



SONS OF THE UNDERGROUND
BOOK 2

Limitless

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LIMITLESS

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Sons of the Underground

Written by Terri Anne Browning

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IN THE UNDERGROUND, I MAKE THE RULES.

The Underground is *mine*.

I call the shots.

It is who and what I am.

I am the *Judge*, jury, and executioner.

Except to her.

I've always been a man who gets what he wants, but she was too young and too sweet to touch.

Now, staying away from her is no longer possible.

She has pushed me to the end of my limits.

My resolve has broken, and I will give up everything, do anything, to hear her say I'm *hers*.

PROLOGUE

ELLIANNA

PEOPLE SCREAMED AND CHEERED ON EITHER SIDE OF ME. Lyla was the loudest and practically sat on my lap. At least Howler was staying on his section of the bench, even if his voice was like a boom to my ears.

In the metal cage, Zachary was fighting a fellow Son. They were both covered in blood, faces swollen, lips split. Sweat mixed in with the coagulation and rolled down Zachary's face in varying shades of pink.

I wanted to look away, but what if something happened when I took my eyes off him?

The men were evenly matched, which was why this had turned into such a bloodbath. Neither wanted to give up, and they were each determined to come out of the cage the winner.

It wasn't like it mattered. There wasn't a belt or a trophy the winner would get, except for a cut of the cover charge at the door. If Zachary won, he wouldn't even take the cash. If Rebel won, he would get a few grand.

Rebel wasn't going to win, though. No one ever beat Zachary "Judge" Bennet.

And even though I *knew* that, it didn't keep me from being scared. He was going to hurt tomorrow. He would be bruised

and scabbed over. He'd barely be able to move as he walked around the house, given the way he was taking one kidney punch after another.

When he went to work on Monday, everyone would know.

Not that this town didn't already know. The Underground was an open secret. One that was technically illegal but brought so much revenue to the area that no one cared. The fact that it was run by the richest man in the state—and a judge on top of that—might also have something to do with it. Not a single person was going to tell Zachary no.

A hard uppercut to the jaw caused him to stumble back and fall against the cage. Dazed, he shook his head, while Rebel approached with a glint in his eyes that promised a quick end.

Covering my face because I couldn't take another moment, I chanted to myself, "I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't do this. Please stop. Please stop."

"Elli, you're going to distract him," Howler said, putting his arm around me comfortingly.

I was mad at Howler. He should have been in there, acting as a referee. Zachary had thrown out the official one for the fight ten minutes after it started because the man had barely missed having his head knocked off when Rebel swung his anvil-like fist at Zachary's head.

But Howler stayed where he was, allowing the match to continue without anyone but the two Sons to moderate themselves as they saw fit. Because if Lyla and I were at the Underground, either Howler or Zachary was beside us when the event started. That was the rule, or we weren't allowed to attend.

I wasn't stupid. I knew it was more because of me than for Lyla's sake. She could take care of herself. Hell, she probably could have taken on a good number of the Sons herself and come out the victor.

Not me.

I only came because Lyla insisted. And it meant sitting beside my favorite person in the world for a little while.

Unless he was the one in the cage.

If I weren't there, then Howler would referee the fight.

With that thought in mind, I jumped up, already turning for the nearest exit.

I barely took a step when a roar came from the cage right in front of me. Zachary flipped Rebel onto his back, causing the other guy to shout. Swinging his left fist back, Zachary connected with Rebel's face. Over and over and over again.

Getting to his feet, Zachary's eyes went straight to where I was standing, still frozen from the sudden attack. His face morphed into something far more lethal than anything I'd seen in the cage that night.

While Rebel remained on the mat, Zachary flew out the door. I barely heard the roar of the crowd as I watched him come toward me. His blood-covered, taped hands cupped my face as soon as he reached me. "What happened? Did someone hurt you? Why aren't you with Howler and Lyla?"

With a sob, I threw my arms around his sweaty middle. "I was scared for you," I sobbed into his chest.

"Ah, Elli," he sighed, holding the back of my head against him. "It's okay. It was just a little spar, sweetheart."

To him. To Lyla and Howler and every other Son, yes, it was just a spar. No one took it seriously. What happened in the Underground stayed there. Any hard feelings that were felt in the cage were left behind. Fighting outside wasn't allowed.

But to me, it was torture. I couldn't stand the blood and violence. And I especially couldn't handle when it happened to Zachary. Swallowing back another sob, I just held on to him, thankful the fight was obviously over.

"Let me get cleaned up, and we can go home," he promised in my ear. "You want a cupcake?"

I shook my head.

"Please don't be sad, Elli. It's over now."

I tipped my head back, examining his split eyebrow that would need stitches and the cut on his lip. His nose was swollen, and he already had a black eye forming. "I don't like it when you get beat up."

His nostrils flared in displeasure. "I didn't get beat up." I just lifted my brows, causing his lips to twitch. "Maybe I got my ass beat a little."

"I think you have a concussion," I observed, noticing the way one pupil was a bit larger than the other.

"I'm going to get checked over by the doc," he assured me. Taking a step back, he offered me his hand. "Come on, little one. You can be my moral support while I get stitched up."

I glanced back at where I'd left Howler and Lyla. With the fight over, the crowd was dispersing, and they had both been swallowed up in it. Zachary tugged on my fingers. "You with me, Elli?"

Sucking my lip between my teeth, I nodded. "Always."

CHAPTER I

ELLIANNA

Five years later

BEGINNING OF JUNE

THE COOLNESS OF THE ROOM WAS SO NICE, BUT IT IRRITATED me too. Mumbling to myself, I cracked my lids open, gearing up to yell at my roommate. Our rent didn't include utilities, and just a couple degrees in temperature could mean the difference between getting a few extra groceries that week or having to scrape by with spaghetti and cheap, canned tomato sauce.

As I sat up in bed, it took a moment for the sleep to fully clear and for me to realize I wasn't back at my apartment in California. Instead, I was in the room I'd grown up in. Remembering that I didn't have to pay for the electricity in the Bennet mansion, and that I could enjoy the comfort of the air conditioning without worrying about paying the astronomical bill each month, I dropped back onto my pillow and pulled the blanket up to my chin.

I hadn't been home for more than an overnight stay in three years. I'd had my reasons, but the biggest one was because I didn't have the time. Between all the classes I'd taken during the regular semester, as well as summer classes so I could get through undergrad as quickly as possible, I also had to work so I could eat.

My scholarships only covered so much, like books, courses, labs, and my apartment—minus utilities. A flight home was a splurge I had to save for months to afford. It sucked being away from my mom, but I kept telling myself that college wasn't forever, and once I had a well-paying job, I'd move her wherever I ended up, and she would never have to cook or clean another toilet for the rest of her life.

I grimaced and opened my eyes. Maybe that was a bit overdramatic. My mom might still be the Bennets' housekeeper—or, as the asshole head of the Bennet family liked to refer to her, their house manager—but she hadn't had to scrub a toilet in over a decade. She had an entire staff that she oversaw who did all the less-pleasant chores of maintaining such a gigantic home.

But she never should have been in such a position to begin with. My mother, Mabel, had had aspirations once upon a time, and they had never included cleaning another person's house. But my father had been a military man, and she'd been too young to understand what that meant when she'd gotten pregnant. Her religious family had forced her to marry him at the ripe old age of sixteen and then cut her off completely.

She'd had no other choice but to quit school and start working the first job she could land. While my dad was on deployment, she had a miscarriage, but for whatever reason, she didn't return to school. At a guess, I figured she'd enjoyed making her own money too much to worry about continuing her education. At the Bennets', she had a room of her own, so she had no reason to worry about rent or making do with a house on base.

It wasn't like my dad was ever home long enough for them to have a real relationship. From what little I knew about their marriage, he was only stateside long enough to sign up for his next tour of duty. How they'd eventually gotten pregnant with me, I didn't even want to think about. But by that time, Mom had worked her way up in the ranks and had become the Bennets' head housekeeper, as well as their full-time nanny.

My entire life, I'd lived in the mansion with her, growing up right alongside the youngest Bennet. Lyla was like a sister

to me. I loved and missed her nearly as much as my mom. Unfortunately, she was off working with her cousins for the summer, so I wasn't likely to see her during this visit.

Kicking the covers off me, I forced myself to get up, remembering that I wasn't just home to laze around the mansion. Mom had free rein to hire short-term staff, and I was going to be helping out while one of the full-time maids took her vacation. With the price of living only going up every week, I couldn't exactly turn down the offer of extra cash, especially when I was going to be there for several weeks.

The thought of having to clean Zachary Bennet's bathroom wasn't appealing, but it paid more than I would have earned waiting tables at the diner near my apartment back in California or shelving books at the library on campus. I'd just have to get over my aversion to scrubbing toilets.

Groaning, I climbed out of bed and got ready for the day.

When I walked into the kitchen, Mom was already standing at the island with a list on the counter in front of her, while two other women in black dress pants and white button-downs stood on the other side. Their hair was pulled back into severe buns, and they had their hands crossed in front of them, listening intently.

Mom's eyes narrowed on me, and I cringed. "I'm sorry I overslept. It won't happen again."

Pressing her lips together, she gave a firm nod before continuing with her list. The other two rushed off the moment she dismissed them. As soon as the door shut behind them, Mom turned a beaming smile on me. "Good morning, sleepyhead."

“It’s scary how fast you can go from demanding overlord to sweet, angelic mother,” I complained as I grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl.

Laughing, she crossed to the fridge and extracted eggs and a carafe of fresh orange juice. “How about something more filling than just an apple?”

“This is fine,” I protested, but she turned and gave me another glower. I fought a sigh. “Sure. Thanks, Mom.”

“That tells me you don’t take care of yourself, Ellianna,” she scolded as she began to whisk the eggs while the pan heated. “What do you normally eat for breakfast?”

I took a big bite of the apple, trying to avoid answering, but that damn glower was too much to ignore. “Don’t worry about me, Mom,” I insisted. “I eat plenty, okay?”

Her eyes flickered over me from head to toe before she shook her graying blond head. “I’m going to pretend like I believe you.”

“I’ll make toast,” I offered, grabbing the freshly baked bread she always kept and cutting off two slices.

“Make some for Judge as well,” she instructed, adding mushrooms and peppers to the eggs. “He should be down soon.”

Swallowing a groan, I did as I was told and stuck all four slices into the large toaster. After setting the timer to the darkest option—which I didn’t necessarily love, but I also knew how much Judge hated it when his toast was even close to burned, and I was a teeny-tiny bit petty—I poured myself a mug of coffee.

The first sip touched my soul. There was no coffee better than my mom’s. She grated in a little cinnamon and nutmeg

before brewing it. I'd always watched her do it, and I made my own the exact same way, but for some reason, it never tasted the same. Sometimes she sent me care packages with her special blend, and I savored every pot. My roommate was always stealing it, so it never lasted as long as it should.

Every time my roommate made some without asking, I tossed one of her socks. Half the time, she had to wear mismatched ones, and they weren't even the fun kind with cute characters. It was usually a navy-blue one with a black or brown or tan sock. She'd been my roommate for two years now, but she still hadn't figured out that I was the one responsible for her missing socks and not the dryer.

Being petty was a small but fulfilling joy.

Oddly enough, she'd accused me of stealing her underwear a few times, but that was beyond ick. No way in hell would I willingly touch her panties. I didn't want to come into contact with anything that touched that slut's kitty. I wouldn't even let her use my bathroom when she had guys sleep over and she didn't want them to know she actually had bodily functions.

I was still enjoying the first sip of coffee when the equivalent of a wet dream for every woman in the county with a working vagina walked into the kitchen. My fingers tightened around the mug, but I controlled my breathing when I saw him out of the corner of my eye. Dressed in an expensive suit, with his dark hair neatly styled back from his face, he was ready for a day on the bench.

Zachary "My Fucking Name is Judge" Bennet was the youngest judge in the state, both when he first was elected to the position as well as now, even though he was only in his thirties. The rumor was that he was considering running for mayor, but when Mom told me that little piece of gossip, she'd

been convinced it was just the locals spreading stories. If Zachary really was going to run, my mom would be one of the first people he informed.

He filled out that suit too well, and I hated that I noticed. I hated that my heart gave a little double thump-thump when I caught a hint of his expensive cologne. It was a subtle scent, a little woody, a little spicy, a hell of a lot sexy.

My presence must have surprised him because he stopped for all of three full seconds, his entire body tensing. I kept sipping my coffee, pretending to continue to enjoy it. But suddenly, the strong brew was sitting unhappily in my stomach, and my breathing turned shallow.

Instinct told me to run, but this was my home—and I didn't run from Zachary “That's Your *Fucking Name* Damn It!” Bennet.

CHAPTER 2

JUDGE

A FLASH OF PALE BLOND CAUGHT ME OFF GUARD WHEN I entered the kitchen, my entire body instantly reacting in a way it hadn't in three fucking years. My heart gave a painful thump the moment I saw her standing there, savoring a cup of coffee.

She was too damn beautiful for her own good. Too young. Too sweet. Too perfect.

Ellianna Chambers grew up right beside my sister, just a few months older than Lyla. I'd watched over her from the time she was born, making sure my bastard of a father didn't turn his temper on her. I'd seen her go from an adorable, chunky baby to a graceful little girl, and then an awkward yet pretty teenager. Sometime around the time she and my sister were able to start driving, things began to change for me, though.

I felt like a sick perv with how potent my response was to her. I sentenced men to the max time in prison for acting on those same thoughts I had in my head. I couldn't control it, and I was a man who thrived on total control in every aspect of my life.

The only solution I could come up with was to get temptation as far away from my depraved thoughts as possible. She was so damn smart and had her choice of

colleges. I'd known she was considering an East Coast school to be closer to her mom, but I made a few calls, ensuring that those universities didn't accept her.

Her disappointment had been nearly too much to withstand. To make up for it, I'd contacted her West Coast school of choice and made sure that her costs were covered under the guise of extra scholarships. When she'd decided she didn't want to live on campus her second year, I'd made sure the apartment she had chosen was safe and then paid her portion of the rent under the same pretense of the cost being covered by a scholarship.

Once she'd left, I'd made the mistake once and only once of being home when she returned for a visit. Since then, I'd ensured I was away whenever she did make the rare trip.

No one had informed me that she would be home now, however, or I would have found somewhere else to sleep for a few days until she returned to California.

“Good morning,” Mabel greeted from the stove. One of the first things I'd done when my father died was have the entire kitchen redone, giving her free rein. That stove alone had been over twenty grand and required a specialist to travel down from Maryland to repair it whenever something went wrong. Not that she knew that. I hadn't let her look at prices, because I knew if she did, she wouldn't choose the appliances she truly wanted.

She'd turned the kitchen into a chef's dream, and my mother had arranged for some magazine to come in and do a photoshoot of the room afterward, pretending she'd waved her creative wand and redesigned the entire space.

“Good morning,” I clipped out, keeping my eyes on Mabel's daughter, who was still standing beside her, sipping

her coffee like she didn't have a care in the world.

While I struggled to simply keep my breathing under control and my hands to myself.

Fuck.

My housekeeper lifted her brows at me. "You must have an unpleasant case this week."

"I spoke to Lyla last night," I announced, forcing myself to walk to the table and pull out my usual chair. "She's coming home for the fall semester."

"That's wonderful news!" Mabel gushed, plating two omelets.

I nodded, trying to turn my mind toward my sister coming home rather than the little beauty whose presence was filling my entire kitchen. Maybe I'd call Howler and fuck with his head by letting him know Lyla was going to be home for at least an entire semester so I wasn't the only sick bastard who couldn't focus today. My goddaughter would enjoy having her favorite person home for more than a few days, and I was already trying to figure out a way to keep my sister home for good.

The toaster popped up, and I caught the scent of burned bread. Ellianna put her mug down and began buttering the charred slices.

"Elli," Mabel admonished softly.

"Sorry. I guess I forgot how finicky this toaster is," she said with a shrug as she tossed two pieces of toast onto a plate.

"Weird that it only gets finicky when you're here," I groused, not fooled for a moment that she hadn't done it on purpose. She enjoyed making my life hell way too much.

She flinched at my tone but gave her mother a tight smile. “We shouldn’t let it go to waste.”

Mabel sighed but carried my breakfast over to me. “What would you like for dinner tonight, Judge?”

I grimaced down at the overly dark bread. Ellianna didn’t know, and I sure as fuck wouldn’t tell her, but I had a deep aversion to burned toast for a reason. My old man had once thrown a toaster at Lyla when she’d tried to make herself breakfast. “Don’t worry about me. I won’t be home tonight.”

“Are you working late? I’ll send you something for dinner so you don’t have to worry about food.”

“No.” Cutting into the omelet, I took a large bite, putting an end to the conversation.

Placing the second plate across from me, she stepped back. “Elli, what would you prefer for dinner?”

“I’ll cook,” she offered. “I’m here to help, not have you wait around on me, Mom.”

“You’re filling in for Patricia, and I only expect you to work from eight until five, honey. Besides, I want to cook for you. I miss making your favorite foods.”

I nearly groaned as I listened to mother and daughter. I’d known one of the housekeepers was going on vacation and had told Mabel to hire a temp service to help out until Patricia returned. But she didn’t like strangers in the house any more than I did. She’d assured me she would figure it out, and I’d trusted her not to overwork herself in the process.

Her hiring Ellianna to fill the gap hadn’t been a possibility that even entered my head. Ellianna was too delicate to do housekeeping. I didn’t like the thought of her dusting, let alone scrubbing floors and bathtubs.

“Doesn’t the summer semester start soon?” I gritted out. She typically took extra classes so she could graduate faster. I wasn’t sure I liked her overworking herself so much, but it kept her away from home, so I didn’t let myself think about it too hard.

Ellianna picked up a slice of toast and crunched into it, taking her time before answering. My stomach tried to revolt, but I pushed it down, locking away the bad memories so I could make it through another day. “I’m sitting out this summer. Mom needs help, and I need the extra cash.”

My eyes narrowed on her. “Don’t your scholarships pay for all your needs?”

She shrugged. “Rent, my courses, labs, and books. But I still have to eat and pay other bills.”

“What other bills?” I demanded, wondering what kind of trouble she’d gotten into that she had other “bills.” “And I thought one of the scholarships gave you a food allowance.”

Her eyes turned to slits on me. “Why would you think that?”

I took another bite of my omelet, ignoring the toast on my plate. “Mabel must have mentioned it.”

“Well, I don’t know why she would tell you that, because it’s none of your business. But she was wrong. I don’t get any extra money from the scholarships. My rent is paid every year, but that cost doesn’t cover utilities. My roommate and I split the other costs, but she doesn’t seem to understand we live in a state that is in a constant drought.” She made a disgusted face. “Julie thinks that the air conditioning should be set to arctic temperatures in the summer and sauna in the winter. We have

the same argument every month over how the bills should be split.”

“How do you normally pay for the extra costs, then?” I snapped, wondering if I should have had someone keeping tabs on her. I’d wanted to—so damn badly—but I’d felt like a fucking stalker just thinking about it.

“I turn tricks,” she said as she took another loud bite of her burned toast.

“Elli!” Mabel shouted, and I fought the need to murder someone.

“What?” She laughed. “I’m kidding. I’ve been waiting tables at a diner near campus.”

Biting back a curse, I made a mental note to contact the person handling her “scholarships,” and I forked the rest of the omelet into my mouth. Picking up my coffee, I swallowed two large gulps before pushing back from the table. “Court starts in half an hour.”

“Have a good day, dear,” Mabel called from the other side of the kitchen. “Let me know if you change your mind about sending over an evening meal.”

Throwing up a hand in acknowledgment, I stomped out of the house. One of my security guards was standing beside my car. He opened my door, and I climbed into the back, my phone already pressed to my ear. It was still early on the West Coast, and my call went to voice mail.

“We need to talk,” I snarled. “Call me back.”

Hanging up, I made arrangements for later. I needed to burn off some steam or no one was going to be safe.

CHAPTER 3

ELLIANNA

AFTER WORKING ALL DAY, I WAS EXHAUSTED, BUT WHEN I entered the kitchen following a long shower, Mom was already standing at the stove, putting food into a bento box.

“Honey, do you mind dropping this off at the courthouse for me?” she asked without looking up from carefully arranging grilled chicken on top of perfectly roasted vegetables and brown rice.

“Did Zachary change his mind?” I asked, popping a roasted garlic and parsley baby potato into my mouth.

“He didn’t call, but I’d feel better if he had a home-cooked meal. His cholesterol was high when he had his last doctor’s visit.”

My brows lifted toward the ceiling in surprise. “His cholesterol? But he’s like...” Mom glanced at me, and I shrugged. “Freaking perfect.”

“It doesn’t matter how much a person works out if they have bad genetics. Heart disease runs in his family. His father died of a heart attack, and so did his grandfather. The cycle will end with Judge if I can help it.” She put the top on the bento box and lifted it toward me.

Reluctantly, I took it from her. “Fine,” I grumbled. “Where are your keys?”

“Take Lyla’s car. It’s not like anyone ever drives it anyway. All it does is sit in the garage, taking up space.”

“Zachary won’t like my driving it,” I tried to argue, only to get glowered at. “He yelled at me the last time I drove it.”

“Because you got a speeding ticket,” she reminded me.

“I was only doing six over the speed limit.” I huffed.

“In a school zone!”

“It was ten o’clock on a Saturday night, so it doesn’t count.” Stomping over to the drawer that held the extra keys, I found the fob I needed and snatched it up.

“That deputy called Judge and made him think you were driving erratically,” Mom tried to excuse. It was maddening how she was always on his side.

I rolled my eyes. “Zachary accused me of flashing my boobs at the guy in an attempt to get out of the ticket.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not,” I muttered defensively, feeling interrogated all over again, even though it had been over four years since I’d gotten that stupid ticket. “Lyla was the one who pulled down her top a bit to give him a little peek at the girls when the cop walked up to the passenger door of the car because traffic was crazy that night.”

A hint of a smile teased at Mom’s lips. “I’m glad she’s coming home. Judge hasn’t been the same since she started working with Barrick.”

I'd already started at college by the time Lyla had started working with her cousin, but I knew how lost Zachary had been when she'd left. He'd taken care of her for as long as I could remember. She was his entire world. If anything happened to her, I knew it would utterly destroy him.

His tenderness for Mom and Lyla showed me he had at least a few drops of humanity inside his cold heart.

Too bad those small signs of warmth didn't include me.

In the huge, detached garage at the back of the mansion, I slid behind the wheel of Lyla's car. When I drove away from the house, I wasn't surprised that the radio was on the same station Lyla and I had been listening to the last time we'd used the convertible. She'd only ever personally driven it a few times. My friend might be able to hold her own in the Underground world, but she was a nervous wreck when she got behind the wheel.

In the past, if I wasn't available to drive, she would get a member of Judge's security detail to chauffeur her around. Her ability to identify and accept her own weakness made me admire her more. Not everyone was able to embrace the parts of themselves that made them vulnerable.

The courthouse was on the other side of town. I rolled down the windows and took my time, enjoying the warm evening air and taking in all my favorite spots as I prolonged the delay in seeing Judge.

Finding that the parking lot only had a few vehicles, I rolled up the windows and reached for the bento box on the passenger seat. As I entered the building through a side door that led straight to the judges' wing, I was greeted by one of the bailiffs.

I remembered the guy from when I was a teenager, and he immediately recognized me. “Miss Chambers, Judge Bennet’s assistant said he didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“Hi, Ted.” I lifted the dark blue box in my hand, showing him the food. “My mom asked me to drop this off. I won’t bother him, but I can’t leave without making sure he has his dinner, or she will worry.”

His face softened. “Judge won’t like Mabel worrying. I guess it won’t hurt anything if you’re quick.”

Giving him a smile in thanks, I walked down the corridor. Judge had the last office at the end. The door wasn’t locked, and I walked in. His receptionist was already gone for the day, and his assistant’s desk was already cleared off, his laptop missing, telling me he’d gone home.

Walking over to the closed door to Zachary’s office, I knocked and waited.

“Come in!” he barked.

Clenching my fingers around the bento box, I reluctantly opened the door with my free hand and stepped inside. The only light on in the room was a single lamp on the large mahogany desk Zachary was seated behind. His damp hair was pushed back from his face. With his focus on the screen of his computer, a frown pulling at his brows, it took me a moment to realize he wasn’t wearing a shirt.

His bathroom door was open, steam still coming out of it. All the judges’ chambers had a private bathroom, but his was the only one I knew of that had a shower in it as well. Howler had put it in for him when Zachary first took the bench, and Zachary had paid for out of his own pocket, so it wasn’t like it had cost the taxpayers a dime.

“You’re late,” he snapped without looking up.

Figuring Mom had let him know I was coming, I walked farther into the room. “I was enjoying the fresh air.”

His head snapped up at the first sound of my voice, his dark eyes briefly flickering over me before turning back to the screen before him. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Mom asked me to bring you dinner.” Crossing to the desk, I placed the container on the corner.

He eyed it skeptically. “Is it burned?”

I smirked. “Lucky for you, Mom made it.”

“Doesn’t mean you didn’t throw in some charred toast,” he grumbled.

Rolling my eyes at him, I turned to leave. “Try not to choke on it.”

Before I could reach the still-open door, a woman dressed in a knee-length black skirt and matching top walked in. Her dark hair fell in waves down her back, her makeup impeccable. Confidence oozed from her, and I could understand why. She was beautiful.

Eyes locking with mine, she stopped just a few steps inside the room. “I thought it was just us tonight.”

“It is.” Zachary’s voice was laced with steel, and I tried not to clench my hands into fists. “She was just leaving.”

Oh God. A sick feeling filled my stomach. I had no idea who this woman was, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out why she was there. Ignoring the burning in my chest, I gave her a tight smile. I wasn’t going to slut-shame, and it wasn’t her fault the guy she was sleeping with was a total d-bag. “I’m Ellianna.”

“Rita,” she introduced, her brown eyes skimming over my blue yoga pants and matching cropped hoodie that exposed a few inches of my stomach. My hair was still down but had thankfully air-dried on the drive over. “Are you sure you don’t want to hang around? I’m okay with sharing.”

The way she kept running her gaze over me, I didn’t doubt she was into sharing. I felt oddly complimented. “Yeah, well, I’m not much of a sharer.”

I was proud of how calm my voice was, while inwardly, I was having a little bit of a tantrum. I didn’t want her to be there for the reasons she was. I didn’t want her to be his fuck buddy, and I really didn’t want them to be something more.

“Then maybe you and I could spend a few hours together,” she purred, taking a step closer.

“Rita,” Zachary barked, and I heard his chair roll back.

Sensing his aggression, I gave Rita another tight smile. “Excuse me.”

“Damn,” I heard her say as I left. “She was a sexy little thing.”

“Don’t even look at her!” he commanded, his voice harsh.

I quickly closed the door behind me and sprinted down the corridor toward the exit. Ted called a goodnight as I slammed through the door, running toward Lyla’s car.

Only when I was locked inside did I let myself react. Gripping the steering wheel, I screamed from behind clenched teeth. “*Ugh!* I hate him! Stupid. Asshole. Jerk. Hate him. Hate him. *Hate him!*”

CHAPTER 4

ELLIANNA

LIST IN HAND, I WALKED AROUND THE PRODUCE SECTION OF the grocery store, working through the many items my mom had sent me out for. She either did the shopping on her own or had it delivered, but with me home, she didn't have to do either. Even though it was Saturday and supposed to be my day off, I liked helping her out.

Picking up a container of strawberries, I inspected the berries before adding them to my cart.

Maybe I'd make waffles for Sunday brunch.

Maybe I'd burn them all—just a little.

And then cover them in fresh fruit and whipped cream so Zachary didn't know.

But I knew I wouldn't go that far. That would only be a sad waste of batter.

Adding a container each of blackberries and blueberries to the cart, I moved over to where the melons were on display. Zachary didn't like cantaloupe. I'd just add a few chunks to his plate as a garnish. Maybe some mint too. He couldn't stand the smell of mint.

For a grown man, Zachary was the pickiest eater I'd ever met. I knew little kids who had less on their refuse-to-eat list

than he did.

“But Daddy, I don’t want to go to Mommy’s house.”

“Josie, we talked about this. After we pick up a few groceries, I have to make a stop at one of the construction sites. It’s not safe for you there.”

Recognizing the voice, I turned my head to find Howler pushing a cart with his three-year-old daughter at his side. I had seen only pictures of Josie since she was a baby. With her blond hair up in pigtails, dressed in a yellow dress with butterflies all over it, she was a beautiful little replica of her father.

“Can’t I go to Grandma’s?” she asked, her eyes gazing up at Howler hopefully.

“Grandma isn’t home.”

Disappointment filled her face. “Oh.”

“Howler,” I called, lifting my hand to wave.

His head snapped around. When he spotted me, his eyes widened, but he left his cart to walk over and hug me. “Elli! The fuck, girl? Why didn’t you let me know you were home?”

I hugged him back, warmth flowing through me at being embraced so welcomingly. Friends were hard to come by back in California. I was too busy and maybe just a little leery of making connections at school. Julie, my roommate, wasn’t even close to counting as a friend, and I felt like the other students in my classes had their heads too far up their own asses to see anyone as anything other than competition. Even at work, I stayed to myself.

A big part of it was because I knew California wasn’t my forever home, and I didn’t want to be hurt when I left.

But I had to admit that physical contact with other people was something I craved. Even though I'd been home for almost a week, I'd only gotten a hug or two from my mom. She wasn't one for displays of affection, and I might have been a little starved for it.

"I'm helping Mom while someone is on vacation," I told him when I stepped back. "So I'm in town for a few more weeks. I guess time got away from me while I was working the last few days. How are you? What are your sisters up to these days? Is Cherie doing okay?"

"I'm good. So are Mom and my sisters, although there are times Kaya gives me indigestion."

His mention of his youngest sister made me smile. "I've seen pictures on social media of her little boy. He is adorable—and those eyes! I guess he takes after his dad?"

"Yeah, I guess. She doesn't talk about him to me. Or more, she refuses to tell me who the fucker is." My eyes widened, realizing I'd inadvertently stepped into that drama, but he quickly changed the subject. Touching his hand to the top of his daughter's head, he smiled, letting me know he wasn't offended. "Did you hear that Lyla is coming home for the fall semester?"

Grinning at how his eyes glowed, I nodded. "Zachary mentioned it to my mom."

"Daddy, who is that?" Josie whispered, looking up at me curiously.

"This is Mabel's daughter, Ellianna," he introduced. "Elli, do you remember my Josie?"

I bent and offered her my hand. "Hi, Josie. It's a pleasure to meet you. The last time I saw you, you were only a baby. I

can't believe how much you've grown."

"Hi," she said softly, shaking my hand. "If you're Mabel's daughter, does that mean you know Lyla?"

"She's only my dearest friend." Guilt tried to hit me, because I hadn't been much of a friend to her over the past three years. I'd been so caught up in school, work, and trying to survive that I'd put everything else aside. Lyla had been the only person to ever truly care about me, with the exception of my mom.

"Mine too!" Josie exclaimed. "Lyla is my bestest best friend in the whole world."

"We need to catch up," Howler said when I straightened. "How about dinner one night?"

I was already nodding. "I'd like that. I've missed you and...everyone."

"Tonight?" he offered. "I have to run to a site for a few hours, but maybe around eight?"

"Definitely."

"Do I get to come?" Josie asked hopefully.

"You're spending the night at your mom's," Howler told her, but the way his jaw was clenched, I wasn't so sure he liked that idea any more than Josie appeared to. Remembering Gwen, I could understand why.

"Is that a have-to thing?" I asked, knowing it was a personal question, but Howler was like family.

"I still have primary custody, but Gwen gets her one or two days a week." A muscle in his jaw ticked. "Sometimes overnight."

Feeling his tension, I touched his arm. “I’m only grocery shopping today. I could take her... If you’re okay with that. I mean, I’m kind of a stranger to her—”

His entire face softened, turning him from the scary MMA cage fighter into the sweet guy I’d grown up loving like an older brother. “You’re no stranger, Elli.”

“Well, if Josie is comfortable coming with me, I don’t mind the company.” I glanced down at the little girl. “We could make cookies, maybe watch a movie?”

“Yes!” Josie cheered then grabbed Howler’s hand. “Please, Daddy? Pretty, pretty please. I want to go with Elli.”

Whether he couldn’t turn down that excited glow in her eyes or he was simply looking for any reason not to send Josie to her mother’s, I wasn’t sure, but he quickly gave in. “Only if you don’t mind, Elli.”

“I really don’t mind,” I assured him. “But I drove Lyla’s car, so I don’t have a car seat.”

He pulled a key fob out of his pocket. “You okay driving my SUV? I’ll take Lyla’s car, and we can switch back tonight.”

I eyed his long legs and wide shoulders. “I think the question is whether you’re okay taking her car.”

“It’s a nice day out, I’ll just put the top down,” he said with a shrug.

Turning to my cart, I pulled the key fob out of my purse. “Okay, then.”

After we exchanged keys, Howler bent to hug his daughter. “Be good and help Elli. I’ll see you later this evening.” His gaze caught mine. “Where would you like to grab dinner?”

“I can cook,” I offered.

“You’re watching my kid, Elli. The least I can do is take you out somewhere nice.” He leaned back to look at Josie. “Where should we eat tonight?”

She tapped her chin with her index finger. “Ummmmmm, how about hibachi?”

“Perfect.” Straightening, he gave me another quick hug. “Thank you,” he whispered before stepping back.

I offered Josie my hand. “I bet you’re the best helper in the universe. Do you think you can assist me with this long grocery list?”

She eyed the berries already in my cart. “Are those for Uncle Judge? He loves strawberries.”

“Yup, those are for him.” I was kind of proud of myself for not contemplating sprinkling rat poison on them. Okay, maybe I’d considered it. Briefly. But murder was wrong. And I was sure killing a judge would get me the death penalty. If I was convicted. “I was just about to pick out a cantaloupe.”

Her face scrunched up. “Uncle Judge doesn’t like cantaloupe.”

“Well, he’s a big boy, and they sometimes have to eat things they don’t like to be healthy.” I guided her back over to the display of melons. “What kind of cookies should we make later?”

“I like sugar cookies,” she said, watching me choose a cantaloupe before moving over to the honeydew.

“Perfect. Let’s make birthday cookies. They’re like sugar cookies, only they have rainbow sprinkles in them.”

“Yes!” she shouted, jumping up and down. “Then we can watch *How to Train Your Dragon*.”

Laughing, I nodded enthusiastically. “Sounds like a great day to me.”

CHAPTER 5

JUDGE

HEAD POUNDING, I WALKED HALF BLIND INTO THE KITCHEN IN search of coffee. I had no idea what time it was, but the brightness coming through the windows told me it was still daylight. I needed to tell Mabel to have someone install blackout shades on every window.

Playful little giggles had me smiling even as I fought the urge to regurgitate all over the pristine tiled kitchen floor. I freaking loved the sound of Josie's laughter.

"Uncle Judge!" she squealed, making spots flicker in front of my eyes for a few moments. When I felt her little arms wrap around one of my legs, I bent to kiss the top of her head.

"Hey, princess. You and Mabel hanging out?"

"No, I'm making cookies with Elli. Would you like one? They're so yummy."

I nearly groaned at the reminder that Ellianna was home. Keeping my eyes on my goddaughter, I gave her a smile. "Thanks, Jo, but I'll pass. I need coffee."

"Okay, we'll save you some." She bounced over to the island, and I watched her go, only then letting my gaze drift over to where the beautiful, delicate woman was putting extra cookies into a ceramic jar.

Her hair was pulled up into a messy knot on top of her head, exposing her elegant neck. She had a smear of flour on her cheek and the tip of her nose. Her apron had little handprints on it from where Josie must have touched her stomach while she'd helped make the cookies. With Ellianna's attention on what she was doing, refusing to acknowledge me, I took a few extra seconds to soak up the sight of her.

All week, I'd tried to put her out of my mind, avoiding the house as much as possible so temptation would be out of reach. But instead of spending the night elsewhere as I usually did, I hadn't been able to stay away. I'd climbed into my empty, cold bed each night, mentally and physically exhausted but too wired from knowing she was beneath the same roof to be able to get much sleep.

Which was why I'd woken up with a raging migraine.

It was her fault I couldn't shake this need for her that burned through me whenever she was close—fuck, whenever I did nothing more than think about her. She was the reason I had no control. She had a hold on me that I couldn't shake, damn it.

Crossing to the coffeepot, I grabbed the biggest mug in the cupboard and filled it to the rim.

I should have already fucked this burning need for her out of my system, but Rita had pissed me off too much, and I'd sent her home on Monday. She was the only regular hookup I could depend on not to catch feelings. She was too busy with her own career and never had relationships with men. Random bed partners had lost their appeal for me years ago. Now I kept it to the ones who only wanted to scratch the proverbial itch.

Gulping down the caffeine, I prayed it would ease some of the pounding in my head. I was out of my migraine meds, and

my doctor had warned the last time I'd called for a refill that I would need to come for an in-person visit before he would write me another prescription. Apparently the asshole didn't understand that I was busy with work.

Making a note to ask one of the Underground doctors to write me a script for my meds, I added more coffee to the mug and walked over to where Josie had returned to help clean up.

“What's your daddy doing today, Josie?”

Her little huff made me smile. She reminded me so much of Lyla, it hurt a little. My sister would be home soon, though, and I'd find a way to keep her where she belonged. Maybe my idiotic best friend would pull his head out of his gigantic ass and wife her. I knew it was the only way I could truly keep her close, but Howler would have to prove himself worthy of her first. I wanted her where I could watch over her, but I also wanted her to be happy.

And Howler and Josie were the keys.

“He had to work.”

I took a sip of my coffee to keep from laughing when she rolled her pretty eyes. “Well, I'm glad you're here. You can help me sort through some files later.”

“Sorry, Uncle Judge. I have plans.” She bounced from one foot to the other in excitement. “After the cookies cool, Elli and I are gonna watch *How to Train Your Dragon*. But you can watch it with us if you want.”

“That's a hard offer to turn down, princess. But I have some work to get caught up on.”

“Okay.”

“How about we have dinner with your dad?” I suggested.

“Daddy is taking me and Elli to hibachi.”

My body tensed, and I glared at Ellianna, who was still cleaning up. She kept her head down, refusing to look at me. “Like a date?” I gritted out.

Her light-blue eyes lifted to me then, and when Josie wasn’t watching, she flipped me off. “No, not like a date. We’re going to catch up because we haven’t seen each other in three years.”

“And whose fault is that?” I snapped.

Her nostrils flared as she looked up at me. “No one is at fault. I’ve been busy with school, and he was always working when I did get the chance to come home. Friendships don’t just evaporate if they’re true friends.”

“Howler isn’t your friend,” I told her coldly.

She crossed her arms over her chest and popped a hip against the island. Did she even know how beautiful she was when she got feisty like that? A delicate little angel who had fire in her. There was nothing sexier to me.

“No,” she agreed.

I almost relaxed.

Fucking almost.

But then she tacked on, “He’s family.”

I could hear my heartbeat pounding away in my ears.

She wanted to see how far she could push me. That was the only reason she did shit like that.

But if she knew how close to the edge I was, how tempted I was to give in and just take what I craved—what only she

could fulfill inside me—then she would have been running away instead of running that beautiful, sassy mouth.

“Do you wanna come with us tonight, Uncle Judge?” Josie asked, not seeming disturbed by the new tension in the room. “We can eat flying shrimp together!”

Ellianna opened her mouth, already shaking her head to shoot down the offer. I also should have already been making an excuse to get out of it. Spending time with her, even with other people there to keep me in check, was dangerous. It only fed the sick addiction I had to her. Made me want to toss out what little sanity I still held on to where she was concerned and take what I needed.

Instead, I found myself nodding, because apparently I was a fucking masochist. “I would love to, Jo.”

CHAPTER 6

ELLIANNA

I WASN'T SURPRISED THAT JOSIE HAD HER OWN ROOM AT THE mansion, or that she had an entire closet full of fun clothes. I had zero doubt that Lyla had bought every outfit in there, along with all the adorable hair bows and ribbons. Given how much Josie talked about my childhood best friend, it was easy to see the love they both had for each other.

After Howler called the landline to let me know he would be leaving soon to pick us up for dinner, I decided to change my clothes, and Josie wanted to dress up too. She chose a light pink dress with white sandals. While I put white and pink ribbons in her hair, she insisted we needed to be twinsies.

Knowing I didn't have anything even remotely close to matching, we ventured into Lyla's bedroom to raid her closet. Lyla was considerably taller and more athletic than I was, so I doubted anything she had would fit me, but I figured Josie needed to see rather than be told.

“How about this?”

I tried not to stiffen at the sight of the old dress shirt she was tugging on. Lyla and I had seen it in a store window at the mall and giggled all the way home about her brother wearing it to a breast cancer research fundraiser the three of us were

attending that night. The shirt was bright pink, and neither of us had actually thought he would wear it, but he had.

Seeing him in that shirt, I'd been so starstruck, I couldn't form coherent sentences all night whenever I looked his way. When he'd walked through that ballroom with such confidence, making every other man in the room pale in comparison, I'd gone from crushing on him to something far, far stronger.

Apparently it had been a one-and-done wear, however. Especially if it was in Lyla's closet.

Pulling it off the hanger, I held it to my front. It was missing the very top button, but that didn't matter. As short as I was, it would fall about midthigh, so it could pass for a dress on me. "I guess it will work," I murmured. "I'd need a belt, though."

"Lyla has a whole bunch of belts," Josie said enthusiastically.

Giving her a smile, I nodded. "Okay. Let's be twinsies."

Twenty minutes later, we walked into the family room, where Zachary was sitting on a couch, reading through a file. As soon as he heard us, his head snapped up. The moment his eyes landed on me, I felt like a bug under a microscope. His gaze scanned over me critically, his jaw tightening in a way that told me he wasn't happy with what he saw.

I wouldn't allow myself to consider why his reaction disappointed me. I'd given up on questioning my reactions to him years ago. Pushing away the unwelcome feeling, I took Josie's hand and twirled her.

"Are we pretty, Uncle Judge?" she asked with a giggle.

He closed his file and tossed it on the coffee table in front of him. “Beautiful,” he gushed appropriately. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m gonna eat all the shrimp!” she squealed, dancing over to him. Standing, he scooped her into his arms as soon as she reached him. “Will Daddy be here soon?”

He tilted his head, pretending to listen, but there was no way he could have heard a vehicle outside. “I think he just got here. Let’s go see.”

Squishing his cheeks together in both hands, she kissed him on the nose. “Let’s go!”

Without sparing me another glance, he walked out of the room. Gritting my teeth, I followed them. A voice in the back of my mind was shouting at me not to go, but I didn’t want to let Josie down.

That, and I’d gotten a sick kick out of how pissed Zachary had been when he’d thought I was going on a date with Howler. Just the thought that Howler would be interested in me like that when he was so in love with Lyla was preposterous, but it was hilarious that Zachary had thought it was a possibility.

Part of me hoped it was because he was jealous, but I was a realist. No way was that even a possibility. Zachary hated me, plain and simple.

Howler was walking up the steps when Zachary opened the front door. Dressed in black dress pants and a polo, Howler had obviously showered and changed before coming to pick up his daughter. Seeing his friend, he lifted his dark blond brows in surprise. “You’re actually home for once?”

“It’s Saturday,” Zachary reminded him in a bored tone.

“No, I’m aware of that. But every time I’ve talked to you this week, you were at work.” His gaze shifted to me. “And not once did you mention Elli being home.”

“Didn’t know I had to keep you apprised of her every move.” Shifting Josie in his arms, he nodded toward the door I’d just walked through. “Jo invited me to dinner. We’re going to eat all their shrimp. Aren’t we, princess?”

“Shrimp is my favorite!” she told him, bouncing her head up and down in agreement.

Howler laughed before glancing at me. “You okay with that, Elli?”

Zachary turned, cocking a brow in challenge, as if daring me to tell his best friend I had a problem with this new arrangement. I forced a smile. “The more, the merrier.”

“Uncle Judge, ride in the back with me,” Josie suggested as he carried her toward Howler’s SUV that I’d left parked in the driveway. Lyla’s car was right beside it, with the top already in place.

As we walked, I offered Howler back his key fob, and he handed over one to the convertible. “Should I take Lyla’s car? I’m sure you’re tired, and there’s no need for you to bring me home when I can drive myself.”

“I’m good,” he said with an easy smile. “I’ll have to bring Judge home anyway. Asshole doesn’t drive unless someone is dying, and even then, it’s iffy.”

“I miss driving,” I admitted, staring longingly at the car. “Back in California, I either take the bus or walk.”

He pushed his key back into my hand. “Then you can drive us. I don’t mind riding shotgun.”

“Are you sure?” Without realizing it, I directed my gaze to where Zachary was helping Josie get buckled into her booster seat.

Howler touched his huge hand to my shoulder. “I trust you, Elli. Besides, I helped teach you to drive. If you’re not safe behind the wheel, that doesn’t say much for me as a teacher, does it?”

Grinning, I shook my head. “I guess it doesn’t. Okay, thanks.”

Climbing up into the driver’s seat, I fastened my seat belt just as the back door slammed shut. “Eyes on the road and no speeding,” Zachary clipped out.

“Sure thing, Dad,” I sassed with a little salute before starting the SUV.

Howler snickered beside me. “Damn, it’s good to have you home, Elli. All that’s missing is Lyla, and it would be exactly like old times.”

“I miss her,” I told him as I reversed. “The house is definitely way too quiet without her. But at least I’ve been staying out of trouble.”

He barked out a laugh. “Why do I doubt that?”

My bottom lip pouted out. “You doubt me?”

“Absolutely. You might look all sweet and innocent, but I know you too well. No way you haven’t been up to something.”

“Nah,” I denied. “I’ve been good. Between work and catching up on a little sleep that I missed out on after finals recently, I haven’t really had any time to stir up trouble. Besides, it’s no fun when there’s no one to cause trouble with.”

“Tell me about school,” Howler encouraged. “You haven’t been home much, so you must be settled in out there.”

I paused at the end of the driveway and waited for a car to pass before pulling into traffic. “It’s school,” I said with a shrug. “I take extra classes to get done as quickly as I can, but there’s nothing exciting about it.”

I could practically feel his frown without having to look at him. “What are you studying again?”

“I’m double majoring in economics and English. They look good on law school applications, so I figured having both would double my chances.” When I felt eyes on me from the back seat, I tried not to squirm or slouch down. “I will take the LSATs in a few weeks.”

“So you haven’t decided where you want to go to law school yet?” Howler asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“It will depend on my scores and where I get accepted,” I hedged.

“Does that mean you aren’t considering coming home and going local?” he asked, sounding almost hopeful. “With Lyla coming home for the fall, it would be nice if you were back full time too. I know your mom would be happy. Georgetown is close enough you could commute.”

I tightened my hands around the steering wheel. “It’s on my list,” I said evasively. I didn’t want to get my hopes up about getting accepted. Georgetown had been my top pick for undergrad, but I hadn’t gotten in.

Zachary had gone to Georgetown for law school. He’d commuted instead of living close to campus so he could take care of Lyla. All my life, I’d idealized him, had wanted to follow in his footsteps and become a lawyer, maybe even a

judge one day. I'd considered being a prosecutor, but after not getting into Georgetown, I'd decided to go into corporate law instead.

"If you're home, Lyla might decide to stay too," Howler said wistfully.

I wanted to tell him she might decide to stay home if he manned up and told her he loved her, but I pressed my lips together to stop the words from spilling out. He wasn't a complete idiot. He knew what would keep her where he wanted her. All he needed to do was grow a pair of balls and claim her once and for all.

CHAPTER 7

JUDGE

I REFUSED TO FEEL GUILTY WHEN I HEARD THE LONGING IN Ellianna's voice as she told Howler she had Georgetown on her list of possible law schools. If she knew what I'd done to ensure she didn't get in for undergrad, I wasn't sure how she would react. But I didn't want to remember how brokenhearted she'd been when she'd gotten that damned rejection letter—or any of the others that had followed.

Focusing on Josie, I didn't look at Ellianna again until she pulled into the Japanese restaurant downtown.

“Your mom didn't want to join us?” Howler asked as we walked toward the entrance.

Josie held my hand, dancing around like the little ball of energy she was. From the moment she was placed in my arms, her tiny little fist clutching at my finger, she'd wrapped herself around my heart. Just like Lyla had when she came home from the hospital. Nannies had been present around the clock, but I wanted Lyla to see me, to know that even though our parents had better things to do, she would always have me.

And just like with Lyla, I'd make sure Josie always knew I'd be there. No matter what.

“She's visiting a friend who had a chemo treatment yesterday,” Ellianna explained, snagging my attention even

though I tried to keep my focus solely on Josie. “Since I offered to do the grocery shopping this morning, she decided to spend some extra time helping out.”

“Miss Lindy?” Ellianna nodded, and Howler grimaced. “Mom sent her flowers after her surgery. I didn’t know she was already starting treatments, though.”

“From what I was told, the sooner, the better. Her cancer is pretty aggressive.”

“Damn. Judge, man, we need to stop by and see her next week. Maybe take her some dinner.”

I nodded. “I’ll get my assistant to arrange for some meals for her and her family. Mabel told me that her son and daughter-in-law moved back in to help take care of her.”

“That’s not the same as us dropping by to check on her ourselves. Remember those fried pies she would make for school fundraisers? We have to stop by. And have the other Sons check on her too.”

“I’ll make her a get-well card!” Josie announced.

“Good idea, princess,” I encouraged, smacking a kiss on her cheek as we walked into the restaurant.

The waiting area was so crowded, it was hard to get to the hostess stand. Eyes turned in our direction, our entrance stopping the flow of conversations as we passed. Putting Josie on my shoulders to keep her from getting accidentally stepped on, I walked over to the woman behind the podium.

“Judge Bennet,” she greeted with a huge smile. “It’s a pleasure to have you join us again. How many are in your group?”

“There are four of us. Wherever you can fit us is fine.”

Josie bent down to kiss my forehead, causing her pigtails to hit me in the face. “The food smells so yummy, Uncle Judge.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s a small wait,” she told me, watching my goddaughter indulgently. “Give me twenty minutes, and we’ll get you seated.”

“Ah, man!” Josie said with a loud groan. “I’m so hungry.”

“Can I get two orders of the shrimp tempura while we wait?” I asked.

“I’ll bring it out right away,” she said with a wink at Josie when she squealed her excitement.

Thanking her, I walked over to where Howler was standing with Ellianna. “My roommate’s name is Julie. She’s all right, I guess.”

Howler threw back his head and laughed loudly, causing everyone who wasn’t already looking our way to turn their heads. “You have that look on your face, Elli.”

“What look?” she grumbled, sounding petulant and so fucking sexy.

I couldn’t allow myself to do more than glance at her because it was too dangerous. I didn’t trust myself not to get addicted to the sight of her. But I still found my eyes drifting toward her every ten seconds. That ridiculously pink dress shirt was hauntingly familiar. I’d told Mabel to destroy that damned thing the morning after the charity fundraiser I’d worn it to.

That entire night, I’d felt Ellianna’s eyes on me. The cravings I’d already begun to feel for her had nearly burned me alive. It was then that I knew she needed to be far, far away

from me or she wouldn't be safe. I was too sick in the head over her, and my control was starting to crumble.

Control was everything in my world.

Control was the difference between life and death at times.

Control kept those I loved safe.

If I lost it, even for a moment, everything I cherished would disappear.

That shirt represented just how close to losing the control I valued I truly was.

And she looked fucking edible in it.

Like with everything else she wore, she was beautiful. But knowing that it was my shirt—that for an all too brief evening, that same material had touched my body and was now wrapped around hers as if she was presenting me with every dream I'd ever had of her on a silver platter—was too much.

My shirt ended just above her knees, the hem caressing her skin the way my hands itched to. If I stared even a second too long, I would start fantasizing about how soft her flesh would be. How her breaths would come in delicate little pants when I pressed her thighs apart. How she'd moan my name when I cupped her wet little pussy through her innocent white panties.

How sweet she would taste.

Fuck.

I quickly averted my eyes, but no sooner did I look away than my skin began to feel too tight, and I was watching her again.

The top two buttons on that stupid pink shirt were undone, giving the barest hint of her small tits. The first button was

missing, sitting in a drawer beside my bed like a sick trophy. I didn't know why I'd torn it off and kept it, even after demanding Mabel burn the rest of the shirt. No idea other than I needed a reminder of how good it had felt having Ellianna's eyes on me that entire night. Other guys had come up to her, tried to flirt, but she hadn't even heard them because she was lost in watching me. I was the center of her attention—of her world—and I had never had a more exhilarating moment in my life.

I'd never felt so strong, so capable, so fucking powerful.

Before or since.

And right then, dressed in a shirt that represented just how sick and depraved I was for her, she wouldn't look at me. Her pretty blue eyes were on my best friend. Her full attention focused on him, making me want to rip out the other man's throat.

Right in front of everyone.

In front of *Josie*.

And I would, I fucking would without hesitation if she kept pushing all the wrong buttons.

“Your words are all nice and sweet, Elli, but you can't hide your disgust.” Howler cocked his head, a grin teasing his face as he gazed down at her. Fuck him. I'd changed my mind. He couldn't have Lyla after all. I would find another way to keep my sister home. “I guess you two aren't friends?”

Ellianna sighed heavily. “Nope. She's...exhausting, I guess is the nicest way to describe her.”

“Why not get a different roommate?” Howler asked with another laugh.

“Because it was hard enough finding the one I have. Yeah, we argue about who is responsible for what part of the utility bills and all the dishes and trash she just leaves lying around the apartment and the creepy guys she brings home—”

Creepy guys.

In her apartment.

Where she slept—*while* she slept.

Fuck.

I needed to take care of that before she returned to California.

The person responsible for Ellianna’s “scholarships” hadn’t called me back yet, and I’d been so busy with work that I’d let it slide, but I’d deal with the fucker Monday morning.

“But the area I live in is safe, and I can walk to campus or work. No other apartment has opened up in the complex in the two years I’ve lived there, and even with the scholarship that pays my part of the rent, I couldn’t afford an entire place on my own. At least, not in a place that is convenient or with as many security features that would keep my mom from worrying.” She shifted from one foot to the other, her fingers playing with her chunky white belt. Without my permission, my gaze dropped to her bare, silky legs. “Besides, it’s only for two more semesters. I’ve survived this long. I can survive a few more months.”

The hostess appeared with a dish of the huge fried shrimp. Nodding my thanks, I slipped her a tip as I took the plate from her and lifted it high enough that Josie was able to snatch two. Instantly, I felt crumbs fall in my hair, but I didn’t complain. Instead, I nudged Ellianna, offering her the appetizer.

Without looking at me, she took one and nibbled at it before Howler grabbed one for himself, leaving two remaining. Munching on one, I stood there, holding the small platter so Ellianna could take the last one when she was ready.

While I watched her eat, I tried in vain not to watch her mouth move. But when I tore my eyes from the sight of the tip of her tongue licking away a stray crumb, they were captured by her body. Even with the belt, that shirt hung off her.

Had she lost weight?

The longer I looked, the more I could see the differences. She'd always been a delicate little thing, which had only driven my need to protect her. But she looked even smaller now.

“Don't you fucking eat?” I barked before I could stop myself.

I could feel Howler glare at me, but my eyes were on the sharpness of her face, the fragility of her wrist, how completely the shirt swallowed her up.

Fire flared in her light-blue eyes, and her cheeks filled with pink in a mixture of anger and embarrassment.

“Judge, what is your problem?” Howler demanded in a low voice.

“Look at her,” I told him, then clenched my jaw to keep from snapping at my best friend to keep his eyes off her.

No one should look at her.

Ever.

She was for my eyes only.

CHAPTER 8

ELLIANNA

MY STOMACH STARTED PROTESTING THE SHRIMP I'D JUST finished. It had been so delicious, and I'd been having a good time standing there chatting with Howler. I'd almost relaxed, almost let myself think everything was back to the way it was before, back when I was one of the special people Zachary cared about.

But reality set in all too quickly, reminding me that nothing had changed. Zachary had to ruin the evening by trying to embarrass me. I guess he'd been too bored and hurting my feelings was the only thing he could think of to entertain himself. Even though three people had attempted to walk up to him within a five-minute span and he could have held any number of conversations with the room at large. Maybe they'd wanted to talk to him about politics or perhaps even discuss something related to the Underground—although that wasn't allowed and was the quickest way for anyone to get on his bad side.

Unless you were Ellianna Chambers. And then every breath out of your mouth irritated the hell out of him.

He didn't even seem to notice the people who hesitantly approached and then chickened out, or the other patrons who kept speaking just loud enough so he or Howler could hear

their names being mentioned. He was tuned out except for when the beautiful hostess brought over the platter of appetizers.

For her, he'd flashed his killer smile and slipped her a tip. She'd blushed so prettily and licked her lips before rushing back to the podium to show the next group to their grill.

"Look at her," he grumbled to Howler. His dark eyes returned to me, skimming over me in a critical kind of way that hurt so damn bad, and I tried not to flinch.

Stiffening my spine, I tilted my head back, refusing to bow before the asshole who hated me. I didn't understand, and perhaps that was why it hurt so much. Up until only a handful of years before, he'd been so good to me. Protective. Kind. Loving. And then overnight, our relationship had shifted. I wasn't sure what I'd done to make him dislike me, but his disdain had only grown where I was concerned.

After a while, I'd gotten used to it. And when I saw how much it irritated him that I didn't react to his coldness, I'd attempted to embrace the new dynamic between us. I pretended to be indifferent, told myself I hated him just as much as he obviously hated me, but it didn't stop the pain.

He used to be my favorite person.

I might have even been in love with him at one point.

But how could anyone love someone who took pleasure in hurting them?

Just as he was doing right then. It didn't matter that at least twenty other people were standing within hearing distance. Even if he'd whispered, they would have overheard our conversation because they were simply that focused on two of the town's Sons. The Underground was the worst-kept secret

in Northern Virginia. Everyone worshiped the fighters. They were practically heroes. And Zachary “Judge” Bennet was their king. Of course they wanted to listen to his conversations.

And he’d chosen to embarrass me in front of them.

“She’s nothing but skin and bones,” Zachary bit out, his eyes blazing down at me.

“Elli has always been skinny,” Howler excused. “She’s got a fast metabolism.”

“She looks like she’s been starving herself,” he seethed. “That shirt is swallowing her. Did you develop an eating disorder while you were away, Ellianna?”

I closed my eyes when I heard a few whisperers mention my name and then my mom’s. Anyone who knew Zachary was aware that my mom was his housekeeper. No doubt she would know about this scene before I even got home.

And as always, she would think I was in the wrong. Probably even side with her precious Judge. He was infallible in her eyes.

There had been a moment in time when I’d thought so too.

“That’s enough, Judge,” Howler told him from between clenched teeth. “We were having a good time until you started running your mouth.”

“You were having a good time,” he countered. “I’m still waiting for Ellianna to answer me.”

When I felt judgmental eyes on me, my skin heated and I felt the sting of tears. Inhaling slowly in an attempt to keep from crying, I tipped my head back a little more and gave him a tight smile. “Yes, I have a disorder. It’s called being a broke

college student. It's kind of hard to fill up the pantry when you also have to pay bills. But you wouldn't know anything about the struggle train, would you, Mr. Billionaire Judge?"

His skin lost a little color, but other than that, he showed no other outward reaction, and I questioned if maybe the change in his complexion was just a trick of the light. "You can't afford groceries?"

"I have what I need," I snapped, tired of the entire conversation. Turning my back to him, I glanced up at Howler. I didn't know why, but shame was weighing me down, making it impossible to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry, but I'm not very hungry. Let's try this again another time." Pushing his key fob into his hand, I stepped back. "I'm going to go."

"No, Elli. Wait." Howler reached for me, but I stepped away.

Forcing a smile, I looked up at Josie, who was still sitting on Zachary's shoulders. She was so content, so confident in the knowledge that her beloved uncle wouldn't allow anything or anyone to hurt her that she was still happily eating her fried shrimp without feeling the shift in everyone else's emotions.

She had no idea how special she was, or how much I envied her.

"Good night, Josie."

She frowned, dropping her half-eaten shrimp in Zachary's hair, but I couldn't wait another moment. I needed to get away from there. Away from those people still staring. Still whispering.

Away from Zachary.

"Wait! You're leaving?" Josie called after me. "But...what about dinner?"

“Elli!” I sensed Howler behind me, but I increased my pace.

“Ellianna.”

I nearly stumbled, Zachary’s voice barking my name vibrating through me. A sob bubbled up, and I quickly had to swallow it.

I hate him.

“Ellianna, wait, damn it!”

“Fuck off!” I yelled over my shoulder as I half jogged toward the street.

“Ellianna!” he roared.

“Fuck. Off!” I screamed, turning to face him. Angry tears flooded down my cheeks, and I quickly scrubbed them away. Vaguely, I noticed Josie was no longer on his shoulders and saw her with her father out of the corner of my eye, walking toward his SUV. “I haven’t even been home a full week yet, and I’m already sick of you. Christ, you’re such an asshole. Does embarrassing me make you feel good, Zachary? Did humiliating and hurting me just now give you that thrill of power that you’re so in love with?”

“I’m concerned, that’s all.” He took a step forward, and I turned back to continue toward the street.

“I don’t have a goddamn eating disorder!”

“Then let me give you an allowance to help with groceries. For fuck’s sake, I can see your bones.”

“No one asked you to look!” I shouted, pausing as cars zoomed past, looking for a taxi.

“Ellianna!” he raged, and I could almost feel the heat of his body.

I began to tremble. From proximity to him or just in reaction to what had happened inside the restaurant, I wasn’t sure, and I didn’t take the time to examine it.

“Think of your mother, Ellianna.”

“Shut up!” I screamed. “Just shut the fuck up.”

He wrapped his hand around my wrist and jerked me backward before turning me to face him. “Ellianna—”

“Shut up!”

“You’re acting childish.”

“And you’re acting like a giant dick.” I tried to pull my arm free, but he tightened his fingers to the point that I grimaced in pain. That didn’t stop the zing of electricity his touch caused to travel through my entire body. My discomfort didn’t cancel out the fact that I was acutely aware of how good he smelled.

He dragged me closer. “You’re being ridiculous. I’m only trying to help you.”

“Are you serious?” I stopped struggling long enough to demand. “Nothing you just did was to help me. The only thing that was accomplished was the sainted Judge got a sick thrill out of humiliating me. You couldn’t even stop yourself from running your mouth long enough to have a meal together in public. Hell, you couldn’t even bring yourself to come home all week because I’m there.”

“Because you’ve invaded my life again!” he exploded. “You’re taking over everything, and I can’t focus. I have shit to do, and all you’re doing is ruining it all. Again.”

Clenching my eyes closed in a weak attempt to hold back the flood of pain, I sucked in a sharp breath. “Okay,” I whispered without looking up at him. “I’ll do my best not to ruin your life anymore. As soon as Patricia returns from vacation, I’ll go. And this time, I promise, I won’t come back.”

“Good.”

That one word had the power to slice all the way down to my soul. Swallowing was difficult, but I did so and forced my lashes to lift. “Just tell me what I did, Zachary. What have I done to make you hate me so much?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I don’t hate you.”

“Please. I need to know. I promise that in just a few more weeks, I’ll leave, and you’ll never have to see me again. I’ll even make sure that we don’t cross paths between now and then. But I have to know what changed between us to make you take so much pleasure in my pain.”

Something resembling the cry of an angry animal vibrated out of his throat, but instead of answering me, he tightened his fingers around my wrist. “Let’s go.”

Digging my heels in, I attempted to pull back again. All he did was drag me a few feet before turning to glare down at me. “Walk, Ellianna.”

“You were the first person I can remember who called me Elli. What happened? Please, Zachary. It’s been driving me crazy for years, and I can’t keep wondering.”

I felt a shudder go up his arm, and he jerked me forward when he continued to walk. “Stop calling me that.”

“Calling you what?” Confused, I replayed every word I’d just spoken. “Wait... Your name? You want me to stop calling

you Zachary?”

If I hadn't been standing so close, I would have missed the change in his breathing. “Call me Judge like everyone else.”

“No,” I shot back stubbornly. “I'm not everyone else!”

At least, I didn't use to be.

Once upon a time, I was something to him.

I was one of the few people whom he was close with, whom he cherished.

“Yes, you fucking are.” Bending his knees, he lowered his head until I could feel his angry exhale blow against my cheek, breaking me a little more with each angry word he spat at me. “There is nothing special about you, Ellianna. Not one damned thing. And that you think you are is why I can't stomach being in the same room with you. You're no one to me. You never have been, and you sure as hell never will be.”

CHAPTER 9

JUDGE

EVEN AS THE WORDS LEFT MY MOUTH, A VOICE IN THE BACK OF my mind was screaming at me to take them back. The pain in her pretty eyes, the sight of the tears that she couldn't hide, they tore at something deep inside me, but I couldn't recall the words.

It was better like this.

Easier for us both in the long run.

She'd go back to school, and I could get back to my life. The cravings and the emptiness I felt all the way to my soul without her would still remain, but she would be safe from my sickness and depravity. And I'd get back the control she tested when she was so close.

Yes, it was definitely better this way.

If she thought I hated her, then she wouldn't question the agonizing need that burned through me every minute of the day. She wouldn't suspect that I was hanging by a thread, ready to fuck her up against the nearest flat surface to finally ease the pressure building within me.

Ellianna's shoulders shook for a moment, a few tears spilling down her cheeks, cracking me open in a way no one

but she was capable of doing. Regret boiled in my belly, making me want to call the words back yet again.

But then, she seemed to steel herself before my eyes, her entire body going stiff, her chin lifting as she gave me a painful smile. “Okay, then,” she choked out. “Well, that’s good to know. Thanks for your honesty.”

I’d never been less honest in my life. The lies were strangling me, stealing the life from my body as she took a step back toward Howler’s vehicle. “We should go. J-Josie is hungry.”

My throat refused to work, not allowing words to escape. Keeping my fingers wrapped tightly around her delicate wrist—because I couldn’t bring myself to release her, my mind refusing to allow my hand to unfold and let go of the first real physical contact I’d had with her in forever—I walked beside her over to the SUV.

“Elli is having a big tantrum, Daddy,” Josie whispered loudly to her daddy. “I think she needs a nap. I don’t care if we don’t eat hibachi if we can have McDonald’s. I want some chicky nuggies!”

“Sure thing, sunshine,” Howler promised, stepping back from getting her buckled in. “I’m going to close this door for a minute, Josie.”

“Is Elli going to be put in time-out?” she asked with concern.

“No, but Uncle Judge might be.”

“Ohhhhh, he’s in trouble!” she singsonged, reminding me so much of Lyla, the tightness in my throat only intensified, and I struggled to swallow.

The door shut, and Howler crossed his massive arms over his chest. “The fuck was that?” he grated out in a low voice, his eyes pinning me in place for a second.

I shrugged.

Shaking his head at me in disappointment, he shifted his gaze to Ellianna. His face softened, causing my hands to contract reflexively. A pained little gasp reached my ears, and I instantly released her. Howler gently grasped her shoulders and guided her behind him before swinging back around to me.

“If Josie weren’t watching me right now, I’d pound your ass into the ground right here, rules or no rules. I don’t know what your problem is, but I’m already sick of it. Call your fucking driver, because I’m not dealing with your shit anymore tonight, and neither is Elli.”

Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I nodded, my throat still not cooperating with me.

With another hard glare, my best friend turned and opened the passenger door. When Ellianna was hesitant to get in, he didn’t give her a choice and lifted her into the seat. “We’re getting McDonald’s on the way home,” he said in a chipper voice for Josie’s sake. “And then we’re going to watch all of the *How to Train Your Dragon* movies all night!”

“Slumber party?” Josie squealed.

“Slumber party,” her father agreed with a light laugh. “What do you say, Elli?”

“Um... Sure?”

I turned to stone when I realized he was taking her home. “No!” I roared, jealousy and a multitude of other emotions

churning within me. “She’s not going with you, Howler. I forbid it.”

Shutting the door, he turned and ran his thumb over his throat threateningly. “Do not push me further tonight, man. Or I’ll forget my kid is watching and beat your ass in this parking lot.”

“You’d break the rules for her?” I seethed. No one broke the rules. Fighting outside the Underground was the quickest way to get a Son banned for life.

“If I’d been the one who’d treated Elli like this, you would break them too.” He rubbed a hand over his blond head in agitation. “At least, the old Judge would have. The man in front of me right now is a fucking stranger. If this is the person you’ve turned into, maybe that’s why Lyla won’t come home for good.”



THROWING BACK THE DOUBLE POUR OF BOURBON LIKE A SHOT, I slammed the tumbler down on the desk in my office and listened to the sniveling little bitch on the other end of the phone make excuse after excuse for why Ellianna hadn’t been getting some of the extra money I’d been providing for her.

I knew it was being spent. It came out of the account every damn month. I had statements that showed it going into the “scholarship fund” and then used. But I didn’t have any idea what happened to it after that. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that someone was pocketing the money Ellianna so obviously needed.

Fuck, if I’d just followed my gut—this need to know her every move—and kept better watch over her, she wouldn’t

have had to suffer for the past few years. She wouldn't have had to choose between paying bills that she never should have had to worry about in the first damn place and being able to fill her fridge with whatever she wanted each week.

“She gets that money, Mr. Bennet, sir,” Tabor vowed nervously. “It goes straight into the account made just for her. I personally deposit those funds myself, sir.”

Every time he said “sir,” my fingers contracted around the glass still in my hand, wanting to smash it across his face. “My accountant will be investigating where all of that money has gone, you sack of shit. If even one penny isn't where it should have been, you better pray I don't find you.”

“I-I swear to y-you!”

“Don't care.” Releasing the glass, I picked up the crystal decanter filled with the twenty-five-year-old bourbon and filled it to the brim. A little sloshed onto the desk and my pants as I lifted it and gulped down two swallows. “That money was for her needs. And she hasn't been receiving all of it. She's been working at some diner at all hours of the day and night just to survive. I can fucking see her bones!”

The words felt torn from me, the picture of how thin she was coming back to haunt me, along with the tears in her eyes earlier that evening.

Fuck!

CHAPTER 10

JUDGE

DRAINING THE GLASS, I SLAMMED IT DOWN AGAIN AND refilled.

“A-a lot o-of college kids turn to d-drugs to help them cope with the stress of school,” Tabor stuttered. “Miss C-Chambers isn’t an exception.”

My hand paused halfway to my mouth, my eyes narrowing as I glared at nothing while I processed the motherfucker’s words. “Let me get this straight, Tabor. You’re telling me Ellianna Chambers has been putting all that cash up her nose because she’s stressed out over...what? A few tests and a difficult study schedule?”

“I’ve seen many students turn to self-medication in order to keep up with the demands of—”

I flung the glass against the wall. As the expensive crystal shattered, the smoky scent of the liquor filled the air around me. “Do not say another word if you want to keep breathing long enough to kiss your wife goodbye, Tabor. I know that girl better than anyone. If anyone can withstand the pressure she’s been under and come out standing, it’s Elli. Do not slander her again, or I promise, your end will be slow and painful. You have two weeks to return the money to her accounts.”

“I... I put those... Those funds...”

“I don’t give two fucks where the money is right now,” I assured him in a deceptively calm voice, the alcohol starting to numb me. Fucking finally. Picking up another glass from the silver tray on the edge of my desk, I poured myself another drink. “What I care about is where it’s going to be when your two weeks are up. And if you value your balls, Tabor, you’ll care too.”

“T-two weeks,” he choked out. “Yes, sir.”

“Talk to you soon, Tabor,” I promised. Disconnecting, I tossed the phone on my desk and sat back, sipping my drink.

A noise from the doorway had me turning and slowly lifting my gaze. When I saw Ellianna standing there, her hair falling over one shoulder, her dress—my shirt—still hanging off her like a fucking dream, I held my breath.

Pushing the door open completely, she stepped inside.

“Thought you were having a sleepover,” I sneered even as my eyes drank in the sight of her in my clothes. I wanted her to get rid of the belt, slowly undo each button, and strip off the shirt before crawling to me and pulling my cock from the strangled confines of my slacks. I wanted her to look up at me through those golden lashes with her mouth all wet and swollen from sucking me off, a smear of my release on her chin. She’d lick away a few drops and moan as my taste continued to explode on her tongue.

And then I’d lift her onto my desk, spread her open, and eat her until sunrise.

She walked toward me slowly, each step measured, as if she was debating with herself how close it was safe to get.

Who it was safer for was still debatable.

All I'd eaten since breakfast was a shrimp while we'd waited at the restaurant. After all the bourbon I'd just slung back like water, the control I constantly had to keep in check when she was near was frayed to the point of snapping.

"Brent Tabor oversees the majority of my scholarships," she stated.

I tilted my head. "And I care...why, again?"

She put her hands on her hips, drawing my gaze. Thankfully, my desk hid her legs from me, or I wouldn't have been able to keep from staring at her like the perv she'd turned me into. "I heard everything, Zachary."

My cock strained against my zipper, causing the metal to cut into my shaft even through my boxer briefs. Every damn time she said my name, it didn't matter how, when, or even where, my body reacted the exact same way. There was no controlling it. She had so much power over me, and I couldn't ever let her know.

"Heard what?" I took another sip of my bourbon, my fingers clenched so hard around the crystal tumbler, my knuckles were white.

"Everything!" she shouted. "How long?"

"How long, what?" I asked, pretending not to understand.

"Don't," she snapped. "Do not sit there and act like you don't know what I'm talking about. How long have you been feeding the accounts?"

I lifted one shoulder. "How long have you been in college again?"

"No," she whispered, her eyes stricken. "No," she denied again, shaking her head. "I got scholarships through the

university. My grades, my achievements, all the volunteer work. Even the internships I did for the two summers before college. My SAT scores were nearly perfect. I worked hard and deserved those scholarships, damn it.”

I inclined my head. “I’m well aware.”

“Then why the fuck were you talking to the man who is my scholarship representative?” she demanded angrily. “Why were you threatening him about missing funds?”

“That’s my business.”

She clenched her teeth closed to muffle her scream. Throwing her hands in the air, she walked away, only to turn around abruptly. Her hands went back to her hips, but this time, she was far enough away that I could see her legs.

Unable to help myself, I licked my lips, tasting the bourbon. Wishing I could taste her.

“You’re insufferable, Zachary.”

I stroked my palm over my throbbing groin, trying to reposition myself before my zipper was permanently imprinted. The pressure over my shaft felt so good, I nearly groaned. Fuck, I could get off just from this alone. I wanted to rub my dick while I looked at her, those angry blue eyes blazing down at me from across the room.

It would be the safest way to get off. I wouldn’t run the risk of getting even more addicted, wouldn’t become a junkie for her touch.

Who the fuck was I trying to fool?

I was already an addict.

I craved her to the point of pain.

Would it really hurt anyone if I had a tiny taste?

Setting my glass down, I pushed my chair back from the desk and slowly stood.

Just one itty-bitty taste.

That was all I would take.

Maybe she wasn't as sweet as I'd imagined.

I just needed to know.

To get her out of my head.

One taste, and I would stop.

CHAPTER II

ELLIANNA

I'D ALREADY DECIDED I COULDN'T SPEND THE NIGHT AT Howler's house long before my mom called. For one, because I knew Lyla would be hurt if she found out I'd slept there. Maybe not mad, because she knew I would never think of the man she loved in that capacity, but it would definitely hurt her feelings, and I couldn't stand the thought of that. For another, because I felt raw and vulnerable. I just needed to be home in my own bed where I could cry and wallow in the privacy of my room.

We'd been eating in the McDonald's parking lot because Josie had been hungry and Howler's stomach had been growling louder than the radio. I was still pissed, hurting—plotting Zachary's death—while I scarfed down my Big Mac with no onions and stuffed my face with a large order of fries when my phone rang.

Swallowing the bite of burger I was still chewing, I'd fought the urge to scream my frustration. But Mom surprised me when I answered. There was no mention of anything that had happened earlier, no lecture, nothing. She was simply telling me that Miss Lindy was having a rough evening. A home health nurse was there to administer IV meds because her friend had been so ill from the chemo treatment, and Mom would feel better if she stayed to assist because she didn't

want to put so much pressure on her friend's son and daughter-in-law.

Part of me was relieved that she wouldn't be home all night, even as I'd been concerned about Miss Lindy. She'd always been so kind to me. Like my mom, she'd been a single mother for most of her son's life.

Then Mom asked me to check on Zachary, and the urge to scream again was overwhelming. She was so worried about him eating the right foods—or in this case, eating at all—that she wanted me to cook for him. If she knew exactly how I was feeling right then, she wouldn't have wanted me within a hundred miles of her precious Judge and anything sharp, flammable, or ingestible. Poisoning his food or drink might be too tempting to pass up.

Howler wasn't happy about my going back to the mansion, but I insisted everything was fine. I'd cooled off, and I doubted Zachary would even be home. I could do a quick check of his office, text my mom that he wasn't there, and then go to my room.

After waving to Josie as her dad drove away, I walked into the house and slowly made my way to the office on the first floor.

His door wasn't usually open. He kept too many confidential files in there at any given time. A light glow flowed out of the room and across the hall. Several feet away, I heard his voice, finally accepting that I was wrong.

He was home, and from the sound of it, he was pissed. I was ready to turn and make a run for my room, too exhausted to deal with him, but as I shifted, I heard a name that was vaguely familiar.

Tabor.

I only knew one person with that surname, but it didn't make sense why Zachary would be speaking to him. Needing clarification, I remained just a few feet from the door to the office, my ears straining to pick up any more details from the side of the conversation I could hear.

But even as it all began to make sense, as it all clicked in my brain, I wanted to deny it.

I had worked hard to get scholarships to pay for my education so I wouldn't be in debt for the rest of my life with student loans. So my mom wouldn't have to worry about the money, or me in general.

Yet, I would have gladly taken on the responsibility of repaying hundreds of thousands of dollars until my dying day if it meant not taking so much as a cent from Zachary Bennet.

Was that why he hated me? Because I'd become a burden to him?

I knew that whatever he was feeding into those accounts wouldn't even put a scratch on his fortune, let alone a dent. But I didn't want his money. I didn't want to feel obligated to him in any way. I wanted to do this all on my own, damn it.

Everything I'd been through over the past three years, the loneliness, the exhaustion, the hours upon hours of studying until I couldn't see straight, suddenly felt like an unbearable weight, when only that morning, I'd been able to happily carry it. None of it was worth the effort I'd so painstakingly put in. The struggle to get out of bed most mornings, missing my mom and Lyla—missing Zachary—had been for nothing.

Because everything I'd thought I was proving to myself—and yes, to him too—was all in my head.

For three years, I'd been living in some stupid fantasy world. Deep down, I'd thought if I could accomplish everything on my own, show Zachary how capable I was, then maybe one day he'd truly see me.

That I could be worthy of him.

It was all a joke.

Humiliation and hurt swirled inside me, making it impossible to see as I blinked back tears. Leaning against the wall, I struggled to control my pain. But while the sting and pressure behind my eyes eased, anger rose in my chest, even as I tried to deny everything I'd just learned.

Each short step to the office doorway was excruciating. Leaning against the doorjamb for support, I waited for him to notice me.

Sitting behind his desk, sipping on his favorite bourbon that I knew cost nearly ten grand a bottle, he looked like he didn't have a care in the world. Like he hadn't just threatened a man's life only moments before. He'd gotten comfortable since returning home. The sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and the top four buttons were undone, exposing his chest. Every inch of skin he'd uncovered was branded with dark ink.

When he was at work, he always kept his tattoos hidden, but when he was in the Underground, he displayed them like trophies.

As a besotted teenager, I'd been entranced by how easily he moved between the two worlds and ruled them both so effortlessly. The elite political judge. The terrifyingly beautiful founder of the Underground, king of the Sons. Every

command he made in either world was carried out without question, for fear of the consequences.

“Brent Tabor oversees the majority of my scholarships.” That seemed like the best place to begin, and maybe—just maybe—he would tell me that I’d gotten it all wrong.

I’d never wanted to be so wrong in my life as I did in that moment.

But he tilted his head, his voice bored when he spoke. “And I care...why, again?”

Angry with myself for thinking, even for a second, that he wasn’t a cocky sonofabitch, I slammed my hands onto my hips. “I heard everything, Zachary.”

“Heard what?” I hated him for how calm he was, how undisturbed his tone was. For breaking my heart for the second time in a single night. And I hated myself for giving him that kind of power over me.

“Everything!” I shouted. “How long?”

“How long, what?”

“Don’t,” I snapped, my anger turning to full-on rage. “Do not sit there and act like you don’t know what I’m talking about. How long have you been feeding the accounts?”

He gave me a careless half shrug. “How long have you been in college again?”

“No,” I found myself denying, still unable to completely admit how blind I’d been. “No, I got scholarships through the university. My grades, my achievements, all the volunteer work. Even the internships I did for the two summers before college. My SAT scores were nearly perfect. I worked hard and deserved those scholarships, damn it.”

Zachary nodded in agreement. "I'm well aware."

"Then why the fuck were you talking to the man who is my scholarship representative? Why were you threatening him about missing funds?"

"That's my business."

He was so enraging. I tried to stop myself, but the scream still erupted from behind my clenched teeth. Throwing my hands in the air, I stomped away, knowing it was better for us both if I wasn't around him when I was so tempted to kill him. But I only got a few steps away before I changed my mind and turned around. Hands on my hips, I glared at him.

He simply licked a few drops of bourbon off his bottom lip.

"You're insufferable, Zachary."

CHAPTER 12

ELLIANNA

AS SOON AS HE STOOD, I FELT A CHANGE IN THE ROOM. A ripple of awareness skittered down my spine, leaving goose bumps along my skin. His eyes never left me as he walked around the desk, his strides almost lazy.

It suddenly felt too hot in the office, my skin burning more and more with each step closer he came. Instinct told me to run, but my feet remained glued in place, my body responding only to him and not the voice in my mind screaming “danger.”

Heat pooled between my thighs, a pressure building in my core and pulsing, while my heart rate jacked up as he neared. My nipples pebbled, scraping over the rough confines of my bra with each labored breath I took.

I wanted to slap his face for making such a fool of me, for pitying me, for making me so beholden to him. This was not how I wanted to be linked to him for the rest of my life. Now, instead of paying back a financial institution, I’d be repaying Zachary. Every last dime, with interest. I wouldn’t rest until it was all returned. Even if I had to find a way to extend my life until I no longer owed him so much as a penny.

He lifted his hand before he reached me, his scarred knuckles caressing down my cheek until he grasped my chin in a surprisingly tender grip. I gasped at the little zings his

touch caused within my body, like micro-explosions on my nerve endings that were exhilaratingly uncomfortable.

The smart thing to do was pull back, kick him in the balls, and walk away.

But I'd already proven how stupid I truly was. There was no use in denying how incompetent I was now.

And damn it, I was still starved for physical contact.

No, that was another lie I'd told myself.

I was starved for him.

His nearness. His touch. His praise. His approval.

I wanted it all. I fucking needed it.

From the glitter in his eyes, I wondered if maybe he was just as hungry for me.

He didn't say a word as he lowered his gaze, watching his thumb skim up to my bottom lip, press firmly into it, and then rub back and forth. I felt my lip plump, and without realizing what I was doing, I touched the tip of my tongue to his rough skin. I heard his sharp inhale but was too consumed by how good he tasted to think about what was happening with him.

He lifted his other hand and gently tucked a few strands of my hair behind my ear before his fingers played across my flesh. But in a flash, he wrapped his huge hand around my throat, turning me, urging me backward until my ass hit the edge of his desk. A brief shot of fear mixed with the burning between my legs, causing my panties to become soaked with my arousal.

Zachary might be a heartless asshole who had done nothing but break my heart for years, but a part of me knew he would never physically hurt me. Even when his temper

became explosive, he'd never been violent toward Lyla, my mom, or me.

No, the hand around my throat wasn't meant to hurt me, but to remind me what I'd always known.

He was in charge.

And from the way my thighs were coated with my need, I liked the way he had chosen to drive that fact home.

He tightened his fingers around my throat, pulling a whimper from me. The feel of his skin on mine was too good, but not enough. I wanted more.

The thumb on my lip fell away. A small sound of protest bubbled up, but before it could be fully heard, he contracted his fingers on my throat. A brief flex, telling me to remain quiet without a single word needing to be spoken.

“Just a taste,” he growled, lowering his head. “That’s all I want. A tiny taste. You’re going to give it to me, aren’t you, Elli?”

But he didn't need my confirmation. He was already brushing his lips over mine in a light kiss. If he'd slammed his mouth against me, it wouldn't have been any less knee-weakening. Every bone in my body liquefied, and I was thankful for the desk behind me or I would have sunk to the floor.

I felt the very tip of his tongue touch mine, teasing, silently demanding entrance. I gave it willingly.

An animalistic sound rumbled out of his chest at the same time he crushed my lips with his. My hands went to his chest, my fingers clutching at either side of his open shirt in an attempt to keep from falling—or maybe to drag him with me.

All thoughts of everything that had happened that evening disappeared as the taste of him exploded on my tongue. I knew if I didn't get more of his kiss, his touch, *him*, I wouldn't survive.

With his hand still around my throat, he angled my head exactly as he wanted, diving deeper, his tongue licking the inside of my mouth. His free hand went to my back, pressing my chest to his, molding me until I was plastered against him. My shirtdress rose up my thighs when I spread my legs, needing all of me touching him.

He slipped the hand on my back to my hip and then down to my bare thigh. At the first graze of his callused fingers on my skin, we both groaned, and his hold on me changed. I gripped his shirt and pulled myself up just enough to change the angle of how I was pressed into him, rubbing against him like a cat.

The tightening of the hand around my throat stopped me, telling me to be good. With his free hand, he lifted me onto the desk, his legs spreading mine so he could fit. Pushing me back, he followed, his lips never leaving mine. Releasing his shirt, I wrapped my arms around his neck, giving myself over to him completely.

I felt something thick and hard flex against my inner thigh, and I shifted, trying to get that hardness where I needed it most. Zachary hissed, and I nearly screamed when I finally found the perfect position. And still, the kiss continued. Our breaths were labored, my mouth swollen, a little numb from how hard he was kissing me, but I only wanted more.

He rocked his hips against me, driving me crazy with each thrust against my wetness. I wanted every inch of us to be skin

against skin, no clothes between us stopping either of us from feeling good.

Questing fingers touched my panties, the fingers on my throat flexing twice to tell me to lift up. I lifted my hips, rubbing against his hardness, but he quickly jerked my underwear halfway down my thighs before I heard the distinct sound of cotton ripping.

The coolness of the room bathed my burning skin for only a few seconds before he hooked his arm under my leg and spread me wider.

“So wet,” he groaned, lifting his head. Chest heaving, he released my throat so he could kiss down it to where my shirt had fallen open, exposing the top of my bra. “Need to taste all of you. Need your honey on my tongue, Elli.”

“Please,” I whimpered. “Yes, please.”

The buttons of the shirt went flying as he tore it open. My bra had a front clasp, and he had it undone before I could take another breath. As my small breasts spilled out, he covered one with his mouth, sucking so hard on the nipple that I couldn't stop my pleasure-filled scream.

Thrusting my fingers into his hair, I held him against me, never wanting him to stop. But he had other plans. For only a moment, he gave me what I wanted before moving to the other breast, showing it the same attention, causing more wetness to pour from my center, coating his pants. The hardness pulsing against me there seemed to double in size. I kept lifting my hips, rubbing against him, needing...

His mouth left my breasts, and he dropped to his knees. I barely registered where his mouth was before a million little lights exploded right before my eyes.

“Oh God,” I cried, my head thrashing back and forth on the desk. “Oh, oh, oh!”

He sucked on my clit while thrusting two fingers into my opening. My walls clenched at the invasion, but then tried to suck him deeper as I detonated.

“Tastes so good. Can’t stop. Can’t stop.”

I’d barely heard his strained words before he was back on his feet. Bending over me, he slammed his mouth onto mine. I could taste myself on him. My mind was processing whether I liked it or not when I felt something broad and hot nudge my opening. My eyes flew open as he thrust into me. Pain sliced through me, stealing my breath, but it was over just as quick as it came.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I held on while Zachary thrust roughly into me three, four, times.

“So good. So tight. Can’t hold back. Fuck, Elli. I can’t stop.”

“Yes, please. Don’t stop.” My back arched as the pleasure began to build again. “More, Zachary.”

I felt him grow thicker inside me, stretching my torn flesh even more, at the same time as his entire body tensed. Pushing back until he was looking down at me, he returned his hand to my throat. “I’m coming, baby. Take it. Take all of me like a good girl.”

CHAPTER 13

JUDGE

SOBRIETY SLOWLY BEGAN TO BLEED INTO ME.

With it, the realization of what I'd just done.

What I wanted to do again.

And again.

And again.

Until one of us perished from the pleasure or malnutrition, whichever came first.

Breathing heavily, I looked down at her. I saw a faint redness around her throat from my hand. Nothing that would leave a bruise. But for a little longer, the proof my hand had been there, holding her, making her submit to me, would remain. Lower, across her chest, she had friction burn from my scruff, her little nipples still beaded and red from my mouth. The shirt she had worn as a dress was destroyed, hanging open, and her bra dangled on either side of her chest.

I was still inside her. Still rock hard.

I'd never seen anything sexier in my life.

Pulling back, I had every intention of thrusting again, starting round two. But then I saw the smear of blood on my shaft mixed with her cream and my come.

Reality hit me hard.

Blood.

I'd just torn through her virginity like an animal.

“No,” I choked out in denial. “No, this didn't happen.” I pulled out of her, my heart bleeding when she moaned in pain. Pulse pounding in my head, I stuffed my still-hard cock back into my boxers, leaving my slacks undone. “I didn't fuck you.”

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I paced away from the desk. “I didn't lose control. I didn't hurt you.”

“Z-Zachary?” She whispered my name hesitantly, her voice laced with uncertainty and distress.

“No!” I bellowed, feeling myself crumbling a little more. “Don't fucking call me that.”

I couldn't focus when she used my name. When she said it so sweetly in that beautiful voice.

My precious angel.

Who wasn't safe with me.

I'd done what I'd sworn I never would.

I'd touched her.

I'd *fucked* her.

Raw and dirty.

With no care for something as sacred as her virginity. It wasn't mine to take. No one else was ever supposed to touch her, damn it. But especially not me.

Not when all I wanted to do was dominate her. Make her do depraved things that someone so innocent—angelic—should never be subjected to.

Things I only wanted to do to her.

I couldn't bend Ellianna to my will.

But if she stayed, I would lose control again.

“I was half drunk. You weren't supposed to be here!”

She was at Howler's.

The reminder was enough to have me pulling at my hair as I tried to leash the urge to find my best friend and crack his skull open. Deep down, I knew she was safe with him. Howler loved Lyla. He only looked at Ellianna as a sister.

But he still cared about her.

Which meant there was always the chance that either of them could develop stronger feelings.

And then I really would lose my mind.

“If I'd known there was a chance of you coming back, I never would have had so much as a drink.”

“I... My mom...” Ellianna cleared her throat as she sat up, folding the ruined pink shirt around her, hiding her perfect body from me. That was the safe thing to do. But now, I ached to tear it from her body completely. Allow my eyes to feast on every inch of her perfection. “Mom wanted me to make sure you had a healthy dinner. She... Um, she's worried about... about your...cholesterol.”

God, I could still taste her on my lips. Her honey scent was on my face. I already dreaded showering because I knew it was the last time I would be blessed with both.

“You shouldn't have been here.”

Her chin wobbled, and I had to clench my hands into fists to keep from reaching for her again. But I knew—*fuck, I knew*

—if I touched her even for a fraction of a second, I would be inside her again in no time.

“I know,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. I-I never should have come back in the first place.”

No. She shouldn’t have. All she’d done was test my control.

And now it was gone.

I couldn’t risk her being there for another minute.

“You have to go back,” I gritted out, my heart throbbing with each word I spat at her. But if she stayed, I wouldn’t be able to hold on now that I knew what she tasted like. How good her tight pussy felt wrapped around my cock. “Today. I’ll get you on the first flight out. Make up whatever excuse you need to in order to convince your mom. But you have to leave. Now.”

Tears spilled over her golden lashes when she nodded. “Okay.”

“Go pack your things,” I commanded, looking up at the ceiling so I didn’t give in to temptation. Didn’t cave at the sight of her tears. Every muscle in my body ached from holding myself back, keeping the much-needed distance between us. “I’ll charter a jet. You’ll be back on the West Coast long before the sun comes up.”

If she’d been on the other side of the world, it still wouldn’t have been far enough away to dampen my need now, but I’d have to find a way to make do with the other side of the country.

“O-okay.”

My need to look at her became too much, and I turned to look out the window, which was a mistake. I could see her sitting on my desk, her hands tugging at the sides of the shirt, trying to stretch the material as she wrapped it around herself more securely. Clenching my eyes closed, I inhaled slowly through my nose.

“I don’t want you working at that diner any longer. The library work-study is fine, but no more waiting tables.”

With each tick of the clock that she didn’t respond, my head began to pound harder until I could feel my heartbeat in my temple. “Ellianna.”

“You called me Elli,” she said so softly, I had to strain to hear her. “Just a little while ago, I was your Elli again.”

My lids began to lift, but I quickly squeezed them shut tighter. She had always been my Elli. She always would be.

“Ellianna,” I bit out, using her full name as a reminder to myself that I couldn’t have her. “No more diner.”

Again, she didn’t respond.

Angrily, I turned my head. She was sitting on the edge of the desk, her feet dangling over the floor. She looked so small and delicate, so fragile. “Did you hear me?”

Turning her head to stare at the wall, she nodded. “I heard you.”

“Good. All the money Tabor has been pocketing will be in your account this week. Do you have enough cash for food and necessities until then?”

Her hair fell forward, hiding her face from me. “I have what I need.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I snapped in frustration. Fuck, I couldn’t handle the idea of her not having enough to eat.

“I won’t starve,” she said, her tone exhausted.

Pulling my wallet from my back pocket, I extracted all the cash I had. Being close enough to touch her was dangerous for us both, but I needed to make sure she had enough money. Crossing to the desk, I grabbed her hand, hating that her fingers trembled when I touched her.

She jerked back when I pressed the bills into her hands, but I wrapped her fingers around the money. Her head snapped up, and I saw the flash of hurt in her eyes. “What are you—”

“Take it.”

“Oh God,” she whispered, her beautiful face going tight. “This is really happening. You’re... And for a moment, I actually believed that—” Breaking off, she shook her head, laughing humorlessly. “I’m so stupid.”

Hopping down off the desk, she walked toward the door, dropping the money on the floor as she went.

“Ellianna, take the money,” I ordered.

“Fuck off,” she called over her shoulder, almost to the door.

“Ellianna!”

Turning sharply, she glared at me from across the room. “I’m not some whore you can fuck on your desk and then pay to forget about it, Zachary.”

I jerked in reaction to her words. “That’s not what I—”

“Bullshit,” she spat, cutting me off. “That’s exactly what you were doing.”

“I would never treat you like a fucking whore!” I shouted, pissed that she would even think such a thing.

Her shoulders dropped in defeat. “You just did.”

“No,” I rasped. “No, baby, that’s not true.”

“I can’t believe I loved you,” she said with a humorless laugh. Lifting her head, she scrubbed at her wet cheeks with the hand not holding her shirt together. “God, you’re such a bastard.”

Her words hit me directly in the center, making it difficult to suck in a breath.

She loved me.

“I’m leaving. Don’t worry about me coming back here. Trust me, I’ll never make that mistake again.”

She loved me.

That was all I heard. All I could think about.

Did it change anything?

I didn’t know.

But before I could figure out if it did or not, she was gone. I was so lost in the sensation of having her confess she loved me, I wasn’t aware of when she left.

By the time I snapped out of it, I couldn’t fucking find her.

CHAPTER 14

ELLIANNA

TEARS BLINDED ME AS I THREW EVERYTHING INTO MY CASES. This time, I didn't leave anything behind. No pictures. No trinkets. Not a single thread of anything that belonged to me.

He wanted to treat me like a whore and then tell me to get lost?

Then I'd go.

I wouldn't come back. Not for anything. Not even my mother.

Slamming the biggest case shut, I put all my weight on top to hold it down so I could zip it closed, not caring if anything broke. I'd have to pay extra for how heavy the damn thing was, and it would cut into what little funds I had, but it would be worth it.

Throwing my purse strap over my shoulder, I dragged the two bulging pieces of luggage down the stairs and out to Lyla's car. I'd leave it in the airport parking lot and then text my mom to have her send someone to pick it up.

Behind the wheel, I needed a few minutes to compose myself enough to be able to see in order to drive. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I was disgusted by what I saw. My hair was a tangled mess. There were tear tracks on my face. I'd

only taken the time to pull on fresh underwear, jeans, and a hoodie before I'd started packing.

I hadn't even showered.

Zachary's come was still leaking out of me a little. Or maybe my torn hymen was still bleeding a bit. I hadn't wanted to waste time using the bathroom to inspect the damage, but I was sore, the once-pleasurable ache nearly unbearable mixed in with the humiliation I felt.

Leaving the key fob in the glove box, I locked up after getting my cases out of the trunk. Someone back at the mansion would have an extra one to unlock it when they picked it up. Or they could call OnStar and get them to unlock it. Either way, it wasn't my problem to worry about.

Inside, I had to max out both my credit cards to get the last seat on the early morning flight to San Jose Airport with an airline I'd never even heard of before, as well as cover the cost for the extra weight of my larger suitcase. By the time I got through security, I only had enough time to get to my gate before they were announcing the final boarding call.

I had an aisle seat, and it was right by the bathroom. The man beside me kept coughing the entire flight, and another passenger was in and out of the toilet as soon as the seat belt light disappeared.

And yet, I barely noticed the discomfort.

My mind was back in Virginia, in Zachary's office. Feeling his lips on me. His hands touching every part of my body. Things had gone from zero to a thousand in the blink of an eye. I had nothing to compare to how good I'd felt, how *wanted*.

Having him want me was exhilarating.

And then, before I could even come down from the pleasure high, he'd destroyed me.

Then again, that was what Zachary excelled at.

No.

He wasn't Zachary any longer. That was the name only I'd called him, because to me, Zachary was the man I'd loved. Even if I'd told myself time and again that I didn't, I couldn't keep lying to myself where he was concerned.

I did love him.

But I hated him more.

Now, he was just Judge. For years, he would get so pissed off that I didn't use the name everyone else did. I wouldn't put him in the same category of some deity like the rest of the world.

He was nothing more than a power-hungry jerk.

I couldn't even remember why I loved that asshole.

Many hours later, exhaustion weighed me down as I used what little energy I did have to drag my luggage through the airport and out to grab a cab in the chilly pre-dawn morning. All I had was enough cash for the cab fare. If I went into the diner, I knew my boss would put me on shift, and then I would have some cash from tips. But they didn't get nearly as much traffic during the summer months as they did when school was in session. It was right off campus, and the majority of students didn't stick around over breaks.

At least I'd have a few dollars to get some groceries and anything else I might need.

My driver lifted the heavy cases out of the trunk outside my building. Thanking him, I dragged them inside and took

the elevator up to my apartment. Everything was eerily quiet as I used my key. Stomach clenching because I had a sudden sense of doom, I opened the door and cautiously crossed the threshold.

The smell of rotting food, stale booze, and body odor made me gag. Flipping on the living room lights, I slowly turned and took in the destroyed view.

There were holes in the walls, a lamp was broken on the floor, where beer cans, red plastic cups, and bottles were littered. Some of them must not have been completely empty because I could see the distinct outline of wet spots. I saw cigarette holes in the carpet and on the couch. One side of the flat-screen television that had been mounted on the wall had fallen, the screen cracked in multiple places.

I moved forward enough to close the door, my feet getting damp from a half-full red cup. Wading through the debris, I walked into the kitchen where a keg sat beside the counter. The refrigerator door was wide open, showing a half pint of milk and more beer, most of them open and turned on their sides. One bottle was still dripping into a puddle on top of the vegetable crisper.

Dishes were stacked haphazardly in the sink. Some broken, all of them disgustingly dirty. Trash overflowed from the can, and I couldn't even see the recycling container I kept beside it.

Too tired to deal with the mess, I walked back to the front door and picked up the smaller case. I was so distracted looking for the key to my room on my key ring that I didn't notice my door was already open until I lifted my hand to unlock it. The door was slightly cracked.

Dread made my stomach protest, and I pushed it in, the squeak of the hinges making me cringe.

If possible, my bedroom was more destroyed than the rest of the apartment. More holes in the walls. The scent of what I could only guess was urine coming up from the carpet. The same trash that was throughout the other rooms was even deeper in here. And a guy I didn't recognize was sleeping on top of my comforter.

Scared, I stepped back.

Turning, I moved toward Julie's closed door. Heart pounding from fear and anger, I shoved it open and flipped on the overhead lights. Her room wasn't destroyed at all. Messy like usual, but untouched by however many raging parties she must have thrown in the week I'd been gone.

She was passed out on her bed with yet another guy I didn't recognize. Both of them were naked. I barely glanced at the bed and got an unpleasant view of them both before I turned and stomped out of the room, leaving the light still on.

Dragging my cases back out into the hall, I slammed the door and then stormed down to the ground floor, where the on-site manager had his own apartment. I had zero patience for Julie's bullshit. Blaine, the manager, had known I was going to be gone for most of the summer.

He could deal with Julie and make her clean up her mess. I sure as fuck wasn't going to be held responsible for the damage done to the place.

Frustration built inside me, making my throat tight and tears sting my dry eyes.

All I wanted was to go to bed, sleep for twelve hours, and then get on with my life. But there was no way I was going to

sleep in that bed ever again. I wouldn't be surprised if the mattress had become infested while I was gone.

Choking back a sob, I slammed my hand against the manager's door and waited. It was still early, but Blaine went for a run first thing every morning. His boyfriend was some fitness junkie. I didn't stop pounding my fist against the metal until it swung open.

“Ellianna?”

I fell against him, giving up the fight to hold back the emotional storm that had been brewing all night. I barely knew him, but I didn't have the energy to keep myself standing on my own for even a moment longer.

CHAPTER 15

JUDGE

PACING MY OFFICE, I HELD THE PHONE TO MY EAR. FOR THE three hundredth time, it went straight to voice mail. Cursing, I flung the phone at the desk and thrust my fingers into the hair at the back of my head.

“Why isn’t your phone on by now, Elli?”

Breathing heavily, I kept pacing. After I’d come to my senses the night before, I’d run after Ellianna, but by then, she’d been gone. Everything in her closet had disappeared, leaving only the hangers behind. When I’d realized all the things she considered special to her were also missing, I’d guessed she’d gone back to California. My suspicions were confirmed when I checked the LoJack on Lyla’s car and saw that it was parked at the airport.

I was partially thankful that Ellianna was putting physical distance between us. It gave me time to think without the temptation of tasting her again. But I was worried about her too. What if she didn’t have enough money to cover her needs until Tabor put those funds back in her account? She hadn’t taken any of the cash I’d tried to give her, and if she was barely able to feed herself as it was, then how the fuck was she going to eat after covering the cost of the flight to the West Coast?

Not only was she low on money, but any number of things could have happened to her on her way back. I just wanted to hear her voice, know she was okay, and then we could both take a few days to calm down and figure everything out.

But her phone was still off. I'd made a few calls to see what flight she'd been on. It was a nonstop to San Jose, which had already landed without delay. She should have turned on her phone when the plane landed. But she hadn't. I'd considered that the battery had died and she just needed to get back to her apartment to charge it.

She should have arrived there over two hours ago, plenty of time for her to charge it, and still, all I got was voice mail.

Unless she'd gotten into trouble between the airport and her apartment.

What if she had been in an accident?

What if someone had harmed her?

What if she was bleeding, scared, alone?

"I just need to hear your voice, Elli!"

Groaning, I glanced around the room, trying to think. I'd already cleaned up the mess I'd made during my earlier conversation with Tabor. There was no longer a single sign of anything that had taken place the night before.

Yet I could still see Ellianna spread open on my desk, looking like every fantasy I'd ever had of her becoming reality. The taste of her lingered on my lips, her scent still coating my face.

She might have been gone, but the memory of how good we'd been together remained, haunting me. Calling me a damned fool for letting her go.

She loved me.

I'd heard her speak those words. Watched her lips form each one as they annihilated the walls I'd spent so many years building around my self-control to protect her from all the things I wanted to do to her.

And then, she just fucking left me.

A voice in the back of my head reminded me that I'd told her to leave—before she'd told me she loved me, damn it. But I didn't want to listen. I was too far gone. Logical reasoning didn't belong within me at the moment.

Gulping against the bile in my throat, I took a quick shower and changed into fresh clothes. I was glad no one was home, because there was no way anyone in the house wouldn't have heard my pained howl when I'd washed Elli off me.

I walked back to my desk and picked up my phone again. When it began to ring, some of the tightness in my throat eased, and I closed my eyes in relief. It rang and rang until I once again got voice mail.

“Call me back,” I rasped before hanging up.

Dropping down into my chair, I leaned forward and put my head on my free hand while I searched for the nearest grocery store to her apartment that delivered. For the next half an hour, I selected all her favorite foods. Once it was scheduled for delivery, I set a reminder in my calendar to do a repeat order every Sunday.

If nothing else, at least I would know she was getting enough to eat.

I gave it a full hour before trying her number again. It rang six times before the call was picked up. “Hello?”

Ice filled my veins at the sound of the male voice on the other end of the line. “Who is this?”

“Who is this?” he shot back. There was a pause and then a muttered curse. “Honey, I picked your phone up by mistake.”

“I don’t want to talk to anyone.” I heard her voice in the background, but the strain that I could detect sent my heart rate into an uneven tempo.

“Sorry, man. If you wanted to speak to Ellianna, she’s not taking calls at the moment. She just got done filling out a police report.”

My heart stopped, and I had to clench my fingers around the phone to keep from dropping it. “Is she okay?” I barked, trying to fight the suffocating sensation.

A police report.

Ah, fuck.

I needed to breathe, but that felt impossible when she was thousands of miles away.

“She’s safe,” the guy said with a sigh. “I’ll let her explain everything when she’s ready to talk. Are you family?”

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation, my hands trembling as my mind rapidly played out a hundred different scenarios that could have happened to her. “Was she assaulted?”

“No, no, dude,” he rushed to assure me. “She’s physically fine from what I can see. But she got home to a trashed apartment. The roommate had a raging party. My name is Blaine, by the way. I’m the property manager at Ellianna’s apartment complex. My boyfriend broke his leg and had to have surgery, so I’ve been at the hospital the last few days with him. Otherwise, I would have been here to deal with any

complaints that were called in. I got home around dawn this morning in hopes of getting in a good run and taking a shower, then heading back before he gets discharged this afternoon.”

I quickly filed all that different information away, but my fingers didn’t ease their grip on the phone. “Are the cops still there, Blaine?”

“No, they finished up about fifteen minutes ago.”

“My name is Judge Zachary Bennet. I’ll handle everything that needs to be taken care of on Ellianna’s behalf. Since you are the property manager, then I assume you have a contact number for whoever is in charge of the case.” I picked up a pen and scribbled down the information when he readily repeated it, including his own contact number. “Thank you, Blaine. If you would, please watch over my Elli until I get there.”

“Sure, no problem. Ellianna is a sweetheart.”

Despite Blaine randomly telling me he had a boyfriend, I couldn’t help the shot of jealousy that had me biting back a growl. All of her sweetness was mine. Stretching my neck from side to side, I focused on more important matters. “If the apartment is trashed, does that mean she can’t sleep there?”

“There’s a crew on their way to start on repairs right now. She has renters’ insurance, so all her stuff is covered, but it might be a day or so before her bed can be replaced.” He sighed heavily. “But don’t worry. I’ve got a spare bedroom she can use until then.”

I almost laughed.

Don’t worry?

The girl I loved couldn’t sleep in her own bed.

I wasn't worried.

I was fucking livid.

It was a struggle, but I was cordial as I thanked Blaine and hung up. Jogging out to the garage, I climbed behind the wheel of the first car I came to. While speaking to the cop in charge of the domestic disturbance case, I drove out of town, heading straight to the airport.

Three people had been arrested, but the officer wasn't confident that any charges would stick for either of the two guys or the woman. The more the man told me about what had happened, the higher my blood pressure rose.

Ellianna had arrived at her apartment to find it destroyed—and a stranger sleeping in her bed. The lock on her bedroom door had been broken, and a few items that she considered valuable were missing. But the place was so trashed, no one was sure if they had been stolen or were just lost in the mess.

I couldn't worry about her stuff. I'd replace it as soon as I had a list. What I fucking cared about was the guy who had been sleeping in her bed—and why she'd felt the need to put a lock on her door to begin with. She'd walked in to find him passed out on her bed. The cops still didn't know if he was only drunk or under the influence of drugs, or both. They'd ordered a tox screen to see for sure because none of the three arrested had been forthcoming.

After I ended the call with the sergeant, I made a few more calls. By the time I got to the airport, I only had a short wait before the private jet was ready for takeoff.

I was going to bring my Elli home.

Where she fucking belonged.

CHAPTER 16

ELLIANNA

BLAINE'S TELEVISION WAS ON SOME DAYTIME TALK SHOW. Vaguely, I heard a group of women and some guy laughing as they talked about the male host's son having his first date. I only heard every few words, and they didn't fully register.

I was trapped in my head. One vision after another kept popping into my mind, scenes from the last twenty-four hours playing out. Sometimes in slow motion with deep, drawn-out voices. Others on fast-forward, sounding like a rip-off of the Chipmunks.

Waiting for dinner with Howler, Josie, and Judge. Being humiliated in front of all those people. Going back to the mansion and confronting Judge about Tabor. Having sex for the first time. Being treated like a whore. Flying back to California. Finding my personal space invaded. Talking to the cops. Watching as Julie and her two male friends were dragged away in cuffs while being screamed and cursed at by my ex-roommate.

Sighing, I took another drink of the strong coffee Blaine had brewed before returning to the hospital. His boyfriend had gone hiking and broken his leg so badly he had to have a rod surgically inserted. I felt bad for crashing at his place, but there was no way I was going back upstairs. When I was able

to think more clearly, I'd search for a new apartment. Somewhere cheaper so I could pay the rent on my own and not touch Judge's money.

What money I received from the renters' insurance claim I'd already filed on the app would hopefully cover a deposit. I'd get some cheap pillows and sleep on the floor instead of worrying about a new mattress if the new place wasn't furnished.

Before he'd left, Blaine had received a delivery of groceries. We weren't close, and I didn't know how he knew all my favorite things, but I was still thankful for the coffee creamer and carbs. My stomach had been a mess, but I'd forced down an everything bagel and then taken a shower. Afterward, I'd felt a little more human.

Now that I was alone, the chaos continued to replay in my head.

On the table beside me, my phone kept buzzing with incoming calls and texts. I ignored it. There was no one I wanted to speak to, not even my mother. I still hadn't come up with an excuse to tell her why I'd left so abruptly. Maybe the arrest of my roommate would be enough to keep her from being pissed at me for leaving her shorthanded without notice.

Taking another drink of coffee, I realized it had grown cold. Grimacing, I glanced over at the window and noticed the sun was about to set. I'd lost track of time since Blaine had left for the hospital. A hard knock on the door made me startle, but I quickly placed my cup on the end table and jumped to my feet.

Before I could reach it, the knock came again, louder and more insistent. Figuring it wasn't Blaine because he would

have a key, I pushed up onto my tiptoes to look through the peephole.

Gasping when I saw Judge, I took several steps back, my mind whirling.

“Open the door, Elli.”

I flinched.

Elli.

For years, I'd ached for him to call me that again. The night before, he'd used it once, and it had brought me more joy than I wanted to admit. Now, it did nothing but bring me pain.

His hand hit the door again. “Elli, open the fucking door.”

Sighing, I turned the lock. Before I could pull the door open, it swung inward, and suddenly, I was in Judge's arms. For a fraction of a second, I started to melt into him. But all too quickly, the events of the previous night flooded back into my mind, and I pushed against his shoulders in an attempt to free myself.

He buried his face in my neck, his arms contracting around my waist as he held me several inches off the floor. “I've been worried sick,” he groaned.

Confused and more than a little skeptical, I pushed against him harder. “Put me down.” He shook his head, and I slapped his arm. “Judge, I can't breathe.”

He immediately eased his hold and placed my feet back on the floor, but he didn't release me. Keeping his hands on my hips, he scanned my face with his dark eyes. “Are you okay? No one hurt you?”

“I’m fine.” I was almost stupefied by how protective he was being. It was like he had turned back into my Zachary, the one who had cared about me. If I hadn’t felt the heat of his body, I would have thought I was dreaming. “But why are you here?”

“That Blaine guy told me what happened. I came as soon as I could.” With one hand still on me, he turned to glance around the apartment. “Where is your luggage? The jet is waiting for us back at the airport.”

With a dry laugh, I stepped back until he wasn’t touching me any longer. Brown eyes narrowed on me, showing me that I was correct. He hadn’t magically turned back into the man I adored. Judge stared back at me, still the ruthless, emotionless bastard he always was.

“I have court in the morning, Elli.”

“Then why did you come here?” I demanded in annoyance.

He clenched his jaw. “Because you needed someone. Your roommate—”

“I don’t need anyone. Not then, and definitely not now. I’ve been doing just fine on my own for three years.” Crossing my arms over my chest, I glared up at him. “What happens to me is none of your business, Judge.”

“Don’t call me that,” he grumbled.

Another laugh bubbled up, making me feel half hysterical. “What the fuck do you want me to call you, then? You don’t want me to use your name. Now you don’t want me to call you Judge like everyone else. Oh wait, I know what I’ll call you. Douchebag. Yeah,” I muttered to myself as I turned to walk back to the couch. “I’ll definitely call you Douchebag.”

“I don’t want to argue with you, Elli—”

“Ellianna,” I corrected, fighting against the warmth bubbling low in my belly from the pleasure of him calling me “Elli” again. I couldn’t let his appearing like he was some white knight go to my head.

Blowing out a frustrated sigh, he crossed to the couch. “Where are your things, Elli?”

Of course he didn’t listen to me. He was Judge Fucking Bennet. In his world, he made the rules, and everyone else had to jump to follow through.

“I probably would have been surprised to see you in this building if I didn’t already know you were footing the bill for my rent.” Picking up my cold coffee, I took two big swallows.

Why did coffee that had gone cold taste so gross, but iced coffee was delicious? It had to be some kind of trick the mind pulled on a person.

Making a growling, frustrated noise in the back of his throat, Judge stomped through the apartment, opening doors as he came to them. Choosing to ignore him, I focused on the television. There was a syndicated sitcom on now. I didn’t watch much TV, so I only knew the bare minimum about the characters, but it was funny enough that I didn’t have to take cues from the studio audience to know when to laugh.

I felt him return before he dropped my cases on the floor beside me. “Time to go.”

“Bye,” I said without looking away from the screen.

“Elli.”

“Douchebag,” I mocked in the same exasperated tone.

“Use my real name, Elli.”

“Listen to your own advice, Douchebag.” I shifted, tucking my bare feet up under me.

“Baby—”

My head snapped up. We had a stare down for a long moment before he muttered a curse. Turning, he walked away. As I watched him go, my heart split open more and more with each step he took, but I didn’t call him back. I’d already learned my lesson the night before. I didn’t plan on making it again.

His hand was on the knob before he abruptly turned and stormed back to the couch, leaving the door open. I had no time to react as he bent and lifted me up over his shoulder.

“What are you—”

He slapped his hand down on my ass so hard I yelped. “You’re already pushing me to the end of my patience, Elli. Be still.”

“Put me down, you asshole!” I kicked and wiggled, trying to get free. I didn’t care if he dropped me—I needed distance between us. His nearness was too potent. “I’m not going anywhere with you. I live here.”

“You’re coming home until the fall semester. Maybe longer. You can go to Georgetown. I’ll hire another driver just to take you to school every day. I don’t like the thought of you driving in congested traffic, but I don’t want you living on campus. It’s not that far of a drive, and being chauffeured will give you time to and from school to study.” He put my phone in my purse and slung it around his neck before arranging the luggage so the smaller case was under his arm, and he dragged the larger by the handle.

I kicked my foot, connecting with his side. I wished I could reach his kidney. That would cause some real damage. Driving wasn't the only thing Howler taught me when I was younger. Lyla and I both got lessons in how to fight and defend ourselves.

She just happened to be more adept at the physical lessons, whereas I was a much better driver. I wasn't much for violence. I didn't want to see it or participate. It had always made me nervous to see the cage fighting in the Underground.

Judge only grunted as he maneuvered me and the cases through the door. "Put me down! I'm not going back with you. And I definitely am not going to Georgetown. They don't even want me."

Which had stung.

Not only had Judge not wanted me around, but the school I'd always dreamed of attending had rejected me too. I'd been so sure that I would get in, with a full-ride scholarship. But almost as soon as I'd applied, I'd gotten the letter letting me know they didn't have a place for me.

When I'd read those words, I'd felt physically sick. I'd stayed in bed for two days, doing nothing but staring at the ceiling and wondering what was so wrong with me that no one wanted me around. Lyla helped me get over the depression. She'd climbed into bed beside me with boxes of takeout, an entire cake from our favorite bakery, and enough diet soda to last a week. For an entire weekend, we didn't leave my room, just sat and ate and watched K-dramas on her iPad.

No one cared more than Lyla when she loved someone.

I'd been so lucky to be one of the precious few.

Fuck, I missed her.

She'd told me there was always the chance I would get in for law school. I'd held on to that hope, even as I'd feared their rejection.

“Don't worry about it. I'll make a few calls.” He was able to get everything out the door and close it without dropping me, even though I kicked him repeatedly in the side.

His continued grunts told me he wasn't unaffected by the blows, but I knew I didn't do much damage. I'd seen him come out of the Underground ring covered in blood. The last time he'd participated in a fight, he'd gotten a bruised kidney. I'd begged him not to do it again.

Not long after that, he'd begun shutting me out.

But at least he hadn't been back in the cage since then—or so my mom had told me.

“I don't want to go to Georgetown!” I shouted, slapping my hands against his back. “Especially if they're only going to accept me because Judge Fucking Bennet pulled a few strings. I'm not that pathetic.”

“You're not pathetic,” he growled, kicking open the front door of the building and walking over to where a guy in a suit was standing beside the back passenger door of a tank-like SUV. “You're amazing. Georgetown will be grateful to have you.”

“Ha!”

“We can discuss school later.” Judge dropped the cases on the sidewalk and barked at the driver to pick them up after the man opened the door for him. “If I put you down, will you get in the car like a good girl?”

Why did he make that sound sexy?

I kicked him again.

“I’ll take that as a no.” He trapped my legs against his body and then shifted his hold until I was being held with my side against the trunk of his body. “Watch your head,” he cautioned as he got in without releasing me.

Once he was situated, his arms remained like bands, binding me to him.

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t,” he said with such confidence, I wanted to punch him in the face. As if he could read my mind, he adjusted his hold so my arms were trapped against my body. Lowering his head, he brushed his nose against my ear. “Let’s go home, Elli.”

CHAPTER 17

JUDGE

“I’M NOT GETTING ON THAT PLANE,” ELLIANNA SEETHED WHEN the driver stopped on the tarmac a safe distance from the jet I’d chartered.

For the entire ride from her apartment, she’d been quiet. I could feel her anger bubbling the whole way, but she’d frozen me out. Which was frustrating as fuck when she was on my lap and my body was one massive ache for her. But as soon as the driver turned into the private section of the airport, she’d started getting mouthy.

“You want me to arrange a different flight?” I offered.

“I want you to take me back to Blaine’s.”

“No.” That wasn’t an option. She was coming home and staying home.

Maybe if she hadn’t told me she loved me, I could have let her stay in California. It would have been a struggle, especially now that I’d been inside her. But once those words had left her pretty mouth, she’d set our fate in stone.

“You can’t make me go with you, Douchebag.”

Jaw clenched, I chose to ignore her new nickname for me. It wasn’t unwarranted, but I wanted to be her Zachary again, damn it.

“Your mom will be upset if she finds out about what your roommate did,” I reasoned. “And you shouldn’t leave her shorthanded. She was depending on you.”

“What my mom doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” She crossed her arms over her chest, side-eyeing me. “I’m sure you’ll agree with me on that.”

“I don’t.”

Her head snapped around, her eyes narrowing on me. “So you want her to know we fucked?”

I grasped her chin. “We didn’t fuck.”

Nostrils flaring, she glared up at me. “Right. Sorry, I forgot. It never happened.”

“Oh, it happened.” Lowering my head, I skimmed my nose up her throat to her ear. “I’ll never forget how good it felt to have your sweet little pussy wrapped around my cock, Elli. But I didn’t fuck you.”

Her breath hitched, but that didn’t stop her from sassing me. “It seems we remember things differently, then.”

Biting back a curse, I opened the door. Placing her on the seat, I slid out and then reached back in to offer her my hand. She stared down at it dispassionately. “Elli,” I warned. “I will carry you.”

“I’ll scream. I’ll make a huge scene. Tell anyone who will listen that you kidnapped me. This isn’t Virginia. No one here is under your reign.”

“But are you sure? Maybe I know people here.” She gave me a withering look, but when I just cocked a brow at her in challenge, she sighed and finally placed her hand in mine. “Good girl.”

A little tremble went up her arm, and I had to fight a groan. She liked being praised. How the fuck was I going to keep my hands off her while I gave her body time to recover from our first time with that knowledge bouncing around in my head?

Once her feet were on the ground, she tried to pull her hand free. Entwining our fingers, I guided her toward the stairs of the jet. While the driver unloaded her luggage and a crew member wheeled it toward the plane, she slowly climbed the steps ahead of me. I stayed back, enjoying the view of her rear in tight yoga pants.

I knew what that perfect ass felt like in my hands. Soon, I was going to find out what it tasted like.

At the top of the stairs, she glanced over her shoulder to see if I was following. When she saw I was still at the bottom, she put her hands on her hips. “Changed your mind?”

“No, baby. I’m just enjoying the view.”

Rolling her eyes, she turned and entered the jet. Fighting a smile, I followed. One of the two flight attendants rushed around to make Ellianna comfortable, while her partner stood waiting for me. “Would you like a drink, Judge Bennet?”

I shook my head. Alcohol was the last thing I needed when it was already a struggle to keep my hands off the beautiful little blonde who was doing everything she could not to look my way. “I’m fine. Just make sure Ellianna is comfortable.”

She inclined her head in acknowledgment. I’d barely noticed either of the attendants on the flight from Virginia. They had both been very professional and only approached periodically to ask if I’d needed anything. Mostly, I’d been trapped in the hell of my own memory and what I was going to do next.

Questioning my moves was something I was unused to, but the few times it did happen in my life were for the same reason. Ellianna. I still wasn't completely sure how to proceed from this point, but I knew I couldn't go back to the way things were before I tasted her.

Ellianna had picked a window seat. Her belt was already on, and she glanced around like she'd never been on a private plane before. When she and Lyla were younger, I would take them both on vacation every summer for a week or two. Every time, I chartered a jet. Maybe I should have just bought one, but I didn't fly often enough to consider it necessary.

I took the seat across from her. "Are you hungry?"

Keeping her attention out the window, she answered with a clipped, "No."

She hadn't eaten the night before, and I had no way of knowing if she'd gotten something on the commercial flight she'd taken. Had she eaten before she'd gotten to the apartment and had to deal with her roommate's bullshit? I didn't know, and it drove me crazy. She hadn't been getting enough meals in fuck knew how long.

"Did you eat? I had the delivery person drop the groceries off at Blaine's apartment after I found out about the roommate incident." And then I'd canceled the calendar reminder for the weekly order.

That got her attention. Slowly turning her head, she met my gaze. "You had the groceries delivered?" I shrugged. "Was it payment for last night?"

"Elli," I growled, pissed that she was going there. "Do not start right now, baby."

"Ellianna," she corrected.

“Elli.” I leaned forward, daring her to argue. Her eyes flared with anger, but she didn’t respond. I loved seeing the flash of sass even as she obeyed my silent command. “Did you eat?” I repeated.

Huffing, she turned her eyes back to the window. “I had a bagel.”

“Fuck.” Sitting back, I combed my fingers through my hair. A bagel. In twenty-four hours, all she’d eaten was a goddamn bagel. I signaled the flight attendant.

“Judge Bennet?”

“As soon as we’re in the air, bring us food,” I instructed.

“Yes, sir. What would you prefer?”

“Everything.”

CHAPTER 18

JUDGE

BOWING HER HEAD, THE WOMAN WENT TO TAKE HER PLACE AS the pilot announced we were departing. Ellianna sighed. “Didn’t I just tell you I’m not hungry?”

“You’re going to eat.” Fastening my seat belt, I stretched out my legs. “And then you will sleep.”

She didn’t argue, but I couldn’t relax. Until she was fed and safely tucked in with a blanket wrapped around her while she pillowed her head on my chest, I wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything else. While the pilot did his job of getting us safely in the air, I sat there and took simple pleasure in watching her.

Her shoulders were stiff, but I could see the exhaustion weighing down on her. I doubted she’d slept since she’d left the house the night before. I sure as fuck hadn’t. Not once in the twenty minutes it took before we were given the clear to move around freely did she so much as blink as she kept her focus on the window.

“Elli.” Unsnapping my seat belt, I sat forward. All the seats were in clusters of four, separated by a half wall that hid the galley and the flight attendants’ area at the front of the plane.

“What?” Her voice came out hoarse from disuse and exertion. She blinked a few times but didn’t look at me.

Standing, I crossed to where a small bar was set up and grabbed two bottles of water from the mini fridge. Going back to her, I took the seat beside her and uncapped one bottle before grasping her wrist and wrapping her hand around the drink. “Hydrate.”

As if every move was painful, she turned her head to inspect the bottle. After a brief hesitation, she took a small sip and then placed it in the cupholder between us. Soon, scents of food reached us, and she sniffed a few times before taking another drink of water.

“Smells like beef,” I commented, wanting to hear her voice.

“Mom doesn’t like you eating red meat.” She took a deeper drink from the bottle. “She told me she wants to stop the cycle so you don’t die of a heart attack like your father and grandfather.”

“There’s no cycle to end,” I told her. “Unlike my grandfather, my dad didn’t actually die of a heart attack.”

That caught her attention. Blue eyes wide, she looked up at me in confusion. “But that’s what Lyla told me he died of. Everyone said so.”

I lowered my head, pressing my lips to the shell of her ear. Her small gasp made my cock pulse. “That’s what I want them to believe, baby.”

“Then what happened?” she whispered.

“What had to,” I told her honestly and straightened. “Would you rather have chicken?”

She shifted in her seat to face me more comfortably. “You can’t say something like that, drop that kind of bomb, and then change the topic. What do you mean ‘what had to’? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to worry about it.” I opened the other bottle of water and took two swallows. I shouldn’t have said anything, but I didn’t want her stressing over me dying of a heart attack like the other men in my family allegedly had.

“What did Mr. Bennet die from if not a heart attack, Judge?”

“Call me Zachary.”

“No. His passing was front-page news in all the local papers,” she persisted. “I remember reading a few of the articles. They all said the same thing. It was a sudden cardiac arrest. It was over before the EMTs even arrived at his office.”

“You were just a kid,” I reminded her. “The week before, I’d had to leave for two days.”

Her brow scrunched up. “What does that have to do with anything?”

I felt chilled just remembering everything that had led up to the bastard’s death. “While I was gone, was Lyla upset?”

“She was always upset whenever you had to go away overnight,” she confirmed. “Many times, she slept in my bed with me. She missed you.”

“I hated being away from home,” I confided. “I hated being away from my sister...and you. Every time I left the house, I wondered what fresh hell I was leaving you both to endure.”

“Judge—”

“Zachary,” I corrected. “When Lyla was four, she tried to make herself breakfast. You had strep, so Mabel was busy taking care of you. I hadn’t woken up yet. It was a Saturday. I thought Lyla would sleep in. But she didn’t. She was hungry, and she wanted to show me what a big girl she was by making herself something to eat. She burned the toast and set off the smoke detector. It was so loud it startled our father out of his drunken stupor. It woke me up too. But he got to her first.”

“Judge—”

“Zachary.” Picking up her hand, I stroked my thumb over her knuckles as that morning replayed through my head. “Every time I smell burned bread, I can see the fear on my sister’s face. The way she trembled as he stood over her, ready to strike her again. I should have killed him then, Elli.”

“Oh God,” she breathed. “He hurt her.”

“He almost hurt you, too.” I lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles, pushing the images of Lyla’s bruises back into the vault where they belonged. “The week before he died, you were in the kitchen. Baking cookies to surprise Lyla. She’d gotten the highest grade on a history test in your class, and you were so proud of her. You were singing and dancing around. I watched from the back entrance. You begged me to be your lookout to make sure Lyla didn’t come in from swimming in the pool and ruin the surprise.”

Her eyes widened at the memory. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“Do you remember what happened next?” I asked, hoping she didn’t.

She blinked rapidly a few times and lowered her gaze. “Y-yes.”

“If I hadn’t been there, he would have hurt you, Elli. I couldn’t risk you or Lyla any longer. I decided then that something had to happen.”

Ellianna swallowed hard. “How did he really die?”

I met her gaze for a long moment, and seeing the horror in those light-blue eyes crushed me. “Are you scared of me now, Elli?”

“No,” she whispered. Her tongue peeked out of her mouth as she licked her lips. “But I think you need to unburden yourself, Judge. That’s why you’re confessing this to me.”

“And you’re my angel of mercy?” I asked with a smile. “Will you absolve me of my sins if I tell you everything, my Elli?”

“Do you have bigger sins than the death of your father?”

It was asked so innocently, like she didn’t expect me to admit the truth. But she had no idea. Killing that monster had been so easy.

Wanting her was something entirely different.

I’d tried so hard to protect her from myself.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 19

ELLIANNA

DO YOU HAVE BIGGER SINS THAN THE DEATH OF YOUR FATHER?

Yes.

He seemed to pack more remorse into that one word than I'd ever heard in Judge's voice my entire life. And something else, something I'd never heard there before.

Self-loathing.

I didn't doubt for a moment that he wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone who was a threat to Lyla, not even his own father.

But that he had committed bigger crimes?

No, I didn't believe that for a moment.

Yet, the truth—or maybe what he considered to be truth—was there in his dark eyes.

What had happened all those years ago with his father, I'd completely blocked from my mind until he'd reminded me. That day, I'd been so excited to celebrate Lyla's test score. She didn't care about academics, but when it came to history, she was the star student.

Mr. Bennet had come into the kitchen that day. Judge was standing at the back door and hadn't seen his dad at first. He was busy making sure Lyla didn't come in from the pool too

soon. The counters were covered with flour and sugar. There was a broken egg beside the bowl I stood over, pouring chocolate chips into. A few of the morsels missed and scattered over the counter and onto the floor.

It was a disaster, but I would have cleaned up the mess.

My mom's boss had been livid. He'd charged at me, his fist already raised to strike, calling me names I'd rarely heard in my life. I'd frozen up, my eyes clenching closed as I prepared to be hit. I knew he wasn't a nice man. Lyla was scared of him—and Lyla wasn't afraid of anything.

But the blow never came.

A crash had me peeking open one eye to find Mr. Bennet on the floor, his nose bleeding. Judge stood over him, breathing hard as he stood like a wall between his father and me.

"Elli, go to your room," Judge had commanded.

"But Lyla's cookies," I'd whispered, fighting tears. I was scared, but I knew Judge wouldn't let anything hurt me. I was safe as long as he was there.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll take you and Lyla to the bakery." His voice was calm, despite the tension in his shoulders. "For now, I need you to go. Okay, Elli?"

"O-okay." I'd run as fast as I could up to my room and hid under my covers, trying not to cry.

Sometime later, Lyla came to get me, and Judge drove us to the bakery, where we picked out a dozen cookies and a cupcake each. No one ever mentioned what happened in the kitchen, and I'd pushed the bad memory as far down as I could until it didn't even register in my mind.

I shook away the past. Whatever happened between Judge and me the day before, he had saved me from his father back then. Not only from being hit by the man, but potentially any other harm as well. Not only me, but Lyla too.

Maybe that didn't excuse the way Judge had treated me the last few years, but it explained more than he probably wanted me to understand. He'd killed his father to protect us. I'd never known—never suspected.

The sound of rattling silverware drew my attention as the two flight attendants appeared, each of them pushing a small cart. The scents of the food became overwhelming, and my stomach growled in a combination of appreciation and protest.

All the dishes were arranged like Michelin-star-quality meals. The steak was in a pepper sauce that was served with asparagus mixed with artful slivers of carrots and perfectly crisp fries. There was also a cucumber and tomato salad and a decadent-looking dessert.

After arranging each cart in front of us as a table, one of the attendants produced a bottle of wine. Once our glasses were filled and we'd been asked if we needed anything else, they excused themselves.

I gazed down at my food, unsure where to start. It all looked delicious, but I wasn't sure how well it would sit on my stomach. I was hungry, but so tired I felt nauseated.

“Just a few bites,” Judge urged, watching me shift my gaze from one plate to another without attempting to pick up his own utensils. “And then you can have the dessert.”

Sighing, I lifted my fork and stabbed at a tomato. Chewing, I lifted a brow at him in challenge. “Happy?”

He leaned his head back against the seat, continuing to watch me. “I’m not concerned about my happiness. It’s yours I worry about.”

I grabbed my wineglass to keep from calling him out on his bullshit. If he was so worried about my being happy, then why did he do nothing but break my heart?

Judge picked up his fork and knife, cutting into his steak. But instead of eating it himself, he lifted it to my lips. “Open.”

Without thinking, I did, accepting the bite. His eyes darkened as he waited for me to chew, his gaze glued to my mouth. When I licked my lips, he muttered something under his breath I didn’t hear and cut another piece of beef. He added a small piece of carrot to the next bite before picking up a fry with his fingers. I accepted both.

“Good girl.”

Silently, he continued to feed me until all the steak on his plate was gone, along with half the fries and a portion of the other vegetables. The food was amazing, but it was the approval in his eyes that fulfilled me the most. That was how it had always been with this man. Nothing had ever brought me more joy than when he was showering me with encouragement and appreciation. Nothing was more addictive than having Judge’s full attention on me.

Dessert was a dark chocolate torte over a spongy base with a dollop of mint sorbet on top. Judge scooped up a tiny bite on the dessert fork and lifted it to my mouth. He didn’t have to ask me to open. My lips were already parted in anticipation. Moaning, I dropped my head back against my seat. “That’s so good.”

A vein in his forehead began to pulse, but he fed me until every crumb of dessert was gone. The fork clattered onto the plate when he dropped it back onto the makeshift table, his breathing coming in heavy pants.

Licking away any lingering traces of chocolate and mint, I glanced down at the two carts. Other than the glass of wine and a single piece of tomato, my own dishes were untouched. But I'd eaten all of Judge's food.

“Aren't you hungry?”

“I'm starving,” he rasped, offering me his napkin.

Reaching forward, I went to grab my plate to offer it to him, but he used his foot to push both carts aside. “It's really good. You should eat,” I urged.

“I'm going to.”

CHAPTER 20

JUDGE

WATCHING ELLIANNA EAT EACH BITE THAT I FED HER WAS torturously satisfying. Every part of it was sensually gratifying. From the way her lips wrapped around the fork, to how she licked her lips after each bite, to the little noises of pleasure that I wasn't even sure she realized she was making. Would she savor having my cock in her mouth the same way?

I could imagine how beautiful she would look, her lips stretched around my girth, her eyes glazed with arousal and the need to please me. She would want to rub her clit, but I wouldn't allow her. Only I got to touch that sacred haven between her legs. If she wanted to come, she would have to wait until I spilled down her throat.

Each time she swallowed another bite, my cock got harder and harder until it was like a steel rod in my pants.

And then I'd eat her until she came, over and over and over again, stopping only when she begged for mercy.

All I could think about was kissing her again. Would she be as sweet as before, or would the food mask what I craved?

I needed to know or I was going to die.

"Judge?" She grasped my shoulders while I settled her in my lap. Her thin yoga pants didn't hide the warm heat that

radiated from between her thighs. If I slid my hand beneath the waistband, I had no doubt I would find her pussy drenched.

Her tongue snuck out, nervously licking her lush bottom lip. “W-what are you doing?”

“I need another taste.” Tangling my fingers in her hair, I gently tugged her head back. “Been aching since you ran away, baby.”

“You told me to go. You—”

I cut off whatever she was going to say by thrusting my tongue into her sweet mouth. A mixture of flavors greeted me, but none of them was strong enough to obscure the one I craved the most. Groaning, I tightened my fingers in her silky hair and deepened the kiss.

She had the power to make me crawl on my hands and knees, and she had no clue. Maybe...

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if she knew.

Keeping her in place with my hand in her hair, I slipped my other hand up under her shirt. The cups of her bra did nothing to disguise how hard her nipples were. I pinched one through the material, making her whine.

My head shot up, my gaze going to where the flight attendants had retreated. If it were anyone else, I wouldn't have cared if we had an audience. But this was my Elli. No one got to see or hear anything we did together.

Releasing her hair, I wrapped my hand around her throat. “Those little sounds are for my ears only, baby.”

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, her eyes flaring with need when she tasted me there. “Judge.” My fingers contracted, causing her to whimper, but from the way

she squirmed that little ass on my lap, I knew it wasn't because she was scared.

“That’s not what you call me, Elli.”

“You told me not to use your name,” she murmured, lowering her eyes to the collar of my shirt.

Using my thumb, I tilted her head back until our gazes locked. “Because every time you say ‘Zachary,’ my control slips a little more.” Thrusting my hips up against her, I let her feel how hard I was for her. “That’s what happens when you say my name, baby. No matter where I am, what I’m doing, who I’m talking to. Every fucking time I hear you speak those three syllables, I turn to steel.”

“Is...” She swallowed hard, and I had to bite back a tortured groan when I felt her throat move. Fuck, I wanted to feel it when she swallowed my dick, when she was gulping down every drop of come I had to give her. “Is that really why?”

I cocked my head at her question. “What reason do I have to lie? If anything, I shouldn’t be making such confessions.”

“Because you’re horny, and I’m the most convenient hole,” she said with a half shrug. “Just like last night.”

My hand tightened until she gasped in shock. I was seconds away from stripping her yoga pants and panties off and then turning her ass red for even suggesting that she was a “hole” to me. “Never, and I mean fucking never, say shit like that to me again, Elli. You aren’t a convenient anything.”

Her lashes flickered. “Then what am I?”

“Mine,” I snarled, crushing my lips against hers.

I could have blamed the bourbon for how far I'd taken things the night before, but what was my excuse when I was stone-cold sober? I hadn't even had a drink of wine while I was feeding her. One minute, I was kissing her, only wanting to savor her taste again, but then she stroked her hand down the back of my neck, and suddenly, kissing just her mouth wasn't enough.

Pushing her pants and underwear over her hips, I lifted her only long enough to get them off before I thrust two fingers into her hot pussy. That sweet little mewling sound was enough to have my cock leaking in my boxer briefs, but I had enough sense to quiet her with my hand still at her throat.

Those little noises stopped, but she pushed her pussy against my hand, greedy for an orgasm. Only wanting to give her what she needed—this time—I strummed my thumb over her clit. Releasing her mouth, I touched my lips to her ear. “I'm going to make you come, but you can't scream.”

“I-I—”

“Not a sound, Elli,” I warned, teasing her G-spot. She was so wet, she was already dripping onto my pants. When she got off, I'd be soaked. Fuck yeah. I wanted to smell like her again.

Light-blue eyes met mine. I could see she wanted to be a good girl, but the pleasure was too much and it was only building higher. Her inner walls gave tiny contractions, trying to suck me deeper, but they weren't the back-bending release I wanted from her. I'd been too lost in the feel of her wrapped around my cock the night before to enjoy watching her come for me, but nothing was going to stop me from witnessing it this time.

The smallest whine escaped her, and I tightened my fingers for a fraction of a second in warning. “I-I can't h-help it,” she

hiccupped.

“You make one more sound and I’m going to have to put something in that mouth to ensure you stay quiet.”

Her pussy gave a little gush, her hips moving in time to the insistent thrusts of my fingers. My cock pulsed, begging to be pulled free of the confines of my clothes. “You like that thought, Elli?” I demanded in a low voice. “You want me to shut you up by putting my cock in your mouth?”

I felt her swallow, once, twice, before she nodded. My balls tightened, ready to spill just from her reaction to the thought of sucking my dick. I wanted inside her again—whether it was her mouth or her cunt, I didn’t fucking care.

But not until she got off.

I pulled my fingers free, resisting the urge to lick her honey off each digit. She shook her head, biting her lips together to keep the protests inside, but my good girl didn’t make a sound, just as I’d commanded. Releasing her throat, I grabbed her ass in both hands and lifted her.

Her legs fell over the back of the seat, and she grabbed on to my hair tightly. Latching on to her clit with my lips, I sucked. The only sounds she made were breathy little pants. It didn’t take long before her entire body was shaking as she drew closer and closer to the edge.

Hungrily, I flicked my tongue over her clit and used a thumb to tease at her asshole. When she whined so damn prettily as she came apart for me, I slapped my hand against one ass cheek, reminding her to stay quiet.

I felt her pussy contract harder, her body accepting the sting of pain as part of the pleasure.

Breathing hard, I lowered her to my lap and then struggled to get my belt and button undone. I had no time to regret not watching her face as she came. I promised myself I would as soon as we found a bed and I could take my time. I needed relief, and I needed it now.

One look at her told me she was still too high from her own release to be able to focus on sucking me off. With her legs straddling me, her wet folds pink, glistening, and swollen from where I'd eaten her out, she was too much to resist. Jerking my cock out of my boxers, I didn't take the time to remember that she might be sore from the night before. I was mindless, too lost in my need for her to think past spilling inside her.

Lifting her hips again, I sat her down on my cock. She wrapped her arms around me, burying her face in my shoulder so her teeth could latch on to my neck to hide her scream as I slammed into her balls deep. Like a miracle, her walls started fluttering around me, another release detonating within her.

“Goddamn it,” I growled. “Perfect. So fucking perfect.”

“Zachary,” she breathed, lifting her head. “I... I...”

“Gotta be quiet, baby. I'll lose my mind if they hear how good I make you feel.” I kissed her throat, right where my hand had been. “Those are mine. It's all mine.”

“Yours,” she agreed, riding my cock without my having to urge her. “I've always been yours.”

“Fucking right,” I grated out. I slapped my hands down on both her ass cheeks, the sound spurring me higher. She pressed her face into my shirt, muffling a scream, her cream flooding down my balls. “I'm about to blow, Elli. You ready for me?”

I felt her nod even as I grabbed on to her ass and started bouncing her up and down on my shaft.

“Zachary,” she whined half a second before she started to come for me again.

The feel of her pussy gripping me, mixed with the sound of my name in my ear, was enough to send me free-falling. Throwing my head back, I bellowed my pleasure as my cock spurted deep inside her.

In the back of my mind, I was all too aware that there was nothing between us to protect her. Just as there hadn't been the night before.

A satisfied, predatory smile teased at my lips as I struggled to catch my breath. I pressed a kiss against the side of her head.

The control was completely gone.

She was mine now.

I'd bind her to me in every way possible.

CHAPTER 21

ELLIANNA

MY ALARM GOING OFF HAD ME SLITTING MY EYES OPEN. I needed to get up and start work. Since I was back, I couldn't just lie around and let my mom down, no matter how tired I was.

Reaching for my phone to turn off the alarm, I was startled when an arm tightened around my waist and a deep groan vibrated against my back. Heat infused every inch of my body as the man behind me molded me back against him. It was difficult to miss how hard his cock was as it poked into my hip.

“Turn it off and go back to sleep,” Judge grumbled. “I can be late for court today.”

It took a minute for me to remember why I wasn't alone in my own bed. Mainly because this wasn't my room. When we'd gotten home in the early hours of the morning, I'd been so tired, I'd stumbled through the door, Judge right behind me with my cases. But when I'd gone into my bedroom, he'd followed.

I'd thought he was just going to drop my stuff in my closet and leave, so I'd face-planted into my bed, not even bothering to put my head on a pillow before closing my eyes, already half asleep.

But before I could drift off into an exhausted slumber, Judge scooped me up.

“What are you—”

“Not sleeping without you,” he’d muttered as he carried me out of my room and into his.

Too tired to argue—and not even sure I wanted to anyway—I let him set me on his bed and strip me. The next thing I knew, he was crawling in behind me. I’d rolled over, cuddling his warm, deliciously naked body while letting sleep fully consume me. Sometime in the few hours I’d slept, I must have shifted away from him. I could guess why. His body heat would have made me sweat, and I hated being too hot when I was sleeping.

But the way he was pressed up against me, it didn’t seem he’d let me get far. He hadn’t had to move much to pull me back to him when I’d tried to get up.

I was still half asleep, but my mind didn’t let me relax. After the events of the past two days, I needed to figure out what I was going to do about this whole thing between us. And from the way his cock kept twitching against me, I needed to do it quickly.

Everything had happened so fast, I was a bit dizzy from it all. My emotions had gone through the equivalent of multiple natural disasters in less than forty-eight hours. From humiliation and rage, to ecstasy and heartbreak. First, thinking I wouldn’t ever return to my childhood home and flying across the country, only to find my apartment wrecked and then having to spend over an hour speaking to the cops. I’d been hanging on to what was left of my sanity by a thread when Judge had shown up out of nowhere and basically kidnapped me.

Not wanting to face all the things we'd done on the plane ride back to Virginia wasn't an option. I had to deal with everything now, figure out what was going to happen from here forward.

Yes, Judge had broken me the last few days. I was still hurting and angry up until he'd confessed to me about his father's death. But I knew this man. He wouldn't have confided something like that to me just to get into my pants. We both knew he didn't have to do anything except crook his finger, and I'd have willingly done all those things with him on the plane.

But he had told me about his dad. I had the feeling that I was the only one he'd ever spoken to about the events surrounding Mr. Bennet's death. The burden was too great, and I'd felt a sense of relief from him after his confession. It wasn't that he would have been worried I might use that information against him. He was Judge Bennet, for fuck's sake. Whether people believed me didn't matter. No one would touch him even if I had proof.

He had to know I wouldn't use anything he said against him. As much as I wanted to deny it or tell myself the feelings I had for him died when he'd told me to leave Saturday night, I knew nothing would ever kill how much I loved him.

Loving him was one thing. Trusting him was another.

And trusting him with my heart?

Yeah, I wasn't there yet.

Maybe I never would be.

There was no way this was going to last. Judge didn't do long-term. He'd never had an actual girlfriend, just fuck

buddies, and I didn't flatter myself that I was anything more than that.

For now.

It was only a matter of time before he got tired of me like every other woman who had kept his dick wet. Logic told me to put a stop to whatever this was here and now. No way this ended any other way except for my heart shattered.

But I was a masochist when it came to him.

I wanted it all. From the mind-blowing orgasms to the gut-wrenching heartbreak that was sure to follow sooner or later. I'd soak it all up so I'd have it to live on for the rest of my life once we ended whatever this was.

Of course, there was only one problem with that.

"I have to get up before my mom comes looking for me," I reasoned as I attempted to lift his arm off my stomach.

He buried his face in my neck, making me sigh with contentment as his hand traveled down my stomach and cupped my bare pussy. He spread my lips with his fingers and began to stroke his thumb over my clit. We were completely alone now. No one was around to hear my moans and cries of pleasure. Even if they were, I wasn't sure I could have held back my needy whimper when he began to play with me.

"If you're not going to sleep, then give me another reason to be late," he breathed against my ear.

I was already wet, a point he proved by stuffing two fingers into my core with ease. Arching back into him, I tried to be the voice of reason. "A-are you ready to explain to Mom what's going on between us."

His fingers didn't even pause as he kept stroking me higher. "Yes."

Whining, I squirmed against him, loving the feel of his cock digging into me. The tip was already leaking, which made trying to remember why I couldn't stay in bed with him even more difficult. "But I'm not ready."

If I had my way, we wouldn't ever tell my mom. Whatever happened when this was over, I didn't want the messiness to include her. I didn't want her to have to choose sides.

Because if I was honest with myself, I wasn't confident she would pick me.

Groaning, he rolled us so that I was on my back and he was cradled between my open legs. "Fine, we won't tell Mabel. For now." He kissed me hard before pulling back. I thought he was going to climb out of bed, but all he did was slide down the mattress until his mouth latched on to my clit.

I grabbed on to his hair, unsure if I was going to push him away or hold him in place. "Zachary!" I hissed.

"Neither one of us is leaving this bed until I'm coated in your taste and scent, Elli," he growled, licking up and down my lower lips. "So if you don't want your mom to find us like this, I suggest you focus on creaming on my face."

CHAPTER 22

ELLIANNA

I RUSHED DOWNSTAIRS IN MY BLACK DRESS PANTS AND WHITE button-down, my hair pulled into a knot at the back of my head. After a quick glance in the mirror, I knew I was presentable by my mom's standards, but I felt like anyone who looked at me would guess what I'd just been doing in Judge's bed.

Heat filled my face as I remembered how he'd made me come twice before he'd thrust into me and spilled after only three pumps of his hips. I loved how out of control he was, how he couldn't contain himself when he was inside me. My inner muscles might have been protesting the harsh overuse, but the rest of me felt more alive than ever before.

Mom wasn't in the kitchen where I expected her to be. That gave me a moment to collect myself a little better and eat a slice of toast before going in search of her. I found her outside, walking back from the shed where the landscaper had an office. Smelling the roses she must have gotten from the talented gardener who kept the surrounding grounds immaculate, she didn't see me at first.

"Good morning," I greeted, and she lifted her head, offering me a warm smile.

"Good morning, honey. Did you sleep well?"

Hoping I didn't blush and give away what I was thinking, I nodded. "How is Miss Lindy?"

Her smile faded, replaced by a mixture of concern and grief. Miss Lindy was her best friend, and I knew she was worried she was going to lose another person she cared about. My mom didn't get emotionally attached to many people because she had lost so many throughout her life.

"It was a rough weekend. I spent last night at her house as well. When I left this morning, she was starting to feel a little better." She walked up the back steps and offered me the flowers. "Arrange these for me, please. You do such a lovely job. I'm going to take them over to Lindy with some soup for dinner."

Taking the flowers, I followed her back into the kitchen. "What else can I help you with today?" I asked as I carried the flowers to the sink.

"I usually take care of Judge's room on Mondays," she said as she started making a list. "You know he's not untidy, but the shower will need a good scrub. He doesn't like anyone else in there or his office, but I'm sure he won't mind you changing the sheets and cleaning the bathroom."

"I do mind," he announced as he entered.

My eyes flickered over to him, and I tried not to lick my lips at how good he looked in a suit. Not even half an hour ago, I'd left him naked in his bed. The sight of him struggling to catch his breath while he lay on his back, his cock still covered in a mixture of our releases, had nearly tempted me to crawl back in beside him.

It was a good thing I'd started on the pill when I'd first gotten to college. Between the stress of school and missing my

life back in Virginia, my periods had begun to get the best of me. After the second month of cramps so bad I could barely drag myself to class, I'd seen the doctor and gotten on birth control in hopes of helping. Thankfully, it had, and now we were covered.

“Oh?” Mom lifted her gaze from her list. “Ellianna is just as capable of cleaning and being discreet as I am, Judge. And you don't like when any of the other girls go into your room or office.”

“My office doesn't need anything done to it,” he said, crossing to the coffeepot and pouring himself a mug.

It was a chore to keep my head down and not tremble when he brushed against me as he walked past me to the table where his breakfast was waiting. He picked up a bagel, layered on a few slices of turkey bacon, which he made a face at, and then added a drizzle of sriracha. “I'm running late.”

“Will you be eating dinner at home?” Mom asked with concern. “Or will you be making other arrangements?”

“I'll let you know,” he told her, sounding distracted.

I tightened my fingers around the stem of a rose, only to yelp when a thorn cut into the palm of my hand. Dropping the flower, I lifted my hand to examine the already bleeding wound. Judge grabbing my wrist startled me. He'd been across the kitchen only moments before, but now, he was bending his head over my hand, his index finger carefully brushing over my palm as he frowned at the injury.

“Mabel, do we have a first aid kit down here?” he called over his shoulder.

“Aren't you late for court?” I reminded him when my mother walked out of the room to grab the kit from the

mudroom.

His brown eyes were glassy when he met my gaze. “Does it hurt?”

“I’m fine, Judge.” I tried to pull my hand away, but he only tightened his fingers around my wrist.

Turning on the faucet, he guided my hand under the water and gently washed the wound. “I don’t want you cleaning today. It will irritate the cut.”

“I have gloves I can wear,” I argued.

“Mabel, Elli isn’t to clean today,” he announced as my mother reentered the kitchen. “If the other two girls can’t handle the load, then we should hire a few more.”

“I’m here to work,” I gritted out, trying not to whine when he swiped an alcohol pad over my hand.

Bending his head again, he blew on the sting. “If you want to work so badly, come to the office and intern with my clerk. It will be more useful for your education, and you can put it on your law school applications.”

“Great idea!” Mom gushed before I could turn down the offer.

Extracting a bandage from the box, she handed it to Judge so he could put it on me after smearing a little ointment on the pad. “Honey, I have the house covered even with Patricia on vacation. To be honest, I didn’t really need your help this summer. I was just looking for an excuse to have you come home. I’ve missed you so much.”

“Mom—”

“Don’t argue with your mother,” Judge admonished, smoothing his thumb over the adhesive to make sure it was

secure. I tried not to notice when his touch lingered. “Get changed and come to my office. I’ll let my staff know to expect you. At lunch, I will get you settled.”

“Fine,” I huffed.

“Don’t be so ungrateful, Ellianna,” my mom chided. “This is a great opportunity. “

Judge smirked down at me. Seeing the predatory gleam in his eyes, I tried not to shiver. “I’ll send my driver back to pick you up.”

CHAPTER 23

JUDGE

“OBJECTION,” THE PROSECUTOR SAID, GETTING TO HER FEET.
“Leading the witness.”

Inhaling slowly, I tried to hide my irritation that I still had half an hour until lunch. I’d had to go straight into court as soon as I got to work. I had a strict no-phones policy in my courtroom, so I couldn’t just pull mine out and text Ellianna to see if she’d gotten to my office yet and was settling in.

That was the fifth objection in as many minutes, and rightfully so. They weren’t novices, but some judges would let a lawyer get away with certain things if they played dumb. I wasn’t one of them.

“Sustained,” I gritted out, telegraphing my dissatisfaction with a look at the defense counselor.

“But, Your Honor—” The man tried to argue at my ruling.

“Sustained,” I repeated, cutting him off before he could make some kind of stupid excuse and piss me off. Sometimes it was work to remain impartial, but I did it. No one could question my judgments, even if they’d tried on appeal plenty of times. I’d never had a ruling overturned. “Next question.”

Ten questions, three more objections, and thirty-six minutes later, I called recess for lunch and stood. Without

waiting for my bailiff, I left the courtroom through my private door. Trying not to sprint down the corridor to my office, I kept my strides even until I reached the door.

Walking in, I found my receptionist behind her desk and my assistant standing at his desk. Ellianna sat in his chair, her focus on the laptop screen in front of her while William stood behind her.

Her hair was down and flowing around her shoulders. From what little I could see of her outfit, she'd changed out of that damned uniform and now wore a red V-neck top beneath a black blazer. Other than the glitter of the diamond studs in her ears, she didn't wear any other jewelry. My gaze went to her throat and lingered. Offering her the internship had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. I could barely stomach the thought of going to work while she stayed at home, probably cleaning, even though I'd told her not to.

It was a stupid idea because I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep my hands to myself during working hours. But I'd be damned if I regretted it. I was already looking forward to all the breaks both the prosecution and defense would request throughout the day.

William was a great assistant. He'd worked for me since becoming a paralegal four years before. I'd never had any issues with him, but right then, he was standing far too close to my Elli, and I considered firing him on the spot.

Or tearing out his throat.

Reining in my emotions, I took the stack of messages my receptionist lifted toward me as I neared.

"Lunch here yet?" I asked Petra, flipping through each message without actually seeing any of them.

“Already on your desk, sir,” she assured me, seeming to sense my growing mood.

“Good. Ellianna, my office,” I barked. “Now.”

I heard a soft huff behind me. “I’ll be right back, William.”

“You two take your lunch,” I advised my receptionist and assistant, glancing briefly at both so they didn’t misunderstand which of them I was speaking to.

“I’ll wait for you, Elli,” William said, giving Ellianna a smile. “I’ll treat you to a pretzel, and we can look over these files while we enjoy the sunshine.”

My fingers tightened around the knob until I heard it protest. “She’s going to be a while,” I informed him through clenched teeth. “Don’t bother waiting. I’ll make sure *Ellianna* gets fed.”

“Judge,” she muttered beside me, her voice strained. She definitely felt my mood shifting, but whether she was trying to soothe or warn me, I didn’t know.

William saw the building rage in my face and gulped. “Right. See you after lunch, Ellianna.”

Taking her by the elbow, I pulled her farther into the room before slamming the door shut behind me. My eyes ate up the sight of her knee-length black skirt that matched her blazer. Simple, but sexy as hell. And then there were the shoes.

Fuck.

Breathing heavily, I stared down at the heels she wore. “Panties off.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

Fighting my hunger, I took a step toward her. “I’m fucking starving, Elli.”

Tilting her head so she could still meet my gaze, she pointed toward my desk, not backing away. “Petra got your lunch. It’s a chicken bacon ranch wrap. Don’t grumble at her because it’s not that greasy steak sandwich that she said you normally want. If I’m going to intern here, I can’t let you break my mom’s heart by eating like crap.”

“I don’t care about the sandwich.” I took another step forward, slowly erasing the distance between us. “Panties. Off.”

“But…” She swallowed nervously and glanced at the door. “We’re at work.”

“You weren’t so worried about getting caught on the plane last night.”

Pink filled her cheeks, but she glared up at me, one hip popping with sass. It only made me want to taste her more. “I was kind of lost in the moment.”

“Trust me, baby. You’re not going to care in about twenty seconds. Panties. Now. I’m not going to tell you again.”

“N-no.” She stubbornly lifted her chin. “I came here to work. If you only offered me an internship because you expect me to have sex with you in your office, then I’m going to go home and work there.”

I wrapped my hand around her throat, earning me a breathy little moan that she couldn’t hide any more than the flare of need I saw in her beautiful eyes. “I offered the internship because I know how capable you are. Getting to taste you throughout the day is just a bonus.” Backing her up, I stopped only when her hip brushed the desk. “Turn around.”

“Judge...” She might have sounded hesitant, but she still did as I instructed.

“You’re not being my good girl right now, Elli,” I scolded against her ear as I bent to pull her skirt up over her hips. “I’m going to have to do something about that.”

“Wh-what?” Her need bled into her voice, making her breath catch. “What will you do?”

Releasing her throat made her whine in protest, but I needed both hands. Jerking her panties down to her knees, I pushed on her shoulders, bending her forward. Looking down at her ass on full display nearly had me shooting off in my pants while I still had my robes on.

Shrugging the damned thing off, I let it fall to the floor before putting my handprint on her perfect ass.

She gasped at the sting. “Judge!”

“That’s not my name,” I growled, smacking her ass again, pleased at the slight jiggle I was treated to.

“Zachary,” she moaned.

“I told you to take your panties off, and you didn’t listen.” One more smack landed, the sound making my cock leak. I rubbed away the sting before trailing my fingers lower. She was already dripping honey. Feeling how turned on she was, I dropped to my knees behind her and started drinking up all her sweetness.

“Oh... *Oh!*” She pushed back against my face. “Zachary.”

“Are you going to be my good girl now, Elli?” I nipped at her swollen clit.

“Y-yes,” she whimpered.

I bit a little harder and felt her pussy contract. “You don’t sound sure, baby. I’ll ask again.” I rimmed her asshole with my thumb, making her whine in shocked delight. I slowly pushed it inside her. “Are you going to be my good girl?”

“Yes!” she cried. “Yes, I’ll be a good girl.”

“*My good girl.*”

“Your good girl,” she affirmed with a moan. “Only yours, Zachary.”

Tearing her panties completely off, I got to my feet and kicked her legs apart as I undid my zipper. Taking out my cock, I notched it to her opening, but I paused, wanting to watch as I sank into her from behind. While I slowly filled her pussy, I pushed my thumb back into her rear hole. Her hands clutched at my desk, disrupting papers and the mouse to my computer.

My balls were so tight, I knew it would be over soon. When I’d stopped fighting for control where she was concerned, I’d been unable to hold back anything. I’d already proven she made me a one-pump chump. But I’d be damned if I spilled before she got off.

With just the tip in her, I played with her virgin hole, listening for any changes in her breathing to tell me if she liked what I was doing. The way her pussy clenched and tried to suck my cock deeper told me just how much. Groaning, I bent over her back and sank deeper.

Reaching around her, I wrapped my hand around her throat and started thrusting. “Can’t get enough,” I growled in her ear. “You’re dangerous, my Elli. And you don’t even fucking know it.”

CHAPTER 24

ELLIANNA

TRYING TO KEEP MY ATTENTION ON THE BRIEFS NEEDING TO BE sorted by case that were piled on William's desk—and not on the delicious sting that remained on my ass—I flipped through the latest stack of motions for a case that was supposed to take place in a few weeks. When I saw something that needed immediate action, I set it aside so William could give anything time-sensitive to Judge when he returned from court for the day.

“You seem restless, dear,” Petra commented from behind her desk.

I lifted my head from my task, offering her a smile. Petra had worked for Judge since he'd taken the bench. She was a barracuda when she needed to be—but a marshmallow for the most part. I adored her. “Sorry, am I distracting you?”

“Not at all. I just thought maybe you might need to stretch your legs, expend any built-up energy.”

I tried not to let my cheeks heat as I once again hoped that she and William had already left before Judge had made me scream in his office at lunch. But if she had heard me coming hard and loud, she didn't let on.

“That's the last batch of briefs we've gotten today. William is still in the law library doing some deeper research on one of

the motions already filed. Some of those motions are marked urgent. Why don't you walk them over to the courtroom and wait for Judge to finish up for the day so he can decide if anything in there requires an emergency hearing?"

A glance at the time told me that court would be adjourned for the day soon. Feeling a sudden thrill at getting a chance to see Judge in action, I took the excuse that Petra offered and picked up the stack of motions that were marked "urgent" in red. I'd seen him only two hours before.

He'd called a thirty-minute recess and had come back to the office. I'd taken one look at his heaving chest and known he was hungry again. Standing there in his judge's robes, he should not have looked like a damn god. They were bulky, baggy, and completely unisex. Yet, I thought he was even sexier in them. I'd gotten a thrill out of the power that one item of clothing represented.

He'd barked an order for William to do some in-depth research on a brief that was supposed to be discussed the following morning and then sent Petra out for coffee at the bakery several blocks over. I'd watched as the door closed behind the receptionist before standing and walking into his chambers.

His door had barely closed behind him before he'd picked me up and carried me to his desk, where he'd spread me open and had his afternoon snack.

It was hard to believe I'd been a virgin only two days ago. Now, I couldn't get enough. What was even harder to believe was how insatiable Judge was. He didn't seem to be able to last a few hours without needing his taste of me. And I would have been lying if I said I wasn't enjoying every minute of it.

As I walked down the corridor toward Judge's courtroom, I lifted a hand to touch my throat. I had a few tender spots from where he'd grabbed my neck the last time. It didn't hurt, but it was just enough to remind me of what had happened. I shivered when I cupped my hand around my throat the way he did. My palm wasn't as big and my fingers were much smaller, but I couldn't contain the dampness between my legs from the rush of memories the small contact produced.

A bailiff outside the courtroom stopped me at the double doors. I dropped my hand from my throat to flash him the badge I'd gotten that morning, showing that I worked for Judge Zachary Bennet.

He eyed it for a moment before stepping aside. "Keep your phone on silent, and don't speak to anyone. Judge has a strict policy."

I smiled. "I know."

Stepping into the room, I took the first open seat at the back before allowing myself to look toward the front of the room. When I did, I had to restrain a gasp of wonder when I found his eyes drilling into me. All I could do was remember both encounters in his office—and how he hadn't taken off his robes while he'd had me spread open on his desk.

Biting my lip, I arranged the stack of documents on my lap to keep from doing something dorky—like wave at him.

"Your Honor, I think it would be a good idea to end here and start fresh tomorrow. Emotions seem to be high at the moment."

Recognizing the voice, I shifted my head until I found the speaker. All I saw was long dark hair that fell in waves down a slender back and ended right above an ass that her skirt

couldn't hide was a dream. Damn, I would have killed for an ass like that.

When she shifted, I saw her face in profile, and my fingers tightened around the edges of the papers.

What the fuck?

Slowly sucking in a deep breath to tamp down the sudden shot of jealousy that hit me with the force of a tsunami, I turned my gaze back on Judge, to find him still looking at me.

“Your Honor?” Rita spoke hesitantly when he didn't immediately give a ruling. He was still watching me, and I lifted my chin, hating that I was jealous but wanting him to know how I was feeling.

I'd forgotten all about Rita and her visit to Judge's office after hours the week before. More like, I'd refused to think about it and had buried the pain of seeing her in his chambers. Even an idiot would have known what was going to happen between them that night. And he'd come home late every night the previous week.

All too aware of how insatiable he was, I shouldn't have been surprised.

But I'd thought it was just with me.

Stupid, Elli.

“Judge Bennet?” Rita said a little louder.

A smirk teased at his lips, and I was so tempted to flip him off. As if he could read my mind, he grinned and finally focused on the prosecutor. “I agree. We all need a break after the high emotions of the last few hours. We're in recess until ten tomorrow morning.”

Pounding his gavel, he dropped it and gave instructions for the jury to leave first. A bailiff called, "All rise," and I stood along with everyone else as the twelve men and women filed out a side door. Judge was still grinning, and I wanted to knock it off his handsome face.

Catching my gaze again, he inclined his head toward the door. For a few seconds, I thought about ignoring the silent command. But the briefs I held reminded me I had a job to do, and I gave a quick nod before exiting out the same door I'd come through only minutes before.

Walking around to his private door, I had to wait over five minutes before he exited. His grin was gone, replaced by frustration, but when he saw me, the grumpy frown melted away. "Miss Chambers," he greeted, an edge to his voice that made me have to fight another shiver of pleasure.

"Judge Bennet." I held out the motions without meeting his eyes. I was equal parts angry and hurt, but I could still be professional, damn it. "These require your immediate attention. Petra thought you would want to see them as soon as court was adjourned."

He took the documents without looking at them. "Give me your eyes, Elli," he commanded.

I flicked them to his face and instantly looked away. "If you don't require anything else today, I'll be going."

"I require everything where you're concerned, Elli." With his index finger under my chin, he gently tipped my head up. "Why are you upset?"

I jerked my head away and took two steps back. "Don't patronize me. You know why." Down the corridor, the others were exiting the courtroom. Catching sight of the busy,

beautiful prosecutor who turned in our direction, I took another step back. “I won’t take up any more of your time, Judge. Since you were unsure if you would be home for dinner, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Elli.” His tone was full of warnings that I chose to ignore. When I turned to walk away, he grabbed my elbow, stopping me from taking another step. He lowered his head until I could feel the heat of his breath on my cheek. “I know what you’re thinking, but it didn’t happen.”

My laugh was full of skepticism. “Okay.”

“I’m not saying it’s never happened,” he explained. “But not last week. After you showed up, and she hit on you, I couldn’t see straight. I sent her away.”

I tugged on my arm. “You don’t owe me an explanation, Judge. We weren’t together.” The sound of heels clicking on the floor told me Rita was getting closer. I tilted my head to the side, trying to drive home the truth of my words for myself more than him. “And we haven’t agreed to be exclusive, so if your plan was to fuck her in your office tonight, then you go right ahead and do whatever you want.”

His brown eyes darkened until they were almost black. I tried not to gulp at the fire I saw banked there. I knew that look all too well. He used to get it when he was in the Underground’s cage, when he’d taken a few painful punches and his temper was about to explode.

“No, we weren’t together then,” he agreed, his voice lowering, turning...feral. “But we sure as fuck are exclusive now. You’re mine, Elli.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do you understand the definition of ‘exclusive,’ Judge? Both parties have to be in agreement not to

see other people. Key word is *both*.”

“I know what it means, damn it.”

“Judge Bennet,” Rita called when she was about twenty feet away. “Is now a good time to discuss the motion to...?” She trailed off when she sensed the tension between the two of us. “I apologize, sir. I didn’t realize this was a personal moment.”

Putting on a tight smile, I turned to face her. “It’s not,” I assured her. “He’s happy to discuss whatever you need to. Excuse me.”

I saw a flicker of amusement on her face. “A pleasure seeing you again, Ellianna.”

“Rita,” I gritted out through clenched teeth. Pulling my arm free of Judge’s hold, I walked back toward his office.

“Do not leave yet,” he called after me.

For the second time that afternoon, I was tempted to flip him off and had to fist my hands at my sides to restrain the urge. Professional, I reminded myself as I stomped away. When I was at work, I would be a goddamned professional.

CHAPTER 25

ELLIANNA

MY MOM WASN'T HOME WHEN I RETURNED. SHE'D TEXTED ME earlier to remind me she was going to be at Miss Lindy's all evening. There was a note on the fridge asking me to make sure Judge ate if he came home. The "if" was underlined three times to emphasize it.

Balling up the little Post-it, I threw it in the trash. I doubted he would be home for dinner. Especially if Miss Big-Boobs Prosecutor was keeping him company. His insatiable appetite at lunch and the afternoon recess made more sense now. If he'd been watching her in court all day, no wonder he was so horny.

I'd just been a convenient wet hole for him.

Disgusted with myself, I went upstairs to shower. Thankfully, I had been able to clean up in Judge's private bathroom after both times earlier in the day so I didn't smell like come all afternoon. He'd seemed reluctant to let me wash away his scent, but I hadn't wanted to be sticky while I was working. And I wasn't sure I could look at Petra and William if I had their boss's jizz leaking out of me.

After my shower, I got to work unpacking my things. My clothes were a wrinkled mess, and I would need to steam the outfit I wanted to wear the next day. It took over an hour to get

everything hung back up before I moved to the other things in my case.

To my surprise, nothing was broken. I put everything back where I'd had it before, some of the items having been in certain spots for over a decade.

By the time I was finished, my stomach was complaining, and I grudgingly went downstairs to find something to eat. I found a container of salad already in the fridge. Spotting some leftover salmon, I chopped it up and added it to the top of my salad. Discovering a zesty vinaigrette that Mom must have made for herself earlier, I drizzled it on top of the food and had a meal ready to go in under a minute.

Even as big as the house was, I could sense no one else was home. My heart dropped, wondering where Judge was—and with whom. Rolling my eyes at myself, I picked up my salad bowl and took it up to my room.

As I flopped down on my bed with one leg tucked beneath me, my phone got a text alert. More concerned about food than who was messaging me, I took a bite and chewed slowly. I already knew who it was, and I knew it would drive him crazy if I took my time replying.

I'd never denied that I was petty.

And maybe I wanted him to punish me again for not being a good girl.

My phone buzzed a few more times, and I finally picked it up, but instead of looking at the messages, I opened my emails and cleaned out my inbox. There was one from Brent Tabor, informing me that some additional funds from one of my “scholarships” had been “underpaid” and were now available to me.

Considering Judge had torn him a new asshole the previous Saturday, the man had worked quickly to return the money he must have been pocketing. I didn't even look at the account amount. I wasn't going to touch it—now or in the future. No matter what happened between Judge and me going forward, I wasn't going to let him pay my way.

Not one to just sit around when a to-do list was piling up, I got to work on deciding what to do next. With my grades, I was confident that the local university would accept me. I wasn't mentally ready to apply to Georgetown, and it would make more financial sense to stay close.

Thankfully, my laptop was unharmed from being stuffed in my larger luggage, so I dug it out and pulled up the website. A few clicks and I was able to apply to the school, for scholarships, and additional financial aid.

While I was busy, I'd ignored my phone when it had been blasted with texts and incoming calls. I'd gotten annoyed with it at one point and turned off the ringer. Closing my laptop, I picked up my cell and nearly groaned when I saw the ten missed calls and the dozens of texts.

“Oops,” I muttered. Seeing how worried Judge appeared from the many messages, I shrugged. “Guess you should come home and check on me then, huh?” I said to myself as I carried my empty bowl down to the kitchen.

The screen lit up with another call. Deciding to put him out of his misery, I lifted it to my ear as I rinsed my dishes. “Hello?”

“You better be glad Tony told me he drove you home,” he growled. “And that I saw you enter the house safely from the security cameras.”

Turning off the faucet, I leaned back against the sink. “You realize I lived in a city five times bigger than this small town all on my own for three years, right? I took public transportation or walked everywhere. There were maybe five people I spoke to on a regular basis. Were you worried about me then? No,” I answered before he could run his mouth. “Of course you weren’t. Maybe don’t give yourself a stroke concerning yourself with how I got back to this house in a town where I’m familiar with about eighty percent of the residents.”

“You must have really liked that spanking you got earlier, because you’re going to get one when I get home, my Elli,” he warned.

My thighs pressed together without my permission, my clit already pulsing. “Pass.”

“I’m leaving the courthouse now,” he spoke as if I hadn’t commented. “Have you eaten dinner?”

“Have you?” I countered, wondering if he’d had Rita for dessert.

“We had an emergency hearing. Petra ordered me something before she left for the evening, and I ate while I heard the defense counsel’s arguments.”

I grimaced. “Was it a heart attack in a sack?”

“No, apparently someone is concerned about my eating habits, so I had some kind of chicken pesto sandwich and a salad.” I thought I heard a hint of a smile in his voice, but if so, it disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared when he repeated, “Did you eat?”

“What if I didn’t?” I challenged, knowing I sounded childish but unable to stop myself for some reason I didn’t

want to explore too closely.

“Then I’ll have to feed you,” he answered calmly. “Answer me.”

“I already ate,” I mumbled. When he remained silent, as if waiting for me to continue, I blew out a long sigh. “Salad with some baked salmon. My mom must have had some for lunch because there were leftovers in the fridge.”

“Good girl.”

Damn it, why did that make me wet?

“I’ll have my driver stop by the bakery,” he announced. “I’ll pick you up some dessert. Any requests?”

His cock sounded like a nice treat, but I pressed my lips together to keep from telling him that. “Surprise me,” I said once I trusted myself to speak.

“See you soon, my Elli.”

CHAPTER 26

JUDGE

MY PLANS HAD BEEN DELAYED FOR THE EVENING WITH THE emergency hearing to discuss an urgent motion, but a call ensured everything was still ready when I had Tony stop. Once I was done, I picked up a few boxes from the bakery, figuring whatever Ellianna didn't eat we could have for breakfast or Mabel could share with Miss Lindy.

Stepping out of the back of the town car, I reached back in for the boxes and gave Tony a nod.

“See you in the morning, boss,” he said. “Will Elli be—”

“Ellianna,” I corrected, cutting him off.

He straightened his shoulders and turned his head forward, jaw tensing. “Will Ellianna be joining you?”

“Yes,” I bit out. “Expect her every day I work.”

“Yes, boss.”

Walking into the kitchen, I set the pastry boxes on the island, but Ellianna was nowhere to be seen. Taking the top box, I walked upstairs, expecting her to be in our room. It had been mine since birth. When my father died, I could have taken the primary suite on the other side of the house, but I had my reasons. One being I didn't like the thought of

sleeping on the other side of the house when Lyla and Elli were in this wing.

Finding the bedroom empty, I dropped the box on the bed and shrugged off my suit jacket. As I walked down the hall to the next room, I rolled my sleeves up to my elbows. Without bothering to knock, I pushed open the door and crossed to the bed, where Ellianna was tucked under the covers, her back propped against a pile of pillows while she channel-surfed.

“Where’s dessert?” she sassed without looking away from the screen.

I didn’t give her the pleasure of arguing. Instead, I lifted her out of the bed and tossed her over my shoulder. Finding her missing her pajama bottoms, I jerked her panties down enough and slapped my hand over her ass. Her yelp brought a grin to my face as I carried her out of the room.

By the time I got to the door, she had recovered enough to start running her mouth again. “You can’t just come into my room and snatch me out of bed. I was comfortable. And what if my mom were here?”

“I know Mabel is at Miss Lindy’s house,” I told her as I entered our room and kicked the door shut behind us. “And if you wanted to remain comfortable, you should have snuggled in the correct bed.”

“I’m tired,” she complained. “I was going to go to sleep after you brought me a cupcake.”

“Who said I brought you a cupcake?” I pulled the covers back on her side of the bed and placed her against the pillow. When I stepped back, she was pouting. “You told me to surprise you.”

“And that didn’t include cupcakes?”

Bending, I touched my lips to the center of her forehead. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see.” Turning away, I started unbuttoning my shirt. Pulling it free from my pants, I picked up the box on the end of the bed and returned to her.

“That box isn’t big enough for a cupcake,” she complained.

“So observant,” I teased.

“Judge!”

My fingers tightened around the jewelry box. “In this room, you call me Zachary.” Turning the box around so it was facing her, I opened the top. “Or ‘Sir.’”

Her eyes widened, but she couldn’t hide the flicker of anticipation I saw in those light-blue depths. “Sir?” she breathed, licking her bottom lip without bothering to look down at what I was holding.

Taking out the thin platinum choker, I tossed the box aside and sat on the edge of the bed. I caressed my fingers over her neck, noticing the faint bruise on her skin from where I’d lost control at lunch. As long as her hair was down, no one would see the mark I’d left behind.

Leaning in, I kissed her there. “When my hand isn’t around this pretty throat, I can’t think straight,” I husked at her ear. “I need something to remind us both of who you belong to, my Elli.”

Feeling her pulse increase, I smiled and pulled back so I could gather her hair to one side. I kissed her exposed neck. Hearing the hitch in her breathing never failed to get me hard. Nuzzling her with my nose, I skimmed my lips up to her ear. She clutched at my shirt, a sweet little mewling sound reaching my ears.

Securing the jewelry in place, I pulled back to admire her graceful neck and the platinum collar. Now that I didn't have to fight for control, I was taking everything I wanted. Marking her was the next step. I'd never wanted to collar anyone before, but I'd been struggling with that need for years where Ellianna was concerned. Discretion was key, but I couldn't function without her branded as mine.

The O-ring sat on the perfect spot of her throat, drawing my attention when she swallowed. Inside the O were three diamonds that to me represented everything I wanted the choker to say.

She was loved.

She was collared.

She was owned.

All by me.

The style was elegant enough that she could wear it with any outfit. Not just anyone would recognize what the piece of jewelry meant, but those who did would immediately understand that Ellianna was off-limits.

Brushing my thumb over the O, I took pleasure seeing the metal against her delicate skin.

“What's this?” she asked softly, her fingers touching either side of the O-ring.

“Your collar.”

Her mouth fell open slightly. “A collar?” I nodded. Confusion pulled at her brows for a moment before she whispered, “As in...I'm your sub?”

“You are mine, yes.”

She dropped her hands, her gaze meeting mine. “I don’t understand. I don’t...know anything about that kind of... thing.”

“I want to be the one who takes care of you, Elli. Protect you, guide you. Fix all your problems. Give you the life you deserve.” I slowly kissed up her throat, savoring each taste. Feeling her tremble, I licked over her fluttering pulse. “And you will be my good girl.”

CHAPTER 27

JUDGE

ALL DAY, I'D BEEN STARVING FOR HER.

During court, it was a struggle to concentrate because all I could think about was getting back to my chambers and sinking into her again and again. I'd been tempted to rip the head off the defense counsel because they seemed so comically inept and were prolonging the day, keeping me from returning to my Elli.

Pressing another kiss to her throat, I stood.

To give her room to breathe, think...choose.

Ellianna touched the choker again, her eyes dazed. "But why?"

"Why what, baby?"

She sighed and dropped her hand. "Why me? You had Rita in your office just last week. Isn't she more...the type?"

"Rita was a convenient fuck," I admitted. "We had a mutually beneficial understanding. She didn't want a commitment any more than I did. Relationships with men aren't her thing. But I didn't fuck her last week, Elli."

Her choker moved when she swallowed hard. "You would have if I hadn't shown up."

“Probably,” I agreed. She flinched, but I didn’t want to lie. This relationship wouldn’t work if we weren’t honest with each other.

Georgetown whispered through my mind, but I quickly squashed the thought. That was the past. Moving forward, we would have nothing but honesty.

“Which is why I don’t understand, Judge.” I shot her a glare, and she squirmed against the sheets. “Zachary, I don’t know why you want me, when you have her to fulfill your needs.”

“She doesn’t fulfill *anything*. She was a body to get off in, nothing more. For years, you have been the only one I’ve wanted. But I told myself I couldn’t have you. You were too young. Too innocent. What I wanted with you would scare you. Those are the excuses I tried to feed myself, Elli. I was still sure that I had to fight what I craved—still crave—with you up until Saturday night.”

“But... I...” She trailed off, seeming lost for words.

“I’ve never wanted to collar anyone before. But with you, everything is different. You will be my first, my only.”

Tears filled her eyes. When she blinked, several spilled over her lashes and down her cheeks. “I want that. To be your only.”

Groaning, I dropped back down beside her. Cupping her face in both hands, I kissed her brow. “You always have been, baby.”

She leaned into my touch. “I...I want this,” she murmured, pink filling her cheeks. “But I don’t know how this kind of thing works. Are there rules? Is this a Christian/Ana relationship? Is it even a relationship?”

“I don’t know who Christian and Ana are, but this is definitely a relationship, Elli.”

Her laugh never failed to make me react. I fucking loved that sound. “You know, *Fifty Shades*?” I must have shown my confusion, because she only laughed harder. “Those movies you refused to let Lyla and me watch when we were teenagers.”

“The porn movie?”

“Oh my God,” she giggled. “You still have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Because it’s just a movie.”

“The books came first.” I narrowed my eyes on her, and she batted her lashes at me innocently. “What? I never read them. I was a good girl.”

“Which means Lyla did?” Her silence was more of a response than if she’d tried to lie. “I’m going to pretend we never had a discussion about my sister watching abuse masquerading as BDSM.”

“But that’s what this is?” she asked, her amusement fading into nervous curiosity once more. “BDSM?”

“We are a Dom and sub,” I explained, unable to stop myself from brushing my thumb over the O-ring. “There might be times when we explore the BD, bondage and discipline, if that’s something you’re comfortable with. But there will never be any SM.” She couldn’t mask her relief. “Baby, my only goal is to bring you pleasure. I’m going to push your limits, just like today, but I will never hurt you.”

“I liked today,” she admitted softly, her blush deepening.

“Which part?”

Her pulse quickened under my fingers. “All of it.”

“Including the discipline?” She nodded. “Use your words, Elli.”

Her tongue skimmed over her bottom lip. “I loved the discipline.”

“And you choose this?” I needed to hear her answer. “Will you be mine?”

“But you said I was already yours,” she whispered, pushing me back to the edge, a trace of disappointment in her voice.

“You always have a choice, baby.”

And I needed her to fucking choose me.

“Yes,” she husked. “I want this. All of it.”

I had to stop myself from wrapping my hand around her throat. *Not yet.* “You’re sure? Once you agree, I won’t let you leave me, Elli.”

“I’ve never wanted to leave you anyway.”

Fuck.

There was no containing me after that sweet confession. It had nearly killed me when I’d sent her to school on the other side of the country. I’d only done it for her. Everything had been for her own good. But there was no way I could let her go now.

If she wanted Georgetown, I would buy the whole fucking university and set it down in the backyard.

A car.

A new house.

Her own fucking law firm?

It was hers.

Everything she wanted, I would give her. No questions asked.

All she had to do was be my good girl.

Forever.

“I’m going to take you hard and fast this first time, baby,” I warned, already ripping her panties away from her soaked pussy. I brushed my knuckles over her drenched folds, causing her to whimper.

When I jerked her legs down the bed, she spread her thighs wide. “Please, Zachary. I need you.”

Closing my eyes, I tried to fight back the demon on my shoulder telling me to wreck her. She begged so prettily, it was hard to resist. Clenching my jaw, I kicked off my shoes and pants. Getting on my knees between her legs, I leaned back to savor the sight of her. In my bed.

Wet and ready for me. Her mouth slightly open as she panted. Those beautiful eyes pleading for me to make her feel good.

“Pull me out,” I commanded.

One silky hand slid inside my boxer briefs. As soon as her fingers wrapped around my shaft, I had to bite back a shout, come already dripping from the tip.

“Tomorrow at lunchtime, you are going to suck my cock. You’re going to lock the door to my chambers and crawl to me.” I could already picture it. *Fuck!* “You will slowly undo my slacks and carefully pull my dick free, Elli. And then

you're going to lick it like a Bomb Pop before you stretch those sweet lips around the tip."

Her breath was coming in choppy little gasps as she visualized the mental picture I painted for her. "I've dreamed of doing that. I can't wait to taste you, Zachary. Please let me suck your cock now."

"No, sweetheart. Not tonight." She pumped me in her fist, and I pulled her hand away. "I need to be inside you too badly, baby."

"But I want it now!"

I didn't know if I wanted to laugh or spank her cunt. I loved how my innocent Elli had gone from Miss Prim and Proper to a spoiled little brat. It was such an effortless switch. Because she knew she was safe with me to be who she truly was behind closed doors. Safe to push my buttons and know I would discipline her, guide her—protect and love her.

Always.

CHAPTER 28

ELLIANNA

HE WRAPPED HIS HAND AROUND MY THROAT, AND I NEARLY sobbed from how good it felt. “I told you, not tonight, my Elli. You’re going to wait until tomorrow.”

“Fine,” I muttered petulantly, rolling my eyes.

He thrust three fingers into my core. Crying out, I clutched at his wrist, my hips already lifting off the bed, wanting him deeper. Three fingers weren’t nearly enough to fill the ache building. Not when I knew how thick his cock was.

“What was that?” he asked, his eyes narrowed on me as he curled his fingers inside me.

“Zachary.”

He pressed his thumb down on my clit, causing fireworks to explode behind my eyes. “What was that, sweetheart? I didn’t hear you.”

“O-okay,” I whined. “I’m sorry. Please, can I have your cock now?” Looking up at him through my lashes, I decided to see how close he truly was to the edge. “Please...Sir.”

“Goddamn it, Elli!” he roared.

I barely had time to notice his fingers were gone before he slammed into me. My scream was loud enough to be heard

throughout the entire mansion. I felt stretched, overflowing—deliciously—full.

It was too much. Too much. Too much! But not enough.

“Fuck, baby,” Judge groaned in my ear as his hips jackhammered into me. “Gonna have to get this room soundproofed. The office, too. Can’t have anyone else hearing how pretty you scream for me.”

As soon as he said “pretty,” I came. He bellowed when I began to clench around his shaft. I couldn’t stop. It was too intense. My stomach muscles began to cramp, but not even that pain could pull me back completely from the deliriously sinful pleasure of my orgasm...

A long time later, I finally lifted my lashes to find Judge leaning over me on his elbows. Sweat was cooling on his skin and he was still struggling to catch his breath, but all he was doing was watching me.

“What?” I croaked out, my throat feeling like it was on fire. I must have been louder than I thought.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Elli.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, but I was distracted when I felt something sticky on my fingertips. Frowning, I pulled my hand away from where it was still pressed to his damp back and found smears of blood.

“Oh my God!” I whispered in horror. “What did I do?”

He released a thick laugh. “You tore me up, baby. And I fucking loved it.”



STEPPING OUT OF THE BEDROOM, I KEPT MY HEAD DOWN. I'D heard one of the part-time housekeepers go into one of the other rooms a few minutes before. I might have been listening at the door to make sure no one was out there—namely, my mom.

After waiting for the sound of a door to close, I'd poked my head out and rushed to my room dressed in the sleep shirt I'd been wearing the night before when Judge nabbed me from my bed. I couldn't even find my ruined panties. Since Judge had already left for his early morning motion hearing before his trial began at ten, I couldn't exactly ask him if he'd seen the little scrap of cotton he'd basically ripped off me.

Hoping he'd simply tossed them in the trash and my mom didn't find them, I rushed through a shower before putting on a little makeup and dressing quickly. Judge had woken me on his way out earlier with a kiss and to tell me his driver would be back to get me. But for some reason, I wasn't a fan of Tony. He was a new-to-me member of the security team. Everyone else, I was familiar and comfortable with. Tony just gave me weird vibes.

Since Lyla's car had been returned the previous day, I snatched the keys on my way through the kitchen. My mom was absent, but I found another note, letting me know she was back at Miss Lindy's house because her friend had a rough night.

Concerned, I texted her to check in before starting the car. As soon as I was out of the garage, I hit the button to lower the top on the convertible. It was a beautiful day, and I'd put my hair in a ponytail with the plan of feeling the breeze. While I was stopped at a red light, the sun glittering off the platinum around my neck in the mirror caught my attention.

Touching the discreet collar, I smiled at my reflection. I wasn't sure what it was about the lightweight necklace, but the feel of it gave me a boost of confidence I couldn't remember having before.

Walking into the office half an hour earlier than expected, I found Petra and William already busy. "Good morning," I greeted cheerfully.

Petra gave me a warm smile. "Good morning, dear."

William barely lifted his head from his laptop screen. When he did, his gaze paused briefly on my neck. I almost touched the choker, but stopped myself in time, not wanting to draw attention to the necklace. "Morning."

Deciding I didn't care if he knew what the piece of jewelry represented, I jumped straight into work, so engrossed in what I was doing that I didn't realize how much time had passed. The office door nearly slammed open, causing us all to startle.

Judge stormed into the room, his face grim and his hair a mess. "How long have you been here?"

I frowned at the strained demand and glanced at the clock on the wall. "I don't know. Two, maybe two and half hours."

"Didn't I tell you to wait for Tony?" He combed his fingers through his hair in obvious frustration when I just shrugged. "I'm not playing here, Elli. I gave you instructions, and you ignored them."

"I wanted to drive myself," I told him, turning my attention back to the stack of motions needing to be sorted that had already been waiting when I'd arrived.

"You could have at least answered my texts!"

Sighing, I lifted my head again, my nails already drumming on the desk in annoyance. “Since you were supposed to be in court, I didn’t think to check my phone. Which is on silent. Because you don’t like for us to have our ringers on in the office. Remember?”

He stabbed a finger toward me almost accusingly. “You are the exception to the rule. Apparently every fucking one of them. I just spent the last hour trying to get you to answer one goddamn text, little girl! While I was in court.”

I couldn’t help the little thrill it gave me that he was breaking his own rules where I was concerned. “It’s not my fault you were looking at your phone when you should have been paying attention.”

“The fuck it isn’t! I was checking on you. Making sure you got here safely and not lying in a ditch somewhere between here and home. Every unanswered text was another minute I was in agony, imagining something had happened to you.”

Hearing the raggedness in his voice had my throat tightening. His eyes were wild, even more so than when they turned nearly black while he raged out. I pushed back my chair. “I’m sorry, Judge. I’ll leave my ringer on. I promise.”

Movement out of the corner of my eye reminded me that Petra and William were still in the room. Shit.

Muttering a curse, Judge fingered his dark hair again. “Turn it on. Now.”

I picked it up off the desk where it had been lying facedown. Turning the ringer on, I gave him a tiny smile. “All better.”

“Not even close. Grab your shit. You’re going to sit in the gallery where I can have my eyes on you all day.”

CHAPTER 29

JUDGE

BEFORE LUNCH EVEN ROLLED AROUND, RITA WAS ALREADY fuming at the defense attorney's witness. She spent the entire morning grilling them, while I half listened and discreetly watched Ellianna as she sat in the front row of the gallery, quietly working on my own work laptop.

Whenever my Elli lifted her head in interest, I took note of what question Rita had asked. As one of the leading ADAs, she had a brilliant mind. It wouldn't surprise me if she became district attorney one day.

But when she asked a question that should have immediately been objected to, I snapped my gaze over to the defense's table, and my blood pressure instantly shot up. The motherfucker wasn't even paying attention. His chair was half turned toward the gallery, his beady eyes on Ellianna. More precisely, her neck.

Without taking my eyes off the other man, I slammed my gavel down hard enough I was mildly surprised it didn't break off in my hand. The lawyer jumped like someone had fired a gun. Turning his chair completely forward, he adjusted his suit.

"Counselor?" I spoke between clenched teeth.

“Y-yes, Your Honor?” he stuttered before clearing his throat. “Sorry, Your Honor, were you speaking to me?”

“Perhaps you would like to join in at any time here and pay attention to what questions are being asked of your witness? Or is Miss Chambers more interesting than defending the rights of your client?”

“Um, M-Miss Chambers, Your Honor?” he squeaked.

“My lovely intern,” I clarified.

His ears turned red. “She is quite beautiful, Judge.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I reminded myself that killing someone in open court would be too messy to clean up. Too many witnesses, not to mention all the blood—and my Elli didn’t like the sight of blood.

“Judge Bennet,” Rita spoke up, and I lifted my eyes to find her sharing what appeared to be a telepathic conversation with Ellianna. “I think this would be the perfect moment to pause for lunch.”

“Agreed.” I tried not to snarl the word.

I didn’t miss the thankful half smile Ellianna sent Rita, who winked in return. Balling my hands into fists, I excused the jury and had to wait until they had exited before giving everyone else an hour recess.

After the hell of a morning I’d spent worrying about Ellianna when I couldn’t reach her, and then Tony telling me he was still waiting in front of the house for her, I’d thought it was a better idea to have her where I could keep my eyes on her. It had helped me focus easier on the trial, but how helpful was it really if I started popping the heads off both defense and prosecution lawyers during the afternoon session?

Exhaling slowly, I walked as calmly as I could into my office. “Both of you take your lunch,” I told Petra and William as I crossed to the door of my chambers. Trying not to rip the damned thing off its hinges, I waited for Ellianna to proceed inside first.

With my closed laptop held against her chest, she entered silently, head held high. The overhead light glinted off her collar, and I felt some of the jealous rage begin to ebb.

Not enough to keep me from slamming the door.

She didn’t flinch at the loudness. Walking to the desk, she placed the computer down but didn’t turn to face me. Unzipping my robes, I hung them up before crossing to my chair and sitting.

My gaze returned to her. Dressed in another skirt, this one a deep maroon, with a matching top and her hair pulled back in a sleek ponytail, I understood why the defense lawyer had been so besotted.

Just because I understood didn’t stop me from wanting to tear the fucker apart, though.

Cocking her head, she gave me a sweet little smile. “Should I apologize...Sir?”

I didn’t have to see the glimmer in her eyes to know she was playing with me. She already knew how easily I caved when she called me “Sir.” A week before, I would have been sweating bullets that she knew the control she held over me.

Now, I just wanted my fucking taste. I’d gone without since leaving her tucked in our bed earlier that morning. I should have been given a medal for lasting as long as I had without unleashing mayhem upon the world.

“For what, *my Elli?*” I stretched out my legs, enjoying being able to look at her openly.

Her slightly upturned nose flared in pleasure. “I’m unsure...Sir. But you obviously need someone to apologize, and I’m the only one here.”

“I don’t want an apology from you, baby.”

Her chest rose and fell in sexy little pants. “What do you want, then...*Sir?*”

Gripping the arms of my chair to keep from reaching for her, I pushed back from my desk. “I believe I made you a promise last night, sweetheart.”

Without having to be told, she dropped to her knees on the other side of my desk. My fingers bit into the leather of the armrests. I’d get my taste, I assured myself. But first, I’d keep my promise and let her have her own.

Seeing her crawl to me on her hands and knees was more erotic than I’d ever imagined it would be in all the years I’d been playing out the scene in my fantasies. My cock was so hard I knew without a doubt I was going to lose my load after one lick of that sweet mouth.

Reaching me, she ran her hands up my legs, watching me from beneath her golden lashes. I’d have to replace the chair by the end of our lunch hour because I was about to break the armrests.

Her confidence was sexy as hell when she carefully unfastened my belt and then the button on my pants. Slowly, so fucking slowly I nearly busted my nut before she even freed me, she lowered my zipper and reached inside.

My cock sprang out, and she wrapped both hands around the shaft.

“Fuck,” I choked out when she lowered her head and licked up the come that was already spilling from the tip.

“So good.” When she moaned at the taste hitting her tongue, I thrust my hips upward. “I want more.”

I would always give my good girl what she wanted.

CHAPTER 30

ELLIANNA

END OF JULY

PHONE TO MY EAR, I WALKED INTO THE BATHROOM ON MY WAY into the courthouse, a smile already on my face. “Which means everything is set?”

“Absolutely, Miss Chambers,” my adviser confirmed. “Your financial aid has already been verified. We have even secured a teaching assistant position for you in our English department for this coming semester after the stellar recommendations from your previous professors. If I’m being frank, we’re honored to have you attending.”

From one of the stalls, I heard someone unwrapping a tampon and figured I needed to finish this call. “I’m so relieved. Will all the details be in your next email?”

“Correct. I’m about to hit send now. The only other information we will require is if your financial aid needs to be extended to include housing. But,” she laughed like we were old friends, “we’re all aware that it won’t be needed. I mean... you know.”

My smile dropped, along with my stomach. I felt oddly queasy, and my first thought was maybe I’d gotten the stomach bug Josie had had the weekend before when I’d babysat her for Howler. “No, I’m not sure I do know.”

“Well.” Her laugh became strained. “With you living with Judge Bennet.”

At least she hadn’t said I was having sex with him. Or that I was his sub. My fingers went to the collar at my throat. I hadn’t taken it off once since Judge had put it on me. No one

ever mentioned it, but I'd gotten a few second glances because of it.

"I mean, because you're Mabel Chambers's daughter, and you're like family to the Bennets," she further explained when I still didn't return her laugh.

"Right," I muttered with a forced smile. "He's just like family."

Thankfully, she ended the call, promising to send the email soon.

From inside the stall, the toilet was flushed, and the door opened. Rita walked out with her briefcase in hand, looking like a total bombshell. I wanted to hate her for being so damn beautiful. But she was too nice for that. In the nearly two months I'd known her, we'd become semi-friends.

"Morning, beautiful," she greeted as she passed me on her way to the sink to wash her hands. "Did I hear you say financial aid?"

I nodded and pressed my hand to my stomach, still feeling sick. "Yes, I start my senior year in a few weeks."

"Then I guess you won't be hanging around this old place as much?" I nodded, and she gave me a pout. "Too bad. So, Georgetown? I thought I heard Judge talking to someone about that last week."

Fighting the nausea, I walked over beside her and turned on the second faucet, hoping a little cool water on my wrists would help. "No, I told him I don't want Georgetown."

Even though he'd said he could get me in, I didn't want my dream school like that. Just like I hadn't wanted his freaking "scholarship" money. If I couldn't get it on my own, then I didn't deserve it.

She snorted. “What, they don’t meet your standards?”

“More like I didn’t meet theirs,” I said with a shrug.

She stopped in the middle of fluffing her amazing hair. Slowly, she eyed me up and down. “Are you fucking playing me right now, Chambers?”

Tears stung my eyes, the memory of that rejection letter suddenly feeling as fresh as if I’d gotten it that morning. “Nope. They didn’t want me.” Laughing dryly to hide my pain, I waved my hand under the paper towel machine and tore off the section.

Rita just kept looking at me as if I were lying to her.

“What?” I finally snapped.

She shook her head. “I’m just wondering who to believe. You or my own ears.”

“Why would I lie about something that nearly destroyed me?” I cried, hating when a few tears spilled free.

“Shit,” she muttered before hugging me. “Hey, don’t cry, okay? I’m sorry. I must have heard wrong.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” My voice was muffled against her chest, but I could still hear the tears that lingered.

Damn it. Why was I so weepy all of a sudden?

Leaning back, she looked down at me with a frown. “I could have sworn when I heard Judge speaking to whomever about Georgetown, he said something about someone’s mind being changed.”

Her eyes became unfocused as she remembered. “No. I was in the elevator with him. I heard the other person say

Georgetown was happy to provide a full scholarship for you. They said “again” clear as day. To me, that meant you had been accepted in the past. I figured you just chose the West Coast school.”

“No,” I denied, shaking my head adamantly, only to feel the bile rise. “No, you just misunderstood. Georgetown was everything to me.” My stomach began to roil unhappily. “Almost everything,” I amended, pulling away from her.

Her sigh made me feel defensive, but she didn’t argue. “If you say so, Ellianna.” She picked up her briefcase and offered me a smile. “But there’s a reason I’m so good at my job.”

After the door closed behind her, I stayed in the bathroom a little longer, waiting for my stomach to calm down. But when the door opened again and several other women entered, I hastily made my exit.

I didn’t think I could last the day without vomiting, and I didn’t want to risk getting anyone else sick. I sent Petra a quick text, letting her know I wasn’t feeling well, and then sent one to Judge.

Me: I think I have Josie’s stomach flu. Going home to rest.

He was already in court, but I wasn’t surprised when he responded immediately.

Judge: I’ll check on you at lunch. Text me if you need anything, baby.

Thankfully, the drive passed without incident. Both part-time housekeepers were in the kitchen when I entered. Patricia had returned from her vacation and was sitting with them as they took their morning break.

“Ellianna?” Patricia stood when she saw me. “Honey, you look ill.”

“Just a sour stomach,” I excused. “Probably Josie’s virus. I’m going to bed to sleep this off.”

“Of course, dear. I’ll let your mom know. She just popped over to check on Lindy. The poor woman had another dose of chemo yesterday and is in the hospital.”

I’d seen how drastic the changes were in my mom’s best friend, and my heart ached. It seemed like as soon as Miss Lindy recovered from one chemo treatment, she had to undergo the next, and the cycle started all over again. “Please don’t worry my mom. She has enough to deal with at the moment, and I’ll be fine by tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely.”

CHAPTER 31

ELLIANNA

MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS TO GO TO JUDGE'S ROOM. WITH MOM at Miss Lindy's for who knew how long, I knew the odds of her catching me in his bed were slim, and I was willing to chance it. I hated how sick Miss Lindy was, but her illness had kept my mom occupied enough that she didn't suspect I hadn't been sleeping in my own bed.

Not long after I crawled into bed, the nausea faded. It was as if it had never happened, but I felt exhausted and decided to just rest. Cuddling Judge's pillow to my chest, I inhaled his scent and closed my eyes, falling asleep almost immediately.

I didn't feel the bed dip, but as soon as someone tried to take the pillow from me, my eyes snapped open.

Concern darkened Judge's face. "How are you feeling, baby?"

"Tired." My eyes closed again.

"Do you need anything?"

I nearly smiled. "Just sleep, Zachary."

"Maybe I should call the doctor. We can get you some meds for the nausea." I felt him stroke my hair back from my face.

"My stomach is fine now."

“Howler said Josie was so sick, he nearly had to take her in for an IV.” I could hear the stress in his voice. “Let me call the doctor.”

Opening my eyes again, I tried to soothe him. “Please don’t worry. I’m fine now. Really. No more nausea.”

Groaning, he nudged me over. Kicking off his shoes, he lay down beside me and pulled my head to his chest. With a contented exhale, I cuddled him, which was a hundred times better than his pillow.

“You’re going to be late getting back to court,” I reluctantly mumbled after a few minutes. I didn’t want him to go, was already dreading it. But his job was important.

“I adjourned until tomorrow,” he announced, kissing the top of my head while squeezing his massive arms around me.

“Judge—”

“I’m not leaving you when you’re sick, Elli,” he growled, cutting off my halfhearted protest.

“But I’m not,” I tried to argue.

“You’re so exhausted, you can’t even complain with your eyes open. That never happens. You’ve gotten sick maybe five times in your life. And I’m not even exaggerating. All of those instances, you ended up in the hospital. I’m not leaving when the chances of that happening this time are high.”

“Fine.” Snuggling closer, I let him have his way. “I think it’s just from a lack of sleep lately. Someone doesn’t let me get enough of it.”

I felt his smile against my brow. “Who woke up whom last night with their mouth wrapped around whose cock?”

“I’m sorry, Your Honor. I must plead the Fifth.”

His sexy laugh vibrated in my ear. “Sleep now, my Elli.”

He didn’t get an argument out of me, and I fell straight back to sleep.

Hours later, my stomach was what woke me again. This time in hunger. Opening my eyes, I took a moment to orient myself. Judge’s steady heartbeat was under my ear, his breathing even as he slept peacefully. One of his arms was like a band around my back, holding me to him possessively.

Pressing a kiss to his chest, I carefully crawled out from under him. Standing, I looked back down at the sleeping man, my heart melting at how carefree he appeared.

Sensing I wasn’t in bed with him, he rolled, causing the phone in his pants pocket to poke out. He’d fallen asleep with all his clothes on except for shoes.

Pulling it from his pocket, I started to place it on the wireless charger beside the bed. My finger must have grazed the screen because it lit up, showing a text message that was time-stamped 2:37 that afternoon. It was nearly seven now. We’d slept all day.

I wasn’t going to read the message, but I caught sight of my name and became curious. Plugging in his security code, which was a combination of Lyla’s and my birth dates, I clicked on the missed text.

Harold: Everything is set. When does Ellianna take the LSAT?

What was set? And why did this Harold guy need to know when I was supposed to take the LSAT?

If everything had gone according to plan, I would have taken the test two weeks before, right after I was expecting to

return to California. But since my life had gotten tossed upside down at the beginning of the summer, I'd canceled.

By making the choice to stay local, I'd decided to postpone the LSAT exam for a month or so to give myself more time to study and adjust to the new school.

Confused by the message, I scrolled up to the original text.

As I read, I felt something in my heart crack open.

"No," I whispered in disbelief.

What I was reading wasn't true.

It couldn't be.

Because if it was, Judge had...

No!

It was a misunderstanding.

He wouldn't do something like that to me.

He just wouldn't.

But the more I read, the more I realized that maybe he could have, and the conversation I'd had with Rita in the women's bathroom that morning began to make so much sense.

My hands began to tremble so badly the phone slipped through my fingers. Angry, frustrated tears blurred my vision, and I took several steps back from the bed.

Pain on a level I wasn't even aware existed ricocheted inside me, bouncing throughout my body until every inch of me ached.

From the many texts between Judge and Harold, I'd been accepted to Georgetown with a full ride. Law school was a

given, as long as my LSAT scores were on par.

But I'd been accepted long before my senior year of college.

I gulped back a sob, willing myself not to fall apart. But that was impossible.

Because Judge had shattered me.

He'd crushed my dream of going to Georgetown. He was why I'd been rejected. Had my confidence destroyed. Been made to think I wasn't good enough.

They were going to offer me all four years with a full scholarship.

But he was the one who had forced them to tell me I wasn't worthy.

No wonder he'd made up the scholarships and hid them from me. It was blood money to ease his conscience after ensuring all my dreams of going to Georgetown were crushed into dust.

I must have made a sound, Judge rolled over, his arm searching for me before he even opened his eyes. Lifting his head when he didn't touch me, he glanced around with a frown. "Baby?"

Another strangled, agonized sound left my throat, and he jerked upright in bed, his gaze zeroing in on me. "Elli, baby, are you feeling sick again?"

All I could do was stare at him through tear-filled eyes. Denial continued to plague me, but in my gut, I knew—I fucking *knew*—it was the truth.

"Wh-why?" I sobbed.

He moved as gracefully as a panther, his big body unfolding from the bed effortlessly. When he stood, his foot landed on his phone, and he bent to pick it up. The screen was still lit up with the many, many texts between him and his good ol' pal Harold.

Even with my vision compromised by tears, I saw the color drain from his face. Eyes pleading with me, he stepped forward. "Baby, let me explain."

"I was accepted to Georgetown years ago." It was a statement, no need to ask the question when that correspondence had told me all I needed to know.

"Yes," he confirmed in a tight voice. "You were."

"And you called in a favor to keep me out."

His chest lifted and fell rapidly, almost as if he were struggling to breathe. "Yes."

My fingers curled into fists so hard, I felt the sting when my nails pierced my palms. "Bastard!"

CHAPTER 32

JUDGE

ELLIANNA WAS THE ONE WHO'D BEEN SICK EARLIER, BUT I WAS the one who was about to puke now.

Her whimper had pulled me from a deep sleep. I knew all the sounds she made and what they meant. It hadn't been the same sweet sound she made when she was wordlessly begging me for more. It wasn't even the sound she made when she'd gotten a paper cut on her thumb two weeks before.

Nothing about this new sound told me she was enjoying how she felt. And it wasn't the same sound she made when she had an injury that I needed to play doctor and kiss better.

My Elli was in distress.

Along with the tears in her eyes, that garbled "why?" would have folded me in half if I'd been standing. And then I saw what was on my phone, and everything turned upside down.

She had my password. I had given it to her freely. We didn't keep secrets. Her ass would be red for a week if she even tried, and I had nothing to hide.

Except, I did.

One gigantic, terrible thing that I knew would hurt her if she ever found out. Which was why I should have just deleted

my conversations with Harold. If she found out what I'd done, she would hate me, maybe even try to leave me. And what was almost as bad, she wouldn't trust me.

“I was accepted to Georgetown years ago.”

I wanted to lie—so fucking badly, I wanted to lie. But I swore I'd never do that to her.

It felt like I had glass in my throat, but I spoke the truth. “Yes. You were.”

“And you called in a favor to keep me out.”

Hearing the raw pain in her voice made my breathing become sharper. I would make this up to her, I mentally reassured myself. We would argue, and I'd grovel, and we would be fine. “Yes.”

Her hands balled into fists so tight the knuckles went white, and she flinched. “Bastard!” she screamed.

I stood there, taking my punishment. Seeing the pain that I'd caused her was nothing short of torture. She should have hit me, slapped me—something, damn it. I deserved it all. But violence was not my Elli's way. She couldn't squash a bug, or even let me do it for her. Even as a kid, she'd made me release them outside.

Having her look up at me like she didn't know me, like I was a stranger—a monster—nearly brought me to my knees.

“Baby,” I rasped, taking a step toward her, already reaching for her, because the distance between us was unbearable.

She took several steps back, almost cowering from me, like she thought I would physically hurt her. I froze, quickly

having to swallow the howl of agony her reaction detonated inside me.

“Why would you do that to me?” she whispered.

“To protect you,” I told her honestly.

“You destroyed my dreams to protect me?” she demanded in disbelief as tears poured down her beautiful, pain-ravaged face. “You shattered my confidence, my sense of self-worth, my every hope of what my future would be to *fucking protect me?*”

“Yes.”

“From what?” she shouted.

“Me!” I combed my fingers through my hair to keep from touching her because I didn’t know what I would do if she flinched away from me again. “I had to protect you from me, baby.”

“I can’t believe you.” Laughing dryly, she shook her head. “You ripped everything away from me, and now you’re going to make up some pathetic excuse for your shitty behavior?”

“It’s not an excuse, Elli.” It made me sick to remember how fucked in the head I’d been back then. What a perv I’d been. If she’d been that close, I would have become the kind of man I didn’t hesitate to lock up for the max sentence. “Baby, you had just turned eighteen. The leash I had on my control was slipping more and more every day, and when you became legal, it only got worse. If you had stayed, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself.”

“You were selfish,” she whispered.

“No, I was selfless,” I corrected, willing her to understand. “I was thinking of your future.”

“You destroyed my future!”

Frustrated because she didn't want to see the truth, I snapped, “I gave you a goddamned Ivy League education.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Gave?” she repeated in a voice that made my heart lift into my throat. “You *gave* it to me?”

“I hated seeing you so down about the rejection letter, so I arranged for all the costs to be covered at Stanford. It wasn't your first choice, but I made it up to you, Elli.”

“It was blood money.”

“Of course it wasn't. You're not listening, baby.”

And she still wasn't. “You wanted me gone so badly, you spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to get me out.”

“I wanted to protect you so badly, I put the country between us so I couldn't touch you.”

“No,” she denied, shaking her head so hard her hair flew around her face. “The only thing I have ever wanted more than Georgetown was you. If you had let me have both back then —”

“If I had touched you then, do you honestly think I would have been able to let you go off to school every day?” I yelled. “Where all those horny motherfuckers would covet and crave what was mine? I would have bound you to me and refused to let you out of my sight.”

“What's changed since then, Judge?” She put her hands on her hips and glared up at me, hating me. “What is so fucking different about now?”

“You love me,” I answered truthfully.

She flinched. “Wh-what?”

“That night, downstairs in my office,” I reminded her. “You told me you love me. And I couldn’t—”

“You felt so guilty that you’d just fucked poor, stupid, gullible Elli, who loved and worshiped you, that you couldn’t keep withholding her dreams from her?”

“What?” I roared, shocked at the way she portrayed herself—at how she thought I felt about her. “No, baby. No. Stop. That’s not how it is.”

“You stop!” she screamed. “Stop lying to me and yourself. All of this, the entire time, it wasn’t because you wanted me or us. It was because I was stupid enough to tell you I was in love with you.”

“No. Listen to me, damn it. Elli, I...”

The door opening behind her had me trailing off. Mabel stood in the doorway, her face unreadable as she took us in.

“Mabel,” I muttered, warning Ellianna her mom was there.

Eyes stricken, she whirled around to face the older woman. “Mom—”

“I came to check on you, but you weren’t in your room. When I heard shouting, I was concerned,” Mabel explained, her expression still unreadable.

“I-I’m feeling much better now.” Even with her back to me, I could hear the forced smile in Ellianna’s voice. “How... Um, how is Miss Lindy?”

Grief flickered across Mabel’s face. “I’m about to head back over. Patricia told me you weren’t feeling well, and I wanted to see for myself if you were okay.”

“It’s fine. We’re fine.”

Mabel’s gaze shifted back to me, and I nodded. “I’ve got this under control.”

She stared at me for a long moment before stepping back. “We will talk in the morning.”

“Mom—”

“Tomorrow, Ellianna,” she said firmly. “You two figure out whatever this is that’s going on between you.”

CHAPTER 33

ELLIANNA

SEEING THE DISAPPOINTMENT ON MY MOM'S FACE, THE disillusionment in her eyes, hearing the defeat in her voice, broke what little was left of my heart.

All my life, I'd worked hard to never let my mom down, and in one crazy moment—one enormously stupid decision—that was exactly what I'd done.

As the door shut behind her, the weight of my failure pressed down on me. Two decades of trying to be the perfect daughter, to make her proud, wasted. And for what?

Because I fell in love with a man who would never love me back.

The sensation of being suffocated hit me. Struggling to suck in oxygen, I did the only thing I could think of.

Run.

I needed away from this. Away from Judge and Mom and this...pain.

With a sob, I rushed from his bedroom.

“Elli!” he roared behind me, but I kept running. When I reached my room, I slammed the door and flipped the lock just as his body crashed into it, causing the entire frame to vibrate. “Elli, open this door!”

“Go away, Judge.”

“Ellianna!” I shuddered when his fist hit the door. “Open the fucking door now. We have to talk about this.”

“I’m done talking,” I called, closing my eyes in hopes of stopping my tears. “There’s nothing left to discuss.”

“You weren’t even listening,” he raged. “I didn’t even have a chance to explain.”

“Bullshit!”

“Baby, please.”

“Fuck off.”

Moving away from the door, I crossed to the closet. Why did I come back here? When Judge showed up at Blaine’s apartment, I never should have returned. Why did I let myself think things were different?

Why did I allow myself to even imagine that Zachary Bennet might actually love me one day?

While Judge continued to pound on the door, shouting so loudly I wondered if the neighbors a mile away could hear him, I started packing. I didn’t rush this time. Everything was meticulously folded and placed in my luggage. I wasn’t going to just run away this time. I’d figure out a plan, and then I would leave.

School was already confirmed. What had my adviser said? That all I needed to do was let the school know if my housing situation changed?

Well, it had.

There was no way I could stay in this house any longer, but I wasn’t going to go back to California. That was where

Judge had wanted me, and I'd be damned if he was going to get anything else he fucking wanted from me.

Swallowing back another sob, I felt the shift of the necklace around my throat. For the first time since it was placed there, it felt like it was choking me. Dropping the pair of jeans I was folding, I pulled at the chain, desperate to find the clasp so I could take it off.

My nails scratched around the chain until I found the little lobster claw. As soon as I released it, the tears came faster. I felt naked, bare, vulnerable. This wasn't right. It was as if a part of me was now missing without the choker in place.

Fingers trembling, I dropped it on the floor.

Out in the bedroom, I heard a loud crash that made me jump. Before I could move to see what had happened, Judge appeared in the closet doorway, his chest heaving.

His wild eyes were so dark, they seemed like bottomless pits. When he realized what I was doing, he stumbled forward. "No, Elli. You're not leaving me."

Wiping my forearm over the tears dripping from my chin, I turned back to folding my clothes.

"Don't do this. Don't shut me out."

"I'm not doing anything you haven't already forced me to do before," I reminded him. "You don't want me here. I don't think you ever did."

"God, why are you being so stubborn?" he exploded. "Why can't you hear what I'm trying to tell you?"

Tossing my last pair of jeans into the luggage, I started on my skirts. "It took me a while, but I finally got the message loud and clear."

“Stop being a fucking brat and just listen to me!”

Ignoring his command, I bent to carefully tuck the skirt into place.

“Elli, where is your collar?” His question came out ragged, guttural. I’d felt his tension when he first came in, but it was different now.

Do not give in, Ellianna.

Without bothering to look at him, I picked it up and tossed it at his feet. “I’m sure you’ll find someone more worthy of that soon enough.”

If there had been anything left of my heart, it would have crumbled just saying those words. He’d taken everything away and finally left me with nothing. I wouldn’t let myself think of him doing everything we’d done together with someone else.

He was never meant to be mine.

I had to accept that.

Arms wrapped around me from behind, jerking me backward against his hard body. “How many times do I have to tell you that you are the only one? No one before. No one after. Only. You.”

A week ago, I believed him.

Yesterday, I believed him.

That morning, I believed him.

I didn’t believe him now.

I couldn’t.

Judge had bent and dented me in the past, but I wasn’t even broken at this point. Maybe it wouldn’t end my life, but it had taken a vital part of me—of who I was.

He'd killed something in me.

I had nothing left.

CHAPTER 34

JUDGE

SHE WAS SLIPPING AWAY FROM ME. WITH THE WAY SHE remained still, silently crying but so calm, I knew I was losing her, and I had no idea how to stop it from happening.

Feeling the sting of tears, I pressed my brow to the back of her head. “Scream, Elli. Break things. Throw a fit. I don’t care. Just please, sweetheart, don’t leave me.”

“Aren’t you done playing this game?” she asked softly. “Are you not exhausted trying to keep up the pretense?”

“There is no game.” No response. “I’ve never pretended a day in my life. I’m not going to start now, especially not with you.”

“I don’t believe you,” she whispered.

“Give me a chance to make it up to you,” I pleaded. “All I need is one, baby. I won’t waste it. I’ll show you how sorry I am.”

“I think you paid your guilt-debt off in orgasms. Relax. You have nothing to weigh you down any longer where I’m concerned.”

“Goddamn it, Elli,” I groaned into her hair.

She tilted her head away from me. “I’m in the middle of something, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“No, I’m not going to fucking excuse you. You’re being unreasonable. Any other time, I’m fine with you pushing my limits and being my spoiled little princess. But not right now, Ellianna. Let me fix this.”

“You’re an asshole for saying that.”

Swallowing the knot that was trying to choke me, I shifted gears. “Where will you even go?”

She shrugged. “School starts soon.”

Muttering a curse, I turned her to face me. “I already canceled the lease on your apartment. Given what happened with your moronic roommate, they didn’t make a fuss about ending it early.”

“I’ll find somewhere else to live.”

“You made me close your scholarship fund accounts,” I reminded her.

Despite the tears still leaking from her eyes, she lifted her brows at me. “I’ve already secured funding for school. A real scholarship, as well as financial aid.”

Realizing she had been working behind the scenes, planning to leave me, I felt sucker-punched. “You were just going to go back without telling me?”

“I guess we were both keeping secrets.”

Releasing her, I stepped back, needing a little space. “I had school already taken care of for you. As adamant as you were about going to law school on your own, I made sure Georgetown honored the original scholarship they offered you.”

“I’m sure that took the greasing of a few palms and a couple threats,” she said dryly. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’ve

gotten my education in order and on my terms this time. I don't need your charity."

"It's not charity. You deserve it. I only made a few calls. Everything else, you earned all on your own." Her skeptical expression drove me crazy. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Elli."

"Okay."

One word. It came out so primly. My proper little Ellianna, acknowledging my apology but not forgiving me. Refusing to put me out of my misery.

Then she inhaled, and I saw it. There, just below the surface, she was trying hard to hide it, hoping I wouldn't see. But I was aware of everything about her. Every minuscule detail about her, I'd memorized and stored away.

Outwardly, she was composed, the only sign of her pain the tears that streamed from her eyes, leaving trails down her cheeks. But I didn't miss how much of an effort it took for her to hold herself steady, to fight back the trembling.

To keep her mind and heart locked away from me.

I'd done this. I was the one who had pushed her past her limits and into this new limbo where she had to hide from me.

It was a million times worse than if she were throwing a fit. That, I could deal with. We both loved it when I punished her for not being a good girl.

But this...indifference...was soul-crushing.

I had no one to blame but myself. I'd caused all of it.

And I would fix it.

She just needed a little time. I could give her that if she needed it. Years ago, I was the one who was sure distance

would help. It hadn't. All it had accomplished was to make me so hungry for her that I'd been unable to contain my cravings any longer the moment my guard was down.

I promised I would give her anything she wanted—needed. Even if it killed me in the process.

Soon, she would realize that distance didn't solve anything. It only made it worse.

If she wanted to return to school, I would smooth the path for her. It wasn't forever. A small blip in time. It would be torturous, but if it proved she could still trust me, I would withstand every minute of it.

“Okay, Elli.” I gave in, my voice thick with emotions I couldn't hold back. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't feel past the burning in my chest. I could do this and survive. I could give her what she thought she needed. “You get one semester. Just one.”

CHAPTER 35

ELLIANNA

I WAS ALL TALK.

I had nowhere to go. The four walls of my bedroom felt like a prison cell. And then there was my door. It hung off its hinges from where Judge must have kicked it open when I didn't respond to him while I was packing.

He left.

Just turned around while I was still crying and walked out of my closet, my room. I was pretty sure he left the house.

My need to get out had dwindled a little. Judge agreeing so easily—giving me fucking *permission*—put a hole in my determination to leave.

And forced me to realize I had zero options.

With a little money saved from my brief paid summer internship, I could afford a motel for a few days. Or I could wait and use that money for rent.

That was the smart option and the one I chose. But sleep was impossible. I sat on the end of my bed all night, half expecting—maybe hoping—Judge would come back and try to convince me to stay for real this time.

What was worse, I still held out hope he would appear in front of me and confess he loved me.

Which only went to show just how pathetic I truly was.

Fuck him.

My phone rang, and my heart lifted. Just a little. But when I saw it wasn't Judge, it plummeted a hundred feet. Sighing, I swiped my thumb over the screen.

A roar of voices greeted me before I heard one I recognized. "Hey, beautiful!"

Frowning, I pulled my phone from my ear to check my screen again before replacing it. "Rita? How did you get my number?"

Her throaty laugh was sexy. No wonder Judge liked to fuck her. Would he again now that I'd given him the collar back?

Wait, was that why she'd called? To warn me he was trying to hook up with her in some bar?

"The one and only, sexy ass," she flirted. "I'm out with colleagues for drinks, and someone said Judge adjourned for the entire afternoon. Because of one delicious little blond. Heard you weren't feeling well, and I got worried our convo this morning upset you more than I realized. So I flashed a little peep of the twins at William in exchange for your digits."

"Oh, yeah, that." I'd completely forgotten about my earlier nausea with everything else that had happened. "No, Rita. You didn't upset me. I was already feeling a little queasy before our conversation."

There was a pause on her end during which I heard a rush of different voices, laughter, and clinking glasses. Moments later, it was oddly silent. "Okay, that was an obstacle-course nightmare. Are you there, beautiful?"

Pressing my thumb to the center of my forehead, I massaged at the throb. “Yeah, Rita. I’m here.”

“What’s wrong?” she demanded. “Have you been crying?”

“I-I’m fine,” I lied.

“I am a human lie detector, Ellianna Chambers, so don’t try pulling that kind of shit with me. Now, I’ll ask again, have you been crying?”

“Maybe,” I whispered, blinking back fresh tears.

“Because you don’t feel well?” she asked suspiciously.

“No.”

“Because of Judge?” I pressed my lips together, trying to fight my trembling chin. “Silence is an answer too, Ellianna.”

“I know. I just don’t feel up to talking about it.”

“That’s fair. I’m not much of a sharer either.” She made a humming noise. “Want to come out for a drink?”

Just the thought of alcohol made my stomach feel sore again. “No, I better not chance it. My stomach is still a bit off.”

“Understandable. Okay, so, you’re mad at Judge. Don’t want to drink. Aren’t up to being with the girls. How about a six-pack of ginger ale at my place, accompanied by a serious eye-candy movie marathon?”

“I…” I hesitated. It did sound better than sitting there in my room with the door at an awkward angle, wishing Judge would come back and love me. “What movie series?”

“I’m in the mood for action. Maybe some *John Wick*? Come on, you know you like them with dark hair and eyes,” she teased.

I snorted. “Kettle, black.”

“Meh, they’re okay. I prefer blondes myself.” I almost smiled. “I’m not hearing a no.”

A tiny laugh snuck out, surprising me. “I want to,” I admitted. I really, really didn’t want to be there when—if—Judge came back. And the idea of facing my mom anytime soon was enough to give me heartburn. “But I’m kind of in a situation.”

“Is it a sitch that requires me coming to your house and untying you?” She sounded hopeful.

Another laugh escaped. “No.”

“Damn. Okay, well, if that’s not the problem, then come on over to my place. I’ll text you the address.”

“Sure.” I gave in without second-guessing my decision.

“Yay!” she squealed. “Slumber party. See you soon, beautiful.”

Bemused, I lowered my phone, shaking my head at her. Hanging out with Rita wasn’t going to solve my problems, but it would hopefully take my mind off them for a little while.

Half an hour later, I pulled Lyla’s car into the driveway outside of Rita’s little cottage-style house. Even in the dark, it was kind of cute. A single story, a little on the cookie-cutter side, but all the vivacious flower beds illuminated by solar fairy lights reminded me of her.

Leaning my head back against the seat, I took a moment to gather myself, smoothing my hands over the soft leather on the steering wheel. I was going to miss this car, but after tonight, I wasn’t going to touch anything with the name Bennet attached to it.

Back at Stanford, I'd walked and taken the bus. This was a small town. I would be fine taking public transportation. Judge automatically thought I would go back to California. It seemed to me like he might have been relieved.

I figured he wanted to go back to his causal hookups and not have to keep pretending to assuage his guilty conscience. That was why he didn't put up much of a fight to convince me to stay. By tomorrow, I would be just a dull memory that might float through his mind from time to time.

He was probably already balls deep in someone else.

Stomach acid burned up into my esophagus so intensely, I pressed my hand to my chest in distress. Damned heartburn. Grabbing my purse and my phone, I stepped out of the car and walked up a small, decorative path to the front porch.

Before I could reach the top stair, the door opened, and Rita stepped out with a grin and a can of ginger ale in hand. "You look like you already need this, babe."

I gratefully took the drink from her and popped the top before taking a gulp. Maybe I was dehydrated and that was why the heartburn was so extreme.

Taking my free hand, she gently tugged me inside. I noticed a small foyer with open archways into a living room on the left and a library/office on the right.

"I already have the first movie cued up," Rita announced as she guided me into the living room. Stylish lamps sat on either side of the comfy-looking beige couch. Her flat-screen was on, and the movie description with a scene thumbnail was up, the option to resume or start over at the bottom.

Two soft throws were on either side of the couch, with a giant bowl of lightly buttered popcorn in the middle.

“Bathroom is through there,” she indicated. “And the kitchen is on the other side of that wall. I don’t have court until tomorrow afternoon, so I planned on taking the morning off. Which means we can stay up all night watching movies.”

I gave her a wan smile. It was a relief to be out of the mansion, but my emotions felt too close to the surface, and I was suddenly questioning being there. I was already a burden to everyone else in my life. I didn’t want to become one for Rita as well.

“Or we could talk,” she offered, taking one corner of the couch. “But I’m cool with whatever you want to do, beautiful.”

Placing my drink on a stone coaster, I folded my legs under me as I took the opposite end. “I don’t want to drag you into my mess, Rita.”

“That sounds ominous.” Picking up her own can, she considered me for a moment. “I deal with messy things every day, sweets. I like you. Okay, I could probably more than like you if given the chance, but I’m just fine with having you as a friend.”

The sting of tears returned, and I dropped my gaze to the blanket. Stroking my fingers over the gray fabric, I exhaled heavily. “You were right.”

“Of course I was.” Her confidence produced a small smile, but it only lasted a second. “Just to clarify what we’re talking about, what exactly was I right about?”

“Georgetown.” Just saying the word aloud made my heartburn worse. “I-I was accepted after all.”

“I figured as much. I mean, why would they be stupid enough to turn you down, Ellianna?”

I closed my eyes. “When I got that rejection letter, it felt like the world stopped. I’d worked my ass off to be good enough. To be worthy.”

“You are worthy, damn it!”

I shook my head, feeling a tear run down my cheek. “I’m not. Being accepted to Georgetown was supposed to be it. Going to school there was... It meant...”

I couldn’t bring myself to say it. Not aloud, and definitely not to her. Judge had chosen her because he wanted her. What he felt for me was only guilt.

“And now, I find out that I was accepted. They did want me. But *he* didn’t.”

She made a sound in her throat, and I looked over at her. “He, being Judge?” I nodded, and she muttered a curse under her breath. “This is why I don’t do relationships with guys. Sure, they are fun to fuck every now and then, but they’re too stupid and immature for something long-term. Men are imbeciles. Half-witted, empty-headed, moronic fools.”

“Yeah,” I agreed weakly.

She drained her can and then crushed it in her hand. “Tell me everything from the beginning. I need to know what level of pissed off to be with him and school myself for the next case he oversees.”

CHAPTER 36

JUDGE

SWEAT DRIPPING OFF ME, I WALKED INTO THE HOUSE AT DAWN. After spending the entire night at the nearest Underground, pounding away on a punching bag, my knuckles were bruised, split open, and caked in blood. When I'd put a hole in one bag, I moved on to a second. But no matter how hard I hit it, how tired and heavy my arms got, it couldn't distract from the swirl of chaos sweeping through my mind.

I'd told Ellianna she could have a semester at school, but I wasn't sure I could keep my word. Everything inside me was already raging to get back to her. Make this right without allowing her to leave me. There were other ways. Ones that didn't involve losing my fucking mind.

But I vowed to give her what she wanted, no matter the cost to myself.

Grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge, I uncapped it and sucked down half the contents as I turned. Only to find Mabel standing behind me.

"Shit," I groaned. "You move as silent as a ninja."

Crossing her arms over her chest, she tilted back her head to glower at me. I remembered that look from my childhood. Fuck, she'd done the same thing a month ago when she'd caught me trailing mud into the house after my run.

This woman had the power to make me feel two feet tall with just the narrowing of her eyes. She was the only true mother figure I had, and I loved her to my bones. Disappointing or hurting her were the last things I ever wanted to do.

“Explain to me why my child was crying in your bedroom yesterday evening, Zachary.”

I flinched. At both the memory of my Elli’s tears and Mabel addressing me as Zachary. It was never a good thing when she used my legal name. “We had a small argument.”

Her eyes turned to slits. “Zachary.”

Setting the bottle on the counter, I rubbed my hands over my face. “I fucked up.”

“Obviously.”

Heaving out a breath, I begrudgingly admitted, “I arranged for Georgetown to not offer Elli admission four years ago. She found out last night.”

“I’m sorry, you...did...what?” She blinked up at me like she didn’t understand the words I’d just spoken. “You did what?”

“I had to, Mabel. It was the only thing I could think of to protect her,” I explained, but it sounded weak to my own ears.

“What was there to protect her from?” she snapped harshly. “She was so heartbroken when she got that rejection letter. Why didn’t you protect her from that?”

“I was protecting her from me—”

“You were protecting yourself,” she cut me off. “I’m neither blind nor stupid, but you are a damn fool. You were scared, so you decided you would take away the one thing that

girl had dreamed of and worked her ass off for. But it's okay, because you were 'protecting' her." She made air quotes as she snidely rolled her eyes. "Do you think maybe, just maybe, you should have asked Ellianna if she wanted to be protected?"

"I—"

"No, of course you didn't. Because you're a selfish idiot." She walked several steps away from me before abruptly turning back to face me. "I know you two have been sleeping together. So apparently you weren't all that worried about protecting her from yourself now."

"I couldn't fight my feelings for her anymore," I admitted quietly.

"And you thought, what, exactly?" Her laugh held zero amusement, and I lowered my head. "That you would wave Georgetown in front of her now like a peace offering, and everything would be forgiven?"

"Mabel, I know I've made mistakes, but all I've ever wanted was for Elli to be happy. I was afraid of what I would do if she was so close. Not giving her the chance to choose for herself might have been a bad decision at the time, but she was too young to understand what she was taking on. I didn't want her to have regrets."

"Do you think I don't know you, Zachary? That I'm unaware of how your mind works? I raised you. Both of you. I know when you struggle. I know what hurts you. I know what brings you joy or terrifies you." She sighed, losing steam. "And I know that your biggest fear of all is telling that girl you are in love with her, only for her to tell you she doesn't feel the same."

My head snapped up, my heart pounding in my ears. “She loves me. I know she does. She’s told me.”

“Yeah?” Mabel cocked her head. “And did you happen to tell her how you feel?”

Swallowing hard, I looked away.

“Like I said, a damn fool.”

I flinched. “She wouldn’t believe me now even if I tried to confess how I feel. Her trust in me has been broken. I need to give her time.”

“Sure. Time. How nice for you to have so much to spare that you waste it by not being happy with the girl you love.” Her voice cracked, and I realized exactly why she was upset.

Miss Lindy’s time was running out. Mabel had spent the summer watching her friend slowly losing the battle against cancer. I’d been told that Miss Lindy’s chemo treatments weren’t working. She had less than a year.

“I don’t want to waste time, Mabel,” I choked out. “Even now, I’m struggling because Elli isn’t in front of me. She’s the one who wants distance, and I promised her I would always give her what she wants.”

“All she’s ever wanted was you,” she said, her shoulders sagging slightly. With a grimace, she walked toward the coffee machine to start a pot. “The only reason she wanted Georgetown so badly was because that was where you went. She wanted to be a lawyer because of you. Her happiness is linked to you, Judge. But you’re too much of a coward to give her what she truly wants.”

Emotions made my voice raspy. “She already has me. She always has.”

“But she doesn’t know that, does she?”

CHAPTER 37

ELLIANNA

RITA WAS WAY TOO CHIPPER IN THE MORNINGS. DANCING around in the kitchen making her fancy avocado toast with a poached egg on top, sprinkled with everything but the bagel seasoning. Humming along to her playlist, with her hair tangled from sleep but still looking like she was ready for some sexy photo shoot.

I wanted to hate her so badly, but I couldn't bring myself to find anything but affection for her. Especially when she placed a fresh can of ginger ale in front of me along with a slice of dry toast.

"You look queasy, beautiful," she told me, nudging the plate of toast closer. "Little bites will help."

She wasn't wrong. I'd awoken feeling just as sick as I had the day before. I wasn't sure what was worse, my broken heart or the intensity of my heartburn.

Picking up the drink, I glowered at the other woman. "Why do you have to be so perfect, Rita?"

"Aww," she gushed, batting her lashes at me. I was ninety-seven percent sure they were the real deal. "Coming from you, that means a lot, sweets."

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m so far from perfect, I’m in a different hemisphere from you.” Crunching on the toast, I followed her with my eyes as she buzzed around like a sexy bee, cleaning up after herself and occasionally taking a bite of her breakfast.

“You hush that delectable mouth right now.” Taking another bite of her food, she dusted her hands over her plate. “I figure you don’t want to stay with me, because hey, we both know you’ll try to rebound with me.”

I bit my lip to hold back the urge to smile. As if she knew that, she winked at me.

“And since you’re hell-bent on not going home, I have a couple of places lined up for you to look at today that are seeking a roommate. I’ve already vetted them all. One is a six-bedroom house just off campus.” She ticked off a finger as she listed the features of the residence. “The only issue I foresee is the bathroom sitch. No one has their own. The second option does have a private bathroom, but the rent is a tad higher and it’s farther from campus. I can go with you to check them out if you need me.”

“Rita, you’re amazing. Thank you.” I wiped my mouth with a napkin. “But you really didn’t have to do that. I swear I was going to look for a place today. And despite the mess I was last night, I can actually do things for myself.”

She waved me off. “Babe, I’ve seen you silence Judge with a look. I’m well aware of your capabilities. I’m just helping out my friend.”

Feeling the burn of tears in my sinuses, I ducked my head to hide my wobbling chin. “Thank you.”

“If I see one more tear spill from those pretty eyes, I’m going to kick Judge in the balls the next time I see him. And since I have a motion hearing with him Monday afternoon, I’ll be risking being held in contempt.”

“Yeah, maybe don’t do that.” Discreetly wiping my thumb under my eye, I laughed.

“Meh, it would be worth it.”



SOMEONE CALLED OUT, AND RITA HAD TO GO IN TO COVER arraignments. She was pissed she wouldn’t be with me to check out the apartment and house for rent, but I reminded her I was a grown woman.

After I left Rita’s, I called my mom. It was a cop-out, but I didn’t know if I could face her, and she’d already texted me three times to ask when I would be home because she wanted to talk.

“Honey?”

I plastered a smile on my face, hoping to sound more cheerful. “Hey, Mom. How is Miss Lindy doing?”

“It was a rough night.” She sounded so sad, tears burned my eyes. “I’m going to make sure the girls and Patricia are covered here, and then I will head back over.”

“Send her my love.”

“Or you could stop by and tell her yourself,” she suggested.

I paused for a yield sign and then kept driving when I saw the way was clear. “I want to, but I have a sour stomach again.

I don't want to risk Miss Lindy getting it."

"Then when you feel better," she countered, but I could hear the question in her voice—was I going to be there?

"I'll try," I hedged.

"Ellianna, do you want to tell me anything?"

I was already shaking my head. No, I really didn't want to tell her anything. "Nothing comes to mind, Mom."

She made a noise that I remembered all too well. It was the one she used when she meant business. It said without words that I needed to talk before she made me talk.

"Okay," I muttered. "Judge and I had a disagreement last night. It's fine. Everything is...fine."

The crack in my voice was enough to prove that nothing was fine.

Would it ever be?

Fuck, my heart hurt so damn badly.

"Honey." She exhaled heavily, making my gut clench. "I've known about the two of you for weeks now."

I tightened my hands around the steering wheel. "What... Um, what do you mean?"

"Do not play games with me, child. I have eyes. I know you two have been going at it like rabbits."

Heat filled my face, and my stomach protested. "Mom!"

She laughed softly. "Relax, Ellianna. I was young once. Sex is a natural thing."

"Mom, I'm not talking to you about sex."

“Then let’s discuss what you plan on doing now,” she deadpanned.

“If I tell you, I don’t want you discussing it with Judge.” This was a test. Maybe it wasn’t fair, but I needed to know once and for all who she would pick—the boy she’d raised like her own, or me, her flesh and blood.

“Whatever you tell me, I’ll take to my grave, honey.”

Blinking back my tears, I pulled to a stop in front of an apartment building. “I’m staying here. I have everything already sorted out. I was going to tell you this weekend. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Wait. Here, as in the college in town, or you’re commuting to Georgetown?”

A fresh wave of pain hit me. “Here in town.”

“Why not Georgetown?” she demanded.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Ever.”

“Elli—”

“My scholarship is taken care of. I have my schedule confirmed. And now I’m looking for a place to live,” I interrupted.

“Ellianna!”

“Please,” I whispered. “Don’t push. Not on this.”

“Ellianna,” she scolded. “He lo—”

“Mom!” I cried. “I am not doing this. I swear I will hang up.”

There was a short silence before she spoke again. “I’m sorry. I won’t bring it up. Will you at least keep me updated? I

don't want to go months without seeing you. I know Stanford is a great school, but I hated your being so far away."

"I honestly didn't want to go in the first place. I felt like it was the only choice I had. He *made* it the only choice I had. Nothing was as it should have been. I had so many plans. Goals that I worked toward and dreamed of."

And Judge had known that. I'd confided in him more than once. But he stole them from me.

"I love you. I hope you know that."

Closing my eyes, I attempted to rein in my emotions. "I do. I love you too."

"Talk later?"

"I promise."

My first stop was the apartment since I was already in front of the building. Only one of the two roommates was present, and they gave me a quick tour. It was a nice place, even nicer than my apartment back in California, but the roommate I met looked so similar to Julie that I couldn't bring myself to truly consider staying there.

Hoping the other place was a better option, I pulled Lyla's car into the driveway. Two other cars were already there, but since there were five other occupants, I was surprised there was even room to park. Both vehicles were older, but well cared for.

The house was a two-story with soft yellow siding and dark blue shutters. The lawn was mowed, but that was about the extent of anyone's gardening efforts. As I climbed the steps to the porch, I noticed a bicycle lying on its side and a pair of muddy cleats.

Carefully, I stepped over the shoes and rang the doorbell. Moments later, I heard a guy yelling, “It’s your turn to get it, Hudson!”

“I got it last time, dickwad!” a feminine voice screeched. “Remember? Mom sent that stupid care package with your stash of fruit roll-ups that I had to sign for.”

“Still your turn,” the guy called back.

“Fine.” I heard a huff just as the door opened. “Yeah? Oh...”

I pasted a smile on my face, quickly taking in her silver pixie-cut hair. Her makeup was perfection in a Barbie meets goth kind of way that reminded me of a sexy vampire. She carried a chemistry book with the page marked by a notebook. “Um...hi? I’m Elli. I’m here about the room.”

“Oh!” Her smile was brilliant, showcasing a dimple in one cheek. “Hey, I’m Hudson. Welcome.”

Stepping back, she waved me in, tucking her book under her arm. “Sorry, my brother only told me about a potential new roommate maybe twenty minutes ago. I guess you spoke to him earlier?”

“My friend did,” I explained. “She was helping me out by setting up viewings.”

“Oh, are you a transfer? Kyndle and I are from Michigan, but our stepdad owns this house, so...” She pressed her lips into a hard line. “We’ve been going to the university for the last three years, but I barely know anyone in this town.”

“It’s my first semester,” I hedged. Even if they weren’t local, no way this girl and her brother had lived there for three years and didn’t know who Judge was. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I didn’t want anyone to link me back to my ex,

even if we were residing in the same small town. “I transferred from Stanford.”

“For real?” She looked at me like I had three heads when I nodded. “Why would you give up Stanford to go here?”

“My roommate destroyed our place while I was visiting my mom over the summer. I walked into a trashed apartment and some guy passed out in my bed.” I shuddered at the memory. “It was...a bit traumatic, I guess.”

“Holy shit, I can’t imagine.” She led me through the house, pointing out each room. “You won’t have to worry about anything like that here. We all get along. There’s Kyndle, my twin brother. Technically, our names are reversed, because someone mixed up our birth certificates at the hospital. But I think I’m definitely a Hudson.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I can see it.”

She beamed. “Anyway, Kyndle can be a dickhead, but he’s mostly cool. Our other roommates will be arriving over the next two weeks. Stacie, Celica, and, of course, Vaya.”

I listened as she told me about the other three girls, taking in the house. It was tidy, the furniture practical and comfortable in appearance. There was nothing showy about the place. It felt warm. Like the siblings had made this house a home.

“The way rent works is everything is included. No surprises with us. My stepdad takes half the money for the utilities and lets my brother and me keep the rest so we can concentrate on school and stay out of trouble so our mom doesn’t worry.” She rolled her eyes. “Not that it helps. She worries even when there’s nothing to worry about. I think she

sits in bed at night coming up with things to be anxious over. Drives my stepdad crazy.”

“Moms, though, right?”

She laughed. “Right.”

After she showed me the bathroom upstairs and what would be my room, we walked back downstairs. I had yet to meet Kyndle, but I had to admit, I liked Hudson’s vibe. I already felt more comfortable with her than I ever had with Julie.

If I took the room, I would have my own place immediately. Although Rita had offered to let me crash at her house for as long as I wanted, I needed my own space to decompress. Maybe wrap my head around the new life I was determined to start without Judge in it.

“Do the other roommates need to approve of me?” I asked when she offered me coffee.

“Nope. As long as you like us and we don’t get serial killer vibes from you—which I don’t, so total bonus—then we’re good.” She picked up her mug and took a drink, watching me over the rim.

I considered my options. Rita was amazing, but I couldn’t keep crashing on her couch. Going back to the mansion was a definite no. And Hudson wasn’t giving me serial killer vibes either.

“I need to meet Kyndle first.”

CHAPTER 38

JUDGE

HOWLER TEXTED ME JUST AS I WAS GETTING OUT OF THE CAR.

Howler: Door was fixed earlier. Better hope I don't tell Lyla about you kicking in Elli's door when she gets home next week.

Me: Ellianna.

I couldn't control the urge to correct him. Shoving my phone into my pocket, I strode through the house. Elli hadn't shown up for work, not that I'd expected her to, but I'd still held out hope.

Entering the kitchen, I moved straight for the coffeepot. I'd been short-tempered in court all afternoon. My bailiff kept giving me the side-eye, and when he wasn't, he would glance around like he expected someone to walk through the door at any moment.

Each time someone had entered the gallery, I would hold my breath, praying it was Ellianna. Suspecting that the bailiff was waiting for her too had set me off, and I'd threatened to fire the man. I was losing my fucking mind.

Grabbing the pot of coffee, I reached for a mug, but before I could wrap my fingers around the handle, something caught my attention.

A key fob.

Lyla's key.

Who the fuck was I kidding? I'd never bought that car with my sister in mind. Even then, Lyla had been nervous behind the wheel. No matter how many times Howler or I tried to teach her, she was just too stuck in her head. I had to admit that I wasn't a fan of driving either, but Lyla was more likely to run into a ditch before she even made it off our property.

But Ellianna loved driving. She'd been such a natural behind the wheel that I'd trusted her to drive me when she was sixteen. When she'd gotten a speeding ticket, I'd nearly lost my mind. And then I'd found out one of the girls—no one had ever told me which one—had been flirty and flashed cleavage at the cop. That fucker was still unpromoted. If he ever wanted to make detective, he was going to have to move to a new state. Maybe another country.

I made sure that car had every safety feature available, but I'd picked the design with Ellianna in mind. Her favorite color. Convertible. Seats. Stitching. The manufacturer had built it to my specifications, based on what I knew Ellianna would enjoy.

Picking up the key fob, I felt something crumble inside me.

She was really gone.

I knew she would leave, but a part of me kept thinking she was just trying to get a reaction. Fuck, it had taken everything inside me not to tie her to our bed the night before and keep her there until she understood.

Until she promised to never leave me.

But I hadn't because she needed to be able to trust me. I'd broken that completely the previous night.

Slamming the pot down on the counter, I barely felt the hot liquid splash over my hand. I didn't notice that I'd cracked the bottom or the contents leaking out, slowly flooding the counter and onto the floor.

Closing my eyes, I tried to rein in my emotions, choke them down, not feel. But it was impossible. Thrusting my hand into my pocket, I jerked out my phone, already calling her before I could stop myself.

It rang three times before I was sent to voice mail, which told me she wasn't on a plane headed back to California.

Yet.

Could I stop her in time?

When the beep sounded, my shoulders dropped. "Come home." Fighting the sting of tears, I clenched my jaw for a few moments, letting the silence stretch but unable to hang up. "Come back to me. *Please.*"

Hearing only silence, I groaned. "Fuck, baby. I miss you already. I'm begging. I'm fucking begging you, Elli. Come home. You don't have to forgive me. All I'm asking is to have you under the same roof. Breathing the same air. So I don't lose what's left of my mind."

Ending the call before I completely lost it, I dropped the phone in a puddle of coffee. Clutching the key fob in my fist, I pressed it to my chest. "Come back, baby."



I HAD THREE CHOICES.

Get drunk off my ass.

Spend the night beating on a punching bag.

Or get on a plane and bring Ellianna home where she belonged.

I promised her I would give her time, and I wasn't going to become a drunk like my father, which only left me with bloody, tape-wrapped knuckles. It was Friday night, so I could have gotten in a cage with another Son. But if Ellianna found out I was fighting again, she would be upset.

Driving myself over to the empty Underground location, I spent a few hours taking out my frustration and pain on the bag before my phone pulled me out of my head.

Grabbing it, I barely saw the name on the screen before I answered. "Tell me you're coming home a few days early," I told my sister.

Hearing her laugh, I felt a small fraction of my tension ease. "Nope, sorry. I just got off the phone with Josie, and I had this crazy need to hear my big brother's voice."

"Why can't you come home earlier?" I grouched. Picking up a towel, I wiped my face. "I haven't seen you since Christmas, damn it."

"I miss you too," she soothed. "I'll be home in four days, and I will get to spend three with you before I have to move to campus."

"I'm still not a fan of this arrangement. Why can't you live in your own home while you watch this celebrity princess?"

"Because she's supposed to be my roommate. That's my cover. I can keep better tabs on her and make friends easier."

"Just have her move in to the house with you. You can take over the other wing. I won't bother you."

“Judge,” she half huffed, half laughed. “How was your week?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I don’t want to argue. How was your week?” she repeated, putting more strength behind the question.

Putting the phone on speaker, I tossed it on the bench and started unwrapping my hands. “Same bullshit, day after day.”

“Nice to know some things don’t change,” she snickered. “How is Mabel doing?”

“She’s okay, I guess. She spends so much time at Miss Lindy’s that I rarely see her.” Tossing the bloody tape aside, I grabbed my water.

Lyla sucked in a breath. “How is she?”

“Not good,” I muttered. Miss Lindy had always been around, just like Mabel. First, as my preschool teacher and then, later, as Lyla and Ellianna’s. Summer camps, holiday events, were memories that always included Miss Lindy. She was an honorary aunt to all of us, including the other Sons.

When the girls were in middle school, she changed jobs and became their English teacher. Miss Lindy had gotten Elli into the classics, and then I had to watch all the Jane Austen adaptations with her because Lyla wouldn’t—and Elli needed to compare them to the books. She always found them lacking something. I still didn’t understand her fascination with Colonel Brandon.

“Damn.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“She’s going to be my first stop as soon as I get home. I’ll take Barrick and Braxton with me.” She hesitated, but then

asked, “Have you spoken to Mom lately?”

My red-flag alert went off. “No, why?”

“She called me about a week ago. Wanted to know if I would be home for Christmas this year.” She laughed dryly. “Stupid question. I’m home every Christmas, but where the fuck is she when the holidays roll around?”

“Last year, it was Paris,” I reminded her. Our mother remembered to text us “Merry Christmas” on New Year’s Day.

My exhausted mind tried to figure out what angle Brenda Bennet was going to attempt to work on my sister or me or both of us.

Asking either of us what our plans were for anything was always a sign she was up to something. But it was still too soon to understand her motives. Hell, she would probably forget about whatever shitshow she was concocting by then. Only time would tell, though.

I would have to make a few calls, check in with her security detail to make sure she was staying out of trouble.

“You sound tired,” Lyla commented a few minutes later, after we’d gone through all our typical conversation topics.

“I just got done with a workout,” I explained. No way in hell was I going to tell my sister what had happened with Ellianna. Lyla would kick my ass—and I would have to let her.

“That’s not your voice when you’re done doing cardio. Or beating on a bag. You sound...off. Are you getting sick?”

“No, I’m fine.”

She made a noise in disbelief. “It’s a migraine, isn’t it? You didn’t get your meds filled?”

“I’m fine, Lyla.”

“I’m calling your doctor and making an appointment for you myself on Monday. You don’t take care of yourself. I swear, you and Howler do nothing but stress me out. Do you live for this shit?”

Sighing, I let her rant for a minute before I cut her off. “Lyla, I said I’m fine.”

“Whatever,” she sassed. “I’m still calling the doctor on Monday. I’ll let Petra know the time.”

“Sure, Lyla,” I gave in. It was just easier when she was in this kind of mood.

“You better go!”

“Yes, Lyla.”

“I love you, you condescending asshole.”

“I love you too, you annoying bitch.”

Her laughter was soothing. “See you soon?”

“You better.”

CHAPTER 39

ELLIANNA

CLUTCHING MY BACKPACK STRAP IN ONE HAND, I TEXTED rapidly with the other. I was running late, but that was nothing new. It seemed like I was late for everything these days.

Class. Work. Life.

After letting my roommate know I was on my way to meet him for coffee, I rushed down the stairs of the English department building. Only several weeks into the term and most of the students I dealt with as a teacher's assistant needed extra credit. Or help with a paper. Or to annoy the hell out of me.

Tucking my hair behind my ear, I almost brushed my fingers over my neck. Almost. I was getting better at not reaching to feel if my necklace was where it should be. Every time I did and I found it missing, I felt a fresh stab of pain.

Clenching my jaw, I exited the building and turned in the direction of the student café. Students were crowded everywhere. Walking in groups, laughing, having conversations about classes and various other subjects. I heard random voices as I walked past them, weaving around everyone as my short legs ate up the distance to my destination.

And then...I saw him.

Phone to his ear, a glint in his eyes, staring at nothing as he spoke to whoever was on the other end of the call. I nearly tripped over the backpack of someone who was sitting at one of the benches along the path.

I hadn't seen Judge in weeks. Read his texts, yes. Deleted his voice mails without listening to his messages, definitely—except for one. I'd learned my lesson the one and only time I'd given in and played the first message.

“Come home,” he'd barked, and then...nothing. The duration of the call was nearly two minutes, but I'd hung up and deleted it after the first fifteen seconds of strained silence. If I wanted to be tortured, I didn't need his breathing in my ear to accomplish that.

All I needed was to remember every moment I'd spent imagining Judge felt something more for me. What a joke.

He looked good, leaner maybe, but still good. Not like he'd been pining for me. Missing me. Aching. Not like me, who could barely sleep or focus or live my life.

Someone shifted beside him, and I nearly lifted my hand to wave at Lyla. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her in person. Or heard her voice. I wanted to run over and hug her, ask her a million questions about how life was treating her. Tell her how much I missed her.

But I stayed rooted to the spot. If Judge weren't with her, I wouldn't have hesitated. Maybe I would seek her out another day.

I was about to turn and go. It was obvious they were going to the café as well since they were standing right outside the doors. Even though I was thirsty and I needed to eat something soon or risk my stomach revolting, I couldn't do it.

As far as I knew, my mom hadn't told Judge I was still in town. If she had, he would have turned up at my front door by now. Maybe. I wanted to think he would, but the likelihood that he had already found my replacement was high.

But I wasn't ready to face him. And I sure as hell couldn't have sat down in that small café, with him drinking coffee with his sister just a few tables away.

As if he could feel my gaze on him, Judge shifted his head, his eyes scanning faces until those brown eyes landed on me. His face morphed into something that resembled relief for a split second before it shuttered.

I sucked in a breath, waiting for him to stomp toward me. Make a scene. Growl. Shout. Maybe pick me up and carry me somewhere private.

He started to take a step toward me, and a group of girls walked by. It only took a moment. Less than a full second. But it was enough to give him pause.

He spoke into the phone and dropped his hand before turning to Lyla and saying something. I was too far away to hear, but Lyla frowned, her mouth moving rapidly as she followed her brother in the opposite direction.

When he walked away, a part of me broke all over again.

No longer trapped by his dark gaze, I sucked in a breath and pressed a hand to my chest. My heart was still beating. I focused on that and attempted to push Judge from my mind.

But that wasn't possible.

In the weeks since I'd found out the truth, everything had changed. But there was no way I could forget a single detail about the man who had altered my entire life.

Adjusting my backpack strap, I kept walking toward the café. I spotted my roommate as soon as I entered. It would have been difficult not to. Something about Kyndle just pulled a person's gaze straight to him.

His hand was already in the air, waving me over. "El," he called. "I already ordered for you, babe."

Ducking my head, I weaved through the tables toward him. Jumping to his feet, he held out a chair for me and waited until I was seated before retaking his. Always the gentleman. At least with his roommates. Everyone else, it was a coin toss of which side of Kyndle they got.

The sweet, I-will-protect-you-with-my-life version or the loud, in your face, ready to fight or run his mouth side. I guess it just depended whether he woke up deciding to choose violence that day or not. He never made me feel anything but safe with him, though, and I kind of adored him.

A to-go cup was already on the table with my name written in Sharpie. A tea bag sat beside it. Herbal. Decaf. From somewhere, I found the will to smile as I took the top off the cup of steaming water and tore open the wrapping on the tea bag.

"Thanks, you're the best."

"I know." He smirked as he leaned forward on his folded forearms. He already had a smear of mud on his cheek, I noticed. If he wasn't in class, he was playing football with his friends. The university didn't have a team, but a group of guys was always hanging around with a ball on one of the quads throughout the day.

Laughing, I dropped the tea bag in and selected a sweetener. "How was your test?"

“Thankfully, it went well. You saved me, El.” He tipped his head down, meeting my gaze. “How about I cook dinner tonight?”

Snorting, I snapped the lid back on. “I would rather not die from food poisoning, thanks.”

His laughter boomed through the café, and I hid behind the curtain of my hair, not wanting the attention. Automatically, my hand went to my throat, but I stopped myself before I could make contact with my bare neck. But that didn’t stop the memory of how Judge had looked as he’d walked away from me outside.

“Hey.” Kyndle’s voice had turned serious, his hand touching my arm, his thumb rubbing soothing circles at my wrist. “Don’t go there. Don’t let him invade again.”

I forced a weak smile. “It gets a little better every day,” I lied.

“No, Elli. You only get better at hiding it. Hudson and the girls might think it’s getting easier for you, but I see the truth.” He lifted my hand and wrapped it around my cup. “Sip. Once your stomach is warm, I’ll grab us a sandwich.”

Quietly, I took a tiny sip. Warmth flooded my belly, easing a little of the sourness that I had learned to live with. At least that was getting easier. A few changes here and there, and I was able to make it through the day without vomiting.

“You have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow?” Kyndle asked, and I shrugged. “I’ll drive you.”

I hesitated. “You don’t need to do that. I’ll be fine.”

“Ellianna.” His voice took on that firm quality, the one he used when he meant business. “One of us *will* drive you. You decide which one.”

If I had to pick one out of my five roommates, it would be Kyndle every time. I had become friends with them all. They were all a bit over-the-top protective and reminded me so much of Lyla it hurt. But Kyndle and I had clicked from the moment we met.

“Okay, I would appreciate the ride.” I gave in. “Thank you.”

“Stop thanking me. You’re my little El.”

I took a few more sips of my tea, and then he went to order us food. From his place in line, he shot me a wink. Smiling back, I pulled out my cell and noticed a text on the screen. Realizing I hadn’t turned the ringer back on after class, I fixed it and then pulled up my messages.

Judge: Call me. Now.

It was time-stamped from only a few minutes before. Erasing the text, I debated silencing my phone again, but I quickly vetoed the idea. Rita might call, and I didn’t want to worry her.

CHAPTER 40

JUDGE

LACK OF SLEEP AND TOO MANY HARD WORKOUTS WERE REALLY catching up to me because now I was seeing Ellianna right in front of me. A few days before, I was sure I'd heard her voice, but when I'd raced around the corner, all I'd found was Rita getting on the elevator.

I missed my Elli so fucking badly that now I was hallucinating.

I didn't have time for a mental breakdown, though. My sister had a psychotic drug addict threatening to gun her down. Someone had seen Howler's ex come out of a drug den with what appeared to be a gun.

Gwen never could accept being told no. After the ass-kicking Lyla had given her when she'd found out Gwen had hurt Josie, "no" was the only word she was getting. No, she couldn't pick up Josie from preschool. No, she would not be getting any more visitation days.

Despite having primary custody, Howler had still paid Gwen for the days she had Josie. Just to make sure that my goddaughter had the things she needed. Now that cash wouldn't be available, and Gwen wouldn't have funding for her bad habits.

After I dropped Lyla at Howler's, I told Tony to take me back to campus. I needed to be sure that I hadn't imagined Ellianna. She'd looked so fucking beautiful. So real.

She could have been anywhere—if she was there—so I started with the last place I'd seen her. My lock screen was a picture of Ellianna, and I had it ready to ask the first person I saw when I stepped into the café.

But as soon as I entered, my eyes were drawn straight to a back table. Blond hair flowed over her shoulders as she took a small bite of sandwich. Placing it on her plate, she wiped her mouth, a tiny giggle reaching my ears over the chatter over the other patrons.

“That's Judge,” someone said loud enough for me to hear as the door closed behind me.

“OMG. That's really him!” A feminine voice came next.

Ignoring them, I made my way through the café, still convinced I was seeing things. She was supposed to be at Stanford. All the funds were already in her account to make sure her necessities were covered. Mabel told me Ellianna was at school. She assured me everything was fine. Every day. Without fail, she let me know her daughter was safe.

As I walked toward her, her image didn't flicker or fade away like it did on the rare occasions I was able to sleep. The vision before me became clearer. My breathing grew labored the closer I drew. When I was a few yards away, her head snapped around, and those light-blue eyes connected with mine.

Chest heaving, I stopped, soaking in the sight before me. Her beauty never failed to stun me. Sometimes I wondered if I

made it up in my head, but then I would look at her pictures saved in my phone and realize how poor of a memory I had.

“El?”

Ellianna jerked and shifted her head. I followed the movement with my eyes and found a guy I didn't know sitting across from her. Tall, athletic, and Ellianna's age if I had to guess. He glanced from her to me and back again, a frown pulling his brows together.

“I have to go,” she muttered, jumping to her feet. Grabbing her phone and her backpack, she hastily backed away from the table. “I-I'll see you later.”

“El, wait. What's wrong?”

“Bye!” she called over her shoulder as she practically ran out a different door from the one I'd just entered through.

She ran from *me*.

Again.

Muttering a curse, I took off after her at full speed. Slamming through the door before it had a chance to close, I raced after her. “Elli.”

Students and professors turned at my roar, but Ellianna kept running. I caught up to her in no time, my long legs eating up the distance she was so desperate to put between us. I moved in front of her a few steps, then turned to face her, my hands automatically going out to steady her so she didn't fall.

Breathing hard, she glared up at me. “Go away. Leave me alone.”

“No, never.” My hands lingered at her waist before traveling up her back. Feeling her warm body under my

fingers was nirvana. I wanted to pick her up and bury my face in her hair.

Somehow, I restrained myself. “Why are you here?”

Shit, my voice came out raw, almost accusatory.

She flinched but tilted her head back stubbornly. “I wasn’t aware I was only allowed to go to Stanford. Oh, wait. According to you, that is all I’m allowed.”

Ignoring the barb, I wrapped my fingers around a lock of her hair. “Have you been here the entire time?”

“Is that a crime, Judge?”

From the glimmer in those baby blues, I could tell she was itching to be punished. Inhaling through my nose, I fought the need to give her exactly what she wanted.

“Does Mabel know you’re here?” I growled.

“She’s my mother. Of course she knows.”

I replayed every time Mabel had told me how Ellianna was doing and realized she had only said “school,” never actually specifying which one, though. Groaning, I tugged on Ellianna’s hair. “Where are you staying?”

“None of your business.”

Movement from behind her drew my gaze. Seeing the guy she’d just been eating with, I pulled her closer, swallowing the snarl that vibrated in my chest.

“El, you okay?”

She stiffened against me before turning her head to glance over her shoulder. “I’m good.”

“It doesn’t seem like it,” he argued. Crossing his arms over his chest, he stared me down. “Is this guy bothering you?”

“No. It’s fine. Everything is...fine.”

I flashed my teeth at him. “You heard her. Now get lost.”

Despite the aggression I was giving off, he didn’t back down. “El?”

She shivered against me. “I really am okay. This is...an old friend.”

“Elli,” I warned.

“Shut. Up,” she gritted out between clenched teeth at me, only to give the motherfucker behind her a smile. “We can talk tonight.”

“Ellianna.”

She pointed her finger in my face without looking at me. “Don’t.”

Cradling her face, I turned her head so she was looking up at me. “Eyes on me.”

Fire flashed in her baby blues. “I’ll deal with you in a moment.” Jerking away from my hold, she turned her body away from me. “I’ll see you later tonight, Kyndle.”

“The fuck you will.” I grasped her hips, pulling her back against my front and locking an arm around her waist.

She slapped at my hand. “Later,” she repeated to the guy still standing there. The longer he lingered, the more painful I promised myself his death would be. “I’ve got this.”

“If you’re sure,” he said reluctantly.

“She’s fucking sure,” I snapped. “Get lost.”

She elbowed me in the gut. “Promise.”

“All right, babe. I’ll see you at home.”

Red film descended over my eyes.

See you at home.

Those words echoed in my head. Over and over again. Through my need to tear the bastard apart, I watched him cast me another hard, suspicious look before he walked away.

I stood there holding on to the only salvation I've ever known. Torn between wanting to rip the fucker's head off or drop to my knees and beg her to come home with me. Where she belonged.

Ellianna waited until he went back into the café before turning to blast me with her icy glare. "Really? Maybe next time, you should whip out your dick and piss on my leg."

I stuffed my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching for her again, even though every nerve was screaming for me to grab hold and never let go. "Don't give me ideas, baby."

"I'm not your baby. I'm not your anything."

Hands fisting in my pockets, I clenched my teeth. "You are everything."

"Did you chase me just to bullshit me?" she demanded.

"Do you think I call you all day, every day, send hundreds of texts daily, beg you to come back to me every day to bullshit you, Elli?" When she remained silent, just looked up at me like she was waiting for me to confess—to what, I didn't fucking know—I barked out a laugh. "What do you want? My soul? Huh? Because it's already yours."

Rolling her eyes, she took a step backward. "A tad too dramatic, but cool story. You definitely would have succeeded if you'd pursued acting." She made a show of checking the

time on her phone. “Sorry, I’m all out of time for you to practice your lines on.”

“You’re maddening, you know that?” I exploded, thrusting my fingers into my hair in frustration. “You only hear what you want to hear. No matter how many times I apologize, you won’t listen.”

“You?” She laughed. “Apologize? Does Judge Bennet even know how to say he’s sorry?”

“I...” I faltered with the realization that she was right.

I’d never told her I was sorry.

Not once.

Fuck!

“Baby, I’m—”

“And what right do you have to even ask me to listen to anything you want to say?” she interrupted. “You have a lot of fucking nerve to think I owe you a single moment of my time, Douchebag.”

“I know I don’t deserve it, but I’m still begging you—”

“And I’m begging you!” she cried. “Walk away and leave me the fuck alone.”

Her tears were too much. How was I supposed to survive them? When they spilled down her angry, beautiful face, I wanted to die at her feet. Anything to stop her pain.

Insanity clawed at me, but I was clueless as to how to fix what I’d broken. To make her listen. To get her to come home.

To love me again.

CHAPTER 4I

ELLIANNA

PAIN FLASHED ACROSS JUDGE'S FACE.

As if he was the one who was hurt.

As if he was the one who'd had his heart torn from his chest. Stepped on. Ground to dust. Left with nothing. As if I had betrayed him. Snatched away his dreams.

And the part that killed me—made me want to rage and revolt and physically hurt him—was that it hurt to see his pain. For a moment, I struggled to breathe, to focus. All I saw was him, the torture in his brown eyes, the agony on his stupid, handsome face.

No!

He didn't get to be the victim. He was the villain. The man I'd always fantasized about being my hero was nothing more than a narcissistic bastard.

“This town is obviously big enough for both of us to live in without crossing paths. Pretend you didn't see me.”

His throat bobbed up and down. Damn him. God fucking damn him for playing his role so well. I almost believed him. But never again. “Go back to the life I'm sure you enjoyed before and after I took up so much of your time.”

He bowed his head, and I heard him swallow convulsively. “I have no life without you.”

Gulping back a sob, I called upon all my anger that had been hiding right below the surface, masked only by my pain. “Goodbye, Judge.”

His head snapped back like I’d just delivered a staggering uppercut. “No.”

“Yes.” Adjusting my backpack, I took another step backward. “I’m going home.”

His eyes flashed amber fire. “To him?”

I tipped my head back and smirked up at him, knowing exactly how dangerous it was to bait him. “Yes, we live together. You’re not the only one who already moved on.”

“Moved on?” he repeated, breathing hard. “Moved on? You think I fucking moved on?”

Cocking a brow, I just stared up at him, daring him to lie. “You’re Judge Bennet. Of course you moved on.”

A strangled sound left him. “There is no moving on from you, Elli. There is no finding someone new. No one better. No one, period. There’s you and only you. Until the day they bury me.”

“Whoa,” I gasped in mock amazement. “You really are the king of pickup lines. Do you give lessons to the other Sons, as well as teach them how to fight?”

Groaning, he reached for me, and I jumped back. “You’re not going home to him. You’re mine, Elli.”

I snorted. “Anyone would think you were an only child with your inability to share your toys. Good thing I know differently.”

“Stubborn little brat.” He shook his head. “I will have to find a way to make you understand.”

“I won’t hold my breath waiting.” Feeling eyes on me, I heard a few whispers as people passed. All of them were about Judge.

“Who is she?”

Heat crawled up my neck and into my face at the snide cattiness of a girl who walked a little too close to us. Judge’s head canted toward the group she was in, blasting the nosy girl with the coldness of his eyes. I didn’t even look her way, but I had zero doubt she would be Judge’s type. Big boobs. Sexy hair. Supermodel body.

Of course she was curious why he would even look twice at someone like me. How I’d thought I was anything special—just because he’d collared me—I was still trying to figure out.

“Too close!” he yelled, and I saw several people jump out of the corner of my eye. “Wide berth. Wider. You see her, you keep walking. Don’t look. Don’t talk. Don’t breathe.”

“S-sorry, Judge,” a few people mumbled, the crunch of their shoes on the sidewalk heavy as they scattered.

“Great. Now most of the campus is going to be terrified of speaking to me.” I was tempted to swing my backpack at his thick head. “I’m a TA, you asshole. I need my students to be comfortable communicating with me.”

“You’re an undergrad. How are you a teaching assistant?” He sounded so incredulous, the urge to swing my bag at his face returned.

“There was a vacant spot in the English department, and I applied.” I wasn’t stupid enough to think I’d gotten the position completely on my own, though. Being connected to

Judge had opened many doors for me. All my professors and even the chancellor had asked me more than once how Judge was doing.

Every time, I would paste on a smile and simply tell them he was busy. Always busy. They would grin like they knew all of his secrets and request I tell him hello for them.

“How did the LSAT go?”

Another direct hit to my center. How did he know where to hit and with what ammunition to strike? “It didn’t, because I didn’t take it.”

“You need those scores to apply to law school.” He said it like I wasn’t aware. “I’ll make some calls.”

“There’s no need.” My phone pinged with a text, but I ignored it.

“Are you putting off law school?” he asked with a frown, his eyes scanning back and forth across my face.

“I changed my major when classes started. Dropped the Econ. I’m focusing only on my English major.” It had taken me a week into the semester to decide what to do. I’d cried about it for a few days, but law school just wasn’t something I was passionate about anymore. “A tenured professor is leaving after the spring term, and I’m a candidate for the empty position that will create when someone else gets the tenure.”

It seemed like a foregone conclusion. The dean already assumed I was going to be taking the job. I hadn’t earned it. Not yet. But would I ever receive anything because of my accomplishments?

Experience told me no.

Unless I moved away, everyone would connect me to Judge, and things would just be handed to me. It was tempting to find a place where his power was unreachable. But I couldn't go. Not now.

And whether I liked it or not, Judge was going to be a huge part of my future.

But I didn't have to tell him that yet.

If he could keep something life-changing from me, I could return it tenfold.

At least for a little longer.

"That's not your plan," he argued, his movements becoming agitated.

"I made new ones," I said dismissively.

"Your dream was to be a lawyer. A prosecutor. Don't give up on that just because you're angry with me," he implored.

My stomach complained, and I knew I needed to get away from him before I puked at his feet. "Those were silly fantasies of a stupid girl who was gullible enough to imagine she had what it took to be a lawyer."

"You're not stupid! You're amazing. Brilliant. Perfect." He stumbled forward a step, his hands lifted as if to beg me. "Please, sweetheart. You are almost there. You can't give up now."

I wrapped my arms around my middle, nausea rolling around like an angry sea before a storm. My late lunch would be on the ground soon if I didn't get out of there. "Good chat, Judge, but I'm bored with this conversation." I turned away, walking toward the café, calling over my shoulder, "Let my mom know I'll call her later."

“Elli!” he bellowed behind me, but I didn’t sense him giving chase this time.

I lifted my hand in the air and waved. “See you around.”

CHAPTER 42

ELLIANNA

YAWNING, I DROPPED DOWN ONTO THE COUCH IN THE LIVING room. I cuddled up to one of the pillows Vaya had decorated with the moment she'd moved in for the semester. It was soft to the touch but firm enough that it had the perfect support for my neck, making for the best naps.

Curling into a ball, I closed my eyes. After a restless night followed by an early morning class and then a few hours tutoring, I'd had a doctor's appointment. All I wanted was to spend the rest of the day, and maybe most of the weekend, vegged out right where I was.

How long I dozed, I wasn't sure, but Hudson's and Celica's excited chatter roused me sometime later. Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I rolled onto my back to find them dressed for a night out.

"Please come with us," Celica urged when she noticed I was awake, her kind smile warming me. "We want to hang out with you."

I adjusted the pillow under my head. "Where are you going?"

Vaya walked into the living room, dressed to kill. She was, hands down, Judge's type for sure, but I knew for a fact he never would be hers. Rita had already called dibs.

“There’s this secret society thing,” she explained, but I already knew what she was going to say before she finished. “It’s called the Underground. The locals are obsessed with it. We go a few times a year when we all have a free Friday.”

“I don’t think I’ll be very good company. But it sounds like you three will have a good time.” I sat up, pushing my hair back from my face. “I’m still trying to recover from this long week.”

“You know why you’re so exhausted all the time?” Hudson argued. “Because you’re all work and no play. You need more fun in your life, Elli.”

“I’ll have fun when college is over,” I mumbled.

“You’ll have fun tonight,” she said with a laugh, grabbing my arm and tugging me to my feet. “Come in, El. It’s a blast. We get to see hot guys beating on each other in a metal cage. Drinks aren’t too expensive. And there is always drama of some kind. I’m hoping Beast fights again tonight. Or at least referees. He’s so freaking hot.”

My ears perked up at that. “Beast?”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen Barrick. But of course, I should have known if Lyla was home, the probability of both her cousins being with her was high.

“Yeah, that’s his fighter name,” Hudson explained. “He’s...” Her eyes widened for dramatic effect. “Delicious. Muscles for days. Long mahogany hair. Beard. He’s got a girlfriend, but it’s not a crime to look.”

“I’m a Howler fan.” Celica fanned her face. “He’s built like a tree, and I want to climb him so bad. Blond hair. Blue eyes. I literally melt every time he’s in the cage and he howls.”

Biting back a smile, I considered my options. My roommates and friends wanted to hang out with me. Judge was well aware I was in town now. If we bumped into each other, I'd just pretend not to know him. Not that I expected him to be there. He hadn't attended a single Underground event the entire summer. Usually because he was locked in a room with me.

Pushing those memories aside, I smiled up at Hudson. "How should I dress?"

I might be close to my roommates, Kyndle more so than the others, but I hadn't told them I'd grown up in this town. Or that I was all too aware of the Underground and every single one of the fighters.

"Whatever you're comfortable in," Vaya answered. "But you look super cute just the way you are."

"If you're trying to win points with Rita by buttering me up, I'm sure it's working," I teased as I turned to climb the stairs.

"I know how to keep my girl happy," Vaya called after me, making me laugh.

Over an hour later, Hudson parked her car in the overflowing lot, and I slowly climbed out. Seeing the crowd, I began to have doubts about joining my roommates for the night.

And what if I did see Judge?

My nerves still felt raw after our run-in the day before. Not to mention my visit to the doctor.

But before I could bail, Vaya linked her arm through mine. "You look beautiful like always," she soothed. "We're going to have a great night."

Forcing a smile, I nodded and let her guide me toward the entrance.

Downtown was at the door, taking the cover. I extracted my wallet from my crossbody while the other three paid their entrance fee. When it was my turn, his jaw nearly dropped.

“No charge,” he squawked when I waved the cash in his face.

“But my roommates had to pay,” I explained, willing him with my eyes not to say anything that would require my having to spend the entire night explaining things to Hudson, Celica, and Vaya that I didn’t want to talk about.

He made a choking noise. “They’re with you?” He pointed his thumb at my friends, and I shrugged. Quickly, he counted out the money they had just paid him and shoved it back at them. “Enjoy the fight, ladies.”

Eyes huge, the three of them folded their money. “I’ll get the first round of drinks,” Celica said, waving the bills.

While she and Vaya went to grab us refreshments, Hudson and I went in search of a place to sit that had room for all four of us. “What kind of black magic was that?” she demanded with a laugh. “We’ve all tried to flirt and flash our way past that guy every time we’ve come here. He never gave us a freebie. But you just blinked at him, and he was about to swallow his tongue.”

I glanced around, pretending to people watch so I didn’t have to lie to her face. “I guess I’m his type.”

That, and every single Son would kill him if they found out he’d charged me to get in.

When I caught sight of a tall blond at the bar, I had the urge to duck down so Howler wouldn’t see me, but I quickly

chastised myself for being a coward. Then I spotted who was with him, and my heart leaped.

Lyla waved.

“Who is that?” Hudson asked curiously.

“A friend. Be right back.” I was already moving, needing to hug Lyla so badly I felt a burning in my eyes.

As soon as we were close enough, we threw our arms around each other. And everything hit pause for a moment. I breathed in slowly as her arms enfolded me. All I wanted was to hold on for a little longer. To have the peace that settled over me last another second.

CHAPTER 43

JUDGE

TAPING MY HANDS, I KEPT THE MUSIC BLASTING IN MY earbuds, blocking out the noise vibrating the walls as fans filled the building.

If Ellianna knew I was fighting, she would be upset. Scared. But she didn't know, and I needed to release all the frustration that built more and more every day. Every hour without my Elli was an hour too long.

Since I'd seen her the day before, everything had gotten worse. The pain. The noise in my head. The need to destroy everything around me.

After another sleepless night, this one spent outside her house—where I'd seen that asshole Kyndle go inside and never fucking leave—I didn't risk going to work. No one wanted me to preside over a case when I was already itching to tear someone's head off.

In the other locker room, Sledge was no doubt getting ready. I needed a good fight with an opponent who wasn't scared to throw a punch. I wanted to bleed. He was a dirty motherfucker. I didn't know why I let him remain a Son, but he'd make me work for it.

Which was exactly what I needed.

My playlist ended in my ear, my cue that it was time to go. Tossing my buds in my gym bag, I flexed my fingers, testing the job I'd done with the tape. It was second nature at this point, but I always double-checked.

Hearing the roar of the crowd, I shook out my building tension. It didn't work. Maybe when I spilled Sledge's blood, I'd feel something other than the gut-churning loneliness of being without my Elli.

Music pumped through the system, and the entire place was in darkness except for the spotlight that followed me.

Eyes on the cage, I stepped out of the locker room. Fans screamed and cried my name, but my gaze was on the man in the ring. My hand touched the cage door just as the lights came up.

A flash of blond behind my opponent caught my attention. My heart lifted into my throat. There she was. Sitting with strangers. No Howler or Lyla to protect her. Looking so beautiful and fragile. Her wounded eyes destroyed me, demanding to know what I was doing.

I hadn't fought since she was sixteen. When I'd taken on Rebel and she'd cried. My head had been killing me, Rebel was about to kick my ass, but then I'd heard Ellianna crying.

"I can't do this. I can't do this. I can't do this. Please stop. Please stop."

Her sobs had haunted me for weeks, and I couldn't bring myself to put her through that again.

And there I was, about to do just that.

Because I couldn't fucking breathe without her.

Stepping into the cage, I let the door slam behind me. I tried to look away from Elli, but my gaze kept traveling back to her. Unable to stop myself.

My head snapped back when Sledge threw a sucker punch. I tasted blood on my tongue.

Yes.

Make it hurt.

Make the pain go away.

Make me feel something.

Anything but despair.

Roaring my rage, finally getting to vent all the pent-up torment that had been festering, I tackled the Son to the floor and unleashed.

Everything.

I might have killed him if Sledge didn't get in a lucky blow. Blood gushed from my nose, and I stumbled back. Sledge took his opening, returning the beating I'd just laid on him.

I welcomed it.

Until I saw Ellianna's face.

She looked like she was going to be sick. A tear escaped her pretty eyes just as she mouthed, "Zachary."

No.

No, I couldn't let her watch this.

I couldn't put her through more.

She was scared.

For me.

Because she still loved me.

Ducking Sledge's next punch, I landed a blow to the side of his head, and he crumpled. Around me, the crowd was silent, the only sound that of the Son's body hitting the mat.

While the ref checked to see if Sledge was still breathing, Ellianna jumped up and ran for the nearest exit.

My first instinct was to chase after her. But then three other girls rushed out behind her. One of them, I'd seen enter the house where Ellianna was staying. Roommates, at least one of them.

I let them all go, knowing that with the way I looked right then, it would only upset my Elli more. I'd get checked over by the doctor first. But then nothing would stop me from seeing her.



POUNING MY FIST AGAINST THE FRONT DOOR, I MENTALLY cursed Ellianna's stubbornness. I'd already pressed the doorbell twice and gotten no answer. There were five cars in the driveway, the same number that had been there the night before when all the lights had finally turned off, so I figured everyone was home.

I wasn't going to let her hide from me, damn it.

"Elli!" I shouted. "Open the fucking door. Now."

Sensing movement on the other side, I dropped my hand just as the door swung inward. But it wasn't Ellianna on the other side.

"She doesn't want to see you," Kyndle informed me. Leaning against the doorframe, he blocked me from entering

the house.

I let him keep that illusion, for the moment.

“Let her tell me that.”

Huffing a laugh, he shook his head. “When a girl says no, it means no.”

I stiffened. “You think I don’t respect her boundaries?”

“You’re here when she already told you to get lost, so…” Lifting his chin, he nodded toward the driveway. “I saw you last night. Sleeping in your car out there like a fucking stalker.”

“Didn’t get any sleep,” I told him with a shrug.

“Looks like you took a beating.” He smirked. “The other chicks you’re stalking give you that busted nose?”

“Elli!” I called into the house. “Ellianna!”

His grin dropped. “Dude, she’s already in bed.”

She should have been home in *our* bed. “Elli!”

“I have neighbors, man. One of them is gonna call the cops. They don’t like noise.”

Snorting, I pushed against him. “Let them. Elli! Get your ass out here. Now.”

He pushed me back. “Do. Not. Talk. To. Her. Like. That.”

His protectiveness of her only spiked my rage. “Elli, if you value this asshole’s life, you better come talk to me.”

Running feet had me looking over his shoulder. Moments later, she appeared. Hair up in a knot. Thin, floral robe hanging open over her matching tank top and shorts pajama

set that had little kittens on it. So innocent. So fucking beautiful it hurt.

“Baby,” I breathed.

Blowing out a sigh, she put her hands on her hips, and I was alerted to the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra.

“Tie the robe,” I snapped.

Rolling her eyes, she folded the robe over her chest and secured it. “Did you even let the doctor check you over?”

Hearing the concern in her voice eased some of the tightness in my throat. “No concussion.”

She *hmped*. “Bet Sledge can't say the same.”

“Don't know. Didn't stick around to find out.” I glanced at Kyndle, who was still standing in my way. Blocking me from the one I craved. “Elli.”

Blue lights pulled up in front of the house, causing Kyndle to laugh. “Told ya.”

Aggravated by the interruption, I took a step back, letting the porch light show the officer who I was.

“Everything okay here, Judge?” the cop called.

“We're good, Nelson,” I assured him. “Just checking on Ellianna.”

He stepped onto the bottom step of the porch. “Miss Elli lives here?”

“Ellianna,” I automatically corrected, holding out my hand to Elli. “Baby, come say hello to Nelson.”

“The fuck?” Kyndle grumbled. “El?”

Glancing back, I saw her duck under his arm, patting him on the stomach as she passed. I restrained the urge to snatch her hands away from him. “It’s fine. Don’t worry.”

“He knows the cops?”

“Sort of,” Elli said evasively before stepping over to the stairs. Smacking my hand away, she shifted around me to give the cop a brittle smile. “How’s your wife, Nelson?”

“She’s doing well, Miss Ellianna,” he told her with a beaming smile. “We just welcomed our first baby last month.”

“Oh gosh! That’s great. Congrats. Do you have pictures?” He pulled out his phone before she’d even finished gushing. “How sweet! Mommy and baby are doing well?”

“Couldn’t have asked for an easier delivery. We’re still learning, but neither of us has ever been happier.”

Watching how genuinely kind and sincere Ellianna was when she spoke to the officer, I was enthralled by her beauty. The way her eyes shone. The musical melody of her laugh. Fuck, I’d missed her. I missed each and every small detail about her, from the adorable way she hogged the covers to the annoying habit she had of not squeezing the toothpaste from the bottom.

“Well, tell her I said hi,” she told Nelson. “And give that precious little boy a kiss for me.”

“I will, Miss Ellianna.” He tilted his head to the door. “You two sure everything is okay? This isn’t the first time we’ve gotten a noise complaint about this house.”

“I’m so sorry you were bothered.” Elli side-eyed me. “I guess we weren’t moving fast enough to answer the door for someone.”

“How many times have you been called out here?” I was already seething. How often had Ellianna been put in danger?

“Get a few calls every term from a concerned neighbor. Last few times were because of parties that got rowdy.”

“We were singing Christmas carols,” Kyndle griped from the still-open door.

Nelson grimaced. “It was May. They were drinking.”

“Finals are killer, man. We all drink after surviving that shit.”

Ellianna made a humming noise. “I’ll personally make sure there are no more causes for complaint, Nelson.”

“I would appreciate that, Miss Ellianna.” He stepped back. “Judge, I’ll have patrols increased in this neighborhood for you.”

“Thanks, Officer. You have a safe shift.” We all waited for him to get in his car, turn off the blue lights, and back out before any of us reacted. I leaned back against the porch rail and folded my arms over my chest, getting comfortable.

“El, are you good with him being here?” Kyndle asked her.

“I’ve got this,” she said after a brief hesitation.

“Okay, babe. But let me know if you change your mind. I’ll kick him off the property,” the other guy promised.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Ellianna stomped her foot. “Why are you here?”

“We still have things to discuss.” Grasping her by the elbows, I tugged her forward.

“I said what I wanted to say yesterday.”

“Exactly. You said. I didn’t get a chance to speak.” Rolling my shoulders, I tried to relax a little. “I’m not leaving until you hear me out.”

I wasn’t leaving then either. Not unless she went with me, but there was no reason to open that can of worms unless I had to.

Groaning, she adjusted her robe and stuffed her hands into the pockets. Impatience pulled at her brow, but she couldn’t hide the curiosity in her eyes. Not even in the porch light. “Fine, I’m listening. Say what you need to.”

“I’m sorry.”

CHAPTER 44

ELLIANNA

HE SAID THOSE TWO WORDS LIKE THEY HELD ALL THE POWER in the world. As if he expected me to praise him for being a decent human being and apologizing for his mistakes.

And maybe it did heal me. But only a little. There was nothing he could say or do to put my heart back together. Not after he'd completely destroyed me.

Yet he looked at me with such hope while leaning back against the banister. Hope and a hint of smugness. He honestly thought an "I'm sorry" was going to fix everything.

Which was so hilarious, I couldn't contain my giggle.

Had Judge ever said those words? To anyone? I doubted it. Unless it was Lyla, and even then, it was questionable. He didn't do apologies. Ever.

When he frowned, his confusion making it obvious my amusement wasn't the reaction he expected, my giggle turned into a full-on laugh.

Muttering a curse, he grasped my hands and tugged me forward. Bending his knees, he looked me in the eyes. "Baby, I'm so sorry for hurting you. It was never my intention."

My laughter quickly dried up. "No, your intention was for me to never find out."

“Of course not. I knew it would hurt you.”

And maybe that hurt the most. He did it knowing what it would do to me, yet he didn't even pause long enough to care. “But you did it anyway.”

“For you.”

“Coward.” Jerking my hands out of his hold, I met his gaze boldly. “You're nothing but a fucking coward.”

“Me?” he growled. “You're calling me a coward when all you have done for months is run away from this situation?”

“Excuse me for taking myself out of a toxic environment.” I heard the air hiss out of him, as if I'd hit him as hard as Sledge. “You're the one who was so scared of what he supposedly felt for me that you upended my entire future to ‘protect’ me from you. From where I'm standing, the only one you were protecting was yourself.”

He straightened to his full height, making me have to tip my head back in order to maintain eye contact. “You don't believe that.”

“It's a reasonable deduction. Based on all the evidence presented, it's the only logical conclusion.”

“Logical,” he grunted. “There is nothing logical about what I feel for you, Ellianna.”

Say it, I silently willed. Say it. I dare you.

Because if he truly felt anything besides guilt and lust, he would have said the words by now. If he had been just as destroyed by our time apart as I had, he wouldn't be able to contain how he felt. He wouldn't be able to withhold those three words that might be the only miracle powerful enough to repair all the broken pieces of my heart.

But he didn't say anything, just stood there expectantly.

I tightened my robe around myself, shivering in the breeze. And still, I waited.

For my miracle.

For three little words that I knew he didn't actually feel, but I still hoped to hear anyway.

When one minute ticked into two, then three, and all he did was stand there waiting for me to respond, I decided to bow out gracefully. "Goodnight, Judge," I whispered past the lump in my throat.

"Elli, wait." He wrapped his arms around me from behind when I turned for the door. "What do you need? What can I do or say to make you understand?"

"I already understand," I choked.

Groaning, he buried his face in my neck. "No, you don't, sweetheart. If you did, you would be coming home with me right now. This misery would be over for both of us. We could have it all."

"There's only one thing I need, Zachary. But you can't give me that."

His arms tightened around my waist to the point of discomfort. "I can give you everything you've ever wanted. Just say the word, and I'll hand it over, no matter the price. It's yours, all of it's yours. All I want in return is you."

Tears blinded me, the urge to give in suffocating me. But I couldn't. "If I have to tell you what I need from you, then it's not worth it. It won't be real. They will be nothing more than empty words you speak to placate me. And as much as I ache

to hear them, I'm not strong enough to survive how much it's going to hurt knowing you don't feel the same way I do."

He skimmed the shell of my ear with his lips. "How am I supposed to know if you don't tell me?"

"You're a smart man, Judge. If you don't already feel the overpowering need to speak the words I need out loud, then you don't feel them."

I wasn't sure if I'd surprised him, or if he finally understood what it was I needed and realized he couldn't give me *everything* as he'd promised. Either way, he loosened his arm from around me enough that I was able to step away.

Turning to face him, I pasted on a smile when I saw how conflicted he appeared. "It's okay, Judge. I told you that I understood. I'm not asking for anything, especially not for you to feel something you can't. That's not fair to either of us."

He opened his mouth but, after a moment of nothing but silence, snapped it closed again. Despite telling myself he couldn't break me any more than he already had, I knew my heart hadn't gotten the memo. All those shattered pieces lying in a pile in the center of my chest felt ground into dust under the pressure of his silence.

"No answer is still an answer."

CHAPTER 45

JUDGE

WHILE I SAT IN MY CAR ALL NIGHT, WATCHING THE HOUSE where Ellianna slept, I tried to figure out what she wanted so desperately but refused to ask for. My gut churned with acid as insanity from lack of sleep mixed with my worry for my sister and missing Elli.

She was so fucking frustrating. The little brat was giving me an ulcer.

Apparently, I couldn't do anything but watch over Elli's house for the moment. But at least I could take care of the Gwen issue and better protect Lyla and Josie. After arranging for someone to pay a discreet visit to the junkie whore's apartment, I settled back in my seat, giving the house my full attention.

From where I was parked, I couldn't tell which room was Elli's. Lights were already off, the house in total darkness. It was probably a good thing I didn't know which room was hers. I wasn't sure if I would be able to resist climbing through her window if I did.

Nelson had followed through on his promise because I'd seen not only him patrol the block, but two other cops as well. All three of them had saluted me as they'd driven past.

Reclining my seat, I leaned my head back, my body aching from the fight earlier. I would need to see my dentist about the loose tooth I'd sustained. My body felt like one big bruise, and I had no pain relief in the car, but I wasn't about to leave, even for the brief time it would take to grab a packet of ibuprofen and a bottle of water from the gas station down the street.

Dawn was just peeking over the horizon when the sound of a door shutting caught my attention. Shifting my head, I found an older man in a robe walking toward me from the house next door, two mugs of steaming coffee in his hands.

Rolling down my window, I waited, recognizing the man but unable to remember his name.

"Morning, Judge," his gravelly voice greeted. "Thought you might need a cup of Joe after watching over little Ellianna all night. You take it black?"

I accepted the cup graciously. "Thank you, sir." Taking a sip, I unlocked the passenger door. "Join me."

"Wish I could, son. But the wife is expecting her Saturday morning coffee in bed." He took a sip from his own mug. "She was the one who called the cops last night. She's always fussy about those college kids. We didn't know Ellianna had moved in, though. If we did, I would have been watching the house better. Definitely will from here on out. Don't you worry."

"Thank you, sir. That puts me a little more at ease, knowing she's being watched over." I took another drink, groaning my appreciation. "You make perfect coffee."

"You learn a few things when you've lived as long as me," he chuckled.

I flicked my gaze back to the house, unable to keep my eyes off it for long intervals. "Other than the rowdy college

kids, you consider this to be a safe neighborhood?”

“Never had any problems.” He leaned against the door. “But I understand your need to look after Ellianna. She’s a precious little thing. So much like her mother. Saw Mabel at the grocery store just the other day, shopping for Miss Lindy, bless her.”

“Yeah, they’re both special.”

He pointed his mug toward my face. “See you’ve been in the cage. If I’d known you were fighting again, I would have made it to the Underground last night.”

I touched a finger to my gash on my nose. “Spur-of-the-moment thing. Doubt I’ll get back in again anytime soon.”

Amusement lit his eyes. “A tiny blond wouldn’t be your reason for either decision, would she, son?”

“She’s the reason I do anything these days, sir,” I confided without shame. “Stubborn brat won’t come home where she belongs.”

“Eh, I’m sure she thinks she has her reasons. That’s one thing my wife has taught me. Whether I understand them or not, she thinks she has a valid point. Regrettably, it’s usually because I’ve legitimately fucked up.”

“Yeah.” I sighed with regret. “How do you get her to forgive you when you do?”

“Flowers. Dinner. Throw in a few ‘I’m sorry, it will never happen again.’ And when that doesn’t work?” He shrugged, his lips twitching with a ghost of a grin. “Well, it’s hard for her to stay angry when she’s blissed out after a few orgasms.”

I laughed. “You’re a smart man, sir.”

“I remind my wife of that every day.”



BETWEEN WORRYING ABOUT LYLA AND WATCHING ELLI'S house, I was drained by Monday. Sleep didn't happen Saturday, and I spent the night parked outside the two-story house all night. Mr. Watson brought me a thermos of coffee Sunday morning when he came out to retrieve his newspaper. But I didn't see Ellianna once.

After seeing the photos of Gwen's apartment, my stress level only escalated. As coked out of her head as my best friend's ex was most days, I had zero doubt she would try to harm my baby sister.

Thankfully, Howler agreed to convince Lyla to take out an order of protection.

It was the first thing I had William take care of on Monday when I walked into the office. A call to Rita hurried it along, and it was on my desk by the time Howler and Lyla walked in at the end of the day.

But of course, my sister had to be difficult, and I had to scare her with thoughts of what could happen to Josie if she didn't sign the restraining order. Seeing the fear and tears in her eyes was too much.

Instead of going home, I drove straight to Elli's. Since the previous Thursday when I'd seen her on campus, I'd been driving myself everywhere. I didn't want Tony or anyone else on my security detail getting the chance to see her when I was denied that privilege.

Stepping onto the porch, I kicked a pair of mud-caked cleats out of the way and knocked. Several moments passed before I heard footsteps. When the door opened, a girl who

hadn't been at the Underground with Ellianna on Friday stood there with a glower.

"Yeah, what do you want?"

"Is Ellianna here?" I asked, glancing over her shoulder in hopes of catching a glimpse.

"Nope." The way she popped the "p" annoyed me. "She's at work."

"She doesn't have an evening class today." I'd gotten both her class and work schedule emailed to me directly from the university's chancellor Friday morning. I'd memorized it by lunchtime the same day.

"She does tutoring for a few other subjects besides English to earn extra cash." She tilted her head pointedly, looking at my car parked in its usual spot on the street. "Are you going to be out there all night again?"

"Probably. Is she at the campus library?"

"We took a vote. We don't like you."

"So, that's a yes on the library," I concluded. "What's your name?"

"Stacie. Hudson, Celica, and Vaya were with El at the Underground the other night. Kyndle, you've met."

"Ellianna."

Stacie rolled her eyes when I corrected her. "If she likes us to call her El, we'll call her El. You don't get a say in her name. And I don't know what kind of drama you two have going on, but seeing you parked outside upsets her. Gives her heartburn. When she noticed your car out there this morning, she threw up in the kitchen sink. Hudson and Vaya had to keep Kyndle from going out to kill you."

“Elli doesn’t get heartburn,” I muttered to myself, concern causing my stomach to tense. “Has she been sick often?”

“Enough to make us gang up on her and pressure her to see a doctor,” she admitted after a brief hesitation. “Kyndle said they gave her a prescription.”

“Fuck!” Turning, I jogged down the steps and over to my car. She was sick enough that she’d gone to the doctor, but she hadn’t told me. Did Mabel know? I doubted it. Ellianna wouldn’t want to worry her mom when Mabel was already working herself to death helping out with Miss Lindy, who was now confined to her bed and receiving hospice care.

It took only a few minutes to drive to campus. Unable to find an empty spot, I parked in a fire zone. Racing across the quad, I took the steps to the library three at a time and slammed through the front entrance.

Sweat beaded on my brow as I jogged through the stacks until I caught a glimpse of familiar golden hair. She was seated at a table for four, textbooks, notes, and her laptop open around her. One chair was pushed back from the desk, which meant someone had recently vacated it because Ellianna would have pushed in before she started studying.

Heads lifted as I marched past, but my gaze was focused solely on my Elli. Chin supported on one hand, she read over a paper in front of her, red pen between her fingers as she made corrections.

She didn’t bother to glance up when I stopped beside her table. “Go away. I’m busy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were sick?” I rasped, feeling out of breath.

Her fingers tightened around the pen, but her eyes remained on the paper. “A little heartburn and sour stomach doesn’t mean I’m sick. I’m just getting older and don’t tolerate junk food like I once did. A change of diet is all I need.”

“Stacie said the doctor gave you a prescription.” She made a quick note in the margin of the paper. As soon as the pen stopped moving, I snatched it from her, silently demanding her attention. Exhaling loudly, she lifted her head, causing her hair to fall over one shoulder. “For antacids?”

“Yup.”

A small flutter of her lashes told me she was lying, but I didn’t know why she wouldn’t tell me the truth. “How long were you not feeling well before you made a doctor’s appointment?”

“Stacie didn’t tell you?” she snarked.

“She said she and your other roommates were concerned for long enough that they convinced you to seek medical treatment,” I explained.

“Yes, it was a huge intervention. Ellianna’s tummy is acting ugly, let’s make her go to the doctor.” She rolled her eyes. “Someone suggested I speak to my doctor about the indigestion I’ve been experiencing. Which I did. I got some meds and changed my diet. Stacie is a drama student. She overembellishes everything, which is why I never take anything she says too seriously.”

“What meds were you prescribed?” I pushed.

She stole her pen back and flipped the English paper she was grading to the next page, already marking it up. “That’s my business and isn’t any of your concern.”

I pulled her chair back from the table and turned it to face me as I crouched down in front of her. Noticing the dark circles beneath her eyes, I caressed my thumb under one. “You haven’t been sleeping.”

She cocked her head to the side, examining my face for a moment. “I could say the same about you. Haven’t you been resting, or do you just stay up all night stalking my house?”

“I worry about your safety.” And it was as close to her as I could get at night. There was no way I could sleep in our bed alone when she was across town, tucked under the covers in a different house. “Mr. Watson said that your roommates throw wild parties.”

“I’d say they are fairly tame compared to the ones the Sons throw after a fight every Friday night.” She nudged my chest with her knees. “There’s this thing called personal space. I would like mine back, please.”

“Sorry, can’t do that. You will only run away from me again.” Grasping the back of the chair with both hands, I caged her in.

“Wow, three sorries from you. I see someone has been increasing their vocabulary.” She patted me on top of the head condescendingly. But she was touching me, so I was going to count that as a win. “Have you been reading *The Road to Sorry* like a big, smart boy, learning to take responsibility for your actions?”

I moaned when her fingertips grazed my forehead. “Please touch me again, baby. It feels so good.”

She stroked her fingers through my hair to the back of my head, and I dropped my cheek onto her lap. Closing my eyes, I

soaked in the euphoria of having her touch me so lovingly. Dropping to my knees, I felt sleep trying to take hold of me.

“Seriously, Judge,” she gently scolded as she stroked my scalp. “When was the last time you slept?”

“I think I got an hour or two at some point Saturday afternoon. Not consecutively, though.”

“Why?” she whispered.

Reluctantly, I lifted my head, wanting her to see the truth. “Because I can’t sleep without you cuddled up beside me in our bed, sweetheart.”

Her lashes drifted down. “Judge—”

“Hey, Elli!” a voice I didn’t recognize greeted as a loud thud hit the table behind me. Jerking to my feet, I found a guy in a graphic T-shirt and faded jeans taking the seat that was still pushed back from the desk. “My class was released early, so I thought I would come straight to our session.”

There was no way he didn’t see me, but he was entirely focused on Ellianna.

“No problem, Miles. He was just leaving.” She scooted her chair under the table and placed the paper aside before pulling a chemistry book toward her. “How did the quiz go this week?”

“Got a B on it, thanks to you.”

“That’s great,” she gushed proudly. I was half tempted to rip out the guy’s throat for making her smile so brightly. Even more so when her smile disappeared as she looked up at me dismissively. “Bye.”

Not wanting to argue with her in front of her client, I bent and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll see you later, baby.”

CHAPTER 46

ELLIANNA

SOMEHOW, I WAS ABLE TO AVOID JUDGE FOR A FEW DAYS. That didn't stop him from sitting outside my house every night, but at least I wasn't face-to-face with him again.

It wasn't that I was afraid of how easily he'd gotten me to comb my fingers through his hair. Or how much I'd ached when he said he had only slept a couple of hours Saturday.

Mostly, it was because I knew he would bring up my doctor's visit again, and I didn't want to discuss that. Yet. I would. He would know everything. But I needed to digest it all myself first.

And maybe my pettiness was keeping me from telling him. Just a little bit.

Thursday night, Hudson and Celica talked me into going clubbing with them, Stacie, and Kyndle. Vaya had taken a long weekend trip up to Baltimore to see her family and celebrate her parents' wedding anniversary, and I didn't want to be home alone.

If I spotted Judge outside, I knew I would give in and go out to talk to him. Maybe invite him in. Maybe let him lay his head in my lap again so I could stroke my fingers through his hair and let him fall asleep. Maybe curl up beside him and get a little rest too.

I had a lot of maybes that I was afraid I would make a reality if I stayed home. And I could be my roommates' designated driver for the night.

Win-win.

Sitting at our table, I sipped my water and watched over everyone else's drinks while they danced. Celica and Hudson were together, laughing and bouncing to the music. They were, without a doubt, drunk off their asses.

Stacie was making out with some random guy, but she'd only had half a drink, so I trusted her to make her own decisions. Meanwhile, Kyndle appeared to be breaking ground with his own potential hookup for the night.

And I missed Judge so badly I was tempted to call him. But I somehow held strong.

"El." Celica ran up to our table. It was a miracle she was able to walk at all in her heels, let alone in heels and drunk, but she pulled it off seamlessly. "Come dance with us."

"But our drinks..." I tried to protest, but I knew if I stayed at the table alone for much longer, I would end up sending a text to my ex.

"They're probably gross by now, anyway," she said dismissively. Taking my hand, she tugged me toward the dance floor. "Come on. We're having so much fun."

Hudson pulled me into their group as soon as we got close enough. Laughing, I attempted to push Judge from my mind and let the music take over.

Hugging Celica, I danced with them for a few songs and just let go. But when I felt someone hug me from behind, I came crashing back to reality. Turning, I shook my head with a grim smile. "I'm with my friends," I told the guy.

He was kind of cute but too put together for me. I wasn't into men who took longer to get ready than I did. If I was honest, I didn't have a type. I'd only ever wanted Judge. Not anyone similar. Not a substitute. Just him.

I didn't get more than two steps back before he grabbed hold of me again. His dirty-blond hair fell into his face, but it didn't distract me from the drunken glimmer in his eyes. "You're a hot little thing. Come here."

"No, really." I pushed against his chest. Hard fingers bit into my hips through the material of my dress. I stomped on his foot out of reflex. His shout of pain was barely heard over the tempo of the music.

"Bitch," he seethed, backhanding me.

Crying out in shock and pain, I stumbled back, holding a hand to my cheek. My face and eye both felt like they were on fire. I felt wetness on my fingers, and when I looked at them, I saw blood. A quick glance at the guy's hand showed a huge championship-style ring on his middle finger.

Celica and Hudson came up on either side of me. "Are you okay, El?" Celica asked with concern, touching my bleeding cheek. "Oh God!"

"Kyndle, no!" Hudson screamed.

That was the only warning I got before her twin tackled the guy who hit me.



THE REST OF THE NIGHT WAS PURE CHAOS. THE GUY WHO HIT me had several friends, and his fight with Kyndle turned into an all-out brawl. I didn't know any of the police officers who

showed up in an attempt to restore order. No matter how much I pleaded, the cop still arrested my roommate. Not even when I threw out Judge's name did they so much as hesitate.

One of the officers even laughed when I told them Judge wouldn't be pleased they were ignoring me. "Okay, honey. Sure, he won't." He eyeballed me up and down, borderline leeringly. "Are you even old enough to be in this club?"

I almost stomped my foot in frustration, but I stopped myself in time.

Grabbing Hudson, Celica, and Stacie, I pushed them into Hudson's car and drove to the police station, but the place was so busy, there was no chance of just bailing Kyndle out. As chaotic as things were, it made it a nightmare at the courthouse for arraignment.

In a last-ditch effort, I called Rita.

"Babe?" she answered, sounding like I'd woken her.

Half sobbing, I gave her a quick rundown of what had happened.

"Christ, Ellianna," she groaned. "Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Th-thank you," I cried into the phone.

"Please don't cry, beautiful. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Thirty, tops."

All of us were still in club wear when we entered the courtroom where Kyndle and the other guys were being arraigned. My cheek was throbbing, my eye so swollen I could barely see out of it. Celica dabbed at the gash on my cheek with a tissue because it kept bleeding. I probably should have

gone to the emergency room, but I was too concerned for Kyndle to worry about myself.

And then the worst thing that could happen did.

The judge's door opened, and I felt the air leave my lungs.

No. Not him. Not now.

He hadn't done arraignments in so long that I hadn't even considered it a possibility. Panic choked me, and I quickly pulled my hair down over my face in an attempt to hide.

"Hey, that's the guy from the Underground," Celica whispered loudly. "And your stalker. You didn't say he was a *real* judge."

"Shh," I hissed.

While his attention was on the files the bailiff gave him, I slunk a little lower in my seat. The court clerk called out Kyndle's name and charges.

Judge's head snapped up, a predatory look on his haggard face. I swallowed a whimper, knowing he was going to take pleasure in what he was about to do.

The door to the gallery opened, and I nearly sagged in relief when Rita ran in. "Sorry, Your Honor." She interrupted, rushing over to the other assistant district attorney. "If I could just speak to my colleague for a moment."

"You may not," Judge told her without sparing her a second glance. "I don't believe you are scheduled for arraignments, Counselor."

"I believe the same can be said for you as well, Judge Bennet," she countered.

That drew his gaze to her and thankfully off Kyndle for a moment. “I’m filling in for Judge Young, who had a death in the family. You, however, are doing nothing more than interrupting my court. Be seated or leave.”

“Judge—”

Ignoring her, he jumped straight back to Kyndle. Nausea roiled in my stomach. Not good. Not. Good.

“Disorderly conduct. Assault. Destruction of property. Public intoxication. Causing a riot,” he repeated the long list of charges. “How do you plead?”

Kyndle was so busy staring holes in the guy who’d hit me and his friends, he hadn’t even noticed who was behind the judge’s bench. All of them looked hungover and were covered in cuts and bruises. The guy who hit me was missing a front tooth. “Should have killed the fucker.”

“Err, apologies, Judge,” the public defender excused. “He’s still a tad intoxicated.”

If I hadn’t already been fighting the urge to puke, the sight of Judge’s evil grin would have made me want to. “I’ll enter a plea of not guilty on behalf of the defendant.”

“People on bail?”

Rita was still whispering to her fellow ADA, causing Judge to have to repeat himself.

“Are you insane?” I heard the guy hiss. Like the cops the night before, I didn’t recognize the man dressed in a cheap suit, his hair slicked back from his face. “I’m not doing that when he has so many charges against him and he’s still half drunk.”

“Counselors!” Judge barked.

Rita stepped forward. “Permission to approach, Your Honor.”

“Denied.”

“The people request bail be set at—”

“Zachary.” I jumped to my feet out of desperation.

His dark gaze snapped to me. “Elli?” His eyes narrowed dangerously. Realizing my hair had shifted away from my face, I covered the still-bleeding gash. “What the fuck happened?”

CHAPTER 47

JUDGE

ALL I COULD HEAR WAS THE SOUND OF MY OWN HEAVY breathing as I sat there looking at Ellianna. Her face was bruised, a long gash on her cheek leaking blood, her eye half closed.

Swallowing hard, I flicked my gaze from her to the fucker standing before my bench with his public defender and back to her. “Did he...” My hands fisted, and I smashed them down on the desk in front of me. “Did he do that?”

“No!” she cried. “He was defending me.”

I was so distracted by the wound to her face that it took me a moment to focus on what she was wearing. A little black dress that barely covered her ass. She wasn't wearing a bra, but the corset-style top she wore pushed her tits up to her throat.

Fuck, she was trying to kill me.

Or make me a killer.

Again.

“You wore that?” I didn't even recognize my own voice, it came out so hoarse. “Where?”

“A club.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. “No goddamn wonder there was a riot!”

Two vehicles had been missing from her driveway when I’d gotten to the house the night before. I didn’t think anything of it. As far as I knew, Ellianna had been inside sleeping.

“Erm, Judge?” The ADA cleared his throat. “The people seek—”

“Shut up,” I snapped, cutting him off. “Ellianna, come here.”

A group of other defendants started whispering to one another. All of them had obviously taken a beating. Had Kyndle taken them all on?

Begrudgingly, I had to give the guy props. He could fight. If I didn’t hate his guts for being so close to Elli, I might have extended an invitation to become a Son.

Nervously, Ellianna cast the group a glance before attempting to tug her dress down lower as she approached the bench. I drank in the sight of her bare legs, her delicate clavicle, the gracefulness of her neck that looked naked without my collar around it.

When she attempted to stop beside Kyndle, my growl kept her moving forward. “Judge, let me explain.”

Hungrily, I ate up the sight of her, trying to beat back the rage when I kept returning to her poor face. Someone was going to die for hurting her. “I’m listening,” I bit out.

“We were at the club. Dancing. Having a good time.”

She’d been out. Alone. No one to protect her.

Fuck, I kept failing her.

“Were you drinking?”

She shook her head. “Of course not. Just dancing. Hudson and Celica and I were in a group. We weren’t causing any trouble. I promise. Some guy came up behind me...” She broke off, seeming to search for words.

To keep me from killing someone in open court?

Nothing would stop that.

“And then?” I coaxed softly.

“This guy came up behind me. Wrapped his arms around me.”

A haze fell over my eyes.

Someone touched my Elli.

“I told him no. I was there with my friends. I-I wasn’t interested.” She gulped, the remembered fear choking her. “He wouldn’t take no for an answer and grabbed me again. It... hurt. I have bruises. I stomped on his foot to get him to let me go, and he backhanded me.”

She touched her face and flinched, blinking away tears as she relived the memory.

And I tried to hold on.

To hold back.

I tried hard.

“Kyndle was only defending me.”

Inhaling deeply, I glanced at the other defendants, but they were so beat-up, it was hard to tell which one Kyndle had started with. “Which one?”

“Judge—” The ADA tried to intervene again.

“Which one, Elli?” I repeated.

“No.” She shook her head vehemently. “You will only do something stupid.”

“Tell me!” I bellowed.

“Him!” Stacie jumped up, pointing the guy out. “It was him, Your Honor.”

Hudson and Celica groaned. I turned my head slowly, taking in the dark-blond male with a missing front tooth. He stared back at me defiantly. Ellianna sighed in defeat.

Maybe I would have been able to remain professional if he had just kept his eyes on me. But when he turned and swept his gaze over my Elli and licked his lips, it was game over.

One moment, I was behind the bench. The next, I’d jumped over it and was charging toward the bastard, only one thought in mind—*kill him*.

A scream, gasps of shock or fright, and loud whispers filled the courtroom, but all I could focus on was making the one who’d harmed my Elli bleed.

“No, no, no, no!” Ellianna stepped in my way, and I stopped in my tracks, letting her delicate body brush mine.

Chest heaving, I glared over the top of her head at my prey. Five cops and the bailiff had moved to take charge of the situation, but all that stood between me and a murder charge was Elli.

Her soft hands cupped my face. “Look at me. Zachary, please, look at me.”

Blinking back the red veil that had fallen over my eyes, I gazed down into her frightened face. She had tears in her eyes,

her chin trembling. The gash high along her cheek was still bleeding. “Baby, you need a doctor.”

She shook her head. “Only if you come with me. Okay? Will you take me to the hospital, Zachary? I-I need you.”

I was starved for the sound of my name from her lips. Carefully, I skimmed my thumb over the bottom one. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’ll take care of you.”

Relief filled her baby blues. “Thank you.”

Tucking her against me, I kissed the top of her head. My heart was still pounding, but the noise in my head calmed. “Just give me one minute, baby.”

“No,” she cried when I stepped back and took off my robes. “Please, let’s just go.”

“Hush, baby.” I tossed the robes to Rita, who grinned as she walked over to us. “I guess we have to wait for another judge now.”

I nodded and leaned in so only she and Ellianna could hear. “Suggest ROR for the roommate. Keep everyone else in through the weekend or longer. Tell whichever judge that it’s a request from me. Let them rot for as long as possible. I’ll be expecting a full report on Toothless by the end of the day.”

She snickered. “Sure thing.”

CHAPTER 48

ELLIANNA

I TRIED NOT TO GASP AT THE STING AS THE DOCTOR PLACED A shot of anesthetic in my cheek. A fire-like sensation spread along the entire side of my face and up past my eye, but it quickly faded.

From his position beside me, Judge fisted his hand that wasn't holding mine. "Be gentle," he snapped at the plastic surgeon who had specifically been called in to stitch up my cheek.

"I'm okay," I soothed, linking my fingers through his. "It doesn't hurt now."

Tormented brown eyes scanned what little he could see of my face while the doctor's steady hands repaired my wound, making sure that the scar would be almost invisible when it healed. How many times had I been in Judge's position, nervously waiting beside him, holding his hand more to comfort myself than him, after he was done with an Underground match?

He still had a faint line on his nose from the last time he'd been in the cage, the week before. Never had he done more than grunt a few times when the doctor would stitch him up. But right then, he looked like he was going to be sick.

“If you wanted to go out, you should have called me,” he groused. “I would have gone with you.”

“That would have defeated the purpose of going out.” The doctor adjusted the light so he could get a better view for his next stitch, then moved in front of me, completely blocking Judge from view.

“And what was that?” he asked, sounding reluctant, as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to know my answer.

While I waited for the surgeon to finish the stitch so as not to distract him, I debated how to answer. I could hedge and say something bitchy about wanting to avoid him stalking me. But the truth was, I kind of liked that he was always outside. It meant he was thinking about me. He cared—even if it wasn’t the way I wanted him to, he still felt something strong.

When the doctor shifted and I was able to see Judge again, I went with the truth. “I went because I knew if I stayed home, I would ask you to come inside. It was too tempting, and I was not ready to give in.”

His fingers flexed, and I heard his ragged inhale.

“One more stitch and we will be all done, Ellianna,” the doctor said, returning my attention back to him. “I suggest ice for the swelling. Alternate Tylenol and ibuprofen for any discomfort. These sutures will dissolve in about a week, but don’t be afraid to shower.”

“I know the drill, Doc,” I assured him with a half smile that he returned as he placed the final stitch.

“If you have any concerns, you know my number. I’m available to you twenty-four seven.”

Judge made a noise in the back of his throat. “If she has any issues, I will be sure to let you know.”

The doctor winked down at me, making me laugh, before stepping back and pulling off his gloves. “I’m all done here. The nurse will be in with your discharge papers. If you have any problems with the eye, let us know. But I’m confident nothing was damaged.”

“She doesn’t need an antibiotic?” Judge asked with a frown.

“No, she should be fine. I don’t like giving antibiotics unless necessary. If it was her hand or foot, I would write a script, but the face isn’t as at risk for infection.” His phone buzzed, and he grimaced. “That will be the OR wondering why I’m not upstairs doing the breast lift I was scheduled to start forty minutes ago.”

“Sorry to pull you away, but I appreciate the help.” Judge stayed quiet, which caused the doctor to laugh as he walked to the door. “Thanks again,” I called after him.

“Anything for you, Ellianna.”

As soon as the door closed behind him, Judge released my hand. Spreading my legs, he stepped between them and wrapped his arms around my back. I felt his warm breath on my neck when he exhaled.

Closing my eyes, I cuddled closer. “I really am okay.”

He trembled. “I can’t take much more of this, baby. I’m trying. I swear, I am doing all I can to hang on, to give you the time you need to forgive me. But I don’t think I can do it anymore.”

“Judge—”

“Please,” he groaned into my neck. “I need you to say my name again. Be my good girl, Elli. Call me what only you call me.”

I couldn't help the way I squirmed at being called his good girl. It felt like an eternity since the last time I'd heard it. And I wanted to be his good girl so damn badly.

"Zachary." His hardness flexed against my inner thigh, a tortured sound vibrating through his chest. "I've missed you."

"Ah, baby. I've missed you too." He trailed openmouthed kisses down my neck and across my bare shoulder. "So much that it hurts, Elli. I can't function without you."

I clutched at his white button-up. "Me either."

"Come home," he pleaded, still kissing me. He didn't seem able to stop. "Come back to me. Our bed is so empty and cold without you. I haven't slept. I can't without you."

I wanted to give in. Wanted to wrap my legs around him and beg him to take me home with him and never leave. But so much was standing between us. I didn't want either of us to have regrets.

And I wasn't sure how he would react when I confessed what I'd kept hidden from him. Being petty didn't feel as satisfying as it had before. Now, I was scared of what would happen when the truth was revealed.

"I...I don't want to argue," I whispered.

"We won't." He pressed his forehead to mine. "Please. *Please*, Elli. Come home with me."

"Okay. I mean, just for a little while." Long enough for him to get some quality sleep. And then I would leave.

CHAPTER 49

JUDGE

ELLIANNA FELL ASLEEP ON THE DRIVE HOME. PULLING UP outside the garage, I parked and just sat there for several minutes watching her.

Only when she moaned did I force myself to get out. Carrying her through the house, I caught sight of the housekeepers, who paused what they were doing to gape at me. Ignoring them, I kept walking, only pausing long enough to open our bedroom door.

I'd rarely been there in the months since Ellianna had left me. Her absence from our bed made the emptiness inside me more intense.

Placing her head on her pillow, I carefully pulled the covers back and tucked her in. Kicking off my shoes, I tore off my shirt. Once I was naked, I climbed beneath the covers with her. No sooner had I wrapped my arms around her than she turned over in her sleep, resting the uninjured side of her face on my chest.

"Zachary," she mumbled in her sleep, burrowing deeper against my side. Claspng her hand, I brought it to my lips before resting it over my heart.

Then and only then did I sleep...

Her needy little whimpers had me sliding my hand from her back down to her ass, squeezing. Her wet core was pressed down on my thigh, the only thing separating her heat from my skin a tiny little piece of cotton.

Restlessly, she squirmed against me, rubbing her clit on me in search of relief.

With a tortured groan, I rolled her onto her back. “Shh, baby,” I soothed, kissing across her chest. I both loved and hated the dress she still wore. It made her tits look amazing, but who knew how many worthless assholes had seen her perfection. “I’ll make it better.”

Ellianna combed her fingers through my hair. “Zachary.”

Finding her lips, I got lost in the taste of her. Fuck, no wonder I’d felt like I was starving for so long. She was the only sustenance I craved. Diving my tongue inside, I decided if I drowned in her, I’d die a happy man.

Needing her naked, I tore at her dress, ripping the seams when I couldn’t find the zipper. She giggled then moaned when I sucked on a nipple as soon as she was free of the material. Her hips arched invitingly, and I pushed her panties down her thighs before finding her clit with my thumb.

“Please, please, please,” she whined.

I wanted to take my time, savor every inch. But when I felt how drenched her pussy was, there was no way I could survive another second without being inside her.

Spreading her legs wider, I lifted one thigh up over my hip and thrust balls deep. She cried out, and I tried to stay conscious as her pussy gripped me. Stars flickered in front of my eyes, but I shook it off.

She was so soft, so hot, so fucking wet and tight, I couldn't breathe from the pleasure.

"Zachary," she moaned, her cries growing louder as her inner walls contracted around me, sucking me deeper. "Harder."

I was already hanging by a thread. Feeling the flutters of her pussy, the gushes of her release as she squirted on my cock, was enough to shoot me over the edge. Groaning, I emptied inside her, burying my face in her neck as I tried to catch my breath.

It was over far too soon, but I wasn't going to complain. Her satisfied hum told me she felt the same way.

"Did I wake you?" she asked with a giggle when we could both breathe.

"Best wake-up call ever." I kissed her shoulder and lifted my head. "Shower or more sleep?"

She glanced at the bedside clock. Seeing it was after dinnertime, we both groaned. "I should probably eat."

"We can order something," I suggested. "Or go out."

"I kind of want a sandwich," she said, nibbling on her bottom lip.

Reluctantly, I pulled out of her, but her soft mewl of protest instantly got me hard again. "Shower with me, and then I'll feed you."



AFTER SHARING A PLATTER OF SANDWICHES, WE SPENT THE rest of the night in bed. Sleeping only in between making love.

When I woke up midmorning, I carefully untangled myself from beneath Ellianna and went downstairs to grab us coffee and some breakfast.

Mabel was standing at the island, her head bent as she read over the grocery list she was making. “Good morning,” she greeted without lifting her gaze. “Coffee is fresh, and there are pastries from the bakery. I got a few cupcakes as well, but I’m still not a fan of my child eating them for her first meal of the day.”

“You know Elli is here?” I asked as I poured myself a mug.

She snorted. “I knew about the nightclub incident before you did. How is she, by the way? I heard she needed five stitches.”

My fingers turned white as I gripped the cup. “She took some Tylenol around dawn, but she said she was okay. I’m letting the bastard stew in lockup for the weekend. Then... we’ll see what happens.”

“Mm, that’s probably best. You wouldn’t want to kill him too quickly.” I made a noncommittal sound, already planning how I was going to gut the motherfucker. “I’m about to go to the grocery store. Any requests?”

“Do we have the creamer she likes in her coffee?” I asked, opening the fridge and seeing that we didn’t. “Get a few bottles of that. I want it kept stocked.”

“She hasn’t been drinking coffee. I’m glad those roommates of hers talked her into going to the doctor.” Mabel added a few more things to her list.

“She said she didn’t tell you about that.”

“She didn’t have to. I have many, many friends in this town, Judge. I know everything you kids do.” She snorted. “Heck, I knew what Lyla was doing even when she was in other states. And if you don’t get this Gwen thing under control, I’m going to have to do it myself. I’ve had about all I can stand where that girl is concerned. You have a week. If she’s not dealt with by then, I will be paying her a visit.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I gave in without argument. “I have my men trying to find her right now.”

“*Hmph*,” my future mother-in-law muttered. “I would feel better if Barrick looked into it.”

“He’s busy trying to fix things with his rocker princess.” I plated a few of the pastries Ellianna liked. “What about orange juice? Or is it too acidic? Damn it, I need a list of what she can and can’t eat right now. And what meds did the doctor prescribe? She never said.”

Mabel laughed and kept scribbling on her list. “I’m sure she will tell you soon.” She pointed her pen at the cabinet where she kept the coffee. “I picked up some of the herbal tea she likes so much. Rita says she drinks that stuff all day long.”

Surprised, I nearly dropped the box of tea when I picked it up. “Rita told you?”

She smirked at me. “She and Ellianna are besties. Didn’t you know?”

Muttering a curse, I filled the kettle and set it on the stove. “That sounds like a really bad idea.”

“Why, because you used to boink Rita?”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. “Mabel, can you please go back to pretending like you don’t know everyone’s secrets?”

She cackled, and I found myself fighting a smile. It was good to hear her laughter. With everything that had been going on with Miss Lindy, I'd been worried she was going to fall into depression.

Once I had the tray set, I pecked Mabel on the cheek and picked it up. "Love you."

"Maybe say that to the girl in your bed," she called after me.

"It's her bed too," I shot back and heard her huff before I was out of the kitchen.

Ellianna was still asleep when I returned. Setting the tray on the side table, I sat on the edge of the bed and leaned down to kiss her awake. "Baby, I brought breakfast," I enticed, kissing a path down her neck.

Moaning, she turned on her side away from me. "Not hungry," she complained, curling into a ball. "Sleeping."

Laughing, I gently turned her onto her back once again. "Your mom got you a cherry cream cheese Danish."

She pressed her lips together. "No thanks."

Leaning back, I looked down at her in concern. The mention of the Danish alone should have been enough to tempt her to open her eyes. Instead, she whined and turned back over, pulling her knees up to her chest.

"Is your cheek hurting?"

"Don't want to talk. Just let me lie here and be miserable for a little while." She grabbed my pillow to cover her face. "I'll be okay after I sleep a little longer."

Not able to get comfortable in the fetal position, she turned onto her back once more. Only to groan and turn back over.

With a cry, she sat upright. Pushing me out of the way, she scrambled out of bed and raced into the bathroom.

Anxiously, I followed to find her on her knees in front of the toilet, one hand holding her hair back while she retched. Grabbing a washcloth out of the closet, I dampened it with cold water and crouched down behind her, laying the cool cloth on her neck. Helplessly, I rubbed her back as she continued to be sick.

By the time she was done, tears trickled down her face. “Go away. I’m gross.”

“Are you done?” Closing her eyes, she nodded. Straightening, I helped her stand and then held her up while she rinsed her mouth.

Once she was cleaned up, I carried her back to bed and tucked the covers around her. Obviously, we had something to discuss, but she was too drained for it. Brushing a kiss over her brow, I took the tray back downstairs so the smells wouldn’t upset her stomach.

Grabbing a pack of crackers and a bottle of water, I rushed back to our room to find her sleeping soundly once again. Shaking my head at my stubborn Elli, I was about to climb back in beside her. To hold and comfort her—and myself.

And then Howler called.

Fucking Gwen.

CHAPTER 50

ELLIANNA

JUDGE WAS GONE WHEN I WOKE UP SEVERAL HOURS LATER. I felt his absence as soon as I opened my eyes, but I was thankful for a reprieve from having to talk about my earlier puke-fest.

After a quick shower, I threw on one of his T-shirts and then found a pair of running shorts in Lyla's closet. My purse was on the floor of Judge's bedroom, so I snatched it up.

No one was home, not even Patricia, which was a relief. I wasn't sure if this was considered the walk of shame or not, but it was as close as I was ever likely to get. Grabbing the key fob to Lyla's car, I made my way home.

Vaya was still at her parents', but everyone else was in the living room when I let myself in. As soon as I walked through the door, Kyndle hugged me. "Forgive me. I was drunk, and I didn't think about what I was doing. Did I scare you?" His bruised hands shook when he cupped my face. "Please tell me you're not afraid of me now, El."

Heart melting, I wrapped my arms around his waist. "You didn't scare me. I was worried about you, though. Were they mean to you in jail?"

"Yeah, so that wasn't my first night in the slammer," he admitted sheepishly. "I was arrested a few times when I was a

teen. Records have been expunged, though, because I was underage.”

“For fighting?”

“Once or twice.” He slung an arm around my shoulders and urged me toward the kitchen. “What can I say? I have bad taste in guys.”

“Don’t we all,” Celica mumbled into her glass of juice.

“Nice car,” Stacie complimented after glancing out the living room window. “That a gift from the judge?”

“It’s my friend’s car. I’m borrowing it for the afternoon.” I needed to study for an exam the following week, and all my books were in my room upstairs. I didn’t know where Judge had gone earlier, but I figured once he took care of whatever had been so important he didn’t crawl back into bed with me, he would be looking for me.

If he chased me, I had every intention of going back to the mansion with him. If he didn’t...

Well, I would have my answer to many unspoken questions.

My stomach had calmed down as it tended to do by midafternoon. Until that morning, I hadn’t vomited in a week or two. I’d thought the morning sickness was calming down now that I was beginning my second trimester.

My pregnancy had been anything but welcome when the doctor called after my first appointment regarding my blood work. I couldn’t believe it when he told me. I was on birth control. Admittedly, a low dose, but I’d been on it for three years. I was regular and had my period every month. My flow might have been considerably lighter than normal and shorter all summer, but I had one, nonetheless.

After I told the doctor he got it wrong, he asked me to come in for an ultrasound. Once I heard the baby's heartbeat and saw them swimming around on screen, I couldn't deny it any longer.

I was pregnant.

From the moment I accepted my new reality, I was anxious to tell Judge. But the angel on my shoulder who always kept me petty stopped me from calling him or showing up at his office.

His decision to block me from attending Georgetown still hurt. He'd kept that secret for years. I probably would have remained in the dark if I hadn't accidentally seen his texts with his old college buddy.

Not telling him about the baby wasn't an option, but delaying it wasn't going to hurt anything.

And maybe, a part of me was worried that if I told him while I was still in my first trimester, he might ask me to terminate the pregnancy. I wasn't sure if I believed that or if my disillusionment over how utterly he had destroyed my faith in him made me think that way.

But now, I was past the point of no return unless it became a medical emergency. Yet I still hadn't told him.

It wasn't about pettiness any longer. I genuinely didn't know how to tell Judge he was going to be a father. And yeah, I was still scared of how he would react.

Because if he didn't want this baby, I was sure his rejection would kill me. I had zero problems raising our child on my own. But I dreamed of Zachary beside me, celebrating every milestone our child surpassed, together.

I guessed I was just as big of a coward as I had accused Judge of being.

Kyndle threw together some sandwiches for everyone while telling me what had happened in court after Judge had taken me to the hospital that morning.

“The new judge was an older guy who spent the majority of the time staring at Rita’s rack.” He layered rotisserie chicken on a baguette with sliced tomatoes, basil, and a thick smear of pesto, making my mouth water as I watched him create art with food. “She kept him distracted with her assets while arguing for me to be released with no need for bail. He agreed, and then her colleague showed up while I was signing the paperwork. Said he would let me off with community service if I took a plea. My lawyer agreed.”

I snatched a sandwich the moment it was complete and took a hungry bite. After I chewed and swallowed, I glanced at my roommates gathered around the kitchen table. “What about the others who were arrested for the fight?”

“Rita got her request for max bail,” Hudson said, taking a sandwich for herself. “I overheard the other public defenders whispering that none of their clients could afford that. So they will remain in county jail until their hearing.”

“I’m glad,” Celica said around her first bite of sandwich that was minus the chicken. “Those assholes need to learn to keep their hands to themselves. Look at El’s face! Are you hurting?”

I grimaced. “The skin feels tight and tender. But the swelling has gone down in my eye a little.”

“After you eat, grab some ice and relax for the rest of the day,” Hudson instructed. “Sleep will be good for you.”

“I need to study, and I have over two dozen papers to finish grading.” Stuffing the last bite of food into my mouth, I licked pesto from my thumb and stood. “But I will be in my room if anyone needs me.”

Walking up the stairs, I checked my phone. The ringer wasn't off, and I hadn't heard an alert, but I couldn't keep from looking to see if I'd missed something. As expected, I had no notifications.

Determined not to obsess over Judge, I spent a few hours studying before settling in to grade English papers. The next time I looked at the clock, it was after midnight.

On a Saturday.

I was such an exciting college student.

Rolling my eyes at my mental musings, I stacked all the papers into a pile and placed them on the bedside table. There was still no attempt at communication from Judge.

Deflated, I curled up under my blanket and closed my eyes, leaving the light on.

I guess I had my answers.

CHAPTER 51

JUDGE

EVERY COP IN THE STATE WAS LOOKING FOR GWEN. HOW THAT stupid drugged-out bitch was able to evade them all, I had no idea, but no one could find her. Every favor I was owed, from every branch of law enforcement, was called in. But they couldn't find one little cokehead?

Frustrated, I paced Howler's living room. Josie was with her grandmother for the night, and Lyla was upstairs sleeping. But I was too hyped up after Gwen had so brazenly slit Howler's tires and carved the word *whore* across the driver's side door.

We knew she had a gun, whether she used it or not was still questionable, but I wasn't going to take chances. I put men outside Howler's mom's house and then doubled up on the protection for my sister. What I wanted was for both Lyla and Josie to come back to the mansion, where security was tighter and Gwen would never dare try to get to either of them.

But of course, every woman I loved was too stubborn for her own good. Lyla was such a pain in the ass, but if staying at Howler's was what she wanted—and my best friend wouldn't force her to leave—I could only work with what I had.

Back and forth, back and forth, I walked from one side of the room to the other. Prowling as my agitation increased by

the minute. Howler was passed out on the couch, but if I woke him to go to bed, he would have been wide awake again, so I left him alone.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I muttered a vicious curse when I saw it was dead. My nonstop calls to so many people from the time Howler had alerted me to what had happened at the mall must have drained it.

It took some searching, but I finally found a charger in the home office. I plugged it in and dropped into the chair behind the desk as I waited for the damn thing to power on. It was close to one in the morning. I should have been home in bed with Ellianna. Countless times, I'd started to type out a text to her, wanting to let her know what was going on.

Each time, I would get distracted and not send it. As sick as she had been, I didn't want to stress her out by causing her to worry about Lyla. I wanted to be home to take care of her, but this shit with Gwen was potentially life-or-death. And I sure as fuck didn't want my angel pulled into this and have Gwen turn her ire on Elli as well. If anything happened to her, I'd lose my mind.

Trusting her to call me if she needed anything, I'd stayed focused on the issue at hand all evening.

Now that things had calmed down and I was left alone to catch my breath, all I wanted was to hear Ellianna's voice.

"I don't do booty calls," she announced with a heavy exhale.

Feeling the tension drain out of me at the sound of her voice, I smiled. "You're awake."

"Not by choice," she complained.

“Are you still feeling sick?” I gripped the back of my neck with my free hand, that damnable helpless feeling returning. “Do you need anything? I’ll send one of the men over to the house now.”

There was a long pause on her end before she spoke again. “What’s going on, Judge? You weren’t home when I woke up, and I haven’t seen you. I thought... But now you’re calling, and you sound so tired. And maybe like...you miss me a little.”

I didn’t want to imagine what she had thought. It would probably drive me crazy. And I wasn’t going to fixate on how she’d avoided the subject of how she felt. I had to be patient. She would tell me when she was ready. Until then, I would let her have her secret. “Fuck, sweetheart. I do. I miss you so bad. Just hearing your voice helps. But I’ll be home tomorrow. I just need to be here tonight.”

“Where is ‘here’?”

I leaned back in the chair, stretching out my legs. “Howler’s.”

“Can I ask why?”

I gave her a quick rundown of everything Gwen had done since the night Mia Armstrong suspected Josie was being physically abused. My precious goddaughter’s confession. Lyla beating Gwen so badly she broke the other woman’s arm. Gwen buying a gun from a drug dealer. The photos of her apartment. And finally, the mall incident from earlier in the day.

Ellianna listened patiently, her soft gasps the only noises she made as she gave me time to vent all my frustration and

fear for my baby sister. By the time I was done, I felt as if a little of the weight had been lifted off me.

And all she did was let me talk. There was no cajoling, no empty promises that everything was going to be okay. Just her slight change in breathing that was all I needed to know she was there for me. Her presence alone was enough to bring me peace.

“Is Josie okay?”

“She’s doing great. With Lyla living here now, she’s thriving. I haven’t seen her so happy before.” I smiled. “I’m going to let Howler marry my sister, Elli.”

She snorted. “Pretty sure she wouldn’t ask for permission if they decided to get married. Lyla does what she wants.”

“True,” I laughed. “But I will allow it.”

I heard her shift in bed. “I miss you.”

My heart squeezed. “God, I miss you too.”

“You already said that,” she teased.

“I’m saying it again. I miss you. I’ve missed you so goddamn badly, I couldn’t think straight. Even now, with you home in our bed, I’m struggling,” I confessed.

“Um...about that...”

I groaned. “You aren’t home, are you?”

“I’m at *my* home,” she defended.

“That isn’t your fucking home, Elli.” I squeezed my neck harder. “Why did you leave our bed?”

“I don’t know.”

“Elli,” I warned.

“I was testing you,” she admitted after a small hesitation, her voice small, weak. Hurt. “Seeing if you cared enough to chase me.”

“And I failed?” That suffocating sensation came back with a vengeance.

“Maybe,” she whispered. “I’m not sure now that you’ve told me about Gwen.”

“What do you need from me, baby?” Fuck, all she had to do was tell me. Everything I had was hers for the taking.

“I only want you, Zachary.”

My heart jumped into my throat. “You have me.”

“But not the way I need you,” she argued quietly.

“Just tell me, Elli,” I pleaded.

She released a muffled scream in frustration. I wanted to scream too. “We’ve already talked about this. I can’t tell you how to feel, Judge. And it’s not your fault if you don’t feel the way I need you to.”

“But I do—”

“What we have is great,” she cut me off before I could tell her I loved her. “I shouldn’t be so greedy. The sex is amazing, and most days, we can get along. It doesn’t mean we do, but we can. Even when I don’t like you, I still love you.”

My sharp inhale at hearing her say she loved me again made her fade into silence for a moment. There were a handful of people I loved in this world. My sister, Josie, Howler, Mabel, and first and forever was Ellianna. Being graced with those three words from her was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

“I know you want me, Judge. You even care for me. And if I’m going to be with you, I have to accept the fact that that will be all I get from you.” Her voice cracked and so did I, but she wasn’t done. “I keep telling myself that I deserve more. That if I move on, maybe someday I will find someone who loves me.”

I knew words could hurt. God knew I’d hurt her with them too many times to count. But until that moment, I didn’t know they could kill a person. It wasn’t just the words she spoke, though. It was the sorrow mixed with acceptance in her voice that cut me open and left me hemorrhaging in Howler’s office.

Her tearful laugh reached my ears, and I wanted to rip my heart from my chest so I could give it to her in a box. It was already hers, damn it. She just didn’t know.

Because I had been too scared—*too fucking weak*—to give her what she needed.

“But the truth is,” she whispered, “I know I’ll never be able to love anyone else. I guess what I need to figure out is if I want to be miserable with the man I love, who can’t love me back. Or be miserable with someone who loves me, but I’ll never be able to fully love in return.”

I wouldn’t think about her with someone else, letting them love her. I couldn’t and still stay sane. It was too much to take. I would destroy the entire house if I let myself picture her with anyone—loving anyone—but me.

If I confessed everything I felt for her right then, she wouldn’t believe anything I said. As weak as her trust in me was, I didn’t know if she would even believe me. But I knew I had to try. I had to stop being a pussy and give the woman I loved exactly what I’d promised.

Everything.

Choking back my tears, I closed my eyes. “Will you come home?”

She sniffled. “Tonight? It’s so late, but I do have Lyla’s car.”

“It’s your car, Ellianna. It always has been. Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

She huffed dramatically. “It’s her car. It has her name on the registration and insurance card.”

Something else I would need to fix first thing Monday morning. Screw that shit. That car was several years old, and she would need something bigger soon anyway. She’d liked driving Howler’s SUV. I would have one customized for her.

Not wanting to argue, I asked again, “Will you come home?” Her hesitation made me sweat. “Not tonight. It’s late, and I don’t want you on the road. Tomorrow.”

“For a sleepover?”

I heard a teasing note in her voice, but it didn’t completely mask her lingering tears.

“If you mean do I want you to sleep in our bed for the rest of our lives, then yes, for a sleepover.”

“Let’s take it one night at a time,” she suggested. “Who knows, by Monday one of us might hate the other again.”

“Listen to me carefully, Elli. I have never hated you. Myself, plenty. You, not ever. There is nothing that will ever cause me to hate you. Do you understand?”

“Maybe there is, though. Maybe...” Her breath hitched. “Maybe I’m keeping something from you that is bigger than

the secret you kept from me. And if I hated you for that, then you will definitely hate me for this.”

I wanted her to say it then and there, so I could prove to her she had nothing to fear, but a part of me was thankful she kept it to herself a little longer.

She needed to know and trust how much I loved her before she confided in me that she was pregnant.

CHAPTER 52

ELLIANNA

PLACING THE LAST OF MY TOILETRIES IN MY OVERNIGHT BAG, I zipped it up. All morning, I'd contemplated how much stuff to take with me for the night, but even as I'd sworn I wasn't moving in with Judge, I'd known I was lying to myself.

I was still lying to myself when I put my stuff in the trunk of Lyla's car, leaving my larger luggage in my room but nearly completely packed. How Judge responded when I told him I was pregnant would be the final deciding factor in whether I stayed for the night or forever.

My heart hoped he wouldn't break it again when it was only just starting to heal. Not fully—it didn't seem like it would ever be whole again—but enough that I understood I wasn't ever going to be happy without the asshole.

Kyndle opened the driver's door for me. "If he breaks your heart again, I know a hole I can bury him in back in Michigan."

Laughing, I hugged him. "I will definitely keep that in mind. See you tomorrow for our study session?"

His worried eyes softened. "Wouldn't willingly miss it for anything, El."

With a final wave, I drove across town. As soon as I pulled into the garage, Judge came jogging out of the back door. It was late evening, and he was freshly showered with damp hair, dressed in nothing but a pair of gray sweatpants.

I'd barely stepped out of the car when he wrapped his arms around my back, lifting me off the ground in a hug. "Missed you so fucking much," he groaned, burying his face in my hair. I felt him shudder. "No more nights apart, for any reason. Ever."

I hugged his neck, breathing in the fresh scent of his soap. "I can't make any promises."

His arms contracted, and I felt his exhale on my neck. "Make them anyway. I don't care if you break them. Just make them, Elli."

Pressing closer to his bare chest, I whispered them in my head, but when I didn't say them aloud, he groaned again. Stepping back, he popped the trunk. When he saw only my small case, I watched his face fall.

"At least you brought something." Lifting the case out, he shut the trunk and guided me toward the house with his hand at my waist.

"Is Mom home?" I asked as we entered the kitchen.

"She was going to Miss Lindy's when I got home about an hour ago."

"Any news on Gwen?" I felt terrible that Lyla was going through this crap, but when I'd mentioned going over to Howler's, Judge had been vehement about me not putting myself on Gwen's radar in any way.

"No one can find her," he grouched, dropping my case on the floor beside the island. "Lyla went over to her friend Mia's

house earlier, and then she came home and I nearly got my head ripped off.”

“What did you do this time?” Knowing him, it could have been anything. Lyla loved her brother, but when he pissed her off, his life was usually put in jeopardy.

“Are you going to get mad at me too?” he mused, mentally debating with himself whether to confess what he’d done to his sister.

“Judge.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “I hate when you call me that. I want to be Zachary again.”

“I see today is one of those days we do nothing but argue,” I muttered under my breath as I crossed to the fridge for something to drink.

“I don’t want to argue, baby,” he soothed, wrapping his arms around my waist when I turned around with a bottle of water in hand. “I just want to be your Zachary.”

Tilting my head back, I met his dark eyes. I wanted to argue, just to see how far I could push him. Once upon a time, he’d hated when I used his legal name. And then he told me why it bothered him so much. He couldn’t control how his body responded when I said his name. I liked that I could do that to him—a little too much, perhaps. But seeing the glitter of something unfamiliar in their depths, I found myself giving in. “Okay, Zachary.”

Nostrils flaring, he grasped my hips and lifted me. I wrapped my legs around his waist, the bottle of water falling to the floor unopened. “I need inside you. Now.”

“Here?” I gasped, but there was no denying I was already wet with excitement. His sweats couldn’t contain his hard

cock. If I reached between us, I could have teased the tip as it strained out of the top. “What if my mom comes back?”

“Fuck. It would be just my luck that she walked in right when I was balls deep in her little girl.” My giggle had his hands flexing on my bottom. “Hold on tight, baby.”

I wrapped myself around him, holding on as he took off at a fast stride through the house. His office was closer than the bedroom, and that was exactly where he went. Kicking the door shut, he flipped the lock and pinned me to the wall. Feeling the wildness in his touch, I moaned, loving that I made him lose control to the point that he was desperate to be inside me.

“My good girl is finally home,” he rasped, pulling my shirt up over my head. “Where she belongs.”

“For the night,” I goaded, earning me a feral growl when he buried his face in my chest, his huge hands cupping my breasts through my bra. “Does that mean I’m not your good girl now, Sir?”

He lifted his head, his brown eyes glittering with madness. “You will always be *mine*, Elli. You like torturing me, don’t you, my little brat? Twisting me up inside until I can’t think straight.”

Looking up at him through my lashes, I pouted. “I don’t know what you mean...Sir.”

“Beautiful, evil little brat.” He traced my bottom lip. “Missed this sassy mouth, baby. Missed this taste.”

He skimmed his fingers down my chin until he wrapped his hand around my throat.

I cried out, writhing against his hardness. Yes! That was where his hand belonged. I hadn’t realized how cold and

lonely the absence of his hold had left me until I had it back. We'd made love countless times the night before, but he hadn't touched me like this once.

"Come home, Elli." His voice rumbled, his eyes full of an intensity I'd only seen shining out of those dark eyes when he looked at me with total possession. "Choose me."

My mouth fell open, my breath panting out of me in quick bursts. "That's manipulation, Sir. Sainted Judge is using coercion."

His grip tightened, causing my clit to throb.

So close. I was so close.

"I already told you the rules don't apply when it comes to you." His breath brushed over the tops of my breasts as he bent to suck on my cleavage. "I will break every law. For you. Destroy, maim, *murder*. To keep my Elli safe and happy."

It never failed to get me hot when he allowed me to be a brat—his brat—but what got me off was when he broke the rules. Especially his own.

Cursing my decision to wear jeans instead of something more accessible, I tried to rub against him. "Coming will make me happy."

"But you're not being my good girl," he grated out. "Only good girls get to come, sweetheart."

Whining, I thrashed my head from side to side against the wall. "You promised. Anything I want, I can have. And I want to come. Right. Now!"

His breathing became more labored by the second. "I will never break my promise to you, sweet Elli. You will get every single thing you ask me for. But I say when you can have it."

He skimmed his nose across my skin to my shoulder, so gentle. But lower, his cock held me captive, his thickness teasing where I ached the most. “I am going to spoil you for the rest of my life. I will take care of you until I draw my last breath. I just need something from you in return, baby.”

“Wh-what?” I sobbed. “What do you need, Zachary?”

“Promise me you’ll come home.” He rubbed his thumb back and forth over my pulse point. Back and forth. Back and forth. His gaze followed the action, transfixed by the sight of my skin beneath his own. If I were a cat, I would have purred for him. It might have been hypnotic if I weren’t hurting between my legs. I felt so empty. “Stay with me forever, Elli. Don’t run from me again. No matter what.”

“No. I can’t promise.” A tear spilled out of the corner of my eye, shocking us both. Hand trembling, he unwrapped it from my throat to wipe away the droplet. “Because you’ll send me away when I tell you...”

“That you’re pregnant?” he finished for me without an ounce of surprise.

I stopped breathing. “Y-you—”

He brushed a sweet kiss against my mouth. “We weren’t using protection.”

My eyes widened. “You weren’t, but I was on the pill. It must have failed.”

Zachary didn’t even blink. “Okay, let’s say that.”

CHAPTER 53

ELLIANNA

CONFUSION FILLED ME, MAKING ME SHIVER AFTER THE INTENSE heat we had been generating only moments before. “What does that mean?”

Groaning, he grasped my hips as he stepped away from the wall. Holding on, I let him carry me to his chair behind the desk and sit down. Turning me so I was sitting across his lap instead of straddling him, he tucked his cock back into his pants. “How far along are you?”

I was still struggling to accept that he had already known I was pregnant. “I...” I licked my suddenly dry lips. “Thirteen weeks.”

“That far?” He sat up a little straighter. “I was guessing more like nine, ten tops.”

I grabbed his chin when he gazed off into space, his eyes vacant as he thought about something. “How did you know? Did someone tell you? I swear, if someone from the doctor’s office called you, I’m suing them. There are HIPAA laws, damn it.”

“No, baby. No one told me. I guessed.” He heaved out a long breath. “And I was hoping.”

A tingle went down my spine. Surprise or pleasure, I wasn't sure which. "H-hoping? For me to be pregnant?"

"Yes."

Jumping to my feet, I glanced around for my shirt. I could not have this conversation with him in only my jeans and bra. When I pulled the shirt over my head, I turned to find him still seated in the desk chair, his hands gripping the armrests so hard he left grooves in the leather.

"Don't leave," he choked out.

"Why would I leave?" I asked with a frown.

"Because I was working behind your back again," he admitted. "And you always leave me. Everyone leaves." He swallowed convulsively a few times, causing my heart to clench at the buried heartbreak I saw on his face. How had I never seen that before? "Just promise you won't leave."

"I won't leave," I whispered. "But just to be clear, you're the one who sent me away. Twice."

"I didn't want you to go!" He scrubbed his hands over his face. "Both times, it was for your sake. The only reason I was able to let you go the first time was because I knew it was what was best for you. I died a little more every day you weren't home."

My mind tried to digest that. "You told me to go after that first time. In here. On this desk." I touched the dark wood, remembering. "You said you didn't fuck me. You were so angry."

"At myself, not you. I was drinking, and as soon as I saw you, I felt what was left of my control snapping. I couldn't have you, but that didn't stop me from dreaming of our first time. And it wasn't supposed to be a quickie on my fucking

desk. But I couldn't hold back any longer, even though I knew it was a mistake. That you would regret it." Pushing to his feet, he walked to the window, his hands squeezing the back of his neck so hard his knuckles turned white. "That I would ruin you."

"Zachary—"

He turned so quickly, his face so ravaged by grief and regret, I snapped my mouth shut. "I know I fucked up, Elli. Even though I told myself it was what was best for you, I regretted interfering with your admission to Georgetown. It festered and grew like a cancer inside me. Missing you. Wanting you. Fighting how I felt every day. I fell asleep every night aching for you so badly that it was all I could do not to get on a plane and go to you. I woke up every morning thinking of you, wondering if you were happy... If you'd met someone. I had a daily mantra. 'As long as Elli is happy, it doesn't matter. If she's living her best life, my agony doesn't matter.'"

"You treated me like shit," I reminded him quietly, stunned by the raw emotion he was allowing me to see.

"If you hated me, then you wouldn't get close, baby."

I waved my hand dismissively. "But what does this have to do with you already knowing I'm pregnant?"

"That night, in this office, you stood right where you are now, Elli. You told me you love me." He rubbed his hand over his chest, pressing his palm directly over his heart. "The only reason you got on a plane that night was because I was so caught up in the euphoria of hearing you say those words that I blacked out. When I snapped out of it, I went a little insane. You were gone, taking every last trace of yourself with you. And I couldn't breathe."

My heart was racing. I wanted to yell at him to shut up, that he was just playing me, telling me all this stuff to get me to stay because I was pregnant. But there was too much emotion in his eyes.

“Confessing that you loved me obliterated the last thread of control I had. There was no way I was going to let a country stand between us. The only reason you came back so willingly was because of what that fucking bitch roommate did.” His jaw clicked a few times as he struggled with whatever he had to say. “I had to figure out a way to keep you with me.”

“Oh God,” I breathed, stumbling back a step.

“You promised not to leave,” he wheezed, brown eyes imploring. “You promised, Elli.”

“I-I’m not. I just... I’m trying to wrap my head around this.” That Zachary Bennet had been desperate to keep me... by any means necessary...was hard to believe, but I did. His glazed eyes and pale face told me how truthful he was.

“Everyone leaves me, Elli. My mom. Lyla. You.” His throat worked when he swallowed. “I know I sent you away the first time. I told you to go the second. And I fucking know I deserved for you to go the third time. But losing you was my worst nightmare come to life. When you got your period every month, I prayed for more time. Just a little longer. Then hopefully the birth control would be out of your system and I could...trap you.”

A strangled sound bubbled out of my throat. “Zachary, you...?”

“I found the pills a few days after we got back from California. I had them switched out and replaced them,” he confessed, bowing his head. “I knew it was wrong. It only

added to the sins I'd already committed against you, but I had to find a way to keep you, Elli."

"Why?" I cried, torn between wanting to run as far away from him and simultaneously into his arms so badly I had to curl my toes inside my shoes so I stayed where I was.

"Because I'm in love with you."

CHAPTER 54

JUDGE

SHE WAS GOING TO RUN.

I could sense it, my body tensing for the impact of the blow when she did. The devastation. The agony.

But if she ran from me this time, I wouldn't be able to let her go like the last time. She had my baby growing inside her. I had what I wanted. Our child was going to come into the world in just a few months. I'd tied her to me irrevocably.

That she was going to hate me for it, probably even more than she already did because of the Georgetown incident, wasn't something I'd let myself think about. Much. She could hate me, but I'd fix it. I would fix everything. Because now I had time to show her.

"You replaced my birth control. With placebos?" I shrugged. "So you could get me pregnant?"

"Yes."

"Because you wanted to trap me."

Shame tried to push in on me, but I shook it off. Where this woman was concerned, I would do a lot worse to keep her.

"Yes."

"Because you...love me."

It was torture, the way her voice cracked on the last words.

“More than anything in this world, Elli. I know—”

She lifted her hands in a time-out motion. “Stop. Just shut up for a minute.” Pushing her hair out of her face, she looked up at me searchingly. I kept my mouth shut and waited.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she demanded angrily after several long moments of tense silence passed.

“I was scared,” I admitted.

“You were...” She blinked several times, stunned. “Zachary Bennet was scared.”

I reminded myself that she wasn’t going to go anywhere now that her secret was out. She couldn’t run from me. She couldn’t hide. She had to stay here. With me. Forever. Because of the baby. But would I really force her? I could live with just having the connection to her through our kid. It would kill me, but if she chose to walk away, I wouldn’t pick her up and lock her in our room.

Her happiness was what I lived for. My misery would be worth it. Because she deserved every fucking thing she wanted.

And if I wasn’t what she wanted, then I would slowly waste away to nothing. But at least I could watch her from the sidelines.

“Zachary, why were you scared to tell me you love me?”

Meeting her gaze, I gave her the truth. “I can stand in the cage and let a three-hundred-pound man beat on me. I can sit behind the bench and stare down murderers. I can look death in the face without flinching. But if I told you how much I love you and you rejected me, it would destroy me.” She

stumbled back another step, and my heart lurched. “I was a coward, Elli. I’m still scared. You have all the power here, baby. Everything you do holds me in thrall. You can break me with a tear. And I willingly give up that control, to you and only you. Now and always.”

She sucked in a ragged breath and turned away. I couldn’t fight back my pain-ravaged plea. “Don’t go.”

With her back to me, she held up both hands. “I’m not going anywhere. Just give me a moment to digest all of this.”

“Okay.” My throat was so tight, it was impossible to swallow. I could barely breathe, but as long as she was still there, I would remain standing.

She bent her head forward, her hair falling over her shoulders. Standing behind her, unable to see her face, I had no idea what she was thinking. My body stayed tense, ready for the blow if she made a run for it.

She should. It was safer for her to get as far away from me as possible. My obsession with her was a sickness I’d spent years fighting. After I’d gotten the blissful taste of life with her at my side, in our bed, loving me, for a few brief months, my world had turned dark when she left. I wasn’t confident I would survive if she chose to go this time. Not even for our baby.

“Say it,” she commanded in her sweetly innocent voice, her back still turned to me, but something had changed in her shoulders. I could feel it flooding the room, and I wasn’t sure it was the outrage that I was expecting, which was why it confused the hell out of me. “Tell me you love me again.”

Carefully, I crossed the room and stepped in front of her, not wanting to make a wrong move and send her running. My

hands shook when I lifted them to cup her face. It wasn't set in hard, angry lines, but I still couldn't read her mood. I couldn't tell if she was going to bolt or let me love her, and that made fear clutch at my chest.

"I love you, Elli," I told her, swallowing my fear in hopes that she wouldn't use her power to bring me to my knees.

She tipped her head back, and I saw her, the confident woman she'd turned into when I'd put my collar around her neck. She'd disappeared when I'd hurt her with the truth about Georgetown. But right then, she stared back at me fearlessly, the glitter in those baby blues telling me loud and clear she was very much aware of all the control I had just handed over on a silver platter. Power she had held all along.

"I'm mad at you for trying to trap me," she announced, her voice turning cool enough to chill me to my bones.

"I didn't try," I stupidly amended. "I did, sweetheart. My baby is inside you right now."

When I decided that getting her pregnant was the only way I was going to get to keep her, I hadn't allowed myself to think past using the baby as my key to hold on to the woman I loved. But once I'd guessed the truth, I'd felt a weird new excitement. After I'd gotten off the phone with her the night before, I'd been busy. I'd found an online baby furniture store that let me design an entire nursery, and I'd spent hours doing just that, wondering what Elli would prefer and coming up with half a dozen different mock-ups for one of the guest rooms in the same wing of the house as our current bedroom.

Once I was done with that, I'd gotten busy ordering her new vehicle so it could be delivered as soon as possible. Lyla's convertible was safe enough, but it didn't have all the updated features, and I wasn't sure how sane I would stay thinking of a

pregnant Elli on the road in a car that wasn't built like a tank. No matter how good of a driver she was, there were stupid people out there who could make the smallest mistakes and steal my reason for breathing away from me forever.

Her eyes narrowed on me. "Was that the only reason you fucked me so often?"

Bending my knees, I put my face close to hers. "I didn't fuck you."

"I dispute that, Your Honor," she argued. "I was there, and apparently I remember the events of our sexcapades differently than you do."

"That wasn't me fucking you, Elli. That was simply the way we make love," I corrected patiently, still on edge from the fear that she would run at any second. "It was me so hungry for you that I couldn't control myself. It was me trying to show you how much I love you. If you had paid attention, you would have caught on to how utterly consumed and obsessed I am with you that I couldn't go a full hour without touching you."

"Well, I'm still mad."

CHAPTER 55

JUDGE

SHE FOLDED HER ARMS OVER HER CHEST AND TILTED HER CHIN in that stubborn, defiant way that told me she had gone into brat mode. My heart kicked painfully in my chest, hope choking me. “Elli.”

“You don’t get to make decisions that involve my body without talking to me first. Creating life is special. If you wanted a baby so badly, you should have at least asked me how I would feel about getting pregnant.”

A flutter of regret tried to invade my mind, but I wouldn’t let it fuck with my head.

She did such a good job of that without my adding more shit to the pile.

And I loved it.

“Now you’re going to have to make it up to me.”

“I don’t want a baby,” I breathed, trying to keep up when my heart was still trying to figure out if hope was plausible. Was she fucking with me, or was she going to be my spoiled little brat and let me truly make it up to her? Hurt filled those eyes that could turn my world upside down with just a blink, and I rushed to correct her assumption. “I want *our* baby.”

Her tongue swiped over her bottom lip, distracting me, but only for a moment.

“I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you about it. I apologize that I sabotaged your birth control, but I’m not sorry that you’re going to make me a daddy.” I slowly lifted my hand, giving her plenty of time to step away, and I wrapped my fingers around her delicate throat.

Her lashes fluttered, her mouth falling open in a soundless cry of need. I didn’t deserve her. “How can I make it up to you, sweetheart?”

She held up an index finger. “First, you have to tell me you love me.”

“I love you.” I gave the words to her without hesitation.

“I wasn’t done,” she complained. “First, you have to tell me you love me. At least three times a day. Six on the weekends. At least,” she repeated for emphasis. “Second.” She ticked off another finger. “I want my collar back.”

My cock was already hard, but at the mention of her collar, the tip began to leak. “Yes, baby. I love you, baby.”

If I’d known how much she would glow when I spoke those three words, I would have manned up and told her years ago.

Fuck, I’d wasted so much time.

“Third.” She ticked her ring finger next, causing my gaze to linger on it. *Soon*, I silently promised myself. My ring would be there soon, and just like the collar and our child, I would mark her as mine. “Everything with this baby will be fifty-fifty.”

“Absolutely,” I agreed, a little insulted she would even include that. “I’m going to be there for every late-night feeding, every dirty diaper, every mess, and every bath. Our baby will know that I love them as much as I love you.”

She gave me a mock glare. “She better.”

“She?” I couldn’t breathe. “She?”

“Congrats, Your Honor. According to the blood work, you’re going to be a girl dad in March,” she tossed at me with a smirk.

Dropping to my knees, I grasped her by the waist and pulled her in so I could press my ear to her belly. She combed her fingers through my hair, holding me closer. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to listen to our baby girl growing in there.” Ellianna giggled. “Shh, I can’t hear.”

“You know it doesn’t work like that,” she chided.

“Maybe for other people.” I closed my eyes to hide my tears, my arms securing her in place. “Any more demands?”

“I can’t think clearly at the moment, but I reserve the right to make amendments at any time in the future,” she huffed playfully. “Do you hear anything yet?”

“Just the beating of my heart.”

“Admit it. You totally failed biology in college, didn’t you?”

Laughing, I kissed her abdomen and stood, gently scooping her into my arms and carrying her out of the office. “That’s what I get for saying corny shit.”

“Corny?” It only took her a few seconds to understand. “Your heart... You mean mine... *I’m your heart.*”

“I love you.”

Her nails bit into my back, her little hum of pleasure only increasing my pace. “You don’t have to say them all at once,” she grumbled playfully. “Spread them out a little.”

Entering our bedroom, I kicked the door shut. Brushing a kiss over her brow, I sat her on the end of the bed and crouched in front of her, taking off her shoes. “I love you.”

My hands made quick work of her jeans and panties, stripping them down her legs after she lifted her hips to help. “I love you.”

“So, I’m going to get them in clusters and then be hungry for them the rest of the day.” Her mouth turned down. “It’s fine. At least I will get some.”

Ignoring her brattiness, I took off her shirt again and then released the front clasp of her bra. Having her completely bare on our bed once more was a test of my willpower. “I love you.”

Ellianna leaned back on her hands, spreading her thighs in invitation. “Do I get to come now, Sir?”

Straightening, I walked around the bed to my nightstand. Opening the drawer, I pulled out the case where I’d carefully placed her necklace. When I turned back to her with the jewelry in hand, her eyes lit up.

She touched her neck. “I’ve missed feeling it around my throat almost as much as I missed you.”

“Good. Because if you take it off again, you’ll probably destroy me.” Sitting beside her, I waited for her to lift her hair

before securing it where it belonged.

When she turned to show it to me, the O-ring perfectly in place, I traced my thumb around it, pausing on each diamond. “Loved. Collared. Owned.”

She shivered, pressing her thighs together and squirming her bottom around on the bed. “That’s what the diamonds mean?”

“Yes.” Lifting her onto my lap, I scooted back until I reached the headboard “Take me out,” I instructed.

Licking her lips, she slowly dipped her hand beneath the band of my sweatpants. Her silky fingers wrapping around my shaft caused me to see stars. No matter how many times she touched me, sucked me, let me inside that sweet cunt, I would never get enough.

“I love you,” I groaned when she rubbed her thumb over the tip, collecting the thick droplets she produced when she stroked me.

She switched hands on my cock so she could lick me off her thumb. Moaning at the taste, she closed her eyes. When her lashes lifted, her gaze trapped mine. “I love you too.”

Happiness like I’d never known ricocheted in my chest. “Is that how this goes?” I rasped, spreading her drenched folds with my fingers so I could stroke her clit with my thumb. Her hips jerked forward, seeking more pleasure. “For every six I love yous I say, you give me one in return?”

She grinned mischievously. “Seems like a fair trade to me, Sir.”

Wrapping her hair around my hand, I pulled her head back. “I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Her breath came in little pants. “I love you, Zachary.”

Unable to take not being a part of her, I split her in half on my cock. Her soaked, tight heat sucked me in, taking me to the root, fluttering around my shaft in massaging waves.

Ellianna grasped my shoulders to steady herself and then began to rock her hips. “Harder, Sir. Pull my hair harder.”

I tugged a little rougher. She cried out, but her pussy contracting around my dick was enough for me to know she loved the quick sting of discomfort.

“You’re so fucking perfect, do you know that?” Gripping a handful of her ass, I lifted her up and down my cock faster. “Always wet for me. Always taking it deep. Asking for more like a good girl. Are you, Elli?” Releasing her hair, I wrapped my hand around her throat, forcing her to look straight into my eyes. “Are you my good girl, Ellianna?”

“Yes!” she screamed, her release hitting her hard and fast, her thighs trembling on either side of mine as she continued to work her hips. “Yes, Zachary. I’m your good girl.”

Flipping her onto her back, I drove into her, my hips pounding her into the bed. “I love you, love you, love you, love you, love you. I love you!” I bellowed, emptying into her still-contracting pussy.

“I love you,” she whispered weakly.

Sweat pouring down my body, I looked down to find her already half asleep. Struggling to catch my breath, I turned us onto our sides and tucked her head under my chin. “Don’t ever leave me.”

Wrapping her arms around me, she let out a contented sigh against my neck. “Never.”

CHAPTER 56

ELLIANNA

WHILE THE LAST OF THE STUDENTS FROM MY FINAL CLASS OF the day filed out, I gathered my things and checked the clock on my phone. We'd run over, but there was no class directly after this one, so I'd been in no rush. I would rather stay a little longer and answer questions that the students might have been having difficulty understanding than have to grade twenty papers with the same mistakes every time.

Monday evenings, I had back-to-back tutoring sessions, but Tuesdays were a lot crazier. I had my own classes until after noon, and then two classes that I was the TA for, followed by a two-hour-long tutoring session with a student who needed help in multiple subjects.

As I walked across campus, my stomach growled. Touching my belly, I gently soothed the baby. "We'll get a sandwich after work."

I was halfway up the stairs to the library when I heard running feet behind me. "Elli."

Turning on the first landing, I found Zachary hurrying up the steps, a Tupperware container in one hand. Joy flooded me at the sight of him. He was dressed in black slacks, the sleeves of his charcoal button-up rolled up to his elbows, and I was suddenly hungrier for a lot more than just a sandwich.

He stopped in front of me and dropped a kiss on my mouth, his free hand pulling me up against his rock-hard body. “Hi,” he murmured against my lips.

“Hi,” I husked, a little dazed.

“I know you’re busy, but it’s dinnertime. I don’t want you to go hungry.” Once I took the container from him, he took full advantage of his free hand to wrap himself around me more securely.

“Thank you.”

“Gotta make sure my girls get plenty of nutrients.” He trailed his hand from my back to my abdomen, his fingers splaying out so that his pinkie and thumb touched either side. “How long before you get a bump and the world knows I put this baby here?”

Tipping my head back, I couldn’t stop smiling at how sweetly adorable he was. Ever since our talk Sunday, he’d been different. The same asshole as usual in some areas, but a completely new man in others. His gentleness when he touched my belly was only one of a hundred new things he did now that melted me.

“It could start developing any time now. But it’s been feeling a little squishy to me recently.”

He poked at my belly button, his bottom lip poking out. “I can’t feel a difference yet.” He nudged the plastic container. “Eat before you go inside. Your student can wait a few extra minutes.”

“Fine.” Shoving my things against his chest, I didn’t waste another second before tearing off the lid. Seeing it was a grilled cheese with ham, and the cheese was still perfectly

melted, while the bread was crispy, I moaned my appreciation. “Did you rush over here after making this for me?”

“I didn’t break the speed limit,” he assured me, his eyes watching intently as I took a big bite. “You’re all about sandwiches lately. I thought you would like this for a snack.”

“It’s perfect. Thank you.” Hugging his side, I licked butter off my lips. “They’re the only thing I wanted to eat when the morning sickness was at its worst. I was careful, though. I made sure to heat the deli meat to a safe temperature.”

He wiped a crumb from the corner of my mouth. “I read that lunch meat can be dangerous for a pregnant woman, so I heated it in the pan before adding it to the sandwich and toasting it.”

“This is even better than the chicken pesto sandwiches Kyndle makes.” He glowered, and I took another bite of the sandwich. “Mmm, so good.”

“You get brattier every day,” he grumbled.

“You love it,” I sassed.

“Fucking right.” His phone rang, and he pulled it out while stealing a kiss. “Hey, man.”

“Something’s wrong,” I heard Howler’s agitated words on the other end and felt Zachary stiffen. “Josie didn’t show up for dance, and Lyla isn’t answering her phone.”

His hand still at my back contracted, but he visibly tried to calm himself. “Maybe Josie didn’t feel like going tonight. Didn’t you say she was going to school an extra day this week. She’s probably just tired, brother.”

“No,” Howler snapped. “Not Josie. She would want to go to dance even if she were puking her guts out. She loves that

class and her teacher. Call your driver. Find out what's going on."

"Yeah, okay," he agreed. "I'm on it, man. Give me a second, and I'll call you back."

Judge hung up but started calling someone else immediately. With every ring that went off in his ear and no one answered, his breathing changed a little more. His distress affected my appetite, and I replaced the sandwich in the container. With a curse, he tried again.

"Shit," he growled to himself. "Babe, I need your phone."

I handed it over without hesitation. He punched in a number but got the same result. Cursing, he pulled up the LoJack GPS to all his vehicles on his own device. "Ah, fuck," he choked. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"What's wrong?"

His stormy eyes met mine. "Tony isn't answering. And the car he was driving earlier is at a drug den Gwen prefers. I think Josie is with Lyla."

I felt the world shift. "Go." I pushed at his arm, my gut twisting with terror for my friend. It didn't help that his fear was so thick I could practically taste it. "Go find her. Hurry."

"I love you." Grabbing my face, he gave me a hard kiss before taking off at a full-on sprint. Heart pounding, I watched him go, feeling helpless.

Lyla and Josie would be okay, I attempted to reassure myself. Gwen was a cokehead and child abuser, but she wouldn't actually take on Lyla. She wasn't that stupid. Her bark was worse than her bite.

But was Tony?

Knowing I wouldn't be able to concentrate on my tutoring client, I sent them a quick text to let them know I had a family emergency, and I rushed across campus to Lyla's car. As I got behind the wheel, my phone rang. Hoping it was news that this was all a misunderstanding and Lyla was fine, I answered without looking to see who the caller was.

"Hey, is everyone okay?" A heavy silence greeted me. Thinking I'd ended the call, I pulled the phone back to see who had called. Seeing the name at the top of the screen, my heart dropped into my stomach. Gulping, I reluctantly lifted it back to my ear. "Mrs. Bennet?"

"Hello, Ellianna. Do you have a moment to chat?"

I would have preferred waterboarding to having a conversation with Zachary's mother, but if she was calling me, she had a reason. Experience told me that whatever she needed to speak to me about, it would be in my best interest to just give in and hear what she had to say.

CHAPTER 57

JUDGE

I WAS SWEATING BY THE TIME MY TIRES SCREAMED TO A HALT outside the condemnable house in a part of town that was known for drug deals and dens. Howler's massive SUV was parked half in the road. Inside the vehicle, Josie was on her knees in the passenger seat, her tear-soaked face pressed against the window.

I ran over to her just as Barrick rolled up.

The door unlocked, and my goddaughter threw herself into my arms. "There was a bang, Uncle Judge."

Swallowing the bile in my throat, I checked her over, making sure she was unharmed. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

She shook her head vigorously. "N-no. Please help Lyla, Uncle Judge. Daddy went inside, but what if Mommy hurts him too?"

Kissing the top of her head, I stepped back. "Lock the door again." As soon as I heard the click, I was running toward the house.

Inside, the house reeked of bodily fluids, skunky weed, decay...and gunfire. As soon as I spotted Lyla, my knees felt weak. She was on her feet, her face haunted as Barrick stepped

back from hugging her. Choking on relief, I rushed her, pulling her into my arms.

“Are you okay?” Like with Josie, I ran my hands over my sister in search of wounds. Just because she was standing didn’t mean anything. Lyla had an insanely high pain tolerance.

So when I felt something sticky under my fingers through the hole in her jacket, I had to fight the roar of rage that bubbled up. Howler pulled her away from me, making her cry out because it jostled her injury.

“It’s just a graze.” She tried to make light of it. “I’m fine.”

Fuck, she’d been shot, and she said she was fine. The women in my life were going to be the death of me. “Get her to the hospital,” I instructed Howler. “Barrick and I will deal with this shit. The cops are already on their way.”

I’d called 9-1-1 on the drive over. It pissed me off that I’d gotten there before them. Someone was going to pay for that delay. With as many boots on the ground as I’d recruited to find Gwen, someone should have dealt with her before she was able to get close to my sister.

Tony helping the crazy bitch was something I never would have expected. If Lyla hadn’t already killed him, the bastard wouldn’t have been breathing for long after I got hold of him. Shaken, I handled the cops who showed up to process the scene. It took a while, but by the time Gwen was in cuffs and a detective showed up to label Tony’s death self-defense, I felt like I was going to collapse.

Thankfully, when Barrick and I stopped at the hospital, Lyla was just being discharged. Her gunshot wound had been stitched, and she was given something for the pain. Reassuring

myself that the danger to my sister was over now, I let Barrick give me an ass-chewing about my security detail before going home.

When I walked into the house, Ellianna was pacing in the kitchen. As soon as she saw me, relief made her shoulders sag. “Oh, thank God!” she cried, throwing herself into my arms. “I was so scared. But if you’re here, then they must be okay.”

As I held on to her for dear life, the stress of the night finally caught up to me. “She’s okay.” Letting the tears fall, I hid my face in her hair. “Josie was scared, but unharmed. Lyla got grazed by a bullet—”

“What?” she yelped. “No, no!”

“But she’s fine,” I rushed to reassure her, giving her a brief recap of what had happened. I could tell when she was scared or grew angrier at Gwen and Tony as I explained everything. “Lyla’s already on her way home.”

Gentle fingers stroked up and down my neck soothingly. Her touch was normally comforting, but I was too trapped in my head. I’d nearly lost my sister, the one person second to Ellianna that I couldn’t live without. I couldn’t think straight.

Yes. Lyla was home. She was safe now.

But what if she hadn’t been able to defend herself?

What would have happened if she hadn’t had firearms training from working with Barrick and Braxton for the last three years?

Arms tightening around Elli, I didn’t bother to mask my sob. “My sister almost died tonight because of a man on my payroll.”

“But she didn’t,” she murmured softly. “She was able to protect herself. You said it yourself. She eliminated the threat. Tony can’t touch her now, and Gwen is in jail. We’ll make sure she doesn’t get out.”

“I was so scared, baby.”

Leaning back so she could see my face, Ellianna wiped away a few of my tears. “She’s safe now, Zachary. Everything turned out as it should have.”

Too overcome with emotion to speak, I nodded, so many *what-ifs* playing through my head. All it showed me was that life was too short to hesitate, too short not to live each day anything but happy.

“Let’s go to bed,” Elli urged, stepping back and linking her fingers through mine. “You need to hit pause and not think about the bad things that might have happened. Lyla protected herself. She’s home with her little family right now. And you’re here with yours.”

I willingly let her lead me upstairs to our room and then into the adjoining bathroom. After turning on the shower, she reached for my belt. She stripped me down and then herself while the shower heated, and then she pulled me under the spray with her.

Clutching her to me, I let the hot jets pound on my back and just held her. “I love you.”

CHAPTER 58

ELLIANNA

SIPPING MY CUP OF TEA, I SAT BACK AND WATCHED AS JUDGE struggled not to coddle Lyla. Zachary had spent most of the day after what happened with Gwen and Tony at Howler's, not even bothering to go in to work. He'd asked me to go with him, but after the traumatic events, I didn't want to overwhelm Lyla by dropping the news of our relationship and our impending parenthood on her. It had been over a week since the shooting, and things had finally calmed down, at least a little bit. And I couldn't go another day without seeing my childhood best friend.

"I told you I'm fine," Lyla complained when her brother took the plate of cookies from her when she walked into the room. "My arm doesn't even hurt now."

"And I told you to sit down and relax. We don't need you waiting on us, Lyla." He placed the dish on the coffee table before snatching several. Sitting back down beside me, he offered me one then stuffed another into his mouth.

Bemusedly, I realized they were homemade birthday cake cookies.

"Josie helped me make them," Lyla commented, grabbing one for herself. "Thanks for teaching her. They're our new favorite."

“Elli’s are better,” Zachary muttered, eating another one.

“Be nice,” I warned. “You don’t want to hurt Josie’s feelings.”

“She’s outside playing with Howler,” he said with a shrug.

“Apologize to Lyla.”

Bending his head, he brushed his nose against mine. “I’m just telling the truth. Your cookies were better. Why haven’t you made me any more?”

I pulled back with a mock glare. “I didn’t make them for you in the first place. They were for Josie. And you were a jerk that day. I don’t make cookies for jerks.”

“Ah, come on. I said I was sorry, baby. Don’t you forgive me?”

I turned my head, taking a bite of my cookie. “Apologize to Lyla, and I’ll think about it.”

Lyla’s laughter pulled my eyes from his pouting mouth. “You two are adorable. The perfect combination of grumpy and sunshine. My dickhead brother and the supersweet girl I consider a sister.”

“Until Miss Sunshine throws a tantrum,” Zachary said under his breath so only I heard him. Heat filled my face, and he winked. “I’m sorry, Lyla. Forgive me for being rude.”

“OMG. I love this.” Lyla pointed between us. “Elli, you can’t break up with him. Like ever. I want this version of him forever.”

A rumble filled the room, Zachary’s eyes turning molten. “Shut the fuck up, Lyla. She’s never leaving me.”

“I said she shouldn’t, not that she should, dumbass.”

Grabbing me around the waist, he lifted me on to his lap. His hand went directly to my belly, rubbing over it. He nuzzled my ear. “You are getting squishy. How did that happen overnight?”

“Judge!” Lyla snapped at him. “You don’t tell a woman she’s getting fat!”

“She’s not getting fat. She’s squishy.” He tucked my head under his chin, covering one ear while pressing the other to his chest. “Why would you even say anything about her being fat? That’s all baby. She’s so tiny, she will probably need a C-section even though our baby is a girl.”

Lyla gasped, and I covered his mouth with my hand. “I wasn’t ready to tell her I’m pregnant, Zachary! She just got engaged. This is her time.”

Contritely, he kissed my palm before pulling it away. “Sorry, baby. I got carried away when she called you fat.”

Lyla jumped to her feet, pointing at her brother accusingly. “One, I didn’t call her fat. You called her squishy, and I assumed you were being your usual asshole self and calling her fat. And two—” her face lit up with delight “—I’m going to be an aunt? I’m getting a niece?”

Bashfully, I nodded. “Yes. I’m pregnant, and it’s a girl. Labs confirmed gender.”

She started jumping around in excitement. “Oh my God! This is perfect. I’m so happy.” Her smile dimmed slightly. “Wait. Weren’t you two still fighting like a week ago? Are we happy about this?”

“I’m happy. I can’t wait to be a dad.” Zachary rubbed his hand over my abdomen lovingly. “Elli?”

I could hear uncertainty in his voice, hesitation. As if he honestly didn't know the answer. Covering his hand, I met his gaze. "I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life. You're the only man I've imagined being the father of my children. I love you, Zachary."

His eyes began to glitter with suppressed emotion. "I love you, Elli."

"Mommy, why were you yelling?" Josie asked as she and Howler came in from outside.

Lyla danced over to Josie. "Jo-Jo, guess what? Guess what!"

The little girl giggled. "What?"

Taking her hands, Lyla twirled her around. "You are getting a cousin!"

"For my birthday?" she asked hopefully.

"No. But maybe next time," Lyla said with a laugh.

"Then can I have a brother or sister for my birthday?"

Howler choked on air, and Lyla laughed. "Not this year, Jo. We're planning our wedding, remember?"

"Oh yeah." She skipped over to her uncle and me. "Are you going to be a daddy, Uncle Judge?"

"Sure am, princess."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Can it be a girl? My aunties all have boys. They smell bad and don't like to play."

"Then I will definitely make sure it's a girl, Josie," he promised. "Just for you, princess."

"Yay!" she cheered. Jumping up onto the couch beside us, she smacked a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks, Uncle Judge."

You're the best. Cookies!"

Bouncing down, she grabbed two of the cookies. "I'm gonna go make the baby a card."

Laughing, I watched her go. She was a ball of endless energy. With her blond hair, I could almost imagine she was my daughter. I didn't know what our daughter was going to look like, and I couldn't help daydreaming about my baby girl when she was Josie's age.

"Elli is pregnant?" Howler asked, grabbing a few cookies.

"She's due in March," Zachary confirmed with pride. "We're having a girl."

His best friend burst out laughing. "Karma!"

EPILOGUE 1

JUDGE

Adjusting the tree topper, I waited for Mabel to give me more direction.

“To the left. Just a little. A little more. Wait, too much. Right just a tad.”

“Mom, it’s perfect,” Elli grumbled from her spot on the couch where she was enjoying her s’more. At the beginning of her third trimester, she’d started craving something new every week. For the moment, it was cinnamon Graham crackers, marshmallow, and Reese’s with gummy bears. “Let him down now.”

“It’s still a little crooked,” Mabel critiqued.

I made another adjustment, wanting—needing—everything to be perfect. “How about now?”

“Just a little to the left again. There!” She cheered.

Dusting glitter off my hands, I stepped off the ladder and gave it a long appraisal. Tomorrow was Christmas. With as crazy as work had been for me and school was for Elli, on top of being pregnant and Mabel staying more often than not at Miss Lindy’s, we’d waited to decorate.

Ellianna hadn’t been in the mood for festivities, but no way were we spending our first Christmas together in years

without a tree. Carols played softly in the background. The tree was the biggest I could find. It took three Sons to carry it in to avoid damaging it as much as possible. Josie was going to love it when Lyla and Howler came over for lunch the next day.

“Are we done yet?” Elli asked from the same spot I’d put her in to keep me company while I decorated the tree.

She had a smear of chocolate and marshmallow at the corner of her mouth. Dressed in green maternity pajamas with the Grinch on the top and little candy canes on the pants, her blond hair in a braid over one shoulder and thick wool socks on her feet, she was so beautiful, I ached just looking at her.

“That top is fitting, considering what a grump you are today,” Mabel told her. “Is your back hurting again?”

She shifted her gaze to the tree that was lit up with what must have been a hundred thousand lights. “I just want this day over with.”

Walking over to the couch, I crouched down in front of her. Rubbing my hand over her beautifully distended belly, I was instantly rewarded with the feel of my little angel kicking against my palm. “How about I give my good girl an early Christmas present.”

“Zachary,” she hissed, sending her mom a shy look. Mabel had her back to us, though, adjusting a few ornaments and pretending not to hear. “Mom is right there.”

Laughing at the adorable shade of pink her cheeks were, I shook my head. With all the dirty things she let me do to her, I thought I’d fucked the innocence out of her by now. But she still blushed easily. “I meant an actual present, baby.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders dropped. “No...I don’t deserve a present.”

“Of course you do, baby. How about the big one wrapped in the same shade of blue as your eyes?”

“No, really, Zachary. I don’t want it.” She licked her lips nervously. “I need to tell you something.”

I wiped away the lingering dessert on her lips. “Did you do something naughty, Elli?” I teased.

She swallowed hard. “Yes. I should have told you already. I’ve wanted to for days now. Weeks, actually. But I promised. I should have just spoken up.” Tears filled her pretty eyes. “Now it’s too late to warn you.”

Stroking my knuckles over her cheek, I tried to reassure her. “Whatever it is, everything will be fine.”

“I kept something from you. We promised each other no more secrets, but I broke it.” Her chin trembled, driving me crazy. The doorbell rang, but all I could focus on was the sight of the tears spilling over her golden lashes. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” I soothed, lifting her hands to my mouth, kissing each palm. “Unless you’re going to leave me, I don’t care. We’ll figure it out. Okay?”

She closed her eyes, shaking her head from side to side. “No. You’re going to be mad. And you should be. I didn’t warn you when I had the chance.”

“Warn me about what, baby?”

Clicking heels outside the room had her eyes going wide as she looked at the door. In the next moment, my mother stepped into the room, Patricia and one of our part-time maids behind her, arms full of presents in various sizes.

Brenda Bennet had a ten-thousand-dollar purse hanging from her bent arm, was dressed like she just got back from Fashion Week, and had a smug grin on her face like she just knew she'd pulled a fast one.

“Merry Christmas, darling.”

Swallowing a groan, I straightened to my full height. “Mother,” I greeted cautiously. “What a surprise.”

“I know,” she said with a smirk. “Lucky for me, dear, sweet, little Ellianna helped me arrange my arrival.”

“I’m sorry,” Elli whispered when I shifted my gaze back to her. More tears spilled from her eyes, and she lowered her head.

“Who pays your security detail, Mother?” I tossed the question at her.

She shrugged. “I’m sure my accountant does.”

“No, Mother. I do,” I informed her with a smirk. “I’ve known you were planning this ‘surprise’ since August.”

What I didn’t know was why Elli was so upset about it. My mother could always manipulate her. Playing the “poor me, I’m so helpless” card and taking advantage of Ellianna’s kind heart.

“No need for theatrics, Judge.” She rolled her eyes. “Honestly, you would think you would appreciate the effort I put in to see my son for the holidays.”

“Ask yourself why you have to sneak around to be welcome in my home, Mother. And then we can talk about *my* theatrics.” Grasping Ellianna’s hands, I helped her to her feet.

Her chin was still wobbling. “You knew?”

“I’ve been keeping close tabs on her since she called Lyla over the summer to ask what our plans were for Christmas. I get a weekly report on her movements and a list of who she calls just to make sure she’s staying out of trouble.” I tugged Elli as close as possible with her baby bump in the way. “What did she say to convince you not to tell me she was coming here?”

Brenda huffed from the other side of the room. “You mean your spies didn’t tell you that?”

Ignoring her, I kept my eyes glued to Elli’s tear-soaked face. “Talk to me, baby.”

She hiccupped. “I got her call the same night Lyla had the incident with Gwen. I was worried, scared, and just all around not thinking straight. I barely heard what she said. I agreed without fully listening. I forgot all about it. Until two weeks ago. And she called to confirm, but I didn’t even remember what I promised her.”

“I’m sure she reminded you.”

She nodded, her braid flying around her head. “She mentioned the w-woman she was going to introduce you to. The one I agreed to help set up a lunch date with the day after Christmas. The same one she thinks will make the p-perfect... daughter-in-law.”

Wiping a tear from her cheek, I blew out a breath. “Another test?”

“No, no, I swear. I knew you wouldn’t even look twice at whoever she introduced you to. That’s why I didn’t say anything. But I was hurt because you obviously hadn’t told your mom about us. Or the baby. And I was a little jealous.”

I cocked a brow, and she sucked her lip between her teeth. “A lot jealous,” she amended.

Biting back a pleased smile, I tipped her head up. “I didn’t tell her yet because I hadn’t spoken to her. Since she was coming for Christmas, I planned to make the announcement then.”

“Oh.”

“Baby?” Mother squawked. “What baby? Please tell me your sister isn’t pregnant already. She’s too young to ruin her figure.”

Tuning her out, I kept my focus on the only person in the room who truly mattered. “I was hoping to make a double announcement.”

“You’re running for mayor?” Brenda asked hopefully.

“God, you get more annoying every time I see you,” Mabel griped.

Pulling the ring box from my pants pocket, I dropped to my knees in front of my Elli. “Ellianna Audrey Chambers, love of my life, mother of my child, keeper of my heart and dreams, marry me. *Please.*”

More tears flooded out of her eyes, but a smile teased at her trembling lips. “Is this real? You are actually asking me to...”

“Are you insane?” Brenda shrieked. “She’s the help.”

Enraged, I slowly turned my head to stare coldly at the woman who had given birth to me. “Shut your mouth, or I will lock you out of this house and freeze your accounts.”

“You’ll never become governor of this state if you marry her,” she wailed. “Let alone mayor.”

“Last warning, Mother.”

“But she’s—”

“Do not finish that sentence!” I roared. “Get out before you make me do or say something that will make Elli cry.”

She sniffled like I’d just broken her heart. “Fine. I’ll be quiet.”

“Too late. Leave. Now.” When she just stood there, I snapped my fingers. Two of her security detail walked in. Both of them had been vetted by Barrick, so I knew I could trust them. Tony had taught me a very valuable lesson, if nothing else. “Get her out of here.”

Huffing, Brenda turned on her heel. “I decided not to stay after all. And I’m taking your presents with me.”

“Oh no,” Mabel said dryly. “Don’t go. We’ll be so sad without you.”

One of the guards closed the door behind them, and I returned my focus to Elli, where it never should have left. “Baby, I’m sorry. I should have waited. Should have known she would ruin this for us. Forgive me.”

She threw her arms around my neck. “I love you. Please, can we get married today?”

Relief made it impossible to breathe for a moment as her words sank in. She wanted to marry me.

Today.

“You don’t want a wedding?”

“Just you. I only want you.”

And I would always give my Elli what she wanted.

EPILOGUE 11

ELLIANNA

The moment the door to the classroom opened, I knew it was him. Had been anticipating it all day, my heart leaping every time my phone buzzed. I'd left it unanswered. Not even clicking on the messages to deny him the READ receipt it would supply him.

Keeping my attention on my students was a difficult feat, especially when my husband's angry, hungry gaze was on me.

I kept lecturing, walking back and forth at the front of the room, asking and answering questions. Building Zachary's anger until I could feel it. My skin pebbled with goose bumps. My nipples hardened. If I'd been wearing panties, they would have been soaked.

My skirt floated around my thighs, barely brushing the tops of my knees as I turned, pacing from one side of the room to the other as I talked.

"Elli," he snarled from the door, his patience at an end.

I shivered in anticipation.

"Class is dismissed."

I lifted my hands when the students quickly began to gather their things. "No, it isn't. Ignore Judge Bennet. We still have fifteen minutes until class is over."

“Ellianna!”

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. Huffing out a heavy exhale, I shooed them away. “Fine. You may go. I need to speak with the judge.”

Everyone but the girl in the front row jumped to their feet in a rush to clear out as quickly as possible. They could all feel his tension. All of them except apparently Nevaeh Stevenson.

She was the youngest and smartest student I’d ever had. I loved her brain, and the way the occasional random thought would pop out of her mouth was endearing. And she didn’t care in the slightest that some of the other students looked at her like she had three heads.

At times, I wasn’t sure if they reacted to her because of her random word vomit, who her father was, or simply because she was so beautiful, she shouldn’t have been in this realm.

“Will you be okay?” Nevaeh asked quietly when Zachary stomped toward me.

I gave her a reassuring smile. “I’ve got this. You go on. I’m sure Braxton is already waiting outside for you.”

She hesitated, but after a moment, the door opened again. Brax stood there while she gathered her books and backpack.

As soon as the heavy oak slammed behind them, signaling I was alone in the classroom with my seething husband, I crossed my arms over my chest. Mostly to hide that my nipples were so hard they were visible through my bra and top.

“What is the meaning of this?” Zachary demanded, pulling my panties out of his pocket.

I feigned shock. “Where did you get those?”

“Rita dropped off a package for me while I was in court. She said you asked her to deliver it to me after you had lunch with her earlier.”

“How strange.”

He stepped into my personal space, his eyes narrowing to dangerous slits. “You better have panties on under that skirt, wife.”

I lifted my chin defiantly. “And if I don’t?”

His nostrils flared, possessive rage and lust swirling in his dark eyes. “You’re not being a good girl, Elli.”

“I know,” I breathed, licking my suddenly dry lips.

He took another step forward, his hardness brushing over my stomach. I had just a few more weeks left until summer break, and I was still struggling to lose the last bit of baby weight. But Zachary didn’t care. If anything, he loved the new jiggle I had everywhere. I only took four weeks off after having our baby, something my husband had been less than pleased about, but I loved teaching too much. Being a mom was great, and I missed Frankie when I was at work, but she distracted my mom, who spent her days babysitting.

After Miss Lindy passed, it had felt like her grandchild was the only thing that kept my mom going. As soon as I realized how much Mom needed Frankie, I decided to go back to work early and begged her to help me. Maybe she knew what I was doing, but she never let on. Some days were a struggle for me to leave the house.

And then there were days like this...

Jerking up my skirt, Zachary exposed my bare pussy. His tortured groan filled the room. “Why are you doing this to me, Elli?”

My bottom lip pouted out. “Frankie has been keeping us both up all night this week. I just wanted a little uninterrupted attention from my husband...Sir.”

He snaked his hand around my throat, caressing his thumb over the collar I hadn't taken off since he'd put it back where it belonged. “I fucking love you, Elli.”

“I love you too, Zachary,” I moaned.

“Turn around. Take the spanking you deserve for making me so insane I adjourned court until Monday so I could fuck my wife.”

A delicious shiver went up my spine. Whimpering in anticipation, I turned and waited for the first wonderful sting.

Later, I would be his good girl.

But for now, it felt too good being his brat.