



Cayden

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Description: Blair Hendricks believed she was living her perfect love story—married to billionaire winemaker Cayden Caruso, surrounded by luxury, and dreaming of the family they'd build together...

But after years of heartbreak and four miscarriages, hope is slipping away.

Desperate to take control, she makes a bold move: secretly undergoing IVF without Cayden knowing!

Cayden believes in fate, not science, when it comes to having kids.

When Blair drops the bomb that she's pregnant with quadruplets, his world is rocked.

Feeling blindsided and terrified for her health, he struggles to accept the reality of their growing family.

Add in the pressure from his old-school Italian family, and tensions between them hit an all-time high.

Can they find their way back to each other before their love—and family—falls apart?

Or will this be the breaking point that changes everything?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

Chapter 1

The fall night was pretty, with the blue velvety sky covered with dozens of twinkling stars. The impossible heat of summer had finally made way for the cooler weather.

Trees were bending their boughs with the wind stirring the leaves and the rain, which had fallen earlier in the afternoon, glistened on the bed of roses and daffodils just along the wide porch.

The woman seated behind the wheel of the snazzy looking red car, took nothing in. Her mind was far away, thoughts troubled. She was trying her best to organize her thoughts and struggled for composure. She had to.

The man inside the sprawling ranch type house, one where she had grown up in, would notice the slightest bit of distress and she was not sure she wanted to unburden herself to him.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open and stepped out. Her boots hit the cobbled stone driveway, and she felt the familiar stirring throughout her body.

The place looked the same. She had been away for three weeks, and it still looked and felt like home. She had lived here for so many years, only moving out when she got married five years ago.

Wrapping her cashmere jacket around her slender body, Blair marched up the steps and pushed the door open, shaking her head at the fact that her dad refused to keep it locked. The neighborhood was secluded, and he had been living here for the past

thirty-five years, but still...

Shrugging out of her jacket, she draped it on the peg of the coat tree and simply stood there inside the foyer, looking around. It was homey and comfortable. The furnishings were not new but had a kind of live-in quality that she appreciated.

It was funny that after being married into one of the richest family in the world, she could still appreciate home. And it was and always will be home. Especially now.

“Dad?” She called out. When she did not hear a response, she made her way through the narrow hallway towards the library where she knew he would be at this time of the evening.

She saw him standing precariously on the rolling ladder and reaching for a thick volume.

“Dad?” She approached cautiously, not wanting to startle him too much. “What on earth are you doing?”

His smile lit up his attractively lined face, mahogany eyes sparkling with pleasure.

“Honey. Why didn’t you tell me you were back?”

“I arrived just this afternoon and had to take a nap. The flight was long and exhausting.

What are you doing?”

“Just searching for a book to help with my lesson for tomorrow,” he patted it and carefully made his way down. Putting the book on the desk, he hurried forward to enfold her in his arms and she just took him in and wrapped herself around him.

The familiar scent of peppermint and tobacco almost brought tears to her eyes, and she wanted to stay in his arms and never leave. It was safer there than anywhere else.

As if sensing her turmoil, he eased her away and held her at arms' length, eyes studying her face closely. "Still my beautiful baby, but there is something there. How about a cup of tea and some comforting conversation?"

"You know how I hate tea."

He nodded. "I do. But in this case, you are going to humor your old man," he patted her cheek, "let me just make a note I have been toying with before it slips my mind. I am teaching a controversial topic tomorrow and must be prepared."

He walked over to his desk and wrote some jottings on his notepad. Blake Hendricks was a professor at the local university and taught religious science. He had had tenure for the past thirty-three years and was extremely popular with his students and members of staff at the university, a place he viewed as his home away from home.

He had met his wife there and often joked that he had married above him. Their love had always been a comfort to Blair and as an only child, she had been brought up to settle for nothing less than true love.

"Now honey," taking her hand, he slipped it through his arm and led the way out of the library, he used as his office. "How was the trip?"

"Too much," she admitted with a slight laugh. "The wine tasting went very well according to the responses received." They entered the cozy and warmth of the large yellow and white room with the old-fashioned appliances. "Sit, I will make the tea."

"Are you certain?"

“I don’t get to touch the stove much anymore.” She reminded him lightly as she foraged for the packet of tea and put the kettle on. “How have you been?”

Blake studied his daughter as she efficiently set out a tray with two cups and added slices of the apple pie, his neighbor had brought over just this evening and noticed the shadows in her beautiful eyes.

She reminded him so much of his dearly departed wife. Catherine had been a stunning beauty and could have had any man she wanted, and she had chosen him. it still baffled him that she had.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

Blair had inherited her caramel complexion, the small face, pointed and determined chin, with the fascinating cleft in the middle and eyes that dominated the face. The color and shape were the only things she had inherited from him. Everything else was a replica of her mother, right down to the petiteness and graceful movements.

“Dad?” She looked up as she finished pouring water over the pouch.

“I am doing great, except the odd reporter who came around wanting to know if the rumors were true.”

“What rumors?” She arranged the things neatly and went to get the honey and lemon.

He waited for her to face him before responding. “The one where your husband is having an affair.”

She tried to stop her hands from shaking, but did not quite pull it off.

“It’s all lies!” She also tried to appear nonchalant, but her voice lacked conviction. She had always been known to tell the truth and lying was not in her makeup and they both knew it. Sitting around the table, she cradled the cup and lifted her eyes to him. “He denies it.” She took a shaky breath.

“We’re having problems, yes, but Cayden would never cheat on me.” She realized that she was vehement in her denial and knew how it sounded. As if she was trying to convince herself that he was not cheating. Please God. Let it not be true.

Blake stirred his tea with the spoon in contemplative silence for a few seconds, his

face expressionless. “I had my doubts when you came back from your holidays and said you met someone. When that someone turned out to be the heir to an incredible fortune, fear took over.” He trained his steady gaze on her.

“I wanted someone who would love you for the wonderful person you are, and I did not see it in the man you chose to spend the rest of your life with. He was too pretty...” He waved a hand when she opened her mouth.

“Please let me finish. Too everything. Too rich and entitled and a former playboy. You are an exceptionally beautiful woman,” he cast a wistful gaze over the smooth complexion and thick dark brown hair was styled into a neat chignon at the nape of a long, graceful neck. Diamonds glinted at her lobes and around her neck.

She was wearing a necklace that had been given to her when she and her husband just started out – platinum – a long chain with a large teardrop diamond nestled between her cleavage.

She never took it off, not even when she was draped in other fineries because it represented a sentiment to her. Her rings were stunning – her clothes expensive, befitting that of the woman she was now. The wife of a very wealthy man.

But all the wealth and status that came with being Mrs. Cayden Caruso had not changed whom she was inside and for that he was incredibly grateful.

“He does not strike me as being a man who can stick it out when challenging times come along. And marriage is composed of the good and bad. There are times when you do not even like the person you are with.”

A faint smile touched his lips. “I am forgetful and disorganized. I would be buried in my research and forget to bring home the milk or pick up the pastry for a dinner party your mother was planning. I would track in mud on her clean floor and often forget

that she was not only a mother and a wife, but a careerist as well.

She juggled everything perfectly, me – not so much. We would argue – or she would reprimand me, and I would sulk and slam into my den - but then I would have to come right out and apologize for being in the wrong.”

His face became sober. “Your husband is spoiled – has been for years because he is the eldest of three boys and heir to the fortune and women climb over themselves to be with him. You, my dear, have been trying to please not only him, but the entire family by trying to produce an heir and that is stressful.”

She stirred her tea and tried to keep the tears away. “Five miscarriages.” She intoned bitterly. “I have been asking God why the punishment. I feel like Hannah in the Bible.”

He nodded in approval. “It is good that you remember your scripture. They miss you at church. And like Hannah in the Bible, you will get your triumph. You have to give yourself time to heal – your heart to settle...”

“He says we should stop focusing on getting pregnant and just be.”

“He might be right.”

“No!” Her voice was filled with passion. “He is not right and is just saying that. His mother looks at me like I am a misfit. Clive and Conail are pretty sweet and treats me with respect, but I do not belong.” She took a hasty sip of her tea and almost burnt her tongue in the process. “I want this for me – for us and it’s not happening.”

“And you think that producing an heir will fix what’s broken?” Her father intuited.

She simply stared at him and felt her heart quaking. He could always read her, no

matter how much she tried to hide it. She had insisted on leaving Italy where the entire family had gathered for the introduction of the new label. And had stood firm when her husband had balked at the idea of her leaving.

“How will it look?”

“Like I am feeling homesick and sick and tired of smiling like I am idiot. Like I am happy, like we are in a perfect marriage.”

“Blair...”

“Are you sleeping with her?”

“With whom?” His deep voice had sounded impatient.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“Claudine. I saw the two of you cuddled together in a corner of the room. In front of my eyes. What are you doing behind my back?”

“I refuse to grace that with a response,” he had told her coldly, “Claudine is a friend.”

“She is a woman you were sleeping with in the past!”

“Years ago, before I met you. You are being unreasonable and paranoid.”

“Am I? Are you falling out of love with me? Is that it? I am unable to give you children and you are thinking of getting rid of me, I know it.”

He had simply stared at her in frustration. “Go back home, Blair, do whatever the hell you want. I cannot do this again. You have been nagging me about so-called affairs and worrying yourself sick because we are childless for now. The doctors said to give it time...”

“I am thirty! And we have been trying for years. Five miscarriages...!”

“Darling...”

“No!” She shook her head. “I know you have regrets. I know what you and your family are saying. You should have married someone else, and they are probably right.”

“I had no idea that you could read minds now.” His voice had turned icy. “I love you, whether you believe that or not, is entirely up to you.”

Shaking herself to disperse the memories, she stared at her father. “I am trying IVF. It is the main reason I came back before they did. I have been meeting with a specialist and am going ahead with it. Two years ago, I implored Cayden to freeze his sperm, and he did. I am meeting with the doctor tomorrow to start the procedure.”

“Without telling your husband.”

“Yes. I have seen his face each time that it was confirmed that I was pregnant and the way he looked when I lost each and every one of them. He is not even trying...,” her hands fluttered. “We have not been together physically for the past three weeks and I... You think he is with someone else.”

“Our love life has been hectic, passionate, unbelievably so.” She linked her fingers together, the tea forgotten.

“You continue to have doubts about our love for each other, but from the very moment we met...,” a smile touched her lips. “I remember it like it was yesterday. The tiny café in the middle of the busy Venetian street. I was coming out and he was going in and he stopped and stared at me.

I was going around him when he took my hand and insisted on buying me an espresso. I had no idea who he was at first and was annoyed at his arrogance. But he was so funny and sweet, and I admired his fluency in the language.

It was two days before I knew he was Cayden Caruso.” She shook her head. “I tried to break it off and he would not let me.” She stared at her father. “I love him, daddy...,” she had unconsciously reverted to her childhood name for him.

“You don’t know him the way I do. To the rest of the world, he is the former playboy

and entitled heir to the wine industry, but to me, he's just Cayden, a man who makes me laugh, who has insecurities about taking over the business, one who loves to play and tease me when we're alone. I know he loves me and this not having a baby, is getting to both of us."

"But keeping something as significant as IVF from him. Isn't that going to drive the wedge even deeper?"

Her heart quaked at that. She had introduced the subject to him several times and he had been against it.

"Absolutely not. It is dangerous and unstable. If it cannot happen naturally, then so be it."

"I don't know!" She picked up her cooling tea and took a sip. "I don't care. I want this and whatever happens, will happen. Hopefully, he will come around when he realizes I am pregnant." She took a deep breath. "I need this, daddy, more than you will ever know."

Reaching out a hand, he touched hers. "Honesty and communication are two especially crucial factors in a marriage. Whatever your mother and I faced, we always had that to fall back on." His expression was sober.

"I wanted a nice churchgoing young man for you, one who would appreciate your value, your worth. You have married into an immensely powerful family.

Outwardly, you are polished and sophisticated, but I know my daughter and know the inside of you. I often see you in the magazines, on the internet and sometimes I am proud and say to myself that this is my daughter, rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous."

He rubbed her hand absently. “But most of that time is spent wondering if you are happy. That is what concerns me the most. Your mother and I were in love until the day the Lord took her from me. I want that to be your legacy, the focal point in your marriage. I want love to be able to conquer all, be the epicenter of your lives together.

But, most of all, I would like to see you and your husband move into somewhere aside from that sprawling mansion where everyone lives.

Give yourselves some much-needed privacy. I know you have an entire wing to yourselves, but the family is still there, and you do not need interference in your union. It has to be just the two of you and the Lord.” His brows creased. “And I pray you will find your way back to coming to church. Even if it is just you alone.”

She nodded. “I have been thinking about that. Coming back and attending services.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“Don’t just do it because you need something from the Lord!”

“I miss the congregation and the warmth of the people there. Being Cayden’s wife is hectic and time consuming, but I need to make the effort.”

“Good.” He patted her hand. “Honey, I want to warn you about keeping things from your husband. It is starting a very dangerous precedent.”

“I have to do what I must.”

“To another round of success.” Alberto lifted his glass of Caruso Sauvignon in a toast as the family sat around the huge living room of the villa. A fire was blazing in the large hearth, giving the rose pink and gold room a distinctive glow.

“Your statements to the press was spot on Clive,” he nodded approval to his second son, who received it with a grateful smile. Compliments did not come easily from the senior Caruso.

“Darling, you were right.” Marianne Caruso turned her emerald, green eyes on her eldest son who was slouched on a comfortable leather sofa near the fire.

“I know,” he flashed her a smile, one that was expected. “About what precisely?”

“About combining the campaign with a charitable ball. The press ate it up and the public are clamoring to place orders.”

“It’s what I do.” He lifted his glass in a toast. Cayden was the only one of her children who had inherited her green eyes, and he was secretly her favorite. She was also finely attuned to his moods and could see that the smile did not quite reach his remarkable eyes.

She knew that bringing up the subject of what was bothering him would be off limits, but decided that a little later on, she would have a frank discussion with him. Blair leaving so abruptly had sparked all kinds of rumors.

The girl had married into the family and even though she had not been suitable, they had bowed to Cayden’s desire to make her his wife. But the marriage was crumbling, and it was obvious to everyone.

“Have you heard from your wife?” Alberto asked abruptly, eyeing his son.

“She arrived back home safely.”

“And you just let her go?”

Cayden’s thick dark brows lifted, his displeasure at the perfectly obvious subject. “Should I have tied her to the bedpost?”

His father’s frown deepened, gray eyes glinting. “I expected you to demand that she stays for the duration. You are the bloody face of the company as well as the heir. She is supposed to be standing by your side.”

“She wanted to go home, and I had no intention of trying to stop her.”

“In my opinion, you have given her too much leeway.”

“Darling...”

“No, Mother!” Cayden held up a hand as the room became silent. His two brothers looked as if they would rather be anywhere else but in the room. “Why don’t we have this out for the last time.

You never approved of the marriage and still think of Blair as an outsider. She is smart and sensitive enough to figure that out for herself. She has blood running through her veins, and it bothers her that she is not accepted, even after all these years.”

“We are not the one running around with different women,” his father shot at him.

Tossing back the drink, Cayden slammed the glass down on the priceless Louis IV table and rose. He had inherited his father’s lofty height and cut quite an impressive physique.

All three boys had inherited the six-foot two muscular frame and black hair that was part of their Italian legacy. But Cayden was the most handsome of the three and most volatile in temper.

“I will not sit here and listen to this nonsense. I hear enough of it from my bloody wife. What I do is of no concern to anyone else.”

His father rose, his expression thunderous. “Whatever you do affects the family, so damn well think again. Where in the hell are you going?”

“To my suite!” He tossed them a look over one broad shoulder as he headed for the arched doorway. “I am tired and need to get some sleep.”

“Let him go,” Marianne waved a hand at her husband wearily, “just leave him be.”

Chapter 2

Blair gripped her pocketbook tightly as she waited for the doctor to finish making his notes. She had heard from her husband last night. For the first time since their argument, she felt a sense of relief that he was extending his trip for another two weeks.

“We have some things to tie up!” He had paused significantly. “Are we okay?”

“Yes.” She had decided that it was no use prolonging an argument while they were thousands of miles from each other and the decision she had spent sleepless nights considering was a done deal. His absence was going to make things easier.

She refused to think about the consequences of what she was about to do. But as she had told her father, it had to be done. It was the only way to save her marriage, and she desperately wanted to be a mother.

Step one had already started. The controlled ovarian stimulation (COS), as the doctor referred to it as, was already in place. She had read upon the subject extensively and knew the pitfalls and risks.

She might end up with multiples and the more embryos, the greater the risks. All of it had been explained to her in details. The clinic was a private one and benefited from her husband’s family money significantly.

Dr. Melbourne was a family friend, but Blair had prevailed on him to keep her visits confidential. He had been skeptical at first, until she produced a reasonable

explanation. “We have been through a lot of disappointments; I just want to surprise him. And I do not want this turning out to be yet another one.”

Step two had been a success as well and she was keeping her fingers crossed.

The doctor cleared his throat, bringing Blair back to the present moment. “Mrs. Caruso, it seems everything is in order. However, I would advise some rest and perhaps a bit of time to yourself to reflect.”

Blair nodded, her mind already racing ahead to the plans she had meticulously laid out. There would be no turning back now. She gathered her belongings and left the office, a determined expression on her face.

Driving back home, Blair thought about the early days of her marriage to Cayden. It had been a whirlwind romance, filled with passion and excitement. But over the years, the weight of expectations and the constant scrutiny from his family had taken its toll.

She wanted to believe that there was still hope left for them, that they could find their way back to each other. But it required a drastic change, a leap of faith that she wasn't sure she was ready to take.

Upon arriving home, Blair got out of the car and took a deep breath, looking at the sprawling estate that had become a symbol of both her dreams and her struggles. She resolved to have a candid conversation with Cayden upon his return, to lay everything bare and see if they could rebuild what had broken.

As she walked through the grand entrance, she felt a wave of determination wash over her. For the sake of her marriage and the future she envisioned, she would have to take this bold step.

“Would you like me to respond to these invitations?”

Blair looked up from the list she was perusing as her secretary came inside the room. It still felt weird to her that she had her own personal assistant and had balked at the idea at first. Until Marianne had insisted on it.

Rather than arguing with her mother-in-law, a task that often ended in futility, she had acquiesced and reluctantly agreed that it was needed.

As the wife of an immensely powerful man, there were lots of responsibilities and their social calendars were often overflowing. Cayden had an assistant at the corporate office who often liaised with her assistant so that things ran smoothly.

“I need to see them before you do anything.”

Glenna brought them over and placed them in front of her.

Blair had chosen to use the smaller library as her office and as soon as she had settled on the lovely green and gold room, with the sliding glass doors that looked out onto the east side of the garden, provisions had been made by her husband to outfit the room and turned it into a fully functional office.

She seated herself at the elegant desk, its surface an immaculate expanse of polished wood. Blair took a moment to absorb the tranquility of her surroundings, letting the serene ambiance bolster her resolve.

The estate was not just a place of residence; it was a testament to the life she had built and the sacrifices she had made. Yes, it had its burdens, but it also held the promise of the future she yearned for.

Her thoughts drifted back to the forthcoming procedure, a culmination of hope, desperation, and careful planning. She could almost feel the weight of the tiny embryos, the potential lives, cradled in the safety of her womb.

She knew the risks, each one a specter looming over her dreams. Blair had always been pragmatic, but this venture required a blend of pragmatism and unrelenting hope.

Marianne's insistence on a personal assistant had been just one of the many adjustments Blair had had to make since marrying into the Caruso family.

It was a world of opulence and influence, where every move was scrutinized and every gesture held significance. Blair had navigated this world with grace, but it had not been without its challenges.

She picked up the invitations, each one a symbol of the social duties that came with her role. As she scanned through them, her mind was already aligning them with the other demands of her schedule.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“These two will have to wait.” She made her decision swiftly. It had become easier, deciding what to accept and what not to. In the initial stage, she had called Cayden for every single thing and had been intimidated to say the least.

She was from a simple family and had been plunged into a world of tremendous wealth. She was also the only Black person in the family and that had given her a bit of a worry and insecurity.

“The luncheon will have to be rescheduled until my husband gets back.” She initialed her response and hesitated briefly on the pleas from a children’s home she had adopted. She engaged in a number of charitable events. In the past, she had taken on too many, until she found herself inundated with begging letters.

Marianne had told her firmly that she cannot expect to save everyone. She had suffered guilt that she was wearing enough jewelry in one setting to clothe and feed several children for years and going on as if everything was right with the world.

When she expressed her distress to her husband, he had sat her down and instead of brushing aside her concerns, had explained that she can only do so much and no more.

“You are already doing your part darling, leave it at that.”

“Do up a letter and a budget and let me have a look at it.” She read the request again. “I was supposed to check into this, but did not have the time. Thanksgiving is almost here, and we need to do something for these children.”

“And this?” Glenna planted her ample frame on one of the padded silk chairs, her round chocolate colored face reminding Blair of the principal of the school she had taught at before her marriage.

Blair looked up, meeting Glenna’s gaze with a thoughtful expression. “This is a request from the children's home. They need additional funding for the Thanksgiving event.”

Glenna nodded approvingly. “You’ve always had a big heart for those kids.”

Blair smiled warmly, appreciating the support in Glenna’s voice. “I just want to make sure they have a memorable day.”

“We can tighten up the budget in other areas,” Glenna suggested, her tone pragmatic. “Prioritizing the children’s event seems right.”

Blair nodded, feeling a wave of relief at Glenna’s reassurance. She turned back to her desk, her mind already abuzz with plans and arrangements.

The estate, with all its grandeur, had become a place where she could channel her energy into meaningful causes. It was not just about the social events and the opulence; it was about making a difference, one step at a time.

“Thank you, Glenna,” she said softly, her fingers deftly moving across the keyboard to draft the letter.

Glenna’s gentle presence was a reminder that amidst the complexity of her new life, she had found allies who understood her heart.

“You have a luncheon appointment with Kelly and Leesa to discuss the fall charity ball.”

“I had completely forgotten about that.” She looked at her desk covered with various folders and assortment of letters demanding her attention.

“I will clear up some of those.” Glenna was already sweeping things into a pile. “By the time you get back, I will have the letters ready to be signed.”

“Thanks.” She was about to push away from the desk when her phone rang. “It’s Cayden.”

“I will get started on these,” Glenna left discreetly and closed the door behind her.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

Blair closed her eyes as his deep voice sent warmth throughout her body. She loved him so much that it was impossible to even verbalize it at times. She had spent the last week or so, resolved to fight for her marriage.

“I miss you.”

Her heart took a quick dive, and she wanted to believe that he was yearning for her the way she was yearning for him.

“When are you coming home?”

“Not for another week.”

Her heart sank. “I see.”

“Are we going to start another argument?” There was a hint of impatience in his

voice. “You know the craziness we have going on here and I asked you to stay.
Christ, Blair...

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

You have been gone for almost three weeks now and I would demand that you get your sexy ass on the plane and come back, but you would only refuse. I have a job to do, and it has to be done.”

“I miss you too,” she told him softly. “The bed is too big, and the suite is empty. I am sleeping in one of your t-shirts. It smells like you.”

There was a pause, and she had to smile as she imagined what he was doing. She had managed to diffuse his anger; she was certain of it.

“Blair, I hate this distance between us,” he said, his voice softer now, tinged with regret. “But I promise, once this project is over, we will have time for just us. No interruptions.”

She sighed, feeling the weight of their separation lift slightly with his words. “I am holding you to that promise, Cayden. We need this time together.”

“I know,” he replied. “I will make it up to you. Candlelit dinners, long walks on the beach - everything you love.”

Blair smiled, picturing the two of them reunited, their lives less chaotic. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Till then, keep wearing my t-shirt and remember how much I love you.”

“I will,” she whispered, feeling a pang of loneliness but also a glimmer of hope. “Take care, Cayden.”

“You too, darling. Talk soon.”

As she hung up the phone, she took a deep breath, determined to stay strong. The door opened, and Glenna reappeared, her arms filled with meticulously organized letters.

“Everything alright?” Glenna asked, sensing the emotional turbulence.

Blair nodded, straightening her shoulders. “Yeah, just missing my husband. But I will manage.”

Glenna gave her a sympathetic smile. “You always do.” She placed the letters on the desk. “Ready for your luncheon?”

Blair glanced at the clock and stood up, smoothing her skirt. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

With renewed determination, she walked out of the office, ready to face the challenges ahead.

If someone had told her she would be rubbing shoulders with the likes of Leesa Wellington and Kelly Takahashi, two former international models who had married powerful men, she would have laughed them out of the room.

She and Monique Romano had become fast friends because of the similarities in their backgrounds. Monique had also been a schoolteacher who had met her husband while vacationing in Italy. It had been her story that had helped Blair to adjust to her now lifestyle.

The restaurant was one that was owned by Kelly, and was elegant and understated, the food delicious and the service one of the best because Kelly demanded nothing less. She and her husband owned restaurants all over the world and somehow they were never in competition with each other.

The couple were still very much in love as they had been from the beginning. It amused and fascinated Blair to see the usually taciturn Kane gazing at his wife as if she were the only woman in the world.

The three women had become her friends as well as the long line of 'wives' who had somehow formed a clique.

But as much as she loved these women, she could not tell them yet, what she was doing. Their husbands as well as hers belonged to the same exclusive club and even if she swore them to secrecy, it would somehow slip that she was going through the procedure.

She had already told her dad what she was about and was feeling guilty about telling him over her husband. She did not want to think about his response when he found out what she was up to, and she refused to put it on her mind.

"There you are." Kelly exclaimed as she escorted to their table by the Maître D."

"I am so sorry I am late. Cayden called just as I was leaving."

"Pierre, we will have the lobster bisque and instruct Anthony to see me as soon as I am finished here."

"Yes Ms. Kelly." The man bowed respectfully, before hurrying away.

Kelly turned her full attention to Blair, her eyes twinkling with curiosity. "How's

everything going with the new project?" She asked.

Blair managed a smile, her mind briefly flitting to the secret she was keeping. "It's coming along," she replied, keeping her tone light. "Lots of moving parts, but I think it's going to be great."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

Leesa leaned in; her interest piqued. "Anything we can help with?" She offered, her voice warm and sincere.

Blair shook her head, grateful for her friends' support but determined to navigate this challenge on her own. "Not yet," she said, "but I'll let you know if I need anything."

Monique, ever perceptive, raised an eyebrow but said nothing, her silence a testament to the trust and understanding that had developed between them. She knew better than to press Blair for details, knowing that her friend would share in her own time.

As the conversation shifted to lighter topics, Blair felt a wave of relief. She allowed herself to relax, savoring the camaraderie and the delicious meal. The laughter and shared stories provided a much-needed respite from the concerns that had been weighing on her mind.

"Alright ladies." Leesa spoke up. They were having the chocolate truffle, and champagne which Blair had refused. "I have another meeting when I leave here and need a clear head."

This was her excuse as the women stared at her curiously. "We want bigger and better this year. Aside from the usual fundraising efforts – focusing of course on the hospitals, and children's homes, we are faced with increased homelessness in several nearby states. There are also the victims of the devastating fire in LA."

"What about a concert?" Kelly suggested.

"That's going to take a hell of a lot of planning and with winter approaching, we need

to send help to the victims as soon as possible.” There are also the families in Haiti and the Philippines.”

As they continued to brainstorm, Blair realized what she loved about these women. They were powerful women married to powerful men but had never lost sight of who they were.

They cared. It was that simple. They were sophisticated and were movers and shakers in their own rights, but at the end of it, they were influential in making a difference. She had questioned herself numerous times about falling for a man like Cayden Caruso, if she had aimed too high and if so, what were the consequences.

But she knew without a doubt that she wanted to be like these women seated around the table. Making a difference to people who needed the help.

“Honey?”

She looked over at Kelly and realized that she had zoned out and the conversation had lapsed.

She quickly gathered her thoughts and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, I was just thinking about how we can make a real impact this year."

Kelly nodded, her gaze thoughtful. "It's a lot to consider, but I know we have the capability to pull it off. The concert idea could be a cornerstone event, drawing in significant funds and attention."

Monique chimed in, "We could partner with some high-profile artists. They often have a keen sense of social responsibility and might be willing to perform for a worthy cause."

Blair's mind raced with possibilities. "We could also leverage social media to spread awareness and encourage donations. It is amazing how quickly information can travel and how many people we can reach."

Leesa leaned back, a thoughtful smile on her face. "I love where this is heading. Let us start organizing teams and delegating tasks. We need all hands-on deck to make this happen."

Blair felt a renewed sense of purpose. The magnitude of their goals was daunting, but with the collective strength and dedication of these women, she believed they could achieve anything. And perhaps, in the process, she would find the confidence to reveal the secret she had been holding close to her heart.

"I was also thinking about my life. I was catapulted into fame and fortune when I married Cayden, and it frightened me."

"You are not the only one." Monique reminded her with a laugh. "I endured the comments that I married for money, and I was out of my league." Her eyes danced merrily. "And I agreed with all of it. My husband was movie star handsome, and I was only regular."

"There is nothing regular about you," Leesa reprimanded her., "you have managed to put your particular stamp on a company that was already established. That is no mean feat."

"Sometimes I feel like I am being swamped." Monique admitted ruefully. "The company, being a mother and wife to a man who makes me want to hit him over the head and love him at the same time."

The others laughed.

“We all face similar challenges.” Leesa murmured as she took a sip of her wine. “Being married to Bradley is often a chore.” She toyed with the stem of her glass, her expression thoughtful.

“People on the outside looking in would assume we have perfect lives. But one never knows what goes on in a marriage. We have our difficulties, but the truth is, I would never change it for anything in the world. Even during the troubled times, I am still in love with my guy.”

“Hear! Hear!” Kelly lifted her glass in a toast and the others followed.

“Blair, I know you have been going through your challenges.” Monique offered in her quiet voice. “But you will get through it. And we are here if you need us.”

She felt tears threatening and felt guilty that she could not share with her friends, not yet, not completely. “Thanks. I really appreciate that.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

Blair pressed a shaking hand to her stomach. Step three was in place. The implantation was finished and now it was a waiting period. Dr. Melbourne told her that she could see results as early as three to four days and she was counting on it.

Her husband was coming home over the weekend, but she was still not going to tell him anything yet. She would keep this from him as long as possible.

There was also another factor. She had insisted on multiple embryos in order to even the odds and chances are she was carrying twins or even triplets. The idea of that was making her so excited, she could barely contain it.

If she had multiples, she would no longer have to worry about doing this again. She would have all of her children in one go.

Sitting out in the parking lot, she started praying, like she had never prayed before. She would focus on the positive. This was going to save her marriage. The rumors were still floating around, and one very pushy and malicious reporter had asked her if her marriage was on the verge of collapsing.

She had given the woman a freezing look that had her slinking away. And had been tempted to call and ask Cayden for reassurances. Taking a deep breath, she turned her mind to what was happening inside her body, a smile touching her lips.

Chapter 3

He simply stood there inside the doorway of their pale gold bedroom and took her in. He had come ahead of the rest of his family because he was impatient to see her.

Three weeks was more than enough time to be away from her and he was unable to bloody sleep without her.

She was seated in front of her vanity mirror, brushing her hair. It was her nightly ritual, and it felt comforting. They had been at odds for too long, It was time to fix things. His body stirred slowly, heat spreading throughout his body as he gazed at the creamy caramel complexion through the transparent blue silk robe.

As if just sensing his presence, she looked up and saw him reflected in the mirror. Her smile came slowly, blooming first in her magnificent eyes and then her sultry lips. Putting the brush away, she turned around.

“You’re back!” Her voice was sultry, a hint of smoke and sex.

“Yes.” He steadied himself for a minute and tried to quiet his heart. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“You sure did.” She stayed where she was, even though she wanted to run into his arms. Her gaze was uncertain, and it broke his heart a little bit to realize that she was not sure where she stood with him. “Is everyone else here?”

He shook his head and belatedly realized he was just standing there. Pushing away from the door jamb, he walked towards her and dropped to his knees. “Hi.” His hands slid up her thighs, feeling the silkiness of her skin. “You just showered.”

“Yes.” One hand went to his face, her expression luminous. “Just now. Lord, I missed you.”

“Did you?” Moving his head, he used his tongue to caress her palm. “How much?”

“This much.” She used one hand to shrug out of her robe, revealing that beneath it

she was completely naked.

“Were you expecting me?” His breath was coming in ragged spurts as he gazed at her breasts with her nipples proud and already erect, Bending his head, he circled the nipple first with his tongue and then scraped it with his teeth.

She screamed! The reaction was violent and explosive as he continued to torture the sensitive nipples with teeth and tongue. She was pregnant and that was definitely one of the very pleasurable side effects.

As if realizing that she needed the release, he cupped her sex and that was all it took. The climax slammed into her with a fury that had her back arching, her body trembling.

“More.” He whispered harshly, face hard and taut with passion. Sliding two fingers into her musky moisture, he stroked the flesh and had her climaxing again.

Her body was trembling, breasts quivering and the sight of her, his woman, his wife, his lover, coated with passion and sweat, her lips parted, he went mad. His control was shredded. Dragging her down with him, they both fought to get rid of his clothing.

Buttons flew as they rolled on the lush gold carpet in a frenzied effort to take off his clothes. With a grunt, he toed off his boots and kicked away his trousers. He was hard as the proverbial rock and vibrating with a need so raw and potent, it ripped through him like a jagged saw.

Wrapping his hands around her narrow waist, he settled her on top of him. She sheathed him, her tightness gripping him until he felt his breath whooshing from his body.

Rearing up, he seized her mouth, tongue foraging, tasting her familiar sweetness. Her fingers dug into his flesh, racing up and down his back as she rode him, milking him, until he felt as if he was dying.

Surely, he could not survive this! Her body arched again as the climax ripped through her slender body. He came then, driving into her and watering her with his seed. Ending the kiss, he cradled her, face buried in the side of her neck, his long, lean body shuddering.

They stayed that way, wrapped around each other. He was still wearing his socks, and their clothing were strewn all around them. This was what he had been missing, night after night, sleeping alone in that big bed in their ancestral home.

“We should try and get up,” he murmured.

“Hmm.” She stroked his neck, the hairs growing thickly at his nape and smiled when she felt him still shuddering. The passion had always been fierce between them, but the three weeks absence had sharpened it to the point of violence.

“That was some welcome home gift.” He lifted his head to give her a quizzical look. “Perhaps I should go away more often.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“I would not recommend it, especially now.” She had decided that it was time to share her news.

“Why, especially now?” He eased up, balancing her in his arms and stumbled towards the bed. She was still wrapped around him when he flopped back on the pillows. He was going to make love to her repeatedly, until they were both exhausted from the lovemaking.

“I have news.”

“Oh?”

“It has happened.”

“What?” He gave her a puzzled stare.

She brushed back tendrils of dense dark hairs from his forehead, fingers trailing the length of his sculpted jaw, the bristles of his shadow rubbing against her skin.

“I love you.”

“I love you too. What is going on?”

“We have been trying so hard and now it’s happened, and I feel like dancing.”

“Darling...”

“I am pregnant,” she blurted out.

“What?” He blinked at her, not fully comprehending what she just said.

Her smile was dazzling, eyes sparkling. “We’re pregnant, darling.”

“How? We have not made love in...”

“A month.” She nodded, a shadow crossing her lovely face. “We had help.”

“I don’t understand.”

“IVF.”

“I am sorry? What?”

“IVF.” She felt the tension in his body and rushed on to add. “Dr. Melbourne is one of the best in the field and we’re working together...”

“Implantation.” His voice had gone deadly quiet, sending shivers up and down her spine. “How?”

“Remember I insisted on you freezing your sperm in case we decided...”

“You decided all on your own without discussing this with me?”

He was slowly withdrawing, and Blair felt the coldness invading her body.

“We discussed...”

“I know damn well what we discussed.” He eased her off and had to fight to remain

calm. “We agreed to wait and let nature take its course.”

“We have been waiting for five years.” She pointed out. Feeling naked and vulnerable, she tugged at the sheets and wrapped them around her. “I got tired of waiting.”

She flinched at the look on his handsome face.

“So, you went behind my back and did this.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“Then consider your work done. I am damn well surprised. In fact, I am quite over the surprise and have now gone into shock.” He slid off the bed and went to get a robe from the closet. Dragging it on, he turned to look at her. “Why in the hell do you need me? You obviously have everything covered.”

“I know you are angry...”

“I am way past that.”

“But in the long run you’re going to see that I was right.” Her face took on a pleading expression. “It happened on the first try...”

“So, that’s why you came back home early.” The look on her face told him he was right. “You lied to me.”

“I didn’t...”

“You deliberately started an argument so that you could leave, so I would let you leave.”

“Let me leave?” Her eyes flashed. “I am not a child.”

“You went behind my back and did this because you knew I would never agree to it.” He was so angry; he could hardly stand it. “We discussed how dangerous...” He dragged his fingers through his hair. “The risks involved. How you could lose your life...”

“Dr. Melbourne assured me that I will be carefully monitored.” She spoke rapidly, feeling the fear spiking her heart. They had discussed the enormous risks and how they ran the risk of losing some if not all of the babies. She had read where several mothers had died in the quest to chase after the IVF dream.

“I will be careful. I will do everything the doctor orders.’ Her voice broke slightly. “Just..., please, give it a chance.”

“You gave me no choice,” he said harshly. “You took it away from me.”

“Because you would not listen to reason!” She cried. “Do you know how I felt each time I miscarried? Like a failure. Less than a woman. I have seen the way your parents look at me, especially your mother.

She was able to produce three boys! Three! And I have not been able to carry a child to full term. You are the heir to the company and that means it’s on you to produce a son.” She rubbed her hand over her mouth. “I had to do something. And if you cannot understand that – then...” She broke off abruptly.

“What I cannot understand is why you went behind my back. Why the secrecy? Why couldn’t you have waited? You just turned thirty...”

“And my biological clock is ticking so much, it’s driving me crazy.”

He stared at her for a full minute, before turning on his heels.

“Where are you going?”

“Away from you,” he told her coldly, “if I stay, I am very likely to do or say something that I will no doubt regret.”

She sat there as he slammed out of the room.

Burying her face in her hands, she took in several deep breaths. She had hoped that his coming home and the lovemaking that had followed would be enough to soften his opinion., He had surprised her.

She had looked up and saw him standing there and her heart had started beating like a trapped bird fluttering to escape. The thick dark hair carelessly tousled no doubt by the breeze, the black silk shirt that made a stunning contrast to his tanned skin.

Broad shoulders she loved to cradled her head on and a chest wide enough to burrow into. The scent of him, the feel of his thickness inside her had fooled her into thinking he would be on board.

That he would understand why she had to do what she did. Moving her hands from her face, she dragged her fingers through her hair. How could he not understand that she had begun to question herself.

That she felt inadequate and riddled with guilt. That she kept asking herself that if he had married someone else, they would have had a son by now. She had to do something.

She knew the risks of course. She had not just jumped into something she did not understand. She had studied the effects and consequences at length, and she was willing to take the chance. It was not only for her, but it was also for both of them. She was tired of feeling like an outcast and less than a woman.

Swiping the tears from her cheeks, she slid down and curled into a ball. She should go and find him - force him to talk about it. But she knew her husband and knew when to leave well enough alone for now.

He was gone the next morning when she woke up. A terse note had been left on the bedside table. 'Gone to play tennis with a friend. Will probably be away for dinner as well. I am not ready to talk about this yet.'

She read the note twice before folding it and putting it in the drawer. She was about to get up when there was a discreet knock on the door.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“Come in.” She pushed herself up and hoped she did not look as awful as she felt.

“Ms. Blair...” Her personal maid, Maria, beamed at her as she hustled in with a tray. “Mr. Cayden said I should bring you something. He just had coffee as usual” She placed the tray on the bed next to her.

“I could not even persuade him to have some of chef’s delicious croissants. They are freshly baked.” The woman chattered on as she went about picking up the clothing that she had forgotten were still on the carpet. Embarrassment swamped her and she tried to explain it away.

“Uhm, my husband..., he...!”

“No explanations necessary.” The woman beamed at her as she draped the articles of clothing over one ample arm. “Would you like me to draw you a bath?”

“No thank you,” Blair shook her head. “I am going to spend the day with my dad, and I think I am in time to attend services at his church.”

“Wonderful!” The woman clapped her hands. “I will pick out something for you to wear.”

Blair opened her mouth to stop her, but realized she did not have the strength and her appetite was non-existent. It had taken her several hours to finally fall asleep and it had been a very restless one.

But she had to get out of this luxurious prison. And church was a sanctuary, she

needed right now. Picking up the tray, she did her best to eat some of the food.

He drove the Porsche. It was appropriate for the ‘need for speed’ he needed at the moment. His eyes were gritty from lack of sleep, and he could feel the anger burning inside his gut.

He had stood by the bed staring at her huddled under the sheet and felt the anger and fear vying for supremacy. And he was bloody furious. She had taken on something that had a hell of risk attached to it.

They had discussed it at length, gone over every detail, done their research. And had decided, both of them had come to a decision not to take that direction, not yet. The doctors had examined them thoroughly and assured them that there was no logical or medical reason they could not produce a child, they just needed time.’

He had seen her retreat a little more each time she was pregnant, and it ended in a miscarriage. She had cried bitter tears and had withdrawn into herself every time it happened. It broke his heart to see what a failed pregnancy did to her.

The last one was just six months ago. Dammit to hell! He pressed his foot down and the car jumped forward, engine purring as he gave it speed. He had no bloody idea where he was going. All he knew was that he had to get away. He could not be in the same space with her. Not now!

“Are we going to talk about it?”

Turning her head, she gave her father an absent smile that did not quite reach her

eyes. The service had been wonderful and had given her a much-needed respite from her troubles. But now she was seated in the cozy living room with a fire burning at her back and the tiredness invading her bones.

“I miss mom so much,” she said suddenly, trailing the gold belt tied around her waist through her fingers. “Her quiet demeanor and the way she always seemed to know exactly what to say.”

“She certainly had a way with words,” Blake handed her a cup of tea, “I am making beef stew.”

She nodded and took a sip of the tea. “Mom would tell me what to do or how to deal with this.”

“I don’t think her talent would have extended that far.” Her father said gently. “Honey, what happened? You showed up here, just as I was heading out for church and have not said a word. I am assuming you told your husband about the pregnancy.”

She nodded, tears clouding her vision. “He’s very angry.”

“Angry that you’re pregnant or that you went about it without telling him?”

She lifted a shoulder listlessly. “I think it’s both.”

“Honey, what did you expect?”

Her tear brightened eyes sought his. “What else was I supposed to do?” She demanded.

“Let nature run its course. I know you want children, but we have a way of trying to

play God. You have it in your head that you have to give your husband an heir and that thought has been channeling your decisions, taking over your life. I know you, Blair.

Whenever you get something in your head, it stays there and nothing can move it.” He smiled wryly as he sat back in the comfortable rocking chair.

“You inherited that from your mother. She would get an idea and latch onto it with both hands.” His expression turned wistful. “And you’re right, she would know just what to say in a situation like this.” He stared at her for a moment. “I am afraid for you. Afraid that in your quest to have children, you have gone too far.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“I am not just doing this for him. I want to be a mother, and you know how much.”

“Yes. But some things are better left to the Lord. Sometimes we take things into our hands and end up making a bigger mess.” Scooting forward, he took the cup from her and took her hands in his. “I am sincerely praying that this is not one of those times.”

She ate in her private salon. Their suite took up an entire wing of the house and consisted of three bedrooms with en suite bathrooms, an office where her husband did his work whenever he was home, a gym, a small library, a kitchen, a sitting room and her green and white salon that overlooked the east garden – a pretty as a picture wooded area, with a dazzling display of pink and white begonias, tulips and a scattering of red and white roses.

There was a view of the tennis court as well as the gazebo nestled between two towering redwood trees. When she had first moved here after the wedding, she had the idea of cooking for her husband. The kitchen was well stocked with supplies, and she loved to cook.

But over time, the sheen of new marriage had worn off, and her desire to cook had given way to a ritualistic solitude in her salon. She found comfort in the routine, a semblance of control in an otherwise uncontrollable life.

The garden's beauty was a balm to her strained psyche, a reminder that life, in all its forms, persisted stubbornly and with grace.

His mother had taken her aside and told her in a firm and unyielding tone that the wife of a Caruso did not have time to be domestic and they had numerous staff to see to their needs.

“My dear, you are going to be too busy with other things to worry about making a meal for your husband.”

She had mentioned it to Cayden, and he had waved it aside, agreeing with his mother.

“Why on earth would you want to spend your time slaving over a hot stove when we have an excellent chef to do just that?”

She had left it alone, realizing that the difference between them was glaring. She loved to cook and would have found pleasure preparing a meal, even closing themselves off from the rest of the family and simply dining alone with each other.

The dinners at the manor were stifling and formal and one was required to dress for them. Thankfully, each member of the family was so busy, they rarely sat down to a meal more than a handful of times.

As she sat alone, the memories of their early days together flooded her mind. How they had laughed, shared dreams, and made plans for a future that seemed so bright.

Now, those dreams were clouded with the weight of unmet expectations and the silent, festering wounds of loss. She wondered if they would ever find their way back to each other, or if the growing chasm between them was now too wide to bridge.

Moving the fork around the plate listlessly, she forced herself to enjoy and partake of the delicious orange duck Anthony had prepared especially for her. She got along well with all the staff because she treated them well. She had once asked Maria to call her Blair, and the woman had looked at her with a horrified expression on her face.

“Ms. Marianne would not allow it.”

And that was the heart of the matter, she decided. She was not mistress of this place. Her mother-in-law was. Marianne Caruso’s word was law, and no one dared to go against her. Blair wanted her own home, where she got to make decisions. She wanted her own family and could see nothing wrong with working to make that happen.

Chapter 4

A full week had passed since the argument. A week during which he had avoided speaking to her except when it was necessary. He came back to their bedroom after the first night, but the big bed was as wide as an ocean and he made certain to stay on his side. She had enough pride to stay on hers.

He would leave exceedingly early in the morning and would not be back home until late. She filled her day with her various activities and tried not to let the pain of his anger and silence get to her. Dr. Melbourne had warned that she should try and stay away from stress.

“The procedure alone is difficult without an added element.”

So, she immersed herself in her own duties. The plans for the Fall Gala were well underway and she was actively involved in the planning itself. She would be meeting with the girls twice a week to prepare.

And the family was back. Which meant that more people would be privy to her business and would notice the tension between her and her husband. She hated that. Hated the fact that they could not have an argument without getting others involved.

His brothers were okay enough and she suspected that Clive had a crush on her,

something her husband had made a comment about.

“He’s just being friendly.”

“It had better be just that,” he had growled. When he said it at the time, it had caused a warm glow inside her.

Dinner last night had been surprisingly pleasant, with everyone still riding the high of the success of the latest vintage. They were so distracted; they did not seem to notice that she was not drinking the perpetual wine with dinner and that she and Cayden were barely communicating.

Last night had been like the others since the argument, cold and barely civil. She was not certain how much longer she could take it.

And they had a function later tonight. His assistant had called to remind her of it. A glittering affair which involved the movers and shakers in the wine industry. She was dreading having to dress up and smile as if everything was okay.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

But she was required to attend. As Cayden's wife, she was going to have to put on a brave face and stand at his side. She had left prematurely when they were in Italy and the papers had picked up on that, making a big deal out of it.

She was responding to an email when she looked up as the door was pushed open.

"Clive." Her smile was warm and sincere as she watched him move across the room with the same grace as his brothers. They had each inherited their father's thick dark hair, but only her husband had the green eyes of his Irish ancestry. "Hi. What are you doing home in the middle of the afternoon?"

"Would you believe I am dodging work?" He asked with a winsome smile, gray eyes scanning her finely-boned face as he took a seat next to her desk.

"Not for a second. What is up?"

Clive leaned back in his chair, his easy manner belying a certain intentness in his gaze. "Actually, I wanted to check on you. You seemed a bit off last night, and I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

She sighed inwardly, appreciating his concern but wary of the potential complications. "I'm fine, Clive. Just dealing with a lot right now."

He nodded, accepting her answer at face value, but she could tell he was not entirely convinced. "If you ever need to talk, you know where to find me," he said softly.

She gave him a grateful smile, trying to alleviate the awkwardness. "Thanks, Clive. I

appreciate it."

"You and my brother okay?" He prodded.

She hesitated a bit. He was friendly and had been one of the first person to welcome her into the family. But even so, she could not discuss her personal business with him.

"We will be, eventually." She toyed with the crystal paperweight Cayden had given her just a few months ago. "Marriage is complicated." She let out a swift laugh and shook her head. "That sounds too much like a cliché."

"Only it's not." He gave her a sage look. "It must be bloody difficult to be married into a family like this. Everything we do makes the news and you cannot go and get a damn cup of coffee without it being reported the next morning. I have been born into it, and it still makes me crazy."

His expression softened. "You are married to Cayden and his reputation has an added element to the excitement.

The press salivates over even the slightest hint of tension. They are going to dig for a story and more than likely make one up." He leaned over and took her hand. "You cannot let it get to you Blair. I have heard the rumors and know for a fact that my brother is not cheating on you."

Her hand jerked in his slightly, but he held on.

"Rumors have a way of stemming from a kernel of truth. I saw him with Claudine..."

"That's history." He squeezed her hand gently and allowed his touch to linger. He liked her a lot and cursed the fact that his brother had gotten to her first. And he could

also see the unhappiness on her lovely face and cursed his brother for adding to whatever it was she was going through.

“Is it?” She shrugged and pulled her hand away. “In the meantime, I am going to have to play nice at the function tonight.”

“I’ll be there,” he flashed her a smile, “take comfort in that.”

She smiled at him. “I will. Thanks, Clive.”

As he stood to leave, she could not help but notice the subtle but unmistakable tension in his posture. He paused at the door, turning back with a thoughtful expression. It is going to be quite an event."

She nodded, feeling the weight of the evening ahead pressing down on her. "I can imagine. I just need to finish up a few things here."

"Alright. I will see you there," he said, his smile not quite reaching his eyes as he left the room.

Alone again, she allowed herself a moment of vulnerability, sinking into her chair with a weary sigh. The evening loomed large and daunting, another stage where she would have to play her part. But for now, she could take solace in the brief reprieve, gathering her strength for the performance to come.

She had chosen one of the sexiest outfit in the vast closet. When she moved in after she married Cayden, adjustments had been made to the suite. His closet was already department store huge, so there wasn't the need for any extensions.

Designers had come in just to make some adjustments which included, shelves for her shoes, hundreds of them, bags, purses, and totes. Then there was the revolving racks for her clothes – designer gowns, everyday wear, suits, outer jackets, sweaters, jeans, and scarves.

When she had seen the finished result, it had left her staggered and more than a little overwhelmed. She had protested that there was no way she was going to be able to wear most of the outfits, but her mother-in-law had set her straight.

“You are no longer a schoolteacher, but the wife of an enormously powerful man. The press will be relentless and will make a note of every outfit you wear. You are not only Cayden’s wife, but you are also representing the Caruso’s family. Bear that in mind!”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

It had sounded like a threat and the way she had said ‘schoolteacher’ made it seem as if Blair had been doing prostitution for a living. The woman had made it plain from the beginning that Blair was not good enough for her son.

Tonight, she was going to dazzle and call attention to herself. In the months to come, she will probably be wearing tents. Dr. Melbourne had also warned that there was every likelihood she would be carrying multiples and in that case, she would start to put on weight quite rapidly. She was not going to think about any of it tonight.

Not the fact that she was pregnant, and the risks involved, nor the pain of her husband not speaking to her. Any of it. She was going to focus on having a damn fun time. Her friends were going to be there and even if it meant flirting with a few men, including her brothers-in-law, then so be it. And to hell with everything else.

“What the hell are you wearing?”

It was the first time he was seeing the dress as she removed her cashmere jacket and handed it to the attendant. They had dressed in separate rooms and by the time he came to escort her downstairs, she already had the jacket on.

“What does it look like?” She lifted her chin defiantly and met his furious gaze.

“If you intended to draw attention to yourself, you accomplished it.” His searing gaze slid down and rested on the tantalizing flesh exposed above the body of the stunning raspberry colored dress. The top was styled in a way that left her shoulders and most

of her back bare and swirled around her legs whenever she moved.

Diamonds glittered at her throat, lobes and around her left wrist. Her hair was loose, the dark brown strands glowing past her shoulders. Her makeup was flawless, thanks to a crash course given to her by her personal stylist. Her lips, the bottom one full and inviting, were coated with the exact shade of her dress.

Before her marriage to Cayden, her only enhancement was slapping some lip gloss on and calling it a day. Now her vanity unit consisted of enough to outfit the beauty section in a store and what they cost could feed a third world country for weeks. She had tried to stop feeling guilty about it, without success.

She was turning away when he took her arm and slid it through his arm. His body was tight with tension, and she felt nerves pulsing off her in waves. She was about to call a truce when she caught a glimpse of a familiar face.

“Claudine. What the hell is she doing here?” The ballroom was packed with people, the women vying with each other in terms of clothing and glitters. But she saw none of that, except the woman who was holding court with several men gathered around her.

“She hitched a ride with me last week.”

Pain radiated inside her heart, and she felt as if she was dying.

“She came with you. In the jet.”

His mouth tightened at her look of disbelief.

“Yes!” He clipped. “It was no big deal.”

“Big enough for you not to mention that tiny detail when you came home.” She started to drag her hand away when he clamped his hand over it to keep her in place.

“People are watching,” he hissed.

“I don’t give one blessed damn about appearances.” Her eyes flashed fire. “You had your mistress...”

“She’s not my damn mistress.”

“She rode on the same plane with you, the private jet. What did you do? Cozied up on the bed and spent the eight hours whiling the time away by having sex?”

“I will not grace that with a response.”

“No wonder, you came back loaded with guilt. Did you leave straight from her arms and come to mine?”

“This is neither the time nor the place!”

“You never mentioned once that she was with you.”

“It was no big deal. She asked for a ride, and I said yes. We were involved years before I met you...”

“The rumors are true.” Blair felt her heart breaking as she stared at the stunning blonde. Very soon, she was going to be fat and bloated and Claudine was back in the states to keep her husband comforted. “You picked a fight because you wanted an excuse to be with her.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” His voice was sharp. Sensing the interest of several people, he

steered her into a corner to give them some privacy. “I had that argument because of what you damn well did.”

“And have been ignoring me for a week.” Hurt and pain radiated through her and left her breathless. “Go to her, see if I damn well care.” Pushing him away, she evaded his hand and hurried off.

“Blair.” He hissed. “Dammit it all to hell.”

Grinding his teeth, he considered marching after her and hauling her in a private room to have it out. But he could not afford to give the press fodder for more gossips and speculations. Changing directions, he headed straight for the bar, his expression causing everyone to give him a wide berth.

He wasn't in a festive mood. And he was especially not in the mood to have a discussion with his mother.

Hissing out a breath, he put the glass down and turned to greet her. The look in her eyes had him sighing.

“I am fine.”

Tucking her hand through his arm, she led him away from the bar and some very curious eyes.

“Are you?” She asked, smiling at the couple who were passing by and giving them curious stares. “Your wife is over there making quite a spectacle of herself. You are drinking and Claudine is holding court. Not to mention, people saw you and Blair arguing as soon as you entered the ballroom.”

She expertly plucked a glass of champagne from the passing waiter and turned to face him, the glass acting as a prop. “You know better than to air your dirty laundry in a room filled with society's gossips. It is clear you and your wife are having problems.”

“That’s nobody’s business.”

She nodded. “It should not be, but we are who we are and what we do makes news.”
She squeezed his arm gently. “Darling, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head firmly, eyes sizzling. “I am not discussing my wife with you or anyone else.”

“Cayden...!”

“Drop it – What the hell does he think he’s doing?” The furious look on his face had her turning to see what was happening and stifled a sigh.

“They are just dancing.”

“My brother is going to feel the strength of my wrath if he doesn’t let her go.”

“And if you march over there, you are going to cause a scene.”

“Do I look like I bloody care?”

Her hand pressing on his arm managed to anchor him. Taking a deep breath, he tore his gaze from the couple on the dance floor and stared at his mother. “She’s doing this deliberately because of some foolish notion that I am involved with Claudine.”

“Are you?” She asked him gently.

“Really mother? You too? I am sick and tired of being accused of something I have not done. Granted, I did not tell Blair that Claudine was on the plane with me back from Italy, but that was because I was trying to avoid a bloody argument.”

“And you don’t think her finding out after, would make her wonder if you had something to hide?” She persisted.

“I have nothing to hide.” He jerked his head up and almost exploded at the sight of his brother with his hand riding low on her back. Her bloody bare skin. The dress was almost transparent, what there was of it and it dipped low enough to make him realize that she was not wearing anything underneath.

Damn her! Damn her for making him so crazy, he wanted to kill his own blood.

“Excuse me.”

“Cayden...”

“We’re leaving.” His face was hard and taut with fury. “If you don’t allow me to depart now, I am going to end up doing something to give this entire room a bloody show.” Taking her hand from his arm, he walked away. He went first to the attendant to retrieve their coats and avoided conversations with people who wandered into his path.

Waiting until the song had ended, he barely managed a civil expression as Clive brought her over.

“We’re going to talk brother.” He said tightly.

“Undoubtedly.” He handed Blair over with a flourish and to further aggravate Cayden, he lifted her hand and kissed the knuckles lightly. “Thanks for the dance.”

“We’re leaving.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“I am not going anywhere with you.” She told him haughtily.

“You think you have a choice?”

She started to ignore him, but instinct warned her that he was on the brink of exploding.

“I should say goodbye to...”

“Not bloody likely.” Practically shoving her arms into the coat, he hustled her out of the room, by gripping her tight and steering her through the crowd. He did not seem to care that they were garnering a lot of attention.

“What’s that about?” Alberto asked his wife as he came to stand next to her.

“Jealousy.” Marianne sighed softly. “And another story for the eager looking reporter from ‘Tell All’ to write.”

Out in the chilly night air, Blair struggled to regain her composure as Cayden's grip on her arm remained unyielding. The valet came running to claim the key fob while they waited. Cayden’s anger was palpable, a storm barely contained beneath the surface of his usually composed demeanor and Blair thought it prudent to remain silent.

Once inside the car, the silence was deafening. Blair could feel the tension radiating off him in waves. She wanted to confront him, demand an explanation for his rash behavior, but the words caught in her throat. Instead, she stared out of the window,

watching the city lights blur as they sped away from the party.

“Where are we going?” She demanded when the tension became too much for her to bear.

“Just shut the hell up!” He snapped. “Do you have any idea how close I was to losing control back there?” Cayden’s voice was low, but the intensity of his fury was unmistakable.

Blair turned to face him, her own anger bubbling up. “And what right did you have to drag me out of there like that?”

His eyes blazed as they met hers. “I could not stand to see him touch you. Not Clive, not anyone. You belong to me.”

Her breath hitched at his words, a mix of anger and something else she could not quite define. “You cannot control me, Cayden. I am not some possession you can claim.”

“You’re mine.” He repeated, his voice dangerously low. “Don’t you ever forget that.”

Clamping her mouth shut, she turned her head away to stare out at the blur of lights as the city faded behind them. A frown touched her forehead when she noticed they were going in the opposite direction from the manor. He was driving fast and very soon the city was behind them, the lights giving way to a more rural area.

“Where are you taking me?” She turned her head to look at him and his profile had her catching her breath. His face was harsh and taut, his mouth tight. His knuckles gripping the steering wheel had turned white.

“Are you attracted to him?”

“What?”

“My brother. The way you two were carrying on earlier, leaves me to wonder if something is going on.”

She simply stared at him. “Have you gone mad?”

He slid a glance at her, his eyes lingering on her lips and for some reason, which made him even more furious. “What are you wearing under that scrap you call a dress?”

“A nude colored teddy.”

“When did you buy it?” He asked tightly.

“When we were in Italy.”

“And you decided to wear it to entice the men at the party, including my brother.”

Her eyes flashed. “I wore it because I liked it. I certainly do not need to entice anyone. Including you.”

He did not answer, and she saw when he touched the left turn signal that took them towards a gravelly road with trees towering on both sides.

“Where are we?”

“Somewhere we can be alone.” His mouth twisted as he slowed the vehicle down.

“We need to go over some rules.” He brought the vehicle to a halt outside a very rustic looking cabin. “One – this is the first and last time you will be wearing that dress.”

“You cannot...”

“Two, you are going to start behaving like my wife and three, we need to talk about the pregnancy that I am not on board with. Four...” He grabbed her hand as she made to shove the door open. “You stay the hell away from my brother.”

“You’re being unreasonable.” She felt her heart jumping with fear at the stark look of fury on his handsome face.

“Unreasonable?” Letting go of her hand; he shoved his door open and came around to open hers.

“Get out.”

“You don’t...,” she gasped as he simply reached in and hauled her out of the vehicle.

Chapter 5

She stumbled, trying to regain her balance as he let go of her. The gravel crunched beneath her shoes; the sound ominously loud in the quiet forest. The air was thick with tension, and the cabin loomed ahead like a dark specter of their unresolved issues.

He did not speak another word until he fished the key from the flowerpot (She had no idea people still did that!). Shoving the plain red door open, he stepped back and allowed her to precede him inside. It was a large open area, with a big enough fireplace.

The fire blazing in the hearth emitted a warmth and coziness that was immediately felt. Pulling her coat around her protectively, she walked into the living area and stood by the fire, waiting for him to resume the argument. She stood there watching as he paced in a tight circle, his brow furrowed.

Shoving his hands into the pocket of his black dress pants, he came to a stop in front of her, eyes wandering over her face.

The silence stretched, weighted with unspoken words, and simmering resentment. She could feel her heart racing, her hands trembling slightly as she clutched her coat tighter. Finally, he broke the silence, his voice low as if he was trying to hold onto his temper.

“I was warned not to marry you.”

She jolted at that, her heart quivering. The hurt of his unexpected comment had her lifting her chin, determined not to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he had pierced her.

“You can always divorce me.”

His eyes flashed. “Divorce? You want to be careful how you throw out that word.”

“What do you want me to do? Grovel and beg you not to leave?” Her anger mounted as she faced him squarely. “If you want to go, if you feel as if you have made a mistake, then let me make it easy for you...” She started to tug at the rings, gasping when his hand clamped over hers crushingly.

“I should have listened.” He continued harshly, eyes blazing. “I should have waited before begging you... Yes! Damn you! I begged you to marry me. And that gave you the power. Leave?” His fingers tightened even more.

"I cannot leave! You have me wrapped around your little finger. I cannot stop wanting you. It is like a sickness inside me. The first time I laid eyes on you; I wanted to make you mine." He flung her hand away and resumed his pacing.

Blair watched him, eyes tracking his movements, her heart in a turmoil. Their first encounter and even the ones after that had been volatile to say the least. His words just now had her feeling weak. But she was careful not to say anything to set him off even more.

Blair took a deep, steadying breath, trying to calm the whirlwind of emotions inside her. The crackling of the fire was the only sound in the room as she watched him struggle with his own storm. The weight of his confession hung between them, heavy and potent.

"I didn't ask for this," she said quietly, her voice trembling despite her efforts to keep it steady. "I didn't ask for you to feel this way, for either of us to feel this way. But here we are."

He stopped pacing, his eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that made her heart skip a beat. For a moment, the anger and frustration seemed to dissipate, replaced by something raw and genuine.

"Here we are," he echoed, his voice softer, almost defeated. "What do we do now, Blair?"

She shook her head, her gaze dropping to the fire. "I don't know, but we can't keep tearing each other apart like this. It is not fair to either of us."

He stared at her for several ticking minutes and felt the emotions storming through his body. The first time he laid eyes on her, something passed between them.

He had felt the prickle of awareness that was so potent, he had almost made a fool of himself, right then and there. He, who had always been able to go in and out of a relationship without looking back had finally met someone he could not say goodbye to.

He had been bold and charming, trying to get her into bed. He had invited her back into the café for another cup of coffee and she had refused. He had then persisted and followed her until he became her unofficial guide. But to his constant frustration, she had refused to sleep with him.

At first, he had thought that as soon as he had sex with her, his life would resume, that he would go back to being the person he was before he met her. But he had underestimated her influence on him. Just kissing her had blown him away. After that, it had been impossible for him to keep his hands off her.

And he had bloody well tried, determined that no woman would ever hold that much control over him. But she had and still did. Even after five years, she still had the power to twist him inside out.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

Turning away, he walked over to the window, broad shoulders hunched.

Easing out of the strappy sandals that were pinching her toes, she lowered herself into the chair next to the hearth and stretched her legs out. And waited. She could tell he was tormented.

That had always been a bane of contention between them – the feelings, and emotions. They had rushed into marriage after just a month of meeting each other. When she realized who he was, she had been horrified and had tried to end things, but he would not let her.

But by that time, it had been too late for her. She had fallen for him. She who had always been so sensible and pragmatic, had fallen for a man who looked like a movie star and was from one of the most powerful families in the world. They defined wine and were Italian royalty.

She was a simple schoolteacher – the only excitement had been this trip to Italy and one to the UK during a package outing that her school had sponsored. She lived with her dad, unwilling to leave him on his own after her mom died and the house was large enough so they could both have their space, if needed.

As she sat there, the warmth of the fire seeping into her bones, memories of their tumultuous relationship flooded her mind.

His relentless pursuit, their whirlwind romance, the passion that had ignited between them - it all seemed like a distant dream now. She had been so naive, so unprepared for the intensity of his love, and the complications that came with it.

He finally turned to face her, eyes going to her bare feet and the shoes dumped next to the chair. Memories swamped him. The first time they had spent together in his suite, how tidy she had been, picking up after herself even though he had reminded her that they had people who did that sort of thing.

“I am not used to having someone picking up after me,” she had protested.

Her disappointment when she could not use their kitchen to prepare meals for them. He had indulged her several times and had relished the absolute joy on her lovely face when she puttered around in the kitchen.

He could not stay mad at her. Just looking at her sitting there, with that sense of vulnerability about her was making him weak. Shrugging out of his suit jacket, he laid it carefully over the arm of the sofa and walked towards her with deliberate slowness.

He was still mad, the anger raw inside him, but for now, he wanted her with an intensity that was bordering on insanity.

His steps echoed in the silence of the room, the tension palpable, almost tangible. As he approached, she looked up, her eyes reflecting a mixture of apprehension and longing.

He stopped a few feet away, his gaze locking onto hers, and for a moment, neither of them spoke. The air seemed to thrum with the unspoken words, the unresolved emotions that had built up over the years.

He knelt in front of her, his hands resting on her knees, and she felt the warmth of his touch seep through the fabric of her dress. "I can't keep doing this," he murmured, his voice low and hoarse. "I can't keep pretending that I don't need you."

She reached out, her fingers brushing the stubble on his jaw, and he closed his eyes, leaning into her touch. "Then don't."

Green eyes sizzled and sent shivers up and down her spine. His touch burned through the flimsy fabric like paper. Her breath hitched and her heart started its irregular beating. He could always undo her with just a look and right now was no exception.

With a muttered oath, he lifted her in his arms and carried her out of the room.

He carried her up the stairs, each step he took echoing in the quiet house, and pushed open the door to their bedroom.

The moonlight streamed through the windows, casting a silvery glow over the room. He gently laid her on the bed, his eyes never leaving hers, and for a moment, they simply stared at each other, their breaths mingling in the cool night air.

Her fingers moved to the buttons of his shirt, undoing each one with a delicate yet urgent grace. As she pushed the fabric off his shoulders, he leaned down, capturing her lips in a kiss that was at once tender and demanding.

It was as if all their pent-up emotions, the anger, the longing, the love, were poured into that kiss, binding them together in a way that words never could.

He broke away, his lips trailing down her neck, eliciting a soft moan from her. She arched into him, her hands threading through his hair, pulling him closer. It was a dance they knew well, a dance of passion and desire, of love and need.

Each touch, each caress, was a reaffirmation of what they shared, what they had fought for, and what they had lost and found again.

The argument was far from being resolved, they both knew it, but for now, the

passion consuming them was all that matters. And it had to be dealt with. Had to be appeased.

The beast inside him was raging to be let loose. As it had been since she stripped away the jacket and the dress was revealed.

Desire and fury had waged a way inside him, until he felt as if he was boiling from the residue. He yanked the material barely covering her breasts and made a sound deep inside his throat like a man dragging in his last breath.

He ripped the cloth in his haste to get more of her and felt his body quivering when she arched and offered the breast for him to feast on.

The sounds coming from her, animal passion, moans filling the room was enough to drive him insane!

His teeth grazed her skin, sending electric shocks through her, and she clung to him, her nails digging into his shoulders. The room seemed to vanish, leaving only the two of them, a whirl of sensations and emotions. Their connection was primal, raw, a testament to the depth of their bond.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

He removed the last barrier of clothing, his hands skimming down her body and lingering on her flat stomach. Lifting his head, he met her gaze, for the moment, his expression unguarded and filled with such promise and love that it had the tears burning at the back of her throat.

Bending his head, he worshipped her flesh, using tongue and teeth until she felt as if she was going blind from intense need.

The first time he had gone down on her, the very first time for her, she had been shy and horrified and had tried to stop him. With laughing ease, he had brushed away her timidity and took her to such levels of passion, she thought she had died.

It had taken her months to be comfortable with such intimacy and even longer to return the favor. Over time, she had gotten bolder, when she realized that there was no pretense, that she really had a powerful hold over him. And that her touch was enough to send him over the edge.

Parting her thighs, he settled between them, hands lifting her towards his mouth. A ragged sigh escaped her and turned into fevered moans as he brought her to the brink of madness.

His tongue stroked her slowly, lavishing her with the familiar emotions that she had never understood or quite got used to. The climax washed through her like quicksilver, lifting her trembling body closer.

Moving away, just enough so that he could rid himself of his clothing, he covered his body with hers, sliding into the wetness that closed around him like a tight wet fist.

He stayed still for a few seconds, head bent towards her, his breath stirring her skin.

He brushed her lips against hers slowly, back and forth, deliberately holding back, his large body was shuddering, his heart racing until it was drowning out everything else. Then he moved. Driving into her with a precision that also deliberate. She shattered him. Being with her like this made him forget everything else.

As their bodies moved in harmony, the world outside ceased to matter. Every kiss, every touch was a declaration, a promise of their undying devotion. The intensity of their passion was almost overwhelming, but it was also liberating, a release of all the tensions and uncertainties that had plagued them.

Time lost its meaning; they were suspended in a moment of pure ecstasy. Her cries of pleasure mingled with his groans, creating a symphony of love and desire. The moonlight continued to bathe them in its ethereal glow, witnessing the fervent reunion of two souls who had found their way back to each other.

Finally, exhausted and sated, they collapsed into each other's arms, their breaths ragged. The room was filled with the soft sounds of their contentment, a stark contrast to the earlier fervor. They lay entwined, heartbeats gradually slowing, the warmth of their bodies a comforting reminder of their union.

He brushed a stray strand of hair from her face and kissed her forehead tenderly. "We still have a lot to talk about," he whispered, his voice hoarse but filled with a newfound softness. She nodded, a small smile playing on her lips.

"But for now," she murmured, "let's just be here, together."

The air around them was thick with the lingering essence of their passion. As they lay there, enveloped in the quiet aftermath, their minds began to wander, reflecting on the journey that had brought them to this moment.

It had been a path filled with twists and turns, heartaches, and triumphs, but through it all, they had remained steadfast in their love for each other.

His fingers traced idle patterns on her back, each touch a silent reaffirmation of his commitment. "We've come so far," he said softly, his voice barely more than a breath against her ear.

She smiled, the curve of her lips gentle and serene. "And we have so much more to look forward to," she replied, her own hand moving to rest over his heart, feeling the steady, reassuring beat beneath her palm.

They fell into a comfortable silence, each lost in their own thoughts yet perfectly attuned to the other's presence. The moonlight still streamed through the window, casting a silver sheen over their entwined forms, as if blessing their union.

Minutes gave way to hours, and the quiet night cradled them in its embrace, a promise of the many tomorrows yet to come.

Eventually, sleep began to claim them, their bodies sinking deeper into the mattress, limbs still entangled. As her eyes fluttered closed, she felt his lips against her temple, a final, tender kiss before they surrendered to the peaceful oblivion of dreams.

Nothing was resolved. She knew it the minute she woke up the next morning. The sun was streaming through the thick red drapes when she opened her eyes. Last night had not been a figment of her imagination. She could still feel the faint bruises, the pressure and soreness of her nipples and the tenderness between her legs.

It had been real. The lovemaking had been tumultuous as usual. He had whispered raw and potent words in her ear as he drove himself to the hilt inside her. She had

responded in kind, holding him against her desperately, calling out his name in a fit of passion. And she had left her own bruises on his chest and back.

He was not lying next to her. She had fallen asleep with his arms wrapped tight around her – while she nestled against his chest. But this morning the bed was cold, indicating that he had risen some time ago.

It dawned on her that they had not spoken about her present situation. She had told him she was pregnant, and he had not said anything except angry words. Her heart shuddered as she also recalled that he had said he was not on board with the pregnancy. Where did that leave them? She wondered dismally.

She was just climbing out of bed when he opened the door and stepped in. Her heart did the familiar somersault as she stared at his raw masculinity. He had shed the jacket and tie. The two top pearl buttons were undone, giving her a glimpse of his strong throat.

His dense dark hair was tousled as if he had spent some time raking it with his fingers. The tail of his shirt was outside his pants, but aside from that, he was fully dressed.

His eyes lingered on her delightful dishevelment. Her hair was tangled, her eyes still sleepy and sexy as hell. Her lips were swollen from the hungry kisses he had enjoyed last night. She had drawn the covers up over her breast, but he could still see the imprint of her nipples. Desire stirred inside him but was ignored.

“I was hoping you were awake. We have to leave.” His voice was cool and formal, causing her heart to sink. “I have an urgent meeting with some associates from overseas. I had completely forgotten that I promised to show them the vineyard in California. I put your jacket on the bedpost.” He jerked his head towards it.

“And your shoes are right here. I am afraid the dress is completely ruined.” His mouth twisted slightly. “No great loss there. I made coffee for myself, and I am guessing that it is tea for you?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“Yes.” So, he was not going to mention the pregnancy. Well, then- tamping down the hurt, she slid her legs off the bed and reached for the jacket.

He stood there for a few seconds as if trying to decide whether to say anything else and then without a word, turned and left the room.

Fighting the tears, she slipped on the jacket and buttoned it up. The good thing about it was that it provided warmth and was able to cover most of her body. They were going back to the manor where, no doubt, the staff would be awake, if not the family and she just wanted the chance to slip into their suite unnoticed.

He was in the kitchen drinking his coffee and standing at the window when she entered.

“The tea is on the counter.” He did not turn around but continued to stare out the window. “The trip last night was hasty, and I did not get the chance to alert the caretakers of our arrival. Hence the empty cupboards.”

He turned around then, his expression carefully schooled. He looked so detached that she wondered if it was the same man who had unleashed such passion on her last night. The same one who had called out her name in the throes of ecstasy.

“We could stop somewhere if you’re hungry.”

She shook her head and went to pick up the cup of tea she did not want.

“I love you.” He said abruptly, expression bleak. “Whatever else is between us, I

want you to remember that.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

He smiled grimly. “For now, yes.”

She swallowed hard, feeling the words, she wanted to say lodge in her throat like a stone. The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken feelings and unresolved issues. Her fingers tightened around the cup, seeking some form of comfort from the warm ceramic.

Tossing back the rest of the coffee, he put the cup away. “I will be out in the car.”

Chapter 6

“Oh Maria, please set the tray over there by the window seat. I need to finish this before I think about eating.”

“I intercepted Maria.” The sound of the familiar voice had her spinning around, one had automatically flying to her untidy hair.

“Marianne.” As usual, her mother-in-law made her feel frumpy and awkward. It was early afternoon, and she always managed to look both cool and sophisticated. She was wearing a chic black and pink tweed skirt suit and had a string of luminous pale pink pearls around her elegant throat.

Setting the tray in the designated spot, she turned in a tight circle to take in the room. “I have not been here since you made the changes.”

Blair held her breath and waited for the subtle criticism. “You went with bold colors. The splash of red and blue is quite distinctive.” Green eyes so much like her eldest

son, zeroed in on Blair. "It's lovely."

"Thank you." Shoving her paint-stained hands into the pockets of her smock, she rocked back on her heels. "I thought you were out for the day."

"The boys are all out." It always amused Blair that she close to lump all of them including her husband in the same category.

She gestured towards the unfinished painting on the easel. "It looks familiar."

"A cabin that we stayed last night."

The woman studied the painting for a minute, before walking over to drape herself gracefully on a padded chair. Sighing inwardly at the intrusion and unwelcome visit, Blair took a seat on the stool she had been using.

She shifted uncomfortably under her mother-in-law's scrutinizing gaze. The tension in the room was palpable as Marianne's presence always seemed to bring a certain level of unease to Blair's otherwise normal tranquility.

Marianne raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. "Just for the evening. Well, I have some business to deal with in town."

Blair nodded, unsure of what to say next. The silence stretched once more, interrupted only by the distant hum of conversation from elsewhere in the house. She felt an overwhelming urge to return to her painting, to lose herself in the world of colors and brushstrokes where everything was under her control.

Marianne nodded thoughtfully. "Your work has always been... unique, Blair. You have a gift."

Blair blinked in surprise. Compliments from her mother-in-law were rare, and she found herself momentarily at a loss for words. “Thank you,” she finally managed, her voice softer than she intended.

As Marianne continued to appraise her surroundings, Blair allowed herself to hope that perhaps, this time, their interaction might end on a positive note. But she knew better than to let her guard down completely. The past had taught her that much.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

She had relaxed enough that when Marianne spoke again, the shock could not be hidden.

“You’re pregnant.” Marianne gestured towards the tray that Blair had yet to take in. “I asked Maria to include a glass of milk.” A smile touched her coral painted lips at the look on the girl’s face. “My son confided in me.”

“I asked him not to.” The sense of betrayal was too much to bear on top of what they were currently going through and only highlighted the fact that there was no sense of privacy in this household. There were too many people involved in the marriage for it to stand a chance.

“He is concerned.”

“There’s no need for that.” Blair said stiffly as she rose to pace, her mind in a turmoil.

“Isn’t there?”

“No.” She turned to face the woman, dark eyes flashing. “And my husband had no right talking to you about something that concerns both of us.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong.” There was a steely inflexion in the soft cultured voice. “It involves the entire family.” She waved a hand as Blair started to say something. “I have not said anything to the rest of the family yet.” Green eyes wandered over the delicate slender frame, covered by the shapeless smock.

“You did IVF, and I would like to wager that you are now carrying either twins or

triplets. Which means there will be complications.” She folded her elegant hands in her lap. “My son has reasons to be concerned about what will happen in the ensuing months.”

“Is that what he’s doing now?” She asked bitterly. “Instead of talking to me, he’s running to you?”

The woman’s face became taut and cold. “Cayden is a very private individual and has always been. I could not help but noticed the tension between the two of you.” Her expression softened slightly.

“You think I am not sympathetic to your plight. I have seen the way each miscarriage weighs heavily on both of you. He never spoke about it, even when I encouraged him to do so.”

“I suppose you are going to tell me that I should have waited.”

The woman surprised her by smiling. Rising gracefully, she brushed an invisible lint from her immaculate attire.

“Let’s just say that I admire your persistence.” She flicked a glance over the girl’s face. “He loves you. For the first time in his life, he is in love and has no idea what to do about it. Because it is the first for him, he is also afraid of losing you. You might want to think about that.” She left, her delicate and expensive perfume lingering behind.

Blair stood there, watching Marianne's retreating figure, her thoughts a whirlwind of emotions. The day had taken an unexpected turn, and she struggled to make sense of it all. The tension between her and Cayden had reached a boiling point, and now this revelation from his mother left her feeling even more conflicted.

She walked to the window, gazing out at the garden below, the vibrant colors of the flowers doing little to lift her spirits. The weight of the conversation settled heavily on her shoulders. She knew Marianne's words held some truth, but the way she had delivered them felt intrusive and unwelcome.

Blair's mind drifted back to the early days of her relationship with Cayden. They had been so in love, so full of hope and dreams for their future. But the miscarriages had taken their toll, creating a chasm of grief and unspoken fears between them.

She realized that they had never truly addressed the pain, instead allowing it to fester and grow.

She hated the fact that he had confided in his mother, had spoken to her about their personal business. She had not wanted him to say anything until she was past the worst.

He was barely speaking to her, the weight of his anger and silence was weighing on her. It was as if last night had not happened. Sitting heavily on the stool, she stared at the painting.

She remembered every tiny detail of the cabin, the weathered logs, fading into a dull sheen of brown. The thick wooded area surrounding it. She would have loved to take a walk and explore. She had caught glimpse of what looked like a lake and an old rickety bridge.

Picking up her brush, she dipped it into the paint and made a sweep over the canvas. She had majored in education and minored in art when she was in college and had seriously thought of taking up painting for a living. She had been to several art galleries before she met Cayden and had often admired Jackson Colby's contradictory works.

The first time she met him she had been speechless. She was not the type to go wild over meeting a celebrity, but Jackson had been her inspiration for years and meeting him in person had floored her.

But his acerbic sense of humor and easygoing manner had immediately put her at ease. It had also amused him that Cayden had deliberately interrupted the conversation between them.

“Need I remind you that I am happily married?”

“It seems that you are the one who needs reminding.” Cayden growled. “Back the hell off – she’s completely mine.”

The memory of that moment brought a smile to her lips. She had been so eager to please him and his family. When they started going out, she insisted on learning everything there was to learn about the business.

“Everything?” He had asked her in mock horror.

“Yes,” she told him firmly. “I don’t want to be sitting or standing in a room with your associates at a function, not having any idea what’s being said.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

He had been pleased that she was taking an interest and made an effort to teach her.

She knew about the five steps before she even heard it from him. The first step being the harvesting, when the grapes are picked from the vines. Then comes the crushing and pressing to extract the juice from the grapes. The fermentation stage when the yeast converts sugar into alcohol.

The clarification and aging and bottling. She had sat around the dinner table where the entire topic was wine and the making of it. She had caught up with the process and heard enough times that some grapes had been picked less ripe to produce wines with higher acidity. She had listened and made notes, much to her husband's amusement.

Before she met him, she and her dad had enjoyed a glass of wine bought from the liquor store a few blocks from their home. It never occurred to her to wonder about the arduous process from vines to bottle made ready for consumption.

She had become fascinated enough to do her own research and had been pleased when her husband noticed her knowledge on the subject.

Wine was consumed at every meal and below, there was a vast cooling room with thousands of bottles of rare vintages. She attended auctions and wine tastings, traveling to several places with him while he attended to business.

Putting away the paintbrush, she pushed to her feet and went to get the tray. She had a life or two growing inside her and even if she was not in the mood to eat, she had to. Things were different now.

“Gilchrist seems to be having a hell of a time.”

Cayden’s eyes narrowed as his brother lowered himself into the chair next to him. “What are you doing here?”

Signaling for the wait staff, Clive ordered a glass of blended scotch.

“The same as you.” He nodded towards the group of men having an avid discussion over glasses of the light table wine that was now a household name. “I had finished with my meeting early and decided to tag along.”

Accepting the drink with a murmur of thanks, he lifted his glass in a toast before taking a sip.

“I am perfectly capable of pulling this off on my own.”

Clive nodded equably, ignoring his brother’s querulous tone. “We all know how adept you are at solving problems.” He took another sip and decided to dip his feet in. “Except where your marriage is concerned.”

He was prepared for the reaction and was not surprised when Cayden lurched forward, his face wreathed in fury.

“Stay the hell out of my private life and away from my wife.”

Clive laughed softly and shook his head. “A little jealousy goes a long way in improving a relationship.” He held up a hand when Cayden started to move closer. “Remember that we are in a public place entertaining prospective investors. And I did see that pesky reporter from ‘Tell All, lurking around.

We would not want to give him something titillating to write about.” His face hardened fractionally. “That said, I happen to care very much for Blair, and she is terribly unhappy. I do not what the hell you had to do with it, but my instinct tells me it has something to do with you.”

Cayden clenched his fists under the table, his knuckles turning white. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to relax and maintain a composed facade. "Blair's happiness is none of your concern, Clive," he said through gritted teeth, "focus on your own affairs and leave us be."

Clive arched an eyebrow, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Oh, but it is my concern, dear brother," he replied smoothly. "You see, Blair and I have always been close, and I can't stand by and watch you drive her away."

The tension between the two brothers was palpable, drawing the attention of the other patrons in the room. Cayden knew Clive was right about one thing - this was neither the time nor the place for a confrontation. He took another deep breath, trying to calm the storm brewing within him.

"Let's get through this evening without any more drama," Cayden said, his voice low and controlled. "We can talk about this later, in private."

Clive nodded, appearing satisfied for the moment. "Agreed. But remember, Cayden, I will be watching. And I will always have Blair's best interests at heart."

As the evening wore on, Cayden struggled to focus on the discussions at hand, his mind constantly drifting back to Blair and the strained state of their marriage. He knew that Clive's words, though infuriating, held a grain of truth. He needed to find a way to mend the rift between them before it was too late.

He brooded through most of the evening. He had not called her, not wanting to be

distracted by their problems. Caruso Vintage was breaking into the mainstream vintage, Table wines, the superb quality minus the exorbitant cost.

Bottles that could be purchased at a local liquor store or be seen in the local supermarkets. And it was his brainstorm, something he was working on along with a team he had handpicked.

His family was well established, had been for more than a hundred years and he wanted something that had his name attached to it. He told himself that it was not because of ego or maybe it was. But he had confessed to Blair that he did not want the position handed to him just because. He wanted to make his own contribution.

Before he met her, none of that mattered. When he started going out with her, the overwhelming love, the raw passion, the need to be with her had planted something deep inside him. he no longer wanted to be the idle rich.

Yes, he went to the office and applied himself because he had been brought up in the wine business and before he could even ride a bike, he had been taught the basics. Wine was in his blood and that was the case for all of them. They could not escape it, even if they had a desire to do so.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

But then he had met her, and his focus had changed. It was an insidious change, one that had happened without him realizing it. But it was there. Before he knew it, he wanted to be better for her. He wanted her approval.

He wanted her – all of her. The fight and tension between them was killing him, but he could not get over the fact that she had gone behind his back on something so bloody life changing.

Underneath the anger, there was the fear creeping in. He could not lose her. It would destroy him.

As the night drew to a close, Cayden found himself standing alone on the terrace, the cool night air a stark contrast to the warmth inside. The city's lights stretched out before him in a dazzling display, but they did little to ease the turmoil within. He leaned against the railing, gripping it tightly as he tried to collect his thoughts.

Clive's words echoed in his mind, intertwining with memories of Blair - their laughter, their whispered secrets, the way she looked at him with those eyes that seemed to see straight into his soul. He closed his eyes, taking a moment to breathe in the crisp air, hoping it would clear his head. It was a futile effort.

Shaking off the fatigue and worry, he turned and walked back into the hotel, determined to let it go for now.

‘Spending the night with my dad. I have an appointment at the clinic tomorrow if you

are interested. Blair.'

He read the text message twice. It was terse and abrupt, and he supposed he deserved it.

He was hurting her and could not seem to stop. He was festering in a morass of anger and pain and was unwilling to let it go.

Of course he was going with her to the clinic. How could she think otherwise? He thought angrily.

He was on his way back home, after an almost entire day of negotiations that had gone well. Now he was going to the manor and sleeping in a bed that was too big without her in it.

Even when they were mad at each other, just her presence next to him was enough to anchor him. Before he could change his mind, he called for her number and very soon, her sultry voice filled the interior of the car, caressing him, winding through him like silk.

"Cayden?"

"Hi. I got your message. Is your dad all right?"

"He is. I decided to come and cook him dinner."

"Something you never really get to do."

"No!"

There was an awkward pause as if neither of them knew exactly what to say next.

“This appointment. What is it for? Just a regular checkup or something else?”

“Just a routine check.”

There was a small pause again as he made the left turn that would take him home.

“You’re staying the night.”

“Yes. Dad is feeling a little under the weather, and I want to make certain he is okay.”

He parked just outside the perimeter, somehow reluctant to go in. “Is it serious?” He was not his father-in-law’s favorite, and the man had made that plain enough.

Blair was his only child, and he treasured her, especially since he had lost his beloved wife. He also did not think Cayden was good enough to be her husband. He was probably right, Cayden thought dismally.

“I think it is just a cold and his blood pressure is a little high. I am persuading him to rest.”

“Is that something you should be taking on? Shouldn’t you be resting as well?”

“He is my father and I am all he has. Do you expect me to abandon him?” Her voice was steeped in frustration.

“I did not mean...” Sighing, he leaned back and closed his eyes. “We keep arguing. Christ, I hate this.”

“You told your mother.”

He stiffened at the accusing note in her voice.

“I did, yes. She wanted to know what is going on and I told her. For your information, it will become obvious soon enough.”

“I wanted to wait...”

“Until what. Exactly?”

“Until I am safe enough. Until I know what is happening.”

“You mean until you know if you are carrying multiples.” It still pissed him off that she could not or would see the danger she had unnecessarily put herself in.

“Yes.”

“I am sorry if that offended you, but it’s done. I will see you tomorrow. Would you like me to pick you up?”

“No. I will meet you there.”

“Alright then, goodbye.” He hung up before he could say something to drive them further apart. If that was at all possible at this point. He did not want to take a turn into the driveway. The last thing he wanted was to go upstairs to his suite, to the scent of her perfume and look at her stuff.

He had become that person. A man who could not survive or function without his woman and it was officially pissing him off. He was also upset that she had not cleared with him before deciding to spend the night at her dad's place.

As if saying it to him would have him objecting. They were husband and wife for God's sake and spending nights away from each other was unacceptable. But so was freezing each other out and behaving like complete strangers.

He sat there for a moment, running his hands through his hair, the weight of their strained relationship pressing down on him. The car felt like a sanctuary, a place of temporary escape from the escalating tension that had woven itself into every conversation they had.

He had trouble remembering the last time they had spoken without an underlying current of frustration or misunderstanding.

The house loomed before him, dark and silent, an uninviting fortress. He knew he had to go inside eventually, but the thought of facing the emptiness was almost unbearable.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped out of the car and made his way to the door, each step heavy with dread. Fortunately, he did not encounter any of his family. He knew his parents were out for the evening as well as his brothers. He declined the offer from the maid, who offered to take him up a tray.

He trudged upstairs to their suite, avoiding looking too closely at the pictures on the walls or the knick-knacks on the shelves. It was only when he reached the sanctuary of their bedroom that he allowed himself to collapse onto the bed, exhaustion and sorrow washing over him.

Yet, even as he tried to convince himself of this, a small, nagging doubt gnawed at

the edges of his resolve. What if this was the first stage of failure? What if the love they once shared was irreparably broken?

These questions haunted him as he lay there, the silence of the room pressing in on him, amplifying his fear. Hissing out a breath, he rose and went into the bathroom.

Chapter 7

They both stared at the doctor in something akin to shock as he imparted the news, but Cayden was the first to recover.

“Quadruplets. As in four babies? Is that what you just said?”

“Yes.” Dr. Melbourne looked back at Blair, his expression a little guarded. “We will be carefully monitoring...”

“No. No.” Cayden lunged to his feet, his face a mask of fury. “We are not skipping past this. My wife is not equipped to carry four babies, and you damn well know it. David, let’s talk about the incredible risks, shall we? Tell us right now, what we are up against and I don’t want it sugar coated.”

“Cayden...”

“No!” He repeated, turning to spear her with angry green eyes. “You wanted this. You fought for it, went behind my back to do it. Now we are going to hear the consequences.” He looked back at the doctor who had moved away from the monitor. “Well?”

“I... It’s a risk as we discussed before,” he intoned reluctantly. “As with every pregnancy...,” he paused as Cayden snorted. “The risk is increased four times.”

“You are playing around with words,” Cayden snapped.

“I am doing my best to ease the fear you have created for your wife.” The doctor responded tightly. “Look, I know you’re scared...”

“Out of my damn mind!”

Dr. Melbourne nodded in understanding. “There’s a risk...”

“I already know all of them.” Blair spoke up quietly. “Pre-eclampsia, gestational diabetes, postpartum depression and the babies will have to be delivered via C-section.” She eased up and used the tissues available to wipe the gel off her belly.

Ignoring Cayden, the doctor pulled up his stool and rolled towards the side of the examination bed. “This is an exceedingly rare occurrence and only one other I have been fortunate to be part of years ago.

I will gather a team immediately in order to monitor your progress...” He stopped as he heard the door slam shut and realized that Cayden had left the room.

The silence that followed was as thick as the tension in the room. Blair turned her attention back to the doctor, her hands trembling slightly as she clasped them in her lap. Dr. Melbourne gave her a reassuring smile, though it did not quite reach his eyes.

"Blair, I want you to know that we will do everything in our power to ensure the best possible outcome for you and the babies. We will schedule regular check-ups, and you will have access to a team of specialists."

Blair nodded numbly, her mind racing with a thousand thoughts. She had fought so hard for this, but now, faced with the reality of carrying four babies, the enormity of the situation began to sink in. She could not help but feel the weight of Cayden’s anger and fear pressing down on her.

"Thank you, Dr. Melbourne," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He gave her a small nod. "Take care of yourself, Blair. Rest as much as you can and try to stay positive. We will get through this together."

Blair managed to make a weak smile before pushing herself off the examination bed. As she gathered her things, her mind drifted to Cayden. She knew he was scared, possibly more than she was, but his anger had cut deep. She needed him now more than ever, but she feared the rift between them was growing too wide to bridge.

Stepping out of the room, she glanced down the hallway and saw Cayden standing by the window, his back to her.

She took a deep breath and walked towards him. His profile was etched in stone and when he turned towards her, his expression did not soften. Moving towards the doors, he pushed it open, allowing her to precede towards the parking lot.

They walked to the car in silence, the icy wind of winter tugging at their jackets.

Christmas had come and gone with the usual flurry of activities. On the surface, they appeared to be a happy couple, but it had been weeks since he touched her. They existed in a bubble of unspoken words and teeming emotions.

He had built up a wall, she could not breach it. Besides that, she had been feeling lousy. The fatigue was getting to her as well as the sickness that persisted throughout most of the day.

He slammed the door shut as soon as she entered the passenger side and came around to sit in the driver's seat. She watched out of the sides of her eyes as he white-knuckled the steering wheel. She was scared. She had hoped for twins at least and had wanted to even the odds. But four babies was a lot to contend with.

It would mean in a few months; she would be bedridden. She was now ten weeks gone and had started showing in her breasts and her tummy. She had started wearing clothing to hide the fact that she was rapidly putting on weight.

But now the time has come for them to tell the rest of the family. Added to that, the press would soon get wind of the fact that she was pregnant. How much they could keep in the family, she did not know.

“Cayden...”

“Don’t!” He turned to face her, and she felt her anger and fear dissolving at the tormented look on his handsome face. “Damn you Blair! I asked you to wait, just give it some more time. Oh God!” Lifting his hands, he dragged his fingers through his hair and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Jesus! Jesus! I wished to God I never met you. I wished to God that I never decided to walk into the crappy café at that time. I would have missed you then and I would not be faced with this god awful fear that’s crippling me.”

“I love you.”

He turned to face her and laughed, harsh racking sounds that echoed in the car. “You love me. Well baby...,” he growled. “I am way past that. You possess every inch of me.

Everything. And I...” Breaking off abruptly, he pushed the start button and backed out. “We will announce the ‘good news’ at dinner tonight. It is understandable if we miss the wine and cheese party this Saturday.”

“I don’t want to...” She eased back with an intake of breath when he whipped his head to glare at her.

“From now on, you are confined to the suite. Is that bloody clear? You wanted this so badly; you are going to damn well follow the rules.”

“I know you’re angry...”

“I am way past that.” It was late afternoon, and the traffic had built up. He had several appointments but had called to reschedule all of them. He was in no frame of mind to face anyone and discuss business.

“It’s going to be fine.” She insisted, trying her best to diffuse his anger. “The good thing about it is we have the resources and Dr. Melbourne is already gathering a team to make certain I have the support.” Her eyes went moist.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

"I just need yours. Your support is the most important part of all this. Without you..." She inhaled a shaky breath. "I cannot do this on my own Cayden. If you want me to apologize for jumping ahead, then I will do so again. But please, I need you."

Cayden's grip on the steering wheel tightened even further, his knuckles turning a stark white. The weight of Blair's words hung heavily in the air, mingling with the tension that had cocooned them both. He knew she was right, but the fear gnawed at him relentlessly, poisoning his thoughts and actions.

The car ride was silent, save for the occasional hum of the engine and the distant thrum of traffic. When they finally pulled into the driveway, Cayden turned off the engine and sat there for a moment, his jaw clenched. Blair watched him, her heart aching, wanting so desperately to bridge the chasm between them.

"Cayden," she said softly, reaching out to touch his arm. He flinched but didn't pull away. "We can get through this. Together. But not if we keep letting this fear control us."

He exhaled deeply, a shuddering breath that seemed to carry the weight of the world. Turning to face her, his eyes were dark with a storm of emotions. "I'm scared, Blair," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'm terrified of losing you. I do not know how to handle it."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she gripped his arm tighter. "We'll handle it one day at a time, one moment at a time. We have to trust each other, lean on each other. Please, Cayden. Let me in."

For a moment, he just stared at her, the conflict evident in his gaze. Then he shook his head. “Let’s get you inside. I am going to need time to sort through my feelings.” Jerking the door open, he got out and came to open her door. Blair felt her heart aching with the realization that he avoided touching her completely.

Lifting her chin, She wrapped her jacket around her more securely and sailed ahead of him. The massive redwood doors open as if by magic and she had to force a smile at the ramrod straight frame that offered a pleased smile as he took her coat.

“Ms. Blair, Mr. Cayden.” Bryce Lowell was the unofficial butler and official ruler of the household staff and had been with the family since before Cayden was born. “The family are all gathered in the blue and white salon. Dinner will be served at eight.”

“Thank you, Bryce. Will you tell the family that we’re going upstairs to freshen up and will be right down?”

“Of course.” The man bowed formally and disappeared.

“Go on up.”

“Where are you going?”

“I have some business to discuss with the family.” His eyes were cold and remote. “Do not worry, I would not dream of imparting the news without you. I will be up in a few minutes.” Without waiting for her to respond, he turned and strode down the hallway. She stood there for a moment before making her way up the spiral staircase.

As Blair reached the top of the staircase, she paused, glancing back down at the empty hallway where Cayden had disappeared. Her heart felt heavy, the weight of their unresolved tension pressing down on her. She moved towards their bedroom, hoping that some solitude would help clear her mind.

Entering the room, Blair was struck by the familiar comfort of their shared space. The soft lighting, the warm tones, and the scent that was uniquely theirs. She took a moment to steady herself, running her fingers through her hair before heading to the ensuite bathroom to freshen up.

Cayden, meanwhile, walked with purpose towards the blue and white salon. His mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions, but he knew he had to put on a composed front for his family. As he entered the room, his family members looked up, their conversations halting momentarily.

“Cayden, glad you could join us,” his father said, his voice carrying a note of authority that never failed to command attention. “We were just discussing the latest developments.”

Cayden nodded, taking a seat, and trying to focus on the matters at hand. But his thoughts kept drifting back to Blair, to the look in her eyes when he had left her at the foot of the stairs. He knew he had to make things right, but for now, this was where he needed to be.

Back upstairs, Blair finished freshening up and sat on the edge of the bed, her thoughts racing. She understood the pressure Cayden was under, but it didn't make the distance between them any easier to bear. She resolved to be patient, to give him the space he needed, while also being ready to support him when the time came.

After what felt like an eternity, Cayden finally came upstairs. He found Blair sitting by the window, staring out at the sprawling estate.

“I will go and freshen up.” He tugged the sweater over his head and carelessly tossed it on the side of the loveseat. “This will only take a few minutes. We are already running late.” Without another word, he strode into the closet to finish undressing.

The last thing she wanted to do was face the entire family and tell them the news that was no doubt going to stir up a mixture of conflicting reactions. On top of that, they were going to notice the tension between her and Cayden. Clive had already remarked on it in anger, blaming his brother for being a fool. She had defended him of course.

But now, they would know why things were not all right between them. Rubbing a hand at the back of her neck, she rose a little unsteadily to see about her makeup.

“My dear, you’re not drinking your wine?” The conversation ceased immediately around the dinner table at the comment from the head of the family. Alberto Caruso had turned his attention from speaking with his son, Clive, towards her.

Blair was so taken aback that she froze in the middle of reaching for her glass of water. The food was entirely too rich, and she had to force herself to stay around the table and try and settle her heaving stomach with the garlic and tomato soup.

She opened her mouth to respond, when to her surprise, she felt her husband’s hand covering hers. His eyes met hers briefly before turning to take in the people around the table.

“We have an announcement to make. We are pregnant.” He said it without preamble and with as little emotion as possible. “There’s more.” He continued as everyone lapsed into silence. “We just came home from having an ultrasound done and it’s...,” he faltered slightly. “Quadruplets.”

A collective gasp echoed around the room, the weight of the revelation settling heavily in the air. Blair squeezed Cayden's hand, her heart pounding in her chest. She glanced at Clive, whose expression shifted from shock to an unreadable mask. Across

the table, Alberto's eyes widened, his stern facade momentarily breaking.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

“That’s an unexpected news.” Alberto’s gray eyes swung from Blair to his eldest son. “How...?”

“IVF.” Cayden offered tightly, his fingers pressing against hers on the table. “We decided to take that route.”

Her soft gasp went unheard and only two people at the table realized it was not quite the truth. Marianne and Clive.

Conail’s grin was forthcoming. “I guess congrats are in order. Brother, you really go for the mega, don’t you?”

Ignoring his son’s comment, Alberto flicked a glance at Blair. “I want to be on board with all of this and consider it wonderful news, but...,” he paused and waited for the maid to set the side dishes down and left the room. “I know a bit about multiples and figure out that this comes with high risks.”

“Yes.” Cayden clipped. “David Melbourne is heading the team who will be monitoring my wife for the entire time.”

His gray eyes switched to Blair who had so far remained silent. “My dear, what do you have to say for yourself.”

“She...”

“I can speak for myself.” She was getting annoyed at her husband’s take-charge manner. His pretending to be on board was not sitting well with her.

Taking a deep breath, she tugged her hand from beneath his. “Full disclosure. I went into this on my own. I went behind my husband’s back and proceeded with the IVF. I was desperate...,” her breath hitched slightly, but she carried on.

“I wanted a family – want a family and thought it was the only way out. I never expected four...,” she paused again and took a sip of water. “I know it’s a lot and my husband,” she avoided his eyes, “he is furious with me. I am going to need everyone’s support.

I know I was never the ideal wife you would have chosen for Cayden, but I love him and right now I am pregnant with four babies. In another month or so, I will be – things will change...” She shook her head. “I never dreamed I would – that this would...”

“Hey.” It was Clive who reached out to place his hand over hers, sending his entire family sweeping glances. “We’re absolutely here for you and I am sure my hardheaded brother will come to his senses...”

“Stay the hell out of it! She is my goddamned wife and...”

“Then bloody well start acting like it!” Clive snapped back. “She needs your support!”

“Enough!” Alberto’s authoritative voice sliced through the argument and was effective in silencing the siblings.

“This is not the time nor the place.” He continued, looking from Cayden to Clive. “My dear,” he looked at Blair, “I do not know quite what to say. This is unprecedented. Clive is right,” he glanced at his eldest son. “Your wife is going to need your support.” He looked around the table.

“All of our support. In this family, we face our challenges head on.” He glanced back at Cayden who remained rigidly silent and unyielding. “If you want to cut back some of your responsibilities at the office...”

“No. I will be accompanying her to all of her appointments and whatever can be done here at home, I will see that it’s done.”

“If you think that’s best,” his father nodded, “in the meantime, we are here if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” Blair told him soberly. Pushing back her chair, she rose before Cayden could get up. “I am not feeling well and would like to be excused.”

“I could come up...”

“No.” She shook her head as her husband stood up and took her arm. “I need to be alone right now.” Pulling out of his hold, she left the room.

The silence was resounding and fraught with tension. Cayden’s appetite had complete deserted him and all he wanted to do was to go somewhere and have a strong drink, probably an entire bottle of alcohol. Pulling out his chair, he sat back down.

“I will go up and talk with her a bit.” Marianne broke the silence and had her son looking over at her.

“Just as long as you’re not stressing her out even more.” He smiled grimly. “I think I am doing that all on my own.”

She went straight into her private salon and seriously considered locking the damn

door. She had taken off the dress she worn for supper and put on something comfortable. The sweat suit was old and one she had kept when Marianne had insisted on her getting rid of her clothing.

The shirt was one of her husband's a plain white undershirt that she grabbed from his drawer. The comforting scent of his cologne somehow managed to soothe her.

She had finished the painting of the cabin, and it was propped up on the opposite wall. A new canvas was on the easel – the stark white waiting for her to put some color to it. She was feeling particularly emotional right now and sick to her stomach. The pills, myriad of them were making her feel a little dizzy.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

Sitting on the stool, she picked up the paintbrush and stared unseeingly at the canvas. She was going to have to tell her dad which would start another series of worries. She had involved people in her drama. The news should have been great, something for the family to rejoice about, but it was causing considerable tension.

If she had been able to foresee what this would cause, would she had done things different? She wondered. Probably. But how she wished things were different. She could not blame Cayden for the fear or the anger.

She had blindsided him and this was the end result. Pressing her hand against her stomach, she took a deep breath and started painting.

Chapter 8

She was so deep in the middle of painting that at first she did not notice the door had opened, until she caught a glimpse of her mother-in-law standing there.

Hissing out a breath, she put away the paintbrush and wiped her fingers on the already soiled rag.

“If you’re here to reprimand me about taking matters into my own hands and the consequences of it, I would like you to know that I am not in the mood.”

Ignoring the sharp sound of her daughter-in-law’s voice, Marianne settled herself on the padded sofa and crossed her excellent legs.

“That looks bold and exaggerated,” she murmured, nodding towards the painting as

she examined the slash of violent purple, red and black colors, “I am not sure what it’s supposed to be.”

“Just a reflection on my violent mood. What do you want, Marianne?”

The older woman studied the mutinous face and the shadows beneath the mahogany eyes.

“You were right about what you said at the dinner table.”

“Which part?”

Ignoring the sarcastic tone, Marianne continued. “I never approved of you because I thought it was too hasty, and you did not fit. You were a schoolteacher and would never be able to become the wife, which would best suit my son.”

She smiled whimsically. “He is my favorite. I happen to love all my children and never hankered for a daughter. I prefer dealing with men, they are less complicated.

I had problems during the delivery and almost lost him twice. I threatened the doctors, begged, and pleaded with them to save him at all costs. My first glance at that adorable face made me realized that I would do anything for him. I would fight to keep him alive.

He had my heart, and I simply melted when they finally placed him in my arms. I spoiled him dreadfully, plied him with toys and lavished him with attention. When I became pregnant with Clive, he would follow me around, clinging to me as if he wondered if he was going to be replaced.”

She shook her head. “He never was, never could be.” She eyed the younger woman who had gone still at the telling of the story. “But I have discovered that you truly

love my son, possibly more than you love yourself. He adores you.”

The smile came again. “I saw that from the very beginning, and I was jealous. I was no longer first in his life. I saw the way he looked at you, the fact that he cannot stop touching you. And because he loves you so much, he is scared to death of losing you.”

She moved forward, her eyes intent. “My dear, you are entering into one of life’s greatest sacrifices and it is most wonderful and magical realm. Carrying a child cradled inside your womb. But you are carrying four at one time.” She shook her head. “I cannot impress enough how much that is going to cost the both of you.”

Blair turned her head away and gazed out the window. January had dumped several inches of snow on the ground and from the looks of the bleak sky, it was far from over. She was tired and depressed, two combinations that were not conducive to her current situation.

“I thought I was doing the right thing,” she murmured. “Still do. I want a family.” She took in a deep breath and let it back out. “I know my husband is scared and so am I.” She shook her head and turned her gaze to the woman in front of her. “I want these babies. And losing even one of them is not something I want to think about.”

Marianne rose gracefully and crossed over to her. Placing a hand on her shoulder, she squeezed lightly. “I am cautiously excited. These babies will be my first grandchildren, and I am praying that everything goes right.”

“Thanks Marianne, I really appreciate the support.”

She nodded and turned to stare at the painting. “It has a certain appeal.”

Blair let out a startled laugh and felt the tension easing inside her chest.

“I think so, too.”

“Goodnight my dear.”

“Goodnight.”

Blair watched as Marianne left, her elegant figure disappearing down the hallway. She remained still for a moment, absorbing the conversation that had just taken place. Her thoughts drifted back to the beginning of her relationship with her husband, the laughter, the shared dreams, and the inevitable challenges that had come their way.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:16 am

She knew that the path ahead would not be easy, but the conversation with Marianne had given her a renewed sense of determination.

As the night deepened, Blair sat by the window, looking out at the snow-covered landscape. She placed a hand on her growing belly, feeling the faint fluttering of life within her. The room was silent, save for the faint ticking of a distant clock, and she found solace in the quiet.

“Nineteen sixty-five Cabernet blend.” Clive picked up the bottle and studied the label, a smile playing around his lips. “A mixture of fruity blend and a double wallop of alcohol. Excellent choice.”

“Thanks.” Cayden’s voice was rife with sarcasm, “not that I needed your approval.”

Ignoring his brother’s surly mood, Clive wandered towards the cheerful fire burning inside the hearth. Propping a booted foot on the mantle, he gazed around the wine cellar. Millions of dollars’ worth of liquor were stacked neatly on shelves.

It had taken years to accumulate the inventory, and the room was a showpiece and the pride and joy of every Caruso male.

“Remember when we sneaked down here in the middle of the night and kept our own drinking party? I was thirteen and you were fifteen. I threw up on the floor and you cleaned up after me. We were both sick as hell the next morning. Dad somehow discovered what we had been up to and figured we had been punished enough.”

“Now that you have entertained us both with the walk down memory lane, why don’t you take a hike?”

“I am not quite ready to leave.” Clive walked over to the bar, neatly built into one corner of the room, and selected a glass. Plucking the half empty bottle from the table in front of the sofa, his brother was sprawled on, he poured a generous amount and went to straddle a bar stool.

“What do you want?”

“World peace, a wife like yours...,” he grinned at the ominous look on Cayden’s face. “And to finally beat you in poker.”

“You keep mentioning my wife and touching her. Are you looking to start a fight?”

Clive shrugged, eyeing his brother over the rim of his glass. “She is amazing. I wish I had met her first.” He smiled slightly at the frown on Cayden’s brow. “I envy you. You have a woman who would go to the ends of the earth for you and sometimes I wonder if you realize how lucky you are.”

“I’m sure you cannot wait to tell me.”

“You are,” Clive told him soberly, “and she needs you.”

“I do not need you to remind me of my obligations. I am fully aware of them.”

“Good.”

They both looked up as Conail entered the room, a smile lighting up his face. “I had no idea there was a party going on. Why wasn’t I invited?”

“Because you’re annoying.” Clive told him blandly.

“You two can stay and reminisce or drink yourselves to death, I’m going to bed.”

“Something I said?” Conail watched as his brother made his way out.

“Always.” With a grin, Clive went to fetch a glass. “Let’s finish the bottle, shall we?”

She was not inside the bedroom. The conversation with Clive had set him thinking. For the last couple of months, things had not been easy between him and his wife. He knew exactly where to find her. In the past, whenever they had an argument, she would go to her studio.

He had discovered to his surprise that she was quite talented as a painter. She had confessed that it was her ‘go to place’ whenever she was feeling stressed. He had several of her paintings inside his office, proudly displayed.

She had given Clive a still life piece for his birthday last year and his brother had hung it in a prominent place inside his office, something Cayden was not certain he liked.

He stood just inside the doorway and stared at the lovely picture she made. Her hair was tied back with a blue and white silk scarf, and she had changed into one of his t-shirts and an old pair of leggings.

The fact that she was wearing his shirt did something funny to his insides. He loved her so much that sometimes it feels as if he was being overwhelmed over by it.

Sensing his presence, she looked up from the canvas, eyes connecting with his. She

looked unhappy, he thought with a pang. And he had contributed to that.

“I thought you had gone to bed.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“It’s an interesting piece.” He came into the room and stood next to her. “What’s it called?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure yet.”

Taking the brush from her hand, he put it away and hunkered down in front of her. “I love you, desperately.”

Tears filled her eyes, and he saw her struggling to contain them.

“You said you were sorry you ever met me.” She reminded him, her voice husky.

His heart turned over at that. “I didn’t mean it.” Taking her elegant hands, now stained with colors, he lifted them to his mouth. “I cannot bear the rift between us.”

“I am not sorry.”

He smiled slightly. “I know you’re not.”

“I want this, Cayden.” Her eyes pleaded with him to understand.

“And I want my wife. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Losing you will destroy me.” His hands gripped hers. “Before I met you, I was carefree, lofty about

the fact that I was not subjected to the varying degrees of emotions.” He placed her open palm on his cheek and closed his eyes as the warmth of her skin seeped into his.

“Now I wonder what I would have done without you.” Dropping her hands, he tugged her into his arms, bracing against the wall and cradling her petite frame against him. “Promise me you’ll be here until we’re both old and decrepit.”

“I can’t...”

“Promise me!”

She lifted her head to look at him and felt emotions flooding her at the intense look on his face.

“I promise,” she murmured, hands cradling his face, “I’ll be here for you, always.”

“Good.” He responded gruffly. Placing his hand over hers, he tugged at the scarf and watched as the silk of her hair spilled over his skin, Crushing the soft strands in his fist, he lifted her mouth and crushed it hungrily.

Her eyes drifted open slowly to find him propped up on one hand, staring at her.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“What are you doing?”

“Looking my fill.” He used his free hand to brush the hairs from her face. Last night, he had made love to her with a tenderness that had her crying and clinging to him.

“Why?”

“You’re so beautiful but you snore.” He grinned as she rolled her eyes.

“I do not.”

“I should know. I am the one sleeping next to you.” His touch lingered on her cheek
“You make these adorable sounds when you sleep, and you burrow.”

“That’s because you always have your arms wrapped around me.”

“Hmm. Keeping you close.” He could feel the tension easing from around his chest. For the past couple of months, he had been on edge – angry one minute and scared the next. But he hated being on opposite side of the fence. His family was right, whatever the case may be and however much he did not like what she did, she needed him.

“Last night was... intense.”

His brow furrowed. “Did I hurt you, baby?”

“No.” She shook her head, feeling the warmth of the endearment. It seemed like ages since he addressed her like that. Her hand wandered over the hairs on his chest and felt her body quickening with desire. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” He stared at her intently. “Should we be making love?”

“Of course.” She moved into him, one thigh sliding through his. “I want to do it again.”

“Blair...”

“It’s been so long since I felt you inside me,” she whispered huskily, reaching down to cup him up.

“Oh Christ!”

“Make love to me. Let me feel you inside me.”

Her look melted him and with a groan, he pushed her back and entered her slowly.

He played hooky and took her driving the next day.

“The cabin?” She recognized the landmarks even though almost everything was covered with snow.

“Yes,” he glanced over at her and smiled at how bundled up she was. He had chosen the clothing she had on. A thick cherry red sweater and black leggings.

He had included a throw from the sofa in their room and she was wrapped up completely and had been asleep for most of the journey. He would have teased her about that, but in all honesty, he had kept her up for most of the night.

The uncertainty of what to expect now that they knew about the babies, still hung there between them, but he wanted to make up for his shoddy treatment. He had no idea what was going to happen and there was still the element of fear.

He just wanted to give them this time together. He had called his assistant and told her to reschedule his appointments for today and the weekend and announced to his parents his intention of taking his wife off to somewhere they could be alone.

His mother had nodded in approval. “You both need the time alone, darling.”

As the snow-laden trees whizzed by, she could not help but think of the moments they had shared in the cabin before. It was a sanctuary, a place where they could escape the demands of their lives and just be together.

When they finally arrived, the cabin looked like a scene straight out of a winter postcard. Snow blanketed the roof, icicles hung like fragile daggers from the eaves, and the windows were foggy with warmth from within.

“It’s stocked this time.” He hopped out and went around to open her door and take her hand. It was so unlike the first time they were here. That time, the anger pulsed off him in waves.

This time, he was smiling at her and treating her like a precious cargo. He had insisted on picking out clothing for them to wear for the weekend and secured a flask of tea and some croissants from the kitchen.

“Watch your step.” He guided her over a patch of heavy snow right in their path. “The caretaker was supposed to plow, but he is out with the flu. He is sending someone in the morning to take care of it.” He had their bags and juggled them as he inserted the key into the lock.

The warmth flooded the room and seeped wonderfully through her clothing. “I’ll just take these to the room,” he told her, indicating the bags he was carrying.

She nodded and went on inside the welcoming warmth of the living room where the fire was blazing. Slipping off her boots, she dragged the fluffy white blankets off the sofa and spread them in front of the fire.

She took in the familiar surroundings, the rustic charm of the cabin bringing back cherished memories. The wooden beams above, the worn leather couch, and the photographs of their adventures together all seemed to whisper stories of love and resilience. She sighed, letting the tranquility wash over her.

He returned to the living room, his face softened with an expression of contentment. “Tea?” He asked, holding out a steaming cup towards her.

“Thank you,” she replied, wrapping her hands around the warmth of the cup. They settled together on the blanket, the fire crackling melodically in front of them.

For a moment, they sat in comfortable silence, both lost in their thoughts. He reached out, gently tucking a stray lock of her hair behind her ear. “I’m glad we’re here,” he murmured.

She looked up at him, her eyes reflecting the dancing flames. "Me too," she said softly. "I think we needed this."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

She finished the tea and leaned against him, closing her eyes in contentment. It had been so long since they were so happy. She knew it probably would not last, but she was going to make the most of it.

“Comfy?” His arms were wrapped around her securely.

“Hmm.” She nestled against him. “You smell good.”

His chuckle warmed her heart. “I should hope so. I showered before we left.”

“It is your particular brand of cologne. It was the first thing I noticed when you accosted me outside that café in Italy.” She grinned and lifted her head at his sharp intake of breath.

“Accosted?”

“Harassed?” She teased.

He was happy to see the light in her eyes and the vivacity on her beautiful face. It had been too long since she was like this.

“I was utterly charming and witty.”

She lifted one tapered brow. “You offered to buy me coffee, knowing full well that I was exiting the café and so I must have had my fill of the brew already.”

“You could have just gone in to ask for directions.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “And when I told you I already had coffee, what did you say?”

“That perhaps you could manage to take another cup.”

“And when I said no, thank you?”

His eyes glittered in amusement. “I followed you like a lost puppy and offered to buy you some pastries.” He shook his head, “Christ, you were stubborn. I almost gave up out of sheer frustration.”

“I am happy you didn’t.”

“Are you now?”

“Yes.” She touched his chin, her long finger tracing a path down his neck. “I never dreamed I could be this happy or this in love.”

His eyes darkened and he captured the wandering hand, bringing it to his lips. “This weekend is about you, sweetheart,” he told her hoarsely.

“No,” she shook her head, “it’s about us.”

He stirred sometime in the night and opened his eyes to see her sitting cross legged with a blanket barely covering her nakedness and a sketch pad in her hands.

“What are you doing?” His sleep had made his voice husky.

“Sketching you. I love the way you look when you sleep.” She continued to use the pencil to finetune what she had already done. Giving him a quick look, she evened

his jawline. “I will never be able to capture the exact shade of green for your eyes.”

“May I see it?”

“Nuh.. Uh...” She flashed him an impish smile. “It is a work in progress and I am not sure I am even going to finish it. I am not particularly good with portraits.” He started to turn on his back when she told him to keep still. “I need to get the indentation of your lower back and your taut backside.” She laughed at the look he gave her.

“I am absolutely painting you in the nude.”

“I hope you’re not thinking of hanging it in the drawing room.”

“I am going to ask Jackson if I can hang it in one of his galleries.” She captured her bottom lip and worried it with her teeth as she concentrated on the task. He loved watching her work and thought she looked sexy as hell.

“I don’t have an ounce of shame; you’re the shrinking violet.” He grinned at the dirty look she threw at him.

“Take it back.”

“You know it is true. When we made love for the first time, you insisted on the lights being off.”

“That’s because I was aware of your reputation.” She moved to the face and penciled in the eyebrow, trying to get the exact shade and density. “I did not want you making comparisons with your other conquests.”

“You never were.”

She looked up at his sober tone. “It took me a while to realize that.”

“You’re my only.”

Her hands trembled slightly and for a second, she had no idea what she was doing.

“Come here!” He ordered gently.

“I am not finished...”

“You are.” Rolling onto his back, he took the pad away and put it aside, before drawing her into his arms. “You’re my everything.”

“Oh, Cayden.” She eased out a shaky breath and blinked the tears away. “I love you so much.”

“Not as much as I love you.” He traced the outline of her full bottom lip. “Be prepared darling.” He murmured, lowering his head. “I intend to lose myself in your delectable body.”

Chapter 9

She realized what he was up to. He was making up for the way he had greeted the news and reacted to it. And she let him. They were going to have to face the pregnancy and the fact that she was carrying multiples at some point, but for now, she was willing to let him take the lead and not mention what was hanging between them.

This was their moment of solace. When they returned home, the craziness was going to continue. She was ten weeks pregnant and surprisingly, the nausea had settled for now.

She was armed with pills- including Vitamin D, calcium, protein, folic acid, iron, omega threes and Vitamin D. She took them in the bathroom and was very diligent about doing so. He never asked her about them even though he had noticed them in her case.

And she never supplied any information. It might be foolish, but they both needed to get away from the decision she had made.

“How about a walk?” She decided the next morning. They had finally made it to bed and had slept like a log wrapped around each other. His lean length wrapped around her had given her peace and she was able to sleep like a baby.

“It’s below ten.” He pointed out. It had snowed during the night. Soft pretty white pellets hitting the windows. He had held her in his arms, and they had watched the snow falling together. She had made hot cocoa with marshmallows and her stomach had been cooperative.

She insisted on making breakfast even though he was not a breakfast person. A cup of coffee and he was out the door, usually.

This morning, he sat with her at the small dining table tucked beneath the large bay window and enjoyed a healthy breakfast of strawberry and blueberry pancakes, topped with whipped cream and mountains of fluffy eggs and bacon. She felt like a wife for the first time since they were married. And could pretend that this was their life.

“If only there was something we could use to combat the cold.” She tapped the side of her head as if trying to come up with a solution. “Ah! Layers. Sweaters, jackets, gloves, and hats. Thermal underwear as well.” She grinned at the mild look he sent her. He was finishing another cup of excellent coffee she had poured him.

If he noticed how domesticated she was, he made no mention of it and seemed to enjoy the role she was playing.

“If you freeze your fine ass off, don’t blame me.”

“I won’t. We could make a snowman.”

“We will not.”

“Please.”

Her mahogany eyes had always been his weakness, and this time was no different. With a resigned sigh, he nodded. “If it starts snowing again, we are done.”

“Agreed.” Excitement lit up her lovely face and had desire stirring inside him. He had been hungry for her. Last night he had alternated between being gentle and rough and feeling guilty about it after.

“Just make certain to put on a thick sweater.” He advised gruffly, feeling slightly upset that she had this influence over him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“I will.” She left the kitchen to go and get dressed. Rising, he went to pour some more coffee and took it with him to look out the window. Bill, the caretaker had already sent someone to clear a path along the driveway and the thick white snow, untouched by dirt and footsteps, was piled high on either side of the walkway.

The vehicle was covered with the powdery stuff and as far as the eye could see, the glaring white was everywhere.

He felt a touch of melancholy as he continued to take in the spectacular scene. It was perfect picture card. And something his wife would probably want to put on canvas. Up here, they were away from the hustle and bustle of their very busy life.

They weren’t surrounded by family and friends, not influenced by outsiders. It was just them. And it felt right and perfect. He dreaded returning home and wished fleetingly that they could stay here forever.

But that was not practical. He had responsibilities. He was Vice President for a huge company. He loved his job; wine was in his blood. He knew everything there was to know about the fermentation – from start to finish. But now things had gotten complicated or more so.

His wife was carrying four babies. He had noticed the thickness of her waist and had no idea what to feel or how to navigate around it. He was aware that they were both avoiding the subject altogether and that was fine with him. He wanted this time with her, where there were no others involved, not even the babies she was carrying.

He was so deep in thought; he did not hear her approach until she was standing

behind him. Staring at her reflection in the window, he smiled slightly at the picture she made.

She was wearing dusky pink, a fluffy hat jammed on her head and covering her ears. The sweater was thick, and the scarf matched the hat and gloves. He stood there while she came and wrapped her hands around his waist, leaning her head on his back. He used his free hand to clasp hers.

“Ready?”

“Hmm.” She murmured. “I just want to stay like this for a bit.”

“Be my guest.” He stroked the silk of her skin. “I suppose we’re going to have to root around for supplies to make your snowman?”

She laughed at his disgruntled tone. “I already have berries for the eyes, and I think I have seen carrots. Speaking of which, I think I will make stew for supper. There’s beef and a ton load of vegetables in the fridge.”

“Sounds lovely. Shall we?” He finished the coffee and turned to face her. Tugging the hat further down, he tipped her chin up and kissed her lips gently. “Let’s do this.”

The sound of her laughter echoed around the space, shattering the serenely like stillness that enveloped the cottage and its environs. Cayden felt the pleasure blooming inside him at how carefree she was.

And the simple pleasure she had with such a mundane task of stacking the snow. She was covered from head to toe in layers, with only her face visible and looked like a teenager up to no good.

No other woman in his past had ever suggested they venture out into the cold to do

anything like this. The women he was used to would have been horrified at the very idea of staying somewhere so rustic and isolated.

His wife brought out the child in him. He had the opportunity of witnessing her interaction with her 'kids' the one she taught and had been amazed and amused at the length she went through to impart her knowledge.

"What do you think?"

Stirring himself, he focused on the huge bulk of the snowman with the enormous head and beady eyes.

"I think the head is too big."

"It's not."

"You asked for my opinion, and I am giving it." He reminded her.

"It's proportionated to the size of his body." Stepping back, she squinted at it. "Okay, maybe, I went overboard with the shape. Why didn't you stop me?"

"And end up spoiling your fun?" He asked with a grin as he came up behind her and wrapped his hands around her waist. Resting his chin on top of her head, he studied the object more closely. "It looks ominous. Enough to scare away any predators. Like bears."

Her head drifted back to stare at him, a frown touching her brow. "You said there were no bears."

"I might have lied about that," he grinned at the quick dart of fear in her eyes.

“Don’t worry darling, the snowman and I will protect you.”

“You might think that is funny, but it’s not. And bears hibernate in the winter.”

“Not here, they don’t.”

“Stop trying to spoil my fun.” Tugging his arms from around her, she went about collecting the twigs he had managed to find and started to make the arms. “There.” She packed more snow in place and stepped back to view her work.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“Perfect. We need to take a selfie.” Sliding her phone out, she took his hand and positioned them so that they were standing in front of the giant snow figure. She took several pictures, determined to have them printed and framed for posterity so that – God please!

They could show to their children. She did not say it out loud, but that was what she was hoping. She was also hoping that in the years to come, they would come back here as a family, during the summer and winter months to play with the children and watch them frolic.

They were taking a walk when he noticed the ominous clouds rolling in. “I think we’d better cut our walk short.” He scrutinized the clouds with a frown. “Looks like we’re for a storm and you’re getting cold.”

Pulling her against him, he rubbed his hand up and down her arms as they made their way back.

“It’s so pretty,” she murmured a little wistfully. “The snow covering everything and the serenity of the area. There are no neighbors in the immediate vicinity.”

They had reached the porch, but he stopped with her to look out over the wide expanse of snow-covered grounds.

“I saw a few farmhouses when we were coming here. Is it mostly farming lands around this area?”

“Yes.” He pulled her in and tucked her close to him. “It is an undeveloped section,

with mostly retired people. The town is small and intimate, and the people are determined to keep it that way. They want to preserve the natural beauty and clean air.

Part of the reason we have left the cabin just as it is. The ground is fertile and at first we were planning on planting vineyards. The winter is harsh in this area, but the land is rich.”

She looked around and as far as she could see, there was nothing much except for a curl of smoke a small distance from them.

“I think it should remain like this.”

“Do you?”

She nodded. “A kind of escape from reality and the pressures of life. I love it here. It speaks of peace and tranquility. Which reminds me, I want to capture some of it. I am taking pictures and making sketches for when we get back home.”

“I thought you might.” He rubbed his hands over her belly slowly. They both looked up as the first drops of snow hit them in the face and stood there for a few minutes enjoying it.

“Time to go inside.” He gently steered her up the steps and opened the door.

“How about you sit by the fire, and I make you some tea?”

“I would love that.” Her stomach was acting up and she wondered if he had suspected she was feeling a little queasy.

Taking off her boots, she spread the blankets out and added some wood chips to the

dying embers. The flames leapt upwards and shrouded the room in a warm glow that had her feeling comfortable in less than a few minutes. He came back with tea and crackers he had found in the pantry. “Figured you might need it.”

“Thanks.”

He came to sit next to her and placed the tray in front of her.

“How’s your ankles?” He asked solicitously.

“A little swollen,” she admitted.

“Here.” Putting the tray at a safe place, he put her feet on his lap and started to massage them.

“How’s that?”

“Wonderful.” She picked up her cup and took a sip of the tea, tasting the lemon and honey.

Did you always know you wanted to follow in your dad’s footsteps?”

Tugging off her socks, he used his fists to deal with her insteps.

“Always.” He responded. She was leaning back against the wall, her fingers wrapped around the cup. “You have to remember that we grew up in the industry. We were introduced to it as children, taught the rudiments...,” he moved to her ankles. “As Italians, we went from Italy to the States.

We were born here of course, but from the moment we could understand, it was told to us that our roots lay in Italy.

Which wasn't bad. We enjoyed the thrill of switching from one country to the next. And wine was a fascination for me." He slid his fingers up her calves and caused her skin to tingle. "I was ten when I experimented with making my own wine."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“And almost burned the place down.” He had told her the story and had her in stitches.

“Mixing several elements at the same time proved to be a disaster and almost a tragedy.”

“You burned off your eyebrows.”

“And gave mother a moment of great distress. I had never seen her cry before and she did that day.” He grinned. “Dad was a little less unemotional and leaning towards fury. I presented an argument that I was following in the footsteps of those who had gone before me and was quite lofty in my dissertation.

I got a wallop for it and a stern speech. I was also forbidden to go down to the wine cellar for a month. It was the appropriate punishment for me, because he knew how fascinated I was with just sitting there and reading the labels.”

His green eyes met hers. “Better?”

She nodded and did not want him to stop.

“How about I take this off?” He tugged at her leggings.

“You just want sex.”

“Always.” He concurred. “But for now, I just want to cater to my wife.”

“I have no objections.” Putting down the cup, she lifted her hips, so he could take it off. Her sweater was next and the scarf. The fire warmed her skin through the thin camisole she had donned and had her feeling drowsy.

“You roped Clive in at the time.”

He grinned, his hands moving towards her thighs. “He was always following me around, wanting to do whatever I was doing. But being the coward he was, he stood far behind me and missed all the injuries.” He worked his hands over her supple flesh and felt her skin shivering.

“Cold?”

“No.” She cleared her throat and felt the drowsiness disappearing. “It’s – don’t stop.”

“I was not planning to.” With his eyes on her face, he used his thumbs to knead her flesh. “You have the softest skin. Reminds me of silk.”

“Your hands are working their magic in more ways than one,” she murmured huskily.

“I live to please.” He eased the edges of her panties and worked his fingers through the hairs covering her sex. “How do you feel now?” His voice had thickened, and he could feel the familiar response of his body.

“Over the moon.” Her body shifted restlessly.

“Perhaps I should stop.”

“If you do, I’m going to have to kill you.”

“You were not feeling well. I know you, baby. I cannot...,” he hissed out a breath

when she simply opened her thighs. “Darling...”

“Don’t stop.” She ordered. “Please. It feels so good. I am sensitive right there. Yes.” She panted. “That is it. Keep going.”

“It’s best if I...,” he peeled the panties off her and tossed them aside, coming back to his position. “Here?” His clever fingers soothed the folds of her vagina.

“Yes. And oh! There.” She arched her back as he slid a finger over the sensitive mound.

Sliding down, he crouched between her thighs, his eyes on her face as he continued to torment her with his fingers.

“So wet.” His voice was unrecognizable, his body already pulsing in anticipation. “So tight.” He whistled through his teeth as he worked his way further in. “The first time I entered you, I could not believe you were so tight. Practically a virgin.”

“You know why.” Her hands clutched the folds of the blanket as she tried to anchor herself.

“You have only been in one relationship, at College.” He was finding it more and more difficult to hold onto his control. His fingers made slick, slippery sounds as they worked their way in and out of her. “I am a very lucky man.” Bending his head, he first used his tongue and then his teeth on the raised flesh and had her calling out his name.

“Cayden... Oh God!” Her body lifted, head twisting from side to side as heat swamped her. “Please. Oh Please!” The thin sound of her voice drove him mad. Dipping his tongue in, he cradled her hips and brought her closer to him, his mouth tormenting the flesh.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

She smelled musky and sweet and the scent of her, of his mate, his woman was steeping inside him, working its way through his bloodstream and making him pulse with a need that was filling every inch of his body. When she came, he sipped, the taste of her driving him mad.

Stumbling to his feet, he practically tore at his clothes to get rid of them before turning her on her side and sliding into her. His arms came around her waist and for a minute, he could not move. He held her trembling body against his, spooning her, feeling the frenzied beat of her heart against her skin.

Bending his head, he whispered words of love and comfort, his breath sliding against her flesh. When she turned her head, he took her lips in a kiss that had the tears slipping down her cheeks. He moved then, slowly at first, sliding into her, easing out again, only to slide back in.

One hand drifted past her swollen belly to cup her sex, his fingers toying with the acutely sensitive flesh and had her going over again. Her body jerked and trembled as he swallowed her moans deep inside his throat.

He came then, the climax slamming through his body like a jackhammer. Ending the kiss, he just held her, his own body shuddering, his heart splintering as love poured through him like a molten lava.

When he finally settled, he held her still. His body was coated with a thin sheen of sweat, his eyes damp, his emotions whirling. Bending his head, he pressed his face into the silk of her hair and just breathed her in. His woman, his wife, his entire being.

“It smells divine.” Coming up behind her, he wrapped his arms around her waist. They had fallen asleep after the tumultuous hour of passion, with the fire in the background providing much needed warmth.

The storm that Cayden had predicted had started while they were in the throes of ecstasy, and it had taken them some time to realize that the sky had opened up and was pouring out powdery white snow at a rapid rate.

“It’s ready.” She turned the flames off and just leaned back in his arms. They had stirred themselves enough to take a hot bath, where he had spent time bathing her and doing a thorough job of it.

“We should eat at the table so you can see the snow coming down.” He nipped at her ear playfully. “I’m afraid your snowman is ruined.”

“I suspect as much.” She turned in his arms and went on her toes to link her hands around his neck. Brushing her lips on his, she breathed him in. “I love you.”

“I love you more.” He rubbed her back. She had not bothered with clothing, but had donned a soft white cashmere robe she had brought with her, and he could feel the imprint of her nipple through the cloth. “Let me set the table.”

She nodded, feeling more than a little overwhelmed by the emotions raging through her body. She chalked it down to hormones. Her body was rapidly changing, both physically and mentally. But this weekend was going to be recorded in her diary to be taken out when things got a little rough.

Kissing her on the mouth, he reluctantly released her and went to set the table.

She stood there watching him for a minute, her eyes misty, before turning away to get the bowls.

They ate in companionable silence, each lost in their own thoughts as they stared out at the snow coming down. Within minutes, everything was once again covered, the stark whiteness giving off a glare that rivaled the sun.

Inside the warm and cozy kitchen, they could pretend that they were an ordinary couple, enjoying the weather and taking a break from their tasks.

For another day, they could keep up the pretense and not think about what was going to happen when they returned home. For now, it was just the two of them – husband and wife, lovers and best friends taking advantage of a very romantic and surreal setting. Nothing more.

Chapter 10

In the ensuing months, she would look back on that weekend with misty-eyed indulgence. Because things went back to normal, the minute they arrived home.

They left early on the Monday morning, because the snowstorm had made driving very hazardous.

Now a week later and she was being carefully monitored. Dr. Melbourne had secured a nutritionist and a private nurse who had been hired to stay at the house to monitor her progress. She was prodded and poked, until she felt like screaming. But she had asked for this and had to bear the consequences.

Nurse Conelly was highly professional and exceptionally good at her job. She was also a midwife and had over ten years of experience. In spite of the brusque manner, Blair was drawn to her and within minutes of spending time with her, found that she

genuinely cared.

She was also brutally honest.

“I have no intention of soft soaping anything.” She told her patient briskly as she did her examination. “I am being paid handsomely for my services, but I am not going to ever lie to you. Dr. Melbourne and the rest of the team are committed to taking care of you and the fetuses you are carrying.”

Looping the stethoscope around her neck, she planted her fists on her ample hips. “You have a beautiful home here and the resources to do everything necessary to make certain you come out of this alive.” Pulling up a chair, she used the instrument to listen to the heartbeats.

“Strong and still four. You are twelve weeks now, and your weight is coming along. I have instructed the kitchen to include more vegetables and fresh fruit. Your mother-in-law said to tell her whatever we need, and it will be acquired.” A frown touched her brow. “Your blood pressure is slightly elevated but that’s to be expected, considering.”

“I feel bloated, and my stomach is queasy.” Blair eased up on the pillows and pressed her hand on her stomach. “And I have to pee again.”

“Part and parcel of the deal.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

Swinging her legs off the bed, she waddled her way to the bathroom.

She was not allowed to drive herself, so someone had been assigned to her. She had most of her meetings here at the manor, because walking long distances made her feel winded.

She felt like an elephant and was quite certain she looked like a very pregnant one. Her husband was on board, but they still did not talk about the pregnancy or had not made any plans. Which told her that he was not optimistic about the outcome.

The weekend they had spent at the cabin had brought them closer together and she did not want to do anything to change that. But there was an underlying tension between them. She wanted to believe she would end up with four healthy babies, no matter what the odds are, and wished fervently that her husband agreed with her.

Rinsing her hands under the sink, she took a look at herself in the mirror and flinched. Her face had gotten round, and her nose was almost twice its size. Her breasts had gone to a B cup now, forcing her to purchase bigger bras.

Her belly was almost touching the sink, and she was just three months into her pregnancy. She felt fat, bloated and very unattractive. She peed every five minutes, had frequent bouts of nausea and cried at the drop of a hat.

She rarely went down to dinner, because she could not bother dressing up and having a conversation. Waddling back into the bedroom, she silently went about doing the exercises that had been tailor-made for her body.

Cayden twirled the scotch in the glass absently as he stared out the one-way glass. A frown touched his brow and his shoulders were tense.

“Cayden?”

Stirring himself, he turned to look at the man seated behind the baronial desk. Alberto had his back to the large fireplace, the shooting flames giving his attractive face an eerie glow.

“You haven’t heard a word that I just said.”

“Sorry.”

“Have you called to check in?”

“The nurse just called a few minutes ago.” He crossed the room to sit on the sofa across from the desk. “Her blood pressure is a little elevated.”

Alberto eyed him closely. “You’re worried.”

He shrugged.

“And you have sent Clive and Conail in your place to Italy. You are keeping your plans remarkably close.”

He nodded. “I keep thinking that as soon as I leave the house, I am going to get a call that something happened to her. At nights, I watch her sleep. She is uncomfortable. She often switches sides to try and find a comfortable position. Her back hurts.

Every night, I have to massage it, and she does not get enough sleep because of the frequent need to urinate. I feel so goddamned helpless.” The frustration was rife in his deep voice. “She is carrying four babies and frankly, I do not know how in the hell she does it. And it is just the first trimester. What is going to happen further on?”

“A woman’s body was created to endure the rigors of childbearing. That said, I am not certain about carrying four at the same time.” Alberto rose and pushed away from the desk. Walking over to the cabinet, he poured himself a drink and came back to sit behind the desk.

“I admire her tremendously.”

Cayden sent him a surprised glance that had him smiling.

“I never approved of the match at first. Thought she had to be a gold digger and thought you had lost all of your marbles when you announced you wanted to get married and so quickly. I had her checked out, you know.”

“Naturally!” Cayden inclined his head in amusement.

“Found nothing in her background to indicate that she was a criminal or anything such thing.” Alberto swirled his scotch thoughtfully. “I was in fact suspicious that she was so squeaky clean. A schoolteacher who never even had a parking ticket. That was ridiculous.”

“She totaled her first crappy chevy when she was sixteen.”

“She did?” Alberto raised thick eyebrows at that. “It never came out in the report.”

“She told me when we started seeing each other. Her parents freaked and did not allow her to drive for a year. She had to do a refresher driving course to satisfy

them.”

“You totaled a brand-new Porsche when you were seventeen.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

Cayden chuckled, the memory coursing through his brain. “I was grounded for a month and had to work at the vineyard in California to purchase the next vehicle.” He sipped his drink in reflection. “Blair got into it with a teacher when she was in high school.

My wife is a bleeding heart and when she found out the teacher was picking on the kid because he was poor, she stepped in and stood up for him.” He smiled slightly. “She is a sucker for a sob story and a champion for the underdog.”

“You’re proud of her,” his father observed.

“Absolutely. We went downtown a few months ago and she insisted on feeding the homeless. Every last one of them. People love her.” His smile faded. “I love her.

It is natural for people to just meet her and be drawn to her, She has that type of personality. She is going to make a terrific mother. If...” He shook his head and stared into the content of his glass.

“I am terrified of losing her,” he admitted with a shaky laugh. “Hence the reason I watch her sleeping.”

“She’s good for you.” Alberto stared at him in wonder. “Before you met her...”

“I was a goddamned mess. I was all over the place, using and discarding women at the drop of a hat. I loved the company, wine was always in my blood, and I loved everything about it, but I was restless and bored. Dangerous combinations. She cured me of that.”

A smile touched his lips. "I never thought it possible to love someone so damn much and I am scared." He admitted with a harsh sigh. "Losing her is not an option. And I know that if she lost even one of those babies that she is carrying, it's going to have a significant impact on her."

Leaning back, he closed his eyes briefly. "I keep seeing her looking at me, expecting me to start asking her about plans for the nursery." He opened his eyes and stared at his dad. "I cannot. I just cannot do it."

Not yet. I am holding my breath and waiting to see what happens. It is not fair to her, but that's how I feel. If it comes down to her or those babies, my instructions are clear, it will always be her."

Alberto nodded, moved by his frank admission.

"And I agree with you completely." She is well cared for son. That much I know. She is being monitored around the clock."

"And I wonder if that's going to be enough."

"I thought you had a late meeting." Her delight and surprise at seeing him home before nine warmed his heart and made him realize that he had been right about coming straight home.

I just met Nurse Connelly on her way to her room." Moving over to the sofa, he sat next to her. "How are you?"

"Fat." She responded with a shaky laugh, her hand reaching for his. "And wondering if my gorgeous husband is thinking the same thing." She laced her fingers through

his. “And perhaps thinking of finding solace somewhere else.”

“There’s actually something I have been meaning to ask you.” Lifting her hand, he kissed the knuckles.

“Ask away.”

“Would you be amenable to having a side piece move in with us?” His eyes twinkled as hers flashed.

“Not unless you want to have that side piece bludgeoned with a sharp object.”

“Just checking.” He chuckled at her ominous expression. “And you’re not the type to get violent.”

“Oh, when it comes to my husband, all bets are off.”

“Then I am going to have to reconsider the side piece part of it.” His smile faded. “The nurse said you were not feeling too hot.”

“Just nausea and wanting to pee every minute.” She spread his finger out and rubbed the simple band of gold she had placed there five years ago. His birthday was coming up and she had hoped to plan a party for him. But feeling the way, she did, it might not be possible, and it frustrated her.

“I am fine now. I ate a whole side of a chicken with some baby potatoes and creamy mushrooms. And was sick after. Your mother brought up a bowl of soup. I think she is starting to like me. Either that, or she feels sorry for me.”

“I think it’s the former.” Tilting her chin up, he brushed her lips with his. “Ready for our nightly ritual?”

She nodded. “Aren’t you going to tell me about your day?”

“As soon as we get you into bed.” Rising, he tugged at her hand and levered her off the sofa. “We’re probably going to have to get a crane to start carting you around.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“You joke about it, but that might be the case.” She muttered.

“I hardly recognized you.” Her dad exclaimed as he took her hand and guided her up the steps. “Is he leaving?” He nodded towards the driver as he walked back around to the driver’s side of the vehicle.

“I told him I would call when I am ready. Can we sit out here on the porch? It is such a lovely day and I have been cooped up inside the house for most of the week.”

“Of course.” He helped her lower herself on the porch swing.

“How about some tea?”

She shook her head. “I am full.” She patted her stomach.

“I am surprised you’re here.”

“Why?” She turned her head to look at him. She had called earlier, and he had sounded a little off. She saw him just this week and he looked like he had lost weight. She wished he would consider coming to live with them at the manor but mentioning that, would be a complete waste of time.

“Honey, you look like you’re about to burst.” He pointed out, trying to hide his own worry. He wished he could see her more often, but he made his daily check and her husband despite their strained relationship kept him up to date.

“Almost four months.” Her smile was whimsical as she used her foot to propel the swing forward. “I have been having frequent contractions. The blood pressure keeps going up and down and I have gestational diabetes.” She smiled at him. “The fun never ends.” Her smile faded. “Do you think I made a mistake dad?”

“Honey...”

She shook her head to stop him. “I keep thinking I should have waited. I have an entire team of professionals at my beck and call. I disturb my husband every five minutes when I get up to go to the bathroom.

I am swelling so fast; I wake up and find that I have gained several pounds. I cannot accompany him anywhere and the press got hold of the news that I am carrying quadruplets, and they keep hounding my assistant and his office. One very enterprising reporter found his way onto the property before he could be chased off.

I have become a circus wonder and I keep asking myself if it is worth it. Nurse Connelly is a miracle. She is at my disposal and only leaves my side when Cayden is home.” She leaned forward and rubbed the small of her back, feeling the stiffness there.

“Do you think you made a mistake?” He asked her quietly.

“I am almost four months pregnant, and we have not done anything about setting up nurseries yet.” She gazed out at the dewy hibiscus plants blindly. The winter that had persisted into the end of March had finally decided to allow spring to make an appearance. But even so, there was a lingering chill in the air.

“Why don’t you start?”

Turning to look at him, she admitted what she had been reluctant to. “I do not want to

jinx it. I do not want to start preparing for the babies and then something happens. It would break my heart.”

Scooting forward, he took her hands in his. “Life holds little guarantees. You know that as well as I do. Your mother had several miscarriages before you came along, and we had all but given up that we would hold a baby in our arms, and we did.”

He rubbed her flesh. “I have a feeling your husband is waiting on you to make the first move. Why not start thinking of colors? Do you know what you are hoping for?”

She nodded, a light gleaming in her eyes. “Two sets of twins. Boys and girls.”

“Picked out any names yet?”

“No.”

“Then I suggest you start.”

“False alarm.” Dr. Melbourne snapped off his gloves as he finished the cervical examination to make certain she was not going into preterm labor.

“That is the third time this week. Should we be concerned?” Cayden asked tightly.

“Her belly is expanding.” Rising from the stool that had been provided for him, he came around to check her blood pressure. “Your ankles are swollen, and I am going to suggest you stay off them for the rest of the day.”

He waited for the blood pressure cuff to inflate and stared at the reading. “Blood pressure is up.” He looked over at Nurse Connelly.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“I have been monitoring it as you ordered, throughout the day.” Mrs. Caruso insists on being in on the planning of the spring social.” She looked up at the imposing man standing by the side of the bed. “She was disappointed that you refused to have her plan your birthday party.”

“Because I did not want you to be stressed.” He sat next to her, expression softening. “Do you want to end up in the hospital? Darling, you have been advised to take it easy.”

“I promise, I will.” She was on the verge of tears and fought to hold it at bay because of the extra people inside the room. She was feeling a little depressed and useless. This was harder than she thought, and she hated being a burden to everyone.

The entire family was at her disposal, including the full complement of staff.

“Good,” Dr. Melbourne nodded. “Everything else is in order. Nurse Connelly, would you mind walking out with me?”

When the woman nodded, he glanced at the couple. “I will be checking in by the end of the week. Please feel free to call if there are any concerns.”

She waited until they left the room before turning into her husband’s arms and wept.

Cayden had seen the sheen of tears in her eyes and was not surprised when she started crying. Rubbing his hands up and down her back, he waited until she was composed, before lowering her back on the pillows. “Better?” He asked her tenderly.

“A little.” She took his hand, “I am causing all these problems. You were in a meeting.”

“Nothing important.”

She gave him a look. “Please don’t lie to make me feel better.”

“Want me to tell you that you just cost the company millions?”

Her eyes went wide. “I did?”

“No...,” bending his head, he brushed her lips softly, “it is nothing for you to worry about. In case you have not received the memo, you are top priority. Everything else falls a dismal second.” Using the pads of his thumbs, he wiped away the tears. “Tell you what?

How about we take a drive later tonight? By that time, your ankles will not be so swollen. We could stop at that hotdog stand you like so much and pig out on hot dogs and fries. And afterwards, we could swing by the park and maybe take a stroll.”

Hope flared in her eyes.

“Reporters.”

He saw the light disappearing from her eyes and wanted desperately to get it back.

“I will make certain we are not followed. What do you say, darling?”

“All right. I would love that.”

“Then it’s a date.”

“I want it to be.” Her voice was wistful. “We have not been on one in ages.”

“Not true. Didn’t we have dinner by candlelight right there on the porch?”

“That wasn’t a date or much of one.” She gripped his hand. “I don’t want you to get tired of me.”

“Now you’re starting to piss me off, after I am looking forward to our date.” Bending his head, he kissed her again. “Stop worrying about us. We are fine.”

“Promise?”

“I swear.”

He showed her an exceptionally fun time. Blair never realized how much she missed doing her daily routine and enjoying the wonderful spring weather until they were whizzing by on country roads, with the top down and the wind whipping at them. He had decided on the BMW convertible with the plush leather seats.

His first stop was at the hotdog stand where the vendor, a wizened man with weathered chocolate complexion showed his delight on seeing her by making her a full-house hot dog piled high with toppings and exclaiming how very lovely she looked.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“Easily the most beautiful pregnant woman I have ever seen....” He had a musical accent that brought up visions of wild blue sea and green palm trees. Of course, Blair had made friends with him and knew he was from the island of Jamaica and had come to the States only a few years ago.

She inquired of his wife and two kids and listened while he told her about a few problems that he was having at the project where he resided.

Cayden was not surprised to hear her tell the man, ‘Blacka’, as he liked to be called, that she was going to get someone to see to the fencing of his property.

They spent quite a bit of time there before leaving for the park. He watched as she devoured a chocolate and strawberry swirl as she sat on the park bench and fed the ducks.

“The sign clearly states that you should not be doing that.” She had left a piece of her bread for the precise purpose.

“I think they just put that up there for a conversation starter.”

“Or it could be that they don’t want anyone feeding the ducks,” he teased. The area was quiet, with just a few people taking walks along the pathways, He had been true to his promise, to make certain there were no reporters hanging around.

“I love the feel of the spring breeze on my skin.”

Taking her hand, he interlaced their fingers. “Have I told you what a remarkable

woman you are?”

Turning her head, she gave him a curious stare. “What brought that on?”

“You inspire me to do better, be better. I love you, Blair Andrea Caruso.”

Her eyes went damp. “And I adore you, my darling husband.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he hugged her tight.

Chapter 11

“We come armed with reinforcements.” Leesa announced, the minute the group of women were shown into Blair’s elegant gold and cream salon.

“I thought it was just you and Kelly.” She could have wept with joy as the women filed in one behind the other. First came Leesa, sweeping into the room with her usual flamboyant grace, a dazzling smile on her lips and bearing an enormous basket of what looked like babies stuff, including an enormous stuffed pink bear.

She was followed by Kelly, who had her own basket, then there was Monique, trailing behind with several items in her arms, enough so that it almost covered her face. And..., Blair let out a startled scream as she stared at the woman she had not seen in ages.

“Tianna? What! How are you here?”

Princess Tianna Ricci moved gracefully across the carpet to kiss her on the cheek. “There is such a thing as private jets and God! I am beginning to sound like my husband.” She plopped down on a comfortable chair next to Blair and slipped out of her stylish ankle length boots.

“I had some business to do in the States as well as checking on mom. When the girls told me they were dropping by, I had to come. Ah here comes another surprise.” They all grinned as Hailey swept into the room, with her own arms loaded.

“Some of your staff are on their way up with more things. Darling, you are huge.” She made the announcement in her own inimitable way as she walked over and sat next to Tianna. “How the hell are you able to move?”

“In slow careful movements.” Tears glistened in her eyes as she stared at some of the most powerful women in the world, right here in her salon.

For the past few weeks, she had alternated between acute despair and hopelessness. She had been making even more frequent trips to the bathroom and her ankles, and every part of her body was swollen. “

The contractions (false ones of course) came frequently and her husband and the entire staff were feeling the brunt of her abject misery.

She was into her seventh month and scheduled for a C-section at the end of April which was two weeks away. The babies were doing okay, and wonders upon wonders, she had gotten her heart’s desire. They were having two sets of twins – two girls and two boys.

A team had been hired to transform three bedrooms to accommodate the quadruplets, and she was only allowed to monitor the progress from afar, by using a device. Cameras were already set up in all the rooms, so she could see what was going on.

She felt fat and useless and on top of it, her husband was barely touching her. Oh, he would do his duty by rubbing the cream on each night, but he had started staying in one of the other rooms because of how restless she had become.

With the frequent trips to the bathroom and her inability to find a comfortable spot on the huge bed, she was making it hard for him to fall asleep. And he needed his sleep. With the spring comes the harvesting and the marketing, which was keeping him so busy.

“This is a ‘no tears’ zone.”

She sniffed them back. “It comes with the territory. You brought me gifts.” She stopped when two maids came in with several gift bags and placed them on a table in front of the window.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“We brought you tons of gifts.” Tianna qualified. “We know your husband’s family is one of the wine kings in the US, but we aim to do our part. But first...” She glanced over at Leesa and Kelly who were arranging the things on several tables and running out of space. “We have more surprises. Kelly?”

“Ah yes.” She came forward, with her usual long-limbed grace and sank down on a cushion on the floor. “We know how unattractive you must be feeling, what with that huge belly in front of you, but I must say, goodness! Your skin is amazing and your hair!

Darling, you must get pregnant more often...” She grinned at the look thrown her way by the others. “And I am being insensitive, but pregnancy does agree with you.”

“I retain water like a damn tap, and I have stopped wearing underwear, because what is the point? My tits are huge, and my nipples hurt all the time, and I think that my vagina is twice its normal size.” She felt the pressure on her chest easing as the women burst out laughing.

“I’m sure Cayden has no complaints in that area.” Leesa chimed in, her smile disappearing at the look on Blair’s face. “Darling, what’s the matter?”

She shook her head and struggled to ease up on the pillows at her back. She had been trying to paint some bright and light objects for the babies’ rooms but had to abandon the project, because she was feeling tired and dejected.

“I should not be discussing...”

“We’re all friends here and I think it’s safe to say that we have all been through things in our marriage.” Leesa looked at the others for qualification and got agreeing nods. “And we’re all here for you.”

“We are,” Kelly agreed.

“We haven’t had sex in three weeks.” She blurted out. “And I cannot blame him. I mean, look at me? I am like three whales rolled in one and I pee every five minutes, so I am sure I smell of urine all the damn time. And he is busy...”

“If you continue to be down on yourself, I am going to hit you over the head with one of those paintings,” Kelly threatened. “You are beautiful, and I am not bullshitting you. You know I do not have time for that. It so happens that we have just the thing in mind, something that is going to boost your spirit dramatically.

A massage and a makeover. We called Barry and he has agreed to delay his trip to France for another day and come over to give us the full works. When he is finished with you, your gorgeous husband is going to be worshiping at your feet.”

Tears came again and this time she let them flow. “Oh, let me cry!” She exclaimed, running her hands over her cheeks. “These are tears of gratitude and joy. What time is he arriving?”

Kelly picked up her phone. “Perfect timing. He is on his way. Now, time to open gifts.”

“I am so grateful you agreed to have lunch with me.” Claudine purred, her tawny eyes hungrily wandering over his face. “I was not sure you would. I take it the rumors are true? Your wife’s expecting four babies?”

“It is,” he responded easily, giving his nod of approval as the waiter poured the wine into the glasses. The restaurant was Italian and was tucked into a private road that led to a pond and a small bridge.

The place was perfect and was part and parcel of his company. It was somewhere they could bring out of town associates they wanted to woo into investing. “You said it was important.”

“Yes.” Using the tip of her fingernail, painted in fire engine red, she dipped it into the rich burgundy and brought it to her lips. Keeping her eyes on his, she slid her tongue over the moisture, the movement deliberately seductive and designed to stir his blood. It did nothing for him, except had him feeling amused.

“I am still waiting for you to tell me what it is.” He pointed out.

She pouted, feeling the acute disappointment that she had not succeeded in her ploy to get him worked up. “Darling, how are you coping? Your wife is carrying four babies, and I have to say, I simply cannot comprehend such a thing.

Why would any woman want to do that to her own body?” She gave a delicate shudder and took a sip of wine as if to wash away the very taste of it.

“My wife is an amazing woman and discussing her with you is off the table.” His voice was inflexible, his green eyes flat. “Now tell me why I had to see you. You did say it is a matter of urgency.”

She pouted again. “I am going back to Italy.”

“Alright.” He gave her a puzzled look. “And that’s it?”

She took a delicate sip of the wine again and eyed him over the rim of the glass. “I

was hoping to bum a ride off you.”

“The jet is used for business reasons and occasional pleasure. I hope that you are not implying that I should have it at your disposal. It is for family and you are not family.”

She winced slightly at that. “We had fun, did we not?”

Cayden tamped down the impatience. He knew what this was – a poorly disguised effort to get him back into her bed. He hadnot been with his wife for almost a month, but he was not even tempted. He would never cheat on Blair.

Aside from the fact that she was very pregnant with his four babies, she was also the woman he was completely in love with. He would never settle for anyone other than her.

“We did. But that was in the past.”

“It does not have to be.” She gave him a slow, sultry smile. Claudine Accardi was an acclaimed Italian actress and a former model and once a long time ago, Cayden had idly contemplated making their relationship permanent, but then she had cheated on him with a cast member.

It had taken that incident to make him realized he would have been settling for the wrong woman. She was incredibly beautiful with her raven black hair and alabaster skin, but she could never be Blair, not even close.

“I would never cheat on my wife. And for you to even hint at that, it shows that you do not know me very well. If that is all?”

Her tawny eyes flashed fire - “I love you.”

He actually laughed at that. Genuine amusement flashing across his face. “No, you don’t. I don’t believe you know the meaning of the word.”

Leaning forward, he lifted one long elegant hand, where a magnificent pearl and ruby ring flashed on her ring finger. “Stunning and very expensive. Was this given to you before or after you dumped the poor bastard you have been seeing?”

She pouted, red lips managing to look both sexy and pleading at the same time. “Pierre is lousy in bed and too clingy.” She gripped his fingers. “You. on the other hand, were a tiger in bed. Darling, I still have such vivid memories of what we used to do there. I do not want to say goodbye.”

“We already did.” He extricated his fingers from hers and finished the wine. “Enjoy the Primavera, it is the best I ever tasted and order yourself a dessert. I have to go back to work.”

He strode away without a second look.

Barry was flamboyantly gay. And his impeccable style and rapier wit were well known in the movie industry. He was horribly expensive but was one of the best. He came in – or rather glided in with a full team of assistants at his beck and call.

His hair was carefully styled blonde – a sort of gilded color immaculately shaped and styled. His outfit was a creaming red and gold pantsuit and a pair of red boots with heels.

After blowing kisses at the beautiful women in the room, he made his acerbic comment on the hugeness of Blair’s belly and her breasts, before snapping out orders. Within minutes, her salon had been transformed into an elegant beauty salon/massage area. Folding beds had been brought, and they were ordered to strip down to skin.

“I don’t feel comfortable...,” Blair began, but was shushed when Barry, simply led her to a comfortable recliner and started to take off the robe she had donned this morning.

“Hey.”

“Darling, I have seen it all and must say, your boobs are quite the work of art.” Stepping back, he pursed his lips and examined her naked upper body.

“Some of my strawberry and honey cream to get the skin glowing. Not that it needs

much help. Being pregnant has brought out the shine.” Clapping his hands, he went to get his enormous work bag and started digging.

“Diego darling, not that cream. It is hard to believe that you have been with me the longest and still have no idea what to do. Use the lemon for Kelly and the citrus for the others.” Shaking his head in disgust, he got to work.

It took several hours of being pommeeled and poked and with her frequent trips to use the bathroom, the tasks took much longer. First she was scrubbed from face to feet with something smelling of raspberry and cream.

And then she was shaved down below, for an added allure. “Bare as a baby’s butt.” Barry nodded in approval. “Your man is going to eat his fill and come back for more.”

Blair had stopped being embarrassed and self-conscious, a few hours ago.

“If you say so.”

“I do, darling.” He purred as he worked on her breasts. “He is going to want to lick every inch of your skin. You’re totally welcome.”

Ignoring his comment, she closed her eyes and allowed his competent hands to work out the kinks. She had called down to the kitchen and food had been sent up, tons of it. The girls had devoured the delicious pates, chilled lobster tails, giant shrimps and caviar and were now content to exchange stories.

Barry was a notorious gossip and had all the goods on most people and was certainly not afraid to dish.

“I am telling you, girl...” He crowed. “That Belinda is a piece of work.” He had

finished with her body and was now doing her hair. “She caught her husband with another man and is refusing to give him a divorce. Leon, please hand me the apricot conditioner. No dummy, the one in the oblong tube.

Good God, you would think you are blind as well as illiterate. As I was saying, she is in denial. I knew the gentleman was gay a long time ago, because he propositioned me at a party some time ago.”

“And I am sure you did not turn him down.”

He gave Kelly an injured look. “I thought you knew me better, darling. I do not mess around with married men. Bad karma. And besides, I was in a very committed relationship at the time.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“You mean with sticky fingers Josh?” Leesa called out.

“You are so mean, darling.” He tsked as he slicked conditioner through Blair’s hair.

“You know I have not yet recovered from what that- that creature did to me.”

“And yet, you were seen with him just last week, making the rounds at several restaurants.” Kelly grinned at his bashful expression. “I have eyes everywhere. What the hell are you still doing with him? Didn’t he relieve you of several thousand dollars and some really expensive jewelry?”

He made a pained sound deep inside his throat as he rinsed Blair’s hair.

“You do not understand how difficult it is to find love. All of you inside this room have found darling men, very wealthy and ones who are committed. Not to mention how well they look on the eyes. Josh is great in bed, and he makes me feel cherished.”

“How much is he costing you this time?” Leesa asked him dryly.

Barry made another pained sound, “he promised not to steal from me again.”

“I hope you got that in writing,” Kelly commented.

“Don’t be such a bitch.”

“I am a bitch and you are an idiot. Now enough of this tiresome conversation, I need some champagne.” Plucking off the cucumber slice, she looked at Blair. “Darling, I

hope you don't mind, but I am going to send someone to raid the wine cellar."

"Be my guest!" Blair waved a hand at her and closed her eyes, contented to tune them out.

He found her on the balcony. His mother told him she had some visitors and who they were, and he was grateful that she had some diversion. He knew she had been suffering from acute bouts of depression lately and was feeling guilty.

He had been spending nights in the adjoining bedroom through tacit agreement. She moved around a lot and often got up to use the bathroom, therefore robbing him of sleep.

He hated to be away from her, but that was the only way he could deal with what was happening. During the night, he would make his way into their bedroom to check on her. He stopped first in the rooms assigned to be the nurseries and made note of the progress.

His mother was the one in charge of the supervision and had been giving him regular reports. Standing just inside what was going to be the girls' room, he admired the pale pink silk wallpapers with the princess theme clearly etched into the fabric.

The furnishings were white and delicate looking. Two cots were already set up, side by side and he noticed additional items inside the room. Stuffed toys were placed on shelves and a pink and white bookcase stood next to the shelves.

Using the adjoining door, he stepped into the blue and green room that would be the boys' and felt his throat closing up and a lump forming. It struck him forcibly that he was going to be a father of four. And he felt slightly overwhelmed.

What in the hell did he know about how to be a dad? His own father was a good one, excellent in fact. Not overly indulgent and had been there for their most important achievements, no matter how busy he was. He was hoping he would be the same.

Leaving the rooms, he made his way into their suite and saw her through the glass as soon as he stepped into the bedroom. Deciding to shower before joining her, he went into the bathroom and made quick work of washing off the very long day.

He would spend time with his wife and delay going to his very lonely bed for as long as possible. With that in mind, he donned baggy sweats and t-shirt and made his way through the open glass doors that led to the balcony.

He was about to comment on the set up of dinner and candles burning, when she turned around and had his heart going into complete overdrive. Words failed him and all he could do was stare.

The disheveled hair was no longer, instead, it was shimmering in the overhead lights with glints of burnished gold showing through the dark brown. That was not the only changes. Her skin glowed as if a light had been turned on inside her and was projecting a flame.

The robe, a rich burgundy and completely transparent, was her only attire. Her soft smile drew him in, with the seductive knowledge that he was bowled over and damned if he wasn't. He felt himself harden to impossible proportions and was vaguely happy he had decided to ditch the underwear.

“Hi.”

Even the sound of her voice had his heart doing springs inside his chest.

He had to clear his throat twice before he could respond.

“Hi.”

“I hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving.” His eyes skimmed over lips coated with shimmering red gloss.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“For food, darling.” She was laughing at him, but he could not find the levity. The hunger was roaring inside him, and he knew that food would have to wait.

“I need you.” He barely glanced at the table and the scent of the candles mingled with the enticing scent of her perfume. Striding forward, he turned her to face him, fingers skimming over her skin in wonder. “It feels like satin.” He murmured. “What did you do?”

She seemed pleased at the compliment.

“I had some visitors today.”

“So, I heard.” He was busy running his fingers through her hair. “That fruitcake Barry is a genius.” He watched as the strands drifted through his fingers with a life of its own.

“That is already established. How was your day?”

“Hmm?” He was distracted by the seams of her lips.

“Your day.” She laughed again, exhilarated that she could do this to him at this stage of her pregnancy. She had started to think she was not attractive to him anymore and wondering if he was wishing that he was with someone else.

“I don’t want to talk.” He growled. “And food will definitely have to wait.”

Taking her hand, he drew her into the bedroom, stopping just when they reached the bed. Turning her to face him, he skimmed his fingers over the dewy softness of her skin.

“You smell like spring,” he murmured, finding himself fascinated by the texture and feel of her. “Is that raspberry?”

“Yes.” Her breath caught in her throat as he continued to examine her face. “I got a full body massage.”

“Hmm.” Tilting her chin up, he traced the outline of her full bottom lip. “I think this was what caught my attention that first time.”

“My lips?”

“Yes.” A frown touched his brow. “A full body massage?” He asked, belatedly realizing the implications of what she just said.

“Yes. Why?”

“You were naked?” His green eyes narrowed, and her lips twitched.

“All of us were. We got the full work up. Barry rubbed raspberry cream on my breasts.”

“Is that so?” There was a dangerous light in his eyes.

“You have to remember he is gay.”

“He put his hands on you and gay he might be, but he has blood running through his veins.

She gave him an incredulous look. “You cannot possibly be jealous...” Her voice petered off at the look on his face. “Oh, come on.”

“You’re mine,” he growled, still not certain how he felt that the man had his hands all over her. “And I am the only man who’s supposed to see you naked.”

“What about doctors?” She could not help but feel giddy that he was indeed put out that Barry had touched her like that.

“They are allowed.” He nudged off the robe and watched as it pooled around her feet. “To a certain point.” He felt the heat pooling into his lower body as he stared at the puckered nipples. “Oh Christ.” He groaned, feeling as if he was going to explode. Lifting his head, he fastened a hand around her neck and dragged her towards him.

His mouth seized hers hungrily. When she came closer as far as her belly would allow, the madness exploded inside him. The kiss was laced with desperation. It had been weeks since he touched her. Weeks since he had been forced to stay away from her because of the advanced stage of pregnancy and what came with it.

Weeks that his body had gone into withdrawal. His hands roved over her shoulders and down her back restlessly as he explored her mouth with a thoroughness that had her clinging to him. He almost ended the kiss when he felt movements in her belly before he realized that the babies were making their presence felt.

Hot vicious need poured through him like molten lava and left him shuddering. Tearing his mouth from hers, he trailed kisses down her neck and feasted on the hollow of her throat. Pressing her back, he made her sit on the edge of the bed, before dropping to his knees. His hands cupped her breast, weighing them in his palms.

“They are huge,” she whispered, not sure about what he was thinking.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“They are perfect.” He corrected, his voice thickening. Bending his head, he proceeded to show her how turned on he was by them. Arching her back, she dug her fingers into the thick strands of his hair as he suckled. A sharp almost brutal pain arrowed through her body and had her crying out. Lifting his head, he stared at her in alarm.

“Darling? Did I hurt you?”

She was trembling. Every bone in her body felt as if it was melting. “Do not stop. Please. I...,” she guided his head back to her breast and stiffened when he pulled the sensitive flesh and suckled hungrily.

The climax had her lifting her body, fingers latching onto the strands of hair. She felt as if she was being slammed into the violent eye of the storm without a safety net. The climax left her weak and trembling and disoriented.

Her eyes drifted open slowly to see him standing so that he could take off his clothes. Pulling herself up on the pillows, she dreamily watched as he shed clothing, leaving his magnificent body.

This man with the well-defined muscles, tanned skin, wide chest with the sprinkles of dense dark hairs, washboard flat stomach and penis full to bursting, was hers. He belonged to her. She lifted her eyes to his, to find that he was examining her body in detail, the way she was doing with his.

Climbing up, he moved over her, planting his knees on either side of her. His hands framed her belly, molding the shape of it, his eyes on her face. “I stopped inside the

nurseries.” His voice was emotional as he felt movements, the flurry of it against his skin.

“I am going to be a dad.”

“Yes.” Her hands covered his and she felt the quiver of emotions. He had finally accepted the pregnancy. It had taken him some time, but he was on board.

“It feels surreal.” Scooting down, he bent to the swollen abdomen, the skin tightly stretched until it had a sheen. “I keep thinking that you must be hurting. How can you be carrying four babies inside you and continue to function.” He kissed the flesh and felt the tremors.

“Women were created to carry babies.”

“Not so many.” His hands cradled her as he planted kisses on the flesh until he was moving further down. She felt when his body stiffened.

“What... Good God.” He whispered, one hand cupping her sex. “You are as clean as a baby’s butt down here.”

“Yes. I wanted to surprise you.”

“You certainly accomplished that.” He examined the flesh in fascination and felt himself hardening even more. “And I am not going to ask who performed the task.”

“I think that’s best.” Her breath hissed out when he ran a finger over the protruding flesh.

Lifting his head, he held her gaze as he straightened. Parting her thighs, he bent her knees and settled between them. Keeping his gaze on her, he guided himself slowly

into her and just stayed at the opening. “Tell me if I am hurting you.”

“You won’t...” Her body arched, and the rest of the words ended in a cry as he used the tip of his penis to rub the engorged flesh. Passion exploded inside her and left her weak.

“No. No. No.” Her head twisted on the pillows, fingers gripping the sheets. It was maddening. She felt as if she was being lit from the inside. “I can’t.” She raised up to grip his wrist, eyes feverish. “Please, I can’t.”

“You can.”

“Oh God!” The scream erupted and she was flying again. He used that moment to ease into her. He was rearing to go, his blood felt as if it was burning his flesh. He knew the minute he went all in; it would be over. Gritting his teeth, he clamped his hands on her knees and did a slow torturous dance that was designed to drive them both crazy.

But there was so much he could do and no more. Her moans, the high-pitched screams and her calling out his name, broke his control. With a feral growl, he drove into her and exploded. His body shuddered as he poured everything inside her.

Three weeks had been too long, much too long. His body bucked and shuddered as the orgasm continued.

When at last he was finished, he managed to find the strength to collapse next to her, his heart racing out of control. He was winded, his heart beating so hard, he could not hear anything else. Turning on his side, he drew her back against him, one hand covering her belly possessively.

They remained that way for several minutes as they fought to gather their composes

and get their breathing back to regular. He nuzzled the back of her neck where the dampness of sweat had seeped into her skin.

“You okay?”

“More than.” She splayed her fingers over his. “You?”

“Ask me that in another hour.” He responded with a chuckle as he brushed back tendrils of hairs clinging to her neck. “There is something different about your hair.” He lifted the strands and studied them in puzzlement.

“I thought you’d never noticed.”

“I was too busy with other things.” He watched as the silken strands slid through his fingers. “You added highlights.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“I did. Do you like how it looks?”

“I think I do. You were really busy today.”

She snuggled against him, relishing the glow of passion that was still wrapped around her.

“Very.” She told him what they had done and a little of the gossip that had been part of the package.

“Massage, makeover and tidbits, what else could one ask for?” His dry tone had her laughing. Turning her head, she stared at him. “I was grateful for the support. I do not know if you noticed, but I was feeling down.”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “I noticed.”

“I felt so unattractive and huge.”

“I don’t know why.”

“I am pregnant with four babies and unable to do anything or go anywhere.”

“Isn’t this something you wanted?” He asked carefully. “You were determined to make this happen and at first, I was furious that you went behind my back. But I admire your persistence and determination.” His eyes searched her face.

“You knew what this type of pregnancy entails, darling. You were the one who told

me you were prepared for anything as long as it turned out all right.”

She poked her tongue out at him, gasping when he quickly bit it.

“Thanks for throwing my words back at me.” She retorted when she could speak.

He smiled at her. “I was just trying to make a point.” His hand drifted upwards to cup her breast. “The part about you feeling unattractive is nonsense. You will always be the most beautiful woman in the world to me and nothing can change that.

Even if you do look like as big as a house.” He grinned at her baleful look. “No matter what changes, or how you look, I love you and that will never change.”

“Promise?” She whispered.

“I swear.” He whispered back before claiming her lips in a searing kiss.

“Surprise!”

Blair jumped, one hand going to her chest as she gaped at the people in the room and the banner hung up across the hearth. The dining room was filled with the full complement of staff and the entire family, including her dad.

“What’s this?”

Taking her hand, Cayden led her towards them. He had insisted that she got dressed and come down for dinner and had not told her why.

“This is our way of wishing you all the best for the safe delivery of those babies.”

Clive grinned as he came forward and took her free hand. Cayden did not bother reprimanding him when he bent to kiss her on the lips.

“Anthony prepared some of your favorite recipes, my dear,” Marianne rejoined with a smile.

“I could smell the rosemary chicken when I was in the hallway,” Her eyes moistened as she stared at the staff. “And dad, you spoke to me over the phone and said you would be at the hospital tomorrow.”

With a wide smile, he came over and cupped her face between his hands. “I had a challenging time keeping it from you. Your husband informed me a week ago that this was in the works, and nothing could stop me from being here. You look wonderful.”

“That’s a lie, but I’ll take it.”

She was guided to her seat with the staff coming over one at a time to wish her all the best.

“Guys, you’re behaving as if I am not coming back.”

“We have every confidence that you will come back – with four adorable babies.” Maria told her stoutly. “Now let us leave you so you can enjoy the meal.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

And she did enjoy it. Tomorrow was the day she had been dreading. It was finally here. Nurse Connelly had monitored her blood pressure and declared that she had been doing very well. She was ready and she wasn't.

She spent some restless nights wandering around the now finished nurseries, visualizing her four babies inside their cots. But now, the time was here or almost was.

She allowed the conversation to ebb and flow around her and was grateful for the support of family. Over the past few months, she had gotten close to her mother-in-law. The woman had become a surprising tower of strength.

The others were also very supportive, coming to visit her and find out how she was doing. For five years, she had felt like a complete stranger in the household, but now she felt like she was part of the family.

But behind the hope and anticipation, there was the nagging fear. The babies' heartbeats were strong and everything was going all right. Her bag was packed, had been packed for two weeks now.

But she was worried that something was going to go wrong. She and Cayden had chosen names, finally. He was the one who insisted on them doing so.

“We cannot have them popping out and not knowing what to call them.”

To the delight of their parents, they had included their names. The boys were” Chad Alberto and Caleb Blake. The girls were: Bianca Marianne and Bella Catherine.

Marianne had been so delighted; she had puffy satin name tags made to hang over the cots. Pink for the girls and blue for the boys.

Everything was in place. The only thing she had to do was to deliver four healthy babies, not two or three, four. She could not settle for less than that.

Feeling pressure on her hand, she looked up to see her husband staring at her in concern.

“What’s the matter?” He whispered.

“Nothing.”

“Try again.”

With a sigh, she put away her dessert spoon. Anthony had really outdone himself and the meal was lavish and delicious.

“Just a little nostalgia,” she confessed, “I don’t particularly like hospitals.”

“No one does.” His eyes searched her face, and he knew there was more. “What’s really bothering you?”

“I’m afraid,” she confessed, “it is just hitting me that the time is here. I am going to get these babies out of me. For months, they have been cradled inside my womb. I have been tentatively happy during the first month or so, not daring to hope, expecting that at any time, I would miscarry.

After what we went through with the previous pregnancies, I was afraid that this would be the same. And now it has come to where I am at the end of the term and the babies are healthy.”

“You’re borrowing trouble.”

She shook her head and took a deep breath. “You are right. I should remain positive and grounded.”

“I am here!” He squeezed her hand. “Always.”

“I know, and I love you so much for putting up with my eccentricities.”

His thick brows lifted, “is that what you’re calling it?”

She smiled at him. “I think it’s an appropriate term.”

“Then we will stick with it.” His expression sobered. “You will be fine darling. I know it.”

She nodded and bolstered up a smile.

Coffee and tiny cakes with strawberries on top were served on the patio. The Saturday afternoon was lovely with the previous rain washing the earth clean.

Flowers bloomed in profusion along the winding paths and the lawns were immaculately groomed. Conversations interspersed with laughter added to the spectacular setting. A comfortable armchair had been dragged out for her to sit, and her cup of tea was placed on a table in front of her.

Blair could not help but wonder if this was her last supper and the thought sent a chill inside her. Picking up the delicate cup, she took a fortified sip. She knew the enormous risks of giving birth to multiples. Something could go wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

She could lose her babies or end up losing her life. She turned to look at her husband who was in conversation with his brothers and felt a whimsical smile playing around her lips.

He was the most handsome of the three and the one who commanded the most attention. He had such a way about him, she thought proudly. Biting her lip, she put away her cup and took several breaths, forcing a smile when her dad pulled up a chair next to her.

“You look pensive.”

She should have known she could not hide anything from him.

“Just thinking about tomorrow,” she said with a shaky laugh, “it’s been a sometimes rough and rocky road, but it’s almost at the end of it.”

His eyes searched her face. “You sound regretful.”

“No.” She shook her head, “Just wanting it to end on a good note.” She reached for his hand. “Cayden thinks I am being fanciful. But there is this instinct or warning or perhaps it is just hormones. But I keep thinking that something will go wrong.”

He squeezed her hand. “I am a strong believer in the Almighty and we brought you up to be as well. We have been praying for these babies’ safe delivery and I know the Lord will come through for us.”

“I have been praying too, dad.” She held onto his hand. “But over the last few days, I

have been thinking about mom. Wishing she were here to offer some advice, to assure me that everything will be fine.

And to help me guide my babies the way they should go.” She looked around, taking in breaths of spring flowers and clean air. The grounds spread out before her, bursts of colors from the magnificent garden, trees spearing upwards and the dazzling white gazebo tucked between two towering oak trees.

“Alberto wants to hire someone to build a treehouse big enough to accommodate all four children.” She smiled slightly. “They are all so excited about it now. The nurseries are so lovely, that I spend hours moving from one room to the next.” Her eyes danced as she looked at her dad. “Have you seen the playroom?”

“Bigger than my bedroom!” He nodded. “Filled with all sorts of toys and playthings a child could ever need. It is all lovely.”

“Then why am I thinking that it will all be for nothing?” She whispered. “Why do I keep having these nagging feelings that something will go wrong.”

Taking her hand in both of his, he focused his gaze on her. “We are not having any of that. I believe in the power of prayer and that is what we’re holding onto. Get rid of everything else and tell yourself that you are coming home with four healthy and adorable babies.”

“I poured you some of the brandy wine.” Alberto handed the glass to him as soon as he entered the room. “I figured you would want something stronger than the wine we had at supper.” Gray eyes scanned his face.

“You are concerned. How is she?”

“Thanks.” Cayden took the glass and went to stand at the window. The living room faced the front of the grounds with the white gates looming upwards. He had lived here most of his life, except when the family was splitting time between the States and Italy.

He had gallivanted all over the world, with acquaintances and friends. Swathing a path through different women and playing hard.

Now he was going to be a father of four. He could scarcely comprehend the magnitude of it.

“She’s sleeping.” He took a sip of his drink as he answered the question. Her father had confided in him that she was worrying, but he knew her better than anyone and as much as she tried to hide it, he had picked up on it. “She’s concerned.” He laughed grimly at the inadequacy of that word.

“It is more than that. She is scared. Her blood pressure is a little elevated and I managed to calm her down so she could get some sleep. We have been through so much already. The miscarriages took their toll, and I have to admit that my hope had all but died.”

Alberto walked over to stand next to him, a frown knitting his brow. “Specifically, what she’s scared about?”

“That this is too good to be true, that she will end up losing all if not some. My fear? Losing her.” His fingers tightened around the glass as tension flooded his body. “That is not a bloody option and she has been hinting that if it comes down to a choice, I should choose the babies. Fat chance of that happening.”

His father placed a hand on his shoulder. “I was faced with that daunting decision when your mother was in labor, and I knew without a doubt that I would choose her.”

He slanted a look at his son. “I held you in my arms after and felt shame and guilt washing over me.”

Taking a deep breath, Cayden finished his drink. “I cannot lose her. The very idea of it, is driving me insane.”

Chapter 13

“Are we ready?” Dr. Connelly’s smile was wide and reassuring.

“As I am the only one carrying four babies inside my uterus, I assume you’re talking to me and yes I am.” More than ready.” Blair rubbed her belly distractedly.

“Good. We are going to be doing some preop examinations to locate the position of each little one and get the sound of their heartbeats. I know Nurse Connelly already checked your blood pressure...” He shook his head and made a tsking sound with his mouth. “She says it’s a little elevated, but that’s to be expected.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“Is that going to be a problem?” Cayden spoke for the first time since they wheeled his wife into the private room.

“No, we have an excellent team here who will make certain everything goes well.” He smiled at Blair again, but instead of relaxing, she felt her heartrate spiking. Trying to calm herself, she increased the pressure on her husband’s hand.

“The entire family is here.”

“I had a nurse send out for some refreshments for them and to tell them to make themselves comfortable.”

They got her into bed and proceeded to change her out of the clothes she had worn to the clinic. A nurse bundled up her thick hair into a tidy ponytail and fluffed her pillows.

“I am assuming you’re staying for the birth?” Dr. Connelly glanced over at Cayden as he did the blood pressure check.

“A team of horses could not drag me out of here.” He answered grimly.

“That is what I thought. Get the man a robe and slippers.” He ordered.

“I am right here, baby.” Bending, he kissed her softly on the lips. “I am not going anywhere.”

“I know.”

Cayden kept his eyes on her face as he quickly donned the protective clothing. Sliding in, he went behind her, holding her against him.

He knew she was anxious and had felt it even though she tried to hide it when they were making the trip to the private clinic. He had not said anything to her, because it would have been hypocritical for him to tell her not to worry when he was crippled by it himself.

“Soon.” He whispered in her ear.

“Yes. Positive thoughts. I love you.”

“I love you more.”

He held his breath and released it slowly as the team started to work on her.

“What’s the camera for?” He demanded, noticing it for the first time.

“Quadruplets are so rare, we want to record it for posterity. We received your wife’s permission.”

“Darling…”

“It’s okay.” She squeezed his hands. “I don’t mind.”

“Ready?” Dr. Connelly was acting as mouthpiece for the rest of the medical team grouped around the bed.

“I am.”

Cayden tried not to wince or voice his distress as the scalpel made a clean slice on her

belly, but for a long time, that memory was going to live with him.

Not to mention when they started opening the incision. “Babies are perfectly placed.” He murmured, issuing swift instructions. “We’re detaching the first one get ready with a towel.” He looked up at the couple and flashed them a smile.

“Looks like the girls are beating the boys out.” He reached in and made the delicate task of plucking the baby out.

“Get ready for baby ‘A’.” He announced.

“Bianca Marianne.” She corrected him automatically.

“The nurses will make a note of it,” she was assured. “So far, so good.”

They both watched in anticipation as the tiny baby was lifted out, her body wrinkled, feet moving energetically. A collective sigh of relief was uttered when she started screaming as if in protest of being rudely ejected from her comfortable warmth.

“Very strong pair of lungs.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“She’s okay?” Blair asked anxiously.

“Her weight is a comfortable five pounds. That is acceptable.” The doctor assured her.

“Make certain to tag her with the name.”

“We will!”

“Now, for the next one.”

Cayden started to relax as Bella Catherine came next.

But then it was time for the boys and that is when he noticed the tenseness in the room.

“What’s the matter?” He demanded.

“Just a little hitch.”

“Please tell us what’s going on.” Blair’s hands held his in a death grip and he could feel her trembling.

“The cord is wrapped around this little one’s neck, we just have to... Ah, there we go.”

“Is he okay? Is my son all right?”

“Let’s see, shall we?” When they took the baby out, he remained silent.

“He’s not making a damn sound.” Cayden noted grimly. “Is he going to be...”

He was then cut off by the angry scream, the baby made.

“Sometimes you just have to give them a little nudge.”

Cayden felt when Blair sagged against him. Wrapping his arms around her, he hugged her tight. Chad Alberto weighed five pounds like his sisters, except Caleb Blake who was four pounds and was going to require some help breathing.

“Nothing to worry about.” There was a collective sigh of relief.

“I want to see them.” Blair demanded. “I want to see my babies.” Cayden was about to second the demand, when he felt her bodysagging against his and her fingers sliding from his. Turning his head, he was about to tease her about deserting him now that she knows she was in the clear when he noticed her eyes rolling over.

“Baby! What is the matter? Something is wrong!”

“Cayden, I am going to ask you to step away now.”

“Not on your damn life. I am not leaving her.”

“She is hemorrhaging. Please.”

He sprang off the bed reluctantly, his face harsh with strain. She was unconscious and looked as pale as death.

He was ushered from the room and the doors closed behind him.

Tearing off the protective garments, he slid on his shoes and just stood there, not knowing what to do. It was when he felt a touch on his shoulder that he stirred and turned to look at his mother.

“We heard that there was a complication with Blair,” she said softly.

“Yes.” He bit out. “She started bleeding. Just like that, she...,” he rubbed a hand at the back of his neck and was surprised to find it trembling.

“Would you like to come with us to look at the babies? They already put them in the nursery.”

“No,” he shook his head, eyes bleak. “I would not feel right looking at them without her. I have to know that she is all right.”

“Darling...”

“Please mother, I just want to be alone right now.”

Marianne hesitated briefly, unwilling to leave him in the state he was in.

“I just need to clear my head. I will be fine.” With that, he turned on his heels and walked away.

“How is he?” Alberto had come up behind her and they watched their son disappeared down the hall.

“Shattered.” She gripped her husband’s hands. “I want to wrap my arms around him and tell him that everything will be all right. He is a grown man with his own children and I just want to kiss him and tell him not to worry.”

Alberto wrapped his arms around her. “We have to allow him the time to figure things out. We have the best team of doctors working on her and I have every confidence that Blair is going to come through this.”

She leaned into him for a minute, absorbing his strength, before easing away and saying briskly. “Let us go tell the others and make our way to the nursery. I want a second look at my adorable grandbabies.”

Taking her hand, he lifted it and kissed her knuckles. “I cannot wait.”

By passing the small chapel and ignoring the curious looks thrown at him by the nurses and clinic personnels milling around, he made his way towards the revolving glass doors and sent the group of reporters a chilling enough glance to have them backing off.

He did not stop until he reached a kind of park with flowering buds and trees waving in the cooling breeze. Spring had officially arrived. Not that it meant much to him at this point. The season had always been his wife's favorite.

She would make a big deal out of it, extolling on the scents, the flowers blooming and the feel of the wind on her skin. She would arrange all sorts of activities around it and would rope him into going for rides with the top down and going out on his speedboat.

Rubbing his palms over his jeans, he stared at the brook coursing over the flat, smooth stones. He had left instructions for them to tell him when she came out of surgery.

Taking a deep breath, he leaned back on the iron rails that made up the back of the chair. He felt numb, helpless, and weary. The actual surgery had not been that long, but it had seemed like a lifetime.

He had witnessed a miracle. His babies, being taken out one after the other – four of them. Three of them healthy - one had to be put in the NICU. And his wife bleeding out. A tremendous sacrifice when you think about it.

After five miscarriages, one each year, they were now blessed with four - because of his wife's determination.

He blew out a breath as he realized that she had given up her way of life, her career without so much as an ounce of hesitation.

He had never pondered on it, had completely taken it for granted that she would stop teaching and fall into the role of being his wife. He had pursued her relentlessly when she refused to have anything to do with him.

At first it was ego; he was damn sure of it. Because in his charmed life, what woman would not be charmed or privileged to be with him? So, he had pursued her, showed up at her cozy little villa and never stopped until she was in his bed.

Or in her bed. The first time between them had been at that charming little place she rented. Instead of him seducing her, she had blown him away.

Her innocence, her unbridled passion, the sweet taste of her lips and her tightness when he entered her had confused and amazed him at the same time. What he expected to be just a holiday fling, something casual had turned into something so significant that he knew he could not just turn and walk away.

A rueful laugh escaped him. He had stayed away from her after that, and it had lasted a damn day. Twenty-four hours and he was back at her door, beating it down and threatening to break it if she did not let him in.

She had succumbed, but his triumph had turned into chagrin when she told him in no uncertain terms that he was spoiled and entitled, and she did not have time to be with someone who displayed that sort of behavior.

Her dark eyes had flashed fire and fueled a desire so hot and brutal that it had him dragging her into his arms and kissing her senseless.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

The familiar sound of Clive’s voice had him hissing out a breath. “I wanted to be alone.” A sudden thought hit him, and he dragged out his phone, wondering if he had

missed a call from the doctor.

“Still in surgery!” Clive lowered himself next him and leaned back, filling his lungs with the clean air. “A spectacular day.”

“What do you want?”

“Just thought I would swing by to keep my brother company.” He slanted a look at him and continued. “A spectacular day isn’t it? I am just coming from the nursery where the entire family including Blake, gathered around to take in the new arrivals.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

They all have the same shade of dark hair that's the Caruso's trademark. And I am already hopelessly in love with my beautiful nieces. I think they favor their mother. The boys – well, that is yet to be decided. Mother thinks they both look like you. She is going to be fine.” He added quietly.

“You have that on good authority, do you?”

“She's strong and resilient.” A smile touched his lips. “I recall vividly the day you introduced her to the family. I could clearly see how nervous she was, but that did not stop her from lifting that small chin of hers and facing mother head on. And that was no mean feat.”

A reluctant smile tugged at Cayden's lips as he too recalled that crucial moment.

“We were still in Italy, and I wanted to tie things down before she left for the states. I persuaded her to meet the family because I wanted to marry her before she changed her mind.” He rubbed his hands over his face and blew out a breath.

“She stood. Such a tiny thing and she endured the glacial look from Mother's face and bore up under dad's interrogation.” He glanced at his brother. “You were very gracious towards her.”

“That's because I had fallen a little in love with her.” He laughed at the look on Cayden's face. “Still am, come to think of it.” He mused. “It is so damn easy to fall for her.

She has class, loads of it. She was not impressed by the luxurious surroundings, a

little intimidated perhaps, but that meant nothing to her.” His lips tilted. “She loves you, completely and that was something I envied.”

Scooting forward, he clasped his hands between his thighs and absently followed a butterfly’s journey from one rosebud to the other. “I might joke around and talk about wishing I had met her first, and I do, but her coming into our lives, changed this family. She has changed all of us, even mother had to admit it.”

“Under extreme duress.” He laughed shakily. “I came out here to be alone – to just contemplate. I have taken her for granted. I was just thinking that she gave everything up for me without question. If given another chance...”

“When given another chance.”

Cayden slanted his brother a grateful look at the qualification. “When given a chance, I am going to love the hell out of her and show her how much she means to me.” As if on cue, his phone pinged. Taking a breath, he dragged it out and read the message. “She’s out of surgery.”

“Then let’s go.”

The mood was a celebratory one in the private room. The three babies had been brought in to meet their mama, while the rest of the family erupted in excited conversation, all of them grateful that she had come out of the surgery successfully.

Their little Caleb Blake was still in the NICU, but according to the doctors, he was breathing a lot better.

After half an hour, the family were told that it was time to allow the new mother to

get some much-needed rest.

“Son, you’re staying, I take it?” Alberto asked with a grin.

“I am a constant fixture until my wife is discharged.”

“That’s to be expected.” Marianne came around and leaning down, pressed a kiss on Blair’s cheek. “Well done my dear. You have made us so very happy with those wonderful babies. We will get things ready for when you come home.”

Her eyes moistened as she stared at the faces around her. “Thanks – all of you for being here.”

“Where else would we be?” Marching forward, Clive kissed her full on the lips, ignoring his brother’s glower. “We cannot wait for you to come home.”

Then it was Conail and then her dad, who seemed a little tired.

“My prayers were answered.’ He said with a heartfelt sigh as he kissed her forehead. “I could not bear to lose you.”

“Thanks dad,” she touched his cheek, “promise me you’ll go home and get some rest.”

“I can afford to do so now.” He kissed her again before glancing at her husband. “Please keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

They all filed out of the room and closed the door. Slipping out of his shoes, he climbed in next to her. “Finally.” He murmured with a heartfelt sigh.” Sliding his

hand around her shoulders, he hugged her. “You gave me quite a scare.”

She snuggled, inhaling his subtle cologne and masculinity. His solidness had her closing her eyes in contentment.

“I never meant to.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“The only reason, I am not berating you.” Tucking his fingers under her chin, he scanned her face. Tendrils of hairs had escaped the neat and tidy ponytail. Brushing the strands away, he leaned in to kiss her on the lips. “Trying to get the taste of my brother’s kiss off what’s mine.”

Her arms came around his neck and to his consternation, she buried her face in his neck and burst into tears.

“Baby.” Gathering her close, he rubbed his hands up and down her back.

“I am sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t be.”

“I am just more than a little emotional.” Easing out of his arms, she stared at him. “I was so scared, Cayden. Before they started the procedure, I kept thinking that I was going to be faced with them telling me that I had lost my babies.

I had gotten so accustomed to losing – the miscarriages, the empty feeling had become so much a part of me that I had embraced it.”

He wiped her cheeks with his thumbs gently. “And now we have four babies – Caleb is still a little bit out of it, but he’s going to make it.”

Her lips trembled as she nodded. “I love you. I know you never approved of...”

He laid his finger on her lips and shook his head. “I have so much making up to do. I

took you for granted and for the first month or so, I was an ass. I intend to make it right.” His eyes glowed as he continued to stare at her.

“You have given me so much and as long as I live, I will always be grateful to you.” He brushed his lips on hers. “You’re my life and I want you to know that.”

“The feeling is mutual.” She whispered tremulously.

“Aren’t you even a bit tired?” Alberto asked his wife gently as she wandered around the girl’s room, touching this and rearranging that. “I thought I would find you up here.”

She lifted shining eyes to him as she cradled a very large and fluffy pink bear. “I always wanted a daughter.”

“I know.” Moving forward, he came up behind her and wrapped his hands around her waist. “You wanted to continue trying for one, until the doctor warned you that having another child would prove to be detrimental to your health and most certainly fatal.”

He kissed the top of her head. They had arrived home and opened a bottle of Caruso Expression and toasted the birth of the babies. The staff had been waiting to hear the news and had broken into wild hoops of relief and delight.

“Now, we have two granddaughters.” Her eyes moistened as she looked around the room. “I was so against the marriage at first and even after. I did not think she was good enough for our son.”

“She has proven herself to be the perfect one for him.”

“She has made him so happy. I never thought I would see the day when Cayden would settle down.”

Stepping from behind her, he took the bear she was giving a death hug and put it back where it belonged. The room was large and befitting a princess. Or two princesses for that matter. The next generation of Caruso’s, he thought whimsically.

“The house will be filled with the sounds of little feet running around and chaos is going to rein.” His gray eyes twinkled as he turned to look at her. “My dear, are you prepared for it?”

Marianne laughed, sliding her hand through his arm as they both stared at the two cots. “More than prepared. I am looking forward to the chaos. I can not wait to hold them in my arms, read them bedtime stories.” Her expression sobered. “We are going to have to start interviewing nannies.

Appropriate ones. I know Blair will want to be hands-on when it comes to the children, but she will need help. Four babies!” She let out a shaky laugh and leaned against him. “They are going to be spoiled rotten.”

He rubbed his cheek against her hair. “We still have little Caleb to think about.” He reminded her.

“He is going to be simply fine. I predict that little boy is going to race past his more healthy siblings.”

Chapter 14

Alberto had called it. Chaos reigned in the usually staid and proper Caruso household. Blair and the babies were discharged after several thorough examinations after a week. She was still sore after the surgery and C-section but had recovered very

quickly.

Her husband had not left her side, taking the week off and spending it there with her even despite her protests.

“I can work from here, can’t I?” He had brushed away the argument with that mild rejoinder. “This is where I should be.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

He would push her in the wheelchair whenever it was time to check on baby Caleb. The others were brought to her by the excited nurses to be fed (she had insisted on breastfeeding, even if it was just for now and was enjoying every minute of it!)

A brand-new SUV had been ordered custom made and the four babies were settled at the back in their car seats while on the way from the hospital. Reporters had been milling around, trying to bribe, coax, bully the clinic staff into getting them a pic of the quadruplets without success.

One very enterprising reporter had managed to evade the extra security placed outside the front doors and had almost made it to the room when he was stopped and ushered out none too gently.

Now they were home.

“Ready?” Cayden hopped, coming around to open the passenger door.

“I am.” She took a look at the back and smiled as she stared at the sleeping babies. “I think they loved the rocking motion of the vehicle.”

Before he could respond, the front doors burst open to eject the entire family, led by Marianne.

“You were taking too long.” Leaning over, she kissed Blair on the cheek before bustling around to where the babies were sleeping. Cayden was brushed aside, and all four babies were captured by a family member.

“The little darlings are fast asleep.” Marianne whispered as she hefted the car seat and peered down at Bianca.

Both Cayden and Blair were left on their own as the family trooped up the steps and into the house with their babies.

“Is this how it’s going to be from now on?” Cayden asked dryly as he helped her out.

“I suppose so!” She stepped out and inhaled the clean air of home. It seemed like ages since she had been here, and the appreciation was apparent. “I don’t mind, do you?” She turned to face him, and he responded by pulling her against him.

“The best thing about having a big family is that we get to share the responsibilities, and we will need help. It also means that I get to spend more time with my wife.”

Her expression turned sober as she stared at him. “I promise you that I will never allow the children to get between us.”

“What do you mean?”

Lifting a hand, she touched the stubble on his face. “I wanted this badly enough to go to desperate lengths. Four babies will take up a lot of our time. But I am making a promise right now that I will not neglect you.”

“Darling...”

She shook her head. “I have been reading up on postpartum depression and the side effects of having multiples. There will be days when I do not feel like being with anyone and I hope to God it does not come to that.

I want to continue to be your wife in every sense of the word. I do not want us to be

consumed by being parents, so that we miss out on each other. I could not bear it.”

Tilting her chin up, his green eyes sizzled as he stared at her. “I promise to knock you senseless if that happens.” He half teased, brushing his lips on hers. “Let’s go inside, shall we?”

She nodded, sliding her hand through his arm.

The family and staff had gone all out to welcome them home. Streamers with her name and the babies’ names hung above the mantel in the large living room. Pink and blue balloons were placed strategically and there were flowers everywhere.

The entire staff had taken time from their duties to greet her. Maria, her personal maid, shuffled forward to give her a hug, sniffing at tears as she stepped back.

They lingered, admiring the new additions to the family until they were told by Bryce to get back to work. And the babies were awake and cooing, obviously reveling at the attention they were receiving.

“We have to talk about hiring at least two nannies.” Marianne announced as soon as the staff had filed from the room.

“Mother, now is not the time.” Cayden settled his wife in a comfortable chair and sat on the arm, one hand curved around her shoulders. “Blair is still recovering from something major. Allow us to settle down first, will you?”

Marianne gave them both a look which clearly said the conversation was far from over.

“All right.” Tucking the blanket more securely around Bianca, she made cooing sounds to the baby.

“Dad, I am so happy you’re here.”

“I have been invited to dinner.” He beamed at her. “And I thank the good Lord, you’re out of danger.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“I am so happy and grateful.”

She sat there half listening to the conversation going on around her and delighted that her babies, all of them were home where they belonged. She did not get a chance with them, but she did not mind. Like her husband said earlier, having a big family at a time like this was indeed a blessing.

Cayden felt when her head became heavy on his chest and turned to look at her.

“She’s asleep.” He whispered, an indescribably tender look on his face.

“Poor dear,” Marianne smiled, “after what she has been through, it’s not surprising.”

“I am taking her upstairs.” He carefully lifted her in his arms, pausing when she stirred and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“The babies...”

“Do not worry about these little darlings. We will take them up as soon as we can.”

“Thanks, mother. I am not certain she will be down for supper.”

“If she’s awake by the time I am ready to leave, I would love to come and wish her goodnight.”

He nodded assent to his father-in-law before leaving the room.

Upstairs in their bedroom, he set her down on the bed and carefully removed first her shoes and then the dress she had worn from the hospital. Maria had already laid out a robe with a zipper in front for her.

Slipping it over her head after removing her clothing, he fluffed her pillows and pulled the quilt over her and just sat there on the edge of the bed, taking her in. It was hard to believe that it had only been a week since she left to go to the clinic. A very tumultuous week where he thought he was going to lose her.

He had so much to give thanks for and he vowed he was never going to take any of it for granted.

Brushing back the hairs from her forehead, he bent to kiss her, before sliding off the bed, careful not to disturb her.

It was already late afternoon. They had spent a considerable amount of time in the clinic. The doctors had done their thorough examinations on her and all four babies and the enormous amount of paperwork had to be dealt with. That had left them spending almost the entire day there.

Taking one last look at her, he left the room and closed the doors behind him. The babies were finally in their rooms and settled in their cots.

“They are sleeping.” His mother whispered as she stood there looking at the two identical girls. “I cannot stop staring at them. They remind me of when you were first placed in my arms. I wept.” She reached for his hand and squeezed. “Granddaughters. Oh God, darling, they are going to be so damned spoiled.”

“Not too much.” He whispered back, using his free hand to touch the tiny, bunched fist. Lifting his head, he stared at Bella, who was sleeping in the same position as her sister.

“You cannot tell me you are not going to try and slay dragons for them.”

“No one will ever be good enough.” He admitted wryly. “I am not only going to slay dragons but will also destroy their lairs or wherever the hell they live.” He stared at Bianca. “The only way to tell them apart is the tiny cleft in Bianca’s chin, just like her mother’s.” He was getting emotional but could not help it.

“And the boys – Chad has a tiny mole on his left cheek. You have to look closely to see it.” She placed her head on his arm. “Darling, I am so overwhelmed.”

“I think that’s the word for it,” he agreed.

He looked around the room and sighed. “There are going to be so many changes.”

“Welcome ones.”

“I’m not pumping.” That was the first thing she greeted him with as soon as he stepped into the girl’s nursery that evening. The babies were three weeks’ old and seem to be thriving. But his wife looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“There is no milk. How could that be?” She looked up at her husband and eased the nipple out of Bianca’s pursed lips. “I am a horrible mother.”

“You’re not a horrible mother.” Marching over, he gently took his daughter out of her arms and placed her inside the cot. Just then Maria bustled in with Bella, propped on her sturdy shoulder, one large hand rubbing the baby’s back soothingly. “This one is all burped and ready for bed.” She stopped short when she noticed Cayden.

“Sir, I had no idea...”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“Get someone else in here and make a bottle for Bianca,” he ordered, “I will go and check on the boys...”

“Your parents are in with them.” Her eyes swung to Blair, who was just sitting there.

“Good.” Taking Bella from her, he cradled the baby and gave her a quick and gentle kiss on the soft cheek, feeling the funny feeling inside his chest as she stared up at him with her curious hazel eyes. All four of them had the same color eyes and he suspected they would remain that color.

“Be a good girl for your grandparents, will you sweetheart? Daddy is taking mommy out on the town.” Lifting his head, he handed the baby back to Maria. “Get the bottle ready.” Turning around, he took his wife’s hand and drew her up.

“I cannot leave...”

“You can and you will.” He practically pushed her out of the room and without even stopping to look in on the boys, he closed their bedroom doors.

“I am not in the mood to go anywhere. I think...”

“You promised me.” He grimly went to the closet and scanned the numerous outfits there. His mother had called in concern, saying that Blair was crying. “You need to do something darling; she is crying and has been doing so for most of the day.

“You vowed to me that we are not going to let the babies’ get in the way of our marriage.” He yanked out a lovely aquamarine gown with a scooped neckline and

fitted waist. She had been working like a fiend to get her figure back and was almost there. “It’s been almost a month.”

Placing the dress on the bed, he stood in front of her and started undressing her like a child. “I am holding you to that promise tonight. We are going out. Dinner and dancing until midnight. We have a full complement of staff here and my parents are more than capable of taking care of our children.”

“Cayden...”

“No!” He shook his head. “No talk of how inadequate a mother you are or anything like that. The doctors and nurses warned that your milk might dry up soon.

We can more than afford tons of formulas and we, along with my parents, and your friends, have decided on the best on the market. They will not be starving and certainly will not lack nutrition.”

He propelled her into the bathroom and into the huge shower install. Turning on the jet, he made certain the temperature was exactly right before picking up the sponge and squirting floral scented gel on. He could see how listless she was and tried to tamp down the worry settling inside his chest.

“Talk to me baby.” He urged as he ran the sponge over her back.

“I feel overwhelmed.” She admitted.

“Fair enough.” He turned her around so he could get her front and felt the quick dart of hot desire pouring into him. Her breasts were still perky, even though he would not have cared if they were hanging down her waist. And her belly was almost flat.

“Understandable.” He bathed her stomach slowly. “We will be interviewing potential

nannies,” he stopped when she shook her head and waited for the usual objections.

“I want to be there for them.”

“You are. You will be. But I am playing the husband and daddy card. We will hire two nannies, ones who are qualified to take care of our babies.” He tried to avoid her pubic area because of the hot desire he could not get a handle on.

He briskly passed the sponge over her middle and turned the water to rinse off the suds. Grabbing some towels, he dried her off and lifted her to carry her into the bedroom.

“Now, I am going to take a quick shower and leave you to get ready.” He hunkered down in front of her. “I adore you baby. I love you beyond reason and I would very much like to have my wife back. Please.”

She snapped out of her funk long enough to realize that he was tired and looked sad and worried – because of her. She had promised him that she would not allow the pregnancy, their babies to get between them and she was doing just that.

For the past three weeks, each time he came home, she was in the nurseries, zipping from one room to the next and resenting the help that was offered.

Even Clive and Conail had offered their services and both Marianne and Alberto had been eager to take care of their grandchildren.

Her dad had dropped by several evenings on his way home from work and had even stayed last weekend so that he could spend time with them. The staff was amazing, each of them bending over backwards to make things easy for her and she was neglecting her husband.

Her hand lifted to cup his cheek. “I am such an idiot.”

“I will not have you saying that...”

“No. Please let me finish. You are right, I did promise not to do this and that’s exactly what I have been doing.” Her eyes sparkled and her chin lifted. “Not this dress. The red one.” She decided. “We’re going dancing until we have blisters.”

He grinned, his spirit soaring. “Let’s get to it then.”

The night was pleasant enough and very soon, Blair's apprehension at leaving the babies, was just a figment and even that disappeared as soon as they entered the small intimate restaurant.

The owner, a friend of the Caruso's from Italy, ushered them into a private booth and gave her a boisterous hug, his dark handsome face beaming, black eyes dancing.

"When are you going to leave this handsome devil and come live with me?"

"I am afraid it's too late now." She returned his hug, her eyes dancing. "We are officially stuck. Four babies."

"And look at you." Holding her at arms' length. Lucio admired her slender curves outlined in the fire engine red dress. "Like you never gave birth."

"You're very good for my ego."

"Now, if you're done ogling my wife, we really would like to be seated."

Ignoring Cayden, Lucio placed her hand through his arm and led the way to the back of the room that led out to a small balcony. "The view from here is stunning and you will not be disturbed. I will have the server sent out in a few minutes."

He pulled the chair out for her. "I would suggest the Caruso Flamboyant..." "We would love that." She responded swiftly before her husband could object. "We're

celebrating after all.”

Lucio beamed at them. “The menu cards are here, but I made some Primavera and a delicious Italian loaf to go with it.”

“That sounds lovely.” She looked at Cayden and he nodded. “We’ll take that.”

“Coming right up.” He clapped his large hands together. “But first, some minestrone soup.” He bustled away to take care of the order.

Leaning back in the chair, she tilted her head up and inhaled the clean air. The restaurant was located near the harbor and the scent of water mingled with the strong aroma of garlic and other spices made for a very pleasant setting.

“Feeling better?”

Turning her head towards him, she smiled and reached for his hand. “I am, yes. I never knew how much I wanted this until you suggested it.”

“You mean after I forcibly took you into the shower and would not take no for an answer?” he teased.

“Something like that.” Turning her hand over, she linked their fingers and stared at the diamonds on hers. “I had to stop wearing these and I felt naked.”

“I never held it against you. Your fingers were swollen, and they were becoming uncomfortable.” Using his free hand, he traced the stones thoughtfully, staring at them before lifting his head to look at her. “Lucio was right. You do not look like you just had four babies.”

“I still have the scar to show that I did. One of the reasons I was getting so depressed

was the worry that you would no longer find me attractive.”

His eyes flared with impatience, and she shook her head, holding up a finger to stop him from commenting.

“It’s not that I don’t know how much you love me, but you have to understand that the body and mind have been through hormonal changes.”

The first course of their meal came just then and Cayden waited until they were alone. Stars glittered overhead, making the candles that had been lit for ambiance, superfluous. A sliver of moon was peeking from the velvety sky and the end of spring breeze stirred the skin.

For a minute, they just sat there, enjoying the atmosphere and excellent soup. He was still holding her hand and forcing them to eat one handed. Blair liked this intimacy between them. For a month, now and even before this, she had been plagued with doubts and fear. Part of wondering if she was going to lose her babies.

Another part was wondering if she had done the right thing. She knew they were far from out of the woods yet.

The doctors had warned them that because of the premature birth, the quadruplets would be plagued with certain illnesses until hopefully they grew out of them. A pediatrician had already been assigned to them and made a house visit just a few days ago.

But sitting here and enjoying a meal with her husband, she knew she was able to face whatever was thrown at them.

As if sensing her thoughts, he lifted their joined hands and kissed the knuckles. “I adore you.” He told her quietly, green eyes holding hers. “I look at my children and I

get emotional. You are the only woman who would have ever made that kind of sacrifice and even if it was that alone, I would love you for it.”

His eyes smoldered as he took in the soft lips made moist by the soup. He had watched her grow huge with his babies and barely able to move around. He knew firsthand the discomfort she suffered for the seven and a half months and he was humbled by her.

“But there’s more.” His smile was indulgent. “You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. The best part of me. I feel fulfilled when I am with you. There is no way I could ever settle for anything less than what I get from you. Even on our worse day, I would still choose you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

Her fingers tightened on his and her throat was heavy. Emotions crowded her entire being and she was left speechless. Putting the spoon down carefully, she lifted their joined hands and pressed his against her cheek.

“I love you.” She told him huskily. “I wanted so much to give you children, to make our own family.” She blinked at the tears. “And I would have done anything to make it happen. I love you completely.”

“Something, I will never doubt.” He was getting emotional as well and felt the warmth of her seeping into his skin. “Tonight, I want it to be all about us.”

Chapter 15

The babies were all asleep. All four of them tucked up inside their cots with blankets thrown over their tiny frames. They had stayed out until after midnight, calling in to check, just once and were reassured that they were on their best behavior.

The sound of his parents’ voices, not to mention Clive and Conail, who had both come home early from their dates had left little doubt that they were indeed in good hands.

With her shoes clasped in one hand, Blair leaned against her husband as she stared at her daughters and then her sons. She did not have to be persuaded to go into their bedroom, after checking and making sure the monitors were on. Tonight, had been a turning point for them and she wanted to make it up to him.

For the past month, she had been obsessed with being the perfect mother, even

though that was not possible, and she had done what she had sworn not to do, neglected her husband. Yes, she had been healing, but that had taken a week and a half. They slept in the same bed, and he had been so patient with her through all of it.

Their babies would sleep through the night, which gave her freedom to seduce the man she loved. She was a mother, but first, she was a wife and his lover.

He sensed the excitement and anticipation in her, one that had been there since the evening commenced. And it had built up steadily. Now it was about to boil over.

His own body responded violently. He wanted her. No, scratch that. The word was too tame or what he was experiencing. It was a craving that dug into his very soul.

Her naked body spread out before him, sent him into a fever pitch of desire that left him both blind and weak. He fumbled, kinda like a schoolboy, fumbling a pass that was handed to him on the field. He was gauche and awkward, his hands trembled.

His heart was racing out of control, and he had started sweating. He had wanted to taste and savor her silky skin, take it slow, but that had been shot to hell and back.

His first taste of the nipples his children had suckled for a few short weeks sent heat crashing through him.

Her cries, frenzied, desperate aching cries, her slender body arching against his, fingers pulling at his hair, drove him insane and that insanity had him covering her body and driving into her with a force that sent her into the headboard. The climax was swift and brutal.

He poured himself into her, pouring, emptying, his sweat slicked body shuddering until he felt as if he was losing his mind. She came then, body rearing up, fingers biting into shoulders, back and chest, nails dragging against skin. He swallowed her

cries, and was certain some of the sounds were coming from him.

Collapsing on top of her, he stayed there for a minute or two, willing the madness to cease. He could not move. His heart was still crashing against his ribs, and his limbs were weak and shaking. Finally gathering what little strength he could garner, he rolled and took her with him, cradling her on his chest.

She curled into him, fingers tangled up in the dense dark hairs that were moist with sweat. For a long time, they stayed thatway, content to allow their breathing to level out or just content to just be.

Lifting her head, she met his warm green eyes and smiled because he was smiling at her. That sexy half smile that had bowled her over from the very beginning.

“What?”

“You look...used.”

“So do you.” She retorted, feeling the love blooming inside her. “And you’re welcome.”

He inclined his head, one hand lifting to trail a finger down her cheek. “You, okay?”

“More than.” Capturing the wandering finger, she kissed the tip of it and watched as his eyes darkened. “It’s good to know thatwe are an old married couple with four kids and can still manage to burn the sheets up.”

His chuckle was low and deep.

“That’s one way to put it.” He continued to stare at her. She had been through some type of transformation. The pregnancy had softened some areas and filled out some.

Her breasts had always been small but had plumped up some.

Her hips were more rounded and her thick deep brown hair with the blonde highlights was thicker and longer. And there was a glow about her that made her beauty a sort of ethereal quality.

“What?” She gave him a puzzled look as he continued to study her features.

“Bianca and Bella have your features.”

“I was thinking that they have yours.” She disagreed and he shook his head.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“The shape of your cheeks, the slant of the eyes. All yours. Which means that I am going to have to get my shot gun at the ready to discourage the boys who will come sniffing around.”

“I was never beautiful...” She shook her head when he opened his mouth to object.

“Not in the accepted sense. I never yearned to be popular or one of the crowd. I was content to just be me. Quiet, a little unassuming but someone with a voice.” She linked her fingers with his. “You make me feel beautiful. It took me a while to realize that in your eyes I was – am.”

“Always and that’s pure nonsense what you just said. You just do not see yourself the way I do, or others do. I have to fight off my brothers and threaten them with bodily harm to get them to back the hell off. And remind them that you are mine.” His arm tightened around her waist.

“And since being pregnant and giving birth, your beauty has increased.” His expression sobered. “You have this sweetness and pureness about you that’s indescribable and people are drawn to it.” Tilting her chin up, he brushed his lips against hers. “And you’re all mine.”

Clive leaned against the door jamb with arms folded on his chest as he took in the unlikely scene.

His big brother, VP of one of the largest and most successful wine and liquor

company in the world was spread eagled out in the middle of a makeshift pink and blue floor made up entirely of jigsaw puzzles depicting a forest scene, complete with animals frolicking, some in repose, while others sipped water from a glossy-looking river.

And his children were in twin attached swings on either side of him. He was wearing baggy sweats and an old t-shirt. His hair was mussed, and Clive had never seen him look happier or more contented. He wondered fleetingly what the people in their society would think of him, if they saw him now.

“Have you driven away the nannies already?”

The babies had so absorbed his brother, he had not heard or felt Clive’s presence.

“I sent them away – they were smothering the babies and getting on my last nerves.” He pushed at the swing holding the girls’ gently.

“And your wife?” Clive strolled into the room and dropped down next to his nephews. He was learning to tell them apart now. Reporters had somehow gotten a pic of them and had spread it all over various papers. Dubbing them ‘The Wealthy Quads’, much to the family’s annoyance.

“Gone to lunch with Leesa and the others.” He continued to push the swing, a smile curving his lips as Bianca fastened large hazel eyes on him. Bella was already sleeping.

“Ah, the summer gala. Hey buddy.” Clive worked a finger into Chad’s tight fist. “They are thriving, even after several scares.”

Cayden’s eyes darkened when he thought back on it. Chad had suffered a series of ear infection that had them fearing he would lose his hearing in the left ear.

Caleb had breathing problem and had to be rushed to the clinic. The girls seemed to be oblivious to the illnesses plaguing their brothers and continued to thrive and grow. Now it looked like they were over the worst (please God!).

He had seen what each rush to the clinic had done to his wife and himself and wanted normalcy.

Clive looked over at his brother, sensing the tension. “They are babies and more than that, preemies. We all knew there would be complications.”

“I had to order Blair to get her fine ass out of the house and take a damn break.”

“And yet, here you are.” Clive sent him an amused look. “Keeping them close and chasing off the nannies.”

“I want to spend time with them. It is the start of summer which means a hell of a lot of activities. New labels to promote and trips to make.

They cannot travel yet of course, and I do not want to leave them knowing that something might happen, and I am thousands of miles away.” He ran a gentle finger over Bianca’s silky dark brown hair. “That would kill me.”

They both looked up as Conail and Alberto joined them.

“It seems we’re late to the party.” Alberto immediately lowered himself to sit next to Clive while Conail joined Cayden.

“I cannot get over how beautiful they are.” He commented, touching Bianca’s bunched fist in fascination. “And how much they have twisted themselves into my heart.”

“They have, haven’t they?” His father agreed with a whimsical smile.

“Dad?”

“Around the back.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

She followed the sound of his voice and found him crouched down on a patch of freshly dug dirt. He was wearing worn garden gloves and had on one of his wife's silly straw hat with a wispy ribbon tied around the brim. A smile touched her lips as she stared at him.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to revive your mother's rose garden.” He eased up somewhat slowly and had her smile turning to worry.

“Are you in pain?”

He waved that away and pulled off the stained gloves. “Just a little stiffness in the knees.” He beamed at her. “You look like a million dollars. Or should I say several billion. How are my grandkids?”

“I left them with the family.” She shook her head as she leaned in for the kiss. “Cayden shooed me out of the house. Leesa and the rest had a meeting re the grand summer gala.” She found a clean spot on the garden chair and perched.

“He was right. After the last episode at the clinic with Chad's ear infection, I needed to go out and start being normal again.”

“As if you could.” He shook his head and poured her a glass of lemonade. “Those babies are going to be fine. Millicent brought over some freshly baked cookies. Let me get some to go with the lemonade.”

Her brows lifted as she gave him a curious stare. “Things are heating up.”

To her surprise, instead of brushing that away, he looked slightly embarrassed.

“I’ll get the cookies.” He escaped before she could say anything else.

“Interesting.” She murmured as she sipped the tart and sweet lemonade and stared out at the patch of land blooming with flowers. He had gotten someone to tend to the weeds and mow the lawn on her insistence.

She had offered to hire someone to take care of the place, and he had finally succumbed, but only after she reminded him that eventually, his grandchildren would be coming around. She heard him making noises about putting in swings and having them build a tree house.

Nostalgia flooded her as she stared out at the lovely space, with the bird house, the sparkle of water from the stream and apples hanging from trees. There were also oranges and lemons, big ripe ones. Part of her mother’s legacy. She turned a smile on him as he came forward with a tray of cookies and another glass.

“I came in from services this morning and just came back here and started puttering around.” He grabbed another chair and sat across from her. “It is always so peaceful and serene, the scent of flowers blooming, the breeze stirring the leaves on the trees. The sound of the trickle of water over rocks.

Your mother used to love sitting out here. She would spend summer days outside, planting and just enjoying the weather. Bugs did not bother her...,” his smile became whimsical. “I used to tease her that it was because of her forceful personality, they wouldn’t dare to land on her.” His smile faded as he took a sip of lemonade.

“I have been faithful to her. It’s silly, but even after she was taken from me, I would

think that it was not right to even look at another woman.” He turned to stare at his daughter. “Millicent...,” he cleared his throat, “she is a wonderful woman.

Kind, sweet and giving. We...,” he cleared his throat again and Blair wondered if he was ever going to get it out. “We have been having intimate relations.” He shook his head. “She will never be my wife, and she is aware of it.

She lost her husband some years ago and her son lives all the way in Alaska. He has a job there as a teacher. We have been keeping each other company.’ “We are living in sin and that is not something I am used to.

Would you mind if we get married? It would be something simple, just you and your husband and my grandkids. She wants to meet them and she is afraid that you are too uppity for her, being married to one of the wealthiest man in the world.

I told her you are the same Blair. My same daughter and that you have not changed one bit.” His dark eyes searched her face anxiously. “If you disapprove, I am will not go through with it.”

Just for a second, resentment flared. He was talking about having another woman live here, where her mother had lived and been mistress, but commonsense reared its head. Her father was lonely and had been alone for too many years to count.

He deserved to have someone to talk to, someone to come home to - one who would cook him a decent meal when needed. She had been feeling more and more guilty because she knew he would never agree to coming to live at the manor.

In the past, she had hounded her husband to agreeing to getting their own place, but since having the babies, she realized they belonged there. It was their legacy.

Reaching across, she folded her hand over his. “I am happy for you, and I have

known Millicent since I was a child. She is indeed a good woman. Now I can breathe a sigh of relief that you have someone looking out for you.”

He beamed at her and squeezed her hand. “She knows you come first in my life and now those grandkids of mine and she understands.” Leaning over the table, he kissed her on the lips. “You look happy, honey, and that’s all I ever wanted for you.”

The scene made her want to cry. They were all on the patio, the one leading out to the east garden, where a slim white sculpture of a woman holding her child in her arms stood. Water spewed and trickled from the fountain and the scent of flowers blooming filled the air.

Maria had told her where she could find them, and she had hurried upstairs to slip out of her clothes and donned something casual. The rules and restrictions that had been placed on all of them, a tradition that was part of the family had been bent, since the babies were born.

With the approach of the lovely weather, meals were served outdoors, under canopies. White lawn chairs decked the landscaped lawns and all of them were gathered around the babies.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

He sensed her. It amazed her that he always knew when she was near. She saw when he lifted his head and his quick smile came. Handing one of the baby girls to his mother, he came towards her, hands outstretched.

“I was beginning to wonder if you had deserted us.”

She walked into his arms readily, inhaling his scent.

“Fat chance of that happening. I went to visit my dad.”

“How is he?” He kissed her gently, one hand cupping her face.

“I will tell you later. Are we eating out here?”

“It is a beautiful Sunday afternoon, so yes. Bianca is fascinated by all the colors.” Taking her hand, he led her towards the group.

“Just Bianca?”

“Bella seems to be more fascinated by my green shirt and the boys are distracted by everything going on around them.”

“Typical males.”

He nipped at her ear and drew her to his side, and they joined the others.

It was a happy scene. And she wondered not for the first time at the changes in all of

them, especially her husband's parents.

Marianne was not dressed to kill in her usual designer outfit but had on a soft cream-colored pants and a shell pink blouse. Her hair was not ruthlessly pulled back in a tidy chignon but flowed down her back. And she smiled more.

She was friendlier and doted on the babies. It was as if a new light had been switched on inside her. Blair had agonized over the decision to go the IVF route, and it certainly came with its sets of problems, but it was worth it.

Taking baby Caleb from Colin, she kissed his soft forehead and smiled at him. He was the one who suffered the most, and she could not help but feel protective, her maternal instinct kicking in.

"What's going on with your dad?" He asked her later that night after the babies had been bathed, powdered, oiled, and put to bed with the nannies taking over.

"Thanks." She leaned back on the pillows and closed her eyes as he massaged her feet. He had diligently rubbed anti-stretch mark cream on her belly, hips, and breasts for the duration of her pregnancy and except for several thin ones on her belly and hips, there was hardly any signs that she had carted around four babies inside her uterus.

"He wants to get married."

Cayden's eyebrows lifted as he continued to massage away the tension. "I had no idea he was seeing someone."

"His next door neighbor. I have known her for years. She is a librarian and I guess

they just kind of fell into the habit of being there for each other.” She wriggled her toes as he worked on her calves.

“I was starting to feel guilty that he was there all by himself. I was the one who used to do the cooking and the major housework. He would get absentminded especially when he has to do research.”

He continued to work out the kinks in her legs. “Is that why you don’t mind him getting married?”

Her eyes met his and she shrugged. “She’s a nice woman and he told me she knows that my mom could never be replaced.”

He continued to rub her legs, his movements slow and rhythmic.

“I don’t know if I could be with anyone else.”

Pleasure shimmered inside her at his admission.

“What if I gave my approval?”

He sent her a quizzical stare before capping the bottle and putting it away. Rising, he shrugged out of his robe and slid in next to her.

“Would you?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

She nodded as she cuddled up to him. “Say I am ninety-nine and dying, with my last breath, I would perhaps give consent to you marrying another woman. She could not be less than eighty years old though.”

His laughter rang out and her smile was wide.

“Ninety, huh?”

She nodded. “How old did you think I would say?”

“Fifty?” He ventured and winced as she poked him in the chest.

“I have every intention of living until the children are finished with college and married. I want to be a ripe old age grandma or even a great grandma and you had better be there next to me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” His hand drifted to her cheek, expression tender. “That’s my desire as well.”

“Good.” She turned her head in the palm of his hand and closed her eyes. “I am so happy and because I am, I want that for him as well. He truly loved my mom, when I looked back at their lives, I could see where they were perfect for each other. They never went to bed mad at each other and she put up with his absentmindedness.”

“Our marriage is far from perfect.” He pointed out.

Her gaze was melting as she wrapped herself around him. “Who wants perfection?”

Chapter 16

“Has everything been arranged?”

“It has.” Marianne assured him, a smile playing around her lips. “It’s enchanting to see how nervous you are.”

“I want everything to be perfect.” He muttered. “It’s her birthday and the last several months hadn’t been good to her.” They both lapsed into silence as they recalled the accident. The babies had just reached their two months mark and since it was the height of summer, his wife had wanted to celebrate.

She had taken them for a drive, telling the nannies that she could manage, and she did not need them. It was only a drive to the park and back, unaware that a reporter had been tailing her.

Ever since the article had come out, with their picture on the front page of Multiples Quarterly, a magazine introduced by Romano’s baby department – they had been bombarded with requests to pose for different magazines.

The picture had garnered more than its fair share of interests – it was an unposed photo that had been taken as a joke by Clive and showed them propped up on mountains of pillows, with the babies in the middle.

Monique had been delighted by the photo when she saw it and had begged for permission to use it. Little did they know that it would blow up all over the internet.

In his haste to follow her, the reporter had run the red light and cut her off at the intersection, sending her over and into a ditch. Fortunately, the injuries had been mostly to her and the babies had only been frightened.

But it had frightened her so much, she had not set foot inside a vehicle, not until last week when she went to her dad's wedding. Suffice it to say that the reporter had been charged and was no longer working at the magazine. The editors claimed that the man had been acting on his own.

Pushing back his chair, Cayden strode over to the cabinet to pour himself a drink. Even thinking about the near calamity turned his insides into liquid.

He had been in a meeting when he received the call from the officers on scene. He had stood there, unsure what to do and Clive had stepped up and offered to drive him. The sight of the vehicle in the ditch had made him weak.

It took him several days to recover. Thoughts of what could have happened had him waking up in a cold sweat most nights. He could have lost his entire family, and it still managed to turn his blood to ice.

"She thinks that I blame her."

"That's nonsense."

He smiled at his mother's practical response.

"I do. Up to a point. She knew that I would never have approved of her taking out the babies on her own. Even if she was just going for a drive." He took a sip of the scotch. "I was pissed. After the initial fear had slowed down, I was royally pissed. What in the hell was she thinking?"

"The blame is not hers, darling, and it's unfair to place it there."

He shrugged. "Tell that to my subconsciousness. I keep picturing her and my children dead. Just lying there in a pool of blood."

He took another sip, this time a longer one. “But you are right. I have been upset with her and things have been uncomfortable between us. She knows I am angry, and she blames herself. I have to do something to make it up to her.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“Then you should take her somewhere. You two should be alone and talk. Try to make things right.”

He smiled. “We will make it right. Blair and I have our differences, and we might fight bitterly, but one thing remains constant – our love for each other. We have a bond that will never be broken, no matter what.

She might sometimes piss me off and I might annoy her, but we know where we stand with each other.” He finished the drink. “I want everything to be perfect.”

“It will be,” his mother assured him.

“He’s still upset with me.”

“I’m sure he’s not.”

She cast her brother-in-law a wry look that had him shrugging.

“It’s good to see you’re taking his side.”

Setting his nephew securely inside his cot, Clive eased the cover over him and stood there watching Chad’s eyes flicker shut. He was recovering from a tennis injury and had been recuperating at home for the past week.

He spent that week mostly in the nurseries, not caring that he was probably getting on

the nannies' nerves. Blair was back to work and had thrown herself into her numerous charities with gusto. In between that, she would zip upstairs or have them bring the babies down to her office so she could spend some time with them.

"You should have seen him when he received the news that you and the babies were involved in an accident. He just stood there, not knowing what to do. I led him out of the conference room like a child. He was shaking."

Turning away from the cot, he walked over to sit next to her on the comfortable chaise. She had Bella in her arms and had just finished feeding her from the bottle. All four babies were thriving and growing like weeds.

"Let me." He took the beautiful little girl in his arms and settled her on one broad shoulder, rubbing her back slowly for her to burp.

"Ah, that's the thing sweetheart." He murmured, "One more." He rubbed again and she obliged him.

Blair put the bottle down and went to get Bianca. She had given the nannies the afternoon off so that she could spend some time with them. But in this household, she was never alone with the babies.

One or two of the family members always found their way up and not to mention the staff. The babies were the light and life of the household, and it was pretty obvious that everyone catered to them.

"I don't know what I was thinking, taking them out on my own." She made quick work of changing Bianca's diaper, smiling as the baby grabbed her finger.

"You were thinking that you could just take them for a spin and come back home. Which should have been simple enough if that damned reporter had not taken it into

his bloody head to follow you.” His expression darkened as he placed his niece inside her cot. “I wanted to wring his scrawny neck.”

Even after all this time had passed, he was still upset. When he thought of what the outcome could have been, it pissed him off. He looked over at her. “You cannot blame him for still feeling scared and upset.”

“I was the one in the accident.” She hissed as she covered her daughter with the colorful quilt that had been a gift from Millicent. Her worries about the woman her dad had married had been for nothing.

Her stepmother was proving herself to be a great comfort to her dad. And was bent on taking care of him. That had taken off a tremendous amount of pressure off of her. Now she could rest easy, knowing her father was in good hands.

“And he was the one who had to get the news that his entire family was involved in a vehicular crash.” He came to stand next to her and placed a hand over her shoulders. “it almost killed him.”

She sighed and leaned against him.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“You know I am.” He kissed the top of her head. “Now, can I leave you to fend by yourself?”

“Leaving us already?” She teased. “Who’s she this time?”

Tilting her face up, he brushed her lips on her cheek. “No one you know. Until I find a woman who comes close to having your qualities, I will continue to seek and search and settle for what I can get for now.” He rubbed her shoulders before walking over

to look at the girls' sleeping. There was a wistful expression on his handsome face.

“My brother hit the jackpot.” With a wave, he was gone.

She wandered around the lovely pink and cream nursery, straightening this and rearranging that. A stuffed elephant was askew on the shelf, and she fixed it. She had received so many gifts from people she did not even know and had donated a number of things to children's homes and the hospital.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

The scent of powder and oil assailed her and made her feel as if she were wrapped up in baby heaven. The accident had thrown her. Cayden was right. She had no business going out on her own.

The argument after the initial scare had been heated.

“What the hell were you thinking?” He had demanded.

“That I had a right to take my babies out for a spin.”

“They are mine too and you should have said something to me.”

“Are you telling me that I have to clear everything with you before doing so?”

“When the hell are you going to realize that you are not some normal person?” The angry frustration had been heavy in his voice.

“You are Blair Caruso and on top of that, you gave birth to quadruplets. Whatever you do, you will make news. Reporters are going to follow you around every damn day. You had no right taking the babies out on your own.”

“It’s times like these that I wish I was a normal person, free to do and go wherever please.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Figure it out.” She had snapped at him before storming from the room.

But the fact was, she would not change anything. She loved him, loved her babies and the irritations and lack of privacy was something she was prepared to deal with, as long as she had them.

Heaving a sigh, she went to check on the boys.

He had to be innovative and inventive enough to get her out of the house. In order to do so, he enlisted her dad's assistance. They were very cool towards each other since the accident and even though they slept in the same bed, they were miles apart.

It ends now. He wanted his wife back and blaming her for leaving the house that day was completely unfair. Besides, he wanted to do something lavish to show her how much he appreciated her.

So, the plan was to have her dad call with some urgency to get her away for the entire day. He assured her with cool dignity that he and the rest of the family were perfectly capable of taking care of the babies.

"I would like to take you out to dinner for your birthday. I suggest you get dressed from there and I will pick you up."

"You want me to spend the entire day away from my children?"

"They are mine too and I would love to spend the day with them."

"Okay, fine." She had sounded disgruntled and none too pleased, but he was going to make up for it later on. Better she thought he was still upset with her, than having her finding out what he was planning, what the entire family and staff were planning.

When she finally left after cradling each baby for several minutes, they got to work. The invitations had been sent out weeks ago and they were expecting a lavish crowd. He had even invited several people from Europe and the family in Italy were already here and settled in an apartment building owned by the company.

His wife just turned thirty-one and he had been through a series of events, some of them life threatening. He was going to show her how much he appreciated her.

Stepping outside, he noted in approval, the team that had been hired to do the decorations, coming out of the pool house where they had been in hiding until she left.

The entire grounds would be altered. Strings of pepper lights were going to be hung from the trees and the flowering bushes would be hung with streamers. A dais had been set up somewhere near the pool and a live band would be playing classical music. Chairs and tables had already been put in place in front of the stage.

Pushing the double pram that transported his daughters, he made his way towards the group of decorators. Clive showed up at the rear, with his sons. The girls were cooing and drooling, their hazel eyes darting everywhere.

It was a vivid scene, with flowers blooming and the scent of summer prevalent. Conail was busy directing the team of gardeners on what to cut and where to put them. His mother was inside discussing the sumptuous menu with the caterers and their own chef.

“It looks like utter chaos,” Clive commented.

“For now!” His brother agreed. “I want everything to be just right.”

“She’s going to be completely blown away.” He observed.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“That’s the plan.” Cayden slanted him a glance, before looking down at his sons. “Think the sun is too much for them? The nannies were horrified when I suggested that I take them out for a walk.”

“The nannies are middle aged women with zero imagination.” Clive grinned. “They are actually very nice women and are devoted to the children.”

“They make me feel as if I have to ask for permission to take them out of the house.”

“I thought I was the only one.”

Cayden grinned at him. “Not a chance. Let us see what the fuss is all about. Conail seems to have his hands full.”

“Moron.” Clive announced cheerfully as he pushed his nephews in his brother’s wake.

“Where is Millicent?” She was still fuming from the high-handed way her husband had dealt with her. She should refuse to go out to dinner with him. Confounding man! She thought angrily. He had picked out the dress and entire outfit and shoved it at her. And after they have been at odds for God knows how long.

And to top it all off, he had insisted on having one of the drivers’ drop her off. If Joe wasn’t someone she liked a lot, she might have taken her resentment and frustration out on him, not that she was in the habit of doing so. But she was pretty upset.

“Gone to the markets” Blake kissed her on the cheek and ease her away to study her face. “I sense a series of complaints coming on. Why don’t we sit on the porch and have some of that delicious pecan pie, Millie made just this morning?”

“I would love that.”

“Sit,” he gestured to the porch swing. “I’ll be right back.”

She sat and took in a deep breath, letting it out, along with the anger clawing at her. It was summer and on top of that, it was her birthday.

After what she had experienced over the past months, she had a lot to be thankful for and she certainly wasn’t going to allow that exasperating man she was married to spoil it. She would to dinner at some fancy restaurant, dance (maybe) – have a delicious meal and go back home to her babies. To hell with him!

So, when her dad came back out, she was all smiles and ready to put it behind her for now.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

Cayden had waited until the last minute to tell her that something had come up and if she would not mind having her dad dropped her off at the manor. She had refused to argue with him and asked her dad if he could do her the favor.

“Of course not, honey, Millie and I are going out to dinner anyway. And we would not mind seeing those grandbabies.”

“I bet they have grown an inch or two since we saw them last.” Millicent was a

slightly plump woman with a sweet smile and an amiable manner. One could not help but like her and Blair did. The woman had proven to be exactly right for her dad.

“You just saw them three days ago.” Blair reminded her as she settled in the back seat of her father’s Lincoln. “Dad, I wish you would let me buy you a new car.”

He glanced at her through the rear-view mirror and shook his head. “Millie and I love this vehicle. It happens to be a classic.”

“It’s old!”

“Bite your tongue. It drives just fine and is not as flimsy as the vehicles they are making now.” He glanced over at his wife and grinned conspiratorially. “Buckle up my dear.”

“What on earth!” Blair straightened up as they swept inside the winding driveway, and she saw the lines of expensive vehicles already parked. “No one told me there was going to be a function here. Dad, just let me off...”

“Absolutely not. We aim to see the grandbabies, before we leave.”

“This is crazy!” She fumed. Shoving the door open, she watched as her husband came forward. Ignoring the charming smile and the way he looked in his spiffy sports jacket, she aimed a withering look at him.

“I really don’t appreciate...,” the rest of the tirade was cut off when he simply hauled her into his arms and kissed her until she was sagging against him. Keeping his arm around her waist, he lifted his head, green eyes dancing and greeted the older couple.

“Thanks for bringing her.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 6:17 am

“You’re very welcome.” Blake’s dark eyes gleamed in amusement and anticipation. “I see you’re entertaining.”

“We are.” Turning his head, he gazed at his wife. “Want to say hi to a few friends before we get going?”

She was still shaky from the potent kiss and had to fight to keep the anger from dying a swift death.

“I suppose.”

Over her head, He winked at his father-in-law.

A frown touched her brow as he guided her along the winding path where lights could be seen shimmering in the trees. Balloons, hundreds of them floated upwards and chairs dotted the pristine lawn.

“Cayden, what...,” her heart fairly jumped inside her chest, and she staggered back when the crowd shouted – “Surprise!” in unison as soon as she rounded the corner. Before she could recover, the live band started playing ‘Happy birthday’ – with a well-known artiste taking the stage to serenade her.

Cayden was highly entertained by the dazed look on her face and drew her against him to whisper in her ear. “Happy birthday, baby.”

She turned to look at him, eyes filled with tears. “You did this?”

“We all did. The family and staff members. It took a hell of a lot to keep it from you.”

“Cayden.” Her throat was thick with tears, but she did not have time to say more as they were suddenly hemmed in by well-wishers who wanted to wish her happy birthday.

Within minutes, she was caught up in the celebration and surrounded by friends she had not seen in a long time. His Italian family drew her in for hugs and her eyes widened in shock when she noticed several royalties in the crowd.

She fumbled when Prince Francesco Ricci wrapped his arms around her and kissed her full on the mouth. “You do not look a day over twenty.” He said with a grin.

The gifts were piled on a separate table and the babies she thought were asleep were actually wide awake and dressed up for the occasion. But there was another surprise awaiting her.

She was in the middle of talking with the group of wives, when a hush fell over the crowd.

“I think your gorgeous husband is about to make a speech,” Kelly said with a wide smile.

Turning around, she looked towards the stage and saw when he was handed a microphone.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, families, friends...” He zeroed in on his Blair. “My wife hates surprises, unless she is the one doing it.” He waited for the laughter to die down. “It seemed only fitting that we celebrate this woman I am in love with. Blair Caruso epitomizes strength and beauty.

She is the strongest woman I know and to me, she is the most beautiful in the entire

world. She gave me four babies and against all odds, she made it happen.” His smile was intimate and for her alone.

“We wanted to show her our appreciation, certainly I cannot find the words to express just how much she means to me. We annoy each other and are often at odds, but even when our days are filled with arguments, it is perfect, because I am with her. “His smile came again as he aimed his gaze at her. “Darling, will you come up and join me?”

It took a moment to steady herself. Suddenly Clive was on her right and Conail on her left, escorting her towards the dais.

Moving forward, Cayden took her hand and drew her to his side. “I would like us all to lift our glasses in honor of the woman of the hour – my wife, the mother of my children and my heart and soul!”

The end... but wait: