



Baby

B I L L I O N A I R E

DADDY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOLIE DAY 

BILLIONAIRE BABY DADDY

A SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE

JOLIE DAY



CONTENTS

Prologue: Ella

1. Marcus
2. Ella
3. Marcus
4. Ella
5. Marcus
6. Ella
7. Marcus
8. Ella
9. Marcus
10. Marcus
11. Ella
12. Ella
13. Marcus
14. Ella
15. Marcus
16. Ella
17. Marcus
18. Ella

Epilogue: Ella

Billionaire BOSS: Secret Baby Sneak Peek

Continue the Series

Connect with Jolie Day

Billionaire Baby Daddy © Copyright 2020 Jolie Day

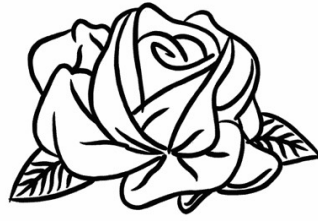
Copyright notice: All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotation embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Warning: This story contains mature themes and language.

Cover Design: ARP Book Covers

ABOUT THIS NOVEL



Two years ago, I had a one-night stand with a hot stranger.

Billionaire, Marcus Willingham.

Powerful, irresistible blue eyes, completely off-limits.

He couldn't get to me before those two thugs grabbed me, but luckily, he was able to chase them off.

It was just supposed to be one night.

No love.

No feelings.

And certainly, no regrets.

Six weeks later, I found myself staring at a positive pregnancy test.

He never called back, and my heart was broken.

Long story short, I married somebody else.

And that somebody else is now my ex. (Talk about a hot mess)

He's demanding custody of a child that isn't his.

There's only one way to solve my problem.

I have to find the real father.

The man I swore I'd never see again.

I need to call Mr. Billionaire—and ask for his DNA.

Easy-peasy, right?

PROLOGUE: ELLA



“Stupid idea,” Ray said. He was my boss, a big and intimidating man, standing at six feet five, skin the color of creamy chocolate, and bald. Although much older, Ray was ripped with muscles from head to toe and still had a fantastic way of showing a sweet side that no other person could compare to. “It’s late and rainy. Take a cab tonight.”

I wanted to roll my eyes at Ray’s suggestion, but I refrained and told him goodbye instead.

My house was three blocks from the museum’s bar, and I usually walked home at night, anyway. As the days grew closer to winter, though, the nights crept up faster and made the evenings darker. Shady people lurked in the shadowed alleyways, and Ray had told me he didn’t like the idea of someone as “feminine” as me walking home alone. As much as I thought of myself as a fighter, deep down I knew he was *probably* right.

I stepped out of the museum’s bar after washing up and grabbing my things, then walked to the curb, hoping to hail a cab. Ray hadn’t been kidding about the rain. It was freaking pouring like a monsoon (just my luck), and it didn’t take long before my outfit was soaked and clinging to my skin. The downpour made it too difficult to see two feet in front of me, and I doubted any taxis were going to spot me even if I stood under the lights of the museum. After five minutes of waiting, I grew tired of it. I wasn’t about to spend the rest of my night standing in the rain and waiting for a ride that wouldn’t show.

I turned from the curb and headed home on foot. Not an umbrella in sight—*of course*—why would I have one in my purse? What did weather forecasters know, anyway? “Oh, it’ll be sunny without a cloud in the sky.” *Tell that to my hair and soaked shirt, Mr. Weatherman.*

This is a stupid idea.

My mind already knew it, but for some reason, my legs just kept moving forward. I searched the streets for taxis, but had trouble differentiating them from other cars. I sighed and wiped soaking-wet strands of hair from my face, heading down the street and looking for the quickest way to get home.

What a perfect ending to an already crap day, I thought.

I turned a corner at a light and continued, trying to think of what I was going to do when I got home.

Change my clothes, warm up with a mug of hot coffee, and then immediately head for bed. Sounds like a good plan.

A firm hand seized my upper arm and knocked me out of my daydream. I gasped as I was yanked backward toward the corner of two buildings. The moment was a flurry of blurred images, droplets of rain, and someone’s rough hold snatching my hair and dragging me into a darker place.

From the muted sounds of the rain, I assumed it was an alley.

I cried out in panic—the hand in my hair *freaking* hurt. I tripped in my shoes, attempting to struggle, and lost a heel in the chaos. Because why not? I was in a B-rated horror flick as the chick who lost a shoe and died. Was this my end? My attacker threw me to the concrete, and I tensed before my head could crack against the hard ground, buffering my fall. I scrambled to get away but nearly ran into a burly figure just behind me.

Although the rain was torrential, I clearly made out the powerful muscles and beady eyes of one of my assailants. I turned around to run but realized I was trapped by the first man who’d grabbed me. He had longer hair that hung around his face and shoulders in a stringy mess. His face was hollow,

and his eyes were glazed over and full of ... lust. *Gross*. He and his buddy were devouring my bare legs with their disgusting gazes, and my now-exposed cleavage that was heaving in breathless fear through my thin blouse.

“I told you one would come around.” He bumped his elbow into his muscled partner.

“Give us your money!”

“Hey, hey, it must be our lucky day.” The scraggly-looking man pointed and narrowed his eyes. “Damn. Look at those legs.”

“We should strip her down so we can make this easy. Then get her into the van.”

Like hell they would!

I panicked, struggling to find a way around my attackers. I screamed at the top of my lungs but feared my voice was lost in the pounding of the rain. I backed away, breathing heavily. I was *not* going to die tonight, not in a dirty alleyway, and not at the hands of dick-bags like this. Nope, I was twenty-five and had my whole life ahead of me. Screw this shit. I searched in the darkness for something I could use as a weapon, but I was immediately cut short...

A heavy motor ripped through the alley and a blast from a headlight washed over the dark space, scaring away the shadows. My attackers were lit up, and they shielded their eyes from the blinding light. A powerful motorcycle tore through the small area, forcing the two men to back away. Within seconds, the biker leapt off the seat of his ride and threw himself toward the men.

“I suggest you keep your hands off her.” His deep voice growled loudly.

The men sized him up, seemingly unimpressed at first, then I saw them staring at the MC logo on his jacket. “We ain’t got no quarrel with you, brother.”

He took a step closer. “Well, if you touch her, then you do.”

Muscle Head hiked his thumb toward me. “This your woman?”

“Yes.”

They nodded and left me to make their getaway back into the shadows.

I was left shivering and half-stooped due to a missing shoe—yes, a bit terrified—okay, a lot, and yet hopeful that the man on the bike was there to save me—and not, you know, mug me like the other two assholes. I watched in shock as he took two steps past me, staring hard into the darkness where the two men had run, and then turned toward me. He eyed me up and down for a moment, saying nothing, and then walked back to his bike and motioned for me to join him.

Not unless I've lost my damned mind! I thought to myself, shaking my head at him. I could barely see him past the headlight of his bike.

“Get on.” He gestured with his hand, his voice harsh through the rain.

I stepped toward him but hesitated.

“You’re bleeding. I won’t hurt you. Get on, quick.” This time, his voice was even louder.

I’m...bleeding? I wondered in surprise, checking myself over to see exactly where. I couldn’t see much. My clothes were muddy from falling, and it looked black in the darkness.

“I’ll get you to safety. They’re going to come back with their gang. Do you want that?”

I had no choice. *Damn it.*

I didn’t want to die at the hands of two degenerate thugs—or worse.

Although the biker somewhat terrified me, I forced my feet toward him. *Guess I've lost my mind after all.* I decided I had to embrace that pulsing sense of danger. I swung my leg over the bike and sat my butt down. The feel of the leather seat was soft against my bare inner thighs, and the feeling of the

machine vibrating beneath me sent a shiver racing through my body. He kicked down and the engine roared louder.

That *sound*. Oh, God.

He was strong. Firm. *Solid*. I threaded my arms under his shoulders and laid my palms flat against his chest. That chest was rock hard, and the touch of the wet leather of his jacket under my hands was strangely calming. I bit my lip. The lead biker revved his engine once more and took off, tearing out of the alley. I ducked my head and pressed it against his back to avoid the cold sting of the rain, amplified by the swift movement of the bike. From my position, I wasn't sure where he was taking me, and I only hoped it was someplace safe.

When he sped up, I was propelled backward and the speed caused me to lose my breath all over again. I had to lean closer to the biker to keep my grip on him, and now my breasts were pressed firmly against his back.

I had been worried about so many things—about taking off with a stranger, about riding a fast vehicle, about having no protective clothing. Anything could happen. *Maybe I can slip away the moment he slows the bike down*, I thought, but I doubted it. I felt light-headed and stunned with shock. Chances were that if I left his bike at any point, I wouldn't make it two steps before tripping and falling over into a solid face-plant. *Wouldn't that be lovely?* I just didn't trust myself enough to get away to safety on my own. I had to put my trust in the stranger, despite how I felt about the whole situation. But, as the wind snatched the band from my hair and sent it flying out behind me in a wild auburn wave, and the bike beneath me sent regular shudders shooting through my body, I held onto the strong, rigid form of the man in front of me, none of those worries mattered. I'd never felt so free, I'd never felt so excited, and I'd never felt so *scared*.

Eventually, the biker slowed outside a large hotel. I looked up from his jacket to see lights welcome us up a winding path toward a massive building. I frowned as the biker revved his motor and coasted up the pathway, wondering if he was sneaking in somewhere.

The biker headed up the path and stopped outside the hotel's back entrance. I gazed at the misty lights filtering from the windows. The man switched off the engine, and I carefully climbed off as he pushed down the kickstand.

I placed both feet on the ground and then swayed.

The world tilted.

I fell backward.

The last thing I felt were two powerful hands grabbing and holding me before darkness consumed me.



I awoke in an unfamiliar room with an unfamiliar face staring down at me. For a moment I panicked, thinking I'd been kidnapped. The bed I was lying on was massive and adorned with silk sheets and a feather-soft comforter. A deep burgundy canopy surrounded me, and a middle-aged woman was at my side, picking up a bandage wrapper that was sitting on the side of the bed. I blinked and stared in confusion.

The woman gazed at me for a moment. "I'm Dr. Ward. How are you feeling?"

I raised my arm to touch my head, but the doctor caught my wrist. "It seems you hit your head, but you'll be fine. Still, it's best if you rest. The bleeding was from a superficial wound and didn't require stitches. You were only out for five-to-ten minutes, give or take. Fainting is common and usually not serious, typically brought on by emotional stress. Emotions like fear, pain, anxiety, or shock can cause one's blood pressure to drop to the point where they faint. Have you ever fainted before?"

Seriously, that was a lot of information to process when I'd just opened my eyeballs—and she talked *really* fast. Was it too soon to ask for coffee? Probably. *Sigh*. "Um, yes, one or two times—well, rarely, only when I'm overly stressed, though."

"Okay, but if you feel your dizziness increase, or if you start feeling sick, or your heartbeat becomes irregular, you

should call immediately. I also recommend contacting your doctor to get that checked out, just to be on the safe side.”

When did I hit my head? I wondered, still feeling groggy. I wanted to ask the question, but I knew this woman wouldn't be able to give me an answer. She hadn't been there after all.

“Where am I?” I asked instead.

The woman seemed sympathetic to my state. “You're at the Regal Heights Hotel.” I gave her a questioning expression—I'd never heard of the place. “You were picked up and brought here to safety. I'm a guest, and was down in the lobby when you were rushed in. I was informed that you were attacked about a block from the Sandmeier Museum.”

I nodded. “Yes. I work there as a waitress. Late shift. I was just trying to get home.”

The woman stood from her crouched position on the bed, brushing the canopy out of the way, and rose to her feet. “Well, try to take it easy. It's best if you stay in bed for a few more hours.” She patted my arm. “Get a good night's rest.”

“Thank you.” I watched as the woman took her leave out the polished oak door and closed it behind her.

I sighed, glancing around the room.

Everything was immaculately kept, but the room was mostly without decoration. There was a large closet directly across from the foot of the bed, and out of the corner of my eye, I took note of a crimson rug positioned on the floor. I wanted definitive answers, other than I was “just in some hotel.” I wanted to know who the man was, the biker who'd saved me last night. Would I ever see him again?

I took my time, slowly peeling the covers off my legs. Someone had dressed me in dry clothes. I now wore a lacy, long silken nightgown. I guessed it was nice of whoever had gotten me out of my drenched uniform I'd been wearing earlier. I had my panties on but wasn't wearing a bra—I'd taken that sucker off and stuffed it in my purse before I left work. The underwire popped out earlier in my shift and had been poking me in the side-boob all damn day. *Oh, God.*

Someone had seen my breasts. Awesome. *See? All-around crap day.* Well, at least I didn't die...

I gradually slid my bare feet to the edge of the bed and rose. My head twinged with a slight ache, forcing a subtle pounding to settle across my hairline and around my ears.

I pulled my hair away from my shoulders and accidentally brushed against the band-aid near my temple. *Oww! Don't touch it, dummy.* I stepped to the door and opened it, peeking out into the hall.

"The persistent type, aren't you?" The voice startled me—it was deep and familiar.

I hadn't expected anyone. Least of all *him*. I recognized the voice as belonging to the biker from earlier that night. I took stock of the man standing in front of me: white shirt and black leather pants. His powerful arms were folded against his chest. He was tall and extraordinarily well-built. I tried not to lick my lips. I *failed*.

"First, you walk past a shady alley in the middle of a rainstorm in the dead of night, and then you get out of bed without assistance, even after I'm sure Dr. Ward told you to stay put."

I stepped further into the hallway. "Who undressed me?"

I was able to see him a bit better now and noticed his eyes. They were the color of a soul-piercing blue, and surprisingly kind, despite his rough appearance. He had a hard stare, but his face was remarkably handsome. He had a dimple in his chin (one I wanted to touch—*down, girl*), a long and thin nose and gently arching eyebrows.

He unfolded his arms as he looked me up and down, his eyes lingering for a millisecond on my breasts. "Dr. Ward. Your modesty is still intact." He gave me a sexy half-grin. "Are you feeling better? You took a hit."

"The doctor said the same thing, but I don't remember it." Thank God it was the doctor who'd undressed me and not "Mr. Tall Dark and Yummy."

“That’s no surprise. You fainted. I’d say you might have a little memory loss—you had a rough night. I mean, it’s possible, but I’m no doctor. Don’t worry, though, I informed the cops. It’s best if you make a formal statement once you’re feeling better. Other than that, you didn’t miss anything major.” He gave me a mischievous smile and winked. “You still remember who *I* am.”

“That’s the thing, though, I don’t. I remember you scaring off those thugs, but I don’t know anything about you.”

“They’re probably a lot more than thugs. I’m Marcus Willingham.”

“Eleanor Rawson.” I was relieved to finally be able to put a name with his face. “Is this ... do you live here?”

He shrugged. “Sort of.”

It certainly hadn’t seemed like a place for some rough and tough biker to live. “Who owns it?”

At this, Marcus dragged his gaze to mine and kept it there. “I do.”

I drew my brows together in a frown. I wasn’t sure what to say. “I’m sorry, it’s just hard for me to pair this place with you.”

He chuckled. It was low and rich, and actually racked me with shivers. They weren’t from fear, but rather of interest. Marcus had a strange sort of magnetic feeling to him that made me want to step a little closer.

“Weren’t you ever told you can’t judge a book by its cover?”

The question should have embarrassed me, but I felt too out of sync with reality to really care at that moment whether I was being awkward in conversation or not. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m still just trying to get over the shock of what happened tonight.”

“Eleanor—”

I smiled. “Please, call me Ella.”

“Ella, we should get you back to bed.” He stepped to the door and rested his arm on my back to escort me inside. His touch sent a shiver of—*Holy shit! Desire?*—skating down my spine.

His manly scent was intoxicating.

Marcus kicked the door shut behind us. Despite still feeling disoriented, I was grateful for his strength. I was craving the man before me, but his strong arms held me in place. As intimidating as he was, there was something very (and I mean *very*) breathtaking about him.

Yep, that's definitely desire for a man I just met. I'm in trouble.

“I should’ve asked my boss to give me a ride home,” I mumbled to break the uncomfortable silence *and* to clear my naughty thoughts. “Then I wouldn’t be here burdening you.”

He shook his head. “You’re not. Tomorrow, you’ll be good as new. For now, I want you to take it easy. Is there anything else you need?” His eyes pierced mine.

Oh, shit. Was he leaning in?

“To be honest, I want to ... I mean ... thank you.” I sounded like a bumbling idiot.

I felt weak. Oh, those blue eyes. I could get lost in them. So gorgeous and so very deep. For some reason, his gaze sent a hot sensation throughout my body, directly to my center, and I felt a tingle between my legs. *God, what the hell is wrong with me?* I wondered and wanted to slap myself silly. I hardly knew this man. I’d never in my life slept with a man on the first night, not to mention after, well, being *mugged*. I fought hard to understand what I was feeling—and why. Okay, so he was freaking panty-melting hot. And he had that ruggedness about him that made a girl want to swoon... But that only happened in movies, right? Nope. I was a goner. I began to feel light-headed, but not from “physical” weakness.

He brought his arms around me, holding me close to him, and I basked in the strength of his embrace and hardness of his

chest. All the pent-up feelings, the excitement and stress, the fear and confusion fell from me.

I lifted my head, and in response, Marcus dipped his.

His presence was warm and inviting.

“You...” I began, feeling small and fragile under his stare.

“Pssst,” Marcus whispered, tilting and lowering his head.

I closed my eyes.

His lips touched mine.

Our mouths melded together in the perfect dance. They were flawlessly formed for each other. Hell, the only thing I knew about this man was that he'd saved me from God only knew what, and that he owned this hotel. Part of that scared me a little, but then another part—a much *larger* part—was almost thrilled by the idea. Maybe it was my dark, inner love for danger. No, that wasn't it. I wasn't somebody who liked, let alone *loved* danger. If anything, I was *usually* a chicken where most men were concerned.

But why then was I wrapping my arms around his shoulders, and he reacted by pulling me closer to deepen the kiss. He held me tightly against him, staring at me. Before I knew it, he had us stumbling back to the bed. His eyes were fixed on me, like I was his prey, when he pushed me down to my back and onto the bed.



6 Weeks Later

Please, please, please, I thought, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth. *Be negative.*

I sank onto the floor and wrapped my arms tightly around myself. The tiles beneath my bare feet had warmed by this point, and yet I still felt chilled to the bone. My eyebrows knitted together as I stared at the plastic stick balanced on the edge of the tub.

My stomach churned, and I felt another wave of nausea. Shutting my eyes, I pursed my lips and took several deep breaths through my nose until the sensation subsided.

One deep breath.

A second.

A third.

By the fourth, I was ready to pick up the stick.

My mind went blank as I stared at the plus sign. In a single instant, my life had changed forever.

I wasn't sure how long I stared at the pregnancy test, but it was long enough to go from feeling nothing to everything at once. I was torn between bursting into tears and beaming with excitement.

Being a mom had always been on the list of things I wanted to accomplish in my life. I loved children—always had, and the idea of raising my own had been one of my dreams. Later. Much later in life.

Jacob would be thrilled. He was a good boyfriend—the nicest man I'd ever dated. He'd even brought up the possibility of getting married, even though we'd only officially started dating a month ago.

Yes, Jacob would be a good father.

Then, my smile faded as the memories of six weeks ago flooded to the surface.

“Don’t question it,” he whispered. “Let yourself go.”

I let myself give in to his delicate kisses and tender touches, relaxing on the bed. Marcus’s fingers slipped beneath my nightgown, trailing feather-light sensations across my stomach and around my hips. I shifted to allow him to remove the silky nightie, and he tossed it behind him.

He growled playfully and pushed me back to the bed.

I gasped as he peered down at me with a dangerous gaze. Slowly he ground himself against me, invoking another gasp from my throat.

Everything about him invaded my senses: his smell, his sounds, his touch...

His gaze had turned from playful to serious, and he rested his hands on my shoulders, holding me in place. He pressed heated kisses along my collarbone, trailing them between my full breasts. He stared down at me hungrily, and I felt defenseless and exposed beneath him. It filled my body with intense shudders of desire.

Marcus’s warm palms closed over my breasts, and his fingers clasped my nipples, his thumbs brushing them over and over. When he pinched them, I twitched and jumped under his touch.

It was almost too much to handle.

Our breath had grown heavier under the intensity of the moment, and the anticipation pounded against my ribcage. Marcus paused what he was doing and straightened his back. I watched as his chest rose and fell steadily. He set his fingers to my panties and tugged them down my legs. He exposed the sensitive flesh hidden between my tender folds and lowered his mouth to taste me.

“Oh, Marcus,” I gasped at his gentle licks and kisses against my clit. He soaked me quickly with his skilled movements. “I want you, Marcus.”

Even in the darkness of the hotel penthouse suite, I could see his smirk. I was caught up in the moment, my body feasting on and relishing the sensations that he was giving me. With

every flick of his tongue, an electric tingle shot through my femininity and into my core. Within a minute, I was wet with want and pounding on the inside, longing to be filled.

Marcus leaned upward, removed his shirt in one fluid motion, and pressed his thumbs to the button of his pants, popping it open. He unzipped and pushed them down his thighs. His erection stood proudly from his body as he revealed himself, and I felt the throbbing in my center grow stronger as I gazed at his size. Marcus positioned himself between my legs, and I barely felt his tip against my entrance.

Marcus pushed himself inside me. He was thick, and he stretched me to the point of pain, but it was fleeting. I tipped my head back and moaned from the movement.

Marcus groaned from my tightness, and he wrapped one hand around the back of my head to support it. He rocked his hips steadily, sliding in and out of me.

“You’re mine,” he whispered.

“Ooo...ooo...yes,” I gasped.

The sensations were out of this world, and I relaxed my body and let him take me. I whimpered his name and fought to cling to him. The throbbing inside me hurt but still felt wonderful, and it was as if my body couldn’t get enough.

“Oh, my God,” I moaned, head falling back against the mattress.

He withdrew slightly, only to thrust back in all the way. “Not quite, but close.”

I giggled as we rocked together.

He penetrated me again and again, reaching as deep as he possibly could. My giggle turned into a startled cry, but it was of pure pleasure. I watched as his hard length entered me again and again, his hips working faster than they had before. His thrusts grew swifter, and I opened my mouth to cry out again, but instead, my scream was silent. My core clenched around his thickness, and before I could tell him to hold off or slow down, my mind exploded with stars, and my body tightened in an earth-shattering orgasm. My toes curled, and I

tumbled into oblivion, clinging to him as if my life depended on it.

He kept going, kept pounding into me, pulling back so he could look me in the eye. Even when he filled me with his warmth, he kept staring at me as though I was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen...

It all seemed like a dream.

A wonderful, sensual dream that still haunted me. Even after all this time, I could still feel his touch. Even so, the memory of that night served as a reminder of something far more important than a one-night stand.

I should have been more careful. I should have waited for my body to adjust to my new birth control. The nausea was back. I barely managed to lift the toilet seat before my breakfast made a spectacular reappearance.

Too late now...

With a deep sigh, I let the test fall to the floor. Even though there was only a small chance, I knew the baby wasn't Jacob's.

I did the math, even double- and triple-checked.

No. The baby was Marcus's.

I sighed.

I knew what I had to do, but it wasn't going to be easy. I couldn't "not" tell Marcus he was going to be a daddy. I had to find a pair of big girl panties around here somewhere and just call him. This was not a conversation I was looking forward to. I mean, what was I supposed to say, "Hey, it's me, Ella. You remember me? That girl you saved and then we had..." No, that sucked ass. I couldn't say that. Shit. I just needed to be an adult and do this. I could do this.

I stood from the bathroom floor, washed my mouth out, and went to my bedroom in search of my phone. While heaving my breakfast, I'd missed a call from Jacob. Damn it. How was I going to tell him I was pregnant with somebody else's baby? I'd think about that afterward. Not now.

I scrolled through my contacts and found Marcus's number. When I dialed, an older woman answered, but she sounded like a secretary. Had he given me his office number? Dick. Even so, I asked to speak with him.

"Mr. Willingham is not available at the moment. May I take a message?"

"Yes. Please tell him Ella Rawson called, and he needs to call me back. 555-4367. It's urgent."

"I'll be sure to do that, Emma."

"No, my name is Ella, it's 555-4367, again, 55—"

"There is no need for you to repeat it. I'll ensure he receives your message, Emma."

"It's Ell—"

And she hung up on me. What a *bitch*.

Next day, I called again. And waited. And called again.



I waited two weeks. The *real* problem was, he'd never returned my calls. Clearly, I'd just been another notch on his belt. When I didn't hear back from him, I'd sworn to myself that I would never see Marcus Willingham again. Sure, he'd saved me, protected me—and that only made it worse. But I knew I had to move on, as hurtful as it was. It had to be that way, because honestly, there really was no future for us, not that I could see. Marcus Willingham had, as I soon found out, a reputation stoked by the press and city gossip (yes, I snooped and stalked him a bit on the Internet), as an ex MC gang member, a bad boy, and a player. He had never made an effort to deny the rumors and, in fact, our "encounter" only served to show me how true they were.

In addition, the Willinghams were one of the most powerful families in the city. Between that and Marcus's reputation, I decided I wanted to stay as far away from him as

possible. I was sure he'd already forgotten my name. Just as I would try to forget his. This baby wouldn't change my mind.

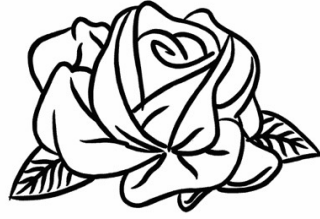
From downstairs I heard the sound of the front door opening, and then Jacob's voice as he called out to me. "Ella, you home?"

"Yeah, Jacob." I finished brushing my hair and left the bathroom, prepared to tell him about the baby.

He came into the bedroom the same time as I did. His face broke into a wide smile when he saw me. "What's up?"

I smiled softly and took his hands in mine. "Guess what?" I pulled him in close. "We're going to be a family."

MARCUS



Over Two Years Later

I was dragged out of a dead sleep by the alarm ringing.

With a grunt of annoyance, I turned it off and let my eyes open. I could have sworn I'd been dreaming, but the details slipped away as I became more alert. I heard a huff to my right, and I glanced over to check on my bed companion.

My Mastiff, Samson, lazily pried one eye open long enough to see I hadn't moved yet, before he closed it again. With an affectionate smirk, I scratched him behind the ears before I climbed out of bed. My joints popped when I stretched, stiff from laying in one position too long.

In one fluid movement, I threw open the blinds. The early morning sunlight flooded the room, and I took a moment to gaze at the cityscape before me. I could see for miles from my penthouse. I never tired of the view. I glanced down to the city streets, tracking six bikers roaring down the highway. My heart was gripped with the urge to jump on my bike and set out on a joyride. But, work came first. Maybe I would go for a ride this weekend. It had taken years of blood, sweat, and tears for me to get where I was, and I never wanted to take it for granted.

After taking a deep breath, I dropped to the floor and started doing push-ups. My morning routine was the same every day. I woke up, exercised, showered, got ready for work, and then started my day. It helped keep my head clear, and it put me in the right mental state to face the challenges ahead.

Thirty minutes later, I was dressed and out the door, only stopping to give Samson a goodbye pat on the head. He yawned loudly, curled up on the couch and fell back to sleep.

My office was located several floors below, and when I arrived, my assistant, Lucy, immediately rose from her desk.

M“Good morning, Mr. Willingham.” She straightened her blazer and smiled. “Your eight o’clock meeting with HR has been moved to nine, and you have several messages waiting for you.”

“Good morning. Coffee?” I walked past her and into my office.

Lucy followed me inside. “I was just about to make a run. Large French Roast with two creams and no sugar.”

“Thanks, Ms. Barns.” I leaned against my desk. “I don’t know how they do things at Patterson Advertising, but here, assistants get the coffee before their bosses arrive. No matter.” I waved my hand and grinned. “You’ll learn.”

The color drained from Lucy’s face. “I’m sorry, Mr. Willingham.” In her rush to respond, she stuttered, “I was going to get it earlier but got side-tracked by a phone call.”

“I wasn’t aware you were so easily distracted,” I said, still teasing her, but it didn’t seem she was getting the message, so I tried again. “It was my impression you were a great multitasker. You said so yourself in your resume, and Phoebe Mac told me it was one of the strengths you highlighted in your interview with her. You wouldn’t have fibbed, now would you?”

“I did, I mean ... I am, and, no, sir, I wouldn’t,” Lucy stammered and attempted to assure me. “The caller was particularly persistent. It took nearly twenty minutes to get them off the phone.”

All joking aside, I wasn’t surprised by her excuse. I was the Managing Director, and my phone was constantly ringing off the hook. Between investors and salespeople, everyone wanted a moment of my time to try and get me to buy whatever they were selling.

“There will always be pushy people, Ms. Barns. It’s your job to handle them quickly and efficiently.”

She inclined her head. “I understand. They were adamant about speaking with you. I will do better next time.”

I supposed I'd taken it a bit too far based on the fear written all over her face. *Note to self: sarcasm and humor—apparently, not my thing.* “Ms. Barnes, I was teasing you. It's all right. Please, take a minute to compose yourself.” I smiled in an attempt to lighten things up. Scaring women wasn't my idea of paradise either.

“Um, okay, Mr. Willingham.” I could visibly see a weight lift from her shoulders, and she let out a breath. “But I do apologize for your coffee, sir ... the phone call. It'll not happen again. I'll—”

“All right.” I cut her off, trying to put her out of her misery. “Let's get down to business. Who called, and what was it about?”

Lucy consulted the iPad. “A woman named Ella Rawson.” She read the message in front of her. “She was *quite* aggressive. We went back and forth because she wouldn't tell me the reason for her call.”

My stomach dropped as soon as I heard the name, and I snatched the iPad from Lucy. “Are you sure she said her name was Ella?”

“Ella Rawson.” Lucy nodded, eyes wide. “Yes, sir.”

I hadn't heard that name in a long time.

Images of mischievous hazel eyes and strands of auburn hair sliding through my fingers assaulted my memories. Memories I'd worked hard to lock away.

I couldn't fathom what Ella could possibly want. We hadn't seen each other since the night two years ago when I'd saved her from two assholes in a dark alley. After that night we spent together, she'd effectively frozen me out. I couldn't say that I blamed her—the press was as aggressively interested in me at that time as they were today—the difference being that, back then, they'd provided a useful smoke screen of nasty MC activity and suggested liaisons (the first accusation was, let's say, *not* incorrect, the second, just ridiculous—mostly) that left me free to become attached to no one and nothing but my work.

“Oh, Marcus.” I heard her gasp.

*I pulled her hands away from me so I could enter her.
“Relax.”*

*E*lla spread her legs apart, and when I thrust into her, it was the most intense sensation, and she started to moan immediately—not faking or exaggerating her pleasure, but just ... voicing it.

“You’re mine,” I whispered in her ear.

I drove into her. I was in control. Fast and hard, I kept a good pace, filling her completely—we rocked together. Ella ran her fingers through my messy hair and threw her head back, gasping as my body moved above her, in and out—fuck, she felt good.

“Oh, my God, it feels wonderful.” I heard her say, echoing my thoughts.

She thrust her hips back into me. Faster and harder still, I pushed into her again and again until she was opening her mouth in the throes of an intense orgasm. She clung to me tightly, and I held her there, suspended in that moment.

I couldn’t stop staring at her. She was gorgeous beyond belief...

I realized Lucy was waiting for me to respond. “I’m sorry, my mind was somewhere else.” I sat down. “Are you still making that coffee run?”

“Of course, Mr. Willingham.” She took a step toward the door. “I’ll be back shortly.”

“Thank you, Ms. Barns.”

I turned my attention back to the iPad as my assistant rushed out of the office. Ella’s number stared back at me, almost like it was taunting me. I placed the iPad on my desk and drummed my fingers on the surface, debating whether to call.

On the one hand, I tended not to get too attached to women. Relationships were few and far between for me. I didn't have the time to devote to them—or the desire. Not that what Ella and I had could even remotely be considered a relationship. Still, we'd had unbelievably intense chemistry, and it was the memory of her smile that had me reaching for my phone.

It only rang once before she answered. "Hello?"

I didn't expect the sound of her voice to hit me like a freight train.

It was a lower register than most women's, and hearing it brought back a wave of emotions I wasn't prepared for. My heart slammed against my ribcage, and I had to take a breath before I answered. "I heard you called."

"Marcus," she said breathlessly. "I'm surprised ... you called back."

"Sure, why wouldn't I?"

"The last time I called you didn't. Long time ago. Your assistant told me you were busy."

I felt a sting of regret. I hadn't suspected she would call. Even though I felt immediate anger rise at the thought of my former employee, I had no intention of opening *that* can of worms again. "I'm sorry. I have a new assistant now. Long story." I leaned back in my chair and paused for a moment. "It's been a while."

"Yeah ... yeah ... it has—over two years." Ella's voice wasn't unfriendly.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm ... Listen, okay, I know you're busy, and I don't want to keep you from your work, but I'm in the neighborhood, and I was wondering ... if you'd meet me for lunch. Today."

"Why, Ms. Rawson, are you asking me out?" I teased.

She gave a snort of laughter. "Hardly. It's just lunch."

“Well, when you put it that way, how can I refuse?” I said sarcastically.

“So ... you’ll do it?”

I raised my eyebrow at her insistent tone. She was clearly anxious to see me. “Bold of you to assume I have the time.”

“I know you do.” I could hear the smile in Ella’s voice. “Your assistant told me you’re free for lunch.”

I pursed my lips, making a mental note to have a chat with Lucy about simple confidentiality rules she should know. Why didn’t she know this? I couldn’t handle another disaster like the last assistant. “Well, then, bold of you to assume I want to see you.”

“If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have called me back.”

Ella was smart. I was intrigued. She would be one of the people I’d met who could hold her own in a conversation.

“One o’clock.” I sat up in my chair. “The hotel dining room. Do you remember where—”

“I do.”

“We’ll have one hour.”

“That’s all I’ll need.”

The call ended, and I hung up my desk phone, unable to prevent curiosity from taking hold. What could she possibly have to talk to me about? We hadn’t known each other before that night, and we hadn’t spoken since.

The image of her shoved against the mattress had me smirking to myself, and I remembered how tight her thighs had been clamped around me, holding me in place.

“I want you, Marcus.”

Those words had never sounded so beautiful. Yes, I’d had plenty of lovers, and yes, I’d reduced them each to a shuddering, begging mess. But, there was something about Ella saying those words that shook me to the core and made me hard in an instant. I had wanted her like I’d never wanted anyone else before.

The noises she'd made had driven me crazy, and the way she'd said my name, so beautiful, so breathless, and eager...

There was a knock on the door before it opened and Lucy appeared, carrying my coffee in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other.

"Just in time. What's in the bag?"

Lucy's cheeks turned pink as she handed me my coffee. "I wanted to apologize for being late, so I got you an everything bagel, just the way you like it. Lightly toasted with veggie cream cheese."

Oh, no. This again.

I didn't need an assistant who brownnosed. I needed one who owned their mistakes and moved forward. In the past, I'd had an assistant who thought she could get in my good graces by going out of her way to buy me things I hadn't asked for.

"Thank you for the coffee, but keep the bagel for yourself. I'm not fond of veggie cream cheese—it gives me heartburn. I don't want you buying me things I didn't ask for. In the future, own your mistakes and move forward. And from here on out, don't tell anybody about my schedule." I took a sip of coffee and turned my attention to my computer. "By the way, I need those reports we discussed. Have you finished them?"

Lucy's shoulders sagged, and she seemed deflated. "Oh ... yes, about the reports. Well, I forgot. I was so tied up with the ___"

"You *forgot*?" My gaze snapped to her, and I took a deep breath to keep from losing my temper. "They were supposed to be your top priority." I waved a hand when she began to stutter again. "You've got a long day ahead of you, Ms. Barnes. I suggest you get back to work." I turned away, effectively dismissing her. I knew if I continued this conversation, I may say something I'd regret. What had started out as a playful exchange earlier had turned to shit in no time at all. I was pissed.

I started the monotonous task of sorting through my daily messages, not bothering to spare Lucy a glance. I couldn't—

not right now. It wasn't until I heard my office door close, that I picked up the phone again.

It rang several times before it was answered. "HR, this is Phoebe."

"I need a new assistant."

Only two years older than me, Phoebe Mac acted like it was more than that. We'd known each other since we were kids, and she'd always had my back. She was like a sister to me, and one of the few people whose advice I sought on a regular basis.

"Marcus—absolutely not. No." I could have sworn I heard her roll her eyes at me. She probably did. "What's wrong this time?"

"She's not cut out for the job." I pinched the bridge of my nose, envisioning Phoebe's face. This might take some sweet-talking. "I need someone else—someone who can handle the pressure."

"You've just fired poor Mrs. Hester-Smith," Phoebe reminded me, "and I don't blame you, *however*, I'm not finding you another one. Give Lucy a chance."

"Poor Mrs. Hester-Smith?" Was she kidding?

"You can't blame her for becoming forgetful with age."

"But I *can* blame her for passing not only private but also business-related information on to my father."

"Lucy won't do that."

"Mac, I'm telling you, this won't end well."

"And I'm telling *you* to stop being so hard on her." I could hear Phoebe tapping what sounded like a pen. "You're so quick to dismiss people when they don't instantly meet your expectations."

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling. "This job isn't easy, and I'm not going to waste time with someone who can't handle it."

“I’m not finding you a new assistant,” Phoebe said decisively. “Not yet. Also, how about greeting me when you call, huh? Ya know, a hi, kiss my ass, how ya doin’, something like that? I don’t appreciate being barked at first thing in the morning. I’ve barely had two sips of coffee.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Good morning, Mac, Goddess of HR.”

“Goddess? I like that title. I totally feel the vibe—has a nice ring to it. I’ll go with that. So, where’s my T-shirt and my bling? And I’ll need a full uniform to go with that title. Everybody around here will need to know the Goddess of HR’s in the house.”

Phoebe was killing me. How was I supposed to have a serious conversation when she kept making me laugh? I straightened my face and cleared my throat. “Will you at least double-check Lucy’s references? I know Aaron Patterson, and there’s no way Lucy worked there for as long as she said she did—if *this* is the way she behaves.”

“*Fine*, I’ll double-check.” Phoebe sighed. “But you still haven’t given me any specifics. I found her more than capable during our interviews, and each time I’ve interacted with her since then, she’s been nothing but professional. Give her time to learn the job, and get used to you,” I heard her giggle, “before you make any rash decisions.”

“Since when have you known me to act before thinking?”

Phoebe laughed. “Don’t try that with me. When it comes to business, you’re calculating and careful. But when it comes to dealing with people on a personal level—well, um, well, that’s a *whole* other story. You kinda suck at it.”

I hated to admit Phoebe was right, so I settled for saying, “She gets one more month.”

“Good. Now, was there something else you wanted, or can I get back to my *real* work?”

“You mean flirting with Ramona and hoping she catches on that you’re hopelessly in love with her?”

“Of course, what else would I mean?”

At this, I rolled my eyes. “Just ask her out already.”

“Ah, well, you see, dating girls isn’t as simple as you seem to think,” Phoebe began. “Not for us girls, anyway. I can’t just *ask* her out. There are steps that need to be followed—things I need to find out in advance. Like, is she single, what does she like to do, does she listen to Ani DiFranco?”

“I don’t see how this is any different than hetero dating. You’re stalling.”

There was a pause. “Shut up.”

Teasing Phoebe about her lack of a romantic life—Not that I had a romantic life to show for. Had sex? Yes. But romance? Nope—was the easiest way to rile her up. I’d been doing it since we were teenagers, and it hadn’t lost its effectiveness.

I grinned. “Did I hit a nerve?”

“I’m hanging up on you now.”

“Bye, Mac, Goddess of HR.”

She snorted. “Bye, boss who owes me a T-shirt and—”

I chuckled, cutting her off. “Call you tomorrow, Mac.”

“Bye, *again*. Stop restarting the conversation. I’m hanging up.” And she hung up.

I shook my head. She always had to have the last word. I felt better and relaxed after our conversation, but still unsure about Lucy. If I were honest with myself, I couldn’t exactly put my finger on what it was that bothered me about her (except the mistakes I’d seen for myself—the unfinished reports being a *huge* slip due to distraction). Despite what Phoebe said, I did tend to give new personnel the benefit of the doubt, but something about Lucy rubbed me the wrong way.

There was a knock on my door, and when I called out, Lucy tentatively poked her head in.

“Mr. Willingham, I have your father on line one.” She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

I kept my composure and my voice steady. “Now is not the time. In the future, you can just take a message from him. You

don't have to keep him on hold.”

The last person I wanted to speak to was my father. We would only end up fighting—like we always did. He'd taken to calling the office several times a week trying to get in touch with me, and I was quick to dismiss him.

“Yes, sir.” Lucy turned to leave. “But he says it's urgent.”

“Everything is urgent to him. I say otherwise. Please, take a message.”

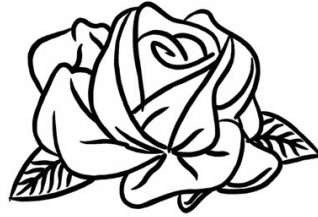
Lucy seemed relieved at my calm tone and nodded in understanding. “Of course, sir. Will do.”

She left quickly and I watched her go, thinking about Phoebe's advice. I'd give her a chance, but only because the thought of finding a new assistant seemed mind-numbing.

Determined to get some actual work done, I turned to my computer. A moment later, my cell phone rang, and my father's name popped up on the screen.

I declined the call.

ELLA



“*F*ucking traffic drives me nuts.” The cab driver eyed me through the rearview mirror, more *specifically*, my breasts. I almost felt the need to cover myself, but that would draw even more attention.

What a perv, I thought, and almost regretted having dressed up and wearing a push-up bra.

“Son of a bitch.” The cabbie swore under his breath as we came to a stand-still at the intersection.

This guy was getting on my damn nerves. Of all the cabs I could’ve gotten into, I *had* to choose this one. He banged his fists against the steering wheel and leaned his head out the window, cursing at drivers who could no more move through the traffic than we could. When he was done, he attempted a peek in the mirror again. I shifted to the side and kept my mouth shut, even though I had a few choice words myself. Shithead being the nicest.

I looked at my phone instead, glad I’d decided to leave early to meet Marcus. I smiled at the photo that served as my phone’s background. My daughter’s adorable round face smiled back at me, blue eyes sparkling with happiness as I tickled her. Awww. She’d been the one thing that helped me through my depression, and if it hadn’t been for her, I probably wouldn’t have sought help. Things had slowly begun to improve, but it would be a long time before I got my life back in order.

When I was younger, it seemed as if life's possibilities were endless. My mother had encouraged me in anything and everything I wanted to pursue. I thought I could take on the world. But then, the harsh realities of life set in, and everything changed.

The past two years of my life had been a whirlwind of ups and downs. I had been through a dark time where I couldn't even keep my job at the museum's bar, which I'd only just begun to crawl out of. I'd always been able to take care of myself ... but somewhere along the way, I'd lost my independence.

And the worst part was, I hadn't even realized it.

Nearly thirty minutes later, the cab finally drove through the long winding path, pulling up outside of Regal Heights Resort & Spa. As I stepped onto the curb, my eyes followed the massive building all the way to the top. It felt larger and more intimidating than I remembered. Or maybe it just felt that way because of what *I* was doing there.

The lobby bustled with guests, and I did my best to stay out of their way as I walked toward the main dining room. With each step, the knots in my stomach twisted tighter and tighter, until I felt like I might throw up. I was determined not to cave in, because if I did, I was going to just turn around and never come back.

I approached the podium and was greeted by an overly cheerful host. "Good afternoon! Table for one?"

"Actually, I'm here for a lunch meeting with Mar—Mr. Willingham." I gave him a polite smile. "My name is Ella Rawson."

"Ah, yes, of course, Ms. Rawson." The host nodded his head once. "Won't you follow me?"

Clutching the strap of my purse, he led me through the dining room to an intimate table toward the back of the restaurant.

"Thank you." I nervously took a seat.

“My pleasure.” He handed me a menu. “Would you like something to drink while you wait?”

“Just water would be great, thanks.”

He walked away and I was left alone, fidgeting in my seat. I hung my purse over the back of the chair and was just about to slip my phone inside when I felt it vibrate. I was greeted with a string of texts.

When are you going to call me back? We need to talk.

I know you read my texts.

You can't ignore me forever.

This is stupid.

You've proved your point. Come back home.

Don't be such a bitch.

For fuck's sake! I have a right to see my daughter.

I felt as bile rose in my throat, and I forced myself to put the phone away. Normally, I would fire back a series of sharp texts, but I was under strict orders from my attorney not to respond. Jacob got off on getting a rise out of people, especially me, and I'd vowed never to take the bait again.

Besides, I had more important things to deal with at the moment.

I thought calling Marcus had been the most nerve-racking thing I'd ever had to do, until I found myself sitting at the table, waiting for him to arrive. When I'd left his penthouse the morning after our wild night, and after he hadn't called me back, I'd made a solemn vow to move on.

And I had.

We weren't right for each other.

True, he was intelligent, sophisticated, charismatic, and probably even the most handsome man I'd ever seen. But I knew his reputation, and I didn't want to be known as *Marcus Willingham's latest conquest*. He'd been linked with numerous women over the years. I didn't intend to be one of them. Not

to mention he'd been associated with a shady MC gang. No, thanks. I didn't need that in my life.

Seeing him again was the last thing I wanted to do, but my hands were tied. I had no choice.

If Jacob hadn't demanded sole custody of Nylah, I wouldn't even have entertained the idea of telling Marcus he was my daughter's father.

Sadly, I was right.

The nice-guy act had been a mask—a façade that I'd foolishly fallen for. I had been so focused on my need for the "perfect" family that I'd ignored the red flags. The subtle jabs at my career or interests, the gaslighting, the isolation from my friends...

"I don't know why you hang out with her, she's strange."

"You're baking again? Are you going to eat it? You were just complaining about your weight."

"You want to start your own business? Hmm. Are you sure?"

"Nothing's going on. You're just tired."

"Oh, come on, it was a joke. Why are you being so sensitive?"

After two years, I'd had enough.

And one day while he was at work, I'd packed my stuff and left. Too bad the battle was still raging.

From the other end of the restaurant, I heard a familiar deep laugh, and it sent a ripple of pleasure through my body. Suddenly Jacob didn't exist anymore, and all I could think about was the man I was about to see. It had been so long I'd forgotten what Marcus's voice could do to me.

He turned from the podium, and his eyes danced across the room until they landed on me. It felt like the first time we'd met. His eyes found mine across a crowded room, and suddenly, no one else existed. I was almost in shock seeing him again. He walked toward the table with sure, purposeful

steps, never taking his hard gaze off mine. I caught myself staring and immediately glanced at my menu, as if his mere presence didn't throw me for a loop.

He's looking better than I remember, I realized, noticing how much broader his chest seemed.

It made me wonder what he looked like shirtless now. He'd been gorgeous before when I'd seen him naked. I couldn't even fathom how good he must look after all this time.

Marcus took the seat across from me. "Hello, Eleanor."

"Ella," I corrected him, glancing up to meet his gaze. "I hate being called Eleanor." I sucked in a breath when his blue eyes locked directly on mine.

"I remember."

I took in his appearance, admiring the way he filled out his tailored three-piece suit. I hadn't expected to see him in a suit, but to my amazement, he wasn't any less attractive. By the look of it, it was something he wore daily, but he still held that same ruggedness beneath it all—the bad boy I recognized. His dark hair had grown out some since we'd last seen each other. It fell in messy waves and curled slightly around his ears. His lips were full and expressive, constantly twitching into a smirk or expanding into a wide smile. There was stubble along his jawline and in *all* the right places—a sexy five o'clock shadow I was sure he purposely left unshaved—but I could still see the distinct dimple in his chin.

The one Nylah had inherited.

"Thank you for meeting me for lunch." I tried to keep my voice steady and confident. "I really appreciate it."

"I'm sure you do." Marcus crossed his arms and rested them on the table.

I tilted my head to the side and frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Marcus shrugged casually as he continued to smirk. "I remember the night we met. You appreciated me then, too."

I had forgotten how smug he could be. To be fair, he'd definitely earned it, but that didn't make it any less annoying. I rolled my eyes but couldn't help the small smile that crossed my face. When Marcus teased me, it didn't feel as if there was malice behind it, or that he was just trying to get a rise out of me.

It was surreal to be sitting in a restaurant with him. Yet, there was an underlying ease between us I hadn't anticipated. I felt calmed by his presence, and he seemed easy in mine as well.

Marcus leaned forward with a slight grin playing on his lips. "Did you want to see me just so you could stare?"

I couldn't help but smile again. I could feel a blush rising in my cheeks, and I cleared my throat in an attempt to bring myself back to reality. "No, I didn't." I set my menu down. "It's been so long since we've seen each other. I wanted to catch up and see how you were doing."

The expression on his face changed from playful to serious. "Did the cops ever find the bastards who attacked you?"

I shook my head. "No, they didn't. At least not to my knowledge."

Marcus nodded.

"Who were those men, anyway? Did you know them by any chance?" I took a sip of my water, wondering if he would answer.

"I didn't." He shrugged. "Back then, I thought they might be part of a rival biker gang because they seemed to recognize the MC gang emblem on my jacket."

I set my water on the table because I'd started fidgeting. "Are you still with them? I mean, part of the gang?"

"No." His answer was definitive, and I believed him.

Marcus regarded me with amusement again, his smirk widening. "Did you miss me, Eleanor?"

Another thing I'd forgotten was how much he liked to push my buttons and how good at it he was. I could feel myself falling into those eyes again and made it a point to glance away every now and then. "I was thinking about you and decided it would be nice to reconnect."

It wasn't a total lie. I *had* been thinking about him and our night together a lot lately. But, it had more to do with the outcome than nostalgia.

"We certainly had a good time *connecting* before." Marcus didn't even blink.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "It was *all right*."

Marcus's brows shot to his hairline. "I'd say it was *more* than all right."

"I'm glad you thought so."

I had to admit, I was a little bit proud of myself for playing it cool. Regardless of the fact that he was the best lover I'd ever had, he didn't need to know it. Why add to his already-inflated ego?

Marcus leaned back in his seat. "If it was just 'all right,' you wouldn't be here right now."

It seemed to me he'd assumed my being here had to do with wanting to have sex with him again. I couldn't blame him—it was the only thing we'd actually done together. But, I didn't want him to continue on *that* train of thought, since hooking up with him was the furthest thing from my mind.

Not that I would be *entirely* opposed to the idea.

The memory of his hands all over my body made me clamp my thighs together. I'd never met a man who'd learned my body so quickly *or* thoroughly. By the end of our night together, he knew exactly what to do to bring me to a quivering mess. Even after all the time we'd spent apart, my memories of his touch were as vivid as ever.

"Maybe I like your personality more than your body." I rose a brow in a teasing gesture.

"Or you can't get enough of both."

I laughed, and Marcus leaned back. “All right, enough pleasantries. Why did you call me?”

“As I said before, I wanted to catch up and see how you’re doing.”

Marcus didn’t seem convinced. His smile faded slightly, and he studied me for an intense moment. “What’s the *real* reason?”

I instinctively wanted to deny his accusations, but it would be counterproductive.

“Am I that transparent?”

“Yes.”

It’s now or never, I thought.

But, now that I was face-to-face with the enormous reality of the situation, the words I’d prepared died in my throat. All the rehearsing and planning I’d done had flown out of the window, and I found myself falling into his startling blue eyes.

“Look, the reason why I wanted to meet is ...” I didn’t know how to finish the sentence. It took me numerous failed attempts to continue. “...I wanted to tell you that ... after our night ...”

He leaned in. “Yes?”

“I ... had a child.”

There was a beat of silence before Marcus raised his brows at me. “Congratulations.” He didn’t sound particularly enthused or caring. In fact, he sounded irritated, as if he felt the conversation was a waste of time.

I hurried to get to my point, realizing I’d been too subtle in my delivery. “A girl, Nylah,” I continued, feeling my stomach churn. “She’s nineteen months old—almost two.” I was so nervous...

I paused, waiting to gauge his reaction, to see if he’d do the math. Marcus squinted at me, and he clenched his jaw, and I could tell he’d caught on to what I was trying to say. But,

when it was clear he didn't intend to respond, I knew I had to say the words out loud.

“You're her father.”

Silence.

The statement hung in the air between us, and I bit my lip, waiting for a response. Tension fell over the table as his eyes bore into mine. My heart beat rapidly in my chest, so hard I could feel every pulse.

More silence.

His blank stare and lack of immediate response scared me. I was ready for denial, for laughter, even a scoff. I hadn't prepared for him not to say a word.

“That's part of the reason I wanted to see you.” I tried to push through the awkwardness. “I thought you had a right to know. She's getting older and, eventually, she'll be old enough to ask about you. I want her to know her father.”

Marcus blinked and shifted in his seat. His hands came to rest on the table. “You told me you were taking birth control.”

“I was. It was a new kind. I guess my body hadn't adjusted.”

Marcus gave a short nod. “If the child is mine, then why did you wait so long to tell me?”

The question was calculative and carefully chosen. At least, it seemed to be. Marcus was just as difficult to read as he had been two years earlier. I took solace in the fact he hadn't tossed me out of his restaurant yet, although there was probably still time.

I let out a shaky breath, pushing through my anxiety and nausea. “I tried. As I said, you never returned my call.”

He didn't miss a beat. “Well, you should've tried harder.”

“I thought you weren't calling me back on purpose, that you didn't want to see me.” I leaned forward when I realized I'd started to raise my voice. “What was I supposed to do? You're part of one of the richest families in the city, and I'm

nobody. Someone you just used to pass the time. We were together only one night. My life was about to change, and I knew you already had so much on your plate. I didn't want to add to it."

"So why add to it now?"

"Because I remembered what it felt like when I was growing up and didn't know my biological parents," I confessed as I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "I don't want Nylah to feel the same way."

Marcus gave another small nod, but otherwise, he didn't speak. I watched him pick up his knife, twirl it, as I tried my best not to fidget. A moment later, he stared into my eyes like he could see inside me. My gaze snapped to his, and he sat up in his chair, placing his folded hands on the table.

"Something isn't adding up here."

"What do you mean?"

"You come here out of nowhere, telling me I have a child." His voice shook with emotion. "One you've supposedly kept to yourself for almost two years. What do you expect me to say?"

"I don't expect anything. I know this is a lot to take in, and I know you have no real reason to believe me."

"You're right. I don't," came his calm voice again.

My palms began to sweat, and I carefully wiped them on my pants. "We can do a DNA test. I'm not naïve. It's a lot to ask for you to accept my word on this."

"It is."

Marcus had yet to change his facial expression, and aside from tiny hints, he hadn't shown any emotion since I told him about Nylah.

"I have to ask"—He lifted his head—"do you want money?"

I met his gaze. "No. I don't want money. I certainly don't want *your* money. I don't need it. All I want is for you to know

that you have a daughter.”

I’d established a baking business not long after Nylah was born, which allowed me to pay the bills. Of course, money was a little tighter now that I had to pay for my own place to live, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle. Working from home saved on childcare, and I’d been able to put together a reasonable budget that allowed Nylah and I to survive.

Marcus gave a curt nod, his mouth set in a firm line. “Well”—He rose to his feet—“Thanks for letting me know.”

My heart sank.

“You’re leaving?” I almost reached out to him. “Don’t you think we should talk about this a bit more?”

As if he had felt my intention, Marcus shoved his hands in his pockets, shoulders rising and falling in a small shrug. “I don’t think so. I took this meeting because I was curious, and now my curiosity is sated. I’m a busy man, Ella. I have places to be and a hotel to manage.”

A spark of anger flared within me, and I glared at him. “That’s it? I just told you that you have a daughter, and you’re just walking away?”

“*If* the child is my daughter, *you* made it clear you didn’t want me involved.” Marcus straightened his tie. “And if you really don’t want money, I don’t know what else you expect from me.”

“I thought you would at least be interested in hearing about her.”

There was a flicker of something in his eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared. “Another time.” He made a show of checking his watch. “I have to go. You’re welcome to stay and have lunch, on me.”

The dismissal hurt more than I thought it would. “I’d rather not.” I clenched my jaw and stood as well. “I was stupid to think you were human and had some semblance of a heart.”

“Says the woman who kept my alleged daughter from me for almost two years.”

“Don’t turn this on me,” I snapped. “I’ve already explained my side of the story, but you’re just going to blow me off without a second thought? Fine! You can be angry with me all you want. I probably deserve it. But remember, this isn’t about you and me. There’s another person involved, one I care about more than life itself. She’s an amazing kid, and you’re going to regret not getting to know her.”

I forced myself to take a deep breath, trying to calm down before I said something I’d regret. “If you change your mind, you know how to reach me.” I wasn’t going to let him have the final word. I wasn’t going to let him be the one to walk away from me—from Nylah.

As I moved past him, his hand shot out to grab my elbow, firmly enough to make me pause and glance up at him. We were so close my breasts grazed his chest. I could feel the heat radiating from him. The smell of his expensive cologne invaded my nostrils, and I found myself taking a step back.

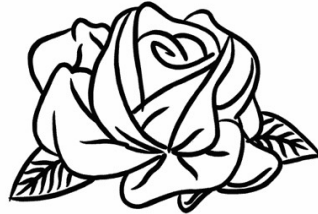
Marcus peered down at me, and in that split second, his expression softened. “It was good to see you again, Ella.”

My heart skipped a beat.

No, I thought to myself. No. Don’t fall for those eyes again. You have to think of Nylah. This is about her. Not you.

But, I knew I couldn’t leave in anger, even though it still simmered within me. “You, too, Marcus. I hope—” I didn’t finish my sentence and pulled away, turning from him before tears rolled down my face. I had to get out of there.

MARCUS



Lucy was talking, but I had yet to hear a single word she'd said.

My lunch with Ella had been hours ago, and I hadn't been able to focus since. I hadn't accomplished a single thing once I'd returned to my office.

As soon as I'd laid my eyes on Ella, I had been blown away by her beauty, again. That heart-shaped face, those eyes, that wide smile, her delicious curves, her ass ... it was all as stunning as I remembered. But any thoughts of bringing her up to my penthouse and burying my dick between her slick folds had vanished the second she turned serious.

When Ella told me her daughter was mine, my mind had gone blank.

Completely.

I prided myself on my ability to handle any situation, yet I wasn't prepared for *this* one. My dismissal of her had been purely self-serving. I needed time to process and think—which I couldn't do while she sat in front of me, staring with those round hazel eyes.

Kids weren't completely off the table, but they sure as hell weren't part of my five-year plan. I had been extremely careful with my past conquests.

Ella had been the only one-night stand I'd had without protection.

And apparently, she'd had my kid.

I wasn't an idiot. I knew the pill failing wasn't unheard of and tended to happen more often than people realized. We had been consenting adults, and we were both responsible. If the kid *was* mine, I would do right by her.

After all, I wasn't a complete bastard.

But the random timing of her admission gave me cause for concern.

I had sensed she wasn't telling me something and, yet, I believed her when she claimed she didn't want money. I'd been around plenty of gold diggers and believed I could spot the differences. Ella's clothes had been stylish and well taken care of. Not expensive, but clearly new and well cared for. She had also walked away from a free meal without even hesitating, something most people didn't do if money was tight.

"Sir?"

I blinked and glanced up at Lucy. I had completely forgotten she was there. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"I wanted to know if you needed me to come with you to the marketing meeting on Thursday to take notes."

"Yes. You're familiar with Patterson's work. What can you tell me about him?"

"Well, he's aggressive." Lucy held her pencil against her lip. "He knows that his company is the best, and he won't hesitate to remind you of that. But the work they do *is* spectacular, so he's earned his bragging rights."

"He certainly does like to brag," I muttered, running a hand through my hair.

Lucy studied me curiously before she spoke again. "Are you all right? You're looking a little pale."

This time I couldn't blame her concern on interfering. The truth was, I wasn't okay—far from it. I was sure it was written all over my face.

"Clear my schedule for tomorrow," I ordered, getting to my feet. I needed to go home and process where I wouldn't be

disturbed.

“Oh, are you not feeling well?” Lucy took a step closer. “I can make an appointment with your doctor if you’d like.”

“Not necessary.” I shut down my computer and closed the file I’d been attempting to read. “Just make sure you take messages tomorrow and keep working on that task list I gave you. I’ll have my cell on me if anything major comes up.”

“I can handle it.” Lucy gave me a thumbs-up.

I nodded half-heartedly and walked out of the room, ready to get back to the penthouse. Being alone was exactly what I needed. The only way I would be able to decide what to do would be to remove all distractions.

When I walked through the front door, however, I knew something was off. Samson didn’t come bounding to greet me as he always did. On further investigation, I found him in the living room, draped across my mother’s knees like an overgrown lapdog.

“Mother? What are you doing here?”

Ruth-Mabel Willingham was the epitome of elegance and class. She had been brought up among the New York elite, just as I had, although during a different time. Nearing her seventies, she didn’t look a day over fifty, mostly due to a strict diet and exercise—well, and most likely Botox. I also suspected plastic surgery was involved, but she would never confirm it.

Unlike my dad, I didn’t mind seeing my mother. I could have a decent conversation with her and not come away feeling like pulling my hair out.

“What kind of question is that? I wanted to see my only son, of course.” She extended her hand toward me. “Hello, darling. I would get up, but your puppy has decided against it.”

Samson lifted his head and nudged at my mother’s other hand until she resumed stroking his fur. I snorted. He was far

from a puppy.

“You big baby,” I told him affectionately. I gave my mother’s hand a squeeze before leaning down and placing a kiss on the top of her head. “You should have called. I could have had dinner brought up.”

“Oh, well, I assumed it would be best to drop by.” My mother lifted her gaze to mine. “Your father says you’ve been too busy to take his calls.”

“You know I’d take your call.”

My mother gave me a harmless slap on the arm. “Be nice.” She knew more than anyone how frustrating my father could be.

Ignoring her comment, I crossed the living room to the bar. “Drink?”

“Yes, *please*. It has been a day.” She lifted her hand in an overly dramatic gesture.

I sighed. “Tell me about it.”

I poured us both a glass of wine and carried them back to the couch. After I handed one to my mother, I started slowly pacing the length of the room. At first, I didn’t realize I was doing it until I saw her watching.

“What’s wrong?” She eyed me carefully. “I’m getting dizzy. Sit down.”

“How do you know something’s wrong?”

My mother gave me “the Mom” look. “I’m your mother, Marcus. It’s my job to know when something’s bothering you.”

“Rough day.” I didn’t elaborate, unsure of how to broach the subject of Ella. While I had contemplated keeping Ella’s confession a secret, I suspected my mother would have some insight on the subject. I’d never really shared much with her in the past, but she’d been making an effort to get close to me, and I thought I should attempt to meet her halfway.

“I had lunch with a woman today.”

My mother took a thoughtful sip of wine, and the expression on her face revealed it wasn't the best she'd ever tasted, but it would do. "Doesn't sound like it was a very pleasant event. Did things not end well between you?"

"They ended fine. That's not the issue."

"Well, then what is it?" my mother asked. "Does she want to see you again? You're thirty-six, Marcus. You're independent. You're no longer in that dreadful motorbike gang. I still get chills thinking of those days." She shuddered. "What was the name? Hellbrothers? No, that wasn't it. Devilish Boys?"

"Devilish Boys?" I was almost insulted by that one.

"Thank goodness I've forgotten," she continued, "that's one good thing that comes with age, darling, you no longer have to recall those terrible things. And please, son, do not bother to remind me." She waved her hand theatrically. Again, in a way only my mother could. "The point is, you can afford to settle down. It's been a long time since you've had a serious relationship, and I do want to be a grandmother at some point."

Be careful what you wish for, Mom.

"Well, I'm glad you think so. Because she believes her daughter is mine."

My mother's eyes widened, and she practically choked on her wine. If the situation hadn't been serious, I would have laughed. Instead, I waited patiently as she coughed her way through it, startling Samson. He got off the couch with a huff and wandered away to find a quieter resting place.

I took the spot on the couch next to her while she tried to pull herself together.

"What? No. Son!" She set her wineglass on the table, to keep it from spilling. "I didn't mean I wanted to be a grandmother right this second!"

"And I didn't want to be a father today." I shrugged. "It looks like we both got more than we bargained for."

She stared at me, dumbfounded, her mouth slightly agape. “A daughter?” she managed to ask. “She says you have a *daughter?*”

I nodded as I sipped my wine, which was actually better than I’d expected after my mother’s dismissal.

A myriad of expressions passed across Mom’s face as she tried to process the information. “How old is she?”

“Almost two.”

“*Two? She’s almost two years old!?*”

I was surprisingly calm. I assumed because my mom was close to having a full-blown panic attack. “Mom, if your voice goes any higher, you’re going to spook Samson...”

“What’s her name?”

“Nylah.”

“Nylah? Her name is *Nylah!*?”

“...and all the dogs in the neighborhood.”

“Marcus, now is not the time for joking around,” my mother scolded. “You need to take this seriously.”

“Trust me, I am. It’s all I can think about. I have no idea what to do with this information.”

“Well, I do.” She sat up straight and eyed me pointedly. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. You don’t even know for sure whether she’s yours.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

That wasn’t possible. There was no fucking way I could just go back to my own life knowing that there was a child out there who I’d helped bring into the world. I was never one to sit back and do nothing, and I sure as hell wasn’t about to start.

“She wants money.” My mother picked up her glass of wine. “That must be her motivation.”

I shook my head. “No, she doesn’t. I can tell.”

“Why? Because she said so?” She scoffed, giving another dismissive wave of her hand. “Marcus, your uncles and your

cousins have been through this situation more times than I can count. Trust me, women *always* want money. First, it's child support, then the next thing you know, you're paying her rent, her bills, her mother's pedicure, her ex-husband's car payment, and who knows what else while she's off doing God knows what."

"Her ex-husband's car payment? Mother, don't be ridiculous."

"Mark my words."

"Normally, I would agree, but Ella isn't like that." I knew she wasn't, regardless of what my mother thought. "And wouldn't she have come to me earlier if that were the case? She knew who I was from the beginning. As soon as she found out she was pregnant, she would have been on my doorstep asking for a handout. But she didn't do that."

My mother sighed and placed her glass on the end table and turned her body toward mine. "Well, what took her so long? She's probably down on her luck and desperate for cash. I can guarantee she's going to ask you for help."

"If the kid *is* mine, I'll do what's necessary to make sure she's taken care of."

"Does anyone else know?"

"No, it didn't sound like it. She was clear she didn't want to be associated with the Willinghams."

"Oh, is that *so*? She didn't want to be associ—" She stopped midsentence and then seemed to think about it for a moment. "That's good at least. Regardless, we need to keep this situation under wraps. The last thing we need is for the press to get wind of the fact you might have a secret love child."

The thought hadn't even crossed my mind.

My parents had been the ones who were always concerned with the press and gossip columns. I'd been too focused on establishing myself outside of the family name to really care about that.

“I’ll talk to our attorneys and have some papers drawn up,” she continued. “She’ll need to sign an NDA before we hand over a dime.”

I rolled my eyes and took another sip of wine. I should have known she would focus more on appearances than how the situation might be affecting me. “That’s not necessary.”

“The *hell* it isn’t.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“I don’t think so.”

I sighed.

“Okay, maybe so.” My mother’s eyebrows furrowed. “But I would feel more comfortable if she signed *something*.”

I was getting irritated. “This isn’t about you.”

She pursed her lips together so tight they nearly disappeared. It was the look she always gave when I hit a nerve.

My mother and I had only had one fight in our entire relationship, and it had been explosive—back when I’d joined the Hell’s Seven MC gang. She had this incessant need to fix every problem she encountered, even if it wasn’t her own. Somehow my issues always became a reflection of her role as a parent, and it wasn’t until I called her out on it that she realized what she’d been doing.

“Then what do *you* want?” she asked.

“I want to see her.”

She laughed out loud (too loud for my taste), then gave me a sympathetic look. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” She shook her head and gave another snub wave of her hand. “You don’t even know if she’s yours.”

“Well, how am I going to know for sure if I don’t?” I pressed forward. “Before I even consider taking a DNA test, I want to see this kid for myself. If she looks nothing like me, then I won’t even waste my time.”

I hadn't missed the eagerness in Ella's voice when she'd brought up the test. She must have anticipated that I'd request one and wanted to make sure I knew it was okay with her.

"Well, it sounds like your mind's made up," my mother said, to my surprise, and drank another sip of her wine. "Nothing *I* say will change it."

"At least one of my parents understands that."

She glanced at me, her facial expression of "yuck" clear as she stared at the wine, but then raised the glass to finish the last drop. "It's late, I need to be getting home." She rose to her feet, waving slightly. "Please be careful, Marcus darling. We don't know what *her* true intentions are, and I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I can take care of myself," I reminded her. "I've done it since I was a kid."

I saw the pang of guilt in her eyes, and almost regretted my words. We hadn't always been close. Both she and my father had been absent throughout most of my childhood, leaving me to fend for myself. Eventually my mother had realized that she had put her work before her son, and she'd been attempting to make amends ever since. My father never realized.

I walked her to the door and embraced her. "I love you, Mother."

She pulled away and smiled, then cupped my cheek. "I love you, too, darling. And I hope you know I only want what's best for you."

I placed my hand on hers. "I do."

With that, she kissed me on the cheek and walked out the door. I hadn't wanted her to leave on a sour note. At least she was trying.

My cell rang, and I was so distracted that I answered it without thinking. "Hello?"

"It's about time you picked up," came my father's annoyed voice. "I've been trying to reach you all day."

Fuck. "I've been busy."

“Too busy to talk to your father?”

“Too busy to deal with whatever bullshit you’re going to throw at me.”

“Very funny, Marcus. I wanted to let you know that there is an opportunity for you to oversee the remodel of the *Rose Palace Resort* and that you should take it.”

“No.”

My father clucked his tongue with annoyance. “Marcus, the *Regal* is doing well. You’ve done a fantastic job, but now it’s time to move on to the next project.”

He just won’t take a hint...

He never stopped. My father thought that the only way to be successful was to have your name on as many contracts and businesses as possible. He was never satisfied with his accomplishments and always looked toward the next big project.

“I’m not having this discussion with you. The *Regal* is mine and mine alone. If and when I decide to leave, it’ll be on my terms.”

“Every successful hotelier doesn’t remain Managing Director,” he lectured. “You have more than enough money to hire someone to do the job for you. Marcus, you have so much potential. You should be doing *more*.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

He protested, but I’d already pulled the phone from my ear. I ended the call angrily and dropped the phone on the couch.

Samson wandered back into the room and wagged his tail when he saw I was finally free to give him attention. I put my wine down and stroked his head. While I did, I thought about my own relationship with my parents. How many times had I wished for a closer family when I’d been a kid? How many times had I been left alone with family members or a nanny because my parents had to work?

If there was the slightest chance the kid was mine, I needed to know. I pulled back from Samson and picked up my wine once more. After another moment of deliberation, I picked up my phone and dialed Ella's number.

It rang several times before she answered. "Hello?"

"It's me."

"I hoped you might call," Ella said. "What's going on?" Her tone wasn't as icy as I thought it would be, but I couldn't say I didn't deserve it, given the way I'd treated her.

"We need to talk."

"I'd say *that's* an understatement." Well, *that* was a bit colder...

"I get that you're angry with the way I reacted, but what did you expect?" I asked. "You called me up out of nowhere, invited me to lunch, and then dropped a huge bombshell on me."

"I understand that, Marcus." She sighed. "I really do. What I didn't appreciate was the *way* you reacted, like it ... like my daughter"—She seemed to choke up—"was no big deal and you were done with the conversation."

I wanted to say I was sorry for *that* part, but I couldn't. Not yet. "I needed to clear my head. Anyway, I didn't call you to argue. As I said, we have a lot to talk about."

"I did enough talking at lunch. I'm more than ready to hear what you have to say."

"I would like to meet her." I heard myself say, and at that moment, I realized it was true. I did want to see the kid for myself. "I think that might be wise before I decide whether or not to take the test." I wanted to make it sound like something more than mere curiosity.

"Is that necessary?"

"Yes." I took a sip of wine and stood to my feet. "If she really is my daughter, you at least owe me a private meeting."

“This isn’t a business transaction, Marcus. This is a child we’re talking about. *My* child.”

“Yeah, and supposedly she’s my child, too, Ella. You have every right to be protective, but I have rights as well, and if you’re serious about me being a part of her life, that’s going to include me seeing her.”

She didn’t respond.

Her hesitation and defensiveness had me concerned. What had happened to cause her to be so overprotective? However, she had delivered the news on her terms, so it was only fitting I meet my daughter on mine. I needed to know for sure, and I needed to know as soon as possible.

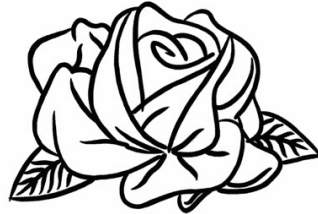
“All right,” she eventually agreed. “What about Friday?”

“Fine. We’ll meet at your place. I’ll be over at eleven. Text me the address.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll see you then.”

She hung up. I lowered the phone and stared out of the window into the darkening sky. In the span of twelve hours, my entire future had changed and been derailed off into the unknown. I was now faced with a decision I’d never thought I’d have to prepare for. I was torn and conflicted as I tried to process the storm of emotions raging within me.

ELLA



“Ella, did you hear me?”

My head snapped up to find Frank staring at me in concern. We were inside a small meeting room just outside the courtroom.

Frank Hyde (yep, like Jekyll and Hyde) was my lawyer. He was a sharp and logical man in his late fifties. He and my mother had been friends for as long as I could remember. As I'd grown up and become more aware of such things, I realized that Frank liked my mom—probably even had feelings for her. Feelings she didn't seem to return. I'd asked her once when I was a teenager why she didn't get together with “Uncle Frank.” She was still a vital and interesting woman, who any man would have been proud and lucky to have as a partner. At the time, I *may* have compared Frank's tall, graying, good looks to George Clooney. My mother had laughed in an embarrassed but cute way and said she was way too busy raising me. When I'd tried to disagree, she'd winked at me and added that she didn't want to let a good friendship be ruined by a failed romance. I had to admit I'd been a *little* relieved (yep, I was selfish like that) to have her decide I was her main focus. Funny enough, and against all the odds, she and Frank had managed to maintain their warm and loving friendship after all these years.

Frank was also the go-to guy for any serious concerns we had in our household. The second I'd called to tell him about my situation with Jacob, he'd offered to represent me. I didn't know what I would have done if it hadn't been for him.

“Yeah, sorry, Uncle Frank. There’s just so much going on. I’m trying to clear my head before we go in there.”

Frank placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “I’ll be there the entire time. “If you get overwhelmed, I’ll step in. You can do this.”

I nodded.

“Now I want you to remember that this is a family court hearing, Ella,” Frank cautioned. “It’ll be set up more like a meeting than a courtroom, like you see on TV. There will be a judge in the room, and a court clerk to take notes. There’s a filing clerk, but they won’t be there today, they just keep the court’s files up to date and organized, and schedule hearings. I might deal with them, but you won’t have to. Our judge has a law student helping with legal research, preparing the case, and anything else they assign them. Finally, a bailiff will be there to keep order and security. Apart from that, it’s you and me, and Jacob and his lawyer. It seems like a lot of people, I know, but you’ll be sitting at a table with me, Jacob, his lawyer, and the judge only. Once we get started, you probably won’t even notice the others.”

If it had been any other day I would have burst into that room, armed and ready to deal with whatever Jacob threw my way. But, the situation with Marcus had drained me emotionally. It had been a few days since he’d demanded to meet Nylah, and as Friday drew nearer, I was growing increasingly anxious. I didn’t want my daughter to meet him if he was going to blow in and out of her life. How was I to know if he’d stick around? That’s what I was most afraid of. She didn’t need another man in her life she couldn’t count on, even if he was her real father. All the uncertainties... I wouldn’t allow her little heart to be broken.

Frank must have sensed it because he leaned in close and asked, “Are you okay with what I’ve explained to you?”

I nodded, a little distracted.

“Did Jacob say something to get to you?” Uh-oh. His face was getting a little red. “Did he intimidate you?”

“No.” I shrugged. “Well, kind of.”

Frank was adamant about me keeping my distance from Jacob, and I was more than happy to agree. I didn’t want to talk to the bastard, anyway. All he ever did was try and degrade me. I could live without *that*, thank you very much.

“He’s texted me a lot, but I haven’t answered.”

“Good. You need to block his number.”

“Trust me, I’ve tried. Every time I do, he just gets a new one.” I sighed, exasperated. “God, he’s like a freaking annoying gnat that won’t give up.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I feel like my brain’s scrambled—it’s like tiny little devils playing ping-pong in there. I have so many thoughts, and I can’t keep track of them.”

“Don’t think about anything else.” Frank reached out and squeezed my hand. “Right now, you just have to think of this moment and this meeting. You can worry about the other stuff afterward. I need you to stay focused on the here and now.”

Easier said than done. “You’re right.” I gave him another nod. I took several deep breaths, trying to center myself (and get rid of the damn ping-pong players inside my head—nasty little suckers!). On the fourth, I managed to push aside my concerns about Marcus. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Frank gave me a reassuring smile and then opened the door, leading me to the courtroom. The first thing I noticed when I entered was that Jacob was already there. I wasn’t surprised he’d arrived early. He was always punctual, annoyingly so. I felt his gaze following me as I moved to sit in one of the two empty chairs across the table. Frank took the seat next to mine.

We had barely sat down before Jacob addressed me. “You’re looking a little tired, Ella. Anxiety getting to you?”

Of course it is, you dick, I thought to myself. If we weren’t in family court, I would have said it out loud, but I wasn’t about to do anything to jeopardize my case. Instead, I bit my tongue and kept my eyes firmly trained on the chair I thought the judge would soon be occupying.

He knew I struggled with anxiety. Throughout our marriage, he'd always used every opportunity to throw it in my face, when he wasn't completely ignoring it, of course. Eventually, I stopped trying to communicate and kept my thoughts and fears to myself. Needless to say, that hadn't helped, either.

Even now that we were separated, my silence didn't mean anything to him. He seemed to get just as much thrill out of attacking me as he ever did. I couldn't stand to see his mocking smile, and, oh, I *longed* for the day I could wipe it off his face.

Little did he know, I had a secret weapon—Marcus.

Jacob couldn't get full custody of Nylah if he wasn't her father. Plain and simple—and if he couldn't get custody of Nylah, he no longer had a hold on my life. I could write him off as a bad dream and never look back.

However, in order to prove Nylah's paternity, I knew I needed evidence. My only chance would be Marcus's taking the DNA test, then I could show it to the judge, and this would be over. With Jacob's money and influence, I wasn't going to take any risks, and I was halfway to getting that proof. But, I didn't want to say anything to anyone until I could prove Nylah's paternity.

Judge Reed entered the room and took the seat I'd been watching so intently. "Okay, before we begin, there's one thing I want both parties to keep in mind." He clasped his hands in front of him and flicked his gaze between me and Jacob. "This meeting is about Nylah Jungmeyer. She is my main concern, and I will be thinking of her as we continue the custody proceedings. I will do what is in the best interest of *her*."

I could feel Jacob staring at me, and this time, I glanced back, wanting nothing more than to smack that smug smirk off his face. I hated having Jacob's last name attached to my daughter. The moment Jacob was out of our lives, I was going to change it.

Judge Reed inclined his head toward Jacob. "Now, I believe Mr. Jungmeyer is first."

The clerk began to tap almost silently on the steno machine.

Jacob sat up and cleared his throat. “I love Nylah. I know I can provide a good life for her. I have a steady job, savings, and even a trust fund started for her. My apartment is her home; she’s spent her whole life there. She needs the stability, and I know I can provide it.”

It killed me to hear *such bullshit*. After Nylah was born, Jacob had shown little to no interest in her, unless he was using her against me in some way. He didn’t know the first thing about taking care of Nylah. His play for custody was done purely to hurt me. As Jacob continued to talk, I bit my tongue so hard I could taste blood. He certainly played the part of the doting dad well. If I didn’t know him, I would almost believe it.

Once Jacob had finished, Judge Reed turned to me. “Is there anything you would like to say?”

“Nylah is my daughter. I gave birth to her. I’ve been with her every day of her life.” I tried to keep my voice steady. “I work from home, so I will be there when she needs me. She’s doing just fine in our new apartment, and I don’t see how starting a trust fund automatically makes you a good parent.”

I could feel myself getting riled up. Frank placed a comforting and warning hand on mine.

“I also don’t see why we can’t share custody,” I added, softening my tone.

Not that I actually wanted to share anything with that jerk, but unfortunately, it was the only safe play I had at the moment.

Judge Reed flipped through the notes his assistant had placed in front of him. “Mr. Jungmeyer has said visitation rights have been denied. Is this true?”

I was furious Jacob had not once put in any real effort to see Nylah since we left. “No. He hasn’t shown interest in visiting her.”

“My client has emails between himself and Ms. Rawson.” Jacob’s lawyer spoke up. He picked up several sheets of paper and handed them to the judge. “In them, Mr. Jungmeyer attempts to set up a time to see his daughter.”

Judge Reed glanced at the printouts and gave me a look over his half-moon glasses. “Do you remember these correspondences?”

“Yes.” I fixed my gaze on the judge. “But I stand by my earlier statement. At first, I complied. But after he canceled twice and didn’t show up the third time, I stopped responding.”

“Ms. Rawson has done everything in her power to ensure Mr. Jungmeyer can see his daughter.” Frank spoke up. “If Mr. Jungmeyer doesn’t follow through, that’s hardly her fault.”

“She moved her clear across the city,” Jacob exclaimed. “How can she expect me to see her multiple times a week if they live so far away?”

“Because if you really cared for her, you would make the effort,” I argued, forgetting myself. “I only moved to be closer to my mother. I didn’t do it out of spite.”

“Are you sure you didn’t?” Jacob narrowed his eyes. “Just like you didn’t just spring the divorce on me?”

“See! You always do this! You always put the blame on me! I told you I wasn’t happy.” I could feel my anger boiling and ready to explode. “You never listened! You—”

Before I could finish, Judge Reed spoke up again. “Let’s conduct these proceedings with civility,” he demanded. “As I stated earlier, this isn’t about the two of you. Whatever did or didn’t happen between you shouldn’t affect your child. Need I remind you; we are not here to discuss your marital troubles. We are here to decide if Mr. Jungmeyer should have full custody or if custody should be shared.”

He turned to Jacob and his lawyer. “So far you have not provided me any evidence to suggest Ms. Rawson is unfit to help raise this child.”

Jacob's lawyer leaned in close and whispered in his ear. I watched them with disgust, wanting nothing more than to just leap across the table and punch him in the throat, although I knew that wouldn't endear me to the judge. And, I'd definitely go to jail ... but, a girl could dream.

"Mr. Jungmeyer would like some more time," his lawyer said. "He is willing to work with Ms. Rawson on a comparable solution."

Judge Reed set the email printouts aside. "Well, that's something at least."

I couldn't help but notice that there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice, which made me smile on the inside. At least not everyone was seeing Jacob as an innocent in all this.

"This isn't going to be solved in one day," the judge went on. "It's going to take time and dedication on both your parts. Understood?"

I nodded. "Absolutely."

We were dismissed about an hour later. Frank helped me out of my seat and led me through the doorway. Jacob and his lawyer were right behind us, and I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise. He was too close for comfort. It wasn't until we were halfway down the hall that I was able to relax.

"Are you all right?" Frank asked once we were out of earshot of Jacob and his lawyer.

"No, I'm not," I mumbled. "The thing that pisses me off is the thought of sharing Nylah with that man. The judge has no idea what kind of man Jacob really is. He's a conniving snake who's only pulling this crap to hurt me."

Frank gave me a sympathetic look. "We both know that, but it's not what we know at this stage, it's about evidence. We have to trust in the judicial process. But, you're doing great. You've presented your case and provided evidence that you're a fit mother. The judge won't take custody from you."

The meeting had taken most of the late afternoon, and the sun was already beginning to set. Frank walked me to my car, and as I climbed in, he looked into my eyes. "So, the judge's

clerk will let me know when the next hearing is, and I'll call you when I know something. Unless Jacob comes up with anything new or his lawyer thinks of a delaying tactic, this should be pretty straightforward from here on out."

I almost told him then that it would be me who'd probably provide the delaying tactic (or as I liked to think, playing the winning hand), but I kept that knowledge to myself. What he didn't know couldn't be used against him, I reasoned. Also, I wasn't even sure if Marcus would take the test—he hadn't *completely* agreed yet. But I was hopeful.

"Thanks, Frank ... for having my back."

"Anytime, kiddo."

Nylah was asleep by the time I got home. I paid the babysitter for her time and went to peek in on her. She was fast asleep, thumb stuck in her mouth with her favorite blanket draped over her eyes. Only her nose and mouth were visible, and I couldn't help but watch her lovingly for a minute. Oh, my precious baby girl. This beautiful child held my heart in her tiny hands. I walked over to her crib and leaned down to kiss her sweet button nose. I would do anything for her.

As long as she was happy and healthy, everything I was going through would be worth the pain.

I thought back to the day I'd told Jacob I wanted a divorce and how scared but determined I was to leave him.

"You can't survive without me!" He laughed in my face. "You think you could raise Nylah on your own? Please, you can't do anything on your own. You need me, Ella."

I clutched Nylah in my arms, and she whimpered, feeling the tension in the room. "No, I don't. I need to do what's best for Nylah and me. And that's not here. That's not with you."

As much as I hated to admit it, on some level, Jacob was right. I had needed him—because he'd made sure of it. He'd driven my friends away, criticized me at every turn, and made it so I was completely dependent on him.

Despite all of that, he couldn't completely control me. I had packed up Nylah and left the day after that final argument.

He was wrong. I *could* raise Nylah by myself. If my mother could raise me alone, then I could raise my own kid.

Closing the door to Nylah's room, I went to change into comfortable clothes. I knew my anxiety wouldn't let me get much sleep, so I wasn't going to try to force it. Once I was comfortable, I headed into the kitchen where my laptop sat on the kitchen table. I booted it up to check on my orders.

As I waited, my thoughts drifted to Marcus.

I understood it would be necessary for him to meet Nylah, but when he said he had rights, I couldn't help but flash back to all the times Jacob said the same thing. It wasn't fair to Marcus to compare him to my ex. I had to remind myself that his reactions came from a different mindset. In hindsight, I *had* prepared myself for Marcus wanting to meet Nylah. I just hadn't expected it to happen so soon. The fact that he wanted to see her was at least a good sign. It meant that he was invested on some level.

Regardless of the dark times I'd been through, Nylah was always the spark that kept me going. She was so positive and happy, and just being around her made my heart lighter. However, after what had happened with Jacob, I was cautious about bringing another father figure into her life, especially if Marcus wasn't there to stay.

You're putting too much pressure on this meeting, I told myself. Marcus doesn't have to be a father figure just because he's Nylah's father. Don't psych yourself up. Baby steps...

My computer loaded up, and I threw myself into the administrative part of my job as a distraction. Baking had always been something I did to relax. It wasn't until my mid-twenties that I realized I could make it into a career. It became a wonderful escape for me. Despite Jacob's negative thoughts on the idea, I started my own baking business after Nylah was born. It took off fairly quickly, and before I knew it, I had a steady flow of customers and orders.

Shortly after, I was offered a job at a prestigious bakery, and when I turned it down, Jacob had asked me why.

“Because nothing could be more rewarding than being home with my daughter.”

Jacob snorted in disbelief. “If you say so.”

I never regretted my decision. Each day Nylah’s personality emerged more and more, and it was wonderful that I was there to experience every moment.

With the orders processed, I set out to fill them. I worked in silence for the next few hours, losing myself in flour, yeast, and milk. I had just pulled a batch of fresh bread out of the oven, and when I looked at the clock, I realized it was nearly two in the morning.

I winced and turned the oven off. I needed to try and get *some* semblance of sleep, or I would be useless throughout the day. Leaving the mess for later, I checked in on Nylah one more time, kissing her on the cheek, before falling tiredly into bed.

I must have dozed off the second my head hit the pillow, because the next thing I knew, sunlight was streaming into my bedroom. Over the baby monitor, I heard Nylah babbling to herself in her room.

She was all smiles when I went in to get her, wavy locks tousled from sleep. Her hair color matched mine, but her blue eyes and the dimple in her chin were definitely all Marcus. They also had similar-shaped faces, and when Nylah got into mischief, I saw Marcus’s smirk.

“Good morning, cutie pie!” I cooed as I lifted her out of the crib.

“Mama! Mama! Mornin’.” Nylah wiggled excitedly. I hugged her close, and she snuggled into my neck. She was always extra cuddly if she went to bed without seeing me.

Jacob could try all he wanted, but there was no way I was going to let him take Nylah away. She was my girly, and I would fight tooth and nail to make sure she was safe.

“Let’s get you freshened up.” I smiled, giving her little kisses all over her face as I carried her to the changing table.

“Ses’me Street!” She clapped her tiny hands with a toothy grin. “M’Elmo!”

“I know, I know, you want your Elmo. You know the rules. No TV until you’ve had breakfast.”

“Bwed?”

I chuckled. “Yes, Mommy made homemade bread for you,” I said, changing her diaper.

Nylah clapped again, and I couldn’t help but kiss her chubby cheeks, making her giggle. My sweet girl was so easy to please.

We went about our morning routine—it felt good after the last few days I’d had. Consistency was important not only for Nylah’s sake but for my own as well.

At eleven on the dot, there was a knock on the front door. I’d gone on a cleaning spree and cleaned not only the kitchen but the living room as well. Nylah sat in the middle of the room, content with her toys as *Sesame Street* played on the TV.

Steadying myself, I rose from the couch and answered the door.

Marcus wore jeans and a plain black T-shirt, his black helmet and a leather jacket under his arm. And I couldn’t help but follow the lines of his muscled arms, imagining them wrapped around my waist. Memories of our night rushed in, and for a few moments, I was frozen. I’d reveled in those memories, still feeling the wind caught in my hair.

He placed the jacket and his helmet on the side table next to the door.

“Hi.” I just stood there like an idiot.

Marcus shoved his hands in his pockets. “Morning.”

I had to step aside as he practically pushed past me into the apartment, breaking me from my trip down memory lane. “Please, *won't* you come in.” My tone was laced with sarcasm.

“Thanks.”

The entryway was small, and when I turned from the door, I found his body closer than I anticipated. His chest was mere inches from mine, and my breath rushed from my lungs as I inhaled his expensive cologne. I instantly thought of the night at his penthouse when he'd pushed me against the bed. His mouth had been hot and demanding, his hands eager as they explored every inch of my body.

Part of me wondered if Marcus remembered, too, because his eyes became hooded, and I saw his gaze drift to my lips. He tilted his head, and I thought I was going to drop to the floor. Instead of kissing me, though, he reached out to touch my hair. And, my mouth fell open.

Marcus smirked. “Your hair looks nice.”

“Um, thanks. You smell good.” I wanted to slap myself. I seriously said that out loud. What was I, seventeen again? God.

He chuckled, and I felt the heat rising in my cheeks.

The moment was broken by Nylah's squeal of laughter. Pulling myself together, I motioned toward the living room. “She's in here.”

Marcus's shoulders tensed, and he took a step further into the apartment. I walked around him, and all the way into the living room, where Nylah was busy dancing along to the song Elmo sang.

I crouched down to her level and leaned in close. “Hey, sweetie. There's someone I want you to meet.”

Nylah let me pick her up, and I turned toward Marcus. He was rooted to the spot, his focus completely on our daughter as I walked over.

“Marcus, this is Nylah.” I rested her on my hip and peered down with a grin. “Nylah, can you say ‘hi’?” Nylah blinked up

at Marcus with her wide eyes before burying her face in my neck. “Oh, come on, you don’t have to be shy.” I laughed and assured her, rubbing her back.

Marcus finally moved. He took a step closer and stooped over so he was eye level with Nylah. “Hey there, little one. My name’s Marcus.”

I had never heard him use such a quiet and gentle voice. My shoulders relaxed at his words, and a moment later, Nylah cautiously withdrew from her hiding place.

“Hewwo,” she babbled with a hesitant smile.

Marcus smiled back. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Nylah peered up at me for a second, before looking back at Marcus and holding out her arms. I clutched her tight, my nervous gaze meeting Marcus’s.

To my surprise, Marcus didn’t think twice before reaching out for Nylah as well. “May I?”

I allowed Marcus to take Nylah from my arms. My breath was literally stolen from my lungs when I finally saw the two of them together. Anyone with eyes could see the resemblance. Even I hadn’t realized just how much they looked alike.

Marcus gave Nylah, who was currently touching the man’s face, his full attention. “It’s like looking into a tiny mirror.”

I chuckled softly. “She does look a lot like you.”

“It’s the chin.” Marcus stared at Nylah in awe. “She’s got the Willingham dimple.”

Hearing Marcus claim Nylah as a Willingham made me smile wider. I knew then that I had made the right choice in telling Marcus about her.

Nylah began to wiggle and point to the ground with a whine.

“Use your words,” I reminded her.

“Down! Down!” Nylah pointed.

Marcus carefully set her down, but as he went to pull away, Nylah grabbed his hand and tugged it in the direction of her toys.

“Pway? M’awcus, pway?”

I interrupted. “How about we have a snack first, cutie pie?” She instantly forgot about Marcus and took off toward the kitchen.

“Come on.” I motioned for Marcus to follow me. “I made cookies.”

We entered the kitchen as Nylah clambered up onto a chair.

Marcus glanced around. “So, it’s just you two?”

I busied myself getting Nylah a cookie (like a grown woman) so I wouldn’t have to make eye contact with Marcus. I didn’t feel like embarrassing myself again. I’d probably stare at his lips, anyway. “Yeah, just us.”

“It must have been difficult raising her on your own this whole time.”

“I was married for a while.” I shrugged. “It didn’t work out.”

I set a plate of cookies in the middle of the table and handed Nylah her sippy cup. She took it excitedly while she swiped a cookie for herself. With nothing else to do with my hands (damn it), I finally turned my attention to Marcus and took a seat.

“So, there’s a husband ... ex-husband?”

I nodded, and he must have guessed by my bluntness that I didn’t want to talk about him.

He sat across from me, shoulders tense as he took in his surroundings. “Looks like you’re doing all right for yourself.”

All silliness had left me, and I suddenly felt self-conscious about my tiny kitchen and cheap Brooklyn apartment. “I know it isn’t a penthouse...”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Instinctively, I wanted to defend myself until I realized Marcus wasn't being sarcastic. His tone and expression revealed he was genuine. After so many years of backhanded compliments and passive-aggressive ridicule, it was going to take a long time before I outgrew my knee-jerk response to a seeming-compliment.

I needed to stop allowing thoughts of the past from ruining what was happening in the moment.

"I *am* doing well." I smiled. "I make enough money with my business to put a roof over our heads and still get to raise Nylah myself. It's really great."

"You've done a good job. She seems like a great kid."

Hearing the actual father of my child tell me I did well had a more powerful impact on me than I thought it would. It warmed my heart. I could feel my eyes begin to sting as tears threatened to come. "Thank you."

Marcus noticed the tightness of my voice. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." I waved my hand. "Just overwhelmed."

"That's an understatement."

If I was overwhelmed, I couldn't imagine how Marcus felt.

"I'm still processing all this." He flicked his gaze from Nylah back to me. "*Hearing* you have a daughter is much different than actually *seeing* her for yourself. There are definitely similarities between us, not just the dimple. Although, I see a lot of you as well."

"You do?" I beamed. I couldn't help it. The ping-pong players were back, but this time, they were playing a tournament in my heart.

Marcus nodded with a slight smile. "Aside from the hair color, she's got your cheekbones and mouth. Also, you two laugh the same way."

Since I'd had Nylah, my mother had been the only one to point out what Nylah had inherited from me. Hearing it from

Marcus felt different. He had studied my face so closely that he could find the same features in my daughter. *Our* daughter.

I watched him watching Nylah and wondered what was going through his mind. His chiseled jaw was clenched tight, and his shoulders were hunched as he rested his clasped hands on the tabletop.

I was struck by the beauty of him. He was still panty-melting gorgeous, not that I was headed in *that* direction again. Those strong features made him look like he was chiseled from stone. He finally glanced at me and gave me a smile.

Damn, those eyes...

I could get lost in his eyes. They drew me in, and I didn't want them to let go (Okay, so maybe my mind was going there a *teensy* bit). The way he made me feel was new to me and so refreshing, especially after my toxic relationship with Jacob.

His presence alone was overwhelming. I had never been with someone who could give me such a powerful physical reaction by simply brushing my hand or lightly touching my back. The last time we'd been in the same room, I'd felt his presence before I even saw him.

"I should get going." Marcus's voice brought me out of my musings.

I hated the thought of him leaving so soon. It was comfortable between us in a way it hadn't been with Jacob, and I didn't want it to go away.

"You could stay if you want," I suggested. "You don't have to rush out of here."

He seemed to think about my offer before he shook his head. "No, I should go." His tone was firmer this time.

My heart sank, but I tried not to let my disappointment show. "All right. I'll walk you to the door." Leaning in close to Nylah, I kissed her cheek to take her attention away from eating. "Can you say bye to Marcus?"

Mouth full of cookies, Nylah only waved and returned to her snack.

Marcus smiled and ruffled her hair. “Bye, kid.”

We walked to the front door in silence. I may have used Nylah bonding with Marcus as an excuse for the DNA test, but after seeing them together, I realized I wanted it to continue. There was potential for Nylah and Marcus to have a relationship, and I didn’t want to lose it.

Marcus stepped into the hall and turned to face me. He was still tense, but I could see something different about him now—in his eyes.

I leaned against the door. “Thank you for coming by.”

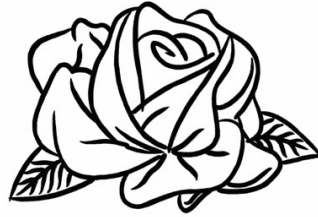
Marcus nodded as he studied me. “I’m glad I did. I’ll let you know if I want to take the test or not.”

I tried to mask my disappointment and stepped aside, not wanting to let on how important his decision would be. I had put him through enough in the last few days. “You know how to reach me.”

He nodded again, grabbing his jacket and helmet. “Goodbye, Ella.”

“Bye, Marcus.”

MARCUS



I was certain of one thing—the kid was definitely mine. The resemblance between us was startling and couldn't be ignored.

I hadn't gone to Ella's with the intention of holding Nylah, but when she reached for me, my response had been automatic. What shocked me the most was that I found myself *wanting* to hold her, and the moment I did, something just clicked. It was like a switch had been flipped. I knew then I would do anything in my power to protect her.

It scared the shit out of me. This sudden and raw emotion was new to me. It was hard to describe *what* I felt for Nylah, but whatever *it* was, it was an emotion I'd never experienced before.

When Ella had suggested I stay, I'd almost taken her up on her offer. But, the uncertainty of my role in their dynamic urged me to leave and take a step back while I processed. It wasn't because I feared responsibility. Hell, I'd been responsible for myself for as long as I could remember. I could handle anything that was thrown my way, and I was confident that extended to fatherhood. But there was another factor I had to take into consideration, and that was where Ella and I stood.

All of those thoughts raced through my mind as I got ready for bed. But I knew one thing: I couldn't worry about issues that were beyond my control. I'd have to take everything one day at a time.

was awake well before my alarm the next morning. When it went off, I hit snooze. I wasn't ready to get up and face the day. Samson snuggled up next to me, happy to have me in bed a little longer.

My attraction to Ella was stronger than ever. Seeing her and Nylah together only made me want her more. Not just because I saw how nurturing she was, but because I saw the pure joy on her face when she looked at her daughter.

Ella had made it clear that she wasn't looking for a repeat of what happened. However, there was a spark between us, and this time, I didn't want to let it slip away as I had before. I chuckled to myself, thinking of what she'd said.

"Um, thanks. You smell good."

I hadn't meant to touch her hair when I arrived. But when she'd turned around, she was just so damn beautiful. I'd *wanted* to kiss her senseless. I knew I'd thrown her off when she stared at me with her mouth hanging open. Then I remembered why I was there when we were interrupted by Nylah.

My alarm rang again, and I forced myself out of bed. For once, I didn't feel like going through my morning workout routine—instead, I took my time getting ready, preoccupied with thoughts of Ella and Nylah. When I finally made it down to my office, Lucy greeted me as she usually did.

"Good morning, Mr. Willingham."

"Morning, Lucy. How are you today?"

She seemed startled at my response, and it was then that I realized that I'd never greeted her properly before. *Damn. Maybe Phoebe was right.* Normally, I'd always gone into what I needed from her for the day. And I just called her by her first name without thinking. I had been so focused on other things, I'd barely thought about work in the last twenty-four hours.

"Um, I'm great. Thank you, sir. Aaron Patterson called. He scheduled a meeting with you for eleven. Your father also called three more times. I told him you were booked solid for the day. I think he bought it."

“Thanks.” She handed me the tablet as I walked past her desk. “Can you come in my office in twenty minutes so we can go over a few things?”

“Of course.”

I sat at my desk, took a sip of coffee, and tried to focus on catching up from the day before. It proved easier said than done—I just couldn’t concentrate on what I was supposed to be doing. My inbox was flooded with messages, and after attempting to answer a few, I abandoned them altogether.

This is insane. All I can think about is Ella and Nylah.

I found myself wanting to see them again, to spend more time with Nylah. Part of my desire was also pure curiosity, and I realized I wanted to be around Ella. Something about her presence put me at ease. I’d noticed it when we first met and then at lunch when I saw her again. Even after all the time we’d spent apart, the moment I was around her, it felt like no time had passed at all.

I thought again about when we’d stood in the entryway of her apartment. She smelled like lavender and vanilla, and I wanted nothing more than to push her against the door and kiss her like I had that first—and last—night we spent together. I couldn’t get it out of my head.

That’s what’s making this more complicated than it already is, I thought. I want her. I can’t be objective and distant without losing her.

Lucy knocked on my open door, a notepad in her hands. “Is now a good time for our meeting?”

I straightened my tie. “Yeah, come in.”

Lucy sat in the seat across from me. I took a moment to collect my thoughts before I addressed her. “Did I miss anything important yesterday?”

“It was pretty quiet. No one stopped by to see you, but your phone kept ringing. It was mostly your father.”

“I’m not surprised,” I muttered. “He just can’t take a fucking hint.” I had even less patience than normal where he

was concerned. I had more important things that needed my attention.

Lucy studied me closely. I thought she might say something more personal, her face showed concern. But she finally nodded in sympathy. “Is there anything else you need, Mr. Willingham?”

“I need to work.” I made sure to keep my voice calm and even, thinking of Phoebe’s criticism. “Especially with the marketing meeting coming up. Let’s stick to the task at hand...”

I was in the middle of a conference call when the door to my office was thrown open so hard that it hit the wall. I spun in my chair to glare at who’d dared barge in my fucking office, only to find myself face-to-face with my father.

A disgruntled-looking Lucy trailed behind, trying to stop him from interrupting me. “He’s in a meeting!”

“I’m Michael Willingham, I. Don’t. Wait.” My father enunciated each word with his self-important bullshit.

Lucy shrank under his tone, and I sent her away with a wave of my hand. I was used to my father’s callousness and wouldn’t subject anyone else to it—if it could be avoided.

“Aaron, I’m afraid I’m going to have to cut our meeting short,” I said into the phone. “But I will look over the Patterson’s marketing plan in the next few days and give you my notes. Thanks for your call.”

I hung up just as Lucy left, closing the door behind her.

I glared at my dad. “Ever hear of knocking?”

He adjusted his suit jacket. “I’m your father. I shouldn’t have to knock.”

“Wow.” I drummed my fingers on my desk. “Pulling the Willingham and Father card in a span of thirty seconds. I must have really done something to get on your nerves this time.”

Michael Willingham was a great businessman but a crap father. He approached every relationship like it was a business partnership—one he was in charge of, of course. I couldn't remember a single moment with him that wasn't work-related in some way.

He took the seat in front of my desk and fixed me with a firm stare. "We need to talk."

"I've already told you that we don't."

"I'm not going to relent, Marcus." He sat forward in his chair. "You know me better than that."

"And *I'm* not going to do what you say. You *should* know me better than that."

"I need someone to take over the *Rose*, and I want it to be you. It *should* be you."

"Why?" I shrugged my shoulders. "I have numerous cousins chomping at the bit to get a piece of the Willingham properties. Ask one of them."

"You're my son, it's your responsibility. Being my son comes with certain expectations..."

"From whom? Rich fucks who take advantage of the people who work for them? Or from you?" I raised an eyebrow. "Or how about I rehire Mrs. Hester-Smith? Think I don't know?"

His jaw clenched, and he sat up in his seat. "I'm not having this argument again. When I gave you the *Regal*, you knew there were certain stipulations that came with it. Once the hotel was up and running *and* profitable, you were to move on. That was our agreement." He glossed right over Mrs. Hester-Smith, just as I thought he would.

"No, that was *your suggestion*." I was trying and failing to keep my temper in check. "I never *agreed* to it. And you didn't *give* me this place, I earned it. I've done every job from dishwasher, to bellboy, to houseman. I know the hotel business like the back of my hand. So, when it was time to hire a Managing Director, I got the job because I was the most qualified."

“You got the job because you’re my son!” He slammed his fist against the armchair. “You can spit on our name, you can distance yourself from me all you want, but you still benefited from the Willingham name, whether you want to admit it or not.”

I should have expected him to gloss over my accomplishments. He was so self-absorbed he couldn’t understand that there were events in my life that had nothing to do with him. I couldn’t summon the energy to argue with him anymore. Between barely sleeping the night before and everything else on my plate, I’d had enough. I clenched my hands into fists to keep from punching the desk.

“Get out.”

“No. Not until you listen to me.”

“Fine.” I stood up so quickly my desk chair fell over. “Goodbye, Father.”

“Marcus, *Marcus!* Get back here!”

I ignored him as I left the office, rather calmly considering the situation. I bypassed Lucy’s desk without a word. I could still hear him shouting after me as I made my way down the hall, but I was already at the elevator by the time he caught up.

My father tried to grab my arm. “You can’t keep ignoring me!”

“Watch me.”

The elevator doors shut in his face—it was only somewhat satisfying. At first, I didn’t know where to go, but then I found myself heading toward Phoebe’s office.

When I got there, Ramona gave me a bright smile from her desk. “Good morning, Mr. Willingham!”

“Hey, Ramona. Is Phoebe in?”

She nodded, and her smile grew even wider. “Go right on in.”

I walked into Phoebe’s office. She was at her desk—glasses perched on the end of her nose as she typed away on

her computer. Medium-length wavy blonde hair framed her face, and she pushed it back impatiently.

“Hey, am I interrupting?”

She glanced up. “Not at all.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “If this is about Lucy again, I already told you—”

“No, it’s not about Lucy.” I did interrupt her this time. “We just haven’t caught up in a while.”

“That’s not why you’re here.” She gave me a “spit out the truth” expression.

“I just had a visit from dear ole dad, and you know, I thought I would pop in and see you to reset my ‘sane-o-meter’.”

Phoebe offered me the chair across from her. “Oh. How did *that* go?”

I sighed. “About as good as you’d expect when I want to live my life one way, and he wants me to live it another way. I sometimes think he forgets I’m a grown man.”

Phoebe made a face. “Oh, man, *that* argument again. Got something that might help. One sec.” She pushed away from her computer and reached to pull open one of her desk drawers. A moment later, she got up and handed me a tiny bottle of vodka. “You look like you need this.”

“It’s not even noon.”

“Hell, It’s five o’clock somewhere. Drink up, Mr. Stuffy Pants.” She snickered and went back to her seat and closed the drawer. “What did your father say, anyway?”

I stared at her and then the small bottle and decided, *to hell with it*. “Five o’clock it is then.”

Phoebe watched me take a huge swig. “That bad, huh?”

“Oh, yeah.” Damn, that was just what I needed.

“You’ve done great work here, and you’re finally standing on your own.” She leaned back in her seat. “You’d think after all this time he would get the hint.”

“He gets it. He just doesn’t like what he’s hearing.”

“Typical man.”

I quirked an eyebrow at her, and she shrugged. “Don’t look at me like that. You know I’m right.”

I conceded with a nod and took a final sip from the small, near-empty vodka bottle before setting it on the edge of Phoebe’s desk. “Regardless, my mind is made up.”

“If he thinks you’re going to fall back in his shadow, he can eat a dick.” Phoebe snorted at her own joke. “Even though I don’t think that’ll solve things.”

I shook my head and chuckled. “Probably not.”

With everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, my father’s reappearance was the last thing I needed. My thoughts strayed to Nylah. Facing potential fatherhood myself, I couldn’t imagine putting such demanding expectations on my own daughter.

“Hey, Bro.” Phoebe waved her hand in front of my face. “Earth to Marcus. Where’d you go?”

“Sorry, something’s just come up, and I’m just a little out of it.”

“Uh-oh. What’s going on?”

Aside from my mother, Phoebe was the only other person I trusted. Since I wasn’t getting anywhere keeping my thoughts to myself, I decided to clue her in.

“A woman I had sex with a couple years ago reached out to me.” I paused. “I have a child.”

Phoebe’s mouth fell open, and she looked positively gobsmacked. “Wait, what?”

“You heard me right.”

It was Phoebe’s turn to take a swig from the vodka bottle. She drained what little was left before speaking. “Nah, I thought I misheard you. You have a *child* you *didn’t* know about?”

I inclined my head. “And I don’t know how to deal with it.”

Phoebe put the empty bottle down and leaned toward me so she could look me square in the eye. “Marcus.” Her tone was serious. “I swear, if you’re thinking of just ghosting this woman and *your* kid, I’m gonna beat you over the head with this keyboard. Then I’ll rip your arm off and beat you with it. Got it?”

Realizing how my words could have been misunderstood, I decided to clarify. “I’m not *that* much of a bastard, Mac, damn. If she’s my daughter, then I’m going to take care of her and make sure she has everything she needs.”

“Okay, good.” Phoebe seemed relieved. “Wait. What do you mean *if*? Are you not sure?”

“I’m sure. I definitely *feel* like she’s mine.”

“Is she cute?”

I smiled at the thought of Nylah’s chubby cheeks. “Very much so.”

“Does she look like you?”

“She does.”

“Well, in that case she can’t be *that* cute.”

I laughed out loud and she followed.

Phoebe shrugged. “Well, what’s the issue, Marcus?”

I thought of Ella with her wide smile and husky laugh. How she’d burrowed into my heart within minutes of meeting her. How thrilled I’d been when she’d reached out again.

“Her mother.”

“Is she a raging bitch?”

“No. No, the opposite, actually.”

Phoebe nodded in understanding. “*Oooh*, you actually *like* this woman, don’t you?”

“If I’m honest, she left a big impression on me back then. Everything about her drove me crazy—not just her looks, and

she's fucking hot—I couldn't stop thinking about her, but I..."

"Let me guess—you left."

"No. I gave her my number. It was her who left that night without a word. Never came back." I noticed Phoebe's "that's not possible—you can't fool me" expression.

"*And* you never tried to find her."

I thought for a minute and then changed tack.

"Look, whether I like her or not isn't the issue. The issue is that I'm not sure I want them to be a part of all *this*." I motioned to the room around us. "The hotel business, the social scene, my past ... eventually, it's going to get out that I have a daughter, and you know how it is growing up in this world."

"Hey, we turned out okay ... well ... kinda," Phoebe corrected herself. "Sure, we could both stand to see a therapist on a regular basis, but we aren't *total* psychos. Half-psychos, yes, but not total ones." She giggled. "Listen, I'm sure the kid will be fine. Especially if her mom is as chill as you say she is."

I conceded with a nod.

"If you're already worried about this business influencing her, then that's a good sign. You're a different person than you were a few years ago. It means you won't let that happen." Phoebe paused, studying me carefully. "Your dad's visit really fucked with your head, huh?"

My lack of response was enough of an answer for her.

I hated to admit that part of me wondered if I would be like *him*. If I would turn into the cold, controlling, demanding man I'd known all of my life. I wasn't naïve. I knew I already possessed some version (if I was being honest, *many*) of those same traits.

"There's a lot to consider. A lot of things I need to factor in before I decide what to do about this."

"How old is she?"

“Almost two.”

“I can’t believe you have a kid.” Phoebe pushed her hair away from her face. “I don’t think I’ve ever even seen you around a baby.”

I chuckled at her disbelief. “Yeah, it doesn’t happen often.”

“What do you *want* to do?” Phoebe asked. “If you had to make a decision right this second without hesitating, what would it be?”

Again, I didn’t answer.

I thought back to my childhood—about how I’d felt when my parents worked, and I didn’t get to see them. When I was a teenager it suited me just fine, but I thought back to when I was a kid. I remembered seeing other families together and how happy they’d looked. I had quickly learned my family would never be close like others, and eventually, I stopped wanting it for myself.

Now, I had a chance to change that. I could step up and be there for my daughter. I may not know how to be a parent, but I could at least give it a try.

“Have you taken a paternity test to confirm?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. Ella suggested it to give me peace of mind. Not that I think she’s lying.”

“Well, isn’t her offering a good sign? If she really had an ulterior motive, she wouldn’t have even brought it up.”

“I know. And if she was after the social status that comes with the Willingham name, she would’ve shown up a long time ago. Regardless, it’s a lot to take in.”

“I bet.” Phoebe sat back and folded her arms over her stomach. “I don’t know what I would do if I found out I had a secret kid.”

I snorted. “Unless you’re missing nine months of your life, I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

She smacked me on the arm. “Shut up, you know what I mean.”

I smiled and ran my hands through my hair. “I should probably go do some *actual* work. Oh, before I go, how are things with you and *Ramona*? She seemed *awfully* happy when I saw her.” I waggled my eyebrows.

“Hush. This is *not* about me, this is about *you*, mister. No changing the subject. *Anyway*, moving on.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s been a day since you yelled about Lucy. I take it you’re finally listening to my advice?”

“I have. I was reminded of it just this morning.” I smirked. “Your voice popped in my head. Must be your mind-speak superpower at work.”

“That’s right.” She cackled and slapped her desk. “The goddess demands her T-shirt—immediately, Boss Man.”

I snorted. “I’ll get right on that, Goddess.”

This talk with Phoebe helped me put things in perspective. Thinking of Nylah pushed my problems with my father and everything else to the back burner. I’d tried to change our relationship throughout the years but had learned long ago that it wasn’t going to happen. I needed to focus on something I could change. If Ella wanted me to have a relationship with Nylah, then I was willing to put in the effort.

Phoebe finally stopped laughing. “Well, you know where to find me if you need to talk.”

I stood from my seat. “Thanks, Mac. Now get back to work.”

Smirking at my dismissal, she grabbed a pen off her desk to throw at me, and I rushed away before she could hit me.

As I walked down the hall away from Phoebe’s office, I pulled out my phone. After thinking of what I wanted to say, I typed a quick message to Ella.

Hey, time to meet me in my office in an hour? We’ll talk and do lunch.

If I was going to spend more time with Nylah, I also wanted to spend more time with Ella. By the time I got back to my office, she’d responded.

Sounds great, see you then!

I didn't realize I was smiling until I saw my reflection in my computer monitor. Feeling calmer than I had all morning, I threw myself into work with renewed vigor.

Forty-five minutes later, I heard voices outside my office door, followed by a distinct laugh that I recognized. With a grin, I got up and went to greet Ella.

She didn't see me at first, so I watched as she leaned against Lucy's desk, laughing at something my assistant said. She was wearing a yellow sundress that made her look like she was glowing. God, she was gorgeous. Her hair fell around one shoulder, and I could see the fullness of her breasts each time she moved. When she finally caught on that I was staring, her smile widened.

"Hey there." She gave me a cute wave. "Sorry, got caught up talking to Lucy."

"Do you two know each other?"

"Sort of." Ella made a seesaw motion with her hand. "I baked a cake for her sister's wedding apparently. So, I've decided we're friends now."

Lucy giggled, seeming more relaxed than I'd ever seen her. "Deal. I definitely want to order a cake from you myself."

"Great, send me the details, and we'll talk later." Ella turned from Lucy, giving me her full attention, a smile still playing on her lips. "You wanted to talk?"

"Yeah, come in." I stepped aside to let her into the office. I closed the door behind us, and again, we found ourselves just as close as we'd been the day before. "Glad you came."

Ella's breath hitched. "I'm glad you messaged me."

Her warmth pulled me in, and before I could stop myself, I reached for her. My arm slid around her waist and I felt her lean into me. Dipping my head, I caught her lips in a kiss.

She went stiff for a moment, before sighing and molding herself against me. Her lips were just as soft as I remembered, and when she started to move with me, I couldn't help but think about all the things I wanted to do to her.

She broke the kiss a second later, licking her lips and placing a gentle hand on my chest. "That's ... not why I came here."

"It's not why I asked you to visit." I gave her a playful half-grin. "Though, it's a nice bonus."

Cheeks flushed, Ella took a step back. "What was it you wanted to talk about? Is it about the test?"

I couldn't help but reach out to run my fingers through her auburn curls. "Yes."

Her eyes widened. "You'll take it?"

I continued to run my fingers through her hair—it was soft and silky, like her skin. "No."

"What?" She gulped. "Why not?"

"I know she's my kid. I don't need evidence to believe you. But I'm glad you suggested it."

"But, Marcus, I don't want there to ever be a doubt in your mind. Please take the test."

I narrowed my eyes at her. Hm. I wondered why it was so important to her.

"Please," she repeated, her eyes begging and pleading.

I sighed. She was probably right. If anything, it would shut my mother up and anybody else who had doubts. I was determined to do better by my daughter than my father ever did by me. She seemed like a great kid, and I was eager to get to know her.

I brushed her hair away from her face and met her hazel gaze. "All right, if it's that important to you, I'll do it."

Her eyes lit up, and she seemed to bounce with excitement. "That's great! Marcus, you have no idea what this means to me." She pulled a business card out of her pocket and handed

it to me. “This is Dr. Harvey Mulvane. One of my clients recommended him, can you believe they were married for...” She stopped, realizing she was rambling a bit. “Well, the pricing for the test seems reasonable, and he takes appointments on short notice, too.” She seemed overly relieved and excited. “When do you think you’ll be able to get over there? Maybe he’ll be able to squeeze us in today.”

“Today?” The warm feeling in my chest started to deflate. I began to feel suspicious of her sudden sense of urgency. “You seem prepared.”

She shrugged. “I assumed you’d want to get this done and over with as soon as possible.”

It was my turn to take a step back. “Why do I get the feeling it’s more important than you’re letting on?”

Ella’s gaze shifted away from mine for a moment, and she winced. “Well, to be completely honest, there *is* another reason I wanted you to take a DNA test.”

My mind instantly conjured up all sorts of scenarios, each worse than the one before. Why did she need my DNA so badly? Did *she* not really think the child was mine? The more stories my brain spun, the angrier I became. “That’s good to know.” I walked around her and leaned against my desk.

“You probably want to know more. Where do I even begin?” She gave me a concerned expression before snorting and shaking her head. “You know what—forget it.” Ella waved her hand in dismissal.

“Are you chickening out? Don’t chicken out.”

“I’m glad you’re going to take the test. Let’s just leave it at that.”

I raised an eyebrow, gesturing for her to continue, but she remained silent.

It seemed she was done talking, and I wondered what the hell was going on. “I’ll have my assistant make the appointment for tomorrow.”

“Great. Text me the date and time. I guess I’ll see you then.”

She turned away from me and walked toward the door. When her hand came to rest on the handle, she paused and glanced back. “Sorry for putting you through this. I hope you decide to spend more time with Nylah. She likes you.”

She didn’t wait for me to respond before she opened the door and walked out.

I waited a few minutes before calling Lucy in.

“I need you to make an appointment for me for tomorrow.” I picked up the business card and held it out to her.

Lucy took it from me. “Of course.”

I turned to my computer, but after a moment of typing, I realized Lucy hadn’t left. I glanced back at her with a raised eyebrow. “Can I help you?”

“Is everything okay?” she asked. “Ella seemed a little upset when she left, and...”

“I would feel better if you didn’t ask personal questions.” I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Lucy, please get back to work. This is not something I wish to discuss.”

She tilted her head. “You don’t like me very much, do you?”

Surprised that she had the courage to voice the question, I gave her my full attention.

“How I feel about you personally has nothing to do with it.” I kept my tone calm. “It’s about your work performance, completing tasks on time, and I’m still not convinced you can handle this job.”

Lucy’s eyebrows furrowed. “Then why did you hire me?”

“You worked for Patterson, and we thought you could handle it. So far, you haven’t proven that you can.”

Her demeanor changed altogether. “Well, so far, you haven’t given me a chance.”

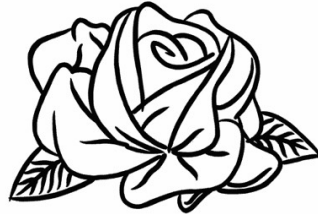
“Then don’t wait for me to. Prove it. Not by getting me things, and not by sucking up—by doing your job and doing it well.”

Lucy took a moment to process what I said before giving me a firm nod. “I’ll do my best, sir.”

“That’s all I need from you. Your best.”

I returned to my work, barely hearing the click of the door.

ELLA



“*I* think it’s clean, Ella.”

I glanced up from the sink where I’d been angrily scrubbing the same pan for the last ten minutes. *Angry at myself...*

Lucy sat at the kitchen table, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee as she watched me. She’d taken half the day off to run a few errands and stopped by to discuss the cake she wanted me to bake for her wedding and ended up staying. It felt nice to have a friend again. I’d lost touch with most of my old friends after Jacob and I had gotten married, and I wasn’t ready to reach out in the middle of a custody battle, because I knew I wouldn’t be a good friend.

“Sorry,” I muttered, rinsing the pan one final time before putting it on the rack. “When I’m anxious, I clean.”

Lucy grinned, then put her hands up in surrender. “Hey, don’t let me stop you. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t break your wrist before you made my wedding cake.”

Snorting in amusement, I wiped my hands on a dish towel before taking a seat next to her. “We definitely wouldn’t want that, now would we?” I couldn’t help but laugh again at the mental image. Only *I* would be able to do something like that. *Hey, Mom. Um, sorry. I broke my wrist cleaning a pan. Think you can come to the hospital?*

We talked for a few more minutes before she left. Nylah was spending the morning with my mother, so I had at least another two hours before I had to pick her up for our

appointment with Dr. Mulvane. With Lucy gone, I threw myself back into cleaning.

As I scrubbed the dried food off of Nylah's highchair, my mind couldn't stop replaying my conversation with Marcus. I kept picturing the expression on his face. When I'd first entered his office, he'd been warm and inviting. The kiss had been completely unexpected, and yet, when I saw him leaning in, I couldn't bring myself to pull away. I didn't want to. And honestly, I didn't want it to end. But, he'd called me in for a reason, and I knew I couldn't allow myself to get distracted. *His lips...*

It was familiar but still exciting. It had felt like the start of something new.

Then his mood had switched, and suddenly he'd seemed withdrawn. Right after I told him I had a reason for the DNA test.

The guilt of my secret ate away at me.

You *are* a chicken, I scolded myself. *A big one, too.*

I should have been honest with him about Jacob and the custody hearing from the beginning. Damn it. I should have told him yesterday. By holding back, I thought I could make the situation clean and uncomplicated. I should have known better. Nothing about our situation was easy—or simple.

He had shut down when he thought I had ulterior motives. He probably thought I *was* coming after his money or something.

I was tempted to call Marcus and explain myself, but I stopped when I remembered I would see him later. If our conversation went badly, I didn't want to risk him not showing up to the appointment. So, I continued cleaning the apartment until it was sparkling, then changed my clothes and left to get Nylah.

he doctor's office was plain and anonymous, located on the first floor of a three-story brick building where various other

businesses operated. It was clean, quiet, and nondescript. Its character was oddly fitting, given the reason we were there. After filling out some paperwork, I paced the threadbare carpet in the waiting room with Nylah, who was excited to see and touch everything she could get her little hands on. I'd just managed to stop her from standing on one of the chairs when Marcus strolled in, dressed in a gray business suit, complimented by a burgundy tie.

He wore a worried expression, although when Nylah clapped excitedly and bounded toward him, he did give her a smile. He reached down and tousled Nylah's hair before he finally made eye contact with me.

I gave him a tentative smile. "Hey."

"Hi, Ella."

"You should check in." I gestured to the receptionist. "I think she has forms for you to fill out."

Marcus nodded and moved past me to do as I suggested. Nylah tried to follow, but I distracted her with one of the books on the small table in the corner.

I wanted to say so many things to Marcus, but I knew we weren't in the right place. I sat quietly as he filled out the forms he needed to, before he came back to join Nylah and me. He sat in the chair across from me, but I couldn't bring myself to make eye contact.

"I'll pay for the test." I instantly regretted my words, knowing how unnecessary and dumb they must have sounded. "Thank you for agreeing to do it." Why did I act like such an idiot around him? Every. Single. Time. My stupid nerves were getting the best of me. Again.

Marcus looked up at me in surprise. "I'll cover it, but thank you for offering, Ella." His eyes softened as Nylah took the opportunity to try and climb up on his lap. Unsure if Marcus was comfortable with the attention, I made a move to stop her, but only received a wave of dismissal.

After a moment of watching him to see if he could manage on his own, Marcus helped Nylah up and balanced her on his

knees. The small interaction gave me some relief.

My heart melted as I watched him playing with Nylah. The spark in his eyes gave me the boost of confidence I needed, and I decided to tell him everything once we were done here.

I opened my mouth to speak but was cut off when the door next to the receptionist's desk opened. A young woman with light-brown hair and a cheery smile walked out with a tablet in her hand.

“Ms. Rawson, Mr. Willingham?”

I lifted Nylah into my arms, and the three of us followed her through the door.

“I'm Hannah, Dr. Mulvane's assistant.” She led us down the hall, and we followed her to one of the examination rooms where she ushered us inside. “I just need to ask some preliminary questions before you see the doctor.”

I set Nylah on the examination table before climbing up next to her, while Marcus silently stood off to the side. I could tell Hannah felt the nervous tension in the air because she seemed even more determined to maintain her perky attitude.

She glanced at the notes on her tablet. “It says here that you're looking to do a paternity test, is that correct?”

“Yes.” I put Nylah on my lap to keep her from squirming. “We need confirmation that he's Nylah's father.”

Hannah nodded, her face a mask of non-emotion. “Mr. Willingham, I see you filled out the necessary consent forms. Do you have any questions for us?”

“How long does it take to get the results of the test?”

“It should take one to two business days. We do the test in our lab right here on site, and although we get a little backed up sometimes—and we currently are—it shouldn't take much longer than that. Are there any other questions I can answer before Dr. Mulvane comes in?”

We both shook our heads.

“Great, I’ll let him know you’re ready.” Hannah stood from her stool and exited the room, leaving the three of us alone.

It didn’t take long. A moment later the door opened again, and the doctor walked in. Dr. Mulvane was tall and thin, had a narrow face and thin lips. He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes as he gave me the once-over. I was glad this was the only interaction I would probably have with him.

“Good morning.” He flicked his gaze to Marcus and then back to me again. “So ... you’re doing a paternity test.”

“Yes.” I smiled nervously. “Is this going to take long?”

“No time at all. I just need to swab the inside of your daughter’s mouth and then do the same to Mr. Willingham here, and you’re good to go.”

“Is there anything we can do to speed up the test results?” I asked.

Dr. Mulvane hesitated for a moment. “Unfortunately, no. Our lab is only so big, and we have numerous tests ahead of yours. We can’t afford to go any quicker. Any change in our procedure risks jeopardizing the results of other tests. I’m sure you realize the importance.” I felt as if he looked a bit too long into Marcus’s eyes.

“I’m sure a sizeable contribution to your lab could help push that along,” Marcus commented. “You must need some new equipment or something.” I was impressed to see Marcus trying to help the situation, and especially the clinic. Dr. Mulvane’s tight smile relaxed slightly, and his eyes became reflexive.

“Well...” he began.

“That won’t be necessary.” I interjected, giving Marcus a firm shake of my head. “We’ll wait our turn.”

Marcus gave me a calculating expression before turning his attention back to the doctor. “You heard the lady. I guess we’ll wait.”

Dr. Mulvane seemed a little less chipper after that. Once he'd swabbed the inside of Nylah and Marcus's cheeks, he made a hasty exit. Hannah returned to lead us back to reception, and then that was it, we were done.

We left the doctor's office in silence, and it took me the entire walk down the hall to muster up the courage to finally speak. Marcus held the door open of the main building so I could push Nylah's stroller through before he gave me a small smile and said goodbye.

"Marcus, wait!"

I hurried to catch up to him, pushing the stroller as fast as I could manage with a child. Thankfully, he stopped walking.

"Marcus, I need to explain..."

He turned toward me, impatience written on his face. "Ella, I'll be honest. I felt something was up—what's with all the rush? And the secrecy? I wanted to give you time to approach me. But whatever you say now, please don't tell me you were lying."

"It's complicated."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Did you want me in Nylah's life so you could profit from it?"

"That's not it at all," I denied. "You *have* to believe me."

He lifted a brow in question. "Why?"

He deserved to know the truth—the whole truth. "Please let me explain," I begged. "Dinner tonight? My place?"

"I don't think so." Marcus removed his phone from his pocket. "I'm a busy man, Ella. I don't appreciate people wasting my time."

"There was a reason why I didn't tell you everything, and it has *nothing* to do with who you are. I promise you. I'm not after your money, Marcus, and not everything is about who *you* are!" I heard the anger in my voice, and it was mixed with a frustrated tiredness that was bone deep.

Nylah heard it, too, and suddenly, she burst into tears, startling both Marcus and me. Before I could move around the stroller to check on her, Marcus had squatted down to her level. He picked up Nylah's stuffed elephant from the ground where it had fallen and carefully dusted off the dirt. Nylah's cries faded as soon as her favorite toy was in her hands.

Marcus smiled at her before his gaze shifted to meet mine. "You better have one hell of an explanation."

I wrapped my arms around my stomach. "I do."

Marcus stood up straight, his jaw set tight as he contemplated my offer. He glanced back down at Nylah and sighed. "Fine. I'll be there at seven."

With that, he shoved his hands into his pockets and walked toward the town car that was parked by the curb waiting for him, and then turned toward me again. "Hey, do you need a ride?"

"No, I drove here, but thanks."

I had been so afraid he would brush me off. Now that I'd arranged an opportunity to explain myself, I wasn't going to waste it. I'd just loaded Nylah into her car seat when my phone rang. Lucy had promised to get back to me later today about the wedding cake, so I answered the phone without even looking at the screen.

"Hello?"

"I'm surprised you answered."

My stomach felt like it twisted in on itself when I heard Jacob's voice. "What do you want?" I wanted to hang up on his ass, but I needed to remain *somewhat* civil until I had proof in my hands. Then he could eat shit.

"Ella, I miss you."

I rolled my eyes, not believing him for a second. "You mean you miss having someone to push around and talk down to."

"Don't be like that. Look, I'm tired of you dodging my messages. Just come home so we can talk about this."

Hearing him refer to his townhouse as “home” was beyond insulting. There had been so many times when he’d felt the need to comment on *his* home and how much *he* spent on us. It had never felt like home, it had felt like my prison.

Neither Nylah nor I would ever go back.

“*Stop* calling me. Anything you have to say to me you can say during our next hearing.”

“Ellie, please. You don’t want Nylah to grow up without a dad. You of all people know how hard that is.”

Go to hell, was my first thought, but I didn’t want to scare Nylah by shouting. “Do not ever call me again.” I hung up before he could say another word. I was proud to have kept my tone under control when all I wanted to do was scream. I wouldn’t dare allow Jacob to know he’d gotten under my skin.

Fuming, I finished strapping Nylah into her seat and backed out of the car. I clutched the phone so tightly my knuckles turned white. My heart began to race, and I found it difficult to catch my breath. I couldn’t believe he’d thrown my insecurity about my own family in my face. *Of course, I should’ve learned to expect it.*

Sharing my history had never been easy for me. Most people in my life didn’t know I was adopted, let alone my thoughts on my biological parents. Jacob had used it against me.

I didn’t realize I was practically panting with anger until I felt light-headed. Shutting my eyes, I forced myself to take a deep breath and exhaled slowly. When I opened my eyes again, Nylah was staring at me with concern. *My sweet little Nylah*. I shoved my feelings about Jacob aside and smiled at my daughter.

“Time to go home, sweetie.”

Nylah gave me a toothy grin as I closed the door.

I had to be strong, for her sake. I couldn’t let Jacob break me—not again. I climbed into the driver’s seat and sat for several long moments, trying to bring my focus back to the present.

I had to think of the positives in my life. There was a strong chance Nylah wouldn't grow up without a father. Marcus seemed sincere about wanting to be a part of her life. Once the DNA results came in, the three of us could move forward.

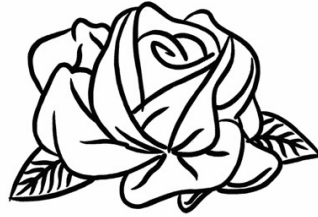
I hoped and prayed that once I told him the whole truth, that he'd still want to be around us. I couldn't help but smile at the mental image of the two of them sitting together. I'd been so afraid that Marcus's anger toward me would affect how he acted around Nylah, but it hadn't. It revealed a maturity I hoped to have someday.

I found it incredibly sexy.

Don't think about that, I told myself. That's not the point of him coming over.

Dragging myself back to reality, I started the car and headed home.

MARCUS



I wasn't sure what to expect in terms of her explanation. Part of me wanted it all to be a misunderstanding, but I was a realist. Things were rarely as simple as we wanted them to be.

Deciding I was done for the day, I turned off my computer and pushed myself up to stand. I had to piss like a son of a bitch, my back cracked from sitting too long, and I winced and stretched.

I pressed the speaker on my desk phone. "Lucy."

She appeared within seconds. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm heading out for the day." I picked up my cell. "Feel free to pack up early."

"Actually, I'd rather stay another hour if that's all right. I want to finish up a few more things before I leave for the weekend."

I had to admit that I was surprised.

Mrs. Hester-Smith had usually been all-too willing to leave early should the chance arise. "If you want. I'll see you on Monday."

I stepped into the elevator and sent a text to Phoebe.

Asked Ramona out yet?

Her response was immediate: *We've already gone out, but a girl doesn't kiss and tell.*

Bullshit. You tell me everything down to the color of their panties.

Shut up.

I see how it is. I guess I won't tell you where I'm headed tonight.

I stepped out of the elevator and unlocked the door to my penthouse, smiling when she responded: *Oh, come on! Ohhh ... Baby Mama. Wrap it up, lover boy.*

I burst out laughing and shook my head. Damn. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed that hard.

I'm not saying shit until you tell me about Ramona.

Fine. We're a thing now. Happy? But shut your damn trap and don't embarrass her. We'll go out for drinks later. K?

Took ya long enough. Drinks next weekend. And yeah, going to meet her for dinner, but it's not like that. Details later. Call ya tomorrow.

Sure it's not. I want those details, Asshat.

I chuckled and left her hanging.

I changed into something more comfortable before I headed over to Ella's place.

*A*s I approached Ella's apartment door, I could smell something delicious cooking. She greeted me with a warm smile, and my heart skipped a beat. Her auburn hair was tied back in a low ponytail, and she wore a floral-patterned dress that had a low-cut neckline and barely reached her knees. I could see the smooth expansion of her long legs, and it distracted me for a second, giving me an unexpected semi. She had no idea how much I wanted her at that moment.

"You came."

"I said I would." I tried to keep my gaze trained on her eyes and *not* her chest. "Did you think I was lying?"

“No, but you weren’t too happy. I thought you might cancel.”

She stepped aside, and I let myself in. “Well, I didn’t.”

The apartment smelled amazing. “You know, now that I think about it, I rarely get to enjoy a home-cooked meal.”

Ella’s eyebrows furrowed in what seemed like shock. “Really?”

“Parents worked, and we lived in whatever hotel my father was running at the time.” I shrugged. “There really wasn’t a need for cooking, except for invitations and barbeques with friends.”

“I love cooking.” Ella led me into the kitchen. “Baking is my specialty, but I *love* being in the kitchen. It relaxes me. My mom taught me to cook when I was eleven, and I ended up taking over many of the meals from then on. I even worked in the museum’s restaurant when I wasn’t tending the bar, prepared small sandwiches and desserts, but when Nylah was born, I had to quit.” She leaned against the kitchen counter. “My boss Ray was something else, though. He could eat half a cake in one sitting.”

Nylah sat in her highchair, playing with a small pile of Cheerios. She looked up when she saw me, and her face split into a huge smile.

“M’awcus!” She reached her hands out to me.

I smiled and affectionately ruffled her hair. “Hey, little princess.” When Nylah said my name, my heart melted. I couldn’t believe a kid her age remembered—that she remembered *me*. I took a seat at the table and was just about to lay my napkin across my lap when a tiny hand reached out and tried to shove a Cheerio into my mouth. “Mfph!” I was caught off guard.

Ella laughed. “She’s trying to share.”

“Yeah.” I grinned and let her put it in my mouth—it was kind of sticky and soggy, but Nylah was so damned cute. “So, what did your mother make for dinner?”

She clapped her chubby hands, squashing a couple Cheerios. “Pie! Pie! Pie!”

Her enthusiasm took me by surprise, and I jumped when I heard the kid shout—she’d been so quiet every time I’d seen her, up until now.

Ella laughed again, carrying a bowl of salad over to the table. “Homemade chicken pot pie,” she clarified. “It’s her favorite. She asks for it all the time.”

I found myself eating another Cheerio as Nylah insisted I share her snack. This time, I gobbled it off her fingers and she giggled. What could I say? The kid made me smile.

After Ella finished setting the table and serving everyone, she sat across from me.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

As much as I wanted to relax and enjoy myself with them, I couldn’t until I knew what Ella had kept from me.

She took a deep breath, and it was then that I realized how exhausted she appeared. Makeup couldn’t hide the dark circles under her eyes or the worry lines that creased her forehead. She crossed her arms over her chest, clutching her elbows and revealing the mounds of her breasts as she leaned back in her seat.

She looked me in the eyes. “My ex-husband wants sole custody of Nylah.”

I needed a few seconds to grasp what she was saying.

Suddenly, her eagerness made sense, to a point. “You need me to keep your husband from seeing your daughter.”

“It’s not as calculated as that.” She shook her head. “I wouldn’t mind if he saw Nylah, but, given the fact that he’s a giant ... he hasn’t been a good husband nor father to Nylah.”

“Are they close?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “Please, Jacob’s barely held her.”

“If Nylah isn’t your ex’s, I don’t get why he’s making a play for custody.” I paused. “Unless...”

Of course. The DNA test.

“... he doesn’t know he isn’t the father.”

Ella’s face flushed deep red, seeming truly ashamed.

“By the time I found out I was pregnant, Jacob and I were ... serious.” She stared down at her hands and then back up at me. “You weren’t in my life anymore and, at the time, Jacob and I were already talking about our future together.”

She paused. “Marcus, I’m not proud of what I did. I was scared out of my mind, to be honest. And ... I didn’t want my baby growing up without a father like I did ... Just the thought alone ... and what if he left because the baby wasn’t his, you know?” She stopped and stared at the ceiling for a moment, seeming to hold back tears. “If I’d known Jacob would turn into the worst person I’d ever met, I would’ve broken things off with him the second I found out I was pregnant. But I can’t change the past.”

“So why don’t you just tell him now? He’d probably back off if he knew Nylah wasn’t his.”

She wrung her hands together. “Yeah, see, you don’t know Jacob. He’ll do anything in his power to hurt me. If I go into our hearing without proof, he could spin it against me and use it to make it seem like I’m lying.”

I couldn’t even begin to wrap my head around what Ella must be going through. The fact that she hadn’t completely lost her mind was a mystery to me.

“I don’t get how he can claim custody.”

Ella shrugged. “I was just as surprised as you are. Not to mention I’ve been with my daughter every day since she was born, yet Jacob’s trying to say that I’m an unfit mother. I would do *anything* for my daughter.”

I didn’t know anybody in their right mind who’d think Ella wasn’t fit to be a mother. She’d come back in my life two weeks ago, and even I could see the special bond she and

Nylah had—one that I was starting to want to be a part of. But, that was neither here nor there.

I sat back in my seat. “Why is he acting this way?”

“Probably because he likes to have control.” Ella picked up a napkin and rolled it between her fingers. “For the longest time he had complete control over my life, and now he doesn’t anymore. It’s eating him up inside, so he’s trying to hurt me the only way he knows how.”

“If he laid a finger on you, I swear, I’ll—”

“No. Nothing like that.” Ella shook her head. “Nothing physical, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t do everything he could to make my life a living hell.”

“What does your attorney say?”

“I haven’t told him yet.”

My eyes widened. “Are you sure it wouldn’t be best to inform him? I believe there are certain procedures that may have to take place beforehand. You might want to keep that in mind.”

At my look of alarm, she rushed on and set the napkin aside. “I know I won’t get far if I just tell the judge Nylah’s not Jacob’s without having proof. I thought I would wait until I had the lab results in my hands. Jacob has a *lot* of money *and* influence. I have just enough money to scrape by, but not much of a safety net. Technically, on paper, he can give Nylah what they think would be a better life.”

I could see the weight of her anxieties wearing on her. In that moment, her shoulders were hunched, and her lips were set in a tight line.

“The truth of the matter is, he never paid any attention to Nylah unless it was to use her against me or keep me right where he wanted me: closed away in his shadow. Around other people, he played the adoring dad, but at home, he wouldn’t even acknowledge her.”

I couldn’t see how anybody could be that heartless. Looking at Nylah and seeing that cheerful smile caused me to

have feelings I didn't even think possible—she'd found a way into my heart as soon as I laid eyes on her. I already gave her attention the second she asked for it. The thought of not caring enough even to give the kid a second glance seemed impossible.

“Why didn't you just tell me this from the beginning?”

“Because I knew it was going to be hard enough for you to accept that you had a child. I didn't want to add this pressure on you as well.” Ella's voice sounded sad, no, desperate. “Finding out you have a daughter is a lot to take in, and it would've been unnecessarily cruel to tell you at the same time that I let someone else believe *they* were her father for two years.”

I thought I saw tears in her eyes and felt it was for me, rather than her child. I felt oddly moved.

She continued, “I wanted Nylah to get to know you, now that Jacob isn't in our lives anymore. I still do.”

I could sense she was still holding something back, and then it hit me. “You didn't know if I would be on your or Jacob's side.”

Ella winced. “No... I mean ... I guess that's part of it. You both have money and influence. I'm a nobody. I didn't know...”

She didn't finish her sentence, and I could see that she was about a minute away from coming completely undone. I pushed my chair back from the table, walking around to stand beside her.

“I'm on *your* side.” I crouched down. “I'm on *Nylah's* side. I believed you when you said she's my daughter. It's pretty obvious.”

Ella gave a weak laugh, and then the tears she'd been holding back began streaming down her face. I reached out to take both her hands in mine. “Marcus, you have no idea how relieved I am to finally speak the truth. I've held it in for so long—it's torn me apart. Thank you for understanding and being on my side, on Nylah's.”

I wiped the tears from her face. “You’ve been through hell. But that’ll be over soon. Once the DNA test comes back, you’ll have the proof you need, and Jacob can’t do anything to hurt you anymore.” I hugged her close and kissed her cheek.

“I’m sure he’ll find a way.”

“Then he’ll have to deal with me.”

Her eyes widened and she sniffled. “Marcus, I don’t want you to get involved in my mess.”

“Too late. I was involved the second he made a play for my daughter.”

Her mouth softened into a small smile. “Do you really mean that?”

“Mean what?”

“You called her your daughter. Do you consider Nylah your daughter?”

I hadn’t noticed the slip until she pointed it out. Which begged the question: did I mean it? I glanced over at Nylah, who was busy making a mess of her pot pie. She had somehow managed to get a piece of it in her soft hair while smearing gravy across her cheeks. She gave me a toothy grin when she caught me staring. I couldn’t deny the way my heart melted every time I looked at her.

“I mean it.”

Ella gave my hand a gentle squeeze, bringing my attention back to her. “I’m really happy to hear you say that.”

My eyes strayed to those lips, and I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward. She leaned in as well, long lashes fluttering as she closed her eyes. Our lips met, and it had just the same effect on me as it did the other times. A shudder ran through my body, and I lost all sense of anything that wasn’t her lips touching mine. Wanting more, I cupped her face and deepened the kiss.

This time when we pulled back, we kept our foreheads touching, not wanting to break free just yet.

“What are we doing?” Ella’s voice was just above a whisper.

“Touching.” I wanted to feel her body pressed against mine. “Kissing.” I leaned in.

This time, Ella turned her head, and I caught her cheek. “Not in front of Nylah.” She nodded toward our daughter who was watching us curiously.

I cleared my throat and leaned back. “You’re right.”

“Rain check ... sometime when she’s sleeping? On the kissing part I mean.”

I smirked. “Love to.”

Any doubts I may have felt earlier were gone. If the only thing she’d been hiding was a douchebag ex, that was fine by me. If there was a chance I could have a relationship with the mother of my child, I didn’t want to let the opportunity pass.

“Wait. What if something happens between us, and then it doesn’t work out?” Ella seemed nervous all of a sudden. “I have Nylah to think about.”

“What if it *does* work out?”

She pursed her lips. “If there’s a chance something could go wrong, and for me, it *usually* does.” She giggled, and I was happy to hear her laugh. “I tend to think that things go right for me, but then I mess it up.”

“I tend to think that things go right for me because I work at it.” I put my hands on her waist and pulled her closer. “That sounds like a good counterbalance. I think we owe it to ourselves to at least try.”

Ella tapped her chin for a moment, her small smile slowly growing wider. “Maybe,” she said coyly. “Maybe we do.”

I grinned and leaned in, but she put her finger on my lips, stopping me. “If we’re going to do this, we need to be careful. I want to go slow. After everything I’ve been through...” She trailed off.

“I get it.” I let go of her waist to give her space. “We can go at any pace you want.”

Ella stroked my cheek before she cleared her throat, pulled back and smiled. “We should probably eat.”

Suddenly ravenous, I took my seat once more and tucked into my food. It had gotten cold during our talk, but I didn’t mind.

“Let’s change the subject to something less heavy,” Ella suggested. “How’s the hotel doing?”

“Profitable. Reservations are steady even though it’s the slow season.”

“That’s great.” Ella picked up her fork. “Still liking the managing thing?”

“Yeah, I am,” I said after swallowing. “It feels right.”

“I hear you’re damn good at it.”

“Says who?”

“Lucy mentioned it.”

“... *and* it pays a shi—crap-ton.” I caught myself from swearing, remembering the small child in the room.

Ella laughed. “Nice save.” She took a bite of her food. “Do you think you’ll stay there for a while, or are you planning to move on to something else?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

I must have sounded more forceful than I intended because her eyebrows shot up.

“Okay, obviously I struck a nerve there. Sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize.” I sighed. “It’s just something I’ve been arguing about with my father.”

“I take it you two don’t get along.”

I gave a dark laugh. “That’s an understatement. And since you wanted to avoid heavy subjects, we’ll just move on to something else.”

“I meant heavy for *me*. You’re more than welcome to talk about yourself. Besides, I feel like all we ever do is talk about my stuff.”

“There’s not much to talk about. My father and I have never gotten along. Either I’m doing something wrong, or I don’t exist to him. There’s no in between.”

Ella grimaced. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It is what it is.” I shrugged. “I stopped wanting a real relationship with him years ago. Normally, we keep to ourselves and things are fine. It’s just that lately he’s gotten it into his head that I need to leave the *Regal* and run one of his new hotels. That’s the last thing I want to do.”

“I bet he doesn’t like hearing that.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Bingo.”

She fell silent, and I took a few bites of food. I glanced up to find her watching me, head cocked to the side. “What?”

“*N*othing. It’s just—I never really considered what your relationship with your parents was like. I hate to admit that I assumed the opposite of what you told me.”

“You thought that they showered me with praise and pride?”

She lifted one shoulder. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

Ella sighed and pushed her plate away, her food barely touched. “I don’t know. I guess because I never knew my birth parents, I tend to glorify other people’s families.”

“That ... makes sense actually. Sorry to disappoint you, but some parents are terrible.”

Ella propped her chin on her hand and leaned against the tabletop. “Well, despite the ‘terribleness’ you turned out ... *okay*,” she teased.

“Thanks.” I chuckled. “But that took years of hard work. I was a pretty messed up kid. Eventually, my mother finally realized my behavior was a cry for help and stepped up.”

“And your father never really got the message.”

I nodded as Ella looked over at Nylah, watching as she ate quietly.

I wondered what was going through Ella’s mind. “What are you thinking about?”

Her gaze shifted to meet mine. “My birth parents. Every now and then I think about who they could’ve been, and what made them give me up. I used to be obsessed with finding them, but then I realized that if they wanted me in their lives, they would’ve made an attempt to reach out.”

“They never have?”

Ella shook her head. “No. Never.”

“Do you know *anything* about them?”

“Just that they were young when they gave me up.” She took a drink of water. “I could tell asking questions hurt my mom, and I didn’t want to cause her pain, so I stopped asking. My mom’s the best woman I know.”

“If it’s really important to you to find out, you should keep at it. The not knowing is only going to continue bothering you.”

“I thought about that.” Ella set her glass on the table. “And I’ve decided to let it go. What if they turn out to be horrible people? What if I meet them and they reject me? Reject Nylah? If I just let it go, I can at least keep the fantasy version of them alive. It’s better this way.”

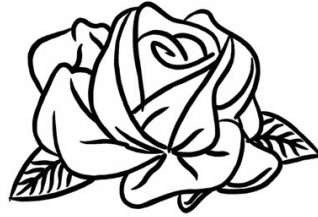
“If that’s what you want to do, I get it. I just don’t want you to regret not going for it.”

Ella reached across the table and I met her halfway, taking her hand. “I appreciate that. But, with everything going on right now, I can’t think about the past. I have to focus on moving forward.”

There was a loud crash when Nylah's plate clattered to the floor. "Uh-oh!" she exclaimed cheerfully.

The moment was broken. We dropped each other's hands and turned our attention to her.

ELLA



Marcus didn't leave until after I'd put Nylah to bed.

Part of me wanted him to stay so we could spend more time together. If a relationship was going to work between us, I needed to set boundaries for myself. I knew if he stayed the night, there was no possible way I could resist him. I'd end up going back on everything I said about taking it slow. *Of course* I wanted him. Hell, I fantasized about it, but it was too soon.

That didn't stop me from going in for another kiss as I showed him to the door. Being wrapped in his arms pushed my anxiety away, and I didn't want it to end. His teeth nipped playfully at my lower lip before his tongue soothed the spot. I opened for him, moaning softly as his tongue met mine.

What had started as a simple kiss began to transform into something more. His arms tightened, and my hand found its way into his hair, digging through the strands as I pulled him closer. I could feel the unmistakable bulge of his cock swelling against my thigh.

"Down, boy." I reluctantly pushed at his chest ... just a little. Shit! This was going to be *hard*.

"Well, we already have a kid together." Marcus gave me a sexy-as-hell grin. God, he was going to be the death of me. "Slow doesn't seem to be in our vocabulary."

I snorted in amusement. "True. But it has to be. For me."

Marcus caressed my cheek. “Whatever you need, I’ll be here.”

He left a moment later, and all I could do was smile as I leaned against the door. My heart felt as if it was going to leap out of my chest. Just thinking about him made my stomach drop, and I felt like I was falling.

You are falling.

With everything out in the open, and Marcus on board, there was no denying how deep my feelings for him went. There was still a lot we had to figure out, but at least we were going forward together.

Together... I liked the sound of that. The ping-pong players had turned into butterflies!

We still had time to wait before the test results were ready. The first day went by with no issues, but by the morning of the second, I was getting antsy. Marcus had made a point to stay in contact with me and check in, so I wasn’t surprised when I received a phone call a day later.

“Let’s go to dinner,” he said.

“I can make dinner again. Nylah doesn’t do well in restaurants.”

“I was thinking just me and you. I’ll take care of the babysitter.”

I was taken aback by his offer. The idea of being alone with Marcus felt more intimate than what we’d shared so far—and freaking exciting! “Are you asking me out on a date, Willingham?”

He chuckled. “That would be the idea.”

“I don’t like leaving Nylah with strangers. Let me make a quick phone call, and I’ll let you know, okay?”

“Great.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Me too. Talk to you soon.” I ended the call and sat for a moment, smiling like an idiot, as usual. I allowed my

imagination to run wild, picturing the two of us sitting together at an intimate table, surrounded by soft music and candlelight. God, I was such a cornball. I rolled my eyes at myself. I hadn't been on a real date in years. I couldn't wait!

When I finally pulled myself together, I called my mom.

Helen Rawson may not have given birth to me, but she was still my mother. Tall and thin with long wavy gray hair, she was stronger than she looked. As much as I'd wondered about my biological parents, I'd never felt more loved than I had throughout my childhood and adolescence. She was my best friend and the most supportive person in my life.

Her husband, Ed, had been killed in a car accident coming home from work only a few months after they'd completed the adoption process, and I had no memory of the man who'd wanted to be my father. He'd gone to college with Frank Hyde, and the two had been fast friends. Frank had translated his own loss into action, helping my mother deal with the legal work required to carry on as a family of two, and they'd moved from mutual acquaintances to close friends.

She was a proud woman, though. Frank would have done more to help if she would have let him, but she insisted on doing as much as she could for herself, and for me. She'd worked two jobs to make sure we had food on the table, and yet she always managed to be there for me when I needed her. Now that I'd been on my own for a short time, I didn't know how she'd done it for so long. If I didn't have her, I had no idea what I would do.

"Hey, Ma. Is now a good time?"

"Hi, honey. I *always* have time for you."

"I was wondering if you could watch Nylah for me tonight."

"I'd be happy to watch my little pumpkin! I love when she stays overnight," she said excitedly. "You deserve a night off, anyway."

"Thanks, Ma."

"Where are you going?"

“I ... have a date.”

The noise she made could only be described as an overjoyed squeal. It made me smile. “Ella, that’s amazing. Anyone I know?”

My mother had no idea of Nylah’s true paternity, and I didn’t feel it was the right time to tell her. “Just an old friend. We recently reconnected.”

“Well, I’m happy to hear that, honey. I’ll be over just before six to pick Nylah up. Make sure my little pumpkin knows her nana is on her way.”

“See you then, Ma. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Nylah was still napping, so I took the time to raid my closet, trying to find something to wear on my date. It was madness! I tossed clothes on my bed like I was getting ready for a garage sale. I had no idea what to wear. God, I was hopeless—okay, *nervous*. What did I wear on a *real* date with Marcus? Black, red, blue? I needed help. I felt like I was in high school again. This was exhausting. I flopped back on my bed and tried to think.

Despite everything going on with Jacob, I had something good and decent in my life, aside from Nylah. I loved being a mother, but I’d been focused solely on her for so long, I’d forgotten what it felt like to do things with other adults.

And I was so excited about our date, I couldn’t think straight, which was probably why I couldn’t find anything to wear.

Speaking of excited, I thought as my phone buzzed with a text.

It was Marcus. *Well?*

I had been so lost in my own head I hadn’t realized nearly an hour had gone by since we last spoke (Oops!). *Ma is watching her. We’re good for tonight*, I texted back.

He responded almost immediately. *Excellent. Pick you up at seven.*

True to her word, Ma showed up just before six. Nylah had already eaten and was busy playing in the living room. Her stuff was packed and ready to go by the door. I, however, was standing in the middle of my bedroom, half my closet spread out on the bed, while I clutched a towel around myself.

“Honey, where are you?” my mother called.

“In here!”

She entered my room and immediately laughed. “Oh, this looks familiar.” She balanced Nylah on her hip. “Someone is nervous about tonight.”

“Whatever gave you that impression?” I asked sarcastically as I rifled through my clothes. “Was it always this hard to find something to wear? I don’t remember it being *this* hard, not as an adult, anyway.”

“It’s only hard if you really like the person.” Ma set Nylah on the floor before moving to stand next to me. My daughter scrambled up onto the bed, wanting to see what all the fuss was about.

“Ma, help me,” I pleaded. “*Please*.”

“All right, all right, you’re okay.” My mom rubbed my shoulders. “Okay, first things first: where is he taking you?”

“Dinner.”

“Anywhere specific?”

“He didn’t say. But I know he wanted it to be a nice dinner, so I’m assuming I should dress somewhat fancy-schmancy.”

Ma nodded and began shuffling through the clothes, while Nylah busied herself with a soft piece of linen. I smiled lovingly as she plunged into the fabric, happily distracted for the moment.

“Okay, dress, skirt, or pants?” Ma asked.

“I want to wear a dress. That’s the only thing I’ve been able to decide.”

She chuckled. “Great, so that eliminates this entire pile.” She shoved a bunch of clothes off to the side, which Nylah

took to mean they were for her. She climbed excitedly onto the pile.

We spent the next few minutes going back and forth until I settled on a simple black cocktail dress. I hadn't worn it since before I had Nylah, so it was a little snug in places. But it still fit, and I still felt beautiful in it.

"So ... tell me about this guy." Ma sat on my bed. "I want *all* the details."

I struggled to find the right words without giving too much away. "He's kind. And I don't mean in the 'I have to be' way but in a genuine way. He has a successful career and works a lot, yet ever since we reconnected, he's made a point to be there if I need him. He puts in the effort."

"All good things." Ma pulled Nylah onto her lap. "Does he know about this little girl?"

I inclined my head with a smile. "They've met a few times already. Nylah adores him, and I know the feeling is mutual. I wouldn't have even entertained the idea of going out with him otherwise."

"Sounds like you're serious about this man." Ma gave me a knowing look.

"We're taking things slow." I lifted one shoulder. "I need to. After everything that happened with 'He Who Must Not Be Named,' I don't want to rush into anything."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That's *not* nothing." I lifted a brow with a pointed expression. "I know that noise. That's the noise you make when you don't agree with me. What did I say?"

"It's not that I don't agree with you taking things slow," my mother said. "It's just, I know you. I know you're going to be careful, but I don't want you to be so careful that you don't enjoy yourself."

“What are you getting at, Ma?”

She covered Nylah’s ears. “It’s okay if you want to spend the night with him,” she said in a hushed whisper. “Just go for it.”

“Oh, my God, Mom, stop talking please.”

“Ellie, you’re a grown woman with needs—”

Mom chuckled when I dramatically mimicked my reaction from when I was a teen. “I’m not listening, lalalalalala...”

Thankfully, she dropped the subject quickly. “Fine, fine, I’ll let it go.” She rose to her feet, cradling Nylah close. “At least text me when you get home so I know you’re safe.”

“I will.” I leaned in to give Nylah a kiss on the cheek. “Be good for Nana, okay, sweetie? Mommy will see you tomorrow morning.”

“Bye-bye!” Nylah exclaimed. “I go Nana.”

I was grateful she was comfortable enough with my mother to go with her. She’d be safe and happy, and I was free to enjoy my evening. They left a few minutes later, which meant I had some time to myself before Marcus arrived.

I let my curls fly free, only using a silver pin to tuck a few of them behind my ear. It had been a long time since I’d worn makeup, so I went with a subtle approach, using just enough to give my pale face some semblance of color. I had just applied my lipstick when there was a knock on the door.

Marcus looked incredible.

In fact, when I answered the door, I had to take a moment to catch my breath. He wore black pants with a tight, navy-blue shirt and a fitted sports coat. His hair was slicked back, and I had the sudden urge to run my hands through it.

He stared back with equal appreciation, his blue eyes raking up and down my frame as he smirked. “Looking good, Ella.” I remembered that he’d stared at me the same way when we first met, and my body definitely reacted to the memory. He caressed my cheek softly as I peered up at him. Marcus

shook his head and stepped back from me. “Looking *real* good.”

I laughed and walked out of the apartment, closing the door behind me. “Thanks, I try.” I grinned. “You clean up well yourself. Where are we off to this evening?”

“I know this nice little place about twenty minutes from here.” Marcus extended his arm toward me. “Shall we?”

Feeling giddy, I slipped my arm around his and allowed him to lead me out of the building. The night was fairly cool, so I huddled closer to Marcus for warmth. As he helped me into his car, I noticed another car out of the corner of my eye.

There were only so many parking spaces in our lot, and I was familiar with who usually parked where. This particular car was unfamiliar to me. Somebody was sitting inside. I wouldn’t have given it a second thought if I didn’t feel a sense of unease because of the way the driver stared at Marcus and me. Thinking I was just being paranoid, I turned away and focused on my date.

After I’d climbed into the passenger’s seat, he shut the door behind me and got behind the wheel. I could sense the same nervous and excited energy coming from him as he started the car. The mysterious man disappeared from my mind the second we pulled out of the parking lot.

“How’s Nylah?” Marcus asked as he merged into traffic. “Was she okay going with your mother for the night?”

“Oh, yeah, she was fine. Mom spoils her and gives her all her favorite foods. I’m sure she’s not even thinking about me right now.”

“That’s good.” Marcus chuckled. “I’m happy you have your mother for support. I imagine this whole situation would be ten times more difficult without her around to help.”

“She does what she can. I’m incredibly grateful.”

I paused, allowing the conversation to lull for a moment before I went on. “Can I just say how happy I am to hear you ask about Nylah every time we talk?”

“Of course I ask about her.” Marcus glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, a surprised expression on his face. “I want to make sure she’s happy and healthy. Does she need anything, by the way? Like clothes or anything?”

“You don’t have to get her anything. I don’t want you to feel like you’re obligated.”

“It’s not an obligation,” Marcus denied. “I really just want to get her something. But, something useful. I’m sure she has plenty of toys...”

I listened to Marcus go on, feeling my heart pitter-patter at his enthusiasm. He was making a genuine effort to involve himself in both of our lives.

“Shoes.” I cut him off without meaning to. “She could use new shoes. She’s growing so fast, and her feet are a really wide six. It’s hard to find shoes for her. I usually have to shop online.”

“Consider it done.”

The restaurant was fancier than I was used to. I felt a bit nervous, until Marcus placed a hand on my lower back to guide me. We followed the maître d’ to a table by the window. It was a cozy, intimate spot where we could speak privately without the chance of someone overhearing. Marcus held my chair out for me, and I sat before he took the seat across from me.

“Can I interest you in something from our extensive wine collection?” The maître d’ asked as we made ourselves comfortable.

“Montoya Cabernet,” Marcus said instantly.

I didn’t know much about wine, but by the reverent way the maître d’ nodded his agreement, I imagined it was a good one. He left to take care of our order, leaving us alone.

I clasped my hands in front of me. “I’m really glad we did this.”

Marcus smiled at me from across the table and reached over to place his hand on top of mine. “Me too. I thought we

deserved to focus on just each other and not the shitstorm that's happening around us. Who knows—maybe you'll get lucky?"

I giggled. "You're frustratingly cute."

"Cute? I can honestly say that's the first time I've ever heard that one before."

I don't know why I'm so nervous, I thought, relaxing in my seat. Yes, I do. Maybe you'll get lucky? Thank God I shaved! When's the last time I've had sex? I didn't want to think about that. Thanks, Ma, for putting the idea in my head...

"Just trying to keep you on your toes," I teased.

"Well, it's working."

A waiter brought over the bottle of wine Marcus had asked for. He showed him the label and the cork, and then poured a small amount into his glass. Marcus held it to the light for a moment, and then lowered his nose to the glass's edge to test the bouquet. I hadn't thought anyone really did that outside of the movies, but on Marcus, the actions seemed practiced and natural. The waiter stood by the entire time, waiting for his approval. After Marcus nodded his head, he poured a glass for both of us. I took the time to glance over the menu, trying my hardest not to linger on the prices. The restaurant was *definitely* an expensive one, and I had to remind myself that Marcus was the one who'd chosen it.

The meal progressed with relaxed conversation. The wine Marcus selected was good, and I found myself enjoying a pleasant buzz by the time our food arrived. The show of courses was fabulous, each one seemingly better than the one before, and I found myself relaxing into the joy of having someone else serve me delicious food and wine. Marcus and I talked nonstop the entire time, and before I knew it, we'd finished off the bottle.

Feeling warm and content, I allowed myself to let go of everything that wasn't Marcus. It was as if we were the only two people in the world, and I didn't want the night to end. In fact, I couldn't help admiring the way his tight shirt stretched

across the expanse of his muscled chest. My tipsiness lowered my inhibitions, and I knew if he asked me to go back to his place, I absolutely would. In. A. Heartbeat.

“Before we leave, there’s one thing I need you to answer.” Marcus glanced up at me as he signed the check.

I gave him a sexy smile. “Is the question whether to go to your place or mine?” I teased, pointing a finger at him, then back to me. I wasn’t *really* teasing...

Marcus smirked and wagged his eyebrows. “Who said there was going to be sex?”

I gulped, looking at him with big eyes. “What’s your question?”

“Are you able to walk, or should I carry you out of the restaurant?”

I couldn’t help but laugh out loud. “What does all this mean now?” I asked, my voice serious again. “For *us*?”

“What do you want it to mean? I don’t need to remind you that *you* were the one who left that night after we first met.”

I sighed and stared at my empty plate. A part of me hoped he wouldn’t bring up *that* night. “Did you really want me to stay?”

“I was disappointed you were gone.”

“So, you’re saying you didn’t do the whole one-night-stand thing when we met?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Marcus admitted. “But I’m definitely more focused on my work now. You’re the first woman I’ve been out with in a very long time. I never saw the need for a committed relationship ... before.”

The way his eyes grew hooded made me breathless. *Before*. He had meant before me. He never saw the need for a committed relationship before he met me. “I already told you the other night that I want to give this a try.” I met his gaze. “I meant it. I still do. Look, Marcus. I like you. I like you a lot. I did from the first moment we met, and when I saw you again,

all those feelings came rushing back. Please, let's not play any more games.”

“I've never played games with you, and I don't plan to start now.”

I believed him. He hadn't done anything to lose my trust. In fact, he'd gone out of his way to prove how committed he was to Nylah, and to me.

I reached across the table, and he took both my hands in his own. No words were spoken, but an understanding seemed to settle between us.

“Come on.” He squeezed my hands. “It's getting late. I'll take you home.”

*W*e walked back to the car hand-in-hand. We didn't let go even when he started to drive. I felt like he was an anchor, keeping me from floating away into the abyss. He stroked my hand with his thumb, and it felt as if I'd never been touched before. My body was acutely aware of where we touched, and I couldn't focus on anything else.

When Marcus walked me to my front door, I knew then that the evening wasn't over—not by a long shot.

“You should come inside.”

Marcus smirked, his sexy dark brow cocked at my choice of words. “Isn't that how we ended up here in the first place?”

“Shut up.”

I grabbed the lapels of his coat and pulled him down into a kiss. His hands immediately fell to my waist, tugging me against his chest. Our tongues danced together eagerly, and my body suddenly felt like it was doused in fire. An erotic shudder soared down my spine to my center when his fingers dug into the fabric of my dress, as if he were restraining himself from ripping it off right then and there.

We broke away, panting heavily. With hunger in his gaze, he slowly pushed me into the apartment, kicking the door

closed behind us.

Everything was different than our first night together. Before, the spontaneity and excitement of the night had us fumbling and scrambling for each other. Things were slower now. Marcus kept his arm around me as he pushed me into the bedroom.

Moonlight flooded through the parted curtains, bathing the room in a soft glow. Marcus slipped his hand through my hair to cup the back of my head and pull me into another kiss. I kissed him back with fervor, slipping my tongue past his lips in my haste.

He chuckled low in his throat, continuing to push me until the back of my knees hit the edge of the bed. Gasping for air between kisses, I busied myself with the buttons of his dress shirt, wanting to feel the firm muscles I'd been admiring earlier. His hands ran down my back, fingers causing goosebumps as they brushed against my bare shoulders. Those same fingers found the zipper of my dress and brought it down with practiced ease.

"I'm going to touch all of you." The dress fell, pooling around my feet. "I'm going to *taste* all of you. Lie down."

I didn't mind the command. I shuddered as I sat on the edge of the bed, staring at him with anticipation. Marcus bent down to kiss me, his firm hand coming up to wrap loosely around my neck.

"But first..."

I shivered as his hot breath ghosted against my lips.

The click of his belt buckle caused me to inhale sharply, and Marcus straightened. He removed his belt, and all the while, his eyes burned into mine. I wanted to help, but I found myself unable to do anything other than stare up at him. Pants open, he reached in to pull himself out, and it was then that I tore my gaze away.

With a shove, I found myself lying flat on my back—nipples peaked from the chill in the room. Marcus looked as if he wanted to devour me. He stepped out of his pants and

dropped to his knees, carefully removing my heels. Next, he yanked my panties off with a quick movement.

Hot kisses were placed along my inner thigh, as he moved toward my center. At the first swipe of his tongue, I bit my lip, trying not to squirm.

Marcus kept a slow pace as he explored my body, stroking my folds once, then twice. I gasped and jerked as his lips wrapped around my clit. The sudden burst of pleasure was unexpected, and it was my turn to grab his hair.

“Liked that, did you?” Marcus muttered a second later before gently blowing.

My body was racked by powerful shakes, making me tug on his hair. “Do it again.”

“Maybe,” Marcus teased. “If you’re good.”

His mouth returned to my sex, and for several moments, he languidly stroked me with his tongue, occasionally using the tip to flick my clit. It wasn’t long before he had my body in a constant state of motion, hips gently rocking as I tried desperately to cause more friction.

I was wetter than I thought possible, and when he slid a finger inside me, I thought I was going to come right then and there. He stilled, and when I dragged my eyes open, I found him staring at me. Only then did he start to move.

“Those damned eyes,” he groaned. “I can’t stop looking into your beautiful eyes.”

I moaned, my body constantly twitching and jerking.

“You look beautiful. I always want you like this.”

“More,” I begged. “Please, Marcus.”

His skilled fingers stroked me from the inside while his tongue swirled around in agonizing, amazing circles.

I was going to come faster than I anticipated, and there was no time to warn him. He seemed to know it was coming. He kept pace with the urgent movement of my hips, and just when I thought I could take it, I lost all control.

I came, crying out his name, thighs clamped around his ears as I pulled his hair. He didn't stop. With a hum of approval, he kept going, coaxing me through my orgasm.

I wasn't used to coming so soon, and I definitely wasn't used to my body being ready for more.

Marcus slowed his movements, fingers still buried in me as he lifted his head to smirk. "That was quick."

"Trust me," I panted. "I'm just as surprised as you are."

Looking smug, Marcus gave me a few more licks for good measure, before gently pulling away. I felt hollow without his fingers. My body sagged against the mattress as he rose to his feet.

I watched through post-orgasmic bliss as he slowly removed the rest of his clothes, never once taking his eyes off me. He was hot as *hell*, the defined planes of his chest glistening with a fine sheen of sweat, and his cock jutting toward me. He put one knee on the bed to climb up before he paused.

"We should probably use a condom this time."

I couldn't help but giggle as I pushed myself up on my elbows. "Probably a good idea."

With a grin, Marcus reached down and rustled through his clothes on the floor, before pulling a sleeve of condoms out of the pocket of his pants. He tossed them somewhere on the bed before crawling over me.

"There, now that's out of the way," he said before swooping in for a kiss.

I threw one arm around his neck and brought him down with me as I lay on my back. His kisses always made my toes curl, and this time was no different. Every part of me wanted to touch him in some way, to cling to him and never let go.

He broke the kiss to sit back on his knees, reaching for a condom.

One hand dropped from my hair, and he tugged me on his lap before crushing his mouth to mine. His cock was hot and

heavy between us, and I couldn't help but rock against him. With one arm secured around my waist, Marcus held me close as he felt around for the condom, *again*, with his free hand.

My mouth fell to his neck, and I nipped the tender spot below his ear, earning a groan for my efforts. He let go of me to roll the condom on, but soon enough his hands grabbed my hips, and he lifted me up off his lap.

When he slowly pushed into me, I couldn't help but gasp at the agonizingly slow pace I stretched around him. My hands came to rest on his shoulders, and my forehead rested against his. Marcus's hot breath ghosted across my lips, the scent of his cologne invading my nostrils. All I could focus on was him—his scent, the touch of his hands on my skin, the taste of him still lingering on my tongue—it was so overwhelming and yet somehow not enough. I wanted more from him.

I wanted all of him.

Marcus held me close as he leaned back, resting against the headboard. With one final push, he was all the way in, buried to the hilt inside me.

I took a moment to adjust, heart pounding like a drum. Remembering the last time we were together brought on a slew of emotions I hadn't been prepared for. I hadn't felt like this in so long—not since *Marcus*. This was what it felt like to be with someone, to ... just be myself. I lost myself in him.

I caught his mouth in a deep kiss, slowly wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him closer. Our chests were pressed together, until there wasn't a part of our bodies that weren't touching. Carefully, I lifted my hips and then came back down, eliciting a moan from both of us.

Encouraged by my movements, Marcus took the lead, hands directing my hips up and down in a steady rhythm. We rocked together as we kissed, hands grasping and stroking every bit of skin we could reach. Marcus thrust up, just as I dropped down, burying himself as far as he could before laying me down on my back. He took over completely, pumping into me with deeper thrusts. I wrapped my legs

around his waist, drawing him in with my heels each time he pulled out.

Marcus moved back slightly to stare down at me, his hair falling into his eyes. He looked at me as if he was gazing at the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“Marcus,” I moaned, arching my back as his cock hit just the right spot.

His face broke into a mischievous grin, and he leaned down to breathe in my ear. “I don’t think you want it bad enough.”

I whimpered. “Please.”

He planted lazy kisses down my neck, followed by the teasing scrape of teeth. “How much do you want it?”

My body was drenched in sweat. I could already feel another orgasm approaching, but at the steady pace he moved, it kept me on the edge. “I’m so close, Marcus, *please*.”

“I *like* to hear you beg.” Marcus suddenly sat back on his heels, hands resting on the bed as he kept pumping into me. “And since you asked so nicely...”

He deepened his thrusts, moving faster and faster until I was moaning so loud my voice cracked.

It was all too much to handle. He kept me on the edge, watching in amusement as I squirmed and gasped for more.

Then, his thumb gently swiped across my clit, and all was lost. I came hard, clamped down around his cock. Marcus hummed in approval and kept moving. He gripped my waist, hard, fucking me through my orgasm as he finally reached his. It only took one or two more thrusts of his hips before he was swearing my name.

We collapsed together in a mess of sweaty and panting bodies. I needed to kiss him, so I did until neither one of us could breathe.

I clung to Marcus, and he held me just as tightly, his fingertips drawing lazy patterns on my hip. I tried to think of

something to say but everything that came to mind didn't seem worthy enough.

Marcus didn't have that problem. "I've been wanting to do that since the second I heard you called."

I gave a breathless chuckle, tucking my head under his chin. "Well, you're not alone. When you came to visit Nylah the first time and stepped through the door, I thought I was gonna faint." *Yep, said that out loud. Could I not think of something else? God.*

Marcus laughed, pulling away so he could discard the condom. While he did that, I climbed under the covers, my body sore and exhausted. I wrestled with the idea of asking Marcus to stay, but before I could say anything, he crawled into bed next to me. *Yes!*

As soon as he settled in, I knew he would be spending the night, and the thought made my heart sing. We moved closer to each other until I was tucked into his side, his strong arm draped around me.

"I'm glad you came back into my life."

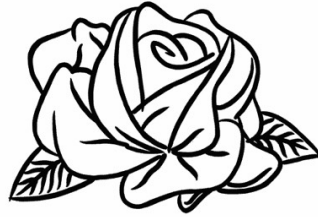
Marcus's breathing hitched, as if I'd caught him off guard. He was silent until, finally, he kissed the top of my head. "Me too."

Tangled together, our breathing slowed until Marcus dozed off. I stayed awake for a little longer, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

I love him.

The statement didn't scare me as much as I thought it would. I actually felt relieved to admit it to myself. With a happy smile, I let my eyes drift closed.

MARCUS



I woke up the next morning with my arms still around Ella.

My brain replayed the events of last night, everything from dinner, up until we passed out. It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Having a solid idea of where we stood definitely helped. I didn't have to second-guess her intentions or my own.

With a contented sigh, I closed my eyes and buried my face in her hair. I knew I should probably get up for work at some point, but I was too comfortable to move. I watched Ella sleep, her heart-shaped mouth parted, and I kissed her forehead. The blanket had slid down, revealing her gorgeous tits. I wanted to touch her again, make love to her until she begged for release. Yet, I didn't. She'd seemed tired, and I couldn't bring myself to interrupt her sleep.

I wondered when the last time was that she'd had a break. She worked so hard, I doubted she practiced much self-care. I made a mental note to plan something for her when the hearings and paternity issues calmed down.

Before I knew it, I'd fallen asleep again.

The next time I woke, the sun was brighter, and I was more alert. I glanced at Ella who was now lying on her stomach, then at the clock and

grunted in annoyance. I'd delayed long enough and needed to get going.

Not wanting to just up and leave, I gently rubbed Ella's back to wake her. "Hey, babe. I gotta leave for work."

Ella groaned, grabbed my arm, and pulled it around her waist like a blanket. "No."

Grinning, I nestled in close, placing kisses along her shoulder. "Trust me, I'd love to stay." I traveled up to her neck. "But I have meetings all day."

Ella moaned, back arching into me. The sound went straight to my dick, and I couldn't help but thrust against her ass. She ground back, practically purring.

"Cancel them. Cancel them all."

"Tempting..." I slipped my hand between her thighs. "Would you settle for making me late?"

"Sure." Ella grinned and rolled onto her back. "You made me late before."

I laughed. "*Touché.*"

She slid her arm around my neck and pulled me down into a sweet kiss. When she did, I caressed her breasts. Her nipples reacted, fully erect from my touch. I reached down, rubbed two fingers around her clit, making her hips jerk up in surprise. She moaned as I stroked her, getting wetter and wetter as time went on.

"It feels nice." She let out a soft sigh when I started to nip at her neck.

"Turn around."

Ella rolled onto her stomach, and I shoved a pillow under her hips. I pushed myself up to sit, taking in the view of her curvy frame and round ass. She glanced over her shoulder to smirk at me, watching with hungry eyes. I spread her cheeks, taking in the most glorious view of her pussy. If I had the time, I'd bury my tongue in it again and eat her out for as long as she could handle it.

Next time.

I draped my body along her back, gripping myself at the base so I could push into her with one smooth stroke. She moaned and clamped down around my cock, practically squeezing me.

“*Fuck*. Ella, you feel so good.”

“Marcus...” she whispered.

I looped my arm around her waist and started to fuck her, nice and deep. Last night had been about taking our time and reconnecting. This morning was about pleasure. I wanted to make her feel as good as she made me feel. More than that, a part of me wanted to claim her. To make my mark and remind her that she was mine. Because I already knew I was hers.

My hips slapped against her ass, echoing throughout the room. Ella was constantly squirming and moving beneath me, but her noises were muffled by the pillow, and I needed to hear them. I slid my hand under her body, up between her tits, until my hand found her neck. Lightly gripping, I pushed her up until she was flush against my chest.

“No hiding,” I growled, fucking her deep. “Let me hear you.”

Ella didn't disappoint. She whimpered and moaned, hands fisting the sheets each time I drove into her. “Marcus,” she panted. “*Ohmy ... G... od. I'm... s... o... close.*”

My teeth found her shoulder, and I gave her a playful bite before soothing the spot with my tongue. “Do you want to come?”

She nodded, curls flying in all directions. “Yes, yes... please,” she begged between my thrusts. “Plea... se... let... me come.”

I let her go and moved back, gripping her hips to bring her with me. On my knees, I took her from behind, transfixed by the way her body swallowed me so easily. Needing to see her unravel, I reached between her legs and caressed her now-beautifully swollen clit, over and over again. Ella almost screamed, jerking from the stimulation. A few more thrusts,

and then she was done. She tensed, her head thrown back in a silent scream as tremors racked her body. I kept going, triumphant and ready for my own pleasure.

When I was close, I quickly withdrew. I came all over her, painting her ass and thighs with thick strips of white. Ella's body shook, and it wasn't until I gave her ass a slap that she allowed herself to collapse face-first on the bed.

“Jeez, babe!”

With a breathless laugh, I got to my feet and searched for something to clean up. I found a box of tissues on the bedside table and wiped my hands before cleaning off her ass and thighs. Once that was done, she rolled onto her back. The flush ran from her cheeks down to her chest. Her nipples were still hard from her orgasm. She looked thoroughly fucked out, and I had to admit, it was a fantastic look on her.

“We should do that every morning.” I winked at her.

She grinned and gave a luxurious stretch, letting me see every inch of her naked body. “Mmm, I agree.”

I checked the clock and frowned. “Duty calls. Can I get another kiss before I get ready?”

Ella sat up, wild curls covering most of her face and tits. Even with the crazy hair and pillow creases on her cheek, I thought she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I stood for a few moments admiring the view, then I leaned down, gave her a kiss, and squeezed her breast. It was quick, but only because I knew if it turned into more, I wouldn't leave that room.

She pulled the comforter up and watched me get dressed. “I'm happy you spent the night,” she said, her eyes radiant.

“I'm surprised you let me.”

“I'm glad I did.”

“Let's not wait two years before we do it again,” I teased.

Ella rolled her eyes and turned on her side, propping her head up on her hand.

“Shouldn’t you be getting up, too?” I asked.

“This is the first morning I haven’t had Nylah in a long time. I’m going to get as much rest as I possibly can.”

I checked my phone, only to see that I had an email from the doctor’s office. “Looks like the test results are in. They want us to come in this afternoon to get them.”

“Thank God.” Ella flopped back on the bed. “Now this mess can finally be over.”

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and walked around to her side of the bed. “I’ll see you later.” I leaned down to give her another kiss.

“Can’t wait.”

*A*fter a pit-stop at home to shower, change, and visit with Samson, I headed into work. I felt different, relaxed, and content. In fact, I couldn’t stop grinning. And it wasn’t just because of the great sex. It was the knowledge that Ella would be there for me after work. I had something to look forward to at the end of the day.

“Good morning,” I addressed Lucy when I approached her desk.

She gave me a funny look but smiled. “Good morning, Mr. Willingham. Did you have a good night?”

My mind flashed to mental images of Ella riding me. “You could say that. Did the samples from the interior designer come in?”

“Yes, they did.” Lucy glanced around her desk. “They’re here somewhere...”

“Bring them to me when you find them.” I headed toward my office.

I left her to search while I started my computer and got myself comfortable. About ten minutes later she entered, seeming frazzled. “Here they are.” She looked at me anxiously. “Sorry about that.”

“No worries.” I took the binder from her.

“I was going to put them on your desk yesterday, but I got sidetracked. I couldn’t help but flip through it.” Lucy fidgeted. “And...” She cut herself off.

“And what?”

“You said you didn’t want my opinion on things.” Lucy shrugged. “So, I’m keeping them to myself.”

I chuckled. “That bad?”

Lucy blanched. “Not great. Very ... simple.”

I started to scan through the ideas for the guestrooms I’d told them to draw up. By the third page, I was bored. “Simple is an understatement.” I looked at her. “It’s bland.”

Lucy inclined her head in agreement. She hesitated for a moment before she took the seat across from me. “It’s also not what you both talked about. You said you wanted modern and bold—something with simplistic elegance. This ... is just plain basic.”

“I’m glad you remember.”

“That’s ... not very nice.”

My eyebrows shot up, and I glanced up from the page to stare at her. “What do you mean?”

The hesitancy I was used to seeing had faded, and Lucy appeared somewhat annoyed. “Why wouldn’t I remember what you said?” She crossed her legs and folded her hands. “The meeting wasn’t too long ago, and you had me take notes.”

“My last assistant wasn’t the most observant or loyal.”

“So that means I’m just like her, does it?”

Intrigued by her boldness, I closed the binder and sat back in my seat. “Did I hit a nerve?”

Lucy pursed her lips like she was stopping herself from speaking. I could sense she was trying to choose her words carefully. “I’m my own person. I don’t know who your

assistant was before me, and frankly, I don't care. All I care about is doing my job. Every time you say something like that, it makes me feel like you think I'm an idiot. I'm not. Well, at least *usually* I'm not."

I hadn't really considered how Lucy felt about my snide remarks, mainly because I tended not to care about those things. I did appreciate her standing up for herself, mind you. Maybe Phoebe was right. Again. Maybe there was more to her than I'd originally thought.

"Clearly," I said. "All right, Lucy, you've earned my respect."

"I have? Thank you, Mr. Willingham." Lucy smiled, a genuine smile this time.

I must have really gotten on her nerves. Not that I blamed her for her outburst. I'd been a dick to her since she started, *and* not exactly the easiest person to deal with.

"Yes, you have." I flipped open the binder and began to skim through the pages again.

Lucy exhaled slowly and relaxed in her seat. It seemed like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. "So, what are you going to do? About the designs?"

I shrugged and slammed the book shut. The pictures didn't look any better the second time. "Find a new designer. Start from scratch."

"Is it going to be expensive?"

"Better now than later. We should still have the file of potential designers. Can you go through them and pick the top five candidates?"

Lucy nodded and got to her feet. "Of course. Is there anything before I do?"

"No, I'm all set."

When she started to walk away, I had a sudden thought and called after her, "Lucy." She turned to face me. "Let me ask you something."

“Of course.”

“It’s personal.”

It seemed like I’d caught her off guard. “Okay...”

“You’re getting married, right? How did you know you wanted to?”

“Get married?” The corner of her mouth curved into a half-smile. “Oh, that’s easy. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life without him in it.”

“Just like that?”

“Yep. When you love someone, it’s that simple.” Lucy lifted one shoulder. “It’s the little things you have to think about. Like, when you wake up, and they *aren’t* lying next to you, how do you feel? Benji used to travel a *lot* for work, and every time I woke up without him, I just felt ... hollow. It was the worst. Or when something good happens, and you can’t wait to share it with them. Separately those things don’t seem like much, but when you start to count them—they add up.”

I considered her answer, thinking about my feelings toward Ella. It had only been a few days, but she was the first person I thought of when I woke up, and the last I pictured before I fell asleep. Waking up this morning with her in my arms didn’t just feel good, it felt *right*. It felt like it was where I was supposed to be.

“Thank you,” I muttered. “That helps.”

Lucy gave me a curious expression before she nodded respectfully and left. I swiveled my chair around to face the large windows overlooking the city.

The appointment at the doctor’s office was just a formality. My feelings for Ella could no longer be contained. Within a short period of time, I had acquired the family I’d once dreamed about as a kid.

Overwhelmed by the notion, I turned back toward my desk, needing a distraction. Thankfully, work provided the perfect one.

A knock on my door an hour later interrupted me, and I glanced up to see Phoebe bouncing on her heels. “Hey, what’s got you so excited?”

She walked in, shut the door, and plopped on the seat in front of my desk. “Well, Ramona.”

“And?” I gestured for her to continue.

“We’re going away for the weekend!” She beamed. I’d never seen her so happy. “This is our first... well, you know. We haven’t had sex yet.”

I leaned forward. “Mac, are *you* asking *me* for sex advice?”

Her mouth dropped open, and she rolled her eyes. “I’m *excited*, and I needed to talk to my best friend. God, you’re such a man.”

“Last time I checked, yeah.” I chuckled. “No, seriously. I’m happy for you two. Where are you going?”

“The Hamptons. Marcus, what if she’s *the one*?” Her eyes widened. “I can’t believe I’m actually saying that.”

“I can.” I thought of my relationship with Ella and my conversation with Lucy. “When you know, I guess you just know, or so I’ve heard.”

Phoebe narrowed her eyes. “What are you not telling me? Wait, why do *you* look so happy? Oh, my God, Marcus!” She pointed at me. “You got laid before I did! I can see it in your eyes.”

“A gentleman never tells.” I smirked, throwing her words back at her.

“Oh, you’re so full of shit. I knew it was gonna happen when you didn’t text me back... Uh-huh. Baby Mama back in action! Marcus is in *loooooveee*.”

I snorted. “You’re not right in the head, Mac.”

She grinned and waved her hand. “Yes, I know. So, is it serious? You, and whatshername?”

“Her name’s Ella, and yeah, I believe it is.” I leaned back in my chair. “And my daughter’s amazing. When things settle down, I want you to meet them.”

“It’s still so strange to think of you as a dad, but yeah, we have to get together soon—the five of us. I can’t tell you how happy I am, for both of us. Whoda’ thunk it, right?” She stood to her feet. “Okay, I best get going. Ramona’s waiting for me. We’re taking off early today, but I’ll let you know how the Hampton’s go.” When she smiled, her entire body lit up.

“Bye, Mac, and have fun this weekend. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Well, that leaves absolutely *nothing*. Bye, *lover boy*.” She winked and walked out the door.

MARCUS



After Phoebe's visit, the morning flew by and before I knew it, my phone beeped, reminding me of my appointment at Dr. Mulvane's. I shut my stuff down, gave Lucy a few tasks for the rest of the day and headed out. Ella and Nylah arrived seconds after I did.

She looked just as stunning as she had this morning. Her curls were swept into a messy bun, and she wore jeans with a loose sweater, making me wonder if she was wearing a bra underneath. *She isn't*, my imagination concluded. Seeing her in such casual clothing made me want to do all the things I'd done to her last night, and then some.

"Hi." She smiled as I pulled her into a hug, feeling her breasts against my chest. My cock stirred with interest. "How was work?"

"Too long." I swooped in for a quick kiss and reached over to tousle Nylah's hair. "Hey, little princess. Have you been a good girl for Mommy?"

"M'awcus!" She gave me a toothy grin and bobbed her head excitedly. "I good guwl." I was just about to respond, but we were interrupted when an assistant arrived to escort us to the examination room. Just like the last time, we were shown in and then left to our own devices. Ella bounced Nylah on her lap while I sat next to her, my arm loosely wrapped around her waist.

"I have to admit, I've been really impatient during the last few hours." She leaned her head on my shoulder. "I also don't

understand why we couldn't get the results over the phone. It seems silly to have us drive all the way back here."

"I'm sure he just wanted to tell us the results in person, considering the whole situation."

The door opened, but instead of Dr. Mulvane, it was Hannah, the medical assistant, who entered carrying a chart. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. It's been extremely busy today. Unfortunately, Dr. Mulvane is unavailable today."

"That's all right, I guess," Ella said. "Do you have the test results?"

Hannah hesitated before she took a seat across from us. She glanced at the lab results in her hand and then up at me. "Yes, I do." She paused. "Unfortunately, it looks like you aren't Nylah's father, Mr. Willingham."

The energy in the room immediately shifted.

My heart sank, and I stared at her, dumbfounded. It didn't make any sense. Anyone who saw Nylah and me together would be able to pinpoint the resemblance. When I held her in my arms for the first time, I instantly connected with her. There was *no* way she wasn't my kid.

Next to me, Ella was equally shocked. "That's impossible," she mumbled. "There *must* be some mistake."

"That can't be right," I agreed. "How accurate are these tests? Should we do the test again?" I tossed all these questions at her in one stream of disbelief and frustration.

Hannah visibly bristled at my tone. "The tests have an industry standard reliability of 99.9%." She said it so matter-of-factly that I was sure it wasn't the first time she'd been asked, most likely in very similar situations. She passed the sheet of paper to me.

"We want it done again," Ella insisted.

"Your insurance—"

Ella frowned and stared at her. "So? What about it?"

"I'll pay out of pocket again." I interjected.

Something didn't seem right.

Hannah appeared beyond uncomfortable. She flicked her gaze between Ella and me before she quickly stood. "Maybe I should give you two some time to talk this over."

"Can't you contact Dr. Mulvane?" I got to my feet. "We're not leaving until we speak with him personally."

Hannah nodded vaguely and hastily left the room. The door had barely closed before I started to pace. "Who the hell does he think he is? He's got a lot of damn nerve not coming to talk to us face-to-face. I can't *wait* to give him a piece of my mind—"

"Marcus?"

Ella's broken voice caused me to spin around to face her. Her eyes were lined with unshed tears, but it was Nylah's whimpering that made my anger fade. I suddenly realized my outburst had startled her, and she was tucked into Ella's side, practically curled into a ball.

"Hey, hey, angel, it's okay." I softened my voice as I knelt down so I was on her level. "I'm sorry for shouting. I didn't mean to scare you." I glanced up at Ella. "Either of you."

Ella let out a shaky breath and nodded. Pushing my own feelings aside, I wrapped my arms around both of them and hugged them tightly.

"Marcus, I swear she's your daughter. I don't understand..." Ella whispered, tears running down her cheeks.

My head was spinning. I barely glanced at the paper in my hand with the clinic's header and the results displayed in what looked like horizontal bar charts. All I could see was my name and Nylah's, and under them, the words "negative match." Despite what science was telling me, my heart and my head said *this was wrong*.

I glanced at Ella. There was no way she could have manufactured the shock and sheer desperation I saw on her face. She was as turned around as I was. A hundred possibilities passed through my mind in a flash—Ella's having sex with someone else, Ella having sex with many "someone

elses,” Ella lying about Nylah’s age—I shook my head to clear it of this shit. No. There was no way. That wasn’t Ella. I had to consider the facts: either Nylah was my child, or she was Jacob’s. Her looks alone said she wasn’t Jacob’s. The only option remaining was the one I’d been happy to believe until this point.

I knew it was the truth.

Nylah was my daughter. There was no doubt.

“I believe you.” I placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “We’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

“You don’t understand,” Ella uttered breathlessly. “Even if we do manage to find someone available this quickly, we’ll never get the test done before the hearing.”

“I’ll take care of it. Money can get things done a lot faster. I’m going to use mine to help.”

Ella pushed away, putting some distance between us. “This isn’t something your money can fix, babe. I have to tell Frank about this now. Maybe he can help. I can’t believe I didn’t tell him earlier, but I thought it was a sure thing. I never imagined—oh, God—if I don’t have any evidence to give the judge, Jacob’s going to win.”

“Over my dead body.”

There was no way I was going to let that man get his hands on them. My family—Ella and Nylah—were *mine*, and I would do everything in my power to protect them.

“Ella, you’re strong and smart. That was one of the things that attracted me to you.” I pushed a stray curl from her face. “You can match wits with the best of them. I know you’re tired right now, but we both need to do whatever we can.”

She took a deep breath, and I could see the tears clearing from her eyes. “Yes.” She nodded. “Yes, you’re right.”

The door opened again, and I spun around to see a different medical assistant. “Dr. Mulvane had a family emergency.” Her voice was firmer than Hannah’s had been. I was sure I’d scared her off. “If you would like to talk to him,

you can schedule another appointment with the receptionist on the way out.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but then I felt Ella’s hand on mine, and the harsh words died in my throat. I didn’t want to upset Nylah again.

“Oh, he’ll definitely be hearing from me again.” I put my arm around Ella when she stood. “We’ll get the test done some other way. And once we get the proper test results, he’ll have a lot of explaining to do.”

I led Ella and Nylah out of the office, breezing past the other staff and ignoring the stares from the patients in the waiting room. No doubt my outburst had been heard by all.

“We *will* find somebody to help us. We’ll do the test again, and we’ll get the correct results. I promise.”

Ella stopped me in the entryway of the building to pull me into another hug. This time Nylah was squished between us, though she didn’t seem to mind. In fact, she put one chubby arm around me and one around Ella and giggled as she hugged us back.

The sound lifted my heart, and Ella cracked a smile.

This is what Lucy was talking about, I realized. This is what I want every day. The three of us together, just like this.

“Come on.” I rubbed Ella’s back. “I’ll take you both to lunch, and we can regroup.”

Ella nodded, and I gave her a kiss on the forehead. “The second she said you weren’t Nylah’s father, my first thought wasn’t about Jacob.

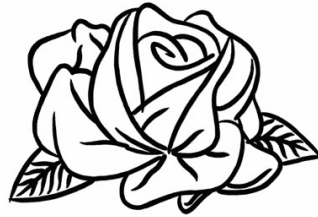
“What was it?”

“I was worried about losing you,” Ella admitted. “I know we talked about being all in. But, that stupid little insecure voice in my head said that this was it. You were going to leave.”

“I’m still standing here, aren’t I?”

Ella beamed. “Yes ... yes, you are.”

ELLA



To say I was confused would be an understatement. I had no idea why the DNA test had come back negative. *Anyone* could see that the two were related. Nylah was practically a carbon copy. It just didn't make sense.

I was so sure Marcus was going to lose it. We'd already had so many ups and downs in such a short time, I just knew this would be the last straw. Even his reassurance didn't help my anxiety about the hearing. I had no idea what to do. Without that test, I couldn't prove Jacob wasn't Nylah's father.

Lunch with Marcus helped a bit. He seemed more determined than before to make us work, and I was grateful. I guessed some small part of me had still worried that he didn't believe me. Thankfully, he proved me wrong.

But, once I'd left the restaurant, the magnitude of the situation set in. Unable to bear the thought of going home yet, I made a detour to my mother's house.

"Ella! What a surprise!" Ma was excited as she opened the door, smiling warmly at me. Her smile immediately dropped once she noticed the expression on my face. "What's wrong?"

I didn't answer right away. Instead, I let myself into the apartment. I saw the remains of lunch on the table, with two used plates and glasses. I recognized Frank's briefcase leaning on the floor against the sofa. I heard the sound of water running in the small bathroom off the hall. I put Nylah down so she could go play and only then did I allow myself to burst

into tears. Startled, my mother held me close, rubbing soothing circles along my back. She didn't say anything, which I appreciated.

The door to the bathroom opened, and Frank walked out. He immediately appeared concerned but had the good sense not to say anything or interrupt. He stood patiently to the side by the table.

The stress of the divorce, the custody battle, and the paternity situation was too much to handle, and I couldn't keep my emotions bottled up any longer. I had always tried my best not to cry in front of Nylah, and thankfully she was preoccupied with her toys.

Eventually, when I calmed down a bit, Ma pulled back from our embrace and wiped the tears from my eyes. "I know, baby. I know how hard this is for you."

"Ma, you don't..." I stopped myself. Part of me was still hesitant to tell her.

She must have sensed it because she frowned. "Are you all right?"

I shook my head.

She took my hand and led me to the couch, and we sat down. "Honey, you know you can tell me anything." She gave my hand a squeeze.

I closed my eyes, needing a moment to gather my courage. There hadn't been much in my life that I'd kept from her, which made it all the more difficult to finally tell her the secret I'd been holding in for the past two years.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Jacob isn't Nylah's father."

Frank made a noise that sounded like he was trying to suppress an exclamation, but to my astonishment, Ma simply gave a small nod. "I sometimes wondered about that."

"Really?"

"Well, she doesn't look like Jacob at all, and she only looks like you around the eyes, well, really, the same hair

color.” She paused. “Does Jacob know?”

“No, he doesn’t. I’ve been in contact with Nylah’s biological father, and he and Nylah took a DNA test. I wanted to give the results to the judge so this nightmare could all be over and done with.”

Mom tilted her head. “I take it things didn’t go well.”

“The results were negative.” I stared at the ceiling for a moment and paused to try and pull myself together. “It doesn’t make sense! Ma, there’s *no way* Jacob can be Nylah’s father. Marcus *clearly* is. I wasn’t with anyone else during that time. I don’t know what to do!”

My voice cracked as I felt the tears come again. Ma pulled me into a tight hug, holding me close. “What does Marcus have to say about all this?”

“He’s determined to find another doctor for a second opinion, or another test. He doesn’t trust the doctor we went to.”

“Ella.” Frank interrupted us then. His tone was urgent, as if he couldn’t hold himself back any longer. “Let me get this straight—Jacob isn’t Nylah’s biological father?”

I met his gaze. “No.”

“For goodness sake. And you’ve known this ... since Nylah was *born*?” I could hear that Frank was trying to keep his tone one of clarification, but I got the feeling he was leading up to something.

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been so foolish!” His exasperated outburst caught me off guard. Even Ma gaped at him, a little shocked he would speak so harshly.

“Frank, I think—” she started, but he cut her off.

“Ella.” His tone was measured but dry. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me this earlier. I’m your attorney, and this is a custody case. Did you not think Nylah’s parentage was important for me to know?”

“I ... I wanted to be sure first.” I tried to explain as calmly as possible. “I wasn’t sure Marcus would agree to the testing, and then I wanted to sort that out myself. I didn’t expect seeing Marcus again would have such a big effect on me, and I didn’t dare hope he would want a relationship with Nylah.” A few tears ran down my cheek, and I brushed them away in frustration.

“I’m sorry to say this,” Frank seemed truly upset now, “but you could do as many tests as you like, and they could all be positive, but they’ll not make one ounce of difference to the family court. What, did you seriously believe that you could get a DNA test from wherever you like and then produce it like the winning hand in a poker game?”

I flushed red with self-recognition. Yes. In fact, that was pretty much what I’d planned to do.

“If there’s any question of a child’s paternity—any at all—it has to be the court that orders the paternity test and from a lab that has AABB accreditation. Nothing else is admissible. You should have told me as soon as we started. I could have had the court clerk schedule this for you and Marcus.”

I just stared at him. I could see ignorance wasn’t going to help as my defense here. “I can’t believe I was so reckless.”

“Oh, hon—” Mom started, but Frank cut her off.

“You’ve been married to Jacob all of Nylah’s life.” He spoke as if explaining something quite simple. “In each case, the husband of the mother is presumed to be the father of the child. This presumption *can* be overturned by a forensic paternity test, but in some states, the time you can do this is limited to the first few years of the child’s life. I thank God, and so should you, that we don’t live in such a state.” He sighed. “Otherwise Jacob would have remained Nylah’s legal father, regardless of the results of the DNA test.”

I stared at Frank in horror, and so did Ma. All my good thoughts about doing things for myself and presenting the results to Frank (and then Jacob) disappeared, leaving a terrible feeling of having behaved rashly and stupidly.

Ma made a noise that could only be described as a squeak—her voice had failed her. She coughed and then said weakly, “What can we do now, Frank?”

“Well, call this Marcus and tell him to stop looking for a new doctor,” Frank said decisively. “I’ll call the judge’s law clerk and explain the situation. I’ll need all of Marcus’s details, Ella. The clerk will check the information I give them and then ask the judge to arrange an order for a forensic DNA test. The court will get in touch with you and Marcus to have the test done at an accredited lab. After that, and *if* the test is positive, things should go quite smoothly, and probably quickly.”

It sounded so logical and simple, I felt as if a fog was clearing from my brain.

“Frank,” I stuttered, “I can’t believe...I wasn’t thinking clearly...I...I think I just imagined I saw a way out of the nightmare, and I just ran at it blindly...I didn’t deliberately *not* tell you. I’m so sorry!” My jumbled words tapered off, as I struggled to understand what I’d done.

“And that’s what I’ll tell the judge, as well.” Frank seemed calmer now that he had a plan, and so did his voice. “I’m not angry at you, Ella—well, not as much as I’m frustrated. I could have helped you avoid this mess you’ve gotten yourself into, and the heartache it’s caused you. I hate to see you this upset. And you, too, Helen.”

“How am I going to explain this to Marcus?” I was struck by this new thought. “He’s going to think I’m a complete idi—”

“...completely irresponsible,” Frank ended my sentence. “Well, I’m going to have to deal with him at some stage, so why don’t you let me talk to him and explain it. If he’s honest, he’ll see that he’s been just as rash as you have, in fact, he supported you in your...” He paused. “In your *endeavor*.”

“Thank you, but to be honest, I didn’t give him all the information in the beginning. He had no idea I needed the DNA results for court.” I glanced at my hands and then up at

Frank again. “Well, it’s a long story, but once he found out, he even warned me and told me I should tell you.”

Frank inclined his head. “Good to know.”

“Thank you, Frank,” my mother said more strongly.

Frank sat down at the table and pulled his briefcase toward him. He took out a legal pad, a folder of notes, and his cell phone. He flipped through the notes for a moment.

“Ma, I’m so tired... So tired of fighting.”

She took my face in her hands, her expression growing stern. “I know this is a lot. But you’re a strong, capable woman, and you love that little pumpkin with all your heart. The best thing you can do right now is not fight for yourself—but fight for *her*. Fight for Nylah. She can’t fight for herself, so it’s up to you to do it. That’s the vow you take when you become a parent.”

“Oh, Mom, I wish I’d never married Jacob.” Tears ran down my cheeks. “I wish I’d broken up with him the second I found out I was pregnant. Nylah could’ve been raised by her real father. I could’ve been with the man I lov—”

I stopped myself. I hadn’t yet *verbalized* how deep my feelings for Marcus truly went. Now that I almost said the words, I realized how much truth was behind them. I loved Marcus. I loved him more romantically than I’d loved any man in my life. The thought of losing Nylah and Marcus was too much for my heart to take.

“We can’t change our past, baby.” Mom stroked my hair. “Thinking about what we could have done will only make us sick. As hard as it is, we need to keep moving forward. There are a lot of things in my life I wish I had done differently. But I learned to focus on what I did right.”

I curled into her side and let my tears fall again. She kept her arms around me even when I eventually stopped crying.

“You took the first step,” she said after some time. “You left a toxic environment to create a better life for you and your daughter. You’re doing everything you can to make sure she

has a good life. A healthy life. Do you think Marcus will fit into that life? Will he be a good father?"

I nodded, wiping the tears from my cheeks. "Yes. You should see them together, Ma. From the moment they met, they connected. He's already asking me what Nylah needs. Not wants, *needs*. He's been so kind and attentive. It's amazing."

"Is Marcus the one you went on the date with last night?"

At this I pulled back, taking a deep, shuddering breath. "Yeah. He's good to me, Ma. Really good."

Ma smiled. "See, that's something else you can focus on—Nylah and Marcus."

I inclined my head, wrapping my arms around myself as I watched Nylah playing with the toy kitchen my mother had bought her. "Are you mad at me?" I asked her after a minute or two.

"Why would I be mad at you?"

"Because I didn't tell you who Nylah's father really was."

Ma sighed and seemed to consider my statement. "It's not really any of my business." She stared at me lovingly. "I love Nylah, no matter who her father is. Just like I love you no matter what."

"I wanted to tell you earlier," I admitted. "But part of me thought I might disappoint you ... and I just couldn't do it."

"Baby, you could *never* disappoint me." Ma looked at me, astonished. "You did what you felt you had to do to protect yourself and your daughter."

"You're right, Ma. What wouldn't a mother do for her child? I'll do anything to protect my baby girl until my dying breath." I thought of the office visit again and shook my head. "When the nurse said Marcus wasn't the father, I was so sure I was going to lose him."

"But you didn't. From what you just said, it sounds like he doesn't plan on going anywhere."

I remembered the fierce determination in his eyes and the way he held Nylah and me. “He said he wasn’t giving up. He feels Nylah’s his daughter, regardless of what that test said.”

Ma grinned and put her arm around my shoulders. “Then you should believe him. It sounds like you have someone else in your corner besides me.”

My heart grew even fuller at the thought. “Yeah, Mom. Yeah, I really do.”

After that, I sat with Frank and told him all about Marcus and the DNA test we’d done before. I gave him Dr. Mulvane’s details and the copy of the test results we’d received. A few minutes later Frank called Marcus. I felt like an eavesdropper, even though we all knew the situation and what Frank was going to say. I certainly didn’t want to hear Frank making excuses for my behavior—I was *beyond* embarrassed. Thankfully, the conversation seemed to go well, and I believed it had a lot to do with Frank’s calm and authoritative manner. He broke character after he ended the call.

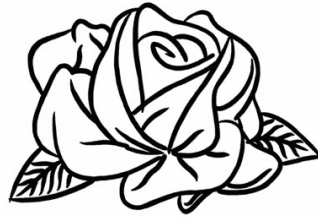
He turned and pulled me into a hug. “Kiddo, don’t worry. I’m here and you can always count on me. Next time, though, inform me *before* you go off half-cocked and do something like this on your own. Promise?”

I tried not to cringe at my impulsive actions, but what was done was done. “Promise.” I was so grateful to have Frank in my life and on my side.

Then, I was finally ready to head home. The last twenty-four hours had been a rollercoaster of emotions, and I just wanted to change into my pajamas and pass out.

Thankfully, the ride home from my mother’s was a short one.

ELLA



I carried Nylah up the stairs to our apartment. She had fallen asleep in the car and was snuggled into my neck, snoring softly. I was so focused on trying not to wake her, that at first, I didn't notice the front door was ajar.

My stomach dropped, and my heart rate picked up as I gently pushed the door open all the way. The first thing I noticed was the living room had been completely tossed and my belongings strewn across the floor. Terrified, I stepped back into the hall and fumbled for my phone. Before I realized what I was doing, I'd dialed Marcus.

"Hey, I wasn't expecting to hear from you ton—"

"Someone broke into my apartment!" I interrupted him, clutching Nylah close. "The door was forced open, and my stuff is all over the place. I don't know what to do!"

"Don't go in," Marcus ordered, his voice loud and alarmed. "Go to your car, now, lock the doors, and call the police. I'm on my way."

I was already halfway down the hall by the time he hung up. Thankfully, Nylah was still sleeping when I put her back into her car seat and climbed in next to her. My hands were trembling as I made sure the car doors were locked, and I called the police.

Ten minutes later, Marcus pulled up beside me. The second he stepped out I was in his arms. He pulled me into a tight hug. "Where's Nylah? Is she okay?"

I nodded and motioned to my car where our daughter was still sleeping peacefully. “The police are on their way. Oh, my God, Marcus, I was so scared!”

“You’re safe, I’m here.” He clutched me tight, and we remained that way until the police arrived a few minutes later.

Two female officers got out of the cruiser. “You the ones who called in a robbery?” the taller one asked.

“I did. My name’s Ella. Ella Rawson. It’s my place.”

“All right, we’ll go check it out,” the second officer said. “Stay here.”

Marcus turned to me as they headed into the building. “What happened?”

“I don’t know.” I was on the verge of hysterics. “I went to my mother’s after the appointment. We just got back. Oh, my God, what if we’d been here? Oh, my God... *Nylah*.” My chest started to heave, and my breath came out in short gasps. I’d had enough today! Who would have done this, and why? What else was going to happen? My anxiety and anger were taking control, and my breathing became shallower. No one would harm my daughter. *No one*.

“Ella, Ella, take a deep breath.” Marcus pulled me to his chest. “You’re having a panic attack. I need you to breathe.”

I tried several times to no avail. The gasping became worse, and Marcus pulled away to cup my face.

“Babe. Take a deep breath—in through your nose. I’ve got you. Listen to the sound of my breathing.”

He inhaled slowly, and I managed to follow his lead.

“Deep breath out—through your mouth.”

My body trembled as I exhaled, but my focus remained on Marcus’s calm voice.

“Deep breath in.”

My heart began racing as I thought of the what-ifs. I kept trying to listen to Marcus and calm myself, but my mind ... it wouldn’t let go. I could no longer hear him over the pounding

of my heart. Images of what *could* have happened flashed through my head—all I could think of was protecting my daughter, and what if I failed? My vision darkened as I began to hyperventilate again, and I could feel Marcus’s strong arms trying to bring me back from the pit of despair.

His voice sounded as if it was underwater. “Babe, look at me. Please, you need to breathe.” I felt him kiss my forehead.

I opened my eyes. “I...” I closed my eyes again and tried to rid my mind of those horrific images. “Okay,” was all I managed to say as tears streamed down my face.

“I’ve got you, Ella. You’re safe. Nylah’s safe. Breathe with me.” He took my hands in his again, and I repeated the calming breathing exercises, listening to the sound of his voice.

Deep breath in through my nose.

Exhale.

Deep breath in...

Exhale.

And another.

This time it was easier, and I could feel the panic and my “Mama Bear” rage slowly beginning to ebb.

“Deep breath out.”

Marcus talked me through several more breaths until I was finally able to breathe through it on my own. Only then did he let me go.

“Come on, you need to sit.”

The backdoor of my car was still open, and I collapsed onto the seat, too tired to stand. Marcus knelt before me, his hands coming to rest on my knees. “Once we talk to the police, you’re going to let them escort you inside to get your things. Then you and Nylah are staying with me tonight. Understood?”

I wanted to cry, but I was too exhausted. “Thank you.” I nodded and reached out to take his hands. “Thank you for

coming.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else.” He lifted my hands to his lips and placed several small kisses on my knuckles. Just then, Nylah began to fuss as she started to wake up. I made a move to stand, but Marcus stopped me. “I got her.”

He walked around to the other side of the car and gently lifted Nylah out of her car seat. My little cutie pie was groggy and whined a few times as Marcus carried her back around to my side of the car. I watched them together, smiling at their interaction. Nylah eventually calmed down and was content to remain snuggled into Marcus’s neck for the time being.

The taller officer emerged from the side door of the apartment complex. She approached us with a grim expression. “I’m Officer Gillan. We swept the apartment and didn’t find anyone. My partner’s up there now keeping an eye on things.”

“Do you know how they got in?” I slowly rose to my feet. Marcus placed a comforting hand on my lower back.

“The lock was definitely tampered with,” Officer Gillan explained. “It looks like it was picked, which probably means we’re dealing with professionals.”

“Was anything taken?” Marcus asked.

Officer Gillan turned to me. “We won’t know until you take a look around.”

“Go on in with her. I’ll stay with Nylah.” Marcus held her close to him, rubbing her back in small circles.

Feeling numb, I followed the officer back into the building. The closer we got to my apartment, the more my anxiety *and* frustration over the situation started to build. I didn’t calm down until I saw the second officer waiting for us.

It took some time to pick my way through the mess. By the time I’d taken inventory of my belongings, even more officers had arrived to process the scene. They started collecting fingerprints while Officer Gillan helped me figure out which of my belongings were gone. Along with my TV, my laptop was also missing, as were most of my jewelry and some cash I

kept for emergencies. Nylah's stuff seemed mostly untouched, much to my relief.

Nearly an hour went by before I was finally able to leave. Officer Gillan helped me carry my things out to Marcus's car.

He had moved Nylah's car seat over and strapped her in. They sat together in the back, and I sighed, relieved, as I watched them play.

"They're cute together," Officer Gillan remarked.

"Yeah, they really are."

Marcus caught sight of us and extracted himself from the car, much to Nylah's dismay. She started to angry-babble until I handed over her blankie.

Marcus raised his brows in concern. "What's the damage?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Pretty much everything valuable is gone."

Marcus took the bags from me as he addressed Officer Gillan. "Any idea who could've done this?"

"Hard to tell." Gillan set a couple bags near the car. "This area isn't exactly known for its break-ins, so that should help narrow things down a bit. With Ms. Rawson's statement and the prints we've collected, we hope to find something."

"I should hope so." Marcus turned to me. "Come on, El. Let's get you and Nylah back to my place."

"Thanks for everything, Officer," I said to Gillan while Marcus loaded our stuff into his trunk. "Please, let me know if you find anything."

"Of course." Gillan reached out to shake my hand. "We'll be in touch soon."

As I eased myself into the passenger seat, I couldn't help but lean back and shut my eyes. Marcus took a moment to speak to Gillan before he followed.

"This is bullshit," he said.

"Agreed."

I felt his hand caress my cheek, and I opened my eyes to look at him. “Are you okay?”

“Nope. Oh, Marcus,” I whispered, “I’ve been so stupid! I know you spoke to Frank and—”

“It’s okay.” Marcus interrupted me. “Forget that misstep. It’s not like I knew all the procedures to the letter of the law. I’m new to this, too.”

“You *did* try to warn me...”

He leaned in, and I met him halfway, my body instantly relaxing as he pressed a gentle kiss to my lips. “You’ll be safe with me,” was all he said as he pulled away. “Now rest.”

I snuggled into my seat and dozed off before we even pulled out of the parking spot. When I woke a few minutes later, we were parked outside of the *Regal*. Marcus got out of the car as a bellman hurried over with a cart.

I wasn’t used to having help, so, I focused on getting Nylah out of her car seat while the bellman unloaded our stuff.

Marcus led me inside, his hand on my back the entire time. I felt safe—*happy* walking through the lobby with Nylah and Marcus, and considering the crap day I’d had, I chose to enjoy the first moment of peace I’d had in what seemed like forever. It was strange how just his presence alone made me feel this way. Having a good man beside me to share my burdens, my happiness, my ups and downs, was something I’d never had before—and I relished it.

The first and only time I’d been inside Marcus’s penthouse had been under *very* different circumstances. It seemed much more comfortable this time, and as Marcus closed the door behind us, I heard the sound of rapid footsteps approaching. Suddenly, a large Mastiff bounded around the corner excitedly. I was startled, but Nylah squealed with delight. “Doggy! Doggy!” She tried to get down.

I held her close until I heard Marcus chuckle. “It’s all right. That’s Samson. He’s a huuuge softie.”

Hesitantly, I reached my hand out to the dog, letting him sniff me. He did so happily, licking my hand before turning his

nose toward Nylah. My daughter's hand looked tiny compared to Samson's nose, but he seemed gentle enough, and so I let Nylah touch the dog's head. The dog's reaction was a satisfied pant, and another lick across my hand.

"Dinner will be here soon." Marcus watched us, amused, taking his jacket off and kicking out of his shoes. "I have a spare room right next to mine that you and Nylah can have. Bathroom"—He glanced at the slobber on my hand—"is just down the hall to the right."

"Thanks." I smiled at him. "For everything."

Nylah was adamant about getting down. After a reassuring nod from Marcus, I let Nylah stand on the floor. Samson immediately started sniffing her face, sending Nylah into a fit of giggles. The sound was enough to relax me further, and I giggled along with her. When I returned from the bathroom, I caught sight of Marcus smiling at the two of us as I knelt beside Nylah and her new best friend.

"This is Samson," Marcus told Nylah. "I think he likes you."

"Samson! Samson!" Nylah repeated.

Marcus and I exchanged a look and shrugged. She'd repeated the dog's name so clearly, and she seemed so comfortable around him. She'd never been around dogs before.

"Yes, Nylah. That's Samson. Way to use your words, cutie pie."

"Samson doggie! Pway!" She clapped her hands excitedly, and Samson nudged her in the butt with his nose. I guessed that meant he wanted to play. Who knew dogs could understand baby talk?

Marcus and I chuckled.

There was a knock on the door, and Marcus answered it. Curiosity sated, Samson wandered back following him, with Nylah trailing close behind. The bellman entered with our stuff, and Marcus helped him unload the cart as I took my jacket off.

I reached for one of the suitcases, but Marcus stopped me. “Don’t worry about it. Go rest. You look like you’re about to faint.”

I felt like I was. My limbs were heavy, and I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes. Wandering over to the living room, I took a seat on the sofa, while I watched Nylah explore her surroundings. Marcus’s place wasn’t exactly kid-friendly, but Nylah was too distracted by the dog to pay attention to any of the breakable objects around.

A little while later, Marcus joined us in the living room, pushing a cart filled with various dishes and serving plates. The amount of food he’d ordered was more than I expected.

“There’s only three of us,” I teased him. “Well, two and a half.”

“I didn’t know what Nylah liked, so I got everything on the kids’ menu,” Marcus explained. “I also thought we could both use comfort food tonight, and it’ll make great leftovers for tomorrow. There’s not much in my kitchen at the moment.”

“Smart thinking. I love cooking, but I gotta say, it’s nice not to have to do it right now.”

I watched Marcus set the coffee table with the food he’d ordered and couldn’t help but be grateful. It had been so long since someone had taken care of me, I’d forgotten what it felt like. The next thing I knew, my eyes had closed, and I dozed off.

When I woke up a short time later, Nylah had crawled into Marcus’s lap. Empty bowls sat on the table as Marcus read to her. Samson had curled on the other side of the sofa, his large head resting on my feet.

“You know, I feel like you’re not even paying attention,” Marcus teased as Nylah impatiently flipped the pages on him.

“Pituwus!”

“Oh, so you just want to look at the pictures?”

“No! Wead! Wead, pituwus!”

“Kid, I hate to break it to you, but you can’t read pictures.”

“Yes! Wead pituwus!”

“I mean, I guess I can try...”

I gave a sleepy chuckle, and Marcus glanced up at me. “Toddlers are fun, aren’t they?”

“I can’t complain.” Marcus grinned back. “Feeling any better?”

“Some.” I glanced at my phone, only to realize it was well past Nylah’s bedtime. “Woah, we gotta get this little munchkin to bed.” I rose from the sofa and made my way over to them. “All right, Nylah, time to say night-night to Marcus.”

Nylah grabbed her blankie and leaned against Marcus in her cute version of a hug. “Night, M’awcus.”

Marcus hugged her back, placing a kiss on the top of her head. “Night, little princess.”

I picked Nylah up and carried her to the spare room. I was amazed to find Marcus had moved my stuff into it while I was sleeping. The large bed was tucked against one wall, so instead of worrying about using the portable crib, I changed Nylah into her pajamas and tucked her into bed. Normally, she fell asleep on her own, but I knew she wouldn’t be able to, seeing as she was in a new place.

I had just turned off the light and settled in next to her when the door creaked open. Samson padded into the room and hopped up onto the bed without an invitation. He found a spot, circled three times, then plopped down with a contented sigh.

Nylah didn’t seem bothered, so I let Samson stay. Within minutes, they were both lightly snoring. I eased out of bed and tucked some pillows around Nylah to keep her in one spot before I silently left the room.

Marcus was busy cleaning up the food but stopped once I came back. “Everything go okay?”

I nodded and shuffled toward him. He met me halfway, wrapping his arms around me. “What a horrible day.”

“Yeah, seriously,” Marcus grumbled. “And it started out so well, too.”

“Mmmm, yeah, it did.”

The memories of waking up together seemed like they were eons ago, not hours. Marcus pushed my hair away from my face and cupped my cheek, bringing me into a kiss. My body warmed to him immediately, pressing against his solid chest.

“If I had the energy, I’d jump you,” I muttered between kisses.

Marcus chuckled. “Lay down on the couch.”

I pulled away slightly. “I won’t be able to do much.”

Marcus gently pushed me onto the couch, his hard body looming over mine. “You don’t have to.” His knee nudged my legs apart, and his firm hand gripped the back of my thigh. “Let me take care of you.”

I whimpered.

Marcus made quick work of the button on my jeans, sliding them down and off my hips with a few quick tugs. They were dropped to the floor, instantly forgotten. I slipped my hand into his dark hair and pulled him into another kiss. His skillful fingers moved my panties to the side, and he stroked me tentatively, waiting for me to warm up to him. It didn’t take long. Within seconds I was wet and ready for more.

We were wearing too many clothes for my taste, and if I had more mental energy, I’d beg him to strip us both. But, that would also mean he’d have to stop touching me, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Marcus broke the kiss and began to move down my body. My breath caught in my throat as he shoved my shirt up, tonguing my navel before nuzzling the hem of my panties. The memory of the last time he was down there was still vivid, and I knew it would be hard for me to keep quiet.

“Oh, babe...”

“I know, baby, I know.” He trailed kisses down my hip. “It’ll be worth it, trust me.”

I did trust him. With all my heart.

Marcus dragged my panties down, and they joined my pants in a heap on the floor. He hoisted my legs over his shoulders and pressed a line of wet kisses along my thigh. The closer he got to my core the more desperate I became, squirming beneath him in my attempt to draw him in.

He noticed and chuckled, before placing a kiss on my slick folds. I bit my lip to stifle a moan, melting into the sofa as he started lapping at my center. The world faded, and my mind couldn’t focus on anything other than the way his tongue felt and the noises we made.

He sighed and grunted as he continued to lick me, face buried between my thighs. His tongue was everywhere: stroking my seams, circling my clit, dipping inside me ... it was all too much. My body began to rock against his face, my hands scrambling for purchase in his hair. I found myself directing his movements, chasing my orgasm that was coming far too fast.

Marcus must have sensed it, too, because he slowed down, and went back to gentle strokes and sucks, humming as I grew wetter.

I expected dirty talk—anticipated it even—but he seemed much too busy. His fingers slid into me and he crooked them just the right way before sucking hard on my clit. I gasped, jerking beneath him, unable to hold back a moan.

It was all a blur after that. I didn’t know how long he tasted me, but every time I felt my orgasm hovering, he’d pull back, ease up, until it retreated. Then he’d come at me vigorously. I was sweating and panting when I finally did come. Marcus caressed me through my orgasm, not stopping until I tugged on his hair.

Only then did he relent, drawing out of me while resting his cheek on my thigh. I peered down at him through blurry eyes. He stared at me as if he were seeing me for the first time.

I wanted to say something but didn't dare break the tender moment. Instead, I smiled back and cupped his cheek, only thinking of the three powerful words I wanted to say out loud.

MARCUS



I woke up the next morning to the smell of something delicious coming from the kitchen. I could hear music playing and Nylah giggling. Both warmed my soul. Samson was no longer next to me.

Ella didn't stay in my room because she hadn't wanted Nylah to wake up in a strange place without her. She'd gone to bed not long after our session on the couch. I'd stayed up for some time, my brain too wired to rest.

I felt like she couldn't catch a break. Between the break-in and the test results, it seemed like the universe was out to get Ella. I couldn't fight the universe, but I could at least give her and Nylah a safe place to stay.

After I managed to get to the bathroom to freshen up, I wandered into the kitchen.

Ella was busy at the stove, flipping pancakes. There was a plate of cut fruit sitting on the counter. I was surprised she'd been able to pull together a decent breakfast with what little I had in the fridge.

Nylah sat at the table in her highchair, devouring her food while Samson sat patiently off to the side, waiting for scraps. The scene was the epitome of domestic comfort, and I found myself never wanting it to disappear.

Ella was wearing shorts and an oversized T-shirt, and her thick curls were pulled up in a ponytail on top of her head. When she saw me in the doorway, she threw me a wide smile.

“Good morning. I was just about to wake you up. Breakfast is ready.”

I smiled back and crossed the room to stand by her side. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pulled her in close, nuzzling her temple before placing a soft kiss there. “I like seeing you when I wake up.”

Her cheeks flushed red, and she leaned into me, pressing her body against mine for a few very enjoyable seconds. Turning and making sure Nylah wasn't watching, I slid my hand under her shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra, and I allowed my hand to rest on her bare breast. I brushed my fingertip over her swelling nipple and enjoyed the soft little sigh that escaped her lips before she pulled away, giving me a “not out here” look. “And I like seeing you first thing in the morning.” She smiled at me seductively.

I ducked my head to try and kiss her, but she stepped back, shoving a plate into my hand. “Eat.” She raised a sexy eyebrow, almost in a commanding expression. “You have work soon.”

“Yes, ma'am.” I didn't move an inch, enjoying the view of her hard nipples pressing against the thin fabric of her shirt. My cock stirred at the thought of what I would do to Ella later.

“Eat,” she repeated, smiling. “You have work soon.” On my way to the table, I pinched her ass. She retaliated by hitting me with a dish towel.

Grinning (like an idiot), I took a seat next to Nylah, who was in the process of picking up a large piece of pancake. Out of nowhere, Samson snatched it from her hand, causing her to break out into tears.

“Samson! No!” I scolded as the dog ran into the other room with his prize. “He'll eat *anything*,” I said to Ella before I followed Samson and took what was left of the pancake from him. I then put him in the bedroom and closed the door, my face firm as I gave him a final, “Bad dog. Stay.”

Ella slipped a fresh pancake in front of Nylah, which seemed to distract her enough from her stolen food. As she sat

across from me, I was again struck by the familial comfort that had developed between the three of us. Having them in my home felt natural.

After she'd taken a bite of bacon, Ella realized I was staring and gave me a funny look. "What's wrong?"

Nothing, nothing at all, I thought. *I just never want to be without you.*

"I want you two to stay with me. Not just for another night, but until we get this whole situation sorted out."

Her eyes widened, and she gasped, coughing when she accidentally inhaled her food. It sent her into a coughing fit, and I went rushing to get her a glass of water. She gulped it down, letting out a few minor coughs before saying, "You do?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Between everything happening with your ex and the break-in, I would feel better knowing you and Nylah are here. Security is top-notch, we can order groceries, and if you need me—I'm right here. I hate the thought of you going back to the apartment after it was just robbed."

Ella didn't say anything.

"I know it's fast," I added. "I'm not saying you have to stay forever. Just, until we know it's safe."

Ella looked at Nylah. Her expression was hard to read, although I imagined she was considering how Nylah would handle staying with me. Our little girl didn't seem bothered by the new surroundings at all (though I would have to ensure that Samson understood where he stood in our new setup—which was *not* at the top of the hierarchy). I gave Samson a suspicious glare when the dog made a reappearance. *How did he get out of the bedroom?*

"I hate the thought of going back to the apartment after it was just robbed, too." Ella shook her head, sighing.

"So, yes?"

"Okay. Okay, we'll stay." She beamed.

I couldn't help but feel a weight lifted from my shoulders. She was safe. My daughter was safe. "Great."

"I'm going to need the rest of our things. I only packed the essentials."

"Let me take care of it. You just rest and focus on Nylah."

I saw her shoulders slump and a look of relief washed over her. I could only imagine how bad her anxiety must have been, especially now that she'd had time to process everything. I knew she'd been angry, but what good mother wouldn't have? She feared for Nylah's safety.

"If there's anything I can do to repay you, please, let me know."

"Ella, you don't need to repay me. I *want* to do it. I care about you, and I care about Nylah. I can't take on all your burdens, but I can at least help with *some* things."

She reached across the table, and I followed suit, taking her hand. "Marcus," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Honestly...I—"

Nylah screeched, and we pulled away in time to see Samson going for more food.

"Samson, *no!*"

He took off running into the living room and flopped down in front of the couch, pouting like only a dog could do. I turned back to Ella and sighed. "I rescued Samson a little over a year ago, and he's still in the process of his training and acclimating into a house dog. This is why he still tries to steal food from the table."

Ella waved her hand. "I understand. He's still a very well-behaved and gentle dog otherwise. The trainer must be doing a wonderful job." She looked over at a still-pouting Samson. "Poor dog. I hope he wasn't abused."

I shook my head. "Not that I'm aware of, but he was found on the streets malnourished and barely alive."

"Hence his instinct for stealing food. I get it."

Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Denny, the professional dog trainer and walker, who took Samson out most mornings. He was a little earlier than normal, but this was actually a good thing—it gave me a bit of time to talk over the best course of action I should take introducing the dog to having a child in the house. Don't get me wrong, I didn't think Samson would hurt Nylah, but I wanted to make sure that we got things off on the right foot, dog psychology-wise.

We talked for a while and Denny was encouragingly sensible.

“Actually, food *can* be a trigger for dogs or a useful way of making a point.” Denny patted Samson's head. “Have Nylah give him his food a few times from now on, and that should give Samson the clear idea that he's not the top dog here. If you combine that with no scraps from the table”—Denny gave me a mock-serious look—“then you'll be fine!”

While I got ready for work, Ella made a list of all the things she needed. She handed it to me on my way out of the door, along with a deep kiss.

“I'll make us a nice dinner tonight.” She ran her hands down the front of my suit jacket and then straightened my tie. “What's your favorite food?”

“Lasagna. I usually watch what I eat unless someone puts a pan of lasagna in front of me. Then all bets are off.”

Ella laughed, looping her arms around my neck. “I can make that. Plus, some dessert.”

I hummed and leaned in again. “*You're* my dessert,” I said softly. “I'd be glad to have you on the couch again—after dinner.”

Her cheeks burned with either embarrassment or arousal, it was hard to tell. Regardless, she shoved me away playfully.

“Go, before you're late.”

“I'll stop by at lunch to check on you.”

With a final kiss, I left the penthouse.

was just as relaxed and content as I had been the previous morning. Lucy wouldn't be in until later, so I wasn't surprised to see her desk empty. However, I *was* surprised to see my father sitting in my office, impatiently tapping his fingers on his armrest. My good mood dissipated immediately.

"You should really fire that assistant of yours. She was quite rude to me when I called yesterday."

"You should get the hell out of my office." I closed the door behind me. "If she was rude to you, maybe I should give her a raise."

"Marcus, I'm not just going to go away." He lifted his fingers like he was counting. "Ignore me all you want, walk out on me again if you have to, but I'm not going to give up."

"Why? Why is my career any of your damn business?"

"We've already talked about this." My father shrugged his shoulders and then gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "I'm not going to repeat myself anymore."

"Well, you'll have to, because my answer hasn't changed." I leaned against my desk and folded my arms. "I'm not going anywhere."

"As my son—"

"Who fucking cares?" I stepped away from my desk and exploded. "Who cares that I'm your son? What does that have to do with my happiness? Do you realize that the only time you acknowledge our connection is when you're trying to get me to do something *you* want? You were never there for me. What gives you the fucking right to tell me how to live my life?"

"I was *always* there for you!" my father snapped back, getting to his feet. "Who put you through private school and college? Who made sure you had everything you wanted? It was *me!*"

"Because that's all that matters to you, right? Material things. You were there for me because you bought me *things*,"

I argued, my voice returning to a calmer level. “That doesn’t make you a good parent.”

“Ungrateful brat!” He sneered. “I took care of you!”

“You *hired* someone to take care of me.” I pointed an accusing finger in his direction. “*Big* difference. You didn’t stop at childhood, either. Or do I need to remind you *again* that you also hired Mrs. Hester-Smith to get both business and even private information, since you *conveniently* ignored me the last time I brought it up?”

“I needed to ensure my investments were well handled, and if you were doing what—”

I cut him off, fucking pissed. “*Your* investments? I’ve worked my *ass* off to get where I am, and this, *Father*, this is precisely why I refuse to listen to anything you have to say. I don’t need you or your spies to watch over my business. As you can see, I’m doing an excellent job on my own, and without your help.”

“So, after everything, *this* is how you repay me?”

“I shouldn’t *have* to repay you. That’s not how parenting works.”

“And I suppose you’re now, what, an expert on parenting?”

I thought about Nylah and couldn’t imagine putting her through what my father had. I was never good enough for him, *never*. It didn’t matter that I was trying my best—I had to be the smartest; I had to be the best athlete; I had to be the freaking best at everything. I had stopped fighting for my father’s approval long ago—yet it seemed he hadn’t noticed. “I may not be an expert, but I know projecting your wishes onto your kid is a shitty thing to do. I can promise you—I will never treat my child the way you’ve treated me.”

“It’s easy to say when you don’t have children.” My father waved his hand in dismissal.

“I have a daughter.”

I had never seen my father's face lose all its color before. He just stood there, slack-jawed, staring at me, wide-eyed. "What did you just say?"

I took a step closer, practically towering over him. "I said, I have a daughter. And when I look at her, I don't see all the things I think she should be. I see *her*, and I want her to be safe, healthy, and happy. That's it. That's all that matters. Nothing else."

For the first time in my life, my father was speechless. He took a step back, putting distance between us. Not that I was surprised. It was his specialty after all.

"Well, daughters and sons are different," he sputtered. "When did you...?"

He didn't know shit. "Don't worry about it."

He was silent for another few seconds before he cleared his throat. "Regardless," he said, his voice no longer as strong as it had been earlier, "this doesn't change anything."

"Of course it doesn't." I stared directly into his eyes. "Why would it? That would mean you'd have to have a heart."

He narrowed his eyes at me, jaw clenched. "Do you really think I don't have a heart?"

"You haven't proven otherwise."

My father looked away for a moment before he cleared his throat again and straightened his stance. "You have a month to finalize your work here." He gestured to my office. "After that, you'll be running the *Rose*."

"Over my dead body."

"If you don't, I'll cut you off. No more financial help from me. No more relying on the Willingham name. You'll be on your own."

"Great. It's about damned time."

"We'll see if you feel that way once you realize how much I've been helping you all these years." My father snorted in disbelief, shaking his head. "Once you see how difficult it is to

provide for a family, you'll be calling me for help. Mark my words."

He pushed past me on his way to the door, but I called after him, "Don't you even want to know your granddaughter's name?"

He paused in the doorway. For one brief moment, I thought he might turn around. He didn't. He kept walking, leaving me standing alone in the middle of my office.

I suddenly felt drained. I walked around my desk, sank into my chair, and buried my face in my hands. I wasn't sure how long I stayed that way, but eventually I heard footsteps heading toward my office, and then there was a soft knock on the open door.

Lucy peeked in. "Mr. Willingham, are you all right?"

I glanced up and frowned. "What happened to you?"

In her hand, she held a disposable cup, but her neatly pressed blouse was stained with coffee. "I bumped into your father on my way in." She gestured to the huge brown spot. "Literally."

"I'm sorry." I sighed. "First, he ruins my mood, and now you have to get me another cup. Can you please?"

"No, I don't." She crossed the room to my desk and set a cup in front of me. "Mine was the one that got spilled."

I picked up the cup and took a much-needed drink of caffeine. "Thank you."

Lucy didn't bother to hesitate this time when she took the seat across from me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." I leaned back in my chair. "It's nothing you haven't heard him shouting about before. By the way, he said you were rude to him."

Lucy looked sheepish. "Yeah, I was." She grimaced. "He called asking for you, and when I tried to answer, he snapped at me. So ... I had no other choice ... I snapped back. It felt really good."

I grinned. “Yeah, I’m sure it did. I’m glad you did, I just wish I’d been there to see it. Usually, no one stands up to that man.”

“Well, then I don’t feel so guilty ... about what just happened.” She stared at me, looking *more* than guilty.

“What do you mean?”

Lucy got to her feet, a small smirk playing on her lips. “I ... may have bumped into him *on purpose*.” She raised her eyebrows.

I chuckled, suddenly glad she was still with us. “In that case, I’ll definitely pay for your dry cleaning.” I raised my cup to her.

“Deal.” Lucy let out a soft laugh, heading toward the door. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to change my shirt.”

*W*hen I got home for the evening, I found Ella and Nylah sprawled out on the floor in the living room, doodling in coloring books. There was the smell of garlic and marinara wafting in from the kitchen, and I could see a pan of bubbling lasagna cooling on the counter when I glanced that way.

I turned my focus back to the pair in front of me. I admired the way Ella was with Nylah. She wasn’t afraid to be messy or silly. My father wouldn’t have been caught dead kneeling down to my level when I was a kid, let alone lying on the floor and playing with me.

“You two look cozy.” I lay my suit jacket across the back of the couch.

Ella looked up and smiled. “Hey there. How was work?”

“Well, my father threatened to cut me off if I don’t take the job he wants me to. So, that was fun.”

“I’m so sorry.” Ella frowned. “I know you love working here. What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. You said it yourself, I love working here. Despite what my father says, I’ve earned this job. Besides, I did the whole ‘rebuilding from the ground up’ thing already. There’s nothing else I’d rather be doing than making sure the *Regal* runs smoothly.”

“Will you be okay financially?” Ella’s face was genuinely concerned, and it warmed my heart.

I nodded. “No worries, I have money saved. The penthouse may be a little more than I should spend, but I can always find somewhere else to live. Maybe somewhere more family friendly.”

Ella’s cheeks flushed, and she offered me her hand. I took it and allowed her to pull me down onto the floor next to her and Nylah. “Well, in any case, you’re home now.”

“Thank Christ for that.” I reached out to tuck a stray curl behind her ear and stroked her cheek. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

“Oh?” She gave me a smirk.

“I’m glad you agreed to stay.”

Ella gave me an affectionate smile. “Me too.”

By that point, Nylah was tired of being ignored and climbed onto my lap for attention. “Hey, little princess.”

Nylah babbled something I couldn’t catch, before proudly holding up her coloring book to show me the beautiful mess of lines she’d drawn.

“Er ... that’s *very* nice.” I dropped a kiss on her head, then caressed her soft hair.

Nylah grinned and reached for me with her other hand. “You!” she exclaimed. “You!”

“Is this for me?”

Nylah bobbed her head and proceeded to dump the book in my lap before getting up and going back to her spot on the floor.

“I think it looks just like you,” Ella teased. “Better, actually.”

“Way better.” I grinned, setting the book aside.

“I have some good news as well.” I reached out and squeezed her hand. “The family court clerk called me today and then faxed over the details for the official DNA test. It’s the day after tomorrow, but the court has priority on these things so the results will only take one business day at the most!”

Ella smiled. “Yes, Frank told me that he heard something good, and that he would leave you to let me know the details. This is great! We’ll have them before the next hearing with Jacob. That’s in three days. This could be over sooner than we thought.” She sighed, and her face relaxed so much I saw weeks of worry disappearing.

“Sorry about the boxes.” I hadn’t even noticed them had she not pointed them out. “I didn’t know what we would need from my place, so I packed pretty much everything. Also, the groceries came, and I put them away. You really ordered enough to keep us going for weeks!”

“I know how you like to cook and bake—and *clean*,” I teased.

“But this place is pretty spotless.” Ella sat back on her elbows and laughed, glancing around.

“The hotel’s cleaning staff comes every Tuesday and Friday. We also have laundry service, so if you need to do anything, put your stuff in a laundry bag by the door, and it’ll get taken care of.”

“God, *no*, I’ll do it myself.” Ella wrinkled her nose. “Eww, the thought of someone else doing my dirty laundry just makes me feel weird.”

“It’s okay to let people do things for you, Ella.”

“It’s also okay to do certain things for yourself,” she shot back. “Such as washing your own underwear.”

I chuckled and opened my arms. She pushed herself up and shuffled into my embrace. “Did Nylah do okay today?” I pulled her close and enjoyed her soft curves pressed against me.

Ella nodded. “For the most part.” She hugged me close. “She didn’t want to leave after we packed up our stuff at home, so that was difficult to explain. But I think she understands that we’re staying here for a while.”

It amazed me that I could be so incredibly entertained by another human being. “Do you ever find yourself just sitting and staring at her?”

“All the time.” Ella beamed, tightened her hug, and kissed my chin. “For the first few months after she was born, I don’t even think I looked at my phone or the TV once. I was so in love with that little face, I just stared at her constantly.”

“I wonder what goes on in her head,” I mused, watching as she babbled to herself, caressing Ella’s hair.

“Me too.”

We fell into a comfortable silence while we continued to watch Nylah play. It wasn’t until my stomach growled that I remembered Ella had made dinner. Even then, I couldn’t bring myself to get up yet, but the sound had broken the moment and made Ella laugh. “We should eat.” She pulled away. “The lasagna is getting cold.”

We got to our feet, and I scooped Nylah up into the air, flinging her onto my shoulders. “All right, kid, time for dinner.”

She squealed with laughter as I carried her into the kitchen.

Dinner took a long time to get through, only because Ella and I talked the entire time. She shared some of the funny things Nylah did throughout the day, and I told her about Lucy’s little “accident.” Before I knew it, she was putting Nylah to bed, leaving me to clean up the kitchen.

I never thought it would be so easy to fall into a routine with someone else, yet it had already happened. Once leftovers

were put away, and the dishes were in the sink, I went to take a long hot shower.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, I was greeted by a beautiful sight.

Ella lay in the middle of my bed, tucked securely under the sheets. When she sat up, the blanket slipped, revealing smooth, naked shoulders and the top of her tits.

“To what do I owe the *pleasure*?” I stalked toward her.

“I want you.”

I reached out and grabbed the end of the blanket, slowly pulling it off the bed to expose the rest of her. Soft curves begged to be touched, and the hold I had on my towel loosened until it fell to the floor.

“*T*hat’s obvious.” Without warning, I grabbed her ankles and yanked her to the edge of the bed. She gasped in amusement, allowing me to spread her legs. Her slit glistened, and I licked my lips, wanting to taste her again.

I dropped to the floor, pushing her legs back until her knees touched her chest. She gasped as I ran my tongue along her slit. Going down on her had quickly become my favorite past time. Any tension in her body started to melt away. Her thighs quivered as I kept going, trailing my tongue along each seam and fold. Ella moaned my name, writhing tantalizingly beneath me.

She mumbled something under her breath. “What was that?”

Her cheeks were flushed, her tits bouncing as she panted.

“Babe, I want you inside of me. *Now*.”

She had never sounded so demanding, and damn it, if my dick didn’t get harder at the authority in her voice. Without a word, I stood up straight and reached into the small drawer of my nightstand and pulled out a condom.

Ella watched me with lust-filled eyes, her pink lips slightly parted as she breathed heavily. Her legs were still spread when I grabbed her ankles and tugged her closer to me. She wrapped her legs around my waist, drawing me in as I pushed inside her.

I fucked her with quick, short thrusts, burying myself as deep as I could go. Ella gasped and moaned—arms and legs wrapped so tightly around me I could barely move.

The mattress creaked underneath us, but we were too busy with each other to even consider being quieter. Ella's mouth sought mine in a demanding kiss, and I responded in kind. Suddenly, she pushed up against me, and I went with it, rolling onto my back and brought her with me.

She rode me, hands resting on my chest for leverage. I was all too happy to lean back and enjoy the show. I grabbed her waist and held on tight, letting her set the pace.

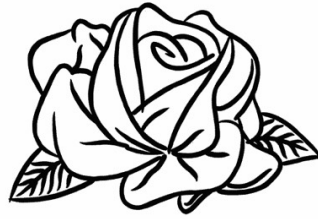
Ella looked magnificent. The way she shut her eyes and lost herself in the sensations was like a work of art.

I wished she saw herself the way I did.

She opened her eyes and caught me staring. With a grin, she leaned down to kiss me again. I felt her walls spasm around me, and I thrust upward a few more times before I came.

We kept kissing even as our bodies stopped grinding together.

ELLA



After all the drama that had happened in the past few days, the three days until the hearing passed in a pleasant blur. Marcus and Nylah took the second DNA test at a lab that seemed light years away from Dr. Mulvane's office. The court order had been faxed to them, and they were all setup when we arrived. The staff was calm and professional, and I felt reassured and confident when we left.

After that, I'd spent the remaining time looking after Nylah, relaxing, baking, and tidying—in that order. It was nice to have the luxury just to think about my daughter and myself for a few days.

"I got you something."

Looking up from my phone, I frowned as Marcus collapsed next to me on the couch. "What? Why?"

He chuckled, reaching down to pick something up off the floor. I gasped as he handed me a new laptop. "To replace the one that was stolen. I know you've been having trouble completing invoices and orders without one, so I wanted to help."

"Marcus, you've done more than enough already. Besides, aren't you supposed to be saving money?"

He rolled his eyes, draping his arm around my shoulders. "Yes, dear," he mocked. "Don't worry, I didn't buy it, not recently at least. I got it for myself three months ago but rarely use it. It's been gathering dust in my home office, so I thought you'd want it."

Feeling a little better about accepting the gift, I smiled and leaned in for a kiss. “Thank you.”

“I actually had a thought about your business.” Marcus met my gaze. “The hotel hosts weddings here all the time. Usually, our in-house pastry chef handles the wedding cakes, but sometimes, he’s too busy. If you want, we can put you on a preferred vendors’ list. It wouldn’t be steady jobs, but you could get a few big ones throughout the year.”

The idea was brilliant, and I was humbled that he thought my work was good enough for his hotel. “Yes, that would be amazing! I don’t mind taking smaller jobs, but they often require just as much effort as larger ones without the payoff. Even just a few large wedding cakes a year would cut down my workload without me having to sacrifice income.”

“Exactly.” Marcus pushed a stray curl away from my face. “And rich people pay ridiculous amounts of money for a wedding.”

“Do *you* want a wedding?” I asked curiously. “I mean, do you want to get married someday?”

“Are you asking me—or proposing?”

I chuckled. “Asking. I’m curious.”

Marcus seemed to consider my question and pulled me in close. “I could see myself getting married,” he eventually said. “But definitely not in one of those huge ceremonies that take months of planning with hundreds of people. I hear Lucy talking about it sometimes, and it just sounds like a pain in the ass.”

“Ugh, yeah, it’s not as fun as people make it out to be. I wanted something small and intimate, but Jacob wanted the whole nine yards. It was a nightmare. I ended up having to plan a wedding I didn’t even want, while also being pregnant... so, that was a *blast*.”

Most of the guests had been Jacob’s friends and family, and looking back on it now, I could see the real reason he wanted the wedding was to parade me around in front of everyone like a trophy.

“It sounds terrible.” Marcus frowned. “Well, I can guarantee if we get married, I won’t force you to plan a giant ceremony.”

“*If* I get married again, it won’t be for a very long time. There are so many other things on my mind right now.”

Marcus didn’t seem surprised or disappointed at my response. “Agreed.” He planted a kiss on my forehead. “Why don’t you go try out your new laptop? You can use my office, Lord knows I don’t.”

Happy with the change in subject and more than ready to throw myself into my work, I nodded and rose to my feet. Nylah was occupied with Samson, so it was the perfect time for me to get some work done.

It felt nice sitting in an office rather than having to spread my work out on the kitchen table. I booted up the laptop and became so focused on setting up my accounts that I lost track of time. It wasn’t until my phone rang that I realized I’d worked for nearly an hour.

“Hey, Ma,” I said as I answered my cell.

“Hey, honey...” My mom sounded nasally and paused to cough. “Listen, I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to watch Nylah later. I know you have your hearing with Jacob, but I’ve been sick as a dog all day. I think I have the flu.”

“Oh, no! Do you need me to bring you anything?”

“No, no, Frank’s already been by,” Ma said. “Honey, I wouldn’t want you getting sick and passing it on to Nylah. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You can’t help you’re sick. I’ll figure something out. Just get some rest.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Ma.”

I waited until I ended the call to swear. “Shit. God damn it.” I stood from the desk and began scrolling through my contacts, trying to think of who could watch Nylah last

minute. When I wandered into the living room, Marcus looked up from his tablet.

“What’s wrong?”

“My mom was supposed to watch Nylah for a few hours while I had my hearing with Jacob. She’s sick. I don’t know where I’m going to find someone last minute.”

“I can watch her.”

It hadn’t even crossed my mind to ask him. My eyebrows shot up, and I stared at Marcus in shock. “You?”

“Yeah, why not?” Marcus shrugged. “I mean, I can take a few hours of my day to spend time with her.”

“Have you ever babysat before?”

“No.”

As close as we’d become over the past few days, he was still relatively hesitant around Nylah. Our staying with him hadn’t changed that. He was getting much better, but for the most part, I handled the parenting, not that I expected otherwise. I assumed it would be a long time before he felt comfortable enough to take on more.

Apparently, I was wrong. I should have considered he’d be up to the task of being alone with her.

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to. If I can’t find someone, I can just bring her with me.”

Marcus set his tablet down and rose to his feet. “I’m not letting her around that man. From what you’ve told me, he’s a jerk. Besides, I can’t imagine being in that room with all that tension would be good for you or Nylah. I don’t want you to feel more stressed than I know you already are.”

“That’s true. She’s a sensitive kid. If she senses I’m upset, it’ll make her upset.”

“Exactly.” Marcus ran his hands down my arms in a soothing gesture. “So, let me stay with her. Besides, it’s not like you’re going to be gone all day.”

I took another moment to consider his offer. Marcus always seemed to have my best interests at heart. He didn't force me to do what *he* thought was best. He genuinely cared about our well-being.

"Okay. If you really think you can handle it, I don't see why you can't stay with Nylah."

Marcus smiled. "We'll have a great time, right kid?"

Nylah, who was busy feeding and babbling to Samson, didn't even acknowledge us.

"See? She's thrilled!"

I laughed and wrapped my arms around Marcus in a large hug. "Have I thanked you enough yet?"

"Plenty." He chuckled and held me close. "But I could always go for more." He waggled his eyebrows and leaned in for a kiss, which I happily granted.

In my wildest dreams, this outcome with Marcus hadn't entered my mind. Yet, here we were well on our way to having the family I'd always wanted. I knew he cared for me, but more importantly, he cared about Nylah. They'd developed a stronger bond in these few short weeks than Nylah *ever* had with Jacob.

I didn't know what was in store for us moving forward. Part of me didn't want to get my hopes up. But, I couldn't help it. With the way things were progressing, it felt like we were heading toward something permanent.

I managed to get a little more work done before I had to head out. After giving Marcus an extensive rundown of Nylah's schedule, I left feeling confident that he'd be able to manage.

*U*nCLE Frank was waiting for me in the parking lot when I arrived at the courthouse. I'd called him the morning after the break-in to let him know what had happened, and he'd texted me a few times since then to checkup on me.

His eyes softened with concern, and he pulled me into a tight hug. “How are you holding up, kiddo?”

“I’m fine, Uncle Frank, really. I mean, it sucks that the police don’t have any leads on the break-in, but at least Nylah and I are safe.”

“Where are you staying now?”

“With a ... friend.”

A *friend* was an understatement. Marcus was more than just a friend. We hadn’t clearly defined our relationship yet, so I wasn’t sure how to describe what he was to me. Boyfriend seemed too immature, lover was *gross*, and partner felt formal.

“A friend?” Frank lifted a brow in question. “I can well imagine who this *friend* is.”

“I’m an adult, Uncle Frank.” I gave him a sidelong glance as we walked toward the entrance to the building. “And *yes*, if you must know ... it’s Marcus.”

He tapped the corner of his nose with his finger. “Can’t get anything past this old man.” He chuckled. “Hey, I can’t help feeling a bit protective of you. I’ve known you since diapers were your choice of daywear.”

“I know.” I laughed. “You and Ma were always around when I needed you.”

Without warning, Frank enveloped me in a bear hug. I put my arms around him and returned it, rubbing his back soothingly.

His emotional response was surprising, yet not unwelcome. “I’m so grateful to have you.”

When he pulled away, he was smiling broadly. “I’m proud of you.” He rested his hands on my shoulders. “You’re doing an amazing job with Nylah.”

I grinned and then Frank took a step back and cleared his throat.

“All right, are you ready to go in there?” He inclined his head toward the building.

I nodded with determination, and he patted my cheek before we started to walk again.

For the first time since this whole thing started, I wasn't anxious about going into the custody hearing. Marcus had taken the official court-ordered DNA test, and I was sure the judge would have the results by now. Soon, we would be able to move forward and forget all about Jacob.

The positive mood didn't last long.

From the moment I sat down at the table, I knew something was off. Jacob wasn't his usual chatty self. He seemed eerily calm and didn't bother to make eye contact with me.

I leaned in close to Frank. "I don't like this."

"Let's not get jumpy just yet," Frank cautioned.

I wrung my hands under the table as the judge took his seat. He was even harder to read than he had been in the past, which only made my anxiety worse.

"Mr. Jungmeyer." Judge Reed turned to Jacob. "I was informed that you have something you'd like to share before we begin the formal proceedings."

Jacob looked at his lawyer, who nodded.

"Yes, your honor, we would."

Judge Reed inclined his head toward the stenographer, who stopped typing and sat waiting for the judge to give him a sign when he could begin again.

Jacob's lawyer slid a folder across the table to Judge Reed.

"My client would like to share some photographs with you concerning Ms. Rawson."

"What kind of photos?" Judge Reed asked before he took the folder.

"Evidence showing Ms. Rawson's questionable habits," the lawyer said.

My stomach plummeted, and I stared Jacob down. “*What* are you talking about?”

“Come on, Ella, drop the coy act,” Jacob said. “I know about your little *boy toy*.”

“I don’t have a boy toy.”

Judge Reed pushed the folder toward me without opening it. I lifted the cover. In it were several photographs of Marcus and me in my apartment. In most of them, we were standing close together, and one even had us kissing. On their own, they wouldn’t have been an issue, but in a few, I spotted Nylah in the background. I had to admit, from an outsider’s standpoint, it didn’t look great. However, I couldn’t fathom how my having a romantic relationship had anything to do with our custody battle.

“Where did you get these?” I asked.

“They were brought to our attention by a concerned third party,” Jacob’s lawyer said. “If you keep going, there are photos of this same man leaving the apartment the next morning. Clearly, he spent the night.”

He was right. There were photos of Marcus leaving my place the day after our date. Jacob and his attorney were trying to construct a narrative that simply wasn’t true.

“These photos weren’t even taken on the same day. Nylah was at my mother’s when—”

Uncle Frank put his hand on my arm. “Not another word,” he ordered in a sharp voice. “Whom my client sees socially or romantically is none of Mr. Jungmeyer’s business, and it has no bearing on this case.”

“It does when it comes to my daughter,” Jacob responded. “You have a strange man coming around your place, with whom you’re *obviously* intimate. Not to mention the fact that your apartment was broken into only a few days ago.”

“Ms. Rawson, is this true?” Judge Reed asked. “Was your apartment broken into?”

“Yes, but I don’t see what that has to do with this case,” Frank answered for me. “Ms. Rawson isn’t responsible for someone’s robbing her, and to suggest otherwise would be ridiculous.”

“It proves that where you live isn’t suitable for Nylah.” Jacob interrupted. “My neighborhood is much safer, and I don’t have random men hanging around.”

I suddenly remembered the strange car I’d seen in the parking lot and realized that it must have been an investigator.

“You son of a bitch!” I growled.

Uncle Frank squeezed my arm tightly.

“Ms. Rawson, please watch your language,” Judge Reed said sharply.

I was shaking with rage and clutching the hand rests of my chair so hard my knuckles turned white. I glanced at Frank whose jaw was clenched tight. He gave me a short nod, indicating I could respond.

“First off, I also don’t allow strange men to hang around my daughter and me.” I tried to keep my voice steady but failed miserably. “The man in those photos is an old friend who I’ve recently reconnected with.”

“Judge, with all due respect, what Mr. Jungmeyer is doing is obviously a direct attack on my client. She has a right to her privacy, and these photos are clearly a violation of that.”

“They were obtained through legal means,” Jacob’s lawyer insisted. “Mr. Jungmeyer has a *right* to check on his daughter.”

The judge raised his hand. “You bring us precisely back to the reason for this hearing and the fact that we are here to consider matters of *the law*,” he said. I didn’t imagine his emphasis on the words, “the law.”

Jacob’s lawyer started to speak, but Judge Reed made a dismissive gesture, and he shut his mouth immediately. The judge nodded toward the stenographer to begin recording the session again.

“Counselors.” He clasped his hands in front of him. “As the court has informed all of you, we ordered a paternity test for Nylah Jungmeyer a few days ago. The results of the test prove conclusively that Mr. Jungmeyer is not Nylah’s biological father. I am not obliged to tell all parties who the father *is*, but for Ms. Rawson’s peace of mind, I will confirm that it was the person who took the test with Nylah.”

“What the—” Jacob’s mouth fell open in shock.

I gasped in relief and happiness, and Frank clasped my hand.

“That being the case,” the judge continued, “Mr. Jungmeyer no longer has any legal claim over the child, Nylah Jungmeyer. That means that I must award sole custody to the child’s mother, Eleanor Rawson.”

“Bullshit!” Jacob shouted. “This is bullshit! I’ve spent a fortune raising that kid and coddling her emotional wreck of a mother! They both belong with me.” Even his lawyer seemed surprised at that.

“You are *this* close to being in contempt of court, Mr. Jungmeyer.” The judge held his thumb and forefinger closely together. He glanced toward the bailiff, who was hovering, ready to move in if requested. “Having seen the forensic evidence and the photos of the little girl and her biological father, I find it hard to believe this is a completely new concept for you. However, I deal in facts not supposition. The child is not yours, and she will remain with her mother.”

Jacob’s lawyer placed his hand firmly on the dickhead’s arm as a warning. “Thank you, your honor.”

Jacob clenched his teeth, glaring at me.

“The court’s decision has been given.” The judge made to stand. “The clerk will meet with your attorneys to give you the written judgments and the details of the test to you, Ms. Rawson. That ends this session.” He stood completely and left the room in one smooth motion, but not before his eyes swept my face warmly, as if to reassure me.

My head was spinning, but I was completely overjoyed. It was over. I had won. Nylah and I could get on with our lives.

Across the table Jacob sat in disbelief. If looks could have killed I would be stone-cold dead.

“Well, it looks like you got what you wanted, you lying two-timing *whore*.”

Frank made a noise like a swallowed curse and helped me out of my chair. He almost dragged me into the nearest empty office and sat me back down.

“Forget him now, Ella.” His stern gaze met mine. “I mean that. I want you to put your life with Jacob behind you and all of the insecurity that was a part of it. Your new life starts *now*.”

Frank knelt in front of me. “You’re all right now. I know this was stressful, but it’s over.”

I shut my eyes and tried to block out everything but my breathing. I took a deep breath before letting it out. “I can’t believe that son of a bitch had a private investigator watching me, following me, taking *pictures*. It was a gross *violation* of my privacy. But, you’re right, I can *finally* start over... I just hope he leaves me and Nylah the hell alone.”

“I have to go back in there.” Frank worried over me. “I need to speak to the clerk about the paperwork and with Jacob’s lawyer. I want him to make sure his client understands this is the end of the road for him. I want you to go back to your car and wait for me there. Can you do that, kiddo?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

I was scared Jacob would pull another of his stunts, and I just wanted him out of our lives. I took another deep breath to calm myself. “Of course.”

Frank sighed and leaned forward, placing a gentle kiss on my forehead. “We won,” he said. “We really won.”

He left a few seconds later, and I rose to my feet and left the office. On my way to my car, I fumbled with my phone.

Marcus picked up after the second ring. “Hey, you’re done early!” His voice had an immediate soothing effect on me. “Everything okay?”

“Yes,” I choked out, as I felt the tears beginning to fall. “Yes, yes, it is.”

MARCUS



I had never been left alone with a child, so when Ella stepped out of the penthouse, I had a moment of panic. That in itself was a strange feeling, since I never panicked. Nylah sat calmly with her toys, and yet I couldn't help but keep my eyes on her like I was waiting for something to happen. Before I knew what I was doing, I was calling Phoebe.

"I need your help."

"What's wrong?"

"I told Ella I would watch Nylah. She left a while ago, and I'm having a small freak-out."

"Why, what's the kid doing?"

"She's sitting on the floor playing with toys."

Phoebe snickered. "So, you're calling me because your kid's sitting there playing quietly?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

"This is adorable. I've never heard you sound so nervous before."

"Go ahead, laugh all you want. I just don't want to screw this up."

"Marcus, the fact that you're worried about screwing it up means that you're *already* screwing this up. JK. I know that you won't let yourself. Listen, you can handle being alone with the kid for a few hours."

Intellectually, I understood what she said. Emotionally was another story. It hit me how incredibly unprepared I was for fatherhood.

I ran my hand through my hair. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Of course not! You’re a man.” Phoebe laughed hysterically at her own joke, and I couldn’t help but be amused by it. “Did you expect you would?”

“Of course. I’m a man. Everything comes naturally to me. I thought this would, too.”

“You’ve been a dad for like what, two or three weeks? And you’re worried you’re not Super Daddy yet? That doesn’t make any sense. Then again, knowing you, I guess it does, but still... You’re putting way too much pressure on yourself.”

“You’re right.” I sighed, feeling like an idiot. “*God*, what the hell is wrong with me?”

Phoebe snorted. “Do you want me to answer that or is it hypothetical?”

“If you have theories, I’d be happy to hear them.”

“You’re a man. Funny how this explanation works for everything.” Phoebe paused, her voice getting serious. “You love her. You’re totally in love with this woman. It’s actually kind of gross how *much* you love her.”

I considered her words and leaned against the couch. She wasn’t voicing something I hadn’t thought of myself. “Yeah, I know.”

“Are you gonna tell her?”

“Eventually... When the time is right.”

“Don’t wuss out!”

“Me? Of course not. *Never*.”

Phoebe scoffed. “Right. I gotta get to a meeting. But you’ve got this. Just enjoy being with your daughter.”

“I will.”

I ended the call and lowered the phone, watching Nylah for a moment. “All right, kid, here’s the deal.” I slid off the couch to sit on the floor with her. “We need to have a talk, man to woman.”

Nylah peered up at me with her big eyes.

“Now, this is my first time taking care of a kid, so I need you to go easy on me. If your mommy sees that I can help take care of you, maybe I can convince her to let you two stay permanently...”

Nylah seemed bored with my talking and turned her back on me, tottering over to her collection of toys.

I watched her go with a smile on my face. The worries and fears I’d faced when Ella first told me about Nylah were practically nonexistent now.

“Since you aren’t really listening, I guess there’s no harm in me still talking.” I rested my back against the couch. “After all, who are you going to tell?”

I couldn’t describe how it felt to come home each day after work to find Ella and Nylah there waiting for me. It was like I’d found something that I didn’t know I had been missing.

“I know it’s crazy, but I love your mom. I love her a lot, and I don’t want to lose her again. The decision is ultimately up to her, but if she wants to stay, she’s more than welcome. It’s funny, for the longest time all I had to focus on was my work. But ever since Ella came back to me, she’s brought more meaning to my life.”

At this, Nylah seemed to realize I was still talking to her and finally gave me her attention, toddling over to me with open arms. Still smiling, I stood, mimicking her open arms, and picked her up.

“You too, Nylah.” I gently swayed her in my arms. “I want you to know something very important—no matter what happens with me and your mom, I’m always going to be there for you.”

Nylah leaned her head forward, bumping it against my chin affectionately.

I rubbed her back. “And ... I want to tell you that I’m your dad.”

“Dad?”

I hadn’t expected her to catch onto anything I said, let alone the most important word of the bunch.

“Yes ... Dad.” I pointed at myself. “*Marcus*. I’m your *dad*.”

“M’awcus Dad.”

I snorted with pride at how firm she sounded. Something told me she got it.

The moment was broken when I heard a knock on the door before the sound of a key in the lock. It was too soon for it to be Ella, so I held Nylah close and waited to see who it was. Samson ran into the entryway, and I heard my mother’s voice greeting him.

“All right, all right, down, boy.” I heard her say. “Is Marcus home?”

She walked in before I had a chance to warn her. As soon as she saw Nylah in my arms, she stopped dead in her tracks.

There was a beat of silence.

“Hey, Mother.” I tried to sound as nonchalant as I could. “You really should call ahead.”

My mother stood frozen in place, staring at the toddler in my arms. “What is that child doing here?”

I glared, not liking the way she referred to Nylah as “*that* child.”

“Mom, this is Nylah,” I introduced. “She’s my daughter.”

More silence followed.

“Marcus...” she began, but her words seemed to leave her, and she didn’t finish her sentence. Her eyes darted between Nylah and me. I saw her notice the startling similarities.

“She and Ella are staying with me for a while.” I took a few steps toward her. “At my insistence.”

“It’s true then?” My mother finally met my gaze. “She’s really your daughter.”

“Yes, she is.”

She didn’t need to know about all the details and the DNA test. It didn’t matter.

She covered her mouth with her hands and continued to stare, seemingly transfixed by the little girl in my arms. Nylah looked back for some time until she grew shy of her staring and buried her face in my neck. I rubbed soothing circles on her back.

“Is there a reason you stopped by? Did you need something?”

My mother ignored my questions. After another moment of staring, she hesitantly reached out. “Can—Can I hold her?”

I glanced down at Nylah, who peeked out from my neck. “Nylah, this is *my* mommy,” I said in a gentle voice. “Your granny. She would very much like to hold you, if that’s okay.”

Nylah glanced between us before smiling shyly at my mother, who picked Nylah up with practiced ease, resting her against her hip instinctively. “Oh, my sweet dear, you’re heavier than I expected. Why don’t we go sit down, hmm?” Mother cooed. She *cooed*. I’d never heard my mother coo at *anything*. “What do you say, darling girl?”

My mother didn’t wait for a reply and headed to the armchair only a few feet away, and Nylah cheered, reaching for Mom’s face.

“She looks almost exactly like you did when you were this age,” she mused, bouncing slightly. “Aside from the hair color and the gender, it’s like I’m holding you again.”

My mother’s soft side was something I’d only just learned about at this very moment. Seeing her with Nylah made me wonder what she had been like with me. Had she been this gentle and soft spoken before the weight of responsibility and societal demands changed her into the sharp, detached woman she’d been for most of my childhood and teenage years?

A strange, almost pained look passed across her face, and I found my smile fading. “What’s wrong?”

My mother glanced at me, expression filled with distress.

“I’m sorry,” she suddenly blurted out, her voice shaky. “Marcus, I’m so sorry.”

My stomach twisted itself in knots, and my expression hardened. “Mom, *what* did you do?”

Nylah pointed down and tried to get out of her grasp. My mother put her on the floor, and she wandered back to her collection of toys. “I ... I ... didn’t know.” She stood, empty arms falling limply at her sides. “Darling, I didn’t think she was *actually* yours.”

I could feel the suspense and panic rising in my chest. I took a step toward my mother and leaned in close. “What *did* —*you*—*do*?”

I could see her eyes welling with tears.

“Jacob Jungmeyer reached out to me,” she started.

“What?”

“Eleanor’s ex-husband.”

“He did *what*?”

My mother stared at me with a pleading expression. “He was so convincing, Marcus. I met up with him at his new apartment, and he told me all about what a gold digger Eleanor was. He told me that she had nothing when she met him, and she married him to better herself. He said that now she was looking to ‘trade up’ to you, a Willingham, using her child. In retrospect, I see that he was just telling me what I wanted to believe.” She took another deep breath. “He said that he had hired a private detective to follow Eleanor ... Ella, but that he had run out of funds. He wondered if I could ... help him—to *protect* Nylah and to stop her from using his daughter as a pawn in her plan.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “Continue.”

“So ... I did.” She tried to look as innocent as she could (and I must admit, she did a pretty good job). “I was able to give the investigator access to the hotel as well, and he took pictures of you and Eleanor together and...”

“*And?*” I said, feeling my blood pressure rising.

“And then I gave them to Eleanor’s ex-husband.”

“Are you *fucking* kidding?” I exploded. “Why would you do that?”

Nylah started to cry—my yelling had startled her to tears. Instantly regretting raising my voice, I knelt to pick her up, trying to ease her tears while still glaring at my mother angrily. She calmed down and nestled against me.

“Son! I thought she was trying to take advantage of you,” my mother shrieked. “I thought you were too emotionally close to see it. Had I known the child was *actually* yours—”

My phone rang, and I glanced down to where it lay on the couch to read the screen. As soon as I saw Ella’s name, I snatched it up and answered. “Hey, you’re done early. Everything okay?”

“Yes, yes, it is.” I smiled but stared hard at my mother.

Ella told me about how she’d been awarded custody, and while I could tell she was happy, there was an edge to her voice that worried me.

“Did something else happen?” I asked her, still glaring daggers at my mother.

“It was awful!” she blurted out. “Jacob had photos of us together and he tried to tell the judge I had *strange men* spending the night when Nylah was home.” She seemed on the verge of crying. “I don’t know where he got them or how, Marcus. I’m not sure he’s just going to drop this! Frank says he’ll sort it all out, but now that I’ve had time to think about it, I feel nervous.”

“Come home right now. Don’t say anything else to that piece of shit. Just come home right away.”

“I don’t know if I can yet. Frank’s still dealing with the legal stuff.”

“Where is he now?”

“He just went back into the room. He told me to go to my car and wait there.”

“Good. Listen to what he said, babe.” I turned my back on my mother. “As soon as you’re cleared to leave—come straight home.”

“Marcus... I’m sort of *scared*.”

The crack in her voice nearly broke me. “I know, baby.” I tried the most soothing voice I could manage. “I know. I’ll take care of this. Just get home safely.”

“I love you,” Ella whispered. “I know it’s not the time or the place to say the words for the first time, but I do. I love you, and this man’s trying to ruin our family.”

“I love you, too,” I said without hesitation or lowering my voice. “He won’t get away with this. I promise.”

We ended the call, and I turned back to face my mother, my anger flaring. “You have no idea what you’ve done,” I growled, keeping my voice down. “Why did you have to get involved? Why couldn’t you just leave well enough alone? I’m a grown man. I can handle myself.”

“Marcus, please, our family’s reputation—”

“Screw our reputation,” I hissed, clutching Nylah protectively. “Why is it our reputation is all you and Father think about? Did you ever stop to think about what this would do to *me*?”

I was livid. My vision tinted red, and the only thing that kept me grounded was the weight of Nylah in my arms.

“Marcus—”

“Please leave,” I ordered.

I turned my back on her for the final time, focusing my attention on Nylah. She was still sniffing, albeit quietly. I hugged her and tried to ease her tears. Everything had been

going well, but thanks to my mother's interference, the shit had well and truly hit the fan.

For Christ sake, I thought. How am I going to tell Ella that my mother was the one who fucked everything up?

"I need you to let me explain," my mother begged.

"I need you to get out of my home." I kept my focus on Nylah. "I have nothing to say to you."

She fell silent. I kept my back to her and hugged Nylah close. I'd just managed to get her to smile when I heard the front door open and close. I turned around and my mother was gone.

Fuming, I started to pace, Nylah still clutched in my arms. I needed to call my own attorney. He would be able to take Jacob to the cleaners. It was the only way to make it up to Ella for what my mother had done.

Nylah was napping peacefully on the couch when Ella finally got home. I could tell from the moment she walked in that she wasn't okay. Her eyes were swollen, and she looked like she was seconds away from a breakdown. Without a word, I moved toward her with open arms.

Ella sobbed and threw herself into my embrace. "I should be so happy now. I got custody. The judge even told me the test was positive! Why is *he* still trying to ruin me with his horrible accusations? How—how did this happen?" she said through tears. "I don't understand!"

I held her tight and buried my face in her hair. Even the elation I should have felt at knowing Nylah was mine was overshadowed by that selfish asshole and his vindictive nature.

"Where did he get those pictures? How did he know about my apartment and here at the hotel?" she went on. "Marcus, I'm so tired of him trying to ruin my life! I want to be *happy*."

"I know, babe." I cupped her tear-stained cheeks and lifted her face toward mine. "You're a good mother. We have the law

on our side now. Jacob will be out of your life soon. And I'll make sure of it."

Ella hugged me tighter. "I just don't know where those photos came from."

I knew I had to tell her. "I do."

"What?" Ella pulled away and stared up at me in shock.

"My mother."

"Your *mother*?"

"My mother."

"Why would she do that?"

"I don't know, and I don't care." I raked my hands through my hair. "Your ex contacted her hoping for sympathy and got even more than he hoped for. I kicked her out as soon as she told me."

"Good." Ella curled her hands into fists. "Good. Because she made a difficult situation ten times worse."

I felt relieved that Ella wasn't holding me responsible for what my mother had done. She nestled back into my arms, and I eased us over to the end of the couch where Nylah was sprawled. I sat with her practically in my lap.

As she glanced over at our sleeping daughter, she smiled softly. "How did things go with Nylah?"

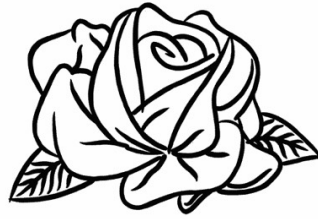
"We survived." I gazed down at her. "Had some one-on-one bonding time."

"Thank you for staying with her. Knowing you were here helped a lot."

"I'll always be here for you two," I promised, holding her close. "Always."

"I know."

ELLA



*A*fter several minutes of passionate kissing, I'd fallen asleep with Marcus, but it didn't last long.

I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't fall back to sleep, so I slid out of bed and went to lay down with Nylah. She slept soundly, her thumb in her mouth. I watched her for some time, memorizing the lines of her face. She was so peaceful. She had no idea of the chaos surrounding her, and I would do anything to keep it that way.

Sleep was still evasive, so I took one more long look before getting up.

No sooner had I crept out of the room did Samson slip past me. I watched him jump onto the bed and curl up next to Nylah in my place. A sense of calm washed over me, and I watched them with a soft smile. Feeling better, I wandered into the kitchen looking for something to do. Thanks to my new laptop, I'd been able to get caught up on my orders much more efficiently than usual.

Regardless, I had the urge to bake, so I went through Marcus's cabinets, searching for ingredients and trying to think of what to throw together. I was elbow-deep in flour, kneading dough when I heard footsteps coming down the hall.

Marcus entered the kitchen a second later, sleepy-eyed with tousled hair. "What are you doing awake, El?"

"Can't sleep." I lifted a shoulder with a slight tilt of my head. "I bake when I can't sleep. What are you doing up? Did I wake you?"

“Nah, Samson did when he left the bed.” Marcus came to stand by me. “Where is he, by the way?”

“Curled up with Nylah.”

Marcus gave me a sleepy smile as he wrapped his arms around my waist from behind. “They’ve become best friends, haven’t they?”

I leaned into his warmth, body tingling as his lips brushed my neck. “Go back to bed,” I whispered. “Everything’s okay.”

“What are you making?” Marcus watched me work over my shoulder.

“Fresh bread for the morning. I always love making sandwiches out of homemade bread.”

“That sounds amazing,” Marcus hummed. “*You’re* amazing.”

I leaned into him, unable to stop the smile from spreading across my face. “You’re right, but you should get some sleep.”

“Only if you come to bed with me.” Marcus nuzzled my cheek.

“Oh, well, I can wrap the dough and just bake it in the morning. But I still have to knead it some more, so it’s going to take a little bit...”

“You don’t have to rush because of me.” He gave me a quick peck and pulled away. “Finish what you need to do. I can wait.”

I watched in awe as he hopped up to sit on the counter next to me, observing me as I continued to knead. “You sure?”

Marcus nodded, crossing his arms and resting against the cabinets. “I’m already awake. Besides, once it’s done, I get to drag you into my bed.”

I laughed. I usually worked alone, so having Marcus there felt odd at first, but then I started to enjoy his calming presence. Once I was sure the dough was good to go, I wrapped it in Saran wrap and then started to clean up.

Marcus hopped off the counter and began helping me, and before I knew it, the kitchen was spotless. It had been years since I'd enjoyed a comfortable silence with someone. When I was with Marcus, I was able to show my vulnerability, and I knew he wouldn't mock or ridicule me for it.

Marcus pulled me toward the bedroom, and with a smile, I followed him. I loved his room. It wasn't only because he had the most comfortable mattress (or because of a few exciting memories), but because of the large windows that made it feel open and inviting. He slept with the curtains open, allowing the city lights to stream in.

My focus was drawn back to him when his arm snaked around my waist, and he pulled me close. There was something different in the air. Marcus had never been one to move slow, but he seemed determined to take his time with me.

His kisses were slow and methodical, almost as if he were trying to take my breath away. He succeeded. When he drew back, I gasped for air, only to find myself being kissed again.

Marcus gently pushed me down onto the bed, joining me seconds later. The comforter was dragged up around us, and then he buried his face in my neck, nipping and sucking the sensitive spot there.

Firm hands ran down my sides, pushing up my sleep shirt so he could feel my skin. His touch electrified me, sending little sparks throughout my body.

As we kept kissing, he slid up next to me, still stroking my hip. "Turn around," he said against my lips.

Doing as he asked, I rolled onto my side so my back was against his chest. His hand glided down my hip until he found the band of my underwear and maneuvered them down. I kicked them to the bottom of the bed.

"You're breathtaking," he whispered in my ear.

Slender fingers dug into my thigh as he lifted my legs, and excruciatingly slow, he slid into me.

We rocked together leisurely, his mouth leaving hot kisses along my neck and shoulders. Even though our upper bodies were still clothed, the slowness and gentleness made me feel close to him. There was no reason to rush.

He pumped in and out of me at a steady pace, while his hand kneaded my breast. It felt as if we moved that way for hours, my climax building so subtly that I hadn't realized how close I was until his fingers stroked my most sensitive spot.

He held me tight through my orgasm, finishing not long after.

Once we were spent, we kept lying that way, wrapped in each other's arms until we finally dozed off.

The next day, I felt calmer. I'd pushed away all thoughts of Jacob and his threats from the day in court. Jacob's insults and the way he'd intruded on my life were still present but seemed further away, while the possibility of a future with Nylah *and* Marcus seemed like it could be a reality. I could feel myself beginning to let go of the knot of anxiety that had been in my stomach for so long.

I threw myself into baking. Along with the bread I'd prepared the night before, I also made a cake and two pies. Nylah loved it. I pulled a chair over so she could help me. The combination of spending time with my daughter and making something from scratch helped to ground me and gave me time to think and even dream of our future.

By midday, however, I was tired of being cooped up in the penthouse. I considered the possibilities and then decided to surprise Marcus. After packing up some of the cake, I dressed Nylah and set out to visit him.

Lucy wasn't at her desk when I arrived. I heard voices coming from Marcus's office, so I sat with Nylah to wait. It wasn't long before the door opened and Lucy came out, appearing frazzled. She was so distracted she didn't notice me at first. I waited until she was at her desk before I got up and

made my way to her. She was engrossed in her work and only noticed me when I placed a small box next to her.

She looked up with a start. “Ella! What are you doing here? Marcus didn’t tell me you were going to stop by.”

“It’s a surprise. Is he in?”

“He’s in a marketing meeting right now, but it should be finishing soon.” Lucy took the small box. “Ooo, what’s this?”

“Cake. I was trying some new recipes.”

“Yes!” Lucy clapped her hands excitedly.” It was then that she noticed that I wasn’t alone. “Who’s this little pumpkin?”

Nylah looked up from her stroller to give Lucy a wide grin.

“This is Nylah,” I said. “Nylah, can you say hi to Lucy?”

Whether or not Lucy heard her, I wasn’t sure. She stared at Nylah with curiosity.

She raised a brow. “Is she—?” She started to ask but seemed to think better of it and stopped herself.

Thankfully, we were saved from more awkwardness by the door opening. I heard Marcus’s laughter, followed by the deep voice of another man. Lucy and I were too busy locked in a silent stare, so by the time I looked up, Marcus stood alone in the doorway.

“Hey!” He grinned when he saw us. “What are you doing here?”

“Brought you a treat.” I showed him the second box I’d brought. “Thought we’d say hi.”

“Well, hello!” Marcus came over and gave me a quick kiss before unbuckling Nylah from her stroller and picking her up. It was undeniable what our relationship was. I smiled and glanced at Lucy, only to see her smiling as well.

“That has to be the cutest kid I’ve ever seen.” She leaned back in her seat. “And I have nieces and nephews.”

“Yeah, the kid’s got good genes,” Marcus said proudly. “By the way, Patterson is going to send us an updated contract. Can you make sure the changes we discussed are actually in there?”

Lucy nodded, all business again. “Of course.”

“Great, thanks.” Marcus turned to me and reached out with his free hand to push a stray curl away. “Lunch?”

As soon as we walked inside the restaurant, we were greeted by a couple of Marcus’s friends. They were waiting to be seated. “Marcus! I finally get to meet Ella and your”—She stared at our daughter, and Nylah gave her a toothy grin—“Oh, my God. You weren’t kidding. Nylah’s a mirror image of you.”

“But cuter.”

“*Way* cuter.” Then she reached out to shake my hand. “I’m sorry, I’m being rude. I’m Phoebe, Marcus’s *longtime* BFF *extraordinaire*, and this is my girlfriend, Ramona.”

“It’s nice to meet the both of you.” I beamed and shook Ramona’s hand as well.

Marcus chuckled and waggled his eyebrows. “Hey, you two. Good to *finally* see you together.”

“Shut up, Marcus. I swear, Ella, I’ve got some stories on this guy from when we were kids—pictures, too.” She winked at Marcus.

Marcus’s eyes lit up, and I held back a giggle. “You *wouldn’t*.”

This time, Ramona snickered into her hand.

“Oh, but I *so would*. Just you wait...” The hostess cleared her throat behind Ramona and Phoebe. “Anyway, our table’s ready. It was so nice to meet you. I’ve already told your man we need to get together soon.” She gave him a sidelong glance and turned back to me with a megawatt smile. “Now we can! I’ll get your number from Marcus.”

“Absolutely. I’d love that.” I nodded and Marcus put his arm around my shoulder. Phoebe seemed like a great person,

and I couldn't wait to get to know her and Ramona.

Marcus waved with his free hand. "Later, Mac."

I was in a happy mood when I got back to the penthouse. Lunch with Marcus had been a surreal experience. I hadn't realized how different Nylah and I being with Marcus in public would be. When we'd done lunch before, it had always been at small places where neither of us knew anyone.

But, to have lunch with him around people he knew and to see him interact with Nylah as any father would, made me realize how much I'd wanted it. We weren't a secret anymore. We were a family, and he wanted everyone to know.

And with the shadow of the custody hearing gone, I felt as if the sun was shining on us, even inside.

Feeling giddy, I reached out and tickled Nylah while she was busy with her toys. She squealed in delight, turning around to give me a grin. "No tickle!" she declared yet leaned in for more. An intense tickle fight followed, leading to endless peals of laughter from both of us.

A knock on the door interrupted our play time, and I hoisted myself up off the floor to answer it. The last person I expected to find standing in the hall was Jacob, and my smile faded in an instant.

"So, I just had to see for myself where you're shacking up now." He craned his neck to try to see into the penthouse.

I tried to slam the door in his face, but he held it open with his foot. "Jacob, *what* are you doing here?"

"I'm here for my wife and daughter. But, if I can't have my wife, I'll just settle for the girl."

Bile rose in my throat, but I stood my ground as he attempted to push past me into the apartment.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I blocked him again. "She's not your daughter and you have no rights over Nylah. You can't just show up here to visit—"

“*Oh*, I’m not visiting.” Jacob interrupted. He reached into his back pocket and took out a piece of paper. He held it so close to my face I almost went cross-eyed. With a shock, I realized it was a copy of the DNA report Marcus and I had first received from Dr. Mulvane.

“This here says your rich Sugar Daddy isn’t, *in fact*, her daddy.” He laughed in a twisted, sardonic tone. “And *I* should know. God knows it cost me enough to get that stupid cow at Mulvane’s to swap a few samples. Why didn’t you just accept that first report and give up trying—like you always do, Ella? You’re a born loser. You were a loser when I met you, and how do they say? Once a loser, always a loser.”

“What do you *want*?” I almost screamed at him.

“Simple. I’m here to take her with me.”

“Like *hell* you will.” I tried to push his hand away, but he shoved his body against mine, forcing me back into the penthouse. Terror *almost* took hold, but I’d be damned if he took Nylah from me.

I rushed to block his path. “You’ll not touch a hair on *my* daughter’s head, you bastard.” I growled the last word in a lower tone. “Over my dead body!”

Nylah whimpered when she heard raised voices, and the second she saw Jacob, she looked like she wanted to run away.

“Don’t *fucking* tempt me, Ella.”

It was as if I was trapped in one of my nightmares. Jacob made for Nylah, but I grabbed his arm, yanking him back.

“I’ll call the cops! You’re breaking the law! *You* didn’t get custody of her.” I didn’t understand why he seemed to be ignoring the obvious facts.

Jacob paused, and I felt a spark of hope, but then he turned and fixed me with a sneer. “I know *that*. I’m not stupid.”

For a fraction of a second, I stood silent.

“Then *why* are you doing this!” I threw my hands to the side, angry as hell. “Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

Jacob spun around to face me, his hand shooting out to seize my wrist. “I wouldn’t have to do this if you would just come back home,” he said condescendingly. “Honestly, Ella, you’re the reason I have to go through all this trouble. We were so happy. You’ll only ever be happy with me.”

“Screw you!”

Jacob glared and shoved me backward. I tripped over the rug and landed on my back so hard it knocked the wind out of me. Nylah began to cry as Jacob closed in on her. Suddenly, there was a truly terrifying bark and Samson ran into the room, putting himself between Nylah and Jacob. Oh, how I loved that dog!

Jacob froze, not expecting to be confronted by a two-hundred-pound domesticated (well, kinda) carnivorous mammal. That gave me just enough time to get back to my feet. I tackled him to the ground and rolled out of the way, just as Samson pounced. While the two struggled, I scrambled for Nylah.

All I heard was Samson yelp before Jacob grabbed my foot and dragged me toward him. I punched and scratched whatever I could, but then something hard cracked against my temple, and stars exploded before my eyes. I tried desperately to right myself, but I was disoriented and could barely push myself up off the floor.

Jacob stood to his feet and picked up my crying angel.

“Don’t you *dare* take her!” I tried to stand, to go after him, but my body wouldn’t obey me. I couldn’t stand without bracing myself against the fucking wall. Damn it! He was going to kidnap my baby! “Jacob, don’t ... Oh, my God, don’t!”

Next to me, Samson struggled to get back on his feet, growling and baring his teeth. Still dizzy, I snatched his collar to hold him back as best I could. I didn’t want to take any chances. If he attacked Jacob, Nylah could get hurt.

“When you’re ready to come back to me, you have my number.” Jacob sneered. “If you call the cops, you’ll regret it.”

And Ella, one more thing. You will *not* win. I can guarantee that.”

Helpless tears poured down my cheeks as I watched him leave with my daughter. Samson began to whine, struggling against the hold I had on his collar and attempting to go after Nylah. I didn't let him go until Jacob slammed the door.

My breath came in short gasps, and my vision tunneled.

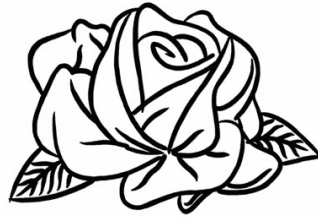
I began to hyperventilate.

My worst nightmares had been realized.

I could do nothing but breakdown.

All I saw was black.

MARCUS



*M*y phone rang for the tenth time that day. I looked at the screen and declined my mother’s call. I couldn’t bear to talk to her—not yet, not after what she’d done. In her haste to protect the “family name,” she’d royally screwed up my trust, needlessly caused Ella to have even more fear and anxiety, not to mention butted into *my* business.

Besides, I was riding on the high of showing Ella and Nylah off to Phoebe, Ramona, and my colleagues. Lunch had been great. The waitresses had cooed over Nylah, and Ella had seemed relaxed for the first time in hours. I hadn’t expected to bring my new family out into the public eye—but after everything we’d been going through—I didn’t want to keep Ella a secret any longer. She deserved more than that.

“Lucy, I’m going to wrap things up and head out.” I leaned against the doorframe to my office. “You might as well leave early. There’s no sense in you staying while I’m out. Unless you want to.”

Lucy seemed pleased. “Actually, leaving early sounds great.” She pushed away from her computer. “I could really use the time to do wedding planning.”

“How’s that going?”

“Exhausting.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “But it’ll all be worth it.”

“I’m just going to elope. I’d rather do that than deal with all the planning and family.”

Lucy paused what she was doing to smirk at me. “Planning to get married?”

“Eventually.”

“You three looked really happy together. I could see a lot of love there.”

“Thanks. It’s been a bumpy start, but I believe we’re going to be okay.”

“Ella’s great.” Lucy inclined her head in approval. “And she deals with you on a regular basis, so you know she has patience.”

“Bye, Lucy,” I said pointedly.

With Lucy laughing at my dismissal, I went back into my office to shut my stuff down before closing up for the day. My thoughts were consumed with Ella.

The all-consuming feelings of happiness died in my chest as soon as I reached the penthouse door. It was slightly ajar, and I sensed something was wrong. When I pushed my way in, the place was dark. Samson didn’t come to greet me.

“Ella?” I called. “Ella, are you here?”

I heard a noise from the living room, and when I turned on the light, I found Ella curled up on the floor with Samson tucked next to her. I was at her side in an instant. Nylah was nowhere in sight.

“Ella, what happened? Where’s Nylah? Is she okay?”

Ella let out a dry sob, her cheeks stained with tears. “He took her,” she said in an empty voice. “He came, and took her... I tried ... and I couldn’t stop him.”

I immediately saw fucking red.

Seeing her so broken and defeated was like a knife to the heart. My anger faded for the moment, and I knelt by her, pulling her into my lap. “Babe, did he hurt you?” She was practically dead weight against me, but I still held her body

pressed as close to me as I could, rocking her back and forth until her sobbing stopped.

I pushed her hair away from her face only to find a bruise on her temple. “I’ll kill him,” I growled, gritting my teeth.

“He’s crazy. He acted like we were still married. He had that first DNA result we got from Mulvane. He warned me not to call the cops, or he’ll hurt her.”

“I swear to God, I’ll fucking kill him!”

“No, I just... I don’t get it,” she whispered. “He doesn’t care that Nylah isn’t his daughter. He...doesn’t...care! He’s known all along, and he’s only been doing this to get me back—in his life. But why? It makes no sense.” She seemed to snap out of it then. “Nylah, we need to—”

“I’ll get her back.” I forced her to look me in the eye. “Ella, I’m going to get our daughter back. Do you want me to call your mother? She can stay with you while I—”

“No.” Ella’s voice was suddenly hard. “No. I’m going with you.”

“Are you sure? I’ll take care of this myself. You don’t look too good.”

Her expression became fierce, and she sat up, putting some distance between us. “I *have* been through *enough* with Jacob. It ends *today*. What he’s done is kidnapping, pure and simple. Nylah belongs with us and we *will* get her back, together.”

I nodded with determination. “Then let’s go.”

I reached into my upper shelf and pulled out a set of slinky woman’s leathers and a second, smaller black helmet. Ella got to her feet, wiping the remaining tears from her eyes, and together, we marched from the penthouse.

We had just reached the lobby when I saw my mother heading toward us. She opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off. “Now is *not* the time.”

I tried to push past her, but she blocked my path. “Marcus, please, I feel terrible about what I did.”

“You should!” Ella spoke up. “My ex-husband just kidnapped *our* child, and you helped him, by believing the stories he told about me rather than listening to your *own* son.”

My mother appeared surprised at Ella’s outburst and seemed to acknowledge her for the first time. “Oh, my goodness. He kidnapped the child? Oh, my goodness. Are you sure? Have you called the police?” She turned to me and asked.

“No cops. We’re going to get Nylah back right now.”

“Then here, this should help.” My mother began fumbling in her purse. “Where is it? I just had it.” She pulled out a folded piece of paper, her hands slightly trembling.

I grabbed it out of her hand and impatiently unfolded it. After I read it, I glanced up at her. “Where did you get this?”

“I got the investigator to do some more digging this afternoon after we spoke,” my mother explained. “He had no trouble getting that girl at that clinic you first visited to confess that she had swapped your DNA sample with someone else’s so the test would come back negative. It seems Jacob paid her to do it, but she gave him up completely when the investigator threatened to get the police involved. It’s probably not the first time she’s done something like this. Anyway, here’s his new address. He moved into an apartment not too long ago.” She turned toward Ella, nodding at the paper in my hand. “Eleanor, I am so very sorry I didn’t trust you. Please, allow me to make it up to you.”

“Thank you for the information, Mrs. Willingham, but frankly, I have more important things on my mind at the moment.”

“We’ll talk about this later, Mother. Right now, we have to go get our daughter.”

She nodded and moved out of our way as we pushed past.

he bellman had seen me approaching and had my keys waiting. He immediately understood my head motion and

tossed them to me as I crossed the entrance toward my bike.

S Ella's face was filled with pure determination—and fear. I sped the entire way to Jacob's new apartment.

She leaned in closer the way she'd done the night years ago and wrapped her arms tightly around my middle. She had to lean with me as we turned around one bend or another and her body pressed against mine, moving in time together. I liked having her on my bike, just as I had back then. Every now and then, I would reach down and place a gloved hand on her knee. On straight stretches of the road when I didn't need to control the steering as much, my hand would linger, trying to comfort her.

All the while, I prayed to whatever higher power there was to keep Nylah safe.

*W*hen we finally arrived at Jacob's apartment, she removed her helmet and shook her hair into place, her expression faltered for a second. She looked pale, and I could only imagine the anxiety she must be feeling, thinking of the man who'd caused her so much pain.

“Are you sure you don't want to wait outside?”

She shook her head. “No, I'm going in.”

We walked with haste. Each step toward the front door made me angrier. Not only had this bastard abused the woman I loved, but he had also had the nerve to kidnap my child. Nothing was going to stop me from slamming my fist into his face the minute I saw him. I rang the bell and pounded on the door without hesitation.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

“Open up.”

Thump! Thump! Thump!

“Now!”

I could hear movement inside and then the sound of Nylah crying. Ella inhaled sharply, her hand reaching blindly for mine. I took it without question and gave it a squeeze. I kicked the door hard where the side of the lock met the frame, and the wood splintered immediately.

A neighbor, an elderly small woman with white hair, peered out of the door of her apartment, but then quickly shut it again when she saw Jacob's broken door and Ella's tear-stained face. Frankly, I didn't look that calm myself.

I pushed the broken door open and saw Jacob rushing toward me. I grabbed him by the front of his shirt and threw him back into the entryway.

"You son of a bitch!" I rammed him into the nearest wall so hard his head almost smacked against it.

"So, you must be the *real* baby daddy." Jacob sneered. "Nice to finally meet you. Have you come to bring my wife back? Has she lost her shine already, rich man? Now get the *fuck* out of my home. You have no right to be here."

"We have *every* right to be here!" Ella seethed. "We're here for our daughter, you bastard! And I'm not your *freaking* wife."

Now that we were inside, I could hear Nylah clearer. "Mommy! Dad!" she wailed, sending my heart shattering into a million pieces.

Ella was already running down the hall toward the sound, leaving Jacob and me alone.

"You're wasting your time," Jacob drawled, seemingly unperturbed by my threats. "She'll come back to me once she realizes she can't play you like she did me. And it won't be long before you're tired of playing dad-eee." He deliberately dragged out the last word into a whine.

"Fuck you, you fucking motherfucker!"

"Man, she really has you sucked in with her 'poor me' act, doesn't she? How does it feel being pussy-whipped?"

I slammed Jacob against the wall again, but harder this time.

“If you *ever* come after my family again, I *will* kill you,” I threatened in a low voice.

I wrapped one hand around his throat, and for the first time since we’d arrived, I saw genuine fear in his eyes. “How does it feel being so fucking pathetic that you have to kidnap someone else’s kid in order to feel anything? You’re the one that needs to get a grip, you worthless piece of shit. You’re delusional! Get some fucking help.”

“I’m delusional? What about you?” Jacob pressed out. “Some chick tells you that you’re the father of her kid, and you just drop everything. You could’ve walked away and kept your life together.”

“You’re right. I could have—if I was a schmuck like you.”

“Screw you!” Jacob spat.

I raised my fist, but then Ella’s voice called my name, and I froze. She stood a few feet away, Nylah nestled in her arms.

As I slowly lowered my fist, I heard the sound of sirens approaching.

Jacob looked smug. “Perfect timing.” His gaze and voice were suddenly confident again. “This is a quiet area. The neighbors are quick to respond to ruffraff causing trouble. Seeing you arrested for breaking and entering *and* assault will be the highlight of my day.”

I let go of him, and he stumbled backward until he hit the wall, falling over moving boxes.

The police pulled up outside the ground-floor apartment a moment later. I pulled Ella and Nylah close, ready to defend the three of us. Several officers got out of the car. I recognized one as Officer Gillan, the woman who’d helped when Ella’s apartment had been ransacked. She marched forward, steadfast with a stiff upper lip, but it wasn’t me she was staring at—it was Jacob.

“You guys got here just in time.” Jacob smirked as she approached. “Did one of the neighbors call you? They broke in and assaulted me.”

“Actually, Mr. Jungmeyer.” Officer Gillan cut him off. “We’re here for you.”

Jacob’s face fell when she reached for him, slapping handcuffs around his wrists before he even realized what was happening.

“What the hell?” He turned, trying to stare the officer down. “You’re arresting the wrong person!”

“Jacob Jungmeyer, you are under arrest for bribery, forgery, burglary, and incitement to pervert the course of justice.” Officer Gillan listed off, her voice and expression firm.

“You can add kidnapping and assault to *that*.” Ella stepped forward, hugging Nylah close. Her bruise had already darkened against her pale skin.

Officer Gillan glared at Jacob in disgust. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law—”

“This is ridiculous!” Jacob blurted out, his voice almost shrieking. “I have papers—”

“So do *we*.” Ella cut him off.

“We found several sets of Mr. Jungmeyer’s fingerprints at Ms. Rawson’s apartment,” Officer Gillan continued. “Considering their previous relationship, it didn’t seem significant at the time, however, in light of this kidnapping, it raises *many* questions.”

All the color had drained from Jacob’s face, and he was suddenly no longer so talkative.

“We were just brought up to date that Mr. Jungmeyer is responsible for ensuring the DNA swabs were switched at the Mulvane Clinic,” she said, addressing me.

“Was it my mother who called you to come here?”

Officer Gillan gave me a curt nod.

“You should’ve just left us alone.” Ella spoke up, staring at Jacob. “After everything you’ve put me through...” She stopped for a moment before she took a deep breath and continued, “You don’t have any power over me *anymore*—and you *never* will again. We’re going to move on with our lives and forget you even exist. I hope you rot in prison for the rest of your life!”

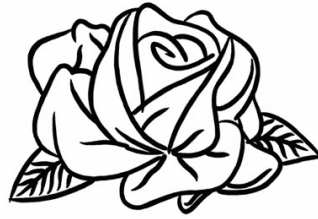
Jacob clenched his jaw and refused to make eye contact with either of us.

Just before Officer Gillan led him away, Ella leaned in close. “By the way, I win.”

Smirking, I pulled her back so that Officer Gillan could walk Jacob to the squad car. Ella slumped against me in relief. I held her close, reaching out to wipe away the stray tears from Nylah’s cheeks.

My family was finally safe.

ELLA



Everything had finally settled down several months later. Jacob had been found guilty in a swift trial—thanks to Marcus and Mrs. Willingham—and gone to prison for sixty-five years, with all the additional charges to include felony kidnapping and assault. The judge hadn't shown him an ounce of mercy and punished him to the fullest extent of the law. I no longer had to worry about him interfering in our lives. Marcus and I were blissfully happy. His mother had even helped bring in a ton of business for me.

She'd shown up unexpectedly at the penthouse and wanted to speak to me personally. After all, she'd been trying to reach out and make amends for quite a while, and she *was* Marcus's mother *and* Nylah's grandmother. I hadn't wanted to shut her out of our lives, even if she had made a huge mistake. She and Marcus were finally on good terms again, which made me happy. I couldn't imagine not having my mom in my life.

"Please, Ella, hear me out," she said. "Being a *thousand* years old has its advantages, darling, you know. And I have a *ton* of connections. It would be my pleasure to help you with your baking business."

I had a chuckle at that as we walked into the living room and took a seat on the couch. "What are you saying?"

"Well, who doesn't love cake?" She lifted her hand with a dramatic flourish. "Besides getting old and forgetting a few things—*certainly* comes in handy at times, let me tell you—old folks at the country clubs *do* enjoy their desserts over

gossip and tea.” She reached out and took my hands in hers. “*If* you will allow it, I will pull all of my connections together, and you will have so much business coming in, you will never have to worry about taking the smallest of orders. That is, if you don’t want to, of course.”

I took a moment to consider her offer. It seemed amazing, and I’d be able to do everything right here from the penthouse, and Marcus had already talked with the in-house pastry chef of the restaurant downstairs as well. I smiled at *all* the possibilities. “Yes, I accept.”

She embraced me in a tight hug. “Ella, darling. I am so happy to help. You have no idea how much my son loves you, and I’m so very thrilled to be able to have a relationship with my granddaughter. I can’t thank you enough for allowing me to be a part of her life.”

“Oh, Mrs. Willingham—”

“Please, call me Ruth.” She patted my arm. “We are family, dear.”

I smiled. “Yes, we are. And you know you’re welcome to visit Nylah any time you please. She’d love it!”

Ruth’s eyes welled with tears, but she quickly wiped them away. “You know, I wasn’t a very good mother to Marcus, but I want to be the best grandmother I can to our little Nylah. She’s precious.” Her voice broke, and she rose to her feet with a watery smile. “I best be on my way. I have calls to make and people to see.”

I walked her to the door. “It was great talking to you again. Thank you for this opportunity.”

She waved her hand in dismissal. “It’s nothing, dear. I’ll be eating those cakes myself. They are absolutely *fabulous*.” With a kiss on my cheek, Ruth turned and left the penthouse.

After that, business started booming, she’d even contacted the Sandmeier Museum. My old boss, Ray, was now a regular client. I suspected he’d been an old flame of hers before she’d married Mr. Willingham, but I didn’t know for sure. Ray’s eyes seemed to gleam each time I brought her up, though.

Something to file away for later. She did love to talk about her past. *Maybe a glass or four of wine will do the trick*, I thought and laughed to myself. She truly was an incredible woman who loved her family. I was grateful to have Ruth in our lives, and Nylah adored her.



*M*a and I had been rushing around all morning, trying to finish the final touches for Nylah's second birthday party. I'd baked a *Sesame Street* cake with Elmo on top because he was her favorite. Basically, we were having an Elmo-themed *everything*. Marcus had insisted we have it outside—he'd reserved an entire park so Nylah could play and enjoy the outdoors. Bouncy house, a slide, the whole nine yards—he'd spared no expense for his little princess. The party was to start at one o'clock! Ruth, Uncle Frank, Lucy, and a few of my and Marcus's friends from work were going to be there.

It wasn't long before guests began to arrive. Marcus was bringing Nylah, but he seemed to be running late. I sent him a quick text:

You on your way?

Will be soon. Just a few last-minute details. Love you.

Love you too!

Phew, I thought. We couldn't have a party without the birthday girl.

Lucy ran over and squeezed me tight after she'd taken a look around. "Oh, everything's perfect. Nylah's going to love it." She poured herself a cup of fruit punch and we walked further out into the park, enjoying the nice autumn day. "Sorry my hubby couldn't make it, he's out of town on business again."

"It's fine! I know he works all the time. How's it going, anyway, you know, married life?"

Lucy leaned in. “Even better than I imagined. Ella, I can’t begin to describe it. All that planning I did for the wedding—and thank you for that *phenomenal* cake, by the way—I worried myself sick over nothing. He’s so loving and supportive, even more so than before.” She smiled wistfully. “I can’t imagine my life without him.”

“I’m so happy for you, Lucy. You seem so—”

We were cut short by Phoebe and Ramona. “Hey, hot momma!” Phoebe waved and Lucy snorted. She set their gifts on the table under the pavilion. “The traffic was *hell*. Speaking of, where’s Marcus and the birthday girl?”

“He said he had a few things to finish up, and then they’d be on their way.”

“Uh-huh.” She glanced at Ramona. “He probably stopped to buy Nylah even more presents.”

Ramona shook her head, her long, dark-brown waves blowing in the breeze. “Sounds about right. Hey, I brought champagne for the adults.” She reached inside her bag and pulled out a large bottle, waving it around.

“Ramona, you didn’t!” I gaped. “Oh, whatever, we can mix it with orange juice and have Mimosas after the party. I’ll have Ma put it on ice.”

Lucy stared at Phoebe. “Don’t be spiking the punch, chick.”

She grinned mischievously. “Who, *meeee*? Never.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re as incorrigible as Marcus, and you’re rubbing off on Ramona.” Just as I said that, I watched as Ma and Frank marched over to the refreshment table to guard the punch. By now, they knew Phoebe all too well.

“Yes, yes, I know.” She took a dramatic bow and grinned even wider.

As if he’d heard me calling his name, he and Nylah came walking into the park. “Mommy!”

“I’ll see you ladies in a bit.” I rushed off to meet them. “How’s my little cutie pie? You been good for Daddy?”

Nylah reached for me, and Marcus kissed me on the cheek. “Sorry we’re late, babe. Where’s your mom and Frank?”

I bounced Nylah on my hip and shook my head. “Ma’s guarding the punch and Frank’s helping. They’re afraid Phoebe might spike it with a little something ... strong, if you know what I mean.”

Marcus burst out laughing. “They best not turn their backs. I see my mother’s joined them. Now they’ll be in for a real party. *She’ll* probably spike the punch.”

“Punch!” Nylah said excitedly.

I peered down at our sweet birthday girl and smiled, and then up at Marcus. “See what you’ve done now?”

“Yep. We may need to make a kiddie lemonade instead.” He wrapped his arm around me and Nylah, and we walked toward our mothers and Frank.

After Nylah opened her gifts, had her birthday cake—which she loved—and we’d sang Happy Birthday, Marcus stood from the table. He leaned toward Nylah’s highchair and kissed her on the cheek, then got everyone’s attention. I wondered what he was doing.

He held out his hand, and I stood as well. And the next thing I knew, he was down on one knee in front of me. Tears of joy welled in my eyes before he could even get a word out, and everybody was already clapping and cheering him on. Especially Phoebe.

Marcus peered up at me and met my gaze. I was shocked my mouth hadn’t fallen open. “Ella, I love you. I love our little family, and I want to spend the rest of my days with you and Nylah in it. You’ve taught me how to love, opened my heart to something I never thought possible.” He paused and opened a small box to reveal a stunning four-carat, princess-cut diamond ring.

This time, my mouth did fall open.

“Ella Rawson, will you marry me?”

I covered my mouth with my hands, happy tears streaming down my face. I couldn't believe it. I had no idea. We'd talked about it sometime in the future, but ... now? Was I ready? Hell, yes, I was!

“Ella, don't leave me hanging.”

Crap. “Oh, yes! *Yes*, I'll be your wife.” He slipped that rock of a ring on my finger. I didn't know how I'd ever get used to it. It weighed a ton. I yanked Marcus to his feet and planted a passionate kiss on him in front of God and everybody.

I heard Phoebe whistle through all the clapping and cheers. She jumped from her chair. “First, congratulations. And second, Ella, that was *so* gross.” She laughed and slapped Marcus on the arm. “But anyway ... it's about damn time.” She pulled us into a group hug.

Soon, everybody was gathered around congratulating us. Ruth and Ma were crying and hugging me at the same time, each kissing one cheek. “I'm so proud of you, honey. You now have the life you've always wanted.” Ma pulled away and wiped her tears. “You've made me the happiest mother alive.”

I was about to respond, but Ruth was too excited. Oh, how I loved these women.

“I second that.” Ruth interjected. “Now I will have to teach you how to *truly* be a Willingham, darling.” She blotted her tears and let out a small chuckle. “I have gained a daughter I never had, after all.” She reached in for another hug.

We turned around just as Nylah giggled and decided to grab more cake. I thought it had been taken off her highchair. Nope. Ma quickly snatched her up before she stuck her whole face in it. She was going in for the kill. I had to laugh at my sweet girl.

“Congratulations.” Frank hugged me. “I'm proud of you.”

“Thanks, Frank.” I kissed his cheek. “You were right about everything, you know.”

He winked and smiled. “Yeah, I know.” He patted my back and went off to help Ma and Ruth with Nylah. She was on a sugar high and wanted to go play in the bouncy house.

Marcus pulled Phoebe to the side, clasping my hand. “So, I need to ask you a question.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Will you be my best woman?”

Phoebe squealed. “*Hells* yeah! For sure. Bachelor party, here I come.”

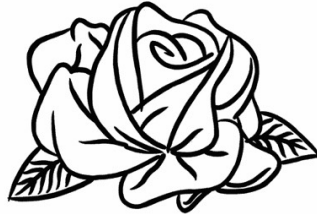
I turned to Marcus, and he shrugged. “You got it, Mac. But”—He produced a bag from behind his back—“that’s not all. Why don’t you take a look inside?”

Phoebe’s eyes widened. “What did you do?” She fished around in the bag and pulled out a “Goddess of HR” T-shirt, sash ... *and* a tiara. “Marcus! I can’t believe it! I’ll be wearing these babies to work, too.” She threw her arms around his neck, catching him by surprise.” You’re the best. Wait, no, I am. Best *Woman!*” She did a little dance, then turned and shouted over her shoulder, “Hey, Ramona, grab that bottle of champagne. I’m gonna be Marcus’s best woman!”

If I had to bet, I’d say Ramona had been in on this whole thing.

Nylah’s second birthday was a joyous occasion. I’d gotten engaged to my daughter’s father, and all the people who’d mattered had been there to celebrate with us. It was one of the happiest days of my life.

EPILOGUE: ELLA



I moved around the bedroom, trying to find something to do. Normally, when I needed to take my mind off things, I lost myself in flour, eggs, sugar, and yeast. But today, the thought of food made my stomach churn for some reason. My phone rang, and I looked at the screen to see who was calling.

“Hey.” I smiled when I answered. “I didn’t expect you to call. Are you guys back already? How was Hawaii?”

Shortly after the incident with Jacob, my mother had told me that she and Frank were getting married. I’d gasped in surprise—in joyous surprise. She’d said that all that had happened with me had made her realize two things. The first was, I was an adult now, and she no longer needed to put her life and her own happiness on hold, just to be ready to be there for me when I needed her. She was so proud of how I’d handled Jacob and that I’d found a new and happier life.

The second thing, so she told me, had been the scare with Nylah. It had made her realize that life was short, and you couldn’t control it or enjoy it by trying to protect yourself all the time. When I’d asked Ma why she’d denied having feelings for Frank all those years ago, she’d giggled and said: “To *heck* with all that.” Then after a few more annoying questions, she’d finally opened up and admitted, that yes, she’d had feelings for Frank for a long time, but that she’d denied them, even to herself, as a way of protecting the life she’d built after her husband’s death. Honestly, a part of me had always known.

I'd laughed when she'd finished by saying, "You know, Ella. It didn't take much prompting for Frank to agree—I hardly got past the 'I want to be happy with someone who loves me' part before he was down on one knee!"

"It's about time!" I'd told her, because *seriously* ... it was.

I couldn't have been happier for them.

"Hawaii was wonderful," Frank said. "But Helen wants to see you guys again, too. Will you be home tomorrow evening if we pop over?"

"Of course." I chuckled as I added, "*Dad.*"

"How's that step-granddaughter of mine?" he asked in the same laughing tone.

"Getting bigger every day. She's going to be as tall as me someday. I'm going to be the tiny mom in a family of giants."

The alarm on my phone rang, and my heart skipped a beat. "I actually have to go, Frank. But I'll call you in the morning, and we can talk more, okay?"

"Okay, sleep well, kiddo."

He ended the call, and I took a deep breath before I looked at the pregnancy test sitting on the nightstand.

It was positive.

Giddy with excitement, I did a little happy dance. Marcus and I had been trying for another baby ever since we'd gotten married. That was over a year ago, and I'd started to wonder if it wasn't going to be in the cards for us.

I left the room in search of my husband. He was supposed to put Nylah to bed thirty minutes ago, and I hadn't heard a peep since. As I approached Nylah's room, I heard Marcus's voice. Silently, I peeked in and smiled.

Nylah was curled up against her daddy's side, eyes drifting closed as Marcus read to her. She had grown so much since Marcus and I had gotten together. At three years old now, it seemed time had flown by, and my baby girl was growing *way* too fast.

As I watched, Marcus quietly put the book down, kissed Nylah's forehead, and then slipped out of bed. He tucked our daughter in before creeping from the room.

Together, we watched Nylah for a few moments, basking in the pride and love we shared for that little angel.

As Marcus closed the door, I leaned against the wall. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Marcus pulled me into a hug, nuzzling my temple. "Do you want to watch a movie? Maybe have a glass of wine."

I grinned. "Maybe skip the wine..."

Marcus chuckled. "Ella, I've told you before, it's not an issue to have a glass of wine every night. It doesn't mean you have a problem."

"That's not why I shouldn't have one."

He studied me curiously, and I watched in amusement as he processed what I said. "Wait ... are you saying ... what I think you're saying?"

I nodded, wrapping my arms around his neck. "We're having another baby."

Marcus's face broke out into a wide smile, and he lifted me up in a spin before he suddenly put me down. "Sorry, babe. I probably shouldn't have done that."

Laughing, I pulled him down into a kiss. "Probably not."

The End

If you LOVED *Billionaire Baby Daddy*, make sure you check out [Billionaire BOSS: Secret Baby](#), available on Amazon.

I hate him—the man who'd taken my v-card and stranded me in a hotel room. Now, here he is in front of my desk introducing himself as my new boss. He's sexier than ever, and I have to work with him—work *for* him! What's worse, he doesn't even recognize me! What will happen if he finds out that he's the father of my child?

BILLIONAIRE BOSS: SECRET BABY SNEAK PEEK



“How about another drink?”

The deep voice sent a shiver down my spine, and I glanced to my left to see who’d spoken. *Holy smokes*. I was face-to-face with the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen. He was tall enough to tower over me, even while I sat on a high bar stool, and his broad shoulders strained against the form-fitting sports jacket he was wearing.

Thick black hair was slicked back from his face, giving me a full view of his dark-blue eyes. They observed me with an intensity I’d never known before, and I immediately found myself drawn to him.

I toyed with the rim of my empty glass. “And ... what would it cost me?”

His smirk widened. He took a seat on the stool next to mine, leaning in close. “Time.” He paused, tilting his head. “And sleep.”

“Sleep?” I rose a questioning brow at that.

“Well, we won’t be getting much sleep tonight, so you’re probably going to be tired in the morning.”

I couldn’t help but blush. Normally, a blunt come-on line like that would have been a major turnoff, and I’d have headed for the door without a backward glance. I’d been hit on before, and I was *definitely* no stranger to men with large ... egos, but his confidence seemed well-earned. I could sense there was something ... breathtaking about him.

The bartender slid a full glass in front of me before removing the empty one.

Hooking up with a strange man was *not* something I'd planned to do tonight, in fact, not something I'd *ever* done before or had ever even intended to do. I could feel the refusal I'd prepared dying in my throat. I'd been working so hard for Christ's sake! I deserved to blow off a little steam and have some fun for a change.

"Convince me." I accepted the drink and felt rather daring—like a bit of a *femme fatale*.

He raised his eyebrow in amusement and gave me an "I would think looking at me would be enough" gesture.

"Well, you *are* attractive," I admitted. "And you seem nice enough so far, but I don't know you."

"What better way to get to know someone than by getting naked and exploring each other?"

"Maybe, I don't know ... a name *first*?"

He laughed, his rich baritone sending a ripple of desire through me. Those deep eyes sparkled as he leaned in closer. "Jonah."

"Hi, Jonah. I'm Naomi."

Jonah's eyes softened, and he reached out to take my hand. "It's nice to meet you, Naomi." The way his mouth wrapped around my name made my entire body feel flushed. "There, now we know each other. So, we're going to finish our drinks, leave together, and spend several pleasurable hours discovering each other."

I had to admit, all of it sounded amazing. When the collar of his jacket moved, I could see the hint of a tattoo on his neck, trailing away under his neatly pressed shirt. It surprised me. He didn't seem like the type—then again, what did I know? The one thing I was sure of was that I desperately wanted to see just how far down that tattoo went.

And, then I remembered ... Oh, *no*! Well, damn it! Today, of all days, why was I wearing the Halloween monster

underwear that Lily had given me as a gag gift? To be fair, they were pretty comfy (so comfy, in fact, I wore them on days to cheer me up, or when I wanted to be reminded of Lily's unwavering self-confidence), but that wasn't going to stop me from killing her later. And—double damn—the reason she'd given them to me in the first place was now more hilarious than before. She'd presented them to me, saying, "There you go. For the only virgin left in our circle over the age of twenty-one! They'll keep your mind *below* your waist for a while." She'd laughed hysterically at her own joke, and at the time, I'd laughed along with her.

Finally, finally, there was this hunk of a man, seemingly hell-bent on deflowering me ... having him see me in these panties would beat all awkward moments I had *ever* been in (and trust me, there had been quite a few). I imagined his face dropping as he undressed me, and instead of finding some sweet hot lingerie, he discovered orange panties with an ogre staring back at him.

"There's just one little problem." I could hear the evasiveness croaking in my voice.

"What's that?"

"I—I really wasn't expecting to meet anyone tonight..."

"I guess we both got lucky then," he murmured.

"I'm a virgin," I blurted out. *I know. Completely out of place.* But somehow this seemed a *slightly* better confession than telling him about Shrek. *So much for femme fatale!* I wanted to crawl under the bar stool and hide. I regretted my words as soon as they fell out of my mouth. If that didn't put him off, nothing would. To my surprise, it didn't.

Jonah showed no signs of surprise, only curiosity. "Why would that be a problem?"

"Well..."

"Is it a problem for you?"

"What do you mean?" *I couldn't even think straight.*

“I mean,” Jonah leaned in so close, our thighs touched—the solid heat of it drawing my attention, “is your virginity a conscious decision, or are you using it as an excuse not to get close to anybody?”

“I think maybe a little bit of both?”

Jonah studied me carefully, his gaze drifting from my eyes down to my lips and then back up again. “What are you afraid of?”

That was a loaded question. *If you only knew*. But seriously, with everything going on in my life, romantic relationships were very low on my list. And I mean *very*. Those panties were proof enough of that. I had my parents to worry about, which meant I never had time to get close to anyone. If I did, my virginity was always something I could use to push them away when things became too serious. Mostly, I just didn’t want a relationship or the emotional ties that went along with it.

I probably would have done the same thing tonight if another man had shown up, but, now, in Jonah’s presence, it seemed I was throwing caution to the wind—my usual excuses were flying out the window at record speed. I mean, it wasn’t like I planned on staying a virgin forever. And this guy, well, he was freaking hot. And his pick-up lines didn’t make me want to run for the hills. So, why not give him a shot? What was the worst that could happen?

Right. I could lose my virginity in Halloween underoos. Maybe I should just play it cool and see how it goes.

“There are a lot of things to be afraid of.”

Jonah gave a nod of agreement. “But if you’re always afraid, you’re never gonna live.”

“A nice sentiment, I could *almost* believe it, if I didn’t think you were just saying it to get in my pants.”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t believe it.” Jonah gave me a mischievous smile. “Besides, I don’t need to resort to cheap lines to get *anyone* in my bed.”

“I’m sure you don’t.” I took a sip of my drink as he took one of his, and our eyes locked.

We wound up in an expensive hotel across the road from the bar. When I heard the price of the room, I almost fainted, but Jonah paid it without batting an eye. His expensive clothes and Rolex had already tipped me off to his wealth, but seeing him drop hundreds of dollars for one night made me feel a little uncomfortable.

I didn’t have time to dwell on it. The second we slipped inside the room, he shoved me against the door and kissed me. He tasted like expensive whiskey and smelled like laundry detergent, soap, and musk. It was an intoxicating combination of scents and tastes, and I quickly became addicted. I melted against him, grabbing his jacket to pull him closer.

“Let me know if it’s too much and I’ll stop,” he whispered into my ear as he nipped at the lobe. His tongue lapped at the spot his teeth had grazed, before he traveled down to feast on my neck.

“Don’t you dare.”

Hands groped at my clothes, pulling and tugging to remove them. I did the same to him, eager to feel his hot skin against mine. By the time his hands were removing my skirt, I really didn’t care about the “panty problem” anymore. Now, they were just a small barrier between me and my fabulous and pleasurable destiny.

I felt him hesitate, and then a smirk crossed his face. “Why, Naomi, you make me sorry my *Three Little Pigs* undies are in the wash!”

“I’ll forgive you as long as you brought the Big Bad Wolf.” I actually heard him snicker like a schoolboy.

The rest of the night was a blur of new feelings and sensations. We did so much and touched each other for so long, I lost all sense of time.

He was dominant and rough, but never with malice. I matched his roughness with my own eagerness, and when we finally collapsed, spent and satisfied, I was changed forever.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked as we lay face-to-face with him stroking my hair, and me, lying against his chest.

“Nothing,” I said with relief. “For the first time in years ... I’m not thinking about anything. Just this moment. Just us.”

Jonah cupped my cheek, bringing me into a surprisingly tender kiss. “Nice.”

I tucked my head under his chin, listening to the steady drumming of his heartbeat. My fingers traced the tattoos etched into his skin, and I followed the black lines until my eyes began to droop.

I dozed off before I could stop myself.

With a sleepy groan and the beginnings of a hangover, I returned to some semblance of consciousness hours later. My surroundings were unfamiliar, and it took me a good thirty seconds to remember where I was. Memories of firm hands and a distracting mouth flooded my muddled brain, and I smiled at the naughty images. I’d never anticipated that sex could be *that* intense. Sure, I had read my fair share of romance novels and heard my friends go on and on about their sex lives, but I’d always assumed the stories had been greatly exaggerated.

Pushing my messy hair out of my face, I rolled over, reaching for my, well, Jonah, only to touch cold sheets. My heart sank. I sat up and looked around the room. The only source of light came from the bustling city outside the large window.

Had he left a note? *No.*

A business card on the pillow? *Nope.*

A message on the bathroom mirror? I kicked off the blankets, went and checked. *Nada.*

Frustrated, I let myself fall back onto the bed. I should have known he wouldn’t stick around. He’d been way out of my league. Rich, muscular, hot, tattooed, *and* mesmerizing? I *knew* it was too good to be true. I’d acted out of character and, sure, I definitely enjoyed it, but there wasn’t going to be a

fairy tale ending. *No, that's not me, I'll never be prom queen* lyrics sounded in my mind.

I could feel myself starting to become self-conscious and a little guilty. I pushed it away. Why should *I* feel bad? Why should *I* let him have that power over me? It wasn't as if I'd fallen in love. Me? Never. Not with him. *Please, Naomi, I scolded myself, you can't be in love with someone you just met.*

I decided that what I felt for him was “first sex affection.” A simple mixture of lust and gratitude! Angry, I stood from the bed. The room was paid through the night, but there was no way I was going to stick around. If he could bang and leave, then so could I.

I got dressed as quickly as possible, and despite my disappointment and determination, I couldn't help but feel ashamed. I hadn't expected us to exchange numbers or anything (I had), but, I at least deserved a goodbye.

Before I left, I took a moment to calm myself. *What's done is done*, I thought. *It was fun and now it's over. Once you leave, put him out of your mind and move on.*

That's exactly what I did.

At least, I tried. I really, really tried.

...

End of the sneak peek.

“[Billionaire BOSS: Secret Baby](#)” is now available on Amazon. Also available as audiobook.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Did you enjoy *Billionaire Baby DADDY*? Continue my *Oh Billionaires!* series. If you love a man in a business suit during the day and biker gear by night, this series is for you. All novels can be read as single books.

Oh Billionaires! Series

[Fake Girlfriend](#)

[Billionaire Baby DADDY](#)

[Billionaire BOSS: Secret Baby](#)

[SOLD: Highest Bidder](#) (Crossover with the *Outlaw Biker Series*)

Or jump straight to my biker series. In this series, you'll find yourself surrounded by dark, dangerous, sexy bikers. All novels can be read as single books.

Outlaw Biker Series

[MAX](#)

[TYLER](#) (coming in September 2020)

VORN

Standalones

[Accidental Roommate](#)

[Protecting Her](#)

[Saint or Sinner](#)

CONNECT WITH JOLIE DAY



From a sexy bad-boy hero and laugh-out-loud moments to the happily-ever-after. If you stay up way too late reading steamy romance novels, you've come to the right place!

Jolie Day is a romance author with a knack for steam. She invites readers to abandon inhibitions and melt into the pages. Alpha men, boyish charms, rugged good looks—her books take you on a thrill ride of suspense and seduction. Do you want to read about the knight in shining armor willing to do anything to protect his woman?

Then her books are for you.



Want a free book?

Sign up to Jolie Day's newsletter and get *The Biker* sent right to your inbox (audiobook inclusive, performed by Audie-award winner Justine Eyre!).

I was running from my past when I met her.

...Well, technically I was speeding on my Harley.

Lauren is a breath of fresh air.

Innocent and impossible to resist.

She's exactly what I need for a new beginning.

To escape the dark mistakes that I've made in the past.

My motorcycle broke down in front of her house for a reason.

Lauren craves me as much as I want her.

She can't stop staring at me when I step out of the shower.

But there's a wall between the two of us.

I'm hiding behind a secret that she can never discover.

Can I break the wall down?

Or are my demons too much to handle for a sweet girl like her?

Sign up here on Bookfunnel:

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/jan388fks1>



Follow Jolie Day on Instagram

[@joliedayauthor](#)



Read More from Jolie Day

[Jolie Day's Website](#)

