



**BAD  
DECISIONS**

**A FORBIDDEN ROMANCE  
HALEY TYLER**

**bad decisions**

**haley tyler**

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*To all the girls who want a hot older man to call you his good  
girl*

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# author's note

This is a *forbidden romance* and contains potentially upsetting events.

**Please read with caution.**

Death of a parent, death of a spouse, alcohol use, forbidden/taboo relationship, breeding kink, praise kink, pregnancy, toxic family relationships, explicit sexual content, and swearing.

# 1

## elliott

SIX MONTHS AGO

“WE’RE SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS.”

I nodded my thanks as the man—I couldn’t remember who he or his wife were—shook my hand.

Did Meredith know them? Probably. It seemed like everyone here knew her. That would make sense, wouldn’t it? People who knew her, loved her, coming to her funeral?

I didn’t recognize anyone except Meredith’s mother, Cora, and her little sister, Reagan. Even the people who said they were Meredith’s colleagues didn’t look familiar.

Emma, our three-year-old daughter, was nestled between Meredith’s mother and sister across the pew. Rae had taken Emma from me when we got here, and I was thankful for it. I didn’t want my daughter to see me like this.

Not that I didn’t want her to see me cry. She’d already seen that. Fuck, had she seen it.

I didn’t want her to see me not cry and wonder what the fuck was wrong with her dad.

Who didn’t cry at their wife’s funeral?

Me, apparently.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t squeeze a fucking tear out. Not one.

“We’re sorry for your loss, Elliott.” I looked up, my lips tight as I smiled at the new mourners.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice hoarse.

Were those the only words I’d spoken today?

“She was lovely,” the woman said, dabbing the corner of her eye with a wadded-up tissue. “And the service was beautiful.” I nodded, unable to find any more words for them.

They weren’t here for my or my daughter’s comfort. They were here so they could sleep comfortably tonight, knowing they’d given condolences to a widowed man and newly single father. They didn’t care about me, or my daughter, or my dead wife. They cared about themselves and their conscience.

My gaze followed them as they walked toward Reagan and Cora. Emma now sat in Reagan’s lap, clutching tightly to her shirt like she was afraid of losing her.

The sight made my throat tighten.

“Thank you,” Reagan smiled.

Her dark hair was picked up in a loose, messy bun at the back of her head, strands of it falling around her face. Her hazel eyes were puffy and red, her full lips just as swollen.

Her thin, elegant hand slid into the woman’s as she gently shook it. I envied her. Envied the effortless way she seemed to carry herself, and the effortless way she seemed to talk to people.

Meredith was the same way.

She never knew a stranger. She treated everyone like a friend—everyone but her husband.

I pushed the thought away.

Now wasn’t the time to think about that.

I turned away from Rae, looking back at the casket. The stupid fucking casket that held my dead wife.

Why would she do this?

I told her not to leave that night, but she did it anyway. She never listened to me.

I wish she would’ve that night.

Meredith's boss approached her casket slowly. I recognized him. He'd been at our wedding. He'd come to our holiday parties. He'd come to our house to check in when Emma was born. Drake was a good guy, a good boss. He cared about his employees, and when he said their company was like a family, he seemed to be the only boss on the planet who actually meant it.

He kneeled by her casket, his head hanging as he whispered something only she could hear. I wondered what he told her.

Maybe that he was sorry she was gone. Maybe he was telling her he'd always watch out for Emma. Maybe he was telling her it should've been him that died, not her.

Or maybe those were all my words I knew I should be whispering to her dead body, but I couldn't make myself go anywhere near her casket. Once I saw her in there, it was over. Everything was real. I'd know it wasn't some sick April fool's joke she was playing on me.

She would be dead, and I would be here, left to raise our daughter alone.

I turned back toward Emma, staring at her as she bounced her unicorn on Reagan's leg. Rae and Cora were in a hushed argument, because of course they were. They couldn't be in the same room longer than a few minutes without being at each other's throat.

A part of me wished they could've waited until after the funeral was totally over to bicker. But another part felt lighter knowing things weren't going to totally change.

"Sorry for your loss." Drake's thick, gruff voice startled me, and I turned to face him. "She was—" He roughly cleared his throat. "She was a wonderful woman. One of the best I've ever known." I nodded my thanks, just like I had with everyone else. "I can't believe this."

He sat beside me on the pew and braced his elbows on his knees. I stared at him, my dry eyes widening as he seemed to break more than I ever had.

“She was so young,” he muttered, hanging his head.

“She was thirty-five,” I said, and he nodded.

“Young,” he repeated. “Her life was just beginning.”

I didn’t know about that. She’d already lived a thousand lives. She’d been the student-body president of her high school and graduated as valedictorian. She’d excelled in college, graduating at the top of her class. She’d gotten a job right out of school and moved up the ranks quickly.

She’d had two long-term boyfriends, both of whom she’d dumped when things got too serious.

Then she met me.

I wasn’t supposed to stick around forever. We were just friends at first, just hanging out. We were casual. Then she got pregnant, and things got real. So, I asked her to marry me. That was what I was supposed to do, right? Marry the mother of my child.

And it was great at first. When things were good, they were great. But when they were bad...they were awful.

“She was about to get a promotion,” Drake said, pulling me from my thoughts. “I don’t know who could take her place. It doesn’t feel right giving the position to anyone else.” He pinched between his eyes.

I hesitated before resting my clammy hand on his back. “You’ll find someone else,” I muttered. He dipped his chin slightly, barely enough to call it a nod.

“She was the best,” he choked out as I dropped my hand away.

“Yeah.” It was the only word I could manage.

He heaved out a breath as he straightened his spine. His eyes met mine, and he gave me a tight-lipped smile.

“I should be consoling you,” he said. “How are you holding up? Emma?” He turned to look at her.

Reagan hugged her tightly, her eyes squeezed shut as Emma tipped her unicorn back and forth, pretending it was

flying.

“She’s okay,” I rasped. “She’ll be okay.” He nodded mindlessly as he watched my daughter.

“She’s a good kid,” he whispered. “Looks like her mom.” I pressed my lips together.

“Just like her,” I agreed, and hated myself for hoping that’s where their similarities ended.

Drake shoved to his feet, wiping his hands down the front of his slacks, before he gripped my hand tightly. His eyes bored into mine as he gave me a slight shake.

“See you around, Eli,” he said. “And sorry for your loss.” I nodded my thanks again, just as I had to everyone before him and will to everyone after.

He made his way down the narrow aisle of pews, his thick, familiar cologne lingering in the air around me. I scanned the little church, grateful there weren’t many people left. My gaze caught with Reagan’s, and she gave me the smallest smile before whispering something in Emma’s ear. She set her down, and my daughter barreled toward me, her arms outstretched.

I scooped her up and set her on my lap, my arm wrapped around her, but my eyes were still on Rae’s. She glanced at Cora, then around the room, and rose from her spot to make her way to me.

She was so different from Meredith. Sometimes I forgot they were even sisters.

“How you holding up?” she murmured, brushing Emma’s soft, dark hair behind her ear.

“I’m okay,” I said, and she gave me a look like she didn’t believe me. “I’ll be okay.”

“I just can’t believe it, you know?” Her eyes turned watery as she looked toward the casket. “I keep thinking she’s going to walk through those doors and say this was all some stupid joke.”

“I feel the same way,” I muttered. I grabbed her hand, lacing our fingers together, and squeezed. “But she’s not

coming back, and we have to figure out how to keep going without her.”

“I don’t know how,” she admitted.

“I don’t either.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to Emma talk to herself and the sniffles of the few remaining people in the room, our hands still locked together.

The casket felt like it was mocking me, like Meredith was mocking me. Every nasty word we’d said to each other that night came crashing down around me.

I should’ve told her I loved her one last time, even if it would’ve felt like a lie. I should’ve told her I didn’t really want a divorce. I should’ve been a better husband to her.

But she should’ve been a better wife to me. She should’ve told me she loved me one last time, even if it was a lie. And she should’ve stayed home that night, not because I’d begged her to stay, but because she’d known she was too drunk to drive and she had a fucking daughter to raise.

She shouldn’t have been so reckless. She shouldn’t have said all the things she did—

I stopped myself from going down that road. It didn’t do me any good to hate my dead wife. I couldn’t soil Emma’s few memories of her mother.

Maybe one day, when the wounds weren’t so fresh and the grief wasn’t so intense, I could remember the good times. Maybe I could forget that night had ever happened and move on with my life. I could pretend like the words we’d spat at each other were just a part of some nightmare, and we hadn’t actually meant them.

Deep down, I knew I could never forget them. Deep down, I knew I meant those words, and I’d never take them back. Deep down, I knew she meant them, too.

And deep down, I didn’t care.



## 2

# elliott

### PRESENT

“EMMA, COME ON,” I sighed. “We’re going to be late.”

“Don’t wanna go!” She stomped her foot down, her little hands in tight fists at her sides. “Don’t wanna. Don’t wanna. Don’t wanna!” She threw herself to the floor, landing on her bottom, and banged her fists on the rug.

If I was a better father, I’d reprimand her and fix the behavior.

But I’m a terrible fucking father and in way over my head and so exhausted I could fall asleep with my eyes open. So, I didn’t even attempt to fix anything.

“Emma.” I crouched beside her, balancing on the balls of my feet. I tried to breathe through my growing anger and frustration, but fuck, it was hard. “Come on.”

“No!”

She let out a screech that made me wince. Tears streamed from her eyes, down her red and sweaty face. Her dark hair was a wild mess around her, her updo I’d worked so hard on now ruined from her tantrum.

I stared down at her, contemplating just leaving her on the floor. I’d long since learned to never pick up a screaming, crying, kicking toddler. I’d gotten kicked in the balls one too

many times when I tried in the past. Now I didn't even think about trying it.

“You have to go,” I said.

“Nuh-uh!” She rolled onto her stomach and screamed into the rug.

I hated seeing her like this—I fucking hated it. But there was nothing I could do. I needed to work, and she needed to go to daycare. My hands were tied.

Her arms and feet flailed around, the veins popping in her neck. Her face began turning more purple than red, and a fucked up thought crossed my mind.

*How long could she go on screaming and crying like this before she lost consciousness?*

Look, it's fucked up. I know.

But I was just so fucking tired, and she was just so fucking loud.

I ran my hand over my hair, disheveling it even more as I let out a long sigh. The wrong parent died. As much of a bitch as Meredith was, she would've known how to handle this. I always felt like she was a better parent—except when she pretended like Emma didn't exist so she could work late. Or when she got annoyed when Emma was a baby and was too needy.

Okay, so maybe we were both just shit parents and Emma deserved far better than either of us.

“How about we get some ice cream after school?” I asked. She shook her head, rubbing her forehead against the rug. That had to burn.

I rested my hand on her back and she let out another banshee screech. I yanked it back and closed my eyes, trying to pray for patience.

*Fuck you, Meredith.*

Nope. That wasn't praying for patience. That was definitely cursing my dead wife.

“You know you have to go.”

“No!”

I took another deep breath.

I couldn't lose my shit and yell at her. As terrible of a father as I was, I knew not to yell at my three-year-old. She was the child, and I was the adult—even if I didn't feel like it.

Even if I wanted to yell at her—and I *really* fucking did—I couldn't. I'd done it once and the terror and betrayal on her little face made me want to fucking die. From that day on, I vowed to never shout at her again.

But she tried my patience every second of every day.

She couldn't grow up thinking angry men were the norm, I reminded myself. I'd be damned if I ever let her get hurt at the hands of an abusive man because I couldn't control my own damn temper.

With that thought in mind, I rolled my shoulders, readying myself.

“Em, come on, baby.” I kept my voice low and soothing, hoping it would help. “Miss Iris and all your friends are excited to see you. Don't you want to see them?”

“No, Daddy! No!” She banged her fist on the carpet again, harder than before, and screamed louder. “Ow!” She rolled onto her side, cradling her little hand against her chest.

“Oh, baby.” I ignored her scream as I dragged her to her feet. “Let me see.” She held her injured hand in the other and extended it toward me.

It looked fine.

I glanced up at her, my heart breaking at the sight of that little lip jutting out, her big, brown eyes teary.

I sighed.

“I guess you should stay home since you hurt yourself, huh?”

She nodded pitifully, but the corner of her mouth tucked up.

Yes, I knew she had me wrapped around her finger. And you know what? I didn't really give a shit.

She'd gone through enough in her young life than most adults had gone through. Losing her mother at three and having to deal with me as her father? Yeah, I'd be a fucking wreck, too.

"Jammies?" she asked, and I sighed as I pushed to my feet.

"Go on." I waved my hand toward the hallway, and she took off in a full sprint, her hurt hand totally forgotten.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I stared down at it. I really didn't want to call my fucking boss. I really, really didn't want to.

But I didn't have anyone to watch Emma and I couldn't take her to the office with me...again.

I pressed the phone to my ear, resting my other hand on my hip as I paced.

"Hello," Tim greeted me tightly. He didn't sound like he was in a good mood.

*Wonderful.*

"Hey, Tim." I rubbed the back of my neck, internally screaming at myself that I just needed to put my damn foot down and make my child go to school.

Millions of parents did it every day. Why couldn't I?

"Let me guess," he said. "You can't come in."

"I can work from home," I said quickly.

"You know, I don't remember the last time you actually came in and worked."

"I was there yesterday," I muttered. He let out a humorless laugh, and I clenched my jaw at the mocking, grating sound.

"You spent most of the day on the phone—"

“Emma was having a bad day. Her teacher called me to see if I could calm her down.”

I didn't want to defend myself to this asshole, but he was my boss, and I didn't really have a choice.

“It's been six months,” he said. “She needs to get over it.” My phone shook my hand. “I'm sure she doesn't even remember her.”

“She was her mother,” I ground out. “She remembers her.”

*I remember her.*

“She should be over it by now. And if she's not, it's your fault.”

I tried breathing through it. I *really* tried to. But his words hit deep.

“I lost my wife. Emma lost her mother. The least you could do is cut me some fucking slack.” The words shook as I said them, my body trembling from the force to stay calm and not chuck my phone at the nearest wall.

He was silent for a moment.

“You've been milking her death, Elliot.”

“Milking her—” I cut myself off as I took another deep breath, pinching between my eyes. “Milking her fucking death, Tim?”

“If you curse at me again, you're fired.” I bit my tongue until I tasted blood. “Don't make me do it, Eli. We've all tried to give you space, but you're never at work anymore. And when you are here, you're mentally somewhere else.”

“I still bring in customers and make you a shit-ton of money,” I snapped. “I'm the best you have in the department.”

“Not anymore,” he said. “That might've been true a year ago, but not anymore.” I stared blankly at the window.

He was right.

I *knew* he was.

Shit had hit the fan months before Meredith died, and it showed in my work. It showed in my attitude for life. It showed in the way I parented my kid, and the way I loved—or didn't love—my wife.

I'd been a mess for a long time, I just thought no one noticed.

“Look,” he sighed, pulling me from my thoughts. “You know I like you, but I can't keep paying you to never work. I put Nina on the biggest account we've ever had because you're too busy off in damn la la land.” I squeezed my eyes shut.

Nina was the youngest person in our marketing department. She was fresh out of college. This was her first job, and she was fucking amazing.

The customers loved her. Trends moved fast online, but she was always ahead of the curve. She'd brought in more clients in her first year of being there than I had in the last five years.

It was depressing as shit.

Before her, I was the best in the department. I was well on my way to being promoted to director. Then the big fight happened, and everything I'd ever cared about just didn't seem important anymore.

“You'll really fire me?” I asked quietly.

“I don't have a choice.”

That was such bullshit. He did have a choice. He just wanted to make the easier one.

“What about Emma? You'll fire me knowing I have to take care of her?” I wasn't above using my daughter to manipulate him into keeping my job.

“She's not my responsibility,” he said flatly.

I hated him. Truly fucking hated him.

I looked over my shoulder, finding Emma in her princess nightgown, curled up on the couch, her pink unicorn tucked

under her arm. She looked so much like Meredith it made my chest ache.

“Can I work remotely again?” I muttered, closing my eyes.

I tried to swallow past the tightness in my chest, at the building emotions burning the back of my nose.

I hated that he was right.

Emma wasn't his responsibility. She was mine, and I needed to be the best father I could be to her. But it was hard.

I didn't have anyone to talk to about these fucked up feelings I had. I was mourning Meredith, but hating her even more. It was hard to get past everything that had been said between us. Everything she'd done.

So, when Emma was asleep, I drank myself stupid. And in the mornings, like today, I was too hungover to care about anything other than going to work so I could sit in my dark, quiet office.

“You can today,” he said. “But I'm serious, Eli. You need to get your shit together.”

With that, he hung up.

I threw my phone onto the couch and braced my hands on the back of it, letting my head fall forward.

Why did she have to leave me with this mess?

Why did she leave that night? Where the fuck was she going?

No, I knew where she was going.

She was going to him—whoever he was.

“Daddy.” I lifted my head and stared at my daughter. “Hungry.” She rubbed her belly and pretended to take a bite of her unicorn. She let out a howl of laughter, rolling around on the couch like it was the funniest thing in the world.

A small smile cracked my lips, and I shook my head.

“Wanna go see Grammy?” I asked, and her head popped up.

“Grammy!” She jumped to her feet and bounced around on the sofa. I didn’t have the energy to tell her to stop. “Grammy! Grammy!”

She jumped and landed on her bottom before scooting off the couch to the floor. I winced at the impact, but it didn’t seem to hurt her.

She took off back toward her bedroom. It was a fifty-fifty shot of what she was doing. Either grabbing more toys, or changing clothes again.

She seemed to go through ten outfits a day and I didn’t know how.

A few seconds later, she emerged with her hot pink raincoat, blue leggings, and yellow rain boots on. It wasn’t raining, but she didn’t care, so I didn’t care.

Meredith would’ve had a fucking conniption if she saw Emma dressed like that.

Instead, Cora was probably going to have one, probably one big enough for the both of them. I snorted to myself.

My mother-in-law was the only family I had. Well, except for my sister-in-law, but she was off traveling the world, one yoga retreat at a time. Cora had an even bigger stick up her ass than Meredith ever did, but I wouldn’t keep her grandchild from her.

And selfishly, I needed the break.

“Grammy!” Emma sprinted toward me, and I smiled as I scooped her into my arms, hugging her close. My throat felt too tight, and I squeezed my eyes shut as she rested her head on my shoulder.

It was a rare moment of softness. She was always bouncing off the walls, or screaming, or throwing shit. We didn’t cuddle as much as we used to, and I didn’t know if it was because she was getting older and just didn’t want to. Or if it was me.

Was it my fault? How badly was I fucking my daughter up?



# 3

## reagan

THE BELL above the door chimed, and I barely held in my sigh. I'd been back in town three days—three of the longest, grueling days of my entire life—and Mom was already making me work at the diner.

I hated it.

It smelled like bacon grease and mop water, and I was tired of dealing with these people. The people from my hometown. The people I'd chosen to leave behind the second I turned eighteen and could venture out into the world on my own.

I'd spent the last three days explaining to everyone why I was back, laughing off their invasive questions, and trying to politely tell them all to fuck off.

After the last two retreats decided not to bring me on as a permanent instructor, I took a step back to rethink my life. Being a yoga instructor at Lotus Retreats was my dream. I could travel the world and practice yoga everywhere, meet like-minded people, and not have to pretend to be someone I wasn't.

When I was here, I didn't recognize myself. I was the most miserable version of myself. All the hard work I'd done to get past the trauma my mother had inflicted on me flew out the damn window the second I set foot in her house.

It wasn't home. It wasn't where I belonged. It was just a place for me to crash until I could find a better place, a more permanent place.

*A home.*

Plastering a smile on my face, I turned and grabbed a stack of menus, ready to fake laugh my way out of whatever awkward conversation I was about to find myself in.

But it wasn't some hometown asshole at the door.

"Eli!" I dropped the menus back on the counter as I rounded it, heading toward my brother-in-law and niece.

"Rae? What are you doing here?" He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me in for a tight hug. I tried not to drown in the warm, leathery scent of him.

"Mom didn't tell you?" I asked, and he shook his head as he let go, taking a step back. "Of course, she didn't." I pinched between my eyes. "I just got home from Bali." He let out a low whistle.

"Bali, huh?" He hiked Emma higher on his hip. "You an official teacher yet?"

"Instructor," I corrected, smiling softly. "And not yet. But I applied again and I feel really good about it this time."

"Well," he sighed tiredly. "I hope you all the best."

"And how's my favorite niece doing?" I reached for Emma and tickled her sides, laughing as she let out a piercing screech.

"Is that Emma?" My smile fell as Mom's voice rang through the diner. I glanced over my shoulder, watching as she stuffed a rag into her apron and rounded the counter. "Thought I heard you."

She didn't give me a second glance as she stepped beside me to take Emma from Eli. As she turned, our eyes briefly met, but there was nothing in them. No warmth a mother should have for her daughter. No love or affection.

Nothing.

"Shouldn't you be at work?" she asked Eli over her shoulder.

“I took the day off.” He rubbed the back of his neck, giving me a guilty look. I held my hands up, letting him fend for himself this time. I wasn’t about to get in the middle of it, not when Mom and I were still simmering from our fight this morning.

I gave him an unapologetic smile as I moved back to the counter. He shook his head, his lips tightening as he tried not to smile back.

“I can’t believe your boss lets you take so much time off,” Mom said.

All humor drained from his face. I knew a probing question when I heard one and turned my back to him. When she interrogated me, Meredith always just watched, and it made things a million times worse. She never stepped in. She never went against Mom.

She just stared.

I wouldn’t do that to Eli—I *couldn’t* do it.

His footsteps were quiet and unhurried as he moved toward the little booth Mom and Emma were in. The cracked red vinyl squeaked as he slid into it.

“Tim’s pretty understanding,” Eli said tightly.

I ignored their conversation as I grabbed a few mugs, a pot of coffee, a kiddy-cup of juice, and slid it all onto a tray. With a deep breath, I turned to face them. Mom’s eyes met mine, slashing through me before she dropped them back to Eli.

I stared at the back of his head as I made my way to them, carefully balancing everything on the tray. They paid me no attention as I set everything on their table, nothing more than their waitress.

Emma bounced her stuffed unicorn on the table, talking to herself. The sight of that little toy made my throat tighten. I’d had nightmares of that unicorn, of the way she’d clutched it at the funeral and every day before. The scream she’d let out when Mom tried taking it from her. The blankness in Eli’s eyes as he stared at the wall.

I turned away before they could see my tears.

I hadn't seen Eli since the funeral, and he somehow looked more haggard now than he had right after her death. A part of me expected him to be better by now.

Even with the signs of aging, the fine lines around his eyes, the slight graying at his temples, he'd always looked younger than he was. But now, he looked older. He looked exhausted.

His black hair was mussed, like he hadn't taken a comb to it in days, and it was longer than I could ever remember seeing it. Dark bags sat under his dark eyes, and he had over a week's worth of stubble on his jaw.

At what point did stubble turn into a beard? Because he was definitely getting there.

He was always so put together. He and Meredith were perfect—both of them perfect with perfect jobs, the perfect marriage, and after Emma, the perfect child.

The perfect life.

Then there was me.

The disappointment of the family. The black sheep.

According to my mother, I still had my head in the clouds and I needed to be realistic. I needed to get a real job and settle down.

I didn't want that life, though.

Not that I didn't want to settle down. If I could find the right person, then maybe. But I was only twenty-two. There was no reason I had to stop traveling—to stop living. I had no obligations, nothing tying me down. Why wouldn't I live life?

But sometimes I longed for the stability of a settled life with a partner, maybe a few kids.

*One day*, I reminded myself.

I could have that all one day.

“Reagan, you gonna come see your niece, or keep hiding?” Mom called. I bit down on my retort, wiping roughly at my face before turning back toward them.

Eli stared at me over his shoulder, and I knew he could see the emotion I was trying to hide. His face softened, but I shook my head, silently begging him not to draw attention to it—to me.

When I got to them, I pulled a chair from an empty table to the end of theirs and awkwardly sat, shifting my hands in my lap as I flicked my eyes between Mom and Eli.

No one said anything.

Tension rippled off Mom in thick waves, and I wondered if Eli could feel it. If the entire world could feel it.

“So, how was Bali?” he asked as he reached for the jar of sugar at the other end of the table. My mouth opened, but Mom snorted, cutting me off.

“Why you’d ever choose to go there is beyond me,” she said, shaking her head.

“It’s beautiful,” Eli said, and my eyes widened. “From what I’ve seen online, at least.”

“It is.” I nodded a few times, dropping my eyes to my lap. “I had a good time. I can’t wait to go back.”

“Go back?” Mom bit out.

“If I become an instructor, Lotus usually has a few retreats at Bali every year,” I explained. Her dark brow rose, and even though she was sitting down, she looked down her nose at me.

“First I’m hearing of it.” I winced. I hadn’t wanted to tell her about it. “I didn’t know you wanted to be an instructor anymore. I thought after the last rejection you were done trying with them.” I shrugged, glancing at Eli before dropping my eyes again.

“You said you feel good about it,” he said. “I hope you get the position.”

“You need a real job,” Mom said dismissively, and I closed my eyes.

*Don't take the bait.*

*Don't take the bait.*

*Do not take the bait.*

“Teaching yoga is a real job,” I said tightly. “It helps people—” She scoffed, rolling her eyes. I felt Eli’s eyes on me, staring at me, waiting.

“If you’re content doing nothing with your life, fine,” Mom said, throwing her hand at me. “But—”

“I wouldn’t say teaching yoga is doing nothing with her life,” Eli chimed in, his voice light. “She gets to travel and meet all sorts of people. That sounds like a rich life to me.” Mom’s jaw tensed as she stared at him.

I was just as shocked. I couldn’t remember a time that anyone took my side on anything. Had anyone ever taken my side? Now that I was thinking about it, I didn’t think so.

“I don’t understand why you’re both teaming up on me,” she said. “I’m just giving my opinion.”

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to remember all those breathing exercises I told my students to practice. Breathing wasn’t working, though.

I didn’t think anything would help. Actually, a lobotomy might.

“We’re not teaming up on you,” I said gently, but I knew she wasn’t listening anymore. I glanced at Eli, finding him giving me an apologetic look.

He understood. He always understood.

He was the only one who ever wanted to understand.

Meredith, as much as I loved her, was too much like our mother for us to really get along. I couldn’t confide in her the way a younger sister should be able to confide in her older one. I always knew the second we finished talking, she’d pick up the phone and fill Mom in on everything.

Then I'd get the tongue lashing of the century all because I wanted to open up to my sister.

I didn't think she did it maliciously. I think she just wanted to help and didn't know what else to do. Probably because she never had to deal with our mother the way I had to.

Everything was always so effortless for her. She was the easy child, the independent one, the smart one, the pretty one. I was always the problem. Always too loud, too messy, too much.

I was always just too much.

I don't think Mom ever really loved my dad, not the way she loved Meredith's dad, and it always showed. It wasn't Meredith's fault Mom loved her more—and I'm not saying that as the bitter younger sister. It's just a fact. But I still resented her for it. And that made me hate myself.

Who resented their dead sister?

"No, it's fine," she said. "I'll just keep my thoughts to myself."

*If only she'd really do that.*

Eli didn't say anything. Not that I expected him to. He just watched us and gave me a tight-lipped smile, his expression sad. I didn't think his sadness had anything to do with me, though. It was still about Meredith.

Not that I blamed him.

Before Mom could say anything else, the bell above the door chimed, and I sent a silent *thank you* to the Universe for saving me. I shot out of my chair, nearly tripping over my feet to get away from her.

"Aren't you going to take Eli's order?" she asked, barely holding back the sneer in her voice. My shoulders tightened, and I held my breath, counting back from five in my head.

"Right," I finally breathed.

"It's fine." He waved me off, but I already had my notepad and pen out and ready. Emma threw a creamer packet at Mom,

hitting her on the side of the head.

“Emma!” she scolded. She tried to take her unicorn, and Emma let out a screech that made me wince.

The diner quieted, everyone’s attention turning toward us. Mom glanced around, laughing slightly, before taking her hand away. But I saw it; the flash of anger cross her face before schooling her features into a soft smile.

“Emma, don’t throw things at Grammy,” she said playfully, tickling her side. There was a brief pause, and I waited for Eli to say something, to reprimand Mom for scolding his child, but he stayed silent.

“Em, what do you want for breakfast?” he asked.

“Ice cream!” He sighed tiredly, and glanced at Mom, then me.

“How about some pancakes?”

“Ice cream, Daddy!” she screamed. My eye twitched at the sharp sound, but I kept my mouth shut. He sighed again, defeated.

He turned toward me, giving me an exhausted smile. “Can she just get a small bowl of chocolate ice cream?” he asked softly. I nodded, not bothering to write it down.

“You’re just letting her get what she wants?” Mom asked, her lip curling back.

“It’s easier than her throwing a tantrum,” he said. “I’m picking my battles here, Cora.” Mom’s brows rose at his tone. Even I took a step back, trying to hide my shock.

Before Meredith’s death, Eli had been the most easy-going person I’d ever met. And I was surrounded by hippies for a living. His calmness would rival even the most seasoned yogi. Now, his calmness felt more like emptiness. Like he was defeated and barely hanging on by a thread.

“You’re the parent,” she said.

“What do you want, Eli?” I interrupted, changing the subject. She gave me a sharp look, and my heart lurched into



my throat. I knew I'd hear about it later, but I just couldn't stand the look he had on his face anymore.

Couldn't she see he was struggling? She probably did. She just didn't give a shit.

"I'm fine with coffee." He was thinner than he'd been at the funeral, less muscular and more lithe. Was he not eating? I scanned the dark circles, his hollow, pale face, and felt my heart break.

Our gaze held for a moment too long, then I stepped back, dipping my head as I turned toward the kitchen. Mom started in on him about Emma again, and I wanted to scream at her to just stop.

If I was Eli, I would've moved as far away from this place as possible, not looking in my rearview mirror for a second. Why would he want to stay here? Meredith wanted to be close to Mom, but what was his excuse?

"Hey, Benji," I said as I walked into the kitchen. His head lifted, a smile already on his face.

We went to high school together but weren't friends. Not because he was a bad guy, we just ran with different crowds. Now, we were both back home and didn't have anyone else to turn to but each other.

"Have an order for me?" he asked, standing at his full height.

He hadn't been that memorable in school. He'd always been too thin and lanky, with shaggy dark hair that hung in his eyes, and clothes that swallowed him. He was awkward and couldn't talk to the opposite sex without fumbling over every word.

But somewhere in the last few years, he'd gotten a haircut, cleared his acne, got a gym membership, and figured out how to talk to girls.

He was cute. And sweet.

And totally not my type.

“It’s for my brother-in-law and niece,” I said, then explained what I wanted.

## 4

# elliott

“YOU REALLY NEED to stop letting her walk all over you.”

Yeah, I knew that already.

“She’ll be a spoiled brat when she’s older—hell, she already is one.” Cora shot Emma a look as she shook her head, looking disappointed. That comment spiked my irritation.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d watch how you speak about my daughter,” I said quietly. Cora blinked, the only sign of her shock. She cleared her throat, and I knew what she was going to say before the words left her mouth.

“Meredith would have *never* been okay with this,” she hissed. I clenched my jaw as I nodded.

“I know.”

“She would’ve never let *her*,” she used her head to point toward Emma, “call the shots. She can’t scream and cry and expect to get her way.”

“I know how to take care of my child,” I said tightly. “If I needed your advice, I would’ve asked.”

Yeah, it was a dickish thing to say. But I was just so fucking tired I couldn’t force myself to care about her feelings. I got it—she thought Meredith was a million times better at parenting than I was. It should’ve been me who died, not her.

I knew that.

Cora opened her mouth to say something, flames dancing in her eyes as she glared at me. Before she could get a word

out, a plate was set on the table in front of me, and the warm scent of bacon hit me first. Then a plate of pancakes was slid in front of Emma.

I braced myself, waiting for the screech, but it never came. Instead, she giggled at the pancake shaped like a unicorn. There were rainbow sprinkles and fruit on top, and even some eggs on the side.

I was honestly shocked she didn't throw a fit for not getting the ice cream.

But if anything was going to distract her, it *would* be a unicorn.

"What is this?" I asked, turning to look up at Reagan. She shrugged, giving me a small smile.

"I figured you both could use some real food," she said. I wanted to argue and say I wasn't hungry, but of course, my stomach took that moment to growl. She gave me a knowing look, her lips tilting up in a broader smile. "Eat up."

She rested her hand on my shoulder, giving me a gentle squeeze before turning and heading toward the guys at the back of the diner. Cora's eyes flicked from me to my plate, then to Emma.

I nearly fucking cried watching her dig into the eggs. I couldn't remember the last time she'd willingly eaten anything without sugar.

"I should check on Benji," Cora said, her voice still tight.

I knew I'd hear about my little outburst later, but that was a problem for future me. Current me didn't give a flying fuck. Current me just wanted to eat.

"You're not going to ask who Benji is?" she huffed, and I blinked in response.

"Was I supposed to ask who Benji is?"

She let out a breath as she slid from the booth, her coral-painted nails digging into the linoleum table.

"He's our new cook."

“What happened to Hector?” The scent of food was making my mouth water and I really just wanted her to go away so I could enjoy my breakfast in peace.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a real, peaceful meal with my daughter. A month ago? Two? Maybe more?

We always just ate in the living room, her attention glued to whatever cartoon she was currently obsessing over. But it was always a fight to get her to eat anything that wasn't ice cream. Or candy. Or anything with chocolate. The only actual food she ever wanted to eat was pizza, and that was getting old.

But the last time we sat down at a table and ate a meal without it being a knock-out-drag-out fight was forever ago.

“His dad is ill.” I shook myself, her words pulling me from my thoughts.

“Sorry to hear that,” I said honestly. Hector was a good man, and his family were good people. It really was sad to hear his dad wasn't doing well.

But also...why was I supposed to care about some new kid cooking?

“I hope I'll have someone to take care of me when I'm old and sick,” she sighed, tracing her finger in a circle on the table. I nearly rolled my eyes. I should've known that was what this was about.

“You know you'll have Reagan and me,” I said. She just stared at me like I was lying.

Maybe I was.

I didn't know anymore. I didn't care, either.

Without another word, she turned on her heel and headed toward the kitchen. My eyes caught on Reagan as she laughed at something one of the guys at the table said.

When had she grown into a woman?

I just saw her six months ago, and she'd still looked like a girl. But now, with her hair the way it was, and her legs lean

and muscular, her ass perky and—I forced myself to stop noticing her body and how womanly she was now.

It was wrong, and fucked up, and so perverted. I couldn't ogle my sister-in-law.

“Look, Daddy,” Emma said, thankfully pulling my attention away from her aunt before I could notice anything else about her. “Uni's eating Uni!” She tilted her unicorn, smearing syrup and whipped cream all over the stuffed toy. But she laughed. And it was a real belly laugh that made me smile.

“How about Uni saves some food for Emma?” I said, lifting my brows. She didn't notice me or my words, and I knew she only took a bite of her pancake because she wanted to and not because I told her to.

I turned my attention to the steaming pile of food in front of me. Bacon, sausage, eggs, toast, potatoes, fruit salad. The works.

My mouth watered.

Why was I so bad at keeping track of our meals? Of our health? Was I that checked out of life that I stopped noticing shit like this?

I hadn't expected to be as hungry as I was as I began eating. I hadn't felt hungry, but I clearly was. That was probably why most of my muscles were gone now.

No food. No exercise. No sleep.

That tended to make your body hate you.

Living on caffeine, liquor, and the hope that your daughter would miraculously stop being so fucking difficult wasn't a way to live. But it's how I lived. It's the only way I knew how to anymore.

Emma ate most of her food, surprisingly not asking for ice cream even once. As soon as she was finished, she scooted off the booth and took off down the center aisle, between the booths.

She sprinted from one end to the other as I finished scarfing my food down. Reagan rounded the corner, food piled high on her tray as she stepped in Emma's path.

I shot out of the booth, ready to rush toward her, already seeing the way she'd fall and hurt herself. But she spun effortlessly around Emma, laughing brightly as she floated toward the table in the back and delivered the men their food.

I stood, stunned at her movements, at the way she'd dodged Emma. It'd been like watching a waltz. I was positive she was about to go down, food flying everywhere, Emma getting trapped under her, pinned to the floor, Uni stomped on and ruined.

But she'd avoided that beautifully.

I slumped back into the booth, a whoosh of air leaving my lungs as I watched her scoop Emma into her arms. The laugh that came out of my child wasn't one I'd heard in a long fucking time, and it made my throat tighten and eyes burn.

I watched them play, and absently wondered how she was so good with Emma and I wasn't. Why did it seem like it came so naturally to her?

Shaking myself, I pulled my phone from my pocket to catch up on emails. Emma was in good hands with Reagan, but she couldn't spend all her time watching my daughter. She had a job to do. It wasn't fair to expect her to work and play babysitter. Same with Cora. It's why I never brought Emma here instead of daycare while I went to work.

It would make life a hell of a lot easier if I could, though.

I chewed my lip as my eyes flicked from my phone to Reagan again. She'd somehow managed to get Emma to settle down and draw. How? How could she do everything so... *effortlessly?*

Maybe I should've felt jealous at her ease, but I didn't. I just felt thankful that Emma wasn't in a bad mood, and we were having a normal day. A day unlike any we'd had in a long time.

I sighed and turned back to my phone. I could do a little work from here, then we'd have to head home so I could use my computer. I should've brought my laptop with me, but I hadn't expected Emma to want to stay, and it seemed like she was in no hurry to leave.

As I typed out an email, I tried to ignore Cora's death-glances I felt her send my way. And I tried to ignore the way my heart squeezed every time Reagan made Emma laugh.



IT FELT LIKE GROUNDHOG DAY.

The next morning, I stood over Emma as she threw herself to the floor, crying that she didn't want to go to school. Tim and Cora's words still rang in my head.

Even though they hadn't said the same thing, the same sentiment was there—*do better*.

Guilt twisted my stomach as I reached down, gripped Emma under her armpits, and hauled her to my side. She screamed so loudly I was positive she'd just ruptured my eardrum.

"Down!" she cried, kicking her feet. I barely dodged her before I took a foot to the nuts, and shifted her, pressing her back against my front, my arm banded tightly around her middle.

"I can't do that, baby," I said softly. "You have to go."

"No!"

I grabbed her pink sparkly backpack and slung it over my shoulder before grabbing both our coats and my bag, then headed outside. If anyone was watching us, they'd probably think I'd just gotten done beating her from the way she was crying.

Her face was red and blotchy, tears streamed down her cheeks, her nose was runny, and her hair was a mess. I



wrestled her into her car seat, wincing at the impact of her tiny fist with my cheek.

“Hitting isn’t nice,” I told her, but doubted she could hear me over her screeching.

I slammed the door, rubbing the ache from my jaw as I rounded the car and slid into the driver’s seat. Kid had a damn good left hook, that was for fucking sure. Adjusting my mirror, I shifted it enough to look at her. My heart shattered.

I contemplated just taking her back inside, or calling Reagan to watch her for the day. But I didn’t know if she was saving up to go on another retreat, or how much longer she’d be in town. But knowing Reagan, she’d drop everything to help me. Not because it was me, but because that was just the type of person she was. She helped people, even if she spread herself too thin. She’d done it after Meredith was gone. She took care of us for the week leading up to the funeral, and when she left and I couldn’t rely on her anymore, I felt even more lost than before.

So, no. I couldn’t call and ask her to step in to play nanny to Emma right now. I couldn’t get used to having her around because after she left and Emma had to go back to daycare, we’d be in the same boat we were in now.

“We can go see Grammy after school,” I said, and was met with another, loud wail. Glancing behind me, I pulled from the driveway and tried again. “You can have some of your unicorn ice cream after dinner.” Again, another blood-curdling scream.

I sighed.

We drove the rest of the way in silence—well, not silence. I just didn’t say anything more.

I parked in front of the daycare, trying to rally enough strength to carry her inside. Emma had mostly tired herself out by now, and probably didn’t have the strength to fight me. But I hated taking her inside when she was like this.

It made me feel like shit when Iris, her teacher, looked at me with pity. But I didn’t know how to tell her that this wasn’t even the worst of it. Getting her here was bad, but she should

see the bath time fight every night. Or the way you'd think I was threatening to kill Uni every time I made her pick up her toys.

Turning, I stared at her. Her eyes were drooping, and her head kept falling to the side. I knew she was exhausted, and I knew the second I got out of the car, she'd find a second wind and would start the fit again.

I didn't have a choice, I reminded myself. I had to do this. I had to put my foot down and take her inside.

But I was glued to my seat.

Finally, I took a deep breath and slipped outside. Surprisingly, she didn't start screaming as I opened her door. Instead, she looked up at me with these sad, empty eyes that were a million times worse than any tantrum.

"I'm sorry, Em," I murmured, but she didn't say anything. She didn't do anything. Just stared.

My throat was tight as I gently took her from her car seat and settled her on my hip. With her on one side and her backpack on the other, I took her in. She rested her head on my shoulder, her fingers toying with my collar.

Yanking the door open, kids laughing and playing greeted me first. Iris glanced over her shoulder, doing a double take when she saw me. She crouched and told one of the kids something before making her way toward me.

"Elliot, hi," she said, smiling brightly. She gave Emma a worried look, but kept that kind smile on her face. "How's Emma this morning?"

She was a short woman, not much younger than me, with dark hair and deep skin. She was pretty, and one of the sweetest people I'd ever met.

"A bit tired," I said softly. "She had a rough morning." Iris nodded sympathetically.

"Of course." She waved her hand behind her toward the nap room. "If she wants to sleep a bit longer, you can put her in there." Emma lifted her head at the word *sleep* and looked

around. “Or if she wants to play, you can take her to the playroom.” She rested her hand on Emma’s back, her thumb stroking back and forth.

“What do you wanna do, Em?” I asked. She barely lifted her arm to point toward the playroom.

Yeah, this was definitely worse than her throwing a fit.

“We missed you yesterday,” Iris said as she walked beside us.

“My sister-in-law is in town and she wanted to see Em,” I lied. Okay, it wasn’t a total lie, but it still felt like Iris could feel that it wasn’t the full truth. But she just nodded and didn’t pry.

Stepping into the room, I hung Emma’s backpack on the little hook by the door and crouched to set her down. Her hand tightened on my collar, refusing to let me go. I closed my eyes, hating myself as I pulled her hand off me.

That’s when the crying began again.

Iris went into crisis mode, crouching next to Emma and murmuring soft, reassuring words to her. Emma wasn’t listening. We all knew it. But Iris kept murmuring.

All the kids had stopped playing and stared at us. If you ever want to feel judged, just stand in a room full of children and let them stare at you like you’ve done something wrong.

Emma grabbed me again, her razor-sharp little nails digging into my arm. I winced as I rested my hand over hers, hating the way she relaxed.

“You gotta let me go, Em,” I said softly, removing her hand. She tried to grab me again, but I held onto her wrist, forcing her to stay still. “I’ll pick you up in a few hours.”

It was eight hours, not a few, but she couldn’t tell time.

“We’ll go see Auntie Rae again,” I said soothingly. “And Grammy.” Tears continued streaming down her face, and I tried to swallow past the lump in my throat.

“Go on,” Iris murmured. “I’ve got her.”

I hesitated.

Emma's face was still red, her eyes swollen, her nose raw. I couldn't just leave her like this, could I? But I didn't have a choice.

I stepped away until I stood in the doorway of the playroom. Only a few steps until I reached the front door. Emma barely listened as Iris tried to calm her down. Her eyes were on me, betrayal burning bright.

I hated myself for every step I took toward the door.

# 5

## elliott

EMMA WAS a million times better when I picked her up from school than when I'd dropped her off. I'd expected Iris to call at least once during the day, but she didn't. And when I went to get her, Emma looked like her old self—free, and playful, and smiling.

It made my heart ache.

It made me forget my shitty day.

It made me forget the last shitty year.

We walked into the diner, one of Emma's hands clutching mine, the other clutching Uni. It was busy for a Thursday night.

Rae and Cora were racing back and forth, Reagan's hair twisted in a clip at the back of her head, sweat beaded along her brow, her cheeks flushed.

"Sit wherever you can find a spot," Cora said as she passed me. "Rae will take your order when she gets a chance."

"No rush."

Grabbing Emma, I hauled her onto my hip and made my way to the back of the diner. I slid her into the booth, dropping her backpack next to her before fishing out a coloring book.

I slumped into the booth on my side and watched as she scribbled with her crayons. I wanted to know what had changed in the hours since I'd dropped her off and picked her up. Why was she suddenly happier? Why did she seem okay?

“Hey, guys.” I jolted as Reagan leaned her hip against my booth. She smiled down at me as she wiped her forehead. “It’s been a crazy night.”

“Looks like it.” I scanned the diner, noting all the teens. “What’s going on?”

“I think there’s a big game tonight,” she shrugged. That would explain why everyone was wearing the team’s colors. “Dinner? Or are you just here to see me?” She nudged my shoulder with her elbow, and I flashed her a grin.

“Both.” She straightened as she pulled her notebook from the back pocket of her jean shorts. They were definitely too short. They showed off her strong thighs, the way her tanned skin seemed to glow under the harsh lighting. They were tight around her hips and ass, and I knew if she bent over, I could get a clear view of her pussy pressing against the denim. “Can’t believe Cora let you out of the house wearing those.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to slap myself.

*What was wrong with me?*

“What?” She blinked at me before glancing down at herself. She didn’t look like she was even wearing anything. The little apron she wore was just long enough to cover them.

“Nothing,” I grumbled. Clearing my throat, I shifted in the booth, thankful the table was hiding my sudden hard-on from her. “I’ll just have a burger. Em will have a grilled cheese.” She nodded as she wrote, but kept sending me weird looks. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

But it seemed I *should* worry about it. She turned on her heel without another word, and my gaze zeroed in on her ass.

Fuck. Me.

She had such a nice ass. Meredith’s wasn’t nearly as round and plump. She had great tits, but I was always more of an ass man. And Reagan’s ass was perfect. Her thighs were perfect.

Somehow, I knew her pussy was perfect. Tight and pink, and

---

Stop it.

I needed to fucking stop.

I was blaming those thoughts on a nearly year long dry spell and not because I was really checking out my sister-in-law. No matter how nice and perfect she looked.

Fuck off. Fuck my brain. Fuck the thoughts going through it.

I refocused on my daughter.

“How was school?” I asked, and she held up her thumb. “What’d you do?” She sighed as she set down her crayon.

“Miss Iris gave me this.” She held out her hand, showing the purple glittery sticker on the back.

“That was nice of her,” I said, smiling softly. “Why’d she do that?”

“Because I was the best cleaner upper.” I grinned broader. “Also got a lollipop.” She turned back to the picture she was drawing, and I took the time to just watch her.

Iris, or one of the other teachers, must’ve braided her hair back. Dark flyaways framed her face, sticking up in different directions. She poked her tongue out as she concentrated, her brows bunching. I didn’t know who she got it from, if something like that was even hereditary, but she’d done it forever. Neither Meredith nor I did it. It was just an Emma thing.

“You’re being ridiculous!” My head snapped up at the sound of Reagan’s voice. Everyone quieted, but the chatter quickly picked up again. Cora was standing in front of her, her lips tight as she scanned the diner. Reagan said something else, but her back was to me.

I inched toward the edge of the booth, ready to jump up and intervene.

Cora leaned forward and hissed something at her. Reagan's head jerked back as if she'd been slapped.

"Stay here for me, Em," I said as I stood. I glanced at her, finding her still focused on her picture. I hesitated for a moment before taking off down the narrow aisle toward the counter.

"I'm twenty-two. You can't control me anymore!"

"Hey, what's going on?" I stepped behind the counter beside Reagan, resting my hand on her back. She didn't look at me. She just continued glaring at her mother.

"You're living in *my* house. You'll do what *I* say." Cora pointed at her. "If you don't like it, find somewhere else to live."

"Fine!" Reagan shouted. "I'll move in with Lily!" Cora barked out a humorless laugh, and I shifted toward the space between them.

"Sure. So you can whore yourself out too?"

"She—" Reagan clamped her mouth shut. Fire danced in her eyes. Cora should be a pile of ash with that look. "She is not a whore." Cora snorted, and I felt Reagan's body vibrate with her anger. "I don't need this." She ripped the apron off and threw it on the counter.

"If you walk out that door, Reagan Marie, do not come back. You understand me?" Cora pointed at the door, and I swallowed thickly.

Shit.

This was not good.

*"Fine."*

My eyes bounced from one woman to the other. I lurched forward as Reagan stormed around the counter, not giving us a backward glance as she yanked the door open.

"Keep an eye on Emma," I said, readying myself to chase after her.

"What?"



“I’m going to try to fix whatever the hell just happened,” I said, giving her an exasperated look.

“She wants to act grown—”

“She is grown,” I snapped.

“Then let her go.”

I took a deep breath. With every second that passed, Reagan was getting further away. She shouldn’t be driving while she was upset.

Panic thrummed in my chest.

She could crash. She could get hurt.

*She could die.*

Flashbacks of that night flooded my mind. The phone call. The news. The drive to the hospital to identify the body. The numbness.

Without another word, I sprinted from the diner and raced into the balmy night. I scanned the parking lot, my heart in my throat.

“Reagan!”

I scanned it again. Where the fuck was she?

The back.

Employee’s parked in the back.

I took off around the side of the building, heading for the employee parking lot. My knees nearly buckled when I saw Rae leaning against her car, her shoulders shaking. Her forearms rested on the top, her head pressed against them.

Slowly, I approached her, trying to make my footsteps loud enough for her to hear me. It didn’t seem like it mattered.

I gently put my hand on her back, and she jolted back. Her head snapped up, her eyes damp and red. The second she realized it was just me, the tears started again.

“Sorry,” she rasped, wiping roughly at her cheek. “What are you doing out here? Where’s Emma?” She looked down, as if she was expecting to see her standing there.

“She’s still inside,” I said softly.

“You left her alone?” Her eyes widened. “Eli—”

“Cora’s looking after her.” The sound of her mother’s name made her lip curl.

“And you trust her?” she spat, her tone accusatory.

“Rae,” I breathed. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. I lifted my brows expectantly and folded my arms across my chest as I leaned against the car.

“Reagan.”

She huffed out a breath as she turned and leaned back. She stared at the dark street for a long moment, but I just stared at her. Waiting.

Her upturned nose twitched as she inhaled sharply. Slowly, she dropped her head forward.

“I just wanted to stay at Lily’s for the weekend,” she mumbled. “I feel like I’m in fucking high school again.” She took the clip out of her hair and ran her hand through the silky strands. “I’m an adult. I shouldn’t have to ask permission to do that.”

I chewed my lip. I didn’t know what the right thing to say was.

“That fight felt like it was about a lot more than just staying at Lily’s,” I said slowly. She slid her eyes to me.

“She wants me to get a job,” she muttered. “A real one.” My brows lifted.

“You’re working here. Isn’t this a real job?”

She let out a humorless laugh. “I’m working here because I don’t have a choice. She told me I have to, or I’d have to find somewhere else to stay.” She shook her head, her hand still in her hair. “I should’ve just gone straight to Lil’s when I got into town. I shouldn’t have even told Mom I was back.”

My heart ached. If she hadn't come back, she wouldn't have been at the diner. I wouldn't have been able to see her. Emma wouldn't have seen her.

"Would you have told me you were back?" I murmured. She blinked at me.

"Yeah. Of course." She said it too briskly to be the truth. I chewed my lip as I watched her. Finally, she scrubbed her hand over her face and turned toward me. "I just need to go, Eli. I can't deal with her anymore. If I have to spend one more second with her, I'm going to lose it."

"Wait." I held my hand up, my eyes closing as I tried to play through every scenario in my head of how I could fix this.

It wasn't like it was a secret that Cora and Rae were always fighting about something. Water and oil got along better than they did. But this felt different somehow. It felt bigger, like they were finally at their breaking point. After this, I knew there would be no going back.

And what would happen when Cora was old? Reagan would regret all the years she hadn't spent with her mother. And Cora would hate herself for not being better to her only remaining daughter.

But if Reagan was ready to end things and walk away, there was nothing I could do or say to change her mind. I knew that.

Selfishly, I didn't want her to leave. I didn't know why. I just knew that I wasn't ready for her to go. Not that we were all that close, or that I'd see her that much while she was in town. But if she left, a part of me knew she'd never come back and I wasn't ready for it.

I knew Meredith would've wanted to take care of her little sister. She'd want to protect her, and she'd want me to do the same. Or maybe that was an excuse. Maybe it was just the perfect thing to say and think to make myself feel better.

Maybe I was just tired of being alone. Maybe that's why I had the idea I did.

"Move in with me," I blurted.

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Move in with Emma and me.” The idea formed further, and I turned toward her, resting my hand on her arm. “Move in with us. I’ll pay you to take care of her full time. You can get out of Cora’s house, save up until you can find your own place, or until you’re ready to leave on your next adventure. I won’t have to take Em to daycare anymore, and I can go to work without stressing about her all day.”

Her eyes searched mine. I braced myself for her to laugh, or push me away, or to tell me that it was a terrible idea. But she didn’t.

“It won’t be a forever thing,” she said slowly. “Just a month or two, then I’m going to Sri Lanka. That’s where the next retreat is being held, and even if I don’t get hired, I still want to go—” She cut herself off, rubbing her hand over her face again.

“Nothing permanent,” I assured her, my fingers tightening. “My home will always be yours, Rae. You’re family.” Her lips pressed into a thin line as she nodded. “We’ll work out payment tomorrow, okay? Go home. Eat something. Get some rest. Pack. And I’ll come get you tomorrow after work.”

Without warning, she launched herself at me, wrapping her arms tightly around my neck. My arms went around her waist, and I held her just as tightly back.

“Thanks, Elliot.” I didn’t think she’d ever called me Elliot before. Always Eli.

I dug my face into the crook of her neck, breathing her vanilla scent in as I closed my eyes. It had been so long since I’d had a hug from another person—another adult. I held her tighter, readjusting my grip on her.

“No,” I whispered against her skin. “Thank you.”

## 6

# reagan

THE BEST THING about basically being a Nomad is I barely had any clothes to pack. I had what I could carry in a couple of suitcases, and that was it. It was probably too little for some, maybe too much for others, but perfect for me.

“Is he still stupidly hot?” Lily asked, and I rolled my eyes as I folded a pair of jean shorts and stuffed them in my bag.

“He’s my brother-in-law,” I said.

There was a pause, then she snorted.

“*And?*” I glared at the phone. “Does that mean he can’t be hot?” She was lucky she wasn’t with me in person, otherwise she’d get a pillow straight to the face.

“He’s my sister’s husband,” I said, exasperated.

My stomach tightened at the word sister. Meredith had never felt like that. Sisterhood always felt just out of reach, like we were so close, but still too far away to be anything closer than friends.

“*Was,*” Lily said, emphasizing the word dramatically. “*Was* your sister’s husband.”

“Just because she died doesn’t mean they’re not married anymore.”

“Actually, that’s exactly what it means,” she said, and I rolled my eyes again. “Plus, I just asked if he was still hot. I didn’t say anything else. Your mind went to the gutter.”

I crumbled the shirt now in my hands into a ball and tossed it into my suitcase, annoyed. She was technically right. But I couldn't think of Eli like that.

But she was still right.

Despite his obvious exhaustion, he was still as hot as he'd ever been. Hotter, even. It seemed like he just got more attractive with age.

I roughly cleared my throat, and she let out a high cackle, making my lips tip up in a small smile.

Lily Anderson, my best friend and slut extraordinaire, figured out my type a long time ago. After she saw Eli for the first time, she pulled me away from our little group and said, *"You little slut! I knew there had to be some guy you were in love with. That's the only reason you'd go after the same-looking guys."*

After she unhelpfully pointed that out, I made it my mission to only date guys who looked like the complete opposite of Eli.

Not because I was into him. Not at all.

It just seemed like I had a thing for the tall, muscular guys with beards and dark hair. But in my defense, what girl was immune to that?

Exactly. No one.

"Since it's in the gutter," she said, pulling me from my thoughts. "What else have you thought about? Have you already fantasized about accidentally walking in on him while he's in the shower? He'd say, well, since you're already in here, you might as well get in, too. And then you'll get it on —"

"Lil, you can't say shit like that," I groaned.

"Whatever," she laughed. "Like you haven't thought about it."

"I haven't—"

“Rae. Come on.” I snapped my mouth shut. I definitely *never* thought about it. Not with him. Not now. Not ever.

Yeah, it was a total lie. But I could barely admit it to myself. There was no way I could admit it out loud. Post-nut clarity was a very real thing. Every time I came while thinking of him bending me over and fucking me until he’d gotten his fill, the guilt set in and I wanted to take everything back. Even if it was just in my own head and no one would ever know, it still made me feel like an absolute perv.

My phone vibrated, and I glanced down at it, stifling a groan. A text from Benji.

Benji:

I heard you’re not working here anymore.

Benji:

I’m gonna miss seeing you every day.

I couldn’t hold the groan back anymore, and Lily stopped talking about whatever she was talking about. Which was a miracle in itself.

“What?” she asked.

“Benji just texted me.”

“Benji?”

“From high school.” There was another pause, then she let out a high-pitched squeal.

“Why the fuck do you have Benji-from-high-school’s number?” she asked. “And, more importantly, *why* is he texting you?”

“He’s working at the diner,” I explained, still staring at the texts.

“Uh-huh. And?”

“And nothing,” I sighed. “We kinda hit it off. He asked for my number. I gave it to him. Not a big deal.”

“Mhm.” I knew what that meant—whatever you say, Rae. But I totally don’t believe you. “So, he’s the one you’re fantasizing about?”

“Lil!” I groaned.

“You’ve been in a dry spell for like a year,” she said. “You deserve to get laid.”

“I’m not sleeping with Elliot.”

“Whoa,” Lily laughed. “Who said anything about that?”

“Fuck off,” I grumbled, but it lacked any heat. She let out another laugh and I shook my head, smiling to myself.

Meredith was my sister by blood, but Lily was my sister by choice. She got on my nerves more than anyone in the world, but I’d take a bullet for her, and I knew she’d do the same for me.

My phone vibrated again, and I glanced down, half expecting to see Benji’s name again. Instead, my stomach tightened.

Eli:

Be there in five.

I stared at the text. I’d completely forgotten he was coming today. I had my own car, so it wasn’t like I needed a ride. And I clearly had barely anything to pack. I should text him back and tell him I didn’t need his help, and I’d meet him at his place later.

But I didn’t reach for my phone.

“Rae?” Lily’s voice pulled me from the spiral I was about to go down. “Are you listening to me?”

“What? Yeah,” I said. “Yeah. Eli’s on his way over. I have to go.”

“Wait—”

“What?” My finger hovered over the red *end call* button.



“You didn’t answer me. Have you heard anything back from Lorelai?” she asked, and I let out a long sigh.

“Not yet,” I said. “But she told me she probably won’t know until the retreat gets closer.” I chewed my lip. “Do you think she was just being nice and already knew she wasn’t going to hire me?” Lily snorted.

“Of course she’s going to hire you,” she said, as if it were a fact. “You’re the best yogi I’ve ever met.”

“That’s not true,” I laughed. “But thanks.”

“She’ll call you back, babe,” she said softly. “If she doesn’t, she’s a fucking idiot and doesn’t see your value.” I twisted my lips to the side.

It was hard to believe that.

Lorelai was the director of Lotus and was amazing at everything she did. She definitely wasn’t an idiot, and she knew who would make decent instructors. If she saw my potential, she would’ve hired me by now, right?

I rubbed my forehead as I sighed. “Yeah. Thanks, Lil.”

I was still tired and down after last night. The fight with Mom at the diner had been embarrassing, but the fight when she got home had been explosive. When she heard that I was moving out and in with Eli to take care of Emma, I thought she was going to have a heart attack.

She was upset, but I didn’t think it had anything to do with the fight or our tumultuous relationship. I think it was all because she wouldn’t be able to control me anymore. Not that she had much sway over my life, but when I was staying with her, she had a say. And I hated that. I hated having to answer to anyone, but especially her.

So, we fought until we were too tired to fight anymore. And we said things we shouldn’t have said. It wasn’t our worst fight, though. But I wished we could just get along. She just made it so fucking hard.

“I gotta go,” I said, grabbing my phone. Lily and I said our goodbyes, and I hung up. Benji’s texts were still on the screen,

mocking me.

He seemed like a good guy. Better than some of my exes, at least. And he was cute. Maybe while I was in town, we could have a fling. Then I'd leave for Sri Lanka and we wouldn't have to see each other again. Just a few casual hookups. Something fun to pass the time. To take the edge off.

Without giving myself time to think, I quickly typed a response.

Yeah, me too. Maybe we can hangout sometime?

His reply was immediate.

Benji:

Of course. Pick the time and place, and I'll be there.

I smiled down at the text, my lip between my teeth. Maybe Lily was right. Maybe I needed to get laid, and maybe Benji was just the right man for the job.



I WALKED into Eli's house and looked around. From where I stood at the front door, I could see the entire house. It had been six months since I last saw the place, but it looked mostly the same. Mourners weren't crowding the space anymore, and there weren't an absurd number of foil-covered casseroles on the table.

The floors were still dark wood and shiny, the walls still white, now with some streaks of color, probably from Emma's markers. Her toys littered the rug in the living room, her pink blanket spread out along one side of the leather sectional like that was her permanent spot.

Dark beams lined the high ceiling, and a low modern-looking chandelier hung in the middle of the living room.

Another smaller one hung right above my head at the entrance. Meredith had loved light and wanted as much of it in her house as she could get. Something we had in common.

Eli brushed past me, my bags in his hands. “I can’t believe this is all you have,” he muttered, giving me an accusatory look over his shoulder. I shrugged and followed him through the living room to the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

“I travel light,” I said.

“Don’t you want more than just a few things, though?” He pushed the guest bedroom door open and stepped inside, using his elbow to flick the overhead light on. I leaned against the doorframe, folding my arms over my chest as he dropped my bags on the bed and turned to face me.

“I’m fine with just that.” I tilted my head toward my stuff, and he glanced down. Maybe it was depressing that my entire life could fit into two duffle bags. “I don’t need much more than that to survive.” I grinned at him, waiting for him to laugh at the stupid joke.

But he didn’t. His face stayed serious. Sad, even.

“And that’s how you want to live?” he asked quietly. My grin slowly fell at the words. “Just surviving?” I swallowed thickly as I stared at him.

“Isn’t that what we’re all doing?” I whispered.

His eyes shifted between mine, like he was trying to figure out what exactly was going on in my mind. Truthfully, I didn’t know sometimes. After this last Lotus trip, everything felt more in limbo than before. Waiting for Lorelai to either accept me or not. Waiting to move on with my life or not.

Waiting.

Just waiting.

“Yeah,” he finally said. “I guess.” He roughly cleared his throat as he straightened and tossed his hand toward the bed. “Make yourself comfortable.”

I gave him a tight-lipped smile, my arms still folded tightly across my chest as he made his way across the room in a few

swift steps. I shifted, pressing my back against the doorframe as he turned to slide past me.

His chest brushed against my arms and I sucked in a sharp breath, my gaze shooting to his. He froze, his eyes wide as he stared down at me.

My mouth felt dry, my heart was in my throat, and everything around us fell away. That touch, as silly as it sounds, felt cosmic. Like everything shifted perfectly into place.

And from his expression, I thought he felt the same way.

“Eli,” I breathed, and he blinked.

The spell was gone.

“I need to go pick up Emma from the diner,” he blurted. “I—I’ll grab us food—or—fuck.”

He shoved his hand through his hair as he stormed away, muttering to himself. I stared after him, watching his broad shoulders shift with every step toward the front door. A giant lump formed in my throat, and I wrapped my hand around it, trying to soothe myself.

It was ridiculous, whatever I was feeling right now. Logically, I knew that.

Maybe I was about to start my period, and I was overly hormonal. Or maybe it was a full moon. Maybe there was some other explanation for whatever the fuck just happened. Because I definitely did *not* feel any type of connection with my brother-in-law. Especially not a cosmic-shifting, soul-sparking, body-melting connection.

I was losing my mind.

# 7

## elliott

STEAM BILLOWED around me as I stepped out of the bathroom, still warm and damp from the shower. I scrubbed the towel over my head, drying my hair. I desperately needed a damn haircut. It'd been way too long since my last one, and my hair was the longest it'd ever been.

I sank onto the end of my bed, bracing my elbows on my knees as I pressed my face into my hands.

What the actual fuck was I doing?

I couldn't get that moment with Reagan out of my head, the way she'd looked up at me, the way her breath had hitched, the way her cheeks flushed. It was playing on a loop in my mind, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake it. I couldn't stop wondering if that's what she looked like the moment before a climax. Did I want to find out? A part of me did. But another part, the sane and rational part that screamed at me for being a fucking pervert, was telling me I needed to chill.

But how could I when she was sleeping feet away from my room?

"Fuck," I breathed, gripping my hair tighter in my fists. There was something so fucking wrong with me for even looking at her, much less thinking about the way it felt to have her body pressed against mine.

Shaking my head, I forced myself to my feet and moved into my closet, yanking a shirt off a hanger and grabbing sweatpants from my dresser. Whatever the fuck I thought

happened earlier, didn't. My body just reacted to a woman, and how my body felt didn't mean a fucking thing.

A soft knock sounded from my bedroom door, and I shoved the shirt on the rest of the way over my head before pulling the door open. I didn't know who I expected—Emma maybe.

I should've known better.

Instead, Reagan stared up at me with those same big hazel eyes. Her tongue darted out to wet her full lower lip, her cheeks slightly flushed.

"Emma wants you to read to her," Rae blurted, throwing her thumb over her shoulder. I glanced down the hall, finding it cleared of all toys, the living room dark, and Emma nowhere to be found.

"Where is she?" I stepped out of my room, closing most of the distance between us. Reagan took a giant step away, pressing her back against the wall.

I wanted to tell her I wasn't fucking radioactive, that she didn't have to get as far away from me as possible, but it was probably a good idea if she kept her distance. It would mean we wouldn't have the chance to have any repeat moments like earlier. Not that anything had happened, but if I hadn't walked away when I did, I knew I would've crossed that line.

"In her bed," she breathed. "I gave her a bath and put her down while you were in the shower. I—is that okay? I figured since it's already eight—"

"Wait." I held my hand up, my brows pushed tightly together. "She *let* you put her to bed already?" Reagan looked confused as she stared at me, her head barely moving as she nodded. I huffed out a laugh as I scrubbed my hand over my stubbly jaw. "Can't believe that. It's usually a fight, and she doesn't go down until nine—well, it's usually closer to ten."

"I asked if she wanted to do some yoga with me," she said, and I gave her a confused look. What did that have to do with anything? "She said yes, so I did a short routine with her. It was just to help calm her down. A lot of breathing exercises."

“And it worked?” I asked, amazed. She shrugged, her cheeks reddening further.

“She’s sleepy and in bed. So, yeah. I guess it worked.” She jerked her chin toward Emma’s room.

I hesitated before making my way down the hall, stopping outside her door. I just stared at her as she laid on her bed, Uni clutched in her hands as she let it fly through the air.

She really *did* look relaxed—more relaxed than she usually did when I put her to bed.

What was Reagan? A fucking toddler whisperer?

“Hey, Em,” I murmured, stepping into the room. Looking around, I noticed most of the toys that were usually on the floor were in her purple toy bin by her closet, her usual piles of blankets were folded and put away, and there weren’t any shoes I had to dodge.

What the fuck was happening?

“Hiya, Daddy.” She gave me a giant, toothy smile, her eyes closing and nose wrinkling. I chuckled as I sat at the end of her little bed, facing her.

“Story time?” I asked, and she nodded before scooting over. “What book?”

“Princess pea!” she shouted, then clamped her hand over her mouth. Slowly, she took an exaggerated breath, letting her chest rise and fall before she dropped her hand away. “Princess pea, please.”

I blinked.

What kind of witchcraft had Reagan done on my child? Was this a weird case of the body snatchers? This wasn’t Emma.

“Sure, baby. Whatever you want.”

Reaching out, I brushed her silky dark hair off her forehead, smiling at her unusual gentleness. I won’t complain, though. It had been way too long since we’d had a fight-free

bedtime and I wanted to savor this moment because I didn't know if it would last.

I grabbed the *Princess And The Pea* book before settling in beside her, one arm wrapped around her as she curled into my chest. I opened the book with my other hand, but didn't start reading immediately.

I just savored this moment and the cuddles from my daughter I'd missed so much.

"Daddy," she muttered, and I glanced down.

"Yeah?" She tipped her head back to look at me.

"When's Mama coming home?"

I stared at her, my throat threatening to close. Tears were already lining her eyes, so she knew my answer.

"We've talked about this, Em," I whispered, tightening my hold on her. "Mama isn't coming home. She's..." I trailed off. What was I supposed to say? "She's in Heaven now."

"But I thought she was supposed to talk to me," she said quietly. "She never talks to me."

"Why did you think that, baby?" I dropped the book to the bed and wrapped my other arm around her.

"You said she's always with me. But she hasn't talked or played. And I can't see her."

Tears burned the back of my nose as I rested my head against the white painted iron headboard. Squeezing my eyes shut, I took a deep breath.

"I meant that she's with you in your heart." My voice came out too raw. "You can't see or touch her, but a part of her still lives inside you." Emma nestled back into my side, her head resting on my chest.

She hadn't asked about Meredith in a while. Not that I thought she'd forgotten about her, but when she stopped asking, I stopped bringing her up. But maybe seeing Rae brought up some memories or big feelings for her. Maybe they'd talked about Meredith.



I didn't know what to say or do.

"Read, Daddy." She jabbed her little finger at the book, and I took another deep breath, forcing my emotions away. My hand shook as I opened the book, my voice tight as I began to read.

Emma clutched Uni tightly to her chest as she listened. I didn't know how I zoned out while reading, and I didn't know when she fell asleep. But by the time I shut the book again, she was breathing deeply, her mouth slightly open.

I brushed her hair back and kissed her forehead, letting my lips linger for a moment. I wanted to take her pain and confusion away. But I couldn't and it made me feel helpless.

One day, she'd truly understand what happened to Meredith, and it would break her heart all over again. And I couldn't save her from that pain, either.

Gently, I pushed to my feet and tucked her rainbow blanket tightly over her before quietly putting the book away and turning on her nightlight. I shut the door nearly the entire way, and leaned against the wall, my eyes shut and hand running through my hair.

Maybe I should try to start dating, just so Emma could have a mother again. I knew no one could truly replace Meredith, but maybe having a woman around, one like a mother to her, might make her feel better. It might help with her outbursts and she might help me know how to navigate being a fucking parent.

*Drink.*

I needed a drink.

I couldn't fix anything tonight, but I could drink my way through a few glasses of scotch before turning in. It seemed to be the only way I could actually sleep anymore.

Making my way through the dark and silent house, I rounded the corner into the kitchen and ran straight into Reagan. My hands shot out, grabbing her arms before she could fall. The water in her glass sloshed over the side, soaking her shirt and sleep shorts.

“Shit,” she breathed, holding the glass away. “Shit. Shit. Sorry. I’ll clean this. Shit.”

“Rae.” She ignored me while she stepped over the small puddle on the floor and grabbed a towel. “Reagan.” She dropped to her knees, and I winced at the impact as she scrubbed the water on the floor.

She was doing too much. Her movements were too frantic.

Crouching, I grabbed her hand, stilling her. “Are you okay?” I asked. Her eyes met mine in the shadowed kitchen, and I watched her throat bob as she swallowed thickly.

“Fine,” she whispered. “I just—I’m sorry for the mess.” I glanced at the now-dry floor.

“It was just a bit of water,” I said. “It’s not a big deal.” She shook her head as I spoke.

“I should’ve been more careful.” I’d never seen her like this. Torn up about something, yes. But genuinely upset over spilling some water?

“It was dark, and you didn’t hear me.” Again, she shook her head like that wasn’t a good enough excuse. “Rae. It’s fine. What’s really wrong?”

“Nothing,” she breathed, yanking her hand from my grasp. Standing, she twisted the towel between her hands nervously. “I’ll get this in the wash—”

“Will you stop?” I barked. Her shoulders stiffened, and I immediately regretted my tone.

“Sorry.” She dropped her gaze to the floor, seeming to fold in on herself.

“Stop apologizing.” I pinched between my eyes. How had things gotten so fucked so fast? I didn’t know, and truthfully, I didn’t know if I cared at the moment. “I was grabbing a drink. You want one?”

Pushing past her, I moved to the liquor cabinet at the back of the kitchen, the one I’d fought with Meredith over. I hardly drank before our marriage started going to shit, but she liked

cocktails most nights. She wanted the liquor cabinet, I thought it was a waste of space and money.

Now look at me.

I kept it well stocked, mostly with whiskey and nothing else, but still...it had been such a point of contention with us that I'd contemplated throwing it out on more than one occasion. Then the fighting began, and drinking seemed to be the only thing that helped either of us.

We were such a fucked pair from the beginning, but with every passing day it felt like things just got worse.

Pushing thoughts of her away, I grabbed a bottle and two glasses. I filled them with ice, then liquor, and turned. I'd felt Reagan's gaze on me the entire time, but had chosen to ignore her. Her eyes were wide, but wary, as she watched me.

"Are you okay?" she asked, accepting the glass I offered.

"Great." I clinked my glass against hers before taking a giant gulp, finishing my drink in one go. Grabbing the bottle by the neck, I began to refill the glass.

"Seems like it." She took a small sip, wincing slightly.

"You don't have to drink it." My lips twitched as she tried to take another sip.

"I prefer wine," she muttered, setting the glass on the counter, but keeping her hand wrapped around it.

"Noted."

We stared at each other, tension growing thick in the air. What the fuck had happened tonight? Dinner had been uneventful. It had been normal, like the weird moment in her room hadn't happened.

But it had, and it seemed like the only thing I could think about as I stared at her.

"Emma's asleep?" she asked, and I nodded as I took another drink. I set the glass on the counter and leaned my hip against it, folding my arms. Her eyes dropped, and I could've sworn her eyes became glazed as she stared at my chest. I

didn't mean to flex, but I did, and wasn't at all sorry about it. I pushed my shoulders back, standing at my full height.

Her eyes slowly lifted back to mine as she licked her lips. I was helpless to do anything but watch, dazed, as she sucked her lip between her teeth. Her lips looked so soft. So pink. What would she taste like? I imagined sweet like pineapple and smoky like the whiskey she'd just sipped.

My cock began to harden, and I realized I wasn't staring at her mouth anymore. My gaze had moved down to her damp shirt, to the way her hard nipples pressed against the dark fabric. Her lithe, toned body shifted, but she didn't do anything to hide herself.

I dropped my arms, clutching my hands together in front of my dick to hide the hardness. She glanced down, and even in the dimness, I could clearly see her cheeks stain red.

"You should go to bed," I rasped. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she stared at me. She barely dipped her chin in a nod. "I leave for work around eight, but you and Em can sleep in."

"I'll make your breakfast," she blurted, her voice breathy. "I wake up early, so—"

"I don't eat breakfast." Her mouth clamped shut, and her shoulders fell, disappointment filling her face. Fuck. "But if you make something, I'll take it with me."

I wasn't used to anyone trying to take care of me. Even if it was just making breakfast, I wasn't used to it. Meredith had been too busy to be that type of woman, and it hadn't bothered me. We were both independent. We lived our lives, did our own things, and came together at night.

Maybe that's why our marriage had fallen apart. Maybe if we'd tried to intertwine our lives, we would've been in a better place. Maybe then we wouldn't have become strangers to each other.

"Do you come home for lunch, too?" Reagan asked, pulling me from my thoughts. "So I can make sure Emma is up so you can see her before you have to go back."

My throat tightened.

“Not usually,” I murmured. “But I can try.” She gave me another tentative smile. Why had I never realized how sweet Reagan was before?

I always knew she was kind. But I’d never paid much attention to her. She’d still been a kid when Meredith and I got together, then, after she graduated high school, she immediately left to travel around with Lily, despite Cora’s objections.

We saw each other on holidays or the occasional times she came home. We texted sometimes, usually when she wanted to know what gifts to get Meredith or Emma for birthdays.

But I hadn’t realized she was *sweet*. I’d obviously always known she was pretty—just, objectively, she was an attractive woman. But somewhere along the way, she’d gone from a pretty girl who was a bit awkward to a gorgeous woman with a soft heart.

I shouldn’t notice things like that, right? I shouldn’t be thinking about how lovely she was, inside and out. I shouldn’t be excited that she was living with me now and I had the opportunity to get to know her better.

She was Meredith’s fucking sister. I was being a creep. This was weird. It was wrong. I needed to stop.

Guilt twisted my stomach, making the rest of my hard-on disappear.

“Did you and Emma talk about Meredith earlier?” I asked. Reagan’s head tilted to the side, her long dark hair spilling over her shoulder.

“No,” she said slowly. “Why?”

“No reason.” I rubbed the back of my neck as I sighed. “She was just asking about her, that’s all.”

“And that’s unusual?” I blinked at her.

“Well...” Yeah, it was unusual, but the way she asked it made it seem like it should be normal. “She doesn’t bring her

up much anymore.” She tilted her head to the other side, as if she was studying me under a microscope.

“Do you?”

“Do I, what?”

“Bring her up.”

My knee-jerk reaction was to tell her, of course, I talked about my dead wife to our daughter. *Of course* I did. But then I thought about it and realized Meredith lived more in my head than she did in my words.

Was that why Emma stopped talking about her? Was it my fault? Seemed like everything was.

“Sure,” I said, shrugging my shoulder. Grabbing my glass, I downed the rest of it before pointing at hers in silent question. She pushed it toward me, and without another word, I drank the rest of hers, too. “Of course, I talk about her. She was my wife.”

Reagan rolled her lips between her teeth as she stared down at the hardwood floor. Her short nails tapped against the marble countertop before she glanced up at me, looking at me through her lashes.

“I don’t talk about her,” she admitted quietly. “Before I came back, I think the last time I said her name was at her funeral.”

My eyes searched hers, trying to find a lie. But there wasn’t one. And a part of me, maybe that super fucked up part that kept thinking about Reagan in wildly inappropriate ways, felt relieved. Relieved that I wasn’t alone in not wanting to talk about her.

“I don’t know how to bring her up,” I finally said. “I just want to move on. And I know that makes me an asshole—”

“It doesn’t.”

“No?” I took a step closer to her, the alcohol coursing through my body making me brave. “It’s only been six months. I shouldn’t even be thinking about moving on.” Her eyes searched mine as I moved another step closer. “I

shouldn't be thinking about anyone else but her." My hand rested next to Reagan's on the counter. "I shouldn't want to move on. I shouldn't want to touch another woman—"

Her breath hitched. Slowly, her fingers brushed against mine and my jaw tensed. I slid my hand completely over hers, ignoring whatever sober part of my brain was still working and yelling at me to stop.

"Don't you think it's wrong?" I whispered, and her lips parted on a silent breath.

"I don't—I don't know." Her pulse fluttered on her neck, and I ached to run my tongue over it. "It's not wrong to move on. But, Eli—" I lifted my gaze to hers. "But you have to move on with someone else."

The moment crashed down around me, forcing me to realize whatever the fuck I was feeling was one-sided.

I took a giant step back, letting my hand slide off hers. "I didn't mean you," I said gruffly. Her face tightened, but I couldn't take the words back. I didn't *want* to take them back.

I'd walked up to that line, and nearly stepped over it, all but forgetting about it. But she reminded me it was there, and how incredibly fucked in the head I was for even thinking about toeing it.

"Goodnight, Reagan." I skirted around her as I hauled ass from the kitchen. I checked on Emma before going to my room. As soon as I shut the door, I leaned against it, dropping my head back and squeezing my eyes shut.

*Idiot.*

Creepy fucking idiot.

I'd be lucky if she didn't decide to leave tomorrow.

## 8

# reagan

I POURED the coffee to the top of the insulated to-go mug. Buttery toast filled the air, and I smiled to myself as Emma softly talked to Uni about her dream last night. She bounced the toy on the table, ignoring her toast and fruit.

My stomach was in tight knots as I waited for Eli to emerge from his room. I'd heard him start his shower this morning, and had tried to focus on thinking about literally anything other than his wet, naked body.

But I couldn't get that image out of my mind.

Setting the sugar jar beside the coffee, I grabbed the breakfast sandwich I made him, and wrapped it in foil, ready for him to eat on the road.

I heard his steady footsteps, and my breath hitched. Turning my back to the entrance of the kitchen, I pretended to make my tea. It was the first thing I'd made this morning and was already half-gone, but he didn't know that. And I didn't have the courage to face him yet.

Not after last night.

My heart pounded, and my palms started to sweat at the memories. What had he been thinking? *What had I been thinking?*

I didn't want him to stop. I wanted him to lift me over his shoulder like a caveman, take me to his room, and fuck me until my body ached. But that was insane, and so fucking wrong on so many levels I didn't know where to even begin.



I could not look at my sister's husband in a sexual way. Even if I had made myself come while I thought about him at least three times last night, it was wrong. Incredibly fucking wrong.

“Daddy!” Emma squealed, and I squeezed my eyes shut as I took a deep breath, preparing myself.

“Morning, Em,” he laughed. “You're very awake.” How could he act like nothing had happened last night? Wasn't he freaking out as much as I was?

Unless I'd misread the entire situation and made a fool of myself.

Shit. I hadn't even considered that, but now that the thought was in my head, that was the only thing I could think of.

I'd totally fucked up and misread everything that happened. Surely, he was just lonely, and he'd been drinking, and was maybe horny, and I was there. He would've hit on anyone—had even been hitting on me?

I rubbed my forehead. Jesus Christ. I'd assumed he was talking about moving on with me, and had shut him down. Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he'd just been asking for advice. Maybe he wanted to know if I thought it was too soon for him to think about moving on.

Fuck.

“You okay, Rae?”

I gasped as I spun around, finding him closer than I thought. His dark brows were pushed together as he stared at me, a worried expression on his face.

“Fine,” I breathed.

Why did he have to look this hot first thing in the morning? I looked like a troll, still in my pajamas—which were just an oversized shirt and yoga shorts—and my hair in a messy bun.

He, on the other hand, looked amazing. His black dress shirt was perfect, not a wrinkle in sight. His pants were

creased, and his shoes? Impossibly shiny. I could use them as a mirror.

“I’m fine,” I said again. His hair was still slightly damp from his shower, his stubble a little shorter than yesterday, but still there. I loved that he kept it—

*Stop. It.*

I needed to stop noticing stupid things like how attractive I found his stupid stubble. So what? A million men had stubble, and they weren’t hot—no, they were. Just not as hot as Eli.

“I made you breakfast,” I blurted before he could say anything. His full lips tipped up, his eyes twinkling.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said softly.

“It wasn’t any trouble.” I skirted around him, grabbing his foil-wrapped sandwich and holding it out to him. He let out a breathy laugh as he grabbed it. “And coffee.” I pointed at his insulated mug, ignoring the way my finger shook. He stared at me, his expression unreadable.

“Rae,” he breathed, his smile falling. “You didn’t have to do any of this.”

Had I done too much? Probably. Mom always said I did.

“Thank you,” he murmured. Roughly, he cleared his throat and glanced at the coffee before looking at Emma. I folded my lips between my teeth as he set the sandwich down to stir sugar into his coffee.

I felt so fucking awkward. He might not even like breakfast sandwiches. And he might’ve already had lunch plans. And maybe it was his routine to make his own coffee, and I’d fucked everything up.

“I’m sorry,” I said, wincing as the words came out. I hadn’t really meant to say it. Slowly, he turned his head toward me.

“For what?”

“Messing up your routine,” I said, twisting my hands together. “I didn’t mean to—”

“What?” He turned fully toward me, forgetting about his coffee.

“If you made your own coffee,” I said, gesturing toward it. “Or breakfast, or whatever. Sorry if I overstepped.”

“You didn’t,” he laughed. “It’s usually a fight to get out the door every morning. This is the most peaceful morning we’ve had since...” He trailed off, his face falling. “A long time.”

Since before Meredith.

Right.

Perfect family. Perfect wife. Perfect life.

My mouth went dry as I nodded slightly. I moved around him, heading for the living room. He grabbed my wrist, stopping me.

“Thank you,” he said again. “Really, Rae. Thanks.” His dark eyes searched mine, and for one fleeting second, it felt like we were the only people in the entire world.

Then I blinked, and the moment was gone.

“I need to get dressed,” I rasped, pulling my wrist from his hold. His throat bobbed as he swallowed and straightened back to his full height. Had he always been that tall?

*Stop.*

I needed to stop noticing stupid shit about him.

So what, he was six-foot-something of pure DILF, but that wasn’t something I needed to notice. Or think about.

Jesus.

“Thanks for the breakfast,” he said again, gruffly. I barely dipped my chin in a nod and scurried from the kitchen, through the living room, and soared down the seemingly never-ending hallway to my room.

I slammed the door and pressed my back against it, letting my head fall back. Why was I like this? What was wrong with me?

I scrubbed both hands over my face, taking a deep breath. I just needed to do a quick yoga routine and clear my head. If nothing else, it would loosen all the muscles I just tensed while talking to Eli.

Before moving to the closet to grab my clothes for the day, I stopped by the nightstand to check my phone. My stomach dropped at the text that stared back at me.

Benji:

Do you want to have dinner with me tomorrow night?

Maybe I shouldn't have looked. I should've just ignored it so I could pretend I hadn't seen this text for a bit longer. I'd just wanted to check Instagram. I hadn't wanted to get asked out on a date.

I groaned as I dropped onto the bed, my phone still clutched tightly in my shaky hand. I contemplated just deleting the text and pretending like I hadn't seen it. But I couldn't do that. That would be the biggest dick move in the world.

Was I even allowed to go out with him?

I cringed. Of course, I was *allowed* to do it. I could do whatever I wanted. But Eli was technically my boss, right? Was I supposed to ask permission before agreeing to anything?

Asking him felt weird, though.

I tossed the phone beside me and scrubbed my hands over my face again.

Even though I knew nothing would ever happen between Eli and me, it felt weird to go out on a date when I lived with him. Even weirder after our kitchen run-in. Both of them, I guess.

I needed to stay out of the kitchen when he was in there.

It wasn't like I could have a fling with him while I was here. That would be wrong on so many levels. I should just go out with Benji. He was the safe choice—the choice that wouldn't betray my sister, or wreck her entire memory. It also

wouldn't make me the biggest whore in the world if I chose Benji.

What was I even talking about? It wasn't a competition. It couldn't be.

Without a second thought, I grabbed my phone and typed out a quick and simple message.

Sure. Pick me up at 8?

Surprisingly, his reply came instantly.

Benji:

I'll be there. See you tomorrow. ❤️

I stared at the heart emoji he sent and cringed. I'd never thought a guy sending a heart emoji was cringe before this moment, but here we were.

Eli wouldn't send an emoji.

Fuck off, brain. I needed to stop thinking about Eli.

I stared up at the ceiling, and groaned again. God, I hoped this was a good idea and it wouldn't totally backfire on me.

# 9

## elliott

THE BOTTLES CLANKED on the seat next to me, and I glanced over, my stomach twisting with anxiety. Even though I'd planned on coming home for lunch, I didn't. Things still felt weird between Reagan and me, and I thought it would be better for everyone if I just stayed away.

The less time we spent together, the better.

But I still felt bad for promising to come home, and not being there. So I stopped at the store and grabbed a couple of bottles of wine to hopefully make it up to her. I doubted she even noticed that I hadn't come home.

Pulling into the driveway, I stared up at my house. It had never been fancy enough for Meredith. She'd wanted a bigger place, a two story with more bedrooms, and a formal sitting area. But this place was always fine with me.

Just three bedrooms, one story, just enough space for us to grow, but not so much it felt like living in a museum. It was homey, something I never had, and always desperately wanted.

When we moved in here after our wedding, she'd already been a few months pregnant. I asked if she wanted to take time off working to stay home with Emma. You would've thought I asked her to jump into a pool full of sharks from the way she'd screamed at me, telling me how sexist I was.

That hadn't been my intention with the question. She'd just been so tired and was hardly sleeping, hardly eating. She hated being pregnant and was running herself ragged. I just

thought she could use a few months to recoup before going back to work.

But that wasn't what she wanted. She wanted to work until the day she died—she *had* worked until the day she died. She never wanted to be a wife or mother, and I think a part of her always resented Emma and me for making her one.

I blinked, pulling myself out of the past. It didn't matter anymore. Whatever she felt, whatever was wrong with our marriage, didn't matter now.

Grabbing the bottles of wine from the passenger seat, I got out of the car, remembering my insulated mug at the last second. I stared down at it, still shocked Reagan had done this for me. It was such a small thing, but I didn't think in all the years Meredith and I had been together had she ever done this.

She'd always told me she worked too, so I couldn't expect her to go out of her way to accommodate me. And at the time, I'd always agreed, even if a part of me just wished she'd do something to show she loved me. To show she even fucking liked me.

I shoved the thoughts away and turned toward the house. With a deep breath, I made my way inside.

The rich scent of roasted meat and buttery potatoes hit me before the sound of Emma's laughter. But once it did, I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face as I shut the door, locking it behind me and setting the wine bottles on the entry table.

"I think Daddy's home," I heard Reagan say. Emma's laughter stopped, then her head poked around the corner before disappearing again. I tilted my head to the side and just waited to see what would happen next. "Go on."

Slowly, Emma emerged wearing an apron that was way too big on her, her hair braided on either side of her head. She shuffled toward me, trying to not trip over the extra fabric at her feet.

I crouched as she approached, stopping a foot from me. She held out a monstrosity of a cupcake, looking incredibly proud.

“Look, Daddy. It’s Uni!” She clutched it tightly, the pink icing dripping over the edges and onto her hands. A blue spike of frosting drooped on one side, and I assumed that was Uni’s horn.

“Looks amazing, baby,” I laughed. I glanced over her head, finding Rae leaning against the doorway, a similar apron to Emma’s on, and her hair picked up in a clip like it usually was. She was smiling softly, and with the soft glow of the golden kitchen lights, and the way her eyes seemed to melt, she looked angelic.

I looked away.

“It’s for you.” Emma stepped forward, tripping on the fabric. Reaching out, I grabbed her before she could go down and took the cupcake from her. “Auntie Rae and me baked them. Eat it!” She stared up at me, grinning from ear to ear like a maniac.

“How about after dinner?” I asked, standing and propping her on my hip. Her lip jutted out in a little pout, and I sighed, glancing at Reagan again. She just grinned before disappearing back into the kitchen.

As I made my way toward the kitchen, I took a bite of the cupcake, feeling the frosting cover my nose and chin. Emma threw her head back and howled with laughter, her sticky hands clutching my shirt.

It was like a sugar bomb exploded in my mouth, and I forced myself not to gag at the crunchy bits of hard sprinkles in the otherwise soft icing. Walking into the kitchen, I dropped Emma back on her feet to the floor as I looked around.

A chair was pushed against the counter next to the stove, where it looked like an actual bomb had gone off. Dishes, bowls, plates, spices, utensils, and cupcakes covered every surface. I stared at the mess, then at Reagan as she helped Emma clamber onto the chair.



“Uh, what happened in here?” I asked, trying not to sound like I was about to have a panic attack at the mess.

“We made dinner, Daddy,” Emma huffed, sounding like it was an obvious answer.

“I’ll clean up,” Reagan blurted. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make such a mess, but Em wanted to help—you have something on your nose.” She tapped her own nose, hiding a smile.

My face heated as I wiped my hand over my nose and mouth, ridding it of all the frosting. I quickly rinsed my hands before turning back toward her.

“Where did you get everything? We didn’t have all this.” I scrubbed my hand over my jaw, scanning the counters.

“I ordered groceries.” Reagan winced. “I should’ve asked. But when you didn’t come home for lunch, I assumed you were really busy and I didn’t want to bother you.”

I blinked at her. “You didn’t have to cook,” I said, and she dropped her eyes. “But thank you.” I tacked on, if only to get that sad look off her face. “I—I’m not used to this.” I laughed awkwardly as I ran my hand through my hair.

“Dinner?” Her dark brows pushed together, and I shook my head.

“Someone making me dinner.” Her eyes searched mine. She opened her mouth to say something, but Emma grabbed her arm, pulling her attention away. “I brought wine.”

Reagan glanced at me again, still looking like she wanted to say something. Instead, she just nodded and turned back toward Emma. As they plated the food, I grabbed the bottles and stuck them in the fridge, trying to ignore the way Emma laughed.

It made my chest ache. I didn’t know why having Reagan here seemed to pull her out of whatever spiral she’d been heading down the last year, but she was a different kid.

“Sit,” Reagan said, waving at me. “Your hovering is making me nervous.” She tried to laugh it off, but it was too

tight to be a joke.

“May I get a drink?” I teased. She rolled her eyes as she nodded and turned her attention back to Emma, helping her scoop food onto a plate. As I passed her, I ran my hand along her lower back. She inhaled sharply, her body stiffening.

I hadn’t meant to do it, but it felt natural. It felt instinctual, like something inside me *needed* to touch her.

Or maybe it was all horseshit, and I was just deprived of touching a woman and was making every excuse I could to touch her.

I didn’t touch her on my way back.

I sat at the table and tried not to stare at Reagan as she helped Emma carry a plate toward me, her tongue sticking out in concentration. They slid the plate in front of me, and I cleared my throat.

“You don’t need to serve me,” I said, and Reagan shrugged.

“Not a big deal,” she muttered. “It’s easier than carrying all the dishes to the table.” Before I could say anything else, she was up and making her way back to the stove, Emma on her heels.

As they brought their plates over and sat with me, I couldn’t help but think that everything felt so normal. Like we’d done this a million times before. Like Reagan had always been here, and Emma had always looked up at her like she’d hung the damn moon.

We ate mostly in silence. Emma talked away, pretending to feed some of the pot roast to Uni before gobbling most of her plate up. Reagan gave me a small smile, like she knew how difficult it’d been for me to get Emma to eat actual food. But here she was, willingly doing it without an argument.

“It’s delicious,” I said roughly.

“Thanks, Daddy.” Emma smiled proudly, and I huffed out a laugh. I’d aimed it at Reagan, but it was probably better to

pretend like I'd been speaking to Emma. The more distance I could put between Rae and me, the better.

Maybe I was right. Maybe I just needed to find a woman, get laid, and move on. I was just latching onto Reagan because she was here, but if another woman was around, I wouldn't have to think about Rae while I fucked my fist every time I showered.

Iris was single. And she was a cute girl. A few years younger than me, recently divorced, no kids. She could work. But now that Emma wasn't going to daycare anymore, I'd need an excuse to see her.

I could think of something.

"Eli?"

I blinked a few times, shaking my head slightly before I looked toward Reagan. Her head was tilted to the side, her dark brows pushed slightly together.

"What?" I asked, and she huffed out a laugh.

"I asked about your day," she said softly. "How was it?" I blinked at her.

"My day?" I glanced at Emma, who seemed mostly oblivious to us. "My day was fine. Why?" She gave me a weird look.

"Just making conversation." I nodded a few times, but that strange look never left her face. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm great." I gave her a smile that didn't reach my eyes. Before she could say anything, I continued. "How was your day? What did you two do?" I glanced at Emma again.

"We played for a bit," she said, and when I looked back at her, the look on her face as she stared at Emma nearly gutted me. It was a soft, radiant look, like her entire face had lit up. I'd never seen someone look like that—so beautiful, and kind, and...and perfect. Shit. "Then we went outside and finger painted. There's a picture on your door." My eyes widened. She turned frantically toward me. "I mean, we hung it on your door. We didn't paint on it."

I let out a soft laugh that turned into a bigger, rumbling one. She paused before joining me. Even Emma was pulled away from Uni long enough to laugh, even though she didn't know why.

"I wouldn't have cared," I said, taking another bite of my food, a smile still on my face.

"No?" She tilted her head to the side. "So, if we paint on your door and walls tomorrow—"

"It can be cleaned," I shrugged. "If she's happy," I looked at Emma again, "I don't care." Reagan's face fell into a relaxed smile.

"That's really sweet," she murmured, sliding her hand onto my forearm. I stared at it for a long moment before pulling away. Her hand fell to her side. I felt her staring at me, but I refused to look at her.

"Thanks for dinner," I said as I took the last bite and stood. I needed to get away from her.

*Far* fucking away.



# reagan

I SMOOTHED my hand over my skirt. I didn't know what to wear, if a skirt was too much, if jeans weren't enough. But in the end, Lily told me to wear the skirt. So here I was. Wearing the skirt.

God. I felt ridiculous.

Benji would be here any minute, and I had to somehow explain to Eli that I had a date. I'd been too nervous to tell him earlier, so I'd avoided him since last night.

After dinner, he got weird. So it was just easier for everyone if I hid in my room and let him and Emma spend time together. Without me.

That's the way it was supposed to be, right? I was just here to hang out with her during the day, not to be anything more than a nanny when Eli needed me. But a part of me really loved having a family dinner with the two of them.

And how fucked up was that? I didn't want to take my sister's place.

Did I?

No.

No, I didn't.

I groaned and ran my hand through my hair, tugging lightly on the dark, silky strands. My makeup was simple, my hair looked the way it usually did. Maybe I should've tried to curl it. Or put on more makeup?

I hated first dates. There was just so much pressure, and I *hated* pressure. I always felt like I was about to explode from putting on a perfect show for my date. I had to somehow show them that I wasn't a weird yogi who had issues ten miles long. But it was impossible to completely hide that part of myself.

First date pressure sucked more than any other type of pressure.

You had to sell yourself, make yourself seem like the best person in the world so you could hopefully get a second date. But I didn't even want a first date with Benji, let alone a second one.

I glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Seven-fifty-five. Five minutes until Benji arrived. Maybe I could just sneak out. Or maybe he'd be like every other guy my age and text me when he got here. If he did, I could just lie and say I was going to hang out with Lily. Eli would never be the wiser.

Slowly, I opened the door and stuck my head out, looking both ways. Eli was playing with Emma before I came to my room to get ready. Maybe he was bathing her and I could just slip out.

My stomach twisted as I stepped into the hallway, closing my bedroom door tightly behind me. Quietly, I made my way to the living room, holding my breath as I passed Eli's door. My knuckles were white as I clutched my purse at my side, trying to force my breathing to quiet.

I peeked into Emma's room, finding it dark, and Eli nowhere to be found. His room. He must've been in his bedroom. Perfect.

I hurried the rest of the way down the hall and into the living room, my shoulders slumping when I didn't find him.

I was in the clear. Thank God.

Then a knock came from the front door and my spine snapped straight. Shit. Shit. *Shit*.

He knocked again, louder, and I sprinted for it, my hand already outstretched for the doorknob.

“Who’s here?”

I stumbled into the wall at Eli’s voice. My head whipped around, finding him strolling from the kitchen, a glass of whiskey in hand. His dark brows rose as he scanned me, taking in my outfit.

“Where are you going?” he asked, his voice clipped.

“I—Lily—” I pointed at the door. My chest heaved with every breath. Eli’s eyes narrowed as he set his glass on the side table. He continued toward me, my heart hammering in my chest with every step closer. His head dipped, and he looked at me through his brows. My breath caught at the intense look on his face.

“Lily?” he asked, and I nodded, my mouth too dry to speak. I pressed my back against the wall as he hovered over me, his eyes searching mine. “You’re wearing *that* to see Lily?” I opened my mouth, ready to give him an excuse when another knock came.

I winced.

Shit.

“I should go,” I breathed. He braced his hand on the wall beside my head, forcing me to stop.

“I’ll answer it.”

“You don’t—”

“It’s not safe for you to answer the door at night,” he said, and my mouth fell open.

*What the fuck?*

He gave me a hard look, almost as if he were daring me to argue. But I just closed my mouth, trying to calm my racing heart. His cologne was strong around me, mixing with the rich alcohol he’d already drunk. Instead of his scent doing anything to calm me, it just ratcheted my anxiety up ten notches.

Slowly, he moved toward the door, his eyes on mine until he reached for the doorknob. I squeezed my eyes shut.

This was it.



I tried to think of an excuse. I could lie and say I didn't know Benji was going to hangout with us tonight. Or I could pretend like I didn't know why he was here. But that wasn't fair to him.

And I was an adult. I didn't have to lie to Eli about going on a date. It wasn't like I was doing anything wrong.

The door opened and the cool, balmy night air pricked my skin. Tension rippled between the three of us. Or maybe it was just between Eli and me. Benji was none the wiser, completely oblivious to whatever I felt for my brother-in-law.

My mouth went dry as Eli opened the door more, glancing at me over his shoulder.

"You're not Lily," he said. He tried to make his voice light, like it was just a joke, but I could hear the tightness in it.

"No, I'm not," Benji laughed. He looked past Eli to me, and I tried to force myself to smile. Eli shifted to the side, blocking Benji's view.

"Well, Rae is expecting Lily." Eli moved to shut the door, but Benji's hand slapped against it.

"I'm here to pick her up." His dark brows pushed together in a silent question. I took a deep breath and pushed off the wall. Sidling up next to Eli, I rested my hand on his forearm.

"I'm going out with Benji tonight," I breathed. I tried to look at him, but he was too intense and my gaze fell to the floor.

"So," he drew the word out, "you lied." I snapped my eyes to him.

"I—" Yeah, I guess I did. "I'm sorry." His right eye twitched as he glared at me, his lips tightening further. Slowly, he turned his glare toward Benji, and somehow, it turned even more lethal.

He scanned him, head to toe, his lip curling slightly. I'd never seen Eli look down his nose at anyone, but I guess I didn't know him as well as I thought. The Eli I thought I knew would've never hit on me the other night. But he had.

And I liked it.

God, I was such a hussy.

I pushed past him, trying to make my way to Benji, who looked kind of terrified of Eli. I didn't blame him. Eli, while not a massive man, had an intimidating air about him.

Eli's hand latched around my wrist, squeezing tight. I gasped and whirled back toward him.

"You're not leaving this house," he hissed, his eyes boring into mine. "Not with him."

For whatever reason, his words spiked my anger. It boiled in my chest as I stepped closer to him, tipping my head all the way back to glower at him.

"You don't tell me what to do," I snarled. His eyes danced with a dark promise, one that told me to stop while I was ahead.

I hesitated.

I shouldn't push. I knew that. But I ignored that tendril of doubt, that bit of logic that told me to stand down, and stepped closer, pressing my chest against his in a challenge.

His full mouth tipped up in a small smirk. "Don't make me —" His eyes lifted above my head to glare at Benji.

"What?" I breathed. His throat bobbed as he swallowed heavily and took a step back.

"Nothing," he said tightly. His hand was still wrapped around my wrist, like he refused to let go. I didn't want him to. "Where are you going?"

"Movies," Benji said awkwardly.

Alright, so a skirt was an okay choice for that.

Not the time to think about my clothing choices. Jesus, my mind was ten kinds of fucked up right now.

I cleared my throat and forced myself to tug my hand away. "Don't wait up," I said, stepping into the night beside Benji. Eli just stared at me, his jaw flexing.

“I’ll see you when you get home,” he said, then shifted his eyes to Benji. “If there’s so much as a hair out of place when you bring her back to me,” he took a small step forward, pointing at me, “we’re gonna have a problem. Understand me?”

Benji’s mouth opened and closed a few times. “Y-yes, sir. Not a hair—” I stared at Eli in utter shock.

Where did he get off saying that to Benji? He was a good guy, wasn’t he? Benji was the last person who’d ever do anything to hurt me. Eli didn’t need to go all protective psycho caveman on his ass.

No matter how insanely hot it was.

Nope. I was thinking with my pussy again.

Wildly inappropriate—his words and my reaction to them.

“We’ll be back later,” I said, grabbing Benji’s arm and tugging him away. I felt Eli’s eyes on me until we made it to Benji’s car.

“Your dad’s kinda intense,” he laughed as he opened my door.

“He’s not my dad.” I slid into the passenger seat. “He’s my brother-in-law.” Benji gave me a weird look before shutting the door and rounding the car. He effortlessly slid into his seat.

“Seems weird for your brother-in-law to have that reaction to you going on a date,” he said as he turned the music on. I tried to practice any of the million breathing exercises I’d learned in yoga training, but nothing helped.

“He’s just overprotective,” I mumbled, folding my arms over my chest. I glared out the passenger window, finding Eli still standing in the open doorway, staring at us. Then Benji took off down the road, and Eli was gone.

Benji’s hand slid onto my bare knee and I stiffened, my head slowly swiveling back toward him. He kept one hand on the steering wheel as he leaned toward me, his eyes on the road.

“Thanks for coming out with me tonight,” he said softly, his thumb stroking my skin.

“Thanks for inviting me.” He flashed me a grin before turning his attention back to the road, his dark hair swinging by his ears. I sat stiffly under his hand the entire silent drive to the theater.

It wasn't that Benji made me uncomfortable. But there was just something wrong about this whole thing. This date. His hand on me. Everything.

I knew it had something to do with the man I'd just left at home, but I couldn't really do anything about it, could I?

I let out a long breath and forced myself to focus all my attention and horny energy on Benji. He'd do. He was cute enough, and kind enough, funny enough, and hopefully hung enough, to get the job done.

God. I was awful. Truly, an awful human being. But it is what it is, right? The man I wanted was totally off limits, and the man beside me, albeit a ridiculously young man without a beard or personality like Eli's, was not off limits. I could make it work.



# reagan

“I HAD A REALLY good time with you tonight,” Benji said, turning toward me. We stood on the stoop outside the door, the moon the only source of light we had.

“I did too.” I smiled up at him, my hand still clutched tightly in his.

It wasn't a lie, either. I really did have a good time with him. He was funny and made a simple date like going to the movies seem special. Most of the night, he was more entertaining than the movie.

After the movie, we didn't want the night to end, so we went to a little twenty-four-hour diner, thankfully not owned by my mother, and shared a sundae. Now, we were standing outside Eli's front door, and I wasn't ready to say goodnight.

At the beginning of the night, I hadn't wanted to even be here. I'd thought it was a mistake and tried to think of an excuse to just go home. But then he'd dragged me from the horror movie we were watching and snuck us into the action movie next door. And when I told him I wasn't into it, he snuck us into the next theater, then the next. He would've kept going if I'd let him.

“Maybe we can do this again sometime?” he asked, his smile soft as he gazed down at me. I tucked my hair behind my ear, my heart fluttering in my chest as I nodded.

“I'd really love that.”

Awkward silence stretched between us. It seemed neither of us knew how to say goodbye. I should just slip inside before

he thinks I was expecting something more. But I couldn't seem to make myself move.

"My hours at the diner are insane for the next few days," he explained. "But after that. Next week?" He sounded so hopeful it made my chest tighten.

"It's a date."

He gave me a tentative smile, hesitating before lowering his mouth to my cheek. My eyes closed as he let his lips linger for just a moment too long. I didn't push him away, though. Not even when his hand landed on my waist and gently tugged me toward him.

Before things could move any further, I stepped back, putting space between us as I reached for the door.

"Goodnight, Benji," I softly laughed. His teeth sparkled in the dark night.

"We can go to my place next time," he said, and my lip slid between my teeth.

That's what I wanted, right? A hook up. A fling. Something casual. And *something casual* would involve getting laid, hopefully on a more than regular basis. And to do that, I had to go to his place because there was no way I could comfortably sleep with him when Eli was in his bedroom down the hall from me.

"Yeah. We'll see." Benji flashed me another grin before stepping off the porch.

"I'll text you tomorrow," he said as he walked backward toward his car. My lip stayed between my teeth as I smiled at him, nodding slightly.

My body felt warm, like it was vibrating. It was ridiculous to have this reaction to him after I'd been so positive I was going to hate our time together.

"Bye," I waved. He stared at me for another heartbeat before sliding into his car. I watched as he pulled away from the curb and headed down the street, the low rumble of his engine the only sound in the quiet, sleepy neighborhood.

My hand wrapped around the doorknob as I clutched the strap of my purse tighter. I took a deep breath, my smile gone completely.

Quiet.

I needed to be quiet so I wouldn't wake Eli.

The door creaked as I opened it and stepped into the dark house, making sure to keep my movements slow and steady and silent. It clicked shut behind me and I rested my weight on it, breathing through the growing anxiety swirling in my chest.

Despite myself, I had a good time tonight. But now that the date was over and I was alone again, reality came crashing down around me. Benji was fun. He was kind.

But he wasn't Eli.

I hated myself for even thinking that, for comparing them. It was weird. It was wrong. I needed to stop. But it felt like the more I told myself to not think about Eli, the more I focused on him. On the way he moved, the way he smelled, his smile, his hair, his eyes. Everything.

All the little things I'd never noticed about him were suddenly noticeable. Like the way one of his front teeth was just a hair larger than the other, or the way his pinky on his right hand was slightly curved. All of his imperfections humanized him in a way I'd never thought of before.

He'd always felt so out of reach, so unobtainable. But these little things made him feel like...

Like he was finally within my grasp, all I had to do was reach out and take him.

But I couldn't.

I couldn't do it.

I couldn't say I'd always had a crush on Eli. When Meredith had first brought him around, I'd had one on him. But every younger sister falls for their sister's boyfriend in that first crush, older guy kind of way. But I didn't think he'd ever noticed me when Meredith was still alive.



And why would he?

Their perfect life mocked me. The way they seemed to effortlessly fit together. It was no wonder he was so broken now. She was his soulmate. They'd always been the blueprint for the relationship I wanted. It felt like he always doted on her hand and foot, and Meredith, even though she didn't have a maternal bone in her body, seemed to thrive as Emma's mother.

I sighed as I ran my hand through my hair. What was I doing here? Trying to take her place? Trying to fill some void in myself, some part of my heart that wanted a family so badly I was willing to play pretend with my brother-in-law and niece?

Maybe I needed therapy—no, I *definitely* needed therapy. Or maybe I just needed Lily to knock some sense into me. Even if she'd probably tease me and playfully encourage me to seduce and fuck Eli, she'd have my back in the end and know how terrible of an idea it would be.

The lamp beside the couch suddenly flicked on, and I jolted, pressing my back harder against the front door.

"You're home late." Eli glared at me, his hair disheveled and t-shirt wrinkled, like he'd been sitting in that exact spot for a long, long time. "I expected you back hours ago."

"Sorry." I winced. He was up waiting for me? I glanced at the wall clock. It was way too late for him to be awake on a work night. He was going to be exhausted.

Only now had I realized the thick scent of whiskey in the air, the sweet flowers I'd bought at the grocery store yesterday mingling with it. Eli's eyes were glassy and bloodshot in the dim light, the intoxication in them clear.

"You think you can go out with him while you live here?" he asked, his words slurring together. How much had he had to drink? "Did you really think I'd be fine with you going out with some guy? Did you at least use protection?"

The words were a harsh slap across my face. The accusation that I'd slept with Benji stung. I'd expect my

mother to spew words like that to me, not Eli.

Never Eli.

My lips parted, a silent breath leaving me as I searched for the right words to spit back. This wasn't like him. I knew it was the alcohol talking, but it still didn't make it alright.

He scrubbed his hand over his face as he scooted to the edge of the leather couch. "I'm sorry," he rasped. "I shouldn't have said that."

"No," I quietly agreed. "You shouldn't have." Slowly, he lifted his head, his face tight. "Are you mad at me?" I didn't know why it mattered. I told myself it shouldn't matter, that I was my own person and had every right to go out with Benji tonight.

But even I knew that was a lie. I cared what Eli thought. I wanted his approval. I craved it.

I held my breath as he stared at me, his eyes unfocused. I wondered what he was thinking about, what he saw when he looked at me. Did he truly see me? Or did he see Meredith?

"Mad?" he repeated, his voice hoarse. "No, Reagan. I'm not mad. I just—" He let out a harsh breath. "I just don't like the idea of anyone else touching you."

"Else?" The word slipped from my lips before I could stop it.

We stared at each other, that single word hanging in the air between us, sucking all the air from the room. With his eyes still boring into mine, he staggered to his feet. Every stumbling step toward me made my pulse beat wildly.

A part of me wanted to run to my room, to just dodge him and pretend like this interaction hadn't happened. He just needed to sleep this off and hopefully forget that it had ever happened.

Did I want him to forget it happened, though?

Finally, he stopped a foot from me. My chest heaved as I took a breath, and his eyes dropped to it, his jaw flexing as he stared at the low-cut neckline. My body surged with a mix of

desire and fear. I wasn't afraid of Eli, but I was afraid of toeing this line with him. Yet I couldn't help but imagine what his lips would feel like against mine.

"Yes," he hissed, stumbling forward another step. I blinked, my thoughts fleeing as I refocused on him. "I don't like knowing he had his hands on you." His possessive gaze met mine again, and it was suddenly impossible to swallow. To breathe.

He rested his hand on the door by my head, his whiskey-scented breath warm against my skin. My heart raced as he lifted his hand to gently stroke my jaw.

"Where did he touch you, Reagan?" he muttered, his glazed eyes tracking his fingers' movement.

"Nowhere," I whispered. His eyes snapped to mine.

"Don't lie to me, angel." My breath hitched at the name. Slowly, he lifted his hand further, tucking my hair behind my ear. "Where did he touch you?" His voice was huskier than I'd ever heard, deeper and filled with something that made my pussy throb.

"Here," I breathed, resting my hand on my thigh. His gaze lowered to it, following my movement as I dragged my hand up, stopping at the short hem of my skirt.

His prominent Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Where else?" I slid my hand higher, letting it disappear under the short fabric and his breath caught. "With his fingers?"

I shook my head, and he let out a low growl. A soft whimper left me as my fingers brushed against my hot, damp panties. I teased myself over the soft fabric, my eyes slowly shutting as I leaned against the door.

Benji hadn't really touched me. He hadn't done more than rest his hand on my leg in the car and during the movie, held my hand at the diner. But he didn't touch me like this. The way I wanted Eli to.

"Did you let him fuck you?" he snarled, banging his hand against the door. My eyes snapped open, and for some stupid reason, my body coiled tighter at the fury raging in his eyes.

“Reagan, don’t fuck with me right now. Did he fuck you?” His hand tightened into a fist, his body vibrating with his restraint.

I gasped as my fingers pressed harder against my panties, the fabric rough against my swollen, sensitive clit. His jaw ticked as he watched me, impatiently waiting.

“No,” I whimpered. He squeezed his eyes shut, his lips tightening. I rubbed a small, tight circle over my clit, moaning at the feeling shooting through my body.

“Reagan,” he rasped.

“Touch me,” I pleaded, my voice breathy and needy. “Please, Elliot.” His eyes fluttered open, even more bloodshot than they’d been moments ago. His hand dropped, and he gripped my thigh.

“You want me to touch you?” he snarled. I nodded frantically, rubbing myself faster. His hand slid between my legs, and he laughed as he rested it over mine, feeling the jerky movements of my fingers. “Such a needy little thing, aren’t you?”

“Eli.” My eyes rolled back as he pressed my fingers harder against my clit. I gave complete control over to him, letting him direct my fingers the way he wanted. He moved them fast and hard, his gaze burning into me as he watched me writhe against the door.

“Is this what you wanted?” he grunted. “You wanted me touching your wet little cunt?” I forced my eyes open as I nodded. “Did you think about me while he had his hands on you? Did you think about how good it would feel to have my cock inside you?”

“Oh, fuck,” I whimpered.

“Did you think about all the disgusting things I’d do to your flexible little body while his fingers were touching you—” He pressed our fingers lower. My panties strained as he pushed my fingers against my entrance. “Here?”

“He—he didn’t touch me there,” I gasped.

“Good.” He shallowly fucked our fingers in and out of my body, making my thighs tremble. “Well? You didn’t answer me, angel. Did you think about me fucking you?”

“Yes,” I breathed, and he smirked. “I always—”

“Always, what?” he prompted. He pushed harder, and I felt my panties rip at the force. “Always think about me?” I nodded, my breathing coming in shallow pants. He dropped his head forward, running his nose along my jaw. “I think about you, too.”

“Really?” I gripped his shirt in my other fist, dragging him closer. “Can I touch you?” He jerked his hips back, not letting me feel any part of his hard body.

“I think about you every time I’m in the shower,” he admitted. “I fuck my fist while I think about pounding into your tight cunt. I think about bending you over every surface in this house and fucking you senseless. I think about the way your pretty mouth would feel wrapped around me. Tell me what you think about, angel.”

“You—”

I could barely speak with the way he was shoving his fingers harder and deeper inside me, tearing the thin fabric with each brutal thrust. Only a few more and I knew he’d be inside me. We would be inside me.

“I think about you stretching me,” I gasped. “I think about you fucking me every second of every day. I think about you filling me up until I’m pregnant.” The words came out before I could stop myself.

He froze.

“What?” He pulled his face away from my jaw.

“I—I didn’t mean that—Eli—”

“You want me to get you pregnant?” he asked, his voice raw. “You want—you want a baby? With me? *My* baby?”

My brows quirked in confusion. “I—no.”

I couldn't tell him the truth, that my ultimate dream was to be a mother, to live this life I was pretending to live with him for real. I couldn't tell him that all I'd ever dreamt of was being pregnant and taking care of a million kids. I couldn't tell him any of that for a million different reasons.

Disappointment flashed over his face before he moved his hand away, leaving my fingers buried inside me.

"This was a mistake," he rasped. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—" His gaze flickered over my body again, my hand still between my legs. He shoved his hand through his hair as he turned away. "I'm sorry."

Finally, my hand fell to my side as I watched him storm away, flicking the lamp off on his way. He stalked down the hall, pausing for only a moment before opening his bedroom door.

Shame and embarrassment heated my body. How could I let him do that to me? How could I let myself do that in front of him? I couldn't believe I'd let myself go that far. He had an excuse. He was drunk.

But me?

I didn't have an excuse other than being a stupid, horny bitch. I should've shoved him away, gone to my room, and fucked myself while I thought of him like I'd done every other night.

Instead, I made myself into a wanton fool in front of him. I'd be fucking lucky if he didn't fire me first thing in the morning and send me on my way.

Maybe I should just pack my bags and leave. It would save us both the trouble and embarrassment.



# elliott

MY HEAD POUNDED as I clutched it tightly in my hands, the fluorescent lights blinding. The little office felt suffocating, filled with my embarrassment and regret. I couldn't believe I let myself get drunk enough to cross that line with Reagan last night.

Again.

I hadn't only crossed it, I'd leaped way over the fucking line. It wasn't even visible from how far I'd soared past it.

And this morning, it had been the most awkward few minutes of my life. She still made my breakfast and lunch, handing them off to me like nothing had happened. But I saw the tremble in her hands, the redness and puffiness of her eyes.

She was as affected by this as I was.

But not for the same reason.

When she blurted that shit about getting her pregnant, my knee-jerk reaction was to freak the fuck out. But after my anxiety had settled, the thought sat heavy and welcome in my mind.

Get her pregnant.

Have a baby with her.

That was so fucking ridiculous it wasn't even funny. It had been something she said in the heat of the moment. There was no way a girl like her, one that had a traveler's soul and adventure in her blood, would want to settle down and be a mother.



Meredith hadn't. She hadn't had any desire to leave her little safety nest. All she'd wanted was to work and become the most successful woman in her company. She was on her way to achieving those goals, but she would've gotten there faster if she hadn't gotten pregnant.

Something she always reminded me of.

Not that she didn't love Emma. I knew she did. Yet no amount of love she had for our daughter made her forget about the few months she'd had to take off. She couldn't stop thinking about how much time had been wasted. She couldn't stop pondering how much further along she would've been if she would've never met me. If she wouldn't have had a baby.

I stared blankly at the computer screen in front of me. Sometimes I wondered if I would've left her sooner if it hadn't been for Emma. If I would've ever taken that next step with her if she would've never fallen pregnant.

I didn't regret my time with her. She gave me my daughter, and for that, I'd always be thankful to her. But I didn't have to like her. I didn't have to pretend I was still mourning her death when I didn't think I had at all.

I scrubbed my hands over my face, sighing harshly. How had this become my life? It was a disaster.

Last night wasn't a disaster...

No, that was a whole ass lie. It *was* a disaster. Probably one of the biggest of my fucking life. But I couldn't stop thinking about the way it felt to force Reagan's fingers to move, to force them inside her, the feel of her panties stretching until they began to rip.

After I ran away like the coward I apparently was, I barely made it two steps into my bedroom before I pulled my cock out and roughly fucked myself. Her teasing scent was still on my fingers, and it only made me more wild. I had to lock the door to keep myself from storming into her room, bending her over, and fucking her until we were both a pile of boneless bodies on her bed.

My cock began to harden at the thought. Fuck. Not again. I was hornier now, at thirty-seven, than I had been at seventeen. And it was all because of Rae.

Reaching down, I gripped my cock over my slacks, squeezing myself hard enough to hurt. A low groan slipped from my throat as I ran my tight fist up, then down, my neck straining as I tried to keep my moans silent.

The sound of my phone ringing jolted me enough I shot out of my seat. My heart pounded as I frantically looked around my desk. I snatched my cell up with shaky hands, dread pooling in my stomach at Reagan's name on my screen.

*Shit.*

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I took a deep breath before pressing the phone to my ear. I didn't even get a word out before I began gathering my things. The sound of Emma crying in the background had me feeling frantic.

"What happened?" I barked.

"I—I don't know!" Reagan cried. She sounded flustered, and the sound of her usually calm voice frantic made my heart squeeze.

"Rae, baby, what happened?" I asked again, trying to hear her past Emma's wailing in the background.

"I—I don't know. She said her ear was hurting her this morning," she explained, sounding breathless. "And now she's running a fever, and she's screaming, and says it's hurting. I don't know what to do. Do I take her to the emergency room? Where is it? What do I do, Elliot?"

"Calm down," I soothed. I paced my office, my jacket clutched in my hand, the other still gripping the phone. "It's probably just an earache. She gets them all the time." Emma let out another howl, and I winced. "What's her temp?"

"Right under a hundred," she muttered. "It's okay, Em. Hey, it's okay, honey." Emma cried again, and my heart shattered.

“I’m on my way,” I said, flinging my office door open. “Take her to the clinic on Oak Street. I’ll be there soon.”

“She won’t get dressed, and she won’t let go of me long enough to get her clothes,” she said, sounding panicked again. “I can’t—”

“Okay,” I breathed, pausing in the lobby. I needed to tell Tim I was leaving. Fuck. “It’s okay. Rae, listen to me. I’ll be home in thirty minutes. Will she be okay?”

“I—I think so.”

“Will *you* be okay, angel?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I know you will be,” I murmured. “Just stay with me for a bit longer, alright? I’ll take care of everything when I get there.”

“I’m sorry, Eli,” she said softly. Emma cried again, and I pinched between my eyes. “I—I can take her. You don’t need to come home—”

“I’ll be there soon,” I said, cutting her off. There was a beat of silence and I waited for her to say something, but when she didn’t, I hung up.

Turning on my heel, I took another deep breath and readied myself for Tim. This would not be a fun conversation.

I hurried to his office, knocking on the door as I pushed it open. “Hey, Ti—” I cut myself off, my mouth dropping open.

“Shit.” He scrambled to fix his pants, leaving Nina helplessly on her knees, her blouse unbuttoned and hair a mess. “Why didn’t you knock?” He glowered at me before turning it on her. “Why didn’t you lock the fucking door?”

“I—I thought I did.” She stumbled to her feet, her knees wobbly on her heels. “I’m sorry, Mr. Mitchell.” I cringed. She still called him Mr. Mitchell? Gross.

“Get out,” he hissed, his gaze unable to stay on me. I moved to the side as Nina rushed past me, giving me a

terrified look. “Not a word, Hayes. Not a fucking word.” He pointed at me and I lifted my hands.

“My kid is sick. I was just letting you know I need to take her to the hospital,” I said, taking a step back. “I didn’t see a thing.”

“You’re kidding me,” he scoffed. “You’re seriously leaving again?” He shook his head, and my anger surged.

“You know, maybe I did see something,” I said in a low voice. His jaw flexed. “And maybe I might write an email to corporate. They’d want to hear about this, don’t you think?” I waved my finger at him, lifting my brows. “Your wife might want to know, too. And think about poor Nina—”

“Blackmail?” he snarled. “Really?” I shrugged.

“Either let me take care of my child, or I’ll tell everyone.”

My hands balled into fists at my sides. I wasn’t in the wrong here. He was the one fucking one of his employees—now that I thought about it, it’s probably why she was moving up the ranks so quickly. Fucking hell. The thought made me feel ill.

“Fine,” he gritted out. “But just today—” I grinned at him.

“How about you just keep your opinions to yourself, yeah? I’ll come and go as I please when it comes to Emma.” I was pushing it. I knew I was, but I didn’t really care. What was the worst that would happen? He’d fire me? He was planning on doing that, anyway.

“Fine.” The word seemed to pain him as he ground it out. We stared at each other for another moment before I dipped my chin, turned, and sprinted across the lobby and out the door.

Thirty minutes later, I pulled up to my house, barely putting the car in park before I threw the door open. My heart pounded as I ran inside, the sound of Emma crying hitting me immediately.

“Rae?” I called, tossing the keys on the entry table as I headed for the hall. She poked her head out of Emma’s room,

her hair messy and face pale. Emma was clutched tightly in her arms as she bounced her lightly.

“Look, Em. Daddy’s home,” she whispered. Emma’s cries barely stopped enough to turn her head. It still rested on Reagan’s shoulder as she stared at me.

Her sweaty face was red, and she was pulling roughly on her ear. Tears, and slobber, and snot coated her face and Reagan’s shirt, but neither of them seemed to care.

As I got closer, Emma reached for me, nearly falling from Reagan’s arms. I jolted forward, catching them before either could go down. “I’m here, baby,” I murmured, grabbing Emma and holding her on my hip. She rested her head on my shoulder, her hand still on her ear.

“She didn’t start feeling bad until you left,” Reagan said softly, her wary eyes on Emma. “I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner. I was trying to figure out what—”

“It’s okay,” I whispered, reaching for her. She hesitated before sliding her hand into mine and letting me tug her closer. I didn’t know why I needed them both close right now, but I did. I wrapped my arm around Reagan’s waist, and she must’ve truly been exhausted, because she leaned against me, resting her head on my other shoulder.

This felt right. Even with Emma sick, and Reagan worn out, holding them both felt right. Like everything in my life had been leading to this exact moment. I squeezed my girls tighter, anchoring them to me.

“I’ll take Em to the doctor,” I murmured. Reagan took a deep breath, drawing strength as she pulled away.

“Let me change clothes and I’ll go with you.” I kept my arm around her waist as I stared down at her.

“Why don’t you just take a nap?” I whispered. “You’re worn out.” She shook her head as I spoke.

“I’ll go with you,” she repeated. “You’ll need the help.”



# elliott

REAGAN WAS RIGHT—I needed the help.

“We’ve been here three hours,” I grumbled, pacing the little exam room. Reagan held a sleepy Emma in her arms on the hospital bed as they watched me. “Why aren’t they doing more?”

“I think they’ve done everything they can,” Reagan said. I knew she was right. There was only so much they could do for an earache, but my baby was still hurting and it was pissing me off.

“Then why are we still here?” I whirled on her, and she narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t know,” she hissed, holding Emma tighter. “Ask someone who works here.”

I knew we were both at our wits’ end. We were more than exhausted and ready to snap at each other over everything. After we got here and Emma’s wailing had stopped, and we were left alone in this little room, everything from last night seemed to hit us both.

So, now we were in this weird limbo where we were skirting around the actual issue, which was how fucking awkward we felt after last night, but also having to ignore it for Emma’s sake. She needed us more than we needed to dissect our feelings or what happened.

The door opened, and I braced myself for more bullshit. I respected the shit out of healthcare workers. But after spending hours in a hospital dealing with people coming in

and out, poking and prodding Emma, and not giving me a straight fucking answer, I was more than over it and ready to kill them all.

“Okay, you’re all set.” I blinked and slowly turned toward the nurse.

“What?”

“You can go.” Reagan didn’t need to hear anymore, apparently. She staggered to her feet, Emma still in her arms as she gathered the giant tote bag full of Emma’s things she’d brought. I grabbed Emma from her, knowing she had to be getting heavy.

“We can go,” I repeated, turning back toward the nurse. She smiled softly at Emma before looking at me.

“Your prescription was called into the pharmacy, so you’ll need to pick that up, but yeah,” she nodded, smiling at Reagan, “you’re free to go.”

“Thank God,” Rae muttered. The nurse chuckled softly as she pulled open the door.

“Take your wife and baby home,” she said. “They look spent.”

I froze.

Reagan froze.

Slowly, I glanced down at her before clearing my throat. “Yeah, they’re exhausted.” After our goodbyes and signing the few things we had left, we made our way down the short hallway.

Reagan was stiff as she walked beside me. She refused to acknowledge me. Instead, she pretended like I wasn’t even there, and when I opened the car door for her, she chose to ignore that, too.

Whatever. I was too fucking tired to deal with her shit. I just wanted to get Em home and to bed, then pass out for a few hours myself.



The drive home was silent, except for Emma's soft whimpers of pain as she tried to sleep. My heart ached with every sound she made. I just wanted her to feel better.

"I'll go to the pharmacy if you'll put her down for a nap," Reagan finally said, her voice hoarse. I glanced at her and re-gripped the steering wheel.

"I can stop on the way." She let out a harsh breath. "Or you can go by yourself, whatever."

"Why are you being like this?" she snapped, and my brows lifted.

"Like what?"

"*Or go by yourself, whatever,*" she repeated, mocking my voice. "What is that? You're being a dick."

"I'm being a dick because I told you to go by yourself after you said you wanted to go by yourself?" I said. "Sure. Okay. Whatever." She glared at the side of my head before huffing out another breath, folding her arms over her chest and turning to look out the window. "What?"

"Nothing," she mumbled.

"So, now you're pouting." I laughed humorlessly. "Real mature, Rae." She didn't say anything, and that somehow made it worse.

When Meredith and I fought, I knew to brace myself for whatever vile shit she'd spew. But I spat the same shit back at her. It was what we did. We didn't hold back. We let the other have it and didn't give a shit if we hurt each other's feelings.

The make-up sex was worth whatever we said. But then we started fighting and not making up, and then life became exhausting.

The point was, I was used to having someone to verbally fight with. I was used to not holding back, or watching my tone, or worrying about what words I was about to say because I knew Meredith wouldn't.

But Reagan was different. Of course, Reagan was fucking different.

“I’m sorry,” I finally said. I slid my eyes to her as she wiped roughly at her cheek. My jaw tensed. I wanted to slam my face into a brick wall for making her cry. “Rae, baby, I’m sorry.”

“Can you please stop?” she whispered, her voice choked. My hand tightened on the wheel until my knuckles were painfully white.

I went to the pharmacy on the way home, not wanting her to drive while she was upset. She didn’t say anything. Instead, she just stayed staring out the window, like I didn’t even exist.

I didn’t know how to make it right.



I SAT on the couch with my nightly glass of whiskey in my hand. I probably needed to stop drinking every night, but it was hard to give up. It wasn’t that I had a problem. If I wanted to stop drinking, I could.

But I didn’t want to stop.

I just wanted something that would help me forget everything that had happened and help me sleep. And the thing that helped was whiskey.

After we got home, I put Emma to bed while Reagan showered and took a much-needed nap. I couldn’t sleep. So I took my laptop into Emma’s room and worked while I watched over her. Every half hour, I got up to check on Reagan. I used the excuse that I needed to stretch my legs, but I knew the truth. I just wanted to check on her, to make sure she was alright. And every time I poked my head into her room, she’d been asleep.

I didn’t know if I should wake her or not. She’d slept for hours, and when I finally heard her stirring around, I couldn’t make myself open her door to talk to her. Instead, I stayed in Emma’s room and when she poked her head in, I pretended

like I hadn't heard her, even though I was painfully aware of her every movement.

I took a long pull from my glass, nearly finishing it. We needed to talk. I knew we did. But I didn't want to. I knew she was going to tell me to fuck off, and that what we'd done was insanely inappropriate.

And I should want to back off, right? Knowing how fucked up it was should make me want to back off. But it didn't. If anything, it just made me want her more. Knowing she was off limits made me ache for her in ways I'd never felt before.

But it was selfish of me to put her in that position. She loved Meredith. She'd always thought Meredith walked on water, that she was this perfect God-like creature who did no wrong. It was plain as fucking day she idolized Meredith.

I didn't understand it, but I'd also seen a side of Meredith most people didn't. She kept her bitchiness and craziness under tight wraps. Even though I knew Reagan had witnessed it on more than one occasion, she seemed to ignore or forget about it.

*That*, I understood.

I tried to do the same thing. I *wanted* to remember the good times, especially now that she was gone. It felt weird to remember all the bad—and there was a lot of it.

It wasn't like I wanted to only think about that. I didn't want to hate my wife. I didn't want to regret ever fucking talking to her. I hated myself more and more every day, and now that I was apparently falling for her younger sister, it made me even more sick.

How much more fucked up could I get?

A door opened, and I sat up straighter. I didn't know why I'd been anticipating Emma to come stumbling into the living room, Uni in hand. But, of course, it wasn't her. It was Reagan.

And fuck me.

She was wearing a pair of tight little yoga shorts and a tight tank top that showed off her toned stomach. Her hair was loose around her shoulders, her face makeup free. I knew I was drooling as I watched her stroll into the living room. She froze when she realized I was there.

“Oh,” she breathed, her eyes wide. “Sorry. I didn’t know you were in here.”

“It’s okay.” I cleared my throat and clutched the glass tumbler tighter in my hand. “Do you want a drink?”

“I was getting some water,” she muttered, throwing her hand toward the kitchen.

“Get some wine,” I said. “You haven’t had any yet.” The bottles I’d bought her still sat untouched in the fridge. Maybe they were the wrong kind. I should’ve asked her what she liked.

“Oh.” She stared at the archway into the kitchen. “I—I don’t drink often.”

“Drink tonight,” I said softly. “We need to talk, and alcohol might make it easier.” She blinked at me. I waited for her to reject me, to tell me there was nothing to talk about.

Instead, she just nodded and headed toward the kitchen on silent feet. I didn’t even bother reprimanding myself for staring at her perfect ass.

I downed the rest of my glass as I stared at the half-empty bottle of whiskey on the end table beside me. Maybe I did have a problem. Maybe I was relying too much on alcohol.

Fuck.

The opposite end of the couch dented in as she sat, and I held my breath, anticipating her words. But they never came. Instead, she sat silently, her occasional gulps the only sound in the silent room.

Finally, I looked toward her and barked out a laugh, startling her. “Didn’t want a glass?” I asked, jerking my chin at her. She grinned as she brought the bottle to her lips. My eyes

dropped to them as she wrapped them around the tip and took a long drink, her eyes on mine.

“Why dirty a glass?” she said when she brought the bottle down. “I plan on drinking it all.” My brows lifted.

“All of it?” I repeated. I grabbed the bottle of whiskey by the neck and contemplated filling my glass. Glancing at her again, she gave me a wry smile as she took another pull. “Fuck it.” I set the glass where the bottle had been before taking a long drink, my eyes squeezing shut as the liquor burned its way down my throat.

“I have a problem stopping once I start,” she admitted. I forced my watery eyes open to look at her again.

She tucked her long legs under her as she shoved her dark hair over her shoulder. Her face was makeup-free, and while she still looked ridiculously gorgeous, she looked young.

Too fucking young for me.

I took another drink as I stared at her. Her chest rose and fell with a deep breath.

“If you want me to leave, I understand,” she said softly, dropping her eyes to her knees. She played with a loose thread on the couch, her full lips pressed tightly together.

“Why would I want you to leave?” She didn’t look at me, but I wanted her to. I really fucking did. “Rae?”

“Last night,” she breathed. “I—what I said—”

“Last night wasn’t your fault,” I interrupted. “I drank too much, and stepped over a line. I shouldn’t have—I shouldn’t have said or done anything that I did.” Finally, she looked at me.

“You think it was a mistake?” she whispered, her voice more vulnerable than I’d ever heard. I took another sip. She copied, taking a deeper drink.

“I think if we were different people, it wouldn’t have been,” I said. “But we are who we are, so yes, Reagan. It was a mistake.”

The words tasted like ash coming from my mouth, but what choice did I have? I couldn't tell her I wanted what she did—I wanted it more than she did. She'd think I was a fucking loon.

Hell. I thought I was a fucking loon.

“Right.” She nodded a few times, hesitating before taking another drink. “But if we were different people,” she gave me a wary look, “what would've happened?”

Dangerous territory.

This was such dangerous fucking territory.

I cleared my throat as I shifted in my seat, suddenly too hot. “Well,” I said, drawing the word out. “What would you have wanted to happen?” She shook her head as I spoke.

“That's a copout,” she laughed, gripping the bottle of wine tighter in her hand. “I asked you first. Answer.”

“Rae.” I huffed out a laugh as I shook my head. “What does it matter? It's just going to make things awkward between us, and—and you're the only real family we have left. I won't fuck anything up between us.”

Her smile slowly fell. “You have Mom,” she muttered.

“I have you,” I said. “Your mother is...” I let out another harsh breath. “She's difficult. You know that. I can't just pick up the phone and talk to her, you know? But with you—”

“You've never called me before,” she blurted, her face staining pink.

“I can start.”

Her hazel eyes flicked between mine as she nibbled her bottom lip. I wanted to pull it free from her teeth. Instead of reaching for her, though, I tightened my grip on my bottle.

I needed to change the subject. I needed to get away from this conversation and pretend like last night hadn't happened. It would be the best for both of us.

“Have you heard back from your yoga retreat?” I asked. She swallowed her mouthful of wine as she shook her head.

“Not yet,” she said, resting her head against the back of the couch. “Maybe Mom’s right. Maybe I should just find something else.” She pinched between her eyes.

“Have you thought about opening your own studio?” She barked out a humorless laugh, and I frowned. “What?”

“Could you honestly see me as a business owner?” She laughed again, shaking her head.

“I don’t know what you think is so funny,” I said slowly. She blinked at me, her smile slowly falling. “I think you’re more than capable of running your own business.”

“You clearly don’t know me,” she said.

“No,” I shook my head, “you clearly don’t know yourself.”

“I do.” Her fingers turned white around the neck of her bottle as she stared at me. “I know that I’d fuck it up before the first week was over. I know I wouldn’t have even one person interested in coming to my studio. And I know Mom would laugh in my face.”

“That’s what you’re afraid of,” I said, pointing at her. “You’re afraid of your mother.”

“I am not,” she huffed. “I’m afraid of going into severe debt over a stupid studio.”

“No.” I shook my head, eyeing her. “You’re afraid of failing in front of Cora. But you know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think you’re even more terrified of succeeding.”

She blinked again. Her mouth opened, then shut, then opened again. “Why would I be afraid of that?” I grinned around the mouth of the bottle as I took a sip. Her eyes dropped to my throat as I swallowed.

“Only you can answer that,” I shrugged. “But I think you know you’ll be successful at whatever you choose to do—”

“I’m not the successful one,” she scoffed. “That was always Meredith. She was good at school. She was good at her

job. She was a good daughter. She was good at being a wife and mother.” I couldn’t hold in my bark of laughter.

“You think she was good at that shit?” I shook my head, a sarcastic smile on my face. The warm buzz of alcohol was flowing freely through my veins, letting truths I’d wanted to hold hostage come tumbling out. “I can promise you, her success started and ended with work.”

“But—”

“We were about to get a divorce,” I admitted. Her eyes widened.

“What?” she breathed, leaning forward.

“The night she died,” I sighed, shoving the glass aside and putting the bottle on the table beside me. “We got into a huge fight. She admitted she’d been cheating on me for nearly a year and said she wanted to take Emma from me.”

“But you were so happy,” she said, sounding shocked. “You had the perfect marriage.” I smiled sadly.

“If only that were true,” I muttered. “I told her I’d already been looking at divorce lawyers, and boy did that piss her off. She wanted to be the one to leave me, not the other way around.” Reagan shook her head as I spoke, like she couldn’t believe it. “When we first got together, she said I wasn’t a forever kind of guy. I was just someone to have fun with until she met her forever man. At the time, I’d laughed it off and agreed with her. But then she got pregnant, and I asked her to marry me—”

“Wait,” she said, holding her hand up. “I thought she got pregnant after the wedding?”

“Before,” I shrugged. “We weren’t even exclusive at the time.” She blinked.

“But Emma—” She looked toward the hall, her face paling. I knew the questions going through her head. Truthfully, they’d been the same questions I had when Meredith first told me.



“Is mine,” I said firmly. “She’s *my* child.” Reagan’s throat bobbed as she swallowed, nodding slightly, her eyes glazed.

“So, you got married because she was pregnant,” she muttered. “Not because you loved her.” I ran my hand through my hair before grabbing the bottle and taking another pull. I was drinking too much. I knew it, but I couldn’t stop.

“I did love her,” I said softly. “I loved that she gave me Emma. And I loved her independence. I didn’t want someone needy, you know? I wanted to live my life while she lived hers. But maybe that was a mistake.”

I stared at the wall, remembering all the times I’d bragged to my friends about Meredith leaving me the fuck alone, or that when I needed to fuck, she never complained. I thought it was a flex that my wife had her own life and never nagged me, or hounded me, or did anything to insert herself into my life.

Now, I think it was because she didn’t care. Maybe I should’ve tried harder to weave our lives together. I should’ve tried harder to make us feel like a married couple and not roommates that occasionally fucked.

When Reagan said nothing, I shifted my eyes to her, finding her staring at the bottle in her hand. She looked sad. For Meredith? It was probably a lot, finding out that your older sister was in a loveless marriage.

I couldn’t stand the look on her face. I just wanted it to go away. I wanted to make it better.

“It wasn’t all bad,” I blurted. “We used to have pizza nights a few times a month to catch up. You know, to reconnect.” I shrugged. “I always looked forward to those nights. We felt like a real family.” Reagan lifted her eyes, and the tears in them gutted me. “Please don’t cry. I promise I treated her well. I wasn’t mean—I mean, okay, I was sometimes a dick, but not intentionally. And it was only when she’d been drinking and said—”

“I always looked up to you,” she said, cutting me off. The words died on my lips. “I always wanted a family like yours. I

thought you were perfect. Of course, you were perfect. Meredith didn't have anything unless it was perfect."

"We weren't perfect, Rae," I murmured. "We were so far from perfect it's not even funny. So was Meredith." I scooted closer to her on the couch, and, surprisingly, she didn't retreat.

"I wanted a husband like you," she said, her voice choked. "And a baby like Emma. And a life like Meredith's. I—I don't even know what to think right now."

"Trust me," I laughed softly, "you can do much better than me." She shook her head, using the edge of her hand to wipe roughly at her cheek. I didn't understand why she was crying.

I stopped close enough to touch her, but far enough away to be appropriate. I knew I wouldn't be able to stomach the regret in the morning if I touched her again.

Touched her beyond the comforting hand I placed on her bare thigh.

She stared at my hand, her chin quivering. I wanted to force her to look at me, to smooth my thumb over her cheek, over her chin, to stop her from being sad. I just...I just wanted her to smile. To laugh. To do anything other than fucking cry.

"We were mostly happy," I told her, trying to soothe whatever ache she felt. "She was happy. But the last few years, things started getting..." I sighed as I trailed off. I didn't know how to explain it. "Meredith was barely ever home, and when she was, we fought constantly. She was drinking more, and even before she admitted to cheating, I knew there was someone else. And I don't blame her. I don't blame her for finding someone who could make her happy. I couldn't be what she needed. I wish she would've waited until after we were separated to start a relationship with him—"

"Who was it?" Reagan asked, and my hand tightened.

"I don't know." She stared at me, her eyes wide and glassy. "She never told me his name, and I never dug. I didn't want to know."

"But what if it's someone you know?" she asked, and I shrugged.

“It probably is,” I sighed. “But I don’t want to know.” She stared at me for a long moment. “It’s one thing knowing she was fucking someone else, it’s another putting a face to him. I don’t want to know. And even if our marriage was complete bullshit, I still loved her. I still do. I always will. It hurt to know that she was cheating on me, Rae. I didn’t take it lightly. It fucked me up—it *still* fucks me up.”

That was the truth. I’d never told anyone this, never told anyone about the cheating or how it affected me. I never told them that our marriage was complete shit, and I never told them that we were getting divorced. And after she died, it felt weird to start airing out our dirty laundry now, when she couldn’t defend herself.

“We should go to bed,” I finally said, squeezing her thigh again. Her smooth, cool hand slid over mine, and she wrapped her fingers around mine.

*Come to bed with me*, I wanted to say, but didn’t. I wanted to hold her. I wanted her to hold me. I just wanted someone in my arms to force the demons I knew would come away.

“I’m sorry, Elliot,” she murmured. “You deserved better.” I stared at her as she gave my hand a small, gentle squeeze, then stood, my hand falling to my side. She strode to the kitchen, and I listened to the soft sounds of her putting the bottle away.

She didn’t say another word as she passed me and made her way down the hall to her room. Her door softly clicked shut, and I finally let out a breath.

Maybe I didn’t need to give up drinking. Maybe I needed to start drinking more.



# reagan

*I DIDN'T WANT someone needy.*

I don't know why those words, out of everything Eli had said last night, stuck with me. Maybe because they'd shattered whatever ridiculous, tiny amount of hope I'd had in my heart that things could work between us.

But he didn't want needy, and I was the definition of needy. Yeah, maybe on the outside I seemed independent, like he wouldn't need to hold my hand constantly, or reassure me with pretty words and kind gestures. But I would need that. I'd need it all, and so much more.

It was for the best, I reminded myself. It would be weird and terrible to fall for him—well, harder than I already had. I didn't know when it even happened. Maybe the second I met him, or maybe when he chose to make sure I was okay and not Mom after the fight the other night.

I blinked at the realization. He chose *me* and *my* feelings over Mom. I couldn't remember anyone ever doing that before.

But it didn't matter when it happened. It didn't matter because he was off limits, and even if he wasn't, he made it clear that he didn't want someone like me.

I sighed and ran my hand through my hair, tugging lightly on it. Thankfully, it was Saturday, so Eli let me have the day off. So, I decided to hangout with Lily. I sent her a text to let her know I was outside her place, and was now waiting for her to come to the car.

Five seconds, or five minutes, it was hard to know with her. Sometimes she'd be ready well before I showed up. Sometimes she'd start getting ready when she got my *I'm here* text.

Her dad, Theo, stepped outside and stretched, his t-shirt riding up his flat stomach. His brown hair was tousled like he'd just woken up. Which wouldn't be surprising since he was basically a vampire—he slept during the day, worked all night.

He strolled toward my car, a lazy grin on his face. He was a few years older than Eli, but somehow looked younger. Despite working as a paramedic, the stress of the job hadn't taken a toll on his looks. Yet.

I rolled my window down as he approached, and he leaned his tattooed forearms on the door as he poked his head inside.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said, smiling. “How you holding up?”

“Oh, you know,” I laughed.

“Your mom still a bitch?” he asked bluntly, and I laughed again. He'd always been more like an older brother to not only me but to his own daughter, too. Mom hated that he treated us as actual human beings with our own thoughts and feelings and not like idiotic children...even when we were idiotic children.

“She'll never not be one,” I said, and he nodded in agreement. He rubbed his hand over his stubbly jaw as he watched me.

“You know you're always welcome here,” he said. I looked out the front window, sighing.

“Things are fine right now. But I may start crashing on your couch soon.” If things kept getting more awkward between Eli and I, I wouldn't have a choice. “But everything is fine.”

“Yeah, I don't believe that for a fucking second,” he laughed sarcastically. “Just come stay with us. The diner won't miss you.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly. He flashed me an unapologetic grin, his green eyes, the same as Lily’s, twinkling. “Lil didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“I’m staying at Eli’s,” I said, nearly choking on his name. “He asked me to take care of his daughter while he worked.” Theo’s brows lifted. “It’s a good gig, though. She’s an easy kid.”

“And things aren’t weird between you?” he asked, and my spine snapped straight.

“What are you talking about?” I blurted, feeling my face heating. “Why would things be weird?” He gave me a look.

“Just thought it would be weird to live with some guy you barely know,” he said slowly. “You okay?”

“I know him,” I said, probably too defensively. “And he’s not some guy.”

“Is there something—”

“Stop harassing my friend.” Thankfully, Lily shoved Theo out of the way before he could interrogate me further. She yanked the door open and effortlessly slid inside. “We’ll be back later.”

He leaned on the door again, giving us both a pointed look. “What trouble are you causing today?” he asked, and I huffed out a laugh.

“You know we never cause trouble,” I said.

“We’re just going to the mall.” A grin curved Lily’s lips. “Can we have some money, please?” She stuck out her bottom lip, giving him the biggest puppy eyes I’d ever seen.

“You’re going to make me go broke,” he sighed, but still pulled his wallet from his back pocket. “Please spend it wisely.” He handed her two hundreds, before holding out the same to me. I didn’t reach for it, feeling uncomfortable at taking his money.

Eli still hadn't paid me yet, and it felt weird asking him for money, even though I was technically hired by him.

"Shoes and makeup is spending it wisely, right?" Lily asked, grabbing the money in his hand. He gripped it tighter, still staring at me.

"Take the money, kid," he said softly. He knew I hated this. Hated taking money from him—from anyone. I hadn't earned it. I didn't reach for it, and he sighed again before handing it to Lily. "Make sure she buys herself something."

"Will do," Lily said, giving him a mock salute. He rolled his eyes as he tapped his fingers on the door, his eyes flicking between us. "Can you please leave now? We have important business to discuss." His brows rose.

"Like?"

"Like, none of your business," she said, glaring at him. Even though we'd been friends forever and I knew that Theo wouldn't ever get mad at Lily for talking to him like that, her tone still made me itchy.

If I spoke to my mother like that—I shuddered at the images that assaulted my mind. I didn't want to even think about what would happen.

"Atty will probably be here when you get home," Theo said, pulling me from my memories.

"Oh, goody," Lily deadpanned.

"I still don't know the problem you have with him." Theo folded his arms over his chest as he stared down at her.

"He's an ass," she shrugged.

"He's like your uncle," he countered.

"So, that means he can't be an ass?" she shot back, and he laughed. "Okay, we really need to go now. Try not to get too drunk."

"I never get drunk," he said, sounding offended. "Be home by nine!" His words were barely heard as I rolled the window up.



“Yeah, fuck that,” she muttered as she slid her seatbelt on. “I’ll get home whenever I feel like it.” I glanced at her from the corner of my eye, my hands tight around the steering wheel.

“You okay?” I asked, and she shot me a look that told me to shut up.

Her long, tanned legs were on full display in her pink mini skirt, and she showed off her glittery belly button piercing in her cream-colored crop top. Her blonde hair was loose around her shoulders, and—

“Oh my God, Lily!” I cried, slamming on my breaks. “You’re covered in glitter!”

“What?” She glanced down at herself and snorted a laugh. “Oh yeah. I put on body glitter and forgot.”

“You forgot?” I took her in again. She was covered in so much glitter it looked like a fucking bomb went off. “I’m never going to get that out of my car. God.” I rested my head against the headrest as she cackled. “It’s not funny. I can’t take glitter into Eli’s house.”

“Why not?” she asked, still giggling to herself. “It’s not like he’s not used to it. He has a daughter.” I thought about it for a moment. I didn’t think I’d ever seen Emma play with glitter. Had I?

Uni had glitter on her horn, but that didn’t count. Paint, she played with. Crayons and markers, sure. But not glitter. Not even glitter glue.

Was it a her thing, or him? He didn’t seem to care that we might’ve colored on his door the other day, so he didn’t seem like the type to care about some spilled glitter. But maybe he was. Maybe he was putting on a show and cared a lot.

About the glitter.

“Speaking of Eli,” Lily said, drawing out his name. “Have you fucked yet?”

“Jesus save me,” I muttered. “No, and we’re not going to.”

“Sure.” She laughed again, and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to ignore the memory of his hands on me. His hand between my legs. I forced my eyes open, letting the bright sun blind and ground me. “Why not?”

I ignored her as I began driving again. I felt her staring at me, waiting for an answer, and she was stubborn enough to do it all fucking day. But I didn’t know what to say. That we almost did, but then I fucked it up with my weird admission? Or that he’d turned me down?

“Can you please stop staring at me?” I growled. She patted my bare thigh in a way that told me she definitely wasn’t going to stop.

“You might as well just tell me now,” she said. “I have other stuff to talk to you about today. But if you need me to drag it out of you, I can.” I groaned. I knew she would, too. I knew she’d bug me about it until I finally snapped and told her everything.

I turned my blinker on as I moved into the turning lane, pausing as a stupid amount of cars soared past me. I pretended like paying attention to the traffic was what kept me from speaking, but we both knew I was stalling.

It was just that I didn’t know where to even begin.

Finally, I sighed. “After my date with Benji, Eli was drunk...”

I told her everything as I drove through the mall parking lot, looking for a parking spot. Honestly, I was more surprised that she stayed silent the entire time. By the time I was done, we were parked and she was twisted in her seat staring at me, her mouth hanging open.

“I can’t believe they were getting a divorce,” she said, and I nodded my agreement. Yeah, everything he’d told me was still a shock to me, too. “And that Meredith was a total bitch to him. I mean, I knew she was a cunt to everyone else, but him? I thought—”

“She’s still my sister,” I said defensively, and Lily rolled her eyes.

“Oh, please. You’ve said worse about her.”

“Yeah, but I’m allowed to.”

“And I’m not?”

I took a deep breath as I stared straight ahead. The parking lot was packed and people were walking everywhere. Somehow, I blacked out while telling Lily everything and found a space in seemingly no time.

“So, he clearly wants you,” she continued.

“He said he doesn’t want needy,” I muttered. She stayed silent for a long moment before clearing her throat.

“You’re not needy,” she said softly. I turned to look at her, finding her staring down at her lap. “Just because you want to know your man wants and desires you doesn’t make you needy.”

“But feeling like he has to tell me he loves me everyday \_\_\_”

“Is an expectation,” she interrupted, looking up at me. I swallowed thickly. “You’re not asking for too much, Rae. And the right man won’t feel like you’re too needy, either. The right one will be more than willing to give you everything you need to feel secure.”

Logically, I knew she was right. That’s how it was supposed to be, right? But finding a guy like that felt impossible.

“Right,” I breathed, rubbing my forehead. “You’re right.”

“I know,” she chirped. I slid my eyes to her, finding her smiling. It didn’t feel like a real smile, though. Something was off.

“What’s new with you?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Nothing,” she said too quickly. I straightened and turned more toward her.

“Okay, so now I know something is definitely going on,” I said. “What is it?” She sighed as she pressed her back harder

into the car seat.

“Dad’s just being impossible again,” she muttered. “And Atticus is—” She cut herself off, giving me a sidelong glance.

“Atticus is...” I trailed off, waiting for her to finish her thought, but she just shook her head. Atticus was Theo’s best friend, basically like his brother. She always butted heads with both of them, but for whatever reason, it felt like lately, she’d been fighting with Atticus more than usual.

But I decided to leave it alone. Unlike my best friend, I didn’t pry into her business. If she wanted to tell me, she would. Something about this shit with Atty made me feel like something much bigger than her usual drama was going on.

“I’m fine,” she finally sighed. I gave her a look, and she huffed out a laugh. “Really. I’m good.”

“Whatever you say.” She grinned and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly.

“You good?”

I thought about it for a moment. I wasn’t good. I was stressing about Eli, and a little voice at the back of my head had me stressing about Benji. I didn’t know how to navigate what was happening. I couldn’t cut Eli out of my life, not when I still wanted to see Emma. And I didn’t want to ruin things with Benji. Not because I saw them going anywhere permanent, but he was a good guy and I didn’t want to hurt him.

Maybe I should just end things with him before they really begin. We’d only had one date, it wasn’t like he was in love with me.



# elliott

I SANK onto the couch beside Emma and she immediately curled into my side, Uni clutched tightly in her arms. Her eyes were still a little glassy, and she was clingier than usual, so I assumed she was still not feeling well.

I hated to see her sick, but other than giving her medicine and extra love, there was nothing else I could do. Wrapping my arm around her, I settled deeper into the couch and blankly stared at the cartoon on TV. I tried to focus on the show, but my mind couldn't help but wander back to last night.

After telling Reagan everything, she retreated to her room and this morning, she all but sprinted from the house when I told her she could take the day off. I didn't know why I stupidly assumed she'd hang out with us today. Of course, she'd want to see Lily. Unless she was using Lily as a cover for seeing Benji again.

Just the thought made my blood boil.

I knew it wasn't fair. I couldn't get mad at her for trying to date. But I still didn't fucking like it. The idea of her with him, under him, made me seethe.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to focus on the TV again. I needed to get my head on straight before she got home. I couldn't jump her as soon as she got home again, demanding to know things I had no right to know.

My phone rang and Emma tensed. "It's okay," I soothed, grabbing my phone from the end table beside me. I inwardly

groaned at Cora's name on the screen. "It's Grammy. I need to answer."

Emma barely lifted her body enough for me to push myself off the couch. With a deep breath, I answered the phone and pressed it to my ear.

"Hey, Cora," I said as I walked down the hall. I stopped at my room, but my eyes stayed on Reagan's door.

"I haven't seen Emma in a few days," she said, jumping straight into it. I sighed and rested my hand on the wall, bowing my head slightly.

"She's sick," I said.

"Sick?" she repeated, sounding alarmed. "Why didn't you call me?"

"It's just another earache," I explained. "She's okay. We took her to the doctor yesterday—"

"We?" she interrupted, and I took a deep breath.

"Reagan and I," I said. I thought it would be obvious who I meant by *we*.

"So, she knew, but not me," she bit out, and I rolled my eyes.

"She was with Em when she got sick," I said. "Rae called me at work, and I rushed home. I didn't think about calling you. There was so much going on." She was silent for a long moment, and I braced myself for whatever bullshit was about to spew from her mouth.

"How are things with her?" she asked. I didn't need to ask which *her* she meant. I knew it was Reagan.

"Great," I said, forcing my voice to be light. "She's amazing with Em, and she's a surprisingly good cook." I laughed, but Cora didn't.

"She's cooking, too?"

My smile fell. Why did that question feel like a trap?

“Yep,” I said tightly. She made a humming sound that grated down my bones. “Is that a problem?”

“No,” she said tightly. “I just didn’t realize she was playing cook and nanny. Is she cleaning too? Might as well add maid to the list.” I ground my teeth together until it felt like they were going to turn to dust.

“I didn’t ask her to do it,” I said defensively. “She’s doing it because she wants to. I don’t know what I’m going to do when she leaves for the next retreat.” Cora barked out a laugh, and I clutched the phone tighter in my hand.

“Those damn retreats,” she said, but the word retreat felt sarcastic. “We both know she’s just using it as an excuse to do drugs, and God only knows what else—”

“She barely even drinks.”

I thought about her words last night. *I have a problem stopping once I start.* If that were true for alcohol, I assumed she didn’t do drugs. And even if she did, it wasn’t my business. It wasn’t like she was doing them around Emma, and they obviously weren’t ruling her life. I knew I did my fair share of stupid shit, including drugs, when I was her age, so I couldn’t judge her for it.

“What else would she be doing?” Cora countered.

“Yoga?” I said dryly, and she huffed out another humorless laugh.

“Oh, I’m sure she does plenty of that.” The phone shook in my hand. “Did you know she went on a date with Benji the other night?”

“Yes,” I ground out. I didn’t want to relive that night.

“And you thought it was fine?”

“She can do what she wants,” I said, even though the words tasted like ash. “I’m not in charge of her.”

“What if Emma needed something?” she asked.

“I was home.” I took a deep breath. I don’t know why I felt so defensive. “When I get home, she’s done for the day.” She



hummed again, and I braced my hand on the wall.

“So, she’s not working this weekend?”

“She went out with Lily,” I sighed. Cora laughed again.

“Of course, she did,” she said. “Do you know what Lily does for work?” No, I didn’t know, and I really didn’t care. “I heard she sleeps with men for money.” My brows lifted. “She’s always at the Diamond Club—”

“That’s a strip club,” I interrupted. “If she works there, she’s probably a dancer or server. They’re not prostitutes.” There was a beat of tense silence and I knew what her next question would be before she even spoke.

“How do you know?” she asked. “Have you been?”

“Yes, Cora,” I deadpanned. “I have been to a strip club a few times in my life. I know what goes on in them.”

“I didn’t know—”

“Look,” I interrupted again. “Is there something you need? I really need to get back to Emma.”

“I wanted to discuss her party,” she said tightly.

Fuck. Emma’s birthday. How the fuck had I forgotten it?

“Right,” I breathed. “What about it?”

“Well, have you planned anything? What’s the theme? What food do I need to make? Or dessert? How many people? What about—”

“Jesus,” I breathed, feeling overwhelmed. “I’ll get back to you on the details. I’m still planning.” I knew she knew it was a total lie, but whatever.

“You know I can do it for you,” she said. I pushed off the wall and paced down the hallway.

I paused at the entrance to the living room. Emma was still curled on her side, Uni clutched tightly in her arms as she watched her show with glassy eyes. She was fighting her sleep, but I knew the second I sat down, she’d cuddle next to

me and be out in a few minutes. So I really needed to get off the damn phone.

“It’s fine,” I said quietly, still watching Emma.

“Just let me—”

“Cora, please,” I breathed. “I need to do this myself.” My throat tightened.

This would be the first major event without Meredith, and I needed to prove to myself, and to Emma, that I could do this. That I could handle things on my own. That I could still give her everything she wanted.

“You’ll let me know if I can do anything,” she said.

“Of course.” I was honestly surprised she didn’t try to fight me on it. I was just thankful she could read between the lines enough to let me have this. “I have to go.” Before she could say anything else, I hung up and strode toward Emma.

She lifted her head enough to look at me, then scooted over and let me sit beside her. As expected, she curled into my side as I wrapped my arm around her, and within a few minutes, she was asleep.



SITTING AT THE KITCHEN TABLE, I braced my head on my hand as I scrolled on my laptop. Meredith had done mostly everything when it came to planning Emma’s previous parties. I grilled, picked up the alcohol for the adults, and bought the best presents I could find. She did literally everything else.

There was so much more that went into it than I realized. But I wouldn’t ask for help. I could do this. I *needed* to do it.

I glanced at my check-list on the table beside me. Bouncy house, ice cream bar, unicorn everything.

I sighed as I rubbed my forehead. What else did I need? Food? Probably. But kids didn’t want real food at birthday

parties. They wanted ice cream and cake. Parents wanted alcohol to deal with all the screaming kids.

The front door opened, and I stiffened. Shit. I zoned out so hard I totally forgot Reagan wasn't home.

Keys clanked in the dish by the front door, then there was a slight shuffling as she walked across the floor. My heart rate picked up as I braced myself. Would she ignore me and go to her room? Or would she come in here and check on me? Did I want her to do that?

Fuck. I did. I wanted to share this burden with someone. But not just anyone, her specifically. I wanted to lay my problems at her feet while she listened to me with that beautifully genuine sympathetic expression. Then I wanted to listen to her day's adventures. I wanted to know everything, and I wanted her to know everything.

I was so fucked.

Her dark head popped into the kitchen, and she smiled tiredly at me. "Hey," she said softly, her eyes scanning the table. I forced my lips up in a tight smirk.

"You look exhausted," I said, and she huffed out a laugh.

"I am." She tossed her purse on the table as she floated toward me, kicking her shoes off as she went. She slumped into the chair beside me and slouched back. "Lily is more tiring than Emma." I leaned back, draping my arm on the back of the chair.

"What did you two do?" I asked, and she shrugged.

"Went to the mall," she said.

"All day?" She gave me a sly grin.

"I took Lil to pick up her paycheck, then we watched the game with her dad and uncle."

"You like sports?" I asked, shocked, and she barked out a humorless laugh.

"God, no," she giggled. "But I liked the snacks. And baseball players have incredible asses."

“You did not just say that,” I said, trying to hide my laugh. Her eyes sparkled with humor.

I felt lighter. And somehow, it felt like she was lighter too, like spending the day with her friend was exactly what she needed to get back to her old self.

“How’s Em?” She ran her hand through her hair as she watched me.

“Still not feeling well.” I grabbed my glass of water, but didn’t lift it to my lips. I just needed to do something with my hands.

“I shouldn’t have gone out today,” she said, biting her bottom lip. My grip tightened on the glass. Everything in me wanted to tug her lip free, but I forced my hand to stay put. I couldn’t keep touching her, even if I really fucking wanted to.

“You couldn’t have done anything if you were here,” I said softly. “We just watched her shows. Nothing exciting.”

“It’s always exciting when I’m around you,” she breathed. Her face flushed red, and she sat up straighter. “I just meant—you always know how to make things exciting. And Emma—” Her words died as she stared back at me. That’s how we stayed for a few heartbeats, just staring at each other.

So much tension filled the kitchen it felt like the air was going to snap.

“You make things exciting too, angel,” I whispered. “We missed you today.”

“Really?”

I hated how shocked she sounded. “Yes, really.” I couldn’t help it anymore. I reached out and rested my hand over hers, gently squeezing. Her eyes fluttered shut as she took a deep breath.

“Elliot,” she breathed, barely audible, “we can’t.” I both loved and hated when she called me Elliot. I was always Eli to her. Elliot felt like I was something more.

She finally opened her eyes, and her gaze met mine again. So many unsaid words swirled in the hazel color. I wanted to

know what she was thinking, what she was feeling, what she truly wanted. Maybe it would help me know what I wanted, too.

“What are you doing?” she asked, sliding her hand out from under mine. I roughly cleared my throat and dropped my hand back to my lap before looking at the laptop.

“It’s almost Emma’s birthday,” I said. My gaze was on the screen, but I wasn’t really seeing anything. “I’m trying to plan her party.”

“When is it?” she asked, scooting closer to me to get a look at the screen. I tried to ignore the sweet way she smelled, but fuck. It only made me focus on it more, and I felt my cock harden in my sweats.

“Two weeks,” I rasped. Her head snapped to me.

“And you’re just now planning?” Her mouth hung open in shock. “Oh my God, Eli! We don’t have any time!”

“We?” I asked, forcing my tone to be light. “Are you helping me?”

“Of course!” she said, her eyes wide. “I can’t believe you’re waiting until the last second. Jesus. Let me see this—”

“No.” I rested my hand on the laptop, stopping her from pulling it toward her. “I want your help—no, I need it. But I also need to do this myself, Rae.” Her eyes searched mine and I knew she didn’t understand. “Meredith always did this.” I dropped my gaze to my lap. “She always planned everything. I just went along with whatever she said. But now it’s just me, and I need to prove to myself that I can do it. I need to prove to myself that I’m a decent father, you know?”

“Eli,” she breathed, her voice thick. “You’re an amazing father.” I shook my head. She was just saying that because what else could she say? She was too nice to tell me the brutal truth. “Elliot. Look at me.”

I didn’t want to, but my eyes lifted without my permission. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” I admitted. “I’m not good—I wasn’t made to be a parent.”

It wasn't like I had any role models. My dad dipped as soon as he found out my mother was pregnant, and my mom was too busy trying to find her next husband that she didn't have time for me. So, it was always just me. I figured everything out on my own, raised myself. I think I turned out alright, but the lingering fear that I was the same absent, mediocre parents as my mother haunted me.

"You're an incredible man," she said softly as she slid her hand onto mine. It was dangerously close to my crotch, but I didn't move it. "And an incredible father. You're doing your best, aren't you?"

"But I'm not doing enough—"

"That's not what I asked," she interrupted, and I blinked at her. I'd never heard her voice so firm before. "I asked if you're doing your best."

"Yes," I nodded.

"And you're not neglecting Em, right?" I gave her a horrified look as she lifted her brows expectantly.

"Of course not," I said. "Jesus. You think—"

"I don't think that," she said, her hand tightening around mine. "But you do. And it's a load of shit." I blinked at her.

"What?"

"It's total bullshit," she repeated. "You didn't think you'd have to do this on your own, but here you are. And there's no rule book, or instruction manual, or forum online that tells you how to navigate life as a single dad while you and your baby mourn. But here you are," she emphasized the words, "doing your best."

"My best isn't good enough," I said, and she shook her head.

"I wish you could see yourself through my eyes," she murmured, staring into my soul. I swallowed thickly. I didn't know what to say to that.

Instead of saying anything, I took a deep breath and turned my attention back to the laptop. I felt her eyes on me, stabbing

into the side of my head. I felt the anticipation, the way she seemed to hold her breath as she waited for me to reply.

But nothing.

I said nothing.

Maybe I was a coward. Maybe I was just protecting my heart. Whatever the reason, I couldn't form any coherent words. Not that I tried.

"Which bouncy house do you like?" I asked, my voice thick and raw. She hesitated before removing her hand and turning toward the screen.

"The pink one," she muttered. "Em loves pink." I nodded my agreement. That had been my first choice, too. "Make a list of what you need and I'll do what I can." I nodded as she stood, still too cowardly to look at her.

Silently, she made her way back across the kitchen, dipping to gather her discarded shoes before grabbing her purse. She paused at the archway and looked back at me.

"You should give yourself more credit," she said, and finally, I lifted my gaze. She'd never looked so beautiful. "You're doing amazing, Eli. And whenever you need to hear it, I'm here to say it. I'll never stop reminding you how incredible you are."

With that, she left. Words still wouldn't come. What could I say? What could I think or feel? She'd made it clear—we both had—that we couldn't feel anything toward each other, but she made it so damn hard when she said shit like that. When she looked at me the way she had.

I sighed and pressed into the center of my forehead, feeling a headache coming on. Glancing at my glass of water, I really wished I would've filled it with whiskey instead. But I was trying to be better and not drink tonight.

What a fucking mistake.





# elliott

I NEVER WANTED to plan another birthday party. Ever. As long as I walked this Earth, I never, ever, fucking *ever*, wanted to do it again.

It was fucking Hell.

Call this person, that person, find a cake decorator—oh, wait, the cake decorator is out on maternity leave? Gotta find another. Get enough plates and utensils, but not the plain, boring, ugly ones. They had to be pink and sparkly and covered in fucking unicorns. Oh, and I couldn't forget the stupid ball pit Emma asked for.

Why had I agreed to a goddamn ball pit?

I rubbed at my temples in firm circular motions. I hadn't had a drink in two nights and my body was screaming at me to just crack the bottle open and take a swig. There was a bottle in my bottom drawer right now. No one would be the wiser. I could just take a pull and return it to its hiding place.

But, no.

I was stronger than that.

And I was at work. The last thing I needed was someone walking into my office when I had the bottle glued to my lips.

After work.

I'd have a drink, or ten. But I'd do it *after* work.

I stared down at the phone number scribbled on a piece of paper. I'd been avoiding calling the life insurance company

because it felt too final. Once the money was in my account, it was all over.

But Cora had been on me since Meredith passed that I needed to do it, and it felt right doing it now. I could use the money to give Emma the best party in the entire world. I just needed to muster up the courage to call and go through all the steps I needed to get the money.

Once I did this, though, it was over and I didn't know why I felt so reluctant to end things. To close this chapter. To move on and try to finish mourning her. Was I even still mourning her? Had I ever even started?

I needed to stop going down this road. Of course, I'd mourned her. I'd loved her at one time. But maybe I'd mourned her and our relationship way before she ever died.

With a deep breath, I typed the number into my office phone and held the receiver against my ear. My stomach churned with every ring. Maybe it was a bad idea.

I knew Meredith had a lot of life insurance money but was it worth it to feel like this? Fuck. I knew it was. Emma could use it. I could use it for her party, then save the rest for college, or her wedding, or for anything she needed.

"Hello, this is Pamela, how can I help you?" a cheery voice said, startling me from my thoughts.

"Hey, Pamela," I said gruffly. "I'm Elliot Hayes, and I'm calling on behalf of my late wife, Meredith Hayes."

"Alright, Mr. Hayes," she said. "What can I do for you?" I took a deep breath and ignored the way my hands shook.

"My wife passed about six months ago," I started. "I—"

"I'm so sorry for your loss," she interrupted.

"Thanks," I breathed, and roughly cleared my throat. "I know it's been a few months, and I should've called sooner. I'm not really sure how it works, but I'm interested in withdrawing her life insurance."

"You should've received the money after she passed," she said.

“I never called—well, I did, but then got overwhelmed, and—”

“I understand,” she said softly. “Do you have the account number?” I glanced at the folded paper and rattled off the number. I waited, intently listening to the faint taps as she typed. “Oh, this is odd. You never received the money?”

“No.” My stomach twisted tighter. “I thought I needed to call to withdraw—”

“Usually, after proof of death, we deposit the money straight into your account,” she said. “You said your name was Elliot?”

“Yes,” I said, drawing the word out.

“And you’re her husband?”

“Yes.” I was starting to have a bad feeling.

“Strange,” she muttered. “It says the money was fully deposited into the beneficiary’s account.”

“That was me,” I said, confused. “I never got anything—”

“Is it possible she changed who her beneficiary was?” she asked reluctantly. “The name here doesn’t match yours. Possibly to her brother? Or her father, perhaps?”

“It’s another man’s name?” I rasped. She was silent for a long moment.

“I can’t give out personal information.”

What a load of shit.

Who could she have changed it to? My mind raced. The night she died, she told me she was leaving to go to the man’s house she’d been cheating on me with. She never gave me his name.

I tried to cycle through every man she knew, every man we knew. A few stood out, but when I landed on one, my stomach fell to the floor.

“If I give you a name, can you confirm or deny it?” I asked. She was silent for a long moment and I braced myself.

“I can’t give out personal information,” she repeated slowly. She said that.

Wait.

She couldn’t give out the information, but she wasn’t saying she couldn’t confirm it. Maybe it was code? A workaround? A way for her to do me a solid without losing her job?

I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to know the answer.

“Drake Abernathy?” I whispered. As his name formed on my lips, everything fell into place. It wouldn’t matter if Pamela confirmed it, I already knew in my heart that it was him.

That it had always been him.

Pamela made a humming sound that sounded a lot like “*Mhm.*”

The backs of my eyes burned.

Meredith had cheated on me with Drake, her fucking boss. I’d shared beers with the guy. I’d personally invited him to our baby shower, to my birthday parties.

Betrayal tasted like ash on my tongue.

I was going to be sick.

I was going to rage.

I was going to break something.

I was going to scream.

“Thank you,” I grunted.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said, sounding genuine. Before she could say anything else, I hung up.

Drake fucking Abernathy. Of all the people in the world, why did Meredith have to go and fuck him? I knew he was better than me, or she thought he was. More attractive, more successful—just more. He was her type in every way, but she’d always assured me their relationship was strictly platonic.

Not that I'd ever had a fucking inkling that they'd ever had non-platonic feelings for each other.

I'd shared my marital problems with the fucking guy. And he was the cause of most of them! He'd consoled me. He'd clapped my shoulder, promised everything would be alright, that Meredith would find her way.

Yeah, she'd found her way. Straight into his fucking arms. Into his bed.

Rage boiled under my skin. How could they do this to me?

I hadn't thought Drake was my best friend, but I'd thought he was at least a friend. Is this why he'd become more active in our lives over the last year? Always coming around?

I felt like a fucking fool.

They'd rubbed it in my face and I hadn't even known. They probably laughed about it together, thinking I was such an idiot.

How many lingering glances had I ignored? How many stolen kisses had they shared under our roof? Had she fucked him in our bed?

I squeezed my eyes shut at the images assaulting my mind.

Meredith was going to leave me, take Emma from me, and go live with him. She was going to take me out of her life, and slot him in, like nothing had changed. Like I didn't even fucking exist.

Why had I been so willfully ignorant? I ignored red flags. Maybe it was easier to do that than acknowledge the truth. But if I had, maybe I wouldn't feel so fucking sick right now.



# reagan

THE FRONT DOOR BANGED OPEN, and I snatched Emma up before bolting to my feet, ready to flee in the opposite direction. Elliot stumbled in, his clothes disheveled, his hair a wreck, one of his shoes untied.

I'd never seen him look like this.

Unease swirled in my belly as I set Emma back on the couch. Warily, I took a step forward.

"Eli?" I murmured. He braced his hand on the wall while he struggled to kick one of his shoes off with the other foot.

"Damn thing," he grumbled, stumbling forward a step and nearly falling. He caught himself at the last moment and went back to trying to take his shoe off.

"Elliot." His bloodshot eyes lifted to mine. He looked haggard—*worse* than haggard. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," he slurred and turned his attention back to his feet. I moved closer to him, ignoring the thick alcohol scent wafting off him. He groaned when his shoe slid against the other, still not coming off.

"Go sit down," I sighed, rubbing my forehead. I needed to get Emma to bed before she realized something was really wrong with him. He ignored me as he tripped over his feet again. "Elliot! Go sit down." He jolted at my tone, his eyes widening as he stared at me. "Please."

He didn't look happy about it, but he trudged to the couch and sank onto the opposite end from Emma. She stared at him

with giant eyes.

“Why don’t you go play with Uni in your room?” I said softly as I approached her. She didn’t look at me. She just continued staring at Eli. God, I was going to smack him for this.

If he wanted to get drunk, that was fine. But he could wait until after she’d already gone to bed. She didn’t need to see him like this.

Anger surged in my veins. How fucking immature was he? How selfish? He clearly drove home wasted off his ass. What if he’d gotten into an accident? Emma could’ve lost her only parent left.

“Go on, honey,” I said softly, smoothing my hand over her silky hair. Finally, she looked up at me.

“Is Daddy okay?” she whispered. I glanced over my shoulder, finding his head lolled back and mouth open.

No.

He very clearly wasn’t okay.

“He’s fine,” I lied, and smiled gently at her. “He’s just tired.” She looked like she didn’t believe me. I didn’t blame her. I was a terrible liar.

But she slid from the couch, gathering Uni tightly in her arms. She stared at Eli for a long moment before making her way to him. I forced myself not to intervene, but it was hard, and I was pissed.

If he did anything to upset her, I really would smack him.

“Daddy,” she muttered, jerking on his hand. One eye opened before the other, and he dropped his head forward.

“Hi, baby,” he slurred. His face brightened as he stared down at her, and my heart squeezed.

He was just drunk. It didn’t make him a bad father.

“You okay?” She kept her hand on his arm, and if I could see her face, I imagined the worry that would be on it.



“Fine,” he said, smiling lazily at her. “I’m just—” He glanced up at me, like he didn’t know what to say.

“Tired,” I said, and he gave me a hard nod.

“Just tired, baby.”

“You missed dinner,” she said quietly. “Where were you? I made you a cookie.” Tears gathered in his eyes, making them redder.

“You made me a cookie?” he repeated, his voice thick. “What did I do to deserve that?” Emma shrugged one shoulder, still gripping his hand for dear life.

“You like them,” she said simply, and something that sounded like a sob choked him.

“Come on, Em,” I said, patting her back. “Bedtime.” She let out a soft sigh, but before she turned, she launched herself at Eli. He grunted out a breath, but his arms instinctively wrapped around her. He held her tightly to him, his eyes squeezed shut.

“Night night,” she mumbled. He hugged her for another moment then pulled away enough to kiss the top of her head.

“Goodnight,” he rasped. His red eyes lifted to mine, but I just shook my head. I didn’t know what he wanted, if he wanted anything, but I couldn’t handle him and Emma together right now.

Luckily, she’d already had a bath and had been winding down for bed, so I read her a short book and promised her an extra story tomorrow night. For being so young, she understood I was worried about Eli without me even having to say anything.

After shutting the light off and leaving her door open a crack, I made my way back to the living room, finding Eli laying on his side on the couch, his shoes finally off. I leaned against the wall and stared at him.

What had happened that led to this? I knew he drank, but he didn’t drink like this.

Or maybe he did, and I just wanted to believe he didn’t.

“You gonna stand there and stare at me all night like a creep?” he mumbled, his eyes still closed. I straightened. How did he know I was even here?

“What happened?”

“Nothing.” He didn’t move, he just stayed laying on his side looking far too comfortable. “Long day.”

His answer pissed me off all over again.

“Really?” I sneered. “That’s the only answer I get?” Finally, he pried his eyes open.

“What answer do you want?”

“The truth would be nice.” I folded my arms over my chest. “No one gets drunk like this on a weeknight for no reason.”

“Maybe I do,” he shot back, his words thick. I let out a humorless laugh as I shook my head.

“Whatever,” I said. “Do whatever the fuck you want, Elliot. But don’t let Emma see—”

“See what?” he snarled. I took a step forward.

“See her dad drunk off his ass!” I shouted, then winced. She didn’t need to hear us arguing, either. “Did you even think about her tonight? Did you think about anyone other than yourself?” He blinked at me, still looking dazed. I knew he wasn’t retaining anything I was telling him, but I was too far gone to care.

“I thought about—”

“You didn’t think!” I interrupted. “If you had, then you wouldn’t have driven home drunk. You wouldn’t have gotten this drunk in the first fucking place. What the hell were you thinking? You’re the only parent she has left and she can’t lose you.”

“I didn’t drive home,” he said. My mouth opened, then closed.

“What?”

“Taxi.” He fumbled with his phone before tossing it to me. My throat was tight as I stared down at the screen. Sure enough, it was a receipt for his fare. I glanced up at him, finding his glassy gaze on me. “Wouldn’t drive drunk. Not a dumbass.”

“I didn’t say you were,” I breathed, handing his phone back to him. It slipped from his fingers and landed on the floor. Immediately, I bent to reach for it. Our heads clashed into each other, and pain shot through me. I stumbled back a step, holding my forehead. Jesus, his head was hard.

“Shit.” He scooted to the edge of the seat, his arm outstretched. “Let me see.”

“I’m fine,” I mumbled. I wasn’t, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Then let me see.” He struggled to his feet, and swayed as he stood. Reluctantly, I pulled my hand away. He grimaced. “It’s a bit red. But I think you’ll be fine.”

“Told you.” I rubbed the sore spot again. He reached for my hand and gently tugged it from my head. He stared down at me like he genuinely cared. I don’t know why that made my throat tighten the way it did. “Is your head alright?”

“I’m okay,” he whispered, his hand still wrapped around my wrist.

“What happened?” I shuffled a step closer. “Why are you drunk?” He closed his eyes as he took a deep breath.

“I found out some bad news,” he said breathlessly. “I wanted to forget about it for a while.”

“Did it work?” His eyes fluttered open.

“No,” he admitted. “It just made it worse.” I bit my bottom lip.

“What was it?” I didn’t know if I really wanted to know, but maybe he needed to talk about it. He opened his mouth, but hesitated.

“Nothing for you to worry about, angel,” he murmured. My breath hitched at the pet name. He had to stop calling me

that, but I couldn't force the words out. "I'm sorry I missed dinner."

"I can warm up some leftovers for you." I made to step away, but his grip tightened.

"Can we just—" He took a deep breath. "Can we just hang out for a bit? I'm not hungry."

"Hang out?" I repeated, my brows scrunching together.

"Yeah. Watch a movie, or—never mind." He shook his head and let go of my hand. "Never mind."

"We can," I rushed out. "I just—"

"No," he said, stumbling back until the back of his legs hit the couch. "It's not a good idea."

"But—"

"I know I'll want something more," he rasped. "I know I'll want to hold you, or—or more. And I can't—" I nodded. I understood, and I agreed. A movie night would definitely end with us crossing another line. But the lines were starting to get more blurred, and I was starting to not care as much. Yet, I couldn't tell him that. I couldn't form the words to say that I wanted him to hold me, to kiss me, to do more with me.

But I kept my mouth shut.

"I'll go to bed then," I said. "Will you be okay?"

"Fine." He waved me off as he sank back onto the couch.

"I'll keep the door open in case you need me," I said as I took a step back. He nodded as he reclined back, his head resting against the back. "I'll check on you—"

"Goodnight, Reagan," he rasped, and I clamped my mouth shut. I sulked back to my bedroom, checking on Emma on the way.

I don't know how he managed to do that, jerk every emotion out of me so quickly, and leave me feeling like...this. Not empty, but not full, either.

Wanting.

He left me wanting, and I don't know if I loved or hated him for it.



# reagan

LILY GAVE me a bewildered look as she took a sip of her tea. “And he just passed out on the couch?”

“Yep,” I sighed. “He didn’t trust himself not to want more with me.” I rolled my eyes as I ran my hand through my hair and leaned back, resting my head against the couch.

It’d been a week since Eli came home drunk, and I still had no idea why. He’d been avoiding me like the fucking plague since that night, too. If it wasn’t for dinnertime, I wouldn’t see him. Emma wouldn’t see him, either.

After dinner, he retreated to his room and would stay there until the next morning. Sometimes, he wouldn’t even have time to get his coffee or breakfast. He’d just poke his head into the kitchen and say goodbye to us, then head out.

I didn’t know what I’d done wrong, if anything. But I wanted to fix things. He just looked so down and lost and alone. I wanted to be there for him, but his walls were up and impossible to break through.

“Did he even ask what you wanted?” Lily asked. I slid my eyes to her. “I mean, obviously, you wanted him to fuck you.”

“Lily!” I laughed and threw a couch pillow at her. It barely missed her tea, and she gave me a wicked grin.

“Come on,” she said. “Didn’t you want to—”

“It doesn’t matter,” I muttered, my smile falling.

“Do you like him?”

“Can we just drop this?” I asked, and she shook her head. “I’m planning on going to the next retreat. I have Benji—” She barked out a laugh, but I ignored her. “What? And on top of everything else, he’s my sister’s husband.”

“But, from what you’ve told me, they weren’t even happy,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Look,” she sighed, running her hand through her blonde hair. “I’m just saying that sometimes things aren’t black or white, good or bad, you know? It’s not bad if you have feelings for him.” I opened my mouth to argue, and she held her hand up. “I know you’re making excuses because you’re scared. I understand. But you’re not a bad person for wanting to be with him.”

“But he doesn’t want to be with me,” I mumbled. She snorted another laugh before taking a sip of her tea.

Emma squealed as she soared out of her bedroom and into the living room, her eyes wide and panicked. I immediately jumped to my feet. Surprisingly, Lily was right beside me.

“What is it?” I asked, grabbing Emma’s arm, ready to haul her away from whatever made her scream like that.

“Uni!” she cried, holding her toy out to me. I paused and glanced down at it. It was covered in purple slime.

“Did it throw up on itself?” Lily asked, and I shot her a look, but she looked serious. Emma scrunched her nose.

“Uni doesn’t throw up,” she hissed, and Lily lifted her hands.

“My bad.” She took a step away. “I’ll be over here.”

Ignoring her, I crouched in front of Emma and gently took Uni from her hands. “We can get Uni all clean,” I promised. She sniffled and wiped her non-existent tears with the back of her hand.

“Baking soda is supposed to help,” Lily said as I stood. They were on my heels as I made my way to the kitchen.



“How do you know that?” I asked over my shoulder.

“The internet is a beautiful thing,” she said, and I huffed out a laugh as I opened the pantry.

I searched for the baking soda, feeling stupidly triumphant when I found it. I sent Emma to sit at the table with Lily, not caring that Lily had no idea how to talk to kids. Even when she was a kid herself, she never felt like one. When she was around, it always felt like having an adult there.

Pouring the baking soda on the toy, I used a cloth to gently scrub at it. Thankfully, the slime began clumping and falling away. I sighed out a relieved breath. I’d need to buy Lily a drink or shoes or make her favorite meal to thank her for this. If Uni was ruined forever, I didn’t know what Emma would do.

“Who’s car—” I stumbled back a step, jolting at the deep rumble of Eli’s voice.

“Where the—when did you get home?” I cried, pressing my hand to my chest. “Jesus, I didn’t even hear you!” His lips twitched into a smirk, but he quickly schooled his features.

“Hey, Eli,” Lily purred. I shot her a glare, but she wasn’t looking at me.

It wasn’t her fault she was stupid hot and had a natural bedroom voice. But it did make things hard when I liked a guy and they finally saw her. They’d forget entirely about me and move on to drooling for her—which was fine. I knew I wasn’t ugly. Just, in comparison, not as hot as her.

I waited for Eli’s demeanor to change, for him to straighten or push his chest out or do anything to show that he was interested in Lily. It’s not like he hadn’t met her before, but it had been years since they last saw each other.

“Oh, hey,” he said, jerking his chin at her. “I didn’t know you were coming over.” He slid his eyes to me and I gave him an apologetic smile.

“Daddy! Uni is dying!” Emma shouted, startling all of us. He blinked, then turned to me, looking horrified.

“Purple slime,” I explained, holding the toy up. His eyes widened further. “I’m fixing it. Uni isn’t dying.” I lifted my brows as I stared at Emma, but her eyes were solely on Eli.

To my shock and horror, Emma burst into tears. Lily looked ready to bolt as Eli and I rushed toward Emma.

“Em,” Eli cooed. “Rae is fixing Uni. It’s okay.” Emma couldn’t catch her breath as she sobbed. I rushed back and grabbed Uni from the counter. Crouching beside Eli, I held the toy out to her.

“Look, it’s coming off. It’s not ruined,” I frantically said.

She just kept crying. Panic clawed at my chest. I didn’t know what to do or how to make her stop. Eli looked just as panicked. I glanced over his shoulder at Lily, who was slowly inching her way out of the kitchen.

“It’s okay, baby,” Eli murmured, running his hand over Emma’s soft hair. She jerked roughly away from him, nearly sliding from the chair. “Emma.”

“Don’t touch!” she screamed, shoving his hands away. We exchanged a look, one that told me he was just as lost as I was.

“Want to play dolls?” I blurted, trying to find anything that would help her stop crying.

“We can go to the park,” Eli added.

“And get ice cream,” I said.

“Boy, you two are great at this,” Lily muttered from her corner of the kitchen. I flipped her off behind Eli’s back, but she didn’t laugh. She just stared at Emma. “Weren’t you trained to help people regulate emotions?” She gave me an accusatory look, and I took a deep breath.

Right.

I’d helped Emma before, but it was usually before bed when she was already winding down for the night. Not when she was in the middle of a meltdown. It was hard to know where to start when I didn’t know what triggered the outburst.

“Hey, honey,” I said softly, clenching my hand into a fist to refrain from touching her. She took a shuddering breath. “Can you breathe with me? Like we do at bedtime?”

Her dark eyes shifted to mine. I wanted to hug her, she looked so upset. Her face was red and blotchy, her eyes wet and already swollen.

“Remember how we breathed last night?” I murmured. She wiped roughly at her cheeks as she nodded. “Can you do that?”

I held my hand up, and her little, shaky finger lifted. She pressed it into my palm and took a deep breath as she drew a line across the top of my palm.

I glanced at Eli, finding him watching us with his mouth parted. I’d explain everything later, right now I needed to focus on Emma.

“Good,” I whispered. She exhaled as she drew a line down, and I followed her lead, breathing out with her. “Big, deep breath now.” She drew another straight line across the bottom of my palm as she inhaled.

She focused on drawing a square on my palm and breathing, and slowly, she calmed down. Suddenly, Eli began humming softly. My head snapped to him. He wrapped his hand around my free one, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Another square, honey,” I whispered, looking back at Emma. She drew another square and by the time she was done, she was totally calm. Eli continued humming, but his gaze was still on me.

“You’re like the kid whisperer,” Lily said. Eli inhaled sharply and dropped my hand, looking like he was coming out of a spell.

“You okay?” he asked Emma. She nodded and wiped her face roughly with her palms. “How did you do that?” It took me a moment to realize he was speaking to me.

“Square breathing,” I muttered, as if that was a perfect explanation. And it was. But I knew he didn’t understand. Not fully. I’d explain later.

After we made sure Emma really was okay.

Eli pushed to his feet and scooped Emma into his arms. She rested her head against his shoulder, looking worn out. He hadn't been this involved in our lives in a week and a small, fucked up part of me was happy she had this meltdown. At least now he wasn't hiding in his room. At least he was here. With us.

"Are you coming to the party this weekend?" he asked, pulling me from my thoughts. I blinked a few times. It took me a moment to realize he was speaking to Lily.

"Wouldn't miss it," she said, smiling tightly. I knew she'd rather be anywhere but a kid's party, but she'd be there for me, and fuck if it didn't make me love her even more.

Eli nodded a few times, but said nothing else as he made his way out of the kitchen. He murmured softly to Emma, and seconds after he disappeared into the living room, the sounds of her favorite show filled the house.

"I'm gonna head out," Lily said, throwing her thumb over her shoulder. She glanced into the living room before stepping toward me. "You should talk to him. And be honest about everything." I shook my head as she spoke, and she sighed. "He won't make the first move. It has to be you. Put it out there and let him know what you want, then the ball's in his court."

"You make it sound so easy." I huffed out a laugh. Reaching out, she grabbed my hand and gently squeezed.

"It is easy," she muttered.

Of course it was that easy for her, but not me. Could it be? Maybe. Maybe she was right. Maybe I needed to just take a risk and tell him how I felt.

I wasn't an idiot, it was obvious he felt something for me. But what? Was it anything more than lust? Than a lonely man wanting the warmth and comfort of a woman? Would he ever see me as me and not as an extension of Meredith? Would I just be a painful reminder of her?

“You’re thinking too hard,” Lily laughed. “I can see all the gears grinding.” She wiggled her fingers by her head, making me smile. “Relax. The worst that’ll happen is—”

“Is I embarrass myself so badly I have to find a hole and dive into it?” I finished, and she rolled her eyes.

“The worst that’ll happen is he says he doesn’t feel the same way, and you move on with your life.” She gathered me into a tight hug. “You know how short life can be. Don’t die with regrets.”

I inhaled sharply. I couldn’t remember the amount of times I’d told her that when we were growing up. As crazy and free as she could be, she was also cautious. She wasn’t a risk taker. She thought I was insane for traveling the world, one yoga retreat at a time. But I thought she was crazy for staying here, in our hometown.

I think our differences were the things that made us unbreakable friends. We balanced each other out in a way we’d never found with anyone else.

Maybe my soulmate wasn’t a man. Maybe it was my best friend.

That was depressing. My best friend couldn’t make me come. Or maybe she could. But things hadn’t gotten that bad yet.

I sighed dramatically, and she laughed as if she knew what I was thinking. She gave me another tight squeeze before letting go and leaving. I couldn’t make myself move, so I stood in the kitchen for a few more minutes, just needing to breathe.

I couldn’t let her get in my head. I wouldn’t ruin things with Eli because I had a crush. Even though I was losing my mind, it felt wrong. But it was getting harder and harder to pretend like everything was normal between us.

“Rae?” I jolted, and spun toward the entrance to the kitchen. He’d unbuttoned his dress shirt, showing off his undershirt, and his hair was mussed. “I thought we could go out to eat for dinner.”

“Yeah,” I breathed, then cleared my throat. “Sounds good.”

“Let me change then we can go to the diner—” I barely held in my groan. I didn’t want to see my mother. He must’ve read my mind because his face softened. “Or we can go to the Italian place on Main.” I gave him a relieved, grateful smile and nodded.

“That’s perfect.”



# elliott

THE SPATULA SHOOK in my hand as I flipped a burger. Sweat beaded along my forehead, but I wasn't totally sure if it was from the heat of the grill or the rage boiling in my chest.

Benji laughed at something Reagan said, his hand planted firmly on her lower back, a soda casually held in the other. I hated how effortless he seemed. How nice. No one was that fucking nice, not without some monsters boiling under the surface.

Reagan hadn't even told me she was inviting him to Emma's party. Why would she do this? After we went out to dinner the other night, it felt like things had changed between us.

Well, things just weren't as tense. I knew I'd fucked up when I came home drunk the other night, but I didn't know how to apologize for it. I didn't know how to make it up to her and Emma. No matter what I thought of, nothing seemed like enough.

I couldn't just explain what I learned. She wouldn't understand because I didn't understand. I knew I was hurt, but after that melted away all that was left was just pure embarrassment and I didn't know why. It wasn't like I was the one who cheated on her, who changed the beneficiary to my lover. Yet I was still ashamed. Embarrassed. Like maybe if I'd been a better husband, none of this would've happened.

Snatching the amber bottle of beer up, I took a long pull, one eye still on Rae and Benji. It took every ounce of strength



I had in my fucking body to not grab him by the neck and throw him the fuck out of my house. I wanted to rip his hand off of her. I wanted to tell her she was never allowed to see him again.

I wanted to take her to my room and fuck her until she understood she was mine.

“You look like you’re ready to kill someone.” I jolted and spun toward the voice. Cora’s brow lifted as she watched me. “Everything okay?”

“Great,” I muttered, turning my attention back to the burgers. She hummed as she folded her arms over her chest. I tried not to pay attention to her, but I couldn’t help but dart my gaze to her every millisecond.

I hadn’t seen her since she had the fight with Reagan, which meant Emma hadn’t seen her in just as long. While it was only a few weeks, I knew it was long enough to upset her. But it felt like betraying Rae to see Cora. I knew it was ridiculous, yet I couldn’t make myself feel bad enough to want to spend time with her.

“The party looks...” she trailed off, and I took another long swig of the beer. “Nice enough.” I ignored her.

Nice enough, my ass. I knew she was impressed. *I* was fucking impressed.

The ball pit was a hit, and kids were squealing and jumping around in the bouncy house. Tables covered with pink tablecloths with flying unicorns, and pink everything were scattered around. Reagan and Lily helped me blow up a million balloons last night for a balloon arch, and Lily had scattered glitter fucking everywhere in my house. It was going to take me years to get it all out, but seeing the way Emma lit up when she saw it all made it worth it.

I’d cover the floors in glitter every day if she kept smiling like that.

Reagan picked up the giant unicorn cupcake cake and hid it in her bedroom so we could surprise Emma with it. I was looking forward to that reaction too.

I smiled to myself at the thought. I knew she was going to lose her shit when she saw a giant, edible replica of Uni.

Reagan laughed, and my gaze snapped to her. She was smiling up at Benji and any warmth I'd just had simmering in my chest turned icy.

If I could get away with killing him right now, I fucking would.

"There are a lot of gifts in the gift pile, too," Cora said, pulling my attention from her daughter.

"We went a bit overboard," I admitted. I wasn't ashamed of it. Reagan helped me pick everything. This party had Reagan's touch all over it. I couldn't escape her even if I wanted to.

"We?" Cora said. "So, she's been alright?" I pushed my brows together at the question.

"She's been more than alright," I muttered. As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I should've kept them in. "I mean, she's been a life saver with Emma. And—"

"And cooking and cleaning," she finished, nodding. "And taking care of you." I cleared my throat before downing the rest of my beer. "She's not Meredith, but—"

I stopped listening. I wanted to tell her Reagan was a million times better than Meredith ever was. I wanted to tell her Reagan would've never cheated on me the way Meredith had. She would've never done any of the things Meredith had.

But I couldn't say that.

"Right," I finally breathed. "I need to take these inside." I loaded the grilled patties onto a tray and gripped it tightly in my hand. I needed another beer, too.

Cora's mouth was still parted, words still coming out, when I walked away. It felt like everything was crumbling down around me. How was this my life?

Walking through the house, I stepped into the kitchen and slid the tray onto the counter before gripping the edge with

both hands. I dropped my head forward and took a deep breath.

Whatever this infatuation was with Reagan needed to stop. But why did the thought of not choosing her make me feel sick? Why couldn't I stop thinking about watching her belly grow with our baby?

I was so fucked in the head. Sick. I was fucking sick.

"Thought I saw you sneak in here," a soft voice laughed, and my head snapped up. I expected Reagan, and disappointment flooded me when it was Lily instead.

Don't get me wrong, she was a gorgeous girl. Long legs, nice tits, pretty face. But she wasn't Rae.

"Needed to bring the burgers in," I said, waving my hand toward the tray. She leaned against the wall, a beer in her hand as she watched me.

"Sure," she said, nodding. She took a long sip, her gaze tracking me. It felt like I was under a microscope. Like I needed to hide. She was stripping me bare in my own fucking kitchen. "It had nothing to do with wanting to get away from Rae and Benji?"

My spine snapped straight. "Why would it?" I asked too quickly. She smirked like she won. "Rae's a grown woman, she can do what she wants." Every word was a lie.

"Sure," she said again. She stayed casually leaning against the wall, but instead of looking relaxed, she looked like a lion circling its prey. "You know she's miserable, right? She doesn't want him here."

"Then why'd she invite him?" I snapped, then took a deep breath. "I don't care. She can invite anyone—"

"She wants you, you idiot," she said. My mouth stayed open, but nothing came out. "She won't make the first move." I narrowed my eyes at her.

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked, and she shrugged as she took another pull of her beer.

“Because I want to see my best friend happy,” she muttered. “If anyone deserves it, it’s her.”

“And you don’t think Benji makes her happy?” she asked. I folded my arms over my chest.

“No,” she deadpanned. “And neither do you.”

“Benji’s a good kid,” I said, and she let out a humorless laugh.

“She needs a man, not a kid.”

I blinked at her. Shifting my weight, I cleared my throat, feeling uncomfortable having this conversation with Rae’s best friend.

“She needs someone—someone—” I cut myself off. I didn’t know what she needed.

“She needs you,” she murmured. “She hasn’t been this happy in a long fucking time.” I shook my head, trying to ignore the words. “I’ve never seen someone so made to be a mother. To be a partner. To be a homemaker and—”

“Stop,” I breathed, squeezing my eyes shut. “She’s my wife’s sister.” Lily stayed silent long enough for me to think she left. But when I opened my eyes, there she was, staring at me with a piercing blue gaze.

“I’ll tell you what I told her,” she said, pushing off the wall. “You’re not a bad person for wanting to be with her.”

I stared at her for a long moment, letting the words sink in.

*I’m not a bad person for wanting Reagan.*

I felt like it, though. Like I was betraying Meredith. But she was the one who’d betrayed me first. She was the one who threw our marriage away, who threw me away. And I think I’d finally found someone who actually...liked me. Cared about me. Cared about Emma.

Reagan was everything I wanted. She was everything I needed.

But it was more than that. I didn’t just want her for what she could do for me or Emma. I wanted her for her. I wanted

her because I cared about her. Because everything she did made me fucking swoon.

Because she was perfect.

Lily grinned like she saw every piece of my heart and mind fall into place. She gave me a subtle nod before turning and sashaying back through the house. The faraway sounds of the party hit me as she opened the door, then silence.

I felt lighter as I grabbed a water from the fridge and headed back to the party. I no longer felt as ready to kill Benji when I saw him with his hand on Reagan. My smile felt real, and my happiness was genuine.

Reagan, in my head and my heart, was mine.



# reagan

“THANKS FOR INVITING ME,” Benji said, smiling down at me. The faint sunset shone on his face, illuminating his bright eyes and smile, making my stomach churn.

“Of course.” I squeezed his hand. I just wanted to go inside. The party was over, and Benji was the last to leave.

“Can I see you tomorrow?” The hope in his voice made my heart dip.

I really didn’t want to see him tomorrow. I didn’t know if I ever wanted to see him again. He was a good guy, but there was something missing. I knew I should like him. That I should want to be with him. That his touch shouldn’t make me cringe.

But there was something I needed, and I knew he couldn’t give it to me. He’d never be able to give it to me.

“Yeah,” I smiled, “maybe.” His smile faltered, like he could feel the lie, but I couldn’t make myself care.

He had been all over me all day. His hand was constantly around mine, or resting on my lower back. He was always whispering something in my ear—nothing dirty, just things. He was too intimate too fast, and I hated it.

It didn’t help that I felt Eli’s eyes burning into me all day. Every time I looked at him, I’d find him already staring at me. At where Benji was touching me.

“I’ll call you tomorrow then,” he said softly. I gave him a reassuring smile even though I didn’t feel it and tried not to

shy away when he pressed a gentle kiss to my cheek. My hand curled into a fist behind my back to keep from wiping his touch away.

It wasn't right—he wasn't right.

Stepping back from the curb, I waved as Benji drove away. I knew why he wasn't right. But he should feel right. He was kind, and gentle, and funny. Mom seemed to actually like him, which was shocking. Even though I knew he wanted to sleep with me, he wasn't pushy about it.

But he wasn't Eli.

I huffed out a breath as I made my way up the short driveway and into the house, silently cursing myself for even thinking about Eli. I debated even inviting Benji, but Lily's words from yesterday haunted me. When she told me I wasn't a bad person for wanting to be with Eli, it validated everything I felt for him. Then it made me panic. So, I panic-called Benji, invited him to the party, and hoped his presence would help me forget about Eli.

No such luck.

I walked to the kitchen, still mentally warring with myself over everything. I shouldn't care about Eli in any way other than like a brother. He was Meredith's husband.

But he was starting to feel less like that and more like someone I could see myself spending forever with. It was hard not to picture this life with him as something more than me just being a nanny for Emma.

I wanted my happy ending, and I knew in my heart that I wanted it with him. But he wasn't mine to have.

Sighing, I began picking up the last of the trash in the kitchen. Mom had helped clean up, but, thankfully, Eli kindly told her to leave when she began invading my space. He probably was just tired of her shit and didn't really notice how much tension there still was between us.

It was hard to see her today, to remember all the words she'd spewed at me. Her disapproval was still palpable, but I knew she'd always feel that way. Sometime in the last few



weeks, I realized I'd never be able to truly make her happy. To have her proud of me or the accomplishments I'd made. I'd never have her brag about me like she did, and still does, with Meredith.

But Eli, whether intentionally or not, took her power away today. He took her away before she could say anything too nasty to me, and I couldn't thank him enough for it.

Shoving the last of the trash in the bin, I tied the plastic string in a knot for Eli to take in the morning, and turned around. I gasped at the sudden sight of him standing there, just watching me, a trash bag in his hand.

"Got the last of it," he grumbled, holding the bag up. I blinked at him before turning my attention to the too-full bag. "I was just seeing if you needed anything—"

"I'm good," I blurted, cutting him off. His lips clamped shut as he nodded. "Thanks." I hesitated before taking a step forward.

It felt like he took up the entire archway. I couldn't pass him without touching him. A part of me wanted to touch him, but a bigger part didn't want to. I couldn't put myself in that position. Every time we touched, it felt like we were heading further down an unforgivable road.

Without telling my feet to, I stumbled forward another step, hoping he'd get the hint that I was trying to leave and back up a step. But he didn't. Of course he didn't. Instead, he held my gaze, the bag still clutched tightly in his hand as he watched me move closer.

"Why did you invite him?" he finally breathed. My mouth opened, but nothing came out, not even a breath. "Why would you bring him to my house?" I flicked my eyes between his, my brows pinching tightly together.

"He's my friend," I breathed, and he roughly shook his head.

"He wants to fuck you," he said. "He's not your friend."

"He can't be both?" I immediately wanted to take the words back as I watched his brows rise. "He doesn't want to—"

to fuck me.”

“Please,” he laughed. “I saw the way he looked at you all day. The way he touched you.” He took a step forward, letting go of the bag and setting it on the floor. His jaw tensed as he glared at me, but I knew he wasn’t angry. Not really. I couldn’t decipher his mood, but I’d been around angry my entire life and he wasn’t that.

“He’s a friend,” I said again. A sarcastic, unamused smirk stayed on his face. “I didn’t know you had a problem with him.”

“You didn’t know?” he said dryly. I shook my head slowly.

“Did he do something to you?” I asked. It was the first I was hearing that Eli had an issue with Benji. I thought Benji was friends with everyone. He was perfect. Eli shouldn’t have anything to complain about.

But maybe that was just around me. Maybe Benji was secretly a fucking asshole, but was trying to impress me—I stopped myself before I could spiral. That was ridiculous. Benji was a genuinely nice guy.

“You’re seriously asking me that?” Eli growled, taking another step forward. All humor was gone, and all that was left was a heat I felt to my core. I stumbled back, but he kept prowling closer, his eyes focused solely on me. Finally, I stopped when my back hit the counter. “You don’t know why I’d hate him?”

“No,” I breathed, and his eyes narrowed. He was too close. I could feel the warmth of his body radiating off him. “Eli.”

His eyes searched mine, his lips pressed into a thin line. He hadn’t shaved this morning, so his stubble was longer than usual. I loved the roughness of it. And I’d noticed a few gray hairs coming in at his temples, and they were doing something stupid to my body. It felt like those few gray hairs were making my pussy go into overdrive.

I blinked, snapping myself out of it. I couldn’t start noticing more things about him to drool over.

Suddenly, he stepped back. Instead of feeling like I could breathe, it felt like I was suffocating. Without thinking, I reached for him, but he pulled away from my touch before my fingers could brush against his arm. The rejection hurt, but I understood.

“I’m fucking this up,” he breathed, running his hand through his hair.

“Fucking what up?” I mumbled. I balled my hands into fists to keep from touching him.

“This.” He waved his hand between us.

I paused.

He gripped his dark hair and tugged lightly on it. “What?” He let out a harsh breath.

“We need to talk,” he said, and I risked a step forward.

“About?” I asked, feeling antsy.

“Everything,” he laughed humorlessly. “Benji—”

“What about him?” I interrupted.

“We need to talk about Meredith, and—”

“What about her?” I took another step forward. He was saying so much, and nothing at all. I didn’t know what to say or think.

“And we need to talk about us,” he concluded. I opened my mouth, but I didn’t know what to say.

“Us?” I finally breathed.

“Reagan.” He said it like a plea, like he was desperate for me to drop it. But I couldn’t. I needed to know what he had to say, what he was thinking and feeling. I just wanted to know everything.

“What about us? Are you—you don’t want me around anymore?” I asked, my throat tightening. Had I truly fucked everything up so much that he wanted to get rid of me?

“God, angel, no,” he said as he moved toward me. He slowly reached out, cupping my face. His eyes searched mine

and my breath caught. “I never want you to leave. That’s the problem.” My brows scrunched together.

“How is that a problem?” I murmured, leaning into his touch. He smiled sadly as he stroked his thumb along my cheek.

After a moment, he moved to pull away, but I reached up and caught his hand, keeping it on my face. “Don’t,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

I didn’t feel him move.

His lips crashed against mine, his hand sliding from my cheek, down my jaw to my neck, and wrapping around the back of it. The kiss was hard, and filled with so much passion I couldn’t breathe. His tongue trailed along the seam of my lips and I eagerly opened for him.

The room spun as his fingers dove into my hair, holding me tightly to him. I slid my hands up his chest and wrapped them around the back of his neck. He groaned into my mouth and the sound was my undoing.

I panted against him, feeling every nerve in my body light on fire as I pressed my hips against his.

But before we could move any further, he pulled away, breathing heavily. I pried my eyes open, my vision blurry with desire as he stared at me.

I anticipated his words before he said them. I knew he was going to tell me it was a mistake, that he was ruining Meredith’s memory by kissing me. By wanting to do anything more with me. Maybe I should feel more guilty about it, but I didn’t. I didn’t care anymore. I just wanted him.

But I braced myself for his words. I brought the walls I’d crafted so carefully back up and waited.

He continued staring at me, his dark eyes wild and pupils blown wide. His hands curled into tight, shaky fists at his sides. My breathing was ragged and raw—everything was raw. My nerves, my emotions, my lips. Everything.

Before I could take another breath, he dove toward me again, his hands more frenzied than before. Instead of a passion-filled kiss, this one was ravenous. I trembled as his tongue forced its way into my mouth, his teeth nipping at my lips, the bite both painful and pleasurable. Gone was the tender Eli, the Eli that wanted to caress and soothe.

I whimpered as his hands fell to the backs of my thighs and gripped tightly. He trailed his lips roughly from mine, down my neck. His teeth bit at the sensitive skin, and my hands shot up to his chest. I gripped his shirt tightly in my fists, but didn't push him away. I pulled him closer and tipped my head back, giving him more access.

“Do you know what you do to me?” he growled against me, his voice vibrating through my body. I groaned as he licked up my throat and latched his lips back onto mine.

In that moment, we were feral for each other. We clawed at each other, growling and whimpering and moaning. He effortlessly lifted me and shoved me onto the counter, forcing my legs apart to step between them. I gasped at the hard feel of him through his jeans.

He ground his cock against me, and my legs widened further. His hands stayed on my hips, groping as pulled me closer to him, forcing my body to feel his.

“Elliot,” I moaned against his lips. His hand lifted to the back of my head and he fisted my hair, yanking my head roughly back.

“Say my name again,” he grunted. He attacked my throat again, biting and licking and sucking.

“Elliot,” I breathed. I dragged my hands up his body and let them slide through his dark hair. He groaned before dropping his head into the crook of my neck, his breath hot against my skin. His hips jerked forward, pressing harder against me. He ground against me, letting me feel every hard inch of him against my throbbing pussy.

Suddenly, his hands dropped back to my thighs, and he lifted me. I screamed and threw my arms around him,

clutching him as he carried me from the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” I breathed, glancing over my shoulder.

“I’m not fucking you in the kitchen,” he growled. It took my mind a moment to catch up and when it did, every wall I’d just put up came crumbling down.

I pressed my lips against his again, loving the way he groaned as he strode through the living room toward the hallway. His hands tightened on my ass, and before we even made it to his bedroom, I was clawing at my shirt and slinging it over my head to the floor.

He kicked the door shut behind us and tossed me on the bed, letting me bounce and blink up at him. “Clothes off,” he demanded before sliding his shirt off over his head. I scrambled to remove my skirt and bra, leaving me in just my panties. I reached for them, but he caught my hand at the last moment. “Let me.”

He stood before me in just his black boxers, and it was the first time I’d ever seen his body like this, so bare. When we’d gone to the pool years ago, before Emma was even born, he didn’t look like this.

A deep V was cut into his lower abdomen, disappearing into his boxers and pointing straight to the hard cock straining against them. His thighs were muscular, and despite not taking care of himself since Meredith passed, he was still toned. Still...perfect.

Everything about him was perfect.

He pulled me from my thoughts as he gripped my ankles and yanked me to the end of the bed. Hovering his body over mine, he roughly kissed me, ripping his lips from mine before kissing down my chest, stopping at my bare breasts.

His tongue circled my peaked nipple, and I arched up into him, gasping as he sucked it into his mouth. He lifted his eyes, meeting my gaze.

“Like that?” he breathed, giving me a wicked grin. I was helpless to do anything other than nod.

“More, please,” I whimpered. He grinned wider before moving to the other nipple, giving it the same rough treatment. His teeth bit down and I cried out.

“As much as I want to hear you scream for me, I need you to be quiet, angel,” he said, his voice guttural. My eyes rolled back at the sound and I slowly slid my hand over my mouth, clamping it shut. “That’s my good girl.”

“Jesus, fuck,” I said behind my hand. He chuckled as he pulled away. His hands were braced on either side of my head as he pushed himself up and stared down at me. His muscles flexed and my mouth watered.

“Like that?” he asked.

“A lot,” I admitted. More than I thought I would, honestly. But I couldn’t give away everything. His smile stayed on his face as he pulled my hand away and lowered his mouth to mine again, kissing me hard before kneeling on the floor. My breath caught at the sight of him.

His long, thick fingers slid under my panties and he slowly slid them down my thighs, exposing me inch by slow inch. My body trembled as he stared at my pussy.

“So wet, baby,” he muttered. “Is this all for me?” He rested his hand on my lower stomach, and using his thumb, he gently teased my clit.

“Yes,” I moaned, dropping my head back. “All yours.” He hummed his approval as he pressed his thumb down harder. My hips lifted off the bed, but he banned his arm across them, pinning me down.

“Be my good girl and stay still for me,” he murmured. I stared down at him, feeling like it was the first time I was ever seeing him. His eyes were hooded in a way I’d never seen before, and his voice—fuck, his voice. It was unlike anything I’d ever heard. I was quickly becoming addicted to this side of him.

Slowly, he lowered his mouth and slid his tongue over my pussy, lightly flicking my clit. I gasped and slapped my hand over my mouth again, trying to force myself to stay still, just

like he'd asked. But he made it so hard. He grinned as he zig-zagged his tongue over my clit again.

I lifted my hips, silently begging him for more. My nails dug into my cheeks as I squeezed my face. He gripped the inside of my legs and pinned my knees to the bed, spreading me obscenely for him.

“Such a pretty little pussy,” he said. “So fucking wet and sweet.” He dragged his tongue slowly through me again before roughly sucking my clit into his mouth.

I whimpered into my hand and dropped my head back, squeezing my eyes shut as he stopped holding back. His fingers dug into my legs as he gripped me tighter.

“Elliot,” I moaned. It was impossible to stay quiet when he did that with his mouth.

“I love when you say my name,” he said against my pussy, his voice vibrating against me. His mouth moved faster as he ate me, licking and biting at my clit, making my entire body tremble. He growled and forced my legs back further, feasting more.

“Right there,” I cried into my hand, feeling my body coil tighter. I was barreling toward the edge, feeling my orgasm rise higher. “Please!” He grunted as he moved his tongue faster. “Oh, fuck. I’m—I’m—”

He pulled away and my eyes snapped open, my hand flying from my mouth. “Wait!” I reached for him but he ignored me as he shoved me back enough to kneel on the bed between my legs.

“As much as I want to drink you down,” he grunted as he shoved his boxers down, letting his thick cock free, “I need to feel you come around my cock.” He pressed against my entrance.

“Fuck,” I breathed, my eyes wide as I stared at where he was slowly piercing me. “Big. You’re—oh, fuck.”

“You can take me,” he said softly. “You’re going to take all of me.”



My mouth fell open, but no sound came out as he pressed into me, stretching me wide. It burned so good as he forced his way inside.

“You feel so fucking good,” he groaned. “I’ve been dreaming about this pussy since you came back.”

I’d been dreaming about his cock since the moment I met him, but I couldn’t tell him that.

He hooked his arms under my knees and shoved my legs back, folding me nearly in half as he slowly pressed further in. “You’re doing such a good job, angel,” he breathed. I squeezed around him, and the veins in his neck bulged.

I didn’t know his praise would make me feel like this, like I was on fire and burning from the inside out.

“Please,” I breathed. “Just fuck me.” He paused and stared down at me, his face reddening from his restraint. “I need more.”

He roughly pressed his lips against mine as he shoved the rest of the way inside with a brutal thrust. I screamed into his mouth, but he kissed me harder, muffling my sounds. Pulling my legs back more, he pulled almost all the way out before slamming all the way back inside.

“So fucking good,” he said against my lips. His cock rubbed against every spot inside me, making me see stars. I’d never felt so completely full before. I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him closer.

He dropped his head into my neck, his breath hot as he pounded into me. My body began coiling tighter, my thighs trembling as he forced me toward the edge again.

“Come for me,” he murmured in my ear. “Squeeze my cock, angel.”

“More!” I cried. I bit down on his shoulder, making him let out a feral-sounding growl. He held himself over me and fucked me harder, our bodies slamming roughly together. I snaked my hand between our bodies and found my swollen clit.

“That’s it,” he grunted. “Rub your pussy, baby.” He leaned back more to watch as I circled my clit with my fingers, driving my pleasure higher. “That’s fucking it. Look at you, taking my big cock. Such a good fucking girl for me.”

“Almost there,” I breathed, moving my fingers faster. “Please don’t stop!”

“I’m going to fill you up,” he continued, grunting louder. “And then you’re going to be a good girl and leave my cum inside you, aren’t you? You’re going to thank me for it, right? Tell me how much you need my cum, angel. Beg me to breed your little pussy.”

My back bowed off the bed as my orgasm shot through me. I squeezed his cock, but barely heard his groans of pleasure as he fucked me through it. My fingers moved faster, dragging my pleasure out.

“I’m about to come,” he groaned. “Filling you up, baby.”

“Come inside me,” I begged, my eyes still closed and fingers still a blur over my clit.

“You’re milking my fucking cock,” he snarled, slamming into me faster. “How much do you want my cum?”

“Fuck it into me, Eli,” I cried. He cursed under his breath and gripped my body tighter, fucking me harder. My hand finally fell away from my over-sensitive clit and I stared up at him. His eyes were wild as he fucked me into the bed.

“Take it all,” he groaned, slamming inside and freezing. His head fell back as he came, his neck straining. I felt his hot cum overflow from my pussy. I squeezed him again, and he made a guttural sound, like he was in pain, but he forced his cock further in, pushing more of his cum out.

He barely pumped his hips, dragging out the last of his orgasm before dropping his head forward and staring down at me, his chest coating in a light sheen of sweat and his eyes hooded and sated. He shifted his gaze to where our bodies were still joined.

“You look beautiful like this,” he muttered. “So messy and full, but beautiful.” My body heated at his words, at the

tenderness in his gaze. “Stay here,” he slowly pulled out, dragging more of his cum out, “I’ll clean you up.”

I laid on his bed and stared up at the ceiling, my heart still racing. I just fucked Eli. I just fucked my brother-in-law. My sister’s husband.

And I didn’t feel the least bit bad about it.



# reagan

RUNNING WATER WOKE ME. For a moment, I just listened to the sound, letting it gently lull me from sleep. I smiled to myself, snuggling deeper into the large comfy pillow. I didn't remember my pillow being this soft, but I was so warm and cozy—my eyes snapped open.

“Eli's room,” I breathed. I pushed myself up and clutched the sheets around my bare chest. “I'm in Eli's room.”

Holy shit.

I looked around, taking in the dark gray bedding and our clothes still scattered on the floor; the black rug under the bed, and wooden dresser by the door. I fucked Eli last night.

No. *He* fucked *me*.

Falling back to the bed, I stared up at the ceiling and relived every second of last night. The way his body felt against mine, inside mine. The way he smelled, and the feeling of him coming—

Oh my God.

He came inside me.

Oh God.

Fuck.

I wasn't on birth control. Why wasn't I on birth control? Because it fucked with my hormones and made me feel like shit. But I didn't care about that at the moment. I cared about not being pregnant.

Jesus Christ, what were we thinking? He should've used a condom, or pulled out, or—or we shouldn't have done it.

No, that didn't feel right. As much as I should, I didn't regret what happened. It felt right. Everything about it felt right, even if it was wrong.

Everything was so fucked, but I couldn't go back to the way things were before. I couldn't pretend like we hadn't shared something magical—no, that wasn't the right word. It was explosive. It was indescribable.

The water shut off and panic clawed its way up my chest. What if Eli didn't feel the same way? What if he woke up, saw me beside him, and needed to wash our bad decisions from his body? What if when he walked out of the bathroom and looked at me, all I saw on his face was repulsion?

I wouldn't survive that.

Knowing he saw me as nothing but a regret would destroy me. So, I needed to get out of his room before he came out and we had to have that awkward talk. Sitting across from him at the table for breakfast would be bad enough, but Emma would at least make us ignore the problem.

More guilt ate away at me. That wasn't her job, to distract us so we could forget about our issues. That's what my mother had done and look how well I turned out. So fucked up in the head and craving attention from a man who I shouldn't crave it from.

Okay, I needed to breathe and stop freaking out. She wasn't going to end up like me because I am not my mother and I wouldn't subject her to that—*breathe*. I needed to breathe.

The first thing I needed to do was get out of bed and leave the room before he came out.

Clutching the sheet tighter, I scooted to the edge of the bed. I hadn't realized it was so high off the ground. Last night, he'd just thrown me on it and after we passed out, I hadn't left his arms.

It didn't matter. I could think about the height of his stupid bed later.

I jumped from the bed, the sheets tangling around my feet. Luckily, I managed to not fall, and hurried across the room, bending to scoop my clothes up on the way. Shirt. Where the fuck was my shirt?

I spun in a circle, quickly scanning the room for it. Where had I thrown it? I knew I'd chucked it on the floor, but where?

I kicked his jeans to the side, but it wasn't under them. Doing the same to his discarded shirt, I was disappointed to not find it.

It didn't matter. I could hunt it down later.

Turning, I rushed toward the bedroom door. My hand wrapped around the doorknob.

“Going somewhere?”

I let out a startled scream and whirled around, my heart hammering in my chest. The towel was slung low on Eli's hips, showing off his toned, wet chest and stomach. He really shouldn't be allowed to be that hot.

He was a dad for fuck's sake. But somehow, that made him hotter.

Fuck my brain. I needed to stop. I couldn't fall any harder for him. Not when I knew he was about to push me away.

“My room,” I said, throwing my thumb over my shoulder. My other hand clutched the sheet tighter, my arm sandwiching my skirt, panties and bra between it and my stomach.

“Why?” He took a step forward and I stepped back. “You're really fucking my plans up here, angel.” My breath caught. Maybe he didn't regret everything.

“What plans?” I breathed. He gave me a feral grin as he crowded me against the door. My body heated and my throat tightened with anticipation.

“My plans for you,” he murmured, slowly tucking my hair behind my ear. “I was expecting to find you still sleeping in

bed like my good girl.” I let out a small whimper and his eyes dropped to my mouth. “You really like that, don’t you, angel?”

“Yes,” I breathed. I didn’t know why, but those words just did something to me. He stroked his thumb down my cheek, his gaze still focused on my lips.

“Such a sweet girl,” he breathed. My hands trembled as I clutched the sheet tighter. “Are you sore today?” I blinked at him.

“What?”

“Sore,” he repeated, his lips tipping up as he looked back at my eyes. “Was I too rough with you?”

“I’m okay,” I whispered. Leaning forward, he pressed a gentle kiss to my cheek. “You were perfect.” I felt him smile against my skin before he trailed slow kisses down my jaw to my neck.

“Perfect, hmm?” My head fell back against the wall as I let out a shuddering breath. He nipped at the sensitive skin. “You were perfect too, my angel.”

Oh, fucking Christ. He was killing me.

His hand moved to my bare leg under the sheet. Lazily, he dragged his fingers up, lightly scratching my skin with his nails.

“Mmm, you’re still naked, aren’t you?” he murmured, dragging his hand up higher.

“God, Eli,” I groaned. I felt dizzy. “Please.”

“I’ll give you what you need,” he said, his voice low. “Just be a good girl and take it.”

I whimpered and shut my eyes, hyper aware of everywhere he was touching me. His lips lazily kissed and sucked my neck as he dragged his hand up, up, *up*, until his hand slid between my thighs.

“Someone’s soaked,” he muttered. “Is this for me?”

“Who else would it be for?” I blurted. He paused, then slowly pulled his hand away.



“You’re a little sassy this morning, aren’t you?” he growled, his lips twitching. “Maybe I should take you over my knee and teach you a lesson.” My eyes widened.

“You’d—you’d do that?” I asked. He gave me a light, lingering kiss.

“If you wanted it,” he said against my lips. He moved his hand back to my pussy, and I gasped as pleasure shot through my body. “How’s that feel, angel?”

Keeping his touch firm, he worked his fingers at an achingly slow pace. I dropped my clothes and the sheet as I wrapped my arm around his neck, tugging him closer. He buried his face in my neck, his breath warm against my skin.

“Good,” I gasped as he slid his fingers lower. Slowly, he pressed inside me. “Shit.” I tightened around him, and he groaned.

“I wish I had time to fuck you,” he rasped.

“I can be quick,” I blurted, and he let out a low chuckle.

“I can’t.” He kissed the curve of my neck to my shoulder. “I need to take my time with you. But I need to see you come again.” His fingers curled and my nails dug into his skin. He growled and shoved them deeper inside me. “Let me see how fast you can be, baby.”

He ground the heel of his palm against my clit as he stroked inside me with his thick fingers. I couldn’t catch my breath. The harder he fucked his fingers into me, the more I couldn’t breathe.

“I need—I—I—” I couldn’t even speak. Or think. Or do anything other than focus on the pleasure he was forcing from me.

“I know,” he grunted. He pulled away to look at me, his fingers moving faster. I stared up at him, my lips parted. “You look so beautiful.” His words were barely audible. “I love seeing you take what I give you.”

I whimpered, silently pleading with him to make me come. I felt it coming closer, barreling toward me. My legs trembled

and I clutched his shoulder tighter.

“That’s my girl,” he murmured. He pressed his lips to my forehead, giving me a gentle kiss. “Show me you’re my good girl and come for me.”

I exploded.

I cried out, but he muffled the sound with his lips. He moved his fingers faster, keeping his palm pressed on my clit. His tongue slid into my mouth as he wrung the last of my orgasm from me.

Finally, he pulled away, and I blinked up at him, feeling dazed. “That was—” I could barely speak. He smiled softly as he tucked my hair behind my ear.

“I know, baby. You’re okay,” he said. “I’ve got you.” He pulled his fingers from me and wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly to his chest. I nuzzled into him, feeling safe for the first time in my life.

I squeezed my eyes shut at the other warm feelings he forced to the surface. The things he made me feel were terrifying. I’d never felt anything like this before, and, in that moment, in his arms, I realized I was in so much fucking trouble.



# elliott

I SET a leftover burger in front of Emma before setting another in front of Reagan. She'd had a permanent blush on her face all day and couldn't stop giving me shy smiles. It was the cutest fucking thing in the entire world.

I couldn't remember a time when I'd felt like this. Happy. Warm. Full of...something. Not love. But something else. Something more. Something I'd never felt before.

"Water?" I asked, resting my hand on Reagan's shoulder. She nodded as she grabbed a potato chip from her plate.

"Can we paint?" Emma asked as I turned my back to the table.

"After lunch," Reagan said.

"With the glitter!" she screeched, and Reagan let out a soft laugh. Grabbing two water bottles from the fridge and my plate, I made my way back, smiling to myself as I watched Emma excitedly chomp on her burger.

"How much glitter are we talking?" I asked as I sank onto the chair beside Reagan. I hadn't sat here before, but I needed to be close to her.

"So much," she laughed. "Lily didn't think Em had enough."

"She has buckets full of it," I groaned exaggeratedly. Emma laughed evilly and took a sip of her juice. Reagan slid her hand onto my leg and gave me a gentle squeeze before

grabbing her burger. Every thought I had left my head, and all the blood in my body went straight to my cock.

She couldn't do that. Tease me and expect me to not retaliate. But later. I couldn't do it now. And the brat knew it.

I glared at her, but it lacked any real heat. She just grinned, like she knew what she was doing and did it on purpose.

"Uni can paint too," Emma said, drawing my attention.

"How about Uni stays in your room?" I said, turning toward her.

"Yeah, we don't want him to get dirty," Rae said, and I nodded my agreement. It was so nice having someone on my side.

With Meredith, it felt like everything I said she argued with, like everything was a competition. If I told Emma no, Meredith ignored it and did the opposite. But Reagan hadn't done that. Not once. She teased me, but had never gone against me. And I hadn't with her, either. It felt like we were a team, not trying to one up each other to win a Best Parent Award.

"Has Uni played with his new friends?" I asked around a bite of food. Emma shrugged.

"He hates them." I choked as the burger went down my throat, and I banged my fist on my chest as I reached for my water. I hadn't been expecting that answer.

Reagan jumped to her feet as I swallowed water. "What are you doing?" I rasped, my voice raw and eyes watery.

"You were choking," she said, pointing at me. "I—I know CPR." My lips twitched.

"That's great, angel," I said gently before taking another sip. "But I wouldn't need CPR if I was choking." She blinked at me. "Heimlich." Her face turned bright red, and she covered it with both her hands.

"Oh my God!" she cried. "I can't believe I said that!"

I chuckled at her dramatics. It was fucking cute—she was fucking cute. Everything about her.

I was so fucked.

“It’s easy to get them mixed up,” I soothed, even though we both knew it was a lie. They were completely different things, but I wanted to make her feel better.

“No, they’re not!” She shook her head behind her hands. I glanced at Emma, finding her just watching, probably confused at what was even happening. But she just chewed on her food, her eyes flicking between us.

Since Reagan had moved in, Emma was actually eating food again and it was helping me not feel like I was on the brink of a breakdown anymore. Seeing her eat something that wasn’t ice cream or brownies made me breathe easier. Surprisingly, the less I stressed, the better I ate and slept. Who knew?

“Sit down, baby,” I laughed. “It’s okay. You made a mistake. Happens all the time.”

“It’s so embarrassing!” She slumped into her chair, her face still hidden. I gently tugged her hands away, and she gave me a pitiful look.

“It’s okay,” I said again, gentler.

“You don’t think I’m an idiot?” she asked. “I swear I know the difference, but I panicked and—”

“I know,” I interrupted. “I’d never think you were an idiot.”

“Really?” she breathed.

“Of course.” I squeezed her hand. “I trust you, angel.” Her eyes searched mine, and the vulnerability in them broke my heart.

“All done!” Emma popped the bubble we were in, and my head snapped toward her. She slid off her chair and before I could say a word, she sprinted from the kitchen, her dark hair flying behind her.

I let out a long breath as I slumped back in my chair. Reagan chewed on her lip as she flicked her eyes between me and where Emma had just disappeared.

“I’ll get her,” I said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. She inhaled sharply, her eyes wide as I pulled away. “Eat up, angel. You need your strength for tonight.” I winked and pushed to my feet.

“Eli—” I paused and looked down at her. She looked like she was closing in on herself and my brows pushed together. “This is real, right? I’m not dreaming? Or thinking it’s more than it is?” My chest tightened.

“This is real, baby,” I murmured, sitting back on the chair and facing her. I gathered her hands in mine and stroked my thumbs along the backs. “I’ve never felt like this—” I cut myself off. I didn’t know how to tell her how I felt. There weren’t enough words in the world to explain it.

“I’ve just never—I don’t do casual, and I don’t know what this is or—”

“We can have the what are we talk later, okay?” I searched her eyes, but she still looked worried. “We’re not casual. I don’t know what label to put on it, but we’re not casual. You’re mine, Reagan. Only mine.” The pulse in her neck beat wildly as she flicked her eyes between mine.

“Does that mean you’re mine too?” she murmured, and I smiled softly.

“All yours, angel.” Leaning forward, I pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “Say the word, and I’ll give you the world. Whatever you need to feel secure with me, I’ll give it to you. But whatever this is, it’s real, and if I have it my way, it’ll last forever.”

She let out a small whimper as she pressed her lips against mine again, scooting closer to me. Her arms wrapped around my neck and tugged me closer as mine went around her waist. I had an overwhelming need to claim her, to shove everything off the table, rip her clothes off, and fill her up. I needed her more than I needed to breathe.

I'd never felt like this, like a fucking caveman. But here I was, panting like a dog, and trying to restrain myself from bending her over and forcing her to take all my cum until her belly swelled with my baby—our baby. I was desperate for her, and she had no idea. She had no clue of the power she had over me.

“We have to stop,” I breathed. She whimpered again, pressing her body closer. I nearly snapped. I was riding the edge, and moments away from throwing her over my shoulder and taking her to my room. “Rae.”

“Please,” she breathed before sliding her tongue into my mouth. I groaned against her and dropped my hands to her ass, groping and pulling her closer. I needed to be inside her. Right fucking now.

Before I could do anything, she pulled away, her chest heaving and pupils blown. She looked so fucking gorgeous like this, and it soothed my caveman soul knowing I was the one who turned her on so much she was breathless and flushed.

“My pretty baby girl,” I breathed, cupping her face. She closed her eyes and leaned into my touch, nuzzling her cheek against me. It settled something in me seeing her look safe and content.

And I made her feel like this. Safe. Sated. Content. Horny.

Loved.

I'd always loved Reagan, just in a different way. It would be easy to fall in love with her, though. To see her as more than just a friend, as someone I could share a few laughs with at holidays. She was so much more than I'd ever given her credit for. And now she was mine, and I was never letting her go.





# elliott

I STARED up at the ceiling. It'd been a full two days since we slept together for the first time and Reagan has been in my bed ever since. If I had it my way, she'd never leave it, never leave me.

I scrubbed my hand over my face. I was being a psycho bastard, but I didn't know if I really cared. We'd had such a good weekend and today was my first day back at the office. I didn't know why I'd felt so anxious about it, like I was scared she'd be gone when I got home. But this thing between us was still new and fragile, and I was terrified of fucking it up.

But she'd been here, cooking and playing with Emma just like she did every other night. It almost felt like nothing had changed, like we'd gone back to who we were before. But when Emma wasn't looking, she snuck a quick peck to my cheek and I felt the world stop spinning. And when she smiled at me like we'd shared something special, my heart stopped beating.

It had only been a few days, and I was already falling for her harder than I knew was possible.

I rolled onto my side and wrapped my arm around her. Even in her sleep, she seemed to relax at my touch and nestle closer to me. I rested my hand on her stomach, stroking my thumb back and forth. My arm tightened as I pulled her back to me, holding her against my chest. I needed her closer.

I pressed a soft kiss to her bare shoulder, letting my lips linger. She smelled so good, like vanilla and pineapple. Her

hair was loose on the pillow and tickled my face, but I wouldn't ask her to pick it up. I liked it down.

Her body stiffened slightly, and I knew she was slowly waking up. I was shocked at how light of a sleeper she was. The morning after our first hookup, she didn't stir when I got up to shower so I assumed she slept like the dead, like Meredith. But after that first morning, I realized that even if I barely shifted, she'd wake up.

It was taking her time to remember she was in my room, in my bed, my arms. But after a moment, she relaxed.

"Why are you awake?" she whispered into the dark room.

"I didn't mean to wake you," I said, continuing to stroke my thumb along her belly. "Go back to sleep." She tried to roll onto her back, but my hold tightened. "Sleep, baby."

"But why are you awake?" she asked again, her voice just as soft. "What are you thinking about?"

"You," I said, digging my face into the back of her neck, inhaling her sweet scent. "Us." She stiffened again.

"Us?" she repeated. Hesitantly, she rested her hand over my arm and trailed her fingers over my skin, causing goosebumps to rise.

"Just how much I love that you're here," I said. "And how I can't believe you want anything to do with an old man like me."

"You're not that old," she laughed.

"I was in college before you were in kindergarten," I said dryly, and she laughed again. The sound made me feel lighter, and I pressed a kiss to the curve of her neck. I couldn't stop touching or kissing her. But I didn't think she minded.

"When you say it like that, it sounds terrible," she said, her fingers still trailing my arm. "You're such a perv."

"Me?" I said with mock outrage. "You're the one grave robbing."

“You’re cradle robbing,” she shot back, and I let out a breathy laugh. “Which is worse?”

“They’re equally pervy,” I said, kissing her again.

“Fair enough,” she sighed. We were silent for a few minutes, but I knew she was awake from the way she never stopped mindlessly stroking my arm. “You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“Of course not,” I immediately said. “And I never will.”

“You don’t know that,” she murmured.

“I do know.” I kissed her neck again, higher up, at the place I knew made her melt. I was still learning her body, but this spot, right below her ear, drove her wild.

“Eli,” she moaned. “You have to get up in a few hours. You’ll be tired.”

“Let me worry about that,” I murmured.

After learning about her obvious praise kink, I researched things to try out on her. I felt a little ridiculous looking up phrases to say, or things to do, and I felt even more ridiculous trying to say them, but every time I gave her praise, even a tiny amount, she melted. And I loved to see it.

I kissed her neck again, holding her tighter against me so she couldn’t move. “Are you going to let me fuck you, pretty girl?” She gasped, and I smiled against her skin.

“Yes,” she breathed. I slowly slid my hand up her stomach and gently cupped her breast over her loose tank top.

“Not too sore?” I murmured as I ran my thumb over her peaked nipple. “I didn’t hurt you earlier?”

“No,” she said, tilting her head to the side to give me better access to her neck. I kissed her again, letting my lips linger. “I feel good.”

“Do you?” I gently pinched her nipple and her back arched. She pressed her hips back, grinding her ass against my growing cock. “Do you like when I do that?” I pinched her nipple again, twisting it just enough.

She whimpered as she arched her back again, trying to press her chest closer to my hand and alleviate the sting. I pressed my lips along her neck again, gently biting and sucking as I toyed with one nipple, then moved to the next.

“I asked you a question, angel,” I said in a low voice.

“I like it,” she whimpered. Her hand wrapped around my wrist as I tweaked her other nipple. I hummed against her, letting her feel the vibration of my voice. “I like everything you do.”

“Yeah?” I rasped, trailing my hand from her breast down her body to her little shorts. “You like when I stretch you with my cock?”

“God yes,” she moaned. She lifted her hips to help me drag her shorts down around her thighs. I ran my hand over her smooth, warm skin, breathing her in deeper. “Elliot, please.”

“Fuck,” I groaned. I couldn’t get over the way she said my name. She was making me addicted to her.

I hurriedly shoved my boxers down enough to free my cock. She arched her back, pressing her ass more toward me, silently begging for more. Roughly, I stroked myself as I guided my cock toward her entrance.

“You want it so badly, don’t you, angel?” I murmured, rubbing my head through her wet lips. “Already dripping for me.” She whimpered as I pressed against her, forcing my head in. “So fucking tight. So good.”

I squeezed my eyes shut at the feel of her squeezing me. Her little breathy gasps spurred me on, driving my pleasure higher. She pressed her thighs together, and it put more pressure on my cock, forcing a groan to leave my throat.

“Keep doing that, baby,” I breathed, and she pressed her thighs together more. Snaking my hand around her body again, I slid it up her stomach, passing her breasts and rested it on her throat.

Her hands wrapped around my wrist as she pushed back against me, forcing my cock in the rest of the way. Her ass rested against my hips, and we paused, getting used to the feel.

“Big,” she whimpered. I pumped my hips, moving just enough for her to let out a breathy moan.

“You look so pretty taking me,” I murmured. “Such a sweet little cunt.”

“Jesus,” she breathed. “I didn’t know you’d talk so much during sex.”

“Want me to stop?” I murmured, slowly dragging out, then pressing back in.

“No!” she cried, and I grinned to myself.

“I didn’t think so,” I said. I could only move at a slow pace, but I wanted more—I needed it. I needed to fuck her into the bed until I filled her up.

Suddenly, I pulled all the way out. Her body tensed as she twisted to look at me, my hand still on her throat. “Where are you going?” she whimpered.

“Nowhere, baby girl.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead before getting to my knees and turning her onto her stomach. I straddled her hips and gripped her ass, spreading her apart. I let a trail of spit leave my lips and drop to her pussy.

She let out a small whimper but otherwise stayed quiet. I rubbed my cock against her, rubbing the spit in before pressing inside her. She gasped at the feel and dug her face into the pillow.

“That’s a good girl staying quiet for me,” I murmured. There was barely enough light in the room for me to watch my cock slide in.

I finally bottomed out and braced my hand on the pillow by her head before pulling my hips almost all the back and slamming inside. She screamed into the pillow, and I moved my hand to the back of her head, pinning her down.

“Quiet, angel,” I hissed. She reached blindly behind her and, using my other hand, I pinned it to her lower back. “Is this what you like?” I dropped my body lower. She nodded into the pillow, her mouth open as she panted. “Of course you do,” I breathed into her ear, “you were made for me. You like

everything I do, don't you? You're my perfect girl. My dream girl. And you love when I fuck your little cunt, don't you?"

"Eli," she moaned. "Please!"

"You love when I fill you up," I continued, slamming harder into her. Her pussy tightened around me, and I knew she was close. "You make me feel so good, baby. I love hearing those sweet little sounds you make." She moaned louder and I smiled to myself. "You're close for me, aren't you?"

"Yes!" she cried, her voice muffled from the pillow. "Don't stop! Please!"

"That's my girl," I murmured. "Come for me, angel. Come all over my cock. Show me how much you love me fucking you." Her body tensed, her eyes rolling back as she cried out. She squeezed me so tight I could barely move. I pushed up, straddling her hips more and stared down at her contracting, leaking pussy. "So messy for me."

"God," she breathed. "I think I just died."

"I'm not done with you yet," I said, and she glanced over her shoulder, her eyes hooded and hair mussed. "You've never looked more beautiful." She inhaled sharply, a small pleased sound leaving her. "You okay? Do you need me to stop?"

"Please don't," she whined. "Keep going." I leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss to her cheek.

"You're so good to me," I murmured. I settled back and gripped her hips. "Ready?" She nodded, her mouth still open as she continued staring up at me over her shoulder.

I dragged her hips up enough to hit a new angle inside her. I stopped holding back and fucked her into the bed. She clawed at the sheets as she tried to stay silent. I wasn't lying when I said she was made for me, her pussy was the best in the world.

"Look how perfectly you fit around me," I muttered under my breath, squeezing her hips tighter.

"It's so much!" she cried. "Elliot!"

“Can you give me another one, baby?” I growled, still watching where I fucked her.

“No!”

“I think you can,” I said. “Rub your little clit. Be my good girl and come again.”

“It’s too much,” she whined, but still slid her hand under her body.

“I know you can do it,” I soothed. She buried her face into the pillow as she moaned. With every swipe of her fingers over her clit, I felt her rub the underside of my cock, and it was driving me insane. “One more, baby. You’ve done such a good job taking me.”

Her body began trembling, and I fucked her harder. “Oh my God,” she screamed. “I’m—”

“I know,” I groaned. “I’m so proud of you, angel.” She exploded, her pussy squeezing me until it almost hurt. I forced my cock to keep moving, fucking her through her orgasm.

Finally, she collapsed to the bed, but I continued fucking into her, feeling my body tighten.

“I’m so close,” I groaned. “Keep taking my cock like that and I’ll give you all my cum.”

I thrust faster, and my cock thickened as I barreled for the most intense release I’d ever had. My fingers dug more into her soft, silky flesh but I didn’t let up.

“I’m coming,” I grunted, slamming into her a few more times. I pressed my hips all the way inside and held myself there, spilling into her. “Take it, Rae. Take it all.”

My chest heaved as I took deep breath after deep breath, trying to come down from my release. It felt like my heart was about to beat out of my fucking chest. I’d never—fucking ever—felt like this before.

I slid from her, watching as my cum spilled out onto her thighs. There was something so fucking wrong and hot at seeing her like this. So full of me. Claimed by me.



I collapsed onto the bed beside her and held my arm out, letting her snuggle into my chest. “I’ll clean you up,” I murmured, kissing the top of her head. She was silent for a moment, then lifted her head to stare at me.

“I like it,” she whispered. “I like the way it feels to have you inside me.” My brows lifted as she pressed a gentle kiss to my lips.

“Good,” I said against her. “I love knowing you’re full of me all night and day. It makes me fucking feral—” I stopped myself. “We need to be more careful, though.”

“I know,” she whispered, resting her head on my chest. “Can we worry about it tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I murmured. “Rest, baby girl. I won’t wake you again.” She nestled deeper into my chest as I stared up at the ceiling.

I know I said we needed to be careful, but a part of me knew it was a lie. I didn’t want to be careful. I wanted to watch her swell with my baby and be unapologetic about it. But she was young and had dreams, I couldn’t take her youth from her by tying her down with a baby.

My stomach twisted in knots.

She had a whole life before me. Would she get tired of playing Mom to her niece and wife to a man who didn’t deserve it? When would she realize she could do so much better than me?

I never wanted that to happen, but I wasn’t stupid. She was beautiful, and sweet, and ambitious. I couldn’t hold her back or she’d resent me. But I couldn’t give her up, either.

Letting out a long breath, I kissed her head again, letting her scent ground me. I’d worry about that shit later. Right now, she was in my arms, content, and safe, and happy.

Happy.

I was happy.

It’d been too long since I’d truly felt like this, and it just made me even more terrified of losing her.



# reagan

“FUCK, BABY,” Eli groaned, tightening his hold on my hair. I peeked up at him, finding the veins in his neck popping, his chest heaving with each labored breath. He dropped his head back on another groan. “You’re making me feel so fucking good.”

I pressed my thighs together at his praise. I had no idea I had such an intense praise kink until he started praising me. I didn’t know where it came from for either of us, but I wasn’t complaining.

“Just like that,” he hissed. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his eyes warm as he dropped his head forward to watch me. “You look so pretty with my cock in your mouth.” I felt my face redden. “How about you rub your pussy for me, angel? Make yourself come while you swallow what I give you.” I whimpered, but obeyed and snaked my hand under my skirt, finding my panties a wet mess.

He gripped my head with both hands and began lifting his hips, gently thrusting. His cock hit the back of my throat and I gagged, but it seemed to spur him on. He fucked my mouth faster.

Tears formed in my eyes as I stared up at him, letting him use me for his pleasure. I rubbed faster at my clit over my panties, feeling my orgasm teetering on the edge. I was still so sensitive from my double orgasms last night, and the other one he gave me this morning before he left for work.

I hadn't expected him to come home for lunch, but he walked through the door ten minutes ago and the look in his eye told me he needed me. And I needed him.

My fingers moved faster, and he sped up, his grip tightening in my hair. He ground his teeth together, his eyes boring into mine.

"That's it," he grunted. "So fucking close." Saliva dripped from my mouth as he fucked me harder. "So pretty for me, on your knees, like a good little girl." I cried out around his cock, and he grinned down at me. "Do you like hearing me tell you how pretty you are? How sweet and messy you look?" My fingers moved faster, more drool poured from my mouth, and tears dripped from my eyes.

Pride shone in his eyes as he fucked my mouth. I'd never felt more warm, more proud of myself, than I did in that moment.

"You're close for me, aren't you?" he murmured. His touch was rough, yet gentle in my hair as he thrust his hips faster. I whined around his cock as I pushed myself closer to the edge, my eyes silently pleading with him. "I know, baby. I know you need to come. Come for me. Come, Reagan."

My eyes rolled back and my mouth went slack. I barely felt him pushing into my throat as my body tightened as I came.

"Swallow it all, angel," he grunted, thrusting a final time before stilling.

My body was still convulsing as his salty come filled my mouth. I greedily drank him down, forcing my eyes to stare into his. He bared his teeth as he stared down at me, his fingers digging into my scalp. Finally, he relaxed his grip as I swallowed the last mouthful he gave me. Gently, he massaged where he'd been gripping me and pulled his cock from my mouth.

"That's my girl," he murmured. "Thank you, angel. That felt amazing." I licked my lips, savoring him as I smiled up at him. Despite having just come, I wanted to again. I didn't

know what it was with him, but I couldn't get enough. I'd never been this horny in my fucking life. "Did I hurt you?" He stroked his thumb along my lower lip, wiping away my spit and his cum.

"No," I breathed. "I liked it." He hummed thoughtfully, moving his thumb back to my lower lip.

"You like it rough, but like soft words," he murmured. I blinked at him. I hadn't analyzed what turned me on, but apparently, he had.

"I guess," I shrugged. "I haven't thought about it."

"I'm trying to figure you out," he said, dropping his hands to his pants and putting his cock away. "I just want to give you everything that will make you feel good."

"You've given me more than enough," I said, resting my hands on his thighs as I pushed myself to my feet.

"Nothing is enough," he said, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me onto his thigh. "I've only given you praise, but I have a few gifts coming for you."

"Gifts?" I lifted my brows, and he grinned.

"They're surprises," he said. "Just a few things."

"You know I don't like a lot of stuff," I said, trailing my fingers over the collar of his shirt. His smile tightened. "It makes it hard to travel with so much."

"Travel?" he asked. I lifted my eyes to his. But before I could say anything else, he cleared his throat and tapped my hip. "I need to get back to work."

"Eli," I breathed, but he just gently pushed me off his lap and stood.

"Thank you, angel. I mean it." He gripped my chin and tilted my head back, pressing his lips to mine.

"Wait. Elliot." I grabbed his arm, stopping him. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," he breathed, running his hand through his hair. "I just—I didn't know you'd still want to travel. But that was

stupid of me. I should've known—”

“The retreats—”

“I know,” he said, cutting me off. “I know.”

“But I’ll come back between them,” I promised. “There are only six a year. And they’re only for a few weeks at a time, so I’ll spend most of my time here.” He nodded as I spoke, but I felt him pull away.

“I know,” he said again. My chest felt heavy as he stepped back toward the bedroom door.

“You’re mad?” I murmured.

“I’d never ask you to give anything up for me,” he said, wrapping his hand around the doorknob. “I just thought—” My throat tightened as he opened the door. “It’s okay. I want you to go. You need to live your life.”

Why did it feel like those words were a lie?

“I want to live my life with you,” I said, and his lips tightened into a sad smile.

“I can’t travel the world with you,” he muttered.

“But—”

“We can talk about this later,” he said, stepping into the doorway. “It’s fine, Reagan. Really. I’m not upset. I want you to have the life you want and deserve. And traveling is the thing that gives you purpose.”

“But—”

“Later, Rae,” he rasped. “Please. Not right now.” I took a deep breath, forcing myself to stay put and not go after him. I wanted to hug him. I wanted to turn the clock back two minutes and redo this entire conversation. “Don’t cook dinner. I want to take my girls out tonight.”

Tears burned my eyes at his words. His girls. Was I still his girl? I felt like I was moments ago, but now...now we felt a million miles apart.



I TIED the band around Emma's hair as I finished her braid. She reached back and smoothed her hand over it, glancing over her shoulder and giving me a wide, toothy grin.

"Thanks, Auntie," she said, hopping to her feet.

My stomach dropped. That's what I was to her—her aunt. But it felt wrong to be called that. Which was ridiculous. It wasn't like whatever was happening with Eli would change my relationship with Emma. She would always be my girl, no matter what happened.

My stomach twisted further.

I didn't want anything to happen—I didn't want to lose Eli, but I was terrified that our conversation earlier was the start of it. The start of him pulling away and ending things before they even began.

"You look beautiful," I said to her as she bounced on her toes.

"I know." She ran her hand over her braid again, her other arm clutching Uni tightly to her chest. I laughed as I reached for her, digging my fingers into her ribs and tickling her.

"Oh, you know, do you?" She squealed with laughter, making me forget about the heaviness I just felt and laugh with her.

"Stop!" she cried, shoving at me with her little hands. Her eyes crinkled shut as she laughed harder.

The abrupt sound of my phone ringing pulled the smile from my face and my hands fell away. She breathed heavily as she continued giggling to herself, dramatically wiping the tears from her cheeks.

"Wanna finger paint?" I asked. Her eyes snapped open wide as she nodded.

"Please," she put prayer hands up, "please!"

“Change clothes,” I laughed, pointing at her door. Before the words were fully out of my mouth, she turned and sprinted for her bedroom.

I grabbed my phone from beside me and groaned. I didn’t want to talk to him.

“Hey, Benji,” I said as I answered, forcing my voice to come out light and not strained.

“Hey.” He sounded way too happy, and it made me uneasy. “I haven’t heard from you in a few days. Just checking in.” I winced.

Yeah, he’d texted me, but I kept conveniently forgetting to reply.

“Oh, just busy,” I lied, huffing out a laugh. I pushed to my feet and paced in front of the couch.

“Yeah, the diner has been insane.” I chewed on my lip as I paused, my free hand braced on my hip. “So, anyway,” he drew the word out, “I thought we could do a movie night at my place. What do you say?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I knew this was coming. Pacing again, I tried to find the right words.

“Benji,” I sighed. “I’d love to, but I don’t think this is going to work out anymore.” There was a long pause and I held my breath, waiting for his reply. He roughly cleared his throat, and I winced.

“Um, okay,” he rasped. “Can I ask why?” I chewed on my lip until I felt the skin peel off. I licked the blood from it, my stomach in a tight ball of anxiety.

“You know,” I said, flailing my hand through the air. “I’m so busy, and you have to work. And—”

“If this is about Lotus, it’s fine,” he rushed out. “We can make it work. I don’t mind waiting for you to come back.” I shoved my hand through my hair.

“I don’t know if I’d want to come back,” I admitted, the truth settling in my belly like lead bricks.



“We can still make it work.” He had a weird mix of hope and urgency in his voice, and it broke my heart.

A part of me wanted to tell him it didn’t matter, that I didn’t want him, anyway. That I had Eli now. But I couldn’t say that. I couldn’t tell anyone about this weird relationship that wasn’t really a relationship with Eli. No one would understand and I knew they’d have negative comments, and it was still so new and fragile, and felt like we were already on the brink of shattering everything—no. I couldn’t tell anyone.

“Benji,” I whispered. “I’d love for you to be my friend, but that’s it.” I closed my eyes again, breathing through the emotions. I hated hurting him. It was never my intention. I thought we’d have a fling, and that meant not catching feelings for each other. And I didn’t, but maybe he did.

I didn’t want to be the villain in his story. I didn’t want to hurt him. But he deserved to be happy, and I deserved—I deserved to be happy too. But what would make me happy? Giving up Lotus? Or giving up Eli?

“Friend,” Benji repeated. “Right. Yeah. Of course.” His voice was tight. Not angry, but rejected. Sad. And I hated myself for it. But there was nothing else I could do.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and he cleared his throat again.

“No, it’s fine.” I sank onto the couch, resting my forehead on my hand. “I understand.”

“I mean it, though,” I said softly. “I do want to be your friend.” He was silent for a long moment. So long I thought he hung up on me.

“Alright,” he finally said. “I—I’ll see you around, Rae.” With that, he hung up.

I knew I did the right thing, that I’d let him down as gently as I could. But I hated doing it. I should’ve never gotten involved with him in the first place. I knew that then but I did it anyway. And now he was hurting because of me.

Breathing deeply, I scrubbed my hands over my face. Why was this so hard? Why did I fuck everything up all the time? I

just wanted to make everyone happy, yet I always seemed to make them upset. Usually with me.

My mind drifted back to Eli and the way he'd looked so betrayed at the mention of traveling. He'd said he wouldn't ask me to give it up, but I knew he wanted it. Not that he wanted to stifle me, but he was older and already settled in his life. And I was still young and—that was just an excuse I'd told myself for not settling down.

I was young, but that didn't mean I had to travel the world. I didn't have to give up a good man and a good life because I was too scared to commit.

But it wasn't fear of commitment that held me back from fully giving myself to him. It was fear of abandonment. It was fear of losing him when he found out I was just a sham, that I wasn't really as great as he thought I was. I couldn't survive seeing the softness leech from his eyes when he looked at me.

Maybe it would be better to break things off before we could get too serious.

That didn't feel right either, though. I was already way past feeling too serious for him. I was head over heels, and that was terrifying.

Sure he liked fucking me, he liked holding me and saying sweet things, but other than that, did he like me? Or was I an easy, convenient lay for him? Would he do this with anyone, or was I special?

The unsurety of it all made me feel sick. Maybe we needed to really establish our relationship before I fell any harder. Or maybe I needed to keep a wall between us and just enjoy the ride he was taking me on.



# elliott

I STARED at Reagan across the table, watching as she brought her glass to her lips and wrapped them around her straw, taking a sip of water. My cock thickened at the sight, at the memory of her lips wrapped around me this afternoon.

Then I'd fucked everything up by being weird and running away instead of just talking to her like a normal person. I should've just told her I didn't want her to leave. But that felt selfish, and I panicked.

I didn't want her to resent me for holding her back, but the thought of watching her get on a plane to fly across the world made my caveman brain rage. I didn't want her to leave. I wanted her right by my side.

If I had it my way, she'd never leave my sight.

Ever.

I'd take her to work with me and sit her in the corner, watching her play with Emma as I tapped away at my computer. Then we'd come home, and I'd sit at the table while I watched her cook, or I'd stand in the doorway while she showered. I'd follow her around like a lost puppy, and be unembarrassed by it.

But I needed to rein it back and stop being such a possessive psycho. She just brought this side out in me and I'd felt nothing like it before.

Which should've told me to take a step back, but I didn't want to. I wanted to steamroll ahead. I wanted to claim every

bit of her mind, body, and soul. I wanted to consume her until all that was left was us. Just...us.

“Sir?”

I blinked a few times, clearing my mind of everything as I turned my attention to the server. I cleared my throat and shifted in my seat, smiling tightly at her.

“I’m sorry,” I laughed. “What did you say?” She gave me a polite smile, her hands clutching the little black leather booklet in front of her.

“I said to take your time,” she said, setting it in front of me. I nodded my thanks as I pulled my wallet from my pocket, purposefully avoiding Reagan’s all-knowing gaze.

The server hurried away before I could hand the book back to her with my credit card in it. Instead, I stared down at it, silently hoping she’d come back soon.

“Eli?” I forced myself to take a deep breath before looking up at Rae. “You okay?” We’d been awkward all evening. Tiptoeing around each other and avoiding any topics that were too heavy.

“I’m fine, angel,” I murmured, reaching out to grab her hand. I ran my thumb along the back of it, giving her a tight smile. She tried to return it, but it was too strained to be genuine.

“Ice cream!” Emma cried, and I snatched my hand back. Fuck. Even if she was just a kid, she was too observant for her own good. I needed to be more careful around Reagan while she was around. At least until we figured out what was happening between us. The last thing we needed was Emma telling everyone that her dad was too touchy with her aunt.

“Tomorrow,” I said, and Emma jutted her lip out. “You already had dessert.”

“More!” She turned toward Reagan as if she’d help her. Reagan gave me a guilty smile, her cheeks staining pink. I held my breath and waited for her to give Emma the go-ahead.

“Daddy said tomorrow,” she murmured. Emma let out a dramatic sigh, turning back toward the table and crossing her arms over her chest. It still surprised me she was on my side with everything.

“You can have juice,” I amended, and Emma slid her eyes to me.

“What kinda juice?” she asked, and I huffed out a laugh as I scrubbed my hand over my jaw.

“We have orange and apple.” Her eyes narrowed as she turned toward Reagan.

“Peach.”

“We don’t have peach, Em,” I said gently, but she ignored me. I glanced at Reagan, finding her grinning.

“It’s in the back of the fridge,” she muttered.

“What?”

“I—I hid it at the back of the fridge. Behind the weird amount of kiwis you have.” My mouth opened, then closed before I let out a choked laugh.

“I like kiwis,” I said. “Sue me.”

“It’s weird.”

“Liking kiwis is weird?” I lifted my brows, and she shrugged.

“Who needs an entire bowl of them?” she countered, and I leaned back in my chair, folding my arms over my chest. She glanced at Emma before sliding her eyes back to me. “That’s where she gets it.”

“Gets what?” I blinked, confused. “She hates kiwis.”

“No,” she laughed, shaking her head. “Her attitude. I don’t know how I didn’t see it sooner.” My brows shot into my hairline.

“Attitude—” I threw my head back and laughed. “Have you met yourself, angel? You’re the one with the attitude.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t get it from me.”

“She’s gotten sassier since you moved in,” I countered, and she shook her head.

“Nope, she’s a hundred percent you,” she said decisively. “You’re the sassy one.”

“I’m not sassy, brat.” Her eyes twinkled as she smiled broadly at me. I could tell she was holding back her laugh, but I couldn’t hold mine back. I laughed again, feeling lighter than I had all day.

A hand snaked in front of me and I jerked back, my head snapping up. “Sorry,” the server said, smiling between us. “Can I just say—” She met Reagan’s gaze before turning her attention back to me. “I hope my husband and I are as happy and in love as you are when our baby is her age.” She tilted her head to Emma. “I just had him a few months ago, and—oh, it doesn’t matter. But you give me hope things will work out.”

“They will,” Reagan said sincerely. I stared at her, finding her eyes bright as she stared up at our server, a genuine and kind smile on her pretty face. “How old’s your baby?”

“He’s only seven months,” the server said proudly, and Reagan smiled broader. “Yours?” She looked down at Emma.

“Just turned four about a week ago,” I choked out. The server’s smile never fell.

“Well, happy birthday,” she said to Emma. Reagan gently nudged her arm.

“What do you say?” she whispered as she leaned over.

“Thank you!” Emma gave her a giant smile, one that made her eyes squeeze shut and nose crinkle. It made my chest tighten. Reagan smoothed her hand over Emma’s hair as she straightened in her chair.

The server made her way to the back and I let out a long breath as I stared at Reagan. She was fully engrossed in a conversation with Emma, both of them giggling and wiggling their fingers at each other.

Meredith would’ve never—

I forced myself to stop thinking. I couldn't compare them. They were sisters but couldn't be more different.

My chest tightened as Emma wrapped her hand around Reagan's fingers. I stared at where they touched, a lump forming in my throat.

How could Reagan still want to travel? Why would she want to leave when she slotted into our lives so perfectly? Before her, we were struggling, but now...she brought so much light to our world and I couldn't imagine my life without her in it. I didn't want to imagine it.



WE SANK onto the couch with a sigh, Reagan's head resting against the back as she stared up at the ceiling with a soft smile. I stared at her, my heart squeezing at the gentleness on her face, the way she seemed so comfortable and at ease.

"Tonight was fun," she said, dropping her eyes to look at me. I cleared my throat and shifted in my seat.

"Thanks for helping put her down," I murmured. She shrugged and turned her attention back to the ceiling.

Tonight had felt like we were a real family. Like this was how our life was always supposed to be. Emma was thriving, I'd never been happier, and Reagan...she seemed lighter. Like she had a purpose. She didn't seem so lost.

"Can we talk?" she whispered. My throat tightened at the words. I knew we needed to, but I wasn't ready. What if she ended everything? I didn't know how I'd handle it. How I'd survive it.

"Sure." I pushed to my feet and held my hand out to her. "In my room?" She chewed on her bottom lip before sliding her hand into mine and standing.

I led her from the living room, shutting the lights off as we went, and headed for my bedroom. Shoving the door open, I



let her enter first. Her pajamas were still lying on the bed, ready for her to jump in to. Mine were beside them like it was normal.

And it was normal. It felt more normal than anything else ever had in my entire life.

She paused in front of the bed, her back to me as she stared down at it. I shut the door and leaned heavily on it, bracing myself for her words.

“I broke things off with Benji this afternoon,” she muttered.

Okay. Not what I was expecting.

“How’d he take it?” I asked, and she let out a humorless laugh.

“How do you think? Like a well-adjusted, normal person. He was upset, but he respected my decision.” She sighed as she ran her hand through her hair. “It would’ve been easier if he would’ve yelled at me.”

“I would’ve had to kill him,” I joked, even though I knew in my heart I really would’ve hurt him if he hurt her. Emotionally, physically, it didn’t matter. If she was hurt, or upset, I’d fix it.

She turned toward me, a sardonic smile on her pretty face. “Sure.”

“I would’ve,” I insisted. “If he yelled at you or upset you,” I shrugged, “dead man.” She huffed out another laugh. She thought I was joking. Cute.

“I’m trying to be serious,” she said, smiling. “We really need to talk, Eli.” I let out a harsh breath, my shoulders slumping forward.

“I know.” I moved to her and rested my hands on her hips. She tipped her head back to peer up at me. “If you break up with me, I can’t promise I’ll handle it as well as well-adjusted, perfect Benji.” She rested her hand on my chest.

“Are we together enough for me to break up with you?” she murmured.

“Yes.” It wasn’t a hesitation. It wasn’t a question. Of course, we were together. “I told you that you’re mine.”

“Yeah, but today—”

“You just caught me off guard,” I rushed out. “If you still want to travel and work for Lotus, I’ll support you. Whatever you choose to do with your life, I’ll support it. And if that means you have to do it without me—” I cut myself off. “I can’t say I’d be happy about losing you. But I’ll never shut you out. My home will always be yours, Rae. No matter what happens, you’re always welcome here.”

Tears filled her eyes, and for a moment, I worried I said the wrong thing. Then she threw her arms around my neck and squeezed tight.

“You mean it?” she whispered. I wrapped my arms around her waist and held her to me.

“Of course, angel.” I buried my face in her hair and inhaled her sweet scent. Three words formed on my lips, but I forced myself not to say them. I couldn’t. I might ruin the moment if I moved too fast. I could scare her away.

Or maybe I just wasn’t ready. Not yet.

But I felt it. I felt the truth of them to my core. I knew I loved her. I always had, and always would. But I couldn’t say it.

“I don’t know if I can come back here,” she said, pulling me from my thoughts. My blood turned cold as the words sunk in. Slowly, I pulled away.

“What do you mean?” I asked slowly.

“This town.” She flicked her eyes between mine. “I can’t be around my mother, and the people—” She let out a long breath. “I just—you and Lily are the only reasons I’ve come back. And Lily is moving...” She trailed off, her voice wobbling.

“And you don’t want to come back,” I murmured, finishing her thought. “Even for me.”

“No,” she rushed out. “I will. It’s just—it’s hard for me to be here, you know? This town holds so many terrible memories for me, and I feel like I’m always on edge, waiting for Mom to pop out of nowhere. I can’t even go to the store without worrying I’ll run into her.”

“Your time here was really that bad?” I asked, and she pulled away from me fully.

“I was always in Meredith’s shadow, always second best. Here, I’ll only ever be her sister. I’ll only ever be Mom’s other daughter. But out there,” she threw her hand toward the window, “I’m something. I’m someone.”

“You’re someone to me,” I said, and she smiled sadly. “What would it take for you to come back to me? Moving?”

“I can’t ask you to move—”

“You’re not asking me,” I said, stepping toward her. I reached for her again, and she let me take her hands in mine. “I’m asking what you need from me. Do you need me to move? I’ll do it.”

“You’d move for me?” she whispered, and I nodded. Emma wasn’t in school yet and didn’t have that many friends here. She’d adjust. I would too. If it meant Reagan coming home to me, I’d go anywhere she wanted.

“Say the word,” I murmured, reaching up to cup her face. “And I’ll give you the world. I told you that, and I meant it.”

“I didn’t know—” She closed her eyes as she leaned into my touch. “I thought you were just saying that.”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean, baby,” I said, and she opened her eyes. Her dark lashes were damp, and the whites were red. “Anything you want, and it’s yours.”

“But Emma—”

“Will survive moving,” I said. I could see her mind working as she stared up at me.

“Your job?”

“I can find a new one, or commute if I’m close enough.” She chewed on her lip. I held my breath, waiting for her answer.

“You can’t move because of me,” she finally said. I sighed and wrapped my other arm around her waist, pulling her to me again.

“I’ll do it,” I whispered. “I’ll do anything for you.”

“Would you travel with me?” she blurted, and I paused.

“I’d love to,” I said hesitantly. “But Emma—she can’t live like that. She needs stability.” You need stability, I thought, but forced myself not to say. She deflated, and I held onto her tighter. “But we can make it work.”

This was all hypothetical anyway. Yes, she was traveling to the retreats, but if Lotus never called her back, never actually hired her, then maybe she’d eventually stop. She’d give up and decide to stay here forever.

I didn’t want her to not work at her dream job, but a selfish part of me wanted her here. I wanted to see her succeed and grow, but I didn’t want to give her up to do it.

And I know that made me a monster to even think, but it’s the truth. I wasn’t ready to lose her.

“Right,” she laughed breathily, dismissively, and patted her hand against my chest. “Of course.”

“But if I could, I would.” I didn’t let her go. I refused to. “Let’s worry about it when we get there, okay? Right now, you’re here and that’s all that matters.” She flicked her eyes between mine as she swallowed thickly. Hesitantly, she nodded.

“Okay,” she whispered. “We’ll figure it out.”

I knew she wanted a plan. She wanted to know everything that was going to happen, and truthfully, I did, too. But this was easier—pretending like this issue wasn’t looming over our heads was easier than acknowledging that she’d be leaving soon.

Unless, maybe, I could convince her to stay.

Could I do that?

Guilt ate away at me. I shouldn't. I should convince her to go. I should send her on her way. I should do a lot of things. But I didn't want to do any of them.

She pushed onto her tiptoes and pressed her lips against mine. It was a gentle kiss, unlike most of the ones we'd shared. Soft and sweet. I let her guide it, let her take control for the moment, just to see where she'd take it.

Her hands moved to the hem of her shirt, and she broke the kiss only long enough to pull it over her head before moving to my jeans. I moved to her skirt, unbuttoning it and shoving it down her legs as she ripped my zipper open. My clothes ended up in a discarded pile next to hers on the floor.

Our movements weren't frenzied, but hungry. Like we were starving for each other. Like we'd been apart for years and were yearning to connect again, to have a fleeting moment of pleasure.

I guided her back toward the bed, my hands sliding along her warm, soft body. She gripped my shoulders as she laid back, pulling me down with her.

"I thought I ruined everything today," I breathed against her lips. "I never want to feel like I've lost you again." I trailed kisses down her jaw to her neck, smiling at the way she gasped.

"I felt so disconnected from you," she whispered, her arms wrapping around me. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too, baby." My hand ran along her taut stomach to her breast, and I roughly pulled the cup of her bra down, exposing her peaked nipple. Lowering my mouth to it, I gently sucked it into my mouth as I lifted my eyes to meet hers.

Her back arched, and she let out a long, breathy moan. She ran her fingers through my hair, holding me to her nipple as I licked, and bit, and sucked at it. I felt her body tremble under me, and knowing this was the effect I had on her made me feral.

I kissed down her body, pausing to pull her panties down her legs. Gripping the inside of her thighs, I pushed her legs gently apart as I settled between them, her pussy already weeping and begging for me.

“So wet already,” I murmured, keeping my eyes on hers as I leaned forward, lightly tapping her clit with my tongue. She clamped her hand over her mouth, her eyes widening. “Do you like when I eat your needy pussy?”

“God, yes,” she moaned behind her hand. “Please, Elliot. Please—”

“Shh, baby,” I soothed. “I’ll give it to you. Just be patient.”

Her eyes rolled back as I ran my tongue through her again, groaning at her taste. It was addictive—she was addictive. Sliding my hand between her legs, I gently probed at her entrance with my middle finger, smiling to myself at the little whimpers she made.

Slowly, I pressed my finger inside, just enough to tease her, enough to feel her clench around me. She spread her legs more, silently begging. I pumped my finger a few times before sliding it out. My mouth stayed on her clit, licking and lapping at it as she writhed on the bed.

She slid her leg over my shoulder, hooking it around my back and pulling me closer to her pussy. I pressed two fingers against her entrance as I sucked her clit roughly into my mouth.

“Oh, fuck,” she moaned. She slid her hands to her breasts and groped them, pinching and twisting her nipples. “That feels so good. Please don’t stop.”

I shoved the two fingers in, curling them as I licked her clit. I stopped holding back and fucked her with them, feeling her pussy swell and tighten with her pleasure. I rubbed at a spot inside her that made her bite her lips to keep from screaming.

Her body shook as my tongue moved faster, driving her higher. I couldn’t stop staring up at her, at the beautiful way she was about to explode.

And then it happened.

She cried out, her entire body convulsing as a gush of liquid shot from her pussy. My eyes widened as I jerked back, not expecting it. But as soon as I realized what was happening, I moved my fingers to her clit and kept rubbing, kept driving her pleasure higher.

“Such a dirty girl,” I growled, “squirting all over me.” Her back bowed deeply off the bed as another smaller stream left her. I dipped down and ran my tongue over her stomach, thighs, and wet, messy cunt, cleaning her the best I could.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed, her body flushed and shaking. “That’s never—I’ve never done that—”

“Don’t apologize,” I said, my fingers still lazily stroking her clit. With every swipe over it, her body jerked. She was sensitive, and fuck if that didn’t turn me on more. “I want you to do it again. And again. And again.”

“I can’t,” she breathed.

“Maybe not tonight, but now we know you can, and I want it to happen every time,” I said. She forced her eyes open to look at me. “Every time, Rae. You understand me?” Her breath caught, her eyes widening as she nodded. “Good girl.”

I climbed over her body, kissing and licking the remaining drops off as I went. By the time I made it to her mouth, she was panting, her chest flushed, and cheeks rosy.

She reached between us and slid her hand under the waistband of my boxers. I hissed as she wrapped her hand around my painfully hard cock, squeezing slightly.

“I need to be inside you,” I grunted. She leaned up and trailed her tongue along my lips, moaning at the taste of her own release. “Fuck.” I ripped her hand away and pinned it to the bed as my other hand shoved my boxers down enough to let my cock free.

Without warning, I lined up and shoved in, silencing her scream with my lips. I relentlessly pounded into her, feeling her cunt wrap tightly around me with each brutal stroke.

I gripped her other hand and moved them both above her head, holding them there as I used her body the way I needed to. Her breasts bounced temptingly with each thrust, her pussy contracting around me, begging for my cum.

My mouth dropped to her nipple again and I sucked on it, lapping at the sensitive nub as she moaned and writhed beneath me. “More,” she pleaded. “More, Eli!”

Letting go of her hands, I leaned back on my knees and gripped her waist, hauling her ass onto my thighs to hit at a new angle. Her back arched into a deep bend, letting me fuck up into her tight heat harder than before. My grip on her waist was unwavering, my nails digging into her skin.

“So fucking good,” I hissed, dropping my eyes to watch her pussy swallow my cock. Finally, I moved my hand to her lower stomach and used my thumb to stroke her clit. “Come again, angel.”

“God,” she groaned. Her thighs quivered and her pussy tightened. “I’m close.”

“I know,” I breathed. “I feel you gripping my cock. Such a good fucking girl for me.” She rolled her hips, lifting and dropping them in a way that made me see fucking stars. Sex had never felt this fucking good before.

She moaned my name, whimpering and whining as she used my cock to chase her pleasure. I stroked her clit faster, and finally, her body tensed as she slammed herself all the way down. I watched her explode again, trying to stay quiet as she came around me, massaging my dick with her orgasm.

Reagan collapsed back to the bed, and I readjusted our bodies so I could comfortably hold myself above her. Gently, I kissed her again. Her lips were lazy and clumsy as she kissed me back, and I knew she needed soft right now. She needed gentle.

“You did so good for me, baby girl,” I whispered, stroking her hair from her face. “You always look so pretty when you come. I love watching you take what you need from me.” I



began sawing my hips back and forth, slower and gentler than before. Pressing my lips to her forehead, I let the kiss linger.

She wrapped her arms and legs around my body, holding onto me as I gently fucked her, coaxing her through it as I barreled toward my own release. She felt so fucking good, so wet and tight and perfect.

“I never want this to end,” she whispered against my neck. She sucked on the sensitive skin there, making me groan. “I want you inside me always.”

“You’re killing me, angel,” I grunted, moving faster.

“I love the way it feels when you fill me,” she continued, her voice just as soft. “I love—” She cut herself off, and I pulled away. I saw the words in her eyes, the same words I’d wanted to say to her but was too scared to.

“I know,” I whispered, and pressed my lips against hers. “Me too.”

My cock began to thicken as I pumped faster. She dug her nails into my back, whimpering into my mouth as I fucked her.

“I promise I won’t leave,” she said, and I groaned. “I promise I’ll be yours forever.”

“Mine,” I grunted, squeezing my eyes shut. “My girl.”

“Yours.” My head fell into her neck as my thrusts became frenzied. “I belong to you, Elliot. You own every bit of me.”

“Fuck,” I groaned. Just a few more thrusts—

“You’re mine, too,” she whispered, her nails digging into my skin harder. “All mine.”

Those words were my undoing.

I slammed in a final time and held myself deep as I spilled into her. Her pussy spasmed around me, milking every drop from my cock.

Rope after rope of cum filled her, and she took every bit of it like I knew she would. I pumped my hips a few more times, groaning from how sensitive my head was. But I didn’t want to pull out. I wanted to get hard again and fill her up some

more. I wanted to make her messy and full and—pregnant. I wanted her pregnant.

I pressed deeper, forcing my cum in as deep as it could go. My lips pressed against hers again, and the image of her belly swollen assaulted my mind.

That was the life I wanted. With her.

She kissed me again, a soft sigh leaving her lips as she pulled away. Her eyes were open and vulnerable in a way I'd never seen before, and I knew I never wanted to break whatever she was giving me. I'd cherish it, cherish her, until the day I died.

"I'll say it one day," I promised. She nodded, a small smile teasing her lips.

"Me too."



# reagan

THREE WEEKS HAVE SLIPPED through my fingers since Eli and I first hooked up, two since the night we almost said we loved each other. Since then, our connection has grown deeper, and it's becoming harder and harder to remember what I wanted before him. My dreams. The life I'd carelessly planned for myself after leaving this town years ago.

But now that I have him, have the life I'd secretly always craved, I don't know if I can give it up. If I can give him up. Yet something still prods the back of my mind—wanderlust. In my heart, I know I'll always be a Nomad, I'll always be a traveler.

As if sensing my internal struggle, Lily turned to me, her dark blonde brows bunched. Emma raced back and forth through the living room, letting Uni soar overhead, screeching and laughing. I was embarrassingly too invested in a cartoon that was playing on the TV. I tried to ignore her, but I relented and slid my eyes to Lily. Her face was as wary as I felt.

"What's going on?" she murmured. I shook my head slightly, giving her a tight smile. I didn't want to explain everything while Emma was around. But I should've known she wouldn't let me off so easily. "Kid. Emma." Emma paused and whirled toward us, her princess dress swishing around her legs. "Can you go to the kitchen and get me a snack?"

"Lil," I hissed, hitting her with the back of my hand. "She's not a dog you play fetch with." Before the words were even out of my mouth, Emma was soaring from the room and toward the kitchen. She had a designated cabinet full of just

Emma snacks. She needed the independence, and when I'd explained it to Eli, he'd agreed. I'd never seen anyone so excited to get a snack for themselves before.

"Okay. Spill it." Lily turned fully toward me, her gaze unrelenting. I sighed and pushed myself up straighter on the couch, folding my legs under me.

"It's Eli," I muttered, and she nodded.

"Obviously. What's going on?" I glanced over her shoulder, anticipating Emma to run out of the room at any second.

"We're kind of..." I trailed off. "Together?"

"You don't sound sure about that," she said, her eyes narrowing. I groaned and dropped my head back.

"We're together," I said more firmly. "I just—I still haven't heard back from Lotus, and we had a talk about it, but nothing was really resolved. And every time I try to bring it up, he says we'll figure it out when we get there."

"Have you called Lorelai?" She pushed herself up fully, matching my posture. I shook my head and ran my hand through my hair.

"I don't want to," I quietly admitted. "If she says I got it, then I have to have the conversation with Eli and tell him I'm leaving. I don't know how he'll truly react. And I don't know how I will, either. I don't want to leave—"

"So don't," she shrugged.

"But what if I don't leave and in a year realize I should've gone? What if I realize I gave up my dreams and life for him?" Nerves swirled in my belly.

Was that the truth? Was that what I was really worried about?

"Then you call Lorelai back and ask for a job," she said. She said it like it was so simple, like it was the obvious answer. "You go on another retreat, or go on another trip. You do whatever you have to to fulfill your soul."

“But—”

“If he loves you, he’ll understand.”

“He doesn’t love me,” I said. She stared at me. “I don’t love him.” She threw her head back and laughed.

“What-the-fuck-ever,” she laughed. “I’ve never seen you so head-over-heels before.”

“What if I give up everything and he doesn’t want me, Lil?” I whispered, my throat tight. Her smile fell.

“Then he’s a fucking idiot and doesn’t deserve you,” she said softly. She reached over and grabbed my hand, gently squeezing. “Look,” she let out a long breath as she pulled her hand back, “I know it’s scary. I know choosing to trust him is fucking terrifying. But what’s life without risk?” I tilted my head to the side as I stared at her. “Either way, this makes your story that much better.”

“What story?”

“Your life story.” She smiled sadly. “If he loves you, when you’re on your deathbed replaying your life, you’ll get to remember the moments that made your heart flutter. You’ll remember all the moments that you fell in love with him over again through the years. You’ll replay the good times with him. Your story will be amazing.”

“And if he doesn’t?” I whispered, scared to hear the answer.

“Then you’ll look back on your life and see how strong you were. How resilient you were. How you had your heart broken by a man you thought you loved and you thought loved you, and you’ll see you survived it. You’ll relive all the moments you didn’t think you’d make it through, and you did. You did. You’ll move on with your life, and it’ll be a full and fucking amazing one. You’ll see the world, and fall in love with people and places, and you’ll leave a bit of your soul in each place you visit. And one day you’ll meet someone else, someone better, someone who’ll love you the way you deserve to be loved.”

A sob shoved its way out of my throat, and I roughly wiped at my cheeks. “Since when did you get so insightful?” I laughed through my choked tears. “Go back to being a dumb whore.”

“I’ll always be a dumb whore, babe,” she said, grinning. After a few moments, my tears dried and I watched as Emma raced into the living room, her arms full of snacks. One of each, by the looks of it.

She threw them at Lily, and Lily’s face tightened as she forced herself to smile.

“Cookies,” Emma panted, pointing at the little packet of her favorite cookies. “And—”

“I see,” Lily said, and I cleared my throat. “I mean. Please show me everything.” Emma smiled broadly and went back to pointing out each treat, and surprisingly, Lily played along, nodding and pretending to be as excited as Emma was.

Finally, Emma ran away, turning her attention back to her toys. Lily rested her head on the back of the couch and glanced at me.

“You okay?” she murmured, and I shrugged. I stared at Emma as she ran back and forth, her laugh just as high-pitched and happy as before.

“What do I do?” I asked quietly.

“You’re the hippie,” Lily said, and I slid my eyes to her. “Follow your heart.” I rolled my eyes, huffing out a sarcastic laugh.

“I’m serious.”

“I am, too,” she said. “Do what feels right. And if staying here with him feels right, then fuck Lorelai, fuck Lotus. Fuck it all. But if you’re having doubts, then...” She trailed off as she shrugged. “That’s your answer, isn’t it?”



LILY LEFT A FEW HOURS AGO, and I put Emma down for her nap twenty minutes ago. After cleaning up, I decided I needed to take a breather and clear my mind. And the only way I knew how to do it was through yoga.

Since living with Eli, I hadn't been on my mat as often as I was used to. Before, I was on my mat multiple times a day, every day. But then things got so busy and hectic, I only had time for a quick routine with Emma every evening.

But I had to make time for it today.

Lily's words still rang through my head as I rolled onto my hands and knees and pushed myself up into downward dog. With my eyes closed, I breathed deeply, trying to force my internal anxieties away.

One day, you'll meet someone else who will love you the way you deserve to be loved.

I didn't want to meet anyone else. I wanted Eli, and only Eli. There was no one else on this planet—in this universe—that would make me feel the way he made me feel.

We didn't make sense. He was older. He was a dad. He was my sister's husband for fuck's sake. But that didn't matter to me. None of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was the soft way he treated me, the sweet words he murmured in my ear every night as I drifted to sleep. The way he looked at me like I was precious. His soft smiles and lazy kisses made me know that there would never be anyone else but him.

Was I trying to self-sabotage? Was I trying to ruin things with him on purpose?

It was likely. I'd been known to do it before. But I hadn't fucked my life over on purpose in...years. Not since I was in high school and was starting to get more recognition than Meredith. I'd ruined my art project so I wouldn't be in the art show because I didn't want to be in the spotlight—no, I didn't want to take the spotlight from her.

So much of my life was spent in the shadows, always making sure to lift her up. Always making sure to lift everyone



else up. It felt like no matter what I did, I was never chosen first. Never the one people thought of.

Even Lotus—I'd been volunteering my time at these retreats for over a year and had begged Lorelai for a permanent position since the first retreat. And every time I asked, she always promised to call me before the next one if she had an opening.

She'd had openings. She'd just given the positions to other people.

Tears burned my eyes. Was I not good enough? I knew I doubted myself, but in my heart I knew I was plenty good enough.

Right?

I knew that, didn't I?

Maybe it was for the best that Lorelai never called. It would make things easier. Maybe then Eli and I could fully commit to each other. I could find a job at a yoga studio and still feel fulfilled like that.

Or I could open my own.

I pushed that thought away.

There was no way I could start my own. I wouldn't know where to even begin. And in a town like this? No one would come.

But if we moved...

Nope.

I pushed the thought away.

My arms began trembling, and I lowered myself back to my knees, settling in to the next pose. My muscles groaned in delight at the stretch.

As I breathed into my pose, my eyes still closed, my mind wandered back to Eli. Would it be so bad to choose him over Lotus? Over traveling? It wouldn't be.

We could go on vacations a few times a year so I could still settle my restless soul. I paused and my eyes fluttered open. I stared down at my yoga mat, the sun from the window casting golden shadows across it.

Was my soul really restless? Or had it always felt like that because I'd never felt settled before? Because I'd never felt safe enough to feel secure? Why did I want to travel so badly?

I was running from my past.

I left this place and ventured out into the world hoping to forget everything that I went through, every inadequate emotion I'd ever felt growing up. But it followed me. Every time I stepped onto my mat, those feelings were there. Every time I begged for a job, my insecurities reared their ugly heads. Every time I silently begged someone to choose me, Meredith's invisible shadow still cast over me in a cold, dark cloud.

Maybe after all this running, all this searching, I'd finally found my home.

My phone rang, pulling me from my thoughts, and I sank onto my knees before pushing to my feet. Grabbing it from where it sat on the couch, I glanced at the caller ID and felt my stomach fall to the floor.

I ran a shaky hand over my hair, trying to breathe through my immediate anxiety. "Hello?"

"Hey, Reagan," Lorelai said. I could hear the smile in her voice. "How have you been?"

"Good," I breathed, my voice tight. I roughly cleared my throat. "Good. I've been—what about you?" She let out a breathy laugh as I sank onto the couch, my eyes glued to the yoga mat in the middle of the floor.

"I've been great," she said. "I was calling to talk about the retreat in Sri Lanka." I hummed—it was the only sound I could make. "Well, as you know, our retreat is coming up in about a week. We're having a lot of the same people, but also some newbies." I hummed again, my eyes burning. "I know this is short notice, but I know you'll be there anyway—" She

let out another laugh. “Would you like to be lead instructor for the newcomers?”

My phone almost slipped from my hand.

“Lead instructor?” I rasped. I’d never applied for that position before. “Not assistant?”

“Nope,” Lorelai laughed. “Lead.” My heart lurched into my throat.

“How long is the retreat again?”

“Three weeks,” she said. “Then there’s another right after, so I’d need you for six weeks.”

Six weeks.

Six weeks away from Eli and Emma. Six weeks away from this place. Six weeks—

“Think about it,” Lorelai said. “Let me know in a couple days. But I’d love to have you as a permanent part of the Lotus team.”

“Th-thank you,” I rasped, my throat dry. “I’ll call you—”

“You okay?” she asked quietly, and I cleared my throat again.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just freaking out.” She laughed again, and I could picture her wide, toothy smile.

“When you stop freaking out,” she said, “call me. Okay?”

“Okay,” I breathed. With that, she hung up and left me to stare at the wall.

I got the job.

The job I’d been waiting for—no, not the job I’d been waiting for. A better job than I ever expected to get.

Lead instructor.

Oh my God.

I threw myself back on the couch, letting out a loud squeal as I kicked my feet. Oh my God! Lead instructor!

A giant smile split my face as I jumped to my feet, re-energized from my earlier turmoil. Once Eli hears this, he'll freak out. He is going to be so excited. Even if he was unsure about me leaving for weeks at a time, but once he hears the news, I know he'll be happy. He'll be more than happy.



# elliott

I STOPPED by the cafe to grab Reagan and Emma the best chocolate chip cookies in town, and a coffee for me. Those girls love chocolate more than anyone else I'd ever met.

For the last three weeks, I'd felt lighter, like the heavy weight of the last year had been lifted off my shoulders and I could finally breathe. Like all the bullshit I'd gone through was worth it, because in the end, I ended up with Reagan.

We hadn't brought up the love word since that night. But with every day that passed, I found it harder and harder to hold it back. I wanted her to know.

My phone buzzed, pulling my attention, and I pulled it from my pocket. Seeing her name on the screen made my heart skip a beat.

Reagan: I have good news!

I smiled at the text. My mind raced with what it could possibly be. It landed on one thing. It was the one thing I constantly thought about, the thing I was obsessed with.

Could she be pregnant?

The thought filled me with a rush of anticipation and hope. Was it wrong to want that? I didn't know, and I didn't care. I wanted it. I wanted to have a million babies with her. I wanted to share that with her.

I grabbed the to-go cup and paper bag from the pickup counter, and, with a smile on my face, whirled to head to the door. Maybe I should stop and grab flowers for her, too.

“Eli, hey.” A voice stopped me in my tracks, and, like a bucket of ice, I turned toward him. My smile fell immediately, and a rage like I’d never felt before boiled to the surface. “How are you? Emma?”

“Don’t talk about my kid,” I snarled. His brows lifted as he took a step back. “What do you want?” He blinked, the only sign of his confusion.

“Just thought I’d say hi,” he said slowly. “You sure you’re okay?”

“What do you want?” I grit out. My hand tightened around the paper bag, every muscle in my body tensing. My good mood was obliterated.

“Like I said—”

“I know,” I snarled. “Just saying hi.” He gave me a confused look. I took a deep breath. It didn’t matter anymore—he didn’t matter. I gave him a once over before turning back toward the door.

“Wait,” he called. “I have Emma’s birthday present.”

That sent me over the edge.

I whirled back around, my eyes bulging and heart racing as I glared at him. “How dare you?” I hissed. “How fucking dare you say her name? How dare you—” I stepped toward him. “Just because you were fucking my wife doesn’t mean Emma’s your child. Stay the fuck away from her.”

I saw it in his eyes—the whirl of emotions, the way he was trying to find a way to backtrack and tell a lie that would placate me. But there was nothing he could say.

“I loved her,” he finally said. “We were happy—” I let out a humorless laugh.

“Yeah?” I scoffed. “Last I checked, you’re still with your wife, aren’t you? So you couldn’t have been all that happy with Meredith if you’re still—”

“Stella has nothing to do with this,” he said, his voice low.

“She doesn’t know, does she?” I asked, a cocky smile curving my lips. “Maybe I should call her up, let her know her husband is a thieving, cheating bastard.” His jaw tensed.

“She doesn’t know anything,” he hissed. That just pissed me off even more. So he could keep his family together, but he was fine ruining mine?

“Where does she think all that money came from?” I asked. His anger morphed into something else.

“What money?”

“Don’t fuck with me,” I laughed humorlessly. “Meredith’s life insurance.” He pressed his lips into a thin line.

“I’m planning on giving it to Emma when she turns eighteen. It’s what Mer would’ve wanted.”

Mer.

She hated when I called her that. Apparently, it was fine for him to do it.

“Don’t bother,” I said. “We don’t want your money.”

“It’s Mer’s—”

“It’s yours now,” I said. “And I don’t want it.”

“Well, it’s not yours,” he countered. “It’ll be Emma’s. When she gets older, she’ll have the choice.” I set the coffee and bag on the closest table and stepped up to him, my chest brushing his.

“If you ever come near my daughter, I will fucking kill you,” I said, glaring at him. I was taller by an inch, but I used it to my advantage and looked down my nose at him. “Do you understand me?”

“Elliot—”

“Do you understand me?” I snarled. “I won’t hesitate. I will fucking slaughter you.”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, then his eyes narrowed and any fear he just had was gone. A cocky smirk lifted the



corner of his mouth. “Has Emma told you about the times she came swimming at my place? She loves Uncle Drake’s pool.”

“Excuse me?” My body heated as rage took over.

“Meredith would bring her over on the weekends, when you were busy working.” He grinned triumphantly. “We had a great time together—like we were a family. But you wouldn’t know what that’s like, would you?”

My hands tightened into fists at my sides. It took everything I had not to punch him in the fucking face.

“You barely had any time for your wife,” he said. “Maybe if you would’ve cared, she wouldn’t have needed me.”

“Me?” I blinked at him. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“She told me everything,” he said. “I know.” I shook my head.

Yeah, I worked a lot toward the end of our marriage. But it was so I could be away from her. And a sick part of me hoped that if I could just make more money, be more of a provider for her, that she’d choose me.

A red haze clouded my vision as I stared at his smug face. Like he was happy about his role he’d had in ruining my life, my marriage. My family.

“If I ever find out you’ve talked to Emma, I’ll kill you.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “You said that.”

My hand shot up and wrapped around his throat. I squeezed, bringing his face closer to mine. He made a gurgling, shocked sound as someone let out a scream.

“I’ll kill you,” I said again, quieter so no one else could hear. People stood from their seats, some scattered back, a few moved forward. I smiled at him, tightening my hold.

Panic filled his eyes and his hand reached up and wrapped around my wrist. A silent plea to let go. With a final squeeze, I let go, shoving him backward.

It wasn't worth doing anything else to him. Not when I had Reagan. Not when I had Emma. My girls. My family.

"I hope to never see you again," I said. "Keep the money. Take your wife on a nice vacation." He rubbed at his throat as people surrounded him. A man stepped between us, but I just grinned and grabbed my bag and cup off the table.

As I shoved the door open, I saluted him with two fingers, feigning a cockiness and calmness I didn't feel. He glared back at me, his hand still on his reddening throat.



MY FOOTSTEPS ARE loud as I stomp up the driveway to the front door. The caffeine did nothing to quash the rage still coursing through my veins. My grip on the paper bag is almost painful, my knuckles white.

I couldn't do anything but replay the encounter with Drake over and over in my head the entire drive home. I was still seething from it, my emotions a heated, rage-filled vortex threatening to completely consume me.

Why would he approach me? How could he come to the funeral? Or look me in the eye, knowing he'd been fucking my wife? That he'd been trying to steal my family—my daughter?

I shoved the door open and stepped in, taking a deep breath. He wasn't important. Meredith's betrayal wasn't important. Reagan and Emma. They were important.

I just wanted to hug and kiss them, hold them while we watched a silly cartoon and they ate their cookies. That would settle the seething, blinding rage inside me. And then, later, I'd take Reagan to bed and fuck her until I felt totally better. Until this day was just a distant memory.

Emma's head poked out from the kitchen, then disappeared. A small smile threatened to curve my lips. There was a hushed conversation, Emma's whisper-shouting filling the house. I tossed my keys on the entryway table, still

standing at the door, waiting to see what was going to happen next.

Her head appeared again, only for a moment. I lifted my hand and waved at her. She let out a high-pitched squeal before disappearing again.

“He’s here!” she cried, and I laughed to myself.

Moments later, Reagan and Emma rounded the corner, Emma propped on Rae’s hip as she made her way to me. I met them halfway, wrapping my arm around Reagan’s waist and pulling her to me as I kissed Emma’s cheek.

“Your surprise isn’t finished,” Emma said, huffing out a breath.

“That’s alright,” I said, sliding my hand over Reagan’s back. She leaned into me, almost resting her head on my arm but refraining. “I brought you a surprise.” I held up the paper bag, tilting it back and forth. “Cookies.”

“Cookies!” she screeched. She reached out, trying to grab at them, but I pulled the bag away.

“After dinner,” I said, and her lip jutted out. I huffed out a laugh as I pressed a kiss to the top of Reagan’s head. I felt her body relax into me, and my arm tightened. “What was my surprise?”

“We burned it,” Emma cried, and my brows lifted.

“I was trying to make cornbread and it burnt,” Reagan muttered. “But I have a new batch in the oven and it’ll be ready in fifteen minutes.” She tickled Emma’s side. “She’s just being silly.” Emma let out a high-pitched giggle, shoving at Reagan’s shoulder.

“How about you go to your room for a second?” I said to her, “I need to talk to Rae.” Emma’s brows bunched.

“Don’t wanna.”

“I’ll let you pick the movie tonight,” I said.

It was a stupid bribe. She picked the movie every night.

But it got her attention, and she slid down Reagan's body to the floor and took off across the living room and down the hall to her room.

As the door slammed shut, I wrapped my other hand in Reagan's hair and pulled her tightly to me, forcing her head backward as I crashed my lips against hers. "I missed you," I breathed.

"Me too," she whimpered, clawing at my arms. My hand slid down her back to her ass, and I groped it over her yoga pants. Fuck. These pants would be the death of me. When she wore them, my cock stayed hard.

"You have news," I murmured, stealing another kiss. She nodded as she slid her tongue into my mouth. I groaned at her sweet taste, but forced myself to pull back. "What is it?"

"We can talk about it later," she said, waving me off. She pulled me back to her, kissing me hard.

"Tell me now," I said. "I can't wait." She smiled against my lips, and I brought my hand down on her ass in a light smack. "Be my good girl and tell me." She groaned, dropping her head back.

"That's so not fair," she whined. I laughed at her dramatics and pulled away, ignoring my raging hard on as she dragged me to the couch. She shoved me down and sat practically in my lap.

I couldn't help the stupid excitement that filled me. Moments ago, I was still raging, but she managed to make it all better. She made everything better.

Her smile was bright, but reserved as she stared at me. But the unmistakable sparkle of excitement was in her eyes. My heart raced as I took a deep breath, bracing myself for the news. Her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her shirt and I put my hand over hers, stilling her.

"Well?" I laughed.

"So, you know how I've been waiting to hear back from Lorelai?" she said, and my stomach immediately dropped.

“Yeah,” I said, drawing the word out.

“Well,” she said, her body shimmering with excitement. “She called me earlier and offered me the lead instructor position!” She bounced a few times, her hands squeezing mine.

My heart skipped a beat. A mix of happiness and dread shot through me. Lead instructor at Lotus Retreats—that was her dream. She’d never hidden it. She’d told me from the moment I asked her to move in with me that this would be temporary, but a part of me hoped over the last few weeks that she’d decided to stay. With me.

I was happy for her. I was excited. But that quickly faded away to the sinking dread in my stomach.

“Wow.” I forced a smile. “That’s incredible.”

“Isn’t it?” She beamed at me. “I’ve only applied for assistant instructor. Never lead, but she wants me—me, Eli—as the lead.” She put her hand on her chest, emphasizing me.

“I always knew you’d get the job,” I said, forcing cheerfulness into my voice. “When do you leave?” Her smile faltered.

“A week,” she murmured. “I know it’s sudden, and I totally didn’t expect this either, but it’s an amazing opportunity.”

“A week?” I choked out. My throat tightened. This was all happening so fast. I hated that I couldn’t be more excited for her. But after my tidal wave of emotions earlier, and now this, it was too much.

“I know—”

“A week,” I repeated. “You’re just going to leave and—for how long?” Her face fell at my tone. I tried to calm myself, to show that I was excited for her.

“Six weeks,” she whispered, dropping her eyes to our hands. I pulled my hand away and scrubbed it over my chin.

“Six weeks.” I shoved to my feet and paced in front of the couch. “Six weeks. You’re leaving for six weeks, and—what?”

You just decided to take the job without even talking to me about it first? You're just going to leave—”

“I have a few days to give her my final answer,” she mumbled.

I forced myself to stop. I just needed to breathe. Shoving my hand through my hair, I took a deep breath. And another. Another.

But all the rage that I'd felt earlier, the abandonment and betrayal that was brought up when I saw Drake surged forward again.

Logically, I knew Reagan wasn't abandoning me. I knew she wasn't betraying me. I knew she wasn't Meredith. But in my heart, it felt the same. It felt like I was losing her, just like I lost Meredith, like I almost lost Emma, and I couldn't take it.

“I thought you'd be happy for me,” she said quietly. “I thought you'd understand.” I blinked at her.

“Understand?” I repeated, my tone bitter. Her gaze met mine, but not even the upset in it could get me to calm down. “I thought you'd understand why I wouldn't want you to fucking go.” She flinched at the swear, and I started pacing again.

“Can you just calm down, please?” she said. “Let's just talk about this—”

“There's nothing to talk about,” I said, slicing my hand through the air. “You've made your mind up. You're leaving.”

Those were the same words I spat at Meredith the night she died, and my heart shattered. Past and present blurred together, and I pinched between my eyes.

“I thought we could make it work,” she said. I turned toward her, finding her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

A heavy silence settled between us, the tension thickening to the point of snapping. The next words that slipped from my mouth were like a poison, fueled by resentment and betrayal that had nothing to do with her. “You're just like your fucking

sister, Reagan. Always chasing after your own dreams and not giving a shit about who you hurt.”

Her mouth parted in shock, and the tears she'd been trying to hold in spilled from her wide eyes. I immediately wanted to take the words back, to soothe the pain I knew I just caused, but I didn't know what to say to fix it. It was too late. The damage was done.

“I can't believe you just said that,” she said, her voice breaking as she pushed to her feet. Her body trembled as she tried to push past me.

“Wait—”

She ignored me as she hurried down the hall to her room, the door slamming shut behind her. My chest heaved as I stared after her, wanting to turn back time. Emotions I couldn't even name scorched my chest. My own pain, my insecurities, overflowed and tainted what was supposed to be a happy moment. I ruined everything.

Her door flew open, and I blinked the burning in my eyes away. “Reagan,” I rasped, but she ignored me, her body weighed down with her two bags. “Wait.”

She shoved past me again, her bag slamming into my chest. I raced after her as she flung the front door open and stormed outside, her shaky hands wiping at her tear-streaked face.

“I'm sorry!” I called, but she just slid into her little car, ignoring my words. I ran into the middle of the street as she pulled away from the curb. “I'm sorry.” The wind carried my words away as I watched her drive away.

I stood there, staring down the street, my heart heavy with regret. The sun, once bright and hot, had set, bathing my world in a cold darkness I deserved.

Trudging back up the driveway, I let out a pained grunt as I shut the door, trying to hold in my tears. A timer beeped somewhere in the kitchen.

The timer for the cornbread.

Fifteen minutes.

That was all it took to fuck everything up.





# reagan

I LAY CURLED on Lily's bed, my body sore and aching from the emotions that had consumed me for the last two days. The tears had long-since dried up, leaving me so numb it felt surreal. Like I was in a nightmare and would wake at any moment.

Lily had been my rock through it all, patiently listening to me repeat everything. She held me as I cried and shared my pain—truly shared it. Her unwavering love, her support, had been a lifeline, but the pain inside me was still there. Still banging against my chest, demanding to be felt.

“Why does it still hurt so much?” I murmured, my voice barely above a raspy whisper. My hand pressed against my chest, as if I could push the ache in it away.

Her fingertips brushed over my forehead, pushing my disheveled hair away. “Because you love him,” she said softly.

“But it doesn't matter,” I croaked. “He—”

“He loves you,” she said dryly. I pushed up on my elbow to stare at her. “He hasn't stopped calling and texting you since you left. If he didn't love you, he wouldn't be trying so hard.”

“He hasn't come to me,” I said, and she let out a breathy laugh.

“Because he doesn't know where you are.”

I twisted my lips to the side, knowing she was right. He'd gone to the diner, he said as much in a text. He didn't know

where Lily lived, and knowing Mom, she wouldn't tell him, if she even remembered.

“Do you think I'm making the right choice?” I pushed myself all the way up, folding my legs under myself. She leaned back against her iron headboard, her hands resting on her stomach.

“What do you think?”

I huffed out a humorless laugh. “That's not an answer,” I said, and she grinned.

“You just don't want to answer it,” she said. “You know if you do, you'll have the right answer. And it might not be the one you want, but you know it's the right one.”

I stared at her, my throat tightening. I knew she was right. The only thing that had been blaring in my head since the second I stepped out of the house was that I was making a mistake.

The familiarity of Lotus called to me. It felt...safe. But it didn't feel right. Yet choosing Eli was a risk I didn't know if I could take. It was uncharted water. And even if we'd been playing house for the last few weeks, that didn't mean anything.

Once everything became real, once we chose each other over everything else, what would happen then? Would the novelty wear off? Would we realize that we'd made a mistake?

But the thought of leaving him and Emma made me want to die. It opened a hole in my chest and I knew they'd be the only ones to ever fill it. Lotus, other retreats, other men—no one could fill it. Just him. Them.

I think the moment he chose me over my mother was the first time I felt it—my love for him. But when did he feel it? Did he even feel it? He hadn't said it, and that scared me.

What if he never did?

Anxiety churned my stomach, twisting and flipping it. It had been like a permanent tumble since I'd gotten to Lily's. If

I wasn't crying, I was puking from the insane amount of anguish coursing through me.

It was all too much.

"Do you think it's too late to call Lorelai?" I asked. Her brows lifted.

"You're taking the job?"

"I—" My voice broke before I could say anything else. My stomach twisted tighter, and a cold sweat broke out across my forehead. "If I choose the retreat, I'll always wonder what if, you know? But Eli—"

"You love him," she repeated, and I nodded. Tears filled my eyes, and she wrapped her arm around my shoulders, pulling me to her. "You're making the right choice."

"You really think so?" I whispered, and she nodded, her head sliding against mine. "I need to call her."

"I'll give you a sec," she said, pressing her lips to my temple. "Maybe Dad will make us some more food." She grinned as she slid from the bed.

"He's done so much," I weakly said, reaching to the side table to grab my phone.

"You know he loves cooking." She waved dismissively as she opened the door. As she slipped into the hall, I stared down at my phone, ignoring the messages from Eli as I brought up Lorelai's name.

More anxiety twisted my stomach. Was I really making the right choice? Years of hard work, of hoping and dreaming of fully working for Lotus, not just being a helper or volunteer, was finally here. It was in my lap. All I needed to do was say yes.

But leaving Eli? I couldn't. I didn't want to even imagine it.

My stomach rolled again, and instead of just anxiety, nausea hit me. Fuck. I jumped from the bed and raced from the room, across the hall to the bathroom. I slammed to the cold tiles, sliding across the floor just as I gagged.

I dry-heaved into the toilet, groaning and gagging every time I tried to take a breath. Lily raced into the room, her eyes wide.

“Rae,” she breathed. I waved at her, trying to get her to leave.

“I’m fine—” I finally threw up, my stomach tightening painfully.

“Shit.” Kneeling beside me, she gathered my hair in one hand, the other rubbing soothing circles on my back. “You’re okay. You’re okay, Rae.”

I threw up again, my eyes straining and watering with every heave. Finally, I slumped to the side, leaning against the cold, hard bathtub. She continued rubbing her hand in circles as she handed me a towel and flushed.

My eyes fluttered closed as I rested my head against the tub. “You’ve been throwing up a lot,” she said hesitantly.

“Probably all the stress,” I muttered. When she didn’t say anything, I cracked an eye open to look at her. “What?”

“Were you safe?” she whispered. I blinked at her.

Safe.

No.

We were a lot of things, but protected hadn’t been one. And every time we slept together, he’d come inside me. After the first day and my initial panic, thinking I needed The Pill, I’d forgotten all about it. It had been hot, and we’d been so into it I hadn’t thought about—

“Could you be pregnant?” she asked, her hand still sliding in circles on my back. Tears filled my eyes.

“Fuck,” I breathed. I banged my hand on the tile beside me as a sob ripped from my throat. “Fuck!”

He wanted me, maybe. But he didn’t want me and a baby.

“It’s okay,” she said quickly. She rushed to the cabinet and opened it, fishing out a pregnancy test. “Take this. It might be negative. Maybe you’re right—it’s just stress.”

I wiped roughly at my face, knowing the truth as I grabbed the test from her.



# elliott

I'D BEEN A DRUNK, numb mess for the last two days. Every word I'd said to Reagan had echoed in my head, relentless and full of regret. They were suffocating me. I'd pushed her away when all I wanted was to hold her close.

But I couldn't fix what I'd ruined. With every unanswered text and call, it was becoming clearer—she didn't want me. I'd fucked things up beyond repair.

I deserved to be alone. To not have her forgiveness. I'd said too many hurtful things. I'd done too much. And it would be the biggest regret of my life.

Emma, of course, had questions. One moment, Reagan was there, and the next, she was gone. Just like Meredith.

When I'd said what I did, I hadn't thought of anyone else but myself and my own pain and issues. I hadn't thought of how Emma would be affected. How lost and abandoned she would feel at Reagan's absence.

Every one of her questions was like a dagger to the fucking heart, reminding me of everything I'd lost—everything I'd fucked up for the both of us.

All the work she'd done with Reagan to get back to the happy kid she was before was gone. Ruined. We were back to fighting over everything, back to her screaming and yelling at me, back to her refusing to eat and back to me drinking my weight in whiskey every night. Our old ways were back like a familiar, unwanted companion and I fucking hated it. Hated myself for causing it.



I glanced in the rearview mirror, finding her staring out the window, her face empty. It fucking destroyed me to see her like that. She didn't deserve this.

Tears burned my eyes as I turned onto our street. I nearly slammed on the brakes when I saw Reagan's car parked out front. Conflicting emotions erupted inside me. Happiness first, followed by hope that she was back; then, finally, dread. Dread that she was here to tell me she was leaving—to give us her final goodbye.

Her final goodbye.

It would wreck me, but worse, it would destroy Emma. I couldn't watch my daughter break again.

As I pulled into the driveway, I contemplated what to do. Do I let Emma go in and see her? Say goodbye? Or do I just drive away, take her to the diner and leave her with Cora while I came back and dealt with Reagan alone?

But that felt wrong. It felt wrong to rob them both of a farewell. I didn't know when they'd see each other again. If they'd see each other again.

If I'd see her again.

I stared at the front door, waiting to see if she'd come out, which was ridiculous. She didn't know we were even here. But I still waited.

“Daddy?” Emma muttered, her voice soft. “Whatcha doing?”

Letting out a long breath, I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. I'd wanted to go to Lily's. I'd wanted to find Reagan and beg her not to go. I wanted to tell her that she belonged here with us.

I wanted to tell her I loved her.

But I couldn't hold her back, and I couldn't stop replaying the way her face had fallen when I compared her to Meredith.

That was what I regretted most, hurting her so irrevocably that I'd be lucky if she didn't slap me as soon as I walked through the door.

“Ready to go in?” I asked, glancing in the rearview mirror. She nodded, her big eyes on mine. Sighing, I got out of the car and rounded it, pulling her door open and unbuckling her car seat. Before pulling her out of it, I paused. Should I tell her Reagan was here? Or maybe a surprise is better.

Fuck, I didn’t know how to navigate this mess.

I pulled Emma from her car seat and settled her on my hip, shutting the door with my elbow before turning toward the house. My steps faltered and anxiety clawed at my insides.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Wrapping my hand around the doorknob, I took a deep breath. Somewhere deep inside me, I knew once I opened the door, my life would forever change. Whether good or bad, I didn’t know. But I knew it would be different. That whatever happened, that whatever she said, would change me.

Shoving the door open, I stepped inside, blinking as my eyes adjusted. There she was, sitting on the couch, her back to us.

“Auntie!” Emma squealed, and she thrashed in my arms, ready to sprint to her. I held her tighter as Reagan slowly rose from the couch. Her eyes looked swollen and red, and her cheeks were blotchy, but she was smiling.

Of course she was. She was always smiling, even through the pain.

“Rae,” I whispered, stepping forward. Emma shoved at my chest, and I reluctantly set her on the floor, letting her race toward Reagan. She scooped Emma into her arms and squeezed her eyes shut as she tightly hugged her.

I was helpless to do anything other than stand and watch. The way Emma held her just as tightly back, the way her little body seemed to relax and her face—

My throat tightened at the sight. It was like she was relaxed. Happy. Like she wasn’t stressed anymore. Like she

had Reagan back and somehow, everything was better. Everything was...right.

“Daddy said you went to work,” Emma said, pulling away enough to look at her. Reagan smiled sadly as she smoothed her hand over Emma’s head.

“Not yet,” she murmured, and my heart dropped to my stomach.

Not yet.

Yet.

She was still leaving. This was her goodbye.

“When do you leave?” I rasped, but she didn’t look at me. Instead, she just stared at Emma, tears filling her eyes. Her ignoring me hurt worse than anything else, but I deserved it. After everything I’d said, I didn’t deserve her attention. I didn’t deserve her forgiveness.

I pulled myself together enough to take a step, then another, and another. I walked past her on the way to the hall, trying to ignore every instinct in my body to go to her, to kiss her, to hold her. To love her.

Instead of doing any of that, I trudged to my bedroom, letting her and Emma have a few moments alone. But, selfishly, I needed to be alone. I needed to be away from her.

I sank onto my bed and buried my face in my hands, blinking the burning in my eyes away. I did this. I ruined it all so much that she couldn’t even look at me.

Maybe I should throw my pride out the window and beg her to stay. Or maybe I can figure out a way to permanently work remotely, and Emma and I can travel with her. Maybe it would be good for Emma, to see the world and experience different cultures. Different people. She’d love the adventure.

But doing that didn’t feel right. Uprooting her life so we could follow Reagan didn’t feel right. We could be her home base, though. We could be the home she came back to after every time, to unwind and relax, to calm down after the weeks of teaching and being around people.

She didn't want to live here, though. And that was an easy enough fix. I was serious when I said I'd move anywhere for her. I could do that. I could move somewhere else, and while she was gone for the next six weeks, I could get a new house set up. I had time to make everything perfect for her.

With a surge of renewed energy, I shoved off the bed and strode across the room. This felt right. Being her home, her safe place, felt right. We could work out the traveling thing. It's what made her happy, so I could live with it. I could live with anything if I still had her in my life. In my bed.

I had to tell her I loved her. I had to promise her the world. Had to promise that we'd still be here, waiting for her when she got back.

I yanked the door open and abruptly stopped. "Reagan," I breathed. She had her fist lifted, like she was about to knock.

"Um. Hi." She dropped her hand back to her side, giving me a hesitant smile. "Emma's in her room." She twisted her hands together as I nodded. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Me too," I blurted.

We stared at each other, my heart in my throat as I took her in. Her face was paler than it had been a few days ago, and her lips were chapped. Her nose was red. But she still looked beautiful. She looked perfect.

A deep blush settled over her chest as she took deep breath after deep breath, the pulse in her neck beating wildly. I wanted to reach for her, smooth her flyaway hairs from her face. But I didn't.

Instead, I took a step back, opening the door further for her. She hesitated before stepping inside and closing the door. She leaned against it, careful to keep her distance from me.

I understood. But it was fucking killing me.

"So," I croaked. "When do you leave?" She dropped her eyes to the floor, her hands twisting tightly together in front of her.

"I—um—"

“Wait,” I breathed, holding my hand up. She looked up at me, her lip between her teeth, and waited while I gathered myself enough to find the right words. “Can I say something first?”

“Yes,” she whispered, barely audible.

I took a deep breath, clenching my hands into tight fists at my sides. I had one chance not to fuck this up. Again. I needed to fix things, if for no other reason than for her to know that I love her. Before she gets on that plane and flies away to live her life, she has to know that I love her. That I’m in love with her.

“I fucked up and said things I shouldn’t have,” I started, wincing as the words came out. Not the most eloquent way to start this. Shoving my hand through my hair, I began to pace. “First, I’m sorry.” I paused to look at her. “I’m truly fucking sorry, Rae. I shouldn’t have compared you to Meredith—that was so fucked. You’re nothing alike, and that was unfair—”

“It’s okay,” she whispered, but I shook my head.

“It’s not,” I said. “It was wrong and—and I’m sorry. Even when I was pissed, I shouldn’t have said that to you. I’d had a shitty day, and then when you told me you were leaving, I felt—I don’t know. Abandoned, I guess.”

“Elliot,” she breathed, taking a step toward me.

“Wait,” I said, shaking my head again. “This isn’t about me. It doesn’t matter how I was feeling, I still shouldn’t have said it. I shouldn’t have said anything—I should’ve just been happy for you.”

“But I shouldn’t have sprung it on you the way I did,” she said softly. “You were right, I should’ve talked to you about it instead of making the decision on my own.” I blinked at her.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I said, and she smiled sadly.

“We’re both at fault,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Reagan.” I took a deep breath, mustering up any courage I had left in my body. “I wanted to go to you. I

knew you were at Lily's—I knew even before I went to the diner looking for you. But I was scared to go there. I was scared you'd turn me away. It's what I deserve, and I know that, but—" My hands shook as I stared at her. "But I love you, Reagan. I'm in love with you. I can't imagine my life without you in it, and if I have to share you with Lotus, share you with the world, then so be it. I'll be here when you get back. I'll always be here when you get back." Tears filled her eyes as she stared at me. I took a hesitant step forward. "I don't want to cage you. I don't want to hold you back, or make you live a life you hate. I want you to see and do everything you've ever dreamed of, and when you're done with your adventure, you can come home to me and rest while you plan your next one. I'm not going anywhere, baby. I'm here forever, and even if you say you hate me and that you never want to see me again, know that wherever I am will always be your home."

Her chin trembled as she stared up at me, her hands twisting together in front of her.

"You might not mean that when I tell you what I came here to say," she whispered. My brows pushed together in confusion. I wanted to reach for her. I wanted to pull her into a tight hug, to hold her forever. But I just stared. I waited. "Eli, I'm pregnant."



# reagan

THE WORDS HUNG thick in the air. I waited for him to say something, to say anything, but he just stared at me, his mouth slightly parted.

Fear and anxiety swirled in my stomach. Was he taking back everything he just said? Trying to find a way to tell me to leave and never contact him again? Was he going to tell me to get rid of it? Or that he'd send me a monthly child support check.

With every silent second that passed, more and more unease overtook me.

“You’re pregnant,” he croaked, his voice strangled. “Pregnant.” I gave him a tight, wobbly smile as I nodded. “You’re sure?”

“I took four tests,” I muttered, reaching for my purse. I rummaged through it, but it was mostly for show. I knew exactly where the tests were. My hands trembled as I pulled the tests out, holding them tightly as I held them between us.

He stared at the small stack in my fist, his eyes just as wide and face still as shocked. Maybe more. Hesitantly, he took them from my hands and slowly inspected each one.

“You’re pregnant,” he said again. “Holy shit.”

He paced as he stared down at the tests, his hands trembling almost as much as mine.

“Sorry,” I whispered, and he abruptly stopped.



“You’re sorry?” he asked, his dark brows bunched. “Why would you ever be sorry?”

“I shouldn’t have sprung it on you like that, and—and I should’ve been more careful. I should’ve gotten on birth control, or at least remembered to take Plan B. But—” My words cut off as he crashed his lips to mine.

“I love you,” he said against my lips. “I love you so fucking much, and I love this baby.” He rested his hand over my stomach.

“You’re not upset?” I whispered, and he pulled away to stare at me.

“How could I be upset?” He searched my eyes, and I clutched his shirt tightly. “You’re—I can’t believe you’re pregnant.” He let out a low laugh, his eyes brightening. “Are you happy? Do you want this?” His smile fell and the light in his eyes guttered. “What about Lotus? And traveling? And—”

“I don’t want to go,” I blurted. “I didn’t want to go even before Lorelai called to offer me the job. I think I stopped wanting to really go before we even talked about it the first time. But I was scared to do something different. Lotus is familiar. It’s what I’m used to. It was the safe choice, but you—you’re a risk.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it, looking unsure of what to say.

“I want to be with you,” I said. “You said my home is wherever you are, but that’s not true. Not really. Because you’re my home, Eli. You are. Not the house you live in. You. And, if you still want me,” I rested my hand on my stomach, “want us. I’d like to stay.”

I couldn’t decipher his expression. I knew he was happy, or he seemed like he was moments ago. But now, with him just staring at me like that, not saying anything, I was starting to doubt myself.

“You’re not just choosing me because of the baby, are you?” he asked quietly.

“What?” Of all the things I’d expected him to say, that had never been one of them.

“You want me for me, right? Even if you weren’t pregnant —”

“Even if I wasn’t pregnant, I would’ve still come back,” I said, interrupting him. “I would’ve still chosen you. Actually, I chose you before I even took the first test. I chose you the second you chose me.”

He stared at me, his eyes flicking frantically between mine. “You chose me,” he repeated, his voice a barely audible rasp. I moved closer, grabbing his hands and squeezing tight.

“I love you, too,” I said softly. His throat bobbed as he nodded, his lips parted like he was trying to speak. A small smile curved my lips at the stunned way he stared, and I pushed up onto my tiptoes, pressing a gentle kiss to his cheek. “I love you.”

His hands slid onto my hips, his fingers digging in slightly as he dragged me closer. “You chose me,” he said against my lips, kissing me harder.

“And you chose me,” I whispered. I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding on tight as he lifted me. My legs went around his waist as he walked us to the bed, our kiss never breaking.

Gently, he laid me on the bed, hovering his body over mine as he kissed from my lips, to my jaw, down my neck. My back arched as he made his way to my chest, gently sucking and kissing the sensitive skin.

I ran my fingers through his thick hair, groaning as he ground his hips against mine.

“I missed you,” he rasped, sliding his hand under my shirt. “So much.”

“Me too,” I breathed, gripping his hair tighter. He groaned, his eyes squeezing shut as he ground his hard cock against me. Slowly, he dragged my shirt off over my head and let it fall to the floor.

“We need to be quick,” he said, kissing my sternum.

“I can be fast,” I promised, nodding frantically. He grinned wickedly as he slid his hand under me, unhooking my bra with ridiculous ease. It fell away and he tossed it to the floor before wrapping his lips around my peaked nipple.

I gasped at the feel of his mouth, his hot, wet tongue on me. His other hand cupped my other breast, his thumb stroking my nipple.

“More,” I whimpered. He gently pinched my nipple, twisting it just enough to hurt but still feel good. My hand curled into a fist in his hair, and he pinched tighter. “Eli. Fast.”

With an annoyed growl, he pulled away enough to rip my shorts and panties down my legs. His eyes were frantic as he took in my naked body, his hands shaky as he skimmed them over my skin.

“I fucked my fist while I thought about you last night,” he said. I smiled up at him as I dragged my hands up my waist to my breast, roughly cupping them. “Wasn’t as good as the real thing.”

“I’d hope not,” I laughed. His eyes snapped to mine, a small grin on his face before he moved his hands to his belt. Quickly, he undid it, yanking his button and zipper open.

“Quiet,” he said, leaning over me again. He kissed me hard, his tongue lashing against mine. “Quiet and fast.” I nodded against him, our breathing heavy.

He shoved his jeans and boxers down enough to let his thick cock free. Fisting it, he stroked himself a few times, his muscles flexing as he held himself up.

“Watch while I fuck you,” he rasped, pulling away.

I pushed up on my elbows and spread my legs wider, watching as he rubbed the tip of his cock against my wet pussy, over my hard clit. I moaned softly as he dragged it lower, pressing against my entrance.

“This is what you want?” he asked, his eyes glued to where he was slowly piercing me.

“Please,” I groaned. At an agonizingly slow pace, he pushed in, letting me feel him stretch me. My head dropped back and he paused.

“I said to watch,” he growled. “So watch, Rae.” I snapped my head back up, my chest heaving at the demand in his voice. He went back to pressing inside me, and my hands tightened in the comforter.

“Fuck,” I breathed. He slammed the rest of the way in, and I smacked my hand over my mouth, stifling my scream. His eyes gleamed as he looked up at me, his lips curling into a grin.

He rested his hand on my lower stomach and moved his thumb to my clit. As he began thrusting, he stroked my clit back and forth. My eyes rolled back at the feeling—it was almost too much. Being stretched by him, feeling him rub me, it was a lot.

I held myself up on one arm as I reached for his wrist with my other hand, trying to stop him. But he ignored me as he stroked faster, his cock slamming into me harder.

“Doesn’t that feel good, angel?” he asked breathlessly. I nodded, unable to speak, and he let out a breathy laugh. “You look like a fucking goddess, laying there taking my cock in your little cunt. So fucking pretty for me. So perfect.”

I tightened around him, whimpering at the praise. He grinned as he stroked my clit faster, and I fell back to the bed, groping my breasts as my back arched. He fucked me harder, our bodies slamming together.

“You’ve never looked prettier than you do pregnant with my baby and full of my cock,” he continued. My eyes rolled back, a low moan leaving me. “I’m so fucking close, baby.”

“Me too,” I breathed. “Don’t stop.” He stroked my clit faster, his cock thickening inside me. “Please, Elliot. Fuck. Please.”

“God, the way you say my name,” he breathed. “Can you be my good girl and come for me?”

“Yes,” I cried, my body tensing as my orgasm barreled toward me. “Please!”

“Come for me, baby girl,” he grunted, fucking into me harder. “Right now. I’m about to—fuck.” He slammed into me as I exploded. My pussy contracted around him as he came inside me, pressing it deeper and deeper with every shallow thrust.

He collapsed over me, pressing a long kiss to my mouth before burying his face in my neck, breathing deeply. I ran my hands through his hair, holding him tight as his cock softened inside me.

I’d never felt so full before—not of him. Just of life. Of love. Everything felt right. Like everything I’d ever aimed for in my life was falling into place, and it was all because of him.

I kissed his forehead, holding him closer. “I love you,” I whispered. He pulled away, his dark eyes bright as he stared at me.

“And I love you.”



# reagan

AFTER WE MADE UP, we had an amazing night with Emma, as a family. We were going to have to figure out how to tell her she was going to be a big sister—we had so much to do, but we had time.

I rested my head on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart and breathing. My eyes fluttered closed as I tried to breathe with him, to calm my still nauseous stomach. Apparently, morning sickness isn't just in the morning. It's all the damn time.

Eli's hand slid onto my back, and my eyes opened. "I never told you why I said those things," he murmured.

"It doesn't matter." I pressed a soft kiss to his chest, savoring his warmth.

"It does." He smoothed his hand up and down my back in long, soothing strokes. "I told you Meredith was cheating on me." I stiffened at the sound of her name, but forced myself to nod. "I never knew who it was with, and I kind of liked not knowing, you know? It was easier to pretend that it didn't happen. But it did." He took a deep shuddering breath, and I lifted my head, resting my chin on his chest as I stared at him.

The moon cast shadows in his room, illuminating his face just enough to see the pain on it. It made my heart squeeze.

"You found out?" I whispered, and he nodded.

"Before Emma's party, I found out she'd been sleeping with her boss."

“Drake?” I gasped. I’d only met him a few times, but he always seemed like a nice man. He was always kind, and he played with Emma, he was nice to Meredith and Eli seemed to like him. But knowing that he was the one she was having an affair with, it made my stomach roll.

“Yeah,” he breathed. “Anyway, before her party, I called the insurance company. I should’ve done it sooner—I guess it wouldn’t have mattered anyway.” He ran his hand through his hair as he stared up at the ceiling. “I called because I was going to use some of the money for the party. But when I did, they said that it had already been sent to the beneficiary.” My brows pushed together.

“You already got it and didn’t know?” I asked, and he let out a humorless laugh.

“Drake was the beneficiary.”

My mouth fell open. “What?”

“Yeah,” he huffed out another laugh. “I was pissed. It was the night I came home drunk and you thought I’d driven myself. I found out that day and drowned myself in the bottle of whiskey I had in my desk.”

“Oh my God, Eli,” I breathed. “Why didn’t you tell me? I wouldn’t have said any of those things. I would’ve left you alone, or made you your favorite dinner, or—or something other than yell at you. Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

He smiled softly before leaning forward and kissing my forehead. “This is one reason I love you,” he whispered. “Because you’re the sweetest fucking person in the entire world.”

I settled into his chest, loving the way it felt to be in his arms, even if the story was breaking my heart.

“Anyway,” he sighed. “I saw him at the cafe the other day. And he said all this shit about taking Emma from me—that had been their plan. That they were going to leave their partner’s for each other, and Meredith was going to take Emma from me. He just said all this shit and I was so pissed, so—so fucking mad. But I felt betrayed, and abandoned all



over again. Like everything that we'd fought about and I thought I'd gotten past was pushed back to the surface. When she first told me that she had someone else, I felt inadequate. Why would she want someone else? What was I not doing for her? But then I realized there was nothing I could've done. She would've still wanted him over me. She would've still left me." I wrapped my arm around his waist, hugging him tightly. "And then I came home—"

"Shit." I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing where he was going with his story. "And you felt like I was leaving you, too."

"I just felt raw that day," he muttered. "And when you told me, I was genuinely happy for you, Rae. I still am. I didn't want to hold you back, and I shouldn't have said any of the shit I did."

"You were hurting," I said, and he shook his head.

"Not an excuse to treat you like shit," he said roughly. "Not an excuse to make you feel the way I did. It's my job to protect you and love you, not hurt you." He tucked my hair behind my ear, his dark eyes searching mine. "I'm sorry, and I'll be sorry for the rest of my life for how I spoke to you. It wasn't okay, and it'll be the biggest regret of my life."

"It's okay," I whispered.

"I'm not okay with it." He leaned forward again, kissing my cheek. "I'll make it up to you."

"You already have—"

"I'll make it up to you," he said again, more sternly. "I promise nothing like that will ever happen again."

"I know," I said. "I trust you." He inhaled sharply at the words, and I kissed the center of his chest. "I trust and love you, Elliot."

"I don't know what I did to deserve you," he muttered, almost to himself. Stretching my neck, I pressed a kiss to his lips, feeling him relax under me.

“Love you,” I whispered. He smiled against my lips before roughly kissing me back. One moment I was above him, and the next, he flipped us and I was pinned to the bed underneath him. He hovered over me, his dark hair falling in his eyes. Reaching up, I pushed it away.

My breath caught at the sight of him, so strong and handsome. And so mine. All mine.

“I love you, angel.”



# elliott

## FIVE YEARS LATER

THE BELL above the door chimed as I stepped inside, my arms full of yoga mats. Faintly, I heard Reagan's soft voice filter through the little studio.

I didn't want to risk disrupting the class, so I dropped the mats by the door outside of the room and made my way to the back office. Standing in the doorway, I smiled to myself as I watched Emma furiously scribble in her notebook, her little brother, Tristan, and sister, Allie on the floor playing together.

"Hey, kiddo," I said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head as I passed. "How's your homework going? Need help?"

"It's awful," she grumbled, and I snorted. She was dramatic at the best of times, but add math into the mix and she bordered hysterical. "I'm never gonna use this stuff."

"You might," I said, and she lifted her eyes to me, giving me a look that should turn me to ash. I held my hands up in mock innocence. "Or maybe you won't."

"I won't," she huffed, looking back at the paper. I rested my hand on her shoulder as I glanced at her paper.

"Multiplication, huh?" I asked, and she nodded as she erased her answer. "Hey, wait." I pulled the chair next to her. "You were close."

"But it was wrong," she said, erasing the numbers.

"You were off by a number," I said, and she glared up at me.

“It wasn’t right,” she said again.

Sometimes, with her perfectionism and competitive streak, she was so much like her mother it hurt my heart. But it also made me happy knowing Meredith had given her something positive. We at least tried to spin those qualities to positive ones.

“Alright, I’ll see you all at the same time next week.” Reagan’s voice carried to the small office as light chatter filled the space. Emma stared at the doorway, but I tapped the paper.

“Concentrate, Em,” I said.

“But—”

“Concentrate.” She huffed out an irritated breath as she turned her attention back to the paper.

After we moved away five years ago, I convinced Reagan to open her own yoga studio in our new town. She was reluctant at first, and it took her a good year before she agreed. The studio has only been open for two years, but it was the best decision we could’ve made.

“Hey, I didn’t know you were here already.” I glanced over my shoulder, finding Reagan waddling into the office.

Okay, waddle maybe was mean, but she was eight months pregnant and far into the waddle stage. She smiled as she slumped into the chair next to me. Allie and Tristan made their way to Reagan with a loud squeal.

She scooped Allie up, balancing her on her leg while Tristan gave up trying to climb his mother and came to his second choice, me. I rested him on my leg as I leaned toward Rae, kissing her deeply.

“Gross!” Tristan squealed, slapping his hands over his eyes. I laughed as I pulled away.

“Math?” Rae asked, giving Emma a sympathetic look.

“It’s the worst,” Emma cried. “I hate it!”

“I know,” Rae said, nodding. “Speaking of terrible things...”

“Oh God,” I groaned. “That’s tonight?”

“Yep,” she said. I dropped my head back, breathing through my annoyance. “She’s trying, but still—”

“It’s a little too late,” I muttered.

“Hey.” She rested her hand on my arm, squeezing slightly. “At least she’s trying now. Better late than never, right?”

“I’d rather never,” I said, and she grinned.

Cora was coming to town tonight. We didn’t live far, maybe four hours from her, but she’d met her grandkids less than a handful of times. She didn’t take mine and Reagan’s relationship well when we first announced it, so I refused to let her be a part of my family’s life. She wasn’t there for our wedding, or Tristan’s or Allie’s births.

I wouldn’t let her put my family in a bad headspace, so after we moved, she didn’t meet Tristan until a few months after Allie was born three years ago.

Since then, she’d seen them on holidays only, but even then, it was a short trip. This was her first week-long visit and I think everyone was dreading it, herself included.

“I can’t even drink,” I muttered, and Reagan let out an unsympathetic snort.

I gave up alcohol five years ago and haven’t looked back. Well, that’s not entirely true. I’d craved it and wanted to cave and have a drink or two, but remembering the person I was when I drank and the person I wanted to be for my family made me refrain.

Barely.

“You’ll survive,” she sighed, resting her hand on her swollen belly. “I don’t know if I will.”

“Maybe having her around will induce labor,” I said, and she rolled her eyes. Emma let out another groan and I turned my attention back to her.

“Sorry, babe,” I said to Emma, letting Tristan back on the floor to play. He ran back to his cars, sliding across the floor to

his mat. “Where were we?”

“Can’t you just do it for me?” she asked, sliding the paper to me.

“You know I can’t.” She let out another dramatic groan, pulling the paper back to her. “You can do it.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Reagan said, groaning as she stood.

“Hey,” I caught her hand, “you okay?”

“Great,” she smiled. “Just swollen and aching, oh and I have heartburn. Otherwise, I’m great.” I huffed out a laugh as she bent and pressed her lips to mine. “I need to set up for the next class.”

“I’ll help—”

“I got it,” she waved. “Lily’s helping.”

I kept forgetting we’d hired Lily. I was still surprised that Lily was such a great instructor. Everyone loved her to death, but I hadn’t expected her to want to be a teacher. Not that she taught yoga. She taught a pole dancing class a few times a week, which did really well.

I kissed my wife again and watched as she left the room, our baby on her hip and another in her belly.

When I looked back on my life, I realized that all the times I thought I’d been happy, I wasn’t. Not really. Because nothing had ever compared to this.

THE END

# about haley tyler

Haley Tyler is a dark romance author who writes your favorite book boyfriends.

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When she's not writing, you can find her reading a romance novel, scrolling TikTok, listening to her obnoxiously long playlists, or obsessing over her next book.

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