Episode Seventy-four-

Jake took Monday off so we could spend it together. Alone, he and I went to the cemetery to visit our father's grave. His mother, who died of cancer when he was twenty, was buried beside him. They were obviously well cared for, both covered in flowers and little tokens of love. We sat on the ground beside one another, my arm around his own as he cried. He wept for our father, whom he missed terribly. For our missed opportunities as a family. Because his parents would never meet his daughter. And all I could do was be there to quietly support him. As emotional as it was for me, it was just as hard for him.

"I know you're happy right now, Pops. It would be so much better if you were here though," he said to the headstone. He picked at the lush damp green grass underneath us. Jacob had created a pile of blades beside him. "But I did it. I promised you that I would find her, and here she is. And she's everything we could have hoped for."

"Jake," I sighed his name, resting my head on his shoulder.

"It almost makes it harder, somehow." He couldn't look at me. "If you were terrible and didn't want anything to do with us, it wouldn't be a big loss. To know he's missing out on you… It breaks my heart, Bella. You were what he always dreamed of."

A tear slipped down my cheek, and he wiped it away gently. "I wish he had found me. I wish he would have called the cops. Something. Anything. Maybe my mom would still be alive,
and I would have known him. But then maybe you wouldn't exist. I don't know. It's so complicated.

"Mom always tried to help Dad when he was looking for you. I spent all last night trying to imagine a world where maybe they found you together and brought you home. Where I had a big sister. It makes me so angry about what we missed. The kind of relationship we could have had."

"Will have. I'm here now. This wasn't where I was born, but this is where my family is from. This is my home now, too. I'll be back soon, I swear to you, Jake."

"Thanks for coming," he breathed. His big hand wrapped around mine and he squeezed it tightly. Leaning over, he pressed a kiss to my temple. Jake's lips were plush like mine, soft and tender. I leaned into it, turning to rest my forehead against his.

I nodded a little. "Of course. Thanks for being so welcoming. It's more than I ever-" I stopped, unable to find the right words.

"Yeah." He nodded in return, smirking down at me a little bit after taking a deep calming breath. "Okay. Come on. Let's go have lunch with the old folks."

We met Vanessa, Alice, our grandfather, Aunt Sue, and Uncle Harry at a local seafood restaurant for lunch. It involved lots of delicious salmon which I thoroughly enjoyed. My aunt and uncle brought pictures of my family for me to take home to keep. My grandfather allowed me to take photos with him as well as the rest of the family. His smile was small, but it was there as he rested his large hand on my shoulder.

When I stood beside my Uncle Harry, I realized that being beside his twin was the closest I was ever going to get to taking a picture with my father. They had the same face, one that resembled my own. He put his arm around me, and I could see his eyes tearing up even though he was smiling. When we said goodbye, he hugged me for a long time and patted my shoulder. His warm eyes lingered on my face before going with Sue in her old truck.

I didn't want to take Alice to the airport that evening. I would miss her so much. I had missed having my best friend so close to me all the time. I didn't realize how much comfort she brought to me every day. But, I knew as much as I disliked being without her, I would be sadder without Edward. I loved her with all of my heart, but I knew that I couldn't live without him. He was my heart.

On the drive, we talked about the LA office we were going to set up together. It was going to be bigger, better, and with more room for growth. We would have a basketball court and a gym. Daycare services. A job center. Then we began to joke about the Sydney branch. If I wanted to raise my little Australian babies in his home country around his siblings, Alice would
find a way to eventually follow.

It was just after eleven when I got back to the hotel. I texted Edward my goodnights since he had to go to bed early. He had to work in the morning. First, some sort of early meeting before going to record for a few hours. I texted Jasper as well. We had sent a lot of messages over the weekend, but we hadn't been able to talk since Friday morning. I had sent him dozens of pictures, though.

“Can I call?” He messaged back. I called him instead as I laid on the uncomfortable hotel bed. The room was only lit up by my laptop screen as I edited pictures that I had taken earlier in the day with my family. “Hello there, dove,” he said, his voice seemed tired and stressed.

“Hi. Are you okay?” I asked right away. I put the computer down and sunk down onto the bed under the covers, getting more comfortable so that I could give him my full attention.

“Yeah… I’m just-” He stopped and sighed, “it doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. Of course, it does. Tell me what’s wrong,” I pressed. I knew he was upset and Edward was already asleep so he wouldn’t have anyone else to talk to. I didn’t want him to hold it in.

“Oh, it’s just that I had another stupid row at work. That prick Jones just takes it out of me,” he explained with another little sigh. His voice was so drained. I could imagine the way his mouth pulled down in a frown.

“What does he do?” I questioned gently.

“He literally wants me to work all the goddamn time. When you were here was the least I’ve worked in ages, and I basically had to piss off half my co-workers just to not work sixty goddamn hours a week. And fucking heaven forbid if I take a sickie like a human being. He has such unrealistic expectations of what I can accomplish in a day. And he’s always on this stupid powertrip. Thinking he can lord over our every fucking second but he can come and go as he damn well pleases. Giving me shit for taking thirty minutes to have lunch. Plus, he’s a pig to all the ladies. A real fucking creep. Maybe not stare at their tits when they’re trying to talk to you, yeah? Maybe try to be a little bit of a professional,” he ranted angrily. He huffed at the end, just feeling more exhausted for having gotten it out.

“I’m sorry. I wish I could be there to make it better,” I replied quietly. There was nothing else I could do or say, though. It made me feel awful. He had been so warm and encouraging to me in the week before, and I didn't have the right words to give him the same things.

“Mm, just like you did before?” He asked in a little hum of pleasure as he remembered our day together alone in Sydney. It might have started terribly for him, but it ended very well for
I giggled a little and flushed. "Maybe not just like before. First, I would try distracting you a little with some dinner and wine."

He gave a soft sigh. "Then, can I have you for dessert?"

"Oh, just me?" I asked teasingly. "No macarons?"

"Only if I can feed them to you," Jasper said charmingly before his voice changed, shifting into something sadder. "I miss you. I knew I would, but I didn't realize this much. I didn't figure I would become as attached to you this quickly. It feels just like with Tony."

There was a little pause, the moment hanging between us.

"I miss you too," I said softly, my cheeks heating at the words. I knew how much they meant to him. "I wish you were here with me right now. I wish I could hold you. I think we could both use a good long cuddle."

"Yeah, actually that does sound really nice," he said in a tiny voice before sighing again quietly. I could feel his depression in my soul, and I wanted to take it away. Swallowing back a lump in my throat, I took in a deep breath.

"Jasper, baby, you can come now if you want to. We will do whatever you need us to do to help you if that's what you want. We both want you in the states with us. If you're so unhappy, just quit. No one will think less of you," I rushed out. "It's okay to walk away sometimes."

"I need the money," he said, his voice soft and sad. I wondered where all his cash went. His apartment was modest, and his jeep was older. I didn't want to pry, though. I didn't know enough about his life yet. It was something I would have to ask Edward about. It was obviously an issue he was sensitive about, and I didn't want to step on a nerve. "And I can't afford to break my lease."

"I'll buy your tickets. I'll help you with your lease," I said with no hesitation. "I'll pay someone to pack and ship your things. Or we'll go back in a month and do it together."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. In a heartbeat."

"Oh, Bella, my dove. My sweet dove," he paused again. "I can see why Tony fell for you so easily," he said the words almost wistfully. "I wish that I could but I can't. I've already put in my notice and my request to use my paid time off. I need the money and... I can’t walk away
yet. I want to do this properly. It'll only be another month or so before I get to look into those lovely eyes and kiss those soft lips again. Don't worry."

"Mine or Edward's?" I asked with a smile.

"Mm. Both. Definitely both," he replied without hesitation.

"Yeah, you better kiss us like you miss us," I teased sassily. Biting my bottom lip, I imagined his mouth on my own. I wanted to feel him again.

"I'm going to do more than kiss you, my sweet little girl," he said in a seductive voice that dripped sex, thick like honey.

"Damn," I sighed heavily. "I really do wish you were here. Edward and I have been talking about the secluded cabin we want to rent when you come. Go out into the wilderness and be as loud and as adventurous as we want to be."

"Wow," Jasper breathed. "Mm, I cannot wait."

I giggled lightly. "Neither can I. Obviously if I'm willing to pay good money to have you come tonight."

"Oh, do you want me to come tonight?" He said teasingly. I giggled again, smiling to myself. "Your laugh is so lovely, Bella."

"How can you be both perverted and charming?" I questioned as I felt my cheeks warm slightly at his compliment.

"It's a talent," Jasper joked in a chuckle before becoming more earnest. "Are you doing okay right now? Seriously. I'm just annoyed about work and missing you both. You're actually the one going through something, and you're fussing over me."

"It's not a bad something, though. It's just a lot to take in at once is all. It's just been unexpected. I'm overwhelmed in a good way. I am..." I trailed off, not sure the word I wanted to use. "Sad, I guess? About certain things but they're things that I can't change now anyway. I just never thought this was a mystery that would never be solved because I really didn't want it to be."

"Why?"

I felt terrible for my answer. "Because I thought he didn't want me like most absent fathers. It just makes the most sense, statistically. And I assumed by the way my grandmother treated me that it wasn't something I wanted to look into too deeply."
He asked gently, “how did she treat you?”

“Like a shameful obligation. One she tried her best for most of the time, but one she didn’t want. I don’t know. Everything about my childhood has this dark filter now. A blood red one. How could she have loved me, or my mother, if she put us through that? How could she teach me piano, while knowing her husband would have killed me if I hadn’t been his granddaughter because of the color of my skin?”

Jasper let out a long sad sigh. “I honestly can’t even imagine. Is there anything I can do?”

I licked my lips, swallowing the lump back again. “Yes. Absolutely. You can take my offer,” I started lightly, making him laugh. “You can get on the first flight out of Sydney in the morning and-”

“Oh, god,” he laughed, sweet and soft. “You’re as bad as him.”

“Well, we do have some things in common,” I teased seductively. “We both want you.”

“I would say that you’re both annoyingly determined, but I think I like that better.” He let out a huffing breath, and I could hear the phone shift a little. "Why, though? We’ve just met. Why would you want me butting into your perfect relationship and life? It would be so much easier if I-"  

I wasn't going to let him finish. "You're not butting in, Jasper. I want you for a thousand reasons but-" I stopped, trying to think about how to explain my feelings to him. "If you're Edward's missing piece, it means you're mine, too. And I think you are. He was so closed off and a little sad, not that I knew that when I first met him and now I understand why. He missed you. And, I realize that it was only for a short while, but I liked what we had in Sydney. I liked being with you, with and without Edward. I want to be with you because first, you're my friend. And you love the man that I do and only want the best for him, too. For much longer than I have. I want to give him everything he has ever longed for. I want to give him the world with you.”

His breath caught in his throat. “You make me want to take that flight so fucking bad.”

“Good,” I said softly. “I promise you that wouldn’t regret it if you did.”

"I know that I wouldn't." I could almost see him smile in the way he spoke. "If anything else, just to kiss you for being so sweet to me."

“Well, you are to me too. So, it only seems fair. You've been nothing but wonderful to me from the second you met me.”
“I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve you both,” he said in a disbelieving tone.

“Eddie does and so do I,” I replied firmly. “Jasper, I don’t think you know how extraordinary you are.”

“Stop, you’re making me blush,” he said teasingly. I giggled, and he chuckled in return.

I looked at the clock on the laptop screen with a heavy sigh. It was getting late, and I had a tough morning ahead of me. "I don't want to, but I need to head to bed now. I have a long day tomorrow."

"Text me when you get home, yeah?" He said gently.

"I will, I promise. Sleep well tonight. Try to relax, okay?"

“I will,” Jasper answered with a little sigh in his voice. I could tell that he didn’t want to stop talking and neither did I. “Sweet dreams. Goodnight, dove.”

"Goodnight, sugar,” I said with a little sigh of my own, ending the call and placing the cell beside me in the darkness. I laid in bed for a few minutes, just staring at the ceiling. I was missing both of my men at that moment, and the bed seemed so big without them.

I spent the morning before my flight with my aunt, uncle, and Vanessa. We had lunch at Sue's. She gave me a beautiful handmade necklace that she created just for me. It was made from gorgeous black onyx beads, delicate and small. There were five strands, one for each of the Black children and one for our father. It clung to my neck like a choker, a tiny silver wolf's paw charm dangling in the center of the bottom strand. I loved it. I put it on right away.

She moved my hair out of the way to look at the necklace. Then she held my chin tenderly, rubbing her thumb over it. Lightly, Aunt Sue patted my cheek and said, “I’ve made all the girls necklaces. It fits you. I’m so glad you like it.”

I promised everyone books from the pictures I had taken. Over the next few weeks, I would be making several for both sides of my new family. I was really excited about it, though. I also promised Vanessa that I would come up again before the baby was born in a few weeks so that I could take maternity pictures for her and Jake. I knew I couldn’t stay away from them long now that I knew them.

Though I sobbed the entire drive to the airport, I was so ready to be back home. Back to Los Angeles. Back to my Edward, our bed, and spectacular life. Just two nights away from him was too much. It was making me anxious. If only I could just convince Jasper to join us sooner rather than later, everything would be perfect.