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## *A Shattered Record*

### **1.**

#### *Prologue*

"Do you love me, Edward?"

I stare blankly into the eyes of this...*I want to call you stranger...but I've somehow given you promises of more...*and not only is the answer no, but it's never been yes.

She crumples and begins to cry into her hands.

I stand there in the middle of our modest kitchen, weary and on edge.

*Don't trust those tears. They've tricked you before.*

This wasn't how my life was supposed to go.

Am I even part of my own story? Rhetorical question naturally, but it's hazy at best. Bits and pieces flash before my eyes every now and then when something triggers the memories, but it's safest not to dig. That's when I spend days in bed, crippled by pain, and popping enough pills to keep the pharmaceutical industry afloat—figuratively speaking.

"Well...I should go to work," I say uncomfortably.

## 2.

I'm on the road again, at last. I usually only do short hauls within the states of Oregon and Washington, but once in a while I do a cross-country drive for the sake of solitude.

At noon, Masen sends me a text message.

***Did you bring your meds, Dad?***

"You're not a doctor yet, son," I mutter to myself.

Everyone in my family has been antsy ever since I made plans for this trip a couple months ago. It feels liberating to be on the way now.

Another message from him pops up an hour and seventeen minutes later.

***Don't forget to call Rose on Sunday. It's her birthday. Emmett wishes you could be there. And please be safe.***

I can only do so much, of course. Even if I'm as safe as I can be, it depends more on the traffic around me. There's very little I can do if a driver I meet is under the influence or such.

When I stop for a quick bite to eat, I type out a response.

***I will do my best. Remind me, how old is Rose turning? I would not like to send her a card with the wrong number.***

Technically, I could buy one without an age, but it would break tradition.

My son answers right away.

***44. Just like you, remember? And what of the meds? Did you bring them?***

Oh, that's right. I remember now.

I chew my burger slowly and answer Masen a final time.

***Thank you, son. I love you, and I will call tonight when I reach the stop.***

For the rest of my meal, I think about the next seventeen days I have on my own. A highly orchestrated drive with several stops along the way. Seventeen days of open roads, my own thoughts, and...well, nothing else. I want to clear my head, but that wouldn't be following Masen's request of being safe. *I won't dig. I won't dig into my mind.*

Yet, as I get back on the road, I feel compelled to do just that. There's something lurking—a veil shielding a precious and gut-wrenching part of my memory. A part that practically whispers to me. *Open me up. Feel the pain.*

"No." I press a palm hard to the side of my head and screw my eyes shut.

"Please stop."

### **3.**

After signing off the cargo, I cross the street to grab a coffee while my truck is being loaded for the next haul. I've had my mandatory ten-hour break, so I want to get out of this town as soon as possible in order to make it to Denver in one go.

"One coffee, please. Black." I pat my hoodie and find a few bills in the front pocket.

"Small, medium, or large, sir?" The young girl smiles politely, albeit awkwardly.

*She's new.*

The poorly-made tattoo on her wrist and the yellowing bruise on her neck pique my interest. Then I spy the faint tan line from a thin necklace and see how neat her hair is. Add to that, she's too polite to be an ordinary, bored waitress and she suddenly becomes a rather dull textbook case.

"How big is the medium?" I ask, because I have never been here before. I don't know the sizes of their beverages.

She points a pen at the cups on display in front of the register.

"Large, thank you. And make it to go." I pay for the coffee, and I turn to leave before a piece of advice enters my mind, so I face the girl again.

"You should go back to your parents."

She raises a brow.

I point to her tattoo. "I'm guessing you did that to impress your James Dean boyfriend, and when he's drunk, he slaps you around a bit. Judging by your sullen expression, you've also realized you don't really love him, which you swore you did to everyone you left behind. But you are too proud to return to your parents, who forbade you to date that boy. Probably because they knew he's no good for you." Next I gesture at the necklace she's not wearing, but the line indicates it was there for a very long time—presumably a simple chain with a small cross. Perhaps a gift at her confirmation, or earlier. After all, this is Idaho in February, and it's not the time of year for tans. And statistically she would be from a good background to rebel her way into the arms of an abusive guy. "Going

against your parents at your age is incredibly common, and maybe they've even been smothering, but they mean well. And only your dignity holds you back. Have a good day, miss."

I snatch up a napkin before I leave the gaping teenager and exit the diner.

I have most likely worn out my welcome, and I really do want to reach Denver before nightfall.

#### **4.**

Good morning, day three. Denver is sunny but frigid. After beginning today's log, I make my pre-trip over to the shipping company to load up the truck.

I get coffee, sign a few papers, and let my son know I'm heading toward Wichita soon.

He replies.

***Check in when you can, Pops. Any snacks for the road?***

I grin at my phone. It's a standing joke between us.

A couple years ago, I had to purchase jeans in a size larger than what I've had most my adult life. Masen, always healthy and now on his first year in med school, whipped me back into shape. He scolded me for the candy wrappers he found in my truck and recommended fruit cups, nuts, and snack packs of vegetables.

That's extremely tasteless and mundane, though. So I compromised. I told him I'd go to the gym regularly when I'm home. I've also stopped taking my coffee with sugar, and no more pastries. But nobody's taking away my Starbursts.

"All ready to go here, Cullen!"

I nod in thanks, and soon I'm leaving the city of Denver.

Or maybe not. I'm on the outskirts, stopped at the last red light before the Interstate, when I see a young woman hitchhiking.

## 5.

I pick at the loose thread on the sleeve of my hoodie and adjust my Northwestern cap, debating with myself. Really, every rational thought tells me to ignore her. Even when she backs away from the truck in front of me, shaking her head in obvious no-thanks at the driver offering her a ride. All of which tells me she might have at least some self-preservation left and possibly even a good head on her shoulders.

The girl walks toward my truck, eyeing it, and then looks up at me in the cab, the question written all over her face. Waves of brown hair get swept back by the harsh wind, and she holds on to her knitted beanie.

*Say no. Decline respectfully. You need this time alone. Or, since it's still red, you have enough time to send her off with a few dollars for the bus.*

But where is she going? I don't know the cost of bus tickets. Nor do I know which bus company is closest, and what if that one happens to be less affordable? Then again, towns generally only have one bus station; all buses will go through there—and now the light is green. *Damn!*

I nod jerkily—in reflex, I think—and the girl radiates relief as she opens the door and climbs in.

"Hi. Thank you so much!" She's out of breath, and she's letting the cold in by wasting time to wipe Starburst wrappers from the seat. "You don't look like a murderer."

Thanks...I guess.

Keeping my eyes on the road, I put the truck in gear and drive off. "Were you not worried about the police?"

"Hitchhiking isn't illegal here." She puts on the seat belt and drops her backpack on the floor.

"No, but standing in the roadway is," I point out. In an attempt to get a better look at the girl, I side-eye her and catch her trying to be subtle, too. She's scanning my ID attached to the window above the dash.

It gives me a brief second to watch her. Very young, early twenties. Clean clothes, hint of freckles, perky nose, and for some unknown reason, all kinds of warning bells go off in my head. *Why?* I'm not blind; I can see she's breathtakingly gorgeous, but that doesn't explain the lack of air in my lungs.

Black spots fill my vision, and I blink past a fog that surges forward from my brain. A pounding headache sets in, causing me to grip the steering wheel tighter in mere caution. *Be safe*, Masen told me.

I'm *trying*.

I miss the girl's response, her voice muddled by the war trying to unleash itself inside my head.

Sucking in a quick breath, I try to regain control of myself, but every time the girl's face flashes past me, it feels like I'm being pulled under water. The weight is crushing on my chest, and I fear I'm having an anxiety attack.

*Why? Why?*

"Are you okay, sir?" Her soft voice filters through, and I register her hand on my arm. "You don't look very well."

My jaw tenses. Survival instincts kick in, and I suddenly have two voices in my head. My psychologist and Masen. Both so concerned for me all the time. *Whenever you get anxious, remember to breathe correctly.*

Because there's more than one way.

*God.* I catch a look at the road, straight and no cars too close, and then I close my eyes and slowly pull in a breath through my nose.

Better.

## 6.

Once I've evened out my breathing and told the girl I'm fine, it takes her approximately nineteen minutes to wipe the worry off her face.

Then she breaks the silence by introducing herself.

"I'm Bella, by the way."

I nod and, *twinge-stab*, rub my chest. "Edward." Though I'm hardly an advocate for mindless chitchat, it might give me the distraction I need, so I scramble for something to say. "Where are you headed?"

She simply smiles, and now that she's warm enough, she takes off her coat and gloves. "Wherever."

No. That's not an answer suitable for her. "You're no runaway, nor are you an itinerant. You must have a destination."

"Itinerawhat?"

"Nomad. Vagabond. Traveler."

"Ah." She lets out a soft, beautiful laugh. "How can you be so sure I'm not a nomad?"

Too easy. "Your bag is new and without identification tags. Good brand, fairly expensive, perfect for hiking and camping, but a vagabond would go with something larger to carry more items. No stains on your clothes, the shine in your hair indicates you recently showered and used your own shampoo or maybe a nice hotel brand, and nomads travel light and cheap. Your beanie just barely covers your ears, which means you probably chose it for style and comfort rather than practicality and durability."

I think I made my point.

"I...heh, I see. Um. Okay, and why am I not a runaway?"

Even easier. "Your accent. It's subtle, but you're clearly from the East Coast."

"So?" There's a grin and a dare in her tone.

I decide I like it.

"Runaways don't travel toward the place from which they are fleeing, and you were standing in the roadway just before the on-ramp to the Interstate heading east."

"I'm impressed," she chuckles.

"Okay."

## **7.**

After my initial reaction to meeting this girl—*Bella*—my comfort returns and grows rapidly. Over the next several hours, we speak here and there but mostly stay quiet, and the silence is devoid of awkwardness.

The very few topics so far have been easy, too. Music: she likes rock and oldies. I prefer jazz but like oldies too, so I find us a good radio station. Destination: she's stuck on "wherever," and I tell her the next stop is Wichita, with a final destination being Florida before I head on home to Seattle again. Weather: Yes, it's cold. We're in agreement.

She's curious by nature, I think. Next she asks how long I've been a truck driver.

"About fifteen years or so." I frown to myself, baffled and irritated I can't be more specific. But I'm there in my mind again—*that* spot—on the edge of whatever's hiding in my memory. *I've* hidden it; the realization strikes me. I'm the one who has closed the proverbial Pandora's box in my head and nailed it shut.

Why would I do that? What am I blocking out?

"Cool. So is this truck equipped with its own sleeping cabin and stuff like that?"

"It has a sleeper, yes." Otherwise it would get rather pricey with all the motel expenses. Logically, it would probably lead to shipping being more costly, as well. "Mine's nothing fancy, though." Several truckers I've come to know over the years—particularly those who do long hauls—have more elaborate sleepers. Reaching behind me, I push aside the curtain so Bella can see.

I can't even stand at my full height in there, but the bed is very comfortable, and I don't need anything other than that and the mini fridge next to it. And my belongings can be found in either the roll-out box under the bed or in the small shelving system on the wall that I actually constructed myself.

"Wow." Bella seems impressed, letting me know this is probably the first time she's inside an eighteen-wheeler. "I could live like this."

My smile is automatic, but it falters slightly. "*Can I go with you in your truck and see the whole world?*" Suppressed or long-forgotten memories dance just outside of reach. "*I wanna see fireflies!*" There's something familiar... Laughter and easy breathing. A love that runs so deep—*Masen*, of course. But why would I lock away memories of my own son from when he was a child?

## **8.**

It takes us ten hours with traffic and a stop for lunch to reach Wichita, then another hour for unloading and signing off. I'm not due to get my next cargo until tomorrow morning, so once the trailer is empty and cleared, I drive toward the nearest truck stop that also has a motel.

"You have two options for sleeping arrangements, assuming you haven't already thought about it," I say. "Either you check yourself into a motel and I sleep in the back as I always do, or we take turns here." I'd be more of a gentleman and offer to sleep in my seat all night, but regulations are there for a reason. If I don't get a good night's sleep, I'll be awful on the road tomorrow. "We could sleep in shifts—one in the bed and one here in the front."

"It's very sweet of you to offer," she replies with a smile. "And while I'm sorta low on cash, I won't take your bed. But I will, if it's okay, just stay here."

She won't sleep well, that's for certain. She's legally an adult, though. It's her choice.

"Of course you can. I fear you won't be comfortable, but it's up to you." I see the exit ahead and switch lanes. In the meantime, Bella is rummaging

through her backpack. "The heater in the sleeper should be enough to keep you warm, but—"

She lets out an "a-ha!" and presents a sleeping bag. "Toasty warm, don't you worry." Her grin is...adorable, really.

"Very well." I smile and face forward, feeling oddly content.

Almost...*happy*. Dare I even say excited? Just a pinch, but I believe it's there. Interesting. "If nothing else, you can always get some sleep in the bed while I drive tomorrow."

"Thank you, Edward. Really. It means a lot."

"You're welcome."

## 9.

Bella gives me breakfast every morning. A big, healthy one—reminding me of Masen. Who is almost the same age, which makes my prurient thoughts about the girl even more disturbing. But I can't lie to myself, and after four days on the road with Bella, it's like everything she says and does arouses me.

It's Sunday, and after a few detours around the Midwest for shipments, we've just reached Atlanta, Georgia. Gone is the cold winter, replaced by a mild chill my standard hoodies can withstand.

"So, after Atlanta, it's...?" Since yesterday, Bella has occupied herself with either reading fiction on her tablet or marking our journey on a map she bought at a gas station. Right now she's holding the map, her legs crossed on top of the dashboard as a table, and a black Sharpie tracking the I-20.

"Fort Lauderdale," I reply.

She hums and trails a finger along the map, this time the I-95 we'll be taking. "It's sort of bittersweet. You'll officially be on your way home."

That's not entirely correct. "More stops and detours on the way west." I haven't even been gone a week yet. I still have eleven days of freedom.

"Oh, really?" Bella perks right up. "Do you think it's possible for me to tag along all the way?"

I chuckle. "You hitchhiked from Denver to Fort Lauderdale because you'd like to end up in Seattle?"

"I told you, I wanna go wherever." She leans back again, a contented sigh slipping through her lips. Last night, I dreamed I had them wrapped around my— "This is my vacation. I just wanted to get away for a little while."

Ah, yes. I have learned she recently gave up her apartment in Los Angeles, and she's not sure where she wants to live next. She's originally from New Haven, New York, but has lived in Los Angeles the past two years.

Bella's shared many stories along the way—everything from her childhood to her dreams of the future. But, truth be told, I've been forced to tune her out several times because I get vicious headaches. Not from her talk, specifically, but from something else. It's like the air around Bella brings me both pain and carefree joy.

I don't understand any of it, much less the dreams I've been having. They're a bizarre mix of vivid and erotic glimpses of her and me together, and shadowy flashes of memories that feel both familiar and extremely foreign.

I wake up hard and heavy-hearted.

A strong sense of yearning is making itself known, and it's highly depressing.

Feeling a phantom twinge of that pain right now, I pull out my phone at the next red light to see if Masen has texted. Sometimes he messages me funny jokes, and he's explained it's his way of saying there's nothing special to report but he wanted to check in.

I think that's sweet.

***Hey, Dad. Don't forget to call Rose today. Love you and hope you're well.***

Well, that's no funny joke.

## **10.**

It's late when I'm done for the day and we reach our stop for the night, but it's three hours earlier on the West Coast, so it should be safe to call now.

Bella and I finish our diner meal, and when she retires to the truck, I tell her I'm just gonna make a quick call.

"To your handsome son?" She grins.

She's a quirky girl, that one. "Not this time," I chuckle. "You think my son is hot, huh?" Why do I regret showing her a photo of him?

"I said handsome, not hot. That would be weird." She scrunches her nose for some reason. "Besides...his father has him beat." With a wink, she saunters off.

I tilt my head as I process her words.

*His father has him beat...*

But...but that's *me*.

Her statement causes my brain to work a little slower for a moment, and I'm still a little dazed when I pick up my phone to call Rose.

She answers after the third ring, so either she was getting ready for bed or there're still people over.

*"Hello?"*

"Happy birthday, Rose. It's Edward," I say politely. "I sent you a card." I do remember doing that the other day.

*"Is that Dad on the phone?"* I hear Masen in the background.

I'd almost forgotten. He's visiting for the weekend. I believe he's flying back to Evanston and Northwestern on Tuesday, and that means I'll be in his neck of the woods on my way to Milwaukee. Perhaps I can stop by and visit him.

*"Yes, it is,"* Rose tells him before addressing me again. *"Thank you for calling. I got the card, too. At least I think I did. It was your handwriting on the envelope."*

Well. Yes. I never know what to write in greeting cards, because the greeting is already there in some fancy font. There's very little else to say, so I usually leave it blank. Sometimes I sign with my name.

*"Emmett says hi,"* she adds.

"Tell him I say hello, too," I say, as it's customary. And I like the kid. "Did Masen wish to speak to me, or...?"

*"He does,"* Rose answers quietly. *"Take care of yourself, Edward. Call if you need anything."*

My son comes to the phone only three seconds later. *"How are you, old man?"*

"I'm good, thanks." I smile over at the truck and see Bella exiting with her toiletry bag. The washrooms are only two parking spots over, and she walks there in her PJs. "We're in Atlanta right now. Fort Lauderdale tomorrow night."

Masen lets out a long breath. *"...We?"*

## **11.**

Once the cabin of the truck is dark, I find myself staring up at the low ceiling above me. Hands behind my head, the blankets drawn to my waist, my clothes folded neatly on top of the mini fridge next to me.

With the shields pushed down to cover the windows in the front, the only light I see is from Bella's tablet, and it's faded—obscured by the thin curtain.

It felt good telling Masen about Bella, my young travel companion. And he agreed to meet with her if she's still with me when I get close to Evanston.

He must've been tired because his chuckle had been forced when he'd told me, *"Don't forget your home, Pops."*

I don't think it's possible to forget that. Silly kid. His education might be taking its toll, although that doesn't surprise me. Even with his workload in med school, he volunteers, takes online classes, and researches in the little spare time he has. I worry.

Rolling onto my side, I focus on the silhouette that is Bella's form, still illuminated by her reading device. She has her legs drawn up and her lower body hidden in her sleeping bag, but the rest is delectable and on

display. A skimpy top with ultra thin straps does nothing to cover her curves. Full, round breasts, a narrow waist with just a hint of softness...

Twenty-three is a good age. I remember being that young...I think. Bliss. It was bliss back then. Masen was born, and I was happiness personified. I can feel it in my gut.

"Can't sleep?" I hear Bella ask softly.

My heart rate kicks up a notch. "How did you know?"

"You usually snore a little bit in the beginning."

Until the first REM cycle takes me, I presume. That's most common.

"Anything I can do?" She carefully pulls the curtain aside and tilts her head in question.

My mouth can't form words.

## **12.**

It takes me so long to answer her that she leaves her spot to stand in the narrow doorway to my sleeper.

"I..." *don't know what to say*. I can only stare at her. God, her legs. I swallow dryly as my eyes get their fill of creamy, smooth, bare legs. Tiny sleep shorts hide the part I want to be buried in, and the lust that sweeps over me is so heavy that my body feels physically weighed down by it.

She makes me so hard.

"Edward...?" She takes a slow step forward. And of course, *she* can stand at full height without banging her head. "Anything I can do for you?"

I-I...I...

Moving automatically, I sit up in my bunk. Blood continues to surge south as Bella takes a final step. Can she see my erection straining under the blankets?

"I'm here," she whispers. Then I feel her hand ghosting along my cheek, and I close my eyes and swallow hard. *It's been so long.* "I'm here." She gently grasps my hands and slides them up her body.

I come alive. My entire being buzzes with heat and desire.

Opening my eyes, I watch as my hands disappear behind her to cup her perfect ass. I pull her close and press my face to her lower abdomen, and Bella lets out a soft moan and weaves her fingers through my hair.

I act on instinct, fueled by urges that have been buried for a long, long time. After I've pushed down her shorts, I dip down and inhale her arousal. My tongue parts her lips. I taste her. I kiss her as passionately as I would've done if I'd kissed her on the mouth.

"Oh *God*, Edward..."

A groan rumbles in my chest. My hands squeeze her ass more roughly, bringing her impossibly closer. I moan against the wetness. My scruff rasps along her smooth folds, and she quivers and gasps in my hold.

Sucking her clit into my mouth causes her to cry out, and it doesn't take more than a couple minutes before she's falling apart.

*I have to be inside. Now, now, now.*

Once she relaxes a bit more, I pull her down with me onto the mattress. I cover her body with mine, her mouth with mine, and my fingers find her slippery wet, hot, and tight.

Bella chants breathless pleas and holds onto me as if I'd go anywhere.

My head begins to pound, but the pain is different. It's urging me to go forward, go deep, and unleash the secrets in my head.

"I have to—I have to..." I don't even recognize my voice. I don't wait for her response, either. Instead I grip my cock and position myself before I force myself deep inside of her.

"Oh, my God! Yesss. More, Edward—*please*..."

I fuck her savagely.

Grabbing her jaw, I angle myself for a hard kiss.

I kiss her like I haven't kissed in sixteen years.

I breathe her in, touch every spot I can reach, pleasure her, make her cry out for me, cling to me, *I want to consume her*.

"I'm—oh fuck," she gasps, "I'm close."

*So am I.*

With every push, I hear deliciously wet sounds from my cock taking her, and those noises combined with the smell of sex and her begging for me are my undoing. A strained moan escapes me, and I push deep a final time before my climax takes over.

I rock into her, feeling myself pulse with each release. She becomes even tighter when she orgasms too, which draws more arousal from me—until I'm utterly spent and sated.

"Holy shit," Bella pants as I roll off to lie beside her. "You're just full of surprises, Edward Cullen."

### **13.**

Our dynamic changes after that first night. We travel as friends, lovers, and confidants. She gives me air; I honestly feel like my life depends on her, which is incredibly terrifying. But at the same time, things have never felt so right.

In Fort Lauderdale, I take her to a nice restaurant. We make love for hours in my sleeper. I drink in the sight of her, completely hooked on her expressions as she tells me about this and that. She's just...captivating.

Tallahassee, Chattanooga, Nashville, St. Louis.

Somewhere outside of Peoria, my headaches begin to fade.

I still have odd dreams—or are they memories?—but I'm happy to be rid of the pain.

"I feel all talked out." Bella turns in her seat and leans back against the door. "It's your turn." She smiles. "I wanna know everything about you."

I chuckle, keeping an eye on the police car in the other lane. I'm going the limit though, so there's no reason he'd stop us. "Not much to tell." Her feet are in my lap, so I give a toe a little squeeze. "Your life seems much more interesting."

"I doubt that. What made you decide to become a truck driver? You're like this genius or something."

Hardly. "I like to drive, and I enjoy the structure of the regulations. It's as simple as that."

"Are you from Seattle originally?"

My brow furrows, and I shake my head hesitantly.

*I'm not from Seattle.*

I don't know why that hit me like a new realization; I knew that already, of course.

"Where did you grow up?" she asks curiously.

*East.* My breathing picks up, though I'm clueless as to why. *East Coast.*

"Uh..." The locked box rattles in the back of my mind and wants to open up. "Out east," I say. *New York. Upstate.*

"College in Washington?" Bella guesses.

No. Yes. Not *my* college. I think. No, I didn't go to college. Of course I didn't. I followed someone to Seattle.

My gut clenches.

As if sensing I need a change of topic, my phone buzzes. And I usually never answer it while I'm driving, but today I ignore my rule and pick it up.

"Edward Cullen speaking."

*"Hey, Dad."*

*Masen. Safe. He grounds me. He's everything.*

"Hello, son. How are you?" I chance a peek in Bella's direction, only to see her smiling softly out the window.

*"All good here. Are you on the way?"*

"Yes." Unless the traffic is worse than normal in this area, we should be in Evanston in about three hours. "Should we meet up at a restaurant, or...? Bella and I haven't eaten yet, and it'll be dinnertime by then."

*"No, no," he says quickly. "We'll order in. I have the apartment to myself. My roommates will be out for the day, and Alec's working."*

"All right, then." I smile. "We'll see you soon."

#### **14.**

"I feel oddly nervous," I say with a grin, leading Bella toward the elevator in Masen's building. It's been a while since I visited, and I let out a breath, hoping my son will like Bella.

"It will be fine." She hugs my arm and drops a kiss to my bicep. "Masen and I have something important in common."

I snort in amusement. "You mean besides your age?"

"No, silly!" she giggles, then lifts her chin. "Plus, I'm two years older than him. So, there."

Realistically, it should take time to build love, so why does it feel like I've fallen already? It makes no sense whatsoever.

"All right." I roll my eyes in a teasing manner at her. "What do the two of you have in common?"

The elevator dings at the same time as she peers up at me and says, "You."

Warmth seeps into every fiber of my being.

The nerves calm down.

Confidence builds up with every step toward Masen's apartment.

I knock firmly and squeeze Bella's hand.

I haven't even lowered my hand completely before my son opens the door.

"Even more handsome in real life," Bella whispers. Too quiet for Masen to hear.

Instead of getting jealous, it's only pride that makes my chest swell.

"Hey, Pops." Masen smiles—albeit uncertainly—and opens the door wider. "It's good to see you. Come on in."

## **15.**

I let Bella enter first, and then I step forward and hug my kid tightly. "Good to see you too, boy." I palm his cheeks and wonder if he's eating right. He looks a little pale. "You work too much, I'm guessing."

He lets out a choked chuckle. "Yeah, maybe."

I gesture for Bella, placing a hand behind her back. "I want you to meet Bella. Bella, Masen—my son. Masen, Bella."

Masen's eyes flick away from me, and he smiles politely and holds up his hands. I'm only now noticing he's holding a towel, and his hands are covered in what looks like flour.

"I'd shake your hand, Bella, but..."

Bella beams up at him. "Of course. It's nice to meet y—"

"Oh, and it's nice to meet you," Masen says hurriedly, nodding. "How about we sit down in the living room? I'll get us drinks."

Masen is nervous and uncomfortable—easy to tell. I tilt my head at him, concerned, but he only forces a smile. *No good*. After showing Bella the

living room, I tell her I'll be right back. I give her a quick kiss, then join Masen in the kitchen.

There's a bag of flour on the kitchen counter, but no other baking supplies. The kitchen is spotless.

"What's wrong, son?"

The pitcher of iced tea trembles in his hand, but he goes on pouring three glasses. "Nothing is wrong." He's always been a terrible liar, which he got from... I frown to myself. *His mother. His mother, his mother, his mother.*

"Dad?"

I look up from the floor.

Masen sighs and walks over to me, a recently washed hand coming up to my shoulder. "Are you happy?" he asks quietly.

It's my turn for the uncertain smile. "Incredibly so, but you're worrying me."

My son has always been a deep thinker, yet still carefree. Compassionate and bright as hell. He stands tall and proud, same height as me. Just like we share most features, actually. But the crease in his forehead that...well, it's been there for as long as I can remember, making him sound and look older than his years...but what once made him come off as smart and thoughtful now appears riddled with sadness.

Has something happened?

"Everything is the way it's supposed to be." His smile grows, a signature crooked Masen smile, though his eyes become a bit glassy. "I'm just happy for you."

Oh. It *has* been a while since I lived for someone other than him.

"Thank you, Mase. That means a lot to me."

He swallows hard, the light fading slightly from his green eyes. "Mase... You haven't called me that since..." *Since...?* But instead of finishing his sentence, he shakes his head quickly, claps me on the back, and grins again. "Come on. I want to hear about your travels."

## **16.**

Masen lets me and Bella do most of the talking, and a couple hours later, I'm relieved to know my son approves of her. He must've sensed I wanted them to like each other, because right before we leave, he hugs me tight and tells me to "go for it."

He also informs me he'll be taking some time off soon to be with family, and I'm glad to hear he's visiting us in Seattle in just a few days.

I'd question it, what with him having just been home for Rose's birthday, but I'm a bit greedy. I want to spend some quality time with him.

"He's amazing, Edward," Bella murmurs, fastening her seat belt.

I nod, definitely agreeing, and turn the ignition. "He is. One day, he'll be an extraordinary neurosurgeon."

We leave Evanston behind, and the silence that blankets us is easy and comfortable.

With everything that's happened lately, I begin to wonder what's really holding me in Seattle. There is *something*, my mind tells me, but I cannot for the life of me figure it out. Have I forgotten something important?

"I want us to be together," I say quietly after a while.

Bella scoots closer and leans her cheek on my shoulder. "I want that, too."

I breathe out in relief and kiss her knuckles. "Will you consider moving for me, then?"

"Oh, Edward. It's only fair. Moving for love—there's no question about it."

She said *love*.

Just like that, I don't care about the long haul anymore. It doesn't matter if we're on the road or heading home, because the thought of *home* doesn't depress me if I get to keep Bella.

*Someone is waiting for you in Seattle.*

*"Don't forget home, Dad."*

I frown.

## **17.**

On day seventeen, we arrive in Seattle on time. I still have a couple hours of work before I can go home, and what Bella told me this morning is creating a bit of chaos in my heart.

*"I should fly down to LA to get my stuff."*

She's in the truck right now booking a plane ticket.

I don't want her to go. It's an irrational fear, but it feels like she'll disappear.

*"The sooner I go, the sooner I can come back so we can start our life together."*

Sounds amazing in theory.

Only in theory.

*"I will be back in two days, Edward. I'll miss you. I-I...I hope you don't think it's too soon, but...I love you."*

I'd returned the sentiment immediately, and then I'd pulled in at the next truck stop to show her just how much I love her.

As I sign the last of the forms, the door opens behind me and Bella sticks out her head from the truck.

She smiles sadly. "Can you take me to Sea-Tac?"

I'd rather not.

## **18.**

Scholarship or not, it costs a lot to help a child pay his way through school. That's why my car is a rusty piece of crap, and that's what I drive home after dropping off Bella at the airport and my truck at work.

The small house I've never liked stands out on the street, because unlike the other homes, mine feels lifeless and is in desperate need of a paintjob. The white shutters are gray. The blue façade has faded. The lawn is overgrown, and the low picket fence is broken in some places.

The key is under the welcome mat as always, and I let myself in, instinctively taking a whiff. *This isn't home*. Home is supposed to smell like soap, the daisies I remember, and love.

The house isn't supposed to be a house, even. Home is a small apartment near the university and has a broken fridge.

"Edward?" The voice comes from the kitchen.

I drop my bag inside the door and look down at my feet.

*Rose.*

I remember.

"You're home."

No. I'm really not. Something's not right about this place, and I instantly get suspicious.

"Masen called."

"Okay." I hang up my jacket, avoiding Rose's gaze. *Don't trust her.* There's always been something with her that doesn't sit right. "Where's Emmett?"

"Work."

How convenient.

"When's Masen getting in?" I ask, passing her to get something to eat in the kitchen. "He's still coming, right?"

"Yes, he'll be here later tonight," Rose answers softly. "I, um, I don't imagine you want your medication, but would you consider the vitamins? Masen wants you to take them, remember?"

I remember.

"Sure," I mutter.

She disappears from the kitchen, and I grab a frozen pizza from the freezer and pop it in the microwave. As I get a soda, I see leftovers in the fridge. The casserole looks tasty, but I've been manipulated by Rose before. Only God knows what's in it.

By the time I sit down at the table with my mediocre food, my heart already heavy from missing Bella, Rose returns with my pill organizer. Seven days, each little compartment full.

"Here you go, love." She smiles, sits down across from me, and slides over the box. "I cleared everything with Masen, and then he can speak to you about the medication later."

I stare at the pills for today.

There are seven of them, and there're usually only four.

## **19.**

Mind-numbing fury spills into my veins. I clench my fists on the kitchen table and look up with a glare to meet Rose's eyes. They widen slightly, and I enjoy the fear I see there.

"What're these?" I keep my voice low, barely contained, and push the three foreign pills toward her.

"Th-they're vitamins from M-Masen." Her act is transparent. She tries to come off as concerned and confused, but I see through her. "They're safe, Edward—"

"Don't lie to me!" I shoot up from my seat and tower over her. I'm practically shaking with how livid I am. "Don't you *fucking* lie to me, whore!"

"Please calm yourself!" Tears roll down her face, and I catch her eyeing the cordless phone on the table. "I wouldn't lie to you—I *swear*."

Out of pure instinct, I raise my hand. Rose flinches and gasps. And I know, if I don't leave right this instant, I will get violent with her. My hands itch to squeeze her goddamn throat until the light goes out and she stops breathing altogether.

Stunned by my own thoughts, I stumble out of the kitchen and hurry toward my bedroom. *I must leave.* I have to get out of here. *Pack your things and go. Call Bella on the way.*

I pack in a rush, glad I already have one bag packed by the door from my drive. I consider sending Masen a text, but he's most likely in the air. He won't have his phone on.

In the back of my closet, I encounter a shoebox that makes my brain scream at me. *Take it! Don't leave it behind! Everything is in there!* Rattled and confused, I grab the box and throw it into my duffel.

When I'm done, I sneak down the hallway and try to calm my breathing. All I want is a quick exit without Rose noticing.

"It's happening again." She's still there, crying and whimpering and speaking in hushed tones. *Is she on the phone?* I stay near the wall and get closer, wanting to hear her. I want proof that she's been trying to deceive me. "It's worse than before," she sobs. "He refuses to-to take his meds. I t-ried to make him believe they were vitamins—"

I knew it. God, I *knew* it.

I'm not fucking crazy. It's that God-awful woman.

"I know," she cries, "but I can't g-give up on him. He belongs to me!"

Almost delirious with rage, I barge into the kitchen and grab the phone from her. I slam it into the fridge, causing it to shatter in several pieces, but I don't hear it. All I see is a terrified Rose cowering away in the corner, sobbing her heart out and pleading with me to take those pills.

"Who's in on this?!" I shout.

She shrinks down to the floor and holds up her palms, showing surrender. "Please don't hurt me, Edward. I'm only trying to help you! I love you and want to see you well!"

"Love me?" I exclaim in disbelief. "You lie to me, try to poison me—"

"No!" she screams.

I clench my teeth and inhale through my nose. *Think about Bella.* "I..." I let out a hollow laugh. "I've been a fool for letting this go on so long. Bella would *never* betray me this way." Another round of tears runs down Rose's face at that, and I grin sinisterly. "That's right. I've met someone. She's...everything. She and Masen—"

"Oh, Edward..." Rose whimpers brokenly. "She's dead!"

## **20.**

More proof that Rose is a lying whore. Seated on the bed in my motel room, I look down at my phone and allow myself to be comforted by the message that popped up an hour ago.

***Already shipped off my stuff! Taking care of some last-minute things, and then I'll see you bright and early the day after tomorrow. Can't wait. Love you!***

I fall back against the mattress and exhale slowly.

Masen will be here soon. He'll help me sort all this out.

In the meantime, I suppose I should look at what's inside that shoebox. It's so inconspicuous and ordinary; I don't understand why my mind would demand I bring it.

I heave a sigh and sit up again, reaching down to grab one of the bags. The shoebox is at the top, and I drop the bag again and place the box next to me on the bed.

A scary thought is that it could be the embodiment of the box of memories trapped inside my skull.

Lifting the lid cautiously, I peer down into the box and see what appear to be newspaper clippings, notes, and photos.

*What in the world?*

I pick up the top photo and grin, both confused and happy. It's a picture of me holding a newborn Masen. I recall this moment with stunning clarity. The maternity ward, New Haven, his beautiful momma resting in the bed that isn't in the photo. *Charlie took this.* I remember.

*New Haven.*

That's...familiar in more ways than one.

*"I love you so much, Edward."*

*"Always, Bella."*

The next thing I pick up is a note. The handwriting...I know it...don't I?

*You needed your sleep, so I took Mase to the playground. Back soon!*

Another photo: Masen is about three years old, and my eyes burn with a sudden onslaught of emotions. *I know that girl.* Bella is pushing Masen on the swing, both their smiles brilliant and full of joy. The sun shines.

I choke up and swallow hard.

*"You're practically a genius, baby. And you want to be a...truck driver?"* A soft, beautiful laugh. She'd ruffled my hair. *"You'll be the hottest trucker*

*out there, who also happens to have the highest IQ of them all."* She always supported me, like I supported her when she applied to a college across the country. *"Can I go with you in your truck and see the whole world?"*

*"The three of us, as soon as you're done in grad school."* I remember the kiss I gave her.

*You told our son about my plan to drive for a living and all the places we could see.*

*"What do you think, kiddo? Should Daddy have one of those big trucks? We could drive down to Nana and Pop in New Orleans again."*

*"Yesss! I wanna see fireflies!"*

My head throbs with pain. Dizzy and fucking scared, I stand up from the bed and stare unseeingly at the box. *You've opened it. Keep going. See it.* I draw in a shaky breath and reach for another item.

Photo. Masen's fifth birthday. Three smiling faces. Me, Masen, my wife. *Bella.*

"God," I choke out. "No."

It feels right, but it has to be wrong. Too much, too painful.

Newspaper clipping. *"...serial car crash takes eight lives..."* Icy roads and a drunk driver behind the wheel. *"...young woman and her husband's parents..."* Bella. Mom and Dad. She'd picked them up at the airport because Masen and I were sick with the flu at home. *"...mourned by husband and a five-year-old son..."*

"No!" I back away and drop the article like it's burned me. It fucking has.

"No, no, no, no, no, no..." I fist my hair, pulling at it. "No...please, no..."

I vaguely register falling to my knees. My lungs burn with lack of oxygen.

Through the whooshing sound in my ears and the crippling pain, I hear pounding on the door, and only Masen knows I'm here. But I can't answer. I can't form a single word, and my legs won't carry me.

*"Open up, Dad!"*

You have to be real, Bella. Tell me this is a sick experiment or a big mistake.

*"It's not what it looks like, Dad! Come on, open the door!"*

## **21.**

### ***Masen's POV.***

"Are you positive?" Alec asks patiently.

*Making sure.*

"It's the only way, baby. I've told you." I park outside the house and get out of the rental. Having received countless texts from both Rose and Dad since we landed, I have a fairly good idea of what's going on. I've been through it before. Sixteen goddamn times. But I'm done. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

Heading up the walkway, I see Emmett's mountain bike. He must've come home from his job at the sporting goods store, which sucks. The kid's only sixteen, and I don't want him to hear this. He likes Dad, and he's obviously protective of his mother, who I plan on ripping a new one.

The door's open, so I walk straight in and find Rose bawling her eyes out in the kitchen.

I feel for her—I do—but enough is enough, and her dream of going further with my father will never come true. I could've told her that when she first became Dad's live-in nurse thirteen years ago.

Whenever he has one of his episodes, he comes home from a cross-country drive blissfully happy, and we've destroyed it every time. We've had him hospitalized and put on strong medication, sending him into a catatonic state lasting for several months. And what follows is a painfully slow process of Dad returning to the living. Weeks of numbness, confusion, until his mind ultimately blocks out everything that has happened. He accepts his condition for a short period of time and returns to work, but like many people diagnosed with schizophrenia, the acceptance doesn't last.

In the end, he stops taking his meds because he grows paranoid and suspicious.

That's when he begins making plans for a long drive, stating he just wants to get away for a short while to clear his head.

*Rinse, repeat.*

## **22.**

### ***Masen's POV.***

It's during the brief periods he's been on his medication that Rose has tried to make him love her. And in attempts to heal and stay positive, my father has agreed to take small steps toward a union his mind and heart will never accept. Sure, he agreed to move into Rose's house. He agreed to weekly dinners with just the two of them. He agreed to consider adopting Emmett. But...Pops has been *considering* that for four years now. Almost as long as he's been pretending to consider sharing a bedroom with Rose.

She needs to face facts. My dad is taken, and he doesn't want that to change.

"Rose." I pull off my beanie and gloves, and Rose looks up from the table, her eyes blotchy and red. "Where's Em?"

"His room," she croaks. "Oh Masen, what're we going to do? This time was much worse."

I incline my head, refusing to show how this affects *me*.

It's breaking my motherfucking heart, but it's time to let Dad go.

He's only happy when he's off the meds. Dozens of medical trials, countless hours in a psychologist's office, and all kinds of drugs haven't helped him.

"I'm taking over," I say, clearing my throat. Legally, Dad has been my responsibility since I turned eighteen, but other than being in love with him, Rose has been a good nurse and friend, so I've trusted her. "I've discussed things with my grandparents, and they agree." I've also researched everything and spoken to professors and doctors in alternative medicine, and they believe it's worth a shot. "I'm moving Dad to Illinois. There's a nice community outside of—"

"What? No!" Rose cries out.

I grit my teeth. *Stay calm, Cullen*. "Look, I'm not asking for permission," I tell her. "I wanted him to go with me even when I started pre-med and Renee and Charlie moved back to New Orleans, but we both know Dad would've refused because of a goddamn gravesite that's kept him here. But shit's different now, and I'm done hoping for a recovery. *It won't happen.*"

My grandparents didn't have to move here, but they love Dad, so they lived here for a few years to help out. It also helped that the four of us were together, and it definitely had a positive impact on me. I was able to be a kid for a bit longer—until I became legal and I was suddenly the parent.

It's a responsibility I'd shoulder for life if it meant my dad was happy, but he's fucking not. He's miserable.

"Don't do this, Masen," Rose pleads tearfully. "We should try one more time. Alice thinks so, too. I talked to her—"

"You did what?" A cold chill runs down my spine. Alice Whitlock is a great doctor, and her methods have worked well with many patients. However, my pops isn't one of them. No hard feelings, it's just not the path for him.

"I love him," she whimpers.

I shake my head. There's no use in talking to a brick wall. The only thing I need from here is to check if Dad found the shoebox, so I move toward his bedroom and open the closet.

Not here.

Damn. *Damn, damn, damn.*

## **23.**

### ***Masen's POV***

"Okay." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Okay." A plan. I need a plan. If Dad has the box, it most likely means he's seen what's inside.

He's at the motel already, I know that much. And he's upset, judging by the barely coherent sentences he's messaged. Which...hell, he probably thinks he's lucid, but that's never the case. Cut-off phrases, mumbling,

and losing their train of thought—the norm for those with schizophrenia. He hasn't even texted me the address to the motel, though it's always the same one.

We think he chooses it after every episode because of the familiarity he feels in that neighborhood. After all, he shared a small apartment with my mom there for years.

*Mom.*

She will help.

Deciding to call my grandparents in New Orleans on the way to the motel, I head toward the kitchen again and tell Rose, "Once I've picked up Dad, we're not coming back here." Renee and Charlie have all the belongings that matter, anyway. "If you want to see him, call me when we get settled, and I *might* arrange something." It depends solely on my dad and what he wants.

The hurt lingers in Rose's eyes, but anger tightens her features next. "How dare you!" She stands up and points a finger at me. "For thirteen years, I've taken care of that man. Thirteen years! And I've looked past a lot. I love him the way he is, *if only he could get over that damn Bella!* I'll take him—flaws and all, even if he'll never be affectionate with me, and his split mind—"

"His mind isn't split," I snap irritably. "It's shattered into fragments of memories that are slowly making him go crazy! And I've fucking had it, Rose. We're done here."

I slam the door on my way out.

**Masen's POV**

As I kill the engine on the roadside motel's parking lot, I slump forward and press my forehead to the wheel, my heart going a mile a minute.

*This has to work.*

"You okay?" Alec strokes my back.

I swallow, manage a small nod, and close my eyes.

Rose is right about one thing, which I'd already concluded. This time is worse.

Calling on the road and asking me to meet a girl he's met happens every time, but this was the first time I agreed. I needed to see for myself, and now I know my dad is the happiest living in two realities.

Every conventional method goes against what I'm about to do, but the thing is...once you stop having recovery as your goal, it opens up a whole world of possibilities. And Dad can handle both realms. If his realities are two circles with a small part overlapping, he lives in the sliver in the middle. I can still have my father for as long as he's alive—I can be Mase again, which was my mom's nickname for me—and we don't have to see him catatonic or stuck in a hole of despair.

It's not about saying goodbye to any world; it's about joining his, if only a little.

"Mr. C is sharp as hell—you sure he'll buy this?" Alec asks.

Yes. I nod again.

Edward Cullen is a logical thinker regarding every aspect, except for when it comes to the love of his life. He'll need for this to be plausible, but he wants it with every fiber of his being, so he'll *make* it logical.

There were complications when he was born, and way back on his side, there's another case of schizophrenia. So he was diagnosed early—actually with too few symptoms to be diagnosed today. But it was always, according to my grandparents, manageable until the trauma of Mom's death triggered a late onset. Obviously he's the reason I went into medicine, but in his case, it doesn't really matter. With inconclusive studies and very little happening on a neurological level, there's no textbook that can tell us what's wrong or right. I believe the state of his well-being depends on his environment now, and his family loves him enough to give him the logic he needs to be happy.

"Let's do this." I sigh and straighten in my seat.

"I'm fucking proud of you. You know that, right?"

I grab his hand and kiss the top of it, and then I get out of the car and text my nana to say we're going in.

My grandparents are up to speed now, and she'll be prepared if Dad doubts me and wants to call her for confirmation.

"Remember to not change your story—at any time," I tell Alec.

Dad is suspicious by his nature, and backtracking will make things worse. If I say something he disagrees with, I will casually step down but not take back a word of what I said.

Giving the door to his motel room a firm knock, I try to peer through the window, but ratty curtains make it impossible. I can see a shadow, but that's about it.

After a few beats though, that shadow falls to the floor, and I knock more urgently.

"Open up, Dad!"

When I press my ear to the door, I hear him crying inside. *Oh, fuck.* My chest grows tight, and I blink past the burn in my eyes.

"It's not what it looks like, Dad! Come on, open the door!"

"Back off a bit, doc." Alec backs away too, and the security guy he was before he became a teacher reappears to ram down the door.

On the third try, the hinges come loose, and I manage to push the door open.

"Christ—Dad!" I run over to where he's lying on the floor. He's not coherent in his grief, so I quickly address Alec. "The box on the bed. See if you can find his wedding band in there." In the past, it's been a reminder he hasn't been able to handle without breaking down. But this time we won't take him away from any illusions. "Dad, listen to me." I hug his upper body to me, his face streaked with tears. I shove away the need to break down myself. "Dad. Where's Mom?"

Alec inches close and holds out the band, and I accept it with a quick nod. Then I reach down to Dad's left hand and put the ring back where it belongs. And if Mom is alive, there's no reason for him to not wear it.

"C-can't be dead," Dad groans hoarsely.

"What?" I pretend to be confused, and I push some sweat-dampened hair away from his forehead. "What're you talking about—who's dead? And where's Mom?"

It takes me several minutes and more questions about where my mother is before Dad begins to come to.

"The box," he whimpers. "I-I saw... Oh, my Bella..." His face crumples.

"Don't trust them," I say firmly, my heart breaking all over again. "It's fake, Pops. Someone's obviously been trying to deceive you."

I hope he won't need a scapegoat, but if he does, I'll use my fucking imagination.

At this point, I don't know which image of my mom he has in his head, or which version of how they met he believes is true, but I'll follow his lead. Trauma has changed his story before, so it's very possible he doesn't remember picking up a young woman on the road. Wearing his ring, hearing me speak about Mom, and being away from the house he's lived in the past ten years will hopefully create the ultimate past for him.

All I really know in this moment is that this man's shattered mind has gone on repeat like a broken record for the last time.

## **25.**

### ***EPOV***

I sit on the edge of the bed, completely numb and exhausted, as Alec makes calls and Masen explains the scheme for me. Or his theories, at least.

Every now and then, I nod along. But I already know the guilty one. It must've been Rose. It makes sense. She must've wanted my wife out of the picture.

"I'd like to apologize, Dad." Masen sits down next to me with a troubled expression.

"Why on earth would you have to apologize?" That's ludicrous.

He smiles, though it's sort of wobbly and weak. "I listened too much to the doctors who always wanted you to try some new drug."

"There's been a lot of medication," I agree.

"Yeah." He bites his lip, hesitating. "Um. I have a plan—or an idea." I incline my head to show I'm listening. I don't really have energy for anything else. "I'd like for you to stop taking everything—except for your anxiety disorder. And your vitamins." I get a little nudge for that.

I'm too emotionally drained to show mirth, though; besides, I didn't miss that little tidbit about my anxiety disorder. "I've only taken meds for my anxiety when I'm stressed out. And you want me to take something regularly?" Not sure that's a good idea.

"No, no," he's quick to assure. "It's more for the amnesia your episodes sometimes causes."

I have to think about that. Of course I know anxiety; I've known it most of my life. But amnesia...?

"Look into your mind." Masen covers my hand with his and gives it a little squeeze. "There are things you don't always remember. For instance, where's Mom?"

I frown down at my lap. *Bella*. Why is LA the first thing my mind thinks of? My wife has no business there. After getting her bachelor's, there was talk of our moving down there for a grad school, but she ended up going with Seattle instead—where we already lived. *Live*.

Regardless, my son must be right. He wouldn't lie to me, and the evidence is right here. I've had an episode—and the logical reason is the box of

truly awfully but thankfully fabricated crap about Bella dying—and now my memory is hazy.

Masen addresses me again. "Wouldn't it be nice to have something that eases your mind when you can't remember?"

"All right," I concede, patting his hand. "Although, I would assume your mother is home." We live close by, so I guess I walked here.

"Okay. And where is home? I'm just checking," he explains quickly.

This time, I muster a small chuckle, and I ruffle his hair. "You have a few years left of med school, boy. Don't be silly—I know where I live."

And it's time to go home. My brain begs for it, for normalcy, for everything to make sense, and I *need* to see Bella. I physically ache for it suddenly.

Standing up, I rub a kink out of my neck and glance at the vile newspaper clipping. "Remind me," I request, admittedly embarrassed for forgetting such a thing, "my parents...?"

Masen's mouth forms an "oh," and he peeks behind him at that box, too. "That part's true, Pops," he murmurs. "Mom survived, but Grandma and Grandpa died."

I nod and avert my eyes to the floor. Of course, I remember the funeral now. And more proof is added in Masen's favor about the amnesia, because there are some blank spots concerning the funeral. Some...thing I can't recall; it's simply blank. So some medication that ensures I won't worry about it does sound fair.

"Edward?"

My head whips around at that voice, and I'm flooded with relief. "Oh God, Bella." I stalk over to my wife in the doorway and squeeze her tightly.

"Thank fuck," I hear Masen exhale.

"You had me so worried!" Bella chastises. She whacks me on the chest before hugging me again. "Mase texted me—did you have an episode, honey?" Now she's concerned.

My perfect wife. I cup her cheeks and brush away a couple stray tears. Never will I forget the beauty she possessed at twenty-three when she gave birth to our son, but she's even more gorgeous now. Laugh lines from age and a full life. Amazing, soft curves. Eyes filled with motherly wisdom and love.

"Everything is fine," I promise her. "Let's go home."

## **26.**

The airport is bustling with life, and last we heard from the speakers, the airline is asking for volunteers to give up seats because they're overbooked.

"I'm glad we got first-class tickets," Alec says.

Masen snorts, amused, and taps said tickets along his thigh.

"I still think it's unnecessary." Bella adjusts her purse on her lap. "We always fly economy class."

"True," I agree. "Nothing wrong with coach." Besides, if there's anything I'm a bit peeved over at the moment, it's our son's rush to get us out of Seattle. We never even went home last night; he insisted—as part of some surprise—to treat us to a nice hotel, and now, a trip to Chicago.

He'd driven over to our apartment to pack a few essentials, but that was it.

"They never ask people in first class to give up their seats," Mase points out. "That's good enough for me."

They generally don't ask bigger parties to give up their seats, regardless.

Eventually, it's time to board, and Mase disappears for a minute to speak with the people at the counter. Why, I have no clue, but he returns soon, and we grab our stuff and get in line with businessmen and the like.

Alec goes first, and I let Bella go before me.

"Hey, Dad?" Masen asks behind me.

I turn to him.

"Uhh...so, I was thinking... Um."

"I said, *next*."

Oh, it must be my turn already.

"Never mind," Masen says. Odd boy.

I hand the young woman my ticket, and I look to see Alec and Bella waiting for us.

Masen and I join them soon enough, and then we get to fly first class to Chicago.

As we get off the plane hours later, I still believe economy is good. And the flight attendants aren't weird there. The one assigned to us kept giving me sad smiles, which bothered me. If she can't keep her private life and whatever happens off the clock to herself, perhaps she should find a better job.

Most relieved of us all though, has to be Masen. Once we've exited the airport and located Alec's truck, our son slumps against the door and presses his forehead to the window.

"Since when do you get jittery about flying, baby?" Bella strokes his back and kisses his bicep.

"I can't help but wonder, too," I muse, helping Alec getting our luggage into the back.

"Wonder what?" Mase mumbles, then yawns.

"When you got anxious about flying," I supply. He must be really tired.

"Oh." He straightens and grins tiredly. "I'm not. Just, uh, nervous about my surprise for you guys."

## 27.

Bella ohhs and ahhs as we walk through the nice one-story, two-bedroom house in a gated community outside Chicago. And Masen handles all the talking.

*"Most residents are your age—maybe slightly older—and have various disorders they need a little extra help with."*

My wife falls for the kitchen and the terrace that overlooks a grassy hill and a pond.

*"Dad, you know I oversee your bank accounts, so when I say you and Mom can afford this, I mean it. And I would handle everything—finish up your affairs in Seattle and have your belongings shipped."*

With my hands clasped behind my back, I peer into the master bedroom.

*"You guys are celebrating 25 years together this year; this trip, some new furniture, and the down payment is our gift for you—if you want it. Nana and Pop pitched in."*

Bella and I meet in the living room, and her beaming smile and glistening eyes say enough. It's so very sudden, very rushed, but I can't deny everything looks amazing.

We've never had a backyard.

*"Selfishly, of course, I want my parents closer, too."*

And we certainly want to see Mase more often.

Alec was born and raised Chicago, and Masen loves it here, so I can't imagine them leaving. New Haven hasn't been home since Bella and I were teenagers, Charlie and Renee live in New Orleans, so...I suppose there's really nothing holding us in Seattle.

*"I've even looked into job opportunities for you, Dad. It would only be short hauls in Illinois, but you'd be driving. It's for one of those companies that drive out food for old folks, and you'd work with someone who'd know what you can handle."*

I kiss Bella on the forehead as she gazes out over the open yard, the hill, and the pond. She whispers in my ear. *We have the most amazing son.*

I whisper back it's because of his amazing mom.

"So..." Masen clears his throat, standing behind us. Bella and I face him, and I see how nervous he is. "What do you guys think?" He grabs Alec's hand.

I grin down at Bella, whose answer I already know, and then face our boy again. "I still don't quite understand the rush, but of course we want to live closer to you too, Mase. Consider Mom and me on board."

Masen gives us a big smile and comes over to hug me with one arm—tightly. I hug him back, and he hugs Bella with his free arm, but I focus on Alec watching from the doorway with a soft smile. He loves Masen, that's for sure. And what else can a parent ask for?

"Welcome to Illinois, Mr. and Mrs. C," he says.

I nod in thanks, kiss Mase on the cheek, and back away. "Is a celebratory beer all right, health nut?"

Masen chuckles. "First round's on me." He pokes my side. "But count on me dragging you to the gym every week now that we live close."

"Oh!" I grunt and grab him in a headlock. "Look who's still got it, huh?"

Bella laughs and rolls her eyes. "Boys will be boys."

## ***Epilogue***

*Five years later*

### ***Masen's POV.***

Sitting back at the head of the table with Alec, I take a sip of my beer and then let out a sigh of contentment. Both our ties loosened, fancy shirts not as tucked in or straight anymore, and stomachs full of food and cake.

The water in the pond shimmers from the setting sun. Soft music—oldies—filters out to the patio where we're gathered.

And my husband is hot as hell.

"You make marriage look good, baby boy." Renee winks and reaches over to pinch my cheek.

"He does, doesn't he?" Alec smiles.

Charlie looks mildly offended, but he's too busy with his third helping of cake to really care. "And I don't? Good to know, hon."

I grin and take Alec's hand under the table, to which his thumb brushes over the gold band on my ring finger. At the same time, my eyes seek out Dad, who's immersed in a private conversation with the wife only he sees.

The twinge of pain never leaves entirely, but his happiness makes up for it in spades. For years, all he knew were hard days; now they're few and far between.

*"He keeps our daughter alive," Nana told me one time. "Until they reunite in heaven, I will continue to see his condition as a blessing. It lets him see his own guardian angel, and she wouldn't leave his side."*

Despite being a man of science, I have to believe that, too. Witnessing his love for Mom and having heard stories from my grandparents about how inseparable my folks have always been, there's no doubt in my mind that their love knows no bounds.

That includes reality.

My parents make the extraordinary possible.

## ***Future Take***

*Eight years after the epilogue*

### ***Masen's POV.***

While Alec gets the door, I roll up the sleeves on my button-down and squat down in front of the movie cabinet in our living room. I hear squeals and cheery hellos from little Katie and murmurs and chuckles from Alec and his sister.

It was my thirty-fourth birthday last week, and we celebrated by going to Greece, but not before Katie gave me a gift I just *had* to open while I was on vacation. So I've made sure she can see the bracelet with sparkly pink beads around my wrist.

"Uncle Masen!" The five-year-old princess flies into the living room and throws her arms around me, nearly knocking me over. "Hi and happy late birthday!"

I laugh and ruffle her dark, curly hair. "Thanks, kiddo. I hear Uncle Alec and you are gonna have a movie day."

She nods giddily, already inspecting the collection of movies we've added to every now and then for when she's here. And because Angela, Alec's sister, is a single mother struggling with both work and school, we watch Katie quite a bit. Which has earned us bragging rights when Katie calls us her favorite uncles.

"Are you going to the hospital?" she asks.

"Hospital," I correct, snickering. "And not today. I'm helping your mom with a work thing." AKA, driving out to my pops.

Majoring in psychology, Angela nervously asked me if she could focus on me and my dad in her dissertation, and had anyone else asked, I would've declined. But Angela's family, and Dad likes her. She had him at *"Nice to m-meet you, Mr. Cullen. I, um, brought sweets for you and your wife."*

Now Angela's known as the nice girl who brings Dad Starbursts on the sly.

Most of Alec's family is incredibly supportive when it comes to Pops, but other than them and the few friends he's made with a handful of neighbors, he doesn't get out much. He still works part-time though, which he enjoys.

At the same time, he's been talking about retiring soon. Even if he's only in his fifties. *"I'd like to spend more time with your mother,"* he says with a smile and a shrug.

Regardless, he likes it when family visits. Especially if they bring candy that his "health nut" of a son won't do unless it's a special occasion.

"You're wearing the bracelet I made!" Katie's gasp of delight brings me back to now, and I chuckle and kiss her on the forehead.

"Of course I am, silly pants." Standing up, I adjust the bracelet just as Alec and Angela join us. "It's pretty, isn't it? I bet all the other doctors at work will want one now, too." I wink at her.

She beams with pride, flashing pearly whites and the spot where one is missing.

Angela narrows her eyes at me. "You got a tan."

I grin. "Jealous?"

"No," she lies.

Uh-huh. Sure, sure.

"Princess Katie, how about we kick out Mom and Uncle Masen?" Alec picks up his niece. "We have popcorn to eat and movies to watch."

"Yes!"

Angela and I have officially been dismissed.

A couple minutes later, I'm ready to go, and I meet up with Alec in the kitchen. Katie's busy waiting for the popcorn to be ready.

"Tell your old man I said hello." Alec leans in for a smooch and then throws a dish rag over his shoulder. "I have a field trip with my students next week. I get off early, so I could always drive out to see him."

I nod and reach for the healthier salt than the one he'd taken out for the popcorn. "He'd like that. Easy on the sugar, okay?" I eye the juice boxes, which I sure as hell didn't buy.

He chuckles. "I love you too, doc."

"Right back at'cha, teach." I pinch his ass and steal another kiss before ducking out of the kitchen. "Have fun!"

Angela and I take the elevator down to the garage, and I unlock the doors to my baby, a sweet old Jaguar my sister-in-law always wants to drive. But considering she's had three fender benders with her truck, she can keep dreaming.

She sighs wistfully and gets in. "It pays to work at a private hospital."

I snort in amusement. Alec and I were fucking buried in loans until only recently. Becoming a doctor isn't exactly free, despite scholarships and steady jobs.

"Do you mind if I start asking some questions already?" Angela asks as I drive out of the building.

"Of course. Go ahead, hon." I know the focus will be on Dad's disorders, but also how I manage everything for him.

I know she will ask some things she's already aware of, too. Only, this time it'll be for the recorder present.

"Thank you." Angela pushes play and shifts a little in her seat to face me more. "In short, what would you say has made it possible for your father to live in peace today?"

I maneuver my way through traffic, and I decide to skip the fairy tale version. It won't be as real, and she won't get a good grade if I sugarcoat things.

"Support from family, no doubt," I say pensively. "But money, too." I go on to explain the help I've received from Nana and Pop, the life insurance policies from Mom and my grandparents on Dad's side, and whatever little they left behind. "Alec's told you about Rose Hale, right?" I'm pretty sure he has, but Angela was only a teenager when all that shit went down in Seattle.

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, yes. The live-in nurse who lived in her own little fairy tale."

That's one way of putting it, I suppose. "She was batshit," I agree, "but she was a huge support for a long time." Particularly the first five or six years. "Charlie and Renee paid for Rose's services until she convinced my father to move in with her and her son. After that, she stopped accepting payments, which I didn't know about at first." Then I learned about her intentions, but I was so focused on school at that point that I only vowed to myself to keep an extra eye on her. "Whether or not she had these delusions about Pops, her taking care of several expenses helped." I shrug, 'cause that's just how it is. "Anyway... It'd be nice to say it's all

about family and love, but it'd be a lie. Not everyone is lucky enough to get the care my dad does."

Angela hums. "What does your father believe, though? Is he aware of the situation, or do you take care of everything?"

This part, she already knows. "I'm his guardian, so it's all on me." I slow down and stop at a red light. "He's always been a hard worker, but his recovery periods have eventually been blocked out, so he only remembers the times he's actually been able to work. He doesn't remember the months of being catatonic or the times he's been hospitalized. Well," I backtrack, "he recalls some of it, though the hospital stays are shorter in his memory. If you ask him, he's just the average Joe who works like everybody else but has anxiety attacks that set him back every now and then."

According to my grandparents, Dad was a bright student, but college was never for him. He drifted from job to job for some time while my mom was in college, and then his dream of becoming a truck driver was born. But it didn't happen as planned, which was to start his business once Mom was done in grad school. However, she died before she could finish, and Dad spent the first few years practically crippled with grief.

I tell Angela how it all went down, how Nana and Pop relocated to Seattle, how they hired Rose, and Angela weighs in with comments and follow-up questions here and there.

"Do you feel like you missed out on anything growing up?" she asks softly.

I gotta think about that, because there's both yes and no. Mostly no, but hell, of course I missed some stuff, too. "My grandparents were good at keeping me out of things until I was...sixteen or seventeen. I mean, I was always aware of Dad being different, but it wasn't until then I found out more."

I'll never forget the violent episodes Dad had while Nana and Pop were still living with us. He'd stomp around the apartment in the middle of the night, shouting about people coming after him, taking a swing at Charlie when he tried to calm my father down... Everyone who spoke against Dad was instantly on "*their*" side. Sometimes it was the government, sometimes it was a secret organization, and worst, the times he lost his shit when he thought criminals had kidnapped Mom.

I was terrified. Nine years old and scared of my own dad.

At other times I was fiercely protective and took his side. If he told me Mom had been taken, it had to be true. Because then there was a chance I'd see her again. I wanted him to be right to the point where I cried and fought for him.

"When it started affecting me, they decided it was time to hire someone," I continue, and that's how Rose entered the picture. "So...yeah, I missed out on some things. Dad was rarely in the right state of mind to go to piano recitals or soccer games or spelling bees, etcetera. But on the other hand..." I tell Angela about family dinners with Dad—when he was feeling well—and my grandparents. Charlie taking me fishing, Renee creating forts with me in my room, Dad—instead of nighttime stories—rebuilding his vision of driving and including me in his plans.

It was pretty cool as a kid to be asked about grown-up stuff. "*What do you think I should name my truck, son?*" He'd take out an atlas and let me help him. "*Where should I drive?*" He brought me with him as his little advisor when it was time to lease the truck from the company he'd be working at.

He taught me the importance of hard work. He read the Sunday paper with me and explained with brilliant logic how things were right and wrong in the world. He gave me a history lesson on homosexuality when I was

fifteen and came out to him, and he said that I shouldn't have been so "damn nervous" because "it was natural before religion said it wasn't."

*"If someone gives you trouble, you come to me, kid."*

"Like any good parent, he's done everything he could," I murmur.

Some of my best memories are from my childhood. Perhaps he wasn't always able to be there for me, but he never let me forget he loved me.

*"In a world that often frustrates me, you're the only one who makes perfect sense."*

We drive in silence for a while, and we leave the city behind for forests and fields and the occasional suburb.

"Does Edward know he has schizophrenia?"

I purse my lips as I pass a couple cars. "On a bad day, he knows. He'll question everything and have nightmares about Mom's death. Like, why aren't there any recent photos on the walls? Why is there only one plate in the sink instead of two? Why are his neighbors sometimes reluctant to chat to Mom? It usually takes him a few days, but his mind protects him and allows him to block it out. He goes back to normal. If he cooks, his mind alters the reality, and suddenly it's his wife who's made a feast. He loved her cooking back in the day, so it's his memories providing him with an afterlife for her."

"That's remarkable." Angela hums. "Do... Do you see his disorders as a blessing?"

"Yes." I've stopped doubting that. At one point, it made my life more difficult, but it's for Dad's own good. "I'm a practical man, but if you were to believe in soul mates, my parents would be the definition. Through his mental disorders, they can stay together. Now, if you ask my

grandmother, she'll say it's God's way of letting Dad see his guardian angel, but..." Well, I'm hardly religious. If I were, I wouldn't be able to stop questioning God for taking my mom away.

"You believe in something, though," she prods gently.

"Their love, I suppose." I'm not sure if I should feel embarrassed about that. "I was just a kid, but I remember enough. I grew up seeing their connection. I mean, even when they fought, they just ended up laughing at themselves. They couldn't stay mad at each other for long." I pause, wanting to give my words more credibility, because it's what I feel deep inside. "I believe the human mind is extraordinary. It's like looking at a DNA strand under a microscope. The mind makes us unlike anyone else, and in some ways, Mom and Dad were in tune with each other—like many wouldn't be."

"Their minds were synched?"

I tip my head from side to side, and then I can't help but grin. "More like Mom's was the only translator who could really understand Dad's. She knew him better than he did, and she's Dad's rock."

When I met Alec, I got to see it for myself. I was this smart-ass punk, believing life could be taught from textbooks, and I had just graduated from pre-med. Enter Alec. We're the same age, but he started college a year later after staying with cousins in England for a while, so he had two semesters left to become the teacher he is today. And he annihilated my entire view of education.

*"Of course it's important, Cullen! But quit believing it's everything. If you could learn every single thing from a book, then why would actually working in a hospital be part of becoming a doctor? Think about it."*

*"For the experience, obviously,"* I'd retorted.

*"Exactly. And experience is life. Experience is something you can't get from books. Experience gives us different perspectives. Otherwise we'd be all thinking the same things—if we were reading the same material."*

Different sources bring different knowledge.

Alec became *my* rock, and it was my new outlook on things that made me consider Dad's disorders from another perspective. Conventional treatments had always failed him, so why did we stick to that? *Life experience* with Dad...didn't that mean I knew him better than some book? In a way, hell yes. So, I took over. I researched for months and designed a lifestyle that would fit *him*, not some textbook patient.

\*

The gated community comes into view, and I slow down in front of the security booth. When I see it's old Mike sitting there, I stop altogether.

He's a decade or so older than my pops, but the two are close.

"Hey, Masen!" He grins. Dipping his head, he peers closer into my car and spots Angela. "You're Alec's baby sister, right?"

She nods and gives a little wave.

"How are ya, Mr. Newton?" I smile back. "Everything good with your wife?"

Like Dad, she has schizophrenia, but her condition is much worse. Jessica is often hospitalized, and she becomes more and more aggressive with each episode. The Newtons live here too, but for obvious reasons we keep Dad and Jessica separated. They'd tear each other apart arguing over what's real and not. Tell my father Mom's not real and you'll have a new archenemy.

"She's coming home soon," Mike responds with a nod. "It'll be nice to have her for a few months before the next breakdown." He narrows his eyes at me. "Haven't I told you to call me Mike, boy?"

"Maybe tomorrow." I smirk. "But let me know if you wanna talk, old man," I say, feeling bad for him. "You have my number, yeah?"

Mike just waves that off, though. "You kids crack me up. Therapy this, therapy that."

"You sound like Dad." I snort.

"Good man. He's having me over tomorrow for some cards. Maybe this time I'll whoop his ass."

"Ha!" My shoulders shake with silent chuckles. "That's right. Stay positive." But I doubt anyone has ever beaten Edward Cullen in card games. "Oh, and if he says my mom made her spinach dip, don't eat it."

It's delicious in Dad's opinion because he lives on the memory of Mom making it and serving it with chips back in the day. But in our reality, he makes it using her recipe, and it's vile.

"I learned that the hard way with Bella's pork chops, bless his heart."

I smile a small one. "Thanks for being there for him, though. It means a lot."

"Pish." He waves me off again. "I really enjoy his company. And unlike many others here, he's not just waiting to die."

Ah, old folks. Gotta love 'em. Nana and Pop are getting there. Last time Alec and I visited them in New Orleans, they were sitting on the porch discussing gravestones while Nana knitted a scarf for Katie.

Good times.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, we say goodbye for now and Mike opens the gate. I drive slowly, passing neighbors, visitors, and nurses.

"I like this community," Angela muses. "It's so peaceful and pretty." We pass a small park where a group of old people are playing chess and enjoying the sun. "Where are the younger residents? I only see the oldsters."

I chuckle. "At this hour? Still at work." Or at home, taking care of the spouses that brought them to this community. Whether it's mental disorders, injured war vets, old age, or any other disability, everyone over forty with money for the down payment is welcome to apply.

We reach Dad's street, and I see his car outside. Maybe he's been to the grocery store or something. I know he's off work today.

"You know the drill," I say unnecessarily, parking behind Dad.

Alec's gotten excellent at reading my pops's body language, so he sometimes visits without me. Usually when I have double shifts at the hospital. But others always let me take the lead.

Dad gravitates toward Mom, so I can see if he believes she's in the room or not. In other words, I know when to greet her.

The door's open as always, so I walk straight in and holler, "Mom? Dad?"

*"Just a second, Mase!"* I hear Dad call. From the bedroom.

Angela blushes, and I grin wryly.

"I don't wanna know," she mumbles.

I snicker. "His imagination is better than ours, remember that."

Logically, Dad picked up a young hitchhiker version of Mom on all his long hauls because it's the easiest one for him to remember. She was twenty-three when she had me, and road trips were something they dreamed of together. But someone who doesn't know him would grin, waggle their eyebrows, and go, *"Of course he imagined her young. Twenty-three beats over forty!"*

Regardless, this doesn't seem to be one of the times Dad's mind and libido are working together. He appears shortly after with a troubled expression. Fully dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt.

"You need to check on Mom," he says, giving me a quick hug. "I knew she'd catch the cold I had last week. I'm worried."

*Oh.* "She resting?" I ask.

He nods. "I think she has a fever, but you'd know better. I'm no doctor. I went out and bought—um, she gave me a list." He digs his hands into his pockets and pulls out a crumpled note.

Standard painkillers and cold medicine.

"I'll check on her. You can relax." I squeeze his shoulder. "How about you show Angela how to work the coffee maker, yeah?"

"Oh, sure, of course." He smiles apologetically at Angela. "Good to see you again, hon."

"You too, Mr. Cullen. I may or may not have brought you something, but we don't want Masen present for that." She winks.

That lightens Dad's mood, and he leads her out to the kitchen to get his hands on Starbursts.

I grin and aim for my parents' bedroom, closing the door behind me and slumping down on the edge of the bed.

There's a glass of water on Mom's side of the bed. Cup of tea. A few pill bottles. Box of tissues.

In moments like these, the happiness fades a bit, at least for me.

"I wish you were really here, Mom," I whisper, scrubbing my face. "I miss you."

If I concentrate really hard, I can sometimes imagine her warmth. A hand on my shoulder, or a smile, or her laugh...

*"I love you, baby. Stay strong for your father and eat your vegetables."*

I chuckle to myself and clear my throat. She'd definitely say something like that. After all, she's the original health nut in the family. She indulged Dad with his love for candy, but she was religious about exercise and always said at least half the plate should be filled with vegetables.

Deciding I've been here long enough, I stand up and grab the cup of lukewarm tea. I finish it in two gulps, and then I take a few of the pills and snatch up a couple tissues.

I find Dad and Angela in the kitchen; he's stowing away a big bag of Starburst in a cabinet that's "out of Bella's reach" while he's telling Angela about work. Apparently he and Benjamin are heading into the city next week to pick up medical supplies.

"You should meet Ben," I say, bumping my arm to Angela's shoulder. "He's not like the dregs you go out with every now and then." Walking over to the sink, I open the bottom cabinet and throw out the tissues.

"Benjamin is a good boy," Dad agrees with a nod.

"I don't think we're here to talk about my taste in men." Angela laughs but elbows my gut. *Ouch*. "Especially not if he lives in this community. No offense, but I'd like to meet someone my age."

Dad chuckles. "He doesn't live here. He's one of the nurses on staff."

"Oh," Angela mouths.

I grin and shake my head, then face Pops. "Mom's sleeping. She's finished her tea, and she doesn't need to take more meds today. She'll be fine. It's just a common cold."

"Oh, good. Good." Dad's nodding, relief evident in his features. "Very good. Thanks, son. I'll let her rest up, then." He waves a hand toward the living room. "The sun's still warm enough. Let's have our coffee on the patio."

We follow him outside and sit down around the table by the grill, and Dad's right. The air is getting crisper, but the sun still provides enough heat.

"I see you got plenty of sun in Greece." The corners of Dad's eyes crinkle with his grin. "Perhaps Mom and I will take a vacation soon, too."

The first and second time—even the third—he uttered those words, I almost had to check if I have an anxiety disorder, too. But these days, I know better. Dad will always want to drive, and according to him, Mom always wants to visit her parents in New Orleans. It's a safe trip, one they take every year.

"That's a fine idea," I say. "Let me know if you want help with a hotel reservation."

Dad inclines his head and takes a sip of his coffee. "So...what brings you out here? Not that I don't enjoy the visit, of course." His eyes flick between me and Angela.

I take my cue. "Well, Angela here is working on her dissertation." That has Dad's interest. "And she's been interviewing families where at least one member has a mental disorder." A white lie. In reality, it's just me and Dad, but she will cover a few other families briefly, as well. "Mainly it's about the family dynamic and how it might differ from, for lack of a better term, normal relationships."

"Sounds interesting," Dad tells Angela approvingly. "I've certainly been prodded and poked at for numerous disorders. Doctors, I tell you." He winks in my direction.

"Don't I know it?" Angela huffs playfully.

I chuckle and lean back in my seat, one elbow on the armrest. Then it's time for a serious question, and his answer will decide how in-depth Angela's interview can be.

I've already told her to stay away from the period between Mom's death and his moving to Chicago, which covers many years. Same with words that can trigger him.

"Do you remember them all, Pops?" I ask carefully.

I know he won't mention schizophrenia. He's in too good of a mood for that. But he tends to be aware of other disorders he's been diagnosed with, by one or several experts. Which is a key debate in the field that covers schizophrenia; is it one disorder or a mix of several?

He sits back too, scratching an eyebrow. "This damn memory of mine." He hums. "There's my anxiety, of course," he tells Angela, who silently brings out her recorder and pushes record. "It's what causes my memory's blank

spots. But over the years, I've been diagnosed with everything from ASD, ADHD, and bipolar to psychosis and manic depression."

I pinch my lips together, not wanting to interrupt, though as someone up to speed with today's medicine, I know a couple of these disorders are assessed differently now. Manic depression is more or less the previous name for bipolar disorder. And he was misdiagnosed as bipolar back when the doctors questioned his schizophrenia. The two disorders share positive symptoms, not to mention treatment in some cases, but in the end the doctors realized the first diagnosis was correct.

Angela's gaze flicking to me tells me she knows the changes very well, but she keeps jotting down notes and nodding him along.

"Do you mind telling me a little how this has affected your family, Mr. Cullen?" she asks softly.

"Well..." Dad puffs out his cheeks, thinking about it. "I sure as hell wouldn't have made it without the help of my son. Bella's always been by my side of course, but if I've learned one thing about today's family, it's that the relationship between parents and children has changed. A shame, really. Petty arguments tear families apart. Pride gets in the way. And priorities, too." He nods. "I fully understand moving away for education and work—even meeting someone—but just look at this neighborhood. There are grandparents and parents who haven't seen their children in years because 'life gets in the way.'" He pauses. "At the same time, there are parents who don't know the difference between guiding their kids and dictating. Many forget to have an open mind when our children come home and introduce something we're not familiar with, regardless if it's a daughter who doesn't want to follow in her father's footsteps or a son who comes home with a boyfriend."

I tilt my head, not having thought about things that way. But there's definitely truth in what he says.

"We live in a world that has so much to offer that we lose sight of what's right next to us," he finishes, bringing his mug to his mouth. He takes a swig, then nods at me. "But in any way, I'm thankful Mase has always been here for us."

My mouth quirks up, and I give the top of his hand a squeeze on the table. "Of course, Dad. Just like I'm thankful you never played dictator." I smirk.

"That's so sweet." Angela gets mushy, though she hides it well.

He laughs and shakes his head at me. "I'd make a terrible one. Your mother's already my boss. And speaking of my wife, I should check in on her. I'll be right back."

I watch him head inside, then sigh and look out over the pond down the hill. Getting married here was just one of the happy memories I have of this place, and I've never regretted moving my pops to Illinois.

"It's hard imagining you guys having bad days," Angela murmurs.

"They don't come often nowadays." For which I'm grateful and relieved. "It was a different story in Seattle."

"Yeah..." She chews on the end of her pen. "Did—" She glances over her shoulder, presumably to make sure we're alone. "Did Rose ever try to visit?"

I nod slowly. "Twice." I made sure to change Dad's phone number when he moved, so Rose has to go through me. "The rare moments Dad remembers her, she's not exactly his favorite person, though. He recalls the live-in nurse who tried to manipulate him—the woman who was always present when it came to putting him in the hospital and on more medication." Reaching into my pocket, I take out a packet of chewing gum and stick one in my mouth. "My family owes her a lot for her work the

first few years, but there's no reasoning with her now. She refuses to think she's done anything wrong, so I've said no both times she's contacted me."

Emmett messaged me on Facebook, too. We were practically brothers for a while, and he didn't want to get involved in any argument, so it was easy to keep in touch with him. The PMs have become fewer and fewer over the years, but if we're online at the same time, we catch up a little here and there.

"Is it okay if I ask your dad about your being his guardian?" Angela asks.

"Sure." That's not a sensitive subject. Pops has dyscalculia, so he gets frustrated by numbers easily. My helping him with banking and personal affairs only makes it easier for me to shield him from certain aspects of the outside world. The fewer people he has to contact, the better.

"Actually, would it be all right if I left you alone?" I wonder. "I just need to run over to the nurses' office and get an update on everything."

"Of course." She waves me along. "I know what to say and what not to say."

"Great. I'll be back in ten."

On my way out, I run into Pops, so I explain I'm just heading over to the office.

He stops me and says, "Just a sec. Mom made cookies for them. I'll be right back."

Standing in the hallway, I hang my head and can't help but grin. My old man. Is it okay to find him fucking adorable at times?

For the nurses' sake, I hope they're store-bought and not in reality made by him.

"Here you go, son." He comes back with a big Tupperware container. "Oh, and Mom says Benjamin should come over for dinner soon. She likes chatting with him."

I nod in understanding and accept the container. "If I see him, I'll let him know."

\*

Fifteen minutes later, I walk back toward the house.

We'd all winced a little when I had opened the container to find burnt chocolate-chip cookies—an Edward Cullen specialty—but Tanya, one of the ladies in the office, admitted that her husband actually likes the chunks of charcoal. So Garrett will be well fed tonight.

Whatever floats his weird boat.

I reenter the house and follow the sound of Angela's laughter out to the patio again.

"Hey." Dad grins. "I'm telling Angela about the time you took off all your clothes and ran naked in the store."

*Wow. Thanks, Dad.* "Did you mention I was four years old?"

"Sure it wasn't at least seven or eight?" he teases.

"I was four," I tell Angela.

"Bella and I had to chase him," Dad chuckles. "For such a little thing, he sure could run fast."

"I can't wait to tell Alec," Angela giggles. "That's priceless."

"Oh, please." I roll my eyes and snicker. "Like my dear old father hasn't already told him every embarrassing story in the book."

"Perk of being a parent." He smirks. "I do hope you'll find out one day yourself, Mase."

I just smile, not wanting to divulge something Alec and I will announce together.

But that's for another day.

**The End**