



*A Risk
Worth Taking*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NIKKI ASH

*A Risk
Worth Taking*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NIKKI ASH

A Risk Worth Taking

Copyright © 2023 Nikki Ash

Cover Design: Jersey Girl Designs

Photo: Sarah Eirew Photography

Editor: Susan Staudinger, SS Editing

RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information and retrieval system without express written permission from the Author/Publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

CONTENTS

[Author's Note](#)

[A Risk Worth Taking Playlist](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Finding Beauty in the Darkness Preview](#)
[Finding Beauty in the Darkness preview](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

AUTHOR'S NOTE: While A Risk Worth Taking can be read as a standalone, it's recommended that The Risk of Falling be read first to ensure the best reading experience.

WARNING: This story contains subjects that may be sensitive for some readers. Trigger warnings (which contain spoilers) can be found on my [website](#).

A RISK WORTH TAKING PLAYLIST

2Step – Ed Sheeran
Numb – Marshmello & Khalid
Crush – David Archuleta
The Heart Wants What It Wants – Selena Gomez
Over My Head – The Fray
Numb Little Bug – Em Beihold
There's No Way – Lauv
When You're Gone – Shawn Mendez
Beautiful Mistakes – Maroon 5 & Megan Thee Stallion
Thank God – Kane Brown & Katelyn Brown

Listen to all my playlists here: [Nikki Ash's Playlists](#)

I don't think anyone is ever ready, but when someone makes you feel alive again, it's kind of worth the risk.

– Nikki Rowe

CHAPTER ONE

ELLIE



The Present

“STOP! PLEASE...PLEASE DON’T DO THIS...” I KICK MY FEET OUT, AIMING FOR his dick, but as I’m about to connect, I’m flipped onto my stomach like a rag doll, my elbows barely catching me before my chin hits the concrete.

He shoves my shorts down my legs, my underwear next.

I squirm, trying to get away, but a pair of hands hold me down while another pushes my thighs apart.

“Please,” I beg, refusing to lie here and take it. “Please don’t—”

“Ellie, what the fuck? Ellie!”

The sound of my name, combined with the shaking of my shoulders, has my eyes snapping open and scanning the room as I gasp for air.

“You okay?” Tim asks.

I glance around and remember where I am: in my condo, on my bed, half naked with my boyfriend of two months. We were working our way toward having sex, until...

“Ellie,” Tim says again. “Are you —?”

“No,” I choke out, shoving him off me. He momentarily loses his balance but quickly catches himself before he falls backward onto the floor.

While tucking my breasts back into my bra, I scramble off the bed and snag my shirt off the ground, throwing it over my head, all while feeling Tim’s eyes on me. Following me. Trying to figure me out.

He won’t, though. None of them ever do. Because I never let them get

close enough.

“El,” he finally says, the pity in his tone making me flinch. He hasn’t the first clue what I’ve been through, but it doesn’t take a genius to realize I’m a broken mess that no one can piece back together.

“Please leave,” I tell him, my tone flat even to my own ears.

“What?” he asks, confused as to where this is going—or not going.

“I want you to leave. We’re done,” I say, having yet to meet his gaze. It’s easier this way. I don’t have to see the hurt or confusion in his eyes.

When the heat of his body wraps around mine from behind, his hands seeking to comfort me, I recoil, not wanting any part of him touching me.

It’s clear he’s not going to leave without putting up a fight. Most women probably love a man who will fight for their relationship. I probably would too if I wanted him to fight for us...But I don’t.

“I said we’re done. Please leave.” I turn to face him, my gaze meeting his, so he understands I’m serious.

He stares at me for a long moment and then shakes his head. “I should’ve known better. Mark said you were a coldhearted bitch, but I didn’t listen.” I cringe slightly at his harsh words but don’t argue, because while calling me a bitch is rude, he isn’t wrong, and I did waste two months of his life.

With a huff, he swipes his shirt off the floor, yanks it on, and walks out the door.

I wait until the front door slams before I slide to the floor. My tears are barely halfway down my face when my best friend is barging through my door and on the floor next to me, holding me tightly in her arms.

“Another flashback,” she says with a sigh—not asking, because she already knows the answer. We’ve been roommates for the past three and a half years, and she knows more about me than anyone.

“I tried,” I rasp, knowing that’s not exactly true and hoping she won’t call me out on my white lie.

Of course, Raelyn isn’t having it. “No, you didn’t. You had a flashback and kicked him out.”

“I’m not ready,” I repeat the same three words I say every time I’m looking to end things with a guy right before we have sex.

“You’re never going to be ready if you don’t stay with anyone long enough to let them in. Trust takes time, El.”

“I gave him two months,” I remind her. “There’s no sense in wasting any more of his time if I know I’ll never be able to trust him.” This isn’t the first

instance where Tim tried to round second base and I pushed him away. However, today, when the flashback hit hard, I knew it was a lost cause. And since Tim is a twenty-one-year-old red-blooded college student who thinks with his dick, I didn't see any reason to delay the inevitable. By this weekend he'll be balls deep in another woman, and next weekend he won't even remember my name.

"El," Raelyn sighs. "You don't trust anyone. You keep everyone at arm's length."

"That's not true," I scoff, resenting her blanket statement. "I trust you and Sienna."

"You trust us to a certain extent, but not even Sienna knows everything..." I shudder at the thought of my older sister, who raised me like her own, knowing *everything*. The sadness, the disappointment, the guilt...Nope, not happening.

"And yeah, I know what happened," Raelyn adds, "but only because we've been roommates for years and I never stopped pushing you to open up and let me in. Except if we're being honest..." She sits back, her gorgeous brown eyes meeting my emerald ones. "I probably don't know the full extent of what you're dealing with."

"I don't want my sister to worry." Raelyn opens her mouth to argue, but I shake my head. "She will, Rae, and I don't want her to. And as for you, you know enough." Enough to understand why I am the way I am without the sort of gory details no one else should have to live with.

"You know I think you're wrong," she says, not for the first time. Whenever I try to take things to the next level with a guy and have flashbacks, freak out, and send him packing, we have this same conversation. "I think you should tell her. It's affecting your relationship, and you're hurting her worse by shutting her out."

"I know," I mutter, hating that the person I love the most in the world is the person I can't stand to be around. Not because of anything she did. No, Sienna Alexander is perfect. She's the perfect sister, the perfect mom, the perfect wife.

It's me.

I'm the broken one.

And if she knew why, she'd blame herself. Then she'd try to fix me, and I'm not sure I can be fixed, which would only cause her more pain.

"I just need to figure my shit out. It all unraveled so fast." I went from

having a close-knit relationship with my sister to escaping to California to get away from her, only going home to New York when absolutely necessary.

“Well, you have five months until we graduate, and unless you’ve changed your mind, you’ll be right back where you started,” she reminds me. “Regardless, I wasn’t talking about Sienna and me when I said you keep everyone at arm’s length. I was talking about men.” She side-eyes me. “You claim you need to trust a guy in order to be with him, but you don’t let anyone get close enough to build up that trust.”

“That’s not true,” I balk.

“Really? Who do you trust?”

CHAPTER TWO

ELLIE



The Past

“UGH, I HATE WRITING ESSAYS.” I SLUMP ON THE COUCH, CROSSING MY ARMS over my chest. “It’s not like I’m going to need to write essays when I’m dancing.”

“Sometimes in life we have to do things we don’t want to do so we can do the things we want to do,” Marina says as she stitches a pair of booty shorts one of the dancers ripped. It’s Friday night and I’m at Wanderlust, the gentleman’s club where my sister works. There’s no shame in her job, because it not only pays enough for her schooling, as well as my dance lessons, but also the bills our piece of shit mom is responsible for. Marina is the club’s house mom, and in the short time I’ve known her, she’s always treated me like her own.

“I just don’t know how to start it,” I whine. “Once I get going, it’s —”

A loud knock cuts my words off, followed by Marina yelling for whoever it is to come in.

“Everyone decent?” the club owner, Lincoln, asks as he walks in and straight over to Marina.

Everyone is not decent. I glance around and find two women topless, one completely naked. Each perking up at the sight of him, hoping he’ll take notice.

I don’t blame them. He’s good-looking with his hazel eyes, prominent nose, and scruffy angular jaw. Add in his height, probably a little over six

foot, the way he wears those designer suits—he clearly works out—plus the fact he’s stupid rich, and he might as well be Prince Charming.

“I’m placing an order,” he tells Marina, not giving a single woman even the slightest bit of attention. From what I’ve heard, Lincoln rarely spends much time here, but his manager is on his honeymoon, so he’s filling in for him.

I tune him and Marina out and focus on my essay, but when I read over the prompt again, I get frustrated and groan. “Writing sucks.”

“Whatcha writing?” I glance up and find Lincoln standing in front of me, looking at my paper.

“That’s the problem. I’m *not* writing. This stupid essay is due Monday, and I haven’t even started it.”

He picks up the prompts and as he’s reading over them, Candy walks by, still topless, and rubs up against him. His gaze lands on her for a beat before he looks back at me. “You’re Sienna’s little sister, right?”

I nod.

“It’s probably hard to focus in here. Why don’t we go to my office, and I can help you there?” He glances at Marina. “Let Sienna know Eliza is with me.”

“You can call me Ellie,” I say, standing and gathering my stuff.

Lincoln walks me over to his office and takes a seat behind the desk, motioning for me to sit in the plump, leather visitor seat.

I notice he leaves the door open, and he explains, “I have an open-door policy. If I’m here, the door is open, and everyone knows they can come to me for anything.” He sets the paper down. “Now, the key to writing a good essay is to understand what it’s asking you to do.”

He spends the next several minutes walking me through how to break the prompt apart and outline, something my teacher never went over with us. By the time he’s done, I understand what I need to do.

“Now, you have to—” His phone rings and he raises a finger, silently telling me to give him a moment. “What’s up, big bro?” I don’t know who his brother is, although I’ve heard from the women talking that they’re close. His name is Micah, and while Lincoln is all smiles, Micah is apparently a brooding asshole—at least that’s how the women describe him.

They talk for a few minutes about the restaurant Lincoln’s opening. From what I’ve gathered, the building has three levels: the bottom floor is an underground sex club called Elite, the ground floor is a strip club and bar,

which is where my sister works, and the top floor will be a restaurant called Impulse. They're still in the building stages, according to Sienna.

When he hangs up, he glances at my paper and mock glares. "You got nothing done."

"I think I have trouble focusing," I admit. "I can memorize any dance number, but when it comes to reading and writing, I struggle."

"You're a dancer?" he asks.

"Yep, dancing is my life. Not dancing like stripping, though," I'm quick to clarify.

"Obviously," he says with a laugh. "So, what do you do—ballet?"

"All types, really. My sister and I started dancing before we could walk," I joke. "My plan is to get into NYU and go to school for dance therapy. It's always been my safe place, and I'd love to teach it one day with my sister. Help other people find their safe place through dance like I did." I shrug. "Maybe we could even open our own studio. Who knows. But in order to get into NYU, I need the grades, especially if I'm going to apply for a scholarship."

There's no way Sienna can afford my tuition, nor would I ask that of her, which means I have less than three years left to get the grades I need to get in and hope for an academic or dance scholarship of some sort. I'll get some financial aid since we're poor as hell, but it won't be enough—honestly, it's never enough.

"You've got this," Lincoln says, his hazel eyes meeting mine. "And if you need any help with your schoolwork, I'm always here. Don't tell my brother, but I'm the smart one in the family." He winks playfully, causing butterflies to swarm in my belly.

We work on my essay for another hour or so, and when we finish, he walks me back to the dressing room. This is the first time I've been around a man who doesn't look at me like I was a prize lamb at the county fair.

Growing up in a home with a drug-addicted prostitute for a mom, I've come across my fair share of men, none of which are bothered that I'm underage. Pussy is pussy to them, and virgin pussy only makes them want me that much more.

I've never met a gentleman like Lincoln. He kept the door open, was respectful, and he didn't make a single crude comment the entire time. As I watch him speak to Marina, before he glances back at me and smiles softly, I can't help but wonder what it would be like to be with a man like Lincoln.

My assumption has always been that all the women here flirt with him because he's rich and hot, only now I realize it may be more than that. They see what I didn't see before: the safety, security, comfort. Things girls like me don't have the luxury of getting.



“I’M GOING TO NEED TO BORROW YOUR SISTER,” LINCOLN SAYS WHEN WE walk through the back door of Wanderlust.

“For what?” Sienna asks skeptically, at the same time I say, “Sure!”

It’s been almost two weeks since Lincoln helped with my essay, and I’ve only seen him a handful of times since. But during each interaction he’s nice and sweet. He talks to me like I’m his equal, not like I’m a little kid or a piece of meat. I like him, and even though I know I’m too young for him right now, one day I won’t be. I read an article online that says the way to a man’s heart is through friendship, so that’s what I’m going to do. Unlike the women who throw themselves at him, I’m going to befriend him, and once I’m old enough, it will be easy to convince him to be with me.

Lincoln chuckles. “The chef I’m looking to hire is upstairs making an array of dishes for me to sample. I’d love a second opinion.”

“I’m starved,” I shamelessly lie. Sienna and I literally just ate dinner before we came here. But I want more time with Lincoln. How can we develop a friendship without spending time together?

“Okay, but I need her real quick,” Sienna says, thankfully not calling me out on my little white lie. “Can she meet you in a few minutes?”

“No problem,” Lincoln says. “See you in a few.” He graces me with a soft smile that makes my belly tighten.

“Oh, wait!” I say, holding out the container in my hands. “This is for you. A thank you for helping me with my essay. It’s homemade soup.” Occasionally, when we have the money for the ingredients, I make meatball minestrone. It’s Sienna’s favorite—mine too—and we can eat the leftovers for days.

Lincoln takes it from me and lifts the lid. “Smells amazing. You made this yourself?”

“Yep,” I tell him, imagining that one day, when we’re together, I’ll make meatballs for him. Men love food, and I’m a great cook. “All you have to do

is heat it up. It's delicious."

"Thanks," he says. "Meet me in my office when you're ready to go upstairs."

When we get in the dressing room, Sienna pulls me to the side, glancing around to make sure no one can hear what she's about to say. "He's too old for you. You know that, right?"

She's sounding like a broken record. When I mentioned to her how he helped me with my essay, I made the mistake of also saying he's nice and I like him. He's different from the men our mom brings home to fuck. And he's way more mature than the guys at school.

"Age is just a number," I counter stubbornly. It's not like I expect him to be with me now. I'm aware that at my age, he doesn't see me like that—hence my goal to form a friendship with him.

"Unless it's a number under eighteen," Sienna says with a stern face. "Then, it's statutory rape."

At her words, I roll my eyes because Lincoln isn't that type of guy, and I wouldn't risk hitting on him right now. I need to be smart about things if I want him to give us a real chance one day. "I'll be fifteen soon. Eighteen is only three years away."

I looked it up, and as long as I'm eighteen, we can be together.

And once I'm legal, all bets are off.

CHAPTER THREE

ELLIE



The Past

“ELLIE...WHAT ARE YOU DOING DOWN HERE?”

I glance up and wipe my eyes when I see Lincoln standing in front of me in the corner of the hotel lobby.

“I wasn’t ready to go home yet,” I admit with a snuffle. “Bad night.”

He sits next to me on the bench and asks, “What’s wrong?” Then waits patiently for me to answer.

So much has happened recently. My mom stole money and drugs from a client and took off, leaving Sienna and me to deal with the fallout—the fallout being our home and car getting torched and a million-dollar bounty on Sienna’s head. Lincoln’s brother, Micah, saved the day by marrying my sister and moving us into his penthouse, which is in the hotel he and Lincoln own.

I left for the summer to attend dance camp—thanks to Micah paying for it—and came back to find my sister and her husband madly in love.

Micah paid for me to start at a new school—a fancy school of the arts—where I thought I was making friends, only to learn tonight that several of them have been talking shit about me behind my back.

“Was it that guy you went on a date with?” Lincoln eventually asks.

“It wasn’t a date.” He and Micah called it that because it’s Friday night and Jameson picked me up. Lincoln lives next door to Micah and was over when Jameson showed up. “It was just supposed to be a study date,” I tell him softly. “We were assigned a project and he asked if I wanted to work on

it with him. Turns out, it was just a way for him to try to get in my pants.”

Lincoln visibly tenses up next to me, looking around as if the asshole would still be here.

“I don’t know where he is. We were supposed to go to the coffee shop, but instead he took me to a party. He offered me a drink, and when I told him I thought we were supposed to be working on our projects, he told me to lighten up. Said he thought a girl from *Booker Park* would be more fun.”

Booker Park is where Sienna and I are from. A small, lower income neighborhood in Tesoro. “I thought when we moved in with Micah, we were leaving that part of our life behind,” I admit. “But I guess the saying is true. You can take the girl out of the ghetto but —”

“Stop,” Lincoln demands. “That’s not who you are. You’re Eliza Bardot. A damn good student, an amazing dancer, and you’re a good person. I saw how hard you were pushing for your sister to find her happiness with my brother. You’re a good sister, El. Fuck that kid.”

His words spark a flame in me. He sees me, like really sees me. Despite where I came from and who my mom is, Lincoln Alexander sees *me*.

“He thought because I was from Booker Park, I’d be easy.” I shrug. “Then he got pissed when I refused to do anything with him, so I got an Uber and got out of there.” I sniffle back my tears as I stare at a couple stepping up to the elevator, hands intertwined, love in their eyes. “What if I’m destined to follow in my mom’s footsteps?” She spent most of her life begging for men’s attention and love, only to be treated like trash. Eventually, I think she just accepted it.

“That’s bullshit,” Lincoln says. “Look at Sienna. She found love and they’re happy as hell, on cloud nine. Both are good to each other and for each other. You are *not* your mother.” His eyes meet mine. “She made shitty choices. You’re smarter than that. And one day, you’ll meet a man who’s worthy of you. The fact that you walked away from that asshole speaks volumes of the person you are.” He rests his hand on mine and pats it gently. It’s only meant as a friendly gesture, but that doesn’t stop the butterflies from swarming in my chest. His touch is warm and comforting, and I would do anything to keep it forever. “You have your entire life ahead of you. Don’t let one dumbass bring you down.”



SHE'S DEAD. MY MOM IS DEAD. SHOT IN THE HEART BY ELEAZAR GUTIERREZ, one of the deadliest crime bosses on the East Coast. And he's filed a petition stating that I'm his daughter. She should've told me. Warned me. Instead, she must've told him. Because he knows and wants me as his own. Sienna and Micah said they'll get this sorted out, but I don't see how.

"Figured I'd find you here," Lincoln says, taking a seat next to me. I'm sitting in the garden on the roof of the hotel, a quiet place I go to when I need to collect my thoughts. Lincoln's come across me here a few times and has dubbed it my place. The only people that have access to it are Lincoln and Micah since only their elevator goes up here. After the first time he found me up here, the entire place was renovated with new couches, tables, and flowers—like my own little sanctuary where I can just sit and think and be alone. He never mentioned it, but I know it was him.

"I thought when she died, I'd finally be safe," I admit out loud as I swipe away a traitorous tear. "When I was eleven, she brought a man home to fuck. Got too high and passed out and he tried to rape me. Sienna saved me and, in turn, was almost raped herself. But I called the cops like she taught me to do, and the guy was arrested. You'd think that would've been an eye opener for my mom. Nope," I say with a humorless laugh. "She disappeared for months, and the next time we saw her, she was high and fucking some guy on the couch."

I glance at Lincoln and find his entire body tense, his jaw clenched in anger. I reach out and pat his hand. "You don't have to be angry on my behalf. It's just the cards we were dealt. Lenora was a shit mother and destroyed everyone and everything in her wake. So, I guess it makes sense that even in her death she would put her daughter at risk."

"He's not going anywhere near you," Lincoln says, his voice steady and calm, so sure of his words. I wish I could be as confident as he is. "Micah, Sienna, and I won't let it happen."



"STOP! PLEASE...PLEASE DON'T DO THIS..." I KICK MY FEET OUT, AIMING FOR his dick, but before I can connect, I'm flipped onto my stomach like a ragdoll, my elbows just barely catching me before my chin hits the concrete.

My shorts are shoved down my legs, my underwear next.

I squirm, trying to get away, but a pair of hands hold me down while another pushes my thighs apart.

“Please,” I beg, knowing it won’t do any good but refusing to lie here and take it. “Please don’t —”

I close my eyes and try to mentally block out what’s about to happen. I did this. I fucked up. Eleazar was coming after my family, threatening to take me. He was going to get custody of me, thanks to paying off a judge. Sienna and I were going to have to run, and she was going to have to leave Micah behind.

I couldn’t let her do that. She’s been through so much. She’s worked so hard to take care of me, and she’s finally found her happiness. I couldn’t be the person to take that away from her. I thought I could talk to him, make him see reason. And maybe I could’ve, except I didn’t have all the facts.

Eleazar’s wife, Arielle, has been having trouble getting pregnant and carrying to term. Several rounds of IVF and just as many miscarriages has Eleazar desperate for an heir—me. She’s jealous and heartbroken that she can’t give him the only thing he wants—a baby.

When I showed up to talk to Eleazar and learned that his plan was to use me as a pawn, I knew I messed up. Especially once he stuck me in a room and said I wouldn’t be going anywhere until this all got sorted. At the time, I thought that was the worst that could happen, until Arielle showed up. She told me she was taking me to Eleazar, but she lied. Instead, she took me to a warehouse and said as soon as she gets Sienna, we would both be killed.

Tying up loose ends, she called it.

She left me with the guards and told them they could do whatever they pleased since I’d be dead soon anyway.

Sienna begged me not to go talk to him.

Micah said he’d handle it.

I didn’t listen.

I left without them knowing, thinking I could fix it.

But now, I’m broken.



“SIENNA!” I YELL, THROWING MYSELF AT MY SISTER. I NOTICE HER HANDS are tied behind her back, so I quickly untie the rope to release her. “I’m so

sorry,” I cry. “I never should’ve gone to see him. I’m so sorry.” Tears race down my face, hating myself for not listening to my sister when she told me not to go to him. “I’m so sorry. I’m so —”

“Shh, it’s okay,” she coos, wrapping her arms around me. It only makes me hate myself that much more because she’s always so forgiving. It doesn’t matter what I do, she loves me unconditionally. “It’s okay.”

She rubs her hands up and down my arms trying to calm me, but I can’t be calmed. The visions of what the men did to me, what they took from me, are in the forefront of my mind. I can still feel them —

“Who is she?” Sienna asks, knocking me from my thoughts.

“Eleazar’s wife,” I tell her.

I spend the next several minutes apologizing for what I’ve done—what I’ve gotten us into—while she assures me it’s all going to be okay because Micah will get us out.

After a while, she gets up to check out the room, trying to open the single window. It doesn’t budge. I already tried.

I’m lost in my own head when out of nowhere, Sienna runs to the corner and throws up.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, praying the guards don’t come in. When I dry heaved earlier, the acid roiling in my belly and needing to come up, they came in to check on me and took it upon themselves to teach me a lesson for soiling the ground. The last thing I want is for them to teach Sienna a lesson.

“Yeah, something smells rancid,” she says.

“Like death,” I tell her. The guards told me this is where they take care of people who are a problem. This is probably where our mom died, and unless a miracle occurs, this is where we’ll die.

“Hey, El, did anyone —”

Before she can finish her question, she’s throwing up again and again. I don’t know what’s wrong with her, but it can’t be good. And when I ask her what’s wrong, she shocks the hell out of me when she says, “I’m pregnant.” She closes her eyes and lays her head against the rough wall. “I only just found out.”

It takes a second for the words to wrap around my brain, but once they do, I start to freak out. “What?” I gasp, wishing it weren’t true. “No...No. No. No.” I shake my head, fresh tears gliding down my cheeks. “I did this. This is all my fault. I went to go see him and now —”

Now my sister, who’s pregnant with my niece or nephew is going to die.

She'll never be able to give birth, raise her baby. I've taken away her happiness because of my stubbornness. I should've listened to her.

"Hey, stop it," she says. "You couldn't have known. Don't worry, we'll get out. Micah will find us."

"No, you don't get it. She's going to kill us. She —"

"Well, aren't you observant?" Arielle says, walking into the room. "You are nothing but a stupid *bastarda* born from a whore." She steps toward me and fists my hair. I should probably fight her, but I just don't have it in me. I've fought and fought and every time I've lost. "You don't deserve anything," she spits. "And I'm going to ensure you never get a dime."

Before she can do anything else to me, Sienna jumps in. "Don't you dare speak to my sister like that." When she gets in Arielle's face, it forces her to let go of me.

"Back up," the guard barks. I glance at him, and shivers wrack my body, remembering what he did to me earlier. "Or I'll have to teach you some manners, the same way I taught your —"

His words are what spur me on. The thought of him doing to Sienna what he did to me. Hurting her and her baby...

"Leave her alone!" I hiss, refusing to let him get near her. She's spent so many years protecting me. I need to protect her. "Don't you touch her!"

"Looks like you haven't learned your lesson," the guard says.

"I've had enough!" Arielle hisses. "Sit down and shut up!" She shoves Sienna backward and she loses her footing, falling to the floor.

It all happens so quickly. Arielle steps toward her, and Sienna curls into a ball, trying to protect her unborn baby.

I snap, grab the gun out of the guard's waistband, unlock the safety, and shoot, refusing to let that woman hurt my sister. My life is already over, but I'll be damned if she hurts the only person in the world who's always had my back, has always protected me.

As Arielle hits the hard ground with a thud, red spreading across the concrete around her, the guard snatches the gun from me and barks out, "What the fuck did you do?"

"Enough!" a loud voice rings out, making us all look at the man who's walked in with his own gun in hand. My biological father. "Give me that gun." The guard nods and hands it over.

The men speak in Spanish for several seconds, and then Eleazar glares at me.

“First, your whore of a mother killed my father. Now, my daughter, my own flesh and blood, kills my wife. I should shoot you dead...” I don’t bother to argue because at this moment, I would welcome death, but then, instead of pointing the gun at me, he points it at Sienna. “But I need you, so instead...”

No, he’s going to kill my sister!

“Wait, please,” I yell. “It’s not her fault. I did this. I killed Arielle. She kidnapped me and...” I ramble on, trying to explain what happened, begging him to not take it out on my sister. I’m in the middle of asking to make a deal, saying I’ll do whatever he wants if he keeps her alive, when a gunshot rings out, and Eleazar’s body hits the ground, landing on his wife’s.

A few seconds later, Lincoln enters the room and shoots the guard in the head, taking him down. And then Micah is running straight for Sienna, while Lincoln scoops me up and carries me out of the warehouse. He holds me in his arms the entire drive back to the hotel and continues to hold me once we’re back home.

I nuzzle my face into his neck, breathing in his scent, using it to block out everything that’s happened. He rubs my arms up and down soothingly, murmuring, ‘Everything’s going to be okay,’ and I try with everything in me to replace the guards’ touch and words with his.

I know later, the nightmares will come, but for a little while, in Lincoln’s arms, I pretend like everything is going to be okay.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELLIE



Present Day

“SO, WHY DIDN’T YOU HAVE SEX WITH HIM?” RAEALYN ASKS. “YOU CLEARLY trust him.”

“Because I left before I turned eighteen.” I found out Eleazar left me everything, making me a multimillionaire. Micah helped me sell off the illegal shit and keep the clean money. For the next three years, I was barely a shell of myself. “I couldn’t tell Sienna what happened because she told me not to go to Eleazar. I put her and her baby at risk.” Thank God they were both okay, and several months later, she gave birth to the most beautiful baby girl, London. “She would’ve blamed herself, then tried to fix me,” I choke out. “And well, I’m broken, Rae, and no amount of tape or glue can change that.”

She wraps her arms around me, and I sigh into her hold. “You’re not broken, Ellie. You’re just a little banged up.”

“Regardless, she doesn’t know. Only you do. I left at the end of my senior year and have only gone home a handful of times.”

“You should tell her,” she says, pulling back and meeting my gaze. “I can see it in your eyes. You hate the rift in your relationship.”

“It’s better this way. We might not be close, but she’s happy, finally living the life she deserves. She has a wonderful husband and two beautiful little girls.” I sniffle back a sob that’s trying to break free. “Telling her will only make her feel guilty, trust me. She’ll shoulder the blame and won’t stop

trying to fix it. She'll hate herself for not protecting me, even though it wasn't her fault. It was mine."

"Okay, so instead, continue to have a strained relationship with your family." She rolls her eyes. "But that doesn't explain why you never hooked up with Lincoln. He's clearly the answer to your intimacy issue."

"He doesn't see me like that."

"Umm, have you seen yourself? Maybe not when you were fifteen, he didn't. But now, you're twenty-one and hot as fuck. Hell, I don't swing that way, and even I'd fuck you."

I'm laughing at her ridiculousness when my phone goes off. "I better get that."

We get off the floor and I grab my phone to check it. It's Sienna...

SIENNA

Please tell me you're coming home for the holidays.

I text back that I'm not sure if I'll be able to make it, hoping she'll let it go. But of course, she doesn't.

SIENNA

Please, El. The girls made you a special present and want to give it to you in person. They're also in the Christmas pageant at the dance studio. You have to come home and see it. Please. We miss you.

As much as I want to say no, I know if I don't at least make some sort of appearance, she'll never let it go. And I do miss my family.

"Maybe when you go home, you can talk to your sister," Raelyn says, nosily glancing over my shoulder.

"And ruin Christmas? Not happening."

"Well, I'm sure Lincoln will be there, right? You could always ring in the new year with him inside of you." She waggles her brows and I shake my head, typing out a message to Sienna.

ELLIE

I can probably come home for Christmas, but only for a few days. I'm busy since it's my senior year and I'm graduating soon.

The truth is, I have nothing going on right now. Classes are over, and my new ones don't start until January, but thankfully she doesn't call me out on it, instead texting back:

SIENNA

Thank you! We'll take whatever time with you we can get. See you soon. Love you.

“You’re not broken,” Raelyn says again. “But you do need to figure your shit out. Get help, talk to someone, talk to your sister. Get laid. You’re living in denial instead of facing the reality. You and Sienna both survived, but she’s the only one truly living.” She places her hand on my shoulder. “It’s time for you to live.”



“AUNTIE ELLIE!” MY ADORABLE FIVE-YEAR-OLD NIECE SHOUTS, RUNNING toward me. “I missed you so much. Are you home forever?”

“Home forever?” Brooklyn, my other—just as adorable—three-year-old niece parrots.

“Aww, girls, I missed you.” I pull them into a hug and inhale their sweet scent. “I’m not home forever. I’m still in school. But I brought you presents,” I say, hoping it’ll distract them.

I pull the two packages I brought out and hand one to each of them, and they squeal in delight, plopping onto the ground and tearing the paper open.

“What are you going to distract me with?” Sienna asks, raising a single brow.

“How about a hug?” I offer, opening my arms. She sighs and steps into my embrace.

“I’ve missed you. Thank you for coming home.”

“Of course,” I murmur like it’s not a big deal. “It’s Christmas.”

“Look who it is,” Micah booms, walking over and pulling me into a hug. “Missed you, kiddo. How’s the West Coast?”

“Warm,” I half-joke.

“Aww, you saying you don’t miss the frigid winters here?”

“I’m saying, the second I stepped off the plane, I almost stepped back on it.”

He chuckles then sobers. “In all seriousness, thank you for coming home. Your sister was worried you wouldn’t show.”

I nod in understanding, but the lump in my throat doesn’t let me speak. Not that I’d know what to say even if I could. I had thought about using this

time with Sienna to tell her everything, but now that I'm here, I realize that's not a good idea. It's Christmas Eve. The girls are dressed in pajamas with candy canes on them. There's a huge tree in the living room. And the smell of ham and cookies is floating in the air.

Now is not the time.

After the girls finish opening their gifts—princess dresses, heels, and tiaras, since Sienna said they're on a Disney kick and will be going to Disney over spring break—they take off to go change into their outfits before dinner. I head up to the guestroom that used to be my room.

When I first left for college, Sienna refused to change a single thing about it, saying it would always be my room. But when I came home to visit for the first time after being gone for almost a year, seeing my stuff everywhere brought back memories of *that night* and all the nightmares that followed. I packed up and threw everything away and then insisted she turn it into a guestroom. The hurt look on her face isn't one I'll ever forget, but it was for the best because Tesoro isn't my home anymore—it's more like hell.

The thought has me getting emotional and needing to get some air. Since we still have a bit before dinner, I sneak up to the rooftop garden. It's freezing outside, so I grab a jacket, knowing that probably won't help, but once I'm up there, I realize it's almost not needed, because surrounding the couches are heating lamps.

"Your sister said you were coming home," a masculine voice says from behind me. "Figured you'd come up here at some point."

"So, you bought me heating lamps," I choke out, trying and failing to rein in my emotions. No matter how long I've been gone, my feelings for Lincoln Alexander never seem to waver.

"Didn't want you to freeze your ass off," he says nonchalantly.

I turn around and take him in: strong jaw, eyes, the color of melted caramel, black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. Jeans that mold to his muscular thighs. It's been a while since I've seen him, but he still looks as gorgeous as ever. I do the math...He must be in his mid, maybe late thirties now. I always assumed the older you get, the more your looks deteriorate. Yet somehow Lincoln's managed to get even better-looking with time. *Figures...*

"Everything okay, El?" he asks, stepping toward me.

"Yep," I say robotically, but the way his lips turn down tell me he's not buying it.

“Let’s try this again. Everything okay?” He steps closer, and I swallow thickly, wondering how my body will react.

Of course, instead of doing what it usually does—vibrating with nervous energy and dread—butterflies swarm my belly, and my heart picks up speed.

“I’m okay,” I say because it’s the half-truth. I am okay. I’m alive and safe. I have money in the bank, and I’m only a semester away from graduating. So, yeah, I’m okay. Aside from dreading any man touching me intimately and lacking a relationship with my sister, I’m okay.

He eyes me for several beats then nods. “Your sister misses the hell out of you. Any chance of you moving home in May?”

I swallow hard, not wanting to lie to him. “I’m not sure,” I admit truthfully. “Just taking it one day at a time.”

Another nod. “You know I’m here if you need anything, right?”

This isn’t the first time he’s said this. He’s told me that several times over the years, especially following the events that went down that day in the warehouse when he carried me out with me clinging to him like he was my lifeline. As I sat, curled up in his arms, he whispered *everything will be okay* repeatedly, and ever since then, every time I see him, he asks me the very same question.

“I know. Thank you.”

I settle myself on the couch, and Lincoln turns the heating lamps on, warmth immediately emanating off them. I wonder if he’s going to sit with me, but my thoughts are answered when he reaches over, squeezes the top of my shoulder, and then disappears back inside, leaving me alone.

I sit like this for several minutes, getting lost in my own head, breathing in the fresh air that goes untouched by the pollution because we’re so far up. Up here, it’s easy to miss home. The quiet, easy feel of being close to my family. It’s when I’m forced to look at my sister and know that I’m not being completely honest with her that it gets hard. When I think about the way she looks at me, knowing something is wrong but not knowing how to fix it. When I walk down the streets of Tesoro, I’m reminded of the evil that lurks in the shadows. Eleazar might be dead, but his spirit still haunts me. Sometimes, it even feels as though he’s watching me. I know that’s impossible, that it’s my mind playing tricks on me, but it doesn’t stop my brain from believing it to be true.

Which is part of the reason why I never wanted to tell Sienna the truth. I thought if I was the only one suffering, then it was for the best. But maybe I

was wrong. Maybe if I lay it all out for her, leaving no secrets between us, we can finally start to work past it all. Sure, she'll be hurt, but will it be any worse than the way she looks at me now? And maybe I can shine a light on the demons hiding in my closet and rid myself of them once and for all.

"There you are," Sienna says. "I forgot about this place." She glances around, clearly confused as to how the heating lamps got here, but I don't bother explaining.

"Dinner ready?" I ask, standing.

"Yeah, but umm..." She looks at me with longing in her eyes, and my stomach tightens, hating that it's all my fault. Everything is my fault. "I just wanted to see how you're doing. How school is going. You're always so busy."

"It's going good," I say, skipping over her first question.

"So, are you still planning to move home in May? Because I've been thinking a lot about the studio and you taking over. Micah and I found out we're expecting again and —"

"You're pregnant?"

"Yeah." A warm smile spreads across her face. "We've decided this baby will be the last one." Her hand protectively goes to her still flat belly and flashbacks to the day in the warehouse surface. Her throwing up, Arielle shoving her, Eleazar pointing a gun at her. Afterward, her bleeding and going to the hospital...I can't do it. I can't tell her the truth. It will only upset her, and that's the last thing she needs while she's pregnant. She's happy and deserves to stay that way.

"I don't know if I'm moving back home," I blurt out before I can stop myself. Sienna flinches, and I hate myself even more. "I was offered a job in California," I say, the lie sliding right off my tongue and leaving a nasty taste in its wake.

"Oh."

"If you need to sell the studio, please don't feel like you need to keep it. I bought it for you to do whatever you want with." When I found out I was left Eleazar's estate, the first thing I bought was the studio Sienna and I danced at. It was always our dream to open our own dance studio. The plan was for me to go to college and once I graduated, we would teach together. But then that day happened and everything changed. She had given me so much over the years, and I just wanted to give her something back.

"What? No." She shakes her head, her eyes turning glassy with emotion.

“The studio will be here, always. Whenever you’re ready to come home, it’ll be here. We’ll be here.” She bridges the gap between us and takes my hand in hers. “I miss you so much. I don’t know what’s going on, why you continue to push me away, but I’m always going to be here. *Always*. You’re my ride or die, and that will never change. Please consider moving home. Even if it’s not here with us. Just being close to you again would be amazing.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say, choking up with emotion, wanting to tell her everything, and hating that no matter how much I push, she keeps pulling. But then I remember that she’s pregnant, and I can’t do it. Stress isn’t good for her or the baby.

So instead, I vow to get my shit together. She’ll never know what happened—and that’s for the best—but if I can just get past my own demons, I can push what happened aside and fix my relationship with her. I can do the one thing she wants and move home. Because she deserves that. Hell, she deserves more than that, but at least this is something I can give her.

Now I just need to focus on fixing my shit. I have five months before I graduate and move back home.

First step: Figure out how the hell to be touched by a man.



“IT’S NOT HAPPENING.” SIENNA SHAKES HER HEAD AND TAKES A SIP OF HER water.

“Well, your name is on the list, just in case,” Lincoln says with a shrug.

“List for what?” I ask, clearly walking into the middle of a conversation. After dinner, I spent time with Brooklyn and London, trying to make up for lost time. After we set out the cookies and milk for Santa, I read them a Christmas story before bed. I thought maybe Sienna would be hurt that they insisted it be me and not her, but all she did was smile and say she’s glad I’m home.

“Elite is having a masquerade party on Valentine’s Day,” Sienna says with an eye roll. “And my dear brother-in-law thinks Micah and I should go.”

“It’s going to be the event of the year,” Lincoln says with a smirk. “We recently added a few backrooms.”

“Backrooms?” Sienna questions.

“Some places call it a darkroom or a black room,” Lincoln explains. “The

rooms are pitch black. You can't see anything."

"How would you know who you're having sex with?" Sienna asks.

"If you're there with someone, you'll know, but you won't see them. Instead, you have to rely solely on your other senses: taste, touch, scent...Or you can book it anonymously." Lincoln Grins wickedly. "Nothing hotter than anonymous, no-strings sex."

"I don't need anonymous sex," Micah says, pulling my sister into his side. "I like knowing I'm making love to my wife."

Lincoln groans. "You're missing the point. It's Valentine's Day, and you guys never go out. You're always home, and now with another baby on the way, it's only going to get harder. Have our parents watch the little rugrats while you enjoy an adult night. Pretend you're strangers...Flirt, hookup. Live a little."

"Maybe," Sienna says noncommittally. "We'll have to see how my morning sickness is. With Brooklyn, it was more like night sickness."

"I give up." Lincoln sighs, making Micah and Sienna laugh. "I'm going back to my place. Let me know when Santa comes, so I can come over."

"You watch the girls open gifts?" I ask.

"Of course," Lincoln says, standing and walking over to the door. "I wish they didn't get up at the ass-crack of dawn, but the look on their faces as they open their presents is worth it."

His words make me realize how much I've missed by staying away. I came to visit last year, but it was only for a few days after Christmas, leaving before New Year's.

Once he's gone, I excuse myself to my room to give Sienna and Micah some alone time. While I'm getting changed for bed, my phone goes off with a text from Raelyn asking how it's going. Instead of texting back, I hit call, and she answers on the first ring.

"You fuck him yet?" she asks without so much as a hello.

"Yeah, right under the Christmas tree," I say, sarcasm dripping in my words.

Raelyn laughs. "Damn, talk about unwrapping presents."

"Ha ha," I deadpan.

"In all seriousness, how's it going?"

I sigh and plop onto my bed. "I've decided not to tell her anything."

"El," she groans.

"She's pregnant again and happy, Rae. So fucking happy. Telling her will

only open old wounds that she's had a hard enough time closing. I'm not doing that to her."

"So, what are you going to do? Avoid her forever?"

"No, I'm going to figure my shit out once and for all. Then I'm going to move home in May and be the best damn sister and aunt I can be."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"The masquerade party."

CHAPTER FIVE

ELLIE



Six Weeks Later

“THIS IS A MISTAKE.”

“No, it’s not,” Raelyn argues. “We’ll go in, you’ll *finally* get laid, hopefully overcome your aversion to being intimate with the opposite sex, and then we’ll get out. *And* while I’m waiting for you, I’ll hopefully get laid too.” She waggles her brows suggestively, and I groan, praying this plan doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass. In my head, it sounded like the perfect plan: show up, have anonymous sex with a guy I trust, and then leave. But now, as we walk toward Elite, a million thoughts are plaguing my mind.

“What if I can’t do it?” I stop and look at Raelyn, my heart pounding behind my ribcage. “What if I freak out? It’s anonymous sex because it’s in a dark room. What if all I see are those men who —”

“Stop,” Raelyn says gently. “We’ve talked about this. You’ll focus on his voice, his scent. And you’ll take charge, insisting on being on top so it’s all in your control.”

“Okay, right, yeah.” I nod nervously.

“It’ll be okay, and if it’s not, you’ll get out of there, and I’ll be right outside the door waiting for you.”

“And what about you getting laid?” I lift a brow.

“You know I was only joking,” she says with a pointed look. “We’re here for *you* and I have your back.”

“Thank you.” I glance behind me and take a deep breath. “All right, let’s

do this.” We both put on our masks and walk around the corner toward the entrance of the underground sex club. “And don’t forget you’re me,” I remind her. “And I’m Sienna.” If we’re questioned, I know enough about my sister to bullshit my way out of it, and Raelyn knows enough about me. But my hope is that once I flash Sienna’s ID, they won’t ask for mine, so it’ll be as if I was never here.

I hand the bouncer Sienna’s license that I swiped out of her wallet on our way out, when I told her we were going to watch a late Broadway show in the city. Despite her being surprised to see me visiting so soon after my last visit, she was so excited to see me again, she didn’t question it.

“She’s with me,” I tell the bouncer when he glances from me to Raelyn. “My husband should be here soon.” I’m lying through my teeth—the kids are with their grandparents, so Sienna and Micah can enjoy a romantic Valentine’s Day at home—but I just need the lie to stick long enough to do what I came here to do. If all goes as planned, I’ll get in and out without anyone ever knowing I was here—or questioning if Sienna was ever here.

“Sounds good,” the bouncer says. “Have a nice evening, Mrs. Alexander.”

As we walk through the club toward the bar, I keep an eye out for Lincoln. Because there’s no way to recognize someone with their mask on, I snuck into his place earlier today and snapped a picture of his mask, so I’ll be able to recognize it. Thankfully, it was on his desk, in his home office. Otherwise, I’d be going at this blind, and that would not be good.

We do a couple laps around the club, and a few guys eye us, but we don’t give them a chance to approach. The club is filled with various shades of black and grey with a hint of red throughout, giving it a mysterious yet sensual vibe. There are lounge chairs and couches in various locations, making the area feel spacious yet intimate. Everyone is wearing masks, but a lot of them are only covering the minimum, so you can sort of see what their face looks like. Raelyn and I both went simple in little black dresses, unsure what the vibe would be, and I’m glad we did, because while a few went for a dramatic vibe, most are dressed in various sexy dresses—the men sporting suits.

I check the main area, then walk down a few hallways that are open and lead to different rooms and a couple of small bars. I’m about to suggest we get a drink at the main bar and wait, when I spot Lincoln strolling through, wearing the silver mask I saw—his tie matching.

“That’s him,” I murmur to Raelyn, nodding toward Lincoln. Even if I hadn’t seen what his mask looked like earlier, I’d still be able to recognize him. I spent years watching him, crushing on him. And even with me away, Sienna posts pictures of him all the time when they’re at family functions that I miss. “He’s heading toward the bar.”

“Good luck,” she whispers over the music. “And remember, I’ll be close by. If anything changes and you can’t do it, I’ve got your back.”

I wait for Lincoln to have a seat at the bar and order a drink before I sidle up next to him, having a seat and playing it off like I don’t notice him.

When the bartender asks what I’d like, I debate whether I should order something alcoholic, but figure one drink won’t hurt and will hopefully lessen my nerves a bit.

“A mojito,” I tell her, going with a drink I normally wouldn’t choose just in case. Lincoln and I have never hung out where there’s alcohol involved, but I’m not chancing ordering my usual—whiskey sour—since Sienna is the one who put me on to it.

While I wait for my drink, I focus on calming my heart rate. With Lincoln next to me, I’m suddenly having a “*what the fuck am I doing?*” moment.

There’s a part of me that feels guilty for concealing my identity from Lincoln and seeking him out for anonymous sex, but the other part of me justifies it because, if by some miracle I pull this off, it will be completely consensual. Still, it feels deceitful.

It’ll just be one time and then we’ll go our separate ways, I tell myself.

“A duck?” a masculine voice asks, forcing me out of my thoughts.

I glance at Lincoln, who’s looking at me. “Huh?” I say dumbly, mesmerized by his hazel eyes that are shining bright against the silver mask that covers the top half of his face, exposing his full lips and clean-shaven jawline.

“A duck,” he repeats, nodding toward where I was absentmindedly creating an origami duck out of my napkin, a nervous habit I picked up when I was younger.

“Quack, quack,” I say, pretending the duck is real because apparently, I’ve lost my damn mind.

Lincoln eyes me for a moment and I worry I’ve already fucked up—I’m attempting to talk lower to disguise my voice without sounding like an idiot, but I have no clue how intuitive he is—when a smile spreads across his face, his eyes light up with mirth, and he throws his head back in laughter.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here before,” he says once he’s stopped laughing.

“How would you know?” I shrug. “I’m wearing a mask.” It’s a black and gold gorgeous Venetian cat mask. It hides most of my face, leaving only my eyes and lips on display. I’ve given myself smoky eyes to blend with the mask, creating a dark, mysterious feel, and my lips are painted a dark red matte, outlined to look plumper than what they are. On top of that, when I went in for a haircut yesterday, I added caramel highlights to my hair, something I’ve never done before. As long as Lincoln’s known me, my hair has always been one color—brown—and I almost never wear makeup, especially lipstick as bold as what I’m wearing tonight.

“Very true,” he says, “but as the owner of this establishment, I make it a point to get to know my guests, and I would’ve remembered that duck...and those green eyes.”

My eyes. Oh, shit. I should’ve worn colored contacts. What the fuck was I thinking? Luckily, based on the way he’s running his gaze over my body—his eyes that were just filled with laughter, now full of desire—he must not recognize me. Because if he knew these green eyes belonged to his much younger sister-in-law, he wouldn’t be checking me out the way he is.

“I’ve only been here a handful of times,” I tell him, trying to be as honest as possible.

The bartender sets my drink in front of me, and I take a sip, relishing in the way the alcohol slides down my throat and warms my insides.

“Are you here with anyone?” Lincoln asks, his eyes trained on my face—well, my mask.

“Nope,” I reply. “I’m new to all this. It makes me...nervous,” I say, my words true. “But with the anonymity tonight’s event brings, I’m hoping to meet someone.”

“What do you think about Elite so far?”

“I think—” I lock eyes with him, trying to up my seduction game since my time is limited “—it has potential.”

A small smile quirks in the corner of his lips, and I wonder how this man has managed to avoid being tied down. Somehow, he’s managed to only get better looking with time.

“We’ll have to see about turning that potential into life changing.”

That’s what I’m hoping for, I think but don’t say. “And how would we do that?” I ask, taking a sip of my drink as I turn toward him, so my bare knee

rubs against the side of his leg.

He does the same, and because we're so close, when his knee slides past mine, he's able to capture my leg in between his own. My insides warm at the way we're connected, and when he reaches over and snags a lock of my hair, twirling it around his finger, that warmth morphs into a fire.

"First, you can start by telling me your name," he says.

I thought about this ahead of time, knowing this question would be a possibility. "Liz," I tell him, using a piece of my name.

"Liz," he repeats. "I'm Lincoln. It's very nice to meet you."

I smile softly, wishing that I were here under different circumstances. Wishing I was older and had a chance with Lincoln. When I was younger, I would fantasize about what it would be like to have his attention like this. And now that I have it, instead of enjoying it, I'm freaking out, praying that I can simply get through what I came here to do. Knowing that if tonight somehow happens, it'll be the only time I'll ever be with Lincoln like this.

Lincoln glances over my shoulder, and my heart drops, assuming he's found someone he'd rather speak to, until he stands and extends his hand. "Dance with me?"

Butterflies swarm my belly as I take another large sip of my drink before I stand and put my hand in his. "I'd love to."

He guides us over to a corner of the club and, as if everyone knows exactly who he is, they part, giving us plenty of room. The music playing is a sexy remix with a good beat. Lincoln reaches out for me, his fingers landing on the curves of my hips, and pulls me close, so our bodies are almost touching.

I wrap my arms around his neck, and we sway to the music, our eyes locked on each other. The song playing transitions into another, and then another. I couldn't tell you how many songs we dance to, or which songs are even playing. Time seems to stand still, everyone else disappearing, leaving only Lincoln and me and our bodies moving and grinding in perfect rhythm with one another.

Lincoln pulls me close, so our bodies are flush, and runs his nose along the curve of my neck, only the tip grazing my flesh. "Vanilla," he murmurs, getting my signature scent correct. "You smell delicious."

We dance like this for several songs, neither of us speaking, instead, allowing our bodies to do the talking. But then a gentleman taps Lincoln on his shoulder and whispers something into his ear, and I'm reminded of where

we are.

Lincoln nods once and the gentleman walks away, and then his eyes are on me. He opens his mouth, and I hold my breath, hoping whatever he was told won't affect the chemistry that's sizzling between us, but then his eyes glitter with regret, and I know he's about to walk away.

He gently shakes his head, and I want to beg him to tell me what he was about to say. But before I can get a word out, he bridges the tiny gap between us that he created when he was tapped on the shoulder and leans in, his masculine scent wrapping around me like a warm blanket on a cold night.

I stay still, waiting to see what he's about to do, knowing deep down, this is the end. He's about to tell me goodbye and walk away. I can feel it.

His warm lips press against the sensitive spot just below my ear, and my entire body reacts in the best way possible. With other guys, being touched filled me with dread, but right now, *his* touch is causing my belly to tighten and the area between my legs to clench. My nipples are hardening, and my heart is beating rapidly behind my ribcage.

"I'm sorry," he says softly into my ear, forcing my eyes to flutter shut in disappointment. "I have to go, but I *really* enjoyed this dance." And then he's gone.

A few seconds later, I open my eyes and glance around, and it's as if he was never here. I stand frozen in my spot, until Raelyn joins me.

"Holy shit, you guys were so hot together," she says. "I thought flames were going to explode from your bodies."

"Not hot enough, apparently," I say, my body still buzzing with electricity.

"Wait, he left?"

"Said he was sorry and that he had to go but he enjoyed dancing with me." I release a harsh breath. "Let's get out of here."

Raelyn's brows shoot up to her forehead. "Seriously? You're leaving, just like that? Maybe he had to take care of something and will be back. What if —"

"I can't do this," I blurt out. "It's for the best that he walked away."

"Why? Did he make you feel uncomfortable? If you're not ready —"

"No, no." I shake my head. "He made me feel the opposite. I've never felt this turned on in my life." After what I went through, I thought the idea of sex would always turn me off...Until now.

"Okay, then why the hell aren't you going after him?"

“Because this was a stupid idea. I spent years crushing on him and then several more years making it a point to get over him. I accepted that there would never be anything between us—that our relationship would always remain platonic. But tonight proved otherwise. The way he looked at me, with heat and desire in his eyes.” I sigh, wishing I could’ve snapped a picture and captured that look forever. “If I sleep with him, if I actually go through with it without freaking out, where will that leave me?”

“One step closer to taking your life back,” Raelyn says.

“I can’t do it. I can’t be with him and then walk away. I can’t sleep with him and then pretend like it never happened. Let’s go.”

“How about we go to the bar and have a drink first?” she suggests. “Once we leave, you might not be able to get back in, so let’s think about this rationally.”

“Fine, but having a drink isn’t going to change anything.”

We sidle up to the bar and each order a drink. I expect Raelyn to drone on about why I should be chasing after Lincoln, but instead we sip our drinks quietly. When our glasses are both empty, and we’ve paid our tab with cash, she turns to me and says, “Now that you’ve calmed a bit, are you sure you want to leave?”

Do I want to leave? No. But is it for the best? “Yes, I’m sure.”

Without giving Raelyn a chance to argue, I drop a couple bills onto the bar top to leave a tip and then get off my barstool, pushing through the throng of people who are dancing, flirting, and kissing—some are doing a lot more than that—determined to get out of here. I’m halfway down the hallway, near the entrance, when I run straight into a hard chest that nearly knocks me over. But before I fall on my ass, strong hands grab my hips, keeping me upright.

I’m about to push him off me, but I notice the hazel eyes, strong, clean-shaven jawline, silver mask—Lincoln.

“You’re still here,” he says.

Maybe I’m projecting, but his words almost sound relieved.

“I’m here.”

A couple tries to walk past us, but we’re standing in the middle of the walkway, so Lincoln pulls me to the side to get out of everyone’s way. I’m not sure where Raelyn is, but I’m assuming she’s made herself scarce.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“What?” His brows crease in confusion, but then he must remember because he says, “Yeah, just a work thing. All part of owning a business.”

I nod, and then we stand here, Lincoln's body pressed against mine, our faces only inches apart. I can practically feel the sexual tension rolling off us in waves, but I don't know what to do, what to say. A moment ago, I was telling Raelyn I couldn't do this and was ready to leave. But now, at the feel of Lincoln's body melding into mine, our gazes locked and filled with desire, all my previous thoughts have evaporated.

I want Lincoln. I want to be with him, even if it's just once. I want to know what it feels like to be with a man by choice, a man I'm sexually attracted to. He's the only man—aside from Micah, who's like an older brother to me—that I trust, and I want him to be the first person I freely give myself to. I might not be a virgin because of what those men did to me, but I'll never consider them my firsts.

They took what wasn't offered.

I want to give myself willingly to Lincoln.

And I know if I don't do it now, in this club, where I have anonymity on my side, it's never going to happen.

“Do you want —?”

“Would you —?”

We both speak at the same time and then laugh at the awkwardness.

“You go first,” he murmurs, his lips so close to mine I can smell the smoky scent of the whiskey he was drinking earlier.

“I was going to ask if...” I swallow nervously. I can do this. The worst thing he can say is no.

“If...” he prompts.

“I was wondering if you'd like to join me in a backroom.”

His eyes light up. “How do you know about the backrooms?”

Oh, shit. Fuck. Why is he asking me this? Wouldn't every member know about the amenities offered at the club they're a part of?

“I heard someone mention it,” I lie, praying he doesn't hear the shakiness in my voice.

He nods slowly. “Must've been a VIP. The backrooms aren't available to everyone yet,” he explains. “You know what they're for, right?”

“Yes,” I breathe, lifting my leg slightly and rubbing my knee against his groin to let him know how serious I am about this. Even though we're wearing masks, and he obviously doesn't recognize me, being in a dark room will help to ensure that he never does.

Lincoln groans softly, and his eyes burn bright with want. “You sure

you're ready for that?"

No. "Yes." I reach out and tug slightly on the top of his dress shirt. "I want you."

"There's something you need to know first. I'm not looking for anything more than one night. What we do in that room is all I can offer you, so if you're looking for more, I'm not the man for you."

I already know this about him. I've heard his conversations with his brother and my sister countless times about not wanting to settle down. He's told them if he meets the right woman, he's not opposed to it, but he's not willing to simply *settle*. So, instead of wasting the woman's time, he makes it clear that he's not looking for anything more than sex. That way she won't be hurt when he walks away—and he always walks away.

"Good," I tell him. "Because that's all I want with you."

He stares at me for several beats, his eyes searching for something...what? I don't know. But when it seems he's found whatever it is he's looking for, he nods once and then takes my hand in his, pulling me down the hall.

And as I follow behind, with my heart beating fiercely in my chest, I say a prayer to whatever sex god is up there that I can get through this. Because if I can't...Fuck, I don't even want to think about how that will go down.

CHAPTER SIX

ELLIE



THE ROOM IS DARK. AS I EXPECTED IT TO BE. TO GET INTO THE BACKROOM, we had to walk to the end of the hall and go through a pair of large, black, wooden doors that took us into a darkened area where the music disappeared and was replaced with a low, seductive tune meant solely to fill the silence. We passed several doors and then stopped at door number one. If I wasn't so nervous, I would've made a joke about selecting the prize behind this first door.

Lincoln pulled a keycard out of his pocket and pressed it to the access box. The light turned green, and he opened the door. For a moment, I could see inside the room because of the bit of light coming from the hall, but all I could make out was a bed before we stepped inside, where the room was shrouded in darkness.

My eyes are still adjusting, so I can't see Lincoln, but with his fingers still threaded in mine, I can feel him. He squeezes my hand and then I'm tugged toward him, my body not stopping until it's pressed up against his own.

"Can I take your mask off?" he asks, running his finger along my jawline.

"No," I say, wishing I could tell him otherwise. "I want this to be completely anonymous."

"All right," he concedes. "What are your hard limits?"

For a second, I'm dumbstruck, wondering why he's asking me that. But then I remember where we are—at a sex club—and since this wasn't planned, and we don't know each other, we don't know what each other is willing and not willing to do.

Shit. I clearly didn't think this through. He owns a damn sex club—of course, he's into kinky shit...and he's going to expect it. Only there's no way I can give him what he wants. I don't even know if I'll be able to go through with sex, let alone allow him to do other things to me.

When I don't respond, he backs up slightly. "If you don't want this..."

"I do," I choke out, "but...I'm new to all of this. My prior experience wasn't—" I swallow nervously, unsure how the hell I can explain to him what's going through my head.

"Wasn't what?" he prompts.

"It wasn't good," I tell him truthfully. "That's why I'm here. I want to be with someone who knows what he's doing. Who will show me what good sex feels like, and then, like you, I want to walk away." I release a sigh of relief at having told him the truth. He may not know it's me, but at least I was honest with him as much as I could be.

When he doesn't say anything right away, I worry he's going to walk away—and I wouldn't blame him. This isn't what he was expecting at all.

But then he gently pushes me backward until my back hits the wall, and his breath feathers across my face. "If there's anything you don't like, you need to speak up. Tell me. Being in the dark means I can't read your features, and sometimes our bodies and minds don't react the same."

"Okay," I breathe, realizing this is happening. I'm about to have sex *willingly* for the first time, and it's with Lincoln fucking Alexander.

With his fingers still linked with mine, he raises our hands above my head, forcing my face to tilt to the other side. With my neck exposed, he places an open-mouthed kiss to the sensitive spot just below my ear and then trails more kisses along my heated flesh, across my jaw, and then places one more to the corner of my mouth. My entire body shivers in response, and he chuckles darkly at my unbridled reaction.

"Tell me what was bad last time," he whispers against my lips, "so I can make sure it's better this time."

"Everything," I croak out, not wanting to relive what happened to me years ago, wanting to stay in the moment with Lincoln. "Please," I beg, "just make it feel good...make *me* feel good."

At my words, his mouth connects with mine. The kiss is firm yet gentle. Hard but still somehow soft. Our lips curl around each other, moving in tandem. Lincoln's tongue seeks entrance and I welcome him, sighing into the kiss as we taste one another. I wasn't sure how it would work with us both

wearing masks, but they do nothing to deter the way we want each other.

All we're doing is kissing, but it feels like so much more. My body is on fire, the apex of my legs is clenching with want, butterflies are swarming my belly, and my heart is racing in the best way possible. I've never felt like this before, and it gives me hope that I'll be able to get through this without freaking out. That the trust in him is enough to make me feel safe with my emotions.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't realize the kiss has ended until I hear Lincoln whisper into my ear, "You taste so good. Can I find out if you taste as good everywhere?"

Oh, fuck. "Yes." I nod frantically, even though he can't see me.

He unlinks our hands, and his touch disappears, reappearing seconds later with his fingers skating down my arm and stopping at my breast. He pulls down that portion of my dress, along with my bra cup, and exposes my nipple. The cool air causes the peak to harden, and when his wet tongue circles the tip and then sucks, I let out a heady moan, my eyes closing as I relish in the pleasure.

Big mistake.

The second my lids close, and Lincoln bites down on my nipple, images of *that night* surface.

The force.

The begging.

The agony.

The pleading.

I try to push the flashbacks away, but they're too strong, feel too real. Every ounce of pleasure is replaced with the memory of pain. My moans are on the verge of morphing into a cry for help.

I'm about to tell him to stop, that I can't do this. But before I can get the words out, a husky yet gentle voice is at my ear. "I've got you, Kitten. Focus on me, on the pleasure I'm giving you. You're in control here." And then his tongue is back on my nipple, licking and sucking.

I release a calming breath, doing as he said, focusing on him, on the pleasure, reminding myself that I'm in control and if I want him to stop, he will.

With those thoughts, my body relaxes. I'm back in this room, with Lincoln, in the moment. It's the first time I've made it through a flashback, and I want to cry in happiness. But instead, I drag my fingers through his hair

and tug on his head gently. I can't see him, but I can feel his eyes on me.

"Thank you," I whisper.

I don't know how he knew what was going through my head—and maybe he didn't. Maybe he could *feel* the change in my body—but in this moment, I know I did the right thing by coming here tonight. Trusting him with my body and mind.

Lincoln responds by pulling the other side of my dress and bra down and giving my other breast attention. I run my fingers through his hair as he removes my clothes and works his way down until he's pressing a soft kiss to my lace-covered mound.

"Fuck, you smell like vanilla here too," he murmurs. "Can I taste you now?"

"Yes," I breathe, wanting nothing more than for him to put his mouth on my body some more.

Once he's removed my panties, he lifts my leg onto his shoulder and starts to lick my center. He focuses on my clit, gently massaging circles on the swollen nub, and I let out a loud groan, loving the way his tongue feels on me. I've used a clit stimulator many times to get myself off, but it's never felt like this. Soft yet firm. A slow climb higher and higher. The more he licks, the wetter I get. I can feel my orgasm cresting, but my body is fighting it, fighting the pleasure, as my mind wars with itself.

Pain. Pleasure.

Screams. Moans.

Fear. Trust.

"C'mon, Kitten," Lincoln says, pulling me back into the present. "Come for me. Let go, and come all over my face."

His words are my undoing. My body relaxes, allowing the pleasure to dominate, as the most intense orgasm takes over my body, waves of pleasure washing through me.

I've barely come down from my climax when I'm lifted and carried over to the bed. My back hits the soft mattress, and Lincoln's mouth presses against mine. I revel in the taste of him, of the taste of *me* on him. I'm not sure when his clothes came off, but when he spreads my legs and begins to guide himself inside me, my hands wrap around his neck, the feel of his naked flesh under my fingertips.

He continues to kiss me, devour me, consume me, as he slowly enters me inch by delicious inch. I haven't had anything inside me since *that day*, so it

hurts, stings. To drown out the pain, I try to focus on Lincoln, on his scent, his taste, the way he's kissing me, but I fear that my haunted past will continue to prevail by overshadowing the present.

I keep my eyes open, even though I can't see anything, and pretend I can see his face. His strong jaw and Roman nose. His hazel eyes and his boyish, playful smile. It's one of the things that drew me to him. His smile. He's always happy, never lets anything bring him down. He doesn't stress, let's everything roll off his back.

Lincoln must feel the tension I'm emanating because he slows down, allowing me time to adjust to him as my body fights against itself.

"Breathe," he murmurs against my lips. I do as he says, sucking in a harsh breath and then releasing it slowly. "That's it," he coaxes. "Fuck, you're so tight. You feel so good."

I wish I could say the same—that he feels good—but right now, all I feel is pain.

I continue to breathe through it, though, trusting in him to make this good. A couple months ago, I couldn't even make out with a guy without freaking out, but tonight, I've already experienced my first orgasm that wasn't self-induced. So, I'll take that as a win.

When he's all the way in, he starts to move. Little by little the pain begins to morph into pleasure as something deep inside me starts to build. My legs wrap around Lincoln's waist, and he cradles me protectively in his arms. I pull his face back down to mine, needing to taste him, smell him. I need him surrounding me—in me, on me, all over me.

My release hits me hard, my entire body trembling as I scream out in pure ecstasy. Without meaning to, my eyes close, but instead of flashbacks hitting me, all I see is Lincoln.

Kissing me.

Touching me.

Consuming me.

I'm not sure if the force of my orgasm causes me to black out, but when I come down from my high and open my eyes, Lincoln is no longer on top of me.

I lie here for several seconds in the quiet darkness, wondering if I dreamt the entire thing, but then I hear shuffling. A moment later, there's a dip in the bed, and strong hands are spreading my thighs. I jump at his touch, and he chuckles softly as warmth touches between my legs.

A washcloth. He's cleaning me up. Taking care of me.

As he gently wipes me down, I choke up with emotion. I'm not sure why, after everything that's taken place tonight, but the idea of him caring for me like this feels more intimate than anything else he's done to me.

I swallow down my emotions and blink back my tears, refusing to lose it now. Later, when I'm alone, I'll allow myself to let go. To remember. Lincoln has no idea what he's done for me tonight, but I'll forever be grateful to him for giving me my intimacy back. Without realizing it, he's replaced the most horrid memories with pleasurable, treasured ones.

When he's finished cleaning me, I assume we're going to get dressed and leave, so I'm shocked when he climbs onto the bed and lies next me. His strong arms pull me into his side, and he whispers into my ear, "Tell me I can have you again because once wasn't enough."

And because what he did to me felt so good, because I know this is the only time that I'll be able to have this with him, I can't help but say, "Okay," so we can do what we just did all over again.



"IF YOU COULD WISH FOR ONE THING, KNOWING IT WOULD COME TRUE, WHAT would it be?"

"Peace," I answer without hesitation. Because all I want is to be at peace with myself, much like how I feel right now, lying in this bed with Lincoln. I don't want this feeling to end, and I know it will once we walk out the door. "What about you?" I ask in return.

After the first time we had sex, we laid in bed and talked about life and love and everything in between. I worried he'd recognize my voice, despite me disguising it, but I think because he was too caught up in the moment, the thought that it could be me never crossed his mind.

Once we were both rejuvenated and ready for round two, Lincoln brought me to orgasm once again before he flipped me onto all fours. A flashback hit me hard, but he immediately felt me tense up and instead rolled to his back, pulling me on top of him and giving me a sense of control. With his help, I brought us both to another orgasm, and after he cleaned me up again, we lied back in bed and proceeded to play a form of twenty questions.

At some point, we're going to have to call it a night, but if he's not ready

to do that yet, I'm okay with prolonging the inevitable. With each new joining of our bodies, a piece of me is put back together. I might still be a bit battered and bruised on the inside, but I can honestly say that I'm not the same broken girl that walked through the doors of this club tonight.

"For you to let me inside you again," Lincoln says in response to my question.

"Well, then," I tell him, rolling over so our eyes lock. "Your wish is my command."

CHAPTER SEVEN

LINCOLN



AT TWELVE YEARS OLD, I KISSED A GIRL FOR THE FIRST TIME. WE WERE AT the movies, and I leaned in and pressed my mouth to hers. I was young, but even back then I could appreciate how soft her lips were. The way our lips curled around one another. The way she moaned into my mouth, urging me for more. We spent the rest of the time making out, and when the credits began to scroll up, I couldn't tell you what the movie was about.

At fourteen, I got my cock sucked for the first time. It was in the locker room at school before football practice, and even though I didn't last long—shooting my load straight down her throat about a minute after she started—the feel of her warm mouth on me as I chased my orgasm was one of the best highs I'd ever felt.

At fifteen, I fucked a girl for the first time. I had snuck into her room while her parents were asleep. She was a little older and more experienced, and I never told her I was a virgin. The kissing lasted longer than the sex itself, but during those few short minutes when I was inside her, I can remember being amazed by the way our bodies connected on such an intimate level.

At sixteen, I got my first taste of pussy. When she suggested that I go down on her, I had no idea what I was doing, and it took forever—as well as her guidance—before she orgasmed. But when she did, when her entire body shook and she came all over my sheets on my bed and my mouth, I felt like I had been given a superpower. Pizza had always been my favorite food, but after that day, pussy became my new favorite thing to eat.

With every new experience, I fell deeper in love with the opposite sex. The female body is beautiful. Thin, thick, curvy, toned...blonde, brunette, redheaded. Large breasts or small. I don't have a preference. I've been with damn near every type of woman, and I appreciate them all in their own way.

It's why I opened Wanderlust and Elite. Because I love women. Their soft lips, feminine curves, their sweet scent, the sounds they make when they come. Some people are addicted to cigarettes, drugs, food, alcohol. My addiction is women, and I have no problem owning it.

Whether it's dancing with them, talking to them, watching as they come all over my cock or my fingers or mouth, I can't get enough of them.

It's also why I never understood how my brother could get married to Sienna, chaining himself to one woman for the rest of his life. Don't get me wrong. She's a cool woman, and I love her like a sister. My nieces are adorable, and I love being an uncle. But why would I ever want to be stuck eating the same food for the rest of my life when I could have a variety?

At least that's what my mindset was...Until now.

As I sit on the edge of the bed, watching the silhouette of the woman I just spent hours with get dressed, for the first time ever, I don't want to say goodbye.

We've had sex three times. I've tasted her sweet cunt just as many. But it's not enough. I want more. I want her to take her mask off and let me turn on the lights. I want to see every inch of this woman that I've spent the past few hours touching, kissing, caressing, worshipping.

Normally, when the night comes to an end, I have no problem walking away. But there's something about this woman that's calling to me. And I have no idea what to do about it.

I can't blame it on not knowing what she looks like because I've had plenty of anonymous sex and had no issues walking away afterward.

Maybe it's the mystery behind her reason for coming tonight: wanting to replace a horrible experience with a good one. Though, I know damn well I rose to the challenge, and she's leaving here completely satisfied.

I don't know. I can't put my finger on it, and it's driving me nuts. My brother once said he knew Sienna was *the one* the first time that he laid eyes on her, and I thought he was fucking insane, but right now, I'm thinking maybe he wasn't so crazy after all because something deep inside of me is telling me not to let this woman walk out that door.

"Thank you for tonight," Liz says softly, her husky voice breaking

through the fog of my thoughts. “I had a really good time.”

Her silhouette moves toward the door, and I get up and meet her there, my hand landing on hers as she reaches for the doorknob, preventing her from turning it. I’ve already asked her to take her mask off, but she said no. I asked if we could turn the lights on, but she refused. I can’t adequately describe the sensation settling over me, but there’s a weird feeling of desperation that’s vibrating through my body, making me jittery, like an addict who needs his fix—despite having had this woman several times tonight.

“Stay with me,” I murmur, my front pressing against her back.

“I can’t,” she says apologetically, almost as if she wishes she could say yes.

“Can I have your number?” Fuck, I’ve seriously lost my shit, but I don’t even care. The thought of never seeing her again is driving me senseless.

“You’re the one who said you’re not looking for anything more than one night,” she points out, throwing my earlier words back in my face.

She’s right. She’s so damn right, but...“I’ve changed my mind.”

“I’m sorry,” she mutters, “but I have to go.”

And with those words, I back up and watch as the first woman I’ve ever wanted something more from walks out the door and out of my life.



“I’VE STOPPED BY THE CLUB EVERY DAMN DAY BUT NOTHING. IF SHE’S returned, it’s not when I’ve been there.” It’s been over a month since Valentine’s Day—six weeks to be exact—and I can’t get the woman off my mind. I even checked the cameras to zoom in on her, but with the mask she was wearing, the only thing I have to go off of is her brown hair with blonde highlights, green eyes, and full, kissable lips. I did notice she has a tattoo on the inside of her wrist, but I couldn’t make out what it was.

Pretty much, I have zilch, so I doubt I’ll ever see her again.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” Micah says. “My baby brother is in love.”

I roll my eyes and take a swig of my beer, focusing on the basketball game that’s on the screen. It’s Sunday, and I’m hanging out at my brother’s place watching the game while Sienna cooks dinner.

“Did I just hear Lincoln’s in love?” Sienna asks, setting a bowl of chips on the table along with some dip. She’s got the phone pressed to her ear, obviously talking to someone, but she’s looking at me, waiting for an answer.

“He’s in full-on stalker mode,” Micah says with a smirk.

“I’m not stalking,” I correct with a glare. “I’m searching for her.”

“You hear that?” Sienna says to whoever is on the phone. “Stalking must run in the family.”

“That better not be my mom you’re talking to,” I hiss. The last thing I need is for her to get it in her head that I’m looking to settle down. The minute I turned thirty she started giving me shit and hasn’t stopped. It’s not that I’m unwilling...I’m not a commitment-phobe like she thinks. I’ve just always been content with my life and haven’t seen any reason to settle down. If someone wants to get married, good for them. If they want to settle down and start a family, that’s great. I’ve just never had the desire...Until now.

Fuck, this is so stupid. I don’t even know what the woman looks like. Under that mask could be a fucking alien for all I know.

But she smells sweet like vanilla and tastes even better. Her lips are soft, and her skin is creamy. And when I’d make her come, she’d release the sexiest moan.

Nope, definitely not an alien.

“I’m not talking to your mom.” Sienna giggles. “Though, they are on their way with the girls, so if you don’t want her to know, make sure you don’t talk about this mystery woman when they’re here.”

“So, if you’re not in love,” Micah says, “why are you searching for her?”

“The woman from Valentine’s Day,” Sienna says to whoever is on the phone.

“Sienna, stop telling people my business,” I bark, which only makes her roll her eyes.

“It’s just my sister,” she says. “Now answer Micah’s question. Why are you searching for this woman? What was her name again?”

“Liz.” Or Kitten, as I called her due to the Venetian cat mask she was wearing. “And I’m searching for her because...” I scrub my hand over my face, fully aware that what I’m about to say is going to sound insane. “Because I think she might be the one.”

“What?” Sienna gasps. “What do you mean *the one*? Like the woman you want to spend your life with? How could you possibly know that after one night?”

“Micah knew you were the one after only seeing you once,” I point out.

“He’s not wrong.” Micah shrugs.

“Yeah, but you don’t even know what she looks like,” Sienna argues.

“Doesn’t matter,” I tell her. “I know what I felt. When we kissed, when I was inside her...What we experienced runs deeper than looks.” When we were lying in bed between rounds to give our bodies time to recoup, we talked, connected on a deeper level.

“Sometimes it feels like my life isn’t my own,” she whispered in the dark. *“But tonight, you gave me back a part of myself.”*

I wanted to ask her what happened, but I didn’t want to ruin the moment. So, instead, I pulled her into a kiss, which turned into another round of sex and orgasms.

“Holy shit,” Sienna breathes, snapping me from my thoughts. “You really do have feelings for this woman.”

“I do,” I tell her. “And when I find her, I’m going to make her mine.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELLIE



“I’M GOING TO TELL HIM.”

“What?” Raelyn asks, confusion marring her features. “Tell who what?”

I’ve just gotten off the phone with my sister, and I’m in shock. “Lincoln. He’s looking for me...well, the woman from Valentine’s Day. Remember how I told you he asked for my number, wanting to see me again?” She nods. “He’s been looking for her—me. I’m going to tell him I’m her.”

I haven’t been able to stop thinking about that night since I walked out the door, which was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. But I did it. Because despite Lincoln saying he wanted more, I was scared that once he knew it was me, it would ruin everything. And since that night was without a doubt the best night of my life, I couldn’t risk it.

But now, knowing he’s been searching for me at the club for weeks, it’s worth the risk if it means I can be with him again.

“Okay, so let me get this straight,” Raelyn says. “You snuck into a sex club, pretending to be your sister. Convinced Lincoln to have anonymous sex with you. The same guy who you said would never give you the time of day because he’s older and your sister’s brother-in-law. And you’re planning to waltz in there and tell him you’re the one he fucked seven ways to Sunday and is obsessing over and you think he’s just going to be like, ‘Cool, marry me?’ Sure, Ellie, let me know how that goes.”

“Well, when you put it like *that*, it sounds bad.” I glare at her, ignoring the fact that she might be right. *Okay, is probably right.* “But you weren’t there,” I argue. “In the room where he made love to me over and over again,

worshipping me. Making sure my needs were met and I was satisfied. And you didn't hear him over the phone. He thinks I'm the one."

"He doesn't think *you're* the one," Raelyn says. "He thinks the woman he spent the night with is the one."

"Which is me," I counter. "I didn't lie about anything. We talked and danced and then went into that room and had sex multiple times, and in between the sex, we talked some more. I might've been vague, but I never lied. I need to tell him. It's like fate."

Raelyn shakes her head. "I think you're making a big mistake, but you know I'll support you regardless."

I pull her into a hug. "Thank you. I'm going to book a flight. My sister and her husband are taking the kids to Disney for spring break before she gets too pregnant. It'll be the perfect time to go there and talk to Lincoln without them around."

"Do it after practice," she says. "We need to go, or we'll be late."

I glance at the clock and see that she's right. Even though it's Sunday, we're meeting with our group to go over our routine for the end-of-the-year showcase. With all of us being busy with our final year of classes, we practice several evenings during the week and on Sundays. This showcase is a big deal for many students looking to begin their careers post-college. Since my plan has always been to teach dance with my sister, the showcase is simply my final grade in order to graduate.



"ALRIGHT, FROM THE TOP."

The music starts, and we all move into position. We've been at this for hours, and I'm sweaty, thirsty, and have a splitting headache, but since nobody else is complaining, I keep my mouth shut.

We go through it once more before Miguel suggests we break into smaller groups to go over the transitions. Because the last part of the routine had me on the floor, I stand, but when a bout of nausea hits me, I find myself sitting back down.

"Ellie, are you okay?" Raelyn asks, handing me my jug of water as everyone stops and watches to make sure I'm good.

"Yeah, I think I'm just thirsty." I take a large sip of water and then go to

stand again, but when I do, blackness shrouds my vision and I wobble on my feet.

Something's wrong. I don't know what, but I can feel it.

My body is weak, my bones and muscles feel like Jell-O.

I try to open my eyes, but everything is swirling around me, as if the room is spinning. And then everything goes black.



“YOU HAVE AN IRON DEFICIENCY,” THE DOCTOR SAYS, “WHICH HAS LED TO pregnancy anemia.”

I eye him in confusion, wondering what the hell he's talking about. “I'm sorry, can you repeat that?” Because I'm pretty sure he has the wrong patient being that in order to have pregnancy anemia, the person would actually have to be *pregnant*.

His brows furrow. “According to the blood work, you have a severe iron deficiency which has caused pregnancy anemia. Luckily, we've caught it quickly. But I noticed you didn't put down who your obstetrician is, so we'll need to...”

He glances up at me and must see the shock in my features, because his eyes go wide. “You didn't know you were pregnant, did you?”

I shake my head slowly, trying to wrap my head around what he's saying.

I'm pregnant.

I'm pregnant.

Holy, motherfucking shit. I'm pregnant.

“I'm sorry,” he says, wincing. “It's been a busy day, and I wasn't thinking.” He scrubs his forehead. “Let me start over.” He sits in the chair Raelyn just vacated, who left to go find us some food. “According to the bloodwork, you're pregnant.”

“Is it...” I clear my throat. “Is it possible you have the wrong patient?” I glance over at his chart. “I'm Eliza Bardot.”

He looks down at his chart and back up. “Yes, I have the right patient, and based on your hCG levels, I'm guessing you're probably around six weeks pregnant.”

“Okay.” I nod emphatically, trying like hell not to freak the fuck out. “Is it possible the tests got mixed up? Like, maybe my bloodwork got mixed up

with someone else's and now some poor woman who was hoping to be pregnant has no idea that she actually is?"

The corner of the doctor's mouth twitches, but he has the good manners to keep it in check. "It's possible," he says, "but not likely. However, since you weren't aware of your pregnancy, we can do a transvaginal ultrasound to confirm. How does that sound?"

I nod again as I try to take in what he's saying.

Pregnancy.

Ultrasound.

Anemia.

What the hell is going on? "I thought I was just thirsty," I whisper.

"That's because of the anemia," he says. "You were a bit dehydrated, so we're giving you fluids." He points to the bag of dripping liquid that's flowing into my IV.

"I'll put the order in," he continues, "and then once we've confirmed your pregnancy, we'll discuss the anemia."

Another nod. Still in shock and confused and *what the fuck?*

The doctor leans over and squeezes my hand, smiling softly at me. Then he stands and steps out, leaving me to my thoughts.

I pull my phone out and click on the calendar app, counting back six weeks. Valentine's Day. My period comes the first of the month like clockwork. I had it in February. I remember because when I went to the store to buy tampons, I also bought Raelyn and me some Valentine's Day candy.

Holy shit, Valentine's Day.

Elite sex club.

Lincoln and me.

Three amazing rounds of sex.

Fuck.

I scan my calendar, trying to jog my memory. Did I get my period in March? I don't think I did. I look at the date and see it's now April. I should've gotten it three days ago, but I didn't. I'm staring at my calendar, trying to have this all make sense, when Raelyn walks in.

"They didn't have any muffins, but I got you a —"

"Are you on your period?" I blurt out.

"Umm, yeah," she says, drawing out each word. "Why?"

"I haven't gotten mine."

"Okay..." She looks at me like I'm crazy. "I'm sure it will come —"

“No,” I cut her off. “Not this month. Last month. I got it in the beginning of February, but it never came in March, and now it’s April, and I always get it the day after you. Always.” Our cycles synced halfway through our freshman year of college and ever since they have always been the same.

Her eyes widen, catching on. “You don’t think...You used protection, right?”

“No, we didn’t. Oh my God, Rae. I’m so stupid. I didn’t even think about it. I’m not on birth control because I wasn’t sexually active, and deep down, I knew regardless of how many guys I attempted to have sex with, I couldn’t follow through with it.”

“But you had sex with Lincoln...”

“Three times with no protection.”

“Why the hell wouldn’t he use protection?” she shrieks.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how it all works...” Which, in hindsight, was irresponsible of me. “But I do know that every member has to submit a clean bill of health, and women have to show proof that they’re on birth control.”

I know a little of how Elite is run because I grew up around it. I might not have been in the actual sex club, but I would overhear the adults talking when I would go to Wanderlust, where my sister once worked as a stripper.

“I wasn’t thinking,” I say out loud. “I was so focused on simply trying to get past my shit, I didn’t think about it. And now...” I glance at Raelyn.

“You might be pregnant,” she finishes for me.

“According to the doctor, I *am* pregnant, and the reason why I felt nauseous and dizzy and blacked out is because I have pregnancy anemia, caused by an iron deficiency *in pregnant women*.”

Her eyes widen in shock. “Oh, shit.”

Oh, shit, is right. If the doctor is correct, I’m pregnant...with Lincoln’s baby.



WHOOSH, WHOOSH, WHOOSH.

Spoiler alert: The doctor was right—I’m pregnant!

I stare at the screen as the ultrasound tech explains that based on my measurements, I’m seven weeks along, and my estimated due date is November twenty-first. Raelyn is holding my hand, and neither of us have

said a single word. I think we're both in utter shock. It's one thing to talk about me being pregnant, but it's a whole other to see the fluttering heartbeat on the screen.

But for me, it's more than just shock. I've never known what it feels like to fall in love. For your heart to be completely owned by someone else. As I stare at the little blob on the screen, I've finally fallen...Because my heart has left my chest and now belongs to the baby in my belly.

"What are you going to do?" Raelyn asks once Dr. Gerard has finished discharging me—leaving me with a prescription for prenatal vitamins, an iron supplement, and a recommendation for an OBGYN.

"I don't know," I tell her honestly.

"If you don't want to have the baby..."

At her words, my hand flies to my stomach protectively. Growing up, my mother never once protected me. Every day I was around her, I was put in horrible situations, and even in her death, she put me in harm's way. If it weren't for Sienna taking care of and protecting me, I can't imagine what my life would've looked like. Even when I didn't listen to her and put myself in danger, she literally risked everything in order to save me.

"This baby might not have been planned, but he will be loved and protected by me," I tell her. "He will grow up knowing what it feels like to have a mother who cares and would do anything for him. I might not be perfect, but I have the money and means to take care of him, and I will love him with everything in me."

*Him...*I'm having a son. The gender was revealed in the bloodwork, and I wanted to know. The more prepared I am, the better.

"I keep hearing you talk about *you*, but not once have you mentioned the father," Raelyn points out. "Does that mean you're no longer going home to tell him that you're the woman he's been searching for?"

I shake my head, my heart sinking at the thought. "I can't do it," I tell her. "I'm going to eventually tell him. I would never keep him from his son, but I messed up badly and can't go home like this. He thought he was having sex with a member of the club who was on birth control. He trusted the woman he was with, and she broke that trust. *I* broke that trust."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to graduate and spend the summer here. I have until the end of November to figure out how to handle this situation. But I'm not going to force Lincoln to be in this baby's life. He didn't ask for this, and he shouldn't

be punished for my choices.”

“I wish I could stay,” she says softly, “but —”

“Stop, you have an amazing job waiting for you when we graduate.” She was hired by a prestigious dance company in Chicago where her family lives. It’s literally her dream job. “You have to go. I get it. Luckily, since I own the condo that we live in, I can stay for however long I want.”

When my bio dad—Eleazar—died, I inherited his entire fortune. After selling off everything, and donating all the blood money, I was left with a little over two hundred million dollars. Those who know me don’t understand why I even bothered going to college. Originally it was because I wanted to major in dance therapy, but when I got here, I wasn’t in the right mindset to take classes that would force me to analyze human behaviors—especially since I can barely handle my own on a good day—so I changed my major to dance and spent the past four years dancing my way through school while hiding from my past and home.

“But you’re going to tell him, right?” Raelyn presses. “You’re going to give him the choice.”

“Of course,” I tell her. “I just need some time to figure out how to blow his world apart.”

CHAPTER NINE

LINCOLN



“I CAN’T FIND HER.” I’VE SPENT MONTHS SEARCHING FOR THIS WOMAN, BUT it’s as if she doesn’t exist. I’ve gone through every member of the club, starting with the ones named Liz and Elizabeth who attended the masquerade party on Valentine’s Day. All the members’ cards get scanned when they enter and leave, so it’s all timestamped. Normally, her card would’ve been scanned for the backroom as well, but I fucked up and didn’t ask for her card since I have access to everything. Had I asked for it, I wouldn’t be where I am: at a fucking loss. Because even after combing through every damn member, I still can’t find her, which makes no sense, unless she lied about her name.

“Maybe it’s not her you’re after,” Micah says from the visitor seat in my office. Since we have access to everything electronically, we do the majority of our business at Alexander Enterprises, which is located in downtown Tesoro. “Maybe being with her made you realize you’re ready to settle down, but it’s not actually her you want.” When I hit him with a hard glare, he sighs. “Go on a few dates and see how it goes.”

“How is taking some woman to dinner going to compare to being inside my mystery woman?”

“Okay, then fuck someone else and see if it’s just as good.”

“Not happening,” I tell him. I know I sound crazy, but I’m not ready to give up yet. Maybe it’s because she’s the last person I had sex with, but I can still remember how smooth her creamy flesh felt, still smell her vanilla scent. When I close my eyes, I can feel the way her body fit perfectly with mine.

The way she tasted. I always use a condom—always—but that night I was so enraptured by her, I went in raw every single time. It wasn't smart to go without a rubber, but I can't say I regret it because fuck, I can still remember the way her warm, tight cunt wrapped around my cock every time she came. Yeah, it was worth it. Thankfully, when I went and got tested afterward, I was given a clean bill of health.

“What are you two gossiping about?” Sienna asks, strolling in.

“Men don't gossip, they discuss,” Micah corrects, making her roll her eyes as she leans down and kisses him on his lips. She attempts to back away, but he pulls her into his lap, making her squeal, and I can't help but smile at how happy they are. Before I spent the evening with my mystery woman, Liz a.k.a. Kitten, I was in no rush to have what they have. I was content with my physical relationships, but now, I want more. I want the closeness, the conversation, the family, and I want it with *her*.

“My bad,” Sienna jokes. “What were you two *men* discussing?”

“Your husband was just telling me to get laid and see if her pussy is as good as my mystery woman's,” I say, knowing I'm throwing my big bro under the bus.

His eyes widen at the same time Sienna gasps. “Micah!”

“What?” he says with a shrug, playing it off. “He's obsessed over this woman and whining like a little girl. Something needs to give. His mood is killing my vibe.”

I chuckle when Sienna playfully slaps his chest. “Could you replace my pussy?” she asks with a laugh as her phone begins to ring and she reaches into her pocket to grab it.

“Fuck no,” Micah says immediately, not falling for that trap.

“Exactly,” I agree. “I want *her*. Not some cheap knockoff.”

“Except you don't know who she is,” Micah points out. “So, unless you want to remain celibate for the rest of your life, you're going to have to get back out there. And I've had enough of your crankiness. You need to get laid.”

CHAPTER TEN

ELLIE



I'M GOING TO DO IT. I'M GOING TO TELL MY SISTER. SHE'S TEXTED ME ASKING if I'll be home for my birthday or if we should celebrate early, when they come for my graduation. It's been over a month since I found out I was pregnant, and since then, my body has already started to change. My breasts are fuller and slightly sensitive, I have a bit of morning sickness, but thankfully the iron supplement and prenatal vitamins are keeping the dizzy spells away, and my belly is starting to form a little bit of a bump. It's not huge, but since I'm tiny, it's making the changes in my body more prominent.

Because of exams and the showcase, I couldn't fly there like I wanted to, so it has to be over the phone. The longer I wait, the harder it will be. They're flying here next week for my graduation, and the last thing I need is Sienna finding out I'm pregnant before I've told her.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I hit call and a couple rings later, Sienna answers the phone, laughing over the line.

"Hey, sis, how's it going?"

"Okay," I say vaguely. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm good," she says, cackling. "But Lincoln just showed up and apparently has a broken dick."

"What? Why?" I gasp, wondering what the hell happened, when I know for a fact, it was working just fine a few months ago.

"He's obsessed with finding the mystery woman," she says. "So, Micah told him to go out with other women."

“He told me to *screw* other women!” Lincoln yells over the phone, and I’m momentarily distracted by the sound of his voice. No matter what’s going on, he’s always smiling and laughing. His voice, while masculine and deep, is constantly filled with happiness. Just listening to him speak soothes me...Until I think about the words he spoke.

He’s having sex with other women...Moving on. That’s good. This is for the best. If he finds someone else, he’ll be too distracted to be pissed when he finds out what I did.

Yes, Lincoln moving on is definitely a good thing...

“Whatever,” Sienna says flippantly. “*Screw* other women. He was cranky, so Micah told him to find someone else so he would go back to being his usual happy self. But based on the way he’s pouting, I don’t think it went well.”

“It didn’t go at all,” Lincoln says. “I’m broken. She broke my dick.”

Oh God. This isn’t good. When he finds out it was me who broke him, he’s going to be pissed. My sister is going to be pissed. Micah is going to be pissed.

“Hey, Sienna,” I choke out. “I gotta go.”

“What? You just called,” she says.

“I know, but...I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

Before she can argue, I click end on the call and then turn off my phone. My head is resting in my hands as I freak out, when Raelyn walks in and plops down on the bed.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

I raise my head and sigh. Then I explain to her what happened when I called Sienna. When I finish, she says, “Maybe this is a sign.”

“A sign? For what? Me to leave the country?”

“No.” She snorts out a laugh. “A sign that he’ll forgive you. He obviously wants this mystery woman something fierce.”

“Yeah, the mystery woman. Not me.”

“Maybe he’ll be so happy to finally know who the mystery woman is, he’ll overlook how it all went down and that she’s you.”

“No way.” I drop my head back onto my pillow and stare up at the ceiling. “Once he knows she’s me, he’s going to lose his shit. I never should’ve done what I did...”

But even as I say the words, flashes from our night together hit me, the way he worked my body, making me feel only pleasure. The hours of talking

in between. I've never connected with someone on such a deep level.

My thoughts flit to hearing my baby's heartbeat in the hospital, seeing his tiny body on the screen...and I know I don't mean the words I just said. That night changed my life in so many ways, including giving me the baby I'm carrying. He's only been a part of me for a short time, but I already love him something fierce.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Raelyn says.

"I snuck into his sex club, one I'm not a member of, and had sex with Lincoln without being on birth control. Something that's required to be a member. Then, I got knocked up. What part of that isn't wrong?" I feel like we've had this same conversation more times than I can count, and I'm sure she's sick of having it with me, but I appreciate how she continues to support me every time I freak out and debate whether or not I should tell Lincoln and my sister. Raelyn is the definition of a true best friend, and I don't know what I would do without her in my life.

"Okay, well, first of all, even if you had been on birth control, it's not one hundred percent effective, so you still could've been in this position." She shrugs. "And you didn't set out to hurt anyone. You just wanted to feel whole again, and Lincoln is someone you trusted to help fix what was broken. And look on the bright side." Her eyes go wide. "It worked!"

"It worked? It worked?" I splutter, sitting back up. "That's what you're focusing on, Rae? I'm pregnant with Lincoln's baby." I lift my shirt and show her the tiny bump as evidence. "And when my family finds out, they're going to hate me."

"Stop," she chides. "Your sister could never hate you. She loves you. And you need to tell them soon because we graduate next week, and you're supposed to be moving back to Tesoro for good."

"Or maybe I don't move back," I say. "I can tell them something came up and I can't make it to graduation, and I won't be moving back home. I can tell them I took an unexpected job."

"So now you're lying to them?" Raelyn raises a brow. "You can't not tell him, and lying is only going to make it worse. Besides, you already admitted to being completely yourself that night, which means the woman Lincoln fell for is you. That has to mean something, right?"

"It means he's going to be pissed when he learns it was me." I sigh in frustration. "Damn it, I need more time to figure this out. Maybe it's for the best if I stay here. It'll give him time to get over his mystery woman so then

he won't feel pressured into being a part of this baby's life once he does learn the truth."

Raelyn nods. "You know I've got your back no matter what you decide."

I spend the night tossing and turning, trying to figure out what to do. Grades close the next morning, and with the credits I've earned, I'm officially a college graduate.

In the afternoon, I go to my three-month checkup where I hear the heartbeat again, which only has me falling even more in love with my baby boy. As I listen to the whooshing sound, I wonder if my mom felt an ounce of the love I feel when she was pregnant with me. And when I think about the answer, I come to a conclusion regarding the matter at hand.

"I'm staying here," I tell Raelyn when I walk through the door. "Lincoln didn't ask for this, and the last thing I want is to force him into fatherhood."

"I understand what you're saying," she says, "but I think you need to leave that up to him."

I place a protective hand over my little bump, remembering how my mom used to treat me. "I was a mistake, Rae, and my mom made sure I never forgot that. I won't put my baby in the same position, risk him being looked at the way my mom looked at me—with regret."

I pull out my phone and send a text to Sienna. I know it'll hurt her but it's for the best.

ELLIE

Hey sis! Sorry to do this, but I got an amazing job opportunity and had to take it. Unfortunately, that means I won't be able to attend graduation, and because it's for the entire summer, I won't be coming home. I'll call you soon. xo

Within seconds, she responds:

SIENNA

Was looking forward to seeing you graduate and spending your birthday with you, but I get it. I just want you to be happy. If anything changes, let us know and we'll be on the next flight out. I look forward to hearing about your job, and just know, this will always be your home if you ever change your mind. Love you.

"What'd she say?" Raelyn asks.

"She understands," I mutter. I should be grateful that she's not arguing or asking questions, but somehow her understanding only makes me feel that much worse.



One Week Later

“I WISH YOU WERE HERE,” RAELYN SAYS OVER FACETIME. TODAY IS graduation, but since I told Sienna I couldn’t make it, there’s no point in going. Walking across the stage won’t be the same without having her in the audience.

“Are you at least going to come to the after party?” She pouts, and I roll my eyes.

“I’m pregnant, Rae. I’m tired, hormonal, and I can’t fit into half my clothes. The only place I’m going to is the mall to buy some jeans that don’t make me feel like I’ve eaten an entire chocolate cake in one sitting.” Mmm...chocolate cake. Maybe I should stop by the bakery on the way and get a slice.

“Fine,” Raelyn relents. “But tomorrow is our day. I need to pack Saturday because I leave Sunday to go home.”

“You got it,” I tell her. “Have a good time. Love you.”

“Love you more.” She blows me a kiss and then ends the video call.

I drop my phone into my purse, hook it over my shoulder, and then swing the front door open, ready to get out of here and get some clothes that fit and a slice of chocolate cake.

Only when I go to step out, I’m blocked...by my brother-in-law. As I stare at him in shock, trying to make sense as to why he’s here, I don’t think about the fact that I’m dressed in tiny cotton shorts and an even tinier tank. Not only is it hot as hell here, but I wasn’t kidding when I said my clothes don’t fit. I’m only a little over three months along, but my belly already has a noticeable bump that makes it hard to wear my clothes that had fit me like a glove before I got pregnant. The second his eyes stop on my belly, I know shit’s about to get real.

Never one to beat around the bush, he asks what we both know he’s thinking. “Are you pregnant?”

I swallow nervously as my hand instinctually goes to my protruding belly. I should deny it, tell him he’s crazy and then slam the door in his face, but there’s no point in delaying the inevitable.

“Does your sister know?” he asks when I don’t verbally confirm. “Who

am I kidding? Of course, she doesn't know," he adds, answering his own question. "If she knew, she'd be all over you...Which is why you haven't told her. Why you canceled our visit for your graduation and said you were taking a job here this summer. Holy shit," he breathes. "You weren't planning to tell her, were you? You were going to keep this from her." He shakes his head, and my stomach sinks at his evident disappointment.

"Who's the dad?" he asks.

His question causes me to panic. I wasn't planning for an interrogation. And I sure as hell can't tell him who knocked me up.

"Ellie!" Micah barks, obviously fed up with my silence. "Who the hell got you pregnant?" If I was considering telling him the truth, the crazy in his eyes would stop me dead in my tracks.

"I-He's not exactly in the picture," I tell him, speaking around the truth.

He stares at me for several seconds and then nods. "You're coming home."

Oh, shit. Fuck. "What?" I say, as my heart picks up speed. "No...I can't. I —"

"Stop," he says, cutting me off. "I don't know what the fuck is going on, but I'm not going to listen to your half-truths anymore. You're done with school and there's no summer job. You're coming home with me now, where your family is, and we'll deal with this together."

"No." I shake my head, my blood pumping so fast I'm slightly dizzy. "I can't. Sienna is going to get upset." I back up slightly. "I messed up, but she's pregnant and shouldn't be stressed." I plead with him with my eyes, begging him not to do this, even though it's futile. "Please, Micah. Pretend like you didn't see me. Please. I can't go home. Everyone is going to hate me."

"Impossible. You're family. We deal with shit together. The stress of you trying to handle this on your own, hiding it from your sister, isn't good for you or that baby. You've been gone long enough. It's time to come home." He extends his hand, silently telling me to take it.

"Wait," I tell him. "My stuff...I need to —"

"We'll pay someone to pack it up. We're leaving now. Let's go."

The drive to the airport is awkwardly quiet, and the long flight in the private plane is as well. I spend the time I'm not sleeping trying to figure out how to get out of this mess. I text Raelyn to let her know what's happened, apologizing that I won't see her before she leaves. Of course, her only

concern is for me and texts that if I need anything to let her know.

The moment we're through the door, Sienna throws her arms around me, ecstatic to see me. "What are you doing here?" she asks, backing up and looking at me with tears in her eyes. Since she's several months pregnant, she's sporting the most adorable bump under her pretty floral sundress.

I'm about to respond, when her eyes, just like her husband's, go to my bump. "Oh shit," she breathes. "Are you...are you pregnant?"

The emotion in her eyes is my undoing, and before I can think about what I'm doing, I blurt out, "Yes, I'm pregnant...with Lincoln's baby." Sienna and Micah gasp, but I don't stop talking, needing to get it all out before they freak out on me. "I'm so sorry. I know I fucked up, but I swear I didn't mean for this to happen, and I'm not expecting anything from him. That's why I wasn't going to come home. I didn't want him to feel responsible. It's not his fault that —"

"Like fuck he's not responsible," Micah barks.

It takes me a second to catch up, and I realize he's pissed because he's assuming Lincoln knew he was sleeping with me. Jesus, I need to explain. This is all such a mess.

But before I can, Micah is storming out of the penthouse, the door slamming open so hard that it damn near falls off the hinges.

"Where is he go—?" And then it hits me. Lincoln! Fuck.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LINCOLN



“WITH ROSA HAVING TO LEAVE UNEXPECTEDLY, I’M GOING TO HAVE TO LOOK into —”

Bang. Bang. Bang. “Lincoln, open the fucking door!”

“Let me call you back,” I say, hanging up without waiting for Lisa to respond—my only concern, my brother.

“Everything okay?” I ask, swinging the door open. I barely get my question out before my brother cocks his fist back and then clocks me straight in the jaw, forcing me to stumble backward.

“What the hell!” I bark, torn between confusion and anger. Micah’s been my best friend my entire life, and while we have disagreements, neither of us has ever put our hands on the other.

“You fucked her? What were you thinking?” He stalks toward me and grabs me by my collar, slamming me up against the wall. This time, when he goes to punch me, I’m ready and duck just before his fist connects with my face.

“Stop!” I yell, having no idea what he’s going on about. “What are you talking about? Fucked who?”

“Micah, stop!” a feminine voice yells. “Please, don’t do this.” I glance around my brother and find Ellie standing there with a pained expression etched into her features. “Please, let me explain.”

“Explain what?” I ask, confused as hell by what’s going on. I didn’t even know she was back in town. The last I heard she was staying in California for at least the summer.

“You fucked her,” Micah spits, “and now she’s pregnant.”

“Who?” I ask again.

“Her!” he barks, pointing his finger at Ellie.

I bark out a humorless laugh, because this must be some kind of joke, only the look on Micah’s face tells me he’s being dead serious.

“Bro,” I say slowly, shaking my head. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’ve never touched Ellie.” I glance at her briefly. “Tell him. Tell him I’ve never touched you.”

I’ve known her since she was fourteen and, yeah, we’ve always had a good relationship, and I care about her, but it’s never been like that. Hell, she’s fourteen years younger than me.

“Lincoln,” she sighs, tears filling her green eyes. “I...”

The regret in her features confuses me. “Ellie, what’s going on?”

“Lincoln, stop playing stupid,” Micah says. “She might not want to hold you accountable, but you were raised better than that. She’s pregnant, and you’re the father, and whether you like it or not, you’re going to man the fuck up.”

“What?” I look at Ellie again. “I don’t understand.” I step over to Ellie, who’s got her arms wrapped around herself and is sobbing softly.

“I’m so sorry,” she cries. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“What?” I ask carefully. “Come and sit down.” I take her hand in mine and bring her over to the couch. If what Micah is saying is true and she’s pregnant—not by me—it can’t be good for her to be this stressed out.

“I’m so sorry,” she says again, covering her face with her hands.

“For what?” I ask gently. “Ellie...” I tip her chin up so she’s forced to look at me. “What happened? You know whatever it is, I’ve got your back.” When she was younger, I was someone she confided in—school, her sister, asshole guys who didn’t deserve her time, her mom—I was even the one who got her out of a shitty situation with her bio dad. But after that day—when she was held captive and almost killed—she started to shut everyone out. I tried to be there for her, but when she moved, and we no longer lived on the same floor in the same hotel, we didn’t really keep in touch.

“I’m pregnant,” she murmurs, liquid emotion filling her lids, “and the baby’s yours.”

I freeze, unsure why the hell she’s saying this. It makes no sense. I’ve never been with this woman before, yet she’s sticking to this claim.

“Ellie, why are you saying this?” I ask, trying to keep the anger out of my

voice. Clearly, something is wrong for her to go out of her way to lie about me being the father of her baby, but she must know by saying this she's causing a shitstorm of issues for me with our family. "Did something happen with the guy you slept with? Did he hurt you?" If he did, Micah and I will no doubt be on the next flight out to kill him.

She shakes her head, and her hand goes to her belly. "The baby is yours. We had sex...on Valentine's Day."

The baby is mine.

We had sex.

On Valentine's Day.

I repeat the words several times in my head, trying to wrap my mind around what she's saying. But it doesn't make any sense because on Valentine's Day I was with...

Green eyes.

Brown hair with caramel highlights.

No. No. No. This can't be happening.

Her name was Liz, not...Eliza.

My hands clench and sweat dampens my palms.

There's no way. She wouldn't...She couldn't.

I try to think...There's no way my mystery woman could be her.

And then I remember the tattoo I saw on the camera. I grab Ellie's left wrist, and on the inside, in script, it reads 'Survivor.'

A tattoo on her wrist, just like my mystery woman.

Fuck. No. This has to be a coincidence. A sick, twisted joke.

But when I look at her face riddled with guilt and regret, and Micah, who's standing nearby, glaring daggers my way, it's clear that neither of them think this is funny.

I stand and back up, needing space. Needing to think. This can't be right. There's no way...I would've known if I was sleeping with Ellie. Right?

But as I stare at her, assessing her features—features of the woman I've been fantasizing about for the past three months—I have no choice but to admit the truth. "I didn't know," I say out loud. "I didn't know it was her."

Micah's eyes alight with fury. "How the —?"

"Stop!" Ellie begs. "He's telling the truth. He didn't know. That's why I didn't want to come home. I messed up, and it's not his fault."

I didn't know, but she did, which means..."How the fuck did you get into my club?"

Ellie flinches. “I pretended to be Sienna.”

Jesus, I scrub my hands over my face. This is so messed up. But it also makes sense as to why I couldn’t find my mystery woman in the system. And since Sienna is family, not a member, the bouncer would’ve let her in without scanning her card.

“You’re telling me you snuck into my sex club by pretending to be your sister, sought me out, and had sex with me, knowing who I was?”

She nods. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” I bark out a humorless laugh. “You’re sorry? Did you think this was funny? Some kind of joke?” I get in her face, my body vibrating in anger. “Did you fuck me with the hope of getting pregnant? Huh? Did you do this on purpose?” The tears that had filled her lids, spill over, but she doesn’t answer me, and I need answers because this is bad, really fucking bad. “Answer me! Did you —?”

“Stop it!” Sienna suddenly appears and pushes me back. “Stop yelling at my sister. Can’t you see she’s upset?”

I bark out another laugh, wondering if I’m dreaming...No, screw that, having a nightmare. Because there’s no way any of this can be real.

“You’re worried about me upsetting her?” I say, glaring at Sienna. “She pretended to be you to get into my club and then seduced me, so I’d have sex with her without knowing who she was.”

Sienna gasps and glances at Ellie. “Is that true?”

“No,” Ellie sobs. “I mean, it is, but it wasn’t like that.” Her cries get harder, and I want to feel bad, but fuck that, she did this. And now her decisions have consequences. “I just wanted to have sex,” she blurts out. “I mean...” Sobs now rack Ellie’s body as she tries to get words out, but she’s crying too hard. Sienna sits next to her sister and wraps her arm around her, comforting her.

“El, talk to us, please,” Sienna pleads. “Did you try to get pregnant with Lincoln’s baby?”

“No,” Ellie chokes out. “I just wanted to know what it would feel like to be with someone by choice. Someone who makes me feel safe. Someone I trust.” She glances up at me. “I’m sorry. I tried so many times to have sex with other guys, but I couldn’t do it, and Raelyn said it’s because I didn’t trust them. I didn’t believe her, but I was desperate to feel good. To take away the images and pain...”

As she explains herself, my thoughts go back to our night together. What

she said to me...She wanted to replace the bad experience with a good one. She wanted me to make her feel good. At the time, I thought she meant she had shitty sex, but now...

“I was raped,” she says, just as the same thought hits me. “When Arielle took me, she allowed the guards to rape me.” Her body trembles, and my fists clench at my sides, wishing all those fuckers were still alive, so I could slowly torture and kill them one by one.

“It was horrible, and it hurt so much,” Ellie murmurs. “And every time a guy touches me, the memories resurface.” She locks eyes with me. “Until you.”

Fuck.

“Oh my God,” Sienna breathes, holding her sister. “Why didn’t you tell me? You’ve been keeping this to yourself all these years?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Ellie mutters. “You told me not to go, and I didn’t listen. It was my fault, and you were pregnant with London and almost lost her. You were bleeding and were nearly killed because of me. You would’ve felt responsible, and I couldn’t let you shoulder that blame.”

It all makes sense now. The way Ellie clung to me the day I saved her from the warehouse. We thought we got there just in time, but the fact is, we were too late. The damage had been done. Sure, they were alive, and we blew up the warehouse, killing everyone involved, but we had no idea that Ellie, only fifteen years old, had been raped. She hadn’t told a soul.

“Oh, El.” Sienna starts to cry. “Is that why you moved away?”

Ellie nods into her sister’s chest. “I couldn’t be here, with all the memories of that day...And I couldn’t tell you. So, I ran to California.”

Sienna always questioned why Ellie never dated after that day, why she was so quiet, and when she announced that she was moving to the West Coast, Sienna hadn’t understood why. But now, all the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

“But none of what happened excuses what I did.” Ellie pulls away from Sienna and focuses her attention on me. “I messed up. I wanted to be intimate with someone I could trust, someone I knew wouldn’t hurt me, would be gentle and treat me right, so I could move forward. I honestly didn’t even think it would happen, and when it did, I figured we would go our separate ways and you’d be none the wiser.”

“Only you weren’t on birth control,” I add, “and we didn’t use protection.”

My thoughts go back to that night. The talking, the touching, the kissing. How perfect it felt being inside of her without a condom. I came inside her several times without thought.

She nods. "And I got pregnant."

"Were you going to tell me?" I ask, remembering that Micah said I should take responsibility, as if he assumed I knew and wasn't going to own up to what Ellie and I created. Holy shit, we created a baby. I can't believe this is happening. One minute, I was desperate to find my mystery woman, and the next, I discover she's Ellie, who is pregnant with my baby.

"Of course," she says. "I just needed some time to figure it all out. I was raised by a mom who didn't want me, and Sienna's dad didn't want her. The last thing I want is for this baby to ever feel unwanted." She stands, and when her fingers splay across her abdomen, I notice a tiny but noticeable bump. "I know this is my fault," she says, sniffing back her tears. "You went into that room thinking I was a member of the club who was on birth control. This baby is not your fault, and I won't force you to be in his life."

"His?" I ask.

She nods. "There was an issue, and I had to go to the hospital..."

"What?" Sienna gasps. "What issue? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Ellie says softly. "I have pregnancy anemia. I didn't even know I was pregnant. I got dizzy during practice for the showcase..."

"You said it was canceled." Sienna pouts.

"I didn't want you to come," Ellie admits. "I knew if you came to see me, you'd take one look at me and know I was pregnant, so I lied to keep you away. About the showcase, the job, not being able to attend graduation. I've told so many lies, and I'm so sorry. It feels like everything has spun out of control, and I don't know how to fix any of it."

Sienna sighs. "Are you okay now? Is the baby okay?"

"Yeah," Ellie tells her with a small smile. "I'm taking prenatal vitamins and iron supplements. Because of how far along I was, they were able to tell me the gender. I'm having a little boy."

Sienna smiles and gives her sister a hug. "Congratulations! How far along are you?"

"A little over three months. I'm due November 21st."

"Eek!" Sienna squeals. "Our babies will only be three months apart! Obviously, we don't know if we're having a boy or girl yet, since we like to be surprised, but it won't matter. Our babies will grow up together and be

best friends. How cool is that?” She turns to Micah, whose face is devoid of all emotion, and she drops her smile, suddenly remembering the elephant in the room.

“Oh, shit,” Sienna murmurs. “You’re pregnant...with Lincoln’s baby.”

“Yeah, she is,” I agree, wondering where we go from here.

Ellie’s emerald eyes meet mine—eyes I’ve been fantasizing about—and I suddenly can’t breathe. Because she might be several years younger than me and off limits, but that doesn’t change the fact that I fucked her...several goddamn times. I ate her sweet cunt and feasted on her perfect tits. I held her and talked with her and...Fuck! She was my mystery woman. No, not *was*...she *is*. She’s the woman I’ve been searching for, hell-bent on finding. She broke my goddamn cock.

“Lincoln,” Ellie says gently, carefully, not wanting to poke the beast. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking about how I was determined to find the woman whom I thought was ‘the one.’ My mystery woman. I didn’t think I’d ever find her.” I wave my hand toward her. “I guess the joke was on me.” I snort out a harsh laugh. “Because even though she’s standing right in front of me, the truth is, she never existed.”

Ellie opens her mouth to say something—what, I don’t know—but I can’t take another moment of being in the same room as her, so I raise my hand to stop her and then stalk out, slamming the door behind me.

Instead of taking the elevator, I take the steps, needing to burn off the raw emotions coursing through my veins. When I get to my car, I go straight to Elite without thinking, with only one purpose in mind: needing to fuck that woman right out of my head.

Only it’s easier said than done. Because when I get there and find a willing participant, I realize far too quickly that my cock doesn’t want this woman.

He wants the woman with the green eyes.

Who smells like vanilla.

With the chocolate and caramel hair.

And perfect, luscious tits.

As I sit in my office and stare at the grainy image of the mystery woman, who I now know is Eliza Bardot, I realize I’m screwed. Because despite the fact that she’s too young, too off-limits, and that she fucked up big time, I still want to feel her under me, on top of me. I want to inhale her sweet scent,

taste her delicious cunt. Sink into her body and get lost in her.

And now, instead of running the fuck away from her, in a few months, I'm going to have a baby with her.

"Figured I'd find you here," Micah says, walking into my office and sitting across from me. "You okay?"

"No," I tell him honestly.

"What can I do?"

I drop the picture onto the desk and look at him. "You can tell me that I'm an idiot."

"You didn't know."

"No, not because of that."

"Then why?"

"Because despite knowing who the mystery woman is, I still want her."

Micah's eyes widen in understanding. "Fuck."

"Yeah," I agree. "Fuck."

"You know you can't have her, though, right?" he states matter-of-factly, giving me a look that says it's non-negotiable, that being with Ellie is off the table. A look that has me wanting to argue but knowing I can't because she's Sienna's little sister, Micah's sister-in-law. And he's my brother. But more than that, he's my best friend, and I'd never do anything to mess up our relationship. Which means, Ellie is completely off-limits.

"Yeah, I know," I say, scrubbing my hands over my face. "She's off-limits." And doesn't that just fucking suck. Knowing the woman I want is right there, within my reach, knowing the way she tastes, smells, feels, and also knowing I can never have her again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ELLIE



“YOU KNOW I’M HERE TO TALK ANY TIME,” SIENNA SAYS, TAKING A SEAT next to me on the couch. “Even if you just need someone to listen. I’m not going to judge, and no matter what you say, I won’t get upset.”

It’s been two days since my truth bombs exploded all over everyone. Lincoln left, Micah went after him, and Sienna gave me my space when I excused myself to cry.

She’s been bringing me my meals since I’ve refused to get out of bed, but today is Mother’s Day, and Sienna deserves to be spoiled. So instead of hiding myself away, I woke up early with my nieces, Brooklyn and London, and we made Sienna breakfast in bed. The girls surprised her with the most adorable cards and homemade gifts, and Micah bought her jewelry.

Normally, they would go to Micah’s parents’ place for brunch, but since Donna and Michael are vacationing in Europe, we spent the morning and early afternoon hanging by the pool. Now, the girls are napping, and Micah excused himself to handle some business, leaving Sienna and me alone.

“I know,” I say with a forced smile. “And I appreciate that, but I don’t want to put you in the middle of this mess.”

“I already am,” she says, reaching over and squeezing my hand gently. “We’re family, and we’ll get through this together. What happened to you...” Tears fill her eyes, but she quickly swipes them away. “I’m sorry. I told myself I’d keep it together, but I just can’t even imagine...Have you talked to someone? A professional?”

“Yeah, though, probably not as consistently as I should. It just feels like

by talking about it, I'm forcing myself to relive the trauma, and all I want is to move on."

"I get that, but maybe in order to move on, you need to face what happened to you in the past. Like how you faced having sex."

My thoughts go back to the night with Lincoln and how, despite him not knowing what I was going through, he helped me face my fears head on. That night was better than I could've ever imagined my first time would be. The way he touched and caressed and —

"What's going through your head?" Sienna asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I think you're right. Facing my issue with sex head on worked, so maybe I should give speaking to someone another try." I've told myself so many times I would do it, but now, I need to actually put forth the effort. In a few months, I'm going to become a mother, and it's important that I'm the best version of myself.

"Speaking of which..." Sienna smirks and edges a bit closer. "How was it?" she whispers.

"How was what?"

"You know." Her cheeks tint a light shade of pink and she waggles her brows. It takes me a second, but once I catch on to what she's asking, I bark out a laugh.

"Are you asking me how Lincoln was in bed?"

"Well, yeah." She shrugs. "I mean, you don't have to get into the details, but we missed out on this. The girl talk." Tears fill her lids, and she smiles a watery smile, and I pull her into a tight hug, needing to be close to her. Sienna is right. We missed out on a lot because of what happened and because I ran. But I'm back home now, so I'm going to do everything in my power to make it up to her.

"It was good," I murmur as we break apart. "Really freaking good. So good, I have no idea how I'm going to be with someone else in the future and not compare them to Lincoln."

Sienna chuckles. "It's the Alexander genes. They're good at everything. It really isn't fair."

"What are we good at?" Micah asks, as he strolls into the living room.

"Sex." Sienna giggles.

Micah's jaw tenses, his eyes going dark. "Ellie," he says, his tone serious. "You know nothing will ever come of you and Lincoln again, right? He's too

old for you. What you did..." He sighs, and his expression slightly softens. "I get it. I don't agree with how you handled it, but you're young and you've been through so much —"

"Wait a second," Sienna cuts in. "Are you saying that Lincoln and Ellie can't be together?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Micah says.

"You are aware that she's an adult, right?" Sienna glares. "If she and Lincoln want —"

"He doesn't," Micah says, cutting her off. "He agrees with me completely."

"Agrees with what?" she asks.

"That Ellie's off-limits," he says in a tone that conveys this conversation is over.

"You can't —"

"Stop," I say, not wanting them to fight. This is precisely why I didn't want to come home. I knew once everyone found out, lines would be drawn, and it's not fair to put them in the middle of this. Sienna deserves to be happy, and I'm not going to be the reason she and Micah argue.

"I agree," I say to them. "Like I told Lincoln, if he doesn't want to be a part of this baby's life, he doesn't have to be. And I'm definitely not expecting him to get down on one knee and propose." I laugh awkwardly to cover up my hurt. I didn't really think the idea of us was a possibility, but that didn't stop me from wishing...

"If you're worried about Lincoln not being there for the baby, don't be," Micah says. "He's upset right now, shocked at the turn of events, but he'll come around and do the right thing."

The right thing... Because this baby wasn't conceived out of love. It was a one-night stand gone wrong. The same way I was conceived.

My stomach knots as the realization hits—that despite never wanting to be anything like my mom, I ended up in the same position she was in—knocked up by a man who doesn't want me or our baby.

"If you'll excuse me"—I stand and force a smile to cover up how sick I suddenly feel—"I'm feeling kind of tired."



Lincoln

SHE'S OFF-LIMITS.

I know this, hell, I agree with this, but it's hard to accept. Because every time I close my eyes, I can't get her out of my head. The way our bodies fit together so perfectly. The way her warm, tight cunt gripped my cock.

But it was so much more than that. It was the conversation. The feelings that ran deeper than I've ever felt. I don't believe in love at first sight, but the chemistry between us was undeniable.

And had she been anyone else, I would've taken it as a sign. I've been thinking about her for months, fantasizing about the day I'd find her. And just when I thought all hope was lost, she appeared at my doorstep.

Only the joke was on me because my mystery woman wasn't just any woman—she's Sienna's much younger sister.

She's without a doubt the youngest woman I've ever slept with. It's not that I'm opposed to younger women, but older women tend to know what they want, and they are a helluva lot more mature. They don't cling. They don't play games. They know the score.

But with Ellie, it was different. I had no idea she was so young because she didn't play games. She knew what she wanted, and she went after it. And in that short amount of time, we connected on a deeper level.

Or maybe my memory of that night is distorted, and it wasn't as earth shattering as I remember. Maybe I'm reaching, like Micah said.

It doesn't matter, though, because Ellie is definitely out-of-bounds, and the only part I should focus on is that she's pregnant with my baby.

The truth is, since the day I found out she was pregnant, I haven't thought about much else.

I've known Ellie since she was a teenager, and during that time, I was always in awe of her strength and courage. She took each shitty situation her mom thrust upon her and handled it like a little badass. Left to fend for herself, she had little choice but to grow up fast.

Ellie went to work with Sienna and did her homework in the dressing room of a strip club every damn night. Her sister busted her ass to pay the bills, and since their mom didn't help at all, there was no money left over to pay for shit. So Ellie worked hard to make good grades in school to get a scholarship, and when she wanted to go to dance camp, she went behind my back and tried to work at Wanderlust—my gentleman's club—to make

enough money to go. Of course, Micah found out and put a stop to it, paying for it himself, but the point is, Ellie was willing to work for what she wanted.

But her mom continued to wreak havoc when she poisoned Eduardo—the dirtiest underground criminal on the East Coast—then told his son, Eleazar, that he was Ellie’s sperm donor to try to save her ass, which ultimately backfired when he killed her and left her to be found. Ellie went after him on her own to try to stop him from taking her away from Sienna. Not just for her own sake, but for Sienna’s, who would’ve been forced to go on the run and leave Micah behind.

Then, when Eleazar’s wife, Arielle, tried to harm Sienna and her baby, Ellie shot her fucking dead.

And the one that nobody had any idea about until recently...

Ellie was raped by several men while she was held captive by Arielle. She hid it from everyone to spare her sister any undue guilt because she knew that Sienna took her responsibility for Ellie seriously. Soon after, she went off to college and got a degree. And then she took control of her sexuality by seeking out a man she trusted enough to be intimate with. And succeeded.

I want to be pissed at her. I want to yell and scream and tell her that she fucked up. Not only did she pull one over on me, but in the process, she managed to get pregnant. So, yeah, I want to be pissed, but what she did is just so typical of Ellie. She took matters into her own hands, like she always does, and made it—well, I guess in this case, *me*—her bitch.

And fuck if I didn’t submit...No, nope, not going there. It’s one thing to give credit where credit is due, but it’s another to go *there*. Back to the club, in the backroom, where I had the best damn sex of my life. Nope, not going there. Ellie might be a badass, she might’ve left her mark on me, but she’s still off-limits.

My phone rings with an incoming call from my mom, and I cringe. Micah promised not to say anything, so I could tell her and our dad myself, but me knocking up Sienna’s twenty-one-year-old sister isn’t a conversation to be had over the phone.

Since it’s Mother’s Day and I can’t *not* speak to her, I hit accept. “Hey, Mom. Happy Mother’s Day.”

“Thank you. How are you?”

“Good. Busy as usual.”

“If you keep working the way you do, you’ll never meet anyone,” she chides, and since I don’t want to touch that subject with a ten-foot pole, I

quickly change the subject by asking about their trip.

After she tells me about the places they've visited since the last time we spoke, she lets me know they'll be home in the next few weeks, making me promise to come over for dinner once they're back. And when we hang up, I wonder how the hell I'm going to tell her that I'm finally giving her the grandbaby she's been begging for, only it's out of wedlock and with a woman she views as family.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELLIE



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, AUNTIE ELLIE!” LONDON AND BROOKLYN SHOUT AS THEY run into my room—well, my old room that’s now the guest room, which is supposed to be converted into the new baby’s room. Which reminds me: I need to find somewhere to live. I love my sister, but after being gone for four years, I feel like an outsider. Lincoln used to come around, but he’s been MIA since I came home, Micah’s been quiet since he told me on Mother’s Day that Lincoln doesn’t want me and never will, and Sienna is overcompensating for both of them by being overly nice and attentive.

I’ve also walked in on them having sex in the middle of the night...Twice—once on the kitchen counter and another time on the table. Yeah, I definitely need to get my own place.

“Wow,” I say, sitting up and taking the gifts they’re holding from them. I read the card that Sienna must’ve helped them write, then glance up at her standing in the doorway, smiling softly, watching as I open the gift. It’s a whitewash picture frame with adorable little blue footprints all over it, and on the bottom, it reads *Love at first sight*. Inside is the sonogram of my little blob from when I was in the hospital.

My finger runs over the image as tears prick my eyes. I haven’t heard from Lincoln since the day everything was revealed and he walked out. I’ve considered texting him and telling him that I can draw up papers for him to sign away his rights, but I keep hoping that maybe he’ll come around, since Micah said he was certain he’d do the right thing.

“Auntie Ellie, are you okay?” London asks, shaking me from my

thoughts.

I glance up at her and wipe my eyes. “Yes, thank you for this gift. It’s the best gift ever.”

“London said our new baby is hers because she’s older,” Brooklyn says. “Can your baby be mine?”

Sienna chuckles, and I can’t help but crack a smile. “Only if you’ll share him with me,” I tell Brooklyn with a wink.

“Of course!” she says. “Mommy says sharing is caring.”

“C’mon, girls,” Sienna says. “You need to get ready for school.”

“But my belly hurts,” London complains.

“Mine too!” Brooklyn agrees.

“Probably because you’re both hungry,” Sienna says.

After the girls wish me a Happy Birthday one last time and run out of the room, Sienna steps farther inside. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay.”

“You have your checkup today, right?”

“Yeah.” Since I moved back here, I needed to change doctors, so I decided to go with Sienna’s OB, whom she loves. I’m going to meet her today and have a checkup at the same time.

“If you want me to go...”

“I appreciate it, but I’m okay going alone.” It won’t be the first or the last time I go by myself. It’s something I need to get used to. Even if Lincoln comes around and wants to be in the baby’s life, at most, we’d be co-parenting.

“I know you’re okay going alone,” she says, stepping into the room and sitting on the edge of the bed, “but that doesn’t mean you have to. It’s okay to let people in.”

“Like who? Lincoln? Since he found out about the baby, he’s been avoiding me like the plague.”

“I think he just needs a little time to sort through what he’s feeling. But I’m here.”

“I know you are.” She’s told me as much on several occasions, but since our conversation on Mother’s Day, where she and Micah almost got into an argument because of me, I’ve made it a point to keep to myself, not wanting to put them in the middle.

“But you have a family. You have the girls and Micah, and soon you’ll have this little one.” I pat her belly gently. “Plus, you have the dance studio. I

don't want you to worry about me. I'm actually planning to go house hunting after my appointment."

"El." She sighs. "There was a time when we were each other's only family. And yeah, along the way, I've added a few more people to the picture, but you're still my family. And you're welcome to stay here as long as you want or need to."

My heart swells at her words, thankful to have such an amazing sister. But even though she has good intentions, things have changed, and she needs to put Micah and her kids first.

"If this is about what Micah said..." She adds, but I don't let her finish her thought.

"It's not. I appreciate you letting me stay here, but with both of us having babies, we're going to need our own space." She opens her mouth to argue, but I quickly change the subject. "Are you going to the dance studio this morning? I haven't danced in weeks, and I'm dying to get into the studio to get my blood pumping."

"Yeah, I try to go every day. But with Nora and Paula taking over my classes until after I give birth, and Samantha now running the front, I feel like I'm no longer needed," she says with a laugh.

"If you want, we can go by the studio for a bit and then head to my appointment together. Maybe you can check out some places with me afterward."

A smile spreads across Sienna's face, and I know I've said the right thing. "That would be great. And we can do lunch for your birthday. Let me get the girls off to school. Then I'll meet you at the studio." She pulls me into a hug. "Happy Birthday, El. I'm so glad you're finally home."

After taking a quick shower to rinse the sleep off of me, I throw on a maternity tank and sweats, pack a change of clothes for my doctor's appointment, and then head out.

I'm pressing the button for the elevator when the sound of footsteps hits my ears, making me tense. Micah, Sienna, and the girls already left for the day, which means...I glance back and see Lincoln walking toward the elevator, his head down, staring at his phone. He looks up and our eyes lock. The look on his face says he wants to go back to his place to hide until I'm gone, but it's too late now.

"Hey," I say, as the elevator doors open, and we step inside. It's a private elevator, so we're the only two on it.

“Hey,” he parrots.

We stand in awkward silence for several moments before I decide to rip the Band-Aid off. “We should probably talk about the baby.”

His eyes descend to my swollen belly, and he nods. “Yeah, sorry, I’ve been busy.” He sighs. “This is all just so...”

“I know,” I tell him, not needing him to finish his sentence. “I really am sorry.”

He shakes his head. “What’s done is done.” The doors open and we step out. “We just need to focus on the situation at hand. Figure out how to deal with it.”

The way he says ‘deal with it’ rubs me the wrong way, reminding me of what Micah said about him ‘doing the right thing,’ and before I can stop myself, I open my mouth. “Our baby isn’t something to be dealt with. It’s a *he*...And he deserves to feel loved and adored. He’s not a business acquisition gone wrong, nor is he a *situation*. I know this isn’t what you wanted, and I already told you that I won’t force you to be in his life, so you don’t need to worry about *doing the right thing*. I’d rather you walk away than treat him like he was a mistake you have to deal with. So, let me know if that’s what you want, and I can have an attorney draw up papers to terminate your parental rights once the baby is born.”

Without waiting for him to respond, I take off out of the hotel lobby and onto the street, my heart racing and my blood boiling. I get that I messed up, that I caused all of this, but he’s not discussing a business transaction—he’s talking about my baby—*our* baby.

Since the studio isn’t too far, I decide to hoof it there instead of waiting for an Uber, so I don’t risk seeing him again.

On my way, I pull my phone out and read my weekly ‘what to expect’ post in the app I downloaded. When I turn the corner, I’m not watching where I’m going, and I run smack dab into someone.

“Sorry,” I breathe. “I wasn’t watching where —”

The gentleman doesn’t even acknowledge me, though. Instead, he continues to stalk in the opposite direction. Rude.

I’m about to turn around when he looks back, his gaze crashing with my own. His glare doesn’t hold for long, but the coldness in his eyes during those few short seconds is enough to send a chill up my spine, despite it being over ninety degrees outside. The look in his eyes sparks a flashback, and I force myself out of my head, refusing to let my return to this town get to me. Then

I resolve to find someone to talk to—ASAP.

Once I arrive, I get lost in dancing. It's always been my way to escape, and for the next few hours, I do just that—everything else fading away.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LINCOLN



“MY BABY ISN’T SOMETHING TO BE DEALT WITH...HE DESERVES TO FEEL LOVED and adored. He’s not a business acquisition gone wrong...I can have an attorney draw up papers to terminate your parental rights once the baby is born.”

Ellie’s words run on repeat all morning while I try to get some work done. *Try* being the operative word because I’ve been staring at my screen for who the hell knows how long, and I haven’t gotten shit done.

“Hey Lincoln, Micah just arrived, and he doesn’t look happy,” our secretary, Rita, says from the doorway. Her words snap me out of my thoughts, and I slam my laptop closed. Until I figure out how I’m going to handle the situation I’ve found myself in, I have a feeling I won’t be getting much done.

When I step into Micah’s office without bothering to knock, I find him barking orders over the phone. While I handle the entertainment aspect of Alexander Enterprises—hotels, clubs, restaurants, etc.—Micah handles the business side of it all, including the not-so-legal shit. Part of owning the majority of Tesoro means sometimes having to get our hands dirty.

“Big bro,” I say, dropping into the visitor seat once he slams the phone down. “How’s it going?”

“Two of Ricky’s men were found dead down at the marina...” Ricky is a huge player in the underground world. When Eleazar died, leaving everything to Ellie, we took over the territory temporarily so shit wouldn’t hit the fan. A lot of men wanted what Eleazar left behind, but we ended up

making a deal with Ricky De La Cruz. Unlike the Gutierrezes, he doesn't kidnap and traffic women. His main focus is on drugs and weapons. With the assurance he would clean up the streets of Booker Park—the south side of Tesoro that had gone to shit thanks to Eduardo—we created a partnership of sorts.

“Bruno was also killed,” Micah adds, referring to one of the men who's been working for us for years.

“Bruno?” Fuck, he knows how to handle himself. For him to have been taken out must mean...“Ambush?”

Micah nods. “The shipment was stolen, and they left the bodies there.”

Everyone in Tesoro knows not to fuck with Ricky or us, so for someone to not only steal from Ricky at our marina, but then leave the bodies to be found, tells us one thing. “Someone's trying to send a message.”

“Yeah, and until we find out who, we need to be cautious.” He opens his mouth to say something else, but his phone rings. “Hellcat, everything okay?” he asks when he answers, using the nickname he's dubbed his wife with.

Whatever she says must not be good because he immediately switches to speakerphone. “What's wrong?” he asks, and the tone of his voice puts me on high alert. With the news of the ambush, my thoughts jump to the worst possible conclusions.

“The girls are sick,” Sienna says. Micah glances at me and shakes his head, obviously having had the same thoughts as me.

“What's wrong with them?” he asks, keeping the phone on speaker.

“I thought they were fine this morning. They wished Ellie a Happy Birthday and gave her a special gift. Though, now that I'm thinking about it, they did mention their tummies hurt, but I thought they were just hungry. On my way to the studio, I got a call from the school clinic. They're both running fevers, and London threw up. I'm on my way to get them now.”

“You have Ricardo with you, right?” Micah asks, referring to Sienna's personal bodyguard. Even though things have been calm the past several years, Micah doesn't take chances with his family. Ricardo has been with us for a long time and would do anything to protect Sienna and their girls.

“Of course,” Sienna says flippantly.

“You make a doctor's appointment?”

“No, it's probably a stomach bug of some sort. But I feel bad because it's Ellie's birthday, and I was supposed to meet her at the studio and go to her

OB appointment with her. She's meeting with her new doctor and seeing the baby today."

Mention of the baby has me shifting in my seat. It doesn't help that Micah's eyes land on mine. "Do you need me to come home so you can go with her?" he asks.

"I want to say yes, but with the girls so sick, I don't want to leave them, and it's probably not a good idea to be around Ellie in case I get sick as well. She might have already been exposed, but in case she hasn't, we should probably book her a room for a couple of days. There's nothing worse than being pregnant and sick."

We live on the top floor of Hotel Blu—an upscale hotel Alexander Enterprises owns. When we were constructing it several years ago, we designed it so the entire top floor would be occupied by us. We have a private elevator that only goes to our floor, access to the roof, private pools on our terraces, in-home gyms, underground private parking, and round the clock security. It doesn't get much safer or convenient than that.

Micah shakes his head. "You're pregnant."

"I know, but I'm a mom. It's different." One of the things I love about my sister-in-law is how much of a devoted mother she is. She reminds me so much of my mom, the way she loves her family so fiercely.

"I'm leaving now and will meet you at home," Micah says.

"You don't have to —"

"Hellcat, I'm on my way. I love you."

After she returns the sentiment, he hangs up and looks at me. "Fucking woman is so stubborn."

"It's one of the many things you love about her."

"True," he agrees. "You should go to that appointment."

"What—?" I start to play stupid, but when he hits me with a hard glare, I close my mouth.

"She's the mother of your baby. You need to work shit out, unless you're planning to have nothing to do with your child." Micah quirks a knowing brow, and I sigh.

"Oh, and can you maybe take her to lunch afterward for her birthday?" he says, standing. "It'd make Sienna feel better knowing her sister isn't spending the day alone. Plus, trust me when I say, you'll regret missing out on these moments."



I HAVE NO CLUE HOW I GOT HERE—AT LIVE, LOVE, DANCE—THE DANCE studio Ellie bought for Sienna years ago when she found out she was rich, thanks to her dead sperm donor. But here I am, watching Ellie dance her heart out. She's strong yet graceful as she moves to the beat, having no clue that she's no longer alone.

When I arrived, Samantha was confused to see me, which makes sense, since the only time I come here is when my nieces ask me to come watch them, and neither one is here today. She was even more confused when I asked where Ellie was—which tells me Ellie hasn't told anyone I'm her baby daddy yet.

Fuck, I'm someone's baby daddy.

She pointed me in the direction of studio B, where I found Ellie immersed in the beat of the music.

When her eyes lock with mine in the mirror, she stills, then turns around and cocks her hip, her telltale sign she's about to give me shit.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, her full lips forming a sexy pout. Fuck, no, not sexy. She's not fucking sexy. *But she really is.*

As she sashays over to me, I can't help but rake my gaze down her body. Her eyes are bright green and expressive today. Her slim neck is exposed, thanks to her hair being pulled up in a messy bun. Droplets of sweat are trailing down into the small sports bra she's wearing, and my thoughts immediately go back to the night we spent together. I couldn't see her well in the dark, but I remember after the third time we fucked, tasting her salty flesh. She had passed out from exhaustion, and instead of waking her up, I spent several minutes memorizing every inch of her body, knowing we'd part ways once she woke up, and I'd likely never see her again.

“I asked you a question,” she repeats. My eyes are currently on her toned legs, and when my gaze begins to ascend back to her face, I stop at her tiny bump. The bump that's there because she's carrying my baby. A baby we created during a night filled with passion.

And then I spent months searching for her...

“The girls are sick,” I blurt out, shaking myself from my thoughts. It doesn't matter how attracted I was to her—*okay, still am*—this is Ellie, and I have to remind myself that she'll always be off-limits, despite being pregnant with my baby.

“Oh no,” she says, moving past me and grabbing her phone. “I had my phone on silent, so I missed Sienna’s calls and messages. She just sent me one a few minutes ago, saying the girls are throwing up and running fevers. Poor things.” She types back a response and then says, “Shoot, it’s a good thing you interrupted me. I need to get ready to go to my appointment. I didn’t realize I had been dancing for so long.”

She grabs her stuff and is about to head out of the room when she realizes I’m still standing here. “Umm, thanks for letting me know about the girls.”

“I was actually thinking I could go with you to your appointment,” I mention. I wasn’t sure until I got here what I was going to do. Yeah, the baby is mine, but until he’s born, I figured it wasn’t really necessary to be actively involved. It’s not like *I’m* carrying the baby.

But as I stand here, taking her in, I realize that despite how fucked up this all is, I want to be involved.

“That’s not necessary,” Ellie says. “I’ve gone to all my previous appointments alone. It’s all good. I promise.”

“I know. You’re strong and independent, and you don’t need anyone.” I don’t mean for it to come across mockingly, but I can see how she’d take it that way.

With her brows furrowed, she cocks that hip out again. “That’s right, I am. When you’ve lived the life I have, all you have is yourself.”

“Actually,” I say, stepping closer, without realizing what I’m doing before it’s too late and we’re only a few inches apart. This close to her, I can smell the vanilla, a scent I’ve been fantasizing about since the moment I smelled it on her that night at Elite. “You have other people. You just choose to push them away, starting with your sister.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s at home with her daughters,” she argues. “As she should be.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. You’ve been gone for four damn years, Ellie. You chose to go away to school. You chose to keep her at arm’s length. And now you’re doing it with me.”

“What?” she scoffs. “How do you figure?”

“Before you even gave me time to process the bomb you dropped on me, you were throwing shit at me about terminating my parental rights. After you’re the one who fucked up...*Liz*.” Yeah, the moment I realized she gave me a part of her real name, I wanted to slam my fist into a wall. Looking back, so many signs were there flashing at me, but I didn’t see them because

Ellie wasn't on my radar. "Well, guess what, *Kitten*? I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere. You can try to push me away all you want, but I won't budge. That baby you're carrying is half mine, and I plan to be in his life, starting with this appointment."

Her eyes widen, and then for a brief moment, they seem to soften, before they turn hard again, hiding whatever emotion she almost let slip. "I need to rinse off," she mutters, stalking past me.

The drive to her doctor's office is filled with awkward silence. When we arrive, the receptionist at the front desk gets her checked in, wishing her a happy birthday as she does so, reminding me of what day it is and that Ellie just turned twenty-two. At her age, I was usually partying with my friends and only working when Micah and my father insisted on it. Ellie, on the other hand, just graduated from college and is expecting a baby. I talk shit about how young she is, yet she's more mature than I ever was at that age.

We're brought back to a darkened room, where a woman by the name of Nayloni introduces herself and says she'll be conducting the ultrasound today.

Ellie lies back, and Nayloni asks her a few questions, inputting her answers into the computer. When she rattles off her date of birth, Nayloni says, "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks," Ellie says softly. "I can't think of a better gift than getting to see my little blob today."

Nayloni chuckles. "Blob, huh? That's a new one."

She lifts Ellie's shirt and squirts blue shit onto her stomach. A few seconds later, the screen fills with a black and white image of a tiny baby.

"Yep," Ellie says, "best present ever."

When I glance at her, the tips of her lips are curved into a huge grin, her gaze trained on the screen, and so much love in her eyes, it makes my heart squeeze in my chest.

"Heartbeat is 148," Nayloni says, taking my attention away from Ellie and back to the screen.

"Is that good?" I ask, having no clue about any of this.

"Yep. It should be between 120 and 160, so he's got a good, strong heartbeat."

He...Because we're having a little boy.

Ellie reaches out and touches the screen, her fingers sliding across his body. "He looks like a gummy bear," she says, her smile lighting up the dark

room.

“Oh, so he’s been upgraded from a blob to a gummy bear? Nice,” Nayloni says with a playful wink. Ellie laughs, and the melodic sound goes straight to my heart. I heard her laugh a few times the night we were together, and then I tried to remember it once she was gone. But my memory didn’t do it justice.

And now, as I listen to it, I know why I didn’t recognize it—Ellie barely ever laughs. When she was younger, she laughed, but after that day, after she was taken and raped, the laughter stopped. Ellie grew up, her body and voice and personality changing. And her laugh changed too, but I never heard it because life was cruel and didn’t leave her with much to laugh about.

And I don’t know why, but in this moment, I vow to make her laugh more often. To make her smile. Ellie’s strong and resilient and a goddamn survivor, but she deserves more than to merely survive...she deserves to be happy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ELLIE



I GLANCE OVER AT LINCOLN AND FIND HIM STARING AT ME WITH A LOOK THAT I can't decipher. For as long as I've known him, he's always been the chill brother, nothing seeming to rattle him—unless you do stupid shit like me and have sex with him and get knocked up, then he shows a bit of emotion. But right now, as he looks at me, his features are filled with raw emotion, and I'm not sure why.

“You okay?” I ask as Nayloni goes about getting the baby's measurements.

“Yeah,” Lincoln says with a tight smile. “It's just all so surreal. To think in a few months, we'll be parents of a tiny, helpless baby, who'll depend on us for everything.”

I nod in understanding, getting a bit choked up at his words. Despite being pissed at me for what I did, I should've known he would do the right thing, which is a huge relief. Still, I feel like utter crap for what I'd done. My stupidity put him in this position, leaving him no choice but to either step up or be a shit father.

Nayloni lets us know the baby's measurements are perfect, and after printing updated pictures for us, she gives me a moment to wipe off the gel and then escorts us to the examination room, where she says the doctor will be in shortly.

“I'm sorry,” I tell Lincoln the second the door closes. “What I did was wrong, and I'm so sorry I put you in this position. I had a one-track mind, and I didn't consider the consequences. Just like I didn't when I went to talk to

Eleazar after Sienna told me not to. Had I —”

“Stop,” Lincoln says gently, pressing his palm to my cheek in a comforting manner. “I agreed to have sex with you. It was completely mutual, and the fact is, even though condoms are up to the guest, I always use them. But I didn’t with you, and even if you had been on birth control, nothing is one hundred percent effective. We both made our own decisions, and there’s no sense in pointing fingers or living with regrets.”

“You don’t regret spending the night with me?” I choke out, shocked by his admission.

“I wish I could say I did,” Lincoln admits with a shake of his head. “But that night, I connected with someone on a deeper level, and through that connection we created this.” He holds up the sonogram picture. “How could I possibly regret what happened, when, as a result, we created such a beautiful miracle?”

Holy shit. I never thought I would hear him say something like this. Since the moment I found out, I prayed for him to come around, to be a part of our baby’s life. When I was little, all I ever wanted was a family, but I accepted at a young age it would never happen, and when I found out I was pregnant, I was devastated because I knew Lincoln would be so mad, there’d be no hope of giving this baby a real family—one I never had. But now...is it possible?

“I want this baby,” he continues, his eyes locking with mine. “And I forgive you. It might not have happened how either of us planned, but we’re going to have a baby together, and I want to raise him with you. There’s no reason why we can’t do that as friends.”

Friends. Right. Of course. What was I thinking? That he’d declare his undying love for me after what I did? Sure, he’s a damn good person—which is why I knew I could trust him—and is willing to forgive me, but that doesn’t change the fact that he doesn’t see me as anything more than Ellie Bardot, his much younger sister-in-law, who he’s now stuck raising a baby with.

Fuck, I really did mess up.

“Knock, knock,” the doctor says, stepping into the room. “I’m Dr. Peterson.” She shakes my hand and then Lincoln’s.

“I’m Ellie, and this is the baby’s father, Lincoln.”

“It’s wonderful to meet you both. I spoke to Sienna at her checkup the other day, and she mentioned you’ve moved home and would be coming in.” Her smile is friendly, and I know right away why Sienna loves her.

“Why don’t you have a seat on the examination table” she continues. “I’d like to take your blood pressure.”

“Oh, it was done when I first got here,” I remark, sitting on the table.

“Yes, I saw. I’d like to double check it.” She puts the cuff on me and pumps it up until it’s beyond tight before slowly releasing the air. After she removes the cuff, she types something into her iPad and then has a seat in front of me.

“I’m concerned,” she says. “Your blood pressure is a bit high, which is common for women who have pregnancy anemia. You’re taking your supplements and iron, right?”

“Of course,” I say, starting to get worried.

She nods. “I’d like for you to pick up a blood pressure monitor. Take and record your blood pressure three times a day in a journal. I’m also going to suggest modified bed rest.”

Wait, what? “Bed rest? Like, I can’t get out of bed? I don’t understand. I feel fine. I’m young and active and eat healthy for the most part, aside from a few cravings. What am I doing wrong?”

Dr. Peterson rests her hand on mine, noticing that I’m starting to freak out. “Pregnancy anemia paired with high blood pressure can lead to preeclampsia as well as other more severe complications. Right now, I’m not ordering you to go on bed rest, but I want you to try to relax, take it easy. We’ll reevaluate at your next appointment. If it worsens, we’ll have to consider medication as well as bed rest.”

When my face falls and my hand goes to my belly, the doctor pats my hand. “The baby is perfect. Sometimes things happen that are out of our control, but unlike years ago, we now have modern medicine on our side. Keep taking your supplements and vitamins, monitor your BP, and don’t stress.” She glances at Lincoln for backup. “Make sure she doesn’t stress.”

“You got it,” Lincoln says, stepping closer to me and putting his hand on my shoulder. He squeezes gently, and when I glance up at him, he smiles softly. “No stress.”

I nod in response, but my mood has officially sunk. Sure, my baby is doing okay right now, but low iron and high blood pressure can’t be good.

When we get into Lincoln’s car, I pull up Google and type in the terms the doctor mentioned, but before I can click search, my phone is snatched out of my hand.

“Hey!”

“Nope.” Lincoln pockets my phone. “Doctor Google never goes over well for anyone.”

I huff in annoyance and glare his way, but it only makes him chuckle.

When I notice we’re not headed in the direction of home, I ask, “Where are we going?”

“It’s your birthday, and I imagine you’re hungry since you haven’t eaten recently. I’m taking you to lunch, and then we’ll go by the store and get you a BP monitor and journal, and then you’re going to do as the doctor said and relax.”

I want to argue with him, but since he’s not wrong, I simply nod. A little while later, I recognize where we are: Elite. My heart clenches in my chest, and I glance at him, silently asking why we’re here. There’s no way he wants to —

“Figured we could have lunch at Impulse,” he says, cutting off my ridiculous thoughts. “I know how much you used to love the food here.”

I did. It was my favorite place to eat, and it also helped that eating there meant spending time with Lincoln. The last time we ate at Impulse was for my graduation dinner before I left for California.

Lunch is good, and Lincoln and I spend the meal talking about school, the baby, and how I like being back at home. It’s not awkward at all, and we keep it light, staying away from anything too deep. It reminds me of before everything changed—when things were a bit simpler.

After we’re done eating, Lincoln surprises me with a birthday cake that’s beyond delicious. Since it’s only the two of us, the waitress boxes up the rest for later. After stopping by the drug store, we head home.

“I don’t think you should go back to your sister’s place,” Lincoln says as he drives toward Blu.

“What?” I jerk my head toward him, wondering what the hell he’s talking about.

“The girls are sick, and you’re already dealing with enough.” He nods toward the bag containing my new monitor and journal. “The last thing you need is to get sick on top of everything else.”

“Sienna’s pregnant and —”

“...she’s their mother,” he finishes. “And Micah texted saying he’s handling it, so she’s exposed as little as possible, but there’s no reason for you to be exposed as well.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” I agree. “As much as I love staying with them,

I was planning to find my own place anyway,” I admit. “The room I’m staying in was set to become the baby’s nursery. Sienna said it was fine, but I know she’d love to be able to decorate it once the baby is born and they know the gender. Plus”—I mock shiver—“I’ve caught them having sex twice.”

Lincoln barks out a laugh. “I’ve walked in on them a few times.”

“Yeah, well, twice is two times too many for me. It’s time to go.”

When we arrive at Blu, instead of going to the elevator, I head over to the front desk to see about renting a place.

“What are you doing?” Lincoln asks, pulling me to the side.

“I need to find my own place, but until then, I was thinking I’d rent a room here.”

“Or you can stay with me,” he says, shocking the hell out of me. Before I can argue, though, he adds, “The doctor said you need to rest. I’d feel better knowing you’re under my roof where I can make sure you guys are okay.” He says, ‘you guys,’ but for some reason—maybe it’s the hormones—all I hear is ‘our baby.’

“You don’t think I can take care of him?”

“What? No.” He shakes his head. “I mean, of course, you can take care of our baby. You can take care of the entire world if you wanted to...”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Sometimes, it’s okay to let someone take care of you too.”

His words make me pause. “You want to take care of me?”

“Ellie,” he says. “You’re pregnant with our baby. We’re in this together. Of course, I want to take care of you. You just have to let me.”



“I’M SO SORRY,” SIENNA SAYS WITH A POUT OVER FACETIME. “I HATE THAT you spent your birthday alone. If I wasn’t afraid of passing this stomach bug on to you —”

“Hey, stop,” I say, shifting on the lounge to get comfortable. “Lincoln went with me to my appointment and took me to lunch afterward for my birthday. He even had a cake brought out. I promise, I had a good birthday, even though it wasn’t spent with you and my favorite nieces.”

“Okay, good,” Sienna says, then squints. “Hey, where are you? That looks a lot like Lincoln’s terrace.”

“It is,” I tell her. “I’m staying with him. Didn’t Micah tell you?”

“No, but I did just wake up from a nap, so he probably hasn’t had the chance. So, you’re like moving in with him?” she asks cautiously.

“No, I’m going to find my own place. I’m just staying with him temporarily since the girls are sick and the doctor wants me to rest.”

“Why? Is everything okay?”

I tell her about my appointment, and when I’m done, she says, “I’m glad you won’t be alone and that Lincoln is stepping up. Do you need anything of yours from here?”

“Lincoln already handled it. He must’ve come by when you were sleeping.”

After Lincoln gave me a tour of his place and showed me to my room, he went by their place to get a bunch of my stuff before going to the office. He said he’d pick up dinner on his way home, and since I have the place to myself and it’s such a nice day out, I figured why not throw on my bikini and spend some time on Lincoln’s terrace. The doctor did say to relax, and there’s nothing more relaxing than lounging by the pool.

“Okay, cool. Enjoy the rest of your birthday, and once the girls are better, we’re having a redo. Dinner, cake, the birthday works.”

“You got it, sis.”

After we hang up, I remove my cover up and connect my phone to the Bluetooth speaker. With the sun shining down, I lie out on the lounge and close my eyes, taking a moment to relax, just like the doctor ordered.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LINCOLN



“DID RITA MISUNDERSTAND? ARE YOU WORKING FROM HOME INDEFINITELY?” Micah asks over my Bluetooth as I drive away from the office, files stacked on my passenger seat.

“She didn’t misunderstand. I’ll be working from home for at least the next few weeks.”

“Because Ellie’s staying with you?”

Because I googled pregnancy and high blood pressure. I told Ellie not to do it, but then, after I arrived at the office, I did it anyway. And what I found scared the shit out of me. Which led to my decision to work from home. The doctor doesn’t feel she’s at risk at the moment, but the only way to ensure she stays that way is for her to relax, and the only way to make that happen is for me to be there with her.

“Because the doctor put her on bed rest.” Okay, not really, but she suggested it, and I’ll be damned if something happens because we didn’t take her suggestion seriously. For the next few weeks, I’m making it my mission to make sure Ellie stays calm and comfortable and stress free.

“Oh, shit. Is she okay?”

I explain what happened at the appointment, and once I’m done, Micah agrees it’s a good idea for me to stay home.

“So, when are you going to tell our parents they’re about to be grandparents again?” Micah asks, and even though I can’t see him, I can imagine the smirk he’s sporting.

“I think that’s something that should be told in person, so I’m going to

wait until they return from their trip. They mentioned being home in time for your baby shower.”

Micah barks out a laugh. “You’re such a pussy.”

He’s not wrong. “Can you blame me? When Mom finds out that I knocked up Ellie, her sweet pseudo daughter, she’s going to kill me.”

“She’s not going to kill you,” Micah argues. “She’ll probably be a little disappointed because she was hoping for you to settle down, which probably looked a little different than knocking up your one-night-stand, but she’ll be so excited to have another grandkid to spoil, she’ll get over the unconventional way it’s happening.”

“Fuck,” I mutter. “I can’t get over this. Seeing him on the screen today was so damn surreal.”

“But beautiful, though,” Micah adds.

“Really beautiful,” I agree. “I just...I’m at a loss,” I admit.

“Because Ellie’s the mom?”

“Because Ellie’s my mystery woman.”

“Who’s off-limits,” he says, his tone brokering no room for argument.

This is where I’m supposed to agree, the way I did last time, but after spending the morning with Ellie—the woman who rocked my world on Valentine’s Day and is now swollen with my child—it’s hard to see her as the same person Micah sees as taboo. At twenty-two years old, she’s all grown up and well over the legal age. Not to mention, wise beyond her years. The woman has been through more shit than most people her age. Truthfully, there’s no reason why she and I can’t be together if that’s what both of us really wanted.

When I don’t say anything, Micah says my name to get my attention. “She’s off-limits, right?”

And because the last thing I want to do is to start issues within our family, I reluctantly agree. “Yeah, of course she is.”

But when I stroll into the penthouse with Mexican food—one of Ellie’s favorites—and find her lying on the lounge, in a tiny as hell bikini, her eyes closed and her belly sporting the sexiest bump, I know it’s going to be easier said than done. Because as I stare at this all-too-grown-up version of Ellie, my head, heart, and cock have all ganged up on me and are demanding I make her mine in every damn way.

“Hey,” Ellie says, scrubbing her eyes and sitting up. “I must’ve fallen asleep. What time is it?”

“Almost five. I left work early and picked up Mexican for dinner. It’s in the kitchen.”

She stretches her arms above her head, and her breasts, which are damn near spilling out of the small triangles, thrust outward. I try to avert my gaze, but it only fucks me harder when my eyes land on the equally small triangle that’s being held together by two strings and barely covering her cunt. That same cunt I spent hours feasting on, tasting, licking, sucking, devouring.

Fuck! What the hell was I thinking suggesting she stay here? And I’m supposed to be working at home for the next several weeks? I should’ve gotten her a hotel room and paid someone to take care of her.

“Hey, are you okay?” Ellie asks, her brows furrowing in concern.

“Yeah,” I choke out, grabbing the towel and tossing it to her. “Maybe, uh, you should check out maternity suits if you’re going to be spending time by the pool.”

She quirks her head to the side. “Yeah, probably. But this one still fits, and nobody’s here but us.” She wraps the towel around herself, covering her body, and I’m finally able to release a harsh breath.

As she saunters inside, completely unaware of the effect she has on me, I follow behind, wondering how the hell I’m going to get through the next several weeks. And then it hits me. It’s not just a few weeks I have to get through. It’s months, no, scratch that, *years*. Ellie being pregnant means we’ll be connected through this baby in some shape or form for the rest of our lives. I’ll have to see her every day, knowing I can never have her again.

“This smells delicious,” she says, as she pries open the bag and dramatically inhales the scent of the food. When she reaches in and grabs the top container, she pulls the lid off and dips a finger into the *queso* and then pops that finger into her mouth. As she sucks the liquid cheese off her digit, her eyes roll backward, and the most erotic moan escapes her, reminding me of the sounds she uttered as I made her come over and over again.

Fuck, I can’t do this. This is goddamned torture. “I need to shower,” I choke out as I stalk out of the room to my en suite bathroom, where I proceed to rub one out.

Only when I fist my cock, images of Ellie come to mind—writhing underneath me, begging me for more. It doesn’t matter that I couldn’t see her...I could feel her, taste her, smell her...

Refusing to get off to the image of her while I’m in the shower, I let go of my shaft and press my head against the cool wall, wondering not for the first

time what the fuck I'm doing.

When I walk back out to the kitchen—my body tense due to the lack of release—Ellie's sitting at the island bar, eating her food. She looks up, her green eyes locking with mine, and a small, unsure smile quirks at the corner of her lips. "I made you a plate."

"Thanks." I sit next to her and notice she's reading on her phone. When she was younger, she always had a book in her hand. Her sister is the same way.

"Reading anything good?" I ask, attempting to make conversation as I take a bite of my quesadilla.

"Apparently when I give birth there's a chance that I'll shit myself."

I'm in the middle of chewing when she says this, so I not only choke, but my food goes flying out of my mouth and all over the counter.

"What?" I ask, sure I heard her wrong.

"That's what it says," Ellie replies, looking at me with wide eyes.

"What the hell are you reading?"

"*What to Expect When You're Expecting*. I figured the more I know, the better I'll be prepared." Her words come out nonchalant, but I can hear the undertone in them—she's scared. She never had a mom growing up, aside from her older sister, Sienna, who took on the mother role, which isn't the same. Sienna grew up having to care for Ellie, so becoming a mom was natural to her, but Ellie doesn't have any experience with taking care of anyone but herself, and she's worried she won't be good at it.

I lean over and palm her face, turning her head so she's forced to look at me. "We've got this, Kitten. This baby will be loved and cared for and want for nothing. Hell, he's already loved and he's not even here yet."

Tears prick her eyes, and I move my thumb to wipe one that escapes. "Thank you," she says softly. "I know I messed up, but —"

"Enough of that," I tell her, dropping my hand from her face. She might've made a bad choice, but she didn't do it maliciously. She was desperate to feel again, to be intimate with someone, and she trusted me enough to know I would never hurt her. "I'm glad it was me you went to. Some other guy might not have understood your cues."

I could tell from the moment we met at the club, she was skittish and needed to be handled with care. I tried to walk away, telling myself I didn't want to deal with it, so when one of my employees told me someone was asking to speak to me, I took that as my sign. But then fate intervened, and I

ran into her when she was heading out. And I knew I needed to have her. I could tell she wasn't experienced, and she confirmed that the little experience she had wasn't good, but I didn't know how deep the demons went that haunted her.

"That's what happened before," she admits. "I tried being with other guys. Once in high school and then a few times in college, but every time, I'd freak out. They would be too rough, too selfish. I didn't know how to explain what I needed because I wasn't sure myself. And then Rae said I needed someone I trusted, and you were the only one I thought of."

"And how was it?" I ask, genuinely wanting to know—but also curious, since I'm the only person she's been with—yeah, I'm refusing to count those fucking assholes who raped her.

Ellie's cheeks tint a light shade of pink, and I immediately wonder if they were that color the night we were together. "Well, I don't have much to compare our night to..." She smiles sheepishly. "But it was good...Really good, actually. Like, you totally put my vibrator to shame. Whoever comes next will have a lot to live up to," she says with a laugh.

But I don't join in because the thought of her being with someone else isn't funny—at fucking all. The idea of some other guy seeing her naked—when I didn't even get to do that—or kissing her and feeling her soft, creamy skin and then sliding inside her warmth as she moans in pleasure, causes my blood to boil and my fists to clench.

Fuck that, Ellie is mine.

And before I can think about what I'm doing, I'm wrapping my fingers around her nape and pulling her face toward me, fusing our mouths together. My tongue demands entrance, and she opens, granting me access.

My hand ascends, fisting the back of her hair, and I deepen the kiss, our tongues tangling as we greedily taste one another. She tastes spicy with a hint of something that's all her. And when I suck on her tongue, and she moans into my mouth, I'm instantly hard, desperate for more than just her kiss.

I need every goddamn part of her. The parts I've already savored that left me hungry for another taste. The parts I never got to experience.

Every. Fucking. Part.

I lift her onto the island and spread her legs, so I can stand between them, and then yank the towel off her body. I step back for a moment, wanting to take her in now that we're in the light, needing to memorize every goddamn curve on her.

Micah's cautionary words creep into the back of my mind, but the second our eyes connect, and she looks at me like I'm everything she could ever want or need, I shove his words out the door, slam that bitch shut, and lock it.

Breaking our gaze, I notice her cheeks are flushed, and her lips are swollen from being kissed. Her hair is messy from my fingers running through it. Her chest is heaving rapidly, and her nipples are poking through the thin material of her bikini top. I want to continue to drink her in, but I'm dying of thirst and need an actual taste.

"Take your top off," I demand. Without argument, Ellie reaches back and unties the knots, the material falling into her lap and exposing her luscious tits.

I waste no time, taking one in my hand and kneading it, while my lips wrap around the other. Her moans of pleasure spur me on, as I lick and suck on her nipple, while my thumb continues to stroke and caress her other peak. I don't stop until she's writhing against me, her legs tightening around my waist, and then she's coming...fucking coming from my touch alone. I remember Micah mentioning how sensitive Sienna is when she's pregnant, but holy shit, this is insane.

"Oh my God," Ellie moans, clearly as shocked by her quick orgasm as I am.

"Did that feel good?" I ask, trailing fiery kisses over her breasts, not wanting to stop touching her. Knowing the moment I do, I'll have to deal with the reality of my actions.

"Yes," she breathes.

"Good, because you're about to come again."

I push her chest back slightly, so she's forced to lean back on her elbows, and when she does this, her belly pushes out, showing off her bump. I never found pregnancy attractive, always associated it with crying babies and losing your freedom, but as I kiss her swollen belly, I can't help but reconsider my stance. This woman is carrying my baby, protecting and nurturing him, until he's ready to enter this crazy world. And if that isn't sexy, I don't know what is.

I press a kiss to the top of her naval and remember something from Sienna being pregnant. "Can you feel him?" I ask, glancing up at Ellie.

"Not yet. I read around twenty weeks."

I make a mental note of that and continue my explorations, kissing each side of her hips. When I press an open-mouthed kiss to the material covering

her cunt, my lips go wet from her arousal. She's so turned on, she's soaked her bikini bottoms.

Instead of having her remove them, I pull the strings myself and watch as the front triangle flops downward, exposing her neatly trimmed pussy.

"Put your feet on the counter."

She does as I say, and her lips spread slightly, her arousal glistening in the light.

"Fuck, Kitten. You're dripping."

My words must embarrass her because she attempts to close her legs, but I'm not having it. "Keep 'em open," I order. "I'm about to eat this pussy, and when I'm done, you'll be sitting in a fucking puddle."

"Oh, Jesus," she groans as she spreads those toned, tanned legs wider, giving me the perfect opening to put my face between them and eat the hell out of her.

I could easily focus on her clit and bring her to a climax quickly, but instead, I make a show of feasting on her, sucking her juices, licking everywhere but the spot that will set her off. She moans and begs, but it's not until her fingers delve into my hair and demands I make her come that I finally give her what she craves. I glide the flat of my tongue up her center until I settle on her clit, massaging it in slow circles until she's coming all over my tongue, her juices sliding down and covering the counter just as I predicted.

Without waiting for her to come down from her high—because I need to be inside her right fucking now—I pull my sweats down, then pull her toward me, so her ass is hovering off the counter. Her eyes widen, and her body tenses, and I stop in my place, remembering her past.

"Hey," I say, making her expressive green eyes look at me, "you're here with me. In my penthouse, on my kitchen counter, about to be fucked until you come for a third time all over my cock."

She nods in agreement, her body instantly relaxing, and I take that as my cue to slowly guide my hard shaft into her hole. With our eyes staying locked on each other, I lean over and kiss her softly, then murmur against her lips, "Wrap your arms and legs around me." The night we were together, she never said it, but I could tell she preferred to be on top and in control. And now that I know what she went through, it makes sense.

Once our bodies are flush, I lift and carry her over to the couch, sitting on it with my cock still inside her. The position forces me to go deeper, and Ellie

moans in pleasure.

“That feel good?” I ask, reinforcing that it’s me inside her and not one of those fuckers from years ago.

“Yes,” she breathes, “so good.” She’s now completely relaxed, confirming my suspicions. When those fuckers raped her, she had no control, but when she’s on top like this, it makes her feel like she has all the power—and I’m completely okay with that.

“When you’re ready, I want you to move,” I tell her, squeezing the curves of her hips gently. “Find what feels good.”

She visibly swallows, and then a few seconds later, she starts to move. While I let her do her thing, I focus my attention on her rosy nipples, leaning forward and licking them. When my lips wrap around the hardened peak and I bite down, her walls tighten, telling me she’s close—which is good, since I haven’t had sex since I was with her, meaning I won’t be able to last much longer.

“I...I can’t,” she whines, her hips rolling and grinding. She’s new to this, and she knows what feels good, but it’s not always easy to get there, especially like this.

“I’ve got you,” I murmur, taking over from the bottom and searching for her sweet spot. I know I’ve found it when she moans and begs me not to stop. I keep going, hitting the spot until she’s screaming out my name, her walls choking my cock like a vice and sending me over the edge right along with her.

It’s when we’ve both caught our breaths and she attempts to climb off me—the mixture of our cum sliding out of her and down my dick and balls—that it hits me what we just did, and what’s worse, it only took mere hours of her staying with me for it to happen.

“I’m gonna go clean up,” she says, sounding off.

Before I can say anything, though, she’s padding across the marble floor and disappearing down the hall to her room, the sound of the door slamming closed echoing behind her.

I should go after her to make sure she’s okay, but I’m frozen in place, wondering not for the first time what the fuck I’m doing.

I ate her.

Fucked her.

Gave her three goddamned orgasms.

It was good. No, fuck that...It was amazing. Just as I remembered it being

with her. Better this time because I could see her.

It wasn't enough. I already want her again. I'm addicted.

And that sucks because it can't happen again.

Because she's off-limits.

Fuck.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ELLIE



ONE MINUTE, I WAS DEVOURING THE MEXICAN FOOD LINCOLN BROUGHT home, and the next, I was being devoured by him. I don't even know how it happened, but I guess the how doesn't really matter. It happened, and it was even more amazing than the night we spent together at Elite. Not only could I feel him, taste him, and smell him, but I could watch as he kissed and consumed and devoured me like he was starved, and I was the only thing that could satiate his hunger.

This entire day has gone completely off course in the best way possible. When I woke up, I thought I'd spend the morning dancing, then go to my appointment where I'd get to see my baby, and then have dinner with Sienna and her family.

But instead, Lincoln not only showed up and made it clear he wants to be part of our baby's life, but he went with me to my doctor's appointment and then took me to lunch for my birthday, complete with a birthday cake. After spending the afternoon lounging by the pool and relaxing, I ended my birthday with a taste of Lincoln—and yummy quesadillas.

But, of course, you can't have the good without the bad, right? It has to balance itself out, which is why I'm sitting in the living room alone, staring at the television. After Lincoln and I came down from our orgasms, we cleaned up and ate at the island. He at least didn't make it too awkward, instead talking about the appointment, when the next one is, if I've checked my blood pressure...But he ate quickly and then used the excuse that he has work to do before hightailing it out of there and closing himself off in his office for

the rest of the evening.

I should probably call it a night, but I'm afraid if I go to sleep, I'll wake up and it'll be like nothing ever happened. So, instead, I'm sitting on the couch, watching mindless television and hoping Lincoln will come out and give me some kind of sign as to what the hell this means. At least then I'll know where to go from here.

The night we hooked up at Elite, I assumed after we had sex, Lincoln would be done, but instead, he took me in his arms and held me. We connected. And I guess I was hoping that would happen again. But with him closing himself off, it's left me questioning everything: Was it a mistake? Does he regret what happened? Is this normal after sex, for people to go their separate ways? Am I overthinking this?

I want to ask Sienna, but a huge red flag would be raised, and the last thing I want is to make our family dynamics even more awkward.

One show bleeds into another...Raelyn calls and wishes me a happy birthday, and I avoid telling her what happened. Another show, and Sienna calls to see how the rest of my day was. Again, I keep it simple, and she updates me on the girls and their stomach bug. Micah is working from home, and they're all quarantining in the penthouse. London's birthday party is postponed until they're all healthy.

I fall asleep sometime during the third show and wake up to the smoky scent of whiskey and something that's all Lincoln as he carries me to my room and lays me on my bed. I'm already in my pajamas, so he unfolds the blanket and then covers me with it.

"Goodnight, Kitten," he murmurs, thinking I'm asleep, as he leans over and kisses my forehead.

"Wait," I say, latching onto his wrist before he can leave. "I..." I want to ask what today meant, but when I open my eyes and find his features a mixture of confusion and pain, almost as if he's at war with himself, I lose the courage to ask, afraid of what his answer might be. Afraid that if I try to slap a label on what this means, I won't like the label he gives me.

So, instead, I go with the whole *ignorance is bliss* mindset, and when he raises his brow, silently prompting me to continue with whatever I need to say, I change my direction. "I want you," I tell him brazenly, sitting up on my knees so we're almost eye level. He swallows apprehensively and flinches slightly, and then he stares at me for several seconds, like he's trying to figure out what to do or say. When he stays motionless for what feels like an

eternity, I assume he's going to tell me no, and then I'll have my answer to the question I was afraid to ask anyway.

But instead, he shocks the hell out of me when he cups the side of my face and his mouth descends on mine. Unlike the frenzied kiss earlier, this one is soft and sensual. He kisses my top lip first and then moves to my bottom, sucking it into his mouth before he deepens the kiss. As his lips glide against my own, he gently pushes me onto my back and spreads my legs, so he's hovering above me, his arms caging me in like a protective cocoon.

"We shouldn't be doing this," he murmurs, his voice pained, "but I can't stop wanting you." His defeated tone has me closing my eyes, wondering if I should put a stop to this. I am the one who started it after all.

But before I can decide one way or another, Lincoln makes the decision for us by pressing his lips to mine once again. He tastes like whiskey and a hint of Lincoln, and I wish I could bottle it up and save it for when he stops thinking with his dick and puts a stop to all of this and I'm left with only the memory of the times we spent together.

I'll be sad, and I'll miss this—the chemistry and connection I feel when we're intimate in this way—but I'll also always be grateful to him for helping give me a piece of myself back. He could've held a grudge, but he didn't. And I never expected him to give me anything more than what he gave me that night at Elite, so every time he gives me a little more, I relish the extra gift I've been given.

As his lips linger on mine, warmth spreads through my body. And then he breaks the kiss and trails his lips across the curve of my jaw to my ear. "Vanilla is my new favorite scent," he whispers, causing the warmth to morph into an inferno. "I dreamed about this scent for months after that night...Fantasized about it. But fuck, Kitten, they didn't do it justice."

He runs the tip of his nose along my neck, inhaling my scent, and I briefly wonder if I should put the flames out now, before the fire inside me gets out of control and sets my heart ablaze. But I've learned that life is short and unpredictable, and all we can do is live in the right now because there might not be a tomorrow. So, that's what I'm going to do—live in the moment with Lincoln.

Tomorrow, he might not want me. He might wake up and regret everything we've done. He might insist we take a step back and focus on the baby we've created since we have years of co-parenting ahead of us. But today, Lincoln wants me. And for someone who went years craving yet

fearing being wanted, being intimate with Lincoln, having him want me and me not push him away, feels pretty damn good.

“Take this off,” he commands, sitting up on his haunches and helping me lift the tiny tank top I was wearing to bed. Because I’m braless, my breasts are immediately on display, and Lincoln wastes no time taking one in his hand and wrapping his lips around my nipple. He licks and sucks on the hardened peak, and I moan in pleasure. I never knew how good being intimate with someone could be. The men who raped me hurt me, and the boys I tried to be with afterward obviously didn’t know their way around a woman’s body, nor did they understand how to pleasure one. Until Lincoln, I felt broken, but little by little, he’s piecing me back together.

Lincoln’s tongue trailing down my torso takes me out of my thoughts as I focus on the way he’s kissing and licking his way down my body. When he removes my cotton shorts and panties, he spreads my thighs slightly and lifts them to my chest. I’m not sure what he’s doing, but since I trust him, I don’t question it until his tongue lands on my puckered hole and flashbacks from that day crash into me like the strongest, unexpected wave, knocking me back and causing me to choke on salt water.

Force.

Pain.

Tearing.

Blood.

Screaming.

Begging.

Crying.

“Stop, please!” I choke out, the memories hitting me so deep, they’ve taken my breath away. Blackness prickles at my vision. White noise clogs my hearing. And then like a light switch, everything turns off. And I feel like I can finally breathe again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ELLIE



“THERE SHE IS,” LINCOLN SAYS WHEN I OPEN MY EYES AND TAKE IN MY surroundings, trying to remember what the hell happened. He’s sitting against the headboard of my bed, and I’m cradled across his lap. I glance down and see that I’m dressed, and then it all comes back to me. Embarrassed by what transpired, I try to scramble off Lincoln, but he’s not having it.

“Stop,” he says gently, holding me tighter against him and palming the side of my face. “Talk to me. What happened?”

I hesitate to answer him, in fear of the flashbacks hitting me again, but when he pinches my chin and tips my face up to look at him, my body instantly relaxes. This is Lincoln. I can trust him. It was stupid to expect that because I haven’t freaked out on him yet that it would never happen.

I keep my eyes on Lincoln as I speak, needing to remind myself that I’m here with him and safe. “When I was raped, they did it...in every hole. But the worst was when they did it from behind, in *that* hole.”

Lincoln’s eyes darken in understanding. “Not now, but at some point, I need you to tell me what happened.”

“No.” I shake my head. “I can’t do that. Please...”

“It’s the only way I can assure what happened today doesn’t happen again,” he explains, and while what he says makes sense, the thought of verbalizing what they did makes me feel sick to my stomach. It doesn’t matter that it’s been years since it happened. Every time I think about it, it’s as if it just happened.

“Everything we’ve done has been amazing,” I whisper. “I just wasn’t

expecting that. But I'll be okay next time."

"Kitten..." Lincoln lays me on the bed and wraps himself around me like the most comforting blanket, trapping my legs in his. He slides one arm under my head and the other glides across my waist, resting on my hip. "You said you wanted to be with me because you trust me, right?"

I nod. "I trust you more than anyone else."

"Then I need you to trust me with what happened. It's the reason members of the club are required to fill out a form with their limits. Something you should've done. Luckily, nothing I did that night triggered you, but it could've. I never should've touched you without scanning you into the system, so I'd know your limits."

"If you would've done that, we never would've been together," I mutter.

"Probably," he admits, "but being the owner of Elite means I'm held to a higher standard, and what I did that night was irresponsible, and something could've gone seriously wrong."

"Why didn't you scan me in?" I ask curiously.

"I was too wrapped up in you. It's no secret I've been with my fair share of women..." When I pout at his admission, Lincoln chuckles. "Not as many as you're thinking."

"How many?"

"I don't keep track, and whatever number I give you won't make a difference. But the point I was trying to make is that even though I've been with other women, something about you felt different. From the moment I saw you at the bar, the chemistry between us was off the charts, and I was so shocked by my reaction to you, all my common sense got shoved out the door."

I can't help the smile that spreads across my face at the fact Lincoln just admitted that the connection he felt was between *us* and not some mystery woman. That night meant so much to me, and it warms my heart that it meant something to him as well.

"I'm glad it did," I tell him honestly. "I know that might be wrong of me to say, but you have no idea how many times I tried to be intimate with guys. I was afraid it would never happen."

"Which is why, as your partner, I need to know what happened. Not just for you but also for me, so I'm not caught up in my head worrying about what might trigger you."

"I don't want you to see me as that person," I say, closing my eyes. "I like

the way you look at me. And I'm afraid if you know what they did...*What they made me do*, the way you look at me will change."

"Let me make something very clear," Lincoln says, palming the side of my face. I open my eyes and our gazes lock. "There's nothing those pieces of shits could've done to you that would make me want you any less. When I look at you, all I see is the beautiful, sexy woman who did what no other woman has ever done—made me want more." He presses his lips to mine and then breaks our connection far too quickly. "One day, you're going to tell me all that happened, and nothing you say will change a damn thing about how I see you, but for now, just tell me this: what is it you want?"

"You," I say without hesitation.

A small smile quirks in the corners of his lips. "And what do you want from me?"

"Everything," I tell him just before I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his face toward mine, kissing him with everything in me.

Our lips caress each other for several seconds before I pull back slightly. "I don't want them to win," I murmur against his mouth. "I don't want what they did to define me. I want to be with you in every way possible, for each memory we create to replace the one they burned into me."

Lincoln nods in understanding, and then his mouth is back on mine, kissing me with the type of passion that sends electrical currents through my body and to the apex of my legs. I break our connection to pull his shirt over his head, and he does the same to me, removing my shorts and panties as well.

Once I'm naked, he gently rolls on top of me, and our eyes meet. "I'm going to do what I did before," he says. "I want you to keep your eyes open and on me, and if you can't handle it, you have to tell me. Okay?"

"Okay," I breathe, a mixture of nervousness and excitement making my heart kick into overdrive. I've heard anal play can feel good, but since my experience was beyond painful, I never planned to find out. Now, with Lincoln, I want to see how good it can be. Everything we've done thus far has only brought me the best type of pleasure, and I have no doubt, he'll make this good too. I just have to hope I can stay in the moment with him.

"Focus on me," he says, noticing that I'm already lost in my own head. He kisses his way down my body, his eyes never leaving mine, and then spreads my thighs wide. Instead of going to my butt like he did last time, he focuses on my pussy, giving it attention until I'm dripping wet and begging

for release. Then, he adds two fingers while massaging my clit, and I fly high onto the most amazing cloud of bliss.

Before I can come down from my high, my legs are pushed back, just like last time—only my eyes are on Lincoln's as he does it, so I know it's coming, allowing me to stay in the moment, in this room, in this bed, with him.

With his gaze never leaving mine, he dips his chin and makes a show of licking the juices that dripped down, his tongue gliding from the bottom of my ass and stopping once he's reached my pussy. Instinctually, I tighten my anus, the feeling foreign, but I don't freak out.

Lincoln continues to lick me from bottom to top, his tongue caressing and massaging my hole and then working its way to my clit. Every time his tongue ascends, he shifts my lower body downward, and when his tongue descends, it's shifted upward, creating a rhythm.

Up. Swipe. Lick. Suck. Down. Massage. Repeat.

Little by little, the past is replaced with the present.

Pain. Pleasure.

Screams. Moans.

Fear. Trust.

"That's it," he murmurs. "I can feel your orgasm. Come for me, Kitten."

Another swipe. Another Lick. One more suck. And my body detonates. The orgasm is so strong, my hips lift off the bed, and my legs tremble. Lincoln keeps me grounded, and when I've finally caught my breath and sit up, I feel like I've won yet another battle against my past.

When I scoot back, needing to clean up, a huge wet circle on the sheet catches my attention. Oh, God. Did I...?

"It's not urine," Lincoln says, as if he can hear my thoughts. "That's from you coming twice." He smirks, clearly happy with himself for making me do that, and I refuse to be embarrassed.

"I need to shower," I tell him, sliding off the bed while avoiding the spot—I'll deal with that after I'm clean.

When Lincoln makes no move to join me, I take his hand in mine and try to pull him off the bed, but he shakes his head, not budging. "I already showered before I came to find you in the living room."

"Fine, then." I grab his crotch that's sporting a hard-on. "I'll just have to dirty you up, so you'll be more inclined to get clean with me."

His hazel eyes widen, taken off guard since I've yet to give him head. The truth is, I've never given anyone head. Never wanted to.

“Ellie,” Lincoln says softly, pulling me toward him. Because he’s sitting and I’m standing, I have to glance down at him. “You don’t have to do that. If you want me to shower with you, I’d be more than happy to do so.”

“I’ve never done it before,” I admit. “But I want to, so you’ll have to help me since I’m sure you know exactly how you like it.”

He searches my eyes for the truth in them, and when he sees that despite me being nervous, I truly mean it, he releases a sigh and nods. “Okay, but if at any point —”

“I’ll stop and tell you,” I finish.

Lincoln leans back and spreads his legs slightly. “I’m all yours,” he says with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. “Just don’t bite and we’ll be good.”

When I flinch, his eyes cut into thin slits. “Talk to me.”

“When I was raped, I never stopped kicking and screaming. I refused to accept what they were doing to me. One guy practically shoved it down my throat and began fucking my mouth, but I refused to accept what he was doing to me, so I bit down and drew blood. He slapped me so hard that I was flung across the room, but at least nobody else tried after that.”

Lincoln’s jaw tightens, and despite him saying he wants to hear everything that happened to me, I worry that I shouldn’t have said anything.

“Good,” he says, his tone dark. “If those assholes were still alive, I’d torture them until they begged for death.”

“Knowing they were dead is how I got through many nights.” I step toward him and reach out, pressing my palm to his heart. His body is like a work of art—chiseled and toned and perfectly tan. “I don’t want to think about them. I want to forget. I want to move forward and live my best life with you”—I press my other hand to the curve of my belly since I’m still naked—and our baby. I spent years fighting for my broken pieces to heal, and thanks to you, they’re finally doing just that.”

I glide my hand down the hard ridges of his abs and stop where his happy trail meets the waistband of his pants. “I want to taste you, just like you tasted me.” I pull his pants down, and he lifts slightly, helping me push them down his muscular thighs. “I want to make you feel as good as you make me feel.” I kneel between his legs. “I want to replace another horrible memory with a good one.”

I wrap my fingers around his shaft, getting a feel for the velvety smooth skin, and then I lean over slightly and give the head a hesitant, open-mouthed kiss.

When a low growl vibrates through Lincoln, hitting my lips, I do it again, this time, sliding my tongue across the tip so I can taste him, the salty liquid hitting my taste buds.

“Jesus, Kitten,” Lincoln groans, “you trying to kill me slowly?”

His words spur me on. Parting my lips, I glide my mouth down his entire length, stopping just before the head hits the back of my throat and then come back up, stopping at his crown. When my eyes meet his and see that they’re filled with molten desire, my confidence rises, and I take him into my mouth again, this time suctioning my lips around his shaft.

“Fuck yes,” he moans as I bob my head, creating friction with my saliva. When I glance back up, wanting to see the pleasure on his features, Lincoln locks eyes with mine. “You’re doing so good...Fucking perfect.”

At his praises, I take him deeper, suck him harder, and I don’t stop until he’s cautioning me that he’s going to come. But I ignore his warning, wanting to swallow every last drop of him.

Once I’ve licked him clean, he pulls me up, so I’m tucked into his side, my head resting against his chest. We lie like this for several minutes in silence, and I start to wonder if he’s fallen asleep, but then he reaches up and tips my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“Ellie, I...” he begins, and I hold my breath, having no clue what he’s going to say. He doesn’t finish his thought for several seconds, but the turmoil in his eyes causes my stomach to roil, and I pray he doesn’t tell me this can’t happen again.

“Yeah?” I prompt, the suspense damn near giving me heartburn.

“We should shower.” He forces a fake smile and then slides out of bed and pads toward the bathroom. When I don’t follow, wondering what he really wanted to say but too scared to ask, he glances back. “C’mon, dirty girl. I need to clean you up.” He shoots a playful wink my way, and I tell myself it’s for the best because my heart might not be able to handle what he was about to say.

Ignorance is bliss, right?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

LINCOLN



DELICIOUS CURVES.

Vanilla scent.

Plump lips that are parted slightly.

Soft snoring.

I can't stop watching her sleep. Yesterday never should've happened. Eliza Bardot is not available for the taking—at least not by me. I knew that, but that didn't stop me from taking her in my living room on the goddamned couch and then in my guest room and again in the shower.

I've thought about my mystery woman for the past several months, and if I were honest, I considered that maybe I'd just imagined the connection. That once I found her and was with her again, I'd realize that I had worked it up into something more than just your typical one-night-stand—something I've done many times and never thought twice about.

I was wrong, though. My memory of that night didn't do the chemistry between us justice. It's deeper, stronger, and I'm completely fucked because regardless of how many times I've already crossed that line with Ellie, I had promised Micah that his sister-in-law would always remain off-limits to me.

Ellie inhales a sharp breath and then releases a sigh, turning slightly onto her back. I slide my gaze down her perky breasts that are hidden by the tiny tank she's wearing, her nipples poking through the material, and land on her swollen belly.

She's pregnant with my baby. We heard his heartbeat yesterday, which was surreal. I've listened to Micah talk about Sienna's pregnancies, but

experiencing the ultrasound for myself, was unlike anything I've ever experienced.

My hand goes to her belly, gently laying my palm flat against the baby bump, just as Ellie's eyes shoot open. She blinks several times before her gaze descends to where my hand is resting.

"Sorry," I mutter, pulling back. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm a light sleeper," she murmurs groggily.

We stare at each other for several seconds, and there's so much I want to say, but I'm confused by my feelings and wouldn't even know where to start. In the world I live in, when you want something, you go for it. Our dad raised Micah and me to work hard, and while I'm a bit more carefree than Micah, I still bust my ass every day to create the life I want.

Yet, here I am, lying in bed with a woman whom I'm attracted to, who's carrying my baby, who's within touching distance, and no matter how badly I want to have her, I know I can't. Last night, despite how amazing it was, never should've happened, and once we leave this bed, I need to ensure that it doesn't happen again. And that is something I need Ellie to fully understand. But first, I need to apologize for giving in to my baser instincts. Beg her to forgive me for not being the responsible one when I unequivocally know better. She's young and pregnant and vulnerable, and I took advantage of that.

"What are you thinking about?" Ellie asks, edging closer and palming the side of my face. Her touch causes me to flinch, and the corner of her lips turn down into a frown in response.

"I have a lot of work I need to do," I answer lamely.

She nods in understanding and backs up. "I should probably go to the studio..." Her words trail off and she sighs, shaking her head. "Well, shit, I'm supposed to be taking it easy, huh?" She laughs humorlessly. "Guess no studio...And Sienna's quarantined, so I can't see her or my nieces." She pouts, clearly getting more annoyed by the second. "Guess I'll shower and start looking online for a place to live." She shrugs and slides off the bed, leaving me lying here wondering how the hell we went from fucking all night and me holding her while we slept, to her looking for a place to live.

Oh, right. I know how we got here: Me...Because I'm a bastard who fell for a woman I'm not supposed to have.



“HAPPY FATHER-TO-BE DAY.” ELLIE HANDS ME A SQUARE BOX THAT’S BEEN giftwrapped in silver paper. I look at the box for several seconds, wondering what the hell she’s talking about, until it hits me—it’s Father’s Day. And I’m an expectant father. And then I feel like shit because when it was Mother’s Day, I didn’t acknowledge that Ellie was an expectant mother. In my defense, however, I had only just found out she was pregnant and wasn’t in the mindset to think about things like that. I had wished my mom and Sienna a Happy Mother’s Day—after Micah reminded me—and avoided everyone else, lost in my own head.

I take the gift from her and unwrap it. Inside is a black book. When I open it, I find a couple of sonogram pictures with the dates written underneath it. The rest of the pages are empty.

“It’s a baby book,” Ellie says. “Women tend to have cuter ones, but I figured black was more your style. You can add to it as the baby grows and then more after our son is born. I got one for Micah when they were expecting London, and he keeps it on his desk at work. I figured you might like one as well.”

Our son.

Ellie and I are having a son.

“This is awesome,” I tell her, leaning in and kissing her cheek, while struggling to fight back my feelings toward Ellie that are threatening to break free. “Thank you.”

It’s been a rough several days since I woke up in bed with Ellie and reminded myself that I need to maintain a safe distance. Avoiding a woman who lives in your home that you are attracted to on a deeper level has a way of testing a man’s restraint like no other. I can’t even count the number of times I’ve jacked off in the shower. She probably thinks I have some sort of OCD about being clean.

“You’re welcome,” she says with a small smile before heading into the kitchen to make her morning tea. Every day she starts with tea and breakfast, then she moves on to yoga and a shower. From there, she spends her day television surfing, lounging by the pool, and reading—avoiding Ellie doesn’t mean I’ve stopped paying attention.



“How’s it going?” MICAH ASKS.

I glance at the plans I’m looking over and sigh into the phone. “It’s going...” If going means reading the damn thing five times because I can’t get a certain brown-hair, green-eyed woman off my mind. Living with her is turning out to be quite the distraction, especially since I spend most of my time fantasizing about what I wish I could have but can’t.

“The kids and Sienna are finally one-hundred-percent again, so we’re planning to have London’s party on Sunday.”

“Sounds good.”

“How’s Ellie? Sienna said she’s been kind of quiet. She’s tried to video chat with her since she couldn’t see her in person, but she’s not very talkative.”

That’s probably because I fucked her seven ways to Sunday, spent the night in her bed, and then pushed her away. And aside from the necessary questions like “I’m ordering food. Want anything?” or “How’s your blood pressure doing?” I’ve been avoiding her like the plague. And she’s caught on, glaring at me every time I run into her.

“She’s been taking it easy,” I tell him honestly. “I’m sure once Sienna sees her in person that will help with them reconnecting.”

“Yeah, I hope so. Well, at least now Ellie can move back in here and get out of your space.”

“Yeah,” I agree noncommittally, my stomach tightening at the thought of Ellie no longer sleeping under my roof. It’s been a test to my restraint living with a woman I want every single second of every day, but I’m handling it, and once the baby comes, I’d like for us to co-parent together. She mentioned getting her own place, but I was hoping she’d consider living with me instead.

My stomach growls, reminding me that I haven’t eaten since early this morning. “Hey, listen, I need to grab something to eat and send the plan revisions for the hotel and casino to the architect. Text me a calendar invite for London’s birthday, so I don’t forget.”

We hang up and I head out of my office, starved and hoping there’s something good to eat in the fridge. I ordered Italian last night, and I’m pretty sure there was some chicken fettucine leftover...Only when I step out of my office and see Ellie, dressed in tight leggings and a tiny sports bra that has her breasts practically spilling out of the top, the only thing I’m suddenly hungry for is her.

She's on her mat, on all fours. Her face is pointed toward the ceiling, and her eyes are closed. Her back is arched, and her round ass is sticking up in the air. With the music playing in the surround sound, she isn't aware she has an audience, and my only thought as I watch her inhale and exhale while she stretches is how easy it would be to get on my knees behind her, tear those pants down her legs, and eat her pussy and ass from behind.

My cock, clearly on the same page, starts to swell in excitement, and I know if I don't get the hell out of here, I'm going to do something I'll regret again.

But before I can make my feet move—no clue if I'm going back to my office to hide some more or making a run for it out the front door—Ellie's face lowers as she turns to the side, her eyes opening and connecting with mine. And one day when I look back, I'll remember this as the moment that I knew I was utterly screwed because my need to be with this woman outweighs my ability to do the right thing by staying away from her.

"Nice of you to come out of hiding," she says, finishing her stretch and then standing. The perspiration glistening on her neck and chest descends into the swells of her breasts, and it takes everything in me not to close the distance between us and lick the salty liquid off her flesh. I'd bet my entire bank account she smells like the perfect mixture of sweat and vanilla.

"I'm hungry."

She stares at me for several seconds, her expression looking as if she wants to say something, but instead, she simply nods and walks away, her pert ass swaying as she goes. I watch, mesmerized, until she disappears down the hallway, and her door shuts behind her.

And then I continue to stare because I can't stop wishing the circumstances were different so I could make her mine.

After forcing myself to go to the kitchen to make myself something to eat, I'm in the middle of heating up some leftovers when a loud scream comes from Ellie's room. I drop what I'm doing, and without knocking, plow through her door. My only thought is that I need to get to Ellie. Something could be wrong with her or the baby. What if she slipped?

But when I get inside her room, she's rushing out of the bathroom at the same time, and we collide—her very wet, naked body running straight into my arms, soaking my entire front.

"Are you okay?" I choke out, trying like hell to focus on her and not the way her dripping wet flesh is pressed up against me.

“There’s a huge ass spider in there, like the size of my freaking head. And I’m pretty sure it has babies.”

“What?”

“A spider! Lincoln, go kill it!” She breaks our contact and shoves me toward the bathroom door. “Go, please!”

Stifling my laugh, I do as she says and head into the bathroom with her following behind. I immediately spot the spider in the corner of the shower and, with balled up toilet paper, smash it and drop it into the toilet, flushing it straight to hell.

The second it’s gone, Ellie breathes a sigh of relief. Then, as if suddenly realizing that in her moment of panic she ran out naked, she glances down at herself and then up at me, her cheeks flush and eyes wide.

She attempts to cover her breasts and pussy the best she can, but it’s too late. I’ve already seen her. And fuck if I don’t want her. She’s still dripping wet, and all I can think about is drying her off inch by inch with my tongue.

My brain tells me to run, but every other part of me begs me to stay. I’m unsure which way to go, until Ellie sucks her bottom lip into her mouth as her hooded emerald eyes rake over my wet shirt that’s clinging to my upper torso. Decision made.

Without giving myself time to change my mind, I bridge the gap between us, but I don’t need to go far because Ellie does the same, meeting me halfway. Our bodies and mouths collide, and I lift her onto the counter, stepping between her parted thighs, ready to devour her in this bathroom.

And then the doorbell rings throughout the penthouse. *Fuck.*

“I better go get that,” I murmur, stepping back and refusing to make eye contact with the woman who’s supposed to be prohibited but who I still almost fucked again.

Without waiting for her to respond, I hightail it out of the bathroom and head straight to the door, pulling it open without considering how I might look.

Well, in hindsight, I should’ve considered it because when the door flies open, standing on the other side are none other than Michael and Donna Alexander, my parents.

“Why are you soaked?” Dad asks, stepping around me.

“You look flushed, honey,” Mom says, pressing her palm to my cheek. “Are you coming down with that bug the girls had?”

“What? No, I’m fine,” I tell them, closing the door behind me. I glance

down the hall, praying Ellie stays in her room until I can tell them about her. Because one look at her swollen belly and they're going to know I knocked up the woman they view as family.

"What are you guys doing here?" I blurt out, making Mom frown. "I thought you weren't coming home for a couple more weeks."

"We decided to fly home in time for London's party," Mom says, having a seat on the couch. "Got in this morning."

"And you came straight here?"

"You've been acting strange," Dad says. "Your mother is concerned."

"I'm—"

There's a bang and then a "Shit! Ow, ow, ow!" And without thought, I run straight to Ellie's room, concerned she—or the baby—is hurt.

"What's wrong?" I ask, when I find her sitting on the bed, her face etched in pain—and thankfully dressed. Her hand is holding her side, and there are tears in her eyes.

"I tripped and hit my side on the corner of the dresser." I kneel in front of her and lift her top, exposing the area already bruising on her side.

"Should we go to the hospital?" I ask.

"No, it just hurt really freaking bad."

"Oh, Ellie, what are you doing here?" my mom asks.

Out of shock, we both stand at the same time, and because I had lifted her shirt up, her round belly is still showing.

"Oh my God!" Mom gasps. "Are you pregnant?"

Dad steps into the room, next to mom, his gaze flicking from Ellie to me. "Son, don't tell me..."

"Is this why you've been acting so weird?" Mom says. "Ellie's staying with you?"

Oh shit.

The look on Dad's face tells me he's put the pieces together. Mom...Not so much.

"Lincoln," he barks. "Did you do this?"

"What?" Mom looks from us to my dad in confusion. "What are you asking, Michael?"

"He's asking if I'm the father of Ellie's baby, and the answer is yes."

Mom's eyes go wide. "Oh," she breathes, her gaze darting between me and Ellie, who's standing frozen in her spot, watching this train wreck of a conversation come to a head. "So, are you two together?"

“No,” I blurt out. “It was an accident.”

Mom’s eyes bug out of her head, Dad’s turn into thin slits, and Ellie drops her head, hiding the frown I saw before she could hide it.

“I don’t understand,” Mom says. “You slept with Ellie casually? Of all the women you could’ve been with…” She shakes her head in disappointment. “I thought we raised you better than this.”

“It’s complicated,” I tell my parents, knowing that’s not enough of an explanation but not wanting to throw Ellie under the bus, and really… I’m not lying. It is complicated.

“Donna,” Ellie cuts in. “This wasn’t Lincoln’s fault.”

“Ellie,” I warn, shaking my head.

“No, I’m not going to let them look at you like that,” she says. “This is my fault.” She places a protective hand on her belly. “I went to Elite and sought Lincoln out on Valentine’s Day. He didn’t know it was me because I was wearing a mask for the masquerade party. We spent the night together, but I failed to think about birth control beforehand. I didn’t plan to get pregnant, but my irresponsibility is the reason why I am. Not Lincoln.”

She sniffles back her tears. “I wouldn’t blame Lincoln if he didn’t want anything to do with this baby. He didn’t ask for this. But you raised him right, so he’s agreed to be a part of the baby’s life. I’m so sorry,” she says, swiping away her tears. “Your family has been so good to me and my sister, and I messed up big time. But please don’t blame Lincoln. It’s all on me.”

“It’s on both of us,” I say, refusing to let her take all the blame. “I might not have known who Ellie was, but I was completely on board with having sex with her at the club. And not using protection was on me as well.”

“So, what now?” Dad asks.

“Now we take it one day at a time, starting with getting ready for our son to arrive in November.”

“Your son?” Mom asks, perking up. “You’re having a little boy?”

Ellie nods, a small smile gracing her face. “We got to see him at the ultrasound. He looks like the cutest little gummy bear.” Then, as if she forgot she shouldn’t be happy because of my parents being upset, she schools her features. “I really am sorry,” she says to my parents. “I know what a mess I’ve created.”

“Oh, honey.” Mom pulls Ellie into her arms. “It’s all going to be okay. I’m a firm believer that everything happens for a reason.” Mom’s eyes meet mine, and she smiles softly, silently telling me that she’s no longer upset. My

shoulders slump in relief. I don't know what the future holds, but what I do know is that we're going to need our family by our side.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ELLIE



“OH MY GOD. HE’S SO PRECIOUS.” SIENNA COOS OVER THE SONOGRAM picture in a way that only a mother can do while staring at a black and white grainy photo.

“He looks like a gummy bear, right?”

She stares at the image closely then barks out a laugh. “He totally does.” She sets the picture down on the island and looks at me. “How are you doing?”

It’s Friday, and I’ve spent the week at Lincoln’s since he insisted that I stay with him so he can keep an eye on me because of my high blood pressure—which has been doing better. While he’s made sure the fridge is stocked and we’ve eaten a few times together, he’s also avoiding me.

“I’m okay.” I shrug. “I need to find somewhere to live.” I sigh, and Sienna quirks her head to the side, picking up on the uneasiness I’m feeling.

“Obviously you can afford a place, so what’s wrong?”

“Being here dredges up old memories I wish to leave in the past,” I admit. “I know one event shouldn’t change the entire course of my life, especially since the people involved are all dead, but I can’t help feeling like this town is tainted. At least in California, I could live in denial. Here, not so much.”

Sienna nods in understanding. “For a few years, I refused to drive on the side of town where the warehouse was. It’s been turned into a shopping plaza, but when I go by it, all I see is that day.”

“I never should’ve gone to see Eleazar.”

“You were trying to protect us,” she says, placing her hand over mine.

“We were going to run, and I was going to have to leave Micah behind, and all you wanted was to stop that from happening. We’ve always had each other’s backs, El. You believed in Micah and me before I did, and you couldn’t have possibly known what that crazy psycho woman was going to do. None of us blames you. Hell, I wouldn’t have the family I have, if it weren’t for you.”

I blame me...And I always will. But it’s pointless to argue. Sienna only ever sees the good in me.

“Is everything set for London’s party?” It’s taking place at the indoor water park on Sunday, and despite having to be in the same vicinity as Lincoln, I’m looking forward to spending the day with my nieces in the water, even if I can’t go down the good waterslides.

“Yep. She’s excited.”

A beep sounds through the room, and a second later, the front door opens, and Micah and Lincoln are sauntering inside while they talk business.

“There’s my beautiful wife,” Micah says when he sees Sienna and I are sitting in the kitchen. He palms her cheek and gives her a kiss that borders on inappropriate, and I can’t help but wish, not for the first time, that I was loved and adored the way my sister is.

I look away to give them their privacy, and my eyes land on Lincoln, standing in the corner, staring at me with a mixture of heat and lust in his gaze.

Ever since I returned home and he found out I’m pregnant with his baby, he’s been hot and cold. First, ignoring me for weeks. Then, on my birthday he went from sweet—going to the doctor with me and then taking me for lunch—to taking me on the counter and couch and again in the shower. The next morning, he was cold again, obviously having regretted what went down between us the night before.

Honestly, I was shocked he let it happen at all. But then again, from what Sienna told me, he was very much attracted to his mystery woman, *Liz*, when he didn’t know she was me. Between Valentine’s Day, my birthday night, and the other day in the bathroom when he almost took me on the counter, it’s clear Lincoln wants me, but he doesn’t *want* to want me because I’m so much younger than him, and he believes that’s a definitive line he shouldn’t cross.

And since I’m the one who created this awkward as hell situation by getting knocked up, I feel like I don’t have a leg to stand on. But at the same

time, I'm not about to become his doormat.

Which is why I need to find my own place, so the temptation will be gone, and we can focus on co-parenting because that's what's most important—the little gummy bear in my belly who I'm determined to make sure has two loving parents and a better life than I ever had.

“Micah, stop,” Sienna says through a giggle. “I'm having coffee with Ellie. Go run your empire.”

Micah chuckles. “I'd rather run you straight to bed.”

“Ugh, so cheesy.” Sienna shakes her head. “Go away so we can have our girl time.”

“Actually,” I say, standing and clearing my throat. “I need to get going anyway.” I force a smile on my face. “I'm beginning my house hunting today.” I don't actually have any appointments scheduled, or a realtor hired, but how hard can it be to find someone to show me some places that are for sale?

Sienna pouts but doesn't argue. “You want me to go with you? I can.”

“Nope, I'm good. But if I find something I like, I promise to get your approval first.”

I give her a kiss on the cheek and then smile awkwardly at Micah, hating that it will probably never be the same between us since I had sex with his brother and ended up pregnant.

Without giving Lincoln a second glance, I head out. Only instead of him staying with Micah, he follows me out and down the hall back to his place.

“You know you can stay here, right?” he says once we're inside. “We're having a baby together...”

“And we can co-parent from different homes,” I finish. “I appreciate you letting me stay here while the girls were sick and you arranging to work from home to watch over me, but my blood pressure is improving. It's going to take some time to find a place, so hopefully the doctor will give me the all-clear by then so I can move into my new place and get settled before the baby comes.”

Lincoln nods, but his pinched brows and pursed lips tell me he doesn't agree with what I'm saying, so I break it down for him in a way he'll understand.

“Linc, living together long term would never work. One day you're going to want to date, or I will, and then what? We bring them here? Put a scrunchie on the doorknob to alert the other person that we're having sex? I

spent years living in fear of being sexually intimate with a man, and now that I've experienced how good it can feel, I want that."

"While you're pregnant?" Lincoln clips, making me roll my eyes.

"Obviously not while I'm pregnant. But after I give birth, I don't see any reason why I can't be a mom and still continue to date. I have no intention of bringing any man around my son until I know he's good enough to be in his life, but I'm young and..." I swallow anxiously. "I want what Micah and Sienna have. I want to fall in love. I want to meet a man who will sweep me off my feet and love me the way I deserve to be loved. And I don't see that happening if I stay here."

Lincoln sighs. "You've always been a romantic."

"When you grow up in a world like mine, all you have is the hope of something better. It's why I clung to you when I was younger. You were the good in a world filled with so much bad. But I took advantage of your good, and for that I'll always be sorry."

"I already told you —"

"I know, I know." I laugh lightly. "You forgive me. But it's more than that. I never wanted to be anything like my mom, but here I am, pregnant from a one-night stand."

I rub my belly, hoping my baby will feel the love I already feel for him. "I have the money she didn't have, and thanks to you being so good about this, we'll give him two loving parents. But one day, I'd like to meet someone. I want the house filled with love and happiness. I want the shit you see in movies, like the perfect Christmases and family dinners. Sienna never imagined having it, but there she is, living her best life, and I want that too. But I can't have it with you. So, I'd rather move out now and start working on creating the life I want for myself and my baby."

"Our baby," he interjects.

"Our baby," I agree. "A baby we'll be raising together for at least the next eighteen years."

Lincoln nods in agreement.

"So, I was thinking..." I swallow thickly, hating the thought that's crossed my mind while I was pouring my soul out to him, but if we have any chance of getting through this parenting thing together, it's something that should probably happen. "I think we should agree to be friends."

"We've always been friends," Lincoln says, confusion etched across his features.

“Eh.” I tilt my head to the side and shrug my shoulder. “I think it was more of an ‘I worshipped the ground you walked on, and you dealt with my teenage one-sided infatuation’ sort of relationship, but I wouldn’t call it a friendship.”

Lincoln chuckles and shakes his head. “Trust me when I tell you that the infatuation was *very much* returned in recent events.”

“But only because you didn’t know it was me,” I say, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice. “So, friends?”

Lincoln doesn’t look sold on the idea, and a part of me wants to ask if it’s because the infatuation is still there and he craves more, or if being my friend is something he isn’t interested in. But really the answer won’t matter because regardless, Lincoln doesn’t see a future with me, and we both deserve to find the person we want to spend our lives with.”

“Friends,” he finally says.

“Good.” I plaster on a smile I hope one day will become real. “Now, I need to start house hunting. Wish me luck, *friend*.” And with a playful wink, I disappear into my room to find a realtor.



“HAVE YOU HAD ANY LUCK FINDING A PLACE YET?” SIENNA ASKS, AS WE wade in the pool at the water park. Because it’s indoors, they keep it at a perfect eighty degrees. We’re both floating on our backs, relaxing with a virgin daiquiri in our hands.

“I have an appointment this week to see a few places.” I take a sip of my drink and glance at Lincoln, who’s chatting with his brother and dad. Unlike his usual businessman attire, today he’s sporting board shorts that are hanging low on his hips, sans shirt.

“Lincoln mentioned that he told you he wants you to live with him.”

“Yeah, but he’s not thinking clearly. We can barely be in the same room as each other without fuck—” I cover my mouth, realizing my error too late, as Sienna scrambles to stand up, her drink falling into the water.

“You what?” she hisses, her gaze flitting between me and Lincoln.

“Nothing,” I choke out, standing as well. “Nothing.” I repeat.

“El, I heard you,” she whisper-yells. “Please don’t lie to me.”

“I—” She arches a brow, daring me to lie, so I switch gears. “It’s not that

I want to lie to you,” I say, glancing at the guys to make sure they’re out of earshot. “But Micah’s your husband, and you don’t keep secrets.”

“You’re my sister,” she says. “Whatever you say, stays between us.”

“I don’t want to put you in that position.”

“You’re not. I don’t tell Micah everything. And I wouldn’t tell him whatever you tell me unless you were in danger or something. You’re not only my sister, but you’re my best friend, and I’ve missed you these past several years. I want you to be able to talk to me. To trust that you can tell me anything. Please, no more secrets.” The hurt on her face has me sighing in defeat.

“Okay, fine. While you guys were quarantined, Lincoln and I...” I clear my throat. “We had sex.”

Her eyes go wide. “So, what? You’re together?”

“No, that’s the thing. He has it in his head that I’m off-limits, so afterward, he regretted it and then began avoiding me.”

“That’s because of Micah,” she says with a frown. “He told Lincoln that you were too young and that he can’t be with you. You were there.”

“Yeah, I know, but that doesn’t mean Micah’s word has to be law.”

“No, but you are several years younger than him.”

I roll my eyes, hating that people take one’s age so seriously. “Age is only just a number,” I point out. “But it doesn’t matter because Lincoln obviously agrees with Micah. And after his constant hot and cold crap, I finally had enough and told him we need to be friends if we want to co-parent. Hence, me needing to find a place to live.”

I glance over at Lincoln and find him staring at me, his gaze burning with desire as he drags his eyes down my bikini clad body. Unlike some women who hide their pregnancy, I love my bump and have no problem sporting it.

“Holy shit,” Sienna murmurs. “He’s practically undressing you with his eyes.”

Because she’s right, and it’s Lincoln’s fault for not hiding his blatant lust for me better, I don’t bother to deny it. “Which is why I need to move out. He may consider me off-limits, but his dick doesn’t agree.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ELLIE



“I’M STARVED. ANY CHANCE WE CAN STOP BY THE MEXICAN PLACE ON THE way home? Oh! Or the sushi place. Mmm...Or Thai.”

Lincoln chuckles from the driver’s side. Since the water park was a bit of a drive, we carpoled because I haven’t gotten a chance to buy my own vehicle yet. I’m putting it off, knowing I’m going to have to buy some sort of mom mobile like Sienna. Well, maybe not as mom-ish, since I’ll only have one baby and she’s about to have her third. “Which one?”

“Huh?”

“Which place,” Lincoln asks. “Mexican, sushi, or Thai?”

“Oh, right. All three?”

I bat my lashes playfully, and he shakes his head.

“Okay, fine. Mexican...No, Thai...No, sushi. Actually! You know what we should totally do?”

I wait for him to play along, and he doesn’t disappoint. “What should we do?”

“Pickup ice cream for dinner!”

Lincoln barks out a laugh. “We just had cake and ice cream at the party.”

When I give him a *so what* look, he chuckles. “Ice cream, it is.”

Ice cream turns into banana splits, and once we have everything we need to make the best ones ever, we head home.

While I’m setting up shop, Lincoln sits at the island and we talk, something we haven’t done much of since everything went down. Sure, we’ve fucked a couple of times, but we haven’t actually had a real

conversation.

“Have you thought about what you want to do after the baby is born?” he asks.

“Like, if I want to work or stay home?” I cut the bananas and place them into the bowls.

“Yeah.”

“I’d like to stay home with him for a while.” Weighing my options is something I’ve given a lot of thought to. But ultimately, my decision came down to one thing. “I spent most of my life home alone,” I tell him while I open the containers of ice cream and scoop it out. “I don’t want that for my baby. If I didn’t have the money I have, if it was necessary for me to work, that would be one thing, but since I can afford to be at home, I want to be there for him. And if I do choose to go to the studio, I can always bring him with me.”

I glance up and find Lincoln smiling softly. “If you didn’t have the money, I’d make sure you could stay home.”

“Because your mom was a stay-at-home mom?” I guess, in a way she still is. Err, or is it a stay-at-home wife? She’s never worked a day in her life and seems to be content with that. She loves her life as a mom and a wife.

“No, if you wanted to work, I would support that decision too. But you’re telling me that what you really want is to stay home with our child, and I don’t care what it takes, I’ll always make sure you and our son have everything you guys want and need.”

His words cause me to choke up, and I look away, using the ice cream as an excuse to avoid eye contact. When I snuffle too loudly, Lincoln asks what’s wrong.

“I’m just glad I’m having this baby with you. I grew up around a lot of bad men and thought that’s how they all were, until I met you and Micah.” I snuffle back my tears. “You guys are a rare breed.”

Lincoln nods in understanding but thankfully lets it go by changing the subject. “So, you’re planning to stay home. What about the studio?”

“Oh, that doesn’t count as work,” I say, pouring the chocolate syrup on top. “Our son will grow up there with his cousins and aunt.” I look up at him. “And if you even think about giving me shit for planning to teach him how to dance...”

Lincoln raises his hands in surrender. “Never crossed my mind. I don’t care if our son wants to play football or dance or join the chess club. As long

as he's healthy and happy, I don't give a shit what he does."

"Good, then we're on the same page." I squirt the whipped cream on top and then hand him his bowl, sitting next to him.

We both take a bite, moaning in unison, which makes us both laugh.

"Now for the tough discussion," he says, glancing over at me. "Baby names."

"Ugh." I take another bite of my food. "I'm going to need some more sugar in me before we go there."

Lincoln laughs. We both take another bite. And that's how we spend our evening. Talking and eating ice cream. It's the most normal thing we've done, and it reminds me of when I was younger, when things between us were simple. Despite the age difference, I'd like to think we were friends. And more than anything, I miss that. Lincoln was always someone I could talk to, and my hope is that someday we can get back to that.



"MORNING, SLEEPYHEAD."

I drag my feet into the kitchen and plop onto the bar stool. "I think I have a hangover."

Lincoln laughs. "I wouldn't doubt it. I told you that third bowl was too much, but you didn't listen."

"Yeah, yeah. I need—" Before I can finish my sentence, Lincoln places a plate of eggs, toast, bacon, and fruit in front of me, along with a cup of coffee.

"Half decaf," he explains, knowing I need and love my morning coffee, but since I'm pregnant, I now take it with only half the caffeine.

"Oh my God," I groan at the sight and smell of the food and drink in front of me. "You are the best baby daddy ever."

Lincoln barks out a laugh. "Remember that when I tell you what name I want for our son."

"Nope," I say, covering my ears. I read the biggest argument couples have is over the name of their baby, and since what you name your child is so important, I don't want to mess this up. Take my name for example—Eliza, named after my psycho bio dad. Or London and Brooklyn, named after where their parents fell in love and renewed their vows. And so because naming our

child is a really huge deal, I'm not ready to discuss it yet, even though Lincoln thinks he has the perfect name. I'm a mood reader, a mood dancer, a mood decision maker. If I'm not in the right mood, this name thing can go either way.

"Fine," he says dryly. "Eat your food. By the way"—he smirks—"see that mango?" He nods toward the pre-cut fruit on my plate. "When it's put together, that's the size of our baby."

I glance at it, then snort out a laugh. "I don't even want to know where you learned that."

"I looked it up. Apparently, there are pregnancy growth charts that compare baby sizes to either fruits or vegetables. According to the fruit chart, next week he'll be the size of a banana."

I stare at him, oddly touched that he's looking up stuff about our baby, and a bit disturbed that people compare them to foods.

"Huh. Thanks for that tidbit of info. Let me know when he's the size of a watermelon. It's my favorite fruit."

"Won't be for a while," he says with a shrug. "Watermelon is the endgame. When he's that size, he'll be ready to come out." Suddenly his eyes go comically wide, as if he's suddenly thought of something.

"What's wrong?" I ask, taking a bite of my delicious bacon.

"Nothing...It's just..." He clears his throat. "How the hell do you think a baby the size of a watermelon slides out of a woman's hole? I mean, I know some women are loose...But take you for example. You can't be more than the size of a lemon. I just don't see how the hell a watermelon is fitting inside of a lemon without causing major damage to both of you."

I'm in the middle of drinking my coffee when he says this, so my drink flies out of my mouth and all over the place.

"Oh my God, Lincoln! Thank you for the visual," I splutter, grabbing a napkin to wipe my mouth. "The hole widens to accommodate the baby. Sometimes there's tearing and it has to be stitched up, but for the most part, the woman's body stretches open for the baby."

Lincoln looks at me, part amazed and part traumatized, and I note not to let him anywhere near my lower half when I give birth.

"Any plans for today?" he asks after a few quiet moments.

I roll my eyes. "You know I'm supposed to be relaxing."

"True," he agrees. "Which is why I got you this."

He pushes a paper across the island, and I pick it up and read it. "A

pregnancy spa day?” I ask. “What’s the occasion?”

“For you to relax.” He smiles sheepishly. “Consider it a belated Mother-To-Be Day gift.”

“You know how much I love the spa here.” Technically, since Lincoln and Micah own the hotel, they also own the spa, but I learned a long time ago that just because you own it, doesn’t mean you don’t have to pay just like everyone else. But cost aside, this was very thoughtful of Lincoln.

“I do,” he agrees. “And I booked it for both you and your sister so you can have a girl’s day, considering it’s been a while since the two of you have had one. Sienna already knows and is excited. My mom’s taking care of Brooklyn and London today since they’re out of school for the summer.”

“Thank you!” I get up and kiss his cheek, then sit back down so I can continue to eat because I’m starved. Maybe this whole friendship thing isn’t so bad after all.



“I CAN’T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I SPENT SO MANY HOURS BEING pampered,” Sienna says as we float out of the spa several hours later, both of us on cloud nine from the treatment we were given. Not only did we get manis, pedis, facials, and pregnancy massages, but we also received fresh haircuts and color. I feel like a new woman.

“Same. I didn’t realize how badly I needed that. Although, is it weird that despite feeling calm, I could totally do with a nap?”

Sienna laughs. “It’s the baby. They suck everything out of you: beauty, energy, sex drive. I could go to sleep and wake up when the baby comes.”

I nod in agreement, not bothering to tell her that beauty and energy I feel on a deep level, but the sex drive...Well, that’s a whole other story. Maybe it’s because I’ve only just recently become sexually active, but I crave it all the damn time. Since I’m almost five months pregnant, and Lincoln isn’t an option, I’m having to resort to the battery-operated toy I recently purchased.

When we get up to our floor, Sienna gives me a hug, telling me that she had a wonderful day, and then we part ways. I might not be too keen on being back in Tesoro, but I’m loving being close with my sister again, and it feels damn good for everything to be out in the open.

The second I walk through the door, I smell the Mexican food, and my

stomach grumbles in anticipation.

“Perfect timing,” Lincoln says, handing me a plate filled with all my favorites. “Figured you’d be hungry.”

“You figured right.” I have a seat on the barstool and start chowing down. “My God, this is so good. Thank you, thank you.”

“Good enough to thank me twice?” he says with a laugh as he sits down next to me.

“I’m thanking you for me and the baby. Trust me, he’s just as happy as I am.”

Lincoln chuckles and reaches over, his hand rubbing my bump. “Is that true, little guy? Do you love Mexican as much as your mama does?”

Him talking to the baby, calling me mama, and touching my belly shouldn’t affect me the way it does, but I can’t help the way my heart pounds against my rib cage, how my tummy tightens, and the area between my legs throb. I’m blaming it on the pregnancy hormones because there’s no way it’s normal to get choked up with emotion and turned on at the same time.

Yep, I need to move out stat, because I can’t see how I’m going to survive living with Lincoln much longer.



“STAINLESS STEEL APPLIANCES, MARBLE FLOORS...” WHEN FRANCO, THE realtor who has been showing me places all afternoon, notices I’m no longer paying attention—instead, focused on the view of downtown Tesoro—he stops rambling and steps next to me. “Not what you’re looking for either?”

I shake my head and wrap my arms around my belly protectively. Franco has shown me several beautiful, expensive, luxurious places, but none of them feel like home. Then again, I’m not sure what home is supposed to feel like. I’ve only had one *true* home my entire life, and it was when I lived with Sienna and Micah. I felt safe and comfortable there. I knew that no matter what went wrong in the outside world, once I was under their roof, between their four walls, I would be okay. And that’s how I want my baby to feel. But none of the homes I’ve seen today give me that same feeling. And if I don’t feel it, how will my baby?

“It’s not you,” I begin, and Franco barks out a laugh.

“Sorry,” he says. “You sound like my ex-girlfriend when she was

preparing to dump me.”

I think about what I said, and once it clicks, I laugh as well. “That’s not what I meant. I just have a certain *type* of place in mind...No, it’s more like I’m seeking a certain *feeling*, and none of these houses have felt like my home yet.”

Franco glances at me and smiles softly. “We can find that place. If it’s available in Tesoro, we can find it. Why don’t we head back to my office and regroup? We can go over what you liked and didn’t like in the places we saw and go from there?”

“Or,” I say, when my belly grumbles in protest, “we can do it over dinner because I’m freaking starved. And my baby agrees.”

Franco chuckles. “We can do that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LINCOLN



“HEY, RITA. I’M MEETING WITH BRODY FIELDS TO DISCUSS THE HOTEL AND casino investment proposal, and I left—” My words come to a halt as my eyes land on Ellie sitting in a booth closest to the entrance of Catch 52, one of the many restaurants that Alexander Enterprises owns. Her head is thrown back in laughter, and her hand is covering her belly—something she does often without realizing it, like she’s worried something will happen to him and she instinctually needs to protect him. She looks breathtaking, and it kills me to know that I can’t have her. That I have to look at her every goddamned day but can’t touch.

I step toward her table, figuring I’ll say hello before my meeting—that’s the friendly thing to do, right?—when I take notice of someone sitting across from her. The person who’s making her laugh. A man.

“Mr. Alexander,” Rita says, confused as to why I stopped speaking mid-sentence.

“I’ll call you back.” I click end on the call and then watch as Ellie and this guy talk and laugh, oblivious to everyone around them, seemingly lost in their own little world. I can’t see the guy’s face because his back is to me, but Ellie’s eyes are shining bright with happiness, something I rarely see on her, and it makes me want to punch something—preferably him. Because he shouldn’t be the one making her happy. That should be me. Only, it can’t, since Ellie remains off-limits. *Fuck, I’m so goddamn sick of those words.*

And then it hits me: she’s on a date.

I’d like to say she’s only doing this to make me jealous, playing games to

get my attention. But she had no idea that I'd be here. This meeting was rescheduled last minute, the location being changed not even thirty minutes ago.

She barks out a melodic laugh that has several patrons glancing in her direction, and it takes everything in me not to yank her from that table and take her away from here.

And then, as if the electric current between us is so strong, her gaze moves to me, her eyes locking with mine. She says something to the guy she's with, offering him a small smile, and then slides out of the booth to come speak to me.

As she saunters my way, I fully take her in. The floral mini dress she's wearing dips low on top, and her already nice-sized breasts—that have grown exponentially thanks to her pregnancy—are spilling out. All I can imagine is placing my lips to the swells of her breasts and kissing and licking her creamy flesh.

She's donning heels that somehow make her tanned, toned legs even sexier. I picture her wrapping those legs around me, her heels digging into my back as I fuck her against the wall.

"Linc," Ellie says, once she's in front of me. "What are you doing here?"

My eyes home in on her plump lips that are covered in pink gloss, and when my brain envisions her wrapping those lips around my cock, I lose my ever-loving shit. That's my only explanation for what I do next.

Without answering her question, I snatch up her hand—even though I'd like to throw her over my shoulder, but she's pregnant, so that can't happen—and drag her toward the back where I know there's a private office.

The manager is sitting behind the desk when we enter, and he stands in alarm at having the owner show up unannounced. "Mr. Alexander —"

"Out! Now," I bark.

He jumps into action, hauling ass out of the office.

The door is barely closed before I'm pushing Ellie against the wall. "You said you weren't going to date while you're pregnant."

Her lips purse and her brows furrow, but I don't wait for an answer, growling "mine," and then start attacking her mouth like a goddamned animal possessed by the woman in front of me. She tastes sweet like pink lemonade and something that's simply her, a taste I can't seem to get enough of as I fuck her mouth.

It takes her a second, but then she's kissing me back as fiercely as I'm

kissing her. Her clothes are ripped off, mine next. And then I'm carrying her over to the desk, setting her down and spreading her thighs open. "You better wrap those sexy heels around my waist, Kitten," I murmur against her mouth. "Because I'm about to show you who you belong to."

She does as I say, and I waste no time, thrusting into her warm cunt that I swear to God was made just for me. She moans in pleasure once I'm all the way in, and I swallow it down, wanting to take and keep everything she gives me.

I'm worked up and know damn well I won't last long, so I reach between us and circle her swollen nub, determined to get her off. Her climax builds quickly, and once she's close, dangling over the precipice, I release her mouth and pull her nipple between my lips, sucking on the hardened peak until she falls over the edge, taking me right along with her.

As we take a moment to catch our breaths, neither of us move—her legs are wrapped around my waist, her heels digging into my back, and I'm still inside her. And then she shocks the hell out of me when she shoves me away.

"What the hell?" I ask, when I stumble back, my wet cock leaking all over the place.

"I should be asking you that!" Ellie sits up and jumps off the desk, collecting her clothes and throwing them on, piece by piece. "One second, I'm in a meeting with my realtor, and the next, you're fucking me on a desk." She puts her dress back on and glares my way.

"Your realtor?" Shit, I totally misread that situation. "I thought you were on a date."

Ellie barks out a laugh, then schools her features. "Wow." She shakes her head. "So this"—she waggles her finger back and forth between us—"was nothing more than a jealousy fuck."

I step toward her, but she retreats, and because I'm still naked, when she hauls ass out the door, I can't follow. I quickly get dressed, but by the time I make it out to the lobby, Ellie is nowhere to be found and Brody Fields has arrived for our meeting.

"Hey, I've been trying to get ahold of you," he says.

"Sorry, I had a bit of an emergency."

"Everything okay?"

"Eh, not really." I shrug. Brody's a family man, so I give it to him straight. "I'm having some woman troubles."

Brody chuckles. "I know all about that. If you need to reschedule..."

“You sure? This isn’t usually how I do business.”

“It’s all good. But when we reschedule, you’re coming down to my neck of the woods.” He extends his hand, and I take it.

“Thank you. She’s pregnant and...”

“Say no more. Good luck, man.”

“Thanks.” I start to head out when Brody calls my name.

“Buy her sweets. Pregnant women love sweets.”

I take his advice and stop at the bakery on my way home. When I arrive, Ellie is nowhere to be found, but since Oscar was outside on security duty, he told me she arrived a little while ago and was visibly upset.

Her door is closed, so I knock, but of course, she ignores me. “Ellie, please, let me in.”

Silence.

I try the knob, but it’s locked.

“C’mon, please. I want to apologize.”

Crickets.

I glance down at the bag in my hand. “I have double chocolate cake.”

Nothing...And then the door swings open, Ellie snatches the bag from me, and then slams the door shut. “Hey!” I yell. “C’mon.” I turn the knob, and it opens. “Can I come in?”

“What were you doing at that restaurant?” She glares. “Were you spying on me?”

“What? Why the hell would I do that? I had an investor meeting scheduled, and we agreed to meet there for dinner.”

“Quick dinner.”

“I rescheduled, so I could chase after you.”

“Whatever,” she mutters, pulling the box of cake out of the bag.

I walk inside and sit on the edge of the bed. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She raises a challenging brow.

“For thinking you were on a date and then acting like a jealous asshole when I have no right to behave that way.”

“And...”

“I’m not going to apologize for taking you on that desk.” I smirk playfully, and she rolls her eyes.

“We’re supposed to be *friends*, Linc.”

“What if I want to be more?”

Her brows kiss her forehead. “What...What are you saying?”

“I’m saying...” I snatch the box out of her hands, setting it on the nightstand, and then push her back, crawling carefully over her and settling on her legs. “I want you, Kitten. Ever since we spent the night together at Elite, you’ve owned every one of my damn thoughts and fantasies.” I press my lips to hers, nipping her bottom lip playfully. “Tell me I can have you.”

“Linc,” she sighs, sounding as if she’s going to tell me no, but when I trail kisses along her jawline, she tilts her head so I can run my nose along the curve of her neck, inhaling her sweet vanilla scent.

“You smell so good.” I press my lips on her heated flesh and suck on it, eliciting a moan from her. “Tell me, baby. Tell me I can have you.”

When she sighs in defeat, I can feel it...She’s about to give in. And then she lifts her shirt over her head, exposing her luscious tits, and I know I have her. I was just in her less than an hour ago, but my cock is already hard.

“Fuck, yes. These tits are mine,” I murmur, taking her nipple into my mouth and sucking on it so hard that it draws a loud moan out of her, which makes my cock that much harder.

I suck on her other nipple, then move down to her belly, giving it a kiss. “This baby you’re carrying is mine.” I glance up and find her staring at me, her emerald eyes filled with heat.

“And this pussy...” I rip her panties clean off her and spread her thighs, then run my tongue straight up her center. “This pussy is all mine.” I suck on her clit, then glance back up at her. “Tell me, Kitten. Tell me you’re mine.”

She stares at me for several seconds, and I worry she’s going to deny it, but instead, she nods. “I’m yours.”

Those two words stir something deep inside of me. I have no idea what I’m doing or where this is going. All I know is that I want to make this woman mine. Maybe I’m selfish and irresponsible to take what I know I shouldn’t have, but I’ll deal with the fallout later. Because right now, all I want is her.



MY PHONE GOING OFF JARS ME AWAKE, AND WHEN I OPEN MY EYES, I FIND Ellie curled into a gorgeous ball against my side, snoring softly. I grab my phone, careful not to jostle and wake her up, and see it’s still early. My thoughts go back to the way she screamed my name repeatedly last night and

into this morning.

Ellie sighs and snuggles closer to me, reminding me that we fell asleep naked when she slides her leg over mine and the heat from her bare cunt warms my flesh.

I'm debating whether to pull her on top of me so we can have morning sex, when my phone goes off again—the entire reason why I woke up in the first place. Fuck, it's so easy to get lost in this woman.

Before I can click on the message, my phone rings. Not wanting to wake Ellie up, I gently slide out from under her and answer the call once I'm in the hall and her door is shut.

“Jesus, fucking finally,” Micah barks. “I was about to come bang on your damn door.”

“Sorry, I was —”

“Doesn't matter. Ricky called. Two of your women were left for dead last night. One died, but one survived.”

“My women?” I ask, confused as hell, since the only woman on my mind is sleeping in the bed under my roof.

“Issa and Olga.”

Fuck, he's referring to two of my dancers who also work at the sex club. “What the fuck happened and why wasn't I called?” I bark. “Where are they now?” I rush to get dressed. The women who work at my club know they're safe. This never should've happened.

“He called me because I'm his point of contact.”

“They're my girls! What the hell did he do to them?”

“It wasn't Ricky. I'm leaving to speak to him now.”

“I'll meet you in the garage.”

“Issa didn't make it,” Micah says once I get into his SUV. “Olga did, but she's in rough shape. Ricky has her at his place with a private doctor.”

“What the fuck happened?”

“That's what we're about to find out.”

When we get to Ricky's, we're patted down, and Micah's asked to leave his gun with security. He glares but obeys, and then we're brought back to Ricky's office.

“Stay calm,” Micah says before we enter. “If Ricky did this, he wouldn't have contacted me.”

“Gentleman,” Ricky says, standing to shake our hands.

“What the fuck is going on?” I ask, getting straight to the point, because

screw staying calm.

“From what I’ve gathered, the women were hired for a private party. Two of my men were invited...Friends of friends.” He shrugs. “When they got there, the women were being fucked in every hole. Nothing unusual for that type of party. But then they noticed the women were tied up and crying, begging to be let go. Both high as kites.”

“They don’t do drugs.” I have the girls tested on a regular basis. “Who did this?” I growl, my entire body vibrating with anger.

“According to Olga...You.”

“What?” I bark, standing so abruptly, my chair flies backward.

“I’m not saying you did this,” Ricky states calmly. “But whoever did, wanted the women to think you were hosting a party and invited them to attend. They showed up and quickly realized you weren’t there, but it was too late. They were tortured and fucked and then beaten and left for dead at the marina.”

“Who found them?” Micah asks.

“My men followed them.”

“And the guys who dropped them off?” I ask.

“We’re looking for them now. They took off after dumping the bodies while my guys were focused on saving the women.”

I nod in appreciation. “Did they hear anything at the party? Who might be responsible for this?”

“Only your name was mentioned, but I’m looking into it. I don’t find it to be a coincidence that my men were invited to a party they thought you were hosting only weeks after my shipment was ambushed and our men were killed.”

“Fuck,” Micah hisses. “Someone is trying to fuck with us. Possibly pit us against each other.”

“Anyone come to mind who might hate you?” Ricky asks. “Normally, I’d say it’s business-related, but leaving two women for dead on your doorstep? That screams personal.”

“No damn clue,” Micah tells him, “but we’re going to find out.”

“And when we do, whoever is fucking with us is dead,” I add, because Ricky is right, this shit just got personal. It’s one thing to fuck with us and our business, but to go after two innocent women. Fuck that.

After discussing this a bit more, Ricky takes us to see Olga, who’s barely awake, but who will thankfully—according to the doctor—make a full

recovery.

“It goes without saying that I’ll cover all of this,” I tell Ricky, referring to the cost of the doctor and making sure Olga is taken care of. I’ll also be contacting Issa’s family to cover the cost of her funeral expenses.

“I need to hold a meeting at the club,” I tell Micah once we’re back in the vehicle. “Those women never should’ve agreed to a private party outside of Elite or Wanderlust.”

“I’m putting extra security on Sienna and the girls,” Micah says.

Speaking of which...Micah’s phone, which is hooked up to Bluetooth, goes off, and he clicks answer. “Hellcat, everything okay?” I can hear the worry in his voice. This has shaken him up. Before he became a family man, shit like this would’ve gotten his adrenaline rushing, but since Sienna and his daughters, he works hard to make sure this type of stuff doesn’t happen so his family isn’t placed at risk.

“Yeah, you left without waking me up.” I can practically hear the pout in her voice.

“I’m sorry,” he tells her. “Some shit hit the fan at work, and Lincoln and I had to go deal with it.”

“Oh, Lincoln’s with you? Perfect! Your parents want to meet for brunch. I’ll text you the location. We’re on our way, and Ellie’s meeting us there too.”

“Okay, baby. See you soon.”

I chuckle over the fact that she doesn’t even ask, just demands, and Micah doesn’t argue. Simply agrees. I used to think it was because he was pussy-whipped, but now, I’m starting to get it. He loves Sienna and wants to see her happy. He’s not pussy-whipped—his wife owns his heart. All these years, I didn’t understand it. Couldn’t imagine a woman ruling my every move. But now, when I do something that makes Ellie happy, and she hits me with that beautiful smile, I absolutely get it. Because that’s all I want—for Ellie to be happy.

Fuck, Ellie! I left without letting her know. I consider calling her, but then I glance over at Micah and change my mind. We’re going to need to have a conversation about Ellie and me, but now isn’t the time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ELLIE



I WAKE UP TO AN EMPTY BED AND A SORE BODY—THANKS TO BEING thoroughly fucked—and sigh, wondering when I became such a pushover. I blame Lincoln. I’ve been in love with him for so long that I allow my feelings for him to cloud my judgement. Any other guy playing this hot and cold game would’ve been thrown to the curb, but when Lincoln goes all caveman and demands I’m his, I turn into a puddle of Jell-O. I should be stronger than that, demand that he stop playing games, but the expert way he works my body is enough to drive me to stupidity. I’m calling it dick brain. Lincoln fills me with his dick, and I turn into a dumbass.

My phone pings with a text, and when I open it, I find a message from Sienna asking to meet everyone for brunch. I don’t know who everyone is, but I’m assuming she’s referring to her and my nieces, so when I show up at the restaurant she messaged, I’m confused to find Donna and Michael there as well.

“Hey, sis!” Sienna says, getting up to give me a hug—well, as much of one that she can give with both of us being pregnant. “The guys are on their way.” Hmm, nice of Lincoln to let me know.

She pulls back and looks down at my belly and grins. “You seriously have the cutest bump. Why can’t mine be this adorable?”

“Oh my God.” I roll my eyes. “Yours is adorable. You’re just almost eight months along, while I’m barely half-baked.”

“How are you feeling?” Donna asks. It’s been a little awkward with Michael since they found out I was expecting Lincoln’s baby, but Donna has

been sweet, texting me to make sure I'm okay.

"I'm good," I tell her, walking over and giving her a kiss on her cheek before I sit down. Sienna sits on one side, with Brooklyn and London on each side of her. So, I leave the chair open for Micah to sit with his family and sit on the other side between Donna and the empty seat.

We're just ordering drinks when the guys stroll in, intense expressions on their faces.

They stop at their dad first to give him a hug and then their mom, both of them kissing her on her cheek. I hold my breath as Lincoln scans the table for an empty seat, hoping that the things he said last night weren't just his jealousy and dick talking, but when he strolls past me without so much as a hello, while Micah gives Sienna a kiss that rivals those in the romance books I read, my heart cracks.

He orders a drink, then turns his attention on me. "How are you feeling?"

"Cold," I mutter, sounding as bitter as I feel.

"Do you need a jacket?" he asks, already moving to remove his like the perfect gentleman he is.

"No," I bite out, then take a sip of my coffee.

"Hey, Lincoln," Micah says from across the table. "How did the meeting go with Brody yesterday?"

"I had to reschedule," Lincoln tells him.

"What? You've had that meeting scheduled for months. You told me you'd handle it. He's a major player —"

"Something came up," Lincoln says, cutting him off. "He understood."

"What the hell came up that had you blowing off Fields?"

Lincoln opens his mouth, then closes it, and it hits me that the meeting he blew off to chase after me yesterday is the one they're talking about.

"There was an issue at the club," he lies.

It's not that I expected him to go into full detail about what happened between us in front of everyone, but the way he flat out lies makes me feel like I'm his dirty secret. Like he gets off on fucking me behind closed doors, but I'm not good enough to be anything more than that.

My thoughts take me back to high school when I went on a study date with Jameson, a kid from my school. I thought maybe he was interested in me, but he was only interested in fucking me. Told me that I was the type of girl guys fucked, not dated. It didn't matter that I was living in Micah's expensive hotel and attending an elite art school, I was still the poor girl from

Booker Park. Lincoln sat with me and told me that guy was wrong, yet here we are, years later, and he's fucking me in secret, embarrassed to tell his family about me.

Maybe Jameson was right...

Needing to escape before I start crying, I quickly mutter an excuse about needing to use the bathroom and take off toward the restroom.

I've barely made it there, when arms gently wrap around me from behind.

"Let me go!" I yell, already knowing from the scent that it's Lincoln.

"Stop, please," he says, spinning me around and pushing me against the wall. "I'm sorry."

"You seem to be saying that a lot lately," I say dryly, sniffing back my tears. "I don't even know why you followed me."

"Because I could tell you were upset."

"Yeah, well, now your family might think you actually care about me, and we know you don't want that." I glance to my left and nod toward the women's restroom. "Hey, look...If we're quick, you can fuck me in there and make it back out before we need to order, and nobody will ever know."

"Kitten, please stop," he murmurs, pressing his forehead against mine. "I didn't want to lie, but —"

"Auntie Ellie!"

"What the hell is going on here?"

"Ohhh, Daddy, you said a bad word!"

We both jump and glance over, finding Micah and Brooklyn standing in the hall.

"Brooklyn, go use the bathroom," Micah bites out.

Once Brooklyn has disappeared into the bathroom, he asks, "What's going on?"

I wait for Lincoln to answer, refusing to lie and hoping he won't either, but when he says, "It's complicated," my heart shatters.

"Actually, it's not," I tell Lincoln, fed up with his shit. "You and me, we're done. Done fucking, done living together, and done being *friends*. There, now it's *uncomplicated*."

Pushing him away, I take off out the back door, needing to get some fresh air. It's a beautiful day out, so I chose to walk here since the restaurant was close. After rounding the corner of the building, I step onto the sidewalk to head back to the hotel.

I'm pulling my phone out of my back pocket to let Sienna know I left

when someone bumps into me. I'm not expecting it, so I stumble to the side, trying to catch my balance. But before I can, I'm shoved again, this time harder.

"Ow," I hiss, unsure what is happening. In a flash, someone grips my bicep tightly, shoving me toward the street. Just then, my name is called, and when I try to turn to see who it is, I'm catapulted forward, losing my footing in the process. In an attempt to protect my belly, I twist my body, praying I land on my side. My butt hits the cement first, and for a split second, I think I'm going to be okay. But the force is too strong, and I bounce off the ground, my head smacking against the concrete. Then, everything suddenly goes black.

As I lose consciousness, my last thought is that I hope my baby is okay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LINCOLN



THE SECOND THE WORDS *IT'S COMPLICATED* COME FLYING OUT OF MY MOUTH, I want to take them back, but it's too late, and now I need to do damage control. But before I can try to explain to Micah what's going on, Ellie snaps on me, telling me we're done, and then takes off out the back door.

"Fuck!" I bark, knowing I messed up. I wasn't expecting to have a goddamn family gathering the morning after telling Ellie I want more with her. I thought we'd discuss shit further once I got back, and then shortly afterward, I'd sit down and have a conversation with my brother and parents.

"What the hell is going on?" Micah asks. "Are you fucking Ellie?"

The door slams closed, and I run after Ellie. I can deal with Micah later. Right now, she needs to be my priority.

When I get outside, the brightness of the morning momentarily blinds me, but my vision adjusts just in time to see Ellie turn the corner. The hotel is only a couple blocks away, so she must've walked here. I pick up my pace so I can catch up with her, and when I turn the corner, I spot her on the sidewalk, only she isn't alone.

My first thought is that she ordered a ride, since the black town car's door is open, but when I get closer, I see the hooded figure isn't helping her into the car but dragging her toward it. And he's got company. Another hooded figure is standing by the door, and someone else is in the driver seat.

She screams out in pain, confirming my thoughts: they're trying to kidnap her. I yell out her name, hoping to get her attention. Only instead, it gets the attention of her would-be captors. The guy holding onto Ellie shoves her in

the opposite direction, and since I'm not close enough to catch her, I can only watch helplessly as she stumbles backward, her body hitting the ground while her head bounces against the cement like she's on a trampoline and not the hard, unforgiving sidewalk.

As I watch the guys who did this pile into their car and peel away, my gut tells me to chase them down so I can torture the fuck out of them until they tell me why they were going after Ellie. Then, slowly and mercilessly, I would end their lives. But with Ellie lying on the ground unconscious, both her and our baby at risk, I have no choice but to focus on getting help.

"Ellie, baby, can you hear me?" I ask once I've reached her. "Ellie, please," I beg, needing her beautiful eyes to open and look at me, for her to tell me she's okay.

When she doesn't respond, I pull my phone out and dial emergency. As I explain to the dispatcher our location and the situation, I run my hand along Ellie's face and body, trying to check her out without moving her. Thankfully, when she fell, she landed on her back, but that also means she hit the back of her head.

Once I hang up with the dispatcher, who assures me that an ambulance is en route, I dial Micah's number.

"Are you coming back —?"

"Ellie's hurt!" I bark out. "Meet us at the hospital."

There are a few different hospitals in Tesoro, but in this part of town, there's only one they would take her to.

There's a crowd forming around Ellie, who's yet to wake up, but I ignore them, focusing on trying to comfort her until the ambulance arrives. I've never felt so damn helpless in my life.

When the paramedics finally show and check her out, her lids flutter, and I pray to whatever God is up there that Ellie and our baby will be okay. After placing a neck brace on her, they work together to lift her onto a gurney, while one of them asks me questions. I only know so much, but their main focus is on her pregnancy.

Since there isn't enough room in the back of the ambulance, they offer to let me ride in the front, but I opt to drive myself instead, so I'm not at the hospital without a vehicle. I arrive right behind them, but I'm stopped from entering the emergency entrance, so I walk around to the front where Sienna and Micah—and Sienna's bodyguard, Ricardo—are already waiting.

"What the fuck did you do to my sister?" Sienna shouts, tears streaming

down her cheeks as she throws herself at me, punching my chest repeatedly until Micah pulls her away.

“Someone tried to take her,” I tell her honestly, not having the time or inclination to filter what I say to keep from scaring her. Between what transpired earlier this morning and having just witnessed Ellie’s near abduction, Sienna needs to know what we’re up against.

“If I hadn’t shown up…” I swallow hard, not wanting to think about what would’ve happened had I not gotten there in time. “When I called her name, they got spooked. The guy dragging her to the car, pushed her, and she lost her balance and fell.”

“Did you recognize them?” Micah asks, his face devoid of any emotion. He’s in boss-mode.

“No. There were three guys, all in black hoodies that hid their faces, driving a black town car. I was too focused on Ellie to chase them.”

Micah immediately pulls his phone out and starts barking orders, demanding the cameras to be accessed and to find the guys who did this. As he does, he holds Sienna, comforting her so she’ll calm down. With her only a couple of months away from giving birth, the last thing she should be is stressed.

Micah hangs up and dials again. “I need a team to go to my parents’ and stand guard. My kids go nowhere. I don’t know who is fucking with us, so we trust no one.”

“I don’t understand what is happening,” Sienna says once he’s hung up.

“I don’t know yet,” Micah says, lifting her chin and kissing her softly. “But we’ll figure it out.”

Sienna nods and then turns her attention on me. “She wouldn’t have left if you hadn’t upset her. What did you say to her?”

“Hellcat,” Micah begins, but I shake my head because she’s not wrong.

“No, she’s right. I fucked up, and if something’s happened to her or the baby…” I choke out, the reality of the situation hitting me like a tidal wave.

I did this.

I was so focused on right and wrong, on what my family would think, I kept her at arm’s length instead of embracing my feelings for her. I knew the moment I found out she was the woman from the club, I wanted her, but I was stuck on the fact that she was also the same *teenage girl* who once had a crush on me.

“What happened?” Sienna asks.

“I’m falling in love with her,” I admit out loud for the first time.

“You’re what?” Micah barks. “I told you that Ellie is off-limits.”

“No, she’s not,” I argue, done with those fucking words. “*Teenage* Ellie was off-limits, but twenty-two-year-old Ellie is a consenting adult.”

“We agreed,” Micah seethes.

“We didn’t agree to shit,” I counter.

“She’s still a fucking kid!” he shouts.

“She’ll always feel that way to you,” Sienna says, “because you see her as a little sister. The girl who grew up under your roof. You helped raise and protect her. But she’s not a kid. She hasn’t been for a long time.”

“She’s fourteen years younger than him!” Micah barks.

“So what?” Sienna argues. “I’m eight years younger than you. Who cares as long as my sister is happy? He didn’t go after her when she was fourteen. You were there, and you know damn well Lincoln never crossed any boundaries. Don’t turn this into something sleazy when it’s not. Ellie was twenty-one and a consenting adult when Lincoln saw her as anything more. She’s the one who made the choice to seek him out. And can you blame her? Your brother is one of the best men I know, besides you.”

Her words cause a lump of emotion to settle in my throat, and I have to force it down in order to speak. “I tried to stay away from her,” I tell Micah. “After I found out she was my mystery woman, despite knowing how attracted I was to her, I tried to stay away. But then I spent time with her...And fuck, bro, chemistry aside, how could anyone not fall in love with her? I love her being in my home, occupying my space. I’ve never been inclined to converse with a woman, but when I’m with her, I don’t want the conversation to end.”

My thoughts go to her calling me out on my shit when I fucked her on the desk after thinking she was on a date. Doing yoga in the living room. Lying out by the pool. The way she reads about her pregnancy and focuses on our baby all the time. She wants so badly to be a good mom...To be nothing like her own. She’s constantly rubbing her belly and talking to him, so completely in love with our son already. What she doesn’t get is that she’s already a better mom than the woman who gave birth to her.

Visions of our future flash in front of me: Late nights in bed, talking, making love. Family trips. Sharing a home, creating memories. Ellie in a white dress, walking down the aisle toward me. Pregnant with more of my babies...

Fuck, they have to be okay.

“You really are falling for her,” Sienna says with a watery smile.

“And you’re really okay with that?” Micah asks.

“I am,” she says, “because my fully-capable sister deserves to fall in love, to be cared for and cherished. Falling in love with you was the best thing to ever happen to me”—fresh tears fill her lids—“and if Lincoln can love her the way you love me, why would I not support them? If he’s capable of being the hands-on dad you are to our girls, of creating the kind of life with Ellie that we share...Why wouldn’t I want that for my sister? Who cares if he’s older, if he’s your brother? My sister deserves to be fucking happy.” Tears skate down her cheeks, and Micah swipes them away.

“If you hurt her...” Sienna says to me.

“If she gives me another chance after today, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure she’s never fucking hurt again. Everything you said...I want that with her.” I glance at Micah. “I don’t need your permission or approval, but as my brother, as my best friend, I’d really like your blessing.”

It takes him a minute of staring me down before he nods once. “Then you have it. Just don’t fuck it up, because you might be my brother, but I’ll kill any motherfucker who hurts Ellie.”

“Good, then we’re on the same page,” I tell him. “Because I plan to do the same...Starting with whoever is responsible for putting her in this fucking hospital.”



CONCUSSION.

Medically induced coma.

Monitoring for bleeding.

I’m trying to listen as the doctor discusses Ellie’s diagnosis and what they’ve done to ensure she’ll be okay, but it’s hard to focus when all I want is to see Ellie with my own eyes, to pull her into my arms and hold her, to check that she’s okay for myself.

“And the baby?” Sienna asks nervously.

“As of right now, the baby is stable. We’re going to monitor them both for the next few days as we slowly wake her,” he says, and I sigh in relief. They’re both okay. She’ll need more time to recover, to heal, but they’re

okay. “If you have any questions, I’ll be back around once they move her to a private room.”

“Raze is already here, ready to guard the room,” Micah says once the doctor has left. “They’ll do shifts. Nobody is getting near her.”

I nod, thankful my brother can handle shit under pressure because right now I can’t think about anything other than getting to Ellie and our baby.

The next couple of days are spent watching Ellie sleep. They’re monitoring her and the baby closely, so we can hear the baby’s heartbeat, which is definitely reassuring, but what I really want is for Ellie to wake up so I can start making shit right. After running tests, the doctor tells us that Ellie is out of the woods, so he lowers her meds, which means she can wake up any time.

And then, in the middle of the night, her emerald eyes open, and it feels like I’m finally able to take my first real breath. She coughs lightly, and I hand her a cup of water. She takes it from me, and while she sips on it, I buzz the nurse, who says she’ll get the doctor.

While we wait, I tell her the baby is okay, and she nods, giving away no emotion. I have no idea where her head is at, until the doctor comes in and asks her a bunch of questions: What’s her name? Her date of birth? What’s the month and year? And then...

“Do you know why you’re in the hospital?”

“Yes,” she says, her voice still devoid of all emotion. “I hit my head.”

I assume that’s all she remembers, and I’m prepared to explain it further, but when the doctor leaves—after letting her know that she and the baby are doing well and will be discharged in a couple of days as long as nothing changes—before I can even speak, Ellie glances over at me and says, “I want you to leave, too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ELLIE



“HEY, CAN I COME IN?” SIENNA ASKS FROM THE DOORWAY, OBVIOUSLY BEING careful since I just kicked Lincoln out, refusing to let him explain anything to me.

“Of course.” I force a smile on my face, and she nods, walking in and letting the door shut behind her.

“How are you feeling?” she asks, sitting in the chair next to me.

“Like I hit my head on the concrete.”

She waits for me to indicate I’m joking, and when I don’t, she sighs. “Ellie...”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I close my eyes, refusing to let the stupid traitorous tears fall.

“We need to discuss it. Someone obviously tried to abduct you.”

At her words, my lids pop open, my mind confused. I assumed she wanted to discuss Lincoln and me...“What are you talking about?”

“When you fell...Do you remember what happened?”

“Lincoln upset me, and after telling him off, I left. While I was walking down the street, I ran into someone.” I try to remember exactly what happened, but it is all a blur. One minute, I was heading toward the hotel and the next...

“The man you ran into was planning to kidnap you,” Sienna says. “It wasn’t a coincidence that you bumped into him. He followed you to the restaurant and was waiting for you. What he wasn’t expecting was for you to leave early or for Lincoln to follow you out. He seized the opportunity and

grabbed you, trying to shove you into the car, but Lincoln called your name, so the guy pushed you in order to get away. You lost your balance and fell, hitting your head.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Micah had the surveillance cameras pulled. They’re trying to figure out who was trying to abduct you and why.”

I take a moment to absorb what my sister is telling me. For years, after Eleazar died, I constantly looked over my shoulder, afraid someone would come after me. Worried those same people might go after my sister and nieces. It felt too easy to simply tear down Eleazar’s illegal businesses, liquidate his assets, and keep the clean money—donating the dirty.

It wasn’t until I moved across the country that I felt like the chains shackled to me loosened slightly. I started moving forward with my life. Trying to find my way in this world. And now, not only am I finally living, but thanks to Lincoln, I’ve been able to move past my intimacy issues.

I can’t let my past catch up to me, hold me down, and restrain me once again. I refuse to go back to being the woman I was. I’m finally free, and I won’t have that freedom taken away.

I glance down at my baby bump and stroke it gently. Now, not only do I have myself to protect, but also my baby, and I’ll be damned if I let anything happen to him.

“El?” Sienna saying my name snaps me out of my thoughts. “Micah and Lincoln are going to find whoever is responsible and make sure they never touch you again.”

On the outside, I nod and force a smile, but underneath, my heart is pounding in my chest. Unfortunately, with the monitors hooked up to me, as my blood pressure rises, the beeping increases.

Sienna notices. “Ellie, calm down, please. I promise everything will be okay.”

“I know,” I lie. “But you can’t blame me for being worried. I have a baby to protect. And what if whoever this is goes after you and the girls?”

I need to get out of here. Get as far away from this town as possible. Away from my family and disappear. I have enough money to make it happen.

“Don’t worry about us,” Sienna says. “Micah is handling it. He would never let anything happen to us. What can I do for you? You shouldn’t be stressed.”

“Can you find my purse?” I choke out, a plan forming in my head. It will suck doing what I need to do, but it’s the only way I can ensure everyone I love is safe.

“Umm, sure.” She walks over to the cabinet and pulls it out. “I grabbed it when we left the restaurant.”

“Thank you. It has my phone in it, and I’m sure Raelyn will be worried since she hasn’t heard from me.” Despite us being long distance, we still chat every day.

I take my purse from Sienna and quickly discover my phone is dead. Thankfully, there’s a charger plugged into the wall, so I set my phone up to charge.

“I’m actually really tired,” I tell Sienna. “I think I’m going to take a nap.”

“Oh, okay.” She forces a smile. “I’ll come back later to check on you.”

“Sounds good.” I fake a yawn.

“I love you, El. And I’m so glad you’re home. We’ll get through this together.”

Emotion clogs my airway, so I simply nod in response, then choke out, “I love you too.”

Sienna stares at me for several seconds, then sighs. With a kiss to my forehead and another *I love you*, she leaves.

Once she’s gone, I grab my phone and start working on my escape plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LINCOLN



“HOW’S SHE DOING?”

“Okay. Quiet as usual,” Sienna says with a shrug. “She’s being discharged in the morning and asked me to bring her some clean clothes.”

“Did she say where she’s going?”

“No. I haven’t asked. I’m assuming to my place since she hasn’t settled on a home yet.”

I scrub my hands over my face in frustration, unsure what the hell to do. It’s been two days since Ellie woke up and demanded I leave. I only know she and the baby are okay because Sienna gives me updates. But they’re not enough. I need to see her, speak to her. I need a fucking chance to make this right.

“I know this sucks, but right now, the focus has to be on her remaining stress-free and safe.”

“I know. Everything just feels like it’s so fucked right now.” The men who went after Ellie have disappeared, and despite having access to the cameras, they were smart and covered their tracks. Our guys are still searching for answers, but as of now, we’ve got nothing. All I want is to wrap Ellie up in my arms and keep her safe. I want to tell her how I really feel and beg her for a chance to see where things go with us. But until she agrees to see me, there’s nothing I can do or say to make anything right.

“The doctor said she and the baby are both doing great, and the guards will keep her safe,” Sienna says. “Just give her time.” She reaches out and squeezes my arm. “I’m going home to make dinner. Why don’t you come

home with me and eat with us?”

I open my mouth to say no, but before I can get a word out, she adds, “And before you say no, I wasn’t really asking. Let’s go.” She hooks her arm in mine. “You need a home-cooked meal and a shower. Tomorrow, Ellie will be discharged, and we’ll figure this all out.”



“BOSS, WE HAVE A PROBLEM,” OSCAR SAYS THROUGH THE PHONE, AND MY blood goes cold. He’s on guard duty tonight, which means whatever he’s about to say is regarding Ellie. “She took off.”

“What do you mean she took off?” I ask slowly, trying hard not to freak the fuck out.

“The doctor came by to check on her, and when he left, I heard him tell the nurse he’s discharging her early. I assumed someone knew and would soon be by to pick her up and take her home. But she was alone when the nurse came back a little while later with a wheelchair and escorted her to the door. By the time I realized what was going on, she was getting into a town car and taking off. Deandre is tracking the vehicle now.”

Fuck. This makes no sense. Where the hell is she going? “Once he has a location, send it to me, and stay on her. I’m leaving now.”

Snatching my keys off the counter, I fly out the door, cursing myself for not putting a location tracker on Ellie’s phone.

I’m just getting into my car when Deandre sends me the location. I don’t know where she’s headed, but I input it into my navigation so I can follow it. About thirty minutes into the drive, I catch up to the car and know exactly where he’s taking her. Sure enough, fifteen minutes later, my thoughts are confirmed when Ellie gets out of the vehicle and walks across the tarmac and up the steps of a private plane.

Without giving it a chance to take off without me, I jump out of my car and run after her. The flight attendant looks like she wants to stop me, but the glare I hit her with has her eyes widening as she backs up.

The second I step onto the luxurious plane, my gaze collides with Ellie, and she looks a mixture of scared and pissed.

“Get off!” she yells, going with pissed.

“Not without you.” I step toward her.

“Did you seriously have me followed?”

“Did you think we’d leave you at the hospital alone? There’s been a guard protecting you ‘round the clock since you were brought in. He saw you take off and followed you here.”

As soon as I’m standing in front of Ellie, I kneel so we’re at the same level. “Where are you going, Kitten?” I ask gently.

Tears fill her lids. “Don’t call me that,” she mutters, “and away from here.”

“Without saying goodbye to your sister and nieces? You know Sienna is going to worry.”

“I…” She swallows thickly and snuffles back a sob. “I have to protect them.”

“By leaving?”

A tear slides down her cheek, and I reach out, gently wiping it away. The sight of her crying has my stomach roiling. Ellie is one of the strongest people I know, an expert at hiding any signs of weakness, so to see her showing emotion is rare.

“By disappearing,” she whispers, and then it hits me. She’s hoping whoever came after her will leave Sienna alone if she’s gone. And by disappearing, she’s protecting herself and our baby.

“Oh, Ellie.” I sit next to her and pull her toward me, cupping her cheek. “Don’t do this, please. Let me protect you. I promise I’ll keep you and our son safe.”

“It’s pointless now anyway,” she mutters. “You found me.”

“Yeah, I did, and I always will,” I vow. “But I don’t control you, and I would never lock you up. If you want to run, you have the money to do so. So, I’m asking you not to. We can figure this out together. Trust me.”

“You hurt me,” she says softly, her accusation cracking my damn heart. “And now I don’t know if I can.”

“Baby, no,” I plead, locking eyes with her. “I know I fucked up, but I need you to give me a chance to make this right.”

“It’s too late,” she says stubbornly. “My only concern now is my baby.” Her hand goes to her belly protectively, and I know I need to take a step back. Ellie’s hurt and scared, and I can’t force myself on her right now. I need to take it one step at a time.

“Okay, but this baby”—I place my hand over hers—“is *ours*, and even though you’re upset with me and can’t trust me with your heart, you know

you can trust me to protect him. Please, at least come home with me so I can protect you both. Running away isn't going to fix this. Whoever is after you also wants to fuck with Micah and me."

"What do you mean?"

"We think the same people who tried to abduct you are also responsible for the shipment that was ambushed and stolen."

"The one that killed Bruno?"

"Yeah. And the morning I left you in bed..." Her lips turn down into a frown, and it takes everything in me not to kiss away her sadness. "I left in a rush because two of my dancers were attacked at a private party that they thought I was hosting. One of them was killed."

Ellie gasps, having had no clue because Sienna kept it quiet, not wanting to stress her out. And while I agree with her logic, I also think she needs to know how serious this is and that whoever is responsible isn't only going after her—they're coming for us all.

Thankfully, Ellie lets me take her back to my place, but once we're there, she shuts herself in her room, claiming to be tired, when really, she's just trying to avoid me. But I accept it for now, content with knowing she's under my roof and safe.

After I call Micah and Sienna to let them know everything that transpired—and promise Sienna she can visit tomorrow—I knock on Ellie's door to check on her. She might not want anything to do with me, but she hit her head less than a week ago, so she isn't going to stop me from making sure she's okay.

When she doesn't answer, I try the doorknob. It turns, so I peek in, finding her curled into a ball asleep. The last time I saw her in this bed was the night we spent together before brunch. The side I fell asleep on is empty, and I probably shouldn't do it, but I kick my shoes off and climb into the bed, maintaining a little space between us.

Only she must sense my presence because she cracks a single eye open. "I told you to go away," she murmurs groggily.

"I know." I brush a few wayward strands of hair out of her face. "But I had to make sure this is real."

"What?" she asks, opening both eyes and furrowing her brow.

"That you're here, under my roof. Alive and safe." I swallow, and the ball of emotion gets caught in my throat. "When I saw you fall..." I release a harsh breath, unable to hold back my emotions. "You were so still, lifeless. I

thought you were dead.” I palm her face, needing to feel her warm flesh. “I don’t want to live in a world where you’re not in it, Ellie. I’m falling in love with you.”

I didn’t plan to say those words, but the second they’re out, I realize I don’t regret them in the slightest. I knew I was falling for her, but the truth is, I’ve already fallen hard.

“Lincoln,” she breathes, “you can’t say stuff like that. It’s not fair.”

“Why? It’s the truth.”

“You’re only saying that because you thought I was dead.”

“No, I’m saying it because I do.” I bridge the gap between us and run my hand down her curves to her ass, then pull her toward me. “I love you, kitten, and I know it’s hard for you to believe me since I managed to fuck everything up. I allowed societal views and my brother’s disapproval to get inside my head and dictate my actions. But I don’t give a shit about our age difference. I felt the pull between us on Valentine’s Day, and it’s only grown stronger since then.”

“That’s just chemistry,” she argues, refusing to make shit easy on me. But I’m okay with that because she deserves to have someone fight for her.

“Part of it, yeah. But I also love the friendship we’ve been developing. I love the way you fiercely protect the one’s you care about. The way you already love our baby.”

I cup the side of her face, and when she leans into it and sighs, my hope is renewed that she’s going to forgive me. “You’ve been through some major shit in your life, but instead of letting it keep you down, you’ve risen. You’re the strongest person I know.”

“My sister used to say that men are good with pretty words, but it’s their actions that show who they really are. If you want something between us, you’re going to need to show me.”

“Okay.” I nod in understanding. “I will. But since it’s late, and we’re both exhausted, I was hoping I could just hold you and our baby tonight. I almost lost you both.”

She stares at me for several moments before she turns her back on me. I assume that’s her way of telling me it’s not happening, but then she reaches back and grabs my hand, pulling my arm around her and placing it on her protruding belly. She snuggles against me, and I lay my head on the pillow, sliding my other arm under her, nuzzling my face into her neck, and inhaling her vanilla scent.

Within minutes, she's asleep, her soft snores the only sound in the otherwise quiet room. I remain awake, holding her tight, thanking God for protecting her and our unborn baby. Then, I think of all the ways I plan to show Ellie that I love her.



“STUPID THING. DOES THERE REALLY NEED TO BE THIS MANY BUTTONS ON A damn remote? Why can't you just have the ones that are necessary?”

I chuckle, watching Ellie bitch at the remote for a few seconds before I take pity on her and pluck it out of her hand.

“Hey! I was using that.”

“You were yelling at it.” I drop onto the couch and then reach out and bring Ellie down with me. She falls into my side, and when she tries to move away, I wrap my arm around her waist, holding her firmly so she can't get away.

When I woke up this morning, her side of the bed was empty. I jumped up and went in search of her, worried she took off, but calmed down once I found her in the kitchen making herself a cup of coffee. She's spent the morning avoiding me. I've caught her cleaning the bathroom, doing yoga, reading a book on the terrace, and speaking to her realtor about new places that have become available. I shut down her cleaning, watched her sexy ass do the downward dog, ordered her some new books that will arrive soon, and glared at her on the phone, which had her telling that asshole she'd call him back later.

It's now early afternoon, and she must've run out of shit to do because she's trying to watch a movie out here since my guest room doesn't have a TV.

“So, what are we watching?” I ask, looking down at her.

“We?” she squeaks out. “Don't you like, have work to do? I'm sure you have better things to do with your time than watch a movie with me.”

“Watching a movie with you sounds like the perfect way to spend my afternoon. Should we grab some snacks, though? I haven't seen you eat.”

Just as I finish my sentence, her stomach growls, and she flushes a light shade of pink. “Food would be good. I think the gummy bear is—Oh my God!” She jumps up, her hand going to her belly.

“What? What’s wrong?” I’m on my feet, ready to scoop her up and take her to the hospital.

“I think I felt him,” she breathes, looking over at me with glassy eyes.

“What?” I glance down at her belly. “Can I feel him?” I place my hand on her stomach but don’t feel anything.

“Oh! I felt it again. I think it’s a flutter.”

“A what?” I remove my hand.

“A flutter. The doctor said I’ll feel him stirring inside me before I feel him kicking. He’s getting big enough that I can feel him moving around.” Her smile is so big and bright, if it were the sun, it would blind the fuck out of me. “I can’t believe I can feel him,” she murmurs. “He’s real and alive in my belly.”

“He is,” I choke out, my emotions getting the better of me. But I can’t help it. It was only a few days ago I thought I was going to lose them both. But here she is, alive and smiling and talking about our baby moving around inside of her.

“When you were in the hospital, I was looking up names on my phone to pass the time. I came across one name that I think would be perfect for him...I mean, only if you like it.”

“What happened to the name you originally wanted?” she asks.

“I think this name would better suit him.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“Donovan. It means ‘strong fighter.’ I saw it and it made me think of you. You’re a fighter, El, and I have no doubt our son will have the same strength as his mother.”

Tears fill her lids, and she grants me the most beautiful, watery smile before she says, “I love it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes descend to her belly. “Hello there, Donovan. What do you think? Do you like that name?” She giggles and glances back up at me. “He fluttered again. So, I’ll take that as a yes. What about the middle name? Any traditions you guys have?”

“Our middle names were derived from our grandfathers. Micah’s is Eugene, named after our paternal grandfather, and mine is Thomas, named after our maternal grandfather.

“We could continue on with the tradition,” she says. “Donovan Michael Alexander has a nice ring to it. Unless Micah already called dibs on it.”

“Micah’s going to end up with another girl,” I tell her with a laugh. My brother already has two girls, and they’ve decided this baby will be their final one. I think part of him is hoping for a boy to even out the gender playing field, but if they have another girl, he’ll be completely okay with it. Both of his daughters are total daddy’s girls.

Ellie laughs. “Probably. But maybe you should ask just to make sure before we settle on it, since Sienna is giving birth before me.”

“I’ll ask, but I’m sure it will be okay. Now, what are you and Donovan hungry for?”

“Mmmm...Pizza...with ham and pineapple.” Her eyes light up. “Yes, with extra pineapple.”

“Alright, so one Hawaiian pizza for you plus a normal one for me. Got it.”

“Hey!” She playfully smacks my arm. “Hawaiian is normal.”

“Sorry, Kitten, but nothing about fruit on pizza is normal.”

I order the food and then make her some popcorn, since she wants it to snack on while we wait for the pizza. And then I find the movie she wants to watch. Since it’s not on any of the streaming services, I buy it from Amazon.

“Save the Last Dance? It’s not one of those cheesy dance movies, is it?” I’ve seen my nieces watching those, and if I’m going to have to sit through two hours of that, I at least want to mentally prepare myself.

“It’s not cheesy,” Ellie says. “It’s my favorite. And in the movie, Derek takes Sara to see the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago. I’ve always wanted to go.”

As she tells me more about the movie—and the Joffrey Ballet—the dreamy look in her eyes reminds me of the old Ellie. The one who was in love with dance and ballet and dreamed of performing professionally one day. Before the dark parts of life snuffed out her light—and dreams.

When she finishes telling me the premise of the movie, I click play, and that’s how we spend our evening—watching two teens from different worlds fall in love while they fight for their futures. Occasionally, I glance at Ellie as she watches the movie. She laughs and cries, and when the couple manages to work through their shit, she clutches her chest, making me realize just how much of a romantic Ellie really is. Which means, I need to tap into that romantic side of her if I have any hope of ever winning over her heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ELLIE



“HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE HALFWAY THERE?”

I glance over at Dr. Peterson, reluctantly prying my eyes away from the monitor displaying my son. Normally, ultrasounds aren't done at every appointment, but when you fall and put yourself and your child at risk, you get to see your baby more often. I'd prefer for my son not to be at risk, but I do love to see him swimming around in my belly.

“I feel like the pregnancy is both flying by and moving along at a snail's pace.”

The doctor laughs, and Lincoln chuckles.

“I've started to feel him fluttering around.” Ever since I felt him that day on the couch when Lincoln and I were getting ready to watch a movie and discussing baby names, I've felt it more often.

“Soon you'll be able to feel him from the outside,” the doctor says with a soft smile.

She spends the next several minutes going over everything with us, as well as running tests that are required at this stage in my pregnancy. Thankfully, the baby is perfect and shows no signs of distress from the fall I took. All the measurements are on par with how far along I am, and, according to Lincoln, the baby is now the size of a papaya.

When the doctor's done, she gives us a printout and then moves on to my blood pressure. “Based on your charting, your BP seems to have improved slightly. I would like for it to be a little lower, but the fact that it hasn't gone up is a good sign.”

“Does that mean I can resume normal activities?”

“It does...However, due to your fall, I would still like for you to take it easy.”

“Oh, that’s a given,” Lincoln murmurs from next to me, prompting me to look at him. When I raise a questioning brow, he shrugs. “Between the anemia, high blood pressure, and the fall, I’m considering wrapping your pregnant behind up in bubble wrap.”

I bark out a laugh, but Lincoln doesn’t join in. “I’m serious, El. You need to relax. I caught you on your hands and knees cleaning the bathroom, for God’s sake.”

“Well, in my defense, your cleaning lady isn’t good.” And I was also avoiding Lincoln, something I’d been doing since I woke up the morning after he told me he loved me. That is, until he cornered me with the promise of my favorite movie and yummy pizza, causing me to cave way too easily.

One part of me wants to believe him, throw caution to the wind and tell him I love him back. But the other part of me is afraid that if I give in too quickly, I’ll appear weak. Like my mother. She let her emotions steer her actions—and look where that got her...Six feet under, after spending her life drugged up with her legs spread for a man who showed her how much he loved her by pimping her out.

Okay, obviously, her life was a bit darker than mine, but she did go from being a talented dancer to a prostitute. Decisions were made, and I’ll be damned if I make any decision that can lead me down the same road my mom took. Which means I need to make sure Lincoln means what he says when he tells me he loves me and wants a future with me.

“She’s been let go, and a new one has been hired,” he says, snapping me out of my thoughts. “The new person is at the house cleaning as we speak.”

Dr. Peterson chuckles. “Any plans for the Fourth of July?”

“What?” I ask, doing the math in my head. Holy shit, I didn’t realize we were already into July. I’m about to tell her that I have no plans, but before I can get the words out, Lincoln speaks first.

“We’re going away.”

I whip my head around to look at him, and he shoots me a wink that has my legs clenching. I might be reluctant to believe he wants a future with me, but my body still craves his touch.

After wishing us a good holiday and saying she’ll see us next month, the doctor walks us to the check-out desk where I schedule my next appointment.

We then head for home, with my assigned bodyguard, Oscar, trailing closely behind.

When I asked Lincoln why I needed Oscar when he and I are out together, he said, “I won’t risk getting distracted by you and not paying attention to our surroundings.”

“How would you get distracted?” I asked.

“Have you seen yourself, Kitten? You’re breathtakingly beautiful, fucking mesmerizing. It’s all too easy to get lost in you and forget everything and everyone around me. I do it several times a day, and I won’t take the chance of something happening to you.”

His words had my heart swelling, but I didn’t show any emotion on the outside, not wanting him to know how much what he said meant to me. Maybe I’m being overly cautious keeping my heart protected by several layers, but if Lincoln wants to break through them, he’s going to have to do more than spout a few pretty words.

“So, where are we going?” I ask once we’re back in Lincoln’s car.

“It’s a surprise, but don’t worry, we’ll be back before Sienna’s baby shower this weekend.”

The surprise is a trip to New York City, but I have no idea why. We get checked into a beautiful hotel, where there’s a large black box with a red ribbon waiting for me on the bed.

“For me?” I ask dumbly.

“For you,” Lincoln says, leaning over and kissing the top of my head. “Be ready to leave at five o’clock.”

I open the box and find the most gorgeous one shoulder, sparkly emerald maternity evening gown that matches my eyes, complete with matching black, sparkly ballet flats, and a sexy yet comfy-looking maternity bra and panties—also black.

I don’t know how Lincoln did all of this without me knowing, but when I put it all on and it not only fits but makes me look like a pregnant fairy-tale princess, I send him a text thanking him, then go about doing my hair and makeup. I keep my look simple, my hair down in beach waves, and my makeup on the natural side, using a bit of mascara and eyeliner to make my eyes pop. I might be five months pregnant, but even I can admit I look sexy.

After shooting a selfie I take using the floor-to-ceiling mirror and sending it to Sienna—who responds that I look beautiful and to have a good time, confirming that she knows precisely where we’re going—I reply that I love

her and then head out to the main room of the suite to find Lincoln standing next to the wet bar, looking handsome in his suit. When he lowers his hand that's holding a drink, I notice he's sporting an emerald tie, and my heart soars. He planned this. I don't know what *this is* exactly, but he took the time to plan the little details, and that gives him extra points in my book.

"Kitten," he purrs, his eyes igniting with heated lust. "You're sexy as hell in your yoga attire, but fuck, you look exquisite like this."

I can't help but laugh at his yoga remark since I do tend to live in my yoga pants, sports bra, and tank.

"This is for you," he says, setting his crystal tumbler down and pulling an oblong black velvet box out of his jacket pocket. I take the delicate box from him and pop it open, not expecting what I find nestled inside.

"It's a Venetian cat mask," he explains, as I take in the beautiful silver and black mask that's attached to a delicate chain. "It's as close as I could find to the one you wore that night."

He takes the necklace out of the box, and I turn around, lifting my hair up so he can clasp it around my neck. Once it's fastened, it drops against my chest, and I look down to admire the lovely gift.

"Why?" I ask, turning around to face him, confused as to why he bought this for me. Sure, that was one of the best nights of my life, but that night changed the course of his life entirely.

When he raises a questioning brow, I explain. "That night changed everything for you. I not only turned your entire world on its axis by getting pregnant, but you've had to deal with the fallout with your family. You went from the carefree bachelor to living with a hormonal pregnant woman." I chuckle, self-deprecatingly. "It's beautiful, Linc. And I love it because for me that night changed my life for the better. If it weren't for you, I would still be hiding from my past and from my sister. And I'd still be afraid to be intimate with a man. But...Well, I guess I don't understand what meaning it holds for you."

He shakes his head and gently cups the side of my face. "You're right, that night changed my life, but Kitten, it changed my life for the better too. That night was the first time I connected with a woman on a deeper level. Before you, sex was just sex. It was fun and a good release. I enjoyed exploring, but I never felt anything like what I felt with you. I didn't understand it when my brother said he knew Sienna was the one for him the first time he saw her dancing on stage—not until that night I spent with you.

“From the conversation we shared, to the dancing, to our time in the backroom, I felt everything. And after you left, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. All I wanted to do was find you.”

“Because you didn’t know it was me,” I mutter, my gaze descending.

“No,” he says, tilting my chin up to look at him. “I didn’t know my mystery woman was you, but that doesn’t change the connection we shared. And since learning it was you who I shared that connection with...Spending the past couple of months with you...That connection has only deepened for me.

“Yeah, I was scared to admit my feelings because the fact is, I am a lot older than you, and to a lot of people that looks bad. But I’m done giving a fuck about what shit looks like. I love you, El, and I love that you’re carrying my baby.”

He moves his fingers from my chin, back to the side of my face, and with his other hand, squeezes the curve of my hip, pulling me closer. “I’m not saying I want to keep knocking you up like my brother and your sister keep doing...” The corner of his lips quirk into a sexy smirk. “But watching you grow my baby inside of you is one of the most beautiful things I’ve experienced. Just knowing that we created him during that night we spent together is such a turn on...So I definitely wouldn’t object if you wanted to make a couple more babies with me.”

I choke out a watery laugh as butterflies attack my chest. “We’ll see if you say that after the baby is born and we’re sleep deprived from him waking up all night.”

“You’re really not going to make this easy on me,” he says with a groan. “My point is that yes, my life changed that night we were together but only for the better, El. Before that night, I had refused to settle down, not wanting to ever *settle*, wanting to make sure the woman I ended up with was the person I could see myself creating a life with. And when I look at you, I see all of that. I see our future...Babies, a home filled with love. Holidays, birthdays, family vacations...Lazy mornings in bed, late nights spent with me inside you. I want it all, and I want it with you.”

“Lincoln,” I breathe, getting choked up with emotion from his words. He doesn’t get its significance because he’s always had it—the loving family, holidays, vacations, birthdays—but all those things he says he wants with me are all the things I’ve always wanted but feared I’d never have.

“I want that,” I whisper, afraid if I say the words too loudly, the universe

will rescind the offer.

“Give us a real chance, Kitten, and I promise I’ll spend every day showing you how much I love you and how much I want this life with you. I’m not saying every day will be perfect, but we can have the life we both want, together.”

I should probably make him work harder for it. It’s only been a short time since I pushed him away and told him he’d have to prove his love for me, but as I look into his hazel eyes, I realize I don’t want to play games. I’ve learned the hard way how cruel life can be, how quickly it can change at the drop of a dime. All we have is right now, and I want to spend it being loved by Lincoln.

“Okay,” I breathe. “I’ll give us a real chance.”

His features morph into pure happiness, and the way my heart swells tells me I made the right decision. I love Lincoln, and I want this life with him. I want to love him and be loved by him. Hell, I’ve loved him in my own way since I was fourteen years old. Not because he was hot and older—though, he definitely was—but because even back then I felt the strength of his love. It was the kind of love that wrapped me up like a warm blanket on the coldest winter night and made me feel safe. Only now that love has blossomed into something more...Something deeper. Something I want to spend the rest of my life nurturing, so it will continue to grow.

“I love you,” he says, pulling me into his arms. “And I promise, you won’t regret it.”

His mouth descends on mine, and I sigh into the kiss, getting lost in him. It’s only been a short time since I’ve felt Lincoln’s mouth on mine, but the moment our lips touch, I instantly crave more of him, more of his touch, his scent, his taste.

When I encircle my arms around his neck, wanting to deepen the kiss, he chuckles into my mouth and breaks the kiss. “Baby, we have plans tonight.”

“Screw the plans,” I mutter, trying to pull him back to me. It’s impossible for me to compare my turbo-charged sex drive to that of someone who’s not pregnant, and it could be because I’ve only just recently found how pleasurable sex and orgasms can be, but I find myself wanting Lincoln often.

“Not happening,” he says, untangling us and taking my hand in his. “You look too beautiful not to take out, and the plans we have, I think you’re going to regret missing...Even if the sex is that good.” He shoots me a flirty wink, and I laugh at how adorably sexy he is.

“Fine,” I say, caving since it really would be a shame not to put this dress to use. “But when we get back here...”

“Oh, Kitten, when we get back here, it’s on.”

The ride in the elevator is spent with Lincoln holding me and kissing me. He draws me in just enough to turn me on and work me up but leaves me hanging and craving more.

I quickly learn that our dinner reservations are for a restaurant in the hotel. We’re sat in a private room where we enjoy a delicious meal. We keep things light with small talk, and it’s nice, being able to talk and laugh without having to focus on the heavy shit that’ll be waiting for us when we return. After dinner, we have dessert, and then Lincoln guides us outside to where a limo is waiting for us.

As Lincoln opens the door, and I slide inside the spacious area that could easily seat several people, I consider what it would be like to lift my dress, push my panties aside, and ride him into oblivion.

He must sense my thoughts because he shakes his head and laughs. “I haven’t been inside you in over a week. When I’m finally balls deep in your perfect cunt, I’m not planning to leave for a while.”

My lady parts clench at his dirty talk, wondering if wherever we’re going is worth prolonging him from doing just that.

But then we stop in front of the infamous Lincoln Center, and I gasp, knowing there’s only one reason we would be here.

“Are we here to see...?” I choke out, unable to finish my words.

“The American Ballet?” he finishes. “Yeah, I wanted to fly us to Chicago to see the Joffrey Ballet, but —”

“They don’t have summer productions.” I know everything there is to know about damn near every dance company. When I was a little girl, all I wanted was to one day tour the world dancing. As I got older, my dream changed to dance therapy, wanting to help others the way dance helped me. But then I was raped, and everything changed. So, I bought Sienna a dance studio and took off to the other side of the country for college.

“We’re here to see Romeo and Juliet,” Lincoln says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“This is amazing,” I tell him once we’ve stepped out of the limo. “It’s always been a dream of mine to come here, but at first I was too broke and then I moved...”

“Well, I’m honored to experience this with you for the first time,” he

says, hooking his arm in mine and guiding me toward the Metropolitan Opera House.

It's not until about halfway through the show that it hits me just how much I've missed dancing. Even simply watching it is soothing.

"What's going through that beautiful head of yours?" Lincoln asks, picking up on my mood change like he always does.

"I miss dancing," I admit. "The calmness it brings. I want to talk to Sienna about working at the dance studio once Donovan is born. And I think I want to go back to school to get my master's in dance therapy like I originally planned. I know that's a lot, especially with a new baby, but —"

"But nothing," Lincoln says. "You're not in this alone anymore. If you want to teach dance, you will. And if you want to further your education, I'll support you." He leans in and presses a soft kiss to my lips. "Your dreams are mine," he murmurs against my mouth. "Your future is mine."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LINCOLN



THE EVENING SO FAR HAS GONE BETTER THAN I PLANNED. FOR ONE, I DIDN'T expect to have such a deep conversation with Ellie before we left our room. I bought her the necklace to symbolize the night we spent together. To show her that despite how we started, I wouldn't change a damn thing. I never imagined a future with Ellie, I never saw her that way, but now, I can't imagine a life without her, and I need her to know that.

What I wasn't expecting was for that necklace to open a line of conversation that would lead to Ellie agreeing to give us a real chance. From then on, the night only got better. She opened up to me, sharing her wants and dreams for the future. With me being older and working from an early age for my family's business, there isn't much I want or need. I've always been content. But listening to her tell me about wanting to get her master's and work at the dance studio reminded me of just how young she is. She has her entire future ahead of her, and I'm going to ensure that every one of her dreams and goals eventually come to fruition. But to do that, we need to find out who the fuck is after us—especially Ellie.

As we ride back to the hotel, with Ellie's body pressed up against mine, her head resting on my shoulder, I type out a text to Micah, asking if our guys have found anything yet.

MICAH

No. Not a damn thing. Either none of the big players know shit, or they're keeping secrets.

MICAH

How's it going in the city?

LINCOLN

Ellie loved the ballet, and she's agreed to give us a real chance. We need to find whoever is fucking with us soon. When we get back, I want in.

MICAH

I'm working on it. You need to focus on Alexander Enterprises, so I know it's being handled. Sienna is due in a month, and the last thing I want is her giving birth with a threat looming over our heads. She and the girls are getting antsy at home, but traveling this far along isn't advised in case she goes into labor early.

LINCOLN

I want in.

MICAH

We'll talk when you get home.

"Everything okay?" Ellie asks when I sigh loudly.

I consider saying yes, not wanting to ruin the evening, but I don't want to lie to her. "We still don't have any leads as to who is coming after us."

She snuggles closer to me, and I wrap my arm around her, needing to hold her tight.

"I wish we could stay here forever," she murmurs after a few minutes. "I like this, being with you away from Tesoro. I feel content and safe."

"I'm going to make sure you feel that way *in* Tesoro," I tell her, kissing the top of her head. "Micah and I won't stop until you do."

When we arrive at the hotel, Oscar escorts us to our suite, doing a search of the place before we enter. I've barely closed the door behind us, when Ellie is on me, her arms wrapped around my neck, and her mouth attacking my own.

My first instinct is to lift her like I'm a fucking caveman and take her against the wall, that's how badly I want to be inside her, but with her being pregnant, I remind myself that I need to be gentle.

So instead, I break the kiss and then lift her onto the dining table, taking a step back to admire the beautiful woman in front of me. Her lips are slightly bee-stung from our kiss, her face and neck flushed a gorgeous shade of pink. Her chest is rising and falling in quick succession, and when her eyes meet mine, they're hooded over with lust.

When I pull my phone out, needing to capture her like this, she tilts her head to the side. "What are you doing?" she asks, her voice breathy.

“Taking a picture of you.”

“We took pictures of us earlier, at the ballet.”

“Not like this.” I snap the picture and then put my phone away.

“Like what?” she questions.

“Like you’re mine.” I capture her lips, and she moans into my mouth. We kiss for several seconds, until I can’t take it any longer, needing to feel more of her.

“How do I get this dress off of you?” I ask. I might’ve picked it out, but the only thing I know is that it matches her beautiful eyes.

“Like this.” She pulls the string on the side, and the dress falls open, exposing the black lace bra and panties I also bought.

With a groan, I step back and kneel in front of her, then remove her ballet flats, dropping them to the side. I glance up and find her peering down at me, her emerald eyes filled with desire.

I take her foot in my hands and press a soft kiss to the instep. Everything about Ellie is feminine, even her feet. I kiss the inside of her ankle, and then I work my way up her smooth calf and thigh. Once I get to the top, I start all over again with her other leg, memorizing every inch of her. When I arrive back at the top, I spread her thighs and suck on her flesh, leaving a tiny hickey that only she and I can see, needing in some way to mark my claim on her.

As if she can hear my thoughts, she giggles, making me look up at her. “I think the baby I’m carrying by you proves that I’m yours.”

“The only thing that will prove you’re mine is when you’re wearing my ring on your finger and your last name is Alexander.”

Her eyes go wide, and I chuckle at having shocked her. “No, I’m not proposing,” I say. “I want to, but I’m afraid you’ll think it’s only because of the baby. So, for now, I’ll mark you with my mouth, watch our son grow in your belly, and convince you to live with me. Then, after the baby is born, I’ll beg you to become my wife.”

I spread her legs wider and press my nose to the lacy material covering her cunt and inhale her scent.

“Lincoln!” she squeaks.

“Stop.” I playfully bat her hand away. “I’ve missed your smell.” I inhale again, and she groans but doesn’t stop me.

After I’ve gotten my fill of her for the moment, I press a kiss to the top of her mound and then work my way up to her protruding belly. It’s crazy how

much it's grown since I found out she was pregnant. I kiss just under her naval then above it, and I'm shocked as hell when I feel it bump against my lips.

"Holy shit," I breathe. "Did you feel that?"

"I did," she says, her eyes wide. "Oh my God. He kicked. Like, actually kicked."

"Amazing," I murmur, peppering several kisses to her belly. And then it hits me. "You don't think he'll know...?"

Ellie barks out a laugh. "No. And if you even think about stopping right now, I'll be forced to finish myself."

The idea of Ellie fingering herself almost has me wanting to stop just so I can watch that happen, but my need to be inside her is too strong.

"Another time," I tell her, standing so I can give the rest of her body attention. Her breasts are covered in lace, just like her panties, so I take a second to appreciate them before I pull both of her cups down and watch as they spill out, her hard nipples beckoning me.

"Your tits are perfect," I say, pulling a nipple between my lips and sucking on the rose-dusted peak.

She moans in pleasure and then says, "You better enjoy them now. Soon, my body will be destroyed. My boobs will be saggy, and my stomach will be full of stretch marks. I won't be perfect."

I stop what I'm doing to give her my attention. "Are you serious right now?" I ask, annoyed that she thinks I could be that shallow. "I've never seen a woman after she's given birth, but if you think your body changing due to you carrying and protecting and growing our baby inside of you for nine damn months is going to make you any less perfect to me, you need to think again."

Without giving her a chance to argue, I devour her mouth. One hand cups her breast, plucking and tweaking her sensitive nipple, while the other pushes her panties to the side and plunges two fingers into her. She's warm and wet, and so goddamned *perfect*.

"Oh, shit," she moans into my mouth. "Harder, Linc, please."

I love that she's slowly getting comfortable enough to ask for shit like that. That she's taking control of her sexual needs and refusing to let the fuckers who raped her win.

I do as she requested, going deeper without being too rough. I work her up, fucking the hell out of her cunt until she's coming around my fingers and

screaming my name.

“I was thinking,” she murmurs against my mouth once her breathing has calmed slightly. “Maybe we could...” She clears her throat, and I back up so I can look at her, not liking the nervousness in her tone.

“What is it, Kitten?” I ask, when I notice her skin is a dark shade of pink.

“I want to replace the bad with the good.”

“Was what we just did bad?” I ask, confused. She was just screaming like —

“No!” She shakes her head. “It was amazing. The way you make me come blows my mind. I meant that I want to replace the bad memories of before with the good ones now.”

“Okay...I thought that’s what we’re doing every time we’re together like this.”

“It is, but I was thinking we could do anal,” she says softly. “When you did it before with your finger, it felt good. I think I’m ready for more.” Jesus, this woman. Her strength and courage know no bounds.

“Hold on to my neck,” I tell her as I scoop her up into my arms bridal style and carry her to the bedroom. Once I’ve laid her on the mattress, I grab the lube from my toiletry bag in the bathroom and then head back to the bedroom.

Ellie is quiet, probably lost in her own thoughts, so I throw the lube to the side and climb onto the bed to kiss her. She sighs into the kiss, the tension slowly melting away.

“You’re in charge,” I remind her. “Everything we do is your choice. You want me to go harder, I go harder. You want me to stop, I stop. Got it?”

She nods in understanding.

“I need to hear the words, Kitten.”

“I got it. I’m in charge.”

“Damn right you are. Now tell me what you want.”

I expect her to hesitate, so I’m pleasantly surprised when she says with determination in her voice, “I want you to fuck my ass.”

And since I would give this woman anything she wants—and let’s be real, what man doesn’t enjoy anal?—I do exactly that.

After making sure she’s ready—and working her up to the point that she’s about to explode—I wrap my arms around Ellie and slide into her from behind. While I slowly fuck her ass, I stroke her clit and pepper kisses along her shoulder and neck, reminding her that I’m here, that it’s me who’s inside

of her. And when she comes, it's my name she screams out in pleasure.

"Thank you," she murmurs with tears in her eyes.

Once I've pulled out, I hold her for a moment before we take a shower. "You never have to thank me, baby. We're in this together." I kiss her soft lips, tasting the saltiness of her tears. "Nobody is ever going to hurt you again."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ELLIE



“I CAN’T BELIEVE HE TOOK YOU TO THE AMERICAN BALLET.” SIENNA SMILES softly. “And look at this necklace.” She fingers the charm on my neck and then glances at Micah. “Remember when you took me to London and got me this necklace?” She touches the ballet slipper charm that’s resting on her neck. “Not only are we dating brothers, but they think of the same ways to spoil us.”

“Great,” Lincoln groans. “Just what a man likes to hear...How unoriginal he is.” He glares at Micah. “When I ran my idea past you, why didn’t you mention you did the same shit for Sienna?”

“Hey,” I say, palming Lincoln’s face. “My sister and I both love dance. It wouldn’t be hard to come up with the same idea to take us to see a show. And this necklace was so thoughtful. Who cares if he did it first? It wasn’t the same. The memories aren’t the same. And it’s something I’ll remember for the rest of my life.”

“Fine,” Lincoln grumbles. “But I’m going to come up with an original surprise that Micah’s never done.”

“Don’t worry,” Sienna says. “Micah doesn’t surprise me anymore. We’re an old, married couple now.”

“Excuse me?” Micah growls. “I’ll show you an old, married couple!” He grabs Sienna by the neck and kisses her hard. And for a moment, I wonder if maybe Lincoln and I should give them some privacy. But then London and Brooklyn come running out and they break apart with a groan.

“You know,” I say. “I was going to go in the pool. Would you girls like to

join me?”

“Yes!” Both of them cheer.

“Go grab your suits. You can change at my place.”

“Your place, huh?” Lincoln says when the girls run off. “I like the sound of that.” He pulls me into him and kisses me. “Say you’ll live with me. Make my place *our* place. I don’t want you to move out, El.”

“I’ll live with you,” I agree.

After the girls go home from spending the day swimming—while Micah proves he and Sienna aren’t an old, married couple (*gag*)—Lincoln insists we move my stuff into his room. So, we order in Chinese and spend the evening intertwining our things.

“I’ve never shared a room with anyone,” I admit once all our stuff is sorted and put away.

“Me either,” Lincoln says. “I always preferred to have my own space.” He pulls me into him, so our legs are entangled. “But I think I’m going to enjoy sharing a space with you.” He nuzzles his face into my neck and nips playfully at my flesh.

“I think I’m going to enjoy it too,” I agree.



Six Weeks Later

“I CAN’T BELIEVE SIENNA SERIOUSLY BLEW ME OFF.” I GLANCE AT MY PHONE again, still no message from my sister. With her being due in two weeks, and my due date just a few months after, I suggested we have a sister day since we’ll both be busy once the babies are born. She told me that sounded great, and then at the last second, she canceled.

“I’m sure she had a good reason,” Lincoln says as we step off the elevator and head to our door. When I told him she canceled, he offered to take me to breakfast.

“I guess.” I pout, feeling super emotional lately. The books all say it’s normal during pregnancy, but it feels like something more. Like I’m constantly waiting for something bad to happen, and it’s stressing me out.

After we returned from our trip to the city, another major incident occurred at the dance studio. I was there after hours, dancing, when the place

suddenly caught fire. Thankfully, Oscar was with me and ushered me to safety, and the damage was minimal. But upon inspection, we learned someone had hacked into the server to ensure whoever was responsible wouldn't be caught by taking the cameras down.

And then a couple of weeks ago, Lincoln's club, Wanderlust, nearly flooded. This time, his security team was able to keep whoever was responsible from hacking the server, but when they found the culprit, he was being pulled out of the water in the marina—his heart no longer beating. They know his name and that he lived in Booker Park, found out he was into drugs. But nobody knows why he did what he did or who he was working for. He wasn't connected to the club in any way. And the phone on him couldn't be recovered. Nothing is adding up...Or maybe we're missing something.

Lincoln keeps telling me not to stress, that it's not good for me and the baby, but it's hard not to worry when bad things keep happening around me.

"While you're adorable when you pout, I prefer to see you smile," Lincoln says as he hits the code and swings the door open, holding it for me so I can walk through first.

"Then tell my sister —"

The lights flip on, and several people shout, "Surprise!" at the same time, nearly giving me a heart attack.

"Tell me what?" Sienna says with a knowing smirk as she waddles over to me. "Happy baby shower!" she says, enveloping me in a hug.

I can't help it. The dam of emotion breaks open, and right in front of everyone, I start bawling. Overwhelmed, I'm hit hard by a myriad of feelings, ranging from worry to happiness and everything in between.

"Oh, El, don't cry," Sienna murmurs.

"Sorry." I sniffle back my sobs. "Thank you." I glance around at the room decorated in blues and greens. Balloons everywhere. There's a huge cake, tons of desserts, and food laid out on tables. And standing behind Sienna are the people who mean the most to me.

parents, Donna and Michael, are both here, smiling softly. It started out rough, but I quickly learned that Donna was more upset with Lincoln thinking he manipulated me. When they learned it was all me, they opened their arms, offering love and support.

My nieces are jumping up and down, holding gifts in their hands. Micah is standing next to them, looking a mixture of happy and pissed off—so, pretty much how he always looks. A few girls from the dance studio are here

that I've become close to. And then, standing in the corner of the room, is my best friend.

"Raelyn!" I shriek, running over and attacking her. We text and talk and video chat almost every day, but I haven't seen her in person since I left California after we graduated, and I miss the hell out of her.

"I can't believe you're here!"

"And miss my bestie's baby shower? Not a chance." She pulls back and places her hand on my belly. "I can't believe how big you've gotten." Her gaze flits behind me, and then she says softly, "And holy shit, girl. It seems when we talk, you leave stuff out. Like the fact that your baby daddy is in love with you."

I glance back at Lincoln, who's smiling at me, and feel my cheeks flush. "I was afraid it wasn't real or that he'd change his mind," I admit to her. "I didn't want to look stupid."

"Oh, Ellie, when will you realize how lovable you are?" She hugs me again and kisses my cheek. "We'll catch up later. Right now, you have a baby shower to enjoy."

"Later?" I ask hopeful.

"Lincoln booked me a room here for the week."

"Yay!" I cheer, so excited to have my best friend for the entire week.

The baby shower is beautiful. Sienna planned everything to a T, including the delicious lunch and desserts. They make me open gifts, and Lincoln surprises me by showing me that the nursery has been painted without me knowing.

I couldn't ask for a better day, and I can't believe Sienna did all of this, less than a month before she's ready to pop.

"You made mine just as special," she says when I thank her after everyone but Raelyn and Lincoln have left. "I'm so proud of the woman you've become, El, and I have no doubt you're going to be an amazing mom."

"You're gonna make me cry," I half-joke.

"I'm serious," she says, giving me a watery smile. "Thank you for coming home. I know Micah forced your hand, but you could've left. I'm so excited to raise our babies together. I love you."

"I love you more."

Once she's gone, Lincoln insists Raelyn and I go relax by the pool while everything gets cleaned up and says he'll order something in for dinner later.

“Thank you,” I tell him, giving him a quick kiss. “Today was perfect.”

Raelyn and I change into our bathing suits and are lying out by the pool, talking about everything that’s been going on with her in Colorado, when my phone rings with a call from Sienna. “It’s time!” she squeals. “Apparently, the excitement from the baby shower was too much, and my water broke!”

“Oh my God!” I sit up. “Do you need me to watch the girls?”

“Could you, please? Donna is on her way to stay with them, but she just got home, so it will be a little while.”

“I’m on my way!”

After letting Lincoln know I’m heading over to Sienna’s place, Raelyn and I take off over there. I give Sienna and Micah both a hug, wishing them luck, and they depart for the hospital. Donna arrives about an hour later, but we stay and hang out, keeping the girls entertained while we wait to hear from Sienna and Micah.

About three hours later, after the girls have fallen asleep, Micah video calls to let us know the baby has arrived and that both mom and baby are doing fine.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense,” Lincoln says, having joined us about an hour ago. “Is it a girl or a boy?”

“It’s a boy,” Micah chokes out. “A beautiful, strong, healthy little boy.”

He moves the phone, bringing Sienna and the baby into view. She looks exhausted, but in the best possible way, as she holds her little bundle of joy and waves to us.

“And what’s his name?” Donna asks.

“Colton Lincoln Alexander. Colton because we like it, and Lincoln in honor of my brother, since he’s the reason we met.” Micah’s eyes move to where Sienna is sitting. “If he wouldn’t have hired her, I’d be a lonely old man.”

Everyone chuckles at his dramatics.

“That’s a beautiful name,” I tell them. “Congratulations. Let us know when you’re up for company and we’ll come by.”

“You can come now,” Sienna says. “Donna is going to bring the girls in the morning.”

“We’re on our way!” I jump up, excited to meet my nephew in person.

After changing, since I was still in my bathing suit and cover-up, we drop Raelyn off at her room with plans to have brunch in the morning, and then we head to the hospital.

Baby Colton is absolutely precious, and if I could, I would hold him forever. But since it's late, we only hang out for a little while, taking some pictures and making sure Sienna and Micah don't need anything.

"This will be you in a few months," Sienna says with a smile when I place Colton back in her arms so she can feed him.

"I'm scared shitless," I admit with a laugh. "You make it look so easy."

"It's not always easy, El," she says. "Parenting has its good moments and bad. Happy and sad. Some days, you'll question what the hell you're doing." She looks at me with a soft expression. "But then your baby will smile at you, tugging on your heartstrings, and it will all be worth it."

"I wish I would've been worth it," I blurt out, immediately regretting bringing up our past.

"You are," Sienna says. "Maybe not to *her*, but you've always been worth it to me."

"And to me," Lincoln adds, squeezing my shoulder. "And it's because of what you've been through that you'll be the most incredible, loving mom to our babies."

"Babies, huh?" Sienna laughs, lightening the mood. "Already planning the next? Guess it runs in the family." She smirks at Micah, who shrugs, and we all laugh.

After saying goodbye to them, Lincoln and I head out of the hospital. Since we drove ourselves—with Chris, another one of Lincoln's guys, following as protection—we walk back to the parking garage. Lincoln opens my door for me, and as I get in, a weird feeling comes over me. I glance around from the passenger seat, and my eyes lock on a gentleman standing in the darkened corner, a chill racing up my spine.

I take my eyes off of him for a second to see where Lincoln is, but when I glance back, the man is gone, leaving me wondering if my mind is playing tricks on me.

"What's wrong?" Lincoln asks when he gets in, attuned to my emotions.

"I thought I saw someone."

"What?" He looks around and pulls out his phone, already dialing somebody. "Who?"

"I don't know. He was standing in the corner, and then he was gone."

"Did you recognize him?"

I think hard on it. Something about that man felt oddly familiar, but I can't place him now... "I don't think so."

Lincoln relays the information to whoever's on the other end of the line, then hangs up and says it's being investigated.

When we get home, we take a shower together, something that's become a part of our routine, and then after we're both dressed, we cuddle in bed. I'm exhausted from today's events, and it doesn't take long before my eyes close and I fall asleep...

Emerald eyes.

Cold.

Calculating.

"You're supposed to be my dad! Please, if you love me, you'll let me stay with Sienna."

"Love you?" He scoffs. "Love doesn't belong in this world. It makes you weak. My family didn't get to where they are with love. We got here with power, brains. We made smart choices."

"Okay, but what does that have to do with me?"

"You will be a smart choice."

"I don't understand."

"You're my blood, Eliza. And from what I've been told, a virgin. In my world, that's worth a lot. There are many men who would pay a considerable amount in both money and favors to marry you."

"What?" I shriek. "You're going to sell me? Are you crazy? I'm your daughter!"

"Enough! Everyone has a part to play. You will play your part, or your sister will pay the price."

"Ellie...Ellie, wake up."

I snap my eyes open and find warm, hazel eyes staring at me instead of cold, emerald ones.

"You were having a nightmare."

"Yeah," I choke out. It was actually a memory, but nightmare works as well. "But it's over now." I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him over to me. "Thank you for being my safe place."

"Want to talk about it?"

I think about that for a second, unsure how to tell him what I'm feeling when I don't even really know myself. *"I feel like we're missing something. I don't know what, but last night when we were in the parking garage...The guy I saw. I don't know. He looked familiar, but I can't place from where."*

Lincoln nods in understanding. *"I'm going to keep you and the baby safe."*

I promise. Please don't stress over this." He places a kiss to my nose, each of my cheeks, and then finally my lips. "Nothing will happen to either of you."

CHAPTER THIRTY

LINCOLN



“HOLY SHIT, EL. YOU FEEL SO GOOD.” I THRUST INTO ELLIE FROM THE bottom, massaging her breasts while she rides me. Her hands are resting on my shoulders, using them as support, and I never want this to end. She’s thirty-two weeks pregnant, and with her bump growing more and more every day, she prefers to be on top, and I’m not complaining. The sight of her tits bouncing as she rides my dick like a stick shift in a sport’s car is a fucking turn-on.

“I’m so close,” she mewls, trying to find the spot that will set her off. Since I’ve spent months learning her body, and I know it better than she does, I grip her hips and find the spot for her. It only takes seconds in this position before she’s flying over the edge and taking me with her. She doesn’t stop until she’s milked me dry, and then with a quick kiss, she climbs off, so we can take a shower and start our day.

“You’re having breakfast with Sienna?”

“Yep,” she says, soaping up her body. “I can’t get enough of Colton. He’s so sweet.”

“Soon, we’ll have one of our own.” I grab the shampoo and turn her around so I can wash her hair, knowing she loves when I do it. Just as I suspected, the minute my fingers delve into her hair, her body relaxes, and she groans in pleasure.

“I have some business to handle. A meeting for the casino we’re building.”

“Can you still go to my doctor’s appointment?”

“Of course.” I turn her back around and kiss her wet lips. “If I lose track of time, just come and get me when we need to go.”

ELLIE

“You’re the cutest little baby, aren’t you?” I say in a baby voice to Colton. He’s seriously the cutest freaking baby ever—after London and Brooklyn of course. But when London was born, I was young and didn’t enjoy her like that. And I had moved to California shortly after Brooklyn was born.

“He’s the devil,” Sienna groans with a laugh. “London and Brooklyn were both sleeping for several hours a night by six weeks old, but not him. He’s going to give me a run for my money, I just know it.”

“Just like his daddy,” I coo, making Colton smile.

“I’m going to make myself a sandwich. You hungry?” Sienna asks, standing.

“Oh, I—” I check my phone and see the time. “Shoot, no. I need to get going. I have my thirty-two-week checkup today.”

“Getting close.”

“Yep, it’s crazy to think that by Thanksgiving, Lincoln and I will be joining the parent club.” I set Colton in his swing and give him a kiss on the forehead. Then hug my sister. “I’m really glad we’ll have you and Micah next door to help us. I’m excited, but I’m not going to lie. I’m also a bit nervous. Being responsible for someone’s life is a lot. And watching how badly mom failed...”

“You’re not Mom,” she reminds me. “And I’ll be there with you every step of the way. And you’ll have Lincoln. He’s a wonderful uncle, and I have no doubt he’s going to make a great dad.” She kisses my cheek. “Let me know how it goes.”

“Will do.”

When I get inside, I call out Lincoln’s name, but he’s nowhere to be found. I check his office, our room, the gym, but he’s not here. I shoot him a text, but he doesn’t respond, so I pop my head out of the door. “Hey, Oscar, have you seen Lincoln?”

“Not since he left about an hour ago. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, we need to leave for my doctor’s appointment, or we’ll be late.” I could’ve sworn he told me to come and get him when it was time to go, but maybe he said he’d meet me there? With my pregnancy brain, anything is

possible. “Can you take me? I’m assuming Lincoln is going to meet us at the doctor’s office.”

“Of course, ma’am. You ready to go?”

“Yep.” I grab my purse, and then we take off down the elevator. I check my phone again to see if Lincoln’s responded, but the elevator has no service. The second we step out the back door, my phone pings with a text from Lincoln telling me he’s sorry and will meet me at my appointment.

I’m typing back a response when Oscar yells, “Watch out!” I look up to see what’s going on, just in time to hear a gunshot ring out and then see him fall to the ground.

“Oscar!” I yell, running toward him.

“Ellie, run!” he chokes out.

It takes a second for his words to resonate in me, but once they do, it’s too late. I’m being yanked up by two men wearing all black. My hands are pulled back and restrained, and my phone falls out of my hand, crashing to the ground.

I scream and cry, hoping to get someone’s attention, but before anyone can come to my rescue, I’m shoved into the back of the car, and some kind of material is placed over my mouth, immediately silencing me.

“Don’t forget the jewelry,” the guy who gets into the driver seat says. The guy who got in next to me snatches my necklace and tosses it out of the car, then yanks my watch off, chucking it as well.

“Done.”

Knowing there’s no way out, I calm myself so I don’t raise my blood pressure and put stress on my baby. Since they didn’t bother to blindfold me, I watch the outside so I can try to see where we’re going. If I can somehow escape or find a way to get ahold of Lincoln, I’ll need to know where we are.

The ride isn’t long, and what scares me is that these guys don’t even try to hide where we’re going, and everyone knows the only reason bad guys don’t care how much you see is if they don’t plan to keep you alive.

When we pull up to a small, rundown house on the outskirts of Tesoro, my first thought is that maybe they took me for my money. But if that’s the case, why did they do everything else they did? Was it to scare us, so when they took me, I’d be more inclined to pay them?

My line of thoughts and questions come to a halt when I’m taken out of the vehicle and brought inside to find the man from the hospital parking garage standing in the living room, staring at me. It was months ago, but the

look on his face is engrained into my brain.

And then he steps forward, the light from outside shining in, making his green eyes sparkle. And I gasp, only knowing one other person who has those eyes besides me...

But it doesn't make any sense because that man died in the fire.

And the man in front of me doesn't look like him.

"Welcome, *daughter*," he spits.

My eyes go wide at the confirmation. He's alive. But how is that possible? And why the hell does he look so different?

"I know I look a bit different," he says, as if he could hear my unspoken question. "But, yes, it's me. While you were dismantling everything my father and I worked to create, I was fighting for my life. While you were spending my money, I was having skin grafts and surgeries. It took years to recover from what you did."

"What do you want?" I choke out. "The money? You can have it all! Just let me go, please."

Eleazar chuckles, and the sound sends chills up my spine. He might look different, but between the green eyes and that laugh, I know it's him.

"Oh, you're going to pay me back, *mi hija*. But the money is only the beginning. I lost seven years of my life because of you, you little bitch. And then, when I return, I find you've destroyed everything. Every business, my home. You ruined it all. So, yes, you are going to pay me back...Starting with giving me the heir you owe me."

"What?" I gasp. "I don't understand. Just take my money. I have millions. You can have every penny —"

"It's not just the money!" Eleazar barks, grabbing my face and squeezing it painfully. "You ruined everything my family worked for. I am nothing now because of you, but once I have the money you took *and* my heir, I'll be able to start over, build again."

"You can't sell me off!" I hiss, pulling my face out of his grip. "In case you didn't notice, I'm not a fifteen-year-old virgin anymore."

"Oh, I know," he says, his face filled with disgust. "You're damaged goods. But you do have something that is of value to me." He glances down at my belly, and I take a step back.

"You can't be serious," I choke out.

"Oh, I am deadly serious," he says. "That baby you're carrying will be mine."

“And what about me?” I whisper.

“Once you’ve served your purpose, you won’t be needed any longer. And I’ll do what you intended to do to me...End your life.”



Lincoln

“SIR, IF YOU NEED TO RESCHEDULE...”

“Can you give me a couple of minutes?” I ask the front desk receptionist, who smiles and nods politely.

Ellie should’ve been here by now, and with her not answering my calls or texts, I’m worried she’s pissed at me for leaving this morning without telling her. In my defense, when Dad called and said that one of our guys had captured an intruder, I took off wanting to be there to interrogate whoever it was, hoping to learn who’s targeting us.

Of course, after hours of our men torturing the guy, we only learned that he was hired to break in and cause a scene. He doesn’t know who hired him or why, only that he would be paid 10k cash if he was able to get away. Whoever it was, either hadn’t counted on us having a guard watching our parents’ house until shit gets sorted, or wanted him to get caught. But the question is why? Why would anyone pay to have someone break into our parents’ house without wanting him to hurt anyone or take anything? Something isn’t adding up.

I click on the tracker app I installed on Ellie’s phone, and it shows she’s still at the hotel. It’s not like her to miss a doctor’s appointment. She loves going to them and hearing the baby’s heartbeat. It doesn’t make any sense.

I dial Oscar’s number, and it rings until it goes to voicemail, so I start to worry something’s happened. I’m about to dial Sienna’s number, since I left Micah back at our parents’ house when I left for the doctor’s appointment, but my brother’s name pops up on the screen.

“Hey, I’m trying to get —”

“Ellie’s been taken.”

Three words. That’s all it takes to bring me to my knees, right there in the doctor’s office. My eyes close, and I pray to God that I heard my brother wrong. After a moment of silence, though, he continues...

“Oscar was shot in the parking garage. He hit the panic button on his watch, but he bled out before the ambulance could get there. Max tried to call us, but we were underground.”

Underground...We were underground interrogating some asshole who broke into our parents’ place while Oscar was shot and Ellie was taken.

“The police were called,” he continues while I remain on the floor, unable to move. “They found her phone, necklace, and watch, but Ellie is still missing. Max confirmed her abduction. He’s checking all the cameras now, trying to see if he can track where they took her.”

I pry my eyes open, knowing I need to stand and walk out of this waiting room, out of this office. I need to find Ellie and bring her home. But my body doesn’t want to move.

I failed her.

I failed our baby.

I promised I would keep them safe, and I failed them both.

While she was being taken, I was— “It was a setup.”

“What?” Micah asks.

“The guy who broke into our parents’ house. It was a setup. Whoever did this, knew we’d go running to our parents’ place. They must’ve known Ellie had a doctor’s appointment. I left, and in doing so, made her vulnerable.”

Fuck! I never should’ve left her. Or I should’ve put more guys on her. If I would’ve —

“Stop,” Micah says, snapping me from my thoughts. “Thinking about the ‘what ifs’ isn’t going to change shit, so don’t do it. We’ll get her back, bro.”

“Yeah, we will,” I agree. “And when we find who took her, heads will fucking roll.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

LINCOLN



“HOW MANY TIMES ARE YOU GOING TO WATCH THOSE VIDEOS?”

When I ignore my brother, my eyes staying trained on the computer screen, watching as Ellie kicks and screams and gets shoved into the vehicle, he reaches over and presses pause.

“You’ve been watching these same videos for the past four weeks. You’ve got to stop before you drive yourself crazy. We already know that aside from them heading to a backroad where the cameras cut off, they don’t contain anything worth a shit that will lead us to her.”

I swallow heavily, my eyes closing slightly from the lack of sleep. If I’m not out searching for answers, threatening and bribing people for information, I’m watching the videos. Over and over again. Because it’s all I can do.

Ellie’s been gone for thirty-five days. Thirty-five fucking days without sleeping with her cuddled into my side. Without seeing her doing yoga in the living room. Without smelling her sweet vanilla scent. Thirty-five days without watching her read her romance books while she lays out by the pool. Without seeing her smile, hearing her laughter.

Our baby has grown another four weeks, is now the size of a honeydew. I haven’t felt him kick my hand, heard her talk to him. She hasn’t rearranged the nursery or bought anymore baby outfits. I have no idea if her blood pressure is up, if she’s able to take her anemia medication.

It’s been thirty-five days, and we’re no closer to finding her. It’s as if the car she got into drove off the face of the Earth. Nobody’s reached out wanting a ransom, her accounts haven’t been touched. We’ve hired the best

of the best, and nobody has any answers.

I press play, and the frame picks up where it left off with Ellie disappearing into the car. A second later, the window goes down, and her necklace and watch are thrown out. Her phone is on the ground already, having fallen from her hand when she was grabbed. Before the window goes up, my screen is slammed shut.

I spin around and stand, cock my fist back, then hit Micah square in the jaw. He stumbles back, but once he's gathered his wits, he comes for me, tackling me to the ground. I expect him to punch me—hell, I'd welcome the pain—but instead, once he's got me pinned, he grips my wrists and holds me down.

“Fucking stop!” he barks. “I get it. You're —”

“No!” I shout back, my heart racing behind my ribcage. “You don't fucking get it. Sienna was missing for a few hours. Ellie's been gone for weeks! Motherfucking weeks! Back then, we knew who took Sienna. But right now, I have no fucking clue where Ellie is!” I lift my legs, causing Micah to fall forward and off balance. I shove him to the side as I climb to my feet. “Watching these videos, searching for her, asking everyone questions are the only things keeping me from falling apart!” I pound my fist against my chest.

“She's somewhere out there, God knows where, probably fucking scared. For all we know, she's been trafficked. She could be anywhere at this point. In someone's basement, in a shipping crate on the way to another country to be sold,” I say, imagining all the horrific possibilities and scenarios. “She's due in a few weeks, and I don't know how to get to her.” I choke out the last words, emotion clogging my throat as tears fill my lids. I close my eyes, wishing the world around me would disappear. If something's happened to Ellie...Fuck, I don't want to be in a world where she doesn't exist.

“Lincoln,” Micah says, palming my face. Prying my lids open, I look into my brother's eyes which are filled with emotion. “We'll find her.”

“You don't know that.” I shake my head and move past him, unable to look at him any longer. All I want is to be alone.

“I promise, we won't stop until we do.”

“Yeah,” I agree, more so to get him to go away.

“Come to dinner tonight, please,” he says, following me to the front door. “Colton has a checkup we need to take him to, but when we get home, come over and eat with us.”

“I’m not good company.”

“Nobody expects you to be. But right now, whether you want to admit it or not, you need to be around family.”

“What I need is to find Ellie.” Snatching my keys, I head out, having no idea where I’m going but needing to do everything I can to try to find her...To find someone who has information regarding Ellie’s captor and where he’s taken her. Somebody has to know something.



Ellie

“IS SHE READY?”

“I’m only thirty-six weeks!”

“I didn’t ask you,” Eleazar barks, shooting me a glare. “Dr. Pasquale, if she were to give birth right now, would the baby survive?”

“M-Mr. Gutierrez,” the doctor stammers, terrified of Eleazar—which makes sense, since he’s coercing the poor doctor into doing as he demands by threatening his family. “Technically, yes, but —”

“No buts.” Eleazar raises his hand. “I’m tired of waiting. The Alexanders are circling. They’re asking too many questions, and I can’t hide for much longer. When I take back my life, I need to make a grand entrance. And the only way I can do that is with my heir in my arms.”

I close my eyes and try to tune out his grand plan. Since he has no intention of letting me survive past giving birth, he’s had no problem speaking in front of me—dead people can’t talk after all.

At first, I was confused as to why he hasn’t killed Micah and Lincoln yet, but when he shared his plan, I realized Eleazar Gutierrez has lost his damn mind. In time, he does intend to kill them, but not until he’s shown Lincoln that he will be raising his son and has reestablished his rightful place in Tesoro. Since he holds them both responsible for trying to kill him and then dismantling his empire, Eleazar doesn’t just want to take his life back—he wants retribution for the time he’s lost.

“I’ll need to run a few tests to make sure, but —”

“Then do it!” Eleazar barks.

“I’ll need a nurse to assist and equipment.”

“Fine.” Eleazar steps toward him and gets in his face. “Just remember that if anyone finds out, I’ll not only have your wife and daughter raped while you watch, but they’ll be tortured and murdered as well. And I’ll leave you alive, so you’ll be forced to remember every day the consequences of having betrayed me.”

“I-I understand, sir.”

“Good! I’m tired of waiting for what’s owed to me. Today is the day I finally take back my life.” He glares my way. “And everyone else loses theirs.”

Eleazar stalks out, leaving the doctor and me alone, but I don’t bother begging him to help me. I learned the first time I did that, the room where I’m being held captive is monitored. When I tried to bribe the doctor for his help, Eleazar punished me by covering my mouth for what felt like days, which prevented me from eating and drinking. As much as I want to fight back, I can’t risk my baby being hurt in the process. My only hope is that Lincoln somehow manages to find and rescue us. It’s the only thought that keeps me going every day.

When the doctor leans in close, I flinch, unsure what he’s doing, why he’s suddenly so close to me, until his lips brush my ear and he murmurs, “I’m going to find a way to save you.”

Just as quickly as he leaned in, he stands upright, and when he leaves the room, I’m left wondering if I just imagined what he said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

SIENNA



“THANK GOD HIS LUNGS ARE CLEAR.” I PLACE COLTON BACK IN THE CAR seat and buckle him in, giving him a soft kiss to his forehead. About a week ago, Colton caught a cold from the girls. We had the pediatrician come check them out. Luckily, London and Brooklyn’s immune systems are strong, and aside from a cough, they’re okay. But Colton is younger, so he’s struggling a bit more than them. The pediatrician recommended having his chest x-rayed to be on the safe side, and thankfully, everything is okay.

“And did you see he weighs twelve pounds?” I add. “He’s getting so big so fast. It feels like he was just born, yet he’s already two months old.”

“Time doesn’t stop,” Micah mutters, a sardonic smile spreading across his face. It’s been a month since Ellie was taken, and even though he’s right, time doesn’t stop, it also feels like someone pressed pause on our lives the moment she disappeared.

“How’s your eye feeling?” I reach up to palm the side of his face, hating how badly it looks. When Lincoln punched him, he got him good. It’s only been a couple of hours, but there’s already an intense bruise forming.

“It’s fine.” He tilts his head to the side, avoiding my touch. I try not to take it personally, knowing he’s not upset with me but worried about his brother and the search for Ellie—just as I am—but it still hurts. “We should head home.”

Ever since Ellie went missing, Micah insisted on homeschooling the girls, not wanting to risk anyone else’s safety by any of us leaving the hotel. The only reason we’re out right now is because Colton needed to have his lungs

checked for fluid, which needed to be done at the hospital.

When we walk past the cafeteria, the scent of caffeine permeates the air, and I make a last second decision to grab a cup of coffee from here. I know from our Lamaze classes that they sell coffee from Coffee Grind, a local coffee shop that I love.

“Hellcat,” Micah grumbles.

“I’ll just be a second. I’m running on fumes.”

While I get in line, Micah stands off to the side with Colton, holding the stroller. And two guards, who are there to protect us, monitor the area.

As the line moves forward, I step up to the counter, ready to place my order, when a woman walking past bumps into me, nearly knocking me over.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she says. “Please excuse me.”

I’m about to tell her it’s okay, when she shoves something into my hand, stunning me silent. I watch as she continues on her way and then open the paper in my hand.

Follow me to Eliza. She’s in danger. Please bring help.

I read the words once, twice, a third time before they sink in, and I rush after her. I have no idea where she’s going or if this is a trap, but I’ll be damned if I don’t do as she says.

“Sienna,” Micah hisses, catching up to me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m—” It hits me just before I start explaining that there must be a reason why the woman gave me a note instead of telling me. Someone might be listening.

“I need to use the restroom,” I say instead. I hand Micah the paper and take over pushing the stroller so he can read the note.

The second his eyes land on the words, his steps falter slightly, his gaze flying around the area until they land on the woman I’m following. And then he pulls out his phone and starts typing.

She leads us outside, and just as I begin to worry about keeping up with her—since we have the baby with us and our vehicle is parked on the other side—two cars pull up.

“Get in with the baby,” Micah says.

“What? No. I need to go to my sister.”

“You need to go home with our son where it’s safe. When we get Ellie,

she's going to need you."

I want to argue, but he's right, and I don't want to waste time when I know he'll never let me put myself in harm's way. So instead, I pull him into a quick hug, telling him that I love him and to please bring Ellie home.

He nods into my hair. "I love you, and I will."

And then Colton and I get into the car with one of the guards, and I pray my husband comes back alive with Ellie in tow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ELLIE



“PLEASE! NO!” I SCREAM, TRYING WITH EVERYTHING IN ME TO SHAKE MY body enough that the doctor won’t be able to cut me open. “Please,” I beg. “Don’t do this! It’s not time!”

The doctor gives me a look of sympathy, and tears fill my eyes, knowing he has no choice. Either I was imagining that he said he would get help, or he was unsuccessful. Either way, he’s numbed me from the waist down, has prepped me for a caesarean delivery, and is about to cut me open and tear my baby out of me, and there’s nothing I can do to stop him.

“I’m waiting on the other nurse to arrive,” he says to Eleazar. “She’s the pediatric nurse. We need her to —”

“I’m done waiting!” Eleazar barks. “Cut her open now!”

“Please! You can’t —”

“Shut up!” Eleazar slaps me across the face so hard, I nearly black out. “Shut her up!”

“I don’t—” the doctor begins, but Eleazar cuts him off.

“Shut her up, or I’ll kill your entire family.”

The doctor nods and grabs something from the table. When I glance over, I see it’s a needle.

“Please don’t,” I whimper.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters almost incoherently. “This will put you to sleep,” he says a bit louder, “so you won’t feel any pain.”

I swallow nervously, staring at him as he sticks me with the needle. A few moments later, everything begins to turn hazy. I try to keep my eyes

open, but they're too heavy.

There's a loud bang followed by several more bangs, and I want so badly to see what's going on, but my eyes give up, closing of their own accord as everything around me fades to black, and I pray that my baby's okay.



Lincoln

FROM THE MOMENT I GOT THE TEXT FROM MICAH TELLING ME THEY HAVE A lead as to where Ellie might be, followed by his location, everything kicked into overdrive.

I wasn't sure what the hell was going on, but I knew my brother wouldn't fuck with me, so I followed the location until it led me to a back road with fresh tracks.

But instead of taking that road, I kept following where Micah was leading me. When I saw his vehicle, I pulled up and got out.

"Where are we? Where is she?"

"I think she's down the road we passed."

"How the hell do you know?"

"A nurse tipped Sienna off. She drove down that road, but I kept going. She wrote that Ellie is in danger."

"So, what the fuck are we waiting for?" I start heading back to my car, but Micah gets out and catches up to me.

"Stop. We don't know what we're walking into. This could be a trap. Whoever has her is most likely armed, probably with an army of men who've been told to shoot without question. We need to be smart about this. I sent Max the location, and he's gathering information."

Fuck, I know he's right. But the idea of us being so close to Ellie and unable to get to her has me shaking.

"Yeah?" Micah says, putting his phone to his ear as two more vehicles arrive with our men inside. "Okay, thanks."

He hangs up. "He was able to hack into a satellite nearby. There's an abandoned house about a mile back. Two guys are guarding the front door, two in the back. He can't see inside, but..."

"But the chances of this being a coincidence is slim. Ellie's got to be in

there.” For the first time in a damn month, I have hope that we’re going to find her.

“Yeah,” Micah agrees as we’re handed Kevlar vests and weapons.

We go over the game plan, with the goal to get in and get out with Ellie—as well as the nurse who Micah believes put her life on the line to deliver the message to Sienna—and then we pile into two vehicles, leaving the others here. Since driving up would tip the guards off and risk Ellie’s captor doing something crazy, we pull over halfway up the road and park, getting out and walking the rest of the way.

Because they’re not expecting anyone to be approaching by foot, we’re able to surround the area. We take out the guards quickly, and Micah and I run in, knowing our men have our backs.

We listen for voices, and once we have a location, we approach the room slowly, careful not to tip off whoever’s here. But when we arrive, and I take in the sight before me, I fear we are in fact too late.

Ellie’s on a medical table, her eyes closed. A doctor is standing over her with a nurse next to him. Another nurse is standing to the side. And then there’s a man in a suit. I don’t know who he is, but what I do know is that he doesn’t belong, and my suspicions are confirmed when he barks out, “Hurry the fuck up!”

I spot the gun in his hand, aimed at the doctor’s head, and I aim my own gun and shoot, taking the man in the suit out. He flies back, blood and brain matter hitting the wall, and the doctor sucks in a harsh breath.

“Stop!” I demand, but he shakes his head. “Stop, or I’ll shoot you just like I shot him.”

“I-I can’t,” he says. “It’s too late.”

I step further into the room, my gun now aimed at the doctor’s head, and faintly hear someone saying, “All clear,” but my only focus is on the huge gaping hole in Ellie’s stomach.

“What the fuck did you do?” I hiss, ready to blow this fucker to bits.

“Mr. Gutierrez made him,” the nurse rushes out. “The doctor tried to stall, but he forced him to cut her open.”

“Mr...?” I glance at Micah, whose eyes are as wide as mine probably are.

“Eleazar Gutierrez,” the doctor clarifies. “He’s been threatening my family to get me to cooperate. He wanted the baby. I’m so sorry,” he says, his eyes and words pleading with me. “It’s too late. I have to deliver the baby. She’s already been exposed.”

“Fuck,” Micah hisses. “I’m calling an ambulance.”

“Is Ellie okay?” I choke out, brushing several sweaty strands of Ellie’s hair out of her face.

“She’s sedated,” the doctor says. “She’ll wake up soon, but right now, I need to deliver this baby.”

“It’s too early. She’s still got a month to go.”

The doctor nods as he goes back to what he’s doing. “His lungs are developed. It will be okay.”

Micah and I watch as the doctor and nurses work in unison to deliver Ellie’s and my son. I’m not sure what they’re doing, but the moment I see a head full of hair, it feels like my heart leaps out of my chest. A moment later, Donovan’s shoulder and upper body appear, and then the rest of him is pulled out. He’s covered in blood, and I hold my breath, praying he’s okay.

And then the most beautiful sound fills the room when our son lets out a cry for the very first time. The doctor hands him off to the nurse before returning his attention back to Ellie. I’m torn between watching him work on Ellie and making sure our child is okay.

As if Micah can sense my turmoil, he says, “Go make sure your son is taken care of, I’ll watch the doctor.”

“Thank you.”

I go to the nurse, who cleans Donovan off and suctions shit out of his nose. “I don’t have all the equipment to check him here,” she murmurs, “but he looks healthy.” She wraps him in a blanket before extending her arms out to me. “Would you like to hold your son?”

I nod, choked up with emotion. After putting the safety back on my gun and stowing it away, the nurse places my son into my arms. His eyes are closed and he’s whimpering, still with a bit of blood and shit on him, but he’s the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Welcome to the world, Donovan Michael Alexander.” His eyes flutter open, as if he already knows his name, and his lips purse together. He lets out a soft cry, and my heart swells inside my chest. I walk him over to Ellie and hold him next to her. “This is your mom. She’s asleep right now, but trust me when I tell you, you’re already her entire world.”



Ellie

THE FIRST THING I HEAR WHEN I COME TO IS HIS VOICE. "...SHE HAS THE MOST expressive, beautiful green eyes and the sweetest smile. And when she looks at you, it's as if you're the only person that matters. She's strong and resilient, and even though life dealt her a shit hand, she never let it get her down."

I'm not sure who he's talking to or where I am, but his voice is soothing, and I'm tired. I want to open my eyes, but it feels like I just need a little more sleep...

The sound of what I assume is a door creaking open hits my ears, and then I hear my sister speak. "She's still asleep?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure she'll wake up soon. How could she not when she's got this perfect little miracle waiting to meet her?"

Huh? Who's waiting to meet me?

Before I can give it much thought, my sister says, "Did all the tests come back okay?"

At first, I think she's talking about me, until Lincoln responds. "He's perfect, despite that asshole having him ripped out of Ellie's womb early."

My eyes shoot open at his words, my hand going to my belly, as everything comes rushing back to me: Oscar being shot, me being taken and held captive by Eleazar, and then Eleazar forcing the doctor to deliver Donovan early.

Where my bump was, it's now flat, and I gasp out loud, realizing I'm no longer pregnant. "My baby," I choke out, my gaze landing on Lincoln.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," he says, standing. And it's then that I see the bundle of blankets nestled in his arms. "Ellie, I'd like for you to meet your son." He leans on the edge of the bed and places my baby boy in my arms, and I immediately start to cry, my emotions overtaking me.

"Is he...Is he okay?" I choke out, my eyes glued to the sweet little baby who's now cradled in my arms. His eyes are closed, and his lips are pursed, making a sucking motion. He's got a bit of dark hair on the top of his head and the cutest button nose.

"He's perfect, El," Sienna says. "He's six pounds and twenty and a half inches. His lungs are fully developed, and he passed all the testing they ran on him once he arrived."

I sigh in relief, thankful that the doctor was telling the truth when he told

Eleazar that the baby was okay to be delivered. Speaking of which...“What happened? Is Eleazar...?”

Lincoln’s jaw clenches. “He’s dead. And this time, he’s not coming back. I blew his head off his goddamn shoulders.”

“Micah and Lincoln said it barely looked like him,” Sienna adds. “But a rush DNA test confirmed that you guys are related.”

“Yeah, it’s him. Someone saved him from the fire and nursed him back to health. He was in a coma for a while and had to have skin grafts and surgeries, which is why he didn’t look the same. Once he’d finally recovered and returned, he was pissed to discover that everything he built had been destroyed. But he didn’t just want everyone involved dead, he wanted revenge.

“His plan was to kidnap and sell me like he originally wanted, but then I slept with Lincoln and got pregnant. So, he changed his plan...”

“To take our son,” Lincoln guesses.

“Yeah. He was going to take him and then kill all of us. Was it the doctor who saved me? He told me he would, but I wasn’t sure...”

“Yeah,” Sienna says with a small smile. “A nurse approached me at the hospital and had us follow her. The doctor asked her to get help, but she couldn’t find us at first because we were at an appointment for Colton. Luckily, she stumbled upon the appointment information when she logged into the hospital’s database searching for any particulars that might help her locate us. That’s how she was finally able to track us down.

“By the time we found the location where you were being held and were able to go in and get to you, it was already too late,” Lincoln says.

“Looks like you showed up right on time,” I say, leaning over and inhaling Donovan’s baby scent. I glance up at Lincoln. “Thank you. This is the second time you’ve saved me.”

Lincoln shakes his head. “I never should’ve had to —”

“Stop.” I reach out and place my hand in his. “Everything is okay, and beating yourself up over what happened isn’t going to help anything. Our baby is here, and he’s perfect. Eleazar is gone, and we’re all okay.”

“Everyone except Oscar,” Sienna murmurs. “He didn’t make it.”

Tears fill my lids. I had a feeling that the shot might’ve killed him, but I was hoping that wasn’t the case. “He was a good guard,” I say through my tears. “A good man. I know he wasn’t married and didn’t have kids, but I’d like to pay for his funeral and make sure his mom is taken care of.”

“We did all that,” Lincoln tells me. “It was a few weeks ago. We made sure he had a good service, and we took care of his mom.”

“Oh, right...Because I was gone for over a month.”

“There she is.” A doctor I don’t recognize walks in. “Glad to see you’re awake and holding your baby. How are you feeling?”

“I’m still a bit out of it,” I admit.

“That’s to be expected.”

The doctor explains everything my body went through, what I can expect healing wise, and then asks if I’m planning to breastfeed. Since I am, he offers to call in a lactation specialist and says he’ll be back later to check on me. Sienna tells us she’s going to let Micah know that I’m awake, giving us a few minutes alone.

“It’s so crazy,” I say once Sienna and the doctor are gone. “I went to sleep pregnant and woke up a mom.”

Lincoln chuckles. “It’s probably for the best. Seeing your insides is something I’ll never forget.” He leans over and palms my face, pressing his lips to mine. “I’m so thankful we were able to find you, Kitten. Don’t be surprised if I don’t let you or this little guy leave my sight for a while. I never knew what I was missing until you came back into my life. Now that I know, I couldn’t handle losing either of you.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing you’ll never have to find out.” I move over so he can join me on the bed, and he climbs on, pulling me and the baby into his arms. “When I snuck into your club hoping to seduce you, I never thought it would end up like this,” I half joke, making him laugh. “But I have to say, the risk was definitely worth the reward.”

EPILOGUE

ELLIE



Four months later

“So, YOU HAVEN’T SEEN HIM ALL DAY?”

“Nope. He said with the Valentine’s event happening at Elite, he would be home late,” I tell my sister as I walk into the penthouse with a sleeping Donovan wrapped in my baby carrier. When I find Lincoln’s parents sitting in the living room, I screech in shock.

“Everything okay?” Sienna asks.

“Yeah, sorry. Donna and Michael are here. Let me call you back.”

I hang up and drop my bags onto the counter. “Did we have plans?” I ask, trying to remember if I made plans and completely forgot. It wouldn’t surprise me. Baby brain is a real thing.

“No.” Donna laughs. “We’re actually here to watch our precious grandbaby.”

“What?” I shoot her a confused look, since in the four months Donovan’s been alive, I’ve yet to have anyone watch him. If he isn’t with me, he’s with Lincoln. It’s not that I don’t trust our family, but after what I went through, I can’t seem to let my son out of my sight. I know it’s unhealthy, which is why I’ve started to attend therapy on a regular basis. Lincoln even attends with me sometimes, and it feels like it’s really helping.

“You have a note waiting for you in your bedroom,” Donna says with a grin.

After I unwrap Donovan and lay him in his crib, I go to my bedroom to

see what Donna's talking about, and sure enough, there's a large red box with a black bow on the bed. I open it and find a note on top.

Happy Valentine's Day,

It was one year ago today that our lives were forever changed. I've enclosed something for you to wear, and once you're ready, there will be a limo waiting to take you to me.

Love,

Lincoln

P.S. I know you're freaking out about leaving Donovan with my parents, but it's only for a few hours, and Sienna and Micah are right down the hall.

HE'S RIGHT, I AM FREAKING OUT. BUT MY EXCITEMENT OVER WHATEVER Lincoln's planned is helping a bit. Setting the note down, I open the tissue paper and find the most exquisite little black dress and heels. Underneath is a lacy set of lingerie and nestled at the bottom is the same Venetian cat mask I wore to the masquerade party one year ago.

Butterflies erupt in my belly in remembrance of that first night I spent with Lincoln. The gentle way he taught me what it means to make love while rocking my world. I thought that night could never be topped, but I was wrong because Lincoln has spent the past year showing me repeatedly just how amazing sex can be with the person you love.

After I've gotten ready, fed Donovan, and have gone over everything with Donna and Michael, I head out with my new guard, Westley. Just as Lincoln wrote, there's a limo waiting for us. Westley opens the door for me and helps me in and then sits in the front with the chauffeur.

The drive to Elite is short, and once we're there, I expect to be taken around back, but instead, we go through the front just like I did last time. The bouncer nods in greeting as I make my way in, a confirmation that there's no need for pretense like last year. As I enter, I quickly realize that Westley's no longer trailing behind. And when I step inside the club with my mask on, I'm

taken back to last Valentine's Day. Only this time, instead of the fear and uncertainty running through my veins, I'm buzzing with electricity at the thought of spending time with Lincoln.

Unsure where to go, I head straight for the bar, since that's where I encountered Lincoln on Valentine's night one year ago today. I situate myself on the barstool, and the bartender brings me over a mojito without me having to ask. It's only then that I realize Lincoln is recreating that very momentous night. Although we've never discussed the particulars of that night, Lincoln clearly remembers everything about it. I love that he remembers even the smallest details, such as what I wore and what I drank.

I take a sip of my drink, and even though I'm not nervous, I create an origami bird while I wait for Lincoln to appear.

A few minutes later, a gentleman dressed to the nines in a sexy tux takes a seat next to me. He orders himself a drink before casually glancing over. "Not a duck."

I giggle at his perception. "A bird." I place it in front of him and slowly look up. With his mask on, just like last time, the only features I can completely make out are his beautiful hazel eyes.

When his gaze meets mine, he shakes his head and chuckles. "How did I not know it was you?" He palms the side of my face. "I would recognize those gorgeous emerald eyes anywhere."

"I'm glad you didn't," I admit. "We wouldn't be where we are if you had."

"I'd like to argue, but you're right. I wasn't ready for you yet. But I am now." He leans in and presses his lips to mine. "Dance with me?"

His question is simple, yet the meaning is so deep my belly knots. "I would love to."

With our fingers entwined, Lincoln guides us onto the dance floor and pulls me into his arms. With my head on his chest, we sway to the music in comfortable silence for several minutes before Lincoln speaks.

"I became obsessed with vanilla after that night. Had I been around you afterward and breathed in your intoxicating scent, I would've known it was you." He inhales deeply, dragging his nose along the curve of my neck, and the area between my legs tightens in anticipation, knowing that soon we'll make our way to the backroom.

When Lincoln doesn't make any move to leave the dance floor, I whisper, "I want you," and he chuckles, the deep yet melodic sound doing crazy things

to my insides.

Without saying a word, he drags me down the hall to the same room as last time. He presses the card to the door's sensor, and we step inside, the bit of light from the hall disappearing the second the door closes behind us.

Lincoln pushes me against the door, and memories from that night come rushing back. Only now, the fear and uncertainty have been replaced with hunger and confidence.

Our mouths connect in a passionate kiss filled with love and desire. I don't have to see him to know that he loves me and craves me. I can feel it in the way his mouth moves against mine. In the way his hands roam along my body.

"Jesus, baby. I can't get enough of you," he murmurs, nipping my bottom lip before he trails open-mouthed kisses along my neck and collarbone. We work in unison shedding our clothes, and once we're both naked, he turns me around so my ass is jutting outward, and my hands are against the wall.

"Spread those thighs, Kitten."

I do as he says, and a second later, he parts my cheeks, and his tongue glides across the tight rosebud. "Oh, fuck," I moan, knowing he needs to get me ready first, but wanting him deep in my ass right now. Lincoln works me up, taking me to the edge, but before I can jump, he pulls back and twirls me around and into his arms. He carries me to the bed and lays me down.

He kisses me hard, then demands, "Get on your knees."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. Once I'm positioned, he slides inside me. He's hard and thick, and as he grips my hips and fucks me with abandon, I'm reminded of how perfectly we fit. I scream out my orgasm, and before I've come down, he's thrusting into my ass.

I never imagined that one day, I'd not only be comfortable enough with a man to have sex, but I would enjoy anal. But I know it's only because I'm with Lincoln. I feel safe with him, knowing I can trust him with every part of me.

I climax again, this time taking Lincoln with me. And when we've both come down from our orgasms, he lifts me once again and carries me to the bathroom. Unlike last time—when I refused to let him see me in the light, in fear of him finding out who I was—we remove our masks and shower together, making love under the water before we get out.

I expect for us to get dressed, so I'm shocked when he guides us back into the dark room and over to the bed.

“Haven’t gotten your fill yet?” I joke, when he hovers over me and nuzzles his face into my neck.

“Not possible,” he murmurs, pressing a soft kiss to the sensitive spot just under my ear. “The more I have you, the more I want you.”

“Never know,” I say with a laugh. “One day you might get sick of me.”

“Not happening. But how about we put it to a test?” He nibbles my flesh, and I moan in agreement.

“Okay, sure.” I tilt my head to give him better access. “But how do you suppose we test this theory?”

“By you marrying me,” he says, shocking me still. “And spending the rest of our lives together.” Because we’re in the dark, I can’t see him, but I can feel when he takes my left hand in his and slides something onto my third finger.

“Lincoln,” I breathe, my heart pounding against my ribcage.

“I love you, Ellie,” he says, his lips pressing against mine. I close my eyes, and when I open them, the light is on, and Lincoln’s looking down on me, his eyes filled with warmth. “Until you, I could never imagine settling down. I was content with keeping shit light and casual. But now, I can’t imagine going back to being that man. I love our lazy mornings and late nights. Watching you do yoga and dance. You’re an amazing mom to our son, and you’re my best friend. I crave you and want you and desire you, and I know I’ll never stop.”

He lifts my hand, and I spot the shiny diamond that’s now resting on my finger. It’s simple yet elegant, and I love it.

“Marry me, Kitten, and I promise to spend our lives proving to you that the risk you took on me was totally worth the reward.”

I throw my head back with a laugh, remembering when I told him that. “I don’t need you to prove anything to me, Lincoln. You already do...Every single day...Through your actions, with your love. Yes, I’ll marry you, but I was wrong...You were never a risk...Because you’ve always been my safe place.”



Want more Ellie and Lincoln?

[Read a bonus epilogue here.](#)

If you haven't read Sienna's and Micah's story,
you can check it out here: [The Risk of Falling](#)

If you enjoyed A Risk Worth Taking, please consider leaving a review. All it
takes is 10 words to make an author's day!

[Review A Risk Worth Taking](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nikki Ash is a USA Today Bestselling author of contemporary romance, focusing on single parent, secret baby, and surprise pregnancy romances. She spends her days and nights getting lost in words. When she's not writing, she's reading. From the Boxcar Children, to Wuthering Heights, to the latest single parent romance, she has lived and breathed every type of book.

Nikki resides in South Florida with her husband, two children, and dog that she considers to be one of her kids. When she's not reading or writing, she's traveling the world with her family—in search of inspiration.

Connect with Nikki Ash

[Website](#) * [Nikki Ash's reader group](#)

[Join my newsletter today and get THREE free books!](#)

[Check out my full list of e-books and audio books!](#)



FINDING BEAUTY IN THE DARKNESS PREVIEW

IF YOU ENJOYED A RISK WORTH TAKING, I THINK YOU'D ENJOY FINDING Beauty in the Darkness. Please be warned, like A Risk Worth Taking, Finding Beauty in the Darkness has content warnings that can be views on my [website](#).

CONTINUE TO READ ON FOR A PREVIEW OF FINDING BEAUTY IN THE Darkness.

FINDING BEAUTY IN THE DARKNESS PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE GIOVANNI

“LISTEN, DON, YOU AND MY FATHER GO WAY BACK, SO IF THIS GIRL HAS THE balls to show up here and ask for the loan, I’m going to give it to her. But I just had Johnny look her up and she isn’t worth shit. You know I don’t normally deal with people like this.”

I’m sitting at my desk in my office, checking my watch for the time... again. I’ve got too much shit to handle today, and dealing with a little girl who needs money to pay off her overdue credit card bills isn’t my top priority, that’s for damn sure.

“I understand, Giovanni. Like I said, I’m calling in a personal favor. This girl, Ashley, she’s a tough cookie, but she just can’t seem to catch a break. Single mom, working at my strip joint to make ends meet. She isn’t like the usual women. She doesn’t do drugs. She’s got her head screwed on right. She wouldn’t be asking for thirty grand unless she’s desperate for it.”

Don is the owner of Double D’s strip club here in Las Vegas. For many

years, Don and my father have done business together. Our family owns the club, but we are what you call a silent partner. My father has been using the club to launder money for years. I, on the other hand, have more productive ways to do business.

“You know the chance of me getting my money back from her is slim, right? Which means you’ll be paying me back if she can’t.” Don knows I don’t lend money to people who have nothing to lose.

“I told her if she can’t pay you back, she’d have to work for you.”

I laugh at that. There’s no way I’m forcing some woman to work for me. The reason everything runs so smoothly is because the women who work here *choose* to be here.

“You know that’s not happening.”

Don sighs. “I know, but I’m hoping she’ll be scared enough, she’ll pay you back. She’s responsible. She’s just going through a tough time.”

There’s a knock on my door, and Johnny—my right-hand man—enters. “Boss, there’s an Ashley Myers here to see you. Edgardo asked me to see what she wants, but she only wants to speak to you. Are you expecting her?”

Edgardo is one of my bouncers here at the club. His job is to keep an eye on who’s coming and going and to make sure shit stays on the up and up. When you’re in the business I’m in, it’s easy for shit to go bad quick. The key is to always be one step ahead.

“Send her back here.” Johnny nods once and heads back out, closing the door behind him. “Listen, Don, apparently your girl has some brass fucking balls because she just got here.”

“Thank you, Giovanni. Like I said, I owe you one.”

“Yeah, you do.” *And I always fucking collect.*

I hang up the phone and wait for Johnny to walk this girl back to my office so I can handle this before I leave to meet my mom for lunch. I check my cell for any messages and notice one from Cecilia.

Cecilia: Senator Hightower hurt Natalie. Can you please come here asap?

Me: Is Rome holding him?

Cecilia: Yes

Me: Be there in twenty. Do we need to call Dr. Fox?

Cecilia: Already did. It’s not good.

Jesus fucking Christ! This isn't the first time the Senator's put his hands on one of my girls. I gave him a second chance because of his affluence in the community, but it won't be happening again—not at my damn club. I look down at my watch and make a mental note to let my mom know I won't be making it to lunch today.

There's a knock at my door and Johnny enters. "Boss, Ashley Myers."

"Thank you. You can close the door behind you."

He exits, leaving a pretty brunette with a banging fucking body, and my first thought is she would make a fabulous addition to the women here. While she's probably almost thirty years old, she screams innocence and maturity in her royal blue wrap around dress. Don was right—she isn't your typical stripper. She hasn't been in this life long enough for it to corrupt her, but it will. It always does.

I stand to greet her, and as I'm assessing her, I notice she's doing the same to me. Her eyes are telling. She's trying to figure out if she can trust me, which is ironic since I'm the one lending her the money. Her eyes roam over my face then descend to my chest. While I start my day in a three-piece suit, as the morning progresses, articles of clothing tend to get shed, piece by piece. My jacket's thrown over the back of my chair and my tie undone with the top buttons of my shirt unbuttoned.

Her eyes stop at the tattoo peeking out of my shirt. It's a saying in Italian.

Dalla nascita. Per sangue. Famiglia. By birth. By blood. Family.

My grandfather, my father, and my brothers all have the same tattoo. We were taken to get the ink done the day we turned eighteen, when we were officially brought into the organization. The moment she realizes I'm watching her check me out she blushes an adorable shade of pink. The men that frequent this place would eat her alive.

I motion for her to have a seat, then sit down as well. "How may I help you?" My tone comes across as *let's get straight to the damn point* instead of polite, and she looks down at her hands for a moment, taken aback by my bluntness. Maybe she was hoping I'd offer her some coffee and pastries. As cute as she is, I don't have time to fuck around. I have a girl who's been hurt and a Senator who's going to pay for hurting her.

Ashley looks up at me, her shoulders squared, back straight. "I need a loan for thirty thousand dollars and I was told by Don you could help me." I gotta give this girl credit. She's holding her own.

"Hmm... Did he now? Did he tell you what I accept for collateral?" I

hold back my smirk because really, I'm just fucking with this woman, but she doesn't need to know that. She doesn't own shit other than a house that will more than likely be foreclosed on in a few months, which is why Don threatened her with working for me, hoping it'll motivate her to pay me back.

"Yes, women," she chokes out, and I've immediately gained respect for her. You can see it written all over her face she's scared shitless, yet she's still here, with her chin up, asking for a loan, knowing if she can't pay me back, she'll be working as an escort here at my bordello: *La Stella Gentleman's Club*. Stella was my nonna's name, which translates to Star. When my father came over here from Italy and opened the bordello forty years ago, he named it after his mother—my grandmother—who died in a shooting shortly after my father was born.

"So, you understand, if at any time you can't pay me back the set monthly payment you'll be required to work it off here at my gentleman's club?"

"Yes, I do." Her voice wavers, but she keeps her chin up.

I have Johnny run a more thorough background check on her, and once she checks out, I lend her the money. She argues about the interest rate, and for a second I almost feel bad because I can pretty much guarantee this woman won't be able to make these payments, but at the end of the day that's not my fucking problem. My job is to bring in money, not give it away. Twenty percent interest is considered low with the people I deal with, but no matter how confident this woman is, she's playing a game she has no business being a part of. What she doesn't know is that by Don vouching for her, if she doesn't pay up, he'll end up taking over her loan.

Once she has the money in her hands, I have Johnny see her out. More than likely I'll see her again, when I'm forced to go after her for the money she owes me, until I know she has nothing left to give. Will I actually drag her here to work for me? Hell no. I prefer all my woman to come willingly, but if she knows that, she won't even bother to attempt to pay me back. More than likely, she'll lose her house then she'll sell her car. Soon after that, she'll rack up whatever credit cards she has. After she's gone down all those avenues, she'll borrow money from her family or a close friend, and once she's out of options and she's hit rock bottom—because they always do—Don will have to take over. Either way, I'll be getting my money back with interest. Because unlike Ashley, who has no idea what she got herself into, Don knows I don't fuck around. I have a reputation to protect, and in the business I'm in, your reputation is all you have.

I'm Giovanni Valentino, and my family runs one of the most powerful crime organizations in Italy as well as Nevada, and I run one of the most exclusive brothels in the United States. I am also one of the biggest loan sharks on the West Coast.

My grandfather, Joe Valentino, is now retired and lives in Italy with my younger brother, Mario, who runs a hotel and restaurant over there. My other brother, Nico, runs the hotels and casinos here in Las Vegas while my father and his adopted brother Stefan, who is Cecilia's dad, deal with the underground aspects of the business, which includes the illegal gambling as well as the exporting and importing of various contraband. We knew from an early age our grandfather and father were powerful men. This life we live is not for the weak.

My brothers and I are spaced two years apart. Me, the eldest at thirty-two years old, Mario at thirty, and Nico is the youngest at twenty-eight. Our poor mother had her hands full raising three boys growing up in the organization while trying to be the perfect mob boss's wife, but she knew from the beginning what she was getting herself into. She was working in one of the bordellos my father owned in Italy before he sold them and moved here. According to her, he saved her life and in return, she keeps her ears covered, eyes closed, and cheek turned pretending my father is the perfect husband. When the truth is, while he might be the perfect boss and businessman, he is a horrible fucking husband by normal standards. I don't doubt he loves my mother in his own fucked up way, but he has no idea how to be faithful, and she chooses to let it all go and accept him the way he is because he makes sure she's taken care of the only way he knows how.

My mother wants for nothing when it comes to materialistic possessions. She belongs to country clubs and takes vacations whenever she wants to. But it's all given to make up for the fact that my father's only true loyalty is to the Valentino organization. While she's busy being the perfect wife at their home in Summerlin, a community in between the bordello and Vegas, he's out running the organization and getting his dick wet all over Vegas. Her life is put at risk every day, and everywhere she goes, she's accompanied by bodyguards—we all are. It's always been our way of life, and I don't know any other way.

Which is why I made the decision early on to never get married. My mom claims I'm being dramatic. She says I'm still young and will change my mind one day, but when I see the emptiness in her eyes she's in denial of, I know

I'm making the right decision. I could never do that to someone. The people we bring into our lives are always at risk. My grandmother was shot going to the corner market in Italy by another organization. My mother has been in life threatening situations too many times to count. I would never want someone I love to be in harm's way for choosing to be with me. Just because it's the life I was born into doesn't mean I'm going to willingly bring someone else into this life.

Besides, why would I want to settle on one piece of ass forever when I can have any woman I want, any time I want? Who wants to eat the same food every day? It's human nature to want variety. My dad chose to get married so he could have a family, but instead of spending his life being the man my mom deserves, he's spent their entire marriage cheating on her. I'd rather stay single and not have to remain faithful to any one woman or be responsible for her wellbeing. I'll leave it up to my brothers to pass down the Valentino name.

I grab my jacket from the back of my chair, throw it on, and head to the holding cell to deal with the senator. Caesar—one of my bodyguards—joins me on my way down the hall. "I saw her, Boss. She's pretty fucked up." My fists tighten at my sides as I stalk toward the holding cell. *I'm going to kill this motherfucker.*

It's as if he reads my mind. "You know you can't kill him." Caesar grabs ahold of my shoulder, pulling me back before I open the door.

"What do you mean I can't kill him?" I'll be damned if this piece of shit lives to hurt another fucking woman.

"This shit needs to be handled properly. He's the senator and running for reelection, and he owes you a shit ton of money."

"I don't give a fuck about the money!"

"You make him disappear and questions will be raised. You don't want that attention, especially while you're in the middle of negotiations with the Lorenzo family." He's right about that. I have enough cops in my pocket to make shit go away if need be, but I'd be pushing my luck if shit goes down with the Lorenzos. We're in the middle of renegotiating the terms of our agreement and they aren't exactly known for compromising.

I swing the door open to find Rome—another one of my enforcers—standing over Senator Weston Hightower. Weston's fists are raised and bound together with a steel chain that's hooked in the ceiling. For a man in his late fifties, he's in decent shape. Gray hair trimmed neatly, probably from

the stress of trying to keep control of a state which can't be controlled. He's shirtless and there are several nail markings covering his chest. The entire room is nothing but concrete and is completely empty.

"I heard you hurt one of my girls tonight, Hightower." I get in his face, looking him right into his frightful eyes.

"I-I didn't mean to..." He stutters over his words, terrified. Bet he wasn't stuttering when he was hurting Natalie. It's so easy for a man to exude his power and strength over a woman, but just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

"Didn't mean to do what, exactly?" Placing my hand on his throat, I squeeze his jugular just enough so it cuts off his airflow.

"Hurt her." His voice is raspy from the lack of oxygen and that has me grinning on the inside.

"Rome, what *exactly* did the senator do to my girl?" I squeeze his throat tighter, causing his face to turn a light shade of red. Most people don't know this, but it takes more than a good squeeze to kill someone. It takes several minutes of completely cutting off their oxygen before the body gives up and the heart stops pumping.

"He choked her with his belt, Boss."

I look down at his pants and see his belt is missing. "And?"

"A gun, Sir."

My head whips around to Rome, keeping my hand around the senator's throat. "What the hell do you mean, a gun? Did he shoot her?" I take my gun out from the back of my waistband and point it directly at Weston's forehead, while choking him harder. His chest is rising and falling faster than before, his heart working overtime to keep him alive since he's lacking the oxygen needed to breathe properly.

"No, he shoved it inside of her and it tore her up. The doctor's checking her out now for internal bleeding." I warned this motherfucker about doing this shit at my club. The last time he used a champagne bottle to fuck her. Tore her pussy and ass up. I gave him a second chance because Natalie asked me to. She swore she agreed to what he wanted to do, but things escalated too quickly and he couldn't control himself. I call bullshit because I don't give a fuck how in the moment you are, you can always control yourself. I'm almost certain Natalie has unhealthy feelings for the senator, but this shit stops now. Her safety comes first.

"Where's the fucking gun now? Get me the damn gun and the fucking

belt!" I roar. Rome bolts out of the room. "Did you enjoy pushing metal fucking objects into my girl?" Weston doesn't say anything, so I squeeze his throat tighter, pushing the barrel of the gun harder into his forehead. I can feel the hardness of his skull against the barrel of the gun, and it takes every ounce of restraint I have not to pull the trigger and blow this asshole's brains out.

Weston shakes his head emphatically, his eyes wide with fear.

"I think you did enjoy it."

Rome comes back into the room with the belt and gun. I remove my gun from his head and tuck it back into my waistband. I release my hand from the senator's throat, and he inhales a huge gulp of air as he tries to catch his breath. Taking the belt from Rome, I wrap it around the senator's throat, tightening it past the smallest hole. He begins gasping for a breath once again. *Good! Now you'll know what she felt like.*

"Please, Giovanni. I'm sorry. Please, I won't be that rough again."

"It's Mr. Valentino to you. You don't get the right to use my first name you piece of shit. And damn right you won't be that rough with her again because you aren't welcome in my club anymore."

Grabbing Weston's gun from Rome, I push it up against Weston's lips, forcing them apart. He tries to fight against me, but when I tighten my grip on the belt, his face goes pale and he has no choice but to open wide. Pushing the barrel of the gun down his throat, I begin to fuck his throat with the gun. He's choking and gagging on the barrel, his face turning a light shade of grey.

"Does that feel good? Huh? How does it feel having a metal object shoved inside of you?" Weston's head shakes and his body starts to convulse from the lack of air. A few more minutes and he'll be dead. I hear one of my men clear his throat, and reluctantly, I let go of the belt. None of my men would dare tell me what to do, but they have my back, and they know killing the senator right now wouldn't be in my best interest.

Shoving the gun down farther, I feel it bottom out as he gags and chokes. Then I move it out of his throat, and with the same gun he just deep throated, I point it right between his eyes.

"You are *never* to step foot in my club again, and our deal... consider it void effective immediately. You have thirty days to pay me back with interest. Don't make me fucking hunt you down." And unlike the idle threat I made to that stripper a little while ago, I *will* follow through on this one.

Dropping the gun and belt to the floor, I walk away from that piece of shit before I change my mind and end his life right here. “Get him off my property and get rid of his gun.” Just as I’m about to exit the room, I hear Weston take a deep breath of relief. I stop and turn back around.

“On second thought, undo those chains.” I nod toward the ceiling. Rome pulls the lever on the chains and the senator’s hands come flying down, still cuffed together. Taking the gun back from Rome, I grab ahold of his right hand. Jerking it toward the wall and splaying his hand out, I smash his fingers with the gun over and over again. He screams in agony as the bones shatter. “Next time you consider hurting a woman who has put her trust in you, remember these broken fingers are nothing compared to what I’ll do to you if I find out about it.”

I get to Natalie’s room and knock softly. “Come in,” I hear through the door. I walk in and see Natalie lying on the bed, the doctor sitting next to her, and Cecilia standing next to Natalie, holding her hand. Cecilia is like the madam of the club. Her entire job is to take care of the women and make sure they’re safe. She ensures they’re all on birth control and are tested regularly, as well as makes sure they are happy. Not a single woman is here against her will, and every one of the women are more than compensated for their services.

When my father first moved our family here, my mom was the madam of the bordello. When I took over the club ten years ago, she passed the torch to Cecilia.

I know my parents are hoping one day Cecilia and I will get married. Cecilia’s dad, Stefan Ricci, is as close to a brother as it gets for my father. My grandfather took him under his wing years ago, and it would give the family great pleasure to have us marry and make everyone legally related. A grandchild together would make us family by blood. While she’s a decent fuck, it’s not happening.

“How’s she doing, doc?” I direct my question at Vivian Fox, the on-call doctor for the mansion, but I give Natalie my full attention. I don’t like to see my girls hurt, especially by a piece of trash corrupt senator like Weston Hightower.

“She has some tearing in her vaginal walls but no internal bleeding. I’m giving her an antibiotic to be on the safe side because of what he put in her.”

I run my fingers over her neck where that asshole choked her. There’s a bright red ring around the entire length of her throat that’s already turning

purple, the first hint of a bruise forming. “Does your throat hurt?” Natalie nods softly, tears filling her eyes. “I made sure he was punished, and he’ll never be back here again. Take a few days off and get some rest, okay?”

“Okay.” I can see the hurt and betrayal shining through in her eyes over the fact a man she cared about used his power and strength to hurt her.

“I want you to speak with Dr. Simone before you go back to work.” Gladius Simone is a therapist all the women see. According to my mom, a woman selling her body for money can make even the strongest crumble, so I make sure every woman who works for me sees the therapist. If she doesn’t feel they are in the right mind, they don’t work here.

I walk Vivian out and thank her for coming so quickly. I can see the disdain evident in her eyes—she wants to say something but the amount of money she gets paid keeps her from speaking her mind.

“I’ll make sure everyone knows Senator Hightower is forbidden to step foot on these grounds,” I say to Cecilia after the doctor leaves.

“Thank you, *amore*.” Cecilia gives me a kiss on my cheek, her hands run up my body, and her perky tits rub against my chest. She lingers a little too long, her wet lips remaining on my flesh, then she moves her mouth over to kiss my lips.

“Not out here, Cecilia.” She pouts but nods in understanding. She knows I don’t fuck around where everyone can see. I have a reputation to uphold. Touching and fucking stays behind closed doors.

Taking her hand in mine, I pull her into my office. It’s on the first floor, along with the restaurant, the bar, and the common area, as well as the private rooms. On this floor, there is also the staff kitchen. All the ladies, including Cecilia, sleep on the second floor. The east wing is for the women who work as escorts, and the west wing is for the rest of the staff. My living quarters are on the third floor by itself, and I never bring anybody to my room. Bedrooms are intimate, and nothing about what I do with Cecilia or any woman is meant to be intimate. It’s nothing more than a fuck, and whoever I’m with, especially Cecilia, needs to remember that.

Once we get to my office, I don’t bother to remove her clothes. She’s been getting too emotionally attached lately and needs to remember she’ll never be anything more than a fuck.

Pulling her dress up to her waist, I push her underwear to the side and stick two fingers inside her to make sure she’s wet. She quickly undoes my pants, pushing them to the ground, then she reaches into my briefs to pull my

dick out.

Grabbing her by her hair, I turn her around and bend her over the edge of my desk, her face pressed against the wood, her ass up in the air. I rip open a condom, roll it over my hard length, then shove my cock into her cunt, fucking her relentlessly until we both find our release.

Once we've both come, I tuck myself back into my briefs and pull my pants up. Cecilia turns around with hearts in her eyes. At some point, I'm going to have to stop fucking her. She wants all types of shit I can't give her. Shit I'm not *willing* to give her.

"I need to get back to work." I open the door, making it clear it's time for her to leave. Money doesn't get made on its own after all.

[Continue reading Finding Beauty in the Darkness.](#)