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michelle gross

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Michelle Gross

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Make no mistakes about it. I know what I look like to others. Young, government-aided, pregnant mom. They see Lucy on my hip, and they see a mistake. I mean, why else would someone have a child so young, right? They couldn't be more wrong. I'm too busy most days between parenting, work, and finishing up my last year of nursing school to let their judging gaze tear me down until *he* moves into the vacant house next to the apartments I live in.

His cold, blunt observation of us doesn't differ from any other stranger. He doesn't know me, but he's already painting a picture of who he thinks I am in his mind. He judges my very round belly, Lucy's inability to leave him alone, the bags under my eyes, and the fact that I couldn't care less what I look like anymore.

He's a rude guy. Stays that way for months too. Then something happens, I'm not even sure what. Judgmental Guy decides Lucy and me—as well as baby Eli, are worth his friendship.

Turns out, Judgmental Guy isn't too mean—okay, he kind of still is. But he graduates to Elijah. I build an unlikely friendship with him which deems it necessary for him to start smiling around me and my kids.

I'm wrong again. Elijah isn't rude. He's terrifying. His strange acts of kindness are unraveling me. Elijah is only my friend.

Right?

Oh, fudge. I think I'm wrong.

Again.

This one is for all the moms.
Whatever, *however*, you do parenting,
ROCK ON!
Also, this one is for you, Sis.
You were my muse for this book.
Your struggles have now become public.
Just kidding.
A little...

But seriously, thank you for reading each chapter as I wrote it and being
my support, as always.

Prologue

Hadley- 7 months ago...

I clutched the purse against my side as I walked up the steps with a certain amount of vigor you'd never see from me on any other given day coming home from work. Normally after working a twelve-hour shift at the nursing home I'd drag my white slip-resistant sneakers across the metal stairway with my head slumped. Our apartment was on the third floor. I always tried to make it up to my bed to sleep for a few hours before Lucy got up. Sleep was scarce between a full-time job, nursing school, and being Lucy's mommy.

But tonight was different. I gripped the purse once more with a beaming face, recalling my earlier conversation with Georgie at work.

"Well?" Georgie arched an eyebrow as I stepped out of one of the two stalls in the bathroom at work. "What does it say?"

I couldn't keep the happiness off my face as I held the stick in my hand. "I'm pregnant."

"Lord, child." She shook her head and was slow to smile. "I didn't think you were serious about trying for your second one."

"I wanted Lucy to grow up with a brother or sister close to her age," came my normal response as of late, since I heard something similar from Mom and worse from Dad weeks ago when I told them Scott and I were trying for another baby.

There was a slight hesitation before she asked, "Has Scott found a job yet?" I knew Georgie. She wanted to say more, but she knew how defensive I got about the subject.

I looked down to keep from seeing her scrutinizing stare. "He's focusing on school right now. He's only got one more year—"

"I thought he got into the police academy?" she interrupted.

I felt my cheeks flush with both anger and reluctance. I hated that I even told people Scott had gotten into the academy. I remembered being so proud of him and not being able to help it. "It didn't work out," was all I told her.

Scott had gotten his Mom to drive three hours to pick him up on the same

day I dropped him off there. Scott hadn't lasted a day, and I wished I had been surprised about that outcome. I was disappointed in him and myself. I wanted him to like what he did, but I hated how enthusiastic he got speaking about his plans when he hadn't even given it a full day.

"Oh, what's he gonna do now?"

"Doctor," I winced as I said it. Georgie nodded, unimpressed or maybe that was her response toward my tight expression.

"That's a long time."

I shrugged. "He seems excited about it." He seemed eager about becoming a police officer too. I closed my eyes and hated myself every time I doubted him. I should be the one that believed in him most, and I was... Maybe just not lately.

There was only so many disappointments a girl could endure before she expected the inevitable letdown. I was fine with Scott doing anything. He was the one hung up on all these things he thought he was supposed to be. Take the police academy... He was so hyped for months, but the week before he was to start I sensed his change. That morning, I thought he wouldn't have even gone at all if I hadn't been the one to wake him up. After that, he went through a phase of saying he wanted to become a lawyer. Now it was a doctor. In between all of that, he had a job at McDonald's only to quit a week later saying he couldn't deal with the manager. We'd just found out that I was pregnant after graduation. I was hopeful when he found a job at the Family Dollar, but that lasted less than a week. That was when I'd taken a certified nursing assistant class. Then I started working at the nursing home. Honestly, I'd been in college as long as Scott had.

Frankly, I believed Scott was someone who might not ever keep a job. He was good at painting beautiful pictures of what our life could be like provided he got this or that job.

The thing was, I liked our life. I thought we were happy. Although Lucy was unplanned, we loved her wholeheartedly, and that was something I couldn't fault Scott about. It was why I stood by him even when my dad said I was an idiot. Scott watched Lucy while I worked. I was perfectly okay with being the one that worked. The one that made a living while he became a stay-at-home dad. It was the freaking twenty-first century. Times were different and things were changing, but people still frowned upon a woman

footing the bills.

Maybe years down the line, when Scott finished medical school and our kids were a little older, he'd become the doctor he wanted. Maybe he wouldn't. Either way, I loved him. Yes, Scott was lazy about work, but he was Lucy's father. He was the man I dated throughout high school, and the father of our soon-to-be son or daughter in my tummy. I chose all of this—the life I carried, Scott, Lucy, and even our small apartment—because I knew things would be better for us in another year. I'd be finished with the nursing program, and I'd get a job at the hospital where I desperately wanted to be. I loved my co-workers and the residents, but I was anxious for better working hours. And my family needed the better pay.

“Yeah, but it works out. He gets to stay home with Lucy while I work,” I said honestly.

“Pay no mind to me, Hadley. You know I'm too old to understand a man staying at home playing video games instead of working.” She frowned as she walked toward the exit.

“He's home with Lucy right now,” I told her.

“It's bedtime of course. He doesn't have to do much babysitting when she's sleeping. Does he watch her when you're in class too?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. My first instinct was to defend Scott. It got old when you heard these conversations time and time again. If Scott didn't have plans, he watched Lucy. Unfortunately, he went out a lot, leaving my parents to watch Lucy since I had classes after work. Most of the time, I couldn't get more than a couple hours of sleep after picking her up since she'd be awake, and he didn't come home until it was time for me to leave again.

“He does sometimes,” I sniffed, feeling down just minutes after being on cloud nine. I stared at the pregnancy test in my hand. “We're happy, Georgie. Is it too much to ask for you to be happy for me? You know how much I've wanted this baby.”

She sighed, came toward me, and wrapped me in her meaty arms. “I'm sorry. I know you're happy. I won't say no more about it.”

“You always say that,” I accused, but I was smiling when she pulled away from me.

“And I always will. You deserve better.”

“You’re worse than my dad.” I huffed.

“You’re my best worker, but you remind me of my foolish daughter.” She patted my shoulder. “I’m not looking forward to losing you next year.”

“I’ll still come to see you,” I told her and then held up the stick, waving it around between us. “Now... Are you going to congratulate me or not?”

“Go to the doctor first and make sure.” She saw me sulking and added, “I’m happy for you.”

I held my stomach and beamed down at it. “I can’t wait to tell Scott. I wonder if we’ll have another girl or a wild little boy?”

“Lucy’s wild enough for ten boys.”

I laughed at her statement. “She’s rotten.”

“Go on,” she shooed me away.

I glimpsed at the watch on my arm. “I still have another ten minutes on my break.”

“No, I mean go home. We’re covered for the night for once, and there’s no need for you to be prancing around, waiting to tell your man. Go on.”

I grabbed her hands and squeezed them. “Really? You’re the best.”

She pulled her hands away and scowled. “Here the best student I ever had grabbed my hands before she washes hers with her pregnancy stick still in one.” She shook her fingers and walked toward the sinks. “See, this is why you need to go home tonight.”

I grinned as I shoved the pregnancy test into my scrub pocket and went to wash up. “Now you know I don’t leave this bathroom until I wash my hands. I just got a little excited.”

I shuffled up the last set of apartment steps. The area wasn’t the best, but I just kept telling myself once I get out of college we could leave this place. I’d chant the same words over and over—*Only three more years... Only three...* Before I knew it, I was chanting *only two more*, and now I was chanting *only one more...* Just one more, and I’d be able to afford a mortgage since I’d be done with school. I’d go on to pass the National Council Licensure Exam—NCLEX for short—and become that registered nurse I was meant to be. In the meantime, I built up my credit score preparing for the day we would move out. It wasn’t easy finding a credit card company that would work with

me since I had no credit starting out, but now I was proud to say I bought my first car—a white Ford Focus that was amazing on gas and affordable to purchase—last year because of my efforts.

Dad nagged on me about Scott, and I would never listen to him about my love life, but I let him aggravate me about everything else. Growing up, he always told my sister and me to *never depend on a man*. The day we got our licenses, he bought us each a hunk of junk car and said that was all we would get from him. Dad taught us to change the tires and the oil. And the day I told him I wanted to build up my credit, he told me it was a good idea. Afterward, he told me he'd skin me alive if I let Scott get a hold of my personal information or anything else. Dad even went with me the day I got my car. He had something to say about every vehicle and stood there beside me as I spoke with the salesman. I knew what he was doing. He wanted to see if I'd let the car dealer cheat me because Dad often said I was too soft. He believed I gave people the opportunity to take advantage of me. Said I was too much like Mom. Mom didn't seem too softhearted to me when she was making him shut up though.

But apparently, Mom and I were *soft*. When I was ten, I gave the five dollar bill I earned from doing chores to a man sitting on the sidewalk at the gas station. He held up a sign saying he needed food. Mom also gave him money. Dad had warned us that the man was a fake homeless person. I didn't even know people faked doing that until we saw the same man dressed cleanly a few hours later getting in his truck to drive—a twenty-four pack of beer in his hands. Dad shook his head and said nothing.

My dad loved Lucy. Loved her with his entire being the same way he had been with Olivia and me, but when I told him I wanted the baby I was carrying, he tried to talk me out of it. He couldn't get past his judgment of Scott. He always said we weren't meant to last, but I begged to differ. We were young, but I had my crap together better than half of the thirty-year-olds. Scott and I weren't the first young parents. All around me I saw so many like us, making it work. The world was full of young sweethearts living their lives together...forever and ever, old and wrinkly.

I grinned as I punched my passcode in to unlock our apartment. Scott was my first, my only, and I knew he would be my last.

I loved Scott, Lucy, and our little speck in my belly. Papaw Will would

come around the moment he saw the baby. He was easy like that. We'd get past it. In a few years, my dad would see that all my struggles were worth it.

It was a little after one. I left for work around eight every day and came home around five or six every morning, then took a quick nap before I'd leave for class. Scott was probably sleeping or playing the PS4 that I'd gotten him with my credit card last year for Christmas. When I entered the living room though, it was completely dark. The TV and game were as quiet as the room was until I startled at the little figure on the couch.

"Lucy?" I whispered as I bent down to get her.

"Mommy?" she mumbled, lifting her head slightly.

She was sleeping sitting up. "What are you doing? Why aren't you in your bed?" I scooped her up in my arms and kissed her forehead. Her tiny little arms went around my neck. Her legs instinctively knew to wrap around me. Such a thing always made my heart melt.

"BeeBee's giggles kept waking me up." Just like that, a bucket of ice fell over me. My smile waned as my heart fell to the floor. Beebee was Lucy's nickname for my cousin Briana. She could never say her name right.

"Briana's here?" I asked slowly. I thought maybe Lucy was having a weird dream. Briana never came over. Briana and I barely hung out since high school. I wasn't as much fun to her with a kid.

"Yeah, she's in your bedroom with daddy."

And because life knew I needed confrontation, Briana's laughter rang out through the thin walls, followed by Scott's.

"I don't like when she comes here," Lucy whispered as she hugged me tighter.

I staggered but held her tight, blood rushing up my neck and face.

Young love turned old and wrinkly. My one and only. My faith all but crashed and burned.

Life chewed up my ideas and spat them out.

Oh, Hadley. What a freaking idiot you were.

Chapter One

Elijah- present

I believed that we chose our level of maturity. Some lucky bastards were fortunate and could do whatever they wanted. They got the family and, God forbid, children. Then there was the rest of us. We made a life working and making bank—hell to the yeah. Some of us enjoyed what we did—fuck yeah. The lesser mortals got stuck in a career they hated—like making food to please folk—just to afford the shit they thought they needed. Some people embodied several of these types. I'd assume that if a person checked off yes to more than one—saying yes to the trappings of family, kids, and a dog—he or she was miserable. I saw the exhaustion dragging down their faces as they chased kids across a store. It was undeniable. No one could make me believe otherwise.

Me? I liked solitude, loved my job, and never grew tired of my routine. Personally, I couldn't cook worth shit and didn't want to learn. Why waste an hour cooking when I could use that time drawing or getting a graphic design out of the way before it was due? The fact was, I had all that I had because I only prioritized myself and my wants. Well, besides my ma but that was about the only person. I guess Hank could count too. He'd been like a father to me all my life and treated my ma with the respect she deserved. But that was it. Okay... Maybe the guys at both my shops made the last few years a bit better than total isolation but that was it. Really.

I owned two tattoo parlors—one I opened just six months ago. My ma is the reason for the new shop, Devil's Lair. She begged me every day to come back to my rural hometown—Sassafras, Alabama—so that she could see me more. It took a couple years, searching for the perfect spot and building but I made it happen because of my priorities. My ma was the main one. Other changes included buying a house. She still complained, though, saying I took too long to get one.

Nonetheless, I was there. But Ma couldn't understand the amount of work I did between painting and graphic designs. She didn't even consider all of my customers at Devil's Poke in Jeffrey—I wasn't very creative naming my

businesses—plus managing the shops. There wasn't nearly enough time to do it all.

But still, I was there for her.

I sighed long and hard as I pulled my truck into park at a grocery store. I couldn't fucking cook, but I sure as hell knew how to snack. You could call me the King Kong of snack food town. I blamed my inability on Ma. She shouldn't have spent all those years feeding me. Now I didn't plan to cook for the rest of my life since I was too lazy, ahem, *busy*.

My cell phone rang just as I shut off the engine. I yanked it off the charging cord and groaned as I saw the name on the screen. "Yeah?" I climbed out of the truck, locking it as I shut the door behind me.

"You didn't say goodbye," Lindsay said.

I stuffed my keys in my pocket. "Yeah?"

"Always the asshole," she muttered through the phone. "Weren't you going to ask me to move with you?"

I laughed. "Why would I do that?"

"Don't be like this over something silly," she hissed. "How was I supposed to know we were official when you never once said we were dating?"

Was that really her reasoning for the childish game?

"Oh, fuck, I don't know, maybe all the times you were staying at my place, spreading your legs for me," I spat, earning a nasty frown from an elderly lady as she wheeled herself on one of those motorized carts. "I wasn't aware I seemed like a man that liked to share."

"Oh my God! I didn't cheat on you!" she yelled.

"That didn't stop you from taking Chris's number right in front of me."

"You could have stepped in and said, 'hey now, that's my girl', but you didn't do that did you?" She exhaled. "Save it. I would have been all in if you had given me a sign that you were too."

I ran my fingers through my hair which was rough from the drive here. "I know exactly what you were doing," I muttered.

She laughed in my ear. "We can still try this, ya know? Let's go all in."

It was like talking to a brick wall.

Nope. I couldn't make Lindsay a priority, not without listening to her complaints. She was a woman who enjoyed playing games while I refused to be anyone's pawn.

I tried. I really did. The only reason I hung with her for so long was that she made it so damned easy. She came around every night without demands. I thought she only wanted the physical—just like me—until the night I caught her flirting with Chris. I wasn't really jealous of the tattooist who worked for me at Devil's Poke. It was all a game to her from the way she batted her eyes to the wicked smile she gave me as she passed Chris her phone. She wanted me to man up and claim her like some Neanderthal. When I didn't, there was no saving whatever we had.

I didn't want anything. I preferred solitude. I didn't mind the company as long as she was fucking quiet while I worked. Lindsay was the only girl I'd met that knew that, so I made her a priority, but that chapter was over. She would never be anything more.

"You should call Chris," I told her after a while.

"I'm going on a date with him this Saturday, actually. I just wanted to try one last time."

I nodded. *That didn't surprise me.* "Chris is a good kid. Don't take advantage of him." When her protests began, I disconnected the call. I looked both ways before walking across the road to the store. No need for a shopping cart. I only planned to get a few things to munch on. All I ever did when I was at home was snack. I always ate out.

I grabbed a gallon of chocolate milk first, but thought about it and put it back since I hadn't even gotten to the house to hook anything up. I already had electric and water, and I had paid a few guys I knew to drive my stuff in the U-Haul. In the back of my truck were a few items, but everything was at the house, waiting for me to handle.

Ma better know how much I loved her. What other capable almost thirty-year-old male moved back to their hometown because his ma begged him to? It would take me all week to unpack, maybe longer since I already had appointments lined up at the shop tomorrow—a thigh and two back pieces to tattoo. That was if they showed up.

I went for the Little Debbie cakes next, still a little sullen about the milk as I walked away, so I trailed back and picked it up. My ass could plug the refrigerator in before anything else just so I could have my damn milk. Once I grabbed my Zebra Stripe cakes and Nutty Buddy's, I moved on to the chip aisle. There was a moment of panic. For a second, I couldn't see any Funyuns. I realized why. There was only one bag left, and it was partially hidden by all the Lay's chips next to it. I nodded and smiled as if to say, "It's all good" when two little hands shot up and snatched the bag before I could.

"Whoa," I said, staring down at the blonde pigtails.

She slowly turned, peered up, and arched her brow at me curiously. "Are you talking to me?" The kid couldn't be more than three and there she was completely alone and stealing my damn Funyuns!

"How about you give me those Funyuns?" I asked nicely.

She stared down at the chips in her tiny grip—those were *mine*—then looked back up. "No. Get your own." She turned to walk off.

"Where're your parents? Little shits shouldn't be all alone even if they're becoming lil' thieves at such a young age."

She scowled, her tiny nose wrinkling up. "She's right where I left her." She pointed to a blonde head leaned over one of the freezer sections. The little girl was inspecting me when I glanced back down at her. I saw the way her eyes rolled over my arms before she frowned. "My papaw always tells my mom that tattoos are ugly on women."

"Oh?" I tilted my head. "Your papaw sounds ugly."

Her mouth fell open. "You have demons on your arms 'cause you're one."

I jumped and hissed. She startled, dropped the Funyuns, and ran screaming to her mom. I bent down, picked up my chips, and chuckled as I walked over to the next aisle and grabbed a pizza—something I could at least heat up easily—then went to the checkout where ugly grandpa's evil thief helped her mom unload their shopping cart items.

Lil' Thief gazed up, eyes widening then hardening as tough as one could look at her age. She saw the bag of chips in my hand and tapped her Mom's side "Mom, mom," she started.

"What is it, Lucy?" Her mother asked as she grabbed her purse and

wheeled the cart forward as the cashier rung up her items. I took in the greasy blonde hair tucked into a messy bun. It probably had been a day or two since she shampooed it. From her chipped nails to her pale, tired face without makeup it was obvious she didn't give two shits about her appearance. The longer I watched her, the more she irked me. I exhaled loudly as I imagined her living off the government. In a matter of minutes, she'd slide an EBT card through the slot to pay for her items.

Guilt washed over me. My ma had been in this shape while raising me, and most of the food on our table before she met Hank came from food stamps, yet I saw more people abuse the system, so my disdain was real every time I saw people like this one in a store.

No one was like Ma. She was her own breed, and she'd hang me for my petty thoughts, but I couldn't stop myself.

“That demon worshipper stole my chips.”

Fucking hell. I went from the dude with demons on my arm to demon worshipper real quick. I'd hate to see what this child would have to say about my shops—creepy, demon portraits everywhere. The horror!

The mother's head snapped up from her purse at her child's voice. She peered around to where her daughter pointed—at me—before turning a pitiful shade of red. Her eyes were the brightest shade of blue I'd ever seen, or maybe it was because she was so pale and sickly looking. She blushed so hard it made her extremely noticeable.

“Lucy, that's not nice! Why would you say that?” She wiped her face and tried hard not to stare at me as she spoke to her daughter.

“He stole my Funyuns!” Her daughter's face was red too. Quite the match, the two of them.

The mom raised up, face squinted in pain as she placed her palm on her back, and that was when I noticed—holy, why hadn't I noticed before? The woman was very pregnant. Just what society needed—another little terror running wild. She gestured toward the small chip bags beside me. “Grab a bag so I can pay. And apologize for saying that.”

The little girl scooted around the shopping cart and snatched a small bag of Funyuns before turning around to me. “Sorry.” She stuck out her tongue as she glared up at me from a perfect angle where her mom couldn't see it.

Sneaky.

“You should really get a hold on that,” I couldn’t point at the kid with my hands so full, but I jerked my head toward it so that she would understand I was talking about her kid.

“That?” The mom’s eyebrows went up a notch. She forgot the part where she was trying not to make eye contact with me as she frowned.

“Your kid,” I muttered.

“Right, *kid*,” she told me. “Not *that*.” She glanced down at her daughter. “Come on, Lucy. Step away from the bad man.”

I scoffed. “I guess that’s better than demon worshipper.”

She straightened up and glared at me. “Would you prefer it if we called you the devil?”

“Suits me.” Kids had no hope of not being little shits when their parents raised them to be just as uptight. I bet she’d love to hear the name of my shops as well.

She scowled and turned around to pay. It surprised me when I saw a debit card slide through the machine. So she had a man she lived off? Popping out babies just to keep him? You’d think she’d at least take better care of herself. “What?” she muttered when I was still staring at her.

I shrugged, unbothered. She closed up her purse, hollered for her kid again before waddling out the damn door.

Good riddance!

I dropped my stuff, slowly covering my eyes with my hands. What just happened finally sunk into my thick skull. I stole a kid’s chips. There was no end to my assholery.

It was a five-minute drive from the grocery store to my new house. The one thing I hated about the place I bought was that it was right next to the projects. I would likely hear all kinds of shit I didn’t want to, but I got a great deal and the house was amazing. Or at least Ma thought so, she was the one that decided for me. I would live in it and pay for it but it didn’t matter what I thought. Apparently, anyway.

I really needed to stop letting her boss me around.

I could almost hear her saying that she'd stop after I found someone else to do it as I pulled into the driveway. Grabbing my grocery bags, I exited the truck. Before I could lock up, I heard a noise from the apartment lot next door.

“Lucy, I’m gonna need your help with these.”

Who knew why I walked around my truck to see when I’d recognized the familiar voice. The woman from the store was helping Lil’ Thief out of a car seat. The moment the kid’s feet hit the concrete, it was like her demon detector turned on. Her eyes darted around before landing on me.

One scrawny arm raised and pointed. “Demon worshipper!”

Ah, fuck.

Chapter Two

Hadley

Just my luck.

I wanted to look up to the sky and yell *why me?* Instead, I kept my panicky gaze locked on the giant man across the lawn from my car.

Even with grocery bags in his hands—mundane stuff—he scared the living daylights out of me in the Piggly Wiggly. I wasn't comfortable around intimidating guys like him—tall, surly, and heavily tattooed. I could feel his testosterone a mile away. Heck, I could feel his glare squashing me like a fly from this distance.

Was he really the guy that bought the house? It had been on the market almost a year. I thought that maybe in another few months I'd be able to nab it before it was sold. Of course, that became a fantasy when the For Sale sign was removed last month and the movers were here earlier. Who was he? I refused to believe he was the owner.

I closed my eyes and chanted, *only four more months, only four more months*. Graduate nursing school. Pass my exam. Get a job at the hospital. Leave these apartments. I was getting antsy being so close to having all of my goals checked off.

As if Eli could sense my anxiety, he kicked me right in the bladder, and my legs bent inward. I turned away from Bad Man-Devil-Demon Worshipper and rushed to the opened trunk. "Help Mommy carry these. I've got to pee." I took a deep breath and frowned at Lucy. "Stop staring, and for heaven's sake, stop pointing!"

She dropped her hand and walked over to me. I knew better than to grab too much from the store. One, because I was too pregnant to carry too much up three flights of stairs. Two, I was too broke to afford much more than the frozen pizzas and juice that had to last until payday in two days. I gave Lucy the pizzas to carry while I got the juices, then shut the trunk and rushed as quickly as a pregnant lady could move.

By the second flight of stairs, I was singing, "Gotta pee, gotta pee, gotta pee so bad."

So Lucy followed up with, "Mommy's gotta pee, gotta pee, gotta pee so

bad.”

I slammed through the door and dropped the juice on the floor. “Make sure the door’s shut!” I yelled at Lucy as I ran for the toilet. My back hurt constantly. My vagina hurt. I couldn’t stop peeing. I went to the doctor last week and was already dilated two centimeters. I had to be careful at this point. Eli needed to stay put at least one more month even if I was ready for this pregnancy to be done.

I washed my hands and glanced at myself in the mirror. *Fudge*, I looked so horrible, but I didn’t have it in me to do anything about it. Maybe after Eli was born... *Hadley, you’re a terrible liar.*

Truth was, I barely had time for myself when Scott lived there. These days, I definitely didn’t have the time to take care of myself.

It would get better.

Just like Scott’s betrayal didn’t hurt as much as it did months ago... almost. After I kicked Scott and Briana out that night, a terrible numbness came over me. It took a few hours of Lucy coaxing words out of me before I finally broke down and cried. What more could I have said or done? Everything I thought I had was ripped out from under my feet. God, I was so stupid. So foolish. So ashamed of myself. It was amazing how fast a person matured when someone destroyed your fantasy. I found out quickly that Prince Charming was only a toad, first loves were just a scam, and love only existed with one’s parents and sister.

I could never love another man like I loved Scott. I wouldn’t even give anyone the chance after him. No one else would hurt me again.

Good thing I was a mom. The last thing on my mind was a man. Well, except for the little man in my stomach. I rubbed it soothingly as I waddled to the hallway. Lucy had already carried everything to the kitchen.

“Pizza again?” Lucy whined.

“Just a couple of more days until Mommy gets paid,” I told her while patting her head. I paused a second. “Want to go to Mamaw’s and let her feed us?”

Lucy bounced on her heels. “Yes!”

I called my parent’s house and Dad answered, “Y’all coming over?”

I smirked even though he couldn't see. "We want spaghetti and peach cobbler."

"You mean *you* want peach cobbler? Don't be using Lucy to get what you're craving when you know your mom will make it if you simply ask. You wanted to be a mom that's just the way it works."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Tell her I want peach cobbler."

"Tell her yourself." He hung up.

Cranky old man.

Dad did tell her I wanted peach cobbler. She was sticking it in the oven when Lucy and I arrived. When we entered the house, Dad got out of his recliner and took Lucy in the kitchen with him. I knew it was just a ruse to get up and let me have his seat. I groaned in relief as I laid back and propped my feet up. I didn't get a chance like this at the apartment. I was always noticing all the cleaning that had to be done. It was a small reprieve from being on my feet all night too. I was trying to work for as long as I could before Eli came, but I didn't think I'd make it much longer. Being a CNA at the nursing home was a lot of heavy lifting—a lot of everything to be honest. Although I lifted no one without an assistant, I shouldn't be doing it at all this far along in my pregnancy. Georgie didn't even know that sometimes I still did it because other workers moped around. I couldn't handle not getting things done when they were supposed to. I'd admit the nights I worked with Georgie though, she forced me to sit around and would hardly let me do anything.

I pulled my phone out and shot Scott a text.

ARE YOU STILL COMING TO GET LUCY THIS WEEKEND?

Scott kept her every other weekend. It used to be every weekend. Lately, it was none at all. There for a while, I thought he'd give me a hard time over custody. He preached about how he was always with Lucy at night when I worked, and he didn't want to put her through it. Boy, he fooled me again.

It started out as delayed pickups to skipping entire weekends. But that was seven months ago when Lucy saw her dad every single day. Now she was lucky if she saw him once a month. Scott didn't hesitate to point out that the situation was my fault. He mentioned we should work it out. I couldn't

believe how the words still came out of his mouth like a normal conversation.

I supposed he expected me to be okay with him screwing my cousin while he was with me, especially in our room with our daughter listening in. He'd been with Briana after that night for a month, maybe two. Dad called her every name in the book when he saw her at another cousin's party last month. They weren't still together, but there had to be someone. Why else would he not come and see Lucy?

SCOTT: YEAH. HOW ABOUT I TAKE US TO THE MOVIES?

HADLEY: YOU AND LUCY? YES, SHE'D LOVE THAT. SHE MISSES YOU.

SCOTT: SHE WOULDN'T MISS ME IF YOU'D JUST LET ME COME HOME. OUR SON IS ABOUT TO BE BORN SOON.

HADLEY: I'M NOT KEEPING THEM FROM YOU. YOU CAN COME AND SEE LUCY WHENEVER YOU WANT. IT WILL BE THE SAME WAY WHEN ELI IS BORN.

SCOTT: WELL, WHATEVER.

I dropped my phone on my lap and rubbed my forehead. Scott was good at trying to make me feel guilty for kicking him out. I'd do anything for Lucy but taking her father back was something I couldn't do. Not even if it meant she'd see him more. I could forgive his laziness along with his knack of not wanting to work. I took him as he was, but I could never take being cheated on. I still couldn't understand what he didn't get from me. What did I do so wrong to make him lay with another woman when all I expected from him was to be faithful to me?

I let my head fall back and closed my eyes only to wake up sometime later by Lucy climbing on my lap. "Come eat!"

"Careful around her belly, Luce," Dad told her as she climbed off of me. I pushed myself up and walked into the kitchen where Mom was setting the table. She handed me a plate and made Lucy's so I didn't have to get up once I sat down.

"Does Bubby like peaches that much?" Lucy asked me as she eyed the peach cobbler Mom placed on top of the oven.

I nodded. "Yeah. Can't get enough." That was why Mom kept the ingredients on hand. I smiled as I dug into the spaghetti.

"Have you heard from Olivia?" Dad asked me.

My sister moved out of state a few years ago. She was a high school teacher and my best friend despite being so many miles away. It was unexplainable. I didn't need to see her as long as I got to hear from her every day. "Yeah, this morning," I told him.

The night I found out about Scott, Olivia had been the first one I called. What did she do? Drove all the way home, used some of her days at work, and saved me from me. She stayed with Lucy and I that week while she built me back up with chocolate and hugs. It was impossible for her to heal me, but she gave me what was needed to push myself through the long month after kicking Scott out. Olivia gave me the strength required to keep him from weaseling his way inside my head again. His family was mean, but they only got worse toward me. I hoped whatever they said about me when they were around Lucy went in one ear and out the other. I didn't talk to people about Scott when Lucy was around, though, I could. Even Dad knew to keep his mouth shut about Scott.

"When is she coming home to visit?" Dad inquired.

"Instead of asking Hadley, why not call her up yourself?" Mom asked. She got a grunt in reply.

"She'll be in this summer," I told him.

And that was that. The rest of the dinner we talked about random things until it was time for Lucy and me to go home. Of course, Dad bent down to Lucy while Mom was putting on her shoes so that I didn't have to. "Want to stay with Papaw tonight?" he asked her.

She shook her head and rushed to me just so she could wrap her little arms around my waist. I rubbed her head affectionately. "No, I'm going home with Mommy."

"Are you sure?" Mom glimpsed down at her with a smile. "Mamaw will cook gravy and biscuits in the morning."

Lucy shook her head again. "No, come on, Mommy." She hurried to the door and opened it for us.

"I'm fine," I told them as I hugged them goodbye and left. They were trying to keep Lucy tonight just so I could get some rest on my day off. They were so easy to read.

Chapter Three

Elijah

“Says right here that three and a half inches are all a girl needs to reach an orgasm,” Waldo said randomly at the shop the next day. Waldo was his nickname. His real name was Walter, but everyone called him Waldo because he was a scrawny little shit and looked like the guy from the books. Just graduated high school a year ago, I believed.

I smirked and shook my head as I turned away from him and returned to the tattoo I was doing. Waldo reminded me of myself ten years ago. Gangly with long hair and god-awful tiny tattoos scattered all across his arm from practicing on himself. I had long since covered up all my shitty failures. He hadn't reached that stage yet, or maybe he wouldn't. He might stay a bony man all his life as well. I hadn't but working out had been my choice.

“Where does it say that?” Wendy spoke without glancing up from the guy's arm she was working on. She came from my other shop. I'd known her for years, and she'd been the only one that liked the idea of moving. Wendy knew it had been a risk, but her girlfriend had been excited about it as well. Six months in, and it hadn't been a failure. Jim and Lance were my other two artists, but they were out grabbing lunch before Jim's appointment arrived. Waldo wasn't a tattooist yet, more like one in training. He sat around and watched everyone else. He was too inexperienced to ink someone, but eventually, we would let him. One day. The kid had potential, we all saw that six months ago when he stumbled in on the day we opened.

“On Facebook,” he answered.

Everyone laughed including me. “You should be in good shape then, kid,” I said as I swiveled around in my chair to get some more black ink.

“Fuck you, Elijah,” he spat, and even the customers laughed.

“How's the new place?” Wendy asked me.

“A mess,” I told her. “Want to come set it up for me?”

“Fuck that. If Cheryl hadn't been the one to fix our apartment, our stuff would still be in boxes.”

“So, you're here for good?” the girl in my chair asked. I didn't take my

attention away from her thigh but she sounded excited.

“I’m originally from here,” I said, tattooing the outline of her flowers. Every girl wanted flowers, feathers, an infinity sign... You know, *girly* stuff. I thought of the little thief wondering how much of a demon worshipper she’d think I was if I had flowers on my arm instead of black and white images of monsters, crosses, and all-around creepy shit. *Maybe I am a little morbid*. I was a horror movie junkie and thought my drawings came from the crazy flicks I watched, but I knew that wasn’t true. All my creations came from my twisted mind.

Shit. Now the kid had me thinking that I might actually be some demon in human form... It explained so much.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” I didn’t bother to look up at the customer’s face. If I did, I might give her the illusion of being interested in whatever she was thinking.

“He’s single,” Wendy told her. “For a reason though. The guy’s an asshole.”

“I like assholes,” flower girl piped in. Did she really say that? Now I had to be even more adamant about not making eye contact. Luckily, she had a nice thigh and as cliché as flower tattoos were on a girl, it didn’t change the fact that they were beautiful. Even more when it was my design that stamped their skin.

Throughout the three-hour session with her, the girl was determined to have a go at me. Wendy had mentioned I was single on purpose. I finally glanced back up at her. Pretty. Dark eyes and hair, but most noticeably *young*, and I was a month shy of turning thirty—too old to deal with clingy. Besides, some men—even in this century—preferred to actually *like* the girl, have some sort of deep attraction to her to want to fuck her. I had one random hookup in my life and it was less than memorable. I had been horny—that happened sometimes—and she’d been available. Even my first time had been better than that, and Talia and me, at sixteen, hadn’t known what the fuck we were doing. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I only wanted sex when there was someone I could semi-like enough to put up with. I enjoyed fucking, but I liked my work more. Some days it was all about which one worked my nerves more—women or my job. Women were a headache, enough said. Besides, I wasn’t attracted to young chicks, so this one was shit out of luck.

“Waldo will get you up front,” I said, shutting her down as I slipped off the gloves and put on new ones to sterilize the entire area. I discarded everything—standard procedure—but our used needles and gloves couldn’t go in with our normal trash. I’d done this so many times that my body went through the motions without me even having to think about it. I never acknowledged the girl’s frown as she finally shuffled away from my chair. It took a good ten minutes before I finished cleaning up my workbench. I had just enough time to grab a bite to eat before my next appointment.

Another day in the life of Elijah Parker.

I got home around ten minutes after eight that night. The parlor closed at eight through the week, and nine o’clock on Fridays and Saturdays. Normally, I’d lift some weights when I got home, but I still had all my stuff to unpack.

“What the fuck?” I muttered as I pulled into my driveway. It was pitch black outside, middle of March and still cold as hell outside yet there were a few idle brats hanging out in my yard. They had to be from the apartments. They appeared to be young teens. One of them held a cigarette in his hand.

I slammed my door shut as I got out of the truck. “Mind telling me what the hell you guys are doing on my property?”

Smoking Kid asked, “You bought this place?”

“Yeah,” I told him. “Now get the fuck out of my yard before I make you.”

“I ain’t afraid of you,” one of them muttered, yet they were all scurrying off toward the apartments.

“You should be,” I hissed as I locked my truck.

One of them whistled and catcalled. I glanced back to see what they were going on about. The street lights illuminated the mom and the little girl as she held her hand, walking to her car.

“They’re doing it again,” the little girl said to her mom.

“Ignore them. They’re just kids,” her mom said with a sigh. “Let’s take you to Mamaw and Papaw’s. I’ll pick you up in the morning when I get off work.”

“Can you get me some gravy and biscuits on the way home?”

The mom frowned. “Mamaw will make you some.”

“Yay!” the little girl cheered as her mom buckled her up in the back and shut the door. I studied the mom from head to toe while she did that. Was she wearing white scrub pants? She was a lot tinier than I first realized. She was all belly. The mom took a minute to breathe and grab her back, then for some reason, her gaze fell on me. She flinched before finally saying, “What?”

I was staring. I’d been watching them this entire time. “What?” I echoed back. She shook her head and waddled over to the driver’s side, got in, and drove away.

Huh? So the mom worked after all. And night shift? Did that mean the dad wasn’t around? I thought of her expression after she had left... She was awfully young to be a mother of two. She looked younger than the girl I tattooed today.

Oh well. I didn’t care, I told myself as I walked inside.

Chapter Four

Hadley

“He’s doing it again,” Lucy muttered while staring out the window.

I knew who she was talking about, but I still placed my textbooks on the coffee table, taking a study break, and sat down beside her so I could spy too.

It had been a few days since the rude man had moved into the house, and a routine had started between him and the neighborhood kids. I frowned as I watched him yell at them messing around in his yard. “He’s only making it worse.”

Seeing him deal with the punks that aggravated me all the time made me glad I didn’t get a chance to buy the house. I wanted far, far away from this building the second I could get us out of there.

I winced as a Braxton Hicks contraction hit me. I laid my head against the cushion and closed my eyes until the cramp passed.

“Are you okay, Mommy?” Lucy asked.

I smiled and took a deep breath. “Yeah, it’s just getting close for Bubby to be here and he’s letting me know it.”

She placed her head on my belly. “Tell him to kick me!”

“He’s stubborn like you. You ask him yourself,” I told her. So cute watching her talk to my belly.

“Kick me, Eli!” When he didn’t move at all, Lucy looked up with a pouty face. “He’s stupid.”

“Lucy,” I warned. “That’s not nice.”

“Mom.” I could tell by the sound of her tiny voice that there was a question coming.

“What is it?”

“Can we go play on the swing set while we wait on Daddy?” she asked while batting her eyes. She was too smart for her age. It terrified me. She was far too observant for a child that was only about to turn four. I couldn’t remember my younger cousin’s toddler being like Lucy at her age. It made me proud but also wary. I couldn’t keep those little ears of hers from listening and trying to figure things out she shouldn’t worry over.

I peeked out the window again. The older kids were still there, and I hated going outside with them around. I normally didn't take her down on the weekends. I knew they'd be there. Her play time was early morning—around two—after I'd picked her up from my parents or right before I tried to get some sleep. I rested while she watched TV. I had no other way of getting rest unless I let her stay with my parents and that would only mean that I'd see her less. A couple of hours here and there always got me through. I simply kept reminding myself, *only four more months*. I had a deadbolt on the door so Lucy couldn't sneak out on me. She had tried once before while I dozed off.

My actions wouldn't earn me any Mother of the Year awards, but I hoped when Lucy looked back on these days, she realized I worked so hard so we could have more. The idea of my daughter hating me one day because I was too tired to play with her scared me most of all. Between nursing school in the morning and my nights spent working, I knew my daughter missed me. I missed her.

Thankfully, it was March. The chill of winter still hung in the air and that was reason enough for telling her no. "It's too cold. It'll be summer soon enough, and then I'll take you to play."

"But they are." She pointed toward the kids through the window.

"Kids who will get sick."

She crossed her arms and sulked—bottom lip puckered. Even though she was the cutest thing ever, it wouldn't work on me. I rubbed her head and pulled her in for a hug. "Look at it this way, when summer comes, not only will we get to play outside, Eli will be here and Mommy will have a new job."

The words weren't a lie. When I set out to do something, I was entirely different from my ex—I worked for what I wanted. Nursing positions were always opening up at the hospital. If anything, the hospital in Redford was only a thirty-minute drive and their hospital was huge and always needing workers. I could work there. Heck, we could move there.

"Will you still be working nights?" she asked, still pouting.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Would you rather I work a different shift?" She nodded, and my heart broke. I considered the possibility of me getting to

pick a shift and sighed. “Hopefully I can then,” was all I told her.

“Why do you want a new job for?” she asked.

“Um... It’s something Mommy wants to do and...” I grabbed her tiny waist and grinned. “They’ll give me more money. More money means more food in the house!”

“Really?” That perked her up.

“Yep! So this summer, how about you, Eli, and me make a plan to buy all the food we want when I get my first paycheck at the new job?”

“Yes!” She thrust her hands in the air.

I laughed, wincing as another false contraction hit me. Maybe it wasn’t Braxton Hicks anymore. They were happening more often. I probably should stop in at the hospital in case they were real contractions. I was so used to feeling tired and hurt that I honestly couldn’t tell on my own. “Not right now though. I have to get the job first. We still have a few months, but when summer comes, so will Mommy’s new job.”

“Okay!”

HADLEY: PLEASE TELL ME YOU’RE COMING. I HAVE TO LEAVE FOR WORK IN AN HOUR.

SCOTT: I’LL GET HER TOMORROW.

HADLEY: AT LEAST CALL AND TALK TO HER.

SCOTT: TELL HER I’LL GET HER IN THE MORNING.

I stared down at my phone, almost wanting to text the words, *She barely talks about you, anymore!* But I didn’t want to fight with him, even through text messages so I placed my phone down and watched Lucy while she played with her toy ponies.

“Lucy...” I waited until she turned her head. I watched her smile up at me from the floor, and I couldn’t tell her that her dad wasn’t coming after all. “Ready to go to Papaw and Mamaw’s?” I asked, and silently, my child grabbed her toys, and got up from the floor.

“I’m going to bring my ponies tonight.” Lucy didn’t ask about her dad. I didn’t know if she already forgot that he was supposed to show, or worse,

that she knew he wouldn't. Six months ago she asked about him every night. *When is Daddy coming home? Why isn't he here?* Every month that ticked by without Scott coming to see her, it was like Lucy was forgetting him. Or maybe my daughter realized that she no longer had him in her life. I wiped my eyes as I took her hand and walked toward the front door.

"Do you need to pee before we get to the car?" I asked, and she shook her head. "Want to call and talk to Aunt Liv on the drive there?"

She nodded vigorously. "Yes, call her now, please." I handed her my phone after I found Olivia's name and hit call.

It was so cold outside, the air so bitter and unwelcoming. I pulled Lucy's hoody over her head as we made our way down the steps, and I paused to look at the sky. "Please don't snow," I whispered.

"Liv!" Lucy yelled so Olivia must have finally answered. *My Lucy!* I heard my sister's loud mouth yell back. "I'm going to Mamaw and Papaw's right now..." And so she talked her head off while we walked.

No kids were out lurking now, and I was happy about that as I pulled Lucy along toward the car.

"Oh no," Lucy sighed dramatically. "The demon worshipper is home."

"Lucy!" I hissed. "How many times have I told you to stop saying that? God bless America where do you learn these things?"

I glanced up frantically toward his home and was relieved to see that he was pulling in, but it was too cold for his windows to be down. He hadn't heard her.

"Here. Liv wants to speak to you." Lucy pushed the phone up to my face as I hauled her into her car seat and buckled her in.

"Yeah?" I answered.

"Demon worshipper?" Olivia snorted.

"The Piggly Wiggly incident, remember?" I told her quietly, peeking between the seats to see him getting out of his truck.

She cackled in my ear. "I still can't believe he moved next door—only you."

"Don't remind me of my luck."

“You never told me if he was hot or not.”

My cheeks heated. “It doesn’t matter what he looks like because he’s an a-hole,” I told her as I stood and shut the door. “I can’t wait to have this baby,” I whined as I grabbed my back. Standing was better than sitting or laying down at this point.

“So, he *is* hot,” she assumed.

I glanced over into our neighbor’s yard again despite myself. He was lingering by his truck. I couldn’t really make out his face since the streetlights didn’t really reach over into his yard, but I had the creeping suspicion that he was dissecting me with his evil glare. The situation had become unbearable. Was he really going to come home every single evening I left for the nursing home? I couldn’t handle these weird confrontations with a male that glowered at me and Lucy like we were a lost cause. But I was too bashful, too soft as Dad would say to do something about it.

But...

It didn’t mean I hadn’t noticed that he was a very handsome man. I just wasn’t attracted to the bad boy types, and he was definitely one. From his almost black hair, long enough to run frustrated hands through, to his hooded dark eyes. This intense guy had more tattoos than skin giving him a dangerous vibe. From where I stood, I could see one tattoo peeking over his collar. And that neck... It was big and corded like someone who worked out all the dang time. He was scary and made me feel uncomfortable.

Yeah... No. He frightened me from even this distance.

“He’s scary,” I mumbled to her. “And he yells at kids.”

I rushed around to the driver’s side and got in.

Chapter Five

Elijah

“Leave the key under the mat, and I’ll help you unpack,” said Ma over the phone.

“I live right next to the apartments. I ain’t about to leave my spare key anywhere.” That was a lie. I already had placed my key underneath the mat. I just didn’t want her to do my work for me. She’d wear herself out doing it if I let her. “I’m a grown-ass man, I can do it.” I had most of it finished, anyway. It wasn’t like I had a lot of stuff. As long as I could find a spot on the floor to sit down with a sketch pad and pencil—or my paints and brushes, I’d put off everything else for hours.

“Language.” She chuckled. “And all right.”

“You can swing by with some of your casserole since I moved back for you,” I said as I pulled my car into the parlor parking lot.

“At the shop?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Should I bring a whole one?”

“I might share it,” I told her and that made her laugh again.

“See you soon. Love you.”

“Love you.”

“And Elijah, I’m glad you’re finally home.”

I smiled as I hung up and made my way inside.

Seeing the mom and her kid heading out when I came home had become a regular thing. I didn’t work on Sunday, but I still saw them leaving when I went to the window.

When I pulled into my driveway on Monday night, I saw them again. From her fast duck waddle, I got the feeling that she disliked seeing me every night.

But that night she wasn’t quick enough. Her kid saw me as she tried to get her in the back seat. “Uh...” The kid could have been pointing while she

squeaked out. It was hard to tell. The streetlight wasn't too bright, and her mom was bent over her, buckling her in. "Demon—"

"Lucy!"

"I mean, chip thief!" she corrected herself like that was better.

Her mom must have finished buckling her into the seat. She stood and slammed the door. It seemed as if she was trying real hard not to look over at me. Watching her waddle the long way around her car, I noted how I'd never seen her wear anything other than those white scrubs—just like the day I had the displeasure of meeting the two at the grocery store. I supposed it wasn't really meeting them since I didn't even know their names.

Correction. I didn't know her name. The kid was named Lucy. The mom was forever yelling it.

Troublesome life. The small moments I saw her each day, she was constantly rushing, always seemed exhausted to the point that it was painful to look at her... Bet she was wondering what the hell she'd been thinking, especially so young.

The back window rolled down, then the next thing I heard was, "Whatcha' lookin' at?" The kid had some serious beef with me, but *I* was staring directly at them. For fuck's sake, how did a grown man get a three, maybe five-year-old enemy?

My ma would be so ashamed. Thankfully, she wasn't around to witness it.

"You've got a problem, kid," I told her.

Her mom finally faced me. "What did you say?" There was that boldness I'd heard at the grocery store.

"Your kid." I pointed toward her daughter, and although I couldn't see her with it being dark and all, I didn't doubt the little brat wasn't sticking her tongue out at me. "She's got a problem."

"And what would her problem be?" she asked. "A creepy old guy staring at us every night we're heading out?"

"The fuck?" I hissed. "I'm getting off work every night when you're leaving. Believe me, I don't want to see the name caller anymore than she wants to see me. She's got a mouthy attitude."

"What is your deal?" She opened her driver's side door like it was the one

she was mad at. “She’s three! Do you realize how stupid you seem picking on a kid?”

“I’m not picking on her. She spoke to me first.”

She laughed incredulously, hand flying to her stomach to hold it. “Because you were standing there staring at us. You’ve been doing that ever since you moved in last week!”

Had I?

My neck and face had never felt so hot before. I was equal parts mad as hell and embarrassed. This foolish confrontation was my fault. Why the fuck didn’t I just let it be? Why did the girl and her mom crawl up under my skin and take up residence in my head?

Breathing in and out, I attempted to find patience. When I realized that I’d become a hopeless shithead, I exhaled loudly and then muttered, “What miserable luck finding out the demon is your neighbor?”

“You stole my chips!” Lucy screamed from the rear of the car.

“Lucy!” her mom hissed. “Why does she keep saying that?” Her gaze briefly landed on her daughter before snapping on me. “Did you really steal her chips?”

I scratched my jaw and stood there for a moment. She had that aura about her... There was something about mothers—even young ones—that made you twitch when guilty. “She dropped them.” There. That was all I would ever admit. “So I picked them up when she did.” Okay, apparently it wasn’t.

“He hissed at me, mommy!”

Ah, fuck.

“Oh, my gosh.” She blew out irritably. “You really took my daughter’s chips. And you hissed at her. What the fudge is wrong with you?”

Fudge?

When she put it like that, I didn’t know what to say. I knew I was an ass. At the time, it had even been a little funny to me. But when someone else had that angry, frightened glance pointed toward me... Someone that didn’t even know me... Wow, what *was* my problem?

I picked a fight with a kid.

I'd never done that. The last time I spoke to a kid was at my younger cousin's birthday three years ago. I only went out of obligation, but as soon as I got there I realized why I didn't do those things. An hour later I was gone.

Despite my tendency to be a jerk, I wanted to believe I was a decent guy. I just didn't care much for kids and wanted none of my own.

"Just stop staring, and for heaven's sake, stop talking to my daughter," she snapped as she got in her car. I didn't get to say anything else. Her car sped off within a minute after she got in it.

I rubbed my temples, but it didn't ease the tension.

I should have ignored the kid and gone into my house. I should have stopped trying to decode them like they were some unsolved mystery on a crime show. This little quarrel had been my fault when normally I was a guy that went about ignoring anything that got on my damn nerves.

With a long, drawn-out groan, I hung my head and finally walked inside.

I saw Lucy and her mother almost every day the following week going to or from work. Lucy's mom was no longer avoiding my eyes when she saw me. Instead, she made it her duty to scowl in my direction. Lucy had that same glower down pat. Angry expressions, however, didn't suit them.

Despite the bags beneath her eyes and the exhausted smile she gave Lucy, the woman didn't appear much older than eighteen. The messy bun didn't help. It only made her look drained. When they were around, their presence drew me in. Maybe it was guilt making me search for them every time I went out the door.

Kids were too coddled and spoiled. They were often bratty and rude like Lucy. But I should have known better. That was a truth I'd only acknowledge to myself. Sadly, the awareness boiled over into my hours at the parlor, and Wendy took notice.

"What's been your deal all week?" she finally asked on Saturday evening.

Grunting, I focused on the small cross tattoo I was working on along the curve of a left breast. When I said nothing, she added, "Not going to tell me?"

“On Monday, I got into a spat with this kid and her mom and somehow, I’ve been feeling shitty about it all week.”

She clucked her tongue and laughed. “Uh-oh. What did you do?”

“You into single moms?” Lance asked from his chair. From where I sat I couldn’t see him, but I knew he was giving a woman a neck tattoo. “That’s surprising. You don’t seem like the kid type.”

“I’m not.” I shook my head with an exhale. “I’m not.”

“Damn, that’s a shame,” the woman whose left breast I was almost touching said with a throaty purr. “I have four kids.”

“What happened with the mom?” Lance asked, amused by the entire situation. But his words were welcome. He saved me from having to respond to whatever my client implied.

“They live at the apartments next to my house,” I began as I wiped the woman’s skin, went for more ink at my bench, and resumed the design. “But before that, I saw them at the grocery store. Her kid came up and beat me to the last bag of Funyuns. Then she mentioned something about her grandpa saying that tattoos were bad or some shit so I hissed. I smiled since I thought it was funny. She dropped the chips and ran off, so I picked them up.

“*Then*, at the checkout, I saw the kid again with her mother. She was just being a *kid* and getting on my damn nerve, so I might have said something to the mom. On Monday night, the kid said something else, and I said something back.”

I heard nothing for the longest time except for the tattoo guns. I thought one of them might have shut off after I’d told my story. Giving up, I paused my work and looked up to find the woman I was inking giving me a semi-hostile scowl.

“You look like an asshole,” she began with a vehement shake to her head. “But now I see that you actually are an asshole.”

Wendy burst out laughing. “I tell everyone that comes in here that he is! But damn, Elijah, picking on a kid? That’s possibly worse than what I could have thought of you.”

I swiveled around in my chair and glared. “How much of an asshole do you think I am?”

She paused and glimpsed up from the leg she was tattooing. Wendy tapped her black nails against her chin before she pinned me with her smile. “Pretty bad, but I gotta say I’m disappointed. You’re much worse than what I pictured over the five years I’ve known you.”

Dropping my shoulders, I turned back to my client. I had ten minutes before my next appointment, and I was running behind. “I know,” I finally said a minute or two later when everyone was quiet—no doubt silently judging their boss. “I can’t stop thinking about it... I feel shitty.”

“I’d say so,” Wendy mumbled, slightly distracted as she concentrated on the design. “It would be a different situation entirely if the kid hadn’t been a stranger. I goof off and poke fun at Cheryl’s niece all the time, but that’s because the kid adores it when I cut up with her. There’s a major difference in a fucking stranger doing that to a child. What the hell, Elijah? Some kids get scared super easy. They’re all so different. Instead of running, she could have balled her eyes out, and the mom might have kicked your ass. Stranger danger is real.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, stopped working again, and rubbed at my temple.

“How about I give you some motherly advice since I can tell from all that god-awful sighing you’re really torn up about this?”

I glanced up at the woman with renewed interest as she studied me curiously. She was an older woman, a lot older than I was.

“Apologize. Not only that, maybe think about buying the kid a bag of chips. It won’t make them like you, but that’s not what this is about. It’s about making you feel better.” She nodded, giving my shoulder a good pat while holding her shirt up with the other. “Now, how about you finish up my tattoo and not fuck it up with all your worrying? Otherwise, I’m not paying.”

Damn. I pissed this mother off, too. But she had a point. To stop this giant ass storm cloud from hovering, maybe I should make peace so I could go about my life and get from under this shit.

After work that night, I grabbed an extra bag of Funyuns at the gas station while I filled up the truck. Only I didn’t see them that night. Her car was parked, so I assumed that maybe she was off tonight. It disturbed me that I was figuring out her schedule. I really was some creepy—not that old—man.

Chapter Six

Elijah

Six days later I saw the mom and Lucy again—the following Friday. I felt she was purposely leaving early on the nights she worked. I felt even worse since I'd disrupted someone's life. So when Lucy and her mom—still didn't know her name—were walking down the stairway right as I pulled in, I was surprised and honestly relieved. I just wanted to get those damn chips on my passenger side seat gone.

Rushing out and slamming the door rather loudly, I strode over to her car with the bag in hand. I knew they saw me coming. When the mom raised her head, she halted and watched me warily. She even glimpsed desperately toward the stairs, debating on going back up before she tugged on Lucy's hand and resumed walking toward her car—staring at it intensely instead of me standing next to it.

Although Lucy scowled at me, she wasn't saying anything. I hadn't been the only one to be scolded about opening my mouth. The closer they got, the more unsure I was on how to handle the whole apologizing thing.

When I saw the mom was going to ignore me completely, I stalked around to the passenger's side. She was at the back door, putting Lucy inside. I thrust the bag over the opened door. It was a bad move since she was already bent down. The bag made a crinkling noise as she flinched and stood quickly.

“Here.” I looked away and shoved the bag toward her. When I glimpsed over at her from the corner of my eye, I saw that my hands were practically on her breasts. I lowered my arms and took a step back as she studied the bag.

“What is it?” She sounded pissed off.

I waved the bag in front of her face. “Chips. I got your kid some.”

The woman's eyes hardened on me. Even underneath the streetlight they were an impressive blue—striking and alluring...maybe. My breath snagged on something in my chest as I waited for her to say something. Anything. Standing there like a fucking idiot was awkward as hell.

“No thanks.” She focused on Lucy, buckling straps over her shoulders and chest.

“Take it,” I told her.

When she finished and slammed the door, she eyed the bag again skeptically. “We don’t want it.”

“I want it!” Lucy piped in, her loud voice slightly muffled from inside the vehicle.

Her mom peered at Lucy through the window. “Lucy, you can’t take things from strangers even when offered. That’s dangerous.”

I dropped my hand. “I did nothing to it.”

“We still don’t want it,” she replied as she did her customary waddle around the car.

I followed, grabbing my wallet from my back pocket. “Here, then, pick her up some on the way.”

When she turned back and saw me pulling out a twenty, it only made her angrier. “We don’t want your money! God bless...” Her words faded into a hiss. There was a different sort of sound that fell from her throat. More like a painful guttural sound as she pinched her eyes shut.

I watched as she cupped her round, very pregnant belly and my eyes widened. “Is everything okay?”

Trying to straighten her spine, she whimpered. “I’m about to have a baby anytime now and a grown man keeps picking fights with me about my daughter. No. I am *not* fine.”

The other mother had been wrong. My not-so-innocent gesture was making everything worse.

“Look,” I said, but she was already in the driver’s seat. Before she could shut the door, I blurted out, “I’m sorry, okay? I feel shitty about the way I acted toward the kid. I don’t like...do well with them.” I offered the bag again. “So, please, just take the damn chips and know that I’ve felt bad the entire time because of it. I’m an asshole, but even assholes feel bad sometimes, okay?”

She was holding her belly...baby...uterus? Really, when pregnant wasn’t it kind of all those things? Regardless, she was still holding it. Now that I stared some more, there was an unnatural gleam to her skin as she tried to focus on me. “Are you sure you’re all right?” I asked again.

She blinked rapidly before shaking her head. “Yeah, I am.” She rested her head on the steering wheel and sighed. “Just forget about it, okay? I won’t let it bother me now that I know you at least feel guilty, right Lucy?”

“Can I have them?” Lucy asked another question instead of answering the one she got.

“No,” her mom clipped out.

“I really did nothing to the chips,” I said almost hesitantly. “Can you even do anything to chips?”

She thought about it seriously before saying, “I don’t know, but how about instead of taking the bag, you’ll promise not to go stealing another kid’s?”

It was right on the tip of my tongue to say something mean. My mouth opened, but I clamped it shut, tilted my head, then said, “That was the first and last.”

“Then, I hope this is the last time we argue....” She drifted off like she was waiting for something, eyeing me expectantly, even her chin dipping down as she studied and waited. For what?

“Elijah.”

“Elijah?” She finished her sentence, strangely appearing dumbfounded about something. Then I gave her the same look she’d given me. “Hadley.” She was quick with the head nod, letting her eyes dart away and gazing at the car door like it was a saving grace. I knew the signs of someone wanting to escape because I did a lot of that myself. Stepping back, I didn’t know what else to do but walk away.

Did people normally just leave after introducing themselves? I thought about it and shrugged. Oh, well. Neither of us was comfortable. She clearly wanted to get away, and I felt ten times lighter after getting those words out. I didn’t care about anything beyond that point.

I heard Lucy yell, “Mommy!” followed by, “What’s wrong?”

That was a trap. One of many I’d fall prey to the months that led to becoming friends with this woman and her tiny family. A fundamental change in my life. Only I didn’t know it yet.

Chapter Seven

Hadley

My water broke.

I knew it was going to happen. Just not right in front of our jerk for a neighbor whose name was closely similar to my soon-to-be born son. If Lucy hadn't yelled... I called my doctor a few hours earlier after suffering contractions far too often and too close together, and she told me to head to the hospital. I saw her a few days ago and she let me know that Eli would come any day. She offered to admit me then, but I refused. Told her I would wait for Eli to pick the day himself with the promise that I'd stay home and rest until he did. And that was what I did all week.

I woke up this morning with the feeling that today was going to be the day.

I sat straight in my seat, shutting my eyes, and trying to think through the pain. I sucked in a breath and whimpered as another tight contraction took hold of my entire stomach, squeezing Eli further into a ball inside my uterus.

"Mommy!" I was scaring Lucy. I could kick myself for being so stubborn. My parents said they'd come to get us and I refused, saying I could do it. Although the hospital was only ten minutes away, I knew it would be impossible for me to drive. I'd seen my co-worker Ali walk right into the hospital while in labor, squirt the kid out, and strut around later like giving birth was a piece of cake. Some women had all the luck. Even though I had a pretty high tolerance for pain, when I reached a certain point, I was a goner.

And I was there. Fumbling around for my phone a second or two before I realized it was in my hand, I searched for my mom's cell number when the car door opened. My neighbor, Elijah, peered down at me with a tight, worried scowl. "Are you sure you're all right?"

I was in so much freaking pain that I gave up and whispered through another pinched breath. "My water broke." No doubt he saw that long before I pointed it out. My gray pajama bottoms were soaked. I could hear Lucy crying in the back but couldn't turn around. "It's okay, Lucy, you knew that we were on the way to the hospital so I could have Bubby."

“I’m scared,” she sobbed.

Me too. “It’ll be—” Another contraction hit, and I finally let my fear creep in. I held my stomach and gritted my teeth together. What if I had the urge to push long before my parents got there? I rushed with the phone, about to dial for them when Elijah unbuckled me.

“Can you stand to make it over to the passenger side?” he asked.

“I’m afraid to even stand,” I wailed as tears seeped from my eyes. “I’m going to call my parents. They’re already on their way to the hospital, but they can stop and get us like I should have let them.”

“You can’t fucking sit out here the way you are.” Why was he angry? I turned my head and saw his face near mine as he put one arm underneath my leg and his other against my back before scooping me up. My belly made it difficult for him to cradle me better. I caught his neck and gasped out of shock and intense agony as he lifted me over the console and onto the passenger seat.

There were some things, no matter how close to freaking out and miserable I was, that I couldn’t help but notice and that was the fact that this man had touched bodily fluids that gushed out of me when he had grabbed me. He climbed in and *sat* in them as he shut the driver’s door with a loud bang.

“What are you doing?” I murmured, clutching my stomach and practically screaming as my entire belly tightened into a giant ball again.

“Getting you to the hospital,” he replied, and I knew it made sense but I was mortified. I hadn’t even wanted Scott to see the agony and mess of childbirth, and that had been the man I’d loved. It was ten times worse for a handsome stranger to see those things. It was too embarrassing for a shy woman to handle.

Another contraction destroyed that train of thought. Eli was coming, and he needed me to get my crap together and make it to the hospital. I forgot about shame and remembered what was ahead—pain, tearing, and pushing then the joy of having Eli.

I couldn’t straighten my spine so I stayed hunched over as Elijah started my car and sped out of the parking lot.

“Mommy?” Lucy was still sobbing. I wanted to soothe her more than

anything, but it was hard when I could hardly concentrate through the pain ripping through my pelvis.

“You ready for Eli to be here?” I asked her without moving from my position.

“Not if it hurts you.”

Her words made me smile through the pain. Kids were so honest.

“Do you need to call the dad or something?” Elijah’s eyes darted over toward me briefly then went back to the road. If my body hadn’t been tilted toward him, I would have missed the gesture.

“He already knows to be there,” I told Elijah, which was another issue I dreaded. All week Scott had nagged me to allow him in the room while I gave birth but I refused. There was a part of me that felt guilty for taking that away from him, but I’d never keep Lucy and Eli from him. I just couldn’t allow him in with me during such a private and intimate moment ever again. He’d lost that chance when he chose to get between my cousin’s legs. He might not have seen it that way, but I did. He made a choice and forced me to make one because of it.

Some women could forgive their men for cheating and come together stronger than ever. Not me. I thought I gave Scott all of me and had only wanted the same from him. Call me young or foolish, even absurd, but I could never look at him and feel what I had for him ever again. He ruined that, not me.

Scott could hold Eli afterward, but I only wanted my mom with me. Olivia would have been my first choice, and even though she left to get here a couple of hours ago, there was no way she would be here before Eli was born.

Now I was crying. Even though I said I didn’t want Scott in there—and I didn’t—I was still overcome with loneliness. I had him with Lucy so I didn’t feel this way, but I’d never felt so utterly alone as I did on the way to the hospital with a stranger that had been mean to Lucy.

What was I doing? How was I going to take care of two kids by myself? Any other day of the week I’d put on my brave face and count down the days until I got a better job, but not at that moment. Not when the pain was tearing into all my doubts and fears.

I sucked in a breath as my belly tightened and tears streamed down my face. Silence gave way to screams as the pain ripped through me. I leaned against the seat and practically tore off the car door's arm. I briefly thought about doing the same to Elijah's arm but caught myself last second. Lucy was hysterical in the back.

"You're not going to have him right this second, are you?" I glanced up at Elijah. He stared at my stomach with bulging eyes.

I glared at him not caring about the tears or my snotty nose. Yelling, I asked, "If you're worried about that possibility then why the fudge did you climb in my car?"

His brown eyes widened more. Even in the dark I saw his face pale. He shook his head and refocused on the road. The man looked positively rattled.

"Sorry," I burst into tears and screamed at the same time because, hello, this agony was killing me. Through gritted teeth, I said, "I'm in a lot of pain. Thanks for driving me." I studied him for a moment and then added, "But can you please go faster? This baby won't wait much longer for a doctor."

Within seconds, the engine roared as it accelerated. Two minutes later, we pulled up to the emergency room's sliding doors. "Do you..." He put my car in park and eyed me warily. I opened my door, staggered to my feet, and grabbed onto the car for dear life. Could I even walk inside? "Sit down. Let me go find a wheelchair!" Elijah hollered as he ran through the doors. I sat down but kept my feet on the concrete and waited, taking deep, even breaths as best I could.

"Are you and Eli going to be okay, Mommy?" Lucy asked from her seat.

"Eli's just ready to come out." I patted the seat where she could see me do it since I couldn't reach her. "It's okay. This is normal."

"We can send him back. I don't like this," she mumbled. I pictured her crossing her tiny arms over her chest.

"Here." Elijah was in front of me. He didn't offer me his hand, but waited as I lifted myself and sat down.

"Can you help Lucy with her buckles?" I asked apologetically, knowing this was beyond weird for any two people that didn't know or even like one another.

He gave me a withdrawn but accepting sigh as he walked to the door and opened it. A few seconds later, Lucy was by my side, examining me as she scanned every part of me. Elijah rushed me inside. “Stay by me, Lucy.” She took my hand and walked by me, barely keeping up with Elijah’s long strides.

He dropped my keys in my lap as he stopped, then called the nurses. “I think her water broke!” I covered my forehead with my palm. Did he have to yell it? The ER wasn’t even where I needed to be, but at least I was here.

I hissed and held my stomach with my free hand as the tightening grew worse. “Can someone please do something? Fuck! Look at her! She’s seconds from having the kid.” *He said kid instead of a baby.*

A pretty blonde stepped out of the doors and greeted him with a smile like she’d seen that scene a hundred times before. Maybe she had, but I hadn’t. Scott had been chill the entire time, even grabbing himself a soda and chips from the vending machine while I waited for my water to break with Lucy.

Thankfully, the nurse came to me instead of Elijah, rushing in and taking over. “It will be just a second, Dad.” She stared straight at Elijah. “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of her. If you want to go ahead. We can prep her and get you dressed—”

“He’s not the father,” I told her quickly. “Please, I have to take my daughter back with me. I can’t leave her out here.”

“But he’s—” The nurse pointed toward Elijah.

“Absolutely not,” I said adamantly. “We don’t know him. He simply rushed us here when he saw us in the parking lot.”

The nurse nodded, clearly confused.

“Hadley!” I recognized my mom’s voice and sagged in the chair. They couldn’t have shown up at a better time. “Did your water break already?” she asked as Lucy ran to my dad.

“Mommy’s been crying,” she told him.

“I can go now,” I told the nurse. “Mom?” I didn’t care that I was about to be a mother of two. A girl knew when she needed her mom, and I was lucky enough to still have mine.

“Go on. Lucy and me will wait outside the windows,” Dad told us with a

reassuring smile. “You ready to be a sister, Lucy?”

Mom came with me as the nurses rolled me away.

I was about to be a mommy for the second time at twenty-one-years-old.

Chapter Eight

Hadley

“You did good, Momma.” Olivia winked at me with her deep-blue eyes, lying on the hospital bed with me the next day. Her new burgundy hair color made them pop even more.

I was tired and sore but already felt ten times better than I had during labor last night. Eli was between us as he gripped Olivia’s index finger—my boy had a strong grip. The nurse had just brought him back. I was sure they’d come to get him again at some point, and I already couldn’t wait to get him to our little apartment.

I ran my fingers across Eli’s forehead. “Thanks, sis.”

“What about me? I did good, too,” Lucy piped in from the bottom of the bed. She was like a wild bunny hopping about. I’d already warned her a few times about being careful with Eli on the bed. I didn’t know what she expected, but I really didn’t think she was as happy as she wanted to be about having a sibling anymore.

Raising to her elbow, Olivia smirked at Lucy. “And what did you do?”

“I said, ‘are you okay, mommy’ over and over,” Lucy answered as she sat crossed-legged.

Olivia and I laughed. “Wow, you did do good,” Olivia told her. “How do you feel about your new baby brother?”

Lucy responded the way she did to anything she didn’t want to acknowledge, by not answering. “When are we going home?”

“Tomorrow, most likely,” I told her.

“Can’t we go home now?” she whined.

“Your daddy will take you home with him tonight.”

She crossed her arms and pouted. “I’ll just stay here.”

Olivia and I shared a frown. “Don’t you want to spend time with Daddy?” I asked her.

She wouldn’t look up from the covers. “Yeah, but not if Eli gets to stay here with you.”

God bless America. It was already starting. “Lucy.” I waited until she finally glimpsed up at me before I grabbed her little hand. “Eli and you are both my babies. When mommy gets to go home, we’re all going home. Together.” I smiled at her. “Don’t you want to spend time with your dad?”

She reluctantly nodded. “Yeah...”

The door to my room opened, and Mom poked her head in. “Scott and his family are back... Just let me know when you’re ready for them to come in.”

I dropped my head on the pillow and groaned.

“Tell them to fuck off,” Olivia told Mom.

“Olivia!” I muttered, watching Lucy who was observing every word. “Don’t say that.” Olivia flicked her gaze at Lucy before giving me a tight frown.

“Sorry,” Olivia mumbled while Mom shook her head. I caught Olivia mouth *not really*, and I couldn’t help but laugh since it was acceptable as long as Lucy couldn’t see.

“Spend some more time with your sister. Scott and his family can wait a bit,” Mom finally said with a knowing expression. “Want me to take you to see your daddy, Luce?”

Lucy glanced at me, then Eli before reluctantly scooting off the edge of the bed.

Once Lucy was gone, Olivia turned to me. “Is he giving you a hard time?” She was referring to Scott.

I sighed. “You have no idea. He tried to stay in here with me last night and thought I’d let him kiss me when I was in tears after the nurse put Eli in my arms for the second time.”

Olivia huffed. “He won’t stop, you know? He knows he fucked up, but he’ll just have to live with it.”

I stared down at Eli asleep between us. “Gosh, he’s so perfect.”

“I’ll come and stay with you when school’s out. All summer.”

I sighed. “No. Enjoy your time off, but I do want you to stay with me some.” I smirked at her. “The kids will miss you.”

The kids I referred to were only a few years younger than me—her high

schoolers. She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, the little shits.” She fussed with Eli’s sparse blond hair—a result of both Scott and I having light-colored hair. “I’ve had a good bunch this year though. That I can say.”

“Most of the boys have crushes, right?”

Every school year, Olivia had to endure the misguided affections of teenage boys. My sister had always been the stunning one. She was taller and thinner than me. I hadn’t seen her with her natural blonde hair since she was fourteen. I obviously had the boobs and butt between the two of us—thanks to Lucy and Eli, but Olivia’s willowy appearance always made me envious.

She laughed. “They’ve not been that bad, but I’m sure they talk about me.”

The door burst open, and Lucy came ran in and yelled, “Mommy! Dad said we can stay in the room here with you.”

“That asshole,” Olivia whispered.

Eli cried, and I scooped him up in my arms when Scott strode in with his obnoxious smirk. He knew what he’d done.

I hated when he used Lucy to get to me.

Chapter Nine

Elijah

Two days later, the following Monday, not that I was stalking around or anything, Hadley's car was in the parking lot when I headed out for work.

So she left with Lucy and came home with an extra one...

I didn't want to admit it, but I thought about them enough to wonder if everything turned out okay.

That was some scary shit. For a moment or two, I thought she was going to have the baby in the car. With all of her screaming and crying bloody murder, I was glad she didn't. She would have scarred both of us. I couldn't just walk away, though, after knowing her water had broken, and the shitty part of it all was I knew she wouldn't have asked for my help.

Ma would have kicked my ass if she knew I'd abandoned a woman in need. Honestly, my mother would kick it over a lot of the shit I did.

That was the reason I kept thinking about the two of them... I guessed it was three now?

Maybe I'd ask her how giving birth and all that went when I saw her again.

Turned out, not seeing them would be the new way things would go for weeks. I went from seeing them almost every night to not seeing them at all. I saw her car in the lot every evening, and sometimes it was gone in the mornings. Maybe she had a new shift, or maybe she was on maternity leave.

How long did that last?

And what the fuck was wrong with me?

After the fourth week of not seeing them, I told myself to stop looking for them. Just stop, man, *stop*.

I supposed this was what we both wanted. It definitely was what Hadley wanted—not to see me again. Good riddance was what I should say. Not to have to hold my tongue around the kid again.

So, what did I do? I returned to normal.

Not that I was ever *not* normal.

Chapter Ten

Hadley

“God bless America, he stinks!” Lucy pinched her nose and scowled at her brother like he was an abomination. Eli’s response was to kick up his feet, blowing tiny spit bubbles.

I grinned as I picked him up from the bassinet in the living room. “Your poop doesn’t smell like roses,” I informed her.

“I poop in the potty though. I’m better than Bubby, ain’t I, Mommy?”

Oh, dear God.

This was the way it’d been since I brought Eli home. Lucy didn’t like sharing my attention. “Do you want to help me change him?” I asked her. She scrunched up her nose and jumped away from the sofa as I sat down with Eli. “I did this with you too. When Eli gets old enough, he’ll use the potty too.”

She shrugged. “Will you play ponies with me?”

“Yeah, go get them.” She ran to her bedroom. The apartment only had two bedrooms, so Eli’s crib was in my bedroom. Not that I was comfortable enough to put him in a different room, anyway. Lucy might sleep in her room one or two nights out of the week. And often she found her way in bed with me.

I threw Eli’s diaper away and washed my hands, and then, he got fussy. It was like clockwork. Eli always wanted a boob every three hours. I also used a pump. Five weeks in, and my nipples were constantly hard and tender. Hopefully, in another week or so, they would be tougher because the cream I rubbed on them didn’t help much. I couldn’t remember how long it had taken with Lucy, but I swore it didn’t seem this long. I tried to feed Eli just as much with a bottle as I did a breast since Mom would keep him the nights I worked like she did Lucy.

Scott was annoying me to death since Eli was born. I let him sleep on the chair the last night at the hospital only because he put the idea in Lucy’s head. He’d used the opportunity to play nice, constantly asking if I needed this or that. I didn’t fall prey even if it had felt a little decent. Hey, I was only

human, and I still wanted affection sometimes. No, I wouldn't take him back. I simply realized that I hadn't died on the inside.

His family drove me crazy too. All I heard from them at the hospital was, *You guys are a family, you need to be together*. They never missed a chance to say, *Scott never sees Lucy. It'll be the same with Eli*. It didn't matter that it was Scott's fault, not mine. Of course, they didn't hesitate with, *Everyone makes mistakes. You need to let it go*.

Family this. Family that. They thought I should forgive him and move on, but I couldn't do it. My family was one-hundred-percent on my side when it came to Scott. They didn't want me with him. It might be harsh, but they wouldn't care if he weren't in my kids' lives. Olivia's friend had gotten pregnant in high school, and I could remember how her parents had encouraged her to give her baby's father another chance after whatever it was he did. Years later and more kids, he broke her all over again. Not everyone was lucky enough to have parents like mine that were so willing to help or even want to, but I could say with complete certainty that mine was looking out for my happiness.

They thought I could do better. I spent years with Scott thinking they were wrong until he proved how right they were. Did I really want to be with someone that I'd never be able to trust again just to please his family?

No!

Thank fudge I didn't have to see them a lot. They were quick to criticize, but none of them ever came around even when Scott and I were together. I just had to accept that they would always drag my name through the sewer.

"God bless America." I raised my head in time to see Lucy smacking her palm to her forehead. "Why is Bubby always so hungry?"

I glanced down at where Eli nestled against my right boob sucking. "I thought we were playing ponies?" I asked her.

She tossed her hands up dramatically. "He's making me remember my tummy growled earlier."

I couldn't help but laugh. "What do you want to eat?"

"Can it be something other than pizza?" Lucy knew that were only two things in our house—pizza and cheap snacks. It wouldn't be for much longer. Soon, I'd buy enough to cram our refrigerator full of all of her favorites.

“Want to go to Mamaw’s?”

“Yes!”

“Here. Call and tell her to make us some food, and we’ll come to see her.” I grabbed my cell phone off of the coffee table, dialed her number, and handed it to Lucy.

My kid had my parents wrapped around her finger better than I ever could. Thirty minutes later we were heading out the door—it took that long to get Lucy and Eli ready, not to mention myself. I settled for a pair of jeans I hadn’t worn since before I’d gotten pregnant and a T-shirt that fit too snugly over my engorged breasts. *God Bless America*—these babies were huge even with a nursing bra on. I wasn’t really going to miss them when they went back to normal... *If* they went back to normal. Could my breasts stay perky much longer? They were doing okay, but I wasn’t feeling confident. My breasts were enormous this time around.

Stop.

It didn’t matter what became of my once perfect breasts. I had Eli and Lucy—they were worth it. Even if my boobs never appealed to a guy again.

Carrying Eli in his car seat, I made sure Lucy walked in front of me instead of beside me so that neither of us tripped down the stairs. “Looking good, mama,” one of the young boys yelled as we descended the last step. He couldn’t have been more than fourteen yet that didn’t stop him from hooting and hollering at me every time they saw me. He ogled my chest. “Wow, really nice.”

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” I asked. It was a weekday in April. It wasn’t even noon, but there he was with two other school-age boys.

“I go when I wanna go,” he said it like he was so proud.

“Look, Mom.” Lucy pointed toward our neighbor’s yard. Sure enough, there he was stepping out of his house and locking it. “It’s...uh...”

“Elijah,” I told her.

“Elijah.” She probably caught herself from saying demon or something. Anything was possible with my kid.

“Stop pointing.”

Now that I thought about it, this was usually around the time he left every

day. I didn't know what he did or if he even had a job, but he drove off at the same time, somewhere between eleven and twelve. I knew because I spent the last five weeks spying down at everyone from my window when we weren't at my parents'.

Elijah must have a job though. He could afford a house and nice truck yet he wore casual clothes out all the time. Dark jeans and plain T-shirts ranging from solid colors to morbid things like demons and skulls. It was kind of odd, more scary than strange though. It matched the permanent arch of his brows and angry glint in his eyes far too well. Sometimes he wore brown boots, other times he wore dark Nikes.

I'd had a lot of days to ogle him.

A few days after I'd come home, I thought about saying thanks, but I was pretty sure I did in the car that night. I figured he'd rather we leave him alone. That was perfectly okay with me. I still hadn't forgotten how he treated Lucy, *but* he came in handy that night.

I shuddered to think about what might have happened if I tried getting to the hospital myself or waited any longer for my parents.

"Uh... He sees me." Lucy squeaked. I glanced up. Sure enough, Elijah was headed directly toward us. "Does he want his chips back? I already ate them all."

"What?" Now I was the one squeaking as I frowned at my daughter.

"Papaw let me have them," she told me.

Of course, Elijah would have thrown the bag in the car when he had gotten inside that night. I hadn't really paid attention. "I already ate them!" Lucy told him as he drew near. He paused, cocked his head at her, and then resumed his long strides toward us. He was a foot in front of me when he glimpsed down at the car seat in my hand. His eyes raked over me slowly, lingering for a moment on my chest before moving over the rest of my body. How dare he check me out in broad daylight? He could have at least offered a proper greeting first.

My face was on fire. No doubt, it was redder than the T-shirt Lucy wore. It only got worse when I saw the moment his gazed *stayed* on my breasts. His dark predatory eyes widened.

I couldn't take it another second.

“Oh, my fudgesicle! What do you think you’re doing now?”

Elijah blinked, then blinked again. “Huh?”

Are you kidding me? Did he really zone out while ogling my boobs?

“You’re staring...*again*.” I didn’t mention the inappropriateness of his actions. He should have known better. I switched Eli’s car seat to my other hand as it got too heavy.

“Sorry.” He grabbed the tips of his hair that fell over his forehead before pinching the bridge of his nose. “I saw you guys and thought I’d check to see how you are.”

Really?

“Why?” My spine stiffened as I sized him up, trying to decipher his intention.

“That was scary as fuck. I thought you would have the baby in the car.” He peeked into the car seat again. “Is it okay?”

“It?” *Deep breath, Hadley.* “Eli’s a boy, and he’s perfectly healthy.”

“Yeah, that’s good.” He paused. “Wait? Eli? Good name.” He better not be thinking his name was similar to Eli’s. I meant, it was but... *I’m sorry Eli*, I didn’t want to change your name even after finding out yours was similar to the neighbor’s. Besides, Olivia already had his name embroidered on so many onesies.

“Thanks,” I told him.

Elijah grabbed his head like he was unsure—or completely confused about something before he took a step back. “Then I’ll be going.” He shook his head again as he turned around.

His head snapped to the right where the boys were. “What?” one of them snapped at Elijah’s menacing glare.

“Better not be causing trouble,” Elijah warned them.

“We’re not on your property are we?” The boy hissed.

“That’s not what I was referring to.”

Elijah walked away, and then I groaned and said, “Thanks.” He looked over his shoulder. “You know, for driving me that night.”

“No problem.” He waved it off.

“Did you have trouble getting home?” I asked.

Another head shake. “Nah. I called someone to pick me up.”

I nodded. “Good.”

“See ya.”

See ya?

See ya?

Why would he say that? See you in passing? Of course, that was what he meant, but it was still weird. Almost friendly.

“Can I have more chips?” Lucy called out.

“Lucy!” I shouted. “You can’t ask that.”

To my surprise, he only said, “Bye, kid,” and headed toward his truck.

No harsh comment to or about Lucy. Maybe he meant it when he said he felt bad.

Sadly, it was time for me to go back to the real world. I’d spent the last six weeks with Lucy and Eli so I wasn’t excited to head back to the nursing home even though we needed the cash. I was almost broke and by the end of my first week, I dreaded the idea that I might have to ask Dad for help to get food until payday. I hated asking anyone for anything. I never did. That was what I had my credit card for. Besides, it was enough that they helped me with Lucy and now Eli while I finished up my last semester of the nursing program and worked.

The only time I hadn’t been with my babies in the last month and a half was for classes and it still sucked. One more month, and I’d be finished for good. My chest vibrated with excitement.

My entire class had our National Council Licensure Exam scheduled for the following Monday after we graduated—if we passed, but I knew I would. It was exhilarating and nerve-wracking. I got a lot more time for studying lately than I ever had before, but being this close, I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d fudge it up somehow.

That was why I needed to go to work and let Georgie tell me how I’d pass

with flying colors. I would miss the old woman when I finally left. She was my rock while I was away from home. There really were two different families when you held down a job—a work-family, and then the ones that were your actual world. The work-family you didn't really see outside of the job, but without them you knew you'd never make it. You shared secrets, fears, comforted one another when needed. There were things that I shared with Georgie that I couldn't tell my mom. Georgie came without judgment. Mom had plenty to go around.

Everyone there knew I'd be moving on this summer. They were trying very hard to get me to continue at the home after I got my RN license. As much as I liked them all, I couldn't stick around. I've always wanted to be at a hospital. It provided better hours and better pay. I wasn't greedy, but with two kids to feed I needed more cash. Besides, I wanted a house too. All of these things required more money than what I had.

One more month. One more month.

I had it.

Lucy and Eli kept me going day-to-day, but this career... It pulled me out of bed every evening or whenever I caught a bit of sleep. I was a good CNA, and I would be an even better nurse. My kids would be happy because their mom stayed focused on the career she wanted.

I still had them. They still had me. They also still had their dad. Just not under the same roof.

“What do you think, Eli?” I peeked down at him in his car seat. “Think mommy will pass her exam next month?” His response was a giggle, but I thought it was more like gas. I hoped. “Lucy Evelyn Jameson,” I called out as I stood by the doorway to our apartment. Lucy and Eli both had Scott's last name. “What's taking you so long?”

“God bless America!” she murmured as she stepped through the hallway carrying her shoes. Despite us needing to hurry, I smiled. I got creative with cussing after becoming a mom. Lucy was picking up on my sayings as much as she'd said it lately. No one else I knew used the phrase like a cuss. “I can't get these stupid things on.”

I sat the car seat down and bent on one knee. “Come here, and I'll help you.” She could put on her pants herself but still struggled with shirts and

shoes all the time. “See the Velcro is easy. You just peel it back, slip your foot in like that, and stick it in place.” I looked at her face to see her staring at mine. “Were you even watching?” She smiled and picked her nose. I dropped my head and groaned. “Okay, let’s go.”

I got off my knee and grabbed Eli in his car seat, and double, *triple*-checked the diaper bag before opening the apartment door. “Did you get everything?” I asked Lucy before locking the door, and she nodded.

Every time I walked to my car, I searched for Elijah. The habit worsened after last week’s confrontation. The odd moment lingered in my head. I’d admit it wasn’t totally unpleasant, but his stare was unnerving.

I didn’t need the reminder that my breasts were huge. *Men*. At least men still noticed me in that way, right? Pathetic especially since I didn’t have the time to make myself pretty anymore. Nice clothes and makeup were just as rare as sleep these days.

Elijah’s truck wasn’t in the driveway, so maybe he wasn’t home yet. The usual gang of boys weren’t out tonight either—thank Heaven! That small reprieve was over when Eli fussed.

“Oh, fudgesicle. He’s hungry again!” Lucy said dramatically as I opened the back door and latched his car seat in.

“Go, get in your seat, and I’ll buckle you in.”

I should have planned our departure an hour ago. It was too late though to correct my mistake.

I adjusted the nursing pad inside my bra. His tears were suddenly full-blown and caused me to leak like crazy. I had my breast pump packed for this reason. My boobs killed me when they were engorged. Hopefully, it would get better in another week or two once my breasts knew exactly how much milk to produce for him.

“He’s breaking my eardrums,” Lucy informed me.

“Thanks for your commentary over there. How about you grab his bottle from the diaper bag?” I asked. Luckily, I came prepared for this. I had already made his next bottle before leaving and had some breast milk packed in a mini cooler to stay chilled until it could get to Mom’s fridge.

“You have it, not me,” she pointed out.

I blinked at my shoulder where it rested. “Oh.” Kids did something to the brain. “Come here, Eli,” I cooed as I unbuckled and scooped him up. I opened the driver’s side door and sat down with him. By the time I found his bottle, he was screaming bloody murder, and my nipples were leaking with him. *Please don’t soak through my shirt before I can change the pads.* “Here you go,” I told him, and he latched onto the nipple right away.

“Finally,” Lucy muttered from her seat.

I fussed with Eli’s hair while he took his bottle, worrying about how he’d handle his first night away from me. A tear slid down my cheek before I could stop it, and I wiped it away. This wouldn’t last forever, but it truly sucked when every fiber in my body begged to be with them. Always.

“Elijah’s home now!” Lucy piped in, and I turned my head to see his headlights.

“I see that,” I told her. “Don’t even think about yelling at him.”

“I told him I wanted more chips.”

I sighed. “You can’t go around asking strangers for things, Lucy. You know better.”

“He’s not a stranger anymore.”

That child.

“He sees me!” she yelled next. “He’s got a bag in his hand. My chips!”

“Lucy!” I called after her but she was already opening her door and rushing out. Bottle and baby in hand, I hurried out after her. “Lucy!”

I paused, eyes going round. He really had a bag in his hand and was coming our way. He saw me and pulled the bag closer to his side as he stalked toward us. His irises were like black orbs underneath the streetlight and even more intimidating. Suddenly he was next to Lucy, offering her the grocery bag. “I’ve had them in the truck all week. Just haven’t seen you until now.”

She glanced up at me quickly. “Can I have them? Please?”

I sighed and finally nodded. “What do you say?”

“Thank you.” She beamed up at him. Kids were so simple.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I told him. I caught a peek of a lot more than

one bag of chips in the bag he gave her.

He shrugged, gaze skimming over me quickly that time. “Are you a nurse?” he asked.

“CNA,” I replied, quickly adding, “But I graduate nursing school next month.” I didn’t have to tell him that. Why did I feel the need to do so?

He nodded, placing his hands in his front pockets. I tossed Eli’s empty bottle in the open door and laid him over my shoulder as I patted his back. Stepping closer, Elijah peered down at me and Eli. “What?” I said nervously, bouncing my left foot.

“You have something on your shirt.” His brows furrowed in the middle as he gazed down at... I followed his gaze to my chest.

“Your boobies are leaking!” Lucy screamed for the world to hear.

“God bless America!” I muttered. The milk had leaked through my pads and bra onto my scrubs.

I glanced up to find his eyes widening. “Oh, that’s...” He covered his mouth and waved his hand around. “Is that normal? Do they do that?” He sounded and looked amazed. You’d think I told him I went to outer space.

“It happens every time Bubby cries.” Why did my child feel the need to tell someone that? She paid too much attention!

“It’s normal when the baby cries or if they’re full. It should stop soon though,” I quickly added to Lucy’s words, spine stiffening, heat spreading across my cheeks. “Is it normal for grown men to ask such a strange question? Are you one of those that gets offended to see a woman breastfeed in public?”

“What?” His gaze traveled away from my chest, to Eli’s head, and up to my face. Elijah stepped away. He must have seen my embarrassment. “No. Fuck. Wow. I’m always making myself look like an— Shit!” He gawked at my chest again before he averted his gaze. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay!” I said and closed my eyes, trying to control the level of embarrassment we were both experiencing. I sighed and turned my gaze to Elijah’s. “I know it’s strange for people that don’t have kids, especially guys...” He looked up slowly. Now it was me turning my gaze from his. “We’re good, you know? The chip incident is forgotten. You don’t have to

bring her anymore.” I gestured toward the bag and resumed rubbing Eli’s back.

“Are we good?” His eyes darted to Lucy for confirmation.

“I’ll take Funyuns every week,” she declared.

I sucked my cheeks in to keep from smiling. I was seconds from correcting her, when he replied with his own smirk. “You drive a hard bargain, kid. How many weeks do I have to do this before I earn your forgiveness?”

“Five!” She held out all five fingers and thrust them up toward him. “And it’s not kid. It’s Lucy. Say it with me. Lou-see. Lucy!”

“I’ll stop calling you kid when you stop calling me demon worshipper.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “I already know you’re Elijah.”

“All right, then it’s settled,” he said. “Lucy.”

She giggled, and he glanced at me. I quickly lost my smile. “We need to hurry,” I said to Lucy so Elijah would know. “I’m going to be late for work.”

He took another step backward, pinning me with a stare I couldn’t quite decipher. I thought I had him pegged as a jerk, but now he was a puzzle all over again. He couldn’t possibly be into me. That much was obvious. The only thing it could be was a guilty conscience.

I walked around the opened doors of my car and buckled Eli into his car seat. He let out a deep sigh. “Come on, Lucy.” I also caught sight of Elijah still standing there watching us as I grabbed her hand and led her around the car.

“Remember my Funyuns,” she told him.

“I’ll remember.” His voice was almost thoughtful when he spoke. After strapping her in, I shut the door and walked around again. “I’ll see ya around then.” He tossed his hand up.

I fidgeted with my hands before finally throwing mine up. “Okay. Bye.”

“See ya.”

See ya.

He really needed to stop saying that.

Chapter Eleven

Elijah

They looked unnatural on her. I rubbed my chin absentmindedly, staring at the framed artwork I'd recently put up in the shop. It was a painting without color except for the red dripping from the horned demon's mouth and chin as he feasted upon the naked woman whose nipples leaked fluids. I drew him crouched, the lady in his hold. There was nothing else in the photo, the surrounding scenery faded out with different hues of grays and blacks.

"Elijah."

She... Baby... Boobs. She breastfed....

"Elijah!"

Still not acknowledging Wendy, I murmured in my daze. "So... A mom's body differs from a normal woman's body."

"Huh?" Lance muttered.

I finally turned away from the artwork—or most notably the bare tits I drew which were a tad too large for her body frame. I wouldn't think too much about why I made them so big. Wendy's eyebrows were close to reaching her hairline as she gaped at me. "What's with you? You're normally only like this when sketching or painting, but you're not doing either. You're just staring all weird-like."

Still ignoring her, I said, "Did you know a woman's tits leaked when a baby cried?"

"Elijah." She rubbed her forehead and then closed her eyes. "I'm not even sure I should say anything, but yeah, *if* a mother is breastfeeding, all sorts of natural things like that happen." She looked at me and scoffed. "You sound like you're just figuring out a woman's breasts were actually there for a reason other than male perversion."

Her words hit the mark. It was a shitty way to think, but I didn't even realize women still did that now. I meant, of course, I knew. I just knew no one who did it. Fuck. I couldn't explain it. Leaking tits were foreign, bizarre, and equally intriguing to me.

"Considering how big Cheryl's tits are, I'd say you like a nice rack better than we do," Lance piped in. He was the only one doing a tattoo. It was one

of our slow days without appointments and only a few walk-ins.

“I won’t deny it,” Wendy agreed with a sly grin before glancing at me. “Is this about that mom? Do you like her or something?”

A month ago I saw those two wet circles on Hadley’s shirt, and I still thought about them. Whenever I saw Hadley and Lucy, my mind went back to that moment.

On two different evenings I caught up with them using the excuse that I had chips for Lucy. Two weeks ago I placed them on her car, hoping that the apartment kids didn’t steal them. Hadley never spoke to me directly. It was always, *What do you say, Lucy* followed by a quick bye.

My hanging around didn’t matter much. Only thing Hadley wanted was to get as far away as possible.

Fuck if I knew what my deal was with Hadley and Lucy. I was pushing the boundaries between us. Why? I had no idea, but I couldn’t stop myself.

I kept wondering about Hadley. Things like just how young she was, and what was her last name. Was the kids’ father still in the picture? If so, where the hell was he?

Anyone could see just how worn out Hadley was. The woman didn’t take time for herself. Every time I saw Hadley she had her blonde hair twisted on top of her head. She didn’t wear makeup to cover those dark circles that stuck out on her pale skin. Her most striking feature was her twinkling blue eyes.

Her weariness hid Hadley’s beauty. I saw it in every move she made and the way she spoke. Lately, I wondered what she’d look like well-rested, well-fed, and relaxed. Why the hell hadn’t someone come to her rescue and let her get some much-needed sleep?

But if she was a single mom, she probably had no choice. Ma worked herself to the bone until Hank stepped into the restaurant where she worked and swept her off her feet. My actual father—not that I’d ever call him that—was out of the picture before I was born. Up and left Ma before she found out she was pregnant. By the time she told him, he’d already gotten another woman pregnant. Two at the same time. He took one and rejected the other. As a child, he tried reaching out to me. I was ten years old and gullible. I fell for his lies about all the cool stuff we would do together and the places he’d take me. Every single time he bailed. Eventually, I stopped answering his

calls, and he stopped coming around. At first his absence upset me. Then I realized I didn't mean much to him, and I stopped caring. I had a good life with Hank, the only father I needed.

"Oh, my God, you do!" Wendy screeched, giving her own meaning to my silence.

"I don't see her as anything other than a young mom," I grumbled, then let my shoulders slump. "I kind of feel sorry for her."

"Why?" Lance asked. I turned around and saw him frowning with a questioning expression. "She has a baby too, right? The kids probably have different fathers. I got a cousin with four baby daddies. She falls in love within a week and thinks she needs to have a baby with every new guy. She doesn't need you feeling sorry for her. I'm sure she's living just fine off of child support."

I went ramrod straight in my seat. Hadley didn't seem like the sort. She seemed too innocent and busy with her life.

What the fuck, Elijah?

Something was obviously wrong with me, especially when it came to the m-o-m. I went from judging her just like Lance was to wanting to defend her. Why? It wasn't like she wanted me around or anything. Maybe it was her naivete—a promise of goodness—that captivated me.

"Wow," Wendy muttered. "Not every single mom is like that." She shook her head as she pulled her cell phone from her pocket. "Working here with you guys every day reminds me why I'm a lesbian."

"She works and goes to some nursing school. I don't even think she sleeps." I wiped my mouth in irritation. "I don't know her, but she's definitely not whatever the fuck you just said." I scowled at Lance.

He tossed his hands up in defeat before going back to the tattoo. "Are you sure you aren't into her?" he asked.

"I'm not," I replied quickly.

"Then why are you fascinated with her tits?" he said.

"Who said I was?"

"Awfully strange for you to be talking about breastfeeding boobs after the mom came into your life," Wendy piped in.

Um...hello...leaking tits...

“Not to mention the new painting he brought in?” Lance piped in unnecessarily.

“Do that man’s tattoo and shut the fuck up!” I pointed at Lance, then Wendy, “And you... Just stop talking too.”

Crossing over into the fifth week, I’d already bought Lucy her chips. This would be the last time—my debts paid and forgiveness earned.

Something told me the kid was conning me out of the chips but I didn’t care. Lucy didn’t seem grumpy anymore with me. Hell, she seemed nothing but excited each time she saw me. I’d hear her say something like, “*Is it time for my chips?*” In which Hadley would rush her daughter into the car without meeting my eyes. She was back to not looking at me, and pretending I wasn’t even there.

It pissed me off a little. I was *trying* to make up for the shitty way I acted toward Lucy and Hadley. I shouldn’t care that she wanted to avoid me. I preferred not to talk to them either...or so I thought. Why was I always fighting the itch to walk over every time I saw them loading up in her car?

I didn’t know whether or not it was frustration or anger that Wednesday night. When I saw those white scrubs practically glowing in the streetlight, I rushed from my truck and crossed the yard with chips in hand.

“Elijah!” Lucy screamed, and I almost smiled, *almost*, at the way she butchered the last part of my name. She didn’t know how to roll it off her tongue properly and ended up dragging out the last part. *Eli-juh*.

“Lucy. Please don’t run. What if a car pulled in the parking lot?” Hadley sighed as she held the car seat in one hand and a diaper bag in the other. Lucy peeked over her shoulder but kept going, meeting me halfway.

“Here.” I gave the bag to her. “Listen to your mom. You’ll scare her to death one of these days.”

Lucy beamed up at me. You’d think I’d just complimented her. “I made her pee a little one time!”

“LUCY!” I didn’t hide my smirk as I glimpsed over at her red-faced mother. “Tell him thanks. This is the fifth week. He’s not bringing you any

more chips. You've been rude enough. Let's go."

Lucy pouted, looking up at me. My eyes widened as I took in her tiny appearance then glanced over at her mom. Hadley was beyond uncomfortable every time her daughter put her through that with me. For some inexplicable reason, I couldn't leave them alone.

Was I stalking them? I was starting to weird myself out. What was my deal?

"Eli-juh," Lucy blinked up at me, still pouting.

"Yeah, Lucy?" I gazed down at her.

"Let's be friends."

Did she want to be my friend? Really? I glanced at Hadley who stood a couple of feet from her daughter. *That* much closer to me. The similarities between the two of them were amazing. Lucy was Hadley's mini-me. Cute kid. Pretty mom.

I could be friends with a kid. *I think*. At least I think I could with this one. I stared down at Lucy. "Sure."

Clapping her hands, she jumped. "Okay. Will you still bring me chips?" She blinked once, twice. That wasn't blinking. The kid was batting her eyes, knowing the art of getting her way. "I also like Skittles."

At that point, Hadley groaned and palmed her forehead. "Lucy..." she whispered, but I caught her smile before she masked it. "We need to stop bugging Elijah like this." Unlike her daughter, Hadley said my name perfectly, the three syllables rolling off her tongue sweetly.

Her words were kind although I was the one annoying them. I stuffed my hands in my pockets. "All right, I'll keep that in mind. I like chocolate milk." I didn't know why I threw that out there, I just wasn't ready for them to rush away even though I knew she had to go to work.

"Me too!" Lucy was extremely hyper I noticed. She looked behind her. "You three, Mom, you like chocolate milk too!"

Eli grunted in his car seat. "What is it?" Hadley lifted the car seat higher and cooed down at him. I was frozen. It was one of those surreal moments—seeing her first actual smile, even if it wasn't for me. Damn it. My throat tickled a little, and my heart rate increased.

Lucy's mom was an exquisite woman—a very *young*, beautiful woman. Her teeth were straight and white. Her blue eyes were remarkable. Even with the dark circles and messy bun... I was enjoying the bun since it gave me a glimpse at her slender neck. It was hard to get much else when she wore nothing besides scrubs. I couldn't make out her curves in them. Kind of bummed about it if I were being honest.

“How old are you?” I asked before I realized how rude that sounded.

Her lips thinned, slight happiness fading as she stiffened. “Twenty-one... Why?”

“I thought you might be nineteen at the oldest,” I admitted with a grunt.

Her nostrils flared. “Are you insulting me? I can't tell.”

“What? No.” I sighed. “I knew you couldn't have been too young with you being in a nursing program but still, you do look kind of like a teen despite those scrubs.” And those giant tits...those giant *leaking* tits. That's the only vivid detail not hidden beneath that loose material.

“Well, I'm sorry for looking like a kid!” She huffed. “Come on, Lucy.” She grabbed Lucy's hand, pausing momentarily. “Wait, how old are you?”

I scratched my chin out of habit. “I turn thirty next month.”

“Me too!” Lucy added, which made me smile. I think she meant her birthday was next month too, not her turning thirty.

“Hmm...” Hadley sniffed cheekily. “I thought you were older—by a lot.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Just how old do I appear?”

Jesus Christ. I worked out every day. I didn't eat healthy if I were honest, but I ate my vegetables and fruits and ran every day. How did I look old?

She sucked her cheeks in to keep from laughing, and I squinted at her, then it hit me. “Oh, I see what you're doing.”

She gave me a full-blown smile this time, and it knocked me off my axis. It was like she shot me with a laser beam or something. “See? It doesn't feel good, does it?” She switched the car seat to her other hand. Her arms must be hurting.

“How is looking younger than you are a bad thing? You'll like that when

you're fifty," I told her.

Hadley shrugged. "It always sounds offensive when you're a young parent."

"Let's go," Lucy took her mother's hand and tugged her away from me. "Will Mamaw make my gravy and biscuits when we get there?"

"I don't know. She might. You'll have to ask her." Hadley turned away from me, but not before meeting my gaze purposely that time. "Bye, Elijah."

"Bye, Elijah." Lucy waved. "Remember Skittles. I also like Twinkies."

"Get in, and I'll buckle you up," Hadley told Lucy as she watched her daughter walk to the car. Then she turned back to me. "Sorry about Lucy. Her grandparents spoil her a bit, and she doesn't realize how weird it is to ask a stranger for something."

"We're not strangers, anymore," I said.

"You know what I mean." I knew she wanted us to stay strangers. "Please don't get her anything else. If you still feel guilty, don't. Lucy doesn't even care about the chip incident. She'll keep bugging you if you keep this up. So don't. You're our neighbor, and I really don't want to waste my energy scowling in your direction the next time you have something bad to say about Lucy."

My eyes widened as she turned away. I couldn't let her leave just like that, not when she was still waiting for me to make an ass of myself again. "Wait." She paused and frowned over her shoulder at me. "Jesus." I wiped my hand down my face and sighed. "You still think I dislike Lucy? I'm insensitive sometimes—okay I am a lot—but I would never intentionally hurt a kid's feelings. I just have a low tolerance for them." Her eyes hardened, and I was screwing this up, but I wanted her to understand me. "I like Lucy though. For a kid, I can tell she's headstrong already and goes for what she wants. I can respect that she's got a grumpy asshole like me bringing her chips every week like it's my job to do so."

Yes. I made her smile. But it was short-lived.

"That's what I'm saying. For your sake, please just stop going along with her. It's not so bad now, but Lucy remembers these things, and she's persistent. It doesn't matter how many times I tell her it's rude, especially

when you ignore me and bring her stuff, anyway. She's a kid. She knows she's not supposed to do it. You didn't help matters by bringing those chips every single week like you were obligated."

I knew I didn't have to do it. I *wanted* to do it.

Holy shit. That was it. I wanted to. Any excuse to venture over here toward them.

"I'm sorry," I finally said.

"It's okay," she whispered. "But I have to go or I'll be late."

"I'll see ya then." I took a step back as she smiled lightly.

"Bye," she mumbled before walking away from me.

I realized in that very instant that I wanted to befriend them, but she was making it impossible.

Chapter Twelve

Hadley

Shaking my head, I stared down at the mountain of food in the break room. “Oh, Georgie, you didn’t have to get me all of this.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Nonsense. We’re finally losing you, and it sucks, but I’m glad for you. Besides, the girls pitched in and made you something. They’re using your last day as an excuse to sneak in here and snack.” That made me snicker as I grabbed a plastic plate and piled it with food. “When do you start at the hospital?” she asked after we sat down.

“Monday. That gives me the weekend to relax and spend time with my babies.”

Georgie shook her head and sighed. “I don’t know what we’ll do without you.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her, and I meant it. CNAs worked long hours with low pay. CNAs did all the brute work and everything else. I’d have the same duties at the hospital and more, but a nursing home and a hospital were different. At a nursing home, we didn’t have patients. We had residents and our job were these people’s home. We had to make sure it felt like home for them despite the care we gave. Not all, but most patients at a hospital could more or less take care of themselves. Most of the residents at the nursing home required absolute care. We tended to their every need. There was a variety of health problems—people suffering from strokes, dementia, Alzheimer’s, and people on bedrest. Some walked into this place seemingly capable and then their disease progressed—the devastating part was watching them steadily decline.

That was why the hardest part of leaving would be the residents. I’d become attached to them and when one passed, I felt it. The sadness worsened when Bethany—a ninety-year-old resident—asked why I had to go.

“Don’t be. You’ve worked hard, and it paid off,” said Georgie.

I knew I did. Between nursing clinicals, classes, tests, and endless hours on the job, I was due for almost four years of sleep, but my hard work had paid off. I passed the NCLEX exam with flying colors! All of that worrying the week before was for nothing.

“I’m ready for more time with Lucy and Eli,” I said cheerfully.

“Well, you’ll be getting a lot of that now. Do you know what shift you’re getting yet?”

“Mornings,” I told her. The nurses at Sassafras’s Hospital did twelve-hour shifts. The options were seven a.m. to seven p.m. or seven p.m. to seven a.m. Three days on and four off was my new work schedule. I couldn’t freaking wait. The only time I took a break from work was during the six weeks after having Eli, other than that, it felt like I was always at the nursing home.

So, yes, I was so ready to leave. This was a great step forward for my little family and me.

Lucy’s bright smile when I had told her, “*No more sleepovers at Mamaw and Papaw’s after tonight,*” was the highlight of my entire week. She jumped up and down on the bed, making her brother gawk at her like she was crazy. That was the moment I knew there was no love purer than a mother and her child. She wanted to be with me more than anyone else. Lucy loved me without fault, and I didn’t want to ever fail her or Eli.

“Oh, here.” Georgie got up and walked toward her locker. “I won’t be able to make it to Lucy’s party tomorrow since I’ll be stuck here.”

It was her birthday present. She would be four tomorrow which was another anxiety entirely. Mom talked me into putting her in preschool. I knew it would be great for her, but it didn’t ease my worries. My baby was ready for school, but I wasn’t ready. It was a week into June, and her first day was constantly on my mind.

“I’ll take pictures when she opens it tomorrow and send them to you,” I said as I placed the present beside my plate.

“Thanks.” When I glanced up from my food, Georgie stared at me. “I’m going to miss you, child. Don’t be a stranger, ya hear?”

Her words made me a little sad. One part of my life, the part that’s kept us afloat the last few years, was ending, but I was ready for whatever came next.

“It’s okay, Hadley.” Mom patted my back the next day as I fought off my tears. “You tried.”

“She shouldn’t have had to try,” Dad pitched in. I could tell by the sound

of his voice that he was angry. “Scott’s family has never been good to her. Why does she have to try for them now?”

“We’ll just have separate birthdays from now on,” Mom added with another tender pat.

It was my initial plan, but then Scott made me feel guilty. He claimed that he couldn’t afford to do anything for Lucy and didn’t want her disappointed in him. He even said that his parents wouldn’t help. All that changed when his family showed up to the lake for the party I prepared for Lucy. As soon as the Jameson’s arrived, all I heard was Scott’s mom nagging.

“Why, Hadley, this party has no decoration.”

“I didn’t know you liked Trolls, Lucy?”

“Meme Lilly will buy you a cake bigger than this one.”

“I knew a woman who did cakes. Hadley, if you would have asked for our input, we could have gotten a bigger one for Lucy.”

“Does Lucy look like she’s lost weight?”

“Are you eating, Lucy?”

“How about Lucy and Eli spend the night with us tonight? Give you and Scott the chance to hang out...”

Her last comment pushed me past my limit. I let Mrs. Jameson know that my children were going home with me. Besides, why would I send Lucy and Eli to someone who spent every moment being rude to them? Needless to say, Mrs. Jameson was not happy. By the time my parents and I loaded up the car, I felt guilty, but it was so hard to be nice to people who could be so mean.

“You okay?” Holly, the only friend who stuck around after I got pregnant, asked me.

It made me sad sometimes when I thought about everyone I lost just because I had a child, but I had no regrets. As soon as I had Eli buckled in, I turned and gave Holly a hug. “Yeah, I’m good. Thanks for coming.”

“It was good seeing you. Let’s hang out if you ever get the chance or I can come over now that you’ll have some free time,” she offered.

“I’d love that.”

She shot a heated look at Scott's family as they got into their car and drove away. "I don't see how you put up with them for so long. You always deserved better than Scott."

"Tell her, Holly," Dad muttered.

"Don't you worry, I am!" Holly said. I gave her a smile as I pulled away from her. "I'm going to head out."

Once my friend was gone, Mom started pestering me. "You guys come over and hang out with us the rest of the day."

I didn't know what I'd do without my parents. They were my rock. They helped me a lot before Scott and I split, but the last year they'd gone above and beyond so that I could finish school and work. They made me feel confident when the rest of the world judged me for being both young and a single mom of two.

"That actually sounds good," I told her.

"Don't let them tear you down, baby girl." Mom rubbed my head like I was Lucy's age.

"Need us to help you unload the presents and cake at the apartment?" Dad asked as he helped Lucy in her seat.

"Nah, we got it, don't we, Lucy?"

"Yeah!" she screamed so I could hear her.

"Ride up when you're finished." Dad stepped over and kissed my forehead. He didn't do it often, but his grumpy butt always seemed to know when Olivia or me needed a little extra affection.

"I will."

The lake was only five minutes from the apartments. When I saw a shirtless Elijah pushing a lawnmower, I did a double take, slowing down as I pulled into the parking lot. From the tattoos I saw peeking out from his T-shirts, I figured he was probably covered, but I wasn't prepared for his toned and muscular body. Since the weather turned nicer, and he stopped wearing jackets, I'd noticed Elijah's bulging biceps. But *God bless America...*

So much muscle. So many tattoos. I wondered if he even remembered what his plain skin looked like?

“Fudge!”

I eased up on my brakes trying to avoid calling attention to my blunder. I’d driven to the end of the parking lot. Another foot forward, and I’d run over the curb. There wasn’t anything I could do but back up and turn around. Too late for being subtle. Elijah noticed us. My heart kicked up a notch. The guy gave me palpitations. Interacting with Elijah wasn’t good for me. It was just all his overwhelming masculinity that made me uncomfortable—it was why I didn’t do well with men like him. He made me flustered, and I couldn’t help it.

That was just me.

“Elijah has so many tattoos, doesn’t he, mommy?” Lucy piped in from the back.

I squinted and checked him out from the safety of the car. Despite my nerves, I liked the moments when he came over to speak to Lucy. Sometimes I thought maybe Elijah was trying to befriend us, but I became so panicky around him that I just wanted to get away. Hours later, I couldn’t stop thinking about how I could have handled myself better. Then, I’d hate myself for running away out of intimidation.

We didn’t meet under the best of circumstances, but his apology seemed genuine. Then I reminded myself that I thought Scott would always be faithful. I might not be the best judge of character.

Disappointed with my thoughts, I put the car in park and grabbed the diaper bag as I stepped out. The mower shut off, and my skin prickled with heat. I knew it was more than the sun shining on me when my cheeks warmed too. Not looking to see if Elijah was coming over, I went to Lucy’s side and unbuckled her before getting Eli whose eyes were wide and blinking after a short nap.

I looked over for the baby wrap carrier and then remembered I left it upstairs.

“Elijah!” Lucy screamed, and I groaned on the inside. My child was too friendly. She didn’t see a stranger which worried me sometimes. I should probably stop thinking of Elijah as a stranger. After all, we knew each other’s names. “Come see the toys I got.”

“Did you get a new toy?”

Fudge. He sounded close. I stood with Eli in his car seat and pushed the diaper bag up on my shoulder. Elijah was on the other side of the car. He had some hair on his chest that I couldn't notice so far away. And with all his tattoos, it was a wonder I saw it at all. I flushed head to toe. His shorts were loose and hung off his hips. He was so...sexy.

Stop staring at his happy trail!

"Today's my birthday. I turned four." Lucy held up four fingers.

"You're messing with me." He placed his hands on his hips and glanced down at her. "Mine too."

"Really?" Lucy and I said together. The previous time we spoke was last month—May—and he'd mentioned his birthday coming soon. It was June.

He glanced at me. "Yeah, really." His gaze swept over me. "Your hair is down."

Oh, fudge! In this smothering heat, I didn't even want to know what it looked like. I grabbed at it self-consciously. "Oh, yeah. Big mistake in this heat."

"Have you had cake?" Lucy asked him, and my heart pitter-pattered a frantic beat. I knew where she was going with her question. "We brought mine home from the party. I'll give you some." She glimpsed over at me knowing exactly what she was doing. "Can he come up and eat cake?"

"Lucy... I'm sure he's busy." I didn't even look at Elijah. It was already awkward enough.

"Are you?" she asked him.

"I don't mind after I finish cutting the grass," he replied. "If that's all right with your mom?"

I lifted my head and gazed up at him. Elijah was serious. At that moment, he watched me and waited for an answer.

"Yay! I'll show you what toys I got," Lucy exclaimed.

Not knowing how to leave this situation properly, I went to the trunk and tried to grab the first bag, forgetting that I'd planned to go upstairs first and grab the carrier.

"Need help?" I tensed as I felt his smoldering body temperature hit my

back, then his shirtless, slightly dewy chest brushed against me as he leaned over and grabbed the bags. “Is the cake up front? Want me to grab it first?”

“S-sure,” I stammered as I gripped the car seat tighter and side-stepped out of his way. “Come grab one, Lucy.” She did and a minute later, Elijah was following us up the steps. He carried every single bag and the cake while Lucy held a Barbie doll she had to show him.

Once we reached our apartment on the third floor, I put in the passcode and let us in. Elijah stood in the hall and dropped the bags at the entrance. Eli was getting fussy strapped in, but I still sat it down so I could take the cake from Elijah’s outstretched hand. “I don’t want to step inside with grassy tennis shoes.” He searched my face as I took the dessert from him. “I’ll come up once I’m finished?” he sounded like he was asking to make sure again.

“Okay!” I said a little too cheery. I was trying to act normal, but didn’t know how to when Lucy had invited a man over like it was no big deal.

“Okay.”

I shut the door and didn’t even get to breathe because I was rushing over to Eli who wanted out of his car seat. He was boob-hunting the moment he landed on my chest. Lifting up my shirt, I unsnapped the nursing bra and fed him while picking up the cake and slowly maneuvering it to the fridge.

“Take your toys to your room,” I told Lucy.

Thirty minutes later, they were scattered all over the living room floor instead. She couldn’t figure out which toy—the dolls or the ponies—she wanted to play with the most. Papaw bought Lucy some cars, and she had those on the coffee table, creating a town with them and playing when Elijah knocked on the door. Cradling Eli, I wiped my mouth and glanced down at the jogging pants and spaghetti-strap top I had changed into. *It was okay*, I told myself. I wasn’t dressing to impress him. I felt Elijah simply wanted to be friends. That was okay... Well, I wanted it to be. The only way to get used to having Elijah around was to *be around him*.

When I opened the door, a spicy, heavenly cologne filled my nostrils. Elijah had showered and tossed on a white T-shirt and black silky shorts. His dark hair still dripped a bit. Elijah’s tattoos were both captivating and menacing-looking on his arms as he stepped in.

He took off his shoes at the door. It was what my family did, and I liked

that he did it without being asked. Good manners.

Wow, I thought Elijah and I could really be friends as I watched him cross the tiny hallway into the kitchen and the living room. “Forgive the mess,” I said.

“Elijah!” Lucy jumped up. “Look at my cars.”

“You like playing with cars?” he asked, sounding shocked. Maybe it was because she was a girl. I played with them when I was younger too.

“Yes. My papaw bought these for me.”

“I used to paint model cars when I was little. They came in these kits where you put them together and everything.” He scratched his chin as he squatted beside her and picked up a blue car from the coffee table. “I haven’t in a long time... I might have to order me one online.”

“Can I have one too?” Lucy asked.

“You’d be interested in something like that?” He sounded surprised again.

She nodded her head vigorously. “Can I paint mine pink?”

He chuckled. It was a deep sound. One I felt in my stomach. “I don’t think they offer pink paint in the kit. If they don’t, I can find some pink for you.”

“And blue for Bubby.” My heart warmed at that. Lucy was coming around to liking Eli more. She wasn’t as jealous, and she thought he was pretty funny when he laughed. Said he looked like an old person without teeth.

“We can make him one too,” he told her, then he gazed up at me. I realized I had been smiling the entire time since Elijah’s attention wasn’t on me.

“Do you want a piece of cake?” I asked quickly, hurrying into the kitchen with Eli in my arms.

I heard his knees crack as he got up and followed me. I pulled the cake out of the fridge and cut him a piece before asking. “We have juice and milk...”

“Milk’s fine.” I opened the cabinet. His arm reached past me before I grabbed the glass.

“I can get it.” Elijah’s deep voice rumbled.

“Nonsense. You’re a guest.” I took the glass from his hand, filled it with chocolate milk—he said he liked it—and gave it to him.

I wasn't sure if I should sit down at the table with him or not.

Elijah was in my apartment. How did that happen?

"Is today really your birthday?" I blurted.

He looked up at me while eating. "It is. I'd be at work otherwise, but they ran me out today on account of what day it is."

Slowly, I took a seat across from him. I studied him, or more accurately, his tattoos and finally asked, "May I ask what it is you do?"

"I own two tattoo parlors." Another bite.

"Two?"

Wow, that explained his tattoos.

"Yeah, one's back in Jeffrey though."

"Why two?"

"Can't give up my first baby because I moved back home." His lips tipped up on the right side, and he gave me a shy smolder. "At least, I'm not ready to let it go just yet." His gaze skimmed over me blatantly before he took the last bite of his cake. "Do you have any tattoos?"

I shook my head. "No, but I've always wanted one. Just never really had time to get one."

He smirked, tipping his head to the side as if remembering something. "Lucy made a comment when she first saw my tattoos. Something about her grandpa not liking tattoos or maybe he thought they were ugly."

"Yeah, he's stuck in his ways." The understanding gleam in his eyes and grin made me smile too. "My dad's a good person though."

"Hank wasn't a fan of them either when I first decided tattooing was something I wanted to do for a living. Now he has a few."

"Hank?"

"My mom's husband." I didn't ask why he didn't say stepdad. The way he smirked at the memory told me he was fond of him regardless of why he didn't.

Carrying her ponies now, Lucy scooted the chair out beside Elijah. She laid out her toys on the table and sat down. "Do you like scary stuff, Elijah?"

Is that why you have them on your arms?”

This little listener. I should have known she was sitting around eavesdropping. My child was a creeper, a very observant one.

“I guess so... Does that make me a bad person?” he asked her.

She tossed her hands up. “I don’t think you’re bad, anymore.” She turned to me. “Can I get a tattoo?”

“You’re too little. When you grow up, maybe...”

Eli whined. I glanced down to see him staring up at me. As soon as he had my focus, he stopped fussing and smiled.

“All right, you little attention seeker.” I beamed at him.

“Does that mean Bubby wants one too when he grows up?” Lucy asked.

I snorted, going along with her. “Maybe.”

“He’s such a copycat,” Lucy said, clearly making up a crazy scenario in her head. Elijah laughed.

My cell phone, still in the living room, rang. I got up with Eli and went to answer it. When I saw Scott’s name displayed, I panicked. I thought about Elijah, and then remembered that he wasn’t Scott’s concern. Besides, we weren’t doing anything wrong. “Lucy. Come answer this. It’s your dad.” When she climbed down from her seat, I caught the frown on her lips. I’d forgotten about the party since she’d perked up since we came home. Her feet padded across the carpet and she took it from my hand.

I glimpsed over at Elijah to see him watching us. When Lucy began speaking, she headed to her room.

Elijah said, “You’re not with their father?” I shook my head and his shoulders seemed to relax. “I knew I never saw anyone when you guys—”

“Nope. It’s just us.”

“Out of choice or...”

“Yeah, some choice. I caught him cheating on me with my cousin.”

“That’s fucking shit,” he muttered, and I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Lucy wasn’t in the living room again.

“Yeah, but it’s fine.”

“It’s not.”

“Better to have found out, than to still be with him and not know what he was doing behind my back.” I shrugged as if the entire thing hadn’t broken me and my trust. Eli grabbed my shirt in his tiny hand and tugged at it.

Elijah nodded reluctantly. “That’s not what I meant. He’s a prick for doing that to his kids’ mom.” Elijah’s anger gave me pause and something fluttered in my stomach. “Were you married?”

“No.” But I thought I meant something to him. Despite the awkwardness of the conversation, I laughed. Now I was afraid Elijah might look down on me for being an unmarried mother. I was still working on not caring what others thought.

Lucy ventured out of her room with a slight frown on her lips as she brought the phone to me. “Dad says he’s coming over.”

I sighed. When Scott asked me earlier, I told him no. If Lucy wanted to go with her dad, I wouldn’t mind, but I hated when he tried to weasel his way back into my bed.

I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but wouldn’t do it in front of Elijah. The kitchen chair scraped the floor, and I glanced up at him. “I should go.”

That was probably a good idea with Scott coming. “Yeah… Happy birthday, by the way.”

A smile touched his lips. “Thanks.” He tilted his head. “I’m right next door if you need anything.” I didn’t know what made him say it, but I liked that he did. It was a nice feeling when someone unrelated said something like that.

“Okay.”

Elijah saw Lucy pouting. He bent down and messed with her hair. “I’ll look into those model cars.” He stood and gawked at Eli like he wanted to say something. Elijah’s gaze widened as he backed away, not saying anything to the baby in my arms.

Then he was out the door.

Chapter Thirteen

Elijah

“Why are you searching for them, anyway?” Hank asked as he searched Amazon for the car paint kits. I was at Ma’s the day after my first visit to Hadley’s apartment. I had a feeling there’d be more visits in my future.

“My neighbor’s little girl actually likes playing with cars and shit. I told her about them, and she wanted one.” I shrugged casually. “So, I said I’d get her and her brother one.”

Ma poked her head out of the kitchen when she heard me. Hank’s eyes lifted from the laptop in his lap. He sat at his recliner. “Would this neighbor happen to be a woman?”

I groaned. “It’s not like that.”

Hank smiled. “Hmm.”

“Am I going to have grandkids?” Ma asked, and I covered my eyes out of frustration. “How many does she have? Will she have more? I don’t like the thought of her not wanting more kids later since she already has two. Or is there more than two?”

How did asking about toy cars devolve so quickly?

“Ma! What in the hell are you going on about? It’s not like that.”

Ma scoffed and turned toward the kitchen.

“You’re buying her kids something,” Hank pointed out. “You always said you didn’t want kids despite your mother’s whining. Frankly, I didn’t even think you liked kids.”

“I don’t really, but Lucy’s not so bad. She’s lively like all kids, but something about her makes it easy for me to talk to her.”

“What about the other one?” Ma yelled

“Huh?”

“You mentioned a brother,” Ma reminded me.

“Oh,” I murmured. “He’s a baby. He does nothing but make weird noises.” *And grab his mother’s shirt.* I saw a lot of white creamy flesh, a lot

of cleavage. So. Much. Cleavage. And a lot more was still hidden from view. Hank laughed. “What?”

“Babies are fun times.” He was messing with me. He had that shitty smirk going on. The one he always did when he was making fun of me for something I did as a kid. He jerked forward, clutching the laptop. “Wait! Is this the same neighbor that was having a baby and you delivered to the hospital?”

“Lucy’s a good kid, but I can’t talk to the baby yet.” I purposely ignored him.

“Why?” Ma asked. “Babies need to be spoken to just like adults do.”

“You sound like you’re planning on talking to him at some point,” Hank added.

“Well, yeah, I’ll talk to him like I do Lucy...eventually.”

Hank scratched his chin and frowned at me. “That’s not the way it works.”

“Leave him alone,” Ma said as she crossed her arms. “This is strange for you, Elijah. Do you plan on hanging around them a lot? Is there really nothing going on with you and the mom?”

“No.” I leaned back into the sofa cushion and sighed. “I don’t mind their company that’s all.”

Ma appeared thoughtful as she tilted her head to the side, slightly proud even as she grinned at me. “Then you must stop being afraid of the baby.”

The truth of her words filled me with dread. Icy fear slithered down my neck. Kids were obnoxious and babies whined all the time, but that wasn’t the only reason I didn’t mess with them. They were fragile, especially babies. I stayed clear of things that were breakable. Besides, I could admit to not being capable of taking care of another life. The thought terrified me. “I’m not going around the baby. He’s just too tiny.”

“You’ll be fine.” Ma arched one brow, amused.

“Yeah, I will since I won’t be touching him. Besides, Hadley’s protective. There’s no way she’ll ever ask me to hold him.” I preferred it that way, too. I didn’t want to hurt something so small.

Ma arched her brow. “Do you hear yourself?”

“I just ordered them,” Hank informed me.

“How much did they cost?” I asked. I had no intention of getting him to order the cars, but I should have known he’d take it upon himself.

“Don’t worry about it.”

I’d just have to stick some money in the sugar bowl before I left.

It was a few weeks later, after work on a Tuesday, when I saw Hadley, Lucy, and baby Eli again. I was parked at Walmart when they excitedly rushed by my truck heading for the entrance. It was almost dark out, but I recognized their voices as clear as day. The thought was mindboggling.

This was getting a little ridiculous. I hadn’t spoken to them since Lucy and my joint birthday when I had a slice of cake in their apartment. I had two cakes that day. One from Ma and one from Wendy and the guys so, it wasn’t like I needed another piece that day.

Why was I like that with them? I’d use any excuse to talk to them at that point.

I rubbed my forehead as I watched them. “Anything I want?” Lucy jumped up and down next to Hadley as they walked. Eli was swaddled in something placed against her chest. Whatever it was, covered both her shoulders and wrapped around her back. The guy seemed snug and comfortable.

They were too far away to make out the rest of the conversation, but they were definitely excited. Even Hadley appeared happy, a little carefree even, and her scrubs weren’t white. They were pink bottoms and a top with some sort of design.

This was the first time I’d run into them anywhere since the grocery store incident. I didn’t know we’d end up at the same place at the same time. If I went in, would she presume that I was a stalker? Why was that even a thought when I knew I wasn’t one? This mother and her kids were messing with my brain in an unusual way.

We were more or less friends, right? Not feeling weird about it, I would go in there like I came to do. It was a strange coincidence. I didn’t have to talk to them. I wouldn’t—just get in and get out like I always did.

Then again... Last week I debated knocking on Hadley's door when the car paint kits came but stopped myself every time. I figured I'd see them. Eventually.

Only I wouldn't talk to them that night. The plan was to get in and get out.

Chapter Fourteen

Hadley

I didn't realize how crappy my body felt over the last year until I spent the past few weeks actually getting sleep. Having days off—let me repeat that *having days off*—was amazing. Lucy, Eli, and I lazed around in our pj's on those days until we got bored. Then, I'd take them to the park by the lake if the older kids were outside the apartment, or we'd go to my parents' house. We'd even Facetimed with Olivia—I appreciated being able to talk to my sister more.

I was nervous about starting at the hospital, but everything turned out okay. I was still getting to know everyone, but so far, everyone seemed great. I could see myself getting close to Rosalee, an RN a few years older than me. We clicked immediately on the first day.

Two weeks passed, and it was my first payday. I felt like a millionaire when I checked my account last night. CNA's barely made more than minimum wage—in a nursing home you had to work a long time to build up better pay. The pending amount was amazing. I even called Mom, and we cried together. Reality hit me. School was over. I didn't process it all until the stress from worrying over money finally fell from my shoulders. Well, almost. There was still the credit card to pay off, but other than that, things were looking up for my family.

At that moment, I was making good on the promise I had made Lucy. As soon as I got off work at seven, I picked up Lucy and Eli from my parents and headed to Walmart. We grabbed random stuff we only dreamed of buying because of my previous budget.

Before going to the food aisles, I took Lucy to pick out a toy. It wasn't a surprise when she picked up a box of Hot Wheels cars. I picked up a new outfit for Eli, and then, headed to the makeup department for a few items and skincare products. It had been a long time since I purchased anything for myself—maybe since sophomore year. A lot of the nurses I worked with dressed nice and looked beautiful. Would it be wrong for me to want to be pretty again? It wouldn't take away from me being Lucy and Eli's mom.

After a few minutes of standing around, trying to figure out what to buy,

Lucy looked up to me with a smile and asked, “Will you do my makeup too?”

She made my life easier, no matter what anyone said.

I’d been feeling a little lost, but slowly, the stress of nursing school and money lifted. Scott’s betrayal and absence in my life felt simpler and somehow less important. The only things that were significant were right there with me, *happy with me*.

Finally, we made it to the food section. We were content tossing items into the shopping cart like we’d never done before. I didn’t notice him at first since I didn’t know the man. At all. I was too busy with Eli in my arms and Lucy yelling for everything, but now I couldn’t stop glancing back at him. Was he following us? I couldn’t be sure, and I didn’t want to be one of those women who overreacted, but something seemed off about the older man. I didn’t want to be rude, but he seemed like a major creep.

Lucy brought over a half-gallon of chocolate milk and asked, “This?”

Placing a hand behind Eli’s head, I bent down toward Lucy and grinned. “How about a full gallon?”

Her eyes lit up as she ran to switch it out. Next, we hit the meats. We grabbed everything possible. Lucy was busy making plans for me to cook tacos when we got home even though it was already so late. She wanted BBQ ribs tomorrow and just mac and cheese another night. She was really thorough about what she wanted as she tossed everything in the shopping cart.

“Can I get some candy?” Lucy asked as I grabbed a loaf of bread.

I held up one finger. “Just one.” I searched around for the older man every so often, feeling better when I hadn’t seen him as we headed toward the front of the store. The shopping cart was overflowing, and I was mentally drained thinking about what came next—taking everything out of the cart, checking out, loading up the trunk, and driving home.

Ugh.

Right before we reached the registers, I saw Elijah. Not really him so much as his tattooed arm plucking a bag of Funyuns from the chip aisle. My gaze wandered over his dark jeans and black shirt, appreciating the familiar way they hugged his muscles, before landing on his face. My cheeks did a

slow burn, and I quickly averted my eyes even though Elijah didn't see me. Or did he?

What was that heated sensation in my chest coming from?

"Mommy is that Elijah?" Lucy mumbled and tapped my hip with her fingers. I was grateful she didn't scream his name like she normally did.

"I think so," I whispered even though we stood at a distance from him.

Eli grunted and stretched against my chest. I knew my beast boy would eventually squirm, especially when he'd been good for so long.

Slowly, Elijah turned our direction. I felt awkward and flushed, so I glanced down at Eli while running my fingers over his head.

From the corner of my eye, I caught Lucy waving. "Elijah!"

I counted to three and then looked up. Elijah walked toward us, a hint of a smile crossed his face as he stared at my daughter.

"Hey," I murmured when he stopped in front of Lucy.

"You guys grocery shopping?" He glanced my way.

I nodded, gripping the cart with one hand and holding Eli's head as he wiggled with my other.

"Can I have some Funyuns too?" Lucy blinked up at me.

"Yeah, let's grab them and go," I told her.

"Been a while." Elijah's voice was deep and gravelly as he spoke.

I pressed my lips together and gave him another nod. "It has." He didn't have to know that on my days off I watched him come home.

"I have those cars with the paint kits." Elijah ran his fingers through his hair as he moved closer and turned in the direction we were heading—back to the chips aisle.

He was talking to me, but Lucy answered, "I knew you didn't forget!" She bounced on her heels. "Can we do them when we get home?"

"It's late, Lucy," I mumbled quickly.

"I don't mind," Elijah said. He shrugged before rubbing the back of his

neck. “Unless it’s close to her bedtime...”

I normally tried to get her in bed before ten most nights, but sometimes I’d let her stay up later.

“Please, Mommy?” More jumping from Lucy. “I want tacos, anyway.”

I sighed before finally giving in. “For a little while, okay? Let’s go check out.”

“Let me grab my chips.” Lucy took off like a bolt of lightning, and I always feared when she did. More than once, she thought it was okay to slip into another aisle, and I’d have to chase her down.

Remembering the creepy old man from earlier, I hurried after Lucy even though the chips were several feet away from us. Sure enough, standing by the bread was the same man. He was staring at me and Elijah who was walking next to me.

“What’s wrong?” Elijah asked, startling me.

How could he have sensed the change in me so quickly? Until Elijah spoke up, I hadn’t even noticed how my heart raced. My eyes drifted over toward the man before I shook my head. “It’s nothing.”

Elijah’s jaws tightened, and he strode over to Lucy. “You guys ready?” he asked. “Want to help me push the shopping cart, Lucy?”

I was too stunned to do anything, but let the two of them take it away from me. Lucy was so small tucked between the cart and Elijah as he helped her steer it. I glanced back toward the stranger. He was slightly annoyed, gripping his cart tightly as he glared at Elijah. With a stormy huff, he finally wandered off.

It wasn’t my imagination. The man had been following us. My heart sank to the floor. I stared at Elijah’s wide, menacing back. Lucy was hiding in front of him. I’d never realized how intimidating big, scary guys like Elijah were even to other men. Knowing he was there didn’t erase the disgust I felt, but it sure was comforting.

I was quiet as we unloaded our things and didn’t even protest as Elijah helped—I was still freaked out. No embarrassment or awkwardness was evident. After paying for our purchase, Lucy insisted we wait for Elijah to pay for his chips, deodorant, and body wash. After he was done, Elijah took

the cart and walked us to my car. As soon as we got there, I removed Eli from the wrap since he was getting fussy. Someone was hungry.

It was dark by the time we walked out of Walmart. Elijah put our things into my trunk. I buckled Lucy in, walked to the driver's seat, and sat down with Eli. He latched onto my nipple the moment I unhooked the strap on my nursing bra.

It was strange how Elijah and I hadn't spoken to each other the entire time in the store yet I hadn't stopped him from helping me. I blamed the easiness on my being creeped out.

"Let me see your phone," I heard him say before he appeared at my opened door. A baby and a breast weren't what he was expecting. He leaned back and turned around quickly. "I'm sorry—" Then very slowly, I could see him peeking around like he couldn't help himself. He was so blatant with his eyes and blunt with his mouth, I wondered if he was aware of it?

"What do you need my phone for?" I fished it out of my scrub bottoms, unlocked it, and handed it to him

"So you can call me the next time you have to shop so late," he murmured as he turned and took my phone. A few seconds later, I heard his phone ding, and then he returned mine. He must have given up not ogling. He propped his elbow on the roof of the car as he looked down at me. He wasn't watching Eli nurse. No, his gaze was fixed on mine. "Do you realize you've been quiet since you spotted the pervy bastard following you guys around?"

"Language please!" I hissed, and Lucy giggled in the back. "And, no, I hadn't noticed."

"Do you realize how long you were in there?"

"No." I scoffed. "But how do you know?"

"I can't even remember why the fuck I went in there," he continued, growing more frustrated.

I sighed. "I don't, but you're telling me all about it." I was trying to figure out what he was complaining about.

Elijah tipped his head back. I could hear him swearing before he finally looked at me. "You guys make me worry. I'm not trying to be mean..."

"Because we're your friends?" asked Lucy.

He slowly nodded. “Yeah, Lucy, we’re friends.” He tapped his knuckles on the car. “I’ll follow you guys home.”

Chapter Fifteen

Hadley

“Do you like tacos?” Lucy asked Elijah the second he stepped into our apartment after two trips down to carry everything in for me in which he responded with *a yeah*. When he made another trip down to get the paint kits from his truck, I placed Eli in his bouncy seat and turned him in my direction so he could watch what I was doing. I was still unpacking our groceries when Elijah knocked.

“Lucy, get the door.”

Within seconds, I could hear her talking his head off before they made it to the kitchen.

“Do you need help?” Elijah placed two boxes on the table.

“No,” I blurted. “Are you sure you’re okay with tacos?”

“I’m not picky, but don’t rely on me to cook or you’ll be shit—” He saw my heavy glare even though he’d already spat the word out. With a quick, slightly guilty cough, he glimpsed down at Lucy. “Poop out of luck.”

Lucy giggled, cupping her mouth. I didn’t know why I tried so hard when I knew my child already knew not to say bad words.

I sucked my cheeks in a little to keep from smiling. “I don’t remember asking you to cook for us. Lucy’s the one that keeps buggin’ you.” I gave my daughter a stern glower.

“We started from the lowest, but now we’re kinda, sorta friends.” He waved his hand back and forth as he grinned at Lucy. It took me by surprise how well he could goof off and aggravate her when he’d made it clear he wasn’t much on kids.

“Kinda?” Lucy placed her hands on her hips. “I choose, not you, okay? I say we *are* friends.” She grabbed his arm and tugged him to a chair. “Let’s paint!”

He chuckled, it was raspy and deep. My skin prickled, completely remembering and becoming aware a male was in my house. “We have to put

it together first.”

That was how the next forty-five minutes went, I listened to the two of them work together as I put away groceries and put on the hamburger meat for the tacos. It was no surprise to me when Lucy got a little bored with the putting-the-car-together part and wandered into the living room to watch TV.

I slid into a chair at the table as he pieced the second car together. “I knew she’d get bored,” I mumbled softly as I watched him.

He chuckled, taking his eyes briefly off the car to look at me. “They’re ready to be painted. Should I ask if she wants to do it?”

“After she eats,” I told her. “The tacos are finished... Do you want me to make you a plate?”

He shook his head and stood, and so did I. “I can get it.” I hurried to the counter and grabbed him a paper plate. I didn’t wash dishes more than I had to. I grabbed another to make Lucy’s before mine.

“The lettuce, tomatoes and everything else is cut up.” I pointed toward them as I made Lucy’s. “Come eat, Lucy.” When I didn’t hear her footsteps, I turned around and Eli wiggled in his bouncy and screamed at me. I smirked at him as I walked into the living room to find Lucy asleep on the couch hugging her favorite blanket. I dropped my arms and sighed. “Oh, Lucy. You didn’t get to eat your tacos.” Shutting off the living room light, I picked her up gently and carried her into her bedroom. I would put the leftovers in the fridge for her to eat in the morning since I knew she’d complain in the morning about falling asleep. She never even budged as I laid her down and covered her up.

Eli was crying now that I’d left his line of sight so I quickly picked him up, murmuring to him as I went back to the kitchen and used Lucy’s plate for my own.

“Did she fall asleep?”

It wasn’t until Elijah spoke that I realized Lucy being asleep made things extremely awkward. Well, not him but me. “Yeah, if you want to take the cars home to paint them or wait for Lucy, either is fine.”

“I’ll wait and see what she wants.” He took a bite of his taco while I put my taco together. Meanwhile, Eli was searching for a nipple to latch onto. I was pretty sure Elijah noticed him as well. His ears got a little red as he took

another bite of his taco. “Go ahead and feed him, I don’t mind.”

I stood quickly. “I can make him a bottle.”

“Would you do that if I weren’t here?” He surprised me. No, I wouldn’t. I liked nursing. I only pumped because I was a working mom and had no choice. I couldn’t be with him twenty-four seven to breastfeed him. “Go ahead.” He turned his chair the other way, giving me privacy.

Feeling extremely nervous, I laughed, and he glanced over at me. “Lucy puts me in some awkward situations.”

He chuckled. “I’ve noticed.” He took another bite of his taco and turned away. I sat down and finally lifted my scrubs so that Eli could latch onto a nipple. “We keep bumping paths.” I looked up to see the side of Elijah’s face as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He kept his eyes averted. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

I blushed, thankfully he couldn’t see it. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“You had Lucy when you were in high school?”

“I actually didn’t find out I was pregnant until after graduation.”

“Working and college with a kid couldn’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t but Lucy was worth all my hardships. I’m finished now though.”

Privacy forgotten, he turned his head. “Yeah? Is that why I don’t see you guys as much anymore when I’m getting home.”

“Yeah. I get more days off now.” His eyes fell to Eli’s head, but I didn’t think he could see anything else. “I’m a nurse at the hospital.”

“Sassafras’s?”

I nodded.

“So we both work with needles?” There was a playful grin on his face as he tilted his head.

“I guess so.” I hoped my cheeks weren’t as red as they felt.

His smile slowly slipped away as he watched me. There was something almost darker about his expression before he stared down at the floor and stood slowly. “I should let you guys rest. Just put the cars up, and I can stop by tomorrow?” I rose with him. He peered at me. A softness washed over his

features. “What’s your last name, Hadley?”

“Reynolds.”

“Been buggin’ me for a while. Not knowing enough...”

I could feel the heat low in my belly and I gulped. Why would he want to know more?

“Mine’s Parker by the way.”

“Huh?” I wasn’t paying attention, too focused on my hot face.

He smiled. “Elijah Parker.”

“Oh,” I shook my head, and he laughed momentarily. “Call or text the next time you’re out so late. That shit’s going to bug the fuck out of me if I start wondering how often you guys shop at night.”

Maybe a few years ago, I was more confident in my own skin, but at that moment I couldn’t figure out why someone like him would care or go out of his way to think about me and my little ones. Maybe he still felt guilty. Feeling mortified at the thought, I held Eli tighter. “If you still feel guilty about your actions toward us in the beginning, please don’t. You’re only making me feel bad.”

He flinched like I slapped him. “You think I’m trying to befriend you guys because of that?” I squirmed as he scrutinized me. “That’s not the reason, believe me. I just can’t look away every time I see you guys. I don’t know. I never thought I’d befriend a single mother either, but here we are.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “You look less tired now. I notice because I want to get to know you, Hadley. And your daughter is pretty cool for a kid.”

I laughed incredulously. “You truly don’t like kids, do you?”

“I can like some,” he mused. I rolled my eyes. “So, what is it, Hadley Reynolds? Are we friends or not? Are you going to stop acting like I’m the plague when Lucy yells at me?”

I scoffed. “I do not treat you like the plague.”

“You look like you can’t wait for me to leave.”

“I... I’m sorry, I just don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I’m just doing what I want.”

“And what is that?”

“I want to know you guys.”

That intense blooming of something I shall not name in my stomach grew larger, and I stared at the floor like it was the most fascinating thing I’d ever seen. “I’ll call if I need to,” I whispered reluctantly.

When I glanced up, he was beaming. “See ya.”

For once, those words didn’t terrify me. Instead, I was already waiting for them.

Chapter Sixteen

Elijah

I tilted my head, eyeing Hadley's number on my phone, contemplating about sending her a text message. It seemed a waste not to use her number since I had it. It was another thirty minutes before my appointment would be here. Thirty long, torturous minutes.

Fuck it.

ELIJAH: HEY.

I rapped my knuckles across the counter before sending another.

ELIJAH: SHOULD I COME BACK UP ONCE I'M OFF TO FINISH THE CARS WITH LUCY?

It took a minute or two before she replied.

HADLEY: SURE.

Sure? Frowning down at the phone, I tried to decipher what that meant. Befriending a mother was no easy task. Somehow, I was making friends quicker with the kid than the adult.

Still... My mind was relentless when it came to them. Another text came in.

HADLEY: I'M OFF. COME OVER WHENEVER YOU WANT.

"What are you smiling for?" Wendy glanced at me.

"It's obvious. It's the mom," Lance snickered.

I tried to hide my smile behind a frown.

"Do you have a picture of her?" Waldo murmured next to me, looking over my shoulder. I forgot he was behind the counter with me. That was how long I'd considered texting Hadley. "Just how hot is this mom?"

"Got big tits?" Jim jumped in. The customers laughed.

"Piss off," I growled. They were *big* but the thought of these pricks staring at her upset me. I had no right to get annoyed, though, not when I was constantly staring at them myself. But I didn't objectify her *out loud*. But leaking tits were intriguing... Everything about that young mom captivated me more so than any of my drawings or paintings ever had.

"So you don't have a picture?" Waldo asked again.

I turned and glared at him. “Why would I?”

“You’re awfully touchy about this chick,” Lance pointed out.

“He’s cranky about everything,” Jim muttered.

No sense denying the truth.

Chapter Seventeen

Hadley

“I haven’t seen you with makeup on in a long time,” Mom noticed with a smile.

“Yeah…” I touched my cheek. “I feel like being pretty again.”

She smirked. “Well, whatever the reason is, I’m glad to see you taking care of yourself again. Nothing wrong with wanting to feel pretty although you’re beautiful no matter what.”

I recalled Mom’s words from earlier as I sat in my comfy pj’s and spaghetti strap top. Eli snuggled in my lap while Lucy colored next to me. Out of the blue, I recalled Scott’s words after taking Lucy and Eli to see him.

He did a double take as he stepped out of his Dad’s car and smiled. “You look good. Did you dress up for me?”

Not once since Eli was born had Scott kept his son overnight. The more he changed his mind about taking the kids, the more reluctant I was about Eli staying with his dad. At this rate, Eli wouldn’t know his father. It was bad enough that Lucy became less and less enthusiastic about seeing or talking to Scott on the phone.

Was I supposed to force them to see their father? Scott was supposed to take the kids to his parents’ house that night. Once again, he changed his mind at the last second. Lucy wasn’t even disappointed.

Neither was I after Elijah texted me and asked if he could come and finish the cars with Lucy. It dumbfounded me how a man who disliked kids could befriend Lucy while their own dad couldn’t care less about them. For Scott, it was less about Lucy and Eli and more about getting back with me. That day he even suggested we sleep together.

What the fudge?

I was so mad that by the time Elijah knocked on the door around nine, I was suspicious and irritated. What if he was being nice to Lucy just to get in my pants? Why the fudge would he want in my pants when he looked like he could get whoever he wanted confounded me. But why else befriend a kid? Scott tried to use his own kids to get his way with me. Why wouldn’t I

suspect anything different from a crabby guy like Elijah?

I placed Eli in his bassinet and went to the door.

Elijah immediately frowned as he shut the door. “Is everything all right?”

Why did he always smell so good? For a moment, I thought *maybe* I wouldn’t mind if Elijah tried anything with me and that startled me. Taking advantage of Lucy’s goodness wasn’t the way to get to me, though.

“Yeah, let me get the paint and cars,” I mumbled as I turned.

“Elijah!” Lucy rushed to him. I glimpsed over my shoulder and caught his smile. “I just got out of the bath.”

He said, “I see that.”

I didn’t trust myself because his smiles seemed genuine. I hated that Scott zapped my confidence.

“Do you have Funyuns for us?” Elijah asked her.

“Yeah,” she screeched, and I went to my room for the cars. When I returned to the kitchen, Eli was crying.

“Do you want me to help you with it? Or do you want to do it yourself?” Elijah said to Lucy as I went to get Eli.

I carried him into the kitchen and held him up so that he could see what Sissy was doing as I sat down. Eli’s giant eyes blinked, and he grinned. He’d been able to hold his head up like a champ since before he was even two months old.

“I want to paint mine.” Lucy grabbed a car and studied the colors. “Can you draw a horsey on mine after I finish it?”

“Yeah. What color are you going to use?”

She frowned. “What color are we painting Bubby’s?”

“How about blue or black? Something manly.”

Lucy giggled. It even made me snort, but when Elijah’s dark eyes flicked over me, I stopped smiling and glanced down at Eli instead.

“She gets bored quick.” Elijah’s deep voice made me jump. I’d been watching him draw on the car for so long in a comfortable silence. He raised

a brow.

“I hadn’t noticed how quiet it became,” I whispered. I laid Eli in his crib about twenty minutes ago when Lucy yawned and ventured into the living room—her normal routine. Instead of admitting she was sleepy, she’d go somewhere and close her eyes. I didn’t think she ever meant to fall asleep but she always did. “You can finish them another time…” I said absentmindedly.

I could have kicked Elijah out a while ago, but we’d been sitting peacefully in the kitchen while he drew a white unicorn on Lucy’s pink car. He was very talented. No wonder he tattooed for a living. Elijah put a lot of detail on such a small car.

“What do you want me to draw on Eli’s?” he asked, returning to painting.

“Um, I’m not sure. Maybe just add some stripes or something? He’s too little to appreciate it right now.”

He nodded with a thoughtful expression. “Never know. He might like doing this sort of thing when he gets a little older. I know I did.”

“Seems like you still do.”

His dark eyes lit up as he lifted them and grinned. “Seems like it.”

I cupped the back of my neck, feeling that simmering heat in my stomach again. “Elijah…”

“Hmm?”

I was becoming uncomfortable, but after seeing Scott I hadn’t been able to get it off my mind. The words rushed from my mouth. “Why are you going out of your way with Lucy? If pretending to like Lucy to get in my pants or something is your aim, please stop.”

He sat up straight and frowned. “Is that what you think?”

“I’m not sure. Call it curiosity about what you’re doing.” I gestured to the thin paintbrush in his hand and the mess on my table. “Lucy gets used to having people around. She doesn’t do well when they disappear or ignore her. If that’s what you’re after—a chance to take me to bed—you should go.”

“Fuck, Hadley.” The words weren’t yelled. They were low and pained like I’d offended him. Elijah tossed the paintbrush down. “If I wanted to sleep with you, I’d go about it a lot differently than this.” His words made my cheeks burn. “Truthfully, I don’t mind any of this. I don’t mind Lucy’s

constant chatter or your tit leaking shit or the fact that you can't do much but get upset or quiet around me." He closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. "It's not that I want to get in your pants. I simply can't help myself. I gravitate toward your little family."

I simply can't help myself.

I gravitate.

I didn't know why, but his words resonated deep inside me and lingered.

He opened his eyes and frowned. "I should go."

"I'm sorry," I murmured quickly. "You just make me nervous. I've never had a guy friend. Sure there were classmates in high school, but we never hung out so it wasn't like we were really friends." Fudge! I was babbling, a nervous habit. I wouldn't be surprised if Elijah didn't understand me.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and stood. "You sound so young."

"Sorry."

"Stop apologizing."

"Fine," I bit out, watching him grab the cars. "I'll clean it up."

"I'll take Eli's and finish it, but Lucy's is done. Just let it dry." I nodded and turned around. I followed him to the door. Elijah faced me so quickly I almost tripped. He caught my wrist and helped me regain balance. "And it's not exactly like our relationship is innocent. I've seen a little side boob."

I gawked at him. "God bless America! It's called breastfeeding."

"A tit is a tit, even if it's being used for nursing."

I wanted to smack him for that comment.

"You said getting in my pants wasn't your goal," I reprimanded him quietly. "And I thought breastfeeding repulsed you? Your expression the first time my shirt got wet around you—priceless."

"Not repulsed... Fascinated. And that's cute."

I scrunched my nose. "What is?"

"The odd way you curse." He mimicked me, "*God bless America! Or fudgsicle.*"

I shoved him, burning red in the face, both fury and joy bubbled in my stomach. I didn't know whether to laugh or be upset. Getting mad seemed to have won out. "Get out!" I hissed softly since my kids were sleeping. "And it's called being a parent."

"Even if you don't say the words, they'll hear them somewhere else."

"You're so annoying!" I grabbed the handle and opened the door, giving his body another giant shove. I knew he was only moving because he was letting me push him around. Otherwise, there was no way I could get him to budge.

"I'm already out the door. How far are you going with me?"

That was when I realized I was outside my apartment. I let go of him and turned around.

"Goodnight, Hadley." His deep voice was achingly soft and gravelly. My skin tingled. I gave in and whispered it back before I shut the door.

Chapter Eighteen

Hadley

ELIJAH: HOW DID LUCY LIKE HER UNICORN?

ME: SHE HATES IT.

I'm lying...

She won't stop taking it everywhere.

ELIJAH: SOMEONE'S MOODY.

ME: NEVER WORSE THAN WHAT YOU ARE.

ELIJAH: I'M HONORED AT HOW WELL YOU KNOW ME.

ME: I'M OVERFILLED WITH JOY.

ELIJAH: YOU'RE BEING A SMARTASS, AREN'T YOU? I MEAN, BUTT.

ME: I DON'T THINK WE CAN BE FRIENDS AFTER ALL...

ELIJAH: I FINISHED ELI'S CAR. I'LL DROP IT OFF AFTER WORK.

ME: OK. I SHOULD BE OFF BY THAT TIME.

Grinning down at my cell phone, I reluctantly put it back in my purse and shoved it into my tiny locker in the break room. My thirty-minute lunch was almost over, but I heard the phone buzz as I shut the locker. Thinking it might be Elijah again, I quickly grabbed it and frowned when I saw it was a text from Scott.

SCOTT: I'LL COME GET LUCY AND ELI THIS WEEKEND.

I'd heard that one before.

ME: I WON'T TELL LUCY AND LET HER BE DISAPPOINTED IF YOU DON'T COME.

SCOTT: I'LL BE THERE. I MISS HER. I MISS ALL OF US, HADLEY.

I didn't know how to reply. I didn't feel the same way. On that day, I recalled everything and saw what was wrong in our relationship clearer than ever before. There was no sadness or anger—just clarity. Scott's actions helped me see that we never had a relationship. I had to allow him to see the kids although he kept breaking his promises. As for us, we were done.

“So, tell me about this neighbor... The one Lucy keeps talking about.” I

could hear Olivia's grin through the phone.

I groaned, ignoring the weird feeling that flooded my chest at the thought of my not-so grumpy neighbor. "It's not like that, so get rid of that tone."

"What tone?" She played dumb.

"The one where you think you know something and you don't."

"Hadley, you know it's okay to have fun, right? You're an awesome mom, and there's nothing wrong with taking a day or two to have fun every once and a while. I'm sure Mom and Dad wouldn't mind keeping Lucy and Eli a few hours so you can spend some time with Holly. Don't you miss hanging out with her?"

I sighed, rubbing my forehead as I washed dishes. "They do enough with me working. I'm not asking for more help."

"How about I come in and stay a few days before school starts back? Let you go out a night or two."

The idea was tempting, but then I looked over at the kids and felt guilty. I chose this life. It wasn't fair to ask others to raise Eli and Lucy while I enjoyed myself. "No, it's okay."

"Hadley," she groaned. "At least enjoy the neighbor's company."

"What?"

She laughed. "Lucy told me he's been over the last two nights."

"It's not like tha—"

"I know, chill," she said with a sigh. "So he's not such a bad guy, anymore?"

"I don't think so..."

"Good, you could use a friend."

"You make me sound pitiful."

"You are pitiful."

"I'm hanging up."

"Love you. Tell the babies I love them."

"I will. Love you."

Perfect timing. The second I set my phone down on the counter, there was a knock on my door.

Elijah.

Wiping my hands on a dishtowel, I strode to the door. His man scent flooded my nostrils as I opened it. Someone showered before coming over again. I noticed his hair was still damp as he thrust the car out toward me. “Here you go.”

“It’s amazing,” I told him honestly, then waited to see what he planned to do next. He simply shifted his feet side to side and waited expectedly.

Sucking in a breath, I asked, “Would you like to come in?”

“Elijah!” Lucy screeched as she ran toward us. My daughter pushed past me and grabbed his hand. “Want to watch a movie?” He simply laughed and let her lead him inside.

Not even fighting my smile, I shut the door.

Chapter Nineteen

Elijah

“How’s that?” I asked the customer as he stood in front of the mirror and inspected the eagle I tattooed on his chest.

“It’s awesome man, thanks.”

“Glad to hear it.” I nodded, pleased with my work. I turned around and disinfected the area.

Once I was finished, I pulled out my phone, disappointed when I saw there weren’t any text messages from Hadley. It has been a little over a week since I’d spoken to them, and I didn’t have any excuses to go see them since finishing the cars. Lucy made us watch *The Croods* that night. I had a good time laughing my ass off. As she said goodbye I realized I wouldn’t mind another movie night with them.

“Jesus, just text her yourself and stop waiting around,” Wendy muttered from across the room.

I scratched my brow and contemplated her words before finally saying, “What would I say?”

Lance glanced up from the back he was tattooing with wide eyes. “How the fuck did you go about talking to any other woman before the mom? Just call her up or text her.” He shook his head before resuming his work. “I’m worried about you.”

I was worried too. I couldn’t stop thinking about Hadley and the kids or hoping to run into them again.

Cocking my head to the side, I finally found her name on my phone and sent her a text.

ELIJAH: HOW IS LUCY LIKING HER CAR?

I had already asked this the last night I’d been over, but I was a little desperate. It took about fifteen minutes before I got a reply.

HADLEY: SHE LOVES IT ALTHOUGH SHE’S A LITTLE DISAPPOINTED IT’S MORE FOR DECORATION THAN TO PLAY WITH.

ELIJAH: I CAN GET HER SOME TO PLAY WITH...

HADLEY: NO! SHE HAS PLENTY.

ELIJAH: OKAY. BUT I DON'T MIND.

HADLEY: HAVEN'T HEARD FROM YOU SINCE LAST WEEK... BEEN GOOD?

I sat taller in my chair. She was asking about me? She never asked about me.

ELIJAH: YEAH. I HAD TO GO TO MY OTHER SHOP OVER THE WEEKEND, BUT I GOT HOME SUNDAY EVENING.

HADLEY: YEAH, I NOTICED YOUR TRUCK WAS GONE ALL WEEKEND.

She noticed? Did she search for me with those big, blue eyes? That made me bolder.

ELIJAH: WOULD YOU GUYS LIKE TO COME OVER THIS SATURDAY? I'LL ORDER PIZZA, AND WE CAN LET LUCY RENT A MOVIE FOR US TO WATCH?

Was that a little odd? Maybe, but I really didn't fucking care at this point. I wanted to see Lucy, maybe argue with her some, and I wanted to stare at her mom until she got all red in the face.

HADLEY: ACTUALLY, I THINK THEIR DAD MIGHT COME FOR THEM THIS SATURDAY. BUT WHO KNOWS, HE WAS SUPPOSED TO LAST WEEKEND AND DIDN'T.

I wanted to tell her she could come over herself, and we could hang out but that would send the wrong message. The blood rushing to my cock was proof that getting the mother alone wasn't a smart move, no matter how tempting. *She's too young, too innocent.* I was older and the asshole who stole her daughter's chips.

I didn't know why but being with them was just...easy.

My phone dinged with another text from her.

HADLEY: BUT, IF HE DOESN'T SHOW, WE CAN...?

I grinned.

ELIJAH: SOUNDS GOOD.

Like any other night, I stayed up late drawing while listening to music and drinking a cold one. Alone. I thought of Lucy's love for ponies and cars and

drew her something. It was six before I laid down that morning. Five hours later, I was up and getting ready for work. I was excited to give the portrait to Lucy this weekend. I had a feeling she would like it. I put it in an eighteen by twenty-four inch picture frame, the size I used with everything I drew or painted, and I hoped she'd want to hang it up in her room.

On Friday, I got the text that bummed the hell out of me.

HADLEY: LUCY AND ELI WENT TO THEIR DAD'S SO, MAYBE NEXT WEEKEND?

I didn't really know Hadley, but I knew her enough that I'd scare the fuck out of her if I invited her over alone.

ELIJAH: SOUNDS GOOD. ANY PLANS?

HADLEY: MY FRIEND HOLLY WANTS ME TO GO OUT TONIGHT, BUT... YOU'LL THINK IT'S SILLY.

ELIJAH: IT'S OUR THING. I THINK YOU'RE INNOCENT. YOU THINK I'M AN ASSHOLE. GO ON.

HADLEY: LOL. I FEEL GUILTY FOR WANTING TO GO OUT WITHOUT THE KIDS. DEEP DOWN, I KNOW NOTHING'S WRONG WITH IT, BUT I CAN'T HELP BUT WONDER IF THEY'RE HAVING A BAD TIME WHILE I'M OUT WITHOUT THEM. I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID THAT. YOU WON'T UNDERSTAND.

She was right, I couldn't understand. As far as I could tell, Hadley put her kids above herself and no one could say otherwise. If anyone deserved to have a moment to themselves, it was her.

ELIJAH: YOU'RE RIGHT. I DON'T UNDERSTAND. YOU'RE LUCY'S WORLD, AND ANYONE THAT HAS EYES CAN SEE HOW MUCH SHE LOVES YOU. HAVE FUN, HADLEY. IT'S OKAY IF YOU'RE ONLY 99% A MOTHER, AT LEAST SAVE 1% FOR YOURSELF.

Feeling honest, I quickly added.

ELIJAH: I'LL STILL HANG OUT WITH ALL PERCENTAGES OF YOU. FRANKLY, I THINK YOU'RE PRETTY BADASS. EVEN ELI BEAMS AT YOU LIKE YOU'RE MORE THAN HIS MILK SUPPLY.

HADLEY: THANKS. FOR SOME REASON THAT MAKES ME FEEL BETTER ABOUT GOING.

I smiled.

ELIJAH: HAVE FUN.

I'd been working for the last four hours on a half-sleeve tattoo. It still wasn't complete when the chime sounded on the parlor door. The blonde that controlled my thoughts strolled in with another girl around her age. Honestly, I didn't notice the friend much. One look at Hadley and all thoughts exited my mind.

Her long hair was straight, falling over her back and shoulders. It was the first time I'd seen her hair down since Lucy's and my birthday, and its length surprised me. It was a nice change from those messy buns that made her look ridiculously more appealing every time I saw her. She wore dark skinny jeans with a white halter top that, thankfully, didn't hide her bust size. On her dainty feet were plain flip-flops. She wiggled her red-painted toes and holy fuck I was lost.

She was sexy in a cute way. The slight bit of makeup she wore barely made her appear older. When her eyes found me in my little corner, her ocean-blue eyes twinkled and that bashful smile knocked me off my hinges, it was so powerful and radiant.

"Can I help you, ladies?" Lance got up immediately, his gaze sweeping over and devouring Hadley in the same way mine had probably been doing.

She shook her head, tucking her hair behind her ears. "I'm just here to see Elijah." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder in my direction, not noticing I was walking toward her. She glanced over Lance's shoulder and studied the parlor. Meanwhile, Lance's gaze was on me. "So this is your shop?" she asked, turning back to me.

I nodded. "Yeah." I cocked my head and let my eyes rake over her. "Did you come for a tattoo?"

"She wants one, but she's too chicken," her friend replied.

"Yeah, one day maybe, but not today," Hadley blurted, placing her hands together at her stomach.

"It's not all that bad," Lance said. "You'll have to come to me when you find something you like."

I scowled and said, "What he means is, come to *me*. I'll do you right." Lance snorted, but I ignored him.

Her friend grinned while Hadley's face turned a shade of red.

"Are you the mom?" Lance asked.

"Mom?" That only made her blush deeper. There was something vulnerable in her pout and the hopeless confusion in her eyes as she glanced at me for an answer.

"Yeah. Elijah mentions your family quite a bit." Wendy piped in while tattooing someone.

"You got time to tattoo me?" her friend asked, looking at Lance.

"Sure, what are you looking for?" he asked. I caught her friend tapping Hadley's shoulder and nudging her closer to me as she sauntered off with Lance. Hadley stiffened.

"Sorry about them." I ran my hands through my hair and frowned. "I do mention you guys a bit. Your kid has somehow weaseled her way into my circle," I admitted. "She's not so bad for a kid."

Hadley laughed. "I'm glad you've changed your opinion about kids."

"Don't get crazy now. I only like *your* kids."

I shouldn't have said that. Her mouth fell open, those rosy cheeks became rosier, and she looked down at her toes.

Changing the subject, I asked, "So what brought you here?"

When Hadley lifted her head, I saw hurt shining in her gaze. Even the wrinkling of her nose screamed that somehow I'd offended her. "How come you didn't tell me how well-known you are?"

"What do you mean?" I was confused as hell.

"Your Instagram page for the shop has a million followers. When I mentioned to Holly that we were friends, she told me how popular your tattoos and drawings are."

A little uncomfortable with Hadley's words, I pointed out, "Like you said, it's my designs, not me."

"You created them," she informed me.

"You never ask anything about me. I wasn't sure you'd want to know about my work," I admitted while rubbing my neck.

Her eyes widened as she processed what I had just said. “I guess I haven’t...”

“Hey, Elijah. You got a piercing,” Waldo hollered from the front, eyeing Hadley’s ass as he did.

It shouldn’t piss me off but it did. Waldo was closer to her age than I was, but I couldn’t fucking see her with the scrawny kid. I thought no one her age would know how lucky they’d be if they had her.

“It’s one down below,” he added.

Hadley’s mouth fell open, and I realized why the fucker said it. Not only because of Hadley, but I’d also have to warn him of saying shit like that. Some of our customers were private and didn’t want that shit said loudly. Luckily, this particular one simply laughed with her friend.

Hadley turned around and saw the girl signing papers at the front. She glanced back at me. “Does he mean...” She waved her hands between her legs.

“Yeah, a clit piercing.”

Her mouth fell open. “You do those?”

“Yeah... We’re both a tattoo and a piercing parlor.” It wasn’t uncommon which proved the naivety of my cute mom friend.

“Isn’t that odd?” It was adorable the way she scrunched up her nose.

“It isn’t any different from tattooing body parts. Just doesn’t take as long.” I shrugged. Her smile was more of a frown by the time her mouth closed. “Are you afraid of me becoming the guy from *Idle Hands*?”

Hadley flinched when I spoke in a low voice.

“Oh, shit!” I grabbed my hand ready to imitate the character from the nineties flick about a man with a possessed hand. I pretended it had a mind of its own, and I was trying to hold my limb back. “Whatever shall I do? My hand is bound to do something inappropriate.”

She scowled. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

I smiled as she stormed away and stood beside her friend, picking out a design. Did I tease her too much? When Wendy shook her head, I dropped my hand. Did I just fuck up?

Thirty minutes later, I was finished with the clit piercing, and Lance was doing a small wrist design for Holly. Hadley walked outside to take a phone call. I figured it was probably Lucy or about Eli. When she stepped back in the parlor, I strode over to her. “What did you mean then?” I asked since I didn’t want her upset with me.

She glanced down at her hands. “I don’t know what I meant. I just didn’t realize you did that type of thing.”

“How is it any different from you wiping asses?” I asked her. “You’re a nurse, right?”

“That’s different,” she protested weakly, not meeting my eyes.

“How so?” I grinned. She was behaving strangely—kind of withdrawn. “Hadley, you do realize a pussy is a pussy unless it belongs to the woman you want, right? There’s nothing sexual about my job. I’m a professional and this is what I do. I’m slightly offended that you’re acting like I can’t be trusted with nipples and asses. In case you’re wondering, I see more dicks than I do clits.”

I normally didn’t care what anyone thought. I knew what kind of person I was. But with Hadley? I felt more than a little crestfallen that she’d think... What was she thinking, anyway? That was it. I didn’t know. If she was negative toward my tattoos, jobs, and just everything, there was no hope for my piercing—a pubic bone one.

Hadley stood speechless.

My heart dropped, and a weird cold sweat swept over me. I caught myself. For a minute, I considered letting those thoughts I’d been having about Hadley become words. Honestly, I wanted to be her friend—Lucy’s too. But maybe I wanted something else too.

Shit.

Fuck.

Damn it all to hell.

I turned away, but she whispered, “Sorry. That was rude of me. I couldn’t tell you the number of butts and penises I’ve seen.” She touched my arm, and when I looked at her, Hadley gave me a bashful smile. “And you’re right. There’s nothing sexual about it.”

And just like that my guilt evaporated. In that moment, I realized that I enjoyed having Hadley around. She was a better person than me.

A sly grin spread across my mouth. “Just how many dicks are we talking here?”

Her gaze flickered to the ceiling. “God bless America!”

Yeah, God bless America for letting me steal a bag of chips from a kid.

Chapter Twenty

Hadley

“Can we ask him, Mommy, please?” Lucy whined in my ear, and I shuddered from the sheer excitement in her voice.

“He’s not home. He’s working. Just because I’m off today, doesn’t mean the rest of the world is.”

I could tell the news devastated her. She sulked and stuck out her lip. “When does he gets home?”

I stopped bouncing Eli in his seat and simply studied my four-year-old sitting beside me. “Why do you like Elijah so much?”

She shrugged and rocked on her knees. “I don’t know.”

“What kind of answer is that?” I leaned in and arched an eyebrow. “Lucy, do you have a crush on him?”

She shoved my forehead, upset with me. “No!” She scratched her nose. “He always buys me stuff.”

My jaw dropped. “Lucy! I didn’t raise you to be so shallow. If Elijah heard you say that, he’d be hurt.”

She scrunched up her nose. “No, he won’t. He’s cooler than you. He’d just smile and laugh.” Wow, I was pretty sure I birthed a monster. I felt sorry for her future husband. “Can we ask him? I really want him to watch *Big Hero 6*. He’ll love it, Mom, like he liked *The Croods*.”

I feigned annoyance, but on the inside, I was a tad nervous. I wouldn’t mind Elijah coming over too, but what if we were bugging him? I saw him over the weekend at his shop, but Lucy hadn’t seen him in a while. It was obvious that she really liked the man. Maybe Lucy and Elijah got along so well because of their brutal honesty manner of speaking.

Their ease around one another made me remember my foolish reaction when I discovered that Elijah did piercings and tattoos for a living. I didn’t know why I was so surprised. Okay, I wasn’t as much surprised as I was... Frankly, I didn’t want to think it. All I had to do was look at the beautiful

tattooed chick. Before Elijah took her into the back room, an awful surge of fear gripped me.

Elijah mistook my response. I didn't think he was a perv. Honestly, I didn't know why I behaved like a girlfriend who'd just found out something she didn't like about her boyfriend. He saw attractive women of all shapes and sizes and tattooed and pierced them wherever they desired. I'd never been a confident woman, but that day, I noticed my flaws all over again. Elijah had seen me at my worst. *Fudge!* He'd seen me on the way to giving birth to Eli. What changed to make me care about his opinion of me? I must seem like a walking disaster to that man.

I'd had too much time to dwell on these feelings, but it shouldn't have mattered. After all, Elijah was my friend. I'd admit that I liked him, but it was because Lucy did. Right? For me, it was admiration that a man like him could be friends with my daughter. So it didn't matter if he saw naked, gorgeous women because Elijah and I were cool the way we were.

Really?

I asked the man if he was trying to get me into bed. How embarrassing! Elijah was attractive, big, had tattoos, and gave piercings to beautiful women all the time. ... I didn't care about all that. Right?

Somehow, Elijah had become our friend.

I smiled and swiped my finger across my iPhone.

"Yay!" Lucy screamed. "Let me call him."

"I can text him," I told her.

"No! Please, please, please, let me call!"

Should I? Elijah was an upfront person. I'd never once noticed a hint of irritation or annoyance from him toward Lucy since we began this journey of befriending him. A guy like Elijah couldn't pretend. He liked my child. Of course, I'd also spotted his obvious way of avoiding Eli. I had of feeling he was terrified of babies. Surely, he didn't hate babies? Who could hate babies?

Elijah.

I groaned, found his number, and handed my phone over. "Here. He might not answer where he's—"

"Elijah!"

I leaned forward, trying to hear, but she stood. Did he answer already?

“Can you come over?” Lucy was bouncing vigorously as she spoke. Eli kicked his legs, getting excited with Lucy as he watched her. “There’s a movie you must watch! Okay! Yeah. Can you bring Funyuns? I also like chicken.”

“Lucy!” My child was such a bum. She just shrugged and ran away with my cell phone.

It wasn’t even a second later when she came running back out. “Oh, my fudge, Mom! He’s bringing us chicken.” There was a pause. “He said to ask you if Lee’s is okay?”

“Tell him not to get anything. I can make us something.”

He must have heard me because she yelled, “He said you can cook next time.”

The moment the call disconnected, I squinted at my child as she handed me my phone. “So this is why you wanted him to come over? I could have bought us some chicken, Lucy.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her into my lap. “Mommy can buy us better food now.” I hated that I had to let her know that.

“Yeah, but with Elijah, it’s better, right?”

“You really didn’t have to bring food,” I said, feeling guilty. I smelled the delicious aroma of chicken, and my stomach growled. I sidestepped so he could come inside with the giant bag of food.

“I think Bubby pooped.” Lucy strolled into the kitchen, holding her nose. Eli was on the floor on the blanket I laid out, kicking his feet in the air. “Can you make my plate, Elijah?”

No *hi*, it seemed. She went straight to bossing him around.

Before I could say anything, he chuckled. “You’ll have to tell me what you want.”

“Here.” She rushed over to the counter, jumping up and down to see. Slightly intrigued and curious, I watched as Elijah lifted her so that Lucy could open the cabinet herself. There was no hesitation between the two of them and that was the first time he’d ever picked up Lucy. I felt a little

strange and fanned my face as I watched them dig out the paper plates. A few seconds later, I went to change Eli.

Lucy made us all sit on the couch and watch a movie together after the meal. I smiled. As the movie went on, I listened to her and Elijah talk and laugh, and it filled me with a sense of dread. Lucy was reluctant to spend time with Scott anymore, but there was still something she was wanting—missing. Deep down, I believed she missed her dad.

I'd love her a hundred times more, even try plucking a star from the sky for her, but I wouldn't let Scott or his family use her against me to get us back together. When she was older, I hoped she'd understand why I made her daddy leave that night.

Missing Scott made Lucy cling to Elijah, right?

Why wouldn't she? Lucy had wrapped Elijah around her finger since their friendship that had started out so horribly... Or maybe it began even before that. My Lucy was impossible not to like.

Lucy sat between us on the couch, Elijah's tattooed arm draped over the cushions and dangled near Eli and me. The entire situation felt intimate yet comfortable, sitting in the dark like we were.

I couldn't remember if Scott ever watched a movie with us. Honestly, I couldn't recall anything we'd done as a family. Was it because Scott broke my heart, I'd lost all the good memories we'd had? I doubted that.

The moment Lucy got up and ran to the bathroom, Eli reached over and latched onto Elijah's watch right there for the taking. The light off the TV played shadows on Elijah's face, but I saw him stiffen as his dark eyes roamed over us.

I smiled, leaning back with Eli as he tried to take the item into his mouth. Elijah moved slightly, took off the watch, and handed it to him. I arched a brow at him. "Is that clean?"

He cocked his head, thinking about it. "Probably not." The moment Elijah took it from Eli, he cried like the world ended. From Elijah's terrified expression, the sound really was the end for him.

I kept my face neutral as I scooted over and put Eli a little closer to Elijah. His giant body stiffened some more as Eli settled down and giggled as he found something new—Elijah's black shirt. "Want to hold him?"

Elijah's head reared back slowly. "He looks good where he's at." Eli was already half on him since he was leaning forward, messing with the buttons.

I burst out laughing. "Oh, fudge, Elijah. He's only a baby!"

"Yeah, he's tiny and breakable and shit." Eli giggled, examining him as he spoke.

I snorted. "I'm getting really tired of you calling my kids that."

"What?" When I lifted an eyebrow, his eyes gleamed in the darkened room. "Shit?"

"We're at a good part!" Lucy announced as she rushed out of the bathroom. She paused, unsure where to sit now that I had scooted over. She ran and dove onto Elijah's lap. Luckily, he caught her, but he still grunted and she laughed.

I smirked. "You know being friends with a mother, you need to get used to Eli. He's a part of me."

I replayed my words in my head and wished I had left the last bit out. Now Elijah's dark gaze zeroed in on mine while my daughter snuggled against his chest like it was normal.

I momentarily lost all sense of right and wrong. I was hit with a wave of emotion so strong staring at him—*them together*. A new feeling burned inside of me. *Yearning*.

I didn't want to lose this. Such a simple thing, our friendship, yet this was different—big and bright. A very different type of happiness.

"I'll work on it... Just not tonight," Elijah said.

I rolled my eyes at him and let Eli pinch his arm hairs the rest of the movie until he left with a promise to Lucy that he'd come over and watch another one with her.

Things were almost perfect now. Scott still bugged me—I didn't think he'd ever stop, nor would his family—but things were falling into place in my life. Every morning I woke up with energy and excitement, wondering what was next. That home I wanted? Where would we go? Where did I want to move? Of course, all of this wouldn't happen overnight or even in a year or two. Lucy was about to start preschool next month and that itself was terrifying and exciting. My child would make me cry even more because she

would be one of those who said, “See ya, Mom” and ran inside without a backward glance.

I was ready to make plans for the next phase of our lives. But I was all too familiar with setbacks and all-around bad luck. My dad made a joke about my luck junior year in high school. The day I got my license, I hit a possum and busted my front bumper. I cried harder over the dead animal than my car. The same week, I busted my nose tripping over the neighbor’s dog when he ran in front of me. I didn’t want to admit how many flat tires I’d had in the short years I’d been a driver. I could have a good luck streak for months, and if one thing went wrong, I feared the future wondering what would happen next.

I was overdue for a little misfortune.

Chapter Twenty-One

Hadley

A few days after our movie night the awful sound of metal colliding jarred me awake. I could feel a slight rumble on the floor. My heart beat terribly as I clutched my chest and picked up Eli just as he started crying. I rubbed his cheek and rushed into Lucy's room, only to remember she went to sleep with me the night before. I ran back and found her sleeping peacefully.

What was that? I knew what it sounded like...like a bad collision outside. What if it was the apartment though? Worriedly, I ran out the door with Eli and peeked over the ledge. My heart fell to the bottom. "Oh, no, no, no, no!" I screamed.

A rusty white truck hit not only my car but a few others. But mine seemed to have taken the brunt of the damage—sandwiched between two other vehicles. Around me tenants were cussing and running out while I stood numbly in place. It took me a minute to snap out of it and rush down the stairs. Before I reached the bottom step, I recognized Elijah's heated voice and saw that he'd grabbed some guy by the shoulder.

It dawned on me. The guy that hit our vehicles was trying to run. If he was willing to leave the truck behind, he likely had no insurance and tags or the truck didn't belong to him. I knew that some shady people lived in these apartments.

Eli wasn't crying, but the angry voices and commotion made him search around frantically as he clung to my shirt with his mouth set in a little pout.

"Elijah," I called out, and his head swiveled around as he gestured for the younger boy to sit down with someone who must have been his mom since she was smacking the crap out of him. Recognition crept over me as I watched. That was one of the little brats that whistled at me most days. He was the driver? He didn't even have his license. He wasn't old enough to have one.

I bounced Eli as Elijah stopped in front of us. "Has anyone called the cops yet?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. The kid's on something and tried to run. The little fucker doesn't even look like he's old enough to be driving."

“He’s not.” My lips trembled.

Elijah rubbed my shoulder. “It’ll be okay.”

His gentle words cracked the dam. Through tears, I whispered, “Do you think they even have insurance? I’m still paying on my car.”

“*Hadley.*” He tipped up my chin. “Relax. Jesus Christ woman, are you always this way? How do you take care of two tiny humans like it’s a cake walk yet freak out over something that isn’t even your fault?”

“This and that are entirely different.” I wiped my eyes. He couldn’t understand. My car didn’t look drivable and that meant I was without a vehicle. Just when I thought I was doing good this happened. It was okay to be heartbroken and upset about it. “I need to go get Lucy. I don’t like her being in the apartment alone.”

“Just go inside, and I’ll come get you when the cops arrive.” He turned and gently shoved me toward the stairs.

“Why? This has nothing to do with you.”

“Fuck if it doesn’t.” His harsh words were oddly soothing. “Go on.”

I stopped protesting after that. I really didn’t want to keep Eli out there when he seemed scared, and Lucy was inside alone.

Forty-five minutes later, Elijah and a cop came up to the apartment. The officer took my information and said the report would be ready in a few days. I felt slightly embarrassed that Elijah asked the cop to come to me, but I was nervous having someone handle something for me. For a second, I wondered if that was how it felt to be in a relationship where someone took care of you. Someone you could rely on without even asking. I never had this feeling with Scott. And Elijah’s not even my boyfriend.

Eli fell back to sleep seconds after Elijah and the cop left. I was about to call Mom and Dad to let them know what happened. One of them would need to come get us in a few hours and take me to work. It amazed me that I hadn’t already. Normally, I’d call Dad. Even though I could fix my own tire or handle a lot of situations, I always called him, if only to complain. But Elijah’s sturdy presence had strangely been enough.

There was a knock on the door before I could. Frowning, I looked through the peephole and found Elijah on the other side. “Elijah? Is there something

else?”

“I think you’ll need new car seats.” He stepped inside. Still confused, I shut the door behind him. “The vehicle’s totaled, Had. I don’t need someone to come out and give an estimate to know.”

He gave me a nickname. It was oddly endearing. But hearing about my car and the seats sucked.

I sighed. “Yeah. I already knew I’d have to get new ones. Any time a vehicle’s been in an accident, you have to get rid of them. My parents have some in theirs”

He glanced down at his watch. “What time do you have to be at work?”

“I normally leave a little after six.”

“I’ll take you.”

“No, my dad will,” I blurted out, not wanting to burden Elijah anymore that morning. “Besides, you don’t have seats for Eli and Lucy.”

He nodded, a slight frown on his face. Why did he seem disappointed? “Then, I’ll pick you up after work and take you to get some new ones.”

“There’s no point in getting any right now, especially since I’m without a vehicle.”

“It’s needed,” he said plainly, heading toward the door. “So, I can take you guys where you have to go.”

My eyes became as huge as saucers. My crazy, stupid heart fluttered. I didn’t ask it to. I definitely didn’t want it throbbing for Elijah—who was too good to be true. Friend Elijah was perfect enough. I needed no more reasons to feel warm toward him.

“*Fudge*, no, Elijah. I can’t ask you to do that.” I smiled, leaned forward, and placed my hand on his chest. I couldn’t help myself. “You’re a lot nicer than you let on.” When Elijah gave me a dark stare, I pulled my hand away. “Thanks. You’re a butthole, but a very nice one.”

His upper lip twitched. “Even with them asleep, you still won’t say ass?”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not. Just interesting.” There was a *hmm* in his tone. “Makes one

curious as to how exactly does one make you slip and say something bad.”

My face was on fire. I *was* firetruck red. My eyes sought the floor instantly.

“What time do I pick you up?”

I groaned. “Once you get something in your head, there’s no stopping you is there?”

“Glad you know.”

“Seven.” I threw my hand up. “Your shop doesn’t close until eight.”

“I can work around that. I won’t schedule any appointments too late from now on.” *From now on?*

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“It means I’m taking you to get some car seats tomorrow, and we’ll pick up Lucy and Eli from your parents afterward. Problem solved.”

“Not that part,” I grumbled. “The *from now on* part.”

“What’s not to get? I’ll be chauffeuring your ass around until you get a new ride.”

“They won’t fit in your truck,” I argued.

That only made him laugh. “Baby, have you seen the back seat of my truck?”

Baby? Baby?

No, I hadn’t but I was suddenly very curious.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hadley

ELIJAH: OUT BACK?

HADLEY: YES. OUT BACK.

ELIJAH: WTF WOMAN? THIS IS A HOSPITAL. THERE ARE LIKE 100 BACK PARKING AREAS.

I laughed as I slid my ID card through the machine, clocking out. As Elijah promised, he was there somewhere. I just didn't know where.

HADLEY: IF YOU'RE GETTING MAD, GO HOME. I DIDN'T ASK YOU TO PICK ME UP. I'LL GET MY DAD TO COME.

ELIJAH: GET THE FUCK OUT HERE ALREADY OR ELSE.

HADLEY: OR ELSE...?

ELIJAH... I'LL STILL BE WAITING : (

Did Elijah Parker, giant-tattooed-next-door neighbor just send a sad-faced emoji to me? And why was it so adorable?

HADLEY: JUST DRIVE TO THE FRONT ENTRANCE.

He was outside waiting, ball cap on, and tattooed arm hanging out the window as I approached. I couldn't help but stare as he glanced at me.

Friend... Friend... Friend... We were only friends. But that didn't mean I couldn't appreciate how handsome Elijah was. He should wear a ball cap more often. It suited him, hiding his usual glower, and made him appear friendlier from a distance. If you could look past his bulging biceps, massive chest, tattoos, and towering height.

"There you are," he called out.

I had to practically jump into his truck. It was a good two feet off the ground. Once I was buckled up, I looked over and saw Elijah grinning. "What?"

"You look good sitting there, pink scrubs and all."

I tilted my head, observed him a moment, then looked ahead. Glad someone was happy about my car being gone. “I’ll let that slide since I could use the compliment. I’ve had a crappy morning.”

“You got a problem with me smiling?”

“Why are you so chipper about this? I lost my car and now I’m stuck having my parents drive me—”

“I already said I would do it.”

“You can’t do it all the time. Besides, why would someone unrelated trouble themselves?” Everyone knew family had to help.

“Watch me.” His dark eyes gleamed with a promise that he planned to prove me wrong.

I gave up, letting him drive us to Walmart where I had to practically beat him with a broom because he tried to pay for the seats. I didn’t actually hit him or anything, but I might have if a broom had been close by. He relented after he saw how upset I got about it. He’d done enough already, especially if he was offering to help me with transportation.

Was befriending people that easy? Did it always make you feel good? In a matter of months, a rude jerk became a part of our lives. It kind of amazed me, in a good way, how different our lives shifted. I liked our friendship.

I was nervous by the time we arrived at my parents’ house. I told Elijah to stay inside the truck while I got Eli and Lucy, but he didn’t. Shutting the driver’s door, he grabbed the car seats from the back and started opening the boxes. I kept glancing over toward the house, worried Dad would come to the porch. He’d take one look at Elijah and that would be the end. I feared he’d say something about his tattoos. He was a good-hearted person, but Dad was old and set in his ways.

“Are these already set up?” Forgetting my dad for a second, I watched Elijah with a bewildered expression as he tried to master the seats.

I smiled. “Don’t worry, I’ll put them in the truck in a second.”

“No, I want to figure this shit out,” he grumbled.

“Elijah!” *Too late.* My nerves prickled as Lucy came barreling from the house and of course, it was Dad that came with her, holding Eli in his arms.

Dad’s eyes did that squinty thing when he took in Elijah. Elijah stood

when he saw Lucy and Dad coming. “Lucy.” Elijah smiled and scooped her up the moment she jumped into his arms.

Dad said, “I think Eli’s cutting some teeth already. Been a bit grumpy today. See Mommy? Is that who you want?” he cooed at Eli who was fussing worse since he saw me. He immediately calmed when Dad placed him in my arms. He was looking for his milk supply.

“Did you miss me?” I asked him, tapping his nose. I remembered Elijah and Dad and turned my attention to them. “Dad, this is my neighbor Elijah.”

Elijah extended his hand, and Dad took it, studying his arm but otherwise saying nothing. Thank fudge! “Nice to meet you.”

“That was kind of you to pick up Hadley,” Dad told him. I could tell he was fishing for information.

I made a noise in my throat. “It was.”

“What time do I need to pick you guys up in the morning?” Dad asked.

“There’s no need. I told Hadley I’d take them wherever they needed to go.”

Dad’s eyes widened as he watched Elijah bend down and study the car seat again, with a determined grimace on his face. “Now how does this thing go...”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Elijah

“Lance, quick, come look!” Waldo yelled the moment he stepped through the doors of the parlor. I didn’t bother to glance up from the sketch I was drawing for a customer.

A second later, they barreled through the door laughing. “Dude, there are car seats in your truck.”

I had to lift my head. “Don’t start. You already know.” I resumed drawing again.

“Yeah, but why are they still in your truck?” Lance sounded dubious, but I didn’t stop drawing.

“What’s the point of getting them out when she has no car to put them in?” Everyone was so damn nosy around here. “Besides, it’s just easier for us in the morning when she works. There’s no loading and unloading them every time.”

Hadley had tried to take them the first day I drove her and the kids to the apartment, but I told her it was pointless until she got a new car. Hers couldn’t be repaired, I could tell just by looking at it. The other day she had her dad take her to get the police report for the insurance company, and it bummed me out. I wanted to take her, but this wasn’t so bad. I’d taken her to work three times this week and picked her up. Sadly, she was off the next few days. Despite telling her I didn’t care, I knew she wouldn’t ask me to take her anywhere when she wasn’t working. She’d likely ask her parents.

A stool scraped the floor as it was scooted across the linoleum. It rolled to a stop on the other side of the counter where I was drawing. From the corner of my eye, I saw Wendy plop down and cross her arms. “We hardly recognize you around here, anymore.”

Humming in my throat, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“You’re not known to be sweet, Elijah. It’s a good look on you.”

Glancing up, I saw her smirking. “Don’t you have a tattoo to do or something?”

“Not for another thirty minutes,” she told me, leaning forward. “Hadley is sweet, lovable, and beautiful. The complete opposite of you.”

I dropped my pencil. “And?”

“We just want to know if you like her. You’re going out of your way to help her, and you’ve left work early three nights this week. You never leave early!”

“Of course, I like her. What’s not to like?” When her eyes sparkled mischievously, I groaned and wiped my hand over my face. “Not like that.”

That was a lie. I really, really liked Hadley more than our friendship deemed appropriate, no matter how much I pretended otherwise. I agreed with Wendy—I barely recognized myself. It wasn’t a bad or even a strange feeling. It was welcoming, so I didn’t question it. *Almost*. My getting a boner every time I thought of Hadley was a bit much, but I’d ignore it since I liked my friendship with her. There was nothing physical about us. I’d never felt as content with someone as I did with Hadley by just being around her.

It was natural.

Fucking perfect if I were honest about it.

Hadley’s features gave away how much younger she was to me, but she was far more mature than most women her age. It was why I didn’t mind her and her little family.

I never questioned what I wanted to do. I just did it and being around them was just *gravitational*. I was drawn there.

It got me thinking lately that maybe I had it wrong about a life with kids and a family being mundane. Maybe the hardships were worth it, then I’d see a screaming toddler in the store and the discouragement to never procreate came back. Then I remembered Lucy’s little tantrum with her mom last evening. I had driven them home. Lucy wanted something, and Hadley wouldn’t let her have it. Her outburst wasn’t annoying because the kid was normally loud, but she could be worse when trying to get her way. Strangely, it slightly amused me how the four-year-old terror tried to bend Hadley to her will. I was ashamed to admit that for some unknown reason Lucy had bent mine in half. If she yelled for something, I got it. That was why there was a bag of Funyuns sitting in my truck. Hadley wouldn’t let me get them because Lucy acted out.

My ex would have loved to ask Lucy how she bossed me around. God knew I'd never do for anyone else what I did for Lucy and Hadley.

Discovering how I felt about Hadley and her family didn't scare me. In fact, it put a smile on face. Despite how I misjudged her on that first day, it had always been easy to be around them. It worried me, though, that I wanted to protect the mom and her kids, especially since I didn't know them well enough. I thought maybe it was because Ma was a single mother before Hank. Honestly, that wasn't it either.

No matter how I tried, I couldn't control my feelings.

"Are you sure? Or are you lying?" Wendy's voice grabbed my attention.

I blinked. "We're friends... If given the chance, I'd take them into my home and keep them there." I murmured, hunched over the counter, and picked back up the pencil.

Wendy gasped. "You really like them, don't you? Even her kids?"

Drawing in a deep breath, I glanced up and said, "I do."

"I never thought I'd live to see the day that you cared more about someone else than yourself. You're so sincere when you speak about them that it's frightening. Look! I've got goose bumps. I can't wait to tell Cheryl about this."

"Don't," I uttered and pinched the bridge of my nose before sighing. "I told her I was her friend. A while back she asked me if I was being nice just to get into her pants. I told her no, but every time I saw her in the parking lot, I grew a little more attracted to her. So when she asked that, I was afraid to admit the truth—that I was really fucking into her. Hadley was finally letting me talk to them without running away. I didn't want to screw it up. Don't get me wrong, being her friend is really fucking easy, but I am into the mom." I paused and took another deep breath. "Fuck. That makes me an asshole, doesn't it? I don't act on my emotions, but I like the way she makes me feel without having to touch her at all..." *But to touch her...* My body shuddered from the thought alone.

Wendy gawked at me with her wide eyes and mouth agape. "Wow... How long have you been holding that in? I swear you're fighting it. One second you're denying you like her and in the next you do a one-eighty. It sounds like you're still coming to grips with your feelings."

“Dude, we heard all that,” Waldo stared over at me.

Rubbing my forehead, I ignored everything that just happened. “That was a lapse in my sanity.”

“No point in denying it now,” Jim hollered across the room.

“Agreed,” Lance murmured.

“You know what? I’m going back to ignoring the fact that I have the hots for the mom. Did you hear me say anything, Waldo?”

He turned away. “Nope. Notta thing.”

“Wendy?” I asked.

“Don’t be an idiot. Let her know.” Instead of responding, I glared at her. Wendy held up her hands and stood. “I didn’t hear a thing.”

It had been three long, torturous days since I’d last seen Hadley and the kids. That was how many days Hadley had been off, with no reason to aggravate me when I wished she would. I didn’t even hear from Lucy, who I thought for sure would have asked me to come and watch a movie. To do something. *Anything*. But nothing. Not even a text. I sent Hadley one asking if she needed anything, and the answer was always *no, but thanks*. Slowly, I realized that Hadley didn’t like to ask for help. When she did, she preferred sticking with those closest to her.

Problem was, I wanted to be closer to them. They could use me as much as they wanted. I didn’t care to be the chauffeur or anything as long as I got to be around them. It was after work Friday evening when I finally saw them.

I nearly exited my truck without shutting off the motor. The three of them were in the small, apartment playground. I was glad to see the young boys that normally hovered were gone, but I was even happier with the chance to see Hadley and the kids.

I strode over toward them slowly, reeling myself in. Didn’t want to give away how thrilled I was to see them. “Elijah!” Lucy screamed, and I smiled. *That’s right, Lucy. I’m your Elijah*. Even the way she said my name was adorable. “I missed you!”

She ran, so I held my arms out for her as she jumped. I was a tall person yet she almost reached my hips with that leap. She was a great jumper. “If

you missed me, then why haven't you called me over?" I asked as she wrapped her arms around my neck and giggled.

She shrugged, peeking back at Hadley who watched us. "I wanted to, but Mommy said we shouldn't aggravate you so much."

I knew it. I pinned Hadley with a scowl and spoke loud enough for her to hear me. "You're never a bother to me, Lucy. You or your mom. Call me whenever you want. If you need me, I'll be there. No matter what." I knew words like this could potentially be very important to a four-year-old, but I wouldn't have said them if they weren't true.

But this made Lucy sad. Her usual smile turned into a pout. "Promise?"

I tugged at her ponytail and smiled. "Never doubt me."

Her smile returned as she laid her head across my shoulder and hugged me softly. My chest squeezed tight until I almost felt like I was choking. She wasn't choking me, but her hug made me feel all closed up inside. "Do you want to watch a movie tonight?" she whispered.

"Yeah. I'd love that, actually."

"Mom?" She turned her head and spoke to Hadley. "Elijah wants to watch a movie with us."

She frowned. "Lucy, you know we're out here waiting on your dad."

Those words were like a bucket of ice thrown over me. It never bothered me before. I never really thought about Lucy's dad until now. It kind of hit me—the sad truth of it all. As much as I adored the chatty child in my arms she wasn't mine. I didn't even recognize the resentment in me burning over that fact. I couldn't stand it. Being honest, I was nothing to Lucy while someone else was. Somehow, that sobering thought was devastating. And there was no one I could admit it to because it made little sense to me. Life wasn't fair.

Lucy's smile drooped, and I saw her unhappiness. The way she hid her eyes, gaze falling to the ground. I didn't think she even wanted to go. I glanced at Hadley holding Eli. Her features were tight, withdrawn as she bounced him. They were all sad. Why would she let them go if she didn't want them to?

Lucy jumped down and walked over to her Mom. Instead of going to play, she plopped down beside her on the bench and sighed. Hadley smiled and patted her back. "It's only for tonight. You can't stay longer than that. I can't have my birthday without you."

Lucy perked up. "I want cake!"

Hadley chuckled. "I'll buy one."

"Who buys themselves a cake for their birthday?" I interrupted, making my way toward them.

They both stared at each other and cackled. "Who needs a reason to buy sweets? Even if it wasn't my birthday if we wanted cake, we'd buy one. Right, Lucy?"

Lucy wiggled her shoulders and tossed one of her hands up all girly. "Yeah. Who needs a reason?" She turned toward Hadley. "Is Bubby going to Dad's too?"

Hadley shook her head. "Not this time. Just you."

Lucy frowned. "Not fair."

"Your daddy wants to see you. Don't you want to see him?"

Lucy dropped her head and reluctantly said, "Yeah, but I'd rather come back home after I see him."

"If you get homesick, which I don't think you will, all you have to do is tell your dad or Meme to call me and I'll come get you. No matter how late." Lucy nodded, and Hadley kissed her forehead while Eli reached for Lucy's ponytail.

Lucy jerked away and huffed. "Bubby won't stop pulling my hair!"

Hadley snickered. It grew louder when she saw me laughing too. "Lucy, he's a baby. He doesn't mean to."

"Look at him! He's smiling about it." Lucy pointed at her baby brother who was grinning at her like she was the sweetest and funniest thing ever. "You always take his side."

"Give your bubby a kiss and love on him before your dad gets here," Hadley said before Lucy giggled and rubbed her brother's head.

"You need to lay off the milk!" Lucy exclaimed.

Hadley sniggered at her again while Lucy stared at me. Since she was on a roll, I feared what she was about to say.

Lucy asked, “Doesn’t he need to stop, Elijah?”

I pretended to think about it before I said, “I don’t know. He appears fat and healthy to me.”

“You two aren’t allowed to be friends if you’re going to pick on Eli before he can even defend himself.” We were all laughing as Hadley grabbed Eli’s hand and cooed. “You’re not fat, my little butterball.”

Okay... “How is butterball better?” I asked with a toothy grin.

“Hush, you don’t understand a mother’s heart.”

“Lucy!”

My smirk vanished as I heard the unfamiliar male voice. Lucy looked up over her shoulder about the same time I saw him too. Lucy’s dad. Like the rest of her family, he was blond and blue-eyed and not very tall. He fit so well with them it made my heart sick.

Lucy stood and walked over to him with happiness lighting up her eyes. Meanwhile, he eyed me the same way I did him. He must have noticed me talking with them. “Who’s this?” His eyes darted over to Hadley who followed Lucy. Her gaze landed nervously on me.

“That’s Elijah. He lives right there.” Lucy pointed at my house cheerfully. “He’s my friend.”

“He is?” He directed his question to Hadley. I didn’t like the slimy way he glared at her like he would give her shit for being around me when I wasn’t there to protect her.

“Make sure you bring her home early,” Hadley told him, ignoring his stony scowl.

“Why don’t I just stay tonight? It’s your birthday tomorrow. Don’t you think Daddy should stay, Lucy?” The fucker was eyeballing me as he suggested it.

I was so angry that I could feel the blood rushing to my face.

Lucy’s gaze darted over to her mother. Hadley’s face was completely red, and she looked like she wanted to say something, but was keeping it all

bottled in. “No, I’ll go. Elijah’s watching a movie with us tomorrow, right?” Lucy searched my face for confirmation.

Just like that, my anger dissipated. I grinned down at her. “That’s right. Have fun tonight.”

“I will!” Another grin my way.

Her dad wasn’t happy though. “Can I have a minute, Hadley?”

“Can we stop and get some ice cream?” Lucy asked him.

“Yeah, sweetie, after I talk to Mommy.”

What a fucking asshole! I knew his kind—men like him thought that kids meant they owned the mothers. They acted like it was okay to mistreat a woman. Well, that bastard had another thing coming. I was—

“I’ll talk to you later, Elijah?” Hadley pleaded. Those ocean-blue eyes begged me not to make things harder on her. And because I wasn’t her ex, I took a deep, deep fucking breath and told myself to relax.

To avoid making trouble for Hadley, I left. It wasn’t my preferred choice, but I relented for her.

Still, my gut churned with unease at the thought of leaving such sweet gems at the mercy of someone that seemed to thrive on putting people down. The glint in his eyes as he looked into Hadley’s sweet ones—it was like he was warning her or challenging her to go against him. I didn’t know, but it wasn’t right.

I didn’t like it. I hated it, actually, because I was the outsider and had no right to say anything.

“Yeah, bye Lucy.” I waved.

“Bye.” She waved back.

“Oh, and Hadley?” I said before walking toward my house.

“Yeah.”

“Don’t buy your cake. I’ll get it.”

“Chocolate cake! Chocolate cake!” Lucy told me.

I chuckled. “All right.”

ELIJAH: YOU AND ELI WALK OVER.

I hadn't been able to stop worrying about them after I left. I had no right to interfere, but the longer I sat replaying the incident, I knew if it happened again, I wouldn't be able to keep my mouth shut.

The only reason I stayed quiet was for Hadley. She had no idea the effect she had on me. Nothing had the ability to shut me up quite like the idea of causing her trouble. I didn't know their relationship. Maybe they were trying to patch things up.

Fuck that. It'd be a cold day in Hell before I let that happen.

I was getting fucking antsy. I needed to know if they were okay. I didn't like the irate way he stared at her.

Another hour went by before she replied.

HADLEY: DON'T WANT TO BOTHER YOU, BUT IT WOULD PROB MAKE LUCY HAPPY IF YOU SHOWED UP AND WATCHED THAT MOVIE WITH HER... IT'S OKAY IF YOU'RE BUSY. STILL CAN TOMORROW? IF THAT'S OKAY?

What the fuck? Lucy didn't go to her Dad's after all?

I needed answers. It didn't matter that I had no right to interfere in their life. I got up from the couch and slipped on my steel-toed motorcycle boots and rushed over. I wanted to be someone she called or wanted to confide in. I wanted that with Hadley so badly. I wanted her to need that from me.

Jesus, I sounded like a Neanderthal or some shit. That woman was filling up my head with endless thoughts of her.

When I knocked on their door a minute later, Hadley answered and the sight of her multiplied my anger tenfold. Her face and neck were covered with blotchy red marks. She'd been crying. "Hadley," I could feel the tension in my voice.

"What?" I spooked her. She covered her face, wiping something that wasn't there.

"I think you should tell me about their dad so next time I don't cause any problems."

Eyes widening, she got all flustered. "You didn't cause any trouble."

"Don't lie," I told her, sliding my index finger down her cheeks. I liked

the soft, fevered touch of her skin. “You can tell me later.” I stepped inside. “Lucy!” I hollered.

When she poked her head around the corner, I saw the same puffy expression on her face. Did he yell at Hadley in front of Lucy? I knew every couple fought at some point or another, but if you made your kid cry, couldn't you stop and think? Or did he do and say things intentionally because he knew it was the best way to get to Hadley? I stared at the mother again. Within a few measly hours, he'd sucked the life right out of her like a leech.

“Want to go get that ice cream?” I asked Lucy.

I caught a slight smile before she frowned and looked over at Hadley. “Can we, Mommy?”

Hadley smiled. “If you want to, we will.”

Lucy walked over and grabbed her mother's hand. “Not if you don't want to, I don't.” Lucy was totally withdrawn from me. I could see her, she was there, but she wasn't the happy-go-lucky kid that ran and jumped into my arms every time she saw me.

That same choked up feeling hit me again as I bent down so that I was on eye-level with her. “We can come back here and watch a movie?” I suggested.

She peeked up at her Mom who was on the verge of tears again. I didn't know what happened, but the rage that tore through me was on the edge of igniting. The only reason I kept it together was that Lucy was upset. I was furious. Something clearly happened, all because I'd been outside with them. I knew deep down that I shouldn't have walked away, but I thought it was the right thing to do.

I was wrong.

Covering her trembling lips, Hadley bent down too, taking Lucy's hands. “Listen to me, Lucy. If it's okay by me, you're allowed to speak to anyone I know, okay? Unless Mommy tells you, I don't care who it is, you don't listen. Look at me, Lucy.” She cupped Lucy's cheeks with tears spilling over them. “I'm your mother, and if I say you can, you can.” I saw Hadley nudge her head in my direction right before Lucy nodded and wrapped her arms around her neck and cried louder. “Now, do you want Elijah to take us to get

ice cream?” A strong head nod from Lucy even though I couldn’t see her face smooshed into her mom’s shoulder. “Okay, then we will.”

“What’s wrong?” I didn’t know who I was asking. They both had me sick to my stomach with worry. I couldn’t bear to see either of them cry. When neither answered, I tapped Lucy’s shoulder. “Lucy…” Her ignoring me messed with my head. I was terrified. I never realized the power a parent could have on a kid, even one that didn’t seem worthy of that title.

“Let me get my shoes.” Lucy pulled away from her mom, wiping and hiding tears from me as she walked around me.

I glanced to Hadley desperately. All she did was give me a weak smile as she stood. “Let me change Eli real quick.”

“Can you help me?” It took me a moment to realize Lucy was talking to me since she hadn’t been her usual self with me. I reached for her pink shoes.

“Yeah. Sit down.” She flopped onto her butt watching me as I tied up her shoes. “Want to go on down to the truck while your mom gets Eli ready?” I asked just to see what she said. She nodded and stood with me. “We’re heading down to the truck,” I called out to Hadley.

“Okay! All I have to do is grab my shoes and Eli’s diaper bag.”

Lucy reached for my hand as we headed out the door. It surprised me, especially since she was barely talking to me, but I grabbed onto her tiny one like it was a lifeline—desperate to get her smile back.

“Know what makes me happy?” I mumbled as we took our time walking down the steps.

“What?” She blinked at me with sea-blue eyes like her mother’s.

“When you smile.” And slowly, but surely, Lucy did just that, gripping my hand tightly.

“I didn’t want to,” Lucy murmured, and I glanced down at her.

“Didn’t want to what?”

“Listen to Dad.”

“Why?”

“He said he didn’t want us around you.” She was sniffing again. “Called Mom names and told me not to talk to you, or he’d be mad. That’s why I hate

going to Meme Lilly's. Dad just takes me there and leaves me with her. She says bad stuff about Mommy, and it makes me cry." I scooped her up. She was crying too hard to walk. She wrapped those little arms around my neck, and I wondered how any adult could live with themselves for making her cry. "Everything's different. I don't want to go there anymore, but Mom says I should because Daddy misses me."

"As long as your mom lets me, I'll always be your friend Lucy. I promise."

Lucy ran up the stairs in front of us. She wasn't back to her normal spunky self, but it was coming back. We made a short trip to get ice cream and pizza—Lucy's choice. I carried both boxes while Hadley carried Eli.

"You're exhausted," I said to her.

Hadley sighed, offering me a small upturned mouth. "Only mentally. Today's been draining."

"I'm not leaving until we talk about that," I warned her.

She only laughed. "I didn't think you would."

Feeling relieved, I smirked.

I'd admit that I couldn't pay attention to the movie Lucy put on for us. I was too focused on them. That night differed from any other I spent at Hadley's. There wasn't much talking or laughter, but Hadley had still asked me there. Lucy nodded off next to me, snuggled under some blankets. Hadley's feet were underneath her ass as she held Eli in her arms, letting him whack her in the head with some sort of toy over and over as she watched the screen.

She caught me staring at her and grinned. "It's time," she mumbled right before she flopped Eli in my lap. I stiffened as fear sliced into me. Immediately after, I couldn't help but think, *Shit, he really is a butterball.* "Relax." She laughed as she leaned against the couch's arm, watching me, and I was watching Eli who was holding his head up perfectly staring up at me. Suddenly he threw his hands into the air and cried.

Fucking hell. I broke him.

I started to give him back when Hadley scooted into my side, almost like

she was snuggling into me.

Maybe I'd hold him after all.

Hadley took Eli's hand and cooed softly to him. "It's okay, see? Elijah's afraid too. You've got to be the big, brave one and show him it's okay."

"I don't want to hurt him," I told her desperately hoping she'd save me from myself.

"Elijah, you won't hurt him. Do you know how terrified I was to hold Lucy when they first put her in my arms? If you'd just give in, I know you'd be a goner. That petrified feeling you have means you can be great at this."

"Be great at what?" I croaked.

"Taking care of babies."

"I'm capable of taking care of a lot more than babies." Lights bounced off her face from the TV, making my heart thump wildly.

"Let's see how you handle Eli then," she mumbled as she laid her head against my shoulder.

Throughout the last bit of the movie, I shared a staring contest with Eli. That was all that happened since I wasn't sure how to talk to a baby yet. Eli either gave into me holding him or sleep, I wasn't sure exactly which. That didn't matter, though. Eli sprawled out on my chest, oddly adorable and comfortable. Lucy's feet rested against my left side and Hadley curled up against my other side.

Since everyone was asleep, did that mean I didn't have to leave? I knew I could fall asleep instantly right here even though I was sitting up. I've never been more comfortable. If she asked, I could say I dozed off.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Hadley

Eli's cries woke me up later that night. With the DVD player stuck on the movie menu, the room was bright. Warmth radiated from someone who wasn't supposed to be there. I pushed off Elijah's arm. I grabbed Eli quickly not wanting him to wake Elijah. My nose was still numb too since my face had been smashed against Elijah's arm. I absentmindedly rubbed it as Eli's lip smacking filled the silent room. The only other sound to be heard was the air conditioner kicking on in the apartment. Barely awake, I bent over searching for the diaper and wipes I kept around the couch. When I found them, I changed Eli's diaper. He was still fussy but not too loudly since he knew what came next. I placed his wet diaper on the floor, telling myself I'd put it in the trash later. Pulling down my spaghetti strap shirt, I unhooked my nursing bra and fed Eli. Without thinking, I leaned on Elijah's arm. I was strangely comfortable and when I was comfortable; it made me extra sleepy.

The realization jolted me upright. Falling asleep with Elijah beside me should have been strange. But after the day before with Scott, being around Elijah was a breath of fresh air.

I noticed Elijah's neck. His head was bent forward. He couldn't be comfortable sleeping upright. Since Eli was still in his arms when I awakened I guessed Elijah was too terrified to move. I should wake him up so that he could go home, but I moved my head to his shoulder. *Just a little longer...*

"Happy Birthday." Elijah's rumbly, husky voice scared the life out of me. "He's going to town."

I rose quickly from his shoulder, meeting his dark eyes. "You scared me," I whispered. "I thought you were asleep. I was about to wake you so you could go home," I fibbed quickly.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he sighed. "How often do you get up with him at night?"

I shrugged, self-conscious suddenly that I flopped an entire boob out for him to see. I wasn't shy about breastfeeding, but Elijah had hawk eyes, and my skin heated knowing that he was staring at us. "Hardly at all. Once every now and then. I've been lucky. He slept through the night a lot quicker than Lucy. I think she was a year old before I got a peaceful night."

He made a ‘hmm’ sound. “I can imagine working and going to school didn’t help.”

Another shrug. “No, it didn’t, but it was worth it.”

“About their father,” he began.

I exhaled. “Hold on. If we’re going to have this conversation, let me carry them to bed.”

He got up, wincing as he cupped his neck. “I’ll carry Lucy. Her room’s the one on the right?”

I nodded. As soon as Eli fell back to sleep, I quickly covered myself while Elijah walked away and burped Eli before carrying him to his crib in my room. When I returned Elijah was back on the couch with his legs sprawled. My heart kicked up a notch, fueled by the thrum of heat low in my stomach.

Between work and motherhood, it had been so long that my body experienced desire that I didn’t recognize it at first. Even when I was with Scott, I didn’t get that level of craving for intimacy. Sex usually happened because he wanted it, and he didn’t care that I was exhausted and needed a lot more effort to make me feel good with him. I felt that down to my soul and thought that was what made it impossible to want sex with Scott.

But with Elijah, I felt a hunger for it. It made me extremely nervous and aware around him. Elijah was my friend. What was worse was that he behaved in ways that I’d want in a lover—a partner. He was everything Scott had never been. I was afraid. I realized sadly, Scott didn’t even do my body right when having sex. Funny how I didn’t notice all the flaws of our relationship when blinded by love and loyalty.

So, how could I even allow myself to trust Elijah after all that Scott put me through? Then again, how could I not want to call him mine?

When Scott followed us to the apartment yesterday and not only hurt mine but Lucy’s feelings, the only comfort I felt was in asking Elijah to come over. My choice was the correct one. Lucy’s misplaced fear and worries were forgotten after an afternoon with him.

Dropping onto the couch beside him, I tucked my legs underneath my butt and faced him. “Go on. If you’re going to make me admit to how foolish I’ve been, let’s get on with it.”

He laid his head against the couch watching me with a stare I couldn't decipher. "You're too sweet for your own good. How the fuck you got with that shithead I saw yesterday, I'll never know. Your kids are the cutest because you're their mother. Definitely didn't get anything from him."

"First off, if I ever hear you talking like that in front of Lucy, I'll smack you. No matter what she might hear from his family, I'll never stoop to their level." Then, I smiled. "But since she's asleep, I can agree. I loved him and as pathetic as it makes me sound, I would have taken care of him if he had never cheated. But now when I look back, I wonder how I thought I could be happy when I was always so disappointed in Scott."

"I'm guessing he didn't work?" There was anger in his tone. I nodded. "Still doesn't?"

"No, but he's in school."

"So, the fuck what? He had a responsibility when you became pregnant. Who lets a pregnant woman work and go to school?" He was getting a little loud. I tapped Elijah's shoulder, and he took a deep breath, closing his eyes and calming himself before he spoke again. "It amazes me that you thought this was okay. There's no way I would have let you go through that. He should have made the sleep sacrifices you made. He should have been the one to juggle work and school and parenthood while you went to school and came home to Lucy. You should have stayed at home and spent all the hours you wanted with Lucy."

At that point, tears rolled down my cheeks. Elijah's words reminded me of the tenderness I missed because Scott never helped me. The embarrassment I felt was worse. I allowed myself to love a man who never once cherished me or our family. I was the only adult working toward our future. Because of Scott's selfishness I missed moments with Lucy. Moments I'd never get back. I covered my face as the tears came harder.

Suddenly two strong hands grabbed me and pulled me close. Elijah wrapped his arms around me and tugged me until I was half-on and half-off his lap. The sheer mass of him soothed something deep inside, giving me a sense of comfort I'd never known before. Not the peace you got from your parent or friend, but something more. His gentle caresses soothed me while stoking a fire deep down, igniting intense emotions within me.

Hooking one arm beneath the bend of my knees, Elijah cupped my cheek.

“I didn’t mean to make you upset, baby. I just wanted you to know how much you deserved. Still do.”

I swiped under my eyes. Suddenly, I was burning all over. Heat from Elijah seeped through my jeans. At that moment, *I thought* I wanted something more from him. “I know,” I breathed out. He gripped the meaty part of my thigh. Prickles flowed from the spot.

“I’m glad you’re not with him,” he murmured, running his fingers through my hair. My eyes met his as he asked, “He upset you and Lucy because I was outside with you guys yesterday, didn’t he?”

I averted my eyes, but Elijah grabbed my chin and forced my gaze back up. Without warning, the words rushed from my mouth. “That’s not what upset me. I can talk to whomever I want. It’s none of Scott’s concern, but when I didn’t give the reaction he wanted, he started in on Lucy. Scott told her that he’d be upset with her if she associated with you. Like what the fudge, Elijah? She’s four, and he’s hounding her to get to me.”

Thankfully, Elijah said nothing, so I continued, “Then, Lucy cried. She was confused about why her dad was so angry. I was speechless when Scott stormed off without telling her bye. I simply held her while we both cried. There was no way I would have let him take her after that fit, but all of this will backfire. Lucy is already so reluctant to spend time with Scott. She doesn’t even care when he backs out on coming to get her, but it’s me that gets the blame for that. His parents say I make Lucy not want to go.” Blinking rapidly, I wiped my eyes and tried to laugh but it caught in my throat. “Sorry, this is probably a lot more than you expected when you wanted to befriend us.”

“Don’t apologize. Never apologize to me. I want to be that shoulder you need to cry on.” He tapped it. “Go on, use me all you want.”

The way he watched me with those intense brown eyes combined with my blossoming desire made me aware that I was almost on Elijah’s lap. All the heat in my belly dipped between my thighs.

I quickly stood and smiled. Raking a hand over my face, I stretched nervously. “Ugh. I can’t believe I cried.”

“Are you okay now?”

I nodded.

Elijah asked, “What about Lucy?”

I frowned. “I think she’s too young to fully understand what happened, and it scares her. One day when she’s older, I hope she understands why I couldn’t let her dad stay with us.”

Elijah stood, towering over me. He moved closer, gently touching my shoulder. “I don’t think she wants that. I think you have a four-year-old that pays attention more than you think. She only wants her mom. And to be happy. I notice Lucy.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s rotten, but she has a heart of gold, especially when it comes to her love for you. You haven’t noticed that Lucy’s not happy unless you are? I think she might have been more upset that you were unhappy than over the things her father said. And... Me. She cried because she thought she’d really not be allowed to see me again.” He chuckled. “Like I’d let you guys go.”

That was true. Lucy had been extremely upset when Scott said he wouldn’t let me bring someone like Elijah around our kids. He went on about his tattoos and things until Lucy cried. Scott honestly believed I was still his or something. It was absurd that he thought he could tell me who I could be friends with. I didn’t tell Elijah that part.

Elijah’s deep voice was low as he continued, “Lucy told me about her dad wanting you guys to stay away from me. She cried as she said it. That’s how I knew that somehow, some fucking way, I became special to someone so precious that I didn’t see how anyone could make her cry.”

Oh, fudge.

He was making me feel things. So many different things. Why did he have to be so kind? Couldn’t he have stayed the jerk we’d first encountered?

It made me yearn for a bigger part of him—those parts friends didn’t share with one another.

But I couldn’t stop picturing it, especially after that night and everything Elijah said and done for us. Why did he treat us so good? My heart wasn’t safe in that situation.

“Do you work today?” he murmured, his fingers idly rubbing my shoulder.

Thinking about work, I groaned. “You just reminded me that I do. What time is it?”

“You have four more hours that you can sleep. I’ll be here around six-thirty.”

“Thanks, Elijah.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s no problem.” His hand dropped leaving behind a phantom warmth.

“But it is.” I reached and grabbed his hand. “Despite our first encounter, I’m glad that we have a friend in you.”

He turned away hurriedly but not before I caught his tight expression. His jaw was set, and his eyes downcast. Did I say something wrong? I wanted to ask but was suddenly unsure. That expression confused me.

He paused and glimpsed over his shoulder. There was something hidden in that gaze. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said as he headed out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Elijah

“I took this picture earlier. She was so mad when I showed it to her before we dropped her off at her grandparent's house.” I chuckled as I handed my phone over and showed Ma the picture of Lucy with her mouth wide open, catching flies as she slept in her car seat. I was a little tired myself. I didn't sleep much after leaving Hadley's apartment, but it was a good tired. Probably wouldn't be feeling that way as the day went on and I was at work but that was okay too.

Ma smiled down at my phone. “I was wondering what you were doing up so early. Did the mom—”

“Hadley.”

“Did Hadley have to work this morning?”

I took my phone back. “Yeah. I'll get her at seven, and we'll go pick up Lucy and Eli.”

“That's the baby, right? Got any pictures of him?”

I shook my head. “No, but I'll take one of him with Hadley. That's the first one I took of Lucy.” I grinned thinking about the way she pouted. It only made it worse that I laughed at her. Everything was all good in her eyes after I told her I only wanted a picture of her.

When I glanced over at Ma, she was watching me with curious eyes. “Might as well bring them over.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “How do I suggest that?”

Ma arched a brow my way, slightly amused. “What do you mean?”

“Answer me honestly, Ma. You're the only female who can still say they love me after knowing me. Should I leave Hadley alone? She's been through a lot. They all have. I don't want to fuck them up—”

“Language, Elijah,” Ma scolded me.

Hank opened the screen door and ruffled my hair like he did when I was a kid. Back then it would always piss me off. That hadn't changed. I leaned my head away and caught him smirking down at me as he went to refill his

coffee cup.

“Are you going to leave them alone?” Ma asked me.

I didn’t even have to think about it. “No.”

Ma laughed. “Then why are you asking such a silly question? I know you, you know you. Do you plan to hurt them?”

“Of course not, but...” I placed my elbows on my knees, dropped my head between my hands, and sighed. “I want to be in their lives more than I am now. This being her friend shit is for the birds.”

“Language,” Ma muttered while Hank grinned. “Why haven’t you asked her out?”

“A lot of reasons.” I sighed. It should have been easy to do so since Hadley was letting me into their lives. I could have that morning. I *should* have, then was equally glad I didn’t when she mentioned I was a great friend. She had me bent out of shape.

“If it’s about her kids, they’ll make your life fuller,” Hank told me after another sip of coffee. “My life would have been empty and dull without your mom. You were such a little shit—a serious handful—but I wouldn’t trade a moment we had together.”

Ma muttered under her breath about our word choice while we laughed.

“Lucy is amazing. You’ll fall in love with her. Beautiful and sweet like her mom. And Eli is a little butterball.”

“Listen to you,” Hank chuckled.

“What?” I smiled.

“You sound proud. Like they’re already yours.”

I frowned. But they weren’t. The fact that they weren’t mine sucked me into a giant black hole. It left me devastated.

“All I know is that I want more than two grandkids. You got to impregnate her at least one more time.” Ma’s words were amusing but far from terrifying. I’d thought about being a father a lot since meeting Lucy. Being a parent was so much more than I originally thought and maybe it was something I wanted.

Maybe I already did. I pictured Hadley with a rounded belly like when we

first met. Only that child would be a part of me and Hadley. Suddenly, I realized I wanted that life.

I couldn't deny it anymore. I wanted that. I wanted them. With me. As my family.

I wanted Hadley—all pieces of her.

The moment Hadley hopped in my car that evening, I had a hard time deciding if I should hand her the cake right away or wait until after we picked up Lucy and Eli. It wasn't like she couldn't see it in the back seat if she glanced over her shoulder.

When I saw the half-eaten one in her hands, I decided to wait. Had she been working there long enough for her co-workers to know about her birthday?

Hadley saw me eyeing the cake and smiled. "You can have a piece. A good friend I worked with, the one that taught me most of what I know, brought it to me today at work and told me to share it with everyone." She snorted. "I think she wants me to go back to work with her."

Pulling out of the parking lot, I asked, "Where did you work before the hospital?"

"A nursing home."

"Any plans to go back?"

Another snort. "No. I love it here. The hours and time off work are perfect for me. As much as I miss Georgie, I don't miss the mental and physical exhaustion that came with working there. When you're a nursing assistant, you learn the importance of team work. Most of the nurses at the home wouldn't help us out. I promised myself that when I became an RN, I'd help without asking. I never wanted anyone else to feel bogged down or alone."

I understood the basics of nursing, but there was a lot I didn't know. The determined smile on Hadley's face, though, told me how important her career was. "Sounds complicated, but I'm sure you're great at this job, and that's not because I think you look fucking cute in scrubs."

Her eyes slid over my way, and her cheeks reddened. She tucked strands of blonde hair behind her ear and rolled those ocean-blue eyes at me.

Beautiful.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Complimenting me the odd way that you do. I don’t know how to react.”

I chuckled. “React however the fuck you want, baby. I’m going to enjoy it, regardless.”

She shook her head, still smiling as she peered out of the window.

Her dad was outside with Lucy waiting for us when I pulled up. This was a habit of his. Hadley’s customary behavior was rushing to leave with the kids as if she was terrified of what her parents might say to me. Maybe it was necessary with her ex—needing to defend him or feeling frightened that he’d get upset with her—but I was a grown-ass man who didn’t want her stressing on my behalf. I understood why Hadley’s dad worried about who she hung out with. She was his daughter. If Hadley and her kids were mine, I’d be a lot worse.

Her mom stepped out a second later, smiling with Eli on her hip. I parked the truck and grabbed the cake I’d purchased. “Do you want to share this with them?”

Her gorgeous blue eyes bugged out as she took in the cake. “Elijah...” She stared into mine. “You didn’t really have to get me a cake.”

“Nonsense. Besides, Lucy would have held it against me ’til the end of time.”

“Elijah!” Lucy said excitedly, a second later her knuckles were hitting the side of my truck as she tried to climb on the sidestep to look through the window at me. “Come in and eat. Mamaw made barbecue ribs for Mommy.”

I laughed as I carefully opened the door and stepped out. She gasped when she saw the cake in my hand. “See, Papaw?” She glanced over at her grandfather on the porch. “I told you he’d bring one.” Hadley finally relaxed a little—the tension in her shoulders eased tremendously.

“Have you wished your mom a happy birthday yet?” I asked Lucy.

She became quiet and looked over to Hadley. “No. Happy birthday, Mommy.” Those bright, curious eyes were back on me. “Do I get a present, too?”

I tugged one of her pigtails and laughed. “We had birthdays last month. I think it’s your mother’s turn.”

She crossed her arms. “Drats.”

Her reaction made me remember the unicorn portrait I still hadn’t given her. “But, when you go home later, there’s something I made for you.”

Her eyes lit up.

“Lucy, why don’t you introduce Mamaw to Elijah since your mom never does?” said Hadley’s mom from beside me. I hadn’t realized she’d stepped off the porch. Hadley glared at her mom.

“This is Elijah, Mamaw,” Lucy said.

“Nice to meet you, Elijah.” The older woman offered her hand. I switched the cake to my left hand and shook hers.

“You, too.”

“Come eat. I made dinner.”

“I bought a cake.”

She laughed. “I see that.”

We had a pleasant dinner despite Hadley’s mom embarrassing her and her father scrutinizing me. Two hours later, I walked them up to their apartment with two cakes and a peach cobbler stacked in my arms.

Hadley opened the door and gestured for me to step in. “Thanks for carrying those.”

“No problem.”

“Don’t change clothes until I give you a bath, Lucy,” Hadley said as she tossed her shoes off and ran into the living room.

I placed the cakes and the cobbler on the counter and headed for the door. “I’ll be right back. There’s something I’ve got to get.”

Hadley’s eyebrows knitted together. “Okay?”

I hurried to my house, grabbed the drawing, and rushed back. I was eager to see Lucy’s reaction. Hadley let me in the moment I knocked. “For Lucy.” I handed it to Hadley, and she gasped.

“Oh, Elijah, it’s beautiful.” Hadley shouted, “Lucy! Come see.” She held

up the picture frame, admiring the painting with a smile.

“Is that a unicorn?” Lucy walked over and took my gift from Hadley.

“Do you like it?” Lucy was only four, so I was suddenly unsure if she’d like something like this. But when she smiled, I stopped worrying.

“This one is prettier than the horsey books at Mamaw’s house. Can we put it in my room?”

Hadley smiled. “It’s yours. You can put it wherever you want.”

“Can we do my room in unicorns?” she asked.

“Of course.”

Lucy tackled my legs with a hug. “Thank you, Elijah.”

I patted her head. “You’re welcome.” She ran out, taking the drawing with her.

Eli screamed in Hadley’s arms, and I glanced at him. “Don’t be upset. I’ll make you something once we know what you like.”

Grabbing my wallet from my rear pocket, I took out the gift card and handed it to Hadley.

“What is this?” She stared at it, frowning.

“A gift card for my parlor. You said you wanted a tattoo, right? Whatever you want, big or small, just let me know. It doesn’t have to be right now. Whenever you think you’re ready.”

She bit her lip nervously. “Are you sure? Aren’t tattoos really expensive?”

“Yes, but if anyone is going to tattoo you, it’ll be me. I’m not chancing anyone fucking up your perfect skin. I’m serious, Hadley, don’t let anyone else do it, okay? I’m the best, and I’ll do you right.”

She tilted her head, watching me with a small, pleased smile. “Thank you, Elijah. Um, I can’t make an appointment though since I never know when I have free time.”

“If you want, the next time you’re available I’ll make sure you can get your tattoo. No matter if we have to do it early or late.”

She nodded slowly. “Okay.” She repositioned Eli on her hip and waited. “Would you like to stay and watch a movie or something?”

Was Hadley asking me to watch a movie?

“You have no idea how much I’d love that, but I got to get caught up on some graphic designs.”

Her smile waned. “Okay.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her if maybe she’d like to bring them over to my house and watch TV while I got caught up. Just having them close would be enough for me. But we weren’t there yet.

Before that could happen, I had to tell Hadley how I felt about her. I didn’t want to be just her friend—never did if I were being honest. Her age and kids didn’t matter to me.

“How about tomorrow?” I offered.

Her eyes brightened, putting everything in perspective for me. “My sister’s coming in tomorrow. She’s a teacher and wanted to visit us for a few days before school starts back next week. If not for that, I’d love to.”

“Next week, then?”

“Next week.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Hadley

“I met your man friend earlier.”

Dread and jealousy churned in my stomach with Olivia’s words as I got into her car. I didn’t know where it came from, but the only *man friend* I had was Elijah. My older sister was gorgeous. I wondered if Olivia was his type. I bet she was. I wondered if he’d ask her out? These thoughts, coming out of nowhere, irritated me. Olivia was my rock, and she’d never intentionally hurt me, but if those two got together, I’d have to move away and never speak to either of them again.

“Elijah?” I murmured. “Did he flirt or something...?” I couldn’t believe I said that.

“He asked if you needed him to pick you up, but Aunt Olivia told him she’d do it,” Lucy said while Olivia grinned, oddly amused.

I had asked him on my birthday if he’d leave the car seats with me so we could use them while Olivia was in town. That was three days ago, and I hadn’t spoken to him in person since then. He’d texted me asking about Lucy, Eli, and me. It was like Elijah was checking up on us.

“You really like Elijah, don’t you, my Lucy?” Olivia asked as she pulled out of the hospital parking lot.

“Yeah. He’s my best friend.”

My heart stuttered. *He’s my best friend.*

And that was all it took to amplify my own feelings for Elijah Parker. A yearning took hold of me every time he left. I missed Elijah when he wasn’t around. Just once, I’d like to be the person brave enough to ask him to stay. Just once, I’d like to accept his help without questioning it.

“What about you, Hadley?”

“Huh?” I was in a daze.

“What do you think of him?”

“I think he’s too good to be true.”

Olivia smiled. “That means he’s your mommy’s best friend too, Lucy!”
“He likes us,” Lucy agreed.

“Hmmm,” Olivia muttered with Eli asleep on her chest. It was after eight o’clock. Olivia watched the same movies Lucy made Elijah watched. Then, I gave the kids a bath.

“What?” I asked her.

“You haven’t been telling me everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“About Elijah. You’re totally hot for him.”

“Shh!” I hissed, eyes staring toward Lucy’s room. “Will you be quiet? You know Lucy repeats everything she hears and not by accident. My kid’s a menace.”

She chuckled. “But seriously, sis, what are you doing? He’s into you big time. How can you not tell? You’ve got him at your beck and call. You should have seen his face when Lucy ran to him while cutting his grass. I heard it when he asked about you.” Olivia sighed and her gaze flickered toward the ceiling. “He’s completely smitten with you guys.”

I tried to see it through my sister’s eyes. The way Elijah helped us and just came over to be around. It was strange. If he wasn’t interested in us why would he do those things? It definitely wasn’t just about friendship, no matter what Elijah claimed. But still...

“You’ve seen Elijah. Why would he possibly want me? I know I’m not the worst thing to look at, but I’m not the prettiest either. And I’m a mom.”

“Oh my God. You kill me. If you’re ugly, then I’m ugly since everyone thinks we’re twins. We’re not hideous.” She huffed, pointing at my chest. “Not only are you gorgeous, but pregnancy also has given you a bangin’ body. See those bazookas and those hips? He’s probably salivating every time he’s near you and afraid of scaring the skirmish single mom. Admit it. I bet he looks at you, and I don’t mean glimpses, but full-on stares.”

My face heated. “His staring is intense, but I’ve gotten used to it.” Not really. I simply looked away, so I didn’t feel things.

“Okay, that’s it.” Sitting up with Eli still sleeping on her chest, she grabbed my phone off the coffee table and tossed it at me. “This has to stop.”

“What?”

“Hadley, you’re bursting out of your seams. You’re not only beautiful, but you’re a capable woman and a fantastic mom. Who wouldn’t want to be with you? Call him and ask him to take you somewhere. Go to his house or something. Anything.”

My eyes widened and glanced at the phone like it would give me the plague. “Are you crazy? It’s almost nine. What would I ask him to do?”

“You said he’s been over and watched a movie this late so what’s wrong with going to his house right next door or letting him take you out?”

I frowned, feeling scared and a little excited about the possibility. “I don’t know. We’re friends. I don’t want to ruin that.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Well, go be friends with him. I’ll be here with Lucy and Eli. And if you stay out all night, it’s not like you can’t come home first thing in the morning since he’s right next door.” She winked. “Stop thinking. I can see it in your eyes that you really want to do it. For one second, be a woman and admit what you want. Don’t you want to see how he is with you *alone*? He’s good with Lucy. Why not find out how good he can be to you? It’s not a crime to do that. You’re still the most amazing mom even if you take a moment for yourself. You’re so wound up over what a parent should and shouldn’t do. I know it’s because of Scott and his mean-ass family. They make you feel inadequate, and you’re scared of them using Elijah against you. Am I right?”

Panic seized my chest, and I couldn’t breathe. I recalled my phone conversation with Lilly the other day.

Scott told me you have a man around Lucy. Do you know how dangerous men are these days? Heard he was a drug addict with tattoos.

I won’t sit back and let my grandbabies be around someone like that.

Scott’s mom’s idle threats always had a way of terrifying me. Lucy and Eli were mine. But even before Scott and I split up, his mother always had her own input when it came to parenting. It was stressful and only got worse when I made it clear that Scott and I were not getting back together. She kept hinting that she’d take the kids from me. I didn’t think she could, but it scared

and enraged me. How did she think she had the right?

Olivia's words were one hundred percent true. Scott told his mom about Elijah and they both had opinions. I hadn't spoken to Scott's mom since. When she wouldn't shut up, I hung up on her. I only answered Scott through text messages. Things were already a mess with those two. Elijah would be an issue Scott and his family would throw in my face, regardless. Scott had wanted them that weekend, but I denied him. I wanted the kids there for Olivia plus the awful way he acted last time we'd seen him was enough for me to stand my ground.

"They'll cause problems," I finally muttered.

She nodded. "They will. It's all they know how to do."

Stopping myself from crying, I agreed. My voice, just like the truth, was sad. Ever since Scott had saw Elijah, it's been awful.

"So, how about you do what you want, anyway? Your kids will be with you, regardless."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to ask. I'm sure he's busy, anyway." I unlocked my phone and thought of what I should say to him. Suddenly I remembered.

HADLEY: ARE YOU BUSY?

He responded immediately.

ELIJAH: NOT FOR YOU. EVERYTHING OKAY?

The tension in my shoulders eased. What came next felt natural.

HADLEY: IS IT TOO LATE FOR THAT TATTOO? I DON'T KNOW WHEN I'LL HAVE A CHANCE LIKE THIS. MY SISTER OFFERED TO STAY HERE WITH LUCY AND ELI.

ELIJAH: I'LL BE THERE IN THIRTY.

When he disconnected, I slowly lowered the phone. My face was strangely heated. "He said he'd be here in thirty minutes."

"That was fast," Olivia chuckled.

I jumped off the couch. "I need to shave. I'm not sure where I want a tattoo."

She gasped. "You're getting a tattoo tonight? You rebel." As I rushed to my bedroom, Olivia yelled, "Do you have any milk pumped for Eli? I don't want to leave the little guy missing his mom's tit."

“Yeah. In the fridge and freezer.”

Thinking of Eli’s needs, I remembered Lucy. I stopped searching for something to wear and stepped into her room. She was playing with her dolls. “Lucy?”

“Huh?” She looked up at me.

How should I tell her? I didn’t want to just walk out without saying I was leaving. She would hate that, but if I said I was going somewhere with Elijah, I knew she’d want to go. “Mommy’s going out with Elijah. He’s taking me to get a tattoo.”

“Like his?” she asked and stood. “Can I go?”

Having kids made it hard to do things for myself. Lucy always wanted to be included in whatever I did.

“How about you and I order some pizza before they stop delivering? Mommy and Elijah can show us her tattoo when she gets home.” Olivia said from the doorway.

“Can I get one?” Lucy asked.

“If you still want one when you’re older, you can.”

“I don’t think the demons will be cool on you like they are on Elijah,” Lucy said.

I laughed. “Yeah, I want something prettier.”

“Hurry back, okay?” she whispered sweetly.

I pinched her cheek. “I will.”

“Elijah, too.”

“Elijah what?” I asked her, confused.

“Tell him to hurry, too. He’s been taking too long to come visit.”

Olivia and I shared an odd expression between us, then my sister smiled.

“Is this okay?” I whispered as he unlocked the parlor door and flipped on the light switch. The fluorescent lights came on, illuminating my pale skin.

Glancing over his shoulder at me, he smirked. “Why are you whispering?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I’m the owner, and I say it’s fine.” He tossed his keys on the countertop.

I rubbed my hands on my thighs. “I know tattooing is safe for breastfeeding since the ink doesn’t transfer into the milk, but that doesn’t change the risk of infections, diseases—”

“Okay, my cute, timid nurse.” He faced me, stepping closer. “I’m legit, baby. I take what I do seriously. Just because I brought you here tonight doesn’t mean I’m going to do anything any differently. You’ll sign a waiver as any other person would. I’ll get a copy of your I.D. and signature. You’ll sit and watch me open everything to know that it’s new. I run a sterile shop. The only thing that you’re responsible for is aftercare.”

I swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. I’m just nervous.”

“I know.” He pulled out a stool for me, and we both sat at the counter. “Do you know what you want?”

“No,” I admitted with a fake cough. My ears were hot like they were getting red. “This was all kind of spontaneous.”

“How about something small? I’ll work you up to the bigger ones later on.”

I arched a brow at him. “Are you trying to cover me in them?”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “My ink all over you is an enticing thought, but it’s always about what you want.”

I forgot my left from my right. His words turned my mind into mush. “Okay. What do you think I should get?”

He bristled. “It’s not about me or anyone else. This is about you. You think enough on a daily basis about everyone else. *Anytime* you’re with me, think of you.” He leaned over and grabbed a sketch pad and pencil. “A greedy or spoiled you doesn’t sound too bad,” he mused, tipping his head up.

I couldn’t fight the smile. “Stop.”

He pinned me with a heated stare. “What do you like so we can figure this out? What would you not mind having on your skin forever?”

I made a ‘hmm’ sound in my throat, still smirking as I thought about it. “I like pretty things.”

“Pretty things?” There was a mocking tone to his voice.

“Don’t laugh at me. I don’t know. I want it to be something pretty, but it has to be important to me. Maybe Lucy and Eli’s name?”

He did another thoughtful nod as he studied his sketchpad. “I agree. Beautiful people need beautiful art on them.”

“I like yours. There are so many. I know I haven’t seen all of them, but I really love your tattoos.” Did I sound a little breathless?

He looked up. “You’ll get around to seeing them all,” he said gruffly before focusing back on his notebook.

What? My heart raced. I could practically hear the blood pumping in my ears.

“How about an infinity sign with Lucy and Eli’s name wrapped into it on each end? I know it’s cliché and overused, but I’d give it my own twist. And later on, if you have more kids, we can add another infinity sign joining them together.” He tapped his pencil rapidly against the paper, not meeting my eyes.

“I never thought about having more than two,” I told him.

He stilled and glanced up. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “But that was when I thought I’d always be with Scott. Now I don’t know. It’s a scary thought. To start over, especially taking a chance with a different man. What if he didn’t stick around or cheated on me like Scott did? I never imagined I’d be a woman that would have kids with different fathers either. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but until Scott cheated, I foolishly thought he would be my one and only.” I smacked my hands against my thighs and sighed. “Ugh. Sorry. I tend to say too much around you. But I think I’d like the infinity sign. Could you draw it so that I could see if I’d like it?”

Shaking his head, Elijah coughed and looked back down. “Yeah. I can draw something.” He started sketching before pausing again. “It really hurts hearing that someone as beautiful and vibrant as you was ever with someone who—”

He stopped, took a deep breath, but just resumed drawing.

What was he going to say?

“I don’t regret anything, you know. That would mean forsaking Lucy and Eli, and they are the best parts of me.”

He slowly smiled. “I think your best parts are all of you.”

“Does that include Lucy and Eli?” I held my breath.

“I said *all* parts of you, did I not?” He frowned. “I’m offended you’d ask that.”

“Wow,” I said amused. “Look how far we’ve come. Remember what a jerk you were?”

“Hush. I’m concentrating.”

“You stole Lucy’s chips.”

He smiled. “She dropped them.”

“And why did she drop them?”

“I was an asshole. There. Are you satisfied?”

“Yes,” I said smugly.

His expression turned somber as he drew. “I’m glad that happened. The thought of not knowing you guys.” He pointed to his chest slowly before rubbing it. “Hurts right here.”

My mouth parted slightly as I watched him. I stood, needing a second away from him just so I could breathe. Everything he said was always so... beautiful...perfect...*right* to my ears.

I’d never known that feeling. It made me think he might want more than friendship. Could I trust that happiness like I desperately wanted? Running my fingers through my hair, I thought about it as I walked around and studied all the drawings and paintings on the wall. Every single one of them had a dark and morbid vibe. Demons and naked women... Violent war drawings with dead zombie soldiers... Female vampires feeding on men... I glanced over at Elijah who was hunched over the desk drawing. He really was different. Darker than other men I’d met yet gentle and kind in all the ways that counted. A low and pleasant hum warmed my blood, the sensation crawling between my thighs. I clenched my legs together, then unclenched, turning myself on. Trying to decode who Elijah was as a man was burning me to liquid fire. Was he a gentle, caring lover? Was he rough? Was he somewhere in between? Could he give me a bit of both?

“Did you draw all these?” I said in a raspy voice.

“Most. Wendy and Lance did a few.”

I just knew that Elijah’s were all the artwork with the demons. He was covered in creepy ones that I suddenly wished to trace with my fingers. I trembled, and that’s when I noticed the next painting. A blonde female draped across the lap of a crouched demon. Her naked breasts arched up in the air as blood flowed from the demon’s lips—her blood. Instead of terror, ecstasy shone on her face. The demon gazed at her almost with yearning, like she was so far away despite her blood dripping from his fangs and lips. He knew he shouldn’t have her, but he couldn’t help himself. And her breasts seemed to be full of leaking milk?

That one was my favorite. Deep down, instead of princes, I thought maybe every woman wanted gentle monsters. Someone strong—scary enough to keep all the bad things away—and gentle only to those he loved. I knew where I went wrong. I’d stumbled upon a faux prince, having never met a monster before. Monsters weren’t easy to approach, but princes came too easily. Maybe you had to deal with someone easy to learn what to do and not to do just in case a monster showed up.

“Did you paint this one?” I asked.

He lifted his head and nodded. Elijah went back to drawing, then abruptly did a double-take and gawked. Something akin to panic flashed in his wide brown eyes. A hint of worry seeped into his voice. “Why?”

“I love it,” I said heatedly. “Will you let me buy it? One day I’ll have a house, and I want it to go in my bedroom. Or honestly, maybe my closet away from prying eyes.”

Elijah flinched, stood, and made his way to me. He studied the painting before looking at me. “You really like it?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Because it’s so dark and you’re so…” His gaze skimmed over me, and I fought the urge to squirm. I couldn’t prevent the desire flowing freely from me to him, though. That would be impossible.

I stared at the artwork. “Studying this picture makes me wonder what the demon’s thinking as he gazes at her. I wonder how it’d feel for someone to look at me that way.”

When I glimpsed at Elijah, his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. The heat between us was palpable, and I wondered if he felt it too. Fudge, how could he not? My breasts were heavy and aching. I shuddered with an overwhelming need for Elijah.

"It's yours to take if you want it," he uttered.

"Really?"

He gave me a firm nod. "Come on. I'm almost finished." He took my hand and led me back over to the stools. He was warm to the touch. I wondered how much warmer he could be.

Thirty minutes later, he was finished drawing my infinity sign. I loved it the moment I saw it. It was made of tiny sunflowers and roses. Lucy's name curved one corner while Eli's around the other. It wasn't big and for my first, I was glad. The nerves hit the moment he asked, "Where do you want it?"

"Um," I glanced around, examining myself slowly. "The center of my back toward the top, maybe?"

"Come here." He stood and beckoned for me to follow. "You'll have to take off the T-shirt." My mouth dropped. "You're the one that chose the back." He was right. "You can hold your shirt to your chest once you take it off if that makes you more comfortable. The bra shouldn't be a problem since you're wanting it high in on your back."

I nodded nervously. "Yeah."

Elijah gathered everything he needed—sterilizing the area and opening a new needle. He kept glancing at me as he did everything as if to prove how clean an operation he ran. I just rolled my eyes and smirked. The moment Elijah turned the other way, I took off my shirt and cradled it to my chest. When he saw that I was ready, he waved me forward. I turned around and let him place the outline on my back. He pointed toward the mirror next to us. "See if that's where you want it."

After checking the placement, I sat down. When Elijah noticed my nervousness, he reminded me that if I could survive pregnancy then I could handle this. He said some people described the needle feeling like tiny bee stings. My apprehension eased as he began. The tiny jabbing pain was nothing I couldn't handle. It hurt but not enough to be nervous over. The

gun's buzzing sound was more intimidating than the pain. Honestly, I was more focused on Elijah's heat against my skin than the discomfort. The glove around his hand did nothing to mask his warmth. In fact, the thought only made it worse. So close, his touch was...

"You okay?" he murmured behind me.

"Mm-hmm."

Two hours later, Elijah was finished. "Go check it out in the mirror." He watched as I got up and stood in front of the mirror, gazing over my shoulder. It was beautiful. No colors were added, instead, he used different shades of black. Whatever he'd done, it was perfect. The sunflowers were feminine yet the black ink and Elijah's drawing gave it an edgier vibe.

"I love it." I caught his pleased expression as I faced him.

After Elijah wrapped a plastic film over it, I put on my shirt while he cleaned up. It was after midnight, and Olivia texted me an hour ago that Lucy finally fell asleep.

While I waited, I said, "Thanks. I know this was last minute, but I'm really glad I got the chance to do this."

"I'm here for whatever you need me for."

I tilted my head at him. He was sterilizing his area again, wiping everything down. I couldn't read past the look of utter concentration on his face. Kind of hard to figure out what he meant when he said stuff like that to me.

All I heard was *I'm here* and my body reacted. Elijah would be the type to spoil me, wouldn't he? I couldn't imagine him with another woman. The thought alone made me angry and hurt. It made me think... *I want to be spoiled, loved, adored, and ravished.* By him. It was a powerful sensation.

"How long is your sister staying?" Elijah asked once he was finished, approaching me.

"Two more days." I waited beside him as he shut off the lights.

Elijah opened the door for me, and we walked out. Suddenly, Elijah turned and his strong hand bumped into mine. Elijah's fingers slid over mine, warmth flowing freely from him to me. I said nothing as he intertwined our fingers as we walked to the car. I studied the side of his face, heart on my

sleeve, as he walked me around the truck and opened the door for me. It was like he was easing me into something. My pulse sped up as I got in. When I turned, Elijah was still there, only closer.

“I’ve got to head to my other parlor, so I won’t be able to take you to work this week.”

I couldn’t mask my disappointment. “Oh.” I waved my hand in the air. “It wasn’t your job to take me. My parents don’t mind doing it.”

He placed his hand on my knee, his thumb rubbing across it. “I want you all to come to my house when I get back next weekend. I’ll order some takeout and let Lucy pick us a movie.”

I would have smiled if he weren’t touching me, but all I could think of was his hand on me. “Hadley?”

Locking eyes with his, I whispered, “Why are you so sweet?”

His hand cupped my knee firmly, *possessively*. “You’re the only one that would call me that. That’s not a word someone would use to describe me.”

“You are though.”

“Only for you and yours.”

“Elijah...”

His gaze fell on my lips. He swallowed hard and drew in a deep, pained breath before he turned away. “Let’s get you home.”

My rattled brain wanted me to reply, *Let’s get you inside me*. The idea frightened me yet cemented itself in my head. These thoughts were unlike me. I was so tuned to him at that moment I felt magnetic.

Panting hard and feeling achy, Elijah drove me home. I briefly thought of the painting and Elijah... Next to me... His tattoos... Naked... Wanting me...pushing inside of me.

Elijah, you’re suffocating me with your firm gentleness. I truly believed him when he said that he liked spending time with us. It wasn’t about getting into my pants with him, but lately...I thought maybe, he wanted me as more than a friend. With Elijah, I thought I could trust him with my body and heart.

Maybe I was reading him wrong. The monster didn’t want me. There was

no way he could feel like I did and not do anything.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Hadley

ELIJAH: I FORGOT YOUR PAINTING LAST NIGHT. I'LL GIVE IT TO YOU WHEN I'M BACK.

HADLEY: OKAY :)

Two days later...

HADLEY: ARE YOU BUSY? LUCY WANTS TO CALL...

My phone rang two minutes later. I handed it to Lucy as she bounced up and down. “Elijah?” her blue eyes widened as she answered Elijah’s call. “Guess what I got! Mommy got me a shirt with a unicorn on it. When are you coming home? I want to show you.” She kept talking so fast that I wondered if she gave Elijah time to respond. “I’m going to school, Mommy said.” She giggled, clutching the phone as she walked around. “Yeah, I’m excited. No, I will have boy and girl friends. Nooo, boyfriends. I’m too young, Mommy said.” More giggling.

Her words made me think back to when Lucy was two. Olivia had her going on a boyfriend tirade for months when she brought her boyfriend home. It convinced Lucy that she needed one as well. Every guy she saw was *her boyfriend*. It was cute until it became embarrassing. Lucy turned every man she saw—young or old—into potential boyfriends for herself. Thankfully, it stopped. I would kill Elijah for bringing that word up.

“Okay. I miss you. I’m going to call Daddy now and tell him.” She hung up the phone.

“You didn’t say bye,” I told her.

I wondered how Elijah took her words. After getting my tattoo, I was curious how we fit into his life. I liked Elijah. Okay, I really, really liked him. Of course, I wondered if he felt the same about me—about all of us.

“Oops. I forgot. Will he be upset?” Lucy frowned. “Can you call him again? I don’t want him to be mad at me.”

I dropped to my knees. “Elijah won’t be mad. When he comes home, he

wants to watch a movie with us.”

She walked up and hugged me. “Can Elijah give me a tattoo?”

“You already know the answer to that, and don’t think a hug will change anything. Tattoos hurt.” I tickled her sides, and she laughed. “Do you want to call Daddy now and tell him about your new clothes?”

She nodded. I dialed his number and handed the phone over to her. Things weren’t good between Scott and me, but Lucy seemed to have forgotten that outburst the last time he was over. I was glad but worried all the same. Scott still mentioned Elijah through text messages that I mostly ignored unless it was about Lucy and Eli. I hoped Scott didn’t start on Lucy again. Now that I was more aware of what I was feeling toward Elijah, I didn’t want my ex ruining the relationship between Lucy and Elijah—even if we were only friends.

“Daddy! Guess what! I got new clothes for school. Yeah, Mommy took me.” She looked up at me hesitantly. “Just me, Bubby, and Mom.” Crestfallen, Lucy handed the phone to me. “Here. Daddy wants to talk to you.”

Keeping my emotions in check, I grabbed the phone. “Yeah?”

“How about I come over tonight?” That was the first thing he said to me.

“Why?”

Long sigh. “I miss you. I miss us. This is ridiculous. You don’t really want to raise them this way, do you?”

“What way?”

“Apart. I fucked up, Hadley, but we can put it behind us.”

Stepping away from Lucy, I ventured into the bathroom and shut the door slightly. “Just stop. It’s been a year, and you still think what you did is something I’m going to forgive. We’re never getting back together. Please, I want to get along for Lucy and Eli’s sake.”

“Let’s get back together then. What are you going to do? Raise my kids with someone else? That *neighbor* is bad news.” The way he said neighbor implied he thought Elijah was more than that. He was, but that wasn’t Scott’s business. “I know what this is, though. You’ll get it out of your system and afterward, you won’t get to say shit to me for what I did.”

“Out of my system?” I whisper shouted. “First off, we’re not together. Second, you don’t know Elijah. He’s never once tried anything with me.”

He snorted. “Okay.”

“Listen to you.” Scott’s words angered me. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and told myself he wasn’t worth this aggravation. The only thing I ever had to speak to him about was our kids. He had no right to anything else. “Lucy called to talk to you. If you won’t talk to her, I have no reason to stay on the phone.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” he spat out.

“Will you please talk to Lucy? She’s excited about starting preschool and wanted to tell you about her clothes.”

“That’s what I’m saying. I can come over tonight. Imagine how excited she’d be for us to all be together.”

He scared me with words like that. If he talked to Lucy like that, he’d make things hard on me by planting ideas in her head.

“She’d be happy if you’d just call her every day.”

“Hadley…”

“You’re not coming over. If you want to spend time with Lucy and Eli, I can meet you somewhere or they can spend the night with you.”

“Why? Do you have something to hide?” He swore under his breath. “Not tried anything my ass.”

Tears pricked my eyes. He mentally drained me. How could I have ever loved that man? “It’s because I don’t trust you. You take advantage of Lucy and use her to get to me.”

“I do not—”

“Yes, you do, Scott. Instead of talking to me, you should be listening to your daughter who asked to call you.”

“Put her on the phone,” he hissed, anger laced in his tone.

My heart dropped. “Not if you’ll upset her. Just be happy—”

“You should have thought of that before.”

His words frosted my heart. I didn’t doubt for a second that he’d hurt his

own daughter's feelings to hurt me. I hung up and dropped to my knees, shutting the bathroom door the rest of the way as I did. I didn't want Lucy to hear me cry.

Just like that, all those good feelings I'd had lately broke into pieces.

"That's not your house!" Lucy yelled the next day. I glimpsed over to Elijah's where Lucy was staring and saw a very tall, sturdy-built woman on his porch. She had dark hair and eyes and they were focused on us at Lucy's declaration. "That's Elijah's house!"

The older woman tilted her head at her, eyes brightening like someone just told her she won the lottery. "Lucy?"

Lucy placed her hands on her hips, an intimidating glower that wasn't very effective slashed across her tiny features. "How do you know me?"

"Elijah talks about you. I'm his momma."

Lucy and I both took her in at the same time.

"And you two must be Hadley and Eli!" She was extremely excited and before I knew it, she was making her way down the steps toward us. "Oh, goodness you're even cuter in person." She stopped in front of Lucy.

Lucy peered around her back toward Elijah's. "Is Elijah home now?"

"He'll be home tomorrow." She beamed down at Lucy, then glanced at me. "Beautiful daughter for a beautiful mother." I blushed at her compliment. "Would you guys like to come in? Elijah doesn't know that I stopped by. I wanted to do a little cleaning while he was away." She winked at me. "He's not a duster, not much of a cleaner or cook either."

Lucy covered her mouth, giggling like the idea of Elijah being that way was funny. "I got called into work on my day off." She frowned, so I quickly added. "But maybe just until my dad shows up."

One second inside Elijah's home, and I knew his one weak point. He was bad at adulting. Or maybe just picking up after himself. Or simply just bad at living alone.

His house wasn't filthy, just lacking. The two-story home didn't have

much in it. His living room was covered in papers, pencils, and all the things I associated with his drawings and paints. They were scattered chaotically over his table and couch. There wasn't much in his kitchen either. I spotted takeout in his trash can.

“Okay, I'll admit it. My son isn't very dirty. Just unorganized.” His mother placed her hands on her hips and smiled down thoughtfully at his mess of papers. “You know, I used to worry about him.” She picked up this creepy drawing and tapped it with amusement. “Odd sort. He has a strange way with art, and it honestly scared me. I thought he was missing something.”

“Missing something?” I frowned, bouncing Eli on my hip.

“Missing an emotion that made him compassionate and caring. Don't get me wrong, I know my boy can love because he loves me but as for the rest of the world...” She threw her hand up. “He never showed the slightest interest. I honestly thought he'd never feel fondness for anything or anyone, but now I know I shouldn't have worried. It's not that he couldn't feel, it's just he never found anyone worth caring for.”

I grabbed one of his sketches and held it up. Like most of them, it was dark and strange. I tilted my head thoughtfully. “I like his illustrations. I'm looking forward to learning more about this part of him.” I cocked my head the opposite way, still inspecting the paper. “I think Elijah likes what he likes is all. Your description of him surprises me. I've only known him as a caring man.” I chuckled, realizing that all of our new encounters with him replaced the awful first impression. “Well, except for maybe the first few times we saw him.”

When I glanced over at her, she had a wide grin on her face.

“Elijah really likes demons, doesn't he, Mommy?” Lucy said out of nowhere.

“Your children are beautiful.” Elijah's mom grabbed Eli's hand and played with him. “It would be a shame for you not to have more one day. That's what I think.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Elijah

HADLEY: WE MET YOUR MOM TODAY. SHE TRIED TO TAKE LUCY HOME.

ELIJAH: I'M SURPRISED SHE DIDN'T TRY TO TAKE YOU ALL HOME.

HADLEY: ACTUALLY... LOL! WILL YOU BE HOME TOMORROW?

Drying my hair off with a towel as I stepped out of my hotel bathroom, my smile was damn near impossible to prevent. Okay, I wasn't trying.

ELIJAH: YEAH, LEAVING THE PARLOR AROUND 2. I CAN PICK YOU UP FROM WORK IF YOU'RE WORKING TOMORROW.

HADLEY: CAR SEATS AREN'T IN YOUR TRUCK, REMEMBER? LOL, THEY'RE AT MY APARTMENT SINCE OLIVIA WENT HOME.

Well, fuck. That sucked. I was dying to see her and her kids. I couldn't get it out of my head that Hadley's asshole of an ex would be there trying to weasel his way back into her life while I was away. I had no right to get angry. In a lot of ways that counted, I was always going to be the outsider no matter how much I didn't feel like one.

I rubbed my chest. That thought made me fucking miserable as all hell.

I knew Hadley had no interest in getting back with Scott. That much was obvious, but I also saw a mom that would do anything for her kids' happiness, and that scared the hell out of me. Hadley already admitted to me about him taking advantage of his own daughter to use against her.

Lucy and Eli's dad enraged me. I couldn't for the life of me understand how he could destroy what he had with Hadley. The man didn't seem to notice the perfection in his own kids.

Did he not realize someone would take one look at what he destroyed and fall madly in love with all the pieces he left behind? That was probably why he was mean to Hadley. He figured it out.

Only it was too late. I was going to do everything in my power to show Hadley that she and her kids were better off without him. That I could belong with them.... That they were everything I never knew I wanted. That a part of

me was always there with them even when I wasn't and that was never going to change. The only thing that's changed was the way I saw things.

ELIJAH: I'LL SEE YOU GUYS TOMORROW WHEN I GET HOME?

HADLEY: THAT SOUNDS GOOD. LUCY WON'T STOP ASKING WHEN WE'LL GET TO SEE YOU AGAIN. SHE MISSES YOU.

Remembering our time alone at the parlor, the soft and heated way her gaze watched me, I swallowed. I wanted to take her in my arms right then and there but I didn't want to do that the very first time I had her alone. No matter how much I thought about stuffing my hand in her jeans and sliding my fingers inside her pussy until she came. Pleasing her was the only thing on my mind. She was so *perfect*, and I wanted nothing more than to show her how much she deserved a thorough night in bed with someone who'd cherish every inch of her creamy flesh. That someone only ever being me.

Calm your shit, Elijah.

Great, I was sporting a massive erection. It was frustrating. I didn't know when it would be the right time to show my intentions to Hadley. She was delicate, fragile from being cheated on, and she was also a parent.

But all of those things only made me want her more so that I could spoil her.

Fuck yes, I wanted to spoil her spirit, her mind, and every inch of her flesh.

ELIJAH: WHAT ABOUT YOU? DO YOU MISS ME?

HADLEY: YES.

One word, but it was everything.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Hadley

“Why are you wearing a dress?” Lucy blinked up at me as I fiddled with the straps of my yellow sundress.

I glanced down at her before checking my reflection again. “Is something wrong with a dress?”

“You never wear one,” she said and mortification set in.

Oh, fudge. If my four-year-old took notice of my change of clothes after getting off work and thought it was weird, would Elijah think so too? I wanted to look pretty, but I didn’t want it to be obvious. I was already self-conscious about my breasts. I couldn’t wear a bra with the dress and since breastfeeding, I’d felt oddly off-balance, considering my breasts were larger than the rest of my body.

“Are we not going to Elijah’s now?” she asked with a frown.

“Yes, we’re still going over to Elijah’s.” I fussed with the hem. “You’re right. It would be silly to wear this when it’s getting dark.”

Lucy bounced up and down with a grin. “No, it’s pretty. You’re pretty, Mommy! I think Elijah will like it.”

My eyes widened like saucers. *Whoa*. Where did that come from? My daughter scared me. I wondered if maybe she listened in on a lot more to Olivia and my conversations than I realized.

“Why would Elijah like it?” I asked her cautiously, wanting to know my daughter’s train of thought.

“Mamaw said he likes you.”

“Did she now?”

A firm nod. “Said he likes me and Eli too, that’s why he spends time with us. Is that why we don’t hang out with Daddy anymore because you don’t like him no more?”

My heart fell to the floor as I bent down. “Lucy, you can see your dad anytime you want to. Mommy and Daddy just can’t be together, anymore. It’s too hard, and it makes me sad. I’ll explain this to you when you’re older.”

“Daddy makes you cry a lot. I don’t want you to cry, anymore.” Tears pricked at my eyes, so I wrapped my arms around Lucy and held her.
“Mom?”

“Yeah, Lucy?”

“Daddy said Elijah wouldn’t be our friend one day. Why?”

“I hope that never happens,” I murmured.

“Me too. I don’t want him to stop bringing me stuff.”

I chuckled. “Lucy!”

“I want to bring my chocolate milk to share with Elijah.” She pushed away from me, and I smiled.

“Okay. That’s fine.”

“Can I bring my pony coloring book to show him?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask him to buy me another car?”

“No.”

“You’re wearing a dress,” Elijah stated the second he opened his door. He oged me for a moment before stepping to the side so we could enter. As we walked past him, his hot gaze seared into me.

“Mommy looks pretty, doesn’t she?” Lucy said, carrying the diaper bag. As soon as she crossed the threshold, she dropped it in the hallway with a huff like her work was done. “I should wear one, too!”

“Did you wear that for me?” There was a gruffness to his tone. His question and the way he said it made me tremble.

Turning around with Eli in my arms, I pretended not to know what he was talking about. “Olivia made me buy it…” I glimpsed down at myself. “Does it not suit me? Oh, fudge, it looks awful, doesn’t it? I just don’t look good in dresses.”

“Lucy, your mother is blind,” Elijah told Lucy then turned to me. “You’re absolutely gorgeous.” He leaned forward, grabbing a strand of blonde hair hanging between my breasts, letting it slide between his long fingers. I held

my breath until he stepped away.

Lucy trailed through the hallway, peeking her head into the living room. “What happened to all the drawings?”

“I put them upstairs,” Elijah said. “I ordered pizza. Is that okay with you?” He looked at me again. I nodded, grabbing Eli’s hand when he pulled at my dress strap. “Um, I have a box of brownies at my apartment. If you want, I can go back and get them...”

“Yes! I want brownies!” Lucy answered.

“Do you have a mixer?” I asked Elijah.

He scratched his chin. “I think so.”

I walked into his kitchen and checked to make sure he had one before I said, “I’ll be right back.”

Elijah stopped me as I stepped into the hallway. I gaped at him like he was a stranger when he held out his hands for Eli. My gaze went from his hands to his face.

“I can hold him.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah. You’ll only take a minute. I can watch Eli while Lucy supervises me, right Luce?”

Lucy giggled. “Right.”

“She can tell me what to do,” he went on, putting a smile on Lucy’s face.

“I can do it!”

Grinning at them, I handed Eli over. Elijah placed one hand on Eli’s bottom and wrapped an arm around his back, holding my son against his chest. Eli stared at Elijah and then laughed. “This isn’t so bad,” Elijah admitted.

The two of them together. A giant, tattooed man holding my baby? Said man being Elijah. Ovaries exploded.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to get him?” I asked Elijah as I placed

the brownies in the oven. He was propped against the counter watching me with Eli in his arms facing forward so that he could watch me too. Lucy was in the living room drawing.

“He’s fine until he needs a tit,” was Elijah’s crass reply.

“Don’t say it like that.” I laughed, moving toward the sink to clean the dishes.

“He needs to learn to share, hogging them all to himself,” said Elijah.

What?

I froze. Heat lit up my body. Thankfully, my back was turned, so he couldn’t see my red face. Not seeing his expression, though, was torturous. Was he joking or hinting at something totally different?

The wooden counter creaked as he pushed himself off of it. *God bless...* Elijah was behind me, and the heat from him seeped through me. Eli’s little fingers grabbed at my hair and pulled. I felt nothing. My attention was focused on how Elijah leaned over me.

“You really are a pretty little thing, Hadley,” his voice was deeper, husky—purely *sexual*. “Instead of gorgeous, I was thinking more along the lines of how fucking edible you look in that dress.”

Damn, I thought. I meant, *fudge!*

His words spoke to a spot much lower than my stomach. I was speechless, but were words necessary? Suddenly, I didn’t know what to say or how to react. Scott had been the only man I slept with. The idea of sex with Elijah left me shaky. “Elijah...?”

I didn’t have to worry about doing anything though, now that Eli was touching my hair, it wasn’t enough for my little boy. He cried and jerked me out of the sexual trance Elijah put me in. “I think he wants his momma,” Elijah murmured, his voice still raw.

When I faced them, Elijah was right *there*. He had me pressed against the counter. He handed Eli over with barely an inch separating us. Eli was rooting around for a nipple, and Elijah did something even more brazen. Hooking his finger underneath one of my dress straps, with a slight tug, Elijah revealed one of my boobs, nipple and all. I helped Eli find it, and he nursed. Elijah watched him, then he was watching me, and I was breathing

hard.

He leaned forward, having to lower himself to reach the side of my face with his own. “The things I want to do to you...” he rumbled in my ear. I closed my eyes. I could hear my own panting. “If you’ll let me... You, Lucy, and Eli *stay* instead of leaving tonight.” I gasped silently as a heavy hand slipped up my dress, sliding along my thigh. He found the edge of my panties and paused. He leaned away, his dark, sinful gaze staring down at me as he did. “You’re not making me stop,” he murmured lowly. “Hadley, are you with me?” He traced the edge of my chin with his index finger.

I couldn’t speak. I didn’t know what to say or do, all I knew was that I’d let him do anything to me the second we were alone. The doorbell rang, and I jumped. The smallest smile touched Elijah’s lips. “Pizza’s here.” His hand fell off my thigh but the other remained at my chin. When my gaze fell to the floor, he grabbed my arm. “Am I scaring you?” he asked softly. “I’ll stop if I am, but I want this. I want *you*.”

Oh, fudge. I was far from afraid. He turned my body into a noodle.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I whispered.

“Is that the pizza?” Lucy’s bare feet padded over the wooden floor as Elijah stepped away from me. I sucked in some much-needed air.

I kept thinking about what he said as we ate and watched the movie Lucy picked out. *Stay*... As tempting as those words were, I couldn’t. I had no reasonable explanation for Lucy. I had no idea what was going on between Elijah and me, but I wanted...

It wasn’t fear I felt—although I might feel it tomorrow—despite Elijah’s deliberate gaze that stayed with me the entire movie. The only emotion coursing through me was my heady desire for him.

Lucy rubbed her eyes. It was a little after ten, and I knew she would’ve crashed already if we weren’t at Elijah’s. “Tell Elijah goodbye,” I told Lucy as we walked into the hallway and put on our shoes.

Elijah hung his head but remained quiet.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” Lucy asked as he bent down so she could hug him.

He watched me nervously for an answer. I realized he might think he

screwed up earlier, but there was no way I could tell him he didn't so I said, "I want to see him tomorrow so, maybe he'll come to see us."

Elijah visibly perked up at my words. That made me feel special like I had power over his emotions because he liked me. "Yeah, you will."

He walked us to our apartment despite me telling him he didn't need to. We said our goodbyes. Elijah was reluctant and made sure I could hear it in his voice. It took thirty minutes to give Lucy a bath and put her in bed. Eli was easier, going to sleep after his bath and boob time. The moment they were asleep, I found my phone and sent Elijah the text I'd been wanting to ever since he had me in his kitchen melting from his touch.

HADLEY: DO YOU WANT TO COME UP? LUCY AND ELI ARE ASLEEP.

To make sure he knew what I meant, I added:

HADLEY: WE HAVE TO BE QUIET.

Two minutes later, there was a soft rap on my apartment door. Tiptoeing across the kitchen, I opened the door and there he was, dressed in the same dark jeans and shirt from earlier. The same raw hunger shone in his eyes.

Elijah invaded my space and forced me back a step as he came close. He shut the door behind him, locking the deadbolt while never taking his eyes off of me. "I thought I fucked-up earlier with you." His voice was low, dark, and sweet all wrapped into one perfect man.

I shook my head and let my eyes trace the planes of his wide chest, remembering how he looked shirtless. His hand wrapped around me and gripped my butt before pulling me flush against me. For a moment, I was on my tiptoes, and then Elijah lifted me higher. My palms flattened on his chest as he carried me across the room. Elijah was so powerful that he did it with one arm as his other hand was occupied caressing my butt. His touch dampened my panties and ignited a fire within me. Everything about Elijah's actions was purely sexual already pushing me to the edge.

He placed me on my feet long enough to wrench my dress over my hips. Then he carried me over to the kitchen table. The wood creaked beneath me but it didn't collapse.

One minute with Elijah and everything I knew about sex seemed dull and wrong. I'd never been manhandled and that was all Elijah seemed to like doing. What had I been missing?

Elijah rubbed his palms against the sides of my legs like it was a battle between gentle and rough. In the dimly lit room I could see Elijah's hesitation. His eyes roved over me, unsure what he should do next.

He snaked his hand behind my neck. My heart beat wild in anticipation of our first kiss. Panting heavily, Elijah's eyes clouded with a fierce sexual haze before he leaned in, and captured my lips—his five o'clock shadow scraped along my nose and chin. His tongue swept along my seam, seeking permission. He pulled it back and tried again. That time I parted for him, the dark mocha taste of him stealing all senses as our tongues met. My core throbbed as he gripped my neck more firmly and devoured my mouth like he was starved for me. Our heavy breathing, like a beautifully scripted love song, filled the room.

Elijah's hand slid over my shoulder and grabbed my strap and it fell from my shoulder. He tugged at the fabric until my breast came free. As he cupped my boob—handling it rougher than I was used to—I moaned. Elijah continued kissing, flicking his tongue over mine before he dragged his mouth away. He placed his forehead against mine and then glanced down at my breast. When he slid his thumb and forefinger over my puckered nipple and pinched, I cried out. He tugged harder and squeezed. Milk spilled out. I raked my fingers through his hair.

“Holy fuck, you're the sexiest thing I've ever seen.”

I felt my face burning, not out of embarrassment. I was just so turned on.

He pulled at my other strap, not satisfied until he had both my breasts on display. He stepped away and admired me. “I've never seen anyone more perfect. *You're* perfect. And I'm going to spend the rest of the night worshipping every inch of you.”

He bent down taking each of my breasts into his hands. Suddenly his lips were on my nipples. I sighed and gripped the edge of the table. His tongue flicked out, teeth caught and tugged just enough...Panting, I grabbed his hair again. He sucked and lapped giving each nipple attention. When I heard Elijah swallowing, it registered. He was drinking my milk!

I didn't know whether to be disgusted or flattered. It should have been strange at the least, but it wasn't. I was too into Elijah and how good he made me feel to be self-conscious.

I started to fall backward, unaccustomed to feeling so much at once. He lifted his head and dark animalistic eyes swept over me. Elijah kissed along my neck easing me onto my back. The joy my soul felt turned into an aching anticipation between my thighs. I was a trembling mess as Elijah's palm splayed on my stomach. He gazed at me with so much admiration before moving on to my thighs. He spread them further apart and bent my legs until my feet were on the table's edge. My dress was bunched up around my waist. Elijah tugged at my panties until they were off. The next thing I knew, Elijah buried his face between my legs catching me by surprise.

"Ah!" I moaned.

He rubbed his finger over my clit, and my back arched. My body shook as I started to come in his mouth. Elijah gave a satisfying groan and drank his fill. While his mouth sucked, he shoved his thick fingers inside me. The man worked magic leaving me writhing and crying out. When I thought I could take no more, he slipped in another finger. Then he gently bit along the inside of my thigh working back to my clit.

"*Elijahhhh*," I cried out as I came like a tsunami all over his face. He didn't relent, even when my body convulsed and shuddered against him. He kissed along my thigh softly, quietly, his fingers slowing as if to give me a second.

Just when my body started to relax, Elijah did it all over again. Minutes later, I reached my peak again. That was a first for me—multiple orgasms.

My body was limp as he stood and leaned over me, his digits still pressed inside me. He dragged his teeth over my bottom lip allowing me to taste myself. Elijah whispered, "Baby, you'll have to be quiet, or you'll wake them. I'm far from finished with you."

I trembled and nodded as he curved his fingers inside me. My back arched again, and Elijah kissed me deeply, but softly this time. I placed my hand over his and raised my pelvis, urging him to a quicker pace. He groaned. "Jesus fuck, you're so precious. I don't deserve to touch you." I kissed his neck. "Is Eli in your room?" I nodded. "The sofa then. I don't trust you not to be loud."

I whimpered my protest as his fingers left my body. Elijah scooped me up with him. He placed me on my feet, pushing the sundress down over my hips until it pooled at my feet. My skin prickled with the awareness that I was

completely naked in front of that man. The thought was as thrilling as it was terrifying. Stretch marks lined my breasts, but I saw nothing but desire in his dark eyes. The hard, long length of his erection trapped inside his jeans was another reminder that despite all the changes to my body after becoming a mom, Elijah was completely into whatever he saw when he looked at me.

But I couldn't be the only naked person in the room. I grabbed the bottom of his shirt, and he helped me lift it over his head, tossing it to the floor. I took him in. His muscled chest was peppered with dark hair. It was sparse—only noticeable up close as I traced his tattoos with my fingers. I dug my toes into the carpet.

I loved everything about him.

Feeling bold, I stepped closer and placed a kiss above his right nipple. I felt more than saw his hand move to his back pockets. He tossed his wallet on the couch before grabbing me by the waist and turning me around as he flopped down on the couch with me on his lap. My knees were at his sides, his giant erection pressed between my thighs. Heat soared low in my belly despite his jeans separating us.

I ran my hands over his broad chest as I leaned forward and kissed him. He rubbed my arms up and down, then he cupped my butt, rocking me back and forth along his erection. Animalistic sounds came from deep down in Elijah's throat. The guttural noise went straight to my pussy. He pinched and pulled at my nipples.

"Elijah," I whimpered. "*Please.*" I needed to know how he felt inside me before I drowned in all these incredible sensations I experienced.

I placed my hand over the tent in his jeans and gripped him, sliding my fingers along his length. He was big. Suddenly I wanted to see every inch of him. Elijah started to unzip his jeans, and I moved back to give him room. Seconds later, Elijah's jeans were around his knees. I gasped. The man went commando, and I got my first look at his dark, veiny cock, bobbing forward. He was so hard and thick, almost painfully so. How was he holding back? I wanted him to get his release more than I wanted my third one.

As I reached out, he placed his hand on mine and brought it over his hard, straining erection and fisted it, dragging my palm up and down roughly. I moaned at the feel of him while his other hand opened his wallet and pulled out a condom. I removed our hands and watched in silent anticipation as he

tore open the packet and sheathed himself. I moved toward him, and Elijah gripped my hips, aligning our bodies until I felt his head nudge my entrance. He paused and waited until the moment our eyes met. Nothing else mattered when I caught his eyes. It didn't matter that everything was so perfect, shiny, and new between us. More than perfect, there was a sense of rightness in that moment. I felt like our souls had done this a million times before even if our bodies hadn't. His hand left my hip and snaked around to the nape of my neck. He brought our foreheads together while maintaining a unified, carnal eye contact. This feeling would define me, would live inside me when I was eighty. For his soul bled through his gaze and seeped into mine before he entered me. A fleeting heartbeat later, he guided me down over him.

My body ignited and bloomed for him. Nothing I'd known or felt before could have prepared me for that time with Elijah. We never blinked as he entered me. The heat that rolled through me was so much more intense because of it. That wasn't sex. I didn't know what it was. It was indescribable, and I came before he was all the way in.

One thrust and Elijah was deep, stretching me perfectly as I slowly throbbed around him. The orgasm was torturously slow. It was never-ending. I was almost afraid. I'd never felt anything so incredible. He felt me coming and dragged me up leisurely and back down over him to guide it along. He knew exactly what to do, totally shattering me.

Waves of ecstasy hit, and I had to fight to keep my eyes open. All I wanted to do was toss my head back and cry out. I was whimpering and on the verge of doing just that when he whispered, "Don't, don't close your eyes." Something in my chest cracked open, and the fire burning my body settled within it. Elijah felt our connection too. There was no way he couldn't. Pain and ecstasy crossed his face as he groaned. "Oh, fuck, Hadley." He kept his pace slow, barely moving as he came right after me. His seemed to go on just as long as mine had.

Afterward, still inside me, he placed a kiss on my jaw. "You're perfect." He kissed my other side. "Are you tired?"

I was, but I also wasn't since he was right there so I shook my head.

"You're lying." He grinned, so I shrugged and smiled. "Just so you know, I normally last longer than that but between you coming on my face and that tight pussy I didn't stand a chance." I rolled my eyes playfully, and he pulled

me off of him, discarded the condom, and wrapped an arm around my back as he switched our positions, tossing me onto the cushions like I was nothing. He had a good struggle with his jeans before he descended over me. “Since you say you’re not sleepy, I’ll make sure I do my job right this—”

Eli cried, cutting him off. I sat up and Elijah scooted over. “Did we wake him?” he asked softly, worry stamped on his face. Elijah was still adorable when it came to Eli. He freaked out and got nervous every time Eli cried.

Rushing to the bathroom, I quickly washed my hands and grabbed the robe hanging on the back of the door. Eli settled as soon as I picked him up. I had a small nightlight plugged into the wall in my bedroom, and I could make out his round eyes perfectly. I mentally groaned. He was wide awake. This would be one of his rare all-nighters. He slept most nights unlike Lucy did at his age, but sometimes he didn’t. I felt his diaper, and he was dry. I offered him a boob, but he wasn’t interested.

Yep. His eyes darted all over the darkened room. Completely alert. A shadow fell over the doorway, and I glimpsed over to see Elijah in his jeans, still shirtless. “He’s wide awake,” I said.

Elijah smiled and came in, his eyes skimming over my room. “His mom is loud,” he teased. I felt my flushed cheeks grow redder.

I scoffed, dropping down on the bed with Eli. “He’ll be up a bit. You should probably head on home.”

Instead of doing that, he sat beside me. “You work tomorrow, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“I’ll head out and change while you guys are getting ready in the morning.” He stroked the top of Eli’s head. My heart stopped. I studied Elijah’s face. He was staring at Eli with a peaceful smile. He wasn’t irritated nor did he leave the second Eli woke.

He was still there. *That moment was real.*

Did I dare trust my heart again?

But most importantly, the mother in me said, “You should probably wash those,” I eyed his fingers, “and I have an extra toothbrush in the bathroom.”

Chapter Thirty

Elijah

I was a fucking goner.

I knew I was a poor helpless fool when it came to Hadley. But now I was a total never-going-back-to-the-way-I-was type of goner. Touching Hadley... Tasting her... I couldn't believe she'd given me that kind of permission.

Hadley and her family consumed my thoughts. All I wanted to do was be around them.

I stayed up until two talking and laughing with Hadley before she finally dozed off with Eli between us. Her blonde hair was loose and spilled all over the pillow and bedcovers as she smiled at Eli and spoke to him and me. I was mesmerized further after I knew how she felt and tasted. How right her body was draped across or beneath mine.

I was wild about her, fully dedicated to her and Lucy and the chubby butterball between us.

I hadn't missed the way Hadley's eyes darted nervously over to the door every so often before she finally slept. She worried about Lucy waking and seeing me. I wouldn't let her nervous energy scare me away though. I knew what I was getting into, and I wanted it even more because of it. Once Hadley saw that I wasn't going anywhere, *ever*, I hoped that she wouldn't hide me from Lucy.

I didn't just want Hadley. I wanted all three of them.

I awakened stiff and cramped a few hours later. Terrified of rolling over onto Eli, I didn't budge an inch. Something strange happened when I looked at him. My world came full circle and showed me what I was missing.

Hadley sighed drowsily and swatted at her clock on her nightstand, catching my attention. It was cute how her eyes blinked as she looked toward Eli with a tender expression. Then they widened when she realized I was still there.

Yeah... *I wanted more moments like that.*

After dropping Lucy and Eli off at her parents and driving Hadley to

work, I came home and the same thought replayed in my head until it was time to head to the parlor.

I wanted it.

At work, I tattooed and joked around. But every thought I had was of Hadley and me and everything in between.

I wanted it.

I left work an hour early to pick up Hadley from work. When I saw her walking out the entrance in a pair of dark gray *The Flintstones* scrubs, my world tilted on its axis. I swallowed my tongue as her gaze landed on mine. Shyly, she lifted her hand and waved, something she had never done before. Which meant she was still carrying around that nervous energy.

Fucking shit. I was too.

That cute, messy bun wrapped atop her head was doing shit to my brain. I thought about removing the band and watching her silky strands tumble across her shoulders as I bent her over and—

I leaned across the console and opened the passenger door before she did.

“Hey.” She sounded a little breathy as she jumped in.

“How are you even more beautiful than when I dropped you off this morning?” I asked her seriously.

She blushed as she buckled up. “Stop. I didn’t even feel like doing anything to my face this morning I was so tired.”

“I’m a little upset that it wasn’t because of me.” Eli took all the credit for that. She laughed. I reached out and grabbed her hand, intertwining our fingers as I pulled out of the parking lot.

“Elijah.” I didn’t like the tone of her voice. It gave me something akin to heartburn. I never thought about what would happen if she regretted last night. What if she pulled away completely? No Hadley. No Lucy. No Eli.

I forgot how to breathe while my heart momentarily stopped at the idea of her...

This had to be what dying felt like. The idea of losing what wasn’t mine in the first place.

“Don’t,” I said, holding her hand more firmly in mine. “Don’t look or sound regretful. I know you’re a mom, and you’ve got plenty of shit to worry about. I’m going to be here. With your kids. Even if it means I never get to take you out on a first date alone, I want to be here with you.”

My chest grew tight as she pulled her hand out of mine. “Lucy really likes you. I just don’t want to ruin that friendship she has with you and what you have with us. I’m scared.” I glanced over at her and saw the glassy look in her eyes. “I’m scared of losing our friend Elijah when things go south.”

I grabbed her hand again, unable to bear her fears screaming at me. “Why can’t I be both? I can be everything you need. As far as things going south? That will never happen.”

She didn’t remove her hand, but from the corner of my eye I saw her turning toward the window. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do because the only way I’d ever leave you guys alone is if you’d ask that of me.”

I felt her gaze on me now. “What is it you want from me?”

Lifting her hand to my lips, I kissed her knuckles. I glanced at Hadley and said, “Everything.”

She finally whispered, “You sound real.”

“Baby, I am real.” I placed our hands on my lap. “I want whatever you can give me. If what you need for me to do is take a step back, I will but I’m still going to come running every time Lucy calls, and I’m most certainly going to flirt with you every chance I get. Even if you don’t let me into that tight pussy again for a while, I’m not going anywhere.”

I saw her squeeze her legs together as she placed her hand on her forehead. “I just need to think of Lucy and Eli and what this would do to them.”

For two days and two long evenings, Hadley made me keep my hands to myself. I could see the wheels turning in her head, *How do we go back to before Elijah had me for a meal on my kitchen table?*

It was amusing to watch the vigorous way she cleaned it the next day.

When she caught me observing her from my spot on the sofa beside Lucy, her cheeks turned bright red and she kicked me out. With blonde strands falling from her bun and still wearing scrubs, Hadley looked almost feral as she shoved me through the door.

“Stop that,” she scolded me.

“Stop what?” I pinned her with a smoldering stare, but she shut it, anyway.

I knew she was afraid. I saw it in her eyes, but I also saw how much she wanted to have me. For an independent woman who’d been hurt, the idea of being with me possibly terrified Hadley. I was safe as her friend Elijah... Next-door neighbor who her daughter liked Elijah... Well, I wanted more. I wanted to come home to them one day. I wanted to be *always there Elijah... Never leaving Elijah... Husband Elijah... Stepdad Elijah... Forever Elijah...*

The next evening was no different. Okay, it was a little crankier than usual. I picked her up, told her how gorgeous she was, and took her to pick up the kids at her parents’. She lit into me for buckling Lucy in wrong and then pushed me aside so she could fix it. She was even more annoyed when I hovered to see what I was doing wrong. Eli was fussy, Lucy was hangry, and their mother was fussing at all of us.

Lucy wanted candy. I got in trouble for stopping at a gas station to get her some. Hadley took the candy and held it for ransom until Lucy ate when we got to the apartment. At that point, I hadn’t said much. The deep scowl on Hadley’s pretty face let me know she was itching to fight with me.

I knew what she was doing. She was *sabotaging*. She didn’t know what to do with me. She couldn’t understand what I was doing there with them. She watched me with terror in her eyes.

All I wanted to do was wrap her in my arms and assure her I wasn’t leaving. I wish I could take away all her insecurities that her asshole of an ex gave her, but I knew it didn’t work that way. The only thing I could do was show her, but that could only happen if she let me in.

“What are you still doing here?” Hadley snapped as she stood at the stove, flipping burgers.

Lucy looked up from the coloring book, dropping her crayon dramatically. “Why are you being mean to Elijah?”

Hadley blinked at her daughter and blubbered, “I’m not.”

“Yeah-huh. Elijah’s been buckling me in since the last time you showed him, and you yelled at him, saying he did it wrong. Then you yelled at him for getting me candy.”

“You need to eat first,” Hadley sighed.

“You’re grumpy,” Lucy said, picking up a purple crayon.

Hadley gawked at her like she wanted to say something, but she seemed to think about it, sighed, and then turned toward the stove. Eli cried. Feeling brave, I stood from my chair. “I’ll get him.”

Hadley twisted around and narrowed her eyes. “I’ll get him,” she said, like I knew she would. I followed her the few feet it took to grab him out of his bassinet in the living room.

“Elijahhh,” she dragged out my name as she cradled Eli.

“You need to chill,” I whispered, pushing the loose hairs off the side of her face and forehead.

“*You* need to chill,” she deflected.

I sighed. “You’re so obvious.”

“*What?*” she hissed.

“You’re trying to make me change how I feel.” I gripped her shoulders. “Baby, I’m here to tell you it doesn’t work that way. I want you no matter what.” I tilted my head and smirked. “Especially like this. I can help loosen you up...”

“Shh,” she hissed. “What if Lucy hears you?”

“Nothing’s changed. This has been happening for a while now, you and I.”

“You need to go.”

“Okay,” I mumbled, removing my hands. Before I left, I said, “I’m scared, too, Hadley, but not the way you think. My fear comes from your not giving me a chance before we even begin.”

Hadley would never understand how she twisted me into knots. Could she honestly say that she didn’t want to try with me? Normally, I never doubted myself, but she had me all kinds of fucked-up.

At least Lucy was disappointed that I was leaving.

For the rest of the evening, I sat around and thought about what I should do and decided maybe the best course of action was to take a step back and let Hadley have her way. Of course I wanted my hands on her. I wasn't even going to pretend that I didn't want to flirt with Hadley. The one mind-blowing time with her the other night was making my chest hurt thinking I'd never get to be that way with her again.

Man, I was depressed.

She kicked me out. Well, not technically but she still didn't want me there, and that messed with my head. Would she even come around to the idea of us or was that my new reality? Did sleeping with her really terrify her that much? Or did she regret it and that was why she was so uncomfortable?

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

Honest to God I couldn't breathe. The air didn't return to my lungs until the mom who tore my life to hell sent me a text around eleven that same night.

HADLEY: YOU ASLEEP?

Two words but my stomach churned in fear. Would that be the end for me?

ELIJAH: NO. IS EVERYTHING OKAY?

HADLEY: LUCY AND ELI ARE ASLEEP...

Holy shit! Was she suggesting...? Heat crawled up my neck, and my cock twitched.

What was I thinking? Hadley made me leave earlier. Why the late night fuck text? I should be fucking pissed and demand she let me take her out on a date. I wasn't a booty call. She needed to know this shit between us was the real deal. She wasn't getting away from me.

HADLEY: COME UP, IF YOU WANT.

Who was I fucking kidding? I barreled through my hallway, stumbled over some random shit on the floor, slipped on my boots, and headed out the door. She didn't regret what we did. She wanted to do it again.

I couldn't wait to smack that ass for scaring the fuck out of me.

Before I could knock, she opened the door like she was waiting on me. Her small hand fisted my shirt and yanked me through the doorway. Hadley closed the door behind me as she stood on her tiptoes and urged my lips to meet hers. Hadley's small petite frame pressed me up against the door, her tongue in search of mine as she gripped a chunk of my hair like a crazy woman.

She had liquid fire pumping through my veins. No, *she* was in my veins. The woman was all through me, embedded so deeply I knew there wasn't a thing I wouldn't do for her. Just to have her in my life... For me to be hers... To wake up with her in my arms every day.

I didn't doubt that the pink grandma gown she wore was so that I had easier access to her. The giant thing was hot as fuck on her. I pulled away from her mouth for a second just to see her in it. I took in her ocean-blue eyes, fueled by lust, in the darkened kitchen. Then I let her resume pawing at my chest as I slipped my hand up her gown and gripped an ass cheek. She gasped and my tongue dove into her open mouth.

"Hold up a second," I groaned as I patted her ass a few times in hopes she'd stop stealing my soul with her kisses. She didn't listen. She didn't even respond. I had to grab her shoulders and pull her away from me. "We need to talk."

Her eyes were glassy and cheeks were flushed as she gazed up at me. "Why?"

"Are you done being a sour puss?" I asked her.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Elijah..."

"You've been a little shit all day."

"I have not," she tried to say, but I shut her up quickly.

"You have. You've been itching for a fight all day. You made me leave earlier. Why? Is it so you can go right back to pretending you didn't fuck me in the morning?"

She tried to pull away from me, but I held her tighter and brought her closer. "I don't want to be a dirty secret, Hadley."

"Why did you even come over if we're not going to..." She let her words die out. I had yet to hear a cuss word from her mouth.

“Who said we aren’t?” I murmured softly. Once I was sure she wouldn’t try to get away from me, I trailed my fingers down her side. “Spread your legs,” I said and realized she’d already done it. Smiling down at her, I lifted her gown and rubbed my fingers over her wet panties. “Will you come sit down and listen to me for a second?”

Hadley nodded, and I scooped her into my arms and carried her to the couch. I sat down with her, curling her up like a child in my hold as I stared at her. “You’re so beautiful, Hadley.” And she was. Everything about her—from the roundness of her eyes and the cute curve in her lips as she blushed and smiled to the angry expressions crossing her face—was perfect. I could never grow tired of seeing her.

Hadley averted her eyes and whispered, “You’ll make me do something awkward. Just stop...”

“You’re always awkward.”

That made her glance up with a slight laugh. “Hey.”

“You’re the definition of jumpy.” I laughed. “You’re my little bundle of nerves.”

She sighed. “I can’t help it.”

“It’s amazing, you know, watching you handle single parenting despite being a nervous person. At times you’re a superhuman, then I see how flustered you get over the shit I say and wonder how you even function. But you do it so easily.” I held her closer, rubbing my thumb across her arm. “I don’t want you to have to do anything alone, anymore.”

She sucked in a breath and met my eyes. “Elijah...”

“I would never say a word to Lucy, Hadley. Not until you’re ready to tell her, but I want to head in that direction. With you. One day I want my life to be with you guys. I’ve felt that way ever since meeting you and your family.”

I never felt more terrified of anything than I did at that moment. I was giving Hadley everything I had to offer—all of me. My time, my love, my thoughts. Anything I had was hers to take if she’d let me have her to love and hold like I so desperately wanted.

She was quiet for a long time as she searched my eyes. It only made my fear worse. What if I was too hateful or bossy for her liking? What if I didn’t

have enough skin because most of me was covered in tattoos? What if she still loved Lucy and Eli's dad?

"Please," she whispered as she closed her eyes. A tear slid down her cheek, and I caught it with my thumb. "Don't hurt me. Most of all, don't hurt Lucy because my little girl likes you, and I don't want her to wonder why you're not there one day like her dad."

"One day, baby, when we're old and gray, I'm going to look over at you while we're sitting on the porch and tell you how these tears were wasted."

She cried harder as she opened her eyes. "God bless... You're serious!"

"One hundred percent." I cupped her cheeks in my hands. "That one percent of you... I want it."

With a ragged breath, Hadley's lips were on mine. Wet nose and all, she pressed her weight into that single kiss, and I took it all. Opening her mouth, I flicked and traced my tongue over hers. She grabbed the bottom of my shirt. I had to lean forward so that she could yank it over my head. And then, together, we took off her grandma nightie. Hadley's nipples hardened the moment the cool air touched her skin. I gripped one roughly, tugging on the nipple until she rubbed herself against my lap. I kept pinching and pulling, completely mesmerized by her perfect breasts. When no milk came out like I wanted, I bent down and sucked one between my lips. She cried out as it trickled into my mouth.

Maybe I should feel bad for getting so fucking turned on by her body, which supplied food for a tiny life, but that just made me want her more. The fact that she let me fondle her like a depraved man only made me worse.

She deserved the attention, and I wanted to be the one that gave it to her. The only one that knew the wild way she bucked and moaned when I reminded her that she was still a woman, *my woman*, and not only a mother. She was a fucking perfect blend of both roles.

Unlike the other night, I planned on fucking her for more than thirty seconds before I lost my shit. It didn't matter though. That moment with her had topped any and everything I'd ever felt before.

"I want to..." Her voice trailed off as she pulled away from me. Climbing out of my lap, she got on her knees in front of me.

“Hadley,” I groaned.

She would be the death of me.

I watched as her bashful eyes moved over my jeans before she unzipped them. I helped her wrestle with my jeans until they were pulled down enough freeing my cock. Just like my desperate heart, it bobbed straight up seeking Hadley. She wrapped her hand around it softly, and I groaned. “Don’t be afraid of hurting me. You won’t hurt him, baby. Go on and choke him out and see.”

Her giggles were music to my ears as she shook her head at me, admiring my cock. Hadley’s eyes were so big and round and glassy as her mouth parted... *Killing me slowly.*

Then she gasped, and I saw exactly what she did at that moment. Her hand moved up to my pubic bone piercing before her eyes found mine. “Is that a piercing?” she whispered in both awe and shock.

“Yeah. I guess you didn’t get the chance to see it the other night,” I murmured hoarsely as I slipped my fingers through the bun atop her head.

“Does it have a purpose?” Her cheeks were getting extremely red, so I knew she had an idea.

“Want to find out?” I asked. She bit her bottom lip, slowly nodding. “Let’s go to your room.” Another nod.

I stood, pulling up my jeans as I pinched at Hadley’s nipples and ass as I followed her into the room. “Shh,” she mumbled as we stepped in and closed the door.

“You guys will have to stay at my house. This apartment is too small, and your mouth is too big—” She covered mine, slightly laughing as I pushed her down on the bed. “I feel bad that I’m over here fondling Eli’s milk supply with him right there in the crib.”

More laughter. “Stop talking before you kill the mood.”

I climbed on top of her, pinching her nipple until she hissed, and pushed her legs apart with my knees. “Let me see if the moods gone,” I whispered, slipping my hand between her legs and feeling the dampness of her panties. “It’s an ocean down there.”

“Can you lose the playful attitude before I smack you upside the head?”

What happened to the guy in the living room?”

I studied her stubborn pout with a smile. “Oh, so you do like that I’m an asshole?”

She rolled her eyes. “Drying up like the desert.”

“I see that being horny also makes you cranky.” I grabbed her panties and yanked them off, forcing her legs in the air. She made a sound in her throat as I gripped her thighs and jerked her into position until her pussy lined up with my cock. I ran my fingers over her clit before slipping into her. “Desert, my ass. I could bottle you up and go live in one with how wet you are.”

“Shh,” she murmured. She wanted *me* quiet now? I smirked and grabbed her tit. Something I couldn’t help but keep doing. She hissed.

“Shh,” I told her, bending down and grazing my teeth over the side of her neck.

She slid her hand over my chest and squirmed beneath me. “Condom,” she whimpered. It was then that I realized how demanding Hadley could get. She was normally so docile and sweet. It didn’t matter. I loved her either way.

Raising up, I kicked my jeans off and grabbed the condom from my back pocket before tossing them into the floor. Hadley eagerly watched as I tore open the packet and wrapped myself. Hiking her legs up, I gripped her thighs and scooted her ass toward the edge of the bed. She shivered as I teased her pussy lips with my cock. I didn’t waste another second talking or making her wait. Lifting her hips slightly, I thrust into her tight pussy.

Hadley’s back arched, and she whimpered. I reached down and grabbed one of her large tits and squeezed—being inside her made me feel like a man possessed. She felt so damn good. I had to have my hands on every part of her. She grabbed her other one as I withdrew and slammed into her hard enough her breasts bounced. She held one firm as I kneaded the one I gripped before caressing the nipple gently. I stroked her a few times before thrusting all the way inside her slowly until my piercing rubbed against her clit. I rolled my hips around completely rooted inside her.

“Elijah,” she gasped. She spread her legs further apart, and I knew she wanted more friction from the piercing. She began grinding against it. When I pulled out, she whimpered and wrapped her legs around me. “Stay close,”

she whispered. “Oh, fudge.” Her tits jiggled slightly as she arched again, then she was reaching up and urging me down over her. “Need you closer.”

Fuck. Like I could deny her anything when she trembled below me, her voice laced with desire heightening my need for her.

I hovered over Hadley and rotated my hips, brushing against her clit again. She squeezed me tighter. “Closer.”

Unless we could swap souls, I couldn’t get any closer, not when I was already hugging her heavy breasts. I understood what she wanted though. I was inside her, but I wanted her to know how deep and intense this was for me. Maybe she felt what I felt.

Pushing one of her legs back so I could nestle deeper inside her, I rested my forehead on hers gently and whispered, “You like that?”

Her forehead bounced against mine. I pumped into her slowly, giving her clit constant stimulation from the piercing. “Elijah,” she whimpered. I felt her stomach tense right before she came. Her entire body fluttered beneath mine as her pussy pulsed around my cock.

I guided her along with slow, steady thrusts. I covered my mouth with hers. The frantic way her tongue fell over mine had both of us shaking. My body strained, fighting the urge building within me.

Since Hadley’s so satisfied with slow tonight, I fought to keep my release right at the edge. As long as I didn’t move much, I could draw it out until she was sated. The greatest pleasure was seeing her shatter over and over for me. Heat crawled down my back and into my stomach just watching her.

If only her body didn’t fit with mine so perfectly, not busting my load would be easier. She fit like a glove, and her pussy was still pulsating a good minute after she came. Her legs tightened around my back. “*Elijahhh*,” she cried out again, and now I knew she was about to guide my own climax from me.

Fucking—

Hadley was already slipping into another one.

“Fuck, Hadley,” I hissed. Fire ran through me. The head of my cock throbbed. There was no stopping me. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t moving, as soon as Hadley’s walls clenched, it was all over for me. Before Hadley could

start or finish, I whispered, "Here, baby." I pulled out and thrust deeply. "Jesus Christ, Hadley." Then we came together.

We sealed it with a kiss before I murmured, "Can I stay?"

"No."

"You're killing me." I lifted off of her, and she pinched my nipple. I swatted her hand away. "Don't pinch me, woman."

She giggled. "Who's the sour puss now?"

I pulled off the condom and placed it at the edge of the bed so I could discard it when I got up. I toppled back over her. "Can't move," I lied.

"Baby steps," she whispered.

"Have you seen my feet?" I asked her even though I knew what she was talking about. "I can't do baby steps."

"Not even for me?"

Exhaling, I sat up and kissed her forehead. "For you, anything."

Chapter Thirty-One

Hadley

I was so sick to my stomach. It was like battery acid churned through it. This was worse than the first day of a new job. This was worse than giving birth.

Lucy was too young to leave me!

Lucy's first day of Alabama Head Start, the government run preschool program for low-income families, made me so nervous I nearly vomited. She, on the other hand, was excited as we walked toward the entrance. She had a bounce to her step as she held my hand.

"Can Elijah come inside too?" Lucy poked her head over her tiny shoulder and looked back to where Elijah stood by his truck.

God bless America! Please don't encourage the big guy, Lucy. She didn't know how much I had to discourage Elijah from doing just that. We dropped Eli off at my parents, so I could go in with Lucy for her first day. I was a complete and utter wreck. It didn't help that Elijah, who had been sneaking up to my apartment the last few days for inappropriate things, was doing for Lucy what Scott had never done.

My desire for Elijah confused me while I was anxious about what Scott's family would say about our relationship. To be fair, I asked Scott if he wanted to come with me on Lucy's first day. He declined and asked me to take pictures for his mom instead.

It hurt and made me sad that Lucy's dad didn't want to be there for her. Even if she barely spoke about her father, which was another thing that made me sad, I couldn't do anything. Scott had to make the effort, but he didn't want to.

I thought maybe he had a lady friend over the last week since he didn't bug me as much, but that also meant Scott spoke to Lucy less. Yesterday, she called him about her first day, but Scott didn't answer. So I sent a text message, and that was how we got a response. I was tired of worrying about Scott spending time with his kids.

As much as I wanted Eli to know his dad, I couldn't control that. Scott had only been around him a few times. I had both of my parents growing up, so I

didn't know how to handle single parenting. The thought of Lucy and Eli not seeing their father broke my heart. I knew there were a lot of kids who had a lot less than mine. It was why I tried so hard to make opportunities for Scott. Maybe it was time to step back and see what he did on his own. Whether he tried or did nothing, I had to believe I was enough.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how much we had. Lucy and Eli had amazing grandparents and an awesome auntie who talked to them over the phone or through Facetime every night. Then there was Elijah...

"Please, Mommy?" Lucy begged. Still holding my hand, she turned around again and beckoned Elijah. "Elijah, want to see my room? Mommy says other big kids will be with me." She held her free hand out, and my heart pitter-pattered as she did.

My face felt hot, not out of embarrassment, but because I felt so much. Lucy really liked Elijah. I really liked him too, but I was scared of getting hurt. Just like Lucy, I was emotionally attached—happy too—and that terrified me. Having him around was wonderful. But what happened if one day Elijah walked away from us?

"Lucy," I whispered as I heard Elijah's giant boots hit the pavement. When I looked over, I caught his uneasy smile as he walked beside her. Oh, fudge, he was uncomfortable and that made me feel awful. I should have known this would happen and had my parents drive me.

On a positive note, my car was paid off that morning. There was enough money left to put a down payment on a new one. No more being chauffeured around. I was determined to drive home in a vehicle even if it meant breaking the bank.

"You don't have to come in," I rushed out, taking in his rigid stance as he moved.

"But, Mom," Lucy whined. "Please, please."

"He's uncomfortable, Lucy," I tried to tell her.

"Hadley, I'm only uncomfortable because I know how much you don't want me going in." Elijah bent down, stopping at the entrance. An employee walked by us with a smile and a wink as she hurried in. "Let's listen to your mom, Lucy. I'll come with your mom to pick you up later." Lucy's shoulders dropped, and I felt like the villain.

Elijah wanted this. I only hesitated because I thought of what Scott's family would say about Elijah stepping in and doing things for Lucy.

"You really want him to come inside, too?" I asked and Lucy looked up at me. "Okay. We're dropping you off, but we can't stay. This is a big kid's school where you go to learn and make new friends."

She nodded vigorously. "I just want him to see it, too. That I'm a big girl!"

I glanced at Elijah and gave him a tiny smile. "Do you want to?"

Elijah dropped his head, shoulders sagged as he took in a relieved breath. His dark, intense eyes touched my soul when he spoke. "I'd like that very much."

He stood, and the three of us walked inside. It was a little chaotic with kids crying in the halls. A couple did the same thing inside Lucy's class. "Luc—"

I never got to finish my sentence. My daughter slipped into the room like she'd been a thousand times before. She walked around, talking ninety miles per hour. It took a second to calm her down and introduce her to the teacher. I watched Lucy and the others, then knew I wasn't needed anymore.

That was it? No tears? Nothing?

Solid fingers clasped over my shoulders and stroked them. "At least wait until you get outside before you cry. You'll freak out Lucy."

Elijah was right. I never even looked at him as I sucked in a big breath and tried to smile. "Lucy, I'll be back later to pick you up, okay?"

She walked over and hugged me tightly the second I squatted down. "Okay. Bye, Mommy." She waited for Elijah who was bending down for her. "Bye, Elijah." She wrapped her little arms around his thick neck and shoulders while he squeezed her. "This is my favorite. Mom and Elijah taking me together," Lucy giggled into his corded muscles before she returned to her seat and ate her breakfast.

I didn't have time to wonder what Lucy meant. Elijah led me out of the room before I burst into tears. "I'm proud of you. You kept it together in there," Elijah patted my back as we walked out the front door.

I hiccupped, wiping my eyes. "She did so well. She didn't even cry."

He laughed. "I never worried about her."

I turned and crossed my arms at him. He leaned down and kissed my forehead, and now I couldn't remember why I was upset with him for laughing at me. His presence was comforting.

"She'll be okay, won't she?"

He nodded, draping a heavy arm across my shoulders as we walked. "She'll be fine. Now, let's go get something to eat."

I wiped my face some more. "I told you my dad's driving Eli and me to look at cars today."

He groaned. "Can't you just let me drive you everywhere?"

I got on my tiptoes and jabbed my finger on his chest. "No! It's driving me crazy not to have a vehicle."

"I know." He pulled me right back to him, slinging his arm over me. "I don't like the idea of you not having transportation either, but I'm not looking forward to it all the same. I like being with you guys." Then he scowled. "Your insurance company sure took their sweet ass time. You should let me put you on mine—"

"Elijah," I gasped.

"That way I don't have to worry about you getting a raw deal."

I didn't know what to make of him.

"You've lost your mind. What's it to you?"

He stopped dead in the parking lot. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

"I can't pretend you didn't suggest putting me on your insurance plan. That's crazy!"

"Why?"

"Why would you do that? It's weird."

"No, it's not. Not when I want to take care of you." He studied something on my face before he sighed. "Don't freak out. I was only saying... *Baby steps*," he promised.

I scoffed. "Baby steps, my butt." I turned away from him, pushing his arm

off me so he didn't catch my smile. "I don't know what to do with all this."

"All this?" he asked behind me. I heard him unlock the truck as he followed me to the passenger side. He moved ahead of me and opened the door.

I climbed in. "*This*," I gestured to what he was doing for me. "You're always helping me. I honest to God don't know what to do with you. I've never..." I studied my hands in my lap, unsure if I should say it. "Scott was never this way. I'm so used to doing everything alone that you're scaring me."

"I'm scaring you because I want to take care of you?" He frowned.

"It doesn't feel like it should be real," I admitted, hiding my eyes. "You don't seem real sometimes."

He moved my hands. "Believe it, Hadley. This is how you should have always been treated. But I'm not sorry that Scott failed you. If he'd done right by you, the two of you'd still be together, and that's something I couldn't bear." He leaned into the truck. "I know where you guys belong, and it's with the man that wants more than anything to take care of you all."

"Don't be," I whispered. "I like where I'm at right now."

"Me too." He leaned closer and kissed me.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Hadley

One week rolled into two. Between Lucy's new school schedule and my late night text messages from Elijah, I felt like I was living a completely different life. I thought I was content years ago with Scott. I thought I was ecstatic when I got my job at the hospital. I thought I never needed anything more than Lucy and Eli to keep me satisfied.

What I didn't know was how much happier I could be. I didn't know this level of pleasure existed. Not only me, Lucy was an all around joyful kid, but I swear she was even more so lately. Her face could light up the night sky.

"Lucy talks about Elijah a lot," Mom said one evening after work when I went to pick them up from her house. Lucy's school starting at nine clashed with my work schedule, so I had to take her to my parents' house every day. Of course my dad tried to get Lucy to spend some nights with them, but she always said no, choosing to stay with me. When I was in school, Lucy and I spent nights apart. I guess she had enough of staying away. Luckily, it was only a couple days out of the week. So far my days off worked to our advantage, and she didn't have to get up early every morning.

"She's so happy, isn't she?" I beamed at my daughter who sat at the kitchen table showing her papaw something she brought home—probably the millionth time since they picked her up that day.

"M-hmm, not only her." Mom grinned at me, but I ignored it. "When are we going to talk about him?"

Him equaled Elijah.

"I need to go home and get out of these scrubs," I told her, rising from the couch.

"Sit down and talk to your mother." I sat down. "Still just friends?"

I fought hard to keep the smile off my face. I examined the floor, plucked at my ear, let my eyes bounce around the room before giving in. "See what you did!" I groaned, pointing at my red face.

She laughed. "He seems good with Lucy. What about Eli? And you? Is he good to you?"

I dropped my hands and grinned so wide it hurt. "Oh, fudge, Mom. He's

so good.” My eyes watered. I was so happy and nervous all at once. “I don’t know what to think of someone treating us well.”

“Oh, baby.” Mom got up from Dad’s recliner, sat down next to me, and hugged me. “It’s all right.”

“Ugh, stop. This is embarrassing.” I pushed away from her. “I really, really like him. I think maybe more than like.”

She pulled me into another hug. “You deserve to be happy. Don’t you settle for anything less. I won’t ever let you again.”

“Is he legit?” I whispered.

“Only you can answer that.” She patted my back.

“Lucy has been so happy since he’s come into our lives. She doesn’t even seem bothered anymore when her dad doesn’t call or come get her. Lately, she hasn’t wanted to go see him at all. Makes me wonder what will happen when Scott decides he wants to see them again.”

“It’s obvious that Lucy thinks the world of Elijah, but that’s not the only place her joy comes from.” I gave Mom a puzzled frown, and she elaborated, “Lucy’s happy because her mother is. I know what you’ll say, but don’t interrupt me. I’m sure Lucy liked Elijah a lot when she first met him, but you realized she liked the things he bought her too. Lucy didn’t start caring for him like she does now *until* she saw that you cared. You think your four-year-old isn’t capable of seeing how he treats you? You think she doesn’t see everything he does for you guys? She notices all right, and she likes him all the more because of it. And also since he’s spoiling her with whatever she wants.”

I laughed and wiped my eyes as she continued, “Don’t get upset when I say this, Hadley. It’s only the truth. Neither of you know what it’s like to have a man other than Papaw help out. Scott did nothing for you. Honestly, how much money did you waste on that boy?”

Her words made me ashamed. It was normally my dad that said these things. She patted my shoulder when I glanced down, unable to meet her eyes. “I love you, Hadley. Now that you know what we did, you know never to settle. Scott was lazy, never wanted to stay home, and didn’t want to grow up and take care of his family. But from what I’ve seen of Elijah, you won’t be able to beat him away with a broom. He’s in this all the way, sweetie.”

I tucked my hair behind my ear. “Really?”

“A man is busy until he finds something or someone to make time for. Has he ever been unavailable for you?”

“Elijah’s tattoo shop is always fully scheduled. I haven’t seen him much this last week since he’s been staying open late. I know he won’t say it, but I think he extended his hours to catch up with all the times he left early to pick me up from work. But no, he’s never too busy for me. He texts me while he’s at the shop and even drove to the apartments between his appointments yesterday because Lucy asked him for chicken.” I cupped my fingers over my mouth. “Oh, fudge. He’s perfect, isn’t he?”

Mom tilted her head. “I’m sure you know how imperfect he can be already, but yeah, sounds to me like he’s here to stay.”

With Mom’s words replaying in my head, I decided I couldn’t survive on text messages alone. I wanted to see Elijah, so we went to his parlor instead of heading home. I drove the SUV Elijah helped me pick out last week—he insisted on going with me. I liked it so far. The monthly payments were a little higher than the ones for the car, but I could still afford it.

Lucy was excited about the idea, but I told her she had to behave. Was it weird to bring a baby and a kid to a tattoo shop? Probably. But if Elijah and I would be a couple, then this was something they’d see and know about. I wasn’t an uptight person, but my dad was a little stricter about things, but even he said nothing about Elijah. Yet.

Maybe it was coming soon with the way Mom asked about us.

“Let me give it to him,” Lucy said, trying to take the bowl of soup from my hands. Mom insisted we bring it to him while visiting him at the parlor.

I gave it to her before she made me drop Eli. “Be careful with it.”

Lucy opened the door for us and yelled, “Elijah!” He glanced up from his corner as he slipped on a pair of gloves.

A cheerful grin stretched across his handsome face. My chest cracked open and all these feelings burst through. “Lucy!” He looked over at the guy sitting with his shirt off. “Do you mind giving me a sec?” he asked the customer.

“Go on. I’m in no hurry,” the man said as Elijah chucked off his gloves and tossed them in the trash.

“I hope we’re not bothering you,” I said while the other tattooists ogled us.

“No. I was just about to begin on a back piece.”

“We brought soup from Mamaw’s!” Lucy thrust the bowl upward. Thankfully, Elijah caught it. For a second, I thought it was about to hit the ground. “It’s good.”

“Thank you. How was school today?” he asked.

“Good. When will you get off work?”

“Late, I’m afraid.”

“It’s been like this all week!” She tossed her hands up dramatically.

“I’ll be free this weekend, and then I’ll come see you.” He ruffled her hair, and she swatted his hand away. “I miss you all.” His gaze fixed on me.

“You must be Lucy,” the female tattooist hollered over. If I remembered correctly, Elijah told me her name was Wendy, but I was too afraid of getting it wrong to say it out loud.

“Are you doing a tattoo?” Lucy said in awe.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Can I see?”

“You can get on the stool and sit and watch me from the counter but it’s against the rules to come back here. Health violations and all.” Wendy paused. “Do you mind if she peeks over here?” I realized she was asking the girl she was tattooing. I saw her shake her head no, and she gestured for Lucy. “Come on.”

Lucy looked at me for permission. “She said sit on the stool, Lucy. Don’t go back there.” She grinned and rushed over to the stool. “Papaw won’t like how much she’s taken a liking to tattoos since meeting you.”

Elijah stepped closer and rubbed his hand down my arm. Goose bumps spread over me at the small bit of contact. I hadn’t had the chance to sleep with him since last week. “Does your dad even know about the one on your back?”

I sputtered. “What? Of course he doesn’t. I’ll tell him when I’m fifty.” I gazed at him—admiring how long and dark his eyelashes were, the unruly mess of hair on his head, and his dark and dreamy eyes. I breathlessly mumbled, “I miss you.” I tightened my hold on Eli, afraid he’d slip right through the putty I became.

“I miss you, too.” More slow fingers running up and down my arms.

“How late will you be tonight?” I asked.

Elijah jerked his head toward his customer. “Depends on how much he wants to get done on his back. I’d say about midnight.”

“Will you come wake me?” It came out as a whisper. Shyly, my eyes met his.

“Fuck, yeah.” He glanced over his shoulder. “But I got to get to tattooing if I want to be out of here anytime soon.”

I nodded. “We’ll leave before Lucy looks at all your paintings.”

He chuckled.

Elijah woke me up after midnight. He called me so I could let him in. As soon as I opened the door, his hands were all over me. He carried me to my bedroom where we barked out orders to each other on being quiet in which neither of us followed.

His hands trailed over my nightie until he reached the bottom. Up and over, he yanked it off of me before we tackled his clothes. Our bodies came back together. So much heat—his body was like a furnace against mine and I thrived off it. He kissed and kissed and kissed me all over before burying his face between my legs. Trembling and coming on his tongue, he hovered over me, slipping inside me so perfectly, and brought me to another orgasm as his piercing rubbed into my clit.

My toes curled in the process. I really, really loved that piercing.

Afterward, Elijah laid beside me rubbing circles across my shoulder. “Come take a shower with me.”

“Go shower at your place,” I said.

“So relentless,” he muttered, pinching my nipple as he climbed out of bed.

I hissed. “Ow.”

I watched as he slipped on his pants and walked out of the room. A second later, I heard the shower come on. Sighing, I climbed out of bed and put on some clothes. I turned on the baby monitor, picked up the receiver, and went to the bathroom. Shutting the door, I locked it in case Lucy woke up.

“This is not your place,” I told him.

“*This is not your place,*” he mimicked. Through the curtain, I saw Elijah’s silhouette as he lathered shampoo in his hair.

“I don’t sound like that.” I fought hard to keep from laughing.

“You sound like a hard ass,” he grunted. “Come here.”

My stomach flipped at his soft command. “I’ll wait and shower in the morning.”

“So stingy with that ass...”

“What was that?”

“Come. Here.”

Eyeing one of Lucy’s cups lying in the floor by the tub, an evil idea struck. Tiptoeing, I grabbed the cup then moved to the sink. I snickered as I filled it up with cold water. “What are you doing? I’ve lost all the water pressure.”

“Washing my hands,” I fibbed, shutting it off.

“What the fuck woman? Get in the shower and let me—” I dumped the cold water over the top of the shower curtain. A god-awful *Ohhhh* sound rushed out of his mouth, and I burst out laughing. “You’re going to regret that.”

I shrieked as he opened the curtain and reached for me. Elijah missed, but that didn’t matter. Water dripped onto my floor as he stepped out of the tub, scooping me up before I got to the door.

I squealed. “Don’t. I still have my clothes on.”

He laughed too. “Should have thought of that before.”

“Noooo,” I yelled as he pushed me under the water, stepping into the tub. He shot me a wicked grin as he turned the hot water knob off. “Noooo!” Cold water sputtered over me. Elijah stood to the side while holding me in place.

“Turn it off, you jerk!”

So, so cold.

“Come on, you can say something a little meaner than that.” I reached out for him as he spoke. He was at the end of the tub where the cold water couldn’t reach him. “Don’t come any closer, you’re cold.”

I laughed. “I want a hug. I’m freezing.”

“Turn the hot water back on, and I’ll hug you.”

“So evil,” I muttered. He let me adjust the water. I sighed happily as the hot water sprayed over my cold, wet clothes. “I’m soaked.”

“I know. You’re a pretty sight.” Elijah gathered my drenched hair off my shoulder as he stepped forward, twisted me around, and pinned me against the wall. My breath came in soft pants by the time he leaned down and kissed me—making everything so intense. The way he kissed was so demanding and controlling. He slid his hand over my neck and stroked the skin while pulling my hair with his free hand. My mouth opened, and Elijah slipped his tongue inside to tangle with mine.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Mommy?”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Is Elijah in there?”

Elijah pulled away as my eyes widened. He stared back at me, not knowing what to say or do.

“Just one second, Lucy,” I yelled before whispering to Elijah. “Oh fudge, oh fudge, I’m soaked.”

“Relax.” Elijah shut off the water and moved aside so that I could step out. I grabbed a towel and patted myself down, but it was pointless. My clothes were sopping wet, and I stood in a large puddle.

While Elijah dried off, I said, “I’ll go out first.”

“My shirt’s still in your room.”

Deep breath. Cracking open the door, I slipped out and shut it behind me, easing Lucy aside so that she couldn’t peek inside. “Did you shower with your clothes on?” she asked.

“No,” I whispered.

“Did Elijah shower, too?”

“Elijah took one, and I accidentally fell in.”

“Is he spending the night? Is that why he’s here? I heard you guys laughing.”

So many questions!

“We were being silly, and that’s how I fell in.” I dropped my head realizing I couldn’t keep this up. Elijah didn’t like it, and Lucy would be heartbroken if she thought I was purposely hiding something from her even if it was grown-up stuff. Slowly, I lifted my head. “Lucy, how would you feel about Elijah being Mommy’s boyfriend?”

“Really?” I wasn’t feeling confident with the dreary sound of her voice until Elijah opened the bathroom door in only his jeans and Lucy wrapped her arms around his legs. “Can we watch a movie?” She gazed up at him.

“I’m sorry we woke you up, Lucy, but you have school and need to go back to sleep.”

She groaned long and loud before asking, “Will you be here when I wake up?” Elijah looked over at me for the answer.

“Doesn’t that sound fun? Elijah getting to be here some mornings with us?” I asked.

She jumped. “Yes!”

“Okay, let’s settle down and head to bed.”

Another groan from her, but she twisted on her heels and thumped into her room. I pinned him with a glare the moment she disappeared through her door. “Was this your goal?”

“You started it,” he pointed out. I bit my lip nervously. “Stop, Hadley. Stop thinking. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. You didn’t plan to keep me a secret forever, did you?”

“No...”

He pinched my nipple. “Better go change so we can get Lucy to sleep before Eli wakes up.”

I could feel myself glowing at the way he said we.

But that was also Eli's cue to cry.

Elijah stifled his laugh. I shoved him while I hurried to change and get Eli.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Elijah

“He kept taking my Play-Doh.” Lucy dunked her French fry in ketchup as she talked to me about her school day. “Then, when I went to read a book, he tried to take it from me!”

“Sounds like a real asshole,” I told her.

“Elijah!” Hadley gasped as Eli nursed in her lap while she ate. We were sitting at her kitchen table. A few days had gone by since Hadley told Lucy about us—she called me her boyfriend. I felt fucking special when she said it, too. Nothing had changed, though. Lucy acted like nothing was different. I was already spending a lot of time with them before Hadley’s announcement.

“Uh-oh, you’re in trouble.” Lucy giggled. “You said a bad word.”

“You do not repeat the things that Elijah says.” I could feel the heat from Hadley’s eyes on my face, but I didn’t glance over as I bit into my burger.

“It’s not the first time she’s heard me,” I said.

“Nope. Elijah says bad words a lot,” Lucy agreed with me.

Hadley sighed.

“Ma wants you all to come to her house tomorrow for dinner,” I added quickly.

“I work tomorrow.”

“I know. That’s why she’ll start cooking around six so that by the time you’re off, it’ll be done. I can pick up Eli and Lucy from your parents while you head here to change. Or you can let me keep them...”

“I don’t think so.” Hadley laughed.

“You don’t think so to what?”

“To you babysitting. Of course we’ll go to dinner.”

I breathed out my relief. “I can babysit.”

She cackled harder. “While I’ll admit you’ve made a lot of progress with holding Eli, it doesn’t change the fact that you’ve done nothing else.”

“Okay, show me. Stop giving him the tit and give me a bottle.”

Lucy giggled, and Hadley rolled her eyes. “Baby steps,” she reminded me.

“Baby steps,” I agreed half-heartedly. “Do you guys want to spend the night at my house?”

Lucy jumped out of her seat. “That sounds so fun. Please, Mommy?”

“Do you know how tired Mommy is, Lucy?” Hadley whined.

“You can lie down when we get there. Lucy and I can watch a movie before she has to go to bed.”

“Can I pick it out?” Lucy asked.

Despite me telling her to go lie down, Hadley still fought her sleep until she crashed on the couch before Lucy did while watching a movie. Eli was asleep on my bed downstairs. I carried Lucy up to the only guest bedroom with a bed in it. I would let her pick which room she wanted at some point whenever I was sure her mother wouldn't neuter me for suggesting Lucy have a room at my place.

But then again, would Hadley want to move somewhere else down the line? If so, I would have to ask her. It might take a while to resale the house.

Baby steps, I reminded myself.

Hadley and the kids were so close *yet* it felt like there was a mountain between us. *When a man knows, he knows*. I never understood how some people rushed into things head first until Hadley. I never knew I wanted a wife and kids until I found her, but I missed her terribly each night that I didn't get to be with her.

I took a second and stared down at Lucy as I tucked the blanket under her chin. Something in my heart swelled, and there was no questioning it. I loved her and caught myself on more than one occasion wishing she was mine. She was a part of Hadley, and I was their Elijah. I wanted to be their family. And that was all that mattered. It still bewildered me how anyone could take them for granted. Turning away, I was almost out of the room when I heard her small voice whisper, “Goodnight, Elijah.”

I swallowed down the emotions that clogged my throat. “Goodnight, Lucy.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, thief. I’m glad you dropped your chips that day. I got to know you guys because of that.”

“You’re the thief.” Her drowsy voiced muffled her giggle. A second later, she was asleep again.

As I stepped out of the room, I left the door opened so that the bathroom light from across the hall could filter in for her. Tomorrow, I’d buy her a nightlight.

I stopped outside the room and placed my hand over my chest. It didn’t matter that Lucy’s words were probably part of her routine with Hadley. What mattered was that I could provide for someone else’s kids, and it was something I wanted to do. I was fucking glad I got this chance to love them.

Minutes later, I stared down at Hadley— so small and fragile in my eyes. She laid curled up on the couch. I rubbed my chest again feeling like a poor sap who couldn’t keep his emotions in check.

So gone. I was so fucking gone.

I scooped her up and carried her to bed. She woke up, asking weird stuff about her kids before she fell asleep next to Eli.

I never went to sleep early. Actually, I didn’t sleep much—a few hours every night had always been enough for me. That was why I went into the basement and messed around with some graphic designs on the computer, keeping the music on low so that I didn’t wake them up.

I didn’t know how long I was down there, but it was long enough for me to switch to drawing when Hadley’s clumsy steps came down the stairs. Eli was in her arms and a bottle rested in one hand. Her hair was wild, eyes half-closed, I swear she was the best—my most favorite thing to look at in any given moment. She stopped in front of me and plopped Eli onto my lap. I gawked at her when she shoved the bottle into my hand. “Since you both want to stay up so late, have at it.”

Without another word, she turned around and trotted up the stairs. Eli regarded me like he was just as confused as I was. We had a staring contest until I decided to get comfortable holding him. Several awkward minutes passed with me trying to get situated. He looked at me the same way I did him—like we were trying to figure each other out. “There,” I told him

hesitantly. “We’re kind of comfortable.” I offered him the bottle, and he took it slowly, his eyes fixed on me. “You can stop creeping. We’re managing,” I said to Hadley who I knew never went all the way up from the sound of her steps. “You can lie on my other side...”

She made her way back down. “Were you drawing?” she whispered softly as she lifted my arm up and snuggled against me. I didn’t think she’d actually want to join me on the floor, but I was glad she did.

“Yeah, I normally don’t go to sleep until about two every night.”

“Yet, you constantly tell me to get some sleep,” she mumbled.

“That’s different. You’re different. I don’t like seeing you tired.”

“Will you come to bed with me, please?” Her beautiful blue eyes fluttered up at me.

I kissed her brow. “All you had to do was ask.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Hadley

I got a call from Scott's mom the next day. She wanted Lucy and Eli to spend the day with them. Normally, I'd never tell them no—not counting the time I did following Scott's outburst about Elijah. When I asked Lucy if she wanted to go see them though, she didn't want to. For the sake of getting along, I'd try to convince her to go, but it was out of the question since we had plans to go to Elijah's mom's house.

That left Eli, but I couldn't get past the ball of anxiety tightening in my stomach. Scott and his family were snooty, rude, and gossipy, but they weren't awful. Because *they were rude snobs who loved to gossip* about me... Because they didn't approve of my parenting and my desire not to reunite with their son, it was really hard for me to be the bigger person.

Eli was five-months-old. He'd stayed over *once* with them and maybe saw Scott's family a few times. They didn't know my child, but it wasn't my fault. That scared me. How would he feel with them?

By eleven o'clock, though, they called the hospital aggravating me. Even Scott chimed in. I found it weird that when they wanted to see the kids it had to happen immediately. I finally gave in around noon because they disrupted my workday. I was mortified they were doing this while I was on the job. I had to call my parents to let them know Scott was coming to get Eli for the night, only to hear from them an hour later saying Scott convinced Lucy to go too. My nerves ate away at me as I tried to work and not think about my kids in someone else's care. I knew Lucy hadn't wanted to go when I called and asked her earlier.

Then my dad told me how Scott acted when he picked them up. Dad was good for exaggerating some details, especially since he didn't like Scott at all. To get through my shift, I kept telling myself that Dad was making up stuff—that Lucy wanted to see her dad.

It worked until Scott called the hospital an hour before I was supposed to clock out. Deb called me to the nursing station with a pitying frown as she handed over the phone. Lucy's tears were the first thing I heard when I put the phone to my ear. Immediately, I said, "What's wrong?"

"Lucy won't do anything but cry. I've offered her ice cream and

everything, and she won't shut up." Scott's bitter tone snapped some of my anxiety and filled me with rage. "See what you've done? She won't have anything to do with me."

"Don't you want to stay and hang out at Mamaw's house?" I could hear his mom trying to talk to Lucy.

"No. I want my mommy."

"She's filling her head with nonsense," his mother accused, and blood rushed to my face. "If she's going to be this way, so can we."

Was that a threat? I was beyond livid.

"Lucy, I'm your dad. Stop crying!" Scott yelled.

"Stop yelling at her," I hissed quietly. "I'm coming to get them."

"No! We just got Eli to sleep. You know how long that took?" He was still shouting.

"She breastfeeds him so, he won't take a bottle!" his mother yelled loud enough that I could hear. She *wanted* me to.

Eli never turned down a bottle. I knew it was a bad idea letting them visit with Scott's family. "I'm coming to get them." I hung up.

They let me leave work early. I was ashamed that everyone knew my drama by the time I left. No doubt, I'd be at the center of gossip the next week. Worrying about rumors wasn't important, picking up my kids mattered more. I was angry and scared, and unsure how I could feel both at the same time. It took me fifteen minutes to get to Scott's parents' house. I shut off the SUV and knocked on the door. Scott answered, but Lucy ran out behind him—still crying—and wrapped her arms about my legs.

"What happened?" I asked. "Don't tell me nothing. Lucy wouldn't be crying over *nothing*."

"I don't want to live here!" Lucy screamed, and now it made perfect sense.

"Where's Eli? Bring him here." I was calm as I spoke, but I never hid the anger in my body or face as I stared at Scott.

His mom stepped into the doorway with Eli who was also crying—my baby who never hardly cried was red-faced and screaming.

Never again.

The rage I felt could kill.

I grabbed him but even then, he didn't soothe immediately. "At this rate, Eli will never know us." She huffed.

"That's not my fault. Grab your shoes, Lucy." She let go of me and turned around to slip by her grandmother and dad, standing in the doorway, to grab her shoes. "You can't expect them to want to come over once or twice every six months thinking they're going to feel comfortable with you."

"Exactly. You don't let them see us!" Scott's mother hissed.

"I'm not arguing about this when you know I always tell Scott he can see them whenever he wants." Eli finally settled down—clutching my scrubs in his meaty little fists while studying my face to make sure it was me. "You ready, Lucy?" She nodded and hurried next to me.

"Hadley, baby, I'm sorry that I'm being so hateful."

I flinched at the way Scott called me baby. Funny. I never recalled Scott using that pet name with me. Elijah called me his baby. It felt different when *he* said it—like he cared about me. Hearing it from Scott didn't even come close.

"I miss you guys. It's making me hateful that Eli doesn't know me. Lucy, don't you miss your dad?" She grabbed my side and smashed her face against my scrub bottoms refusing to answer or look at Scott.

"That's not my fault," I repeated with a sigh.

"You kicked me out."

"That shouldn't stop you from seeing Lucy or getting to know Eli!" I glanced over at his mom. "I think you guys should see them a few hours here and there before trying to spend the night again."

"What?" she said.

"Tell them bye, Lucy."

"Bye," Lucy whispered, urging me to the car. I turned around and headed for it with Lucy right by my side.

I tensed up when I heard gravel crunching behind me. Scott yelled, "Don't think I don't know about Elijah? Lucy told me. You think I'm going to let

you keep *that* around my kids? Keep up your shit, and you'll see that I'm serious."

Ignoring him, I opened the back door and buckled Eli in first before helping Lucy. There were so many things I wanted to say, but I realized none of it mattered when Scott didn't really care. Tears filled my eyes. Admitting that he only saw his kids as a way to hurt me was too much to handle.

I cried. Lucy saw it since I had to buckle her up. By the time I finished, the tears ran down my cheeks with a vengeance. I broke some more when she cried with me. "Don't cry," I told her sternly, wiping away the tears on my face that continued to fall.

Scott was still running his mouth, but I crossed him out of my mind. I walked around and climbed in the driver's seat and drove off. "I don't want to go back," Lucy whimpered as I drove.

"Want to tell me what happened?" I wiped my eyes as I glanced at her through the rearview mirror.

"They just kept talking and talking about you." She threw her head back, crying harder than before. My tears fell as I focused on the road. "I hate when they talk about you. It makes me cry."

"It's okay, Lucy." Her words upset me. I shouldn't have let her go. I should have said no.

"I don't want to live at Meme Lilly's."

"You're not living anywhere but with me," I told her. "I promise." That seemed to settle her. Her tears finally quietened. She was wiping her eyes when I asked, "What's Bubby doing?"

"Looking around," she answered with a snuffle. "He's happy now. It's okay, Bubby." I stared in the mirror to see her leaning across the middle to grab Eli's hand.

I cried all over again.

In my panic state, I never got the chance to speak to Elijah that day. It wasn't until I saw him stepping out of his house that I remembered we were supposed to go to his mom's. He must have been looking for us.

He doesn't need my troubles, I told myself as I stepped out and opened the

back door to get Eli.

He didn't need my burdens with that giant smile on his face as he walked toward us. Then slowly, like ours, his smile dimmed as his gaze swept over me. I picked up Eli from his seat. Walking over to Lucy's side, I couldn't look at Elijah because the tears were on the verge of falling again.

"Hadley." I didn't answer him when he spoke. I helped Lucy unbuckle her straps, and she climbed out. "Lucy." She looked up at him. "What's wrong?" Her eyes darted from me to Elijah, clearly torn, afraid she was doing something wrong. It took less than a day for Scott and his mother to crush Lucy's spirit.

"Go on," I croaked.

She didn't waste a second after that. Lucy ran and jumped at Elijah who lifted her up. "What's wrong?" he said again. Instead of answering, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Come here, Hadley." His voice was soft yet firm. I glanced down. Staring directly at him would make me crack.

Three seconds was all it took for him to step closer, then he squished Eli and me to him and Lucy. "Y'all need a hug or some shit?" Lucy's giggle vibrated the parts of me that were touching her. "Even Eli is red-nosed and teary-eyed. I want to know who did this."

She pushed off his chest a little to see his face. "Are we going to your mom's house?"

He glanced at me. "Ask your mom."

She turned around and asked, "Are we, Mom?"

"If you want to," I whispered.

Lucy said, "She'll feed us like Mamaw does." That had Elijah laughing.

"Okay, you beggar, we'll go." I ran my fingers through her hair as she laughed with Elijah, pleased I called her a beggar, apparently.

"Go wash your face up and change out of your scrubs." He sat Lucy down and took Eli from my hands. "Want me to put the car seats in my truck?"

"No, you can just drive us in mine."

He nodded. "Stop staring and go on."

"I need to feed Eli. I don't know—"

“*Hadley*, he’s fine. See his smile? We can wait right here. You can feed him at Ma’s. Go before I smack that ass, or she’ll be smacking mine if you walk in the door looking like that thinking I was the blame.”

Lucy sniggered. “You can’t whoop Mommy, Elijah, she’s old.”

“I will if she doesn’t cheer up.” He peeked down at Lucy as he opened the back door. “If I’m not allowed to whoop her, then you’ll have to help me hold her down so we can tickle her.”

“I want to be tickled!” Lucy yelled.

“Go wipe your face, woman, it’s unbecoming.” Elijah cocked his head at me. I went to open my mouth but he said, “You want another hug? Come here. Don’t be shy.”

My eyes prickled with more tears. I sighed and hurried off which was Elijah’s plan all along.

Elijah was right about his mom. The second she saw me walk in she glared at him and asked me what her rotten son had done to me. No matter how much I told her he did nothing, she kept giving him the stink-eye as we ate. Thankfully, Lucy cleared the air saying everyone needed to be tickled thanks to Elijah.

It didn’t help that I still couldn’t shake my mood. Elijah kept watching me. I knew he was waiting to find out why I was on the verge of tears every time he looked at me. Honestly, I didn’t know either.

I didn’t want to be a burden.

Thoughts like that kept crossing my mind relentlessly. I knew Elijah well enough to know that he desperately wanted me to let him in completely. There was a silent plea in his gaze every time he stared at me. It stirred every emotion I had, especially that day when I wasn’t feeling like a good mother or a good person.

And because of that, I kept swallowing down the emotions and barely meeting his eyes. There was no way I was good company, but his mother never said a word. His stepdad stole Eli away the moment we’d gotten there. It was so nice. I wished I could have enjoyed the moment, but all I thought about was how terrible I felt, and how I shouldn’t have let the kids go to Scott

when I wasn't comfortable with the arrangement. In all honesty, until Scott tried I would never be comfortable. I couldn't make him or his family visit Lucy and Eli. Complicating matters was all the times Scott let Lucy down, saying he'd come to get her and never show. But his parents blamed me since I kicked Scott out in the first place and ruined our family.

And now they were getting worse. All I could think about was the threat Lilly made at the door. Would she really try to make Scott go to court over custody? I wasn't an unfit mother. Scott was unemployed and lived with his parents. But did any of that information make me feel better? No. I'd lived in fear of Scott suing for custody ever since I caught him cheating and made him leave.

"Elijah says you like cars, Lucy?" Hank asked her while we ate at the dining room table. Eli, still on his lap, had stuck his hand in Hank's mashed potatoes several times. The old man let him do it on purpose as he kept scooting his plate closer for Eli. After the third or fourth hand dip, he finally brought it to his mouth to taste it. His fat little body stiffened as his eyes widened as he looked down at the plate. I think he liked it but couldn't be too sure. Elijah's mom kept trying to steal Eli from Hank which hadn't happened yet. The woman didn't seem willing to give up though.

Lucy smiled. "Yes. I like ponies too."

"Elijah has a collection that we kept from when he was little," said Hank.

Lucy gasped. "I want to see."

"I'll bring them out after we eat." Hank grinned down at Eli.

"How many more kids do you plan to have?" Elijah's mom blurted.

I choked on the piece of meat in my mouth. I grabbed my soda and took a drink.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I rubbed my chest.

"Did I surprise you?" she asked kindly.

"A little," I admitted. I glimpsed over at Elijah beside me who was watching me far too intently at the dinner table. "I never thought I'd have more than two."

That was the truth. It was also true that I thought I'd grow old with Scott.

A foolish dream. I wanted to go back in time and strangle myself for living inside a fantasy when in reality I had been so tired and stressed all the time. It was so obvious that I had been alone in that so-called relationship.

“Now you got to have more than two,” she chided me.

“Ma leave her be,” Elijah murmured quickly, taking a giant drink of his soda.

“I’m just saying I want more than two grandbabies.” She pinned him with a smirk. “Are you saying you don’t want any?”

I glanced at Elijah again who was sighing at his mom. “Of course I do.” He gave me a sidelong stare.

My face was suddenly a furnace.

Another truth—I always thought I would have kids with one man and one man alone. I knew it was the twenty-first century and things happened. Guys were crappy and sometimes it was the women, *but* I never thought that one day I’d consider a future with another man or having more children.

A lot of things weren’t what I thought they’d be.

I found myself overwhelmed, perhaps, because Elijah was an earthquake of a man, but definitely not against the idea of maybe. Correction. Not maybe, just *one day*.

One day he might live with us.

One day he might be our real family.

One day he might make me his wife.

Elijah’s my one day.

“Relax,” he whispered, reaching out and grabbing my hand. He placed it on his lap where he drew lazy circles with his thumb across my hand. “*Baby steps.*”

I still wasn’t convinced I could meet his eyes yet. My emotions needed an outlet, and that seemed to be him right now. I risked breaking if I stared for too long, but I snorted when he said that. I suddenly understood where his intensity came from—his mother. Both of them wouldn’t know subtle if it smacked them in the face. She obviously knew Elijah and I were seeing each other, and she wanted grandkids. No one would have ever guessed.

Still, I noticed the way they fussed over mine. Did I ever feel this comfortable with Scott's family? Did they ever make me feel at home? I just met Hank. With the way he played with Lucy and Eli was like he'd been around them thousands of times.

I liked his mom and Hank. They were going the extra mile to make us feel comfortable. No, maybe that was just who they were, but I liked it.

Oh, fudge. This warm atmosphere was only getting to my already frazzled nerves. I knew what I needed, but it had to wait until I had Elijah alone. My heart had wanted it since I saw him step out onto his porch.

"Come on, Lucy." Hank stood with Eli. "Let me show you his old room."

"Let me hold him for a while." Elijah's mom finally got Eli.

Lucy followed Hank out of the dining room. I rose from my chair and picked up plates.

His mom saw me and sighed. "I'll get it, honey, don't worry about cleaning up."

"I don't mi—" I didn't even finish what I was saying before a plate slipped through my hand and shattered on the ground. The blood drained from my face as I bent down. "I'm so, so sorry." I apologized over and over, too mortified to look up.

"It's okay. It was only a plate. I have about thirty more if you need some." She was laughing at herself until she saw what I couldn't keep at bay any longer. "Oh honey, why are you crying?"

"Hadley," Elijah bent down and took the broken pieces out of my hands. "It's only a plate. Look at me."

I covered my eyes with my arm instead. "I'm sorry."

"You're killing me. Baby, you're going to have to tell me what's wrong before I find out and hurt someone."

His words only made me cry harder for I was still waiting for what I needed from him.

"I'll clean it up, Elijah. Take her on the porch if you need to." He rose, pulling me up with him. His mother patted my back as he grabbed my wrists and led me forward. "It's okay, honey."

I was so embarrassed, but I couldn't stop myself. Was this a mental breakdown? A panic attack? What was wrong with me, and why couldn't I control it?

The screen door made a creaking sound as he pushed it open and led me outside. The second it slammed shut, he pulled me close, smashing my nose into his chest as he hugged me. I breathed him in, warming at the way one hand snaked around my back and the other rubbed the top of my hair. My arms were at my sides, and I just let him hold me—let him comfort me. It was the only thing I wanted since I saw him earlier. In his embrace, all the anxiety and hurt and troubles seeped out of me like he was channeling everything for me. The feeling was instant and so overwhelming that I was tired. And content. So very content.

The tears hadn't stopped, and even though I felt like the world had slipped from my shoulders the moment I was in his arms, it didn't change the fact that the problem was still there inside me. It only meant that I had wanted to rely on someone.

I was a mother of two at twenty-two. I worked a stable job, had my own bills, and responsibilities. I comforted my kids when they were hurting but in that moment, I knew I found someone to comfort me. Someone to take care of me when I needed it.

It was what I'd been waiting on, what I'd been wanting, and how I'd come to rely on Elijah. When did it start?

"Let's grab Lucy and Eli and head to my place, all right? Whatever this is, you're going to talk about it," he whispered, rubbing my back.

My snot and everything was dripping on his shirt, but he didn't seem to mind. "Scott came and picked them up today. Lucy hadn't wanted to go, but he convinced her to when he came to get Eli," my voice was gravelly since I was still bawling. "She ended up crying on him and his parents, Eli too, and they got so upset over it. The only time I have ever not let Scott see them when he asked was after that week when he threw a fit. I've always told him that his parents can come get the kids whenever they wanted. Elijah, they never call and want to see them but once in a blue moon. Then they get mad when Lucy and Eli cry on them... Eli doesn't know them, and Lucy never hears from them!" I wiped my eyes. "Is it really my fault? Am I really to blame?"

“God no, Hadley.” He hugged me tighter. “You’re not responsible for grown folks getting to know their own grandchildren. If Scott or whoever doesn’t make the effort to get to know them, that’s on them, not you. No matter what shit they tell you.”

“I’m scared they’re going to give me crap.”

“Sounds like they already are, baby.” He was still rubbing my head soothingly. And it was honestly making me feel better. “That’s why you got to grow thicker skin. That shit won’t fly with me. I won’t let you get hurt by them anymore.”

“That’s Lucy and Eli’s family,” I whispered.

“That doesn’t give them the right to be so fucking hateful when it’s their fault to begin with. Stop trying and see how much they do. If they want to be in your kids’ lives, that’s good, but if they don’t...” He held me at arm’s length and reached for my hand, bringing it to his chest. “They have me. Whatever I can be, I’ll be for those two. I love all your pieces, especially the ones that call you mom. I hope one day they’ll come to me instead of just you when they need something because I’ll be here.”

“Elijah...” I mumbled right before throwing my arms around his neck.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Elijah

I watched Lucy as she trudged down the steps at Ma's house. We were leaving her house. Ma gave Hadley a hug when I brought her back in, and thankfully, Ma asked no questions. She was probably creeping with Eli somewhere by the window, but I knew she meant well so I'd let it slide.

I studied Lucy's slumped shoulders as she opened the car door. Hadley was having trouble getting Eli away from Hank on the porch. "I thought you were cheering up. Why are you suddenly a sour tail again?" I ruffled Lucy's head, and she swatted it away as she climbed into her car seat so I could buckle her in. I was really getting the hang of the five-point harness. It helped that Lucy could buckle herself in—getting out was still a problem.

"Are you really going to have kids?" I froze and glanced up at Lucy's face. Her lips were set in a stubborn pout with her arms crossed over her chest.

"You don't want me to have any?"

She shook her head. "You'll forget about us if you have some."

I smiled and flicked her nose. "Silly. No matter how many kids I have, you will always matter."

"How?" She huffed it like it was impossible.

"If I do have kids, who do you think will be their mommy? Yours, goofy."

"Then I'd have another Bubby or Sissy?" she asked.

"Yeah. Lucy, as far as I'm concerned you and Eli are already my family. One day I plan to make what I feel in here," I tapped on my chest, "official."

"How?" Her nose wrinkled.

"I can't say 'cause you'd go and tell your mom, and it's something I want to surprise her with when I know she's ready."

"I want to know!"

"Will you be okay with that? Me being a part of your family one day?"

She was quiet as she thought about it. "I don't want you to like me less."

"No one could ever take your place, Lucy. No matter what anyone says or

thinks, you come first.” I messed her hair up again. “You’re the reason I want to give you another brother or sister. I don’t even like kids except for you and Eli. I swear.” She cupped her mouth and grinned.

“What are you guys smiling about over there?” Hadley asked as she opened the other door to put Eli in his car seat.

I laughed when Lucy said, “It’s a surprise!”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Hadley

My worries seemed pointless. A week passed since the tear-a-thon I'd done last Sunday, and I hadn't heard from Scott or his family. Everything was back to normal. Well, except for the fact that I stopped texting Scott and asking if he'd like to see Lucy and Eli.

I stopped completely and it was a relief.

Lucy didn't bring up her dad anymore, and I wasn't going to either. I was done trying. If Scott wanted to try, I hoped for his sake he didn't wait around until they were older and wanted nothing to do with them. It wouldn't be my fault if it happened, but of course I'd get the blame—the villain. Maybe I was since it terrified me to think of still being with him if he had never opened my eyes by cheating. I would have dutifully and hopelessly stayed by his side because he was the father of my kids—Scott was just as much a child as Lucy and Eli.

Since meeting Elijah, I was clearer about a lot of stuff—all the little things I never really thought too much about before. I hadn't seen how easily aggravated Scott would get some nights when I worked and had to stay with Lucy. I never noticed how much he'd rather play a video game than get a job. Scott always used the excuse of being in college preventing him from getting a job. It didn't matter to him that I wore myself down working full-time and attending college. Not once did I ever imagine that I had a choice.

Honestly, everything felt too good to be true.

Elijah was all the things I'd never experienced before. Even before we'd gotten together, he went out of his way to help me. Seeing us every day never seemed like a burden for him. That was how much he wanted to see us. Even if it meant slipping into the apartment after twelve each night the past week just so he could lie with me, and talk to Lucy before our day started each morning. He filled up my SUV on the way home Sunday from his parents so that I wouldn't have to stop for gas during the week despite my protests. He bought groceries without my knowledge while I was at work and took them to the apartment. I thought it was funny how he asked for the passcode claiming he'd forgotten his wallet the night before and needed it before he went to his shop. I didn't know what to make of him. Honestly, I was out of

my element with Elijah. It was hard to get used to someone doing things for me, especially when I never asked. I wasn't struggling, anymore either. Since working at the hospital, I saved quite a bit of money, but we argued over Elijah doing things for the kids and me. Every time, he'd tell me, "You better get used to it."

My heart swelled and quadrupled in size. Even if I didn't know how to let Elijah care for us like he wanted, I was still in awe with him. He was beyond perfect and that was what was so scary.

Well, actually, I knew Elijah wasn't perfect. I knew how much he cussed, how hateful and rude he could be. He often spoke first and thought later, but with us he gave us something sweet. His eyes lit up any time Lucy spoke to him. He made the effort to know Eli even though he was terrified of him. Eli recognized him when Elijah walked into the room. And to me, the man was my safe place. A place I didn't know I needed. So, Elijah, to me and my little family, was perfect in all the ways that counted.

In reality, I had a feeling that Elijah and I were moving quickly. He hadn't stayed a night away from me all week. Instead of worrying about that, though, my heart was more distraught of imagining him not being in my bed every night.

The fact of the matter was, I loved him hopelessly and that love only grew every day he looked at me and mine like we were his to love.

On Sunday morning when it was time for me to head to work, Elijah surprised me by saying, "Why don't you let Lucy and Eli stay with me today so that they don't have to get up?"

I stared down at his bare chest as he sat on the edge of the bed. He rubbed his stubbled jaw as he watched me. "Twelve hours is a long time to watch them..." I said hesitantly.

"It's fine. I've changed Eli's diaper a few times this week. I can do this. I know Eli doesn't mind breast milk straight from the fridge cold. I got this and anything I don't, Lucy can help me with."

"You've never changed a poopy diaper," I informed him. Sighing, I said, "I don't know..."

"If things get rough, I can take them to your parents' house or go to Ma's. Would that make you feel better?"

“Why do you want to?” I asked. Scott was their dad and that man couldn’t be bothered to see them.

“Because I just do. Why would you take them to your parents when I’m right here?” He stood and wrapped his arms around me. “I’m here. Lean on me. I wouldn’t offer if this wasn’t something I didn’t care to do. You’re going to have to use me one day, why not start today?”

“Oh, fudge.” I propped my forehead on his shoulder. “Let me ask Lucy and see what she wants to do.” I already knew what she would say, though. “Please, Elijah, call the hospital if you need me or my mom. I’ll write down the numbers.”

“I’m going to go put the car seats in my truck while you’re asking Lucy.” He stepped around me.

I placed my hands on my hips. “You’re awfully confident.” He simply chuckled as I made my way to Lucy’s room. I didn’t turn on the light as I walked over to her bed and sat next to her head. “Lucy, Lucy.” I shook her until she stirred. She sat up for me slowly. “Elijah said you and Bubby can stay with him today? Or would you rather go to Mamaw and Papaw’s?”

“I want to stay here with Elijah.” She rubbed her eyes.

“You sure?” She nodded. “Lie back down and sleep some more.”

She was back out in seconds, and I hoped she didn’t regret her decision when she awakened.

ELIJAH 12:00 PM: SOS SEND REINFORCEMENTS. I DON’T THINK LUCY AND I WILL COME BACK OUT ALIVE AFTER THIS ONE.

ELIJAH 12:10: WE SURVIVED BUT ELI’S CLOTHES DID NOT. JESUS CHRIST. HOW DOES SOMETHING SO SMALL MAKE SO MUCH SHIT?!?

ELIJAH 1:00 PM: I DON’T THINK YOU’D APPROVE OF THE CLOTHES I PUT ELI IN, SO WE’RE TAKING THE DRIVE-THRU AT WENDY’S. LUCY AND I ARE STARVING ON JUST CEREAL. NEITHER OF US CAN COOK. IT’S A SERIOUS PROBLEM.

HADLEY 1:15 PM: SORRY, I KEEP MY PHONE IN THE LOCKER. I’M ON MY LUNCH NOW. IS EVERYTHING ALL RIGHT? AND PLEASE DON’T SCARE ME LIKE THAT. -_-

ELIJAH 1:16 PM: WE’RE SURVIVING. WE’RE AT MY HOUSE RIGHT NOW. LUCY WANTED TO COME OUT HERE.

HADLEY 1:17 PM: HAS ELI BEEN FUSSY? WHAT ABOUT LUCY?

ELIJAH 1:18 PM: DOWNLOADING...

It was a picture of Eli sitting up on the floor in his living room while he watched Lucy draw next to him.

HADLEY 1:19 PM: LUCY IS STILL WEARING PJ'S.

ELIJAH 1:20 PM: SHE DIDN'T WANT TO CHANGE. WE WENT THROUGH THE DRIVE-THRU, ANYWAY.

HADLEY 1:21 PM: LOL! THANKS FOR WATCHING THEM TODAY. I'M SURE LUCY'S THRILLED ABOUT IT.

ELIJAH 1:22 PM: DON'T THANK ME. PLEASE, FUCKING DON'T. EVERY TIME I SEE THEM, I WONDER HOW I SURVIVED BEFORE YOU ALL CAME INTO MY LIFE. I WAS A MISERABLE FUCK NOW THAT I THINK BACK.

HADLEY 1:23 PM: MEAN? YEAH, BUT I DOUBT YOU WERE MISERABLE.

ELIJAH 1:24 PM: DIDN'T REALIZE WHAT A LONELY SAP I WAS UNTIL YOU GUYS. NEVER CARED TO GIVE ANYONE MY TIME, BUT NOW I'M LONELY JUST AT THE IDEA OF NOT SEEING YOU GUYS FOR A DAY. SEE WHAT I'VE BECOME?

HADLEY 1:25 PM: WHAT HAVE YOU BECOME? LOL.

ELIJAH 1:26 PM: MUNDANE. I WANT THE ORDINARY, ROUTINE LIFE. THE HOUSE, THE WOMAN TO SHARE IT WITH, AND THE KIDS. AND I WANT IT WITH YOU.

HADLEY 1:27 PM: YOU'RE SO SWEET.

ELIJAH 1:28 PM: ONLY FOR YOU. ONLY. 4. U.

HADLEY 1:30 PM: MY LUNCH IS OVER. I'LL TEXT WHEN I'M ON BREAK.

ELIJAH 4:23 PM: WE'RE HAVING ANOTHER FOOD CRISIS. LUCY'S REALLY HAVING FUN WITH ME NOT BEING ABLE TO COOK. SHE SAYS I'M OLD ENOUGH TO TAKE CARE OF MYSELF.

ELIJAH 4:30 PM: WE'RE HEADING TO MA'S. SHE'S COOKING FOR US AND BEFORE YOU ASK, I TOLD LUCY TO CHANGE BEFORE WE LEFT.

HADLEY 4:50 PM: ON MY BREAK. IS EVERYTHING OKAY? ARE YOU STRAPPING THEM IN THE CAR SEATS PROPERLY?

ELIJAH 4:52 PM: DOWNLOADING...

It was a short video of Eli laughing at Hank making weird noises.

ELIJAH: I'M GOING TO PRETEND YOU DIDN'T ASK THAT. CHILL WOMAN.

HADLEY 4:54 PM: SORRY. CAN'T HELP IT.

ELIJAH 4:55 PM: LUCY HASN'T ASKED ABOUT YOU BY THE WAY... BUT I MISS YOU IF IT COUNTS FOR ANYTHING. CAN'T WAIT TO SEE YOU IN A BIT.

HADLEY 4:57 PM: SAME. ONLY TWO MORE HOURS.

Elijah sent me a text thirty minutes before I got off saying they were back from his mom's. He never said if he was at my apartment or his house, though, so I guess I'd find out once I got there.

His truck was parked at his house, but I still walked up to the apartment first. It was a good guess since that was where they were. "Mom!" Lucy rounded the corner of the kitchen as she smiled at me.

"Did you have fun today?" I asked as I set down my keys and wallet.

She nodded vigorously. "Elijah burned pizza, so we got to go to his mom's and eat."

"That was confidential information, Lucy," Elijah hollered.

Smirking, my eyes widened on the mess that was my apartment. How did it get this bad when they weren't even here the entire day? I was seeing all his flaws and knew that I liked him all the more, regardless.

It was a nice way to come home. I wondered if that was how he felt when he slipped in my bed every night through the week? I hoped so.

Eli was in Elijah's lap with just a diaper. I took a closer look at Lucy and saw that she wore a dress with pajama bottoms. I made a mental note to set her out some clothes to wear the next time she stayed with Elijah.

"You got a plate in the microwave that Ma sent with us," Elijah voice vibrated off his chest as he stood. The butterflies swam in my stomach as he walked over and placed a kiss on my lips. Eli reached out for me, and I took him with a smile.

"Make sure to tell her thanks for me," I said. "Lucy come help me pick up your toys. We have to get you bathed and ready for bed." I glanced at Elijah. "Do you need to go home and rest? When will your hours at the shop go back to normal?"

“Just this week. I may extend my hours for Saturday permanently but that’s it.” He walked over to the microwave and turned it on. “I’ll go grab a change of clothes and return if that’s okay with you?”

His back was turned. Sometimes, in those moments, I almost felt his vulnerability like I did mine. “Hurry up. I might want to snuggle or something...”

He glanced over his shoulder with a playful smolder spreading over his handsome face. “You can snuggle all you want with me.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Elijah

“About this weekend...” I let my words drift off as Hadley bent over the crib and placed Eli inside. It was going on ten, and Lucy was already asleep by the time I got there. I hadn’t slept at my place since they spent the night and didn’t plan to unless they were with me.

“What about it?” Hadley mumbled as she peered down at Eli with the same vibrant lovesick expression. The same one I fell prey to over the months of watching her give that look so freely to her kids.

“I’ve got to head down to my other parlor, the one in Jeffrey.” I scratched the stubble on my jaw as she sat up and turned toward me slowly. “Would you guys want to go with me?”

“Would that mean us staying in a hotel all day while you did whatever it is at the shop?” She scrunched up her nose, clearly not liking the idea of being stuck in a room. I never planned it being that way, anyway.

“No. You guys could come with me to the shop. I might have mentioned you a few times to the employees. They’re eager to meet all of you.”

“Wouldn’t it be weird?”

“Why would it be weird?”

She snorted. “Do you really think I didn’t notice the sign at your shop here? ‘Unsupervised offspring will be pawnd’.”

I grinned and she rolled her eyes. I’d forgotten about that sign.

“I don’t think it’d be a great idea to bring a five-month-old and a four-year-old to sit around all day while you—what is it you’re doing?”

“Selling it.”

Her eyes widened. “Really? What for?”

“I don’t have the need for it unless you’d want to move down that way later on?” She gawked at me. “I’d take that as a no. I couldn’t see you living more than an hour away from your parents, and Ma would kill me if I left after just moving back.”

Tucking loose blonde strands behind her ear, Hadley walked over and sat beside me, but I tugged her onto my lap instead. She wrapped her arms around my neck and smiled. “Why does where I want to go mess with your wants?”

“I think you already know.” I tightened my grip on her thigh.

“I do want to move out of this apartment sooner rather than later,” she mumbled as I pressed my lips along the side of her neck.

“Why are we staying here every night when I have a home you could already make yours?”

She sighed pleasantly as I bit into her collarbone lightly, slipping my hand beneath her shirt and lifted her bra up so that I could pinch her nipple. “Elijah... Could you really handle this life forever?” She brought my head down to her beautiful tits.

“Fuck, yeah,” I murmured into her shirt as I slowly pulled away from her. I lifted it up and over her head before palming her breasts.

“Then you should know that I don’t want to live here. I don’t want to live *near* here either. I’m so tired of these apartments,” she whispered breathlessly.

“I’ll get you out of here. We can search together. I can resale the house and while we’re waiting it can be *ours*.”

“Are you sure?” She pulled my head away until our gazes locked.

I kissed the inside of her hand. “I’ve never been surer of anything in my life. Haven’t you figured out what you mean to me already?”

She leaned down and kissed me feverishly until my skin tingled and burned—until it felt like I would step right out of it. That was how powerful her touch was for me.

“About the weekend, will you go with me?”

“I work on Sunday.”

“Then we’ll make it one night only and be home Saturday.”

She closed her eyes, sighing into my lips. I watched her eyelashes flutter every time I flicked my tongue over her lips. “Are you sure it’s okay for Lucy and Eli to be there?”

“If I say it is, it is. Lucy loves drawing. Who knows? Maybe I’ll have her designing tattoos in no time.”

That made her laugh, then her eyes opened and her expression turned somber. “She’s influenced by everything you say and do, Elijah. That’s a powerful responsibility.”

“Are you saying I’m a bad influence?”

She grinned at me like I was being funny while shaking her head. “No, on the contrary, I hope she learns to be stronger than I am through you.”

“You’re strong,” I told her.

“I’m easily hurt.”

I frowned, cupping her cheeks. “It’s too late for that. I think you should know by now that your daughter is the same when it comes to that.”

Her eyes dropped. “I know.”

“That’s why you guys have me to tell people to piss off when needed.”

“Is it now?”

I helped her to her feet so I could slide off her shorts. “There’s plenty of perks to having me at your beck and call.” Her eyes turned heavy-lidded as I kissed her belly before she sat down on my lap again. “Want me to show you?”

“I think I might already know, but keep showing me, in case I might forget.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Hadley

Elijah sold his old parlor to the guy that ran it since he'd moved. Apparently, Ked, which was the guy's name, had been hounding him about buying it from him, but Elijah hadn't been ready to give it up.

Until a certain lady and her kids came along.

A flourish of happiness hit me as I thought back to all the things Ked mentioned. Stuff that Elijah had told him about not having the time for a lot of *shit*—Ked's words—any more. He had new priorities, aka, us. Ked was really adamant about making sure how much I knew that this wasn't like Elijah. The new owner said I'd made a man out of Elijah. That fact pleased Ked—a man who was happily married with four kids.

To say that I was glad we went with Elijah was an understatement. Eli didn't care much since he was so little, but he was well-behaved the entire time. Lucy, however, loved it. She thought it was cool. Elijah was already convinced she was destined to be a tattoo artist. I told him her stick people had a long way to go.

We stayed Friday night in a pleasant and clean hotel with two beds in one room. I wasn't ready for Lucy to see me cozied up to Elijah just yet, so I slept in the bed with her and Eli until they fell asleep then slipped in with Elijah and snuggled with him until daybreak.

Early Saturday morning we left, after stopping at the Devil's Lair one last time. Lucy was ecstatic since she got two quarter machine tattoos on each of her hands—a pony and a dog. She wouldn't stop talking about them the entire drive back to Sassafra. It made me smile remembering how much I liked getting those when I was younger.

"Do you care to stop at Walmart? I need to grab some groceries before we head to the apartment." I took a sip of the soda Elijah purchased for me earlier.

"Yeah." Elijah used his signal and turned off the intersection.

"Why can't we stay at Elijah's tonight?" Lucy grumbled in the back. "I want to bring my nightlight over there. Can I, Mommy?"

I glanced at Elijah who chuckled. “I don’t care where we go. As long as we’re together.”

“Elijah’s!” Lucy screamed.

“Lord, no need to yell,” I winced. “I guess we’ll stay at his house.” I leaned over the middle console and smirked back at her.

A couple of minutes later, we parked and climbed out of Elijah’s giant truck. “Want me to carry him?” Elijah asked me as I opened the door to get Eli.

“I was going to put the carrier on and carry him that way.” I glanced over at Elijah coming toward me.

“I’ll carry him.” I stepped aside as Elijah took my spot and picked up Eli, and then went over to help Lucy. Elijah finally caught me staring at him as we grouped together in front of his truck and began walking inside. “What?”

I tilted my head, giving him an appreciative bat of the eyes. He was holding my child in his arms—arms in which were inked and muscled. At that moment, the ease of being with Elijah finally hit me. Was this wrong? Why was it so natural?

“Why are you staring at me like that?” he asked with impatience in his voice.

I sniggered. “I like seeing you with my baby. Why? You got a problem?”

He arched a brow and tugged me closer. Lucy giggled as she hopped as we walked hand in hand. “Then keep looking.” I shook my head at his flirty words. “That’s why I can’t see you not having another one. Or two.”

I froze, eyes widening as I gaped at him. With a deep laugh, he jerked me forward and out of the traffic I was holding up. We hadn’t discussed anything about kids even after his mom brought it up two Sundays ago. Of course, I knew we’d talk about it eventually, and I was a little surprised he hadn’t brought it up sooner. It was clear he wanted to, especially after he admitted to wanting them *with me*.

My mother was right about one thing with guys. She always said that when a man knew what he wanted, he was persistent in his pursuit. If a man didn’t do that for Olivia or me, Mom said he wasn’t worth the time. I hadn’t

listened to that advice as a teen, but I finally understood her words.

The thrill of Elijah's affections zipped through my stomach, lighting me up with a flush glow of nervousness and happiness. I'd grown confident in myself again. Honestly speaking, I knew I was a capable mother and adult despite the times I let Scott's family create doubt in myself. I knew I could take care of me and my mine just fine. Life had been hard, but it became much easier. I didn't need Elijah in my life, but he fit in all the same because he made it so. And that effort he made? What reason did he have for it? There was no reward other than us. Stepping into my world changed Elijah's life, and he welcomed it with open arms. His lifestyle was vastly different than mine yet in all these months of getting to know each other, he slowly meshed our worlds together with no apologies. He wanted this with me.

I thought I was gradually heading toward the scary place of *needing* him in my life. In fact, I might have been there already. I'd never depended on anyone other than my family. Needing Elijah scared me to death. How did I get to be so reliant on him? And why did that feel safe like I honestly trusted he'd do anything for me?

And that was the thing, wasn't it? I had total faith in Elijah.

I let my mind run rampant with images of our future together with the possibility of more kids. The only scenario I couldn't see was the one where Elijah wasn't with us. He belonged with me and my little family. He was *our* family.

"I think I've gone and broken your mother, Lucy," Elijah mumbled beside me. I heard Lucy giggle. A grunt came from Elijah. "Earth to Hadley. Will you stop staring at me like that and grab a buggy?"

"I'll grab one!" Lucy piped in as she ran in front of me and grabbed a shopping cart.

I finally snapped out of it and focused on the man I ogled. He smirked as I peered into his dark, dreamy eyes. "We need to have this discussion eventually without you fading away on me."

"I didn't fade away." I rolled my eyes with a smile on my face as I walked up behind Lucy and helped her with the cart. "I find this a curious topic for someone who was adamant about showing his dislike for kids."

"I've had a change of heart," he murmured behind me as we strolled

through the store. “I think I just like the ones you birth.”

I laughed, momentarily lost to his touch as his palm splayed against my lower back. I liked that he didn't mind staying close even in public. “I think you've never given one the chance until Lucy,” I informed him.

“He's not allowed to. I don't want him to like others. I like it with just us.” Lucy glared up at me. Her bright-blue eyes caught me off guard with how serious she seemed to be.

I glanced over at Elijah and could tell he was way too pleased as he beamed down at her. I liked how much she adored him too, but I didn't want her to be hateful about it. “What about when your cousins meet him? Or if you ever bring friends home? They won't like him if he's mean.”

Lucy frowned and turned away gripping the handle on the shopping cart. “I don't want anyone to steal him away. Can we not show him to cousin BeeBee, please?”

At the mention of Briana, the blood drained from my face. “Who's Briana?” Elijah smiled completely unaware until he caught my expression and it faded from his face. He sensed it then. The sourness in my stomach didn't come from the betrayal. I no longer felt any sort of thing for that moment in my life. The bitterness came in the realization that night still lived in Lucy's mind, and the way she perceived it was heartbreaking.

“Lucy, want some bananas?” Elijah stepped over to the bananas and grabbed some. He watched me carefully. He didn't say anything about it, but those deep-abyss eyes revealed the promise of words later.

“Can we get some apples, too?” she piped in, letting the subject drop.

“Should I cook so your mom doesn't have to today?”

Lucy stuck out her tongue and gagged. “You suck at cooking.”

“I saw you picking your nose yesterday,” he deflected. I fought a smile as I grabbed the shopping cart that Lucy left in the middle of the aisle since she was too worried about arguing with Elijah now.

“I don't pick my nose!” She did, but by her clenched fists, she was very embarrassed about it.

“Don't lie. It's unbecoming,” said Elijah.

“What's unbecoming?” Lucy asked.

“Guys!” I hollered and all three heads turned along with a few passersby. I pointed toward the chips.

“The last melon,” Lucy mumbled slowly as her eyes took in the last bag of Funyuns.

“Melons? You mean Funyuns, nose-picker,” said Elijah.

She huffed at him. “It’s *Ice Age*, the movie.” When his brows furrowed in confusion, she palmed her forehead like it was the end of the world. “You haven’t watched *Ice Age*?” When he shook his head, she continued, “We have to watch it!”

I snorted a little as I watched Elijah and Lucy hustle toward the last bag like an angry mob. Eli grinned. He didn’t have a clue why he was being bounced around in Elijah’s arm, but Eli liked it all the same. Probably getting a kick out of the two he was stuck with.

Lucy tossed the chips in the cart once I reached them. Dragging the cart around made me feel like the fourth-wheel.

“You know what we need?” Elijah glanced at Lucy.

She smiled. “Ice cream?”

He shook his head. “No, but that sounds good too. Chocolate milk.”

“Let’s go get it!” Lucy bounced.

Yep, I was the extra. The only one grabbing *real food* as they tossed in a lot of junk we didn’t need, but those donuts Elijah tossed in made me salivate, so I wasn’t going to complain.

“What is this?” I recognized Lilly’s hateful voice.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Hadley

I turned and saw Lilly glaring at us. Her eyes were incredibly focused and very, very angry as she noticed Eli in Elijah's arms.

I only felt guilty for a fraction of a second before I realized I had no reason to be. Elijah was my boyfriend. He was great with my kids—Lilly's grandkids. What Scott didn't do and all the times he never sought to see them, Elijah made up for.

"Lucy, Meme Lilly is here." Understanding flashed in Elijah's gaze as I spoke, but he made no move to hand Eli over to me nor did I to try to take him.

Lucy was in a good mood and it showed. She didn't seem upset when she saw her granny. It didn't even seem like she was thinking about the last time she cried with her. For that, I was grateful.

"Meme Lilly," Lucy said and stepped over to her with a smile.

It was a reluctant one since she was still glaring at us, but she gave a brief one as she looked down at Lucy. "You were supposed to come see Daddy this weekend. What happened?"

Um, what?

Lucy tilted her head. "We went to Elijah's tattoo shop!"

Oh, fudge. I knew things were going to get bad by the way Lilly's entire face crinkled with furious lines as she skimmed over me. "You what? You never answered Scott's calls or texts when he called to see them this weekend. And you took them to a tattoo shop instead?"

I frowned. "Scott never called or texted—"

"Don't lie! He told me he did!" She screeched, face turning blood red.

My face was equally hot. I glimpsed around as people strode by. I couldn't believe she'd act this way in public. Nor could I believe she'd lie about something like that. Maybe Scott lied to her? Either way, she had no right to confront me.

"Mommy?" Lucy seemed anxious as she walked over to me.

“What is this on her hands?” Lilly rushed over and latched onto Lucy’s arms. She tried to pull away, but Lilly gripped her too tightly as she glared at the fake tattoos.

“It’s my pony and puppy,” Lucy smiled a bit as she spoke until Lilly opened her mouth.

“What is wrong with you?” she snapped, her voice full of scorn. Her eyes dilated while her mouth curled like an angry dog.

“What do you mean? They’re fake tattoos. I’m sure Scott had them dozens of times as a kid.” I reached down and pulled Lucy away from her grandmother.

“That’s beside the point. You think I’ll idly sit back and watch you bring such a bad influence around my grandkids? Look at him.” She gestured toward Elijah. Hissing, she added, “Tattoos are so disgusting and say a lot about a person’s character.”

“I don’t like when you yell, Meme,” Lucy said frowning.

“Meme is trying to take care of you.” She patted Lucy’s head. Lucy stepped back immediately which earned me a scowl.

“Let’s not have this discussion in public,” I offered nicely despite the anger and hurt I felt. “You’re scaring Lucy. This isn’t the way to act.”

“Having two kids doesn’t mean you know things.” She put her hand in my face and that was when I felt Elijah moving behind me. “I’ve raised three, and there’s no way I’d separate a dad from his babies the way you have!”

“Hadley said she’s not doing this here, so I think you should move along so we can finish shopping.” Even while trying to sound nice, Elijah’s personality and stature was just too big and demanding to ever seem anything but rude.

Lilly became rigid with rage. “Shopping? You’re not their family. You don’t even belong in this conversation.”

His nostrils flared as he held Eli closer. His eyes were wild and angry as he glowered at the elderly woman. “That’s where you’re wrong. They’re my business because I care about them. I’m not going to stand back and allow you to hurt them like the last time they saw you.”

She gasped and her accusatory gaze landed on me. “How could you do this to Scott?”

Elijah tossed his hand up, clearly getting frustrated. “She’s done more than enough. If he really wanted to see his kids, he’d make an effort. All of you would instead of throwing your blame on someone else.”

She scoffed. “Wow. Spoken perfectly from someone who knows so little. Has she told you that? She’s the one that never lets Scott see them!”

Lies!

“Want to take them to the truck while I checkout?” Elijah asked softly as he placed Eli in my arms. I nodded quietly as Lucy tugged on my hand and followed behind Elijah who took the shopping cart from me.

Of course Lilly followed. “I’ll be taking this to court,” she told me.

I was so mortified. What if we ended up on the internet in one of those crazy-people-of-Walmart videos simply because Lilly saw us shopping with Elijah. That’d be my luck. And what was worse was the fact that I was beginning to suspect that Scott was lying to his parents about what really happened. He chose not to show up each time he said he’d come for Lucy. And every time he failed, Lucy would sit in front of the window frowning. Eventually, she stopped waiting to see her dad. Her sad faces turned into disinterested ones. Thanks to Scott, Lucy didn’t want to see her dad since she spent so little time with him.

Elijah stopped in front of me and sighed before he looked at Lilly. “Don’t you follow them outside. You’re a grown-ass woman. Act like one.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s no way to talk to a woman. You want that around Lucy?” She pointed at him.

“Elijah, please,” I mumbled quickly, just wanting the scene to be over.

“I only see one mature woman, and it sure the fuck ain’t you,” he told her. “Have you stopped to wonder that maybe your actions are the blame for losing touch with your grandkids? No wonder Lucy cries when she’s with you. Look at the way you’re acting.”

“Elijah,” I said more sternly. When he glanced at me, I gave him a frustrated frown as I gestured to Lucy who was listening to every word he said.

“I’m calling Scott right now and telling him about this nonsense. First thing in the morning, I’m taking him to the courthouse.”

Elijah chuckled dryly. “Take him? See what I mean? Raise your own damn kid before worrying about someone else’s.”

Although I agreed with everything Elijah said, I didn’t appreciate how he’d done it. Maybe if Lucy and Eli weren’t listening it would be better, but I wasn’t okay with anyone bad-mouthing their father in front of them even though he deserved it. I didn’t want to raise them to think it was all right. And the fact that Elijah continuedly ignored my plea to ignore her only made it worse.

So, yes, I was hurt and angry at him and this entire situation.

“Tell your meme bye, Lucy. We’re heading to the truck,” I blurted. Lucy never said it though.

“You need the keys.” Elijah handed them over. When I walked away, he grabbed my shoulder. “Hey…”

I shirked away from him and steered Lucy out of Walmart.

“Lucy!” We turned around to see Lilly running out after us. “Don’t you want to see your mommy and daddy get back together?”

“Lilly,” I breathed out slowly. “You’re going too far. You’ve caused a scene in a public place.”

“You know this is ridiculous, Hadley. How can you guys raise your babies apart?” So she was being docile and trying to be nice. Her tone was fine, but her words were all wrong.

“I’ve been raising them just fine. In fact, single parenting happens all over the world, and those kids are doing fine.”

“Lucy…” She dropped down to Lucy’s height. “What do you want?”

“My mommy.” She clutched my leg.

“No, I mean don’t you want to see Daddy and Mommy get together again as a family?” Lucy pressed her face into my leg and ignored her.

“Don’t be this way to her,” I practically begged as I bent down and scooped up my four-year-old in my other arm. It was hard to hold them both but I was determined. “I know you mean well, but what you’re doing is

wrong.”

And with that, I turned away and hurried to Elijah’s truck. I buckled Eli in quietly as Lucy climbed into her car seat and waited for me. “Are you okay, Mommy?” she asked as I buckled her in.

“I should be asking you that,” I mumbled.

“I’m okay. I hope Elijah doesn’t get lost in there alone.”

“He’ll be okay.”

“Will he get my chips?”

“He will.”

Before I closed the door, she asked, “Do I have to go to Meme’s?”

“Only when you want to.”

“I don’t want to.”

Kissing her forehead, I shut her door and climbed into the passenger seat. It didn’t take the A/C long to cool us as we waited. A few minutes later, Elijah placed the groceries in the bed of the truck. When he sat in the driver’s seat, I peered out my window instead of looking at him. “Hey...” he murmured.

“How much was it so I can pay you back?” I asked, still not turning in his direction. I knew I was being unreasonable and grumpy. No one despised me more than me. But my mind was in absolute turmoil. Eli and Lucy were my everything, and the fact that someone just threatened to take my world from me haunted every molecule in me. I hated confrontation more than anything and didn’t like people talking the way Lilly and Elijah had in front of my kids. I also didn’t like how he disregarded me when I tried to get his attention.

It scared Lucy when people yelled, and I didn’t like her feeling afraid. So, yes, I was angry.

“That’s a dumb-ass question when you know I’m not letting you pay me back.”

I whipped my head around and glared. “Fine. It can go to your house.”

“Hadley,” he groaned, closing his eyes. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

“You shouldn’t have yelled at her. She’ll try something just because of you.”

“I don’t care who it is. You’ll never see me stand back and watch as someone talks to you that way. I’ll never be okay with that shit. Never.”

Tears filled my eyes, so I faced forward. I didn’t want to be this way in front of Lucy. My cell phone started going off. My heart dropped when I saw that it was Scott. When I ignored it, I knew Elijah was watching. The rest of the drive was spent in uncomfortable silence with my phone going off every minute. Neither of us even thought to put music on to fill the tension.

All I could think about was what Lilly planned to do. It filled me with nausea. I unbuckled my belt and hopped out of the truck the second he parked. He went to grab Eli, but I mumbled, “I’ll get him since we’re going to head to the apartment.”

“I thought we were going to Elijah’s?” Lucy said still in her car seat.

“Not tonight,” I replied.

Elijah’s hawk eyes were on me. “Hadley...”

My phone started going off again. “Later. I need to deal with this mess.”

He sighed. “At least let me carry the groceries to your apartment.”

“No. Take them to your house.”

“Lucy, do you want your chips?” Elijah helped her out.

“Yeah, will you eat all the food without me?” She asked him just as a text message came through my phone.

SCOTT: ANSWER YOUR PHONE!!!

SCOTT: I SWEAR TO GOD, HADLEY, I’LL NEVER LET YOU SEE YOUR KIDS IF YOU KEEP THAT MAN AROUND.

SCOTT: HE FUCKING YELLED AT MOM!

Elijah’s soft, deep chuckle pulled me away from the text messages. “No, goofy. We’ll eat together. It ain’t going to all disappear within a day.”

“I want to go to your house,” she whispered.

I closed my eyes, tears threatening to spill. Scott yelled at me all the time, so how was his reasoning fair? It was okay for him to yell at me but not for

anyone to do it to his mother?

“Maybe she’ll change her mind later,” Elijah whispered to her.

“Come on, Lucy.” I hefted Eli into my arms and watched as Elijah handed Lucy two bags loaded down with what she quickly picked out to take to the apartment.

It only made me feel distressed. I hated being upset with Elijah of all people. It hurt my soul, but I was scared and frustrated about Lilly and Scott. I didn’t know what they would do.

“Bye, Elijah...” There was a sadness in Lucy’s tone as she said it.

“Hey...” I ignored him, walking faster. His footsteps grew louder as he ran. “You’re that upset with me?” I peeked down at Lucy who was keeping close to him and he sighed. “Will you talk to me later?” Like clockwork, my phone started going off, and Elijah glared at it. “Just tell him to fuck off.”

“See, it’s not that easy,” I muttered as I resumed walking. “Come on, Lucy.”

She took my hand as we walked away from Elijah. With every small step she took, she glanced back.

Chapter Forty

Hadley

“Mommy, stop crying,” Lucy hugged her knees as she continued watching me from the floor. She hadn’t left that spot since we got home.

I finally answered Scott’s call once we were inside the apartment, only for me to drown out everything he yelled in my ear.

I was mentally drained after listening to him.

It had been hours, and Scott still harassed me with phone calls and texts. Everything had been perfect. We were having a great time until Lilly saw us shopping with Elijah. The longer I sat there, the more confused I was as to why it was such a problem for them that Elijah was in our life. It wasn’t fair that Scott had nothing to do with Lucy and Eli but got mad when someone else did something with them.

Why did I have to experience all this turmoil and fear? Why did I have to worry that someone would come and take them away when they were happiest when with me?

I shouldn’t have to. I shouldn’t even be threatened by their father and grandma like that.

But realizing that only made me cry more.

More text messages came in. I was hesitant to pick up my phone and view them thinking it was going to be Scott.

ELIJAH: I’M WORRIED. WILL YOU PLEASE LET ME COME UP?

ELIJAH: I CAN’T STAND KNOWING THAT YOU’RE UP THERE CRYING OVER SOMETHING THAT’S NOT EVEN WORTH CRYING OVER.

You big buffoon. Why did he have to be so hot-headed? I loved that he defended me but hated the way he spoke to Lucy’s grandma right in front of her.

ELIJAH: IS LUCY MAD THAT I YELLED AT HER MAMAW?

I peered down at Lucy after reading his texts. She stared at me with round eyes. “It’s been a long day, hasn’t it?” I asked.

“When are we going to Elijah’s?” she asked instead.

“We’re going to stay here tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because...”

She frowned. “You said I could always see Elijah if I wanted to, no matter what anyone says.”

“I never said you couldn’t.”

“Then why are you crying?”

I sighed. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I don’t want to go to Meme Lilly’s anymore!” She jumped up suddenly and ran off. I got up and followed her. She was belly-first on her bed.

“I’m not making you go to your meme’s house.” I sat down beside her and patted her back.

“I hate it there! All they do is say mean stuff about you, and it hurts my feelings!”

I always knew they would talk about me, but what I never understood was how much it hurt my little girl. It felt like a knife straight into my heart.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whispered.

“Because I didn’t want to make your feelings hurt too.” She sniffled. I wiped my eyes and scooped her up in my arms. She hugged me tightly.

“Shh. It’s okay.” I rubbed her head. “I won’t ever make you. I’m sorry. I just wanted you to spend time with your dad.”

“He’s never there!”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to go there now.” Her head lifted, red, puffy eyes stared at me. I smiled. “Let’s go back into the living room with Bubby.” She nodded and let me carry her. “What do you want to eat?”

“Pancakes?” She shrugged hesitantly.

“At seven in the evening? Sounds good to me!”

“It’s dark out now,” Lucy whispered as she stared out the window.

“It’s close to bedtime now,” I told her as I nursed Eli.

“When are we going to Elijah’s?” She asked for the hundredth time. “He’s waiting on us.”

“Let’s give him a break.” I wasn’t feeling too good about the way I’d treated him. The more I replayed it in my head, the more I liked that he just stepped in. Lilly was the one being ridiculous. Every harsh word Elijah said was the truth. And Lucy... She never once spoke of being upset with him. The only thing she was worried about was going to his house.

Oh, fudge. I was emotional and stressed. I just wanted Elijah to make it all better, even though I was the one to cause the situation. I let my anxiety and worry over Lilly seep in and ruin the happiness I’d felt with that man.

That had to stop. I had to stop letting Scott destroy our lives. He had no right.

“Why do you want to go over to his house?” I asked Lucy.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I just like when Elijah’s with us.”

“Lucy, why do you like Elijah so much?”

“He buys me stuff.”

I chuckled. “You’re rotten.”

“Can we go now?” She grabbed my arm and pulled. “I’m going to tell him you’ve been crying.” She dropped my arm. “Give me your phone. I’m calling and telling him.”

“Is that supposed to scare me?” I asked her with a smirk.

“No. It’s to make you stop crying. Elijah will stop the tears.”

I didn’t even question my four-year-old. She was right.

“Go put on some pj’s while I change Bubby.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Are we going to Elijah’s?”

How could I be so foolish to let one confrontation make me feel so terrible? Look how happy Lucy was... We were all happier when I was with Elijah.

“Yeah, we are.”

She jumped up and down. Unease coursed through my body as I changed Eli. I didn’t bother to change my clothes. All I could think about was how

Elijah must have felt when I abruptly pulled away the first time something bad happened.

I was ashamed, and the need to cry was present all over again.

I held Lucy's hand on the way since it was dark out. I probably should have told him we were coming over but just getting us all together again was all that mattered in the end.

My knuckles tapped on the door twice before I dropped my hand to my side and gripped Lucy's hand again. Nervous jitters swam in my stomach when I heard his giant footsteps nearing the door.

Our eyes met the second he opened the door, and in the process, all my anger seemed childish and absurd. The few short hours I'd spent away from Elijah felt like a lifetime, and seeing him then... His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed and drank me in, like he was surprised and happy I came that night. That was all it took for the tears to spring from my eyes. "I'm sorry," I croaked out right before his big, comforting arms enclosed around Eli and me.

"Thank fuck. I was on my way out. Was going to break in if I had to. You expected me to sleep alone now when I'm so used to being next to you?" His mouth was hot at my ear and his voice was a raspy whisper, making my skin tingle and burn as I pressed my wet face into his shoulder. Eli babbled incoherently as he pulled at Elijah's shirt.

"Me too!" Lucy pulled at my pants leg.

Elijah bent down and scooped her up. "You too."

Her little arms went around Elijah and me and honestly, this moment was the best *ever*. "All together again," Lucy said cheerily, and I laughed, getting all choked up in the feelings that were so good they'd make anyone cry.

There was a lot of crying that night.

As I stared up at Elijah's stubbled chin, and then his dark eyes came into view and softened as he smiled at Lucy, *everything was good again*. Nothing was ever wrong with us to begin with. Elijah did something I wished I had the nerve to do—*talk back*. I promised myself on the walk over there that I'd learn to stop letting people have control over how I felt about myself. I knew it would take time. Good thing I had Elijah around. I was suddenly more than okay with him standing up for me, I was so tired of doing everything by

myself.

Without words, he said every day with his actions, "*I got you,*" and my brain was finally catching up to my heart. I believed in him wholly.

"We watching a movie?" he asked Lucy.

"Yes!"

"One," I told them. "Then we have to go to bed."

"Yay!"

Chapter Forty-One

Hadley

I awoke to the credits rolling on the movie Lucy had picked out. I didn't remember falling asleep, only the brief memory of the start of the movie then nothing. The first thing I noticed was how warm I was and also cramped. I was lying curled up to one of Elijah's legs which took up the entire couch. How did that happen? I glanced up and saw that Lucy and Eli were lying on each of his sides. All three of them were asleep. Eli was spread out, arms in Elijah's face, as he hung halfway off his chest and partially on his arm. Lucy was curled up to his side, butt hanging off the couch, mouth wide open.

It filled my heart completely. The fierce, undeniable loyalty and surge of protection I had for Elijah. We meant something to him. Just like he meant something to all of us. I was so tired of Lilly and Scott saying what a bad influence Elijah was on my kids.

He wasn't. He was completely in tune with himself and gave no apologies for it. I hoped that when my kids were older, they strived to live their lives the way they wanted just like that. And when he loved, he did it completely.

I'd been feeling his heart with his actions months ago...

Slipping my tingly arm from beneath one of his legs, I climbed out from between them. I grabbed Lucy as gently as I could and carried her up to the bedroom she and Elijah had claimed for her. I turned on the nightlight as I left.

Elijah jolted forward when I pulled Eli from his chest. He already had that the-baby-is-moving sixth sense. His sleep-filled eyes were sexy as he took me in cradling Eli to my chest. I brought my finger to my lips so that he knew to be quiet. He rose slowly, cracking his neck as he followed me into his bedroom where I froze at the doorway. I saw that he bought a crib and put it up since the last time I'd been there.

He stepped in front of me and adjusted the blanket in the crib, so I could lay him down. The second I placed Eli down, I rounded on Elijah. He caught me by the waist, pressing me snug against his muscular chest.

Every time we stood close, touching or apart, I was left in awe with how much bigger he was compared to me. No wonder he was so imitating when I

first saw him —his size, tattoos, and angry glare. But I had found comfort in his strength. Safety. A place to unravel and let go of my worries. Even when it was time to step away from the peace his arms brought me, he'd be there to take on my troubles with me.

“I hate the way I spoke to Lucy’s grandma in front of her, but she was being a bitch,” he said, breaking the silence first. His large, calloused palm smoothed over my chin and tipped my head upward. In the darkened room, his brown eyes were like black orbs. At that moment, they were equal furious and begging. Elijah’s furrowed brow told me he was still upset.

“I never told you before, but I don’t allow anyone to talk bad about Scott or his family with Lucy present. I don’t want to raise her to hate him just because my family doesn’t like him, but now I’m starting to wonder why I even tried. Scott is making Lucy not want to have anything to do with him without my help. I’m sorry for the way I shut you out. Lilly had me so embarrassed and hurt. When you ignored me at Walmart and yelled with her, it upset me even though part of me was deeply touched that you defended me.”

Elijah’s mouth pressed a hot kiss against the tip of my nose. It shouldn’t be sexy, but it was. His breath fanned my cheeks, and the soft, firm press of his lips ignited tingles through me. He tucked my hair behind my ear and whispered, “I’m sorry that I was so furious you thought I was ignoring you. I just couldn’t let that woman talk to you that way, and I was slightly ticked that you allowed it.” The harsh truth of his words heated my cheeks. “I want to ask you something, and I want you to be honest with me, baby.”

I shivered in his hold, forever loving that I was the someone he called baby. I was never going to get over it. Elephants were stomping around in my chest, trembling my heart with a brilliant stream of happiness. All from that one word.

“What is it?” I waited, anticipating fear from what he was going to say.

“The way Scott’s mom acted today is that how they’ve always treated you?”

My stomach fell to the floor, bile rose in my throat. I lowered my eyes and when I did, I could feel the tension coiling up in his body. The muscles in his arms flexed and rippled as they tightened around me. There was an incoherent, growl vibrating in his chest before he moved us further away

from the crib and hissed. “I can never be okay with that shit, you hear me?” He tipped my chin upward again, making me meet his intense glare. “*Never*. You better hope that Scott never comes at you the way his mother did. I don’t care that he’s Lucy and Eli’s father, I’ll knock his fucking teeth in since he’s a man—”

“Elijah.”

He continued, “I’m serious. I’m fucking pissed that you of all people are spoken to that way. You’re an awesome mom and an amazing person. I know that. Those fuckers know that. You never take a moment to yourself. Your kids are always with you unless you’re at work. Hadley, you go above and beyond.” His hands rubbed my arms as tears fell.

I’d needed someone to tell me I was doing okay. It wasn’t easy to parent. There were some days you were scared you were failing miserably.

“It’s got to stop, baby, you can’t let them tear you down every time they see you.”

I shuddered, more tears and snot. “I know,” I croaked. “I’m tired of trying for them. Lucy doesn’t want to go, and I haven’t felt comfortable with the idea of her staying with them in months. I don’t care how much crap they give me, *I’m done*. Until she wants to go see them, I’m never making the effort for them again, but I’m scared.” My voice wavered. “So, so scared they might actually try to take them from me.”

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” he whispered gruffly. He wiped my nose with his fingers, unbothered that he was touching my snot as he used his shirt as a tissue, then he hugged me. “I know there’s no point in telling you not to worry because you will anyway, but believe me when I say you don’t have anything to stress about. You’re a great mom, and you’re completely stable with a job and an apartment.”

Eli grunted in the crib and we both froze, waiting to see if he awakened. When it was clear he was just grunting in his sleep, Elijah grabbed the baby monitor and led me toward his master bathroom. “Let’s go take a shower.” Once we were through the doorway, he flipped on the light switch and disappeared on me. I could hear him shutting the bedroom door in case Lucy woke up.

Anticipation made me shiver. Even my fingers were tingling with the need

to touch him. I was completely enthralled with him as he stood in front of me and tugged off his shirt. His demons moved as his muscles and tendons flexed. He was so sexy, sometimes I thought he might be too much for me. It didn't help that he was a jerk to ninety-nine percent of the population, I knew the kind of lingering looks he got from women. I noticed it every time we were out together.

He caught me staring, gaped mouth and all, and that smoldering grin took over his features. "Do I need to undress you too?" he asked while unzipping his jeans.

I snapped out of it. Blinking rapidly and shaking my head, I had a flustered moment of trying to take my shirt and jeans off all at once which earned me a chuckle from Elijah.

"Come here," his voice was so soft and sweet like a purr, and I might as well have been a snowman. I took two tiny steps and melted into his arms.

"I'm going to get on your nerves a lot more in the years to come," he said as he grabbed the bottom of my shirt and lifted it over my head. "You're precious to me—you, Lucy, and Eli. I'll never let you get treated poorly again even if I have to smack your ass a few times to build up some backbone in you."

He squatted in front of me. I swallowed nervously and glanced down as he unbuttoned my pants and rolled them down my legs with my panties. He smirked at me and smacked my butt. I yelped and rubbed my stinging backside. Ow. He actually put some effort into that.

"I don't think that will help anything since it's my soft personality that needs deliverance," I told him.

He took over rubbing my butt cheek as he stood. "Probably right, but it's going to be fun all the same." He smacked it again.

I winced. "Heyyy. That hurts."

"Got a nice ring to it, though."

I was trying very hard not to laugh, but it was impossible with him smiling.

"Now for the tits," he went on, snaking a hand around and unclasping my bra. As soon as they sprang free, he groaned and scooped me up. "Fucking

hell. You're killing me." Heat fanned my skin as his erection bobbed and slid up against me. The feel of him bare and without a condom caused my entire body to quiver. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and rubbed against him once, letting his erection slide between my lips and against my clit before he pulled me inside his shower. He closed the glass door as he stepped in with me.

I didn't realize his showerhead was one of those that you could hold in your hand until he was taking it off and pulling it away from us as he adjusted the temperature. My nipples pebbled. The chill in the air and the desire coursing through me were both to blame. I admired the firmness of his backside and how every part of him was well-built.

He caught my gaze as he faced me. "Cold?" he asked as he lifted the showerhead and sprayed it down my chest. I moaned softly. The hot water was heaven. I tossed my head back and arched into the stream as it raced over my body.

"Never going to get tired of looking at you," he murmured as he gripped the nape of my neck. My eyes opened just as his mouth tackled mine. He flicked his tongue against my lips, and it felt so sensual and divine that my legs wobbled. I parted my mouth, allowing him to conquer my lips, pacifying me in every erotic way possible. Pulling away, he instructed, "Lean up against the wall."

I shivered as my back hit the cold wall. He loomed over me, placing the stream between us so that it ran down my breasts. Giving one of my boobs a soothing caress before he tugged on the nipple, he squatted down, face aligned with the space between my legs. My need was insistent and heart-pounding, fluttering masses of warmth and tingles. A desperate need to be filled.

Elijah pointed the showerhead toward my bellybutton, leaving a hot trail of water. With his free hand, he cupped my vagina, leisurely rubbing his thumb across my clit before he slipped a finger inside of me.

Oh, fudge. I moaned, spreading my legs apart. He saw me struggling and grabbed one of my legs at the knee and held it up. How did he expect me to manage with one foot on the floor? I was barely managing with two before he even started touching me.

Pumping his digit in and out of me a few times, I was in a slight haze

when I saw him lower the showerhead down, down, down until he sprayed the water over my clit, and I jumped, but Elijah braced his arm over my hip and held me firm.

Oh, oh, oh... So much stimulation. My stomach clenched. It felt so good, but the pressure was so intense it gave me a tickling sensation that I wasn't sure I could bear.

Leaning over, I pulled his hand away and sagged a little as the pressure left my clit.

"Too much, I think," I whispered through several pants.

Brown eyes smothered me with their intensity. "I think you can handle it."

I shook my head. "No... *Oh!*" I raised up, flattening my back against the wall as he sprayed the water over me again, this time adding his pumping finger.

My stomach fluttered, tightened, and flinched every time my clit was hit with the pressure. *I can't... I can't...can't.* It was a web of pleasure and torture, the way the torrent brought a tantalizing tickle in its wake, then proceeded to unfurl a frenzy of heat that when it blossomed, I cried out, grabbing Elijah's hand that was wrapped around the showerhead.

"Elijah!"

My entire body bucked and arched. I hunched over him, needing him to stop as the orgasm took control of me.

I whimpered as he finally relented, leaving me a quivering mess. His finger drove the last few seconds of my ecstasy to the very end as he moved the showerhead away from me.

He let my leg drop from the hook of his arm. "You're so lovely, Hadley." His voice was thick, full of lust and smoke waiting to be unleashed upon me. He stood, bringing me back against the wall. "You okay?" One hand idly rubbed my shoulder as he placed the showerhead where it belonged.

I shivered some more as he tilted my neck. Kiss. Kiss. Planting his lips across my skin. I sighed happily in my lust-enhanced state. "Want you inside me now," I whispered throatily. I fluttered open my eyes as he stood to full height.

"Let me grab—"

He went to move, and I snatched his arms.

“I want to feel you completely.” My admittance made me nervous since he took in a deep, croaked breath as he neared, letting me coax him back to me. “I’ve been on birth control since my six-week checkup after having Eli.”

He pressed his forehead to mine, meeting my eyes with the most star-struck, passion-filled gaze I’d ever seen, and said, “I want that too... Fuck... I want that so much. I’ve never before...”

His words were lost as I leaned up and kissed him, softly, beautifully, so in sync the way our breath fell and rose together like our very job was to start where the other ended. He was shaking already by the time I sucked on his bottom lip just enough that it was playful, teasing, and intimate all in one. His huge length pressed against my belly as he hooked one of my legs over his hip, then the other, hoisting me up against the wall.

Shuddering breaths, bodies aligned... I saw my lover, and my future filled with all these epic adventures with him. I wanted him to know if he didn’t already. “I love you.”

“I’ve *been* in love with you. You’ve made me all domestic and shit.”

I snickered, quickly quietening as he nudged his erection against my opening. I never took my eyes from his as he slowly entered me, inch by perfect inch. I could feel every exquisite detail as he moved inside me—the way my inner walls clung to his mushroom-shaped tip, his thick pulsating girth as I stretched to accept him entirely. My mind was going haywire with the knowledge that we were as close as close could get—I didn’t want this type of intimacy from anyone else but him. A thundering inferno threatened to spill over if he went any deeper. He hissed and it turned into a groan.

“Hadley, I didn’t think you could feel any more perfect. I was wrong. So fucking wrong. You’re so tight and hot. Jesus, baby, you were made for me.” His dirty words imploded on the blooming heat I already felt, then he thrust a little deeper.

I spiraled, vaulted. My inner walls clenched around him as I arched, scattered, and submerged into the flames. “God bless...America! *Ahhh...*”

He kissed my opened mouth. “It ain’t gonna hurt you to say fuck or shit. No one’s listening but me right now.” He nipped my ear with his teeth, and I shivered. He slowly pulled out and thrust back in. I gasped. He gripped my

hips and legs tighter. “You’re still milking my cock. Fuck! I’m not going to last.”

I understood perfectly. The third time he thrust into me, his piercing edged along my clit and I was coming unglued again. No wonder my body never stopped pulsating against him when he thrust me right into another orgasm. I gripped his hair, body slipping down the wall some as I arched and whimpered.

His grip on me slackened. He tightened his hold on me, lifting me up as he thrust like a wild man, guiding my release into a crescendo. Elijah groaned, desperately seeking my lips as he kissed the ever-loving soul out of me before his release shot into me. Heat rose on my already hot cheeks. I could feel every sensual pound in his length, and the way he filled me in ways he never could with a condom.

We kissed and kissed even after our bodies stopped pulsing. He placed my wobbly legs on the floor, and his erection slipped out of me. His hard length was bobbing and pressing against my belly, ready again. The water was lukewarm, becoming cold when he pulled his lips away from mine. His cheeks were slightly flushed, his lips a deep cherry red, and his eyes soft and hazy as he stared down at me with so many emotions. All of them had something to do with him loving me.

He shut the water off, dried us off and did me once more on the bed underneath the blankets before we succumbed to sleep.

Yesterday I was braver. My nerves were back with the morning sun.

It was okay though. Elijah sat on my parents’ porch swing with me as I dialed Scott’s number, his hand soothing circles over the top of my thigh, creating a sense of comfort and safety. Lucy and Eli were inside while I made the call.

Scott answered on the third ring. “I’m guessing you see how foolish you were yesterday?”

Forget my nerves. His bitter tone made my resolve tighten. “No, Scott. I actually have something to tell you.”

“And what’s that?”

“The only ones that have ever acted foolishly are you and your mother.”

“What the—”

“Don’t interrupt me,” I snapped. “I’m sick and tired of you and your family degrading me in front of Lucy. Do you have any idea how much that hurts her feelings? How much you guys make her cry? I’ve tried so hard to get along with you and your family since we’ve split up, offering to let you keep Lucy on the weekends and you never showed. She’s four, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t know you’re blowing her off.”

“Hadley!”

“No, you have no right to get upset. Lucy loves you, but she doesn’t even want to go see you lately, and I’m not going to make her. If you want to see her, I can meet you, but until she’s ready to spend the night again it’s not happening.”

“That’s fucking ridiculous. You’ve got her brainwashed is the problem.”

“If you and your mom can’t be civilized, then I guess we *will* have to go to court. They might make your lazy bu—ass get a job to pay child support.”

Elijah reared back and mouthed, “ass” before smiling, and I shook my head at him.

“Are you kidding me?” Scott yelled in my ear. “Did you just say ass? You never cuss. What’s gotten into you?”

“It’s me getting sick and tired of putting up with this kind of immaturity from you and your mom. If you guys are going to be awful, I can too.”

“You know I can’t get a job until I’m out of school—that’s too much work! You can’t ask me to pay child support when it’s your fault I never see them!”

It was like talking to a brick wall.

I sighed. “Funny, how you made me work while I went to college full-time and was pregnant.”

“Hadley!”

“Lucy loves you, and Eli doesn’t even know his father. If it weren’t for them... I want to be civil about this, but it’s up to you.”

He hung up.

All the tension from the phone call drained from my body, and I sagged into the bench. Elijah pulled me into his side. “You okay?” he asked softly.

“I’m fine.”

It didn’t take long for his shoulders to start moving. My eyes widened as I realized his entire chest vibrated. I sat up and saw him laughing. “What’s so funny?”

He cackled. “You said ass.”

My cheeks heated remembering. “You’re the one... Forget it.” I glared and crossed my arms, pushing my back against the bench and swinging us angrily.

“Yeah, but I didn’t realize how weird it would be.”

God bless America! He was still laughing.

“How is it weird?” I muttered.

“It sounds so foreign and cute coming out of your mouth, I couldn’t take you seriously. Don’t ever cuss at me when we’re arguing ’cause it will only make me laugh, and you’ll get madder than a wet hen.”

“Like now?”

He tossed his head back, literally red in the face as he lost his breath from chuckling. “Ass.”

He seemed so content. His eyes glistened, entire face lighting up when gazing at *me*. I *did* that to him. Made him jubilant.

I could do that for the rest of my life and never grow tired of the feeling bursting through my chest.

“You’re being one,” I bit out, trying not to smile.

“I love you, my little bad girl.” He pulled me back into him.

“I love you,” I said it moodily even though I was smiling into his pectoral muscles as he held me close.

“We got this though. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Not you, he said *we*.

I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed him tightly.

“Strangely, I’m okay. I’m just sad for Lucy and Eli. I’m scared that Scott

and his parents will keep going like this until it's too late and neither of our kids wants anything to do with them.”

“If it happens, you're not to blame.” Elijah sighed. “He and his family will be at a major loss if they miss out on those kids because of their pettiness, but I know they have an amazing mother, and she makes up for hundreds of moms and dads and...they have me.”

“You're awesome, too.”

He smirked down at me. “I am, aren't I?”

I rolled my eyes as Lucy threw open the screen door. “Elijah, Papaw said for you to come to him. He needs your help.”

Elijah stood. “Better go see.”

Once he disappeared through the door, I peered over at Lucy. “Is Papaw testing him with something?”

She shrugged. “He asks about Elijah a lot. Why?”

I smirked. “You'll understand the day you bring home a boy.”

“Do I bring home one tomorrow after school?”

“No!”

She narrowed her eyes, followed by her little careless shrug. “I'm going to see what they're doing.”

I trailed after her with a smile.

Life was great.

Chapter Forty-Two

Elijah

Four years later...

“Lucy, go find a nurse!” I panicked as I slammed the brakes and threw the truck into park.

“Will you chill?” The eight-year-old was ninety-nine percent sass, I was positive of this. That was the only language she seemed to speak. “Mom’s fine.”

“She’s right,” Hadley groaned, face pinching in pain as she clutched her round belly. “My water hasn’t even broken yet. No need to freak out.”

“Are you okay, Mommy?” Eli’s lips were close to trembling. He was probably on the verge of freaking out like I was.

“I’ll go grab a wheelchair,” said Lucy, jumping out of the truck and running inside.

“No, I’m fine. I can walk.” It was too late for Lucy to hear her mom.

“You’re not walking. How far apart are the contractions now?” I asked, placing my palm against her belly. She was so full of shit. Her stomach was tightening up into a giant ball as she pinched her eyes closed. It scared me. Seeing her in pain drove me fucking crazy.

“Every two minutes?” She winced.

I hopped out of the truck, rushed over to her side, and opened her door.

“Here!” Lucy yelled across the parking lot. She placed the wheelchair next to me while I helped Hadley out.

“Can you help me with my buckles, Sissy?” Eli asked.

“You little turd, I have to do everything,” Lucy complained, helping him anyway.

“Is it time for baby bruther to come?” Eli asked.

“Yep.” Lucy shut the back door after Eli hopped out.

“Mamaw and Papaw should be here soon,” Hadley told him as I eased her into the wheelchair. “Lucy hold his hand.” She hunched over again, and my

heart pounded terribly in worry as I saw her belly drawing up.

I wheeled her inside, stopping at the first nurses station I came to. “She’s in labor!”

“Has her water broken?” one of the nurses asked.

“No, but it will at any time.”

The nurse simply smiled at me, and it grated on my nerves. “Let’s check you guys in.”

I was about to say something not so nice when a warm palm slid into mine. I glanced down at Hadley who was beaming up at me while squeezing my hand reassuringly. “Me and Jackson are fine. I think we’re going to be here a while before my water breaks.”

I bent over a little and kissed the knuckles that gripped mine before I sighed. “Kick my ass if I start getting on your nerves too much. I just can’t stand seeing you in pain.”

“I know,” she murmured softly.

“Here, we’ll get you to sign her in, and we’ll set her up in a room.” The nurse gave me a paper. “You are her husband...?”

“I knew you guys would be here sometime this week,” I exhaled in relief when Hadley’s doctor strode up to us. “How are you feeling, Momma?” She touched Hadley’s belly.

“Like I’m ready to have this baby,” Hadley responded.

“What about you, Dad?” She placed her hand on my shoulder.

“Can we get Hadley to a bed? I know she’s not—”

“Ah,” her mouth widened as Hadley and her shared a knowing smirk. “I see. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of your wife and baby.”

Thirty minutes later, I was sitting beside Hadley as she laid in bed. Her eyes were pinched shut in anguish. And fucking hell, there was no way I could stomach her sitting there for hours in discomfort. They had to do something.

“Hank!” I peered over my shoulder as Ma and Hank stepped in. Hank was smiling as he bent down and scooped Eli up.

“How are you feeling?” Ma came over to the bed and asked Hadley.

Hadley opened her eyes slightly. “Ah...”

“Do you guys want us to take Lucy and Eli to grab something to eat?” Ma asked.

“I want to go!” Eli screamed.

“I’m going to stay here with Mom,” Lucy said, and I looked over at her watching her mom. Even with the sass, she was every bit her mommy’s girl still. Worry tugged on her lips the longer she watched Hadley.

“We’ll be in the waiting room after we get back. Make sure you bring him out to the window where we can see him after he’s born.” Ma patted my back. I fished my keys from my front pocket and handed her the truck keys.

“Just drive the truck. It’s already got his car seat.”

“Come give me a kiss, Eli,” Hadley told him. He jumped down and ran to her. I helped him up on the bed where he placed a kiss on her cheek. “You ready for baby brother?” she asked him.

He nodded vigorously. “Feel better, Mommy.” He ran back to Hank.

Once they were gone, Hadley looked at Lucy. “Weren’t you hungry?”

“You know they’re going to bring me back something anyway.” Lucy shrugged casually with all the faith in the world. She was right. They definitely would bring food back for her, probably for Hadley’s parents too who weren’t there yet.

“Does it always take so long?” Lucy asked suddenly. “Why is nothing happening?”

I felt the same way she did. I hated that it was taking so long.

“You two need to stop worrying,” Hadley told us.

“Elijah’s the one on the verge of crying, not me.” Lucy pointed out.

“I bet I won’t be the only one crying,” I added.

She glared at me. “I bet you ten dollars!”

“I bet you’ll be washing my truck.”

“God bless America!” Hadley gripped her stomach. “Lucy, you’re acting just like him lately. I can’t handle two of you.”

Lucy and I shared a knowing smirk before she snickered. She placed her

head next to her mom and sighed. “After today Mom, we’re going to be outnumbered.”

“I already feel outnumbered between the three of you ganging up on me as it is.”

Six hours later, Jackson Parker was born.

I tried to stay strong as I held Hadley’s hand, sweat coating her forehead and dampening her hair. I already knew it, but now I was positive... She was the strongest person I’d met.

As soon as Jackson came out crying, I cried with him. The happiest, proudest moment of my life was in that room.

I was a husband. Step-dad. Dad.

How much my life had changed over the years since meeting Hadley. I kissed her on the lips, rubbing her wet hair as tears ran down her cheeks too.

They placed Jackson in my arms, and I held him so that Hadley could see him too. “He’s so perfect,” she whispered to me. I nodded in agreement, unable to look away from him.

I didn’t forget my promise.

Bring him to the window as soon as he’s born. I don’t want to wait to see him.

Lucy was worse than the grandparents about wanting to see him.

Wiping my face, I glanced down at Hadley who was already nodding like she knew what I was thinking. “Go show him off then bring him back to his mommy.”

The doctors held the door open for me. Several feet across the room were six faces. They all jumped up and down and pointed except one. Lucy held Eli even though he was almost as big as her as he pointed at Jackson, and she completely broke down. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she covered her mouth and still tried to hold her brother on her hip. Her reaction only made my tears worse.

Because I knew she felt it too. That insane love that tackled my very being

the second I saw Jackson the first time.

Seeing his sister cry, only made Eli start too. Now every smiling face was crying as I held him up toward the window.

I stared at the two kids that made me into this person I was, and I swore my heart quadrupled in size. Some days I couldn't believe I had all these people in my life to love. And I couldn't believe they loved me.

Bonds came from more than just blood.

Sometimes it was just there, and you didn't question it.

I loved my family.

Life was...

Amazing.

Epilogue

Hadley

Eight months later....

“All right, Jackson,” Elijah sighed as he dropped behind me on the blanket. His hairy legs caged around me as he adjusted the umbrella once more so that we were hidden from the hot sun. “What the hell, son? You only need one tit, stop trying to yank both out.” I laughed as he moved Jackson’s hand away from the boob he wasn’t nursing from.

“I don’t like the sand,” Eli mumbled as he sat down and scooted beside us. “It burns my feet.”

“Keep your swimming shoes on,” I told him.

“Blame your mom, Eli. She’s the one that wanted us to vacation on the beach.” I pinched Elijah’s arm after he said it.

Lucy let out a deep breath. “Saltwater tastes bad.”

“That’s why you aren’t supposed to drink it,” said Elijah.

She glared at him. “I can’t help that it went up my nose when a wave knocked me under!”

He chuckled. “Yeah, you were getting your ass kicked out there.”

“You didn’t even get in. You just watched. I’d like to see you out there.” She pointed toward the ocean.

“Let’s go then.” He stood up. “Come on, Eli. Let’s go show your sister how it’s done.” Eli took his hand after slipping on his shoes.

“Knee deep, you guys, and no farther!” I warned them, staring up at Elijah. “Hold Eli, please? And don’t goad Lucy too much. I’m already worried...” My gaze followed where she walked toward the water, glancing back our way to see if Elijah was coming.

“I know, baby. That’s why I’m heading down. She wants to go back to the water, but I can tell she’s afraid to stay down there alone. She won’t go out far.”

“Sissy is afraid?” Eli asked sounding surprised.

“Come on.” Elijah scooped him up. “Those waves are no joke. That’s why

it's better not to go down alone. She's not afraid as much as she is smart..."

His words trailed off the further away they got, and I smiled after them.

When I looked down, Jackson smiled up at me. "What is it?" I cooed. He laughed as I placed my bikini top back over my boob. "Want to say ma-ma?"

"Da-dad!"

"Noo! Ma-ma..."

"Daaa-daaa."

I laughed. "Okay, traitor, see if I give you any more milk. Does Dad give you milk?"

"Daa-daaa."

I ruffled his dark hair. He was the spitting image of Elijah with his dark eyes and hair. "Now I know you're doing it on purpose."

Jackson and I played in the sand a little as I watched the three of them play in the water.

Scott called Lucy once or twice a year. Eli never got the chance to know his father so when he tried to talk to Eli, he wasn't really interested. Scott would play the blame game and that would be it. We wouldn't hear from him again for a while.

Lilly never gave me trouble with them. My guess was she only wanted to hurt my feelings and scare me that day. Like her son, she never made the time to be a part of their lives but still blamed me for it.

They knew where we lived and could come see them whenever. Even when we moved into Elijah's house, they still knew because I told them. Last year, we moved again. Same town, just a new home. Elijah's parlor, Lucy's school, and the hospital were all reasons why we stayed in the town including the fact that our parents would cry a river if we moved away. We also told Scott and his parents where the new house was too.

How hard was it to pick up the phone and call someone? Or ask to come see them when you lived in the same county?

I was only sad for my kids. I hated that they didn't get to see their father even though neither of them wanted to anymore. I knew it would have been different if I had forgiven Scott. He would still be on a couch while I worked.

They would likely see him every day, but I couldn't imagine them happy because they would have seen me struggling to be happy with someone I could never trust again. Scott still lived with his parents. He wasn't in college anymore, and he didn't work. That put things into perspective for me. My kids would never get to see me treated the way I should be treated if I'd stayed with Scott. They'd never know what it was like to count on someone and for them to be there, no matter what.

Elijah was a father to all my kids. They didn't call him Dad. Well, Eli wanted too sometimes, and I wasn't sure if I should correct him or not since he had known no one else besides Elijah. I could see the twinkle in Elijah's eyes when he called him Dad, and it cracked my chest open with so many emotions. I stopped being confused after that.

He loved them unconditionally, and when I corrected Eli once, I saw how disappointed Elijah had gotten. No one was more disappointed than me. Now that Eli was close to turning five, I sat down and talked to him about Scott and Elijah. I told him it was okay if he wanted to call Elijah Dad. I cried because Eli had cried since he was so happy. He thought all the times I acted funny when he called Elijah Dad that I was disappointed in him. He was afraid I was mad at him, and that made me feel like the worst mother in the world.

I realized Elijah deserved this, and Eli deserved a father in his life that would always be there. Eli spent the entire day calling him Dad just to be saying it after our conversation. That night, my big, mean husband cried against my chest he was so happy.

Sometimes, I thought Elijah forgot Scott was a part of Eli and Lucy until the rare moments he called. I wasn't even sure why Scott even bothered when it was mostly him arguing with me. Scott had the nerve to flirt with me knowing I was married, and Elijah would neuter him if he so much as blinked my way.

That was something I loved about Elijah. His love for me never withered or slowed. He was constant and true even after nearly five years.

Lucy was slowly becoming the female version of him. She was into drawing, already daydreaming about tattooing people for a living. Since she was only eight, I wasn't sure if she'd still feel that way ten years down the road, but I couldn't wait to see.

Eli was more conservative and shyer than Lucy ever was. I could already tell that he would be my little gentleman. He was so sweet and caring. Elijah even had him opening doors for everyone at stores.

I didn't even want to think of the attention those two got when they were out together. And now there was another one... I glanced down at Jackson passed out in my arms. Maybe I shouldn't let the three of them go out anywhere without me. The idea was tempting, but my husband kind of loved me a whole lot which made it impossible for anyone to tempt him.

Besides, I trusted him with my kids. Of course, I trusted him every day with my heart.

These days my dad didn't complain about the type of man I was with or married to. He'd never spoken a single bad thing about Elijah. The only things he liked to complain about was the half-sleeve tattoo on my left arm and the many more he knew I'd get.

It might be true when they say, "choose your lover wisely since you'll become a reflection of each other." In a lot of ways, I was different. My love with Elijah made me a stronger woman who occasionally cussed in which he'd laugh until tears were in his eyes. I told him my tattoo ideas, and he'd draw me something. His warped fascination with creepy things was slowly seeping into me. The painting he had given me forever ago hung in our room as proof of that. We'd had some hot sex after he admitted that the picture was drawn as a memory of me because he couldn't stop thinking about my *leaking tits* as he put it. I looked forward to the moments we sat down and watched a movie together as a family, and what came after everyone fell asleep each night—our moments.

Jackson woke right before the three of them came back.

"Let's go stick his feet in the ocean, then we'll go grab some food. Eli's hungry," Elijah said. Jackson was already reaching up for his dad as he leaned down and took him from me. He offered me a hand and helped me up. He kept hold of me as we walked down to the water. Lucy held Eli's hand as we stood by and laughed as Jackson tensed up the second his feet hit the waves.

And my family, so close together, was having a blast. Elijah's broad back bent over as he dabbed Jackson's feet, and the way Lucy and Eli were laughing at him...

Oh, fudge.

I fell in love with Elijah all over again.

THE END

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About the Author

Michelle is from a small town in Eastern Kentucky where opossums try to blend in with the cats on the porch and bears are likely to chase your pets—this is very true, it happened with her sister's dog. Despite the extra needed protection for your pets, she loves the mountains she calls home. She has a man and twin girls who are the light of her life and the reason she's slightly crazy.

As a kid, she was that cousin, that friend, that sister and daughter, the talker who could spin a tale and make-believe into any little thing so it was no surprise when she found love in reading and figured all these characters inside her head needed an outlet. They wanted to be heard, so she wrote.

The voices keep growing faster than she gets the time to write.

The stories are never going to end. That's perfectly okay, though. We never want to stop an adventure.

She writes and loves many different genres so sign up to her mailing list to keep updated on her releases!

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