



# Knocked Up

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** First comes love. Then comes marriage. Then comes baby in a baby carriage. Just not necessarily in that order. . . .

Braxton: I should probably be dead or in jail right now. Instead, thanks to some tough love, I worked my ass off and now I own a string of tattoo parlors throughout the Pacific Northwest. And yet the one thing I've always wanted—a family—still seems out of reach. When my best friend gets married, I'm just hoping to blow off some steam with the super-hot maid of honor. But after Cara Thompson tracks me down to tell me she's pregnant, she's more surprised than I am when I tell her I'm all in.

Cara: For the first time in my life, I'm living for myself—not for my parents and their ridiculous expectations. I gave up on my MBA, dropped out of the Ivy League, and moved to Portland to pursue my dream of becoming an artist. And what's the first thing I do? Get knocked up. For a tatted-up sex god, Braxton Henley seems way too eager to “be there for me.” Is this guy serious? Maybe. He sure is patient. Because he won't back down until I admit what I know in my heart: that our one night stand might've led me to the one.

**Total Pages (Source):** 89

# Page 1

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Prologue

Cara

Two blue lines.

Two pink lines.

One pink plus sign.

In my hand, blurry vision can do nothing to diminish the digital readout, bold as can be. PREGNANT.

“These can’t be right.”

“I’m afraid they are, sweetie.” Jenna’s gentle hand makes large sweeping circles on my back where I’m hunched over the closed toilet seat. In front of me is the proof she’s right.

Denial, however, is quickly replacing her as my new best friend.

Pregnant. Knocked up from a one-night stand at the age of twenty-four.

My parents will be so proud. Shit.

“Oh my God.” My groan has nothing to do with the morning sickness that hasn’t abated despite it being three o’clock in the afternoon. Morning sickness my ass. More

like all day and half the night. Everything makes me want to hurl these days. It shouldn't be too shocking to be staring at a half-dozen pregnancy tests that confirm what I've already been smart enough to figure out.

No, the groan has everything to do with what in the hell I'm supposed to do now.

And, you know...my parents.

Shit shitdamn.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Jenna asks, crouching down next to me. Her hand hasn't stopped moving and I'm desperate for her to lull me to sleep. Put me into a trance and take me back in time to about six weeks ago. The night she got married. The night she stood at the altar and pledged her forever to her new husband, Dan. The night Dan's friend from college walked me down the aisle following the happy couple. The night he then whisked me into his arms on the dance floor, licked tequila salt off my wrist, and then took me to his room.

Fantastic.

My baby daddy is a professional wooer.

"I had sex and got pregnant, Jenna. What else is there to explain?"

"Sassy when you're knocked up, aren't you?"

"Shut up."

She nudges her knee into my hip. "You know what I mean. You're tight-lipped about this. What are you hiding?"

“Wasn’t tight-lipped a few months ago.”

She snorts and playfully slaps my back. “Gross. Those aren’t the details I need. This isn’t like you, you know? I can’t help it if your silence is worrying me. Who’s the guy?”

I’d love to tell her it’s no one she knows. But no, I had to go and get pregnant by the best man at my best friend’s wedding.

“Ugh.”

“Come on,” she says, pushing me harder. The force of her jostling makes my stomach roll and I lift the toilet lid.

“Knock it off. You’re making me sick.”

“Sorry. Crap. But you’re going to tell me, right?”

Shit shitdamn.Again.

## Page 2

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“No. Don’t you have to get home to your husband?”

“Procrastination will only make me more rabid, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” She runs a washcloth under water and returns, pressing the cool rag to the back of my neck. “That feels so good, Jenna. Thank you so much.”

“You know I’m here for you, right?”

I nod into the toilet. Now that my skin is cooling, I don’t feel like puking. “I know. You’re the best.”

“Don’t forget it, either.” She kisses the top of my head and cleans up all the evidence of my one night of indiscretion.

And yes, I know it’s Braxton’s because while I’m twenty-four, I’m also very...particular. I’ve had three lovers in my life. That’s it. A whole three. Awesome. I have sex so rarely I wasn’t on the pill. I figured I’d meet a guy, take my time, and when it felt right, then I’d go on it.

A one-night stand at my best friend’s wedding isn’t only cliché, it’s so far outside my zone of normal operating behavior I wasn’t the least bit prepared. Apparently, neither was Braxton. At least not that fourth time.

Ugh. Damn, it was good sex, though.

So is the guy, which makes all of this so much worse.

I push away from the toilet and splash cold water from the sink onto my cheeks. She's at the doorway, arms crossed, brows furrowed. "I'll be okay, Jenna. Thanks for coming today. I needed you."

"All right. But I'm here when you need to talk too, you know?"

"I know." She slides her purse onto her shoulder and pulls on her teal ballet slippers. I'm about to let her walk out the door, knowing I've hurt her by my secrecy, when I stop her.

"Jenna?"

She spins around, brows furrowing again at my tone. "What is it?"

Another wave of nausea hits and I prop my hand on the counter, steadying myself. "I'm...I'm going to need Braxton's number from you or Dan."

She jolts backward and her jaw drops. "What would you—"

"Six weeks." I continue before she can finish the ridiculous question. "Count back six weeks to what we were doing."

"You didn't." Her head shakes frantically. Blond hair flies all over the place as I stun her into silence, which is a feat in itself. "You...what? My..."

I have to put an end to this blubbering. I walk to her and close my hands over her shoulders. Giving her a little shake, I snap her back into the present. "Yes. Six weeks ago. Your wedding. Braxton and I, well...Braxton and I spent the night together. And I didn't tell you because you were on your honeymoon and then I just wanted to forget it. Okay? There. Yes, Braxton is the dad and I need to call him. But..." I wring my hands together. Good grief, I'm muddling all of this up. "I need some time, Jenna.

I need time to figure out what I'm going to do, what I'm going to tell him, okay?"

"Oh, sweetie." She quickly closes the space between us and wraps me in her arms.

"Of course I will. I'll do anything you need."

## Chapter 1

Cara

### ONEMONTHLATER

There are certain moments in life a young girl believes are absolute certainties.

Fairy tales are not only real, they really do come true.

Unicorns fly through the sky spreading glitter in their wake.

Boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, boy and girl get married. Girl has a baby.

I've dreamed of and planned my wedding since the first time I saw Cinderella's blue ball gown.

My wedding was going to be romantic. It would have white roses all over the place, twinkling lights hanging from the ceiling. I would wear glass slippers and my father would walk me down the aisle, glowing with a mixture of pride and pain as he handed me off to my groom. It was going to be classy, but excessively beautiful and extravagant.

## Page 3

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In my fairy tale, my parents would be ecstatic. My brother would threaten the groom with bodily harm if my soon-to-be-husband ever hurt me. They would laugh it off, hug it out, and then my groom and I would dance the night away before he swept me off into my very own, happily ever after.

In reality, parents turn their backs on their children.

Brothers die.

The happily ever after spent living in a mansion like the one I grew up in turns into a studio apartment in downtown Portland no larger than a shoebox. The disowned princess gets knocked up in a one-night stand and spends the next six weeks puking morning, noon, and night with no relief in sight. My midwife has assured me it will end once I reach the second trimester, but I'm now ten weeks along and more than doubtful.

I've had a month now to get used to the idea of pregnant. To weigh the pros and cons of this fiasco I've found myself in. I've had time to consider all my options and there is only one that brings peace to my soul, while at the same time scaring me half to death.

I'm keeping the baby.

I have to tell the father I'm having his baby.

It's no longer just the morning sickness causing me to puke.



Butterflies have been swarming inside me, rolling and taking flight ever since I made my decision, but the time has come to let him know.

From everything I know about Braxton firsthand, and from years of Dan occasionally mentioning him, he's a good guy. A noble guy.

My first impression of Braxton when I walked up to him at Jenna's wedding ten weeks ago didn't include any thoughts of good or noble. Nope. My thoughts dove straight to the gutter, and my knees wanted to hit the floor.

The weekend with him had been spectacular, better than any time with a man I'd had yet. Tattooed from his knuckles to his throat with a large piece all over his back and down both sides of his ribs, Braxton was nothing like the country club members I'd been around my whole life.

Tatted and dark and menacing and absolutely delicious.

Just the memory of Braxton, the way his strong hands tenderly caressed my body, the way he lost control and slammed into me, can heat my body in pleasurable ways. I dream of his groans. I still feel the weight of his body on top of mine. I wake up in the mornings, gasping for breath, reaching for him next to me for another round.

It's a disaster. I'm still trying to find my footing in Portland after throwing away my family's expectations of me and going out on my own. I'm struggling to find my place in the art world, working part-time at Gallio's Galleria while spending the rest of the time working on my own art either outside at the amphitheater when it's weather permitting, or alone in my apartment.

A baby is the last thing I need thrown into the mix.

It changes all the plans and promises I've made.

I'm still keeping it.

I only hope Braxton doesn't despise me for it. We might have just been a one-night stand but we're connected through Jenna and Dan and while we haven't seen each other since the wedding, that doesn't mean our lives won't continually cross paths in the future.

I've put this off long enough.

Grabbing the notepad where I scratched down his number and address for his tattoo parlor weeks ago when Jenna gave it to me, I slide into a pair of tan ankle boots and toss my purse over my shoulder.

It's time to face the music.

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I'm a block away from MadInk, feeling more green due to the sudden movements of the MAX light rail system, on my way to tell the man I barely know I'm having his baby.

I know a few certain things about Braxton Henley. He's twenty-eight, owns a tattoo parlor in one of the seediest areas of Portland, and he's been friends with Dan since college. He moved out of Portland to go to college in Seattle, where he also learned the art of tattooing. He's only recently returned to Portland to open MadInk.

Since Dan travels almost weekly for his job, and I'm busy on the weekends with my own art shows, having only recently moved back to Portland myself, it never worked out for the four of us to get together and meet before Jenna's wedding.

That's what I know. He's busy and drills needles into people's skin for a living.

Oh, and he fucks like the Energizer Bunny. Actually, he's better than the batteries that power my own personal go-to device. The man doesn't stop and knows his way around a woman's body like he was born to pleasure them. Or, he's just had a lot of experience.

Which makes me want to vomit.

And did I mention he fosters animals? If he has that big of a heart for animals then he won't exactly be pissed about the fact he got the maid of honor knocked up, right?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:08 am*

Right. My hands clasp together and I get a sudden waft of stench coming from the garbage dumpster in the alley I pass.

Fortunately, MadInk is right ahead and before I can second-guess myself and run back home to call him instead, I lunge forward and grab the door handle.

I whisk it open and a bell jingles. I gasp, inhaling the crisp, cool air inside, and almost stumble to my knees before righting myself.

Getting to my feet, I rub my arms and glance around. The waiting area, a small section of metal and black leather chairs, is empty. In the middle of the chairs is a glass table, three-ring binders are spread out in a fan shape, some open to reveal small but intricate and colorful pieces of art. Tattoos, probably.

In the distance, the faint buzzing of needle guns is barely audible over the heavy metal music.

“Can I help you?”

I jump at the voice and the woman who’s entered the lobby area without making a sound. Walking behind a large desk filled with small pieces of glittering jewelry, she snaps her gum with boredom clear on her face. “Need some ink? We’re busy tonight but the head guy can fit you in if it’s a small piece.”

“No.” God no, is more like it. I have a perverse fear of needles. The sharp stinging pain. And how do people ever truly know they’re sterilized properly?

“So what can I do you for then?” Her eyes narrow, dip down and then up, trailing my body. “You don’t seem like the clientele we usually get. You lost?”

I wish. Southtown isn’t far from where I live, but two blocks into Southtown is an entirely different world from the Pearl District.

“No, I’m not. Is Braxton here?” As soon as I ask the question, my gaze lands on a portrait on the wall. My heart seizes. It’s not just any ocean, it’s his. The way he sees it. The way he’s imagined it. Startling blues with bright orange lighting the night as the moon rises, pinks and swishes of purples melding at the horizon. It seems and feels as if the water travels forever. Just like it appears in real life except the painting makes me hurt. Because he wants to see it and hasn’t.

I don’t know what possessed him to tell me all about it when we were together, but I’ll never forget the story or the ache in his voice as he mentioned his desire to see dolphins splash in bright teal waters.

I am going to throw up.

Clearing my throat, I step toward the girl behind the counter. She’s sitting in a chair, bar height, feet kicked up onto the counter. Her feet, clad in rubber flip-flops despite it being only fifty degrees outside, wiggle to a beat of music. She has multiple facial piercings and ink covers the entirety of her arms until it disappears beneath cutoff sleeves of her tank top.

“Sweetie, listen, I’m not sure what you need—”

“I need Braxton,” I blurt. Get a grip, I tell myself. Just say what you came to say and leave. “I don’t have an appointment, but my friend Jenna said he should be here.”

She scans my body again, a piercing on the outer edge of her upper lip glimmering in

the light as she presses her lips together. “So you do need to see the head guy.”

Her gaze makes me uncomfortable, like she’s inspecting me. “Yes. If he’s not busy.”

“Sure thing, sweetie.” Without taking her eyes off me, she reaches for a phone next to her and presses a singular button. “Yeah, B? Got a girl out here needs to talk to you.” Silence, then, “Don’t know. Seems like a Free People model if you ask me, but she’s asking for you.”

Free People? I’m not certain whether to be offended or flattered. I’m in my last remaining pair of “fat” jeans, barely able to squeeze my quickly growing backside into them and unable to button them at night when pregnancy bloat appears. My flowing tunic top is able to hide the small pudge in my front, and while I might be dressed more hipster-ish, I’m not sure she really cares.

“Don’t matter you don’t know Free People, B, just get your ass out here. Girl looks like she’s gonna puke.”

The phone snaps down and she grins. The Cheshire Cat comes to mind as she breaks out into a toothy smile. “He’ll be right here. You need a bucket?”

Is it that obvious to everyone that I’m constantly two point five seconds away from vomiting these days? I shake my head. “No, thank you.”

“So how do you know Braxton?”

“Not sure that’s any of your business, Stell.”

His voice. It rumbles through me, flows like water and sends thrills down my spine. I’ve spent weeks trying to forget his voice, so hung up on that one night we spent together that I’ve been sure I had to be imagining him and all his deliciousness.

But nope. Hell no. No way in hell. Braxton is standing in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, looking just as stunning, if not more so, than I remembered. I don't know how it's possible, but in the flesh—and sober—I go liquid.

Black cropped hair, dark as the night. Tanned, olive skin so beautifully perfect it makes a girl want to lick it right up like melted chocolate. And I've done that. Several times. I've had my hands and tongue and body all over this massive man who is currently staring at me like I've stolen something precious from him and he'll stop at nothing, absolutely nothing, to have it returned. I can't peel my eyes away. He was breathtaking in a suit. In jeans currently hugging his large and muscled thighs and a plain white T-shirt, his muscles pop and with the way they're currently crossed, holy hell, the tattoos...can anyone say "arm porn"?

Damn it. I should have run.

Be a better person. Be the girl I know you can be, the girl who's deep down in your soul.

## Page 5

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Shit. Jimmy always chooses the worst times to speak to me. I hate listening, but he'd been impossible to ignore while alive. On his deathbed, even more so.

"Can I help you?" Braxton asks. His voice is so brisk, so hardened, I falter, going back a step before regaining my balance.

He's looking at me like I'm a complete stranger.

This is more mortifying than I'd imagined. I'm not much to sneeze at, but was I so forgettable to a guy like this? Yowch. This stings. The night with him had been the most adventurous night I'd ever had. I let loose in a way I hadn't since before Jimmy's death over a year ago and it'd been thrilling. He'd given me more than one thing I'd never experienced before.

Perhaps that's the problem. Hormones and a first-time orgasm with a man have muddled my mind, making it seem more spectacular than it truly was. Hell, for a guy like him, it's probably a nightly thing. Weekly minimal.

"Hey, Braxton. I'm Cara, a friend of Jenna's. Can we talk?"

"Depends on what you gotta say."

I look at Stella. She's in her same seat, and no joke, a bag of popcorn has somehow appeared in her hands. She tosses a handful into her mouth and waves. "Don't mind me. We don't get pretty girls like you in here and I'm thinking this is going to be fun."



“Stella.” I have to fight a flinch. She glares at him like he’s a mosquito. She has to have some massive lady balls. That glare turned in my direction would make me want to burst into ash. “Enough.”

“You don’t want me knowin’ your business, don’t go airin’ it in public.”

“Damn it. You’re a pain in my ass, you know that?”

“Love you too, B.”

My eyes bounce back and forth at their banter. But those last four words, they stall my chest. Shit, I haven’t even considered. “Are you two...dating?”

Stella throws her head back and laughs. It’s maniacal and loud and I can only stand there staring at her. She jerks back and reaches for the desk as she throws herself forward, slapping her hand on the counter. “Holy shit, girl. You’re hilarious and I think I love you too.”

“Jesus, fuck,” Braxton growls and then he’s front of me. Holy cow, he moves fast. “Let’s go,” he growls again. His large, muscled hand wraps around my bicep and he tugs me forward. I can do nothing but follow him, tripping over my boots, the sound of Stella’s crazy laughter echoing loudly in the hallway.

He stops when he pulls me into what looks like a madman’s office. Papers are scattered all over the place and a chair resembling one I see at the dentist’s office sits in the corner. The door slams shut and I spin around, which is a mistake.

He’s right in front of me. He’s so tall I have to tilt my head up and he’s too close. His masculine scent invades my senses and another wave of nausea hits me.

This has to stop. My hand flies to my stomach and I step back. God, I’m going to

puke all over his feet and won't that be amazing.

He doesn't know me and I'm going to throw up all over him before I can tell him I'm pregnant. Awesome second impression.

Perhaps it'll be more memorable than my first one.

"You wanted to talk?"

I look away, trying to settle my rattled nerves. "Yeah, um, I'm Cara. We met at Dan and Jenna's wedding a few months ago."

"And?"

Don't puke. Just tell him. I hug my stomach more firmly. "Okay. Well, we met and um...well, I'm pregnant." He doesn't move, not a single twitch of any emotion flashes in his eyes or his face, not a single damn muscle twitch.

This isn't going how I expected at all. "And, well, it's yours."

## Chapter 2

### Braxton

I'm being an asshole, but frankly, the prissy woman deserves it. I've been with a lot of girls who wanted to go slumming with a guy like me who they'd never take home to Mommy and Daddy, or girls who would do the exact opposite just to set off the fireworks of a lifetime when Daddy saw what kind of guy his princess had deigned to bring home.

I've gotten used to it. A lifetime of being misjudged, being thought of as less than

someone else because of my zip code, hardens a man like me. Growing up in my hood, kids like me went one of two ways with it. Died in the anger, turning to drugs and gangs and a lifetime of running from the police, or we got out.

Lucky for me, I had Irvin at my back, teaching me the right way to live before my anger turned all-consuming.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:08 am*

I'd thought Cara was different. The night I met her at Dan's wedding rehearsal she'd been flustered in that cute, innocent way that was a fuckuva turn-on. Yeah, we'd probably had way too much to drink and ended up in my hotel room the next night when we shouldn't have, but she'd lit up for me in a way no other woman had. Tight and wet, she'd pulled me in over and over again. I worked out hours every day, no excuses, but after the night with her, my abs had hurt from the workout we'd had.

So when she woke up, rolled my way, and threw the pillow over her head, groaning, "Fuck. What a fucking disaster I am," well, yeah...she doesn't deserve shit from me.

Except she just spun my world into a tailspin.

"Excuse me?"

She has to be kidding. Or I have a contact high from Javier's joint he keeps sneaking into the alley and smoking between customers. That has to be it.

This spicy but innocent little spitfire hasn't just shown up in my place of business to tell me the wrapping I always use on my dick malfunctioned.

But hell if she doesn't look like she's going to puke all over my feet, either.

"Sit down," I say, and guide her to a chair before she can argue.

Her head falls into her hands, her dark brown hair making a curtain so I can't see her. But I can hear her, and her shoulders are trembling.

“I’m so sorry. This is just so humiliating, and I don’t mean to just blurt that out, but I figured you should know. But how embarrassing. I mean, you don’t even remember me.” She throws her head back, chocolate-colored hair whipping wildly, fingers swiping under eyes so blue they’d reminded me of the Caribbean Sea.

Damn it. A girl who cries is my kryptonite. Plus, if she’s pregnant...

“I know who you are, Cara,” I say. She jolts in her chair, head snapping up giving me a clear view of her face. She looks sick. Truly sick. If she’s pregnant, she’s getting the short end of the stick with that pregnancy glow women rave about. Hell, even Stella had it with both of hers and she was always looking in the mirror, constantly gushing over how good her skin looked.

Her brows furrow. “Why? Why would you—?”

I’ll apologize later. “Perhaps we have bigger things to talk about. You want to repeat what you said?”

Her hands tangle in her lap. She’s just as beautiful as I remembered. The first time I saw her, my dick noticed first, but for the rest of the weekend, the rest of me was trying harder than I could remember trying to get a girl to notice me.

The fact she regretted it so much and had no problem sharing that with me still stings.

Her voice is small, shaky when she says, “Well, I’m pregnant. And it’s yours.”

Yep...just as terrifying and dizzying as it’d been the first time. “You sure it’s mine?”

“Of course it is. I wouldn’t have come all the way here unless I was sure.”

Of course she wouldn’t. Princesses don’t cross the Willamette River to the slums

unless necessary.

Fucking hell. This is a disaster.

“So, what?” I cross my arms over my chest. Mostly to stop from reaching for her, shaking some damn sense into her. I’d been under the impression we’d had a good weekend, no, a great one. We’d laughed and drunk and the next day at the wedding, she’d leaned into me, rested her hand on my chest, acted like she’d known me as long as she’d known Jenna. A few more drinks at the reception, she didn’t hesitate at all to take my hand in her much smaller one and lick her lips, saying, “I’m not ready for the night to end, are you?”

It was the sweetest pickup line anyone had ever used on me. It’d worked like a charm.

If it was possible for her skin to pale further, it does. She turns a slight shade of green. I lean forward, closer to her. And mistake. Jesus. Her eyes are so blue they’d reminded me of the ocean, not up north on the West Coast where it’s always dark and cloudy, but in the photos of the Caribbean, where the water is so clear it sparkles. I’d spilled my secrets thinking she gave a damn about me. Lesson learned.

“What do you want from me?”

“I just thought you should know, of course.”

She pushes back in her chair and stands, wiping her hands down the sides of her hips. Beautiful narrow hips I’ve had my hands wrapped all around in several different positions. Like hell she’s leaving now.

I reach for her hand and step closer. “Cara, did you come here to tell me and walk away, or do you want something from me? You need money or something?”

The fact I have to ask pisses me off, but she's being elusive.

She pushes back and covers her mouth with her hands. Her eyes dart around, scanning the floor. "Can you, um, step back?"

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:08 am*

She isn't looking at me, something that pisses me off further. Two months ago, it'd felt like she couldn't get enough of me, now she's acting like she can't stand to be around me. It only further confirms I made the right decision. Even though I'd wanted to get her number, as soon as she'd crawled out of bed, she'd taken off before I could realize she wasn't using the restroom and coming back to bed. Just...gone.

"It's just that, well, you smell really good, but it's also making me—" She lurches forward. I've seen enough drunken assholes to know what's coming. I scramble to the side of my desk and grab the garbage can.

Full of papers, I don't even think. Just shove it right in front of her as she throws up.

She takes the can from me and sinks back into her chair.

Shit.

"I'm so sorry."

She wrenches again and I pull her hair off her cheeks, holding it in my fist. The memory of doing that to her while she was on her knees hits me hard and fast. I shake it off and focus. "It's okay, Cara."

This girl. Watching her throw up, repeatedly, I suck in a breath and hold it. The stench is nasty.

"I'm so sorry, Brax," she murmurs, her voice dry. "It's just, I'm making a mess of this." She gags again and damn it if it doesn't make me want to hold her in my arms,



bathe her, clean her...

And, hell.

A baby.

My baby. Somehow in all the anger, the shock of seeing her, I haven't even considered the fact my kid is inside of her. It's my child, my fault she's throwing up.

I slide my phone out of my pocket and call Stella. "Whatcha need, boss? More Magnums?"

If Stella wasn't like my sister, I'd have fired her years ago. Late to work, bitchy to the customers, she's not exactly a model employee, but I've known her since we were kids and I might not be a lot of things, but I'm damn loyal. She's also a whiz with numbers, something I've never been able to figure out.

"No. Washcloth, warmed, and crackers and water. Now."

I hang up before she can ask what the hell for and step away from Cara to open the door.

The scent of the puke has infiltrated my office. Damn. It'll take days to air this out.

All of that becomes irrelevant when Cara sniffs. "I'm so sorry, Brax. I didn't mean to come here, didn't mean to tell you this way."

"It's all right." I slide my hand up and down her back even after she sets the wastebasket down. Goosebumps pop on her arms. It's beautiful. She's beautiful. My dick clearly remembers the feel of her skin because it twitches.

Yeah, because now is the time to get a fucking hard-on.

“You okay now?”

She shrugs. “Comes and goes. Whoever said morning sickness was a thing is a lying sack of shit. Hits me at the worst times, all day long. And I’m so tired. I can’t sleep, can’t eat.”

That explains the pale skin and dark circles under her eyes.

“Come on.” I slide the garbage can out of the way. This girl needs someone to take care of her and I need answers. “Let me get you back home and we’ll talk.”

“I’m really tired. Can I just leave you my number and you can call me? Maybe we can do this later?”

Like hell that’s happening. I’m not some dick who walks away from responsibility. I’m also not setting a woman out on a street in this neighborhood looking like she might pass out at any moment.

“No, come on.” I hold out my hand and when she places her palm in mine, electric heat zings straight to my chest. Yeah, I’m not letting her go. Not yet, anyway. “I want to make sure you get home okay and I’ve got a car out back. Did you drive here?”

“No.” She shakes her head and sways on her feet. Her head smacks my chest and she goes listless. I tighten my grip on her. “Braxton? I don’t feel so well.”

She sways again and her eyelids flutter closed. I grab her right before her body goes limp and crashes to the floor.

Stella walks in, eyes wide, nose scrunched from the smell, crackers in one hand,

bottle of water in the other. “What the hell? Did she puke? Is she drunk?”

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“Don’t ask. I’ve gotta get her to the hospital and call Dan and Jenna. Will you call and reschedule my appointments?”

“Brax—”

I’m already pushing past her, making her step backward so I can get through the doorway.

“I’ll call you later and explain, Stella. Just do this for me. Oh, and clean up my office.”

I take a step into the hallway and Stella’s shriek bounces off the walls. “Holy freaking nutballs! It reeks in here!”

If any of this was funny, I’d laugh my ass off.

Instead, I’ve got a pregnant woman in my arms and a mission to get her to the hospital.

Oh, and I still can’t forget she thinks screwing me is a disaster.

At this point, I don’t think she’s all that far off.

Chapter 3

Cara

My eyelids pop open to the soft sound of metal clicking and the brush of something over my stomach.

I'm in a car.

"What the heck?" Braxton is in front of me, inches from my face. He's leaning over me, sliding his hand to my shoulder and just above it. "What are you doing?"

"You fainted." His rich, dark eyes flicker back and forth between mine, to my mouth and back. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

Fainted? How could I have? I shake my head, but it makes me woozy. Dropping my head back, I settle into what feels like butter-soft leather. I'm too tired to talk and I'm cocooned in the scent of Braxton and the brush of his fingers over my shoulder.

"Are you okay? You collapsed and then passed out."

"I'm pregnant and I'm puking all day long, but I'm fine. My midwife says it'll pass in a few more weeks."

I force my lids open. I'm so tired. So miserable. I can barely eat anything and when I do, the food rarely stays down. My diet consists of saltine crackers and tiny little ginger candies that are supposed to help with the nausea, but even those are mostly worthless.

"I'd feel better if we get you checked out anyway."

I could fight him. Except I don't have the energy to push him away or even undo the seat belt he strapped me into. Plus, he's still leaning into the passenger side of his car, his eyes so close to mine and his lips that are so completely beautiful and full and soft. I shudder, unable to stop the memories from rushing through me.

“Cold?” Braxton eyes, his brows furrowing. “Hold on.”

Before I can tell him I’m not cold, but remembering our beautiful, passionate night together, he’s back and draping a thick fleece blanket over me.

The door closes, the trunk he’d opened thuds shut, and then he’s rushing around the back of the car. I barely have the energy to pay attention as he easily slides into the seat and starts his car.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry about this. About all of it.”

The whole pregnancy part, showing up at his tattoo shop, sleeping with him in the first place. All of it is so far outside my normal operating procedure it’s taken me over a month to find the courage to tell him.

And he still hasn’t said anything.

The palm of his hand taps the steering wheel repeatedly. “Let’s just get you checked out to make sure you’re okay. Then we’ll talk about what comes next.”

“I’m keeping the baby.” He sounds like he wants to discuss options. Getting rid of my baby is not one of them. It was never an option I considered.

My eyelids grow heavy. I’m so damn tired. All the time. I barely have the energy to pick up a paintbrush these days, much less stand on my feet for hours at my shifts at the gallery. But I swear, right before I drift off, I hear him breathe out a sigh of relief and say, “Good. I’m glad.”

## Page 9

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I wake again when Braxton's arms are beneath my knees and behind my back. "Hey," he says, almost sounding shocked I'm not sleeping. He lifts me out of his car and my hands that have somehow found their way to his shoulders push against him.

"I can walk."

"Let's not risk it today."

I struggle against his hold and give up. The man's built like a mountain and I've seen his strength in action, when he pinned me against a wall, dropped to his knees, and threw my legs over his shoulders.

My body warms, despite the chill in the air.

Braxton strolls into the emergency room like he doesn't have a hundred and thirty pounds in his arms, and my cheeks burn as heads turn in our direction. He ignores them, sauntering right up to the front desk.

"May I help you?" The woman behind the counter glances at us with little change in her expression. It must not be the first time she's seen a woman carried into the ER like a bride.

"She needs to be seen," Braxton says, before I can answer. "She's pregnant and has fainted twice in the last half hour and she's puking."

Her black eyes drift to me. "Name?"

“Cara Thompson,” I whisper. My throat is dry and every tiny movement of Braxton’s arm makes me feel like I’m on a roller coaster. Tilting my head back, I meet his gaze. “Please put me down. I’d feel better on my feet.”

Thick black brows pull together before he nods. He sets me on the floor gently, carefully, like I’m cracked porcelain and one jarring move could shatter me.

I think I might, anyway.

All of this is so, so horribly wrong.

“Thank you.” I cling to the counter in front of us. I give the receptionist my midwife’s name and thankfully, Braxton brought me to Portland Regional where Pam has admitting privileges.

With a few rapid clicks of her fingers on the keyboard, I answer a handful of questions and she gestures to the chair. “Have a seat. We’ll be with you soon.”

A sweat breaks out along my forehead and I wipe it away. “Please,” I say, my voice hoarse. It hurts to talk. I push my tongue to the roof of my mouth to stop what I know is about to happen.

Not here. Not in the waiting room. Not in front of Braxton again.

“I need a bowl.”

The woman looks up. Whatever she says has her moving quickly and a kidney-shaped pale pink tub is thrust in front of me.

Braxton’s hand goes to my side and he holds me to him as I bend forward, gagging.



“Oh shit.” I moan, unable to help myself. This is the most miserable month of my life. Why women go through this willingly is beyond me at this point. Why they choose it multiple times is baffling.

In the background, the woman’s fingers are still wildly typing on her keyboard and she pushes from her chair. “I’ve bumped you up in the queue. We’ll get you back to a room.”

“Thank you,” Braxton says. “Appreciate it.”

“Cara Thompson,” a new, male voice says and Braxton helps me turn toward the direction of double doors that have swung open. A young man in teal scrubs is standing there, eyes scanning the room, and stopping on me as Braxton helps us toward the door.

“Thank you,” I mumble. “I’m sorry for everything.”

His hand on my waist tenses. “Stop apologizing.”

For a brief moment, I feel bad we’re getting moved to the back so quickly. The waiting room is full and more than one sickly-looking person scowls at me as we pass them. I push them out of my mind. This is the worst I’ve been and I’m barely able to move I’m so exhausted.

Everything on my body hurts down to my bones like I’ve run a marathon without proper training.

All I want to do is collapse into a bed and sleep for the next seven months, and if it has to be in a hospital room, I’m more than willing.

—

## Page 10

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They poke and prod me. Four attempts to get an IV into my arm left it looking like it's been pummeled with a meat tenderizer.

After hooking me up to various machines, a nurse came in and gave me antinausea meds along with nutrients through a second IV line. Strung to wires and tubes and monitors, I drift in and out of sleep for hours, the murmuring of a television in the background and Braxton's occasional voice while he speaks on the phone filtering into my mind.

It's been hours since I went into a room and saw the doctor. Based on my weight loss and dehydration and constant vomiting, I've been diagnosed with hyperemesis gravidarum. It's essentially morning sickness times a million and might last through my entire pregnancy. Not to mention, until I reach fourteen weeks, my risk of miscarrying is higher than average.

As if I don't have enough to worry about.

It was this news that pushed tears from my eyes and down my cheeks. I've cried more in the last two months than I have since Jimmy died. Hormones aren't only just a pain in the butt, but nothing has gone right for me since Jenna's wedding.

I'm moping, feeling sorry for myself, but it's more than that. I'm also terrified out of my mind.

I've been on my side, turned away from Braxton, despite his attempts to speak to me.

I've never wanted to be a mom. Not really. It was always something I assumed I'd

do. Go to college, then law school. Join my dad's firm where I'd make partner by thirty. At some point along the way, I'd be introduced to a man my parents approved of and we'd marry, love playing second fiddle to respect and mutual goals, and once we were both settled in our careers, then I'd have a child or two because it was also expected.

I don't regret walking away from that life or my parents' unreasonable expectations. Watching my brother die in my arms in a hospice facility changed me for the better, at least I hope it has.

The fear of miscarrying is worrisome enough. Thinking about losing someone else I've fallen in love with before even seeing them sends me over the edge. I want to feel him or her move and see if it's born with Jimmy's eyes or mine, or the peach fuzz I had as a baby or Braxton's inky black locks.

I'm fully bonded to something the size of a lima bean.

My vision turns blurry and I squeeze my eyes shut.

Behind me, Braxton sighs, as if he can see my shoulders shaking, or hear the cries I'm trying to keep quiet. I puked all over the man's office and fainted in his arms. The last thing he needs is to have me bawling into his shoulder.

"Cara." Braxton calls my name.

I shake my head and burrow my face into my pillow. The urge to tell him I'm fine screams at me, but I can't.

A chair squeaks, metal on linoleum, and soon he's at the side of my bed, his hand on me, between my shoulders.

His large, warm palm runs sweeping circles around my back. It reminds me of the day Jenna came to my apartment and helped me while I puked my guts out a month ago.

He says nothing, and I'm thankful. I need the silence and space to think. His fingertips dig into my lower back, massaging me firmly, yet gently and slowly. It's not sexual. But he's strong, and it feels so good, muscles in my shoulders and neck relax as his thumbs press in around my spine.

"Everything will work out." His voice is deep, smoky and firm, as if he can will anything he wants into existence by a simple declaration.

I've never had that kind of confidence. But it helps, and as my body relaxes, my tears evaporate.

"Thank you." I swipe away my tears and tuck my hands under my cheek. His hands are on my back. Turning to look at him would mean losing my massage and it's the first comforting and soothing touch I've had in months.

God, how pathetic.

A one-night stand giving me a back rub is the most physical touch I've had other than Jenna's hugs.

"I talked to Jenna and Dan while you were sleeping."

"Is she coming?"

"Dan has an event with Lane Holdings tonight."

"Right." I helped Jenna search for a fancy dress weeks ago for this night. Dan works

in their finance department and they're having some spring fundraiser. I'd forgotten it was today. "Okay."

"I want you to spend the night with me."

My back tenses, my whole body jerks, and his hand stops massaging.

"I meant to sleep, Cara."

“I knew that.”

“I don’t want you going home and being alone after they let you out.”

“I’ll stay here.”

“They’re not admitting you.”

I know that, of course. The last time a nurse came in she said I would be staying for two more hours and having some more blood drawn, but I’ve been at the hospital for well over six hours getting filled with vitamins and rehydrated. I’m already feeling better, just tired and more mentally exhausted than physically.

Actually, all the rest and lack of puking has left me feeling the best I’ve felt since the day before I took a pregnancy test. I don’t need someone else looking out for me.

“I can take care of myself.”

Braxton’s hand falls from my back and the chair screeches as he moves it back. His body looms over the bed, the bed shifting as he puts his hands on it. I don’t even have to turn over to know he’s bent over and glaring at me.

I open my eyes and peek anyway. “What?”

“You’re not going home tonight and spending it alone.”

I’ve never excelled at taking orders. “I believe it’s the twenty-first century and I can

do whatever I want.”

A corner of his lips lifts, turning into a smirk I’ve seen before. It was right before I told him I couldn’t go a third round after the first two mind-blowing orgasms.

He’d tilted his head, smirked, and whispered, “Let’s see.” Then he’d attacked.

My cheeks flush and heat travels down my spine that has nothing to do with the blanket or the room temperature.

“Okay.” He pushes off the bed and pulls his phone out of his back pocket, sliding it to unlock and tapping on the screen.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting Stella to go buy food for you.”

Confusion must be stamped on my features because he finishes the text and crosses his arms. “I’ve always liked it when you tell me I can’t do something. Makes me want to prove how wrong you are.”

He remembers everything I just did, and if I wasn’t in a hospital with tubes shoved into me I’d punch him.

Or slap him.

Or grip his shirt and pull him to me.

Freaking hormones.

“I’m not going home with you.”

“Okay.” He nods.

He doesn’t mean a damn word of it. I can tell in the glimmer of his eyes and the set of his shoulders.

And whatever. He wants to take me to his place, play babysitter, waste hours of unnecessary effort, he can go right on ahead.

I roll over and put my back to him. “Fine.”

“I also remember liking it, really liking it, when you gave in.”

I’d call him a jerk, but he probably already knows it so I don’t bother.

Instead, I spend the next hour pretending to sleep until a nurse comes in and tugs out my IVs and the doctor returns with my discharge papers. He also hands me a prescription for more antinausea medicine, as well as a diet plan for people with my condition. Rules on how often to eat, what to eat when, a mixture of carbs and protein and fats that is high in nutrients and easy to digest.



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Just looking at the list of foods makes me nauseous. Getting the medicine is definitely the top priority.

Fortunately, Braxton must sense this as well, because he tugs the prescription from my fingertips, wraps his hand around my bicep and tugs me out the door. “Let’s go. We’ll get you something to drink and the medicine on our way to my place.”

### Chapter 4

Braxton

The urge to pull Cara into my arms and reassure her everything will be okay pulses beneath my skin, but I fight it back.

Every damn time she starts to become vulnerable, she throws our night in my face. How am I supposed to care about someone when she makes it so damn apparent she despises the time we spent together?

Shame, because while she regrets fucking me, besides her sudden change in opinion on that Sunday morning, Cara had been the best I could ever remember having. It wasn’t just physical, although that definitely surpassed any expectations I had when she first suggested we head to my room. Our connection went beyond physical. Beyond mental. Something happened when she was so close to me and even with my hand on her back, trying to comfort her, I still feel it.

Which makes me the fool. If Cara showed one hint of wanting another go at me, I’d probably trip over my shoes in my hurry to kick them off and get us naked, even

knowing she'd regret it afterward.

The car ride to my building is relatively quiet other than the jazz music playing from my playlist and the infrequent protests Cara made early on.

I shut her down with a firm scolding. "It's my kid too and you might not be okay with this, but I take care of my responsibilities. You're staying at my place and I'm not discussing it further."

Her pale blue eyes had gone wide and she'd turned her head away, meekly replying, "Okay."

It's the last word she spoke.

Now, pulling into my spot at the John Ross building where I've recently bought a penthouse level condo, Cara makes a squeaking sound from the passenger seat.

"You live here?" And her tone isn't kind or surprised, more shocked mixed with disbelief.

In all the things Jenna and Dan told me about Cara Thompson, neither mentioned her being judgmental. Mostly it was all good things, her artistic abilities and desire to make a living creating art. Her bubbly personality. All of it was so damn spectacular in person, I must have missed something.

Disappointing.

"Yep." I'm snippier than I should be, but I'm losing the ability to care. A lot of people see a man covered in tattoos and think thug. Cara never showed me this side of her and the surprise in her voice reeks of judgment.

Perhaps I've had her pegged all wrong from the beginning. Or she fooled the hell out of me at the wedding.

"Business must be doing well."

With my jaw clenched, I keep my mouth shut and grab the prescription we picked up on our way and open my door. I slam it harsher than I intend, the sound echoing in the underground garage. I'm at her door, opening it just as she does the same.

I grip her elbow, holding her steady, and guide her to the elevator where I enter my keycard.

She must notice my irritation because she brushes her dark brown hair off her shoulder and tugs her elbow out of my grip. Crossing her arms over her stomach, she rubs her arms as if she needs to keep warm.

For once, I don't bother trying to help her.

"Did I say something wrong?"

You know, this morning, I was a guy, slightly hungover, more slightly regretting the pretty little redhead I took home from a bar last night. She'd been a gymnast. She hadn't disappointed me in the least with her flexibility or her strength.

I woke up, gave her a kiss, and tapped her backside as I escorted her out the door to her waiting Uber, knowing I'd never see her again. Then I went to work thinking it was going to be another completely boring Friday.

The last thing I expected was this girl in front of me, so innocent and spectacularly sexy in my memories, to show up, proclaim I'd gotten her pregnant, puke all over my office, and faint in my arms only to spend six hours taking care of her. All so she can

continue apologizing and acting like her life is over because some asshole who owns tattoo parlors ruined her one brief night of sexual irresponsibility.

Fuck this.

The door opens and I step in, leaving Cara behind me. It goes against every instinct I have, but screw her.

When I turn around, she's still outside the lift, eyes wide. "Coming?"

“Yeah.”

I wait until she’s securely inside and the doors are closed before punching in the floor to my condo. It’s a penthouse, but not the only one on the floor, although it is the largest. I swore to Irvin when I was ten that if he’d help me get out of my neighborhood, I’d buy the largest home I could, and I’d keep watch over the old place.

I never knew the man I idolized as a kid was a man who invested well, and purchased more life insurance than imaginable. So imagine my shock when he passed away my second year of college, leaving me the beneficiary of millions of dollars’ worth of investments and insurance.

I did the one thing I promised him I would. Bought the biggest place I could find that would overlook all of Portland, the river, and in the distance, my old neighborhood along with Mount Hood even farther in the distance. On a sunny day, I can see all of it from my wraparound balcony and every day I step out there, I think of Irvin, and all that he gave me.

And none of it is financial.

“Why’d you come see me today?” I ask Cara. She jumps at the sternness in my tone and I don’t really care. I’ve been so worried about taking care of her today I haven’t actually had time to process the news she gave me.

I’m going to be adad.

In the reflection of the mirrored doors, her brows pinch together. “I told you. I thought you had a right to know.”

“How noble. And that’s it? You were just going to stop by, let me know I was going to be a dad, and leave?”

She jerks, her face paling. I’m being an ass and I can’t stop myself. The day has been a complete whirlwind and all I’ve been able to think about is her...but what about me?

“I, well, I hadn’t gotten that far, I guess. But I thought we’d talk about it, you know, and if you want to have a part in it?”

“If I want to have a part in it? In what, being a dad? What, from what you know of me, gives you any indication I wouldn’t want that?”

She shakes her head, wisps of hair slapping her shoulders before cascading down her chest. “I...I’m confused. Are you mad at me?”

“No, Cara.” I shake my head. Swiping a hand down my face. All the memories I have of her slam into me, making me groan. “I’m not mad. Every guy likes to hear that it’s a fucking disaster when you sleep with him.”

“Braxton—” She starts but the elevator slides to a stop and the doors open.

I step out, hearing her feet following me, and I’m at the door to my place, throwing it open when she reaches me.

“Come on in. I’ll show you to your room.”

I hold the door open for her with my arm extended but she doesn’t enter.

Her cheeks are no longer pale, but the color of strawberries, and she's nibbling on her bottom lip.

She's done that before, when she suggested she wasn't ready for our night at the wedding to end.

Damn her for being so enticing when I'm such a damn mistake.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Doesn't matter." I wave my free hand forward. "We should get you something to eat and you need more rest."

She steps toward me, not the open doorway. Lifting her hand, I keep my gaze on hers as she moves it like she wants to press it to my chest. At the last second, she freezes and lets her hand fall to her side.

Dropping her gaze, she nods once and steps inside. I follow her, letting the door slam shut behind me, and I move around her until I'm past the short entry hallway and in the kitchen.

Behind me, she gasps, and the sound shoots straight to my dick. Fuck her.

Fuck this entire situation. I can easily back out now. Tell her I want nothing to do with the baby. Pay for her medical care, sign my rights away, give her the chance to find a guy she actually wants to raise a kid with. As soon as I think these thoughts, I steady myself against the kitchen counter.

That's not happening.

The kid inside of her is mine, and I wouldn't be the man Irvin helped raise if I

washed my hands of this entire thing.

We'll just have to make the best of it.



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“Look.” I brace my hands on the counter, straightening my arms, and turn to face her. She’s staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows that line this side of the condo. The view is incredible. I can stare at it for hours, and some days, I do, with nothing but a glass of Glenlivet straight in my hand and my feet kicked up on my coffee table.

But now, all I see is her, tears slowly streaking down her cheeks, terror on her face like I’ve slapped her or she’s remembering a nightmare.

“Look, Cara,” I say again, swallowing down the part of me that still wants to be an asshole. “I get it. You didn’t mean for this to happen. And I apologize for being a dick, but you have to give me some credit here. You’ve dropped an awfully large bomb in my lap today.”

“I understand.” She wipes tears away, rubbing her fingers together. The emotion on her face dissipates, but she keeps her eyes on the view. “If you’ll show me where I’m sleeping, I’m going to go to bed. It’s late and I’m tired.”

Her voice is blank. Not angry. Not hopeful, and not disappointed.

Just blank and I’ve done this to her.

“You should eat.”

“I really just want to sleep.”

“Cara—”

“Please, Braxton.” She spins on her heels, facing me, defeat stamped all over her slumped shoulders. “I’m tired. You can process this bomb I gave you and we’ll talk tomorrow. Okay?”

It’s not. Nothing about this is okay, but there’s not much I can say. She’s been sleeping all day and her color is finally normal again, but she’s still pale and the purple circles under her eyes seem to be darkening by the minute.

“Okay.”

I push off the kitchen counter and open up the bag containing her prescription. “The doctor said you won’t need these tonight, but you should take it first thing in the morning. I’ll get you settled and see if Stella brought the crackers I asked for and then I’ll bring them back to your room.”

I hand her the bottle along with bottled water from the fridge and start walking. “Your room is this way. It’s just a guest room, and nothing special, but you have your own bathroom. I’ve got a cleaning lady who comes every week so it should be clean. I don’t usually come in here.”

“It’s lovely,” she says, as we reach the room. My room is on the other side of the apartment, around the corner from the living room, past the office. If anything happens, I won’t be able to hear her.

Maybe I should sleep on the couch, just in case.

“Braxton?”

“Hm?” I jerk my head toward Cara. “What?”

“You look lost.”

I am. So damn lost. This urge to protect her and care for her is insane, and she can barely stand my presence. Fuck the problems I find myself in.

“I’m fine. Was just thinking. Is there anything you need?”

Her nose scrunches and she looks around the room. “I don’t have any clothes. Or a toothbrush.”

She sounds as lost as I feel. Who can blame her?

“I’ll get it. Be back in a few minutes.”

I leave, not bothering to close the bedroom door. While I hurry around my condo, I head to my room and snag an extra toothbrush—stopping as a small whine comes from my room.

“Shit.” I stop at Lucy’s kennel and crouch down so she can sniff my fingers. Her tan ears pull back and she scratches at the kennel door. “I totally forgot about you, girl. Stella take care of you? Yeah?” She sniffs and licks my fingers. An abused bullmastiff pup when I started fostering her, she’s now well over fifty pounds, and growing rapidly, but still thinks she’s tiny. She behaves more like a lapdog or kitten than the beast she appears to be. “Let me get Cara settled and I’ll take you out, okay?”

She yips at my fingers playfully.

“All right. All right. I’ll hurry.”

Lucy’s whine increases as I grab a T-shirt from a drawer and an extra toothbrush. By the time I’m done, she’s pawing wildly at the kennel door and I know the sign.

If I don't get her out now, she'll piss all over the place.

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I make a quick detour to grab her training collar and leash and then I'm opening the door. I clip it on her but before I can tell her to heel, she tears out of my hold, bounding through the apartment.

"Lucy!" I shout, hurling after the eight-foot leash that's trailing behind her. "Heel!"

"Oh!" Cara's shout sends me into double time and I slide around the corner of the hallway, to see her squatting, ass to heels, her arms around Lucy's neck as she nuzzles right up to her.

Bright, vivid blue eyes slam into mine and I'm struck stupid.

Lucy doesn't like anyone. It took weeks to get her to stop trembling when she was dropped off at my place. She'd been badly abused and beaten by her previous owners. I've never seen her have this playful reaction to another human being before.

"I'm sorry," I say, finding my voice. I close the space and grab Lucy's collar, giving her a quick tug to pull her off Cara. "She usually hides from people, avoids them at all costs."

"Oh." Cara pets the top of Lucy's head and slides her hand to Lucy's ear, scratching it. "How surprising. She's really sweet. What is she?"

"Bullmastiff pup. I'm fostering her."

She smiles and it's peaceful and sweet. Exactly like how I remember her. A strange heat burns my chest. "She's big for a pup."

“She’ll be a hundred pounds full grown.” An awkward silence descends and I hold out my shirt and toothbrush. “I grabbed these for you. I have to get her outside before she pees. Need anything else?”

“No.” Her smile vanishes and she gives Lucy another gentle rubdown as she stands to her feet. Lucy tugs on her leash and collar to get closer. To Cara.

I’m so struck by the dog’s reaction to this woman I barely register it when she stands and steps back into her bedroom doorway. “Thank you, again, for everything. I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Yeah.” My throat has gone dry though. She’s lost and vulnerable and so damn happy to see this dog that’s a pain in my butt even if she’s still sweet. Right now, Cara’s giving me a look that’s a mixture between apologetic and friendly, and I’m so damn tired of hearing her apologize and thank me today I can’t handle any more of it.

I want to kiss her light pink lips and pull her to me and press my hand to her lower abdomen even though I know I can’t feel a baby yet. And I want to do it all, while she wants nothing to do with me.

“Sleep well.” I’m gruff, but it’s necessary.

I’m going to have to learn how to be around Cara, help her through her pregnancy, and raise a kid with her. And I have to do all of that while trying to get over the intense physical reaction I have whenever she so much as glances at me.

Fuck my life.

## Chapter 5

Cara

Silence falls in Braxton's home after he leaves my room with Lucy. It's amazing he can be so rude to me and yet obviously love animals so much to foster them. I'd like to think it's because he might be more of an animal person than a people person, but unfortunately, I think the blame of his rudeness sits squarely on my shoulders.

I don't remember saying it was a disaster to sleep with him. I do remember thinking he was still sleeping when I snuck out of his hotel room the morning after, but the disaster has nothing to do with him or the time we spent together, more because I was just entirely embarrassed I'd had a one-night stand to begin with.

My first, at twenty-four. I didn't know how to behave. Stick around and wait for him to wake up to regret it or blow me off like I'd heard happened to many of my friends?

Would we have talked and laughed and maybe had another round of hot sex before he kicked me out without getting my number?

All my college friends talked about getting out to avoid all of that, so it's what I did. If my parents' disappointing voices echoing in my head, repeating how I'm a disaster and can rarely make the right choices, accidentally came out of my mouth that morning, it's completely not Braxton's fault.

And it explains why he was rude to me earlier in the day, why he pretended not to know me at first.

Hell, most days, I don't even want to know me. But I'm trying. I'm trying to do the right thing and at some point, I have to quit listening to my parents' constant disapproval of every decision I make and forge my own path.

It's the entire reason why I dropped out of law school and moved out on my own anyway.

To live for Jimmy. To do all the things we'd always wanted to accomplish outside the umbrella of our parents' financial help.

And somehow, I keep screwing it up.

But that also means it's time to make it right too.



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An hour ago, I slipped into his T-shirt, unbuttoned my jeans, keeping them fastened with a hair tie I've taken to carrying on my wrist for when my jeans become too tight. I've alternated between pacing the floor of this small, nondescript, and completely undecorated bedroom, and tossing and turning all over the top of the beige comforter.

If I sleep, I'll dream of Braxton and the memories of hot sex. Without fail, they come almost every night.

If I talk to him, I risk upsetting him again.

A loud bark from down the hall grabs my attention and I spin on my feet.

Lucy. Such a sweet pup and I can't forget the surprise on Braxton's face when she came right to me, panting and licking my hand.

"Remember. If he takes in strays, and takes care of wounded mutts, he's not an asshole." I repeat my earlier mantra that gave me confidence to walk through the doors of MadInk, and open the door to my room.

I walk slowly, not wanting to interrupt whatever he may be doing, but the only sounds I hear are Lucy's playful growls and Braxton's quiet laughter.

I spot him as soon as I turn the corner. He's sitting in a dark brown leather chair, one that looks comfortable and worn but expensive. I'm again struck surprised by the fact that a man who owns a tattoo parlor in a less-than-impressive neighborhood to say the least, can afford a penthouse apartment in downtown Portland.

It sparked a hundred questions when I realized he lived in this building, all of them more curious but again, my mouth moved faster than my brain and I offended him.

I'm pretty much batting a thousand on the most embarrassing ways to put my foot in my mouth today.

He tosses the ball to Lucy and she fumbles it against her mouth, bumping it across the hard wood floor. She paws it twice and the ball rolls to my feet. She slides to a halt, sitting back on her haunches and tilting her head up at me.

"She likes you."

Braxton's voice startles me and I look up from where I'm crouching to grab the ball. "I've never seen her run to a person before and with you it was like she couldn't wait to get to you."

I pick up the ball and toss it to Lucy. She watches it roll by and turns back to me, barking once.

"She wants to be petted," Braxton says and I pull my eyes from the dog to him.

"Can I?"

"She doesn't bite. At least she hasn't yet."

He leans back in his chair, knees spread wide. He's changed clothes, from his jeans and T-shirt to a pair of cozy gray sweats and, if possible, an even tighter—this time navy—shirt.

I don't know if his words are a warning or approval so I go to Lucy and hold out my hand for her to sniff. She immediately licks my palm and nuzzles my hand with the

side of her head.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” I tell Braxton, but my attention is on Lucy. Her deep black eyes are sad, like she’s been drowning her entire life. Plus, focusing on Braxton is dizzying.

He’s so handsome, sexy, and built. He’s done nothing but take care of me, and all I’ve done is mess it up.

“Can’t sleep?”

I shake my head and stand from petting Lucy. As I step toward Braxton, she crowds my side, walking next to me until I’m at the couch.

I take a seat at the far edge, tucking my feet under me, and Lucy rests her face almost right in my lap.

“She’s really sweet,” I say, smiling at the dog.

When I glance at Braxton, his brow is furrowed. A tumbler of alcohol is against his lips, ink covering his knuckles.

“Hmm.”

It’s all the response I get. I’m not surprised. We know practically nothing about each other and I’ve now invaded his home, even if it was at his suggestion, but I’m no fool. This guy takes in abused animals, and I’m his new pet he thinks he has to nurse back to health.

The thought is depressing and I try to push it to the side while I replay what I want to tell him.

And like Jimmy used to tell me, whenever difficult news needed to be shared, which he had a lot of, it's best to dive in and get it over with.

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“My dad is the founding partner at the most prestigious corporate law firm in Portland. His father started the firm and family is supposed to continue that path. It’s always been expected of my brother and me.”

I stumble over what to say next, mindlessly running my hand over Lucy, and face Braxton. He’s holding his glass in his lap, leaning forward slightly, like he’s paying attention but only against his will. Memories of Jimmy flood me and I choke down the emotion that always follows.

It’s not the hormones this time. I really miss my brother.

“Anyway.” I shake my head and blink harshly to clear the burn of tears. “My brother is the prodigy in the family, the one who always did what they wanted, and not because it was expected, but because he truly enjoyed it.”

“And you?” He takes a sip of his drink, and it’s hard to see with the ink on his hands, and peeking out above the collar of his shirt, but I think he’s tensed.

“I’m not that.” I shrug slowly and look behind Braxton’s inspecting dark eyes to the dark skyline beyond. Lights flicker off close buildings, other high-rise condo buildings have their windows wide open and I can see into their buildings like a fishbowl. “I’ve always disappointed them. I quit school, I moved out, I moved to my own apartment and threw myself into making a success of my art, oils mostly, sometimes acrylics, landscapes but I love the urban streets too.”

My cheeks burn and I wipe my hand across my mouth. I haven’t meant to say so much, but it’s so easy to get lost in my dream and my passion.

“It sounds like your parents are assholes for not appreciating you as you are, Cara, but why are you telling me this?”

“Right.” The burn in my face spreads and I readjust my position on my couch. Lucy moves with me, almost burrowing into my lap even though she’s still on the floor. It’s like she senses my stress and is comforting me. I can’t help but watch Braxton’s gaze fall to the dog and his thick, black brows furrow.

“Well, the truth is, I’ve never had a one-night stand. I didn’t mean to say or imply sleeping with you was a disaster, I more meant I’m the disaster, because I had no idea what to do afterward—”

“Never?” Those furrowed brows are now arched high and the surprise is evident. “You’ve never?”

“Not like that, no.” I squeeze my eyes close as memories assail me. Powerful ones. Passionate ones. That night was filled with more passion than I’d ever experienced. So no, I’ve never experienced anything like that night before. “I didn’t know what to do afterward. Stay? Go?”

“Waking me up and kissing me would have been my preference.” A smirk tugs at his lips and he takes a swig of his drink. “And the fucking-disaster part?”

“I meant I was a disaster.”

“Funny, because I don’t remember there being anything disastrous about that night, Cara. And trust me, I’ve remembered it a lot. Often. On repeat.”

Thump. Thump. Thump. It’s my heart, threatening to escape my chest. At his words, the heated look in his eyes as he’s leaning forward. He’s taken control of this conversation and tossed us on the expressway in the wrong direction.

I clear my throat. Multiple times. He has to sense my unease because that smirk of his is on full blast. Goodness. This is why I jumped into bed with him, why it was my idea. All he has to do is set his intense expression on me with a mirthful look in his eyes and I'm a goner.

I fight it back, brushing my hands down my thighs. They're sweaty. Clammy. I'm losing control of everything I wanted to say to him and I can barely bring myself to regret it.

Pretending to ignore everything he's said to me, I say, "I just wanted you to know I didn't regret it. I'm sorry if me walking out that morning hurt you."

His smirk widens to full-out grin and he leans back in his chair, arms on the rests, knees spread wide. His head tilts to the left and his simple, controlled movements almost do me in. I imagine clamoring across the couch to sit in his lap so he can hold me, comfort me, slide his hands to my backside or up beneath my shirt.

It's a disturbing visual, one I can't shake, and by the way my breathing increases, I know Braxton can tell. I'm doing a poor job of hiding my attraction to him.

I could blame it on hormones except I think it's likely to be a complicated case of lust.

"Forgiven," Braxton says. "And for what it's worth. I'm glad you're keeping the baby. Even more happy you came to tell me about it."

His words are a balm to all my nerves. He's implied it, he's shown he's a man who takes care of the mess we've made, but to behappy? My frazzled nerves pop, loosening all the tightness I've been holding for weeks while I debate what to tell him, ifto tell him.

“Thank you,” I breathe. My hand slides to my stomach, my swollen area that is pressing against my barely held together jeans. His gaze drops, eyes narrow, one hand curls around the armrest until the white knuckles are definitely visible beneath his ink.

“You should get some rest,” he says, and this time, I can’t argue. Something odd and fiery is in the air, something I remember, but even thinking something can happen between us now is ridiculous.

I’m just the girl he knocked up, the new responsibility, and while I’m thrilled he wants to be a part of this baby’s life, Braxton and I are not awe. I need to remember that.

“Good night,” I whisper, standing and giving Lucy a final ear rub as I move. “Sleep tight, Lucy.”

She makes a purr that sounds more like a cat than the large and fierce-looking dog she already is, and I swear, as I head to my bed, I hear Braxton call Lucy to him and say, “You like all that attention, sweet girl? Yeah, I would too.”

## Chapter 6



Braxton

Sleep doesn't come easy. Between the reality of the last twenty-four hours crashing around me, along with the girl I've wanted—dreamed of—sleeping in my apartment, as well as trying to sleep on the couch so I can hear Cara if she needs me, I'm up and showered and ready for the morning by six.

We have too many things to talk about, and I'll rest once we get them settled. First thing, her doctor in the emergency room yesterday suggested she contact her regular obstetrician to set up an appointment and verify everything is okay. We didn't even have time yesterday to talk about her doctor's appointments, if she wants me to come with her, or who her doctor is.

I want to know all of it, and not just the pregnancy.

I want to know more about Cara. Her apology yesterday still shakes me, and I'm trying not to think about the fact she'd never had a one-night stand before. Isn't it a rite of passage for everyone in college these days? My amount of one-nighters is uncountable. They're easier than relationships. And she certainly wasn't a virgin the night we were together. She was way too talented to be pure.

There's something inside of me that makes me want to pound my chest in victory and issue a battle cry at the idea Cara, someone who doesn't use sex for sport but for connection and passion, chose me.

It means she wanted more than just my dick, something I'd been certain was all she wanted when she fled the room like the hounds of hell were chasing her.

Now things are different. She could only have reacted the way she did last night if she still wanted me, if the night meant just as much to her as it did to me.

I don't just want this baby, I want a family.

She's going to be the one to give it to me while I work my ass off to give her everything she needs.

Reaching beneath the collar of my shirt, I tug on the ridiculous necklace I've worn since I was eight. Irvin and I bought it at an arcade, one of those stupid penny presser things. I carried it in my pocket for months until I lost it, but Irvin had found it, drilled a hole in it and slid it onto a chain so I wouldn't lose it again.

I take it off to sleep and that's it.

I press the faux-gold coin to my lips. "This is for all you've done for me, man."

Like always when I think of Irvin and everything he gave me, not just his investments, but saving me from a life on the streets, my chest burns.

Yet it's rarely in as much pain as it was when he first passed.

It's strength. Confidence. I might have been sired by a heroin addict who took off as soon as he got off, but Irvin is the man who made me. And Irvin Teller is a thousand times the man I can only ever hope to be.

I know exactly what he'd say to me if he were standing in front of me. He'd clasp my hand, pull me to his chest, and he'd wrap me into one of his comforting bear hugs, all while whispering, "Go and get your girl, young man, and make sure you treat her right."

“Will do, old man.” I kiss it again and slip the necklace back beneath my shirt.

In the kitchen, I grab crackers and 7 Up for Cara and head to her room. I’ve already let Lucy out more than once this morning and as soon as we came back, she trotted to Cara’s doorway, and lay down across the threshold.

I’ve checked on her several times and she hasn’t moved, but when I round the corner this time she’s sitting, nose almost pressed to the door, and a tinny whine escapes her.

“What is it?” I ask.

I haven’t had Lucy long, but I’m more than amazed at how she wants to be close to Cara. Dogs are good judges of people and even without Cara’s apology last night, I was halfway to letting it go based on Lucy’s reaction alone.

As Lucy continues to whine and scratch the door, my steps speed. Her ears are pulled back, on alert, and I’ve long since learned dogs know more than we think they do. Shoving aside manners and politeness, I open the door to Cara’s room expecting to see her still sleeping. Instead, her covers are thrown back and the bed is empty.

The bathroom door is closed but the light is on, coming from beneath the door and eventually, so is the vivid sound of retching.

“Shit.” I drop the crackers and pop on the dresser and move double-time to the bathroom, where I find Cara’s hunched over the toilet.

Lucy is behind me, whining, but it’s Cara who has my full attention.

I crouch behind her and gather her long, thick chocolate-colored hair in my fist. “You’re okay,” I tell her.

“Oh my God. Go away.”

She's not currently puking but her arms are crossed over the toilet seat, her head resting on her forearms.

She reaches up and flushes, then settles back to her spot.

“What do you need?”

“Privacy.”

She moans, and I can’t help but bite back a laugh. “It’s not like I haven’t seen it before.”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me.”

My hand runs up and down her back slowly, hoping to soothe her, and eventually she pushes off the toilet and rests on her heels.

She’s still gripping the seat with her hands, but with every movement, she seems to grow more confident that she’s done.

“Okay?”

“Besides humiliated you’ve seen me puke again, yeah, I’m okay.”

“Come on.” I hold out my hand for her to take, and when she puts her palm in mine, I lift her to her feet. “I was bringing you a drink and crackers. Perhaps if I’d thought about it sooner, you wouldn’t be here.”

She turns and gives me a tired, worn-out smile. “I agree. This is your fault.”

Not exactly what I meant, but I’ll play along if it means she keeps smiling at me. “Of course it is.”

I settle her on the bed. While she nibbles on a cracker, I go back to the bathroom, clean up the floor and counter, and bring her the antinausea pills. “Have you taken this yet?”

“No. And I’m sure if I had, it’d be flushed by now.”

She’s barely looking at me. Stupid. She has no reason to be embarrassed around me. I’ve seen more of her body than she probably has. “I’ll let you get ready. Is there anything you need?”

“Pants to wear home? Have any women’s yoga pants lying around?”

Her smile tells me she’s teasing, but I’m not stepping on that trap. If I want to keep my dick, the answer to that question is alwaysno.Fortunately, I’d be honest in saying it too.

“I have some sweats you can wear.” They’ll swim on her, though.

She must be thinking the same thing because she says, “That’s not necessary. I can wear the jeans I had on yesterday. They’re just uncomfortable.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, but thank you.”

She nibbles on another cracker and I wait until she’s taken her pill and sipped her drink and she still hasn’t looked at me.

Being embarrassed is one thing.

Avoiding me is something else and it burns something painful in my gut.

I can chalk it up to us being mostly strangers, but I've heard enough about her over the last couple of years to get the general idea that's she's pretty damn cool.

That was the opinion I had of her at the wedding as well—down-to-earth, slightly crazy in a good way, full of fun. She was definitely sexy as hell. Yet, since she walked into MadInk she's had one hand up, like she wants me involved in this pregnancy but doesn't want me getting too close.

Well, too damn bad for her. I haven't fought my way out of the slums only to become successful enough to open a half-dozen-and-counting tattoo parlors, some of which have been shown on cable network reality shows, to stop fighting for what I want now.

—

I find a rare spot of street parking and pull to a stop in front of Cara's worn-down old building in the Pearl District. This makes no sense. She alluded to her family's wealth yesterday talking about her dad's career, but Dan has also mentioned her parents are crazy rich. And she's living in a crumbling apartment that looks barely habitable?

The question *You live here?* burns on my tongue but tastes sour in my mouth.

She said it to me yesterday, and I refuse to talk to her the same way or risk throwing it back in her face. The ride was quiet, filled with stilted conversation until I turned on my Jazz Rock playlist. Usually it helps calm me, but there's been nothing calm flowing through my veins.

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“This is it?” I ask, taking the crappy tone out of my voice.

“Yep. Home sweet home.” Her eyes glance to the top level of the five-story building and her shoulders sink, as if the thought of walking up that many stories is already daunting.

She lives in a shithole. Across the street, two homeless men are huddled in the overhang to another building’s entrance. More are wandering up and down the street, most likely trying to decide where to hang for the day. Homeless people are common in Portland, and typically harmless. Hell, I never hesitate to either feed them or hand them a few dollars.

Knowing Cara lives where so many congregate settles like a rock in my stomach. She has to be careful. She’s pregnant with my child.

I’m three seconds from throwing my gearshift into drive and taking her back to my place when she opens the door. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Wait.” I climb out and close my door at the same time she does. “Let me walk you up.”

She shifts her gaze to the building and back to me, nodding. “Okay.”

Finally, accepting help unwillingly but without the argument. I could get used to this.

It’s at least a step in the right direction.



I meet her at her side of the car, and take the small bag I gave her to carry her medicine and some extra crackers I'd insisted she bring for the short ride.

Following her to the door, I look over my shoulder and notice the attention we've received—along with my BMW—and glare at the few men eyeing us. Damn it.

Her living here makes absolutely no sense. She has to at least have some money.

"What floor do you live on?" I ask, as we take stairway after stairway. Turn after turn.

She looks at me over her shoulder. Already her healthy color from yesterday is fading.

Shit.

I move quickly, wrap her in my arms, and lift her.

Hands fly to my shoulders. "What are you doing?"

"What's it look like?" For good measure, I flash her a wink. Damn, this feels good. Other than yesterday when she was passed out, there have been more times I remember enjoying her in my arms. I will those memories away before my dick springs to life like a teenager having his first glance of Dad's stolen Playboys. "What floor?"

"Top. Fifth floor."

"Not to sound like a dick, but how have you been doing all these stairs with being so sick?"

“Slowly.”

The smile she was wearing disappears and I do feel like a dick. Something must have happened to me when we were in the hospital and I was watching fluids get pumped into her thin frame.

I’m protective of her. She has my child inside of her and hell if I’m letting anything happen to either of them. The fierce need to force her back in the car and return to my place returns. There’s plenty of room for both of us. I even have a spare for a baby’s nursery. Hell, I’m even considering what fucking color to paint the baby’s bedroom walls and I haven’t touched a single wall since I moved in...when she stops me and I set her on her feet.

She opens the door and waves me in but I freeze at the threshold.

“Holy shit. Did you get robbed?”

## Chapter 7

Cara

“No, I didn’t get robbed.” I look around the one-room studio apartment just to make sure, but everything looks to be right where I left it, and I inwardly cringe. This isn’t the first time I’ve been embarrassed around Braxton, but I thought we’d be on level footing. I mean, how much can a tattoo parlor owner make? And I don’t care about the money, or how much of it he has, I’ve just been around so much of it in excess my entire life that part of his original appeal was he was sonormal.

Now, he’s living in an amazing penthouse, just as rich as every other guy I’ve dated. Who cares that my apartment is the size of a shoebox with my bed being a couch that pulls out and my clothes and art supplies are crammed into one room?

And, well, it could look like I was robbed because I'm not the tidiest person in the world. All my belongings are scattered, literally, over every single square inch of the apartment, including the floor. But, hey, maximizing storage space in a teeny-tiny rental is difficult on the best of days, and I'm saving for my future plans.

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Which I now have to change. And that's been overwhelming to think about.

I certainly don't need his judgment about where I live, and the irony of that isn't lost on me.

I kick several pairs of shoes out of the way and turn to Braxton, still standing in the doorway. "Thank you for the ride home."

His black eyes narrow, scanning the room. They bounce back to me and land with a ferocious scowl. "You're not staying here."

"Excuse me?"

"You can't stay here. It's too small. What are you going to do when you have our kid here?"

I should probably start planning for that. My apartment is so small I have no idea how I'll fit a crib in. I shrug. "I'll figure it out."

He flashes me a look like he's just stepped in a steaming pile of dog crap.

"Pack your shit. You're moving in with me."

What? He has to be kidding. "No! Why?"

"Because this place is a shithole in an unsafe neighborhood. You can barely walk up the stairs right now and you've been sick. You can't stay here alone and there's no

place to put him or anything he'll need, like a crib." His eyes bounce around the room again. "Where do you even sleep?"

His last question is spewed out like a vicious whip.

I point to the couch before I understand why I'm explaining myself to him. How dare he think he can boss me around. "The couch pulls out and it's plenty comfortable. It'll be fine."

"Good God. You can't raise him like this—without a car to get around and walking five flights of stairs. How are you going to manage him with a stroller or diapers or groceries?"

He's shaking his head.

My heels dig into the carpet. Him him him. Since when did our baby become a boy?

I curl my fingers around the door and lean toward him. "What if it's not a him, Braxton?"

His head jerks back. "What?"

"You keep calling the baby a him. What if it's a her?"

"I don't understand the question."

Gah! Men are so dense.

"I mean. What makes you suddenly think it's a boy? And what if it's a girl? Would you still be this bossy? Or even want it?"

Face paling, he looks like he's the pregnant one with severe morning sickness.

"Holy—" He shakes his head rapidly. "Are you kidding me? I didn't mean anything by it. Do you really think I'm that big of an asshole? I'm trying to take care of you. Of both of you."

His expression is so shocked, so hurt, I'm unable to form words. I don't even know where this sudden rage is coming from.

Instead, he takes my silence as an answer. "Wow. Okay then." His shoulders drop and he runs a hand firmly down his face. "I'll see you at the doctor's appointment on Tuesday. Get some rest and make sure you take your medicine."

He grabs the doorknob, pulling the door from my hand, and I stumble forward, barely catching myself before he slams it closed. His heavy footsteps echo down the hall until he hits the top step and I'm still left, staring at the door.

I want to run after him. Talk to him. Why is it every conversation we have ends in an argument when for one weekend, we got along so splendidly?

But the sudden movement of throwing open the door and starting to charge into the hall churns my stomach.

I do an about-face, run to my bathroom, and barely make it before I empty the contents of the meager breakfast Braxton had made for me.

“You have to apologize to him, Cara. I hate to say it, but I’m totally on Braxton’s side on this one.”

I eye my best friend, chilling with a glass of Prosecco on my recently cleaned-up couch. I know without a doubt she’s absolutely right. Whatever came over me left me as soon as I cleaned up my most recent round of morning sickness.

My shoulders heave with a knowing sigh. “I know. He was just so bossy, I don’t even know what came over me. And it isn’t like the entire weekend has been normal.”

And I feel even more crappy considering thirty minutes after Braxton left, Jenna showed. She’s spent the entire day helping me clean—doing most of it while demanding I rest—and taking care of me.

And why?

Because Braxton the Saint called her. I’m not sure it’s possible for the guy to get any nicer when I’ve been nothing but a raving lunatic.

My hand settles on my surprisingly settled stomach, and my gaze drifts lustfully back to Jenna’s Prosecco. Drinking alcohol in front of your pregnant best friend should be grounds for dismissal.

“It’s also not Braxton’s fault you’re on a nine-month trip to Hormonal Crazy Town. Cut the guy some slack.”

“A nine-month what?” I glare at her, already hating that so much of my life is uncontrollable.

Jenna laughs off my warning glare.

“Come on, I’ve read *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*.”

“You’ve read—”

“Well, yeah, haven’t you? I mean, my best friend’s pregnant. I figured I need to know what’s going on.”

I toss my head back into the couch and press the heel of my palms into my eyes. I’ve managed to pull up a due date calculator and call my midwife, but that’s about all I’ve done. “Gosh, no. I haven’t read a thing. I’m totally failing at this mom thing!” A pillow smacks my hands and I throw it into my lap, glaring at Jenna. “What?”

“Stop all the negative talk. You’re going to be an amazing mom. And you’re an incredible woman. You have to stop listening to all the self-doubt your parents spoon-fed you. I wouldn’t be friends with a loser, Cara.” She sips her Prosecco and wiggles the flute in the air. “I’m too cool for that.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Well, learn to stop, and get the books or get online. And when you’re ready, apologize to Braxton.”

I throw the pillow back at her, almost smiling when it hits the glass in her hand.

“When did you get so wise?”

“When I became an old married woman.”



She waves her blindingly sparkling rock in the air and I laugh.

We change the topic from my pregnancy to her work as an interior decorator and hours later, when she leaves after one hundred assurances I'll be fine, I send a text to Braxton, apologizing for losing my mind on him.

But it doesn't matter, because he never replies.

## Chapter 8

Cara

I've been on pins and needles the last few days, checking my phone an exceedingly huge number of times, and every time I see Braxton hasn't sent a text, a small lump has formed in the pit of my stomach. I can't even describe how horrible I feel for the rotten things I've done and said to him, and the fact he hasn't accepted my latest apology has worry niggling in my mind at all hours of the day and night.

Gone are my erotic memories of the way he touched me. They've now been replaced with fear he won't be here, that he won't come and he'll walk away, not only from me, but our child. And through all of it, I've done a lot of thinking, trying to determine the answer to the question he asked me multiple times.

What do you want from me? Why are you telling me?

It's not because I wanted him to know he was going to be a dad. It's not because I want him to be a part of his baby's life.

It's because I want him to be a part of mine. Which is the most terrifying thought I've had yet. It puts my heart on the line, it makes me risk my own safety...it's forcing me to follow what Jimmy's dying dream for me was...Live, Cara. Live for both of us. Be

true to you.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

Tears blur my vision as I walk around the corner of my midwife's office building. It's a plain, brown brick building with peeling and chipped bricks on the corners, completely nondescript and unimpressive. Other than the sign stuck to the entry glass doors, I never would have known this was a medical office. The first time I came here, I almost turned around and left, not from nerves, but from terror that the inside would be just as unimpressive.

Instead, the office is small, but bright and warm, and even though it's only my third appointment, it already feels like home with the comforting brown microfiber couches and potted plants. There's a warmth in the air mingled with a gentle scent of lavender.

As I pull open the door, expecting to inhale the same calm aroma, I pull to an immediate stop when Braxton's head lifts and our gazes meet. His expression gives me nothing. I don't know whether to sigh in relief that he's here, or arm myself for a battle.

He's sitting on one of the few couches, a gray knitted hat in his large, inked hands, knees spread, worn jeans fitting him perfectly down to his scuffed brown boots. I take him in all in a matter of seconds, startling when I hear my name called.

"Good morning, Cara."

I turn abruptly from Braxton and face the receptionist.

"Hey, Katie, how are you?"

Her shoulder-length light brown hair swishes as she tilts her head to the side. “I think that’s what I’m supposed to be asking you.”

“I’m good. Better in the last few days.”

“That’s good. Pam told me you had quite the weekend.”

I fight against the urge to look at Braxton. “It wasn’t my best yet.”

It was one of my worst and not just because of the excessive puking.

Katie’s fingers clickety-clack on the keyboard and she grins at me when she’s done. Her smile might be what sealed the deal for me in keeping this small midwife practice instead of switching to a larger OB office with more than ten doctors. They’re not just personal here, they truly care, and I really, really need to feel that right now.

“I’ll let Pam know you’re here. Have a seat.”

“Thank you,” I murmur. I turn and even though I’d like to hide, to take another seat in the small office, as far away from Braxton as I can get, I slide onto the same couch as him, sitting close to the middle. I’m close enough to get a whiff of his cologne, not close enough to have him feel like I’m invading his personal space.

“Hey,” I say lamely, sitting down and wrapping my wool coat tighter around my waist. The weather is gloomy and brutal and they’ve been forecasting days of rain. The skies have been cloudy and it’s been so completely depressing every time I glance outside my window, I haven’t been able to paint for a week. Although some of that might be my attitude as well.

“You’re feeling better?” Braxton asks. His grip tightens around his hat like he’s

strangling it, but it's his eyes that snag my attention. The dark, rich color in them, the thick black lashes rimming his eyes, curling up. He has eyes that women spend thousands of dollars a year on products for to make them look almost as good as his natural ones.

"I am. Thanks for asking."

"I got your text."

My lips press together, holding back a snippy comment, and I turn away. "I see."

"I think after this, we should talk."

Talk. Of course. If we were dating, I'd know a breakup was coming by the defeat in his voice. "Sure," I finally say. "Yeah, of course."

"Good."

Goodness, it's not possible for us to be any more awkward and I peer at the door, willing Pam's assistant, Kim, to walk through and call my name.

When it doesn't happen, I watch the second hand of the clock above the door rotate in a full circle, the minute feeling like an hour. I turn to Braxton and smile hesitantly. "I'm glad you're here. Thanks for coming."

"Yeah?" His head is cocked to the side, eyes on me, and at the edges they crinkle as his lips lift into a smile. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Good," I reply.

"Good."

His smile widens. My cheeks flush at the sight of its beauty, and I turn my head away, shaking it and laughing nervously. “This is strange.”

“We’ll get through it.”

I only hope he's right.

---

I'm sitting on the exam table, fully clothed, with Braxton standing next to me. Pam has done all her preliminary checks, letting me know my hCG levels are strong, and we've talked about the weekend, about the records she has from the hospital visit. Both Braxton and I have answered her questions, and her encouraging smile when I tell her I'm only puking when I feel my stomach becoming empty instead of all day gives me hope everything will be okay. She's even written me a different prescription for antinausea meds, a new form of tablet that dissolves under the tongue. The pills I'd had were small but difficult to swallow, and I'm almost excited to get the new script filled.

At least I was, until she told me she wanted to check the baby's heartbeat.

"We can't do an external one?" I ask, choking and my skin paling. I glance nervously at Braxton, who has absolutely no idea why the idea of hearing the heartbeat with an internal monitor might make me nervous.

"We can," Pam replies. Her short but crimped curly blond hair bounces on her shoulders as she smiles. "But you're still early enough that sometimes it can be difficult. I think it'd be easier, more reassuring for you, to do an internal check."

Internal. Right.

"I'll give you a few moments to disrobe."

My cheeks burn as she gives me a reassuring pat on the knee and leaves the room. I came to confirm the pregnancy and at my first appointment, I told Pam the dad didn't know yet. The second appointment, she seemed almost surprised I didn't bring him with me. So her surprise at seeing Braxton might be because she believed I was alone, or she's swooning over all his exposed ink and a jaw meant for cutting granite.

But now that I'm alone with Braxton, and I'm supposed to disrobe in front of him, I feel like vomiting in a way that has nothing to do with pregnancy.

"I can leave," Braxton says, sensing my unease.

"This is silly," I say. "I mean, I've been naked in front of you, right? You've seen me—"

"I want you to be comfortable."

Goodness, I'm a wreck. "No, I am, it's just, an internal check isn't my favorite, and, well, now I'm getting naked and you're here and want to talk and God, I can't stop rambling and I'm so sorry and—"

Big, strong, and warm hands clasp my cheeks and Braxton is there, in front of me, bending down. He's inches away and his presence and his touch snap my mouth closed as I gawk at him.

And then, he's not just watching me, he's leaning forward, pressing his lips to mine, and I'm so shocked by his touch and the feel of him and the taste of him, my lips part, my eyes pop open, and his tongue slides out, sweeping along my upper lip before he's pulling back, separating, ending our kiss way too soon.

And he's smiling. Full out, all white teeth, dark eyes glimmering in amusement while I gape at him. My heart is beating so fast I fear a heart attack is on the horizon.



“What was that?”

“I thought if I kissed you, you’d calm down.”

He couldn’t be more wrong. My hand moves to my chest, the frenetic pace of my heartbeat is so severe I’m gasping. “That...well, that didn’t calm me down.”

“Yeah.” He grins. And winks. Winks at me! “It didn’t calm me down either. But Pam’s going to be back soon, so how about you get ready without the freak-out, okay?”

His hands are still on my cheeks. And then they’re sliding to my neck, to my shoulders where he squeezes in the most reassuring and comforting way possible. “I’ll turn around.”

Right. I still have to take my pants and underwear off. “Okay.”

He leans toward me again, presses his lips to my forehead and then he’s gone, giving me his back, and even though he’s wearing a leather coat, I can tell by his stance that he’s not nearly as comfortable as he’s pretending to be.

I quickly take everything off and drape the paper sheet over my lap, leaving my socks on, and when I’m ready, the edges of the sheet tucked under my thighs and backside, Pam knocks on the door.

“Ready?” she calls as she’s already pushing open the door.

“Yup.” I sound like I’m about ready to croak, and Braxton’s deep, rumbling chuckle worsens rattled nerves. He kissed me!

I raise my hand to my mouth and as my fingertips press my lips, they’re taken away,

gripped in Braxton's warm hold. He smiles down at me knowingly and I force my attention on Pam.

She pulls the internal monitor out of the drawer, along with a bottle of lubricant and a condom, and Braxton's grip on my hand turns almost bone-crushing.

“Is that—”

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“Yup.” I cut him off.

“Um.”

“Now you see why I wanted the external one,” I mutter quietly.

I can't look at him. My cheeks are on fire, and for some absolutely insane reason, other parts of my body are warming and this should not be happening at my midwife's office.

“So,” Pam says, turning around and back to business. Except it's hard to take her seriously as she waves what looks like a massive vibrator in her hand. “We're going to insert this inside of you.”

“Holy shit,” Braxton mutters. And God, kill me. Please kill me now.

If Pam hears him, she ignores him as she steps toward me, and pulls out a set of stirrups from beneath the table. “I'm going to need you to lie down, Cara, and spread your legs, and slip down to the edge of the bed for me.”

“I feel like I've heard this before,” I say, unable to stop myself. My filter has evaporated along with my self-respect and all of this is so absolutely humiliating.

Pam pauses, glances at me and then at Braxton and nods, understanding. But I swear, as her gaze sweeps down Braxton's arms, even she blushes. Which is great...my midwife thinks my non-boyfriend baby daddy is hot.

“I feel like I’ve said this before,” Braxton says, and both of our eyes whip to him. My gracious. He’s smiling, shoulders shaking like he’s holding back the world’s most boisterous laugh, and it’s all I can do to not kill him while he’s standing there, glancing between the monitor-slash-vibrator and my spread legs and I can’t hold it in anymore.

“This is embarrassing.”

Pam is back to business, already spreading the condom over the phallic-shaped instrument, and then she drizzles on the lubricant.

Braxton’s breath brushes over my cheeks. His dark locks tickle my temple as he whispers, “I feel like I should be offering to help with this.”

“Shut up,” I grit, my stomach muscles clenching from trying not to die or laugh. “This isn’t funny.”

“Oh. This is the funniest thing I’ve ever seen, I’m not going to lie.”

My fingers squeeze his hand and Pam is in front of me. She holds a small black box in her other hand and the tip of the wand against my center. “I’ll go slow, and it might be cold, okay?”

“Yup.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Braxton whispers. “I don’t know whether to be terrified or turned on right now, Cara.”

“Shut up,” I all but growl at him but then the monitor is inside me.

Based on Pam’s pressed-together, smiling lips, she’s pretending to pay us absolutely

no attention as her gaze is fixed on the device in her hand and she clicks a button and...

Tha-thump thump thump tha-thump thump thump.

My vision goes blurry immediately as soon as I hear the comforting, whispered trampling. It sounds like horses racing inside my abdomen and Braxton's hand grips mine so tightly my fingers might break.

"There's that healthy baby." Pam smiles at me, softly and kindly and genuinely. This is why I absolutely adore her.

I desperately needed this reassurance.

"Is that it?" Braxton asks.

I nod, my head moving rapidly, and I turn to him, compelled to see him, and when I do, my own heart rate kicks into high gear. "It's the baby."

"My God." His eyes are wide and he swipes his hair off his forehead, staring at the monitor and my covered stomach area and back to me and I'm a trembling shaking mess as I see tears fill his own eyes and there's nothing we can say. Nothing we can say to each other because this sound...this gloriouswhooshing,galloping sound is the most beautiful thing I've heard in my entire life.

"We made a baby." A tear falls down Braxton's cheek and he leans down, brushing his lips over my cheek, and his voice is so gruff, so broken and beautiful. "Thank you. Thank you so much, Cara."

Chapter 9

Braxton

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

“The baby is strong,” the midwife, Pam, says, but I’m hardly listening to her.

I can’t stop holding Cara’s hand, grinning at her. I’ve had the weekend to get used to the idea of becoming a father, and it hasn’t been easy. In addition to Cara’s attitude last weekend when I was only trying to be nice, I’m on my own emotional roller coaster.

My dad took off.

My mom overdosed on drugs when I was in college, a habit she’d kicked and been free of since I was born, but apparently, from what I last heard from her, the loneliness and empty bank accounts we always had became too much for her.

And Irvin. He’s the only adult I’ve ever had in my life who was certain I could make something of myself and get out of the crappy neighborhood. His death provided me the financial means to make all the dreams I had come true, dreams he championed.

So I’m not exactly sure how in the hell I’m supposed to be a dad when my own DNA is sorely lacking in parental involvement, but I finally figured, if I can be a third of the man Irvin was, someone who would see a punk-ass preteen and take him in, and provide all the love and support he could ever need, then I’m sure as hell certain I can do it for my own child—boyorgirl. I just have to get Cara to see that.

But this...this moment, with both of our eyes filled with tears and our cheeks stained, this moment is everything.

I don’t see the woman I shagged at a wedding.

I don't see the woman who puked all over my office or passed out in my arms.

I just see her, the mother of my child, and she's never been more stunningly beautiful. Her face is soft despite the tears, showing a vulnerability she hasn't yet shown me.

For the rest of the appointment, I listen quietly while Pam finishes her checkup. I leave the room when it's time for Cara to get changed and I meet her in the front waiting room where we schedule her next appointment.

For a brief moment, I see the hesitancy return to Cara's eyes when she schedules it, checking with me to see if it works with my schedule, but what she doesn't know is that there's absolutely nothing inconvenient about any of this.

Sure, it's happened well before I was ready, and absolutely unprepared, but life wouldn't be life if it didn't throw you a curveball every once in a while.

It keeps you on your toes, keeps life exciting, and I am absolutely, one thousand percent excited for this next roller coaster of an adventure.

"So," Cara says, tucking the appointment reminder card into her small purse. "You said you wanted to talk?"

"Yeah. Can I take you to lunch?"

"Actually"—she smiles, that beautiful soft smile, and the palm of her hand flattens against her stomach—"food sounds really, really good. Maybe a place with burgers? Or ribs? Or a really huge steak?"

Her eyes glaze over like she's imagining the largest New York strip in the world, and I bite back a laugh.



I know just the place to take her.

---

Phil's is a classic diner. A throwback to the fifties where they make real milkshakes and have not only the best burgers I've tasted along the entire Northwest coast—an endeavor I've put a lot of time over the years in discovering—but over the years they've widened the scope of their menu, and now grill a mean steak. What I like even more than the food is the atmosphere. Phil's was constructed to look like an old train car. Narrow and long, there's one small row of booths covered in bright red vinyl along the windows and then a bar running the length of the car where the stools are covered with the same vinyl. Behind that is the kitchen, where you can always hear the cooks shouting orders at one another. The place isn't what I had in mind when I told Cara I wanted to talk to her. It's loud and rambunctious, the two servers skating by us on roller skates across the black-and-white-tiled floor. Add in the shouting from the kitchen and the fervent "Order up!" and it's not the best place for a private, serious conversation.

But more important than talking, I want Cara to know me, and nothing says *me* like taking her to the place Irvin always brought me on Sunday afternoons for lunch. We're even sitting at the table where we spent most of the meals. On the metal edge of the table facing Cara's side, my initials are carved, something I did when I was twelve and Irvin wasn't looking. Had he ever noticed it, he'd have made me pay to repair it.

This place and this booth hold sentimental value to me and it seems the perfect place to bring Cara when she mentioned a burger earlier. Sitting in a booth that's heavy with memories of my favorite person in the world only makes sense considering I'm still overly emotional after hearing my child's heartbeat for the first time.

Cara still hasn't lost the glow that blossomed on her cheeks when we heard the

heartbeat. The confirmation that everything is well with the baby is, I think, exactly what we both needed. She also seems to have her appetite back, since she's suggested getting almost everything on this menu. Hopefully, her meds are working and she won't be tossing it all over the floorboards of my car in an hour.

And for the first time since she walked into my tattoo shop last Friday, I can finally breathe without feeling like I'm being strangled every time I inhale.

"Hey, sugars," the waitress says, snapping her gum and rolling to a quick stop on her skates. "Y'all decided what you want to order?"

Cara flashes me a grin that can only be described as amused, although whether it's from the diner or her impending order, I have no idea. I nod at her to go first.

"I'll have the double bacon cheeseburger with a salad, extra French dressing, please. And I'll also have an order of onion strings for an appetizer. Oh, may I also have a cup of your chicken noodle soup? Please?"

The waitress, Marissa based on her name tag, glances at Cara as she scribbles. "Before or with the meal?"

"With, please. Oh, and a double chocolate fudge shake too. Large."

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I can't help it. I smother my mouth with a choking sound but it escapes as my laugh rumbles through me. This girl just ordered more food than I did when I played high school basketball. She has absolutely no idea how large these burgers are, or the fact that all the food is served on fourteen-inch silver platters that could hold a pizza.

Her cheeks pinken and I shake my head. "Sorry. That's just a lot."

"Well," she huffs in the most adorable way. "I'm eating for two."

"Or six." I wink at her, showing her I'm teasing, and when the waitress turns to me, I order a regular cheeseburger. It's less than I usually order, but I'm betting Cara will leave approximately eighty percent of her own food untouched.

"So," she says, once Marissa skates away. "You wanted to talk?"

Where there was a mischievous excitement in her eyes when she approached me at the wedding, asking me to keep the night going with the same tone of voice, now there's still a haze of uncertainty in her blue eyes. It's a look I want to shake from her, because she seems so scared of me, so hesitant to ask me for anything. It's ridiculous. What she doesn't know yet is that I have a feeling I'll give her everything she desires without question or thought.

Or, I can remind her of the kiss we shared. I might have done it to quiet her down but between the kiss and the feel of her beneath my hands again, and then the cock-shaped instrument that went inside of her, I've been sporting a semi for the last hour just thinking about filling her again, but this time with something more substantial—me.

I'm not going to sit here and lie to the girl, or beat around the bush. I could wax poetic about how I think we should get to know each other, become friends, and then hope I can slide my way into her heart, but I'm rarely anything but blunt, and I don't see the point in changing now.

I wait while she takes a sip of her water, the glass trembling slightly in her hand showing her nerves. The last thing I want is that sip of ice water to end up sprayed out of her mouth and ending up all over the table.

She sets the glass down, and I wait no more.

"I think we should date and move in together."

## Chapter 10

Cara

My hands grab on to the metal and chipped-Formica table in front of me like an earthquake has suddenly hit the diner. It might have. That's the only way to describe the crazy force shaking me.

"I'm sorry, you what?"

"I want to date you. And I want you to move in with me."

He holds no shame or embarrassment in his gaze, none of the bossy arrogance he used in my apartment when he saw the poor little dump I live in. Instead, there's something else there, a heat that's been swirling around us since the first time we met.

It's the chemistry, the fact I can still practically feel his lips on mine from earlier, and

the ease with which we can tease each other—him better at it than me—that is what made it so easy to approach him the night of Jenna’s wedding reception and suggest the night not end quite yet.

Because it’s Braxton, and he cried without a hint of embarrassment when he heard our baby’s heartbeat, and as soon as I mentioned lunch and what I was currently craving, he took me immediately to a place I could tell is somewhere he loves, and not somewhere convenient. I know that because it took us thirty minutes to get here and we passed dozens of burger joints and steakhouses on the way.

And yeah, I’d love to date him, to be with him in that way we were months ago, but I’ve jumbled everything up in the last few days and he didn’t even manage to reply to my text of an apology. So there’s a lot of unanswered questions and now that there’s a baby on the way, jumping into a relationship because there’s a baby on the way doesn’t seem like the most responsible choice either.

“Why? Is it because you don’t like my home?”

“No. Can I be completely honest?”

I’m not quite sure I’m ready for his brand of honesty. Although secrets haven’t helped anything so far.

“Sure,” I say, my voice wobbling with fear. “Honesty sounds good.”

He leans forward, the sleeves of his long shirt are pushed up to his forearms and have I mentioned how perfectly his shirts always seem to fit over the curves and dips of his chest and biceps? He’s so beautiful that as he sets those forearms, all his brightly colored inked designs on such beautiful and manly display, I almost forget he’s about to throw me into another tailspin.

He drops his head, pummeling me with sharp determination in his eyes and a wicked tilt of his lips. “I want you. I wanted you the weekend of the wedding and I wanted you the next day and I was pissed you snuck out so I didn’t bother Dan for your number. While we might have cleared up that misunderstanding, it still pissed me off.”

I’m so stuck on the I want you and I wanted you it takes me a moment to process everything else he said. “Okay.”

The tilt of his lips curve up into an almost full grin. “I can see I’m shaking you up a little bit right now, but going slow has never been my thing. I see something I want and I don’t hesitate to go for it. I want to date you because I enjoyed our weekend together. I felt something, what, I’m not exactly sure, but I know it was so good I wanted to see you again. So that’s what I want to do. I want to see you outside doctor’s appointments, for dinner, a few movies, whatever else we can think of to do together.”

I want that. Goodness, I really want that too. I want it so badly I force my hands into my lap so I don’t reach across the table and cover his gorgeous, strong hands with mine and beg Please, yes, let’s do all of it and more.

He also isn’t kidding. He doesn’t go slow.

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I feel the urge to move at turtle speed, there's more to us dating than having a good time. What if we try it and it doesn't work out? Then we still have to raise a baby together with a failed relationship between us.

"What if we start as friends?" I suggest, trying to appease his need to speed through life with the force of a whirlwind and compromising.

"I'm not getting friend-zoned by you. I'm not risking that."

"Braxton," I say and then stop. I don't even know what to say, how to say it, how to toss my fears at him when he seems so certain about this—about us. I grab my water and take a few small sips, waiting until it settles down my throat. The chill from the ice does nothing to cool the warmth pulsing through my body at his words and determination.

I'm saved by having to say anything else when Marissa appears with my onion strings and soup. She slides everything onto the table, dropping off small plates and rolled utensils all the while, still snapping her gum. "Anything else I can getcha?"

"No," Braxton says, never once pulling his eyes off me. "I have everything I need."

I huff a laugh, shaking my head, and reach for a thin onion string and pop it into my mouth. "This is absurd," I say after I've swallowed and I'm pouring ketchup into a massive pile on the plate.

"Your appetite? Yeah, it's a bit absurd."

“Shut up,” I mutter, smiling while I say it. It’s not what I was talking about and we both know it, but I like the way he feels so free to tease me.

I dip into my overwhelmingly large appetizer and eat a few bites of soup. I’m already beginning to feel full and the entire time, Braxton is watching me with a mixture of amusement and seriousness. When I slide the onion string basket into the center of the table, he takes a few and we both munch quietly.

I want to date him. I wanted to see him again too after the wedding, I was just so embarrassed.

I want everything he’s offering besides the moving-in-together thing. It’s much too fast. If we date, I want to move forward at a natural pace, not feeling like I’m one of his fostered animals he takes in because they need help and a home.

And perhaps it’d be safer for me to say no, for us to remain friends. Two friendly parents who aren’t together have to be better than parents who can’t stand to be in the same room together. My priority is no longer me and my needs, our baby’s needs come first.

It’s that thought that has me changing my mind on everything. For the first time since I decided to move forward with this pregnancy and confess the truth to Braxton, I finally feel what Jenna’s been trying to tell me.

I’m going to be a great mom. I can do this. And because I have this new, settled confidence and hope, I figure...what the hell, I’ve promised Jimmy something too.

Live for us, Cara. Live the life I won’t be able to have. Follow your dreams. Grab hold of them, please, promise me this.

I wash down the emotion thinking of Jimmy always brings and face Braxton.



His eyes meet mine and whatever he sees in my expression wipes away his grin.

“Cara—”

I cut him off.

“Is all of this because of the baby?”

“No.” His eyes slide to the left and he runs his hand across a hint of stubble that tells me he’s the kind of man who shaves frequently, but even twice a day wouldn’t keep his thick, black scruff away completely. “Okay,” he says, shaking his head and turning back to me. “Maybe a little. At least the moving-in part, but that’s because I want to take care of you. I don’t want to miss a thing about this baby or your pregnancy, and I don’t think I’m a jerk for not wanting to miss out on anything. Besides,” he says, and he gives me that teasing grin, “how can I run out and get you midnight cravings if I’m not around you at midnight?”

I can think of a few ways and those thoughts sear a heat to my chest before I can shake them off. It’s sweet. Too fast, but sweet.

It’s the sweetness that draws me in because he’s not the kind of guy who appears like he should be sweet, and yet it’s his kindness that pulled me in as soon as I met him. It took me approximately thirty seconds to see past the muscles and the sex-on-a-stick body and all that ink I wanted to lick all over the place. It’s his kindness and honesty that seal the deal now. At least with some limits.

“This Friday, the art gallery has a showing. Would you like to be my date?”

“Yes.” He nods and does what I wanted to do earlier. He reaches across the table, takes my hand in his and runs his thumb over my palm. “Yes, I would like to be your date.”

“Okay then.” I pop an onion into my mouth and nod. “Good.”

“And moving in with me?”

“Too soon. We can try dating, but not that.” I fumble with how to say it, not wanting to hurt him, but like I’ve already said, honesty is what we need right now. “I moved out on my own to prove to myself I can do it. I still need that, I guess.”

“Understood.” His hand is still holding mine, his thumb swishing back and forth along my palm and it’s such a small touch, but it’s not innocent. That tiny little swipe of his skin against mine sparks a sweet hot sensation and spreads it through my body. “Would I talk you into it if I tell you Lucy misses you?”

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“She does?” I smile. I liked his dog. I’ve never been able to have one and have always dreamed of having a pet. Mom said they smelled and made messes and she couldn’t be bothered with anything that would disrupt her perfectly ordered life or home.

“Every night I let her out of her kennel and she runs straight to the guest room. She whines so much when I take her out I eventually just put the kennel in there.”

“That’s...” Weird, I think, but I don’t say it. It makes my heart warm in a way I can’t remember it ever feeling. “I miss her too. But do you want me moving in with you just because I like your dog?”

I’m teasing him, and I hope he sees it. Based on the fact he doesn’t get upset, or annoyed, but smiles that heartbreakingly beautiful smile of his, I figure he gets it.

“No. I don’t want you to move in with me just because you like my dog. I want you to like me.”

I pull my hand from his slowly and regretfully, but while I’m trying to jump and reach for my dreams, small safe jumps are better than leaps. I smile at him, showing him what I’m not yet capable of saying, that I like him too, but not enough.

I dig into my soup.

“Friday,” Braxton says, sitting back in the booth. “We’ll start with Friday.”

He has a plan cooking in his eyes, something I’m sure I don’t want to know about, so

I nod my agreement and take slow, measured sips of my soup.

This is good. There's a chance we might be good, but I still hear the whispered voices of disapproval from my parents, and a rock settles deep in my stomach.

At some point, I'm not only going to have to tell them I'm pregnant, I'm going to have to introduce them to Braxton. I might have just climbed a significant hill, but I'm not sure the mountainous obstacle of Mr. and Mrs. Cliff Thompson is one we'll be able to scale unscathed.

But Friday. We can start with Friday.

## Chapter 11

Cara

Good morning. Feeling okay?

The phone dings from my bathroom counter where I'm getting ready for work. It's Friday, three days since I've seen Braxton, three days since I invited him to be my date for the gallery showing. We've been texting constantly, and always, my day starts with this same text from him.

I grin as I slide my thumb across the screen as another text comes in.

I'll pick you up at six tonight. Can't wait to see you.

My cheeks ache from the stretch of my smile and I type out a slew of texts I know Braxton wants to see.

I ate two crackers this morning and didn't puke. Yay! #Pregnancygoals

I'll be ready for you.

His reply is almost immediate, as it usually is. It appears that when Braxton told me on Tuesday he didn't want to miss a minute of my pregnancy, he wasn't the least bit joking. It feels strange to constantly have someone texting me, or calling as he sometimes does at night, just to see how I'm feeling. It feels really good too. My parents could hardly be bothered with Jimmy and me growing up. Our nanny Sasha was the one who picked us up from school when we had the flu and prayed for us before bed. My mom always seemed like us being children and getting the occasional flu or strep throat was more of an annoyance to her schedule. So while it's taking time to get used to Braxton checking in on me, I also keep smiling every time he does.

That's what I like to hear—about you being ready for me.

And congrats on the crackers. Hopefully you're on the tail end of morning sickness.

Goodness. Between caring for me and making it clear he wants me in a way he's already had me, Braxton is making it entirely difficult to take things slow.

As far as his hopes on the puking—a girl can dream. I spent most of yesterday afternoon puking at the gallery, reassuring Luca a million times that I was just fine. He's the owner, early thirties, a slim Italian man who's not only quite the playboy, but, well, he enjoys playing with boys. When I first met him, it wasn't exactly obvious that he was gay, and my heart squeezed a bit when his current monthly fling showed up and popped a kiss right on his lips in front of me. He's a good guy, an even better boss, giving me way too much flexibility over the last few weeks. Yesterday we were so busy with final preparations and verifying the catering and deliveries and artwork setup, as well as soothing the fragile and worried egos of the artist we're showing tonight, that I'd forgotten to eat lunch. Which meant my stomach, needing to always have something in it, revolted from my neglect.

Braxton wasn't thrilled when he called last night. I was already in bed at seven o'clock, tucked in and rewatching *Sons of Anarchy* on Netflix. He insisted on coming over to check on me.

I barely managed to hold him off, promising that tonight, I'd do something I'm still not entirely sure I'm ready to do.

I'm going back to his apartment after the show so he can make sure the same thing doesn't happen tonight or tomorrow morning.

To say I'm nervous about spending this night at his place again is a massive understatement, but at least this morning's lack of nausea helps me feel better. By the time I leave for work, it's the first time in weeks where I haven't felt like I'm dragging an additional thirty pounds behind me.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

I waltz into Gallio's Galleria a few minutes early. The bell chiming above the door behind me grabs Luca's attention immediately. He's at my desk at the entrance, leafing through the binder I prepare for all of his showings, and when he sees me, his eyes pop wide open.

"Cara, honey, what are you doing here?"

"Um. I work here."

He checks his shining gold watch and his thin black brows crinkle. "Yes, at eighty-three, and here it's only eight twenty-two." He lifts his head and looks even more confused. "I do not understand."

Shaking my head, I walk to him and playfully shove his shoulder. "I'm early. It's not the first time."

"Are you certain of this?"

I'm grinning now, silently laughing at this hottie of an Italian man who still carries the faintest of accents and proper language and shove him out of my way. Punctuality and I have never been the best of friends. "Don't you have work to do?"

"Ah, yes. Work, work, work. That's all you're concerned about. My question for you is, when do you play?"

He wiggles his black brows again, bouncing them up and down letting me know exactly what he's implying.

My hand drops to my stomach, a small pouch visible to me but most likely not to others. Mostly it appears like I've constantly eaten four too many egg rolls. It's not yet a cute pregnancy belly, just a bloated pouch. "I think I've played enough."

"Yes, of course." He rolls his eyes and strolls from my desk to pour me a cup of hot water. I've found hot water and lemon in the morning soothes my stomach. "And the man you play with is coming tonight, correct?"

Luca is hilarious and a big old ball of playful trouble. I've told him almost all about Braxton, holding back specific details, especially his looks. Mostly because Luca would be on that like white on rice, even if Braxton doesn't swing that way. Luca admires the beauty in people, and he's not afraid to show it. I just don't need to hear about what my eyes can see just fine all day long either.

"Yes, Luca, he's coming." He hands me my hot water and I take a small sip, testing the heat. "Thank you for this."

"My pleasure, beautiful Cara."

We get to work then, preparing for the deliveries coming later this afternoon. Originally we didn't need additional help in setting up the gallery, but now Luca is forcing me to be cautious about the weight I lift. He's hired two men to come and unload the tables and display walls where we'll hang the remaining artwork from our basement storage. Once they arrive, I spend the rest of the morning directing them to where they need to be set up. After they leave, I adjust the tables to the precise location to show the best.

Luca yells at me twice to stop the heavy lifting.

I shake my head and keep working. It's ridiculous how overprotective he's become since learning I'm having a baby.



Today, I'm smarter than yesterday, keeping a small bag of snack foods—wheat crackers, almonds, and raisins—nearby so I can snack off and on, whenever I get the urge. When lunchtime rolls around, I'm not only still feeling well, but we don't have much to do except adjust some of the artwork's showcase lighting and finish covering the food and display tables with some accessories.

I smooth out a tablecloth where the wine and champagne glasses will be set, right next to where the bar will be, when the door chimes.

I turn as Braxton waltzes in, holding two paper bags in one hand and tugging off his gray knitted hat with the other.

“Hi.” My hands slip down my hips, smoothing out my black dress pants just to give my hands something to do. “What are you doing here?”

He holds up the paper bags and walks toward me. “I brought you lunch today so you don't get sick.”

Heart. Melt. Puddle. Floor. My entire body seems to liquefy. He's a miraculously sweet man in the body of a gladiator and continues to throw me off course.

“Thank you. That was really nice of you.” I'm breathless. It's his fault. No one should be so nice and attractive. I don't know what to do with him.

“Not a problem.” His gaze takes a quick tour around the gallery, hesitating on some of the already displayed artwork before dropping back down to me. “This place is incredible. Did you do all this?”

“Um. Yeah, most of it, with Luca, the owner. Thanks.”

Free food delivered and compliments are too much for this hormonal girl to handle.

“Is there somewhere we can eat this?” he asks.

“You’re staying?” I can’t hide the further surprise in my voice and Braxton’s confidence slips for a moment.

“I’d planned on it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

Right. Of course. This is good. This is better than good. So why am I so nervous to share another meal with him? It's not our first. It's not even our second or third if you count the wedding weekend where we were sat close to each other. I'm being an idiot.

"No, no, it's fine. Of course you can stay. I'd like it."

"If you keep rambling," he says, leaning down low so his smile is bright enough to make me squint. He's so much taller than me, almost a full foot, and when he gets close and leans into me like this my body does strange things in reaction—like lean closer. "I'm going to have to kiss you again to get you to stop."

My mouth snaps closed and my teeth click together.

His grin turns wolfish.

"Well, well, well, who is this beautiful piece of canvas that's arrived in my gallery?" Luca's voice echoes in the wide-open building, bouncing off gleaming wood floors and brick walls up to the exposed pipes above. His shoes click on the floor, growing louder as he quickly approaches.

"Luca—" I warn, but it's hopeless. I'd forgotten he was here, and if I'd remembered, I would have ushered Braxton out the door immediately to prevent this exact scenario.

"Luca Gallano," he says, holding out his hand as he approaches us. "So lovely to have such beautiful art in my gallery this afternoon."

“Uh.” Braxton’s eyes dart to mine and I shrug.

“He means you’re the art.”

“Uh.”

I stifle a laugh. I’ve never seen Braxton look so uncertain. It’s endearing, and I decide to let this conversation swing however it may instead of attempting to stop it.

I want to see how Braxton can handle Luca, who not only doesn’t care about social manners but instead barrels through them.

“Braxton Henley,” he finally says, gripping Luca’s hand and giving it a firm shake. “Nice to meet you.”

Luca sighs and covers Braxton’s hand with his free one, so he’s holding him more intimately than just a polite handshake. “What brings you here, Mr. Delectable Piece of Art?”

With his hand still encapsulated by Luca and his other hand still holding our lunch, he gestures with his head in my direction. “Cara. I’m here for Cara.”

Understanding dawns in Luca’s eyes. Still, he doesn’t let go of Braxton’s hand. We’ve now well surpassed the point of politeness with his hand grab, but Luca leans in, tugging Braxton’s hand closer to him. Rolling to his toes, he stage-whispers, “Oh. You’re the man she plays with, I assume then.” He flashes me a deliciously evil wink. “What good taste you have.”

“Played,” I choke out. This is what happens when I let Luca run wild. “Just once.”

“Although I’m hoping for a rematch soon,” Braxton says, and slowly but I can tell

firmly from the way his forearm flexes, he peels his hand from Luca's. "Very soon."

Kill. Me. Now.

Luca's boisterous laugh fills the space. "Of course you are! How could you not? Cara is beautiful."

"She is." Braxton says the word to Luca, but his eyes are now on me, and he's no longer confused or embarrassed. No, the look he's currently flashing is intentional, proving exactly how much he wants that "rematch."

What in the world have I gotten myself into?

Still, there's food to eat and a new, strange feeling deep in my abdomen.

"We should eat lunch," I force out, although my throat is now gritty.

"One more thing," Luca says, pointing a finger in the air. "You will take care of her, correct? And the baby?"

His delightful teasing is gone, and in its place is a possessive look in Luca's eyes I've never seen unless he's examining art he wishes to purchase.

"I take care of what's mine," Braxton confirms. There's no mistaking the confidence in his voice.

He might have thrown out the idea of us dating, but it's clear he already considers me his.

I bristle at the possession, and yet, it smooths away on its own. To be owned should feel like I'm being sent back fifty, sixty years in women's rights. However, there's a

warmth about it too. I've been an obligation. I've been a distraction and annoyance.

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

I don't know if someone has ever looked at me and desired me the way Braxton seems to.

“Good. Because she is very special. And should be treated as such.”

“Luca—” I'm dying of humiliation and I can scarcely pull my eyes off Braxton to glare at Luca, but Braxton doesn't give me the chance.

He reaches over and curls his hand over Luca's shoulder. I swear I see my boss shiver with pleasure. “I know. Trust me, Luca. I get it.”

The men stare at each other, while I'm frozen. This is insane! They've both fallen off their rocker.

I'm not special, just the girl who got knocked up, but with the way they seem to be having a conversation with only their manly glares, I want to be the woman they believe me to be. I want it desperately.

“Lunch,” I say, forcing out the word on a mere, straggled breath. “I need to eat.”

“Take all the time you need, loves,” Luca says, as I swing out my arm for Braxton to head toward the back of the gallery where we have a small, but updated and comfortable, kitchen area. “And do not worry about keeping the sound down, I like to listen!”

“Oh my God,” I mutter. “I'm going to kill him.”

Braxton slides his arm around my waist and squeezes. “I like him.”

## Chapter 12

Braxton

One of the most important lessons Irvin taught me was that time gives perspective to all circumstances.

I’ve spent a lot of time this last week considering my new circumstances with Cara and while I was as blatant as I could possibly be at lunch the other day, I’m quickly learning blatancy and bluntness aren’t going to win her to me.

She has a softness about her, a vulnerability that I don’t often see in women anymore who tend to be more aggressive or assertive. The confidence and bluster of women who believe they don’t have to wait around for a man to make the first move, or ask for the first date, or pay the dinner bill, isn’t a bad quality. Typically, if I’m enjoying the company of a woman, I don’t care if her hand reaches for the check, although I almost always reach for it first. But hey, if someone needs that, wants that, whatever.

Cara isn’t only lacking that assertiveness, uncertainty swirls around her. From the short conversations we had about her family, I figure they’re a bunch of new-money assholes who expect perfection and when it isn’t given, the person who’s disappointed them becomes less important, or ignored completely.

While I know she has Jenna, and she’s mentioned a brother fondly, I wonder who in this world has ever taken the time to tell her she is important.

I’ve at least had Irvin. But this girl, every time she’s given a compliment, she doesn’t brush it off, trying to be coy or fish for more, like she thinks she has to brush it off. She simply appears like she doesn’t believe them, like she’s just done with Luca and



me agreeing she's special.

It's not even that she might not believe it, it's that she can't see what we see in her. I'm determined to show her exactly the kind of beautiful and selfless woman I believe she is.

I'm drawn to her, and attracted to her physically, and I don't want her to just think I am, remaining uncertain where I want to take us, I want to be able to fill her with confidence that if she gives us a chance, it won't only be worth her time, it has the potential to be the best damn decision she's ever made.

I think about all of this while we eat lunch, keeping the conversation mostly about tonight's show. We laugh about Lucy, how she's still scratching at the guest bedroom door when it's closed and her new bed is exactly where Cara rested her head last weekend.

After we're done with lunch and I return to my condo, Lucy bounds out of her kennel and attacks my calves and legs, her nose sniffing in hyperspeed.

One damn night with my dog, not even, but only a handful of hours, and I'm playing second fiddle in my own home to the lingering scent of a woman.

Given Lucy's inherent love of Cara, I'm considering keeping the dog too. It's the first time I've considered it instead of continuing to foster.

"Calm down, Luce." I rub her head, scratching behind her ears while she whines and bumps my thighs with her nose. "She'll be here later, just chill, dog."

She jumps on me, throwing her front paws to my hips in her recent version of a hug, her tongue lolling at the outside of her mouth, tail wagging so hard it's beating against the doorway.

“Come on, we’ll go out and I’ll feed you.”

She scampers off my hips and bounds to the door like I told her Cara’s arrival was imminent. While I’m walking the damn dog, she’s more playful, bouncing and bounding and ignoring other dogs for probably the first time, as if she too is as excited as I am for the chance to spend another night with Cara.

Cara has wrapped both of us around her finger, and I couldn’t care less about it.

The walk takes longer than normal because Lucy is in no hurry to do her business so by the time we get back to my place, I’m running late to shower and get dressed in one of the rare black suits I have.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

I'm not a suit guy, definitely not a tuxedo man, but Cara has told me that while tonight's dress is dressy, it's also not formal.

I pull on my suit, slide my money clip into my breast pocket, and double-check my black tie is knotted decently. It's a wreck. Crooked and wrinkled. I rip it off and unbutton the top button. The only ink on my body that's visible is the curve of a design that appears in a hint above my collar and the backs of my hands.

I don't bother shaving, and instead run some hair cream through my hair to hide the fact it's been mostly beneath a hat all day. Hopefully, it looks good enough to be on Cara's arm with her coworkers and members of the art community she mentioned she's dying to impress tonight.

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I pull up to Cara's apartment building, only two minutes late, and frown as I see her standing on the doorstep to her place.

Her simple, black high heels add several inches to her height, but it's her exposed legs that snag my attention first, forcing me to follow the length of them, pausing at the hem of her dress that floats just barely above her knees. She has her arms wrapped over her front, tugging a white wool coat closed around her, and in the chilly breeze, her chestnut-colored hair flows around her shoulders, swirling and giving off a halo effect that makes me want to drop to my knees and pray to God that somehow, she and I are meant to be together.

Yet I'm frowning as I climb out of my car, meeting her at the passenger door where

she's already hurrying to.

"You shouldn't have been out here," I say, hating the scolding tone in my voice. I open the door, but block it so she can't slide in to her seat without brushing past me. Her teeth chatter from the cold even while she grins at me.

"Seems silly for me to wait for you to run up five flights of stairs just to run back down them again. I didn't mind."

I take her hands in mine, where she's been briskly rubbing them together. "Your hands feel like ice."

She laughs softly, and I almost feel like Lucy when she presses one to my cheek. She has turned me into a dopey puppy needing to please her. "You're sweet. I'm fine, and like I told you earlier, I could have just met you there. The gallery is closer to your place anyway."

She's independent. Trying to live on her own and make something of herself. It's the reminder of who she is, who she wants to be, that reminds me how utterly uncertain she is of herself too. I draw back, skimming my gaze down her body again.

"Yeah," I say, this time my voice rough and full of meaning. "But if I'd done that, I wouldn't have the memory of your sexy legs or what I'm imagining is an even sexier dress, sitting next to me in my car."

"Well," she huffs. "I hope it meets your expectations."

I lean forward and brush my lips across her cheek. She stills at my sudden movement, but relaxes when my hand settles at her hip, holding her to me. "I have a feeling, Cara, that you will surpass all the expectations I have of you."

My lips linger at her ear, until I've inhaled enough of her sweet, flower scent to last me until we get back home. I give her a teasing nip at her earlobe, feeling her shudder from the contact beneath my hand.

When I pull back, her lips are parted, eyes dilated. She stares at me like I'm the most unexpected gift she's ever received.

Little does she know, I think the exact same thing about her.

I step back, hiding my erection pressing against my dress pants behind the opened car door, and gesture for her to enter. "Shall we go?"

"Yeah," she whispers, licking her bottom lip, just a hint of her desire still flaring in her eyes and that soft, seductive gesture. "I wouldn't want to be late."

I only hope we don't have to stay the entire night. I saw the hangings earlier. I could barely stomach the sight of them. "Pretentious" came to mind, more paint splatters and wiggly lines in mismatched colors, I couldn't bring myself to ask Cara's opinion.

To me, art should have a message. Tattoos aren't all that different, only a different medium and canvas, but there should always be a story behind the art. Something that resonates with your soul.

The art I saw earlier filled me with the need to pop Excedrin.

—

We arrive early, and Cara speeds off to spend the next hour assisting Luca with final preparations. I make myself available doing whatever Luca requests but art, especially modern art, is outside my realm of knowledge so while I help readjusting lights to Luca's specifications, I mostly try to stay out of the way.

Once the doors open and the crowd filters in, I give up the idea of spending the night next to Cara. I keep an eye on her, instead, while she's working, showing off piece after piece, smiling and nodding politely, all while the passion in her rich blue eyes hold me captive. They light with excitement while she discusses not only the pieces available for purchase, but when she is pulled into any conversation that delves into art. It's obvious from the way her body responds—even as she stifles the occasional yawn—that although she might be worn out from the long day, she not only loves art, creating and discussing the various modes and periods, she lives it.

When she's in between conversations and sipping sparkling water from a champagne flute, I go to her, settling a hand at her lower back.

"Tired?" The dark circles are blooming beneath her eyes and as I ask, she hides another yawn behind the back of her hand.

"Yes." She turns to me, eyes fluttering as her gaze travels up my suit before reaching my face. "I'm exhausted. How much more time do we have?"

"Not long, from what I can see, most of the pieces have already sold. You've done really well tonight."

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

“Well, Marco has quite the following.”

She’s referring to the artist who appeared earlier with a flash of personality twice the size of his small, five-and-a-half-foot frame. His assistant has been on his heels all night, cowing to every whim he’s requested. Her short red hair and slim jaw make her seem familiar, but I haven’t paid much attention to her. Twice though, I’ve caught her glancing my way with what can only be interest in her eyes.

Too bad for her I’m uninterested in whatever she’s considering offering.

“Marco’s a pretentious ass,” I mutter, and take a sip of my own water. I’m driving tonight so I’ve opted not to drink, plus I hate champagne and it’s all they’re serving.

“Yes,” Cara giggles softly, “he is that too.”

I tip my glass in the direction of the canvas we’re standing in front of. “Be honest with me. What do you think of this?”

“Well.” Her eyes do that sparkle thing again, and she turns to face it. I do the same, keeping my hand resting on the small of her back. “I think Marco is quite talented. His use of—”

“It’s shit, isn’t it?” I murmur the question in her ear so no one close to us can hear.

She huffs a quiet sound, shaking her head, but she also doesn’t deny it.

“Honest, Cara. Tell me what you think.”

She turns to me, tilting her head back so she can look me directly in the eye, and her eyes glimmer with humor. “It belongs in a seventh-grade science experiment on optical illusions, I think. Or one of those adult coloring books.”

“It gives me a migraine.”

Her smile widens and she covers her mouth with a laugh. “It makes me want to throw up, and not because I always feel like throwing up.”

The reminder of how sick she can get erases my humor. “How are you, really?”

Her hand settles on her stomach and she grimaces. “It’s been a while since I’ve eaten. I have some almonds in my purse, but that’s in the back.”

“I’ll get them for you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s not a problem. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Cara looks so thankful, color blooms on her cheeks and I’m unable to resist her sweet expression. I lean down and brush my lips to her temple, whispering, “Stay here.”

I move quickly, ditching my glass on the table near the bar as I head to the small lunchroom at the back. There, I quickly find her small designer clutch and I take out a small bag of almonds along with a ginger candy. She might not want to have it while she still has to talk to customers, but I drop it in my pocket and head back out.



When I reach her, she's speaking with Marco and his assistant, both of whom turn their attention to me as soon as I reach the trio.

I nod, acknowledging them, and ignore the way the assistant's eyes narrow in annoyance on me.

"Here," I tell Cara, her taking my complete focus. I rip open the small bag of almonds and take her hand, dumping a few into her palm.

"My apologies," she says to Marco and his assistant. "I haven't eaten, and..." Her voice trails, like she doesn't want to tell them she's pregnant.

I do it for her. "Sorry, my girlfriend is pregnant."

"Oh," Marco says, his face twisting into something akin to disgust.

Next to me, Cara gasps. So she's not exactly my girlfriend. Yet.

But it's the redhead whose lips press together, brows lifting slowly as she says, "Excuse me, Braxton? Pregnant? Girlfriend?"

And I remember exactly where I've seen those eyes before. And that red hair.

## Page 35

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

Jesus. It was just last week I brought her home. She's the gymnast. And hell if I can remember her name although she clearly remembers mine.

Cara's gaze bounces back and forth between us. "You two know each other?"

The redhead...good Lord, why can't I remember her name? I'm usually better about this. She glares at me and then sneers at Cara.

"Yeah, we know each other. I'm Anna, and you should know your boyfriend is a cheating jerk because he just fucked me last week."

### Chapter 13

Cara

My stomach rolls and I absolutely lose what little appetite I already have.

Anna's declaration rocks me back so harshly, Braxton's hand lands on my lower back to steady me.

"Excuse me?" I ask. I had to have misheard her.

Based on the anger suffusing Anna's features, I absolutely haven't.

"Cara," Braxton says. My head snaps to his, and I don't know if he can see my shock that's quickly mingling with anger, but do I even have the right? We're not together.

We've never been together.

Technically, tonight's our first date, and of course he's had women before me, and in the last couple of months.

Unfortunately, none of the logic quickly racing through my mind is settling the effect this news has on my nerves.

"Don't." I shake my head, stepping away from his touch. Already my face is feeling flush with heat and embarrassment.

I turn to Marco and mutter, "Excuse me."

As I'm turning to walk away, I still hear Braxton say, "You have no idea what you're talking about right now but throwing that down was bullshit, and makes me glad as soon as you disappeared into your Uber, I wiped that night from my memory."

Oh crap. What a jerk! I can't believe any of this, but why am I so surprised?

Why am I so hurt? So he slept with someone last weekend. He has every right to do so. We're not together, and of course he dates one woman at a time. Although perhaps it does explain why he never returned my text.

My hands are trembling so profoundly it's virtually impossible to push down on the door handle. It takes me several tries before the handle doesn't slip out of my hands and it's just enough time for Braxton to reach me.

"Listen to me." His body heat crowds my back and he pushes both of us into the room, letting the door close behind us.

I jump from the harsh sound of the lock clicking and refuse to face him.

I cannot believe this is happening with a client of the gallery.

Luca is going to murder me for causing such a scene. And Anna? She not only works for Marco, she works for an agency that represents and promotes the most up-and-coming artists on the West Coast.

She's not only viciously astute in the art world, she has connections like I would if I would have gone into law with my father.

This has disaster for Luca's gallery written all over it.

"Don't." I drop my head into my hands, trying to calm my breathing. When I get upset or stressed, my stomach knots, which is the last thing I need. "Don't say anything. You don't owe me an explanation."

He fucked me just last week.

Her shrill voice is a Ping-Pong ball inside my brain.

"Cara." Braxton's hand lands on my shoulder. His touch is gentle but warm, radiating heat beneath the thin layer of my cap-sleeved dress.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

I shake my shoulder, but he doesn't remove his hand. Instead, he steps up closer, until his chest is flush with my back and his hand on my shoulder slides down my arm until his palm is at my stomach—covering my stomach, where our child grows.

I'm going to be sick.

"You're right. I don't owe you an explanation. I was with that woman before you ever came into MadInk, Cara, before I knew about you."

All my runaway thoughts screech to a halt and my hands drop from my face. "What?"

"Yes." He's laughing now, shoulders shaking, bumping against me, and I know he's not doing it to be mean, but is there anything really funny about this? I can't find the humor.

His hand on my stomach presses in, and he shifts me, turning me so we're face to face and his hand is at my back. "You might still be pissed when I tell you it was thenightbefore you came into MadInk, but if I'm going to be completely honest, for the last two months, every time I was with a woman, I was honestly just trying to fuck the memory ofyouout of my head."

"That's disgusting." My brows furrow. If he thinks I'll be flattered by his admission, I'm not.

"Might be, but it's also real." He cups the side of my neck, holding me gently. His thumb brushes back and forth against my sensitive skin, igniting pops of pleasure skipping down the length of my arms and chest. "What's also real is that since we

spent that night together, I've thought about little else besides being inside you again. So you can be upset I'm not a monk, upset I can treat someone like Abby—"

"Anna—"

"Whatever." He grins. "Whoever. It's not the point, and neither is she. You can be upset I would treat someone like her so callously, but it doesn't change the fact that before she came home with me, she came on to me, she bought me a drink. She knew exactly what she was getting into when she slid into the car next to me and when I called her an Uber and sent her home. But don't be upset that it all happened before you waltzed back into my life and told me you were having my child. That's not fair."

It's not fair, and he's right. While everything he's saying is upsetting, it's the way of the world and one-night stands, things I know so little about except through others. And is it really any worse than how I treated him?

All of my anger drains. Other than being embarrassed at her outburst, I don't have a reason to be upset with Braxton.

"This is humiliating," I mutter, pressing my hands to his chest. "I get what you're saying, but I still don't like it, and I don't think I like knowing she's been with you. I have to work with her occasionally."

"And if I could change that for you, I would, but there's nothing we can do about it except move on from it. Okay?"

He makes it sound so simple. I might be naive when it comes to one-night stands, but I'm not naive to how women behave when they feel they've been scorned. And if Anna believes she's been wronged in some way, she still has the ability to make my job a living hell for the next several weeks.

I've been staring at his chest, at the dip in his throat where his dress shirt is unbuttoned because he's gone sans tie. And now, I drag my gaze up the column of his throat, to his chiseled jaw and straight to his full, lush lips that have been all over me.

My body responds and his black eyes fire with lust at whatever he sees in my expression. I can only imagine what it is, because my body is responding to everything I see.

I'm flushed now, for an entirely different reason, so when he tilts his head and dips down, I don't move away.

And when he presses his lips against mine, almost tenderly, like he's testing to see if I'll push him away, I don't.

I inhale his masculine scent of spicy pine and man and my hands slide to his shoulder, seemingly on their own volition, and then my lips are parting as his tongue slides over my bottom lip and he dips inside.

And for the first time in months, I'm tasting him, inhaling his scent and digging fingers into his suit at his shoulders, and all of this is so familiar from our first time, I'm unable to stop the sensations rippling through my nerves, making me crave more of him.

"Fuck," he mutters, his voice gruff as he yanks away from my mouth and tilts my head. He kisses my throat, sliding his tongue and his mouth along the side of me, right to that perfect, hidden, and invisible spot that shoots desire straight to my core.

"Oh," I whimper, fingers digging into his suit and gripping him harshly, pulling him to me as my hips roll, pressing against him.

His length is hard against my stomach, his hands tight at my hips, and his mouth is

doing such wicked things to my throat, my jaw, working back to my mouth, that I can visualize where all of this is headed...where all of this has gone before.

But I don't want it to be like last time, with so much uncertainty and complications between us, so even though I desperately want what he's giving, I push his shoulders until he relents, leaning back from me.

"What?"

"I can't." I'm a gasping, breathless mess. "Not here," I quickly amend.

"Okay." He grins and presses his lips to mine. "Not here."

"Not yet," I quickly add, because sex isn't on the table. Not tonight. Not this week or next.

If Braxton wants to date me, he has to do it my way.



*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

Slowly. Intentionally. Not falling into bed because it feels so mind-blowing wonderful.

“Not yet?” he asks, and his lips are tilting up at the ends.

“No.”

His eyes bounce back and forth between mine, his lips pressed together like he’s fighting a laugh, and then his arms are around me, holding me tight to him, flush to his body, my hands on his chest pressed and sandwiched between us.

“I can take ‘not yet,’ ” he says, and I can hear the humor in his thick voice. “Because you’ve just told me it’ll happen again, and with how good we are together, trust me, I have no problems waiting until you’re ready.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He pulls back, one of his hands sliding up my back to cup the back of my neck. His look is serious, full of intent and desire, but also honesty. “Yes, Cara. Anything worth having is worth the wait.”

“Okay.” It comes out as a squeak, and Braxton laughs.

He pulls away from us, and reluctantly, I let him go, dropping my hands only to have one of them taken in his palm.

“Let’s go back out there, ignore Abby—”

“Anna.”

“Whoever, and get you home to bed. You need your rest.”

—

I stretch in bed, lazily shoving my arms above my head, my eyes jumping open when they hit a wood headboard I’m entirely unfamiliar with.

Sitting up, my stomach dips and a quick glance around settles my surprise, but not my stomach.

I’m in the guest room at Braxton’s, although I have no memory of the trip to either his place or the bedroom.

“Ugh.” I drop my head into my hand and groan. I must have fallen asleep on the way home. I barely remember saying good night to Luca.

I do recall the searing glare Anna sent me on our way out the door. It was one filled with “You’re such a tramp, forgiving a man who can cheat on you,” based on the way she also glared at my hand clasped with Braxton’s as we left the gallery.

Braxton had leaned down and whispered in my ear, “Ignore her. No one needs to know our story except those we choose to share it with. Okay?”

I’d mumbled an agreement, slid into the passenger seat of his car after he helped me in it, and remember nothing else.

“Damn,” I groan, and slide my legs out from beneath the thick, plush covers and stare at my legs.

They're bare.

A quick check tells me I'm entirely naked save for the black satin underwear I was wearing the night before. I jump out of bed, my stomach rolling with such force I fall forward, slamming my hand onto the nightstand.

Damn it. I have to remember not to move so fast. And eat, as soon as I wake up. My hand brushes against something that makes a crinkling sound.

Yes. Damn, he's good.

Crackers. Juice. One of my antinausea tablets, and a note.

Take me is scribbled on it. I shake my head and grin.

He apparently thinks of everything, including how to see me naked again.

My cheeks heat, and I quickly sit down on the bed, shoving a cracker into my mouth and almost draining the glass of juice before I take the tablet.

Lying back down on the bed, I drape an arm over my eyes, blocking out the morning light. I have no concept of what time it is, but I've learned that even after taking my meds, it's best to lie still for a few minutes, nibble on a few crackers, and rise slowly. This morning's jolt to awareness has me queasier than I've been in recent days, so it takes me longer, but eventually, I feel steadier. Once I do, I use the restroom and wash my hands, and only then do I spy the makeup kit I'd packed in an overnight bag on the counter. It includes travel-size toiletries and hair products.

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A quick glance at my ruined mascara and matted hair tells me a shower is an excellent idea.

Braxton might want to see me naked, but in no way am I prepared to show off my zombie-preggo-lady look. I shower quickly, throw on minimal makeup, enough to cover up the still slightly green look from morning sickness complexion, and toss my hair into a messy knot on top of my head. It's when I'm sliding into my most comfortable, stretchy pair of yoga pants that I catch my profile in the mirror and cringe.

The pants are tight, digging into my stomach and sides above my hips.

And it's like the air stills while my hand settles on my stomach. It's no longer just a nightly bloat.

I'm showing. It should make me uncomfortable or scare me, shouldn't it? But as I stare into the mirror, I catch my own soft grin.

I'm having a baby. A real-life baby and it's unexpected and with an unexpected guy, but so far, Braxton's the kind of guy I'd imagine myself with.

His idea of dating doesn't seem so scary now. He's definitely good at following through on taking care of me and he's handled all of this with such confidence. He's becoming my calm strength in the midst of what could be a brutal storm. I might not know him well, but I know enough to know he won't let any hint of that storm come close to me.

He's not only a great guy, he's also really, really sexy. A girl could do much worse, but I'm not sure it gets much better.

I grab my empty juice glass and sleeve of crackers intent on heading to find him, but as soon as I open my bedroom door, I come to an abrupt stop, almost tripping over a wagging tail, sad puppy dog eyes, and a happy tongue lolling out of Lucy's mouth.

"Hey, girl," I say, crouching down and going straight for her ears.

She whines, bumps her nose into my palm, and licks me wherever she can reach.

"She's been waiting for you. Thought she was going to have at least three heart attacks this morning."

I look up as Braxton speaks and all that confidence, my newfound excitement at seeing him, spikes to immeasurable levels.

He's standing at the edge of the hallway, shoulder braced against the wall. His arms are bare. In fact, everything above his waist is bare. His ink is everywhere.

It's been so long since I've seen him like this, it takes all my will to resist jumping to my feet and tackling him so I can taste him all over.

This is not pregnant hormones kicking into high gear, creating a throb at the apex of my thighs.

This is simple, boy meets girl, girl wants to taste hot boy, physical chemistry.

Chapter 14

Braxton

She's beautiful, crouched down, ass to heels, a package of crackers in one hand and her other hand on the top of Lucy's head where she paused as soon as I spoke.

But it's her eyes, like always, drawing me to her, pulling me closer as though the web of chemistry I've always felt between us has finally made its way to her.

"Hey," Cara says, giving Lucy another rub and pushing to her feet. "Good morning."

Good morning, indeed. Although it was a better night last night when I was peeling her skintight satin dress off her body and standing there like a jackass, admiring her body, thinking of the way it was going to change in the upcoming months. I only felt slightly disgusted with myself for doing it when she passed out and was unable to see my vast appreciation of her body.

Shame, because with the way she's eye-fucking me, I think we're thinking the same thing...

Desire.

I've been pretty blunt with what I want from her, especially throwing a relationship with her down like a gauntlet, one she was clearly hesitant to pick up. Last night, after the run-in with the redhead, I'd considered stepping back.

Now? Her gaze is glued to my chest and my abs, and I drop my arms from my chest, letting her look her fill. No way in hell am I backing down.

It's full speed ahead, picking up exactly where we left off the morning she snuck out on me.

"You should eat." I push off the wall and snap my fingers, calling Lucy to me, but like she's behaved since last weekend, with Cara around, Lucy wants nothing to do

with me.

“I’m not really hungry. I ate some crackers.”

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Lucy wags her tail and nudges her face against Cara's knee, pushing her forward.

I arch a brow and nod toward Lucy. "Seems Lucy thinks you needs to eat."

Grinning, Cara shakes her head, a mixture of baffled and amused as she walks toward me. "Dogs are so strange."

I press my hand to her lower back and pull her flush against me. I don't give her a second to hesitate before I press my lips to hers, tasting the lingering mint of her toothpaste. "Dogs are good judges of good people. Let's get you fed."

"Speaking of feeding me." She shakes the crackers back and forth. "Seems someone not only brought me food but removed my clothes last night. You wouldn't know who did that, would you?"

"You were passed out. Did you want to sleep in that dress?"

"No, but..."

"I didn't touch you." I grin, thinking of her body. The warmth of her soft flesh as I removed her dress. "At least not too inappropriately. You can scold me all you'd like, but I won't apologize for taking care of you. Or thinking your body is sexy as hell."

She humphs, but it lacks impact. She looks too damn cute with her scrunched-up nose and lips.

"Come on. Breakfast. Food. What would you like? I was making eggs and potatoes."



We reach the kitchen and I slide her onto a barstool facing the worktop where I'd been chopping potatoes before Lucy was alerted to Cara's shower turning on and off.

"Just potatoes," she says, and although I want her to eat some eggs for protein, the muted green haze to her skin makes me not push it.

"Potatoes it is. If you'd like more juice, help yourself to the fridge."

—

"So you've told me about your parents, and you mention you have a brother, but what is your family like?"

My fork full of potatoes is halfway to my mouth when I pause. "What'd I say?"

Cara's lips are pressed together and she's looking out the windows. We chatted while I cooked, we talked about the art gallery and how I got my start with opening my first tattoo place. Get-to-know-you bullshit that doesn't feel like bullshit when I'm talking about it with Cara.

Things have been going, well...easy.

Her happy expression has evaporated and changed to utter sadness.

"You okay?" She still doesn't speak. "Cara?"

She blinks, pulling herself out of whatever has grabbed her attention, and smiles shyly at me. "Sorry. Your question caught me off guard." She clears her throat and takes a drink of water, and I notice her hand has a slight tremor to it.

"What is it?"

“Nothing, really, I wasn’t prepared for you to ask about Jimmy.”

She sniffs and I set down my fork. I give her a few minutes, keeping an eye on her. Slowly, a realization settles, because she has that faraway look I know I get in my eyes whenever Stella and I talk about Irvin, and it kills me.

So instead of waiting for her to tell me about her brother, I start speaking.

“I had a mom.” My voice is bland, as it always is when I think about her. “Got knocked up by someone she hooked herself to in order to get money for drugs.”

Cara’s expression changes to surprise and I find myself smiling at the cute way her brows raise and her lips part. “What?”

“Yeah.” I settle my forearms on the table. “Bet Dan doesn’t talk about that much when he talks about me, does he?” She shakes her head but I don’t need the answer. Dan would take my secrets and anything I’ve told him about my life to his grave. “See, I was born addicted to drugs. My mom was clean for a long while after she had me. She’s always said she quit when she found out she was pregnant, but I don’t think she realized she was pregnant for a long while so by the time she stopped, the damage was already done. She told me when I was little I spent six weeks in ICU, born more than a month early, unable to breathe on my own.”

“Braxton—”

“It’s not a big deal.” I smile lightly. It’s not, really. “But I figure we’re getting to know each other and there’s not much in my life I’m ashamed about, but I was always ashamed of that. Not so much anymore. I met this guy when I was twelve. Big old three-hundred-and-fifty-pound mammoth of a man. Irvin. He caught me and a couple buddies trying to shoplift from the 7-Eleven and hauled us out of there so fast, telling the guy at the counter he’d deal with it, I almost shit my pants.”

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I laugh at the memory. Irvin was so damn scary that day, I was sure I was either getting hauled off to jail or murdered in some lunatic's basement. Cara's face has paled and her mouth is gaping but not one sound comes out.

"Anyway, I was running with the wrong crowd, but I lived in a neighborhood where there was the bad crowd and the deadly one so I was making the best choices I could at the time, and I don't know what it was that day, still don't, but Irvin took me in. He gave me a place to stay, made me come to his house after school to help me with my homework, all that shit my mom couldn't deal with. Lived four blocks away from my own home but after that first day, there was something between us, and his home eventually became more of a home than my own."

"Wow, it's good you had that. Good you have someone like that in your life."

"Yeah, well, Irvin's son died in a gang when he was thirteen. Joined up despite the fact he had a dad in his life who gave a shit about him, which is better than most of us around there had, so I never really got it because Irvin's a scary beast, but his heart was just as large. Anyway, I was struggling in school, barely passing, and it was pissing me off because all I wanted to do was get out of that hellish neighborhood and do something." I paused, took a long drink of my coffee, and glanced out the window. "I couldn't read, Cara," I say when I look at her again. "Don't know if it was the drugs, or I was born wrong, but I couldn't read. Fucking killed me too, to have everyone think I was so damn stupid."

"You couldn't—"

"Nope. Not until about eighth grade, I couldn't read shit except small words I could

memorize, but Irvin helped me out, had me write shit out and he figured out I was writing half my letters backwards or upside down. Eventually, he took me to some doctors and we discovered I have dyslexia.”

I drop the bomb and wait for the look of pity but all Cara does is blink rapidly. “You met Dan in college.”

“Yup.”

“But—”

“Still sucks to read, I’m not going to lie. Takes me three times as long as anyone else, but that’s why I majored in art and then switched to tattooing. Not a lot of reading required, and when I do scripts on people, I have to think of the letters as art drawings and not an actual word. I haven’t messed up yet.” I flash her a grin, belying my own unease with this. “Stella’s from my old neighborhood. I grew up with her, and she’s a fucking whiz with numbers and definitely better with words than I am. I wouldn’t be able to run the business without her.”

“Wow, I mean, I want to say I’m sorry you have to deal with all that.” Her brow scrunches. “Although that doesn’t sound right either. Mostly I’m just really impressed with what you’ve been able to make of yourself even with your disability. I mean, you live in one of the most expensive buildings in Portland, for crying out loud. I’d say you’ve done okay by yourself.”

“Irvin bought this place for me.” Damn. A lump lodges in my throat and I push it down. Then I push away my food. “Not really.”

“I don’t understand.”

I rarely talk about Irvin with anyone anymore, except for occasionally with Stella.

Somehow, Irvin became the dad or uncle to the fucked-up kids in our hood. Stella and I are two of the few who took to him like he tried to take to all of us, trying to save us from the shit his son went through.

“He died when I was still in college. Man lived in this crappy, falling-apart two-bedroom home as long as I knew him. Had no clue he’d done some major investing over the years. Man died a multimillionaire and lived like a pauper.” I drop my head and squeeze my eyes closed. I can’t even look at her. “He and I used to sit outside on his crumbling front porch and he’d ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I always told him I had no clue, but I’d point across the river, and tell him, ‘I just want to live high. See what it’s like to live in the sky.’ ”

“Braxton—” Her voice sounds broken and so uncertain.

I lift my head and grin. “He gave me all he had. I gave half to Stella and she reinvested all of it into MadInk. But when I heard I was the beneficiary to all this damn money I never knew the man had, the lawyer had given me a note he’d written. All it said was, ‘You better put this to use, so you can live high in the sky, or I’ll haunt your white ass.’ ”

I chuckle, because the man was always rough, always giving me shit, but fuck...he was a good man. The best man I’ve ever known.

I shove off from the table, needing space, but before I can stand, Cara is in front of me, scrambling onto my lap and straddling me. She throws her arms around me and yanks me to her.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and her voice isn’t only broken, she’s crying. “I’m so sorry you lost such a good man, but I’m certain he’d be so proud of you.”

She holds me tight. I wrap my arms around her waist and hold her tighter. Settling my

chin on her shoulder, I grit my teeth. Both of us don't need to fall to tears.

"I lost Jimmy," she says, after minutes of us holding each other. "My brother."

"Yeah?" My hand drifts up her back. I brush hair to the other side of her shoulder and continue running my hand up and down her back, settling her. She's gripping me tighter like she needs to cling to me to be able to talk.

"Yeah. He died just over a year ago, but he was sick for years before then." She clears her throat and says, "Leukemia."

"Shit, Cara. I'm sorry."

She pulls back, but I still hold her firmly in case she's planning on running, but instead, she wipes tears off her cheeks. "We were twins. He was older by five minutes, but you'd have thought I had never been born at all with all the attention he got and how little I did. Made him so mad, all the time, the way my parents would expect so much from both of us, but they only ever praised him or acted like he was the only one who could do anything. The day of his funeral, my mom looked right through me, like I wasn't there, shook her head, and said, 'I don't know how I'll live without my child,' like she didn't even realize her other one was standing right in front of her."

"You kidding me?"

"No." She blinks harshly and opens her eyes. They're swirling with emotion, pain, and anger, but I see a spark of determination in them too. "I moved out that day. Quit school. Found my apartment and I decided, screw them. I was only going to law school because it's what we were supposed to do and I never wanted it in the first place, but I kept thinking if I tried hard enough I could make them love me."

Jesus. My mom was a drug addict who eventually overdosed, but if we were comparing the two, I'd almost say Cara's mom is worse. "You shouldn't have to make her love you, Cara. She's your mom."

"I know. That's what Jimmy always said to me. When he went to hospice, he made me promise I'd get out of there, and I'd live my life. I tried telling him they'd need me, but when Mom said that to me, I knew, like always, Jimmy was right."

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“I’m proud of you for finding the strength to do that, Cara.”

Her smile goes soft and with more tears swimming in her eyes, she whispers, “I don’t think anyone’s ever been proud of me except for Jimmy and Jenna.”

“I am.” I slide my hands to her cheeks, brushing away her tears as I hold her close to me, letting her see how serious I am. “We both came from shit lives, Cara, but we both had people in our lives who were there for us, and I swear to you, right now, I will make sure our child has the best of everything. I don’t care how hard it is, how much work it takes, how much it costs or how little, our child will have everything we didn’t, including two parents who are always there, who will always love him or her—boy or girl.” I grin at her. She blushes and it’s so damn cute I press my lips to hers softly, slowly, soaking in the taste of her and the feel of her.

I don’t push it farther. I don’t take her like I want to, and when she relaxes in my hold, falls into the kiss, I pull back.

Then we spend more time talking about Irvin and Jimmy, laughing over stories while we finish our breakfast and clean up.

It’s the best morning I’ve ever had in my life, until Cara places the last plate she’s cleaning into the cupboard and turns to me.

“I should get going.”

“What?”



“I’m feeling the best I have in weeks, and I haven’t painted in a while. I’d like to try today.”

Oh. Not exactly like I can stop her.

“Sure. Yeah.” Hell if I wanted her to leave though. I like her here, in my home, us talking about heavy shit without it seeming heavy. No one outside a small circle of people knows about my dyslexia. I hate the assumption I’m stupid that comes with it, but Cara just took it all in stride, it never changing the way she looks at me.

Except that’s not really true either, knowing what I’ve struggled with, it’s like her gaze on me is fiercer, more determined to make something good work with me, and that’s the only reason why I’m so willing to take her home now instead of spend all day with her on the couch, eating whatever she wants and can keep down, resting with a remote in one hand and her body wrapped in my other arm.

She’ll be back.

We can do this.

“Let me show you something first.”

“What?”

“Come on.” I take the towel out of her hand and toss it to the counter. I hold her hand while we walk down the hall into a completely empty room that holds nothing other than a white couch and a drafting table. I come in here sometimes when I want silence to draw tattoo designs, but I haven’t had a real use for the room until now. Now I know exactly what it’d be perfect for.

She inhales a quick breath as we enter, and her gaze immediately goes to the wall of

windows that overlook the river. It's my Hail Mary pass, one last chance to get her to see things my way. "Move in with me and you can paint in here."

"Tempting," she says teasingly. By the way her eyes gloss over and the lingering look she gives as I walk her out of the room, I think it is tempting her.

I'm totally cool with using all the tools at my disposal to have her stay in my house.

## Chapter 15

Cara

It's a replay of almost three weeks ago as I rush down the street to MadInk. My stomach is rolling, from the MAX and the nausea that's been plaguing me all day. I'm nervous, hands sweating, stumbling on the small heels I shouldn't have even bothered slipping into, but they were the first pair I could find when I made my decision.

It's been two weeks since Braxton took me home. Two weeks where we've had long conversations at night, him occasionally stopping by, bringing me dinner and putting on a television show that I inevitably fall asleep to within ten minutes of it starting. Two weeks where he then wakes me up, and I groggily get ready for bed while he prepares the pull-out sofa. Two weeks where he kisses me tenderly, tells me good night, rests his palm on my stomach and says good night in a way that makes my insides flip and flop in a delicious way as he speaks to our baby. Two weeks where I feel myself falling for him more and more every time we spend time together. He's been caring and kind. I catch his lingering glances on not only my slowly growing stomach and swollen breasts in a way that isn't simply protective, yet he hasn't done anything more than kiss me tenderly and take care of me.

My hormones are off the charts insane on the days I don't feel like puking every minute of the day, which, in all honesty, has been quite rare. Even with the antinausea

meds, I've still been puking almost nonstop from the time I wake up to late afternoon, and today, I believe I've finally figured out the cause.

The food trucks that are parked from morning to afternoon in the parking lot behind my apartment. I don't even have the windows open and don't need to in order to inhale the mixture of chicken and tacos and seafood and beef and the gyros...good Lord, just the thought of the smell of lamb almost sends me careening down the alley outside MadInk.

I push through and settle myself for a brief moment before I pull open the door and enter Braxton's tattoo parlor.

The bell rings obnoxiously, but this time, I don't hesitate, walking quickly to where Stella is perched in the same spot she sat the last time I was here.

"Hi, Stella. I'm Cara."

"Know who you are, sugar." She snaps her gum while smiling. "Also know when you want to make a mess, you go all out. Took me hours to get the smell out of Braxton's office last time you were here."

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

She winks like she's teasing me, but I'm not feeling it today. If I'm not lucky, we're going to have a repeat. How humiliating would that be? Plus, the shining ring she has pierced through her upper eyebrow is blinding me, sparkling and flashing whenever she moves her head.

"Uh, is he here? I need to speak to him."

"Yep. He's finishing up a client though. He'll be out in a few minutes. Want to sit and wait?"

"Yeah, thanks." I wring my hands together. I haven't told Braxton about the puking. I've been letting him think it's becoming more rare because I know the minute I tell him the truth he's going to insist on me moving in with him again.

He's mentioned it a couple of times in passing, but he hasn't pressed anything.

But I'm sick of being sick, and at this point, I'll try anything. I'm desperate, and while my midwife assured me I'll start feeling better around fourteen weeks, which is next week, I highly doubt it will happen unless I get out of my apartment.

I'm also too nervous to sit like Stella suggested. I'm so tired I might pass out. My gaze is drawn to the glass cases Stella is perched behind and I look at all the metal rings and bars, where there are also sets of colored balls on the ends. There are hoops with jewels on them, which I assume are for belly rings, tiny jeweled pieces that look like standard ear piercings. And then there are other metal loops with balls on them that remind me of a bull with a ring through its nose. Stella has something similar in hers.

“You have anything pierced?” she asks, leaning forward.

“Uh, no.” My cheeks heat though, because I once heard about this certain kind of personal piercing and I’ve always been curious.

“Ah, but you want something pierced.”

She must see me blushing. It’s probably hard to miss.

I shrug, and keep looking at the bits and bobbles, my chest burning every second.

“Oh, come on, tell me what you’re thinking about. A girl like you, I’d imagine a belly button ring.”

I lift my head. “What do you mean, a girl like me?”

“You know.” She throws her arm out and waves her hand in a circle motion in front of me. “Classy. Probably well-mannered and polite and all that shit.”

I laugh, but I’m stunned, at not only how well she can read me but why it seems to irritate her. “Is that bad?”

“I don’t really care as long as you’re good to Brax, but that don’t mean I think you’re good for him.”

The heat inflaming my skin is replaced with a chill so quickly I shiver. “Why would you say that?”

“Because he might live in a high-rise and he might have money, but that don’t mean you two come from the same world. You’re someone who went slumming, saw a hottie with inked arms and went for a walk on the dark side and now you’re faced

with the consequences of it. Don't mean you won't wake up someday and decide to go back to the life you're supposed to have and when you do, I doubt you'll be wanting to parade Braxton around country club galas when you make that walk."

I can't even process the things she's saying and the vile way she's saying them. I was just dreaming of a clit piercing, for crying out loud, and now I'm having to defend my choice to be with Braxton?

But have I even made that choice yet? I certainly haven't told him.

Ugh. This is a mess.

Still, it gives her absolutely no right to talk to me like this. Lowering my voice, I lean forward, curling my hands around the glass counter. "Braxton told me about Irvin." At that declaration, Stella's jaw drops. I don't care why it surprises her. "He's told me how you two clung to that man, and I'm sorry for your loss. Irvin sounds like an incredible man. He's also told me about the...difficulties...he's had in school and how he not only thinks he can't run this business without you, but how important you are to him. I'm guessing he wouldn't like the things you're saying to me right now."

"You gonna tell him?"

"No." I push back and drop my hands to the side. "You might not like me, but you also don't know anything about me to make the judgments you're making right now. And I don't really care. I still like the fact that it sounds like even though Braxton grew up in a really shitty situation, I'm glad he has someone looking out for him."

She reminds me of Jimmy. I can only imagine how big of a dick he'd be to Braxton right now if the roles were reversed and he were alive. God, I miss my brother. I'd also take him to task for being a dick as I know Braxton would to Stella if he knew what she was saying.

There's no point in causing trouble between them for the sake of trouble.

"Thank you so much!" A giggling feminine voice calls and snags my attention from Stella, who's glaring at me.

"You're welcome." It's Braxton's voice that follows her and soon, a bombshell of a woman is walking through the doorway. I stumble back a step at the sight of them.

And all my confidence from defending what Stella spewed all over me unravels to the floor.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

This woman is a Marilyn Monroe look-alike with a rocker bent. She has curling platinum-blond hair and a body filled out with gorgeous curves. She has a tattoo sleeve up one arm covered in brightly colored flowers and vines. They haven't seen me gawking at them yet and my jaw drops to the floor as she pulls out her shirt from her chest and shoves it down past her boob. All over her large breast is a white bandage.

She grins up at Braxton and giggles again. "I can't believe you just did this for me. It's going to be beautiful."

My hands curl into fists as I watch her literally shoving her breasts into his face. And...that means he just had his hands all over her chest. Probably her stomach, her ribs. Who knows where he had to touch this woman who's inked like him and has a few piercings like Stella. She is someone who looks much more like they belong with Braxton than me.

Shit.

"Thanks for coming in," Braxton says. His hands are in his pockets. His eyes are on hers. In fact, I don't think he's looked down at her boob once since she yanked it out for him. "Stella here will—" He looks to Stella, catches me, and pauses, and as he continues speaking, his eyes don't move from me. "Stella will finish up with your aftercare instructions. Thanks again for coming in."

"You're so welcome," she croons.

And I no longer care about her. I'm already walking to Braxton, intent on doing



something I've been wanting to do for weeks.

I'm not entirely sure if it's because of the crap Stella said, the strange burning sensation in me at the sight of this woman that makes me want to set her on fire, or if it's just because Braxton looks completely freaking edible right now with his black hair, his unshaven scruff lining the front of his throat, the ink on said throat and down his forearms, exposed beneath his navy blue T-shirt.

Hell, it's probably a combination of all of it, and right now, I'm determined to put Stella and this unknown woman in their place.

"Hi," I say when I reach Braxton.

"Hey...what are you—"

I don't give him time to finish the question. I wrap my hands around his biceps, lift to my toes, and press my mouth to his.

## Chapter 16

Braxton

I have no idea what's going on right now, but I'm totally rolling with it.

Cara's lips pressed against mine, forcefully, pleadingly, I set my hands on her waist and yank her to me, one hand moving to the side of her neck so I can tilt her head. I kiss her back, without any of the restraint I've been desperately trying to hold back for the last two weeks, while I've waited...and waited...for a sign that shows me she wants to be with me.

This is one helluva sign.

My tongue slides against her lips and she opens. I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, nibbling and tasting her, the fruity taste of her lip gloss I've remembered for months and the sweet scent of her perfume. Our mouths fuse together, and she slips her tongue against mine, and all sense of where we are, that we're in my place of business, that Stella's eagle eyes are probably watching every minute of this interaction. And most likely she's displeased because she's been displeased about everything for weeks—it all now completely slips my mind.

My senses are ignited, from the brush of her hair against my arm, the tiny whimper in her throat, the hitch in her breath. I've wanted her for months, teased her and thrown all my cards on the table, but this is the first, true indication she's wanted me.

Hell if I'm missing the opportunity to show her exactly what I want from her.

A bell chimes, breaking the spell, and Cara pulls back. I don't let her go far, keeping her close to me. Her eyelids lazily flutter open while I catch my breath.

"Wow," she breathes.

I grin. "Good morning indeed."

She laughs then, and it's breathless because she's still searching for hers and her voice is throaty. She's beautiful, with cheeks flushed and lips glistening.

"If one of you ain't gonna go throw up, mind if I do?" Stella asks.

"Yes," I all but growl. God, she's been a pain in my ass for three weeks. Like she's on a perpetual rag and I know she's not pissed off at her husband, because he's never a jackass. He's the only man who can handle her sass with ease but my patience is all but drained. "Don't be a bitch."

“Don’t make out with your baby mama in the entryway. You just pissed off Bianca and she was planning on a lot of repeat business until you shoved your tongue down Cara’s throat.”

“Fuck off,” I state, rolling my eyes. Bianca will come back because I’m the best tattoo artist in the Northwest. She wants me, she made that clear, even going so far as to fake an orgasm from the pleasure of the needle sting while I worked on her piece earlier. Sometimes it happens. It’s chemical and physical, but faking one?

I’m not a moron. She even threw my name in on a moan that, for the first time ever, almost made me call in Javier to finish up. But whatever.

She might come back because she wants my dick, but she’s not getting anywhere near it.

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“What are you doing there?” I ignore Stella’s scowl and focus on Cara. “Not that I’m complaining, and that was one hell of an enjoyable hello, but is everything okay?”

“Um.” Her brows scrunch together in that cute way she does when she’s thinking. She looks hesitantly to Stella and back to me. “No, not really. Can we talk?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

I usher her to my office and while she takes a seat, I shut the door and go through the motions of cleaning the chair from Bianca, wiping it down and tossing all the tools and ink pods into the trash.

“What’s up?” I ask, looking up from my task when she hasn’t said anything.

Her eyes are glued to my tattoo chair. “Do you do that a lot?”

“Tattoos?” I ask, amused. “Yeah, quite a bit. It is my job.”

“Obviously. I mean that...like that woman’s...”

“You mean do I ink a lot of tits?”

She stammers and a pink spreads to the apple of her cheeks. “Well, yeah. Sort of.”

Ah...so was that the reason for kissing me? Marking her territory when it was obvious I had my hands on another woman’s body? Stings a bit, that it was for show and not real, but I’m not totally buying it.

She was way too into that kiss to be faking it like Bianca's orgasm.

"It's my job, Cara. And trust me, there's nothing sexual about it for me at all when I'm putting a piece on someone, regardless of where it is. It takes too much focus to think about anything else."

She nods and doesn't say anything. I settle my ass on the edge of my desk, blocking her view from the chair, studying her until she lifts her gaze to me.

She blushes again and sucks her bottom lip in between her teeth.

Yeah...she liked the kiss. Good. I plan on doing it again before she leaves the room. This time we'll have privacy.

"So. What do you need?"

"Don't be mad at me, okay?"

"What's wrong?" I lean forward, hands braced on my knees. I can feel the scowl forming and the heat in my chest. No good news ever starts with "Don't be mad."

"I said you can't be mad," she squeaks, and pushes off her chair standing in front of me. "I didn't mean to hide it from you, but I didn't want you worrying, and you've done so much for me."

I throw my hand out and cup the back of her neck, pulling her in so quickly she falls, slamming her hands against my chest. "What's wrong, Cara?"

"I threw up again today," she says quickly, "I threw up again and I've been doing it for the last two weeks and I don't think the meds are working."

Damn, she can ramble. A weight loosens from my chest as she does it, and whatever I thought she was going to say, this isn't nearly as bad. I pull her to me, slowly, tilting my lips up letting her know what's coming right before I seal her lips to mine.

"Omph," she says, silenced by my kiss.

I keep us steady, our lips pressed against each other, fused until her shoulders slump and her fingers loosen their hold from my shirt.

"Okay," I whisper, brushing my lips against hers. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." She nods quickly. "I'm fine, it's just a pain."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Her eyes slide to the left. "You're doing so much. I didn't want to worry you, and I kept thinking it will get better."

"And it's not?"

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“No. I think it’s the food trucks outside. All those smells.” Her nose scrunches up and she gags. “I can’t get away from it, even with my windows closed.”

I really, really like where this is going.

I pull back and smirk. “So what you’re doing here, is you want to ask me...” I let my voice trail off, arching my brows. I know exactly what she needs and it’s exactly what she doesn’t want to ask for.

Finally. Hook. Line. Sinker. I’ve got her right where I want her.

She pushes her bottom lip into a pout. “I’m wondering if I can still move in with you.” Her eyes jump to mine and she lifts her hands. “Just until I’m feeling better.”

“Sure.”

“Sure?”

“Of course you can.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“That I get you to myself twenty-four-seven? You’re absolutely right.”

She rolls her eyes. “I meant, you’re happy you’re finally getting me out of my crappy apartment.”

Damn skippy I am. I'm smart enough not to say it. "No, I'm happy I get to spend more time with you."

Which is also true. I can't get the girl out of my mind, and if I jack off to thoughts of her one more time I might finally rub my favorite body part raw, even with extra lube.

"Is that it?"

"No, Cara," I sigh. Reaching out, I settle my hands on her hips. "I like you. I really liked that kiss you gave me when you saw me. I want more of them. A lot more of the kisses and a lot more of other things too, but you already know that. I like that you felt you could come to me for help, and yes, I'm glad you're moving in with me—"

"Just until I'm feeling better."

Not on her damn life is she moving back out once I have her.

"Okay," I say, showing her I don't believe a word she's saying.

"Braxton—" she starts to say. I recognize the tone.

I don't let her argue.

I seal her lips to mine and I kiss her rebuttal out of her. When we pull apart, we're both more relaxed, both breathing heavy, and my dick is shoving against the zipper of my jeans, proving exactly how much we really like Cara Thompson.

—

"Do you have everything you need?" I scan the small studio apartment. It looks three



times larger now that Cara's scattered mess is neatly packed in suitcases and a few boxes. The only thing left to get to the car is her art supplies, but I'll have to come back for them tomorrow. The car is full of her clothes and shoes and toiletries. I've insisted she take everything, because even while she's protesting, only an act of God will get her moving back into this place.

"Yes, I think so."

She looks so lost, one of her hands pressed to the window, and I feel a small pang of guilt at my earlier thought. This is her home, the place she wanted to move to prove to herself she could live on her own and follow her dreams. She's told me all about it while we've been packing and I've been able to come up with two certainties.

One, she's so damn brave, fighting for something she desperately wants and having no support outside Jenna to make it happen. She's trying to live for Jimmy by living for herself and I admire the hell out of her for it.

Two, I really fucking despise her parents. They have this incredible daughter, and it sounds like she's always been the forgotten one, pushed into a life she's never wanted and never shown an ounce of tender care.

I almost feel like a prick for being excited about her living with me, but not a full one, because I plan on being so good to her she'll never want to move out.

"Cara." I drop my voice, trying to sound patient and soothing, but mostly I'm in a hurry to get the hell out of here. "We should get going. You need some food."

She drops her hand from the window, shaking her head, and when she turns to me, her lips are lifted into a shy smile. "Of course. Thank you again."

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“You don’t have to thank me. Someday you’ll realize I want to take care of you.”

A faint pink slides across her cheekbones and she ducks her head, tucking a chunk of hair behind her ear. I hold out my hand, and when she takes it, I entwine our fingers together, leading her toward the door. We’ve taken three steps on our way out when a firm set of knocks hits the door.

Cara jumps at the sound, looking to the door and to me.

“Who could that be?” I ask.

“No clue. No one shows up unannounced and Dan and Jenna are at his family’s house this weekend. Weird,” she says, dropping her hand from mine and moving toward the door.

She peeks through the peephole and flips her head back to me. “It’s my parents.” Her eyes are wide, face pale, but another set of knocks hits the door.

Fabulous. Just what I want right now.

I cross my arms over my chest, planting my feet. If she thinks there’s any chance in hell I’m going to put up with their bullshit, she’s dead wrong. “Open it.”

“I don’t want to,” she hisses at me.

I roll my eyes and move past her, opening the door and tugging her back with me.

“Mom, Dad, hi,” Cara says, moving away from me. “What are you doing here?”

Her mom waltzes in, dressed in a floor-length shimmering black gown, some sort of puff of fur wrapped around her shoulders. Her dad follows, suavely dressed in a tuxedo, salt and pepper sprinkled along the temples of his jet-black hair. He looks like every asshole lawyer I’ve encountered.

There’s no denying they’re Cara’s parents. She has her father’s facial features, bright blue eyes and the same nose, but she looks almost like a spitting image of her mother, tall and lean, graceful on her feet, and dark brown hair I assume the woman spends a fortune on to maintain the look of her twenty-four-year-old daughter.

“Cara,” her dad says and glances at me. His gaze drops to my arms, I’m assuming to the ink covering them, and he visibly flinches. “You have company.”

She jolts on her feet, gaze bouncing between me and her parents like she can’t decide where to stand. I make the choice for her and move closer to her, resting my hand on her hip.

“Mom, Dad, this is Braxton. Braxton, this is my mom and dad, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson.”

The fact she doesn’t give me their first names doesn’t go unnoticed, but I’m not even given time to say hello.

Her mom’s gaze does a sweep of my body, making an even more putrid look as she takes me in and looks at her daughter. “How are you? We heard you were in the hospital last week. Are you okay?”

I’ve been dismissed. I couldn’t give a shit. It’s the tone in the woman’s voice that makes me clench my jaw tightly.

In my hold, Cara slumps. “Yeah,” she says, brushing a hand across her forehead. “I’m okay. How did you know?”

“Dr. Sherman informed us.”

I have no idea who this guy is, but Cara does, because those slumped shoulders straighten right up. “Hecalledyou?”

“Of course he did,” her dad says. “You can’t expect us not to worry about you when we hear you were at the hospital and you didn’t bother informing us yourself.”

“Holy HIPAA violation, Dad. I can’t believe he’d do that.”

“Please,” her dad says. His tone suggests he’s fighting an eye roll at his daughter, but is too stuck up to do so. “You’ve known him your entire life, and it’s not as if he told us why you were there.”

“Are you okay?” Mrs. Thompson asks.

Something softens in her mom’s eyes as she asks the question though, and for a moment, I think the woman actually cares. Perhaps I’ve judged them all wrong.

Cara looks at me, nibbling on her bottom lip. I know without asking what she wants.

“Tell them,” I say quietly, giving her a nod.

She gathers whatever courage she needs and swivels back to her parents. Clasp ing her hands together, her voice shakes as she says, “I’m fine. I promise. But actually, maybe we could go out to dinner? The four of us? I have something I’d like to talk to you about.”

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“Oh. Well, we’re really busy. We’re just stopping by on our way to see Les Misérables at the Keller Auditorium. Can it wait? I’ve had this night planned for months.”

Bubble popped, they’re definitely here out of duty, maybe a smudge of concern. As soon as they hear that she’s fine, both expressions quickly shift to annoyed. “And as long as you’re okay, we’ll be on our way.”

Her dad. God damn, he’s a cold bastard.

He presses his hand to his wife’s back, gesturing for them to turn, and I don’t know what it is about that moment, what rushes through Cara’s mind, but as their backs are turned to us, intent on leaving, Cara blurts, “I’m pregnant.”

Oh. Shit. My hand tightens at her waist.

Her parents both freeze and spin on their heels.

“Excuse me, young lady?” her dad says, his voice stern, but not nearly as stuck-up as her mom.

Her mom’s lips are parted, hand at her chest as if Cara’s just delivered a devastating blow. Probably to them, she has, they’ve haven’t concealed their disdain for me since the moment they walked in.

“Braxton and I, well, we’re having a baby.” She tosses her hands up and lamely says, “Surprise.”

“You did this to her?” Her dad’s gaze shoots to me. “You did this to her, you can take care of it.”

Every nerve in my body pulls tight at the venom in his voice. “I am taking care of her, sir.”

“No,” he says, his voice thickening. “I mean, you take care of it.”

My hands clench into fists. If he wasn’t Cara’s dad, I’d punch him.

His implication isn’t unnoticed by anyone. Next to me, Cara gasps and barks out “No.”

“We’re having this child, sir,” I grit out. Because, damn, I hate him, but I won’t lower myself to his level, the fucking prick. Being respectful is difficult, though. “And I am taking care of your daughter.”

“How?” Her mom laughs ridiculously, as if I’m ridiculous, me taking care of Cara is ridiculous. “Living in this hovel? Panhandling for money?”

“Oh my God,” Cara says.

I begin praying for all the self-control in the world. If God hears me, I hope like hell he answers this prayer even though I’ve never asked him for a thing a day in my life. “Get out.”

“Now, Cara, this is silly. Come home, we’ll forget this mistake,” her mom says, brushing her hand out toward Cara’s slightly expanded stomach. “And we’ll get you back to school where you belong. We’ve allowed this silly rebellion to go on long enough but we understand you loved Jimmy and you’re still grieving. Let’s not push this tantrum too far.”

Her mother speaks like she's having tea with the queen of England. Proper and dismissive and like we're some tiny, little fun game to play.

"I've had enough," I say. I pull Cara with me until we're at the door to her apartment, scooting around them. She's frozen in my arms, her body chilling like they've doused her with an ice bath. My only concern is her. "Get the hell out. Don't call Cara, and never drop yourself at our doorstep until you can apologize. Your daughter is pregnant, giving you a grandchild. That's what she's doing and we're doing it together. If you can't support her when she needs it, then she doesn't need you."

"Please," her father scoffs. "Like you can handle it."

I have the enormous urge to explain exactly what I do, the mid-six-figure salary I make, and point him in the direction of my condo. "As a matter of fact," I sneer but Cara pats my stomach.

Whispering in a voice so hoarse it sounds like she's been screaming, she says, "Don't. Just don't, Braxton."

"I can make this better." And, good Lord, why do I give a shit about trying to?

"It's not worth it." Tears swim in her eyes and she blinks, looking back at her parents. "They're not worth it. This is why I haven't told you, because I knew you'd be cruel, I just didn't think you'd be this cruel. Jimmy would be disgusted with you and you know it, and I don't want to look at you."

"That is highly inappropriate," her mother says, and I bark out a laugh I can't contain.

"Are you kidding me? She's inappropriate? Your entire visit is off the charts."

"Young man," her dad says, "I expect respect from you, some..." He waves his hand

out toward me, like he can't even imagine what to call me. "Braxton" would be nice, but I'm certain they don't remember my name.

"Give respect to your daughter and I'll show you respect. Until then, get out of her home. She doesn't need this stress from you."



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I'm barely holding back the fury that's boiling my veins. My head might explode, my brain is so damn hot.

Cara sniffs and her entire body is trembling in my hold. Fuck them for making her cry.

"Just go," she says, sniffing again and wiping her cheeks. Her parents barely spare her a glance. "Just go. Perhaps once you've let this news settle, we can discuss it further."

"Yes," her mother says, glancing at the dainty and elegant Rolex on her wrist. "Let's do that. We really must go."

"Do the right thing," her dad says, and they turn, her mother's dress swirling in a cloud of shimmering black at her feet as they leave, closing the door behind him.

"Funny," Cara chokes out. "I thought I was."

She turns into my chest, cries, and I wrap her tightly in my arms, resisting the urge to slam both of their stuck-up faces into a wall until they see sense.

## Chapter 17

Cara

"I ordered pizza. Should be here in thirty minutes."

“Thanks.” I’m in absolutely no mood to eat.

Braxton sits down on the couch next to me and hands me a bottled water. Reluctantly, I remove my hand from where I’ve been resting it on Lucy’s head, which she has perched on my lap, and take the water. I have no idea how long I’ve sat here, curled in a ball on the corner of his couch, staring out the windows at the darkened view of Portland, but it’s been long enough the sun is now long gone and the skyline is dotted with lights from buildings and cars and a few boats on the river.

I’ve barely paid attention to Braxton moving around his condo, but I’ve registered the sounds of him making multiple trips in and out and the sound of my luggage clunking through the space as he takes it somewhere.

At some point, he took Lucy on a walk and when he brought her back in, she ran to me, licked my face, and settled in her spot on the floor in front of me, peering up at me with sad lonely puppy dog eyes that must be a mirror image of what is in my own.

My parents really, truly suck, and it sucks more that they’re the only parents I have.

Who treats someone horribly and nastily? I still can’t fathom everything they spewed tonight and how horrifically embarrassing it is that not only did Braxton witness it, but he was the object of so much of their trash.

I’ve been painfully reminded how little my parents truly care about me.

“It’s not like I expected a ticker-tape parade or anything,” I say aloud, more to myself than Braxton, who’s sitting next to me. His arm is draped over the back of the couch, his hand fiddling with my hair on my shoulder.

His presence is relaxing despite his lack of response. He’s angry, that was evident from the moment they left and he swept me into his car, mumbling and cursing,

maneuvering through the streets of Portland like he was leading a high-speed chase.

“I mean,” I continue, not even knowing why I’m bothering, “I didn’t expect excitement and for my mom to begin planning a baby shower or anything of the sort. And I’ve obviously been avoiding telling them, but at no point in time did I think it would go like that.”

“Perhaps you took them by surprise. They did show up at your apartment worried about you.”

I huff a laugh and twist so I can look into his eyes. Eyes so dark even he can’t hide the taste of his lie. “Cute.” I smile for the first time in hours. “It’s cute you’d give them that much credit.”

“Who’s Dr. Sherman?”

“My dad’s best friend. In a perfect world, in their perfect world, I’d marry his son, Graham. Miles Sherman and my dad went to prep school together. He’s also the CFO of the board at Portland General. Doesn’t make sense how he even saw my name as a patient, but I have no doubt he knows exactly why I was there. It’s only slightly impressive he didn’t tell my parents everything and spill the beans.”

Braxton is silent, although his jaw is working, telling me has plenty to say, but I don’t care. I don’t want to hear it and I don’t want to talk about it.

Today has been exhausting. I rest my head back on his arm, settling in to him as his arm wraps around my shoulders and he holds me against him. Closing my eyes, I inhale the rich scent of him, and blow out a long, calming breath. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I just want to forget about everything that’s happened so far today.”

Even as I say it, I think of Stella and the words she hurled at me. I haven’t told

Braxton and I have no desire to. She's important to him and she might be right. I might be absolutely no good for Braxton, but it has nothing to do with where—or who—I came from. It has much more to do with the fact I've essentially saddled him with a family and a child long before either of us wanted it.

"I don't want to forget everything about today," Braxton says, and even through my closed lids I can tell he's smiling. He has that teasing tone in his voice he uses when something sexual is about to follow. "I really, really liked that kiss."

"I knew you were going to say that." I open my eyes, smiling, expecting to see him grinning down at me, but instead there's a heat in his expression. He might be teasing, but he's dead serious.

His hand slides to the back of my head and he dips his, tilting at the last moment before his lips press against mine. There's nothing powerful about the kiss. It's the exact opposite of when I slammed my mouth to his earlier and essentially staked my claim on him, but it's so...so much better.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

The gentle brush of his lips on mine gives me just a hint of his taste and the restraint he's using not to push it further. I sink into him, into his scent and his touch and the brief skim of his lips over mine. A shiver rolls through me, sparking pleasure in the tips of my fingers and toes.

This man. He just does it for me in myriad ways.

"Braxton," I whisper, leaning in.

"No more," he says, pulling back. He smirks. "No more until after we eat, and then, I promise you, I'll take away all the horrible parts about your day and replace them with good ones."

"What bad parts?" I ask.

He laughs, tucks me into his shoulder and kisses the top of my head. Then he kicks his feet up on the coffee table, flicks the television on and pulls up Netflix. We watch mindless television until the pizza arrives.

---

Lips brush against my neck, followed by a flick of a tongue and a slight bite of teeth. "Mmm." I shift back. I really like this dream I'm having.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Braxton says. "I need to get Lucy outside."

Hm. In my dreams, Braxton does and says a lot of things but he never talks about his

dog.

“Cara,” he says, as I press back again. This time he chuckles, his hand slides to my stomach. “As much as I’m liking this sleepy side of you, we need to get moving.”

He doesn’t sound like he wants to move. He doesn’t feel like he does either, not with his erection pressed up against my backside.

“Honey, you have to stop that, as much as I’m enjoying it.” Now he’s groaning, in a not so pleasant way. And since when does he stop me? Which means...

I flip my eyes open and flinch. “Um. What?”

His breath is at my ear, tickling me. “Good morning.”

I wipe the sleepy haze from my mind and blink. Oh God.

We’re in his living room, and it’s now bright out. Netflix isn’t on and the fire he turned on last night after we ate and I took a shower isn’t on anymore either.

“Braxton?” I ask, still frozen, still feeling him along my length of my body, his arm is still at my stomach, beneath my long-sleeved shirt. The fact I even say his name is ridiculous. Who else would I be sleeping with?

Oh no. We slept together? On his couch?

“Good morning,” he says again, and as he does, his arm beneath my head slides out. He shifts, until he’s practically on top of me and I’m on my back. Wow...he looks really, really good in the morning.

I reach out my hand and slide it against his cheek. It’s been days since he shaved and

the coarse hairs tickle my palm. “Hey. We fell asleep?”

His eyes dance back and forth between mine and he grins. “You did. I didn’t want to wake you up by moving you so I settled down with you.”

My eyes pop open. “What?”

“Told you I wanted to sleep with you again.” He grins shamelessly as I roll my eyes, then he moves, and when he does, my eyes widen further.

He settles himself on top of me, and my knees— traitorous body—open for him, allowing him to lower until his erection is at my center.

“Oh.” I can’t suck in the breath before it escapes me.

“Yeah,” he says, moving closer. With his nose, he presses my face to the side, and trails kisses across my cheek, to my jaw, back to my ear. “And I’m really, really liking where this might be going, been wanting you in the morning just like this for a long time. But I really do have to get Lucy out.”

Who gives a crap about the mutt? “Not yet.”

I slide my hand from his cheek to his shoulder, down his arm, to his side. God, I’ve missed this, and with him so close, pressed against me, I really, really want it.

“Come with me? We can get you some juice and take Lucy somewhere to get some breakfast.”

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I really don't want to walk the dog in the morning chill.

I really don't want Braxton to move off me.

I really want to stay right where we are, doing something other than talking.

"Okay," I mumble instead but I can't hide the disappointment in my voice.

Braxton bites my shoulder playfully and grins against me. "I like where your mind is at though. But I'd prefer to take you when I know you won't throw up all over me."

Awesome thought.

"How are you feeling?" he says, as if we're both thinking of the real reason I'm here.

It only takes me a second. "I need crackers and my meds."

"I'll get them for you." He slides off me, rolling to his feet, and my hands drift away from him. "Then we'll get Lucy."

"How about I stay here, get some more sleep, and you wake me up when you get back from your walk?"

"I would, because I like that sexy tone in your voice," he calls out, walking away from me. "But when I take you again it's going to be in my bed where Lucy can't bother us and like I said, when I know you aren't going to puke. So get up and let's get moving."



My mind wanders to his bed. I haven't seen it yet or his room. He's only shown me the guest room where I slept before.

I don't even know what's gotten into me. Morning sex isn't my thing—all that stale breath has always grossed me out.

“Fine.” I didn't even brush my teeth last night before we passed out on the couch. I have to smell disgusting and if Braxton kisses me, I don't want remnants of last night's pepperoni and sausage on my breath.

“Gross,” I mutter and push to a sitting position as he walks back in and sets down my typical breakfast. Juice, crackers, and medicine. I nibble on some crackers while he watches, and when I feel steady on my feet, I stand.

“Good?”

“Not rushing to the toilet quite yet.” It's so awesome that my vomit is such an important discussion topic. “But I do need to use the restroom.”

“Don't take too long.”

“Whatever,” I grumble, slowly making my way down the hall to the guest room.

I'm just about to round the corner when I hear Braxton call out, “I take it you're not a morning person.”

I give my answer in a one-fingered salute, to which he laughs.

Chapter 18

Braxton

The disdain of Cara's parents' disapproval from last night hangs over her through the morning, through our walk with Lucy and well past that until she pushes up off the couch and declares she's going to go to work for a few hours.

We haven't talked about their surprise arrival last night. I definitely didn't want to push it after seeing her so shaken up, and I'm hesitant to do it later this afternoon after she returns from work.

Unfortunately, her parents being dicks isn't something that's going to disappear overnight either.

I can, though, find a way to bring her through this conversation in a way that might upset her, but can bring her relief afterward too, so while she's at work, I make a phone call. Once that's done and plans are confirmed, I haul my ass to a liquor store to pick up whatever empty boxes they have. Then I go back to her place and carefully pack up her remaining art supplies and canvases.

She's fucking talented. I flip through her completed canvases, stopping every few moments when one of her urban pieces hits me in the gut. I don't know if she's traveled all over the country in order to paint some of these, if she looks at photos and imagines better or different lighting, or if her mind is just that beautiful of a fucking place to be, but none of her completed pieces belong stacked inside a shitty studio apartment.

They're way better than Marco what's-his-face's psychedelic bullshit from the showing two weeks ago.

Which only leaves the question if she's shown them to anyone, if Luca knows how talented of a painter he has working for him.

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Hell, some of these don't even look like paintings, but photographs, they're so crystal clear.

I take extra care with her unfinished pieces, packing things up as best I can, trying to set it in boxes how it's grouped all over her floor and in some bins she already has stacked to the side of her easels.

When I get back to my place, the concierge, Pete, assists me in bringing everything upstairs.

By the time I hear the front door unlocking, Cara using the key I gave her before she left for work, I'm almost done setting everything up in the room I showed her last week could be hers if she did move in with me.

Lucky me it only took food trucks and two weeks for me to get her where I want her.

Grinning, I wipe dust off my hands and head out to the living room. Like always, Lucy has greeted Cara and Cara's ass is to her heels as she bends down, rubbing the dog's head and petting her.

I've had Lucy for months now, and while a few people seemed interested at first, the longer I have her, the harder it's getting to want to let her go.

Plus, now that she's all about Cara, I don't even know if I want to give her up. She's a mixture of fierce-looking and dopey, but she'll be a big damn dog in just a few months and a good protector to have around when I'm not here.

On the other hand, I'm also getting ready to have a baby. What asshole raises a kid and a massive dog in a penthouse apartment?

But what else am I supposed to do? Give up the view I've always wanted? The view I promised Irvin I'd have?

"Hey," Cara says, snapping me out of my runaway thoughts.

I push them to the back of my mind. "How was work?"

"Good." Cara stands, laughing lightly as Lucy bumps her thigh. "It was slow, but it helped to stay busy."

"Have you eaten?" Usually when she gets busy she forgets.

She rolls her eyes, dropping her purse on the couch. I'm not a neat freak, but I like shit put away. I'm quickly learning Cara tosses whatever she has wherever it can go. But there's something about her purse on my couch, her black boots kicked off onto the floor near the entryway, that doesn't bug me.

I like her crap strewn about my place.

"Yes, I ate. Luca insisted and bought me French onion soup and a salad."

"Good. Come here." I hold out my hand, waiting as she gives me a curious look and heads my way. We're at the mouth to the hall and her new art room is just past where I'm standing, but she still has a glimpse of a smile tugging on her lips as she makes her way to me.

"What is it?"

“A surprise.”

“Surprise?” Her brows bounce up. “A good one?”

“I hope so.”

I take her hand when she’s close enough, pulling her behind me, and then I push open the door to the room. We’re blasted with the afternoon sun shining directly inside the windows and a gasp comes from behind me.

“What did you do?” Her hands are at her mouth, eyes wide, skipping and dancing over all of her stuff. I had some empty shelves, so I placed a lot of her smaller buckets of brushes and rags on those. Her paints are separated by type: acrylic, latex, watercolors, on the floor in wooden buckets she already had. Her paint dishes are stacked on another shelf, and her canvases, the completed ones, are spread throughout the room, where I’ve hung two of my favorite ones.

One’s a view of Lovejoy Street, with its boardwalk sidewalks, metal chairs placed outside a well-loved bakery. Trees line the sidewalk, cars zip along the street, black canopies overhang the doorways of various restaurants. The entire painting is as if she pulled up a chair and an easel, one sunny, slow morning, and painted until she’d finished.

It’s amazing, and it’s part of Portland, and as soon as I saw it, I had to hang it so it could be seen every day.

“You did this?” Cara asks, walking into the room, stopping in front of her painting.

“It’s too incredible to be hidden behind other canvases.” Her cheeks turn a rosy pink and she shakes her head. “Have you ever showed these to Luca? They’re way better than that other artist’s stuff.”

“Thanks.” She laughs but it’s an uneasy sound. Tucking a small chunk of her hair behind her ear, she shakes her head again. “I haven’t. He knows I paint, but I’m not trained. It’s just in my head.”

Which makes her that much more impressive.

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“You should show him. He’d give you your own show in a second.” And I’d bet money down she’d sell out.

“You’re sweet,” she says, turning from her painting to the room. Her fingers brush over the tops of her canvases, eyes examining the bins and buckets where I’ve placed everything, as if she’s mentally calculating all of her stuff is here.

“I’m honest.”

She makes another laughing sound, like she’s humoring me, but joke’s on her. I’m taking all this, or photos of them, into Luca first chance I get. If she wants to be an artist, she shouldn’t hide everything because she lacks confidence.

“I can’t believe you did all this today.”

“I told you that if you moved in, this can be your art studio.”

“But this is temporary,” she reminds me.

I shrug. Whatever. She can keep thinking it if she wants.

“Right,” she mutters, her lips tugging up at the ends. Shaking her head, as if she can’t believe either me or what I’ve done, she walks to the windows. “It’s beautiful here. So perfect to paint in. Thank you, Braxton.”

“I thought it’d help,” I say, letting the words not spoken linger in the air...after last night.

“Yeah.” Her hand rests against the glass and I move to her, eating up the space between in long, quick strides before I settle my hands on her hips and slide them toward her stomach. I rest my chest against her back and settle my chin on the top of her head.

“What are you thinking?”

“They’re not the nicest people in the first place, but even I’m shocked at what they said last night. I keep replaying it in my mind, keep hearing them telling you to take care of it. It sucks.” In the window’s reflection, her chin wobbles. “I think...I think I’ll give them a few days to calm down and absorb everything and maybe see if we can talk to them again?”

Sounds like hell. “Think they’ll be willing to do that? Because I’m not going to lie, Cara, I really don’t know if I’ll be able to control my temper if your dad is a dick like that to you again.”

“I know.” She sounds sad, almost broken. Then, a cold chuckle bursts through her lips. “I wonder what they’d say if we invited them here for dinner.”

I grin, press my lips to her head. “You want that, we can do it.” It’ll kill me to be polite to them, but at least if it’s in my own damn place, I can kick them out. But I also know the game she’s playing, and her parents aren’t going to give a shit I live in a penthouse, they’ll still look at me and see a thug.

“Nah. I don’t want that. I keep wanting my parents to be decent people and accept people for who they are. Or me, at the very least.”

“They should.”

“They won’t.” Her hand falls from the window and she presses it to the back of my



palm. Her skin is cool from the glass. I flip my hand over and hold hers to her stomach, my hands on top of hers. “They won’t ever do it. I don’t even know if it’s worth the argument. It might make me immature, but I think it’s best if I avoid them for a while. I’ll let them come to me. I have no doubt they’ll have more opinions they’ll feel the need to share.”

She spits out “opinions” like the distasteful word I’m sure it will be from them. I figure they’ll have demands and expectations and requirements, not necessarily thoughts and opinions, but who the fuck cares. I don’t.

And if last night’s meeting taught me anything, it’s that Cara has a backbone not only when it comes to her parents, but for fighting for what she wants.

“Whatever you want, Cara. I’m here to support you in that, you know that, right?”

Her fingers press more tightly against her stomach and she nods. “Yeah. I get that.”

“Good. And now, since we’ve got that shit out of the way, I’ve got more plans for you, so get your butt to your room, shower, and get dressed. We’re going out.”

Her shoulders slump. “Do we have to?”

“Yup. We’re picking up Dan and Jenna for dinner at Luella’s Ristorante. I already have reservations made.” At least tonight she’ll spend it with people happy for her, who love her and care about her. Hopefully, that will wash away the remaining pall from last night. At least she’ll remember she has people in her life who give a crap.

She sighs. “I don’t know, Brax—”

“Want you to spend the night having fun. You haven’t had it easy, haven’t had the energy. I want to give you this, Cara.”

“No, it’s not that. I want to see Jenna. I’m just not sure I can stomach Italian food.”

Finally, an easy fucking problem to solve. “What do you want, then? I’ll change the reservations.”

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She turns slowly, and I barely loosen my arms, but let them drift to her hips as she moves until she's facing me. "Are you always this agreeable?"

"I think you'll remember there are definitely times I prefer to be a bit bossy, honey." Her cheeks flush the way I knew they would. "But I really don't want you puking at Luella's. It's a nice place."

She laughs and shakes her head. "Whatever."

"What sounds good to you?"

"I don't know. Steak, maybe?"

"You got it. Go get ready. I'll make the calls."

"Thank you. Thank you for making all of this so easy for me." Before I can tell her it's not a problem, because it's not a problem to change reservations from Luella's to the City Grill where I actually know one of the sous-chefs, she slides her hand to my cheek, rolls to her toes, and presses her lips to mine.

She tastes like sunshine and sweetness and I take her kiss, losing myself in the feel of her, the fact she's kissing me and not the other way around, and I wonder for a brief moment, if we can just cancel dinner, order in again, and have the entire night to ourselves.

Before I can decide which is better, she pulls back and licks her bottom lip slowly, sealing in the taste of me and grinning.

“I’ll go get dressed.”

I watch her leave, my gaze trained to the swell of her luscious ass as she leaves. Then I readjust my hard dick, make some calls, and head to my own bedroom to get dressed.

The City Grill requires a suit. It’ll be the second time in two weeks I’m wearing one for her. If she eats well, has some laughs, and enjoys the night with her friends and perhaps shares her appreciation of that fun with me later in less-clothed ways, I’ll wear a fucking toga if that’s what it takes to make her happy.

## Chapter 19

Cara

I’m just over thirteen weeks pregnant. My previously nonexistent tummy area now holds a small pooch that makes wearing my dressy clothes difficult.

I’m also learning pregnancy cravings come at the absolute worst times possible.

The four of us have been seated at a beautiful table on the thirtieth floor of the U.S. Bancorp Tower. Beams between the windows are covered in warming golds and tans, cherrywood chairs and white tablecloths...it’s elegant and relaxed, casual but classy, a place that makes you want to settle in with good friends and good food and enjoy a great night of dining and company.

When we arrived earlier at the base of the building, I’d looked all the way to the top, knowing exactly where we were headed, and with an awe in my voice I didn’t bother to hide, I had turned to Braxton. “You got us reservations here? How?”

“It’s all about who you know, honey,” he’d said.

Behind us, Jenna had snickered.

Turns out one of his repeat clients at MadInk is a sous-chef at the restaurant and was able to pull some strings, not only getting us an excellent table with a window view so we could see the Cascade Range in the distance, but he's had a complimentary bottle of champagne delivered to our table as well.

Lucky for them. Jenna laughed when I glared at her happily filling her champagne glass while I'm stuck with sparkling water.

I'm scanning my menu knowing their Wagyu top sirloin is succulent and mouth-watering and their rice rolls are made to utter perfection along with their rack of lamb, when I glance over the prosciutto stuffed chicken, which I've had before and is amazing, and feel my stomach roll.

"This was a really great idea, Braxton," Jenna says, forcing me to lift my gaze. "It's really great to have all of us together."

"No problem," he says, nodding toward her.

She takes a sip of her champagne and goes back to her menu, whispering to Dan about what sounds good to him.

My gaze goes to the mountain range and I take several slow and deep breaths to try to settle my stomach. When that doesn't work, I dig into my small clutch, grateful I remembered to bring some of my ginger candies.

"What's wrong?" Braxton asks when I crumple the plastic wrapper and shove it inside my handbag.

"Nothing. I'll be fine." I take a sip of my water, the iced chill doing nothing to soothe

my quickly heating skin.

I know exactly what this means, and I'm regretting every single moment of what I know is sure to come.

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One wrong whiff of a chicken being hauled past me and I'll be embarrassing myself and our table.

God. Sometimes being pregnant truly sucks. I might be used to the idea, growing excited on the best days to think about raising a child, but mostly it's just terrifying and nauseating and now, on a night when Braxton's planned to hand me a slice of fun, all I can think of is my food ending up all over the floor.

Shit.

"You look white as a sheet," Braxton says. He presses his hand to my forehead and scowls. "And you're hot. Why didn't you tell me you're not feeling well?"

"I'm fine," I grit out.

"Um, you don't look fine," Jenna says. She circles her finger in the air, gesturing toward my face. "You look sick."

"Just a wave of morning-slash-all-day sickness. It'll pass. I promise."

She gives me a concerned look and glances at Braxton. "We can go somewhere else."

"Good idea." He crumples his napkin on the table.

I grab on to his forearm as he stands from the table. "No, we don't have to. I love this place."

It's true. I do. And I flash him pleading eyes. I hate we're making such a fuss when I've already changed the restaurant we were originally going to go to. This sucks. And yet, as Braxton grins down at me, he's not the least bit annoyed.

"I want you to have a good night with friends, the place doesn't mean shit to me. Let me go speak to the host and explain what's going on and settle our tab."

We've ordered nothing except the champagne that was free, but it's not easy to get reservations on a Saturday. If I've made him waste money, I'm going to kick myself.

"It's fine," Jenna says. "We'll go wherever sounds good to you, or back to Braxton's and get pizza or takeout. I just want to hang out. It's been a while. Plus—" she grins and winks, "—I want to keep swooning over the way Braxton looks at you."

She's delusional. "Jenna—" I warn.

"How does he look at her?" Dan asks.

"Like he wants to get her alone and rip that dress off her." She grins.

Dan laughs and shakes his head. "What does that look like?"

She leans toward her husband and grins wickedly. "Sort of like you did earlier, when I came down wearing this dress."

"Ah." He nods. Jenna flushes. Their cuteness might be what makes me puke. "Now I get it."

"Gross," I moan and they both turn to me, cheeks flushed with apparently a night of loving already taken care of, or at least started. "Stop."



“Come on.” Jenna stands, and Dan helps her into her coat before coming to my side and helping me with mine. “Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know. Give me a minute to think about it.”

I wait until we’re out of the elevator, the quick speed rushing through me and giving me a small dose of motion sickness, something else I get to thank pregnancy for.

When we’re out in the fresh air, Jenna asks me again.

“You know, I think nachos sound great. And chips and salsa, maybe some queso.” I’m already dreaming of a hot and spicy burrito from El Gaucho when Braxton laughs.

“Got it. Let’s roll.”

—

“This whole night reminds me exactly why I’m not planning on knocking you up anytime soon, babe.” This comes from Dan in the backseat of Braxton’s car.

“Excuse me?”

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“Puking, sickness. Hell, you’re picky enough. We don’t need to add to it.”

If I didn’t know Dan well enough to know he’s only teasing with his typical dry humor, I’d punch him.

Based on his oomph and the way he rubs his bicep when I glance back in the rearview mirror, I figure Jenna did it for me.

“Shut up. You’re totally making me pregnant on our anniversary.”

“I am?” he asks, laughing.

I look at Braxton. He’s grinning, clearly enjoying their banter. Knowing Dan, he started it just to not make me feel such an asshole for forcing us out of a really nice restaurant to head to a hole-in-the-wall Mexican place.

“Yes.”

“Why our anniversary?”

“Because.” Jenna sighs like she’s exhausted from even having to explain this. “Then we’ll get Cara’s hand-me-downs.”

Dan barks out a laugh. Braxton’s shoulder shakes like he’s fighting one.

I turn in my seat. “What? Are you crazy?”

“No!” Jenna exclaims, and her eyes are wide and serious. “Have you read how much baby gear you need? There’s like a shit ton. Plus all the clothes they only fit into for a few weeks, nursing items you won’t need after a few months. Pumps and pillows and cribs and playpens and car seats and strollers.”

My eyes pop open with every item she lists. I haven’t even considered the gear...or the cost.

“What does that have to do with our anniversary?” Dan asks. Admittedly, I’m wondering the same thing. As nutty as Jenna is, she’s also a planner. And a huge fan of upcycling.

“Seasons. Then the babies will be born the same time of year and ours will be able to wear the same clothes as Cara’s.”

“They’re so fucking bonkers,” Braxton says, whispering to me. He’s been holding my hand and at his statement, he squeezes it, while Jenna and Dan continue arguing in the backseat.

“They drive each other crazy.”

“I think it’s their form of love.”

“Hey!” Jenna says, and her hand slaps my headrest. “Don’t talk about us like we’re not here, and help me out anyway, Cara. Doesn’t the idea of everything you need make you hyperventilate?”

An embarrassed heat flushes my cheeks. “I haven’t even thought about it,” I admit on a mutter.

“What? Aren’t you reading that book I told you about?”

“Um...” I shrug and look at Braxton.

He looks just as befuddled as me. “What book?”

“What to Expect When You’re Expecting!” Jenna shouts. “It’s like the bible of all things baby- and pregnancy-related. How are you two not prepared for this!?”

“In my defense,” Braxton says, flicking his gaze to Jenna in the mirror and back to the road, “I’ve only known about this for a few weeks.”

“And you’re a guy,” Dan cuts in.

He nods. “And I’m a guy.”

“And what does that mean?” Jenna snaps. “That only women are supposed to know this? You do know you’re responsible for a pregnancy too, right?”

“Yeah,” Dan says, face cold as stone. “The good parts.”

I burst into a laugh, Braxton does the same. “Cowboy down, Jenna, you’re not even pregnant yet.”

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“Well,” she huffs. “It’s never too early to be prepared.” She kicks the back of my seat. “But it can be too late. So you need to get on it.”

“Message received, Mom.” I groan again, but this time it’s in delight as we pull into El Gaucho’s. Ever since I thought of it, my tummy has been rumbling with excitement. So far, there are at least two dozen items on their menu, one I’ve memorized from earlier visits, that I desperately want.

Braxton pulls into a spot near the front door and doesn’t turn off the car. “Wait here a minute,” he says and jumps out of the car, slamming his door shut before I can ask him what’s going on.

He returns just as quickly, slides into his seat, and hands me their menu. “Still sound good?” he asks, opening it for me and holding it up.

“You’re funny.” I’m laughing. Everything sounds amazing. Fajitas, enchiladas, burritos. Oh, churros. A giant bowl of salsa with their jalapeño queso dip. Lord, I might just order two of everything. But it’s his thoughtfulness that fills me with an even more delicious sensation.

Good Lord. This guy. “It sounds great.”

“Good.” He snaps the menu closed. “Just wanted to make sure.”

“Nice move,” Dan says, unfolding himself from the backseat. “Way to think ahead.”

“I have good ideas occasionally,” Braxton returns. He whips off his tie and suit coat,

apparently more than happy to dine at a three-star Mexican restaurant, and he still doesn't seem to care about not going to City Grill.

I'll make it up to him. Someday when I can afford to pay, I'll take him there myself.

"Let's eat," Dan groans. "I'm fucking starved. All this damn waiting..."

He winks at me, letting me know he's just teasing.

Then Jenna meets him at the side of the car and smacks him across the back of the head. "God, you're an idiot."

He pulls her to him and kisses her. "But I'm your idiot, and don't ever forget that you chose me."

"I must have been drunk."

I'm still in the car, turned, and watching it happen when Braxton dips his head back inside. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah." I smile. This time I mean it. "It's perfect."

## Chapter 20

Cara

My stomach is so full it looks like I'm growing a massive alien baby instead of something currently the size of a bean. My sides and cheek muscles ache from laughing.

El Gaucho ended up being the perfect place to eat dinner. We were able to relax and

laugh, and have some fun, and by the time we drop Dan and Jenna off, Jenna way too drunk off her whole two margaritas, I can't think of a better way I could have spent the night.

"Thank you for making me go out tonight," I tell Braxton.

His hand is holding mine, something he took at dinner and has barely let go of. He squeezes it. "I'm glad you had fun. Did we wear you out?"

"No, surprisingly I don't feel that tired." It's probably the adrenaline. I should be exhausted. It's well past eight, which has been when I've been passing out on the couch most nights. Perhaps tonight is what I've needed, though. Good food and great friends and an even better man at my side to remind me that we might be having a baby, but our life and future are far from over. "You're a good man, Braxton."

"I had a good role model."

He turns back to the road, zips us in and out of traffic, and while he goes silent, I know he's thinking of Irvin. From the little bit he's told me the man practically raised him. "What would he say about you getting some girl pregnant?"

I can't imagine the man Braxton has described would react the way my own flesh and blood did.

His hand squeezes mine firmly. "He'd tell me not to fuck it up. Be a man. Do my part. Be there." Of course he would. I'm about ready to agree with Irvin when Braxton shakes his head. "No, that's not true." He glances at me quickly before turning a corner, taking us to the underground garage of his building. "Irvin wouldn't say that to me."

"What would he say then?"

“He’d tell me that having a child is the greatest thing in the entire fucking world. That there’s nothing like holding life you created and it’s scary as hell every moment of the day, but it’s the most rewarding thing he’s ever done. He’d tell me to be a man worthy of that honor.”



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“God,” I say, my tears already burning with emotion. “You are, you know. You’re exactly the kind of man Irvin would say that about.”

He’s worthy of all of it. Hell, I think between us, Braxton is already more emotionally prepared for this baby than I am and not only have I known longer, I’m the one carrying it.

“Thanks, Cara,” he says. He stops in his parking space and shoves the gearshift into park. Before I can blink, his hand is at my neck, he’s pulling me to him, and then his mouth is on mine.

It’s glorious, and as surprised as I am, I surrender to the feel of him, the suddenness of his kiss, the force of it, as if he needs to touch and taste me more than he currently needs breath.

He’s intoxicating, overwhelming, and while he looks so scary and large all muscled and inked, he’s the kindest, best man I’ve ever met.

I’m overwhelmed with all of him, all of who he is and how he makes me feel, safe and protected in such a difficult situation, and yet I know he’s not doing it out of a sense of responsibility, but because he genuinely cares.

And while we kiss, my body responds, warms, and tingles travel down my arms and sides, until my nipples bud, my center is throbbing.

“Braxton,” I whisper, pulling away so my lips brush against his. “Take me upstairs.”

He smirks. “Where did you think we were going?”

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“This is not exactly where I expected this night to lead,” I tease, mesmerized by the sight of his ass in those dress pants while he bends over the huge soaking tub. He dragged me straight through his condo direct to the bathroom, barely giving me time to kick off my heels when we entered his home. I figured he was just in a hurry to get to the good stuff, but nope. Braxton’s bathroom is massive and white, but other than that, I’m not paying attention at all to the decor or finishings. I’m too focused on the curve and strength of his body.

He stands, flicking water from his fingers into the filling tub. “Turn around.”

“Um.” I move slowly, surprised when his hands, warm from checking the water, are at my neck, sliding down my zipper. “What are you doing?”

“I want you to take a bath while I feed Lucy and take her for a quick walk.” From the bedroom, Lucy’s whine is distinct, paired with her pawing at the kennel I know she wants to exit.

“A bath.” This is definitely not what I meant when I told him to take me upstairs.

“I’m certainly not letting you sit down on the bed or the couch. You’ll be asleep before I get Lucy’s leash on her.”

I could argue, I don’t. He’s probably right. If I sit down now and relax, it’s most likely lights out. This is one night I don’t want to miss. Every brief touch of his fingers skimming down my skin as he removes my dress builds the anticipation of what I’m hoping is still to come.

“Braxton,” I sigh as his hands reach mine at my side, pushing my sleeves off my arms. His fingers trail along mine, brushing back up my arms.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he murmurs. In the mirror, I watch our reflection as he dips his head. I know it’s coming, that delicious feel of his lips on my shoulder, but I still jolt from the pleasure of it as his lips press against my sensitive skin. “When I get back, I’ll join you, so take your time.”

His eyes meet mine in the mirror, his lips lifted into a smile against my shoulder. “Got it?”

“Yeah,” I whisper, forcing out a reply. I can’t take my eyes off him, the way he’s still dressed and I’m fully exposed except for the thong he hasn’t removed, my dress so low-cut in the back it didn’t allow for a bra.

I turn to him, his hands slip to my hips, and I step back out of my hold.

The last time we were together was rushed and frantic, drunken kisses and passionate lust. My clothes had been whipped off without regard, with no time for seduction.

This time, I want to own all of his responses, draw them out.

I stand before him in nothing but my satin thong and the length of my hair covering my breasts.

And then I strip away the satin.

“Fuck,” he groans, his gaze fixed to the tops of my thighs and then slowly drifts up, as if he’s trying to memorize every curve of my body, the slope of my hips, the curve of my stomach. In front of him, I’m entirely unembarrassed at my nakedness. His approval is clear in the shine of his dark eyes, the clench of his hands into fists, and

the quickening of his breath. “Get in the tub before I forget about the dog.”

“Can’t have that,” I murmur playfully.

In slow, teasing movements, I step over the ledge and sink into the tub. A groan slips through my lips as I slide into the water. It’s warm, not overly so, but still soothing, and the scent of lavender hits my nose as I smooth away the bubbles.

“I didn’t take you for a bubble bath kind of guy.”

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“Dan’s dumb sense of humor when he saw the tub after I moved in.”

“Remind me to thank Dan and his perfect sense of humor.” Braxton turns to leave, shaking his head, but as he reaches for the doorknob I stop him. “Braxton?” I pull my hair back and lift it on top of my head. The move brings my breasts above the bubbly waterline. “Can you help me with something?”

His head hits the door and I laugh as he groans.

“What?”

“In my bathroom, on my counter, I have a hair tie. Can you please grab it for me?”

He looks at me over his shoulder, but his gaze sticks to my breasts. “Hair tie?” he asks my boobs.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Sure. Be right back.” He’s still talking to my breasts.

Men. I’m not sure they ever grow up, but I like this. I’ve had so few lovers, I’ve never fully been comfortable with them, or the act of sex. It’s something to me that should be explored with the most intimate of relationships, where there’s one hundred percent trust. I’m not sure I’ve ever trusted myself, much less my partner, to fully be able to let go.

Braxton taught me months ago I’m able to. It’s why it’s so surprising to me, still, that

that night was so incredibly mind-blowing. Now, in his bathtub, in his bathroom, and living with him, I have no nerves about being with him again.

It helps that he looks at me, even fully clothed, like he's seeing me naked, and enjoys what he sees.

—

I'm slipping into sleep mode, still warm in the bathtub, when Braxton returns from walking Lucy. His presence in the bathroom is a physical feeling, and I know before he's ever walked into the room that he's ditched his clothes before entering. There's a heaviness in the air, a sense of expectation that makes me slide my eyes open.

And I'm not disappointed in what I see. All his ink across his chest, down his arms, over his pecs only accentuates the curved muscles and the dips of his abdomen. He has a dark, thin trail of hair down the center of his stomach that thickens as it reaches his lower abdomen, spreading out to where he keeps himself perfectly trimmed and shaved around his beautiful dick that's already semihard. He's the perfect masculine specimen with a dick that's thicker than average, the perfect length that you know will feeloh so beautifully goodbut not painfully so.

I stare at him like he stared at my breasts. "Lucy okay?"

"Eating. Move forward and stop staring at my dick."

"No," I reply, grinning, and shift forward. I lose sight of him for a brief second before his entering the tub behind me creates waves in the water.

He settles behind me, moving his legs to the outside of mine, and then his arms are wrapped around me, the palms of his hands settled softly against my stomach.

“Every time I touch you here I’m overwhelmed,” he whispers. “Does it ever hurt?”

His voice is so awed, I melt against him. He treats me like I’m his precious gift, and there’s so much about each other we don’t know. “No.” I cover his hands with mine. “Mostly I just feel full, I guess, is the way to explain it.”

“We really need to get that book Jenna was talking about. I feel like I don’t know a thing, and I want to know everything.”

Tears swell in my eyes. Hormones and Braxton’s sweetness the sure cause. “I was so terrified to come and talk to you to tell you. I’m sorry I waited so long.”

“Forgiven.” His lips press against the top of my head, and he reclines back so my back is pressed to his chest, my head at his shoulder. “Just don’t make me miss anything else.”

I can feel his smile against my temple, and I nod, but I’m too emotional to speak. This man. He’s being supportive and so confident everything will be okay, that we will somehow make a relationship work, I want to bottle all of it so I can douse myself with it when I need it.

Or, maybe I can do what I’m doing now.

Learn to rest against Braxton when I’m feeling weak, when I need someone at my side and at my back, supporting me and helping me along.

It seems so easy in here, with the warmth of the water and the strength in his arms and the calming scent of lavender.

Is it possible it’s this easy? That a relationship with someone can be this relaxing and inspiring?

I desperately want to find out.

“We should get out of here,” I say, when my lids begin to feel heavy and my limbs are relaxed. “There were other reasons why I wanted you to bring me upstairs, you know.”



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“Yeah?” His hands on my stomach slide to my hips, down my thighs, back up to my waist. “Anything fun?”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.”

His hands at my waist tighten and he helps me stand, moving behind me and stepping out of the tub first. I’m wrapped in a large, heated towel from a drying rack just outside the tub and Braxton takes over, drying me off and warming me, inciting desire along every inch he touches.

Once we’re dry, he drops the towel to the floor and we’re facing each other, nothing between us except a sliver of air that’s as warm as the water and the towel he’s just used.

He reaches out, cups my cheek with his palms, and dips his head. He pulls my body flush to his, his excitement and desire for me evident against the press of my stomach but there’s no resistance.

I surrender to his touch, to his kiss, and my hands slide up his arms, gripping his biceps to steady myself.

He walks forward, pushing me backward while keeping us connected at the same time. My knees hit the softness of his bed and then I’m bending backward slowly, being moved and falling to the bed while he follows me, settling his weight in between my spread legs.

I'm no longer relaxed, or sleepy. Every nerve ending in my body sparks alive, buzzing with anticipation as I brush my hands up and down his back, down to his hips, up his sides.

We move reverently, slowly, memorizing the feel of each other, delighting in each whispered groan, every gasped breath. Every groan from deep in his throat when I touch him is a present, given so freely.

I cannot hold back, cannot wait any longer to remember what it feels like to have him inside of me.

"Braxton," I gasp, fingertips digging into his back as he kisses my throat, my collarbone. His hand brushes over my nipple, swollen and tight, more sensitive than normal and it's a shock of pleasure straight to my sex. "I need you. Want you."

God, I will come soon, simply from the friction of our bodies against each other, the stretch of my thighs making room for him, the fire burning in my veins.

He shifts, pulling back and watching his hand as it drifts down my body, between my breasts, to my stomach, and then he's there, at my center, and his gentle touch on my clit makes me gasp, arch into him.

"Yes."

"I want to watch you," he says. "You're so beautiful, and fuck, I remember the way you light up for me. Is it fucked up I think you're sexier now that you have my kid inside you?"

I'm barely coherent, and shake my head back and forth. Words are useless, I can only make needy little noises he pulls from me with every press of his thumb against me.

“Close,” I gasp, and my hands grab his biceps. “Please. You.”

“You’ll get me once you come.”

This. This is the demanding and so-in-control Braxton I remember. The man who gave me pleasure beyond my wildest dreams, but now I know he’s not just a sexy body, an incredible lover, he’s compassionate and so gentle, so confident.

He’s amazing.

And he’s watching me like I’m the most precious, treasured gift he’s ever seen.

It’s this knowledge that does me in, coupled with the circles he’s drawing on my clit with perfect rhythm and pressure, that sends a fire down my spine, spreads to my hips. “Braxton.” I cry out his name. “Coming. Shit. God, yes.” My chants are nonsensical, as my eyes squeeze closed, lighted sparks igniting behind closed lids as I shove my head into the pillow, yanking him down to me.

I kiss him while he takes me through my orgasm, over the crest, and brings me down until I’m trembling and sated, all because of him.

## Chapter 21

Braxton

She’s fucking beautiful. Her hair is a mess, her mascara has run from her time in the bathtub, but it’s the flush of her cheeks, the heaving of her breasts, the way she grapples to steady her breathing that undoes me.

I make this beautiful, intelligent, and oh-so-well-mannered woman fall apart with just the slightest touch. It makes me feel victorious, like I’ve conquered a difficult course

and found my prize at the end.

My dick is throbbing, pulsing with the need to sink inside of her and make her come until she's tightening around my dick, but I hesitate, unable to remove my gaze from Cara, who is most beautiful immediately after climaxes, and a nervousness flickers through her eyes.

It reminds me she hasn't had many lovers, and yet she's chosen me. Twice now, she's made it clear she wants me. Our unborn baby aside, I'm so damn thankful to be with her again. She's slightly scatterbrained, completely disastrous when it comes to tidying up, but she laughs in a way that's freeing. She's reaching for her dreams and fighting for them with a stubbornness I admire.

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She's fucking amazing...and amazing to fuck.

"I don't know if I can go again," she says, finally unleashing my bicep and reaching between us. Her hot palm presses against my dick and her slim fingers wrap around me. "You're incredible."

"You can go again," I assure her. I've seen her do it before. "Let me get a condom."

"I'm already pregnant, you know," she teases, her other hand settling on her stomach.

"I know." I hesitate to say it, but she's met one of the women I've been with since her, but I'm all in with this woman, including honesty. "I haven't been tested in a while."

"Right." Her excitement wanes and I lean forward. If I could kiss away her doubts or her fears I'd spend the rest of my life with my lips attached to hers.

"I'll do it this week."

"Okay," she says, but she nibbles her bottom lip as I shift to the side and yank open a drawer next to my bed. I make quick work of ripping open the condom and rolling it on, before I return to her.

She's still lying on the bed, and while I want to take her missionary and feel every part of her body against mine and have her long legs wrapped around my hips, I'm really loving her growing breasts and stomach.

I want to run my hands all over her while inside of her.

I lie on top of her, shove my hand beneath her back, and roll until she's on top. She immediately rubs against my dick and the pleasure from the heat of her makes me bite back a groan. I'm not even inside of her yet and could come.

"Ride me," I grit out with clenched teeth. "I want to see all of you, feel all of you, while you get me off."

"So bossy," she mutters, but she's smiling and spreading her hips, straddling me and pushing off my chest. Her hair falls down like a curtain, covering us, and I shove my hands into her hair, holding it back. Nothing will hinder my access or my view of her. Not tonight.

Then she's wrapping a hand around my length, guiding me to her, and she's sinking slowly, oh so damn slowly, down me. I shove my head into the pillow beneath my head and arch my hips up into her.

"Shit," I groan, holding on to her head and pulling her down to me. "You feel so damn good around me."

I take her mouth, holding her against me while she starts moving, and I move my hips to her rhythm, working her mouth at the same time she works me over.

And it's not only amazing. It's beautiful. Her whimpers shoot straight to my balls, her scent envelops me. The feel of her stomach brushing against my abs makes me pull away from the kiss. I slide my hands down to her neck, her shoulders, over her breasts that have grown since the last time we've been together and then I move my hands down to the swell of her abdomen.

I rest my hands on her hips and hold her still.

“Braxton,” she whines.

“Shh, honey. I just want to look at you.” I want to treasure her more than I want to get off. I want her to know how much I fucking care about her and it has nothing to do with the baby inside of her, but her as a woman. But I still can’t deny that knowing she’s carrying a child, my child, makes her absolutely, one hundred percent the most beautiful woman in the world.

I pin her with my gaze, my thumbs sweeping inside her hips. She jerks and moves but I keep her as steady as possible as she looks down at me.

“You’re beautiful, Cara, absolutely beautiful.”

“Soon I’ll be the size of a house.”

“Then you’ll be the most beautiful house I’ve ever seen too.”

She tries to roll her eyes, but I slam my hips up, forcing myself deep inside of her and her eye roll gets cut off as she groans from the feel of me.

Tomorrow, I’m going to the doctor. I won’t take her bare until I can assure I’m clean, but I cannot wait to feel her heat directly on me.

“Braxton,” she whimpers, moving wildly, and I follow her.

I grunt. She moans. And we both lose control. I shift, lifting her at the same time keeping her connected to me as I move to my knees, cradling her so she’s in my arms as I take her down to her back.

I can’t get enough of her. I want to watch her grow. I want to watch our baby being born.

I want it all. All of her. Everything she can give me.



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I'm falling in love with her and it's the easiest thing I've ever done in my entire life.

"Cara," I groan, as her body trembles beneath me. She's clawing at me, falling into a second orgasm and I can't hold out until she's done, I plant myself deep inside of her, shove my forehead into her neck, and I groan her name again as I come.

---

"This sound will never get old," I say, listening to the whoosh whoosh whoosh of our baby's heartbeat.

We're at the midwife's office again for Cara's fourteen-week appointment and thankfully, the dildo cam, as I've taken to calling it, is no longer necessary. Instead, she squirted some clear gel on Cara's stomach and moved around a device on top of her belly a few minutes ago, quickly finding the baby's heartbeat.

And I helped make this tiny, tiny little sound. It's the coolest.

"I think it'll get even better when the baby's here," Pam, the midwife, says, with a gentle and teasing smile.

I like her. She's kind and patient with a soft voice, but she also talks to Cara in a no-nonsense way about her morning sickness and how everything else is going. So far, besides the heartbeat, there haven't been any surprises, just the report that everything looks good.

Cara's even beginning to put on a little bit of weight, which is a good thing

considering all the puking she's done the last couple of months.

But ever since she's moved into my place, she seems to be feeling better.

"Thank you," Cara says, and I hold out my hand to help her sit up. She wipes off the gel on her stomach and lowers her shirt.

I've had my hands all over her body multiple times since last weekend, and all I want to do is scoop her into my arms, take her back home, and devour her all over again. It must be some primal instinct left over from cavemen.

"Any other questions?" Pam asks. "Because if not, you'll be able to schedule another appointment for four weeks and if you'd like, we can do an ultrasound for then as well. We like to do them around twenty weeks to ensure the baby is growing properly."

"Yes," I say. I haven't called our babyhimfor fear of pissing off Cara again, but I'm really tired of sayingitall the time as well, like we're not sure if there's a baby or a basketball or alien inside her. "We want that." I look down at Cara. "Don't we?"

"Can we find out the gender then too?" Cara asks.

Pam nods. "We can certainly try if you'd like to know."

"We want to know," Cara says, looking up at me this time as bashfully as I just looked at her. "Don't we?"

"I do." I'm grinning.

Parenting has already made me a fool for a baby I've never met, but, yeah, I want to know. Boy? Girl? There's a lot to figure out.

“Okay then,” Pam says, laughing softly at our ridiculousness. We are ridiculous. We’ve done nothing, studied nothing, at least I haven’t. Periodically, Cara gives me some random fact, something she’s been doing since the weekend, with her eyes on the screen. At least she’s finally started looking into pregnancy information like Jenna suggested.

This morning it was, “Hey, did you know our baby is the size of a lemon?”

To which I’d replied, “Can we call it Squirt?”

Yeah, finding out the gender is necessary.

“I’ll leave you two alone then, and when you’re ready, make your appointments up front. You’ll have to go to a different building for the ultrasound, but we can schedule your prenatal visit immediately following, or at least try to. And don’t forget you can call me if you have any questions. None are too small, I promise.”

“Thanks, Pam,” Cara says.

I thank her as well, and after Cara finishes fixing her clothes, grimacing when her shirt doesn’t tuck so easily into her pants, she grabs her purse. “Ugh. I’m going to need new clothes soon.”

She’s taken to wearing only loose sweats and oversized T-shirts at my place, and today it looks like she’s trying to force things into the waistband of her jeans. It looks uncomfortable, and what if she’s squishing the baby? I’m smart enough not to ask. If I’ve learned anything it’s that pregnant women can be emotional.

“We can go shopping after work tonight.”

I have to get back to MadInk, barely having enough time to take her to lunch.

“Maybe this weekend,” she says, and her nose scrunches. “I can probably wait until then. Come on, let’s go get those appointments scheduled.”

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I follow her to the front desk, where we schedule everything for exactly four weeks from today. I take a card with the times of our appointments on it so I can take that morning off from MadInk. I'll have Stella put the dates in the calendar when I get back to work.

"Okay," I say, once we're back in my car and settled. "What sounds good to you for lunch?"

I doubt I have to ask. Ever since we went to El Gaucho last weekend, Cara's been eating spicy Mexican food almost nonstop. Pregnancy cravings are no joke.

She turns to me, her grin wide and easy, and laughs. "Tacos. What else?"

See?

### Chapter 22

Cara

My feet are propped up on the coffee table in front of me. Netflix is streaming a ridiculously amazing show about Vikings. In my lap is the book Jenna's been telling me to buy that I finally got around to purchasing. Next to me is a notebook and pen, which I've been using to scribble down every single baby item known to man I have to purchase. Jenna wasn't kidding. Babies need more supplies and gear and accessories than I had realized. In one hand, I'm holding a large chocolate shake that was once topped with whipped cream, and in my other hand, I'm holding a greasy, delicious French fry. Lucy's head is on my thigh, wide eyes glued to me ever since I

came back from grabbing my dinner. She's staring at me, waiting for me to drop a fry.

She doesn't seem to care about the food in her dish despite the dozens of times I've told her she has her own food.

I'm dressed in my sole remaining pair of black yoga pants that are stretched to the max at the seams, and my sweatshirt is so old it has holes in the wrist cuffs...not because it's fashionable, but because I've owned this since my freshman year of college.

Needless to say, I look pretty much like the mess I currently am when Braxton walks in when he's done with work.

"Whoa," he says, laughter rich in his voice. "Looks like someone's finally over the Mexican craving."

I dip my fry into the shake and pop it into my mouth. "I had a craving. Sue me."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He walks to me and bends over the back of the couch, kissing the top of my head. "How was your day?"

"Busy, I worked at Gallio's this morning and spent the afternoon painting." I grin up at him. In the last two weeks, my morning sickness has abated to more of an annoyance than an impending doom, and I've been more inspired than I can ever remember feeling. I blame my new painting space and the incredible views I see morning, noon, and night, and it's not a complaint. "Yours?"

"A pain in the ass. I worked on a back piece that took most of the day." He holds up his hand and curls his finger. "My hand feels like it might become a claw permanently."

“Nice. Did you eat?”

“Yeah. Stella and I grabbed some takeout.” He points to my shake and cardboard container of fries. “Is that your dinner?”

I pop another chocolate-coated fry into my mouth. “I’m working on my calcium intake.”

“You’re a nut. Let me go take a shower and I’ll be back.” He glances at the television, where a fight scene filled with mostly half-naked men wearing furs grabs his attention. “What are you watching? Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

He stops near the mouth of the hallway and turns back to me, as if he’s just realized he’s forgotten something. “Hi, Lucy.”

The dog’s ears twitch but she doesn’t take her eyes off the fry in my hand.

“Ah, I see,” Braxton says. “I’ve been replaced by the love of greasy food.”

“It’s the dinner of champions.”

His laugh echoes down the hallway and I pet Lucy’s head. “Good girl,” I say and give her the fry she’s been patiently begging for. I love this dog. I work fewer hours than Braxton so I’m home a lot more than him. I like that she follows me everywhere, always sitting at my side, usually with her dopey face resting near my stomach.

Braxton has mentioned before she’s difficult to adopt out because not everyone wants a pit bull, especially a mixed breed of one, and I’ve been secretly hoping I can talk him into adopting her. I don’t know how I’ll be able to say goodbye to her. I was never allowed to have pets growing up, my mom insisting they were too much work and they smelled and shed, but even with the dog hair that’s frequently sprinkled all

over my clothes, I've completely fallen in love with her. She seems so much larger than she did a month ago when I met her, and Braxton's place isn't exactly the best for a dog as big as she's going to be, but I still can't imagine giving her up for anything.

Not that it's my call.

I hold out another fry, which she steals just as quickly, as Braxton comes into the room.

"Oh, that's why my girl has no use for me," he says, heading straight for us. "You've stolen her from me with fries and ear rubs."

"She likes them," I insist, and scoot over on the couch so he can slide in next to me. It's become our nightly routine when he gets home from work. We eat, chill on the couch curled up next to each other, and most nights, I wake up as he's carrying me to bed.



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His bed, because since the first time we slept together two weeks ago, we haven't spent a single night apart.

Lucy gives him an annoyed look as he takes the spot where she's been resting and ignores him.

"How's my little guacamole doing?" Braxton asks, his hand resting on my belly.

"And you say I'm a nut." Ever since I told him the baby was the size of a lemon, he's taken to checking a website that measures a fetus's size using fruits and vegetables for references. I love it, though, the way he's always asking about our baby, or how I'm feeling. I've never felt so pampered or taken care of, and over the last two weeks since we've been living together, I haven't just begun falling for Braxton, I'm completely head over heels in love with him.

He's not only an incredible man, he's going to be an even more amazing father.

"Well, yeah. You're sixteen weeks so he or she is the size of an avocado. Given your abundant cravings of Mexican food, I figure it's also filled with spices."

"Nice." I drain the rest of my shake and eat my fries while I hand Braxton the remote so he can put on whatever show he wants. I've been putting off telling him about a phone call I received from my parents a couple days ago, but I can't avoid it any longer. "I have to talk to you about something."

One of his arms is slung over my shoulder and at what has to be an ominous tone in my voice, he grips me tighter.

“What is it?” He drops the remote onto his lap and turns, lifting me so I’m facing him. “What happened?”

“My parents called.”

We haven’t spoken of them since the day after I moved in. They’ve been shoved into a back corner, collecting dust bunnies while at least I pretend that someday my parents will become decent people. At my statement, Braxton’s eyes widen and a muscle jumps. “They did.”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“And they want to see me for dinner. Tomorrow night.”

“How kind of them to give you a day’s notice.”

My gaze slides to the left and Braxton’s hand lands on my thigh. “Cara? They called today?”

“Not exactly.” I can’t look at him. I haven’t technically lied to him, but it’s the first time I feel like we haven’t been completely honest with each other either. Somehow, it feels like I’ve betrayed him in some way.

“When did they call?”

“Monday?” I chance a peek at him as the weight of the couch moves.

He shifts back, pulling his arm from behind me. “I see.”

“I didn’t mean to keep it from you, I just wanted to avoid thinking about it.”

“What’d they say?”

My hand rests on my stomach, as if I’m already feeling the need to protect my baby. I can’t hide the cringe when I say, “They want to talk to me about my situation.”

“Your situation?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.” He scrubs a hand down his face, back up and through his black hair. Tension radiates off him and I fight not to shrink away from the glare in his eyes. “You can’t go. I have an appointment I can’t change and there’s no way in hell I’m letting you be around them alone, so they can treat you like crap.”

His reaction is mostly why I’ve been avoiding this entire conversation. “The thing is, they specifically said they only want me to come.”

God, it sounds horrible, and it’s even worse I’ve been considering this. The hurt in Braxton’s face is clear and it makes me want to reach out to reassure him it’s just their same old crap. I lift a hand and he pushes it down, shoving off the couch. “I see.”

It’s the second time he’s said it. It hurts more this time.

“Braxton—”

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“No.” He lifts a hand to stop me, and I move off the couch to go to him, but he takes a step back. “This pisses me off, Cara. Why do they want you alone? So they can manipulate you more? Twist your head about me? Why?”

“Because I don’t know!” I fly my hands out to my side and they smack my hips. “I don’t know, and I’m not looking forward to it, but there’s nothing they can say or do that changes how I feel about you and me raising this baby together.”

He takes a step back, skin paling, and just...stares at me.

“Raising this baby together,” he mutters. He spins around, putting his back to me, and brings his hand to his face so I can no longer see him, but I despise the slump of his shoulders as he turns back to me. “Right. That’s all we’re doing.”

“That’s not what I meant.” We’re not just raising a baby together. We are together, at least I’ve been thinking we are.

“It’s fine, I get it. Go to dinner. I’m going to go work out. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Braxton—”

He doesn’t stop, he just lifts his hand in the air, giving me his back, and dropping his hand. Even Lucy flashes me a sad look and trots off after him.

Great, I’ve even hurt the dog’s feelings.

But mine are hurting too. It’s the first time we’ve fought since we tried to start dating,

and this sick sensation in my stomach makes me want to go to him and tell him how I feel. That I think he's amazing and I'm the luckiest girl in the world to be with a man like him.

I probably would have, if he would have let me finish a single sentence.

Maybe we just need some space. When I feel myself drifting off on the couch, I turn off the lights and television and head to what I've begun thinking of as our room, hearing the treadmill still whirring ever since he disappeared into the room he uses as a home gym as I pass it.

I pause at the threshold of his room, debating, but what the hell. The worst he can do is wake up and kick me out. I get ready for bed and slide into his sheets, pulling the covers to my chin. I have no idea how I'll sleep, but somehow, I manage to drift off, only to be wakened later when the bed jostles me. Braxton rolls, slides his arm over my side, and rests his hand at my stomach, shifting until his chest is flush against my back.

His lips press against my temple, and he says nothing, so I don't either, but at least, even upset with me, he still wants me.

I link my hand with his at my stomach, and hope we can resolve this in the morning.

—

A moan pushes past my lips, and it's the sound I make coupled with the warmth pressing into my back that pulls my eyes open. Braxton is still behind me, his hand still at my stomach, but our hands are no longer interlocked like they were when we fell asleep. Instead, his hand is lower, his fingers even lower, and they're brushing against my sex in soft, teasing movements.

“Oh,” I gasp, as he swirls a finger around my clit.

“Shh. I want to touch you.”

“Please” and “thank you” are on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t speak. I can’t. I’m delirious with sleep and the anticipation of pleasure. My head rests against the pillow, against Braxton’s shoulder, as he presses against me. His erection is thick and hard, sliding along the crease of my backside.

He gathers moisture as he slides a finger inside of me, hooking it and rubbing along my sweet spot.

A shiver of delight rolls down my spine, making me arch into him, and it all feels so perfect. I could wake up like this every day for the rest of my life and never want for anything else.

“More,” I whimper, turning my head and shoving it into the crook of his neck. I kiss his throat, rolling to my back and spreading my legs. Morning sex is the best sex. Languid and slow, still warm from the bed. My mind runs away from me, thinking of what it will feel like as he shifts on top of me, slides deep inside. I want him.

I reach down and wrap his length in my hand, sliding down to cup his balls and stroke his shaft.

“Fuck,” he groans. His ab muscles tighten, his hips lift toward me. Mine arch into his hand and I look down at us, our sheets now pushed off, and I watch as we play with each other.

“Braxton.” I’m already trembling, heat building low in my back, spreading toward my hips. He moves suddenly, understanding the desperate plea in my voice, and he’s forcing my legs wider with his hips and dipping down, he takes a nipple into his

mouth, rolls it with his tongue.

“Oh God.” They’re so sensitive. Sparks of pleasure ignite my senses, traveling through my nerves, and I’m breathless. “Yes.”

“Do you want more?”

“You. I want you.”

“Open your eyes.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

I haven't realized I closed them, but I open them, stare directly into Braxton's deep, dark eyes. His lids are half-lidded, mixed with sleep and desire and yet even as he continues teasing me, alternating between sliding his finger inside of me, rubbing it along my clit, he makes no effort to give me more.

"I was an ass last night."

It takes me a moment to remember our fight, and my body tenses, but he shakes his head, bends down, and sucks a nipple into his mouth.

"Oh God." I arch into him. So freaking good.

"I want to be more than just the man you're raising a child with."

"You are." The admission bursts through me, he's making me drunk with pleasure, annihilating my senses, everything that generally screams at me to hold back. But everything he's doing to me feels so good, I'm mindless. "You are more than that."

He examines me, dark penetrating gaze bouncing back and forth between mine. "Good. I care about you, Cara. I don't want your parents hurting you."

"I really don't want to talk about my parents right now."

His lips tilt up and then he's pulling his fingers from me, himself, rubbing the tip of him through my wetness and it's so beautiful so see. His thick, perfect cock sends jolts of heat to my body as he rubs it against my clit, and then he's there, pushing in slowly, dropping to his elbows and we're connected—condoms kicked to the curb



last week when his tests returned clean.

Every brush of his chest against mine causes friction on my nipples, and I'm already so close, and he's moving so slowly, shoving a hand beneath my back to lift my hips.

"Oh God," I moan against his throat. "So perfect. Faster."

"No. Slow. I want it slow."

I want him to have everything he wants. My hands move to his hips, his back. He's hot, already slickened with sweat, good God, how long did he play with me before I woke up to have both of so close already.

It doesn't even matter. He fills me completely, stretching me, hitting the end of me so deep inside, his pelvis putting the perfect pressure against my swollen bundled nerves it's not long before I'm gasping.

"Braxton," I cry out, biting down on his shoulder as my orgasm heats my skin. I'm burning, and it's beautiful, and he's moving so slow, long measured strokes that make me reach for him, dig my hands in to speed him up, but he refuses.

The room fills with the sound of our flesh, the mingled groans from him and whimpers from me.

My body is so well primed, it doesn't take much, I'm trembling, he shoves deep inside of me, throwing me over the edge of my orgasm. Bright lights spark behind my closed lids and my fingers are digging into his skin, holding him against me while my body falls apart beneath him and he's grunting my name, cursing the heavens, and slams deep inside of me.

He pulses, emptying himself, and his teeth are at my shoulder, biting down as he

groans out his own climax, immediately following mine that's refusing to dissipate.

"Cara." My name is a groan, ripped from deep in his throat and my hips are still shifting, riding the pleasurable wave and my God it's insane how long it's lasting but when he tries to pull off me, I arch into him. The friction is unending, the pleasure so intense I'm screaming his name and clawing at him.

"Oh my God," I gasp as I finally feel my climax recede. "That's insane."

"That might be a world record in length."

I laugh, kiss his throat down to his shoulder. I'm pulsing around him, my orgasm finally dissipating but lingering aftershocks roll through me.

"Crazy." I can scarcely catch my breath, and his weight on top of me is divine.

I thrust my head back, away from his throat, until I can look into his eyes. "Good morning."

A heat spreads on my cheeks, nothing to do with the orgasm or the slow, sleepy sex. Embarrassment at what he said, bringing up my parents, our fight last night slides into the forefront of my mind. "I'm sorry about last night too."

"I want you," he says. He's still inside of me. This is the most ridiculous time to have this conversation, and yet every time he slides out, and pushes in, he's drawing honesty out of me in a way I can't hide. "I like you."

He stresses "like," giving me a hint he means more. I blink, unable to respond with anything less than the truth, but, good Lord, it's terrifying.

I try anyway. "When I woke up that morning after the wedding, I'd just had the best

weekend of my entire life with a guy, and I was utterly terrified that to you I'd been just a way to spend the weekend."

"What?" His head jerks back. "Why would you think that?"

"Inexperience?" I shrug my shoulders. I'd told him part of the truth. I had felt like a disaster, but mostly it was just because I didn't know how to do one-night stands, but also because what if he didn't think of me the same way I had him? "I gave you more than just my body that weekend, Braxton. I was scared to risk getting hurt."

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My hand sweeps up and down his spine, hoping he understands.

His eyes soften in a way that tells me he gets it completely. He pulls out of me slowly, his dick still semihard, and even softening he's still glorious. He pulls me with him as he sits back on his knees until I'm straddling him, my arms draping over his shoulders.

Then he does the sweetest thing I've ever experienced, perhaps far more intimate than what we just experienced together.

His hands slide to the back of my neck, up into my hair, and he massages my scalp.

"I will treasure every single part you give me, Cara, you have my word."

My breath catches. There isn't a hint of doubt in his voice or his expression, and my lips part, surprised at the depth of the emotion I see etched into his features.

It's not an admission of love, it might be too soon even though I definitely feel myself falling in love with Braxton.

Before I can respond, he pulls me against him, my forehead to his shoulder, his hands at my head, and he holds me—hugs me.

It's the least sexual thing we've done, but it's the most tender, the most loving.

I close my eyes, feel the rhythm of my heart beating against my chest, and I realize I'm wrong.

I'm not falling for Braxton Henley.

I've already landed.

## Chapter 23

Braxton

I didn't expect this morning to happen. When I woke up and Cara was pressed against my body, I reacted instinctively. I went to bed pissed last night, but not entirely at her.

It seems as if every time I try to move us closer, I get the sense she's got one hand up, holding me back.

It's frustrating as hell. I figured falling in love with a woman would feel more like parasailing, happening softly and brilliantly, like you know everything in the world is right.

It feels like plummeting to my death, skydiving without a parachute. It has to be the dumbest fucking thing I've ever done, yet there's no way I can stop it.

I love her. I want her in my life. I want her to look at me and only want me. When she told me she was terrified I'd hurt her, it took everything in me not to blurt it out. But even I know telling her now is too soon. She's still too damn skittish. So I hold her and let her feel me, let her feel secure in my arms, hoping like hell my silence says enough.

I'm still pissed at her parents, though, and we need to talk about it, about tonight.

Her going to dinner with people who could ship her off to a hospital and have her

“situation” taken care of without me knowing scares the shit out of me. It’s far-fetched, granted, but I’ve been looking into Cara Thompson’s parents. They’re fucking loaded. They could easily do it with the connections they have.

My stomach rolls. If I could change my appointment, I would, or demand dinner another night.

The other part of me knows Cara needs this. She needs to be with them, stand up for herself and what she wants without someone there.

I need to make sure she knows I’m at her back, even if I’m not in the room.

I get up to shower, and she rolls over. By the time I’m out of the bathroom, she’s woken up.

My room is now littered with clothes and shoes she kicks off and flings, letting them stay wherever they land. Pink cotton panties are in a pile at the corner of the bed, a gray sweatshirt pooled on the floor. Her black yoga pants are hanging off the edge of the dresser.

She’s the messiest woman I’ve ever spent time with, and yet her mess only makes me smile. It means she’s here, in my space, and I really fucking like the idea of that. And I don’t even clean the place myself, so, really, who gives a shit?

I find her in the kitchen, swallowing down a glass of orange juice, which means she’s taken her medicine. She hasn’t puked in weeks, although she still periodically turns green. It’s not the only change I’ve noticed in her.

Her breasts are growing, swollen and shoving against the thin shirt...my shirt...she must have thrown on when she rolled out of bed. I’ve noticed when we have sex over the last couple of weeks, that not only is her appetite for food increasing again, but

her appetite for sex is too, and when I play with her nipples, she practically comes from the slightest touch.

It's fucking sexy as hell, and so is seeing her stomach press against my T-shirt, our baby now making itself known in the morning where she used to show only at night. We went shopping last week and she bought a bunch of maternity clothes, but the sight of her in my shirt is so much better than the few dresses and tops and pants she purchased.

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She has her profile to me, standing at the counter when I enter the room, and I stop, watching her. All parts of her are filling out, her hips a bit wider, her ass a bit thicker. It's not just her stomach and breasts that are changing, it's all of her.

She's beautiful, and the minuscule ways she's changing every day make me glad I'm not missing a moment of this.

Thank God for food trucks and morning sickness creating a nasty combination.

"Hey," she says, jumping as she notices me probably staring at her like a stalker. "You okay?"

"You're beautiful." The admission tumbles out of me.

A blush hits her cheeks and she looks away, glancing down at the counter. She does this often when I compliment her, as if she's not used to receiving them, but fuck that.

It's now mission one for me to make her know how beautiful she is, inside and out, every day. I go to her, unhesitating when I reach her, and lift her by the waist, setting her on the counter. Her knees widen and I step in, pressing myself against her body, my hand to her stomach.

"How's Squirt?"

She rolls her eyes playfully. "That sounds gross."



“Bean?”

“Not really a fan.”

“We have to think of something.” “It” makes me think of Stephen King or the Addams Family. Not the cutest name for a baby.

“Pumpkin?”

I flash her a feigned, mock look. “You think our baby will be orange?”

She slaps my hand away. “It’s a nickname, not a prophecy. Besides, two more weeks and we’ll know what we’re having.”

“Yeah.” Jesus. She’s turning me into a sap. I press my forehead to hers, staring down at my hand as I move it back to her stomach. She thinks she felt “Pumpkin” move the other day, then thought it was gas. I’d laughed so hard I snorted. According to the book she finally bought where we have dog-eared pages all over the place, it’s still early. But God, I want to feel that. That first kick, that first proof that there really is something inside her, something we created. “What do you think?”

“Girl.”

“Yeah?” I glance up. It could be her mother’s intuition. I picture bows and ribbons and dance classes and boys...oh shit, the boys. The teenage little fuckers. “No. It has to be a boy.”

That way I only have to think about one penis. Not everyone else’s. Holy shit. I’m going to be adad.

“You okay?” Cara asks, her hand at my cheek.

“I’m going to be a dad.” I don’t know what look I give her, but her jaw drops and a soft laughing sound comes from her.

“You’re just now realizing this?”

No. I’m not an idiot. I’ve known this since she told me. But there’s something about the reality. Our ultrasound coming, names. The swell of her belly. God...how did I not realize there was actually a person in there before this?

“I think reality is just starting to hit me.” Fucking hell, I sound like a pussy, but damn it, I’ve been talking about honesty, and was pissed last night that she’d held out on me. I can’t give her that now. I won’t.

“I think...” I say, lifting my eyes to see hers, beautiful blues crinkled at the edges. She’s still laughing at me and rolls her lips together. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

Her lips part and she breaks out into a wide smile. “Oh, thank goodness!” She laughs again and yanks me to her, throwing her arms around my shoulders. “I’m so glad to hear this!”

I rub my head against her shoulder, pressing my lips to her neck. “What?”

“You always seem so confident. I’m always so terrified I’m going to screw something up. You think I’m ready for this?”

No. It’s the beauty of it. Neither of us is ready, yet somehow we’re making it work. Not just making it work, but we’re doing it together.

“We can do this, right?”

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She slides her hand to my cheek, lifting my face so our gazes meet. “Yeah. I think we can. Together, right?” A question dances in her eyes along with her words, but God. Yes.

“I want us together.” It’s not even about the baby. But I put the force of my conviction into my statement, into my expression, so she can see everything, every way I feel about her, to leave no doubt.

She drags her teeth across her bottom lip and her fingertips skim across my cheek, down to my jaw. Her touch is feather light and heavy all at once. “Me too.”

Thank fuck.

I have to get to work, and as much as I don’t want to bring up another argument, it still needs to be said.

“After dinner tonight, I want you to call me. Immediately.”

Her expression dips, like she’s forgotten about it. “I’m serious, Cara, I won’t be there to hear the shit they pull, but I want to be there for you after. Promise me.”

“Of course. Nothing bad will happen. They’ll either accept this, or they’ll insult me and I leave. I promise.”

There’s nothing but honesty and determination in her eyes. I bend down and brush my lips against hers, grabbing her hips, and help her off the counter, not letting go until I’ve gotten my fill of her and she’s steady on her feet.

I don't want to let her go. I don't want to throw her to the wolves without someone at her back.

But she needs this.

And I really am late for work.

"I gotta go," I groan, pulling back from her.

"I know. I'll be okay. I promise. I'll see you back at home when I'm done, okay?"

"Yeah," I say, unable to stop smiling like a goof. I don't think she realizes she called my place home. "I'll see you back at home."

I kiss her again and leave, tossing her a grin over my shoulder when she stands in the doorway, shoulder propped up against the doorframe while I wait for the elevator. Her hair is still messy from sleep and sex, the T-shirt plenty long enough to cover all the important parts of her.

And I want this. Her. Standing right where she is, every morning, waving me off to work.

Damn. When did I become so traditional?

—

"What is your problem?" Stella snaps, slapping down a stack of folders. "You're being a dick."

"I'm not a dick." I'm not, I'm on edge, knowing any moment Cara is going to get into the Uber I called for her to take her to her parents' house.

Her night from hell without me is about to begin. I hope I'm being overdramatic, that everything will be fine, but I doubt it. There's no way her parents are going to accept me being the father of Cara's baby, or her baby.

They give too many fucks about perfection.

"You've been an ass all day and Tim doesn't look that thrilled with you."

"My work ethic is fine." Tim and I are taking a ten-minute smoke and bathroom break. I needed the time to stretch my hands as much as he did his muscles. We've got at least another hour to go before we reach a stopping point. Hopefully by then, Cara will be on her way to me. "And Tim is fine too. Just leave it, Stella."

"Talk to me."

She crosses her arms, taps her Doc Marten boot on the tiled floor, and glares at me.

"God, you're a pain in the ass." I toss a pen across my desk and sit back in my chair. "Cara's having dinner with her parents and I'm concerned it won't go well, that's all."

"Why won't it go well? Too afraid Cinderella is going to discover she belongs in a castle and not a parlor?"

"The hell? What's your problem?" Stella's rough around the edges. Her life was just as tough as mine, but she's never been an outright bitch like this. Not to me.

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“Nothing.” She shrugs, but her sneer stays firmly fixed in place. My hands curl into fists and my sudden burst of protectiveness toward CaraoverStella stuns me. “I just think before you get with this girl, you should really think about it. Not like you two really belong together. She’s too preppy. You’re too normal.”

“Wow. Get the hell out of my office.”

I can’t believe she’s talking to me like this.

“I’m just sayin’—”

“I don’t want to hear what you’re saying, Stella. She’s living with me. She’s having my baby. We are together and frankly, we’re good that way.”

“You can’t really think, though—”

“I don’t think it.” I shove my fists into the desk and stand, bending over it so Stella can’t miss a second of my seriousness. “I fucking know it, Stella. She’s sitfor me and I won’t tolerate you being a bitch to her or saying shit like this to me. You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“I am on your side.” Her hands fly to her hips. “I am on your side and that’s why I’m worried.”

“Nothing to worry about.” The timer dings on my phone, telling me my ten-minute break is up, but hell if I’m in the mood to finish now. Anger and confusion with Stella are pumping blood through my veins at dangerous, heart attack levels. “Take a

break. Get out of here. Go get us something to eat, wherever you want, but don't come back to work tonight until you've gotten rid of your attitude."

"My attitude?"

"Go, Stella." I shove off the desk and reach the door to my office, stepping around her. She's more like a sister to me than an employee. I've known her more than half my damn life. "If you can't be happy for me, happy I've finally got all the shit in my life going right, shit you know I've wanted for over a decade, then maybe you shouldn't come back at all."

"You can't mean that."

I'm not even sure if I do. I fucking love Stella.

You love Cara too.

I do love her, and I'm willing to take out anyone who can't see past our differences to realize how good we can be together.

"I do, Stella."

I head down the hall, back to the main area where I've been working on Tim's tattoo, taking my time pulling on new latex gloves and realigning my supplies on the tray before I turn back to him.

The buzz and concentration of the needles will wash away the epic disaster that just occurred.

Chapter 24

Cara

I haven't been to my parents' house since the day I packed up my meager belongings and moved out. Their visit to my apartment wasn't just a surprise, it was the first time they'd ever come there. I wasn't entirely sure they knew my address.

Last night's argument with Braxton still weighs heavily on my mind as I sit in the back of the SUV Braxton had called for me, texting me to let me know when it would arrive outside his building. I don't want to fight with him, although I definitely enjoy the way we made up.

Plus, I essentially admitted to him that I love him. And then I went and called his place home.

I hadn't realized I said it until he left the apartment, it took me a few minutes to understand why his smile had gone so wonky and happy before he left. Once I replayed the conversation in my head, I realized it was true.

His penthouse condo is more of a home than any I've ever had before. He's the most family I've had outside of Jimmy and Jenna. But Jimmy is gone and Jenna is married, ridiculously planning to start a family based on my delivery schedule, and I know two things for certain, as the SUV pulls into my parents' drive and their early-1900s home looms in front of me.

One, Jimmy would be so happy for me, if he could see how happy I currently am.

And two, I am absolutely in love with Braxton Henley and I can't imagine anyone else I would want to have a family with. He's all hard edges and scowls on the surface, but beneath the ripped muscles and brightly colored ink, he has the largest heart of anyone I've ever met.



Based on the way he looks at me, the things he's said to me, I have no doubt he's falling in love with me too.

I will treasure every single part you give me, Cara, you have my word.

I close my eyes and breathe out a slow, confidence-gathering breath as I remember his promise to me earlier. Knowing he's thinking of me and worrying about me right now fills me with everything I need for the night ahead.

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Regardless of how my dinner goes with my parents, everything will be fine.

It's this assurance that has me opening the door of the SUV and thanking my driver. I don't need my parents' permission or their blessing. As much as I'd love for us to have a good relationship, one based on love and compassion and support, I'm twenty-four years old and I've finally realized if they can't give that to me, then I don't need it or their negativity in my life.

Stepping out of the SUV, I brush down the sides of the long, flowing dress I chose. It's bright blue, covered with large tropical flowers. It's one of the maternity dresses I bought when Braxton and I went shopping: it has thick shoulder straps that come down, showing off my lovely new cleavage from my rapidly swelling breasts. There's a thick band just below them and then the material puffs out of my belly. It makes me look larger than I actually am. I chose to wear it tonight for that reason. I will not hide anything from them. Now that my morning sickness is less of an all-day dramatic affair and a lingering sensation I can manage with small meals and frequent snacks, I'm actually beginning to like the changes pregnancy is making to my body.

My breasts are larger than ever and the small swell of my stomach makes me smile when I stand in front of a mirror after my shower.

I'm growing a tiny little human inside of me, and perhaps it's as this reality becomes more clear, I realize that this life inside of me is depending on me to teach him or her how to grow up, to be a decent and kind and loving person. Whether it's a girl or a boy doesn't matter to me. Squirt belongs to Braxton and me and no one else's opinion matters.

Great. Even I'm using the ridiculous nickname.

Smiling, I head up the walk to my parents' home and open the door, not bothering to ring the bell or knock. As soon as I enter, I'm assaulted by the aroma of dinner. Garlic and bread and a host of other scents that actually make my stomach rumble. I also have no doubt my mom didn't prepare a single item of the dinner. She's most likely had it either catered in, or had someone prepare it here, but it doesn't matter. For all her faults, she's the master at choosing dinners.

What makes me pause as I remove my jacket and set down my purse, however, isn't the lack of greeting at the door, or the delicious food sure to be coming my way, it's the laughter coming from the back room and quiet hum of music, the muffled murmur of voices that tells me it's not solely dinner with my parents.

Great. I get to be talked down to in front of guests, which means their barbs will be more passive-aggressive than usual.

"Hello?" I call out, giving a quick peek into the library and then a formal sitting room as I head down the hall, past the main staircase. My heels click politely on the original wood floors, polished to a sparkling shine. "Mom? Dad?"

There's no response, so I continue until I've reached the kitchen and turn the corner. I take in the sight in front of me, barely holding back a laugh at the ridiculousness of the scene.

Of course this is why they didn't want Braxton to come.

The Shermans are here. Miles and my father are dressed in suits and perfectly smoothed ties as if they haven't been wearing them all day at the office. My mom and Darla Sherman—best frenemies who are only polite to each other because they have to be—are both dressed in black gowns, as if this is a formal affair, or they're headed

to some sort of gala after this. Perhaps a funeral.

Possibly my mother's, because I'm definitely feeling some murderous tendencies as I take in who else is here.

Graham. My age. Handsome. A complete goofball who's recently finished law school.

He's at the fireplace, elbow up on the mantel, glaring at what I know is a whiskey sour because it's the only thing he's drunk since we turned twenty-one. Currently, he's staring at it like it's much too sour and he wants to crush the offensive glass in his fist.

From my spot at the corner, still unnoticed, I can smell the stench of a setup that is never going to happen. Graham, while a decent friend of mine, is his father's puppet and will do everything his family says, but Jimmy and I are two of the few people who've known since we were all sixteen that Graham is gay.

I'd bust a gut laughing if this wasn't so pathetic. All my anger and nerves dissipate, and suddenly, I'm very much looking forward to the evening ahead.

Let the games begin.

"Hello," I state again, since my earlier greeting went unheard, and step into the room.

My mother is the first to turn, quickly followed by Darla. Both of the women's eyes do a quick dip to my protruding abdomen. Where my mother flinches away, Darla's light blue eyes lighten with excitement.

I rest my hand on my stomach and walk toward the parents who are fanning out in a semicircle, while Graham hangs back. My arrival is apparently something to be

celebrated.

Perhaps to them, it is, especially if they think I don't see exactly what's going on here.

"Good evening, Cara," my father says, leaning in and giving me a peck on the cheek. His cologne is the same he's worn since I was born, and I remember at one time, as a young girl, I'd crawl into his lap just to smell him. Occasionally, I would sneak his ties into bed with me, using them like a blanket and running the silk through my fingers and pressing it to my nose to fall asleep.

Odd, how he used to be my hero and now I know he's all plastic and perception.

"Father," I greet politely and step back, shaking hands with Miles Sherman and saying hello.

Darla greets me next, hands at my shoulders, and air-kisses both of my cheeks. I actually like Darla. She's the nicest of my parents' friends, rather normal. Probably why my mother despises her. "Hi, Mrs. Sherman. How are you?"

"I'm well." She grins down at my stomach. I doubt she's happy to see me, but more thrilled at the prospect of my unborn child being her grandbaby. "How are you? How are you feeling?"

I smile up at her, happily. "I've never been better."

With little pretense, I glare at my mother, not bothering to touch her. If I'm correct, this is all her doing in the first place. "Mother."

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

“You’re late and dinner might be getting cold. We should start our meal.”

I’m five minutes early and I have no doubt that the caterers are hiding off our formal dining room, ready to serve piping hot and delicious entrees.

“Actually, Cara and I will not be joining the rest of you for dinner tonight.” Graham says, walking up to me and giving me a hug. “I’m so damn sorry,” he whispers in my ear before pulling back.

“What?” My eyes widen and I jolt, but am unable to move out of his hold. He adjusts me to his side and winks at me before looking at my parents.

“Excuse me,” my mother says. “Dinner is ready.”

Graham glances at a watch that isn’t on his wrist. “So is our reservation. I believe for what you are all planning, Cara and I should have our conversation privately.”

“Graham—” Darla says, but she’s cut off by my father.

“That makes sense,” he says. “Yes, that sounds like an excellent plan. You two go out and get reacquainted. You can join us back here for drinks later.”

He raises his highball glass in a toasting gesture.

It takes everything I have not to snap at him. Instead, I take comfort in Graham’s still firm embrace.

This whole conniving extravaganza has well exceeded the line of never gonna happen, but at least dinner will no longer suck.

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“So,” Graham says to me as soon as we’re seated at Le Chat Noir, a French restaurant I absolutely adore, “you want to explain to me why I was called to the house tonight or”—his eyes drop to my stomach, hidden beneath the table, but his point is obvious—“or do I need to guess?”

I reach for the glass of sparkling water with one hand while the other rests on my stomach. “I believe we’ve been set up.”

I grin, but it’s solemn, and I’m not sure what Graham’s been told, but other than being a goofball and willing to play his father’s game to become partner by thirty, something Miles has always wanted for his son, he’s a good guy.

Him whisking me away from the nightmare at dinner only to call and get us a table at this place on the way is proof of it.

On the way here, I guided the conversation to Graham and kept it there, what he’s been up to since the last time I saw him, which coincidentally was Jimmy’s funeral, and how he’s been with his studying to pass the bar.

He failed it his first time. From the sounds of the stress in his voice and the tight pinch of his mouth while he explained studying for it the second time, his test in a few weeks is weighing heavily on him.

“I got that, honey,” he says, “but what I want to know is why and how it is you’re pregnant in the first place.”

“Well, you see, sweetie,” I tease, leaning in, “when there’s a boy and a girl, a boy puts his parts inside a girl’s—”

“Cut the shit, Cara.”

Oh-kay. Apparently stressed Graham lost his ability to joke.

“Sorry.” I take another sip of my water and set the glass down, trailing my finger around the stem of the elegant wineglass. “What have you been told?”

“I was told by my mom, who talked to your mom, that you’re in an unseemly situation”—I all but roll my eyes as he air-quotes “unseemly.” Please.—“And that you’re alone, struggling with no income to raise a baby, and your mom spoke with my mom, and your dad talked to my dad, and they think, since we’ve been family friends forever, that it’s best at this point to become family. Hence,” he points his finger at his chest and scowls, “I’m supposed to marry you. And I’ll do it, honey, you know I will.” He leans forward, and for not the first time in my life, his attractiveness is almost enough to steal my breath away if I still liked the polo shirt, suit-wearing, golf-club-membership kind of guy.

And, you know, if he was straight.

Fortunately, I find I have a taste for the tatted-up, knitted-hat, rough scruffy jaw, muscled variety. Which is why I’m boiling, my lid about ready to blow right off my top before he’s done talking.

“Excuse me?” My forehead aches from the stress of my brows shooting up so high and so fast. “You were told what?”

“I see that might not be the truth.”



“It sure as hell isn’t,” I hiss, leaning so close to the table I’m almost bent over it. “I am not alone and I’m most certainly not struggling for income. Granted, I’m not rolling in six figures, or even high five figures, with my job at the gallery, but I sure as hell am not alone. I’m living with Braxton, the father of my child, and we’re together, and Mom and Dad know this considering they showed up at my apartment one night when we were there, and I told them.”

One would think Graham would be shocked by the fact his parents and mine have had no problem lying to him.

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Fortunately for me, it's not the first time.

"I see," he says, and takes a drink from his glass of white wine. He seems at a loss for saying anything else, and I definitely can't blame him for that.

So while he processes the extremely screwed-up nature of our families, I peruse the menu, and when the waiter returns we both place our orders.

It's when the waiter leaves, and Graham is already sipping out of his second glass of wine, he says, "I shouldn't be surprised at this."

"I'm certainly not, but why should you not be?"

"I came out to my parents about six months ago."

"You did?" Holy shit! He's been terrified of that moment since we were so young, since he tried to make out with a girl his first year of college, just to make sure he was really gay, to see if he could swing it, and when he was done, called me and said he never wanted to touch another woman for as long as he lived.

And he'd sent me a photo of the girl. She was gorgeous. Definitely make-out worthy.

"How'd it go?" I don't even need to ask. It explains everything at my parents' house earlier, and the way he's swallowing his wine quicker than a starving man chugs water. "That bad?"

"Pretty much the worst possible scenario I'd ever imagined short of being disowned."

“Oh. Graham.” My heart aches for him. His pain is so evident in his expression. I reach across the table and take his hand in mine, squeezing it tightly. “I’m so sorry. Tell me about it.”

“I’d rather not.” He drains his glass of wine and sets it down, sucking back the taste of his drink. “I think we have enough to talk about with you, woman. Tell me who got you pregnant and why my parents approached, insisting I should marry you so this baby can have a decent upbringing.”

“Decent?” I arch a brow, teasing. It takes him a minute to smile.

“Yeah, I get the irony. But fuck decent. Tell me everything.”

It doesn’t take me more than a breath to let it all spill out. I tell Graham everything. We talk about Braxton and my pregnancy, I tell him about the food trucks. By the time our own food arrives, we dig in, laughing and talking as I continue spilling all my stories about Braxton.

He asks me about the pregnancy. I give him the rundown on how far along I am, that I am secretly hoping it is a boy and grows up to be just like Braxton, with a bit of Jimmy sprinkled in.

We laugh about our parents, he jokes that if it doesn’t work out for us, he’ll happily take over and I can be his beard.

We spend hours at the restaurant, and I completely forget about my parents. I forget about everything except how good it feels to be with Graham, someone who totally gets me, and Braxton, a man who just might love me like I love him.

So when Graham suggests we head out and go a few blocks east to a jazz club he loves with live music, I don’t hesitate to say yes.

## Chapter 25

Braxton

To say I'm fucking pissed as hell at 11:25 p.m. is the fucking understatement of the century.

Countless calls to Cara's phone have gone unanswered all night long. I didn't bother sending a text or leaving a voicemail.

It became clear she was avoiding me when she never answered, and it became really fucking clear why she was avoiding me when Stella showed up after going out to get food, it taking her longer than an hour, and I know it was because it took her that long to stop being pissed at me.

When she returned to MadInk, after my fifth unanswered call to Cara, she didn't just have a bag of Imperial Chinese food with her.

She had a photo on her phone of Cara, her arms wrapped around some asshole's neck, her cheek on his shoulder, and both of them were fucking laughing. She had a photo of that same guy with his shirtsleeve rolled up. Cara's finger on that man's forearm, tracing what looks like a script tattoo and the way she's looking at the ink, then looking at the guy in a fucking third photo...it's the same look she gives me after she comes. The same look she gave me this morning when she said she'd be home. My home. Our home.

Stella was no longer pissed, but smiling, pretty damn vindicated. Even when I took her phone, sent myself the pics, and then hurled hers across the entryway at MadInk, crashing her phone into my favorite portrait of the Caribbean Sea, she still wasn't pissed.

So, yeah, I came home and have spent the last two hours drinking. Heavily. I rarely drink, much more rarely drink to excess, but tonight fucking calls for it.

I don't know who the fuck he is. All I know is that the asshole she was out at a bar with, leaning on him on a barstool, is not her fucking father. And since her brother is dead, it's most definitely not him either.

Lucy is already kenneled for the night because the last thing I wanted to see was her jump for joy at seeing Cara whenever the hell she decides to come home.

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I'm sipping on a glass of Scotch when I hear the clink of my door. The catch of the lock follows as she locks it behind her and then the clipping sound of her heels on the floor as she enters.

Then a thud, followed by another one that's deeper as she kicks off her heels and one hits a wall.

It's dark in the room, because I can't be bothered to lean over and switch on a lamp. And in those few seconds, all the shit, all the anger I feel, hurls into my chest at a thunderous speed.

Just this fucking morning we were talking about being in this together. And I don't know if it's the shit with Stella, the fact she's right and Cara does belong in a different world from mine, or the fact she fucking lied about having dinner with her parents so she could go hang out at a fucking bar with some guy who looks like the exact kind of guy I'm certain her parents would choose for her. But as Cara walks into the living room and flicks on a light, I don't even flinch at the brightness.

"Hey," she says, having the nerve to walk toward me. Clueless. Totally fucking clueless, I know. "What are you doing here sitting in the dark?"

She stops when I don't answer, but I'm too fucking stunned to speak. And maybe too drunk. I set down my drink just in case.

Her hair is messed, flyaways at her temples and around her ears and she has the rest pulled back off her neck and shoulders. Her cheeks are flushed, her mascara slightly smeared beneath her eyes.

Beautiful, glorious, and completely uninhibited. She looks exactly like she does after I've made love to her.

"Braxton? You okay?"

"I called you."

"Oh. Yeah." She dips her head and digs into her purse. She pulls out her phone and gives me a guilty look. "It died at some point. I guess I forgot to charge it earlier. I'm sorry if I worried you."

"I wasn't worried."

She takes a step forward, hesitantly this time, and tilts her head to the side. "Are you mad at me? I'm sorry I didn't call, but I said I'd come right home after dinner."

Her voice trails off and I laugh coldly.

"Was worried about you when you didn't answer my first few calls. Then I got pissed when you didn't answer my next few. Then, I saw you were in good hands and stopped being worried and just stayed pissed." While I'm talking, I pull up the photo Stella took and when I'm done, I lean forward, sliding my phone across the coffee table. It lands just on the edge of the table closest to her.

"I don't understand—" She glances down and her lips part, forming a circle. Her eyes go round and her fingers go to her ears, brushing back some of her flyaways. "Oh."

"Yeah. Looks like a fun dinner with dear old Mom and Dad," I sneer. I'm unable to stop it. Hours of being anxious about her dinner, worried how it was going, that I wasn't there to protect her from her parents, then pissed, not only that she's all over some preppy little asshole, at a bar no less, but the fact there's a bubbling glass of

what looks like champagne in her hand.

She's fucking pregnant with my kid. Drinking. That might be the thing that has me pissed most of all since she knows who I came from and how I was brought into this world.

"Wow. Okay, Braxton, there's an explanation for all of this and if you calm down for a minute I'll explain."

"You're fucking drinking alcohol with my kid in you, Cara. You have your fucking hands all over some other guy after having your handsall over me this morning and yesterday and the day before."

Hurt splashes across her face but I'm too pissed, both with anger and the Scotch to give a fuck.

"And you think there's an explanation that will help calm me down? Go ahead, give it." I wiggle my fingers. I'm being an asshole.

It registers, but there's too much other shit shouting at me to do any good. Stella's inside my head, telling me she'll go back to high-class when she can. My mom is there, on her knees, giving some damn guy a blowjob to pay for more drugs, not giving a shit I haven't eaten in days. Cara's there, telling me fucking me is a disaster.

All of it's slamming around at some high damn decibels, I scratch my fingers across the back of my head and almost miss it when she wipes a tear off her cheek.

"Don't be a dick, Braxton. This isn't what it looks like."

"Looks to me you caved to Mommy and Daddy and got with a man they approve of. They happy with you now for once? They proud of you finally?"



She steps back quickly, almost tripping over the side table behind her and even in my drunken state I think of her falling to her ass. Of getting hurt.

I reach for her and she smacks my hand away, then smacks my bicep.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” she hisses, scrambling to regain her balance and moving back quickly. “Don’t you ever touch me, never again, you asshole. I’m leaving and I’ll call you when I can stand to even think of talking to you again, but this...what I thought we had, Braxton. We’re done.”

“We never had shit,” I snap back at her. “Not if you can turn away from me that quickly.”

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“I don’t know if you’re drunk or if you’ve lost your mind, but this conversation is over.” She turns and hurries to her room, a room she hasn’t spent any time in in a week except to get dressed and showered, and I should have known then, the other day when I told her to move all her stuff into my room, and she refused saying she thought it was best we still had our space, that she still had one damn hand up, holding me back while barely letting me in.

Now I know why.

I’m still standing, glaring at the spot she was in before she went to her room, when she returns. In the distance, Lucy’s whining, this sad, soulless moan, but all I see is the bag in Cara’s hand.

“Sober up and when you realize how big of a dick you’ve been to me tonight, maybe I’ll talk to you. But don’t you ever think you’ll get anything from me again, unless it has to do with the baby. You can go to hell, Braxton, you jumping to your worthless conclusions tonight tells me one damn thing.”

“What’s that?”

“That I’m glad I realized you’re the asshole you are when I’m only starting to fall in love with you, not after I’d completely fallen, because the pain I feel right now, listening to this bullshit, would tear me to shreds if it happened later.”

I slam back on my heels. Love? Fucking love? Bullshit. Before I can call her on it, she closes the space between us, not because she wants to be close to me, but because I’m blocking her way to the door and her freedom.

And it's only then, as she gets close, that I see the devastation on her face, in her eyes.

She's not fucking lying.

I've destroyed her.

"Thank you for showing me that the words you told me about treasuring me were just a bunch of bullshit, just like every other man I've ever known, except for Jimmy. Thank you for showing me who you really are now, before I was in too deep to get out."

"Cara," I say, my voice ragged. My tongue is thick. Holy fuck. How much Scotch did I down tonight?

I reach for her but she slides by me.

I'm too slow to move, and all I see is her backside, her beautiful ass in that dress that in any other circumstance, I'd want to tear off her to get to the prize beneath, and I must be drunk, and stupid, because even now, as pissed as I still am, as hurt as she is, I still want to do that.

"Cara."

She pulls open the door, and then turns, giving me a blank expression. I haven't seen it since the night I first brought her here. And it kills me.

Kills me like a damn knife to my chest.

"Graham...that guy I was with tonight? He's gay. He's been my friend since we were kids and I'd tell you why I was out with him tonight, instead of with my parents, but

you don't deserve an explanation. Fuck you for not thinking better of me."

The slam of the door behind her is almost as loud as her parting shot.

## Chapter 26

Cara

I'm in desperate need of coffee and eye drops as I shuffle into Graham's kitchen the next morning. My head is pounding, I've had barely an hour of sleep, and my stomach is screaming for me to fill it. I showed up at his front door, unable to call him and hoping like hell he hadn't moved in the year since I've seen him, and as soon as he opened the door, I collapsed into his arms.

He held me while I sobbed, barely able to get out the story through my crying and wretched sounds until I could cry no more, but had lost my voice.

I've lost more than my voice.

I still can't believe the way Braxton spoke to me. The callous, hurtful things he said are permanently etched into my brain and every time I blink, my eyes sting from the pain but it's the flash of his furious face when I first looked at him after seeing he had a picture of Graham that hurts more than anything.

He thinks I'd cheat on him. He thinks I'd go to a bar and get drunk while pregnant. He thinks I'd betray him in such horrific ways, I still can't fathom it. And he might have been drinking, but he wasn't so completely wasted as to not understand what he was saying.

"God," I groan, filling my cup of coffee from the prepared pot on the counter. Screw decaf today. One cup of the good stuff won't hurt anything.

“Not God,” Graham says. His voice makes me jerk, and coffee sloshes over the side of my mug. “But perhaps your knight in shining armor.” He walks straight to me, and I don’t have time to brush the spilled coffee off the dress I’m still in from last night. I passed out on the couch before I could change.

“How’s my princess?” He presses his lips to the top of my head and sniffs. “Besides stinky.”

“Broken.”

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“Not broken,” he murmurs before pulling away. “Just maybe dented a little bit.”

I’d laugh if it wasn’t true, but instead, I don’t respond. Tears are filling my eyes again and it hurts so much to keep crying I turn away from Graham while he goes about getting his own breakfast. He’s dressed in jeans and a gray polo shirt, jeans ripped at the ankle hems and around the edges of his back pockets. His hair is tousled, not neatly styled like I’m used to seeing it.

And on his arm is the tattoo he showed me last night. Be You. Be True.

I flinch at the tattoo and open the fridge, my shoulders shaking while I pretend just seeing that ink doesn’t make me cry.

He was telling me about coming out to his parents, how they’re in absolute denial and are certain a girlfriend—or a wife who happens to be pregnant already, even better—is certain to change his mind and like me, he’s simply going through some spoiled rich child, millennial phase of growth.

But we’d gone to that bar to listen to live jazz music where I’d sipped sparkling water and he’d begged me for more details on Braxton. Mostly what he did and what he looked like.

As I told him, his eyes popped wide and he’d begun rolling up the sleeve of his dress shirt. “Got this done two months ago, gave me the courage to come out to my parents. Went to MadInk because I heard it’s the best. Braxton did this.”

Written in an Old English–type scroll, I’d skimmed my fingers over the ink of his

arm, smiling, thinking of Braxton. I was thinking of Jimmy wanting me to live my life, Braxton giving me the keys to do so, Graham having the strength and being connected to both of us in some way without even knowing it.

I love it,I'd told Graham.

He'd smiled down at me.You love him.

My smile had gone wonky.Yeah.

And somehow, in all of that, someone who knew me, knew my connection to Braxton or maybe Braxton himself, had taken a photo.

Using the moment I realized I really truly loved him, to destroy it.

What a freaking mess.

I grab a raspberry Greek yogurt from the fridge and slam the door so hard the entire appliance shakes.

“Easy, killer,” Graham says. He’s laughing but there’s still concern in his voice. “Don’t take this out on Frigidaire.”

“You’re so weird,” I mutter. I grab a spoon and plop down on the stool, tear off the wrapper of the yogurt and dig in.

“You going to be okay today? I can take the day off studying. Not like I’ll pass anyway.”

That explains why he’s dressed casually. He’s still studying for the bar and I know he does all his studying at the Portland Central Library where it’s quiet and he can hide

and pull his hair and groan his frustration without anyone hearing.

“I can help you. Don’t know how a law student dropout can help, but I can try.”

“Nah. You’ve got other things to worry about.”

Yeah. Like calling Jenna. Somehow getting all my crap out of Braxton’s and back into my studio.

I’m going to miss my painting room.

Not as much as I’m going to miss Lucy, though.

Or Braxton.

I sniff and dip my head.

“Hey.” Graham walks to me and presses his finger to my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You’re going to be okay, right? Talk to him. Clear this up.”

I shake my head, but he has such a firm pinch on my chin, I can’t move much. “You didn’t hear the things he said to me.”

“No. And they’re shitty, and trust me, I want to punch him in the face for saying that to you, but it also sounds like there was a lot in his head. Listen to him, you at least have to figure out a way to move past this for your child’s sake.”

He’s right. I know he is.



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That doesn't mean I'm making the first move though. No way in hell.

"I need to call Jenna."

"Yes, you do. But when he calls you, don't avoid him."

He lets my chin go and I shove a spoonful of yogurt into my mouth, not answering.

Leaning forward, Graham rests his elbows on the other side of the counter. "Love you, Cara. You need anything from me, any help or anything, you know you can always come to me, right? And you can stay here as long you want too."

"I know. I really missed you, Graham."

"Good. I missed you too. Next time you decide to be your own person and not your parents' puppet, don't forget there are people in that life who still love you and I'm one of them."

He points to his chest and I nod.

"Speaking of puppets..."

"Don't start." He rolls his eyes and pushes off the counter. "I want to be a lawyer. Just because I want the same things he pushes down my throat doesn't mean I am him."

"Thank God," I mutter again.

He laughs and ruffles my already-messed-up mane. “I’ve got to go study, but I’ll be back around five. You going to be here?”

“Don’t know.” I shrug. I plan on calling Luca and telling him I’m not coming in, and I have to call Jenna, but if she and Dan can move my stuff out and back to my apartment, that won’t happen until after she gets off work. I say all this to Graham, more thinking out loud than anything, and he kisses my cheek.

“No problem. Call me and let me know. You’re here, I’ll bring home dinner. You’re not, we’ll talk soon.”

“Thanks, Graham.” My chin wobbles. “I’ll let you know.”

He gives me a quick hug, grabs his laptop bag and backpack, and heads out with another shout that I can stay if I want.

He’s been so good to me. Last night when I left Braxton’s, I gave the taxi the address of Graham’s place, quickly crossing off Jenna as an option. She’d go ballistic, Dan would probably be pissed but maybe he wouldn’t, and it was that uncertainty, not knowing where Dan would fall, that held me back.

Braxton might be a dick, but I don’t need to ruffle their friendship any.

God. How am I going to keep being friends with them if Braxton and I don’t work out?

“What a mess.”

I drop my head on the counter and cry.

Chapter 27

Braxton

I'm a dick. There is absolutely no fucking excuse for the way I behaved last night and I've had all night and most of the morning, barely sleeping at all, drunk and sitting on my couch in the dark after Cara stormed out, to think of a million reasons I can give her to explain why I lost my shit.

I'm a dick.

So far, that's all I've got. I can't call her and try to fix this shit if I don't know why I lost my mind so badly. So I'm sitting in my office after canceling all my appointments for the day because a hangover and a tattoo gun is fucking stupid, trying to sort through bills and invoices and organize my disaster of a place, when there's a knock on my door.

"Yeah?" I call out, shuffling a pile of designs I occasionally create when the day is slow and I'm feeling creative.

Stella pops in her head, a plastic bag from the sub shop down the road dangling in her hand in the narrow doorway. "You need something to eat."

She's giving me a wide berth and I'm alert enough to know that this sandwich is her way of trying to get on my good side. Last night when she showed me those photos, I absorbed all the shit she'd already said to me, that Cara and I don't belong together. I took in her almost satisfied expression that she was able to show me the truth to spare me the hurt of falling in love with a woman who would take off on me or would realize she's too damn good for me. I didn't even fucking question why or how, after just warning me that Cara and I didn't belong together, how she found her with another guy, why she took the photo, and why she was so intent and focused on showing them to me.

But today, after spending hours replaying last night in my head over and over and over again until I was dizzy, I started seeing things a bit differently, and if Stella hadn't put those ideas in my head earlier last night, I doubt any of this shit would have happened.

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Not that that excuses me being a dick to Cara.

“Not hungry.”

“Braxton—” The door squeaks as she walks in and sets the sandwich bag down on my desk.

“Don’t want to talk about it, Stella.”

Like usual, when Stella wants something, she doesn’t give up. She takes a seat on the chair across from my desk, crosses one leg over her knee, and taps the back of my desk with the toe of her black heels.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Fucking hell, she’s stubborn and a pain in my ass.

I throw down the papers I haven’t been paying the least bit attention to and glare at her. “What do you want?”

“So...how did last night go?”

“You shitting me?”

She twists her eyebrow piercing and shrugs. “I’m curious is all.”

Fuck it. It’s not her fault I lost my shit, even if it is her fault I lost my shit, so if she wants to be stubborn and a pain in my ass, she can have all of it.

I lean back in my chair and throw my hands in the air. “Let’s see, Stella. I went home, was so pissed I got shit-faced drunk, Cara came home and I didn’t even let her get a word in. I essentially called her a cheating, lying bitch, which pissed her off. Then she told me she was falling in love with me, that I was a dickhead, and the guy she was with is gay. So, I pretty much fucked up because I’m not falling in love with her, I’m already fucking there, and she walked out of my place with an overnight bag telling me she wants nothing to do with me except for our baby—” The devastated look in her eyes hits my memory and I flinch. God, what a fuckup I am. “That what you wanted to hear?”

“She didn’t cheat on you?”

So help me God. I’ve never wanted to strangle Stella more than right now as she stands in front of me processing last night’s bullshit in condensed form.

“She’s in love with you?” Her fingers at her piercing fall into her lap and her voice softens. Stella’s voice never softens. Ever.

“Yup.”

I’m glad I realized you’re the asshole you are when I’m only starting to fall in love with you.

Starting to fall in love with me. She’s falling in love with me. I took a fucking sword and might as well have slashed her heart right open, right there, in the middle of my damn living room.

What in the hell is my problem?

Moments pass where Stella stares at me, the clicking of her shoe making me want to rip them both off her feet and toss them into the hallway. “And the guy she was with is gay?”

“That’s what she said right before she slammed the door in my face.”

Several more moments. The clicking of Stella’s damn shoe on my desk is now accompanied with the matching tick-tock of my clock on my wall and all of it is making me feel like I’m a captured soldier being tortured.

“Maybe I messed up,” Stella says, and her voice is a little bit soft, and mostly scared.

“Jesus. You think?” I swipe a hand across my forehead. “It’s not even your fault, it’s mine because I was the asshole who didn’t just go home, wait for her, and say, ‘How was dinner?’ you know, and give her a minute to explain anything.”

“Yeah. That probably wasn’t good either.”

Is she fucking kidding me? “Stella.” It comes out as a growl.

“Well, what was I supposed to think when I saw her with some guy and all over him? It looked bad! And he’s the kind of guy she should be with anyway.”

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“Thanks. Now I’m not a dick, I’m a loser dick.”

“That’s not what I mean, Braxton.”

“Then what is it, Stella, because I gotta tell you, I’m really fucking tired of hearing you say she’s too damn good for me.”

She is, though. But she’s not either. We’re both the same, working our ass off to follow our dreams, just because she had an easier life in getting there doesn’t mean shit. I at least had people at my back supporting me and encouraging me. Cara comes from a life of money. I come from a life of people who care, so frankly, I think I had the better life.

“Why do you hate her, Stella? I never took you for being so judgmental but this she’s-better-or-I’m-better isn’t you. You don’t even know her.”

She scrapes her teeth over her lip piercing and her chin trembles.

The hell?

“Whose fault is it that I don’t know her, Braxton? She shows up, tells you she’s pregnant, and suddenly you’re hanging out with Cara and Dan and Jenna all the time, you haven’t even let me try to get to know her.”

I jerk in my chair and fall forward, my elbows landing on my desk. “The hell? What are you talking about?”



“When’s the last time you saw Bonnie or Asher, Braxton? You haven’t been to our place since Cara waltzed in here that first day. You think I don’t know you’ve already changed enough since you moved into that condo and then some rich chick shimmies her way into your life and suddenly you’re too good for me? It’s always supposed to be us.”

My head is spinning from her accusations, but it’s the wobble in her voice and the tears filling her eyes that stun me more than what she said. Stella crying?

I’ve seen it once. The day we buried Irvin.

“Stella—” I say, gentling my voice, but she lifts a hand to stop me.

“And yeah, maybe I’m being stupid. But I didn’t think she loved you. Or that you loved her. I assumed you were only with her because of the baby. You pissed me off and then she came in here, all rich and shit like she has any idea what it’s like for us, or for Robbie and I who skimp and save every damn dollar and it’s still barely enough, and you don’t even see my kids anymore. Like you think we’re not good enough to be around her or something. They miss you, Braxton. I miss you.”

“So you fucked up my life because you’re jealous?”

I don’t know whether to throttle her or hug her. Or kick her ass. Or shake her until her common sense returns. “You have Robbie, Stella. You’re married. You have kids. Don’t I get that too? Don’t I get the chance and time to have a relationship?”

“Well, yeah.” She swipes a finger beneath her eye. “But I didn’t think you’d ignore me when it happened either, or forget you’ve already got two kids in your life who are crazy about you.”

I don’t want to admit it, but she has a point. I don’t remember the last time I saw her

hellions and I used to be over there almost every week for dinner or to take Asher to the park and throw a ball around with him. And fuck me, I haven't even thought of them, I've been so wrapped up in Cara and our baby and her puking and trying to get her to care about me...

Shit.

I reallyama dick.

I drop my head into my hands and sigh. Who knew in trying to get everything I wanted in life, I'd push aside all the friendships with people who have always been there for me. If it wasn't for Stella investing her share of Irvin's inheritance into MadInk I'd never have gotten it started in the first place.

I push off my desk chair and move around, lifting Stella, who's sniffing and crying out of her chair, and I pull her into my arms.

"You're a fucking pain in my ass, Stell." I hold her to me while she cries. "And I'm really fucking pissed off at you for being such a bitch. You could have just told me, asked us over for dinner too, you know. But I should have made that effort too, and introduced Cara to you guys. That's my fault, honey."

"Well, this looks cozy," a man says, and I lift my head to find a guy in the doorway, sneer twisting his lips, shoulder resting on the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest. He's dressed in jeans and a slightly wrinkled gray polo shirt, but I know exactly who he is. He's the guy in the photos. "Should I take a picture, send it to Cara, see what she thinks about it?"

Fuck.

Stella sniffs one more time and pushes against me. My hands fall to my hips as she

steps back.

“You must be Cara’s friend,” I say lamely. He obviously knows me.

“Yup. Graham. And you’re Braxton. Came to talk to you.”

Awesome. Because the day hasn’t been shitty enough yet.

“Sorry,” Stella says, and I don’t know who she’s talking to because she doesn’t look at either of us. “I’m really sorry,” she mutters. “I’ll go up front while you two talk.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:09 am*

She turns from me and Graham shoves off the doorway as she walks by. She mutters another apology as she passes him, but Graham doesn't move his steely gaze from mine.

"Stella," I call out to her when she's passed Graham and he's still glaring at me like he wants my head on a pike.

"Yeah?"

"No worries. It'll all work out."

Because I'm going to make it so, I just have no clue how to do it yet.

She gives me a sad smile and heads down the hallway.

Graham steps further into my office and shuts the door. "I thought, since you were too big of an ass last night to get the story from Cara, that I'd stop by here today, tell you what happened, because I'm really not too fucking happy Cara showed up at my house last night, after spending hours telling me how awesome you are, only to be such a damn wreck she was almost as upset as she was the day Jimmy died. She's been my friend a long time, and I get you two are connected now, and always will be, and I don't really care if you're pissed I'm here, but I need to clear this shit up so you two can move on."

Goddamn it. "How is she?"

"Broken, is how she referred to herself this morning."

Jesus. My chest burns. He's not pulling any punches and I respect the hell out of him for it. "Want a seat?"

"Not really. I don't have a lot of time, so I'll just get right to the point. Last night, Cara's parents, who are even bigger assholes than my parents, maneuvered a situation where both of our families figured they could get everything they wanted. I came out to my folks a few months back and we can just say that they're less than pleased at the idea. So, unfortunately, they told Cara's parents. Cara's parents had already met you and my folks might be pissed that I'm not the perfect kid they want, but Cara's are worse. They got together, figured both of us had had enough time to have our tantrums, and we needed to grow up."

My hands ball into fists until my knuckles ache. I'm really not liking where this is going. When he doesn't continue, I tilt my chin, silently telling him to continue. I'm too pissed to speak and last night taught me a lesson: when I do that, I screw up.

"So anyway, they figure, Cara's knocked up and pregnant, and me, well, I'm never going to give them a child or get married or have whatever it is they want me to have—"

"Your parents are dicks."

"Yeah. My dad is, Mom's okay, but she doesn't have much of a backbone to stand up to him. But that's not really the point. Last night, Cara and I get ambushed and I got us the hell out of there. See, Cara and Jimmy and I, we all grew up together. I've known them my whole life, and up until I told my parents, only a couple guys I dated while in the closet and Cara and Jimmy know I'm gay. But after Jimmy died and Cara moved out, she quit calling me and taking my calls, so last night when I figure out the reason they wanted our families to get together for dinner is because they expect us to get married—two problems solved for them— and there was no way in hell I was having that conversation with our parents and Cara without talking to her,

so I got us the hell out of there.”

Yeah...about as bad as I expected.

Ice chills my veins and sends a shiver down my spine and it's all I can do not to shove my fist through a wall.

“And the pictures?”

“Yeah, see, that's where you're really the biggest asshole on the planet.” He holds out his forearm and I see the script on his arm. Be you. Be true. It's vaguely familiar, but I'm too focused on what he says to give it more than a passing glance.

“Jimmy was the cheerleader of our little trio. The perfect son, loved his life, but he loved his friends and his sister too. And when we were teenagers, he used to tell Cara, ‘Be you, honey. Be whoever you need to be and be happy.’ And me, he was always telling me I had to be true to myself because he wouldn't be friends with a hypocritical asshole. Eventually, the three of us, we shortened that to this.”

Shit fucking damn.

“I get it,” I say, clenching my teeth together. Fuck, I'm not cold anymore. I'm burning up. Fury is boiling over, red sparking the edges of my vision.

“Actually, you don't,” Graham says, “because you did this tattoo. You inked me with Jimmy's words before I got the courage to come out. But the last thing I did before I came out, was come here and sit in your chair. It was Jimmy's words, but it was your hand inking them into my skin that gave me the courage to do it.”

“You're shitting me.” I press the palm of my hand into my chest, a lump larger than Texas building in my throat.

“Nope. And I think you get it now, because last night, whenever those pics were taken, by whoever, they didn’t know that the reason she was smiling at me and had her hands all over me was because she was looking at me, telling me how much she loved you. She said it must be fate that we’re all connected in a way that goes deeper than anything we could have imagined. And when she told me she loved the ink, I told her she loved you, and she got all fucking goofy smiley at me and said she did.”

She loves me. She’s not falling in love with me, she might have been before last night, before seeing her brother’s words inked into her friend’s arm by a gun I held in my hand, but she learned that and she loved me.

“I love her,” I say, teeth aching so bad they might snap right out of my gums, and I don’t even give a shit if this guy believes me. “I fucked up last night, and I know it. But I had shit in my head about how Stella and I grew up, how she deserves better than some guy from the slums and a drug-addicted mother and I saw her with you, the kind of guy she deserves, having a drink while she’s pregnant and I didn’t think.”

“You didn’t.”

Damn. This guy. I’ve got him beat by about fifty pounds and six inches and he’s not intimidated by me in the least.

“I’ll make it right.” I have no idea how, but I will. I’ll bleed myself dry figuring out how to make this right.

“You better.”

“She still at your place?”

“Don’t know. She said this morning she was going to call Jenna and Dan, talk to them about getting her stuff out of your place and back into her studio.”

“She’s not fucking moving out.” No way in hell. Last night, spending the first night alone without her in weeks was bad enough. No way in hell I’m doing it permanently.

“Where do you live? She and I need to talk.”

## Chapter 28

Cara

I call Luca, explained I won’t be in and why in an abbreviated version, and he’s not bothered at all by my taking the day off. It’s probably the sniffing and crying over the phone as soon as I hear his voice that makes him even more compassionate than usual.

I do not, however, call Jenna. At least a half dozen times I find myself staring at my phone, her number pulled up on my screen, but I’m unable to press the send button.

I don’t want to deal with anything, and I managed to pack enough last night, as haphazardly as it was, to last me through the weekend at least. There’s no point in waiting to get my stuff out of Braxton’s, but there’s also not an urgent need. We’ll have things to talk about eventually, and there’s still a baby we’ll need to figure out a



way to raise together. I would never keep that from him, but I can't imagine forgiving him anytime soon either.

Plus, it's not like he's called to apologize or talk either.

Every time I blink, his words and his scowls flash through my mind so much that by the time Graham returns home, I'm still curled in a ball on his couch, HGTV binge-watching marathon on for background noise only.

"So today was productive, I take it."

His gaze scans me, and he reaches over and flicks off the television.

"How was your studying?"

Graham's eyes have dark circles under them. His tousled hair from this morning is even messier, strands flipping every which way, which tells me exactly how stressed and worried he is. He's probably been tugging on it all day.

"Go shower," he says, ignoring my question and tossing the remote onto a chair so it's out of my reach. "Seriously, you need to get cleaned up."

"I don't want to." I want to mope and whine and revel in my broken heart.

"You'll feel better. Did you call Jenna?"

Nothing will help me feel better. I shake my head and find myself unable to look Graham in the eyes. Instead, I stare off at the now blank television screen. "No. I don't want to bother her."

"She's your best friend."

“And married to Braxton’s best friend. I don’t know if I want to tell her anything until I figure out what I’m doing next.”

“You know your problem?”

“Yes, I know about fifty of them.”

The cushion next to me depresses from Graham’s weight and he pulls me into his arms. My hand falls to my stomach and I collapse into his hold.

“No. You only have one, and it’s that you’ve never liked taking help from anyone. You always want to do it alone, but right now, there’s more than just you to think of.” My hand tightens on my stomach on instinct. “And you have to talk to Braxton.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I know.”

My gaze falls to my hand, my swollen abdomen beneath it. It looks like I have a melon in my stomach, even if it is a small one, but there’s absolutely no hiding my pregnancy anymore from anyone. “It hurt, Graham. So much. I keep hearing everything he said, how he could think I’d cheat on him. Or lie to him.”

All those stupid painful emotions I’ve done a sucky job of pushing away all day return and I shove my head into Graham’s neck, hating that I’m such a wreck and that I trusted Braxton and I fell in love with him, even if I told him I wasn’t already there to save face.

God, he’s destroyed me and all over some stupid assumption he didn’t even ask about.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:10 am*

“I hate men,” I choke out over a sob.

Graham doesn’t say anything. He holds me for a few more minutes, running his hand through my hair and over my shoulder, soothing me until I calm down, and then he kisses the top of my head. “Go shower. You’ll feel better if you get cleaned up and while you’re doing that, I’ll order us some pizza.”

“Pepperoni and sausage and jalapeños,” I mutter. Pizza actually sounds good.

“Jalapeños on pizza?”

“It’s really good.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” He gives me a gentle shove. “Now go.”

I groan, stretching my legs as I roll off the couch in an overdramatic fashion.

“Fine, I’ll go. But I’m showering under duress.” I glare at him.

He grins. “Noted.”

—

I’m in the hall bathroom after my shower, just finishing blow-drying my hair when it happens. When I feel it.

“What?” I whisper to my reflection to the mirror, but I’m already setting down the

hair dryer and brush and lifting up the pale blue camisole I put on after my shower. It's tight on my stomach, stretched across everything that's growing, but it also makes everything look cute. I ignore the cute factor and lean forward. I need to get closer.

Then I feel it again.

A tiny little flutter. Like eyelashes against my cheek. Or the wiggle of a ladybug in my palm. And it happens again. In the exact same spot.

My hand falls there, and I press my thighs against the bathroom counter getting my stomach as close to the mirror as I can, and I'm staring down at my stomach, staring at where I feel the little flutters.

I see nothing in the reflection. I press my hand more firmly to that area and...

The baby. I can feel it. It's early, but I feel it again and then a third time.

"Holy crap." I am in awe, and tears form in my eyes.

It's amazing. I watch my reflection in the mirror. A tear drops off my chin and hits my shirt just above my right breast.

After several moments, I feel another flutter. A kick. My baby is kicking me and it's the most beautiful thing in the world.

"Graham!" I shout, tugging down my shirt and fixing the waistband of my gray yoga pants. "Graham!"

I call his name again, hurrying down the short hallway toward his kitchen and living room.

“You have to see this!” I cry out again and reach the end of the hallway that opens up into the small living area, the even smaller dining area, and the galley kitchen beyond.

And I freeze.

He hasn’t answered me, but now I know why.

Graham is resting against the kitchen counter bar top, but he’s relaxed, a little less disheveled, and his eyes are pinned on me. I barely pay attention to him because it’s the guy a few feet from him that catches my attention and steals my breath.

Braxton is here. He has his hands on his hips, one hand holding his hat. His dark head of hair looking like he’s been wearing his hat all day. He’s in his typical jeans and thermal shirt, this time a deep, dark red that looks absolutely fabulous on him.

And both of their eyes are on me.

“Are you okay?” Braxton asks, taking a step toward me.

Graham steps in front of him, though, blocking his movement toward me, but I still step back toward the hallway.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:10 am*

“What are you doing here?”

All my joy flees and is replaced with something darker, something cold that eats away at all the happiness I’ve just experienced.

“What is it, Cara? Are you okay?” Graham asks, and my eyes flicker from his concerned look to Braxton’s even worse one, but I’ve never seen this expression on him and I don’t know what to make of it.

I look back to Graham. “What’s he doing here?” I’m almost shrieking. Panic is buzzing in my veins, making my arms tremble and my voice shake.

“He came to talk. Now, what were you shouting for? Is everything okay?”

Behind him, Braxton’s lips are pinched together, his gaze never moving from me. I can feel him watching me he’s so intense.

I shake my head. “I’m okay.” I’m not telling him why I was crying out like it was Christmas morning and Santa just delivered me a real live unicorn. Actually, screw that. Braxton’s here. And I’m not letting him ruin this. Not this.

I look directly at him, showing him all my pain and my hurt and there’s no joy in my voice when I say, “I just felt the baby move.”

Chapter 29

Braxton

I just felt the baby move.

I move quickly, too quickly for Graham to stop me, and I'm in front of Cara, her wide, terrified blue eyes on me as she steps out of my reach. I missed it.

I missed my baby move for the first time.

"Cara—"

"Don't you dare come any closer to me."

"I can explain." My gaze drops to her stomach. I've had my hands all over her, but every night we're on the couch I'm touching her, pressing my hand to her belly in hopes I'll feel the baby move and of course, of course, it happens on this day. When I can't touch her, when I can't pull her into my arms without fear of getting a right hook to my jaw. "I'm so sorry, honey. So sorry. Please let me explain last night."

"Why should I? You didn't care about letting me explain."

"I know. I'm a dick. That's part of what I need to explain."

"No explanation needed. That was loud and clear."

I'd smile at her sass if she weren't so damn angry she might twist off my balls.

Car keys jingle behind me, and then Graham is next to me, pushing me out of the way to get to Cara.

"No bloodshed, you two, these carpets are a pain to keep clean."

I grunt, because this dude not only has some serious guts, after we got the shitty part

out of the way at my office earlier, I also learned he's hilarious.

Cara could do worse with a friend than Graham, but not sure she could do a whole lot better.

I stand there, watching another man bend down to kiss her cheek, but the entire time Graham is moving toward her, touching her, resting his hand on her belly that I desperately wish was my fucking hand, she's still gaping at me.

He whispers something in her ear and I can't hear it, but her eyes flash wide as her jaw sets back to really, really mad, and probably more hurt.

"Pizza should be here soon," he says when he moves back. "Already paid and tipped so you two have fun. I'm going out for a while." He grins down at Cara. "And if you're not here when I get back, I'll get the key from you some other time."

"I'll be here," she snaps, still staring at me.

My lips twitch but I pull back my grin before it comes out. The hell she will.

"Mm-hmmm." Graham steps toward me and slaps my shoulder. "Be good to her."



*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:10 am*

“I will.” It’s not a promise. It’s a vow.

I’ve got a short fuse and not many manners, but if Cara gives me another shot, I’ll break my neck proving to her that taking a chance on the guy who got her knocked up is the best risk she could ever take.

Cara lets loose a low sound, might be a growl, as she watches Graham walk away and then it’s the two of us, in his small but decently decorated and not too flashy apartment.

I step back out of the hallway, closer to the living room to give her space to walk through. I hadn’t planned on her being in the shower when I got here, but I’m thankful for it. Gave me a few minutes to talk to Graham about her state of mind since he hadn’t seen her all day.

Move slow. She’s not pissed as much as she is hurt.

“Can we talk? Please?”

She chews on her bottom lip and then pops it out, moving past me to a black leather chair that’s facing me. There’s another chair like it on the other side of a round table and a small matching couch.

I move to the couch, close enough I can touch her, but I don’t.

“You talked to Graham?”

I clasp my hands together, elbows on my knees, and face her. “He came and talked to me today. Told me about last night.”

“Of course he did,” she mutters and crosses her arms, collapsing back into the chair.

Her pout is adorable, but I’ve got a long, bumpy road ahead of me and there’s no clear navigation.

“He cares about you, and I know it might not seem like it, but I do too, honey. I’m so damn sorry about last night, about thinking the worst of you, not giving you a chance to explain anything. I should have trusted you enough to not even need an explanation—”

“Yes. You should have.”

The pain in her voice, in the narrowed blue eyes that are stormier than the bright Caribbean Sea, slice right through me. It’s the chin trembling that almost does me in. The way she blinks harshly, I know she’s fighting off tears.

“Cara—”

“Why? Why would you say those things to me? I thought...” She shakes her head again. “I don’t think I can talk to you about this. Not yet. You hurt me.”

“I know. And I will probably hurt you again. I’m human and I’m an idiot sometimes but I swear to you, you give me another chance, you let me make this right, it’ll never happen again.”

“No.” She sniffs and looks at the door to the apartment, avoiding me. “I can’t take that risk with you. Not again.”

“You have to,” I say. “You have to because you love me. And when you love someone, you forgive them, and I want that from you, Cara. I want your love and your forgiveness and I’m so damn sorry I hurt you. I had my head twisted with shit Stella said, I was pissed I hadn’t heard from you, so damn worried about what your parents were saying to you and not having any way to protect you from them, and then I saw you with that drink at the bar, your hands on another man, and I just...I just snapped. It was too much, all at once, me feeling worthless and powerless, and I handled it poorly. I was a complete shit. I know it. But, honey, I’m so sorry, so damn sorry I hurt you like that. And I swear to you, you let metryto make this right, you will never regret it. That I swear to you.”

By the time I’m done, her eyes have lost their fury, replaced with something else, something more blank.

Something hopeless. “Stella said something to you.”

“Yeah, but—”

“She hates me.”

“She doesn’t.” She opens her mouth and I know it’s to argue, because Stella also told me today about the shit she said to Cara. “She doesn’t hate you, she was mad at me. She was jealous.”

“Jealous?” She sounds incredulous. “Of me?”

“No. Yes.” I take a breath. This conversation is getting away from me. I take a chance and I unclasp my hands, reach out and settle one on her knee. She jumps but doesn’t move it away, so I hold her firmly. “Stella’s like my sister, I’ve told you that. Irvin was all she and I had, and she’s married now, has two kids, but it’s always been us, just me and Stella in a different way. It’s not that she hates you, it’s that she

wanted to protect me...and she was hurt I didn't bring you around her. She started thinking you were too good for her, and I was ignoring her and not seeing her kids, and she twisted shit in her head, then put it in yours, and really, fucked it up in my head. She feels like shit for it."

"She should."

Damn it. Terror the size of a castle builds inside of me. I don't know how to fix this if I can't get her to give me anything.

Several minutes have passed and she hasn't looked at me. All I can see is her chest rising and falling with every measured breath she takes.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:10 am*

“Graham told me about the tattoo, honey.” She flinches, either at the reminder or the endearment, but it’s something so I keep pushing. “I’m honored, Cara. I’m so damn honored I was the one chosen to put Jimmy’s words on Graham’s skin. He came in today, told me all about it, why you were out with him and not your parents, and I gotta say, I thought your parents were dicks before, but they’re completely off the charts with their maneuvering last night, but Graham is cool. He and I are cool. I’m fucking thrilled I was the one to do his tattoo and I’m glad you saw it. I’m glad you love it.”

Tears spill down her cheeks and she wipes them away when all I want to do is take them from her, and then ensure I never give her a reason to cry again.

“I’m honored you’re falling in love with me, Cara. I’m sorry I took that and fucked it up, but give me a chance. Please.”

She shakes her head. I can feel my chance slipping from my fingers.

“I can’t, Braxton. I’ve got someone else to think about right now, someone more important than either me or you, and last night is a vivid reminder we hardly know each other.”

Fuck that.

“I know I love you.”

She jumps, blinks, and looks at me. “What?” Confusion wrinkles her brow and I all but laugh. “You can’t.”

“I can. I do. I always will. I fell in love with you the first night we were together, Cara. For months I was unable to get you out of my head, wanting to get your number and call you. But then I kept remembering how you ran from me and were embarrassed that you slept with some guy like me. You’re sorry you did that, and I get it, as much as it hurt, and I’m not comparing the two. I’m not, I swear it. But when Stella came to me with all her bullshit and it became my bullshit, that’s what I was thinking. Thinking you were someday going to run off on me again and then when I saw you with Graham, that’s all I could think of...that you’d done it, you found someone your family would approve of, that you’d finally get their approval and your happy family, and I’d just be the guy whose rubber broke inside you one night.”

“Braxton—”

“I know it’s stupid.” I take her hand and squeeze it. “I just want you to know where my head was, but that doesn’t change that I love you. I do love you. Falling in love with you was so damn easy for me I didn’t even realize it was happening.”

“You’re such an idiot,” she says, and she shoves off the couch yanking her hand from mine.

Not exactly the reaction I was hoping to hear.

“What?”

“You!” She spins at me, pointing a circle in my direction. “You’re an idiot! You’re the dumbest man in the world if you think that I would run off with some guy just to make my parents happy. Haven’t I proven to you that I don’t care what they say anymore? Don’t you remember me telling you if they were rude to me I’d leave and come tell you? I went to that dinner last night fully intent on walking away from them forever, because I was so certain of us that they no longer matter. And then...”

She trails off, shaking her head. Her hands go to her hips and she laughs. “God. We’re a disaster.”

“We’re not.” I push off the couch and I walk to her, covering her hands with mine on her hips, and I hold her close, firmly too so she can’t run. “We’re not a disaster, Cara. We’re a work in progress.”

She laughs softly and her forehead collapses onto my chest.

Best fucking feeling in the entire world, having her leaning into me and not shoving me away.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, pressing my lips to her head. “I’m so damn sorry about last night. But I do love you. I’m in love with you. I want you and I want us to start a family and I know we haven’t been together long, but it doesn’t make it wrong either.”

She shakes her head against my chest and I keep talking. “Forgive me. Or at least try to. Come home with me tonight and let me just hold you because last night without you by my side fucking sucked. We’ll get past this. All couples fight and argue, and I guarantee you we’ll do it again, and I’ll be an idiot again and probably an asshole at least a dozen times, but we can get past them too.”

“You sound so sure.”

She might not sound sure, but she pulls her hands from beneath mine and slides them to my back.

God. Her hands on me have never felt so damn good and my shoulders relax for the first time all day.

“I’m sure because I love you, and you love me.”

“I don’t.”

Bullshit. Instead of calling her on it, I yank my phone out of my back pocket, pull up the photos and find the one where she was gazing up at Graham...like she loved him.

Except now I know that’s about the time Graham said she admitted to him she lovedme.

I hold the phone down in her line of sight so she can see it.

Now that I know the context, I love the damn photo.



*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:10 am*

“You look at me like this, and I know from Graham and Stella that right around this time last night, when you were looking up at Graham all doe-eyed and stoned, lips soft and happy, that you were learning about that tattoo and you were telling him you loved me. Proof is all over your face, honey, and it’s beautiful.”

She takes the phone in her hand and pulls it close.

Seconds pass where all I hear is my heartbeat thumping against my chest.

She shakes her head and I grit my teeth together. Arguing her into admitting she loves me might not be the best idea. Handing me my phone back, she drops her hand back to my hip. I slide the phone into my pocket and press my finger to her chin, tilting her head up so I can look her in the eyes.

“I love you, Cara. I love you and I love our baby and I want to be a family. Please, come back home with me.”

She blinks, pretty, beautiful blue eyes shimmering with something much more hopeful than the stormy waters earlier. “Okay. I’ll come back home with you.”

My entire chest collapses with relief and I cup her cheeks, holding her firmly in the palm of my hands. “Do you love me?”

“I do. Please don’t make me regret it.”

“Never.” I take her mouth in mine, sealing my promise with a kiss, and when we’re done, I take my family home where they belong.

## Chapter 30

Cara

“Stop pacing, honey, you’ll wear yourself out.”

I shoot a glare at Braxton and spin on my heels, pacing another lap in the doctor’s incredibly tiny waiting room. There’s no way I can wear myself out when there’s only ten feet of room.

“I’m nervous.” We’re in the waiting room at the radiologist’s office, moments away from our ultrasound. We’re finding out if we finally call Squirt a boy or a girl, and I’m so excited I can’t stand myself.

“I know. Come here.” Like always when Braxton gets bossy, I listen, mostly because I’m learning every day he only has my best interests at heart. When I get close to him, he grabs my hand and pulls me onto his lap.

I fall with an oomph of surprise and look back to the nurse at the reception desk. “You can’t have me on your lap in the waiting room.”

He grins. It’s a grin that makes me warm all over. “Ah, but I can have you whenever and wherever I want.”

Other parts of me not only get warm, but wet. “Don’t turn me on in the doctor’s office, Braxton Henley.”

“Cara Thompson?”

Both of us turn our heads in the direction of the feminine voice. A nurse is standing at the door, blond hair pulled up into a topknot, teal blue scrubs on and a clipboard in

her hand.

“I think that’s our cue,” Braxton says, his hand on my back, guiding me to my feet.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go see what we made, shall we?” He grins down at me. I pick my purse up off the chair and look at him over my shoulder.

“Boy,” I guess, because all the midwives’ tales I’ve read online have told me that’s what our little squirt is.

“Healthy,” Braxton counters. He always says it and now, I can’t believe I ever accused him of only loving our child if it was a boy.

He absolutely, one hundred percent, doesn’t care either way. Even when I’ve tried to prod him into choosing a gender he just shakes his head, kisses me and then my belly, and says, “As long as it’s healthy.”

—

“Phil’s diner?” I ask when Braxton pulls up to the train car diner he took me to after the first midwife’s appointment.

“It’s where we began, sort of,” Braxton says and grins at me. “And it’s a great place to celebrate.”

It’s not exactly where I’d choose to celebrate the fact we’re having a boy. I was right!

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:10 am*

Holy cow, we're having a boy!

I can't contain myself. I throw my face into my hands in the front seat of his car and tears erupt like a volcano.

"What the hell?" he asks.

"I'm just so damn happy!" I grin at him with eyes filled with tears and for a split second, Braxton looks completely stunned.

Then he does what he always does when I'm a complete, massive wreck.

He yanks me into his arms and he kisses me.

"You okay now?" he asks when he pulls back. His eyes are glimmering with moisture and happiness.

"No. I'm a mess."

"You're a beautiful mess. Come on, I have something planned for you."

A surprise at Phil's diner? Do I get my own roller skates? I laugh at the idea and climb out of the car, Braxton meeting me and closing the door for me.

I'm ushered into the diner and as soon as we step inside, the entire diner erupts with cheers so loud I jump back into him.

“Congratulations!”

I can't believe this. I'm swept into a euphoria as I scan the room. Dan and Jenna. Stella and her husband, Robbie, who's hilarious and bossier than Braxton. Bonnie and Asher are in front of them, and Robbie has a hand curled around each of their shoulders, holding his hellions in place.

We've seen them several times since our argument a few weeks ago. The first couple of times were awkward, but then things settled. It might take me a while to fully trust Stella and call her a friend, but her kids who are absolutely crazy and always hyper and shouting go a long way into smoothing the rough areas when it comes to us.

Then there's Luca.

And Graham.

Javier from MadInk is here.

Everyone is here.

“Oh my gosh!” I throw my hands to my mouth and then turn, and throw my arms around Braxton. “You planned this?”

“Wanted everyone we love to celebrate with us. Should we tell them?”

I grin at him. I probably look insane. “Can I?”

“Go for it, baby.”

I spin on my feet and throw my hands in the air, shouting, “We're having a boy!”

Shouts go up, more shouts and cheers and clapping hands and I'm rushing into the melee of Jenna's arms around me, then Graham's and Luca's, when I'm suddenly yanked back by Braxton's hand grabbing mine and pulling me back to him.

"What the heck?" I ask, as he's tugging me.

He doesn't stop until I'm standing in front of everyone again. "What are you doing?"

"That was sweet, baby, but that's not what we're celebrating."

Huh? "What?"

"They can be happy for us that we're having a boy," he says, and before I can ask what he's talking about, he drops to a knee.

He's dropping to a knee.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 5:10 am*

Oh my God. Braxton is on a knee in front of me.

Pulling out a box.

A black box.

Behind me, I vaguely recognize Jenna's squeal of delight.

"Oh my God," I whisper, my hands already shaking. "Shut up."

"Nope." He grins at me and takes my hand. His other hand has the box.

He flips it open.

"Cara Thompson, in front of everyone who loves us, who's happy for us, I want to promise all of them, and you, that if you agree to be my wife and marry me and give me the family better than anything I'd ever dreamed of having, I will make sure that all of your dreams come true, every day, for the rest of your life, because you've already given me mine."

"Braxton—" My voice is wobbly. Shaky. How am I even speaking? My knees feel like jelly and I might fall over.

"Marry me, Cara. Be my wife."

"Yes!" It rushes out of me with such force I surprise myself and I laugh, and he laughs. And the crowd around us cheers.

But I'm still staring down at him, more tears running down my face as he takes the ring out of the box. A gorgeous sparkling diamond that's round and bright and I don't even care what it is just that it's on my finger and I'm getting married.

"I love you," he says, kissing my hand as he stands. "I love everything about you."

I throw my arms around him again, my belly preventing me from jumping into his arms like I desperately want to.

I kiss him until I can't kiss him anymore as all of our friends—our family—cheer and clap and Graham yells for us to get a room.

Then I twirl, tossing my hands into the air again, and shout, "I'm getting married!"

## Epilogue

### Braxton

My fiancée is beautiful. She's even more beautiful on her hands and knees, her hips wide, plump ass shaking as I thrust into her. It's one of the few positions where I can make love to her now that her due date is so close, and as much as I love it, I can't wait until I can kiss her while I'm making love to her.

"Braxton," she whines, and I know she's close. Her already tight walls feel incredible against my dick.

I slide my hand from her hip to her center, pressing against her clit while I speed up my thrusts. "Get there," I demand of her, because I'm so close.

Every time I sink inside Cara I could blow like a rocket, and the more she grows with our baby, mostly all in her breasts and stomach, the fiercer that need is.



There is nothing more insanely beautiful than watching the woman you love grow with your child inside of her.

“Please. Yes.” She pushes back against me, her legs and hands already shaking, and it’s that sign that tells me she’s almost there. She always goes wild right before she releases.

“Yes,” I groan, slamming into her at the same time my fingers manipulate her at the front.

And it doesn’t take much, because she throws her head back, her walls clamp around my dick, and I push inside her as deep as I can go, but not nearly deep enough because I’ll never be deep enough inside of Cara to be satisfied.

We tumble over the edge of our release together, and she collapses to her elbows. I stay inside of her until I can breathe at a reasonable pace, running my hand up and down her back.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like Pam’s idea of a lot of sex to get this baby coming was the best idea she’s ever had.”

We had her last regular appointment this morning where Pam gave us that idea, a cheeky grin on her face. As soon as we got back to the apartment, Cara attacked, all grouchy and demanding I follow her midwife’s orders to get this baby boy out of her immediately. I chuckle against her shoulder, bending over her to kiss her. She’s three days from her due date, her stomach as big as a watermelon, and she’s cranky.

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Likecrazycranky. The fact she still has her sense of humor is miraculous at this point.

“He’ll come when he’s ready.”

“I hate it when you say that. What if he never wants to come?”

“He will. Soon.” I slowly slide out of her, helping her roll to her left side, and trail my lips down the side of her body, kissing everywhere I can reach down to the curve of her hips before I move off the bed. “Stay here. I’ll clean you up.”

She hums a satisfied sound and I move to the bathroom. After a quick cleanup of myself, I come back with a warm washcloth and clean Cara up before I climb into the bed behind her.

Her hand is on her stomach, and as she turns to me to kiss me, her lips are twisted in a slight grimace.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she says. But her features tighten. “That must have just brought on another contraction. My stomach is as hard as a ball.”

I feel it for myself, her entire stomach tight and hard. Another Braxton-Hicks. They’re driving us both insane. Every time she gets one I think it’s time to go and grab the bag. To which Cara slaps my hand and tells me to chill out.

“We have the Halloween party tonight with Dan and Jenna. Do you want to skip it?”

“No. I’ll be more miserable sitting around here doing nothing.”

Her call. These days she’s pretty miserable out and about just as much as she is at home. Luca got so tired of her snapping at customers he told her last week to start her maternity leave early and not return until she’s normal again.

It took everything I had not to laugh in her face when she demanded, “Can you believe he said that to me?”

“Whatever you want, honey.”

I kiss her cheek again and move to roll away from her but she grabs my arm and holds on tight. “Braxton?”

“Yeah?”

“You know I love you, right? Even when I’m losing my mind and being bitchy, you know I love you, don’t you?”

Her eyes hold a hint of fear, something I haven’t seen in her. Cara’s one of the strongest women I’ve ever met. It undoes me as much as it helps me.

It’s nice to know I’m not the only one losing my mind these days.

“Of course I do. And I love you just as much.”

“Good. I should shower.”

“Want help?” I’ve used the excuse it’s hard for her to bend over more than once to help her in the shower. Which usually leads to more pleasurable activities than washing her back.

She smiles at me, that soft, serene look in her eyes appearing that's been there pretty much since we found out we're having a boy. It was as if the reassurance on the ultrasound that the baby isn't only real but is completely healthy transformed her into a woman completely at peace with her life.

“Yeah.”

I get her up, biting my lip as she groans as she stands, her hand clasped in mine and one hand holding up her belly, and then we head to the shower, where we go for a second round of our midwife's helpful instructions.

I'm in the closet afterward, throwing on a thermal long-sleeved shirt, my hair still wet from the shower, when Cara walks in behind me.

“Braxton?”

Her tone catches me off guard and I turn to look at her, still naked from the shower, but her makeup is done and her hair is dried, hanging down and covering her breasts.

Her hands on her stomach, her face scrunched.

“What is it?” I'm already moving toward her.

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“I don’t think we can go to the party anymore.”

“Why?” I cup her cheek. “Not feeling well?”

“No. But.” Her chin wobbles and I glance down at her stomach. “It’s more than that. I think my water just broke. “

Then she smiles. Broad and happy and a little bit dopey and she shrugs. “I think we’re having a baby.”

—

“Holy shit,” I murmur. I can’t peel my eyes off him.

So damn tiny, the weight of him in my arms so damn huge even if he’s only eight pounds and one ounce. Once Cara’s water broke, her contractions started quickly after. We called Pam, who met us at the hospital a mere six hours ago.

We were settled in a room, strapped up to a heart monitor, and once her contractions became more difficult, Cara was given an epidural.

Two hours later she was pushing, and four pushes later, James Irvin Henley was born.

Nothing has prepared me for the heavy sensation in my chest and gut and the weight of the world and responsibility on my shoulders while I hold my little guy in my arms for the first time.

Cara's voice is tired but content as she brushes her finger over his hairline on his scrunched-up and wrinkly forehead. "He's beautiful, isn't he? I can't stop staring at him."

Neither of us has taken our eyes off him, except for when we lost ourselves, kissing each other like crazy as soon as he came out and Pam and the nurses were doing what they needed to do. But as soon as they placed him in my arms and I settled right next to Cara in the bed, we've only had eyes for our son.

"He's perfect."

A knock comes on our door and a nurse, Becky, peeks her head around the curtain. "You have visitors. Want me to send them back?"

"I'm not sure Jenna will stay away," Cara says, smiling up at me. "We should let them in."

"I don't want to share him." She laughs, and I know I'm pouting. Calling Dan and Jenna was a mistake. They then called Stella and Graham, and everyone met us at the hospital, which means they've been here for hours, hanging out in the waiting room. For a while I thought Jenna would shove me out of the room just so she could be here when our baby was born instead of me, she's so damn excited for us.

"We'll have him forever, you know," Cara says, and her eyes are glistening with a happiness I can't even describe, it's simply otherworldly.

"We will," I assure her. Because we have us. The three of us, and hopefully more, forever. "We're getting married as soon as we can. I don't care where or how, but you're taking my name."

She nods. We haven't talked much about wedding planning mostly because Cara insisted she didn't want wedding photos of her while she was pregnant. I haven't

pushed it, but I want us to all have the same name. My name. Our family's name.

Reluctantly, I hand James back to Cara and kiss her slowly. "I'll go get everyone. Do you want me to call anyone else?"

She presses her lips together and shakes her head. She hasn't spoken to her parents for months. She made one phone call to them after they tried to force her into a marriage with Graham, letting them know they'd gone too far. That they're welcome to be a part of her life when they can accept her for who she is, and want to know their grandchild, but since then we've heard nothing.

"Only Luca. He'll want to know."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. James doesn't need them until they can be decent."

I hate that she still looks conflicted, something she tries to hide from me, but it's her call. "Okay, honey. I'll go get the rest of the family then."

Our friends have become our family. Graham and Luca come over frequently for dinners. Graham has passed his bar exam and started working at his dad's law firm and is currently single. Luca goes through men like water, and while there's nothing between them other than friendship, they've become quite close. It's helped Graham to be more comfortable after coming out to be introduced to Luca and many of his friends in the gay community, especially since his parents still refuse to believe him. Jenna and Dan have declared themselves our son's aunt and uncle, as well as Stella and Robbie. The four of them are fighting for recognition as godparents, seeming to forget they'll all help us with raising James.

It's a mishmash of people and personalities and lifestyles, and it's wild and crazy and more than a bit bonkers sometimes, but it's also perfect.

Until today—which takes happiness to inexplicable heights—I’ve never been happier, and Cara isn’t shy in sharing the same.

She grins then, wide and soft, and kisses James’s forehead. “I’ll be here.”

“I will too.” I kiss her, then James, and smile back at Cara. “I will always be here.”

“I don’t doubt it for a moment, Braxton. It’s one of the many reasons why I love you so much.”

“I love you too. Forever.”

I head out to the waiting room, practically trampled by the rush of our friends to get to Cara and James, and while they all crowd into our room, me pushed to the side for a moment, I take another look around at the life we’ve created.

It’s perfect. It’s beautiful. And it will only continue to get better because we’re just getting started.