



Grumpy Boss

DADDY

ALEXIS LEE

Grumpy Boss Daddy

A Second Chance Secret Baby Romance

Alexis Lee

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Contents

[Chapter 1 Elle](#)
[Chapter 2 Luke](#)
[Chapter 3 Elle](#)
[Chapter 4 Luke](#)
[Chapter 5 Elle](#)
[Chapter 6 Luke](#)
[Chapter 7 Elle](#)
[Chapter 8 Luke](#)
[Chapter 9 Elle](#)
[Chapter 10 Luke](#)
[Chapter 11 Elle](#)
[Chapter 12 Luke](#)
[Chapter 13 Elle](#)
[Chapter 14 Luke](#)
[Chapter 15 Elle](#)
[Chapter 16 Luke](#)
[Chapter 17 Elle](#)
[Chapter 18 Luke](#)
[Chapter 19 Elle](#)
[Chapter 20 Luke](#)
[Chapter 21 Elle](#)
[Chapter 22 Luke](#)
[Chapter 23 Elle](#)
[Chapter 24 Luke](#)
[Chapter 25 Elle](#)
[Chapter 26 Luke](#)
[Chapter 27 Elle](#)
[Chapter 28 Luke](#)
[Chapter 29 Elle](#)
[Chapter 30 Luke](#)

Chapter 1 Elle

“I’m going to kill him!”

I fumble for my keys. They always seem to be at the bottom of my bag when I need the damn things. I finally grab them, but my hand snags the handle of my bag as I drag them out, so the keys just drop onto the floor. I groan.

“For fuck’s sake!”

“You okay?”

“I just dropped my keys.” I bend over and pick up the offending objects, almost dropping both my bag and my cell phone at the same time. “I just want to kill Dad. I mean, who doesn’t stay for their spouse’s funeral.”

“Oh, honey. He really didn’t stay beyond the viewing?”

“No, he didn’t. He hightailed out of there as soon as the viewing was over.”

I couldn’t believe that my own father would be so callous. I knew he and Mom had not been on good terms lately, but neither of them would tell me anything about it. I just heard the shouting when I was home for the holidays. Well, Dad would shout. Mom would just cry. She had been very miserable towards the end of her life.

This just feels like the ultimate disrespect towards someone Dad claims to love by turning up to see her in her coffin before leaving. I have never felt so embarrassed before.

I unlock my car and get in, tossing my bag onto the passenger seat. Then I slump back against my seat and close my eyes. My headache is getting worse.

“God, I hate funerals. I want Mom back.”

“I know.” Carly sighs. “I wish there was something I could do to help. I feel awful that I can’t help from where I am. Ben and I could have come with you.”

I swallow. A hard lump in my throat is refusing to move. It’s been there ever since I got the call that Mom had passed away. The cancer had taken hold far quicker than anyone anticipated. I didn’t have any time to get home. Having my friends with me would have helped.

Too late now.

“I could have gotten time off to help. If only she’d told me...”

“What could you have done? Forced him to support her? You did tell her that your grandmother tried to get him to be there for your mom, and he just blew her off. Do you think you could have done any better?”

She has a point. I could not have gotten Dad to be there for Mom if Grandma couldn’t. But it still hurts knowing Dad didn’t give a shit about the woman he was married to.

“Look,” Carly goes on, “when you get back, why don’t we have a night in? We can get drunk and eat lots of junk food while watching sappy movies.”

“We’re not old enough to drink, Carly.”

“Who cares? We’ll be in our house, and given what you’ve been through it

would be understandable.” Carly pauses. “We’ll do something for you, whatever you want.”

What I want is for Mom to be alive and home with Dad. But I know I won’t get my wish. However, Carly’s offer sounds very tempting.

“Okay. I don’t know when I’m getting back. I’ve got to sort through Mom’s stuff with Dad.”

“Take your time. Whenever you get back. Ben and I will be ready for you.”

“Thanks, Carly.”

“I’d better go. I’ve got to get back to class.” Carly’s voice softens. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

“I will.”

Carly hangs up. I lower my phone to my lap and close my eyes. The headache is getting worse, and I really want it to stop. This is too much for me. I have cried so much during the funeral service, watching my mother’s coffin go through the curtain, and I don’t think I have anything more to let out.

Except anger. Towards Dad. I am angry with him for deserting Mom at this time. Everyone noticed, and I am embarrassed that people came up to me asking where Dad was.

When I find him, he is going to explain himself. I will not take flimsy excuses.

It doesn’t take long for me to get back to my parent’s house. I am still shaking even as I pull into the street, my hands trembling on the wheel. I am

so exhausted, so emotionally drained. All I want is to hide away from the world until it stops feeling so awful.

I get to my parent's house, and I realize that I can't pull into the drive behind my dad's car. There is another car there already, a small car in bright pink.

I park on the curb and get out, staring at the car. I don't know anyone with a bright pink car, and I didn't think Dad knew anyone, either. I approach the offending item, noticing that there are lashes on the headlamps.

I didn't know cars still had those.

What is going on?

I go into the house, putting my bag on the table.

"Dad?" I call. "Dad, are you here?"

There is no response to me, but I do hear a moan coming from the kitchen. Then I hear a second moan, this one coming from a woman. My heart sinks. I already know what is going on.

I don't want to go looking, but my feet take me down the hall to the kitchen. I stand in the doorway and see a dark-haired woman sitting on the counter, wearing just a man's shirt that Dad is starting to unbutton as he kisses her. He is shirtless, wearing jeans that look to be undone and are starting to sag about his hips.

For a moment, I am shocked at what I'm seeing. Of all the scenarios in my head, this is not what I expected.

"What the hell, Dad?"

The woman gasps. She pushes Dad away and tugs her shirt closed, closing her legs and shifting her knees away from me. Dad turns, blinking when he sees me.

“Elle. I didn’t think you were going to be back yet.”

“Obviously.” I can’t stop myself from staring at the woman. “Who is this? What the fuck is going on?”

“Language, young lady,” Dad warns, but I storm over and shove him in the chest.

“Shut the hell up, Dad! I don’t give a damn about my language when I’ve just come back from Mom’s funeral to find my dad messing around with his side piece!”

“You should watch your language, Elle,” the woman says as she gets off the counter, still buttoning up the shirt. “At your age, you shouldn’t be cursing so much.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I spin around on her.

“I don’t know who you are, but you don’t get to tell me what I do.” I am so angry that I feel like I’m vibrating. “What the fuck are you doing here? You’re the reason Dad left Mom’s funeral, I take it? And in her house as well? Do you not have any respect?”

The woman shrugs.

“She’s dead now. We can’t get caught by her anymore.”

“What sort of logic is that?” I scream.

Dad grabs my arm and pulls me back. It's only then that I realize that I've been advancing on the woman. I yank away from Dad and hit him in the chest.

"What the hell, Dad? Why would you do this? You and Mom were married!"

"And it wasn't walking for a while. Your mother knew that, but she was too stubborn to let go." Dad moves away from me and wraps an arm around the woman's waist. "Megan and I have something special. Not like what your mom and I had."

I feel like I've walked into a nightmare. But it all begins to fall into place. Mom and Dad have been fighting over the past couple of years, especially since I left for college. Dad is barely home, and when he is he and Mom barely interact. Is it because of this woman?

"You think cheating on Mom is going to be excused, Dad?" I demand. "How long have you been fucking around on her?"

"It's not cheating," the woman says. She puts a hand on Dad's chest and gives him a smile. "Not when the marriage is already done."

"I didn't ask you," I snap. "How long, Dad?"

Dad sighs.

"Megan and I have been together for three years."

"*THREE YEARS?*" I feel like Dad punched me in the face. "You've been cheating on her for three years? While she was going through cancer?"

"Well, your mother was too weak from her cancer treatments to do anything." Dad kisses Megan, giving her a smile that makes me nauseous. "A

man has needs as well.”

“And I was happy to oblige,” Megan responds with a giggle.

I really feel like I’m going to be sick.

“Her cancer treatment and getting better was more important than you getting your rocks off, Dad,” I tell him. “You’re disgusting. Both of you.”

Megan sneers at me.

“That’s not a way to talk to your parents, Elle.”

“What the...? You’re not my parent! Don’t think I will accept this relationship, either!”

“We don’t need your approval, Elle,” Dad says sharply. Then he takes Megan’s hand and holds it up to show the wedding band on her finger. “Also, Megan is your parent. We got married at the courthouse today.”

It takes a moment for the words to sink in. I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Then I see Dad looking proud and Megan’s smug expression, and I know that it’s true.

Oh, God. No, not this.

“No.” I shake my head. “No, this is messed up. This is seriously fucked up.”

“You really need to watch your language, Elle,” Megan reminds her again, and I swung around on her.

“I don’t want to hear from you. You keep your mouth shut, you slut!”

“Hey!” Dad steps between us, squaring up to me. “You will not talk to your

stepmother like that, Elle. Show some respect.”

I stare at him.

“She is not my stepmother, Dad.”

“She’s married to me, which means she’s your stepmother.”

“I don’t accept her.” I shake my head and back away. “And don’t think I’m going to let this go. I can’t be happy about you fucking around on Mom when she needed you. To leave your wife’s funeral to marry your side piece? That’s just messed up.”

“She’s not my side piece. She’s my wife, and you’re going to treat her as such.”

I snort and turn away.

“No fucking way. Hell is going to freeze over before that happens.”

Dad growls.

“Then you can get the hell out of my house. I won’t have you treat Megan like that.”

“Don’t worry, I’m going.” I storm into the hall. “I’ll pack what I can get into the car. Anything else left over just send it to Grandma. Then you won’t have to worry about me ever again.”

“Elle!”

I ignore him, storming up the stairs to my bedroom. I slam the door behind me hard enough that the doorframe rattles. Then my legs give way, and I fall

to my knees, the carpet barely cushioning them. I curl into a ball, and the floodgates open.

I start to bawl.

Chapter 2 Luke

Three Days Later

“Would you like anything else, gentlemen?”

I manage to give the waitress a smile as she hovers by their table.

“I think we’ll be fine. Thanks.”

The waitress gives me a smile that doesn’t quite reach the sad expression in her eyes, and walks off. I watch her go, noticing the natural sway of her hips. Her long blonde hair is held back in a ponytail that trails down her back, making me want to reach out and see if it’s as soft as it looks. Marcus chuckles.

“Nice to see you’ve still got an eye for the ladies.”

I turn back and frown at him.

“I can appreciate a pretty woman. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“No, not at all.” Marcus picks up his glass, giving me a knowing look. “Besides, after what you went through with Hannah, I don’t blame you for going on the prowl again.”

“I’m not on the prowl!”

“I’d beg to differ after seeing the look on your face just now.”

I roll my eyes and concentrate on my food. We came out to dinner to cheer me up after dealing with my recent ex-girlfriend. I didn't come out to look for another woman to distract me from my breakup.

Although if the waitress who has been serving our table made an offer, I wouldn't pass it up. She is a stunning young woman, and I can't stop myself from watching her whenever she's close by. However, even though she's very professional and does a good job, I can tell that she's very upset, and she is close to tears. It makes me want to hold her for comfort.

I push this away. I'm not dealing with another woman's problems right now.

"Luke!"

I jump when a hand waves in front of my face. Marcus pulls his arm back and shakes his head.

"I think I would do better on my own. I would have a better conversation."

"Sorry." I put my knife and fork down, rubbing my hands over my face. "I just feel so drained. After finding out what Hannah had been up to, and knowing that she has stolen from me..."

"I get it. You don't want to believe someone you were with for so long could do that to you." Marcus shakes his head. "I thought she was pretty cool as well. Evidently not. She had both of us fooled."

"She called me earlier today," I grunt. "I have too many voicemails from her."

"Is she still trying to get you back?"

"Yes. Something about it was a mistake and she should have talked to me,

that she didn't mean to hurt me."

"She didn't mean to sleep with another guy and then use your money to pay off his debts?" Marcus snorts. "She wouldn't be able to hurt you worse if she actually stabbed you in the back. I don't get her thinking."

"Neither do I. And I don't want to hear it."

I don't know how long it will be before the anger vanishes. Hannah was my girlfriend for five years. She used to be my rock. Now she's the worst person I've ever encountered. And she is still trying to justify why she had an affair for almost all of our relationship and why she stole my money. She is going to be making up excuses until she's blue in the face.

I don't want to hear it anymore. I had deleted the other voicemails so I didn't have to hear her voice. My lawyer can deal with it.

I pick up my glass and take a sip. I wish I wasn't driving, but I really want a drink.

"I'm sorry, Marcus. I'm not very good company tonight."

"I'm not really surprised, given what's happened this week." Marcus gestures at his empty plate. "But I'm always there for free food."

"I knew you were here just for that."

"And for you to have someone to rant to. I'm happy to let you complain as much as you need, or to sit beside you in silence." Marcus shrugs. "Whatever you need, and I think you've done both."

I can agree with that. In the last couple of hours, I have gone from ranting about how Hannah used me to sitting in silence. I feel exhausted from it all.

The only thing that has brightened the evening is the pretty blonde waitress serving our table. I have only been single for a couple of days, but I cannot take my eyes off her when she comes into view.

Something catches my eye, and I look over to see the waitress at another table nearby. There are four young men of college age making comments at her that make her embarrassed. One of the guys is leering at her, opening ogling her breasts. She looks uncomfortable, quickly taking their orders before she hurries away. I watch her go, and see that she is almost close to tears. What just happened there?

“Hello? Luke?” Marcus waves a hand hand in front of my face again. “You’re drooling again.”

“What?”

“That girl. Why don’t you just ask her if she wants to go back to your place instead of looking like a creep?”

I frown at my friend.

“Marcus, she’s clearly upset. I’m not about to proposition her.”

“Well, maybe you should. It will take your mind off the bitch you were with for far too long.” Marcus looks at his watch. “Shit, I’d better get going. I promised Rachel I would see that movie with her. She’s been dying to go for a while.”

“Okay.” I manage a smile and gesture at his empty plate. “I’ll settle up the bill.”

“Thanks.” Marcus taps my shoulder with his fist. “I’ll come by tomorrow.

We've got that plan to go over, and a fresh start is what we need."

Marcus walks away, heading towards the exit. I go back to my food. I'm exhausted, and I want to go home, but my stomach is telling me that I need to eat. Also, I find that I can't really leave without losing contact with the waitress.

I feel a little uncomfortable paying attention to her when I'm newly single, and she's clearly not in a good mood, but I can't help myself. I am unable to stop watching her when she comes into view, and it's getting to me. Thankfully, Marcus didn't notice that I've been sitting with an erection for most of the evening.

Maybe he had, but my best friend didn't say anything about it.

I am almost finished with my meal when I hear a gasp. I look around, and I see the waitress standing by the college jocks' table, her hand holding onto her backside. One of the jocks is high-fiving his friends. Did they just grope her?

Something stirs in my belly, and I feel the familiar strain of anger building. How dare they put their hands on her like that? I have to stop myself from getting up, going over to them, and slamming the bastard's head into the table.

Calm down. She's not yours, so you need to back off.

I wouldn't mind if she was mine.

Whoa, where had that come from? I barely know the woman, and I don't even know her name. Yet I'm being possessive over her?

“Come on, Elle, don’t be so frigid.” One of the guys sits back in his chair and puts his hands behind his head. “You love it really, don’t you?”

I watch as she regains her composure and crouches down to pick up the tray, which is on the floor at her feet. She puts it on the table, not looking at any of the guys watching her. Another one of the boys, a muscular-looking blond who looks like he spends a lot of time in the gym, leans over and gives her backside a firm swat. The sound of his smack is very loud and seems to echo around the room. She jumps, and the boys burst into laughter again. I see that she says something, but it is drowned out by the sneering.

I cannot believe what is happening. How do they think this is appropriate? And I can’t sit here and not do anything about it.

Standing up, I stride over to their table. She is still taking their empty plates, putting them on the tray and not looking at anyone. Her cheeks are red. I glare at the lads at the table.

“Knock it off, will you?”

The guy sitting closest to me looks me up and down and scoffs.

“What do you want? Haven’t you got anything better to do?”

“Yeah, buzz off and leave us alone.” The kid with his hands behind his head is sneering at me, looking me up and down like I’m something he’s just stepped in. “We’re just trying to have dinner.”

“Does dinner also include assaulting the waitress?” I ask sharply.

The second guy snorts.

“Assault? We haven’t hit her.”

“Touching a woman without consent is assault, especially if you’re smacking her. Or did they not teach that to you at school?” I look at each of the young men, who don’t seem to be remorseful at all. “If you want to make fools of yourself, go right ahead. But don’t drag the servers into your debauchery.”

The guy who had told me to buzz off - I am guessing that he is the leader of the group - rolls his eyes and sits up.

“Listen, old man, just fuck off and leave us alone. Elle doesn’t mind what we’re doing, and we’re not bothering anyone.”

Elle has gone by this point, taking the tray along with their plates. Ignoring the assholes, I walk away and back to my table. The urge to smack all of the idiots around the head had been great, but I wasn’t about to get into trouble like that. Just as long as the server - Elle, I remember - gets away for now.

I am about to sit down when Elle appears, this time without the tray. She slows as she reaches me, giving me a tiny smile.

“Thank you.”

“Are you okay?”

She looks as if she’s going to say that she is fine, but I see her lips tremble in a whimper. She is barely holding on, and seeing her like that makes me want to pull her into my arms and not let go.

What is going on with me?

I gesture at the seat across from me.

“Come and sit down.”

“What?” She stares at me. “But I can’t! I’m working!”

“You need to take a moment.”

“But my manager...”

“I’ll take responsibility if your manager says anything. I can’t have you going around like this.”

We stare at each other, and something flashes between us. I feel it, sudden and hot. And I see her eyes darkening as she looks at me. That makes me cock harden even more, and I feel guilty for reacting like this when she’s in distress. Finally, after what feels like forever, she sits across from me, putting the tray on the table and folding her hands in her lap. She looks anywhere but at me as I sit down.

“Have some water,” I say, picking up the water pitcher.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Look, you’re upset, and you need to take a break. Have some water.” I pour some water into my glass. “Don’t worry, I haven’t touched it.”

She looks apprehensive as she takes the glass, being careful not to touch my hand. She takes a tiny sip, still not looking at me. I watch her, admiring the lines of her face, her long lashes, her soft and sensual-looking mouth, her clear skin. She is really pretty.

“Thank you,” she whispers, glancing up at him. “It’s very kind of you.”

“Do you know those guys?”

“Unfortunately. I go to college with them.” She shakes her head. “They’re the

type of guys who were able to go to college without having to pay a dime, and they find it funny that I have to work to pay my way through my degree.”

I arch an eyebrow.

“I never understood that when I was at college, and I still don’t get the mentality. You’re doing something worthwhile.”

“Apparently, that makes me lesser in their eyes.”

“So they think it gives them the right to assault you while you’re working?”

Her jaw tightened.

“Trust me, I’ll be dealing with them back in class. But I can’t retaliate while I’m on the clock, or I could get fired.”

“Do you want me to say anything?”

“No. My manager wouldn’t care. Just that I carry on with my job.”

“Seriously?”

“As long as the customers are happy.”

I am beginning to regret coming to this restaurant with Marcus. The food was great, but the way the staff were treated was less to be desired. I am not uncomfortable with being there anymore. I push my mostly-eaten meal away and reach for my wallet.

“You shouldn’t have to put up with that.”

“I need this job as Dad isn’t paying my tuition anymore. I don’t have a choice.”

“We all have a choice, and you need some pride.”

She straightens up.

“I have pride. But I’m also practical.”

“You’re also undeserving of this treatment.” I get out my card and hold it out to her. “I want to pay now. Can you do that? Then you and I are getting out of here.”

Her eyes widen.

“What? You...what?”

“After what I just witnessed, you should be heading home, or getting out of here, at the very least. Once I’ve paid, I’m going to take you away from here.”

She is staring at me like I’ve gone mad. And maybe I have gone mad. I’ve never done this with a woman before. Never had I suggested that I take a woman with me and I don’t even know her name. Then again, I was with Hannah for a long time; maybe I’m out of practice.

Don’t think about her. Focus on the woman before you.

“I...I don’t...” She swallows. “I don’t know what to say. How do I know you’re not going to be like them?”

“You don’t. But I prefer that you were out of here and safe and not in here close to tears.” I peer at her. “Maybe you just need someone to talk to. I don’t mind if you vent to me.”

She still looks confused and unsure what to do. I know that I’m behaving in a

manner that would make anyone suspicious, but seeing her upset like this and knowing that she's close to breaking, I don't want to walk away from her.

The emotions running through me right now are too much, and I don't know what to do about it.

After what feels like forever, she reaches over and takes my card from my fingers. Our hands touch, and I feel a warm tingling that makes my hand feel ticklish. From the way she pauses, her cheeks flushing a little, she feels the same thing. She gets to her feet.

"Let me get your bill for you," she whispers. "Then I'll get my belongings."

"You're going to come with me?"

"That's what you want, isn't it?" she shoots back with a wry smile. "Besides, I've had enough of this place. I can find another job."

I can't stop myself from smiling. There is a bit of fire still there in her.

"I'm Luke, by the way."

She hesitates.

"Elle," she mumbles.

Then she hurries away, and I watch her go, knowing that those hips are going to be in my dreams for a while now.

Chapter 3 Elle

I stand in the middle of his apartment and look around in awe. This place is huge, far bigger even than I anticipated. I feel like I shouldn't be here; it is too intimidating.

Part of me wants to go home and lick my wounds after the way those pricks treated me. At least I would be somewhere that made me feel safe.

But I can't leave. That would mean walking away from someone who took the time to check on me. Who bothered to stand up for me when my manager was telling me to ignore the bastards as they need the custom.

It helps when he's very easy on the eye as well.

"You don't need to look so scared."

I jump and spin around, only to bump into Luke's chest and bounce off him. He catches me as I stumble, holding me up until I get my footing back. Having him this close, pressed up against his solid, warm chest, is making me feel lightheaded. It's been a while since I have had a guy hold me in such a manner.

"I..." I swallow and step away from him, my hands still tingling from touching him. "This is really where you live?"

"It is." He looks amused. "Were you expecting something bigger?"

"What? Oh, no!" I shake my head hurriedly. "I was...it's a bit...big?"

Luke chuckles.

“Of all the reactions I could get from you, I did not expect that.”

I don't know what to say to that. I watch him as he goes over to what appears to be a drinks cabinet and gets out two glasses. How can I not watch him? He is lithe and graceful when he moves, tall and slim covered in solid muscles. If he says he is an athlete or a model, I will not be surprised. Those jeans he is wearing hug his legs and ass in a way that draws the eye, and that sweater...it does not do anything to hide his body.

My dark-haired Samaritan is very handsome, and from the way he behaves he knows it.

My knees are weak at the thought of being in his company. Alone. When I'm trying to ignore the fluttering in my belly.

“Here you go.” Luke turns with a glass of something and holds it out. “Have a drink.”

“I...I shouldn't,” I try to protest. “I don't really drink.”

“Given what's happened, I think you can manage just one.” His smile is very charming, and I can feel myself giving in already. “It will warm you up as well. You're shivering.”

I know I'm shivering, but I can't tell him the reason why. Biting my lip and gathering my courage - it has deserted me lately - I walk over to him and take the glass. Our fingers brush against each other, and I almost drop the glass in my surprise. From the way he smiles at me, he knows that I feel it as well.

I cup my hands around the glass and take a sip. And almost pull it away as

the disgusting taste fills my mouth. It feels like my throat is burning. I start coughing, and the glass is taken away from me.

“Take it easy there,” Luke says as he pushes a bottle of water into my hand. “Anyone would think you’ve never had a brandy.”

“That was brandy?” I croak as I manage to get the bottle lid off. The water is soothing as it washes away the bitter taste. “I normally sneak the vodka.”

“You haven’t developed your palate yet.” Luke sips his own drink and watches her. “Maybe we should stick to water.”

That sounds like a good idea. I feel like I’m about to collapse now my legs are feeling shaky. I try not to stumble after him, and manage to sit down without making a fool of myself. My heart feels like it’s racing, and I’m getting short of breath. What is wrong with me?

Luke puts his drink on the coffee table and turns to me. Normally, I can manage being around simply anyone. I am a server, after all; I know how to conduct myself. But with him I feel like anticipation is prickling at my skin, and I am coming out in goosebumps. I’ve served good-looking men before. What is so different about him?

“Are you feeling a little better getting out of there?” he asks.

“A bit.” I sigh. “I have a feeling my manager is going to have a word with me next time I go in. I did leave before my shift finished, after all.”

“Given you were being hassled, I think that’s justified.” He peers at me. “You said you went to college with them?”

“Sadly. They’re on the football team.” I grimace. “Pricks, the lot of them.

Think ladies eat out of their hands.”

“That doesn’t excuse putting their hands on you.”

“Normally, I’d be telling them off. Screw my job, I would have hit them with my tray.”

“I wouldn’t have been surprised if you had.”

I sigh.

“I just can’t be dealing with it right now. They might think it’s funny, but I’m going to snap on them soon. Especially when they made a comment about my mom.”

I feel the lump building in my throat again. I’m not going to cry in front of him. I will not. He fits forward, peering at me with hazel eyes that are threatening to suck me in.

“What did they say?”

“Something that I can’t bear to repeat,” I whisper. I can’t look at him when I speak. “Her funeral was three days ago. It just makes me sick that they would make that comment.”

“I’m sorry.” He sounds genuine about it. “It must be hard.”

Something touches my back, and I jump. I look behind me, and see that he’s touching my back. I can feel the heat of his hand through my shirt. But I don’t tell him to move away, even as he makes no move to pull his hand back.

It feels like comfort. A tiny gesture is giving me more comfort than what I

have had already. What is wrong with me?

“You have no idea,” I mutter. “I lost both of my parents that day. Maybe even before then.”

Luke frowns.

“Did your father die as well?”

“No, he’s alive. He’s just with a coworker.” I swallow. “He snuck off from Mom’s funeral to screw her in the house. I had to walk in on them.”

Luke blinks. Then he stares at me.

“He was cheating on your mother?”

“More than that. He went out and got married to her while we were having Mom’s funeral. And then the...that woman...” I stop myself from cursing. “She has the audacity to think that I have no right to be upset over the fact she and Dad are now married. Even though they were messing around on Mom while she was going through chemo.”

I can feel how close I am to tears. Every time I talk, or even think, about Dad and the woman he married I feel like I’m going to break down. It’s been three days since I left, and Dad hasn’t reached out to apologize. I did get a text, but there was no apology. It was just a lot of excuses and scolding me for not accepting his wife.

I cannot believe he could be so callous.

Getting to my feet, I pace away from the couch, running my hands through my hair. This is stopped because my hair is still tied back, and my fingers get caught. I tug the band out of my hair, fighting back the urge to scream. The

anger is barely contained, and I want to lose it.

“Elle?”

I freeze. Then there are footsteps, and I feel hands on my shoulders.

“I’m sorry.” His voice is soft. “I can’t begin to imagine how things must be for you right now.”

“I can’t believe he would betray Mom like that. Even if they weren’t getting on, he shouldn’t be so disrespectful. To cheat on the day of your wife’s funeral...” I let out a snarl and shrug his hands off. “I wish I could wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze.”

“That’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

“A bit much would be bitch-slapping his side piece into next week the moment I hear she’s a part of my family now! Dad is lucky I didn’t do that.” It’s getting harder to push the anger back now. “I want to grieve my mom. I miss her, and I want to remember her. But all I can think of is seeing those two...those two, in Mom’s house...”

“Elle.”

Luke takes my hands. I hadn’t realized that they were clenched into fist. His fingers feel warm around my hands.

“Just take a deep breath.”

“What am I supposed to do when my life is turned upside-down and refuses to go back up again?”

“Getting angry is just going to make things harder for you.” His voice is

gentle, soothing. “It’s done now. He made his bed, so he can lie in it. Focus on you, not on him.”

I snort.

“That’s easier said than done.”

“You may say that, but I think it can be quite simple.”

Looking up, I watch him warily.

“If you think it’s simple, what would you do to get rid of the anger?”

“Do something to distract me. Focus on yourself with something to make you feel good.”

They are really innocent words, but I find myself shivering. A throbbing is starting between my legs, and I can’t ignore it. I swallow.

“Like what?”

Luke smiles. He moves closer, and touches my chin with his warm fingers. I find my eyes closing as his lips touch mine, and for a moment my mind doesn’t know what to do. I have someone I don’t know kissing me, and I am standing there like an idiot.

Then my brain snaps back into reality, and I find myself wanting to kiss him more. I put my hands on his arms, unsure if I should be pushing him away or dragging him close. This kiss is firing me up, and I’m struggling.

I don’t know him. All I know of him is his name and that he lives in a big, fancy apartment. He’s a stranger to me.

A kind, hot stranger, but still...

His hand is squeezing my backside, sending ripples through my middle. I can feel his erection pressing against my belly. I have to stop myself from rubbing myself against him.

The thing is, I don't live dangerously. I'm not a daring person. But with him holding me, my mouth still throbbing from his kiss, I find myself not caring about any of that. I just want to have something for me for once.

I run my hands up his arms and over his shoulders. His hands are both on my backside now, nearly lifting me onto my tiptoes. I wrap my arms around his neck, trying to hold onto my balance as he takes charge, his hands just as confident as his mouth.

I'm not a virgin. I've been to bed with guys. But Luke has not gotten my clothes off, and he's already making me melt.

Suddenly, he grabs my thighs and lifts me off my feet, wrapping my legs around his waist. His erection rubs against me through my pants, and I squeal into his mouth as he pressed me against him. Luke breaks the kiss and starts moving his lips down my neck.

"Fuck, Elle. You taste so sweet."

I'm aware that he's saying more than that, but the blood is rushing through my head and I feel like I'm underwater. Then he starts moving, everything shifting around me. I'm expecting him to lay me down on the couch, but instead he passes the couch and into another room. It's not until he's laying me down, his hands going to the buttons on my shirt, that I realize that we're in a bedroom. The sheets are cool and soft against my back.

I feel like I'm burning up.

Luke has my shirt undone before I'm aware of what is happening, and he pulls it apart to reveal my simple white bra. He groans, his hands shoving my bra up to free my breasts. His touch is enough for me to start moaning, arching up into his palms as he squeezed my breasts.

"You look stunning." Luke is growling as he starts kissing over my chest. "Just gorgeous."

His mouth takes my nipple, his tongue flicking across the hardened point. His other hand pinches my other nipple, and soon I'm writhing beneath him. It feels amazing. His thigh is between my legs, pressing against my clit through my pants. I rock on his leg, trying to ease the throbbing. But it doesn't work. I need more than this.

I manage to reach and grab at his sweater, giving it a tug.

"Should I be the only one getting my clothes off?" How am I able to talk right now? I feel like I've been sprinting.

Luke lifts his head, his piercing gaze searing into me. Giving my breasts a final squeeze, he begins to shift off me.

"Only if you're naked and ready by the time I'm done."

I grin and sit up to shrug off the shirt.

"Don't take too long. You promised a good time."

"Trust me, you'll get it."

My hands are still shaking as I tug my clothes off, almost getting my pants

stuck on my shoes. I am able to get them off, although I nearly fall off the bed in the process, and I finally kick all of my clothes away. Shifting back onto the bed, I watch as Luke takes off his jeans.

Oh, my. He is magnificent. A body perfectly sculpted with muscle. He looks like a model, everything just right. And his cock...

I cannot stop looking at his member, standing proudly from his crotch. My body tightens at the thought of getting him inside me.

“If you keep looking at me like that,” Luke says, breathing heavily, “I’m not going to be so restrained.”

I smile and sit back on my hands, shifting my legs apart.

“I thought you said you were going to give me hot and hard sex. I’m beginning to think you’re not going to follow through.”

Luke growls. Then he grabs me and flips me onto my belly. He arranges me onto my knees, my head pressing into the bed.

“Oh, I’m going to follow through.” His voice rumbles against my back as he nudges my knees apart. “You’re going to be begging for more afterwards.”

I start to laugh at his arrogance, but then he enters me with one firm thrust, and I end up moaning instead. He is huge, filling me to the point I don’t know if I can cope. For a second, I forget how to breathe, and I push myself up onto my elbows, clutching onto the bedding as I push back against him. Luke grabs my hips and begins to pound into me with a pace I can barely keep up with him. All I can do is hold on and let him thoroughly ravish my body.

It won't be long until I'm coming. And I feel it happen before I'm ready, building up before slamming into me that I feel like I'm being doused in flames. Luke's hands tighten against my hips, and he shifts to change the angle. That makes my orgasm start up again. He doesn't let me come down from the first one.

As I'm shuddering through my second climax, Luke's whole body tenses, letting out a groan before he collapses, managing to get himself before he completely falls onto me. For a moment, I can't think of anything. My mind had gone blank.

Then I'm aware of Luke slumping off me and gathering me into his arms.

"Don't think that I'm done with you yet."

I smile, trailing my fingers across his chest as I look up at him.

"You'd better not be."

Chapter 4 Luke

As I wake up, I'm aware that I am alone in the bed. Rolling over, I see that the side where Elle had been sleeping was empty. And the sheets are cold.

I don't remember her leaving the bed. Then again, we had been very energetic during the night, and she wore me out. It was meant to be about the gorgeous girl who ended up in bed with me, and I like to think I did wring her out. I want to be sure that I left her satisfied.

I am certainly happy with how the night went.

But not having her in the bed with me puts my mood down. I feel a bit deflated. Getting out of bed, I leave the room and into the living room. No sign of Elle.

Strange.

I check the rest of the apartment, and she's not here. There is nothing to indicate that she was here at all. For a moment, I'm confused. Did I actually have a woman in my apartment last night, or did I imagine it?

Then, as I'm going through the kitchen, I catch sight of an envelope out of place on the counter. It has my name on it. I pick it up, seeing the note scrawled on the back.

"Sorry. Had to go. Family emergency. Thanks for last night. Bye."

That is it. Nothing else. Not even a phone number. I don't even know how to

get hold of it. I stand there, wondering what just happened. Have I been ditched?

A buzzing interrupts my confusion, and I realize that my intercom is going off. My spirits lift. Is that Elle? Has she come back?

I hurry through the apartment to the front door and turn on the intercom.

“Elle?”

“Elle? Who the hell is Elle?”

It takes a moment for me to figure out who is at the door of my building.

“Marcus?”

“Who else would it be? Are you going to let me in?”

“Hmm?” I look down at myself, remembering that I’m naked. “Oh. Right. Come on up.”

I have enough time to throw some clothes on before my friend arrives. While I may be comfortable with my body, I’m not comfortable enough to stand naked before Marcus. Hurrying into the bedroom, I throw on some sweatpants and a t-shirt, all the while wondering where Elle could have gone. Maybe she did have a family emergency, but something doesn’t sit right with me. It feels like she was just making up a reason to leave.

What happened? So many questions are going around in my head, and I don’t know any of the answers.

Maybe the restaurant can help me. They would have her contact details. My spirit renewed, I head into the living room and find my phone. It doesn’t take

much to find the number for the restaurant, and a pleasant-sounding woman answers the phone after a few rings.

“Good morning, Franco’s Bar and Grill.”

“Hi, I was one of your customers last night, and I found a pocketbook by the restrooms. My colleague reminded me about it just now.” I cross my fingers. Hopefully, they will take the lie. “There was no ID inside, but there was a picture of our server inside. I believe it might be hers.”

“Oh! Which server was it?”

“I believe she said her name was Elle.”

“One second.”

There is a knock at the door, and I head through the apartment to open it. Marcus gives me a questioning look, but I put a finger to my lips before beckoning him inside. A moment later, the woman is back.

“I’ve just spoken to my supervisor. He said that Elle didn’t mention having lost a pocketbook.”

“Maybe it was her boyfriend’s if he was there last night.” I suggest, trying not to think about Elle having a boyfriend.

“Elle’s single. It could be hers.” The woman sounds dubious. “But I don’t know how we’re going to contact her. She quit this morning.”

I feel cold.

“What?”

“She called very early, before we opened, and said that she was quitting immediately.”

“I see.” I try not to sound frustrated. “So, there’s no way that I can get the pocketbook to her? Doesn’t she have a friend or something?”

“She goes to the university here. You could try contacting them to see if they will let you know. Other than that, you’re going to have to turn it in to the police so they can get it to her. I’m sorry, sir.”

“It’s fine. It was a long shot.” A very long shot that didn’t work. I sigh. “Okay, thanks.”

I hang up, feeling worse than I did when I woke up. Marcus leans on the counter and watches me with some amusement.

“So, are you going to tell me what you’ve been up to? Why are you asking to return a girl’s pocketbook?”

“That part was a lie.” I put my cell phone down, fighting back the desire to throw it across the room. “I just want to find that girl who was serving us.”

“What? Why?” Then Marcus’ eyes widen. “Wait, don’t tell me. You fucked her, didn’t you?”

I don’t respond, but I can feel my face getting warm. There is no point in denying it: Marcus knows me too well. Marcus groans.

“Seriously, Luke? You had to take one of the waitresses home?”

“We were both consenting adults, so what’s wrong with that?”

“Sounds like she wasn’t too happy about it, seeing as she’s already gone.”

I scowl at him. Then I pace away, thumping the doorframe with my fist.

“I have no idea what I did wrong. But I know that Elle has managed to cover her tracks in the time between her leaving and me waking up.”

“So, she didn’t leave anything?”

“Just a note saying she had a family emergency. I call bullshit on that, but there’s nothing to disprove it.”

“What did you do to make her run away?”

“Nothing! Nothing that could be considered bad, anyway.”

Marcus sighs and rubs the back of his neck.

“Maybe it’s just one of those things, Luke. Maybe you should just pass it off as an experience that you’re not going to have again.”

“An experience?” I snort. “Did you just call Elle an experience?”

“What else can I call it? You had a night with her, and she ran off. You’re more than likely not going to see her again. So, just put it away in your memory. There’s no point in stewing over it and wondering what might have been.” He spreads his hands. “You might never see her again, after all.”

I don’t like hearing that, even though I know that he’s right. But it doesn’t make me feel any better. Right now, all I can think of is finding Elle. And from the way things are, she doesn’t want to be found.

Chapter 5 Elle

Two Months Later

I take a tiny sip of the water, and I feel my stomach churning. I hope I'm not going to throw up again. My throat is burning from doing it over the last few days, and my stomach feels empty.

Whatever I ate was doing a number on me. My boss isn't going to be happy that I've got to stay at home tomorrow. It was either call in sick or I am going to be spewing up my guts every ten minutes.

I hate being ill. Hopefully, Carly and Ben will be able to find something to settle my stomach. I don't want to be off work, but I may not have a choice at this point if nothing stops me from running to the bathroom more than I should.

There's a ringing coming from somewhere? Is it really happening or have I started hallucinating? I rest the cold glass against my forehead, closing my eyes as the small respite soothes me. Then I hear that the ringing is still there. That is not a hallucination.

Sighing, I put the glass down and gingerly make my way through the house. It's coming from the living room, isn't it? I search around, but I can't seem to find it. There's no phone in sight.

Then I hear it under something. Sure enough, I pick up a cushion and find my

cell phone. I don't remember putting it there, but given how things have been going, anything is possible. I had been putting things down in obscure places and forgetting where I had left them for a while now.

I hate being out of sorts. For me, being sick is just horrible. It makes me feel like I have no brain and I can't function properly.

The caller ID is a name that makes me smile. I answer the call as I ease myself onto the couch.

"Hey, Grandma."

"I'm sorry, dear, if I woke you up."

"No, not at all. I just couldn't find my phone." I press a hand to my stomach.

"Although I might just go back to bed. Things are not great right now."

"Oh, honey." My grandmother's voice feels like warm honey. It is soothing.

"Do you want me to come to you and look after you?"

"It's fine, Grandma."

"Are you sure? You haven't been very well recently, and I'm worried about you."

"You don't need to drive all the way over here to look after me. It's too far."

Grandma snorts.

"I may be pushing seventy in a few years, but I'm still healthy enough to drive a couple of hours to look after you. Someone's got to do it, after all."

I can't help but smile at that. Grandma has been my rock recently. She is

furious at Dad for cheating on Mom and getting married on the day of Mom's funeral. From what Grandma told me, she verbally tore her son apart over his actions. Dad still stood firm on his decision, and he had even tried to get Grandma to meet Megan to get to know her, but Grandma had outright refused. Nobody else wanted to meet Megan, either; everyone loved Mom.

Dad had gained a wife and lost a family. I still can't believe Dad would do something like this, and with a woman closer to my age. It feels surreal, like a dream I'm going to wake up from.

But it's been two months, and I haven't woken up.

"I love you, Grandma."

"I love you, too, darling. I'm really sorry about my stupid son, Elle. I still cannot believe he would abandon everything for a little tart."

"I don't think Megan's that."

"I would say so. She was getting involved with a married man, and she knew about it. Yet she carried on like she was entitled to your dad's attention. She's a tart."

I can't argue with that. But I don't want to think about her too much. It just makes me angry, and that wears me out. I'm fed up with being angry all the time.

"Has your dad tried to contact you?" Grandma asks.

"No, not that I know of. I have him blocked."

"Well, I thought you might need to be aware of this. Your dad and Megan are actually having a wedding ceremony."

I was feeling very warm not too long ago. Now I'm feeling extremely cold.

"Really? But I thought they were already married."

"Apparently, Megan wanted an actual ceremony, and your dad was happy to oblige." Grandma sounds bitter. "He said that he can't say no to whatever Megan wants, and she deserves a proper wedding."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. The man thought this was going to make anyone happy? He had been close to lynched by both his family and his first wife's relatives, and he still thought this was a good idea?

"It's going to be a bit sparse, isn't it? I can't see you and our relatives going."

"Don't worry, we're not going anywhere near it. Megan wants a big wedding, but it's going to be rather empty on your dad's side. Maybe he'll have a few friends there, but none of his family."

"That's going to make things awkward."

"I thought I'd let you know, anyway. I don't want you to get blindsided by your dad. I'm sure he is trying to make contact to ask you to be in the wedding."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He wants you to be part of the wedding. I told him he was delusional to think that, but he won't listen. Apparently, Megan wants that as well."

I definitely don't want that. The thought of supporting a wedding to a woman I despise does not sit well with me.

"Thanks for letting me know, Grandma." I sit up when I hear the sound of the

front door. “That will be my roommates coming back. I’d better go.”

“Alright. I thought I’d let you know what your father’s up to. Feel free to say no as much as you want.”

I snort.

“I’m planning on doing that anyway. I’m not going anywhere this mess.”

“I’m not surprised. Love you, darling.”

“Love you, Grandma.”

I hang up just as Carly comes into the room. I see a movement behind her as Ben goes past the door, carrying some bags.

“Hey.” I manage a smile as I sit up. “How were your classes?”

“They were manageable. I’ll know more once I get past the exams.” Carly reaches into her bag. “We got our groceries from the store, and some ginger ale for you.”

“Ginger ale?”

“It’s meant to be good for unsettled stomachs.” Carly pulls out a long slim box from the bag. “But I also picked this up. I thought this might be useful.”

“What is it?”

Carly holds the box out, and I’m about to take the box before I realize what it says. I stare at my friend.

“A pregnancy test? Why would I need one of these?”

“It’s best to know now rather than later, isn’t it?”

“But...I haven’t...you know...” I feel my face getting warm. “It’s not necessary, Carly.”

Carly snorts.

“Not necessary? Elle, you had a one-night stand with a guy you ran away from. You don’t know his full name, and you still slept with him.”

“Carly!”

“Well, that’s what you did. If you’re feeling nauseous and being sick a lot after a one-night stand, the natural thing to believe is that you could be pregnant.”

Pregnant? I can feel the panic building and I shake my head.

“No, that can’t be right. I’m not pregnant.”

“Did you use protection?”

“I...I can’t remember.”

That’s a lie. I can remember. We hadn’t used protection that night, not on any of the times we had sex. I had been so wrapped up in what I was doing that I didn’t think about it at the time. And I was stupid.

Now I could possibly be pregnant because of something stupid. I don’t want to believe it.

“You’ve got to check, Elle.” Carly hasn’t pulled the box away. “If it says it’s negative, at least we can rule it out. And if it’s positive...”

I don't like how she's trailing off like that. I'm sure that I'm not pregnant. But if that's the reason for me being sick...

I snatch the box from my friend and stand up. Unable to look her in the eye, I sidle past her and go up to the bathroom. God, how could I have forgotten something as simple as protection? Luke had been so seductive that he drew me in and held on.

I can't believe that I didn't keep a level head about it all.

It doesn't take long for me to take the test, although the time between taking the test and waiting for the result has me pacing around the bathroom. Why can't it be instant? The tension is too much.

When it's finally ready and my phone is bleeping to tell me so, I snatch up the test and look at the little window.

Two lines. Does that mean I'm pregnant?

I check the box, and it says what I am fearing. It means that I'm pregnant.

My legs suddenly feel weak, and I lean against the sink, dropping the test into the bowl. I really feel like I want to be sick now. I'm pregnant from a one-night stand. That is not in my plan. I was meant to go to college, go to work, and live my life. Babies were not in my plan until I'm properly settled.

Why now?

What do I do now? My mind is racing. I have a lot going for me, and I have no time for a baby. I don't even think I can cope with having a child; they are a lot of work, and you need patience. I'm pretty sure I don't have the patience to raise a kid.

But the only other option is abortion. And the thought of doing that leaves me feeling cold. I don't feel ready for a baby, but I don't feel ready to get rid of it, either.

I don't know what to do.

A laugh from outside gets my attention. I look out and see our neighbor in her garden. It backs onto ours, so I have a clear view of her back yard. She is outside with her little baby, who is attempting to walk. He is holding onto a walker, but he is attempting to let go and walk towards his mother, who is coaxing him towards her. Each time it looks like he is going to fall and sit on his behind, she swoops in and picks him up, which causes him to laugh. Then she puts him back on his feet, making sure he holds onto the walker, before she starts again.

I can't help but soak up the baby's laugh. It's so free and happy, loud and without a care in the world. And I can see the smile on the neighbor's face, even from where I am. She looks just as happy.

Raising a baby can be really hard, and I know I'm going to struggle. But seeing my neighbor with her baby, looking so proud of her little boy and cuddling him, it makes me wonder if the hard times are worth it for the good parts.

That could be me in a few months. If I can get through this, that will be me.

I can do this.

Chapter 6 Luke

Six Years Later

My muscles are in agony. That run was tougher than I anticipated. I slow to a stop and start wheezing as I try to get air back into my lungs. Marcus laughs.

“You’re really getting out of shape, Luke. You can normally do this run without any problems.”

“I have been sick lately, Marcus,” I remind him, gasping for air as I try not to hunch over, my hands on my heads. “Maybe going for a run so soon after recovering from pneumonia was not such a good idea.”

“You were the one who wanted to do this, so don’t blame this on me.”

“Would I ever do that?”

“Yes.” Marcus grins as he heads towards his car. “I’d better go and change. The flight still hasn’t changed, has it?”

“It shouldn’t have unless the pilot says the weather is bad. We’re still scheduled for nine-thirty.”

“Then I’ll meet you at the airport in an hour. I’m already packed.” Marcus gives me a wave. “Good luck getting back in your state.”

“Fuck you, Marcus.”

“No, thanks. You’re not my type.”

I roll my eyes and head towards my car, surprised that my legs are not collapsing under me. That run is normally pretty good, and I can cope with it, but this morning it’s making me feel like I’ve just run the ironman course. Maybe we should have taken it slower, or gone on an easier route. It would have been better for me to do that.

But I’m an idiot. I would never do something that sensible. Even if I have been ill.

My body is shaking, but I manage to get home without any problems. Everything I need for our trip to Cleveland is ready to go, so all I need to do is shower and change. Then Marcus and I will be meeting up with our new purchase, the Cleveland Bulldogs. Marcus has been telling me that it’s a good purchase, and we won’t regret it. I have yet to believe it, but I trust Marcus’ judgment. He knows a good team when he sees it.

And he’s been right so far over the years.

I get home and take a quick shower. It takes a while for my body to stop feeling like it’s going to collapse on me, although my lungs are still hurting. Running on the tailend of pneumonia is not something I want to do again anytime soon.

Dressing doesn’t take long, and I put the alarm on before I leave the house. It will only be a couple of days, and then I’ll be back. My housekeeper will keep an eye on the place until I return.

Then again, I don’t expect any problems out here on the outskirts of the city. Things were far quieter than in the middle of the city. Four years, and I

haven't had any issues with my house.

It's certainly nice to think that I come back to a place like this rather than my old apartment.

My phone is ringing as I'm pulling out of the drive. My dashboard indicates that it's my mother calling. I sigh. I don't really want to speak to Mom. She's a pain at the best of times, especially in recent years. I love her, but Mom is always pestering me to find a woman to settle down with and raise kids. That's not really an interest for me.

I mean, the one person I could see myself settling down with vanished six years ago and I have no idea where she is. Pathetic? Maybe, but I know other women pale in comparison to the young and gorgeous server I took to bed within an hour of meeting her.

Of course, Mom is not going to understand. I just wish she would stop.

But if I don't answer the phone, she's going to keep bothering me until I do. And I would like to get through this meeting with the Cleveland Bulldogs without embarrassing myself because my mother won't stop calling.

I pressed the answer button on the dash.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey, darling. I've done it. It's all set!"

"What are you talking about? What have you done now?"

"I have gotten you a date!" I swear I hear Mom squeal. "Finally, I might see you with a girlfriend!"

It takes a moment for me to realize what she has just said. And it sounds ludicrous.

“What do you mean, you’ve gotten me a date? I didn’t ask for you to do that.”

Mom huffs.

“Well, when am I going to get any grandchildren? I’m not going to become a grandma if I don’t have any little kids running around.”

“If you wanted to become a grandmother, you should have had more children and not focus your efforts on me.”

“But I only needed one child. I wanted to focus my efforts on one child. I can’t bring myself to split my love between two children.”

I wonder if she’s heard herself lately. It just sounds awful, and it is giving me a headache.

“Well, if that’s the case, I’ll make sure - when I find someone I want to have a kid with - that I have just one kid. I can’t have you treating them differently if you’re unable to love more than one child at once.”

“Luke! Don’t talk like that! I’ve got plenty of love in me for lots of babies.”

“You’re not making any sense, Mom. And I haven’t got time to figure out what you really mean without getting a headache. I’ve got a plane to catch.”

“What?” Mom’s screech makes me wince. “You’re getting on a plane? Where?”

“I’ve got a business meeting in another state. Marcus and I are heading off

shortly.”

“But...but I’ve told the woman that you’re looking forward to meeting her. You’re having dinner tonight.”

“I’m not going to be back for a few days.”

“That’s unacceptable!” Mom complains. “You have to come back, otherwise I’m going to look stupid!”

I sigh. This is not what I want to deal with today.

“Mom, the reason you’re going to look stupid is because you chose to set up a blind date without checking with me first.”

“Well, the last time I tried to do that, you outright refused.” Mom huffs. “I should have said it was dinner with your father and I instead. Then we could have gotten you in the door before you realized what was going on.”

“Does this mean Dad was in on this as well?”

“He knows his place, and he knows you need to think about settling down.”

I doubt it. Dad and I are close, and he is content with me doing what I want. It’s my life and not something for him to dictate. Dad respects that. Unfortunately, Mom doesn’t.

“Look, Mom, you need to stop doing this. You’ve done this before, and it’s not worked. Why do you keep setting me up without my consent?”

“I told you! You need to find a wife and have children! I want to be a grandmother!”

She is starting to sound like a child now.

“Like I said, if you wanted to be a grandmother, you should have had more children instead of putting the pressure on me. You did this to me last minute, again, and I have no intention of going on any sort of date. Again. Knowing the women you pick out, we wouldn’t be a match, anyway.”

“Oh, but you would! This girl is very suitable for you. Just what you need.”

“I’m a grown man, Mom! This has to stop!”

“But what about my grandbabies?”

I groan and resist the urge to yell. My throat is not well enough for that.

“Just stop it. I can’t believe I have to tell my own mother that she’s behaving like a child. Stop poking your nose into my life, and leave me alone. If I want to find someone and have a family, that’s up to me. I won’t be pushed into it by you.”

Mom starts moaning.

“But by the time you decide that, I’m going to be gone from this world. And I will never have held a baby in my arms.”

“Be one of those people who cuddles premature babies or those without a mother. I’m sure that will satisfy you.”

“But it’s not the same!”

“You carry on like this, and I might not want to have kids at all. Now, I’m going to be at the airport soon, and I can’t be on my phone. Bye, Mom.”

I can still hear her demanding that I stay on the phone as I hang up. Talking to Mom has given me a headache again. What is she thinking, telling me that I need to have a child for her? She knows that pushing me into something is just going to result in me refusing to do anything. But she keeps doing it.

While I can understand why she wants me to be happy and with a family, it seems to be getting lost with her own desires.

I make a mental note to ask Dad if he can refer her to a doctor to see if her memory is okay. This isn't the first time I've told her no to setting me up. It's getting stupid.

I pull into the parking lot, and I see Marcus getting his bag out of his trunk. I pull into the space beside him and get out. Marcus grins at me.

"You ready for the flight? Apparently, the weather is good, so it should be smooth flying."

"I'm more than ready," I declare as I shut my door and open up the trunk. "Anything to get away from Mom's scheming."

"What's she up to now?"

"I'll tell you once we're up in the air." I grab my bags. "And after I've had a large drink."

Marcus laughs.

"Is she up to her old tricks again?"

"Oh, she is." I shut the trunk and lock up my car. "Let's go. I need to have that drink. It will help the mood."

Chapter 7 Elle

“We’re going, Mommy.”

I look around to see Amy standing in the doorway, wearing her coat and backpack and clutching her favorite cuddly toy. The dog is looking a little sad. I make a mental note to throw it into the washing machine when she gets home.

“Okay, sweetie.” I put the cloth aside and crouch down. “Let’s have a cuddle before you go.”

My daughter skips over and gives me a big hug before giving me a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

“Love you, Mommy.”

“Love you, too, darling. Have fun at kindergarten.”

“I will.”

With a toothy grin at me, Amy leaves the kitchen. A second later, Ben sticks his head into the room.

“You’ll be gone when I get back, won’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m meant to be.” I gesture at the kitchen table. “Once I’ve cleaned up everything here.”

“Then I’ll see you later.”

“Sure.” I smile at him. “Thanks for taking Amy. I do appreciate it.”

“I said I’d help you out with anything, didn’t I?” Ben grins and winks at me. “You can ask anything, you know, Elle.”

I try to ignore the implications there. I know that Ben is hinting something else, but I cannot bring myself to say stop. That would involve an awkward conversation, and I don’t want to go through that.

“Just make sure she has everything when she gets there,” I tell him as I pick up the cloth again. “I don’t want the teachers calling because she’s forgotten something and she’s upset about it.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t forget anything.” Ben gives me a way. “I’ll see you later. Have fun with the bulldogs.”

He disappears, and the door opens and closes a moment later, Amy’s chatter fading away. I get on with tidying up the kitchen. Once this is done, I can head off to work, and I can be confident in the fact there will be less for me to do when I return.

Living with Carly and Ben is not a problem; we got used to living together back in our college days, and we got ourselves into a good routine. But with a child involved, things do get tougher. The stress in Amy’s younger years was something I don’t want to go through again.

But Amy is five now. She is a little more independent and can help with minor chores. She loves to clean, which I find surprising. Ben and Carly don’t complain, though, so I’m not going to put up a fight with it. Amy just adores the two of them.

If someone had told me six years ago that I was going to end up being a

mother and living with my two best friends as a makeshift family, I would have thought they were mad. I wasn't going to be a mom, not so young. But it happened, and now I have a child who seems to be growing up too fast.

I know I am grateful to Ben and Carly for their help. If they hadn't stepped up to help me while I left college and started working as soon as Amy was born, I would have been struggling. Grandma did offer to let me come home with her so she could look after me, but I can't do that to her. She deserves to be a great-grandmother, not childcare. And I definitely couldn't go to Dad. I have had nothing to do with him since he married Megan. They will try to contact me and get me to come back, but I just ignore them now. I'm not interested.

Dad made his bed with his actions. This was what he wanted to do. If he doesn't like the current medium of being cut off from his family, that's on him. I'm not going to help him.

I have a child of my own, and I have more important things to worry about.

"Are you doing something, or are you just staring into space?"

"Hmm?"

I look up. Carly is standing next to me. I didn't hear her join me.

"Carly." I lower the cloth and put it on the table. "Sorry, I didn't hear you."

"I noticed. You looked like you were off in your own world." Carly peers at me. "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay." I shrug. "I'm just tired. I've got a long day today, and I didn't get much sleep last night."

“At least you don’t have to worry about Amy waking up in the night.” Carly smiles. “I’m glad she’s grown out of that.”

“So am I. I thought the three of us were going to end up hallucinating with madness.”

“That’s to be expected when you have a baby. You go to their schedule.”

“I’m glad we can train them to what is acceptable,” Carly grunts. She leans on the table and folds her arms. “Ben doing okay with the school run?”

“He’s been fine with it. I go in the other direction at the same time, and it’s on his way. He’s like a godsend.”

“I see.” Carly regards me thoughtfully. “He does a lot for you, doesn’t he?”

I understand what she’s talking about. I sigh.

“Don’t start this again, Carly.”

“He’s clearly in love with you. Why won’t you give him a chance?”

“Because I can’t see him like that.” I shake my head. “Sure, I love him, but he’s like a brother that I never had. I can’t see him as anything but that.”

“You should tell him, Elle. Ben’s going to get fed up with loving you from afar unless you say something.”

“And what do you expect me to say? ‘I love you, but not like that?’”

“That would work. It’s to the point.” Carly frowns. “I’m in this house with you, so I would like to have some harmony here.”

“I thought we had harmony.”

“Not when I can sense the tension coming from Ben. He’s going to make a move soon, and you’re going to end up turning him down. That will just make things worse.”

“Telling him I don’t care for him in that way is going to do the same thing,” I point out.

“This should have been sorted out years ago.”

I don’t respond. I know she’s right. I sensed something change between Ben and myself while I was struggling to learn how to be a mom without my mom around, but I didn’t want to address it. Maybe I should have, so Ben wouldn’t have dealt with this for years. This is my fault, I know that much.

I’ve made a mess, and I don’t know how to clear it up without hurting people.

And this is something I don’t want to think about right now. I have an important job to do, and I have to get on with it. Putting the cloth I had been using to clean in the washing machine, I walk past Carly towards the hall.

“I’m not sure when I’ll be back. Diane said I didn’t have to worry about anything after this shoot, but it’s going to take quite a while.”

“I’m sure you won’t mind, given you’ll be around several burly football players.” Carly sighs. “I’m really jealous. Some of those guys...wow.”

She fans herself. I shake my head with a smile as I find my coat and bag.

“It’s not going to be that arousing, trust me.”

“I don’t know about that. Plenty of hot guys to drool over.” Carly pushes off the table and follows me into the hall. “Just remember what I said, Elle. You and Ben need a talk sooner rather than later. Otherwise both of you are going

to get hurt, and I don't want my best friends to fracture."

"I'll see what I can do." I don't look at her as I head towards the door. "Hopefully, I'll be back before Amy is. I'll get takeout tonight."

"Make it Chinese, and I'll stop bothering you about this."

I acknowledge this and head out to my car. I wish Carly hadn't mentioned anything about Ben now; it's all I'll be able to think about, and it's going to be distracting. It's not that I don't like Ben. He is my best friend, after all, and he's a great guy. He will make any woman happy.

It just won't be me. I feel like that I don't have the capability to do what he wants of me. It wouldn't be fair on him if I tried when I'm not prepared for it.

I don't want to think about this anymore. It's just going to put me in a low mood, and I can't be at work today with a scowl on my face. I have to be bright and upbeat. The Cleveland Bulldogs were coming for a photoshoot with their new owners, along with an interview that one of the most popular sports journalists was undertaking. I have to be on hand for everything, and we will get paid handsomely.

This is not the type of job I can walk around in a bad mood.

I get to the studio and head up to our room. Diane is already there, sitting at her desk and going through her computer. She looks up and smiles as I come in.

"Morning. You're just in time."

"Just in time?" I check my watch. "You told me to be here for nine-thirty, didn't you?"

“I did, but I got a call from the coach. They’re asking to come in early so they can get the photos out of the way before they meet Mr Ward and Mr Daniels.”

“Mr Ward...are those the two people who have bought the bulldogs?”

“That’s them. Their interview is at twelve, so they’re flying in right now. Coach Maxwell wanted to get this part done faster, so we agreed to start at nine-thirty instead of ten.”

I sigh.

“I suppose there’s no hope of having a coffee, then?”

“In this job? We’ll be lucky.” Diane gestures towards the cloakroom. “Get your things away and set up the lights. It won’t be long until they get here.”

And it wasn’t. I am barely out of the cloakroom before the players come wandering in. God, it’s been a while since I’ve been in the same room as some fine specimens. I’ve helped shoot several sports teams, but somehow this feels different. Probably because they’ve been dubbed as the surprise team to pip all the other teams to the Super Bowl. I don’t know who is starting these rumors, but the Cleveland Bulldogs are running with it. I’m not about to argue with statistics.

The next couple of hours are really busy. I’m trying to keep up with everything, setting the lights in the right way and getting refreshments for the players. I can take pictures - I am now a licensed photographer - but when we have something this big, Diane is in charge and I’m the one doing the odd jobs. I don’t mind at all; I like being on the go. Keeping busy is good for me. It gives me less time to think on things that I don’t want to think about for a

while.

Of course, it stops once I slow down, but that won't happen for some time today.

After two hours of rushing around, dodging very large bodies and brushing off the flirtatious remarks that came my way, it is finally over. We're down to the last player, the quarterback. As Diane takes the final shots and I'm standing back to take a moment to breathe, I'm aware of new people into the room. It's a large studio floor, but it feels a little cramped with the football team and their management present. A couple more people makes it like we're stuck in an elevator.

"Okay, we're done!" Diane lowers her camera and looks over her shoulder, her gaze going past me. "Looks like we finished on time as well."

I turn, and see two men in suits standing by the door. They look to be closer to forty. One is on the shorter side, jet black hair that looks like it's been caught by the wind, his suit not hiding the muscular frame he carried. I can see him playing football himself. The other is taller, at least six feet, light brown hair with a trimmer frame, He looks good in a suit.

Why does he look familiar? I'm sure I've seen him before.

Then he looks at me, and I realize that I have seen him before. Several years ago, and he's got some gray hairs showing, but it's still the same person I met that one night six years ago.

Luke, my one-night stand, is staring at me. And I can tell from the way he is looking at me that he knows exactly who I am.

Chapter 8 Luke

I cannot believe it. Elle is here. She's here, and she looks even prettier than I remember. Her hair is shorter, and her figure is curvier than before, but it's her. And I cannot take my eyes off her.

Of course the last time we encountered each other was here in Cleveland, but she had vanished. I thought she had left town and gone elsewhere. And she had been here the whole time?

I want to talk to her, find out what's been going on. I want to see what she's been up to. Six years is a long time to not see someone, and we barely spoke the last time. We did a lot of things, but it wasn't talking.

But I don't have a chance to speak to her. She sees me, goes pale before spinning away and getting busy with her work. The next thing I know, I'm being whisked off to my interview in another room. That takes up a lot of time, and I have to concentrate when answering the questions. While Marcus can take charge, I need to look like I know what I'm talking about when all I want to do is talk to Elle.

She's looking well. I wonder what's been happening with her. Is she married now? Has she settled down?

The thought of her being with another man just fills me with jealousy. I don't want anyone else to be with her. That is not happening. But then I have to remind myself that Elle is not my woman. I'm not qualified to have any claim to her.

I want to have a claim on her, though. Badly.

As soon as the interview is over, I'm up and out of the room, going back to the studio. The players have already gone, although Coach Winter was still present. He was leaning on the desk talking to Diane, giving her one of those charming smiles that made me guess that he was trying to chat up the photographer. She was pretty, certainly.

Not as pretty as Elle, though. Who is currently taking the lights down and sorting out the back screen. She has her back to me.

I approach her.

"Elle?"

She stiffens, but she doesn't turn around. She barely misses a beat as she takes down the lights.

"I am a little busy right now, sir. If you have any questions, could you direct them towards Diane?"

"What if I want to talk to you?" I hesitate. "I mean, it's been six years. And you did disappear without any warning."

Elle pauses, yet she still doesn't turn to look at me. I want to reach out and make her turn around, but I keep my hands to myself.

"Six years is a long time." She sounds nervous. I can hear her voice trembling. "People have reasons. And I had mine."

"And what were they for disappearing on me during that night?"

"It's none of your business."

I am a little annoyed by that.

“You do realize that you spent the night in my apartment. That means it is my business.”

“I’m not having this conversation, Mr Ward.”

“You used to call me Luke, remember?”

“I do remember.” Elle spins around to face me, and I see the distress in her eyes. “I also remember how we said it would be just one time, and that’s what it was. One time. Nothing more.”

“That hasn’t been forgotten.”

“So why are you approaching me now?” Elle glances away and she shakes her head. “Please, just don’t come near me, Mr Ward. I have a job to do, and I can’t be seen talking when I’m busy.”

“Elle…”

“No!”

Elle moves away from me, picking up the last lighting fixture, and moves it to the side of the room. I am about to go after her when I’m stopped by Coach Winter, who is coming across the studio towards me.

“Mr Ward! Thank you for coming!”

I fix a smile on my face and turn to meet him, accepting the outstretched hand. The grip from the older man is strong and firm.

“It’s not a problem at all, Coach. Mr Daniels and I are happy to meet the

team. We have to know about the people we've bought, after all." I shrug. "Besides, I was curious to see what the team were like. I'm impressed on first impressions, I will admit."

"Excellent!" Coach Winter beams. "The boys are going to be at training now, but we have organized a press conference after lunch. Are you and Mr Daniels set for lunch?"

"I don't think so. Anywhere you can recommend?"

"If you're into barbecue or cajun, there's a new restaurant near the stadium that caters to your tastebuds."

That sounds like something Marcus would like. I don't mind barbecue, either. But the thought of food is not on my mind now I've found Elle.

And, from the way she's rushing out, she's eager to leave. I don't want that to happen.

"How about you talk to Mr Daniels about it? He's still with the journalist, and I've got to finish up here."

"Of course. I'll have a word with him." Coach Stephens gives me a brisk nod. "I'll see you later, Mr Ward."

Clapping me on the arm, he leaves the room. As he goes, I turn to see Elle coming out from another room just off the studio, putting on a coat and slinging a bag over her shoulder. She is moving quickly, not even looking in my direction. I start towards her.

"Elle..."

But she ignores me, heading towards the door and leaving. The door shuts a

little too hard behind her, which makes Diane look up with a frown.

“I really wish she would stop doing that. The door doesn’t need that much force.”

“She’s leaving for lunch?”

“For the day. We don’t have anything else to do today, so I said she could go home.” Diane shrugs. “All that’s needed is some editing, and we don’t need two of us to do it. Besides, she can be around to pick up her daughter from kindergarten. She doesn’t get to do that normally.”

Elle has a kid? So she has moved on. I don’t like hearing that, but I can’t argue with it. I’m not her own, so Elle can do what she wants. Including start a family with someone else.

But I still don’t like it.

I should be leaving and going with Marcus. We should carry on with our meetings, but now I’ve found Elle I don’t want to leave. I need to find out more, although Elle is not going to be inclined to talk to me.

Maybe I can speak to her colleague instead. She might be inclined to talk.

I walk towards the desk.

“She seems to be efficient. I watched her work earlier.”

“She is. Very efficient. I don’t think I know anyone who works as hard as her.” Diane shrugs as she sits back in her chair. “Except me, perhaps. When she came to work for me as an apprentice five years ago, she was doing three part-time jobs while raising a baby. Now she’s only on one, thank God. The poor thing would run herself ragged just earning for her daughter.”

I frown.

“No father in the picture?”

“No. She said it was a brief fling, and she couldn’t bring herself to get rid of the baby. She had to drop out of college to give birth and raise her daughter.” Diane sighs. “She lives with a couple of friends, so she’s not completely alone, but Elle is not keen on relying on anyone else too much. What she can do herself, she will.”

“I see.”

No father around, a brief fling...wait, did she say that Elle had to drop out of college?

I knew Elle when she was in college. Did that happen later? Or...

“How old is her daughter?” I ask. “You said she’s in kindergarten?”

“Amy turned five not too long ago. Sweet kid. Elle brings her in every now and then.” Diane looks pleased. “A little budding photographer, she is.”

It sounds like Elle has managed to get a fresh start for herself. When I met her, she was a waitress dealing with her mother’s death and her father’s betrayal. Now she’s a photographer with a child.

A child that is five years old.

Did that mean...?

No, of course it can’t mean anything. It’s just a coincidence, that’s all.

Even so...

“Luke?”

I jump, and turn to see Marcus sticking his head around the door.

“What?”

“We’ve finished up. Aren’t you coming? I’m starving, and Coach Stephens has told me about this place I want to check out.”

“I…”

I should be going with him, but I can’t. Now my path has crossed with Elle and I know she’s close, I have to see her. We need to talk. I don’t know if she’ll listen to me, but I can try. I’m not about to let her walk away again.

I wave at Marcus.

“Give me a moment, Marcus. I’ve got something to do here first.”

“Okay.” Marcus looks curious. “What’s going on?”

“Just wait in the car for me, will you?”

Marcus opens his mouth, but then he glances at Diane and decides not to speak out. He nods and leaves, closing the door. I turn back to Diane, who is looking bewildered.

“Is there something I should know?”

“Let’s just say some unfinished business.” I clear my throat. That didn’t sound right. “I… I knew Elle a while ago. Back when she lost her mom.”

“Oh.” Diane’s expression shifted. “I see. She didn’t give any indication that she knew you, though.”

“We kind of left on...uncertain terms. Things were up in the air, what with her family situation...” I didn’t know how to explain it further without giving away all of the details. “I didn’t get the chance to apologize, to catch up. You know how it is.”

“I suppose.” Diane tilted her head to one side. “Elle doesn’t talk much about her past. Just that it was painful.”

“I hope not to be that part anymore.” I hesitate. “Is it possible to have her address? I want to drop by at some point. See if she’ll speak to me. Lay things to rest, you know?”

I should have done better than that. God, I sounded so flimsy. I own multiple companies, a grown man approaching forty, and yet I am stumbling over words because of one woman.

She brought me to my knees, and six years on that hasn’t changed.

Chapter 9 Elle

I can't believe it. Luke is here. He's the one who bought the Cleveland Bulldogs. And I just had to run into him at the studio.

This feels like a bad dream. A really bad one. I can't see him, not now. Too much time has passed, and he's going to want answers.

Answers that involve my daughter. I'm sure Diane will have said something about Amy to Luke. She likes to talk about Amy, just like she would talk about her own children. My coworker loves kids.

Will Luke connect the dots? I don't know if he will, but I don't want to take the chance. Hopefully, Diane will not say anything.

But, then again, given how rich Luke is, I'm sure he'll be able to find me, anyway.

I'm still shaking as I pull into my driveway behind Ben's car. Then I sit there for a few minutes, trying to gather my thoughts. Six years on, and Luke still has an effect on me. It's remarkable that he can make me feel like we're meeting for the first time again. That spark is still there.

But I don't know how I'm supposed to react anymore. Everything is just a mess.

What if he sees Amy? What if he demands to know who the father is? I can't tell him. I should, but I just can't.

A knock at the window makes me jump. I shriek, and hit my shoulder against the door. The door opens, and Ben is leaning in. He looks concerned.

“Are you okay? I heard you come home, and you didn’t come inside.”

“I...It’s nothing.” I gulp. “Amy’s still at kindergarten, isn’t she?”

“Of course. She’s not due out until two-thirty. Elle, are you okay? You’re white as a sheet.”

“It’s just...I’ve had a shock, that’s all.” I start to get out. “It’s nothing, really.”

“Are you sure about that?” Ben clasps my shoulders as I stand up, only to let go when I wince. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m just clumsy.” It’s a little uncomfortable with Ben standing so close, and I shuffle to one side. “It’s just been a bit of an...interesting day, that’s all.”

Ben frowns.

“Did one of the players put their hands on you? Is that why you’re so shaken?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

“Then what happened? I’ve never seen you behave like this before.” Ben’s eyes search my face. “Elle, talk to me.”

I don’t know if I can find the words. Ben knows about me having a one-night stand, but he doesn’t know who the father is. What could I tell him? The only things I knew about Luke were his first name and that he’s got a lot of

money.

I know how he's a billionaire who can buy out anyone he wants, and that he can probably make things difficult for me if he wants.

I hear the sound of a car coming along the street, and I look to see it pull up on the curb. For a moment, I think it's Carly coming home. But she said she was going to be working late. Then I see Luke getting out from the passenger seat, and my heart sinks as my knees go weak. Oh, God, how had he found me so quickly? Had Diane really told him where I live?

Ben turns as Luke approaches, putting himself between him and me. I touch Ben's shoulder.

"It's okay."

"What? Do you know him?"

"I do. He's harmless."

I don't know about that, but I can tell that Luke is not going to leave just yet. Not if the look on his face is anything to go back. Ben doesn't look as convinced as I am. He stays in front of me as Luke reaches us, looking past Ben to me.

"We still need to talk, Elle. I'm not going anywhere until we do."

His expression says he means it. I won't be able to make him leave right now.

"Who the hell are you?" Ben demands. "And what do you want with my friend?"

"Ben, please!"

I step around him, bumping into the car door with my elbow. I grimace as my arm throbs, but I move out from behind my friend. Both of them are watching me, Ben looking territorial, and Luke...well, he doesn't look happy.

Given how I left him six years ago, I can't blame him for that.

"I'll give you two minutes," I say to Luke. "That's it. And then you leave me alone."

Luke's jaw tightens.

"I don't know if I can do that, but that will do for now."

"That's not the answer I'm looking for, Luke."

"That's all you're going to get."

He is glaring at me now, and I'm trying not to tremble. God, I never knew he could be so intimidating. Ben is watching me.

"Elle?"

"Go back inside, Ben. I'll talk to Luke alone."

"What? What if he...?"

"He's not going to do anything." I keep my eyes on Luke. "Not in broad daylight."

Ben looks skeptical, but he moves towards the house with one last look at Luke. I wait until he is inside and the door shuts before I turn back to Luke. Only to see him right in front of me. I squeak and jump back before I bump into him. He grabs my arms to hold me up, but I push them away.

“Would you not do that? I’m on edge as it is.”

Luke doesn’t respond. He just watches me, a steely expression in his hazel eyes. I remember looking into them once, seeing the flecks of green mixed in with the brown. They were beautiful eyes.

Now he was staring at me in a way that made me uncomfortable, and not in a good way. I take a deep breath and count to ten in my head.

“How did you find me so quickly? You must have moved at the speed of light to catch up with me.”

“Your friend told me where you lived.”

“I figured that she would. She likes to think everyone is our friend. Her one weakness is that she’s overly friendly.” I fold my arms. “And I bet you spoke to her with a sob story about us having lost touch and now you want to reconnect. Tug at her heartstrings.”

“Not quite along those lines, but close enough.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“I did want to talk to you, Elle.”

I shake my head.

“No, that is not happening.”

“Why not?” Luke puts his hands on his hips. “Why can’t I talk to the woman who spent the night with me and then just scarpers while I’m sleeping? What’s wrong with that?”

I flinch as his voice raises, and I hope that none of the neighbors that are home hear what we're saying. I don't want them to know what's happening out on our lawn. I lower my voice, hoping he will do the same.

"I left a note saying that I had a family emergency."

"Only a few hours before, you said that your mother was dead and your father was shackled up with a younger woman."

"I have other family. My grandma is getting older, and I went back to help her."

There is technically the truth. I did go back to help Grandma, but not until two weeks afterwards. Until then, I had hidden away in my house trying to forget about everything. The pain of knowing I had lost Mom and finding my Dad messing around with that woman had taken a while to wear off.

"Not only did you do that," Luke went on, "but you quit at the restaurant and told whoever works there to say they didn't know how to contact you."

"What of it? It's not like we had an undying love to overcome. We had sex, Luke. That was it. What were you expecting? Me to be there in the morning and take me for a coffee? Carry on for a couple more days before you get bored with me? Were you expecting that?"

Luke falters, and I can tell this is what he was thinking would happen. And I'm surprised to find that I wouldn't have minded if this had happened. Wait, what am I doing? This is ridiculous.

"We agreed on the sex, and nothing more. Certainly not what would misconstrue into a date. That was not something I said I would do. Now, please, just turn around and go. There's no need for us to talk anymore."

“What?” Luke stares. “You think we don’t have more to discuss?”

“No, I don’t. We saw each other again, we’re both old news, and it should be left as that.”

“Why can’t it be anything else?”

Am I hearing him correctly? I shake my head.

“No. Nothing more. You and I are from two different worlds. They collided once, and I’m not going to do it again.”

“Why not?”

Because I don’t trust myself around you.

“Because I said it won’t. Now, will you please go? I think your friend is waiting for you.”

Sure enough, his friend Mr Daniels has climbed out of the car and is watching us. I wish he would come over and take Luke with him.

“You don’t think we have something else to talk about?” Luke demands.

“Like what? Why I wouldn’t keep touch with you? You already know the answer, Luke.”

“What about your daughter?”

I stiffen.

“What about her? She’s nothing to do with you.”

“Do you think so? How old did Diane say she was? Five years old?” Luke

steps towards me, and I'm unable to back away. "We were together six years ago. That means it's a possibility that Amy is my kid."

I suddenly feel cold. Oh, God, he was putting the pieces together. I look at our feet.

"Tell me, Elle," Luke insists. "Tell me that Amy is my daughter. That you kept her away from me for five years. That you didn't tell me that I was a father."

I still refuse to look at him until he grabs me arms and shakes me, forcing me to look up. He looks furious, but I can see the desperation in her eyes.

"Tell me!"

"It was my choice." I don't know how I can keep my voice steady when my heart is racing. "I did it because I thought it was right."

"Right? How is this right?"

I want to cry, but I won't. I count to ten in my head, telling myself not to break down. If I do, I'm going to end up sobbing in his arms. That is not going to happen.

"Luke!"

Mr Daniels hurries over, and he grabs Luke's arm.

"Luke, let her go. Don't do this."

For a moment, Luke doesn't seem to hear him. Then he lets out a growl and releases me. I almost sag to my knees, my arms wrapped around my middle. I'm barely holding on to the tears as Luke steps back. He is breathing

heavily.

“I want a DNA test on Amy,” he rasps. “If she’s my daughter, I deserve to know. And I want answers from you.”

I can’t respond. I’m unable to respond when my chest has tightened to the point I’m struggling to breathe. I watch Luke as Mr Daniels urges him away, back towards their car, and gets him in. As Luke sits in the passenger seat, I see the look on his face. He looks like he’s in pain, almost like he’s about to break himself.

They pull away, and I watch the car go. It’s then that I collapse onto the grass and try to get the air back into my lungs. This day had started out well, and it had gotten worse.

And my decisions are collapsing around me.

Chapter 10 Luke

I'm still struggling to believe what I found out today. Elle has been here all this time, and she has a child that could possibly be mine? I feel like I've been slammed into a brick wall. My head is spinning.

How has this happened? Why does it feel like I've had everything turned upside-down?

"Mr Ward?"

I look up. Kenny, the star quarterback, is standing beside me with a beer in his hand. He looks at me with a frown. I then realize that I've been staring at my beer and I haven't taken a sip. My mouth is parched, so I pick up my glass and take a sip.

"Yes, Kenny?"

"Are you okay? You've been staring at your beer like you're expecting to absorb it by osmosis."

"Sorry. It's been a long day." *And I've just found out that I might be a parent.*

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Kenny doesn't look convinced, but he moves away and joins the rest of the team. The bulldogs had hired out the entire bar for the evening. After a photoshoot, interviews and a press conference, everyone seems to be intent on letting their hair down. Normally, I would be joining in.

But I can't bring myself to be happy. Not when my head is in a mess.

Marcus walks over after excusing himself from the coaching team, who have commandeered a table for themselves. He puts his glass on the bar before sitting beside me.

“Are you going to tell me now what's going on?” he asks.

“You mean about what happened earlier?”

“Of course I mean about earlier! You make me drive out to a residential house to confront one of the photographers, and I hear about a DNA test, but you won't tell me afterwards what's going on. You just say that you'll tell me later.” Marcus gestures with his hands. “Well, it's later. In fact, it's been fucking hours, and you haven't said a thing about what happened. Now you'd better talk to me.”

I know I should have told Marcus before. I told him about Elle before, but he could have forgotten. I never forgot, and everything had just come back to me when I saw Elle again. Even now, my hands are trembling at the thought that she was so close and I wasn't able to touch her.

Sighing, I take another sip of my beer.

“Do you remember that girl I spent the night with some years ago? The one who left and quit the restaurant I met her at?”

Marcus frowns.

“Are we talking about the girl who served us?”

“That was her.”

Marcus blinks.

“What? The photographer with the blonde hair and the gorgeous curves that you wouldn’t stop staring at? That was the waitress from your one-night stand?”

“That’s her.”

Marcus whistles.

“Wow. I knew that was here in Cleveland, but I wasn’t expecting you to run into her again.”

“Neither was I.”

“Did you not realize it was her from the studio?”

“It’s under her coworker’s name. And I didn’t get Elle’s last name, anyway. But it was her.”

“So why did you stalk her back to her house and confront her?” Marcus demands. “And in front of that guy who looked like he was going to deck you.”

“I had to talk to her,” I protest. “After she practically ran out on me and vanished, don’t you think I deserve an explanation?”

“Didn’t she leave a note? I thought she did.”

“That meant nothing. Especially if she vanished from her job as well. And there’s more that I didn’t tell you.” I shift on my stool. Why am I feel nervous about telling Marcus about this? “She had a kid. A daughter.”

“She’s got a child?”

“She’s five years old.”

I see when the penny drops. Marcus’ eyes widen and his mouth drops open.

“What? You think that this kid could be yours?”

“There’s a possibility that this is my daughter.”

“That explains why you were saying you wanted a DNA test.” Marcus whistles and shakes his head. “Shit, you’ve put yourself into a big fucking mess.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do, Marcus. Beyond finding out if this kid is mine, I don’t know what to do.” I absently turn my glass around and around on the bar. “It’s been going around in my head ever since. I’m just stuck, Marcus. What if this kid is actually mine? I missed out on a lot of time with her. I feel like a failure.”

“You might not even be the father, Luke. It could be just a coincidence.”

“I know it. In my gut, I know I’m the father.”

“What did Elle say about it? Presumably, she said otherwise because you wouldn’t have asked for a DNA test.”

“She didn’t really deny it. She just said that it was her choice.”

“That’s it? It was her choice to keep it from you?” Marcus snorts. “That sounds like a cop out.”

“For what, though? I didn’t do anything bad to her six years ago.”

“Maybe it’s a part of her life she wanted to erase, and you’ve brought it all back for her. There is that possibility.”

I didn’t think that our night together was something she wanted to forget. Then again, I remember that she had been going through a lot of pain with her family back then. Maybe the sex we had was a painful reminder. I don’t like that.

“What are you going to do?” Marcus asks. “Are you going to get this DNA test?”

“I am. I want to know the truth.” I follow a trickle of condensation down the outside of my glass with my finger. “I might stay in Ohio for a while longer. If this child is mine, I want to get to know her. I can’t do that from my home in another state. I should stay close to get to know the kid. Make up for the five years that I wasn’t there.”

Marcus nods.

“I won’t argue if you want to do that. You deserve to do that, after all.”

“You’re not going to struggle at the office without me around?”

“Luke, how long have we been doing this? I don’t need you standing right next to me to cope.” Marcus gulps at his beer again. “Besides, with our job you can work from anywhere that you want. You can set up in a hotel room as long as you have wifi and a laptop. There’s no need to rush back to deal with the office. I can do that.”

“Are you sure?” I grimace. “I feel like I’m putting a lot on you, Marcus. After all, I’ve just found out something that’s going to change everything.”

“You focus on yourself.” Marcus clasps my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “When was the last time you did anything for yourself? I certainly can’t remember because it was that long ago. Don’t worry about the business for now. Focus on this.”

He’s right. Nobody’s going to care as long as I make myself known when necessary. I don’t have to be at everything for every step. Marcus is capable of looking after things on his own. All I have to do is take a step back.

I need to settle this with Elle. Get the answers she was dodging me on. And find out who that guy is to her. Is that her boyfriend? It would explain why he was angry with me. If he isn’t Elle’s boyfriend, he looks as if he wants to be.

The thought of Elle being with anyone else makes me angry. I don’t like it at all.

Over the loud noise that is giving me a headache, I can hear a phone ringing. A moment later, my pocket is buzzing. I get it out, hoping that it isn’t Mom calling. I don’t want to talk to her right now.

But it’s Dad’s name instead.

“I need to take this.”

My phone stops ringing before I get outside, so I call Dad back. He picks up on the first ring.

“Hey, son.”

“Hey, Dad. Sorry, I was stuck in a loud place. I was finding a quiet spot.”

“It’s fine. You always get back to me. How’s Cleveland?”

I think I'm a father, Dad. You might have a granddaughter.

I don't say this, though. This is not something I can throw on Dad until I know the truth. I don't want to get his hopes up. I lean against the wall, the cool evening air tickling my face.

"Eventful." I finally settle on this word. "I might be out here a bit longer than expected."

"Nothing bad?"

"No, not like that. It's just how the job is."

Dad grunts.

"I'm sure there's more going on, but I'll ask about that later. Right now, I need to talk about your mom."

"Mom?" I groan. "What has she said now? I'm getting fed up with this."

"She's been upset today, and she's shut herself in the bedroom saying something about how ungrateful people are. She's not talking to me, but your name was mentioned a few times." Dad pauses. "Did something happen between you two? What did she say?"

I sigh and close my eyes.

"She set up a blind date for me for a date tonight."

"What?"

"She called me this morning to say that she had a date ready for me, and I just needed to turn up. I told her off for planning something without my input

or consent, and she got upset about it.”

Dad gives a heavy sigh.

“Oh, great. Not this again. How many times has she done this to you?”

“I don’t know. I lost count a while ago.” I rub a hand over my face. “This is getting stupid, Dad. I’m forty next birthday, and having my mom setting up dates for me is getting embarrassing. Can you just tell her to stop?”

“You think I haven’t tried? I’ve told her to stop setting these up and to leave you alone, but you know how your mother is.”

“Yeah. She’s too damn stubborn to listen to reason unless it’s coming from her.” I want to bang my head against the wall. “What’s she doing right now? Is she in your bedroom still?”

“Yeah. I can hear her sobbing in there. She’s locked the door so I can’t go in there even if I wanted to.” Dad sounds resigned. “I think I’m going to head out and have dinner at the diner. I’m going to have her stomping around getting angrier that I’m not on her side for doing something stupid if I stay in the house.”

“I get where she’s coming from, but the pushing is not helping.”

“I understand. And I’m cool with what you do as long as you’re not doing anything illegal.”

I can’t help but laugh at that.

“Dad!”

“Well, it’s only fair, isn’t it? That’s a better condition than what your mother

has.”

“Can you talk to Mom once she’s calmed down? I don’t want to talk to her unless it’s an apology. I’m really busy right now, and I can’t talk to her when she’s upset.”

“I will,” Dad promises. “Let’s hope she hasn’t given the other girl your number. I remember the last time she did that.”

I groan. I remember that as well. The girl turned out to be something of a stalker. She had contacted me so much that it was like my phone was ringing constantly. Blocking her hadn’t worked, and it wasn’t until I sought a restraining order that she backed off. All because she wanted to be with me for my money.

Mom is not a good judge of character.

“Well, let’s hope that’s not happening this time. Otherwise I’m going to be more than a little annoyed.”

“I’ll make sure that she has.”

“Luke?”

I look around. Marcus is in the doorway, gesturing for me to come back inside. I almost forgot how long I’ve been outside.

“I’d better go, Dad. I’m needed right now.”

“Don’t work too hard. And I’ll deal with your mother.”

“Thanks, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you, too, son.”

I hang up, feeling emotionally drained from that phone call. It feels like I’ve had more than enough news thrown at me today, and I just want to lie down.

“How’s Dennis?” Marcus asks. “Is he doing okay?”

“Dad’s fine. But Mom’s still upset about the blind date not happening.” I shove my phone into my pocket. “She’s kicking up a fuss again.”

“I’m not surprised.” Marcus chuckles. “Maybe we should get you a chastity belt. That would put any woman off.”

“Very funny.” I grab his arm and turn him around, pushing him back into the bar. “Inside, you. If we’re going to stay for a little longer, the least we can do is make the most of it.”

Although with the way my head is feeling, I would rather go back to the hotel and lie down in the darkness.

Chapter 11 Elle

“So, he actually came here?” Carly stares at me. “He seriously came here and confronted you on the front lawn?”

“I wouldn’t say he confronted me...” I began, but Ben cut me off.

“Of course he confronted you. He was furious. I thought he was going to take a swing at me.”

I roll my eyes.

“Don’t exaggerate, Ben. He wasn’t going to hit you. Luke’s not like that.”

“How do you know? You know him for a couple of hours six years ago.” Ben’s tone is a sneer. “And the only things you exchanged were names and bodily fluids.”

Carly smacks his arm hard.

“Shut up, Ben. You’re not helping.”

“What? It’s true, isn’t it? He has no right to come back and demand anything, especially anything to do with Amy.” Ben shakes his head. “I won’t let it happen.”

I glare at him.

“That’s not up to you to make, Ben.”

“I’m Amy’s godfather.”

“But you’re not her parent! That’s me! And that means it’s just me who needs to make the final decision.”

Ben scowls. He doesn’t look happy with what I’ve just said. I ignore him, focusing on Carly. At least she has a sensible head on her shoulders right now; mine is all over the place.

“He wants a DNA test, and when that comes back, he wants to be in her life. I honestly don’t know what to do.”

“You think he shouldn’t be in Amy’s life?” Carly asks.

“I...I don’t know.”

“Why not? Surely, Amy deserves to know who her dad is.”

I understand that, but it doesn’t make me feel any better. I run my hands through my hair, wincing as my fingers get caught in a tangle.

“I think it’s because I didn’t tell him when I found out I was pregnant. I didn’t know how to get hold of him, but also I was scared that he would do something that would take my child away from me.”

“I see.” Carly’s expression says that she does. “You think he would end up taking Amy away because he has all the money and you don’t. Either then or now, you would end up losing.”

“Does that sound stupid?” I wince. “Given what happened with Dad and Megan coming out of nowhere, I was scared that things would turn out badly.”

Ben snorts rudely.

“Well, this is what happens when you have unprotected sex with a guy you don’t know.”

“Shut up, Ben!” Carly snaps at him. “You’re not helping.”

“Can you blame me? We’ve raised Amy between us, and then suddenly the guy turns up expecting to have access to her? I’ve been the one Amy calls ‘Papa’. I don’t want that to change.”

I sigh.

“I know it’s not something you’re comfortable with, Ben...”

“I may not be the biological father, but I’m as much her parent as you are, Amy. I don’t want that guy around her.” Ben stands up. “But I know you’re not going to listen to me. You never seem to listen to me when I need you to.”

“Ben...”

But Ben storms out of the room. Carly looks pained as she rubs her hands over her face.

“Let me talk to him. I’ll get him to calm down.”

“Are you sure? It’s a lot to throw on the two of you.”

“We’ve been in this together the last six years. It’s only fair that I help out.” Carly looks at her watch. “Anyway, you need to get going. Weren’t you going to take Amy to the park to meet your grandma shortly?”

“What? Oh, shoot!” I jump up and snatch my phone from the coffee table. “I’d better find Amy. I’m surprised that she hasn’t come looking for me.”

“Mommy?”

I jump when I hear Amy’s voice. When I turn around, she’s standing in the doorway, wearing her coat. Carly laughs.

“I think someone’s ready.”

“I’ve been sitting on the stairs waiting to go, Mommy Carly,” Amy says. Then she looks up at me. “What were you talking about, Mommy?”

I hide a grimace. I hadn’t expected for her to be practically outside the door. Hopefully, she didn’t understand any of what we said.

I give her a smile and beckon for her to follow me as I leave the room, getting my coat and dropping my phone into my bag as I sling the bag over my shoulder. Carly enters the hall as we’re leaving the house, giving me an encouraging nod.

“Focus on Amy. I’ll talk to Ben.”

“Thanks, Carly. I won’t be long.”

Hopefully, Carly will be able to talk some sense into Ben. She’s the level-headed one out of the three of us. Although I can understand Ben’s side of things; he became Amy’s de-facto parent when she was born, and he saw Amy like his daughter. Amy adores him. I know that’s not going to change even with Luke around, but Ben feels threatened.

He has to understand that while I have my own reservations about the whole thing - he is a billionaire, after all, while I’m not exactly poor, but I’m not

rich, either - I have to think about what is the best for Amy. And if Luke is still the decent guy I remember him as six years ago, he'll not take Amy away from us.

I don't know if we can come to an agreement, but I hope that we can once things have calmed down.

It doesn't take long to get to the park from our house, and Amy immediately runs over to Grandma, who is sitting on a bench against the fence. Grandma puts her book aside and smiles as Amy practically jumps on her.

“Hey, Grandma!”

“Hey, gorgeous! Careful, you're getting heavy!” Grandma hugs Amy tightly before setting her back and looking at her with a proud smile. “You're growing up far too fast for my liking. I want you to stop growing.”

Amy giggles.

“Silly Grandma! I want to grow up and be like Mommy!”

“I'm glad you want to be like someone.” Grandma cups Amy's face in her hands before tapping my daughter's nose with her finger. “Once you've played in the park, shall we go and get nuggets and fries.”

“With ice cream?”

Grandma winks at her.

“I'll talk with Mommy about it. Our little secret.”

Amy whoops and scampers over to the climbing frame. I smile and shake my head as I sit beside my grandmother.

“You indulge her too much. Ice cream?”

“She’s my granddaughter. I’m allowed to spoil her.” Grandma puts her book into her bag. “I’ve booked into my usual Air B&B for the week. If you need me to help out with getting her to kindergarten, let me know.”

“Are you sure? You came here to see your great-granddaughter, not to be a maid.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

I need to tell her about Luke. But I don’t know how. I’m still trying to comprehend it myself. And I don’t know how Grandma is going to react.

Hopefully, she will know what to do better than I can. She does have a clear head, after all.

“By the way, your father hasn’t been trying to contact you, has he?” Grandma asks as she watches Amy climbing up to the slide.

“What? Of course not. I blocked him years ago, and I haven’t had any contact from him since that I know of.”

“Because he’s been asking the rest of the family how to get hold of you. He believes you have a new number, so he wants it. Of course, nobody is giving it to him, but it’s not stopping him from asking.”

Dad is trying to get hold of me? I haven’t thought about him in a long time. Ever since I caught him canoodling with that woman, I’ve cut off everything with him. Anything I needed to get from Dad, my other relatives did it for me. His brothers - my uncles - are still really angry with him for what he did. Mom was very much loved, and Dad screwed up something good. Nobody in

Dad's family talks to him unless they absolutely have no choice.

Thankfully, I have the ability to not speak to him. He's never met Amy, and I don't plan on changing that.

"What does he want from me?" I ask. "Does he want to see Amy or something? Because that isn't happening."

"That's what he wants." Grandma sighs. "He wants to see his granddaughter. And he's upset that we all kept it from him. Nobody told him until last week that he had a grandkid by you."

"You what?" I stare at her. "Did he genuinely not know about Amy?"

"No, we all kept it from him. I know you didn't care either way, seeing as he wasn't going to meet Amy anyway per your wishes, but we didn't think there was much point in telling him as it would just cause you extra stress." Grandma squeezes my hand. "We just want to be sure that you don't have those two parasites bothering you, especially given what they found out about Megan."

"What do you mean?"

Grandma hesitates, looking around at Amy. But Amy is still on the climbing frame, sitting at the top of the slide. I put my other hand over Grandma's.

"She can't hear us, Grandma. What's going on with them?"

"Well, they started trying for a baby as soon as they got married."

"What?"

"Kevin said he wanted a boy, and he was denied the chance, and Megan was

eager to get pregnant before she turned thirty. But nothing happened, or when she did get pregnant she had a miscarriage. Things were getting strained between them.” Grandma shakes her head. “I heard this from your uncle Roddy. Apparently, they went for some tests, and the chances of her getting pregnant is very low. The only way to guarantee a successful pregnancy is to have IVF, but Kevin doesn’t earn enough for that, and Megan’s salary would barely make a dent in it, either.”

I can see where this is going.

“You think if Megan finds out that I got pregnant around the same time they started trying while she’s struggling, that she might end up targeting me for some reason?”

“We were concerned that she could go crazy towards you, and you don’t need that. We just did it to protect you.” Grandma nods at Amy, who is now on the swings. “If you don’t want Amy to meet him, we’ll carry on as normal. If you do, we’re on your side.”

“I’m really touched, Grandma. You didn’t need to do any of that.”

“Yes, we did. Your mother wasn’t the only one betrayed by your father. My idiot son chose to ignore his own family for a squeeze who is causing all sorts of problems. That’s on him, and if you want nothing to do with him, that’s absolutely fine. We’ll do what you wish.”

I don’t know what to say to that. After bumping into Luke today, my head is in a mess. I don’t want Dad coming around me and pestering me to let him see Amy. That was a headache I didn’t want right now. Not when I already had one from Luke, and from Ben behaving like he’s been done a disservice due to Amy’s biological father coming back out of nowhere.

Things just seemed to stack on top of each other today. It is getting too much.

I squeeze Grandma's hands.

"Thank you for sticking with me, Grandma. You're awesome."

Grandma gives me a smile and puts her arms around me, giving me a hug.

"Of course I'm awesome."

"And not modest at all," I laugh.

"That as well." Grandma sits back. "Now, once Amy's worn herself out, we'll get something to eat. And you can tell me what's going on with you right now. I can tell you're not yourself today, and it's clearly eating at you."

Sometimes I wish that she wouldn't do that. It makes me feel like I can't hide anything from her. Then again, I don't want to hide anything from Grandma; she always knows what to do.

I sigh and nod.

"Okay. But I'd rather tell you now. Because I've got to figure out how to tell Amy."

"Tell her what?"

About her father has turned up and now wants to be around her. How am I going to tell my daughter that?

Chapter 12 Luke

I can feel my heart racing as I pull up outside Elle's house. When she called me earlier today, I didn't know if I was more surprised that she had found my number, or that she was calling me. She said that she would let me come to the house and see Amy but to go by her lead. She has given me a lot of conditions, which I have to keep if I want to see my daughter.

I know I said I wanted a DNA test, but in my gut I know that Amy is my kid. The timing of everything is just too coincidental for it to be someone else. I don't know why Elle is trying to be vague about it, but I intend to ask her about it.

And I plan on seeing my child.

Even as I'm looking forward to this, I can feel myself shaking. My heart is racing, and I'm definitely sweating. Never did I think I would encounter a child of mine after being intimate with a woman years ago. Becoming a father back then hadn't even been on my mind, and it was only just coming into my thoughts more recently. To know I had a kid all this time and I didn't know about it...

I don't know how to feel about it, although I'm definitely feeling hurt. Elle had to have her reasons for keeping Amy from me. I can only hope she can trust me not to do anything bad to them. I would never do that to them.

I could never hurt them.

I ring the doorbell, and wait. It feels like forever before the door opens, and the man from before fills the doorway. He leans his arms on the doorframe and looks me up and down with a sneer.

“So you did come, then,” he says in a tone that doesn’t go down well with me.

“I did.” I stand there, waiting for him to move. “Are you going to let me in?”

“You think I want you anywhere near Elle and Amy?”

“I don’t intend to get in the way of you guys, but I do deserve to know.”

The guy snorts rudely.

“We were doing fine, no problems at all. Then you had to turn up. I don’t like that.”

“Ben!”

I jump at the sudden extra voice. A petite woman with spiky red hair appears behind Ben and tugs on his arm, moving him away from the door.

“Stop it. You’re acting stupidly.”

“I might have reluctantly agreed to him coming in, but I still don’t like that he’s here.”

“And it’s not up to you. This is Elle’s choice, so get away from the door and find another room to sit in if you can’t be polite.”

Ben glares at her.

“You would banish me in my own house?”

“All of our names are on the title to the house, and if you’re going to behave like a brat, then you’ll be treated like one.” The woman points towards the stairs. “Now go.”

They glare at each other for a moment before Ben turns away and storms up the stairs. I flinch when I hear a door slamming shut. The woman turns to me.

“Sorry about that. Ben’s been rather on edge about this since you turned up.”

“That’s Elle’s boyfriend, is it?”

“What? Good God, no! Elle’s never done anything with him like that. We’re just good friends.” She gave me a smile and beckoned me inside. “Come on in. I’m Carly.”

“Thanks.” I step into the house, and hover in the hall. “I’m sorry about yesterday. When I saw Elle, and realized she had a kid...”

“Emotions overflow, and you don’t know what to do. That’s understandable.”

“Really?”

“Of course.” Carly turns to me, and I see sympathy in her eyes. “I think anyone who finds out that there’s a chance of being a father and you were never told would react in the same way.”

I give her a sheepish smile and rub the back of my neck.

“It’s not something I’m used to. Being on the back foot. Has Elle ever said why she never told me?”

“Could she get hold of you?”

“I...no, she couldn’t. But she could have looked for me.”

Carly frowns and folds her arms.

“Elle was going through a lot back then. She was emotionally raw, and becoming pregnant just added to everything.”

“I could have helped her. I’m not a monster.”

“You knew her for a couple of hours, and I bet you didn’t talk much, did you?”

I wince. This woman is much younger than me, and she’s making me feel about two inches tall.

“Did she think I was going to not want anything to do with her and the baby?”

“Or that you would take the baby away from her or make life hell for her.”

“I would never do that.”

“But Elle didn’t know that. She didn’t really know you, so she was scared.” Carly sighs. “It should have been wise for her to find a way to contact you, but we made the best of it. She was never without any support. Amy’s not gone without.”

“Except a father,” I remind her.

“But until you can prove you are there for Amy and not for selfish means, we won’t add that. I know Elle won’t let you do anything to hurt her daughter.” Carly pauses. “Or her.”

The thought of hurting Elle doesn't sit well with me. I hold up my hands.

"I promise that I won't do anything to Elle. I would never be able to hurt her. We might not have known each other for long, but I actually liked her."

"Seriously?" Carly gives my crotch a pointed look. "Are you just saying that because you could keep it up for a long time?"

"That's not nice."

"It wasn't meant to be."

I can see that while she's softer than Ben, she's going to be tough to win over. But I want to be honest with her.

"I did actually like Elle. There was something about her that I wanted to know more. In fact..." God, am I about to say this to someone? "I wanted to get to know her properly. Which I had been planning on doing before Elle ran away. I didn't want to lose that spark we had."

"Then she left."

"She did. And I had no way of contacting her. She left no number, she quit at the restaurant, and I didn't even know her last name. I had no choice but to give up." I fix my gaze on Carly. "And I'm not going to leave until I know there's nothing I can do. I can but try to be there for my kid."

Carly is silent for a moment.

"You've not met her, and you believe that Amy is yours?"

"I'm certain about it. Given the timing, it's going to come out that Amy is mine. I'll still do the DNA test to make it official, but I'm not going

anywhere.”

“Do you mean for Amy or for Elle?” Carly asks.

I hesitate. Had I been talking about my daughter or her mother? I’m not really sure anymore.

“Both.” I eventually decide to go with that. “I’m not going anywhere for either of them.”

Carly stared at me for a moment. She is rather disconcerting despite her size. I’m trying not to squirm.

“I know that Elle is nervous about you being around,” she says quietly. “She doesn’t need to say it to make it clear. If you want anything to do with her beyond co-parenting, you are going to have to take it slow. Go at her pace.”

“It’s been six years, Carly. I think that’s slow enough.”

Carly frowns.

“If you don’t take it slow, she’s going to withdraw even more and you will miss your chance. You won’t get a second opportunity. Remember that when you go out there to see her.”

I will remember that. But taking things slow after not seeing her for six years doesn’t sit well with me. However, I’m determined to keep close by to see my daughter, and I want to also be close to Elle.

Take it slow. This is not going to be easy.

“Elle’s out in the garden with Amy,” Carly says. “They’re playing catch.”

“Catch?”

“Yes. Amy’s in the little league.” Carly looks amused. “You weren’t expecting that, were you?”

“I wasn’t expecting you to say that.”

“Elle played softball in high school. She’s been teaching Amy how to play.”

Elle is full of surprises. I’m curious to see this. A thump from upstairs makes me look up towards the ceiling.

“What about Ben?”

“You let me talk to him. I’ll make sure he doesn’t bother you.” Carly points down the hall. “Off you go. You came here to see Amy, didn’t you?”

“Oh. Right.”

Still slightly stunned, I make my way through the house and onto the back porch. Elle and a little girl with light brown hair in a ponytail are throwing a softball back and forth. Both wear a glove on one hand. I stand there and watch. Elle is catching the ball easily, her movements certain and confident. Amy doesn’t flinch as she catches the ball in her glove, although her throwing is a little wonky and Elle has to chase the ball before starting again. But she does get it on target a little bit.

Not bad.

Amy then turns towards the house, and I get a proper look at her. She looks so much like her mother that it’s startling, but she had my hair color, and I can see that she has my eyes. Then when she smiles at me, I’m reminded of pictures that Mom showed me of when I was a kid. Even though we’ve never

met before, she has exactly the same smile.

“Luke.” Elle falters, her confidence seeming to fade. “I didn’t think you were going to come.”

“I had a bit of a...conversation with Ben and Carly.”

Elle grunts.

“I can’t see Ben having a conversation with you.”

“Well, we somehow managed.”

“Mommy,” Amy speaks, “who’s this?”

Elle looks a little panicked. I step off the porch and approach Amy before going down on one knee to be at her eye-level. I give her a smile and hold out a hand.

“Hey, I’m Luke. I’m an old friend of your mother’s.”

Amy looks dubious. But she comes forward and shakes my hand. She has a surprisingly strong grip for a five-year-old. Then she drops my hand and steps back.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” I gesture at her glove. “You’re pretty good. Carly says you play little league?”

“It’s minor league.” Amy sounds admonishing. “I’m not old enough for little league.”

I hold up my hands.

“Sorry. Do you do well?”

“She does well enough in the outfield,” Elle says as she approaches me.

“Amy, can you play on your own for a moment? I need to talk to Luke.”

“Okay.” Amy takes the ball and smiles at me. “Nice to meet you, Luke.”

“And you.”

I watch her go to the swings, dropping the ball and the glove on the grass.

Then I turn to Elle.

“She’s a polite kid.”

“I made sure she kept her manners.”

“As you should.” Luke pauses. “Have you told her?”

Elle shakes her head.

“Not yet. I spoke to my grandmother about this, and she said that it would be best to ease this into her gently. Get her to know you first before you tell her.”

I’m not sure I like that idea.

“Shouldn’t we say something first and then figure it out later?”

“If we do that, it could go wrong. Besides,” Elle hesitates, “we need to do the DNA test.”

The DNA test. I almost forgot about that. I spread my hands.

“If you don’t want me to go through with it if it will upset Amy, I

understand...”

“We should do it.” Elle’s voice is quiet. “I know you’re her father, but having it official and on paper would help. But only if you want to be involved in her life.”

“Of course I do.”

“I don’t want you walking in and out of her life when you please. She needs stability.”

“I’m not one of those people who does that, Elle. Of course, it will be difficult with my job being in another state, but I can make it work. And I’ll give you the child support you need...”

Elle flinches.

“I don’t want any money from you, Luke.”

“You don’t want the money you should have had from me in the last six years? I didn’t pay, I should cover the costs. I can afford it.” I stare at her. “Why would you not want to take it?”

“I...” Elle swallows and glances away. “Pride, I suppose. I don’t like having to rely on other people. It took me a long time to relax enough to let Carly and Ben help me, and they’re my best friends.”

“I get that, I really do. But we should do things properly.” I look over at Amy again. She is swinging away, looking content. “I’ll do what you say and take it easy with Amy, as long as you accept the monetary support you should have been given. If you don’t want it, I’ll put it in a trust fund for her to use when she’s old enough to do what she wants with it.”

I can see Elle wavering a little. She is really proud and doesn't like accepting anything. I have to admire that a little bit. But I wish that she would swallow that pride and accept my help, because that's what I want to do for her.

More than that, I want to be able to hold her and not let go.

Finally, Elle nods after taking a deep breath.

“Okay. We can discuss the money part another time. But don't think this is going to change anything. It's all for my daughter.”

“Our daughter,” I remind her.

Elle licks her lips, and I find myself wanting to kiss her.

“Our daughter,” she whispers.

Chapter 13 Elle

Two Weeks Later

I squeal and jump up and down as Amy hits the ball hard and starts running towards first base. She gets there in plenty of time, and she turns to me and waves with a beaming smile.

“I didn’t think minor league softball was so competitive,” Luke comments as a mother from the front row jumps up and shouts that it was a foul ball. “Is it always like this?”

I laugh as I sit back down.

“She’s normally drunk, so she’ll shout at pretty much anything if it doesn’t do what her alcohol-fueled brain wants.”

“If she’s drunk, why is she here? Shouldn’t she be thrown out?”

“That does end up happening. It’s only because she’s the coach’s wife that she hasn’t been banned from the field already.” I shrug. “It’s something I don’t get involved in as long as she leaves Amy alone.”

Luke grunts.

“That’s not making me feel any better, having a drunk woman acting like an idiot.”

“Oh, she’s harmless. Don’t worry about it.” I nudge him. “We just need to keep our distance, and we can simply ignore her. Everyone’s here just to see the kids play. We know how to handle her.”

Luke doesn’t look convinced. I know that the woman in question is mostly just verbally annoying. She never got physical with anyone, it was just a lot of screaming and complaining. But we mostly ignore her. Although I have to admit that it feels better and quieter when she’s not here.

Amy takes off at a spring towards the next base, and she gets there in time. Luke looks approving.

“I thought she was a good little runner when she showed me at the park. Now I can really see it.”

“Impressed, then?”

“Of course. You’ve done really well to cultivate her strengths.”

I feel warm and happy at that. I’m glad Luke can see that. He’s never trodden on my toes regarding Amy, and he’s followed my lead over the last couple of weeks. Something I never thought would happen.

It’s been a fortnight since Luke and Amy met, and while I wanted things to go slow so Amy could get used to Luke’s presence, it seems as if the two of them have just clicked. Amy really likes Luke, and she will talk to him about absolutely anything. If Luke is bored by it, he doesn’t show it. He follows her lead with anything, and I have to admit that it’s quite amusing to see a grown man at the beck and call of a five-year-old.

He would be a good father. I regret that I didn’t look for him to let him know in the beginning, but I’m glad that we’re doing this now. We can co-parent

well enough, I believe. Luke has bought a house not too far away that he works out of, and he spends every other afternoon with his daughter. He's even taken us out to dinner a couple of times, and from the way Amy is around him, I can tell that she likes him.

I'm glad that they're getting along. It would have been uncomfortable if they didn't.

But there is some discomfort in the house. Ben is not happy about it at all. I can understand why when he's been Amy's father figure since she was born, but things haven't really changed at home. Amy still calls him 'papa' and she looks to him like she would a father. But Ben doesn't like that Luke is around and slowly taking this away from him.

I need to have a word with him again. I don't want Ben to ruin what Luke and I are cultivating between us, and I don't want him to upset the relationship Luke is building with Amy. We're not going to become an immediate family, and the only thing that is changing is that Amy's biological father is around. Ben seems to think everything is going to change and implode.

Hopefully, he'll come around eventually.

"Elle?"

"Hmm?"

Luke is frowning at me, his eyes searching my face.

"Are you okay? You went a little...well, you wandered off there. And Amy's waving at you."

“What? Oh!” I see Amy has gotten around the other bases, and she is jumping up and down by the fence. I wave at her. “Well done, darling!”

“Did I do great, Mommy?” she shouts at me.

“You did amazing!” I stick up both thumbs. “Can you do that again?”

Amy nods eagerly, still grinning as she runs off, giving Luke a wave. Luke chuckles.

“I wish I had that much energy.”

“No, you don’t. I have no idea where she gets it from. She’s more than likely going to crash later.”

“She’s on the go so much. Is that normal for her?”

“Pretty much.”

Luke shakes his head.

“Each time I see her, I have more respect for you for raising a child like Amy. You’ve done a good job.”

I feel my face getting warm.

“You say that far too much, Luke.”

“But I mean it. You’re a good mom, Elle.” He smiles at me. “She’s a great kid. You should be proud of her.”

I don’t know what to say to that. All I’m aware of is that he’s closer than I remember. Is it because we’re sitting close together or is he leaning towards me? Either way, it feels like he’s going to kiss me.

And I realize that I want him to kiss me.

Then a movement behind Luke catches my attention, and I look past to see a familiar person at the end of the stands. He's standing on the steps, seeming to searching the bleachers.

My heart stutters, and I gasp. Luke pauses.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine.”

I never thought I'd see Dad again. The sight of him is leaving me both panicked and angry. Putting a hand on Luke's shoulder, I stand up.

“I'll be right back, okay?”

“Sure.” Luke is watching me in confusion. “I'll wait here.”

I barely acknowledge him as Dad's eyes land on me. I know when he recognizes me. Not waiting for him to say anything, I make my way past the other parents, and I reach the end of the seating. Dad stares at me, looking me up and down.

“Elle? It's really you?”

“What are you doing here, Dad?”

“I came to see you.” He starts to reach for me, but I hold up my hands. He falters. “Can't I greet my daughter?”

“We have not talked in six years for a reason.” I am not about to do this in full view of everyone else, and I'm sure Luke is watching me. I gesture for

Dad to follow me. “This way. We can talk in private.”

I’m surprised when Dad follows me off the bleachers and into the parking lot. When I’m confident that we’re far enough away that we won’t get bothered, I stop and face my father. Apart from the graying at the temples, it’s like time has been good to him. He still looks pretty much the same.

Part of me wants to hug him. Even with my anger towards him, I miss my dad. But he messed everything up with his affair and then married the mistress. I don’t want anything to do with that, especially when the mistress is nearer my age than his.

“What are you doing here, Dad? How did you know where I was?”

“I know Mom goes to Cleveland on a regular basis, and I checked her car. She puts your postcode into the SATNAV.”

I make a mental note to tell Grandma that she needs to keep a closer eye on her car keys.

“That explains how you know where I live, but what about here? Did you follow me?”

“I did. I arrived in time to see you leave.” Dad looks a little sheepish, hands shoved into his pockets. “I spent a good couple of hours sitting in my car, bracing myself to come and see you. It’s been agonizing.”

“Well, it’s going to be agonizing now, because you’re going back to where you came from,” I snap.

“Elle...”

“No, Dad. I cut off contact with you for a good reason. Actually, two good

reasons. I'm not getting back in contact with you for anything. Certainly not for my daughter, and definitely not for me."

Dad looks upset about this. I don't really care. He didn't care when he went off in the middle of Mom's funeral to get married to his side piece, so why should I care about him now?

"Please, Elle..." Dad hesitates. "I want to talk to you. Just talk. Is that too much to ask?"

"What about?"

"It's delicate. I don't really want to do that in the middle of a parking lot." He gives me a pleading look. "Please, can we go elsewhere and talk?"

I don't want to go anywhere, especially not with Amy. But he looks desperate about wanting to talk to me.

If I give him a few minutes of what he wants, maybe he'll leave me alone properly.

"How long are you in Cleveland?" I ask. "Is this a flying visit or are you staying somewhere?"

"Today it's a flying visit, but I can come back another time." Dad now looks hopeful. "You'll see me, then?"

"I'll organize a date and time through Grandma. You can get details from her."

"I can't have your number again?"

I shake my head.

“I don’t trust you, Dad. I don’t feel comfortable giving you my number.”

“But I’m your father!”

“And you betrayed Mom and broke my trust. You want to get that back? You’re going to have to earn it.”

I think Dad wants to argue about that, but he backs down. He’s not completely lost all common sense.

“Okay. Fine. I’ll do that.”

“But I do have a condition.” I hold up a finger. “Megan is not to be part of this. I don’t want her anywhere near me or my daughter.”

Dad looks annoyed.

“She’s your stepmother, Elle.”

“Correction: she’s your wife. She’s not my stepmother, and I will never consider that homewrecker as part of the family. If you want to discuss something with me, I’ll entertain you, but if she’s coming with you, I will walk away and you’ll never be able to speak to me again.”

Dad stares at me.

“You would make me ditch my family because of that?” he demands. “I can’t do that.”

I can’t help but laugh at that.

“Did you just hear yourself? You are very good at ditching your family, Dad. You did it to me and Mom. And I’m not asking you to ditch her, just don’t

bring her along. I see her around, and we're not talking. You got it?"

"But..."

"Got it?"

Dad looks as if he wants to protest this. Thankfully, he doesn't, and he nods.

"Okay, fine. I won't bring her along. If I do that, we can talk?"

"We can. Now, will you go away? I need to go back to my daughter."

"Can't I watch her play? I am her grandfather, after all."

I hesitate. I know that I can't stop him - this is a public place, after all - but I'm not comfortable with it. Finally, I give up.

"You can watch. But you are not to approach her. Don't say anything to her, don't interact with her, nothing. Or we're not going to have that talk."

Dad looks upset.

"But this is my granddaughter, Elle. You didn't tell me you had a kid, and I have to find out through everyone else."

"You know why I didn't tell you, Dad. Don't pretend it was an injustice. I didn't want anything to do with you." I step around him. "Now, if you'll excuse me? I'll let you know through Grandma when we can talk."

I don't wait for him to respond, heading towards the field again. It's not until I am back in the bleachers and sitting beside Luke that I can breathe properly again. Luke peers at me.

"You okay?"

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

I give him a small smile.

“I’ll tell you later. Just don’t ask me until then, okay?”

“Okay.” Luke looks unsure, but he backs off. “Whatever you say.”

At least there is one man in my life who listens.

Chapter 14 Luke

Three Days Later

“That’s it, I think,” Marcus declares as we put our things into our bags. “Are you going back now, or do you have enough time for a drink?”

“I’d better get back to the airport, actually.” I zip up my laptop case. “They’re ready to go once I’m on the way. We might be lucky to leave as soon as possible.”

Marcus looks amused.

“You’re that eager to get back to Cleveland, huh?”

“Can you blame me?”

“With you being on the cusp of having a ready-made family? Not really.” Marcus picks up his bag. “Just be careful, Luke. I don’t want you to get hurt because of this.”

“Nobody’s going to hurt me except myself, Marcus. Trust me.”

Marcus grunts. He picks up his bag and slings it over his shoulder.

“Well, I’ll call you later today. We can go over the new business plan then.”

“Sure thing. I’ll hear from you later.”

With a wave over his shoulder, Marcus leaves the room. I’m not far behind,

heading towards the elevator that will take me down to the parking lot. I'm looking forward to going back to Cleveland. I've only been away for a couple of days to deal with a meeting I had to be present for, and I'm eager to go back.

Not something I expected to happen, if I'm honest. But having a daughter to go back to is a big incentive. I am looking forward to seeing Amy again. Her and her mother. The thought of going back to Elle does make me smile.

We're not a couple, and I don't think Elle is prepared for any type of relationship beyond being a co-parent. But I'm happy to go back. Elle's company lightens my day.

Could we become a couple? I really hope so. But I'm going to have to go at her pace for everything. It's a slow dance, but I'm content to do it, just as I am with my budding relationship with my daughter.

Amy is adorable. I am so pleased with how she's been raised. Elle and her friends did a really good job. I do feel a little envious that I wasn't there in the early days, and I missed those first milestones, but at the same time I don't think Amy would be the child she is now if I had been present.

I'm glad to call her my kid. Although I haven't said that yet. I wouldn't be able to say it out loud just yet. It's up to Elle when she wants to break it to Amy. But I feel like that's going to backfire the longer she waits. Surely, Amy needs to know sooner rather than later.

It isn't my choice, though. Elle said she wanted to do it, and I don't want to break that trust I'm building with her.

I hope that it's soon, though. I want to be free to call Amy my daughter. That

would make me so happy.

I'm halfway to my car when I hear someone calling my name. I turn, and see a plump woman of medium height and graying brown hair walking towards me. It takes me a moment to recognize her; it has been a while since we saw each other face-to-face.

"Mom? What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you, darling." Mom smiles and reaches me, drawing me into a hug. "It's been such a long time since we've seen each other, and when I heard you were in town, I wanted to catch you before you left."

"Well, I can easily come and see you at some point, Mom. But I can't stop right now." I unlock my car and open up the trunk. "I've got to get to the airport."

"You're leaving again?"

"I'm going back to Cleveland. Didn't Dad tell you that I'm planning on moving there?"

"He did tell me, but I didn't quite believe it. You love it around here."

"I do, but there are things waiting for me in Cleveland."

Mom frowns.

"It's not a woman, is it? Have you got yourself a girlfriend?"

I don't respond. Much as I want to, Elle and I are not a couple, and while the DNA results have come back saying Amy is my daughter, I want her to know about who I am first before I tell my parents. They will understand when I

explain the reasoning. But now is not the time. I put my things into the trunk and close it.

“Did you come and see me for a reason, Mom? Or did you just want to say hello?”

“I wanted to say hello.” Mom pauses. “And I also wanted to invite you out for dinner. It’s been a while since we’ve done that.”

I sigh.

“Sorry, Mom, I have plans already. If you want to plan it in advance, I can see when is a good time for me.”

“Why can’t you be more spontaneous?”

“Because I’m not a spontaneous person. You should know that by now.”

Mom huffs.

“But we were really looking forward to this. You can’t stand us up like this.”

“I can’t stand you up when I didn’t know it was happening, Mom. You should know that by now. Dad will be fine with it.”

“But it wasn’t your dad that I was talking about?”

“What?” It takes a moment for me to figure out what she means. I groan as the penny drops. “Oh, no, not again, Mom. Really? Another blind date? I’ve told you this before.”

“But she’s not a blind date this time,” Mom insists. “You know her.”

“I know her? What?”

“It’s Hannah. Your ex-girlfriend.”

Oh, God. Of all the people she had to pick, why did it have to be her? I shake my head.

“Absolutely not, Mom. No way am I having dinner with Hannah.”

“Why not? Hannah’s a lovely girl. I don’t understand how you let her get away.”

“I didn’t let her get away! She cheated on me and made comments that said she was only after my money. I dumped her once I found out about both.” I hold up a hand as Mom starts to argue. “No way. If you have to set up these dates without my consent, at least choose someone I haven’t dated and didn’t show themselves as a cheating gold-digger.”

“Luke, don’t be rude about her!”

“She doesn’t deserve niceties, Mom. Not after what she did to me. Now leave me alone. I don’t want to talk with you any longer. This is getting stupid.” I open the door and get in behind the wheel. “Go away, Mom, unless you want me to call Dad and tell him what you’re up to. And I’ll do that if you keep bothering me.”

Mom looked upset.

“You’re never going to give me any grandchildren, are you?” she pouts. “Am I just going to be growing old without any sweet babies around me?”

“Babies are not accessories, Mom. If you want me to have children, stop pushing it onto me. Otherwise you’ll never have any. Now, goodbye, Mom.”

I slam the door shut and turn on the engine, being careful not to hit Mom on

my way out of my space. I do feel a little bad treating Mom in this way, but she is getting too much. I'm getting fed up with her trying to push me onto other women. And onto Hannah, of all people? She is the last person I want to be around, especially after what she did to me six years ago. She couldn't still be looking for that golden goose after all this time, surely?

She's not coming anywhere near me.

As I pull out into the traffic and head in the direction of the airport, I wonder what Mom will say when I finally tell her that she does have a granddaughter. But I'm not sure if Amy will be prepared for my mother.

Chapter 15 Elle

“That’s me done now,” Diane declares as she packs up her bag. “Can you lock up, Elle?”

“Sure thing. I’m not going to be much longer.” I gesture at my laptop. “Just a couple more emails, and then I’m done myself.”

“Thank God for that. I thought all of this would never get done.” Diane waves at me as she heads towards the door. “I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Bye.”

Diane leaves, and I get back to my work. It’s going to take a while for me to finish off these email requests. Most of them seem to be coming from potential brides looking for a photographer, but they don’t want to pay the fees we advertise. It’s ridiculous how many people think just pressing a button is all we do.

Diane would have a fit if we shot a wedding for free.

But not much longer. I’ll be home soon, cuddling my daughter while we watch a movie. Maybe Luke is going to join us. He said he would be coming back today.

I can’t deny that I’m looking forward to seeing him again. I was surprised to find that I missed him when he was away, and he hasn’t been gone for that long. It’s rather...bewildering, and I don’t know what to make of it.

Maybe because the chemistry from our time all those years ago really hasn't gone away, and it's grown even stronger in the meantime. And I'm struggling to keep my hands to myself.

This is meant to be about Luke and Amy, not about us. And yet...

A knock at the door shakes me out of my thoughts. Putting my laptop aside, I get up and head over to the door as the knocking starts again.

"We're closed!" I call as I open the door, the rest of my words dying away when I see Luke on the threshold. "Luke! What are you doing here?"

"I came back earlier than I planned, and I thought I'd come by and say hello." Luke gives me that smile that starts the throbbing between my legs again. "Can I come in?"

"What? Oh, okay." I step aside. "We're done for the day, so I'm just finishing up."

"That's fine." Luke closes the door behind him and follows me into the main studio. "What are you up to after you're done here? I can take you and Amy out tonight. We can go and catch a movie or something."

"I was planning on having a movie night in, actually. Amy loves doing those with us." I smile at him. "You're welcome to join us, if you want."

"Is Ben going to be happy about that?"

"Ben's working late tonight. He won't be there to complain."

Actually, he has barely been at the house to complain about anything. If I didn't see him around every now and then, I would have thought that he had moved out. Ben has withdrawn from us since Luke turned up again, although

he is still attentive towards Amy. I understand why he's upset, but it feels like he's sulking elsewhere because he's not the only male figure in Amy's life. Luke doesn't want to tread on anyone's toes, but Ben is purposefully shoving his under Luke's foot.

I need to have a talk with him.

"By the way, I meant to ask," Luke leans a hip on my desk as I sit down again, "have you arranged a meeting time with your dad? You said that he came along to meet you at Amy's game."

"Oh, that." I have almost forgotten about that. "I'll check with Grandma later. I've not put it on my list of priorities right now."

"Is it because you don't want to?"

"Pretty much." I sigh. "I know it's awful to hear when it's my dad, but after what he did I don't really want to give him the time of day."

"What do you think he wants?"

"I have no idea. Maybe a reconciliation? A chance to meet his granddaughter? Whatever he wants, I'm not having that tart involved. She can burst into flames, as far as I'm concerned."

Luke's mouth twitches.

"That's a bit of a strong sentiment."

"Given what she's done, it's the least she could do. I'm not having her anywhere near Amy." Especially given her mental state regarding being unable to have kids. I don't want to give her an opportunity to be anywhere near Amy. My gut says that she will take advantage of it. "I'm worried that

it's not completely innocent. What my dad wants to discuss, I mean. I don't want to do it, but it's the least I can do for Amy. Then I can say I tried."

"I get that." Luke's voice is gentle. "If you want, I can go with you if you need support."

I'm touched, but I shake my head.

"It's fine. Carly says she'll go with me. She's scarier than you can ever be."

"I can be scary when I want to be."

"I'm sure you can, but I've got this covered." I touch his arm. "I do appreciate your offer, though, Luke."

Luke regards me thoughtfully.

"Is it because you don't trust me, Elle?"

"What? Where did that come from?"

"Would you allow me to go with you if you trusted me?"

I don't know what to say to that. I stand up and start to walk around him; having him this close is a little confining.

"We're not discussing us, Luke. Not now."

When Luke touches my wrist, his warm hand closing around my fingers, I find that I can't walk away. I'm frozen as Luke straightens up and urges me to turn to him. His touch moves up my arm stroking my elbow before going up to my shoulder.

"Will I ever get your trust back, Elle?" His voice is soft, almost a whisper.

“What do I need to do to show that I’m not here to hurt you?”

Why does he have to talk like that? I can’t focus when he does that. I gulp, licking my lips, but that only makes Luke’s eyes drift to my mouth and stay there. The throbbing is getting stronger, and my legs are feeling weak. I sway, and Luke grabs at me, wrapping an arm around my waist. Our faces are inches apart, and I feel his breath against my lips. He is so close now, closer than I’m used to.

It’s been a long time since he was this close, and my reaction to him is the same. I want more. A lot more than what he’s offering.

The chemistry really hasn’t gone away at all. If anything, it’s gotten stronger.

Reasoning going out of the window, I brush my mouth over his. Luke stiffens, pulling his head back as he stares at me.

“Elle?” he croaks.

“Shut up.” I reach up and put my hands on his shoulders. “Just shut up.”

When I kiss him again, I press a little firmer, and I don’t pull away. Luke’s hands tighten on my waist, I think he’s going to push me away. But then he kisses me harder and pulls me in, taking charge of the kiss. I’m practically melting in his arms as he dominates me, making me want him even more than I thought was possible.

My desire for him never went away. And now it’s spilling over.

Luke turns us around and presses me up against the desk. His hands push underneath my t-shirt and brush against my bare skin. He shifts until he’s between my legs, and I’ve been nudged onto the edge of the desk. Still

kissing me, he grasps my backside and pulls me forward as he pressed his erection against my core. I break the kiss with a gasp as I feel his huge cock through our clothing. My head falls back as he starts kissing my neck, rocking against me while his hands shove under my clothes to grasp bare flesh.

This feels amazing. Although I know we should stop. Even though no one is going to come into the studio at this point, we could have someone walking in on us and catching us. But that doesn't scare me. In fact, it excites me.

How do I like the thought of being caught? I've never felt like that before.

Luke's hands are making quick work of my clothes, tugging my t-shirt up over my head and tossing it aside. My bra goes the same way, and my breasts spill out into his hands. Luke groans as he grasps my breasts, squeezing them together as he brushes his thumbs over my nipples.

"These are fuller than I remember."

"Perks of having a kid," I pant, arching into his hands. "All of these curves came after childbirth."

"And I want to get my hands on them," Luke growls. "Right now."

He starts shoving my leggings down my hips, taking my panties with them. They get stuck on my sneakers, but before I can get down to take my shoes off, Luke is thrusting his fingers inside me. I gasp and clutch onto the desk, the angle of his thrusts making me shudder almost immediately. With his mouth on my breasts and his fingers inside me, it's like an onslaught that I'm not really prepared for.

But with the way my body is responding, I'm certainly not complaining.

It doesn't take long for me to climax, and I'm shuddering through my orgasm on the edge of the desk. I'm barely climbing down from my high when Luke removes his hand and gets me onto my feet. Before I can figure out what is going on, he's turning me around and bending me over the desk. A moment later, I hear a rustling of clothing, and then his cock is pressing against my folds. He is slow and careful as he enters me, and I can't stop a loud moan from escaping as he eases into my body.

He does start off gently to start with, but then his thrusts increase and he's soon pounding into me, his body slapping against me with his fingers digging into my hips. It feels incredible, and I can't do much except hold onto the desk as Luke takes my body. The desk is squeaking loudly as it scrapes across the floor, and papers end up falling to the floor, but I don't care.

I want more.

When my orgasm hits me again, I'm shaking so hard that my legs are almost collapsing under me. Then I feel Luke climaxing as well, his body stiffening with one final thrust and clutching my hips so hard that it started to hurt. But given how incredible I feel overall, it barely registers as we come down from our highs, leaving me slumped and panting against the desk.

Luke pulls out of me and lifts me up, turning me and putting me back on the desk as he kisses me. He makes a satisfied sound as he runs his hands over my body.

"You feel as incredible as you did back then," he whispers against my mouth. "Maybe even more so."

"I'm glad I can make you approve."

“Oh, I approve. A lot.” Luke pressed kisses to my cheek, to my ear, and then down to my neck. “And I don’t want to let go this time. I don’t want you to run away.”

Even with my misgivings about us and how things are going right now, I find that I don’t want to run away, either. I want to stay, preferably in Luke’s arms.

“Can we try again, Elle?” Luke lifts his head as he speaks, staring at me with that intense look in his eyes. “Can you and I start again and carry this on? Because I don’t think I can cope if you walk away from me again.”

I don’t think I can cope, either. I bit my lip and nod.

“Okay. We can try.”

The relief on Luke’s face is palpable. He cups my head in his hands as he kisses me.

“Good.”

Chapter 16 Luke

Even though I'm exhausted, I'm still smiling as I finally enter the apartment. Spending time with Elle and Amy is amazing, and I've enjoyed every moment. Amy is an adorable little girl, and while I often have no idea what she's talking about, she is quite bright. And she has a quick-witted sense of humor that doesn't fail to make me smile.

As for Elle...she is just Elle. I have to stop myself from putting my hands all over her. She is enticing, and that smile of hers, one that reaches her eyes and gives her a sparkle, draws me in. It makes me want to do more than just have dinner with her.

If we do, it would be alone. In bed, with Elle naked underneath me. I would love to feast on that.

It's been a week since we agreed to take things slowly, and for Elle and Amy to get used to me. Especially Amy; I have never been in the position where my father turns up out of nowhere, and I'm not going to push Elle to tell her the truth. Much as I want to hear her call me 'dad', I don't want to end up with Amy lashing out; that would not be fair on Elle. She said that she wants to introduce it slowly, so I will have to go along with what she wants.

But I can say now that I'm very pleased with my daughter. She's bright, sharp and talented. And she loves her sports, which surprises me. Amy did say that her papa watches sports all the time and she enjoys it.

Hearing mention of Elle's friend and housemate being called 'papa' makes

me feel uncomfortable. I don't like it at all. But Elle says it's how Amy addresses Ben, and she's not going to change what she's used to.

Although I have a feeling that Ben encourages it. I've seen how he looks at Elle, and I know that he wants to be the only 'papa' in Amy's life. He doesn't want me around.

Well, I'm not going anywhere. I have no intention of doing so.

Dropping my backpack onto the couch, I go into the bathroom and turn the shower on. I've got a couple of hours to shower, dress and get ready for a video conference with investors from Japan. Then I'll be able to finally sit down and do whatever I want.

Although, knowing how long these conferences go on for, it will probably be past midnight by the time I'm done.

At least I'll have a day off tomorrow, and I plan to take Amy to the zoo while Elle has work. Elle had agreed that I could do this, and Amy is excited about going. I have to admit that I am as well; it's been a while since I've been to a zoo, and I will be going with my daughter. The trust Elle is giving me for going alone with Amy is remarkable; I don't want to break that trust.

I'm undressing for my shower when I hear my phone ringing. Sighing, I turn off the shower and head back into the living room. Where the hell is the damn thing? It always seems to run away when I need it.

I finally find it, stuck in a crevice of my backpack. Prying it out with my fingers, I get my phone out just as it stops ringing. Groaning, I toss it onto the couch. It could wait. I need this shower, and I can't talk to someone while I'm getting ready for a meeting.

But then it starts ringing again almost immediately, Marcus' name flashing up on the screen. Sighing, I pick my phone up once more. What does he want now?

“Marcus?”

“Hey, mate. Sorry to call you at this time, but the video conference has been postponed?”

“What? Postponed?”

“Yeah, until next week. One of the investors got called away with a family emergency, and they're a major player in this club. It's best that we wait until that's sorted out.”

So much for doing any work.

“How long ago did you find this out?”

“About ten minutes ago. Sorry, Luke, I know you've got things to go over where you are, but I didn't know until just now.”

“I'll let you off.” I rub a hand over my face. “I'm too exhausted to do anything except go to sleep at the moment. I would probably be falling asleep during the meeting, anyway.”

“Same here. Things are incredibly busy over here, and all hands are on deck.” Marcus lets out a heavy sigh. “I don't know what a break means anymore.”

I wince.

“You really know how to make me feel guilty about not being there in the office all the time.”

“It would be just as busy even if you were here. Your presence wouldn’t make a difference.”

“Nice to know that you need me in my own company.”

Marcus laughs.

“Besides, you’ve got a reason. A lovely woman and a sweet little girl need your attention right now.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Aren’t you dating Elle now?”

I sigh.

“I don’t know. We’re just taking things really slow, but I have no idea if that means I can call her my girlfriend. And we haven’t told Amy I’m her dad yet.”

“Are you kidding me?” Marcus sounded bewildered. “Why not?”

“How would you go about telling a little girl that you’re her parent after several years not knowing who you are? And how she came to be?”

“Luke, you don’t need to tell her the second part?”

“But you get my point.”

“I do, and I don’t.” Marcus sighs. “I guess because I’ve not been in that position myself.”

“Not with your wife, at least.”

“I’m just glad I’ve got an awesome woman in my life. If this had happened to me, I don’t think I would have coped as well as you.”

I don’t know about that; Marcus is tougher than me. He could have managed this with less mess. I walk through the apartment and into my bedroom. I fall onto the bed and stare at the ceiling.

“I’m not sure what’s tougher: telling my daughter that I’m actually her dad, or telling my parents that they do have a grandchild.”

“What? You haven’t told them yet?”

“No. I didn’t know how. And you know what Mom’s been up to lately. She’s still desperate for me to find a wife.”

“I thought your dad told her to back off.”

“He did, but I doubt Mom actually listened.”

Marcus grunts.

“Probably not. But if you tell her that you’ve got a daughter, maybe she’ll back off.”

I am not so sure about that. She might ease off on me giving her a grandchild, but she would still be pushing for me to marry. While the idea of Elle becoming my wife sounds amazing in my head, I’m not about to force her. Nor do I want to marry anyone else.

The thought does not want to be entertained.

“You think I should tell my parents about this now, then,” I murmur.

“Absolutely. If you hold onto this for much longer, it’s going to be harder to explain. Let them get upset at you now rather than later.”

Marcus has a point. I should be telling them the truth, even though we haven’t told Amy yet, and we have done a DNA test. But I don’t need to do a test to know that Amy is my daughter; it’s clear when we’re together that she’s my kid. Elle has commented on it before.

I’m sure Elle will forgive me for saying something to my parents now.

“Well, I’d better let you get on with it,” Marcus says. “I’m going to make the most of this evening and pretend I have a social life.”

I smile.

“Good luck with that. I’m sure your wife will be happy to hear that.”

“I know I will be. Talk to you later.”

Marcus hangs up, and I use those few moments afterwards to figure out what I’m going to say. Once my parents answer my call, I have to tell them they’re grandparents, but how? Do I make small talk and ease in? Or do I just blurt it out before I do anything else?

God, this is going to be difficult.

I decide to go for the easier route, and dial my dad’s number. He’s going to be shocked, but he’s not going to freak out like Mom. He can be more levelheaded about something like this.

Hopefully.

Dad answers slowly, and I can hear the tiredness in his voice.

“Hey, son.”

“Sorry, Dad, did I wake you up?”

“No, not really. I was just dropping off in my chair.” Dad yawns loudly. “I should start heading to bed, but that means getting up from my position right now, and I’m comfortable.”

I can’t help but laugh at this.

“Mom’s not going to be too happy if you do that.”

“She’s busy in the kitchen. We just had some friends over, so she’s cleaning up. So, what’s up? You don’t normally call at this time. Everything okay?”

“I...I think so.”

How do I answer a question like that?

“What do you mean by that?” Dad sounds confused. “Has something happened?”

“In a manner of speaking.” I roll onto my belly, the room momentarily tilting before righting itself again. “I’ve got something to tell you, and I’m not sure how you and Mom are going to take it.”

“Okay, now you’re beginning to scare me. What’s going on?”

Here it comes. I take a deep breath.

“I’m a dad, Dad. Well, I’m a father. A parent.”

There is silence at the other end. Has Dad cut the call? Then I hear him stuttering.

“What...you...are you serious?”

“I am. I’ve been getting to know her recently. Her name’s Amy.” I find myself smiling. “She’s a real sweetheart. A bright kid. You would love her.”

“What? Are you saying she’s not a baby?”

“She’s five years old.”

Dad emits a curse at his end that makes me jump.

“You have a five-year-old kid and you didn’t tell us?”

“I didn’t know myself until a couple of weeks ago, Dad. The mom had no way of contacting me.” That is actually true, and I’m not about to go into the nitty-gritty details of how she could have found me. “I’ve been getting to know her. She’s a great kid.”

“And you’re certain that this is your child? You’re not being swindled, are you?”

“No, of course not. We’re doing a DNA test, but it’s essentially just a formality. You just have to look at her to know she’s my daughter.”

“I see.” Dad sounds dubious, and I can’t blame him for that. “Why would the mother bring her into your life now?”

“Let’s just say it was a pure fluke that I found out. Just like it was that I met her again.”

“Is this little girl the reason you’re living in Cleveland now?”

“Pretty much.” And her mother. “I want to be close by to know her more. We

haven't told her just yet, but we will be soon. However, I wanted you to know that you're a grandparent. I know you would want a baby..."

"Don't be silly, Luke. I don't care about any of that, and you know it. I'm just concerned that this has come out of nowhere."

"It's not as ominous as you're making it out to be."

"Sorry, son. This wasn't something I was expecting you to say."

"I get that." My back is starting to hurt, so I roll over and sit up. "But there wasn't really a way for me to say it without giving you a shock."

"It's a shock, certainly," Dad grunts. "I was expecting you to one day tell me that you had eloped, but to say you actually had a kid...well..."

"*What?*"

I flinch when I hear the sudden shriek from Mom. She must have heard what we are talking about. I listen as I hear Mom and Dad bickering at their end, Dad clearly telling Mom to calm down. Then Mom's voice reaches my ear at a volume that makes me pull the phone away from my ear.

"Luke? What's going on? I just overheard your dad talking about you having a kid. Is that true?"

"Yes, Mom." I don't know what else to say to that without sugarcoating anything. "I'm a dad."

"But...what..." Mom splutters. "Why didn't you tell us? We could have been there for the birth! We could have helped out!"

"Why would you have been there for the birth, Mom? You weren't expecting

to stand by while the birth was happening, were you?”

“Of course! That’s what families do!”

This makes me glad that I didn’t know about Amy before. I sigh.

“My daughter is five years old. It’s been a while since she was born.”

“She’s *five* years old and you’re only telling us about her now? Luke, how could you?”

“I didn’t know myself until recently. Her mother and I lost touch years ago.”

Mom snorts rudely.

“I bet she’s looking for a payday. She must know that you’re rich, and she’s looking to cash out by manipulating you.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Why else would she not tell you?” Mom demands. “She’s probably got no money and sees you as a gullible cash cow.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

“Mom, Elle isn’t like that.”

“How do you know? Have you had her checked out?”

“What? Why would I have her checked out?”

“Because you’re rich and she’ll drain you dry!”

My head is beginning to hurt. While I can understand her concerns, this was not quite the response I was expecting from her regarding finding out that

she's actually a grandmother.

I get up off the bed and begin to pace.

“Mom, this isn't the case with Elle. I believe her about her child.”

“You'd better get a DNA test!”

“That's already in the works, but she looks like my clone! I don't need one. Anyway, why are you so upset? I thought you wanted a grandkid, and you've got one now.”

“But what about the baby stage?” Mom wails. “I wanted to be there for the pregnancy, help with the birth, cuddle my grandchild and do everything a grandma does with a baby. That got taken away from me!”

I'm not sure if I should laugh or not. Mom sounds like she's lost the plot.

“You do realize that a grandchild isn't a do-over baby for you, Mom, don't you?”

“How could you say that?”

“Because you're talking about being there for the pregnancy and helping with the birth. You seem to think that you would have a front-row seat to all of this. That's not how having a grandchild works.”

“But...”

“I seem to recall you complaining about changing diapers when I was still in them. You've mentioned it many times over the years. Amy is six, so you don't have to do any of the yucky stuff you hated before.”

“I don’t hate it!” Mom cries. “It’s different when it’s my grandbaby.”

“You’re making it out to be something else, and it’s beginning to scare me. Just be happy that you’ve got a granddaughter, and once she’s gotten used to me, I’ll introduce you and Dad to her.”

“Why can’t we see her now?” Mom demands. “We have a right to see our granddaughter.”

“You need to wait until Elle and I are comfortable for her to meet other family members. And if you go charging in as you are, you’re just going to freak her out, and then she’ll never go anywhere near you. Do you want that to happen?”

Mom splutters, and I wait for her to reply. Instead, I hear a frustrated growl, and a loud bang in my ear. Flinching, I rub my ear before putting the phone to my good ear. A moment later, I hear a scuffling noise and Dad answers.

“Sorry, son. Your mother just threw my phone across the phone.”

“Just because I told her to wait until we introduce her to my daughter?”

“She wants things to happen immediately. You know what she’s like.” Dad sighs. “It’s been six years. I’m sure we can wait a little longer.”

I’m glad that Dad understands. But I’m still worried about Mom.

“It’s up to Elle when this happens, but if Mom behaves like this towards her and is overbearing to Amy...”

“I’ll make sure she behaves if she wants a grandchild in her life.” Dad promises. “She’s my responsibility.”

“Thanks, Dad. I hope she does behave herself.”

“I’m not losing the chance of knowing my granddaughter because of your mother. She’ll calm down and listen to reason soon.”

“Are you sure about that, Dad?”

“Of course I am.” Although Dad’s tone doesn’t convey the same confidence as his words. “I’d better go and do some damage control.”

“Okay. I’m sorry about thrusting this on you, though.”

“In a situation like this, it’s not exactly something you can ease into. I don’t think I’d be able to do it any differently.”

He does have a point. I just wish I had been able to do it a little better. I sigh.

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, Luke. The only time you need to apologize is if you end up deserting your kid.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

The thought of leaving Elle and Amy has not crossed my mind. I’m not interested in doing it. Now I’ve found Elle, and she’s letting me past her defenses, I know that I can’t desert her at all.

Both her and our daughter are precious to me.

Chapter 17 Elle

“Argh!” I slow to a stop and tread water. “What was I drinking when I agreed to this?”

Carly laughs.

“We’ve been doing this for years, Elle. What’s so different this time?”

“It’s fucking freezing!”

“Of course it is. You do know that’s what happens at this time of year.” Carly swims past me. “Come on, we haven’t done our quota for the session.”

I grit my teeth and slowly follow her. Sensations are coming back to my fingers and toes in spite of the gloves and boots I’m wearing, and the wetsuit is doing a good job of making sure my body is working properly. It’s still freezing cold, and I can feel it wrapped around me, but I keep going. I know my limits.

Although, not for the first time, I question my life choices. When Carly suggested this during our university days, I thought she was mad. But I agreed, thinking it would be something daft to do. Now we do it every week, swimming in the lake at the sports center where the local triathlon club trains for the open water part of their race. Now we’ve been doing it every week, almost like we lost our sanity the first time we got into the cold water.

It’s good exercise, and I do enjoy it, but today is far too cold. I don’t think I’ll be lasting for much longer.

We do another lap of the lake, keeping close to the buoys set up for the laps, and then I head towards the launching platform. That is enough for me.

Carly catches up with me as I get out, scrambling onto my hands and knees. She takes off her goggles, wiping water from her face.

“No more?”

“No more. That’s a bit too cold for me.” I take slow, easy breaths as I get up. The adrenaline rush I get from getting out of cold water is hitting me, and the buzz feels amazing. “I’m going to go get changed.”

“I’ll join you shortly. I’m going to take another lap around the lake.”

“Aren’t you going to freeze?”

“We haven’t been in thirty minutes yet. I’m going to make the most of it here.” Carly pushes off the platform. “I’ll see you in the locker room.”

I’m not about to argue. I want to go and get warm. Feeling my whole body tingling at the sensations now coming back to me, I head back to the locker room on unsteady feet, my hired tow float bumping against my legs. My fingers manage to get the clip undone and I drop it off at the hire desk before stumbling to the locker room, which is simply a container near the water’s edge. There are a few other ladies in there, all of whom are in various stages of undress, trying to get warm. I get my gloves off, dropping them onto the floor, before unzipping my wetsuit.

Cold water swimming is normally a great way of shocking my system and making me feel refreshed. But I wasn’t able to concentrate today. I could barely focus on my swim when my mind was not working properly.

Luke is still in my thoughts, and he just won't leave me alone. It's not his fault, not really. There have been times over the years where I've thought about him and what he's up to. But it's nothing like this. It's like he's seeped into my being in the last few weeks since he walked into my workplace. And we're spending a lot of time together, alone as well as with Amy. Luke is working hard to gain my trust and get Amy used to him. I have to commend him for that; he's respecting my choices.

And it's taking its toll on me. I asked for slowing down and taking time on any sort of relationship between us, and yet every time I'm with him I want to do more than just hold his hand or give him a quick kiss before we part ways. I want to drag him to my room, get his clothes off, and devour his body for myself. I want to lie in bed and be cuddled - it's been a very long time since I've had anyone cuddle me as I fall asleep.

I just want to be held, full stop.

I'm very aware of what is happening to me with my feelings, and it scares me. Luke is very good at getting past anyone's guard, and he isn't even trying. He's just doing it naturally. One smile at me, and I'm putty in his hands. That's not good, but I find that I don't care.

He is amazing with Amy as well, and I can tell that Amy likes him. She is comfortable with him to the point Luke can take her to the zoo without me needing to be there. According to her daughter, they had a blast.

I haven't told her that Luke is her father yet, and I don't know how to do it. If I'm honest, I'm scared about it. What is her reaction going to be? Is she going to be happy that her father is in her life? Or is she going to be angry because we lied to her?

I wouldn't blame her for the latter.

I'm mostly dressed and putting my sneakers on when Carly comes into the locker room. She has taken her hat and goggles off, and she's shivering a little. I frown at her.

"You were in there a little too long, weren't you?"

"I'm fine. It's just the buzz is a little more intense." Carly's teeth aren't chattering as she drops her things by her belongings and begins to strip. "I just wanted to soak it up a bit more."

"You do know we can go into the pool inside instead of coming out onto the lake," I point out.

"Where's the fun in that? Besides, the scenery is pretty awesome, and it's quiet outside." Carly makes a face. "We would have to deal with everyone filling up the lane and not getting out of the way while we're trying to swim."

She does have a point; the indoor pool is always very busy. I grab my jumper and tug it on. The warmth is wrapping around my body, and it feels really nice.

"So, with Amy in kindergarten right now and you have the day off from the studio, what are you planning on doing today?" Carly asks, grimacing as she unzips her wetsuit and peels it off down her body. "Are you going to pig out with lots of junk food with awful movies? I'm down for that if you are."

"Awful movies?"

"Well, rom-com movies are awful."

I laugh.

“It’s only because you don’t like them.”

“You’re just proving my point.” Carly manages to get the wetsuit off her legs and wraps her towel around her. “Anyway, do you fancy doing that? I need to do something with my time off.”

Watching awful movies, curled up under a blanket while my daughter is at pre-school, sounds really tempting. But I have something that I need to deal with. It’s the day Dad and I have finally organized to see each other, and I’m really nervous about it. We have things to talk about, and I have to get my point across about Megan and how we need to focus on our relationship and not with her involved. I know Dad isn’t going to be happy about it. But I’m going to stand my ground.

Hopefully, being in public will mean that Dad won’t get really upset and I can do damage control without any attention being drawn to me.

“Actually...” I hesitate, watching as Carly begins to take off her swimsuit under her towel, holding the ends between her teeth. “I have something to do at lunchtime, and I might need someone to come with me.”

“Really? What...” Carly’s frown clears when realization dawns. “”Oh, you’re meeting your dad, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. He says he wants to talk about coming back into my life and getting to know his granddaughter.” I shake my head. “I’m not comfortable about it, but I can get my point across and we can talk about what we should be doing going forward.”

“He’s had six years to get back into contact with you, to apologize for the way he behaved. Doing it now doesn’t really make sense.”

“To be honest, it doesn’t really make sense to me, either. Although I can have a good guess, if what Grandma told me is anything to go by.”

“What did she say?”

I pick up my wet swimsuit and wrap it into my towel with my hat and goggles.

“She said that Megan’s been trying to get pregnant for some time, but she hasn’t been able to carry a baby to term.”

“Ah, I see.” Carly raises her eyebrows. “You think because she can’t get pregnant, she’s trying to find a way to be around a baby.”

“I don’t know about that, but it could be why Dad’s reaching out. No way would I let that woman anywhere near me or Amy.”

“Well, speculation isn’t going to help anyone. You’re going to have to find out from the source.”

“I plan to, but I don’t feel confident going alone anymore.”

“Does Luke know about this?”

“No. It’s already complicated without Luke being there.” I watch my friend as she tugs on her leggings. “Can you come with me? Dad wouldn’t dare do anything stupid with you around.”

Carly is nodding before I’ve finished speaking.

“You try and stop me. This is my goddaughter we’re talking about who’s going to be affected. I’m not going anywhere as far as she’s concerned.” Carly shivers as she wraps her towel around her and burrows into her bag.

“Just let me get dressed first. I think that was a little too much for me.”

I laugh.

“I did warn you.”

“I’ll be fine. Just a massive mug of coffee, and I’m set.” Carly grins at me.

“Although I wish we could have a glass of wine instead. That would be more appropriate to what we’re going to do later.”

Chapter 18 Luke

“Would you like anything else, Mr Ward?”

I shake my head as the server takes away my plate.

“Nah, I’m good. Can you bring me the bill? I’ll settle up now.”

“Sure.” The girl gives me a big smile. “I’ll bring that over to you now.”

She walks away, and I check my emails again. Nothing else has come in so far, which is a relief. Working through lunch isn’t really ideal, but there was so much going on and I couldn’t ignore my growling stomach any longer. At least the little diner across the street from my apartment has wifi, and their food is pretty good.

Maybe I can bring Elle and Amy here. We can have a few dates here, and the children’s menu was quite big.

Just the thought of those two brings a smile to my face. Elle said to me yesterday that she had the day off, but she would be free after lunch. Once I’m done here, I might just head over to her place and see if we can get a bit of alone time. With any luck, we can have the house to ourselves.

Going slow and not being able to be intimate as a result is tougher than I thought. Even if Elle doesn’t want to get naked, maybe I can get a cuddle on the couch with her.

God, I’m sounding like a teenager in the throes of a new romance. I’m not

sure whether to find it cute or cringe at it.

The server comes back, placing the bill onto the table.

“There you go, Mr Ward. You need anything else, just let me know.”

“Thanks.”

She walks away as I check the bill. As I’m getting my wallet out to pay, I hear her greeting more customers.

“Good afternoon. Table for three?”

“Yes, please.”

I stiffen. Was that Elle? What was she doing here? There is a curved mirror above the door going towards the bathrooms near my booth, so I have a clear view of the rest of the diner. And, sure enough, I can see Elle and Carly following the waitress towards one of the booths. They’re accompanied by an older gentleman who looks vaguely familiar, but I can’t place him. Where have I seen him before?

The server seats them at the booth behind me. With the high dividers between us, and the fact I’m sitting further into the booth, none of them appear to see me.

It’s clear from the expression I saw on Elle’s face in the reflection that this is not something she’s looking forward to. I want to join them in the booth and sit with her, but I find myself unable to move. Elle wouldn’t appreciate me jumping in to help her. She’s got Carly, so I’m hoping that it won’t escalate or anything. But what is going on?

I notice that the server has come back to my table, now armed with the card

reader. Before she can say anything, I've got my card out and held it out. One bleep, and it's done. She tears off the receipt and hands it to me.

"Thank you. Hope to see you again soon!"

I simply give her a nod in reply, not wanting to speak and reveal myself to Elle. I carefully gather my things together, putting them into my backpack. Then I realize what I'm doing. What was I doing? I shouldn't be eavesdropping on Elle's conversation. I should be leaving, but that would mean they would see me.

I'm stuck. This is going to be awkward either way.

"Shall we order something?" the gentleman asks.

"I think we should leave that for now, Kevin," Elle's response is rather chilly.

Kevin? I didn't think Elle knew anyone called Kevin. Then I remember where I had seen him. He had been at Amy's game a while ago, and Elle had taken him elsewhere to talk. She told me that it was her father, and he wanted to talk to her. I did offer to be there with her, but she said she could handle it.

I certainly can't bring myself to leave. Not anymore.

Her father sighs.

"I wish you would call me 'dad'. You did when we last saw each other."

"You caught me off-guard. And I'd be fine to call you dad again if you can show that you can be a father to me."

"Of course I can be a father to you. I've always been a father to my little girl."

I hear Elle snort.

“Your little girl? I hate you calling me that. And what sort of father are you that you chose your side piece over your family? You certainly weren’t a good husband.”

“Megan is not a side piece, Elle. She’s your stepmother.”

I don’t need to see Elle and Carly to know that they’re grimacing.

“Megan will never be my stepmother. I was an adult when you two married, and she’s not much older than me. She will always be known as my father’s wife. Nothing to me.”

“Don’t talk like that, Elle.” Kevin’s voice sounds as if he’s trying to tell her off. “You shouldn’t be so disrespectful.”

“You mean like you and Megan disrespected Mom by having an affair, getting married on the day of the funeral and moving her in? You think I’m disrespectful after that?”

“Elle,” I hear Carly’s voice. “Calm down. We’re not here to discuss that.”

At least Elle has her friend with her. She needs a calming influence right now. And I wish it was me right now.

Elle lets out a heavy sigh.

“Okay, fine. You said you wanted to talk, Kevin. So talk.”

“Were you ever going to tell me about Amy? That I had a granddaughter?”

“I’m not sure. If you divorced Megan, I would have reached out, but you’re

still with her. I wasn't going to have anything to do with you if she was still about."

"You're so cold, do you know that?"

"Given what you did, can you blame me? I lost my mom and I find out my dad's been cheating on her. How do you expect me to react?"

"I expect you to reach out and we can talk about it once you calm down."

I almost burst out laughing at that. Why did it sound like he was trying to blame his actions on Elle instead?

"Don't give me that, Kevin. You and Megan were in the wrong. You don't get to have me in your life after what you did, and I'm not about to have that woman pretend she's a mother to an adult daughter who's closer to her age than her own husband."

"Megan's not a bad person, Elle."

"I don't care. I want nothing to do with her."

"Well, you might have to."

I sit up. What did that mean?

"What are you talking about?" Elle sounds guarded. "What do you think is going to happen? I'm not ready to forgive or forget what you did. You betrayed Mom as well as me. That's not something I can move past."

"Can you at least listen to what I have to say? Don't go rushing into anything." Kevin's voice makes me feel like I'm listening to nails on a blackboard; it was very grating. "This is important."

There is a moment's silence, and I'm tempted to look over the top of the divider to see what was going on. But I stop myself, although I'm sure I look like an idiot eavesdropping on another conversation when I should have left already.

"Okay, fine," Elle huffs. "Talk. What do you want?"

"Megan and I...we've been trying to have children together, and Megan is infertile."

"I know about that. Grandma told me."

"She did?" Kevin sounds surprised. "You're still in contact with Mom?"

"Of course I am! I cut you out, not the rest of your family. They're not dicks, after all." Elle sighs, and I hear the leather creaking. "I'm sorry about the infertility, what's that got to do with anything?"

"We were going to do IVF, or have a surrogate carry the baby to term, but then Megan finds a photograph of your daughter that one of my brothers had stuck up on the fridge. She said that Amy looks like the perfect little girl, just what she wished for herself."

I am not liking the sound of this. Something in my gut tells me this isn't going to end well. From the tone of Elle's voice, she thinks the same thing.

"Where is this going?"

"Give us Amy for us to raise."

For a moment, I think I must have misheard. There is a gasp, and then I hear Carly. She sounds outraged.

“What the...are you insane? Why would Elle give you her daughter?”

“Well, she’s a single mother, isn’t she? How is that appropriate for a little kid? It’s got to be tough raising a child alone.”

“She isn’t raising Amy alone. She lives with me and our other friend, so she’s got support. And your mother and brothers are there as well, so she’s not on her own!”

“Even so, it must be really hard. We’re a two-person household, and I’ve had experience of raising a child before. Plus, I get paid really well. I can easily provide for Amy. And Megan can be at home with her. We can give her a great life.”

A flash of anger runs through me. He can’t seriously be thinking that this was even okay to ask.

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” Elle snarls. “You and that witch want to take my daughter away from me because I’m a single mom? What sort of logic is that?”

“Don’t use that language with me, Elle.” I cannot believe he is scolding her for cursing. “Your stepmother wants a child, you have a child that Megan wants. She wants to become Amy’s mother. So you should be giving her to your stepmother.”

“She is not my stepmother!” I jump when Elle starts yelling. “No way am I going to let that woman anywhere near my daughter! And if you think I’m going to agree to that, you need to go and get yourself checked out in a psych ward. That is not what you tell your daughter to do when you’re trying to get back in touch with me. Or did you just do it so you could get me to hand

Amy over?”

Kevin’s hesitation is enough. He really thought Elle would do that. How can anyone sane think this was a good idea?

“Come on, Elle. We’re leaving.” I hear Carly practically growling, and the sound of the leather seating squeaking again. “I think we’re done here.”

“No, we’re not done!” Kevin snaps. “Megan is desperate for a daughter, and Amy is perfect.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to demand your granddaughter off your own daughter!” Carly shouts back. “What part of you thought this was actually reasonable, logical, or sane?”

“Amy will do better with two parents rather than one! You think she is going to grow up well if she’s got a single mom and random people in and out of her life? She’s better off with us.”

I can’t take this anymore. I’m out of the booth and pushing past Elle and Carly to get to Kevin.

“What? Luke?”

I barely hear Elle’s exclamation as I grab Kevin by the collar and haul him out of the booth.

“You listen here, you pathetic excuse for a parent,” I snarl into his face. “You will not get your hands on Amy. I will never let you or that woman you’re married to anywhere near my daughter.”

“What?” Kevin looks confused. “What did you say? You’re Amy’s dad?”

“I am. Elle and I may not be a couple, but I’m in Amy’s life. And there is no way I will let her go with you, especially after what you just said about Elle.” I shove Kevin away, and he topples onto the seat behind him. “Taking Amy away because Elle’s a single mother? What logic is that? She’s probably the most adjusted kid I know. The one who will screw her up will be you, especially if you try to force her to call a woman you screwed during your previous marriage ‘mom’. God, you make me sick.”

I am so angry that I can feel myself shaking. I cannot even comprehend that someone would demand a child like she was a toy to pass around. Reluctant to pull away from the bastard, I go back to my booth and gather my belongings. Then I turn to Elle, who is staring at me with round eyes.

“I think it’s time we left,” I look past her to Carly, who is looking equally stunned at his presence. “I’ll meet you back at yours, Carly.”

“Oh. Right.” Carly grabs Elle’s arm. “Come on, Elle. Luke’s right. We should leave.”

“We haven’t finished talking!” Kevin jumps to his feet and puts himself between his daughter and the door. “Give us Amy! Megan wants her!”

I step past Elle and square up to the older man. He’s a little taller than me, but I’m confident that I can take him in a fight.

“Our daughter is not going with you,” I hiss at him. “Now get out of our way. And if you come anywhere near Amy or Elle again, I’m going to make sure you regret it.”

I am hoping that he will take a swing at me so I can be justified in hitting him, but he doesn’t. He just glares at me. Before either of us can do anything,

Elle grabs my arm and drags me towards the door.

“Not now,” she mutters. “Later.”

I couldn't agree more. If I say anything more now, I'm going to really lose my temper.

Chapter 19 Elle

I am still shaking as I get home with Carly. Dad actually asked for me to hand over Amy? How did he think that was a good idea? I couldn't believe that he actually said that.

Did he and Megan seriously think that I would give them Amy without any arguments? Even if I hadn't cut contact with them, I was not going to roll over and do as they wanted.

The two of them are insane.

"I'll go and find some alcohol," Carly says, heading towards the door. "I think we're going to need it."

That sounds like a good idea. It might help me decide what emotion I am going to latch onto. I don't know whether to be in tears, be angry, or just simply scream. Dad betrayed me years ago after he betrayed Mom, and he is doing it again. All this to satisfy his spoiled brat of a wife.

I turn when I hear the sound of a car, and I watch as Luke's car pulls up behind Carly's. Luke gets out and comes straight over to me. I don't argue as he pulls me into his arms and holds me. His embrace is warm, and it makes me feel safe. I bury my face into his chest, wrapping my arms around his waist and holding on. We don't say anything for a moment, with me listening to the beating heart against my ear.

"I'm sorry you had to hear all of that," Luke finally speaks. "And I'm sorry I

jumped in like that.”

“Did you know where we were going?”

“No, I was there for lunch. It was just a coincidence.” Luke lets out a shuddering sigh. “But hearing him pretty much demand that you hand Amy over...I just couldn’t sit back and let you deal with it alone. Amy’s my daughter as well.”

“I know.” I sniff and look up at him. “I’m glad you were there, though. Although I might have done the same as you if you hadn’t.”

“He’s lucky I didn’t beat him to a pulp. Was he always that crazy?”

“I thought he wasn’t. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Well, we can deal with that. My lawyer can make sure that your dad and his wife can’t contact you legally, and it can get Amy covered.”

I frown at him.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

Luke arches an eyebrow.

“He just demanded that you hand over your daughter. You think it’s not necessary to hire a lawyer?”

“I can’t afford your lawyer. I’m sure Carly, Ben and I can get one if we put some of our savings together...”

“Elle.” Luke touches his finger to my lips. “Amy is my daughter, too. That means I will do whatever is possible to make sure they don’t come anywhere

near her.”

I don't know what to say to that. I'm still in shock over what Dad wanted of me. This makes me feel like I'm in some weird dream, and I want to wake up.

“It's going to be okay.” Luke presses a kiss to my forehead. “You're going to be okay. That man is not going to get our daughter.”

Our daughter. I do like the sound of that. Those three words I want to say to him are on the tip of my tongue, and I can feel myself getting ready to say them. Was it too early to say them? Probably, but at this point I don't really care.

“What's going on?”

I look around and see Ben coming towards us from his car parked on the curb. I hadn't heard him turning up. The look on his face as he glares at Luke is enough to make me shiver. I pull away from Luke and face my friend.

“I thought you were going to be at the office today.”

“I came back to get something I forgot for a meeting.” Ben looked from me to Luke and back again. “What's going on here?”

He's looking for a fight, I can tell. And from the tension in Luke's shoulders, he's ready to let loose after confronting Dad. I touch Luke's arm.

“You go on home, Luke. I'll be okay.”

“Do you mind if I pick up Amy from kindergarten?” Luke gives me a pleading look. “I'd like to see her, especially after what happened...”

“Sure, that’s fine.” I manage a small smile. “You’ve got the details of the pickup, haven’t you? I’ll let the school know.”

“I’ve got them. I’ll take her out for ice cream.”

“She’d love that. Just don’t spoil her too much.”

Luke grunts.

“I think it’s more for me than for her. Thanks, Elle.” He leans in and kisses my cheek. “I’ll see you later.”

Part of me wants to drag him back for another kiss, but Ben is watching me with an angry glare that makes me uncomfortable. I watch as Luke goes to his car and gets in. As he’s pulling down the drive, Ben approaches me.

“What was that about?” he demands. “What happened? Is it about your dad?”

“I’ll explain later. I’ve still got to process it.”

Ben doesn’t look happy.

“You should have let me go with you. I said I wanted to be there.”

“Ben...”

“You’ve been pushing me away lately, and it’s driving me mad, Elle. I want to be by your side while we’re dealing with your father, but you say you don’t want me. Instead, you bother him.”

I frown.

“What are you saying?”

“You’re pushing me aside for Luke Ward. Because he’s Amy’s dad? Because he’s handsome and rich?”

“Luke happened to be there by chance. Carly and I didn’t not ask him to come along.”

“I’m sure that’s what happened,” Ben sneers.

I stare at him, but my friend only glares back at me. He’s been giving me random harsh comments ever since Luke came back into my life, but I can mostly ignore it. Now I feel like I can’t ignore it anymore.

Especially when I think there is a double-meaning behind his words about pushing him to one side for Luke.

“Ben...” I really don’t want to do this. I rub my hands over my face. “Seriously, this isn’t about choosing one person over another. I don’t know why you’re getting possessive over me when there’s never been anything there between us.”

“How do you know?” Ben snaps back. “You’ve never even attempted to try. There could be something there if you allowed yourself to open up again.”

“Ben...”

“I’ve been there for you the whole time, Elle. Ever since we met in our freshman year, I’ve been there, hoping that you would see me as I want you to. Eight years waiting for you to realize that we can be a great couple. That you can love me as I love you.” Ben’s face is tightened in anger. “But then you had to get pregnant by someone else. And years later the guy turns up, and you’re already back in his arms? Are you kidding me?”

I don't know what to say to any of that. I did suspect that Ben has feelings for me, but hearing it out loud felt like a slap in the face.

"Nothing can happen between us, Ben," I whisper. "I've always seen you like a brother."

"Oh, really?" Ben sneers. "And what about Ward? Do you see him like a brother? It didn't look like that when you were cuddling him just now."

"That's nothing to do with you."

"I think it does! He can't love you like I can."

This is going nowhere, and I can feel myself wanting to scream. This is not what I want after I've been told by Dad that he only wants contact with me to get my daughter back. I step back and turn away.

"Get whatever you needed from the house and go back to work, Ben. I'm not doing this now."

"I'm not going to let this go, Elle. You can't walk away from this."

"Well, I am." I reach the house and swing around on him, only to find that he's been following me and I almost bump into him. "I'm dealing with a sociopathic father and a psychotic woman he calls a wife. The last thing I need is for you to declare your love for me and act possessive over me regarding Luke. That's not helpful!"

"At least tell me that there's nothing beyond being a co-parent with Ward," Ben insists. "Amy was meant to be my daughter. Ward's already taken her from me. I'm not about to have him take you as well."

He is beginning to sound mad. I shake my head.

“You’re seeing things that aren’t there. You’re beginning to scare me.”

“That’s how serious I am about this!”

“Then you can stick your head in a bucket of cold water and get it out of your head. It’s not happening, and I’m not going to discuss it. Now, get what you came back for and get out of here.”

“Elle.”

I storm into the house, and I go up to my bedroom, slamming the door hard behind me. Then I slump against the door, sliding down to sit on the floor. I need a moment to myself, or my head is going to explode.

This day could just not get any worse.

Chapter 20 Luke

I'm relieved when the last meeting is done. Given the incident earlier in the day, I'm not really in the right mindset to deal with anyone regarding his multiple businesses. But it has to be done, and I did push these back so I could see my daughter back from kindergarten.

I'm glad I got to spend time with Amy. We went to get ice cream, where Amy would talk fast about what she had been doing during the day. She is like a sponge, absorbing everything around her. It is rather fascinating.

I like spending time with her. She's a real sweetheart.

At least being around his daughter makes me feel a little better after what happened earlier. I'm still shocked over what Kevin said to his daughter. How could he think that telling Elle to hand over her daughter for him and his wife to raise was going to go? He had to be insane. Sure, his situation was sad, and I do feel for him to have to go through that, but their process of getting a child was just ridiculous.

Will they try to snatch Amy? If they were that desperate...

I push that out of my mind. That is not how I want to spend my evening.

Closing my laptop, I get up and head into the kitchen. My stomach is growling, reminding me that I haven't eaten since the ice cream treat with Amy, and now it's almost midnight. I need to have some sustenance before I sleep, otherwise I'll be tossing and turning.

And with my thoughts as they are right now, I don't want to be kept awake all night.

I'm looking through the fridge, wondering what to rustle up for myself, when I hear a knock on the door. That has me straightening up. I'm not expecting anyone, and if Elle was coming over she would have told me beforehand. And I have a doorman, so nobody unauthorized will be outside the door.

One of the neighbors? Have I done something to upset one of them? I doubt it, seeing as I keep to myself. Unless someone is complaining about the loud music I was playing earlier.

The knock comes again. Sighing, I close the fridge and head to the door. Sadly, there's no peephole, so I hover my hand over the lock.

"Who is it?"

No answer. I wait, but I can't hear anything.

"Hello? Anyone there?"

Still nothing. Had whoever was outside just walked away thinking they were not going to get an answer?

I open the door and begin to move forward to step out into the hall to check. Only to stop suddenly when I see the tall, slim blonde woman standing in front of me, wearing a black coat over a slinky black dress, her hair down to her shoulders. She gives me a smile.

"Hey, Luke. It's been a long time."

It takes me a moment to recognize her. I stare at her.

“Hannah?”

“I’m glad you remember me. I thought I was going to have to give you a hint.” She looks me up and down, her eyes glinting in approval. “You’re looking pretty good, Luke. Even better than I remember.”

How could I truly forget the woman who broke my heart? Hannah had been my girlfriend for some years, only for me to discover that she slept with plenty of other guys while keeping with me because I was wealthy and she wanted to be set for life. I ended it with her as soon as I found out, and it was another six months before Hannah stopped bothering me about getting back together.

That had been nearly six years ago. Now it looks like she is back to do it all again.

“Well?” Hannah raises her eyebrows. “Aren’t you going to invite me in? I did fly out to meet you, after all.”

“No, you are not coming in.”

“Oh, come on, Luke.”

Hannah starts to go past me, only for me to block the doorway. I glare at her.

“I said you are not coming in, Hannah. Just because you’re here and you’ve traveled a long way doesn’t mean I’m going to let you in.”

“What’s wrong with you and me catching up? That’s all I want to do.”

“I’m not gullible, Hannah. How did you find out where I am, anyway?”

Hannah grinned.

“There were a few interviews recently commenting that you have moved to Cleveland, and as for your address...let’s just say your mom is very good at finding out things when she needs to.”

“Excuse me?” I blink. “Mom told you my address?”

“She knows that I’ve been trying to get back with you for years, but you keep blocking my attempts.”

“There is a good reason for that, Hannah.”

Hannah ignores this comment, carrying on as if she hasn’t been interrupted.

“She contacted me and said if I wanted to get you back on side, I should go to you in Cleveland to show how serious I am. And I’m here now.” Hannah opens her coat more and reveals the barely-there straps of her dress and the low-cut of the bodice. I can tell she’s not wearing a bra. “Maybe I can come in and show you what I’ve got now. Or haven’t got, I should say.”

Hearing this makes me feel sick. How did I find someone like her attractive? I don’t know whether to be angry at Hannah for still following me, or at Mom for pointing Hannah in my direction. She knows why we broke up, and she knows I’m taking things slow with Elle.

Unless she wants to control who is in my life. By pushing me back towards an ex-girlfriend instead of the mother of my child.

“Leave, Hannah.”

“What?” Hannah falters. “Why?”

“There are so many reasons why you should leave. Not least because of the audacity you have to just turn up at my apartment without warning or an

invitation. That's wrong on so many levels." I shake my head. "Also, I'm not single. I'm not about to disrespect my girlfriend by bringing you inside, especially when I know you're not here to talk."

That is not really the truth. I'm not dating Elle, but the thought of calling myself single didn't work well with me. I don't feel like a single man, and that suits me fine.

Hannah's face pales.

"What? But...your mom said you weren't with anyone!"

"That's because it's none of her business. I don't tell her everything, and I'm certainly not going to talk to her about my love life. Besides," I gesture at her, "why would I get back with someone who treated me as a personal ATM?"

"That's not fair!"

"You disrespected me and my bank account because you saw dollar signs. I have more self-worth than that. I'm not interested in going through that again. Now leave and tell Mom that you and I are not happening again. I'd do it myself, but I'd probably lose my temper and scream at her, and it's too late to do that."

Hannah splutters, but I hold up a hand before she responds.

"Go away, and go back to where you came from. Now get lost."

"But...where am I supposed to go?"

"You didn't find yourself a hotel?"

“I thought I was going to be staying with you.”

I shake my head. The nerve of the woman.

“Go home, Hannah. And leave my building, or I’ll have the doorman escort you forcibly from the premises. You shouldn’t have gotten past him in the first place.”

“With my looks and how I’m dressed, he didn’t even argue when I told him you were expecting me.”

Now the doorman probably thinks that I’m bringing in hookers. I need to have a word with him. I start to close the door.

“Bye, Hannah. And don’t ever contact me again.”

“Luke, please...!”

But I cut off Hannah’s protests by slamming the door shut. As an afterthought, I lock the door and put the chain on. This is a problem I don’t want to deal with tonight.

Chapter 21 Elle

“Phew!” Diane lets out a sigh of relief as the door closes behind the last client. “I’m glad that one is over now. That was exhausting.”

“I’m still surprised that there are people who behave like this regarding their kids.” I take off the lens from my camera and begin to pack it away. “I get wanting your kid to be successful, but talking like you want to be the one in her place is just cringeworthy.”

“People like to live through their kids in a vicarious manner.” Diane turns off the lights and folds them down. “They weren’t able to get that career or position when they were younger, so they make sure the kids can do it.”

I find it scary that there are plenty of parents who behave in such a manner and won’t let them have a mind of their own. The child in the photoshoot had looked a little dead behind the eyes, and she had tried so hard to brighten up and smile, but it didn’t work. The mother had wanted to take the final product to a modeling agency so she could get her daughter signed up. I have a feeling she’s not going to do well, even with a beautiful and talented daughter but was an empty shell due to being browbeaten by her mother.

I feel sorry for the little girl. She deserves better.

“What are the chances of the child turning against them once they’re capable of doing it?”

“I’m sure it’s pretty high. I would have been furious if my mom tried to make

me do what she wanted when she was a girl.”

“Wasn’t she a professional gymnast?”

“Yep. And look at me.” Diane laughed as she moved to touch her toes, stopping before she had gotten her hands past her knees. “I’m the least flexible person on the planet.”

I laugh.

“You could make a living as a gymnast clown.”

“Does those actually exist?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they did. They seem to have plenty of jobs for practically everything.”

“No, thanks. I hate gymnastics. The gymnasts themselves are lovely, but it’s not something I’m going to go into unless I’ve got my camera.” Diane heads over to her desk and logs in on her computer. “Let’s see how these came out. Although I don’t know how I’m going to put any life behind her eyes. She was just so blank.”

“You noticed that as well?”

“I’m afraid so.”

I sigh and zip up my bag, making a promise to myself to never do this with my daughter. Amy is not going to be turned into a puppet for me. I would never treat her like this.

Megan will probably do that if she is given half a chance.

She's never laying eyes on Amy. That's not happening.

I hear something ringing, and it takes a moment to realize that it's my cell phone, buzzing away on my desk. Diane raises her eyebrows at me.

"I thought you had turned it off."

"I thought so, too." I wince as I get up off the floor. "I hope it's not a cold call. I'm not in the mood for a sales pitch."

"If it is, tell them to fuck off. That's what I do."

I laugh as I pick up my phone. It's Carly's name flashing up on the screen. Nothing unusual there, seeing as it's the weekend and Carly is looking after Amy. They are probably wondering when I'm going to return home.

Not too long now. Then I can go back and we can have a girl's night in while Ben is visiting family and Luke is working. I'm looking forward to it.

"Hey, Carly."

"Elle, you need to get back right now."

Carly sounds scared. That's not like her at all.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"There's a social worker at the front door. She says that she's here to investigate you."

It takes a moment for the words to sink in. What did she just say?

"What? A social worker?"

“She won’t tell me the details, but she’s here with a police officer and they are here to make sure Amy is safe and well.”

Has someone called CPS on me? I can feel the panic building.

“Elle, I don’t know what to do. They’ve allowed me to call you, but they’re going to come in regardless. Amy’s scared, and I don’t know what I should be doing.”

“Just go along with what the police officer says, Carly. Answer their questions. I’m on my way home now.”

“Please hurry. The cop is scaring me, and the lady doesn’t look very nice.”

I hang up and turn to Diane, who is watching me with a frown.

“What’s wrong? You went as white as a sheet.”

“CPS and the police have turned up at my house.”

“What?”

It sounds strange saying it out loud. I swallow as my mouth goes dry.

“I need to go back. I’m sorry, Diane...”

“Don’t apologize. Just go.” Diane points towards the door. “You’re needed elsewhere. I’ll sort all this out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Stop questioning it, Elle, and just go. Your problem takes priority over work. Go.”

I don't need to be told again. Grabbing my things, I rush out to my car and drive home as fast as I can. I want to put my foot on the gas, and I'm trembling as I drive, but I manage to keep it together. The knowledge that there is a CPS worker at my house is frightening to me.

Who would be calling them? Surely, they couldn't suspect that I would hurt my daughter. Amy means the world to me. I would never hurt her.

Somehow, I manage to get home without causing an accident, and I pull into the drive. I nearly drop my bag as I hurry towards the house. Following the voices as I come through the door, I enter the living room to find Carly and Amy on the couch with a police officer standing next to them. A plump woman with red hair and wire-rimmed glasses is sitting across from them, writing something in a large notebook. She looks up as I come in.

“Mommy!”

Amy jumps up and runs over to me. I grab her and hold her tightly, trying not to cry in relief at seeing her. Forcing back my distress, I concentrate on the woman.

“What's going on here?”

“You're Mrs Anderson?”

“It's Ms Anderson.”

“Ms Anderson.” The woman picks up an ID that's lying on the coffee table and shows it to her. “I'm Pamela Crier. I work for Child Protective Services.”

“Who called you in? Who is telling stories?”

“I'm afraid I can't tell you. The calls are anonymous, after all.”

“Then why are you here?”

Ms Crier puts the ID down and shifts to sit on the edge of the chair.

“We received a phone call saying that your daughter was being left at home while you were at work, and that she was not being properly fed or cared for. There were a lot of details that we had to follow up on.”

I feel sick hearing this. I would never do anything to abuse my daughter. The thought of that disgusts me.

“Whoever told you that was lying. I’ve never done anything of the sort with Amy.” I nod at Carly. “I’m sure you’ve been told that already.”

“We’ve had a discussion. You two are...roommates?” Ms Crier raises her eyebrows. “She said that you two have lived together for years.”

Is she implying a sexual relationship between us? I don’t know whether to get angry or burst out laughing at the implication.

“Carly and I have known each other since university. We’ve lived together with another friend for eight years now.”

“I see. And Amy’s father? Is he around?”

I hesitate. I still haven’t told Amy about Luke. This is not how I wanted to do it.

“He’s around.” I choose my words carefully. “We’re not together, but we’re on good terms.”

“I will need to speak to him as well. We have to look at everyone in your daughter’s life.”

I know Amy is looking at me. She wants answers. How do I manage this? Choosing to focus elsewhere, I turn to Carly.

“Could you call him and ask if he’s available to come over? I need to speak to Ms Crier.”

“Of course.” Carly pauses and glances at the police officer. “Am I allowed to leave the room?”

“You’re not under arrest, miss.”

“You could have fooled me.” Carly stands up, nodding at me. “I’ll be right back.”

She leaves the room. I move to the couch, Amy still clinging onto me, and sit down. Ms Crier watches me, and I can feel the police officer’s eyes on me as well. It’s very unnerving.

“I take it you’ve had a look around my house already, Ms Crier,” I say stiffly.

“Actually, I was waiting for you to return home before I did that. As Amy’s primary guardian, I would need you to answer the questions.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath, tightening my arms around Amy as she buries her face into my neck. I adjust her so she’s sitting across my lap. “I don’t know who thought it was a good idea to waste your time, but I would never do anything to hurt my daughter. I would never neglect her.”

“We have to follow these calls up, otherwise we wouldn’t be doing our job properly.”

“I get that, but what is the need for the cop?” I nod in the burly man’s direction. “I’m not a danger. I feel like we’re wasting his time as well.”

“The anonymous caller also said you were known for dealing drugs and being violent,” the cop replied. “We have to ensure the safety of everyone involved.”

Did I hear that correctly? Someone said I was dealing drugs? That sounds ludicrous to my ears.

“I’ve never done drugs in my life, and the only time I’ve wanted to be violent was when I caught my dad cheating with someone only a few years older than me.” I rub Amy’s back. “But I would never hurt Amy.”

“Nevertheless, we still have to be sure before we can say otherwise.”

“I understand that...” I groan when I hear a phone ringing. “God, what now?”

Ms Crier gives her a pointed look.

“Are you going to get that?”

“Will you allow me to?”

“As long as you take the call in here.”

I manage to ease Amy off my lap and get my bag from the hall, fumbling with my phone as I enter the room again. It’s a number I don’t recognize, but it could be that client I was hoping to hear back from. She has been dodging my calls for a while now.

I answer it before it goes to voicemail.

“Hello, Elle Anderson.”

“Are you going to listen to reason now?”

It takes me a while before I recognize the voice.

“Megan?”

“We told you that Amy should come with us. Why won’t you just do as you’re told?”

I pull my phone away from my ear and stare at it. It’s not morphed into anything else. I’m still hearing insanity. I glance at Ms Crier and put the phone on loudspeaker.

“Megan, why are you calling me? And what are you talking about?”

“We deserve to have a child! You don’t!” Megan is practically shrieking into my ear. “If you won’t give us Amy, we’ll make sure you don’t get to keep her.”

She sounds manic. Almost like her mind is broken. Then it clicks for me.

“Did you call CPS on me? Or did Dad?”

Ms Crier looks perplexed. The cop’s expression says he had no idea what to think.

“Someone has to take Amy away from you! How is she going to get a proper childhood if she’s in your house?”

“Megan, you do realize that you can get yourself into trouble for filing a false report and wasting resources, don’t you?”

Megan barks a harsh laugh.

“As if they’re going to charge me. Kevin said you weren’t going to listen as

you should. I'm just making sure your life is going to be hell for telling us no."

Ms Crier's mouth is open. She looks how I feel.

"All because I said no to you two practically kidnapping my daughter?"

"We were going to give her the life she should be having. You are a single mother and a useless human being. You shouldn't have her."

"I think you need to go to the nearest psych ward and have your head checked out. You sound crazy."

"I'm not crazy!" Megan shouts. "I want my baby! And I won't have you stopping me!"

She hangs up, and silence fills the air. For a moment, nobody speaks. Then Amy whimpers and starts to cry. Shit, I have forgotten that she is in the room with us. Tossing my phone onto the coffee table, I go to my daughter and hold her tightly.

"It's okay, Amy. I'm so sorry." I rock her, rubbing her back. "I'm so sorry."

"Is she going to come and take me?" Amy sobs against me, practically clinging to my arms. "I don't want to go with her! I don't want to leave you!"

"That's not going to happen, honey. I'm not going anywhere." I look up at Ms Crier. "Isn't that right, Ms Crier?"

The social worker looks like she doesn't know what to say. I can't really blame her, I'm rather stunned after what I just heard. I didn't realize that I knew someone who was really crazy.

Who on earth did Dad marry?

Chapter 22 Luke

I see the police car pulling away from outside Elle's house as I turn into her street. The sight of the police being present leaves me feeling scared for Elle and Amy. Did they think she was in danger? Or that she poses a danger? From the phone call I got from Carly in the middle of a meeting, she thinks it's the latter.

I don't understand what's going on. Elle is a marvelous mom, and she has raised Amy really well. I can't believe anyone would think she is a bad parent.

Parking outside the house, I am crossing the front lawn as the front door opens and Carly comes out with Amy. Both are wearing coats and hats, and Amy looks like she's just finished crying. My heart breaks at the sight of her, and I go straight to Amy.

"Hey, kiddo." I kneel before her. "How are you holding up?"

Amy's bottom lip trembles, and she hugs me. It takes a second of returning the hug to realize this is the first time I've actually held my daughter. It almost makes me break down as well. I look up at Carly.

"Where's Elle?"

"She's inside. I said I'd take Amy out for ice cream after all that." Carly gives me a pointed look. "Ben is not going to be back for a few days, so you won't be disturbed if you need to talk."

“I’ll remember that.” I ease Amy back and adjust her hat so I can see her face better. “You go and enjoy that ice cream. Have you had dinner yet?”

Amy shakes her head.

“Well, how about a takeout dinner tonight? I’ll get whatever you want.”

“Really?”

“Really. Think about what you want, and I’ll get it.” I stand up and nod at Carly. “Look after her.”

“Don’t worry, I plan to.” Carly clasps Amy’s hand. “Come on, sweetie. Let’s go and get that ice cream.”

I watch both of them leave, getting into Carly’s car and heading down the drive. Then I go inside, following the sound of clattering in the kitchen. Elle is there, going through all of the cupboards and seeming to be putting everything away or shuffling crockery around. I stand in the doorway and watch her. She looks angry, and I can’t blame her for that.

“Elle?”

“I’ve been meaning to clean out my cupboards for a while. This place is an absolute mess.” Elle doesn’t stop as she starts to unload the dishwasher. “The social worker didn’t say anything, but I felt so embarrassed at the state of my house. I can’t believe we left the place in such a state.”

“You didn’t know it was going to happen, and she must have said things were fine.”

“She did, and she said they would close the case with a note to say it was a malicious complaint, and the cops are going to have a word with the bitch

who called in, but I still can't believe we had a kitchen in this state.”

She is beginning to bang cups and plates down on the counter. If she puts them down any harder, she is going to end up breaking something.

I cross the kitchen and catch hold of her as she reaches back into the dishwasher, easing her away before she can grab anything else. Elle tries to pull away, but I pull her into my arms and hold her. She is stiff, and I can feel her trembling, but she soon melts into my hold, putting her arms around my waist and resting her head on my shoulder. I wait, slowly rubbing her back.

After a while, Elle lifts her head.

“I'm sorry,” she whispers.

“What for?”

“Because I got angry. I'm getting overly emotional about this...”

I kiss her, silencing her. I pull away before she can react, resting my forehead against hers.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You have done nothing wrong.”

“I had a CPS worker in here, along with a cop. I feel like I have.”

“No, you haven't. And they clearly didn't find anything wrong if they say they're going to class it as a malicious complaint.”

Elle snorts and pulls away, moving back to lean against the counter with her arms folded.

“I think it helped that they were able to hear Megan when she called me to...I

don't know what I would call it because it wasn't gloating."

"What? Megan?"

"Dad's wife?"

It takes me a moment to realize what she was saying. I stare at her.

"Are you saying that she said that she was the one who called CPS?"

"Apparently, because I wouldn't give Amy over like she's a toy that needs to be shared, they're going to make my life hell. I don't know what their endgame is, though, because I still wouldn't give Amy to them."

"Did you tell the social worker about this?"

"She heard it. I think it was a few minutes before she stopped looking bewildered."

I'm not surprised. If I heard something like that, I'm going to be wondering if I had heard it correctly. I knew there were plenty of people who would make a malicious call to CPS, but I never thought it would happen here.

"Megan sounded...unhinged," Elle goes on, frowning as she stares at the floor. "Like she had lost grip on reality. I think her desire to have a child has just made her slip into insanity."

"I've heard that people can go crazy when someone close to them has a kid and they can't have one themselves."

"But they wouldn't call CPS and lie about the person, would they? All this because I wouldn't hand over my daughter?"

“Are the police going to do something about it?”

“I hope so. The cop was vague about it, and I was too stressed to ask too much.”

I wish I had been here when the police were. I would be demanding everything to be thrown at Elle’s father and his wife. How dare they do this to us? Just because they couldn’t get what they wanted? It feels ridiculous.

“What are you going to do about it?” I ask.

“I don’t know if there’s anything I can do beyond waiting to see what the cops and CPS say. I’m going to get a follow-up call at some point in the next few days.”

“You need a restraining order.”

Elle frowns at me.

“I doubt I’ll be able to get anything.”

“You can get a civil protection order. Your dad is a family member and he’s harassing you.”

“But he doesn’t live in this state.”

“It doesn’t matter. You can still file it. Just tell my lawyer when you want it done, and it’ll be taken care of for you.”

But Elle is shaking her head.

“No.”

“What? Why not?”

“Because this is my family. Dad is my problem. I don’t want to get you involved.”

“Are you kidding me, Elle? I was there when he told you what he wanted from you. I heard him demanding to take Amy for him and that psychotic wife of his. Plus, I’m Amy’s father. Why wouldn’t I get involved?”

Something flickers behind Elle’s eyes. Then she looks away with a heavy sigh, her shoulders slumping.

“I’m sorry. It...it’s just that...I’m not good at accepting help. It took forever to be comfortable with Carly and Ben looking after me when I found out I was pregnant. I’m even reluctant to ask for help from my extended relatives, especially Grandma. Taking people for granted is not something I’m good at.”

I cross the room and cup her head in my hands, kissing her forehead.

“You don’t need to worry about that. You could never take me for granted, Elle. Anything you need for me, you can have. You only have to ask.”

“You do realize that could be dangerous if you said it to the wrong person.”

“But I know you won’t take advantage. I trust you.” I brush her hair away from her face. “And this involves both of us. We’re a team here. Anyone comes after our kid is going to have to deal with me as well.”

Elle still looks dubious. I can tell it’s hard for her to relax and let other people in. She trusts Carly and Ben, and I am hoping she can let me in as well.

“Okay. Maybe I’ll talk to your lawyer tomorrow. I’ve got a migraine, and I don’t want to deal with that mayhem anymore.”

“That’s fine. I’ll let him know you’ll be calling.”

“But I’m paying his fee. I won’t rely on you for that.”

“We’ll talk about that later.” I kiss her before pulling away and gesturing at the crockery across the counter. “Let’s clean up this place, shall we? And when Amy and Carly get back, I’ll order in. Whatever Amy wants, we’re going to have.”

“That means we’re going to end up having Chinese,” Elle grunts. “Amy loves it more than burger and fries.”

“I won’t argue with that. Whatever she wants.”

Elle manages a small smile.

“You’re going to spoil her, Luke. Don’t be surprised if she asks more and more off you.”

“She’s my kid. Of course I would.” I pause. “Are you going to tell her that she’s my daughter? I presume you haven’t done it yet.”

“I…” Elle bites her lip. “I’m still trying to find the right time. Be patient with me.”

I don’t want to argue it, so I let it go. But I am a little annoyed that she still hasn’t said anything. If she leaves it any longer, Amy is going to get confused.

However, Elle said she wants to tell Amy about me. I’m not going to be disrespectful of her wishes. Even if I’m itching to tell my daughter the truth about me.

Not now. I am not about to destroy Elle's trust in me.

Chapter 23 Elle

A gust of wind blasts across the park, and it almost knocks me over. Diane doesn't react, barely lowering her camera as the models brace themselves against the wind.

"Just a couple more shots, guys, and then we're done!" she shouts over the noise. "It's too much to carry on here!"

I can't agree more. This is not what any of us expected when we met at the park to shoot for a magazine that has commissioned us to take pictures for. We had checked the weather before coming out, and everything said it was fine. Evidently, things decided to change between checking the weather and getting out to the park because this wind is pretty bad. I never expected it as I try to keep the lights upright.

Diane takes another few shots, and then she lowers her camera and waves her arms.

"Okay, that's enough for now! It's too much out here!"

"Thank God for that!" declares the female model as she hurries over to where their belongings were. She tugs on her coat, shuddering as she wraps it around herself. "I didn't think it would be that cold out here!"

"Same here!" Diane goes over to her as I try to dismantle our equipment. "We're going to have to finish off at the studio if your client wants more than what we've got here, Lucia. Otherwise something's going to get broken."

Lucia sighs.

“I suppose we’re going to have to do that. Is it warm in your studio?”

“We can put the heating on as high as you want.”

“Then tell us your address, and Trevor and I will meet you there.”

I think that sounds like a good idea, although I don’t understand why we couldn’t do all of it in the studio and then put a background in. That would work just as well, especially in weather like this.

I put the lights away into their cases and begin to take them over to Diane’s SUV. As I’m coming back to get the second case, Trevor is there lifting it up for me.

“It’s okay, I’ve got this...”

“It’s fine. I’m happy to help.” Trevor gives me a lopsided grin as he steps around me. “Anything to help a pretty lady.”

I roll my eyes. Trevor has been flirting with me since he arrived at the park. He is really good at his job, and he and Lucia show a great chemistry for what is needed, but in between takes before things got too bad I saw him looking at me, as if he expects me to be watching him and not doing my work. It’s rather tiring.

I just want to work and go home to my daughter. It’s been a week since the CPS worker came to the house with the malicious complaint, and even though it’s been confirmed as closed, I’m still on edge. What if Megan hadn’t called me at that point? What if they had taken Amy away regardless of what they found? A lot of scenarios have been going through my head since that

day, and it's driving me insane.

Luke is good at distracting me when I get agitated around him. Even though he's just as upset, he's soothing me and ensuring that I don't show how upset I am around Amy. The poor thing is still scared that someone is going to take her away, and I still feel guilty that I forgot she was in the room when Megan was spouting off her nonsense.

Luke is my rock, and I feel bad for leaning on him too much, but he doesn't complain. I'm grateful for that, because I need that right now.

The last thing I need is to have a model hitting on me. But I do want to get out of the wind as soon as possible. Sighing, I clear up the rest of the set we had put up, grateful that there wasn't much. Trevor puts everything into the back of the SUV, and is shrugging into his coat as I approach with my own camera equipment.

"I'm sure Diane's given Lucia the location of our studio," I tell him as I shut the trunk. "We'll meet you there shortly."

"Okay." Trevor regards me curiously. "Do you fancy going for a drink afterwards?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Or maybe dinner? I'm sure you're going to be starving."

He really is hitting on me. I fix him with a cool stare.

"Sorry, I've got a boyfriend and a kid with him."

"He doesn't need to know about it."

“What...did you just suggest that I should cheat on him?”

Trevor shrugs with a grin that makes me want to slap him.

“What he doesn’t know can’t hurt him. And I think I can get you to change your mind.”

“Absolutely not.” I step away, keeping my eyes on him as I move around him. “Unless it’s to do with the photoshoot, don’t talk to me about anything else. I think that’s the best thing for you to do.”

Before he can say anything more, I get into the passenger seat and slam the door. Diane, already behind the wheel, jumps.

“Whoa, what happened there?”

“Trevor just tried to hit on me.”

“He did?”

“And said Luke doesn’t need to know.” I scowl. “I can’t stand people like him.”

Diane whistles.

“Shit. You as well?”

“As well? He hit on you, too?”

“About an hour ago when I was checking the makeup was good for the lighting. He suggested that we go and get a drink or maybe some food afterwards.”

“That’s pretty much what he said to me.”

Diane laughs.

“At least we know his MO. I think this will be the last time we work with him, though.”

“I won’t argue with that.” I click my seatbelt into place. “Let’s get this over with. I just want to go home.”

The drive back to the studio is in silence, and I find myself looking in the rearview mirror several times. I can’t help myself; given what happened the week before, I’m feeling very paranoid. I feel like everyone is looking at me and following me around. Dad and Megan have me feeling tetchy, and I’m beginning to jump at shadows.

It’s scary, and I hate it.

Finally, we get to our studio. The wind is still pretty strong, but at least we’ll be inside. As Diane is opening the trunk of the SUV and we’re getting the equipment out, Lucia comes hurrying over.

“Hey, are you expecting someone else?” she asks.

“Not that we know of,” I answer. “Why?”

“Because there was someone trying to get into the studio as we arrived. Trevor asked who he was, and he said that he worked with you two and he had lost the key to the studio.”

Something cold runs down my spine, and I momentarily freeze up. Behind me, I can hear Diane joining us.

“What? Did you say someone was trying to get into the studio?”

“Yes.” Lucia nods, huddling in her coat. “Something about him didn’t sit right, so I told him I would call the cops, and he left pretty quickly.”

I glance over at Diane, who looks just as troubled as I feel. I zip up my coat, but it doesn’t stop me from feeling cold.

“What did he look like? Did you get a good look at him?”

“No, he was wearing a black jacket and a black wooly hat.” Lucia frowns. “He was tall-ish, strong build, mid-forties? I’m not good on guessing age. And he had a beard.”

That can describe Dad to a T. But it can also describe any other regular guy of the same age. Diane is watching me.

“You okay, Elle?”

“I’m fine.” I square my shoulders and manage a smile. “It’s just a little... unnerving, you know?”

Diane knows about the fake CPS call, but she doesn’t know about Dad trying to harass me into giving him Amy. It’s something I don’t want to concern her with. Maybe I’ll tell her once things have died down and Dad and Megan have backed off; it’s certainly too much for me, and I’m involved in the mess.

“Well, let’s get inside, and then we can get back to work.” Diane gestures at the back of the car. “Help me get this stuff out, will you?”

“Sure.” I join her and help Diane drag one of the cases out. “If only we could hire a strong young man with muscles to move our equipment around. It would make things a lot easier.”

“We could ask Trevor for help,” Diane suggests. “If you fancy having him chat you up again?”

“Not a chance. I’d rather do my back in than have him help me out with the expectation of something in return.”

Diane laughs.

“I’ll see if we can get a hot young guy to be our personal assistant and muscles. I’m sure we can stretch the budget.”

The hilarity makes me feel a little better, and it helps me concentrate on getting things out of the back of the car. At least we don’t have to take things up stairs, otherwise I would be giving in and asking Trevor for help.

I prefer to keep him at arm’s length after what he said to me.

We carry the first case over to our studio door, and Diane unlocks it. Lucia holds it open for us and we stagger inside.

“Where did Trevor go?” Diane asks as she puts the case down with a gasp. “I thought you guys came here together.”

“I don’t know. He said he needed to check something and went off somewhere. I don’t know what he’s up to.” Lucia turns as the door opens again. “Where have you been?”

“Sorry.” Trevor enters the studio, unzipping his jacket. “I thought I’d follow that weirdo and see what he was up to.”

I stare at him.

“You actually went after him? What were you planning on doing?”

“I don’t know. He was acting really oddly, and I saw him go around the side of the building instead of going towards the parking lot.”

“So you decided the best thing to do was to go after him?” Lucia shakes her head. “God, you’re such an idiot.”

“Well, two lovely ladies work here alone.” Trevor gestures at Diane and myself. “I want to be sure they’re safe.”

“And this isn’t going to get them to drop their panties for you, Trevor,” Lucia shot back. Then she nods at the camera in Trevor’s hand. “Where did you get that from?”

“He saw me following me and ran, but he dropped this.” Trevor’s expression turns grim and he looks at me. “There are a lot of pictures of you on here, Elle.”

I blink.

“What? Of me?”

Trevor holds out the camera, which I take and look through the memory card. As I click through them all, I feel dread settle in my stomach. Sure enough, the pictures are of me. I’m in the foreground in all of them. Sometimes, I’m with Amy, and in others I’m with Luke, who has his arm around me. We look like a little family.

But this frightens me. Someone has been following us. If that was Dad who had run away...

“Elle?” Diane is at my side. “You okay? You’re as white as a sheet.”

“I...I think I need to sit down.” I can feel myself swaying. “This...I...”

“Okay, darling, come and sit here.” Diane leads me over to a stool and helps me sit. Then she takes the camera from me, flicking through the photos herself. Her eyes get rounder and rounder. “Holy...someone’s been following you around for a while.”

I can’t answer. I just nod. Lucia looks worried.

“Should we call the cops?” she asks. “What if he comes back?”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t, otherwise he’s going to get a face full of bear spray.” Diane’s voice is almost a snarl. She lowers the camera. “Sorry, guys, we’re going to have to finish this another day. I don’t think any of us are in the right mindset to finish.”

“Hell, I want to get out of here.” Trevor holds up his hands. “This has nothing to do with me, and I don’t want to become a target.”

“Oh, shut up!” Lucia swats him in the stomach. “As if anyone would make you a target. Do you need anything from us? We’re happy to help.”

“If you can give the cops a description, that would be a help.” Diane goes over to her desk. “I’m going to call them right now.”

I sit up.

“But what about the shoot? Shouldn’t we get it done?”

“Elle, someone tried to break into our studio, and it’s clear that he’s stalking you.” Diane frowns at me. “I know you’re in shock right now, but now isn’t the appropriate time to work.”

I want to argue about that - work is something I need to distract myself, especially after seeing those pictures of me. I can keep myself together until

later. But Diane is right; this isn't the appropriate time. I don't think I can stop shaking long enough to do anything.

I bury my head in my hands. It feels like this day has been declining since the morning, and it's hit rock bottom. I can't take it anymore.

Chapter 24 Luke

“I think the boys are going to be celebrating for about a week after that win,” Marcus laughs as we leave the football stadium. The sounds of the players cheering and singing follows us out. “They’re so chuffed about that.”

“That sounds like an understatement,” I smile, getting out my phone and checking for any missed calls. Thankfully, there are none, and no messages, either. A surprising state for me that I wasn’t needed during that game. I put my phone away. “But they deserve that. They really stepped up to the game.”

“And against their rivals as well. That’s probably boosting their confidence right now.”

“What are the chances that they’re going to be drunk when they get back to training in the morning?”

“Highly likely. Ever tried playing sport with a hangover?”

Marcus scoffs.

“That’s nothing. We did that at university, didn’t we? I seem to remember playing soccer after a heavy night of drinking.”

I groan as I remember.

“God, don’t remind me. I’ve lost count of how many times you dragged us out to have fun, only to be dragged out again to play soccer.”

“We got an awesome breakfast afterwards, didn’t we? That helped with the hangover.”

“But did we have to play soccer before that? I swear they kept throwing more balls into the pitch to annoy us.”

Marcus laughs and nudges me.

“You do know that was the alcohol messing with your brain, don’t you?”

“And I still wonder why I let you do that to me.”

“Because you love me.”

“Don’t push it, Marcus.”

“Okay, I’ll stop.” Marcus checks his watch. “I’d better get going. I promised that I would be home tonight, and I don’t want the plane to be waiting for me.”

“Say hi to your wife for me.”

“Will do.” Marcus taps me on the shoulder with his fist. “I’ll call you later. See what else there is we can do.”

I hope there isn’t much to do tonight; I want to go to see Elle and Amy. Amy was talking about the pantomime of Jack and the Beanstalk, and I managed to get tickets to go into the front row.

A nice way to finish off a good day.

As I’m going towards my car, I’m aware of someone calling my name and footsteps. I turn, only to stare as Elle is hurrying towards me.

“Elle? What...?”

I don't get any further before Elle throws her arms around me and buries her face in my neck. For a second, I have no idea what's going on. Then I wrap my arms around her and hold her as she gulps in air in shaky breaths.

Then she's kissing me. My arousal stirs at the feel of her mouth on mine and her body pressing up against me, but I fight it back. I can tell that Elle is in some distress, and she's not looking for sex. She wants comfort.

What's happened?

Elle breaks the kiss suddenly, her cheeks flushed and her breathing heavily. She opens her eyes, and I see the fear there. Something has really scared her. She swallows.

“I really needed that.”

“Elle? What's happened?”

“Just...” Her hands run over my shoulders, her fingers digging in through my jacket. “I just had a bit of an unnerving experience.”

Now I'm getting paranoid. Fumbling with my keys, I get my car unlocked and led Elle over, urging her into the passenger seat. Then I get in behind the wheel, locking the doors as an afterthought. We sit there in silence for a moment, Elle leaning back against the headrest with her eyes closed. She looks worn out.

“What happened, Elle?” I ask. “Did something happen at work?”

“Sort of.”

“What does that mean? Did you get one of the models harassing you?”

She shakes her head.

“No, nothing like that. I can handle all of that. But I...I might have a stalker.”

“What?”

“Well, both of us might have a stalker. But I think it’s mostly me as the target.”

Stalker? That came out of nowhere. I turn to face her.

“I think you need to start from the beginning. You’re scaring me now, Elle.”

Elle sighs. She reaches out and takes my hand.

“I’m sorry, Luke. Diane told me to go home, and I didn’t know what to do. I just drove around for a while until I decided to find you.” She bites her lip. “I didn’t want to bother you, but...”

“You can bother me all you want, especially if you’re shaken up.” I squeeze her hand. “You know you can rely on me.”

“I know.”

I wait. I can tell that Elle’s still trying to get things sorted out in her head. If I’m honest, if I found out that I had a stalker, I would be in a mess as well. That’s not something I would be able to cope with, either.

“Someone was trying to get into our studio,” Elle says, her eyes fixed forward as she speaks. “The models we were with caught him trying to get in. When he left, he dropped his camera. There were photos of me, of us, all

through the memory card.”

“Are you saying someone’s been watching you for a while.”

Elle nods.

“The first photo is of me dropping Amy off at kindergarten. The outfit she’s in was at the start of the week.”

“Are you saying someone’s been following you for a week?”

“I think so. He manages to get quite a few, including through the window of my house.” Elle lets out a shuddering breath. “He...he took pictures of me in my bedroom as well.”

I feel a shiver going down my back. This guy has managed to take pictures of her in the part of the house Elle was meant to feel safe in? And he had snapped some of Amy as well? I can feel the fear and the rage mixing in my belly. If this guy comes anywhere near my girl, I’m going to rip his head off.

“I think it’s Dad,” Elle says quietly. “It’s got to be.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because one of the models described the guy and it sounds like my dad. He’s proficient enough with a camera, so it’s not a stretch to think he would do that himself.”

“Why would he stalk you like this, though?”

“You know why! He and Megan want Amy for themselves!”

I shift around to face her, holding her hand between both of mine.

“You said there were photos of you. Was Amy in some of them, most of them, or not many of them?”

“What?” Elle blinks at me. “She was in a few of them, but the camera was mostly focused on me.”

“If your dad is after Amy, he would be taking more photos of her than of you, wouldn’t he? She’s the target, so she would be the focus of his attention. Does that make sense?”

“I guess.” Elle shakes her head. “But that wouldn’t explain why he was trying to get into my studio. I feel like I’m the target, like he’s looking for a weakness that he could use against me.”

I can see that happening, but I don’t agree with her that it’s her father, although I do believe that he’s deranged. Someone else is on my mind, and they are more likely to be the stalker, although they wouldn’t be doing it personally.

“I don’t think it was your dad, Elle.”

Elle snorts.

“Who else could it be? If you’ve got a better suspect, I’m dying to hear it.”

“My mother.”

“What?”

Sighing, I sit back in my seat, rubbing a hand over my face.

“I’ve told you about my parents before, haven’t I? How Dad is a great guy but Mom...she’s determined to have me married and settled down with

multiple kids. She is desperate to be a grandmother.”

“I remember you telling me about her.” Elle holds up a hand. “Wait, was she behind your ex-girlfriend coming to Cleveland and trying to get into your apartment?”

“She was. She gave Hannah my address and everything.” I shake my head. “Let’s just say Mom is on very thin ice right now.”

“If I were in that situation, I’d be cutting her off immediately.”

“We’ve been through this before, Elle. It’s not as easy as that.”

“I think it’s very easy.” Elle sighs. “But that is your family, and you said you would deal with it.”

I remember what we talked about before regarding my mother, and I have purposefully kept her away from Elle. I don’t want her to be subjected to Mom with her rude questions and wanting to know every intimate detail of what we did. I know Mom, and she will definitely do that.

“So, you think that your mother hired someone to stalk me,” Elle says slowly. “Does she know about me?”

“She does. And she knows about Amy.”

“What?”

I hold up my hands as Elle stares at me.

“I was only telling my dad and asking his advice. Mom overheard and decided to get involved.”

“But I haven’t even told Amy about you yet.”

“I know that, and the fact you’ve not done it is really grating on me.” I gesture at her. “You need to tell her. If this carries on, Amy is not going to forgive you so easily for keeping this from her.”

Elle looks away.

“We’re not discussing this now, Luke. Now is not the time.”

“Yeah. Right.” I drop it, but I have no intention of letting it go completely. “Anyway, Mom now knows about Amy, and she’s not happy that she wasn’t there at all.”

“Did you tell her about me?”

“No, I didn’t tell her anything about you. She probably thought that she would need to find out something about the mother of her granddaughter and hired someone to find out more about you.”

“So I get a creep following me and taking pictures as a response.” Elle shakes her head. “God, as if I didn’t have enough problems right now without adding a potential stalker of a mother-in-law following me around.”

“We’ve both got crazy parents.”

“Crazy isn’t how I would describe Dad and Megan. Psychotic, more like.” Elle closes her eyes. “God, this is giving me a headache. I just want to go through my life with my daughter. I don’t want any of this drama.”

I notice that she didn’t mention me in that, and I have to admit that it hurts to hear that she’s not including me. I push that aside. That is not something I should be focusing on right now.

“What are we going to do?” I ask. “Are we going to go to the cops?”

“I’m going to be letting the cops know about this, although I don’t know if there’s anything they can do seeing as we barely saw the guy.”

“But you have the camera. You might be able to trace it back to its owner.”

“That’s true.” Elle nods. “It’s in my car right now.”

“Get that over to the cops right now. The sooner you find out who is doing this, the sooner you can stop looking over your shoulder.”

“Can I take you up on the offer of using your lawyer for this? It might help me out a little if I have him with me.”

“Of course.” I squeeze her fingers. “You don’t need to ask, just call him.”

“Thanks.” Elle hesitates. “I’m sorry for coming to you like this...”

“Stop.”

Elle does stop, and I lean over to kiss her. I have to force myself to pull back.

“Don’t ever apologize for coming to me over this. I would want to know if you’re dealing with this shit.”

“I’m just bringing more trouble to you, though.”

I manage a chuckle.

“I think bringing me trouble should be the least of your worries. Someone’s following you and our kid. I’m not going to sit back and let it happen without doing something about it.”

Elle peers at me.

“Why do I have a feeling you’re going to do something that’s going to get you into trouble?”

“I won’t get into trouble. Trust me.”

Elle doesn’t look convinced. I kiss her again and sit back.

“You go to the cops and deal with this. Do you want me to pick up Amy?”

“Ben said he was going to collect her.”

“Oh. I see.”

While I understand Ben’s relationship with Amy, hearing that another man is picking up my daughter doesn’t sit well with me. I fight back the jealousy and shift in my seat.

“Okay, I...I’ll see you later, I guess.”

“Luke?”

Elle leans over, kissing me softly. She gives me a small smile before drawing back.

“Thank you. I appreciate you letting me get all that out. I was feeling like a mess.”

“I’ll do anything for you, Elle. You know that.”

Elle touches my cheek, and then she gets out of the car. I watch her walk away, crossing the parking lot to her car. I want to go with her and make sure she’s safe, but I know that Elle will get annoyed with me for following her

about. She needed someone to be with her at that point, and now she was drawing back on her own strength.

I feel honored that she came to me, but I wish she would have stayed.

Sighing, I put the keys into the ignition and turn the engine on. I have quite a few things to get on with. Most of it involves Mom, and if she's the one stalking Elle.

If she is...

I really hope that it isn't her. Because I don't want to think about the consequences once I find out if she's the reason Elle is having to look over her shoulder after her privacy was invaded.

Chapter 25 Elle

I feel like a fool for going to Luke in a mess and talking in such a disjointed fashion. Everything came out in a mess, and I feel like none of it really made any sense. But Diane had told me to go home, and I didn't know what to do until I remembered Luke was nearby. He had mentioned watching something about the Bulldogs at their first game.

I'm glad that I did find him, and that I got to be in his arms. Just being held by Luke makes me feel a little better. I don't feel unstable and scared. He just...he's like a tonic for me.

Things are meant to be going slow between us, and it's going well. But I know Luke wants more than what I'm giving him. He wants me to tell Amy the truth about him, about where he was in the past. It is going to be a very difficult conversation, I know that much. Especially as I've been putting it off for a while now. Amy isn't going to be happy with me.

But it needs to be done. If Luke and I are to progress further with our relationship, I need to sit Amy down and explain about her dad. And hope that she can forgive me for hiding it from her.

Maybe I should leave it until we find out who's stalking me. I don't want to add further angst.

I realize that I'm planning on hiding from the inevitable again. God, I'm in such a mess, and I can't lean on Luke for support this time. I'm on my own.

Tonight. I'm going to sit Amy down and tell her tonight. I have to if I want to be with the man I love.

The man I love. I've been saying that in my head for a while now, and it's feeling good each time I say it. I just hope I can get the courage to actually say it to Luke.

It feels like forever before I am returning home. Being at the police station hadn't taken long, especially not with Luke's lawyer present, but it had felt rather sluggish. At least the camera is with the police and they're taking it seriously, and yet I feel like something else should be done. What, though, I have no idea.

My head is hurting from all of the thinking.

I park my car in the street and get out, fighting back a yawn. As I'm getting my things off the passenger seat, I hear someone calling my name.

"Elle!"

I turn, and I freeze when I see a familiar figure striding towards me. For a second, I can't quite place her, but I'm sure that I know her. Then the voice matches the face, and I realize who it is.

"Megan?" I straighten up, shutting my door and keeping my bag in front of my body. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought you and I could have a conversation about this...situation." Megan comes forward, a little too close for comfort, and it has me backing up. Megan stops. "I'm not going to hurt you, Elle."

"How do I know you're not? You've pretty much done everything else."

“I just want Amy. What’s wrong with that?”

“Aside from the fact I’m not going to give you my daughter because you can’t have children?” I shoot back. “I’m sorry that you can’t have kids, and I feel for you. But that doesn’t mean you can waltz in and take my daughter from me. That’s not how it works.”

Megan glares at me. The brief pleading look is gone very quickly, but then she brings it back, taking a deep breath and briefly closing her eyes.

“Can’t we talk about this like adults, Elle? You will understand once we’ve talked that we’re right on this.”

“Right on what?” I snap. “The fact you’re jealous that your husband’s daughter has a kid and you don’t? You have no biological link to Amy, and even if you hadn’t been Dad’s side piece and married him on the day of Mom’s funeral, I wouldn’t let you anywhere near her.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because you’re too unstable, that’s why!”

Megan narrows her eyes at me.

“I did not come here for a fight. I came here to talk.”

“Well, pardon me for not wanting to have a conversation with someone who wants to snatch my daughter for her own,” I sneer. I am too tired to hold back anymore, especially with the audacity Megan is showing towards me. “I get that what you’re going through is difficult, and I’m not taking away from that. However, you don’t get a free pass beyond that.”

“Elle…”

“Did you think I was going to say ‘okay, fine, have my daughter’, step away and just leave you alone? That’s not how the world works, Megan. If you want a daughter, you can adopt. You can foster kids. Hell, you can even get a surrogate to carry your baby. You don’t need to come to me and demand that I hand over my six-year-old!”

Megan shakes her head.

“I don’t want to do any of that. I want your daughter. I found out a lot about her snooping around social media, and she’s amazing. Bright, talented and beautiful. Just what I want for a daughter.”

I’m feeling nauseous, wondering what happened to Megan for this outrageous plan to make sense to her and that nobody would think it was ridiculous. I look towards the house, and I see the lights on. Hopefully, Ben will be able to see what’s going on. I don’t want to bring Megan closer to the house.

“While I have sympathy for you, taking my child is not the way to go about it.”

“We can provide her a home!” Megan protests. “We can give her a two-parent home. What are you giving her? Three single people and no father in sight. How is that healthy for Amy?”

“And how is your current mentality healthy?”

Megan lifts her chin.

“At least I know we can look after Amy as she deserves. Better than you.”

This is getting stupid. I really want to get away from her now.

“Elle? You okay?”

I almost sag in relief. Ben is in the doorway, stepping out onto the porch. I give him a wave, not taking my eyes off Megan.

“It’s fine, Ben. Mrs Anderson was just leaving.”

I think Megan is about to protest, but instead she scowls and glares at me before moving away.

“Fine. I’ll go for now. But this isn’t over. You are not going to be saying no to me for much longer.”

“Is that a threat, Megan?”

“It’s a promise. Amy is my kid, and I’m taking her with me. You can be sure of that.”

I want to grab her and slap her, but I keep my hands clutched around my bag.

“Maybe get yourself checked out before you have children. Because no sane women would do this.”

Megan’s eyes glitter at me.

“You won’t be saying that once I show that you can’t win against us,” she whispers. “I’ll be back for Amy, so get ready to hand her over.”

She sounds so sure about it, and I can’t believe I’m listening to this. She sounds crazy. That’s scarier than knowing someone is stalking me.

I watch her walk away to another car further down the street. I don’t stop watching her until she drives away and leaves the street. Footsteps behind me

has me turning around, and I see Ben joining me.

“What was that?” He frowns at me. “You okay?”

“No, I’m not.” I can feel my headache building again. “I feel like I’m in a crazy TV drama plot.”

Although anything in a crazy TV drama would make more sense than what is going on right now.

Chapter 26 Luke

My phone is ringing as I'm taking my coffee from the barista. I move away and place it on a table as I dig into my pocket. It stops ringing just as I get it out, the missed call saying it was Elle calling me. I immediately call back.

"Luke?"

"Hey. Sorry, I got to the call a bit too late." Balancing the phone between my chin and shoulder, I open two sugar packets and tip it into my coffee.

"What's up? You okay?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"You think so?"

Elle lets out a heavy sigh.

"It's just...it's been a week since Megan turned up here, and there's nothing from her and Dad. It's...well, it's putting me on edge."

I can understand. I've been on edge since Megan confronted Elle on her driveway. From what she told me, the other woman's ramblings were just too much. It sounds like Megan has some mental instability, and she's not getting any help for it.

I want to feel sympathy for the woman - after all, she's desperate to be a mother - but I can't. Not when she falsely called CPS on Elle and threatened her.

“They’re probably lying low for now.” I grab my phone before I drop it and pick up my coffee cup. “You did have her reported for a false CPS complaint, after all. They most likely don’t want to get into further trouble after that.”

“I suppose that’s it. But I just got a call from Grandma.”

“She knows something?”

“She’s not sure. Dad was apparently over at her house last night, demanding to know when she was next coming to see me and Amy. Grandma wouldn’t tell him and threatened to call the cops, which had him running away, but she’s concerned.”

That does make me worried about Mrs Anderson. She’s a stellar woman who stood by her granddaughter when her son was behaving despicably. Her loyalty to her great-granddaughter has never been brought into question. I struggle to believe that she and Kevin are blood-related because they are so different.

“You think he’s up to something?” I ask.

“I’m sure of it. Dad is not one to leave something alone if he doesn’t get what he wants. He was like this when he was married to Mom. She found it frustrating that Dad would behave like a sulking child when he didn’t get his own way, be it taking the lead on a project, getting that promotion he believed was in the bag for him, or when someone on the street got a better-looking car that we couldn’t afford.” Elle pauses. “I want to say he was a good dad in between all of that, and there were moments when he was a good person, but they’re far and few between now.”

“A bad person can still do good things, but it doesn’t mean they’re redeemed

in any capacity.”

“I know. I wish Mom was here. She would hand Dad his ass on a plate and tell him to get lost. She was more formidable than I am.”

I think about Elle’s mother. She has spoken about her with a lot of fondness, and I am sure we would get along really well if she were alive. Elle loves her dearly.

Kevin lost more than he ever anticipated when his wife died. But, given his behavior with Megan and how they’ve treated Elle like an incubator, he doesn’t seem to care.

“Well, you’ve got me. And I’ll look after you and Amy.”

“I’m sorry, Luke.”

“What are you sorry for?”

Elle sighs.

“I feel bad for having brought you into this mess. You have enough to deal with without me and my crazy relatives.”

She does have a point, but I never thought about it like that. Everyone has problematic family members - myself included - so to bring family drama into a relationship isn’t unusual. I wish I could go to her and assure her that it’s going to be okay, but I’m on my way to a meeting. The bulldogs won’t be too happy if I don’t turn up when it was specially set up for me.

“I’ve got a mad mother, remember? Given what she’s doing, what your dad is up to seems to pale in comparison.”

“Is she still trying to set you up with your ex?” Elle asks.

“If she is, I haven’t heard anything about it since I kicked Hannah out of my building. She knows that she’s in serious trouble, so she’s keeping quiet.”

“Does that mean she’s lying in wait until you’ve calmed down?”

I wouldn’t be surprised if that is what she’s doing. I have heard from Hannah since she attempted to get into my apartment. She is pleading for us to get back together, and that she’s sorry for what she did. Given that Hannah’s low on money due to her excessive spending habits, she needs another cash cow. I am not going to be that. Hannah loves my money, not me.

Also, she’s not Elle. She can never compare.

“Mom will learn her lesson. Dad’s keeping an eye on her.”

“Will she accept us eventually?” Elle queries. “You said you’ve told her about Amy, and while I’m not comfortable being around her given her behavior, I do want her to know Amy.”

“I don’t know, but I am willing for her to meet Amy if she can behave herself and not do anything that makes you and Amy run away.” I hesitate. “That does require you telling Amy that I’m her dad, though. She will get confused if we just introduce my parents without an explanation beforehand.”

“I know. It’s not that easy to bring up in conversation.”

“The longer you leave it...”

“I know!” Elle snaps. “Listen, Grandma’s coming up today, and we’re going to take Amy to the park. I’ll tell her then.”

This should have been done a long time ago. However, I'm not about to get into it with Elle; it's just going to strain things between us, and I don't want that.

"Okay. I can come over later to help if you want."

"I'll let you know." Elle sounds tired. "I'd better go. Grandma's going to be here soon."

"She's going to be okay, is she? Given what your dad was doing last night..."

"Dad knows better than to go after Grandma. My family will rip him to shreds, and that's after I'm done with him. He knows it."

"Even so..."

"Don't worry about her. Let me do that." Elle is silent for a moment, but I can hear voices at the other end. "I'm off. Amy's ready to leave for the park."

"Okay. I'm going into a meeting shortly, so I'll be unavailable for a bit."

"Don't worry. We've got everything covered." Elle's voice softens. "Bye."

"Bye."

I almost say 'I love you', but I hang up before I do get to say it. That is something I want to do in her presence, not over the phone. Checking my watch, I see that I've just about got enough time to get to the stadium for that meeting with the bulldogs. Marcus is joining me by a video link, so everything will be ready once I get there.

I'm leaving the coffee shop when I hear someone calling my name. Looking around, I don't initially see anyone there. Then I see Ben coming towards me,

striding angrily. His fists are clenched, and his expression is tight.

The last thing I need is to have a confrontation with this man, especially out in public. But I can tell he's not going to walk away and leave me alone, so I wait for him to get to me.

“Ben, what do you want?”

“You need to leave Elle alone.”

That makes me pause. I stare at him.

“Excuse me?”

“Elle was happy with everything until you turned up. You brought all of this trouble to her door, and it's stressful for her.” Ben is breathing heavily. “I want you to leave. Do what you did all those years ago and vanish.”

It takes me a moment for the words to sink in. Did he just suggest that I desert Elle and Amy?

“You want me to walk away from Elle? What about Amy? She's my daughter.”

Ben snorts.

“Where were you for all that time?”

“If you recall, Elle never told me. We had no way of contacting each other.”

“I've been there for every moment of Amy's life. I helped change her diapers. I was there when she took her first steps. When she was learning to use the toilet and ride a bike for the first time, I was the one who was present.

As far as I'm concerned, Elle doesn't need you around, and Amy certainly doesn't."

"You're seriously telling me to abandon my daughter? Because you want to keep playing house?"

Ben bares his teeth at me.

"Amy calls me 'papa'. What does she call you? She certainly doesn't call you dad. Elle hasn't told her yet, which means she's ashamed of you. I don't care what your title is, how rich you are or what you've done with your life, you're not worthy to be Amy's dad."

"That falls on you, does it?"

"Damn right it does."

This is filling me with rage. I can take Ben's snide remarks towards me, but this is going way over the line of disrespect. I push the rage back, knowing if I lose my temper now we're going to end up fighting in the street. That I don't want.

"Ben, I get you're in love with Elle, and you think you have your own family with her, but your fantasy was never going to hold up."

"Fantasy?" Ben's eyes bulged. "Did you just call my life a fantasy?"

"Elle doesn't love you like that. She's told me so, and I know she's told you."

"You think she loves you instead?"

"I'm not going to put words in her mouth." Although I really hope so. I sigh.

"Look, I know you're not happy with your current life has been turned

upside-down, but I didn't plan on barging in to take anyone away from you. Elle still cares about you, and Amy adores you, so why would I separate you from them?"

Ben scowls.

"Elle and Amy are my family, not yours."

"I'm Amy's father, and Elle and I are in a relationship."

"That's a lie! Elle never said anything about that!"

"Maybe she did and you weren't listening." I hold up my hands, trying not to spill my coffee at the same time. "I get it. You love Elle, and while you two were never a couple, you had a good balance and a good life. When I came here, I had no intention to change that, but knowing that Amy is mine..."

"DNA says you're her dad, but I'm her father!"

"I'm sure if you talk to Elle about that, she would disagree."

Ben looks like he's going to take a swing at me. People are stepping around us, giving us strange odd looks. The last thing I want is for this to become a spectacle.

"Ben..."

"It would be better that you left, Luke. Pay the child support for Amy, as you should, and just go. We were happy until you turned up."

"You mean you were happy until I turned up," I correct him. I frown at him. "Why are you doing this now? Are you concerned that Elle has chosen someone else? That does sound rather possessive, don't you think?"

“You have no idea about our relationship,” Ben snaps.

“I understand that Elle cares about you, and she values your friendship. I’m not going to disrespect that, and I’m grateful that you were there to make sure Amy became the great kid that she is. I won’t be telling you to leave now that I’m here if she wants you in her life.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“If you don’t, that’s fine. However, I’m not going to leave town and disappear because you want Elle and Amy to yourself in your little makeshift family. That’s not how things work.”

Ben shakes his head.

“You would be doing everyone a favor. Just because you have money…”

“I don’t care about money. I care about Elle and Amy. I’m not stepping aside for you because you were always there. I appreciate your role in Amy’s life, but not that you’re telling me to abandon my daughter and the woman I love so you can go back to your fantasy.”

Ben steps towards me, and I shuffle back. If he comes any closer, I’m sure he’s going to hit me.

“You’ve ruined everything,” he spits at me. “We were doing fine, and then you came along.”

“Believe what you want. But you don’t speak for Elle, and I’m sure she’ll be pissed at you for doing this. Now, I’ve got a meeting to get to, and I am already late.” I turn away. “Just go home. You’re making a fool of yourself.”

I know it’s risky to turn my back on this guy when he’s looking for an excuse

to attack me, but I don't want to spend more time arguing over something so silly. I don't own Elle, and neither does Ben. And he is mad if he thinks I'm going to walk away from my daughter.

He's just as insane as Elle's dad.

Chapter 27 Elle

“Are we meeting Grandma, Mommy?” Amy asks from the backseat.

“She plans to meet us shortly, honey.” I pull the car into a space next to the park and turn off the engine. “We’ll go and have something to eat afterwards. Where do you want to go?”

“Can we go to that burger place? Where we went for Auntie Carly’s birthday?”

“Of course. Whatever you want.”

And then I have to do what I’ve been putting off for a while and tell my daughter that Luke is her father. I should have done it a long time ago, especially as Amy has asked in the past about her dad, but I haven’t been able to do it. I’m scared of Amy’s reaction, and I never expected Luke to turn up again.

Now they’ve spent time together, and Amy likes him. They get on really well. Will that still be the same after I tell her the truth? Will she be angry? I won’t blame her if she is.

Hopefully, Grandma will be able to help me. I can’t do this alone, and Grandma promised to be there when I do it. She’ll be able to help me keep Amy calm.

Although I’m not sure how to go about it. Do I explain about how we met, or just tell her and leave that for later? Amy is going to have a lot of questions.

Will I be able to answer them all?

I'm not looking forward to this, and I know it's my fault for not doing this when I was supposed to.

"Mommy?"

"Hmm?"

Amy is shaking my seat.

"Can I get out now? We're here."

"Oh. Sorry, honey." I forgot what we were doing. I get out and open Amy's door. "You go on ahead. Grandma will be here shortly."

"Okay, Mommy."

Amy runs to the gate onto the playground and goes straight over to the swings. I lock up the car and I'm walking over to the park when I hear someone calling my name. Turning, I'm surprised to see Ben walking towards me. He looks a little flushed, and I can see the frustration in his face.

I wait for him to join me.

"Ben, what are you doing here? I thought you were at work."

"I had some Christmas shopping to do, and I remembered you saying that you were going to be at the park with Amy, so I thought I'd join you."

"That's great, but..."

I hesitate. Given what I'm about to do, I don't really want Ben there. He has taken on the father role, and while I'm grateful about his help, I know he's

taken it really seriously. And after his confession of love for me, it's making me a little uncomfortable. He's already upset that Luke is around, and hearing me tell Amy who her father is won't be good for him.

I don't want further hassle.

"But what?" Ben frowns at me. "What's wrong? Don't you want me here?"

"Not really," I admit.

"Excuse me?"

I shove my hands into my pockets. I wish Grandma is here; that would make this a bit easier to handle, seeing as I know Ben is not going to like this.

"I'm going to tell Amy about Luke."

"You mean..."

"That Luke's her dad? Yes."

Ben's jaw tightens.

"Why would you need to do that? We've got a good balance in our lives. You, me and Carly..."

"It has to be done. Luke and I are a couple, and Amy deserves to know."

"You're a couple? When the hell did that happen?"

"That's not your business, Ben. The point is, Amy doesn't deserve to be lied to. She should know about Luke."

Ben's eyes narrow.

“And you just ignore what I’ve done for you two?”

“What are you talking about? Of course not!”

“Then why tell her something when Luke’s not going to be around for much longer? It would just mess her up when he’s not there to be her dad.”

I’m confused by this. Luke isn’t going to be around.

“What do you mean by that?”

“He’s rich, isn’t he? He could have any woman he wants. He might be wanting to be a dad now, but that’s going to wear off eventually. Then he’ll be gone, and you’ll be back where you started.”

“How do you know that?”

Ben shrugs.

“I just know. If he’s got any sense, he’ll be leaving.”

There is something about the way he says that which makes me suspicious. I stare at him.

“What did you do, Ben?”

“What? You think I did something?”

“I’ve known you for eight years. I think I know you well enough by now. What have you done, Ben? Did you say something to Luke?”

Ben doesn’t respond, but he doesn’t need to; I can read the look on his face. There’s a faint smugness about him.

“Are you insane? Why the hell would you do that?”

“What? He wasn’t there for Amy for all these years, and he thinks he can come back into your life like nothing’s happened? Amy doesn’t need him. She’s got whatever she’s wanted in life from us. What can Luke give her except money?”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I knew Ben wasn’t happy about Luke coming back, but I didn’t think he would do something like this.

“So you told Luke to go away and not return? Is that about right?”

“Of course I did. He doesn’t get to take what I’ve been cultivating since before Amy was born.”

“Excuse me? Cultivating?” I fold my arms. “What do you mean by that? You’ve not been cultivating anything. I swallowed my pride and asked you and Carly for help during my pregnancy, and you stepped up to help. Did you think you were doing this for some big outcome?”

“Well, I became Amy’s dad, didn’t I?” Ben spreads his hands. “She calls me ‘papa’.”

“Which she interchanges with ‘Uncle Ben’! It’s not exclusive. She adores you, yes, but she knows you’re not her dad.”

“But I’m sure she would like me to be her dad more than Luke.”

I’m getting the feeling that this is turning back onto our relationship. I look past Ben to check on Amy, and see that she’s on the climbing frame. Confident that she can’t hear us arguing, I turn back to Ben.

“This is about jealousy, isn’t it? You want me and Amy to yourself, and you

see Luke as a threat to what you're comfortable with. Did you really think that you would be able to claim us as a family in more than just a simple title for our little group?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you are my family. What twenty-year-old year would agree to help out with their classmate's pregnancy and expect nothing in return?" Ben shakes his head. "I did it because I love you, Elle. I always loved you, and you wouldn't look at me like that. I thought if I stepped up to help and show that I could be the partner you deserve, you would fall in love with me in return. But no, you had to hold onto your feelings for Luke Ward, and as soon as he returned you were back in his arms. You think I'm going to let that happen after what I've done for years?"

It feels like I've been slapped in the face. I knew that Ben had feelings for me, but I've never felt the same way. I thought he knew that. It's why nothing ever happened before.

I need to get away from him.

"Ben, I do appreciate what you've done in the past. To do what you've done is amazing, and I think you'll be a great dad when you have your own children one day. But it won't be with me."

"You're rejecting me?"

"I rejected you before, remember? I said that I am with Luke. I love him, and that's not going to change because you don't want him around."

Ben growls in a way that makes me jump. He grabs my arms.

"You used me for eight years, Elle! The least you can do is be my girl."

“That’s not how it works, Ben. Now let me go!”

“I’ve loved you for a long time. I’m not about to have that rich bastard step in and take everything from me. You and I are meant to be together. Don’t you see that? We even have a ready-made family! The only thing you need to say is yes to me.”

“For what?”

“For everything!”

He is sounding insane, and I’m getting very scared. I shove him in the chest, but he doesn’t let go.

“Ben, stop it! You’re sounding crazy!”

“Luke doesn’t deserve you in his life. That’s my life! And he can’t have it!”

“Enough!”

I punch him in the stomach. Ben groans and lets go of me, falling to his knees as he clutches at his stomach. I back away before he can grab hold of me. My heart is racing, and I feel nauseous. Seeing Ben like this makes me regret not addressing our relationship properly years ago. Now he’s coming across as a madman.

I take a deep breath to calm myself.

“You have two weeks to get your things out of the house and find somewhere new.”

“What?” Ben is panting heavily as he looks up at me. “You’re telling me that I have to leave?”

“Carly and I will buy you out of your share of the house, but after what you’ve done just now and what you’re trying to do with Luke, I can’t have you anywhere near me or Amy.”

Ben pushes himself up, staring at me like I’ve gone mad myself.

“You would block me from seeing her?”

“You’ve tried to sabotage my relationship with Luke, and you are showing you’re being too possessive over me. I can’t trust you anymore.” I fight back the tears as I look down at my friend of eight years. “I’ll do whatever I can to protect my daughter.”

“But I would never hurt her!”

“You just put your hands on me. Can you safely say you wouldn’t do the same to Amy?” I step around Ben. “Grandma is going to be here soon. Please, just leave us alone and make arrangements to move out. This has gone on for long enough.”

I can’t look at him right now. Not after what he’s just said. I need to put space between us as quickly as I can. Hurrying away, I enter the playground. Amy is coming down the slide as I approach her. She runs over to me.

“Are you okay, Mommy?” she asks. “I heard you shouting at Uncle Ben.”

“It’s fine, honey.” I manage a smile and I kiss her head. “We just had a disagreement.”

“Are you going to make up?”

I hesitate before I answer.

“Possibly. We just need a bit of time. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

“Okay.” Amy hugs me. “That’s for you. I thought you might want a hug.”

“You are so sweet, my darling.” I hug her back. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, Mommy.” Amy lets go of me and runs over to the climbing frame again, waving at someone behind me. “Hi, Grandma!”

I turn, and I see Grandma coming into the playground, still huddled in her coat. Smiling, I go over to her and we embrace.

“Thanks for coming.”

“It’s no problem. I said that I would do whatever was needed to help you.” Grandma raises her eyebrows. “Although I wasn’t expecting you to want help with this. Wouldn’t this be better to do with Luke?”

“I need to talk to Amy on her own. She might react badly to the news.”

“You think she’s not going to be happy that you never told her before?”

I don’t bother to deny it, not when Grandma knows me too well.

“That’s my fault, and I’m willing to admit it. I just need someone with me when I do it. Then I can bring Luke in once Amy has gotten used to the news. I don’t want his heart broken if Amy rejects him outright.”

“You really believe that’s going to happen?”

“I hope it doesn’t.

Grandma regards me curiously, and I can tell she’s judging my actions. I can’t blame her for thinking I’m an idiot; I’ve been calling myself that for

years.

A sudden scream has me freezing to the spot. There are other children in the playground, and quite a few of them are squealing. But I recognize Amy's voice. And that is not a scream of joy.

She's in fear.

A second later, we hear shouting.

"Get your hands off her!"

Spinning around, I see a mother trying to get Amy away from a guy wearing a bulky coat, a wooly hat pulled down over his head with a ski mask covering his mouth and nose. He is on the other side of the fence, and he had a firm hold on Amy's hood. Amy is screaming and trying to get away, and the mother is yanking the man's arm.

"Let her go, you maniac!"

"Hey!" I start to run across the playground. "Let my daughter go!"

It's not until the second similarly-clad guy appears next to Amy's attacker that I realize that there is more than one person. And they're holding something in their hand, pointing it at the mother's face. He sprays something, and the mother lets go with a scream, falling to her knees as she clutches at her face. As other parents go to her, both attackers grab Amy and lift her over the fence. Amy is kicking and screaming her head off, but they manage to run across the grass.

"Amy!"

I vault over the fence and run after them as they disappear into the parking

lot. But when I get between the cars and look around, I can't see them anymore. It's like they disappeared. I can't even hear Amy screaming, either.

Where were they? What did they want with my kid?

“Elle!”

I turn around and see Ben jogging towards me. My chest is heaving as I gasp for air, but I manage to get my words out.

“Someone's...someone's just kidnapped Amy!”

“I heard the screaming.” Ben looks around. “Where are they?”

“I don't know. They just vanished into thin air.”

There is a loud revving of an engine, and we turn around. A car is coming towards us, gaining speed as it gets closer. Suddenly, the world is moving very fast as Ben shoves me out of the way. I stumble and fall rolling into a parked car as I hear a cry and a loud bang. Moments later, the car engine is revving again, and the car is peeling out of the parking lot.

My head spinning and pain in my shoulder, I sit up, trying to get my senses back. Then I see Ben on the ground not far from me, face-down on the tarmac.

He isn't moving.

Chapter 28 Luke

The minute I get the phone call from Mrs Anderson I'm in a state of panic. Someone had come into a busy park and kidnapped my daughter in front of everyone, and three people are in hospital. One of them is Elle.

This can't be happening. This has to be some disgusting joke. But from Mrs Anderson. She's not the type to do this, and I heard the trembling in her voice.

My heart is breaking, both for her and for Elle.

I get to the hospital and rush into the lobby. It takes a while to get past the front desk, who are reluctant to let me through when I can't prove that I'm Elle's boyfriend, but then I'm going into the ER. It's not that busy, but the staff are bustling around and barely notice me as I check each of the cubicles. I almost rip a curtain off the rail as I pull it back to see if Elle is there, only to find a woman with a nosebleed and her head wrapped in a bloody bandage staring at me with a man I've never seen before sitting next to the bed. Embarrassed, I pull back.

Elle is in the end cubicle with her grandmother. She is on the bed, arguing with Mrs Anderson.

"I can't stay here!"

"The doctor said you hit your head, Elle. You need to be checked for a concussion..."

“Amy’s been kidnapped, Grandma! I have to go out there and look for her!”

“Elle...”

Then Elle catches sight of me, and she immediately bursts into tears.

“Luke!”

I hurry over and wrap her into a hug. She clutches at me, taking handfuls of my shirt as she sobs. I rock her, cradling her close.

“I’m here. It’s okay, I’m here.”

“I’m sorry.” Elle’s voice is barely audible, her face buried in my jacket. “I’m so sorry.”

“What are you sorry about?”

“I was meant to be watching Amy. I took my eyes off her, and she got kidnapped.” Elle looks up at me. “If I’d been watching her, none of this wouldn’t have happened.”

I don’t know what to say to that. Then Mrs Anderson touches my arm.

“Can I talk with you outside?” she asks.

I’m reluctant to leave Elle’s side, but I can tell Mrs Anderson has something to tell me that’s important. I press a kiss to Elle’s head.

“Give me a second.”

“I want to leave, Luke. Can you talk to the doctors about letting me out of here?”

“Only if you go through the tests they want you to do.”

“But...”

I cut her off as she protests.

“I don’t want you collapsing on me. If you want to help find Amy, I need to be sure that you’re in good enough health to do it. Okay?”

Elle looks like she wants to argue, but her shoulders slump and she nods.

“Okay. I’ll do it. But the moment I’m given the all-clear, I’m out of here.”

“I don’t doubt it.” I kiss her. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Stepping out of her cubicle, Mrs Anderson pulls the curtains across and leads me to a corner of the ER, away from Elle’s bed. Her expression is grim as she turns to me.

“She’s mostly bruised and has suspected concussion, but it could have been worse.”

“How so? What could be worse?”

“One of the other mothers tried to stop the kidnapping, and she was sprayed in the face with what turned out to be bear spray.” Mrs Anderson nodded towards a bed in the corner, curtains drawn across. “And Ben was hit by the car as it was getting away.”

“Wait, Ben was there as well?”

“From what I saw, the car was going for Elle. If Ben hadn’t pushed her out of the way...” Mrs Anderson draws a shuddering breath. “He’s in surgery right

now. I don't know the details."

Shit. I was not expecting this. I rub my hands over my face, trying to fight back the fear and the rage that is building. Amy is still out there. I need to find her.

"Where do you think Amy is? Any ideas?"

"She's with Kevin and Megan," Mrs Anderson replies grimly. "There's nobody else who would take Amy like this."

"I agree with you there. But where would they be now? Do you know where they would have gone?"

Mrs Anderson shakes her head.

"I have no idea. I wasn't even aware that they were in the state. Kevin did call me last night, but he seemed to be asking me about my movements tomorrow."

"Did you tell him what you were up to?"

"I kept it vague. I didn't tell him we were going to the park, though." Mrs Anderson is swaying on her feet. "To have my great-granddaughter taken in front of me...I can't believe I had to witness that."

I grab a nearby chair and bring it over. Then I urge the elderly woman to sit down.

"Thank you."

Mrs Anderson sits heavily, her face ashen. I'm worried that she's going to end up having a heart attack. I crouch beside her.

“Can I get you anything?”

“No, just give me a moment. I need to get back into Elle, and I don’t want to see her like this.” Mrs Anderson looks at me, fear flickering in her eyes. “You’re going to get Amy back, aren’t you? I’ve called the police, and they’re looking for her, but...”

“I’ll get her back. I’ll be bringing her in myself.” I am going to keep that promise. “Is there anything you can think of that might be useful? What did you say to the police?”

“An officer has come by and taken details of what happened.”

“Did you tell them it was your son who took Amy?”

Mrs Anderson nods.

“I did, and they said they would look into it. But I don’t have a way of knowing where he might be.”

“What about GPS? Do you have that thing on your phone where you can sync up with someone else and know their whereabouts?”

“No, we’re estranged. I don’t have anything to do with him, so I wouldn’t be linking our phones together.” Mrs Anderson’s eyes widened. “I forgot! Kevin’s car would have GPS. And from what I saw as they left, they were using his car.”

That is something. I bring out my phone.

“Tell me the license number. We can get the GPS signal from that if we know the make and model as well.”

She tells me, and I tap it into a message on my phone, sending it off to a friend of mine who does our IT stuff for the company. If anyone can find someone with a car tracker without going through the rigmarole, it's him. Mrs Anderson is watching me as I put my phone away.

“Will that help find Amy?” she asks.

“I hope so. He'll find where your son's car is.”

“Do you think he's going to hurt her?” Elle's grandmother looks nervous. “I'm scared that they might harm her if Amy refuses to do what they want.”

“I don't think they will. After all, they just want Amy as their own, don't they?” I stand up and squeeze her shoulder. “You stay with Elle and make sure she doesn't leave. She needs someone with her right now. I'm going to get Amy back.”

“Please do that. I know the cops will be able to find her, but...” Mrs Anderson shakes her head. “I would feel better knowing that you're there when she's found.”

I have no intention of being anywhere else. I walk away and head back outside, still brimming with anger, but I'm determined now. There is a lead, and that is giving me hope. I'm going to get my kid back.

The cops had better be close when I find my daughter, because I won't be responsible for my actions once I get hold of Kevin Anderson.

My phone bleeps as I reach my car, and I see it's from my contact. He's just sent me the coordinates of the location of Kevin's car, along with the address. It's a motel on the outskirts of Cleveland, right near the route that would take Kevin back to where he lives. I text him back to notify the police about it and

I start driving over there.

It doesn't take long to get to the motel, but I feel like I've been driving for hours. I see Kevin's car outside one of the rooms, and a light on inside the room itself. Pulling up behind his car, I get out and approach the room. Part of me is telling me that I should wait for the police to arrive and let them deal with the idiots, but I can't hang around for them. My daughter is in there, and I want her out.

Amy is coming home with me, not with them.

I knock on the door, angling myself so they can't see me through the blinds across the window. I freeze when I hear Amy's voice.

"Who's that? Is it Mommy?"

"Quiet!" I hear a woman's voice hiss.

Then I hear Kevin. He sounds like he's on the other side of the door.

"Who's there?"

I don't respond. I just knock again. From where I am, I can see the blinds moving as someone looks out. Hopefully, they can't see me.

I knock for a third time. Finally, I hear the chain coming off the door, and the door opens. I don't wait for Kevin to see me, barging in and shoving him back. Kevin stumbles and hits the bed before falling to the floor. Megan and Amy are on the bed, Amy looking rather miserable with a sad-looking Chinese box. She brightens up when she sees me.

"Luke!"

Megan grabs for her as Amy scrambles off the bed and catches hold of her sleeve. I fly across the room and slap her arm away, hauling Amy out of reach.

“Don’t you dare touch her!” I snarl.

“Give her back!” Megan screams. She gets onto her knees on the bed, her expression one of fury. “She’s our baby! You have no right to take her!”

“I think that’s you and your psychotic husband who have no right to take her,” I snap back. I pick Amy up and cuddle her, feeling my daughter bury her face into my neck as she clutches tightly onto me. “You’ve put three people in the hospital to kidnap a child you have no claim over. Do you realize that you’ve done the wrong thing?”

“She should be ours!” Megan screeches, the sound making my ears hurt. “That little bitch shouldn’t be able to have kids! Why can she have children but I can’t?”

“So you kidnap your husband’s granddaughter? Where’s the logic in that?”

Kevin is getting to his feet. He looks ready for a fight, baring his teeth at me.

“We can be better parents than Elle. And Megan wants a child. What better solution?”

“Just adopt! Or get someone else to carry the baby! Your daughter went through this with you last time you met!” I tighten my arms around Amy as Kevin comes closer. “Taking Amy without anyone’s consent is not the way to go about it. You seriously thought people would agree with it once you actually had her?”

“Everyone would understand!” Megan sags onto the bed. She is wailing now. “Why does she get to have a family? I wanted several children we could cherish, and I can’t keep a pregnancy viable. That’s not fair!”

I am watching Kevin, who is faltering as he looks at his wife. It makes me wonder how much of a driving force his younger spouse is with all of this. I’m sure that if Megan wasn’t demanding this, Kevin wouldn’t have done this at all.

Megan is screaming out a tantrum, curled up on the bed as she sobs. Amy whimpers.

“Can we go? It’s hurting my ears.”

“Of course.” I glare at Kevin as I move towards the door. “The police are coming, and they’re going to arrest you for kidnapping. You try and take Amy from me, and I’m going to make sure you end up in the hospital where you put your daughter. But you’ll be in a worse state than she is right now.”

Kevin looks like he’s going to argue, his body tense. But then his shoulders slump, and he stares at the floor. At that moment, I see a weak man. A coward, easily influenced by a woman who is mentally unstable.

I shouldn’t feel sympathetic for his stance in any of this. I look over at Megan, who is still screaming.

“Get her into therapy. She’s going to end up doing something worse one of these days.”

“All she wants is a child of her own.” Kevin’s voice is barely heard over the screaming.

“And you should focus on yourselves and not take your granddaughter because you’re jealous of your daughter.” I stroke Amy’s head. “Don’t be surprised when you get sued for the pain and suffering you caused. Or the restraining order that’s coming your way. You or Megan lay your eyes on Amy, and you’re done.”

I don’t wait around to hear Kevin’s response, leaving the room as the first police car pulls into the parking lot.

Chapter 29 Elle

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

Ben makes a face as he looks at himself, an IV drip sticking out of his hand and his leg in a cast, held in a sling above the bed.

“Like absolute hell. Why does the pain have to linger for a long time afterwards?”

“It’s normal when you’ve broken your leg and had internal injuries,” I remind him. “You’re lucky that was all that happened. It could have been worse.”

“How are you feeling?”

I sigh.

“I have a mild concussion, so I’m told to rest for a couple of weeks. Other than that, just some big bruises.”

“You’ll be up and around in no room.”

“I doubt it. Amy keeps me...” I falter as I think about my daughter. “Well...”

“She’s going to be found,” Ben assures me. “They’re not going to get very far.”

“I hope not.” I lick my lips. My mouth is very dry. “I still can’t believe that they would do something like this. I get they want a child, but to take mine?”

“They’re just mentally unstable. And after what they’ve done, they shouldn’t be having children at all.”

“I’m surprised that I turned out okay after being raised by that man.”

“Well, you had an awesome mom.” Ben is peering at me, looking slightly ashamed. “I’m glad you’re checking on me. You didn’t have to.”

“You’re my friend, Ben. And you did save me. I would be a terrible friend if I didn’t check on you.”

“Even after what I said?”

I sigh. I had been trying to forget about that.

“That’s not something I want to discuss while you’re in the hospital, Ben. We can talk about it later.”

“How about we talk about it now?”

Ben presses a button on his bed remote, and the back of the bed rises up until he’s upright. Then he turns to me.

“Look, I’m so sorry about what I did. What I said. I mean, I do love you, and I wish that it was me you loved in return, but I know that’s not something I can realistically expect.” He sighs and shakes his head. “After being with you since the beginning and helping raise Amy, I’m very protective over the two of you. Seeing someone else come in and slot into the role I’ve wanted for so long...that really hurt. I saw it as my territory being invaded.”

“That wasn’t the case, Ben.”

“I know. I had a balance that I was content with, and then Luke came along,

and I felt threatened.” Ben winces. “I said and did some really stupid things because I didn’t want to lose the two of you. But while I was lying here, coming round from the surgery, I realized that I was being an idiot, and I can’t force anything that I want to be a reality. It just makes me sound as crazy at your father and that woman he married.”

I listen to this, and I feel the urge to cry. All of the emotions from the last few hours and not knowing where my daughter is have just collapsed, and I’m feeling raw. I blink back my tears.

“Nothing would have changed with us, Ben. True, I would be with someone else, but nothing needed to change.”

“You might have said Carly and I weren’t needed anymore. That you and Luke were going to be a family together.”

“We might have wanted our own place, but we wouldn’t have kicked you out. You two are Amy’s godparents, and you have been my rock for so long.” I reach over and take his hand. “I would never keep Amy away from you, either. Although you’re going to have to work on that possessive nature of yours.”

Ben grimaces.

“I know. I’m still really sorry about that.”

“Just don’t do it again. I don’t want to hear you ranting about something like that. It scares me.”

“I’ll still move out and find my own place.”

“There’s no…”

“There is a need. I should have done it years ago.” Ben’s mouth twitches. “And I doubt you want me around cramping your style. While I can step back and accept that you have your own life, living in close proximity to you and Luke isn’t going to do me any favors. You were right when you said we needed space between us. It’s best that I do what we need to do so our friendship can be maintained.”

I know he’s right, and I know that’s what I asked of him before. But now he’s suggesting it, it feels like he’s talking about never seeing each other again. I manage a smile.

“It’s going to feel strange without you around the house making a mess and getting in the way,” I tease.

“I’m sure I can carry on doing the same with Carly.”

“And I’ll never hear the end of it.”

There is a knock at the door, which opens and Carly sticks her head inside. She smiles at me.

“Can you come out here a moment, Elle? Someone needs to talk to you.”

Was it Luke? Has he come back? I give Ben a smile and squeeze his hand before I stand up.

“Behave. Don’t do yourself more of a mischief.”

“Charming.” Ben rolls his eyes but he’s smiling. “Sounds like you don’t trust me to sit in a bed with my leg in the air.”

“No comment.”

I leave the room, Carly closing the door as I move into the hall. Then I see Amy sitting between Luke and Grandma across the hall. Seeing her has me wanting to cry again.

“Amy!”

“Mommy!”

Amy jumps up and runs over, hugging me tightly. I clasp onto her, scared that she might suddenly vanish on me and this is a horrible dream. I pull back and clasp her head in my hands. Yes, she is very real.

“I thought I’d lost you.” My voice chokes, and I clear my throat. “You scared me.”

“I was scared as well, Mommy.” Amy’s voice is clear, but I can hear the tremor. “I won’t ever have to see those two people again, will I? Daddy said I wouldn’t have to.”

Daddy? I look over at Luke, but his face is expressionless. Did he say something to her? He must have done if Amy’s saying ‘daddy’.

“No, you don’t have to see them again. I’ll make sure they never come near you.” I kiss Amy’s head. “You’re safe now.”

“Grandma said that Uncle Ben was hurt trying to get me.” Amy says. “Is he okay?”

“He’s okay. He’s made of tougher stuff.” I look up at Carly. “Can you take her in to see Ben? I think he’ll be relieved to see her.”

“Absolutely.” Carly takes Amy’s hand. “Mommy’s going to wait out here for you, okay?”

“Okay.” Amy hugs me again. “I love you, Mommy.”

“I love you, too.”

Amy follows Carly into the room. As the door closes, Grandma gets to her feet. She comes over to me and gives me a hug.

“Well,” she says as she pulls back, “that was an...experience. One that I never want to do again.”

I can wholeheartedly agree. I look over at Luke, who has also stood up. He looks just as exhausted as I feel.

“I’m going to get a coffee,” Grandma declares. “I need something to calm my nerves.”

“Coffee to calm your nerves, Grandma?”

“Maybe a chocolate bar, then. I’m only just remembering that I haven’t eaten for some time.” Grandma glances over at Luke. “I have a feeling you two need to talk, anyway.”

So this was her subtle way of giving us space. I squeeze Grandma’s hand and she walks away. She’s barely gone a few feet before I’m in Luke’s arms, hugging him tightly. Luke cradles me, burying his face in my neck as he lets out a heavy sigh.

“You got her back.”

“I did.” Luke pulls back to look at me. “I found them at a motel. Your dad told the cops that they were feeding Amy before they drove home. Apparently, they had everything set up and ready for her at their house.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Sadly not. I don’t think they thought through anything beyond taking Amy by force, though, because when the cops asked how were they going to explain where Amy came from when there would be an amber alert out for her, Kevin had no answer.” Luke pauses. “Megan has been moved to the psych ward.”

“She what?”

“She had a mental breakdown when I came to get Amy. I got there before the cops, and she was still screaming when they went in to get her and Kevin. Your dad was trying to calm her, but eventually he slunk back and watched as a couple of officers led her out of the motel room. I think her mind snapped.”

I shouldn’t feel sympathetic for Megan, not after what she did. But I understand, and I feel for her predicament. Just a little bit.

“All she wanted was to be a mom.”

“She shouldn’t have fixated on Amy, though.”

“She had me as an enemy in her mind, even though I was no real threat to her, and she wanted to take what I had because she wanted it.” I shake my head. “That and her desperation to be a mother...things just snapped.”

“I saw that. They’re going to keep her under observation for now, and hopefully she’ll get some help.”

“Away from us, I hope.”

“Absolutely.” Luke gives me a wry smile. “And I thought my family were

nuts.”

“Megan is not my family.”

“Well, your dad did stick his dick in crazy.”

I groan and slap his chest.

“Don’t. I don’t want to think about that.”

“Okay, I won’t.” Luke rests his arms around my waist. “How about we talk about something else? Like us.”

Us. I do like the sound of that. Then I remember what Amy had said.

“Did you tell Amy that you were her father?”

“I...not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

Luke grimaces.

“I had to talk to the cops about why I was there. I was leaving the motel with Amy in my arms, after all. I had to tell them that I was coming for my daughter.”

“And Amy heard you?”

“I couldn’t exactly put her down and move away when there were guns pointed at my head. They thought I was one of the kidnappers for a few seconds.” Luke hesitates. “I know it’s not how you wanted things to go, but I didn’t have much of a choice.”

I guess that I can't really do anything about it now. Luke did what I should have done ages ago.

"How did she take it?"

"She was curious about it, and asked a lot of questions while I was waiting for my statement to be typed up at the police station. I told her what I could, so I'm sure she's going to end up asking you some more when you're home. But she's not upset about it, or angry. Maybe that will come later, but she's reacting better than you thought."

"I guess so." I close my eyes and lean into him. "I'm sorry I didn't do it before. I guess I was still scared."

"About what?"

"About everything. It's easier to bury my head in the sand."

"I can attest to that." Luke kisses my head. "I'm sorry as well. I should have been there from the start."

"That was my fault. You didn't know where I had gone." I look up at him. "I did run away from you, after all."

"Are you going to run away from me now?"

I know the answer to that already, and I shake my head.

"No. I don't want to do that. Not with you."

"That's good." Luke smiles and kisses my forehead. "Because I want to be there for you. You and Amy. I love you."

Those three words make me feel warm and happy. I rise up onto my tiptoes and kiss him.

“I love you, too.”

Luke’s whole body slumps and he hugs me as he kisses me again. Both of us are smiling when we stop.

“Now that is one way to end a day like this.”

“I can’t argue with that.” I wrap my arms around his waist. “So, what do you want from me, Luke? Is there anything in particular you want, or shall we leave that for another time?”

“We can discuss it later.” Luke hugs me. “But I can tell you now I want whatever you want. I hope that’s not too much to ask.”

I like the sound of that.

Chapter 30 Luke

Three Years Later

“We shouldn’t be doing this!” Elle hisses at me as I lead her into our villa.

I grin at her, tugging on her hand.

“You don’t want me, then?”

“Of course, but we do have children to keep an eye on!”

“Ben and Carly have got Lewis, and Amy is entertaining Liz and Mom. Plus Marcus and Dad are present. We’ve got plenty of people to watch them. Besides,” I take her into the bedroom and spin her around, falling onto the bed with her as Elle squeals, “I haven’t had an opportunity to be alone with you for a while.”

Elle groans as I start kissing her neck.

“God, Luke, you’re impossible.”

“What? I miss you.”

“Even though we live together?”

“We’ve got children, and there always seems to be something.” I slide my hand under her skirt and drift my fingers up her thigh. “We’re on vacation now...”

“For Grandma’s birthday!”

“It’s still a vacation, and your grandmother told us not to wait on her all the time.”

In fact, Liz is the one who told me to take Elle away from the rest of the party. There had been a twinkle in her eye when she said it; she is under no illusions in what we’re going to get up to.

Having a nine-year-old and a two-year-old in the same household did mean things weren’t as smooth-sailing as I thought it would be. I wouldn’t change it, but I would like to have even just a few minutes where I can cuddle my wife without someone jumping on us.

Elle makes a sound of frustration and she starts tugging at my t-shirt.

“You really know how to tempt me. I shouldn’t be so seduced by now.”

I chuckle as I ease back and take off my t-shirt, tossing it aside.

“Good thing you are. It makes this so much easier.”

Elle’s eyes darken as she looks me over. Three years on, and even with everything going on it’s like we’re still possessed with a hunger for each other. She reaches out and runs her hands over my chest, sitting up to press a kiss to my belly. My cock is so hard it’s painful as it strains against my jeans.

Elle glances up at me.

“If we’re going to do this, you’d better get yourself undressed. We’ll take forever if we do our usual foreplay.”

She doesn’t need to tell me twice. I clamber off the bed to undress, nearly

falling flat on my face as I try to take off my jeans before taking off my shoes. Elle is also taking her clothes off, which is a little distraction. After having our son nearly two years ago, she has a softer body with a few more curves, and it looks absolutely stunning to me. I'm hungry for more whenever I see her like this.

We've been making up for lost time over recent years, and I still feel like I'm not done.

My clothes all over the place, I get back onto the bed, only to have Elle push me onto my back. Naked as I am, she kneels between my legs and strokes my cock before taking me into her mouth. My hips twitch as those delicious lips suck on me, and I watch as she bobs her head over my cock, stroking my shaft with one hand. I love watching her like this; it's very erotic, and I can't get enough.

She stops before I get too close, and she clambers onto my lap, straddling me as she rubs her cock against her pussy. We both moan as she slides down, taking me inside her. I grip her hips as she begins to ride me, rolling her hips and increasing the speed until she's practically bouncing on my lap. Her moans are unashamedly loud, her eyes closed with her head falling back. The way she lets go is amazing.

I can't believe that I have this incredible woman in my life, and that she is mine.

Moments after Elle comes, her pussy clamping down around my cock in her orgasm, I can feel my own climax gathering speed. It doesn't slow down, and I am coming as well, my whole body tensing as my release fills her.

Elle is the first to move, climbing off me and falling onto the bed. We lie

there staring at the ceiling, both of us panting. Somehow, I manage to find words again.

“I love it when you’re vocal.”

“Only because the children can’t hear us.”

“They probably did from where they are.”

Elle slaps my shoulder.

“That’s not going to happen.”

“I missed hearing you come like that.”

“Well, I did say we’ve been busy.” She smiles. “And I haven’t been feeling too great lately. My stomach feels like I want to empty it at inopportune moments.”

“Are you still feeling sick?” I roll onto my side and face her. “Maybe you should go to the doctor and get it checked out. If this is food poisoning, it’s taking a while to get out of your system.”

“Didn’t I tell you? I’ve already been.”

“You did? I don’t remember.”

Elle laughs.

“You don’t remember much of anything. Typical guy.”

“That’s not fair,” I protest. I wrap an arm across her waist. “So, what did the doctor say?”

“Well, I had to have a few tests done. It was right before this trip, so he said it would take a couple of days. I got a call from him, and he said it was an illness...”

“What?”

“But it would be something I can recover from soon.” Elle pauses, giving me an impish look. “I think he said nine months, although it could be less depending on when the time starts.”

I’m confused. What is she talking about? Then it comes to me, and I realize what she’s saying.

“Are you pregnant?”

“I am.” Elle laughs, rolling towards me. “He thinks I’m about six to eight weeks, so I’m going to need an ultrasound when we get back to get a definite due date. It would account for feeling sick all the time.”

“Weren’t you sick with the other two?”

“Not with Lewis, but with Amy I felt awful all the time.” Elle grins. “I’m probably having a girl, if I’m going by that logic.”

“I wouldn’t mind that.” I kiss her. “Are you sure about having another child? We didn’t plan for more...”

“But we did say that we would take whatever happens, and we weren’t using protection, so it was inevitable.”

“Do you think we can cope with a third?”

“I know we can. We’ve got enough family to help us out.” Elle’s eyes glinted

mischievously. “Your mom is going to be delighted to have another grandchild. She’s been doting over Amy and Lewis.”

I’m glad about that. I did have to give her a telling off for trying to push my ex-girlfriend onto me again, but once things had calmed down I had introduced her to Elle and Amy. Elle had been pregnant with Lewis, at that point. Mom and Dad had welcomed her into our family, and they adored their grandchildren.

“Careful with Mom, though. She’ll probably want to name the baby.”

“Not a chance.” Elle kisses me. “Do we have to go back right now? I want to make the most of my current state.”

“You’re not feeling nauseous?”

“Not yet. So...”

She doesn’t get to finish as I kiss her and roll her onto her back. I don’t think I’ve been happier in my life after Elle agreeing to marry me when I fluffed up the proposal by dropping the ring and hurting my back when Elle jumped on me for a hug and knocked me over. The pain was worth it, though.

I know, for certain, that I’m lucky with what I’ve got.