normal, and she has no cerebral swelling. She’ll wake when she’s ready. Just give her some time, Mr Cullen. Do you have any further questions?”

I shake my head.

“Thank you,” I mutter.

She nods.

“My colleague Doctor Singh will look in on your wife later.”

“Thank you,” I mutter again, and she leaves.

Pulling up a chair I sit down beside my wife. Tenderly I take her hand. It’s warm. I squeeze it gently.

“Wake up baby, please,” I whisper. “Be mad at me, but be awake, please.” I lean forward and brush my lips against her knuckles.

“I’m sorry. Sorry for everything. Please wake up.”

I sit back and wait.

~

“Edward, you should go home and sleep. I’ll watch her.” Carlisle is adamant as puts Bella’s chart back in place and stands with arms crossed at the end of her bed.

“I’m not leaving her.”

“Edward, you need to sleep.”

“No, Dad. I want to be here when she wakes up.”

“I’ll sit with her. It’s the least I can do after she saved my daughter.”

“You should be with Alice.”

“Esme is with her.”

“Is Mom okay?”

“She’s an emotional wreck. We all are, Edward. And so are you. Please go home and sleep.”

“No, Dad. Stop asking. It’s not going to happen. I can’t leave Bella.”

Carlisle rolls his eyes in frustration, then gazes down at my wife.

“She’s a remarkable young woman.”

She’s fucking crazy, putting herself and the baby at risk. But then Alice – what would have happened to Alice? Oh shit. This is such a mind-fuck.

“How is Alice?” I ask.

Carlisle sighs.

“She’s groggy, and scared, and angry. It’ll be a few hours before the rohypnol is completely out of her system.”

“Christ.” That fucker was one twisted, sick son-of-a-bitch.

“I know. I’m feeling seven kinds of foolish for relenting on her security. You warned me, but Alice is so stubborn. If it wasn’t for Bella here…”

“We all thought Smith was out of the picture. And this crazy, stupid wife of mine – Why didn’t she tell me?” The anger surges through my bloodstream again.

“Edward, calm down. Bella was incredibly brave.”

“Brave and headstrong and stubborn and stupid.” My voice cracks.

“Hey,” Carlisle moves and rests his hand on my shoulder, squeezing. I don’t flinch. “Don’t be so hard on her, or yourself, son.”

“I’ll try, Dad.”

“I’d better get back to your mom. It’s after three in the morning Edward, you really should try to sleep.”

“I’ll sleep here.”

He sighs once more in frustration.

“You’re as stubborn as she is. Congratulations again on the baby. That’s some good news, in all this mess.”

I pale, and Dad frowns at me.

“Edward, you’ll make a great father. Stop worrying about that.” He squeezes my shoulder again. “I’ll be back later this morning.” He turns and leaves.

A great father, eh? Fuck. I put my head in my hands. Right now, I just want my wife back. I don’t want to think about the baby.

I stand and stretch. It’s late. I’m stiff and sore and heartsick with worry. Why won’t she wake up? Bending, I kiss her cheek. Her skin is soft and reassuringly warm against my lips.

“Wake up baby,” I whisper. Nothing. She does nothing, but sleeps.

~

“Good morning Mr Cullen.”

What? I’m startled from my doze. It’s the nurse. I can’t remember her name.

“I’m going to replace your wife’s IVs.”

“Sure,” I mumble. “Do I need to leave?”

“It’s up to you.”

~

I am not sure if I can stomach any more visitors. I grimace at Detective Clark’s retreating back as he closes the door. He’s the last person I want in here. I don’t want to share my wife with anyone, not when she’s like this. I just want Clark to keep that twisted fucker locked up. I snort at the irony. The fucker is here, somewhere in this hospital, because my wife put a bullet in him. Fuck. Anger surges through me again. I wish I’d killed him when I had the chance. And for the first time I wonder if maybe I should learn to shoot too.

I gaze at the bouquets that line the room, from my mom and dad, her mom and

Bob, Charlie, Rose and Emmett, Jasper, Taylor and Gail, Kate, Angela, Billy and Jake. Everyone loves Bella. I gaze down at her. What's not to love? I caress her lovely, translucent cheek with my knuckles.

"Baby, wake up. Please. Wake up and be mad at me again... anything. Hate me... just wake up. Please."

~

"Mr Cullen, I'm going to remove the catheter from your wife."

"Oh, why?"

"Doctor Singh isn't happy catheterizing pregnant women over a long period of time. It runs the risk of UTI."

"Okay, sure. Do I need to leave?"

"It's up to you."

"I'll go stretch my legs."

~

There's a knock at the door and my mom enters. She's carrying a small bag.

"Hello darling."

"Mom." She hugs me briefly.

"When did you last eat?"

I'm shocked to realize I can't remember.

"I think I had a donut yesterday."

"Oh Edward." She scolds me, then strokes my cheek. "I've brought macaroni and cheese. I made it for you."

A lump forms in my throat.

"Thanks," I whisper, and in spite of the fact that my wife has still not surfaced, I realize I'm hungry. I'm fucking starving.

"I'll go heat this up. The nurse's kitchen has a microwave. I'll be a couple of minutes."

I nod.

~

Esme makes the best mac and cheese in America – better even than Gail's. We sit side by side, watching my beautiful wife who stubbornly refuses to wake.

"... We took Alice home this morning. I wanted to check on you and Bella."

Esme continues to talk while I eat.

"How is she?" I ask, my mouth full.

"Edward! Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Sorry," I mumble with my mouth full, and she laughs. And for the first time in forever my lips lift in a reluctant smile.

"That's better," Mom says, her eyes warm and glowing with love. I feel more hopeful with her here. I finish the last forkful and put my plate on the floor.

"That was delicious. Thanks, Mom."

"My pleasure, darling. She's very brave, your wife."

"Stupid," I mutter.

"Edward!"

"She is."

Esme's eyes narrow.

"What is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Something's up. I mean something other than Bella lying here unconscious."

I frown at her. How does she know this? She says nothing, just gazes at me. Silence

fills the room, broken only by the hum of the machine monitoring Bella's blood pressure.

Fuck. Interfering woman. I crack under her scrutiny, like I always do.

"We had a fight."

"A fight?"

"Yes. Before all this happened. We weren't talking."

"What do you mean, you weren't talking? What did you do?"

"Mom –"

"Edward! What did you do?"

I swallow. Fuck. Tears threaten again. Fuck. It's just my fatigue, just my anxiety. I swallow.

"I was so angry," I whisper.

"Hey." Esme takes my hand and squeezes it. "Angry with Bella? Why, what did she do?"

"She didn't do anything."

"I don't understand."

"The baby. It was a shock. I stormed out."

Mom gazes at me and squeezes my hand again, and suddenly I'm in a confessional.

"I saw Irina," I whisper, and shame swamps me. My mother's eyes widen in shock, and she releases my hand.

"What do you mean *saw*?" she hisses with righteous indignation.

Fuck! *Did you sleep with her?* Bella's question haunts me from – when, yesterday? First Bella, now my mother.

"Nothing like that! Fuck, Mom!"

"Don't curse at me, Edward. What was I supposed to think?"

"We just talked. And got drunk."

"Drunk? Shit!"

"Mom! Don't *you* swear! It sounds wrong."

She presses her lips together.

"You are the only one of my children that makes me swear. You told me you'd cut all ties." She glares at me.

"I know. But seeing her finally put it all in perspective for me. You know – with the child. For the first time I felt... repulsed."

"Repulsed. Well, I suppose that's something," Esme murmurs, almost to herself.

"Children will do that to you, darling. Make you look at the world in a different light."

"She got the message."

"Good."

"I hurt Bella." I can barely say the words.

"Does Bella know you saw her?"

"Yes. Irina texted me, and Bella read her text. She was putting me to bed."

"Putting you to bed?"

I shrug.

"You were too drunk?"

I flush.

"Oh, Edward." She shakes her head, and I don't know if it's in disgust or anger. She reaches over and clasps my hand again.

"Darling... We always hurt the ones we love. You'll have to tell her you're

sorry. And mean it, and give her time.”

“She said she was leaving me.” My voice is barely audible as I express my darkest fear. I gaze at my wife to reassure myself she’s still here, still alive. I will her once more to wake up.

“Did you believe her?” Esme’s voice is softer.

“At first, yes.”

“Darling, you always believe the worst of everyone, including yourself. You always have. Bella loves you very much, and it’s obvious how much you love her.”

“She was mad at me.”

“I’m sure she was. I’m pretty mad at you right now. I think you can only be truly mad at someone you really love.” She squeezes my hand again. It’s reassuring.

“I thought about it, and she’s shown me over and over how much she loves me... to the point of putting her own life in danger.”

“Yes, she has.”

“Oh Mom, why won’t she wake up?” And suddenly it’s all too much. The lump in my throat swells to choking and I’m overwhelmed – the fight, Bella leaving, nearly dying – fuck... and though I’ve tried to hold back my tears, I can’t. “I nearly lost her.” The words are barely audible as I voice my worst fear.

“Edward,” Esme gasps. She wraps her arms around me as I break down and, for the first time in my life, weep in her arms. She rocks me to and fro, kissing my hair and crooning soft words as she lets me cry. My mom. The first woman to save me. I sit up and wipe my face, and she’s crying too.

“For fuck’s sake Mom, stop crying.”

Her tears turn to smiles, and from her purse she hands me a tissue, and takes one for herself.

Reaching up she caresses my face.

“It’s taken twenty-four years for you to let me do that,” she says sadly.

“I know,” I whisper.

“Better late than never,” she says.

I give her a watery smile.

“I’m glad we talked.”

“Me too, darling. I’m always here.”

“I know, Mom.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to be a grandmother.”

“I can barely believe it either.”

~

It’s dark. Late. Bella lies in her own private world. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Will she ever wake?

“Oh baby, please come back to me. I’m sorry. Sorry for everything. Just wake up. I miss you. I love you.” I kiss her knuckles and rest my head on my arms, on her bed.

~

It’s a soft touch, fingers running through my hair.

Shit. I wake instantly and sit up. Bella is gazing at me with wide, beautiful brown eyes. Oh thank God. Joy bursts in my heart. I have never been so pleased to see those eyes as I am now.

“Hi,” she croaks, her voice hoarse.

“Oh, Bella.” Oh Thank God, Thank God, Thank God. I grasp her hand and hold it up to my face so she’s caressing me.

“I need to pee,” she whispers.

~ooo000ooo~