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Chapter 1

The Barbeque

Music

"YOLO" by The Lonely Island feat. Adam Levine

"Wake Me Up" by Avicii

EPOV

After pocketing the house keys in my cargo shorts, I turn off the sound on my cell and—

"Here: take her," Angela says, thrusting Hazel into my arms. While our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter laughs at being jostled, I push down my fury at my wife's behavior toward her. "We're staying for two hours, that's

it. You see each other every day, and I have a briefing with a new client tomorrow morning."

"You see that house over there?" I secure Hazel on my hip and point next door. Angela raises a brow. "Our house. Yeah? Feel free to go home whenever. It's my sister's birthday, Angela—Hazel and I are staying for as long as we want. Christ."

She huffs and rings the doorbell.

And I'm glad I've broached the topic of divorce with her.

"Cwist," Hazel giggles, pushing my cheeks together. "Cwist, Daddy."

I chuckle at her, and then my brother-in-law, Anthony, opens the door.

"Late as always." He grins and motions for us to enter. "Come on in. Everyone's in the back." Angela steps in first, and when I enter, Anthony leans close, pretending to greet Hazel while he whispers something to me. "Bella's up to something—just warning you." He finishes with a kiss on Hazel's cheek.

I groan internally. "That little shit."

Hazel gasps at my language, eyes growing wide, and I clamp a hand over her mouth before she can parrot and squeal.

"Lemme take my niece before you have her saying...you know...*duck*."

I roll my eyes, stifling my amusement, and hand her over. Seems I gotta deal with my sister, anyway.

Pushing up the sleeves on my Henley, I walk through one of the three McCarty houses on this street, following the sounds of kids splashing around in the pool out back.

Anthony and I work together as sports journalists, but he's also an expert commentator on various cable channels—for those who can afford him—so that explains a massive house in expensive suburbia. My own house, right next door, is thanks to the inheritance left by Grampa Cullen. Bella invested her money in her business, and I invested mine in the house.

Once I reach the patio, I scan the twenty-something people in search of that annoying fucking sister of mine. Make no mistake, I love Bella beyond stupidity, but she knows how to meddle and make me go crazy.

The Cullens and the McCartys have always been close—well, up until my parents disowned me—and I'll never forget the god-awful day I walked in on my little sister and Anthony, one of my best friends.

He and I are the same age, so we were basically attached at the hip growing up, along with Emmett and Dale, Anthony's two-years-younger twin brothers.

Maybe it wouldn't have been so sickening if it wasn't for the fact that my sister is ten years younger than me, which means she was eighteen and Anthony was twenty-eight when I caught them.

It took a while for me to get over it—the thought of my best friend and baby sis shacking up—but I didn't really have a choice when Best Mistake was born nine months after their initial hookup.

They asked me to be AJ's godfather, so there was half my forgiveness, and then the rest followed when they named their second son, Masen—a seven-year-old crazy little thing—after me, although Dale is his godfather. We'll have to see if the baby girl Bella's cooking in her belly right now will bring me more pride or not, but I presume Emmett will be her godfather.

Speaking of the baby-maker that is Bella McCarty...

I find her at the snack table talking to Rose, Emmett's wife, and I sneak up behind her, motioning for Rose to keep her mouth shut.

"Did you see what she's wearing?" Bella's saying, laughing. And if I know her, which I do, she's probably talking shit about Angela. Rose and Bella can't stand my wife. "I mean, *hello*—tits about to fall out. We've got kids here, you know."

"And what the fuck are *you* wearing, sis?" I ask in her ear.

She jumps and shrieks. "Brotherpucker!" Spinning around, she looks up at me with a glare, fist waving in my face and all. "*You!*"

"Seriously," I chuckle and give her a slow once-over. "What *are* you wearing?" I happen to know the light yellow "dress" she's wearing is really a gypsy skirt that she's just pulled up and fastened a belt around her—well, not her waist, 'cause she's seven months pregnant, so the thin black strap is more under her breasts. "That's a skirt." I point.

"I'm hot." She pouts and fans her face.

I nod. "Your husband would probably agree." Okay, she's beautiful, but she looks funny, too. She may be successful at decorating Hollywood homes, but her wardrobe belongs to a fucking hippie. "Meanwhile, I'm your brother, and I can almost see your ass." I dig in my pockets for my smokes, but then I remember Bella doesn't allow smoking where the kids can see.

"She's wearing leggings, jerk." Rose scoffs.

I shrug. "Uh-huh. Anyway..." I kiss Bella on the forehead. "Happy birthday. You're officially no longer a twenty-something-year-old." She already knows what her present is, because we always give each other the same thing. I take her to dinner and then a concert, and when it's my birthday, she takes me to dinner and a game.

"You know, that would sting if it weren't for the fact that you're officially *old*." Bella smirks up at me. "Whatever you say...it can't touch me, little brother."

Don't ask me why she calls me that. But she has for the past fifteen years, and for no good reason. Age difference = already established. And she's at least a foot shorter than my six three.

She *is* protective of me, though, so that could be it.

"So, where's my favorite niece?" She peeks around me.

"Hey!" Rose looks offended. "You've forgotten my girls? And Dale's?"

I smirk at her. "There's no contest, Blondie. Sorry. You seen the eyes on my baby girl?"

"She got them from me," Bella brags.

The round shape, yes, maybe. But the color's all me. Bella and I both have brown hair, but I ended up with our mother's green eyes and Bella ended up with our father's blue.

"By the way, Edward," Bella adds, still looking for Hazel, "there's someone I want you to meet later—There she is!" And now she's spotted my daughter with Anthony, so she takes off in a waddle. Masen is there, too, and I think he's looking forward to having a little sister. I know Anthony is itching for a daughter. The way he pulls Bella close, always keeping a hand on her belly, is pretty solid proof of that.

I'm still a little pissed at my sister for not even hyphenating when she married that big oaf. Would it kill her be McCarty-Cullen? Or Cullen-McCarty? No. Not fucking likely. But whatever.

"Look who I kidnapped!" Bella comes over again, a giggling Hazel in her arms.

"Can I carry her, Mommy? Can I?" Masen looks up, finally seeing that I'm here, too. "Oh! Hi, Uncle Edward." He grins goofily.

"Hey, kiddo." I chuckle and ruffle his hair. "Where's your brother?"

While Masen's the monkey, the little freak who can't sit still, AJ's the boy who's *always* still—and is usually attached to his iPad and the games he has there.

"Up in his room." Masen scrunches his nose. "Mommy, I'm goin' in the pool now!" Before Bella can even answer, he takes off in a run and jumps into the kidney-shaped pool where a handful of kids are already playing. Emmett and Dale are there, as well, and Anthony looks like he wants to join, but he's busy flipping burgers and shooting the shit with their dad, Geoff.

"Be careful, baby!" Bella shouts. "Jesus, that kid is gonna give me grays."

Geoff McCarty is cool, a foul-mouthed old bastard. When my father called me disgusting and told me I was no longer his son, Geoff and Mary McCarty became my pseudo parents, even though I was twenty-five years old. They adore Bella and sort of became her parents, too, when she dumped our parents the minute she graduated high school.

I told her over and over she didn't have to cut her ties with them for my sake, but Bella just gave me a weird look that asked a rhetorical, "*You stupid, little brother?*"

They still call her sometimes.

~oOo~

A while later, we're all gathered at a long table, and there's food everywhere. It's loud, there's running around to keep track of the kids, it's fucking crazy, and it's how a birthday party is supposed to be.

Angela is the only one who'd rather be somewhere else, but it's easy to ignore her. If she wants to be a bitch—fine.

Actually, Bella looks a little pissed, too. She's seated across from me, and Anthony soon notices her pout and asks her what's wrong.

"Garrett is late," Bella snarls before shoving half a hot dog down her throat.

Anthony gets a dazed look in his eyes, so I reach over the table and smack the side of his head.

"Hey!" He glares at me.

I shrug.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon, honey." Rose comforts Bella.

"Who's Garrett?" I ask, picking up my burger.

Emmett chuckles, to which Rose shuts him up with a furious look.

"Bella's new photographer," Anthony answers.

"He's not *mine*," Bella corrects. "But he's the one we hire."

They must be close, then. My sister is strict when it comes to family—only the closest are welcome. Around us now...it's almost only McCartys here. Parents, kids, grandkids, spouses, cousins. My grandmother—the only Cullen we have left in our lives—would've been here if it wasn't for the fact that she doesn't leave Boca unless someone dies. She moved there after Gramps died about ten years ago, and she's having a ball.

I'm pretty sure she hosts illegal gambling parties with the other blue-haired old folks.

"Can you take Hazel?" Angela asks as her phone starts ringing. In my periphery, I see Bella and Rose exchange a look. I just roll my eyes and take my daughter. "I'll be back in five."

"So, half an hour, then?" Bella mutters under her breath.

Rose snickers.

"Bella," I warn. Not that I have anything else to say. Both Bella and Rose have tried to connect with Angela several times over the years, but my wife isn't interested. It seems making partner at Cheney Law is the only thing Angela cares about.

Regardless, I don't want any trouble. Also, soon enough I will tell my sister that Angela and I are getting divorced. I just need to get Angela to agree to give me Hazel first.

"What?!" Bella nearly shouts.

"Easy, sweetheart." Anthony rubs her shoulder.

"I think I heard the doorbell, guys," Dale says.

"Oh!" And Bella suddenly looks happy again. Jesus Christ, maybe she's bipolar and not pregnant. "Edward, could you get it for me?" She bats her lashes. "It's probably Garrett."

"Um." I frown, confused. "Yeah, all right—"

"I can take Hazel." Bella holds out her arms.

"Auntie Bewla!" Hazel giggles.

Standing up, I hand over the baby girl to my sister, then I make my way inside the house. I can hear Angela on the phone upstairs, probably talking to one of her coworkers. As usual.

When I get to the hallway, I run a hand through my hair and open the door, expecting some flamingly gay guy.

What?

In Bella's business, there's a whole lot of them. Besides, Anthony's a possessive fucker; he wouldn't let her be close friends with an attractive man...like this one. *Fuck me.* I know I promised myself to hide what I really want, but sometimes it's fucking impossible.

It's a man's man. Almost as tall as I am, dark hair, broad shoulders, a sculpted body, brown eyes, and fucking dimples.

Jesus.

"You don't look like the man in the photos in Bella's office," he says in a warm voice.

I clear my throat and manage a smirk. "I would hope I'm in at least one of the photos." I stick out my hand. "Edward Cullen—Bella's brother."

He smiles. "Ah. Definitely heard of you. I'm Garrett Peters." He shakes my hand firmly. "It's nice to meet you."

Yeah, he's gay. His eyes rake over me, not-too-subtly but not all that obviously, either. I still see it, though, and it explains why Anthony's cool with this guy.

I'm so screwed.

I also understand now what Anthony told me earlier about Bella being up to something. Garrett is this something. That meddling little...

"You too." I nod curtly, irritated with my sister. "Everyone's out back. Come on." Turning around, I head for the backyard again. My shoulders are tense with frustration and anger. I know Bella means well—really, she's a fucking sweetheart—but she has to respect my wishes.

After the shit I went through with my parents and a few of my friends, I decided it was just easier to keep others happy. I met Angela, eventually learned to love her, and things were...so goddamn easy. Much easier than it would've been if I'd accepted the fact that I'm more drawn to men than women.

I wonder if I'm the only one who's gone *back* into the closet after confessing my sexuality to my family.

~oOo~

Garrett is an instant success among the women at Bella's party, and she ignores every glare I send her. Since people sense the tension between us, we're soon divided in two groups. The women fawn over the new guy next to the table with all the alcohol, and the men get stuck on babysitting duty by the pool.

"I don't fucking see it," Emmett says, watching his wife going gaga over Garrett. "Should I be worried about Rose saying the wrong name tonight?"

Geoff cracks up. "You should be worried about her locking herself in the bathroom without you, son."

"Thanks for the love, Pop," Emmett grumbles.

Anthony walks over to me and keeps his voice low. "You know Bella's only doing this because she loves you, right?"

"Don't, Anthony," I sigh tiredly. I don't want to hear it. This isn't the first time my sister's tried to introduce me to a man, and it's fucking exhausting. Keeping up the charade without temptation is bad enough.

"I'm just sayin'." He holds up his hands in surrender. "She can see that you're not happy."

I scrub my hands over my face, wondering if I'm that transparent.

"Anthony, baby!" Bella hollers across the backyard. "When will the babysitters get here?!"

Anthony checks his watch while I wonder why they need babysitters.

"An hour!" he calls back.

"I'm gonna try and find the next momma to my kids," Dale jokes.

At least I hope it's a joke.

I nudge Anthony's arm with my elbow. "You going somewhere?"

"We all are." He grins. "Mom and Dad are staying back, but there're too many kids for them. Since it's Bella's birthday, she said she wants to go to a club."

"She's pregnant," I protest. For the record, I'm really not a club person. It's crowded, dark, and people get all sweaty. I find happiness in sports bars instead.

"I know. It's awesome. The perfect dick repellent." Anthony's serious. "I don't have to worry about bastards hitting on her the second I turn away."

"Bro," Dale laughs, "no matter how pregnant Bella is, there will be dudes coming on to her. She and Rose dancing together is like a wet drea—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Anthony, Emmett, and I shout. I shake my head, getting back on track, and add, "I'm not going. Even if someone can watch Hazel, it's not my scene."

Emmett smirks and arches a brow at me. "You're actually gonna deny Bella? On her own *birthday*?"

I stare at him blankly, though I'm fuming on the inside. See, this is why you *don't* want sisters. They get you so fucking wrapped around their pinkies, it's not even funny.

"You know you're gonna cave," Anthony chuckles.

I hate when he's right.

Chapter 2

The Club

Music

"Buttons" by The Pussycat Dolls

"Candy Shop" by 50 Cent and Olivia

"Hold On, We're Going Home" by Drake and Majid Jordan

EPOV

"Pussycat Dolls!" Bella shouts, jumping off Anthony's lap. She grabs Rose's hand and tugs her away from Emmett. "Let's dance!"

"You were *just* down there, baby!" Poor Anthony looks beyond tired.

I chuckle, comfortable just sitting here in our booth on the second floor. And I don't have a wife to look after. She's at home.

"But this song is so good!" My sister's already on her way to the stairs.

"I can go with them," Dale offers eagerly.

Bella nods. "Yeah, come on! We'll make a Dale sandwich."

Which *thrills* Dale—to dance between Bella and Rose—but infuriates my possessive brother-in-law.

I smirk as Anthony drains his beer and stands up. "I don't know if she makes me feel younger, or if she's wearing me out."

"You don't *look* younger," I observe.

He flips me off, and then it's just Emmett and me in the booth. And *Garrett*.

"Fuck that," Emmett says, getting to his feet. "I'm not leaving Rose in the hands of my dear twin." He takes off after Dale and Rose.

Awesome.

"We really know how to clear out a place, huh?" Garrett grins lazily.

I force a smile and throw back a shot of Jäger.

Being stuck in a booth with one of the most attractive men I've ever met isn't easy. Good thing the jeans I changed into earlier hide the ever-present semi.

I'd join the others down on the dance floor if it wasn't for the fact that I see too many same-sex couples there already. Even if I don't really like clubbing, I'm not exactly a stranger to it. But if a man comes on to me...I'm not in the right mind-set for that.

Angela has agreed to divorce, but she's gonna do all she can to keep Hazel, who she doesn't really give a shit about. But to spite me, she'll fight dirty. In other words, I should focus on that. Nothing else.

Nothing. Else.

~oOo~

What the fuck do I know? I mean, *really*. Well, I know that Anthony was dragged toward the bathrooms twenty minutes ago by my sister. I know that my jeans feel tight in the crotch area. I know that whatever awful song is playing is about lollipops and candy shops. And I know that it's easier to talk to Garrett after three beers and four shots of Jäger.

I'm drunk enough to wish that Rose, Emmett, and Dale weren't here.

"So, what kind of boss is Bella?" Dale interrogates Garrett. "She high maintenance?"

Garrett chuckles and leans his forearms on his knees. "She's not technically my boss—I'm a freelancer."

"I bet she's demanding," Emmett says, ignoring Garrett's comment. It's all semantics anyway, I suppose. When my sister hires him, she's in charge. But Emmett's wrong.

So, I shake my head. "She's the one who will show you pictures of AJ and Masen if she likes you," I answer. "But if you're on her bad side, you'll be dismissed until you've learned your lesson."

Garrett smirks and tips his beer bottle in my direction. "Sounds about right."

"So, she's exactly the same person—doesn't matter if she's at home or at work," Dale concludes. His tone indicates that he's disappointed. He loves gossip, as much as he denies the subscriptions to *People* and *US Weekly*.

"Look for gossip elsewhere," I laugh.

"That's not gossip," he slurs. "It's research—all in the name of wanting to know my sister-in-law better."

Emmett cracks up. "You've known her since she was in diapers, bro."

"You can never know a person too well." Rose is clearly on Dale's side. She turns to me and arches a brow. "Do *you* have any news to share, by any chance?"

I tilt my head, my brow furrowing. "No?" That shouldn't have come out as a question, but whatever. I have no clue what she's digging for.

She gives my hand a pointed look.

I frown, checking it out, then...oh yeah, right. *That*. I roll my eyes. "I didn't wanna lose it. Christ, don't read into that shit." My wedding band is in my pocket.

I spilled some beer earlier!

"Uh-huh," she mutters as Bella and Anthony come up the stairs.

I make a face.

"Well, you two look freshly fucked!" Emmett booms out.

"No, no." Bella smooths down her dress. "It's just that pregnancy glow."

"Sure, you freak," I mutter, bringing my beer bottle to my lips. "And I'm straight." I said that last part quietly, and in my blessed buzz, I can't say I'm concerned about much of anything.

Once Bella and Anthony have found seats, I've scooted closer to the other end of the booth to make room, and it takes some fucking effort to ignore Garrett sitting next to me. *Close*. Talking to him while I'm intoxicated is one thing, but this is almost too tempting.

A waitress stops by; another round is ordered, but I decide to go down to the bathroom first. Fuck, it's a wonder I've lasted this long. After telling the guys I'll be back soon, I head down the stairs, and I sure as hell feel the effect of the alcohol more now.

As usual, the line to the ladies' room is miles long, but I slip right into the men's room.

By the time I'm done, I've been eyed suggestively by two guys, and a few women in the line, so I hurry the fuck out, still wiping my hands on a paper towel.

Doesn't help I haven't gotten laid in months.

Who knew suggesting divorce would cause the missus to stop putting out?

"Edward!" I hear someone shout over the music.

Turning around, I catch Garrett and Dale by the bar.

I move through the crowd toward them. "Didn't we just order upstairs?"

"The girls wanted snacks, too," Dale says, throwing a handful of peanuts into his mouth. "Ooh—" he shoves me aside "—hot honey at twelve o'clock. Maybe she'll be my next baby mama."

A second later, he's lost in the crowd.

I lean back against the bar and watch, amused, as I spot him on the dance floor hitting on a woman much too young for him. Then I shift my gaze to two men dancing seductively to the beat of a slow R&B song.

Goddamn.

If I weren't drunk, I wouldn't have indulged in even looking. Now it takes several seconds to avert my eyes, and when I do, I see I'm caught. By Garrett.

He tilts his head and leans close since the music is so loud. "It's not easy figuring you out."

I press down a groan as I get a whiff of his aftershave and back away slightly. "Maybe I'm not yours to figure out."

He concedes with a nod. "Then I gotta wonder why Bella wanted me to meet you."

"That makes two of us." I face the dance floor instead, finding his closeness too tempting to deal with. "She's up there if you wanna go and ask her." I jerk my chin at the second-floor seating area.

Take the hint, man. Leave before I do something I'll regret tomorrow.

He does leave, but he tells me he's just gonna drop off the snacks, and then he's going outside for a smoke. Which comes with a look that says I'm welcome to join him.

Rooted in place, I order two shots of vodka and throw them back in quick succession. *I'm not going out there.* Of course I'm not. It would be beyond stupid. The agreement to divorce or not...it's too soon to consider myself single, right? Besides, I've pushed down my sexuality for too long to cave now.

And what does this say about Garrett? Is he hitting on a man who's married? To a *woman*?

Or, you know, he's just interesting in getting to know you.

Screw that. I'm drunk—not stupid. I know flirting when I see it.

But...I wouldn't mind asking him what Bella's *really* told him.

Okay, so I'll go out and have a smoke. That's all. It's not like I'm gonna ask him to suck my cock or suggest that we go to his place and—

"Fuck." I adjust myself.

And when I see Garrett heading toward the exit, I follow.

Chapter 3

The Alley

Music

"Excess" by Tricky

EPOV

Walking just a bit unsteadily, I track down Garrett in the alley next to the club.

"I have a question," I tell him as I pass a few other smokers. Garrett's head snaps up, and he takes a drag from his cigarette. And now that I'm out here, I light up one, too. "What exactly did Bella say to you?"

I trust my sister; she wouldn't tell anyone anything that isn't her business to tell, but I'm still curious. She must've said *something*.

"About what?" He arches a brow.

I chuckle, although there isn't much humor in it. "Me, obviously. She wanted you to meet me. For what reason?"

Garrett shrugs and takes a few aimless steps farther into the alleyway. "She told me it was her birthday this weekend, and she invited me. I had mentioned that I was having trouble with my ex and that I needed to get out some. So, I accepted the invitation, and she told me she wanted to introduce me to her brother." Another shrug and another couple steps farther in. "There's nothing else to it, Edward."

I narrow my eyes at him, absently following, and can't help but ask, "What kind of trouble?"

That earns me his lazy grin. "Ah, if you won't share, neither will I."

"What is this—kindergarten? Show and tell?"

He winks. "Who said anything about showing?"

Wonderful, now I'm both turned on and irritated. Not a great mix.

I can't stand not being in control; I have my carefree moments, but I've never liked being the pursuer. I run my own game—people come to *me*—and I decide what to do next. Now I'm almost chasing answers, and it's from a man I should avoid at all costs.

Control...what a joke. Since we arrived here, there's only been an illusion of it, and even that is slipping through my fingers.

I'll be damned if I won't get it back, though.

"You haven't asked me a question," I point out.

He doesn't miss a beat. "All right. I heard your little comment upstairs—the sarcasm when you said you're straight."

I make sure to keep my face neutral—even though I'm far from calm on the inside. "That's not a question."

He laughs through his nose and leans back against a brick wall. "How vague of you."

And I think it's time to take this man down a peg or two. Walking closer, I end up right in front of him, and I take a long, slow drag from my smoke as I study him. Being a few inches taller works in my favor, and I enjoy the rapid fading of superiority in his eyes.

"Ask me a question and I'll answer," I say quietly, huskily. "But keep in mind that we're practically strangers." I pick some invisible lint off his shoulder. "I don't owe you my life story."

He swallows, and his eyes flick to my mouth. "If you're gay, why are you married to a woman?"

"Because it's easy." I throw away my cigarette and take one small step closer. "Why are you coming on to a married man?"

"Because I'm a glutton for punishment?" He chuckles uncomfortably. "Are you happy with your wife?"

That gives me a pause, but then I answer truthfully, yet, perhaps again, vaguely.

"She won't be my wife much longer." As the words slip through my lips, I already regret them. I've opened a whole new can of worms now, and I'm too far gone to retreat.

Only a few inches separate us; I can feel his fucking body heat, and it's turning my cock into steel.

"What trouble are you having with your ex?"

He glances at my mouth again but promptly shifts his gaze to look me in the eye. "Nothing I can't handle. He's just...persistent, despite the fact that we're done." With a small tilt of his head, his cheek brushes against my jaw. "Are—fuck," he curses, "are you gonna make a move soon or what?"

"Presumptuous," I murmur, grasping his chin. "Do you want me to?"

"You know I do," he growls.

I do the last thing I should be doing; I crash my mouth to his.

Feeling him melting into me has to be one of the most intense things ever. Groaning, he opens up for me, and it's my turn to groan as our tongues meet. Instead of acting apprehensive after decades of repression, all my

desires are unleashed in a heartbeat. I push him harder against the wall, my mouth demanding on his, and grind our erections together.

"Fuck, Edward," he moans, sticking his hands down the back pockets of my jeans. "I want to suck you."

I shudder violently, certain I've never been this turned on before. There's a storm raging inside me, inner voices shouting different warnings, but the lust I feel for this man drowns it all out.

Cupping his jaw, I brush my fingers over his scruff and revel in the sheer manliness I've only fantasized about for the past fifteen years. Rough hands, hard muscle, the mouthwatering flavor of aftershave, mint, fresh perspiration, and *man*.

And he wants his mouth on my cock?

"Here?" I mutter gruffly as I nip at his jaw.

Instead of answering, he grabs my hand and ushers me deeper into the alley, between two Dumpsters, and pulls me close again. This time, I'm the one leaning back against a wall.

"Here," he says quietly and starts unbuckling my leather belt.

Exhaling sharply, I scrub my hands over my face, and I just let him tug my jeans down my hips. And my boxer briefs. And then he grips my cock, causing me to groan a curse. I *know* I should pull away and get the hell out of here, yet I can't. I fucking *can't*.

"Tell me you want it, Edward." He jacks me slowly, expertly, and nuzzles my neck. "God, you're big. So hard."

"I want it," I grunt, thrusting into his hand. "I want to see you on your knees—" A panted moan escapes me, "...with my cock in your mouth."

He whispers a quick "Fuck" and sinks to his knees before me. Just a second later, my cock is engulfed by hot wetness and eager suction.

Even in my drunken haze, I get that I need to cherish this. 'Cause who knows when I'll get to experience something like this again. Threading my fingers through his dark, silky hair, I guide him over my cock and curse each time I have to blink.

He hums, my erection sliding deeper along his tongue. His lips are firm yet soft around me, and his cheeks hollow out with each suck.

"Jesus, Garrett," I pant.

He's fucking amazing. As he reaches up and cups my balls, a powerful surge of pleasure shoots down my spine. It settles in my groin, my sac tightening and drawing up. I can barely keep my eyes open, but there's no way I'm missing this. Not a second of it.

I caress his cheek with my thumb. "You look fucking beautiful sucking my cock, baby."

He moans in response and picks up speed, his eyes closing as he takes me down his throat and swallows.

Fuck!

"Close—" I suck in a breath, shocked by the lack of warning. It usually builds up slowly, but now—shit, shit, shit. "Oh my God, almost there." I groan and finally let my eyes close. I fuck Garrett's mouth, encouraged by his moans and humming sounds.

Two more thrusts and I lose it when I feel his throat muscles constricting around me.

I'm completely rigid, my face scrunched together as if I'm in pain, not swimming in goddamn euphoria. In a few thick streams, my come slides down his throat, and he swallows with each fucking one, which only prolongs my orgasm.

In the end, I slump against the wall and tilt my head back, breathing heavily. *Jesus Christ*. I swallow and wipe my brow; meanwhile, Garrett tucks my softening cock back into my boxer briefs and jeans again.

Fuck me, I'm done.

Chapter 4

The Escape

Music

"Hurricane" by Parachute

EPOV

As soon as I hear the beep of my phone, I turn over and groan into my pillow, already knowing it's Bella. Even if Garrett hasn't told her anything, it doesn't take a genius to figure out I escaped like a fucking coward earlier. And that's why I can't sleep now, approximately three hours after I came home and stumbled into my bedroom, or more accurately, the guest room.

I can't get the image of Garrett's face out of my head—his expression after he, uh, sucked me off.

.

"Do you want to go to my place?" he asks, hooking his fingers into the belt loops of my jeans.

I freeze, reality crashing down on me.

For fifteen years, I've been swearing off men, and now...

What the fuck have I done?

.

Sighing heavily, I reach over to the nightstand and check my phone.

You and I will have words tomorrow.

Oh yeah, my sister is pissed. Rightfully so. It was her birthday and I didn't even say goodbye. I just bailed and sent a half-assed apology during the cab ride home. Not to mention how I treated Garrett.

I'd just blurted out, "I have to go!"

.

His face falls, but I keep retreating.

"What?"

"I gotta go." I shake my head, panicking on the inside. "This—fuck, this was a mistake."

.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I bury my face in the pillow once more, desperately wishing for a distraction. Hell, at this point, I wouldn't mind waking up Hazel, despite that she can be a pain to get to sleep.

Tomorrow, I promise myself, I will tell Angela that we're gonna get started on the divorce proceedings. We will separate, and I will tell Bella, who in turn will tell the rest of the family and probably plan a celebration party.

And I will fight for my life in order to get custody of my daughter.

Angela isn't a good mother, anyway. But because she's bitter, she'll try to hurt me. She's all about image; a divorce, being a single mother...that won't look good for someone who wants to make partner at work. Not to a fancy fucking family like the Cheneys.

When I mentioned divorce to her the first time, she was upset in a way that made me realize she doesn't really give a fuck about *us*. It's more about how it'll look for her. And for months, she's gone from bitter and venomous to...smug? Yes, that's the word. Because now she doesn't

believe I will ever go through with it. She thinks the fact that I want Hazel fulltime is holding me back, which...well, it's been true for a long time.

But this can't go on.

Fuck, I'm a mess.

"Too old for this shit," I grumble into my pillow.

I remember how nervous yet hopeful I was when I came home to my parents one day to confess that I was gay—well, bi, but...I've always been more drawn to men. Anyway, I held out hope that they'd be fine with it, because up until that point, I'd thought the world of my parents. Sure, they were fairly conservative, but there had never been anything indicating that they'd throw me out and say I was no longer their son.

I was fucking *crushed*. Gutted and hurt.

And I escaped then, too. My own parents, along with a few friends who couldn't accept it—I ran away from them. Even the guy, Jasper, I was seeing. I couldn't deal with any of it.

This was in grad school, so I wasn't *that* young, but it still left me feeling like a fucking orphan. So, I switched schools; I moved to the East Coast, and I learned later that my move had broken Bella's heart. She called me crying and begging me to let her move with me, but she was only fifteen. There was nothing I could do.

She suffered in silence for three years and spent as much time as she possibly could with the McCartys. And during those years, I lived pretty destructively in Boston. I maintained good grades, but I was a goddamn zombie. And I punished myself by not socializing. I removed myself from temptation.

Eventually, I met Angela.

When Bella met her...Christ, I remember the confusion on my sister's face, since she knew I preferred men. Then as it dawned on her, her expression showed sadness, resignation, disappointment, understanding... She knew I was with Angela for all the wrong reasons, and she bit her tongue for years, but then the little hints began—probably because she noticed I wasn't the happy-go-lucky brother she'd grown up with.

"You're letting our parents win, Edward," she'd told me once. "You're seeking their approval, and you're not even in contact with them."

That little shit was always too smart for her own good. Or rather, for my good.

Anthony had thrown in his two cents with, "You know, the only thing Carlisle and Esme deserve from you is a big ol' fuck you."

I heard them, Bella and Anthony; hell, all the McCartys—loud and clear—but I didn't do anything about it. I'm still married...if only on paper...and I'm back in that closet. Although, it's pretty fucking transparent these days. Only Angela and the kids in my life are unaware of who I really am.

Hiding is easy. So is escaping.

Look where that's brought you. You're a guest in your own house.

And I hurt people in my path. Either by leaving them in the dust or ignoring them when they try to help.

Chapter 5

The Fight

Music

"Gone in September" by Mike Posner

"Like a Boss" by The Lonely Island

EPOV

The next morning, I'm not surprised to find Angela gone. Doesn't matter if it's the weekend or not; she's always working. So, once I've chugged down a gallon of water and an obscene amount of painkillers, I get Hazel ready for the day before we walk over to Bella and Anthony's house.

I figure I might as well get that over with right away, and then when Angela comes home tonight, I'll tell her we're separating.

Ringling the doorbell, I hear Anthony shouting AJ's name and telling him to "get his ass in gear," which means they probably have plans. And a couple seconds later, Anthony opens the door, looking frustrated as he struggles with his tie.

"Hi, Unca T!" Hazel waves.

"Hey, sweetheart." Anthony grins at her.

I raise a brow. "You working today?"

He sighs and nods. "Covering the Dodgers game for ESPN." That's right; they're playing the Giants tonight. Definitely not a game you wanna miss. "What's up?"

"Is Bella here?"

"No—" he opens the door wider for us to enter "—she had an emergency staff meeting...some fuckin' celebrity who refuses to wait." He curses and gives up on his tie, which is probably for the best. He'll have to change at the studio anyway. "She said she'll be home in a couple hours, though." He gives me a wry look. "You're starting off the day with a beatdown from the little sister, huh?"

I huff a chuckle. "Figured it was best to get it over with." I pause. "You think I'm in much trouble?"

"Yup." He nods and checks his watch. "Dammit. AJ!" he shouts up the stairs. "We gotta go!"

"Where're you going?" I ask. "And where's Masen?" That little clown is usually running around like crazy, and he never fails to come running if someone's at the door.

"Mase is with my parents—followed them home earlier when they took off," he answers, referring to the babysitting duties Geoff and Mary had here yesterday. They must've spent the night, too. "And now I'm gonna drive AJ over to a friend's house; then I gotta finish an article *and* email it to my editor before noon, then get to the studio by one."

And I'm suddenly even more grateful I still have a few days left of my vacation. "You wanna trade?" I ask. "I need to see Bella anyway, so I can drive AJ on my way to her office. You can watch Hazel." Who is a perfect angel if there's a movie on.

A pain to get ready for bed, but easy as hell to babysit—that's my daughter.

"I'm definitely taking you up on that," he says right away. "Come here, sweetheart." He scoops up my baby girl and gives her a smooch, causing her to giggle. "You get to spend the day with me instead! How's that?"

"Yeah, otaay." She offers a silly grin and a shrug.

I chuckle, then spot AJ as he comes down the stairs. "He's alive!" At the barbecue, I only saw him briefly while he grabbed two burgers. Then he went upstairs again.

"Very funny," he mumbles, rolling his eyes. Kids today. And that fuckin' Bieber look. AJ's got that down. "I'm ready, Dad."

"Your uncle's driving you instead, kid." Anthony pulls out his wallet and hands over a twenty. "Not that I think you and Jimmy will leave his room and, God forbid, join the living, but just in case."

AJ scowls, mutters a thanks, and pockets the money.

I smile, amused, seeing a lot of Bella in AJ. While I was on every sports team available, my sister was a nerd. But for some reason, she went against the grain, 'cause even as a little geek, she was very popular. She had countless friends; still, she preferred to spend her weekends holed up in her room playing video games and drinking Dr. Pepper.

"Mom will pick you up at seven, all right?" Anthony says.

"Got it." AJ ties his sneakers. "What's for dinner tonight?" His voice cracks slightly, but no one mentions it, though it still causes AJ to blush.

Poor kid. Puberty is never fun, and AJ's early. Hell, he's not even twelve yet. Couple months to go.

"Pizza," Anthony replies. "It's game night."

Yeah, Bella insists they all watch the games when Anthony's covering, which I think is pretty cool. After so many years together, my sister still gets all silly when she sees Anthony on TV.

Masen thinks it's awesome—it's something he brags about to his friends—but AJ's over it.

"You ready, buddy?" I ask.

He nods and walks out of the house.

"Right." I turn to Anthony, who sighs in *whattaya gonna do?* I grin and slap his shoulder. "Just a phase, man. We've all been there." After kissing Hazel goodbye for now, I make my way out and head back over to my house to grab my car keys.

The ride is silent, aside from the few times I ask my nephew how he's doing in school—now that summer break is over—if he likes his new teachers, what computer game he's currently mastering, and if there's an interest in girls yet.

I get shrugs, head shakes, and mumbling in return.

But...when I think about it, I'd rather take AJ's silence than Bella's preaching. Her office is on the way to AJ's friend's house, so if I deal with that first while AJ waits in the car or at the mall across the street from Bella's office building...she would have to make it quick.

Another escape, huh?

"Shut it," I mutter.

AJ gives me a confused look. "What?"

Damn. "Nothing. I wasn't—" I sigh, wondering if I'm losing my mind. "I wasn't talking to you." Evidently I was talking to *myself*. My shoulders slump. "Anyway—" I clear my throat, seeing Bella's building ahead "—would you mind waiting outside while I just talk to your mom?"

He shrugs. "All right."

"I'll be gone ten minutes—tops," I promise, finding a parking spot fairly quickly. Guess it's good it's Sunday. "You wanna wait in the car?"

"I'll be over at the mall," he mutters as I kill the engine.

After sending him off, I make my way to the fourteenth floor where Bella runs her design business, and I'm not surprised to see her floor empty. I pass a small cubicle area, one studio, and two conference rooms before I reach my sister's corner office.

It's open, so I knock lightly on the door, causing five heads to snap up. Bella's at her desk, and she's got four employees showing her samples of...I don't know, there's fabric, freaking *tile*, and what looks like fake grass.

"Hi, Edward," Jessica, Bella's assistant, says. "Been a while since you came around."

"I'll rectify that." I smile, recalling the numerous times I've dropped by to either take my sister to lunch or eat here. "You got a minute, sis?" I turn to Bella.

She smiles tightly. "You can take five, guys." And her crew walks out, leaving me alone with a woman who goes from *pregnantly* glowing to pissed in two seconds. Her sweet smile says *fuck you*, and her eyes just might start shooting fireballs soon.

"That's a lot of pink." I sit down on the other side of the desk and eye the fabric and tile samples, all in shades of pink.

She stacks a few papers on her desk and sighs. "Paris Hilton wants a Chihuahua-shaped indoor pool with pink tile." I snort a laugh, and she fights a smile. "You didn't hear that from me." She zips her mouth and throws away an imaginary key.

I incline my head. "Of course. You look good, by the way." Yeah, I'm sucking up. "Everything good with the baby? You feelin' okay?"

"Like a boss."

Okay, hint taken. No more stalling. So...let the lecture begin. "AJ's waiting downstairs, so I can't be here long."

She arches a brow. "If you think I'm gonna tear you a new one when you have my son waiting for you in the car, you are sorely mistaken." She scoffs and shakes her head. "You know, you can be a real piece of work, Edward."

"I know I fucked up," I say, leaning forward. "It was your birthday party, and I shouldn't have bailed like that—"

"No, you shouldn't have, but that's the least of my concerns right now." She glares at me. "I don't know what happened between you and Garrett, but it's fucking obvious that something did."

I don't reply.

She lets out a noise of frustration. "Can't you see that you're hurting people?" I open my mouth to speak, feeling ashamed, but she holds up a finger. "I will always love you, and I've been in your corner for as long as I've lived." She pauses. "That said, I'm so disappointed in you, and don't really like you right now."

"I'm sorry." I feel like shit. There're plenty of things I'm sorry for, but I have to admit I'm not sure *exactly* why Bella's mad at me. It could be more than one thing, I mean. But... "Perhaps you should stop setting me up, though." I give her a pointed look. "I don't even know why you're doing it."

Her anger fades for a moment, and it's replaced by amusement. "You know...YOLO."

"What?"

"You only live once," she clarifies. "And I want you to realize that you could have so much more—happiness, most importantly. And you're not happy."

I can't deny that, but I can continue. "I've asked you not to, Bella," I say quietly. "Yet, you keep meddling." *You keep throwing temptations my way.* "Why can't you just stop?"

"Because I love you, Edward," she says softly. "It's painful to see you like this. But, if you're really serious..." She forces a smile. "I'll stop."

For some reason, I'm not relieved.

"Why did you apologize, by the way?" she asks, to which my brows knit together. "I said I didn't like you right now, and you said you're sorry. What are you sorry for?"

Damn female intuition. "For bailing on you," I answer, hoping that's the correct one. "And for..." *fucking shit up with Garrett.* "Never mind." I tense up, furious with myself for last night.

"Wait, let me get this straight," she chuckles humorlessly. "You come here to see me, but you'll evade a simple question?"

I groan and scrub my hands over my face. "That's not..."

"No." She grits her teeth, and I see her eyes welling up, which just brings my asshole status up to a whole new level. "I don't want to hear it right now anyway. You'll be at our house for the game—end of story. We'll talk then. You're dismissed."

My eyes widen. "Are you serious?"

"Are *you*?" she shoots back. "My guess is that you came to my house and Anthony told you I was working. What makes you think I can—and *want* to—drop that to give you time?" *Fuck*. "Look, I bet you think all I wanna do is argue with you, but that's not true. Trust me, I'm pissed at Garrett, too. And myself."

"I don't understand." I frown. "Why would you be pissed at Garrett? Or yourself, for that matter." I acted like a prick last night; that's why I'm here. To apologize.

Although, I definitely should've picked a better time.

"I know I'm pushy." Her mouth quirks up in a wry smile. "I invited Garrett yesterday, and I know I gave him mixed signals. *However*—" she stabs a finger to her desk "—I sure as shit didn't force you to fuck in an alley—"

"We didn't—!" I shout, then lower my voice, "We didn't fuck." I glare at her. "What do you take me for, Bella?"

She just shrugs. "*Something* happened, didn't it?" Again, I don't reply. She nods. "Exactly. Whatever." She waves a hand. "I may have introduced you, but that's it. You shouldn't have done what you did, and Garrett certainly shouldn't have taken things so far. But I suppose that's on me—I was foolish to think that a little flirting would be enough."

I can't help but get pissed. "Maybe you should just let me run my own life! I know you only want what's best for me, but my mistakes are my own."

She nods, lips pursed. "You're right, and I already promised you I'll stop. I apologize. But can I just ask you one question?"

"Shoot," I sigh.

"Are you ashamed of being gay?"

I get up and leave.

Chapter 6

The Chat

Music

"Facebook Song" by Rhett and Link

"Shooting Star" by Owl City

EPOV

With the Dodgers game on in the background and Hazel finally asleep, I sit down in my living room and boot up my laptop. Earlier today, I got a text from Mary who said Bella has uploaded some cute photos of Hazel on her Facebook, and since I'm horrible at taking photos, I just download them. And speaking of texts, I'm ignoring my sister's.

Three times in the past few hours, she's texted me.

She's pissed at me, but Bella always sets aside arguments so the family can come together and eat dinner and watch a fucking game.

But *I* can't.

There are certain things in my life I'm finally ready to deal with, such as divorcing the woman I'm married to, but when it comes to...other things, I'm just not. Because...yeah, a part of me is ashamed of being gay. If my own parents can't accept it, how can anyone else?

At the same time, I *know* it's not wrong. When I see same-sex couples, I don't turn away in disgust or think it's sinful.

I envy them.

Sliding on my reading glasses, I log on to my Facebook account that I rarely use and start downloading photos of my daughter, nieces, and

nephews. There's one of Anthony and Bella, where he's tenderly rubbing her belly, that I download, too. I try to ignore the stab of envy there as well. Lastly, one photo where Hazel and I are in the pool together.

Once I'm done, I scroll down Bella's timeline, expecting to see countless *Candy Crush* ads and shit from the *Supernatural* fandom, and they're certainly there, but so is a week-old comment thread started by Bella's high school boyfriend.

Jacob Black: Long time, no see, Bella! I see you're no longer a Cullen?

Isabella LuvsCastiel McCarty: Hi, Jake! Wow, it sure has been a while, hasn't it? Nope, no longer a Cullen. Anthony McCarty snatched me up :-)

Jacob Black: How about that? I figured it would be Emmett or Dale if it was a McCarty.

I grin to myself, seeing that Anthony has butted in there.

Anthony McCarty: Nah, she wanted a real man.

Jacob Black: Oh, I know she only wants real men. She's had me, remember? Too bad I had to go off to college back then.

I shake my head.

Isabella LuvsCastiel McCarty: You're both so funny...

Isabella LuvsCastiel McCarty: I sent you a PM, Jake.

Jacob Black: I've seen it, hon.

Hmm...

What's also on Bella's timeline is a comment from one Garrett Peters.

Garrett Peters: Lunch next week? Btw, who is Castiel?

It was posted just a few minutes ago, and Bella's already replied.

Isabella LuvsCastiel McCarty: Castiel is the love of my life. Don't tell my husband ;-) And we can definitely do lunch! I'm sorry I didn't catch your call. I turned the sound off when the game started.

With the cursor hovering over Garrett's name, I hesitate for a minute before I click on the link and send him a friend request. Which makes me feel juvenile, but I'd like a chance to apologize for my even more childish exit last night.

And if he doesn't want to talk, I'll probably wallow in self-pity and check out some porn—

A notification saying I'm now friends with Garrett Peters throws porn surfing out the window.

"No chickening out," I mutter, opening up a new PM to send him.

Edward M. Cullen: Hey. I want to apologize for last night. It was a coward move, and I'm sorry.

I blow out a breath and hit send, then sit there and wait while I sip my beer. One little check sign at the bottom tells me he's seen the message, and it fucking haunts me. Ignorance is bliss; this is not.

When his reply pops up, I think I've stopped breathing altogether.

Garrett Peters: Don't mention it. I was out of line. I had no right to take it that far. Really, we're cool.

"Thank fuck," I sigh, relieved.

Garrett Peters: Would you like to start over? I figure one can't have too many friends.

I quirk a brow, feeling my mouth turn up, too.

Edward M. Cullen: I'd really like that.

And for the next hour, we kill any traces of awkwardness by messaging about things normal people would talk about when they get to know each other. Work, family, kids, hobbies, music... Nothing on spectacular blow jobs, rough groping, or fantastic kisses in an alley. He talks about some of his most demanding clients, he admits that he's named his favorite camera after one of the Golden Girls, he states that he hopes the Giants will win the game tonight—which leads to a minor argument from this Dodgers fan—and he confesses that when his much-younger sister crushed on Justin Timberlake, Garrett did the same, although in secret.

Garrett Peters: I took her to one of his concerts, solely for her sake of course, and she was ready to claw at the thousands of girls who were basically all wearing a proposal on their shirts. She was very possessive.

I crack up at that, remembering Bella's crush on Mark Wahlberg; she had posters of him everywhere. I can't say I found him very attractive at that time, though. Now is another matter.

I'd do him.

Edward M. Cullen: How old is your sister? And I sincerely hope she no longer holds out hope for Timberlake.

Fetching a new beer, I see that it's getting late, and I wonder when Angela will get home. No matter how late, I intend to talk to her tonight. I'm done waiting.

Garrett Peters: She just turned 28, so she's 9 years younger. But I do think she'd dump her boyfriend if Justin came knocking.

Now I snort at his earlier comment about his sister being *much younger*.

Edward M. Cullen: Bella's ten years younger than I am, so the Cullens win, my friend. Just like the Dodgers are about to do.

His response is short.

Garrett Peters: Fuck.

I chuckle.

Then I hear Angela's car pulling in.

Fuck indeed.

Chapter 7

The Reasons

Music

"It's Time" by Imagine Dragons

"Secrets" by OneRepublic

EPOV

It's three in the morning when I carry a half-sleeping Hazel over to my sister's house. My baby girl whines and whimpers between yawns and teary hiccups, only proving that my decision to leave the house was a good one.

Who knew Angela could scream so loudly?

"Daddy," Hazel whimpers.

"I know, baby." I kiss her head and walk up the path to Bella and Anthony's house. "We'll get you back to sleep in no time."

"Oh..." she whines. "No sweepy." She rubs her eyes with her fists.

"Sure you're not," I chuckle as I knock on the door. I'd ring the doorbell, but there's no need to wake up the entire house. "So, you don't want to have a sleepover with Auntie Bella?"

She seems to consider this. "Wiv ice cweam?"

"A little late for that." I kiss her red nose. "Maybe tomorrow."

She goes for stern, although a yawn ruins it. "Auntie Bewla gimme ice cweam."

"I know she does, but not in the middle of the night." I listen as who I assume is Anthony comes down the stairs. And he opens the door a couple seconds later, looking expectantly tired in sweats and with bed hair. "Sorry to wake up you up, man."

"No worries—" He breaks off when he yawns and scratches his head. "What's up?"

"Angela's turning our house into a war zone." I sigh. "Mind if we crash in your guest room?" There used to be two, but AJ's moving into one of them, and his old room next to his parents' will soon explode in pink and purple for the peanut.

"Of course." Anthony frowns and lets us in. "What's, uh...what's this with Angela?"

Since he looks fucking beat, I suggest he goes to bed and we can talk tomorrow, but he snorts and shoots that down. Well, sort of. He says he does have an early day tomorrow, so he bids us goodnight and finishes with, "I'll send Bella down."

And I'm not sure that's smart. You don't actually wake up a pregnant woman. But then again, if she isn't first to hear gossip, she'll break Anthony's balls anyway.

So, while he disappears upstairs, I head to the guest room and thank God Hazel's already dozing off. I place a few pillows around her on the large bed, hoping I'll join her soon. But knowing my sister, this just might be an all-nighter.

By the time I reach the living room, a sleepy Bella is already there with a tub of ice cream that she's topping with barbecue chips.

That's just wrong.

"Talk to me." She yawns and tries to pull Anthony's college hoodie over her knees, but her belly's in the way. "Shit," she mutters and sits cross-legged instead. "Okay, talk. Anthony mumbled 'Angela,' 'warzone,' 'Ed's spending the night,' and 'fucking bitch.'" At my raised brow, she waves a hand. "All right, maybe I added that last part."

"Thought so." I sit down in Anthony's chair, far away from where Bella's smashing chips with a spoon. "Well, this isn't exactly gossip hour—"

"No, but I'm letting you stay in my house." She smiles sweetly.

"You're evil," I chuckle through a groan. After fighting with Angela for the past several hours, I'm fucking exhausted. But...I suppose my sister deserves to know. "I told Angela we're getting a divorce." I hold my breath as I wait for her response.

She stares at me blankly. Then... "Get the fuck out. You did *not* tell her that."

"I did." I nod and stifle a grin. "Truth is, I've told her before that I wanna separate, but she hasn't taken me seriously." Because she's been confident that I'd never give up Hazel, which I won't. But tonight, Angela saw that I'm serious.

.

"You're not kidding, are you?" Angela stares at me with an incredulous expression. "You're actually going through with this?"

"Yes."

She scoffs and starts pacing in front of the TV, her heels clicking heavily on the hardwood floor. "You know I'll get half of everything, right?"

Ever the lawyer, that one.

I roll my eyes. "I'm aware." But there's no way she will even want this house. It's surrounded by McCartys, and she's expressed in the past that she wished we could move. I'll just buy her out. Fuck, money's the last thing I'm worried about. It's Hazel. "But my daughter—"

She barks out a dark laugh and wags a finger at me. "Oh, don't even try, Edward. It's our daughter, and we'll share custody. No court in California would take her away from me."

I'm aware of that, too, as much as it kills me. I grind my teeth together and push down my fury. "Can I just ask you why you want custody? For fuck's sake—last year you even forgot her birthday, Angela!"

And she blames it on being busy with a case...

.

I'm brought back to the present when Bella throws herself at me and whacks me in the head with a spoon full of ice cream.

"Ah, fuck!"

"I'm sorry!" she cries out. "I'm so sorry, Edward!" While I groan in pain—and the fucking mess—Bella's torn between remorse and utter joy.

"Lemme help you." She fusses over me with a napkin. "I'm sorry. And I'm so happy right now!" For being so tiny and...well, female...she's packs some strength in her arms. She squeezes the shit out of me in a bear hug. "I'm so h-happy."

And here come the waterworks.

"Don't cry, sweetheart." I take the napkin smeared with ice cream and wipe it over her face—

"You ass!" she laughs through her tears.

I grin and sit back in the chair. "I was just being helpful."

She snorts and plops down on the couch again. "Now I'm all sticky." To which she licks on the sleeve of the hoodie and then drags it down her cheek. *Jesus Christ*. "Don't give me that look. I'm pregnant. I'm allowed to be a little gross."

"A little?" I chuckle.

"A smidgen."

Sure.

Then the humor fades, and Bella's bottom lip quivers. "You have no idea how relieved I am right now," she whispers.

I smile, loving my sister a whole lot right now. She's always stood by me. "If you're half as relieved I am, I get it." I reach over and give her hand a squeeze.

She purses her lips, then shoves a spoonful of ice cream and chips into her mouth. "But thomething ith bothe'ing you."

I've already stated that Bella is too damn intuitive.

"Let me guess: when you're pregnant, you're allowed to talk with your mouth full, too."

"You get it!" She grins. And twirls the spoon. "But don't change the topic. What's wrong?"

"Hazel," I admit, leaning forward on my knees. "I don't want Angela near her, Bella."

Her face falls a little, and she nods, no doubt understanding. How my sister manages to be a terrific mother and have a successful career is

amazing to me. Not because she's unique; I know there are many women out there who juggle both. But Angela is not one of those women. She only cares about her job, and...I don't know. I can't accept that.

Regardless of how busy I am with work, forgetting my own daughter's birthday...it would simply never happen.

"What is the plan now?" she asks softly. "Anthony mentioned something about a war zone. Do you think she's going to take you to court?"

"No." I shake my head. "We'll split everything fifty-fifty, which, according to Angela, includes custody of Hazel. And there's..." My throat suddenly feels tight. "I mean, what can I do?"

I can't prove that Angela is unfit to be a mother. There's no evidence of her neglect and coldness. In front of a jury, she'd be an angel, of course.

My family would testify in a heartbeat, but they'd be considered character witnesses, and I'm not even sure it would hold up in court—seeing as they're *my* family. I'm sure Angela's parents, who live in DC, would object and say she's an extraordinary mom.

"I get it." Bella sighs, a frown creasing her forehead. "And the war zone?"

To that, I only roll my eyes. For being so focused on social status, Angela is over at our house right now being a fucking drama queen. "She insisted on leaving tonight," I say, shaking my head at the memory of Angela stomping around throwing things into boxes. "She's packing her personal belongings, intent on checking in to a hotel." I wave it off. "I'm honestly relieved she's leaving right away."

"Hmph. Well, she better not take shit that's not hers to take."

I smile wryly. "She was packing her clothes, jewelry, and her goddamn books from law school."

Bella cocks the bitch brow and sniffs. "You know, if the jewelry's worth something, you'll go fifty-fifty there, too."

"Noted," I chuckle.

It grows quiet for a while, and Bella stares into space and eats her disgusting ice cream. Her expression almost worries me, 'cause when she's silent for too long, she's usually up to something. But I'm too tired to read into that right now. However, there is something I want to solve before I attempt to excuse myself for bed.

"About earlier today, Bella..." Well, technically it was yesterday.

"Don't worry about." She shakes her head. "It's water under the bridge. I promise you I will no longer interfere—uh, *much*." She smiles sheepishly, and I laugh through my nose. "And you...you'll just solve whatever happened with Garrett. It's none of my business."

My eyebrows rise. "Anthony gave you a talking to, huh?"

"No comment. But..." She hesitates. "I have something to confess."

Fuck.

Now what?

"What have you done, sis?" I keep my tone neutral, but when Bella says she has something to confess, it usually involves me. And another man.

"It's not something I've done." She gets a little defensive there. "It's just..." She blows out a breath, looking honestly upset. "Over the past fifteen years, I've only wanted you to be happy." I nod, listening. "But three months ago, I found something—a second reason for wanting you out of that *fucking* closet."

I'm slightly taken aback by the venom in her voice, but she's not glaring at me or anything. It's that word—closet—she doesn't like it. She's always argued passionately and heatedly for equality, no matter whom you love. I understand that, although I wonder why she seems even more upset about it now.

"It *kills* me that you would be ashamed of being gay, Edward," she croaks, her eyes rapidly filling with tears. "Because—because if you're ashamed of yourself, what will you think about your nephew—my *son*—" she points to her chest "—if...when *he* comes out?"

My eyes widen, and my heart starts hammering. "What?"

"AJ." Her voice is merely a whisper. "I found a magazine under his bed... Maybe he's just curious, but Anthony and I don't give a damn." I swallow hard, and she narrows her eyes at me. "We would *hate* it if he felt ashamed of himself. It would *gut* me, Edward. That's not how we have raised him."

"Bella..." Christ, I don't know what to say. I'm shocked, stunned...*worried*.

"I'm not going to push you, I *swear*," she vows as a couple tears roll down her cheeks, "but can you just promise me one thing?"

I nod cautiously.

She releases a breath and wipes her cheeks. "I want you to think of people who might look up to you—you and adults in general—people who are too young to understand the importance of *asking* for advice. People who are surrounded by what's *normal*. AJ only sees what's around him—that his friends have started talking about girls and so on." She pauses to calm down. "Anthony and I will obviously talk to him, but without hinting at what we know. He'll come to us when he's ready, and I don't want any fears or insecurities holding him back."

Leaving the chair, I sit down next to Bella and place an arm around her. "You're amazing. You know that?" I kiss the top of her head. "And I promise to stop acting as if I'm doing something wrong."

"I wish you'd feel it, too." She sniffles.

"I'll work on it. I *know* it's not wrong. It's all up here—" I tap my temple "—and the number Mom and Dad pulled on me."

"I know." She sighs heavily and puts the ice cream on the coffee table before leaning into me. "Did I tell you they sent me a check for my birthday? They called, too, but I didn't answer."

They usually do, so I'm not surprised. "How much money was it this time? And more importantly, how did you spend it?"

When Bella turned twenty-one, Mom and Dad sent her a check for two grand.

She donated it to the LA Gay & Lesbian Center.

Bella shoots me a sideways smirk and fiddles with the hem of her hoodie. "A thousand dollars, and I haven't spent it yet. But I was thinking I could special order condoms with the text 'Carlisle and Esme Cullen support gay rights' on 'em. What do you think?" I crack up and have to cover my mouth with my fist before I wake up the house. "We could spread them all over LA—stand on street corners and offer them to people."

"Don't get *me* involved in that," I laugh.

"Oh, you boring old fart." She giggles. "I'd tell you to remove that stick up your ass, but you probably like it there."

I flick her forehead and hide my amusement. "Too fucking far, Bella."

She rolls her neck and snaps her fingers as if she's all ghetto. "Ain't nuthin' wrong with a li'l backdoor lovin'."

I grimace at that, getting all the wrong images. "All right, I think that's enough."

"Gotcha." She winks and goes for her ice cream again.

Chapter 8

The Guwl

Music

"Can't Stop" by Maroon 5

EPOV

"Fas'a, Daddy!" Hazel laughs and claps her hands. "Fas'a!"

I grin at her in the rearview mirror, maneuvering my way through the evening traffic. "I can't go any faster than this, baby girl."

Half an hour ago, Anthony called me when I was just finishing up a sport's interview at a radio show, and he stuttered out, "Labor! Bella, I-labor!"

So, I hurried over to Rose and Emmett's place to pick up Hazel, and now we're all on our way to the hospital. Well, Mary and Geoff are unfortunately not coming; Geoff's down with the flu, and we can't risk the peanut getting sick.

"You excited about having another cousin, Hazel?" I ask and stop at a red light.

"Yes! A guwl! No boy."

I smile, thinking about last week when Hazel insisted we go out and buy the newborn a present. An idea Hazel got from Rose, who came home one day after shopping. I had already ordered my gift for both the baby and Bella, stupidly figured that Hazel was too young to care.

So, we went to the mall and she picked out a stuffed animal for the baby, and then I ended up giving my girl some new toys, too.

I'll admit, in the past couple months, I've spoiled Hazel a bit, afraid she's taking the divorce hard, which can be considered foolish since she's not even three yet. But with how little Angela's been around, it still worries me—the effect it will have on my daughter, I mean. Then again, Angela's always been distant.

I've barely even spoken to her in weeks. After moving out and signing all the papers, she just told me she'd contact me when she'd found a less temporary home. As for now, she's living large at a nice hotel, and I suppose even she is not so stupid as to want Hazel there. The baby girl would get bored in a second.

There's physical pain in my chest whenever I think about shared custody. I'm repulsed by the mere idea of it, yet it looks like reality for me—soon enough.

I'm ashamed to admit that I've actually considered blowing it off, the divorce, and keep living a lie. But I've had Bella and Anthony knock some sense into me. My life is about me, too. Not only Hazel. I have to be happy as well. It just sickens me that it's at Hazel's expense.

Garrett's knocked some sense into you, too.

I sigh.

That's true. He has. Not necessarily by being blunt like my sister and brother-in-law, 'cause Garrett and I aren't *that* close, but he's still said his peace. And that was, "Would you deny anyone else to find happiness? No? Then why would you deny yourself? You don't strike me as a masochist, Cullen."

I think he told me that the first time we spoke over the phone.

Let's be frank; Facebook is a bit juvenile for two forty-year-old men to hide behind. Okay, Garrett's thirty-seven, but what the hell. PM'ing through Facebook worked just fine for a few weeks, and then it got old.

Becoming friends with Garrett Peters was definitely an unexpected surprise, but I'm afraid I've shot my chances of more to hell. Granted, I'm not ready to jump into a new marriage, but my attraction has certainly grown over conversations about hobbies, pasts, dreams, and whatnot.

Besides being a flirt by nature—that motherfucker—he has been nothing but friendly and polite. And that would've worked well if I haven't spend countless nights and showers thinking back on when he sucked me off like a pro.

Speaking of, I should probably text him and tell him Bella's in labor.

When we arrive at the hospital, I do just that.

~oOo~

After ten hours of labor, Bella gives birth to little Grace Marie McCarty.

So much for the third kid just shooting out of her.

Hanging around the hospital for a whole night—and then some—with a toddler...not wonderful, but every ounce of exhaustion vanishes when it's Hazel and my turn to visit mother and child.

Anthony and AJ have gone home for a quick shower and to pick up food, so it's just Bella, Masen, and the little one when I come in, carrying Hazel on my hip.

"Hi," Bella whispers, a tired but bright smile on her face. "She just fell asleep."

Hazel nods and holds a finger over her lips.

"She's gorgeous, sis. Congratulations." I kiss Bella on the forehead, then I soundlessly pull one of the chairs as close as possible and sit down with Hazel on my lap. "Tired?"

"So tired." She nods and beams down at the pink bundle. "But I could stare at her all day."

"That's my sister." Masen points, and he's hovering very close to Mommy.

"And she looks like your mother," I murmur, gently brushing a finger over Grace's hand. "But she has Anthony's hair, doesn't she?" Mostly brown, but with some red in it.

Bella nods, agreeing.

Masen looks contemplative as his gaze flicks between Grace and Bella. "My sister is a baby," he finally mumbles. "Mommy doesn't look like a baby."

I chuckle quietly. "No, but when Mommy *was* a baby, she looked just like that." Our parents had me young—very young—and by the time Bella was born, they'd been trying for about five years.

"She's pwetty," Hazel whispers. She's too fucking cute, still holding a finger over her lips. "Gotta be quiet, Daddy."

"That's right." I rub our noses together, then turn to Bella again and squeeze her hand. "I called Nana a couple hours ago. She sends her love and asks that you give her a call when you come home. Oh, and she expects tons of pictures."

The last time we visited our grandmother in Florida, Bella and I taught her how to Skype, so I suspect my sister will find herself holding the baby up to a webcam soon.

Nana Marie may be close to eighty, but she's a fierce woman. And after we Cullens split up fifteen years ago, she told Bella and me, "First and foremost, I'm your nana. How my daughter can act like that is beyond me, but karma will get her."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Bella giggles. "Anthony's already filled his phone."

I have no doubt about that.

"Daddy," Hazel whispers, cupping her hand near my ear. "Can I give Gwace the pwresent now?"

"Of course." I smile as she opens her thin jacket, where she's been hiding the pink teddy bear, and extends it to Bella.

"Here," Hazel says, appearing oddly shy.

"Aw, thank you so much, sweetie." Bella's eyes well up, mainly due to hormones and exhaustion, I suspect. "I'm sure Grace will *love* it. I'll show it to her as soon as she wakes up, okay?"

Hazel nods and burrows into me, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

"I have your gifts at home." I smirk. "They're not hospital appropriate." All right, the main gift to Bella—a bracelet—isn't bad, but her favorite tequila is, which she'll probably guzzle on a girls' night when she's done breastfeeding. I gave her that when AJ and Masen were born, too. And Grace's gift is a baby tub that I picked out as per Bella's registry list. *Safest to just follow orders.*

Bella chuckles. "If I remember correctly, I'll enjoy one of those gifts when—" She's cut off by a light knock on the door.

Garrett?

Chapter 9

The Invitation

Music

"First You Break It" by Filter

EPOV

"Is this a bad time?" Garrett asks, half-smiling. It widens for a quick beat when he sees me, and I try not to read into that. "You ordered a photographer, Mrs. McCarty."

Figures. When AJ and Masen were born, Bella and Anthony hired a photographer right away, wanting photos from the hospital when the boys were all new in the world. Now is no different, aside from the photographer not being a stranger.

I've never—ever—given a shit about appearances, but right now it's painfully clear that I've been up all night and he hasn't. He looks freshly showered, sinfully sexy in jeans, a simple t-shirt, and a leather jacket.

I feel ridiculously hot in my hoodie and sweats with half a juice box spilled on them.

Pretty sure there's cookie dough in my hair, as well.

It makes me wish I never changed out of my suit yesterday before we came here.

"No, come on in." Bella smooths down her hair. "Thank you so much for agreeing to do this. I look like hell, but that's the point, isn't it?" She grins.

"You look beautiful—you always do." Garrett smiles and does what I did before, brushes a finger over Grace's hand. "She's precious, Bella. What's her name?"

"Grace Marie," Masen answers for Bella. "She's my sister."

"I'll be in the waiting room, sis." I stand up with a sleeping Hazel in my arms and lean down to kiss Bella's cheek. "Anything I can get you?"

"No, I'm fine." She smirks, probably knowing...somehow...that I'm putting some distance between Garrett and me.

But my reason for wanting the distance has changed. I no longer want to stick my head in the sand.

I'd rather stick it between his thighs.

The timing isn't the best, though, but my biggest reason is that he's in my life to be a friend. Considering how forward he was when we met, he would've made another move if he was still interested, right?

Or maybe you should stop being so arrogant and make that move yourself. Only an idiot puts himself out there to be rejected twice.

Fuck.

~oOo~

Approximately twenty minutes later, Anthony and AJ return, and the McCarty family has their own little photo shoot in Bella's room.

Rose and Emmett tell me they're planning on taking their two daughters to see a movie, and they offer to take Hazel, too. But I hesitate because she's cranky as hell, having not slept well.

"I wanna go wiv Auntie Wosie and Unca Em, Daddy," she whines.

I raise a brow at Rose and Emmett. "You'd be wise to take back that offer."

"Oh, come on." Rose smiles and takes Hazel from me. "If she falls asleep, she falls asleep. And if she doesn't, she gets a movie and then McDonalds."

"Yes!" Hazel says gleefully through a yawn.

I chuckle, thinking they're nuts, but it's their call. "I'll be at home. Just call me when she gets crankier."

"Ye of little faith." Rose tsks. "We'll bring her home in a few hours." Behind her, I see Garrett entering the waiting room and packing his camera into his bag. "Come on, girls. Let's go see some minions!"

The girls do get excited, but it feels like Emmett trumps them.

They all leave, and the waiting room grows silent until I approach Garrett and ask how it went. He smiles and brings out the camera again, quickly showing me a few shots on the small display.

If my sister's family looked complete before, it has nothing on now. Bella and Anthony look expectedly tired, but incredibly happy, and both AJ and Masen look like the proud big brothers they are.

"Did Bella order copies for all of us?" I ask, wanting a set of my own. Especially of the photo where they're all together and the one with only the siblings.

"She did." He nods and stows away the fancy Nikon again. "She mentioned you prefer black and white photos?"

"She said that, huh?" I chuckle. "To be honest, I don't really have a preference, but she told me black and white would go best with my new living room."

He frowns at that. "You're moving?"

"Oh. No." I shake my head. "But when I told her about making some changes at the house now that Angela has moved out, Bella was eager to remind me of the fact that she's an interior designer." I huff a laugh, recalling her words. "She said, 'I won't even take a commission; just fork over your credit card so I can go buy pretty stuff for you.' She'll probably redecorate the whole house." Which I actually don't mind at all.

"Sounds like Bella's gotten herself a project for her maternity leave." Garrett grins lazily. "We had lunch a while back, and she said she feared death by too little to do when Grace was born."

Yeah, that's my sister. Seems like nothing tires her. "She always has to have something to do," I agree. "So...what's on your agenda for the rest of the day?" I force myself to keep eye contact, not wanting to be a pussy.

I'm freaking tired, but...not even phone calls are enough now. I want to see more of Garrett, even if I'm already developing too deep feelings for him. Attraction is one thing, but two months of getting to know each other has made me look forward to every second I talk to him. I'll even go as far as to say I sometimes miss him.

"Nothing much." Garrett shrugs, though his casualness seems just a tad practiced. "I took the day off today when I got your text last night."

I nod and avert my eyes for a beat, then look up again and massage the back of my neck. "You wanna come over for a beer or something?"

He raises a brow, perhaps surprised at my question. Or maybe he's trying to figure out my intentions.

"Sure," he says eventually, a hint of wariness in his tone.

I don't like that one bit, but I hope I can ease any concerns he may have.

If he wants to be friends, we'll be friends. If he wants more...

"I'm just gonna swing by my studio, then I'll come over. That okay?"

I nod. "Yeah, of course. See you soon."

Chapter 10

The Relief

Music

"Try" by P!nk

EPOV

I was naïve to think I'd have enough time for a shower before Garrett reached my house. Well, I did have time, but when he rings the doorbell, there's still a towel around my hips, and as I hurry downstairs I nearly trip when I struggle to put a t-shirt on.

Running a hand through my damp hair, I open the door and smile apologetically. "Come on in—make yourself at home. I'm just gonna run upstairs and get dressed."

"Uh, no worries." Garrett gives me a once-over, this one much swifter than the one the day we met, and I'm suddenly worried about rejection. But if Garrett can put himself out there, so should I. I owe it to both of us, and he deserves it.

Letting him in, I tell him there's beer, soda, water, whatever he wants, in the kitchen, and then I jog up the stairs again. Sweats, jeans, chinos—fuck it, I've been a sweats guy at home since Hazel was born. I grab a gray pair—at least they're new—and I pull them on, thinking *eh, what the hell* when I realize they hang pretty low on my hips, before I head down again.

As I'd hoped, Garrett hasn't left the kitchen yet; that's good, 'cause I'm hungry. "Cafeteria food doesn't really do it for me," I say, announcing my presence. "Are you hungry? I thought I'd heat up some leftovers." Or

more precisely: Mary's curry chicken casserole. All I have to add myself is rice.

"I can always eat." He grins a little, then tips his beer bottle at the fridge where there are several drawings. "I see Hazel's a budding artist."

I can't help but beam at that, the proud father that I am. "She didn't get it from her parents, that's for sure." I open the freezer and pull out a Tupperware container. Moving around my kitchen, I start defrosting the casserole in the microwave and get water for the rice going on the stove. "Do you like kids?" Personal question perhaps, but inquiring minds want to know.

In my periphery, Garrett shrugs and leans against the kitchen island. "Who doesn't? But I never saw myself having any."

"Oh..." I nod slowly and pour the rice into the pan.

"I just haven't been in a relationship where I've thought that far," he clarifies quickly.

"Oh," I repeat, a pinch of relief settling in me. "I get it." And I do. Hazel wasn't actually planned, because I didn't think about wanting a family with Angela, so when she told me she was pregnant, it certainly took me by surprise. Then I got excited—hell, I was over the moon—whereas Angela was more resigned than anything.

With nothing else to do right now, I grab a beer for myself and then join Garrett by the island. "I'm glad you decided to come over," I sigh, content for the first time in weeks. Right now, I allow myself to have this without thinking about the bullshit in my life.

Bullshit has a name: Angela.

"Oh, yeah?" Garrett turns more in my direction, resting his hip against the counter. "Any particular reason?"

Yes.

"I wanted company," I admit, running a hand through my hair. "*Your* company." I send him a sideways glance and nudge his arm with mine. "I also want to thank you for..." I shrug, at a loss. Or maybe not. "I don't know, just being there?"

Perhaps I haven't shared every detail of the divorce proceedings with Garrett, but he still knows enough. He also knows my struggles—that I want my daughter, that I worry for her...

He cocks his head and smiles. "That's for friends are for, right?"

Friends.

I smile tightly. "Is that what we are? I mean, I know we're friends, but..." I release a breath, knowing it's time to put myself out there. "You're kind of hard to forget, Garrett."

He bobs his head and looks down, appearing torn. Which stings. More than I thought it would.

Then he sighs heavily. "I fucking wish you were easy to forget, Cullen." A humorless chuckle escapes him. "Bella's always told me you're a sweetheart—a nice guy, but...Christ, I don't know." He tilts his head at me. "I think you're one of those men who *are* genuinely nice but don't see the effect you have on people—men and women." I...I have nothing. *Nothing* to say to that. "The night we met? I set out to have some fun, nothing more. But then *you*—" He chuckles again, no mirth in it whatsoever, and it morphs into a groan as he scrubs his hands over his face. "I can't get you out of my head."

To *that*, I have something say, and I can't get the words out fast enough. "I don't want you to." Leaving my beer behind, I close in and place my hands on the island top on each side of him. "I've been absorbed in my own mess, but I wouldn't approach you like this if I wasn't ready for it. If I only wanted a quick fuck, I'd act like the asshole I was at that club."

Garrett's quiet, chin dropped to his chest.

Jesus Christ, I really want him to give me a shot.

"Please," I whisper, leaning forward to brush my lips against his temple. I bring my hands to his hips and slowly slide them up his sides, feeling the hard muscle underneath. "Can you give me a chance?"

Garrett huffs but doesn't look up. "How can you be ready, Edward? Honestly." He finally faces me. "Your divorce isn't even final, and you've said it yourself, you have a lot on your plate." I open my mouth to jump in, but he continues before I can. "And I don't blame you. I'm not blaming you for anything. I'm just questioning your intentions."

I nod in understanding, ready to lay it all out there. "I'll be upfront with you. I've never been a player—not even when I was young—and I'm not looking for a rebound. I'm a relationship kind of guy. That said, I'm not ready to play house or meet your parents, but—" I grasp his chin when he tries to avert his eyes. "*But*, I want to try this. I want whatever commitment you can give me, because I can't get you out my head, either. I can't label my feelings for you yet, but I know I've never felt like this before."

Angela doesn't even come close, and there was a time I did learn to love her. Jasper, who I dated for a while before I came out to my parents...Liam, my first college boyfriend...I was young and naïve; I was so in love—I thought—yet, it doesn't hold a candle to this.

"Are you gonna ask me to hide?" Garrett asks quietly, flatly.

I shake my head no; I'd never do that to anyone. I've suffered for fifteen years by hiding who I am, and I know the pain. To put someone else through that would be incredibly selfish and downright cruel.

"Never," I vow. "I *will* ask for discretion until my divorce is final, but that's only four months away, and I won't *hide*."

But to protect Hazel and myself from whatever bullshit Angela might pull, I can't afford to flaunt a new relationship—doesn't matter if it's with a man or a woman.

"Listen," I murmur, "I have something to prove—to myself, mostly, and to my family. But I don't *need* you to do that; I happen to want you. For who you are, not for any other reason." I pause, fearing I'm not saying it right. "What I mean is, I can march over to my sister's house and tell them I'm no longer gonna give a shit about what other think. They'll be thrilled to hear that, and it'd be enough, but—"

"You *will* care, Edward," he says, voice both serious and soft, understanding. "Most do, and I've come to know you—*you* will definitely care."

"You do know me." I incline my head. "But it's not a fear I can overcome by just saying the words, is it? I need to—and want to—*show* that I can overcome it." Fuck, I'm rambling. I scratch my head. "I'm not good at this," I chuckle, looking up at the ceiling for a second. Then I blow out a breath and face Garrett once more. "I don't want to use you for anything. I care about you, and I want to have a relationship with you. Yes, I have my insecurities, but you know who I spend basically all my time with." I widen my arms. "My family, and I've never felt the need to hide from them." The microwave pings, so I hold up a finger, then walk over and

crank up the heat, the defrosting done. Returning to Garrett, I wait for his response.

He laughs. "Oh, don't look so fucking nervous, Cullen." With a hand on the back of my neck, he yanks me close so our foreheads are touching. "I can definitely pull off *discreet* for a few months." My pulse kicks up as he brushes his lips to mine. "You said what I needed to hear."

With relief flooding me, I kiss him back—deep. Unlike that night in the alley, I unleash more than just lust. It's sweet fucking acceptance, although I'm not stupid to think all my troubles will go away overnight. But I'll take it day by day, and I *know* I have support—people who have no issue reminding me when I find myself doubting and repressing.

"You feel so fucking good against me," I groan as he kisses my throat. Cupping his cheeks, I bring our mouths together again and taste him with my tongue.

"You drive me crazy," he pants, pushing his hips forward.

I push back, desire searing through me. Even through his jeans, I feel him rigid and big. Going commando under my sweats only makes me feel more.

"Ditto." I nip at his bottom lip, then kiss my way to his jaw and neck. "I can get used to this."

I feel his lazy grin more than I see it. "Me, too."

Chapter 11

The More

Music

"Mirrors" by Justin Timberlake

EPOV

Garrett stirs when I return to my bed here in the guest room, but I'm quick to push him down when he moves to sit up.

"Go back to sleep." I pull the covers over us and welcome him to use my arm as a pillow again.

After dinner earlier, Garrett ordered me to get some rest when I couldn't stop yawning. I agreed on the condition that he came with me. Foolishly, I'd hoped something would happen, but I'd been too tired.

"Did I hear the doorbell?" he asks drowsily.

"It was just Rose dropping off Hazel." I yawn and kiss his forehead. "For once, she went down in seconds." Apparently, Hazel hadn't been cranky until they were on their way home, but Rose did admit that my girl had dozed off a little in the theater.

"Do you want me to...?"

"I want you to stay right here," I murmur, moving my free hand down his chest. I'm incredibly tempted to ask him to remove his black boxer briefs, too, but I suppose I should be thankful for the t-shirt and jeans he took off earlier. My own t-shirt's on the floor as well, but I left my sweats on since I'm not wearing anything underneath. "Your body is fucking perfect." I had to say it.

Like me, he clearly takes care of himself—exercises, eats well, grooms...

When was the last time I was in bed with someone intimately—with or without sex—and not a single part of me wanted to move away?

"Don't get me started." Garrett smirks and rolls on top of me. I suppress a groan, feeling his semi rubbing against mine. "This..." He leans down and starts kissing my chest. "Since that first night, I've wondered what you'd look like without clothes on. You're even sexier than I thought." His fingers brush over the sparse chest hair I have; he doesn't have much either. "And your face..." When he cups my cheek, I turn and kiss his palm. "Christ, you turn me on, Edward."

I chuckle huskily, definitely noticing. "I can tell." I thrust upward and elicit a moan from him. "It's mutual." What I can also tell is that he seems reluctant to take charge, which suits me perfectly. Because I prefer to be the dominant one in bed.

That said, I'm not gonna lie and say I've never had the pleasure of a man's hard cock in my ass; I certainly have, and...God, I want to feel Garrett. All of him. Now that I have him here, it's extremely difficult to hold back—even a little.

Over the years, I've learned to be creative with my own desires. Porn, a well-hidden box of toys, and a good imagination. Yet, nothing can ever come close to the real deal.

"I want you." My chest rumbles with a growl, and I flip him over, ending up on top of him. "You're gonna have to tell me how far I can take this."

Much like he did in that alley a couple months ago, he answers with an action. He shifts under me, getting closer to the edge of the bed, and then he reaches down to his jeans. When he's back in position, he's got not one but two condoms between his fingers.

"Preference?" He raises a brow.

"For tonight?" I smirk and slip a hand between us. "Both. But I prefer to top."

"Sounds—sounds good to me," he groans as I cup his erection through his boxers. "Oh yeah, so good."

His groan morphs into one of protest when I get off the bed, but I wink at him and walk over to my closet. It's by habit that I keep my stuff in here even though Angela has moved out. But I don't really need to hide anything anymore. Regardless, I find the box, and inside I retrieve a bottle of lube.

By the time I return to Garrett, he's naked on the bed, lazily stroking his cock.

My mouth waters at the sight. I get on the bed, tossing the lube to the side, and glide my hands up his muscular thighs. As I get close with my hands, he removes his and lets me take over. Wrapping my fingers around him, I stroke him slowly and firmly. *Fuck me*. I lean down and nuzzle the base of his cock, inhaling deeply.

"Are you gonna tease me?"

I laugh through my nose and shake my head no. As if I have patience for teasing. "Don't worry." I grip his cock and suck him into my mouth, peering up at his clenched abs, rising and falling chest, and defined pecs. I hum, my eyes closing...I fucking savor. "I want you to fuck me." Just the thought of not having to depend on a dildo again is enough to make me moan around him.

He grunts and pushes himself up on his elbows. "Then you better stop right now."

But I want more, so I suck him as hard as I can for a few more seconds. My tongue swirls around the broad head, over the slit, then down his length. I memorize every ridge, every reaction he gives me...

"Enough," he growls. "Come here."

I let him pull me up, and I lie down next to him, my back to his chest. Right away, he starts kissing my neck, my shoulder, while his hand roams down my abs to my crotch. I hiss as he fists my cock. At the same time, I hear him working a condom onto his own cock.

"Am I rude for asking if it's been a while?" He grins against my skin.

I huff a chuckle, already becoming out of breath. "I don't need any preparing, if that's what you're really asking." I enjoy a little pain, and just 'cause I haven't had another man's dick in my life for years doesn't mean I haven't gotten my ass filled.

Tilting my head back, I claim his mouth in a hard kiss while he drizzles lube on his cock. My ass clenches in anticipation. I blow out a shuddering breath, reality checking in. *This is happening*. Fucking finally. I won't allow myself to get depressed with regrets, because it would undoubtedly ruin me. Something amazing did come out of my suffering—Hazel—so if I focus on that...and the fact that my years of hiding are over...

I groan, feeling Garrett rubbing the head of his cock over my hole. With his arm hooked under my knee, he opens me up and begins to apply pressure. He moves slowly, slower than necessary, but I refuse to rush it. It burns and stings, though it's fucking sensational—my cock grows even harder at the pain.

"Fuck, Edward," he pants into my neck.

I moan. "Give me more." Oh, *God*. Gritting my teeth, I push back on his cock and feel it sliding deeper inside me. He fills me completely, and we

pause for a beat when he's all in. "Christ." I suck in a breath and tilt my head for a kiss again.

"You feel so fucking good." He kisses me slowly and deeply, tangling our tongues together. Wanting more, I clench my ass, causing him to curse. "You want me to lose it already?"

My skin flushes with heat as he finally moves. Perhaps he's realizing I don't need it gentle, that he doesn't have to be careful. His strokes are long; they hit me deeply, and with each thrust, my body gets more worked up.

It's my turn to hold back. He revs me up, excites me so much that... It'd be so easy to just flip him over and slam into his—

"Oh, fuck. I'm gonna need you soon," he grits out and bites down on my shoulder.

I moan as he resumes jerking me off, keeping it the same pace he fucks me. My head is fucking swimming.

"I want your ass," I growl.

"Fuck, yeah." He slides out of me, though the burn is still there. It'll fuel me so fucking beautifully when I get inside him.

While he gets rid of his condom, I roll mine on. Then I kneel between his parted legs and pour some lube in my palm. Garrett watches intensely, unmasked lust in his eyes.

A bead of sweat trickles down my temple.

Keeping my gaze locked with his, I stroke him slowly and push a finger inside him. He parts his lips and breathes heavier. Two fingers, then three. His chest heaves. A drop of pre-come seeps out of his cock, so I dip

down and close my mouth around the head of him. He bucks his hips and moans.

Fuck me, he's sexy.

Garrett doesn't have to say anything. Just with his eyes, he says, *now, now, now.*

I kiss my way up his body... "Spread," I murmur, nudging his legs farther apart. Taking hold of my cock, I rub it against his exposed hole and slowly begin to fill him. Inch by inch until my balls press against his ass.

"*Jesus,*" he gasps. "Don't stop—*fuck,* don't stop."

"I won't." My voice is gritty and shaky. It's...it's almost too good. Hot, incredibly tight, and wet. A whirl of feelings rushes through me, but the one I cling to is the thought of having nothing between us one day. I want to slick up my cock and drive into him without a rubber, fuck him raw, and get all the things that come with that level of commitment. Trust, labels, promises...

Resting my forehead on his shoulder, I catch my breath and let the shudders course down my spine. Then I pull out, only to push in once more. He clamps down on me so hard that I groan and screw my eyes shut. The pleasure assaults me from every direction, which spurs me on.

With urgency lacing every fuckin' movement, I slide my cock in and out of Garrett. Our hands roam—they paw roughly, greedily. The kisses are hungry and bruising, and I get demanding.

"No—" I bat away the hand he's trying to touch his cock with "—I'll make you come. No one else." I pick up some speed and shift my hand down the backside of his thigh. "Wrap your legs around me, baby."

He obeys, and his surrender is the sweetest fucking thing. A flare of possessiveness swells in my chest; it, too, shines through in my movements. In a way, we mirror each other, yet not. He melts into me, gives me everything; I take, and I go harder. But at the same time, I'm fairly certain our expressions are the same.

More.

"More," he pants.

"Yeah..." I give him more. "I—" Instinct tells me to say something, but I don't know what, and my words get stuck. Instead I dip down and kiss him—hard, passionately. I fist his hair with one hand, the other sneaking between us to his throbbing cock. When he groans, I plunge deeper with my tongue, aching to just fucking consume him.

A tightness builds up in my gut, threatening to uncoil at any moment. Thankfully, Garrett tells me he's almost there. So, I fuck him faster, stroke his cock harder, and press more weight on him, wanting to be as close as possible.

"Let me see you come," I moan into his mouth.

His nip to my bottom lip stings enough to make me hiss and slam my cock as deep as I can go. He cries out a "Fuck!" at that and nearly arches his back off the mattress. Only seconds later, his cock spurts out the first stream of his release, and I let go of the last ounce of restraint I have left.

One, two, three more sharp thrusts and I go completely still inside of him as I come.

God-fucking-damn...

"Oh, my fuckin'..." Garrett groans.

I collapse on top of him, panting heavily in the crook of his neck. "I...I..."
Fuck. I swallow dryly. "I second that." *Shit.*

"I can't move..."

I chuckle, out of breath. "I think I know why. You've got 187 pounds sprawled over you."

"No," he laughs, then groans, "that's not it. I think you fucked me into jelly."

Grinning tiredly, I shift off him and melt into the mattress. "Well, you're not going anywhere, are you?"

He stretches, winces, and flashes me one of his lazy smirks. "I suppose I'm not."

Chapter 12

The Truth

Music

"Cool" by Gwen Stefani

"Beneath Your Beautiful" by Labrinth feat. Emeli Sandé

EPOV

After my meeting with my editor, I head home, but I go over to Bella and Anthony's instead of my own house. I've only been gone a couple hours, so Hazel's spent some time with Anthony and the boys in the pool. And I sincerely hope my sister's sleeping, or at the very least, resting. She and Grace just got home this morning; she needs to rest up.

Before I use my spare key to let myself in, I fire off a quick text to Garrett, telling him I'm home.

He has another couple hours of work; then he'll come over for dinner.

I have no plans on skirting around Hazel when it comes to Garrett. She's too young to grasp the concept of a relationship, and it will be simpler to just ease Garrett into our everyday life.

Slowly.

Some days Garrett will be with us—some nights, too—others he'll be at home. Because it's simplicity I need in my life right now, and I'm thankful Garrett understands. Hell, even he said it was a good thing we take things slowly. We're just going to spend time together, grow closer naturally, and take it from there.

"Edward, is that you?" I hear Bella call quietly, sleepily.

I loosen my tie and enter the living room silently, knowing Grace's bassinet is next to the couch. She seems to be sleeping, and my sister's bundled up on the couch, dressed in one of Anthony's t-shirts.

"Have you gotten any sleep?" I murmur, dipping down to kiss her forehead. Before I walk over to the chair, I pull up the blankets and get the can of Sprite she's reaching for. The can's cold, so I assume Anthony or one of the boys has given it to her recently. I can hear them out by the pool—Hazel, too.

Bella nods then gulps down some soda. "A couple hours—my God, this is good." She wipes her mouth and sets the Sprite back on the table. Then she speaks while she peers down in Grace's bassinet. "Someone's awake," she sings softly.

I smile and stand up again. "Can I hold her?" I haven't held her yet, and I'm Uncle Numero Uno, for Christ's sake. Bella nods and smiles, then asks me why I didn't wake her up when I dropped off Hazel. To which I frown in confusion, 'cause why on *Earth* would I have woken her up?

As I sit down with Grace in my arms, Bella answers. "You should've woken me since you have news to share."

I'm still confused, but I now I focus on little Grace instead, and she's too fucking cute for words. There's wonder in her big blue eyes, even though I know her vision is still quite blurry.

"I have no idea what you're referring to," I reply absently as Grace grasps my finger. "I just might take you home, little sweetheart." She gurgles in response. "That's right." I nod. "Get used to my voice, 'cause I'm your favorite uncle. There's Emmett and Dale, too, but they're less important."

Bella snorts in amusement, then gets back on track—her own track. "I am obviously talking about you and Garrett."

I scratch my head, nodding thoughtfully, and think of the McCarty family that lives across from me. Rose and Emmett. They dropped off Hazel yesterday...Garrett's car was in the driveway...I looked half-asleep when I opened the door...

I can totally envision Rose peeking out from behind her curtains in their kitchen, checking if Garrett's car was still there this morning. Which it was.

When Grace lets out a loud wail, she saves me from answering. So, I just stand up and return her to Bella. "Yeah, go to Mommy. Shut her up," I croon.

"*Duu-ude.*" Bella gives me a dirty look. "Did you just tell me to shut Grace up?"

I laugh and twirl a finger. "Other way around, sis." I'm down to snickers when my ass hits the chair once more. "I'm thinking if you're busy with her, you won't ask your annoying questions." Reaching into my pocket, I grab my car key just to have something to occupy my hands with.

"Anyway, you're definitely lucky." I give Grace a glance. "She seems quiet for a baby."

Hazel was colicky for three months.

Three. Fucking. Months.

Bella sighs and crosses her fingers. In return, I humor her and knock on wood—the coffee table.

"By the way, did you know we have a bet going?" I inquire, grinning. "It's about you—when you'll start climbing the walls for having too little to do."

Bella seems pensive for a bit, then asks, "Any specifics?"

"Anything outside your own house is considered work," I reply. "Rose says you won't make it more than two weeks before you'll start something—any kind of project." Bella has vowed to take two months maternity leave, and then she'll only return part-time. "Emmett has very little faith in you; he said a week and a half. Dale put down three weeks."

"Hmm. Is my husband in on this bet?" She arches a brow.

"No," I lie.

Anthony said a month, knowing he'll lose. It's called solidarity, he claimed.

"What's your guess?" she asks, cocking her head.

"Oh, I have no faith in you at all," I chuckle. "I have two-fifty on a week."

She purses her lips and nods slowly. Then she raises a brow again, eyes questioning, and a slow grin spreads on my face. I nod back.

One week. We'll split the money.

"But you can't overdo it." I point to her, deciding that's my condition. "You do need to rest."

"I get it, I get it. I'll just...I don't know, run out real quick to pick up samples for the new carpet in your living room or something."

That sounds fair.

"Brings you back, doesn't it?" she muses wistfully. "You and I may have ten years between us, but we've still had plenty of times where we pulled pranks on the McCartys."

"So, now you're a Cullen again, huh?" I tease. But she's right. Especially when I did my undergrad; we lived close, and I often came home for the

weekends. It was before I came out—back when everything was just...regular, a regular childhood.

Dale was so competitive that he actually stomped his feet and exploded in tears when Bella and I either pulled a prank or beat him and his brothers in various games.

"And seeing Dale cry was a rare sight," I joke.

"Yeah, so rare." Bella giggles. "As rare as hearing 'Sweet Caroline' at Fenway."

My eyes grow wide. "I love you," I blurt out, being a typical man. But nothing will make me prouder to be her older brother than when she makes sports analogies. "Even if we hate the Red Sox, that...that was beautiful."

"Awww." She wipes a fake tear. "Thanks."

From outside, I can hear AJ and Masen arguing about whose turn it is to check in on Bella and Grace. It's a fight that AJ seems to win, and it's only a matter of seconds before he comes in from the patio, smiling at his mom.

That, on the other hand, is a rare sight. Well, not the smiling part, but he does usually stick to himself. However, I know how proud he is to be Grace's big brother, so I get it. After I stopped being jealous of Bella when she was the baby who got all the attention, I was proud, too. And always ready to help.

"Um, is there anything you want, Mom?" he mumbles. I'd say he's almost through puberty, but he still keeps his tone low and soft—to prevent the inevitable occasions where his voice cracks, I assume. I remember doing the same, not that it worked very well. "Oh. Hi, Uncle Edward."

"Hey, buddy." I smile at him. "Everything good?"

He nods, then turns to Bella, waiting for her response.

"No, I'm good. Thank you, sweetie," she says.

But in my head, a plan forms quickly, and I need AJ within hearing distance. "Actually, I bet it's been a while since your mother ate," I tell AJ, growing a little nervous. "Would you mind making her a sandwich?"

Bella frowns. "Really, that's okay. I'm not hungry."

"Indulge me," I say, smiling tightly.

Take the hint, woman.

She doesn't, but AJ does. He walks to the kitchen to make a sandwich.

"What—" Bella begins, but I cut her off.

"Garrett spent the night at my house," I say, throwing it out there.

Bella blinks slowly, as if catching up. "Um...I know; Rose told me, but...you didn't wanna talk about—"

"We're dating." I smile wryly, thinking it's the only term AJ can't misinterpret. Had I said Garrett's my *partner*... Shaking that off, I give Bella a pointed look, then glance in the direction of the kitchen.

"Oh," she mouths, followed by her eyes widening as it really dawns on her. "Oh!" And cue waterworks. "Thank you," she whispers tearfully.

"Thank you so, so much, Edward."

I incline my head. "It's the least I can do," I whisper back. "Now, get your damn act on."

Although, for me...it's not an act. It's the truth.

"Right." She nods and wipes her cheeks. "Um, so, so...you're boyfriend and boyfriend, huh? That's wonderful!"

I close my eyes and shake my head. Safe to say, my sister was *not* a drama major.

"I'm sorry," Bella giggles quietly through the remains of her crying episode. "I'm not an actress."

"No shit," I chuckle. Then I sigh and scratch my head with my car key. "But yeah, I guess you can say we're boyfriend and boyfriend." By now, I've raised my voice just enough for AJ to catch my words. "We're gonna be pretty discreet before the divorce is final, but that doesn't exactly include family."

"I should hope not." Bella smiles. "You guys should come over for dinner this weekend!"

I shoot her a look that says she's milking it, but she clearly doesn't care. Then again, the more I speak, the more relaxed I feel. I realize I like this, being open about the relationship I've just started. A few walls crumble around me—walls I've kept up and guarded for the past fifteen years. The relief is...fucking immense.

"I'll ask him," I say, rubbing the back of my neck. I smile hesitantly and nod to myself. "Yeah. I'll ask him."

"I'm so happy for you, Edward," Bella whispers, bringing out the tears once more. "You have no idea."

Oh, I think I have an inkling. But I don't say that, because AJ appears with Bella's sandwich on a plate and sets it down on the table.

I watch him carefully, worried about him. Hiding the way I have... If I can help him, not only will it make him happier in the end—that, at the age of

twelve, finding out his feelings aren't wrong, something I'm only beginning to realize at the age of forty—but it will also make me feel better.

AJ has his parents' unconditional love and acceptance, and I want him to see that. If he happens to be gay, telling Bella and Anthony should be the least of his worries.

I know he's heard us; he wrings his hands awkwardly and blushes, keeping his eyes averted.

"Thank you so much, baby." Bella still looks emotional, but she smiles at her son and places a sleeping Grace in the bassinet again before going for the sandwich.

"I'm gonna go," I say, clearing my throat. "You need to rest, sis, and I'm gonna get dinner ready for when Garrett comes over."

"Ooh, date night?" Bella grins.

Definitely milking it.

I roll my eyes and keep my amusement to myself. "I think I hear Hazel calling my name," I bullshit and step out on the patio.

The baby girl is busy climbing Anthony in the pool—so is Masen—so Hazel doesn't see me until I'm standing by the ladder with a towel.

"Hi, Daddy!" She squeals as Anthony tosses her away. Hazel loves being underwater, but the life vest only allows a couple seconds, much to her disappointment.

"Time to go home, sweetheart." Anthony swims over to her and playfully nibbles on her cheek. "Or I'll just have you for dinner."

"No! Daddy, save me!" she giggles.

"You'll be my dinner instead, baby." I grin and squat down and hold out my hand. "Come on—you can do it!"

"I'll save you, Hazel!" Masen splashes toward them and clings on Anthony's back. "I'm Superman!"

"All right, all right." Anthony laughs and helps Hazel reach the ladder. "I surrender!" Then he growls and attacks his son instead.

"Hey, you." I wrap the towel around my daughter's shoulders and pick her up in my arms. "You ready to go home and fix dinner?"

"I help you?"

I nod. "Of course. You know I can't cook without you. And you remember Garrett from this morning?" She nods and plays with my tie. "He's coming over again. That okay?" Another nod from Hazel.

"*Really?*" That's Anthony. With Masen on his back, my brother-in-law throws me a sly, lopsided grin. "Tell me *everything*, girlfriend."

Funny.

"Bite me," I retort.

So, Hazel giggles, grabs my face, and bites my chin.

Chapter 13

The Goodbye

Music

"Firework" by Katy Perry

"My Little Girl" by Tim McGraw

EPOV

"No, de udda' song!" Hazel complains.

"You've said that ten times now!" I sit down on the floor with a huff, changing the song on the CD player again. Hazel has one CD that Bella's made for her; twenty songs, and I keep hearing *no, the other song, the other song*. I wish I were a mind reader.

"I can't believe you don't know the song she's talking about, Cullen."

I turn to the fucking couch where Garrett's sitting and getting his fucking camera out, and I fucking scowl at the motherfucker.

He smirks.

"De udda' song." Hazel comes to stand next to me, and she plays with my hair. "The guwl sings *boom, boom, boom*."

I squint, trying to remember, but lyrics aren't my thing.

"May I see?" Garrett sneaks up behind me and holds out his hand for the cover.

I hand it to him, and he hums, scanning the song titles.

"Try number fourteen." He hands it back.

So, I push play on some Katy Perry song, at which Hazel fist-pumps the air. "Tha's'e one! I'm weady now." She strikes a silly pose on the living room floor, eager to play model in front of Garrett's camera. "Auntie Wosie say I gotta shake it." I choke on my saliva and end up coughing; meanwhile, Hazel cocks her head at me, a curious expression on her face. "Wha's'a shake it?"

"There will be no shaking," I tell her, standing up. "You little goof." And Rose is on my shit list. "Just dance and be silly—you're good at that." Sitting down on the couch, I watch in amusement as Garrett humors my baby girl with the camera.

Seconds later, when Hazel's bouncing around, I do hear Katy Perry sing 'boom, boom, boom,' although it's drowned out by Hazel shouting the words.

"You're adorable, princess," Garrett chuckles.

I sip my beer, beyond content to just sit back and watch.

Over the last few days, it's been like this. Garrett has come over most nights for dinner; he's stayed a couple, and it's been indescribably wonderful. To be honest, I've always felt at home in this house, but Garrett replacing Angela has certainly made it homier. More comfortable.

Tomorrow we're all going over to Bella and Anthony's for dinner. I presume the women are gonna make plans for Thanksgiving, too, which is coming up soon. But what I look forward to is going to a family dinner with someone I actually want to be there with—who wants to be there, too.

"You look lost in thought." Garrett plops down next to me. Hazel has seemingly lost interest in goofing around in front of a camera. Now she's just dancing in her own world.

"Just thinkin'." I smile and lift my arm, placing it around his shoulders. "I like having you here."

"Well, your house does beat my apartment, so I guess I like being here, too."

"Oh, I see how it is." I grin and nuzzle his jaw. "You only want me for my money."

He snorts, as if the mere idea is ridiculous, then tilts up for a kiss that I happily give him. We don't go far at all, but I want my daughter to get used to some amount of affection—closeness, touching... I don't kiss him very deeply, but I linger, brushing my lips over his a few times. Growing more addicted to him.

We break the kiss when Hazel makes kissing noises.

"Almost time for you to go to bed, baby girl," I mention, pressing a last kiss to Garrett's temple. "How about we—" I'm cut off by my phone dinging in my pocket. "Bath time," I say absently, bringing out my phone. I make a face when I see it's a text from Angela.

Then a knot tightens in my gut when I read it.

I've found a condo. Already furnished. Shall I pick up Hazel on Sunday?

I struggle against nausea, and I can't even tell Garrett what's wrong. I just hand him the phone instead, unable to speak.

"Damn," Garrett mutters, scowling at the display. "And there's nothing we can do to prevent this?"

For one second, I revel in the fact that he said "we," but then I'm back to fighting the bile rising in my throat.

I manage a shake of my head, thankful Hazel is distracted by dancing again. And she's going to spend a whole week from Sunday with Angela? Christ. Angela barely *knows* our daughter; she doesn't give a shit about making Hazel *happy*.

I wish...God, I wish I had something—something to hold against Angela. Yeah, I'd fucking blackmail her ass if it meant I could have Hazel full-time. But knowing my to-be ex-wife...she may be cold and heartless, but something illicit could prevent her success in her career, which she'd never jeopardize.

~oOo~

On Sunday, Bella comes over an hour or so before Angela's due to pick up Hazel. Garrett's still here, though he plans to take off soon. And just in case Angela would be early, Garrett parked his truck across the street instead.

I don't like keeping him hidden, but we're all in agreement that it would do no good if Angela met him before the divorce is final.

And I highly doubt that Hazel would "sell us out." For one, Angela isn't one to ask Hazel about her life. Two, Hazel has always turned to me when she has questions. Three, she doesn't know the meaning of boyfriends and girlfriends, nor does she think kissing and hugging is limited to people who are married or together. That's for family—to her, there's no difference. Lastly, four, even if Hazel would talk, Angela has never really been a listener. Because what child would say something of value?

Anyway...yesterday proved to be a bust. The kids had fun and so on, but everyone noticed pretty quickly that I wasn't really present. So, I can thank Garrett for giving them the gist, which made everybody back off. Not that I was totally gone. I still got a kick out of Masen's funny look when he saw me placing a hand on Garrett's leg at dinner. And, of course,

let's not forget the wide eyes we got from several kids when Garrett kissed me. Then Masen had asked Bella if Uncle Edward missed Angela so much that I was kissing my friend—who was a *boy*.

That had caused Bella and Rose to launch into a lecture about love, and that just because you're a boy, you don't have to like girls, etc., etc.

AJ was quiet—more than usual—but throughout the evening, we noticed how the stiffness in his shoulders seemed to ease. We certainly see that as a good thing. Yet, nothing held my interest for long; I kept worrying, thinking about worst-case scenarios, all of them involving Hazel ending up at the hospital because Angela wasn't paying attention.

Safe to say, we ended the night fairly early.

And today...I've told Hazel—I've explained to her as best as I can...Mommy and Daddy don't live together anymore...you will sleep over at Mommy's new house for a week, seven nights...

Hazel just recently grasped the concept of "tomorrow." A week can end up being an eternity or just half a second for her, depending on how she likes it.

Hazel is too young to get her feelings hurt by neglect; she'll just scream until someone hears her. In other words, she doesn't hate Angela. Angela is Mommy. Mommy isn't home often, but she's there...somewhere... Hazel isn't always comfortable with Angela, though the fact remains: it's Mommy. And Mommy is a good person, right?

Bullshit, says this daddy.

So, what happens tonight when Hazel wants me to tuck her in? Since that's what I always do?

She won't understand.

"Where's Hazel?" Bella asks softly as we sit down in the living room.

"Napping," I answer, resting my elbows on my knees. "I've tried to sound as excited about her spending time with Angela as possible, but I still don't think she gets it." I push my hands into my hair and tug at the ends. "And it's not like I can make promises about all the fun things they'll be doing, 'cause..."

Bella sighs. "Yeah, Angela doesn't do fun. Have you discussed day care for when Angela's working?"

"She'll go to her regular place," I mutter, frowning at the floor.

Since I work a lot from home, Hazel only goes to day care when I cover games on site, or if they hire me to go on radio shows, but those are usually at night. That's when Hazel tends to end up with my sister or with Rose. Hazel does have a handful of friends from day care that she sometimes wants me to set up play dates with, but...she still likes it best when she's with family. Either with Bella and Anthony's kids, Dale's two, or Em and Rose's girls.

"I wish there was something I could do." I sigh heavily and lean back, absently fiddling with the hem of Garrett's t-shirt. "Isn't this where we discover skeletons in Angela's closet to use against her?"

"Unfortunately there's nothing to find." Bella scowls and checks her fingernails.

Garrett and I exchange a look before I cock a brow at my sister. Who is avoiding my gaze.

"Seems like you know what you're talking about, sis," I say evenly.

"Maybe..." She bites on her thumbnail, still looking anywhere but at me.

"Isabella Marie."

"Fine!" She throws her hands up. "God, you don't have to middle name me." There's another scowl. "Okay, remember Jake from high school?"

"Yeah," I grumble, remembering the mutt Bella dated her final year. "And I thought he was old news." I narrow my eyes at her, thinking about the little reconnecting they did on Facebook a couple months ago. "You're in contact with him again? I'm not so sure Anthony's happy about that."

"Please." She rolls her eyes. "Like I give a shit about Jake. But whatever." She waves a hand. "He happens to be a private investigator, so I sent him a PM. Mind you, I did it for Garrett's sake at first."

I look to Garrett, and he nods. "My ex?"

Sadly, I remember that, too. Garrett's ex wanted him back—was pretty relentless about it—but then he just vanished.

"What is it with your fuckin' exes?" I'm talking to both Garrett and Bella. "Ex-partners belong in the past." It's my turn to scowl, and I'm not happy to admit it, but the mention of Garrett with another man is enough to make my blood boil.

"Right. Because your own ex is a fucking treat," Bella says wryly.

All right, she's got me there. "Touché." I nod. "Go on."

"I wanted to know what James was up to," Garrett says, referring to the motherfucking ex. "Since he'd just stopped contacting me."

"Most would celebrate," I say irritably. "But not you—nah, you hire a PI to find him."

"Are you jealous?" He smirks.

"Fuck you." I grab his jaw and plant a firm kiss on his lips. "You're mine. Get used to it."

"Okay, let's do the foreplay when I'm not around." Bella looks a little uncomfortable, but I see it as payback instead. It's not like she and Anthony have ever been discreet. "It's hot when it's Castiel and Dean, but my brother..." She shudders.

"Who—"

"Don't ask, baby," I chuckle and shake my head at Garrett. "You don't wanna know—"

"Anyway!" Bella speaks over us. "Garrett just wanted to make sure James was gone for good, which he is. Jake tracked him to the East Coast, and he's already gotten a place to live, a job, whatever." She pauses her rant to take a breath. "Then...then I thought about Angela, and I brought it up with Jake..."

"He tried to find something on her," I state quietly.

She nods carefully. "Are you mad at me?"

"Mad? No." I huff a small humorless chuckle and drag a hand down my face. "I'm not mad at you, Bella." I'm disappointed in myself because I didn't think of this before. "But Jacob didn't find anything?"

"No..." She gives a floor a glare and bites her thumbnail again. "That bitch is spotless, and Jake followed her around for three weeks."

Figured.

If there's one thing Angela's good at, it's her job, and she wouldn't ruin her steady climb for anything.

"Daddy, I'm up!" I hear Hazel call from her room.

Garrett pats my thigh when I try to get up. "I'll get her."

I nod and blow out a breath. "Thanks."

When it's just Bella and me in the living room, she joins me on the couch.

"Will you be okay?"

"Yeah..." I lean against the back of the couch again and stare up at the ceiling. "Just...I gotta get used to it, I guess."

"Do you want me to stay when Angela gets here?"

I loll my head to face her and smile wryly. "I don't think so, sis. You'll just threaten her or something."

She doesn't deny it.

"I'll make things clear to her," I say. "If she harms one hair on Hazel's head..."

"I'll help you hide the body." Thing is, Bella's serious. Don't mess with Mama Bear.

~oOo~

When Angela arrives, it's been about twenty minutes since Bella and Garrett left.

"Hi, Mommy." Hazel smiles, but she also sneaks over to me and hugs my leg.

Angela checks her watch. "I have my assistant coming over soon to drop off a few files. We need to get going."

I grit my teeth and grab Hazel's jacket. "She said hi, Angela."

"Huh? Oh." She gives Hazel a quick smile. "Hi, darling."

Letting Hazel put on her jacket and shoes herself gives me a minute while she's distracted. I close the distance between Angela and me, and I keep my voice low. "I won't demand the Mother of the Year, but if you prioritize work when she's there, count on my interference. Are we clear on that, Angela?"

"I'm perfectly able of taking care of her," she spits out. "But you know what? I am also human, Edward. As soon as she cries, are you going to try to sic CPS on me?"

I smile darkly at the thought of Angela being human. It's actually quite laughable.

"Tempting, but no." I shake my head. "However, there's a difference between making a human mistake and simply ignoring our daughter's needs." I pause and take a step closer, keeping Hazel in my periphery. "A human mistake is to accidentally heat up her food too much, forget to brush her teeth, or hell, even lose sight of her at the grocery store." That last one...it happens to many; that's just how it is. Parents aren't infallible. I've forgotten to change her diaper a few times, which has given her a rash. I've also dropped her once.

I'm far from perfect.

But those are *mistakes*.

"What's your point?" Angela hisses, glaring up at me.

"That if I find out my baby girl is spending more time with your assistant than with you..." I trail off with an arched brow. "Or if I find out her new toys at Mommy's office are a stapler and a couple rulers—that's not a human mistake. It's fucking neglect."

She opens her mouth to speak, but I'm not done.

"Right now, for instance. What is Hazel doing?" I grab Angela's jaw before she can look. "No cheating," I chuckle humorlessly. "You don't know, do you? But *I* know." I point to my chest. "I know she's playing with her shoelaces and pretending she can tie them. Because I know her, and I pay attention to her. I'll be impressed if, by next week, you even know her favorite color."

With that, I let her go and squat down next to Hazel. "Can you give me the best Hazel hug in the world, baby?" She giggles and throws her arms around my neck. I pretend she's choking me. "Can't...breathe..." I tickle her sides, and she lets go. "You're so strong." I widen my eyes.

"Like you," she laughs and flexes her arms.

"That's right." I chuckle and kiss her nose. "You'll have fun at your sleepover with Mommy, yeah?"

Her smile fades a little and she gives a small nod.

"Come on, Hazel." Angela's got the door open.

I force myself to smile while I say goodbye.

When they're gone, I punch a wall.

Chapter 14

The Happy

Music

"YOLO" by The Lonely Island feat. Adam Levine

EPOV

The first time Angela calls and tells me she can't pick up Hazel, I'm furious because her neglect has already started.

The second time it happens—a few weeks later—I just shake my head. During Angela's weeks, I find myself "babysitting" Hazel a few times, and then, another few weeks later, Angela cancels her week altogether.

She has to go on a business trip, she says.

By the third time Angela has too many late nights to see our daughter even a day, the pattern is clear enough for hope to spark up in my chest.

I should've seen this coming.

Angela has never prioritized anyone but herself; I should've known having shared custody was an empty threat on her part.

Hell, even on Hazel's third birthday, Angela was a no-show.

We do hear from her occasionally, but more time passes between each call, and each call gets briefer.

On the rare occasion she spends time with Hazel, she returns her before Hazel can even miss me.

And today... It's March, and today we're celebrating two things: my divorce being final and Anthony's birthday.

Bella said that called for karaoke.

So, after a barbecue at my house—well, it's Garrett's now, too; he officially moved in yesterday—Mary and Geoff babysit the children while the rest of us head out.

For the first time in...I don't even know how long, it's fun to go out.

"Okay, everyone knows the rules!" Rose exclaims as we find a booth in the karaoke bar. "Edward and Anthony are not allowed near the stage!"

"Yeah, no singing for them." Bella agrees.

I snort a laugh and sit down next to Garrett, who asks, "Why?"

"Because they can actually sing," Emmett says frankly, "and that's not what karaoke is about."

Anthony and I shrug.

Bella eyes Alice, Dale's new girlfriend. "Can you sing, hon?"

Alice smiles impishly. "Not well."

"Good enough for me." Rose bumps fists with Bella.

Those two are still evaluating Alice, whether or not to give her their stamp of approval, but I have a feeling they'll give her the thumbs up soon. Dale is clearly in love, and Alice is good with his son and daughter.

"If you can sing, you better fake it," I murmur to Garrett, draping an arm behind him at the back of the booth.

He laughs through his nose and shakes his head. "I'd rather sit here and watch as they make fools outta themselves."

"See, that's why I love you," I chuckle, tilting down to kiss him.

It only took me a few months to fall for this man, and I thought of that fucking YOLO business and admitted my feelings right away. Feelings that Garrett reciprocated, much to my relief.

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After my shower, I skip getting dressed. It'd just give me time to chicken out. So, with a towel wrapped around my hips, I head downstairs to where Garrett and Hazel are watching cartoons.

"Hi." Hazel's not even looking at me. Her eyes are glued to the flat screen, which can explain the extra serving of strawberry ice cream on her clothes. Thank God she's seated on a towel. Bella would give me the bitch face if I already ruined the new couch.

"I have to tell you something," I say to Garrett, probably keeping this too business-like for the moment. But I can do sappy and sweet once the words are out. Garrett offers me his what's up? expression in return. I clear my throat. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Daddy," Hazel replies frankly and absently scoops some ice cream into her mouth.

I let out a shaky chuckle and run a hand through my wet hair.

Garrett smiles softly. "I love you, too." Jesus Christ, it feels like I'm smiling with my whole damn face. He mouths the next words, and they mean even more. "Both of you."

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Garrett hums and nips at my bottom lip. "Love you, too."

Fuck, we need to cut this short tonight. This past week, Hazel's had nightmares, so she's ended up in our bed every night. Safe to say, Anthony and I gave Masen and Dale's son—DJ—a talkin' to for showing Hazel a horror movie.

But tonight all the kids are having a sleepover with Geoff and Mary, so...

"Don't look at me like that," Garrett mutters and goes for his beer.

My mouth quirks up. "Like what?"

"Like I'm gonna get it."

I bark out a laugh and face the others who are picking out songs. "But you are, baby." I catch the goose bumps on his arm but make no mention of it. Instead I ask the others who's going first.

Emmett waves between Dale and himself. "We're gonna do 'Motherlover' by The Lonely Island—"

"The hell you are, bro!" Anthony grimaces. "You sick fuck—you, we have the same mother."

"Shit." Emmett frowns. "Didn't think of that."

Bella laughs. "It's okay, though. I have an idea." She leans down and whispers something to Dale and Emmett.

Two minutes later, my sister takes the stage with the beefy twins, making her look like even more of a midget. When she grabs the mic and searches me out, I know I'm in trouble.

"This is for you, little brother," she giggles.

"Why does she insist on calling you *little* brother?" Garrett snickers.

I shrug, then groan a laugh when Dale and Emmett sing the first notes of "YOLO" by The Lonely Island.

But when Bella is right, she's right. So, I tip my beer bottle in her direction and acknowledge that *sometimes* her meddling can be a good thing. A very good thing.

Such as...happiness.

Chapter 15

The Bedroom

Music

"Sideways" by Citizen Cope

EPOV

Though, as *happy* as I am to spend time with my family—trust me; I'm a family man—Garrett and I have barely entered the honeymoon state of our relationship, so privacy is very much appreciated...and enjoyed...and, and, oh yeah...

"That's it," I groan.

Straddling Garrett's midsection on our bed, I guide his head over my cock and fuck his mouth slowly. His hair is still damp from our shower.

"You like sucking my cock, baby?" I brush my thumb over his cheek. He jerks his head in a small nod and sucks me harder. "*Fuck.*" I lose myself for a moment. *In* the moment.

It feels like it gets more intense with every day that passes. I love him—Christ, I really love him—but I wonder if I'll ever be done falling.

When I get too close, I pull out and order him to get on all fours.

I reach for a condom and the lube, nearly unable to wait until we can make love without the damn rubber in the way. But we're responsible; it's been four months since our last tests, and we'll get tested again in two.

As I roll the condom down my cock and apply lubrication, I reach between Garrett's thighs and stroke him. I tease his ass with my mouth, making him desperate, just like I want him. It's when I swipe my tongue over his

hole that he moans *Please, Edward* so grittily. And when I tongue-fuck him, he pants out *Now, now, now* between gentle thrusts.

There's nothing like hearing him beg.

Dropping a final kiss to his lower spine, I position my cock to his ass and grip his hips as I push forward.

"I love being inside you." My voice is strained, shallow. Buried deep inside him, I pull him with me as I sit back on my heels. My hands roam his chest, my mouth already latched onto his neck. "Christ, Garrett..." He clenches around me, causing my cock to swell and harden further.

"I love you..." He groans, his head falling back to my shoulder. "Fuck me good, baby. Fuck me good."

"Mmmm." I graze my teeth along his neck and rotate my hips, pushing deeper into him. "Don't I always take care of you?"

"Yes," he grits out. "Christ, yes. So good."

His skin flushes with heat, and I do fuck him good. I fuck him hard, slow, fast, and gentle. In different positions. All over the bed. I draw it out. I make him pant and gasp for air when I fuck his tight ass like a jackhammer. I make him groan in need when I ignore his cock. I make him curse when I shove away his hand, denying him the right to touch himself.

"I need to come," he begs. "*Please, Edward.*"

"No." I pull out of him, roll him over so he's on his back, and throw his legs over my shoulders. "Not yet."

With that, I slam back inside him and begin to fuck him into the mattress. Looking down between us, I watch as my slicked-up cock moves in and

out, feel how he squeezes me, and love how thoroughly fucked I make him look.

"This is my cock." I fist his and stroke him too gently for him to enjoy it.

"Property of Edward Cullen." As his legs slide down my arms, I lean forward and press my forehead to his. "Isn't that right, love?" I whisper.

"Yours," he pants, meeting every one of my thrusts. "Fuck—always."

Always.

I claim his mouth with mine, tension and energy traveling down my spine. Small tingles run through me, eliciting shivers. Moaning into the kiss, I grab his jaw, angling for more, for even deeper, all while my orgasm approaches rapidly.

"I'll take care of you," I say through clenched teeth, slamming in once more before I start coming. For several seconds, my climax has its hold on me, coming first with explosive bolts, then drawn-out shudders and sensational tremors.

"Do you know how sexy you are when you come?" he whispers, kissing my jaw, chin, my lips.

I let out a pent-up breath and push myself up. "No," I chuckle, still catching my breath. "But I can imagine the faces I make." Nothing sexy about them, I'm sure. "Now it's your turn."

Still kneeling between his thighs, I lean down and work his cock without teasing this time. As I suck two fingers into my mouth, I think he gets where I'm going with this, and his heated gaze darkens further.

"Pull up your knees," I instruct quietly, bringing my fingers to his ass. His feet are firmly planted on the mattress, and the second I slide those two digits inside him, he thrusts back. "That's it. Move with me."

By the time I've found his prostate, I suck his cock into my mouth, my free hand holding onto the base in a tight grip. With enough pressure applied on his prostate, he controls his own movements and rubs up exactly where he wants my fingers. Small thrusts, some circling, massaging, all while I suck him as deep and as hard as I can.

In salty pulses, I taste his building release, and I swallow, wanting more. He moans and curses, his fingers weaving through my hair. He's already close, I can tell. And completely lost.

"Come on, baby," I murmur, suckling the tip of his cock. "Let me swallow you."

"*Fuck.*" He sucks in a sharp breath, his muscles tensing, and another few beads of come spread in my mouth. "I'm—I'm..." *coming.*

Rubbing his prostate slightly harder, I redouble my efforts as he climaxes. Rope after rope slides down my throat, his moves jerky and instinctual. His groans are hoarse and shallow. His lips parted. Eyes closed.

It's un-fucking-believable how satisfying it can be to satisfy someone else.

When Garrett shudders, returning to the present, I stop my ministrations before his body grows too sensitive to my touch. I drag my ass off the bed, dispose of the condom, wash up, and get back just in time for Garrett to doze off.

"I'm getting old," he mumbles through a yawn.

"I have three years on you, so does that make me ancient?" I pull the covers over us and lie on my side, close enough to feel his body heat.

"You always have more energy than I have," he grunts as I steal a quick kiss. "Stop bitching."

I laugh. "Goodnight, Garrett."

"Goodnight...love you."

"Love you, too. And it's your turn to pick up breakfast tomorrow."

Cracking an eye open, I see that he's torn between smiling and grimacing.

"Fuck you."

"Just did."

The Epilogue

Music

"First Day of my Life" by Bright Eyes

AJ's POV

"Are you sure they'll be all right with this?" Seth asks.

I nod, hoping so.

My mom turns thirty-four today, and I asked if I could bring somebody to the barbecue. Mom and Dad said yes right away, and I think they're on to me. 'Cause I tend to use names or at least say "friend." But this time I just said "somebody," and my mom is a freak when it comes to figuring things out.

I've only told Uncle Edward about Seth, 'cause...yeah, there's no way I'd talk sex with my mother. And Dad... I shudder. *No*. Been there, done that. But Uncle Edward's cool about it, and he doesn't get too personal.

Not that I'm...having sex...shit, I'm not even sixteen yet. I just...had some questions. Whatever.

Blowing out a breath, I open the picket fence gate and look down to Seth's hand, wondering if I should take it. I want to, but I'm not sure he'd like that. It was just last week he came out to his parents, and it didn't go well. His mom is like my own, so she's supportive, but Seth's dad freaked out.

Afterward, I had been the one Seth called, and we met up, and...um.

We kissed, all right?

I've liked him for a while, but we haven't really been close. Friendly but not *friends*. But he came up to me after school one day, and he kinda just blurted out that he needed to talk to me. And since pretty much everyone knows I'm gay...I don't know, whatever. Some accept it, some don't. I have a handful of friends that I stick with, and now Seth's slowly becoming a part of that group.

Then, last week—about two or three months since he told me he's gay—he came out to his parents. He'd told them that he had feelings for someone, and that guy's name was AJ McCarty.

Hell, yeah.

"You ready?" I ask as we reach the door. I trace my key chain and pull out my keys. Even here, I can hear my younger cousins splashing around in the pool on the other side of the house.

"Um, yeah." He glances around us nervously, as if someone's gonna jump out of the bushes. "Just..." His eyes flick to my mouth, then he leans forward, tilts his head, and kisses me quickly.

Instaboner.

Okay, not really, but this is gonna take some getting used to!

"We don't have to hide—you know that, right?" I rub the back of my neck, cursing the way my cheeks always heat up. I totally got that from Mom. Otherwise, I look just like my dad, but that fucking blush...and Mom thinks it's *cute*.

"Are you sure?" he asks for the hundredth time.

"My mom's just gonna be happy, if anything." I roll my eyes at the thought of her. Don't get me wrong; I love having her support—all my family's support—but she can...um, sorta get in your face a lot? I think she

wished I was more of the, uh, flamboyant kind of dude...like, someone she could take shopping.

She's just gonna have to do that when Gracie gets older. Or my cousin Hazel—she loves that shit already, and she's only seven or something.

Reassuring Seth once more, I unlock the door to my house and enter, and this time I grab Seth's hand.

"You're nervous, too," he hisses quietly, no doubt feeling the clamminess of my hand.

"Well..." I shrug, at a loss. "I've never brought someone home like this before." It's the truth. Seth's my first boyfriend—first kiss, *first grope*...and fuck, was that awesome.

I think I jerked off three times after that night!

~oOo~

When Seth and I step out on the patio, we're both holding each other's hand. Death-grip style.

Dad and my uncles are by the grill, 'cause men can't barbecue alone, and Mom and my aunts are sitting at the grownups' table, having probably already finished setting everything up. The kids' table is nearby, as is the table with all the plates, salads, drinks...whatever, and most kids are in the pool.

Grandma and Gramps are on vacation—in Atlantic City, I think.

"Which one's your brother?" Seth asks, leaning close.

I point to the lanky mofo about to jump into the pool with my cousin DJ, Uncle Dale's kid. They're the same age: eleven. Well, Mase turns twelve later this year, and he just hit puberty, which makes me laugh sometimes.

It's what older brothers do.

"And that's my sister over there." I point to the cute four-year-old struggling with her life jacket. Hazel is standing next to her, and she can swim, but the grownups still force her to wear floaties unless there's an adult in the pool. But it looks like Uncle Garrett's on his way over to them...

"AJ!" Mom's spotted me. Only a second later, she's heading toward me, 'cause she's also seen that Seth and I are holding hands.

"Too tight," Seth whispers.

"Sorry." I swallow and loosen my grip. A little. "Hey, Mom."

"Hi!"

"Are you?" I smirk. "High, I mean." 'Cause she's beaming and shit.

"Funny you." She smiles up at me before hugging my middle—as if she didn't see me a few hours ago. "Are you gonna introduce me to your boyfriend?" Abruptly, she spins and around and shouts, "Anthony, baby! Get over here!"

I quickly wipe my forehead; unfortunately, I can't blame my sweat on the sun.

"What's up, my love?" Dad drapes an arm around Mom's shoulder.

"AJ..." Mom grins.

"Right." I clear my throat. Fuckin' blush... "Mom, Dad, this is Seth Clearwater—Seth, my mom, Bella. Um, McCarty. And my dad, Anthony."

Dad offers a tight smile, and Mom giggles, "You're gonna have to let go of his hand so we can greet him properly, baby."

That, too.

I let go of Seth, and he wipes his hand off his thigh—I actually think his cheeks are a little pink, too—and greets my parents.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. McCarty," he says nervously. "And happy birthday," he adds quickly to my mom.

"Oh, it's Bella and Anthony, honey," Mom says. "And it's very nice to meet you, too. Come, I'll introduce you to the other crazies."

Dude, Mom just kidnaps him...

"I'd actually prefer Mr. McCarty," Dad mutters, although Mom and Seth are long gone.

I squint up at him—not that he's much taller; just a couple inches. "You don't like him?" I want my parents to like Seth.

"I don't *know* him, champ." Dad sighs and puts his arm around me. "And I know most fathers are thrilled—or proud—to find out their sons are dating, while their daughters...we protect them with guns." He chuckles quietly, kinda wistfully. "But I lean toward the gun with all my children. You're still my baby, AJ."

"Oh." I don't know what to say, except... "I'm glad you don't own a gun."

"If Seth's a good guy, you don't have to worry about me buying one," he retorts.

I smile and nod, conceding.

"You might wanna run interference soon, buddy." Uncle Edward comes over and ruffles my hair. What's up with that shit, anyway? I'm almost a grown man! "Seth doesn't look very comfortable." He tips his beer bottle

at the grownups' table where Seth's being chatted up by Mom, Aunt Rose, and Aunt Alice.

"Seth might as well get it over with," Dad says with a shrug.

"Dad, no!" That's Hazel laughing about something, and Uncle Edward automatically looks over there, but she's just goofing around with Uncle Garrett in the pool. Besides, my uncle is "Daddy" while Garrett is "Dad."

"Daddy!" And that's Grace... "You toss me, too!"

"I'll be right there, sweetheart!" Dad calls back. Then he turns to me, his lips pursed, like he's deliberating. *What?* "Should I have a father-son talk with you again?"

Uh, that'd be a no!

Look, the sex talk will always be embarrassing, but it's fucking worse when it's about anal.

I've barely rounded second base; I don't need to know the details about...*home run*.

"Thanks, but I don't think we have any bananas at home," I groan in embarrassment. "And I still remember our talk from when I was thirteen. And fourteen." *Vividly*.

Uncle Edward barks out a laugh.

"Hey, I did what Google suggested," Dad defends.

"Yeah, well..." I mumble, "I don't like it when my dad preaches about the differences between KY and Astroglide."

Apparently, my mom prefers Astroglide. Like her son needs to know that shit. It's bad enough they have sex vag—oh, gag—vaginally.

I shudder.

"Maximus is better," Uncle Edward mutters before taking a swig from his beer.

"And that's my cue to leave." Dad walks away, shedding his t-shirt on the way to jump into the pool. "Dale, Em! Lemme know when the steaks are done!"

"Don't worry, AJ," Uncle Edward chuckles, "I'm not gonna embarrass you further."

I flush and look down, but truth is, I don't get as embarrassed when he's the one talking. I don't know, but he's got a more casual approach about...everything, and he's not trying too hard all the time. Mom and Dad aren't either—in general—but when it's about sex? Christ! It's like they're aiming at turning me red.

"You do know you can come talk to me, though, right?"

"Uh-huh." I nod jerkily. "Yeah..."

"Garrett, too—if talking to me is too weird."

"It's not," I say quickly.

"I'm glad." He gives my shoulder a squeeze. "Now, go save your boyfriend before your mom talks him into some shopping spree."

"Good idea." I snicker. "Thanks, Unc."

Crossing the lawn, I walk toward Seth, and when he looks up and smiles widely at me, it feels pretty damn good.

Guess I was nervous today for nothing.

You mean until you remember that you forgot to buy your mom a gift?

SHIT!

No, no, it's cool. 'Cause this is where I bring out the, "I'll watch Mase and Gracie so you and Dad can have a date night." Or the, "You want a foot rub, Mom?" Or the winner, "I'll do laundry for two weeks."

Whew.

The Outtake

AJ's First Kiss

Music

"Airplanes" by B.o.B feat. Hayley Williams

AJ's POV

Reaching the playground in my neighborhood, I get off my bike and see that Seth is already here.

It's pretty dark, so I can't see if he's upset or...or if everything went well tonight.

I lean my bike against a picnic table, then stick my hands down my pockets and walk over to the swings.

"Hey," he says quietly as I pick the swing next to his.

Shit, it doesn't look like it went well. "Um, how did it go?"

He shrugs and looks down at the sand. "Mom's okay with it, but Dad..." He winces.

My shoulders tense up, and I remember stories I've read online—about people who've come out to their parents.

"Did he hurt you?" I grit out, ready to punch Mr. Clearwater.

He laughs weakly, completely without humor. "Not physically. Don't worry about it." He still won't look at me. "I'll be fine."

"I'm sorry," I whisper. Damn, I wish I could...I don't know, comfort him. But just 'cause he's gay and I've liked him for months...it doesn't mean he

likes me, too. "Um—" my cheeks flush "—I...I'm here, you know. If you wanna talk. Or whatever."

He swallows and bobs his head in a small nod, looking nothing like the hot and confident dude he usually is. Well, he's still fucking hot, but...I don't like the vulnerability in his dark eyes.

"How did it go when you came out?" he asks, giving me a sideways glance. "You've told me your parents are cool with it, but you haven't told me, like, how it played out."

I blow out a breath, thinking back...I'd recently turned fourteen.

Shit, coming out was *not* easy. But I was lucky.

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"Mom..."

"What's up, sweetie?" She checks the oven, doing dinner or something, maybe lunches for me and Mase. I don't know.

"Um." I clear my throat, feeling my cheeks heat up already. "I—" Fuck, my voice almost cracked. "I don't, uh...I don't like girls."

Shit. I mean...I think Mom and Dad already know, but this is still... Ugh, I'm all nervous.

It gets real quiet for a beat, and then Mom appears in front of me.

"Can you look at me?" she asks softly.

I do, and for some reason I feel like crying. Pathetic much?

"I already know," she whispers and cups my cheek. It's funny—I feel two feet tall right now, yet I grew taller than Mom over this summer. "And you have nothing to worry about—not when it comes to Daddy and me, okay?"

I nod, my throat all thick. My vision gets a little blurry, too.

"Oh, come here." She throws her arms around me, and I squeeze my eyes shut. "I'm so proud of you." She sniffles.

Shrugging out of the hug, I look down, feeling awkward.

There's no reason for her to be proud of me.

"What's up?" Great, now Dad joins us. "Something wrong, champ?" He ruffles my hair like I'm some kid.

"No." Mom quickly wipes her cheeks. "Nothing is wrong at all." She eyes me carefully. "You wanna tell Daddy or...? Waiting is fine—whenever you're ready."

I swallow hard, panicking for a second. 'Cause my dad is like...he's this expert commentator, all about sports and manly stuff, and what if he'll be disappointed? I'm sure he'd rather have a son who will be the next big football player or something.

But he doesn't seem to think it's a bad thing that Uncle Edward's gay...

He was even Uncle Edward's best man when he married Garrett last year.

And if Dad's already guessed, then it hopefully won't come as a shock.

"I'm gay," I croak.

Have I ruined everything now?

"Oh...so, the day has come, huh?" Dad blows out a breath. "And—and this has you upset, why?"

I frown to myself, then finally dare to look up at him. He smiles cautiously, looking worried. And my dad never cries—never ever, unless you count when I was born...and Mase and Gracie—so it freaks me out to see his eyes all shiny.

I think...I think my fear is that he's faking it. That he'll pretend to be okay with it but will secretly love Mase and Grace more.

I shrug, unable to say anything. Not a single word.

Well, there is one thing. "I'm s-sorry." My voice cracks.

"Oh, AJ—" Mom starts crying. "Oh, no, no, no."

"Don't you fucking dare apologize, son." Dad palms my cheeks, and he's pissed. There's also sadness, I think. I don't know! "Mom and I love you for who you are," he says thickly, yet firmly. "The only time I want you to apologize is if you've done something wrong. Are we clear?"

I nod quickly and gulp, wishing I could man up and not fucking cry. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Come here, baby." His voice gentles, and he squeezes me to him. "Haven't you learned by now that being gay isn't wrong? I thought we taught you better."

"You did—you have." My words are muffled against his t-shirt. "But..." I sniffle. "It's easier to be straight."

"Well, fuck easy," he grunts. Releasing me, he palms my cheeks again. "Actually, you do owe us an apology. For apologizing."

"Daddy's right," Mom says, still weepy. "That was a dumb move."

I smile hesitantly, swearing I'm like a thousand pounds lighter, then chuckle once and wipe my nose with my shirt. "All right. I'm sorry for apologizing."

"That's better." Dad claps me on the shoulder and kisses my forehead.

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Uncle Edward's reaction was pretty similar to Dad's, and my uncle had also explained to me why Mom said she was proud of me.

"What you did, buddy—being upfront with your parents about something like this at such an early age...it's definitely a reason to be proud. You're braver than I was, and I want you to know I'm very proud of you, too."

His own story...I can't say I envy him, but I'm very glad he's happy now. Plus, it totally made it easier for me to be honest with Mom and Dad.

That doesn't mean I don't wanna junk punch Mom and Uncle Edward's parents.

Shitheads...

Shaking my head, I return to the present and finish my story to Seth. By now, we've walked away from the swings and ended up at the picnic table instead. We're both seated on the table, our feet on the bench.

We sit so close that I can tell we have the same Axe body spray.

"Your parents sound cool," he says with a small smile.

I nod and look down at my sneakers, agreeing; they really are. "What did you tell your folks, exactly?" I ask.

I feel nervous for some reason. Or maybe it's just because Seth and I are alone. Okay, that's happened before, but it's different now. I just don't know why.

"Um, I told my mom I like someone," he admits, which causes my gut to tighten.

Ugh, I don't wanna see him making out with another dude. As far as I know, there are only two other guys at our school who are gay, both seniors. Then again, Seth still has friends in San Diego; it's where he lived before moving here last year.

"And I told them the guy's name." Seth rolls his eyes. "Not my smoothest move. Mom cried, but she also hugged me, and she kept saying, 'It's okay, it's okay, it's okay.' And Dad was angry. Disappointed..." He winces again and averts his eyes. "Mom thinks he'll come around." But Seth doesn't seem to believe it. "We'll see, I guess."

I release a breath, peering out over the playground, and curse myself for being selfish. I'm here to listen, and I really fucking feel for him, but I can't help it. I want to know who the hell it is he likes.

"Have you told the guy you like that you're gay?" I ask, hoping I sound casual.

"Yep. A couple months ago."

Racking my brain, I try to remember if he's mentioned someone...

A couple months ago. A couple months ago. A couple months ago.

He told *me* a couple months ago.

I suck in a breath and chance a glance at Seth, who is looking back at me nervously.

Me?

Unconsciously, I lean toward him a few inches, then I notice he's been doing the same thing. The knot in my stomach tightens further, but for a whole other reason than before. It's me he likes? *Holy shit*. Just a couple seconds later, we tilt our heads and kiss.

Best. Fucking. Kiss. Ever.

Dude, it's your first.

Whatever.

I'm the fucking *man*.