







# One Little Mistake

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** He comes back home and finds a pregnant stranger living in his apartment.

There's no room for love left in Max's heart.

A cynical sailor, hardened by loneliness and pain, he dreams of just one thing — to come home, shut the door, and forget the world exists.

But instead, he finds a pregnant stranger in his apartment and all his plans go up in smoke.

Because somehow, everyone around him is convinced... she's his fiancée.

A mistake? A coincidence? Or a carefully planned scam?

Either way, he's going to throw her out. No questions asked.

Erin still believes in love.

Every day she arranges bouquets for proposals, weddings, and declarations of love — hoping that one day, someone will bring one to her.

She was sure she'd found the one and moved into what she thought was her fiancé's apartment.

One mistake.

One wrong address.

And her entire life turns upside down.

He didn't think he could take care of anyone.

She had no intention of letting another man into her world.

But now they're stuck under the same roof. Because sometimes, the best things in life begin with the most unexpected mistakes.

One Little Mistake is a heartwarming accidental pregnancy romance

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

“Hey, man! Heard you finally touched solid ground. When are we celebrating?”

My friend’s voice comes through the speakers. How the hell did he find out so fast?

“Let me come back to life first. I’ve spent half a year in a metal can, and I think I’ve turned into a sociopath.

” And I’m not even exaggerating. For the past six months, all I’ve seen were the bland faces of twenty-two crew members, the ocean, and those obnoxiously loud seagulls that, for whatever reason, kept flying way out from the coast and getting on our nerves.

“Oh, right, right. You’ve got a fiancée waiting for you. The lone wolf’s finally settling down,” he mocks, and I snort in response.

“Fiancée is a bit of an overstatement, Simmons. But yeah, after a boring life on the ship, it’s good to have someone to run to. I’ve been waiting for this.” I punch the steering wheel and feel my blood heat up.

“Don’t tell me you’re not planning to marry her.”

All the joking vanishes from his voice, and now he’s way too serious.

I’m the last one in our group still enjoying the single life—and I don’t regret it one bit.

Family life just isn't for someone like me.

I tried it. Didn't work. But my friends and their wives are always trying to set me up with someone.

"Why should I marry her? We're in an open relationship."

"Are you serious right now? I thought having a baby was a pretty solid reason to tie the knot."

"What baby?" I ask, confused, turning the wheel of my brand-new SUV to the left.

Picked it up from the dealership an hour ago.

Luckily, the managers there were real pros—handled everything in a couple of hours.

Though the suspicious stares were impossible to avoid.

Can't blame them: I showed up straight from the airport, suitcase in hand, rocking a beard I haven't shaved in God knows how long.

"She's pregnant... You didn't know?" He lowers his voice like it's some top-secret intel.

"Natalie? Pregnant?" I can't help it—I burst out laughing. "She was flooding my phone with selfies last night. Not a trace of a baby bump."

"Who's Natalie? I'm talking about Erin."

"Erin who?" I mutter. "Shit, I'll call you back—there's a cop up ahead."

I end the call, still trying to figure out what the hell is wrong with Simmons, and ease off the gas.

I just want to get home already. Take a shower.

Toss out all the clothes that reek of engine oil so bad no detergent could ever save them.

Crawl under a blanket and stay in bed for a few days.

I don't even remember the last time I got a good night's sleep.

Oh wait—yeah, I do. Two months ago, during a storm when we had to drop anchor.

The ship rocked so hard, it felt like I was being launched out of my bunk.

I'm completely disoriented, still feel the ocean's sway, and my ears are buzzing from the engine noise.

The highway's crawling with cars, trees, people, buildings—everything's irritating me.

It's like I suddenly landed in another world.

And yet, there's a strange relief in it, knowing I've got four months ahead without breakdowns or inspections.

The apartment complex looks exactly the same as it did six months ago. It's already dark out. I try to spot my windows, but it's useless. I won't remember. I only lived here for a few months before I shipped out, and I didn't bother to memorize anything.

Exhaustion's kicking in hard. I drag my heavy suitcase up the stairs—nearly forty-eight hours without sleep and a long flight with two layovers is taking its toll. I spend forever digging for my keys, finally push the front door open, and frown.

The lights are on. It smells like food. There's a TV playing in the kitchen.

What the hell is going on?

Did Vivienne split up with her husband and crash at my place for a bit?

Or maybe my little sister decided to welcome me home this way?

I don't notice the women's coats in the closet right away. Perfume bottles by the hallway mirror, a few pairs of boots on the shoe rack. Yep—definitely Vivienne. She could've at least given me a heads-up.

I walk into the kitchen and freeze in the doorway. A girl is standing with her back to me. I can't see her face, but the long red hair? That's definitely not Vivienne. And it sure as hell isn't my sister.

For a second, I think I've walked into the wrong apartment. But no, this is my kitchen—and the key fit the lock.

“And who the hell are you?” I say loud enough to cut through the noise of the TV.

She lets out a startled scream and spins around clumsily. Her eyes go wide with panic, but she quickly recovers, grabs a pancake spatula off the counter, and points it at me like a weapon.

For the record, that's my pancake spatula. Same with the white button-up shirt she's wearing—though I guess I could be wrong.

“Don’t come any closer! I’ll call the cops!” she yells, full of fire.

“Very threatening,” I mutter. “How’d you get in here?”

I lean against the doorframe, arms crossed.

“I mean it! Or are you... are you a friend of Max?” she asks, shifting uneasily from foot to foot.

I glance over her—I can’t miss the very obvious baby bump. Pregnant. Great.

“Well, actually, I am Max. And you are...? No, wait, don’t answer,” I cut her off with a wave of my hand.

“Let me guess: you broke in while the place was empty, right? Pack your things and get the hell out. I’m not in the mood to deal with some random chick tonight.

And if I notice anything missing, don’t worry—I’ll file a report. ”

“This is some kind of joke, right? Max set this up?”

She starts walking toward me—moving way too smoothly for someone that pregnant. She passes by, looks around the room, then opens the front door and peers into the hallway.

“Where is he? This isn’t funny! At all!” Her eyes flash with anger, lips tight, fingers nervously tugging at the sleeves of the shirt.

“Okay, let’s skip the drama class performance and get you out of my house.”

“This is a mistake. You must’ve come to the wrong apartment.”



“How did you get in? Where’d you get the keys?” That’s the only thing I actually want to know.

She stares at me, unblinking. Swallows hard. Her brows knit together, and her hand goes to her belly.

“Vivienne gave them to me. The neighbor,” she says quietly.

“Oh, great. You dragged Vivienne into this too?”

“No, no, that’s crazy. This is my fiancé’s apartment. His name is Max, and he’s working on a ship right now.”

“Well, well, now it all makes sense. Someone clearly got all my info—but surprise, I came back a week early. Didn’t see that one coming, huh?”

I grab her coat from the hook and toss it in her direction.

“Here’s your jacket. Boots, purse, what else? Take this too.”

I sweep all the makeup off the shelf into a paper bag and hand it to her.

She doesn’t move. Tears well up in her eyes, and I grimace. I hate tears. Classic manipulation tactic.

“Is this some kind of prank? Because if it is, it’s a really stupid one. Sir, please leave my fiancé’s apartment. Go on, get out!”

She throws her clothes to the floor and points at the door.

“Excuse me?” My eyebrow shoots up.

Okay, she's got guts. My nerves are already hanging by a thread, and now this.

She should be thanking me for not calling the cops—not trying to throw me out.

“You heard me! I don't know who you are, but please take your suitcase and leave me alone.”

Her face and neck flush deep red, and she rubs her massive belly with one hand.

Is it even real? Or part of the act?

“So you're claiming that you have every right to be in this apartment, and I don't?”

“Exactly.”

“Alright then. Let's go.”

“Go where?” she asks, confused, blinking rapidly with those ginger lashes.

“To prove I belong in my own damn home. And I'm curious what proof you've got to back up your story.”

I head straight for the study, walking fast. The stranger shuffles behind me.

I push the door open—and freeze.

“What the hell is this?”

I stare, stunned, at the baby-blue horror show where my loft-style office used to be.

“Where's my desk? Where are my collector's edition books? What happened to the

walls? What the hell went down in here while I was gone?" I shout, looking around at the crib against the wall, a changing table, and a bunch of baby stuff that's completely taken over my space.

I glance back at the terrified girl.

For a split second, I actually wonder if I really did walk into the wrong apartment.

But no—this is insane. Absolutely insane.

"And you're... Erin?" I ask suspiciously.

A few things are starting to click in my head, but none of it makes any damn sense yet.

Pregnant girl. Sailor fiancé. Is this who Simmons was talking about?

"Yes," she nods. "Can you please explain what's going on here?"

"I think you're the one who needs to explain. Why are you living in my apartment, acting like you own the place—and why the hell did you tell my friend Roger that you're pregnant with my baby?"

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

The girl is sitting in a chair, eyeing me warily, while I stand across from her, holding out my passport.

“See? I’m Max Taylor. And here—these are the ownership papers for the apartment.”

I flip through a few more pages and shove the documents in front of her face.

Sure, I could’ve kicked her out without all this drama, but first of all—she’s pregnant, and with women like that, you’ve gotta be careful. And second—I’ve got way too many questions for her.

“What does it say? Read it.”

She leans in, squinting at the letters, frowns, then blinks in surprise.

“Harbor Street, number seven, apartment two-seventeen,” she reads aloud in a hoarse voice. “But that’s... that’s impossible.”

She looks up at me with those huge green eyes, clearly waiting for an answer. Funny thing is—I want one from her too.

She gets up and walks over to the dresser, grabs her phone, and starts scrolling.

“See? My boyfriend texted me the address. There’s no mistake.”

I stare at her like she's lost her mind. Her boyfriend texted the address? What, does he live here too, and I somehow missed it?

I snatch the phone from her hands.

'Harbor Street 7, apt. 217. Meet Nick at 2:30 p.m. He'll give you the keys.'

"That was five months ago," I say, stunned, noticing the timestamp. "You've been living here this whole time?"

"Uh-huh," she nods, biting her full lips.

I scroll up, then down, scanning the messages. Mostly long texts from Erin, a few short replies from her so-called boyfriend.

"Well, that explains everything," I say.

"What explains what?"

"You got played."

"What?"

"He gave you a fake address because he never planned on sticking around."

I nod toward her very pregnant belly. "Happens all the time. Bet you anything the name he gave you isn't even real."

"No. Max wouldn't do that. I saw his driver's license," she says firmly.

"He texted you three times in total. And how long's it been?"

I check the messages again, scrolling up the thread.

She snatches the phone from my hand and hugs it to her chest.

“There has to be an explanation.”

Her eyes dart around the room. She exhales shakily, then winces slightly, like she’s in pain.

“Such as?”

“He... he said he was busy. That the signal was bad.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that. But what about the wrong address?”

“It was a mistake,” she whispers, almost inaudibly, and starts nervously pacing, her hand constantly rubbing her stomach.

“I’ll call him now. Try to get through. We’ll sort it out. Maybe the realtor messed things up—he was buying a new place right before he left.”

“No way. Unless Vivienne and her husband decided to cash in on me—but a meteor’s more likely to hit Earth.

You’ve been dumped. Deal with it, however harsh it sounds.

You can stay till morning, fine. But after that, pack your things and go deal with your fiancé yourself.

I didn’t come back home to play detective.

And now I'll have to redo the whole damn home office. ”

I kick the wall with the toe of my sneaker and clench my fists in anger. So much for coming home.

“I don't believe you,” Erin insists. Stubborn as a brick wall. “I talked to his sister. She's been in this apartment before I moved in.”

“Don't tell me you talked to Elena,” I say, holding my breath—and her face says it all. “Fantastic. Just fantastic.”

We fall silent, glaring at each other, both convinced we're right.

I pretend there's no stranger in my house, try to act normal: open the fridge—stuffed to the top—grab some sausages and juice, and still ignoring Erin, I enjoy my dinner. One good thing about this whole mess.

“By the way, the shirt's mine too,” I say casually, scanning the kitchen to see if anything else has changed.

Her eyes fill with tears—just what I needed.

She paces the room nervously, one hand on her lower back, phone to her ear again and again. Then she disappears for a bit, before coming back. Eyes red from crying, lips bitten, face flushed.

She looks straight at me.

“Vivienne will confirm who's telling the truth. Because she knows Max. The real Max.”

There's a spark of determination in her eyes.

“Good idea. But it's too late to bother the neighbors. We'll wait till morning,” I say, trying to sound indifferent.

Erin snorts and leaves the kitchen again.

I lean back in the chair and rub my eyes.

What a surprise from the universe. Just insane.

I slowly poke at the sausages with my fork, going over a hundred versions of how this girl could've ended up in my house.

What if she really is a con artist? I should probably check if the safe is still here.

“Max?”

Her worried voice cuts through—and I meet her eyes, wide with fear.

“I think I'm in labor,” she says through tears, clutching her stomach and gasping.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

“You’re kidding me?” I choke on my food and start coughing hard.

That’s just what I needed to complete this perfect day.

“Nope.”

The girl shakes her head, completely lost, her face twisted in pain. One hand’s braced against the wall, the other—like always—is rubbing her belly.

“I’m calling an ambulance,” I shoot up from the chair, fumbling around for my phone.

“A cab. Not an ambulance.”

“What do you mean, a cab?”

“I need to get to the hospital.”

“You get to a hospital in an ambulance, not in a damn cab.”

“Should I go pack a bag?”

She looks at me like she’s asking for permission.

I nod like an idiot, trying not to freak out—but all my so-called composure and manly

calm goes straight to hell the moment Erin walks back into the kitchen with a small duffel bag in hand and mumbles:

“My water broke.”

“Screw the ambulance. I’ll drive you myself. You’re not giving birth in my house.”

I grab her bag, push her gently toward the door, and rush out without even thinking about grabbing a coat. It’s freezing outside, but the adrenaline has me burning up.

She keeps stopping every few steps, groaning loudly, muttering under her breath, talking to the baby.

It feels like we’re walking to the car for hours.

“Back seat. Get in.”

I open the door for her—and we hit a new problem: Erin just physically can’t get into the damn SUV.

It’s too high off the ground, and I end up practically lifting her inside.

Any other time, I’d probably laugh at how ridiculous this looks. But not now. Not when some random girl’s about to give birth in my car.

Luckily, the roads are empty. I floor it, speeding straight toward the hospital.

I keep checking the rearview mirror, watching Erin.

The way she’s breathing—heavy, shallow—it’s making me feel sick.

God, just let us get there in time.

“Put the phone away already,” I snap, frustrated. “If he wanted to answer, he would’ve picked up by now.”

Because the whole damn ride, all she’s doing is calling someone. Over and over.

“I’m calling the doctor who’s supposed to deliver my baby, “ she says in a strained voice. “And his phone is off. “

“It’s past midnight. He’s probably been asleep for hours.”

“No, he’s my relative. Even if I called at two in the morning, he’d come. We had an agreement.” She turns to the window, nervously bites her lips, and lifts the phone to her ear again.

She hisses from the pain a few times, and tears run down her cheeks.

I start to feel anxious, gripping the steering wheel tighter as I follow the GPS.

“We’re here,” I exhale in relief, realizing no one’s giving birth in my car. At least not tonight.

“Help me.” The girl opens the door and looks at me with those piercing eyes.

“I’m coming.”

She struggles to get out of the car, even with my help. At one point, she squeezes my hand so hard I’d bet anything there’ll be bruises there tomorrow.

“Sorry,” she says, looking at me with guilt and pulling her hand back.

I feel sorry for her. She's about to give birth right after finding out the guy she already thought of as her husband actually left her.

I close my eyes, telling myself that being kind never leads to anything good, but I still can't bring myself to leave her here in front of the hospital. That wouldn't be right. Wouldn't be manly. I grab her bag from the car, take her by the elbow, and head toward the emergency entrance.

The five steps up are hard for her. She clings tightly to my arm, breathing loudly, too loudly, and I start to get scared—she looks way too pale and exhausted.

“She's in labor!” I shout the moment I push open the door to the maternity ward.

The nurse at the desk looks up instantly.

“Happens every hour here. Let's all stay calm. Do you have her ID?”

Right then, Erin cries out again, and I feel anger boil inside me toward the medical staff.

“ID? She's having contractions. Strong ones,” I hiss.

“I'm supposed to be seen by Dr. Sanders. Is he here? Is it his shift tonight?” Erin asks hoarsely.

The nurse frowns and sighs.

“Dr. Sanders was in a car accident this morning. One moment, I'll call the midwife,” she replies, pressing a call button.

I start pacing nervously, flinching every time Erin screams again. Is it really that bad?

She looks too pale, and there's fear in her eyes that's starting to creep into me, too. What the hell am I even doing here? I should've been fast asleep by now.

"I'm Dr. Collins. I'll be delivering your baby instead of Dr. Sanders," says a ridiculously young doctor, who immediately fails to inspire any confidence in me. "Come on in. I'll examine you."

He and Erin disappear behind the door, and I'm left standing there in the hallway with her black bag, completely lost on what to do next. In the end, I just decide to sit down on a chair by the wall and wait. But I don't even get the chance.

That same doctor bursts back out, calling out anxiously, "Lizzy, get a gurney—her water just broke, and she's already at eight!"

I have no idea what that means, but the look on his face is so worried it makes me even more nervous. Suddenly there's a flurry of activity around me, and once again, I have no clue what to do. So, when they wheel Erin down the hallway on a gurney, I just follow the whole parade.

"I'm not supposed to have a natural birth. Please, do a C-section," she begs through tears.

"It's too late for that. The baby's already on the way."

"What's going on?" I cut in.

"Don't worry so much. Half of our patients come in with some kind of complication, but they still give birth naturally and everything turns out fine," the nurse says, trying to reassure Erin. Then she turns to me.

"Are you here for a partner delivery? Follow Ellie, she'll get you a gown, shoe

covers, and a mask.”

“No, no, no, no partner delivery, I’m not—”

“So when it comes to making the baby, you men are all front and center,” she snaps, “but when it’s time to support your wife—you vanish into the bushes.

Fine, then wait outside the delivery room.

But you’re still putting on the gown and shoe covers.

At least this one’s sober—earlier today we had a dad who started celebrating before the baby was even born. ”

Long story short—I have no idea how it happened, but instead of going home with a clear conscience, I end up sitting in a hallway in a ridiculous white gown that doesn’t fit me at all, flinching every time a gut-wrenching scream comes from behind the door across from me.

I’m not feeling great about any of this.

At some point, I catch myself thinking, What the hell am I even doing here?

I almost get up to leave—but the women’s bag in my hand stops me. I can’t just leave it here.

I pace the hallway, still gripping the bag like it owes me something. Then suddenly everything gets suspiciously quiet, and the next second, a sharp, high-pitched baby cry cuts through the silence. I exhale in relief. It’s over.

“Congratulations, Daddy. You’ve got a son,” a woman appears in the doorway and

drops the bomb on me.

Wonderful. Just became a “dad.”

“Thanks, but I’m not—”

I want to say I’m not the father and that this is all some huge mistake, but before I can get the words out, the doctor’s loud, panicked voice drowns me out:

“Miss Carol, get the resuscitator. Now. Cardiac arrest!”

“Is... is that supposed to happen?” I ask weakly, calling after the same nurse who just congratulated me on fatherhood—but no one answers me anymore.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

Five months ago

“Damn it!” I hiss, realizing I’ve officially lost the battle with the lock.

Desperation washes over me, and I understand there’s no way I’m getting into the apartment tonight. Just perfect.

“Need some help?” comes a woman’s voice from the side. I flinch at the sudden sound and drop the damn keys on the floor.

I glance over at the stranger—petite, young, wearing an expensive fur coat and high-heeled boots. She fits right in with this luxury high-rise.

Max always did have a thing for luxury, so I’m not even surprised he chose a place like this.

“Well, unless you’ve got a magic lockpick, I don’t think you can help. The lock’s completely jammed,” I say, not even bothering to hide the sarcasm in my tone. I plop down on top of my suitcase and sigh in defeat.

“And you are...?” the blonde asks, narrowing her eyes and giving me a slow once-over.

“My boyfriend’s out at sea. He left me the keys, and I’ve been trying to open the door for half an hour now. I think the lock’s stuck. I should probably call a locksmith, but



my phone's dead.”

I don't even know why I'm telling her all this. Maybe so she doesn't think I'm some kind of burglar.

“You're Max's girlfriend?” she asks suddenly.

Now it's my turn to eye her suspiciously.

I'm pretty sure my thoughts show clearly on my face, because in the next moment she throws up her hands and smiles.

“No, no, I'm just his neighbor. Nothing like that. He actually mentioned you'd be coming, but I think he said you were stopping by to pick up your things, not the other way around,” she adds, frowning at the bags surrounding me.

“Must've been a mix-up,” I shrug. “Not that it matters if I can't even get in. Guess I'll stay at a hotel tonight. Maybe he gave me the wrong keys. Could I borrow your phone? I need to call a cab.”

“Wait a sec—Max gave me a spare set of keys and said you might need help getting in. Didn't he tell you?”

“That's weird. Then why did he ask his friend to give me the keys?” I murmur, glancing at the floor.

Last time we messaged, the connection was so bad it took ten minutes for him to download the photo of the pregnancy test.

Maybe not all his messages came through?

She thinks for a moment, then leaves me alone in the hallway and returns a few minutes later. She inserts the key into the lock—and to my surprise, it turns on the first try.

She pushes the handle and opens the door with a victorious smile.

“Well then,” I raise an eyebrow in surprise. “Thanks. Good thing we ran into each other.”

“So... are you staying long?” she asks casually.

“Hopefully forever. I’m Erin.”

I grab the handle of my suitcase and roll it into the dark hallway.

“Vivienne,” she says after a pause, watching me carry in two duffel bags and a blooming potted orchid. “If you need anything, come by—I live next door.”

“Thanks for the help. Really. Otherwise, I might’ve been living in that hallway for the next six months.”

“Max probably just changed the locks after moving in,” she adds, nodding toward the keys still lying on the floor.

“Maybe. Anyway, thanks again, and good night,” I smile, close the door behind me... and still can’t believe my luck.

The first thing I do is pull a phone charger out of my purse, and it feels like an eternity passes before the screen finally lights up with a wallpaper of a deep blue ocean.

“I made it. Got here fine,” I text Max, and while I wait for a reply, I start looking around the apartment.

Open-concept kitchen and two rooms. One is spacious and bright, with a huge bed in the center. The other is smaller, set up as a workspace, with a tall bookshelf lining one wall.

Knowing Max, I can guess he had nothing to do with the interior design—because I can’t even picture him sitting at a desk with a pen in hand. Unless it’s to play another computer game.

Maybe someday we’ll turn that room into a nursery, though it’d be a shame to lose such a cozy space. It feels like every detail in here was chosen with care, like it was all meant specifically for this room. Even the spines of the books are arranged by color.

Inside the closet, I find a whole row of crisp white shirts, slacks, and ties. I’ve never once seen Max dress that formally.

I open the second door and smirk—now this is more like him. T-shirts, jeans, baseball caps, and an endless number of track suits—folded so neatly and precisely, there’s no doubt in my mind: a woman’s been here.

That thought makes me uneasy.

In the last few weeks before Max left for his trip, he started pulling away. Disappearing. Not answering my calls as often.

Could there really be someone else?

No. Most likely, after moving in, he hired someone to unpack all the boxes and

organize the place.

There can't be another woman in his life. Not after our whirlwind romance, meeting his family, his friends...

"Cool. Make yourself at home for now. We'll figure something out later," comes the reply—and the smile slips right off my face.

"We'll figure something out later..."

That phrase sticks with me. Won't let me go.

Especially after how he didn't say a single thing about the pregnancy. No happiness. No reaction. Just a dry: "You sure? Like, really sure?"

It's not like I was trying to trap him with a baby or anything, but since it happened, I'm not the only one responsible.

And I do love him—no point in denying that—and honestly, I was even a little happy about how things turned out.

If this is how it happened, then maybe it's fate.

And the pregnancy would just speed up our status change from "dating" to "married."

Max and I met on social media seven months ago.

Although, to be honest, I hadn't even planned on replying to him.

Lately, messages from random guys had been seriously annoying me, and I was actually trying to find the "messages from friends only" setting when a notification

popped up—Max Taylor sent you a message.

I just snorted, closed the window, and didn't respond.

But a week later, when a customer walked out of my flower shop with a giant bouquet of roses, I suddenly felt this strange emptiness.

Loneliness.

Coldness.

I watched the tall, well-dressed man walk away and found myself dreaming about someone just like that. Like something out of a fairy tale. A little romance, a little magic, and some crazy, all-consuming love.

Screw it, I thought, and in a burst of emotion, opened up my page again.

I scrolled through all my male friends, wondering who I could text and maybe ask out—but somehow, they all turned out to be either married or “taken”.

Even Robert from college—the nerd with the glasses that looked like my grandma's—he was “in love with Anastasia Duck.”

That's when I went into my messages.

I opened the stranger's profile and just stared.

Handsome. Tall. Muscular. Blond hair and green eyes. A bit of a cocky smirk, but his face seemed open, friendly. Stylish. Well-traveled. And clearly not the kind of guy who denied himself much.

At some point, I even wondered if someone had just stolen his pictures. Guys like him don't usually look for girls online. They go to nightclubs, size up the local talent, and pick whoever catches their eye.

But something still made me open the chat window.

Fueled by emotion, I messaged Max—telling myself this was the last time I was ever going to take the first step with a guy online.

And it worked.

At first, we just texted about everything and nothing—shared stories about past relationships and heartbreaks.

He was a great conversationalist: quick-witted, sarcastic, funny. He kept me on my toes, never letting me get bored.

After a month of chatting almost every day, when I already couldn't imagine starting a morning without his "Good morning, sugar" or going to bed without "Sweet dreams, beautiful," my phone rang.

It was the first time I heard Max's voice.

Young, slightly husky, low, velvety—and absolutely hypnotic. It was the kind of voice you just wanted to keep listening to.

I was afraid to say the wrong thing. Afraid my voice would sound dry, irritated, or squeaky. Afraid he wouldn't call again or text me after that conversation.

But to my relief, it only brought us closer.

Sleepless nights with my phone in hand, messages that grew more and more personal, photos that made me blush... and then came the agonizing wait for our first meeting—it all drove me crazy.

Almost four months apart, and the man I'd never even seen in real life had become my everything.

Someone whose invisible presence in my life made me feel happy—and gave me energy that lasted for hours.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

The day Max got back from his rotation at sea turned out to be a huge disappointment.

Just imagine—making plans together, dreaming about vacations, movie premieres, counting down the days until he was finally back... and then, on the day, all I got was a short message:

“I’m back. Heading home with a friend. Don’t miss me too much.”

I slid down the wall and sank to the floor, unable to hold back the bitter tears.

I had really thought he’d come straight to me.

I had picked out my best dress, done my hair and makeup. I’d closed my little flower shop early, just after lunch and spent the whole day glued to my phone, nervous, excited. And he... didn’t even offer to grab a quick coffee.

My heart ached from the unfairness of it, but I had tried to hold it together and not let my mind spiral.

We ended up meeting three days later.

Totally unexpected.

I had been trimming thorns off a bunch of roses, arranging them into a heart shape,



cursing all men and my own hopeless romanticism—when my phone rang.

It was Max, saying he'd pick me up in half an hour.

And, of course, just my luck—I was having the worst day.

No makeup, wearing a stretched-out sweater and worn jeans, because I had woken up feeling like crap and had just thrown on whatever was closest.

I had to act fast.

Thankfully, my flower shop was inside a shopping mall.

I ran into a boutique, grabbed a beige blouse and black skinny jeans, then sprinted to the shoe store next door and picked out a pair of stilettos in under five minutes. After that, I'd raced to the cosmetics kiosk on the other side of the mall.

Max had shown up the moment I added the final touch—some tinted lip balm—and exhaled in relief, pleased with how I'd pulled it off.

The few minutes I waited at the entrance had felt like forever. At one point, I had seriously considered running away.

My hands were shaking. I had already chewed up my lips. I kept scanning every face that passed by... and I hadn't even realized when he appeared right in front of me.

“Hey.”

His voice had sounded just like it did over the phone—but his appearance... God, he was ten times more attractive in real life. Especially his eyes. How was it even legal for a man to look that good?

I had opened my mouth to say something, anything—but all I had managed was a shaky exhale.

“I’ve got the right girl, yeah? You’re Ginger?”

He had raised an eyebrow, studying me, waiting for confirmation.

“Ginger”—that was the nickname he’d given me because of my bright, fiery hair. And for the first time ever, it hadn’t bothered me. The way he said it... it had sounded different. Special. Ours.

“Yes, it’s me,” I had breathed out, finally letting it sink in: this really was my Max.

It had felt strange—talking to him in person instead of over the phone.

I kept feeling like I was somehow cheating on the guy who still lived in my messenger.

I had caught myself listening closely to his voice, trying to recognize the tone I knew so well. Casually, I had slipped in a few questions—ones only the real Max could’ve answered—just to make sure this wasn’t some elaborate joke.

It was probably paranoia, but my brain hadn’t been able to reconcile the image. Yes, he had looked somewhat like the guy from the photos—but in real life, he was completely different.

A little shorter than I’d imagined; Broader shoulders, smaller nose, wider cheekbones, different haircut.

Charismatic. Quick on his feet. Clean-shaven.

The only thing that had been exactly the same was that wide, easy smile.

I had worried that the magic would vanish the second we were alone, that things would feel awkward between us—like they usually did during first dates.

But it hadn't happened. On the contrary, it felt like we'd known each other forever.

And as silly as it sounded, if he had invited me over to his place that night—I would've said yes. On our very first date. But he hadn't.

Instead, on the way home, he had bought me a bouquet of flowers and kissed me softly—warm and fragrant, the kind of kiss that lingered. His cologne had driven me crazy, made me want to bury my face in his chest and never leave.

I had hesitated. Had thanked him more times than necessary, stalling, dragging out the goodbye, unable to bring myself to open the car door and step out.

After four months of nonstop talking, that man had felt like home to me.

I had known nearly everything about him—his favorite food and drinks, his fears, his past relationships, the music and books he loved... even a few intimate details he probably hadn't meant to share.

I had never believed in love at first sight.

But now, looking at him—I just knew.

He was mine.

And I wasn't letting go.

“What time do you get off work tomorrow?” he asked, snapping me out of my strange trance.

“Six,” I replied, and deep inside, a flicker of hope lit up—this couldn’t be the end. We were definitely going to see each other again.

“Then I’ll get us movie tickets.”

“I’m in,” I said, unable to hide my happy smile. I stared into his eyes for a few seconds without blinking, and then reluctantly stepped out of the car.

And after that, everything happened so fast, I didn’t even realize how half of his stuff ended up in my rented apartment—and mine in his.

How he had introduced me to his parents when they came to visit, and to his best friends, who we ended up traveling with.

He wasn’t stingy—never let me pay for anything.

He loved parties and nightclubs just as much as he loved staying in and watching a show together.

It had all felt so real, so serious—there was no room for doubt. Why else would he do all that?

But something shifted the moment Max found out the exact date of his departure. It was like someone flipped a switch. He grew distant, closed-off, always busy. Suddenly, he barely had time to see me. He picked up his things from my place and dove headfirst into preparing for his new contract.

“Are we okay?” I had asked him once, holding my breath, because the uncertainty

was eating me alive.

“Of course we are, Erin.”

“It’s just... you’ve been acting strange lately.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He had pulled me into his arms and kissed me gently. “I just want to buy a place before I leave. I found a few listings but can’t decide.”

“I see,” I said, a little disappointed, still waiting for him to ask if I wanted to help him pick.

And then time flew. I didn’t even realize how I ended up alone again—in the apartment, in the city.

We didn’t even say goodbye in person on the day he left.

No kiss. No hug. No wave.

He hadn’t even told me when his flight was and hadn’t asked me to take him to the airport.

He had just texted: “Already on the plane. I’ll call you when I land.”

Three hours later, the phone rang. That familiar voice again.

And just like that—loneliness. Again.

I had gotten used to Max. To his presence in my life. To our constant calls and messages. So when he suddenly disappeared, it felt like the ground had been pulled out from under me. I couldn’t find peace anywhere.

This time, he had signed with a new company. His ship now sailed across the ocean, with long transfers between ports and almost no signal. It felt like my life had emptied out—and fallen apart.

One night, someone shattered the front window of my flower shop.

The woman I rented my apartment from asked me to move out urgently because her daughter was filing for divorce.

I got into a car accident because I hadn't been paying attention and totaled my car.

And to top it all off—two red lines on a pregnancy test.

It had all hit me out of nowhere, within the span of a single week, knocking me off balance and making me feel helpless for the first time in my life.

In that moment, all I had wanted was a man's support; To lean on a strong shoulder and hand over my problems to someone else for just a second. To hear someone say, "It's going to be okay."

But Max didn't even check in to read the message telling him he was going to be a father. I clutched my phone even in my sleep, trembling all over as I waited for his reply.

I had been terrified of his reaction—and finally let out a breath of relief when he suggested I move in with him.

And so, here I was. Surrounded by sterile cleanliness, high ceilings, and floor-to-ceiling windows. I had collapsed on the bed, still in my clothes, too exhausted to even move.

I ordered food delivery, called the auto repair shop for the fifth time that day—bugging them about my baby, because getting around the city without her had become a nightmare.

Then I sat there, trying to process the fact that I was pregnant.

What would happen to my flower shop? How would I manage on my own with a baby once Max left for work again?

Those questions haunted me throughout my entire pregnancy. I'd had to keep working, solve every problem on my own, attend all my doctor's appointments by myself—and because of my heart condition, I'd even been hospitalized for a while.

Max had written so rarely that I sometimes cried the whole night through. Then I would wake up early and throw myself back into work.

I tried to fill every second of free time just to keep my mind from spiraling over Max.

“Can I start turning the office into a nursery?”

“Yes. Want me to send money?”

“I've got it.”

For some reason, my pride hadn't let me accept his money. Maybe it was the hurt. Because I had just told him we were having a son—and he had barely reacted.

Day by day, the resentment kept growing.

I'd texted him updates about how I was feeling. Sent him photos of nursery furniture. And in return? Short replies. A handful of phone calls. And even those—I had

initiated. Because I had desperately needed to hear his voice. Just to believe that everything was going to be okay.

Vivienne—my neighbor and now a friend—had told me it was normal for men not to know how to express their feelings.

But I had known Max. I knew what he was like.

I'd only started to calm down when I found that app that let you track ships. And I had seen for myself that they really were out in the open ocean for weeks at a time, far from land, far from any cell signal.

That was how the months of my pregnancy had passed.

In agonizing waiting.

In sadness.

In loneliness.

And in constant uncertainty about what the next day might bring.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

I want to sleep. It feels like I could pass out standing up. But instead of going home after all this chaos, I'm sitting in the head OB's office, where the nurse led me for some unknown reason, sipping disgusting instant coffee and hoping it'll at least jolt me awake.

The hospital smell clings to my nose, dragging up memories of the worst times in my life, and the nervous tension is gnawing at me.

I pace the room, then rock on a chair that's about to collapse.

It's almost morning. I'm exhausted, pissed off, and starving.

But something keeps me here, won't let me just get up and leave.

The department head shows up out of nowhere—disheveled, sleepy, and clearly anxious. She greets me with a nod, pulls a white coat from the cabinet, then sinks into the chair across from me with a heavy sigh.

“My name is Marie Gray. And you're Mr. Taylor...?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

I nod, not sure how she already knows my name.

“Alright, Mr. Taylor. The thing is, your wife—”

“No, no, we're not married,” I cut her off quickly, down the last of the coffee, and rub

my eyes.

“Erin was admitted too late, so we had to take emergency action. There was significant blood loss. The delivery was... complicated,” she says carefully, choosing every word, and I get the feeling she’s holding something back.

“So what’s going on with her?” I ask, a bit on edge, since no one’s told me yet whether she made it or not.

The thought that the redhead might’ve died messes with my head. Just a couple of hours ago, she was in my car, screaming in pain.

“She’s in intensive care. Stable condition, but unconscious. We did everything we could. All we can do now is wait and hope.”

“Got it. Thanks for the update. Can I go now?” The relief hits me hard. She’s alive. She’s too young to die like that, leaving a kid behind. And I still don’t know what the hell she was doing in my apartment, which is driving me insane.

“The baby boy’s fine, if you’re wondering.”

“Yeah, someone already told me.”

“If you’d like to see him, you can come by tomorrow.”

“Eh... no thanks. I’m not really feeling it.”

The doctor’s face changes instantly—from kind to stiff, from neutral to judgmental. Her eyes say it all: she thinks I’m the father, and I couldn’t care less about my son. But I’m not about to correct her. Let her believe whatever she wants. Doesn’t matter to me.

“So that’s it?” I get up from the chair and remember the bag I’ve been dragging around for hours for no damn reason. “By the way, these are Erin’s things. Where should I put them?”

“Leave them, I’ll pass them to the medical staff. And... I checked, her insurance is out-of-network...”

I blink.

“What does that mean?”

“It means our hospital isn’t in her insurance company’s provider network.”

A laugh slips out of me.

“Maybe contact her relatives then? Do you have any numbers?”

“You’re the only one listed under emergency contacts,” she says, giving me a sharp look from behind her glasses.

“No way, that can’t be right,” I frown.

“Maxwell Taylor,” she reads from Erin’s medical file. “That’s you, isn’t it?”

“You could say that,” I sigh in defeat, realizing I can’t just walk away and leave Erin here. It’d be a whole different thing if she were conscious and could call her family, but right now?

No one even knows if her “Maxwell Taylor” exists — or if they’d even be able to reach him.

I get home at dawn. My eyes blur, my temples pound. I sit in the car for a couple minutes, gather some strength before heading up. I close my eyes—and I don't even realize when I fall asleep.

I jolt awake when a car horn blares, slam my head into the door, and glance around, completely disoriented.

It takes me a moment to figure out where I am.

Mentally, I'm still in my cabin on the ship, catching sleep before a shift.

My eyes widen, my heart hammers. People are rushing by outside the window—it feels surreal after staring at the same damn horizon for half a year.

“Shit,” I mutter, stretching my stiff neck and reaching for my phone. One in the afternoon. Just great. What a night.

I pray this was all just a dream. But no—the red scarf on the back seat, the one Erin forgot in a hurry, is still there. A reminder that, apparently, I became a “dad” last night.

Her face flashes before my eyes again, and I need to get to the bottom of this. Fast.

I step out of the car and call my sister on the go. If Erin was telling the truth and really knew her, then Elena's the one who can clear things up.

“Aaaaaaah! Brother!” Her squeal blasts through the speaker, and I wince. “You're back already? Why didn't you tell me?! Did you bring me gifts? Did you get that bag from Italy like I asked?”

A grin tugs at my lips just from hearing her voice. Elena's twenty, but half the time

she acts like a kid. In my head, she still is one.

“I’m back, I’m back. And yeah, I got the perfume, too. Listen, have you been to my place while I was gone?” I press the elevator button and tense up, waiting for my sister’s answer.

“Well yeah, I told you I would.”

“And you didn’t notice anything... weird in the apartment?” I lower my voice, glancing over at the concierge, who’s eyeing me suspiciously. Looks like he doesn’t recognize me. Not that I recognize him either.

“Other than the pregnant fiancée you’re apparently hiding from the entire world?

” she teases, and I close my eyes, biting back a curse.

“But don’t worry, bro, I didn’t say anything to Mom and Dad.

Figured if you’re keeping quiet, there’s a reason.

You’ll introduce Erin to everyone when you’re ready. ”

Well, at least there’s that. The last thing I need is our parents getting excited about some long-awaited “grandchild”.

“Elena, I met her for the first time in my life yesterday,” I sigh, completely done with everything. “So now tell me everything, in order. I seriously don’t understand how this girl managed to get into my apartment. She’s probably just a scammer. A pregnant scammer.”

“What?” she gasps and goes quiet. Hopefully, she’s racking her brain for every detail.

Then suddenly, she bursts out laughing. “God, Max! Why do I always fall for your dumb jokes?”

“It’s not a joke, Elena. I’m dead serious. I have no clue who Erin is or how she convinced everyone she’s my fiancée. So start remembering.”

“I did tell you about her. And you even replied—barely, in your usual way. Did you forget already? Stop messing with me. I was already getting excited about babysitting my nephew. When is he due again?”

“Wait, when exactly did you tell me about her?”

“When I stayed at your place for that Lara Fabian concert. I opened the door and walked in—and there was this random girl mopping the floor. I even sent you a pic from the concert, remember? We all went together. Didn’t Erin mention it?”

“Don’t hang up,” I say quickly and open my messages.

I scroll through our short chat, and my finger freezes when I see the photo from the concert hall downtown.

My sister and a girl with fiery red hair.

Erin. No doubt about it. Just not as pale and exhausted as she looked yesterday.

She’s thinner, with sharp cheekbones, long curls, makeup, a bright sparkle in her eyes, and a wide smile.

“Erin is so cute. You two would look great together,” Elena had written.

“Yeah,” I replied. That was it. “I thought she was just one of your friends you’re

always trying to set me up with,” I mutter in frustration, finally realizing that this girl didn’t just barge into my apartment—she barged into my life.

“Wait... you’re not joking?” my sister asks, now sounding serious.

“Does it sound like I am?”

“So... wait, the baby isn’t yours?” She actually sounds disappointed. Like that’s what we should be worrying about right now. “Why don’t you just ask her? Let her explain. Max, Erin’s amazing! I was honestly happy you’d finally found a good girl and were settling down.”

“Don’t start, Elena. You know I’m not getting married anytime in the next ten years. Just tell me—did she say anything about herself?”

“No. I don’t think so. Honestly, I think the best thing now is to just talk to her.”

“I would love to, but Erin’s in a coma,” I say with a heavy exhale, and something tightens in my chest. I feel bad for her. No matter what. And for the baby, too. If she doesn’t make it... he’ll be left an orphan.

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I hesitate before pressing the doorbell. I stare at the brown door, hoping I’ll find at least a shred of truth here. Some kind of lead.

Vivienne completely charmed me from the first time we met. So small, delicate, always with a trace of sadness in her eyes.

But not anymore, because now she’s practically glowing with happiness—something I can’t quite share with her at the moment.

“Oh, Max, hi! It’s so good to see you. When did you get back?”

I freeze. Her eyes are sparkling, white curls spilling over her shoulders, that wide smile, flawless figure... It honestly looks like she’s gotten even prettier since the last time I saw her.

“Yesterday. Evening,” I say hoarsely, after a pause, grateful for my thick stubble hiding my face. I’m pretty sure I blushed like some teenage girl under her gaze.

“Wanna come in?” she offers.

“No, I’ll be quick.” Somewhere in the apartment, I hear a low male voice. Logan—her husband—is home. And I’ve got zero desire to run into him right now. “Listen, it’s about Erin,” I mutter, unsure how to ask her why a pregnant stranger ended up living in my apartment.

The situation is a total mess, and accusing Vivienne of letting some scammer into my place feels a bit too harsh.

“Oh, she’s so lovely! I’m really happy for you two,” she says warmly, and I can feel my jaw tighten, my eye twitching at her words.

“Yeah... about that. She’s... not my girlfriend. And I was really hoping you could tell me how she ended up in my apartment.”

“What?” Vivienne’s eyes widen in surprise, and then—just like my sister—she laughs out loud. “Such a dumb joke. Anyway, how’s Erin? She was saying yesterday her back had been aching all day.”

“She’s not great,” I say sharply, not getting into details because I know the two of them had become friends. No point upsetting Vivienne. “I’m serious right now. Some



random girl lived in my place for half a year. How did that happen? She said you gave her the keys. Is that true?"

"Yes." The smile drops from her face instantly. Her eyes dart around nervously. "But... hang on. You asked me to give them to your girlfriend, remember?"

"When did I ever say that?" I scoff in disbelief.

"Well... about a month after you left for your rotation."

I frown. Try to make sense of what she's saying. I pull out my phone and scroll through my messages with Vivienne.

And frown again.

"I asked you to let Natalie in. She left some of her stuff at my place."

"I... I'm sorry... Are you sure? It's just... she was standing at your door and said your name. It was the day after your message."

"And it didn't seem strange to you that she moved in instead of just stopping by for five minutes? And that her name isn't Natalie?"

"I'm sorry, Max. God, I... I just deleted your message right away. You know how Logan gets about us texting, so I didn't remember her name. You said a girl would show up, so I gave her the keys. You're not serious right now, are you?"

Instead of answering, I bring my phone closer to her face so she can see the message with her own eyes.

"Oh." Vivienne covers her mouth with her hand, looking at me in shock.

“But how? Erin talked about you so much, it never even occurred to me that she might be lying. And she didn’t seem like the type at all.

She runs a flower shop in the mall, volunteers, we even went to the spa and shopping together.

Picked out a crib for your... her baby. Why would she break into your apartment and lie about being with you? ”

Good question.

I rub my face, then give her a brief rundown of everything I’ve managed to learn so far. Now there are three of us—confused, bewildered, and with zero answers.

“She met my sister, too. And apparently my friend.”

“You mean Lucas Simmons?”

I nod.

“He helped assemble the nursery furniture and took some of your books. Said there’s no way you’d let them be thrown out. Promised to stash them for you until you got back.”

I’m both grateful and annoyed that even my friend somehow got roped into this mess. If not for him, some homeless guy could’ve spent the whole winter burning my collectible volumes.

“And how did Lucas even get involved?”

Vivienne shrugs. Then, for some reason, she lowers her voice to a whisper and

glances toward the door that leads to my apartment.

“Maybe we should just ask Erin? I still don’t believe she’s some scammer. She had six months to clean out your place, and instead, she turned it into a nursery. That doesn’t really add up, does it?”

“Don’t even mention the nursery,” I groan, rolling my eyes. Another disaster I’ll have to fix.

Vivienne smiles at that, and I can’t help but chuckle too.

“Most likely, her boyfriend found out she was pregnant and just disappeared. Gave her a random address, and it just happened to be mine. Though honestly, that sounds ridiculous,” I sigh.

“Or maybe... maybe this guy actually does know me somehow... I don’t know what to think.

And no one’s giving me a straight answer. ”

“What does Erin say?”

“She’s convinced there’s been some mix-up. That I’m the one who got the wrong apartment. Also, she gave birth yesterday,” I add all in one breath.

“Oh, that’s wonderful...”

Vivienne catches my disapproving look and falls silent, hiding her excitement behind a small, sheepish smile. “I should go visit her. If you’re right and the father really bailed, she’s all alone. God, that’s awful. I can’t imagine what she must be going through.”

“Yeah, we’ll visit. Just... later. The delivery was complicated, and no one’s allowed in right now,” I lie. Mostly.

I say goodbye to Vivienne, promising I’ll let her know when it’s okay to visit Erin, and finally head back into my apartment.

I barely have the energy to take off my shoes before collapsing face-first onto the bed.

The last thing I register before blacking out is that the sheets smell different.

Like someone spilled an entire bottle of floral perfume on them.

It’s irritating.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

I wake up, and the first thing that feels off is the silence. It's almost never quiet on a ship—there's always the hum of the engine, crew voices, someone snoring behind the paper-thin wall of my cabin. So the total silence in the apartment feels unbearable.

I turn on the AC, the TV, the electric kettle—anything that makes noise—and only then do I start to feel some semblance of comfort.

I open the fridge and spot some pots. These ones with red poppies definitely aren't mine.

Natalie picked out my kitchenware, and she would've called this pattern tacky as hell.

Right away, I think of Erin and grimace, because I'd just managed to stop obsessing over the whole situation—and now my brain is flooded again with a hundred questions and theories.

I make myself a strong coffee and try to ignore the urge to call the hospital and check if the girl's regained consciousness.

Then I pass by the home office and can't help myself—I peek in.

The blue chaos is still there. The crib's in the same place.

The giant plush bear pisses me off. I want to tear it all down and return the room to its original state, but I don't have the heart to throw anything out just yet. I slam the door

shut and call Lucas.

“Hey, I’ve got a couple questions,” I say slowly, still debating how to bring them up.

“Listen, how did you even meet Erin?”

“What, are you jealous or something? Come on, Max, you know me—I’d never.”

“No, it’s just... Erin mentioned you helped with the nursery. I wanted to thank you,” I lie, not ready to tell him the truth yet. He’d never let me live it down.

“Ah, got it,” he drops his voice to a whisper. “I knew those chicks screwed something up. Told them there’s no way in hell you’d let your precious paperbacks get tossed. Anyway, you owe me now—I saved them. They’re safe up in my attic.”

“Thanks. Honestly, that’s the best news I’ve had in the last twenty-four hours. But seriously—how did you end up involved in all this?”

“Your sister asked me to help. I didn’t believe it at first—until I saw your redhead. And damn, can she cook. You’re a lucky man. Hope it works out this time.”

Classic Simmons—knows just how to ruin the mood in under five seconds.

“This time” means my previous marriage. Six years ago.

Things were great—until the money ran dry.

Then I got hit with serious health issues, had to quit working at sea and stay on land for nearly two years.

Income dropped. Medical bills piled up. Cynthia started throwing tantrums. Sulking.

She even had to get a job for the first time in her life.

Then one day, just like that, she packed her things, filed for divorce, and ran off with her boss.

I only found out thanks to mutual friends.

I don't know how I didn't lose my mind back then. I was obsessed with her. I loved her. I did everything for her. And she walked away during the worst moment of my life—without a second thought.

“Yeah. I hope it works out too,” I say after a pause and hang up. I grab my jacket and head out to get some fresh air.

The city feels foreign. I don't even remember the way to the grocery store right away. While I was gone, a real estate office turned into a travel agency, and the old house on the corner got torn down—construction already underway.

I look around, feeling weirdly lost in all the noise and motion.

People in the store are driving me nuts with how slow they move.

While I'm unloading groceries onto the belt at the register, I hear a baby crying nearby, and instantly Erin and her son pop into my head.

I shouldn't care. But maybe because she somehow slipped into my apartment and pretended to be my fiancée for nearly half a year...

or maybe because I basically helped deliver her baby—I just can't shake them off.

To get rid of the dark thoughts and keep myself busy, I buy a gym membership and

start spending a few hours there every day.

I ignore my mom's constant questions about when I'll come visit her and dad—because my ex-wife lives on the same floor.

And apparently, she still gets along great with my parents, which means she could knock on their door any minute to borrow sugar or salt.

A few days go by in a blur of “bed-fridge-bed-gym-shower-bed,” and it's during one of those workouts that I get a call from an unknown number.

“Yeah?” I answer, breathing heavily, slowing the treadmill down.

“Mr. Taylor, this is the head of the maternity department.”

“Good afternoon.” I slam the “STOP” button in shock and nearly fly off the treadmill.

“You should come in. It's been a week, and you haven't visited your wife or son even once. We can schedule the discharge for tomorrow, if that works for you.”

“Discharge? Tomorrow?” My heart kicks up. Thank God—she's alive.

“Yes. Come closer to noon.”

Erin's things are still in my apartment. I've got a million questions for her, and I'd rather catch her at the hospital than risk her vanishing. This whole thing's still way too sketchy—I need some clarity.

“Alright. I'll be there,” I say. The woman hangs up, and only now do I realize how much tension I've been carrying all these days.



I pull up to the hospital at exactly eleven. I stand near the entrance, waiting for Erin and the baby.

Five minutes pass. Then ten. Then fifteen. I'm sure I'd notice a red-haired girl coming out of the only door in this wing—but after twenty minutes, I start doubting whether I'm even waiting in the right place.

I head to the reception. To my surprise, it's the same nurse on duty.

"Excuse me, I need to see the head doctor. She called me."

The nurse eyes me carefully.

"You the baby daddy?"

"You could say that," I mutter, shoving my hands into my pockets.

"I'll call her."

A few minutes later, I'm escorted into the same office. But this time, I'm not in shock—I can actually think straight and take in what's being said.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Taylor," the woman says with a smile. I try to remember her name—it's on the tip of my tongue, but my memory betrays me. "Please, take a seat."

She opens a thick notebook filled with scribbles, scans it, mutters something under her breath, and jots down a few notes.

"I sent your wife's medical history to a specialist in another city.

There's a good chance she'll recover." She pauses.

Long pause. Presses her lips together—that classic warning sign before someone drops bad news.

“Erin has been transferred to a different department. They have everything she needs there. I’ll give you the contact info for her new doctor. ”

“Wait,” I say, thrown off, “That must be a mistake. You told me yesterday she was getting discharged today.”

“The baby is being discharged. Erin...” She exhales.

“I won’t beat around the bush. The truth is, two days ago, her condition worsened.

The baby’s been here for eight days now—he’s perfectly healthy, no issues, the staff is caring for him.

But what if this goes on for months? No one can predict when she’ll wake up.

Could be a week. Could be a month. It’s different for everyone.

I think your son would be better off at home, surrounded by a loving family. And I’m sure you’re eager to see him.”

She’s nervous. And I start getting the sense that something’s off here. I remember Erin mentioning she wasn’t supposed to have a natural birth. Most likely, this woman is scared I’ll go public with what happened—because no matter how you spin it, it smells like medical negligence.

“So what exactly is going on with my... wife?” I clear my throat, still tripping over that word. “Can someone explain it to me clearly?”

The woman's eyes widen. She looks away and starts tapping her pen against the desk.

"I think that's a question best answered by her attending physician. My job is to deliver babies," she says with a nervous chuckle.

"Right. Then I'll go."

"Wait—I asked them to bring your little one here," she says, standing up with a too-bright smile.

"What? Why?" I snap a little harsher than I intended. This whole situation is getting under my skin. Maybe it's time to find this girl's relatives. Let them worry about her.

"What do you mean, why? He's your son," she says, squinting at me. And that's when I realize I should've corrected her back when I had the chance. Letting her believe Erin and I were a couple—and that the baby is mine—was a huge mistake.

What the hell am I supposed to do with a kid? Especially one that isn't even mine?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

I frown. Well, guess I should've cleared everything up from the very beginning, so we wouldn't be having surprises like this now. But I wanted to avoid a long-winded explanation so badly, I just went along with the doctor's assumptions last time, hoping it'd be the last I'd see of them.

I never imagined they'd actually try to hand me someone else's baby.

I shut my eyes and exhale sharply, trying to stay calm and not say anything I'll regret. This whole situation is, to put it mildly, spiraling out of control.

"Look," I start, "there's been a mistake. That baby's not mine. And since Erin still hasn't regained consciousness, he should stay here with you for now."

After that, I'm hoping to walk out of this maternity ward and never come back.

I don't even care anymore how this stranger ended up living in my apartment.

I just want peace. A few weeks of silence, at least. The ocean's still flashing behind my eyelids, the engine's hum echoing in my ears, and I haven't slept properly in months.

My body's stuck on night shift mode after six months at sea.

"Mmm-hmm. Got it," the department head drawls, pulling off her thin-framed glasses, pushing aside a worn-out patient log, and fixing me with a sharp look. "You

know how many men like you I've seen in my years here?"

I arch an eyebrow. This should be interesting.

"They give birth and then just abandon their babies. I mean, I can understand it from single mothers with barely a penny to their name—but you, Mr. Taylor? It's obvious you're not struggling financially. You could easily provide for a child."

Her eyes sweep over the thick gold bracelet on my wrist, the expensive watch, the car key with a logo that makes it obvious what kind of ride I drive.

"I understand it's a shock. I understand things might not be great between you and the child's mother, and maybe you have no idea how to care for a newborn. But there are relatives, there are nannies. Your wife risked her life to bring this child into the world, and now you just want to walk away?"

She leans forward, voice sharpening.

"If you refuse to take the boy, child services will step in, and he'll stay in the system until Erin wakes up.

Can you imagine the stress that puts on a baby?

Who's going to hold him, love him, care for him the way he needs?

Will you be able to sleep at night knowing your son is lying alone in a crib, hungry and neglected? "

She's clearly trying to tug at my heartstrings—and, okay, maybe it's working a little—but here's the thing: this kid isn't mine. So no, it's not going to work. No guilt, no moral awakening, no sudden fatherly instincts kicking in.

Her impassioned speech is cut off by a knock at the door. I turn toward the sound and watch a young nurse in a white coat enter the office, carrying a small bundle in her arms.

“He just ate, so he’ll probably sleep the whole way,” she says brightly, walking toward me with a big smile as she tries to hand me the bundle—inside of which is a pink, slightly scrunched-up baby. Cute? Eh. The mom’s not bad-looking, so maybe he takes after the dad.

“Nope. No, thank you.” I raise both hands like she’s holding a grenade, refusing to take the kid.

Then I turn back to the head of the maternity ward.

“Look, there’s been a mix-up. My name is Max Taylor too, but I’m not the father of this baby, so I’m not taking him home.

If it’s about money—fine. I’ll cover whatever needs to be covered.

But I’m not taking on this kind of responsibility.

What am I even supposed to do with him? Let me try to find some relatives of Erin’s.

Or the real dad. They should be the ones looking after him. ”

“Mr. Taylor, now I’m completely confused,” she says, frowning. “Last time, you didn’t deny this was your son. Now you’re saying the opposite. What am I supposed to do with the baby? Can you please make up your mind?”

“Someone here should look after him,” I say calmly. “I’ll pay for whatever he needs. And if possible, I’d like to get Erin’s personal things—her phone and ID. I need to

contact her family. I left a bag here last time, remember?”

She presses her lips together, clearly annoyed. Her glare sharpens. I can tell she’s not thrilled about how this has turned out—and me refusing to take the baby only makes it worse for her.

“Fine. Martha, please bring Miss Hale’s belongings.”

“And... and the baby, ma’am?” the nurse asks, flustered.

“Back to the ward, obviously,” she replies with a sharp edge. “Apparently, the father isn’t the father after all. Make sure the boy is cared for.”

She falls silent for a moment, watching Martha’s retreating figure as she leaves with the baby. When the door closes behind them, the head nurse locks her eyes on me again.

“And you, Mr. Taylor... I sincerely hope you find your ‘not-wife’s’ relatives as soon as possible.”

“Sure,” I mutter, giving a curt nod. This vacation’s turning out great. One week back on dry land and things are already a complete mess.

I wait silently for the nurse to bring Erin’s stuff, then finally say my goodbyes and step outside. The fresh air hits me hard, scrubbing away the thick smell of hospital disinfectant.

I climb into my car, still on edge. The whole day has been a disaster, courtesy of our mystery new mom. I dump the contents of her purse out onto the passenger seat and pick up her phone.

It's the latest model—just like mine. I plug it in and groan when the screen lights up. Locked. Password. Or Face ID. Neither of which I have.

Fine. Whatever. Guess I'm not meant to solve this today. She'll wake up eventually, right? And when she does, she can find her own family. Or the baby's real dad. I mean, she's not going to be in a coma for a whole year... right?

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I get home late that evening. First, I ran into a couple of friends, then spent a long time just driving around the city, lost in thought, my eyes constantly drifting to the passenger seat.

Erin Hale, twenty-five. According to her documents, she lives somewhere deep in the sticks.

Owns a black 2015 Toyota. Registered as self-employed, runs a flower shop—just like Vivienne said.

Pretty ordinary girl. Doesn't seem like a scammer, and nothing went missing from the apartment, except maybe the office furniture.

As I drive past my parents' house, I catch a glimpse of lights in the windows of my ex-wife's place and step on the gas—anything to get away from the temptation of sneaking a look at her.

Even though she crushed everything we had, I still get hit with waves of nostalgia sometimes, aching to turn back time.

To that first apartment. Small, but with a view of the park—and most importantly, it was ours.



We were happy there, making plans for the future, going on beach vacations, and every spring we'd take a week or two in the mountains.

And hell if I know what more my ex-wife wanted.

The sudden ringing of the intercom rips me out of my memories, and it takes me by surprise—I wasn't expecting anyone.

With effort, I lift my head from the pillow, pull on a T-shirt and jeans, and head for the door.

The screen shows Vivienne's worried face, and my brow rises in surprise. It's nearly eleven at night.

"Vivienne? Is everything okay?" I ask as I open the door and take in her petite frame.

"Yes—I mean, no, not exactly."

She slips past me into the apartment and shuts the door quickly, cutting us off from any nosy neighbors. It's obvious she's nervous, unsure where to start. Her eyes flit around the room, pausing on the women's clothes hanging by the door and the shoes on the floor.

"She's not here," I grunt, already guessing who Vivienne's eyes are searching for.

She gives me a guilty look, presses her lips together, and clears her throat.

"I feel awful about all this," she says in a low, muffled voice.

"I'm so sorry. I just never imagined that someone who knew so much about you—and was pregnant, no less—could turn out to be a complete stranger.

If she stole anything, I'll make it right, I swear," she adds passionately.

"But I really don't think Erin's that kind of person.

I got to know her pretty well over these past few months.

She just needs a chance to explain. You didn't report her to the police, did you? "

"No," I shake my head.

"Good. I'm serious, Max—I spent a whole week working up the courage to come over. You have no idea how much this whole situation has been eating me up inside."

"It's fine. Let it go," I say wearily, rubbing my eyes.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then I should get going before Logan realizes I'm gone. You know how he is." Vivienne rolls her eyes, and just the mention of her husband puts a soft smile on her face.

She hesitates. Her hand is on the door handle, but she doesn't leave. She glances back at me with a furrowed brow, like something's still bothering her. Finally, she blurts it out,

"Listen, I've been trying to call Erin. Her phone's been off for a week. Do you know how she's doing?"

I let out a heavy sigh.

“Erin... she’s... The baby’s fine, healthy. But the birth didn’t go well. She’s in the ICU.”

“What? Oh my God.” Her eyes go wide with panic. She hugs herself and bites her lip. “How is that even possible? What are the doctors saying? Have you been to see her?”

“Yeah, today. No clear prognosis yet. They’re taking care of the baby. They think I’m the father and tried to dump the kid on me.” I roll my eyes and give a dry, nervous laugh.

I keep my gaze fixed on Vivienne, hoping she’ll say something like, “You did the right thing, Max.” Something to ease my conscience. But what I get is completely different.

“We have to take the baby,” she says firmly, marching past me into the kitchen. She sits on a tall stool, staring into space.

“What do you mean we have to take the baby?” I follow her in, stopping across from her.

“If they think you’re the dad, they’ll hand him over to you without a second thought.

” She locks eyes with me—those bright blue eyes full of unwavering determination.

“You’ve got everything here for a baby already: crib, stroller, diapers—Erin bought all of it.

I’ll help. My daughter’s older now, way easier to handle. We can do this.”

“No,” I say flatly.

“Max, imagine if it were your kid and you weren’t there.”

“If a hospital handed my kid over to some random guy, I’d sue them into the ground.”

“This is different. Erin’s a good person. We became friends, and she really does love... her boyfriend.” Vivienne hesitates, then adds, “What if you... met her at a club, spent the night together, and just forgot? Maybe the baby really is yours.”

“Not a chance,” I snap, harsher than I mean to. But I’m sick of people trying to dump this baby on me. “From what Erin said, the father took off the moment he found out she was pregnant. I told you that already.”

“We have to help her.”

“I’ve helped her more than enough. Hell, she lived in my apartment for five months. I’d say that’s plenty.”

“Max.” Vivienne shoots me a look like I just drowned her kitten.

“No. Don’t even ask.” I shake my head. “I’ll find her relatives, or that runaway baby daddy—but we’re not taking the kid. What if Erin... dies?” I ask, my voice hoarse. Because yeah, that’s a very real possibility.

Her eyes go wide at the thought.

“Then I’ll have to raise him,” I mutter, chilled to the bone by the idea. “What else am I supposed to do—drop him off at a foster home myself?”

“Okay,” she says after a pause. “Give me her doctor’s contact info.

I’ll talk to them myself. And try to find her parents—he can’t stay in the hospital

forever.

Just thinking about him all alone in there makes me want to cry.

I even saw his ultrasound photo, Max. Erin couldn't decide on a name.

We picked out baby clothes together. I have to see him, make sure he's okay. ”

“He's fine,” I reply. “He's fine, I saw him today. Red and wrinkly, didn't cry, slept like a rock”

Vivienne only leaves after I promise—again and again—that I'll start searching for Erin's family first thing tomorrow.

I shut the door behind her and realize I've gotten myself into another mess. The kind that's sticky and weird and only gets deeper the more you try to claw your way out.

But Mrs. Gray's words echo in my mind—how the baby would end up in foster care if no one claimed him.

And that hits different. Because I spent the first six years of my life in one of those places.

I know what it's like to grow up without parents.

To never feel a mother's hug or hear someone say they love you.

No holidays. No bedroom to call your own.

Just a world behind a tall iron fence that you were only let out of every once in a while.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

My conversation with Vivienne stirred up memories I hadn't touched in years.

Memories of a time when all I ever wanted was to be chosen.

I used to watch other kids at the orphanage get taken away by new parents—led off to a place the caretakers said was so much better—and I wanted that too.

I wanted to know what it felt like to have a mom and dad, the way every kid in that place dreamed of.

I never asked Helga and Steven why they chose me, or who that boy in their photo album was—the one they've kept safe for all these years.

To me, they became Mom and Dad the moment I stepped into their home, and I've always been grateful for everything they gave me.

Elena, born a few years after my adoption, still has no idea that we're not related by blood.

I grew up in a loving home, got a good education, and turned out okay. It's honestly terrifying to imagine what could've happened if I'd stayed in that place until I aged out.

I don't manage to fall asleep until morning. When I do finally wake up, it's abrupt—like someone shoved me. I check my phone, drag myself out of bed, and

start walking through the apartment. On the way to the shower, I stop in front of what is now the nursery.

I hesitate. Then I give in, turn the handle, and peek inside.

The giant plush bear is still staring at me reproachfully, and I wince.

“Don’t even try to guilt-trip me. I’m not falling for it,” I mutter, not breaking eye contact with the stuffed toy.

Something about this room—and the stillness in the whole apartment—makes my skin crawl. I quickly shut the door and back away.

The whole day drags by. I can’t figure out what to do with myself.

Back when I was married, every minute of my time off was accounted for. Family visits, trips, shopping malls, dinners out—Cynthia hated staying home. I got used to that lifestyle, even though all I really wanted sometimes was just a quiet day in.

After the divorce, Elena—being the little sister and all—took it upon herself to pull me out of my post-marriage slump.

I tolerated her daily drop-ins, doing my best not to blow up and slam the door in her face.

But when she suddenly moved to another city for school, I realized just how much I missed the chaos.

If it hadn’t been for Elena, I’m not sure where I’d be now. Maybe I’d have ended up bonding with Kevin from the first floor—the guy who hits the 24/7 liquor store every morning at dawn. And that would’ve definitely been the end of me.

That evening, I finally try to find this mysterious Aspen Creek on the map.

Turns out, it's nearly two hundred miles away.

I quickly decide it's way easier to drive to the hospital and unlock her phone with her Face ID than to spend an entire day on the road—not even knowing if anyone's actually living at her registered address.

Either way, someone in her family needs to know what happened. Assuming she even has family. I've been holding on to her phone all day, hoping someone would call, but the screen stayed dark. Looks like there's no one out there worried about her. A whole week has gone by.

The next morning, I head to the hospital at sunrise. Big mistake—her doctor doesn't show up until nine. When he finally arrives, he recognizes me right away and leads me to my “wife's” room.

I hesitate outside the door. Not sure why I suddenly feel anxious. I take a few deep breaths and grip the handle.

There are two beds inside. The red hair is hard to miss. I slowly walk over to Erin.

There's an IV line in her arm and tubes in her nose.

Her breathing is shallow—her chest rising and falling so slowly it's like she's barely hanging on.

She looks pale, fragile, like all the color's been drained out of her.

The girl I met—rosy, lively, with a sharp stare and quick hands flipping pancakes—is gone.



Now there's just... this.

I stand by her bed for a while, just staring at her face. I don't even know why I came—well, that's a lie. I came to unlock the damn phone. But the reality of how fast life can fall apart has me frozen.

Just a week ago, she was probably counting the days until her baby arrived. And now? No one even knows if she'll make it.

And despite the fact that this girl is a complete stranger, my chest aches for her. Genuinely. Because what she's facing is terrifying. And because I've been there—I get it. I wouldn't wish this kind of helplessness on anyone.

I stare at her hand; Long fingers, thin wrist. I don't blink, willing her to move—just a twitch. Maybe she's just sleeping? It's not impossible, right?

I sigh, shove my hands in my pockets, and walk over to the window. My eyes land on the drab building across the way, and for a moment, I forget where I even am.

There's this stupid part of me—the part that won't shut up—pushing me to do something noble. Call in the best doctors in the country, demand the real truth, make something happen. Save her.

And then there's the baby.

Yeah. Someone's gotta figure out what the hell to do with him, too.

I need to find her family. Fast. Otherwise, I'm going to do something stupid.

I cross the room in a few quick strides and stop beside Erin again. Pulling her phone from my pocket, I bring it close to her face and unlock it with.

The sooner I hand Erin over to her parents, the sooner I'll start sleeping at night.

The lock screen lights up, and the first thing I do is reset the passcode. Then I go straight to her contacts and search for anyone labeled "Mom".

Nothing.

"Dad".

No results.

"Mommy. Father. Dearest Mom. Mama".

Nada.

Eventually, I give up and just scroll through her entire contact list, hoping to spot someone with her last name. Still nothing.

I open her messaging app. A few texts from clients. A couple from Vivienne. Not a single message from family. Not even from a close friend.

I finally find that Max guy—only to be disappointed again. According to the app, he hasn't been online in ages.

I glance back at Erin. Then lower myself into the chair beside her bed.

Before I even realize it, I'm tapping out some strange rhythm on my knee, nerves getting the better of me.

"Who are you, mysterious stranger who just dropped into my life?" I whisper, my eyes fixed on the slow, steady rhythm of her heartbeat on the monitor.

Then I suddenly straighten up and leave the room. No point in putting this off any longer.

With quick strides, I cross the hospital lobby and push through the front doors.

A sharp gust of wind cuts through my jacket, making me shiver.

I yank my hood over my head and head straight for the parking lot.

Once in the car, I punch the name of her town into the GPS, silently praying that a five-hour drive won't end at some broken-down shack in the middle of nowhere.

But honestly, what other choice do I have? Her flower shop's been closed for weeks according to her last social media post, which means I won't find any employees to talk to. No one to fill in the blanks. No one to explain how this woman ended up in my apartment, in my life.

It's like Erin's a ghost—seen only by me and the handful of people caught in her orbit. She showed up out of nowhere and vanished just as suddenly, leaving behind a trail of questions with no answers.

A thick fog settles over the highway, forcing me to ease off the gas. At this pace, I'm not sure I'll make it back home tonight—but weirdly, I don't mind. The drive gives me something to do. A break from the endless stretch of nothing.

That's the downside of my job. You work like a machine for six months straight, no weekends, no breaks—and then suddenly, you've got all the time in the world and no idea what the hell to do with it. Especially when you live alone and keep relationships at arm's length.

Of course, the weather decides to throw a full-on tantrum. What should've been a

three-hour trip drags out to five. When I finally roll into Aspen Creek, I pull off onto the shoulder of a narrow, uneven road to check the directions. A wave of doubt hits me hard.

What if this is another dead end?

What if I drive all the way out here just to turn around again?

Can I really go back to my life like nothing ever happened?

My hands grip the steering wheel tighter as I turn off onto a dirt path. A line of old houses greets me—some boarded up, some barely standing. Hope starts to slip away again.

But then I see it.

A well-kept house with a real roof and trimmed hedges. The number matches.

I exhale, finally allowing myself to relax.

Well... here goes nothing.

I step out of the car and make my way toward the house. A scruffy black mutt comes charging at me, baring its teeth in what I guess is supposed to be a threatening growl, though its size makes the whole act kind of ridiculous. I let out a quiet chuckle.

Scanning the yard, I silently hope someone spots me. Relief washes over me when an elderly woman appears on the porch at the sound of barking.

“Who’s there?” she squints, calming the dog with a flick of her hand.

“I’m here about Erin,” I call out, raising my voice, already bracing myself for the dreaded reply that no one here knows who that is.

Her brows knit together as she tosses a shawl over her shoulders and walks toward me.

“Did something happen?” she asks, her eyes searching mine with genuine worry. I hesitate. Dropping a bomb like she’s in the ICU isn’t exactly how I want to introduce myself to her family. But of course, I get the honor of delivering the bad news.

“No, everything’s fine,” I lie, glancing away and pretending to study the red shingles on the roof, avoiding her faded blue eyes. “I just wanted to speak with her parents. Are they home?”

“Her mama’s overseas,” she replies with a short pause. Not a word about her father. “And who exactly are you to our Erin?” she adds, cautious now.

“I’m... a friend. Max.”

Surprise flashes across her wrinkled face, quickly replaced by a warm, welcoming smile. She looks me over from head to toe, then nods approvingly.

“Well, I’m Mrs. Hoover, Erin’s grandma. But you can call me Margaret. She’s told me all about you.” Her eyes soften even more. “Didn’t know you were back, Max. Come in, come in.” She nudges the little mutt out of the way—it keeps trying to latch onto my leg. “So... where is my granddaughter?”

Her eyes wander to my car, clearly expecting Erin to step out of it any second. And that’s when the guilt hits me. How do I tell this sweet old woman that Erin’s been unconscious in intensive care for a week?

“She... she gave birth,” I start slowly, “and she’s still at the hospital for now.”

“Oh, bless her heart!” Margaret clasps her hands together in joy. “Come on in, Max. You can tell me everything. Is the baby healthy? Who does he look like?”

“Yes,” I reply shortly, without much detail. Then I reluctantly follow Mrs. Hoover into the house.

On my way here, I didn’t really think through what I was going to say to Erin’s family.

Well—scratch that—I had planned to walk in and drop the bomb about her condition right away, but turns out that’s easier said than done.

Now I’m sitting here, completely unsure how to start.

And the worst part? There’s still no one to take the baby home.

I seriously doubt this seventy-something woman could handle an infant on her own.

“Sit down, Max, make yourself comfortable,” Mrs. Hoover says warmly. “I’ll put the kettle on. Baked a pie with homemade jam this morning. Something told me I’d have company.”

The house is modest, but clean and cozy. A newer microwave and electric kettle look out of place against the backdrop of well-worn cabinets and a crocheted table runner. I rest my arms on the table and sneak a look at the time. It’s getting dark soon, and I’ve still got a long drive back.

While Mrs. Hoover moves around the kitchen, fussing over the teapot, I glance around the tiny room, trying to figure out what the hell I’m supposed to do next. Do I

tell her the truth or not?

“Erin didn’t talk much about her family,” I start cautiously. “From what I understand, it’s just her mom and you?”

“Her daddy left a long time ago. She doesn’t remember him,” Mrs. Hoover replies with a sigh. “My daughter and I raised her together. Ellie’s been working overseas for years, and we stayed here. Erin grew up so fast... sometimes I can’t believe it.”

Her eyes glisten with tears, and as she reminisces, the deep lines on her face seem to soften.

“Hard to believe my little girl is a mother now. Feels like just yesterday she was running barefoot through the yard.”

“When is her mother coming back?” I ask after a short pause. “Erin’s probably gonna need help with the baby.”

“Probably by summer. Ellie wanted to be here for the birth, but Erin talked her out of it. Said she’d manage.

Ellie’s met a good man over there, might even get married soon.

Erin didn’t want to pull her away from that.

And honestly, it’s about time. Poor girl’s almost fifty and still hasn’t caught a break.

Would be nice to see her finally happy for once. ”

She shakes her head and lets out a long breath.

I answer her questions about my relationship with Erin in short, vague replies. I don't deny being "that Max," but I don't confirm it either. And when Mrs. Hoover asks why Erin hasn't called, I lie and say she lost her phone right before the delivery—but wanted to send her love.

I just can't bring myself to say out loud what kind of shape Erin's actually in.

I ask for her mother's number, tell her it's just in case, and do my best to dodge the idea of staying the night.

Mrs. Hoover looks disappointed, and honestly, I get it. She probably spends most of her days alone. Her daughter's far away, caught up in her own life abroad, and Erin was off trying to make something of herself in the big city. No one really has time for an old woman anymore.

The drive back feels longer than ever. My head is pounding, and my mind's all over the place. On one hand, I'm relieved—at least there's someone who could take the baby if it came down to it. But on the other hand, the thought of this sweet, worn-out family going through a tragedy guts me.

And the kid... damn, I can't help but feel sorry for him. So new to the world, and already on the brink of losing it all.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

I get home close to midnight, but even though I'm dead tired, I can't sleep. Not even the dull drone of late-night TV helps. I down cup after cup of coffee as I pace the room, glancing at Erin's phone lying on the table.

I hate snooping through someone's private stuff.

It's not my thing—digging around in someone's dirty laundry.

So I hesitate for a while, unsure if I'm doing the right thing.

I unlock the phone, open the gallery, then instantly lock it again, not ready to go through her pictures. Then I repeat it all over again.

Curiosity wins. So does the need to figure out who this "Max" is. What if he's someone I know? If I can track him down, maybe I can finally get some peace and enjoy my damn break, instead of stressing about some stranger and her baby.

I pull up a chair, sit down, and give in. The photo gallery is mostly flower arrangements, bouquets, shots of Erin posing in the mirror. Each time in a different outfit, always smiling like she has the whole world at her feet. Her eyes sparkle. And every single picture was taken in my apartment.

That pisses me off a little.

Everywhere I look, there's something of hers—her toothbrush in the cup, her body

wash in the shower, her dishes, her underwear in my dresser. During the months I was gone, she made herself right at home. Took over everything. Made this place hers.

Don't even get me started on the nursery. I've been avoiding that room like the plague, not even looking at the door without my stomach twisting.

I smirk when I come across pictures of her with my sister. I'm guessing they were celebrating Erin's birthday. There's Vivienne, a few women I don't recognize, balloons, cake. Erin looks genuinely happy, completely unaware of what's coming next.

I frown. Pulling my eyes off the screen for a second, I sip my coffee, and tap my fingers on the table like a damn metronome. I should just let this go—walk away, forget it ever happened—but the image of that redhead lying in a hospital bed, so pale and fragile, keeps flashing in my mind.

So does the bundle they tried to hand me in the maternity ward.

By now I can practically trace her pregnancy through these photos. The way her body slowly changed, her face got rounder, her belly grew. She went from fit and petite to waddling around like a watermelon. But there's still no Max. That's when I start to get irritated.

I keep swiping through the gallery—faster now—until finally, I find pictures of her with some guy. And no matter how hard I stare at his face, no matter how much I try to recall where I've seen him before... I come up empty. I've never seen this dude in my life.

But I know he's the one.

I can tell by the way she looks at him—soft eyes, full of love. I can tell by the setting, the kind of intimate photos they took together. I scroll through them quickly, not lingering too long on the ones where she looks... stunning.

I sigh and run a hand down my face. What the hell is this?

I don't know this guy. And I have no idea how he knows me. Or why he sent Erin to my door of all places.

By the time I finally crawl into bed, the sky's already lightening. I check her messenger one last time, hoping someone's texted her.

Nothing.

Okay. Time to let this go. Just imagine she had the baby before I came home. Imagine I know nothing about her condition or the tiny baby boy lying in some hospital crib right now.

Maybe then I'll finally get some damn sleep.

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When I wake up, I head out right away. I have no idea what to do with myself, but I sure as hell can't stay cooped up between four walls any longer.

I figure I should probably stop by my parents' place—I haven't seen them since I got back—and the second I open their front door, I regret the decision.

The smell hits me first—my mom's signature pie. Then come the voices. Two female voices I could recognize out of a million. One's soft and raspy—that's my mom. The other's slow and sugary sweet—my ex-wife.

“Son, good to see you,” Dad says as he steps out of the living room, probably hearing the front door shut. No turning back now.

He looks exactly the same as he did half a year ago, and I’m relieved. Lately, he’s had some health issues; seeing him unchanged is a comfort.

Still, it’s weird seeing him with gray hair and a slight hunch. I always remembered him as fit, broad-shouldered, with thick dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard. That’s how he still exists in my memory.

“Hey, Dad. Sorry I didn’t drop by earlier—had some stuff to take care of.” I nod toward the bags in my hands. “Brought you and Mom a few gifts.”

But really, my entire being is focused on the conversation happening in the kitchen. And the footsteps heading straight my way.

“Max! Finally!” my mom beams, pulling me into a hug. “I had a feeling you’d stop by today. Cynthia and I made your favorite—casserole.”

She peers into my eyes, searching for approval. I force a smile and fight the urge to flinch at the mention of my ex-wife’s name.

I never told my family the truth about why we split.

They’ve known Cynthia since she was a kid—we grew up next door—and they love her like their own daughter.

When they found out we were together, they were over the moon.

After the wedding, they wouldn’t shut up about how perfect we were for each other.

And when everything fell apart, they begged us to reconcile, completely blind to what she'd done.

After the betrayal, I gave them the short version—we just didn't work out. Told them not to bring it up again. I didn't need their pity, or to see those looks.

The problem is, I'm stubborn. And Mom? She thinks I'm the one who screwed things up. Still treats Cynthia like her beloved daughter-in-law. She's even hinted more than once that Cynthia wouldn't mind giving it another shot. Took everything I had not to snap and spill the truth.

"Thanks, Mom," I say, my smile finally settling into something real. "I'm starving."

I can already picture the look on my ex-wife's face when she sees me walk in—and how fast she'll decide this is her golden opportunity to win me back. But there's no "us" anymore. Not after she spent six months living with some guy while I was going through multiple surgeries.

And all because of that damn ski resort in Switzerland, where Cynthia insisted we go.

Great vacation—ended with a broken hip, and then my body rejected the metal rod.

The bone just wouldn't heal. It felt like that hell would never end.

Hospitals, IV drips, surgeries, a cane, a limp.

For the first few months, I could barely get out of bed.

I started to lose hope—especially once we ran out of money.

I was in no shape to work, not like that.

“Come in already, why are you standing in the doorway?” my mom fusses, taking my jacket and asking how the trip went and when I’m heading back out to sea.

“You’ll never settle down at this rate with that job of yours.

Enough already. Find something on land. What woman’s gonna put up with you being gone nine months out of the year? ”

“Mom, you know I don’t know how to do anything else.” I kiss her cheek and smile.

She always hoped I’d follow in her and Dad’s footsteps, but I would’ve made a terrible sociology professor.

I walk into the kitchen and freeze for a second.

Cynthia’s there, standing with her back to me at the stove.

Her body is tense like a drawn bowstring—she definitely heard me come in and knows I’m here.

She hasn’t changed one bit. Still slim, with long light brown hair. Those delicate fingers with the perfect manicure, that trendy athleisure set that belongs more in a gym flirting with guys than in a kitchen. She turns around and forces a smile.

“Max? Wow, talk about unexpected. When did you get back?”

I want so badly to feel absolutely nothing when she speaks—to finally be free of her hold over me—but I can’t.

The second I see Cynthia, it’s like I’m yanked backward in time, back to the days when I was hopelessly in love with her. That phantom feeling is still lodged

somewhere deep inside my chest, crawling to the surface when I least expect it.

She wipes her hands on the apron and acts like everything's fine. Like there isn't a massive canyon between us—and like she didn't dig it herself. She only hesitates a beat before taking a few steps toward me, leaning in for a kiss.

I turn my head away. Her lips barely brush my cheek, but it's more than enough to make me want to scrub the spot raw.

I can't stop myself. I raise my hand and wipe my cheek slowly, deliberately, without breaking eye contact.

Like her kiss was something dirty I needed to get rid of—as if it had come from some toad, not the woman I once wanted.

Cynthia presses her lips together, her face tightening.

She's trying to hide her irritation, but she's always been terrible at that.

She's an open book. It's never hard to tell whether she likes someone or not.

“Helga, I think I'll head back to my apartment,” she says coldly. “No need to interrupt your nice little family dinner.”

My mom doesn't pick up on the venom in her words. Cynthia keeps her eyes locked on mine, then slowly scans me from head to toe—just like I did to her a moment ago.

“That beard still doesn't suit you,” she mutters, yanking off her apron with a sharp tug.

“Cynthia, where are you going?” my mom says, shooting me a disapproving glance.

“We made so much food. Stay and have lunch with us. You and Max haven’t seen each other in ages.”

“I’ll walk Cynthia out,” I cut in before the begging starts—before my mom’s coaxing and Cynthia’s fake reluctance corner me into sitting through a meal where I’ll have to tense every time our bodies accidentally brush against each other.

“Max,” my mom says quietly, shaking her head at me like I’m being cruel and ungrateful.

I nudge Cynthia toward the door. The second we’re out of my parents’ view, I grab her elbow to pick up the pace—because she’s clearly in no rush to leave.

“Can you please stop hovering around my family already?” I snap.

“We live across the hall, Max. I have a good relationship with your parents. What am I supposed to do? Hide in my apartment and come up with stupid excuses not to see them?” she hisses, like a cornered cat.

“Maybe you should just move.”

“Not everyone has the kind of money you do, Max,” she says, her voice dripping with bitterness like I’m hoarding fortunes while everyone else is scraping by on instant oatmeal.

“Then find yourself someone who does,” I say with a smirk, mocking her.

I flinch when she places her palm flat against my chest.

“Listen,” she says more softly now, the anger draining from her face, leaving only sadness.



“I’m really sorry for everything that happened.

I was stupid. Naive. You were my first and only real love, and I guess...

”—She looks away, biting her lip, — “I made a terrible mistake, Max. I wish I could go back and fix it. I miss you.”

Her hand moves up, brushing my neck, my jaw, and she presses against me.

I swallow hard, cursing myself for how my body still reacts to her scent, her touch.

Cynthia feels like a favorite childhood toy—one you’ve long outgrown but can’t bring yourself to throw away because of all the memories attached to it.

I can’t tear my eyes away from her face. She’s become a stunning woman; even more beautiful than the twenty-year-old girl I once lost my head over.

It’s crazy to think she’s still single.

“Don’t,” I rasp, grabbing her slender wrist and pulling her hand away.

We stand there, breathing heavily, facing each other.

Tears well up in her eyes, and I know I need to get her out of here before she pulls one of her little tricks and knocks me off balance again.

“I hope this is the last time we see each other,” I say, voice low and final. “I wish you happiness.”

I open the door and motion for her to leave.

Cynthia exhales sharply, wrinkles her perfectly shaped nose, and sweeps past me, leaving behind that familiar trail of Chanel perfume that clings to the air, dragging up long-buried memories of a life that once felt happy.

Max

Thanks to Cynthia, our family dinner ends up feeling a bit... strained.

Mom brings her up every ten minutes like clockwork—praising her, gushing about her new job title, how smart and ambitious she is—and keeps glancing at me, clearly waiting for some kind of reaction.

I finally snap a little sharper than I should, asking her to drop the subject. The less I know about my ex-wife's life, the less I think about her—and the better I feel.

Thankfully, Dad steps in and steers the conversation in another direction, and the rest of the evening flows peacefully, even warmly. Like old times. Just... without Cynthia.

At the door, as I'm putting on my coat to leave, Mom suddenly decides it's time to speak her mind.

"Max," she says gently, "you've been alone for so long, never in a serious relationship, never remarried... I honestly thought it was because you still loved Cynthia. But if that's not the case, then what's really going on? Are your father and I ever going to have grandkids?"

"Mom, come on," I say with a sigh. "That's Elena's job. Go bug her for grandkids. I'm not ready yet. And for the record, there is someone. A woman. So you really don't need to worry about that."

Not a total lie. Almost.

“Really?” Her eyes light up with curiosity. “Then why haven’t you said anything? We should have a family dinner!”

“Too soon, Mom. But once things are serious, I’ll be the first to let you know.”

I kiss her cheek, say my goodbyes, and head out of their apartment building.

For a while, I just sit in my car, watching the lights flicker in their windows. And then I realize I’ve been staring at Cynthia’s apartment for several minutes.

That pisses me off.

I hadn’t thought about her in forever. But tonight... it’s like something snapped loose, and the damn floodgates opened.

I fire up the engine and take off, wishing more than anything that my ex would move to another continent and stop popping up in my life.

By the time I get home, I’m in a foul mood—drained and running on fumes. I collapse on the bed, shut my eyes for maybe ten seconds, when the doorbell rings through the apartment like a fire alarm.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I mutter, dragging myself off the mattress.

When I open the door, I’m surprised to see Logan and Vivienne standing there with grim faces.

“Something happen?” I ask, eyeing them both suspiciously.

“Can we come in? We need to talk,” Logan says. He looks uneasy, hands buried deep in his pockets, shooting nervous glances at Vivienne, who’s clearly upset. And I have

zero clue what kind of conversation needs to happen at eleven p.m.

“Sure,” I step aside, letting them in and closing the door behind them. “So... what’s going on?”

They hesitate for a moment, then Logan starts talking.

“We went to see Erin,” he says, and my whole body tenses. My lungs feel tight, like all the air has suddenly disappeared. Weird reaction for someone who’s supposed to be a stranger.

“She’s still unconscious. I talked to the doctors. No one’s giving any real answers. But if no family comes forward soon—or if she doesn’t wake up— Child Protective Services will get involved. The baby might end up in temporary care until something’s figured out.”

“Well... damn,” I exhale, running a hand down my face.

“Max,” Vivienne jumps in, her tone firm and final. “Logan and I decided to take the baby in. Just until Erin’s out of the hospital.”

My eyebrows shoot up. That was not what I was expecting to hear.

“Erin only had her grandmother, and she lives hours from here. Her mom’s abroad. Someone needs to step in now.”

“Yeah, I know,” I nod. “I went out there—found the address in her documents. But I couldn’t bring myself to tell the truth. No point stressing an elderly woman. Maybe Erin wakes up in a day or two and this all blows over. Why upset her for nothing?” I look away.

“I just know if it were my kid in there, I’d want someone to take care of them. I really think Erin would want this,” Vivienne says.

“That’s a good idea,” I nod, letting out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. At least the kid’s not my problem anymore.

But Logan and Vivienne don’t move. They’re still standing there, looking at me with something in their eyes I can’t quite place. Expectation? Hope?

“Something else?” I ask.

Logan shifts his weight. “Thing is... we can’t take the baby legally. Not without parental permission. But the hospital and everyone at the maternity ward already think you’re the dad. So we were hoping... you’d help us get him released.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen,” I cut him off before he can even finish.

“Max, we wouldn’t be asking if we could handle this ourselves,” Logan starts to lose his cool, and now I fully recognize the stubborn neighbor I know so well.

We lock eyes, both equally hardheaded. For him, it’s all simple: take the kid, sign some papers, and they’ll look after him.

But no one’s thinking about the fact that if something goes wrong, I’m the one legally responsible.

And who’s to say Vivienne won’t show up at my door tomorrow telling me to take the baby back?

“I’ve got her mother’s number. I was planning to call her in the morning. Let her come sort all this out,” I say, my tone sharper than I intended, but I’m getting the

sinking feeling that if I don't act fast, I might accidentally become someone's dad.

"Seriously?" Vivienne's eyes light up with hope.

"Yeah. Anything else? If not, good night." I pull the door open and motion for them to leave.

Why is everyone so determined to hand me this baby?

It's like this whole situation will never end.

I might as well pack up and leave town, just to get away from people who are convinced Erin's my girlfriend and I'm supposed to play daddy now.

"Keep us posted if anything changes," Logan says as they walk out. "And if you need help—anything at all—just say the word."

I shut the door firmly behind them.

I'm so done with all of this.

I start toward the bedroom but stop in front of the nursery door—the one that's been haunting me for days. First thing tomorrow, I'm calling the designer who remodeled my place last year. He's going to turn that room back into my office.

I switch off all the lights, and the second my head hits the pillow, I'm out.

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I sleep until noon. It's gray and rainy outside. I force myself out of bed and into motion—because the sooner I deal with all of this, the sooner I can shut up that

nagging voice in my head.

I brew a strong coffee and walk to the panoramic window.

The city is completely swallowed by the thick curtain of rain, and I clench Erin's phone tightly in my hand.

Turns out her mom was saved in the contacts by name, which is why I couldn't find the number earlier.

I take a deep breath, clear my throat, and hit call.

The ringtone echoes in my ears while I mentally rehearse what I'm going to say to Ellie. I'm tense. Pacing. Every muscle in my body tightens as I wait for a stranger's voice to answer on the other end.

One ring.

Two.

Three.

Silence.

Voicemail.

I hang up and try again. I'm not stopping until someone picks up.

Finally, maybe on the fifth try, I hear some static... and then a rough male voice.

"Hello?"



“Uh—sorry, is this Ellie’s number? Did I dial right?”

There’s a pause, like he’s weighing something.

“Where’s Erin? Who is this?” He speaks with a noticeable accent, and I instantly assume he’s the man Ellie stayed overseas for.

“I’m Max. And who are you? I’m calling for Erin’s mother.”

Another pause. A loud exhale from the other side of the line.

“Ellie had a stroke. She’s in the hospital. Don’t tell Erin—she shouldn’t know right now. She’s doing better, but the doctors want to keep her under observation a while.”

“Erin had the baby,” I say quietly, matching his tone. “She’s in the ICU. I thought her mom might be able to come get the kid.”

More silence. I shut my eyes. Could this whole situation possibly get any worse?

“Then...” I hesitate, not sure what else to say, “just let me know if Ellie improves. I’ll keep this phone on me. Call anytime. I’ll keep you updated on Erin too.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

“Yeah.” I hang up first and sink to the floor.

Then I call Erin’s doctor, hoping for some kind of miracle.

But no miracle comes.

The entire day I can’t sit still. No appetite. Not even my favorite video game can take

the edge off. Eventually, I yank the cord out of the wall, slam the laptop shut, and storm out of the apartment. I head straight for the one next door.

“Max? Is something wrong?” Vivienne asks, wide-eyed.

“Yeah. What do I have to do to take the kid?” I ask before I can second-guess it.

Two hours later, I’m sitting in the maternity ward chief’s office.

“Alright,” she says sternly, peering at me over the rim of her glasses. “As I understand it, Mr. Taylor, you and Miss Hale aren’t legally married. Which means, under state law, I’m not authorized to release the child to you.”

“I know,” I reply through clenched teeth, hoping like hell we can find a workaround. Vivienne and Logan are waiting in the car, and judging by the determined look on their faces, they’re not leaving without a baby.

“And to be honest, you really ought to make up your mind,” she adds with a sharp edge in her voice. “One day you’re the father, next you’re a neighbor, then an Uber driver, and now you’re back to being the father. It’s hard to keep up.”

“Is there a way around it?” I ask cautiously.

She sighs and leans back in her chair. “Technically, yes. Since the mother is currently incapacitated and the biological father hasn’t been legally established, you can apply for temporary kinship care—but only if you’re willing to sign an affidavit stating you are the presumed father.”

“Great,” I say, my throat suddenly dry. My palms sweat at the thought of writing that down, but I just want this over with.

“Here,” she slides a piece of paper across the desk. “Write a statement acknowledging that you, Max Taylor, are in a domestic relationship with Miss Hale and accept responsibility for the child. This allows the hospital to release the baby into your care under provisional supervision.”

“What?” My eyebrows shoot up. “You want me to put that in writing?”

“Yes,” she says, already reaching for a hospital form. “And I’ll need a copy of your government-issued ID.”

“Of course. Just a sec.” I pull out my wallet, hand her my driver’s license, and stare down at the blank sheet of paper. My fingers curl around the pen. This feels like a trap—like a lifetime contract disguised as a hospital form. But my hand still moves.

It’s not too late to walk out. I could drop the pen, mumble some excuse, and pretend this never happened. But instead, I find myself scribbling line after line, essentially sentencing myself to fatherhood.

Then suddenly—

“Hold on,” she says sharply.

I glance up. Her eyes are narrowed, scanning my ID. The warmth in her voice vanishes.

“This says your name is Max Taylor,” she says slowly.

At that moment, my phone rings. Unknown number. I silence it with a flick of my thumb.

“Yes?” I ask, suddenly tense. “Is there a problem?”

“Everything’s wrong,” she says sharply, setting my ID down on the desk with a thud and sliding it back toward me.

Another call buzzes from the unknown number. The phone vibrates like an angry wasp on the table. I finally shut it off.

“According to Miss Hale’s patient file, the father’s name is Maximilian Jack Taylor.”

“Must be a mistake,” I reply with a strained chuckle, realizing I just exposed myself over something so damn trivial.

“A mistake where only the last name magically lines up?”

I exhale hard through my nose, fixing my stare on her. My mind is racing, flipping through every possible escape route.

“Look,” I say, doubling down, “I’m the kid’s father, and I want to take him home—at least until Erin’s out of the hospital. What do I need to do to make that happen?”

“Simple,” she replies coldly. “Take a paternity test.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not violating state policy just because you’re feeling heroic,” she snaps.

“If the father can’t be verified through family confirmation or legal documents, then we need genetic confirmation before releasing the child.

I’ll refer you to a certified lab. Until then, the baby stays under hospital custody. ”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I snap, my voice rising. “A few days ago, you

practically tried to hand me this kid to cover your own screw-up—now that I’m ready to take him, you’re demanding a paternity test?”

“Keep your voice down, Mr. Taylor,” the head of the maternity ward cuts me off sharply.

“For the record, I would’ve asked for documentation last time too, before letting you walk out of here with an infant.

Make no mistake about that. And second—what mistake, exactly, are you referring to?

Miss Hale was brought in when it was already too late for a C-section.

That wasn’t our call. She likely ignored the early signs of labor, and by the time she got here, we were out of time. ”

“That’s bullshit,” I spit out. “And you know it. Keep pushing, and I swear you’ll have inspectors crawling all over this place by next week.”

“I suggest you calm down and get the paternity test done,” she says with a sugar-sweet smile that doesn’t reach her eyes.

“If you’re telling the truth and this child is yours, why so defensive?

You were the one begging us to hold on to the baby a few more days—so I’m sure you can wait a few more now. ”

Damn it.

I try to keep a straight face, hiding my disappointment, but in my head—I’ve already

lost this battle. We lock eyes, irritated and unyielding, and I'm ready to say a dozen sharp things when the shrill ring of her office phone slices through the tension.

"Yes?" she answers curtly, her gaze still fixed on me. "Really? And her condition? ... Uh-huh. Right. No, but he's in my office right now. Yes, of course."

The way she looks at me shifts slightly, and I immediately know—it's about Erin. My chest tightens, heart skipping a beat. I brace myself for the worst.

"She's awake," she says flatly. "Congratulations. You'll be able to take the child home—with the mother. Not today, obviously, but soon enough."

"What?" I blink, not sure I heard her right.

"Your wife woke up," Mrs. Gray repeats louder, lacing her words with sarcasm, clearly calling my bluff about the whole father act. And just like that, it's as if a mountain rolls off my chest. Breathing suddenly becomes easier.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

Waking up feels... strange. Like I've been transported back three years to the morning after my best friend's birthday party—when we all swore off drinking for life and couldn't even look at alcohol without getting queasy.

It feels like something is slowly pushing me toward consciousness, but no matter how hard I try, I can't get my eyelids to open. Darkness wraps around my thoughts, pulling me back under, and I drift off again.

The second time I wake up, it's like being hit over the head.

My eyes snap open, and I find myself staring at a yellowed ceiling.

I lie there for a few minutes, trying to stop the room from spinning, trying to focus my vision.

There's an annoying beeping above me, and something foreign is lodged in my nose.

I try to reach for my face, but I can't.

I'm so weak I can barely move my fingers.

Inhale. Exhale. Again.

I close my eyes and open them, praying this is just a nightmare. But then I realize something terrifying—I don't feel the baby moving.

For the past few weeks, my baby boy had been wide awake almost nonstop—kicking, twisting, keeping me up night after night. I'd grown so used to that feeling that now, the silence inside me is what feels foreign.

My trembling fingers reach for my now-flat stomach. A cold wave of panic crashes over me. He's not there. I have no idea where I am or how I got here. My memory is blank. I try to sit up, but the room tilts, black dots dance in my vision, and a sharp ringing pierces my ears.

I fight it, but the darkness is stronger, and I think I'm blacking out again.

The third time I wake up, it feels like I've been asleep for days. My head is heavy, my body limp, but my mind is finally clear.

In a flash, everything from last night comes rushing back. The strange man who insisted the apartment was his. The labor.

I was scheduled for a C-section next week—my son was supposed to be born on February fourteenth, not a day earlier, and definitely not through natural delivery.

I try to sit up, to look around the room, to spot a crib—anything—to make sure he's okay. I don't even want to think about the alternative. Of course he's fine. Of course he's sleeping peacefully right now.

But I can't lift myself. I have no strength.

My arm feels numb, especially where the IV is taped to my skin.

The best I can do is turn my head. That's when I notice there's another woman in the room, lying in the bed beside mine.



She's wearing an oxygen mask. Her breathing is labored, and the steady beeping from the monitor must be tracking her heart rate.

There's no baby. No crib. No signs that a child has ever even been in this room.

Where am I?

Where's my baby?

What happened to him?

My breathing quickens. So does my heart rate. The monitor starts to beep louder, faster. I want to rip the cord out just to shut it up.

"Hey! Someone!" I try to yell, but all that comes out is a dry, broken rasp. My throat is sandpaper. My whole body aches. "Someone!" I manage again, through tears—but it's barely louder than a whisper.

The panic builds. I can't just lie here and wait for someone to show up. I need to know where my baby is. I need to see him.

I summon every last ounce of strength, push through the sharp pain in my lower abdomen, and roll onto my side.

I lie still for a moment. Breathe in. Breathe out. Just make it to the door. That's all.

But I misjudge my strength. Instead of getting out of bed and steadying myself along the wall, I collapse straight onto the cold floor, helpless.

The IV rips from my arm.

Tears stream down my face. A soft sob escapes my throat.

“Help me...”

That’s how the nurse finds me. Crumpled on the hospital floor, whispering for help.

“Where’s my baby? What happened to him?” I grab the nurse’s wrist, trying to find an answer in her pale gray eyes.

“Let me help you back into bed. Hold on to me,” she says, completely ignoring my questions as she tries to lift me off the floor.

“Please... just tell me my baby is okay,” I croak. I can’t move, and despair is consuming me like a wave crashing over my head.

“I just got back from medical leave. I’m afraid I don’t know your case yet,” she says apologetically, and I desperately want to believe her—that the staff isn’t hiding the truth from me.

I try not to think the worst. My baby is alive. I would’ve felt it if something happened to him. That’s what they always say about a mother’s instinct, right?

“I’ll call your attending physician. He’ll explain everything,” she says. “Now come on, carefully... like that. You really shouldn’t be wandering around in your condition.” She mutters the last part under her breath as I manage to stand, barely.

With her help, I make it back into bed and lie there, heart pounding, waiting for the doctor. Every second stretches into forever. I try to remember something—anything—about the delivery. I think... the last thing I remember was a baby’s cry. High-pitched and piercing. Or did I imagine it?

The uncertainty is unbearable. I stare at the ceiling and count the seconds, trying to keep my mind from spiraling.

When a man in his forties finally walks in, I tense up immediately, bracing for bad news. I watch him closely, trying to read his face.

“Well, Miss Hale, glad to see you awake. You gave us all quite the scare. How are you feeling?” He shines a light into my eyes and asks me to follow it.

They check my blood pressure, temperature, and ask a few basic memory questions.

Then he adjusts my IV. I still don’t ask the question that’s been burning inside me.

I watch his every move, waiting. Finally, I gather the courage.

“Doctor, please...” I clear my throat and close my eyes. “My baby... is he okay?” My voice breaks, a knot tightening in my throat.

“Don’t worry. Your son is perfectly healthy. He’s in the nursery wing, just waiting for his mom to recover so she can take him home.”

I exhale, relief flooding me. My baby is alive.

“Can I see him?” I ask, hope rising in my chest.

“I’m sorry, that’s not allowed right now. The nursery is in a separate building. But maybe your husband can bring you some pictures.”

“Husband?” I let out a faint, sad laugh. “I’m not married.”

“Oh—my apologies. I assumed Max was your husband. That’s how he introduced

himself.”

“Max? He’s here?” My voice trembles.

“He stopped by a few times. He seemed really worried about you.”

“Really?” I ask in disbelief.

“Visiting hours are over for today, but I’ll see if he can come by tomorrow morning. I’ll get in touch with him.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, biting my lip, grateful beyond words. “Could you... maybe bring the baby here? Or could I go see him?”

“Stay put,” he says gently. “You’re not quite ready to be up and about just yet. But if your condition keeps improving, we can definitely arrange a visit in the next day or two. After all, wheelchairs aren’t just for grandmas, right?” He gives me a wink, trying to lighten the mood.

I smile for the first time.

“Thank you.”

“Now try to get some rest.”

“Okay,” I nod.

“And please, no more solo adventures around the room. Promise?”

“I promise,” I nod again.

I wait for Max with barely contained anticipation.

I want to see him, breathe in his familiar scent, feel the taste of his lips again, and hear him talk about our son.

It still doesn't feel real—that I spent over a week in the ICU.

That I became a mother. That Max came back. That he didn't leave me.

Most likely, that bearded man was just messing with me. And I think I even know who put him up to such a ridiculous prank. Sounds exactly like something Max would do.

I thought I wouldn't be able to fall asleep. Not now, with so much racing through my mind. But at some point, I must've drifted off, slipping in and out of a hazy sleep.

What wakes me up is the loud creak of the door and an unfamiliar male voice.

"Just a few minutes, I promise."

Footsteps draw near. I assume it's a doctor, so I open my eyes, ready to greet him—to show I'm awake. But instead, I meet a pair of piercing eyes. The same ones that stunned me the first time we met.

We stare at each other in silence. Me—in surprise. Him—with something that looks like relief, like he's glad it's me lying here and not someone else. He stands just a step away, his gaze traveling over me and stopping at the IV line taped to my arm.

I suddenly feel exposed under his gaze. Vulnerable. I must look awful. I haven't seen my reflection, but from the tangle of my hair, I can imagine the rest. And somehow, that bothers me. More than it should.

The first time I saw him, I was too terrified to really register his features—just the beard. But now I can't look away from those eyes. That washed-out stormy blue, almost too vivid to be natural, especially paired with jet-black hair.

"I'm glad you made it," he says in a low, gravelly voice before turning to the window.

He stands with his back to me, takes a deep breath, then spins around as if about to say something—but doesn't.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, breaking the silence.

"Just thought I'd check if you needed anything," he mutters. "Clothes, little stuff... oh, and I brought your phone."

He's clearly nervous. I can see it in the way his movements are sharp and jittery, how his eyes dart around the room, barely settling on me.

"Did Max send you?" I ask, the only logical explanation for why this man is standing here. "Where is he? Why didn't he come himself?" I'm starting to panic, my eyes flicking toward the door.

"Your runaway fiancé hasn't shown up," he says with a crooked smirk. "And I doubt he will anytime soon."

"No, you're lying," I snap, anger bubbling up in my chest. Why is he doing this? Why lie to me, play games like this? "The doctor said Max visited me," I add stubbornly.

"Still remember my name?" the man mutters wearily, then pulls a chair up next to my bed and sits down, locking eyes with me again. The silence grows thick between us.

“I don’t understand,” I whisper, breaking eye contact.

“I’ve been in touch with your doctors this whole time—what’s so hard to get?” His tone sharpens, tinged with irritation. “No need to thank me. You waking up is thanks enough. One more minute and I would’ve made the biggest mistake of my life.”

My eyebrow arches, questioning him. But he says nothing more. Somehow, I can’t even bring myself to think of him as Max. That name still belongs to the father of my child.

“I don’t believe you. Why would you do this? Why help some random girl you don’t even know?” I start to feel anxious again, wishing he’d just leave and never come back. Because if everything he’s saying is true, then Max really did lie to me, sending me to a stranger’s apartment and disappearing.

“I’m asking myself the same thing,” he mutters with a shrug. “Guess there’s something about you that makes people want to help. Vivienne and Logan were ready to take your baby home, look after him until you’re back on your feet.”

Just hearing about my baby knocks the breath out of me.

“What happened? Do you know how he is?” I stare at him, heart pounding, desperate for even a few words—something, anything—that will tell me my son is okay. That he’s healthy. That I don’t have to worry.

“Your heart stopped,” he says bluntly. “But officially, they put it down as a birth complication and severe blood loss. I didn’t get all the details.

” He pauses. “The kid’s fine. Doesn’t look like you.

They tried to hand him over to me; thought I was the dad.

” He chuckles dryly, and the room falls silent again.

I relax just a little. I’m pretty sure there’s a soft, dreamy smile on my face now, because in my mind, I’m holding my baby boy in my arms. Tim. I’ll call him Tim, I decide, suddenly and firmly.

“Here’s your phone.” I blink in surprise when he pulls my smartphone out of his pocket. “Call your grandma, your friends, whoever. Let them know you’re okay. I didn’t tell anyone you were in the ICU—figured it’d just worry them. But I’m sure someone out there’s been wondering.”

“Did you talk to someone?” I ask, tension creeping into my voice. I can’t understand how he’d know about my grandma.

“Something like that,” the man says evasively, then gently places the phone in my hand. “I saved my number, just in case. Max Taylor. I changed the password, sorry—it’s all ones now. If you need anything, call me. Your stuff’s still at my place, so we’ll have to meet again anyway.”

“Thanks,” I manage to whisper, barely holding back the tears.

This Max—the one everyone thought was my husband—wasn’t my Max.

The disappointment sits heavy on my chest. I feel alone.

Abandoned. I can’t see my son, I can’t reach the guy I thought cared, and it really feels like I’ve hit rock bottom.

Although... things could’ve been worse, I guess.

The first thing I do is check the phone for missed calls, then open my messages and



social media. There are a few unread messages, but none of them matter right now. I'm looking for one name. Just one.

“He still hasn't been online,” the man says, watching me closely—like he's reading my thoughts.

“He probably still doesn't have reception,” I mumble, lying to myself as I set the phone aside and swallow the bitter lump of disappointment rising in my throat.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

The man doesn't say much. He just sits there quietly, staring off into the distance. He's... strange. He looks dangerous, intimidating even—I mean, I did think he was a criminal when I saw him in the apartment. But in reality, he's calm. Steady. Almost... gentle.

I bite my lip, trying not to cry in front of him. Not from pain, but from the knot of hurt sitting in my chest.

Max hasn't messaged me. Not once. He hasn't called to ask how I'm doing.

I nearly died.

Our baby could've been left without a mother while his father's still very much alive.

And this stranger—he's right. As much as I want to deny it, the truth is undeniable.

Max left me. Just walked out of my life. But hope is a stubborn thing. My heart wants to believe there's an explanation. That there was a reason.

Things were good between us—at least, I thought so. We talked about the future. We never even fought. He asked me to move in...

A shaky breath escapes my lips as realization hits me like a wave. That apartment... Maybe it wasn't his. Or maybe I got it wrong and mixed something up.

I cling to that thought like a life raft, refusing to let myself drown in despair.

“Are you okay?”

His voice cuts through my thoughts. He must’ve read everything on my face, because there’s concern in his eyes.

“Yeah,” I lie, barely audible. “Just... still trying to process everything.”

I don’t know what to say to him. I close my eyes, hoping he’ll take the hint and leave. I know I should be grateful—he saved me. But I’m so bitterly disappointed that it wasn’t Max who walked through that door that I can’t even look at him.

“Max,” I force his name out. It tastes like regret. “Thank you for everything. I promise I’ll pay you back for all the expenses.”

“I’m not billing you for saving your life,” he replies curtly and stands up.

His tone shifts so suddenly it leaves me confused. What did I say?

He walks toward the door, then pauses with his hand on the handle and glances back at me.

“Vivienne says hi. She’s planning to stop by soon. She was really worried about you. And... my sister sends her regards too. Take care.”

I nod.

Watch the door click shut behind him.

Exhale.

Finally, I let the tears fall.

My grip tightens around the damn phone until my knuckles ache. Everything blurs. I sob silently into the sterile quiet of the room, feeling small. Abandoned.

But this is something I'll have to get through. I will get through it.

Because now I have a tiny human to live for. A brand-new life who's become the center of my world. That's what matters. That's what I'll hold on to.

For a moment, a terrifying thought flashes through my mind—what if something happened to him? What if a container fell and crushed him? Or there was a storm. What if he fell overboard?

Being a sailor is a dangerous job.

The idea sends a chill through me.

I don't want to believe the worst, but there has to be a reason he's been offline for so long. It's not like he's just ignoring me—he's gone. Completely.

I open my messenger app again and type a short message.

“You're a father. It's a boy.”

It doesn't make me feel any better, but now I can only wait—staring at the screen, praying for that little “delivered” checkmark to pop up.

By evening, I finally gather the courage to call my mom and grandma to tell them I've given birth.

I start with Mom.

“Hey, sweetheart, how are you feeling?” comes her sleepy, familiar voice, warm and comforting through the line.

“I’m good, Mom. You’re a grandma now,” I say, holding back tears as the words leave my mouth.

“Oh, baby girl, congratulations! How’s the little one? Will you send me pictures? When did it happen? How are you feeling?”

She bombards me with questions, and I have to bend the truth a little so she doesn’t worry.

Hearing her voice gives me strength—grounds me.

I wish she could be here with me right now. To see her smile, feel her hug, be wrapped in that motherly comfort only she can give. I want to tell her everything that’s been happening. But I don’t want to ruin this moment with the truth—that my son may never know his father.

“We’re doing fine. Tim’s still in the nursery, but once they bring him in, I’ll take tons of pictures. I only just woke up today... everything’s still a blur. How are you?”

We talk for nearly an hour—or rather, we cry to each other through the phone, managing to squeeze in a few sentences here and there between tears.

After saying goodbye to Mom, I glance at the time and, seeing that it’s still early enough, I call Grandma next.

More tears. More joy. And then she says something that makes my whole body freeze

in place.

“That boyfriend of yours is quite the looker!” Grandma says with a chuckle. “He should really shave that beard, though—it makes him look like a bandit.”

“Wait—what? Who are you talking about?”

“Who else? Your fiancé. He came by the house.”

“Max came to see you?” I ask in confusion, my mind racing. From the way she describes him, it sounds like the man from the hospital. But what was he doing at my house? How did he even know where to go? Why would he call himself my fiancé?

“Well, of course he did. Who else would I be talking about?”

The rest of our conversation doesn’t flow—it’s hard to focus when my thoughts are spinning in a completely different direction. After we hang up, I lie there for a long time, clutching my phone and staring at his contact name.

Max Taylor.

Should I text him or not?

I roll onto my side and chew on my lip, feeling like a nervous little girl. And then, before I can talk myself out of it, I give in and type:

“Did you go to my grandma’s house? Why?”

I hold my breath while waiting for a reply. What if he is some sort of creep? Someone collecting information on me and my family to gain our trust?

But... why would he?

His response comes instantly.

“You were in the ICU. There was no one to pick up the baby. I was exploring options. I didn’t tell her anything about your condition, don’t worry.”

His words surprise me.

They actually sound... thoughtful. Caring, even.

Suddenly, I feel a bit guilty that he had to worry about me.

And then, like a slap, I remember what I did to his home.

I still haven’t fully processed the fact that it wasn’t my Max’s apartment.

But the shame is already creeping in, prickling under my skin.

I feel so stupid. My face heats up at the thought of how completely I took over his space.

Not just rearranging his things—living there for months.

“I’m sorry. About the nursery. I’ll pay you back, I promise. Please don’t throw out the furniture—I’ll come get it.”

I shove the phone under my pillow, afraid of what he might say back.

It buzzes with a message almost immediately, but it takes me a full thirty minutes to work up the nerve to check it. I finally cave, unlock the screen in the dark, and squint

against the glow.

“Forget it.”

I smile.

He’s a weird guy.

Anyone else in his position would’ve flipped out—probably demanded I pay for the damage or threatened legal action.

But not him. He acts like none of it even matters.

Though, to be fair, that first night when he found me in his apartment... he looked pissed.

And I get it.

I really do.

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On the third day after I woke up, they move me from the ICU to a regular room, but they still won’t let me see my son. I’m going crazy with impatience.

Once, I even lose it a little with the attending doctor, begging for just a few minutes with my baby—but all I get in return is a curt refusal.

It’s unbearable, knowing he’s so close—just in the next building—and not even being allowed to catch a glimpse of him.



So I lie.

I know I shouldn't mess with my health, and honestly, I'm still not feeling great, but I don't tell anyone. All I want is to get out of here as soon as possible and finally hold my baby in my arms.

On the fifth day, a snowstorm starts outside. The snow falls so thick that I can't see a thing past the white veil.

I'm alone in my room. I feel pathetic, completely falling apart.

In all this time, the only person who came to visit me was Vivienne.

She probably knows what a fool I've been and how badly I messed things up with Max, which is why I can't even look her in the eye. I told her so much about him—and she thought I was talking about her neighbor.

It turned out... badly.

Vivienne barely spoke when she visited. The tension between us was almost physical, and neither of us brought up the subject directly. It hurts to know that our friendship might be over because of this.

She really is an amazing person, and I'm beyond grateful that she was willing to take responsibility for my baby when I couldn't.

It's midnight, and I still can't sleep.

I stare up at the ceiling, thinking about the future.

Making plans.

At least I have some savings—that should be enough to get us started.

It's a shame I can't work from home. I read somewhere that babies can have allergies to flower pollen, so my shop won't be an option. It'll have to be a nanny or my mom. Either way, I'll have to work.

My thoughts are interrupted by the soft buzz of my phone vibrating.

I reach for it and freeze when I see a new message from Max Taylor.

“How are you feeling?”

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

For a split second—before I even register the sender’s name—my eyes widen in surprise, and my heart flutters wildly in my chest. The bright light from the phone screen stings my eyes in the darkness, and I don’t immediately notice the last name next to “Max”.

At first, I think it’s my Max. I hold my breath, feeling goosebumps ripple across my skin, a rush of endorphins blocking out both the physical and emotional pain.

But then my vision adjusts to the light. I look closer, and it hits me—it’s not that Max.

A wave of disappointment crashes over me, as if someone dumped a bucket of ice water over my head.

My fingers grip the phone tightly. I clutch it to my chest and close my eyes.

I promised myself I wouldn’t fall for false hope again, but every time I hear a notification ding, my heart squeezes painfully and whispers, “It could be him.”

After a few minutes, I finally open the message and stare for a long time at the simple but meaningful words.

I imagine what I would say if it were really my Max texting me. Then I shake off the thought—stupid—and remind myself I owe this man an answer, at the very least, out of gratitude.

If it weren't for this stranger, things might have ended very differently.

And now, even the fact that I still haven't seen my son seems a little less crushing compared to the thought that I might not have lived to meet him at all.

I type back:

“Thank you, I'm feeling better.”

It sounds a little dry, but honestly, what else can I say to a man I've only met twice?

Max Taylor: “Glad to hear it. I'll come by tomorrow if the weather clears up. Need anything?”

Me: “Why?”

Max Taylor: “Need to bring a few things for your baby. The hospital staff asked me to.”

I realize he's probably talking about picking up some essentials, so I quickly start typing:

“In the nursery...”

But I delete it, not wanting to remind him of the disaster I created in his apartment.

I rewrite:

Me: “There's an envelope with cash under the crib mattress. Please take whatever you spent and anything else you need to get. Thank you.”

He starts typing. Then stops. Then starts again.

The typing indicator bounces for so long that I figure the conversation is over.

I tuck the phone under my pillow... and immediately feel it buzz again.

Max Taylor: “You’re gonna need that money. Don’t worry about it.”

Me: “No, I can’t accept that.”

It just feels wrong—to accept money from a stranger.

Especially for someone like me, who’s been taking care of herself for years.

Or maybe it’s because I’m just not used to people helping without expecting something in return. Before Max, none of my boyfriends were exactly generous, so whenever he paid for something during our trips, it always made me uncomfortable.

Max Taylor: “I can.”

While I’m still thinking about what to say, another message pops up.

Max Taylor: “You should’ve been asleep by now. Stick to your schedule.”

Me: “I can’t fall asleep. I still haven’t seen Tim.”

I finally spill the thing that’s been gnawing at me all day.

Max Taylor: “Who’s Tim? Thought your runaway fiancé’s name was Max.”

Me: “I named my son Tim.”

There's a pause. I hold my breath, staring at the phone screen without blinking.

Max Taylor: "Good name. Good night."

I toss and turn in bed, unable to find a comfortable position.

My whole body aches, and I still feel unbearably weak, yet sleep won't come.

I try to get up and walk to the window. It doesn't happen on the first try.

Until now, the nurses have been helping me make it to the bathroom and back, and even that short trip feels like running a marathon.

I brace myself against the windowsill to keep from collapsing to the floor, and stare out at the city, blanketed in snow.

Thanks to the streetlights and glowing windows, it looks almost magical.

The last few snowflakes swirl gently in the air before disappearing into the thick white cover on the ground. It's like something out of a fairytale.

I lift my gaze to the dark sky—no stars in sight, not even the moon. Not that you usually see stars in a big city, anyway.

The memory of my small hometown hits me hard: summer nights, the smell of fresh grass, and a sky so full of stars it looked like someone had tossed handfuls of gold across it.

A pang of homesickness tightens in my chest.

For a brief moment, I wonder if I should take Tim and go back there for a while.

Escape the city noise. Cut away the painful memories. Start over.

The buzz of my phone pulls me away from the snow-covered streets and back to bed. It's Max Taylor again.

Max Taylor: "I tossed the teddy bear—sorry if that's a problem. It was getting on my nerves. Everything else is still there. You can pick it up once you're discharged."

I chuckle. It feels like a sign. Out with the old life, time to clear space for the new—one filled with warmth, light, and comfort. Even if right now I don't even have a place to live. It's fine. What matters is that we're healthy.

Me: "Thanks for the favor. It was a gift from Max. I would've tossed it, anyway."

Max Taylor: "No wonder I hated that bear from the moment I saw it."

Word by word, short texts, and silly stickers—

I don't even realize we've ended up texting all night.

It's that "stranger on a train" effect, when two people, knowing they'll probably never meet again, tell each other things they've kept bottled up for years—fears, regrets, heartaches.

I needed this conversation.

I needed to talk to someone who wouldn't pity me, wouldn't call me foolish, wouldn't mock or gloat.

Sometimes it's easier to share your failures with a stranger you think you'll never see again.

That's how it was supposed to go with us, too. But something went wrong. Because when I wake up the next morning, I find a man standing beside my hospital bed, a baby blanket in his hands.

I stare at the man in confusion. He carries the chill of the winter air with him, the scent of frost clinging to his clothes.

Snowflakes are melting on his warm jacket, his hair is tousled, his nose red from the cold, and his gaze is locked onto me.

His expression gives nothing away; in fact, he unsettles me a little, especially with his sudden appearance in my hospital room.

But in that moment, my heart flutters with disbelief—because I recognize the blanket in his hands. The same one I had bought weeks ago at the baby store.

I open my mouth to say something, to ask if it's really what I think it is—but the fear of being wrong chokes off the words.

He doesn't say anything either. Just stands there, studying me, like he's seeing me for the first time.

My cheeks burn.

I remember all too clearly the things I shared with him during our late-night chat.

Far too much for someone who's practically a stranger.

"I... is that...?" I stammer, nodding toward the bundle in his arms.

The man hugs the bundle a little closer to his chest and takes a step toward my bed.



“Your Tim. Or at least I hope it’s him,” he mutters, leaning down to hand me the bundle.

I take it with trembling hands. I barely notice when his cold fingers brush against mine, sending a jolt of electricity through me. Because my baby is here. Wrapped tightly in a warm blanket, the corner pulled up to cover his tiny face.

“How did you manage that?” I lift my gaze to him, feeling my vision blur with tears.

“Snuck him out when no one was looking,” he says with a crooked smirk.

“What?”

I yelp louder than I should have, then lower my voice to a hiss.

“What do you mean, you snuck him out?”

“Half the staff couldn’t make it in because of the snowstorm. Only two nurses were left covering the whole floor, so I just slipped into the nursery and grabbed the kid.” He shrugs, completely unfazed.

“Hopefully I didn’t mix him up with someone else—they all kinda look the same.”

My eyes widen. He can’t be serious.

I glance down at the bundle in my arms, then back at him.

“You... you actually kidnapped a baby?” I whisper in disbelief.

“You wanted to see your son, didn’t you?” he says, voice low and steady.

A pause stretches between us. The little bundle in my arms squirms and lets out a soft grunt, and I instinctively pull him closer, rocking gently.

“Relax. I’m kidding,” he finally says, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

“I’ll go talk to your doctor. You two... have some bonding time. But he’s gotta be back in about thirty minutes.”

He tugs off his scarf, exhales sharply, and shoots me a strange look before turning toward the door, unzipping his jacket as he walks away.

“Why?”

The question bursts out before I can stop it.

“Why what?” He pauses at the door, glancing back at me. He knows exactly what I’m asking—but he makes me say it out loud.

“Why are you helping me? I’m nobody to you.”

He smirks. “Got a little bored on vacation,” he says, then slips out.

I don’t know whether to believe him or not. He’s impossible to read—sometimes gruff and angry, sometimes oddly patient.

I swallow the lump in my throat and run my fingers along the corner of the baby blanket, still too nervous to look at my son’s face.

This moment feels overwhelming. Huge.

I take a deep breath. Then another. Slowly, I pull the blanket back... and the breath

catches painfully in my chest.

Tiny nose. Long lashes. A few wispy strands of light hair peek out beneath a cap;

A sleeping angel. For a moment, I forget how to breathe.

“Hi, little one,” I whisper through my tears, rocking him gently. “Mommy missed you so much.”

I lose track of time. I could sit like this forever, just memorizing every perfect detail of his tiny face.

I wait, hoping he’ll open his eyes, look at me, recognize me somehow—know that I’m here, that I never left, that I love him with everything I have.

But he keeps sleeping peacefully, even as Max returns, knocking quietly before stepping into the room.

He stops beside me, looking down at the two of us.

“He needs to go back now,” he says softly, almost apologetically.

“Already?” I exhale in disappointment.

“You’re recovering fast,” he says. “If all your tests come back clean, they’ll discharge you in about five days—on the condition that you take it easy, stick to a strict routine, and come in for weekly checkups. So, you’ll be together again soon.”

“You’re weird.” The words slip out before I can stop them.

“Yeah, well, it is what it is. Sorry,” he smirks.

“No, I didn’t mean it in a bad way. I just meant... anyone else would’ve forgotten about me by now.”

“You’re hard to forget. Your stuff’s still all over my apartment,” he says with a dry chuckle.

“Oh my God, please don’t remind me,” I groan, my cheeks burning. “I feel so embarrassed. Not only with you, but also with Vivienne, and your sister. I can’t even look them in the eye. I mean, how dumb do you have to be not to realize something was wrong?”

I turn away from him, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from crying.

“Not gonna lie and say no harm was done,” he says, sounding almost amused.

“Simmons’ already blabbed to half our friends about my ‘adorable, sweet, pregnant fiancée’, and now I have to explain to everyone it was just a huge misunderstanding.

Thankfully, Elena had the sense to keep her mouth shut and not tell our parents the ‘good news’.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, the full weight of everything sinking in.

I barged into his life, turned it upside down—and now I have no idea how to fix any of it.

How did this even happen?

What were the odds that I’d end up in the wrong apartment, with a sailor who just happened to have the same name as my boyfriend?

Or... was it really a coincidence? Maybe my Max meant to send me there? I don't know what to think anymore.

"If you want," he says, almost reading my mind, "I can track down your Max. Just give me more info on him."

"No. I don't want to know anything about him. It's just the two of us now." I clutch my baby to my chest, unwilling to let him go. But I have no choice.

Max promises they'll bring him back to me for an hour tomorrow—and the day after that, too. Reluctantly, I hand Tim over, feeling like I'm abandoning him forever; betraying him. My mother's heart shatters at the thought of even a short separation.

"Get well soon," the strange man says with a nod before disappearing through the door, my son in his arms, leaving me alone once again.

Max

I know exactly why I'm helping her. And it's not out of some damn sense of chivalry or good upbringing. It's because, better than anyone, I get it.

Betrayal by someone you love and trust cuts you down, no matter how strong you are. When the people you thought you could count on walk away, it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman, a cynic or a dreamer—the blow still hits just as hard.

That's why I'm stepping up for her, convincing the doctor to at least let me bring Erin her baby for a few precious minutes. Even I, the cold-hearted bastard that I am, can see what it's doing to her—being so close to her son and yet so painfully far.

If you ask me, separating a mother from her newborn is nothing short of cruelty, and it's doing her no favors when it comes to getting better.

I try not to get too caught up in all this caring crap. Try not to think about the redhead. Or the tiny kid who snored so sweetly in his crib that even my hardened heart clenched for a second, and for the briefest moment, I pictured my own kid lying there instead.

Maybe someday I'll get married again, tie myself down to a woman, have kids. Maybe.

But after all these years, I've gotten used to the way I live—used to the loneliness—and honestly, I'm not sure I want to change a damn thing.

Gripping the steering wheel tighter, I head toward the hospital, still not quite believing I'm doing this again—voluntarily offering to help Erin.

She doesn't even know. She texted me last night, saying she was being discharged today. I didn't reply. Not because I don't care—hell, it's the opposite.

She's gotten under my skin, and that's dangerous. Women always mean trouble, and women in trouble? Double the chaos.

I'm heading toward Building 5, cutting across the hospital parking lot.

I haven't been talking to Erin, but I've checked in with her doctor every single day. The guy wanted to discharge her two days ago, but I pushed back, insisting they keep her a little longer.

After everything that happened, she needed the extra time. No way I was letting them rush it.

I'm just stepping onto the front steps when the door swings open and a slightly pale girl with fiery red hair appears, clutching a baby wrapped in a blanket tightly against her chest. Her eyes are glued to the little bundle, so she doesn't notice me right away.

For a second, I consider turning around and letting her go her own way—like it was supposed to happen—but then she slips on the icy threshold, and I rush forward to catch her before she falls.

“Oh, thank you so much,” she gasps, her voice shaky with fear, and lifts her gaze to me.

Her eyes widen in surprise—big and green. The kind of green that could drive a man insane.

“M-Max?” she stammers, blinking rapidly. “What are you doing here?”

“Figured I’d finish what I started.”

I step back, giving her space, and pull a crooked grin.

“Brought you here. Might as well take you back.”

Cynthia used to say my sense of humor was terrible. Now I’m starting to see her point—because Erin’s not even close to smiling.

Same as the last time, when I joked about stealing her baby and she damn near had a heart attack.

“I thought we agreed you’d come by my place after you were discharged to pick up your stuff,” I remind her.

“Yeah, but... I need to rent an apartment first before I can move everything. I have an appointment with a realtor at noon to check out a couple of places near my work. I swear I’ll get a truck tomorrow to haul it all over. I’m so sorry for the inconvenience!”

She blurts it out in one breath and nervously bites her lower lip, completely unaware of how ridiculously adorable she looks doing it.

Damn it.

I’m supposed to be annoyed with her—not melting like snow underfoot. She’s a stranger. A woman with a baby, no less. She took over half my closet, nearly destroyed my book collection, and don’t even get me started on all the crap that flooded my apartment.



“Are you insane?” I snap, my irritation boiling over.

“You’re not even fully recovered yet, and you plan on running around the city with a baby in your arms looking for an apartment?

Are you out of your mind? What if something happens to you?

Did you not hear what the doctor said? Bed rest. No physical strain.

” I throw it all at her, right in her face, because this reckless girl seems like she’s living in a fantasy world.

Does she not get how serious this is?

“And what do you suggest I do?” she fires back, matching my energy, stepping closer until we’re practically face-to-face.

There’s fire blazing in her green eyes, and for a second, I’m thrown.

Compared to Cynthia, she’s actually pretty tall. I’m not used to it—every woman I’ve ever dated barely reached my shoulder at best.

“Should I just live on the street? Right here, on the hospital steps? Or maybe,” she spits, sarcasm dripping from every word, “I could just move in with you. You’ve already got a nursery. My stuff’s basically there already. Super convenient. And, by the way, I’m a damn good cook.”

“Sounds perfect,” I growl through gritted teeth.

Without thinking, I wrap an arm around her waist and steer her toward the parking lot.

“What?” she squeaks, confused.

“You said it yourself—you’ve got nowhere to go. My place was your home for almost half a year. What’s a few more days?”

“Have you lost your mind?” she stammers, trying to pull away. “Thanks, really, for everything you’ve done for us, but now’s not the time for jokes at my expense. We have a taxi waiting. Good luck and goodbye.”

She tilts her chin up and strides proudly down the path leading toward the hospital gates.

I smirk. Na?ve little thing.

I trail after her, hanging back, watching as each step seems to get harder and harder for her.

“Give him here,” I sigh, stopping her and holding out my arms for the baby.

She shoots me a glare, like all her problems are somehow my fault.

“I can handle it. Don’t worry,” she says, lifting her eyes to meet mine.

And that’s when I notice the shimmer there. Silent tears spill down her cheeks, soaking into her knitted scarf.

“I don’t doubt you can,” I say calmly. “But maybe wait until you can actually walk two miles without collapsing, yeah? Come on. You know I’m right.”

I pause, then push a little more.

“I’m not exactly thrilled about the idea of having you crashing at my place again, but half your stuff’s already there, the nursery’s set up, Vivienne lives next door, and I’m not that horrible once you get used to me.”

“Are you serious right now?” she asks, voice trembling, and I see the fire in her eyes flicker out.

Truth is, I’d planned to find her a place today—sign the papers, get her moved in—but like always, nothing’s going according to plan.

“As serious as it gets,” I say, holding her gaze.

“You know,” she says quietly, “I’d love to take you up on your offer. Really. But I can’t. My cab’s waiting. Goodbye.”

She hesitates for a few seconds, then she walks away.

I exhale, close my eyes, and tell myself she’s not my problem. I did everything I could. My conscience is clear.

But for some damn reason, instead of turning around, getting in my car, and forgetting about this whole mess, I find myself running after her.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

I'm beyond excited about today.

Honestly, I can't even remember the last time I felt this upbeat—even though, technically, I have nowhere to go and, oh yeah, I'm a single mom now.

I have no idea how to take care of a newborn.

I'm terrified I'll screw something up. I blame myself for not being able to breastfeed and for having to rely on formula to feed Tim.

I have no clue how I'm going to handle everything moving forward...

but that magical thing everyone talks about—maternal instinct—has to kick in eventually, right?

It has to.

I pull my son closer to my chest.

It's cold and windy outside, and I'm terrified he'll catch a chill. I do my best to walk steadily, pretending to look confident, hiding the fact that I'm feeling a little dizzy.

No weakness. No slipping up. I have to stay strong. I don't have the right to fall apart.

Max's words still sting. He knows perfectly well I didn't do any of this on purpose.

Sure, it's not ideal having a stranger basically take over your home, but it's not like I planned it!

Okay, maybe it's a little bit my fault, but none of his friends seemed the least bit suspicious when a very pregnant "fiancée" suddenly appeared out of nowhere—so why should I have been?

I scan the lot for the cab, double-checking the license plate number, and reach for the door handle to open it, when suddenly, a hand slams the door shut, and an arm wraps tightly around my waist, pulling me back.

I jump from the shock, but the next second, the familiar scent of his cologne hits me, and the deep rumble of his voice confirms what I already know.

"Sorry, but you won't be needing a cab anymore," Max says, handing the driver a few bills through the open window, completely ignoring my pathetic attempts to protest.

I hiss under my breath, desperate not to wake the baby, and squirm in his grasp, shooting him a murderous glare. But he acts like I'm not even there.

"No, no, no," I butt into their exchange, shaking my head furiously. "Don't leave! I need that ride!"

The driver stares at us, confused, eyes darting back and forth between Max and me.

"Had a little argument with my wife," Max says, rolling his eyes and giving the driver a lazy half-smile. "Women, right?"

"Ah, young people!" The driver chuckles, shaking his head.

To my shock, he rolls the window back up and starts the engine, getting ready to drive off.

“Hey, wait!” I lunge for the door handle, trying to stop him, but Max’s strong hands pull me back before I can even touch it.

“Easy,” he murmurs close to my ear. “Or he’ll think I’m kidnapping you.”

I stare after the black car as it pulls away, completely stunned. Did I seriously just get kidnapped by a stranger?

“You’ll thank me later,” Max says, steering me away.

“My offer is way better than whatever you had in mind. Take a day to rest somewhere safe and think about your next steps. Tomorrow, I’ll help you find a new place.

Dragging a newborn all over the city isn’t exactly a brilliant plan.

Ask Vivienne to watch him for a few hours. Be smart, Erin.”

His warm breath grazes my neck, sending a strange shiver down my spine.

He smells like mint gum, just faintly masking the scent of tobacco. God, I hope he doesn’t smoke—if he does, there’s no way I’m letting him anywhere near my baby.

I want to turn my head toward him to meet his gaze, but when I do, his lips accidentally brush against my temple, and I instinctively jerk back, putting more distance between us.

“Sorry,” I mumble, feeling heat rush to my cheeks.

I'm breathing too fast, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. The spot where he touched me burns like it's on fire. My hands are shaking. Something strange is happening to me.

The situation is saved by Tim, who wakes up and starts crying. At first quietly, then louder and louder, so much so that passersby begin to turn and stare at us, and I can't seem to calm him down.

"There, there, it's okay, my little one," I coo, rocking him in my arms.

"Come on, Erin, don't stand out here in the cold," Max says evenly, gently steering me toward his car.

I want to cry. Just this morning, I had everything figured out, pulled myself together piece by piece, found a few housing options, thought through how I would handle work—and now I feel helpless again, letting Max meddle in my plans.

But he's right about one thing. I don't have the money to pay rent.

I would've had to go to him anyway to get my savings, and the baby's things.

No diapers, no bottles, no clothes—nothing.

Max opens the back door of his SUV. He helps me into the car; I avoid meeting his gaze, and he seems unusually tense and lost in thought.

Luckily, Tim quickly settles down, closes his eyes, and drifts back to sleep.

I carefully run my fingertip over his flushed cheeks, wiping away his tears.

A tightness forms under my ribs from the overwhelming tenderness filling me, and

for a moment, I forget where I am and with whom—until the man reminds me of his presence.

“Do you need anything from the store? Formula? Diapers?”

I catch his gaze in the rearview mirror and swallow the lump forming in my throat. His eyes are so unusual. I’ve never seen anything like them in my life.

For a moment, I get lost in them, then quickly clear my throat and try to pull myself together.

“Yeah, I’d really appreciate it if you could stop by a store,” I say.

“Text me a list. I’ll grab everything you need. You two can stay here,” he replies.

“No, it’s just... there are some... you know, women’s things, and also stuff for Tim. I don’t think you’ll figure it all out on your own.”

“I’ll take pictures. You can choose. Don’t worry,” Max says.

He turns toward the supermarket, while I sit there frantically trying to remember if I had packed any of those “women’s essentials” among my things at his place.

The thought of asking a strange man to buy something like that makes my face burn with embarrassment.

And then it hits me: Max would make a good husband. A caring one. Even with how irritable and distant he can be sometimes. If he’s willing to help a complete stranger like me, I can only imagine how he would treat the woman he actually loves.

Someone’s going to get very lucky with him.



Too bad my Max wasn't like that.

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It feels like an eternity has passed since the last time I rode the elevator up to the floor that had become my true home.

I loved this neighborhood.

I loved the location of the building.

I loved the people who lived here.

I loved how safe it felt.

I never had to worry about coming home late from work, fumbling for my keys while someone could sneak up behind me and knock me out.

I loved that there was a little daycare right in the courtyard and a good school just a block away.

I had even spotted a storefront on the first floor, already dreaming that once Max came back from sea, and the financial burden wasn't solely on my shoulders, I could rent it and open my flower shop.

It felt like the perfect plan—working practically from home.

And now, I'm riding up in the elevator in heavy silence, lost and overwhelmed by the realization that I'll have to rebuild my life from scratch.

Because now, it's not just about me anymore. There's a tiny, completely helpless

little person who depends on me for everything.

The elevator doors slide open, and Max steps aside, letting me go first.

He's carrying two large bags; another one is still in the car—he said he would come back for it later.

I take a deep breath. The hallway is quiet, my footsteps echoing loudly against the empty walls. Just a few feet away from the door with that cursed apartment number, I slow down. I swallow the lump rising in my throat, nerves buzzing under my skin.

“Something wrong?” Max asks, catching up to me.

“No.” I shake my head quickly, watching as he pulls the keys out of his jacket pocket, slides them into the lock, and swings the door open.

“You gonna stand there all day?” he says with a raised brow as I hesitate, shifting from foot to foot, peeking inside at the all-too-familiar entryway walls.

I step over the threshold and freeze. My eyes scan the room, trying to catch any changes that might have happened while I was gone. But everything seems just the same. Even my shoes are still sitting neatly on the shelf. The door slams shut loudly behind me, and I jump.

I glance around in confusion, finally realizing that I'm alone in the apartment with a man I barely know.

I turn to look at Max. He pulls off his boots and jacket while my mind reels, flashing through every true crime story I've ever watched.

Maybe getting into his car hadn't been the smartest idea after all. Trusting him—even

less so.

Yes, he helped me. Yes, he brought me here.

But why?

What does he want?

He pushed so hard to get me here—for what reason?

I stay frozen, panic clawing at my chest, paranoia eating a hole straight through me.

Max suddenly takes a step toward me, and instinctively I shrink back, my spine hitting the wall behind me.

His brow lifts slowly. He frowns, watching me closely with those serious, unreadable eyes.

“What’s wrong with you? You look like you’re afraid of me,” he says, his voice low and a little rough.

I try to mask the fear in my eyes. Square my shoulders. Pretend everything’s fine. But my gaze betrays me, darting toward the door—and the keys still sticking out of the lock.

That’s a good sign, right?

God, Hale, you’re losing it.

For once in your life, a normal guy crosses your path, and you immediately label him a serial killer.

“I just want to hold the baby so you can take off your jacket,” he explains patiently, like he’s talking to a scared little kid.

I nod, forcing myself to relax. It’s just my imagination; stupid late-night crime shows messing with my head.

Max stretches his arms toward me, and reluctantly, I pass Tim over to him.

“There we go,” I murmur, gently pulling the corner of the blanket back from my son’s head. It’s warm in the apartment, and I don’t want him to overheat.

Max stands frozen in place, like he’s been glued there. He’s holding the baby so carefully, so still, as if one wrong move might wake Tim up.

I quickly shrug off my coat, switch my boots for a pair of house slippers, and gently take my son back into my arms.

“I...” I stammer, unsure what to do next.

I had gotten used to thinking of this apartment as ours—mine and Max’s.

But now, the real owner is a complete stranger.

I hesitate, standing awkwardly by the door, waiting for some kind of permission to move deeper inside.

“I left the nursery the way it was,” Max says, his voice even. “Once you find a new place, I’ll turn it back into an office... so...”

He trails off, presses his lips together, and jerks his head toward the door leading to the nursery.

I understand without needing more words. Gratefully, I slip away from his intense gaze and into the room meant to be Tim's first home.

The nursery really hasn't changed. A wave of sadness washes over me as I take in the ceiling lights, the crib, the toys, the hand-painted designs on the walls. I had poured so much of myself into this space, picking out every detail with love, waiting months for some of the orders to arrive.

And now... it's all for nothing.

I lay my son down gently in the crib, unwrap the blanket, and slip off his warm little hat.

God, he's so tiny. It's impossible to look away. And he looks so much like his father.

A lump rises in my throat.

They say babies change as they grow. I can only hope Tim's resemblance to Max fades with time.

For a while, I just stand over the crib, unable to tear my eyes away from my son, overwhelmed with relief that I finally get to be near him again.

When I step out of the nursery, the smell of food hits me from the direction of the kitchen. Probably, I should've been the one to cook something for Max as a thank-you. Instead, he's the one standing by the stove.

I hurry to take over, walking into the kitchen and taking in the scene: everything looks spotless, way cleaner than it ever was when I lived here.

It's so unlike most guys.

Or maybe he has a housekeeper?

“Let me finish cooking,” I offer, stepping closer to him.

He turns around, gives me a heavy once-over, sighs in frustration, then turns back to the stove.

“I grabbed ready-made meals at the store,” he says. “I just need to heat them up. I can manage that much. You need to rest. Go lie down while the baby’s sleeping.”

I wrap my arms around myself, feeling completely out of place. It’s hard to shake the feeling that everything here is foreign to me now. Well, except maybe for that candy dish on the table—that’s mine. And the frying pan on the stove too.

Then it hits me: there’s only one bedroom here.

One bed.

There’s barely any furniture at all, like the owner’s some kind of hardcore minimalist.

“I’ll just crash in the nursery on the floor,” I mumble. “I’ll grab a blanket from the closet.”

“Are you crazy?” Max snaps, spinning around.

He grabs a plate, piles some food onto it, and sets it down on the table with a thud.

“Sit. Eat. Then go to the bedroom and rest,” he says firmly. “I know exactly what the doctor said about your recovery schedule.”

And I obey him without a fight. I nibble on some bland potatoes, poke at the salad,

doing everything I can to avoid his gaze.

“Thanks,” I murmur quietly.

I pick up my plate and head toward the sink, planning to wash it.

“I need to feed the baby,” I say. “Where did you put the formula?”

“Top shelf by the fridge,” he answers. “Hang on, I’ll get it for you.”

Max reaches for the cabinet, and as he stretches, his T-shirt rides up slightly, revealing the defined muscles of his abdomen.

I quickly look away before he catches me staring. The guy is seriously built—no point lying to myself. His shoulders are way broader than my Max. He’s tall, fit, and athletic. If only he shaved that beard, so I could actually see his face, not just his eyes.

He fits into this apartment so naturally, feels so right here—way more than my Max ever did.

“Here,” he says, handing me the formula. “But after this, no arguments—you’re going straight to bed, got it?”

He gives me a pointed look, and I nod, not daring to argue. Besides, I feel weak as hell.

“We’ll figure out the next steps tonight,” he adds.

“Thank you,” I breathe out, turning away from him.

I close my eyes, feeling his presence with every part of me—his heavy gaze burning into the back of my head, the quiet shuffle of his footsteps across the kitchen, and the strange tension holding us both tight, making it impossible to relax or slip into an easy conversation.



Erin

To my relief, Tim falls asleep quickly, because I'm starting to feel dizzy and overwhelmingly exhausted. The sun hasn't even set yet, and I'm already completely drained. I'm not used to being idle, so I can't wait to fully recover and get back into my usual rhythm.

Maybe Max was right: if I had dragged myself all over the city with a newborn in my arms, I wouldn't have made it.

I don't even have the strength to think about whether I should lie down in Max's bed. I just head for the shower, find my pajamas exactly where I left them, crawl under the blanket, and instantly pass out.

It feels like I never left this apartment. Like nothing has changed and it's still my home.

Somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, I hear the door quietly open, muffled footsteps, and then the mattress dips under someone's weight. A wave of heat sweeps over me when Max stretches out next to me—over the blanket, but is still way too close.

My heart starts pounding like crazy, ready to burst out of my chest. Sleep vanishes in an instant, and my breathing turns uneven.

I lie there, listening to the faint sounds in the room, cautiously peeking at him through half-closed eyes.

But he doesn't make a move.

He just stares thoughtfully at the ceiling, then eventually reaches over to switch off the light, rolls onto his side, and, it seems, falls asleep. Still fully dressed.

I lie there for a little while longer, but then I jolt upright when I hear a baby crying from the next room. God, what time is it? I reach out blindly for my phone on the nightstand.

Crap. I was supposed to feed him an hour ago!

Behind me, I hear a muffled groan—sounds like Tim woke Max too.

I use the light from my phone to guide myself to the nursery, scoop my baby into my arms, and head for the kitchen to prepare a bottle of formula.

“Shhh, it's okay, sweetheart. Just a little longer, Mommy's got you,” I whisper, trying to soothe him while tears slip down my own cheeks.

It's so much harder than I thought—to watch your baby scream in distress, to feel so helpless.

His tiny face is blotchy and red, his eyes wet with tears.

“Here, baby, come on. That's it.”

I bring the bottle to his lips, and, thank God, it's enough to calm him down.

I cradle him in my arms, pacing back and forth across the room, listening to the silence slowly return to the apartment.

When Tim finally drifts back to sleep, I settle into the armchair next to his crib, pull a blanket over myself, and just sit there, watching my little boy.

I end up browsing rental listings nearby, getting so caught up in my thoughts that I don't even notice Max appear in the nursery until I startle and look up at him with wide eyes.

He looks groggy, a little ruffled.

Without saying a word, he walks over to the crib, his gaze lingering on the sleeping baby for a few seconds. Then he glances at me and whispers,

"Are you planning to sit here all night?"

"I didn't want to wake you again," I murmur. "We're already causing enough trouble."

"It's nothing," he brushes it off.

He walks to the window and glances outside.

"Looks like a snowstorm's rolling in."

I get up from the armchair and stop behind him, watching the trees sway violently under the gusts of wind, their branches illuminated by the glow of the streetlights.

The snowstorm is just picking up, but the ground outside is already blanketed in white.

"If it keeps snowing like this, you're gonna be stuck here for a few more days," Max says, still facing the window.

He turns his head slightly toward me, and under his intense gaze, I suddenly feel very self-conscious.

That's when it hits me—I'm standing here in nothing but a thin pajama set. Definitely not the best choice for strolling around in front of a man I barely know.

"I guess I should've gone apartment hunting today after all," I mumble, biting my lip. "Now you're stuck putting up with us even longer. Maybe we'll just end up staying here forever," I add, trying to joke, but it comes out all wrong.

A nervous laugh escapes me, and Max's thoughtful silence only makes the awkwardness even worse.

"Come on," he says simply, ignoring my lame attempt at humor.

He walks past me, lingers for a moment by Tim's crib, and then heads for the door. I follow him without thinking.

It feels strangely domestic, like we're a real couple, and the thought throws me off balance. I stumble slightly, my breath catching.

I open my mouth, about to suggest I could just crash on the couch—even if it's way too small and stiff to sleep on properly—but before I can get the words out, the shrill buzz of the doorbell cuts through the quiet of the apartment.

"Are we expecting someone?" Max asks, giving me a questioning look.

"Definitely not me," I say, wrinkling my nose at the loud noise, immediately straining my ears to hear if Tim's woken up.

"At eleven at night?" Max glances at the clock, frowning. "I'll get it," he says, and a

sinking feeling twists in my gut.

I take a step after him, fighting the overwhelming urge to grab his arm, to beg him not to open it. To just pretend we're not home.

But it's too late. I hear the soft click of the lock turning and the door creaking open.

Max

I open the door and stare at the woman standing in front of me, blinking a few times in disbelief, half-hoping she'll just vanish into thin air.

“Are you going to let me in?” Cynthia asks haughtily and, taking full advantage of my shock, steps inside without an invitation.

She's wrapped in a mink coat, her high-heeled boots gleaming like she just stepped out of a showroom. Her hair is slightly damp from the melting snow, and if you ask me, there's way too much makeup on her face.

“What the hell are you doing here? How did you even find out where I live?” I hiss at her, glancing down the hallway to make sure Erin can't see us.

“I was driving home from work when the snowstorm hit,” Cynthia says, cocking her head and giving me that sly fox-like look of hers. “Couldn't see a thing on the road. Your mother called, and I might've mentioned my situation... She suggested I wait out the storm at your place. She didn't warn you?”

“Cynthia,” I exhale sharply, clenching my fists to keep the anger bubbling inside from exploding. Of course, my mother had to meddle—despite me telling her to stay out of my business.

“I'll call you a cab,” I snap. “You'll head home, and until then, pretend you're not here. Better yet—pretend you're a damn statue and don't move.”

Color floods Cynthia's cheeks—pure rage. But she holds herself back, trying to stay composed, though back when we were together, she would've already unleashed hell by now. She used to do that a lot—blow up, storm off to the bathroom, and sob loudly until I caved and gave her whatever she wanted.

“Wait,” she says, touching my hand to stop me from making the call to the cab service. “Let's talk. I've missed you so much. This snowstorm—it's like fate giving us a second chance.”

She looks up at me with those wide, trusting eyes, and for a split second, I hesitate.

No matter how much I hate to admit it, Cynthia still holds a little sway over me. Ghosts of the past don't let go easily. They pull at you, drag you back, make you hesitate when you know better.

“That's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard,” I say in a rough voice, looking away from her and bringing the phone to my ear.

While I'm unsuccessfully trying to find a cab, Cynthia kicks off her shiny boots, shrugs out of her mink coat, and heads toward the closet. She freezes.

At first, I don't get what's wrong. Then I see it—and a slow smirk spreads across my face.

Erin's clothes. Still hanging there.

At least one good thing came out of this mess.

“You're not alone,” Cynthia says, her voice a little shaky, her eyes darting around the living room with new focus. Her gaze lands on a makeup bag, a pair of women's shoes, a purse.

“You’re not in a relationship with anyone, are you?” she stammers.

“Been spying on me, huh?” I cross my arms over my chest, watching her face twist through a whole damn range of emotions.

“Your... your mom told me,” she mutters, clearly flustered. “I didn’t want to come, but she convinced me. Said you were alone.”

Yeah, sure. Mom strikes again.

“Cynthia, I’m a grown man. I don’t report every step I take to my mother,” I say dryly.

“Now, do me a favor: lower your voice and help me find you a ride. Because right now, there isn’t a single free cab in three different services, and like hell you’re staying here tonight.

You might just have to spend the night in your car. ”

I chuckle and start dialing again.

“Who is she?” Cynthia demands, her voice dripping with jealousy—and I catch the first flicker of rage lighting up in her eyes.

“What does it matter?” I snap, brushing her off.

“Max,” she whispers seductively, stepping closer, “I know no woman could ever truly replace me.”

Her voice is low, thick with longing, and when I glance down at her, her eyes are shimmering with unshed tears.



Her hands land softly on my shoulders, her touch light but purposeful.

She knows exactly what she's doing—how a few tears could always break down my walls, how easily she used to get her way.

Maybe on another day, I would've taken advantage of the moment. Maybe I'd have let myself remember what it felt like to have her soft skin under my fingers, to breathe in the scent of her hair, to taste her lips—and then toss her out in the morning with a few cutting words.

But today, I'm not alone in this apartment.

Maybe fate's finally throwing me a bone, keeping me from making another mistake I'll regret.

"Cynthia, you know it's over," I say tiredly, wrapping my hands around her slender wrists and gently pulling her away from me. "And, for the record, it wasn't my choice. I wasn't the one who walked away."

She refuses to let go. She presses herself against me and murmurs in a hoarse voice,

"You've only gotten more handsome with time. I always loved your strong body, those long fingers, the veins in your hands, the way you smelled... that woody cologne. We all make mistakes, Max. But we also get the chance to fix them."

"You know," I say coldly, taking a step back, "I appreciate the flattery. But your apology's a little too late."

Cynthia doesn't belong here. Not in this apartment. Not in my new life. She looks completely out of place, like a piece from a different puzzle, and all I want is to get rid of her as fast as possible.

She opens her mouth to say something, but right then, a baby's cry cuts through the apartment.

Cynthia's face falls, the flirtatious spark in her eyes snuffed out.

She stares at me in confusion—and then, without so much as a glance our way, Erin walks past us down the hallway, putting the final nail in the coffin of my supposedly single life.

Her long, fiery hair cascades over her shoulders and back, the silky pajamas clinging to a body that hardly shows any sign of just having given birth.

Does she even realize how stunning she looks?

Too stunning. Even with her pale face and visible exhaustion.

That's when it hits me—Erin must've heard everything Cynthia and I just said. I completely forgot she was here.

"Max, what the hell is going on?" Cynthia snaps, her voice rising. "You have a baby here?" She cranes her neck, scanning the apartment.

"Yeah, and so what?" I say coolly. "Babies aren't aliens. It's not that weird."

"You got involved with some girl who has a kid?"

"And why the hell do you care?" I snap back. "Call your damn taxi and get out."

"No," she hisses, narrowing her eyes. "If that were your kid, your parents would know. Does your mother even know you brought some random girl and her brat into your home?"

“Listen carefully,” I snap, my anger boiling over as she lectures me like I’m some rebellious teenager.

“Who I date, whose kids I raise—that’s none of your damn business.

You’d do well to keep your mouth shut, Cynthia, unless you want everyone finding out the real reason for our divorce.

I don’t think our families would be thrilled to learn that while I was stuck in bed with a shattered hip, unable to even make it to the damn bathroom on my own, you were screwing your boss on weekend getaways.

Imagine that—sweet, perfect, well-mannered Cynthia cheating on her crippled husband with some older guy...

who dumped her the second he got bored.”

Cynthia’s breathing hard now, furious. The polished, charming act crumbles right before my eyes, exposing her real self.

“You’re just as much of a fool as you always were, Taylor,” she spits. “Instead of building a proper life with the right kind of woman—starting a family, having your own kid—you’re wasting your time. Some redhead dumps her bastard on you, and you’re eating it up.”

“And who said he’s not my kid?”

I cross my arms over my chest and stare her down, daring her to push further.

Silence falls between us, heavy and tense. From down the hallway, I hear Tim’s faint cries and Erin’s soft, soothing voice singing to him.

Cynthia freezes for a second, scanning my face like she's trying to read the truth. Her frown deepens.

"No... that's insane," she finally mutters, her voice shaky. I catch a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. "Why would you hide a kid from your parents?"

"I just haven't had the chance to introduce her yet.

And Elena's been keeping quiet like a damn soldier.

Don't worry, Mom will meet her grandson soon enough.

He was just born. Caught me off guard too," I add, letting the lie slip a little too easily.

God, I hope this doesn't come back to bite me later.

"And now," I continue, my tone hardening, "since you finally understand you're not welcome here, maybe help me find you a cab before the city gets completely buried in snow."

I ignore Cynthia's dagger glare and dial up the taxi service again, only to get hit with the same bullshit response: "Sorry, due to weather conditions, there are no available cars in your area."

Are they all conspiring against me tonight?

I don't let Cynthia step further into the apartment. We're both stuck in the entryway, tension crackling between us. I'm getting more pissed by the minute when, even after ten more calls, no damn car materializes.

And as much as I'd love to shove her right out the door into the storm—God knows she deserves it—I can't quite bring myself to do it. But hell if I'm letting her spend the night here.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement. I turn my head and see Erin—wide-eyed and frozen mid-step—trying to slip past us toward the bedroom. She's hoping to stay invisible, but no chance of that. Not with Cynthia.

Cynthia lets out a loud, mocking huff and starts eyeing Erin from head to toe like she's inspecting a piece of trash on the sidewalk.

Erin stops dead in her tracks. She looks even paler than usual, her green eyes darting around like she's searching for an escape route. Her fingers twist nervously at the hem of her silk pajama top.

She doesn't know what to do with herself, as if she thinks she's interrupted something very important.

"Sorry," she clears her throat, confirming my suspicion. She probably decided that Cynthia is my girlfriend and now, because of Erin's presence, I might have problems.

"This is my ex-wife, Cynthia. And this is Erin," I say, clearing up her mistaken assumption.

I deliberately leave Erin's status undefined—Cynthia's imagination will fill in the blanks just fine. Erin's eyes widen in surprise, like I just told her I used to be married to a dog. Her lips part in a drawn-out, "Ohhh."

Cynthia opens her mouth to say something, but I stop her with a wave of my hand. Her lips open and close—clearly she wants to snap back, but doesn't dare while I'm standing here. She's still clinging to the image of the perfect, well-mannered woman.

“Would you like some tea?” Erin offers, completely unaware of the level of my disdain for Cynthia.

“Cynthia was just leaving. And you should be resting already. Go on,” I say, nodding toward the bedroom door, and I don’t say another word until it closes behind her.

“Your taste has really gone downhill,” Cynthia sneers.

“My taste has changed,” I shrug. “I prefer modest, self-sufficient women now. Not selfish snakes.”

“You’ll get bored with them fast. And when you do, you’ll remember me—but it’ll be too late,” she says haughtily, way overestimating her importance.

I decide not to dignify that with a response.

Another fifteen minutes pass, and even Cynthia starts getting angry.

She’s clearly tired of standing by the door, and whatever plan she had for tonight is clearly falling apart.

Good. Helping Erin turned out to be a smart move—now my ex gets to see me as a family man instead of some lonely hermit.

“Give it here. You can’t do anything yourself,” she snaps, snatching the phone from my hands and pressing it to her ear.

Looks like someone was hoping for a very different kind of night and is now fuming. I tune her out and watch, bored, as she fails to get a cab. Cynthia mutters something under her breath and shoves the phone back at me.

“I’ll figure it out myself,” she says firmly, shooting me a furious look, as if she caught me cheating on her during our marriage.

“Don’t be stupid. The weather’s a nightmare out there.”

“What do you expect me to do? Crawl into bed with the two of you?” she snaps, throwing a venomous glance toward the bedroom.

“I’ll drive you myself. My ‘tank’ can handle the weather. When the roads are clear, you can come back for your car.”

Cynthia looks like she wants to argue, wants to storm off dramatically and slam the door behind her—but then she visibly deflates and gives in.

“Wait here. I’m going to change,” I tell her, heading toward the bedroom.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Max

The nightlight is on in the room. Erin stands by the window, her back to me. She flinches slightly when the door clicks shut behind me and we're left alone.

Once again, I find myself studying her figure.

Not stick-thin like Cynthia. Erin has long legs, perfect posture, and a head of thick, beautiful hair.

She looks meek, at least on the surface, not the type to be a schemer.

And judging by everything, probably loyal too.

Her boyfriend is a complete idiot for leaving her.

Though, to be fair, my ex-wife also seemed perfect at first, and look how that turned out.

"I'm heading out for a few hours," I say, not sure why I feel the need to explain myself. "Cynthia's too scared to drive in the blizzard, so I'm taking her home. I'll be back right after."

I realize I'm drawing a very clear line between me and my ex, for my own sake, as much as for Erin's.

She turns to face me. A tiny wrinkle forms between her perfectly shaped brows. She's



clearly thinking hard about something. Then she breathes out, relaxes a little, and steps toward the bed.

“You don’t have to explain yourself. And nothing’s going to happen to me if you’re not home overnight. I feel fine.”

Yeah. She definitely misunderstood the whole situation.

Erin lifts the corner of the blanket and hides underneath it, shielding herself from my gaze.

“I’ll try to be quick,” I say, lingering for a second. “If you want, I can crash on the couch. I get it. I’m a stranger to you, and you probably don’t want to share a bed.”

Lie. I don’t get it at all. I’m just saying it to be polite. Honestly, even if she asked me to sleep on the couch, I’d still end up in the bedroom. After half a year of wrecking my back on a lumpy mattress, sleeping in my own bed feels like pure bliss.

“No, it’s fine. It’s your home, after all. I already feel bad enough for everything that happened and for bothering you again,” she says softly. “Just... grab an extra blanket from the closet, please.”

“Sure,” I nod, then head into the walk-in closet to grab some warmer clothes.

“Sweet dreams,” I toss over my shoulder as I leave the room, immediately spotting Cynthia pacing back and forth in the hallway, her heels clacking loudly against the floor.

“Let’s go,” I say, grabbing my car keys from the console, throwing on my jacket, and steering my ex firmly toward the door.

Cynthia stays silent, her face tense, her mind clearly racing. Every few steps she sneaks strange glances at me, like she wants to say something but doesn't. Fine by me.

I swear, if she so much as hints about "giving us another chance", I'm kicking her out of the car. Right there. Blizzard or not.

"New car?" she asks, arching an eyebrow when we get to the parking garage and I disable the alarm.

"Yeah, just bought it," I say, deciding that opening the door for her would be way too much—she can manage. I walk around to the driver's side, get behind the wheel, and wait until Cynthia climbs into the SUV herself. Then I start the engine, crank up the heater, and pull onto the street.

There's already a good amount of snow on the ground.

The roads are covered, but not so badly that you can't drive at all.

I keep my speed slow, the wipers working overtime.

Every now and then, we pass another car.

The heavy silence between us feels suffocating, so I turn on the radio, but halfway through the ride, Cynthia reaches out and turns the volume down.

She pins me with a stare and finally can't keep her sharp tongue in check.

"Yeah, there's no way that kid is yours," she snorts, her eyes glinting with the smug satisfaction of someone who thinks they've just solved a great mystery.

“You never even wanted your own kids that much before. So I have to wonder—what is it about this Erin that made you agree to take her in with...” She pauses, searching for the right word. “With the extra baggage.”

“That’s none of your damn business,” I snap through gritted teeth, gripping the steering wheel harder.

“It’s just interesting,” she presses on, ignoring the warning in my glare.

“Is she in love with you—or your money? What? It’s convenient, isn’t it?

Finding some big-hearted fool like you and wrapping him around her little finger.

You always were eager to help everyone, handing out loans, never asking for them back, even a year later.

You’re too easy to manipulate,” she finishes smugly, and I roll my eyes.

I’ve heard this speech way too many times before.

“I’d say you ranked first in taking advantage of me.”

“I’m being serious, Max,” she says sharply. “Think about your future. Why would you settle for a woman with another man’s kid when you could have your own?”

“Erin would make a damn good mother for my kid,” I lie without hesitation, and the way it makes Cynthia even more furious gives me a small flicker of satisfaction.

“At least she sure as hell wouldn’t bail on me in a tough moment just because I couldn’t afford to bankroll all her whims,” I add, hitting right where it hurts the most—at the sore spot of our past relationship.

“You know it wasn’t like that,” she says in a trembling voice, turning toward the window.

I can bet her silence won’t last long.

We pull up to Cynthia’s building around 1 a.m. The roads are already buried under a thick layer of snow. I know going back out there isn’t exactly the best idea, but leaving Erin alone in the apartment on her first night back from the hospital doesn’t sit right with me, either.

What if something happens?

Sure, I could crash at my parents’ place and head back in the morning, but there’s no telling how bad the roads will get overnight. Better to head back now while it’s still manageable—even if barely.

“Well? You getting out or what?” I say, glancing at Cynthia, who’s still glued to the window and not moving.

“Sorry, but I’m not about to play Prince Charming and open your door for you. It’s freezing out there.”

“And you... you’re not staying the night?” she asks timidly, turning to face me—though there’s no trace of shyness or innocence in her eyes. She bites her lower lip and looks at me hopefully, waiting.

“Where exactly?” I arch a brow, studying her face.

Hard to believe I was once head over heels for her—though maybe not that surprising. Cynthia always knew how to present herself, how to be witty, charming.

And how to lie straight to my face without blinking. How to play me like a damn fiddle.

“At your parents’ house, maybe. Driving tonight is suicide. Look at that snowstorm—you can’t see a damn thing,” she presses.

“It didn’t bother you the whole time we were barreling down buried streets,” I say with a smirk, seeing right through her ploy to get me to stay. “But now you’re playing the voice of reason?”

“Don’t twist my words. You know exactly what I meant. Don’t be an idiot, Max. I’ll worry,” she adds, softening her voice.

“I’ll text you,” I say dryly. “Now get out. I still have to drive back.”

“Be careful,” she whispers as she lingers for a moment, her eyes scanning my face before she lets out a heavy sigh. “And do something about that beard—you look like a monk.”

She yanks the door handle and clumsily climbs out, letting a blast of freezing air into the car before slamming it shut.

I watch to make sure Cynthia gets safely inside her building before I slowly pull away from the curb.

Visibility is crap—maybe a meter at best. The wipers can’t keep up with the snow piling onto the windshield. I creep along at a snail’s pace, staring absently at the swirling white flakes. If I weren’t so focused on not crashing, I’d probably be admiring the beauty of it.

Feels like it’s been years since I really saw snow—probably three winters ago, since I

usually spend the season out at sea.

My eyes are practically glued shut from exhaustion. It's two in the morning, and there's not a soul in sight. At this point, I'm not even sure I'm heading in the right direction. No street signs. No traffic lights. No recognizable turns. Just endless white.

I have no choice but to switch on the GPS and follow the little blinking dot on the screen.

The wind howls around the car, snow swirling violently, and twice I nearly skid out taking a turn. I'm starting to seriously regret my decision. I should've stayed at my parents' place. Or hell, just kicked Cynthia out into the snow and forgotten she ever existed.

About two blocks from home, the inevitable happens. The SUV gets stuck.

No matter how much I hit the gas, how much I rock the damn thing back and forth—the tires just spin uselessly in a massive drift.

“Perfect,” I mutter through gritted teeth and slam my palms against the steering wheel.

I take a deep breath, trying to keep a lid on my frustration. Fine. I'll wait a bit, see if the blizzard dies down. If not, I'll walk it. Two kilometers, give or take? I can manage that. Anything to get back to Erin and the baby.

I try to keep my mind busy, to stop it from drifting where it wants to go—back to Cynthia, our marriage, and all the what-ifs.

The truth is, I gave her too much. Spoiled her. Never said no. Let her believe she owned me, that I'd never leave.

She didn't realize... I liked making her happy. I liked the sparkle in her eyes when I did something right. I liked thinking I had someone to fight for, to build a future with.

But it was all an illusion. The biggest disappointment of my life.

I listen to music, scroll aimlessly through my phone, but by around three in the morning, I finally crack and decide to step outside.

Good thing I dressed warmly.

I grab my gloves off the back seat, zip my jacket all the way up, pull on a beanie, kill the engine, and shove the door open. A blast of snow whips into the car immediately.

I step out and shudder under the brutal wind—it smacks me square in the face, and my boots sink deep into the snow.

For a few seconds, I hesitate, questioning my life choices. Should I even try to get home tonight?

But stubbornness wins. I mutter a few choice words under my breath, square my shoulders, and start trudging forward, praying my phone doesn't die before I can navigate through the maze of side streets.

It only takes a few minutes for the freezing wind to start stinging my face like needles. Every step feels heavier, like I'm wading through quicksand.

God, what a mess I got myself into. I keep grumbling to myself, cursing every bad decision that led me here. Snow keeps slapping me right in the eyes, making it almost impossible to see.

The only small mercy? About fifteen minutes in, I take a left turn, and now the wind

is finally at my back instead of pummeling me head-on. Walking gets a little easier—but the cold still cuts to the bone.

And then, just when I start to think maybe I'll make it, my phone battery dies with a pathetic little beep.

I groan loudly, standing there in the middle of the snowstorm.

Perfect. Just perfect.



Erin

I still can't wrap my head around the fact that Max was married.

At first, I thought the woman was his fiancée and panicked, thinking I might cause trouble for him, but after overhearing a few sharp exchanges—totally by accident—I pieced together enough to realize their divorce was anything but peaceful.

And that Cynthia definitely didn't just “happen” to show up here in the middle of a snowstorm.

Honestly, she didn't strike me as likable at all. I was shocked Max ever chose someone like her.

He's calm, decisive, direct, reliable—or at least, that's the man I've gotten to know. She, on the other hand, is pushy, spoiled, and arrogant.

They don't match at all. Well, unless you're talking about appearances.

From the outside, they look good together: stylish, petite, elegant—exactly the type you'd imagine standing next to a man like Taylor.

I won't lie: Max is very attractive. Built, powerful, with that quiet magnetism you can practically feel across the room. And for reasons I can't even explain, I find myself desperate to see what he looks like under that thick black beard.

Maybe if I didn't have a child now...

Maybe if my heart weren't still quietly mourning someone else...

Maybe if we had met under different circumstances...

I would have jumped at the chance to get to know him, to go on a few dates, to try to charm him somehow. Men like Max are rare. Gold.

Outside, the snow is still falling, making the whole room glow almost unnaturally bright.

Sleep won't come. I know, deep down, that I'm probably stuck here another day. There's no way the roads will be cleared enough by morning to make it back into the city.

I glance at the time. The minutes are dragging unbearably slow.

My eyes shift to the window, and for some reason, a wave of anxiety for Max washes over me.

Driving in weather like this is dangerous—was it really worth the risk? Or was there something else? Maybe he's been gone this long because of the snowstorm. Or maybe he decided to stop by his ex's place "for a coffee".

For reasons I don't even want to name, the second possibility bothers me way more than it should.

I roll onto my back and listen carefully to the sounds of the apartment.

I wish I had bought that little sofa for the nursery—then I could've stayed the night with my baby. But the truth is, I never planned on needing it. I thought, at least for the first year, he would be sleeping right here with us, in our bedroom.

And yet... here we are.

Max.

His name won't leave my head.

I still can't believe he would do this to me. To us.

He's the father of this child. Could someone really just walk away from their own son like that?

I know there's something about this story that doesn't add up. I feel it in my bones. But part of me is terrified to dig for the truth. Terrified of confirming that the man I trusted was never who I thought he was.

I don't have his parents' phone number, but I remember a few of his friends from social media.

I make a snap decision, pull up his profile, find Colin, and before I can talk myself out of it, I send a message:

"Hey. Do you know if Max is okay? Have you talked to him?"

I hold my breath, staring at the screen for what feels like forever. But it's two in the morning—normal people are sleeping. Not me. Despite the exhaustion dragging at my body, sleep refuses to come.

Something is gnawing at me.

I check on Tim a few times—he's sleeping soundly, thank God.

I'm just stepping out of the nursery when I hear the sound of the front door opening.

Heavy footsteps.

I freeze, my heart hammering wildly in my chest—and then comes a rush of relief so strong it makes my knees weak.

I scurry back to the bedroom like a guilty little mouse, dive under the covers, and listen. Max passes by the bedroom, heads to the bathroom, and slams the door behind him.

The water starts running.

The only thing separating us now is a single, paper-thin wall. And somehow, that realization makes my heart pound even harder.

The man spends way too long in the shower, and then suddenly the apartment goes completely silent.

The silence is broken by the heavy footsteps approaching the bedroom. I hold my breath when the door creaks open and quickly squeeze my eyes shut, pretending to be asleep.

I'm sure Max just came in to check on me. Which is why I freeze in shock when he approaches the bed and the mattress dips under his weight.

Without warning, he flops down onto the bed, yanks the blanket up, and slides in—far too close to me. So close that his damp, bare skin brushes against mine, making me flinch and instinctively scoot to the very edge of the bed.

“What the hell?” he rasps, fumbling for the bedside lamp.

The sudden brightness makes me squint.

“Oh, right. Forgot you were here,” he mutters with a heavy sigh, then flops back against the pillow.

Silence.

I find myself staring in disbelief at his flushed face... and the broad, muscular chest on full display.

“You okay?” I ask, not sure how to act or what’s going through his mind.

“Yeah,” he mutters, covering his eyes with one hand before reaching over to turn off the light again.

Darkness swallows the room. But even without seeing him, I can feel him. Every cell in my body is aware of him—his heavy breathing, his overwhelming presence.

I’m lying in bed with a half-naked man. Does this count as cheating?

“You were gone for a long time,” I whisper into the darkness, desperate to break the tension between us.

“Had to ditch the car and walk the rest of the way,” he says after a short pause.

“You walked? In this weather?” I ask, horrified, suddenly understanding why his face was so red and raw.

“Yeah,” he says simply.

“But... it’s freezing out there. And a blizzard. You must have been frozen.”

“Already warmed up. Hot shower helped a lot.” Then, in a low, teasing voice, he adds, “But if you’re thinking of helping me warm up another way... I wouldn’t say no.”

His husky laugh makes my face burn so hot I’m sure it could melt all the snow outside.

“Of course, I’ll help you warm up,” I say in a serious voice, pushing myself up in bed.

“Whoa, I was kidding! Chill,” Max says quickly, clearly misunderstanding me, which makes me smile slyly.

“I was just going to make you some tea with honey. What were you thinking?” I tease him lightly.

“Something a lot stronger,” he mutters. “Stay put. Get some sleep.”

His hand finds mine in the darkness, his fingers wrapping gently around my wrist and tugging me back down.

My pulse jumps.

I freeze.

I can feel my heart hammering against my ribs, feel the heat of Max’s bare skin against my own.

He’s too close.

Too much.

I'm reacting way too strongly to him.

I owe him my gratitude, and that's it. Full stop.

"Don't argue," I mumble, pulling my hand free and sitting up abruptly. "You'll just get sick, and it's no big deal. Besides, I was going to check on Tim, anyway."

"You need to rest, Erin," he says, and the way my name sounds in his deep, tired voice makes something stir inside me.

I catch it in my mind and replay it over and over.

For the first time, I actually like the way my name sounds.

"I was resting. I just woke up," I lie, grabbing the first excuse that comes to mind as I hurry out of the room. Away from Max. Away from that bed.

I linger in the kitchen way longer than necessary, stirring the tea with honey far more carefully than it needs. Anything to delay going back. Anything to give Max enough time to fall asleep.

My eyes wander around the kitchen, and I sigh. Everything here feels so familiar, so safe, so heartbreakingly mine. And yet I know none of it ever really was. It was just a mirage, an illusion of a perfect life, a glimpse of a happiness that was never meant to last.

My eyes are heavy, and sleep starts pulling me under.

I know I barely have time to rest—Tim needs to be fed again in just a couple of hours.

Carefully, I crack open the bedroom door and immediately lock eyes with the man lying there.

Max is sprawled out on his back, the blanket pulled up to his waist, quietly studying me, following my every move with those sharp eyes of his.

“Here,” I say in a shaky voice, handing him a steaming cup of tea.

“Thanks,” he rasps, clearing his throat as he sits up, leaning against the headboard.

He takes a sip, winces—it’s clearly too hot—and pulls the blanket higher, hiding from my gaze the thin black trail of hair running down his stomach.

I don’t know what to do or where to put myself. Feeling awkward and out of place, I walk over to the window and stare out at the snow-blanketed city, though I barely see anything at all.

Max’s presence is overwhelming. There are too many questions swirling around my life right now. Too much uncertainty.

“Are you just gonna stand there like a statue?” he teases softly. “Come lie down. I promise I won’t bite. We can even build a pillow wall if you want.”

“No, it’s fine,” I mutter, swallowing the lump in my throat, and finally make my way back to my side of the bed.

I lie down on the very edge, clutching the blanket up to my chin, and stare at the ceiling. Max switches off the bedside lamp, shifts around a bit, and then goes still. I listen to his breathing—steady, heavy—and somehow, despite everything, I drift off too.



But what feels like only a heartbeat later, my phone alarm goes off, letting me know it's time for Tim's early morning feeding.

It takes everything in me to force my eyes open.

I'm so exhausted I can barely move, and for a moment, I forget there's someone else in the apartment besides me.

Someone who, right now, is sleeping, pressed tightly against my back, breathing softly against the nape of my neck.

Half-asleep, I somehow convince myself it's my Max. I snuggle closer, rubbing against his body, sinking into the familiar warmth until my gaze catches a tattoo on the arm wrapped around me.

I jolt, heart racing.

Instinctively, I jerk away from him so fast I almost fall off the bed, freezing in place when Max mumbles something in his sleep.

Reality crashes down on me in a blinding, brutal flash.

Panic floods me.

I wait until I'm sure he's fallen back into a deep sleep, then quietly slip out of the bedroom. Tim is still asleep. I watch him for a moment, my heart squeezing with love, then gently lift him into my arms and head for the kitchen.

Doing my best not to make a sound, I prepare a bottle of formula. As if sensing it, Tim blinks open his eyes and lets out a soft whimper.

I move to the living room, settle into an armchair, and feed him, smiling at the way his little nose wrinkles up and how he eats with his tiny eyes squeezed shut.

I jump when I spot Max standing in the doorway. How long has he been there, watching us?

“Morning,” he says, nodding and walking over. “The whole street’s buried in snow. Looks like we’re stuck inside for a while.”

“Yeah, I looked out the window earlier,” I mumble, biting my lip. “Sorry about all this.”

“Stop apologizing. It is what it is. Not like we can change the weather.”

He shrugs. “Besides, you would’ve needed some time anyway to pack your stuff. Oh—” He holds out my phone. “Somebody texted you. Might be your boyfriend.”

My heart skips a beat. I quickly reach for the phone. No need to even unlock it—the message is already there on the screen.

“Hey. What do you mean something happened to him? Far as I know, he’s fine. Should be back from the trip soon.”

Colin’s answer punches the air right out of my lungs.

I stand up, cradling Tim in my arms, the walls spinning around me. I stagger a few steps forward, mind blank, then set the empty bottle down on the side table and instinctively hand Tim over to Max.

“Hold him for a minute. Please.”

Before he can say a word, I rush out of the room and lock myself in the bathroom.

Everything shatters—my strength, my calm, my hope, and even that cold shell of indifference I fought so hard to build.

The dam breaks. My hands tremble. Tears flood down my cheeks. I slap my palm over my mouth to keep the sobs from escaping. Because now I know for sure: Max was right. My Max lied to me.

For some twisted reason, he sent me to the wrong address instead of telling me the truth—that he didn't want me.

That he didn't want our baby. That he never planned to build a future with me.

It's over.

For real this time.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

“Erin, are you okay?”

I flinch at the sound of Max’s voice and his knock on the door. For a moment, I’d completely forgotten I wasn’t alone.

“Yeah, I’ll be right out,” I call back, forcing my voice to sound cheerful.

I quickly turn on the faucet and splash cold water on my face, hoping to wash away any trace of tears.

Max doesn’t say anything else. He stands there for a few seconds, then tells me breakfast will be ready soon before walking away.

I stay put, staring at my reflection in the mirror: pale, thinner than I remember, with dark circles bruising the skin under my eyes.

Am I even beautiful? Could I ever be enough for a man to truly love me? Maybe it’s the awful color of my hair. Maybe it was never meant to be between Max and me from the start.

Am I just... boring? Not smart enough? What’s wrong with me? Why wasn’t I enough to make him stay—to make him want a life with me?

Why did he leave me, leave us?

A bitter smile twists my lips. Before I can change my mind, driven by emotion, I grab my phone and start deleting every social media account I own.

No more refreshing Max's page every five minutes. No more wondering where he is, who he's with. No more clinging to hope like a fool, only to one day see a smiling photo of him with someone else.

And just to finish it off, I block his number too.

I exhale sharply. It feels good. Really good.

Like the first step into a new life—one without him.

I have a future to build. I have someone tiny and precious to live for. I'm not a scared little girl anymore. I have a job. I'm independent. I'm grateful for my baby.

And as for Max... there will be other men in my life.

Better ones.

I push the door open and march toward the kitchen. The rich smell of toasted bread fills the air.

I stop in the doorway, watching Max's broad back. He's fiddling with the coffeemaker, getting breakfast ready, and a wave of guilt crashes over me. As if crashing at his place uninvited wasn't enough, now I'm just here being completely useless.

"Let me help," I offer, stepping closer, but freeze when he shoots me a pointed look.

I quickly change course and sit down at the table instead.

“Is Tim still sleeping?” I ask awkwardly, glancing around the room.

God, what must he think of me? Some mother—handing her newborn to a stranger and locking herself in the bathroom.

“Yeah, I put him down in his crib,” Max says.

“Thank you.”

“Any news about your boyfriend?” he asks, jerking his chin toward the phone clutched in my hand before turning back around.

“No. Nothing yet.”

My voice sinks lower. I scramble for another topic.

“Do you think the roads will be cleared by evening?”

“Maybe,” he says. “But they’re calling for the weather to get worse this afternoon. So, chances are, we’re getting snowed in again.”

He sets a plate down in front of me, then places a mug of tea beside it.

“Hope this is okay. I’m not sure if there are any things you’re supposed to avoid.”

“It’s fine,” I say, pulling the plate closer.

I can’t help but watch him again—something about him keeps drawing my eyes, and I can’t quite figure out what.

“We could invite Vivienne over,” Max says after a beat, flashing a tense little smirk.

“I’m sure you two would have plenty to talk about.”

“I... I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I stammer, feeling heat creep up my neck. “It would just be...awkward.”

“What exactly would be awkward?”

He arches a brow at me, waiting.

I look away, chewing the inside of my cheek, feeling that awful embarrassment rise up again.

“I spent all that time telling Vivienne about Max,” I blurt out, dropping my fork with a clatter.

“About our trip, about how romantic he was. I shared everything—my hopes, my fears. I honestly believed we’d live next door to each other forever.

And now she knows...it was all a mistake. All that time, I was telling her stories about the wrong guy. She thought I was carrying your baby!”

The last part comes out in a half-laugh, half-groan, and I collapse back into my chair, mortified.

“Did you two become friends just because of me?” Max asks, his voice sharp enough to snap me out of my pity party. “Did anything about your friendship change once the truth came out?”

“No, but—”

“Did you lie to her?”

“No, but—”

“You’re the one who got tricked here, not Vivienne,” he says sharply. “And for the record, so did I.”

The corners of his mouth lift into a faint smile, and I realize he’s no longer as angry as he was during our first meeting.

“I still feel awful,” I mutter, rolling my eyes and taking a sip of tea. “I swear, I’ll make it up to you.”

“I’ll make sure it’s all taken care of, don’t worry,” Max says. “Although, maybe it would just be easier to have another kid—preferably a boy—so we wouldn’t have to redo the nursery.”

I can’t tell if he’s joking or being serious, so I don’t comment.

“So what’s your plan now?” Max asks after a short pause.

“Well, I’ll have to completely rethink everything,” I admit. “I was planning to rent a small storefront right downstairs—close to home and the baby—but now I have to start over.”

“You could rent an apartment here, in this building,” Max suggests suddenly, and honestly, it doesn’t sound like a bad idea. “I’ll see if I can get the building manager’s number. Maybe he knows someone who’s renting.”

“Yeah, that could work. Thank you,” I say, and try to lighten the mood.

“At least we won’t have to haul the crib too far.”



I catch myself smiling at him—at his faint, almost sad, but genuine smile—and it surprises me how much I like it. There's a kindness to him, something steady and solid that makes me want to learn more about his life.

What happened between him and his ex? Why did they split up? What went wrong? Because from where I'm standing, Max seems like a good man.

We trade a few more casual remarks.

He won't let me touch the dishes—orders me to rest instead—but sleep is the last thing on my mind after the message from Collin.

I fight to push thoughts of my ex away, but they creep back in when I least expect it, pulling me out of the moment.

I try to stay busy: picking up my things scattered around the apartment, sticking to the schedule to feed my son, avoiding Max whenever I can. I collapse on the bed, exhausted, just as another snowstorm starts to swirl outside the window.

It almost feels like this apartment—this bedroom—is doing everything it can to make me stay. Holding me here just a little bit longer.

By evening, I suddenly start feeling off. Dizzy, cramping low in my abdomen, so weak I can barely push myself out of bed to dig through the closet for a blood pressure monitor.

Max walks into the room without knocking just as I'm checking my pressure.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asks, squinting at me, studying my face closely.

"I'm fine. Just keeping an eye on things," I rush to reassure him, but he's not buying

it.

In a few quick steps, he's crossing the room and taking the monitor out of my hands.

"Your blood pressure's low," he states after glancing at the screen.

I sigh and shrug, but something in me snaps. I yank the device back from him with a sudden burst of irritation.

"It's normal for me right now. No big deal. What did you want, anyway?"

I hate that he's seeing me like this—weak, fragile, so far from the girl I used to be.

No manicure, no decent clothes, extra weight from the pregnancy still clinging to me. And now this: too weak to even take care of myself properly.

"The delivery service isn't running," Max says, ignoring my outburst. "So dinner's not happening. I can't cook. At all."

"I'll take care of it," I blurt out, already feeling guilty.

I should've thought of it myself. The least I can do is thank him for everything he's done—for his hospitality, for putting up with me.

"Sit down," Max mutters irritably, pressing his hand firmly against my shoulder to stop me from getting up. "I'll figure something out."

He turns on his heel and leaves the bedroom without another word.

I pull the blanket up over myself, sinking into the bed, and without even realizing it, I fall into a deep sleep. I wake up to the sound of a baby crying somewhere in the

apartment.

My heart jumps—it's Tim. How long has he been crying while I was passed out like this?

I shoot up from the bed, and dark spots dance before my eyes. The dizziness is still there, clinging to me.

Holding onto the wall for support, I follow the sound down the hallway, open the door to the nursery—and freeze in the doorway.

Max doesn't see me. He's holding Tim in his arms, gently rocking him, trying to calm him down. And it looks... it looks so incredibly sweet that my heart twists painfully in my chest.

It hits me then. I miss this.

A man.

A partner.

Someone in the house, in my life.

I think about how I set up the nursery all by myself.

How I hired movers, arranged for the furniture to be built, found someone to paint the walls.

How, in the final months of my pregnancy, I struggled to carry groceries up to the apartment alone.

How now, I'm facing endless sleepless nights—just me and my son.

And it all could have been so different if I had a loving husband by my side.

“Easy there, buddy,” Max murmurs. “You don’t want to wake up Mom, right? You’re a little man, not a crybaby, so pull it together, huh? Don’t even think about getting a song out of me.”

The man is really trying his best to calm the baby down, but it’s not working.

“Probably needs a diaper change,” I say, giving away my presence, and carefully take my son from him. “Hey there, little guy, Mommy’s here. Shh, don’t cry, sweetheart.”

While I’m fussing over Tim, Max stays close, quietly watching everything I do.

“There’s a studio available on the sixth floor,” he suddenly announces, catching me off guard. “I got the landlord’s number. You can call tomorrow if you want to check it out.”

“Thank you,” I mumble, throwing him a confused glance.

“No big deal.” He shoves his hands into his pockets and shifts awkwardly, like he wants to say something else but isn’t sure if he should.

“Did you manage to cook something?” I jump in, trying to keep the conversation going.

“Found some dumplings in the freezer,” he says almost apologetically. “Tasted them. Pretty close to homemade.”

“If they were in the pink bag, then yeah, they are homemade. I made them a few

weeks before Tim was born,” I smile.

“In that case, you’re a great cook. Here, let me take him. You really shouldn’t be carrying anything yet. Actually, you should be resting. Come on, I found a few good movies. I’ll bring dinner to you in bed. Since we’re stuck here together, might as well pass the time.”

While I settle into bed with Tim, who’s now wide awake but not crying anymore, Max brings over a tray with two plates.

A comedy is playing on TV, the room is dimly lit, the wind howls outside.

Max and I lie on opposite sides of the bed, Tim between us. If I let myself forget for just a second that we’re practically strangers, it would be easy to believe we were a real family.

Warmth and comfort fill the room, and it’s so overwhelming, so right, that it terrifies me.

Somewhere around the middle of the movie, I drift off to sleep, right after my son. Through the haze of sleep, I feel someone tucking the blanket around me and hear a soft whisper.

When I crack my eyes open for a second, I catch sight of a stroller beside the bed and realize Max must’ve brought it here so I wouldn’t have to get up at night.

Around midnight, I’m jolted awake by Tim’s loud cries. I have no choice but to get up and feed him. Max isn’t in the bedroom anymore. I find him in the kitchen, sitting at the table, wearing headphones, a glass of whiskey in front of him, scrolling through his phone.

When he notices me, he lifts his head, his gaze sweeping over me. He pulls one earbud out and hits me with unexpected news:

“Cynthia couldn’t keep her mouth shut. She told my mom about you and the baby. And Elena—wanting to get a dig in at Cynthia, I guess—kind of... embellished the story. Now my mom’s dying to meet you two. Wants to make sure it’s all real.”

Max

Cynthia's little stunt sparks real fury in me.

What was she thinking, telling my mother that I'm living with a woman and that she has a child? A child that isn't mine.

Did she think my mom would come running to talk some sense into me? That I'm fifteen and will just do whatever my parents say?

I've been an adult for a long time now. I have every right to live my life the way I choose.

And Elena isn't exactly innocent in this either. She's the only person who knows the real reason behind my divorce, which is why she absolutely loathes my ex-wife.

She doesn't understand why I keep my parents out of the loop or why I even let Cynthia set foot in my place, but she does know one thing very clearly—if she breathes a word of anything, she'll lose my trust for good.

So she keeps quiet.

But she doesn't pass up any opportunity to throw dirt on her former sister-in-law and paint her in the worst light possible. And now, it seems, she decided to twist the knife even deeper—by painting a picture of my happy life without Cynthia.

Women are nothing but trouble. I'm so sick of all this.

What was meant to be just a few weeks of vacation has turned into complete hell.

What am I even supposed to tell my parents now? That it was all a joke? A prank that Elena decided to play along with?

One way or another, I'll have to explain myself. Because if I don't, how the hell do I later explain where my supposed son disappeared to?

I look up from my phone, deciding to postpone the conversation with my mother until morning, and immediately lock eyes with Erin.

I take out my earbuds—and that's when I hear the baby crying.

“Funny how one small lie can spiral into a whole avalanche of chaos,” Erin sighs, walking toward the kitchen cabinet as if she didn't just say something deeply philosophical.

But I notice something's off. Her steps are unsteady. She winces, leaning her hands on the granite counter. Stubborn as hell. Still trying to prove she's fine. But if she really felt okay, she wouldn't have left the baby crying in the other room alone.

“They discharged you way too early,” I mutter and get up to help. “Move. What do you need me to do?”

“I've got it.”

“Yeah, I can see that. You're barely standing.”

I glance at her pale face and shake my head.

“You really should get a nanny. Just for a month, until you get stronger. Honestly,



good thing I intercepted you at the hospital. Imagine being alone with the baby right now in your condition.”

Her expression pales even more. Looks like I struck a nerve.

“What was I supposed to do?” she shrugs weakly and reaches for the baby formula.

I catch her wrist before she can grab the bottle—her hand is so small, I could probably wrap both of mine around it twice.

“Sit down,” I say, nodding at the chair, “or better yet, go check on the baby. I’m capable of reading the back of a formula box. Trust me.”

She doesn’t argue. Just gives me a look—some strange mix of defeat and confusion. I guess that says it all.

No matter how cold I might be toward women in general, Erin somehow gets to me. Maybe it’s because I know exactly how she feels right now. I was a wreck, too, when Cynthia left me. But for women... betrayal cuts even deeper.

I boil the water, carefully read the instructions, shake the bottle until the formula is smooth, then head toward the bedroom.

When I get there, I find Erin lying in bed with the baby in her arms. The soft glow from the bedside lamp highlights the copper tones in her hair and doesn’t do much to hide how pale she is. She’s holding Tim close to her chest, quietly humming a lullaby.

I stop dead in the doorway, forgetting why I even came in here. For a moment, I imagine she’s my woman, holding my son in her arms. And just like that, something twists in my chest. A lump rises in my throat, and it suddenly becomes hard to

breathe.

I'm not the sentimental type. But once, I used to dream about a real family. A loyal, loving wife. A couple of kids. Someone waiting for me back on land. Someone worth fighting for.

Maybe Elena was right when she told me I should at least try something serious. Something more than just a string of nights and a disappearing act the next morning.

I watch Erin feed her son, and somehow, I feel like a stranger in my own home. But more than that, I can't wrap my head around how someone could just leave these two behind. No explanation. No support. Just lie—and disappear.

There's nothing manly about that. And trust me, I've seen a lot over the years at sea.

The second officer on our ship has been married for seven years, and for three of them, he's been keeping a side girl.

Tells his wife he's shipping out, but really he rents a place in another city and spends three weeks with his mistress before the crew even boards.

Then, when he actually comes home, he lies again—says he's still out working.

Even has one of the guys send him photos from ports along the way so his wife doesn't suspect anything.

She's not stupid—tracks the ship's location online.

And I just... don't get it. If you're done, if the spark is gone, if you're into someone else—why keep pretending like everything's fine? Why keep playing house?

Loyalty and trust—that's the foundation. If you're not ready to give that, if you still want to screw around, then don't get married in the first place.

"Vivienne stopped by," I say, breaking the silence. I grab a pillow and pull a blanket from the closet. "You were asleep, so I sent her home. She said she'll come by again tomorrow."

"Really? Thanks," Erin replies, relaxing a little.

"Don't think anyone's mad at you for the mix-up with the name or the address," I say as I head for the door. "At least I lucked out and ended up with an honest woman who only slightly redecorated my place—instead of walking off with my valuables."

I throw the joke out casually, but as usual, she doesn't laugh. Just knits her brows like I said something offensive.

"Where are you going?" she calls after me.

"I'm sleeping on the couch tonight. Don't want to disturb you and the baby."

"But that couch is... really uncomfortable," she says, unsure.

I don't turn around. Just keep my eyes on the dark door ahead.

How the hell do I explain to her that the last thing I want when I lie beside her is to sleep? That the smell of her skin and hair hits me like a drug the moment the lights go out? That even looking pale and exhausted, she's more attractive than any woman I've been with lately?

There's something about Erin—something that pulls you in, makes you want to look closer. To know more. To touch. To taste.

Or maybe it's just been too damn long since I had a woman in my bed. Maybe I should hit up Natalie sometime.

"I'll survive one night," I grunt, and step out without looking back.

The couch is as awful as I remembered. Actually, scratch that—calling it a couch is generous. It's a piece of junk, not meant for sleeping on. I toss and turn, trying to find a position that doesn't feel like torture, then finally give up and move to the floor.

Silence blankets the apartment. Too thick. Too heavy. I switch on the TV, volume down to a whisper. Better. I close my eyes, just starting to drift when—

A loud, high-pitched wail cuts through the air like a siren.

Great. And here I was thinking newborns weren't that hard. Eat, sleep, chill in their crib.

Yeah, right. Spoke too soon.

I check the time and give it ten minutes. If the kid's still howling, I'll go see what's up. But luckily, he quiets down, and I finally fall asleep again.

Only to be woken up by voices from the kitchen.

I rub my eyes and glance out the window. The storm's passed, but the streets are still buried and not a snowplow in sight. My back's killing me; Muscles stiff like I slept on concrete—which I kind of did.

I shuffle toward the kitchen, following the sound of soft chatter—and smile when I see Erin and Vivienne sitting at the table, both with babies in their arms, chatting and laughing over lunch.

I take in the scene. Vivienne's petite, like a real-life Thumbelina.

Erin, taller, still manages to look delicate somehow.

And today, she looks... better. Fresher. There's a quiet light in her eyes.

A soft smile. A dimple. She's leaning back in her chair, cradling the baby with one arm and lazily poking at her salad with the other.

"Morning," I say to make my presence known. Two sets of eyes turn my way.

"More like lunchtime, sleepyhead," Vivienne teases. "So, how's the whole 'pretend family man' thing going? Ready to settle down and start a real one? This feels like the perfect warm-up round to me."

"I'd have married you ages ago, Vivienne," I smirk, flipping on the coffee machine, "but you won't go anywhere without Logan. Guess I'll have to keep looking. I'll be sure to let you know when I find 'the one'."

"And why bother looking," she counters with a sly grin, "when you've already got such an adorable girl and a baby in your apartment?"

I freeze with a cup of hot coffee in my hand, not even noticing how it burns my skin. Erin blushes, shooting an accusing look at the ever-pleased Vivienne. The latter gives me a sly wink in return.

I pretend I didn't hear her, because what she just said is complete nonsense. I barely know Erin and the kid isn't mine.

"I've arranged for us to see the studio today. The previous tenants haven't moved out yet, so we can stop by around three." I clear my throat and glance at Erin. "You

feeling up to a short walk around the building?”

“Yes. That’s great news, thank you.” She nervously tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and casts another disapproving look at Vivienne, clearly uncomfortable.

“Then I’ll leave you girls to gossip,” I add, and head back to the bedroom for some more sleep.

I fall onto the bed and inhale deeply, catching the faint scent left behind on the sheets.

I think about Natalie, how I always changed the bedding after she left, and realize I have no desire to strip the sheets after Erin.

Suddenly, I remember I never explained the situation to my mother. Good thing the snowstorm hit, otherwise, she probably would’ve been pounding on my door at six in the morning. Well, guess I’ll just say it was a bad joke. A little scheme to make Cynthia jealous and get her off my back.

Sounds believable enough.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

“Max is a great guy. You should take a closer look at him. No girlfriend, owns his own apartment, kind and dependable. He’s long overdue for a wife. And forget about your ex, or you’ll miss your chance to build a real life. Your baby needs a father, Erin, and you need a husband.”

Vivienne’s words echo in my mind and refuse to leave.

Not the part about me taking a closer look at Max—I don’t even let myself entertain that thought.

We’re practically strangers, walking separate paths.

But Vivienne’s right about one thing: I do need a man.

A solid one. The kind of man you can lean on, who will stand like a wall behind you. But are there even any good ones left?

I follow Max toward the elevator. Tim is sleeping soundly in the baby carrier, which Max insisted on carrying himself.

Today I feel more rested, almost energetic, and for once I’m not thinking about my ex.

Maybe it’s the nerves. I’m genuinely anxious about the apartment.

I really don't want to leave this building.

Clean air, a park nearby—everything a child needs.

We enter the elevator and ride down to the sixth floor.

I glance sideways at Max. As always, he's silent, brooding.

I wish I could see his real smile. The genuine one.

I bet it's beautiful. Is he like this only with me, or is he always this closed off?

With Vivienne, he jokes around and seems relaxed.

But with me... it's different. Maybe that's how it should be, though, right?

"One-twelve. Here we are," he says, stopping in front of a dark door and pressing the buzzer.

I clasp my hands nervously, glance down to check on Tim—still asleep—and try to calm the flutter in my stomach.

A young guy opens the door and invites us in.

I step over the threshold and scan the small apartment.

Sure, it's tiny compared to Max's place, but for me and the baby?

It's enough. The rent is reasonable. The windows face the park, and while Max asks a dozen practical questions, as if I'm a clueless child who doesn't understand this stuff, I find myself gazing at the snow-covered trees. In spring, the view will be stunning.



“If everything looks good, you can call Den. I’ll be out in two weeks. All the furniture stays,” the tenant’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts.

I glance at Max questioningly.

“Two weeks?” I ask, disappointed. “I thought it would be available in the next few days.”

“Wish I could,” the guy shrugs, “but I need a little more time.”

“Thanks. We’ll talk it over and let the landlord know,” Max replies, his fingers tightening around the baby carrier.

I press my lips together in disappointment and silently follow Max out of the apartment.

“Did you like the place?” he asks once the door closes behind us.

“Yeah. I’ll put down the deposit today and sign the lease. Now I just need to figure out where to stay for the next two weeks—preferably close by.”

We stop, facing each other in the hallway. Max looks at me like he’s staring straight through me, absentmindedly twisting his keys in his hand.

“You can stay here... if it comes to that,” he sighs, as if the words physically hurt to say.

“Oh no, thanks, but I’ve imposed on you enough already,” I reply quickly. “I’ll look for a short-term rental today. And I really hope my car’s still where I left it. With my luck, it’s probably been stolen while I was in the hospital,” I add with an eye roll.

“If you mean the gray Hyundai,” Max smirks, “it’s safe and sound. Taking up my spot in the underground garage.”

“Oh—I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“I got used to it,” he waves off. “No big deal. But speaking of cars... damn. I completely forgot I abandoned mine in a snowdrift in the middle of the road. Guess I should go dig it out,” he mutters, clearly annoyed, throwing on a coat before heading out and leaving me alone in the apartment.

I want to accept his offer. This place feels like home. The familiar walls, the cozy routine, no packing, no rushing, no stress. But no matter how tempting it sounds, there’s one problem: a moody, broad-shouldered man who clearly isn’t thrilled about sharing his space with me and my baby.

Max is gone for four hours. Four. I actually start to worry.

It’s dark outside, and he’s not answering his phone.

I try to tell myself I shouldn’t care. He’s just the guy who accidentally ended up involved in my mess.

But I do care. My mind starts spinning with worst-case scenarios: What if something happened?

I wash the dishes. Cook dinner with whatever’s left in the fridge. I do anything I can to keep busy. Then I find myself hovering over Tim, watching him sleep, listening to his soft little breaths. I could stand there forever, just looking at him.

Max still isn’t back by seven, and my heart won’t settle. Maybe it’s because he’s been kind to me. Because he helped.

By eight, I start to feel weak. I realize I haven't taken my meds. I sink into the armchair by the window, switch off the light, and let my eyes follow the snowy glow of the city. Every now and then, a car passes below, and I track each one, hoping.

When I hear the key turn in the lock, I flinch—and then, forgetting all about the dizziness and the pain, I practically run to the hallway. I must look insane: hair a mess, eyes wide with relief. But I don't care. He's here. He's safe.

Max sets two large grocery bags on the floor and gives me a puzzled look.

"You okay?" he asks, frowning.

"Yeah, of course," I say quickly, catching my reflection in the mirror and smoothing my unruly hair. "You were just... gone for a while."

"Took forever to find where I actually left the car. Then I had to dig it out. And I stopped by the store on the way back..." He shrugs off his coat and shoes, runs a hand through his messy hair, picks up the bags, and heads for the kitchen. I follow, quiet as a mouse.

"Smells good," he notes, nodding toward the stove.

"Beef stew," I mumble, flustered.

"Perfect. I'm starving." He pulls out baby food from one of the bags. "I got the same brand of formula for Tim as last time. My phone died, so I couldn't call to ask what else you needed."

"Thank you." I blink in surprise, genuinely touched by his thoughtfulness. God, why couldn't my man be like this?

While I stare into space, getting lost in a daydream of some imaginary happy family, Max puts the groceries away with quiet efficiency. I can't help but notice how tidy everything is. I've been gone for weeks, and the place still looks spotless—like no one even lived here.

"You've got a doctor's appointment in two days," he says, sitting down at the table. "They should have the roads cleared by tomorrow, so we'll be fine getting there. Mmm—this is good," he adds after a bite, actually smiling.

"Thanks. I'll go now," I mutter, rising to my feet, hoping to make a quiet escape before the awkwardness swallows me whole.

"Erin." His voice stops me in the doorway.

I turn around and meet his serious gaze.

"There's a hotel a few blocks away. You could stay there until the studio's ready.

But honestly, I think you should stay here.

"He pauses. "You're still recovering. What if something happens?

What if you don't feel well and no one's around to help? Just... think about it."

"Okay," I whisper, before slipping into the bedroom. My heart's pounding like crazy. Why the hell am I so nervous?

I lie down on the bed and press my palm to my chest, taking a few deep breaths, turning over everything that's happened to me lately—carefully avoiding Max's tempting offer.

Because the apartment doesn't come alone.

It comes with a caring man. One who is grumpy as hell and, at times, seems completely unwelcoming.

The next day, Max and I avoid talking about me moving out.

I start gathering my things from around the apartment, trying to stuff everything into the same two suitcases I arrived with six months ago, but it's pointless.

I've accumulated way too much stuff. Max watches silently, offering no commentary.

He eats, sleeps, plays video games, occasionally asks me something meaningless.

In the evening, we end up in the bedroom again, on opposite sides of the bed, watching another movie.

About halfway through, I realize Max is fast asleep—so is Tim in my arms. I gently lay the baby in his crib, tuck the blanket around him, and then I just stand there in the middle of the room, staring at the sleeping man.

He's wearing a t-shirt that clings to his body, outlining every muscle.

One arm is thrown over his head, the other rests by his side.

I don't dare wake him. I switch off the TV, slip under the blanket, and lie there for a long time, staring up at the dark ceiling. I listen to Max's slow, heavy breathing. At some point, he mumbles something incoherent in his sleep, then rolls onto his side and throws his arm over me.

I freeze. I don't even dare to breathe. My whole body trembles from the closeness.

From his scent. From the weight of his arm across my chest.

It's been so long since I was close to anyone.

I kept waiting for my Max, dreaming of him, longing to be in his strong arms. And now, after the bitter truth, all I want is comfort.

Support. Something real. Masculine. And from just this accidental contact—his body against mine—I feel like I might explode.

A storm of emotion sweeps through me, crashing right into my soul, and with my eyes closed, I let myself pretend. Just for a minute. That the man sleeping next to me is mine. That he's the one I love. The one I've been waiting for. The one I ache for.

Just for a minute. No one said I couldn't dream.

But my perfect little fantasy shatters the moment Max's phone rings. He flinches, quickly pulls away from me, grabs the phone, silences it, then sleepily checks the screen—and still answers.

"Yeah?" he mumbles hoarsely, barely audible. Then he turns his head in my direction, and I quickly shut my eyes, pretending to be asleep. I'm not even sure he can see me clearly in the dim light. But I listen—closely. As if this call might change everything.

"Natalie, not tonight. And not tomorrow either."

From the quiet of the apartment, I catch a woman's voice on the other end. I can't make out the words, just the tone. She sounds annoyed. Upset.

"I said I'll call you. I'm busy. No, I'm not lying. Seriously. Okay, talk soon."

So, Vee was wrong. There is someone in his life. And for some reason, that thought stings.

A tight knot forms in my throat, my mood darkens, and I have the sudden urge to get up and leave. Head straight for the couch, maybe. And yet... I feel ridiculous. Why do I even care if there's a woman in his life?

The room sinks back into silence. Max exhales sharply, then gets up and walks out.

And just like that, the loneliness crashes in.

Overwhelmed, I let out a quiet sob, feeling a single tear roll down my cheek. Self-pity is the worst kind of emotion—but it wins tonight. Eventually, sleep takes over. A deep, heavy kind of sleep that carries me through the night.

So deep that I don't even hear Max come back. I only realize he's there when I wake up to the sound of Tim crying.

Erin

The suitcases are still standing in the corner of the room.

Max said the roads haven't been cleared, so he's not driving me anywhere with the baby, and there's no way he'll let me take a cab.

Still, the very next morning, he reminded me about the doctor's visit.

When he saw me wearing a light turtleneck, he made me change into a thicker sweater—even though I'd be wearing a warm coat, and it was just a few steps from the front door to the car.

I glance at myself in the mirror and suddenly realize I've been walking around this apartment like a pale ghost these past few days.

I never used to let myself go like this.

A woman next to a man should always look her best. I find my makeup bag, apply a bit of color, run a brush through my long, thick hair, fluffing the roots for volume.

A little lip gloss makes my lips look fuller, and a swipe of black liner brings out my eyes. I take out my jewelry box, choose a pair of gold earrings, and fasten them with practiced ease.

I give myself a critical once-over in the mirror. It's strange seeing myself without the round cheeks and belly. Still far from perfect, but it's a start. I take a deep breath and



step out of the room.

Max is already by the door, holding Tim's carrier. His brow arches in surprise the moment he sees me. His eyes trail down and then back up again—he'd only asked me to put on a warmer sweater, but in ten minutes, I'd transformed like I was heading to a date.

I act like I don't notice. Pull a coat from the closet—the one that didn't even come close to buttoning just weeks ago—and my hands tremble as I fasten the buttons under Max's silent stare.

"I'm ready."

"You look good. Definitely on the mend," Max says, then immediately looks away. He opens the door and lets me go first.

In the elevator mirror, I catch our reflection and realize that, yeah, we really do look like a couple.

A beautiful one, to be honest. Our eyes meet, and, for a split second, we both freeze, staring at each other.

The air between us charges with static, suddenly too heavy to breathe, and I don't understand why I'm reacting like this.

To him. A stranger. A man I barely know.

A man who isn't mine. I look away first, embarrassed, and focus on the floor indicator blinking through the numbers.

The ding of the elevator breaks the moment. We step out quickly as others step in.

The cold wind hits me in the face the second we walk outside. I instinctively glance down at my sleeping son. He's wrapped in a warm onesie, tucked under a thick blanket, but I still worry he'll catch a chill.

Max lightly rests his hand against my lower back, guiding me toward the car.

Tim and I take the backseat while he climbs in up front.

He starts the engine and eases onto the road.

It's a slow drive—icy roads, almost no traffic.

Soft music plays from the speakers, and Max taps the steering wheel in rhythm, quietly humming along.

The closer we get to the hospital, the more nervous I become.

What if I'm still not fully recovered? What if they want to keep me longer, or worse, separate me from my son again?

But my fears turn out to be unfounded. Everything's fine.

I'm getting stronger. The doctor even cancels one of my prescriptions.

On the way back, I feel lighter. I gaze out the window, soaking in the winter wonderland. Although, let's be real, is it even winter anymore? Spring is just two days away. Time has flown, and I still haven't fully wrapped my head around the fact that... I'm a mom now.

"You go ahead. I'll get Tim." Max turns to me.

I nod and pull the handle, stepping out into the cold. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with sharp, clean air. There's a lightness in my chest and clarity in my mind—a kind of peace I hadn't realized I was missing.

I crouch down and scoop up a handful of snow, hold it close to my face, and gently blow. Tiny flakes scatter into the air like glitter, catching the sunlight.

The car door slams shut. Max walks over to me.

“Beautiful, right? And the air!” I smile at him, eyes sparkling.

He smiles back. The rare kind—soft, almost... tender.

“Yeah... beautiful,” he murmurs, his eyes not leaving my face.

“Do I have mascara smudged or something?” I ask, suddenly flustered, digging through my purse for a mirror.

“No. You're fine. Except maybe...”

He steps closer. Close enough that I feel his breath against my skin. Tall. Really tall. He looks into my eyes. Leans in just slightly—and I stop breathing. What is he doing?

“You had an eyelash,” he says.

He lifts his hand and brushes my cheek with the pad of his thumb. I shiver. Our eyes lock. My lips part. I want to say something, anything, to break the tension, but someone beats me to it.

“Max? What's going on? Who's this girl? And... whose baby is that?”

We jump apart like teenagers caught making out behind the school. Both of us snap our heads toward the voice. Max frowns and exhales heavily.

“Mom? What are you doing here?” he asks tiredly, and my eyes go wide.

Oh no. His mother was the last thing we needed. Another round of awkward introductions and damage control coming right up.

“Not happy to see me?” she replies sharply, her eyes never leaving me.

The woman’s older but still striking. She stands in a long coat with a fur collar, high-heeled boots, twisting a pair of leather gloves between her fingers. Despite everything I’ve heard from Elena about her being kind and warm, there’s nothing welcoming in her expression.

I remember what Max’s ex-wife told her about me—and yeah, if I were her, I’d probably be less than thrilled at finding some random woman with a baby hovering around my son.

“So it’s true,” she says finally, shifting her gaze from me to Tim.

I try to spot any resemblance between them. But Max must’ve taken after his father, or maybe it’s just the beard covering most of his face, because I don’t see any shared features. His eye color’s different too. Elena, on the other hand, looks a lot like her.

“What exactly is true? That I’m helping out a single neighbor with a kid?” Max asks as he locks the car. “Roads are a mess today. Black ice everywhere. You took a cab or came by public transport?”

“Subway,” she says curtly.

“Then wait in the car,” Max says, nodding toward his SUV and pressing the unlock button on the key fob again.

“What?” She blinks in confusion. “You’re not even going to invite me in? I came all the way across the city to see you. Max, don’t you have something to tell me?” Her eyes dart back to me.

Max exhales. He knows there’s no avoiding her now. With a curt gesture, he invites her to join us and walks off toward the building without looking back. We follow.

“And which apartment are you staying in?” his mother asks me, her tone deceptively sweet.

“Sixth floor,” I reply, almost not lying.

“I see. I’m Helga,” she says, offering a tight smile.

“Erin,” I respond, feeling awkward as hell.

We enter the building in silence and wait for the elevator. The small space feels cramped for the four of us. The air is tense. Just as the lift starts to move, Tim lets out a soft whimper, and I shift him into my arms to calm him.

“I think he’s too warm,” Max offers. “You’ve bundled him up like we’re headed to the Arctic, and it’s hot in here.”

“He’s just hungry, aren’t you, sweetie?” I coo, kissing Tim’s cheek and rocking him gently.

Helga watches us closely, something calculating behind her narrowed eyes. She opens her mouth to say something again as we step out of the elevator, and she

squints even more suspiciously when we all file into the same apartment one after another.

Honestly, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do. Max doesn't give me any cues. Doesn't ask me to wait at Vivienne's, or explain anything. Just leads me home, confidently, wordlessly, as if this is all perfectly normal.

Thankfully, I cleared out most of my things from the open spaces earlier.

Otherwise, his mother would've tripped over baby stuff the second she crossed the threshold.

Hopefully, the only clue left behind is the nursery, and maybe a few pieces of clothing still hanging in the closet. I pray she won't go snooping.

"So... Erin's not going home?" Helga asks, casually. Too casually.

"Erin's apartment is under renovation, so she's staying here until the evening," Max says smoothly, not even blinking as he offers the explanation. He looks completely unbothered by the whole situation, as if having a woman and a baby in his apartment while his mother watches is a regular Tuesday.

"And her husband doesn't mind?" Helga presses on, arching a brow.

"I'm not married," I reply with an awkward smile. I want to retreat to the bedroom with Tim, but then I remember I'm supposed to be a guest here, not a temporary resident. So instead, I follow Max and Helga into the kitchen. I still need to feed Tim, after all.

"Should I order something? Mom, are you hungry?" Max reaches for his phone and glances between us.

“Oh no, don’t worry, although...” Helga trails off as she suddenly stops in the middle of the kitchen. “That bakery—the one on the corner—is it open? I wouldn’t mind their cinnamon rolls with some tea. You’ll go pick some up, won’t you, sweetheart?”

“I doubt they’ve opened yet after the storm,” Max replies hesitantly, but I catch the subtle flicker of worry in his eyes as he glances at me.

“I could’ve sworn I saw someone walking out of there,” she insists, her tone too light to be casual. “Erin, have you tried their pastries?”

“Yes,” I say, a beat too late. “I wouldn’t mind some cinnamon rolls either,” I add with a soft smile, trying to reassure Max that I can handle ten minutes alone with his mother.

Max hesitates, clearly torn. His fingers tighten around his phone.

“Mom, can I talk to you for a second?” he says, giving her a look that makes it impossible to say no.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

They step out of the kitchen, and I quickly turn on the kettle, reaching for the box of baby formula.

My ears stay tuned to the quiet voices coming from deeper inside the apartment.

They're definitely talking about me. I can only hope Max manages to make it clear to his mother that I'm not after him.

The last thing I need is unnecessary drama or accusations.

Mrs. Taylor returns a few minutes later, wearing a tight smile, watching my every move like a hawk.

"You have a beautiful little boy, Erin," she says after a pause, eyes fixed on Tim, now peacefully resting in my arms. "Ah, I keep dreaming of grandchildren, but it seems I'll be waiting a while longer," she sighs, almost dramatically.

I watch her cross the kitchen like she owns the place. She walks straight to the right cabinet and pulls out tea, then a mug. No hesitation. Like she's done it a thousand times before. She fills the kettle, glances inside the fridge. And something inside me flares. Uncomfortable. Territorial.

Because despite everything, this kitchen feels like mine now. I've been cooking here, organizing the shelves, rearranging the spices. Watching someone else take over, even his mother, makes me bristle.

"And what do you do, Erin?" she asks, her gaze flicking back to me.



“I’m a florist,” I reply. “I have a little shop. I also do floral designs for weddings and events.”

“Charming,” she says. Though I can’t tell if it’s a compliment or just something polite to say.

A few moments of awkward silence pass. I focus on Tim, rocking him gently, pretending not to be bothered by the woman’s presence.

“You like my son,” she says suddenly—not a question. A statement.

“I’m sorry?” I look up, startled, eyebrows drawn together in confusion.

“I see the way you two look at each other. I see how you look at Max. What I don’t understand is why he’s lying to me. Yes, he’s private, but he’s always trusted me. I’ve never judged his choices. It’s his life.”

“With all due respect, it’s not what you think,” I say, offering a nervous smile. “There’s nothing going on between us.”

“A bottle brush, house slippers, tableware that wasn’t here before, flowers on the windowsill—” she gestures toward the blooming orchids.

A full fridge. You’re clearly not just the neighbor from the sixth floor.

If you’re even the neighbor at all.” Her eyebrow lifts sharply.

Her tone is sharp. I feel myself flushing with shame.

“How long have you been staying here?” she presses.

“I... I’m not in a relationship with your son, I promise,” I say quietly. “Max just helped me out. I do live in this building. My place is under renovation, so I’ve been spending most of my time here with my son. That’s all.”

“But you do like my Max,” she states matter-of-factly.

Just then, the kettle whistles, saving me from having to answer. I exhale in relief as she turns her back to me, busily stirring sugar into a teacup.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” she says over her shoulder, her tone tight but polite. “I have nothing against your... arrangement. I just always hoped he’d get back together with his ex-wife. They were such a beautiful couple. So in love. I still believe it’s not too late.”

She’s trying to get under my skin—I realize that much. But why? Max is a grown man. He’s hardly the type to be manipulated by his mother.

“I know he’s divorced,” I say carefully, “but I think Max might already be seeing someone else. Though I can’t say how serious it is...”

I’m not sure why I bring it up—maybe I’m fishing. Hoping she’ll mention the mysterious Natalie, the woman who called in the middle of the night.

Mrs. Taylor turns around abruptly. There’s a flicker of curiosity in her eyes. She looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to continue. But when I don’t, the spark fades. Her smile falters. Suddenly, she looks tired. She sits down beside me at the kitchen table.

“No need to lie. I’m not some wicked witch,” she says with a crooked smile. “You’ve met Elena, haven’t you? She hasn’t visited Max since he came back.”

I blink, unsure where she's going with this.

"You look just like she described," she adds.

"I was really hoping the baby was Max's.

But if that were the case, wouldn't he have told his father and me the good news by now?

I suppose Elena said something just to get under Cynthia's skin.

Those two never got along after the divorce.

And Max—well, he's always been private. Maybe he didn't want to shock us with sudden changes. "

I stay quiet. God, this is a mess. Max is definitely not going to be happy that, in just ten minutes, his mom and I managed to escalate things to the point where she now thinks we're a couple.

"You know," I sigh, rolling my eyes, "lately, everyone assumes I'm dating Max and that he's Tim's father. And now here you are, joining the club."

She doesn't seem angry with me—more like... disappointed. Though I'm not sure what exactly has let her down: that Max hasn't reunited with the oh-so-perfect ex-wife? That my baby isn't his? Or that he might actually be involved with a woman who already has a child from someone else?

"Then why would he help you, Erin, if there's nothing between you two?"

Mrs. Taylor tilts her head, her tone probing.

“You probably know your son better than I do,” I answer, trying to keep my voice calm.

“Yes, he seems gruff and distant, and I’m sure he could drill a hole in a wall just with that look of his...

but deep down, he’s incredibly kind and caring.

I’m endlessly grateful for what he’s done.

If not for Max, I might not have even gotten to see my son... ”

I glance down at my sleeping baby, my chest tightening with that familiar ache of tenderness. We’ve been through so much already... and who knows what hopes and heartbreaks still lie ahead?

“I think whoever ends up becoming his wife will be very lucky to have a man like that by her side.”

“Well, let’s just hope my future wife appreciates those qualities,” comes a voice from behind me, deep and warm.

I jump in my seat.

A few heavy steps, and then the soft thud of a paper bag hitting the table. The scent of fresh pastries wafts through the kitchen. Max stands over me—too close, too present—and I suddenly can’t bring myself to look up.

How long has he been standing there?

What did he hear?

Was he around when I mentioned Natalie?

My heart thunders in my chest, loud enough that I think they both can hear it. I feel embarrassed by everything I said. Thank God I didn't add that I wouldn't mind having a husband like him myself.

"Hope my mom didn't tire you out with all her chatting?" Max teases.

"She's a bit more talkative than you, so yeah... in ten minutes, I heard and said more than I have in the past two days." I try to joke, my voice lighter than I feel.

"And you're hardly a chatterbox yourself," he counters, flashing me a look. "Unless we're talking about dinner options, you don't say much at all."

Then he turns to his mother, who's been quietly watching us.

"So, Mom, what made you rush over here in this kind of weather?" he asks casually. "Actually, never mind. Elena already called and apologized for oversharing and... embellishing the story a bit."

He throws his hands up. "As you can see, I'm still very much single and not hiding anyone from you."

Mrs. Taylor rolls her eyes. The lines on her face soften, and the smile returns. She looks at her son with affection as she opens the bag of pastries.

"Well, the girls almost clawed each other's eyes out over you," she says. "Elena threatened to rip out every last hair on Cynthia's head if she so much as looked in your direction again. I figured I'd better come sort things out myself."

"I'll talk to Elena," Max mutters, his tone shifting instantly. The humor drains from

his face, replaced with that familiar brooding seriousness. “She’s acting like a child.”

“She’s protecting you... from what, though?

” his mother wonders aloud, her voice tinged with concern.

“You haven’t told me everything, have you?

Same old Max—bottling it up, carrying the world on your shoulders like no one else exists.

You forget you have a family, one that would gladly carry the load with you. ”

She sighs and looks at me with a sad little smile. “I tried to help you two make peace. Cynthia was like a daughter to me, you know that. But maybe it’s time to let that go. When you’re ready, Max... tell me everything. If you think I need to know.”

She stands, brushing imaginary crumbs from her lap.

“Thanks for the pastries, but I should go. I’ll call a cab, don’t worry. Stay home. It’s rude to leave a guest all alone.”

“Mom,” Max calls after her, taking a step forward, but Helga is already heading out of the kitchen. She’s hurt—I can tell. Maybe not by anything he said, but by everything he didn’t.

Of course, I get it. To her, Max will always be her little boy—someone to protect and fuss over.

But he’s a grown man now. He has his own life, and some things—especially personal things—just aren’t meant to be shared with your parents.

Not out of secrecy, but out of love. Because you don't want to worry them with the weight you're barely managing to carry yourself.

Max follows his mom out, leaving me behind. An unwilling witness to a conversation that clearly wasn't meant for my ears.

But now I can't stop wondering... What really happened between Max and his ex-wife?

Max leaves, and I'm left alone with the baby.

Tim falls asleep quickly, and I stay close by, so I don't even hear Max return.

I flinch awake when I finally notice him lying on the bed next to us.

He's reading something, hasn't realized I'm awake yet.

So I lie still, trying to breathe as quietly as possible while watching his profile.

He looks relaxed, totally unbothered by my presence, but somehow the room feels warmer, more comforting, just because he's in it.

It's a strange feeling that's hard to put into words, but I know it's real.

We've barely spent any time together, and yet it's enough for me to feel...

something. Something soft and uncertain, like the very beginning of affection.

I get so lost in my thoughts that I don't even notice when Max stops reading. His eyes are on me now. He's watching me. How long has he been doing that?

“Hey,” I whisper, swallowing the lump in my throat, feeling strangely exposed under his gaze.

“Hey,” he whispers back, careful not to wake Tim. “You hungry? I brought a bunch of food—not the healthiest, but definitely tasty.”

Food. Of course. It’s the only safe topic we ever seem to land on.

“I could’ve made dinner,” I offer, even though I know how that sounds.

“Maybe. In a week or so.” He closes his book and gives me a small shrug. “Just because you’re getting better doesn’t mean you should stop taking care of yourself.”

“How’s your mom?” I ask after a pause, not really knowing what else to say.

“She’ll survive,” he says with a half-smile, snapping the book shut and getting up from the bed. “If you need anything, I’ll be in the living room.”

“Okay,” I whisper. But what I really want to say is: Stay. Don’t leave. Just... sit with me for a little while longer.

Later, after the sun’s gone down and my phone chirps with its usual feeding reminder, I pick up Tim and tiptoe quietly through the dark hallway.

And then I jump and nearly scream, when someone rings the doorbell.



Max

After my mom's visit, I feel... off.

Back in the car, on the way to my parents' house, we agreed: no more questions about my personal life, and my relationship with my ex-wife is nobody's business. When the time is right, I'll explain everything. But for now, I'd rather let the past stay buried where it belongs.

Still, there was one thing Mom said that's been gnawing at me ever since—that she saw the way I look at Erin. That I don't need to hide my feelings for her. That she'll accept whoever I choose.

And now I can't stop replaying that in my head. I'm thinking about Erin's appearance. The way she talks and even moves. At first, she drove me crazy. Then I started to feel sorry for her. Now?

Ridiculous. I don't feel anything. Not really. We're not giving each other lingering looks. There's no unspoken tenderness. That's all because of the kid. Yeah. The baby threw me off course. That's all.

I need to get back to my normal life. Real life.

With friends, parties, Sunday dinners, fishing trips.

And a woman, who's smart, beautiful, well-mannered, but fiery too.

Wild, even. Erin may be beautiful, sure, but she's not mine.

This is just me being decent. I'd have done the same thing for any other woman.

There was no way I could throw her and her baby out into the snow.

A sharp knock at the door cuts off my thoughts. I hurry to open it before Tim wakes up. Funny how in just a few days I've adjusted to having a baby in the apartment. I tiptoe around like it's instinct. Even keep my phone on silent.

I open the door without checking the peephole. Big mistake. Because standing on my doorstep, wrapped in a long fur coat and tall boots, is Natalie.

Beautiful. Seductive. Just like always. Her overpowering floral perfume hits me the moment the door opens, and I wince. I told her to switch to something else.

She doesn't even wait. She throws herself at me right there in the doorway.

"Missed me?" she purrs, locking eyes with me and running those sharp acrylic nails down my shoulders.

"Natalie, what are you doing here?" I ask, already tired of this, knowing how hard it will be to get her out of my apartment.

"What's wrong? Not happy to see me?" She pouts, batting those long fake lashes at me. Then she snakes her arms around my neck and presses her lips against mine.

I kiss her back, barely. No enthusiasm. Not when I know there's someone else in the apartment. Someone sleeping just down the hall. I pull away after a second, but Natalie, being Natalie, takes it the wrong way.

“I’ve been getting ready for this all day.” She undoes her coat slowly, revealing... well, way too much. I sigh, loud and heavy.

Sure, the night could’ve gone differently. But a few feet away, there’s another woman asleep. And a baby. And suddenly, I realize... I don’t even want Natalie anymore. Not like I used to. Her lipstick, her heavy eyeliner, those fire-engine red nails—it all feels too much. Too loud. Too fake.

“Natalie,” I say, grabbing her gently by the wrists to stop her. “I told you I was busy. You know I hate it when you just show up.”

“Funny, last time you seemed really happy to see me.”

She’s impossible. Damn it. I knew her head was full of fluff and wedding fantasies. Tall, rich, handsome—that’s her perfect man.

“Sorry, but I was actually just heading out,” I lie, grabbing her purse off the console and handing it to her. I lift her coat back over her shoulders to cover the bare skin she so dramatically revealed and try to steer her toward the door, praying she’ll get the hint.

“Uh-huh...” she drags the word out, then suddenly whips around to face me. The playful sparkle in her eyes is gone. Now she’s pure fury. “Who is she?”

“Natalie, even if I did have someone, that’s none of your business. We agreed this was casual, remember? I’m not putting up with your meltdowns. So do us both a favor and leave. I’ll call when I have time.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” she sneers, lips twisting into a bitter smirk. “I wait for you like some loyal little puppy, always ready to jump when you call, and this is what I get? ‘No time’, ‘go away’, ‘don’t bother me’?” She mimics me with a mocking tone.

“No one asked you to wait like a damn puppy,” I snap. “And let’s not pretend, Natalie. I know exactly what you’ve been up to. Our circles aren’t that big. Surprised? Yeah, sweetheart, I even heard about your failed attempt to land Bishop.”

Her eyes widen, darting from side to side like she’s hunting for a lie that might stick. She freezes, stunned, but I’ll give her credit, she doesn’t stay down long.

“You’re unbelievable. What kind of crap is that? Did Julia tell you that?” she scoffs, but her voice wobbles. “God, she’s still obsessed with you. Can’t stand that you picked me, not her. But Max, you do need me. You know you do.”

She lunges at me, practically launches herself into my arms like a cat in heat. Arms around my neck. Chest pressed to mine. Her hands grip my jaw as she kisses me like we’re in some damn soap opera.

It all happens so fast, I barely register it before she’s pressed up against me—too close, too eager.

I take a step back, bumping into the wall.

I open my mouth to tell her exactly where she can shove her desperate act, but Natalie mistakes it for surrender.

She slips her tongue between my lips, deepening the kiss without giving me a chance to react.

I wrap my hands around her waist, ready to push this leech off me, but just then, a muffled baby’s cry breaks the silence. I whip my head toward the sound and lock eyes with Erin. She’s frozen in place by the entryway, eyes wide with shock, staring straight at me.

Natalie reacts instantly. She pulls back just slightly, then turns around and gives my unexpected guest a puzzled once-over.

“What’s this supposed to be, Max?” she asks coldly, running her eyes over Erin from head to toe, then pressing herself against me even tighter, making it painfully clear just how close we are.

Erin

I stare at Max with another woman, and I can't quite understand what hurts so much. Is it the fact that he has someone? That she is pressed so close to him, kissing him, with every right to be here? Unlike me.

Reality slaps me hard, and for a moment, something sharp twists in my chest at the sight in front of me. But really, what did I expect? Max is a grown man—with grown-up needs. He has his own life. And women.

She and I study each other closely. She's beautiful—undeniably so—but the cold calculation in her eyes ruins any good impression.

She clearly sees me as an intruder on her turf, and looks down on me with smug superiority, making sure I know exactly who she is to Max and what they share. Not that the kiss didn't already say it all.

"Alright, Natalie, it's time for you to go," Max says in a firm voice. I'd overheard enough to know they were arguing—he probably hadn't wanted to let her in at all. If he had, she would've known I was here.

Maybe I should've kept my head down and stayed quiet, but Max's words about Natalie cheating on him while he was at sea stirred something inside me.

Max is a good guy, and someone like her clearly doesn't deserve him.

He needs someone completely different. And he needs her gone—for good, not just

tonight.

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me who she is and what she’s doing here!” she snaps, yanking her arm from his grip and stepping toward me, eyes blazing.

“And who do you think I am to him?” I reply, with a mocking smile, suddenly realizing I’m the one in the stronger position here—not her.

“Max?” She shoots him a demanding look.

“Natalie, it’s over. It’s been over for a long time. I’m living with another woman. And we have a child together.”

If I’d been drinking something just then, I definitely would’ve choked on it. Max throws me a pleading look, silently asking me to go along with the lie, and the fact that this girl means nothing to him suddenly makes it easier to breathe. A small smile creeps onto my lips.

“Whaaat? You’re joking, right? Baby? This is a joke.” She laughs nervously.

“And please, keep your voice down—you’ll wake the baby.”

“This is insane. No, he’s not your kid! When would you have even had a baby? This is some kind of sick, stupid joke. I don’t believe this. No way.”

“Natalie, I don’t owe you any explanations. It’s late, it’s dark out—you should go. Now.” He moves to usher her toward the door, but of course, Natalie decides she’s going to have the last word.

“Why are you smiling, huh?” she snaps in my direction, her eyes flashing with a crazed glint. Honestly, if Max wasn’t holding her back, I’m pretty sure she would’ve

lunged at me.

“Think you got him just ’cause you got knocked up? Think again! I slept with him, got it? Just last week! In that very bed you’re sleeping in now. So go ahead, keep dreaming about your happy little family—or maybe take off those rose-colored glasses.”

Max just lets out a heavy sigh and opens the door for her.

I don’t say anything. Not a word. But deep down... it stings. A little. The thought that he touched her so recently. Kissed her. That maybe she drank from my cup, maybe her things are still in the bathroom, maybe I’ll find one of her hairs on the pillow tonight, makes my stomach turn.

“Liar!” she shrieks, trying to slap Max, but he catches her hand just in time and forcefully pushes her out of the apartment.

“All the best to you both!” she yells just before the door slams shut behind her—loud enough to finally wake Tim.

“I’m sorry about that scene,” Max mutters, jaw tight. “Didn’t think she’d show up in the middle of the night.”

“You really need to work on your taste in women,” I snap, not bothering to hide how I feel about either Cynthia or Natalie.

“Should I hire you as my consultant?” he throws back, attempting to lighten the tension.

“Afraid that’d mean at least a few years of monk life for you,” I smirk, then turn toward the nursery without another word, his heavy stare still lingering on my back.



But my heart is fluttering like a bird in a cage. My hands won't stop shaking. And that kiss—that kiss—between Max and Natalie is still playing on a loop in my head.

God, how disgusting.

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I finally decided to accept Max's offer and stay in his apartment for the next two weeks.

He was right—living alone in my condition isn't the smartest idea.

My mom couldn't come, and grandma already had her hands full.

But the next morning, I got a call from the landlord saying the guy who was renting the apartment was moving out early and I could move in two days.

I should've felt a surge of happiness at that news, but instead, I looked around the place with a strange ache in my chest. I was going to miss all of this.

"Something wrong?" Max appeared in the room, his eyes scanning me closely. I must have looked thrown off—his face was laced with concern.

"No, everything's great," I replied, forcing a smile. "I can move into the apartment this week. Can you believe it? I'll need to call that leasing company soon, too—the one that handles the commercial units on the first floor. I really need to get back to work before I lose my regular clients."

"Wow. That's actually great news," he said, rubbing his beard awkwardly.

"Yeah, it feels like life is getting back on track. Well, I should go start packing up the

nursery. I'll need help to break down the crib and moving some furniture..."

"Don't worry. I'll help you move everything," Max said firmly. And two days later, he was already hauling my things down to the sixth floor in the elevator.

The move took all day. I kept walking through the apartment to double-check I hadn't forgotten anything.

Still, I kept finding little things—like a candleholder, a cup, or a forgotten toy.

Max and Logan dismantled the wardrobe from the nursery and carried it out piece by piece.

Honestly, I would've hired movers, but clearly the guys wanted to prove they were real men—capable of more than just making money and sipping expensive whiskey at night.

Vivienne helped me unpack boxes and organize everything. We ordered food and ended up having dinner all together. The atmosphere was so warm and easygoing—even with the guys bickering every five minutes—I didn't want the night to end.

It's already late. The kids are asleep. We are stretched out on the couch, chatting about random things.

The lights are dim, voices low, the room filled with that kind of soft, cozy calm you don't want to break.

I close my eyes for what feels like a minute, and the next thing I know, Logan and Vivienne are gone, and I'm half-lying on the couch, pressed up against a very warm, very male body.

His scent makes my head spin; his steel-hard muscles leave me in awe. I try not to breathe. Goosebumps race across my skin when I feel his breath against my temple. The place where his palm rests on my waist burns—so intimate, so possessive.

What is he doing here? Did he stay to make sure I'm okay?

Or did he fall asleep next to me, just like I did?

I'm afraid to move, afraid to find out if he's awake.

So I lie here with my eyes closed, soaking in every second of this moment.

I feel small... but safe. And I don't understand what's happening to me.

Where is this trembling coming from? The tightness in my chest, the wild heartbeat?

Why do I want to press even closer, to bury my face in his broad chest?

His breathing is steady, and I decide Max must be asleep.

Carefully, I move my hand and place my palm against his chest. One of my legs has gone a little numb from the awkward position, but I don't dare move again.

If he wakes up and leaves, I'll be alone in this apartment that doesn't feel like mine.

"You're not asleep?" his voice murmurs unexpectedly into my ear, and I jolt, lifting my head. In the dim light, I meet his eyes—cold, sharp, and completely focused on me.

His gaze traps at me. I can't speak. I just stare at him, wanting to reach out, to touch his face, to trail my fingers along his rough stubble, the curve of his lips.

Is this even real? Just days ago, I was broken over someone else, couldn't imagine living without him.

And now? Not a single thought about my ex, the father of my child.

Just this grumpy giant, whose touch feels dangerously good.

We look at each other, and it's like the whole world is buzzing. Something short-circuits in me. I must be losing my mind. How else do I explain the fact that, in the next moment, I press my lips to his?

For a second, Max doesn't react at all, except for the way his hand tightens on my waist. Hard. Almost painfully. I panic, certain I've completely screwed up. He probably thinks I'm some desperate idiot throwing herself at him. I start to pull away, about to stammer out an apology—

But then he parts his lips and crashes into me with a force that knocks the breath out of my lungs.

Now it's my turn to freeze.

From the sudden flash behind my eyes, from the dizzying kiss, from my own boldness and the heat flooding my body under his touch.

My fingers dig into his shoulders. It's madness between us—pure, electric madness—as if the tension of the past days had finally snapped, releasing all the chaos in one blinding rush.

We crash onto the couch. Max is on top of me. There's only the thin fabric of our clothes between us—and the best part? I don't want to stop. Not this time. I want, just once, to stop thinking, stop weighing what's right or wrong.

We're like two starving animals, clinging to each other, desperate to get even closer.

It's not enough. It's nowhere near enough.

What's happening to me? Just yesterday I was mourning Maxwell... and tonight I'm ready to give myself completely to another man.

I tremble under him, pressing closer, breathing him in, tangling my fingers in his unruly hair.

But even through the haze of desire, I know my body's not ready. Not yet. I haven't fully recovered after giving birth, and no matter how badly I want this, tonight can't go further than kisses.

Max's hand slides up my thigh, and my mind is spinning.

I tell myself just one more second, then I'll stop him.

But his lips move to my neck and a soft moan escapes me—one that snaps us both back to reality.

He suddenly pulls away, standing up quickly.

I spring from the couch too, adjusting my clothes and brushing my hair behind my ears, afraid to meet his eyes. My cheeks must be on fire. My hands are still trembling.

"I'm sorry, Erin. That shouldn't have happened," he says, voice low and rough.

"No, I'm the one who should apologize," I cut in quickly. "I thought I was dreaming, honestly. I... it was just a weird moment."

“Yeah... a very weird moment,” he mutters and clears his throat.

The silence stretches.

My heart is still pounding, adrenaline rushing through me like a storm.

“Well... I should go,” he says, voice tight. “If you need anything, just call.”

“Okay.”

Max studies me for one last second in the dim light, then turns and walks toward the door.

I follow him with my eyes, staring at his broad back, trying to calm my breath.

“Good night,” he says softly as he opens the door.

“You too,” I whisper as the door closes behind him, cutting us off and leaving me completely alone.

Erin

The next few days fly by in a blur of errands.

During my first walk with the baby, I quickly realized pushing a stroller isn't as easy as it looks.

Curbs, steps, uphill ramps... I bought a bunch of things for the new apartment, finally rented the commercial space on the first floor before someone else grabbed it, and posted an update on my store's page saying I'll be reopening soon.

Life, it seems, is slowly falling back into place.

But I can't stop thinking about everything—about men, about my life. And most of all, I dread running into Max. How am I even supposed to look him in the eyes after what happened?

For several nights in a row, I have the strangest dreams. Taylor kisses me—then suddenly pushes me away.

Then Maxwell shows up with that judgmental look in his eyes, shaking his head like I've failed some moral test. "So much for loyalty," he says.

"I go out to sea for a while and you throw yourself at the next guy you see." I break into a sweat, begging him to stay—but still, I can't help reaching out to the other man.

Standing at a crossroads, torn between the father of my child...

and the one who's somehow awakened this storm inside me.

And yet, despite the fear, every time I step outside, I find myself searching for Max. Hoping. And each time I come back empty—disappointed. He doesn't call. He doesn't text. The only sign of life came through Vivienne, when she stopped by and casually mentioned that Max had asked how I was doing.

She gave me a look, like she knew something. 'Something happened between you two, didn't it?' her eyes said. Maybe Max told her. Either way, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Couldn't stop waiting for our next encounter. We have to see each other again... right?

I kept my phone close. Listened for footsteps at the door. But whether Max had lost interest in me and Tim, or I'd just made something out of nothing, I couldn't tell. He never showed.

Then, on Saturday, Vivienne invited me to their wedding anniversary. "Just a little get-together with close friends," she said. So I definitely wasn't expecting to see Max there.

I stand at the threshold of the living room with Tim in my arms, feeling my heart pounding wildly as my face flushes with heat. Vivienne winks at me—she definitely invited him on purpose. Max and Logan can barely stand each other.

It's only been a week since I last saw him, but it feels like a lifetime. He's a stranger and yet, somehow, achingly familiar. He's dressed differently today. A crisp white shirt and black jeans. He's standing by the window, facing sideways, hands in his pockets, staring up at the starry sky.



“And now that everyone’s finally here—let’s sit down!” Vivienne calls out, and Max turns, his gaze landing on me.

There are only a few feet between us, but even from this distance, I can see his pupils dilate and darken.

He holds his breath—just like I do. A chill runs down my spine, my throat dries up, and my hands begin to tremble.

Instinctively, I lick my lips, and his gaze drops to them instantly.

I know what he’s thinking. I don’t even need to guess.

And it makes me blush like I’m eighteen again, as if it’s the first time a guy ever kissed me.

“Good to see you,” he says hoarsely, taking a few steps toward me.

“Hi,” I breathe, drinking him in with my eyes, unsure what to do with myself.

“He’s asleep?” he asks softly, nodding toward my son.

“Yeah,” I smile, unable to hold his gaze, which feels like it’s slicing right through to my soul. “I’ll go lay him down next to Nadine,” I say quickly, grateful for an excuse to slip away and give myself a moment to breathe, to calm my nerves before facing him again.

Though who am I kidding? I hoped all day I’d see him here. I wore a loose black dress to hide my post-pregnancy figure, did my makeup, even curled my hair and draped it over one shoulder just right.

The door to the nursery muffles the guests' voices and shields me from their eyes.

I press my back to the cold wall and close my eyes.

It's not so bad. Max doesn't seem to remember what happened that night.

Or at least he's not treating it like a big deal.

Maybe it meant nothing to him. Not like it did to me.

I exhale slowly. Catch my reflection in the mirror. I look good—actually good. No worse than Natalie or Cynthia. That gives me a boost of confidence. I pull a soft smile onto my face and head back out.

Everyone's already seated at the table. Logan sits next to Vivienne. His twin brother is with a date, one of Vivienne's friends and her husband—people I've seen a few times—are chatting nearby, a stranger... and Max.

There's only one seat left—and, of course, it's right next to Max.

I slow my steps. All eyes are on me. Max sits with his back to me and doesn't turn around. I quietly take the empty seat beside him, pretending to listen to the conversations around the table. But in truth, I'm focused on just one person in the room.

He unsettles me. His presence chips away at my confidence. And our bodies are so close that I can't resist a "casual" brush of my leg against his under the table—just to confirm that yes, his touch still sends a confusing jolt through me.

"I'm Greg," the guy to my right says with a charming smile. "Mind if I keep you company tonight? Since we're both solo?"

I glance up at him and smile politely in return.

“Just juice for me. I’m not drinking tonight,” I reply, and I could swear I hear a faint growl from Max’s direction as Greg pours me a glass of apple juice.

Greg turns out to be a great conversationalist—funny, warm, easy to talk to. He asks about my work, shares a few stories. He’s a friend of Logan’s. I find myself genuinely laughing at one of his jokes when, out of nowhere, a hand lands on my knee—and my heart practically somersaults.

Max’s hand. Hot against my skin, even through the thin layer of my stockings.

I go rigid. The conversations around us fade into background noise. Every nerve in my body is tuned to that single point of contact.

I’m tense, strung tight. I don’t dare look at him or glance down.

What is he doing?

Why?

His thumb slowly strokes over my knee. I finally turn my head to look at him.

He looks completely relaxed. Casually listening to Logan, not a single trace of mischief on his face. But his hand... it begins to move upward. Slowly.

I don’t know what I want more: for him to stop, or to keep going.

But common sense wins out. I gently nudge him with my foot under the table, a silent message: Not now. Not like this.

His hand freezes. Then he shifts slightly in his seat, leaning closer to me.

“You okay?” he asks, his voice low and close, his breath brushing my ear, making my skin tingle. “You look pale. Maybe you should lie down for a bit. Are you still on medication?”

He’s doing this on purpose. I know it.

Testing me. Trying to rattle me.

But why?

“I’m fine, don’t worry,” I say coolly, lifting my eyes to meet his. There’s a hint of defiance in my gaze, a smirk tugging at the corners of my lips—my way of showing him I’m not about to start blushing like a teenager around her celebrity crush.

But then his leg brushes mine under the table. Slowly. Purposefully. His hand tightens on my thigh. The scent of his cologne hits me like a drug—warm, masculine, magnetic. I feel this ridiculous urge to press my face into the crook of his neck and just breathe him in.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Is this hormones? The lack of intimacy in my life?

Why does his touch light me up like this?

There’s a lump caught in my throat. Screw it—I’ll play his game. I nudge his leg with the tip of my shoe, then slowly trail upward, all while keeping my eyes locked on his. Watching. Waiting.

A spark flickers in Max's eyes. He leans back lazily in his chair, still watching only me. Heat radiates between us.

And suddenly, I wish I were twenty again. Then maybe I could let myself go—flirt, tease, not care about appearances or consequences. But I'm a grown woman. A mother. Sitting at a dinner table in someone else's home, with people around us. I have no right.

Max drains his glass in one go. I glance at him, disapproving—he's clearly drunk. That explains the sudden playfulness. His eyes shine, pupils slightly dilated, cheeks flushed, voice looser than usual.

And just like that, I'm pissed.

I pull away sharply. Then rise from my seat without another word.

"Excuse me, I'm just going to check on the kids," I say with a forced smile, and step out of the room, feeling his gaze pinned to my back.

But I don't go to the nursery.

I slip into the bathroom and head straight for the sink.

My reflection stares back at me—flushed, breathing unevenly. I reach for the cold water, then freeze. I've got makeup on. One splash and it's ruined. I turn off the tap, brace my hands on the marble counter, and exhale through gritted teeth.

Then I hear it.

The door creaks open.

My heart skips a beat.

Max.

The soft click of the lock behind him echoes like a gunshot. We're alone. Trapped.

My pulse pounds.

Thump—pause—thump-thump—pause.

He steps forward.

And I know he's barely holding himself back.

And worse... I don't want him to.

Erin

I barely manage a single breath—just one—before I’m pinned against the cold wall.

Max’s lips crash onto mine, and I can’t believe this is actually happening. The taste, the scent, the groan—intoxicating.

I like touching him. I like how his stubble scratches against my skin. I like knowing he wants me.

Why else would he be here?

His hand grips my waist, pulling me closer, anchoring me to him. I’m trembling all over. I clutch at his shoulders and accidentally pop the top button off his shirt.

I rise on my toes to meet his height, kissing him back, but I can’t fully let go.

“N-no, wait...” I whimper, when his fingers tug my dress upward with clear intent.

“What?” he pants, bracing his forehead against the tile near my head.

His whole body’s strung tight. Ready. Wound up.

“Not now,” I whisper, unable to fight him... but not ready either.

Pause. A long one. His breath fans over my skin, sending a wave of goosebumps down my spine.

“Yeah,” he exhales. “Sorry.” He takes another breath. “This isn’t exactly the right place. Let’s get out of here. Grab Tim, go back to mine, just the two of us. Keep this night going?” he murmurs at my ear, sending the ground out from under me.

If his hands weren’t holding me up, I’d probably collapse onto the tiles.

“No, you... you don’t understand,” I murmur, biting my lip.

I have to tell him the truth now or he’ll think I’m just pushing him away.

“I can’t. Not yet,” I whine softly, pressing my nose into his neck, so he knows it’s not about him, so he won’t think I’m trying to get rid of him.

“Damn. I didn’t think...”

Max kisses my temple, pulling me close again, his hand stroking my back gently, soothing.

We stand there in silence. Breathing each other in. Leaving light kisses like promises. Until someone tries the bathroom door, a jiggle of the handle, then silence. We spring apart like we’ve been burned, quickly straightening our clothes.

We exchange burning glances, wait a beat in silence, then step out into the hallway when it’s finally empty as if nothing happened.

“Stop flirting with that clown,” Max hisses under his breath through clenched teeth, and I can’t help but smirk.

Jealousy? Seriously?

Soft music plays in the background. The couch where the girls are lounging has been



moved toward the window, giving a perfect panoramic view of the city lights.

The guys are still at the table, loudly debating something. Max and I go in opposite directions. I drop into an armchair angled toward the living room—and toward Taylor.

“You look a little flustered,” Vivienne teases, giving me a knowing wink.

I smile in return.

“So... has the ice finally cracked?” she leans in with a grin.

“He’s a pretty decent kisser,” I say with a playful shrug. “Tall, hot, and scratchy,” I add mysteriously, and we both burst out laughing.

“He seriously needs to shave that ridiculous beard—if that’s what you were talking about,” Vivienne rolls her eyes, and we melt into the girls’ chatter.

But I can’t stop my eyes from drifting back to Max. And every time I catch his gaze, that invisible cord between us pulls tight again. Heavy. Intense. Wanting.

He’s lounging back in his chair, glass raised lazily to his lips that were on mine just moments ago.

I look away. Can’t take it. Have I ever felt this before? I’ve been charmed before. Sure. Nervous, even. But this ache, this flutter in my chest—this is new. Maybe I felt something similar when I met Tim’s father.

Once.

But not like this.

I stare at the city lights outside the window, my insides a hurricane of emotion.

I don't know what this is. Gratitude? Something more? And how is it even possible to fall so fast, so hard to forget someone else so completely?

A slow song begins to play. Someone turns up the volume. It pulls me out of my haze. Logan walks up to Vivienne and takes her hand. Others follow.

I watch them, swaying together, warm and smiling. And then I see Max. He's coming toward me—slow, sure steps—and my pulse spikes.

I don't know where to look. What to do. One moment I'm melting in his arms like I've been his for years, and the next—I can't even meet his eyes.

Max stops right in front of me, looks down, and extends his hand. I place my palm in his, warm and steady. He leads me to the center of the room and interlaces our fingers.

I rest my other hand on his shoulder and look straight into his eyes. And just like that I'm drowning. He leads me in the dance if you can even call it that.

We simply sway, slowly, gently, closer and closer with each breath. Everything about it feels right. Familiar. Like we've done this a thousand times before. Like we've known each other for decades, maybe even longer.

"You look incredible tonight," Max murmurs in a husky voice. "Did I already say that?"

"Maybe," I nod, a little flustered.

Another pause.

“How’s the new place?”

“Better than I expected.”

I can sense he’s just as thrown off by this pull between us as I am. He doesn’t know what to say, what to do, despite how confident and intimidating he usually seems. And I get it. I’m a complicated woman with someone else’s child.

That’s a lot.

The song fades. I exhale in quiet disappointment; I could’ve danced with Max for hours. Just us. No interruptions. No space between us.

But he doesn’t let go of my hand.

Even as the others move away and the room quiets, we stay right where we are, locked in a silent gaze. There’s something unspoken crackling between us.

And all I can think about is how much I wish we were alone. So I could truly feel what it’s like to be touched by a man again. To be seen. Desired. Held.

But it’s not meant to be.

At least not tonight.

“It’s getting late. I should head home, get some rest,” I say. But I don’t move.

“I’ll grab Tim. Walk you out,” Max replies after a beat, and turns toward the nursery.

I find Vivienne to say goodbye.

“You two are perfect together,” she whispers. “You didn’t cross paths by accident. Trust me—things like this don’t just happen. Don’t waste your chance. Don’t let a good man slip away.”

“I don’t know...” I admit. “Tim’s father... he...”

I want to say something might’ve happened to him, but Vivienne cuts me off sharply.

“Oh, forget that idiot. Has he ever checked in on you? On the baby? Asked if you needed anything? He lied to you. I know it hurts. It’s brutal—admitting the person you loved could do that to you. But you need to face the truth and kill that naivety before it kills you.”

She says it like someone who’s lived through it. She’s not looking at me and I follow her gaze, expecting to find Logan but no, he’s on the phone. Vivienne is watching his twin brother.

“Is there something I don’t know?”

I get this strange feeling that something happened between those three in the past.

“Just listen to your heart,” Vivienne softens.

“If right now it wants to be with Max, then be with him. Live in the moment. Don’t overthink it.

A month ago, you were on the brink of life and death, and today, thank God, you’re standing here in front of me.

You’ve been given a chance to change everything, so take it. ”

“I’ll try.”

“Ready?” Vivienne and I fall silent as Max appears beside us, holding my son. She gives me that look that says, “Told you. He’s already getting used to your kid.”

“Yeah, let’s go. Thank you, Vivienne. Everything was delicious. And congrats again.”

We say our goodbyes and step out. The moment the door closes behind us, it’s suddenly so quiet, it rings in my ears.

“Maybe you two should stay at my place?” Max suggests out of nowhere, glancing toward his apartment.

“No, we’re going home,” I hurry to decline, my fingertips brushing my lips that are still tingling from his kiss. “But... if you want, you can come in for tea. Or coffee,” I add quickly, remembering how he practically runs on the stuff.

“Wouldn’t say no,” he grins slyly, and we take turns stepping into the elevator.

While I fuss in the kitchen making coffee, Max sits back on a chair, relaxed, watching me. Sleeves rolled up, top buttons undone, eyes locked on me. I have no clue how to act around him. Sure, we’ve kissed twice now, but we haven’t talked about it at all.

I slide a cup toward him and sit down across the table.

“Have you started the renovation yet?” I reach for a safe topic because the tension between us is getting on my nerves.

“No. Every time I think about it, I just want to give up on life,” he chuckles, shooting me a sly look. “What’s your plan for next week?”

“Well, I rented a space for the flower shop. I’ll be moving in, getting it all set up. A few more days and I’ll be back on my feet completely.”

“If you need help, call me. I’m free most of the time, so you can count on me.”

“Thanks,” I exhale and take a sip of tea.

We keep talking about nothing in particular for a while, and I’m just starting to feel disappointed, thinking maybe Max regrets the kiss, when he stands up to rinse his cup. As he walks past me, he suddenly stops and runs his hand through my hair.

“This hairstyle suits you,” he murmurs hoarsely, then leans down and kisses the top of my head. Soft. Easy. My breath catches at the tenderness of it. I don’t want him to pull away.

“Your faucet’s leaking. I’ll drop by tomorrow around noon and fix it, okay?”

“Yeah...” I whisper, caught off guard, and then Max suddenly seems in a rush to leave—without saying anything about what just happened between us, without acknowledging the desire we couldn’t contain.

“Sweet dreams,” he smiles, hands in his pockets, and walks out of my apartment, leaving behind his cologne... and total chaos in my heart.

I toss and turn all night, unable to sleep, just counting down the hours until tomorrow.

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Max shows up around one in the afternoon.

He’s got tools in hand, wearing a T-shirt that hugs his body just right, showing off

those maddeningly defined muscles. I catch myself staring and completely miss the fact that he's asking me something.

"Can I come in?" he repeats louder.

"Oh—yeah, sorry," I mumble, blushing like always around this man, and step aside to let him in.

He takes his time fixing the faucet, asking about random things as he works.

Offers to tag along to my doctor's appointment next week.

Says he could drive me and Tim to my grandma's because it's not the smartest idea to drive that far alone with a baby.

I tell him I'll think about it—I don't feel like explaining to my grandma who this man is or why Tim's father is no longer in the picture.

She was so excited to help plan our wedding.

Max finishes up and stays for lunch. He watches Tim with obvious interest—says he looks like he's grown in just a few days. And then... he leaves. Just like that.

No dinner invite. No hug. No kiss.

Just a simple "See you later," and he's gone. I stare at the door, feeling both disappointed and relieved at the same time.

Maybe what happened in the bathroom was just a heat-of-the-moment thing, and I really shouldn't make any more mistakes.

Maybe I should just focus on my son, my work, and stop getting flustered by the first guy who's shown me a little kindness.

Yes. Exactly.

I repeat this to myself all day.

And by evening, I'm unscrewing the lightbulb in my bathroom on purpose and texting Max to say I need help.

A little female trickery never hurt anyone.

Somehow, over the next week, we both keep coming up with the dumbest excuses to see each other.

Borrowing sugar.

Ironing pants to get that perfect crease.

Sharing homemade pie that's suspiciously too much for one person.

I lie and say I can't find my hairdryer and then pretend to search every corner of Max's apartment.

It's ridiculous. But it's also the first time in a long while I've felt alive.

Like I've stepped into the past—back in high school, when I used to come up with the exact same kinds of excuses just to see the boy next door. The one who never even noticed me.

Sometimes, when we're close, I "accidentally" brush against Max—just to feel the



heat of his skin. And sometimes he's the one who steps in too close, close enough that I think he's going to kiss me again... but he doesn't. Not even a touch. Like he's afraid of something.

After another week, I start to feel like Max has unofficially moved in.

He stays late almost every night, takes walks with us in the park, and drives me to the clinic.

Somehow, effortlessly, he's become part of my daily life.

The crying baby doesn't scare him. The fact that he spends most of his time with us doesn't bother him.

He even takes Tim out in the stroller so I can work on floral orders.

So I make a decision: I won't rush him. I'll let him get attached, let him miss us when we're not around. Let him figure out on his own whether we mean something to him or not. Because if you move too fast—without understanding your own feelings—you're bound to mess things up. To fall.

I'll give him a month.

If he keeps pretending that nothing's happening between us—that there's no electricity in our glances, no flutter in our chests—then I'll make the first move. His leave won't last forever, and I do want more than just friendship.

Being near him has already started to erase the past. The memories of my ex, the sting of betrayal—they've begun to fade. His face, once so vivid in my mind, now feels distant. Dim. Just a smudge on the map of my life.

Max

The knock on the door comes just as I'm about to collapse into bed. My first thought is that it's Erin. A late-night visit usually means something happened, so I rush to open the door without thinking.

Since that night at Vivienne's—when I lost it and nearly made a huge mistake with Erin—we've been spending a lot of time together, and slowly, I've gotten used to having her and the baby around. But I've kept my distance. I have my reasons. Good ones.

I open the door and find Logan standing there. Holding a bottle.

"I need to talk to you. Serious stuff. Mind if I come in?"

He looks like the last place he wants to be is my apartment, but something's clearly pushed him here. Sweatpants, house slippers, narrowed eyes. He glances past me into the apartment.

"I still haven't recovered from your last mystery brew," I mutter. "I'm not exactly thrilled about a repeat."

"That wasn't mystery brew. That was a very expensive Irish whiskey. You just don't know how to handle real drinks, man. Or appreciate them," he smirks.

"I don't drink. Except on rare occasions. What do you want?"

“Let me in and I’ll tell you.”

“It’s nearly midnight. What, Viv kicked you out?”

“I wish. She and the kid are out at the country house. I just happened to be in town for work. How’s Erin?”

” he adds, stepping into the apartment without waiting for an invitation.

He heads straight to the kitchen, pulls two glasses off the shelf, pours a generous amount into each, and hands one to me.

“Why are you here, Logan? You and I having friendly drinks is a stretch. So just say what you came to say and get out,” I say wearily, dropping into a chair and clinking the glass against the table.

“Nadine’s not my daughter. Or... she is. Biologically. But not the way you think,” Logan blurts, then downs his entire glass in one go.

I stare at him, trying to process what the hell he just said.

“What do you mean, she’s not your daughter? She’s your spitting image. Even has your awful temper.”

“Vivienne used to be my brother’s mistress. When we met, she was already pregnant—with his kid. So technically, Nadine is my niece.”

Now that’s a bombshell. I don’t believe it. I stare at my neighbor, stunned, trying to wrap my head around what he just said.

He spreads his hands like that somehow explains everything.

“And you’re telling me this... why? You looking for confession hour?” I ask, no malice in my voice, as I pull Logan’s “brew” closer. I’d sworn I wouldn’t touch that stuff again—but tonight? I might make an exception.

“This isn’t a confession, Max. It’s help,” Logan replies, as if reading my thoughts.

I raise a brow, waiting for him to elaborate.

“I’ve seen the way you look at Erin. She means something to you, but the kid’s holding you back, right?

Let me tell you something—when you really care about a woman, and you watch her kid grow up, reach for you, call you Dad...

it doesn’t matter whose blood’s in his veins.

You love him like your own. With everything you’ve got. ”

“It’s not about Tim,” I cut in, still turning the glass in my hand.

“Erin’s a good woman. I don’t want to mess with her head.

She’ll get used to having me around, the kid will start thinking I’m his father, and then, one day, I’ll head back out to sea, rethink everything, and decide I’m not cut out for this.

I don’t want to hurt her, Logan. She’s already dealing with enough. ”

“Then some other guy will swoop in and grab her. And chances are he won’t be as careful with her feelings as you are. Don’t you think Erin’s a grown, smart, and capable woman who can decide for herself if she wants to try a relationship with you?

Don't screw this up. You'll regret it."

"I've been married, remember?" I mutter.

"And trust me, there's nothing good about it.

Ended in a screaming match, and my ex still won't leave me alone—even though she's the one who walked away.

So no, I'm not looking for anything serious.

And Erin? She doesn't need a man who'll be there for a few nights and then disappear. "

"You're wrong," Logan exhales, gaze drifting to the window.

"Sometimes life throws us wild curveballs that bring the right people to our doorstep. I used to think Vivienne was a scam artist. Hell, I even tried to use her for my own gain. And now? I can't imagine life without her or Nadine.

Think hard, Max. A good woman's not easy to find.

And Erin—she's smart, kind, independent, loyal.

Exactly what a guy in your line of work needs. "

"With my job, it's better not to have a family at all," I say sharply—though, truth is, I think the opposite.

I think about how I wouldn't mind the sound of little feet running through this house, the echo of laughter filling up the space instead of the unbearable silence pressing in

from all sides.

“In any case, it’s your call,” Logan shrugs. “I just wanted to show you from experience—sometimes happiness blindsides you. The real trick is not screwing it up when it does.”

I stay silent, leaning back in the chair, eyes fixed on the wedding band on his finger.

No one’s asking me to get married. Hell, it’s just a couple of walks, a few shared dinners.

Testing something more than lingering glances doesn’t mean I’m signing my soul away.

And Erin—if my gut’s right—isn’t in a rush to tie herself to anyone, either.

She’s been burned, just like me. She won’t dive into anything again unless she’s damn sure.

But I like her. I’m drawn to her. I want to protect her, keep her safe.

I want to get lost in her lips, trace every inch of her skin with my mouth, tear through the restraint that’s been chaining me back.

Logan’s right about one thing—we’ve got a pull between us that’s hard to ignore, and we’re not kids anymore, too scared to figure ourselves out.

It’s all clear. One of us has to make the first move—and it sure as hell won’t be Erin. If she says yes, then we’ve got two months, tops, to figure out what the hell this is... and where we’re going from here.

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

Erin

I absentmindedly examine the gerbera in my hand.

It's quiet and peaceful in my little shop.

My son is asleep nearby in his stroller, and I'm working on a few custom floral arrangements.

Right now, it doesn't even feel like a real flower shop—just the bare essentials.

Only what I need for today's work and a few fresh roses.

I haven't found the courage to hire a nanny yet, so I work just a couple hours a day while Tim is sound asleep.

That's enough to make three or four hatbox bouquets—and they bring in a decent income.

Thankfully, I'm feeling much better now. Sure, I still get a little dizzy sometimes or feel my blood pressure dip, but compared to how I felt a month ago, it's nothing.

I've started getting used to this new rhythm of life.

I wake up, change a diaper, feed Tim, eat breakfast, and head outside for a walk with the stroller.

Half an hour of fresh air, two hours of work, then lunch.

Diapers again, baby food, another walk, and a quick stop back at the shop to hand off orders to the courier.

In the evening, once Tim's asleep, I quietly tidy up the apartment, picking up scattered things, washing the dishes, and planning the next day.

I call my mom and grandma, catch up with friends who live in other cities.

And often, I share tea and cake with Max—or I watch as he installs another shelf or fixes something for me.

I admire his toned body, always freshen up a bit before he arrives, and sometimes I can't help but watch him for ages as he carries Tim around the apartment while I cook or take calls.

A soft grunt comes from the stroller, and I quickly grab the handle, gently rocking it to lull my son back to sleep.

“Just a little longer, baby. Mommy's almost done. Shh-shh, my sweetheart, we'll eat soon,” I whisper and flinch when the bell above the front door rings.

A tall man steps inside. I only glance up, vaguely annoyed with myself for forgetting to lock the door from the inside.

“Sorry, we're closed,” I say without lifting my head.

“That's too bad. I was hoping to buy flowers for the most charming girl in the world,” comes a familiar voice, and my eyes widen in surprise.



“Max?”

“Why? Don’t I look like myself?” he asks playfully, smiling at me.

“It... it suits you.”

I’m so flustered I start to stammer. I hungrily take in the features of his face he’d been hiding behind that beard all this time.

Max looks young. Much younger than I thought.

Sharp cheekbones, a square jaw. A beautiful face. Strikingly so. A light dusting of dark stubble, and with it, those ice-colored eyes look downright mesmerizing. I can’t take my eyes off him. He was handsome before, sure—but now...

“You look younger,” I say with a smile, feeling my heart race wildly. I just can’t get used to him like this. It’s like there’s a stranger standing in front of me.

“So that means young girls definitely won’t be hitting on me anymore,” he grins. “They usually go for older guys.”

“Your sense of humor’s still intact,” I reply, trying to keep things light, though I’m suddenly flustered and unsure what to do with myself. “Sooo... did you come for flowers or just to stop by?”

“What do you have?” he asks, glancing around the almost-empty shop.

“Roses,” I nod toward a bucket of white ones. “A client was supposed to pick them up, but canceled right before lunch.”

“Perfect. I’ll take them all. How much?”

For some reason, I feel disappointed. Max pulls out his wallet, and all I can think about is who he's buying those roses for.

When he places several large bills on the counter and silently watches as I wrap up fifty-seven roses in clear cellophane, my eyes almost well up with tears.

I barely manage to hold them back. I'd let myself believe that maybe, just maybe, there was something growing between us—that he was helping me and Tim not out of pity but because he wanted to. And now, it's all crumbling.

My emotions swirl in chaos. I avoid his gaze at all costs, terrified I'll betray what I'm feeling. My hands tremble. I just want to go home and hide.

"Here," I say, handing him the bouquet. Goosebumps race down my arms when our fingers brush.

"Thanks. The flowers are stunning—just like their owner," he says with a wink, then turns and walks out. I watch him go, stunned, feeling like a fool. I don't know what to think.

But I don't get a chance to cry, because the bell above the door rings again.

"Did you forget something?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest in a defensive gesture. My voice comes out hoarse and subdued.

"No. Here, this is for you," he says, holding the bouquet out to me again, and I stare at him in confusion. "Let's pretend we didn't see each other a minute ago, and that I just came in to invite you to dinner and give you flowers, like I'm supposed to."

"You bought flowers from me to give them... back to me?" I frown, but already feel the tension inside me start to melt away. A breathy chuckle escapes my lips. God,

what a clown.

“It happened spontaneously. I needed flowers, and as a client, I bought them from you. So... how about we go downtown tonight? When do you finish? I know a nice restaurant. I wanted to talk to you about something important.”

“I... Oh, yeah. I’m in. I’m almost done, but I need to stop by the apartment to change and feed Tim first.”

“No problem. I’ll wait here and we’ll head home together.”

Max’s presence makes me nervous. He keeps pacing around, peeking into the stroller, then staring at me for long stretches.

I’m tense. His words won’t leave my head.

What does he want to talk about? Did something happen?

What are the flowers for? I sneak a glance at him again, unable to pull my eyes away from his face.

God, that short beard suits him so well. He looks like a damn god.

If he kisses me tonight... if things go further than they should... I won’t stop it this time. I want him. I deserve a little slice of happiness. Even if it’s temporary.

I finish up my work. The courier arrives right on time like always. I hand off the orders, lock up the shop, and head toward the front door of the building with Max at my side.

It’s already warm outside, and I’m wearing a light coat.

A soft breeze whips my hair in all directions.

The grass is turning green, birds are singing.

Everything feels calm and peaceful, but I can't shake the bad feeling creeping up my spine.

Like a storm cloud is about to roll in and ruin this perfect day in an instant.

Is it because of the talk we're about to have? Or am I just overthinking again?

Tim starts to fuss, so I pick him up, holding him close while Max walks beside me, pushing the now-empty stroller. He presses the elevator button. We wait, locked in a tense gaze. My chest tightens. The air crackles.

Click.

Ding.

The elevator doors slide open. I exhale slowly, turn to step forward—and freeze.

I can't move. I can't breathe.

I stare wide-eyed at the man standing inside. He stares right back. Shock. Confusion. Disbelief. It floods both our faces. I blink, trying to convince myself it's just someone who looks like him.

But it's not.

It's him.

Max.

The real father of my child. Standing in the same building, within arm's reach.

No.

No way.

This can't be happening.

I can't get air into my lungs. My knees threaten to buckle. I stare at him in disbelief. He stares at me. Then, his gaze drops to Tim in my arms. I clutch my baby tighter, instinctively, protectively. His eyes go wide. He blinks.

"What's wrong? You feeling okay? Why aren't you getting in the elevator?" Max asks, oblivious to the man standing inside.

I finally snap out of it. Turn toward him, dazed. He's holding the stroller with one hand and the bouquet of roses he just gave me with the other. He looks concerned, completely unaware that in a split second, everything might have just changed.

"Erin?"

The other man's voice cuts through the tension like a knife.

"Oh my God, where have you been? I thought something happened to you. I've been losing my mind! I searched everywhere... Is this... is he our son?"

Max—the other Max—takes a hesitant step forward. He's so close I can smell his cologne. The same scent. The one from my memories. And it pulls me violently into the past.

“M-Max?” It’s all I can manage to say.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the stunned expression on the face of the Max who isn’t mine. And I know nothing will ever be the same again.

“You must be the runaway groom, huh?” Max says with a dry chuckle, cutting the other man off before he can say another word.

“And who the hell are you supposed to be?” my ex snaps back, glaring him down with growing hostility.

“No one,” Max says coldly. “Erin, let’s go.” He tries to nudge me toward the elevator.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa—hold up, man,” my ex growls, stepping forward. “That’s my fiancée. And my son. So if anyone here’s nobody, it’s you. Thanks for the help with the stroller, but we’ll take it from here.”

They’re standing face to face now. The tension between them thickens like a storm cloud, and I swear—give them one more minute, and they will be at each other's throats.

“Both of you—shut up!” I snap. “No one’s going anywhere until we figure out what the hell, Max, made you send me to the wrong apartment?! And where the hell have you been all this time?”

“Let’s go home. I’m not having this conversation in front of strangers.

First of all. And second—where did you disappear to?

Your flower shop’s closed, all your social media accounts are gone.

I couldn't even find your friends to ask if you were okay.

I went to the police, imagined a million horrible things, and turns out—you managed to get yourself a man while I was gone. ”

“Watch your mouth,” Max—my Max—takes a step closer, voice low and threatening.

“I disappeared?” I explode. Months of pain, confusion, and sleepless nights come rushing back, rising like a tidal wave inside me.

“You sent me to a stranger's apartment! You messaged once a month!

Never asked about the baby, never asked how I was doing—and now you're blaming me because the one person who was there for me actually gave a damn? ”

“What the hell are you talking about—‘wrong apartment’? Are you out of your mind? I gave you my keys. I got back from my deployment, went to my place—and you were gone! No note. No message. Nothing.”

“You gave me the wrong address!” I shout, my voice so loud it jolts Tim awake in my arms.

“I'm telling you one more time—I gave you the keys to my apartment.

What the hell are you talking about? And I couldn't call you because three months ago my phone went overboard!

I didn't get a new one until a month later, and none of the numbers were saved.

Not even yours. There was no way to recover the SIM card. ”

“No...” I whisper. “You’re lying...”

“Why the hell would I lie to you, Erin?” His voice softens, but his eyes plead. “What happened, really?”

And just like that, my entire world wavers on a fault line between what I thought I knew... and what might have been the truth all along.

“Here, you texted me this.” I pull my phone out of my purse with trembling hands, my voice catching in my throat as I swipe through the messages. My fingers finally land on the one. “Harbor Street 7, apt. 217.”

“Three-seventeen,” Max, my Max, corrects gently, a quiet weight in his voice now.

“Two-seventeen,” I insist, holding the phone screen toward him.

I watch as his expression changes. The anger drains from his face, replaced by confusion. Then guilt. He furrows his brows and looks at me, as if seeing me clearly for the first time.

“Shit... baby, I’m so sorry,” Maxwell murmurs. “My finger must’ve slipped. I didn’t even notice I sent the wrong number. Why didn’t you text me when you realized it was the wrong place?”

“It’s... it’s a long story,” I whisper, suddenly feeling so foolish. God, how did I end up in this mess? It feels like a cruel joke, like some absurd dream. And the worst part is, I don’t even know how to feel about seeing Tim’s father again. Am I relieved? Angry? Scared?

“I need... I need some time alone. I’m going to my place. We’ll talk later.”



“Which one of us are you talking to?” comes Taylor’s cold voice from behind.

“Both,” I say quietly.

“No way, sunshine,” Maxwell cuts in with a hopeful smile, stepping forward. “I finally found you. I’m seeing my son for the first time. I’m not letting you walk away now.”

He wraps an arm around me and presses a kiss to my forehead. It should’ve felt comforting, familiar even. But all I feel is suffocated. Cornered. And guilty—because Taylor is still there, watching. And I can’t meet his eyes.

Five minutes ago, I was content. Happy, even. Now I’m standing at a crossroads again, and every direction feels wrong.

I’m too stunned to protest when Maxwell gently guides me into the elevator. He wheels the stroller in beside us, presses the button for 28.

The last thing I see is Max’s cold stare as the elevator doors slide shut in front of me. And in those eyes, I think I catch it—bitterness, pain, anger, and disappointment.

Erin

I'm still in a daze. I don't believe a single word he says, but somehow, I follow him on pure emotion.

I need to make sure—did I really mix up the apartments?

Does he really live here? Is he telling the truth?

Though I'm not sure that'll make things any easier.

If anything, it only complicates everything.

It was so much simpler to believe he was a jerk than to admit I might've been wrong and have to start trusting him again.

My temples are pounding, my chest tight with anxiety.

I watch Max walking down the hallway with confident strides, and I tremble.

How long has it been since we last saw each other?

He feels like a stranger now. I don't even know how to act around him.

Tim must sense the shift in me too—he squirms and starts crying.

I pull him tighter into my arms, whisper something softly just to soothe us both,

trying to make sense of this madness.

“Come in,” Max says, opening the door for me, and I peer into the apartment warily.

A few pairs of sneakers by the door. Unpacked suitcases.

Minimal furniture. An open-plan kitchen, a bedroom, a small office.

The layout is almost identical to Max’s place in apartment 217.

It’s small, not yet lived in. A nervous chuckle escapes my lips when I spot the bookshelf along the wall—technical manuals, a reference dictionary.

This is insane. Like someone’s playing a cruel joke on us.

Max watches me closely as I take everything in, not taking his eyes off me.

“When did you come back?” I ask in a whisper, avoiding his gaze.

“A week ago.”

“I see.”

“And where have you been all this time?” he asks, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

“I...” I want to tell him I was living in someone else’s apartment, the one I thought was his, but I decide he doesn’t need that much detail. “A neighbor helped me into a vacant apartment—I thought it was yours. Later, I rented a studio on the sixth floor.”

We stare at each other in silence. I search his familiar features, trying to understand what I feel toward him now. Suddenly, Max closes the distance between us in a few

quick steps and pulls me into his arms.

“My girl... I was so worried,” he murmurs, kissing the top of my head. I freeze. His touch, his nearness—none of it stirs the same storm of emotions it once did.

“And who was that guy with you?” he suddenly asks, looking me straight in the eyes.

“That’s... just a neighbor,” I lie boldly, not wanting him to know anything about the other Max. “He knows I live alone with the baby and helps me out sometimes.”

“He touched you? Did something happen between you two?” Max’s voice suddenly hardens, his eyes turning sharp.

“What? Of course not,” I laugh nervously, instinctively taking a step back.

“Are you sure?”

“Max, I was pregnant. I was just recently discharged from the hospital because the delivery had complications—I could’ve died. And you think I was chasing guys during all that?” My voice rises, anger bubbling up. “And anyway, why didn’t you call or text me more often?”

“Come on, babe, you know how shitty the signal is in the middle of the ocean—if there’s even a signal at all. And you could’ve called me, right? You had my number, unlike me. You erased every trace of yourself. Deleted your socials, too.”

“Don’t flip this on me.”

“Alright, alright, calm down.” He exhales. “Damn, I still can’t believe I’m a dad.” He walks over to the couch where Tim is peacefully lying. “He looks like me,” Max says with a soft smile.

I wrap my arms around myself, feeling awkward and out of place.

I want to close my eyes and rewind everything.

I had finally made peace with being alone, with Max being a liar.

And now... what? How am I supposed to shift gears in five minutes and forget everything I went through while he was gone?

How am I supposed to forget there's another man out there—someone I could've spent tonight with, someone I actually like?

I feel awful. The father of my child, the man I once said I loved, is right next to me, and all I can think about is someone else. But how can I trust this Max again? How do I know he's telling the truth? It all sounds convincing, yes, but a seed of doubt has already been planted deep inside me.

Max walks me back to my apartment, and I'm relieved when he doesn't insist I stay with him. He scans everything in the apartment with jealous eyes, even opens the closet doors like he expects to find another guy hiding inside. He's in no rush to leave.

"Do you need money? Maybe something for the kid?" he suddenly asks, hands shoved deep in his pockets.

"No, we have everything we need. Thanks."

"I'll leave some cash just in case. You never know—I might have to visit my parents or something."

He pulls out his wallet and counts out several hundred-dollar bills. Lays them on the

table. I want to hand them back, but I don't have the strength to argue right now. Besides, he is Tim's father—he should take part in raising his son.

“Well, I'll get going,” he mumbles, avoiding my gaze. “I'll stop by tomorrow. We'll talk then. I've got a meeting at four today, so I have to run.”

“Yeah, of course,” I exhale with relief. I desperately need some space. Some silence to process Max's sudden return.

“Don't disappear on me again, baby.” He gives me a quick kiss on the lips, then walks over to Tim, gently touches his tiny hand, lingers for a moment, just looking at his son—and finally rushes out the door.

I slide down the wall and sit on the floor. My head is spinning. No clear thoughts. I don't know what to do first. Everything is slipping from my hands. I'm nowhere near calm.

And then a message pops up. It's from Max—the one in apartment 217—asking if I'm okay.

And I don't know what to say. That I'm confused? That I can't tell truth from lies anymore? That I'm not even sure I'm happy Tim's father is back? That I'm not sure I want him in our lives? That I really wanted that elevator moment with Max? That I'm sorry his plans went off track because of me?

I barely sleep that night. Tim keeps crying, needing attention. And in the morning, I wake up to drops of water splashing on my face.

I open my eyes and freeze in horror. We're being flooded. The upstairs neighbors, apparently.

I jump up, panicked, hands trembling as I grab my phone. I call Max. Not the father of my child Max. At the same time, I scoop Tim out of his crib—his clothes are damp, too.

“Max?” My voice cracks. “Our apartment’s flooding. Can you please come over?”

I’m holding back tears. It feels like the universe is throwing test after test at me, seeing how much more I can take. How much longer is this black cloud going to follow me?

I’m on the verge of a full-blown breakdown as I take in the extent of the disaster. Water is everywhere. Ceiling. Walls. Floor. Max shows up five minutes later, scans the room silently, then bolts upstairs without a word.

He’s gone for a good half hour.

Meanwhile, the water keeps seeping into the apartment.

I start packing a bag for Tim—just the essentials. I’ll drop him off at Vivienne’s for now. After this kind of flooding, the whole place will need serious repairs. Which means... we’re basically homeless again.

I angrily toss a pile of soaked baby clothes to the floor and flinch when a strong, familiar hand lands gently on my shoulder.

“Hey, calm down. This isn’t your fault. The neighbors upstairs left for vacation,” Max says quietly. “Building manager had to call them to get permission to break in and send a plumber. I’ll talk to your landlord. We’ll sort it out.”

I spin around to face him. I probably look like a wreck—and the way he’s looking at me makes me feel even worse.

“Thanks. I’m fine. It’s just... this whole thing came out of nowhere,” I say hoarsely, unable to tear my gaze away from him.

“I know. I get it.” He hesitates, then adds, “So... have you decided anything about... him?”

“Not yet,” I murmur, quickly looking away. Shame creeps up my neck.

“You’re not some naive girl, Erin,” he says, reaching out and gently gripping my chin, turning my face toward him. His eyes are the same deep blue that used to disarm me so easily. “You didn’t actually believe the crap he was spouting in the elevator, did you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore,” I whisper, shaking my head and pulling away from his touch. I take a step back and cross my arms tightly over my chest—shielding myself from his words, his stare, his logic.

“I just... I need time to figure out what the hell I’m doing.

His explanation sounded convincing, but not completely.

I know he could’ve found a way to reach me if he really wanted to.

But still... he’s Tim’s father, Max. I don’t want to take that away from my son.

And he’s not... I mean, he wasn’t a bad person.

At least, he used to be someone I believed in. ”

I don’t even know who I’m trying to convince—him or myself.



“Just promise me you won’t make any decisions yet,” Max says, his voice low but firm. “I asked a few people to look into this Max Taylor guy. In a couple days, I’ll have everything—where he was, when he came back, what he’s really up to.”

“Why are you doing this?” I ask quietly. “Why do you care so much?”

I hold my breath, waiting for his answer. Deep down, I know if he said he had feelings for me, if he said he wanted to try being something more—I wouldn’t hesitate. I’d say yes.

I’m so tired of being strong. Tired of carrying everything on my shoulders. The complicated pregnancy, work, the apartment, labor, the hospital... and the only person who’s been there for me through it all is the man standing in front of me. A man who, by all logic, should’ve never cared.

Max frowns, his eyes searching mine. He scratches his jaw, his gaze drifting to the stroller and then back to me.

“Erin, I...”

“Whoa—what happened here?” a voice interrupts from the door, and I groan in frustration. The front door wasn’t locked, and Max—the other Max—walks right in.

“Flooded,” I mutter, gesturing around at the soaked floor and walls.

He glares at the man beside me, who returns the look just as sharply.

“Did you do this?” Max nods at the puddles forming beneath our feet.

“No, he didn’t,” I say quickly.

“Alright. Erin, start packing. You can’t stay here with the baby. You’re coming to my place.”

“What?” My eyes widen at the sudden announcement—even if, technically, it makes sense. We do have a child together.

“What do you mean, what?” he shoots back. “You really thought I’d leave the two of you here? We also need to figure out this repair situation. Do the upstairs tenants cover it or is it coming out of pocket?” He gestures toward the ceiling.

“I haven’t talked to anyone yet.”

“Good. I’ll handle it. That your bag?” He nods toward the duffel on the bed.

“Yeah, just the basics.”

“Grab whatever else you might need. Let’s not have you running back and forth. I’ll carry everything down.”

I sneak a glance at Max-from-217—yeah, that’s what I call him in my head. He’s standing there, watching the other Max’s every move, saying nothing. Then finally, he speaks.

“Don’t forget what we talked about, Erin,” he says with a dry chuckle, his tone colder than I expected.

His eyes pierce right through me, and a chill runs down my spine.

He looks... disappointed. But why? What did I do wrong?

Because I didn’t refuse to leave with Max?

Where else was I supposed to go? I can't exactly show up at his door with a baby and a suitcase.

Tim's father is back, and he's supposed to help now. I shouldn't be dumping everything on someone who owes us nothing. That's what I keep telling myself—even when the door closes behind Max-from-217, and my chest tightens in guilt. Even then, I repeat: I'm doing the right thing.

"I'll call a cleaning service. They'll take care of the mess," Max says.

"Great, you handle it," I snap, my nerves fraying. "All I need now is for the front window of my shop to shatter for this to be a full-blown disaster."

I'm losing it. I just got settled into this apartment, started to feel like my life was coming together—and it's all falling apart again.

What drives me crazy the most is that instead of soaking up the joy of motherhood, focusing fully on my baby, I'm constantly stuck in survival mode. Worrying about money, scrambling for solutions, watching every dime. I can't even afford the time to fully recover my own health.

All I wanted was a few months of peace and quiet. Just a little time to breathe. But life keeps throwing bricks at me, one after the other, like it's trying to crush me into the ground. That's why I let Max take control. Let him do what he should've been doing from the beginning—taking care of us.

I hand over two suitcases, push the stroller ahead, and leave the apartment behind.

I tell myself I trust him—that he'll actually call the cleaning company.

But as the elevator passes the floor with apartment 217, my chest tightens again.

Bitterness rises in the back of my throat, sharp and lingering.

Erin

Max heads out to deal with my rental situation, and I quickly scan the apartment, feed my son, and realize—I can't stay here. Thankfully, I've got a few flower orders to fulfill today, so I strap Tim into the stroller and hurry to the elevator.

The air outside is crisp and clean, with just the right amount of sun. A perfect day to take a family trip somewhere. Perhaps walk in the park, a riverside stroll, or even a spontaneous picnic out of town.

I tilt my head up, searching for the windows of the apartment where I lived for the past six months.

Maybe it would've been better if neither man had ever come into my life.

I'm so tired of the emotional back-and-forth, the fear of being let down again.

I just want to say to hell with it all—pack a bag and go to the countryside, or better yet, visit my mom.

I hadn't seen her since Christmas. I remember surprising her with a flight and a suitcase full of gifts.

Just thinking of her makes my chest ache. She's worked overseas for so many years that I barely remember anything different. But one thing I know for sure: I don't want my kids growing up without me the way I did without her.

I delay going back upstairs as long as I can. I stroll through the courtyard, wander aimlessly in the baby section of a store, picking out clothes and toys for Tim. But when I finish the second thermos of formula, I'm out of excuses.

The walk helped clear my head. I realized that when it comes to Maxwell...

at this point, I want nothing more than friendship.

The time we spent apart changed something in me.

The love I thought I held onto all this time—it's faded, leaving only memories.

Or maybe it wasn't love at all? Maybe it was the fear of being alone.

The pregnancy. The way a guy like him actually noticed someone like me.

As soon as I step into the apartment, the smell of cigarette smoke hits my nose. I wince.

"Maxwell, could you not smoke in here? There's a baby." I only call him by his full name when I'm mad at him.

"Sorry, babe. I'll air it out." He jumps off the couch and cracks open a window. That "babe" makes my skin crawl.

I study the man I once loved, the one I suffered for, the father of my child—and all I feel now is emptiness. Bitter, with a strange aftertaste of disappointment and burnt oatmeal.

"The apartment's cleaned, by the way, so don't stress," he says, walking over to peek into the stroller. "Wanna go grab dinner somewhere?"

“No, I’m tired. Let’s just order in.”

“Oh, come on, don’t be so boring. We need to get out, clear our heads. The weather’s amazing.”

“If you want to go, go. I need to feed our son and take care of a few things.”

“You mind if I head out alone then?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Cool. Want me to bring you something?”

“I’ll let you know.”

He strips off his loungewear as he walks, revealing toned abs and a tattoo on his back.

Still as handsome as ever—but I feel nothing.

It’s like he’s a stranger now. Which, I guess, isn’t all that surprising.

He’s been gone so long, I stopped feeling like he was part of my life.

I’d built him up in my head—this perfect, charming, generous man any woman would be lucky to have. But now, all I see are his flaws.

He tossed his clothes on the floor and headed for the shower. No questions about how I survived these months, how the birth went. No concern, no guilt. Just self-absorbed silence. He’s a narcissist—plain and simple. And I was going to build a life with this man?

God, why didn't You show me this sooner?

No, I don't regret having him in my life—if it weren't for him, there'd be no Tim. But my own blind faith in him? That I regret deeply.

And suddenly, I think of Max. The one from apartment 217. Quiet. Steady. Thoughtful. We didn't talk much, but even in silence, being near him felt... safe. Comforting. He radiated strength and calm. The kind of man you trust. The kind who doesn't disappear the second you turn your back.

Not like this one. Not like Maxwell.

I feel out of place in someone else's apartment. After quickly feeding and putting Tim down to sleep, I slip into the bathroom. I splash cold water on my face and study my reflection in the mirror. Gaunt. A sickly glint in my eyes. Pale.

My gaze falls on the laundry basket—and I freeze. Perched on top is a hair clip. Not mine. Silver with a glinting gemstone that sparkles under the bathroom light.

I walk toward it slowly, staring at it for a few moments before picking it up. I turn it over in my fingers, frowning, and then, as if possessed, begin scanning the entire apartment for signs of another woman.

I don't even know what I'm hoping to find—or prove. But a few dark hairs on the bathtub, a tube of lip gloss near the entryway, and a scarf hanging on the coat rack stir something hot and bitter in my chest.

So he was looking for me, huh? Worried sick, was he? Yeah, I can see how broken up he must've been—just enough to start bringing random women over in between his grieving sessions.



I'm fuming. Hurt rising like a tidal wave. I think about our dates, the time we spent together, the mornings tangled in bedsheets, the way we devoured each other—and my heart aches. Because now I know there was never any love. Maybe not even from the start.

Just an illusion. Something I wanted to believe.

So many years, and I'm still the naive girl who lets herself be blinded.

I decide I'm going to talk to Max as soon as he gets back.

I hate this fog of uncertainty, and I want it over.

Now. We either lay everything on the table and figure out how to be something—even if just co-parents—or we go our separate ways for good.

Honestly, maybe it would've been better if we'd never seen each other again. If his sudden disappearance had just stayed an unanswered question.

There's a reason fate split us apart once already.

I can't sit still. I pace the room nervously, glancing at the clock.

It's already dark outside. I'm so tired I can barely keep my eyes open, but Max still hasn't come back.

Eventually, exhaustion gets the better of me.

I tell myself I'll just lie down for a few minutes—but I don't even notice when I drift off.

I wake up to a loud knock, confused at first about where I am. The unfamiliar bed, the strange walls—it all makes me tense up. Footsteps echo through the apartment, and I instinctively grab my phone, ready to call the cops if I have to. But then yesterday comes rushing back to me, and I relax.

I realize now is definitely not the time for a confrontation. So I shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep.

I listen. Max is moving around the apartment, humming to himself, completely unconcerned about waking the sleeping baby.

He's drunk. I know that tone, that sway in his steps.

God, I hate this version of him. There's no reasoning, no calming him down—no getting him to hand over the bottle and just go home.

At least it's 3 a.m. and not the middle of the day.

The bed creaks under his weight as he stumbles into the bedroom. I tense when he climbs in next to me, sliding under the covers. I scoot to the very edge of the mattress, not wanting him anywhere near me. This doesn't feel like closeness. This feels like I'm lying next to a stranger.

What even was this between us? A moment of weakness? Desperation?

"Baby," he slurs, leaning in close, his breath warm and thick with alcohol. "I missed you so much. Come here."

His hands brush over my skin. I recoil instantly.

"Max, you're drunk. Get off me."

“Come on, Erin... don’t you want me? It’s been so long. I missed you like crazy.”

“No, Max. I don’t want you. And would you please stop breathing on me? And keep your voice down—the baby’s sleeping. Your baby, by the way,” I snap, finally turning to face him in the dim glow of the nightstand light.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he says, frowning. “You got someone else now? That ‘neighbor’ guy? You screw around while I’m gone and think I won’t find out?”

“First of all, sweetie,” I say, my anger rising, “you have to be in a relationship with someone to be cheated on. And when I told you I was pregnant, you didn’t say a single thing about us being together.

Not one word. Second—look who’s talking.

I found women’s things in your apartment.

Don’t even pretend you were out there searching for me.

Anything could’ve happened to me! Your son could’ve been left without a mother! ”

A chill runs through me as I say it. Because it’s true. I could’ve died, and who knows what would’ve happened to my baby.

“But you didn’t,” he says flatly, shrugging. “So what are you freaking out about? Come on... let’s just remember how good we used to be. You’re still so damn sexy, Erin.”

He leans in again, tries to kiss me, but I turn my head.

“Stop,” I say sharply, pushing him away.

Max looks at me with a strange glint in his eyes, then lets out a mocking laugh.

“Good thing I never married you. You’re painfully boring and uptight,” he says with venom, and I stiffen. His words hit like a slap to the face, making my entire body go cold.

“What did you just say?” My voice comes out hoarse, disbelieving.

“Bet you got pregnant on purpose, huh?” Max sneers. “Little small-town girl sees a guy with prospects and decides to lock him down?”

“If you haven’t noticed, I never asked you for a single damn cent during my entire pregnancy—or after giving birth!

I’m independent, Max. And not exactly broke either, just so you know.

So screw you!” I throw the blanket off and nearly leap out of bed.

I never should’ve come here. I hoped for a civil conversation, some real answers—but all I got was confirmation that my ex is a total asshole.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

“Yeah, go ahead. Run back to your neighbor. The one drooling over you. Just do yourself a favor this time and make sure he’s actually dating you and not just killing time on vacation.

You’re such a naive little girl, Erin. Easy to confuse things, huh?

He proposes and suddenly you’re already picking out wedding dresses.”

I pretend not to hear, but inside, it burns. I really thought he was better than this. Once. We were good together once—before reality ruined it. What the hell happened to him?

I scoop Tim into my arms, refusing to even glance in Max’s direction. I grab my purse and walk out—still in my pajamas and slippers.

The tears press at my throat, but I force them down. I didn’t know words could hurt this much. And now I’m not so sure my son even needs a father like him.

I step into the elevator, my hand hovering above the number “6” but not pressing it. I hesitate. Somewhere else in this building, it’s warm. Safe. A place where I can be weak for once. Where I can feel comfort and calm. I swallow the lump in my throat and finally press the button for my floor.

The elevator descends painfully slow. My temples throb. I feel drained. Broken.

That’s when I make a decision.

I'm leaving.

Tomorrow morning, I'll pack everything and go. Just for a month. My grandmother's house is in the next town over, and there's a decent pediatrician there too. Tim and I will be fine.

At least we'll be far away from all this.

Close to someone who truly loves me.

As the elevator doors slide open, I catch myself subconsciously expecting to see Taylor standing near my apartment.

But that's wishful thinking. It's the middle of the night—normal people are already fast asleep.

And after I walked out on him to go back to my ex, there's no way he'd show up to check on me and Tim.

I pause outside my apartment door. The thin pajama fabric offers no protection from the chill in the hallway, but honestly? The cold helps. It clears my head. I'm glad I cried everything out earlier—before Max revealed who he really was. Because if I hadn't, tonight would've broken me.

I dig out my keys, step inside, and flick the lights on. The warped floorboards and ugly water stains on the walls and ceiling make me wince.

I change the sheets, pull Tim's crib closer to the bed, and just stand there watching him sleep.

His tiny face—so peaceful, so familiar—grounds me.

Brings me calm. Brings me clarity. These men...

they're not worth my tears. The only man who matters is lying right here in front of me. And we've got a whole life ahead of us.

I fall asleep at dawn. Wake up to feed Tim. Then I lie there for a few minutes, staring at the ceiling. I've made up my mind. We're leaving.

I get up, freshen up, and start gathering what we'll need for the next few weeks. Clothes, diapers, bottles—everything I can think of. I'm nearly done packing when a knock at the door makes me pause.

I don't want to see anyone. But whoever it is—they're not going away. The doorbell rings again. Loud pounding follows. Shouting. My stomach twists. I rush to hush it all down before Tim wakes up terrified.

I know who it is.

"Go away. I don't want to see you," I say through the door, voice firm and cold. I'm proud of how strong I sound.

"Erin, open the door. We need to talk," Max calls out.

"We already talked, Max. Last night. We said everything that needed to be said. There's nothing more."

"Baby, I drank too much. I didn't mean half of what I said..."

"I'm glad you drank too much. That way, I finally got to hear how you really feel."

A long pause. Then a breathy, defeated "Erin..." on the other side. He's quiet now,

but inside me, anger is boiling over. The nerve of him—showing up here after everything.

“It was a bad night, okay? But seriously, we do need to talk. We have a son. That’s not going to change.”

“I really appreciate that you occasionally remember you have a son,” I say coldly, forehead pressed against the door. My breath hitches. God, I’m so tired of all this.

Suddenly, I hear the lock turn—and jump back in panic. What the hell? Max steps into the apartment, looking rumpled, his eyes red and tired, guilt written all over his face. I glance down and spot the spare keys in his hand. Right. I forgot I gave them to him yesterday.

“What do you want?” I sigh, exhausted, trying to hold back the fury rising inside me. But Max always was persistent—once he had something in mind, there was no getting rid of him.

He shuts the door behind him and takes a step toward me. I stop him with a raised hand.

“You’ve got exactly three minutes,” I warn, forcing my voice to sound firm.

“Look, Erin... I’m sorry for what I said. I just... I was overwhelmed, okay?”

“By what exactly?” I ask flatly.

“By the fact that I have a kid.”

“Well, that tends to happen when you don’t use protection. Maybe keep that in mind next time.”



“Come on, don’t be a bitch—it doesn’t suit you.”

“And don’t play the victim. Just get to the point. Two minutes left.”

“Okay, look. I’m being honest because I don’t want us to be enemies. And I don’t want you thinking I’m some kind of asshole.”

I snort. Too late for that, isn’t it?

“You’re a great girl. Beautiful. Smart. But I’m not ready for marriage or kids.

I’m thirty, Erin. I figured I had at least five more years before settling down.

And then, boom—this. You spring a kid on me.

I’m not saying I’ll bail—I’ll support you financially, I’ll take Tim on weekends, go to his soccer games and all that. But that’s it. That’s all I can offer.”

I stay silent, jaw clenched.

“I mean, seriously—I just wanted to spend a chill vacation with a pretty girl. I didn’t sign up for diapers and midnight feedings. My apartment still reeks of baby poop and you were there, what—half a day?”

“That’s it?” I manage to ask, expression unreadable.

Inside, though, I’m reeling. Just a vacation fling. That’s all I was to him. Maybe that’s just how sailors are—fun, spontaneous, allergic to commitment. Convenient, really.

“I don’t need your support. But I won’t keep you from seeing your son. You’ve got

my number. Use it if you actually give a damn.”

“Erin, come on, don’t be so dramatic,” he sighs and leans against the wall, rubbing his face.

“I’m not being dramatic. I’m being honest. Just tell me one thing. When exactly did you get back from sea, Max? And be honest this time.”

He looks away. Fidgets. Which basically confirms what I already suspected.

“Well?” I press.

“Three weeks ago,” he mumbles.

“Did you even look for me? For us?” I ask, my voice rising. “Did you care? Or did you walk into an empty apartment and think, ‘Great, problem solved’?”

“Of course I cared!” he snaps, the fake calm cracking instantly.

His glare sharpens. “Stop acting like I’m some monster.

I came back ready to talk things through, to figure out what to do.

I freaked out when I saw all your stuff was gone.

At first I thought maybe you just moved out—but then I found out your flower shop’s been closed for months. That’s when I got seriously worried.”

“Your time’s up,” I say coldly. “Thanks for finally showing your true colors. I would’ve stayed in denial a little longer if you hadn’t.”

“What true colors, Erin?” he throws back. “Did I ever say I loved you? That this was serious?”

“But... you introduced me to your parents,” I whisper, suddenly ashamed.

“They showed up without warning. What was I supposed to do—shove you out the window?”

I go quiet. I feel stupid. So unbelievably stupid. And more than that—I don’t believe in love anymore. I just... don’t. Whatever it is people write about in books or sing in songs, I’m done pretending it’s real.

“Thanks for stopping by,” I say, forcing a flat tone. “You’ve got my number. I’ll be spending some time out of town. And now, if you’ll excuse me—I need to finish packing.”

I hold the door open for him but avoid his eyes. My cheeks burn as I remember telling him I loved him. And the stupid messages. God.

“Take care, Max. Good luck.”

I don’t wait for a reply. I close the door with trembling hands, lock it, exhale, and rest my forehead against the wood. My eyes squeeze shut.

We were never an us.

Never.

Erin

The silence lasts only a few minutes before someone knocks on the door again—this time with urgency. I yank it open, fully expecting to see Max again. Hasn't he humiliated me enough?

“Forget something?” I snap, but my voice dies in my throat.

It's not that Max.

“Oh—sorry,” I mumble, taken aback. “I thought it was someone else.”

The edge in my tone instantly softens, and my breath catches when I see Taylor. He looks exhausted, like he hasn't slept all night. There's something grounding about his presence. Familiar. Solid. My anxiety vanishes, replaced by awkwardness and a flutter of nerves.

“Everything okay?” he asks, because I've gone still and quiet, just staring at him.

“Yeah, yeah... come in.”

“You heading somewhere?” he asks casually, gesturing with his chin toward the bags piled behind me.

“To my grandma's. I just... need a reset. I miss home. Figured fresh air and a bit of nature would be good for Tim, too.”

“Your ex driving you there?” He says the word with clear distaste.

“What?”

“Max. Is he taking you?”

“Oh. No. We, uh... It’s over. That’s done.” I shrug and look away, my cheeks burning.

“Good,” Taylor mutters, scanning the water stains on the ceiling. “Didn’t like him. Glad that’s been sorted out quickly.”

He pauses. “I’ll drive you.”

“To where?” I blink at him, confused.

“To your grandma’s.”

“You don’t have to. Really. I already feel like I’m constantly bothering you. You’ve done so much for us already—way more than you needed to. I haven’t even paid you back for the repairs in the shop.”

“Don’t argue. You’re not driving that far alone,” he says firmly, brushing off everything I’ve said. “Are these all the bags, or is there more?”

“The stroller and the baby tub.”

“Got it. I’ll load them in the car. Let me know when you’re ready.”

“Okay,” I whisper, stunned once again by the way Taylor just handles things—without fuss, without asking for anything in return. Just quiet strength that

leaves me with no room to protest.

Even though I won't admit it out loud, the idea of sitting next to Taylor in a car for a few hours, delaying goodbyes, stealing glances at him—I can't say no to that. So I pick up the pace, gather the last of our things, take Tim in my arms, and head down to the underground parking garage.

I settle into the back seat with Tim, even though I desperately want to sit up front—closer to him.

Taylor drives with calm confidence, steady hands on the wheel, not in a rush.

I watch the back of his head, occasionally catching what feels like his gaze in the rearview mirror. Or maybe he's just watching the road?

"You said you wanted to talk," I finally break the silence. "Before... you know, my ex showed up."

"We'll get to that," he says after a pause, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. His knuckles turn white. "He didn't hurt you, did he?" he asks through clenched teeth, trying to keep his anger in check.

"I can handle myself. Don't worry," I say softly.

"Good. So, what's the situation now?"

"He's on his own. Timur and I live separately from him," I say quietly.

Silence again. I turn to the window, watching the familiar road blur past. Back in college, I used to visit my grandma every other weekend.

This route is burned into my memory—every bend, tree, even the cracks in the pavement.

A wave of nostalgia washes over me. Things used to be so simple.

I wish I could rewind time and relive those carefree years.

I'm nervous about going home. My grandma still doesn't know that Max and I broke up, and I'll have to explain somehow. She's old-school—strict and proper. It took her long enough to accept that I got pregnant out of wedlock.

When the dented white sign marking the entrance to our little town flashes by, the flood of memories nearly overwhelms me.

Childhood moments. Teen days. Everything comes rushing back.

I smile despite myself. The streets, the trees in bloom, people I recognize through the car window—it's like I've stepped into a parallel world, one untouched by the chaos of the city.

Taylor pulls up to my grandmother's house like he's lived here his whole life. I don't even get a chance to ask how he knew the address—because my throat tightens the second I see her burst out the front door, panic and love all over her face.

I jump out of the car in a hurry and rush toward her.

“Why didn't you let me know you were coming?” Grandma scolds gently, wrapping me in a hug. “I would've gotten the house ready! My goodness, sweetheart, just look at you! You've become such a beauty.”

“I missed you so much, Grandma.” My heart aches with tenderness, and even Ollie's

bark makes me smile. “Come on, I want to introduce you to someone.”

I open the back door. Tim is sleeping soundly, so I carefully lift him out of his car seat.

“Thanks,” I murmur to Max, who’s still sitting behind the wheel.

“Well, would you look at this strong little guy,” Grandma coos, leaning over Tim. “I finally lived to see the day. Now I can die in peace.”

“Grandma, don’t say that,” I laugh softly.

While the two of us talk, Max gets out of the car and starts pulling bags out of the trunk.

“Good afternoon,” he says politely, with a small nod. Grandma smiles back at him, and my mood takes a sudden dive—because she knows who he is. But what has he told her? “How’s your health?” he adds.

“Good enough to dance at your wedding,” she replies with a sly grin.

My cheeks burn. I feel awkward, but Max seems completely unfazed. He calmly pulls the stroller out of the car and carries it toward the house. Grandma and I follow him through the yard, away from the prying eyes of the neighbors.

“Put everything in that room,” I say, pointing him toward the living room. My own room is too tiny—there’s no way Tim and I would fit in there comfortably. “Thanks again.”

We pause in the doorway, eyes locked. His pupils are dilated. I glance at his lips and instinctively lick my own—dry, craving his touch.



“So... are you staying long?” Grandma suddenly appears next to us. We quickly step away from each other like guilty teenagers, heading to opposite corners of the room.

“I’m planning to stay about a month,” I reply, avoiding Max’s gaze as I begin folding Tim’s clothes into the wardrobe. The tension between us is thick enough to cling to the walls.

“Oh, what a joy! You’re always gone so fast, always rushing back to work.

But here, the air’s clean, and we’ve got real farm-fresh food—not that processed stuff from your city stores!

” she chirps. “Oh! We need to bring the crib down from the attic. I knew we’d need it one day!

Your mom kept saying, ‘Just toss it already’.

Max, would you give us a hand with that? ”

“Of course.”

“Grandma, Max was actually about to leave. He’s in a hurry.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, looking at us in confusion.

“Not until I’ve put the crib together,” Max says with a smirk. “Where can I find it?” he asks Grandma, and the two of them head toward the attic stairs while I drop down on the couch and exhale. I glance around the room, still in disbelief that I’m finally home. It really is peaceful here.

I assume Max will take off as soon as he finishes assembling the crib—my old crib,

by the way. But he doesn't seem in a rush. Right after, he heads out into the yard, grabs an axe and starts chopping firewood.

I hide behind the curtain, secretly watching him. As always, Max does things his own way, completely ignoring my not-so-subtle hints or protests.

"Did something happen between you two? Did you fight?" Grandma asks.

"No. Why do you think that?"

"Well, you're acting strange. Not how a husband and wife would act."

"Grandma," I turn to face her and take a deep breath, "he's not my Max. We broke up. This is my neighbor. He knows I live alone with a baby and has been helping me out."

I decide it's time to say it out loud. Well, most of it. One lie down. Just Mom left to tell.

"You broke up?" she gasps, sitting down heavily on the chair. "Just like that? Are all the women in this family cursed or what?"

"Please don't worry. Everything's fine," I say, kneeling beside her. Grandma has always been so protective of me, and I know the idea that I'm now a single mother probably hit her harder than it hit me. "Sometimes people come together. Sometimes they fall apart. It's not the end of the world."

She stays quiet for a moment. Then hits me with a curveball.

"But this Max—he likes you. I can tell. No man spends that much time helping a woman with a baby unless he cares. I saw how he looks at you."

“Grandma, don’t start,” I laugh nervously. Great. I was worried about how she’d react to my failed relationship, and now she’s already picking out my next husband.

“No, you don’t start,” she retorts, wagging her finger. “Don’t let a good man slip away. He even came by after you gave birth. He was worried. Men like that are rare, sweetheart. You’ll regret it if you let him go.”

“Believe me, I know,” I sigh and move to the stove, giving the meat in the skillet a stir. But my heart pounds like crazy—because she’s right. Max didn’t have to help us. He didn’t have to drive us here or stick around... or chop wood in the yard.

“And do you like him?” Grandma asks, diving straight in.

“I think... yeah,” I whisper, breathless at the realization. Because falling for someone again—after everything—is terrifying.

“Smells amazing. Wouldn’t say no to lunch,” a voice suddenly says behind me, making me jump.

I jump at the sound of his voice, my eyes widening in alarm.

How long has he been standing there?

What did he hear?

My whole body stiffens. My face flushes with heat.

I’m too afraid to turn around and meet his gaze.

I don’t even notice that I’ve started aggressively stirring the meat in the pan—anything to keep my hands busy.

Anything to hide how flustered I am. I need him to leave soon.

Because I don't like how he makes me feel.

And I definitely don't want him knowing I like him.

"It's almost ready," Grandma says cheerfully behind me. "Come on, Max, take a seat. Erin will set the table. She's such a wonderful hostess! I'll go check on the baby and see if he's awake."

Thanks for that, Grandma. Really.

Now it's just the two of us.

I move automatically, pulling plates from the cabinet and setting them on the table without a word. I still can't look at him. My hands are shaking. I try to hide it as I scoop food onto the plates.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice calm. "You seem tense."

"I'm fine." I force a smile. "So, uh... when are you heading back?"

"What, trying to get rid of me already?"

"No, I just—I mean, it's going to get dark soon. I'll worry if you drive in this weather," I lie through my teeth and finally, finally meet his eyes.

He's clearly amused. His eyes sparkle. A smirk tugs at the corners of his lips. He's watching me—closely, intently.

He sits back in his chair, legs casually crossed, arms folded over his chest.

Yep. He definitely heard everything.

“There’s still a few days’ worth of firewood to chop,” he says. “Once I’m done with that, I’ll head out.”

“Max, what is all this?” I hiss, leaning closer, confused and a little angry. “What are you doing?”

“You mean you still don’t get it?”

I want to ask what exactly he means, but just then, Grandma walks back in, and I clamp my mouth shut.

Lunch is awkward, to say the least. Grandma and Max do most of the talking, while I sit there feeling like a guest in my own home. Apparently, the shrubs behind the house need clearing—and of course Max volunteers.

I picture our backyard and do some quick math: best-case scenario, he’ll be stuck here for another week.

And then—boom.

Out of nowhere, a storm hits. Just moments ago it was bright and sunny, and now we’re facing thunder, lightning, and sheets of rain slamming against the windows. So much for him leaving tonight. Driving in weather like this would be insane.

It’s like they’re all in on it—Grandma, Max, even the weather.

Not that I’m upset about it. Not really.

I just don’t know how to act around him. What to say.

I've never had this problem before, but something about Max makes me feel like a teenager again. Awkward. Tongue-tied. Ridiculously self-conscious.

And I hate that. I hate that I care. I hate that I'm nervous.

I hate that I kind of don't want him to leave.

By the time night falls and the thunderstorm still reigns outside, I give Max my old bedroom. I lay out fresh sheets and hand him a clean towel.

"There's nothing for you to change into, sorry," I say with a nervous smile as we stand alone in the bathroom. "We haven't had a man in this house for over twenty years, so... no extra clothes, either."

"Give me a raincoat or an umbrella," he says. "I'll run out to the car. I think I've got some gym stuff in there—sweats or something. I'll change into that."

"Sure." I take a step forward, but Max suddenly blocks my path.

He's close. Too close.

His warm breath hits my skin. His scent—cologne mixed with something purely masculine—wraps around me like a net. He leans in, brushes his nose along my neck. And just like that, the world disappears. Silence crushes the room. There's only him. Only us.

I suck in a breath, sharp and shallow. Goosebumps ripple across my entire body.

And then—he abruptly pulls back. If his hands weren't gripping my waist, I swear I would've collapsed right onto the tile.

What the hell was that?

“Go get me that umbrella,” he says hoarsely, his voice low and rough, his eyes dark and locked on mine—like nothing just happened.

I practically bolt out of the bathroom, silently swearing to never, ever be alone with him in a confined space again.

Erin

I lie in the dark, listening to the rain drumming against the window.

My heart is still fluttering after what happened in the bathroom.

For a moment, I thought Max was going to kiss me—to erase the distance between us, to show me that he felt the same pull I did when we were near each other—but he stopped.

And then he shut himself in his room, wishing everyone goodnight like nothing happened.

Sleep won't come. It's nearly impossible to drift off knowing that the man is right there—just beyond the wall.

So close, yet so far. I press my palm to the wall, drag it across the surface, close my eyes, and imagine him here.

With me. Like before, when I lived at his place and we shared a bed.

Back then, it didn't feel like a big deal.

But now, I would give anything to feel his warm breath on my neck again, his heavy arm draped over my waist, that scent of his that makes my skin flush and my pulse race.



I roll onto my back and let out a long breath.

That's when I hear it—the creak of my bedroom door opening.

At first, I think it's my grandmother checking in, but the steps are too deliberate.

Calm. Confident. Like a predator moving through the night.

I freeze, eyes scanning the darkness, trying to make out his silhouette.

But I don't really need to see him. I can picture every sharp feature of Max's face from memory.

I forget how to breathe.

What is he doing here? Why did he come?

My whole body trembles with anticipation. My throat is dry, my chest tight, my heart pounding like it's trying to break free from my ribs. The mattress dips under his weight.

He sits beside me for a long moment. Then he leans down and brushes his fingertips across my cheek.

“Are you awake?” he breathes, so softly the words disappear into the night.

“Yes,” I whisper, voice shaking. My eyes lock onto the shadow of his face, my head spinning from how close he is.

I wait.

At first, I think he's going to get up and leave, and the idea crushes me. But then—his lips are on mine. Out of nowhere. No warning.

I tense. Just for a second. Then I move.

I kiss him back like I've been waiting my whole life for this moment. My arms loop around his neck, pulling him closer. The weight of his body over mine feels like coming home. I burn under his touch, filled with a kind of energy that makes me forget everything except him.

"Just say the word, and I'll stop," Max whispers hoarsely, pulling back slightly.

"No... I don't want you to stop. Please," I breathe out.

That's all he needs.

He crashes into me with a force I wasn't prepared for.

The dam breaks. I melt beneath him, losing all sense of self, lost in the whirlwind of what's happening between us.

It feels insane. Like something out of a dream.

Max is careful—so careful—and I know it's taking everything in him to hold back.

Inhale, exhale, moan—his hands, his mouth, my burning skin.

He kisses me, swallowing my gasps, and I don't even notice when our clothes disappear and we're tangled beneath the sheets.

I'm shaking all over. Down to the tips of my fingers. I'm scared. It's been so long. A

whole year. And the birth... I worry I won't be good enough, that I'll mess something up—but Max eases every fear with his touch, his patience, his care. He grounds me and helps me let go. Of everything.

“I can't control myself around you,” he murmurs between kisses. “You're so beautiful... it's unreal.”

His words hit me right in the chest. Am I really beautiful?

“Tell me you want this, too. That you want me.”

“Yes,” I exhale, already burning for him.

I don't want to think about anything else.

Not now. Not when this—this thing I've dreamed about for weeks—is finally happening.

I fall into him, completely. No regrets.

Just a rising tide of pleasure carrying me far from anything real.

I whisper his name, rake my nails across his skin, nip at his neck, and silently pray that come morning, this won't vanish like some cruel dream.

He's like a starved animal—and I don't mind being his prey. Everything about this feels right. So right I don't even think about stopping. We were made for each other. Cut from the same cloth. I just wish we'd found each other sooner.

“I really hope we didn't wake Grandma,” I mumble, half-laughing as I try to catch my breath, still reeling from what just happened.

“She mentioned her hearing’s not so great,” Max grins, lying on his side and pulling me close, threading his fingers gently through my hair. “Did I hurt you? Are you okay? I’m sorry if I was too rough.”

He kisses my shoulder, and the lump that forms in my throat almost chokes me. God, please. Let this be real. Let this last.

“I’m okay,” I whisper. “Really.”

I want to ask, what now? But I’m scared. Scared that Max will say it was just a one-night thing. That what happened between us was nothing more than chemistry.

“I’ll stay with you guys here for a week or two, if that’s okay?” he says.

“Why are you even asking? You’re going to do whatever you want anyway. Since when has my ‘n’ ever stopped you?”

“You don’t want me to stay?” His voice tightens slightly as he props himself up on his elbow.

“It was a joke, Max.”

“Well, your sense of humor’s... weird.”

“Says the guy who once named a cactus after me,” I laugh.

My hand finds his in the dark, our fingers intertwine, and we fall into a comfortable silence. There’s barely enough room for the two of us on this narrow couch, but I wouldn’t trade it for a king-size bed. Because Max is here. With me. That’s what matters.

His breathing is steady, his arms are wrapped tightly around me—like he's afraid I'll disappear.

I don't want morning to come. I don't want this night to end.

I fight sleep with everything I have, but eventually, it wins. And when I open my eyes, it's already light out.

I reach across the mattress—and touch nothing.

Max is gone.

I sit up quickly.

Where is he? Did he leave? Did he just vanish?

Panic grips me. My mind races with worst-case scenarios. I scramble out of bed and glance over at Tim's crib. Empty.

Breathe, Erin. Breathe. You just overslept. He didn't leave you.

Still, my heart won't calm down.

I pull on my robe and rush out of the room barefoot, desperate to find them. I stop in front of the window—and that's when the tears hit me. Hard.

But they're not tears of heartbreak. They're tears of something else entirely. Joy, maybe. Or overwhelming tenderness.

Max is sitting on the bench outside, cradling Tim in his arms, bottle-feeding him with practiced ease. He's softly telling him something—words I can't hear, but I feel their

warmth. Ollie, our dog, circles them excitedly, tail wagging, nudging for attention too.

Tim looks so tiny in his arms. Fragile. Precious.

I never thought something so simple could hit me this deep.

“See?” my grandma says, appearing beside me. “Didn’t I tell you? That’s not just kindness, sweetheart. He loves you. And that child.”

I nod slowly, tears still spilling down my cheeks.

“I really hope so,” I whisper.

“He’s been with the baby since early morning,” Grandma says with a smile. “Told me not to wake you. Good man, that one. Just what you need.”

“Yeah...” I murmur, still completely captivated by Max, unable to tear my eyes away from him.

“Go on, join him. I baked some pastries and made soup—we’ll say you cooked it. Oh, and I opened a jar of jam—let’s say you made that too.”

“Grandma!” I shake my head, trying not to laugh.

“What? You’re a great little homemaker!”

“You might as well bring out that scarf I knitted like seven years ago and tell him I made it yesterday.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea! I think it’s still in the closet. I’ll go look for it.”

“I was joking, Grandma,” I laugh after her as she shuffles off—and yet, despite the chaos in my chest, I finally make up my mind to step outside. To face him. To meet Max’s eyes for the first time since last night.

Erin

It feels like I've stepped into a parallel universe—or maybe I'm just dreaming the most beautiful dream in the world.

Max and I fall asleep and wake up together.

I move around the kitchen while he works in the yard—fixing the fence, hauling stones to the backyard, trimming trees.

Sometimes he just lies in the hammock with Tim napping on his chest. We've gone out to the river a few times for small picnics, kissed, laughed, and simply enjoyed each other.

I feel happy. Truly happy, for the first time in years.

And Max doesn't even need to do anything to make it happen. He just has to be here, like he is now.

But I'm scared. Scared that one morning, I'll open my eyes and he'll be gone.

I'm falling for him—hard—and it terrifies me.

We haven't known each other that long. I've been hurt before.

And love, in its rawest form, is dependence.



And breaking free from that? Nearly impossible.

Max hasn't given me a single reason to doubt him, and yet.

.. Life has taught me that nothing this good lasts.

Let your guard down for one second—and it all crumbles.

And, of course, I was right.

A week later, I wake up to find his truck no longer parked in the yard but out on the driveway near the gate. Max is dressed and on the phone, pacing.

I rush outside in my slippers, trying to catch a few words of his conversation—but I can't make anything out. He sees me and quickly wraps up the call.

“You're up?” he says, stepping toward me and pulling me into his arms. He kisses me—but all I want to do is scream. To grab onto him and not let go.

“You're leaving?” I ask in a hoarse whisper, avoiding his eyes.

“Got a call from the company. They need a few documents I left back at my place.”

“What? You're going back out to sea?” My eyes widen in shock as I stare at him.

“Calm down, Erin. It's just an interview. They might not even have an opening.” He cups my face gently, forcing me to meet his gaze. His thumb brushes across my cheek, but it doesn't comfort me this time. Not at all.

“Do you want me to bring you anything from the city?” he asks, like this is just a quick errand.

“No, just come back soon, okay? Or... maybe I’ll go with you? Let me just change and grab Tim,” I blurt out and instinctively turn toward the house, but Max stops me before I take a single step.

“I promise, I’ll be back by tonight,” he says, kissing me one last time before hurrying toward his truck—leaving me in the middle of the yard, wrapped in a shawl and shivering from the early morning chill. I watch his back with growing unease. Please, let nothing happen to him.

All day, a strange feeling won’t let me go. But what am I even worrying about? Max texts me regularly, lets me know he made it to the city, and eventually messages that he’ll be off the grid for a bit while at the crewing company.

Still, I try to shake the tension, distract myself by thinking about what to make for dinner.

An hour passes. Then another. Then three.

Max still hasn’t called. I finally cave and text him first—no reply.

It’s already getting dark, and the pie I baked has long since gone cold, and Max still isn’t home.

I keep telling myself to calm down, to just be patient and wait. But I can’t. My stomach is in knots.

Finally, around ten at night, my phone rings. I snatch it up without hesitation.

“Hello? Max?”

“Hey... did you miss me?” His voice is quiet and tired. I press the phone tighter to my

ear, afraid to miss a single word.

“Where are you? Are you close? Are you coming home soon?” I ask anxiously.

There’s a long pause. He exhales heavily.

“Erin... I’m shipping out.”

“What? What do you mean? When?” I cry out, panic rising in my throat.

“Tomorrow morning.”

“So soon? Why didn’t you tell me this morning?” My voice cracks. My chest tightens. Bitterness and disappointment fill me. Why now? Why when things were finally going right?

“I didn’t know,” he says softly. “Didn’t think it would happen this fast. They needed someone right away.”

Listen, Erin—this contract’s three months on, three off.

Not six or nine like before. You won’t even have time to miss me before I’m back.

And I need this. I want to work a few more years, save up, open a business—so you and Tim will have everything you need. So I can stay with you year-round.”

“I already have everything I need. I just... I don’t want you to leave. Not now.”

My voice comes out small, a little whiny, and I can’t stop the trembling in it—or the quiet sniffles.

“You’ll wait for me, right?”

“Of course I will. Why would you even ask that? What time’s your flight? Will I see you before you go?”

“Seven a.m. I’m packing now, picking up a few things I’ll need. As much as I want to come see you, there’s just no time to make it there and back. The company delayed signing the contract, and I had to wait until HQ sent it back. I’m sorry. I feel like crap, too, if that helps at all.”

“No, I just... It’s all so sudden. But I mean, it’s only three months, right?”

“Right. Listen, I’m leaving my keys with the front desk.

I’ll tell the concierge to expect you—go pick them up when you get back.

I want you to come home. Both of you. I want to know that someone’s waiting for me.

I didn’t touch the nursery. The crib will need to be moved back again, but I’m sure Logan will help.

I’m also leaving some cash in the kitchen cabinet.

Use it for Tim. Don’t worry about work, just focus on him. ”

“Max?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re real, right?”

“Of course I am, baby. Just give Tim a kiss from me and don’t cry.”

“I will. I promise.”

“I’ve gotta go. I’ll call you again before I take off.”

“Maybe I can make it to the airport in time? Say goodbye in person?” I ask, even though I already know he’ll say no. My mind’s racing, plotting ways I could make it into the city.

“No. Don’t, okay? I’ll just worry the whole time. It’s the middle of the night—who would even drive you?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Erin. Don’t be reckless, please. Just get some sleep and stop overthinking everything.”

His tone shifts—firm now, no room for arguing.

“See you in three months,” he adds, chuckling softly.

“Not funny.”

“It’s the best I’ve got. Promise me you’ll listen to me?”

“I promise,” I say, after a pause.

“Good. Then sleep tight. I’ll text you, and if you’re still up, we’ll talk a bit more later.”

“Okay. I won’t sleep. Call me.”

We say goodbye. For a few minutes, I pace around the house, unable to pull my thoughts together. I knew this moment would come eventually, but I didn’t think it would be this soon.

I halt in the middle of the room. I can’t just let it end like this. I need to say goodbye properly. Hug him. Kiss him. Look into those incredible eyes and tell him I’ll wait. That I love him.

I bolt out the door and rush to my neighbor’s. Tucker—my old classmate, once my best friend. And more importantly, he has a car.

“Can you take me to the city? Please, it’s urgent. I’ll pay whatever you want,” I blurt out, breathless.

“Right now?” He blinks at me, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

“Yes. It’s really important. Please,” I beg, and I squeal when he nods.

I run back home, dress my sleeping son, throw a few things into a bag, and climb into Tucker’s car. Max is going to kill me—no question—but he’ll cool off. I can’t just let him leave like this.

I’m practically buzzing with impatience the whole ride back. The road feels endless, but when the city lights appear on the horizon, I finally exhale and smile.

I pay Tucker, thank him a hundred times, and rush inside. My chest is tight with anticipation—excited and terrified all at once. Just one day apart, and I already missed him so much. What will I do when he’s gone for three months?

The elevator takes forever. When the doors finally slide open, I hurry toward apartment 217—the one that once changed everything. But I stop just short.

His door is open.

My heart thuds. I step forward slowly, cautiously, and peek inside.

Then I see it. And it feels like the floor gives way beneath me.

I slap a hand over my mouth to stifle the sob. My chest seizes. Tears spill instantly.

There he is. Max. Standing in the middle of the room. Holding another woman.

I recognize her instantly. His ex-wife. Here. At one in the morning. At his place.

And suddenly, everything makes sense. Why he told me to stay at Grandma's tonight. Why he kept saying today wasn't a good day. Why he was acting off.

She's clinging to him, her fingers digging into his shoulder. He's gently rubbing her back like he's comforting her.

I stumble backward. One step. Then another. And another. Like I'm trying to outrun the pain tearing me in half.

I can't look at it. It feels like my heart is being torn apart, piece by piece.

No. No. No. This isn't happening. This isn't my Max. He wouldn't—he couldn't—just hand me over like that.

I need to go back and demand answers, but I'm so scared, I can't even move.

I rush back into the elevator, clutching my sleeping son to my chest with one arm while wiping away hot, salty tears with the sleeve of the other.

I ride down to the sixth floor, unlock the door to the rental apartment, and gently settle Tim into his crib.

Then I lock myself in the bathroom and cry.

Loud, aching sobs that stretch deep into the night.

I cry until there's nothing left. Until morning comes. Until pain gives way to numbness.



Max

Sometimes, I hate my job. Because of it, I missed my sister's graduation, my mother's milestone birthday, and my best friend's daughter's christening.

I've spent so many years stuck at sea. I've missed nearly every Christmas celebration, and now—just when I've finally figured out what I want, when I've found a woman who feels like home, someone I don't want to let go—I have to leave again.

Head back out to sea. Without even saying goodbye properly.

I was furious when she left with her ex.

Chose him over me. I was ready to tell the world to go to hell.

But then I realized something important: Erin needs to figure things out.

She has to make a choice. Because you can't build something real with a woman who's torn between two men.

And I was right. The sparkle in her eyes, the way she laughed, the way we lost ourselves in each other at night—during those moments, it was only us. No one else existed.

I'm packing my bag, calculating if I have just enough time to swing by her place and make it back.

I don't want to leave like this. It's only been a day and I already miss her like crazy.

I want to hold that beautiful body against mine one last time, take in everything about her—but when I weigh the risk, I know it's not the smart call.

My flight's in the morning, and with my luck, anything could happen on the way there—flat tire, engine trouble—and I can't afford to lose this assignment.

It's only three months, and then I'll be back, right where I belong. With my girl.

When someone knocks on my door in the middle of the night, I don't even have to guess who it is.

Of course it's her. Silly girl didn't listen and somehow made her way here.

To our home. Because I wasn't joking when I asked her to move in.

I'm done coming home to an empty apartment.

I've outgrown the failed marriage, had my fill of bachelor life, and now I'm ready for what's next.

I throw the door open and feel my stomach sink. Cynthia.

What the hell is she doing here? Of all people, she's the last one I expected to see tonight.

I don't get a chance to ask before she lunges at me.

Throws her arms around my neck and starts sobbing uncontrollably.

I assume it's another one of her performances—a desperate attempt to win me back—so I try to pull her off and show her the door.

But then she drops a bomb so heavy, everything else disappears—even Erin.

“Mom’s dead, Max.”

I freeze, staring blankly at the wall in front of me, unable to process what I just heard. My ex-mother-in-law had been like a second mother to me. I’d known her since the first day I joined the Taylor family, and it doesn’t make sense—this smiling, kind woman, just... gone.

“What happened?” I ask, my throat tight with a lump I can barely swallow.

“Heart attack,” Cynthia says. “She was home alone. I came back and found her on the floor. The ambulance came, but it was too late. She died on the way to the hospital.”

“I’m sorry, Cynthia,” I manage, because I’ve never been good at saying the right thing, never knew how to find the words that could actually help.

So I just sit there in silence, letting her cry, letting her get it out.

At some point, I feel like someone’s watching me.

I glance toward the open door, but there’s no one there.

“Come on,” I say eventually. “I’ll make you some tea. I’m flying out in the morning, so I won’t be able to be at the funeral. I’m sorry.”

I can’t kick her out—not now, not when she’s this wrecked.

So I lock the door and lead her to the kitchen.

She moves slowly, her legs barely holding her up.

She's trembling, hiccupping from all the crying.

I feel a wave of pity for her, but I remind myself, when I was sick, she had no problem sneaking around with someone else. And eventually, she just left.

"Your girlfriend won't mind me sitting here drinking tea with you?" she asks with a crooked smirk.

"She's not home. Went to visit family," I lie.

Cynthia gives me a look that says 'Yeah, sure', but I'm not going to explain or justify anything. I owe her nothing.

She leaves just before sunrise. I call her a cab and walk her to the car.

At the last moment, she tries to kiss me—same old Cynthia, even in the middle of a tragedy—but I pull back sharply and walk away without a word.

Then I call a cab for myself, drag two suitcases out of the apartment, and leave the keys with the doorman, telling him the woman with the child who lived here before will come pick them up.

One last glance at the high-rise, and then I get in the car with a heavy heart and head for the airport.

On the way to the airport, I call Erin. I just want to hear her voice before the plane takes off, but she doesn't pick up. I wait ten minutes, drumming my fingers on the

door panel, and call again. Maybe her phone's on silent?

I check my bag, get through security, and still nothing from Erin.

I shoot her a message and head to the departure lounge.

Try calling a few more times. The unease is growing—this gut-deep feeling that something's wrong won't let up.

I don't put my phone away, not even when I'm boarding the plane.

Just before takeoff, ignoring the repeated announcements to power down devices, I hit dial one last time.

No answer.

What the hell could've happened overnight?

I try to reason with myself—maybe she overslept.

Maybe when I land, I'll have a message from her waiting.

I want to believe that. Desperately. But disappointment sets in.

Four hours later, there's still nothing.

Then there's the transfer, introductions, getting up to speed with the new crew.

The ship's already loaded, and before I can wrap my head around it all, we're pulling away from the dock.

I reach for my phone, ready to try Erin one last time before we lose reception—and growl out loud when I realize the battery’s dead.

“What the hell kind of day is this?!”

We drop anchor near the Gulf of Aden, and I don’t immediately realize why. I’m still agitated about leaving like that—not saying goodbye, not hearing her voice, not knowing if she and the baby are okay.

“What’s going on? Why are we sitting here?” I ask the second engineer at lunch.

“Shipowner’s negotiating with a private security company. It costs a fortune to get escorted through the Gulf. Last time we sat here for two weeks waiting for seven more ships to form a convoy.”

“Private security?” I blink.

“Don’t tell me this is your first time on a ship?”

“I’ve only ever worked the Atlantic routes.”

“Ah, that explains it. Pirates have gotten real bold lately, so owners don’t take chances. We won’t go through the canal without armed escort.”

“Shit. I forgot about that.”

I don’t usually watch the news, but now and then I catch headlines—another cargo ship hijacked, another oil tanker seized. Hard to believe that kind of thing still happens in the twenty-first century.

“Does this kind of thing happen often?” I ask.

“Not in my experience,” the guy shrugs.

“That’s good.” I exhale and dive into work, trying to keep my hands busy and my mind off my girl.

We sit at anchor for another three days, and the crew is losing their minds from boredom. We even organize a fishing contest. With a makeshift rod, we haul up a few big fish and grill them for dinner.

On the fourth day, the green light finally comes in from the office—we’re cleared to move on.

Anchor’s up, engine’s full throttle. The rumble, the rocking—all of it so familiar I barely notice anymore.

By now, it’s completely dark outside, and there’s nothing to see but black.

The salty air sharpens my thoughts, and the wind slaps my face just enough to keep me alert.

“Where’s the security detail?” I ask the captain, who’s staring into the darkness ahead like he’s expecting something to crawl out of it.

“Not joining until later. Another hundred miles and we’ll hit the rendezvous point. The mercs will board there.”

“Got it.” I nod and step away from the railing.

On my way to the cabin, I swing through the galley and make a strong cup of coffee.

Then I lie down on my bunk, staring at the ceiling, gripping my phone tight.

Still no signal. I hope we anchor near a port soon—somewhere with reception—just so I can send Erin a message.

I miss her. Desperately. When she lived just one floor below, it was enough just to know she was near.

That alone gave me peace. Now, with thousands of miles between us, the need to hold her, to run my eyes over her face, to hear her voice... it's unbearable.

In the tiny bathroom, I barely fit in the shower stall—one of the perks of being a tall guy, I guess. I'm standing in front of the mirror, wondering if I should shave the beard, when I suddenly hear shouting. Then a noise—distant, sharp, unmistakable.

Gunfire?

I turn off the water and still. No... That can't be. This isn't some action movie. It's only been a week since I joined the crew. There's no way something like that's happening.

Silence.

A few more seconds tick by. Then it hits—the general alarm blares through the entire ship.

Seven short blasts. One long.

Shit. Not this. Please, not this.



Erin

I didn't even notice when I fell asleep, but I wake up late in the afternoon to the sound of Tim crying loudly. I jolt awake, my eyes darting across the wall, disoriented for a second until memories come rushing back, crashing into me and yanking me into reality.

I grab my phone. Almost noon. And over twenty missed calls from Max.

My fingers clench tightly around the phone, my heart starts racing.

Now that I've cooled off—now that the fog of anger and resentment has lifted, now that the sharp sting of disappointment isn't whispering worst-case scenarios in my ear—I realize how foolish I've been.

I didn't talk to him, didn't give him a chance to explain.

I just ran, like a coward with her tail between her legs.

With a clearer head, I suddenly remember how Max's ex-wife once showed up in the middle of the night.

I remember the scattered hints he dropped about her.

And I realize—if I had only been a fling to him, he wouldn't have asked me to stay at his place, wouldn't have told me to wait for him to come back from sea, wouldn't have talked about a future together... right?

Ughhh, what have I done?

I was supposed to see him off, to say goodbye at the port. Instead, I panicked, jumped to conclusions—ones I can't even be sure were right. Or maybe I'm just fooling myself again?

I hold Tim in my arms, trying to calm him down, and before I can chicken out, I hit the call button.

I try to reach Max, but the line says "unavailable".

I pace around the apartment, lost in a whirlwind of doubt and indecision.

I close my eyes and force myself to imagine a life without him.

That we've broken up. That he left me for someone else.

And just that thought... it breaks me. I realize I can't do it. I can't lose him.

Maybe I should just pretend nothing happened? Go downstairs, ask the concierge for the key, move my stuff back into apartment 217, and leave the rest up to fate? Just erase what I saw last night. Blame it on my imagination playing tricks on me.

I pause and think for a few minutes. Then I realize—I don't have to pretend. I can find out for sure.

If Max really cheated on me, there's bound to be some trace of it in his apartment.

I throw on some clothes, grab Tim, and rush to the elevator. I get the key from the concierge and head straight to that familiar door. I unlock it cautiously, as if expecting to find his ex-wife still inside.

But the place is empty.

I step slowly across the cold floor, then start checking the apartment, almost obsessively.

I go over every corner, especially the bedroom and bathroom.

But there's nothing—nothing to suggest that Max spent the night with another woman.

The only signs that anyone was here at all are two unwashed mugs in the kitchen.

Meanwhile, on the dresser in the living room, I spot a few of Tim's rattles that I forgot to take. And in the closet, neatly folded, are my scarf, a tank top, and a few hair ties.

I cover my mouth with my hand. God, how foolish I've been.

Foolish, mistrustful, impulsive. I ruined our chance to say goodbye properly, doubted a man who never once gave me a reason to.

But can I really be blamed for struggling to trust again, after everything that's happened to me?

My caution turned into self-sabotage. But it's okay.

We'll have time. So much time. I'm done with doubt and second-guessing.

I want to be with Max. Beside him. Living under one roof, falling asleep and waking up in the same bed, watching him eat my cooking and feeling proud that such an incredible man is mine.

Suddenly, I'm overwhelmed with the urge to text him.

To tell him how deeply I've fallen in love with him, even if it feels crazy after such a short time.

We barely know each other. We haven't even had the time to talk about our pasts, our favorite things, the little details that make a person.

But we'll get there. All that matters now is hearing his voice, knowing he's okay, and finding something—anything—to explain why I disappeared this morning and didn't answer his calls.

That's when I realize I left my phone in the rental apartment. I rush to the sixth floor and groan in frustration when I realize I locked myself out in the rush.

It takes forever to call the landlord, explain the situation, and wait for him to bring the spare keys.

By the time I finally get my phone, there are seven more missed calls from Max and several messages.

Panic grips me. I snatch the phone with one hand while making formula with the other for my hungry son—second time today I've fed him off-schedule because I can't pull myself together—and I call Max immediately, but it goes straight to voicemail.

My heart sinks. I hate myself a little in that moment.

With shaking fingers, I type out a short message. It's not the truth—it's a lie, an excuse—but I don't know how else to fix this.

“I’m so sorry. I had my phone on silent and couldn’t find it in the house.”

I stare at it for a second, then add, “I love you, Max. So much. And I’m waiting. We’re waiting for you. Come home to us soon.”

Tears spill down my cheeks.

I can’t sit still, can’t breathe right. So I spend the rest of the evening packing clothes back into drawers and suitcases, preparing to move in—so that when Taylor comes back, we’ll be here. Just like he wanted. After all, what are three months, when I’ve waited my whole life for him?

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Max never told me the name of his ship, so I can’t track its location online—and when he hasn’t been online for an entire week, I start to worry.

I miss him so much. Desperately. It still hurts that fate decided everything for us and didn’t give us even a few more days together.

And I keep blaming myself for that night—for how impulsive, cowardly, and downright stupid I was.

May greeted Tim and me with sunshine, green lawns, and the sweet scent of blooming trees around the house.

This morning, my mom called and said she’s finally flying in to see her grandson.

I’m thrilled—we’ve only spoken over the phone for so long—but even that joy can’t override the sharp, persistent anxiety lodged deep in my chest.

I can't put my phone down. I'm afraid to miss a call from Max—even when I'm in the shower. I've started putting the apartment back together, moved Tim's crib back into the nursery. He's grown so much, already holding his head up and babbling like a little chatterbox.

And all this time, I've avoided even thinking about my ex.

Or no—not out of fear. I simply don't want to see him again.

I wish he'd forget we exist and disappear from our lives forever.

He seems to have no rush to stay in touch with his son anyway.

He texted once, asking if we needed money. I said no, of course.

The evening is quiet. A soft drizzle taps on the windows, lulling me into drowsiness, but I don't go to bed yet. I'm standing in the living room, ironing tiny baby blankets, half-watching the evening news when something on the screen makes my heart skip. My gaze flicks up, away, then snaps back.

Wait... was that...?

Panic kicks in. I grab the remote and turn up the volume.

“...negotiations are ongoing to bring the captured sailors home. A special hotline has been set up for the families, where you can get the latest updates...”

I freeze the screen and dash to the hallway, frantically digging through my bag for a pen and paper. My temples pound, hands shake, heat rushes through my body like fire. Panic rises like a wave. I feel dizzy.

No. No. That wasn't Max. It can't be. Just someone who looks like him. It was a blurry ID-style photo, maybe from a personnel file—people get misidentified in photos like that all the time. Right?

I don't even remember how my fingers dial the number. I don't realize the ringing has stopped until a soft female voice comes through the line.

"Hello? Are you there? I can't hear you."

"Uh—yes, I'm here," I stammer, trying to find the words. "I... I saw the news on TV, and I think... I think my husband was on that ship. But I only caught the end of the report..."

"Can you please give me your husband's full name and the name of the vessel?"

"Max Taylor. I don't know the name of the ship," I say, barely above a whisper.

"Max Taylor, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry... but he's listed among the crew members who were taken captive..."

"Wait—are you sure it's him? Could it be another Max Taylor? Can we check the date of birth or something?"

"I understand. Let me verify that for you. One moment, please."

As the hold music plays in my ear, I pray. I pray with everything I have that it's not my Max. What are the chances, really? That pirates—fucking pirates—in this day and age, attacked his ship of all ships? Hope burns for exactly twenty seconds before the

dispatcher returns and shatters my world.

I don't hear the rest. My phone slips from my fingers. I collapse to the floor and cry silently, my body shaking. Just let him be alive. Please, don't let anything happen to him.

The following days play out like a loop: wake up, call for updates on the captive sailors, feed Tim, put together a few bouquets just to keep myself from spiraling, feed Tim again, play with him, take a walk with the stroller, stare at the phone with a lump in my throat, call the hotline again.

Nothing.

Day one.

Day two.

Day three.

Still nothing.

The silence eats me alive. It all feels like a nightmare I can't wake up from.

The thought that I may never see Max again makes me want to claw at the walls.

The only thing that keeps me from losing it completely is our son.

Because of him, I keep going. I stay functional. I live. And I wait for a miracle.



*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:56 am*

And just when I think I've run out of hope—after the most agonizing three weeks of my life—the voice on the other end of the line says something different.

“Max Taylor? We actually called you earlier today. You're his wife, right?”

“Yes,” I reply, my voice trembling, afraid she's about to say the worst. I lean on the table for support—my legs feel like they might give out.

“Everything's alright, Mrs. Taylor. You can meet your husband tomorrow.”

“What? When?”

“Tomorrow at 7:00 PM,” she tells me the flight number, but I still can't believe it. That it's over. That it's real.

“Oh my God, really? Really?” I cry, my voice breaking as tears stream down my cheeks.

“Absolutely. He'll be on board. Everything's confirmed.”

“Thank you so much, thank you,” I laugh through my tears and pinch my wrist to make sure I'm not dreaming. Then I grab Tim and rush to the supermarket. I need to cook something for Max—my always-hungry man.

I can't sleep that night. I clean, pace the apartment, try to choose the perfect outfit to meet him in. I wait. I wait for his call. Because if everything's okay, if he's flying in tomorrow, he should call. He should know I'm losing my mind over here.

I get to the airport two hours early. I just can't stay cooped up in the apartment a second longer—I need to be as close to him as possible.

I wait.

Wait endlessly.

Wait with my heart in my throat.

I check the arrival board a dozen times, praying the plane lands early—even if it's just ten minutes. I pace back and forth through the terminal. I take Tim to the restroom twice to change his diaper, terrified that I'll miss Max coming through the gate in that exact moment.

Finally, they announce the arrival. People start crowding around the exit. The wait is agonizing. I pull out a compact mirror and check my makeup. I can't resist—I dial Max's number, but his phone is still off.

The stuffy air, the nerves, the blur of unfamiliar faces—it all becomes too much. I feel lightheaded, but I don't care. Not now. Not when I'm this close.

I'm waiting.

The sliding doors open, necks stretch forward, everyone scanning the crowd for their loved ones. The first passenger steps out—but it's not Max.

Disappointment.

I wait again for the doors to open. I move closer, peering into the corridor. Dozens of people stream out, dragging their luggage behind them, but I don't see him.

Smiles, hugs, laughter, even tears. But none of them are mine.

Max still hasn't appeared. The crowd thins.

My anxiety spikes. I replay the scene in my head, imagining our reunion.

A whisper of doubt creeps in—what if he changed his mind about us?

I shove the thought away. I adjust the little sock on my baby's foot.

Then, just when I think it's over, I spot familiar faces to my right—Max's mother... and his ex-wife. What the hell is she doing here? Could it be...?

I don't even get to finish the thought, because at that moment the door opens again—and I see HIM.

He's walking slowly. Limping. Gripping a cane in one hand, bearing weight on it. His leg is bandaged above the knee. His beard's grown out. There's a bruise beneath one eye. He looks thin. Worn out. But he's mine.

Our eyes meet and no words are needed. None. His eyes hold so much—everything. A hurricane of emotions. A whole universe. Mine.

He stops. Just stands there, a quiet, sad smile on his face.

And I? I run. I dart past his mother and Cynthia before they can reach him—because he's mine.

Always has been. I've waited so long. I don't even notice the tears until they're streaming down my cheeks.

I throw my arms around him, press into his chest, breathe him in, absorb his warmth.

“Max,” I whisper. “Max,” kissing his neck, his jaw, and finally his lips.

“Shhh, baby, I’m here,” he murmurs, stroking my back with his free hand.

“You’re hurt. Are you in pain?” I ask, eyes scanning him frantically.

“I’m okay, sunshine. I am now,” he says gently.

“Why didn’t you call me? I was losing my mind.”

“You won’t believe it, but I dropped my phone overboard,” he chuckles, not taking his eyes off me. “I’m serious.”

“Idiot,” I sniff, wiping away my tears. “I wouldn’t have survived if something happened to you.”

“Hey, little man,” Max says, reaching out and gently squeezing Tim’s tiny hand. “So, I’ve had three long weeks to think things through. And I’ve decided—it’s about time we put my name on your birth certificate. The ‘father’ slot is still open, right?” He winks at me.

“There were a few applicants,” I grin through the tears, “but I saved it just for you.”

This... this is more than I ever dreamed of.

“Only thing is, I’m kind of... out of order right now,” he says, nodding toward his leg.

“We’ll get you fixed up in no time. I even know a few miracle remedies,” I grin, eyes

shining through tears.

He opens his mouth to say something, but his mother appears before he can.

Her face is tear-streaked, she's clutching a handkerchief, and she throws her arms around him, whispering something I can't make out.

I glance away—and that's when I spot Cynthia.

She's standing a few steps away, red lips pursed, glaring at me with disdain.

I meet her look head-on, smile sweetly, and give her a little wave as if to say, 'You're not needed here, darling'.

She scoffs, gives Max a disgusted once-over, then spins on her heel and storms off.

"Mom, did I ever mention I'm planning to get married?" Max says suddenly, his voice raised just enough for everyone to hear. I whip my head toward him, stunned. His mother pulls back, eyes wide, shifting between him, me, and the baby in my arms.

"And here you were telling your poor mother there was nothing going on between you two!" she scolds gently, pressing a hand to her heart.

"Let's get home. Your father and Elena are waiting—they were dying to come to the airport, but I told them to prepare the house for your arrival.

Oh! And where's Cynthia? She was just with me. She's been so worried about you."

"Let's leave Cynthia out of it, yeah?" Max snaps, the irritation in his voice sharp.

"Didn't want to spoil the moment, but maybe I should've come clean sooner. The

reason for our divorce? She cheated on me.”

“What?” His mother gasps, completely blindsided, eyes round as saucers.

“No details, Mom,” he says firmly, shifting his gaze to me and Tim, “but I really hope I never see her anywhere near my family again.”

I inhale. Deeply. Like I haven’t in weeks. I smile. And when we slide into the taxi, I lean in close and whisper, “I love you, my quiet man.”

“And I love you, my fiery girl,” he murmurs back.

Erin

Our first “official” date broke every rule in the book. First of all, we’ve already been living together for a month. Second, we’ve been married for a week. Third, we have a baby. And fourth—we’ve kissed (and done a whole lot more) plenty of times before.

We had a small wedding with close family only, then celebrated at a cozy restaurant.

Grandma cried, Mom smiled, Max’s parents stayed neutral, and Elena seemed happier than all of us combined.

Tim’s biological father apparently lost all interest in us—and honestly, thank God.

The last thing I want is to revisit that chapter.

Besides, my husband has a jealous streak a mile wide, and I’d rather not test his patience.

Max is driving us somewhere outside the city, despite his leg still bothering him. He says it’s a surprise. He still limps and gets self-conscious about it, but I love him just the same—even with that scruffy beard he refuses to shave.

He’s worried he won’t be able to go back to sea because of the injury, and I wouldn’t let him, anyway.

Thankfully, we have a place to live, some savings, and my flower shop.

I even suggested we open a few more locations across town, really grow the business, but he's still thinking it over.

Says he wants something more “manly” like a garage.

Our first “date” ends up being in a secluded forest cabin with panoramic windows and a lake out front. We talk. We laugh. We eat. We kiss. A lot. And once Tim finally falls asleep—we move on to dessert.

“You know,” I whisper between kisses, tugging his shirt off, “I was thinking maybe it's time we made another baby?”

He freezes. Pulls back. Stares into my eyes. It jolts me.

“What's wrong?”

“We already have Tim,” he says hesitantly. “Why do we need another?”

“You... don't want to have more kids with me?”

Our romantic moment crumbles. If it weren't for the ring on my finger, I'd think I was just a one-night stand.

“No, sweetheart, no. I want kids with you—so badly. At least two more. But...”

“But?”

“I don't think I could survive losing you,” he says with a heavy sigh.

“I still haven't recovered from your first delivery—and back then, you were just the stranger who'd taken over my apartment.



When that nurse came running out of the delivery room yelling ‘cardiac arrest’...

Erin, I lost it. No more pregnancies. Not until we know it’s safe.

Please. We’re not in a rush, right? Tim’s still little.

And having two babies in diapers would be insane. ”

“I’m fine, Max. I just can’t have a natural birth again. Next time, I’ll be checked into the hospital a month early, just in case.”

“No. Let’s wait. Five years, at least.”

“You just killed the mood,” I pout, giving him a playful punch in the chest.

“Wanna bet I can bring it back?” he smirks, pushing me onto the bed.

We’re both painfully stubborn. Those first few months of living together were blissful, but let’s be honest—real life gets messy.

Still, no matter how bad our fights get, we never stay mad for more than two hours.

Sooner or later, one of us has to touch the other, kiss the other, and the rest just melts away.

My husband is quiet, smart, kind—the best man in the world.

And I truly hope he doesn’t kill me when he finds out I’ve been pregnant for five weeks already.

I’m terrified of giving birth again—maybe even more than he is—but I’ll never admit that.

I have to be strong. For all of us. Because I'm a mother, and a wife who loves fiercely.

Because Max is my heart, and I am his. And our hearts beat in sync with one another. If mine stops—his will too.

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Max

I always imagined my ideal woman would be sweet, shy, petite, and definitely a brunette. How Erin ended up being the one is still a mystery. I don't know what exactly made her get under my skin the way she did—but without her, life doesn't make sense.

Actually... I do know.

My wife is beautiful, tall, insanely stubborn, too independent for her own good—and so incredible that I still can't believe she's mine.

Except in moments like this. Moments when she decides to do things her way.

Like this pregnancy.

She said she was on the pill. I believed her. And now here I am, nervously pacing the narrow hallway, my mind replaying everything that led to this moment. Cold sweat clings to my back, and I try not to think about the worst.

I've been through captivity. Taken a bullet.

But a C-section?

Never.

I'm in a sterile gown, sitting outside the operating room—for the third time. First time, I bolted when I heard the word “incision”. Second time, I caught a glimpse of blood on the instruments. Third time, no reason—just pure panic.

“Get it together,” I whisper to myself.

I glance at the clock.

Twelve minutes.

It feels like an eternity.

This waiting—this not knowing—is killing me.

A nurse walks by, and something in me snaps.

“I changed my mind,” I blurt out. “I want to be in there with her.”

She sighs, clearly exhausted, but opens the door anyway and nods me in.

I nod back, guilty and desperate, and slip back into the room.

I sit behind the curtain near Erin's head and grab her hand, squeezing tight.

And then—one minute later—I hear it.

The first cry of our daughter.

I smile like an idiot. Can't help it. But I keep one eye on the monitor that tracks Erin's heartbeat.

Lately, I've been having nightmares about it stopping—about losing her.

If I lose her...

That would be it. I wouldn't survive it.

I stand up, take a step closer to see our baby girl for the first time. Is she mine? She looks nothing like me. Tiny, pink, scrunched-up face... and a shock of red hair.

They clean her up quickly and lay her against Erin's bare chest—skin to skin—so she can feel her mama's warmth.

"All her mom," I whisper, my throat tight.

Well. Now I've got two redheads. And I have no doubt that someday, they're both going to drive me and Tim completely insane.

The End

To my husband, who spends most of his time at sea, but for us, distance has never mattered. Our love has always known how to find its way home.