

GREYHUF FININGTON

UTTERLY,
RELENTLESSLY
HIS.



Utterly, Relentlessly His.

ever
THE EISENBERG EFFECT

GREYHUFFINGTON

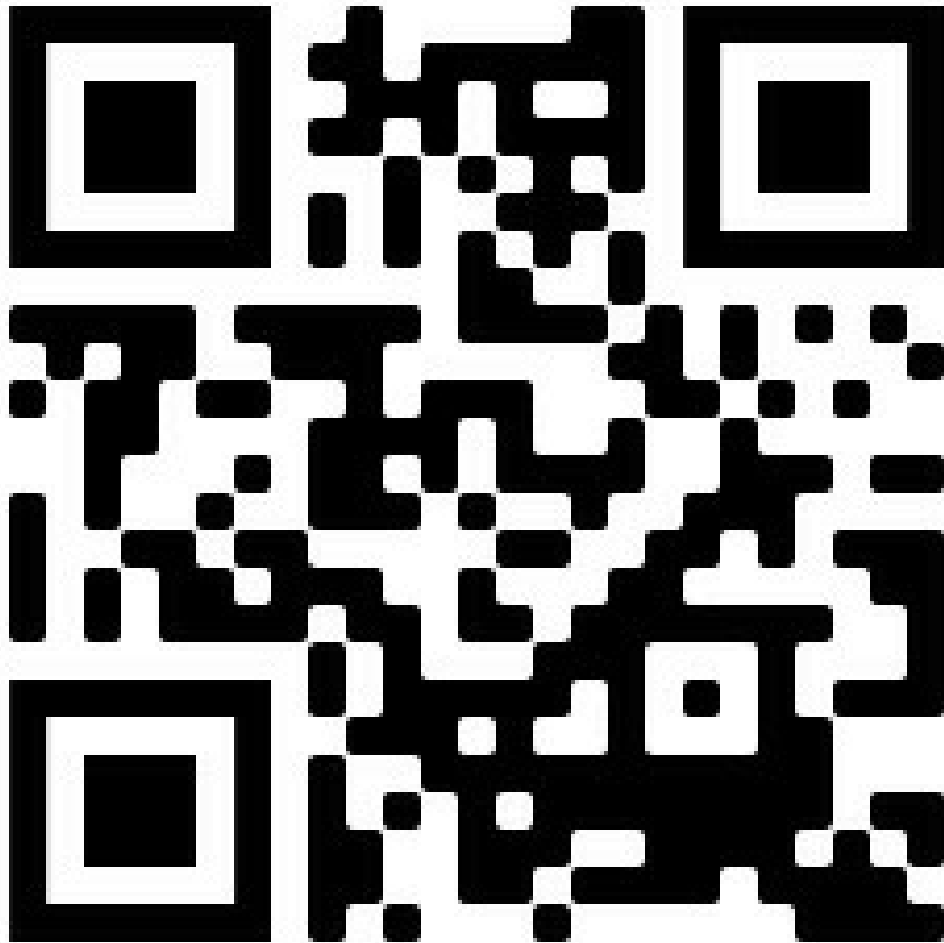
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ever
THE EISENBERG EFFECT

GREYHUFFINGTON

ONE

ever

FRESH, warm tears kissed my skin after a single blink, ran along my cheeks and ended their journey in the fresh linen beneath me. Voiceless, I'd been reduced to silent cries that I felt as if no one heard. And, as plentiful as they were, I seemed to always have more – *and more and more*.

For the last eight weeks, it was more of the same. Each day, I was a bit more rooted in my sorrows. I'd gotten so deep into the abyss that I didn't think it was humanly possible to pull myself out. I felt like it was useless to even try at this point because I'd done so for weeks, only to end up in worse shape than I'd started. It was like a never ending cycle of sadness, tears, dissatisfaction, disappointment, and shame.

This new territory I was treading was both scary and embarrassing. Though it was likely I wasn't, I felt like the laughing stock of my home. All jokes were on me. Sometimes, I could even hear the gentle giggles at my

expense. Maybe it was all in my head but maybe it wasn't.

Rolling over in the bed that still felt foreign to me, I hugged the pillow. I missed my bed. I missed my children. I missed myself. *I missed my Luca.*

Isolation was never my preference, but lately it was the only thing that allowed me to maintain the piece of sanity I was clinging to. The second I attempted to step out of my new bedroom, the world came crashing down. I never imagined not sharing a room with the man I loved more than life itself, but it was life that had gotten in the way of that.

And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get back to that. I couldn't get back to him. My center no longer existed – just darkness, pain, and depression. The thought of it made the same heart I'd used to love him heavy with grief for the loss of what we'd worked so hard to build. It hurt. All of it, burdening me with an anxiousness for the unknown that I could never and would never be able to fulfill.

“Eh. Eh. Eh. Ehhhhhhhh!” Lucas welled.

What was once the most precious sound was like fingernails on a chalkboard now. Cringing at the sound of my son's cries was the most hurtful, but I seemed to get more peeved with the sound each time I heard it. The disgust had hardly anything to do with my precious boy and everything to do with my uselessness in his world. Aside from being his source of nutrients, I had nothing more to give him. Not even the love I'd given the rest of my children – especially in the first few weeks of their lives. This time, things were different.

Luca's footsteps were the next thing I heard. Like clockwork, this was our morning routine. We'd been reduced to nearly nothing. Yet, he was still resilient and patient and beautiful and loving and so damn amazing that I was still wondering how God could make a man so perfect. And, then hand him over to me as if I deserved him. I didn't. Especially not now.

As the father and son duo closed in on me, the cries got louder, the tears got thicker, and my breast began to throb as they lactated. My body sensed my son's hunger and worked overtime to produce the milk that he needed to survive. It understood my son's need and could still produce under stress while I withered away as if I couldn't muster the strength to do the same. Though amazed at its capabilities, I was still jealous. I, too, wanted to be everything that my son needed. I just couldn't be.

The creaking of the door as Luca pushed it open forced me to take a deep breath and hold it before releasing it. By the time I did, he was flipping on the

light. My eyes burned as forced light intervened the darkness I preferred. I failed at the lousy attempt to get myself together, flopping my tired hand next to me on the bed instead of clearing my face of tears.

I had nothing to hide. Luca was well aware of all things concerning me. I had nowhere to hide, anyhow. He could feel it all. I could see the worry lines on his handsome face as he got closer and finally sat next to me on the bed.

Still hugging the pillow, I began to weep. His presence was the gravitational pull I tried resisting because it lowered me deeper into the hole I couldn't climb out of. Feeling like the biggest disappointment in his world, I could hardly stand to look at him. I'd let him down. No longer was I the woman that he'd fallen in love with and married. I wasn't Ever Sinclair and neither was I Ever Eisenberg. I wasn't sure who I was.

Yet, he continued to master perfection and never left my side while doing so.

TWO

Lucas

THE IVORY SHEETS that bundled on the bed once kept my heart warm. Now, she was four rooms down, furthest from every indication of life outside of her head. That's the way she wanted it and deep down inside I knew it was the way she needed it.

Since our son Lucas was born, her mental health had spiraled and I was still trying to help her gain control of it. She didn't want to be in the space she was in, which only pushed her further away. The thought of not being herself and unable to perform the tasks as the mother of our children gutted her and left her with mere pieces of the woman she was prior to his birth.

Postpartum depression was new for us both and it was the toughest shit I'd ever had to deal with. Not even the eight years that I put down in the

government books compared. Seeing my wife broken and battered, mentally, without the power to help was heart wrenching. There was no amount of money in the bank that could cure her. There was no amount of pleading on either of our ends that would result in a decluttered mental space. Not even therapy had helped.

Lucas laid still on the bed as I watched his little chest rise and fall. He had fallen in line with the rest of our bunch and adopted all of his mother's features. I was sprinkled throughout, but just like the rest of our children, he was Ever's mini. His big blue eyes and light blonde hair was the only thing that separated him from the others. We were all still trying to figure out where they'd come from. But, came to the conclusion that both Ever's and my gene was recessive in that match up, leaving him with eyes unlike any of ours.

Clearing my throat, I tried swallowing the sea of emotions that rose each morning after I got the girls out of the door and strapped into San's truck. I'd upgraded her Honda so that she could comfortably fit several car seats at once. Seeing the girls off to school with constant questions about mommy's condition and curiosity of why she couldn't participate in their mornings was a struggle that I'd never successfully conquer. Especially not when everyone was accustomed to having their mother be part of every minute of their day at home.

I saw my chef more than ever now. Dinner wasn't prepared by Ever and I was simply too exhausted with the days work and the girls to cook it myself. With me caring for Lucas every day, San was the girls' full-time nanny for the moment.

The clearing of my throat startled a sleeping Lucas. I stiffened, refusing to move a limb as I silently prayed that he didn't wake up. My prayer went unanswered as he began to squirm a little more, eventually stretching his tiny arms and voicing his disdain. His belly was empty and it was time to eat.

I'd grown to dislike feedings because it only meant that I'd be inflicting a little more pain on Ever. Seeing Lucas but realizing she was helpless to his cause always burdened her. But, as out of touch with reality as she was, I refused to allow her to let go of the one thing that kept her in contact with the light at the end of the long, dark tunnel. Breastfeeding was a glimmer of hope for her and the one time she was able to feel useful.

Besides, she'd hate herself if she allowed her milk to dry by the time she came out of this cycle she was in and Lucas was forced to depend on shelved

milk. It would destroy her. So, for preventative measures – though very hard – I made sure she kept her milk flowing and Lucas fed.

THREE



“EH. EH. EH. EHHHHHHHHH!” Lucas cried.

He had a healthy set of lungs on him that I knew would disturb his mother so I rushed to his side and picked him up. His little eight-week-old body settled into my arms, fitting perfectly as I began my journey down the hallway where we’d find the source to his aching stomach.

As what could only be described as too soon, we arrived and I was burdened with the most unpleasant task of all. *Click*. I flipped on the light. There she was.

The sight of my thinning wife left another hole in my heart each day that I witnessed her. Eating was last on her list. Sleep was her best friend and tears had become her favorite beverage. She drank them daily as they slid down her face and reproduced them from her eyes at a moment’s notice.

I inched toward the side of the bed where I sat. As I laid Lucas beside her,

Ever clenched the pillow she was hugging a little tighter. I remembered a short time ago when she hugged me like that... when I was her pillow.

“I’m sorry,” she cried.

“Shhhhh.”

“I just can’t free myself,” she admitted.

“It’s okay. Come on.”

After standing up, I leaned over the bed and sat her up against the headboard. Even that was too much of a task for my baby. I pushed aside the part of her shirt that was meant to be lowered for nursing to expose her beautiful breast. I missed them so much. I missed her so much.

I returned to my spot on side of her and cleaned her face of tears. When I felt that she was ready, I reached over and grabbed our son. Ever closed her eyes, too consumed with her own disappointment to fully accept Lucas.

“Look at him, love,” I encouraged.

“He barely even knows me,” she sighed, tears streaming down her face, again.

“You’re all he knows, Ever,” I explained.

Lucas felt the absence of his mother. At only eight weeks, she was everything to him. Her lack of presence was the main reason it was hard to get him to quiet, sleep, or get through the day without being swaddled tightly.

“I’m useless,” she told me, finally opening her eyes.

“You’re sick, Ever. There’s a difference. Your son needs you. The girl needs you. *I need you, mommas.*”

“I just don’t feel so good, Luca.”

“I know.”

Not wanting to overwhelm her, I decided to let the topic rest. It was the same thing day after day. Instead of continuing the conversation, I allowed her to gaze at our handsome son. My heart smiled when she mustered the courage to lift and finger and move the patch of his long hair from near his eyes.

Our eyes locked when the familiar sound of discomfort erupted from his quivering lips.

“He’s hungry,” I explained, hoping to cancel any thoughts in her head that formed about his displeasure for her presence.

“Here, let him fill his tummy,” I insisted, pulling the pillow over and positioning Lucas on it so that Ever didn’t have to hold him. She rarely ate a bite of her food on a daily basis and simply didn’t have the strength to

manage his weight.

Right away, my greedy boy took to his mother's boob and began suckling. I watched from afar as Ever stared down at him as he guzzled the milk from her boobs. This was new for her. For us. The slight twinkle of admiration in her orbs that I witnessed, I hadn't seen since the week after his birth when she began falling into her deep depression.

Still, the painful smug on her face remained. But, that didn't stop the glimmer of hope that I clung onto when I saw her hand lift again, this time to rub our son's face and then the hair on his head. Though a small gesture, it was progress for us all.

Baby steps. Baby steps. I thought.

FOUR

ever

I COULD HEAR his footsteps long before he entered the room. Silently, I prayed that he wasn't trying to interest me in food because I didn't have an appetite. As much as I knew I should, I just couldn't bring myself to accept food. It only upset my stomach and left me feeling nauseous. Frequent trips to the bathroom weren't ideal for me at the moment. Not even opening my eyes, which was why I hoped he didn't turn the light on again.

"Ever," he whispered as he neared the bed.

I imagined he wasn't expecting an answer because we both knew that I didn't have it to give. But, I'd heard him. My heart had heard the pain and trauma my situation was causing him. We'd heard him, clearly, even the words he'd never say.

"It's time for a bath," he revealed, making my flesh crawl at the thought.

As his large, comforting hand rubbed against my sandy bush, I could feel

the chunks of hair as they gathered in his fingers and dislodged from my scalp. When it was all said and done, I wasn't sure if I'd be left with any of the hair that I once loved so much.

"Cut it," I said to Luca, finding the words to describe my most prominent feeling at the moment.

"Ever, you don't mean it."

"Please."

"Do you think it'll make you feel better?" He asked, obviously willing to do anything to help.

My hair had grown to the middle of my back. Pregnancy after pregnancy had left me with too much to maintain. For once, I wanted to be freed from whatever shackles it must've had me in.

"Yes," I admitted, clinging to the pillow that I'd discovered as my safe haven.

"If I do something for you, you have to promise you will do something for me." Luca bargained.

"I can't," I told him, immediately.

"You don't even know what it is and I know you can, baby. You simply have to let me help you. Okay?"

"Luca, I can't."

The truth was, I couldn't. If it didn't involve hours on end of rest, then I couldn't.

"Yes you can, baby." Luca gritted. I could hear the frustration in his voice.

"Please don't get upset," I pleaded, emotions climbing. My eyes burned from the nonstop tears I'd cried over the weeks but I could feel the fresh ones stain my cheeks.

"I'm not upset, love. I'm just... I'm trying, Ever. I'm really trying. I'm fighting and I need you to fight with me. I can't do this without you. I'm miserable. I'm miserable every day I wake up and you're not beside me. Every time I hear our son cry out to you but you can't be there, I'm sick to my stomach. Every time the girls ask about you or Elle cries for you, my shit hurts. We're all feeling the effects of your absence and we need you back. So, understand that I'm not upset. I'm just hurting, Ever. I'm hurting because for once I can't fix what's wrong with you. But, I'm not going to stop trying. Don't punish me for that."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm letting you guys down. I just don't know how to

come out of this dark, dark place I'm in. I can't find myself in there. I feel so lost."

"Let me help you," he asked, "Please."

"I don't think you can."

"If you try, too, then I know we can figure this shit out, Ever. It's us. It's me and it's you."

"My God, you're perfect." The words that haunted me fell from my lips. I was everything but. Yet, I'd been given a man that was closest to perfection as it got.

"I'm far from it. If I cut your hair for you, I need you to promise me that you will join me for lunch in an hour. We don't have to leave the house. I just want you to come downstairs and sit at the dining room table with me. I'll make something simple like sandwiches or some shit. Or, I can order whatever you want to be delivered. It's whatever you want, Ever. I just want you there with me. I feel so fucking empty out here."

I carefully considered his offering, wondering if I had the strength. I quickly concluded that I didn't, but the denial I wanted to give him just wouldn't surface. Before I knew it, I was agreeing to something I knew that I wasn't capable of. I just didn't know how to tell him.

"I promise."

I didn't recognize my own voice, but I did recognize the smile on Luca's face as he heard the words. And for the first time in weeks, I felt good about myself. I wasn't sure how I'd make it to the dining table or if I would, but for him I'd try. Because, without a doubt, I knew he'd do the same for me.

FIVE

ever

LUCA'S large hands stabilized me as he lifted me from bed. Dangling from his broad shoulders, I bounced with each step he took as he made his way into the bathroom. Walking required energy that my body didn't possess. Even emptying my bladder was too much of a task.

Before lowering me onto the toilet, he pulled down my underwear and the pajama shorts that I wore along with them. As soon as my butt brushed the toilet seat, my bladder gave in and released everything I'd been holding onto. The relief I felt was incredible.

I could hear as Luca rolled the tissue onto his hand. Shame covered me as he ripped what he'd be using from the roll. *Please, Ever.* I begged. *Come out of this.*

Once I finished, I leaned forward and allowed him to clean my bottom. When I was ready, I lifted my arms so that he could rescue me once again from my miserable attempt to care for myself. Happily, Luca helped me up to my feet and lowered the toilet seat. He rested me on top of it and stood back for a brief moment with a hand on each hip.

“How short are we talking?”

“Can you decide?”

I couldn't. But, I knew that Luca wouldn't steer me in the wrong direction. I trusted him more than I did myself.

“Aight. I want your shit even so I'm going to use my clippers,” he explained.

Less energy distribution was my best bet for now, so I didn't bother to respond. Besides, there wasn't anything left to be said. I wanted this all to be over quickly so that I could get back to bed. Luca had replaced the bathroom light with dimmer, less intimidating ones but after a while it still made my head throb.

As I closed my eyes to stop the room from spinning and the little flies from popping mid-air, Luca exited. Too exhausted to stay upright, I rested my head on the bathroom counter. Sleep was so easy to come by. The coolness of the counter didn't help much, either. Before I knew it, I'd drifted off to sleep.

Hearing Luca re-enter the bathroom startled me. The quick snooze couldn't have lasted any more than four or five minutes but I wasn't complaining. Rest shut my thoughts off completely and made everything feel fine for once. That's why every chance I got, I wanted more of it.

Luca got everything set up as I continued to lay on the counter, trying my hardest to catch a few more Zs. When I felt his hand on my head, I knew that it would be impossible. He lifted my face from the cool counter and sat me upright. There was a small comb in his hand that I was sure he'd stolen from the girls' room.

Without hesitation, he began combing through the knots in my hair. In clumps, my hair fell onto the floor all around me. To avoid the tears that were working their way up at the sight of my beautiful hair falling so effortlessly to the floor, I closed my eyes.

It wasn't long before I heard the familiar sound of clippers. Bzzzzzzzzzz.

“I need you to hold still and try not to move. If you feel yourself getting too weak, then let me know. We can finish another time.”

Luca knew that I understood even if I didn't have the ability to respond. As the sound of the clippers lulled me into a calm that I hadn't experienced in weeks, my eyes remained closed. I counted down from twenty over and over. I'd lost count of just how many times I'd done so by the time the sound of the clippers ended.

Then, there was the comb, again. Though my eyes were still closed, I knew every move Luca made. The buzzing started again. Then stopped. Then started. Then stopped. And, finally, there was the comb again.

Shortly after, Luca brushed hair from my shoulders. I could feel the smile on his face as he stood back and admired his work. Because, surely, he couldn't have been admiring me. I was and had been a mess for the last six, nearly seven weeks.

When I felt his hands underneath my armpits, I knew that he was ready for me to see what he'd done. Unfortunately, I was unable to assist him in his attempt. Nevertheless, it was successful just like the rest of them.

I'd forgotten how his body felt against mine until he pulled me in front of him and placed my hands on the counter. His solid chest against my back reminded me of the times when my mental health wasn't a barrier of ours. It wasn't long ago. Just eight weeks ago, we were both the happiest we'd ever been. Bringing Luas into the world felt like my redemption after losing Dylan but I'd quickly learned that it was the start of my demise.

"Open your eyes," Luca instructed. I could hear the smile in his voice.

Obliging, I unsealed my lids. Staring back at me was a woman that I didn't recognize. A saddened, unhappy version of myself that I wanted so badly to overcome. And, then there was Luca.

He was still as beautiful as I remembered. His brown skin was flawless and so was that heart of his that I heard thudding in his chest. The smile that he craved, I couldn't muster, but I did admire the work he'd done.

The very blunt cut stopped at my shoulders, lifting so much weight from them. I felt like I'd shed much more than the tears I cried had allowed in weeks. For the first time, I felt like I'd taken a step closer to the light that was too far away to even see much of any more.

"I'm going to come out of this."

I heard myself say. I wasn't sure where it came from, but it didn't feel like as much of a lie as it sounded. The tears that I expected to come were nowhere in sight. Postpartum for me was debilitating. It was a mental hell that stole my ability to move my limbs, my lips, and my mind.

“You will.”

SIX

Luca

HER SKIN WAS STILL PERFECT. Because bathing her was the only time I truly got to explore the flawlessness of it, I found myself enjoying bath time a lot more than Ever. She hated it. The bright lights that once made her squeal upon entry, I'd switched for dimmer ones so that coming out of the dark wasn't as difficult. Sometimes, we even opted to leave the lights off completely.

Though Ever didn't have many words during these moments, I could feel her most. I could still feel her angelic spirit and still feel the woman underneath the surface. I could still feel my baby. She was in there, just a little lost.

Because today felt extra special and Ever had given me more than I could've imagined she would on the dreadful walk to her room this morning, the tub was filled with bubbles. The fizzling sound they made as they burst

one by one seemed to be satisfying to us both. With her eyes closed and her head leaned back slightly, Ever enjoyed the warmth of the bath and the quiet of the moment.

“You’re amazing,” I told her, repeating the affirmations that I recited during bath time.

It was important for me to speak life into Ever, even when she didn’t feel like hearing it. I was her voice of reasoning during this trying time. I wanted to be that center she claimed was missing. I had to be the landmark that would help her find her way. Otherwise, my baby would be lost forever, I was afraid.

“You’re kind and you’re loved.”

I used the sponge to wet her freshly cut hair. Ever becoming more beautiful, I thought was impossible but I was sadly mistaken. The fresh cut brought about a change that I didn’t know she needed but was truly happy with. And, to top it off, it was beneficial to her mental and emotional health. She’d smiled, sort of. That was a start.

Baby steps. Baby steps.

“You’re special to me and Essence and Emorey and Elle and Lucas. You’re the light of our lives. You make us all better. You deserve to rest. You deserve to be taken care of. You deserve to be catered to.”

Ever said nothing as I poured the two-in-one shampoo and conditioner on my hands. I began working it into her sandy blonde strands, massaging her scalp in the process. The humming from her throat assured me that she was enjoying the feeling of my hands on her scalp even if words weren’t released.

God, I miss my wife. I felt empty inside. The physical exhaustion was nothing in comparison to the emotional toll that Ever’s state had taken on me. Her bubbly, bright energy had fueled my somewhat dark energy for so long and now that it was missing, I, too, felt lost. She was my center. She was my landmark. She was my happy place. Without her in my world, I was devastated.

“We miss you,” I admitted. “You hear me, Ever? The girls and I miss you. Essence, as sweet as she is, is missing you the most. And, Emorey, she’s confused. Elle is, she’s not taking the milk in the cup so well. We need you to fight, mommas.”

“Please, Luca,” softly, she begged, “Please stop.”

With her eyes still closed, ridges developed along the bottom line of her top lid. She didn’t want to hear the mess our home was in her absence and I

wanted to kick my own ass for mentioning it. But, it was hard not to when everything was going to shits while she withered away. We needed her back. It was as simple as that.

“What would you like for lunch?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Luca,” she sighed, preparing to deliver bad news.

“You promised, Ever. You’ve never lied to me. You’re not going to start today.”

Another deep, long sigh slowly escaped her lips before she nodded her head.

“Okay. But, please let me have a nap first. I feel so tired.”

She did. I knew she did. The amount of work she’d done this morning was more than she had in weeks. Though excited about the progress, I knew it was exhausting for her.

“Aight. I’ll think of something. But, before you go to sleep, I need you to feed Lucas.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“I love you, Ever. And, I’m never going to stop. Let’s get through this and put it behind us like everything else.”

“Okay.”

That was all she had for me and that was okay with me. As long as she was giving me something, I could work with that. If it was the last thing I did, I’d make sure that my baby came out of this an even better person. This was only a bump in the road. It was til death for us.

SEVEN

ever

I IMAGINED this was how heaven felt. Big, bright, and warm at the same time. It had been weeks since I'd been out of the room, into the hallway, and down the stairs. Everything was foreign. And, everything was bright. Possibly a little too bright for my, now, sensitive eyes.

A heavy sigh left my lips as I forked the salad in front of me. It was delicious. I'd eaten almost half, which was a lot more than I'd eaten of anything else. I was impressed. From the look on Luca's handsome face, so was he.

I wanted to tell him how much I'd rather be in bed than at the table, but his excitement for my presence was too obvious in his brown orbs. I'd been letting him down for far too long, now, and craved satisfaction for him. So,

even with burning eyes and a heavy heart, I remained for him.

He'd chosen the smaller dining table, but even it felt vastly larger than I'd recalled. It was still beautiful, nonetheless, but its size was a painful reminder of my circumstances. The empty chairs that surrounded it were once filled with little bottoms, booster seats, or removed to make room for high chairs. Now, there was only us.

Is mommy still sick? Emorey's voice rang loud in my head. I missed her awfully. She was the most fearless child I'd ever seen in my life and to know that I'd birthed her was still stunning to me. Her confidence was commendable and her vocabulary was impressive. She said whatever came to mind and had no apologies for it. I admired her will and dedication to authenticity. She'd need it in the world that we lived in.

Then there was Essence, who stuck a note underneath the door at least three times since I'd been inside. *Feel better. I love you mommy*, she'd whisper underneath the crack between the door and flooring. Her heart was gold and to know that I couldn't bring myself to be at her side hurt me to the core.

I still hadn't brought myself to read either one that Luca had laid next to me. Though she didn't have the words to say, often, she had them to pen. Her soft nature reminded me of the version of me that I loved most and that I was able to be once Luca came into my life.

She had me on my knees more than any one in my home because I knew that the world was hardly any place for softness. It hardened you and it did so quickly. Before depression crippled me mentally and physically, I prayed for my baby often. It was important to me that she found someone just like her father who'd protect that softness and nurture it like he'd done mine. Otherwise, she was doomed.

Elle. My sweet baby had no idea where mommy was and didn't know how to voice her objections to my absence all that well. *Mommy. I want mommy*. I'd heard night after night as I laid with my sorrows heavy on my heart.

I wanted her too. I wanted her sweet kisses and her random hugs. I wanted her greedy little hands on my boobs as she disregarded my rejection for her obsession with milk straight from my boobs. She was a big girl now and I wanted her to understand that it was okay to sip from somewhere other than mommy's fountain of milk.

And, Lucas. I'd only spent a healthy week with him before my mental

health began to decline. I didn't know my son and that, most of all, kept me down in the dumps as time continued to tick away. He was as precious as his father and a very good boy.

I imagined his presence would bring me so much joy, but it killed me. It killed my spirit. And, for the life of me, I couldn't find the same joy and comfort in his birth that I had the three times before. I'd found myself asking if I truly loved him or if he truly belonged to me. He didn't feel real and neither did he feel like mine.

The questions got louder and louder in my ear each day and eventually, I began to spiral. They opened doors for new questions, doubt, and fear. Before I knew it, I was weeks in and had no contact with him or my other children unless I was feeding him.

"What's on your mind?" Luca spoke for the first time since we'd sat down.

We hadn't said a single word to one another, both too lost in our thoughts to even notice. I inhaled to the point of pain and then released the breath I'd taken in. I struggled to find the correct words as my eyes darted across the room. It wasn't until they landed on the assortment of rain boots that were lined up in the mudroom that they came to me.

"They must hate me so much," I shared.

Luca shook his head as he laid his fork down on his plate. "Stop telling yourself that any of us hate you. It's just your mind playing dirty, dirty tricks on you. Listen to me... listen to your husband, Ever. We love you through sickness and in health."

"Please help me," I pleaded, "Please help me get back to my family, Luca."

EIGHT

Luca

SHE FINALLY WENT DOWN and hardly with a fight. Lunch had taken more energy from Ever than she had to give. She'd sacrificed her comfort to satisfy me and I was grateful for the effort. Though she would've rather had lunch from bed, seeing her sitting across the table from me was evidence that she was ready to break through the barriers and get better.

I stepped back from the thick sheets that I'd tucked her underneath and admired her from afar. It had been weeks since she'd stepped foot inside our bedroom and even longer since she'd last rested her head on our pillows. So, watching her chest rise and fall as she fell deeper into slumber made my heart swell in my chest.

I love you more than you'll ever know, I thought to myself as I gazed. To the point of pain, I loved my wife and I'd do anything for her – even lay my life on the line. When it came to her, there were no limits to where I'd go or

what I'd do. She and those four little people of ours were my everything. They knew it and so did everyone else around us.

Lucas' tiny fists clenched and then unclenched as he had his helping of milk. I'd convinced Ever to kill several birds with one stone. All I needed was for her to agree to lie in our bed for her nap. As a result, she'd be able to feed Lucas, sleep in, indulge in skin-to-skin contact, and spend some much-needed time with our boy.

Please help me get back to my family. I'd heard her words loud and clear. As I made my way to the sitting area of our bedroom, I grabbed my laptop from the nightstand. I'd been waiting for the moment that she insisted on my help. I'd learned the hard way that it didn't matter how much I wanted her to get better, she wouldn't until she was ready. With the progress she'd made in the last twenty-four hours, I knew that time had come.

Belize. I wasn't sure why that destination was at the forefront of my mind but I stuck with it. Within an hour, I'd managed to book us a private flight out, a villa for five days, and some excursions. I logged out and shut down my computer screen when I was finished. My view was like nothing else. Seeing Lucas' tiny hand clinging to Ever's body as she slept peacefully beside him. Her boob sat comfortably in his mouth, serving as a pacifier as her heartbeat lulled him through his nap.

Just like that, I remained until there was movement. Ever batted her eyes as she tried to comprehend what was happening around her. She'd obviously forgotten where she was and the fact that she'd agreed to be there.

"Luca?" she whispered, confused.

"You're okay, Ever. You said it was okay for me to put you in our bed."

"I know. I just... I want you near."

Her words were like medicine on the wound her health condition had left me with. I stood to my feet and erased the distance that kept us apart. When I made it to her side, her left hand ran the length of my arm.

"I love you," she admitted for the millionth time in her life.

"I love you," I responded, placing my hand on her thigh.

A gasp left her body as her brows furrowed and breath hiked in her chest.

"What's the matter?" I asked, concerned with whatever had come over her.

"Nothing. I just--," she stuttered, "Nothing."

"What is it, Ever?"

Silence coated the air as we both held one another's gaze.

“What is it?” I asked, again.

“Can you make me feel good?” She rushed out in a whisper as she closed her eyes and turned her head in the opposite direction.

I grabbed the bottom of her chin and turned her in my direction, again. Her shame was not acceptable and silly at the same time. Whatever she wanted, Ever could have.

“Yes. Yes, I can make you feel good, love. All I need for you to do is tell me exactly what you want and how you want it and I got you.”

“Yeah?” She nodded her head, but in question.

“Always and forever. Now, I just need you to open your mouth like a big girl and tell your husband how he can make you feel better this afternoon.”

Ever swallowed long and hard before opening her mouth as she’d been instructed. But, when she did, I was all ears. I wanted to hear what she had to say. The anticipation made my dick hard.

“I want you to eat it until I cum,” she admitted.

“Eat what?” I probed.

Closing her eyes, she confessed, “My pussy.”

NINE

ever

WITH A HAND OVER LUCAS' small body to protect him from falling off the bed – as if he could roll – I watched as Luca admired me. I wasn't sure what he saw that was so fascinating. I was a mentally ill woman who couldn't even care for her own flock. I'd spent so many days in hiding that I didn't even know how to accept the light. Everything in my home felt foreign to me now, even him.

“Get out of your head,” he insisted.

As he released the words, his fingertips glided across the pink flesh of my center. He purposely initiated the bulb that was the most sensitive feature of my body. Without warning, my body submitted. My legs opened wider, giving him free reign over my glistening cave. My back arched slightly as a silent cry tried to escape my lips.

It had been far too long since Luca had touched me. And, I didn't mean in

a normal way. He did so every day. I meant really *touched me*. Like lovers. Like for-lifers. Like he used to. Like I loved for him to. Like only he could.

“Look at me.” Luca demanded.

There was no doubt in my mind that I loved this man with everything in me. And, while postpartum depression was tough, he was even tougher. There was no doubt in my mind that he would be the difference maker for my condition. And, before it was all said and done, he’d be the cure, too.

He was medicine for my soul. While most deemed it idiotic to claim one as your completion, I believed it wholeheartedly. I wasn’t like most. I craved companionship. Though he’d entered my life when I was dead set on my independence, deep within I knew that someday I’d search for my soul’s mate again. I just needed time to heal from the damage that had been done in the previous relationship.

I didn’t have to search. He found me. He was effortlessly put in my path and that’s how I knew that he was destined to be mine. Luca completed me. I wasn’t ashamed of that truth, especially because I knew the same was for him.

I gave him my eyes as he’d requested. Just as I did, his eyes lowered until they were leveled with my pussy. I watched as he swiped his tongue across my flesh. Once. Twice. By the third time, My eyes were closed and my mouth had slacked.

“Ummmm, Lucaaaa,” lowly, I moaned.

His tongue against my flesh was divine. It had been far too long since I’d experienced his skill. He was a very calculated and confident man. He knew exactly how to make my body cream.

Luca sucked my nub into his mouth along with everything surrounding it and began flickering his tongue back and forth, mercilessly forcing me to surrender to his deepest desires. *Cum in my mouth*. His words were so vivid, as if he was speaking them through his silence.

A surge started from my toes and made its way up both of my legs until it combined at my center, doubling in intensity. To combat the pressure, I squeezed my eyelids, pressing them together with hopes that I could suppress the inevitable. I wasn’t ready for our moment to end because I knew that once the fireworks ended, the mental turmoil would commence.

“Cum,” Luca begged, stopping momentarily and commanding my attention.

At the sound of his voice, I was undone. The universe shattered behind

my lids as I reached my pinnacle. I felt as if my world finally made sense while simultaneously making no sense at all.

“Lucccccccaaa!”

My hands wandered at alarming rates. Lucas’ safety was no longer my top priority. Not falling from the mountain top I’d been hoisted onto was. I found Luca’s harms and slid my fingers up his body until I had his head between them. My body rocked back and forth in an effort to prolong my orgasm while holding Luca in place. The second he disengaged, it would all be over. I wasn’t ready.

“Oh God. Oh God. I’m cumming!” I breathed, rubbing my pussy against his tongue.

My fluids raced from my body and out from my spout, forcing me to release Luca from my grasp. The fountain intensified as he gave it space. And, just as it slowed to a creep, my husband’s girth filled me.

TEN

Luca

MY GOD WAS SHE GLORIOUS. Her walls accepted me, hugged me, and cried to express just how much they missed me. And, I missed them. I missed her. Beneath me, she spat words from her mouth that I hardly understood. I wasn't sure if I wanted to, either.

Her nails pressed against my skin as I dug into her, softly and with as much care as I'd been taking of her over the last few weeks. I didn't have to examine my shaft to see just how much she was enjoying the long, deep strokes from her husband. I could hear the sound of her wetness in the silence, confirming what I already knew.

"I love you," she rushed out, "God, I love you."

"Forever," I responded. It was so true.

I loved my wife with every fiber of my being. She felt so close to the reason for my existence these days that I couldn't decipher the difference. I

lived for her. I breathed for her. I mourned for her, too. The woman she was trying to find had died and I couldn't wait until she embraced the new woman she was becoming.

It would simply be the upgraded version of the Ever she once knew. I'd already prepared myself for her. And, I, too, would elevate with her. While it was depressing for her to even consider, it was beautiful for me. I'd loved Ever at every stage and would continue. I'd loved each version of her that she'd evolved into after each child and each life-changing experience. It was understood that I'd continue to love the newer versions of her as life continued.

That's what I'd signed up for and I wasn't backing out. Love didn't work like that. Marriage didn't work like that. Ever and I... we didn't work like that, either.

I quickly realized that I wouldn't last much longer than a minute or three. It felt like forever since I'd slid into her warmth. I wasn't prepared, not mentally or emotionally.

"Come back to me," I begged my wife as I felt my nut on the horizon, "Come back to me."

"Okaaaaaaay," she cried, tears streaming down her gorgeous face.

"I'm cummin'," I announced, reluctantly removing myself from her well.

It was the first time I'd ever forced myself out of Ever and it wasn't easy. However, I understood that we weren't in a position to bring another child into the world, not now. We had to work on getting her mental health in order so that we could care for the one we'd just had – and as a team instead of alone.

My dick was completely covered in her juices, wetting the bottom of her shirt when it made contact. I watched as my semen shot from the tip of my dick and soiled her top. Her eyes widened at the sight as a tired smile curved her lips upward. This was a first for us both and until I knew she was better, it would be the standard. I owed it to her, her mind, her body, her heart, and her spirit. They all deserved the break that we were ready to give them.

"Feeling better?" I asked when I returned with the towel to clean us both up.

All by herself, Ever had managed to remove her shirt and strip down to nothing. After birthing an entire squad, she was still flawless. *To me*. The tiny lines along her stomach were reminders of her sacrifices and I appreciated her for each one of them.

“I feel like...” She struggled to verbalize her sentiments. “Like I was just given the closest thing to a cure that I could’ve gotten.”

“Let me find out it was just some dick you needed all along,” I toyed, though I knew it wasn’t the case. My baby was battling something far beyond my imagination. “Sexual healing.”

“That’s not all I need but it really, really helped.”

“That’s good because you can have as much of it as you want over the next week. We’re hopping on a plane and getting out of here. You deserve some time away from it all and that’s exactly what you’re about to get.”

She perked up. The brightness in her eyes made butterflies swarm in my stomach and my heart pound against my chest. She was excited about something. That shit nearly made my head explode. However, she saddened just as quickly and then those big, watery eyes stopped the heart they’d made beat erratically.

“What about Lucas?” She worried.

Of course. It was just like her to worry, but with me around she didn’t have to do that. We’d established that long ago but I guess she’d forgotten. I was going to make her remember though. I’d made sure to come up with a solid plan for the children. They’d be well taken care of while we were gone.

Between the women of my family, they wouldn’t suffer a bit in our absence. Everyone was more than willing to lend a helping hand. And, when it came to Ever’s health, they were ready to go the extra mile to assist with recovery. All we had to do was say the word.

“Don’t worry. It’s all straightened out. All of that breastmilk you’ve been storing in the event of an emergency is about to come in handy – for this emergency. They’re going to split time between my mom and your mom’s house. Then, there’s San. There’s also Lyric. They’ll be fine. I just want you to get better and I think this helps.”

“Can I at least see them before we go?” she asked, stunning me into silence.

I simply nodded my head for a few seconds while I tried to find the words to respond. I wasn’t in search of anything massive, but words, in general. Because, this was monumental. This was a step in the right direction. This was exactly what I’d been waiting for. My baby was on her way back to me... on her way back to *us*.

ELEVEN

Luca

SHE'S *my whole world and I wonder if she knows it*. From the driver's seat, I admired my wife's honey-colored skin that matched her brown eyes and blonde tresses. The sadness in her eyes and the heaviness of her emotions were written all over her beautiful face.

"What's the matter?" I asked, reaching over and placing a hand on her thigh.

Though I knew exactly what was tugging at her heart, I wanted her to voice it in order for me to assure her that things would be fine.

"I just feel so... I just—," she stuttered.

"Tell me how you feel, Ever. Tell me and don't bury it. Be upfront and honest about whatever is bothering you."

"Unfit," she sighed as her body rocked, "I feel so unfit."

"If ever I'm ill and can't care for you or the children properly, I expect

you to pick up the slack. The people around us, I expect them to chip in, too, because that's what this shit is all about, baby. Making sure one another is straight. The village isn't there to just be there. They're ready and willing to help so we're going to let them. You're far from unfit. You're sick, Ever. Just because your sickness doesn't look like other sicknesses, it's here and we're handling it. Until you feel better, stop beating yourself up. And, even then, don't beat yourself up. Okay?"

"Okay," she answered, nodding as if it would help convince her of the things I'd just said.

"If you were unfit, I wouldn't have fucked with you," I chortled, confirming things she already knew, "Not knowing my plans for the future and the family I desired."

"The thought of you not pursuing me depletes my lungs of oxygen and I feel like I'm fighting for my life, immediately. Please, don't ever mention anything remotely close. I can't handle it."

"That's *The Eisenberg Effect*, baby."

Smiling, I watched as she cringed, scrunching her pretty features while looking in my direction.

"Is that what it is?"

"Without a doubt."

"Well, it's all-consuming, overpowering, and has some magic mixed with it."

"I can't disagree with that," I replied, bringing her hand up to my face.

Muah. I kissed her pinky.

Muah. Her ring finger.

Muah. Her middle finger.

Muah. Her index finger.

Muah. Her thumb.

Muah, I ended with a kiss on the back of her hand.

"I love you."

"Forever."

Silently, we tackled the rest of our journey to the hangar where Ever followed me onto the plane. We took the second row of seats where hers faced mine. If either of us got too tired on the flight, the bedroom was just behind us. After we settled and the crew announced our departure, my eyes still hadn't left my wife's frame.

Upon noticing my gaze, Ever's cheeks flushed another shade and her

nervous eyes skirted all over the plane. My heart broke at the sight of her trembling hands and the gnawing of her bottom jaw. Her breathing was erratic and far from controlled. She was unrooting before my very eyes and it was hard to watch.

“Whaaat?” She asked, forcing a smile.

“You’re the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life. It’s always a treat when you cross my line of vision.”

“I must look a mess,” she chuckled, nervously, unable to sit still in her chair.

Through gritted teeth, I tried repairing my broken heart. This wasn’t just any woman. Ever as mine and I halfway blamed myself for not taking better care of her mind. Her body, I’d handled with care since the day that she entered my world. It was tangible, something I could see and feel and touch.

Her mind, I could’ve cared for so much better. Because it wasn’t something that I had the privileged of seeing, it was a bit harder to determine when it needed a little extra attention and care until it was too late. I felt like I’d be kicking my ass for years to come, not quite forgiving myself for letting baby girl slip and not catching her.

Ever ran her hands through her hair, trying to improve her appearance as if she wasn’t already perfect. She had to know it. It was impossible to think otherwise with a face like hers. It was unlike anything or anyone else. Unique in every way, I loved everything about it. *About her.*

“You look like a slice of heaven, baby. I don’t think I’ve made a better choice in my life. Choosing you was the best decision I could’ve made. I’m a lucky ass nigga.”

“I fear that I’m the luckiest of us both. I have you.”

This time, her smile was genuine.

“I never imagined you’d lie to me, but here we are.”

It was as if time had slowed. When I watched her toss her head back in laughter and show every tooth in her mouth, every crack the breaking of my heart had left was sealed together with her love. It was almost all I’d ever need in this lifetime. God had truly been on my side when he sent her my way.

“Where do we go from here, Luca?” The seriousness in her tone let me know that she wasn’t referring to the lie she’d just told me.

Sighing, I reached over and grabbed her right foot. As I removed her shoe, I stared back at her. The confidence that she once sported was

showcasing itself, again. I could feel a shift in her demeanor. It was a shift that I wasn't opposed to because it was in the right direction.

Her bare foot against my palms was gratifying. Under her spell, I lost track of my thoughts momentarily. I watched as she found comfort in a new position, one that supported her leg that rested on mine. I massaged the middle of her foot before moving upward.

"We go wherever our love leads us. There's no roadmap for us, Ever, and I'm not looking for one. I'm committed to this rollercoaster, no matter where it takes us. I'm locked in and I'm not getting off. Postpartum ain't got shit on this love I've got for you. When we beat this, it's back to living and enjoying life together. Back to spending this fucking paper. Back to blowing your back out. Back to living out every dream you've ever had. Back to being the best fucking mother you can be. Back to us. Back to Ever and Luca. Cause, half of me is missing right now. I'm not whole. I won't be until you shake back."

"I've taken so many parts of you through this all. I owe you."

"You don't owe me a thing, love. I just want you better. Lending pieces of me to help you get there is nothing. I'd do it a hundred times over. Just get better and we're back to it. For now, get some rest because you look like you could use it."

"I'm so tired all the time," she admitted, yawning in the process.

"You're exhausted, mentally. This week is your time to really rest. I know it's hard back home. Although you're asleep, having the children running wild through the house—"

"Keeps my mind going, even when my eyes are closed and I'm resting."

"I know."

I released her foot from my grasp and stood to my feet.

"Come on. Let me get you to bed. We have a few hours."

"You coming to bed with me?" She asked.

"I'm not sleepy, baby."

Her big, glossy eyes warmed every inch of me. I'd obviously disappointed her with my statement.

"Fix our face, pretty. I'm not leaving your side. Not tonight, not ever."

"Seriously? You'll stay back there with me."

"Wherever you are, that's where I want to be. Take my hand."

When I extend my arm, she placed her hand inside of mine and followed me through the aisle until we reached the door that separated the bedroom from the rest of the plane. I waited until Ever was completely inside and on

the bed before closing the door behind us.

“Here, I got it.”

Leaning down, I removed her other shoe.

“Can I undress?” She asked, looking up at me. I loved when she did that shit.

“If you’re trying to give that pussy up, yeah. If you’re just trying to rest, then I suggest you keep that shit on.”

“What about both? I always get the best sleep af—.”

“Say less.”

Without hesitation, I unclothed Ever and allowed her to climb in bed. Once she settled, I removed every article of clothing that I’d chosen for travel. My dick stretched after being restricted for far too long. It was happy to be free and happy to get reacquainted with its very best friend.

Ever glared from the bed. The smile on her face was comical. Baby was deprived. I could smell her magnificent arousal as I climbed in bed next, hovering over her. Her pussy would get the attention it deserved, but for now, I wanted to feast on her pebbled nipples and hope she didn’t drown me in breastmilk.

TWELVE

ever

THE BELIZE MORNING sun had kissed my face a thousand times or at least that's how it felt. Truthfully, it had only been fourteen times which was a lot more times than we'd planned. But, after seven days, I wasn't ready to return to reality. Here, it was paradise.

The chains that had been locked around my brain since having Lucas were broken by day four and freedom found me. I could breathe again. I could feel, again. I could see again and the first face I saw when the blinders were removed was Lucas'. And, my, was it a beautiful sight.

From the moment we touched down in Belize he'd been careful with my heart and my healing. He gave me the space I required and welcomed me into his space whenever I didn't need my own, anymore. He cooked each morning for me, bringing me breakfast in bed until I was ready to join him at the table. He explored the island alone until I was ready to explore it with him. He

didn't force my hand on any matter, giving me exactly what I needed but only when I was ready.

I slowly, but surely came out of the zombie-like state that I'd been stuck in for weeks and weeks on end. Everything was so much clearer and the load that sat on top of my chest began to shrink. The guilt of Dylan's death was no longer weighing me down. The hardships of my life before Luca was no longer replaying in the back of my head. The guilt of Dewayne's death didn't feel so heavy anymore.

The burden of loving all of my children equally didn't bother me like it had been. The burden of having so many children to nurture didn't seem like a burden anymore. The thought of therapy that had been suggested by Luca earlier on didn't irritate me anymore. Everything felt so much better. I felt better.

After two days of resting, I climbed out of bed alone. The physical restraints of depression were no longer handicapping me. I could move about as freely and as often as I wanted. That, within itself, was not progress that I took lightly.

By the third day, I was able to shower for nearly an hour, only taking small breaks to sit on the bench inside of the gorgeous shower. I never wanted to leave it. I found so much peace inside that it held me hostage. With each tear I cried during the shower session, I shed some more of the weight that was heavy on me. When I exited, I felt fifty pounds lighter.

By the fourth day, I began exploring the island with Luca. We'd leave for hours and only return when it was time for bed or until our feet began to cry for help. From shopping to dining to participating in the cultural happenings, we were having the time of our lives. And, on that day, I began to truly smile again.

When day seven reached us, I simply wasn't ready to go. I packed all the milk I'd pumped in the last seven days and Luca had it flown straight to Channing so that Lucas could feast on fresh milk. Day seven was the day that I felt most peaceful and more prepared to take on the rest of my life, but it didn't mean that I had to. Not right away, anyway. I wanted to spend some more time with myself and then a little with my husband before the craziness of our world got a hold of us, again.

Day eight, I discovered my love for meditation and yoga. From day eight until now, I'd start my mornings with a twenty-minute meditation session and then follow up with forty-five minutes of yoga. I was feeling and looking a

lot better. I promised myself those two things wouldn't change upon my return. I wanted them infused in my everyday life and be my own little *calm before the storm*.

Day twelve, a void was birthed. One that involved my children, their smiles, their love, and their innocence. I missed every little finger and every toe on their bodies. I missed hearing them laugh and play and fight. I missed the tantrums and the hugs. I missed the long weekend days in bed for hours watching movies.

I missed Lucas and I missed nursing him. I wanted so badly to have him in my arms. I didn't know my son, not at all. I didn't know what he loved or hated. I didn't know how he slept or the hours he was awake. I didn't know his scent or how bad his poop smelled. I didn't know what his cries meant or how he liked to be held. I knew nothing.

While that reality had crippled me for weeks and weeks, that wasn't the case now. I was desperate to get to know my boy. I had to. I was his mother and I wanted to be his entire world until he was old enough to determine that there was more to life than me.

Luca was surprised to hear that I missed my babies by day thirteen. He said he knew it would come, but he was unsure of when. I missed them all. I really did. Finally, I was ready to get back home, put on my big girl panties, and face the music. I couldn't run forever and I didn't want to. Being a mother was everything to me and that was the problem this time. It became a little too much too soon. I needed the break from it all. The break had saved me.

Feel better, mommy. The last words that Essence spoke to me were so clear and so close as I tried combating the exhaustion I felt from Luca's greed in bed. He couldn't keep his hands to himself and he was wondering why we had so many children to begin with. Though we both wanted more, we knew the time wasn't right. When it was, he'd have no trouble making it happen. He hardly wanted to get off me. I didn't want him to, either, especially not last night.

"Feel better, mommy?"

I opened my eyes and sprang forward in bed. The second time was much clearer and felt so much closer. When my ears stopped ringing and settled, the sound of tiny laughter and soft voices curved my lips upward into a smile. My eyes began to burn from the tears that were fighting to find the surface.

"Feel better?" My sweet girl asked again.

I turned to find Essence at the edge of the bed, sitting, watching as I unraveled. Loudly and unashamed, I sobbed. This time, it wasn't tears of sadness but those of joy and completion.

"Mom," Essence spoke again.

"Yes?" I asked through tears.

"You're going to wake Lucas and he's nothing nice when he's awake."

I turned to the other side, and there he was, sound asleep without a care in the world. He was so handsome in his onesie. Disregarding everything Essence had said, I leaned over my baby boy and tucked my hands underneath him to pick him up. He stirred until he woke completely.

"Hiiiiiiii," I cried, staring down at him as I placed my back against the headboard of the bed. "Hiiiiiii, you."

I removed my breast from my shirt and positioned him more comfortably. The second my boob was close enough for him to smell the milk that was beginning to seep out, his lips began popping. I pushed him forward, close enough to latch. And, when he did, tranquility swept through me.

"Somebody's awake," Luca said as he entered the room with Elle in his hands.

Immediately, she stretched her arms for me.

"Milk," she said while signaling with her hands.

Though she wasn't exactly a breast baby anymore, I wouldn't deny her. My breasts were full and overflowing. There was enough milk to feed both her and Luca. In fact, I preferred it so the stiffness and tenderness would both subside. She climbed up onto the bed and raised my shirt, herself. When she was comfortable enough, she latched on as well. The wholeness of my heart was inexplicable.

"Mommy!" Emory ran in behind Luca. She still had food in her mouth.

"Em!"

"Can we go swimming today?"

"Only if your dad says yes."

"So say yes, daddy," she begged.

"Yes," Luca said without thinking twice.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

She jumped up and down, bringing a smile to my face. Luca leaned over and kissed my moist lips before wiping the tears from my face.

"I love you," he said to me.

"Thank you," I replied. "Thank you."

THIRTEEN

ever

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING?” Laura asked as soon as I stepped into the building with a sleeping Lucas in one hand and a very tired Elle in the other.

It had been two weeks since we’d been back, and adjusting was a lot. When I had Lucas I dropped off the face of the earth. It was Luca who’d adapted to life with four little ones under the age of ten while I drowned in my sorrows. However, since the much-needed vacation, we’d taken, I was more than happy to resume the role of their full-time caregiver with the assistance of my husband.

Today was the first day that I stepped foot outside. I’d been inside, admiring the beauty of our home and exploring the little minds of our children. I was submerged in love and didn’t want to lift my head or resurface. If I didn’t think I’d have another mental breakdown, I would’ve stayed inside with my children and husband for the rest of my days. But, we

all knew that we had to come up for air sooner or later. Now, we were here.

“I’m better,” I admitted.

Was I at my best? Probably not, but I was far from the woman I was a few weeks ago. I didn’t even know who she was. While I still didn’t recognize myself, it wasn’t for the same reason that I hadn’t weeks ago. This time, I was simply trying to get acquainted with the newer version of myself, the mother of five with a thriving bakery and amazing marriage. She was someone that I was desperately trying to meet and maybe have a sit down with because she mattered most to my future.

“That’s so good to hear. You look good and well-fed,” she joked.

“Luca is making sure I’m stuffed every day and every night. I’ve tried more new foods in the last couple of weeks than I have my entire life but I’m not complaining.”

“I know that’s right. Here, let me get him while you go lay her in my office.”

She was part of the reason the children were so spoiled. Mama Eisenberg’s day job consisted of carrying our babies around everywhere she went in the daycare. Now that Emorey was in pre-k, it was only Elle and Lucas. Up until the day that we went on vacation, it was only Elle. Lucas was home with us. But, now that he was part of the daycare clan, I could count on her spoiling him rotten, too. It was inevitable.

“You’re going to spoil the poor thing,” I warned.

“And? That sounds like my problem, not yours since I plan on having him during business hours while you and Luca do whatever you do.”

“We work,” I chuckled.

“That’s not what that belly says every few months,” she scoffed.

“I can admit that we make a lot of babies, but that’s just to keep you in business. Aren’t you grateful to have someone to keep you company in that big office of yours?”

We headed in that direction. She was now holding Lucas while I kept Elle attached to my hip.

“Ummm hmmm.”

“We’re just trying to keep the last name alive. Lyric can’t do it and Laike won’t do it. We’re your only hope.”

“You kind of have a point there,” she tittered, “That boy won’t even give me a damn dog if I asked him. Lord, where did I go wrong with that child.”

“Somehow, he remains your favorite,” I reminded her as I sat Elle on the

large bean bag so that she could rest if she wanted. She was a little tired when I woke her this morning.

“Whatever.”

“And, you shouldn’t be worried about a dog. We got you one of those, too.”

“You two are the gifts that just keep on giving, huh?” She asked, sarcastically.

“It’s why you love us so much.”

“Bye. Get out of here and go enjoy your day. I’ll see you later when I drop them off.”

“See you later,” I told her as I waved, “Everything is in the bag, including frozen milk and fresh milk.

“Bye!” She screamed, forcing me out of her office.

I shook my head as I made my way down the hall and out of the door. When I finally made it to my truck, I climbed inside and sat in silence. Before starting the engine, I took a second to acknowledge the progress I’d made this morning. Luca offered to take everyone to school, but I was adamant. I knew I could make it happen and I did.

The smile that stretched across my face hurt so damn good. I felt the stinging of my eyes and tried to will myself not to cry. However, this was major for me. It meant the world. All I’d ever wanted to do was be the best mother I could be and getting back to that person – no matter how slowly – was at the top of my priority list.

I did it. I did it. He’ll be so proud, I thought of my dear husband.

Speaking of him. My phone started ringing. I looked down in my lap at the screen to confirm it was Luca. It was. It always was.

“Hi,” I answered.

“Hi. Everything going smooth?” He questioned.

“Yes. Everyone is at school.”

“That’s what’s up, Ever. I’m proud of you, baby.”

“I told you I had it.”

“You did and I never doubted that you did, love.”

“Thank you... thank you for never doubting me or giving up on me.”

“I love you too much for all that and you know it.”

“I know.”

“You got places to be, though, so I’m going to let you go.”

“See you in two hours for lunch?”

“See you in two hours for lunch,” he confirmed.

I started the engine and headed for my next destination. I made it in under twenty minutes. The humongous building was something straight out of a magazine – intimidating almost. However, I found the office I was meant to be in, in only a few minutes. And, when I was face to face with the woman that was highly recommended to whip my mind back into shape, relief washed over me. Even her presence was like the calm to the storm brewing inside of me. Therapy had already started and I hadn’t even introduced myself.

“Good morning, I’m *Kirklynn Benedict*. Right this way,” she greeted.

FOURTEEN

ever

IF I WAS TASKED with describing how much better I felt, I wouldn't be able to. The solo nail appointment was everything my heart and soul needed after the emotional day I'd experienced. The first day at Kirklynn's office left me drained, completely.

After a long and late lunch with Luca, I went home alone to digest everything we'd touched on in the session. Though my eyes were tired of crying and I felt like I had no more tears left, more appeared. But, for the first time in a long time, the tears I shed made me feel so much better than I had before.

"Goodness, I feel like a new person. I think I recognize myself a little," I said aloud, talking to absolutely no one.

Naturally, my eyes landed on the large, well-lit sign that was just across the street. *Ever Sinclair*, it read. *That's me. That's mine.*

With weights on my chest, I took a step closer to the edge of the curb. Then, another. And, it wasn't until I reached the front door that I stopped. In an instant, I unlocked the door using my code and entered the building.

I looked around the place, standing right in the middle. All of my hard work had been put into the bakery and I missed it more than I could've imagined. From the formulation of sweet treats to the feeling of dough rolling underneath my palm, I missed it. Everything.

"God, please give me the strength to get back in here. Help me. I need you now."

Unable to withstand the emotional load the bakery required of me at the moment, I quickly exited. There was so much on my mind as I made my way to my vehicle. Though the moment was heavy, it was the motivation I needed to keep going until I could get back to myself – *just as Luca said.*

I didn't bother selecting music during my ride. My thoughts were running rampant and all I wanted was to feel things, whatever they were. No matter what they were. And, to my surprise, they were much more pleasant than I'd expected.

"I'm going in tomorrow."

As I pulled into our garage, the words left my mouth. There was as much conviction as there was confidence behind them, making me smile until my lips reached my eyes almost.

"I'm going in tomorrow," I repeated, this time a bit louder and with much more enthusiasm.

Excitement grew in my belly, not only from the anticipation of what was to come the next day but from what I knew I was about to walk into. The chaos, I was prepared for it. Once, I thrived in the trenches of motherhood and I was slowly getting back to that.

I stepped into the house from the garage entry and followed the noise all the way to the living room where my girls were all enthralled in a different activity with the television running in the background. There was so much beauty in the room. Each one of them had stolen my entire face to have as their own. Hadn't they been years apart, they'd all get mistaken for triplets.

"Heeeeeey, Elle," I greeted the tiniest one who noticed me first.

Her hands were stretched as her fingers wiggled. She, too, was happy to see me.

“Did you miss me, mommas?”

“Pick up. Pick up.”

She bounced up and down, ignoring my question.

“Alright, alright. Just for a second. Mommy has to feed brother, okay?”

When I pulled her into my arms and up on my hip, her little lips landed right on mine.

“Down, mommy!”

“What? You just got up here.”

“Down, mommy.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll put you down.”

“Hi, mom,” Essence called out, not budging from her spot on the couch.

“Hey, baby. How was your day?”

I sat Elle back down and began to remove my shoes. My feet were begging to be freed.

“It was good. How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling good, Essence. I figured I’ll try to go to the bakery tomorrow. I’m actually really happy about that.”

“Me, too. If you get the chance, can you make us some more snickerdoodle cookies? I miss those a lot.”

My best friends. Essence had been such a great friend to me since she was born. She didn’t know it, but she helped me fight so many silent battles by just being there with a toothless smile or kisses like the one Elle had just given me. Then, Emoree came along and the two tackled the position that most parents refused to allow their children to fulfill. My children were my friends and I wouldn’t trade that relationship for anything. Our friendship was deeply rooted and solved problems that many didn’t have to suffer through if they’d just opened their minds to the idea of friendship with their children. It was as pleasant as it was helpful.

“I will. That’ll give me something to actually do when I get there. I had no idea what I’d be doing. I just know I want to go.”

“You should.”

“Mommy, I painted this,” Emoree said, pulling on the end of my shirt while holding a sheet of paper up as far as it would go.

“You did? Let me see, Em.”

I kneeled to her height so that she could understand she had my undivided attention. It was the only kind of attention you were to give Em, or not give her any at all.

“You like it?”

“I love it. Is it for me?”

“No,” she stated, snapping her neck.

“Oh. Well, uh...” I didn’t exactly know how to respond, too tickled with her display of sassiness.

“It’s for daddy.”

“Okay. It’s the second picture this week for daddy. Does mom get any?”

Her obsession with Luca hadn’t gotten any better. It had actually gotten worse. Their father-daughter relationship was the purest, kindest, and most gentle I’d ever witnessed. During my downtime, they seemed to get even closer. I wasn’t sure if that was possible but they’d proved me wrong.

“Next week.”

“Alright. I’m going to hold it to you. Speaking of daddy, where is he?”

“Making dinner.”

Just as she mentioned it, the seasonings hit my nose and made my stomach growl.

“And, where’s Lucas?”

“In the kitchen,” Essence answered.

Emoree was over me the minute I asked about someone besides her. For her to have so many siblings, she still suffered from *only-child* syndrome. I doubted it was something she’d ever overcome.

“Thanks, Es. Get everyone washed up and ready for dinner. I’m going to check on the guys.”

“Okay.”

I headed for the kitchen, allowing the aroma to lead the way. When I entered and saw Luca mixing the salad with Lucas not too far, chilling in his car seat, I couldn’t help but take a second to savor what was before me. I’d envisioned a better life all those years ago, but I’d never imagined this level of perfection and pure satisfaction. My heart was full watching them both. My boys.

“You’re home,” Luca rejoiced, finally noticing me.

He was all up on me and all in my space before I could manage to respond. His lips were as soft as they’d always been when they landed on my forehead and then my lips. I kissed him hard and I kissed him deeply, only ending the connection at the sound of Lucas’ whimpers.

“I’ve missed you,” Luca whispered against my mouth.

“I’ve missed you.”

I had. Although he was right there with me through it all, I missed the version of him that didn't carry so much weight or have double the responsibility. I missed the version of him that required my presence and my light. My heaviness had spilled over into his world and I could see it on his face each day. But, we were in such a better space that I knew it wouldn't be long before my Luca resurfaced.

"I need to feed him."

"Yeah. He's about to start tripping."

"I see."

Slowly, I reached into the car seat that Luca had on the counter and pulled Lucas into my arms. Before honoring his request for food, I pressed his body against mine and rocked from one side to the other. His birth had taken so much from me and required so much of me that I once hated the thought of it. But, now, as the bandaids were being ripped from my wounds, I was thankful that I had them. Lucas' birth only made the real. They'd already been present. He forced me to face them, remember they existed, acknowledge them, and begin to heal them.

"Hey, momma's man. Hey."

As if he could hear my thoughts, Luca appeared with the wrap that I was about to search for. With Lucas in my arms, I began wrapping us properly so that I could free my hands to help Luca as he emptied my breasts.

"I'm ready. I've decided to go into the bakery tomorrow and spend some time there. Essence wants some cookies so I'm going to make us a batch," I revealed while unhooking my bra to give Lucas access to his milk supply.

"Yeah? That's good shit, baby."

The cheer in his voice was the most rewarding thing I'd ever heard.

"You think it's a good idea?"

His opinion mattered to me. Always had, always would.

"A great idea. You'll feel a lot better, I bet."

"I think so, too. After my manicure, I went over. It was the motivation I needed."

"Glad you did that, then."

"I feel so close to whoever it is this situation forced me to become. I'm not avoiding her anymore. I'm ready."

"That makes me a very happy man, Ever, hearing that."

He stopped what he was doing to look over at me. *I love this man so much. Every part of me. Every single piece of me. I love him so much it hurts.*

My God. He's mine.

“Why you looking at a nigga like that? What's on your mind?”

“Nothing. Just that I'm a blessed woman to have you by my side. With you, I feel like nothing is impossible, even my reset. Laying in that bed all those weeks, it was you that kept me going. Being unwell and seeing you handle everything so graciously and so well, that altered me. After so long, I knew I had to get back to you so that I could relieve you.”

“I didn't need relief, baby. I just needed you. Now that you're making strides, I'll still carry as much of the load I need to until you're all better.”

“Thanks, baby. What are we having for dinner?”

“They begged for pasta, again. So, we're having that and salad. I made some garlic bread and salmon, too. I'm afraid I'll turn into a noodle if I eat any more pasta alone.”

His lips turned up as he scoffed, shaking his head. When it came down to the kids, he was willing to suffer for their satisfaction.

“How can I help?”

“Help me get the plates fixed and to the table.”

“Say no more.”

I stepped up to the sink and twisted the handles on the faucet. This was it. This was exactly what I needed to end the day. Time with my husband and the children we shared. Nothing more mattered. Nothing else ever had.

THE END.

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