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Master of the Universe II by Snowqueens Icedragon 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 self-control 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 ex-mistress, 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 steady 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 god-forsaken 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

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~

The Serenity Prayer, written by Reinhold Niebuhr