



Due At The Same Time

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Category: Romance

Description: "Who is the father?" Ambrose asked abruptly.

"None of your business," I retorted. "And don't ask questions you don't want the answer to."

Professor Ambrose Hargreaves lives next door to his ex-wife Indi, and life is just perfect. Until he discovers his ex-wife is pregnant and suddenly the perfect life with his affair partner begins to unravel. . .

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Ambrose

A hh, life is just perfect, I thought as I drove my sleek little silver BMW down the shady tree-lined street of Applewood Subdivision.

Life stretched in front of me in glorious rolling hills of pure intellectual and romantic bliss.

But as I pulled up in front of the home I shared with Astrid, I heard the sound of a lawnmower and grimly remembered the one tiny problem in my existence.

The fact that my ex-wife Indigo still lived right next door.

Unfortunately, we were still neighbors.

When I very generously offered to Indi in the divorce proceedings that she could keep the house in return for not touching my retirement and savings accounts, I expected she would sell it.

Who would want to live next to their ex-husband? And Astrid was such a hippie free spirit. What did she even want with stuffy Applewood Subdivision? She had told me many times how ridiculous our HOA was.

I even told Indi myself about Astrid's pregnancy, very early on, to give her plenty of time to get the house on the market before Astrid began to show.

After all, Indi had struggled with infertility for a few years when we were married, so

I assumed it would be extremely painful for my ex-wife to live next to Astrid as my fiancée's belly grew.

Surely it would only remind Indi of what she didn't have.

However, she didn't seem to appreciate my gentle suggestions.

Damn that woman! She had always been positively impossible sometimes.

This was why I did my best to not interact. Maybe that was a mistake. After all, I needed to consider how distressing the whole situation would be for her.

If she would only sell the house!

I pulled in the driveway just as I saw Astrid's car turn down the street.

"Good afternoon," I called out politely to Indi, who totally ignored me as she continued to mow the lawn in a big baggy T-shirt and bicycle shorts.

I turned to greet my fiancée with a kiss. Like myself, Astrid was quite tall, with sleek blond hair pulled back into a tiny bun. She had just come from the gym, so her 25 week bump was particularly noticeable in her tight tank top.

"Darling, you look divine," I said, giving her a kiss.

"Thank you, baby," she replied, running a hand down my expensive silk tie. "How did your faculty meeting go?"

Before I had a chance to answer, she noticed Indi mowing the lawn.

"Surely that's a HOA violation," she hissed to me. "Look at her out here. Can't she

hire someone like everybody else?”

“It’s not a violation to mow your own lawn,” I laughed affectionately, putting an arm around Astrid.

“Remember, darling,” I added. “She’s probably really struggling living next to us and seeing how blissfully happy we are every day. Your adorable little belly is going to be a constant reminder for her. So we really need to be thoughtful of her feelings.”

Astrid kissed me again, then stroked her round bump lovingly. “You’re so right,” she murmured. “I have to remember her empty, barren womb and my good fortune.”

We turned to go in just as Indi finished and headed over to her front porch to grab a drink.

It was a warm day in late September, and she had her long deep auburn hair pulled into a ponytail.

There was a slick sheen of sweat on her face and she wiped it off with the hem of her T-shirt, then pulled the whole thing over her head and draped it over the garden fence.

Astrid’s fingers suddenly bit deeply into my arm and I heard her sharp intake of breath.

The briefcase dropped from my numb fingers, hitting me painfully in the shins.

Indi was wearing only a sports bra and shorts and her excessively ample cleavage was spilling out of the tight black fabric.

And underneath her bouncing breasts was a round, perky. . .

. . . baby bump .

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Indi

Tears hovered on my eyelashes as I pulled into the driveway.

I was supposed to work for another couple of hours at my job as a massage therapist, but my boss Burton had let me leave early today.

And I had sworn to myself I wasn't going to test at work.

It always fucked me up, ruined the rest of my day so I couldn't concentrate on anything.

But I'd been so hopeful. At lunch, Burton's Philly cheese steak sandwich had made me feel a little nauseated, and my breasts were achy and sensitive.

But when I looked at the test on the bathroom counter it was the exact same result as every month for the last three years we had been trying to have a baby.

One line.

One stupid line and the rest of the test was plain as fuck, totally blank without even a hint of pinkish color. Not even a ghost of a line.

The gears in my brain instantly starting whirring with desperation.

Maybe it was a faulty test.

Maybe it was an old test.

A bad batch.

Maybe if I tried again with the first pee of the day tomorrow morning.

But my stomach sunk with despair and I dropped the test into the garbage with numb fingers.

Failed again.

What was wrong with me? Why was this so easy for all my friends but so hard for me?

Ambrose had gotten a sperm test. There was nothing wrong with him. He had a normal sperm count.

It had to be me .

I was only 33, for God's sake.

And I was the reason we had been trying so long, with no success at all.

Ambrose didn't understand it. He was always wanting to fix it, find the problem. Drink this green smoothie, up my protein, do more yoga together. Start IVF. I was exhausted by his brain trying to logically solve my infertility, even though he meant well.

I wanted to just focus on relaxing. Every month that went by made me more tense and wound-up.

This sucked.

Even though we'd been fighting more recently, I needed the comfort of my husband's arms right now, needed him to hug me and tell me everything was going to be OK. Even if afterwards he said: with 55 grams of protein a day, you'll definitely get pregnant.

Ambrose's car was in the driveway of our big cream and brick-colored house, but when I let myself inside, he wasn't there.

Not sitting at the table with his laptop and a stack of scholarly journals, or out doing laps in our pool, his long strong arms scything in perfect lines from one end to the other.

Well, damn, where was he? Had he gone on a run?

We were supposed to be training for a half-marathon or something, even though I had little to no interest in that. But if I didn't try out his hobbies we wouldn't have anything to do together.

I wandered out to the backyard, morosely sucking on my iced lavender latte.

That's when I heard it.

A squeaking sound coming from our neighbor's yard.

Eek, awkward. Astrid must be fucking someone at 3 pm in the afternoon.

I mean, all right. She was recently divorced. The hedge back there between our houses was pretty tall. I guess it wasn't that strange.

Good thing Ambrose wasn't here.

He was so stiff and proper that he'd be probably be all furious at the lack of Dignity and Decorum and report them to the HOA.

I wasn't going to do that. Astrid was a little cold, but she was nice enough. Since she worked in an adjacent department to Ambrose's, we'd seen each other quite a bit in the last year or so. She wasn't the easiest person to get to know, but we were casual friends.

After all, that would make an awkward situation to report my next-door neighbor to the HOA.

Then I heard something else.

A deep voice.

I had already turned to go inside, but at that sound I froze.

Wait, what the fuck?

I paused, straining to hear it again.

I was just being ridiculous.

My husband and I were in the process of having a baby . We'd been married for 5 years and were still madly in love.

But then I heard it again.

A gravelly rumble that was different than his usual modulated, cultured tones.

I knew that voice

My heart pounding, I rushed down my manicured lawn.

I wanted to cry out,

Who is that

Who is there

It's not him, is it

He wouldn't

He loves me

But my voice wouldn't work.

I pressed my face up against the hedge, my fingers yanking the thick, dense greenery apart.

And I saw them.

Ambrose and Astrid on her new garden patio furniture.

Ambrose was sitting in the chair, his long legs sprawled wide.

He was still wearing his tweed jacket, like he'd just come from work, his tie askew.

Astrid was astride him, her skirt pooling around her long sleek thighs.

He had his hand in between their bodies, and under my horrified eyes I saw him moving his fingers rapidly.

I realized with horror that he was fapping at her clit, trying to get her to come.

His shirt sleeves were pushed up, the cuffs hanging loose.

Ambrose never allowed himself to look this unkempt.

No need to worry that he'd see the new hole in the hedge, because his eyes were glued on her.

"Come on, baby. Almost there."

His hand was frenetic, practically fucking starting a fire, the tendons straining in his forearms.

Astrid was looking down at where their bodies were connected, her hips jerking back and forth.

"Faster," she breathed. "Almost there."

I saw sweat break out on Ambrose's forehead, his glasses slide down his nose, his hand move so fast it was a blur.

"You ready to be filled?" he groaned.

His eyes were locked so tightly on her, so greedy to watch her every pulse and twitch.

Ready to be filled?

How could he do this to me?

Was it my fault?

“You’re so naughty,” Astrid purred, “so wicked. It’s dangerous to fuck in the middle of the day like this, but you just can’t stay away, can you?”

“I shouldn’t have,” Ambrose groaned. “She might catch us.”

He meant me

That was how my husband talked about me when I wasn’t there. As she to be worked around.

Astrid came with a juddering shake, gripping his hair, her dress falling down her back so he could suck her pointy nipple into his mouth, his suctioning tongue laving all around her breasts with loud, obscene sounds.

“Ready for me to fill you with my cum?” he growled. “You want a baby in this belly?”

All the air left my lungs, as I clutched my flat, empty belly.

This was a nightmare

I was living in a nightmarish parody of a marriage.

And I opened my mouth and screamed.

Present day

Astrid and Ambrose were both standing in their driveway staring at me, Astrid looking like she'd stepped in shit and Ambrose's face drained of all color.

It had taken many months for me to be able to look at him without a pang of pain. At first I had only stayed in the house because I wanted to finally do the backyard garden exactly like I wanted.

Then, as I began to transform the yard, I didn't want to go anywhere.

He was not going to chase me out of my own home.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"How—when?" Ambrose started, raising his hand, then belatedly realizing it was not polite to point at a pregnant woman's belly. He dropped his hand abruptly, pursing his lips together like a pig's asshole.

He looked like such a stuffed suit, drawing himself up poker-straight. God, what had I ever seen in him? Was I blinded by his height? The fact that he had this attractive thick salt and pepper hair with one romantic curl falling across his forehead?

Did I have some sort of professor fetish?

"We're both pregnant at the same time," I said, because they were just staring at me. "Isn't that fun! How many weeks are you along, again?"

"25 weeks," Astrid said, her mouth barely opening, like if she barely opened it she wasn't responsible for her words.

"Me, too," I said brightly. "25 weeks on Saturday. We're due at the same time. Isn't that crazy?"

“Is there a . . . father?” Astrid broke in, her too-big blindingly white veneers barely fitting in her mouth. “Or sperm bank we can congratulate?”

“I’ll pass your congratulations along to the father,” I said. “He’s on a business trip now.”

Ambrose’s face flushed and he tightened his lips.

He never liked to be bested in anything, and I could read the signs that he was getting annoyed at feeling knocked off his balance.

“Congratulations,” my ex-husband said. “I am—sure that was a surprise to you.”

“On the contrary,” I retorted sweetly. “I wasn’t even trying to get pregnant. My baby daddy is just particularly virile.”

“Who is the father?” Ambrose asked abruptly.

His fingers went to the knot in his tie, worrying the silky fabric like he wanted to yank it off.

“None of your business,” I said coolly. “My pregnancy is none of your damn business. And don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to.”

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Ambrose

“ S he is gaining a lot of weight,” Astrid said after we had gone inside. “Getting really big all over. I suppose some women don’t care that you’re eating for two now is just a myth.”

I kept my eyes carefully averted from the window where I knew Indigo was still outside.

Her belly was certainly bigger, but all I had noticed was how happy she looked. Her face pink and flushed with working in the garden, her hair thick and glossy. Even her full lips were looking pinker and more plumped-up.

Even though I had personally read several books on pregnancy, and distilled the information to Astrid, including the myth of eating for two , it was so self-evidently true that Indi was in the bloom of health that I didn’t bother to reply.

Astrid must be suffering from emotional upheavals common to the second trimester.

“For all his faults , I’m very happy my ex-husband lives on the other side of town,” Astrid added pointedly, jerking the freezer door open.

“Finn has his problems, like being a narcissist and afraid of commitment, but at least I don’t have to see him every day.

I have no idea why Indigo still insists on staying at that house. ”

Why did my ex-wife want to live next to us?

I had assumed it was because she was still in love with me, but now, I wasn't so sure.

I felt irritated.

"We have to remember that she must be in a great deal of inner pain having to live next to us," I said, but this time my attempt to encourage kindness and consideration of her feelings fell flat.

"Maybe it was a sperm bank," Astrid said flatly, pulling the chicken breast from the freezer.

I looked out the window at where Indi was now in the kitchen drinking a glass of water.

I was sure there were plenty of men who would want to impregnate her.

I felt slightly indignant, in a totally ridiculous and irrational way.

After three years of trying, really, Indigo was going to get pregnant the first month with some other man? That was just like her to be that infuriating.

Turning my chair, I attempted to face the other direction, but I only got an eyeful of Indi pulling out her updo so her long shiny red hair tumbled all down her back.

Hastily, I jerked the curtains closed.

For months I had barely looked at my ex-wife. That wasn't going to change just because she was pregnant.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Astrid grumbled.

Without Indi in my vision, I was able to think more clearly.

I had simply been surprised. That she was pregnant. It was merely a matter of medical interest to me. Really, good for her. She had wanted very badly to be pregnant.

“Let’s just forget about it,” I told my fiancée. “It doesn’t affect us at all, whatever she chooses to do.”

But this was easier said than done, and I felt the question of who the father was reappearing in my mind to an irritating degree for the next several days.

That weekend after Astrid had gone to the gym, I sat down at the kitchen table with my laptop. There were 25 essays in my briefcase, but I felt irritable and itchy.

My ex-wife and I had done everything correctly.

Had sex the day before, the day of, and the day after ovulation.

My sperm was in the normal range. Of course, the doctor had said sperm counts did decrease after age 40, but that was probably for unhealthy slobs, not men in the peak of their physical capacity like myself.

But was that what had happened? Indigo had found someone closer to her own age? Why had I never seen a man at her house?

I felt unaccountably pissed at this.

Why wouldn’t she tell me who he was? There was no logical reason not to.

Hell, I probably still had a higher sperm count than whoever it was.

Was it her boss Burton?

One of her friends from college? Maybe that dipshit Greg who had hearted her name change on Facebook.

I knew some of my fellow faculty members occasionally went to the Luxury Rejuvenation Spa, where she worked.

Had one of my friends been seeing her? I shifted uneasily in my chair, frowning at the essays as I adjusted my glasses.

It didn't matter.

It was none of my business.

I pulled out the first paper and determined to focus on my grading.

This indiscreet way my mind was wandering was simply a result of stress. The selection for Department Chair was coming up, and I wanted it to be me.

But without wanting to in any way, my eyes drifted to the house next door.

Now why did Indigo insist on always leaving all her curtains just flung open, so anyone could see into her kitchen and living room? After all, some creeper might come into Applewood and peek in her windows.

We were divorced and I had moved on. I didn't need to see her this much.

Hell and damnation, why hadn't she moved away?

She was a distraction.

I threw up my hands as she came outside in nothing but a tank top, no bra, and tiny tight shorts.

She had very large, voluptuous breasts, and to my irritated eye, they seemed to have almost doubled in size since she got pregnant, bouncing gently with each step, her overflowing curves bursting out of her tank top.

Her rounded belly peeked out from underneath the hem, swelling the band of those shorts.

It was just disorienting, because for years I'd wondered what she'd look like pregnant, and now she was pregnant.

With someone else's baby.

My jaw set as she filled up her watering can and waved to the mailman.

Was he the father?

It would be just like her nonsensical free spirit love and peace ways to be impregnated by the mailman.

Angry at myself, I picked up the phone to call my 75-year-old mother. She and my father lived in the next town over and we talked every day.

She was still absolutely sharp as a tack and the best person to run any problems by.

"Harold!" she called out to my father as soon as she picked up. "Turn down that golf, Harold. . . Harold ! The television! It's too loud! It's my boy on the phone and I want

to be able to hear him.”

First, I updated her on the latest news about my efforts to become Chair of the Archaeology Department. Dr. González, the current Chair, was taking a few years off to lead an archaeological dig and Mother and I agreed I was the clear choice for his successor.

Then we got to the meat of the matter.

“Something interesting has happened here,” I said, clearing my throat. “It appears Indigo is pregnant.”

“Tch,” she humphed disapprovingly. “Of course! It sounds like something she would do, run out and get pregnant by some bum just because she’s jealous of you.”

“Now, Mother, we don’t know that. It has nothing to do with me, after all.”

But privately I did feel aggrieved.

How the fuck had Indi gotten pregnant?

“It happened on the first try,” she had said, with her eyes shining.

And we had done it for months without success.

It was like she was taunting me with her voluptuous overflowing fertility.

“Everyone has always been jealous of you, Ambrose,” my mother said.

“Ever since you were a little boy. It was because you were cleverer than all the other children. Even in kindergarten, it was clear you were destined for greatness. I saw the

makings of a university professor in you even then. And of course at that age everyone else's children were still eating their nasal secretions, while you were already reading advanced books. ”

“Oh, now,” I laughed. “I was like any other child my age, I'm sure. Although I do remember my bafflement when the kindergarten teacher told me the rest of the students weren't ready for the sonnets of Shakespeare.”

“I do remember that,” she said. “And many other similar occurrences all throughout school. And if you recall, I was always against your marriage with Indigo. The way you met was so irregular, my darling! And of course you were never on the same plane intellectually. Astrid is so much more suited. I cannot wait until she's my daughter-in-law and I will be the grandma to a little princeling. ”

“It does feel a touch inconsiderate of Indi,” I acknowledged. “Especially since Astrid with her delicate constitution has had such a difficult time.”

“That's right,” my Mother agreed. “Don't let your natural good nature stop you from taking Indigo firmly in hand if necessary. Harold!” she called out suddenly. “Harold, I forbid you to eat that lemon cake. That is for tea with my friends.”

“I'll let you go,” I said absently, and we parted.

“I love Astrid,” I said out loud, settling back into my chair, but my eye was caught by a motion outside.

There must be some goddamn law against your ex-wife living right next to you bending over to weed the garden, the two beautiful round cheeks of her ass up in the air and wiggling with every movement.

When she knew damn well I was an ass man.

I ground my teeth together as my cock twitched, banging frenetically into my thighs.

What was wrong with me? Some kind of goddamn sex muscle memory?

I did not want to have sex with her.

Indi was going to have to cover up, that's all there was to it.

Grinding my teeth, I shut my laptop and walked outside, my fury growing with each step.

"I know you're doing this on purpose," I gritted out to her as soon as I drew even with the fence that divided our front yards.

Putting a hand on the front windowsill for balance, Indi straightened up and turned around.

"Doing what on purpose?" she asked sweetly.

I drew myself up stiffly. "I'm not going to go back and forth with you on this, but what you are wearing is against HOA regulations."

"Is it?" she asked, putting a hand on her hip.

Her skin glistened in the morning sunlight.

Did she not have work or something? Why did she have to be outside all the time, glowing and glistening?

"Yes," I replied shortly. "Clothing must be free of obscenity."

“I don’t think there’s anything obscene on my clothes,” she countered, looking down at her body.

Her shorts had hiked up so I could see practically the whole length of her creamy white thighs.

“Your whole outfit is. . . an obscenity,” I said. “I am sorry, but it is too revealing.”

“Too revealing?”

“You can see your. . . breasts. And too much of your. . . lower regions.”

She cocked her head and looked at me. Indi was a laid-back and easygoing person. She had always deferred to my superior knowledge and experience while we were married. And I was in the right here.

I absolutely was not going to let some cock twitches throw me off my stride.

“What if I called your bluff, Ambrose?” she asked quietly. “Made you get that book and show me exactly where it says I can’t wear this outfit to weed my garden?”

“Do you really want to test me on my knowledge of the HOA regulations?” I retorted.

Indi only snorted and turned away.

“Goodbye,” she said dismissively, heading back inside.

Her dismissive tone infuriated me. “And why aren’t you at work?” I called out.

She turned, her hand on the front door. “My baby daddy makes plenty of money,” she said. “I don’t need to work during my pregnancy at all.”

One of her hands was placed protectively on her belly, her fingers splayed out over the perfect-shaped bump.

Had she felt her baby move yet?

Had the baby's father felt it yet?

Who even was the father? Not that I had been paying attention, but I'd never see another man at her house.

I stomped back inside and closed all the curtains firmly.

The conversation was still stuck in my mind a few days later as we prepared for the delicate wine and cheese charcuterie event designed to shore up my support in the Archaeology department.

I had spent hours selecting the perfect wines and cheeses, and my coworkers oohed and aahed over the selection of expensive meats and exotic cheeses.

Astrid was wearing a long navy blue gown and looked regal and elegant. And I was no fool. I knew my looks were a benefit in my career. Together, we were the perfect power couple.

“With an intellectual approach to pregnancy, it's like we can almost transcend the limits of the physical body,” my fiancée was saying to Dr. González when there was a knock on the door.

I opened it to see. . . Indi.

Infuriatingly, enragingly close enough that I could scent her familiar shampoo.

She wasn't wearing a tank top and shorts this time. Instead, she was wearing a bright yellow bikini and flip-flops.

Before I could open my mouth to protest that she had done the exact opposite of what I had told her to, she pulled out a roll of tape, and stuck a piece of paper to the front of my door.

“Professor Ambrose Hargreaves? You are in violation of Applewood HOA regulations. Your lawn appears to be 1/4th of an inch too high. You have 30 days to bring your yard into compliance.”

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Indi

Now my mama had always told me to kill em with kindness, and that's the motto I'd tried to live by.

But my stuck-up jerk ex was really testing me.

So I decided if he was going to play the HOA game, I was going to play it right back to him.

Sweetly , of course.

So I held my ground as Ambrose stalked toward me, every angry, offended inch of him bristling.

“What are you doing here?” he hissed.

I could see his colleagues straightening up, craning their necks to see me in my bikini, and adjusting their ties.

Astrid scuttled up behind him, jutting her chin out at me and putting a hand in front of Ambrose like I was going to leap at him.

Jealous, was she?

“You need to leave now,” Astrid spat.

She always wore colored contacts, so her eyes glinted at me with a purple light, and her hands twitched like she wanted to wrap them around my neck.

I only smiled sweetly at them.

“Just leaving this notice here and then I’ll go.”

Ambrose stepped closer. “How dare you come over here!” he blustered, and I could feel the suppressed anger throbbing from him.

“Honey, is he bothering you?” Dr. González called out.

Now, if Ambrose was becoming a silver fox, with his salt and pepper hair, his boss Dr. González was a whole silver bear, a big man in his 50s with a rough, craggy face and massive hands.

“Since you were so kind to tell me that what I was wearing was obscene, I thought I would return the favor so we can both be in compliance with our HOA. Your grass is a fourth of an inch too long. It’s lowering the tone of the neighborhood.

The rest of us work hard to make sure our lawns look good and you’re lowering our property values. You’re welcome for the info.”

Since I knew Ambrose was very proud of his little highly regulated lawn, I was pleased to see his face flush, and a muscle twitch in his jaw.

“Now, what's all this about clothing?” Dr. González said in astonishment.

He was not a classically handsome man, but his craggy face was quite appealing and he pulsed with raw masculine energy.

“I don't see anything wrong with your clothing,” he said. “I would have to disagree with Dr. Hargreaves that you need to change what you wear.”

I saw Astrid shoot a furious glance at my ex, and I knew Ambrose hadn't told her about what he had said to me.

Interesting. Apparently he was keeping it a secret that my breasts were upsetting him.

Ambrose only looked flushed and miserable, darting his eyes around like he was avoiding looking directly at me.

His other colleagues agreed with the Chair, surrounding me and murmuring in assent.

“Nothing wrong with what you're wearing, Indigo”

“I think you look very nice”

“Don't listen to him”

I gestured down at my bikini. “It's a very warm day, and I was merely gardening, but Ambrose tells me if I wear things like this he'll report me to the HOA!”

There were gasps of horror all around the room.

“I am sure that was a misunderstanding,” Dr. González rumbled. “Surely Dr. Hargreaves didn't mean that. If what she is wearing bothers you so much, professor, perhaps you should close the blinds.”

There was silence for a moment, and I crossed my arms over my chest.

My ex glanced down at me and I saw the angry beet-red color rise in his cheeks.

But of course he couldn't say anything in front of his boss and fiancée.

"That's right," he said stiffly. "It was a misunderstanding."

I couldn't tell if Astrid was madder at me or Ambrose, but her nostrils were flaring like laundry blowing in the wind.

Now I had no desire to be around my ex and his grim little girlfriend, so it was time to go.

"Thank you so much, Dr. González," I said. "I'll let you all go back to your party now. Bye bye."

I waved pleasantly and headed down the steps.

Now, was it my fault if several of his colleagues preferred to bring their wine and cheese and prosciutto over to my yard and chat with me as I deadleafed my rose bushes?

It would serve him right for disguising a campaign for Chair event as a sociable get-together.

"Here's my card," Dr. González said as the party wrapped up. "Call me if you need anything, sweetheart. I'd love to help out. A sweet girl like you shouldn't be mowing her own lawn just to keep up with these goofy HOA regulations."

Then with a wink he was gone.

As he passed by, I saw Ambrose standing at the doorway, his hands gripping his arms so hard he was wrinkling his perfect little silk sleeves.

Tightly-wound arrogant bastard

I waved at him in a friendly manner and went back inside.

The next morning, I was sitting at the kitchen table with my coffee when the phone rang.

“Hello there, baby girl, did you miss me?”

His voice came out like butter over the phone, like dripping, wicked, melted butter that would fuck you ten different ways to Sunday.

“Oh, I’ve been keeping busy,” I said, thinking about Ambrose’s impotent rage. “How’d your shows go?”

“They went off like a bang , dollface, but I want to talk about you , angel! I want to hear all about you and that beautiful belly I plan to worship the second I see you.”

“Baby and I are both doing fine,” I laughed.

“Have you changed your mind yet and decided to marry me?”

“Absolutely not,” I chuckled. “Remember, we are not together and only coparenting.”

My baby daddy was sinfully tall and sexy and fucked like a god, but we had gotten pregnant quite unexpectedly and I did not see him as marriage material.

I could hear him pouting over the phone.

He was not a man used to ever hearing the word no .

“What can I do to change your mind, you beautiful aggravating creature? I’m trying to make an honest woman out of you.

We’re heading back now, and I can be at your place by this weekend?

I can’t wait to feel our baby kick. Then once I’ve rubbed your feet and gotten you all the jalapenos and ice cream you desire, I plan to pleasure you for hours. ”

"I don’t know if you coming over here is a good idea,” I said.

He exclaimed in surprise and began to list all the ways he planned to make it worth my while.

Still.

Did I want the drama?

But then I glanced out the window and saw my asshole ex Ambrose out in his yard, his mouth set in a grim line. Under my indignant eye, he took pruning shears and harshly snipped off the head of a gorgeous pink rose whose head just barely fell half an inch in his yard.

“Actually it’s a great idea if you come over,” I said. “See you soon!”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am

Ambrose

Once the last of our guests were gone, the smile slid from Astrid's face as she whipped around to face me.

"What was all that about, Ambrose?"

The knot in my tie suddenly felt extremely tight.

"What do you mean? I think the Provence Rosé and Havarti went very well together."

"You know what I mean," Astrid snapped with a glare. "Why were you even talking to Indi? What were you doing even thinking about her clothing and how tight it was?"

The injustice of this stung.

"You know I take the Applewood Subdivision HOA rules very seriously. That's all. It was nothing to do with her body . You know I don't care about her body."

"Do I?" Astrid asked.

There was a stiff and uncomfortable silence in the kitchen.

"Of course I don't care about her body," I repeated.

But this didn't seem to improve my fiancée's mood.

“I’m going to watch TV,” Astrid said, stomping up the stairs.

What I was going to have to do was make it very clear to Indi that whatever she might have assumed from my comments was incorrect and she did not need to go around acting like I had some sort of prurient interest in her.

I had said those things in a generous and neighborly spirit, to make sure she did not get in trouble with the HOA Board.

But as I sat with a glass of wine at the table, I did not feel generous and neighborly. My whole body felt prickly, angry, and upset.

Indi was the one who wanted to get divorced in the first place

The thought came to me, unbidden and unwelcome, and I drove it down as hard as I could and picked up the phone to call my mother.

For ten minutes I poured every passionate denunciation of my ex-wife that I could into her supportive ears.

She agreed with me on all points.

My lawn was certainly not 1/4th of an inch too long.

In fact, it was the nicest lawn in the neighborhood.

That was all just objective fact.

I was just starting to calm down, when a movement across the hedges caught my eyes.

Indi was in her kitchen again. This time the curtains were pulled shut, but they were the same ones she'd had when I lived there, so I knew they weren't thick.

She was still in her bikini top, and I watched her grab for a bottle on the kitchen counter and shake it, then squirt a generous portion on her hands and begin to rub gently and carefully all over her little round bump.

My mouth instantly went dry and I clutched the phone tighter in my hand, not hearing anything my mother said.

My eyes strained to see past the filmy curtains, watch every slow, luxurious motion, as Indi's elegant fingers circled her belly button.

Her skin was always so soft and even from this distance the tips of my fingers practically tingled with the memory.

The motion of her arms pressed her breasts even higher, the lush curves almost falling out of her bikini top.

Was that the tip of one of her unbearably rosy and pert little nipples poking out?

My mother was saying something about the possibility of Indi improperly maintaining her pool cleaning schedule, but my tie was tight, way too tight, and I tore at it with overheated fingers, needing some room to breathe.

My breath sounded like the rattle of an old car in my ears.

Indi spread the oil all over, her fingers delving just past the top of her bikini bottoms, and I inhaled harshly, leaning forward against the table, straining to see every little motion.

Was that a tiny tip of her pink tongue darting out in concentration?

Was she going to pull her bikini bottoms down further ?

“What are you doing?” Astrid’s voice rang shrilly in my ear, and I was so startled, I pitched forward and hit my chin on the edge of the table.

Oh my god

I had been sitting at my kitchen table watching my ex-wife rub coconut oil on her belly like some kind of creepy pervert .

With an effort, I clutched the table, holding up the phone.

“Talking to my mother,” I rasped out, hoping I didn’t sound like a lunatic. “Is there a problem?”

Astrid’s eyes drifted to the window, and I fervently hoped she wasn’t able to see through the curtains from her angle.

“I suppose not,” she sniffed.

I was going to have to find some way to shake off this madness. My life was perfect.

Just perfect

“I AM SO HAPPY TO SOON BE MARRIED TO YOU, MY QUEEN,” I called out loudly as Astrid left the room with a sniff.

But when I turned my head, Indi was gone.

Every day after, I tried to put my plan in motion, but Indi either wasn't home or wasn't outside.

I wasn't trying to make her jealous. Just making sure she knew I didn't desire her or anything like that.

Finally, it was a Saturday morning, and I knew she was home, because her car was still in the driveway.

Astrid and I were outside watering the rose bushes and the Amazon delivery truck had just come by and dropped a few packages next door. So surely Indi would be coming out soon.

I wasn't going to do much.

Just make my devotion clear.

Just kiss and love on my fiancée a little bit. Just so Indi knew that despite what had happened, I did not still think about her and how her lush curves used to drive me wild.

Used to was the operational phrase here.

So when Indi came out in a little white sundress with flowers all over it and her auburn hair falling in shining waves down her back, I took the opportunity to dip Astrid like a romance hero, and attempted to plant a kiss on her lips.

However, we didn't get the coordination quite right, as she turned her head and my passionate kiss only ended up in her hair.

"What are you doing, Ambrose?" she snapped uncharacteristically, and Indi turned

her head to see Astrid's face wrinkled up in disgust. "You'll throw your back out."

"Just a bit of gallantry," I tried, but Astrid ignored me, smoothing down her ponytail.

"You're messing up my hair."

Well, that was a failure, I thought sourly as Indi's front door shut with a decided snap.

"DON'T YOU LOOK RAVISHING," I said loudly.

"Ambrose, stop yelling," Astrid hissed. "I can hear you perfectly well."

Now what?

I was mulling over different new strategies for making Indie jealous, when I heard a squeal and the sound of a heavy, throbbing bass beat.

I turned and saw a bright yellow Lamborghini Revuelto, a sports car that cost a cool \$1 million if it cost a dime, spin around the corner at a very improper rate of speed in this subdivision, and pull into Indigo's driveway.

The bass beats emanating from the car were so loud I felt them in my chest cavity, but before I could open my mouth to protest, not that anyone could have heard me over that din, the engine stopped and a tall man with dark hair and a leather jacket stepped out.

He pulled off the jacket and dropped it in the backseat, revealing a tight shirt over huge biceps and a lot of tattoos.

My dear fiancée gasped and clutched my arm so tight her nails dug into my flesh.

“What is Finn doing here?” Astrid gasped.

I wasn’t used to seeing Finn O'Donoghue without his usual celebrity entourage or bevy of rock-star groupies, but you couldn’t mistake Astrid’s ex.

Finn and Astrid had been married for a few years, but Finn had been afraid of commitment, clearly wary of the depth of his own feelings, probably due, Astrid said, to not being challenged enough in school growing up, and they had divorced.

Finn turned and gave us a little one-fingered wave as he walked confidently up to Indi’s front door, then opened it without knocking and walked right in .

That was weird.

Astrid was digging her nails so hard into my arm, I felt I had to say something.

“Well, he looks in a good mood? Darling, you did so much work to improve his emotional intelligence,” I said, patting her comfortingly on the back. “I’m sure he appreciates it.”

“What is he doing over there?” she hissed, her hands pulling at her long blonde ponytail, her beautiful face pinched in worry. “How do they even know each other?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I didn’t think she was even a fan of his music. Usually Indi has much different taste in music, like instrumental harp and zither. Not loud and randy Irish punk rock.”

Why in the world had Finn just walked right in? He hadn’t even knocked.

“Did she—maybe win a contest,” Astrid said. “Maybe he ran a Meet A Fan contest. I can’t think of any other reason for him to be over there.”

“Maybe,” I said, but I felt a sudden stab of doubt.

Remembering how Indi’s soft and creamy legs looked in that sundress, the way I caught a tiny peek of her pink panties when she reached down to grab the Amazon packages.

I thought of one particular reason he could be over there.

We both stared at the next-door house.

“I think I’m going to talk a walk down the street,” Astrid said abruptly, rubbing her belly with a frown on her face.

Her eyes were still on Indigo’s house.

“Want me to go with you?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “Why don’t you take care of the lawn. After all, isn’t it 1/4th of an inch too long?”

But as she stalked down the street, I couldn’t think about anything else, pacing back and forth in front of the next-door house.

Surely

Surely not

After all, it was very dangerous of Indi to leave the door open and I should tell her.

Or maybe I should say hello to Finn.

There was no reason not to.

I knocked on the front door, very firmly.

But there was no answer.

My anxiety spiked. I knew they were in there. Why weren't they coming to the door?

Now, since I had previously lived in that house for a long time, I knew that there was a broken lock in the dining room window and I was sure Indi hadn't gotten it fixed.

When I furtively stepped off the sidewalk and through her lawn to the dining room window, I found I had indeed remembered correctly.

It wasn't like I was going inside. Very far inside, anyways.

I just wanted to reassure myself that she was ok.

That this was all above-board and proper. There couldn't possibly be anything. . . carnal between them.

Shoving down any doubts as to the propriety of my actions, I put my fingers on the window and slowly pushed it open.

I heard nothing. The dining room was silent.

Sudden fear seized me. What if something had happened? What if Indi had fallen down and Finn didn't know what to do? What if Finn was secretly a serial killer?

Hoping I was wrong, I hoisted myself up on the sill and slithered inside.

Now it isn't every 45-year-old man who can move like this , I congratulated myself before my lower back cramped up unexpectedly and I barely had time to instinctively dart behind the curtains when I saw movement at the door.

Shit, now I had really put myself in a fucking position here, jumping behind the curtains like some snooper instead of a concerned neighbor.

But they didn't even look behind the gauzy curtains.

Finn had both his hands on Indi's face and she was getting kissed very thoroughly by this. . . rock god .

What had gotten into Indi? Finn was not a suitable person for her!

I was about to leap out and object to his rough handling when he boosted her gently onto the kitchen table and bent down to lay kisses on her little round belly.

"Oh my god, you're showing so much now, eh lassie," he said in that fake Irish accent that made me want to strangle him.

I had it on very good authority that he was born in Minneapolis .

But I was aware my position was not very strong.

What would it look like if they discovered me behind the curtains?

For a moment, I debated stepping out in the most dignified manner I could, but then Astrid's ex ran his hands up Indi's thighs, her pretty little flowered sundress pooling up around her waist.

"Let me worship you," he rumbled, stroking her thighs and raising his hands under

her skirt to squeeze her hips gently.

I felt a surge of raw jealousy go through me, flooding my entire body from the top of my head to my very fine expensive leather-clad feet.

“If you insist,” Indi said, spreading her beautiful thighs wide, and I got a titillating flash of her pink panties and the outline of her plump lips against the thin fabric.

But then that jackass Finn was in the way, blocking my view with his massive shoulders as he groaned in pleasure and drew my ex-wife’s panties down her thighs slowly.

Indi watched him, her long hair falling down her back, biting her full lower lip. The expression on her face made my stomach heave painfully.

She used to look at me like that

When Finn had pulled the panties from her ankles, he stood up to his full height and brought the pink scrap of fabric to his face and took a huge sniff.

“You’re the sexiest woman I’ve ever met in my life,” he rumbled, sticking his tongue out and licking a line up her panties, then sucking them fully into his mouth as he groaned in ecstasy.

“Finn!” Indigo squealed, her cheeks pink, and I writhed with fury.

This fucking poser had no right making her look at him like that!

He stuffed the panties in his back pocket, and captured her lips with his, running his rough hand up her thigh.

He suddenly flipped up her skirt, exposing her beautiful pink pussy, and it was so puffed-up and swollen with need I had to stuff the curtains in my mouth to muffle a scream of jealous rage.

“Ohhh baby, you have to marry me,” he moaned, putting one hand on the back of her throat and beginning to stroke her deliciously dripping pussy with the other.

“I’ll give you anything you want. I’ll cover you in riches.

You’ll have a different house for each day of the week.

A yacht for each month of the year. Just marry me .”

My hands tightened on the curtains as I stuffed more of the fabric in my mouth, my throat dry with silent screams.

No, no, no, anything but that . . .

“Finn, how could you!” Astrid suddenly screamed through the open window with piercing intensity, and she began to beat on the glass pane right next to me with her fists, her engagement ring sparkling brightly in the sunshine.

I was so startled by the hammering, I jerked sideways and stumbled forward, tearing the curtain from its rod and falling on my face right in front of Finn and Indi.

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Indi

I was just putting morning coffee on to boil when my baby daddy burst in the door with a bang.

“Finn!” I cried as he came up behind me and began kissing up and down my throat, one strong arm around my hips.

He smelled good, like leather and expensive cologne, his hand tightening firmly on my ass.

“Shit, baby, it’s been way too long and you look way too good.”

I flicked a glance over to my open window, wondering who could hear Finn’s ecstatic groans as he gently bit my shoulder, and licked up my throat.

“Someone might hear you,” I said sternly, but my resolve was weakening.

“Who cares, baby?” he grinned, snaking a tattooed arm around to stroke my belly.

“You want me to put a suit on so I can sneak over here unnoticed in your snobby-ass subdivision?”

I laughed to myself at the thought of Finn’s massive body stuffed into a suit, the dark swirls of tattoo peeking past his cufflinks.

“It’s not that,” I protested, as his tongue flicked out and licked the sensitive hollow of

my collarbone.

“Then what is it? Indi, I’m crazy about you, you’re carrying our baby. Let’s make it official.”

His big hand stretched across my belly, the contrast between his tanned hand and my pale creamy belly looking seductive and wicked.

“I think it would upset Ambrose and Astrid,” I said delicately. “And you know we are only casual.”

“Who gives a rip about either of them?” Finn rumbled in my ears, his big fingers teasing the band of my skirt. “And I don’t want to be casual with you, lassie.”

I bit my lip.

“You’re going to be off touring again in a few weeks,” I countered, breaking apart to go get my cup. “You don’t need your pregnant baby mama around while you’re being an international Irish punk rock sensation.”

“Come with me,” Finn coaxed, following me over to the counter.

“Riding in the tour bus for weeks? You are not a serious person,” I said severely, pouring myself a cup of coffee and then measuring a generous portion of cream.

“I can be a family man,” Finn rumbled in my ear, his massive arms gripping the counter on either side of me. “I’ve been following along with how our baby is growing on the app. At 30 weeks they’re the size of a cabbage. That’s damn fascinating.”

Shit, he was such a charmer. These damn pregnancy hormones!

I turned and kissed him.

With a groan, he fell on me, both hands on either side of my face.

I felt his thick dick on my stomach and I pulled away for a moment.

“Not here, for god’s sake, at least take me to the dining room.”

“Anywhere, baby,” he said, as he carefully picked me up and carried me into the other room, setting me carefully on the table.

Finn’s dark eyes were hooded with lust as he looked at me.

“Let me worship you.”

His hands felt rough but pleasurable on my thighs, his thumbs pressing gently into my most sensitive spots.

I could feel my resolve weakening. Well, who was I to turn down worshipful sex? And Finn was a fucking pagan Irish god in the bedroom.

“If you insist,” I said, spreading my thighs wide.

Finn instantly dropped to his knees so he could peel my wet, dripping panties off my ass and down my legs.

My skin and body began to pound with need as he sucked my freaking underwear into his mouth, his wicked tongue flicking out and sucking my soaked panties dry, the sharp flash of his white teeth making me shiver in anticipation.

He was promising me the world, anything I wanted, but I only leaned back as he

circled my clit, feeling my nipples tighten against my top.

Finn and I were just way too similar, but goddamn, did he ever have clever fingers. . .

His lips were at my throat, his low growls vibrating in my chest, and I felt my body start to liquify, my thighs start to shake, because damn, I was going to come hard and fast. . .

Suddenly, I heard a terrific pounding on the window, and I looked out over Finn's massive shoulders to see Astrid, looking like a little blonde rat, her nose plastered to my kitchen window.

"Finn! How could you do this to me?" she wailed like a banshee.

Then I barely had time to register Astrid's feral little face before there was a terrific rustling and a loud rip in the curtains and my ex-husband Ambrose fell directly out of the curtains and on his face in front of us.

"The fuck?" Finn yelled and as if on instinct he grabbed the back of Ambrose's shirt and ran him into the refrigerator.

Astrid was screaming now, at the top of her lungs, and for a moment I was struck silent with shock, but then I hopped off the table and grabbed for Finn's T-shirt.

"Stop! It's just Ambrose."

By this time, Finn was on top of Ambrose's prone body and throttling my ex with his own tie, but at this he stopped and Ambrose fell awkwardly to the ground.

"What the fuck is going on?" Finn asked irritably.

I waved impatiently at Astrid, because she was still pounding on the window and her face was looking pink and flushed.

“Let me in right now,” she was howling.

“I guess we better let her in or the neighbors will start to complain,” I said to Finn.

Rolling my eyes, I gestured toward the front of the house.

“Just come in the door and stop making all this racket!”

Then I turned to my ex-husband, who was trying to stand up in a dignified manner, his face red as a beet.

“Why are you hiding in a corner watching me have sex , Ambrose?”

“That’s not—that’s not what I was doing,” he began as Astrid shot into the room, huffing and puffing and clutching her stomach.

“Then what were you doing?” I asked, leaning back against the counter.

I felt the little flutter of my baby moving, and I spread my fingers on my belly to feel every bit of it. I loved the reminder that she or he was in there happy and well-fed. I hadn’t found out if I was having a boy or a girl at my last appointment, because I wanted it to be a surprise.

And there was no way I was letting any man stress me out.

“I was—just making sure you were OK,” he said lamely.

“Bullshit,” Finn retorted, folding those massive arms across his chest and glaring at

Ambrose.

“What are you doing here, Finn?” Astrid broke in.

I could tell she was trying to get a hold of herself, pretend like she wasn’t freaking the fuck out.

“Is this some kind of joke? Or maybe a bet?”

She wasn’t looking her best, really, her hair sticking out with static electricity, and her veneers clicking together anxiously.

Finn snorted. “A bet? Have you seen Indi?”

He leaned over and kissed my belly. “No man would need a bet to be with her. I’m proud as fuck to be the father of Indi’s baby.”

“Finn, why—how,” Astrid burst out inarticulately. “I thought we were close .”

“We’re not close,” Finn said flatly.

“You might have told me , though,” Ambrose blustered, and he began to bullshit, which I recognized unerringly as his way of bullshitting himself into feeling better.

“How are you and Indi close?” Astrid snarled at him. “Finn and I are way closer than you and Indi.”

“We’re not fucking close ,” Finn snapped. “Now both of you get the fuck out of here. I want to go back to what we were doing and you two are fucking ruining the mood.”

They all began to quarrel, pointing in the air and arguing.

“This is why we didn’t want to tell anybody,” I broke in. “Because I knew the two of you wouldn’t take it very well.”

“Who said we wouldn’t take it very well?” Ambrose demanded.

His hands were tearing at his tie and there was a belligerent look in his eye, but his face looked green.

“How long has this been going on?” Astrid cried shrilly, ignoring Ambrose and talking to Finn.

The rock star put his hands up in exasperation.

“I’m over this,” Finn said firmly, suddenly dropping to his knees in front of me, so his broad back was to Ambrose and Astrid. “I’m going to suck your ex-wife’s sweet juicy pussy and unless you need some tips, you might want to get the fuck out.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Finn popped his head under my skirt and I felt his tongue lick up the whole length of my lips, then twist and plunge inside me.

As my eyes fluttered open and closed with my bliss, I saw Ambrose’s white face, his artful salt and pepper hair disarranged, his glasses broken where Finn had run him into the side of the refrigerator.

“Indi—” he said, and there was a strange note in his voice, something I hadn’t heard in a long time there.

Something raw and jagged, but I couldn’t think about that now as I plunged both hands into Finn’s dark hair, tightening in the thick waves and wanting him even closer to me.

“Right there,” I couldn’t help encouraging him, as Astrid’s lips trembled, like she was going to cry.

“Just go,” I groaned as Finn’s covered head moved rhythmically under my skirt, his enthusiastic slurps as he ate my pussy loud and echoing in the kitchen.

“Finn, please,” Astrid begged, but Ambrose took her firmly by the shoulders and led her outside.

I barely lasted until they were at the front door before I came with a loud cry, my legs shaking as pleasure washed over me in luxurious long waves, and Finn carefully moved two fingers into my sopping wet channel to give me another one.

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Indi

That week, it was my first birthing class at the community center.

I was stretching and bouncing lightly on my birthing ball when Ambrose, Astrid, and his mother Millicent walked in.

Giving me a death rattle glare, she and Astrid air-kissed and my former mother-in-law went to sit down behind them.

Of course they would be close. Millicent and Astrid were two sides of the same coin—both with that tall, arrogant gait, both looking like everyone else was shit under their fancy shoes.

Millicent was in her mid-70s with an impeccable white updo and gimlet gray eyes. I absolutely loathed her.

“Oh, how sweet,” the birthing instructor said, gesturing at Astrid and I. “It looks like you’re due at the same time. And you live next door to each other? I bet your babies will be best friends!”

She began to demonstrate the breathing exercises we could use during labor as Astrid glared at me.

“Finn not here?” she asked me snottily as Ambrose carefully arranged his mother’s purse, parasol, and small violent dog beside her. “I guess some women just can’t keep a man.”

“He had something to do this afternoon,” I replied politely, turning aside to concentrate on my breathing.

Pant-pant-blow

Pant-pant-blow

I am a vessel of love and peace

“Indigo! Indi!” Ambrose hissed, replacing Astrid on the birthing ball beside me as she went to get a drink of water.

“Go away,” I hissed back. “You’re being a real weirdo, Ambrose.”

“I need to talk to you,” he said out of the corner of his mouth.

“You’re pissing off your mother,” I retorted, feeling her death ray stare on me.

“Indi, please—you don’t realize how you’re torturing me.”

“Because I’m with a younger man now? Get a hold of yourself!”

I stood up and took my birthing ball to the far corner of the classroom.

I did not want to hear whatever bullshit Ambrose had to say.

Pant-pant-blow

Pant-pant-blow

I am a vessel of love and peace

When the class was over, I didn't wait around, but grabbed my bag and was the first one outside in the parking lot.

It was empty except for Ambrose's dad and me.

My former father-in-law Harold was a thin, nervous man, his balding head covered with a stupendous toupee because my mother-in-law insisted he not be seen in public without one.

Before he retired, he had been a successful CEO of a model train company, but in private life he was dominated by my giant eldritch horror of a mother-in-law.

"How are you doing, my dear?" Harold asked, bounding over to clasp my hand affectionately.

"I'm doing well," I said, giving him a quick hug.

He had always been literally the only good and kind member of Ambrose's family.

His little spectacles quivered in time with his tiny mustache, while his pale blue eyes glinted with unshed tears.

"I'm so happy to see you thriving."

"Not allowed inside?" I asked sympathetically and he sighed gustily.

"Millicent said I was to stay outside and make sure no uncouth person touched our Rolls-Royce."

I didn't have a chance to say anything else before Astrid stalked over.

“Finn will get bored of you,” she hissed as Harold darted over to accompany Millicent to their car. “He’s congenitally incapable of staying interested in one woman, especially one who does not stimulate him intellectually.”

I am a vessel of love and peace I reminded myself, but apparently peace was going to mean making sure Astrid didn't fuck with me any more.

“I didn’t hear him complaining about needing intellectual stimulation when he had his head between my thighs this morning,” I retorted.

She gasped, and to my surprise, she began to whimper.

“Just—please don’t have sex with him,” she begged. “I’ll introduce you to anyone else you want, I promise. Just—not Finn! Please please please please please not my ex. I can’t bear to see it.”

“Are you trying to keep him as backup?” I asked, stunned at her stupidity.

But just then, a shadow passed across the sun and I looked up in astonishment to see an enormous golden hot air balloon hovering above us.

What the hell

Then Finn’s head popped over the side and he swung himself over the rope ladder, descending from the balloon like an action star, giving Astrid and I a great view of his well-shaped ass in tight jeans as he climbed down. When he was halfway, he turned to me with that gleaming grin.

“Marry me, Indigo,” he called, holding out a little velvet box to me.

It was open, and even from halfway up the ladder I saw it sparkle with an obscenely

huge diamond.

His eyes shone at me, and I opened my mouth to reply, when suddenly Ambrose darted in between us.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am

Ambrose

This couldn't be real.

It wasn't that I was jealous of Finn.

Was I absolutely sick of hearing about him from Astrid, particularly her need to analyze every aspect of their relationship? Yes.

But it was more that I knew Indi very well and knew he was a thoroughly unacceptable choice for her.

If I could just talk to Indi— tell her that Finn was a very unsuitable person—

I had been formulating the words for days, trying to find the right ones.

But it was difficult to approach this situation after I had been caught in my ex-wife's curtains. Unfortunately, I feared she had taken entirely the wrong interpretation of my actions.

Unlike what Finn said, I was not being creepy or a pervert or obsessed. How was I supposed to know they were going to have sex when I came to check on Indi?

I had been motivated by a very honorable need to make sure she was OK.

But I simply could not accept this whole situation. And neither could Astrid.

“How could Finn be the father of her baby?” my fiancée demanded for the hundredth time. “When he was with me , he said he never wanted kids.”

She was putting on makeup for the first birthing class, very aggressively, dotting the sponge so hard on her face that little puffs of powder blew into her eyes.

“Maybe it was not planned,” I said, wondering why her eyes were so red. It looked like she had been crying. But she never cried. “Maybe it was a spontaneous thing.”

But somehow the idea of Finn and Indi being so overcome with passion that her pregnancy had been a wild and unexpected surprise, made me feel somewhat nauseated.

Astrid did not seem to like it either, flipping her makeup case shut with a snap and brushing past me angrily.

I thought I might warn my ex at the birthing class, but Indi did not seem very receptive to conversing with me.

Even though I should have been focused on Astrid, I couldn’t stop looking at Indi.

If it hadn’t been for my. . . indiscretion, could that have been my baby in her belly ?

I clamped down on that thought as hard as I could and buried it deep with superhuman strength.

That way lay madness

I would just keep my head down and try to stop thinking about Indigo.

But when I saw Finn sweep in on that ridiculous hot air balloon I couldn’t contain

myself anymore.

As the rope ladder dangled down in front of her, for only the second time in my life, I reacted entirely spontaneously.

“Indi, you cannot!” I said earnestly. “I can’t let you do this!”

Finn growled in annoyance as I locked eyes with my ex-wife, willing her to understand.

Indi was absolutely glowing from the birthing class, her hair flowing like rippling waves of auburn around her face. In the wind from the hot air balloon, it was swirling around her face like she was a goddess emerging from the foam in a Renaissance painting.

Simply magical, like she always had been

“And what right do you have, Dr. Hargreaves, to have anything to say about who I get married to?” Indi asked, coldly and evenly.

The tone of her voice was absolutely terrifying to me.

Indi was the sweetest woman I had ever known, all sunshine and light.

She cared for every life form down to a little worm on the sidewalk.

I don’t think I’d ever heard her say a harsh word, and just the cold uncaring tone in her voice was enough to make me weak at the knees.

“Butt the fuck out,” Finn warned from the rope ladder. “I’m going to kick your ass, Ambrose!”

Just then, Astrid clutched at my suit jacket.

“You must stop them, Ambrose!” she cried out shrilly. “Finn is just under some sort of spell!”

“Astrid, you need to move your delusional ass, too!” Finn said, finally hopping down from the ladder.

But when Finn stumbled down the last steps I cocked my fist and pasted him a good one on the nose. Perhaps it was not the intellectual approach, but the time for words had passed.

Finn looked absolutely murderous.

He staggered back a bit, then swung at me.

I was able to miss the worst of it, but he still caught me on the chin.

“God, stop, both of you!” Indi cried.

Astrid began to scream, entirely uselessly, using an ice scraper from the car to wallop me on the back.

Presumably she was trying to break up the fight, but it hurt like hell.

Indi’s face looked white with horror, two big spots pink with embarrassment on her cheeks, and Finn put me in a headlock as I attempted to punch him in the gut.

Quite the crowd had begun to gather, several of them with their phones out taking video footage but, just then, my own father leaped up the rope ladder and began to climb.

He then blew a whistle very loudly.

“Stop all this!” he bleated, the rope ladder swaying wildly underneath him.

“Harold, get down this instant!” my mother gasped angrily, but he continued to blow the whistle until Finn and I broke apart.

The crowd’s excited attention had turned to him and I was forced to hold the ladder steady so he could climb down.

Once he reached the ground, he hissed loudly at me.

“For God’s sake, take Astrid away!”

I was already turning around to see where Indi was, but I was forced to chase after my fiancée to keep her from running after Indi and Finn’s car as it disappeared down the street.

My mother looked absolutely furious, but I couldn’t think about that right now.

Astrid and I rode home silently.

How had my perfect life gone so wrong?

“Perhaps we need a trial separation,” I said into the silence. “To give us a bit of space from each other. I can sleep on the couch.”

“You mean we can see other people?” she asked eagerly.

“You don’t have to act so excited,” I said stiffly. “After all, you are carrying my child and we are engaged.”

“Did you or did you not just try to sabotage your ex-wife’s engagement to another man?” she demanded.

My jaw still stung from where Finn had punched me. I could only hope my own fist to his nose had at least incommoded him.

“I simply think Finn is not right for her,” I said.

“Indi isn’t cut out to be a rock star’s wife,” Astrid agreed, her lips tightened in displeasure.

She kept compulsively smoothing her hair, checking her face in the mirror.

“What are you doing ?” I asked, trying to moderate my tone. “Indi certainly looks like a rock star wife, but why would she want to be on the road in a bus that stinks like sweat and cheap beer for half the year?”

“You mean why would she want to live a life of unimaginable luxury and excitement?” Astrid interrupted.

There was silence in the car for a moment.

“It is ridiculous to be arguing which of our exes is better,” I said.

“How dare they get together,” Astrid cried. “And your ridiculous father made everything worse! Whatever possessed him to do an embarrassing thing like that?”

“On that we agree,” I said, but a little flicker of doubt went through me as I remembered.

Indi’s stricken pink face. She had clearly been embarrassed by Finn and I fighting

and didn't like being the center of attention. As ridiculously as my father had behaved, he had clearly done it to pull attention from Indi.

Perhaps I had misjudged—

But then I was distracted by seeing Finn's car in Indi's driveway.

What were they doing inside?

The unwanted memory filled me of his head under her skirt, moving around, the lucky bastard getting to lick Indi's sweet juicy pussy.

Life now was sheer torture.

Finn had a few weeks in between his tours, so I had to see them together constantly. Swimming and splashing around in her pool, Indi squealing with excitement as Finn twirled her around. Grilling on the front porch. Singing together with cups of tea as they walked arm-in-arm.

I had no idea what Indi had said to him about the engagement. All I knew was I didn't see a ring on her finger, but it occurred to me that she might be hiding the ring or not wearing it around Astrid and I because she knew it would upset us.

The thought was so humiliating I determined to keep my head down and focus on Astrid and the baby, but it was impossible to ignore Indigo's bubbly, radiant happiness.

Each day she became even more glowing and beautiful as her belly swelled.

Astrid and I were barely talking while Indi and Finn were doing shit like dancing in the motherfucking moonlight together.

I didn't want to know this, but one night Astrid and I were in the kitchen for our late dinner, the silverware clinking noisily because we were saying nothing to each other.

So I could hear Finn and Indi very clearly.

They had some kind of little radio playing softly, light and buoyant Irish music. It sounded delightful, so it couldn't be Finn's music.

But they were dancing together, Indi light on her feet like always, Finn with an arm around her deliciously thickening waist.

"How is the Anthropology Department doing?" I asked Astrid, for something, anything, to distract me from the little shadows that fell across the window.

Finn was leading Astrid on a merry dance all through the garden, circling around the flowers and bushes, the first leaves of fall beginning to drop gently down around them.

My mind was dragged unwillingly back to that day months ago . . .

"I regret that you saw that," I said stiffly, breathing heavily because I had just run across the span of two yards so I could head off Indi.

My wife was sitting at the table.

"I regret that you did that," she said calmly.

"There is no need to overreact," I said, but inside I was feeling panicky. "It was a mistake. It doesn't mean anything. I'll stop."

Indi didn't say anything.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Finding the number for a lawyer,” she returned tranquilly.

“You—want to get divorced over this?” I asked in astonishment. “One—mistake in five years?”

“One mistake?” Indi asked, turning her eyes to me. “You think you’ve only made one mistake in five years?”

“That’s right,” I said.

I was feeling heated under the collar and irritable. There was no way Indi was going to get divorced over this. She loved me too much. I was going to call her bluff.

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She finally shook her head.

“I don’t even know what to say to that. Are you leaving or should I?”

“Indi, you are being ridiculous!” I protested, barely holding back my temper.

“You cheated,” she said dismissively. “You can barely even apologize and you don’t think you’ve made any mistakes? It’s over, Ambrose.”

And with my offended hauteur, I had stalked away and moved in with Astrid.

My stupid pride and conceit had stopped me from instantly falling to my knees before my wife and begging for her forgiveness.

Why the fuck had I been so full of pride? There was no guarantee Indi would have forgiven me, but I should have pulled out all the stops and begged on my hands and knees.

Because I knew now that I was only fooling myself.

I had buried my feelings, but I hadn’t stopped loving her.

Now she had moved on. And not just with anybody. But a goddamn international rock star.

Why in the world had I been so conceited that I hadn’t gotten down on my hands and knees, hadn’t begged for another chance? Hadn’t done everything to prove I deserved

another chance?

Indi had mentioned other mistakes, other things, had factored into her decision.

I wondered if my arrogance had somehow given me a disproportionate view of how I treated her. In my own head, she had always appreciated the guidance and wisdom of an older man. Perhaps I had been. . .somewhat overbearing at times? Full of my own opinion?

I was not used to critical self-reflection and now these pork medallions tasted like sawdust in my mouth.

My attempts at conversation with Astrid went nowhere.

She was flicking her eyes back and forth all around Indi's yard, tracking their every motion. Her eyes looked bloodshot.

"Are you in love with Finn?" I asked, forcing another bite of pork medallion in my mouth.

Because I was damn sure I was in love with Indigo still.

But she ignored me, suddenly leaping from her chair and throwing open the window.

"Finn! Finn! Come over here! I've cooked your favorite for supper, blackberry tart!"

"Fucking hell!" I heard Finn bark, and I couldn't entirely blame him.

I had to go pull Astrid from the window before she collapsed sobbing into a chair.

Astrid was clearly delusional. And I was probably just as delusional, too, to think Indi

could ever look at me again.

Hell and damnation.

That night, I looked at the couch with loathing. I couldn't stand another night on it, so I went outside to the back porch and settled myself on one of our new lawn chairs. It was padded, right? It had to be better than Astrid's stiff leather sofa.

But I woke up a few hours later to noises.

It appeared Indi's bedroom window was open and she and Finn were engaging in some nocturnal activities.

Shit

And I couldn't even move, because the ridiculous nonsensical chair would squeak and she'd know for sure that I was there. After falling out of the curtains I couldn't bear to let her think I was just sitting around all day waiting to spy on her having sex with her new man.

So I just lay there, poker-stiff and still.

"Baby, you've got to move out of this neighborhood," Finn said. "It's filled with psychotic lunatics and creepers."

Indi's voice was so soft I couldn't hear what she said, but my skin crawled with shame.

"Come on, angel," he said, and I could hear a rustling, the sound of his lips meeting hers.

“I’ll get you a way better house. Any place you want. Any town you want, any country you want. Somewhere with a high gate and guard dogs so Ambrose and Astrid won’t always be crawling in the windows.”

She laughed then, and I burned with shame.

How had I, an unusually intelligent man, managed to fuck up my life to this extent?

There was no way to avoid my feelings. I had to lay there with tears gathering in my eyes, blurring my vision until they slowly fell down my face as Indi got thoroughly pleased by another man.

The night was so quiet I was able to hear everything.

“Come on top so I can see you. . .”

“Hell no, you aren’t too big, mama. . .”

Low groans

“That’s it, this is the best shit, this is the best pussy, oh Indi, girl, you have to marry me. . .”

Then the breathy sweet groans of Indi and I had never been so jealous of anyone in my entire life, because I knew exactly what Indi looked like grinding down on my dick.

And now she was pregnant, oh god, she’d look even more beautiful. . .

When they were finally done, I wiped my wet face on my shirt and went inside. Then I stayed up the rest of the night, pouring my heart out passionately in a letter to

Indigo. She was worthy of every height of poetry, every beautiful turn of phrase.

I couldn't believe I had been such a fool.

"She walks in beauty/like the night," I began with the most romantic sonnet in my arsenal.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day/

Indi, thou art more lovely and more temperate."

Perhaps it would be a little awkward, to co-parent with Astrid, but living next door would mean our child would have easy access to both parents.

"Your hair falls like auburn-shadowed gold," I began. "Your teeth are like a flock of sheep."

OK, maybe that was plagiarizing Song of Solomon. "You can sink those pretty little teeth into my cock any day." Damn, now that was going way too far to the other extreme.

But still I poured my heart out, telling Indi like I never had before all my regrets about how I had behaved, how stupidly I had acted. How it had been nothing but a mistake with Astrid and it was only my foolish pride that had made me move in with her afterward.

After I was approximately twenty-two pages in, I re-read the whole thing, hoping it was as convincing as I thought, and that I wasn't too maddened by sleep deprivation.

Feeling a bit melodramatic, I kissed the envelope, then sealed the entire thing with my fancy wax seal, and put it in my ex-wife's mailbox.

Then I lay down to grab a few hours' sleep on the horrible couch.

I overslept, but the first thing I did was hurry to the yard to see if Indi had received my letter yet.

To my horror, the first thing I saw was Finn at the mailbox.

“That’s for Indi!” I called to him, but, before I could leap over the hedge and wrest the envelope from his fingers, he had ripped it open and my passionate declarations of love were in my rival’s big meaty hands.

Indi

I replayed the entire ridiculous episode in my head all the way home from the birthing class, as Finn listed all the things he wanted to do to Ambrose, including boil him like an Irish potato in a stew and cut off his limbs and feed them to various Celtic deities.

But it was baffling why my ex-husband had acted that way. Ambrose was usually so concerned with status and decorum. Running up to me like that, with his eyes wild and his perfect salt-and-pepper hair disarranged, his jaw like granite, was not at all like him, and I couldn't understand it.

But, somehow, it pissed me off.

I had been over Ambrose for months. Did my best to ignore him.

Yet, somehow, he kept popping up like a whack-a-mole game.

"The less said about Ambrose the better," I said, cutting across Finn's expostulations. "I don't want to think another second about him."

"All right," Finn said reluctantly, running his hands through his thick dark waves. "But—hell, I had all this shit planned out."

He took the little velvet box from his pocket and opened it again.

"I know you aren't sure yet. I know you think we're too alike maybe.

But please, just—hold it,” Finn said, giving me that big gleaming grin.

“I’ve never met anyone like you. Look at the massive diamond, lassie, and think of all the possibilities.

How many more diamonds and gems I can cover you with?

This was Prince Harry’s second choice engagement ring, you know. ”

“Prince Harry—what? How did you—? I don’t just care about diamonds!” I protested, although my eyes seemed entranced by the sheer level of sparkle here. “I care more about making the world a better place for our baby! My causes are what I care about the most!”

“I care about all of those causes too!” Finn said, coming around behind me to nibble on my neck. “I love the fuck out of all your causes.”

“You’re not supposed to love the fact that our local wildlife and trees are endangered,” I protested.

But thinking about that only made me think of how Ambrose and I had met, and how I had been surprised a man who seemed so stuffy and pompous could do something like that .

And I was in no mood to remember it.

The only way Ambrose had surprised me recently was how willing he apparently was to humiliate himself to keep me from marrying Finn, but that could be chalked up to the fact that Ambrose was usually the most handsome man in town, and now that Finn was around, he was only a second or third-placer.

“I will give a million dollars for every single tree you want to save,” Finn was saying, and I did not want to remember Ambrose, so I leaned back into my baby daddy and let him slip his fingers underneath the band of my shorts and start to stroke my pussy, always with that one rough finger on my clit and the others pressing deftly inside to that patch of sensitive skin that made me wild. . .

Maybe I should say yes. Finn was romantic, loaded, funny, doted on me and the baby, and was sexy as hell.

For the next few weeks, I tried to focus on planning my baby shower. Finn and I were not planning on finding out our baby’s gender, but it would still be fun to get together with friends and have a small, low-key party.

However, it seemed like every time I stepped out my front door or looked out the kitchen window, I saw Astrid, looking like Garfield with his nose pressed up against the window of a pasta restaurant, and one day she finally came up to me at the fence as I was watering my roses.

As usual, she looked pretty and perfectly done-up. At first glance. But the closer I looked at her, the more there was. . .wrong, like a badly-painted china doll that was beginning to crack.

“Indi, can I come in and talk to you?” she asked, her lips spread wide over those massive brilliant white teeth.

“No,” I said politely. “Finn is getting out of the shower and I’m afraid you are in no emotional space to be able to handle that.”

She gulped visibly, the carefully arranged curls around her head trembling.

Strangely, it seemed like since Finn had arrived she’d been trying to hide her bump,

not show it off as she had been before.

“The shower? Oh god. Oh god. . . here’s the thing,” Astrid said, then she stopped and stared unblinkingly at me for several long moments.

“What’s the thing?” I prodded. “I don’t have all day.”

“The thing is—” Astrid said firmly. “That I don’t want Ambrose anymore.”

I crossed my arms over my belly.

“And? What’s that got to do with me?”

“I don’t want him anymore,” Astrid said, her eyes gleaming with a fanatical look. “You can have him back.”

“Sorry, no take-backs,” I said. “It’s a very well-known rule.”

Astrid blinked her huge china-blue eyes at me.

“What do you mean—you don’t want Ambrose back?”

“Why would I want Ambrose back?” I asked coldly. “After I saw him fucking you on the back porch over there, I ceased to have any interest in him.”

“That was a mistake,” Astrid said anxiously, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. “Just some messing around that went too far.”

“Indeed,” I said, turning to go. “I’m sorry, but I have no interest in your love life.”

“Please, Indi,” she cried suddenly, clutching at me. “I want Finn back! I neeeeeed

him, you don't understand!"

"Perhaps you should have taken better care to stay married to him," I said, wrenching my shirt from her grip.

"He wanted to divorce me," Astrid said unhappily, pulling at her corkscrew curls. "I thought it was because he was too much of a free spirit to settle down. He is an untamed eagle you know, bold and free. It would have been so shameful of me to try to clip his wings."

I listened without sympathy to her inane babbling. "He seems perfectly ready to settle down now," I said.

Astrid's narrow face turned practically green with envy. "Why? Why?" she yelped. "What do you have that I don't? I don't understand it!"

I shrugged.

"Think of how I'm suffering," she begged. "Just look at these bags under my eyes."

"Right, like you thought of my feelings when you went around fucking my husband in your lounge chair?"

"I regret that," she said hastily, but I only rolled my eyes.

"Goodbye, Astrid."

"Take Ambrose baaaack," she wheedled. "Please please please, I beg of you. I'll give you money to let Finn go. My family comes from old Swedish money, you know. I could set you up for life, Indi. You'd never have to work another day."

“I already get plenty of money from Finn,” I retorted. “I don’t ever have to work massage therapy again if I don’t want to.”

“Indi, you don’t understand!” she groaned. “Finn and I are soulmates!”

“Funny,” I said. “Why would your soulmate give me an engagement ring?”

I drew it from my pocket as the stunning brightness of it reflected the sunlight and hit her right in the eyeballs.

Astrid let out an anguished screech, clutching the fence posts.

“He gave you that?”

“That’s right. And we’re not even engaged. He just gave me this to try to convince me.”

She gasped out a sob.

“Indi, I’ll give you anything. Please please. I’m sorry for fucking Ambrose. I’m so so so so sorry. It wasn’t that memorable, I’ve already blocked it from my memory! I will never talk to him again if that’s what you want. Just give me my husband back !”

Her eyes were bright with tears but all I had for her was a sigh of exasperation.

“You are embarrassing yourself,” I said. “Just go back and make the best of it with Ambrose. Or break up with Ambrose. Do whatever you want. Just leave me out of it for I fear I do not care.”

“How could I ever be satisfied with Ambrose’s stodgy old teacher ass?” Astrid pouted. “When I know a rock star like Finn does want to settle down.”

“But not with you ,” I pointed out helpfully. “He doesn’t want to settle down with you. ”

“Indi, I will clean your home myself for a year! Two years! I will get down on my knees and scrub your toilet with a toothbrush. Do you want my car? My ring?”

She started riffling through her purse and throwing wads of \$50s at me.

“Take it! Take anything!”

I rolled my eyes and I went back inside.

“Goodbye, Astrid.”

I heard another anguished screech from her as she saw Finn’s massive, sculptured body pass by the living room window, clad only in a tiny little peach-colored towel that did barely anything to hide his massive hanging dick.

He jerked the curtains shut and I wasn’t one to turn down Sunday morning sex, so I allowed him to gently position me on my hands and knees on the bed and then pleasure me with long, decadent strokes.

“Want to go check the mail?” I asked afterward as I stretched like a cat on the bed, loving the way my swollen belly was getting bigger every day. “I’m supposed to be getting a few Amazon packages and we can put together the crib later if you want.”

“Anything you like, baby,” he reassured me, then put on the world’s tiniest gym shorts and went out the door.

I lay there for another moment, luxuriating in my skin, then I remembered I wanted to check my old bloodwork for my iron levels, so I went into the office to find them. I

flicked through my neatly filed paperwork, pulling out the letter from the lab, but something was stuck to the paper.

What in the world was this?

It looked like one of Ambrose's old medical documents.

Annoyed, I yanked it out of my drawer.

There was a sort of commotion outside, but I ignored it to look at what I had found.

I thought I had gotten rid of every evidence of Ambrose in this house, or as much as you can get rid of an ex who lives right next door to you, but apparently he was sticking around like a noxious type of fly.

He was going to get this paper in his mailbox with a cold note that said, "I don't want your shit around."

There was something sticky on the document, a few brown speckles all over it and I rolled my eyes.

Mr. Multitasking had apparently been drinking coffee while opening the mail and spilled it over his doctor's letter.

I pulled it closer.

Wait, this was Ambrose's sperm count results.

I scratched at one of the coffee spots with a pink-nailed finger and gasped in shock.

The coffee spot had covered up his results.

My eyeballs bugged out at the number on the paper.

For years, we had assumed the problem was me, but it wasn't. Not at all.

As I got up to check on the racket outside, I realized one thing.

There were very few sperm floating around in Ambrose's arrogant, bastard balls

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Indi

My fists clenched in determination, I stared down the bulldozers as they moved slowly toward me.

The rest of my Save Applewood Nature Park group had skittered out of the way when the development team brought in the trucks and bulldozers to scare us off.

But I wasn't budging. Even though there was a huge lump of fear in my throat, I was determined not to leave until they backed down.

A huge crowd had begun to gather: nosy neighbors, picnickers, bikers, and TV reporters, all of them flicking eyes between the development guys in ill-fitting suits and me.

If I left right now, they'd start work on the new golf course and the oldest park in town would be nothing but a giant gaping hole in the ground.

Community groups had begged for an environmental survey, hoping that the presence of the endangered Shy Coral-Hued Worm would delay it until we could organize opposition to destroying the park.

Then I saw a very tall man striding over to me.

Oh, shit.

Here must be the stuffed shirt expert, ready to assure the TV reporters and the rest of

the crowd that there was absolutely no danger to the Shy Coral-Hued Worm with this new golf course.

I gritted my teeth as he strode up to the reporters, imperiously gesturing to them for a microphone, which he tapped with tanned fingers.

He was very tall and lean, with short dark hair beginning to go gray at the temples, dressed in a light blue collared shirt and suit pants, with a striped blue and white tie.

Holy goddess, it must be 102 degrees out here and he was dressed like he was going to the Kentucky Derby, complete with classic pointy asshole shoes and some fucking cologne that smelled like gold doubloons.

I was only wearing a long gray skirt and tank top, but I was not about to let him intimidate me.

He flicked his eyes over to me. They were a chilled light ice-blue, and for a moment I felt an unusual squirming sensation deep in my gut.

“I suppose you must be the hippie here trying to chain herself to a tree,” he said sharply as he set his briefcase on a nearby rock and took out a huge stack of papers.

It was that cultured, condescending voice that pissed me off.

“I suppose you must be the corporate bootlicker who doesn’t care about the park at all! They’re proposing to ruin important habitats here!”

“ Pardon , but you don’t have to tell me about the importance of habitats. I’m Professor Ambrose Hargreaves, from Smith & Cockburn College,” he said, as if that was supposed to mean something to me. “Who are you?”

“ I’ve never heard of you,” I retorted, ignoring his question. “But think about all the species you’d be killing here! Think of all the people who use this park!”

“Look at it!” he countered, pointing down at the ground, where the Shy Coral-Hued Worm, most unlike its name, was wriggling about in grimy pink glory.

“It’s just a worm, madam. There is absolutely nothing special about it.

If you get out of the way of these bulldozers I will personally order you a dozen new worms.”

I glared at him, heat and anger pulsing in my temples.

Professor Hargreaves had his sleeves neatly rolled up, just one prim and proper little lieutenant general roll of his powder blue collared shirt, but it was enough to show the way his tendons flexed.

Ugh

What a waste of good arms on a spineless corporate lackey.

“It’s not just about the worm, asshole,” I hissed. “The Eastern bluebirds eat this worm. Without the worm, no bluebirds. The whole interdependent web of life is threatened if we don’t do a proper environmental study.”

His eyes narrowed at me, the big stack of papers stilled in his hands.

“What’s this about the bluebirds? That wasn’t in the preliminary report I got.”

“There aren’t bluebirds around here!” one of the developers shouted, but Ambrose ignored him.

“Yes, there are!” I insisted. “They’re rare but I’ve seen them.”

His eyes raked almost painfully down my body, and I felt one thing instantly under my skin.

I wanted him.

"I saw nothing about that in the preliminary report," he repeated, and I saw some of the corporate guys shuffle around.

There was silence for a moment, the sound of a large dog loudly eating an ice-cream cone the only thing I could hear in the park.

“Not very many sightings of the bluebird,” one of the other suit guys finally said resentfully, and I sucked in my breath with hope.

And without another word, Dr. Hargreaves dropped his papers and twisted around, striding from his place with the other suits to stand beside me.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“The Shy Coral-Hued Worm will not be harmed on my watch!” he boomed out as my jaw dropped with shock.

I watched as the developers’ faces puckered angrily, and they began to argue with the professor, shaking their fists and the development plans at him. One of the truck drivers revved his engine.

But the professor didn’t back down. Without the slightest sign of effort, he immediately launched into a passionate legal and constitutional defense of the park.

When the truck driver revved his engine, Dr. Hargreaves grabbed my arm and pulled me behind him, keeping his strong fingers encircled around my elbow, and my skin fucking burned where he touched me, my skin heating up with the raw intensity I felt rolling off him.

Once he had decided something was right, he was like a granite rock, shouting down the opposition and quoting lengthy passages of the state constitution until they all gave up and rolled out of there.

I watched in astonishment, the sweat rolling down my back and soaking my tank top, as they all left, the TV cameras, the bulldozers, and the trucks.

Everybody but the two of us.

“ You did that, Professor Hargreaves,” I said, hardly believing it. “I didn’t think you would.”

“I suppose I did,” he said, looking a little surprised himself. “That was most unlike me. Call me Ambrose, by the way.”

Ambrose

What a proper, old-fashioned name for a man who had seemed like the very sort of traditional, tightly-wound asshole I had always avoided.

For a moment we stared at each other, and I felt something crackle between us, an energy that was so intense I couldn’t breathe for a moment. And then a few papers from his briefcase began to scatter on the wind, and I immediately dropped on my hands and knees to pick them up.

They were clasped to my bosom when I looked up and he was staring down at me, his

eyes so full of naked lust that I couldn't move away.

I hadn't meant to be on my hands and knees in front of him in such a wanton pose, but I stood up and held out the stack of papers to him, waiting to see what he would do.

He took the papers, stacked them neatly on top of the nearby rock, then bent down and kissed me.

And at first it was going to be a pity fuck for me, like just a primal expression of glee and thankfulness at what he had done out there, but then his lips fell on mine, and it was nothing like I had expected, all that starched stiffness unraveling outward as his hands gripped the back of my head, his lips devouring me with some fucking dirty nasty energy I didn't know he had in him, and my heart began to pound.

He pulled me behind the rock so we were hidden from everyone at the park, pressing me up against the hard surface as he kissed me so thoroughly that I felt like I was melting, blazing sticky heat all over me but I didn't care as I put my hands on his taut back, feeling the lines of lean muscle through his sleek shirt.

His tongue didn't tease at my entrance so much as demand with entrance, and I opened my mouth with a gasp, feeling my nipples tauten under my shirt, rub against his hard belly.

He broke off with a gasp.

"Madam—I apologize," he said in a raw voice, looking agonized, the muscles in his jaw moving.

He ripped his glasses off and stuffed them in his pocket, but he didn't move his body from where his long thighs were pressed against me, his chest heaving, his other arm

only inches from me.

“I am—usually more gentlemanly. I am—having a very difficult time controlling myself. You are—driving me mad, madam. This has never happened before, I assure you.”

The idea that he was coming apart, that this stiff and proper man could have that wild look in his ice-blue eyes, one arm curving around me, the other tearing at his tie, was intoxicating to me. What would it be like to see all the tightly-wound parts of him unravel?

So instead I gripped him by the front of his lapels and he fell on me with a groan.

I was absolutely dripping wet, my back stretched tight as I arched my pussy against the thick bulge grinding into me, and he fumbled at my long skirts like he couldn't wait another second.

“Bloody hell, woman, you're like a godsdamn Fabergé egg, like a luxury for an emperor,” he groaned in my ear, and I wanted to scream with laughter at this insane description of myself, since I was a massage therapy student who had no money and 4 roommates, but I was too horny.

I didn't plan on coming, not on the backside of this rock, with a busy road only a few dozen feet away through the trees.

But something about how this man fucked me meant my body was on fire, wanting more of him, wanting to see how he'd come undone.

He sunk his hands in my hair and pulled, and I didn't even know if he was doing it on purpose, the way he was fucking me like some feral, possessed animal, one hand digging into my ass, the other wrapped around the back of my throat so he could

devour me with his lips.

His cock was long and thick, with a slight bend at the end that hit me just fucking right, and suddenly I was literally goddamn squirting, coming with a huge gush and soaking my thighs and the entire front of his fancy pants, but I didn't care, riding him with fevered, frenetic energy, clutching him tighter with my thighs, wanting him and his strange combination of propriety and untamed passion.

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He smelled like fucking old money and a dirty raw desire, and I fell for him then, dragged under the wave of that strange, wild combination that was Professor Ambrose Hargreaves and I couldn't wait to explore more.

Present day

I thought it was an epic love, but he probably had just wanted to have sex with me.

That's all we ever were , I thought dismissively, as I put the memory firmly away and hurried outside.

My belly was really beginning to stick out now, Finn & I's baby kicking out and fluttering like a butterfly as I waddled out the door to see my ex-husband and my baby daddy wrestling in the middle of the lawn.

Finn appeared to have several pieces of paper in his hand and he was holding his arm out to stop Ambrose from grabbing them.

“O Indi, your eyes are like a bluebird's wing,” Finn called out in a high falsetto. “O Indi, your skin is like a creamy bath of marble sculpturing. Who the fuck is taking a bath in marble sculpturing, you dipshit?”

“What is going on?” I cried out as my ex twisted Finn's wrist.

My baby daddy was built like the back end of a refrigerator, but at this he was forced to drop the papers on the ground.

Ambrose went to grab them and Finn stepped directly on the scattered papers, his boot leaving muddy footprints all over.

“Indi, this fucking fool’s still in love with you,” Finn howled, pointing and laughing at Ambrose.

My blood seemed to run cold, my stomach doing flip-flops in horrified disbelief.

Almost automatically, I glanced over to my ex, assuming Finn was just taunting him.

But Ambrose had fallen to his knees to try to collect the papers. He looked white to the gills as he nodded.

One short, sharp confirmation.

The hell?

Just then my horrible ex kicked at Finn’s kneecap and the other man went down like a sack of rocks, his big hands reaching out to grab Ambrose by the collar and then they were both rolling across the lawn again punching each other.

I heard a crunch as Ambrose hit Finn’s nose, then a crack as Finn’s elbow connected with Ambrose’s ribs.

“Fucking give it up!” Finn ordered. “You lost Indi and she’s mine now!”

“She needs to know how I feel!” Ambrose gritted out.

I realized sitting here and yelping “stop!” was not going to do anything, so I grabbed the garden hose and turned it on full blast at both of them.

My commitment to a peaceful existence with all living things had never been tested more.

They didn't want to stop punching each other, but were forced to when I aimed the powerful jet of water directly between them, Ambrose rolling away and grabbing for his glasses and Finn on his hands and knees heaving.

I directed the water lower, filling in a pool of water between them and the two men got to their feet, eyeing each other warily.

“Can you go get me an ice cream cone, Finn?” I asked quickly. “And a jalapeno? I’m getting these wild cravings and I feel quite faint.”

Finn looked resentfully over at Ambrose.

“All right,” he said. “Don’t touch Indi,” he added, pointing a big tattooed finger at Ambrose. “Don’t touch her, don’t look at her, don’t talk to her.”

“And can you maybe get one for Astrid, too?” I asked, hoping desperately to lower the temperature between all of us so Astrid wouldn’t go into early labor or something.

“Baby, hell no,” Finn said. “That’s not my baby in her. I don’t have to do fuck-all for her. She can get her own damn ice-cream cone.”

He got in his car and drove off as Ambrose dropped heavily down to the curb.

I eyed my ex.

He might be the father of Astrid’s baby. According to the test, he had sperm. His count was just so low that presumably it would have taken a long time to get her pregnant. And it had only been a few months after they got together.

I didn't want to talk to him, but I knew if I had any hope of a peaceful last few weeks of my pregnancy and a nice relaxing baby shower, I was going to have to try to break the constant tension between the two men.

So I pulled out a lawn chair and sat down in it, Ambrose beside me on the curb, arms propped on his thighs, his head hanging between his legs.

I felt absolutely furious at him.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I asked through gritted teeth. "Why are you doing this? Why are you getting into fights with Finn?"

Looking over at him, I saw that there were rips and tears all in his collared shirt, and a big bruise was blooming on his cheek.

"I'm trying to figure out how I fucked my life up to this extent," Ambrose said bitterly.

I noticed one of his hands was shaking as he ran it through his hair.

This was surprising. Ambrose was usually so assured in everything. Usually, Ambrose's philosophy was that life was perfect and he was a king among men.

"What do you mean?" I asked, stalling for time, because I need to haul myself up and out of this chair and away from this conversation.

This had been a mistake.

I didn't want to hear his answer. Did I?

"I know you must hate my goddamn guts," Ambrose said, and his voice was still

hoarse from being throttled, “and maybe that poetry was kind of shit. But I just want you to know even though I’m a colossal asshole, I love you and I was delusional to think I could stop loving you.

I don’t think I can ever stop. I’m so sorry I fucked us up like I did. ”

He turned sideways and I clenched my fists to resist the urge to pop him right in the nose.

“What gives you the fucking gall to tell me in my third trimester that you still love me?” I hissed furiously at him, and that was only the beginning of the fury I intended to unleash on his head when a stately Rolls-Royce glided smoothly down our street and parked directly in front of Ambrose’s house.

His mother (oh god) and father got out of the car.

Millicent always had her lip curled up and a cat’s-asshole expression on her face and today was no exception.

“Hello, Mother,” Ambrose said, wiping his hands on his pants and standing up. “What are you doing here?”

“It Is Your Father,” she said in all capital letters, enunciating each word carefully. “I believe he is due for A Little Visit with you. Perhaps you can be a good influence on him, son.”

Oh, god. Millicent had often done this when Ambrose and I were married. When Harold would fall afoul of one of her many insane dictates, he would be sent in disgrace to visit us.

And Ambrose did as he always had done. Nodded like a prissy little saint and

promised to do his best, then took his mother's arm to guide her back to the car, with barely a glance spared for his own father.

"I hate how Ambrose treats you," I said tightly, as I watched my ex-husband's ramrod-stiff back and shoulders accompany his mother to the car.

"Ah well," Harold said, "What are you going to do? He's a Sagittarius."

I tsked, torn between affection that he still remembered all the astrological charts we'd done together and frustration that he wouldn't stick up for himself.

"That is no excuse. He needs to pull his head out of his ass."

I glared at Ambrose's back, annoyed at myself for feeling anything in regards to him. I hadn't felt a thing for months. Why was the old frustration at his inability to see how fucking toxic his mother was creeping back?

I had tried to tell him so many times. But he would never listen.

That was just another reason that it was a good thing Ambrose and I had divorced. He had a pig-headed insistence that his own godlike judgment must be right.

At any rate, Harold seemed perfectly happy to be deposited in Applewood Subdivision, ripping off his toupee and rubbing his freed head contentedly.

"Need any help around here?" he asked.

"I wish you would leave Millicent," I sighed. "It's not OK how she treats you. You must know it isn't."

For a moment, pain crossed his face, and he looked weary, even his mustache

drooping in defeat.

“She keeps a tight hold of the money,” my ex-father-in-law sighed. “I couldn’t afford to live on my own. I’ve had to do some outlandish things just for a little pin money to buy a cigar now and again. Like sell plasma.”

“You sold plasma?” I asked sharply, feeling horrified.

Ambrose’s parents were absolutely loaded . To think of him in his 70s having to go down and sell plasma just for a little freedom!

“Yes. . . among other things,” he said. “But I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Wait, what other things did you sell?” I asked, but Harold didn’t answer, only patted my hand reassuringly. “Don’t worry about me, honey. Let’s just have a nice visit. Want me to make you a cup of rose tea?”

“All right. Rose tea sounds divine. But you shouldn’t have to sell plasma. Anytime you need money, come to me. Please.”

He helped me up and we started to walk back into the house when I noticed a few envelopes had fallen out of Ambrose and Astrid’s recycling bin and into my lawn.

I bent down, cursing Ambrose and Astrid for their messiness, and shoved the papers back into their recycling.

But just before I slammed the lid back down, something insane caught my eye, and suddenly I knew .

I knew who Astrid’s baby daddy was

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Ambrose

I tried to concentrate on what Dr. González was saying during the faculty meeting, but my mind kept wandering.

Indi with that adorable frown on her face, Indi with her nose wrinkled up

The way she used to sing to the garden because she said it made the plants grow better

Indi in front of me on the bed, her back arched, that rich auburn color spilled all over her back as I buried my hands in her hair, smelling her scent, whispering filthy things in her ear that I could barely believe were coming out of my own mouth.

Filthy, raunchy, dirty things, because somehow the way she looked at me, with that light, wicked look in her eyes always drove me mad. . .

My cock stiffened in my pants, not a very comfortable thing at a faculty meeting, and I shifted, trying inconspicuously to slide my briefcase into my lap so no one would notice my cock was at attention, when Dr. González turned to face me.

“Dr. Hargreaves, we’ve received a really concerning video, and unfortunately it’s necessary to play it for the Archaeology faculty as the election for the new Chair is coming up. This does cast some doubt in your ability to lead the department in a professional manner.”

I stiffened in my chair, my hands tightening on the briefcase.

What now

Dr. González pointed his projector at the screen and an image of a giant, yellow hot air balloon came into view.

Oh shit

He played the entire episode for the rest of the faculty, my coworkers watching in stunned silence as I leaped onto the screen, and the laughter began as I swung a punch at Finn.

At first the laughter was quiet, then it got louder as I took his fist directly on the chin, and finally they broke out into open guffaws as Astrid began to hit me with the ice scraper on the back.

My face was contorted in pain as I tried to dodge her blows, and that was where Dr. González paused the video, my mouth opened in a very unattractive manner, my glasses sliding down my nose.

“Several weeks ago,” Dr. González said, “I was attending a dinner party at your house where evidence came forth that you had been annoying your ex-wife, and here I see video evidence that you have been annoying her again and engaging in boorish fisticuffs with her new lover. This is becoming an obsession with you, Dr. Hargreaves. Explain yourself.”

My colleagues were laughing openly now, nudging each other and asking if they could get the video sent to them.

My cheeks burned, and my coworkers did not help with statements like:

Oh wow, Indigo really traded up, didn't she?

Isn't that Finn O'Donoghue? Oh my god, he is so hot

Ugh, I wish Ambrose wasn't in the way, I can only see half of Finn here

Ambrose, is there any way to edit you out of this footage

Did you see those paparazzi pics of Finn on a yacht? The one where you can see how big his. . .you know is? Damn, Indi is so lucky

My throat felt scratchy and raw and I swallowed convulsively.

"I—know this doesn't look good. I'm—just trying to tell her how I feel."

"Do you need to take a leave of absence?" Dr. González asked, his voice clipped and disapproving. "You need to get a hold of yourself. This is very embarrassing behavior."

I slunk home like a dog.

I didn't think I'd be getting that Chair position and now everyone knew that I was obsessed with my ex and she had moved on.

To complete my misery, on the way home I passed by Indi and Finn, walking hand in hand on their way to the park. He had a picnic basket on his arm and her Stanley cup cradled in his biceps, and I was stricken with such insane jealousy that my eyes clouded with bitter, regretful tears.

Astrid was sitting on the porch when I got back, sipping a big glass of milk.

She looked angrily over at me.

“Your baby is taking up so much space even milk gives me heartburn and I’ve got the squirts from your horrible cooking and I can’t walk to the mailbox without getting Braxton-Hicks contractions and you ,” here she paused to take a deep breath, her bloodshot eyes glaring at me as she struggled for words.

“I heard about your stupid poetry,” she finally spat. “What is wrong with you?”

There was silence for a minute as I tightened my hold on my briefcase.

“I’m still in love with Indi,” I said.

“Fuck you,” Astrid said, beginning to wail. “Stealing you away from her was supposed to be fun and awesome and exciting. Not this.”

I had nothing to say, because I couldn’t believe I had cheated on Indi.

And I had compounded my initial stupidity by not immediately falling to my belly and begging for her forgiveness because the explanation, such as it was, for my behavior, was so shamefully stupid and moronic that I couldn’t bear to have her know how utterly dumb I had been.

And so instead I had stalked out and gotten together with Astrid, who was as pleased as a cat with cream, but I could only delude myself for so long.

“Why does she get everything I want?” Astrid cried, the lines of mascara tracing down her cheek in rivulets. “She gets my first choice and my second choice. It’s not fair!”

And I still had nothing to say.

The next day, I sat at the kitchen table and took out a big piece of lined paper. My life

was godsdamn falling apart but I didn't give a fuck. If I could fix this one thing, fix it with Indie, nothing else mattered.

DE-OPTIMIZED PERSONAL CHOICES RE: INDIGO I wrote.

It was time to figure out how I had fucked up the best thing that ever happened to me.

The biggest fuck-up had been with Astrid but what else? Indi had said there were other factors in her decision to get divorced.

I sunk my head in my hands and began to think.

Domestic chore disparity? I ran over our chores. We had taken turns cooking, doing the dishes. I had arranged and hired a cleaning service, even someone to wash and fold our laundry.

Sex? Except at the end, we'd always had a fucking phenomenal sex life. Indi was the hottest woman I'd ever seen in my life, and I always made sure she came first, at least once if not more.

So what was it?

What were those mistakes I had made?

My eyes caught a motion outside and I looked over the hedges, to see Dad and Indigo in her front room.

Due to heavy rain last week, the baby showers had been delayed and would take place soon.

Indi was wearing a white T-shirt and her 36 week bump was really popping out, all of

her already lush curves looking even more overflowing and tempting.

I was so jealous of everything to do with her. Finn for getting to go to every maternity appointment with her. Even my father for getting to sit on the floor with her setting up a Christmas train. It wasn't even Thanksgiving yet, but Indi liked to get the whole house decorated early.

Damn, was he bothering her? I put my hands on the table, getting ready to go tell him to leave her alone, because the last thing I wanted was for my ex-wife I was still wildly in love with to be pissed off at me for dumping my visiting father on her, but then I paused.

Indi was having fun . The two of them were setting up the train set carefully, Indi cross-legged on the floor, her belly poking out from under her T-shirt. There was a newspaper between them, and I wondered for a moment if they were looking over the daily horoscope.

Indi had always liked doing that, wanted to do my star chart or some such bullshit, but I had had no time for such unscientific foolishness.

But now. . . I'd do anything as long as it was with her.

Strange. . . looking at my father, he wasn't babbling, sitting there with a foolish grin or chewing his mustache.

He wasn't acting like he always did at my parents' manor.

His fingers moved deftly, and he looked relaxed.

Strange, it was almost like he was a different person over there.

He was wearing a big knitted sweater that I'd never seen him wear before, but suddenly it looked a bit familiar.

Indi had made him that, hadn't she? For a birthday or Christmas, maybe?

My mother hated it and I had just assumed Dad did too, because he never wore it.

But now I saw him wearing it happily.

I frowned, feeling an uneasy sinking sensation in my gut.

The two of them sat there. Unbothered, unfussed, enjoying themselves.

Had I been looking at my father all wrong?

Indi had always told me I was too hard on him, but I had dismissed her concerns.

Dad was a fool, a man who couldn't do anything right, an embarrassing babbler, someone Mom and I dragged through life with our much stronger intellects.

Wasn't he?

Abruptly, I got up and walked out the door and onto the sidewalk. Indi wouldn't like me messing up her garden.

Then I knocked on the door, my heart in my throat.

There was no reason either of them would want to see me, but I knocked anyway.

My palms felt sweaty and I kept swallowing convulsively.

It was such shame and dishonor when Indi came to the door and seeing me made the light drain out of her face and those full pink lips turn down.

“What do you want now?” she asked abruptly. “Finn is not exactly fond of you, you know. If he catches you here, he’ll kick your ass.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry if my letter made anything uncomfortable for you. But I’m not sorry for what I said.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she said breezily, a lovely smile flashing across her face. Those little freckles on her nose crinkled up adorably. “I enjoyed seeing you get your ass kicked, Ambrose.”

Then she turned and went back inside, but she didn’t slam the door in my face so I followed her.

My dad was amiable, happy to see me, made a comment about the train, which allowed me to respond awkwardly.

I remembered how I’d always complained about my mom dumping him on us and felt grossly ashamed.

I had never heard him talk like this—the difference was night and day.

Indi with her sweet and accepting personality had allowed him to blossom, to talk about things he was interested in and show off his mechanical abilities. And as a result he was more relaxed, less jumpy and giggly.

He wasn’t who I thought he was at all, and I sat stiffly on the couch, barely putting a word in with their light, easy banter.

“Thanks for helping me set this up,” she said with delight. “It’s something I always did growing up with my dad but I could never figure out how to set this complicated track up.”

Indi had lost her parents years ago and I realized with a jolt my dad had been making sure Indi got to recreate something meaningful to her.

“He would have been proud of you,” my father said. “You’re a clever girl. Barely needed my help at all. Now I’ll go find some batteries and let’s see how this old devil can run.”

Dad hurried out the door and I was left in the room with Indi.

She sat there cross-legged like an angel, her little belly poking out that I would have died to be able to touch, her long auburn hair tied up so that little curls escaped all over her face.

Never once had I ever done anything but brush her off when she opened the paper to the astrology section. Or asked her about the boxes of model train sets in our attic.

“Indi—” I began, then stopped.

My throat closed up as I realized the most embarrassing tears were starting to prickle at my eyes.

“I am so sorry for everything. I see now that I was a pretty damn bad husband and I don’t know how you put up with me so long. I did everything wrong. Please, I want to start over.”

“I am carrying another man’s baby,” she said sharply.

Awkwardly, I slid off the couch and beside her on the ground.

“I don’t care. Indi, please—” then my voice broke, cracking horribly and to my horror I began to cry, and nothing else was able to come out.

She merely looked at me, arms crossed over her chest.

“Ambrose, we were only ever sex,” she said sharply. “It was nothing else. We had nothing in common besides fucking. You got bored and cheated on me, the end.”

“No, it was more than that,” I said desperately. “Just let me prove it to you! I love you, from the moment I saw you—”

“Even if I forgave you, I don’t see what you have to offer me,” Indi said. “I’m not in the market for selfishness and arrogance.”

“I want to do better—” I cried eagerly, but my dad was coming through the door with the batteries and she was already turning away from me.

The train ran like a dream, even puffing out little plumes of smoke, and Indi clapped and laughed, her face lit up and I was so intensely jealous of anything and anyone that made her look like that.

When we got back to my house, I turned to my father. This was step one in my crow-eating tour.

“Dad,” I said. “I’m sorry for how I’ve treated you. I haven’t been very fair to you at all. I want to apologize to you for that and make it up somehow.”

He looked surprised, patting down his flyaway hairs and bringing out a tiny comb to run through his moustache.

I resisted my urge to lecture, bulldoze, insist. I just waited.

“You surprise me, son,” Dad said slowly, and I felt like such a godsdamn worm. “There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“Yes, Dad, there is,” I said, fighting my emotions again. “I want to be a better son to you. Would you like to do something together?”

He tucked the comb back in his pocket. “Well, now, I have been hankering for a real good game of Risk. And you know your mother doesn’t allow board games in the home because the colors clash with the decor.”

Spending hours over a tiny board moving pieces around and trying to capture Norway with my back cramping did not sound like a fun time, but instead of doing what I always did, I stifled my initial impulse and sat down with him.

I was 45 years old and it was time to stop being such a fuck-up.

The next morning, Astrid burst into the bathroom at around 9 am as I was shaving.

My now ex-fiancée had been strangely affectionate lately, which I hadn’t even noticed because I was too busy thinking about how to win Indi back. It consumed all of my waking moments.

“Get dressed, Ambrose!” she shrieked. “The baby shower is in 10 minutes and guests are already arriving!”

“But—” I said, glancing down at my phone to make sure. The days had all run together but surely I hadn’t forgotten that.

“Today is Indi’s baby shower,” I reminded her. “Not yours. Yours is on Friday.”

“I changed it,” she said.

There was a smear of lipstick on her teeth, as she smiled so widely I could see every one of her teeth and a gold filling shining at the back.

“After all, you wouldn’t want that little slut getting all the attention, would you? Now get down here.”

Indi

As I stuffed the incriminating letter back in Ambrose and Astrid's recycling bin, my mind was whirling.

Astrid had gone to a sperm bank.

Her baby wasn't Ambrose's at all.

This news was so insane I couldn't think about anything else. There was Ambrose all excited to be a father, but he didn't know his balls were largely empty and his baby was another man's.

For some reason, I didn't tell Finn about it as the weeks went by.

I wasn't sure exactly why. Why did I feel a little. . . protective of my stuffy old ex?

What should I do? What exactly was my responsibility here? Unless I went digging in their garbage again, I didn't have any proof.

The day of my baby shower dawned bright and sunny, a perfect fall day for our low-key gathering.

I opened my window to breathe in the fresh air, only to hear the disharmonious sounds of my ex-husband and his now ex-fiancée yelling at each other.

Ambrose was not the kind of man who yelled, so I wondered what had gotten him so

heated under the collar, but all I heard was his very angry, “ don’t call her that ever again ” before I banged the window shut again.

I wasn’t going to let him or Astrid ruin my baby’s big day!

However, I should have known there was bullshit afoot.

Somehow, I shouldn’t have been surprised when visitors began to stream into Astrid and Ambrose’s front yard, first Millicent and all of her horrible rich asshole friends in their Rolls-Royces, then Astrid’s friends from Pilates class, and Ambrose’s coworkers.

The hell ?

She had changed the date of her party to be the same day as mine, but starting an hour before, and before long all her guests had taken up the street parking and there was an enormous catering truck from Pumpernickel Princess Palace blocking my driveway.

The sound of a hired string quartet began to stream out of their spacious three-story, as Astrid’s guests gathered on the lawn.

Astrid was so jealous she couldn’t bear to let anyone else have any attention. Her party would always have to be the biggest, most luxurious, and most expensive.

But I had something they didn’t. And for once I decided to put aside my principles and be a little bit petty.

“Finn, do you want to come out here?” I asked, as innocently as I could, as he pulled a tight white collared shirt on and began to do up his cuffs.

“Sure, babe,” he said, rolling his sleeves up instead so his powerful forearms were

visible, muscles flexing at his throat and wrists.

I led the way outside, Finn following me.

I knew he looked and smelled absolutely sinful, tall and built, like a dark Irish sex god, his hair wet from the shower and that absolutely criminally sexy aftershave.

But of course, I couldn't help it that my baby daddy was this sexy, and if Astrid hadn't moved her shower to the same day as mine, Finn wouldn't have walked out at the exact moment Ambrose and Astrid were about to do their gender reveal.

Astrid was preening herself on being the center of attention, and she was just counting down to zero, holding one of those little exploding cannons that would burst out either pink or blue confetti.

Ambrose was standing beside her in a dove-gray suit. He was looking like something a cat would drag in these days—drawn face, haunted eyes, big dark circles under them.

I had never seen him look so knocked off his balance, off that kingly pedestal he had always seemed permanently affixed on.

But even if I could forgive what he had done, I didn't think I could ever forget the sound of his voice, rough and gravelly, saying "You want a baby in this belly?"

Nope, couldn't forget that.

"3. . . " Astrid said, her jaw practically unhinging with how widely she smiled as she looked around at her audience.

Boy, she was really counting on this being a success.

But a few women had already started to look around at Finn, to grab their neighbors and start to whisper.

I tried to ignore how Ambrose was looking at me, a dark burning spark in his eyes, that something raw and untamed in him that he always tried to tamp down. . .

“2. . .” Astrid said, her eyes widening as she spotted Finn, and her grin was more maniacal than ever, as I saw her literally wiggling with lust to try and push her tits up higher in her gold maternity dress.

“Is breá liom tú ,” Finn rumbled in my ear, and I didn’t know very much of the Irish language, but of course that meant I love you , and I smiled, but at his rumbly deep voice, even more people turned around, their eyes practically making big goo-goo hearts at Finn, and by the time Astrid said,

“1 and go. . .”

Her entire audience except for my former mother-in-law Millicent had turned around to gawk at Finn standing in my lawn, raking a hand through his hair as his shirt popped up a bit, exposing tanned skin and all those ripping side and back muscles.

Still staring at Finn, Astrid shook up the cannon vigorously and shot it out, all the blue confetti exploding directly into Ambrose’s face.

POW

“It’s a boy!” my ex said, choking on the millions of pieces of paper and spitting them all out one by one, but he was the only one to say anything. Even Astrid was looking jealously at Finn as he pulled the grill out and began to get our BBQ started.

“Honey, don't you think you ought to call the police about all that smoke?” Millicent

asked shrilly. “Surely that’s illegal!”

But Ambrose shook his head. “Afternoon BBQs are permitted under the HOA guidelines.”

“It sure smells good,” Harold said, waving cheerfully at us, and some of Ambrose’s guests began to reluctantly turn back, wiping their drooling mouths.

But that didn’t last too long, as Astrid had unfortunately gone with a very diet-friendly platter my former MIL had suggested, very heavy on the wheatgrass and pumpernickel bread, and the lure of Finn’s BBQ was simply too much to resist.

“There’s plenty for everyone!” Finn called, and soon all Ambrose and Astrid’s guests had trickled over shamefacedly to our side of the fence, where Finn gave Harold a can of beer for each hand, and then Dr. González was offering to make some guacamole and chicken dip and Finn was turning up the music and there was no one left on the other side but a furiously glaring Millicent and Astrid, and Ambrose bending over trying to pick up all the confetti.

Our yard was still rocking with dancing and drinks hours later when I walked up to the fence.

“Congratulations on the boy,” I told Ambrose, who was sitting putting the cards for their new baby in a scrapbook.

His eyes looked haunted and miserable.

“Thank you,” he said, swallowing so hard his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. “And, of—course, I’m sorry that what I did with Astrid caused you pain. I regret that more than anything in the world.”

“I’m not in pain,” I said cheerfully.

His smile was twisted as he looked at me. “I know you aren’t. But I am, though. You’re beautiful, smart, and kind. Everyone wants you. But me? I can’t move on. I thought I could, but I can’t. I’d only be deluding myself.”

I didn’t know what to say for a moment, and then Astrid was there, looking like a jump scare with her eyes all wide and her hair sticking out in all directions. The day had not improved her temper.

“I’ll get even with you for this,” she hissed.

I rolled my eyes. “You slept with my husband and now you’re complaining because it didn’t go the way you wanted. Instead of me pining away next door, I’m happy and thriving. Get over yourself, Astrid.”

She gasped, but it was so true that her face turned an unpleasant beet-red, and she opened her mouth, inflating her lungs so her words would carry all down the street.

“Indi and Finn are having A BABY GIRL!” Astrid screeched. “They didn’t want to find out but I bribed a nurse at her office! So that’s your surprise ruined.”

There was a moment of stunned silence and I heard Harold tut disapprovingly.

“Bitch,” Finn said with loathing as Astrid crossed her arms and stuck up her bottom lip at me.

For a moment she looked like a cat in cream, but Astrid didn’t get a chance to smugly enjoy her triumph when Finn said,

“I married you for your money. So you might as well quit fucking trying to get back

together since I never loved you in the first place.”

There were gasps of horror all over the yard, someone helpfully turning the radio all the way down so all the guests could hear every word of her humiliation.

“No no no no no, it can’t be true,” Astrid begged, clutching at Finn’s shirt. “Take it back, take it back !”

“Astrid, you are only embarrassing yourself!” Ambrose said sternly, prying her fingers off his shirt one by one. “Stop this.”

But Astrid did not appreciate his advice.

“And you?” she spat with loathing. “You’ve got like no sperm.”

There was stunned silence in the crowd, everyone struck completely dead silent at this news.

Ambrose didn't look particularly concerned.

“Don’t be ridiculous. How did you get pregnant then?”

“I went to a sperm bank!” she shot at him, trying to shake him off. “The one off Fifth Street. Went and carefully selected a peak physical specimen. Couldn’t wait forever trying to wring some sperm out of your balls.”

“Why, that’s the one I go to!” Harold cried out jovially. “Lovely waiting area. They even give you a free cup of coffee afterwards.”

“Holy fucking hell and bollocks,” Finn rumbled Irishly in my ear and I clutched the fence in shock.

“Harold!” Millicent snapped, enunciating each word with awful, crystal-clear clarity. “Are. You. Telling. Me. You. Have. Been. Donating. EJACULATED MATERIAL to a sperm bank?”

“Just on Tuesdays,” he chirruped, the two beers Finn had given him clearly empowering him beyond anything I had seen in my life.

“Oh my god,” Finn said. “Is— Harold your baby daddy?”

“But—but, it’s not possible!” Astrid cried heatedly, looking pale. “I chose my sperm donor profile very carefully and, I can assure you, I would not have chosen a profile anything like him .”

“What did the profile say?” Finn asked.

“Powerful CEO—” Astrid began.

“I did put that,” Harold said, almost apologetically. “I did own my own company before I retired, you know. I’m rather proud of that.”

Ambrose was looking green about the gills, but Astrid went on.

“Piercing blue eyes—”

“That could also have been mine,” Harold said.

He pushed his spectacles up and opened his eyes as wide as he could.

“My eyes are very blue. Some people have even said they are lovely, but I don’t know about that . I’m a modest man, really. But perhaps I did say piercing.”

“The description said fit and in the prime of his life,” Astrid said, desperately now, her eyes starting to look wildly about the yard as if there was another option.

“I put that as well,” Harold said proudly. “Life doesn’t end at 70, y’know. Why in some ways I feel as young as any buck of 55.”

Astrid screamed.

“Am I to believe your fiancée is carrying my husband’s child?” Millicent cried to Ambrose, brandishing her parasol like she was going to spear her husband. “Harold, of all the worthless imbeciles in this world, you are the most—”

“Mother, that’s enough!” Ambrose said sternly.

She looked as if she’d been popped in the mouth.

“Ambrose, you— dare to talk to me in that manner?”

“ Silence , Mother. This is your fault for being so hard on him that he felt he needed to sell his sperm to get any money of his own. I hope this is a lesson to you in the future.”

Millicent’s mouth opened and closed, and for once, I noted with satisfaction, she had nothing to say.

“I don't want this baby!” Astrid wailed. “I don't want to give birth to your little brother. My god. I’m suing that sperm bank. This is false advertising. After I give birth, you’re up, Ambrose. It’ll all be on you. I’m out.”

At this juncture, I deemed it prudent to break up the party, and after our wide-eyed guests had left, Finn and I went inside.

He made me a hot tea and we settled down on the sofa. I rubbed my belly, feeling unsettled.

Finn pulled me into his arms, still laughing at the events of the afternoon. “You think Ambrose would really raise a baby that wasn’t his?”

I chewed my lip.

“Yes,” I said slowly. “I think he would. He has always wanted kids. He will feel responsible for the baby. I think he’ll want to raise him. It doesn’t sound like Astrid has any interest now.”

Finn laughed heartily.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, feeling a bit annoyed.

I myself felt raw inside, a little upset. It wasn’t my baby. Or anything to do with me. But my heart hurt thinking of what Astrid had said and what Ambrose must be feeling.

“Just the thought of Ambrose raising a baby that isn’t his, doing all this work, and—not even his! His father’s virile sperm instead! You really think he’ll raise his baby brother?”

“Yes,” I said after a moment, “I think he will.”

Finn wanted to talk about it more, was definitely not done laughing until the tears streamed down his face, but I felt pensive.

The next morning, Finn’s limo driver had just arrived to take him to the airport when I got a text from Harold.

“Astrid’s gone into labor,” I told Finn.

”Well, that’s my cue to go,” my baby daddy said regretfully.

“Text me and tell me all about it, baby girl. I’m off to Las Vegas to start my next tour.

But I’ll do my damndest to get back for our baby’s birth.

And just say the word, a chroí, and I’ll hire a whole army of midwives to be there in case I can’t make it back in time. ”

He looked so glum at having to leave that after I had kissed him goodbye, I elbowed him affectionately and tried to make a joke.

“Remember, you’re a free man. Now you can get pussy-deep in some groupies.”

He sighed.

“I’m feeling very depressed that you won’t marry me, angel. I don’t do that groupie shit anymore. I used to, when I was first starting out and. . .it was a mistake. A long time ago, before I met Astrid, I lost some. . .pretty important things just fucking any pussy I saw so it’s soured me on that.”

He raked a hand through his hair but tried to smile at me.

“When I’m depressed I can get a little reckless at the gambling table. I’ve made an account for you and the baby and put \$20 million in it.”

“20 million? Finn, you didn’t have to—”

“Just to make sure I don’t gamble it away, lassie.”

“Finn, be careful,” I warned, almost in tears at his generosity, “Astrid is getting, in her words, desperate to impress you . Just be careful.”

“I will,” I said, and I watched him drive away, spotting that dark flash of his hair out the window as the limo went down the road.

I had just put my long hair up in a bun and sat down to the table to plan my day when the phone rang.

“Yes?” I asked.

“It’s the Orchard Grove Hospital,” a clipped professional voice said. “I have you listed as Ambrose Hargreaves’ emergency contact?”

“We are divorced,” I said in exasperation. “I shouldn’t still be on those forms.”

“Ma’am, you are still listed as his emergency contact and I’m going to need you to come down to the hospital.”

Ambrose

“ N o, no,” I insisted, waving the nurse away and attempting to sit up. “I have to be there to see the birth.”

The room spun around me as I clutched my head.

Across the room, Astrid was deep in the throes of labor, and I was doing my best to keep up. It was very important to me that I was there for my. . . new half-brother.

My stomach roiled with nausea and I turned over, heaving into the trash can.

I wasn't going to be a father at all. At the age of 45, I was finally going to be a big brother.

The nurse was a stern, no nonsense woman, and she looked at me like I was the most useless kind of person in existence, and I could not really blame her.

So you are the kind of high maintenance baby daddy who demands all this attention during labor , her glare said clearly, even though I desperately did not want to be.

“I have to be there,” I insisted, attempting to get up from the chair.

Perhaps if I did not look directly at Astrid and stayed up by her head, reminding her of various birth mantras.

After all, it seemed awfully wrong that this baby was going to come into the world

with no one there to care for him but me.

Astrid had made it very clear she did not want her son.

Maybe she would change her mind once she saw him?

But otherwise she had made it very clear that I was going to be doing 100% of the care.

I stumbled toward the bed and Astrid let out a full-body scream when she saw me.

“Get him out of here!” Astrid shrieked. “He’s in love with his ex-wife!”

They all looked at me as if I was even more of a worm.

“We’re going to break your water now,” the doctor said, and I found myself fainting dead away again, and as I floated dreamlike, I remembered.

I remembered the day it had happened.

“Monogamy is such an unnatural construct,” Astrid said, her breast brushing past my arm as we worked through a stack of recently-acquired documents together in the library.

Since she specialized in anthropology and I specialized in archeology, our departments worked very closely together.

I should have cut it off then and there.

She’d been flirting with me for months. But women often flirted with me and I never thought much of it.

But the problem this time was I didn't stop it.

I didn't remind her that I was happily married, that I loved my wife more than anything. That I wasn't the type to cheat.

The type to cheat was a sleazebag, some grungy kind of fellow with a golden chain and a name like 'Vinny.'

Not a man like me. And so I teased her back and didn't think I was in danger.

Of making the stupidest and most sleazebag mistake of my life.

"The high status men in old Germanic tribes had multiple women," Astrid said.

I knew she was attempting to seduce me, but at the moment, I didn't care. I didn't think I was at risk.

She was a beautiful, intelligent woman and it was a flattering distraction that she was so interested in me.

Now, naturally, I still loved Indi, but everything with her had been so tense and stressful lately.

She was due to take a pregnancy test again, and I felt like I couldn't take another failed test.

I couldn't shake the feeling that somehow I was doing something wrong. I could not fathom what it could be. I had read all of the books. I was a supreme physical specimen. My sperm count was exemplary. I ate healthy, I exercised. I was planning to run a marathon.

But somehow, month after month, failure.

It was like a test I kept failing and I didn't know why.

And I wanted, so badly, to not think about tests, vitamins, Indi's face pinched with worry, my craven gut-deep fear that I wasn't doing something right. . .

My body shook as I dreamed, as if I could prevent what had happened, stop myself from going over to Astrid's after work, knowing full well that if I went over there just for a drink that I was feeling so desperate for distraction that I'd linger, that I wouldn't move away when she stepped up to me, that I wouldn't stop her when she kissed me. . .

When I came to again, I was sprawled on a couch in the waiting room covered in a tissue paper like blanket, and my ex-wife was looking down at me, tapping her toe impatiently.

"Is there something I can help you with, Ambrose?" Indi asked.

God, she looked beautiful, that big belly bump popping out in front of her, the lovely auburn curls spilling down her back. I wanted to sit up and watch her waddle up and down the hallway and just worship her.

"What do you mean help me?" I asked weakly. Being found limp on a hospital couch was hardly the way I had dreamed of spending time with Indi.

"The hospital called me. You still have me listed as your emergency contact. Why haven't you updated that?"

My throat felt sandpapery, but I knew perhaps it was time to come clean about my insecurities, even though it was a deeply humiliating process.

“Denial,” I said, “Ever since we got divorced I’ve been in denial it was real. I guess I hoped. I hoped that somehow, if I didn’t change that, it would make it not real, and we could still get back together.”

She stared at me and then asked, “What did they call me in here for? What’s wrong?”

“I kept fainting,” I said, jealously thinking that Finn would never have fainted, probably grew up birthing calves and lambs out in the Irish countryside and would be shoving the doctor aside to deliver Indi’s baby himself.

“You fainted?” Indi asked.

“I fainted.”

Without another word, she left the room. I sat up, attempting to wipe the drool from my mouth, contemplating my miserable life decisions.

When she came back, she was holding out a can of ginger ale.

“Drink this,” she said, “It always helps you when you’re feeling nauseated or dizzy.”

I stared at the can. Indi was so sweet. She was the sweetest woman in the world. Why hadn’t I thought of that?

“Thank you,” I said inadequately.

“Goodbye, Ambrose,” she said. “Just sit down with your head between your legs if you feel faint again.”

When I made my way back to the delivery room, my new brother was in a bassinet beside Astrid and she was crossing her arms and ordering room service.

“There you are,” she said. “Well, it’s your turn now.”

“Do you--feel any differently?” I asked, walking carefully up to where the tiny baby was swaddled in a colorful blanket, a knit yellow cap on his head. “He’s pretty cute. We could still co-parent.”

“Nope,” Astrid said. “I don’t want anything to do with any member of your family and I still plan to sue the sperm bank for loading me up with your father’s sperm. Masterful CEO type, indeed!”

I sat down beside the bassinet and watched him sleep.

The hours, maybe even days, blurred together as the nurses came in frequently to check on him and prepare bottles of milk.

Then, as I napped fitfully in the chair, I woke up with a jolt to a paper cut on my throat.

When I jerked upright in surprise, my fingers closed over a crisp piece of paper.

Well, it was official.

Astrid had signed over all parental rights to me and was nowhere to be found.

There was a tiny cry from the bassinet, and I saw the baby’s mouth open wide, his tiny fists suddenly flailing about and his whole face turning red.

Hurrying over, I started to sweat realizing I had never held a baby in my life, but I carefully picked up the burrito-shaped child and held him in my arms.

To my surprise, he seemed to like getting bounced gently up and down, and he liked

even more the bottle of milk a nurse prepped for him.

I held the bottle with terrified fingers and I watched him drink.

My throat closed up as I remembered how Indi and I had looked forward to doing this together. But now she was having a baby with the world's most hypnotic Irishman and I was here holding my half-brother.

All my friends and coworkers would tell me to put him up for adoption. My mother had said she wanted no part of it.

They would say

Not your baby

Not your responsibility

Hell no

But I looked at my baby brother, the way his eyes were so blue, the way his fist was incredibly tiny.

I was a complete fuck-up, I had done so many fucked-up things.

I had lost the love of my life by being a pompous windbag convinced I could do no wrong.

But by god I was going to do better.

This baby was my responsibility and that's all there was to it.

But as I got him ready to go, I faced the unpleasant truth that I no longer had a vehicle here.

I called my mother.

“Can you come to the hospital and pick us up? Astrid’s taken the car somewhere and it had the carseat in it.”

“Who is us ?” she asked. “You and your degenerate father?”

“No,” I said, “Me and the baby.”

“The baby ? The one your own father sired? Why’s it still around?”

“Mother, it’s not the baby’s fault,” I said sharply. “And I will expect you not to ever say anything to make him think he is less than wanted and loved. It’s not his fault all this shit happened. He’s just a baby who needs us.”

“Who is this us?” she asked. “Count me out of this ‘us.’ You may not bring that thing over to visit me. Now give it to someone who can waste time raising it and come visit your Mother.”

I was stunned by the evidence of her cruelty and in the moment I couldn’t speak she hung up the phone.

How could she be so wrong about this? It was like getting a rug pulled out from under me.

And then something was wrong with my card so I couldn’t even call an Uber.

I had to beg a ride from my ex-wife.

“Of course you came,” I said, feeling fucking shredded and frazzled as fuck and I’d only been this child’s official guardian for a few hours. “You’re an angel, Indi. I never deserved you.”

I thought she might rub it in my face, but instead she said, “I have two carseats so you can have the extra for now.”

Then we arranged my brother in the backseat and I climbed in after him to make sure he was ok on the ride home.

I was surprised to feel Indi’s eyes on me in the rearview mirror.

“Are you going to keep him?” she asked.

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I looked down, my finger trapped in the baby's grip, adjusting his little hat so his ears wouldn't be cold.

"Yes, I am. It's not his fault."

I glanced up, but she flicked her eyes quickly away so I couldn't see the expression in them.

"What are you going to name him?" Indi asked after a moment.

"Well," I said. "I know I—we—really liked the name Julian, but I don't want to take that one if you're planning to save it for another baby. In the future."

There was a big lump in my throat at the idea of Indi and Finn having another baby together.

Would they get married? I knew Finn wanted to, of course he'd want to.

Anyone would be lucky to have Indi. It took a special kind of asshole to have her and then throw away the relationship with a stupid mistake.

"No," she said lightly. "I think Julian suits him. I think you chose well."

Julian . It did suit him. I could already tell he was a regal child.

As we neared home, Indi asked a question I had never expected.

“Why did I hear you doing fucking breeding dirty talk with Astrid? If I could ever forgive you, I couldn’t forgive that. When we were in the middle of dealing with infertility and trying to get pregnant.”

“The truth is so goddamn embarrassing!” I said. “It would ruin your view of me as a supremely virile man,” I added, feeling like as banter went it wasn’t my best.

“Ambrose, I have Finn for anytime I’m craving someone overflowing with virility. I want the truth from you.”

Sighing, I closed my eyes and remembered the day.

“It doesn’t usually do that,” I said, my cheeks flaming as I looked down at my flaccid cock with a mixture of fury and bafflement.

“How long do we have?” Astrid asked, pulling down her shirt and twiddling her nipples.

They weren’t quite as exciting as I had imagined. Just breasts really. Maybe it had been more about the idea of something forbidden, because now that I was actually doing something forbidden, I felt a bit ill.

“Maybe an hour until Indi gets home,” I said.

“Let’s make this quick then,” Astrid said, ripping her skirt up and showing me her lacy thong.

But my penis did not seem inclined to be quick.

Astrid dropped to her knees between my thighs and applied her wet mouth to my cock, leaving exciting red lipstick marks all over it.

But my cock did not seem to want to go .

This was really embarrassing. Indi and I had had voracious sex ever since the day we met, and I had never once had a problem getting it up for her.

In fact, until the last several months when trying to conceive had become so stressful, I'd never had a problem going multiple times a day.

And just the thought of our honeymoon in Bali was enough to get my cock twitching.

In fact, it was twitching now.

I looked down in surprise to see it beginning to stand up like a soldier in Astrid's mouth.

"Yes, Daddy," she breathed, scrambling up and onto my lap, wrinkling my nice tweed jacket but I couldn't think about that now.

I was not into Daddy kink whatsoever. What was I supposed to say to that?

Luckily Astrid did not seem to expect an answer as she ripped out a condom and sunk down on my mostly-hard cock.

I gripped her hips and tried to enjoy the thrill of a dangerous liaison.

But she didn't make the same sounds as Indi or move the same way as Indi. She didn't feel like my wife, and the way she kept licking directly inside my ear was very distracting.

What kind of loser was I to be thinking of my wife while I was supposed to be having a hot dirty fuck with my coworker in the backyard?

This was a mistake

After this, I was going to tell Astrid it was a one-time thing, go take a shower, and spend the rest of the decade making it up to my wife.

Oh, shit, my cock was drooping now.

If I closed my eyes, it would come back up. If I thought about how Indi looked, how she smelled.

The carpal tunnel was really getting to me as Astrid finally came, bouncing up and down on my dick.

I didn't think I was going to come so I was going to have to fake it.

I screwed my eyes shut and thought of the hottest thing I had ever said to my wife so I could at least stay hard to get this over with.

“Ready for me to fill you with my cum?” I growled. “You want a baby in this belly?”

And that’s when I heard her scream. . .

When I had finished telling Indi, I sat with my head bowed, thinking I had totally ruined any potential second chance with her.

“Christ, you’re a dumbass, Ambrose,” she said disapprovingly.

“I know,” I said. “Not only is it the single stupidest thing I’ve ever done, but now you know it wasn’t even hot and I had to think of you the entire time just to keep my dick up. And it was only pride that kept me from crawling back to you before.”

“I can’t think about this right now,” was all she said. “I’ll come in and help you make sure Julian gets settled in your place.”

But when we arrived in Applewood and drove down our pretty lane with the leaves all bright with red, yellow, and orange fall colors, my house was on fire.

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Indi

Bright orange flames shot from Ambrose and Astrid's lovely three-story house with the wraparound porch.

Holy hell

I had assumed she'd be chasing after Finn in Vegas, but instantly I recognized this as Astrid's feral little ferret brain at work. And she was nowhere to be seen.

"Take Julian into your yard. Keep him safe. Please," Ambrose said through gritted teeth, and I felt my stomach do a flip-flop as I obeyed, yanking my keys out and going around to the back seat to carefully unbuckle and cradle the sleeping newborn in my arms.

Once he made sure we were safely on my front porch, Ambrose took off into the backyard of his home.

"Dad? Dad?" he called out, and my heart sunk.

No no no

I waddled into my backyard, watching as the scarlet sparks rained down on my ex-husband. He pounded loudly on each window, calling out for Harold.

But there was no answer.

“Dad? Dad? Fuck!”

I saw Ambrose rattling madly at the back door, but it was locked.

“Dad, wake up!”

Shit

Through the flames, I saw the shape of Harold clearly outlined in the living room window, lying on the couch taking an afternoon nap.

“Be careful!” I cried. “I think the roof is going to cave in!”

“I have to get him!” he roared back.

Ambrose had always been as stubborn as a mule, and he stayed there despite the falling sparks lighting up his collared shirt, the ash that blew through his hair.

There was a crash from one of the upper floors. The ceiling supports were starting to crumble.

I saw him glance around on the ground, then grab one of the heavy decorative rocks that lined the garden walkway, ripping through his silk sleeve and wrapping the cloth around his hand.

Then he smashed through the glass panels of the door and and ripped it open.

I shrieked as one of the second-floor windows imploded, holding my hands over baby Julian’s ears so he wouldn’t hear the terrifying sounds of the building collapsing.

A firetruck siren sounded in the distance, getting closer.

My heart was pounding so hard I was afraid I was going to faint, and then Ambrose burst out the door, his father's unconscious body slung over his shoulders.

My god

My ex-husband's face was sooty and slick, his glasses broken, and his shirt was in tatters, blood running down his wrist where the glass had cut his arm.

"Indi, get back!" he called sharply, and I saw his eyes flare at me as he stalked across the yard.

Goddamn, I hated , definitely hated when he used that bossy domineering tone with me. I was very safe all the way over here in my own yard.

But I retreated back even further until I was on my front step.

Ambrose jogged with his father across the yard and then over the fence just as the roof collapsed.

Julian was still asleep like an angel on me as Ambrose laid Harold out carefully on a soft patch of my grass.

"Dad, Dad!" Ambrose cried, his voice breaking as he loosened his father's collar and began to pat his cheeks vigorously. "Wake up, Dad! Please—God, please be OK!"

I felt my heart give a ridiculous lurch inside me as the firetrucks swung into the driveway.

"I can't feel a pulse, Indi!" Ambrose cried, and he looked up at me with such haunted eyes, his face looking like skin scraped over a skull.

And of course, immediately Harold popped up like a rabbit out of a hat asking, “What’s wrong? What’s all this? Can’t an old man take a nap in peace?”

Ambrose’s shoulders slumped and he gripped his father in a tight hug.

“I thought for a minute we’d lost you. Fuck! I—love you, Dad.”

Harold looked over at me, bewildered but patting Ambrose on the shoulder.

“I love you too, son. Er, sons?”

“Looks like someone tried to burn down the house while you were still in it,” I put in.

“Well, that explains that strange gasoline smell I noticed while I was doing my crossword puzzle on the couch,” Harold said.

“I saw Astrid out there with a gas can. I didn’t think much of it at the time.

I don’t understand women very well, thought it was some new TikTok thing.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have gone to sleep.”

“Perhaps not !” Ambrose groaned. “You’re going to give me a heart attack .”

And not only had Astrid burned her whole house down, but she’d apparently emptied out Ambrose’s checking account as well.

“You can stay with me for a few weeks,” I said after the firefighters had put out the fire and all that was left was a pile of smoking rubble. “Until you find a new place and can get your money back.”

“I—” he began.

“There’s more than enough room for you and Julian and Harold,” I said.

My ex-father-in-law looked up from where he was patting the little bear ears of Julian’s little fleecy jumpsuit.

“I think I’ll camp out in the backyard. I’ve always wanted to go camping but Millicent said it was not for people in our tax bracket.”

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you want,” I told Harold. “You disreputable old bastard.”

He grinned at me. “I’m feeling quite young again. There’s so many things I want to do in my retirement that I haven’t gotten to yet. Like buy a farm out in the country and raise chickens. And it’s not looking like Millicent is going to forgive me.”

Never had a man been so happy at the prospect of being divorced.

Once we had been advised to contact the police if we saw Astrid, we all went inside and I ordered a massive amount of veggie sushi from the fanciest and nicest place in town.

“I’ll keep a record of what I owe you,” Ambrose said earnestly, his face smeared with grimy soot. “Hopefully I can get this situation straightened out with my bank soon.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I shrugged. “Finn is filthy rich. I have way more money than I know what to do with.”

I saw him swallow hard and nod at me.

“When you talk to him tell—him that I appreciate you letting me stay here.”

“Finn and I aren’t together,” I said, a bit more sharply than I expected. “I can do what I want.”

“But he’d do anything to keep you,” Ambrose said. “I know the feeling.”

I turned away. I wasn’t going to give him any hope, but there were tears in my eyes that I didn’t know how to explain.

As each week of my pregnancy progressed, I grew rounder and rounder, and my baby more and more active in my belly, thumping my bladder with vigorous karate kicks and jabs. My feet had not been seen in some time.

There was no word from Astrid. The police had not been able to find her.

Now there were a few things always true about my ex-husband. He was stubborn, earnest, and a hard worker. He had the semester off now that Julian was born, and he never once asked me for help.

He did all his laundry, the baby’s laundry, and even my laundry. He changed every diaper, made every bottle, was up with Julian’s slightest cry.

When I offered to help, he handed Julian to me and told me to just kick up my feet and relax and snuggle the baby while he ran loads of laundry, vacuumed, or braised pork chops.

And I had to reluctantly note that Ambrose had been serious about turning over a new leaf. He had completely changed in how he treated his father. Instead of contempt or disdain, he now treated Harold with kindness and respect, was interested in his father’s opinion and hobbies.

Harold was very happy to hold baby Julian and discuss the crossword puzzle with him, but said if Ambrose were to take over the more active parts of parenting his little brother, it would be ideal for his own hip replacement.

Unfortunately, the longer I was in a confined space with Ambrose the more a certain problem appeared. It surely meant nothing. It was just that how good he was at domestic work and how loving he was with his little brother did not mix well with third trimester hormones.

And I was crawling with third trimester hormones.

I resisted them when Ambrose insisted on doing a full Sagittarius star chart.

I resisted them when Ambrose came with me to get the winter herb seeds for my garden.

But I was crawling with hormones.

What was wrong with me?

After all, I was supposed to be considering Finn's offer. Finn was everything every woman would want—movie star good looks, talented, filthy rich, massive muscles, heavily tattooed, those forearms, devoted to me, that accent.

So why was I sat here on the couch at 10:30 pm trying to watch a movie and ignore Ambrose mixing up formula for baby bottles in his sweatpants?

There had always been some particularly unholy attraction to Ambrose in sweatpants and a T-shirt, like seeing him out of his starched-up proper clothes just reminded me of that coiled passion underneath his proper exterior.

I glanced over as he bent down to empty the dishwasher, his long stronger fingers moving deftly to stack bowls and plates, swipe a few clean bottles.

There was a muscle that flexed in his broad shoulders, and I couldn't help the way my eyes dragged down the V-shape of his back to the way his sweatpants sat low-slung on his hips.

What was wrong with me?

I was not sat here carnally desiring my cheating ex-husband!

It took me a while to get to sleep, and then when I finally did I had to wake up again in an hour to pee. After stumbling to the bathroom, I heard Julian start to wake up.

Half-asleep, I stumbled down the hall and into his room, thinking only that I'd help Ambrose for once since I was already awake.

As I opened the door, I collided with my ex, Ambrose's arms going out to steady me, his fingers sliding under my thin tank top to keep me from stumbling.

I gasped at the contact. I was barely wearing anything—only a thin little tank top and boy shorts to sleep, and his touch seemed to make my already overheated skin burn, my nipples suddenly hardening so fast I felt the tips of them sting. Was I starting to produce milk already?

I was breathless suddenly, and Ambrose gripped under my hair.

“You ok?” he asked. “Fuck, didn't see you there.”

His voice was rough with sleep.

“I’m fine,” I gasped, trying to make my pounding heart relax. “I can rock Julian to sleep if you want. Since I’m up already.”

“Of course,” Ambrose said. “Let me grab his bottle.”

I sat in the chair and fed Julian. He was getting big, strong, his tiny newborn arms filling out with plump rolls.

He was a loved baby.

Julian snuggled in and fell asleep in my arms.

I looked over and saw that my ex-husband was crying on the bed, his head buried in his hands.

“It’s fine,” I said. “You know I’m over it, right? You don’t have to worry that you’re hurting me. Or about what happened.”

“It’s just—” Ambrose said, his voice shaky, and then he choked and had to start again. “It’s just that—seeing you with a baby— it’s everything that I had ever—have ever dreamed of.”

“Ambrose—” I began, but I didn’t know what to say.

“And all along, it was me. I was the reason that you couldn’t get pregnant right away. It was my fault. If it wasn’t for me, you would have had babies a long time ago. The whole time it was me.”

I felt my heart constrict so tightly I could barely breathe.

“It was no one’s fault,” I said firmly, “It doesn’t mean you can’t ever be a father in

the future.”

Ambrose shook his head.

“But I want to have a baby with you . You and me. Now I fucked everything up. And I don’t know how to unfuck it.”

“Yeah, you did fuck it up,” I said.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed it, but my mother has always sort of treated me like a prince. Perhaps that wasn’t ideal.”

“Hmm, I had noticed that,” I said neutrally.

He laughed and shook his head, trying to wipe his eyes on his T-shirt.

“You tried to tell me so many times I was full of it, in such a nice, sweet way too, but I was too stubborn to listen. I am so, so sorry for everything I did.”

His eyes met mine and I felt that old, familiar buzz begin to grow between us, as I saw that raw emotion in him.

But how could I go back? It was impossible, ridiculous to think we could ever build something new after obliterating what we had.

“Think nothing of it,” I said. “Think of us as friendly co-workers now. Or friendly co-habitaters now. Or whatever it’s called when your ex-husband lives in your home.”

I put Julian carefully on his back in the crib and Ambrose rose from the bed. Then I walked out the door, and for a moment, just a moment, Ambrose held my arm, his breathing fast, passionate, my back tingling as I felt him behind me.

“I love you,” he said in a low tone, his breath rustling the hairs on the back of my neck. “Desperately. Madly. Give me another chance. Please .”

“Goodnight, friend,” I said sternly, pulling my arm gently away and heading down the hallway as quickly as I could at 39 weeks.

It was none of Ambrose’s business that I was horny.

And it was definitely none of his business that I didn’t feel merely friendly toward him.

But once back in my bed I could not go to sleep.

Once again, that same throbbing heat between my legs tortured me.

Twisting my body, I slipped fingers past the band of my panties.

But when I closed my eyes, I felt the ghost of Ambrose’s breath across my throat still. Felt the press of his fingers on mine.

Fuck

I decided to walk about in the garden a little bit. Maybe that would clear my head. Make me stop thinking about just fucking Ambrose, just a good old-fashioned fucking dirty fuck.

I could not stop thinking of the feel of his hands on me, how they had felt slipping under the band of my top.

I needed something to distract me from these insane third trimester hormones.

And just as I wandered into the front yard, two huge, bright beams of light shone on me, and I heard a loud, screechy voice say, “Oh, I see one of us was able to keep her figure. You’ve let yourself go, Indi.”

She revved her engine.

“Hello, Astrid,” I said.

Indi

“ I ’m still pregnant, dumbass,” I said, blinking in the sudden bright glare from Astrid’s headlights.

“What, are you eating for four?” she screeched. “Just wait until Finn sees you now.”

“He’d still want to fuck me and not you,” I said irritably. “Give it up, Astrid. You need to go. Surrender to the police. They're looking for you.”

I began to feel a little stab of fear as she revved her engine, her long red nails digging into the steering wheel.

“It’s a lie!” she cried.

Her car was blocking the exit and I was hemmed in by the hedge on the other side. Shit, I didn’t think I could make it out of the way of her peach Mercedes if she tried to pin me against the garage door.

“Give me Finn!” Astrid shrieked, drumming her hands on the wheel. “I’m sorrrrrrrry for having sex with your husband. I thought he was gonna be better. But you don’t have to punish me by taking away my DREAM MAN.”

“Finn doesn’t want you,” I retorted, trying to edge sideways, but with the size of my belly, I wasn’t built for edging.

“Oh, you’re not going to get away with this!” she cried, rolling the car forward so the

hood was only an inch from pinning my legs into the garage door.

“Stop!” I suddenly heard my ex-husband order, and then Ambrose was there, pouncing up on the hood of her Mercedes and grabbing hold of the windshield wipers, ripping them off in his hands.

Astrid’s Mercedes was her baby and clearly, this was the only thing that could have distracted her.

She backed up and gunned the car at Ambrose.

“You will pay for those, you brute! They cost \$500 apiece!”

She knocked the car painfully into his shins but Ambrose wasn’t even looking at her.

“Move, Indi,” he ordered, and once again, his commanding tone was not helping my revolting little secret arousal at his voice, making my knees feel weak and wobbly.

“I hate you so much!” Astrid shrieked. “What kind of man cheats on his wife and then goes crawling back to her? And you’re not getting away that easy, bitch!”

She spun the car back around to me as I tried to get out of the way but just as I started to move a huge Braxton-Hicks contraction tightened my belly painfully and I clutched it, wincing in pain.

Shit, too slow

Because Astrid was really gunning for me. Her face behind the twisted windshield wipers looked maniacal, her lipstick a crooked slash across her face.

But before she could touch me, Ambrose charged forward into the path of her car and

swung me completely out of the way, only a second or two before Astrid jerked the Mercedes forward.

The movement trapped his legs against my garage door, but I was laid down as soft as a pillow on the other side of the hedge as he was ground into the fender.

“Give it up!” Ambrose gritted out to her. “Everything I ever did with you was a mistake I wish I could take back!”

I cast madly about for a weapon, anything to distract her, but there was nothing.

“Let him go!”

“Indi, do not make me tell you twice!” Ambrose bit out again, his eyes flaming at me. “She’s fucking nuts! Get out of here!”

“God, you’re such a wound-up asshole!” I seethed, my hormones clawing at me like tiny knives down my skin. “Calm down! I’m not going to just leave and let you get flattened.”

Suddenly, there was a firm peppering sound like a lot of smallish rocks hitting her windshield, and Astrid shrieked in horror.

“What—who the fuck? This is a \$35,000 windshield!”

There was another spray of rocks, more this time, splattering across the glass and gouging little chunks out of the car.

I turned my head and there was Harold in an old-fashioned pajama set and nightcap with a slingshot he’d bought to keep my bird feeders free of squirrels but then been too soft-hearted to use.

“How dare you impregnate me with your ancient geriatric sperm? I’m going to kill you!”

In a rage, she reversed, the car brakes squealing, and then twisted the wheel toward Harold.

Ambrose moved like a flash, grabbing at something in my garden, and when he got up he had one of my sharp metal trellises for tomatoes in his hand.

With one smooth motion, he jammed it into Astrid’s front tire.

It immediately made a terrific popping sound and began to rapidly deflate, much like the lipstick melting off Astrid’s greasy face.

“Nice work, son!” Harold praised, because unlike me he did not hold grudges at all.

Ambrose yanked open the car door and pulled Astrid out by the back of her dress, then walked her firmly over to my compost bin and stuffed her head in.

“Dad, would you mind calling the cops? And then please go sit in Julian’s bedroom in case he wakes up. Indi and I will wait out here and make sure she doesn’t try to escape.”

My heart was in my throat as I walked over to him, my hands shaking uncontrollably.

“Remember how I used to complain that your compost bin stunk?” Ambrose asked me cordially as he held Astrid’s head firmly down so her face was smashed in a big pile of leftover lima beans.

“I take it all back. This is sheer genius. If you give me another chance, I swear I’ll help you put 10 of these around the house.”

“I don’t want to talk about—compost,” I said, feeling on the edge of strong hysterics and still a little out of breath. “Are you all right ? You literally ran in front of a car.”

“I’m fine! Who cares as long as you’re safe,” he said, his brows drawn together sharply as he looked down at me.

“You’re such an idiot ,” I cried, involuntarily gripping his T-shirt, wanting to freaking strangle him for being so reckless.

My ex’s eyes burned down my body until they landed where my hands were twisted in his T-shirt, my frenzied motion pulling it up so I could see his flat belly and the deep V of his hips. For a moment I froze. Then Ambrose put his free hand on my chin and kissed me.

Damn, I hadn’t forgotten this at all, the way his fingers dug into my skin, the way it felt to have his lips on mine, his grip spanning my jaw.

There was something just raw and fucking feral about him and apparently I wasn’t as immune to it as I wanted to be.

“Fuck you both,” Astrid said in a muffled tone, and Ambrose only shoved her face down further into some rancid banana peels.

Somehow my arms were around his neck and I was pulling him down closer, my mouth opening so his tongue could tangle almost viciously with mine. He smelled like gold and frankincense, the thick strands of his hair feeling so familiar under my fingers that I wanted to grip them and yank . . .

Wait shit shit shit

My pussy was pounding with need and I felt slick arousal soak my panties as I ripped

away from him.

Ambrose was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling so fast I thought he'd hyperventilate just staring at me.

"Indigo—" he began, putting his hand out to me as Astrid screamed with garbled rage.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," I told her as police headlights swung down the lane.

Because it was better than saying any of the things that were in my brain. I didn't even want to acknowledge some of the things that were in my brain right now.

I just needed dick.

It wasn't personal.

Ambrose stepped aside and the cops handcuffed Astrid.

"Unhand me!" she snapped. "All I did was burn down my house and try to run over my sperm donor."

"Bye now!" I said politely as she was shoved into the back of the squad care. It looked like Astrid was going to be in jail for quite a while.

I turned and hastily waddled back inside before Ambrose could talk to me.

My back and hips ached. I was probably going to go into labor. Then Finn would fly back for the birth and I wouldn't have to think about Ambrose or my feelings at all. In fact, I refused to have feelings until further notice.

I was getting Braxton Hicks like crazy, I couldn't get comfortable at night, and my daughter had dropped so low I was having to pee constantly.

It was time to get her out!

And tomorrow was Thanksgiving, the notoriously least sexy holiday.

Everything was going to be fine.

So what if I was still a little bit attracted to my ex-husband?

So what if I wanted to grab him by any one of his silk ties and sink down on his cock until my ass hit his thighs and then grind on him until he shot cum deep inside me?

It was just a momentary madness. It would go away.

But the next day Ambrose was annoyingly competent and helpful. He had always been an excellent cook and we prepared the meal together with well-ordered precision while Harold watched model train repair on YouTube with Julian.

The turkey was just getting fragrant when the doorbell rang.

Since Ambrose was deep in peeling potatoes, I opened it to see Millicent, wrapped up to her throat in luxurious white furs and glaring at me, her thin lips tightened in disgust.

“ You !” she said in tones of unadulterated loathing. “I should have known you with your nasty dirty hippie ways was behind Ambrose choosing to do this ridiculous thing of raising this child instead of dropping him off at the nearest orphanage!”

I felt a fierce, hot defensiveness of my ex rush through me.

“Ambrose chose this on his own!” I hissed. “He would never drop Julian off at an orphanage! And you should be proud of what a good job he’s doing with his brother. He’s changed every diaper. Fixed every baby bottle.”

“Me? Proud? Of a man fixing a bottle ?” she asked in horror.

“That’s a job for the nanny if I ever heard of one.

It’s all your fault, Indi. Before he met you, he would never have done such a thing.

Before you introduced all this silly lovey-dovey crap he was focused on the things that would make Mother proud: money and intellectual prowess. I wish you’d never—”

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“Wrong!” Ambrose interrupted, striding up behind me in the hall.

“Loving Indi was the smartest thing I ever did. Anything she changed in me was for the better. Mother, you need an Attitude Adjustment. You can turn around and take that skunk fur with you and don’t bother calling me again until your Attitude has been Adjusted and you are ready to apologize to Indi and Dad. ”

As he slammed the door, Harold popped the window open.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyer,” he squeaked out. “Now that I’m in the habit I plan to really get to sowing my wild oats at 75.”

“Sorry,” Ambrose said to me, in an embarrassed tone that was new to him. “I apologize for my toxic family.”

“It’s—fine,” I said in a strangled tone as Harold went to flex in the mirror and Julian napped in his little rocker.

“No, it was wrong of me to not see it before,” he said.

I did not reply, and we finished preparing the Thanksgiving meal.

“Let’s celebrate Astrid being in jail by you giving me another chance,” Ambrose said. “Look at how I can mash these potatoes. I even promise I’ll try to be nice to Finn.”

“Why should I trust you?” I asked, pulling a loaf of crusty homemade bread out of the oven. “What’s the guarantee that you wouldn’t just run around with your dick out

the next time you got stressed?”

“Indi, look at my face,” Ambrose said, leaning toward me so that I felt all that coiled-up passion edging me.

“Is this the face of a man who is thriving? Are these the under-eye bags of a man happy and satisfied with his choices? You are looking at a fucking broken shell of a man. A middle-aged archaeologist full of bitter regret and heartburn every time he thinks about his mistakes. And the fact that the love of my life has been getting pleased by the world’s most famous Irish bastard. ”

“Hmm,” I said non-committally.

After dinner I went on a long walk, ate some pineapple and then drank raspberry leaf tea, all in hopes of going into labor.

But aside from a few Braxton-Hicks contractions. . . nothing .

I was going mad with these hormones! I needed to get this baby out .

For supper the next day, we sat down to a meal of the absolutely spiciest Indian food I could get. Phaal curry, andhra chilli chicken, pork vindaloo, bags full of samosas.

Nothing.

By this time I was 40 weeks and 5 days and my baby girl seemed like she was in no hurry.

At 40 weeks and 6 days, I was sitting on the couch after breakfast wondering what my feet looked like when Ambrose made a suggestion.

“You want to get this baby out, don’t you?” he asked. “Dad just went to town for his morning ice cream cone and Julian is asleep in the other room. Let me help.”

“I’m not having sex with you,” I said, without conviction because inside my body was absolutely craving him.

“Well, what about. . . that other thing?” he asked, resting his arms on the back of the couch. The way his forearms flexed with the movement was extremely unfortunate for my peace of mind. “That isn’t sex . It’s just. . .helping you jumpstart your labor.”

My face flushed because I knew exactly what he was talking about.

If there was one thing Ambrose had been absolutely obsessed with, it was gripping me by the hips and diving between my thighs. The man ate pussy like it was the only way to go to the moon, like it was an algebra equation he had to solve.

The memory made my pussy felt uncomfortably swollen and heated, and I squeezed my wet thighs together, but it gave me no relief.

“Fine,” I said. “But it doesn’t mean anything.”

With one swift moment, he moved over me on the couch.

“It means everything to me,” he replied, and with a dizzyingly familiar movement, he put both hands on the band of my yoga pants and slid them down.

“ Delectable .”

He bit his lip and I didn’t dare to look down past my belly because I could feel how wet my panties were, how they must be sticking to my pussy and outlining my swollen lips.

I was already crawling the walls when he bent down past my huge bump and I couldn't see him. But I could feel him— carefully, peeling down my panties and then gently opening my wet pussy lips so he could see my clit.

My hips were moving on their own volition, already beginning to grind down on the contact, wanting more of it.

“Let me take my time,” Ambrose begged, but I was afraid of what would happen if I agreed.

“No,” I said, my hands digging into the couch cushions. “I don't need you getting all sentimental over my pussy. Just make me come.”

“All right,” he said, and I heard the couch creak as he lay on his belly, squashing his long body into the foot of the couch. I was panting at the feel of his breath on my thighs, then he wrapped his arms around my hips and jammed my pussy against his face.

Fucking hell, I almost levitated at the dirty wet sounds his mouth was making as he licked up all my slick arousal, plunging his tongue inside me, then circling my clit.

My breasts had been getting larger, heavier this week too, filling with milk and making me ache with how swollen and engorged they were and when he carefully brushed a thumb by my stiff nipples I moaned at the agonizingly pleasurable contact.

“Take me back,” Ambrose said from between my thighs. “I'll make it up to you. I promise.”

“Silence, laborer!” I said. “Focus on your job and not your feelings.”

“I can do it better,” he rumbled against my clit, as my fingers clutched desperately at

the cushions, slick sweat dripping down my breasts. “I know you better, I can make you come harder .”

“Nonsense,” I breathed, but I closed my eyes tight to avoid looking down, knowing there was an orgasm building inside me.

He scoffed into my pussy, which was still unfortunately a very hot rumble of sensation. “I can prove it,” he said, and I felt a finger drag down my pussy, under my body, and begin to circle my asshole.

“You’re a fucking freak,” I said, focusing on keeping my voice steady and calm.

“Only with you,” he said. “Only with you have I ever fucking let that out.”

His finger teased around the rim of my asshole and I wiggled with anticipation, feeling my chest beat with excitement.

“Depravity ,” I said.

“Does that mean stop?” Ambrose asked, pausing.

“No,” I groaned. “ Damn you, Ambrose. Do it.”

Goddamn this man. The way he knew exactly how I liked it, the perfect amount of pressure on my clit, the delicious sting of feeling his finger in my ass pressing through that tight outer ring.

I exploded with a loud groan, my belly tightening as my orgasm rocked me and Ambrose licking and sucking me through it as he always had, that wicked finger up my ass stretching my pleasure longer, an achingly screaming long release that cramped my calves and sent wet pulses of arousal all down his face.

The utter bliss of his full-body pleasure, the upside of his tightly-wound repressed passion.

As I recovered, I waited to see if he'd ask for anything else. But he didn't, just stood up as I lay in a jelly-like state on the couch.

My bleary, orgasm-blurred eyes focused on him and I saw the thick bulge of his cock under his belt, straining at the fabric of his pants. There was a muscle that twitched in his sculptured jawline and I knew, I knew damn well, how much he wanted me.

But he didn't suggest anything for his own pleasure, he only left the room and came back with a towel and cleaned up my sticky wet thighs with gentle motions.

“Want some spiced hot chocolate with cinnamon and ginger? I know you're trying to only do one cup of coffee a day.”

“Sure,” I said, watching his tall lean body go into the other room and start taking supplies from the cupboards.

My entire body was suffused with a lingering, liquid pleasure and the phone rang.

Languidly, I picked it up.

“Hi, angel. Waiting for that call that you're in labor so I can hop on a plane and come see our baby girl. Have you given any more thought to my proposal?”

What was I going to tell Finn?

Indi

Finn and Ambrose couldn't have been more different. Finn was outgoing and gregarious, charismatic, funny, and generous. Ambrose was prickly, snobby, intense, took everything way too seriously, was pretty bad at both yoga and meditation, and was overall a pain the ass.

Who in the world would choose him over a literal rock star?

So why did I hear my mouth forming the words?

"Finn," I said, taking a deep breath. "You would make a perfect husband."

I paused, searching for the right words, but I heard him groan.

"Shit. I know what that means."

"But—I'm not in love with you. And I don't think you're in love with me, either."

"I am," he said earnestly. "If you accepted me, I would love you forever, Indi."

"I know," I said. "You'd be loyal, generous, and loving. I'd never have to worry about you being unfaithful or unkind."

There was silence over the line.

"But?" he asked grimly. "I know there's a but coming."

“I just—,” I began, feeling like an asshole, “I can’t help feeling like there’s a specific reason you take such care to be a good man. Like there’s a woman out there. . . not Astrid. . . maybe someone from a long time ago. . . and she’s the reason you take such care not to be an asshole now.”

There was silence over the line again.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I hope I wasn’t overstepping. You can tell me to fuck off. But I just feel like there’s a one that got away out there for you.”

More silence, then I heard Finn’s heavy sigh.

“You’re clever as shit, Indi. Just another reason I want to marry you. Drop-dead gorgeous, sweet, and smart.”

But I knew I was right, so I shut up.

“There is a reason I don’t drink anymore,” he said, with that deep gravelly voice. “That I don’t just fuck every groupie around. But what I did, there’s no coming back from.”

I couldn’t think of anything to add, and I thought I heard him mutter, “not that I can find her anyways.”

Then louder, he said, “All right, mama. I understand, even though it sucks. All the same, I’m going to kick Ambrose’s ass when I get there.”

Well, I guessed that was to be expected. . .

I looked over and Julian had woken up from his nap, so Ambrose was taking down the supplies for my gourmet hot chocolate with one hand and cradling Julian with the

other, his fuzzy baby head nuzzling at Ambrose's neck.

My insides began to melt into a freaking puddle.

Goddamn Ambrose. Why did he have to make everything so fucking complicated?

He was doggedly, stubbornly trying to be a better man. And sometimes it really fucking pissed me off.

Because the way my skin felt watching him was absolutely sinful.

The things I wanted him to do to me were fucking nasty .

I wanted his fingers so tight on me that I gasped, I wanted his hand on my ass until it stung, I wanted a lot of things I shouldn't.

And then after a restless night tossing and turning to get into a comfortable position with my bump, I still hadn't gone into labor at 41 weeks and 0 days.

And nothing was working.

My lower back aching, I walked down the hallway and sat down with my laptop at the table. I should decorate for Christmas, but I had absolutely zero energy to.

What methods had I not tried yet?

"Can I get you anything?" Ambrose asked, pushing his glasses up his nose as he walked into the room wearing Julian in a sling and a dish cloth in his hand.

Oh my god

“How about stop arousing me with your domestic competence?!” I wanted to scream at him, but I didn’t.

“No,” I said. “I’m going to the store for some dates. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“I’ve had an STD test,” he said. “It came back negative. In case you want to try that method of jump-starting labor.”

“I don’t know to what you refer,” I said. “Goodbye.”

When I was back I ate three dates in a row and, while it was a very pleasant experience, I didn’t feel any contractions.

Grrrr

“There’s one method you haven’t tried,” Ambrose said, shutting the door to the bedroom where Julian would be napping.

Oh shit

“Nipple stimulation.”

“I don’t know if that one would be very helpful,” I stalled, trying not to look at my ex-husband.

He stood at the entrance to the kitchen with his sleeves rolled up to the elbows and a button undone at his throat.

Ambrose nodded. Didn’t try to lecture at me. Didn’t try to come back with studies on the subject.

“OK. If you ever want to try it, just ask,” he said.

Fuck it

“All right,” I said, leaning back against the counter before I lost my courage. “Do it fast before I change my mind.”

I thought he might try to take his time, but he obeyed me, taking two quick steps closer and putting both hands on my shirt. My skin began to heat up when I felt his fingers on my breasts and he yanked at the fabric, spraying buttons everywhere. My shirt tore open with a violent rip.

“God, yes,” I couldn’t help moaning as my head fell back.

Why had no one else ever fucked me like this? This raw, untamed, can’t-live-another-second-without-you kind of fuck?

My breasts were heavy, swollen, spilling out of my maternity bra, and he unclasped it with two deft fingers.

My nipples felt so hard and tight with arousal that they could have cut glass and something pulled deep inside me, a low dirty desperate need.

Ambrose took another step closer and held my heavy breasts in each hand, moving his thumbs so they began to circle my nipples.

It was absolute agony, an arousal so fast and consuming that it was white-hot pain.

“Goddamn, you’re beautiful, Indi.”

His eyes were a blaze of blue at me. “I wanted you as soon as I saw you. The first

damn minute I saw you there in that skirt with your arms folded over your tits and your fuck-me lips, defying that bulldozer. I wanted you so badly.”

“I thought it was your passion for conservation,” I gasped, trying to keep my hips from jerking forward, needing more contact with him.

His mouth twisted up as he pulled my nipples, just a tiny pinch of a pain, just a tiny bit too hard for comfort.

Just how I liked it

“I’m afraid it was just you. I would have stepped in front of anything you told me to.”

Coiled anger at how he had fucked it all up flared through me.

“Well, no one told you to fall in love with another woman,” I shot at him, the words bubbling out of me.

His eyes narrowed at me and he dropped hands to my hips, dragging me closer until I felt his cock pressing against the thin fabric of my pants.

“I never loved anyone else but you,” he gritted out, his fingers digging into my hips. “No matter how I fucked up.”

The tension pulled between us as I saw that muscle move in his tight jaw.

“Fuck it, just fuck me, Ambrose,” I hissed at him, feeling unbearably hot and achy between my thighs. My pussy lips were so swollen my panties were tight and biting into my skin.

“ What? ”

“I said, fuck me! It doesn’t have to mean anything. Just fuck me so I can go into labor.”

"Of course it means something," my ex almost snarled as he ripped at the buttons on his shirt, then at his belt buckle. "It's always meant something with you. It could never be just a fuck. This is a marry me fuck."

And all that tightly-wound propriety began to unspool as my ex-husband gripped me by the hair and kissed me. With the other hand he ripped down my yoga pants and panties until they pooled at my ankles.

The tips of my nipples stung and I looked down to see two little drops of milk as I gasped with relief.

Ambrose flipped me around and positioned me carefully against the counter as I felt my thighs slick with arousal.

“On your elbows,” he said, kicking the kitchen stool closer.

Then he lifted me up on the stool and tipped up my hips so he could have easy access to my aching wet pussy.

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Ambrose

I could barely believe what I was hearing and I felt myself beginning to unravel from the inside out.

My cock was already hard as a rock, but now the tip was twitching too, precum beading it and dripping down my thighs and soaking my pants legs.

Indi was tipped up in front of me, my eyes dragging down her creamy perfect cheeks to that hint of her pretty asshole, and then down between her thighs where I saw her rosy pink swollen pussy.

I gripped her hip and then positioned my cock at her entrance. Her back was arching in anticipation, and her thighs already trembling.

Oh my god, to feel my cock inside her again was heaven .

I couldn't stop an embarrassing grunt every inch I went deeper.

And the way she wiggled that juicy round ass in front of me.

That ass used to be mine to do what I wanted, spank as many times as I wanted until it was such a pretty color.

I put my hands on her hips and ground her all the way down over my dick.

Shit, hell, I could already feel an orgasm coiling at the base of my spine, and I was

not going to blow this by coming early.

My fingers curled around her as I thrust my cock in as slowly as I could, dragging it out as her delicious wet heat gripped me, then plunging inside again.

With one hand, she pulled her hair out of its neat little bun and shook it all down her back.

Oh, damn. I knew what that meant.

“But—” I began, not wanting to cause her even the slightest discomfort while she was pregnant.

“Do you know me or not?” she hissed back, making my skin break out in hot, crazed lusty sweat.

“I know what you want, naughty girl.”

I reached up and my fist closed in her hair, tugging those deliciously silky strands, and she let out the hottest moan, her hands tightening on the counter.

My cock slid in and out of her, my release building as her perfect pussy gripped me.

Her belly was like silk under my fingers as I moved my fingers between her thighs to circle her clit, a swollen and straining bud.

My jaw was clenched together trying to hold off my release, and I didn’t think I could hold out much longer.

“Come for me,” I gritted out, pulling tighter, harder.

“Yes, Ambrose,” she moaned, “ Yes .”

Indi was such a squirter and I fucking loved it. Her release was a deluge, soaking my hand as I rubbed her slick little clit and I couldn't hold my own back any longer. My balls were swollen with the kind of massive, gargantuan load only my wife could pull from me.

My hips sunk forward and I released in Indi with a huge, aching groan, my balls pulsing as I kissed her throat, sucking her delicious skin into my mouth.

“God,” she gasped, clutching the counter. “I don't think I can hear out of my ears yet.”

But I already had both arms around her because I knew her knees were going to give out after a release like that.

“Forgive me,” I begged in her ear, my heart in my throat. “I love you so much. You know I can't live without you.”

And then I felt a little pop reverberate through her body and Indi's waters broke.

“We don't need to go yet,” she said, “the contractions are still 8-10 minutes apart.”

But the idea of her not being at the hospital filled me with unspeakable panic.

“Dr. González and Dad are going to take care of Julian until we get back. I've double-checked your hospital bag and added your cellphone and laptop charger cables. Let's go.”

“No no,” Indi said, but I could see her let a breath out carefully as she worked through a painful contraction. “Not yet.”

Panic and blood roared in my ears.

What if something happened to her?

I closed my hand in her hair again and pulled.

“You’ve had some higher blood pressure readings and I am not going to fuck around with you or your baby’s health. We are going to the hospital now .”

Her breath caught, and I felt her heartbeat flutter.

“All right, Ambrose.”

I grabbed the hospital bag and guided her out the door and into the passenger seat of my car.

“Finn is going to charter a private plane to get here as fast as he can,” she said as we sped down the highway.

“All right,” I said. “If you want me to go when he comes, just tell me.”

I felt tense and panicked.

What if we didn’t get there in time?

What if there were complications?

What if I fainted again?

This time, I was determined not to be such an embarrassing mess, so I had bought ginger chews to combat my nausea and immediately I stuffed three of them in my

mouth.

I was determined to be there for Indi for as long as she wanted me there.

We got quickly set up and Indi bounced on a birthing ball for a while, but it wasn't long before her contractions were coming closer now. Every 5 minutes. Then every 3 minutes. Then every 2 minutes.

When I felt light-headed, I dug my nails into my palms and focused on encouraging her.

Good girl, Indi

You're doing so well

I had been prepared for so many worst-case scenarios, but I hadn't expected the gut punch when a nurse told me,

"You're doing good, daddy."

"Oh, I'm—not the daddy," I said awkwardly. "I'm just a guy who's in love with her."

She gave me a bit of a strange look, but then Indi was in the hospital bed and it was time to push.

Astrid hadn't wanted to see my face at all in labor, so I felt a lump in my throat when Indi gripped my hand as she pushed, bearing down as hard as she could.

Like maybe she didn't hate me. Like maybe she did want me there.

And even when the baby's head crowned, I was determined not to fail her. I dug my

nails so hard into my palms they bled and I didn't faint on her.

Doing perfect, Indi

I can see her head

She looks perfect

Almost done now

Indi's fingers gripped me as with one last push her daughter came into the world.

"Amazing job," I said, my knuckles white and tense on the railing of her bed.

Her face looked radiant, the auburn strands sticking to her forehead with sweat, and I brushed them aside gently with the cool cloth.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked after they laid her baby in her arms.

Would I be in the way? Did she want me there?

"A coffee," she said.

"From your favorite place?" I asked. "I'm on it. I'll be back in half an hour."

I was so weak and sweaty with relief that my glasses kept sliding off my nose and I had to shove them in my pocket.

Maybe I could order some food for her , I was thinking as I headed back in the hospital. Or go out and get anything else she'd need.

Carrying her coffee carefully, I pulled the hospital curtain aside to walk into her room.

And stopped dead in my tracks.

Finn was there, bending over the bassinet to pick up his daughter for the first time.

Indi was smiling at him, looking luminous, and I watched as Finn carefully lifted their baby up and cradled the tiny swaddled newborn to his chest.

Now I absolutely hated this bastard more than anyone, but I let the curtain fall and stepped back.

I had to let them have these first moments together.

Even though it hurt worse than anything yet.

Numbly, I walked down the hallways until I found an empty waiting room, then I sunk into a chair and stared at the drab walls and gently humming vending machine.

I didn't even realize I was crying until the tears soaked through my collar.

This was all that I had given up.

All that I had thrown away.

Through ego and immaturity.

Well, my ego had been shattered, then pulverized.

I didn't care about any of the things I thought were so important. The only thing I

cared about was getting Indi back.

And that might never happen.

She might decide it made her happier to stay with Finn. After all, he was the father of her daughter. He could give her anything she wanted.

I came with fucking baggage . Humiliating mistakes, cheating, betrayal, ego, a fucked-up family, and I had taken her for granted. Didn't appreciate what I had with her.

Why wouldn't she choose that other somebody who hadn't fucked up?

My eyes were aching, and I went out and got her a fresh, hot coffee, then came back.

I didn't want her to think I'd forgotten her.

Hesitantly, I walked into her room. This time, Indi was breastfeeding and Finn standing beside her.

"Here's your peppermint latte," I said.

Finn's eyes snapped up as soon as he heard my voice and I saw a muscle throb in his jaw.

"Oh, there you are, asshole," he snarled, and his hands closed into fists as he stalked toward me.

But he had a right to be pissed. After all, for months I had been trying to win back the woman he loved.

And he had just met his baby for the first time. I didn't want to ruin the big day.

So I just stood there and let him hit me.

"Don't spill the coffee," I said, holding it far away right before Finn's massive fist landed directly on my eye.

Fuck, he had a massive reach and it stung, my eye instantly swelling closed.

"Stop!" Indi said sharply. "That's enough, Finn."

"Thanks for the coffee," she said to me.

I would've rather died than stress Indi out after she had just given birth by demanding she choose between us.

"I've—got to go get Julian," I said. "Just text me if you need anything."

And then I left them there together.

Dad, Julian, and I went to an AirBnb in town for the week. I knew Finn would have to go back to his tour, but I was sure he'd be back as soon as he could. Indi said he planned to buy some massive mansion in town so he could be close to their daughter.

I could tell he was going to be a good dad.

What if Indi decided to marry him after all?

Just because we had fucking amazing mind-blowing sex didn't mean she was going to choose me.

After all, Finn had never cheated. He had never betrayed her. He had never been so stupid as to divorce her.

I had to accept that she probably wasn't going to choose me.

But I didn't want to accept it, and I only went through the motions of each day, doing what needed to be done to feed and take care of my dad and brother, suspended in uncertainty, frozen with fear of losing her.

After a week was up, I got a text.

"Ambrose," it said. "We need to talk."

Shit, I thought I knew what that meant. My stomach sunk.

But, even still, I was desperately excited to see her.

The snow was gently falling as Julian and I drove through the streets to Applewood, and my brother was still asleep as I hauled his carrier inside.

I had agonized over my outfit, ironing my shirt over and over, picking a paisley-printed tie to go with my powder blue collared shirt.

"Come in," I heard Indi's musical voice, and my heart ached at how lovely and glowing she looked sitting on the couch with her baby in her arms.

"Want to hold Aoife?" she asked as I put Julian's carrier down.

"Of course I do," I said, even though I felt like throwing up from the nerves. "Let me just check one thing."

I looked hastily in the laundry room. Yep, sure enough, the baskets were piled high with dirty clothes. I threw a quick load in and dumped a hasty cupful of baby-friendly detergent, then washed my hands.

“Sorry, just wanted to run a quick load,” I said. “So you didn't have to do it.”

I couldn't interpret Indi's expression. “But I want to hold her,” I said quickly, sitting down next to Indi.

Aoife was tiny and perfect, with curly auburn hair and bright blue eyes that blinked up at me.

“She's beautiful,” I said. “Look at that sweet little expression on her face. She looks just like her mama.”

“She just had a bunch of milk,” Indi laughed. “Such a good eater.”

I raised Aoife up a bit to hold one of her tiny hands, and she looked marvelingly at me.

Then she threw up all over my shirt and tie.

“Oh—I'm sorry!” Indi cried.

“No need to apologize,” I laughed, dabbing at the spit-up with a burp rag and then sitting Aoife up and supporting her neck carefully so I could pat her gently on the back. “Powder-blue is a bit of a passé color anyways. Really she did me a favor.”

I patted her back gently until Aoife gave the cutest burp and I looked up to tell Indi about it when I saw my ex-wife had tears in her eyes.

“What’s the matter?” I asked anxiously. “Are you OK?”

“Ambrose, I—missed you. You and Julian. And Harold, of course,” she laughed. “But I missed you a lot.”

A wild, untamed hope sprung into my heart.

“Indi, does that mean—do you mean—”

I could barely even bring myself to verbalize what I was hoping.

“It seems I still love you,” she said, the tears hovering angelically on her lashes.

“I love you, Ambrose.”

Carefully cradling Aoife against my chest, I slid to my knees in front of her.

“I love you so much, Indi. I swear I’ll never make you cry ever again. I can’t stand being apart from you. Marry me again .”

My arm was around her waist, squeezing her delicious curves. Wanting to hear the words over and over.

“Yes,” she breathed, and I felt the cool soft sensation of her hands sliding around my neck, touching my flushed and overheated skin, making me burn everywhere for her.

“I could live without you,” she said. “But I don’t want to.”

My head filled with such pure joy as she tipped up her lips to be kissed that the room spun around me and I had to gasp for breath.

“O goddess of mountainous mercy,” I cried, forgetting that my pompous poetry was absolutely not going to do me any favors, but she only laughed delightedly.

“It was your cooking, Ambrose,” she teased. “Your cooking that turned the tide, not your poetry. But I kind of like it, tell me some more.”

“Your hair is like a fiery deluge,” I began, before starting to laugh too, at myself, at the wild, untamed joy that flowed through me, and I sat on the couch beside her and kissed her again.

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One year later

“The prodigal father returns!” Harold caroled as he burst in the front door, looking tanned and fit from his most recent cruise.

At first there was a little difficulty over Harold having no money to divorce the horrible Millicent, but when I found out that was the hold-up I insisted he borrow some of my money for a lawyer.

He was able to get a very fair distribution of the marital funds, and this year he had spent it on the purest enjoyment, which I was very happy to see.

I bounced Julian on my hip as Ambrose came in after him, two massive suitcases and a steamer trunk in his arms.

I hugged my father-in-law and he reached out his arms for Julian as Ambrose dragged the rest of his luggage in.

“Why, my boy, you’re looking big and strong. Look at this other son of mine, back here complaining about a measly little five suitcases and one steamer trunk. You’ll have to eat all your spinach so you can take over from your big brother.”

Ambrose only grinned and shook his head ruefully. “These suitcases better not be full of Caribbean rum or you’re going out in the snow.”

“Throwing out an old man at Christmas?” Harold snorted. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Where’s Aoife?” My father-in-law asked me.

“Out with her daddy,” I said. “She’ll be back soon and then we’ll all have a little Christmas Eve dinner together.”

Harold took Julian to look at the Christmas train and I raised my arms for a hug from my husband, suddenly feeling nervous.

“Come here, I want to tell you something.”

My palms felt a little slick, and I tried to wipe them inconspicuously on my skirt as he followed me to the bedroom.

What if he said it was too soon?

But I was excited too, a great ball of excitement growing in my gut and threatening to burst from my chest cavity.

Damn, I should have thought of something cuter, more whimsical. But I couldn’t wait.

“I know it must be a shock, but I—have a bun in the oven.”

Ambrose’s face looked alarmed and he turned like he was going to sprint from the room.

“It’s no big deal,” he said at the doorway. “Such a thing could happen to anyone, and it’s no big deal if you left it in too long. So what if the bread is a little crispy! We’ll just scrape off the burnt parts.”

“Oh my god!” I cried, darting forward and dragging him back into the bedroom.

“Aren’t you supposed to have a PhD? I’m trying to tell you I’m pregnant!”

My husband looked utterly astounded and then he was darting forward and enveloping me in a huge hug as I twined my legs around his waist.”

“I just had a feeling,” I laughed as I buried my face in his neck, feeling the muscles in his back under my fingers. “I had some tests left and I randomly took one. And it was positive!”

“I can’t believe it. . . I can’t believe it,” he said, his voice muffled in my hair. “I’m so lucky to have you. God, I love you.”

“Maybe all you needed to do was just relax and let it happen. I love you, Ambrose.”

He held me so tight I felt his heart thudding against my chest.

“I’m gonna take Julian out for a hot chocolate,” Dad hollered from the other room.

“Go for it!” Ambrose called back, his voice thick with emotion.

Once I heard the door shut, he twisted and fell back onto the bed with me, his mouth urgent on mine.

“Ambrose, Finn is going to be here soon,” I laughed.

My husband glanced down at his watch.

“Now I know we have at least 10 minutes and believe me, sweetheart, I can make each of them count.”

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“Dude, you kind of overcooked that steak,” I said, dropping my plate beside the sink where Ambrose was doing the dishes.

For a moment I saw a muscle pulse in his jaw, and I felt my own tense, my hands in my pockets automatically tightening into fists.

Just try me, motherfucker. . .

But I knew damn well Ambrose had promised Indi that he’d try to get along with me.

“I’m sorry it was not to your liking,” he said stiffly. “Perhaps next time you can bring the cow in and show me where you want to slice.”

“You’re a fucking punk,” I said.

I should stop. There was no damn point in fucking fighting with Aoife’s stepdad. We were going to be in each other’s lives now and that was it.

But I still hated the sight of his smug motherfucking face.

Bitter jealousy roiled in my gut.

It had taken me 12 painful, long months to get over Indi. And even though I had finally been considering trying to fuck someone else again, I still felt bitter. Ambrose had everything I wanted. Happy wife, happy family,

Forgiveness

He had forgiveness and I didn't.

But what you did was worse , my conscience whispered to me.

Abruptly, I pushed off the counter and walked out into the living room, kissed Aoife again and left.

Indi was the most supportive co-parent you could ever imagine, and I saw Aoife as much as I wanted every time I was in town.

My phone rang as I headed to my car and to my surprise, it was Bernard, the business manager for the Toadstrand Landing Beach Hotel, which I owned.

“There is a matter of business that requires your attention down here,” he said.

In my old home town? With this hotel I hadn't thought about in years?

“Just contact my business manager,” I said.

There was silence.

“Mr. O'Donoghue, I think it's something you'll want to take care of yourself,” he said.

“All right,” I said.

It wasn't like I had anything else to do at the moment. I didn't particularly want to go back home to my empty mansion on Christmas Eve.

Not that I wanted to go back to my hometown either, the small beach town where I'd lived after coming over from Ireland as a teenage boy.

My hometown was about an hour away from Indi's house, and I drove down there, feeling restless and bitter still.

I had given up drinking 10 years ago, but fuck, I craved a drink right about now.

I drove past the small beach homes and empty downtown. Toadstrand Landing always looked so depressing in the off-season.

Then I pulled into the Toadstrand Landing Beach Hotel. It was a dilapidated building with weathered gray boards and tile falling off the roof.

I owned it and the attached cafe, and had for 10 years, but its ownership had never done what I had wanted it to do.

So why didn't I sell it?

What was the point of keeping it?

I had bought up half the town, but nothing had changed.

She hadn't taken the bait.

"What's happening?" I asked Bernard as I walked into the entryway.

Bernard looked as if he'd been a butler in a previous life, with a lugubrious stuffed-fish face and jowls over a striped waistcoat.

"Mr. O'Donoghue, it appears we are under inspection," he said, thrusting a letter at me. "The hotel and the Lavender Bliss Cafe."

I barely glanced at it, grabbing a bottle of champagne that was on the front desk.

I had been sober for 10 years, but what was the point? What was I doing all this for? I needed to just get drunk and fuck some groupies. Something to make me forget everything.

“Whatever,” I said. “Let them come. Once they see who I am, they’re not going to do a real inspection.”

“A Mouse Has Been Seen On the Premises,” Bernard said.

“Just tell the inspector who I am,” I said, popping the cork of the champagne and raising the bottle to my lips. “And they’ll sign off on anything.”

“Wrong,” came a clear, crisp voice from behind me, and I froze with the bottle halfway to my mouth. “The inspector doesn’t care that you’re a celebrity.”

I spun around so fast the champagne slopped all over the front of my shirt.

Oh my god

After 10 motherfucking years.

I was finally seeing her again.

And she looked pissed.