



Starting Today (Healing Us #1)

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Category: Dark Erotica

Description: The trauma Elle hides is buried deep beneath her carefree smiles and reckless behavior.

When she meets Jake, Elle feels a spark for the first time in almost a year. With Jake, she starts to believe she can rebuild herself, reclaiming the future she thought was lost.

Despite his best intentions, Jake struggles to be the knight in shining armor Elle has made him out to be. Elle convinces herself that Jake saved her and she keeps giving him second chances, even when the cracks in their relationship begin to show.

Everything changes one night when Jake does the unthinkable—crossing a line that shatters Elle's trust.

As they both fight their way through their darkest days, Elle must decide if she can truly forgive him.

Will Elle and Jake be able to rebuild their love, or is some damage too deep to heal?

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I'm not sure what day it is as we merge onto the freeway, but it's not like it even matters anymore.

They all bleed into one another, like a string that stretches on endlessly, each one fading into the next without warning, without change.

The rhythm of the tires on the road is almost soothing, but my mind won't stop.

Like a storm raging inside that I can't outrun while sober.

So, I press my face against the cold glass, frowning at the mountains passing by.

They aren't far off; I can see them between the trees as we drive.

Standing tall, like silent giants guarding the Pacific Northwest.

Out here, away from the big cities, you get to see the beauty that draws so many people in.

It's in the silence, I think, in the steady rhythm of nature that simply exists.

Out here, the rules are always the same, no matter who you are.

Out here, you always know exactly where you stand.

The beauty of the PNW never fails to take my breath away, but its gray skies do nothing for my mood right now, so I squeeze my eyes shut to block it all out.

I'm tired...

and not just because we drove from Tacoma to Portland last night for my first rave.

We're now heading to Seattle for another one tonight.

Because I can never make up for what I've done, so I keep sinking deeper, hoping this life will eventually swallow me whole.

It's Saturday.

I finally remember, opening my eyes and rolling down the window, sighing as I let the cool breeze fill the car, trying to breathe through the thoughts working their way through my head again.

We went to Portland to sell ecstasy for Silas.

It was a totally different experience from rolling our friends, Sam's.

Usually, we'd just chill. Listening to music quietly, spending hours talking about anything and nothing at all.

I'd mother everyone, making them laugh as I reminded them to drink their water and unclench their jaws.

We'd ride the high out in his garage until the sun rose, and then everyone would go on their way.

I'm not sure if raves are my thing.

There are too many people, the music is too loud, the lights too bright - I can still see

them when I close my eyes - and the air is thick with sweat as everyone dances.

I try to move and scratch my leg, an itch that's been near constant the last hour we've been on the road, but it's no use.

There's not enough room to even take a full breath with the four of us stuffed into the backseat, let alone reach down.

"He's looking at you again,"

Kay whispers, staring up at me. At least I have it better than she does. I'm sitting in an actual seat, but she's lying across everyone's lap.

I don't need to look in the rearview mirror to know she's right. I can feel his eyes on me. I have since we left Portland.

"He has a girlfriend, and he introduced me to her as his sister."

He isn't my brother, but I've known him since I was in middle school when he moved to town because he was my brother's friend. Yes, it's entirely cliché to have a crush on your older brother's friends, but I don't care.

"I don't even have a brother, and even I know with absolute fucking certainty brothers don't watch their sisters the way he watches you."

She jokes, winking and wiggling her eyebrows suggestively as she once again adjusts, making the guy at the other window grunt.

"Oh, shut up, Keven. You're the one with your legs spread wide enough a basketball could sit between them."

She rolls her eyes, and I try to lean around the guy next to me to see Keven, but I can't, so I give up and sit back.

“Let me take you out, Kay, and you'll find out why I sit this way, baby,”

Keven suggests, sounding deadly serious.

Everyone in the car laughs, and I can't stop myself from flicking my eyes to the rearview mirror when I hear Silas, instantly meeting his gaze.

My face heats when he winks back at me, and I turn back to the window.

Even though I'd rather be back at home most days, here I am.

Where Kay went these days, I went.

We've been best friends since we were 12.

I can't even remember how we met; it's like one day, she was just there, and then she was everywhere.

We were so different, though; people had a tough time figuring out how we fit.

If Kay was night, I was day.

Most people would say we were like oil and water, but oil and water don't mix, so that's not right.

You can't have night without day, which is why we're perfect together.

She was tall and thin, with wild hair and an all-black wardrobe.

Her hair was cropped short, longer than the boys, but never quite as long as the girls.

She changed the color of her hair more often than the seasons changed.

She wore her make-up dark, her shirts low-cut, and her big brown eyes were always framed by thick eyeliner.

She kept her head above the clouds and didn't give a fuck what anyone thought.

She lived by her own rules, spoke her mind, and marched to the beat of her own drum.

I, on the other hand, had always tried to look put together.

My long blonde hair was usually up in a tight, high ponytail.

I preferred loose sweaters in muted colors that wouldn't draw attention, never something to make me stand out.

The only makeup I had worn was mascara, which made my hazel eyes pop. They changed colors depending on what I wore, but they always had a golden ring around the center.

But that was before.

"You okay?" Kay asks.

Of course she notices. The world sees what she wants it to see, only a few people get to see past that.

"Yeah."

I lie even though I know she will see through it. “Just tired.”

I hesitate before asking, “Do you really want to go to Seattle tonight?”

“You know we have to. Grandma’s still mad about the car. We need to give it another day or two.”

Yeah, maybe longer, I think to myself.

She might have borrowed her grandma’s car, and she might have gotten a ticket at a photo-enforced stop sign in an area her grandma had never been to, which might have prompted her to go through her wallet and notice the missing cash.

I never said we made good decisions together.

Back-to-back raves, 175 miles apart, in the same weekend to sell ecstasy and party definitely wasn’t a good decision.

Borrowing her grandma’s car with no license also probably not the smartest idea we’ve ever had.

“Silas is letting us crash with him for as long as we need.”

She goes quiet before continuing, “Unless you want to go home?”

“I don’t know where I’ll go if she doesn’t let me back in.”

I close my eyes and lay my head back against the window. I take a deep breath and hold it to the count of 10 before slowly exhaling. Sometimes, it works to stop the guilt that threatens to drown me.

Things with my family are tense at the best of times. They know what I am doing, and I'm not allowed back there unless I'm not high. Which means I'm rarely there.

Even though I know I should be there. Even though I know that's where I am supposed to be.

"She knows it was me,"

Kay whispers, waiting for me to look back at her before she smiles, "It's always me. She knows that. She loves you. I think she secretly hopes you'll finally influence me, and I'll become a little clone of you."

Kay laughs and rolls her eyes dramatically.

I doubt it. People think Kay's all sharp edges and tall walls, but I know better, and so does her grandma. It's hard not to be tough when you've lived through what Kay has. Her mom left her with her dad and grandma at a young age, and then her dad died a few years later. It's just them now. And me.

"Hey, Silas, next exit, please. A girl's gotta pee."

Kay shouts over the music.

"Yep. Just saw a sign for a Jack n' the Box, so we'll stop for food, too."

His eyes find mine again, and I force a smile on my face. Fake it until you make it. That's the only way to stop this spiral. Drugs aren't the only way to numb the shame.

It's just a game, I tell myself. I didn't know he was in a relationship when I was flirting with him yesterday, and now that I do, nothing will happen. It's not like I expected anything to come from it anyway; I've been flirting with him since I was 16.

And I'm a lot of things now, but the other woman isn't one of them.

It takes a few minutes of maneuvering to get Kay out before everyone can jump out of the backseat. I'm last, but the second I close the door and turn around, he's there. One hand on my hip guides me back towards the door I just closed, and one hand lands on top of it, boxing me in.

"What do you think you're doing, Elle?"

He lowers his voice and glances over my shoulder before moving in closer, "You're just going to ignore me all morning after last night?"

"I was flirting with you last night before I met your girlfriend, Silas."

I have to remind myself he has a girlfriend or I'll get lost in his green eyes. I have to ignore his hand on my hip, his finger tracing slow circles on my exposed skin above the waistband of my jeans.

He is fucking gorgeous, at least a head taller than me with his green eyes that are intense and currently switching between my eyes and lips in quick succession. He has beautiful tawny skin that is covered by light stubble that makes him look even sexier than he did at 16. His arms and chest are covered in tattoos, and he is muscular enough that I might have been known to daydream about him picking me up and fucking me against a wall.

"Did you miss the way Alexis was all over Keven when I was giving you the tour of her place?"

He says while fighting off a laugh before pulling back enough for me to see him get serious, "We're not exclusive, Elle; in fact, she fucked Keven after I went to bed. Alone, with blue balls, I might add, from having to watch you all night."

He says it solemnly, with no hint of a joke or smile.

I squeeze my eyes shut and lean back against the car, letting the metal cool my hot skin, but then his hand slides to the back of my neck, pulling me flush against him.

“Don’t hide from me. I like watching you blush.”

A hand leaves my hip as he traces my reddening skin, fingers brushing lightly over my collarbone, following the trail of the heat that spreads from my chest up to my cheeks. His touch is gentle, teasing, but his eyes are dark as they follow the path his fingers take.

My breath hitches, growing shallow and uneven. Each inhale comes a little quicker, a little more desperate, and each exhale shakier than the last. The steady feel of the circles on my hip bone is the only thing keeping me from floating away. Sixteen-year-old me would be squealing and jumping up and down that Silas-fucking-Cane was interested in me.

“I didn’t know.”

I look up at him through my eyelashes, putting my hands on his shoulders and letting my body relax into his hands a little now that I know there’s a possibility. I look between his eyes and lips. Fuck waiting until later. I want to feel good now, but as I start to stand on my toes, we get interrupted.

“Ahem,”

a throat clears behind us, “Don’t mind me. Just going to...hop in really quick.”

Kay rambles. “As you were.” I can’t see her face, but I can hear the smile in her voice and feel the car shake as she gets inside.

Silas leans in, rubbing his nose from my cheek to my ear, and bites it before letting go and whispering, “We’re not done here, Elle.”

He tightens his grip on my hip and neck before letting go and walking away, his stride long and unhurried.

“Don’t,”

I warn as soon as I get in the car and scoot down next to Kay. It’s no use, though; she instantly starts laughing.

“I leave you alone for five minutes.”

She beams, nodding her head in pride and hands me a Jumbo Jack Jr. “What did he say?”

“Apparently, they’re in an open relationship, and get this, she hooked up with Keven last night. While he went to bed, alone.”

I leave the rest unsaid.

“I’m not surprised there. Keven is hot as hell,”

she laughs. “After you went to bed, Alexis came on to me. Tried to take me upstairs, but rule number seven, we don’t leave each other sleeping alone in random houses. I thought she was just drunk, but I guess not.”

She shrugs her shoulders and begins to eat.

Everyone starts to pile back into the car before I can ask Kay if she thinks it’s a good idea for me to get involved with him, even though I know her answer. She’s always

telling me sex is just sex.

I lean back, staring out the window as we get back onto the freeway, the world blurring, and before I know it, my eyes are closing.

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“I only came because of you,”

I whine. If I were being honest with myself, her ditching me for some dick isn't all that surprising. I just hate being alone, especially in crowds like this.

“Hey.”

She places her hands on my shoulders and mimics taking long, deep breaths until I do it with her. “You’re fine. I’ll be back, and you’re with friends, kind of,”

she laughs. “You’ve got this.”

But I don’t feel like I’ve got this. I slept the last two hours of the drive, and my neck aches from the awkward angle it must have been in the whole time. Walking around Seattle at night, alone, on MLK Jr Way makes me nervous. It’s busier here than last night, and trying to sell these pills alone leaves me paranoid. Plus, being around so many people makes me uncomfortable. Every time the door swings open, a rush of music and people comes spilling out.

“Do your thing, then find someone to dance with. Enjoy the music, okay? Promise me you’ll try to have a little fun.”

She gives me a quick hug before turning toward Keven, who’s waiting for her by the car.

“Here, take these to start.”

Silas walks over and hands me a small bag. “James has the rest, so find him when you need more.”

Then he jogs towards Kay and Keven, leaving me standing there wondering how I ended up alone.

With nothing else to do, I start walking around, hating the way the streetlights flicker. I watch everyone at first, afraid to ask the wrong person if they want to buy drugs. Jesus, this is what my life has come to. The street is packed with people, groups gathered together in the parking lot and the line to get in stretching from the building all the way down around the corner.

I weave through the crowd, trying to blend in, to look like I belong. I just need to find one person, and I know the people around me will know what I have. Like sharks scenting blood in the water, they always know.

“You looking for anything?”

I ask a girl with a bad bleach job as I approach her. Her short hair falls just above her ears, which are weighed down by massive gauges.

“Yeah, I've been standing out here for half an hour with no luck,”

she laughs, and rubs her arms to fight off the chill in the air.

I get it because May in Seattle after the sun goes down isn't exactly warm, and the tight, black sequin dress I'm wearing does jack shit against the cold. The dress is short, hitting just above my thighs, and leaves very fucking little to the imagination, and every step I take causes it to ride up a little more. Within four steps, my ass is hanging out. The fabric clings to every curve, and each sequin catches the light like tiny stars scattered across my body.

It's not something I'd usually wear, but Kay insisted. Plus, she's wearing a matching one. I wouldn't stand out so much if I was next to her like we'd planned.

"I got some White Rolex's and Blue Diamonds. \$8 each."

"Hell yeah, I'll take 2 of each. I've got some buddies inside."

She shakes a little as she digs some cash out, and I wonder if it's the cold or if this is her first time getting high. Did I look this out of place last night? I laugh to myself a little; her nerves are enough to simmer mine down.

Just like I knew they would, the people around us pick up on what's happening, and I don't even have to leave my spot while I sell the rest of the bag. The girls compliment my dress while the guys ask what it feels like, deciding to just rub the sequins themselves.

When I find James towards the back of the line, leaning against the wall, he looks up from his phone, surprised. He takes the cash from me and counts it.

"That was fast,"

he says, counting out more pills and handing them to me.

"Must be the dress,"

I shrug, "I didn't do even half this much last night."

I tuck the pills into my bra and turn to leave before he stops me and tells me that I'll be going inside with him when he gets to the front of the line. Hopefully, Kay will be back by then so I don't have to go in there alone.

An hour goes by, and I've almost sold out again, so I scan the crowd in the line and spot James near the doors. I head over to him and hand him the money I have, but this time, he doesn't count it.

"Here, for you."

He hands me another bag and 4 single pills that I immediately shove into my bra, with no intention of taking them here.

The line moves quickly, and I haven't even made it through the door before the first girl I sold to walks right up to me and shocks the hell out of me when she grabs my face and starts kissing me.

Stunned, I stand there with my arms hanging loosely at my sides until I feel her tongue on my lips and I reach up to gently push her off me. She smiles when she opens her eyes, her pupils blown, and she laughs.

"These are ah-mazing! Do you have more?"

Yeah, she's definitely rolling now. She didn't give off I kiss stranger vibes when I met her earlier.

"Yeah,"

I say, recovering from the shock. I start to pull my stash out, but stop when two guys walk up and throw their arms around her shoulders.

"These are the buddies I was telling you about earlier."

She laughs, rolling her eyes and shrugging them off her shoulders.

“Hey, how you doin’?”

The one on the right asks, smiling.

The one on the left just stares at me. He’s cute, with short brown hair, cropped close in a military cut. His blue eyes stand out. Even with his pupils blown as wide as dinner plates, they’re glowing. He’s got a sharp jawline, though his facial hair is scruffy and patchy, like he gave up halfway through growing it out. It doesn’t exactly flatter him.

“Hi.”

I wave awkwardly, but before I can say anything else, I’m yanked around roughly and come face-to-face with my friend Kendra.

“What are you doing here?”

she demands, looking me up and down, her expression shifting into a grin. “I almost didn’t recognize you in this dress.”

“Kendra! I’m so fucking happy to see you.”

I laugh shakily, relief rushing through me, “Hold on a second.”

I grab her hand so she doesn’t disappear when I turn back to the blonde.

“Sorry,”

I say. “You wanted more?”

“Yeah, four more. My name’s Bianca, by the way. I figured you should know my

name after I shoved my tongue down your throat.”

She grins playfully, ignoring the confused looks from her friends.

“I’m Elle,”

I say with a smile and hand her the pills. “Have fun, and make sure you stay hydrated!”

I wave before walking away, pulling Kendra with me past the doors and further into the venue.

“Damn, you got some?”

Kendra asks excitedly as we walk further into the venue, weaving through the crowd of people.

“Yeah, but they’re not mine, so you gotta buy ‘em.”

We move deeper into the party, the music blasting around us and the lights flashing to the beat.

“You know, if you push it too hard, someone’s going to notice.”

She warns me after we get stopped another handful of times by people recognizing me from the line outside, wanting more. Four more girls have kissed me, but I’m not complaining.

“I’ve been careful. I promise.”

I nod, aware of the risks.

Kendra leans in a bit, her voice lowered. “They were cute, the ones I first saw you with. Did you know them?”

“No, but that girl, Bianca, was the first one I sold to tonight. She said they're here together.”

Kendra nods. She tries pulling me onto the floor to dance, but I shake my head. I'm too overstimulated by the bodies pressing into me, from the girls kissing me, and the room is packed.

It's too crowded and too hot. I nod my head towards the doors, wanting to step out for a smoke. She flips me off with a smile on her face before turning around and disappearing into the crowd.

As soon as I step outside, the cool air hits my skin, sending shivers down my spine and immediately cooling me. I lean against the wall, pulling out a cigarette. Just as I'm about to light it, I catch sight of the guys who were with Bianca earlier.

They're standing nearby, and I can feel the cute, quiet one watching me with those bright blue eyes, a smile tugging at his lips. But it's his friend who approaches me first.

“I'm Brandon,”

he says then points to his friend, “That's Jake. We were with Bianca earlier.”

“Hi, I'm Elle,”

I reply, giving a little nod. “You guys having fun?”

“Yeah. Hey, would you mind taking a picture with me? I want to remember

everything about tonight.”

Brandon asks, phone already in hand. He slings his arm over my shoulder and pulls me in before I can respond.

“Say cheese!”

He laughs before smacking a kiss on my cheek and I’m blinded by a quick flash.

I just smile and shake my head before lighting my cigarette.

Jake raises his eyebrows at me.

“I’m usually not the one who gets kissed in photos,”

I explain, answering the question in his eyes. Kay has always been the center of guys’ attention, but for the first time tonight, with him looking at me like that, maybe I’m sort of glad she’s not around.

“You should be,”

Brandon says, his tone playful as I tear my eyes away from Jake to look at him again. He puts his hands on my shoulders and takes a small step back to look at me, the intensity of his gaze making me shift a little, uncomfortable. “You’re fucking hot.”

“Thanks,”

I start to say, but as I tuck my lighter back in my bra, I realize I don’t feel my pills.

“Fuck!”

I feel around carefully, not wanting to give these guys a free show, but it's no use. They're gone.

“What’s wrong?”

Jake asks, stepping closer to me.

“I think I lost my pills. They were just here,”

I crouch down as best I can without flashing the people behind me, and the guys pull out their phones to light up the sidewalk, but I don't see them.

“That sucks. Can you get any more?”

Brandon asks, putting away his phone.

“No.”

Even though I wasn't going to take them tonight, I hate that I don't have them anymore. I learned a while ago to save what I was given, so I that don't go through withdrawals after running out of pills or the money for more.

“Let’s go back inside. I’ve had enough fresh air for now,”

Jake finally suggests, already pushing himself off the wall, grabbing my hand, and pulling me with him.

“Yeah, okay,”

I say, taking one more drag and tossing my cigarette.

We get inside and make our way toward the room I was in with Kendra earlier. I spot her across the room and wave. She flashes me a wink and waves us over. We weave through the crowd, bodies bumping into us as we move.

The DJ is perched on a makeshift stage at the back, the pulsing beat vibrating through the air. The room is buzzing now, a sea of bodies moving in every direction. People are dancing and jumping, caught up in the energy, while others lounge in the corners, their hands lighting up the darkness with neon trails as they watch the light shows.

"I love the way your dress feels,"

he says, his voice loud but barely enough to hear over the music. His eyes roam over my face as his hands play with the fabric, exploring my body. He pulls me closer while walking me back towards the wall.

"That's your friend, right?"

He asks and nods over my shoulder. I turn and nod back at him when I see Kendra has moved and is now leaning against the wall, her hips swaying with the beat.

"Dance with us?"

He asks her before settling me between them.

Kendra's hands grab me from behind, pulling me back until I'm pressed against her, my head falling against her shoulder as Jake's hands land on my hips. His eyes leave mine before nodding at Kendra. She slowly drags her hands up my torso, and Jake moves a knee between my legs.

I can't hear their breathing over the music, but I can see the rapid rise and fall of Jake's chest with each breath, and I can feel Kendra moving against my back. My

heart pounds louder than the bass, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

My eyes flutter shut, letting me focus on the sensations as I feel Jake pull back, and his hand trails its way from my hip to the space between my thighs. My eyes snap open, locking on his and the question in his heated gaze.

“Just relax,”

Kendra whispers, her lips brushing my neck before she pulls my ear between her teeth.

I tell myself to just go with it, that if nothing less, I deserve this, so I nod my head, giving him permission before closing my eyes again and willing my body to relax. There’s really no difference between this and what I thought I would be using Silas for tonight.

He squeezes my thigh firmly before letting go and rubbing soft, feather-like circles over the fabric of my underwear with just enough pressure to send shivers racing down my spine. Kendra slowly moves, one hand sliding up to cup my breast before slipping it under my dress, pinching my nipple, and smiling against my neck.

I moan and my hips jerk as Jake pushes my panties to the side, swiping his finger through the wetness gathering there and rubbing my clit. He moves a hand to my throat and squeezes it lightly at the same time as a finger slips inside me, and I bite my lip to stop from crying out, even though no one would hear me over the music.

The song changes, and it’s quiet for a moment as the beat builds up again, so I slam a hand over my mouth, quieting my moans as Jake’s finger pumps into me with the beat.

I open my eyes as Jake leans in and says something that has Kendra lifting her head

and my pussy clenches. He presses in a second finger, stretching me as his hand flexes around my throat, and I stare, transfixed, as he starts kissing her.

The music, the crowd around us that could spot us at any moment, her pinching my nipple, and his hand around my throat, have me trembling. Holding my breath and desperate for my climax, I spread my legs a little wider. Reaching down to pull my dress up higher, I start rubbing my clit, rocking myself against Jake's hand.

Jake rips his mouth from Kendra and brings it to my ear before shouting over the music, "Fuck I wish it was my dick that was buried in your tight pussy. Look at how sexy you are riding my hand like a dirty slut."

My pussy clenches, my walls spasming around his fingers as my orgasm builds faster with his words, "Yeah, that's it baby, cum on my fucking hand."

I close my eyes, squeezing so hard that tiny stars dance across the darkness. My eyes roll to the back of my head, and my muscles are so tight that my body twitches involuntarily. He curls his fingers again, and I cum.

He doesn't let up as he fingers me through my orgasm, not slowing down until I feel a gush, and look down, surprised to see a large wet spot on Jake's pants.

"That's fucking hot."

He yells, his voice thick and filled with pride. I can see the bulge in his jeans, the shape of his big dick clear through the tight fabric and I panic. The last ten minutes crash into me like a tidal wave. I've never done anything like this before. The most action I've gotten in public was all those girls kissing me earlier tonight.

"Holy shit, did you just squirt?"

Kendra yells in my ear when she looks down and sees Jake and me both staring down at his leg between my thighs. He pulls his fingers from my pussy and looks me in the eyes as he slips them straight into his mouth. His eyes never leave mine as he smirks around his fingers.

Pulling my dress back down, I grab Kendra's hand, squeezing past Jake, and rush to the bathroom. The door swings open with a push as girls move out of the way, and the dim light inside offers cover from what I'm sure is a bright red face.

I shift impatiently in line with my soaked legs until a stall finally opens and I go in to clean myself. I walk back to Kendra and splash cool water on my face as laughter bubbles up. Risking the dirty bathroom floor, I balance on one foot while wiping the other, sighing as we move away from the sink to lean against the wall.

"I don't know what that was."

I don't regret it, but I've never done anything with someone I wasn't dating, let alone a stranger.

"You had a good time. That's all it has to mean."

She shrugs. "I'm gonna head back out there. You good?"

"Yeah."

I walk back over to the sink and stare in the mirror. My hands linger on the counter when I'm done, fingers tracing the edge of the sink as I try to pull myself together. I look exactly how I did before, but I can still feel and hear him whispering in my ear.

Shaking my head, I smile at how ridiculous I'm being and move out of the way when a girl exits the stall and needs to wash her hands. I hop onto the counter and check my

phone, realizing I have some missed calls from Kay.

“Hey,”

she answers right away, “we’re heading back that way. You ready?”

She's yelling because even in the bathroom, it's loud.

“I’m in the bathroom,”

I put my mouth to the phone and cup my hand around it, “but I can meet you out front. How far are you?”

“About 20 minutes. See you soon.”

She hangs up, and I scroll through old pictures, a dumb time to take a stroll down memory lane, but I can't stop myself. It isn't until I'm crying that I put my phone away. I wipe at the tears desperately, hoping none of the girls in here notice.

I try to focus on their conversations. A pretty blonde girl starts telling a story about the threesome she saw in the backroom, explaining it in such detail that I feel like I am a part of it. It takes me an embarrassing amount of time to realize I was a part of it.

The girl closest to me won't stop petting my dress, despite my attempts to remove her hand. My skin is still oversensitive, but she keeps humming and flipping the sequins.

30 minutes pass by before Kay texts that she's here, and I rush outside.

“Hey, where's the fire?”

a voice teases, catching me as I stumble.

I glance up and meet crystal-clear blue eyes. Jake. Has he been here waiting for me this whole time?

“Oh, hi. No fire,”

I laugh awkwardly, “my friend is just here to pick me up, that's all.”

“Oh, ok, well, can I get your number? I'd love to call you sometime.”

He pulls his phone out and hands it to me. He smiles when I hand it back, leaning in for a kiss. I stand on my toes to press a quick kiss to his cheek. My heart is racing as I turn to walk away.

As I step back out into the cool night, my phone buzzes in my hand with a text.

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Kay and I spent the 45-minute ride home talking in the backseat about our nights. Of course, she's proud of me, high-fiving me when I tell her what I let Jake do to me on the dance floor. Her words are fast and loud when she starts questioning me, causing Keven to turn from the front seat and listen.

Did anyone catch us? Did I reciprocate? Did I know I could squirt?

I don't know why I look to see if Silas is paying attention, but I do. His knuckles are turning white from the grip he has on the steering wheel, and his eyes are hard when they meet mine in the rearview mirror. I don't even know why he cares. He left me there tonight for hours, even after everything he said to me in the parking lot.

“No one saw us that I know of, but I wasn't exactly paying attention to anyone else.”

I roll my eyes and lean back in my seat, turning my attention back to Kay, “No, I didn't. I was a puddle of fucking goo. I don't think I even knew my own name, and no, I didn't know I could do that.”

Kay starts telling me about her night with Keven, and he pipes in, offering her a round three, but I tune them out, resting my head against the window. My mind is already going back to Jake and the feeling of him pressed against me, and I can't help but imagine what he's like in bed. The way he whispered in my ear, talking dirty, has me pressing my thighs together. I've never been called a dirty slut before, and if someone would have asked me before tonight if I thought I'd like it, my answer would have been no.

Silas slams the car door when we get to his apartment, and I flinch. Yeah, he's not

happy. But fuck him, he's not my damn boyfriend, and I didn't do anything wrong. He doesn't get to walk around throwing a fit. I'm tempted to just leave, but Kay grabs me and drags me inside, straight to the couch we've been sharing since we got here a few days ago.

Silas goes straight to his room, leaving his door open but snapping at Keven when he tries to follow him. He just shrugs and plops down on the chair across the room as Kay and I get comfortable.

"He's pissed, girl,"

Kay says, whispering once we're settled.

"I don't even know why he cares,"

I half shrug, "but I don't really care. He could have let Keven borrow his car and stayed with me."

I hadn't even thought about it until now, but Silas didn't need to leave; he chose to.

"You have nothing to feel bad about,"

she insists, rolling over to fall asleep and throwing an arm over her eyes to block out the rising sun.

I don't feel bad. I'm a little irritated he's throwing a tantrum, but that's about it.

My phone buzzes right before I start to fall asleep, and I smile to myself when I see it's a message from Jake.

hey you get home alright?

yeah, just laying down, you?

same just thinking about you

don't think too hard ;)

if I said you had a nice body would u hold it against me?

No, why would I?

...read it again ha

Oh.

Wow I'm embarrassed I missed that:)

that's ok ha you're tired

anywaysss I'm gonna get some sleep. ttyl

ok night hit me up later cuz I'm kid free tonight and I'd love to see you again

I didn't know you had a kid...I do too...

really?

Yeah.

I got pregnant in high school by my long-time on-and-off boyfriend. I thought we were in love, I thought we could make it work. But when my son was four months old, I left. I didn't know it then, but I had been suffering from postpartum depression.

I was drowning. I was doing it alone because his dad was still in school and went to work afterward, but then he'd come home and smoke pot and go to bed. I couldn't say anything, though, I couldn't complain, because he was working and providing for us.

I told myself it was okay, that not loving every minute was okay. Until it turned into anger. Until the baby was crying after waking up, and I thought about how easy it would be to just walk away and never look back. I did the math and figured out it would be a little under 6 hours until either my mom or his dad came home.

I let him wail as I packed a bag. I let him scream as I walked outside. I made it to the bottom of the porch before I turned around and ran inside. I cried with him in my arms for hours afterward.

I hated myself for it. I still do. So, I do whatever I can to forget. Forget crying to my mom about how overwhelmed I was, her telling me I'd be fine. I just needed to sleep for a full 8 hours, and I'd be fine.

I left for a night away. One night with Kay to just be Elle again, just for a little while, but instead of sleeping, we went to Sam's and I got high for the first time. It was like a rush of pleasure; for the first time in months, I felt alive. My mind was running, but it was quiet. I didn't have to do anything, didn't have to remember anything. I just sat there for an hour with my hand on my chest, feeling my heartbeat.

He's a year old, and he's only just now letting me get close to him without screaming for my mom. It hurts, but I left, and I know it's my fault he doesn't know me. That doesn't stop the pain, though, not when I know I'm a stranger to my own son now. It's the reason I keep getting high.

My parents, God, they've been better to me than I deserve. I think my mom feels guilty for suggesting I leave and for who I spiraled into because I took her advice, but it's no one's fault but mine.

At first, I came home and tried to pretend everything was okay, that I was okay. That only lasted a week. I waited until everyone was asleep, and I left Damian's dad a note next to the bed saying I couldn't do it anymore. I got high an hour after I left, and I've been high almost every day since then.

Dear Diary, or whatever haha

It's been a while since I wrote in here. I just didn't have anything good worth remembering until now, I guess.

I met a guy last night, Jake. I don't know.... there's just something about him.

-elle

I spend most of the next morning texting Jake, telling him a little about Damian and why I'm gone, but he doesn't push for more information. I thought because he had a kid, he'd be appalled when he learned I had basically given my son away, but he didn't seem to judge me for it. Instead, he just said that the baby blues are no joke, and he understood. His daughter's mom suffered from them, too.

When he asks if I want to see him tonight, I forget Silas is around and I ask Kay if she wants to go. Tossing the remote on the couch next to me, Silas gets up, slamming the bedroom door shut behind him as Kay tells me no. I shrug my shoulders and decide to just ask Kendra. She thought they were cute last night.

Hey girl, I'm talking with the guys from last night and they want to hang out. you down?

omg yess I've been talking to one of them too

Which one?

Jake!

Shut up!

That mother fucker.

I call Kendra as I walk outside for privacy, and she reads off the texts he's been sending her. Every one of them is the same as the ones he sent me. I slump against the building, my chin dipping down to my chest as I swallow my embarrassment.

I let him touch me. Let him talk to me all day and smiled like an idiot each time his name flashed across my screen.

What a fucking prick. My heart pounds as part of me wants to scream, to call him and tear him apart. Instead, I close my eyes and look up to the sky, counting to ten before I put Kendra on speaker and type out my final text to him.

I'm not new to the game sweetie and I play it better than you do. Next time you talk to two girls from the same rave, you should probably make sure they're not fucking friends.

"I really like Jake," Kendra admits, her voice quiet.

I tell Kendra I'll call her later and head to Silas' kitchen and grab his vodka, chugging straight from the bottle before putting it back in the freezer and heading to the couch. Kay watches the whole thing with wide, worried eyes, but she doesn't say anything after I shake my head and toss my phone on the coffee table.

Silas watches me for a minute before getting up and bringing back shot glasses for the four of us and the bottle. After a few shots, he asks me to go talk with him, so I follow him into his room, lingering in the doorway before he laughs and pulls me in

and closes the door behind us.

“I like the way you watch me when I come into the room.”

He smells like vodka as he crowds me, following me as I take a step back. I’ve been too busy on my phone talking to Jake to spend any time watching Silas today.

“The way your eyes follow me, like you just can't help yourself.”

He smiles when I place my hand on his chest, like it's an acknowledgment of what he said, not me trying to stop him from getting closer.

“Silas,”

I blink up at him, shaking my head, “I don't like this.”

“Don't play hard to get now, Elle. You’ve been teasing me all weekend.”

I push harder against his chest as my back hits the wall, “You've wanted this, wanted me for years.”

“Not like this, Silas. You're scaring me.”

My stomach drops, and my hand starts to tremble when he presses closer still.

“You gave it up so easily last night,”

he sneers, his eyes going hard. “I think it's my turn.”

He leans in like he's about to kiss me, so I push harder against his chest and turn my head, banging on the wall with my free hand trying to get Kay or Keven to come help

me, but Silas rips my arm away from the wall and holds it above my head.

“Stop,”

I beg him. “Don't do this,”

I plead. “I don't want this.”

He doesn't hear me, or he doesn't care because he doesn't stop. I feel his lips on my neck, and I yell out for Kay before he slaps his hand over my mouth, cutting me off.

“Don't be a bitch, Elle, it's not a good look on you,”

he growls, his voice angrier than I've ever heard him. He uses his hand, covering my mouth to turn my head away before he bites my neck, hard. So hard, I flinch when I feel him break skin.

“What's going on?”

Kay pushes the door open, and her eyes find mine, wide in terror as I shake my head and sob under his hand.

“Keven,”

she whispers, and then the door is pushed open wider as Keven appears behind her shoulder.

“Dude,”

he starts, but stops when Silas yells to get out. I shake my head no until he forces it still.

“Keven,”

Kay whispers again, this time fear lacing her words, “Stop him.”

Keven puts a hand on Silas’ shoulder, and he must decide it's not worth it because he shoves me into the wall before shaking his head in disgust and leaving, slamming his bathroom door closed behind him.

Looks like I’m taking one for the team and hanging out with Brandon tonight because I’m not staying here.

I’ll be okay. I always am.

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"Are you sure?" Kay asks for the tenth time, her voice edging on concern as we sit outside, the cold creeping into my bones while we wait for the guys to pick me up. After Keven went to check on Silas, I packed the little stuff I had here and went outside to call Kendra, letting her know I was down to hang out with her and the guys.

Jake never did text me back after he got caught, which is fine. I wouldn't have responded anyway.

"Yes, we're just going to Kendra's house. And you know I can take care of myself."

"Elle,"

she looks at me like she still sees me pressed against the wall, his hand over my mouth and tears in my eyes. I shake my head, a silent plea.

"Fine, but I'm taking a picture of his license plate when he gets here,"

she says, like it's the most logical thing in the world. I can't help but smile a little. I'd expect nothing less from her.

"Now's your chance. There he is."

I say, my voice coming out shaky as I look down the street and spot the headlights coming around the corner before he pulls into the driveway. I take a deep breath and try to calm my racing heart and tuck my shaking hands into my pockets as I stand up and make my way to the car.

I thought I was prepared to see him, thought what happened earlier would ruin my night, but my cheeks heat when he rolls his window down, sticking his arm out, waving hello. All I can think about is what his fingers felt like inside me. How different he felt pressed against me than Silas did tonight. He's even more handsome now, not covered in sweat and high off his ass.

I do my best to ignore him, though, focusing instead on Brandon as I greet him and give Jake a small nod before sliding into the back seat while Kay takes her pictures. First, his license plate, then him and Brandon, before warning them that if I don't text or call to check in every thirty minutes, she'll call the cops. They both look back at me like she's crazy, but I just shrug my shoulders.

"How's your day been?" I ask Brandon, keeping my tone light as we get on the freeway, determined to act like Jake doesn't even exist, even though every part of me is aware of how close he is.

"Same old,"

he says, shrugging casually like I know his schedule, "Work, gym, the usual. But this is definitely a nice change of pace." He says, turning around in his seat to look at me and smiling.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat and stare down at my feet. I'm not interested in him in the slightest—not just because of what almost happened tonight with Silas and not because he's nowhere near as good-looking as Jake. My eyes drift to Jake in the rearview mirror, and I'm surprised to see him already watching me. I look away quickly, heat rushing to my face and my stomach twisting at the memory of his hands on my body, his voice in my ear.

My phone buzzes with a text and my head whips back to the mirror to see Jake smiling as he puts his phone away.

you look beautiful tonight.

I shove my phone back into my pocket, shaking my head, and go back to ignoring him completely. I turn my focus to the window, watching as we pass through Fife, anything to keep from meeting his eyes. It's late, so the road is clear as we make our way to Kendra's, and I use the short drive to clear my head of everything Silas.

I can still feel Jake's eyes on me, though. My jaw clenches, my breathing shallow, as he watches, like a game of chicken, and he's waiting for me to break first.

"My dad's upstairs sleeping, but don't worry, he sleeps like the dead,"

Kendra says 15 minutes later when we pull up to her house. She grabs my arm and leads us inside, whispering about how excited she is and how good Jake looks tonight.

"Drinks, anyone?"

She asks as we gather around her kitchen island. Brandon stands next to me and smiles my way when I look at him. I smile back only because Kendra asked me to make him comfortable, ensuring Jake stays longer.

I couldn't stay at Silas', but having to sit here all night and watch Jake and Kendra flirt doesn't sound like a good time either. I don't get it. She knows what happened with me and Jake; she was there and actively participated in what happened on the dance floor.

"I brought Vodka,"

Jake says, pulling out a bottle of Smirnoff and holding it out.

I snatch it from his hand, bringing it to my lips. Smooth and bitter, the liquid hits my tongue, and I swallow hard, feeling the liquid snake its way down my throat. A slow warmth immediately spreads through me, easing the tightening in my chest.

“Damn. A woman after my own heart,”

Brandon jokes as I hand him the bottle next, eyeing me with a raised brow as he takes a smaller swig and then hands it to Jake.

“Who wants to play a drinking game?”

Brandon asks after everyone has had a drink. I start to shake my head no, but I see Kendra out of the corner of my eye mouthing yes. I knew what I was getting into tonight, but I had planned to do the bare minimum. Games feel like too much effort right now.

Brandon keeps up his flirting as we play Never Have I Ever, sending what I can only assume are supposed to be flirty looks my way and tossing out jokes left and right. I toss out basic, safe questions when it's my turn and mostly lie during theirs. Never have I ever been in an orgy, no drink, lie. Never have I ever had a one-night stand, no drink, not a lie. Kendra uses her questions like they're foreplay, and Brandon scoots closer to me, clearly seeing where she's trying to lead the night.

Across the table, Jake watches with an unreadable expression as Brandon puts his arm on the back of my chair. His lips are pressed together, and he gives Kendra a hard smile when she touches his arm, turning his attention back to her.

I take the opportunity, with his eyes finally not on me, to excuse myself and slip into the kitchen. As I pour myself another shot, I hear footsteps behind me. I take a breath and turn to see Brandon leaning against the doorframe, his smile still in place, but lopsided as he squints his eyes at me. I scolded myself for the way my heart skipped a

beat, thinking it might be Jake.

“Hey, where’d you go?”

“Just needed a breather,”

I say lightly, turning back to my drink and trying to focus on pouring it, but listening to keep a mental note of where he is behind me, slightly uncomfortable with being alone with him after what happened with Silas.

"Oh, come on, you sure it's not because of me?"

He walks into the kitchen, a playful look in his eyes as he comes to stand beside me.

“No, it’s not you,”

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “Just not really in the mood for all this.”

I gestured vaguely back to the room, “Raves in two states this weekend and not enough sleep.” I add, wanting him to understand without hurting his feelings. He seems like a nice guy, and I hate that I’m leading him on.

Brandon pauses, processing my words, and then responds with a nod. “Fair enough. No pressure, okay?”

he says, reaching out and placing his hand on my shoulder and giving it a small squeeze before walking back into the room with the others.

“So, how old is your son?”

Jake asks a little while later. It’s the first time he’s spoken to me tonight.

“Damian’s 13 months now.” I smile.

“My little girl, Caylee, is four,”

Jake replies, a wide smile spreads on his face when he talks about her.

“Caylee is the cutest. She’s such a little daddy’s girl, too.”

Brandon chimes in, leaning back in his chair. He hasn’t touched me again since our encounter in the kitchen, and his chair is a few inches further away.

“She really is cute. Jake sent me a picture of her earlier today.”

Kendra gushes, laying her head in her hands and staring at Jake like he hung the moon. He sent me the picture today too, before I found out about him and Kendra talking, and she really is adorable, but I don't say any of that. I just smile and nod my head, Jake watching with a small dimple appearing as he smiles back.

He eats up her attention with a smile on his face, but his eyes are on me as he slips his hands behind his neck and leans back in his chair.

“Hey, it’s getting late, or, I guess, early,”

Kendra laughs, glancing at the clock. “My dad will be up for work soon. You guys wanna head back to your place and keep hanging out or something?”

The guys exchange a quick look, and before Jake can say anything, Brandon jumps in eagerly. “Yeah, sounds good,”

he says, flashing a grin. Jake just nods and smiles before asking where the bathroom is, as I head back into the kitchen to clean up so Kendra’s dad doesn't notice. But as I

reach up to put the now-clean glasses in the cabinet, I feel someone come up behind me.

“Here, let me”

Jake says, reaching over me to put a glass away, boxing me in. I turn to face him and take a deep breath as he places both hands on the counter behind me, the subtle scent of sandalwood and citrus surrounding me as I stare up at him.

“You can ignore me all you want, but you do look beautiful tonight,”

he whispers, leaning in, “I’m only here because he wanted to see you,”

he nods to the room behind him, “and I have a feeling you’re only here because she wanted to see me.” He smiles, lifting a hand to tuck my hair behind my ear, “Are we sticking with that?” he asks backing away, an eyebrow raised as he walks backward, only turning when he’s at the doorway.

I shake my head as I turn, placing both hands on the counter in front of me and hanging my head. It looks like we were both taking one for the team tonight. Being around him feels like I’m in a constant state of whiplash. I shake my head and smile as I walk back into the room, the way he whispered the word beautiful playing on repeat in my mind.

“Here, Kendra, you take the front.”

Brandon offers once we’re outside at Jake’s car, and I take the opportunity to text Jake back.

9:00 PM: you look beautiful tonight.

NOW: Keep your eyes on the road this time ;)

Brandon continues drinking in the car, finishing off the bottle that Jake brought and staring at me longer, like the conversation in the kitchen earlier never happened. I keep my focus on him, watching him closer now that he's clearly drunk. His voice grows louder as the 45-minute drive to Lacey goes on, his eyes growing glassy and unfocused as they roam over me.

The longer this goes on, the more uneasy I feel. My skin prickles, a knot tightening in my stomach, but I can't look away. I wish I could, but I'm stuck, unsure if I'll become trapped under a man's hands for a second time tonight.

But I can feel Jake's eyes on me from the rearview mirror, lingering too long, long enough to make me worry Kendra will notice, but she doesn't. She just continues talking, filling the silence when Jake gives short, clipped responses back. Jake was right earlier, but he doesn't need to know that.

I don't want to think about why that makes me happy, why being near Jake feels like a pull, why every part of me wants to meet his gaze.

"So, he's definitely hammered,"

I say, glancing through the window as Brandon spills his drink on the floor, laughing like it's the funniest thing in the world. I hate drunk people. Kendra and Jake have been out on the patio, leaving me alone with him since we got here half an hour ago.

"He'll be fine,"

Jake says and shrugs. "Don't worry."

He's leaning against the railing on the patio, his back to me.

“You good out here?”

I ask Kendra, keeping my tone light, hoping I can stay out here and that I don't need to go back inside.

“Don't worry about me. Go have fun.”

She's either drunk or oblivious to how not fun Brandon is, and I don't know which one is worse.

Jake shifts, looking over his shoulder and glancing at me for the first time since we arrived, before smiling and giving a small, almost amused shrug. “Yeah, go have fun. It looks like everyone's having a blast.”

“Yeah, fun.”

I let out a short, sarcastic laugh and take the hint, heading back inside.

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After another hour of Brandon slamming back shots, he pulls me down onto the couch and promptly falls asleep with his arm slung over my body, keeping me against him. I'm ready to go home. I don't like him, and I'd already put up with more than enough of watching Kendra flirt with Jake all night.

I wait until I hear his snores, and then I roll out from under his arm as carefully as I can, striking a ninja pose and laughing at myself when I make it off the couch unnoticed. I walk to the bathroom just in case any of them wake up and ask where I am going, but they sleep through it all. I go and sleep next to Kendra on the floor after that.

When I wake up, I look over and come face to face with a wide-awake Jake. His arm stretched out under Kendra's head, his fingers brushing the hair from my face. I swallow, trying to snap myself out of it, but I can't stop looking at him. His messy hair, the relaxed curve of his lips as he smiles at me, and the rise and fall of his chest with each breath.

"Hey,"

Jake whispers softly, his eyes flicking down to Kendra quickly before looking at me again, his voice a little rough from sleep, "You okay?"

How can I explain that I am a mess? That I want him, but I don't because he tried to play me, and my friend likes him. I nod as Kendra stirs awake. Jake gives her a more subdued smile than the one he gave me before telling her he's going to take a piss.

"Oh my god, Elle, last night was incredible, wasn't it?"

She's way too excited for someone who just woke up.

“Yeah, it was something,”

I joke, my stomach sinking.

“I can’t believe how much fun we had!”

Kendra props herself up on one elbow and looks at Brandon sleeping before continuing in a quieter voice, “And Jake? He was just... he’s amazing, right?”

she sighs happily.

“He’s something,”

I force a smile, nodding absently as I feel my phone buzz twice beside me. I reach over, surprised to see Jake's name pop up on the screen, and I snatch my phone and roll away from Kendra so she doesn't see it.

I'm not going to pretend to be ok with this anymore

I want to switch

My heart stops as I read the message. I stare at the screen, my mind racing. Before I can overthink it, I quickly type back:

I'm not a homie hopper Jake.

No one would think you were. We met first and we gave our friends their chance

Now it's our turn

What do we do?

I wait for him to respond but before he can, I hear the bathroom door creak open, and look up to see him stepping out, grinning.

He keeps his distance from Kendra, sneaking dimpled smiles my way for the rest of the morning while we clean up and get ready to head out and pick up his daughter.

When he mentions Tolmie State Park and the bay, I'm all in. It sounds like exactly what I need right now. No expectations, just a chill day. If Kendra doesn't want to switch, I'll enjoy a day at the beach and ask to be taken back to Tacoma. No harm, no foul.

"I need to talk to you about something," I say after grabbing Kendra and taking her to the bathroom, seizing the opportunity to talk to her when the guys go out for a smoke. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. I've never been one to shy away from confrontation, but it's not something I necessarily enjoy.

"What's up?" She asks as she fixes her makeup, last night's mascara slightly smeared under her eyes.

"I think,"

I hesitate, my fingers nervously tugging at the sleeve of my shirt, "I'm... Look, I want to switch. I don't like Brandon." There. Let her be angry or whatever.

"Oh, really? That's funny because Jake likes me. He could barely keep his hands off me last night." She smirks, her reaction not surprising me.

My stomach tightens, and I take a deep breath, my hands clenching at my sides. She doesn't know that it was Jake's idea. Her reaction might irritate me but at least I

already know the outcome, so I try not to smile back at her.

She acts like he wasn't knuckle-deep in my pussy two nights ago, and I know for a fact they didn't hook up last night because I slept beside them. I can't blame her for wanting him if even I do, too.

"All's fair in love and war, Elle. If you really want him, you can try, but just so you know, from where I'm standing, I don't see him switching." She leaves the bathroom before I can respond, and I take a second to gather my thoughts before the door opens again and Jake comes in.

He quickly shuts the door behind him. His eyes meet mine as I hear the lock click. For a second, there's a heavy silence before his eyes drop to my lips, and my stomach tightens as he smirks.

"Did you tell her?"

He asks, his voice low, while he slowly approaches me.

"I did,"

I whisper, the words barely out before his hands land on me, and he's pulling me toward him.

His hands cup my face, and before I even have a chance to react, his lips are on mine. Fast, urgent, like he can't wait another second. There's no easing into it, no softness. His kiss is hungry, desperate.

"I've been thinking about you and your tight pussy for two days,"

he growls between kisses. "I told Brandon the plan. He's down to switch. He could

tell you weren't into him.”

“She doesn't think I stand a chance,”

I say as I back away just enough to grin up at him.

“I sent Brandon to pick up Caylee for me,”

he says as his eyes flicker to the wall beside me. He moves us, pushing me up against it, and smiles wickedly before kissing me again. “He’s taking Kendra.”

I take the hint for what it is and pull him closer by his shirt. I slip my hands beneath it, tracing his abs with my fingertips, kissing from his mouth to his neck. I bite, suck, and lick my way to his chest, to the little tattoo peeking out through his unbuttoned polo.

I think about the way he made me cum so hard I saw stars, about how he surprised me by making me squirt when I didn't know I could, and I want to make him feel the same way. So, I drop to my knees and look up at him through my lashes.

“Fuck,”

he groans, low and guttural. He places both hands on the wall and leans against it as I unbutton his jeans, “Keep your eyes on me, Elle.”

I look down long enough to free him and stare back up at him with wide eyes.

“Yeah,”

he laughs, “and you're gonna take it all,”

he smirks and nods his head to continue.

The confidence I felt moments ago is gone. I've only been with four guys before, and I've never seen a dick this big. He jerks a little as I grab him, my fingers almost reaching around him. I pump him once, twice, before looking up again. I stick my tongue out and lick him from base to tip before taking him in my mouth.

"Shit,"

he hisses when I close my mouth around him and suck. "Use your teeth a little, just a little."

I smirk as I lean forward and take him into the back of my throat and bite down gently at the base of his dick. Yeah, no gag reflex is coming in clutch right now. I'd do a happy dance if I could breathe.

"Fuck, did you just,"

he stutters as he looks down at me in awe. "Do it again."

he thrusts, and I meet him, tears gathering in my eyes as I gag for the first time in my life.

"I'm gonna fuck your face, tap my thighs if it's too much,"

he says softly, his voice thick. He runs his thumb gently across my cheek before unleashing himself on me.

My eyes burn as drool drips down my chin, but he doesn't stop. He grabs my head, holding me still, and takes what he wants. His dick slams into the back of my throat, with each thrust more punishing than the last. My pussy clenches around nothing as

he groans above me.

“Eyes,”

he snaps, and I look up at him, unaware I had even closed them. I’m not usually this turned on by sucking dick, but I can feel my panties getting wetter, and I whimper. Jake must hear me because, without warning, he pulls out. A string of drool connecting my mouth to his dick makes me giggle as I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. He grabs me by my shoulders, lifting me and spinning me around before grabbing my throat and I’m hauled back against his chest.

“Tell me if you don't want this,”

he whispers into my ear before placing a soft kiss just below it, slipping his hand between my thighs and rubbing me through my clothes. I press myself harder against him in response.

Within seconds, he has my chest pressed against the vanity as he lifts my arms and places my palms against the mirror. He rips down my leggings and panties in one go before slapping my ass once and lining himself up with my pussy.

“Fuck,”

he grunts, “you’re so wet.”

The tip of his dick slides against my clit, making my legs shake.

He presses in and my back bows as he grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls, using it as an anchor as he slams into me. He doesn't give me time to adjust, his second thrust has me moaning and closing my eyes until he slaps my ass, telling me to open them.

Using his free hand to grab my hip, he hauls me against him with each thrust, slamming into me and hitting my g-spot with each stroke.

“Look at you taking me so well.”

I watch him pull back and drop his head to his chest as he watches his dick disappear inside me, “You’re doing such a good job.”

He buries himself in me, bottoming out with each powerful thrust as he fucks me harder. I bite my lip, crying out as he bends his knees, his dick sliding so deep I try to pull away, but he pulls me up against him by my throat, stopping me.

“I could live and die in this pussy,”

he groans, his features softening as he tilts his head back, completely lost in his own pleasure.

My body is on fire, watching him in the mirror as my orgasm builds, muscles tightening around him like a vice, which only makes him go feral.

“I knew you'd be a good girl,”

he pants, his hand moves from my hip, reaching around me until he's playing with my clit.

“Fuck, you're gripping me so damn tight. I'm gonna cum,”

his growls and his words have me spiraling. I shatter around him. He moves, using both hands to drive my hips back into him, and he fucks me through my orgasm.

Four pumps later, he trembles as he spills inside me. His chest drops onto my back,

pressing me into the vanity, making it difficult to breathe. We stay there, chests heaving, before he stands up and slides his softening dick out of me and tucks himself away.

He pulls me up with gentle hands and moves my hair off my neck before placing soft kisses along my shoulder and smirks at me in the mirror.

“I want my cum dripping out of that pussy all day,”

He buttons his jeans and winks. His dimple is on full display as he walks out of the bathroom with a smile.

I follow him out of the bathroom after taking a moment to fix myself, just as Brandon and Kendra come walking through the front door with Caylee.

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We've been sitting in Jake's living room for 30 minutes now. We spent a few hours at Tolmie State Park, and then Jake invited us back to his place in Centralia.

It was bittersweet watching them play at the beach, Jake chasing Caylee towards the water, grabbing her and spinning her around when the waves came too close. Damian loves water, I'd be fighting to keep him out of the cold bay. I can almost hear his giggles, the sound of his small feet pattering against the sand.

We built sandcastles, laughing as we watched them fail to hold up against the dry, brittle sand. Would Damian have laughed or cried when the castles fell?

We collected shells and sand dollars along the beach, and I could picture Damian struggling to keep them from dropping out of his overflowing hands. That image of him, so small and carefree, brings a smile to my face, even if it's bittersweet. A soft breeze tugs at my hair. The salty scent of the ocean mixing with the trees that lined the beach behind me was relaxing, and I found myself wandering off alone for a quiet minute.

Caylee was a great buffer between everyone because, at this point, I could tell Kendra still thought she had a chance with Jake, trying to talk to him anytime Caylee ran off. To his credit, though, he's focused on Caylee and not either of us, but every so often, I'd catch him smiling my way.

Caylee clung to me like glue after we found seaweed on the beach, and Jake started chasing after her with it. She jumped into my arms, begging me to save her.

"She won't save you, Bug,"

Jake laughed and charged, making me turn and run from him. Caylee laughed as she watched him chase us over my shoulder.

She fell asleep on me in the car on the way to Jake's, and my heart broke. Regret and shame surged through me. My stomach twisted as I watched her sleeping on my shoulder. So, I looked out the window as tears ran down my face. I wiped them away, but they kept coming, hot and relentless against my cheeks.

I feel like I'm walking a line between staying in the moment and wanting to break free from it. How can I sit here, playing with a kid that's not mine, when I haven't seen my own son in so long?

Would Damian happily play along? No, I bet he'd be napping right now after spending hours running wild and free on the beach.

"Is this your property?"

Caylee asks me while handing me the same DVD for the fourth time. She's been walking between me and her dad, handing it to us before taking it back and asking again. It's cute, if not mildly annoying, to be honest.

"You don't have to keep playing. She'll keep at this until you tell her to stop,"

Jake laughs, tickling Caylee and making her drop to the ground.

And then there's me. I'm here, but not really. I can't help but wonder if anyone else notices how quiet I am. Her sweet little laugh fills the air, and I start to think about Damian again before excusing myself to call my mom out on the patio.

"Hey, Mom," I say, my voice trembling.

"Elle? Are you okay? What happened? " She sounds tired. I close my eyes, pressing the phone tightly against my ear. Of course, she thinks something is wrong. I only call when I need something.

"I just... I miss you guys, him. I miss Damian. I... I don't know what to do." I can hear her sigh on the other end.

"I know, baby girl. I know."

"I just..."

I whisper, trying not to let the guilt take over, "I'm trying to be better. Can I come see him?" I choke on the words, knowing I've messed up so many times.

She's quiet for a moment, "Four months, Elle. We haven't seen you in four months."

I flinch at her words. I knew it had been a while, but I hadn't even noticed it had been that long. Days blend into weeks, and before I noticed, it's been months. I hang my head, how could I let this happen, and pinch my thigh as I start to shake, the desire to get high strong as I struggle with my guilt. Shame, guilt, and self-loathing are all triggers for me now.

"You can come,"

she relents, the tiredness in her voice turning sharp, "I just... I wish you'd take care of yourself, Elle," her voice cracking just a little at the end.

"I am, I will," I say, barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"Alright,"

There's another long silence, but then she says with a sigh, "Next time you're sober for 24 hours, come over." The words hang in the air, heavy with something deeper than just disappointment. An accusation and a truth. She doesn't think I can do it, not get high long enough to see him.

"Tomorrow then, I haven't taken anything since Friday."

"Okay, I'll be home all day. It's my day off. Take care, Elle."

"I miss you too, Mom," I say, my voice low, but I hear the click as she hangs up.

I slide into the chair behind me, my elbows resting on my knees as I put my head in my hands. I can't breathe. I close my eyes for a moment, trying to swallow the ache in my chest. I want to fix it. I want to be better, but the gap between us feels impossibly wide. I can't reach her, I don't even know how to reach myself.

The tears come before I can stop them, sliding down my cheeks like ice. I just want to disappear into the darkness, to escape this feeling, but I can't. Not here. So, I sit, alone, letting the emptiness consume me.

"Are you sad?"

Caylee asks, after she throws the patio door open and skips over to me.

"I'm not anymore. Do you wanna go play again?"

I smile, sitting up and wiping the tears from my eyes.

Caylee watches me with her big brown eyes and smiles before grabbing my hand and dragging me inside. She bypasses her dad in the living room, who gives me a small smile, and takes me to her bedroom to show me all of her toys. She spends an hour

pulling out every Barbie she owns and telling me their life story. We laugh and play with them before Jake comes in and tells her it's bath time.

I don't even realize until I'm sitting alone in her room that I hadn't thought about getting high once since Caylee took my hand in hers and wanted to play.

With both Jake and Caylee occupied, Kendra sees her chance to finally talk to me alone, offering me a cigarette, so we go outside. She leans her elbows against the railing and is quiet for a minute before she sighs and turns to look at me.

"I don't mind Brandon; he pays more attention to me than he does you,"

she shakes her head, so I guess she did notice all the looks Jake sent my way, "And anyway, it was pretty dumb of me to ignore what happened between the two of you the night we met him,"

she laughs.

"I didn't want to like him, not after he was talking to both of us, I can't explain it."

I bump my hip into her and smile, "Sometimes people just click. I guess it's one of those things."

"So,"

she stands up straight and faces me, "We good now?"

"We were always good."

I grin and pull her in for a hug.

“I think I just wanted someone who wanted me so bad, they made me squirt all over a dance floor,”

she whispers in my ear before pulling away, throwing her cigarette off the patio, and slapping my butt on her way into the apartment.

I stay, finishing my cigarette and watching the sun set. Today was hard—seeing Caylee playing and smiling at her dad, so carefree, so whole. The realization that I’m not actually a mom sets in like it usually does, but this time, I can’t do anything to numb it. Even if I had something, I wouldn’t take it, not with a kid around.

“Hey,”

Jake sits down next to me after Caylee has been bathed and put to bed. “Seems like they’re hitting it off.”

He nods over to Kendra and Brandon, who are curled up in his oversized chair, watching TV and talking.

“Seems like no one was bothered by the switch after all.”

He smiles, "You’re quiet, Elle. You okay?"

“Yeah, I’m good.”

I want to shout that I’m not ready for this—ready for whatever this is. I want to be honest, but I know honesty would change everything.

“Can I ask you something?"

I lean in a little so that no one but me hears him.

“What's up?”

“Do you... Do you like it when I talk dirty?”

he asks, his brows pulling in like he's a little uncomfortable asking.

“Yeah, I do.”

I'm confused; did I not act like I did? No one had ever talked so dirty to me. Sure, I'd get the 'you feel so good' or something like that, but Jake has a filthy mouth, and I love it.

“It's just that you don't... I don't know, talk back?”

“Oh, um, yeah. I do. I like it more than I thought I would, so please don't stop, but...”

I pause, unsure if the truth will be too much for him, but I decide to be honest, “I was... sexually assaulted when I was in elementary school, and I don't remember everything, but I do remember him making me tell him it felt good, and how mad he would get if I didn't.”

Jake interrupts me and pulls me into a hug. His arms wrap around me, warm and firm, holding me tight, his hand rubbing small circles on my back.

“You don't have to keep going; I understand.”

He lets me go and settles back against the couch, pulling me under his arm and whispering against my head, “I'm sorry that happened to you, and thank you for telling me.”

Thinking about that time in my life is never easy. It feels like a scar that never really

heals. The shame of what happened always made me worry about what a guy would think. Maybe they'd pity me, or worse, see me as damaged and think less of me. I knew it wasn't my fault, but knowing that never took away the shame. I've gone to therapy. I know I'm not defined by what happened to me, but it never really goes away.

"You were good with Caylee today. Did you call your parents earlier on the patio?"

Jake asks, changing the conversation.

"Yeah,"

I smile and begin to relax, "I can see Damian as early as tomorrow. They only let me come over if I haven't been high in 24 hours, which I get. But it doesn't happen often because I'm high more than I'm not. But I don't want to be."

"That's cool. Do you want me to bring you over there tomorrow?"

"I don't have any money to give you for gas, and they live in Tacoma."

I can't ask him to take me, but I need to get there.

"It's not a problem. I'll drop Bug off with my mom for a few hours and take you,"

he kisses the top of my head, slipping his hand into the waistband of my shorts and leaving it there, "I'm happy to take you to see Damian. It'll be good for you."

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“Take a left here,”

I tell Jake as we exit the freeway. Instead of taking Caylee to his mom, Brandon and Kendra stayed at his apartment with her, offering to take her to the park when she started pouting as we walked out of the door.

The ride to Tacoma is quiet, my nerves getting the best of me. Jake uses his phone to text me and asks if he can hold my hand, totally different from the man who made me cum not once, but twice in the few days I’ve known him. But it’s cute, so I reach over and take his hand in mine with a smile on my face.

“You ready?”

Jake asks, letting go of my hand to downshift into second gear at the turn.

“I am. I really appreciate you bringing me. Thank you again.”

I watch the streets I grew up on pass by. Streets that I know like the back of my hand—each corner, each pothole that makes a car bounce. I can’t help but notice them, the cracks in the pavement, the faded curbs, and the way the trees along the sidewalk have grown wild, like they’ve been left to their own devices for too long.

We pass by an old park, the one with the rusted swings and a weathered slide that used to burn my legs in the summer heat.

The closer we get, the more my stomach sinks. We pass houses that are pristine, their lawns trimmed perfectly, their paint fresh and new. Then, just a few blocks over,

there are the run-down ones, the houses with peeling paint, cracked windows, and rusty fences.

“It’s no problem. My cousin lives around here, actually. I’ll probably swing by her house instead of waiting at Starbucks.”

I wonder who his cousin is because I’ve lived here for 15 years, and if she's around my age, I probably went to school with her.

“Next street, take a right and go down a block until you see the big blue house on the left.”

I shift in my seat nervously. This is the longest I haven’t seen Damian since I left him.

“Just shoot me a text whenever you’re ready, no rush,”

Jake says with a smile as we park behind my dad's Camry. “Have fun,”

he adds before I shut the car door and all but run to the house.

My mom does her usual inspection of my pupils before she stands aside and lets me in. She crosses her arms as I step over the threshold. Damian shrieks down the hall, a giggle following shortly after, and her lips press into a tight line.

She might love me, but she's always in momma bear mode for Damian when I’m around. That’s fine, I'm not here to see her.

I walk into the living room, and there he is. Stepping over the baby gate and crouching down a few feet away from Damian, I watch him play.

He's so big now. I blink away tears as I look at him, my baby. My throat tightens as I fight against the sob trying to work its way out of my throat.

"He's talking more now, and climbs anything and everything in his way. We had to lift the gate up a few inches,"

mom laughs, coming to stand behind me. "Not high enough that he can crawl under, just tall enough he can't throw himself over it anymore."

Damian stops playing and looks over when he hears my mom's voice, and I hear her walking away, but my eyes stay on him.

"Hi buddy,"

I whisper, afraid to scare him if he doesn't remember me, "whatcha got there?"

He watches me for a second before smiling and looking back at what he's playing with, pointing, and saying fire truck but it comes out as fire fuck.

"Wow, that's so cool!"

I laugh and move closer to him. "What else do you got over there?"

I ask as I sit beside him.

He wastes no time before bringing me all of his toys excitedly and I cry softly because he's happily playing with me with a smile on his face, instead of crying for my mom to come back.

We play for an hour before he starts getting tired, and my mom brings me his sippy cup and tells me I should put him down for his nap. I shoot Jake a text as I lie down

with Damian, letting him know I'll be ready soon.

After we're settled on the couch, Damian puts his hand on my cheek and smiles as he drinks his milk, and his eyes slowly drifting closed. He fights sleep for a while, not wanting to take his eyes off me, like he's afraid I won't be here when he wakes up, and my heart breaks.

When I left, it was supposed to be for a night away with Kay, to get a break because I had been overwhelmed and struggling. That night away turned into this. I've been gone for almost a year, my parents have temporary custody, and I can apparently go four months without seeing my son.

I hate who I have turned into, and I know I can only blame myself for getting high the night I left, and for every time I've gotten high again since. I'd never done drugs before. I didn't really understand addiction or how it ripped every piece of yourself away, slowly, bit by bit.

The room feels smaller as I stand from the couch and see my mom standing in the doorway. She is standing there, her arms folded across her chest and her eyes red, but she doesn't move. She just stares at me like she isn't sure what to say, or maybe she doesn't know what to do. She doesn't move. Doesn't even blink.

"Mom..."

My voice cracks on her name. I can barely make it past my lips, but it is all I have. I swallow hard. I want to say something, anything, but the words won't come.

My fingers dig into the sleeves of my shirt, trying to hold myself together, but it is pointless. The tears start to spill over, quietly at first, until a sob breaks free.

And then, finally, she unfolds her arms. She takes one slow, uncertain step toward

me, and I meet her the rest of the way. For a second, she is as stiff as a board, but then she pulls me in.

“I’m sorry, Elle,”

she whispers, her voice shaky, raw, “I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t know how to fix this, Mom,”

I choke out, my face pressed into her shoulder.

Her arms tighten around me, but she doesn't say anything, and we just stand there, crying, until Jake arrives.

The drive home is harder than I thought it would be. I can't stop thinking about all the ways I fucked up; all the ways I ruined my life. I can feel it pulling me under, that familiar, all-consuming guilt and hate that eats at me day after day. So, when we get back to Jake’s, and Bianca is there with ecstasy, I don't think. I don't hesitate.

Anything is better than the thoughts in my head.

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I live with Jake now because I don't have anywhere else to go. It's not something we've actually talked about, but I haven't asked to leave, and he hasn't asked me to go. He's been taking me to see Damian at least once a week so it's not like there hasn't been an opportunity for me to be gone. I don't want him to think I'm using him for a place, so I do a lot around his apartment. Cook, clean, stuff like that. And I hang out with Caylee while he works. I don't know though. There's something I can't put my finger on.

-elle

It's been a month now since I came to Jake's, and every morning I wake up expecting him to ask if I'm ready to go home. He never does.

We, meaning Jake, decided we shouldn't sleep together again while we get to know each other better. We haven't had sex since the bathroom at Brandon's, and I'm walking on a tightrope at this point. All the little touches, the literal dry humping at night before bed, I've never heard of women getting blue balls, but I'm sure I have them at this point.

I find myself waking up to quiet mornings, the smell of coffee drifting from the kitchen, and the soft sound of Jake moving around in the other room. So different from what it was like at Kay's— people coming and going all night and sleeping until the afternoon. I was used to chaos, like the world never quite stopped spinning. But here, with Jake, everything feels calm.

In the evenings, we cook together, the kitchen usually messy with half-prepared ingredients and he teases me about how I can't get the timing right, the sides always

done and cold by the time the meat is finished.

Bianca shows up randomly and I find out they are leaving in the morning. They're going to California, to Disney Land and Warped Tour. They made plans the week I met Jake and he forgot all about it, he says. He shrugs it off when he tells me, his grin a little sheepish, like it isn't a big deal.

"Come on, you should come with us!"

Bianca says, "Jake would love it, and seriously, it's going to be a blast."

We hit the road at 6 AM, Bianca taking the front with Jake. The miles slip by like they're nothing, and I laugh as Bianca tells stories about Jake from high school, trying to embarrass him, but he just shrugs it all off. He keeps glancing back at me, his eyes soft and relaxed as he drives, but every so often, the hand that casually rests on the gear shift stretches back to my leg, brushing it lightly for a few seconds before pulling it back.

"So, we don't have any plans tomorrow. What do we wanna do?"

Bianca asks after we stop for gas a few hours into the drive in Portland.

"I want to get a tattoo on Hollywood Boulevard."

Jake grins.

"I've always wanted my nipples pierced."

I joke, leaning forward between the seats to join the conversation.

"Really?"

Bianca asks, turning to me with a strange look, “You seem so...sweet, so innocent.”

“Was it the drugs I sold you or the orgasm Jake gave me on the dance floor that made you think that?”

I deadpan, shaking my head, “No money, though, and I’m not asking you guys to pay for that.”

“Why?”

Jake asks, “It would be for me anyways at this point.”

He smirks.

“I don't think you can do it,”

Bianca laughs and leans back, folding her arms across her chest, “I bet you chicken out.”

“Alright, find a shop.”

I tell her.

We don't check into our hotel until almost midnight, all of us exhausted from the long drive, passing out the minute our heads hit the pillows.

I get my nipples pierced on Hollywood Boulevard on Friday morning with Bianca in the room with me to ‘watch me panic and bail,’ she says. The first piercing stings, but thankfully, it’s over before I have a chance to react. A quick breath, a flash of pain, and it’s done. But the second one doesn’t go as smoothly. The guy nods he is ready, so I inhale and exhale sharply, pushing all the air out of my lungs when he looks up

with an apology in his eyes.

“Sorry, it was a bit uneven, I'm gonna have to do it again.”

I doubt he's sorry with that smile on his face.

“Deep breath in and fast breath out,”

he tells me again.

I grip the table and stare daggers at him as he shoves the needle through, stepping back with his hands up when he's finished.

“Yeah, I get that look a lot,”

he laughs before he starts to clean me up and goes over the aftercare instructions.

We spend the next day at Disney Land and we end up getting high. I haven't been high in public before, not like this, not surrounded by so many people. We do It's a Small World twice before the submarine ride for Finding Nemo. It's too much for me. Feeling like I am trapped, I take a deep breath and look over at Jake, who is grinning like he is having the time of his life.

I feel out of control, like the world is spinning too fast. I close my eyes for the rest of the 14-minute ride and try to breathe through it. The world feels like a cartoon in here, the people around me are laughing, smiling, kids tugging at their parents' hands.

It isn't until the parade at the end of the day that I feel like I can breathe again, laying on the ground next to Jake.

The next day at Warped Tour is a bust. It's too hot, too crowded. We barely last

through A Day to Remember's set before calling it quits. Drenched in sweat, our clothes cling to our bodies, the sun beating down on us as we head back to Jake's car. The drive back to the hotel is miserable with no AC and I announce I am heading straight to the pool.

"Come here,"

I call to Jake from the deep side of the pool, partly hidden by a cabana that no one is using. The pool is empty, and Bianca is taking a nap in the room, as are most guests from Warped Tour since it's the closest hotel.

Jake swims up and treads water in front of me, smiling and swimming back a little when I reach out for him.

"What do you think you're doing over here, Elle?"

He asks, eyeing me when I start to undo my bathing suit bottoms.

"We're alone,"

I pull a string, "You've been teasing me for a month,"

I switch the arm holding me up on the ledge and undo the string on the opposite side, "and if you don't fuck me, here, in this pool, right now, I'll make you watch as I get myself off." I grab the bottoms before they can sink and set them on the ledge beside me.

"So, what's it going to be?"

I ask right before Jake surges forward and shuts me up with his mouth.

“You’re so bad, Elle,”

his voice is rough, and his grip firm as he reaches out and cups the underside of my boob, careful of the piercing, “You wanna fuck, baby?”

“Please,”

I whimper and nod my head.

“So, touch yourself then,”

Jake demands. And he pulls back just enough to watch as I slide my hand across my stomach and bite my lip to hold back my moan as I start rubbing my clit.

“I was waiting, Elle. I don’t do casual, but you want to be mine so bad, don’t you?”

He grabs the ledge, and with his free hand, he grabs his dick, fisting it.

“Are you ready for me?”

he asks, but shakes his head when I nod. “Slip your finger in that tight pussy and show me.”

I slide a finger in and moan, willing to do anything he asks at this point.

“Another,”

he says, and he lets go of himself before reaching over and taking my throat into his hand as I add a second finger and start fucking myself. He pulls himself closer and swallows my cries, shoving his tongue in my mouth.

I let go of the pool ledge and swing my arm around him, nails biting into his shoulder as I continue to finger myself. I feel him coming closer and guiding his cock towards me.

I pull my hand away, bringing it above the surface, wrapping my lips around my fingers at the same time he lines himself up and slowly, so fucking slowly, pushes forward, filling me, stretching me, until his hips meet mine.

I wrap my legs around his waist and shove my face into his neck as he fucks me against the pool.

“You wanted my dick, so fuck me, Elle.”

he says, grabbing my hair and pulling my face out of his neck as he raises an eyebrow in challenge.

“Fuck,”

he says when I reach behind me and use the pool as leverage and begin to ride him. I lean back a little and watch as he slowly disappears inside of me before I slide back up and do it over again.

I take my time, chasing my own climax, fucking him slowly, watching and waiting to see how long he gives me control before he takes what he wants. I stop watching where we're connected and reach down to play with myself. My orgasm is already close from a month of foreplay.

“You feel so good. You're so big. I've never felt this full before you,”

I moan as I start to ride him faster. It's the first time I've ever said anything during sex, and Jake goes wild.

He grabs me and swims to the corner of the pool, spreading my legs wide so they're pressed against each side, grabbing the ledge and fucking me in long, slow strokes while playing with my clit.

“I love the way you look with my dick filling you up,”

he grunts, feeling my pussy tightening around him, “Already?”

he chuckles. “Such a good girl.”

I feel Jake twitch inside me as he pushes as deep as he can, bottoming out while we pant through our orgasms together.

We finally had sex yesterday IN A POOL! Haha, that was epic! But afterwards, Jake and Bianca got drunk.

Not even a good drunk.

He keeps trying to fool around in front of Bianca, and I don't like that.

I think I love him, he treats me so good and he has helped me so much, but...

I try so hard not to get mad at little things that would usually make me mad.

I don't want to fight with him.

I have to filter myself and how I react to what he says.

It feels like I'm living a lie.

Like I'm pretending I'm okay with half of the shit he does when I'm really not.

The way he talks about his ex, Caylee's mom, and what she would do, that's how I would usually be, too, and he said he'd never go through that again.

OMG, he just came over to me and laid on top of me, squishing this notebook between us, and said I need to talk to him when I'm mad, that I can't just shut him out!

He just said he wants to 'put me on lifelong lockdown' and he wants to be Damian's stepdad. He was drunk, but why did it make me so happy? It's only been a month, but if things keep going good...

-elle

On our way home the next morning Jake goes through about 2 dozen songs before he settles on one.

He catches my eye in the rearview mirror, a quiet smile playing on his lips, and then gently reaches back to take my hand.

Whatever It Is by the Zac Brown Band fills the car and, in that moment, everything else fades away.

All I can think is how I want to hold onto this feeling forever.

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“It’s my birthday, why can’t you just be fucking happy and celebrate with us?”

Jake asks after we get Caylee situated in her room. We’ve been back from California for a week now, and Jake invited some friends over for his birthday tonight.

“I’d celebrate with you if Caylee wasn’t fucking here,”

I throw my arms up and start to leave the bedroom before Jake grabs me by the arm and spins me around again.

“What’s your problem? I can’t leave now?”

I ask, crossing my arms over my chest, watching him.

“It wasn’t even supposed to be my night with her but her mom needed a babysitter, what was I supposed to say?”

He’s acting like I’m angry for no reason.

“I don’t know, Jake, how about no because you’re going to be rolling your ass off in about 15 minutes!”

I shout, getting more frustrated as he continues to try to rationalize the fact that we have an apartment full of people on drugs with his 5-year-old daughter here now.

There are so many people here, I decided to wait on taking mine until I saw what they were going to be like. You can never really tell what the high will be like, and I only

knew two of his friends here tonight, plus I have social anxiety and I don't like new people. Now, I'm thankful as fuck because Caylee showed up about ten minutes ago unannounced, and Jake was minutes away from his high.

“Look, I'm never going to be the kind of man who turns down time with his daughter,”

he starts, but I cut him off. Why the fuck does he think that's what this is about?

“Jake, listen to me, there won't be a single sober person here who can take care of Caylee in 15 minutes. I understand you already had plans, and you had already taken the pills, but this isn't safe.”

I plead with him to understand as I walk up to him and cup his face.

I look into his eyes and see his pupils dilating. I sigh before taking a step back, “Just go out there and have fun. I'll sit with Caylee and help her with whatever she needs tonight.”

I don't want to ruin his high, but I can't ‘celebrate’ with Caylee here, just like I wouldn't go see Damian high or even coming down from one.

I hear Jake complaining to his friends about me ruining his birthday as I walk into Caylee's room and shut the door. I stand there for a minute, resting my back against the door, before Caylee turns around and smiles at me.

“Hey, Bug, you wanna play Barbies with me?”

She has a wall full of toys and we spend an hour playing, building castles with blocks, racing toy cars, and creating whole lives for her Barbies and dolls. She's completely absorbed in it, laughing the whole time before she says she's hungry, so I

bribe her with a popsicle after dinner if she stays in her room.

When I go out, everyone stops what they're doing to watch me. The room goes quiet as I heat up some chicken nuggets, and I try to ignore their eyes on me. Jake and Bianca act like I'm not the one who sold them the pills they took at Blackout.

I give Caylee a bath after she gets popsicle all over herself, sneaking her in and out of the bathroom like a game so she doesn't see her dad and want to go to him. I tuck her into bed before lying on the floor next to her, and fall asleep curled up in her little blanket to cover what I can.

Sometime later, I'm woken up by Jake sliding in next to me, his hand immediately slipping under my shorts and rubbing my clit. I try to bat his hand away and whisper, "Not in here."

But he doesn't hear me. He shoves a finger in and hisses under his breath.

"Jake,"

I try again, this time grabbing his face so I can look him in the eyes, "Not in here. Let's go to our room."

"You're not still mad at me?"

he asks while he continues to pump his finger into my pussy before adding a second one and curling them. I hate that it feels so good.

I shake my head no, lying so I can get him to focus enough to hear me, and reach for his face again when he looks down to watch as his hand moves beneath my shorts.

"Our room,"

I say again, and this time he listens.

“I'm eating your pussy tonight,”

he says as he slides his hand out of my shorts, standing up and hauling me off the floor into his arms, carrying me to the bedroom.

His friends are still in the living room and they laugh as he storms into our room and slams the door shut behind us. I waste no time wiggling out of his arms and taking a step away from him. He's so high he thinks I'm playing a game with him, so he starts to follow me step for step with a grin on his face.

“No.”

I say forcefully, “Jake, I'm not in the mood after the way you spoke to me earlier.”

“I was just knuckle deep in your pussy, Elle, you can't tell me you aren't wet right now.”

He says, laughing.

“That is not the point.”

I stop moving backwards, standing my ground.

“So, you dragged me in here to continue to be a buzz kill and fight?”

he asks, looking confused.

“No, you literally carried me in here.”

I throw my hands up in the air, wishing I could scream at him, but I don't want to wake Caylee up.

“Yeah, after you told me to,”

his voice raises with every syllable.

“No. After I pointed out we were in your daughter's room, on the floor, right fucking next to her sleeping.”

“Don't you dare judge me!”

he snaps at me as he starts to move towards me, and I look up at him with wide, shocked eyes and move to the left.

“You’ve been judging me all night, and I'm sick of it,”

he shouts now, loud enough that I know his friends can hear him over the music. “You can't sit there all high and mighty when I know you. You left your son so you could get high, so don't you dare judge me.”

My mouth drops open, his words hitting me like a physical blow. I see it—the second his words hit him too. I watch the way his eyes close in shame, how his head lowers as if what he’s just said is too much for him to bear. But it doesn’t change anything. The damage is done.

They always say the truth hurts, but it feels like he just shoved a knife into my chest.

“Wow,”

I whisper, moving slowly, each step heavier than the last, and sit on the bed. My mind

paces, my heart shattering, but all I can do is sit there, trying to breathe, trying to process the pain.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Elle. I didn't mean that.”

He comes over and drops to his knees in front of me, grabbing my face with both hands. His bloodshot eyes searching mine, “I’m so sorry.”

Tears start to roll down my face as my body trembles, but I shake my head and say nothing. He’s right. I did give up custody of my son, but I have never and would never do drugs around him or any kid for that matter.

Fuck him. I’m not perfect. He knew that, and he still chose to stab his words through my heart.

I grab at his hands, my nails digging into his calloused skin, desperate for an escape. That soft touch turns to a fist before he mutters a curse, storms over, and with a wide swing, swipes everything off the top of the dresser onto the floor, making me flinch. His eyes pierce through me, one final blow before he storms through the door, slamming it behind him.

I curl up on the bed as I cry. I’ve never seen him so mad, never felt the sting of sharp words hurled at me from his lips. I lay there awake until the sun rises, worried I'll fall asleep and he'll climb into bed with me. But he doesn't.

I don't see him until I hear Caylee wake up a couple hours later and she comes into the room with her stuffed monkey. Jake trails behind her, looking awful. He stands in the doorway, leaning a shoulder against it as Caylee comes up to the bed and asks me if I want to eat breakfast with her.

I drag my tired body out of bed and follow behind her, pausing as Jake steps off the

doorframe and places a soft hand on my arm, “I’m sorry. Can we talk about it after I drop Caylee off after work today?”

he asks, his voice quiet, remorseful. I watch as he shifts, eyes full of regret.

“Okay. After work.”

I nod, the words coming out soft.

After work never comes.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

He's been gone all day. Everything was fine a few hours ago. Jake had gone to work this morning and picked Caylee up at five to bring her back to her mom's but that was 4 hours ago now, and I haven't heard from him since. All my texts have gone unanswered and after the second call, those have been sent straight to voicemail.

-elle

I call Jake again, my thumb hovering over the screen as it rings. Voicemail. Again. I hang up, my frustration rising to just below the surface as I set my phone down. I stare at the last cigarette he left me before I snatch it up and head out to the patio.

Stepping out into the cool night air, the weight of the silence presses in on me as crickets chirp and my heart beats loudly in my chest.

The patio is dim, the only light coming from the flickering streetlamp in the courtyard.

I bring the cigarette to my lips, the tip glowing orange as I inhale deeply, letting the smoke fill my lungs.

The burn calms my nerves for a moment.

I take another drag, holding it in a bit longer, before blowing it out and watching the smoke curl in the air.

He kissed my forehead as he said goodbye, and they left.

I knew the drive was only 45 minutes each way, so he should have been back by six o'clock, depending on traffic along I-5 through Olympia, and it's just after nine o'clock now.

I worry.

It's what I do.

I'm a worrier, so I put my cigarette out and head inside to try calling again when I hear keys. The handle twists and Jake steps inside, his silhouette framed by the dim light spilling from the hallway. For a moment, I just stand there, unsure if I should feel relieved or angry or both.

"Oh, hey,"

Jake comes in and drops his key on the island in the kitchen.

"Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for hours. I—" he walks past me, ignoring me, and heads into the bedroom.

Okay then. I follow him, ready to lay into him.

"I got fired after I clocked out tonight, okay? Neighbors complained about the noise, and apparently, it's a one-strike system here. So yeah, they let me go,"

he laughs, the sound without any humor, "and because the apartment was part of the package, we have until the end of the week to move."

"Wait, what?"

I don't understand. "It was a weekend, and you weren't loud after 10 PM."

“It doesn't matter. I'm an employee or was anyways,”

he laughs again, shaking his head, “so what time it was doesn't matter.”

They weren't even loud. Caylee slept through the night with no problems. How could someone complain?

“I didn't want you to freak out,”

he mutters, taking his shirt off and tossing it into the laundry hamper. “Figured I'd handle it on my own and tell you later.”

“Handle it on your own?”

My voice cracks on the words, the anger starting to bubble up inside of me, “Jake, we're supposed to be a team, you don't just handle it alone. Do you have any idea how worried I was? I've been calling you for hours—”

“I said I'm sorry, okay?”

No, he didn't.

I stand there, my feet stuck to the floor like concrete. He left me here to worry all day and now he just expects me to let it go. Where are we supposed to go, anyway?

Jake stands with his back to me, his shoulders perk up a little, and he turns around with a smile on his face.

“That's why I've been gone, and my phone died,”

he runs a hand over his face, exhaling sharply. “After I dropped Bug off with her

mom, I stopped for a drink with Brandon and ran into an old buddy of mine. He's got an opening at his office, and he wants me to come back and meet his business partner."

"So, you're leaving again?"

"Yeah, I came back to tell you and get my charger. If you were 21 you could come with me, but I have to figure out my next steps, our next steps, and a job is the first thing on that list."

He grabs the charger from the wall and heads back into the kitchen.

"You don't want to at least talk about what happened last night before you go?"

The fact that he hasn't even mentioned it, hasn't even acknowledged how dangerous it was, makes me question everything. I thought I could handle this. I thought we could handle this. But not talking about it? Not even once?

The absence of that conversation feels like I'm not even worth enough to try. The fact that he hasn't said a word about it sits in the pit of my stomach. I can't shake the ache that comes with it, the ache of being left in the dark, alone.

Last night... God. The things he said to me, the way he looked at me, like I was nothing. I can still hear his voice in my head, cold and distant, and it cuts through me like a knife every time I let myself think about it. How can we move forward when he made it clear how he feels about me not having my son?

The anger is there, bubbling beneath the surface, but underneath it is something worse—doubt. Am I really supposed to just let this go? Am I supposed to act like nothing's wrong? Every part of me screams that I shouldn't, that I can't, but here I am, arms crossed, feeling like I'm drowning in all the things I can't say.

“Of course I do, but I’m out of a job and now I have not only my daughter to worry about providing for, but you too.”

“Can you at least leave me cigarettes?”

I ask, anger lacing my words as I follow him into the kitchen. I get it, I do, but he left me here without a word for hours.

He doesn't say anything as he pulls his pack from his pocket, counting how many he has left before dropping the whole thing on the island and grabbing his keys to leave. The whole interaction was less than ten minutes, and he was gone again.

I don't know what to do with myself, so I start cleaning. I scrub the countertops until my fingers are raw. I sweep the floor until it feels like I could carve grooves into the wood, trying to suffocate the fire building inside me. The house looks spotless when I'm done, but I'm still raging inside. I sit there for a while, letting everything sink in before the tears start, and I crawl into our empty bed, alone.

I decide right then, in that moment, that I'm done. Done with the drugs. Done with lies. Done with everything that's been keeping me stuck, keeping me from who I want to be. I can't keep doing this; I can't keep drowning myself in pills and alcohol. I can't fix him, but I can fix myself. I swallow hard, my throat dry, and I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

I wake up sometime before 4 AM and shuffle to the kitchen for a glass of water, finding Jake on the couch, snoring lightly. On the counter lies a small, hand-picked bunch of flowers from the garden at the apartment entrance, it looks like, with a single chocolate kiss.

I smile as I lie down next to him, gently pushing him over enough to fit beside him. He reeks of alcohol and he's snoring, but I'm happy he's back. He's here, and that's

enough for now. His phone is hanging from his hand, lying on his chest, and the screen lights up with an incoming text from Bianca.

Ditch the bitch and come back out.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

“I’m not using anymore, I’m done,”

I tell Jake as I sit across from him, the sun filtering softly through the kitchen window as we drink our morning coffee.

“That’s really great, babe,”

he responds, not looking up from his phone.

“I’m done,”

I repeat, my voice steady as he finally looks at me and smiles, but my hands tremble slightly around my mug, “I don’t want to be around drugs anymore.”

His smile falters, just for a second, but it’s enough for me to notice, and he taps his fingers on his mug as he thinks. He’s thinking, what is there to think about?

And that’s what scares me. Because I don’t know what he’s thinking, if he’s willing to make this change for real, or if he’s just saying what I want to hear to keep me around. I need to know. I need him to choose me. To choose us.

“When did I become the bitch you should ditch?”

I finally ask Jake.

“You went through my phone?”

He asks, his brow furrowing slightly.

“No,”

I say slowly, “Bianca texted you as I was getting onto the couch with you.”

“It’s no big deal. She was just joking.”

He shrugs it off like it doesn't matter, but it does. She’s his best friend, and none of his friends who came over on his birthday said a word to me as they left.

“Well, I think it is.”

“Fine. Think whatever you want.”

He shrugs and picks up his phone. “I’m calling my mom. See if she’ll let us crash there while we figure out the next steps.”

He strides out to the patio, the door clicking shut behind him as he lifts the phone to his ear

I’d only met his mom once, and it was pretty clear she didn't like me from the start. Not only did she spend more than 30 minutes gushing about Jake’s ex, Caylee’s mom, but she grilled me about why I didn't have custody of my son.

I take a deep breath as I step into the house, Jake holding my hand and leading me inside. His mom, Tara, is sitting at the kitchen table when I walk in, and the moment our eyes meet, I feel her judgment.

“Elle,”

she says, her voice sharp yet polite. “Nice to finally meet you. Jake’s told me a lot about you.”

Her gaze doesn’t soften.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Tara.”

I nod and try to smile.

“So, I understand your parents have custody of your son?”

she asks, leaning forward, not wasting any time.

My chest tightens when Jake doesn't say anything to her for being so forward before I've even taken a seat at the table.

“I... I struggled with postpartum depression,”

I explain quietly, the words tasting bitter in my mouth as I sit down, “I didn’t leave him because I wanted to. I was in a really dark place.”

“And now that you know you had that, what have you been doing to change it?”

“I see him as often as I can, Jake takes me every chance we get,”

She tilts her head slightly, as if trying to sense a lie.

“And how does your mother feel about raising your son?”

“I’m sorry, I don't know how to answer that. I know she wishes it were me, but she loves him. She wouldn’t want him anywhere else.

“Hmm, not even with you?”

she looks from me to Jake, who is sitting, scrolling on his phone to my left.

Before I can say anything else, she shifts gears.

“You know,”

Tara begins, her tone suddenly warmer, “Jake’s ex, Caylee’s mother, and I have become quite close over the years. We have monthly dinner dates still, just the two of us, and we always go to the casino afterward. It’s really nice. I think you’d really like her, Elle.”

“That’s... nice, but I’m sure it’s hard for Jake to see you two so close, don’t you think?”

“Oh, Jake and I have had our talks about it, of course,”

Tara smiles, but it’s not a warm one, “He’s a little uncomfortable with it sometimes, but he understands how important it is for me to keep those ties with her, for Caylee’s sake.”

Her words hang in the air as I try to keep my breathing steady. It’s clear she doesn’t think I’m good enough for Jake, but I won’t let her make me feel small. I’ve never had a problem with standing up for myself. She can think what she wants, but I haven’t gotten high since our trip to Disney Land, and I’ve been seeing Damian once a week since we got back.

“She wasn’t thrilled, but she wouldn’t say no and make me homeless, so we have a room, temporarily, at her house,”

Jake says, pulling me from the memory.

“Between your best friend not liking me now and your mother thinking I’m a piece of shit, this should be fun.”

my voice drips with sarcasm as I lean against the wall, arms crossed.

“Bianca doesn't hate you. She’s just not in the same place as us. She wants to keep partying and getting high. I can't blame her for not wanting to hang out right now, and you shouldn't either.”

Jake eats his words over the next week while we pack to move to his mom’s, because Bianca doesn't keep her new feelings about me quiet. It comes to a head when we’re in the moving truck and she calls him, his phone on speaker while he drives.

“You’ve changed, and not in a good way. How can you be with someone who doesn't even like your kid, Jake?”

Bianca asks.

I bite my tongue to keep quiet as Jake looks over at me quickly before turning back to the road.

“She doesn't have her own kid. How could you think she wants to be around yours?”

she continues, and I squeeze my hands into fists.

“That’s enough, Bianca. Jesus. Figure your shit out,”

he snaps and hangs up on her, tossing the phone onto the dash.

“You know I like Caylee,”

I start before he interrupts me.

“Don't listen to her. She's just pissed I told her I'm not partying with her anymore,”

he says, reaching over and grabbing my hand.

“I won't lie,”

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. “I'm glad you decided to stop using with me, but I don't want you to end up losing your best friend just because I want to get clean.”

“No, you were right. Having Caylee there that night wasn't right. I could tell it was beginning to be a problem, so that's why I agreed to stop. And I won't lose Bianca. She's been my best friend since 9th grade.”

I've spent the last year partying, getting high and miserable, but I ignored the emptiness, pretending it didn't hurt. Nothing ever made me want to stop. Until Caylee was there while everyone got high. I knew my choice to get clean was the right one. Jake had just started to party, and at first, I felt a little guilty for being the reason he stopped. He saw what was starting to happen pretty quickly because of his past issues with addiction, and he decided that after his birthday, he wouldn't do it again.

It's only been a few days for him, but he hasn't been on ecstasy as long as I was, so he doesn't have to go through the withdrawals like I did. The shaking and sweats started less than 72 hours after I had taken my last pill. I was angry and paranoid for days. I begged Jake to call Bianca to bring some over, but he ignored me, bringing me food that I refused to eat and even tossing me into a cold shower after one of the nastier fights I instigated.

That's when I learned that he had a past with drugs. At just 14, he moved in with his dad for the first time, and he started using meth. It took his dad two years to catch on, and he was beaten and shipped back to his mom, who brought him straight to a rehab facility.

I spend the drive to his mom's lost in my thoughts. Withdrawals and detoxing were hard, but I've already started putting some weight back on. My cheeks have filled out, making me look more alive. I've been welcomed back into family events at my parents, and they've started letting me take Damian out of the house for walks or lunch on 6th Avenue.

Slowly but surely, I'm weaving myself back into his life.

"My mom promised to be on her best behavior. As long as we're both looking for work and helping around the house, she won't have any problems with us being there."

Jake finally says as we pull into the driveway.

To her credit, Tara is nicer than when we met. She helps us carry in our stuff and even cooks a nice meal for us to all sit down and eat together.

"Bianca asked me to come over. She said she wants to apologize and talk,"

Jake tells me after we sit down in the family room after dinner.

"Don't worry about a thing, Elle. We'll watch some Survivors and have a girls' night while he's gone."

Tara smiles at me and starts to turn on the TV.

“I won't be gone long.”

Jake leans over and kisses me before he leaves, not even waiting for me to respond.

Feeling awkward with being alone with his mom, I suffer through the show in silence, and when she says goodnight, handing me the remote, I text Jake asking when he'll be back. After 10 minutes with no response, I turn the TV off and head to the room.

I wake up just past 8:00 AM, and I reach for Jake, only to find the bed empty beside me. My heart skips a beat. Panic rises in my chest as I sit up, my mind already racing with questions. Where is he? What's going on?

I stumble out of bed, my feet cold against the floor, and rush toward the kitchen, hoping to find him there. When I step into the room, the scent of brewing coffee hits me—rich and strong—but it's not Jake I see standing at the counter. It's his mom.

My stomach drops. The knot in my chest tightens. Where is he? The panic swirls into something darker, angrier, and I can't shake the feeling that something isn't right.

“Good morning, Elle. We need some eggs for breakfast. Do you mind running to the store for me?”

She hands me her keys before waiting for a response, and I roll my eyes behind her back as I reach out to take them.

“Have you seen Jake this morning?” I ask her

“I haven't. Maybe he fell asleep at Bianca's. He's probably on his way home right now.”

As I'm walking out of the grocery store, I walk past the little teriyaki place attached to it and I hesitate, pausing on the sidewalk as I do a double-take. Bianca laughs, drawing Jake's attention. He turns, a smile on his face as he looks for whatever made her laugh, but the moment our eyes meet, he quickly drops his gaze and spins away.

It was our first night at his mom's house, and he left me to hang out with his friend, lying to me, staying out all night, and ignoring my texts.

Tara is more than happy to help me get my things together and drive me to Tacoma.

Sometimes I wish I wasn't me. That I was born into a different family, had been a totally different person. Never met all these dickheads that have hurt me. Life is a bitch. Why do I let these guys make me feel so worthless? I wish I had something good to write about, but my life is going nowhere. I'm stuck. I always get stuck.

-elle

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My dad's standing at the door, waiting for me. His face breaks into a grin, a look of relief I haven't seen pointed in my direction in a long time.

"I was surprised you called, but Elle, I am so glad you're here,"

he says, his voice a little too soft.

"Where's Mom?"

I smile weakly, my heart still racing from the drive, stepping inside and setting my bag down in the entryway.

Dad sighs, his smile fading as he runs a hand through his thinning hair. "That's why I'm glad you're here,"

he starts, his voice a little rough, a little unsteady. "Your mother left. She just... she left me and Damian here two days ago and hasn't been back."

What?

I watch as my dad scoops up Damian from the floor, squirming in his arms, and then suddenly, he's shoving him into my chest. "She won't even take my calls," he mutters. Damian's wide eyes meet mine, and he lets out a soft giggle.

I look at my dad, really look at him, and something sinks in. The hurt in his eyes, the way he's trying to hold it together. This isn't just about Mom leaving. It's about everything that's been falling apart since I left.

“I—I didn’t know,”

I say, finally breaking the silence. My throat feels tight, like I’m swallowing something bitter.

“It’s not your problem, kid. But...”

He shrugs, his shoulders slumping, “You’ve got a place here if you want it. If you pass a drug test. That’s the deal.”

I can do this. I can pass a test.

“Alright,”

I say, smiling proudly that I can do that, because I know I’ll pass. “I’ll take the test.”

Dad nods slowly, relieved I didn’t argue, but I know the questions floating through his mind. He’s wondering if I can actually do it, if I’m really going to be able to pull myself together after everything that’s happened. I know because they’re crossing mine too.

I take a breath, trying to steady myself, trying to remind myself that this is what I need. This is the step I have to take. Even if it feels like everything is falling apart, with Jake, with mom, with who I used to be, I can put a few pieces back together.

With Dad working third shift and sleeping most of the day, I’m instantly thrown back into caring for Damian full-time. I couldn’t be happier. And stressed. It’s not easy. I’m tired in ways I forgot I could be — physically drained and emotionally exhausted, but every time I see Damian’s little face, I can’t help but smile.

I’m so busy with Damian, I don’t even think about Jake until he calls me four days

later, asking if he can come over and explain everything. I agree, but warn him that I have Damian, and if he wants to fight or argue, I'll pass. I won't have that around him.

“I don't want to lie to you, so I'm just going to lay it all out,”

Jake says an hour later, having shown up right as I was putting Damian down for his nap. “I got high. That's why I didn't come home. That's why I ignored you standing outside the restaurant.”

I already knew that. I figured it out as soon as he looked at me. I saw his eyes. I didn't leave because he spent time with his friend; I left because he put my sobriety at risk. I look over to Damian, sleeping on the couch, and think about how much better my life has been since meeting Jake.

Sure, I put the work in. I got myself clean, but it was because of him. Because I had a safe place to go, because I had someone who cared about me enough to help me, and because I saw with my own eyes someone choosing drugs over their kid, and it didn't sit right with me at all. I saw what I must have looked like when I continued to choose getting high over my son.

I knew what my life looked like before Jake, and I could count on one hand the things I had going for me. Since meeting him, I've gotten clean, I've gotten my life turned around, and I now have my son back.

“Are you going to do it again?”

I ask, looking back at him.

“I want to say no,”

he said, his voice wavering, “but I won't lie to you. I don't know. I do know I don't

want to. I don't want to be that person. The kind of father who risks his daughter, the kind of man who risks losing the woman he loves.”

My chest tightens, a rush of warmth flooding through me. I feel light—almost weightless. It is the first time he has said that. Living together for almost 4 months, he never said those words to me. Without thinking, I lean in and kiss him, a soft, lingering kiss that speaks the words I can't seem to find. In this moment, there is nothing else—no worries, no doubts, just pure happiness.

“I'm staying here. I finally have my son, and I need to do this right. So, if we're going to be together, we need to get used to this.”

I say after I pull back, smiling.

“You're not going to say it back?”

he smirks.

“Of course, I love you, dumbass.”

I roll my eyes, “But I need you to promise me that you won't use anymore. I can't be around that at all.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon together, but when Jake asks to stay over tonight, I tell him no and immediately feel the tension between us. His irritation is sharp, unmistakable. But even as his disappointment hangs heavy, I stand firm.

Being happy today doesn't undo what happened. It doesn't erase the hurt or the broken pieces of trust, and it feels wrong to reward him for what he did to put us here in the first place. For the first time, I stand my ground with Jake and he goes home.

After a few weeks, Mom comes back home, and we all agree that I can stay and continue being Damian's main caretaker. The first few days are awkward, but we fall into a new rhythm. She doesn't get quite as upset with me anymore, but there's a certain distance between us. It's like a quiet understanding that things are how they should be and we have to find a way forward.

The final court date for my parents' guardianship of Damian comes and goes, the case dropping when we don't show up, and we celebrate by having dinner at our favorite restaurant.

Jake and I are doing better. The distance is not an issue with him working again and coming over every weekend. He got a job with his old sponsor, Ed, working construction, and we fell into a new routine. Bianca's been trying to get him to hang out, but he's spending all his time off in Tacoma with me and Damian.

He takes me out on dates, arranging for my mom or dad to watch Damian for an hour, just so I can catch my breath. I can feel the thoughtfulness in his actions—not the kind of gesture driven by fear that I might leave again, but something deeper. There's a softness in his eyes, a quiet pride, like he's not just supporting me—he's genuinely proud of how I'm fighting to make it all work.

He takes Damian and me to the park if he gets off work early, and he doesn't get annoyed by the way Damian clings to him, always trying to play and leaving us with practically no alone time.

My parents dote on Caylee and even offer the spare bedroom for her to have her own space here, which helps because Jake can't keep his hands off me, and I'm tired of having to be quiet.

“Do you know what I love most about Caylee having her own room over here?”

I ask after the kids are asleep, and we crawl into my bed.

“What?”

he asks, taking his shirt off and settling in.

“That I can kiss you whenever I want,”

I lean into him and kiss him before pulling away again. “Wherever I want even,”

I smirk as I start trailing kisses across his chest before moving to straddle him.

“Don’t tease me,”

he whines, “I’ve been so good, I know you don’t like messing around in front of the kids.”

“Do you see any kids?”

I ask while I slip my hands into his boxers, pulling them down as I shimmy backward and push my panties to the side, sitting down and starting to move, rubbing my clit along his dick.

Jake grabs my hips and presses me harder against him, and we both groan.

“You’re so wet already. Have you been thinking about my dick all night?”

“Yes,”

I say quietly, and I ride him faster. I reach up to rip my shirt off as Jake lets go of my hips and pulls me down, taking my nipple into his mouth. As he bites down, I lean

forward just enough so the next time I roll my hips, he slides into me and I lower myself onto him. We both moan as I slowly sink down, letting my body adjust to him in this position.

“I don't think so,”

he growls as he holds me against him and flips me onto my back before grabbing my ankles and throwing them over his shoulders. “We can be as loud as we want now, and I want to hear you scream.”

He drops his head and without warning bites my clit before kissing it and sucking it into his mouth.

I reach and grab a handful of his hair as I grind against his face, my other hand fisting the sheet.

“You taste so sweet,”

he says and laughs when I try to shove his head back down.

“Please,”

I whimper.

“I love it when you beg, Elle.”

He slides his finger into my pussy as he bites my thigh, watching as he fucks me with his finger.

“Get up here and fuck me,”

I demand and pull him up by his hair.

He smirks as he holds my gaze, and slams into me so hard the headboard hits the wall. He grabs my thighs, spreads them, and fucks me like a porn star.

“Your pussy feels so damn good, fuck. I love how wet you get for me.”

A punishing thrust accents every word.

He surprises me by flipping me again, pulling my ass in the air while shoving my face into the mattress, his hand stays there as he pounds into me relentlessly.

I push back against him, meeting him thrust for thrust, and reach underneath me to play with myself.

I moan into the bed as he bottoms out and stops moving, grunting through his orgasm as I start to cum with him.

We went to a party at his friend’s house last weekend.

He got mad that I gave his friend, SHELBY, A GIRL!! a lap dance, and we were play fighting and he accidentally hit me in my face, so I walked away.

He followed me into the bathroom and wouldn't leave me alone, so I pushed him and he fell onto the toilet.

He got up and screamed at me.

Said ‘fuck you, you dumb bitch’ and left.

Said I needed to find my own way back home.

I spent ten minutes looking for a ride from any of his friends, but everyone was drunk. He found me outside crying and told me he was sorry and he loved me.

We were drunk.

It started as an accident.

I love him, but this is his last chance.

I try to treat him good because he deserves it.

Because without him, I wouldn't be where I am now.

And I want him to look back and be able to say that I made him the happiest he's ever been.

-elle

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

I'm sitting at home with my cousin while our kids play when Jake calls me. With my cousin being here, I asked him to skip coming over this weekend, but I love how thoughtful he is, and I answer the phone with a smile on my face, making my cousin laugh at me.

“Hi babe, what's up?”

I hear people talking in the background and realize it's a butt dial, so I hang up. On the third call, I decide to go smoke and listen, telling my cousin I'll be right back.

As soon as I close the door, I hear Bianca laugh through the phone.

“So, where'd you meet her?”

Bianca asks.

“At Home Depot, she was looking for something, and I helped her find it, then she asked for my number. We've been talking every day since then,”

he says, still laughing. “She's fucking something, isn't she?”

“Yeah, these pictures she sent you are fucking hot, dude. How doesn't your crazy girlfriend know about this?”

Her voice is clearer than his.

That's why Bianca sounds so close, she has his phone.

“That’s the best part, B,”

Jake chuckles, “I saved her number under Ed. If Maria ever texts me while I’m with Elle, she just thinks it’s my boss.”

Bianca bursts out laughing as I hear the unmistakable click of her hanging up.

My hands shake as I smoke. My heart races, every beat feeling like it’s going to burst out of my chest. I laugh because his bragging about not getting caught is what got him caught, and his friend set him up just so I could catch him. I take a long drag from my cigarette, trying to steady my shaking hands, but it doesn’t help.

Check your call log and don't bother calling me again.

Within minutes, he starts calling me, my phone buzzing relentlessly, his name flashing across the screen. So, I don't hesitate to turn it off as I walk back inside, acting like everything is fine.

“How’s it going, being back?”

Nancy asks when I come back inside.

“I think Damian is getting used to everything, you know? The new normal.”

“Yeah,”

she says, looking over at me with a small smile. “It’s a lot of change. But he’s lucky to have you back. You’ve really stepped up, Elle.”

“Thanks, Nancy,”

I say, my voice catching a little. I felt like I was just barely keeping it together. “I didn’t really know what I was doing at first. It’s a lot of responsibility, but...”

I trail off, watching Damian grab the soccer ball and kick it toward Leah, Nancy’s daughter, who misses it by a mile, both of them bursting into giggles. “But I think it’s getting easier. We’re finding our rhythm.”

“How’s it really been, though? I mean, with everything... with your mom?”

Nancy takes a sip of her tea, her eyes following the kids, too.

“That’s... that’s harder in a lot of ways.”

Things are tense. I think she's struggling to let go, to let me take over completely.

“It’s hard,”

I continue, the words coming a little more easily now. “She hasn’t said anything outright, but I can tell. She still gets up to do everything for Damian, even when I’ve got it. Like the other day, I told her I’d handle his lunch, and when I found her in the kitchen ten minutes later, she said she didn’t even realize what she was doing.”

“You can’t change how she’s feeling, Elle. You’re not taking anything away from her. You’re just doing what you need to.”

After we get the kids to sleep, I help Nancy get the couch ready for her to sleep on, and then I head to bed myself. As I close my eyes, the weight of everything, my mom, Damian, and Jake, lingers. I turn over, burying my face in the pillow, wishing I could escape from it all. The hurt is sharp and bitter, and I can’t shake it. I’m calling my friend Holly for her cousin Justin’s number tomorrow.

I wanted to be important to him like he was important to me. I wanted to mean something to him.

-elle

“I’m glad you called,”

Justin says the next evening as I pour us both a shot.

“Same. It’s good to see you,”

I smile over at him, “You look good.”

“I look good? Clean is more than a good look for you.”

He smiles as he takes the shot glass from my hand and taps it against mine before shooting it back.

“Thanks. It took me a while, but I’m here with my son and you guys,”

I nod to Holly and her boyfriend sitting on the couch. “So life is definitely better.”

“You want to go smoke?”

I ask as my phone buzzes with an incoming text.

Jake: I want to see you

Yeah, NO.

“So, what have you been up to?”

he asks, leaning back casually with a grin on his face.

“Honestly, I’m just getting used to being a mom again,”

I sigh, “It’s great, don’t get me wrong, but it’s tougher than I expected. He still cries for my mom sometimes.”

“You’re sticking it out, though?” he asks

“I am. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Holly and Nick join us, bringing the bottle of vodka with them, and we take shots and bullshit. Justin sits closer to me to make room for them. Our knees brush, and I catch his eye, a small smile playing on my lips, though it doesn’t quite reach my eyes.

Fuck Jake for talking to other girls, but fuck him even more for ruining my night.

Holly’s face lights up as she nudges me playfully, and I can’t help but smile.

"Remember that summer in high school when you practically lived at my house? My mom made you do all those chores like you were one of her own kids."

"Yeah, I remember. Your mom gave me a whole list. I swear, I washed more dishes that summer than I have in my entire life."

Justin laughs, shaking his head. “I remember that! It wasn’t just dishes either. It was as many chores as they all had.”

“Right?”

I chime in, laughing even harder now. “She didn’t even ask me if I wanted to do it. I

just woke up one morning, and she handed me a broom.”

I’m still laughing when I see headlights on the street seconds before a silver car pulls up and parks.

“Shit,”

I mutter under my breath, my heart racing as I rise to my feet, instinctively backing away from Justin.

“You guys should go, I’m sorry.”

I don't take my eyes off him as he climbs the stairs. He offers a curt nod to Holly, ignoring the guys completely, before stopping directly in front of me.

“Ready to talk?”

His voice is a low growl, tinged with anger, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Not particularly. I told you not to come.”

The fact that he's angry with me pisses me off even more.

“You said ‘yeah’, so I came.”

He shrugs his shoulders and leans against the house, crossing his arms.

“I said ‘yeah, no’ the ‘yeah’ was fucking silent.”

“Well, I’m here now. Invite me in to talk,”

he nods to the door behind me as Holly, Nick, and Justin come walking out. I hadn't even noticed they'd left the porch.

"She's busy,"

Jake snaps as Justin approaches me. He just raises his hands up in a gesture of peace before he shakes his head and walks around us.

"You don't get to do that!"

I shout at Jake while he stands there looking smug.

"Do what? Keep assholes like him away from my girlfriend?"

"First, he's not an asshole, he's actually really fucking nice. And second, I'm not your girlfriend. You lost the right to call me that when you bragged about Maria!"

"One, don't yell at me like I'm a child. I'm 24, an adult. Try being one too."

He sneers as he takes a step toward me, causing me to back up a step, and holding a finger up. "Two, you moved out and didn't speak to me for days, so you don't get a say in what I do when you leave me,"

he adds a finger and takes another step. "Three, I never met her in person after that first time at Home Depot," another step and my back hits the door. "And four, you still love me. I bet if I stuck my hand down your cute little shorts, I'd find your panties soaked and your pussy dripping, wouldn't I?"

It's so wrong, because he's not wrong.

"Nothing happened, Elle. You left, and when I had to chase you down, I wasn't sure

what would happen, so I kept my options open. Sue me,”

he shrugs before he puts his hand in my hair and pulls me to him.

“Did you fuck him?”

he whispers against my mouth, and I shake my head no. He leans his forehead against mine, and I feel him relax.

“Let’s not do this again. If you have questions, ask me before you disappear and almost ruin everything,”

he says as he pulls back, looking into my eyes.

“Only if you don't start texting other women again.”

“I can do that,”

he laughs while pulling me in and holding me, “Let's go to bed, I'm tired. I work tomorrow morning in Olympia, and I just want to hold you. I miss you.”

After lying in bed, Jake pulls me against him, and I fall asleep with my head on his chest, listening to the sound of his heartbeat. When I wake up, he’s gone, but there’s a ‘good morning, I love you’ text waiting for me.

“Is there anything I can do to earn your trust back?”

he asks when he calls me later that night.

I shake my head, even though he can’t see me. Earn my trust back? He has it.

“No,”

I say, “You already have it. I owe you everything, Jake. Look at where I am versus where I was. That's because of you.”

“You’re crazy,”

he laughs. “How about we plan a little vacation to Portland with the kids soon? I think we could all use a change of scenery.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

We took the kids to Owen's Beach and spent hours playing in the sand. Jake let them bury him, and the kids gave him a mermaid's tail before they ran off to play.

I smile as I watch the kids chase the waves, Jake sitting beside me on the bench, his arm around me as he talks about our future and having more kids.

For now, he's perfectly happy with the two that we have, but he wants more.

A house with a white picket fence, somewhere for the kids to run and play.

He tells me about our wedding in the summer with a smile on his face as he imagines the day.

"I want that with you. I want to keep building it every day. I want us to grow old together."

My heart melts at his words. The warmth of his hand in mine, the sound of the waves, and the laughter of the kids in the background make everything feel perfect.

"I see it, too,"

I say, squeezing his hand. "I see it all."

We stay there quietly for a while, watching the sun dip lower, the sky turning into a canvas of orange and pink, the perfect ending to a perfect day.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

I grip the edge of the seat, trying to keep my breathing steady as the car pulls up in front of Bianca's place. This is a mistake. And I know it is. I know it is.

What should have been a simple detour to pick up Jake's friend has turned into something else entirely. I glance at him in the driver's seat, my stomach tightening. He doesn't seem fazed, not a hint of discomfort on his face. How does he do it? How can he sit there so casually while I feel like I'm being swallowed whole?

I want to scream. I want to throw myself out of the car and walk away, but I don't. I stay there, my fingers gripping my phone. We should be on our way to my house with Caylee right now. We should be packing for Portland tomorrow morning.

Jake's friend, the one who called and needed a ride, steps out of the car and meets Bianca at the door.

"This wasn't part of the plan."

I finally speak, my voice barely above a whisper, but it's enough. I hate how much I already feel like I'm giving in.

I should've said something.

I should've told him to turn around.

But I didn't.

I kept my mouth shut, pretending like I could handle it.

My chest tightens, the panic creeping in slowly, then all at once.

This is not what I want. This is not where I want to be. But here I am. Stuck in this car with him and a sinking feeling that no matter what I do, nothing's going to change.

I can feel the rage building inside me, like a fire that's been smoldering just beneath the surface, ready to consume everything in its path.

I never thought I'd be here, in this moment with him again, but now it's all I can focus on.

The frustration is suffocating, clawing at my chest, twisting into something darker. Betrayal.

When we got to Sarah's, I stepped into the bathroom for just a few minutes, thinking I could breathe, clear my head.

But I came back to find Jake on fucking ecstasy.

My blood boils, my hands shake, and I can't make sense of it.

How could he do this again, after everything? How could he do this to me, to us? The world around me tilts, the edges blur, and I'm left trying to process the magnitude of what he's just done to us.

I thought something was up when I found him in her kitchen instead of waiting for me in the car, but it wasn't until he started playing fucking techno and avoiding eye contact that I knew it.

"Jake,"

I say quietly, reaching a hand out for his, “are you ready to go?”

His hand is clammy in mine, but he finally looks at me.

The evidence is there in his eyes because, sure enough, both of his pupils are blown.

“Are you high?”

I demand, dropping his hand.

“No,”

He blinks, his expression shifting so quickly it feels like whiplash. Defensive to angry, like a switch flipped inside him, and suddenly, I’m the one who’s wrong. “No, why the fuck would you ask me that?” he snaps.

Why the hell do I keep doing this? Why am I still here?

“Jesus fucking Christ. Don't act like I wasn't on that shit for a year. I know what it looks like when someone's high!”

I rise from the kitchen table and walk around to stand in front of him so I can get a better look.

“You’re wrong,”

he says like the words themselves somehow make it true, like I can't see it with my own two eyes.

I feel the anger rise in my chest, hot like the sun, burning its way through my system, but I don’t say anything. I just shake my head and walk toward the bathroom because

I can't. I'm done. Done with this, done with the lies, done with him.

The one thing I asked for was his sobriety, and the one thing I needed from him was honesty.

And now he's sitting there, looking me straight in my fucking eyes, and lying to my face like it's nothing, like I'm an idiot who can't see through his bullshit.

It takes forever for me to get ahold of Kay, but if I really need a ride, she'll come and get me. She'll come. She always does. She just needs time to sober up.

I debate calling a taxi but then I remember I gave Jake all my cash, and I walk back into the kitchen to ask for it back.

"Hey,"

I start, my voice harder than I want it to be, so I try to keep my tone even, "I, uh, I need the cash back."

"No,"

His eyes narrow, "fuck, just calm down, I'm not high. Let's just go get Caylee and talk about this at home."

he pleads.

Sarah starts to laugh before slapping a hand over her mouth and walking away. I follow her and ignore Jake.

"I already know you gave him one,"

I start, but she stops me.

“I didn't give him anything,”

Her words say one thing, but she's shaking her head yes with pity in her eyes.

I already knew, but having her confirm it shatters something inside me. I start to reach for my phone to call Kay again when suddenly, a loud crash echoes from the front of the house. What the hell was that?

Without hesitation, Sarah shoves me aside and runs down the hallway, heading straight for the kitchen, where Jake is. I don't even think before chasing after her, my heart racing as I follow.

My breath catches in my throat as I take in the chaos around him. Jake is standing over the sink with a knife in his hands, and the kitchen table is destroyed. Two legs have been kicked out from under it, and everything that was on it has slid to the floor, broken.

“I'm so stupid,”

Jake pounds his fist against the sink, the knife wobbling as he does. “I just keep fucking it up. Fucking us up.”

“Jake, stop. This isn't helping.”

Sarah steps forward, her voice trembling.

But Jake doesn't hear her. His breath comes in short gasps, his knuckles are white around the knife, and his eyes are on me.

“No, baby.”

I soften my voice, “You didn't ruin anything.”

His grip on the knife loosens, and I take a small step towards him, “Let’s go talk on the couch.”

He looks unsure until I take another step and hold my hand out for him. He reaches for me with the hand holding the knife, until he sees it and he drops it on the ground. I pull him to the couch and mouth I'm sorry to Sarah over my shoulder.

Jake crumples onto the couch, his head falling into his hands, and I hear the raw sound of his sobs breaking through the air. I sit on the edge and rub soothing, small circles on his back, trying to calm both of our racing hearts. His pain wraps around me, and for a moment, I forget everything else—the anger, the betrayal, the hurt.

“I’m sorry, I don't even know why I did it. It was there and she offered it and I just wanted to feel good,”

he pleads with me to understand, his head lifting enough to look over at me.

“Shhh,”

I whisper, and pull his head down to rest in my lap. I play with his hair as he continues to cry, his tears staining my pants along with my heart. Each tear follows another promise, another plea, but it all feels tangled.

“I’ll never do it again,”

he whispers between sobs. “You, Caylee, Damian... you’re my world. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Please... don’t leave me.”

Taking out my phone and Jake's, I text Caylee's mom, asking if we can swing by in the morning to pick her up. I follow it with a text to my mom asking her if she would mind watching Damian tonight and blaming it on a flat tire. It's way too late, and there's no way I'm letting him near the kids tonight.

When the tears finally subside, Jake lifts his head, his eyes red and puffy. He sits up straight, his voice quiet yet steady as he starts telling me about the future he sees- the same conversation we had at the beach.

When I wake up in the morning, having fallen asleep sometime after 4 AM, I stretch out on the couch alone and see Jake asleep in the chair beside me.

It only takes a minute to decide what I'm going to do.

He gave me a place to sleep when I had none. He helped me get clean. He's the reason I have my son. He's put up with my mood swings and impulsive decisions every time I'm upset with him. I can't walk away from him now, not when he needs me the most. He's given me everything, and he deserves that in return.

"Hey,"

he says, his voice rough from sleep.

"How are you feeling?"

I ask tentatively, afraid to set him off again.

"I feel fine. My neck hurts a bit from sleeping in this chair, but otherwise I'm great."

He smiles before looking at his phone and seeing the time.

“Shit. Shit!”

he looks back at me with wide eyes.

“I texted Caylee’s mom from your phone last night, we can pick her up at 9 AM. And my mom kept Damian last night. As soon as we get Caylee, we’ll go get him and head out.”

“We don’t have a lot of time to talk before we’ll have the kids,”

he begins, but I don’t let him finish as I stand, walking over to him, and settling onto his lap.

“I love you, and you love me; everything else can be figured out. Let’s get the kids and go. I think we could both use a few days away from here.”

I kiss him on the nose before standing up and getting ready to go.

Portland is a hit. First, we take the kids to the zoo, spending hours wandering the exhibits. Jake carries Damian on his shoulders, while Caylee skips between us, her small hands wrapped around both of ours. It’s almost picture-perfect.

Jake’s doing a good job of hiding everything from the kids, but not from me. I see the tension in his jaw, the way his smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes. The fear in his gaze when he looks at me when the kids aren’t watching.

We pause in front of the lion exhibit, the kids excitedly pressing their faces against the glass, and Jake steps back, standing a step behind us with his hands in his pockets.

I reach out, my fingers lightly graze his arm, and he flinches slightly. When he turns to me, his smile is strained, and he notices me dissecting it. “Everything’s fine,”

he says, but I know better.

“Jake,”

I whisper, leaning in closer, “everything really is fine. I’m not going anywhere.”

I pull his hand from his side, placing it above my heart, and lean my forehead against his.

He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and leans into me. His shoulders relax, and when he opens his eyes again, they’re clearer than they were moments ago. His hand lifts to my cheek, and his thumb caresses my skin. “I love you, Elle.”

“I love you, too.”

How many more chances will I give him? I love him, but I’m tired.

-elle

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

We got home from our weekend in Portland at 10AM to my parents standing in the middle of a near-empty apartment.

“Congratulations! You have the place all to yourselves.”

My mom gushes, a wide smile spread on her polished face.

“What?”

“Your father and I packed up our things. We figured you and Damian deserved a place to be a family without us getting in your way.”

The apartment is attached to the house and was considered the butler’s apartment when it was built in the 1890s. For most of my life, this had been my grandmother’s place, until she died a few years ago. My parents have already cleared out all of their belongings and moved the kids’ things into the bedroom for us. The apartment isn’t grand, but it is perfect nonetheless.

It’s a small one bedroom, so if I don’t share it with Damian, the living room will be my room. It has a kitchen, a bathroom with a shower, but the best part is that it has its own entrance.

“We just thought... you're doing so well, so it’s yours now. If you want it.”

They tell me it is because they are proud of how far I’ve come, but part of me knows it is because they are ready to shift from being parents to being grandparents the rest of the way. They deserve that.

The reasoning doesn't matter because, for the first time in my life, I am on my own. Even though they are just a wall away, my parents won't be taking care of me. Jake won't be taking care of me.

As much as I want him to move in, I know that he needs some time to not only get clean, but stay clean. I tell him that when he asks if he can move in after we bring my bed from my upstairs bedroom.

"I just think we should wait,"

I say, smoothing out the sheet as we work, "It's not that I don't want you here..."

"This is about Thursday, isn't it?"

he drops the blanket and looks at me.

"Yes, it's about you getting high. But it's also..."

I nod and pause, trying to find the right words without setting him off. "Of course, I miss seeing you every day, but I need to know you're in a good place first. I have to make sure you're clean and that you stay clean."

"I get it," He takes a deep breath, running his hand through his hair before quietly saying, "But I don't want you to think that I can't do this."

"I believe you. But I need you to show me you can stay clean, and not just for a week. I won't risk my son, Jake."

"I've been thinking about going back to school," Jake says, changing the subject as he finishes making the bed. "There's a program that's only a few months long, and the pay is almost double what I'm making now."

"School for what?" I raise an eyebrow, slipping under the covers.

"Phlebotomy."

"I don't even know what that is," I laugh, shifting to get comfortable.

"It's drawing blood, like at a hospital for lab work," he says, like it is no big deal.

"So, you're thinking about poking people... with needles?" I stare at him. No, thank you.

"It's a steady job, good pay, and it's in high demand." He shrugs like it's not the weirdest job to consider.

"You could totally do it, but don't ask to practice on me," I hate needles, "but I'm happy for you."

He is taking steps forward, and I can meet him halfway.

Jake enrolls in a school about 30 minutes away a few days later. He starts coming over every night because Tacoma is closer to Renton than Lacey is.

Sometimes, he spends his weekends with Caylee at his mom's, but most of the time, he's here. By the time I notice he's basically moved in, it's too late to do anything about it. Besides, between school, work, and his insane amount of homework, he doesn't have time to even think about getting high.

We celebrate our one-year anniversary that night, and he surprises me. We spend the day wandering the city after he brings me to Portland. When we get back to the hotel, he pulls me onto the bed, into his arms, and he takes me soft and slow that night, the first time he's ever made love to me instead of fucking me. I'm not sure I'd say it's

what I prefer, but there is something really sweet about it.

By the time he starts his externship, he is officially moved out of his mom's and in with me, and things are better than ever.

With his weird hours at the clinic and my mom helping, I am able to get my GED. There are days when it feels like I am running on empty, like I can't keep up with the demands of everyone around me, but I need this. I need to prove to myself that I can do it. That I can make something happen. I did a course at the local community college, and six weeks later, I have my diploma and have started looking for a job.

It wasn't easy finding work flexible enough to fit around everyone's schedules, but I can't afford daycare. Eventually, I get a temp job as an office assistant and I love it. Every step I take, no matter how small, is bringing me closer to something better. I am not just surviving anymore. I am living.

We are clean, but not sober. For my 21st birthday, we got a babysitter and go bar hopping. My mom and Jake take me to the casino. I've never been a big drinker, but I black out sometime around the fourth bar, and Jake has to carry me out. After my birthday, we start going out every Friday night for drinks, but I quickly realize I like to fight with Jake when I'm drunk, so I limit myself to one or two at most.

But drunk Jake sex is a whole different level.

"Fuck, you look so good tonight,"

Jake pulls me against him, causing us both to stumble.

"Shhh,"

I try to whisper, but giggle when it comes out louder than I expected.

“Why? The street’s empty. It’s like 3 AM,”

he laughs and moves behind me, sloppily kissing and sucking on my neck.

I stop laughing when he starts to make his way from my neck down my shoulder, and his hand glides over my breasts. I grip his hair over my shoulder as my breathing picks up, my chest rising and falling with each quick inhale.

He turns and smiles down at me before sinking to his knees, but I grab him to stop him.

“No,”

I laugh at the pout on his face. “You have to be quick,”

I say as I turn around and pull him out of the street and stand in front of a high wooden fence. I turn to look at him over my shoulder as I lift my dress up over my ass.

“Fuck, I love that ass.”

he comes up behind me and starts palming my butt. “But this?”

he adds as he kicks my legs apart, “this pussy is mine, isn't it, baby?” he asks as he shoves my panties to the side and slowly pushes his dick in.

I brace my hands on the fence above my head and arch my back the way he likes, my ass pressing against him, and moan, nodding my head.

“I’m gonna marry this pussy soon.”

he pulls out and slams back in, making me gasp as I drop my forehead on the fence and he fucks me.

Marry? I can't even form a question because he leans forward and starts rubbing my clit.

“You liked that, didn't you?”

he laughs while he pulls me up onto the tips of my toes, changing the angle and hitting my g-spot. “Start bouncing on my dick then, Elle,”

he taunts sarcastically, “and play with your pussy or I'm gonna finish without you,” he warns, pinching my clit before wrapping his hand around my throat.

He's fucking me so hard I stumble forward, so he lets go of my throat and pushes me against the fence hard enough that I yelp, but he doesn't stop. He fucks me like a toy, shoving my cheek against the fence so hard I think it might bruise, but he just keeps going as he slams into me one last time and grunts through his orgasm.

He barely has time to put his dick away before a car turns onto the street and he dives behind a garbage can to our right, leaving me there with my ass in the air and his cum dripping down my thigh.

Without warning, he shoves my hands aside, pulls my dress down, and spins me around. His finger jabbed in my face, his tone suddenly angry.

“You can't just leave your ass hanging out for any guy to fucking see!”

Spit flies on my face as he yells at me.

“You just dropped, I didn't-”

I start before he turns on his heels and storms away.

“Jake,”

I try, but he ignores me as I try to catch up with him. He stomps all the way home before dropping onto the bed, clothes, and all, and immediately passes out.

He's shocked in the morning, seeing my red cheek.

“What happened?” His voice is quiet, careful even.

He doesn't even remember. I stare at him, the words stuck in my throat for a moment, the frustration boiling just below the surface.

"You don't remember last night? Screaming at me on the street? Me chasing after you when you left me there?" My voice cracks.

"I... I don't remember that," he says, his voice almost a whisper. "I'm sorry. I don't... I didn't mean to hurt you. I-God, I fucked up, again."

It doesn't feel like enough. Nothing ever feels like enough with him anymore.

“Maybe we should cut back on our drinking.”

I hedge, nervous about how he'll react.

“Yeah. Maybe I've been drinking too much, and it's getting out of hand,”

he says, and I don't want to argue right now, so I nod my head.

"How about this?" he says, trying to change the subject. "Let's go out. Let's do

something different today."

Before I know it, we're heading out the door for a spontaneous trip to the Olympic Game Farm in Sequim.

I'm surprised at first and I can't help but feel a little nervous. On the way, we stop for gas.

The muscles in his forearm flex as he fills up the car. His eyes lock on mine, and a smirk tugs at his lips, sending butterflies through my stomach.

When he returns to the driver's side with a bag full of snacks, my favorites, and a small, fluffy teddy bear tucked under his arm, I smile. It's so... simple. So sweet.

He hands me the snacks, his eyes searching mine as he does. "Here," he says quietly, his voice softer now. He leans in and kisses my cheek gently.

He's trying to make things right, in his own way, and I feel a flicker of something. Maybe hope.

As we hit the road, the kids chatting in the backseat, I try to push aside the tightness in my chest, and I glance over at Jake.

"What's on your mind?" He asks.

"You said something last night."

I twist a little so I can see him better.

"Did I?"

He looks over at me before looking back at the road, his brow furrowing.

“You said you wanted to marry me.”

His gaze flickers between me, the road, and the kids in the back.

“Yeah, you did. But you were... pretty occupied while you said it.”

I check to make sure the kids aren't paying attention before continuing, “And you might have said you would marry my...”

I wiggle my eyebrows at him.

“Yeah, that sounds like me,”

he laughs.

“It’s just, well, you played that song in California, and now this.”

I don't know why I'm nervous, but my heart is beating so fast I swear he can hear it.

“It’s not that I don’t want to marry you,”

he starts gently, reaching over and squeezing my hand. “I just think we need to have our own space first, somewhere where both the kids have their own rooms and we’re really on our own before taking that step.”

He brings my hand to his mouth and places a soft kiss on my knuckles.

His words hang in the air, warm and reassuring, but there’s something off in the way he says them. The kiss on my hand feels distant, like it's a promise he’s not entirely

sure he can keep.

My cheek hurts. He was drunk and rough with me while we had sex in someone's yard last night. He pushed me against the fence and held my head there. I don't think I like drunk sex anymore.

-elle

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

We start to save. Every paycheck, we put aside what we can and we spend weekends scrolling through listings, imagining what life could look like in a home that is truly ours. And then, finally, we find it — the perfect place.

In March, we move in.

The house is beautiful. It's a classic craftsman-style home with wood accents and intricate details that give it so much character. There is a yard for the kids to play in, something we've dreamed about for a while. And, it even has the white picket fence.

The kids each have their own rooms upstairs. For the first time, we have a home that feels like it could grow with us. And for the first time in a long time, Jake and I have privacy. Our bedroom is down the hallway between the kitchen and the living room, a quiet space. Just for us. No more sharing rooms.

We throw a housewarming party a few weeks later. It is the perfect way to celebrate. Watching everyone mingle, laughing, and enjoying the food we've put together makes me so happy that my face hurts from smiling.

Bianca ends up coming around again, swearing she's clean. We have my parents take Damian for the night on a weekday and invite her over, not wanting to risk her showing up high around him. The evening is filled with apologies. She spends most of the night explaining herself to Jake and me, her words heavy with guilt, telling me that she knew I was good for him, and she was just jealous he had found a reason not to need her or the drugs anymore.

She lands a job at the casino requiring random drug tests, so I believe her. She starts

coming over more often, spending time with the kids and playing video games with Jake long into the night.

About a month after her first visit, she asks if we need a roommate. Her lease is expiring and she spends her days off work here anyway, so Jake agrees before we can even talk about it privately.

“It’ll be fine,”

he says that night in bed, “you gave me a second chance, why can't we give her one?”

I’ve given you more than one second chance.

“I have given her a second chance. That's not what I'm trying to say.”

I sigh, irritated that he’s missing the point, like always, “I would have just liked it if you had talked to me about it first before saying yes.”

“Would you have agreed?”

he asks, giving me a knowing look.

“Probably, but you didn't even give me a chance.”

I roll my eyes and turn away from him.

“Okay, Elle, can Bianca move in?”

he asks while cuddling up behind me.

I ignore him, so he starts tickling me. I try to squirm away, but he's quick, his fingers

finding the spots that make me laugh the hardest.

"Jake! Stop!" I gasp between giggles, but he only tickles me harder.

"Come on, answer the question," he laughs.

He finally stops, his hands resting on my waist as I catch my breath, both of us laughing softly now.

"You're impossible,"

I mutter, smiling.

"I'll take that as a yes, then,"

he says, his voice low and teasing.

Bianca moves in, and for a while, everything feels good, peaceful, even. She picks up after herself, buys her own food, and pretty much keeps to her room all day. It's quiet, but I can tell Jake is happier with someone around to hang out with that isn't me and the kids.

But then, one evening, she invites her sometimes boyfriend over for drinks. Jake and Aaron know each other from high school, so the three of them end up in Bianca's room, catching up and drinking well into the night. At first, it feels fine, but as the hours stretch on, and Jake doesn't come to bed, I can't help but feel the familiar unease.

It's just after one in the morning when Jake stumbles into the room, drunk.

"Shit,"

he grumbles as he trips over his own shoes on the ground before flopping into bed.

“Elle,”

he whisper-shouts into my ear while reaching around me to squeeze my boob. I’m not in the mood to deal with his drunken mood swings tonight, so I pretend to be asleep.

“Baby,”

he whines while sliding his hand down my body and cupping my pussy. It takes everything in me to keep my breathing even. I bite my lip to stop myself from moaning as he rubs my pussy over my pajamas.

Drunk Jake sex is always great, but the angry Jake that usually follows isn't worth it tonight, so I just lie there.

My eyes snap open to the darkness of our room, and he looks down at his hand and pushes my panties to the side. I feel him moving, so I close my eyes again as the bed wiggles and he gets comfortable on his back. He settles back down and shoves a finger into my pussy without warning. I gasp, but he’s too busy fingering me and jacking off to hear it.

“Fuck, I wanna be in your tight pussy so bad,”

he whines, adding a second finger, “I love the way you stretch to take all of me, like your pussy was made for me.”

I widen my legs a little before remembering I'm supposed to be asleep, so I try to cover it up with a snore and roll my head away from him, holding back a laugh at how loud I just snorted. If he weren't plastered, he'd know I'm awake.

“Shhh,”

he whispers as he slows down, his fingers slowly easing out of my pussy until he’s sure I’m not waking up. “Such a good,”

grunt, “fucking girl.”

He picks up the pace, and I moan softly, whimpering his name when I feel my orgasm building, my hips moving on their own.

“Fuck, you're gonna cum in your sleep, aren't you?”

The bed shakes as he jerks off, “Jesus, that's so fucking hot.”

He grinds the palm of his hand against my clit as he curls his fingers and taps my g-spot one last time. I cum all over his hand.

The bed stops shaking as he gets up and straddles me. I open my eyes into slivers to see him switch between watching my face and looking down. He moves my panties to the side and starts rubbing his cock along my clit, using his hand to wipe up my cum and rubbing on his dick.

“God damn, it’s like you have a magic vagina,”

he laughs to himself, looking at my face again before staring at the ceiling and groaning my name. He finishes all over me, hot cum landing on my panties, my pussy, and my stomach.

“Shit,”

he laughs louder this time as he looks down and sees the mess he made. He checks on

me again before ripping his shirt over his head and gently wiping me clean. He flops onto the bed next to me and promptly falls asleep.

I fall asleep wondering who was wrong for letting that happen. Him, for taking what is always freely given even though I didn't say yes, or me, for letting him.

The house is silent when I wake up, everyone sleeping through their hangovers, so I quietly make breakfast for Damian. I get him situated in the living room with his favorite morning cartoons while I clean the kitchen. Staring at the countertop near the garbage, it is stacked full of empty beer bottles from last night.

Jake starts drinking more frequently again, although he doesn't always get as drunk as the night he thought I was sleeping. Sometimes it's just a beer after work, sometimes it's a six-pack and he falls asleep on the couch, but after a month of constant drinking, I finally speak up.

“Maybe you've had enough?”

I ask Jake when he stumbles, getting up to grab another beer.

“It's Friday, and I've had a long week,”

he snaps at me before continuing to the kitchen.

“Caylee is bored with Damian at his dad's, and you're just on your phone and getting drunk,”

I say, following him into the kitchen.

“She's fine. She was an only child until you came around. She knows how to entertain herself.”

He grabs a new Coors Light and twists it open, taking a long drink before shutting the fridge door and turning around.

“I just wish you could go a day without drinking, but that's all you ever do lately.”

I regret it as soon as it comes out. His shoulders stiffen, and he gets a hard look in his eyes as he pushes off the fridge.

“You do, huh?”

he sneers, “Well, I wish I could come home after a long day and not get bitched out for no reason.”

He takes a step toward me, “I wish I could go a day without you nagging about the garbage needing to be taken out,” another step and he’s in my face, “I wish I could fuck my girlfriend, but she always has a headache these days.”

“Maybe I wouldn't have a headache if you didn't crawl into bed smelling like a damn bar every night.”

I turn to leave, so tired of fighting.

I want to grab him by his shoulders and shake him, ask him what's so wrong with our life that it drives him to drink, but Caylee is sitting in the living room watching us.

“Hey, Bug, you wanna go play in your room?”

I reach for her, but Jake stomps into the room and grabs her first.

“Fuck you, Elle. I’m done. Let's go see Grandma, Caylee.”

Jake grabs for his keys, but trips and nearly falls on top of Caylee.

There's no way he's driving with her right now. I reach his keys first and shove them into my pocket.

“Give. Me. My. Keys.”

his voice is hard, and Caylee looks at me with wide eyes, trying to wiggle out of his hold.

“I can't stop you from leaving, Jake, but you're not taking her with you.”

I scoop her up and walk backward, tossing him the keys. I bolt to our bedroom, slamming and locking the door.

“It's gonna be like a sleepover, Caylee. You wanna build a fort?”

I ask and pull her to the other side of the bed. I yank the blanket to the floor while Jake pounds on the door, shouting.

My laughs don't drown out Jake's anger. I know that. I plaster a smile on my face, ignoring the fear bubbling in my stomach. Caylee must know it, too, because she offers me a small smile before getting to work on our fort. He eventually leaves, his tires spinning out on the gravel in the driveway, but it does nothing to ease the tension in my body, not even when Caylee falls asleep. I don't close my eyes until Jake's mom texts me to let me know he's there.

He's all smiles when he walks through the front door the next morning, Caylee's favorite doughnuts in hand. She runs to him, laughing, the events from last night already forgotten.

How I wish it were that simple for me. He pulls a bouquet of roses from behind his back and hands them to me with a sad look on his face.

“You did the right thing,”

he says, walking into the living room after settling Caylee at the table with her treats.

“I know.”

I don't need him telling me that.

“I was out of line last night,”

he continues as he sits across from me on the couch, “I can't believe I tried to drive that drunk with my daughter.”

“I know.”

I'm tired. I don't have the fight in me anymore. I don't want to hear him say it again. I don't want the endless apologies that always come, each one wearing me down a little more. Nothing changes for long.

“I'm sorry.”

He says softly.

“You always are,”

my voice cracks as my heart breaks. He's always sorry, always going to stop, always going to do better.

“What can I do?”

he asks, his shoulders dropping because, for once, I'm not just sweeping it under the rug with his apology.

“I don't know, Jake. I... I'm tired.”

I didn't realize how tired I was until right now. I hadn't realized how little I do for myself, how lonely I've been, even at his side. My life revolves around Jake and what he wants, what he needs.

I'm tired of not standing up for what I want, what I need. I've been a pushover because I put him on a pedestal and saw him as the hero who saved my life when I hit rock bottom.

“I'll stop drinking at home,”

he offers, and it's a good start.

“We have to take Caylee home and pick up Damian, so let's talk about this later.”

I ignore his miserable look and head to the bathroom to shower, hoping to wash off the last 24 hours.

Yeah, I don't like drunk Jake anymore. I think it's time I start figuring out what I really want for my future because this isn't it.

-elle

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

We spend hours talking after I make a list of what I think are the issues in our relationship. He is understanding, supportive even, and suggests we try couples counseling. He says he'll start looking for one right away because nothing is worth losing me. We make a plan, and I feel like it's a good start, not nearly enough, but a good start.

He makes it a point to come home from work with a smile on his face. Every other day or so, he brings me flowers or a snack I like.

I fall in love with Jake all over again when he keeps his word and hasn't had so much as one beer at home. He chooses to go to the bar down the street where our friend Cody works when he's had a long day or needs to get out of the house for an hour. He doesn't come home drunk, and he doesn't stay out all night.

He hasn't found a therapist yet, but we sit down every Sunday and work through anything that happened during the week that we need to get out.

By May, Bianca moves out, unhappy when Jake announces it'll be a dry house. He takes it hard, but I tell him that if she couldn't support him in making healthy choices, it is better that she does not live with us. I have forgiven her for the problems she caused, but I haven't forgotten. When Jake wanted to get clean, she convinced him he didn't need to and that I was the problem, not the drugs. The last thing we need is for her to convince him that the drinking isn't the problem when it clearly is.

Since we've stopped drinking in the house, things have been great. We spend weekends out with the kids and nights at home, cuddling up on the couch and watching movies. Jake tries to teach me how to play his favorite video game, but I am

horrible at Call of Duty. He teases me, then kisses me and tells me how much he loves me for trying.

When we start having fun together again, I realize we'd been acting like roommates who fuck and not as a couple. He starts courting me again, bringing me home flowers and planning date nights. It's like I am seeing him again for the first time.

On Mother's Day, we go to my parents' house and have a big family BBQ. Everyone shows up early to cook so mom doesn't have to, and I am surprised that even Jake's family has come because they hardly join us for anything.

We are just finishing up setting the table when Jake whistles to get everyone's attention.

"I'm so glad that you all came today to celebrate all of the amazing mothers in this family,"

he says, pulling me into his side and wrapping his arm around my shoulder. To my mom, Tara, thank you for always having my back, even when I was a shitty son. I know I put you through the ringer, but I'm the man I am today because of you,"

he pauses, holding his glass up as everyone claps before continuing, "To Elle's mom, Shelly, I'm so thankful for you because you gave me one of the most precious gifts any man could ever ask for. You have raised an astonishing woman, and I thank you every morning that I get to wake up next to her. Not only is she as beautiful as you," everyone chuckles, "but she is kind, brave, and selfless. She is the most supportive partner I've ever had, and it's because of you, so thank you for raising my future wife."

I'm smiling at my mom, watching tears roll down her face as his words register. I whip my head to him, and he's smiling down at me, tears gathering at the corner of

his eyes as he starts to speak again.

“When I met you, I thought to myself, ‘man, she is going to wreck me,’ and you did, in the most beautiful ways. You’ve changed me in ways I never thought possible. You’ve shown me love, patience, and a strength I’ve never seen in anyone else. I watched you struggle through your addiction and claw your way out of it all on your own, and I don’t think I’ve ever been as proud of anyone as I am of you. We’ve overcome so much, and I know that no matter what comes next, as long as I have you by my side, I’ll be okay. So, it would be my greatest honor in this life if you said yes and married me.”

I quickly give up trying to keep the tears from falling and nod my head, speechless. I wait until he places the heart-shaped ring on my finger to throw my arms around him as everyone around us cheers. After kissing him a million times and staring at my finger a million more times between kisses, everyone comes to congratulate us.

I spend the day with a smile on my face and constantly fighting back tears. My parents offered to keep Damian overnight, and Jake’s mom takes Caylee, giving us a night to celebrate alone.

“How long have you had this planned?”

I ask him when we get in the car to go home.

“Long enough to make sure everyone we loved was there. I knew you wouldn’t expect it today, but if everyone got together like that on a different day, you would have figured it out.”

He takes my hand in his before kissing my engagement ring.

I’m engaged. We’re engaged.

“I’ve dreamt of seeing your engagement ring wrapped around my dick since I bought it,”

he says as he kisses it again and slowly lowers our hands down his chest.

“Like this?”

I laugh as I unbuckle his pants, reaching in to pull him out. I stroke him once before playfully posing my hand above his dick, showing off my ring with a smirk.

“You’re gonna pay for that when we get home,”

he laughs and tucks himself away before grabbing my hand again.

The moment we step through the door, Jake throws me over his shoulder and marches us to the bedroom. I laugh and swat at his ass, bouncing with every step.

“Can we try something new?”

he asks when he sets me down. His hand on my chest pushes me until the backs of my knees hit the bed.

I nod as I sit, and he kisses me before kneeling on the ground to remove my shoes. He pushes me to lie on my back and slowly pulls my pants down while trailing kisses down my legs, stopping when he gets too close to my foot. I move to pull them away, but he yanks my leg back and tells me to stay still.

He moves to the other leg, kissing from my ankle up to my knee before placing both hands on my thighs, pushing them apart and pulling me down to the edge of the bed in one move.

“Is my fiancé wet for me?”

he asks as he drags his hands up and down my thighs. Leaning in, he uses his nose to rub my clit through my panties and groans low in his throat, lifting my thighs to rest on his shoulders.

“Yeah, of course, you are,”

he continues rubbing my clit with his nose, making me squirm, “You always are,”

he uses his nose to push my panties to the side. “Such a good girl.”

I cry out when he bites my clit and my hips jerk.

“Na-uh,”

he says as he pulls away and slaps my pussy, “I said stay still,”

We make eye contact, and he waits for me to nod before he lowers his head again and kisses away the sting.

Fuck. I grab the sheets and begin to shake as he fucks me with his tongue. Every time a shake becomes a jerk; he stops and slaps my pussy. I watch his head rise as he slowly pushes a finger in, and he watches in fascination as he fingers me. When he adds another, I clench around him and he groans, slowly sliding his eyes to mine.

“You’re doing so good,”

he rasps, curling his fingers and making my toes curl, “Turn over. Don't let my fingers move or we stop,”

he says when I start to pull away.

I think about how to do this before I slowly lift my right leg over his head, twisting my left hip under me while he continues to fuck me with his fingers until I'm lying face down on the bed.

“That’s my girl,”

he whispers as he lifts my legs one at a time, placing my knees on the edge of the bed. I start to rise onto my hands when he stands and pushes between my shoulder blades.

I stay there, ass in the air, pussy dripping down my thighs, and I turn around. He steps out of his clothes and grabs an extension cord from the floor.

“Do you trust me?”

he asks, voice low as he walks back to me.

“Always.”

I swallow, looking away from the extension cord to his face, my voice firm, my eyes never leaving his.

“All you have to do is tap me twice and we’ll stop,”

he promises as he lines himself up with me.

I nod and follow the extension cord with my eyes as he slides it under me. He puts his hand on my shoulder, tugging me up until I'm almost sitting upright, and lets go before he wraps the cord around my neck, each hand holding one end behind me. My

pulse is racing when I realize what he's planning.

I feel him slowly press into me while the cord rests softly on my neck. He wraps the cord around one hand and gently rubs my back as he slowly begins to fuck me. Every thrust sliding deeper until he bottoms out, his hips flush against my ass.

"You feel so fucking good,"

he pulls out and slams all the way back, making me cry out and lean forward, the cord tightening around my throat, stopping me.

"I knew you'd love this,"

he says, my pussy squeezing him, making him groan and fuck me harder. His wrist circles and pulls the cord tighter every few thrusts until it's tight enough to cut off my airway, and my back is pressed against his chest.

"Touch yourself,"

he whispers as he bites my ear, lowering me

I reach down, pressing my fingers against his dick, and use my wetness to rub my clit in fast, hurried circles. He pushes me against the bed, and spits before he starts playing with my ass, slowly sliding his thumb in. Almost immediately, he tightens the cord one last time, my pussy clenching around him.

"Yeah, that's it, cum baby, squeeze me dry,"

he pulls on the cord, slamming into me, grunting and fucking me through my orgasm.

"Such a good girl, taking every inch of me,"

he drops the cord. “Your pussy was made for me.”

Jake is relentless as he fucks me, hands gripping my hips so hard I’ll have bruises tomorrow. He pulls out, and his cum coats my ass before he pushes his softening dick in, both of us moaning as he stretches me.

He did it! He asked me to marry him! Everything we’ve been through has made us stronger, and I’m so glad I stuck it out. He is my future, and I can’t wait to be his wife!!!

-elle

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

“Come out with me tonight?”

It’s his birthday and he hasn’t gone out for weeks, spending all his time helping plan the wedding.

“I don’t know, Jake,”

I hesitate because I don’t want to ruin his birthday, but I don’t like being around him when he’s drunk.

“I promise I won’t get drunk. I just want to have fun with you and my friends.”

He reassures me.

“I’ll just leave if you get drunk, Jake. I don’t want to fight, and that’s all we ever do when you drink.”

I take a deep breath and try not to get ahead of myself. He has been good about not getting drunk, I remind myself.

He’s done so well lately that I don’t want to hold the past against him, but it’s hard not to. All the fights. The way he changes when his words start to slur, and his eyes become distant as he gets angry. How do I know this time will be different?

“I get it,”

his smile falls, “I’ll be good. Just a couple of drinks, I swear.”

I trust him. Or at least I want to trust him. Somewhere along the way, I stopped.

I have to admit I am surprised when we get to the bar and Cody has decorated it a bit. A happy birthday banner hangs across the liquor shelves, and there are a few of Jake's friends waiting for us.

"Did you always plan to come out tonight?"

I ask him because he hasn't said anything to me before ten minutes ago.

"I wanted it to be a surprise,"

he runs a hand through his hair and waves to the guys, "I know you've been stressed over planning the wedding. I thought we could use a little fun."

He kisses me before walking over to Cody and doing that weird bro hug thing that guys do.

Jake nurses a few beers all night, and we sit together at a table with his friends. I try to relax, but as the night wears on, Jake's voice grows louder, his words a little slower, and his eyes glassier. I decide to get up, telling them I'm using the bathroom, and stand around the corner to see what happens.

I tell myself I'm crazy.

He wouldn't, he promised.

My heart sinks when I immediately see Cody bring three shot glasses and set them in front of Jake. He quickly looks around and slams them back before laughing as Cody collects the empty glasses and leaves.

Why didn't I just stay home?

As pissed as I am, I know better than to make a scene. So, I take a deep breath, and once I'm calm enough, I walk back to the table with a smile on my face.

"You okay?"

he asks as I sit back down.

"I think I'm gonna head home. I'm tired."

He opens his mouth, but I wave him off, "I want you to stay and hang out with everyone. It's your birthday!"

It sounds fake to my own ears, but he's already drunk, so he doesn't notice.

"Are you sure?"

he asks, sounding sad. Even though I know the thought of me leaving makes him happy. He doesn't have to pretend if I'm not here.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Don't stay out too late. You work tomorrow."

I remind him because he's probably already forgotten, and kiss him on the cheek before leaving.

On my way home, I decide I'm too pissed to go home and sleep, so I call Sam and end up driving to his house instead. When I walk in, I break down and tell Sam everything. About Jake sneaking the shots, about the lies, about the fights we've had that no one knows about. He listens, his face growing serious as I finish.

“I didn’t know his drinking was so bad,”

Sam says quietly, his voice full of concern.

“I don’t think anyone did,”

I reply, running a hand through my hair. “I didn’t even know. He’s better at hiding things than I thought.”

I take a deep breath. “He was so... sneaky tonight. It reminded me of what he used to do before he got clean.”

How did I not see this coming? Here we are again, with the same problem, just a different vice.

My phone goes off, and it’s Jake, but I ignore it, not wanting to argue. I just want a moment of peace. I’m so fed-up with this bullshit.

He keeps calling and eventually leaves a voicemail.

“Why are you at Sam’s, huh? You said you were going home because you were tired. I’m coming to get you.”

I can hear the sneer in his voice, the anger in his words.

Great. I left so we wouldn’t fight, and now we’re fighting anyway. He must have left the bar and tracked my phone when he didn’t find me in bed at home.

“Don’t drive, please. You’ve been drinking,”

I call him back and hope he hasn’t gotten into the car already. “I’ll come home, but

Jake, I don't want to fight.”

“Fine. But hurry up. I have to be at work in a few hours, and I just want to go to sleep.”

He hangs up before I can respond.

The drive home feels long, even though it’s only a few minutes. The minute I step inside, I see Jake standing in the living room, his body rigid, his face twisted in anger.

His jaw is clenched, and his brows are drawn together in a harsh line, making the usual softness of his features almost unrecognizable. His eyes—dark and sharp, narrow as they lock onto me, like he’s already decided he’s mad before I even have a chance to speak.

Cody is sitting in the chair nearby, completely unaware—or more likely, uncaring that I’ve walked in. He’s scrolling through his phone, his face blank, his thumb moving slowly across the screen, not even bothering to look up.

“Where the hell were you?”

he demands, slurring.

“I was at Sam’s,”

I reply, keeping my voice even. “I needed some time to think.”

“Think about what?”

He scoffs, shaking his head. “You should’ve been with me on my birthday, not running off to another guy’s house.”

This isn't what I signed up for. God, I love him, but this isn't what I want.

“He's your friend, too!”

I shout before taking a breath, “I told you I didn't want to fight, Jake. I don't want to do this right now.”

“You think I want to?”

Jake's voice cuts through the silence, low but filled with so much fury that it makes my stomach sink. His words come out sharp, like a slap.

The raw anger in his voice makes me flinch, and for a split second, I'm afraid—his fists are clenched, his face is flushed with anger, as if every word he says is another thread unraveling, pulling him closer to losing control.

“I can't talk to you when you're like this. When you drink, you're not the man I fell in love with, and I can't keep doing this.”

“So, what, you're just gonna leave me now?”

His tone changes so quickly. Quiet and defeated, but his eyes stay hard, his fists still clenched. “You're just done?”

“I'm not done, Jake,”

I say softly, “I'm just going to bed. Do you want the couch or the bed? I don't care, just pick one because I don't want to sleep next to you tonight.”

“Couch,”

he says before stomping over and throwing himself down on it.

I shake my head and walk to the bedroom, gathering his work clothes and setting them outside the door so he doesn't have to try to find them in the morning in the dark.

Just as I'm falling asleep, the door handle starts to shake, and Jake pounds on the door.

"I need my work clothes,"

he shouts.

"They're at your feet,"

I yell back and roll over away from the door.

"You better open this door before I break it down, Elle."

He screams, his voice rising with each word, his fists pounding harder on the door.

My pulse quickens, a knot forming in my stomach as his anger starts to seep through the walls. It's not the first time he's shouted, not the first time he's been angry. But there's something in his voice now, something deeper. And the worst part? It pisses me off. I hate how easily he can make me feel small, how quickly he can shift from someone I love to someone I'm afraid of.

"Your work clothes are at your fucking feet,"

I yell again and grit my teeth as I get up to unlock the door.

A step closer and it would have hit me as Jake comes crashing through it.

Then all hell breaks loose.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

“What the fuck?”

I stand there in shock, my mind struggling to catch up to what my eyes are seeing, as Jake struggles to stand up, pushing himself off the broken door, looking around until his eyes land on me.

The door is half on the bed, cracked down the middle, with splintered wood scattered across the floor. The door frame is completely knocked out of place, swaying like it's barely holding on.

This is insane. My heart pounds in my chest, but I can't look away.

“All you had to do was open the fucking door so I could get my fucking work clothes.”

His chest heaves with every ragged breath he takes.

“I was in bed, you idiot, and your clothes are right there,”

I say, pointing to the clothes on the floor in the hallway, and move to walk past him.

“Where do you think you're going?”

he yanks on my arm and spins me around. Cody gets off the chair in the living room, forehead creased as he makes his way towards us in slow, almost casual strides.

“Jake, you need to let me go.”

My voice is calm, but I'm terrified of the look in his eyes, eyes that are burning into me with something that makes my blood run cold. I want to scream at him, tell him he's out of control, but the words are stuck in my throat. His grip tightens painfully. My hands are shaking as I try to pull away. The tightening in my chest hurts more than his grip on me as I try to pull away.

"You're going to ruin everything, Jake,"

I finally manage to whisper, my voice trembling. His hand around my arm tightens past the point of pain.

"You think you're so fucking special, don't you?"

he spits at me, "but you're always going to be the dumb bitch that chose drugs over her kid."

Before I realize what I'm doing, I slap him across the face, and I hear Cody's sharp inhale as he finally reaches us in the hallway.

Jake's eyes go blank. In an instant, every trace of emotion is wiped from his face. He reaches forward with both of his hands, wrapping them around my neck.

And he squeezes.

He's in my face, yelling incoherently. Spit flies as I claw at his hands and struggle to breathe. I try to cry out, but it's no use. My lungs burn, and my vision narrows on his empty eyes as he strangles me.

It feels like forever before I'm ripped out of Jake's grasp, Cody finally reacting and pulling me against him. Not so much holding me as he is shielding me. I try to take a breath, but my throat burns as I force the air back into my lungs, each inhale like fire

in my throat.

“What the fuck?”

Cody yells, but I'm frozen.

I've never seen Jake like this. I don't know who this man is. I stare at him, my pulse racing, and I can't tear my eyes away from this stranger in front of me.

“You're so fucking crazy! Get the fuck out of my house!”

I try to scream at Jake, but my throat is tight, and my voice comes out broken. Every muscle in my body feels like it's frozen, but my mind is racing, replaying every moment that led to this. Every time I ignored the warning signs, every time I told myself it wouldn't get this bad.

Jake charges, his fist in the air, but Cody shoves me out of the way, and I stumble into the kitchen, turning to see Cody shove Jake away from him into the broken doorframe.

Jake's eyes are wild as he searches for me, and I walk backward until my back hits the pantry door. When Jake starts coming my way, every instinct in me is screaming to run, to get away, but my feet won't move. I'm stuck with my back pressed against the pantry door.

As he takes a step closer, I feel a surge of panic, a desperate rush of adrenaline. My hands shake uncontrollably, and I finally move and reach for whatever I can find. Cans of food, anything that could stop him, anything that could keep him away.

My breath is shallow, every movement frantic as I throw them at him. The clatter of metal hitting the walls rings in the air, but they do nothing. My aim is too wild.

“I fucking hate you,”

I scream, my throat raw, as Cody grabs him, pulling him around the corner and I hear the door open and slam closed behind them.

I stand there stunned, staring at the mess around me until I hear Jake pull away and speed down the street, his tires squealing on the road.

I flinch when I hear the door creak closed, but then Cody walks around the corner, alone. His eyes immediately fall to my neck, wincing.

The adrenaline slowly leaves my system, and I bury my face in my hands as uncontrollable sobs tear through me.

“You need to call the police, Elle,”

he says quietly, standing a foot away from me.

I call Kay first, knowing I’ll need someone to stay with after all of this.

Kay gets here first and cries when she sees me. She drops to the step in front of me and holds my hands in hers. Refusing to leave my side when the cops show up 15 minutes later.

A woman officer quietly sits with us on the porch and listens patiently as I numbly tell her partner what happened tonight.

More officers quickly arrive, some of them with cameras, asking my permission before having me stand against the house for pictures before they go inside.

They call it a crime scene.

It's midnight by the time they leave. Kay wraps me in her arms and leads me to my bed, and I let her. She lays me down before I watch her walk out and start picking up the cans of food in the hallway.

I stare at the crooked door frame while she quietly puts my house back in order before sliding into bed next to me.

"You'll be okay,"

she whispers as she scoots closer to me, but not touching me as I start to cry.

"We'll figure it out tomorrow," she

promises me as I finally start to fall asleep.

I'm shaken awake and the first thing I see when I open my eyes is Jake, kneeling on the ground in front of me. He quickly drops his hand, but my heart races as I reach behind me to Kay in a panic, but stop when he speaks.

"I just want to talk,"

he says, his voice rough, "I brought coffee, can we sit on the porch?"

I don't owe him anything, I remind myself as I swallow, my throat still tender.

"Please."

he pleads, his voice cracking, "If you don't want to hear what I have to say, I'll leave,"

he closes his eyes for a beat. "Ten minutes, all I'm asking for is ten minutes."

“Five,”

I hear myself agree. Part of me, some small, broken part of me, still wants to believe that there's something left of the man I knew.

I see his shoulders sag in relief as he nods and backs away, heading towards the front door, and I quietly wake up Kay to fill her in on what's happening.

“If you're not back inside in ten minutes, I'm going out there,”

she says, her voice hard as she reluctantly lets me go. I smile a little, knowing she has my back.

“I don't even know where to start,”

Jake says after shutting the door and sitting down on the steps. He hands me my coffee and moves to sit next to me, but I shake my head.

“That's fair.”

he steps back and takes a deep breath before continuing. “I don't know if I remember everything that happened last night, but what I do remember makes me sick.”

His voice is thick with shame, his gaze lingers on my throat before dropping to the ground like he can't bear look at me.

“I called Ed this morning,”

he adds as he begins to pace, “I told him what happened, and he told me to check myself into rehab. And I will. I am. I have to wait for a bed to open up, but he said I can stay with him and his wife until one does.”

Is it just another promise he won't keep?

He's not asking for forgiveness, not trying to sweet-talk me into giving him another chance. It feels different this time. He's... offering something. He's never even offered AA meetings, let alone rehab before.

"I don't know what you're thinking,"

he runs a hand through his hair, shaking his head, "but I know we can get through this. Last night? That's not who I am. You know that."

he stops in front of me, his eyes searching mine.

"I'm going to start going to meetings before and again after I check in,"

he says, his voice softer now, desperate. "I swear, Elle. I'm so fucking sorry."

"I don't care if you're sorry," I snap, and he flinches, "Sorry doesn't fix this."

I point to my neck.

"We don't have to make any decisions right now. Let me prove myself to you."

He says when I don't say anything again.

I don't know what to say. I had planned on just giving him his five minutes and asking him to leave.

"What about therapy?"

I ask him.

“Yeah, I mean, I can find someone.”

He nods, and his voice perks up. “I don't know how soon a bed will open up for me, but I can try to get in with a counselor as soon as possible.”

“You need to choose,”

I tell him, my voice shaking, but I stand up so I can look down at him from the porch, “You need to choose between me and drinking. Because I don't care if it's tomorrow or ten years from now, I will walk away if you ever take another drink.”

“I swear it, Elle. I'm never drinking again. I can't lose you.”

"You can lose me," I say, my voice breaking a little, "You will lose me if you ever pick up a drink again. You're not just messing up your life, Jake. You're messing up mine and the kids' too. What if they were home last night?"

There's a long pause as he stares at me, his face paling.

I want to scream at him that his shame isn't enough. That I'm so damn tired of waiting for the man he's supposed to be. But I take a deep breath and turn away instead, walking toward the door.

“I'm not making any more promises, Jake,”

I say and take a deep breath, pausing at the door. “Just... prove it, and maybe I'll believe you. I'm not going to make a decision until you do.”

He did it. He got a bed in a rehab facility, and he's sober. It took a little longer than I thought for a place to open for him, but he stayed with Ed and went to meetings until he went in. I didn't want to see him, so he would text me every day, but now that he's

in there, he can't.

I miss him. God, I miss him. If he doesn't stay sober though, I won't go back. No one deserves what he did to me. Especially not me for putting up with all his bullshit. I know I always say 'this is his last chance' but this time I really mean it. I'd rather be a single mom.

-elle

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

The sky is blue today, not a single cloud in sight. It's not a sight you see often in the PNW and I try not to think of it as a good sign. I lift my face to the sky, close my eyes, and bask in it while I sit on the porch and wait for Jake.

He went to rehab just like he promised he would, and he gets to come home today. This is the longest we've gone without seeing each other since we met, because I have chosen not to attend any of the family sessions I have been invited to. I told him I needed space, but I just wasn't ready to face him. Still, he's done everything he said he would. A part of me wanted to believe I'd be okay without him, that I could go on with my life and find peace without him in it. But the truth is, I haven't.

When his car finally pulls into the driveway, my stomach is swarming with butterflies, and I can't tell if I'm nervous or actually excited to see him after so long. My heart races as I watch him step out, his movements slow, almost deliberate, like he's not sure what comes next either.

"Hey,"

he smiles, but it's small, hesitant, as he walks up to me with his hands in his pockets.

"Hey."

I smile back, and we stand there awkwardly for a minute before I get the nervous giggles. "I'm sorry I didn't go to any of the sessions you invited me to."

"That's okay. You weren't ready,"

he says as he finally reaches the porch.

“So,”

he clears his throat, “Are you okay with me being here?”

“I think so.”

“Take all the time you need,”

he assures me, “I’m not going anywhere. We can take this one step at a time, at whatever speed you need.”

He steps up to me with a brow raised and opens his arms, leaving the decision to me. I smile and shake my head as I walk into them.

“Where’s Damian?”

he asks, his voice muffled against my head while he holds me.

“At my parents. They thought we’d like some time alone.”

I tell him. My mom picked Damian up an hour ago so we could have a night to talk and work things out.

“Good. I missed him, but I’m glad we have some time to ourselves.”

His hold on me tightens, and I feel him nodding against my hair before letting me go.

The truth is, I’m more than just glad. I’m relieved. I’m scared. I’m hopeful. Everything is still so confusing.

“I made your favorite, spaghetti, if you're hungry?”

I ask and nod to the house.

“Starving.”

He smiles, a real smile this time, as he takes my hand and we walk inside.

There's a church around the corner Jake walks to every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for his Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and we quickly fall into a new routine. He sees his counselor once a week and even invites me to a few sessions.

I don't attend meetings with him, but I do go to every therapist appointment he invites me to. He shares things there that he's never shared with me, and even though there are absolutely no excuses for his behavior, I understand him a little more with each session. The pieces slowly click into place. He talks about his childhood and his struggles with feeling out of control.

Sober Jake is happy Jake, and happy Jake makes me happy. So, when the wedding date quickly approaches, and Jake asks me if we're still getting married, I say yes. Because despite everything, I still want this—us.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

Jake has gone all out, flowers in hand and everything. He took the kids to my parents' this afternoon, so when I hear the doorbell ring, I'm not expecting it to be him. He's standing there, holding the flowers out to me, and I smile.

"They're beautiful,"

I say softly, taking the flowers from him and inhaling the sweet fragrance.

"Ready for date night?" he asks, his voice warm and steady.

I nod, trying to ignore the way my heart skips in my chest. "It's... It's been a while since we've had one."

He smiles softly. He's been so patient and thoughtful in the last few months as we've worked to put ourselves back together.

I let out a quiet breath as we're led to our table, tucked away in a corner with a view of the city skyline. The lights are dim, and the quiet hum of conversation feels perfect.

"This is fancy,"

I smile. We don't usually go for fancy.

"You deserve nights like this. You deserve to feel special... to feel like you matter."

"I've been thinking about us,"

I say, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. “I know it hasn’t been easy, but I’m proud of you.”

“What matters now is that we’re here,”

He reaches across the table, his hand brushing over mine. “Right now, together. I want to make sure we stay here. I want to give you the space and the time to heal and... I just want you to feel safe with me again.”

“I do feel safe,”

the words come out softly

Jake’s face softens, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. “I know healing doesn’t work on a timeline. I just want you to know I’m here. For whatever you need. Whenever you’re ready.”

It's quiet now. There's no rushing. No pressure.

“You’re really trying, aren’t you?” I ask.

It was exactly what we both needed to remind us that love, like anything worth having, took time. But it was always worth fighting for.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:20 am

The ceremony is beautiful. The backyard is littered with flowers and filled with our family and friends. Our wedding party comes out when The Wedding March begins, but instead of the traditional, soft strains of the classic march, it shifts into a remixed rock version that blasts through the speakers as they strut down the aisle, holding Guitar Hero controllers like they're rock stars.

Then Jake surprises me by reading his own vows after I recite the officiant's standard ones.

"Our story hasn't been easy,"

his voice wavers, but his eyes hold mine, "We've had to fight our way out of dark places, but through it all, you never gave up on me. You stayed when I didn't deserve it, and you fought for me when I was lost."

As he speaks, each vow feels like it's wrapping around me, binding us together in a way that makes everything that's happened to get us to this moment fade into the background. The tears come before I even know what's happening, gentle, but relentless.

"So today in front of everyone we love most,"

he continues, his voice steadier now, "I vow to show up for you as you have shown up for me. I vow to continue growing, not just as your husband, but as a man who strives to be better for our kids, for you, and for us."

I turn at the mention of the kids and see them sitting next to my parents. Everyone is

crying along with me.

“Most of all, I vow to fall in love with you over and over, every single day, just like I have since the moment we met. No matter what happens, I will always choose you. I love you, today, tomorrow, always,”

he chokes out, his voice a whisper by the end.

“Today, tomorrow, always.”

I mouth the words back to him.

He doesn't wait for the ‘you may kiss the bride’; instead, he grabs and holds me, his body shaking as he cries softly. The crowd claps, and we’re introduced for the first time as husband and wife.

The reception is a blur of laughter and music, the sound of glasses clinking, and the soft hum of chatter fills the backyard. Fairy lights twinkle above us, casting a warm glow on everyone’s faces. When Jake and I walk into the backyard hand in hand, the crowd erupts in cheers, and we’re both grinning like fools as we make our way to the center of the space.

We cut the cake; the frosting sweet on our lips as we feed each other a bite. We share sparkling cider toasts with our loved ones, each glass raised in honor of us. There are speeches, some heartfelt, some funny, but all full of love. And through it all, Jake never lets go of my hand.

“I can't wait to fuck my wife,”

Jake growls in my ear as he presses me against the hotel room door I'm trying to open. His body is warm against mine, the heat of his breath on my neck sending a shiver down my spine.

Wife. I let the word settle in my mind. It's simple, just one word, but it feels like it carries everything. Everything we've been through, everything we've fought for.

"You're gonna have to wait until we're inside,"

I laugh and open the door, walking into the honeymoon suite.

"We're inside now,"

he grabs me around my middle, dragging me back into him as the door closes softly behind us.

The room is huge, with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook downtown, a private hot tub on the patio outside, and a huge king-size bed with rose petals covering it.

"Where does my wife want to be fucked first?"

Jake asks as he moves my hair to the other side of my neck, trailing kisses over my sensitive skin. "Do you want it on the bed, nice, and slow?"

I shake my head no.

"Or do you want me to fuck you from behind, with your tits pressed against the window, knowing anyone could look up and see you?"

he asks, and I whimper.

"That's my girl,"

he praises before he lets go of me and starts to unzip my dress, "It's a beautiful dress, baby, but my dick's been hard all-night thinking about getting you out of it."

I step out of my dress and bend to take off my heels, but he stops me, telling me to leave them on.

“Walk over to the window, slowly,”

he tells me, and I listen.

I turn to look over my shoulder and see him undressing, watching me, so I add a little sway to my hips and smile. When I get to the window, I turn, arching my back on it as I unhook my bra, holding the front to me as I slowly drop one strap at a time. My eyes stay on Jake as he fists his dick and walks over to me.

As I look at Jake, and the way he’s watching me, I realize this love isn’t just the “happy ever after”

kind of love. It’s messy, it’s complicated, and it’s imperfect—but it’s ours.

“You’re breathtaking,”

he says before stopping a foot away from me. “Drop the bra,”

he demands.

“Now touch yourself,”

he says while he stands there, his dick in his hand.

I lift my hands to my hair and start removing the bobby pins before shaking them loose. My hands drop to my throat as I trail them lightly over my skin, then lower, cupping each breast. Jake’s eyes are like fire, burning my skin as he watches my hand glide down my stomach before I slip it under my panties and rub tiny circles over my clit.

Jake groans as he watches, pumping his hand up and down his dick faster.

“Are you wet?”

he asks, his voice low and rough.

“Show me,”

he says when I nod my head yes.

I moan as I work my finger in my pussy, wishing it was his thicker one. I close my eyes and lay my head against the glass before his hand on my wrist stops me. I open my eyes and look down when his hand continues to move mine, guiding my finger in my pussy at the same speed he’s rubbing his dick.

I spread my legs wider when he pulls my hand to his mouth, sucking it in and humming with approval. He leans forward, guiding my arms above my head and trapping them against the window. He pushes my panties to the side, pushing his finger into my pussy. His moans match my own as he pulls it out completely, adding a second before pushing them back in.

“My wife has the prettiest,”

he brings his mouth to my ear and whispers while he curls his fingers, making me moan, “wettest,”

he leans down, taking my nipple into his mouth and bites, “and tightest pussy.”

He plays with my nipple piercing, pulling it with his teeth almost to the point of pain before kissing it softly and moving to do the same to the other.

“Please,” I beg.

“Turn around,”

he says as he pulls his hand back, wiping his wet fingers on his dick.

He pushes me against the glass, lines himself up, and pushes inside me in one move. My tits bounce off the glass, and he grabs my arms, twisting them around my back before locking my wrists together just above my ass.

“You feel so good, wife,”

he says as he slams into me. He uses one hand to keep my hands where they are, and he spanks me. My pussy clenches around him. He groans and spanks me again on the opposite cheek before letting go of my hands. He holds onto my hips as he fucks me harder.

“Anyone could be watching,”

he says as he presses a hand into my lower back, making me bend a little, the position change making him go deeper, “watching your beautiful tits bounce while I fuck you.”

ONE YEAR LATER

“It worked,”

I tell Jake as soon as he steps through the front door. He freezes, his hand still on the doorknob,

We’d been trying for another baby since we got married, and our anniversary was just a month away. Four months ago, I made an appointment with a local infertility clinic where the doctor said not to get my hopes up, warning me that getting pregnant with PCOS could take multiple tries, and even then, she cautioned, there were no

guarantees. There could still be more hurdles down the road, but after just one round of Clomid, we were pregnant.

We were lucky. The doctor told me that it sometimes took as many as five attempts, and even then, it wasn't a guarantee that we wouldn't need further interventions like IVF.

"You're sure?"

Jake's voice cracks slightly as he searches my eyes, a smile already on his face.

"Yes," I say, my smile widening. "I'm sure, Jake. I took another test this morning. It's positive."

To him, my agreeing to get pregnant showed him I had truly forgiven him. I know what it means to him because it means the same to me. This pregnancy, the fact that we're still here, after all the struggles we've faced, is a symbol of everything we've been through: forgiveness and growth.

He's been sober and more than amazing since that awful night. He didn't give in. Not once. And with each day, I've seen him become a better version of himself.

He exhales a shaky breath and pulls me in for a hug. When we pull away, he whispers, "I can't believe it. We're going to have a baby."

I nod, feeling tears welling up in my eyes—tears of relief, tears of joy, tears of everything we've been through to get here. "I can't believe it either."

"Thank you for believing in me," he says, cupping my face, his voice barely above a whisper. "Thank you for giving me a chance."

"We did this together, Jake. You've done the hardest part, and you're doing it every

single day. This is just the beginning.”