

A WHITTAKER FLORAL NOVEL

A dense floral arrangement of pink and red dahlias, hearts, and leaves on a black background. The flowers are the central focus, with several large, multi-petaled dahlias in shades of light pink and peach. Interspersed among the flowers are several hearts of various sizes and colors, including solid pink, dark red, and hollow hearts with a red outline. The leaves are dark red and have a serrated edge. The overall composition is symmetrical and fills the frame.

**LOVE
AND
ARRANGEMENTS**

SOPHIA SABBIONI

LOVE AND ARRANGEMENTS

A WHITTAKER FLORAL NOVEL

BOOK 1

SOPHIA SABBIONI

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18 DAYS POST-OVULATION

“Ow!” I squealed, curling an arm over my breast protectively, scowling in the direction of the man who hit me. My every instinct was to tell him off—I wanted the self-absorbed, elbow-wielding, boob-jabber to *feel* my anger, but as I turned to glare at him I found myself face-to-face with a teenager.

“I’m so sorry,” he said as our eyes met, his wide and shocked in his pretty face. I blinked at him irritably, and his gaze darted to my chest then back up, as if he was worried looking at an injured breast may still constitute harassment.

He was a dumbass kid and nothing more, and my anger fizzled and died until all that was left was some bland annoyance. Of course, everything was annoying me this morning. With a sigh, I turned the other way, letting the boy off the hook but still rubbing the injured boob. The kid must’ve had elbows of steel, because it hurt. Absentmindedly, I let my focus shift out the window of the L, watching the buildings whip by, my body lurching with the erratic sway of the train. My phone dinged in my hand and I looked down at it.

Will: I’m going to have to work late tonight.

My brow twitched in something akin to a shrug as I read his text. Will and I hadn’t agreed to see each other tonight, and he hadn’t crossed my mind yet this morning. I frowned, thinking—not for the first time—that my total lack of disappointment regarding Will’s busy schedule was probably

something worth examining. Not today, though, because the dulcet voice of the L announcer pulled me from my thoughts (*This is Chicago. Doors open on the right at Chicago*) and I hiked my bag higher on my shoulder and squeezed my way to the doors.

The sun was peeking over the lowest skyscrapers and the sky was spectacular in ribbons of gold, purple, and pink as I squirmed out the crowded train and onto the platform. Truth was, no matter how much public transportation annoyed me, and it did, you just couldn't be mad at a sky like that. I looked up at it the entire way down the steep stairs until I reached the street, which continued under the train tracks. Then the sky was obstructed, and I moved quickly until I reached work.

Elizabeth Whittaker Floral and Events.

The smell of fresh flowers wafted out even before I got through the vestibule. I loved that smell. It smelled like life and vitality and Mother Nature, and it made me want to take hikes and dig my fingers into soil and be one with the earth. I didn't ever *do* any of those things, to be clear. The feeling usually passed in about fifteen minutes, and then I became nose blind and it was just another day at work.

Work for me was making big, fancy flower arrangements rich people paid way too much money for. Not to say the flowers weren't worth it—they were lovely—it's just, if I had ten thousand dollars to spend, it would never be on a bunch of cut flowers that would die days after my eighty-thousand-dollar wedding. Then again, if I had eighty thousand dollars, I'd probably just elope and keep the cash.

“Hey! Hold the door!”

I turned to see Julia rushing up behind me, and I held the door with one hand. Julia was young and pretty and unabashedly without depth. She loved the British royals and selfies and online quizzes, and she looked like a Disney princess in a Jonathan Cohen dress. She was beautiful and sweet and entirely uncomplicated.

Julia was exactly the kind of girl Milo would end up with.

Milo.

I blinked hard to clear my head. Why was I even thinking about Milo right now?

And what could I say that would make you understand why my neighbor Milo held residence in my brain twenty-four-seven?

For starters, Milo was hot. Really hot—like the kind of hot where I think I could say *hawt*, except I'm never really sure if I'm using that word right. I mean, I'm too old for it anyway, like that brief stint after the *Austin Powers* movie when my mom began saying "Yeah, baby," with uncomfortable frequency—

But Milo.

Strong jawed with lips that bordered on obscene, he kind of looked like if that *Outlander* guy had a baby with Brad Pitt. Except not, because Milo's curls were dirty blonde and his eyes were the color of wheat stalks—and, shit, once you've compared anyone's features to wheat you've crossed into serious creep territory.

So, yeah, I had a crush on Milo.

Anyone in their right mind had a crush on Milo.

And yeah, I told my mom "he's not my type," with an eye roll, but that was mostly because *my type* did not look like... like *Milo*.

My type were regular people.

But Milo had been, unfathomably, one of my very best friends since we met in college. He was the way-too-good-looking roommate of my boyfriend at the time, and we bonded watching *Wayne's World* one afternoon when my boyfriend decided to stay at the library an extra hour to work on a project.

A year after our afternoon with Wayne and Garth, my boyfriend had moved in with the girl he'd shared that stupid project with, and Milo and I were fast friends. Milo dated my friend Krissy, and I dated whoever seemed interested.

By the time college ended, Krissy and Milo had broken up, but Milo and I remained tight. Tight enough that, when he told me there was a vacancy in his apartment building a few years back, I jumped at the opportunity.

Julia slipped through the door and I shot her a friendly smile. I'd wanted to hate her from the very instant I laid eyes on her, and I'm usually pretty committed to these sorts of things—I have an unusually good barometer for assholes—but Julia was sweet. Not the kind of person I could ever be friends with—not even close—but sweet. “Hey, Jules.”

She grinned, showing off two perfect, gleaming rows of white teeth. I bet she'd never even needed braces. “Morning, Drea. You look happy today.”

Did I? I shrugged. “I'm good. It's a pretty sunrise,” I offered.

Julia glanced dreamily through the front windows as if she could see the sky, even though we both knew our view was entirely blocked by elevated tracks. “It is,” she agreed. Then her eyes shot back to me, all of the dreamy quality evaporated—I recognized the expression as her inquisitive look. “Are you still seeing that Will guy?”

Shit, Will. Had I forgotten about Will *again*?

I pulled out my phone.

In fairness, Will was good-looking—regular good-looking, but good-looking nonetheless. And funny. And the handsome, successful Italian my mother dreamed of me marrying. And I'd been out with him a bunch of times since we met in November.

I sighed, swiping the phone on to type a hasty text.

And yet he couldn't hold court in my conscious thoughts long enough for me to remember to text him back.

Drea: No problem. I'll see you Friday!

Stuffing the phone back into my pocket, I gave Julia a polite nod. “Yep,” was all I said. My mother may've had dreams of me settling down with Will, but I certainly wasn't

thinking about marriage. At least not to Will. And not really to anyone else either, it's just impossible to spend huge parts of my day making wedding bouquets and setting up weddings and seeing brides without, you know, thinking about my own *very theoretical* wedding every so often.

Did you know you can have your wedding at Chicago's Theater on the Lake? My theoretical wedding is there. It's beautiful. My bouquet would have Blushing Bride and Pincushion Proteas, Anemone, and Israeli Ruscus.

"Good morning, Drea," Elizabeth Whittaker said as I walked through the curtain to the back of the shop, her prim voice pulling me from my thoughts.

When I grew up, I wanted to be Elizabeth Whittaker. She was this ass-kicking machine, but she did all her ass-kicking with the regal air of Julie Andrews. I loved her.

I'm not sure the feeling was mutual.

In my wedding fantasy, Elizabeth comped the flowers and came to my wedding and shook my husband's hand (for the sake of this fantasy, my husband was Chris Hemsworth, so it's entirely possible Elizabeth was just secretly star-struck) and she seemed really happy for me. I think I even saw a tear in the corner of one of her honey-brown eyes.

In real life...our relationship was more like a friendly good morning and the occasional check-in. I wasn't expecting adoption into the family anytime soon.

"Good morning," I replied, feeling the sharp dig of fingers in the flesh of my left arm as I hung my coat. It was less painful than the boob-jab, but no less annoying.

"C'mere," was hissed in my ear, and I turned to see Matty's golden eyes inches from mine as she pulled me toward her office. "Be right back, Mom," Matty said at full volume, a statement that was not met with any sort of approval, but Matty kept going anyway.

Matilda Whittaker—daughter of Elizabeth, and Matty to all but her mother—never let her mother's disapproval slow her down.

I followed Matty into her office willingly, although she continued to drag me forcibly as if I were a prisoner. She kicked the door closed with a single black high heel, her long lashes fluttering at an extraordinary rate over the honey-brown eyes that were a perfect match to her mother's. My eyes widened expectantly, the international sign for *fucking get on with it*. Matty only grinned in reply. "I had sex with John Tomaczuski."

"Who's that?" I asked mildly. I was a serial monogamist. Matty, on the other hand, maintained a constant flow of relationships with an assortment of attractive men. It was only fair, though, because Matty was stunning. She stood before me today in a gray, skin-tight knit dress, black tights, and black pumps, her raven hair twirled into a complicated bun atop her head, eyes dark and lipstick red, dangling earrings her only accessory. Leaning back so she half-sat on her desk, Matty scowled at me. "He's the chef."

"Oh, the chef," I said, my interest piqued as I recalled the muscular blond Matty had shown Hannah and me a picture of last week. "You two slept together? How many dates have you been on?" I rolled my lips between my teeth, realizing I sounded like my mother, and I certainly hadn't meant to sound judgmental. Did it really matter how many times she'd seen him?

"Five. Last night he invited me over and cooked me the most amazing steak you've ever had."

"I don't eat steak."

Matty frowned again. "Don't be difficult. You know what I mean."

I shrugged. "I imagine you mean the steak was good. How was *he*?"

"Impressive," she replied, widening her eyes meaningfully to let me know John Toma-whatever-his-name-was was packing heat. I'll admit I was a little intrigued, but it wasn't the question I'd meant to ask.

"I meant, how *was* he? His personality, not his dick."

“Oh,” she looked disappointed. There was a knock at the door and we both turned to look at the shadow evident through the curtains. Easily recognizing our third friend, Hannah, Matty gave a quick nod and I opened the door. “Get in here,” Matty hissed. Hannah stepped forward, wearing her trademark leggings and oversized sweater, her hair spun into a giant bun on the top of her head. Not for the first time, I imagined what a field day my grandma Moretti would have had holding her down and plucking her thick unibrow until it was tamed.

My eyes pulled away from Hannah, not wanting her to feel self-conscious, and instead followed Hannah’s gaze across the workroom, noticing Elizabeth scowling as I closed the door. Unlike Matty, I wasn’t the owner’s daughter, and I couldn’t afford to have her pissed at me.

“Your mom’s getting pissed,” Hannah said, reading my mind.

Matty made a face which simultaneously acknowledged and dismissed this fact. “I know, I know. I was just telling Drea that I slept with John Tomaczuski.”

Hannah gave a quick shrug. “That’s not news, Matty.”

“What do you mean, that’s not news?” Matty asked, her voice raising an octave in what may have been surprise but was likely horror, as if Hannah were suggesting John had posted it on his Twitter feed.

“She means you always intended to sleep with John,” I provided, trying to move the conversation along. I didn’t think Elizabeth would fire either me or Hannah, but that didn’t mean I liked making her angry. “And, as much as I want to hear about it, I’d like to keep my job more, so are you free tonight?” I already had a hand on the doorknob.

“I agree with Drea. Did I mention your mom looked pissed?” Hannah asked.

There was nothing Matty hated quite like not getting her way, but she was reasonable enough not to take it out on either of us. “Fine, of course. Hannah’s place?” Matty’s place was unquestionably the largest and most beautiful, but it was a bit

south of the shop, and that was a hike for Hannah and me, since both of us lived farther north. Hannah's place was in the middle of Matty's and my place, so it was the usual compromise meeting spot.

"Absolutely," I replied quickly, stepping out the door. "Sorry, Elizabeth," I said as we approached the older woman. I smoothed back my hair, which was wound in a French braid since Elizabeth liked her employees to have their hair out of their faces and out of the arrangements.

Elizabeth smiled one of her trademark smiles, which appeared warm, yet failed to ever make me feel better. "Not to worry, Andrea, I know it's Matilda we were waiting for."

"We're not even late," Matty muttered, leaning a hip against the table next to her, bordering on insolence.

To say Elizabeth and Matty butted heads would be an understatement—they were consistently grinding gears. To a spectator, which I was, it could be hard to watch. Elizabeth held high standards and Matty met or exceeded every one of them. Still, Elizabeth never cut Matty slack and Matty always acted like a petulant teenager to her mother. Sometimes I wanted to yell at them both, but screaming, "Fucking knock it off!" seemed like a bad career move.

"Bitty, can you please be sure we've ordered everything for the Stone wedding?" Elizabeth said, looking at the older woman responsible for our stock. Bitty, who barely ever talked, nodded agreeably, and Elizabeth's attention turned back to us. "Hannah, I'll need you constructing today. Matilda, if you have time, Hannah will probably need help—"

"I can help," I interjected.

"Yes, we'll need that too, but first I'd like your assistance with my 9:30."

"Oh, of course," I agreed. Elizabeth always liked to have someone prepping stems for her while she met with clients. She felt it allowed her to talk to them more personally, which made the brand more high-end.

Or something like that.

Elizabeth glanced at her watch. “How about you start on one of the arrangements until I need you, and Matty can finish it if need be.”

“Sounds good,” I said agreeably.

“Which clients are coming in today?” Matty asked. “Mahoney?”

“Mahoney this morning and Marasigian this afternoon,” Elizabeth confirmed. My brain wandered as the conversation continued between Matty and Elizabeth. Christ, my boob still hurt. Both did, actually.

What the hell?

Will and I had planned a date on Friday, and though Will tried, he hadn't quite mastered the gentle touch necessary to get me off. Instead, he was the kind of guy who spent most of his time playing with my nipples while I got myself off. If breast-play was off the table, God only knew how he might decide to “help” the process along.

I PULLED my backpack off as I stepped into Hannah's little entryway. Truman, her hundred-pound chocolate lab, licked my face as I bent to take off my shoes. “Dammit, Tru,” I muttered. “Taking off my shoes is not giving consent.”

“Truman,” Hannah scolded as she joined me in the entryway, “Drea, can you leave the door unlocked so we only have to buzz Matty?” she asked, although I always arrived before Matty and knew the drill.

“I have wine,” I replied, digging two bottles out of my old blue backpack and holding one up.

“Perfect. I have a pizza cooking, and you know Matty'll come with some junk.”

Tru padded around me excitedly as I followed Hannah into her small kitchen. Reaching into one of the two cabinets to retrieve glasses for the wine, I asked, “What's new with you?”

Hannah shook her head. “Nothing. This. Work.”

“You’re not seeing anyone?”

“I went on a date with this guy Freddy, but nothing came of it.”

I looked at Hannah from the corner of one eye as I opened the first bottle of wine. If I were being entirely honest, I never would’ve befriended Hannah if it wasn’t for Matty. It wasn’t because there was anything wrong with her—in fact, I really liked her—it was because she was so quiet and reserved I probably never would’ve taken the time to get to know her.

Matty, with her beauty and her outgoing nature and her dark humor, was impossible to overlook, but the same couldn’t be said about Hannah. Hannah was pretty in an...*unstyled* sort of way. She was shy and reserved and you’d never know she had a really great sense of humor because in a group she’d mutter half her jokes only loud enough for Matty or me to hear. She and Matty had been friends since college, and I envied their closeness. Just a little. But I’d never mention it.

“Not going to see him again?” I asked, but Hannah’s answer was interrupted by the ringing of the buzzer. She walked out of the kitchen and I kept pouring wine, rubbing my eyes with my free hand. I was so freaking tired today. I hadn’t even wanted to come out, but here I was. I had to call it an early night, though. Obviously I wasn’t getting enough sleep.

Hannah walked back in, Matty trailing behind her, already talking loudly about John Tomaczuski. “He had an eight pack,” Matty said, her voice low and husky. The eight pack had clearly affected her. Helping herself to the one of the tiny corners of pizza that had resulted from Hannah cutting it into squares, Matty looked at me. “I bet Will looks good under his shirt.”

My boyfriend, Will, was muscular but not chiseled like Matty was talking about. It was more a *suggestion* of a six-pack than rippling muscles. “He does,” I agreed, but based on Matty’s skeptical expression, something in my voice revealed he looked more *regular*-good than supernatural-good.

“You know who I bet looks amazing with his shirt off?” Matty said, looking at me with her brown eyes lit up and sparkling. She helped herself to a wine glass and poured a drink. “Milo.”

Yep. Milo had all the abs.

My shrug was noncommittal. Matty brought up Milo all the time. She’d had her eye on him since the moment she met him. Matty liked pretty things, and Milo was so beautiful. If I were a good friend, I’d set them up, but I couldn’t make myself do it. I could live with Milo dating any number of women, but not Matty. I could never sit through one of these nights and hear about Milo. I just couldn’t. “So? John?” I deflected, grabbing a piece of pizza as Hannah set them on the coffee table, then curling my legs under me on the couch. Truman set his head on my thigh and I smiled. Tru always liked me best.

20 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I inspected my face in the mirror. I was kinda' freckly. I often thought it was a lot of bullshit that I could have an olive-dark complexion and freckles, but I did. Brown eyes, but not like Matty's sparkling honey eyes or Hannah's deep brown with golden starbursts. Nope. Mine were just brown. They weren't ugly. I wasn't standing in front of the mirror thinking I was ugly. I was just kinda'...regular. But my Grandma Moretti would've come back to life just to die of shame if I'd accepted regular, so I paid good money for my side-swept bangs, my immaculately manicured eyebrows, and my carefully picked wardrobe. Grandma would be proud.

I shimmied into a black lace thong and a black bra that, while not a set, matched well enough to impress Will, I was sure. I firmly believed all the fancy underwear in the world didn't really matter if it was skimpy enough to show some skin. Far as I could tell, men were all pretty simple where underwear was concerned.

I wasn't very well going to gossip with Matty about how good Will was or was not sexually—that seemed gross—but Will was pretty good. I wouldn't say getting me off was his *top* priority, but it made the list, which was more than I could say for other guys. At the very least, Will tried positions that let me get myself off. I'd been with a grand total of six men in my life, and Will was top-three.

I grabbed a coat and my purse, then scrounged up a cute hat and gloves. Not exactly sexy, but it was always brutally cold at the end of January, and I knew up on the L platform I'd

near freeze to death if I wasn't as covered as possible. Then I was out the door, twisting the lock behind me and heading down the front steps to the courtyard.

I saw him before he saw me, my eyes scanning his form greedily. I was on my way to a date, though, and I knew I didn't have time to talk. Lowering my head against the frosty air, I continued to the gate, but he'd already seen me.

“Dre!”

He was the only person on Earth who called me that.

My family called me Andrea—pronounced “On-Drea” like my Italian grandfather namesake. By the end of high school, I'd spent the previous seventeen years (pretty much as long as I could speak) correcting people when they called me by the Anglicized “And-ree-a,” and I was beyond sick of it. I just wished I had an easy name, like Kim. No one mispronounced Kim.

When I started college I decided to simplify everything, and I began introducing myself as Drea. Problem solved.

“Dre!” he called again. I looked up to see Milo crossing the courtyard at a slow jog to join me. Even at this distance I could see his smile.

The casual observer may think Milo's smile was perfect, but I knew better. His two front teeth were just a tiny bit too big compared to the rest, and his bottom teeth were slightly misaligned thanks to wisdom teeth he'd waited to take out until his early twenties. Some dentist once suggested he get invisible braces for those bottom teeth. I thought that dentist should be laughed out of dentistry. That minuscule imperfection somehow only made Milo more perfect.

“I thought maybe you were avoiding me,” Milo said as he got close. The smile that still rested on his lips—lips I couldn't tear my eyes off of—suggested Milo had never considered I was *actually* avoiding him. He'd probably never been avoided by anyone before. I was probably the one stupid woman on earth who didn't want to be around Milo Maddox.

Except I did.

Milo was like a drug. Being around him felt so good—how could I spend time with him right before I met up with Will? I couldn't. It wasn't fair. Because as wonderful as Will was, as smart and as much as he made me laugh, I never felt that *warmth* I felt when I was with Milo. I never felt that electrical buzzing that made my skin feel the tiniest bit too tight.

"I *was* avoiding you," I said, and Milo laughed as if this were a joke.

"Where you headed, Dre?" he asked, falling into step next to me.

"I'm meeting Will for dinner," I replied.

"Ah, a date. Do we like this guy?"

I shot Milo a look. "*I* like him. You don't know him."

"A problem within itself," he responded smoothly. "When am I going to meet him?"

I was leaning toward never, if I could swing it. "You gonna show him your shotgun, tell him to treat me right?" I asked sarcastically.

Milo's lips puckered out slightly and I wondered how he'd made it through most of January without chapped lips. "Something like that," he acknowledged. "C'mon, hop in the car with me. You're going to get frostbite with your legs out like that."

I glanced down at my exposed legs. Boots covered up to my knees, but my thighs were exposed and a polar wind was making me wish I could exchange my thong for wool panties. "I'm fine," I lied.

He slung an arm over my shoulders. "Why're you so damn stubborn?"

"It's part of my charm," I replied dryly.

"It is," he agreed, guiding me by the shoulder into the backseat of a blue compact car. I slid over to allow him some room, even though I was cold and sitting pressed up against Milo seemed even more appealing than usual. "Address," he commanded, and I obeyed, handing him my phone, where the

address remained up on the map I'd saved earlier. Milo gave the driver the new stops and leaned back, looking at me for a minute in silence. "You look nice."

Meh.

Terrible compliment. It's what you say to your mom.

"Thanks," I replied half-heartedly, allowing my eyes to blur and refocus out the window beyond Milo. It was beginning to snow, and I watched the slow flutter of snowflakes until each became a tiny spot of wet on the window.

His voice pulled me out of my trance. "Promise me you'll take a car home."

Hadn't really planned on going home, actually.

I hesitated, not wanting to tell Milo I planned to sleep—minus much sleeping—at Will's place, but before I could speak, he looked down, sighing softly. The sound—a simple whisper of air from between his rounded lips—made my chest ache. Was it possible to be hungry for another human? "Dre," he repeated, his voice holding more authority as we pulled up to the restaurant where I was supposed to meet Will. Milo tapped my bare knee with his index finger. The ache traveled, filling my whole torso, burning at every extremity. "You'll freeze."

"Milo," I protested.

The car stopped and his finger moved in a lazy figure-eight over my kneecap. "Promise me." His eyes pulled up from his finger to my eyes, staring me down seriously.

"I promise," I breathed out.

He grinned, removing his finger from my skin, perfectly casual and unaware he'd exploded my ovaries and left me a trembling mess of want. Milo swung the car door open and slid out, offering a hand to help me. I shimmied cautiously, attempting to not give Milo and half of Chicago a show by letting my thong flash as I climbed out of the car. There was no gracious way to shimmy, though. "Call me next week, okay?" he said.

“Will do,” I agreed, and he gave me a hug before shifting past me and back into the car. I straightened my purse on my shoulder, trying to look unaffected by Milo Maddox.

“And Dre?” he said, looking back up at me through the open car door. I lifted my brow in question. “Have fun.”

I SAW Will the second I walked into the restaurant, waiting at the bar for me, sipping something-or-other on the rocks. I moaned mentally. Will. Smart, funny, handsome Will.

And yet I would’ve given anything to get in that cab and drive to wherever Milo was going.

You see?

Milo ruins everything.

Will saw me at that moment and I inhaled deeply, smiling big and wiping my brain of all the Milo nonsense. Sure, I had a mild physiological reaction to Milo. But Will was great. Will.

“Hey,” Will pulled me in close as I walked up, giving me a soft kiss on the cheek. “You look gorgeous.”

I smiled for real this time. “Thanks. You don’t look half bad either.” Will looked really good, as a matter of fact, in a black suit with a white shirt unbuttoned to reveal the tiniest sliver of his strong chest. It was like man-cleavage. I could already picture my lips kissing that tiny bit of chest, moving their way across his hot skin. “Why don’t you give me your coat and I’ll drop it off at the coat check while I see if our table is ready.”

I slid out of my coat and stuffed both hat and scarf into one sleeve, smoothing my hands over my hair. “Thanks.”

He took my coat and started to walk away, but turned back suddenly. “That’s your wine there.” He nodded in the direction of a wine glass, and I picked it up.

“Thanks,” I repeated.

For a couple minutes I simply sat at the bar, sipping the wine, trying not to drink too fast so I wouldn't have too much. My eyes caught on Will as he came back toward me. He ran a hand through his dark hair and grinned, revealing a perfect set of white teeth. They were almost too white, and I wondered how frequently he was whitening. "Our table's ready," he said as he got close, looping an arm around my waist. He was only a few inches taller than I was when I wore heels, as I was tonight with my boots, but he was strong, and he had a tight hold on me as we moved. I usually would've balked at being herded around like a farm animal, but Will was so sweet and gentle I didn't think much of it.

The waitress brought us to a table near the back and we sat across from each other. I set down my wine and felt a wave of exhaustion. "You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I'm just so tired. I don't know what's up with me."

"Did you have a wedding before this?" It was not uncommon for me to do wedding set-ups with Elizabeth on Fridays and Saturdays, but there hadn't been one today. Not many people were getting married on January Fridays.

"No. Tomorrow."

Will's nose curled. "It's supposed to snow tomorrow. Did you see that?"

"It's snowing now."

"It's supposed to accumulate tomorrow, though, like, stay-off-Lake-Shore-Drive, don't-leave-the-house, hope-you-have-some-frozen-pizzas accumulation."

"I always have frozen pizzas," I assured him with a smile, taking another sip of wine and feeling the tiredness wash over me once more. Maybe no more wine tonight.

BY THE TIME we were done eating, I thought I might have to lean onto the table and rest. In high school I used to rush to

class some days just to take little five minute passing-period naps. I needed that today. Just five minutes. I could lay my head down on the table—

“You okay, Drea?”

“I’m sorry. Yeah. I’m just really tired. Maybe I’m coming down with something.”

Will reached across the table, holding my hand. I watched as his thumb slid over my knuckles, and a tiny wave of nausea rolled through me. “You want me to get you a car home?”

A little. Maybe. Bed sounded so good, and maybe that was a sign I should go, but before I could truly consider going home, I answered him automatically. “No. Don’t be silly. I’ll rally once we’re up and moving. Let’s go back to your place.”

Will grinned and stood, reaching out a hand. “Sounds good.” He led the way back to coat check and out to the waiting car. The fresh air was cold as fuck, but it revived me, wiping away all my sleepy feelings.

In the cab, Will’s soft palm landed on my exposed thigh and crept up. I ignored it, continuing our conversation about Will’s work day as a lawyer until his fingers rested high on one thigh, nearly grazing my lacy panties. I wanted to shift, to make him touch me, to forget about common decency and make out in this stranger’s car. I didn’t move a muscle though, not until we arrived in front of Will’s building and I stood on the freezing cold sidewalk kissing him. He had really full, pouty lips. Soft ones. We walked into the building hand-in-hand, but broke into another kiss in the elevator. Sure, it was probably under surveillance, but I didn’t care. We stumbled into the hall as the elevator dinged and then made our way—fumbling and kissing—down the false-privacy of the hall. We sort of half-stumbled, half-fell into Will’s apartment, where we made our way to the couch quickly, Will’s strong, compact form hovering over me as I lay back into the cushions. I reached for his belt as we kissed, but he stilled me with a single hand. “Hold on. I’ll be right back.” He stood to his full height above me and I reached for his belt once more.

“Don’t go,” I murmured.

He grinned sexily. “I’ll be right back.”

21 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I rubbed my face, looking around me, then rubbed again when I didn't find my room as I'd expected. "The fuck?" I muttered. I was in Will's living room, a blanket tossed over me that I pushed off with one hand. It was dark, but not all the way dark. I grabbed my purse off the coffee table in front of me and pulled out my phone.

4:45.

Holy shit.

Why was I asleep on Will's couch at 4:45 in the morning? Fuck. I had to pee. I pushed myself up and away from the couch then headed down the hall to the bathroom. I peed in the dark, then flipped on the light to see myself in the mirror.

It wasn't great.

I washed my face with the liquid soap Will had out on the counter, scrubbing to get off yesterday's makeup, which had gone from smokey and pretty to hot mess at some point during my extended nap. I smoothed my hair down best I could and crept out of the bathroom, figuring I'd sneak out and call Will later. This was pretty high on the humiliation list, and I'd rather not have the conversation face-to-face.

Unfortunately for me, Will was standing in the dark hall as I came out of the bathroom. "Hey. How're you feeling?" he asked, cupping my cheek in one palm.

"What happened? It was last night and then it was today."

I could see his eyes traveling between mine, trying to decide how sick I was. “You don’t remember anything?”

“No,” I moaned. “Did you drug me?” I joked. I did actually remember a little. I remembered making out, moving to the couch, then Will got up—probably to get a condom—and the pillow on the couch had been so soft.

“Of course not. Do you think you were drugged?” Will asked seriously.

“No. God, no. I just—I don’t know. I must be coming down with something. I’m so sorry.” I felt a blush rise to my cheeks, picturing Will coming back with the condom to find me snoring.

God, I hoped I didn’t snore.

“Don’t worry about it, Drea.”

I looked down at myself, feeling suddenly awkward. “I, uh, I have to go. I have to get home and change before work.”

His fingers found my hip. “You sure? I could skip my workout.”

For God’s sake, hadn’t we just established I had some dread disease or something? How could men be thinking about sex this often? “Will,” I said, and the single word was a letdown and apology all rolled into one word.

He grinned. “Okay, okay. Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

BY 4:30 THAT AFTERNOON, as I attached arrangements to each side of the ten front pews for tonight’s wedding, my mind was on laying down. The front two pews had cushions, and I eyed them longingly. “What the fuck’s the matter with me?” I muttered.

“Dunno. What the fuck *is* the matter with you?” Matty asked cheerily, stepping next to me to attach the eighteenth of twenty arrangements. “You kinda look like shit,” she offered, as if that were a diagnosis.

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically.

She attached the second to last of the arrangements while I moved past her to do the last one. “Seriously, though, what’s up?” she asked. “You’re slow today. You’re never slow. Are you okay?” She picked up the empty box as she finished and watched me fumble with my arrangement. “You want to go out? Get a drink?”

I wanted to sleep.

Sleep. Sleep. Sleep.

“No, I’m beat. I’m just going to go home and rest.” I stood and we walked down the aisle together. “You’re not going out with John?”

Matty’s face twisted, and she lowered her voice. “Heavy flow day. If you don’t feel like taking me out, I’m heading home and chilling in sweatpants and granny panties. Maybe get some ice cream first. It’s supposed to snow like crazy tonight.”

There was a moment.

A few seconds when all activities ceased in my body, like my brain was supposed to fill the void with something important, but I couldn’t remember what.

“Are you ready for the snow?” Matty asked.

Was it the snow?

No.

“I think so,” I replied slowly, still trying to piece together my thoughts.

Ice cream, granny panties, heavy flow day.

Heavy flow day.

When the fuck was my last period?

“Have fun tonight. I’m going to go rest. I’ll see you Tuesday,” I said in a rush, pulling out my phone before I was all the way out the door.

Calendar.

Search.

X (because that's the mature way I mark periods in my calendar).

December 21st

Thirty-four days ago.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

I couldn't get to the drugstore fast enough. The tired didn't matter. The cold didn't matter. I rushed out of the church and into a Walgreens as quickly as I could. "Welcome to Walgreens. Stocking up for the storm?" the cashier said cheerily as I rushed through the door.

No.

I sped down the aisles, searching frantically until I found the pregnancy tests with diapers and condoms and shit. There were so many. Why didn't they just have one? Pee on this. Yes or no. How fucking easy would that be? I grabbed a three-pack and began to walk back to the check-out, but I suddenly felt self-conscious.

I didn't accidentally get pregnant.

I used condoms.

Every time.

They were an absolute inconvenience, and men were always thinking of reasons to go without, but I demanded them anyway. I used them every damn time.

And now this dumb kid at the check-out in his Walgreens uniform with his aggressive acne was going to think I was lackadaisical about safe sex.

Which was a stupid concern.

I knew that.

But my brain was significantly compromised ever since I'd realized I might've fucked up my entire life. I walked to the food aisle and grabbed some eggs and cereal and Doritos and chocolate and any other must-have blizzard item. The world

was already a mess of slushy snow outside and, pregnant or not, I wasn't going much of anywhere tomorrow.

22 DAYS POST-OVULATION

The box said it needed to be morning.

Well, not exactly.

The box said morning was the most reliable, but I'd be damned if I was going to get a false negative because I couldn't wait nine hours.

So I waited.

Despite my intense desire to sleep and despite the fact that I'd stayed up until 1:30 AM scouring the internet for pregnancy symptoms (fatigue, breast pain/swelling, frequent urination, spotting, mood changes) and pregnancy with a condom (in practice condoms are only about 85% effective—*I'm sorry, what?*), I couldn't sleep.

I was going to be sick.

Which was a symptom of pregnancy.

Which didn't make me feel any better.

My search diverted to “using a condom correctly” and onward from there, on and on, hour after impotent hour. I fell asleep with my phone on my chest, but I didn't need an alarm to wake me this morning.

I always had to pee when I woke up, but it was urgent this morning, and I fumbled with the wrapped test, trying to read the directions again even though I'd read them a hundred times yesterday.

Facing downward. In the stream. Long enough but not too long. Lay flat. Wait.

I pulled my leggings down low and sat awkwardly straddling the toilet, then let myself begin to pee before I stuck the stick into the stream, bending forward to watch and make sure it was perfectly positioned.

How was this really happening?

Finally, I pulled it out of the stream, stuck the cap back on and laid it flat.

Three minutes.

Three agonizingly slow minutes.

I walked into my kitchen and turned on the coffee, waiting for it to warm up. *How long does it take a Keurig to warm up?* I searched on my phone.

Three minutes.

Okay. Stay calm. Get a mug, make your coffee, go look.

TIME HAD MOVED in a blur since I'd looked at the test, and I couldn't tell you if five minutes or five hours had passed. Mostly, I lay in bed, curled into a tight ball, my eyes open and staring at the side of the nightstand next to me. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the word. *Pregnant*. Just as it had appeared in the tiny little screen. *Pregnant*.

But I'd been so careful.

So goddamn careful.

Will.

It was Will's fault, then.

Fuck, it didn't matter.

I hadn't even been responsible enough to use contraceptives correctly, and now I was having a baby.

Would Will be in my life forever? Should we get married? Did I like Will enough to see him every day for the rest of my life? Should we break up? Should we even have this baby? How the fuck was I going to tell him, and did I have to? I mean, if I wasn't going to keep it...

But no.

I had always been proudly pro-choice—I *was still proudly pro-choice*, I reminded myself—but now this was my uterus, and the choice was mine. I couldn't—my hands fluttered to my stomach, pressing into the flesh and trying to make sense of the idea something *lived* there. Something was *growing*.

The wracking sobs came again, wave after wave of gasping, choking sobs until I must've fallen asleep, because next thing I knew there was a knock on the door.

I pushed myself up to sit, noticing the sky's color had shifted. I walked to the front door, not even glancing down to see how I looked. Probably Carlo, the building maintenance guy. He usually came by in bad weather to make sure the radiators were working.

I swung the door open and was nearly tackled by Reggie, who jumped up on two feet excitedly to lick my face. "Reg! Off!" Milo commanded, while I issued a much less authoritative "Uck," and pushed Reggie down. I glowered up at Milo, who was currently the second-to-last person I wanted to see. He grinned in return, unperturbed. "Were you sleeping?" he asked, gently tugging a single messy wave of my hair.

I pushed my hair out of his grip and out of my face. "A little," I admitted. I didn't move out of the doorway, even though it was cold in the hall. Reggie, however, wasn't waiting for an invitation. He bounded past me and began sniffing the living room rug as if I may've invited other dogs over since he last visited. Milo leaned against the door jamb patiently. I hadn't noticed the bag he was holding until he set it by his feet. "What's that?"

He glanced down at the bag and looked sheepish. "Five beers, ten eggs, a package of bacon, and half a baguette. Pretty

much all the food I had besides some odds and ends—beans, a can of green beans—nothing useful.”

I thought I should’ve understood what the hell Milo was doing wandering around with half-eaten foods on a Sunday afternoon, but I legitimately didn’t. My brain was shit today. I blinked at him dumbly.

“I thought...if we combined our food...we might have something better to share for dinner.”

I was still blinking.

Milo wanted to share food?

“Why don’t you just go buy food?” I asked impatiently. Glancing back, I could see Reggie had made himself comfortable curled on my rug.

Milo’s head cocked adorably, his eyes squinting and his brow knitting together. “Nowhere’s open, Dre, and I couldn’t get there anyway. I had to scrub Reggie dry just to come this far.” He held up the end of a towel I hadn’t noticed slung over one shoulder.

“The apocalypse?” I asked dryly.

“The *snow*pocalypse, I think they’re calling it.”

Crap. The snow.

“How bad is it?” I asked, receiving the same befuddled expression once more.

“Have you really not seen?” he asked slowly, taking a better look at me. I squirmed uncomfortably, then turned away from the door and walked to my front window, pulling open the drapes to reveal a world of pure white.

“Fuck,” I breathed out.

“Crazy, right?” he asked, and I expected his voice to be closer, but I turned to find him still leaning on my door jamb.

Dracula.

Beautiful, irresistible, dangerous, and waiting for me to invite him in.

And somehow, even in the depths of my misery, knowing that I would have to tell my family and Will and everyone I knew I'd gotten pregnant, knowing I'd have to *raise a human* (which was impossible, far as I was concerned), knowing that I didn't make enough money and didn't have a good enough job and didn't have childcare and that my whole life was ruined—knowing all that, my body still warmed a little at Milo's presence.

"You okay, Dre?" he asked quietly from his place at the door.

I had turned back to the window, looking out at the white world with its soft, smooth edges of snow pile, lost in my thoughts, but now I turned to look at him once more.

I was *not* okay.

"Shut the door. You're making it cold," I said.

The vampire's invitation granted, Milo entered without further comment, walking directly to the kitchen. I followed him, watching as he began to dig through the fridge and pull things out. "Did you just come to steal my food?" I asked, glancing down as Reggie slid past me and sniffed around his owner. He was a big dog—an Irish Wolfhound—who came nearly to my chest. His head was big and thick, but the rest of his body was wiry under the heavy, shaggy coat.

Milo's head popped back out from the fridge. "I came because you're good company, but I thought we could combine to make something better."

Combine with Milo to make something better. The idea made my cold, dead heart flutter just the tiniest bit.

Except—I was pregnant.

And see? That could kill any flutter.

Milo pulled some peppers and onions out and began chopping. "Damn. Do you have any black beans? I should've brought mine," he said, and I walked into my attached pantry (which was really just an old closet at the back of the kitchen which still boasted a barely-sealed coal door) and dug a can of black beans off one of the shelves.

“Do you want corn?” I called out. “Or tortillas?”

“Ooo,” he replied, sounding delighted. “Absolutely. This is going to be amazing. You’re going to love it.”

My can opener was stored in the closet, so I opened both cans on a prep cart then brought the entire assortment to the kitchen. I turned the Keurig back on, since it had long since turned itself off while I’d been sobbing in bed. Milo was already heating a pan when I came back out. “You wanna rent a movie?” he asked, his eyes not moving from the pan as he shoveled the red pepper and onion in. “Any chance you have a zucchini?” he added.

“Yes to the movie and no to the zucchini. You’re asking a lot for a guy who showed up with a half-eaten loaf of bread as his contribution.”

He grinned. His dirty blonde curls had grown long enough to tuck behind his ears and he was currently sporting a scruffy beard. He’d grown up in the Midwest his whole life, and yet he somehow looked like he’d just set down his surfboard.

Sometimes I liked to picture him that way—with a surfboard under one arm, wetsuit tied around his waist, running a hand through his hair and smiling like this...

Hey, Drea, remember how you’re pregnant?

With a baby?

In your uterus?

I pressed my fingers into my eyes, willing this feeling of dread/worry/anxiety/horror to go away. “I’m going to go sit down,” I said.

In the moment before I walked out, I saw his expression morph from jovial to concerned. “I’ll bring this out when it’s done, okay?” he offered gently. Only a few minutes had passed when Milo stood in front of me, holding a coffee. “I thought maybe you’d want this,” he said, handing down the mug.

God, yes. Desperately.

“Thanks, Milo,” I said, raising the mug to my lips and taking a little sip, then opening my lips to let it pour back into

the cup when I realized I shouldn't be drinking coffee.

"You okay?" he asked, now clearly alarmed.

"I'm fine. It's hot," I lied. Milo nodded and walked back into the kitchen. I pulled my phone out, frantically searching the internet for *coffee during pregnancy*.

Oh, God, I drank some of that wine the other night. I'd have to search that too.

A few minutes later, I'd established I was allowed two cups of coffee and I shouldn't worry about the wine, although I intended to worry anyway.

"Be good," Milo growled at Reggie as he carried out a stack of tortillas and some hot sauce. "Coffee cooled down?" he asked, looking at me curiously.

"It's great. Thanks." I took a sip in illustration.

Milo looked wholly unconvinced, but he continued to bring out food, returning with a plate filled with bacon and a bowl of some sort of scrambled egg mixture with a big spoon in it. "My suggestion is a scoop in a tortilla with hot sauce," he said, handing me my plate. I did as I was told, serving myself up a breakfast taco while Milo did the same. He grabbed the remote control as he took his first bite. "You didn't turn on the TV."

"Go ahead," I suggested, though he already had.

He flipped around for a while and then gasped. "Did you see *Fury Road*? It's on cable. Wanna watch it?"

"Isn't it that old *Mad Max* movie?" I looked at him, my nose curled in distaste.

"It's really good. You have to see it. You'll like it." His eyes widened adorably with each statement, and though I doubted he was right, I had a hard time saying no to Milo.

"Fine," I said with a sigh. My mind wasn't going to focus on a movie anyway.

Milo grinned excitedly. "Sweet. How's the taco?"

I took another bite, holding my hand in front of my mouth so I could talk while it was still full. “Really good. Thank you for making it.”

“My pleasure, Dre.” He pressed some buttons and set down the remote. “You’re going to love this.”

AN HOUR and a half later I’d actually become interested enough in the movie I could forget everything for a minute or two, but then the pregnant girl would come on the screen and it would all come back in a nauseating rush.

“Keep watching,” Milo said. “I’m going to run to the bathroom.”

Shit, yeah, I needed the bathroom, too.

I paused as he got up and headed down the hall, and he looked back. “You don’t have to wait.”

“I have to go too. Go ahead,” I said, standing and stretching as he walked through the bathroom door.

It only took him seconds to turn around, and before I knew what was happening, he was standing at one end of my short hallway while I stood at the other. “Dre,” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

I should’ve been quicker. I should’ve realized it was all still out. Or better yet, I should’ve thrown it away in the first place.

But I hadn’t, and now Milo knew. Will didn’t know. My mom didn’t know and neither did Matty or Hannah, but Milo knew. I stared, wide-eyed, unsure what to say. Milo walked closer, cutting the distance between us in half, but not closing it altogether. “You should go, Milo,” I said in a rush, but I didn’t mean it, and I hoped he wouldn’t leave.

“No. Talk to me, Dre.” He cut the distance in half again. Mathematically, he could keep cutting halves forever and

never reach me. “You—you’re pregnant?” He choked on the word, like it was difficult to push it through his throat.

“I mean, yeah, I guess.”

“Will’s?”

“Of course,” I snapped. I felt the emotion surge up in my chest, burning its way to my throat and behind my eyes, and I willed myself not to cry. Milo cut the distance in half once more, and he was very close. “It was an accident, Milo. Please don’t tell anyone yet,” I choked, leaning into his chest, which was only inches away. The tears came then, and I pressed my face into his well-worn sweater, trying to hide from the world.

There was a minute or two during which I let myself cry—lost myself in it, really—and then I gulped down some air and the tears slowed to a trickle. It was at that point I realized Milo’s arms were wrapped tightly around my middle while he whispered softly to me. “Shh. It’s alright. I’ve got you. It’s alright.”

The crying waned, and his whispers faded, but I still had one ear pressed into Milo’s strong pectoral, listening to the slow thump of his heart and growing increasingly embarrassed. He hadn’t let go, but probably only because he felt badly. “Dre?” he asked finally, and I tensed, bracing for any of the countless humiliating questions he might ask.

“Hmm?” I asked. I started to step back, but his arms pinned me. I looked up at his face, trying to prepare for the questions—or maybe for pity or even judgment. I was trying to be ready, but I knew it was going to hurt.

“While I have you stuck here, you should probably admit *Fury Road* is an awesome movie.” The statement was unexpected enough that a laugh bubbled up out of me, which made Milo grin, and my body relaxed as he let me go. “I still have to pee,” he said with a conciliatory shrug, “but I’ll be awaiting my apology.”

25 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I let days pass by. When Will told me he had a really difficult case and would be tied up, I didn't protest. I should've. I was a shitty person. I knew all those things. But I still didn't say anything to him. Today, though. Today I had to try and make dinner plans with Will.

I'd meant to tell people. I meant to tell Mom and Matty and Hannah and of course Will. I'd meant to. I was so nervous, though. It was messing with my stomach. I lay in bed, my nose scrunched unhappily as my stomach turned. I had to tell people before this stress made me sick. Being stress-sick couldn't be good for the baby.

I picked up the phone and pressed the button for Mom. She picked up on the third ring. "Hello, beautiful. How are you?"

"I'm okay," I said, not even sure if it was true.

What exactly was the opener for this conversation?

"I, uh, I wanted to tell you something."

"Really?" She sounded cautiously intrigued.

I inhaled deeply, but it turned my stomach worse. "It's just—I'm dating this guy, Will, you know?"

"You mentioned that," she replied, her voice clearly requesting I continue.

I should explain that Mom was awesome—just, the best. We'd been close when I was young, but after the divorce, our relationship changed. First, it was terrible. I was twelve and I

rebelled so hard, but she hung in there. Through every session with the therapist and taxiing me back and forth to my dad's, she hung in there.

I'm not sure when the switch flipped for me. Maybe not until I was twenty or twenty-one, but I suddenly realized she was pretty damn amazing, and I stopped fighting so hard, and our relationship became good again—better than good—I felt comfortable talking to my mom about almost anything.

Anything, it turned out, except unintended pregnancies.

But none of that was my point. My point was that my mom didn't take shit from anyone. She could read people, and now that she could tell there was *something*, she wasn't going to let me off the phone until she knew what.

"I'm pregnant," I said flatly.

There was silence. *Is this why it's called a pregnant pause, I thought humorlessly, because it's an agonizingly suspenseful hesitation?*

Probably not.

"What does Will think?"

"I haven't told him yet," I said.

"How far along are you?" I could hear disapproval in her voice, even though I was certain she was trying to sound neutral.

"I don't know," I admitted. I felt stupid saying it, but it hadn't occurred to me to do any research before this call. Although I stalled almost a week before I even made the call, so it's not like I had any excuse.

"Andrea," Mom said reprovably.

"I made a doctor's appointment, but I haven't been yet. How do you know how far along you are?" I asked plaintively.

Or, a better question, how was I going to raise a kid when I couldn't figure out basic adult stuff?

"How long ago was your last period?"

I did some quick math before I replied. “Forty-two days.”

“Okay. You’re six weeks pregnant.”

“Oh. It’s that simple?” I asked, feeling stupid.

“Yep. When do you plan to tell Will?”

“This week. He had this case that’s kept him busy so he hasn’t had time to talk.”

“Andrea,” she scolded once more.

“It’s not like I can drop this on him during a phone call,” I said defensively. *Hey, Will. How’s the case going? Have I mentioned I’m pregnant?*

“Andrea.”

I made a throat noise that acknowledged she was probably right without me having to say it aloud. “I’ll try again for tonight.”

“That’s good. Then call me tomorrow, sweetheart, and you can tell me what he said. Anything else new?”

I rolled my eyes. Was I going to become like this in another twenty-six years? “No, Mom. Certainly nothing that comes close to *I’m pregnant.*”

“Just checking,” Mom said mildly. “Don’t bite my head off. I’m going to let you go, then. I’m at the grocery store and I have to check out.”

There was something mildly disturbing about the fact my mother had been wandering the aisles of her local Jewel Osco while I delivered this news, but I didn’t mention it. “Okay, Mom. Talk to you soon. I love you.”

“Love you too, Andrea.”

The phone returned to its call favorites, and I stared at it, dreading the call I knew I had to make. Finally, I hit the contacts and found *Will*, pulling my knees up to my chest and resting the phone on them.

“Hey, Drea. I only have a minute. I’m headed into mediation.”

This interaction, in some form or another, had happened twice in the past two days, and I'd let it happen. Said, "*Okay, good luck!*" and let him hang up, but I knew I couldn't keep doing that. "Are you free tonight? I'd like to see you."

"Drea, I'm sorry. This week is crazy, like I told you. I might be able to have dinner tomorrow. I have to see how things are going."

"Okay," I nodded even though he couldn't see me. "Tomorrow is good. Let's have dinner. I think we should talk."

"Talk?" Will asked. "Shit. Is everything okay? I've just been busy this week."

Part of me wanted to blurt it all out now. Detonate it like a bomb through the telephone, then hang up and run.

"Will, no. It's nothing like that. I know you have to work, but it's important." It felt wrong to only tell him this much. I knew he'd worry. His mind should be on his case, not on whether or not I was going to dump him, which was probably his naïve concern right now. Although, if I was honest, the future of my relationship with Will had been swimming around in the crowded pool of my thoughts all week. Was this *it*? Sure, the sex was okay, but what about when we were older and had less sex and we just stared at each other, wondering what happened to our lives? I couldn't lie and say "*Everything's great, so don't worry.*" Everything was not great. Everything was fucked. I was about to leap him from casual dating to tied together for life via the biggest responsibility we'd ever face.

So, no, I couldn't make him feel better now.

"Okay," he said, his voice resigned to the breakup he was probably anticipating. "Tomorrow. I'll make it work."

"Thanks, Will. Good luck today."

"Bye, Drea."

Again, the phone returned to its call screen and I was left staring at it, feeling impotent and alone. I switched to my text screen.

Drea: What are you doing?

I'd avoided any extra conversation with Matty and Hannah so far this week. It hadn't been hard, since the storm had extended my regular two days off to three. In the days since, I'd made polite chit-chat, but mostly worked with my headphones on. Hannah was always happy to put her head down and lose herself in her work, and Matty had been extra busy because the storm had closed the shop Sunday and Tuesday, so I'd made it through almost the whole week without a soul knowing my secret.

Well, no one except Milo.

Milo had stayed with me that first night. He hadn't said another word about the pregnancy test, and that'd been fine with me. Instead, we'd watched the end of *Fury Road* and then started the *Saturday Night Live* I'd recorded the previous night. I don't know when I fell asleep, but I woke up on my couch, covered with a blanket, and Milo and Reggie were gone. He'd left a note saying he took my spare keys to lock up, and he'd drop them off later.

It continued to snow through Monday, but Milo came by as promised. I'd just made a big pot of soup and was sitting down to enjoy it with Milo's half-loaf of bread when he knocked. I laughed when I opened the door to find him in a balaclava with only his honey-brown eyes visible. He pulled down the bottom half, revealing his big grin. "It's fucking cold out here." Reggie was still dusted with fresh snow, and he shook himself off in apparent agreement.

"Come in. I can get a towel for Reg. I made soup."

"It smells amazing, but I'm waiting on a call for work, so I should get back. I just wanted to bring you your keys." His gloved hand opened to reveal the little set.

I plucked them up, trying not to let my disappointment show. As much as I was glad to have an excuse to stay inside and avoid telling everyone about the baby, spending time with the one person who already knew seemed like a pretty tempting way to get my brain off all my problems. "Let me get you some soup, at least," I said, tossing the key into the bowl next

to the door and turning toward the kitchen before he could refuse.

“Yeah, I’ll take you up on that. I still don’t have much food.”

I poured two Mason jars full of soup and ripped off half the bread for him, packing the entire thing in an insulated lunch box I’d used for work a few times. “Here you go,” I said as I walked back to the door, where Milo and Reg were waiting just inside the threshold.

He beamed when I handed him the bag. “You’re amazing, Dre.” Reg poked my hand with his cold wet nose, and I pet his head absently, still looking up at Milo. “You’re good?” he asked.

“I’m good.”

“You’ll call me if you need anything?”

“I won’t need anything,” I replied. My eyes shifted down to the bag for a minute, realizing I’d packed Milo lunch and dinner. I sort of wished I’d thought to only pack lunch. I’d never call him, but I liked having him around.

“Alright. Have a good night then, Dre.” Reg popped back up as Milo put his hand on my doorknob.

“You too, Milo.”

He’d texted once on Tuesday afternoon to let me know our local grocery store was back open and sending out deliveries, but I hadn’t heard from him in a couple days.

Hannah: Nothing

Matty: Just left work. Let’s drink wine

Matty: This week sucks

You have no idea, Matty. And I couldn’t even drink the damn wine.

MATTY PUSHED a bag into my chest as she walked in. “I got snacks,” she said. I could see chips and salsa under some chocolate, but I didn’t want any of it. My stomach had been bothering me all day.

“Sorry. I didn’t think to make a pizza. I can throw one in,” I offered. “Thanks for coming out to my place.” I felt too crappy to go much of anywhere.

Hannah made a slight humming noise. “Let’s just order something.”

“Sushi?” Matty offered, knowing full well Hannah disliked it, although she often used my love of sushi to bully Hannah into ordering some white rice and dealing with it. Today, though, the idea of raw fish was nauseating, and on my internet list of prohibited foods besides.

“None for me,” I said, and Hannah grinned at Matty victoriously.

“What do you want?” Hannah asked me.

“I’m not—I don’t feel good,” I replied awkwardly. Matty started to hand me a glass of wine, but I put a hand up. “I invited you both here to—” I was cut off by a knock at the door. Of course. Because life was giving me every possible opportunity to tell no one.

I walked out of the kitchen and to the front door, sighing as I looked through the peephole. I swung open the door to reveal Milo and Reggie once more. “Hey,” Milo hummed out, his voice its usual melodic tenor.

“Hi, Milo,” Matty drawled. I fought a second sigh and watched a slight flick in Milo’s eyebrow as his eyes traveled to Matty, then me, and back.

“Hi, Matty.”

“Come on in, we’re just ordering dinner,” Matty offered, and I didn’t have to turn to face her to picture her perfectly—head slightly cocked, golden eyes slightly narrowed, pretty smile dancing playfully on her red lips. I’d seen that expression more times than I could count, and there wasn’t a

man on earth who could resist it—at least, never one I’d seen. Milo’s eyes shot back to me.

“You should—” I hesitated to finish the sentence—to say he should go, even though I was thinking it—but Milo understood.

“I shouldn’t stay,” he replied, his eyes on me for a second before they shifted back to Matty. “I just wanted to check in on Dre after the storm. I didn’t know everyone was here. I won’t interrupt girls’ night.”

“You’re not interrupting anything,” Matty protested.

“Matt,” Hannah muttered under her breath disapprovingly.

“Have a nice night,” Milo said, shooting me a quick wink. I’m not sure what the wink meant. I doubted I’d be having a great night telling people I was pregnant. Just the idea made me want to throw up.

Matty let out a dramatic sigh as the door closed behind Milo and I turned back to look at her. “Tell me again why you’re not dating him?”

“I’m with Will,” I said dispassionately, and now seemed as good a time as any to launch into my confession.

“Fine. Be with Will, but tell me again why *I’m* not dating Milo?” Matty said with a grin.

“Matty,” Hannah scolded.

“Alright, alright,” Matty acquiesced, and we moved to sit down in the living room.

I picked up my bottle of water, looking down as I spun it in my hands. “You guys,” I began, and I knew they were looking at me, even though I could only see them through the tiniest sliver of my peripheral vision. “I’m pregnant.”

“Holy shit,” Matty murmured at the same time as Hannah let out a gasp. “Are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious,” I snapped.

“Will?” Hannah asked tentatively.

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?” Matty asked.

“Will? Nothing yet. I haven’t told him.”

Hannah’s eyes went wide. “How far along are you?”

Matty’s hand came up, interrupting my answer. “Have you decided if you want to keep it?”

“Yeah, I’m going to keep it.”

Matty nodded. “Okay, because we’ll be with you no matter what,” she assured me.

“Of course we will,” Hannah agreed.

“Thank you, guys.” I felt better. Except I felt terrible. Truly terrible. “I think I’m getting sick, too.”

“Morning sickness?” Hannah asked.

The idea hadn’t occurred to me. “I don’t know. I didn’t really feel it this morning, so maybe it’s not. Maybe I’m just coming down with something.”

“I don’t think it works like that. I think it’s whenever.”

Matty looked at Hannah questioningly. “Why the fuck do they call it morning sickness, then?”

“I didn’t name it, Matty,” Hannah replied impatiently. “I’m just telling you what I saw when I was a kid.”

When Hannah was a kid.

If there was a subject more awkward than my pregnancy, it was Hannah’s childhood, growing up in some weird hippie commune she called *The Community*. She didn’t bring it up much and we didn’t ask a lot of questions. I wondered exactly how many pregnant women she’d tended as a child, but I sure as hell wasn’t asking.

“Jesus, I don’t know anything. How am I supposed to raise a kid?” I lamented.

Matty pulled out her phone, tapping for a minute. I assumed she was researching morning sickness until she held the phone up triumphantly. “There. I ordered you a book. Now

you'll know as much as any new mom who wasn't raised in a...community." Matty gave a shake of hands that wasn't quite air quotes as she said *community*, and Hannah made a face at her, but smiled.

26 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I looked up one of those online pregnancy-day-by-day websites and figured out the baby was officially twenty-six days old, which was somehow different than the number of days since my last period, which was how I figured out how many weeks along I was. Apparently birth happened roughly 270 days after ovulation, but since that was harder to track, doctors estimated using the last period. I sighed. The whole damn thing was confusing.

The website said the baby was three millimeters big and was currently growing a heart, which felt like something I didn't want to fuck up, so I also found a giant list of all the things I shouldn't eat. It was extensive, but I felt so shitty I didn't even care.

I threw up once in the morning, but it didn't make me feel better like throwing up was supposed to. I ate a saltine cracker, but I couldn't make myself eat anything else. Mostly I sat on the couch all day watching home renovation shows and feeling right on the verge of vomiting.

Will was coming over in six hours and I was supposed to cook for him, but I would rather die than get up. I picked up my phone and dialed.

“Hi there, beautiful. How are things?”

How was it I could be going about my life just fine, but then my mom asked me how things were and I just wanted to dissolve into a puddle? “I'm shitty, Mom. Really, really shitty.”

“Oh no! Did you talk to Will?”

I sniffed, still fighting tears. “No. I’m supposed to tonight, but I don’t even know how I can because I’m so sick. I’m not going to make it, Mom. I can’t make it through nine months like this.” I scowled as her laughter tinkled through the phone. “Oh my God, I’m serious. How can you laugh?”

“I’m sorry, Andrea. I had the worst morning sickness too. The stories I could tell you about all the times I threw up—” she began, but I cut her off.

“No! God. I can’t listen to stories about being sick. What’s the matter with you?”

She laughed some more. “What have you eaten?”

“Nothing,” I whined, “and I’m still nauseous all the time. I tried eating some saltines but I didn’t feel any better.”

More laughter. I’d had about enough of this woman. “Andrea, you have to eat!”

“I can’t,” I said, feeling a thickness in my throat just thinking about it.

“Baby, that’s what makes the sickness go away. Small amounts, constantly. I used to set an alarm to wake up and eat overnight. Find things you can stomach. Personally, I liked Coke and ramen noodles.”

“Mom, these websites say I need protein and milk and vegetables, and you’re telling me to drink pop and eat ramen?” I shook my head, rolling my eyes.

Mom laughed again, damn her. “Good luck getting any of that healthy crap in if you’re vomiting nonstop. Trust me. A Coke every morning. You can try the ramen or find your own thing, but find some panaceas.”

“Panaceas?”

“You’re cure-alls. If you believe they’ll work, they will.”

The idea of eating still turned my stomach, but I had to do something before Will showed up. “Fine.”

“Let me know how it goes. I can always drive up if you’d like.”

“Maybe next week. I’ll call you.”

“Sounds good. Love you!”

“You too,” I grumbled as I clicked off the phone and stood, walking into my little kitchen. I knew I didn’t have Coke, there was no question there, but I checked my pantry to see if I had a random ramen lying around. No such luck. Leaning my head against the fridge in defeat, I looked down at my phone once more.

Drea: Any chance you have a Coke and a ramen over there?

He responded quickly.

Milo: Is this a craving?

I sighed irritably. I could just walk to the store myself. I could make it. Maybe. But before I could tell Milo to just forget it, he texted again.

Milo: I have it. I’ll bring it over in 20

Milo: That ok?

Drea: Yes. Thank you

Milo showed up, as promised, twenty minutes later, holding out a twenty ounce Coke and a package of ramen noodles. “Oh my God. Thank you. My mom says these will make my morning sickness go away.”

“Really?” he asked, stepping in without invitation and closing the door behind him. I hadn’t intended to have Milo stay, but once the vampire had been invited, he could come and go as he pleased, right? Milo took the ramen back from me. “I’ll make this for you, if you want to sit. Or shower. You could shower.”

I looked down at myself. I was wearing the leggings and thermal combo I’d put on for Matty and Hannah’s visit, but I’d been a day removed from showering then. Now I was bordering on gross. “I look terrible.”

Milo grinned. “You look alright. You *smell* terrible.”

“Milo!” I squealed, lifting an arm surreptitiously to try and smell myself. It wasn’t great, but I couldn’t shower this instant. I had a date later. I’d need to shave and—

I stopped myself.

What was the point? There was no way our by-the-way-we’re-pregnant date was going to turn into a let’s-get-down date. That’d be messed up.

“Okay. I’m jumping in the shower. Are you sure?” I asked as I stood, clutching my stomach as I felt it lurch.

“I’m sure you smell, yeah,” Milo replied, wiggling his eyebrows. “Try this.” He dug into his bag and pulled out one of those chocolate chip granola bars my mom used to pack in my lunchbox. “These helped my sister when she was pregnant.”

I took the granola bar. Did everyone know facts about pregnancy except me? “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

A half hour later I sat on my couch, wearing a new pair of leggings, this time with a tee and oversized sweater. It was insane to me that food was finally getting my stomach back to normal. For a quarter century I’d learned you avoided food when you got sick, now it was the only cure. Pregnancy was fucked up. “I hate men,” I said cheerily as I ate a bite of noodles.

Milo’s eyes widened in a charming, “*Me?*” expression, but he said nothing.

“Yes, you. Women can’t eat ramen noodles and Coke and stay all fit like you,” I said, slurping up another noodle.

He laughed. “I assure you, I’m not drinking pop and eating ramen all day.”

“Still, you had it in your fridge. I would never have this shit in the house,” I grumbled.

And then I saw it.

It was so tiny—minute—but I saw the slightest hesitation; the moment when he considered correcting me.

“Oh, God,” I said, my face contorting with a sudden wash of embarrassment. “You didn’t have this in your fridge. You went out and bought it, didn’t you?” I put one hand over my eyes, rubbing tiredly. I felt the sudden threat of tears—which I will blame on pregnancy hormones, thank you very much—and I pushed them back forcibly.

“It wasn’t a big deal, Dre. Everything you wanted was at the convenience store on the corner. It took five minutes.”

I looked back at him and damn if I wasn’t crying. “Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t have it? I could’ve gone out and gotten it.”

He slipped off his chair and onto the coffee table so he sat in front of me. “Dre,” he said softly, reaching out toward my face for an instant before his hand dropped and he clutched the edge of the table instead. He looked unhappy, and that only made me feel worse. “You’re talking with Will tonight, right?” he asked, and I nodded. He nodded back with a sigh I didn’t really understand. “Good. Okay. I’m sure he’ll take care of you, but it’s okay to call me if you need little things, okay? You’re my friend, and I’m happy to do it.” His voice didn’t sound all that happy. It sounded much more resigned.

I felt like there was going to be more, but there wasn’t. Instead, he stood suddenly and pushed a hand through his messy blonde curls, looking decidedly unhappy. “Thanks, Milo,” I said quietly, still embarrassed.

His face softened into a smile. It was gentle and sad looking, I assumed because he felt so badly about me and my pregnancy. “Always, Dre.”

I’D OPENED the door to find Milo so many times this week, it felt strange to see Will on my threshold. That in itself made me feel guilty—guilty I liked seeing Milo, guilty I’d chosen an apartment in the same building as him two years ago, even if it

was on the other end of the courtyard and even if it was a really good deal. The thing was, when Will was around, I could forget about Milo, and that had to mean something, right?

Will held out an amaryllis. It drooped decidedly to the right when I set it down. “There aren’t a lot of winter flowers, but now I’m thinking I should’ve just gotten roses or something,” Will said with a shrug. He was cute, and I felt badly for preparing to ruin his life.

“It’s beautiful,” I assured him, although it wasn’t really. “Come on in. You want a drink?”

Will entered, tossing his coat over my living room chair and reaching for my wrist before I could walk away. “I’ll take wine, but first—” the pads of his fingers trailed along my jaw to my neck as he closed the distance between us and kissed me. I took in a stuttering breath as our lips parted. Kissing him felt wrong.

“I, uh—I need to tell you something.” I’d planned to get that drink first, but he needed to know.

“So you said. I thought I better steal that kiss while I still had the chance.”

“I’m pregnant.” We were supposed to be sitting on the couch, drinking wine. Well, *he’d* be drinking. I had a very large glass of water, but that wasn’t the point.

Will stared at me. “You’re pregnant?”

“*We’re* pregnant,” I clarified.

“H—how?”

I gave a shrug that clearly said, *you know*. “I mean, condoms aren’t always effective. I guess—I guess, it didn’t work.”

I swear I saw the tiniest glimmer in his eye, like for one second he considered asking if I’d been faithful, but he didn’t. Instead he moved past me to sit on the couch. I reached into the kitchen and grabbed a wine glass and the opened bottle,

pouring as I walked to Will and handing it down to him.
“What are you going to do?”

“I’m having the baby,” I said simply, coming to sit next to him on the couch, curling one leg up under me. Will swallowed hard.

“I, uh, I have to think,” he said, and I nodded my understanding, shifting on the couch to face forward.

Ten minutes passed, during which time I debated whether or not I was meant to say something, but I finally just decided to stick to silence. I’d had all day to cry in bed, Will deserved ten minutes to freak out.

“When did you find out?” he asked finally, and I turned back to face him.

“‘Bout a week ago. I wanted to tell you in person.”

He nodded. “Okay.” He was quiet for another moment before he continued. “Can I be really selfish for a minute?”

“I guess,” I replied tentatively.

“I can’t—I don’t think I can have dinner. I just need a little time to think about this, Drea. I’m so sorry. I know how bad that is.”

I shook my head. “That’s not selfish at all, Will.” It wasn’t. It was unfair to expect someone to engage in idle chit-chat after a bombshell like that.

“I’m so sorry. I have court tomorrow, but can I see you Friday? Can we have dinner Friday?” He stood, putting his untouched wine down on the coffee table.

“Friday. Sure,” I agreed.

28 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I t'd only been two days since I first set my alarm for 2:15 AM so I could eat a granola bar, and I was already exhausted. I wasn't nauseous, though, so exhaustion was going to be the new normal.

I was still sipping my Coke as I walked into work, nursing the soda the way I'd once nursed my morning coffee. I was entering Lunar Month 2, whatever the fuckall that meant, and the baby was growing eyes. I'd eaten Cap'n Crunch for breakfast (which was practically a multivitamin, right?) and although I felt like I could heave at any given moment, I'd so far made it roughly forty hours since my last upchuck. I was no dummy, though, I made my morning commute on the L with a plastic bag, just in case.

"Morning Drea," Julia said pleasantly as I walked in. She didn't know. If it were up to me, no one else would ever know, but realistically, the belly was going to be a giveaway at some point.

"Morning," I replied, walking into the back and daydreaming about being one of those teenagers you saw on TV shows who wore increasingly large sweatshirts to keep anyone from ever noticing they were pregnant.

Yesterday I'd seen one of those *I-didn't-know-I-was-pregnant* shows and it'd blown my mind. I was currently carrying around a barf bag, my boobs were inflated like balloons (sensitive to even a stiff breeze), I couldn't stay awake past nine at night, and I peed every ten minutes. No

normal human could overlook these symptoms. Either I was pregnant or I was dying.

Matty grabbed my arm, pulling me to her office. “Did you tell him?” she asked excitedly. Yesterday had been her day off, so I’m sure she’d been waiting for this update with bated breath.

“Yeah,” I said, not going on to explain more.

There wasn’t much more.

“And?” she asked impatiently, her eyes wide.

“And...he left,” I said with a small shrug.

“What?” She said, the word coming out as two syllables. “That motherfucker. I will rip—”

I put up a hand, looking to quell her desire to rip... whatever she’d been about to rip. “It wasn’t like that. He was stunned and he left, but he said he wanted to see me again tonight.” I shrugged again. “He needed time to process.”

“Time to process?” she repeated, sounding skeptical.

“I mean, to be fair, I didn’t even get out of bed all day after I found out. Sitting and eating Italian food like nothing happened is a big ask.”

“A big ask?” she parroted once more. She was getting on my nerves. I couldn’t even begin to imagine how an unintended pregnancy would explode Matty’s perfect little world.

But it was kinda fun to picture.

“Matt,” I said impatiently.

“Fine,” she agreed reluctantly. “I just worry about you.”

I softened a bit at her uncharacteristic admission. “Thanks. I’ll be good. If Will doesn’t want to raise this baby, then—”

“Then you can finally get with Hot Milo,” she said with a playful grin.

“Right,” I joked. “He was out of my league before, but I’m sure vomiting constantly and retaining water like a human

sponge will level the playing field.” Matty laughed, and I continued, “Seriously, though, I don’t think Will is bailing. He’s a good guy.”

Matty shrugged as she rested her hand on the doorknob. “That’s great for the baby, but is it what *you* want?”

Evidently it was a rhetorical question, because Matty swung the door open and walked out toward the small gathering of employees, leaving me gaping at her back.

WILL SENT a car to pick me up, which was weird. I couldn’t help but assume it was a way to be nice to his pregnant girlfriend before dumping her. A literal guilt trip. Still, I’d spent my last few L rides clutching my barf bag and attempting not to breathe through my nose (because every L smell was nauseating) so I’d take a pre-dumping free ride where I could get one.

Will lived in a loft that was entirely too small for what he’d paid for it, but that was the point, I guess. I dialed the little speakerphone that called up to the loft and he buzzed me into the vestibule so I could take the elevator up.

He was leaning out of his door as I approached, a confident smile curling his wide lips crookedly. “Hey,” he hummed, wrapping an arm around my waist and kissing me gently when I got close enough.

Okay. Maybe *not* a breakup?

“Hey,” I replied tentatively when his lips left mine. He still held me close, and from this angle I looked up at his dark eyes curiously, hoping my extreme confusion wasn’t showing.

“Come in,” Will said, leading me in, arm still slung around my waist. “Food’s almost ready. You can sit down.”

“You cooked?” I asked. In the four months we’d dated, Will had cooked for me only once.

“I did. Eat some bread, if you want.”

My eyes shifted to the garlic herb bread on the table in front of me. It smelled really good, and I hadn't thrown up in hours. I was going to eat that whole fucking thing. I cut a slice for myself (bigger than a normal slice, but smaller than the whole thing), and took a bite.

So good.

Will walked in with a platter of pasta and seafood, which he set in front of me. "I looked online, and it's okay for you to eat all this."

Okay. That was sweet, I guess.

"Thanks," I said. "How's work?"

He smiled, serving each of us some pasta, then offering a container of parmesan to me. "Exhausting, but I think the two cases I've been most involved with are finally coming to an end."

"That's great," I said enthusiastically, although I felt pretty neutral.

"I'm sorry about the other night," Will said as I took my first bite.

"This is really good, and you don't have to be sorry."

"I shouldn't have walked out, Drea. I was overwhelmed, but I shouldn't have walked out. I'll never do that again."

I shrugged. "Well, I'll probably never give you another surprise pregnancy announcement," I said, shoveling in another bite. "This is seriously so good, Will. You've been holding out on me," I joked.

"Drea?"

"Hmm?" I replied, looking up from my food, my mouth full of tender shrimp.

"I really care about you, and I want to be there for this baby." I was swallowing a big bite, preparing to agree this was a good thing, when Will stood.

And knelt.

I didn't want to look horrified, but I'm sure I did.

"You make a good teammate, Drea, and I want to make you my wife."

It was, quite possibly, the least romantic proposal ever. I mean, people who got married so they wouldn't have to testify against each other probably had more romantic proposals. "Will," I protested.

"We'll be a family."

"No. Will, no," I said, looking down at the enormous ring in the box Will had flipped open.

"I knew you'd be unsure, Drea, but it's a good idea. I have great insurance."

My nose curled. Insurance? I had never pictured a proposal which included discussing health benefits. Maybe during his vows we could figure out my FSA options.

I spoke slowly. "I don't want to marry you for your insurance, Will. I want to marry someone I'm in love with. I like you—a lot—but I don't want to get married just because of the baby...I don't think."

Did I?

Was marrying Will the right thing to do for the baby?

I sighed. "Could you—" I gestured for him to stand back up. "Let's just have dinner and talk. Just—please put the ring away for now. It's beautiful, though, by the way," I added awkwardly.

Will stood, his eyebrows knitted together over stormy eyes, rounded lips turned down in a frown. I wasn't sure what to do, so I cut another slice of bread. It was good bread. Finally, he sat and began eating again, and—other than the delicate scrape of fork on plate—silence reigned over us.

I considered myself socially adept, but I didn't have the foggiest idea what to say to the baby daddy whose proposal I'd flatly rejected. I went with, "This is seriously good bread, Will," which I thought might've been the wrong choice. Will looked up from his food, his face still stern.

“You know I’m a lawyer.”

I stopped chewing, my expression rather deer-in-headlights. “I’m aware of that, yes.”

“I’m going to need a DNA test, Drea.”

My eyes widened. This dickhole. “We’re going from marriage to DNA test in one conversation?” I asked in disbelief.

“It would be irresponsible of me not to,” he answered coolly. “We did use a condom every time.”

I struggled to remain calm and keep from saying terrible things. I was very good at saying terrible things. Currently, I wanted to tell Will that maybe his stupid ass couldn’t put a condom on right. I wanted to suggest that maybe he was a bit small, and perhaps *that* was the problem with the condom (for the record, Will was very average in size, but if you’re going to say terrible things, you go for the jugular).

I didn’t say any of those things, though. And wasn’t that the rub? Here I was, refraining from saying terrible things, and there was no one to read my thoughts and appreciate my sacrifice. Alas. Sometimes you had to be a good person for the sake of being a good person. I drew in a deep breath. “Condoms are only effective eighty-five percent of the time, but of course I’ll take the test. I have a doctor’s appointment on Monday.”

“Monday?” he growled irritably. “You know I work Mondays. I’m in court.”

I felt an instant flood of guilt, and the right thing to do would’ve been to apologize, but the guilt made me feel angry, and then... “And I’m supposed to plan around your schedule when two days ago you couldn’t even stick around to talk about it?”

Will flinched, and I knew the jab hit home. More guilt followed. Dammit. I really wasn’t holding the leaving against him—did I mention how good I was at saying terrible things? We resumed eating in silence for a minute until Will spoke. “I told you, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left.”

I knew he was sorry, and I wasn't even upset about it. I was just being a dick. Although, in my defense, he was a dick first...after I rejected his proposal...but still. I inhaled deeply and pulled out my phone. "You don't need to be sorry," I replied. "It's okay that you needed a day. And look." I held the phone out to him. "It's my list of questions for the doctor. I was going to ask about the DNA test. I mean, I have no doubts, but you shouldn't have to be unsure either."

"I appreciate that."

I didn't feel like apologizing, but I truly hadn't intended to keep him away from the obstetrician appointments. I sighed. "And I'm sorry about the appointment. I don't know if I'll ever be able to do weekends because of my work, but maybe we can figure something out for the future."

"I appreciate that," Will repeated.

I cut another slice of bread.

It was really good bread.

31 DAYS POST-OVULATION

What should you wear to the gynecologist? That was the question of the morning as I stared into my closet, trying to choose. I wanted an outfit that said, *I'm responsible. Responsible people accidentally get pregnant too.*

I settled on a pair of jeans and a sweater with a big blanket scarf. I wasn't sure if it was responsible looking, but at least it was warm. I left my hair down, pulling on a hat and my coat and heading out.

The OB-GYN I picked was supposed to be really good, but I had to take the brown line to the blue to get there. It was inconvenient and cold, and part of me just wanted to cave and take a car there, but I knew it would cost a bunch of money. *Every car ride is like a box of diapers*, I reminded myself, tucking my face into my scarf as I walked out the door.

The wind was ri-fucking-diculous, blowing snowflakes into my face like little shards of glass. Sometimes I hated Chicago. My eyes burned and I looked down to avoid that terrible frozen-tears feeling. Digging in my pockets, I pulled out gloves.

"Whoa!" The voice took me by surprise, as did the two large hands on my shoulders. I lurched back and away from them, looking up to find Milo. "Sorry. I thought you saw me," he said with a grin.

"I've gotta catch a train," I said, shifting to one side so Milo would let me by. He turned and walked with me across the apartment courtyard instead.

“Why do you never get a car? It’s fucking freezing.”

I stifled an eye roll, more because I thought my eyes might literally freeze that way than because I thought I would offend Milo. I had similar conversations with Will often, because these were two men with well-paying jobs. Will was a litigator and Milo was a voice actor. Both made over a hundred-thousand dollars a year. I made so much less than that it was ridiculous. My salary was closer to one figure than to six figures. Literally. I stayed at my job because I loved my work and it paid my bills.

Barely.

And that was when I was one person.

A mournful little grunt escaped me. Money was one of the topics I’d banned myself from worrying about. “I’m ordering a ride,” Milo said.

“You don’t even know where I’m going.”

“That is true. I do not. You headed to Will’s?”

I glanced in Milo’s direction as we walked. We were nearly at the mailboxes, and soon he would have to turn back to go home. I was nervous as hell and kinda wished I had someone to talk to. “No. I have my first doctor’s appointment.”

His eyes widened, his thick lashes heavy with freshly fallen snowflakes. “That’s exciting. Will meeting you there?”

“No. He can’t make it.”

I saw a hint of a frown cross Milo’s face, but it was gone so fast I wondered if I was imagining things. “Tell me you’re not taking two trains all the way down to the medical district?” he asked, and I gave him a defiant look that answered his question. We walked through the gate and past the mailboxes, but Milo didn’t turn back. “I’m ordering a car. Come back and wait at my place where it’s warm.”

I was already dying from the cold, and I wanted to say yes, but I shook my head. “I’m good.”

Milo put a hand on my elbow. “Dre,” he said firmly. “You’re the most stubborn person I’ve ever met. The news this morning said you shouldn’t even leave your house. Just let me get you this car.”

Yes! Yes! Yes! “Milo, I’m fine except you’re running me late.”

This time his brow lowered in a visible frown. The anger looked out of place on Milo’s face, and I caught myself before I reached out to touch him. “How can you possibly say no? It’s fucking freezing, Andrea.”

There were a lot of things I should’ve been focused on in that moment, but what caught my ear was that he said my name perfectly. He’d called me Dre for so long, and Drea before that, it came as a surprise he knew it. My eyes shifted to where he still held my elbow and his gaze followed. He let go suddenly, as if surprised to see himself touching me. “Alright,” I agreed. I kinda had to pee anyway, and I’d probably throw up on the L.

His eyes widened happily. “Good. Great. Okay. Come on, it’s fucking cold.” He laughed, turning to walk back to his place, his stride faster now. I had to hurry to catch up.

I’d been to Milo’s apartment, but not with any frequency. A rehabbed two-bedroom, it was much bigger and much nicer than my own place. “Christ, Milo. I didn’t remember how nice your place was. This is beautiful.” The wall with the fireplace—including all the built-in bookshelves surrounding it—was painted black. I sat down on a sapphire chair at one end of a long leather sofa. Reggie hopped up so his front feet were on my lap, his enormous face tilted down to look at me. “Get down,” I muttered, pushing at the oversized beast.

“Reg,” Milo said sternly, and the dog fell into a sit at my feet. “Thanks. I didn’t pick any of it.” He grinned lopsidedly. “My middle sister is an interior designer.”

I breathed out, still marveling at the space around me, which was made both bright and cozy with white accents of blankets and some sort of macramé on the wall. “It’s Pinterest-worthy.”

Milo laughed. “I’m sure it’s up there somewhere. The only way my sister would donate her services was if I gave her carte blanche and let her take all the pics she wanted for her social media accounts.”

“That was an excellent trade. Tell her I’d accept those parameters anytime.” I stood. “Where’s your bathroom?”

Milo looked perplexed. “You can’t go to the bathroom.”

I stood, blinking at the man dumbly. “Why not?” I asked slowly, my brain locking in on horrifying visions of Milo assuming I wanted to shit in his bathroom. I didn’t, but I wasn’t sure exactly how one went about clearing up that misunderstanding.

Milo cocked his head slightly, a faint smile on his lips, and I noticed, looking up at him, he was still wearing his hat and coat. “You need to pee when you get there.”

“I don’t want to pee when I get there.”

This time he laughed. “You have to pee in a cup every time you go to the doctor, Dre. They check it every time.”

“God, what on Earth for?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, but my sisters have had conversations about it because my oldest sister Sammy has a shy bladder. Apparently you have to pee in a cup. Every single time, I think.”

I was still gaping dumbly as I pulled out my phone and discovered Milo was correct. “They’re testing my sugars, I guess?” It came out more like a question than a statement. Add this to the fucking endless list of things I didn’t know and would never know because I was going to be the world’s worst mother. “What else don’t I know?” I moaned, a rhetorical question, since the answer was everything, ever.

Milo looked down, then held up his phone. “Car’s here.”

I stood, inhaling deeply to calm myself. “Okay. Thanks for your help, Milo.”

Milo gave me one of *those* smiles—the kind that turns every woman into a useless vessel for hormones, unable to

process any information other than how insanely beautiful this male specimen was. “I’m coming with, Dre.”

He walked a few steps to the door, holding it open for me, and I followed, my mouth hanging open, still in an estrogen-induced coma. It wasn’t until we were in the hall that my senses came back to me. “No, Milo. You’re not coming,” I protested.

“Dre,” he said, turning to face me as he walked effortlessly backward down the narrow hall, “You’re nervous, and Will can’t make it, and I can do a google search and fill you in on what’s going to happen on the ride over. This is what friends do.”

You probably know I’m about to say yes, and you’re probably judging me right now—I would judge me right now, if I weren’t so confused—but Milo’s argument seemed sound. It was exactly what Matty or Hannah would’ve done. Of course, Matty and Hannah didn’t have a sexy grin that made my ovaries do a *Cha-Cha Slide* every time I saw it.

“Fine, I guess. I don’t know,” I mumbled. Milo held the car door open for me, taking that as a yes and squeezing in next to me. I scooted over to the opposite door to give him plenty of room. “At least tell me what to expect.”

He was holding up his phone, reading from a website, an act that surely would’ve made me nauseous if I’d attempted it while in a moving car. “It’s a little different everywhere, but it basically goes like this: you get there, they have you pee in a cup, maybe fill out surveys, then you go to an exam room. They’ll make you sit in one of those paper sheets for a really long time, then they’ll come in and check you out, probably check the heartbeat or do an ultrasound, and then send you on your way.”

Panic was setting in. “You think there’ll be an ultrasound? Will wants to be there for that.”

He scrolled through the article for a moment, then said, “Some docs do it right away, some wait a little longer. Did you ask?”

“No, of course not. It never occurred to me.” I felt the tears burning in my throat. I hadn’t ever been a crier, but lately I was. I hoped it was a pregnancy thing and not a forever thing.

I thought Milo was reaching for my knee, but he grasped one hand instead, squeezing it. “Don’t worry. We’ll make another appointment if need be. You get to decide.”

“I do?” It felt to me like any doctor worth his salt would look at me and know I shouldn’t be a key decision-maker in this process.

He squeezed my hand once more. “Of course. I’ll make sure of it.” I looked down at where he held my hand. Mine was in a glove, so it didn’t feel so much like holding hands—none of the warmth and surety of lacing your fingers with a man’s and feeling the strength in each oversized finger where they held you tight. This was the kind of hand-holding my mother might’ve done.

Still, I liked it, and that gave me the increasingly familiar guilty feeling.

Probably seeing my eyes on his hand, Milo let go and pulled off his hat, rubbing his fingers through the messy curls beneath. I didn’t think he was trying to look sexy, but I felt like I should avert my eyes.

The car pulled up in front of the medical building and we both climbed out. Milo grabbed my elbow once more, looking at me seriously. “Do you want me to leave, Dre? I don’t want to step on any toes. I’m just trying to be a good friend.”

Would that seem reasonable to Will?

I wasn’t sure, but it was going to have to do. “No, stay. I’m freaking out,” I admitted, biting down on my lip.

Milo grinned as he began walking toward the building. “Are you sure? If you change your mind when you calm down, let me know.”

The minute someone repeats an *are you sure* to me, I instantly begin to wonder if they have ulterior motives. Did Milo really want to leave? Was he second-guessing?

I didn't answer him—and I certainly didn't share my embarrassing thoughts—but rather walked in and headed up to the office instead.

As Milo predicted, I was given a pee-cup and a clipboard full of forms when I signed in. I handed him the clipboard. “Wish me luck,” I said, holding up the pee-cup.

Milo shrugged, giving a little shake of his head and a chuckle. “Good luck?”

Probably everyone knows how to do this, but in case you've missed being pregnant or having a UTI or getting a drug test or whatever else they make you pee in a cup for, let me fill you in on the ridiculous set of rules:

1. *Wash your hands.*
2. *Use wipe to clean labia—front to back, you heathen!*
3. *Open pee jar—be careful not to touch the inside or rim!*
4. *Begin stream*
5. *Collect pee once stream is already going*
6. *Fill it up to the line, or else*
7. *Seal jar and put into pee collection turnstile.*
8. *Wash your hands again.*

I thanked God and Milo as I peed, because no way I would've been able to fill the damn jar if I'd gone at his place, then I headed back out to the reception area, where Milo was sitting, reading a copy of *Us Magazine* absently.

He handed me my clipboard as I sat. “Look—Julia Roberts goes to the grocery store, just like us,” he joked, holding the magazine up.

“Right,” I murmured, looking at the reception area around me. It was painted in a variety of blues, with seats in a few perpendicular rows, which gave the illusion of privacy without actually providing any. Straight ahead of me was a couple, probably in their thirties, bent over a clipboard just like mine, while to my right a younger couple—the woman clearly pregnant—leaned in to look at a shared pregnancy magazine.

My stomach twisted uncomfortably, and I looked back down at my clipboard.

“Has a person, related by blood, had any of the following:”

I began scanning down the variety of boxes, but my family had been in pretty good health. Dad had high blood pressure, so I checked the box.

Then I froze.

How was I supposed to fill out the boxes for father?

And wasn't this important?

I pulled out my phone, hitting the button for Will and ignoring the curious look I could see Milo giving me from the corner of my eye.

“You have reached the voicemail of William Benedetto. Please leave—” I hung up, my stomach lurching as anxiety flooded my body.

“Andrea?” A nurse asked, leaning out the door. She'd said the American “And-ree-a,” but I knew it was me. I hadn't finished the forms—*couldn't* finish them, actually. My heart was liable to thunder out of my chest and my stomach felt like someone was wringing it out. I inhaled a shaky breath through my nose as I stood.

I was more than halfway to the door when the nurse smiled past me. “You can come too, Dad.” I turned to see Milo raise a hand to wave away the assertion.

“I'm not—”

I could see each of the other couples in the room looking at this scene—even as they pretended not to watch. My cheeks flooded with heat and I cursed Will for not taking off and Milo for not being the father and me for being so fucking dumb I'd landed myself in this situation. “Please,” I croaked to Milo, but sound didn't even come out, just a tiny puff of air in the shape of a please.

Milo hopped up and closed the distance to me in a couple of strides, placing a hand on my spine and looking down at me

with a concerned smile as we began walking once more. “You okay?” he asked under his breath.

“Right this way, Andrea.”

“It’s Drea,” Milo corrected.

“Oh, sorry,” the nurse said mildly, not appearing apologetic in the least as she led us down a hall, made a right, and gestured into an open door. “Step up on the scale,” she said, but I was wearing boots and a coat and holding my clipboard, and I froze.

Milo took the clipboard from my hand. “It’s not done,” I said suddenly, shooting a frantic look toward the nurse. “I don’t know the father’s family history. Can he fill it out next time?”

The nurse’s gaze shifted to Milo, still holding the clipboard. “You want to go ahead and fill it out?” she asked, tipping her chin.

Milo gave her one of his patented Milo-smiles, and she blinked a couple times as if she’d been stunned by a bright light. “I’m not the father—just a friend.”

If you’d asked, in that moment, if it was possible to be any more embarrassed than I was, I would’ve told you no, but as I watched the nurse’s lips curl into a slight smile, her eyes raking down Milo, I reached mortification status. “Well aren’t you a sweet friend,” she drawled.

Fuckall.

I was a pregnant woman—somehow at the obstetrician with her neighbor—and now he was going to score a date.

This was my rock bottom.

“Thanks,” he replied politely—this time without the smile—as he held out the clipboard. “Probably you should take this.” He turned back to me. “Let me hold your coat, Dre.”

I handed Milo my coat and shucked my boots and I was tempted to tell Milo to look away as I stepped on the scale—even though that was stupid and vain and *Hello! I was a pregnant lady with a boyfriend*—so I didn’t.

The nurse asked me about my last period and my symptoms and made notes in a tiny notepad she stuffed back into her pocket as she stood. “Go ahead and take off your bottoms including underwear. Nice to meet you,” she said, although she was looking at Milo even as she held out a folded, fabric sheet to me. “The doctor’ll be right in.”

Milo gave a polite nod and I mumbled my thanks as she walked out, holding the sheet awkwardly. “You good? I can go.” he offered.

I’m not a horrible person, I swear. I knew he should go. Intellectually, I knew it was crazy to go to the obstetrician with my crush. Even if said crush was also a longtime friend. I knew that.

But.

But if I had to sit in this room, bare-assed and alone for a half hour, waiting for the doctor to come in, thinking about Will and this baby and my brand new, suddenly completely predetermined life, I was going to freak the fuck out. “Stay,” I said, “but go behind the curtain so I can get changed.”

Milo stepped behind the curtain that shielded my naked self from the door, and I hustled out of my jeans and underwear, carefully folding the latter and slipping them between the layers of my jeans where they lay folded on the counter. I hopped back up on the examination table and covered myself with the large fabric sheet—a clear upgrade from the paper one my old gynecologist had been using—but which was barely large enough to wrap around my waist completely. In eight months my ass was going to be on display. “Okay,” I said to Milo, sucking in a deep breath and trying not to think about it.

43 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I swung my feet sideways, stumbling in the half-dark of my room, my eyes still straining to adjust as my feet tried to remember their role in the running process. I made it to the bathroom, pulling up the seat as I knelt in a fluid, well-practiced motion and heaved—a yellowish mix of two AM granola bars and water splattering into the bowl below. I panted, catching my breath, arms outstretched, head lolling, leaning forward until I held the upright toilet seat. The edge of Will's toilet bowl had pee-splatters on it, but I didn't care. I mean, I cared, it was gross, but it was the middle of the night and I wasn't in the mood to clean someone else's toilet seat.

I finally pushed myself up and plodded back to bed, feeling equal parts exhausted and wide awake. I climbed in and Will, who'd remained blissfully asleep on his side of the bed, now stirred enough to reach out and draw me near. I allowed him to pull me into his body, appreciating the warm firmness of the man as my body eased back into his. I relaxed, but I knew I wasn't going to fall right back to sleep, and instead my mind wandered to the conversation I'd had with Matty and Hannah earlier that morning.

Matty was picking up stems and snipping them with a precision that only came with years of experience. "I've decided to give Will a chance," I announced as I constructed a bouquet. Hannah stood next to me looking critically at an arrangement, head cocked while she listened, but it was Matty who was doing most of the talking.

“You’re going to marry him?” she asked, failing to hide her disbelief.

“No. Jesus, no. I just mean, I’m going to really give the relationship a shot.”

Matty nodded, looking unimpressed as she plucked out a ranunculus. It was possible the look was for the flower, but I assumed it was for me. “That’s good,” she said, although her voice sounded doubtful.

“It is good,” Hannah piped in.

“It would be good for the baby,” Matty added, although, going by her tone, she still didn’t buy into her own argument.

“But the baby would be fine if you weren’t with Will,” Hannah said. I looked up at her, but she was still entirely focused on the arrangement.

“You think?” I asked quietly, my eyes never leaving her face even though she wasn’t looking back.

There was silence as Hannah scowled at her work and pulled out a few flowers before she finally looked up, surprised to see Matty and me staring at her. “Of course I think so. You don’t have to be with Will to raise the baby.”

I THOUGHT ABOUT THAT NOW, tucked under Will’s arm. If not for the baby, would I choose Will? I couldn’t say for sure. I ran my fingers lightly up his arm, feeling the spring of hair and give of muscle under my fingertips. Admittedly, I liked the feel of him holding me against my body at night, but that hardly seemed like a reason to maintain a relationship.

Will was...Will.

I felt like I should have more passionate feelings in either direction—*My heart flutters every time I see him* or *Ugh. I hate the way he chews*—but I didn’t really feel either of those. I hadn’t yet begun the death knell of nitpicking, but I also didn’t feel that new-relationship-excitement. Mostly I just felt tired and vaguely nauseous, but that obviously had very little to do with the man himself.

For a long time I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but the sleep never came. The conversation just repeated in my mind until the sun came up and I rose with it.

76 DAYS POST-OVULATION

It felt weird to be off on a Saturday. Saturdays were the busiest day at Whittaker, except maybe Friday, when we typically had an event *and* had to be ready for all our Saturday weddings. Still, Friday never felt like Saturday. On Saturday, we were working dawn to dusk to prep a wedding, and since I often went with Matty or Elizabeth to do setup, I had a very close and personal view of each wedding.

Had I seen bridezillas?

You bet. Lucky for me, handling bridezillas was entirely Matty's job, and she was really good at it. It was kind of fun to watch.

Was it cool to set up in the fanciest hotels in the city?

Not especially. Most of the people who visited Whittaker were too rich for their own good. It was disturbing.

Did I know exactly what kind of wedding I wanted?

Chicago's Theatre on the Lake aside, not really. I knew the flowers I wanted, obviously, but in my opinion the wedding itself didn't matter nearly as much as the person I was standing next to. As florists we didn't actually stick around for many weddings, but the ones I'd seen in real life were pretty cut and dry—if the two people were so in love they forgot the wedding existed, it was perfect. Everything else was just performative bullshit.

Had I ever seen someone stood up at the altar?

Kind of. I once set up a wedding that was canceled at the last minute by a bride with second thoughts. You'd think it'd be like having a front row seat to a soap opera, but really it was just very sad. I understood if she wasn't in love and couldn't go through with it—and really, it would be better for them both in the long run—but that day, watching the groom pinch his lips together and swallow his tears, I was heartbroken for him.

I pulled on my coat—a lighter one today because the weather had finally warmed up to a balmy fifty-two degrees, which any Chicagoan knew was as good as shorts-weather after a long winter—and walked out into the courtyard, my eyes catching immediately on the mess of blonde curls.

I hadn't seen Milo in the three weeks since my first trip to the obstetrician, but I'd found Amazon boxes of ramen noodles and Coke in the mailroom a couple of times. I had intended to head out to my appointment, but Milo's position on the other end of the courtyard, facing my direction as he played fetch with Reggie, gave him a clear view of me, and he began walking in my direction after the next throw. The ball came within a few feet of me and Reggie charged after it, his blue leash streaming behind him, then brought the ball directly to me, dropping it at my feet and sitting obediently. I picked up the tennis ball and threw it across the courtyard, letting it sail past Milo, who was growing close.

“Hey,” Milo said. “How you feeling?”

My hand touched my belly lightly, not because of the baby, but because I knew my pants were held closed by a rubberband. As of yesterday they didn't close easily. “I'm good. Thank you so much for the ramen and Coke. It's been a lifesaver.”

“Did you try any granola bars?”

“I did,” I said, curling my nose. “I've been setting an alarm for 2:15 every morning to eat one. It's horrible.”

“I'm sorry,” he said, looking genuinely empathetic.

Not your fault. You weren't the guy that put the condom on wrong, I thought, but instead said, "The waking up is horrible, but the granola bars are a lifesaver. I can't thank you enough."

"I'm glad to help. I'll see what other wisdom I can glean from my sisters."

I couldn't decide if the idea of Milo discussing me with his older sisters was flattering or horrifying, and thus I hadn't yet responded when I heard Will.

"Drea!"

I glanced in the direction of the gate, where Will's face was pressed to the bars, a cocksure grin on his lips. It was Milo who jogged over to the gate and let him in.

"Hey," Milo said, sticking out a hand in Will's direction, and I watched as Will clasped the hand and the two men pumped vigorously. I couldn't decode guy body language, so I had no idea what to make of any of it. "Will, right? I'm Drea's friend, Milo. I was just telling Dre I'd check with my sisters and see if there were any other morning sickness cures they could think of," he explained.

Will's eyebrows flicked up and he nodded as if this were an obvious solution to my problem, even though he'd never mentioned his own sisters in our conversations about pregnancy. "That's a great idea. Thank you."

Milo shot a friendly smile toward Will, then stifled a yawn. "I'll let you two get going on your date. I just got back in town, and I'm exhausted. Dre, I'll catch you around, okay?"

"We're not headed out on a date, we have the ultrasound today," Will said, and I couldn't help but frown a little at the "not a date" assessment. I'd been looking forward to getting lunch afterwards. "Thanks again for going with to the first appointment. I had a really important case going on at the time I couldn't miss." At this point I was pretty sure we'd moved from friendly conversation into gorilla-like chest-pounding, but Will's tone continued to be congenial.

My gaze shifted back to Milo curiously, assuming there must be some subtle posturing happening, but I saw nothing.

“You’re going to your first ultrasound today? That’s phenomenal. Bring back a picture,” he said in reply.

“I will,” I agreed. “I didn’t know you were out of town. Where were you? Work?”

“Yep. For two weeks. Poor Reggie was boarded, so I thought he needed a good run,” he answered.

“Oh! Next time you should bring him by me. I can take care of Reg.”

Milo smiled a crooked little smile that accentuated his full lips, and I found my eyes drawn to them. It was probably a pretty normal human reaction to attractive male features, but a rush of guilt flooded me anyway, and my eyes darted to Will—strong jaw, dark eyes, the littlest bit of an overbite that made his lips look even more kissable. “It was good to see you,” Milo said, snapping his fingers once by his side. I watched as Reggie fell into line next to Milo’s hip, Will’s arm looping around my waist in a way that felt very possessive for a man who’d just scoffed at the idea of a date.

“You too,” Will answered before I had the opportunity.

“You too,” I repeated, feeling silly. Will dropped his arm at the gate and I followed him through, glancing back at Milo, who stood with his large hand on Reggie’s shaggy head. He shot me a wink—Milo, not Reggie, obviously—and a grin that left me smiling despite my efforts to be unaffected.

I looked back at Will, who now walked in front of me as he closed the distance to the waiting car—why did he not just wait up, for fuck’s sake—and I felt the familiar rush of guilt that came any time I saw or even thought about Milo.

What kind of mother was thinking about other men all the time, right? Except, when I thought about it, this baby had done a lot of shit to my body—it gave me boobs libel to tip me over, made me pee thirty-five thousand times a day, left me tired and bursting my pants buttons and vomiting night and day and crying at old episodes of *Seventh Heaven* (yeah, I don’t get it either)—but it did nothing to make me love Will Benedetto. I could choose to be with Will because it was best

for my baby, but that choice seemed to have very little effect on my body's response to the hot construction guy working across the street (he'd been in coveralls and a hoodie for the past month, and everyday I found myself imagining peeling off those layers to reveal bunching cords of muscles beneath...) and it did nothing to dampen the decade-old crush I had on Milo.

But it did make me feel plenty guilty.

I glanced at Will once more as we slid into the backseat of the car. He was already looking out the window, but his gaze returned to me then, as if maybe he could feel my eyes on his hair. "So that was Milo, huh?" Milo was not what I wanted to talk about, and I gave a little grunt in agreement. "He said he was out of town. Where was he?"

My nose curled in irritation at the question, innocent though it was. "I don't know. L.A. usually."

Will's hand landed on my knee. It was warm through the leggings I was wearing, and I softened. "Right. Isn't he dating Taylor Swift or something?"

"He's obviously not dating Taylor Swift," I muttered irritably.

Will smiled crookedly. "Well, he's dating some model or something, right?"

Yes, last I knew he was, but I didn't want to sit around some Uber discussing Milo's dating life. "I have to pee," I said with a sigh. How could something the size of a lemon make me have to pee this much? I was terrified to imagine what a watermelon was going to do to my bladder. I imagined I'd just leak all day like a water balloon with a pinprick.

"You should've gone before you left," Will scolded.

"I couldn't pee at home, because then I wouldn't be able to pee in the cup," I informed him, proud to have this new bit of knowledge—quite possibly the only damn thing I knew about being pregnant. Will made a noise in his throat, but I couldn't tell what it meant. Silence reigned for a while before I spoke again. "Are you excited about the ultrasound?"

He was looking out the window, watching the buildings pass, and it was a moment before he responded. “I’m kind of freaked out, Drea.”

He didn’t look at me, and I put my hand on his thigh. “Me too.” At this he looked back at me, his dark eyes troubled.

“I, uh…” Will trailed off, glancing out the window again as we slowed to a stop outside the medical building.

“What’s up?” I asked, but he shook his head dismissively, scooting closer in a way that demanded I open my door. I obliged, sliding out of the car and stepping up onto the sidewalk.

“Nothing. You ready?” he asked, reaching out to guide me by the elbow. I slipped the elbow grab and offered my hand instead. I was the only one of the two of us who knew where we were going. I didn’t need to be guided.

I led us into the building and to the elevators, taking us up to the third floor and making a right as we entered the hall. Will had given my hand a squeeze before dropping it in the elevator to run his fingers through his hair nervously. I watched him from the corners of my eyes. Sure, his behavior was weird, but it wasn’t every day that you saw your unplanned, unborn child, so I figured I’d cut him some slack.

I walked up to the desk as we entered the office and Will followed closely behind. “Andrea Moretti,” I announced, smiling politely.

“Hello, Andrea,” the receptionist said. “You can use one of the cups in the bathroom. Wipes are in there. Please wipe front to back, then use the oil pencil to write your last name on the cup, and we’ll call you back in a few minutes.”

“Okay, thanks,” I replied. “The father wasn’t able to make it to my first appointment, so he wasn’t able to fill out the medical history form, but he’s here now, so we could fill it out,” I offered.

“That won’t be necessary,” she replied mildly, not looking up from her computer. I wanted to ask *why* that wouldn’t be

necessary, but it didn't seem like she was going to be any more helpful, so I turned back to Will instead.

"You can sit. I'll be right back," I said, and he nodded, walking to the grouping of chairs behind us as I went through the doors that led to the back.

The cups were different from the one I'd used the first time, which had a lid and my name attached on a sticker. These reminded me of the cups that come with Easter egg dying kits, and I didn't think to write my name on it until after I peed, which was a definite mistake. *Good to remember for next time*, I thought as I put the still-warm sample into the little pee-cup closet in the wall. Will didn't notice me as I came through the door, allowing me to watch him as he sat, his leg drumming furiously while he flipped through pages of a pregnancy magazine. I reached for a gossip mag as I sat down next to him, crossing my legs and laying the magazine on top of my lap. "How you doing?" I asked, a smile curling one side of my lips.

"This says it's important to pick good compression garments after you give birth," he replied.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "What's a compression garment? I have an image of a mother nursing in a corset, but I imagine that's not right," I joked. Will chuffed out a short laugh, looking up at me with the tiniest of smiles. It was little, but it was more than he'd offered in nearly an hour.

"Andrea?" The nurse called, and I stifled an eye roll at her predictable mispronunciation.

"It's Drea," I corrected as I stood, walking to her.

"Sorry, what?" she asked. "Andrea Moretti?" she repeated, still butchering my name.

"That's us," Will answered quickly, and I shot him an irritated look.

"Drea," I corrected again. "I go by Drea. I don't know if you can add that to the chart or anything."

"It doesn't matter, Drea," Will mumbled, following the nurse in back.

I shot him an irritable glare, but he was too distracted looking up at the room numbers to notice.

“I’ll make a note,” the nurse said mildly. Let’s bring you into room six, and you can step up on the scale, Drea.”

I stepped onto the scale as Will sat down in the chair opposite me, his leg beginning to drum once more.

“Wonderful. Go ahead and have a seat and we’ll take your blood pressure, then I’m going to bring you into our ultrasound room, okay?” The blood pressure only took a minute and then she was moving again and Will hopped up to follow.

“Will we meet with the doctor?” I asked as we followed her down the hall once more.

“After,” she replied, ushering us into a darkened room. “Have a seat here and you can lower your pants just a touch—to your hips, okay? The ultrasound technician should be here in one minute.”

“Is this what last time was like?” Will asked when we were alone. I couldn’t see him where he sat behind me, and I had to fight the urge to twist around to see his face.

“No,” I said. “We just stayed in the room and saw the doctor.”

“Have you thought about my proposal, Drea?” Will asked, and I froze, my eyes wide in shock. I had no idea he still wanted to talk about it. My mind reviewed the proposal frantically, trying to remember how we’d left off, and I opened my mouth to say something—*anything!*—but the door swung wide before I could, revealing the ultrasound technician silhouetted in the bright hall.

“Hello,” she said cheerily. “Are we ready to see baby?”

“We are,” I replied, false cheer in my voice, my thoughts still split in a thousand different fucked-up directions.

“I’m Ally,” she said, “and you’re...”

“Drea,” I replied, “and this is Will.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Drea and Will. Let’s see this baby of yours.” She picked up a squirt bottle of something. “I’ve been warming this, but it’s still going to feel funny, so I’m sorry,” she said, helping me tuck paper towels around the edges of my clothes before she squirted.

Not cold, just goopy.

“Alright,” she announced as she held the wand over my now messy belly, not yet touching me, “I’m going to take some measurements, get you some pictures, and then you’ll go back and meet with the doctor to go over results. Sound good?”

WE’D SOMEHOW gone ten minutes in silence. I was sure he was waiting for me to talk about the proposal, and, lacking a good answer to his question, I’d simply remained mum. This strategy wasn’t going to last long.

“Do you want one?” I asked finally, holding out a strand of ultrasound pictures.

“Sure,” he said flatly, taking the pictures and looking down at them for a while. I’d already stared at them for a long time when the technician gave them to us. It looked like I might be pregnant with a Teddy Graham. “This is our car,” he added, nodding toward the car waiting at the curb.

I slid in first this time, and he followed. “I can’t marry you, Will,” I said finally.

“Why? Because we’re not in love?” His voice was disdainful, as if this were a foolish reason.

“Yes. Exactly.” I’d been hoping our driver didn’t speak English well, but I caught him glancing in his mirror and I blushed, lowering my voice pointlessly. “A baby isn’t a good enough reason to get married.”

Will rolled his eyes. “It’s the best reason to get married. The baby deserves a family, and we’re both ready to settle down. You know that, Drea.”

It was true that if I met the right man—someone I loved, for God’s sake—I’d be ready to settle down, but under no circumstance was I ready to *settle*. “Look, we can keep dating. We can see if there’s anything there.”

Again, silence.

Silence for so long, I feared I may be getting the silent treatment.

Then he spoke quietly. “That’s not something I’m willing to do. I honestly don’t think I’m ready for this, Drea.”

My brow dropped, anger bubbling in my stomach. “You’re not *ready*? Ready for what?” Leave it to Will to go from marriage to *not ready* in the span of a car ride.

“I don’t think I’m ready for this kind of relationship,” he replied.

I felt the rage hit me like a too-big wave that crashed over my head, and I could hardly breathe. “You’re not *ready*, Will? Because there is most assuredly a baby in my goddamn uterus and they are most assuredly coming out in September.”

Will sighed. It was a condescending sigh. “I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.”

“When I’m right? Yeah, becomes hard to argue, eh?” I snapped, relieved to see my apartment. I swung the street-side door open the instant the car came to a stop. The driver was yelling at me, but I didn’t care.

84 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I clomped up the stairs, looking down at my Converse while I walked, my belly small but now visibly sticking out of my body. It used to feel impossible to envision a time when my belly would be big enough to obstruct the view of my shoes entirely, but at fourteen weeks my body no longer felt like mine at all. Maybe that was the purpose of all the vomiting and crying and water-balloon boobs—I was being reconditioned to think of my body as something outside of myself, so that when truly horrifying things began to happen, I wouldn't question it.

Your skin and uterus are going to stretch enough to jam a watermelon-sized human into a body cavity which was already the exact size of your existing and very important organs.

Sure, sounded reasonable.

Then you will force said human (full of its own bones and organs) through a hole you struggle to get a large tampon into some days.

Obviously. That made sense.

Then you will return to your previous size as if nothing ever happened.

Hmmm. Are we sure this is going to work?

But then, before you can think too hard on the subject, you have to jump up to throw up or cry at an episode of *ESPN's 30 for 30*. It was a bizarre way to live.

Hannah was leaning on her door frame, watching me walk up the stairs. “You’re moving slow, lady.”

Looking up, now only a couple steps away, I made a raspberry at her and she laughed. “Is Matty here?”

“She just got off the L, so she’ll be another five minutes,” Hannah replied, shifting out of the way to let me into the apartment, where Truman had padded up to the door to await my attention, his long tail swishing.

“Hey, Tru,” I said, holding a hand out to him and scratching behind his ears as he rubbed his thick skull into my palm. He sat his butt down first, then lowered his front paws, and finally rolled over onto his back, revealing his belly to me. I followed him without thinking, as I always did, and was soon crouching on the floor to pet him.

“Truman,” Hannah scolded, “Don’t make pregnant women crawl around the floor to scratch your belly. Have some dignity.”

“He’s fine,” I said, thinking backwards on my butt so I was sitting on Hannah’s floor. Truman, ever the opportunist, wriggled closer until his head lay on my extended legs.

“You’re so good with dogs. You should get one,” Hannah suggested, and I looked at her with a wry smile.

“Before or after the baby?” I asked sarcastically, and she blushed slightly. “I think I’m going to have my hands full. Here’s hoping babies like me as much as dogs do,” I muttered.

“Obviously your baby will think the world of you,” she replied flippantly, as if this were a guaranteed truth. “What’s happening with Will?”

“Yes, what’s with Will?” Matty chimed in as she walked up the last of the stairs. Hannah held a hand out to me and I let her help me up so I could get out of Matty’s way. Hannah’s place was great, but it was definitely tiny.

I didn’t really want to talk about Will, but I’d known I couldn’t have a girls’ night without the subject coming up, so best to get the discussion out of the way. “Will is the same,” I

replied. “He’s ready to marry me, but doesn’t want anything to do with me besides.”

“What about the baby?” Hannah asked.

“I’m not entirely sure. He wants to be in the baby’s life, I think.”

“Well, that’s good at least,” Hannah said on a sigh.

Matty was far less impressed, her well-manicured eyebrows nearly touching her hairline. “I hate him.”

“Stop,” Hannah said.

“What? Why can’t I hate him? He’s treating Drea like shit. This is his baby, you know.” Matty set down her bag and stood with her hands on her hips.

I sighed. My every inclination was to agree with Matty, but I no longer had that luxury. “Because he’s the baby’s dad, and the best thing I can do is get along with him, even if he’s wildly hatable.”

The statement received an oversized eye roll from Matty. “Fine, but before we do what’s best and get along, can we all agree Will sucks?”

“Yes, two-thousand percent,” I grumbled. Hannah said nothing, but locked on the two of us with her scolding gaze.

“Alright. I can live with that.” Matty picked up her bag of snacks and walked toward the kitchen. Hannah and I followed. “So, now that we’re “Team Will” again,” she said this part with enough sarcasm to deepen Hannah’s scowl and to make me smile, “what’s the plan?”

My lips twisted thoughtfully. “Let’s not go so far as “Team Will,” and there is no plan. The baby isn’t coming for months, so we wait and see how we can work it out.” I pulled two trays of sushi out of the bag I’d carried in (cooked for me, and nobody better dare suggest there’s cross-contamination, because I’d lose my mind) and a box of fried rice for Hannah. Matty added a bag of Doritos—which was Matty’s contribution to most everything—and Hannah grabbed three Heineken 0.0’s. None of us had been big Heineken drinkers

prior to my pregnancy, but now Hannah and Matty often chose non-alcoholic beers when they were with me, which I thought was sweet.

We brought all the food out to the living room couch and got ourselves settled before turning on *Past the End*, which was our favorite trashy nighttime drama.

IT WAS NOT EVEN ten as I walked into my own vestibule, but I was already exhausted. I froze when I heard a jingling ahead of me, but the noise quickly revealed itself to be the massive head of an Irish Wolfhound. “Reggie,” I murmured, offering a hand that the dog gave a quick lick.

Milo’s head popped over the railing of the nine stairs that led to my landing. “I was writing you a note,” he said.

“No need. I’m here,” I replied, climbing the first six stairs before stopping, simply because there wasn’t enough room at the top for all of us. “Did you bring me more ramen? You didn’t have to do that.”

“Are you not eating it anymore? I tossed some Coke and granola bars in as well.”

“Nope, I’m still eating all those things, although I’ve been thinking about trying to sleep through the night instead of setting my alarm for the granola bar. I’d kill a man for a full night’s sleep.”

“Are you still getting sick?”

I shrugged, mildly appalled that daily vomiting had become shruggable in my life. “Sometimes, but not as much. Mostly I just get queasy now.”

Milo laughed. “That’s good, I guess?” he said, although the statement sounded like a question, and I laughed in response.

“You sticking around, or just pulling a ding-dong ditch?” I gestured toward the door.

“Actually, ding-dong ditch today, but I was hoping you and Will would come to a dinner party at my house Wednesday night.”

I tried holding my breath.

I tried rolling my lips between my teeth, biting them hard enough to hurt.

I tried anything on Earth that might keep the tears from coming right then, but I was hopeless. I mean, if I couldn't stop crying at commercials, what hope did I have when it came to a situation like this?

And so the tears came, burning at my throat and the backs of my eyes, and Milo rushed down the couple stairs that separated us, his hands landing on my arms. “Dre, what's wrong?”

I sucked in a stuttering snuffle, trying to stop the tears, but they were happening whether I liked them or not, and I gulped a sad little hiccuping sound, still trying to catch my breath.

Seeing I couldn't explain myself, Milo pulled me in for a hug. We'd hugged before, but not often, and I really sunk into this one, appreciating the strength I felt under my cheek. “What happened with Will?” he asked quietly, and I realized his face was dipped in close to my ear.

Intellectually, I knew I should pull away from Milo, but I didn't want to look him in the eye while I talked about Will. “I don't know. He gave me an ultimatum, then didn't like my answer.”

Because I was still clutching the man, I felt his muscles stiffen ever so slightly, but I couldn't have told you what that meant. “What was the ultimatum?”

“He wanted to get married.”

Milo exhaled a long, slow, noisy breath. “But you said no?”

“I don't love him.”

“Does he love you?” Milo asked.

“No,” I said quickly. “I mean, I don’t think so. Even his proposal was all about becoming a team and using his excellent insurance. It was like a meeting with HR...with a big ass ring.”

Milo chuckled, and I felt the rumbling of it in his chest where my face was still pressed. I really needed to remove myself from this embrace.

But one more minute.

Then Milo set his chin on my head. “I’m really sorry about Will, Dre. Does he still want to be in the baby’s life?”

“I assume, but we haven’t worked anything out yet.”

Neither of us spoke for a couple of minutes, but Milo’s chin remained on my head, and I didn’t move from his embrace. “I still want you to come Wednesday,” he said finally. “You can bring Matty.”

I stood up abruptly, surprising Milo as I squirmed out of his hold, because how stupid was I, melting into his hug when he was busy trying to finagle a way to invite Matty over?

“You okay?” he asked, and I nodded noncommittally, already pushing past him toward the door.

“I’m fine,” I grumbled.

I’d made it to the top of the stairs when his hand captured my wrist, pulling me to a stop. I looked back at the man irritably. “Dre, you can bring Will or Matty or that other friend you have—what’s her name?”

“Hannah.”

“—or Hannah or no one at all. I don’t care. Just come, please,” he said, and he seemed genuine, but it didn’t do much to make me feel better.

“I’ll think about it.”

He smiled, pushing his hair behind one ear and lifting his brow over a single golden eye. “I’m gonna bring you ramen every day until you say yes,” he threatened.

I lowered my chin, shooting him a dismissive look that was belied by the smile that tugged at the corners of my lips. “So I get daily grocery deliveries and still don’t have to go to your party? How terrible for me.”

He still held my wrist, a detail I’d forgotten until his thumb began a slow stroke down the sensitive skin on the inside. It made my toes curl in my shoes. “Wednesday,” he repeated.

“Right. And bring Matty,” I repeated back, trying to sound neutral.

He pursed his wide lips. “Bring anyone you want. I just want to see you.”

87 DAYS POST-OVULATION

“We have a strange week coming up,” Elizabeth said. I’d previously been looking down at my bump, paying only half-attention to Elizabeth and Matty’s morning meeting, but at this I perked up, not sure what “strange” would entail. “I got a call late last night from Mrs. Hauser,” Elizabeth continued. We were all aware of the Hauser-Stone wedding, involving two of the most influential families in Chicago and scheduled to take place next week. “It’s been canceled,” she said.

My eyes went wide, and there was an audible gasp from someone. “Do we know what happened?” Julia asked, and I cringed, because although we all wanted to know, Elizabeth wouldn’t take the question kindly.

“Of course not, and I wouldn’t share it with you if we did. These are incredibly private families, and we will *not* be idly gossiping about them,” Elizabeth snapped.

Private my ass. Those two particular families went out of their way to land on the society pages of the newspaper. They dreamed at night of being the Midwest’s answer to the Kardashians. It wouldn’t surprise me if the entire wedding had been a publicity stunt. God knew they could afford it.

“The Stone wedding was our only event next week,” Elizabeth continued, interrupting my thoughts, “and while I’m not looking to take money out of anyone’s pockets, Matty and I would like you to consider taking any vacation days you may be holding. You know we’re entering into the busiest time of year, so it will be nearly impossible to be out after this.”

That sentiment may've been a little over-dramatic, but it obviously did get much harder when people were out over the spring and summer months. Still, I didn't plan to take off during spring or summer. I needed the money for Polpetto (the not-quite name I'd found myself calling this baby, since when I said "they" people assumed I was pregnant with twins. The word meant *Little Meatball*, which was a nod both to the baby's approximate size and my frequent desire to eat turkey meatballs).

"Any questions?" Elizabeth asked.

No one replied.

"Great. Check in with Matty or me if you plan to take any time."

"LUNCH?" Matty asked, leaning over my table a few hours later. "Hannah's in."

I glanced at my watch. It was just shy of noon, when most people would leave to get lunch. "Sure. I'm in." I thought—not for the first time—that I should make my lunches everyday so I could save money, but being pregnant was exhausting enough without having to give up weekly lunches with my friends as well.

We walked up to a local taco shop, sliding into a booth as we waited for our orders. "Can you believe this wedding?" Matty hissed under her breath.

"It's crazy," I agreed. "Are you working next week?"

She nodded. "Mom wants to look at the year ahead and all that shit," she muttered, taking a sip of water.

I looked to Hannah, who shrugged. "Not sure yet," she said, "but I doubt it."

"You guys have plans tonight?" I asked. I'd gone back and forth on Milo's party, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to go just a little.

“What’s tonight?” Hannah asked as our taco plates were set in front of us. I was nearly drooling over the fish tacos on my plate.

“Milo’s having a party, and he invited you guys.”

“Seriously?” they said in unison, although Matty sounded intrigued and Hannah sounded shocked.

“Yep,” I replied. His exact words had been rattling around my head for days. *Bring anyone you want. I just want to see you.* Okay, so I was sure he didn’t mean it the way I was imagining, but dear God was I really enjoying the imagining.

“I didn’t even know he knew my name,” Hannah said, lifting a taco to her mouth and tilting to take a bite. I didn’t have the heart to tell her Milo *hadn’t* known her name, although odds were good he would remember it now—Milo might’ve looked like a god, but he was really down to earth. Hannah and Milo had just never directly interacted.

“Why did he invite us?” Matty asked.

I shrugged. “He was inviting Will and I, but then I told him we’d broken up.”

A smile curled one corner of Matty’s mouth. She was holding a taco, but not taking a bite. “What did he say *exactly?*”

Stalling, I took a bite of taco. It was damn good. “I don’t remember,” I said through my full mouth.

Matty’s eyes narrowed and her grin deepened. “Liar.”

I swallowed, clearing my mouth. “Okay, he said, “Bring Matty and Hannah if you want. But come.” This was a tiny lie, but it was the gist of what Milo said without sounding unnecessarily rude, so I went with it.

At this, Matty’s eyes widened and even Hannah’s taco dangled in the air. I took another bite nervously. “Have you two ever had sex?” Matty asked.

“Sex?” I asked, as if the word were foreign to me. “Of course not. No. He’s—he’s *Milo*—have you seen him?”

Matty rolled her eyes, eyelashes fluttering prettily. “What are you? A bridge troll?”

“No, but Milo dates models—actual working models, not even Instagram models.”

“You’re ridiculous, and we’re going to this party. You need to have sex with Milo.”

“Have you lost your mind? I’m fourteen weeks pregnant with Will’s baby. Literally the last thing I need is to have sex with Milo.”

Matty made a face, her nose curling unhappily. “And you’ve been unhappy with Will for months.”

“I have not,” I said on reflex, but a seed of worry took root in my mind that perhaps it was true.

Matty took a bite of taco, staring at me the whole time. I’m not even sure she blinked. The woman was psychotic. “What’s his AOE?”

“What the fuck’s an AOE? Is that a baseball thing? You know I don’t know baseball,” I said. Hannah looked equally flummoxed.

“Average Orgasms Expected.”

“That is *not* a real thing,” I said, in the same instant as Hannah asked, “Is that a real thing?” I glanced at her with a slight smile curling my lips. She was adorably naïve sometimes.

Matty took another bite of taco. I wasn’t sure if it was to lend her bullshit an air of authority or if she was just thinking it up as she talked. “It should be,” she replied finally. “A man’s AOE should be a 0.8 *minimum*, and I’m being generous. I mean, in real life, we all should be aiming for a 0.95 or better.”

Hannah shook her head. “But what does that *mean*? And is it real? You didn’t answer.”

“It’s not real,” I repeated, plucking a chip from the bowl between us.

Hannah looked to Matty for confirmation of my assessment. “Well, it’s not in books or anything,” Matty conceded, “but this shit is scientific.”

I laughed and Hannah looked skeptical, but Matty persisted. “Think about it. I say bare minimum is four orgasms out of every five interactions, because when you think about it, that’s pretty low. That’s saying, if you have sex twenty times, four will be duds. Who wants that? Really, we should all be aiming for a 0.95.”

“Orgasm nineteen out of twenty times?” I asked with a grin, doing the math for all of us.

“Precisely,” Matty answered, popping the last bite of her first taco into her mouth with two fingers. Admittedly, you couldn’t have this conversation without thinking of past boyfriends’ AOE, and both Hannah and I were silent for a minute.

“What was Will’s AOE?” Matty asked with a smirk.

Not great.

My face probably gave away this truth, because she sat staring, waiting for my answer. “I don’t know,” I answered, exasperation evident in my tone. “Less than 0.8,” I admitted. Definitely closer to half.

Hannah’s brow quirked up, which always looked a bit strange since she didn’t manicure her thick brow, so it seemed to make a long caterpillar wriggling across her forehead. “But seriously, Matt, how many men meet this arbitrary line you’ve set?”

Matty looked unimpressed. “All the ones who want another date.” Long lashes blinked over honey-brown eyes. The woman had balls, I’d give her that. “After all, men expect a perfect 1.0, right?”

Okay, she had a point, but I wasn’t going to encourage her.

Matty’s brow—delicately waxed in stark contrast to Hannah—bounced up and down salaciously. “What do you think Milo’s AOE is?”

“Haven’t considered it,” I lied. As a matter of fact, in all my best fantasies, Milo had an average greater than one.

“Sure,” Matty replied, her tone making it obvious she didn’t believe my lie. “You can tell me after the party tonight.”

“You wanna go?” Hannah asked, sounding unhappy at the prospect (Hannah was not a crowds/party person).

“Up to you,” Matty said with a smile, nodding toward me as she bit into her next taco with gusto, “but I’d like to go. It’ll be fun.”

MATTY WORE a lightweight floral dress that fit her like a glove, tossing a chunky sweater over it to keep out the early April chill. Hannah didn’t come, of course, and next to Matty I felt awkward in my aqua-colored fitted damask dress. I had the exact size baby bump where people couldn’t tell if you were pregnant or not, and so they glanced furtively at your stomach all night.

I was used to seeing Matty’s dark hair twisted up and away from her face, but it was down and flowing over her shoulders at present, looking like a silky curtain of chestnut brown. My hair was down as well, laying in messy auburn waves that extended just past my shoulders.

“Where’re your shoes?” Matty asked, and I looked down at what I could see of my bare feet.

“My bedroom,” I said, walking away from her and to the closet in my bedroom, where I dug out a pair of platform espadrilles.

“Those are cute,” Matty said brightly as she attempted to tuck the hanger strings back into her dress.

Pulling my second shoe on, I reached out to help her. “Thank you.”

“You excited?” she asked.

“Excited?” I repeated, unwilling to admit I was currently losing my mind over what Milo had meant by inviting us tonight. The answer to her question was obviously yes. Or, more accurately, the answer was, *I’m freaking the fuck out.*

“Yes, excited.” Matty rolled her eyes. “Sometimes you say shit and I just want to strangle you,” she said pleasantly, as if she were telling me my hair looked nice today.

“That seems dramatic,” I replied dryly, reaching back into the closet to grab a clutch and then following Matty to my door.

Milo lived at the northeastern-most edge of the U-shaped complex while my own apartment was tucked into the southwestern bend of the U. Because of this, the most direct route between our two places was through the grassy courtyard, but since the snow had thawed, the grass was unwalkably muddy, so Matty and I stuck to the sidewalk where it ran along the building.

We hit the button for Milo’s place and were quickly buzzed through, walking up the flight of stairs to find his front door open a crack. I pushed it slowly.

There were so many kinds of parties.

A fact which did not occur to me prior to pushing open Milo’s door.

Because, shit, I was a twenty-six-year-old woman and every time I’d gone to regular twenty-six-year-old parties, they looked like a mess of people holding cans of beer, standing around bowls of chips and poorly-thought-out appetizers.

Not Milo’s party.

Milo’s party was a fucking soiree. It was a dinner party. Were those the same thing? I didn’t even know, but Milo probably did. Regardless, I was glad Matty had demanded we err on the side of dressing up, because this was a motherfucking dress-up party. Did I sound like a child when I said that? Because I felt like a child in this sea of Chicago sophisticates. Except...pregnant.

Thank God for Matty.

“Glad you brought me?” Matty asked quietly, either reading my mind or reading the sudden tension that rippled through me. She shot me a wink.

“Hate you for bringing me, is more like it,” I grumbled under my breath. “Reggie,” I murmured, reaching to pet the shaggy gray dog as he approached.

“Come on,” Matty said, touching the back of my arm to spur me on.

We headed toward Milo’s kitchen, giving polite smiles to people as we walked. It was a group of only eight total people, half of whom were sitting in the living room sipping wine, while the other half were perched on barstools at Milo’s island. Milo was stirring something on the stove, and although he stood with his back to me, my eyes were drawn to the thick curve of muscle at the backs of each arm—visible even under his cardigan. He was mouthwatering.

“Hello,” Matty said cheerily, and Milo turned to look at us, a smile spreading across his handsome face, his eyes warm on me. Those golden eyes raked down my body, and I felt naked in front of him. My hand drifted to my stomach as if I could cover Polpetto.

Setting down his spoon, Milo reached out and gave Matty a hug, then aimed himself at me, first pulling me into a gentle embrace and then turning his face to kiss me softly on one cheek. I’d hugged Milo before, but not one previous hug in eight years had included a kiss. I was shell-shocked. “This is Matty Whittaker and Drea Moretti,” Milo said, nodding toward each of us in turn. His hand still rested on my spine. “Ladies, this is Sylvia, Kesean, Raul, and John. They’re actors I work with.”

I resisted the urge to tell Kesean I absolutely recognized him from a carpet commercial that played before a bunch of onDemand shows. It was one of those ones you weren’t allowed to fast forward past, so I’d been stuck watching it a billion times.

“Nice to meet you,” Matty said, serving as my voice box, since I was apparently struck dumb since that kiss.

“Yeah, pleasure to meet you,” I agreed, but I could sense I was awkward and stilted.

“You want wine?” Milo asked, and I could see he was looking at Matty as he stepped up to the counter full of bottles.

She hummed her agreement before saying, “White, please.”

“Do you do voice work?” the woman identified as Sylvia asked. She had icy blue eyes and blonde hair that flowed nearly down to her waist in pretty waves. I’d never seen eyes quite that color, and I wondered if they were contacts. Either way she looked like some modern Aphrodite.

“No, I own Whittaker Floral in the West Loop,” Matty answered pleasantly. It was the first indication Matty also felt a touch intimidated by this strange breed of beautiful actor-folk sitting before us. Matty still worked for her mother, although she had every intention of taking over at some point in the future. Accordingly, the shop was actually called *Elizabeth Whittaker Floral and Events*, and it was still fully owned by Elizabeth, but I certainly wasn’t calling Matty out on it.

Milo poured Matty a glass of white wine and walked closer to hand it to her, his hand landing on the small of my back once more. I had to keep myself from jumping out of my skin at his touch, and when he leaned close to my ear to whisper, I almost trembled. “I have sparkling juice, caffeine-free Coke, or water. What’ll you have?”

I will have you, please, in bed and naked.

I felt the heat at my cheeks and thanked God I’d been born with olive skin that covered all but the deepest blushes. “The Coke would be perfect,” I said, turning to look up at him. His face was mere inches away, close enough that I could see the starbursts of darker brown surrounding each iris. I swallowed hard and Milo grinned, drawing my eyes to his thick, juicy, oh-my-God-I-want-to-bite-one lips.

“Coming right up,” he replied, and his fingers gave the tiniest squeeze to my spine. I struggled to force my brain back to the question that’d just been posed by Kesean, blinking up to make eye-contact with the man.

My whole body was currently distracted by Milo, but I feel it only fair to tell you that all three men in this room were hot as hell. John was slender and dark with piercing green eyes, although he had an arm wrapped around Raul, whose dazzling smile was unnaturally white and had the ability to melt your panties just the tiniest bit. Matty already had her eye on Kesean, I was sure, which was fair because with his strong jaw, dark eyes, and megawatt grin he was unnaturally attractive. But there was Milo at my side again—“Here you go,” Milo offered, smiling at me. “I have to finish cooking, but I’m glad you came,” he said quietly enough that only I heard him as the others continued talking.

“You need help?” I offered.

“Nope. Sit, relax, meet my friends. There are only four foods I make well, and this is all of them.”

Raul, who’d maybe been eavesdropping on our conversation, leapt out of his seat. “Drea, I’m sorry. Why don’t you take my seat?”

“I really am fine,” I said, and it was true, but Raul frowned.

“I insist.”

Feeling awkward, I sat down in the proffered seat, giving a smile towards beautiful Sylvia, who now sat to my right. “You work with Milo?” I asked unnecessarily.

“Yep. I do mostly voice work,” she answered, which blew my mind, because *seriously* if this goddess couldn’t find work on screen, there was no hope for any of us. “How about you? How do you know Milo? Through Matty?”

I couldn’t help but smile that Matty had, in the three minutes we’d been here, so ingratiated herself that she was the obvious link. “No, no. I work for Matty, but I’ve been friends with Milo since college.”

“Really?” Sylvia asked, sounding genuinely shocked by the idea. “Is he just the same now as he was then?”

I looked at Milo’s back, unsure how to respond, because *my* Milo and *this* Milo seemed very different. The Milo I knew came over to my place wanting food. This Milo seemed like he was an Australian accent short of becoming Curtis Stone—a Curtis Stone with sinful lips.

God, I was a mess.

“He’s pretty much the same, yeah, except I never realized he could cook, so that’s kind of blowing my mind right now.” I watched his arms flex as he strained some pasta.

Sylvia’s eyes were also on the man, and I felt the familiar flare of jealousy as I glanced at her and realized she might share an interest in Milo, or, worse, that he might have an interest in her. In any other scenario, I would’ve cheered her on, but my mental obsession with Milo didn’t have any room for a third party. “That’s so funny. He always throws the best dinner parties,” she mused.

The jealousy was now flaring to a small wildfire.

Why did I not know he threw the best dinner parties?

“Do you mind carrying this out?” Milo asked John and Raul, who grabbed up the tray of bread and bowl of salad, walking out of his gleaming kitchen and back toward the dining area.

Matty and Kesean were still engrossed in conversation about God knows what and Sylvia leapt out of her seat to help. “Let me help you, Milo,” she said, placing a hand on his sculpted bicep. I inhaled slowly, quietly. This wouldn’t be the first time I’d watched as Milo dated some gorgeous model-type.

Milo shook his head. “I think everything is out there but this, and I’ve got it. Go ahead and sit, Sylvie. In fact, guys,” he said, drawing Matty and Kesean’s attention as well, “I think everything’s ready to go. Everyone can grab a seat.”

I stood, accepting the command as applying to me as well, but I let Matty and Kesean walk ahead of me so just Milo and

I remained in the kitchen. Milo was mixing up some sort of pasta, and it looked good. “How is it the guy known for his great dinner parties is the same guy showing up at my door with a half loaf of bread and some cans of beans?” I asked. Milo shot me a roguish look in response, carrying the now-mixed bowl of pasta to where I stood and setting it on the counter. He leaned his hip against the white quartz. “Which Milo’s the real thing?” I asked.

“Both are the real thing.” He rolled his eyes in a way that was self-deprecating and sheepish. “Or neither, depending on how you look at it. You look beautiful tonight, by the way.”

I sucked in a hard breath and was instantly embarrassed that my chest heaved in obvious reaction to his compliment. I’d seen all sorts of expressions from Milo—care, concern, humor, irritation—but the look in his eyes now was different than usual. These were the eyes of a man drinking me in. It was unnerving to recognize the expression on Milo, who’d never shown that level of interest before. “So, I know *nothing* about you. Is that what you’re saying?”

He tilted his head down, shooting me a dry look, his fingers landing softly on my hip to pull me the tiniest bit closer. “You know me better than all these people,” he whispered. “In fairness, I brought bacon that day, and everyone loves bacon. And, you may recall, I was the one who cooked up those beans and bread.” He shrugged. “But if you must know, I practiced cooking this whole dinner with my sister before I ever invited anyone over.” I felt his fingers flex again, and now our bodies nearly touched. What the hell was going on here? “She picks really easy stuff for me to cook.”

A rational woman would’ve probably jumped up on the counter and wrapped her legs around Milo before he had time to rethink whatever he was up to, but I was no rational woman. On a regular day (pre-pregnancy) and with a man who was regular-hot—as opposed to the best looking guy at a dinner party full of models—I had game. I’d never felt as comfortable as Matty, who wouldn’t hesitate to talk up a ten, but give me a solid eight and I would seal the deal. Milo was a *twelve*. “I

thought your sisters lived far away?” I asked (If you’re keeping track, this is a highly unsexy thing to say).

“They do. We video chat.” His face lowered closer to mine and I could feel his warm breath as it whispered over my skin. I failed to stifle the low moan of delight, and one side of Milo’s mouth curled up in a grin. “I’m going to visit them next week.”

“Hey, sorry man, we need more wine,” a man said, interrupting whatever the fuckall was happening here. I stood up straighter, but Milo held me in place with his fingers on my hip. Both of our eyes turned to the man, who’d been chatting in the living room when I arrived. He had jet-black hair, a wide mouth, and eyes that were naturally just the littlest bit squinty, giving the impression he was always picturing you naked.

Or maybe he was just picturing me naked. Who knows?

“Yeah, grab a few,” Milo agreed, nodding toward the bottles lined up on a vintage bar cart. “Paul, did you meet Drea?”

“I did not,” he said, stepping closer with a hand out and shooting me a grin I felt all the way down to my ovaries. Milo didn’t back away from me, which only made the interaction more confusing.

“We’ll be right out,” Milo said. “Can you make sure there’s still a couple seats for us?”

“Of course. Nice to meet you, Drea.”

“You too,” I said, although it lacked any conviction since I felt like I was wandering around the Bizarro World.

“Come with me,” Milo said.

I glanced toward the dining room. “I am.”

Milo’s eyebrows raised. “To Springfield.”

My mouth hung open like someone had broke the latch that was supposed to keep it closed. “Springfield?”

“Yeah, to see my family. My sisters have tons of pregnancy advice. You’ll like it.”

“I—” I what? I’m pretty sure I was gaping in shock. “I have to work,” I said.

Milo looked disappointed.

Milo looked disappointed? What was happening here?

“Oh well. I’m leaving a week from today, if you change your mind.” Then he did the single most confounding thing any man has ever done. He kissed my forehead. It was tender and sweet, but it didn’t speak to my ovaries like every other thing Milo did, so I had no idea what it meant. “Ready to eat?”

90 DAYS POST-OVULATION

“How are you only just telling me this now?” Matty demanded, and Hannah leaned in, propping her chin on one hand.

“I don’t know. I obviously wasn’t going, so it didn’t matter.”

“He invited you on a road trip to meet his family,” Hannah repeated back to me. It wasn’t really a question the way she said it, more like she was tasting the words the way a critic tastes a meal.

“That makes it sound weird. He just invited me to come with. He thought I’d like talking to his sisters. They’ve had tons of advice about the pregnancy,” I explained, but my explanation was met by two identical, skeptical stares. “It’s not like you’re making it out to be.”

“And he kissed you?” Hannah piped in.

“No. Not exactly,” I explained, watching Matty’s eyes widen like a prosecutor who’d nailed a case. “He kissed me once on the forehead. Definitely *not* a sexual kiss.” Kind of romantic, though. Not that I planned to say that to Matty and Hannah. I also wasn’t mentioning the confusing end of the night, when I’d almost begun to expect a kiss from Milo. Instead, he’d turned to face me, lacing the fingers of both hands through mine, the thumb of one hand running up and down my skin. “Think about Springfield. It’d be fun,” he said. For another moment he held my hands slightly away

from my body, then he squeezed both gently. “G’nite, Dre. I’ll watch you walk.”

A couple of Milo’s friends remained in the apartment or he probably would’ve demanded to walk me home. Matty had left with Kesean a half hour earlier, breaking every three-dates-before-sex rule she’d ever had. I’d since heard every fiery hot detail of that night (spoiler alert, he was apparently rocking a 2.0 AOE after their first sexual encounter). I walked to my end of the building on my own, glancing back to see Milo holding the door frame with both hands above his head, swaying forward.

At some point this morning, I’d casually mentioned Milo’s offer (knowing full well I hadn’t brought it up yet), and here we were—getting very little work done as both women hovered at my work station.

“You need to go,” Matty said authoritatively. I expected that response from her.

“I’m not going, obviously.” My eyes shifted to Hannah for the back-up I knew she’d provide.

“Matty’s right. You should go.”

My jaw dropped at my traitorous friend.

“See,” Matty intoned.

“It’s kismet,” Hannah said, her tone suggesting this were fact, rather than batshit crazy.

“Seriously?” I muttered.

“He didn’t know you were off next week, right?” Hannah asked.

“I wasn’t going to take off,” I replied.

Matty and Hannah’s noses both curled. “We don’t have any clients. Why would you work?” Matty asked. Usually our three very different backgrounds didn’t matter, but sometimes the fact Matty came from money really stood out to me.

I looked down at my stomach meaningfully and then back to Matty, my eyes widened. “Matt, I love this job, but you

don't exactly pay me millions. I need all the money I can get."

She shook her head. "Nope. I forbid you from working."

"But your mom said—"

Hannah cut me off before I could finish my thought. "Of course you *can* work if you choose, and of course you're worried about money, but we both know those couple days won't net you enough to matter in the long run. So let's make a deal."

I cocked my head, curious what on earth *deal* Hannah might propose. "Are you serious?"

"Very," Hannah replied. "When the baby is born, you're not going to be able to take spontaneous roadtrips. You owe it to yourself to do this kind of shit now, while you still have a chance."

"*That's* the deal?" I asked, glancing at Matty, who looked equally curious.

"No, that's the rationale," Hannah replied as if this were obvious. "The deal is you let me and Matty buy your dinners and coffees and lunches for the next couple of weeks when we all go out. It should make up for a solid hundred or so of the money you might lose working—probably more—and it'll give you a chance to do one last crazy thing. Plus, it'll save Matty from having to think up busy work to fill a whole weekend."

"Amen," Matty said. "Count me in on that deal. Mom wants to reorganize our stock rooms, and I have *no* idea how you can help in your condition."

"I already said no. How can I even change my mind now?"

Matty shrugged. "That's easy—you tell the truth. You thought you had to work and now you don't." She held out my phone. "Do it now."

"I'm not doing it while you two listen."

Not at all dissuaded, Matty said, "Alright, then go in my office and do it."

I bit my lip nervously, but took the phone. If I said yes, then what? What was I even hoping for? I had no idea. Matty gave me a push and I glared at her as I walked into her office, shutting the door behind me and sitting down in her white desk chair.

For a minute I just held the phone, then opened up the texts.

Drea: Wedding got canceled this week and now I have no work. You still going to Springfield?

I made a face and deleted the second sentence before pressing send.

Drea: Wedding got canceled this week and now I have no work

Milo's response began scrolling quickly, but took a few seconds to come through. During those few seconds I wanted to vomit, but it may just have been that I was due for a snack.

Milo: Come with me!

I let out a long breath, not sure if I felt better or worse.

Milo: It'll be like when you went to Springfield in 7th grade plus a personalized tour guide

I laughed, wondering if I'd mentioned my own seventh grade trip or if Milo realized nearly every suburban Chicagoan took a seventh-grade trip to Springfield.

Drea: Literally the only part of my 7th grade trip I remember is walking around the Holiday Suites in my bathing suit and cutoffs

Milo: We can arrange for that

This text included a winking emoji, and I looked down at my pregnant belly, trying to decide if I should legitimately buy a maternity bathing suit.

Okay. I was doing this.

95 DAYS POST-OVULATION

“I made a mixtape,” Milo declared, holding up his phone as he leaned a shoulder against my doorway. Reggie stood next to him.

“What’s with Reg?” I asked.

“He comes with.” Milo’s eyes widened. “Did I not tell you that? Is that okay?”

“Milo,” I said, but he didn’t take a breath, continuing to talk before I might object.

“I can’t believe I forgot to say anything. I think we could still board him if you want.”

I walked across the room as he talked, fisting my hand in his T-shirt playfully like I might shake him if he didn’t stop talking. “Milo,” I repeated firmly. His hands floated down to my hips, holding me in place in a way that was equal parts confusing and intoxicating. My eyebrows lifted high—my best menacing look. “I love Reggie. I don’t care if he comes with.” I uncurled my fingers, smoothing his shirt flat over his strong chest, and I felt one of his thumbs explore the bulge of belly at my hip. I should’ve felt self-conscious, but I didn’t.

“What’s happening with Will?” Milo asked quietly, catching me entirely off-guard.

“I haven’t talked to him since we broke up,” I replied, looking back and forth between Milo’s dark eyes.

“You know we’ve never been single at the same time?” Milo asked, and I felt my heart rate speed up immodestly. If I

were honest, I couldn't *remember* a time when we were both single, but his assertion still seemed implausible. More likely, Milo just hadn't been interested.

"That seems unlikely," I replied, my eyes never wavering from his.

His chin tipped forward and he narrowed his eyes slightly. "I think I'd know, Dre." Now my heart was beating furiously like a bunny, and I wondered if I could actually have a cardiac event from Milo's intense stare. "But you're pregnant now, and I don't want to get in the way of another man's baby."

What the fuck was I supposed to say to that?

What did it even mean?

My hand dropped from his chest as I stiffened. I'm sure I should've felt elated at the prospect of Milo appearing interested, but I only felt pissed. Why was he saying this now, and why like this? I turned, shaking my head irritably, and headed back into my room. "I have to finish packing up my stuff."

WE DROVE in awkward silence for nearly an hour, Milo driving and me looking out the window, only occasionally interrupted by Reggie's wet nose on my elbow. "Dre?" Milo said quietly about forty minutes in. I turned from the corn to look at him, but said nothing.

"Have I ever told you about my dad?"

I wasn't sure what the right response was. He'd once told me his dad had died, but he hadn't gone into detail, and I hadn't pressed. Cautiously, I replied, "You told me he passed away when you were young."

Milo nodded, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Seven. I was seven."

I could feel the ache of those words deep in my chest, and I wished there was anything on Earth I could do to lessen it, but

I knew better. “I’m so sorry, Milo.”

He gave me a wan smile, settling one hand on my leg, near my knee. “I only have two real memories of him, and one is so cliché I sometimes wonder if I made it up.”

I hesitated, not sure if I was meant to ask what the memories were. I was usually good at talking to people, but I felt frozen now.

“He taught me to play catch—or at least I think he did.” Milo shrugged one shoulder, his lips curling into a lopsided smile. “I hope it’s a real memory, because the only other thing I remember is him sick. He used to read to me from his bed, until it got too hard.”

“Milo,” I said quietly, settling my hand on top of his. He shifted to knit his fingers with mine.

“My whole childhood, I would’ve given absolutely anything for more time with my dad.” His voice caught, and I felt emotion clog my own throat. “That’s all I meant earlier. I can’t get in the way of another man’s baby because I can’t get in the way of Polpetto having every opportunity to be with their dad.”

“I understand,” I said, disentangling my fingers to push some hair behind my ear. Really I needed space—space from Milo, space from Will, space from the constant expectations that came with having a baby. I smoothed a hand over my stomach. What if I didn’t want to be with Will? Did I owe Polpetto a life married to Will even though I didn’t love him?

I didn’t know what to say, how to respond to Milo that could both respect his feelings and mine, and so we fell into silence again, until I became aware of the pressure that meant I was going to need a break soon. “I have to pee,” I said.

“It’s about ten minutes to a bathroom. You gonna be okay?” he asked, concern etching his voice.

It was hard to stay mad at Milo, particularly since he hadn’t really done anything wrong. All he wanted was the perfect life for my unborn child. It wasn’t his fault that life

wasn't so perfect for me. "What're you going to do if I say no?" I asked, trying and failing to keep the smile off my lips.

His eyebrows knitted together. "We can pull over?" he offered, and I laughed.

"I can handle ten minutes, Milo." I glanced in his direction, watching his relief. I knew sharing the story about his father hadn't been easy, and I didn't want to discount that, no matter how I felt about it. "Hey, you played baseball as a kid, didn't you?"

He looked perplexed by my sudden topic change. "Through high school, yeah."

"That's what I thought. You know, you had to have learned to throw a ball somewhere. It was probably from your dad."

He blinked a few times, as if shocked the thought had never occurred to him. "God, you're right. That means I didn't only see it on TV and imagine it happened to me."

"Nope. It's probably a real memory."

Milo smiled, crooked and sad, staring out the windshield as he drove, deep in his memories.

I gave him a few minutes of quiet, then said, "Are you ready to share that playlist you made?" At this he grinned widely, hitting some buttons on his phone until Flo Rida's "Right Round" came on. I couldn't help but laugh. "*This* is your playlist?"

Milo laughed, a warm rumble that bordered on musical, and I remembered why he made such a good voice actor. "It's our own little flashback radio station," he said. "Wait till you hear what's next."

Flo Rida faded into Queen as "Bohemian Rhapsody" began. "I have not watched *Wayne's World* in forever. Maybe not since I saw it with you," I said. Milo steered us into a gas station.

"We should rent it this weekend." He put the car in park and stopped the song. "Welcome to Wilmington, Illinois. Enjoy your piss."

I curled my nose at him but couldn't help but smile. "I'm going to get candy. Are you going to eat candy with me?"

"You know I don't eat candy, Dre."

I stuck out my tongue. "Boo. Way to shame a pregnant woman. You suck, Milo. I'm buying enough for you."

I walked inside to pee and found Milo waiting for me when I got out of the bathroom. He was holding gummy bears and Twix, my college favorites. "I'll share them with you, if you want," he offered grudgingly.

I softened immediately, walking up to him and taking the candies from his hands. "You're ridiculous, but...sweet, and you don't have to eat candy if you don't want." I walked us down the next aisle and stopped. "There's one more thing I want—don't shame me, I think it's a craving, and I'd never ask you to eat it." I picked up a smoked beef stick. "I want these, like, all the time."

Milo cringed. "Did you eat them before you were pregnant?"

"When I was eight, maybe, but not since. I don't even eat beef. And yet every time I see one I want one."

"That's disgusting," he said, stepping closer to me and pushing a long wisp of hair back from my face. His dark eyes were clouded with unhappiness, and I considered putting the beef stick down. "I'm sorry, Dre. I never want you mad at me."

My head tipped to one side in question. "You don't have to apologize. Beef sticks are disgusting."

He blew out a long breath. "Right," he said finally, then took the food from my hands. "Snacks are on me. Everything's on me."

"That's ridiculous," I snapped, grabbing at the food, which he easily shifted out of my reach.

"Nonnegotiable. I invited you, we both know I make more money than you do, and I'm not pregnant."

All valid points. "Fine. Thank you," I grumbled.

“I know that pains you to say,” he said with a grin as we checked out and headed back to the car.

After letting Reggie out for a quick stroll and pee, we got back on the road and “Bohemian Rhapsody” turned into “I’ve Gotta Feeling.” It was literally a playlist from college. I stared out the window, watching cornfields fly by as I tried to make sense of what was going on with Milo. It was so confusing. Milo was my crush, sure, but was he trying to tell me I had been *his* crush? Did people like Milo even have crushes? It was mind-boggling. Surely I had to be misreading the whole situation, a prospect which was next-level embarrassing.

MILO MADDUX HAD three older sisters in Springfield. His mother lived with the youngest, Ashton, in a small home on the edge of the city. His middle sister, Kelly—the interior designer—lived with her husband and two boys near the new capitol. We were staying with his oldest sister, Sam, along with her husband, their two sons, and their daughter. Sam was a government statistician and her husband, Jim, was a securities compliance examiner. That was all I was told, and I literally had less than zero idea what those jobs entailed (except that Sam was obviously a math smarty, but that seemed like a dumb observation to make out loud). The rest of the family had far more familiar jobs—Kelly’s husband, Ford, was a doctor, while the littlest-older-sister, Ashton, was a teacher. Mom was retired.

We pulled up roughly four hours after departing Chicago—the extra hour thanks in part to my astounding *three* bathroom breaks. “Holy shit, Milo,” I said, looking at the man incredulously. “How the fuck big is your sister’s house?”

“Way too fucking big,” he answered with a chuckle and shrug combo. I was staring at one of those monster brick homes built in the ’90s. A driveway curved around the front of it, and we pulled to a stop beside a massive entrance. The house spread in both directions away from the entrance, taking up a hefty footprint. I glanced down at myself, feeling

suddenly self-conscious, as if I should be wearing nicer clothes. Milo came around to my side of the car, holding out a hand to help me out. I didn't really need his help, but I took it anyway.

Okay, can we stop for one minute, because Samantha Maddox Teague. Jesus. I may've had a girl-crush on Milo's sister.

I've probably failed to get across just how good-looking Milo is because it's hard to quantify. Sure, he has honey-brown eyes that can be impish and playful in one moment and then narrow as if he's looking into your soul, and yeah, he has lips that beg to be kissed and nipped (especially the bottom one, which was big and pouty and sexy as hell), and of course the whole thing was wrapped in a package of strong jaw and bulging muscles, but I'll never really be able to get that across to you.

Just like I will never be able to describe how ridiculously pretty a girl-Milo is. Sam had blonde curls that hung to her shoulders, bright hazel eyes and a wide-lipped grin. It was utterly unsurprising that Jim Teague was, himself, entirely sexy, even though he was graying at the edges (but in a real gonna-be-a-silver-fox kind of way). The three Teague children included two brunettes (oldest son, Maddox, and little girl, Miranda) and a blonde (middle child, Mitchell). Their house had seemed intimidating as hell, but it was nothing compared to meeting this family, who'd missed their calling as picture-frame stock-photo models.

"Milo!" Sam squealed, opening her arms to welcome her brother as we walked in her door. She was currently alone in the expansive entryway, and Milo leaned in for the hug, still holding my hand.

"Hey, Sammy. This is Drea."

"Andrea!" she said excitedly, and I was shocked when she said my name exactly right. It was disconcerting. "I've heard so much about you. How are you feeling? Did the granola bars help?"

I inhaled deeply, preparing to answer her onslaught of energetic questions. It reminded me a little of Julia.

“Maybe let them in first,” a voice said dryly as Sam’s husband joined us, walking in from another part of the house. “Sorry, I was outside with the kids. Nice to see you, man. You’ve got about forty-five seconds before they get in here.”

Milo stepped forward, letting my hand go with a squeeze as the men leaned in for hugs. Then he gestured to me. “This is Dre—” He didn’t get a chance to finish my name before three children came screaming toward us like banshees.

I was still thinking about the little squeeze he’d given my hand, trying to make sense of it, but Milo had squatted down and was greeting each child. He cracked jokes that had all three in fits of giggles, then stood up tall, scooping up the little girl. “Miranda, Mitchell, Maddox, this is Drea.”

That was a fuckload of M-names. I smiled, because what does one say to three random kids?

Mitchell (I *think* Mitchell, it was a little hard to keep straight) squinted at me. “Do you two kiss?” he asked.

“Mitchell, that’s rude,” his mother shushed him. “How about you and your brother take your uncle and Drea’s bags to their room?” she suggested, then rolled her eyes as she turned back to us. “I’m sorry if my children make you reconsider motherhood while you’re here,” she whispered, grinning. “You two hungry for lunch or you want to get settled first?”

Milo grinned in my direction. “Dre will say she’s fine, but how about we get her set up in her room, just in case?” he offered.

Honestly, I was oddly tired for a person who’d done nothing so far today but sit in a car seat, but I had every intention of ignoring that and being a good guest.

“Okay. I’m going to feed the kids, but we can get lunch for you guys whenever you want. You hungry for anything now, Drea?”

What kind of amateur did she take me for? I had granola in my bag. “I’m good. Thank you so much.”

Sam smiled, and it reminded me of Milo, which was an odd sensation. “Milo can take you to your room. He knows where it is.”

Milo nodded his agreement and took my hand, walking us farther into the house. My original assessment that the house was stupid big appeared to be entirely accurate. There was a monster eat-in kitchen, a living room, dining room, den, and guest suite on the first floor, and it was to this suite that Milo took me.

I plopped down on the bed tiredly. “Your sister is so pretty,” I mused, making Milo laugh. “Are they all that pretty?”

“Sam and I look like my dad. The other two look like my mom, so you’ll have to tell me what you think.”

My eyebrow quirked up. It would be shocking if the other two Maddox children were as stunning as these two. Milo was, quite possibly, the best looking man I’d ever met. “It’s hard to imagine any two people could turn out better looking than you and Sam,” I said earnestly.

He snorted. “I’m glad you’re here with me, Dre.”

“Me too, Milo.”

“Want me to leave you be to sleep?”

I knew I should get up and socialize, but I dropped back on the bed instead. Milo sat down next to me. “No. I’m getting up,” I replied.

“Looks it,” he joked, then laid down next to me, propped on a single strong arm. Rolling my face to look at him, my eyes were drawn to the bulge of muscle peeking out from under his T-shirt sleeve. My mouth went dry. At some point in college Milo and I had probably innocently laid on the same bed, but it had been a lot of years since college. “Have I told you how beautiful you look today?”

And there went my heart rate again. “No, but I just assumed it,” I said, grinning.

“You remember that time we watched *Wayne’s World*?”

“Of course. Dom wanted to stay at the library—probably because Vanessa was there.” I frowned. “He was cheating with her even then, wasn’t he?”

Milo gave a minuscule head shake/eye roll combo. “I think so. I don’t know. Dom was a fuck-up. I always thought you deserved better.”

I laughed. “Well, better doesn’t always come a’knocking.”

His eyes, unfocused and looking off above me, narrowed. “Sometimes I wondered how Dominic had gotten so lucky.”

What the fuck was Milo saying? I felt like he’d begun speaking in riddles today.

I shrugged off his comment, not willing to embarrass myself by reading into his words. “You had Krissy.”

“Krissy was a pain in the ass,” he muttered.

“Krissy was my friend,” I reminded him sternly.

“*Was* being the operative word. You know she was a pain in the ass, that’s why you never see her anymore.”

Krissy *was* a pain in the ass, and a smile tugged at the corners of my lips, but I refused to agree with him.

“I told you, we’ve never been single at the same time,” he continued.

“Does it matter?” I asked flippantly, growing irritable with this walk down memory lane.

“Does to me,” he replied, reaching out to touch the line of my jaw where I was turned to look at him. Goosebumps erupted in his wake. “I’ll let you rest,” he said, and I stifled the urge to scream. Why did it seem like he was about to say something important a hundred times today, but he never did? Was this all in my head? Was I going crazy?

Milo sat up and grabbed a blanket from where it sat draped over a chair and tossed it over me. I didn’t think I should sleep, but the bed was damned comfortable. “Rest as long as you want, okay? I’m going to go eat with them, but you don’t have to. There’s plenty of food for later.”

I DIDN'T EXPECT to fall asleep, but it was dark when I woke up, still snuggled under the fluffy blanket Milo had laid over me. I had to pee and I was queasy. I grabbed my purse as I stumbled into the bathroom, digging out the granola as I sat down on the toilet. Yes, I knew it was disgusting, but it beat throwing up.

Once my bladder was empty and my stomach had enough granola to avoid disaster, I smoothed my hair in the mirror and headed out into the house. I wandered into the den with its timber-loft ceiling, then through the kitchen and into the dining room. Finally, I wandered back through the living room, but the whole place was deserted. I found myself standing in the expansive foyer, not sure what to do, so I pulled out my phone.

Drea: Where are you?

Milo: Hang on

The text had come instantly, but I wasn't sure what to hold on for. "Dre?" I heard Milo call out.

"I'm by the stairs—where are *you*?" I asked, looking around me. He popped out of the living room and I jumped. "You scared me. Where the hell'd you come from? I just looked in there."

For the second time today, Milo brushed my hair back from my face. I resisted the urge to lean into his touch. "The basement. C'mon. I'll take you down."

"The basement" didn't really do justice to what was downstairs. This wasn't a creepy basement with cement floors and spiders in every corner like the basement I'd had growing up. This was a palatial, 2500-square-foot playland, complete with darts, a pool table, and a massive bar and theater space. Like the rest of the house, it was ridiculous.

It was also full of Maddoxes.

I gulped down hard as Milo led me through the kids—who'd multiplied in number and were in the midst of some sort of game of tag with Reggie—and into a wine room (I'm sure there's some fancy name for this room, but I don't know it, so suffice to say it's a big-ass room with a zillion bottles of wine in the walls and a big butcher block island in the center) where seven of Milo's closest relatives already sat, sipping wine.

"You're up!" Sam declared triumphantly, as if I'd overcome some dread disease. "I bet you're starving. Are you hungry? Milo said your morning sickness was really bad. How far along are you? Has it gotten any better?"

Again, I wasn't sure which question to answer first, but Milo interceded gracefully. "There's plenty of food, but how about I introduce you first," he suggested. The comment was directed at me, but loud enough for everyone to hear. "This is my sister Ashton and her boyfriend, Kevin, my middle sister, Kelly, and her husband, Ford—their sons Tom and Josh ran past when we walked down—and my mom, Regina."

Each person nodded to me in turn, looking at me with open curiosity, like I was a puzzle to be figured. "Hi everyone," I said with a little wave, and I could see Milo grin from the corner of my eye. He led me to the seat he'd just vacated, ushering for me to sit, then pulled another stool up next to me. I was already eying the giant charcuterie board in the center of the table.

"I split the board in half," Sam said, obviously noticing I was looking at the food the way Sylvester drools over Tweety. She pointed to a river of fruits down the center of the board. "Over here is all soft cheeses and deli meats—baby poison—and that side should be all things you can eat safely."

"Thank you. That was really thoughtful." I didn't know all of Milo's family yet, but Sam sure was nice.

Jim laughed. "It seems nice, but you should've seen her lose her shit when she was pregnant and we went to this work function of mine."

“There was *nothing* I could eat!” Sam interjected, apparently still indignant, though the slight must’ve happened at least five years earlier.

Kelly laughed, and I took advantage of the moment to sneak a look at the brunette. Neither Ashton nor Kelly were as stunning as ethereal Samantha, though they were probably the prettiest women in most rooms. Kelly had dark brown eyes and chestnut hair that curled past her shoulders. Her eyes were bigger than either Milo’s or Sam’s, framed by heavy lashes. “Sammy was awful pregnant,” she said with a smile.

“I was not,” Sam objected.

“You so were,” Ashton agreed.

“Pregnancy affects everyone differently. I remember how sick I was. It was terrible,” their mother added calmly.

Sam looked at me. “Kelly didn’t get sick at all. What a bitch, right?” she joked.

I looked at Kelly in astonishment. I knew there were people who never got sick, but I couldn’t even imagine what that’d be like. “You *never* got sick?”

Kelly flashed a grin at her older sister as she replied. “No. I really liked being pregnant. I felt great.”

My nose curled in distaste and Sam moaned loudly. “See? She’s awful. You can say it, Drea, we all know it.”

“Don’t get me started on labor, though,” Kelly said with a shudder.

I was trying not to think about labor yet. Have you ever heard of a Fourth Degree Episiotomy? Look it up. You’ll never sleep again. It’s that horrible.

“Don’t scare her, Kelly. Jeez. You two are awful. I’m sure it’ll be fine, Drea,” Ashton added, popping an olive between pretty pink lips. The women devolved into stories of their own labors, but I focused on compiling a plate of hard cheeses, bread, and olives.

Milo’s hand landed on my thigh, sending shockwaves up through my leg that settled low in my rounded belly. He

leaned in close to one ear. “Are you regretting coming with me yet?”

I grinned, but didn’t reply, taking a bite of crusty bread stacked with cheddar instead. It was a good, old, tangy cheddar and I prayed it was allowed food, because I was going to eat the shit out of it. It didn’t escape my attention that Milo’s warm palm didn’t move from my thigh. Instead, it was all I thought about. He had really great hands—wide and strong, with broad knuckles and a tangle of veins running throughout. They were the kind of masculine hands that would look like art when they ran down a woman’s body.

I needed to get a hold of myself.

Fortunately, Milo’s family was really easy to talk to. He’d mentioned on the ride that dry-humored Sammy was his favorite, but I found all three sisters to be pretty equally funny, although Ashton was obviously the quietest of the three. Of the men, Jim and Milo cracked the most jokes. Ford seemed pretty serious and I’m not sure Ashton’s boyfriend, Kevin, ever spoke. Of all of them, Regina freaked me out the most. She seemed to mostly watch the conversations, adding in only to quell brewing arguments or offer some sort of wisdom. My mother never shut up, so the quiet was disarming. I was willing to bet money she was sizing me up, and for some reason I desperately wanted to pass muster.

It was after nine when Kelly collected her sons, who had settled in the theater to watch a *Star Wars* movie, and began giving out hugs goodnight. Ashton, Kevin, and Regina stood as well, and I gave each a hug like a receiving line at a wedding. It was weird and familial, but they were all really nice to me, so I tried not to overthink the process. In fairness, this whole day had been weird.

“Okay,” Sam said, turning toward Milo and me. “We’re going to get the boys up to bed. Are you two all set in your room?”

I nodded, noticing the singular *room*, but not commenting on it. We all walked up to the main floor, where Milo and I

headed toward my room and the Teague family continued upstairs.

Milo paused at my door, letting me go in first and then leaning on the frame casually. Ah, yes. Milo the vampire, waiting for permission. I stood with the bed behind me, looking at the door where he stood but not inviting him in. “Milo, do these people think we’re a couple?” I asked, my voice low, leaving out the, *Holy shit, are we a couple?* I wanted to ask.

His head moved from side to side noncommittally. “Possibly,” he admitted.

“Milo, *why* do these people think we’re a couple?” I hissed.

His smile was small and embarrassed looking. “Probably because I talk about you a lot. And I’ve never brought anyone home to meet them before.”

This would’ve been the time to ask about his interest in *being* a couple, but a thought occurred to me, and my eyes went wide as my hands flew to my stomach. “Milo, do these people think this is *your* baby?”

Milo stepped into the room uninvited, but left the door open behind him, closing the distance between us in two long strides. “Stop calling them ‘these people,’” he chided with a smile, cupping my face with one strong hand and tilting my head up to look him in the eye. His voice was low when he spoke, and my throat felt thick, like I couldn’t get in enough air. “I don’t have any secret motivation,” he said. “I talk about you because you’re on my mind. I invited you here because I like to be with you. I know you’re pregnant with Will’s baby—so does my family, by the way—and I know I don’t belong in that equation, but somehow I can’t stop wanting to be closer to you.” He gave a tiny shrug, and I watched as his eyes glanced down to my lips, then up again. I knew I should say something, but I didn’t know what, and I wasn’t sure I had the oxygen to say it anyway. “I’m going to sleep in Mitchell’s room—he’s got a great set of bunk beds. Good night, Dre.” With this, he leaned in and his lips met mine.

I'd pictured kissing Milo Maddox more times than I could count, and it was always breathless and needy, but this was neither of those things. This kiss was tender and soft, slow and sensual. The fingers of his right hand tensed slightly as he held me in place, but the rest of him was yielding to me. This kiss was a question.

Unfortunately, the only answer I could muster, communicated not through words but through my expression of pure shock, was, "*What the hell is happening?*"

96 DAYS POST-OVULATION

The stupid, smug clock face announced it was past one, but I still couldn't sleep. I'd spent the last three hours laying in bed, thinking about that kiss and touching my lips, wanting to feel it still. Six times I'd stood up, ready to go out and find him. Three of those times I got right back into bed. Two times I peed and then got right back into bed, and one time I stumbled through the dark house—den to kitchen to living room—before realizing I didn't know where Mitchell's room was, and I couldn't go storming through closed doors in the middle of the night. Besides, I was pretty sure frantically kissing the hell out of Milo in his nephew's bedroom was the worst idea I'd ever had.

So that left me here. In bed. Wide awake.

I LOOKED like hell the next morning, I was sure, but Milo looked peaceful and well-rested. He was stretched in a chair in the den, Miranda on his lap, reading a book aloud. The book was about some pig and an elephant—apparently funny since Miranda was in fits of giggles—but what stopped me in my tracks were Milo's voices.

Intellectually, I knew Milo was a voice actor, and that meant Milo could portray a number of voices, but somehow when I pictured him at work, I always pictured him speaking in his normal voice—after all, who wouldn't want to listen to Milo's sexy voice? These were *not* sexy voices. They were

goofy and charming and different enough that even without the pictures I was captivated by this picture book. I wasn't alone, either, because Mitchell and Maddox sat nearby, pretending to be otherwise engaged, but secretly listening with smiles on their faces.

Unable to sleep, I'd snacked throughout the night, but I knew from experience that would only slightly lengthen the amount of time before I'd puke if I didn't get breakfast, so I dragged myself away from the pig and elephant story and wandered into the kitchen.

"Morning," Sam said brightly, her blonde hair tied up on her head. "Milo said you have Cap'n Crunch every morning to keep from getting sick, so I got some for you." She gestured to a box of Cap'n that looked wildly out of place in her chef's kitchen.

I couldn't remember having told Milo about my love of Cap'n, but I grabbed the box in relief, already feeling the twinges of nausea that came with waiting too long to eat. I grabbed a few with my bare hand, then froze, mortified to be elbow-deep in someone else's cereal.

Sam glanced up at me and smiled. "Don't worry. That box is all yours," she said.

"Thank you. I'm sorry," I replied, removing my hand slowly and popping the fistful of barrels and berries into my mouth. Then, as if to prove I were a civilized human, I poured a bowl.

"I took off today, since you guys are here and the kids are home. Milo said you wanted to see the sights, or was he kidding?"

"She does!" Milo called out from the other room.

"I guess I do," I replied with a smile.

"Are you from here?" she asked.

"Springfield?"

Sam laughed. "Illinois."

“Oh, yeah. I grew up in the suburbs.” I wondered if that phrase had the same meaning here in the boonies. I mean, technically this was probably a suburb of Springfield, but everyone must know *the* suburbs referred to *Chicago’s* suburbs, right? “West of Chicago,” I added.

“Got it. I’m going to go jump in the shower. You need anything?”

“No, this is exactly perfect.”

She smiled. “You can thank Milo for that.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to her words. “Sam?” I asked, and she looked back at me. I considered asking her any of the multitudes of questions I’d thought up while I lay awake last night thinking about Milo, but then I wussed out. “What time did you want to leave?”

She glanced at her watch. “Let’s not rush. How about 10:30?”

“Sure,” I replied simply, taking another bite of cereal.

I’d just finished the bowl and was staring absently at the *Find the Differences* activity on the back of the box when Milo walked in. “What time did you and Sammy decide?” he asked, coming to stand next to me at the island. I stared at his torso, then up to his face, trying to decide what to say to him about the things he’d told me last night.

Or about the kiss.

Or about maybe kissing again.

“10:30,” I replied. “Thanks for getting me Cap’n.”

He ran a strand of my hair through his fingers. “My pleasure, although it’s pretty gross food.”

I shrugged. “I know I’m supposed to eat all fruits and vegetables and shit, but my body wants Cap’n Crunch and beef sticks and Coke. I’m off to a bad start as a mother.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re going to be amazing.” His eyes were soft and warm, looking down at me. “I’m gonna go jump in the shower, ’kay?”

Milo.

Naked.

I resisted the urge to fan myself as heat flushed over my olive skin. Damn, I was a mess. Was I always a mess, or had Milo done that to me? “Yep,” I said, but it came out as a croak, and I looked down at my empty cereal bowl, squeezing my eyes shut in embarrassment.

For a long time I sat staring at the cereal box, until a woman I didn’t know bustled into the kitchen. She ignored me wholly, and I looked around the room for any indication of who she was. “Hi. I’m Milo’s friend, Drea,” I said finally.

She looked up, surprise written on her wide features. “I’m Agnes. Can I take that for you?” she offered, reaching for my bowl, and as she continued to wipe up the kitchen her presence became clear.

Agnes didn’t seem at all perturbed by me, but I felt weird watching her clean, so I got up and headed back to my room. I chose a pair of jeans with a black stretchy panel for my belly and added a long-sleeved thermal that was lightweight but would keep out the early spring chill, making a pile on the bed to change into after I showered.

I wasn’t prepared for Milo—when is anyone prepared for a shirtless Milo Maddox—when he came out of my bathroom wrapped only in a towel, water still dripping down the delicious contours of his muscled chest and abs. I wanted to run my tongue along those water trails. Fuck.

Milo ran his free hand through his curls, which, still wet, looked unusually brown. The other hand clutched his towel. “I’m sorry, Dre. My stuff was in here, and, and...”

He seemed to run out of things to say, and I crossed the room, utterly unsure of what I was doing. “Milo?” I asked, watching him blink rapidly.

Milo Maddox was nervous.

I couldn’t bring myself to ask any of the questions I’d been thinking about, and kissing a naked man was as good as asking for sex, so I didn’t know what more to do. “I’m going to

shower,” I said finally. Milo’s shoulders sagged a little, and guilt washed over me.

I could invite him back to the shower?

Terrible idea.

Ask him to stick around the room?

Until I got out of the shower, naked and dripping? Also a terrible idea.

“Did you mean what you said last night?” I asked instead, laying my palm on his bare chest. I expected his skin to feel cool, but he was hot to the touch.

“Of course. Every word.”

I captured his face between my palms so he couldn’t move and kissed his lips— softly, quickly—not giving either of us even an extra second to deepen the kiss or drop the towel or get lost in a tangle of limbs on the soft bed. “I’m going to shower,” I repeated. Milo smiled.

HIS NOSE WAS shiny and hot in the spring sun, and I rubbed it. “What do you think of the name Lincoln?” I asked Milo as he rubbed Abe Lincoln’s shiny bronze nose as well.

“Lincoln Benedetto?” he asked.

I frowned. “Lincoln Moretti,” I corrected. *My* name, not Will’s.

Milo’s hand still rested on Abe’s nose. “I like it. You wanna go upstairs?” He gestured toward the upper level of Lincoln’s Tomb, which appeared to be a monument to fallen soldiers, although I couldn’t be sure from here. Maddox, Mitchell, and Miranda had been very respectful and quiet inside the tomb, but now they were running off their energy in the grass outside of it. Sam sighed as she approached us.

“Y’all go upstairs yet?” she asked.

“We were just headed up,” Milo replied, letting go of Lincoln’s statue and grasping my hand. His skin was especially warm from the heated metal, and I shifted to knit my fingers into his. Milo gave me a gentle squeeze as he began to walk. “Better or worse than seventh grade?” he asked.

“Like I said before, I have zero recollection of my seventh grade Springfield trip, but spending time with you is way better than spending time with Rick Morales.”

Milo’s brow raised high. “Rick Morales?”

We climbed the steps to reach the top of the tomb, which held another monument. “Seventh grade crush. First guy to ever feel me up, although he stayed over the shirt.”

“Am I supposed to feel jealous?”

I laughed, turning back to look out at the cemetery below us. “Of course not.” I tried not to wonder if he *did* feel jealous. I felt like we were stuck in some hellacious relationship limbo, where one could only wonder what Milo was feeling.

“You ready for Lincoln’s home?”

“I feel like we did this out of order,” I complained.

He’d been watching me, but now he turned to look out over the cemetery, placing our held hands on top of the ledge without letting me go. “You’re ridiculous, Dre,” he murmured with a smile.

98 DAYS POST-OVULATION

He'd held my hand.

Touched the small of my back.

Pushed my hair behind my ear.

Held my gaze until my mouth watered and my stomach clenched with desire.

But that was it.

For three days.

He was driving me up a fucking wall.

And now it was Saturday night, and we were sitting out back around a fire pit, telling jokes and laughing with his family, and Milo was running his fingers along the bare skin of my forearm. I couldn't think with him touching me like this, even casually, and I knew it had to stop. Matty, Hannah, and I texted yesterday, and Matty demanded I make my move.

She was right.

Tonight was the night.

Except that meant I was risking losing Milo.

And Milo meant the world to me.

I sighed. Same old stupid dilemma. Scratch the itch or maintain the friendship. Thing was, the itch was getting pretty goddamn intense.

"I'm getting tired," Milo said, glancing at me. He'd slept on Mitchell's bunk bed the last three nights, so I wasn't sure

what he was suggesting, but the answer was yes. Whatever the question, the answer was yes every time.

“Me too.”

Milo stood, offering his hand, and again I laced our fingers together, although this time I wasn't letting go until I got what I wanted. We said our good nights and walked back inside. Milo was nothing if not predictable. He walked me to my door, stopping to lean on the frame. “G'nite,” he said.

I inhaled deeply. “Come in.”

Milo's eyes bored into me as he stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. I was alone with Dracula, and I wanted to expose my neck just to feel him taste me. Laying both hands on his firm chest, I looked up into his face. “Why did you invite me here?”

“I told you before, I like spending time with you.”

“Why'd you kiss me?”

One corner of his lips curled up. “I don't know. I told myself I shouldn't, but it's hard to look at your lips and not kiss them.”

“Then kiss them,” I said.

“Dre—” Milo protested, but I lifted onto tiptoe to reach his mouth, pressing my lips to his, my hands sliding up to his shoulders to pull him closer and deepen the kiss. Whatever protests Milo had, they died on his lips as his arms wrapped tight around me, pressing my whole body to his (as much as he could with the hard belly between us).

His kiss three days ago had been tender, but mine was hot and needy, my tongue tangling with his and my teeth nipping at the bottom lip I'd spent so much time fantasizing about. “Dre,” he murmured into my mouth, but my name on his lips only heightened my need and made my skin burn with desire.

He put the distance back between us, holding me still with heavy hands on my sides, near where my hips used to flare, pre-bump. “Dre,” he repeated more firmly.

“I know. I’m sorry. We can’t have sex and then go back to normal. I know. It’s hormones, Milo.”

Milo’s nose crinkled. “Who said I wanted to?” he asked.

Well, I definitely read this situation wrong. Shit. My stomach turned, desire replaced with embarrassment.

Milo captured my jaw between both his hands, forcing me to look at him. “I’ve always known you’d be willing to have sex, Dre. I mean, you were dating people—or I was—but I always knew that if I pushed the issue...” His voice trailed off, and the hot blush I felt on my cheeks was surely visible, that was the level of humiliation we were quickly approaching.

“I’m not—that’s not—really?” I stuttered. I’d been sure I was hiding it, and now he was telling me I’d been drooling over him for eight years? This was a nightmare.

Milo laughed, which made my stomach gurgle in reply. “Dre, sometimes the way you look at me—” His fingers tightened on my jaw. “Like you’re having a hard time keeping your eyes...your hands...your...*fuck*—” The word was a hot breath, and it kept me frozen in place, even as each of his previous words began to grow clear in my fuzzy brain. “Like you could barely keep your *lips* off of me. Sometimes it’s hard not to give in.”

My eyes fell closed, but each horrifying word glowed on the backs of my lids. Wasn’t that just the best? I looked like I wanted to lick him and he occasionally struggled to dismiss the low-hanging fruit. Fucking super. I twisted my head from his grasp, and he let go, stepping back. “I do not—” I protested hopelessly, but Milo interrupted me before I could say more.

“It’s not just you.” He inhaled deeply, his lips curling into a smile as he continued, “You had this dress in college. It was blue with little flowers on it—not too short but cut down the front just a little bit.” I remembered that dress. I liked it. “It was my kryptonite—it was so hard to keep my hands off you.”

My heart thundered in my chest, the heat moving through me in waves I wanted to lean into. I licked my lips. “But...you don’t want to have sex?”

Milo's face dropped closer, putting only centimeters between our lips. "You misunderstand—I'm saying this all wrong. I don't want us to go back to *normal*." His voice was so low I could barely hear him, and I leaned into his words, into the feel of his breath against my lips. "I've gone eight years wanting you, and I'm not looking for a one-and-done, Dre. I want *you*."

I wished I could freeze everything. Freeze Milo right where he was, with his eyes fixed to mine and his lips parted, waiting. I wanted to stand up out of this intimate embrace, pace back and forth around the room, catch my breath, and freak the fuck out, because I didn't know how to *do* the things Milo's eyes were proposing. I know, I was a pregnant lady acting like I didn't have sex or relationships, but Milo's eyes weren't proposing sex. His words were—I think—except that my ears were buzzing so loudly I could barely hear him, but his eyes were begging me to be gentle, to not break his heart, and what the fuck—this was *Milo*. Wasn't Milo dating Taylor Swift or something? Since when did Milo Maddox have feelings for any woman, let alone me?

"Dre?" he said gently, and I couldn't say yes to him because the surge of feelings I'd repressed since I'd met Milo—that hopeless, one-sided love I'd pushed down until I could forget how it burned at my heart and lungs to see him date other women—was threatening to pour out of me.

And I couldn't say no because I simply couldn't.

And so logic took over.

"I want you, Milo," I whispered, and his smile grew wide, my eyes drawn to the overlap in his bottom teeth. It was, quite possibly, the only imperfection on his body. "Till the baby."

His brow knitted in confusion. "What?"

I knew feelings of love for Milo were stupid and immature, and they belonged pushed back down where I could forget about them and move on with my life. "You're not signing on to be a dad, Milo. I get that. Neither of us wants a one-and-done, but we have to be realistic."

His eyes closed, taking away the only shot I had at making sense of his thoughts and feelings, then his lips met mine.

I swore there was a message in that kiss, but it was in some foreign language no one had ever taught me. It was the same gentle, sweet kiss from that first night, although this time his fingers tangled into the waves at the back of my head, holding me in place, pacing me. His tongue swept across my lips tenderly and I opened myself to him, my body swaying closer as his free hand settled.

I had a bad habit of planning what I was going to say while the other person was still talking, and before Milo, kissing had never been any different—even as I was pouring myself into a kiss I was always thinking of my next step, my next move, the thing that would take us from kissing to mind-blowing.

But all that noise disappeared.

Because whatever would come next—amazing as it was going to be—it didn't matter. This moment, this kiss, quieted every cell in my body. All I felt was soul-deep contentment—a desire to be close to Milo—and I never wanted it to end. A tiny sigh escaped me and I felt Milo's lips curl in a smile. He backed away from me enough to look down into my eyes. "Hey," he rumbled, and I felt the vibration of the word in his chest.

I licked my lips, drawing the bottom one between my teeth as I inhaled deeply, and Milo ran his thumb along the swollen flesh until it popped back out.

Can't go back to normal.

I don't want normal.

His words bounced around my brain like one of those super balls set loose.

"I should head back up to Mitchell's room," he said when I didn't respond, and if I knew nothing else, I knew I didn't want him to go. I grabbed his wrist as his fingers slid from my hair. It was thick, and I was instantly aware of how much more powerful he was than me.

"No. Stay."

He paused, his hand landing to cup one side of my throat, my fingers still wrapped ineffectually around his wrist. I felt the slow stroke of thumb along my skin—just a whisper of a touch, and my body screamed for more. I let go of him, my fingers trailing down his shoulders and the planes of his chest, and he followed my lead, teasing down my neck and collarbone until his hand cupped a single breast gently. “Fuck you, Miles Morales,” he said.

Nothing like Milo saying weird shit to get me out of my head.

“From Spider-Man?” I asked.

“Oh, damn. That *is* the kid from Spider-Man. What’s the kid from seventh grade who got to second base?” he asked with a laugh, and I cracked up.

“*Rick* Morales,” I said, dissolving into giggles again.

He tweaked my nipple through my shirt and dove back into my neck, lavishing it with kisses and nips that silenced my giggles with a needy gasp. My fingers still rested at the hem of his shirt, and I tugged up on it to reveal Milo’s sculpted body.

And Christ almighty, what a body it was.

My fingers trailed his skin, wanting to memorize every peak and valley of muscle, and he squirmed a little as my touch traveled, featherlight, over his ribcage and to one side. “Are you ticklish?” I asked, and he grinned in reply.

He captured both my wrists easily in one hand, holding them in front of my body and pressing my breasts up in the process. “I know you too well to answer that honestly.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “You can’t hold me here forever.”

Shifting my hands to one side, he leaned in and began kissing my neck once more. “I don’t have to hold you forever. Only until you promise never to tickle me again.”

A grin tugged at the corner of my lips, though I was struggling to keep a clear head as his kisses became hot and

wet. “What makes you think I’d ever agree to such a thing?” I asked, my breath hitching as his tongue ran a slow line from shoulder to shoulder.

Milo held up his left hand, and my eyes were drawn to it. It moved slowly under my shirt, flipping up my bra to massage my breast, then flicking at the nipple. His mouth dropped to my chest as his hand moved down my hip and slid into the elastic hem of my pants, then past my panties, his fingers beginning a taunting exploration.

My fingers itched to touch him, to roam his body, to hold his head to my breast where his tongue swirled and pulled, but my wrists remained trapped in his strong grip. My hips rolled forward instinctively as he played my body like a master musician, plucking and thrumming, until my breaths came in little hitching pants of desire.

And then he stopped.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, heavy-lidded eyes opening to look down at Milo, frozen with his face nuzzled into my breasts and his hand in my panties.

He glanced up at me, and even in the dim light his eyes seemed to glow. “You have to promise.” His fingers began to move again, and I gasped, so close to coming apart in his arms.

“Promise what?” I choked out as he slowed to a stop once more. I would’ve signed away everything I owned for him to keep doing what he’d been doing.

His kisses worked their way back up my chest to my neck. “No more tickling. Ever.”

My forehead knitted together. “Are you serious?” I nearly snapped, but my impatience only made him grin.

Pressing his lips to my earlobe, he whispered, “You should promise, I’m even better with my mouth than my hands.” At the word *hands* his finger gave one tiny flick that drew a strangled cry from my lips.

“Yes,” I moaned, my head lolling back. Still holding my wrists, he pushed me back on the bed carefully.

“Yes?”

“Yes. I promise. Anything you want,” I panted, and he released me instantly, sliding off my pants and burying his face between my legs in a single motion. All I could do was tuck my fingers into his soft blonde curls and hold on. “Milo,” I gasped, so close to the edge I could barely hold on, “I want to feel you.”

He moaned into me and the vibration made me press my mouth closed again, stifling a cry. “You will, but I want you to come first,” he said, then he was gone once more, humming a low tune that made me fist my hands tighter into his hair as my hips pressed upward, the pressure building to an almost unbearable level. He sucked hard and the sensation exploded through my body. My muscles tensed, hips bucked, and fingers fisted until finally the feeling passed and my body sagged. I loosened my grip on his hair.

“Did I hurt you?” I asked, smoothing my fingers through the curls.

He kissed the inside of my thigh. “Never,” he replied simply. He slid up to lay next to me, and I realized he was still in his pants. I had exactly zero idea how one was supposed to have sex while pregnant, so I took advantage of the situation, sitting up and crawling toward the bottom of the bed. I’d hoped the move looked sultry, but realistically I’d lost the ability to do sultry sometime in the first trimester. Fortunately, Milo didn’t seem to mind, his eyes following me on my course, dark with desire.

“Sit there,” I instructed, patting the edge of the bed where I knelt.

Milo sat, looking down at me as if he weren’t entirely sure what to expect, even though the next steps seemed quite obvious to me. I unbuttoned his pants, feeling the strain of his erection where it pressed against his zipper. Leaning back on his arms, Milo lifted his hips and let me slide his pants down his thighs. I removed them completely, feeling a rush of saliva at the sight of his large dick, which sprung forth like an illicit jack-in-the-box. I licked my lips, looking up to catch his eye

with a smile, then began a slow series of wet kisses down his shaft, ending at the tip, where I let my mouth envelope as much as I could, my hand moving rhythmically as I created a swirling suction.

Milo groaned appreciatively, leaning back on his hands once more and gazing down at me. I looked up, finding his breathing labored and mouth slack. It was sexy to know I had that effect on him, and I focused on his cock, giving all my energy to bringing him pleasure.

“Dre—” he gasped. “Drea.” His hands stilled me, pulling me up to kiss him. “You’re so sexy. I want you.” He leaned back on the bed, gesturing for me to straddle him. “Like that, yes,” he whispered, and I could feel his hard length pressed against me. I rocked my hips indulgently and he groaned. “Fuck, Dre.”

He felt amazing, and I wanted nothing more than to sink onto him and make us both come, but I couldn’t. “Milo? Do you have a condom?” I’d fantasized about being with Milo more times than I could count, but I certainly hadn’t prepared for it. The fact that my legs were shaved was an impressive accomplishment, far as I was concerned.

“Condom,” he repeated. “Yeah, in my bag. Lemme up.” He lifted me by the hips as he made his request, bringing me to standing easily. I shifted out of the way as he fumbled through his bag, coming out victorious, holding up the little package. With a grin at his beaming face I laid back down on the bed, propped on my elbows.

“No. You should be on top. That’s best for pregnant women,” he said, climbing onto the bed next to me.

I froze, because, *what the fuck?* “Is this, like, a thing you have? For pregnant women?” I sat up, pulling my knees as tight to my chest as my rounded belly would allow and putting some space between Milo and me. I’d be damned if I were going to be someone’s weird fetish.

“No. Drea, no.” He climbed onto the bed, moving toward me until I flinched back, at which point he stopped, the worry visible on his face. He sighed, reaching out to touch my knee.

“Nothing weird.” His lips curled the slightest bit. “Well, kinda weird. I did spend the past two nights in a seven-year-old’s bunkbed google searching the best way to have sex when you’re pregnant because I want you, Dre. I want you now the same as I wanted you five months ago the same as I wanted you five *years* ago the same as I wanted you the day you knocked on my dorm door with your hair piled high on top of your head and a green apron tied ’round your waist.”

I’d started dating Dom the summer before college, and I’d worn that green apron to his dorm to show him my new get-up on my first day at the local flower shop. I couldn’t believe I’d even registered on Milo’s radar that day, let alone that he could remember it so vividly. I set my arms on my knees, resting my chin on top, and Milo slid closer, brushing my hair from my face.

“You’re beautiful, Drea.”

“On top is best?” I asked quietly.

“There are a few ways, because you’re still so small. In a few months it’ll probably be the best choice.” He nodded his chin up at me and laid down. “How about you lay down here, and I’ll tell you.”

Turning so I faced away from him, I curled my body into the Drea-shaped void made by his form. I loved how neatly we seemed to fit. His fingers ran a sweeping path up and down my exposed skin, moving so slowly I might not’ve even noticed if it hadn’t felt so good.

His lips were close to my ear as he began to speak in low tones. “You can be on top, riding my dick until you come, giving me a view of your incredible breasts.”

Whoa. This was not what I expected when he offered to share his research. It was so much better.

“You can lay on your side—just like this—but lift your leg up and let me drive into you from behind, rubbing your clit until you come apart.” My breath was growing more labored as I pictured each scenario, and I felt the pressure of Milo’s growing erection against my spine. “Or we can prop some

pillows under you and I can fuck you sitting up so we can both see your pussy devouring my cock.”

Holy.

Shit.

Or, at this rate, I could just come before Milo ever touched me because goddamn was he good at this. I rolled over to look at him. “When you’ve said you do voice work, did you really mean phone sex?” I asked, my voice noticeably husky.

Milo grinned, but said nothing, his brow lifting in an unspoken question: *Which?*

I inhaled deeply. “The last one,” I breathed out, and his grin deepened.

“My favorite as well.”

101 DAYS POST-OVULATION

He showed up at my door early, holding a bottle of Coke. I glanced past him, but Reggie wasn't there. "Where's Reggie?" I asked tiredly, smoothing down the rats' nest that was my hair.

"I thought we should talk," Milo said seriously, and I felt my throat constrict.

"Worried about him overhearing?" I joked, but the words didn't come out nearly as lightheartedly as I'd intended. Instead, they sounded tremulous, belying my weak effort at carefree humor.

Milo took a single step closer—stopping as usual in the doorway—then reached for me, his hand coming to rest on the curve of my neck. "Now that we're home, I thought we should talk about what happened in Springfield."

I wished I'd finished eating my cereal, because maybe then I wouldn't feel quite so queasy. "Okay," I agreed quietly. "Come in." I took a step back and out of the way for him to enter the apartment, but he followed me, moving closer so both his hands weaved into my hairline. My face was tilted up toward him and my lips parted, my mind flashing through the couple days of bliss we'd shared. It'd been in a bubble—I'd known that—but it was so *right*—full of those full-lipped, soft kisses that had me pressing forward, eager for more, and the sex I couldn't get enough of—sensual and sweet. Now we were out of the bubble and every kiss and touch and whisper in the night was flashing through my brain like one of those

last montages before you die. And was that what right now was? The moment before this perfect, amazing, pretend relationship died?

“When we were in Springfield...” he trailed off, still cupping my face so I couldn’t easily shift out of his embrace.

“I get it, Milo. We’re home and you’re reconsidering things. It’s okay.”

He frowned, his brow lowering and fingers tightening on my jaw. “I’m not reconsidering things, Dre, but I want you to have a chance to. I’ll understand completely if you don’t think we can be long-term, I just...I just wanted you to know how I felt, finally.”

I shook my head until he relinquished his hold on me, then I walked into the kitchen with a sigh. The cereal in my bowl was already soggy, and I reached into the box for a dry handful. Milo had placed the Coke on the console near the door, but now he picked it up and set it in front of me on the counter. “Talking to you feels like knights and knaves sometimes,” I lamented.

“I don’t know what that means,” he said, his brow still knitted. He perched on the single stool that sat in the corner of my kitchen.

I took another bite of cereal. “It’s a bad analogy, really, it’s just what came into my head,” I explained. When he didn’t say more, I continued. “On the island of knights and knaves, knights always tell the truth and knaves always lie. You have to use what they say to determine if they’re really knights or knaves.”

“I’m telling the truth, Dre—of course I’m telling the truth.”

“I know, that’s why it’s a bad analogy, Milo. My question isn’t about whether or not you’re telling the truth, it’s always about whether or not you’re reconsidering.”

He hopped up, closing the distance between us but not touching me this time. “I’m not reconsidering. I’m giving you the chance to reconsider.”

I cocked my head, my nose curling as I looked at Milo. He was wearing a pair of shorts over compression pants that clung to his muscular legs and one of those breathable shirts people who run wear (I don't know what they're called, because the sum total of my "workouts" are my daily walks to and from the train). His hair was long enough it warranted a ponytail to keep it out of his face—more or less a messy bun on top of his head—which only served to accentuate the strong jaw and plump lips that were surrounded by a light beard. His eyebrows lowered over his golden-brown eyes in response to my scowl. "Are you going for a jog?" I asked, and he looked surprised, taking a step back to glance down at himself.

"I was going to," he replied tentatively.

I smiled, shaking my head. "Milo, I am a pregnant woman staving off nausea with my hand in a box of sugary cereal. I love my job, but I make exactly *no* money, I don't exercise, and I've been told by a former boyfriend that I'm a ball-busting bitch." I looked down at my rumpled pajamas. "I also look a hot mess right now. You are successful and funny and *unnaturally* good-looking naked, and you're on your way out to run—probably for fun—and *everyone* likes you, Milo." I shook my head, grabbing another fistful of Cap'n, shoving it in my face, and talking around it. "Obviously *I'm* not the one of the two of us who needs to reconsider."

"You're worried about me?" he asked quietly.

I gave him a look that clearly said the '*Duh*' I had too much pride to say aloud.

"Listen to me," he said, his voice low and rough as he approached, picking me up and putting me on the single counter I had in my kitchen, then leaning into me with a force that might've been frightening were it not Milo. "I wasted eight years watching you date assholes and not telling them to fuck off, or not ending relationships with women I knew I had no future with the second I heard you were single. If you want me like I want you, I'm not wasting any more time.

"You make my mouth go dry, Dre, and my heart hammer in my chest when I see you. I feel nervous like a teenager, but

then I touch you and it goes away, because everything just feels right. You and me are *right*, and whatever bullshit you think about who we are or why we don't work, forget it. I *want* you." He thrust his hips into mine in illustration, holding me tightly, and in that instant I wanted him too. Badly and right now. "I had to give you a chance to decide if this is what you really wanted, but Dre, I *want* you."

Reaching to the bottom of his athletic shirt, I peeled it up and over his head, then ran my fingers down the soft skin of his chest. Underneath was all hardened muscles, but his skin was so soft, and I leaned in to kiss the point where neck met chest, watching as his breaths heaved under my lips.

"Dre?" he asked, lifting my chin in both of his hands so we were eye to eye once more. "Is this what you want?"

I captured his face between my hands, skimming a thumb over his cheek as I looked into his dark eyes. "I had a crush on you from the first day I laid eyes on you, Milo, any woman in her right mind would, and once I got to know you, my favorite fantasy was to be *yours*."

"Then you're mine," he growled, sinking his fingers into my hair tightly and landing a possessive kiss on my lips. I arched into his strong grasp, eager to give myself over to him, to be *possessed* by Milo Maddox, caged in his strong arms.

"Milo," I breathed into his mouth, and he lifted me, his arms hooked under my thighs while I held him tightly around the neck, kissing him passionately. He broke away from the kiss once he laid us in bed, pushing up my pajama top to reveal my breasts and sucking a darkened peak between his lips. My body arched in ecstasy, my breasts so unusually sensitive right now, and my hands reached for him—the long lines and ridges where his muscular body disappeared into his pants. My fingers curled around the waistband, but it was too tight to move from my angle, and his tongue was making slow trails along my skin that were beginning to monopolize my thoughts. I lifted myself onto my elbows to watch him make the worshipful journey over my body with his tongue, taunting me, and I moaned once more, then pulled him back up to my face and kissed him again. "Take off your pants." I'd intended

it to come out all sexy dominatrix-like, but the words sounded like a desperate plea instead.

He pushed his pants-shorts combo to the floor while I dug a condom out of my nightstand and turned back to face him, carefully slipping out of my shorts and giant pregnancy panties in one movement so he wouldn't see them. "Fucking hell, you're beautiful, Dre," he said as he sat down on the bed. "Come here." He shifted so he remained sitting, beckoning me to him with outstretched arms. Leaning back against the wall, he helped lower me from kneeling onto his lap, and I moaned as he filled me. "Just like that," he murmured, his large hands holding my hips and ass and guiding me. My hands found his face, stroking over his cheeks and jaw as I rode him.

Once I'd found a good rhythm my head fell back, mouth slack, and Milo's right hand shifted so his thumb could press into my clit. "That's right, Dre," he whispered into my breasts, cupping one. "Don't stop." I didn't have to be told twice—I was so close, bouncing and grinding on top of him, the heat of rushing blood filling me from belly to breast, pooling and aching—and I screamed out as it all broke apart like floodgates that had been released, washing through my body as my muscles clenched in wave-like spasms. Milo only took a few more thrusts, calling out some mixture of "Dre—oh, fuck Dre," before he, too, roared his release, pulling me closer as his body tensed and then letting go suddenly, as if he worried he might be hurting me. His face leaned forward into my breasts, which heaved almost comically in his face (being on top is hard work even when you're *not* pregnant, and I was winded).

I shifted off his lap and fell back onto my pillows, where he joined me a moment later. "Got any plans today?" he asked.

I laughed. "Not really. How about you?"

He shrugged. "Just you, Dre."

123 DAYS POST-OVULATION

Matty propped her feet on the dash of the minivan. “Let’s get coffee,” she suggested with a yawn. “We’re early anyhow.”

I made a face. My stomach was bothering me, and I didn’t really want coffee, but we *were* early. I turned into the Starbucks, pulling into the hefty drive-thru line.

“How are things with Milo?” Matty asked. To her credit, it was the first she’d asked in over a week, and I knew she was dying to know.

“Good,” I replied. Better than good, as a matter of fact. It’d been almost four weeks and things were, quite honestly, spectacular, but I felt like saying that would be some sort of jinx. “Can you hand me that bag?”

Matty looked at the floor where I was pointing to the plastic grocery bag which held the garbage from lunch. She handed it over, probably expecting me to have some trash. “I’m going on a date tonight,” she said.

“Really? With who?”

“A guy I met online. I have high hopes, but in case he’s going to murder me, his name is Jacob and we’re going to Lula Cafe.”

Pulling up to the speaker, I shifted uncomfortably, my stomach flipping. I felt the familiar burn in the back of my throat. “Can I get a large latte, please?” I asked.

“Sure. Is that hot or iced?”

I swallowed hard. “Hot, please.”

“You’ve got it, see you at the window.”

I pulled around to the window, still feeling terribly nauseous. I was going to need to eat. “Can you pull the granola bar out of my purse?” I asked. Matty handed me her phone to pay then unzipped my purse. I held the phone out to the waiting barista.

“Your latte’ll be right up,” the barista said cheerily.

“Thanks,” I replied as the window slid closed, then I bowed over the grocery bag and threw up. I looked up as the window squeaked back open.

“Here you go!” The barista chirped brightly, and I accepted the coffee, handing it to a horrified looking Matty.

“Are you okay?” Matty asked.

“I’m fine,” I replied, tying the bag and setting it at my feet. “Can I have that granola bar?”

Her mouth tugged down in a disgusted frown as she handed me the food. “Pregnancy is awful.”

I grinned, taking a bite of granola. “You don’t know the half of it. Now when I throw up, I pee a little. I’ve had to start wearing pantyliners.”

“Jesus,” she muttered. “And you’re telling me Milo’s hot for that?” She looked legitimately skeptical.

“Nobody’s hot for *that*, but he seems to be hot for me, I guess.” Which was an extraordinary, amazing, unbelievable understatement. Milo was sweet and gentle and goddamn sexually masterful. I hadn’t told Matty, but he scored well above a 1.0 on her dumb AOE scale.

“Huh. And is he any good?” she asked, still fishing for the details I’d failed to provide her.

“I think so,” I replied simply. Matty rolled her eyes.

“You’re not going to throw up at this wedding, are you? I could’ve brought Hannah.”

I shot her a look. We both knew she couldn't have brought Hannah. The woman was the most talented artist I knew, but she was not the "Elizabeth Whittaker brand." Not that Elizabeth was at all judgmental, but when you were booking weddings for tens of thousands of dollars the people showing up to set up needed to dress nicer than leggings and a top knot, and Hannah never did. I was currently in a form-fitting black dress that came down to my calves, pretty enough to fit in and subtle enough not to stand out.

"You have a picture of this Jacob guy? You know, in case I need to spot him in a lineup?"

Matty grinned, pulling out her phone and scrolling through as I drove. At the stoplight, she held up the picture. It was a red light, so I took my time looking at him. He had black hair and dark eyes and a wide, brilliant smile. Maybe Greek, maybe Italian, definitely handsome. "Nice," I said, admiringly.

"Yeah, for sure he's hot. Here's hoping he's even a little interesting. What are you doing tonight?"

I shrugged. Same thing I'd done most days this week. "Milo's coming over."

She made a face and threw her green coffee stopper at me. "You're irritatingly cute in love."

An off-key laugh burst out of me. "I'm not in love. It's been four weeks. Not even."

"Ummm, okay," she said, agreeing in words but not in her sing-songy tone.

135 DAYS POST-OVULATION

No way this was real life. It was probably some beautiful fantasy, and I was probably dying.

Most likely I'd fallen and hit my head and I was in a coma in some tiny hospital room—probably a shared room because I didn't have the kind of insurance that got me an individual room—or worse I was dying but I wasn't at the hospital. Probably it was something embarrassing like I got tangled up in my bed sheets and fell and hit my head and I would die there on the floor and not be found until I started to smell.

Point was, Drea dating Milo could not be real.

It was a coma-dream.

I couldn't come up with any other reasonable explanation.

On a positive note, this dream was a great way to die.

Because *Milo*.

God, Milo, carrying popcorn, his face split into one of those smiles that left me lightheaded like I couldn't get enough air, and even though his warm, brown gaze was on my face the whole time he walked back into the room, I felt an irrational compulsion to look behind me like Molly Ringwald at the end of *16 Candles*. “*Me?*” I would ask internally, as if some supermodel—or Taylor Swift herself—were sitting at the end of the couch, and he may in fact be looking at her.

But there was no one else. Just me and Milo, and that smile was meant for me—just like the bowl of popcorn I would intend to share but probably eat three-quarters of. He

sat down on the couch, pulling me back into the space under his arm so my head leaned on his chest, then swept my hair back and dipped down to inhale, sighing this glorious, soul-deep, I-wish-I-had-it-recorded sigh of absolute contentment. He made the same noise sometimes in the moment he entered me, and in my own delusional thoughts it felt like an “*I love you.*”

Milo pressed play on the remote, and even though the choice tonight had been mine, my mind wandered during the quieter scenes of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Foremost in my thoughts was last Tuesday night, when Milo and I had made love (me on top, if you’re wondering, with Milo holding my hips, guiding me to my release before he drove up into me, triggering not only his orgasm, but a second orgasm for me) and then we laid in bed together naked. His long fingers had been trailing over the skin of my belly where it bulged slightly, and he was humming absently—as Milo did all the time, I’d discovered—when I felt that little bubbly butterfly-wing sensation. “Polpetto’s kicking,” I said.

“Can I feel?” Milo asked, looking back toward me, wide-eyed.

“No,” I replied with a soft smile. “Probably not. They’re little. I think only I can feel it right now.”

Sitting up, Milo stared perplexed at my belly, as if waiting for it to do something. The feeling had passed, and I wondered if I’d imagined it, or if it were really gas. “I think the baby likes your humming.”

“I was humming?” he asked, and I laughed, rolling my eyes.

“You’re always humming, but you have a beautiful voice.”

“You know, when I was a kid I didn’t want to be a voice actor.”

Laughing again, I replied, “That’d be a weird childhood dream, so I figured. I always assumed you’d wanted to be an actor.”

He shook his head subtly, his lips curved and his eyes faraway. “Naw. I wanted to sing. I loved it.”

“You have a beautiful voice,” I confirmed. Now that I spent a lot of time with him, there was no missing the humming. “What happened? And how did I not know that?”

Milo shrugged. “You know, most of my girlfriends hate my humming.”

Holy shit. You guys, I know I’m twenty-six-years-old, but Milo Maddox just called me his girlfriend. Did you hear that?

“I like it, and I think Polpetto likes it, too. Do it again.”

He slid down the bed so his face was even with my stomach, then he began to hum softly. It was a quiet song filled with vibrato that sounded so familiar, but I couldn’t place it. “I know that song. What is it?” I asked.

He glanced up at me. “Do you? My grandmother used to sing it to me at bedtime.”

The butterfly wings took up residence in my stomach. “Milo, the baby’s kicking,” I whispered, as if my voice might stop it.

He grinned, leaning forward to kiss my stomach before he began singing again. This time there were words, but the song was Italian, so I couldn’t recognize them all.

“What’s that called?” I asked when he stopped.

“*Caro Mio Ben.*”

“My dear...” I stumbled in my translation.

“My dear beloved,” Milo answered.

“It’s beautiful,” I replied.

He slid back to the head of the bed, lowering his face until his lips were close enough to touch mine. “So are you, *caro mio ben.*”

And then he kissed me.

And there was more sex.

But I tore my mind off the memory and the accompanying question—had Milo kind of said *I love you?*—and back to the wizards on my television as Milo asked, “You okay? I assumed I wouldn’t get to eat any of the popcorn, but you haven’t touched it yet.”

“I’m good.” I took a handful of popcorn in illustration. “Just giving you a chance to eat a little before I devour it,” I joked. It was a lie, but it sounded a lot better than, “*Just thinking about how I’m falling even more in love with you.*”

138 DAYS POST-OVULATION

The room where we waited was dark except for a glowing computer monitor and a desk lamp. My pants were pushed low on my hips and my shirt was pulled up to my bra, leaving me technically covered but feeling quite naked with my round belly sticking out. Way too naked to be in a dark room with Will Benedetto.

We sat in silence. Technically, I laid in silence with Will slightly behind me and to my left. We'd already gone through every pleasantry either of us could think of, and now we were ready to get this show on the road. "I bought the crib yesterday," I said, smiling at the memory of Milo, curls tucked behind each ear, hunched over a pile of parts and frowning at the picture directions.

"You don't have to get everything. I can get things," Will said.

I glanced back over my shoulder to the unhappy knit of his brow, and, feeling badly, I reached out a hand to him. I wasn't sure if he'd even take it, but he clasped my hand eagerly, holding it between both of his own. "We're basically going to need two of everything, Will, so you'll get your chance."

"True," he replied flatly.

I opened my mouth to tell him I'd happily share my list with him, but the door opened before I could speak. "Hello!" The technician declared brightly as she breezed in. "Welcome back, you two." She looked down at her folder. "Will and Drea, is it?"

“That’s right,” Will answered.

“Perfecto!” she said, and I marveled that she was this level of excited about her job. “Just like last time, I’m going to take some measurements, but unlike last time, we can find out the gender if you’re interested. Would you like to know, or keep it a surprise?”

“We want to know,” I answered quickly.

Will squeezed my hand, which he still held, then leaned closer to my ear. “I’m excited to find out, but my ma says it ruins the surprise.”

I cocked an eyebrow, looking up at him from where I lay. “The unintended pregnancy wasn’t surprise enough, huh? We have to engineer surprises now?” I asked dryly.

Will was grinning. “It was more than enough surprise for me, as you know. I turned into a bumbling idiot.”

“We heated this up, but it’ll probably still be a little—” she squirted the ultrasound goo and I yelped before she could say “cold” or “chilly” or “goopy” or whatever she was going to say. This time it was both chilly and goopy, for the record. She swirled the wand around and green blobs lit up the screen. There was the familiar whooshing beat of baby heart, and then her wand settled. “Here you are!” she said with the delight of someone talking to an actual infant. “Here’s baby’s leg and an arm, and this is the side of its head. Not giving me a view to tell you gender, but we’ll take some measurements and see if we can get it to move around for us.”

“Sounds good,” I agreed, not sure what the appropriate response was to this info. She clicked through the measurements in silence for awhile.

“Where’d you get the crib?” Will asked.

“IKEA. I can show you the one I got.”

“Maybe you can come with me,” Will suggested.

“Maybe,” I said noncommittally. I didn’t really feel like hoofing it through IKEA a second time, and it was sure to be

less fun without Milo—who'd never been there before—ooohing and ahing over every fork and toilet brush.

“Hmmm,” the technician said, and her tone drew my eye from the screen, where I'd been watching her click over the baby, to her face. Her tight frown was evident even in the dark room. “Let's stop for now.”

“Let's stop?” I repeated back, tension rippling through every muscle in my body.

“I'm having a hard time getting some of the measurements, so we'll stop.” She looked at me seriously. “You need to make another appointment.”

“What?” I asked, fully panicked now, pulling my shirt down to sit up even as she was wiping the jelly from me.

“What about the gender?” Will asked.

“I'm not able to see that today. You need to make another appointment.”

“Is something wrong?” I asked frantically.

“Probably not, but your doctor will want an appointment,” she said as she bustled out of the room. I was dumbstruck.

“Will?” My voice was small.

“Yeah, Drea.”

“What the fuck just happened?” My hands dropped to my stomach protectively.

“I'm not sure, but it'll all be okay.”

I turned to look at him, my eyes searching his. What I found there wasn't encouraging. “How do you know?”

“I don't,” he admitted, “but I can feel it, Drea. It's going to be alright.” He set his hand on mine where it rested protectively over Polpetto.

146 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I should've been enjoying a Saturday night, but I wasn't. I was sitting opposite Milo at a really lovely restaurant and my eyes kept drifting off to one side. It'd been more than a week, and if my brain was left to its own devices for even a moment I would worry. The technician hadn't told me what to worry about, but Google had plenty of suggestions. Down Syndrome. Heart defects. Open spinal column. I was trying to prepare myself. I knew I'd love my baby no matter what, but I wanted to be able to protect them, and the unknown never stopped being scary.

By day I made flower arrangements like a zombie, and by night I laid in Milo's arms, crying. "Hey," he said gently, reaching across the table to where I sat. "I can't pretend to imagine how you feel, but you can take care of Polpetto right now by setting the worry aside for a few minutes and eating a good meal—which you haven't been doing lately. A half hour. I wouldn't ask for more, Dre."

I chewed my lip, looking at him. Worry creased the corners of his eyes and his full lips were turned down unhappily. He wore a pair of navy pants that fit like a glove, right down to the curving hint of his generous package (which my eyes had been drawn to), and a black button-down that stretched tight against his muscular body. The host had given him a hungry once-over as she sat us, and our server was downright flirtatious, but Milo hadn't given either woman a second glance. He'd kept those worried eyes trained on me all night. And that—a tiny bit—made me feel good, but mostly I just

felt guilty—guilty every time I was thinking about Milo instead of the baby, and guilty every time I was worrying about the baby instead of appreciating Milo. Realistically, though, no amount of worrying would change the results of the next ultrasound, so I should attempt to be in this moment with Milo.

I smiled at the man, watching a bit of the tension ease from his face. “Okay. I solemnly swear to order a giant meal that costs an arm and a leg—that I cannot even begin to finish—in order to get this kid some iron.”

“Good. I will gladly pay said arm and leg. Besides, this place has unbelievable steak.” His smile stretched wide, and it had the same effect as always—warmth spread through my body and my lungs squeezed just enough to make me worry the baby might not be getting the necessary oxygen.

“You know I don’t eat steak. It’s unhealthy and bad for the planet.”

His head tilted forward and he looked at me from under his brow, a grin playing on his lips. “Bold words from a woman who eats her weight in sugared cereal. You know you’re anemic and beef sticks, while unhealthy *and* bad for the planet, aren’t a real source of iron.”

I sighed, opening my mouth to protest, but he was right, and the server interrupted me before I could speak.

“Are you two ready to order?” she asked. Her words acknowledged my presence, but her body language did not. Her body tilted toward Milo, and her eyes were glued to him as she asked the question. Part of me wanted to hate her, because to anyone who didn’t know what a fuck-up I was, it would be an obvious assumption I was carrying Milo’s baby—and *seriously*—but the nicer part of me knew how hard it was not to ogle Milo. Even Milo had mentioned I’d spent the past eight years looking at him like it was hard to not grope him. No woman in her right mind could look at Milo and not want to run her hands down every inch of him.

It was biologically impossible.

And considering the man in question was more or less ignoring our server, staring at me with his lips turned up in a tiny grin while he ordered, I could be forgiving.

Sorry, lady, this one was mine. For as long as humanly possible. Which may only be another three months.

I sighed.

Milo looked at me curiously, but couldn't ask me why I'd become suddenly wistful, since I was now in the process of ordering a steak from a very disinterested server. I was hoping Milo would forget about the sigh by the time she left, but no such luck. "You okay?"

"I'm good."

"Whatcha' thinking about?"

You.

He didn't let me answer. "It's gonna be okay, Dre."

"Thank you. I—" I bit one corner of my lip. For once I *hadn't* been thinking about the baby, but now I was again.

Milo reached across the table, taking my hand. "It's going to be okay. No matter what."

I nodded half-heartedly. "Okay."

"Thank you for ordering the steak."

I couldn't help but smile at him. "You're welcome, but it's more for the baby than for you," I joked.

He laughed. "Okay, I'll take that." He stared at me over the table for a minute. "You're beautiful, Dre."

I don't know if it was the tone of his voice—the way it deepened just a little like he was almost pained—but hearing this compliment from Milo never got old. My face warmed invisibly and I bit down on my lip. "Thank you for taking me out, Milo. You make things better."

"Does that mean you're feeling better? For this half hour, at least?"

I didn't get a chance to answer, because at that moment a tray of steaming food came barreling up to our table and was set inches from me on a wooden stand, prepared to serve the next table. It was a beautiful plate of food—my compliments to the chef—but it smelled strongly of chicken, and my stomach lurched unexpectedly.

Although I'd never once felt sickened by it before, in an instant I was positive if chicken was happening, vomit was happening. There were no two ways about it. "I gotta—I gotta—" I stammered, my thighs banging the underside of our table in my effort to get up quickly. Eyes from all the surrounding tables were on me now, watching as I tripped over myself and Milo looked on, alarmed by my escape.

"Dre? Are you okay?"

It wasn't so much that I was ignoring him as that I was trying my damndest not to breathe, but it probably looked like I was ignoring him as I rushed away from the table and to the bathrooms.

A moment after I rushed into the stall, panting as I looked down into the toilet—not quite at the moment where I needed to touch it, but not ruling it out—the door to the bathroom banged open. "Dre?" Milo's voice. In the women's bathroom. "I'm so sorry," he said gently to the woman who'd come out of the stall next to mine.

"I'm here," I replied, my voice weak.

"Are you okay? Are you throwing up? Is the baby okay?" he asked all in a rush.

"Chicken," I exhaled, shuddering.

"What?" he asked.

The word made my throat flex involuntarily, and I looked down into the toilet again. "The table next to us," I panted. "The smell." Another gag pressed at my throat. "I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"Hey, hey," he said softly, edging into the stall with me, close enough to wrap his hand around my belly gently.

“You’re okay, and the baby’s okay. I don’t care about dinner. We can go home and eat ramen and Coke and ice cream.”

“Polpetto likes that idea,” I said with a chuckle as the fluttering baby kick landed near Milo’s touch. *I know, Polpetto, I love him too.*

“Was that—was that a kick?” Milo asked.

“Yeah, could you feel it?”

“Yeah, I think—there!” he said victoriously, and I laughed.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Polpetto, you’re so strong,” Milo crooned at my stomach. He turned my body so he could see my face. “You okay or still might throw up?”

“Seventy-thirty in favor of not throwing up,” I replied with a shrug.

“Okay, you’re going to stay in here however long you need, then head out to the car. Don’t worry about your stuff, I’ll get it. I’m going to have those steaks wrapped up and we’ll go home. If you want ramen, that’s fine, but you *are* anemic, so I’m grabbing the steaks just in case.”

“Yes, sir,” I joked.

“Ooo. I like that. Remember that later tonight,” he said, shooting me a wink as he backed out of the bathroom.

That was the moment I realized the old lady was still in there. “No worries. I remember it was broccoli for me,” she said with a shudder. “My husband was just like yours. He’d call ahead to parties and tell people they better not dare make broccoli or we’d never speak to them again.” She laughed. “Can I help you, hon?”

“No, thanks, I’m alright,” I replied, not adding that I was alright as long as I never saw, smelled, or even thought the word “chicken” ever again. My stomach lurched. “I’m just going to head out to the car. Sorry he came barging in.”

“Don’t be silly. What a sweetheart. And easy on the eyes,” she added with a wink. Great, I was trapped in a bathroom with Blanche from the *Golden Girls*. I smiled and nodded as I walked out.

Ten minutes later, Milo swung open the driver’s side door, handing me a bag full of food as he slid into the driver’s seat. I set it by my feet. It was a minute before I realized he was staring at me. “I’m so sorry, Milo.”

One hand reached out to me, threading into my hair and cupping my head. He was staring at me, the faintest smile playing on his lips, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. “Don’t apologize. I—uh, I’m happy, Dre.”

“Me too,” I replied, although I was sure that hadn’t been what he was about to say. *I can’t believe we had to leave? I’m glad you’re okay? I don’t want to end things in a few months? I love you?* The list went on and on, with my imagined responses growing less and less likely.

“Did you throw up?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good,” he replied, drawing me closer and kissing me deeply. My body leaned toward him, craving more of his touch, but the kiss ended. “Let’s get you home and feed you before you do.”

Driving home, watching the city blocks move by slowly, a thought occurred to me. “All this nonsense with the you-know-what made me forget about the ultrasound for awhile,” I announced, looking at Milo.

He laughed. “Nausea was not my first choice as a distraction, but I’m glad.”

152 DAYS POST-OVULATION

It was a different technician. I was glad, because whatever had happened last time, I'd come to tie it in my head with the technician—why did she blow me off? Why did she leave me feeling so worried?

Will sat nervously at my side, chewing on a fingernail. It was grossing me out. “Stop,” I muttered irritably.

“Sorry,” he replied, shifting to sit on his hands like a child, and I felt a little guilty. I knew I'd been short with him since the moment he'd picked me up this morning, and I knew none of it was his fault. It wasn't his fault we didn't know if the baby was okay and it wasn't his fault he couldn't make me feel even the slightest bit better. He was probably sitting here just as worried as I was, and the right thing to do would be to reach out and make him feel better. I didn't want to, though, so I let him sit on his hands instead.

The technician was making cheery small talk, evidently oblivious to our previous experience. “Are we finding out the gender today?” she asked brightly.

What's with the employees at the OB-GYN and collective nouns? *How are we doing today? Are we finding out the sex? When are we due?* Last I checked, *I* was the only one with fetish-porn sized boobs, puking my guts out day and night, peeing every five minutes. *I* was the one who had to somehow get this baby out of a tiny little exit, and yes, *I* did want to know the sex, because we both knew *you'd* know either way.

I was also a touch more irritable in my present state.

Will must've answered while I was seething, because she continued, "See here?" She clicked and a little arrow popped up on the screen. "*That* is a little girl. Congratulations, you two."

"A girl," Will breathed out.

A girl. I inhaled deeply, then let out a long breath. "What about the other stuff?"

"Other stuff?" the technician asked.

"We came two weeks ago and they said we had to come back; that some of the measurements were off."

She frowned at her screen a moment, then looked back at me, her face sympathetic in a way that terrified me. "Sometimes the baby just won't sit right. The doctor will talk to you more, but I honestly don't see anything alarming."

It took a minute for her words to sink in, ready as I was to hear the opposite. "She's okay?" I asked.

The technician winked at me. "Your doctor will want to go over results, but I wouldn't worry."

"A BABY GIRL, DREA," Will murmured for the hundredth time today. I knew he was blown away and wanted to talk about it, but all I wanted was to share the news with Milo.

I smiled at him. "I know. It's wild."

Will reached out and clasped my hand. I didn't pull away, but I was struck by the inconvenient truth: I hadn't told Will about Milo. *I* knew what I had with Milo was special, but I also knew it would sound like a silly rebound, so yes, I'd failed to mention it. The car pulled up in front of my apartment and I was relieved to break that connection and slide out. "Hold on, please," Will said to the driver, then followed me onto the curb. "Drea."

I turned back, holding the straps of my purse to busy my hands. "Yeah?"

Will stepped closer, reaching to set his hand on my forearm. “I know you didn’t like my proposal, but think about it. We make a pretty good couple, and we’ll be a family. I can support you two.” I cringed at his description, which was as unromantic this time as it had been last time.

“Will, no,” I said, and I opened my mouth to explain once again I didn’t love him, and to finally tell him about Milo, but he stepped forward in that moment, cupping my face in his hands and leaning close.

“Drea, I miss you,” he whispered.

And finally, far too late, there was the tiniest scrap of romance. There was also the jingle of dog tags, and a little woof behind me.

Motherfucking Reggie.

I twisted my head, trying to pull free, but Will didn’t let go. “Will, I’m seeing someone else.”

He frowned, but still his hands didn’t move. “You’re dating?” he asked. I twitched again, trying to shrug off his touch.

“Milo,” I replied, and Will’s eyes shot up, narrowing on the man in question, who I knew without looking was behind me. Finally, Will’s hands dropped and I took a step away from him.

“Are you serious?” Will asked, and I couldn’t tell if he meant serious about Milo or just telling the truth. It didn’t matter either way.

“I don’t want to marry you, and I’m dating Milo,” I clarified. I hadn’t been brave enough to turn around yet, but Will’s eyes were dark and angry, never deviating from Milo where he undoubtedly stood on the other side of the gate. There was a second low woof, and I heard Milo’s whistle, a simple command that Reggie return to him. Forgetting Will, I spun around to look at Milo. He was still ten or fifteen feet away from where we stood at the gate, and while his body looked as tall and strong as ever, his face didn’t. The small

knit in his brow, the way his jaw ticked, the downturn of his plump lips, they were all signs he was upset.

Why hadn't I talked to Will sooner? I could've cleared things up long before this. God, I sucked.

"Milo," I said, but he didn't move closer.

"Drea," Will said in the same moment.

Milo's eyebrows jumped. "*He's calling you,*" the gesture said.

"Drea," Will repeated. Begrudgingly, I turned back to him. "Promise me you'll think about it."

"Fine," I said, although I didn't intend to. I knew who I wanted, and it wasn't Will Benedetto. Milo had begun to walk back to his door, and between his long stride and the lock on the courtyard gate, he was in the apartment building before I could catch up. I watched as he swung open the vestibule door, looking like he was going to power through and let the thing slam in my face, but he stopped instead. Reggie turned back to me and I pet him as I closed the distance, finally close enough to speak to Milo. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, Dre." His voice sounded resigned. It was far more terrifying than anger would've been. I struggled to see a clear way forward—the way I would convince Milo I was completely his.

I could say *the* words.

Jesus, no, Drea. Get a grip. This relationship was short term. I could fall in love with him—who wouldn't—but I couldn't *tell* him I loved him. Not after so little time together and not while I was pregnant with another man's child.

I followed him upstairs and through the door. "You hungry?" he asked. I still felt the tension surrounding us.

"Milo," I said, and his name felt strange on my lips, as if I'd said it one too many times in the past half hour. Milo paused in his journey to the kitchen, looking up to meet my eye. "It's a girl."

In an instant, the chill vanished from the room, and Milo closed the distance between us, gathering my hands in his. “Dre.” His voice was thick with emotion. “Is she—were things okay?”

I moved his right hand, which still clutched mine, to my stomach, where Polpetto was kicking. “She’s fine. Can you feel her or no?”

He nodded, his fingers flexing over the curve of my belly. “She’s okay? What’d they say?”

I shrugged. “Everything looks fine. They said sometimes they just can’t get a good look, and that was what happened last time.”

A low, musical sigh escaped him—something between a hum and a purr—and he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me closer. “No more worrying,” he whispered, setting his forehead against mine.

I laughed. “Ah, yes, there’s nothing else even remotely terrifying in my future, Milo.”

His mouth showed up in double-vision with our faces so close, but I could still see the upturn of his lips, and I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed the bejesus out of him. He kissed me back, his lips demanding and needy, and I opened myself fully. With my ever-expanding stomach I lacked the ability to jump into his arms and wrap my legs around his waist, but I leaned into him and he scooped under my knees, lifting me without the slightest pause in our kiss. On a normal, not-pregnant day, I would’ve hated being carried like a damsel to his bed, but my body had changed so much since getting pregnant, and I couldn’t help but like when he lifted me like nothing. It was vain, but I was vain sometimes.

When he laid me down on his bed, I was tucked under his much larger frame, still kissing passionately. Aggressive wasn’t the word, but there was something different about him today. *Assertive?* I didn’t know, but I liked it. His fingers played at the frilly edge of my shirt, then slid up and under, the slight chill of his touch somehow setting fire to the skin where he caressed. I arched into him, but instead of the graceful

curve of back and fan of ribs the move usually resulted in, I mostly just shoved my overly-firm stomach into his chest. The absurdity made me laugh. “That was supposed to look sexy,” I explained when Milo gave me a curious look.

“You’re incredibly sexy,” he hummed into my neck, nibbling his way across the soft skin there.

“You have an illness,” I replied with a grin. “Or maybe you do have a secret fetish after all. I’m gigantically pregnant.”

Milo rolled to one side, propped on his elbow, and closed his eyes. “In the sunlight, your eyes are almost orange. They remind me of the most perfect autumn day—the kind you wait all year for so you can pull on a sweater and walk through the woods to see the colors. There’s the tiniest dusting of freckles across your nose, and your top lip makes a little bow. The bottom one is full and round and both are a perfect pink.” He opened his eyes. “I could go on. I’ve spent the last eight years memorizing you, Dre, like a great book you want to read over and over but just can’t carry around.” He glanced down, skimming his fingertips over the rounded flesh once more. “This is different, but you’re the same, and it was always you I wanted.”

I swallowed hard. Sometimes Milo said things that sounded forever and temporary at the same time. I doubted he knew he was a master at speaking in riddles.

“Take off your clothes, Andrea.”

I obliged, sliding my elastic jeans and massive panties off and tossing them in a heap with my shirt and bra next to the bed. By the time my slow ass was naked, Milo was fully nude and kneeling on the bed, watching me.

“Creeper,” I joked, but my breaths were coming in jagged pulls. It was hard to have that intense stare on me, and I hadn’t even had time to process everything he’d said—he’d been memorizing me?

“Lay down.”

Without hesitation, I laid down where I'd been previously, looking up at the Adonis above me.

Authoritative? Was that the word?

Milo laid next to me once more, propped up on his elbow. At this angle only a couple ripples of abdominals were evident, with a dusting of blonde hair down from his belly button. I skimmed my fingers along the path until Milo hissed. He wrapped an arm around my hips, turning me into my side and into his body in a single graceful maneuver. "I want you like this," he growled in my ear, and desire flamed at my core. He lifted one calf and balanced it over his thigh, then I felt him enter me. My body relaxed into his as his fingers found my most sensitive spots, stroking and gliding as thrusting into me. I reached behind me to pull him closer. I wanted to feel his muscles bunching and straining over me. "With me. Mine," he murmured into my ear.

The temptation to forget everything and lose myself in Milo's sexy growl was overwhelming, and I gave in to it, focusing on his voice and the feel of his skin against mine.

Possessive. That was the word. Milo was possessing me, but I was giving myself freely.

Usually orgasms build, like climbing a mountain and sledding down, but this was not that. My orgasm was hard and fast, and I clutched at Milo, feeling his muscles still clenching under my grasp as he moved to his own peak.

It took many minutes of silence to catch our breaths, Milo holding me tightly against his chest. It was he who spoke first, asking a question better asked with my back to him. "What was Will saying?"

"Outside?" I asked, not for clarification, but to buy time. I was sure Milo had heard plenty of it.

"Mmm-hmm."

"I don't know. The insurance benefits of marriage," I replied sarcastically, but that hadn't been far off.

"Dre, look at me."

I didn't want to, but I would've done just about anything he asked of me, so I rolled over.

"I love her already—" My heart hammered in the moment, thinking he was declaring his love for me, then realizing just as quickly he meant the baby. "—and the last thing I want is for us—*this*—to get in the way of her having a happy family." *This*. It was such an ugly word for how good and whole I felt with Milo.

I'd been broken up with before. Lots of times. I'm loud and opinionated, bossy and a little mean. So, yeah, I'd been dumped, but this was going to go on the books as my first nude dumping. "There's nothing between Will and me," I mumbled, but I didn't want to keep Milo here if it wasn't what he wanted.

Milo hooked under my chin with one finger, drawing my gaze back up to his. I searched his eyes, desperate to understand his motivation right now—was it about the baby? Will? Me?—but all I could see was sadness. Tremendous sadness. "Maybe there should be. He's right. I grew up without a dad, Dre—"

"So did I," I interjected, my voice challenging. My mom did a perfectly fine job, thank you, and Milo's dad *died*, so that obviously wasn't the same.

"I know," he sighed, "and both our moms were wonderful, but it was hard. It doesn't have to be that hard for you and Polpetta."

For a second I was taken back by the name he'd used—we'd always said Polpetto—but he was right, she would be Polpetta. I was shaking my head before I'd fully processed his words. Whatever kept Milo from ending this now, that was what I needed to say. He needed more time to realize *he* was the best thing for me and for Polpetta. "We already had this conversation and we decided to date until the baby was born. Nothing's changed."

Everything had changed. I loved him. I needed him.

Milo nodded. "You're right."

“I love when people say that,” I joked with a forced grin, desperate to move the conversation away from this seriousness.

Milo smiled back. “Let’s order dinner.” He leaned in to nibble my earlobe, and I would’ve been happy to skip dinner, except I was sure that would end in vomit. “I’m ordering chicken,” he whispered, and I could hear the laughter in his voice.

My throat clenched involuntarily as my stomach turned. “What is *wrong* with you?” I said, punching his shoulder ineffectually as he laughed and pulled me in closer, landing a kiss on my head.

191 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I wasn't sure what woke me. Was Milo snoring? He'd been sick all week, so it was possible. My hip hurt and I rolled over in a sad, three-point-turn sort of move that involved lifting my knees, then heaving my stomach up into the air, then settling my knees again before letting my stomach drop to the other side and adjusting my butt.

I was facing Milo now. A scrap of streetlight streamed in through the bedroom window, and I stared at his face in the dim glow. His mouth was open (sick breath a little funky, if I were honest), face totally relaxed, messy curls falling over his eyes.

For a while I stared at him, wondering how I'd ever survive our inevitable break-up. It'd been more than three months, and I was—yep, I could say it—totally stupid in love with Milo Maddox.

Except I couldn't say it.

Because Milo and I had completely different lives. I was a human-beach ball, on the verge of becoming a mom, and he was a crazy-hot, jet-setting actor (more or less) with a constant stream of interested women.

So, yeah.

Eventually Milo was going to be in LA, getting hit on by hot women, and he'd grow bored of me. And I had a baby to think about. Polpetta. I laid my hand on my stomach, feeling a familiar burn just under my ribcage. Crap. I'd been awake too long. It was eat or vomit.

Sighing, I pushed up and out of bed. Reggie lifted his head to watch me but didn't move from his spot next to the bed. In the kitchen, I poured myself a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios and ate, staring at the wall exhaustedly until I'd finally eaten enough to feel better. I trudged back to bed tiredly.

Milo was still sleeping with his mouth hung open, snoring occasionally. I didn't know what he'd eaten for dinner—or maybe it was because he was sick—but his breath was gross. I rolled away, trying to get away from the smell, but although it didn't seem possible for his breath to be looping around my head and making its way to my nose, I swore it was. For a long time I tried to ignore it, burying my face in my pillow, but I was sure I could smell it.

I got out of bed again, walking to the closet. I pulled out a can of air freshener spray and walked back to the bed. I tried to spray around my side of the bed, figuring that would be enough, but I swore I could still smell that breath, even at a distance and through a cloud of pine scent.

Creeping closer, I leaned over my side of the bed and sprayed the freshener over Milo's head. Even in the dim light I could see the scented mist rain down on him. He grimaced, smacked his mouth twice, and opened one eye.

I was still standing over him with the can uplifted.

I tried to drop my arm quickly, but his head lifted off the pillow. He squinted at me curiously while his tongue moved around his mouth. "Did you just Febreeze my mouth?"

"No," I said, and I hadn't *intended* to, so that had to count for something.

Milo grinned. "Tastes like you did. And you *are* holding the can."

"I'm sorry," I rushed to say, climbing into the bed to touch his face. "I smelled something and I couldn't sleep."

At this Milo laughed. "My breath is so bad you can't sleep?"

I frowned. "It might be in my head," I admitted.

“You think?” He laughed. “Get over here.” He lifted the cover and I tucked myself back into his embrace, where he settled one heavy palm on my stomach. I sniffed tentatively, but only smelled snow-covered pine.

196 DAYS POST-OVULATION

“Please tell that again to Hannah,” Matty said, still clutching her stomach as Hannah looked at us curiously. I shut the door behind Hannah and walked back to the couch.

“I sprayed Febreze in Milo’s mouth while he slept.”

Hannah’s eyes went wide. “Why?” she whispered.

“I don’t know. I smelled a smell,” I said, my shoulders sagging.

Hannah looked at Matty and laughed. “You’re a mess, Drea.”

“Yes. Obviously. Look at me.” I held my hands out in illustration. “I tried to put on sandals with little buckles on the side yesterday—couldn’t do the left one. I gave up.” I threw my hands up in exasperation. “And this morning,” I exclaimed, “I realized I was going to throw up so I got my pants and underwear off really fast.”

Matty’s face curled. “Good god, why?”

“Because I pee when I throw up. My life sucks, man.”

“What’s Milo have to say?” Hannah asked quietly.

My eyebrows lifted nearly into my hairline. “Are you serious? I don’t tell him when I pee on his floor, Hannah.”

“I mean about the relationship,” she clarified.

I inhaled deeply. “I don’t know. We always planned to break up when Polpetta was born.”

“Your daughter is not going to appreciate being called a meatball,” Matty piped in, apparently knowing the translation for *polpetta*, “You’re supposed to pick a cute nickname, like Sweet Pea.”

Hannah waved her off dismissively. “*You* suggested the breakup, didn’t you?”

I rolled my eyes. “I mean, yeah, but he’s not going to want to stick around and raise my kid, Han.”

“Maybe not, but what do you want, Drea? If you had to choose now, would it be Milo or Will or someone else entirely?”

“Milo,” I grumbled.

“He’s really good in bed, right? Like, still, even after a few months when maybe he doesn’t need to impress you?” Hannah and I turned to Matty, who shrugged apologetically. “Just curious.”

“But Will called this week,” I admitted.

“What’d he want?” Matty asked, adequately distracted from her previous question.

“He wants to go to birth classes,” I said. “He plans to be in the room.”

“Do you want him in the room? Don’t you get to decide?” Matty asked, pouring herself a liberal helping of wine. I knew I’d encouraged them to get wine tonight, but now that I was looking at it, I missed wine. I took a sip of the fake beer I was holding.

“He’s the dad,” I grumbled. “I’m not saying no.” Hannah pulled her knees to her chest, resting her chin on them and looking thoughtful. I waited for her to comment, but she didn’t.

“You don’t think they actually make you lay on the floor for birthing class, do you? They always do on TV, but you can barely bend to get buckets from the walk-in, so I can’t imagine you crawling on the floor,” Matty said. “It seems cruel.”

Amen, sister. I knew I was supposed to want to go to this dumb birthing class, but I didn't. "You know what's cruel? Class starts at seven at night. I'm in pajamas by seven."

"What's Milo think?" Hannah asked, and I cocked my head, perplexed.

"About what?" He seemed to tolerate my very uncool eight-o'clock bedtime.

"About Will taking you to birthing class."

I blew out a big sigh and my left shoulder bounced in a half-hearted shrug. "I don't know, but he's been weird since the last ultrasound." I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip. "I feel like he's gearing up to break up with me," I admitted quietly.

"Are you going to let him?"

Hannah and I gave identical looks of confusion to Matty—head tilted, forehead creased, eyes scrunched—because what in the hell was she talking about? "In my experience getting broken up with isn't optional," I replied slowly. Go figure, in the world of Matty Whittaker, breakups were a choice.

"Have you told him how you feel?" Matty asked pointedly.

"I'm not even entirely *sure* how I feel," I lied, the stock answer coming out before I had time to evaluate it.

"I agree with Matty. You should tell him how you feel before he breaks up with you."

When I feel attacked or cornered, I lash out. Fortunately for everyone, I'd gotten better at keeping it all inside, but I wanted to lash out at Hannah in that moment. To make her or Matty feel as hopeless and awful as I did. My brain went for the jugular, filling with terrible, angry thoughts like, "*When was the last time you even went on a date, Hannah?*"

I didn't say it, so let's all agree I'm growing as a person.

Instead, I took a deep breath and tried to reason with them. "Do you two hear yourselves? Do you know how humiliating it'll be to tell him I love him right before he dumps me?"

“Maybe if he knows the truth, he won’t dump you,” Hannah said.

“That’s one hell of a maybe,” I grumbled, still refraining from saying anything hurtful, even though I hated this stupid conversation.

“Okay,” Matty said, her sculpted brow lifting, “consider the alternative. You never tell him, and he either dumps you or continues to date you, always assuming you’re just a fun lay.”

“Matt!” Hannah protested.

“Jesus, Matty,” I said with a sigh. I could always count on Matty not to pull any punches.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t wrong.

“Sorry,” Matty said, her tone an obvious *sorry, not sorry*.

“It’s fine. You’re right. I should talk to him.”

I should talk to him.

Christ.

That sounded like a nightmare.

202 DAYS POST-OVULATION

The worst part about childbirth classes was not the lady that spoke in dulcet tones while she held up a doll, going through the motions of rocking and burping and changing it as if it were real. It wasn't the part where we were prompted to share our greatest fears and most thrilling excitement. It wasn't our annoying classmates, who came up with new levels of stupid and useless questions after every baby burp or video clip, and it wasn't even Will, who once tried to hold my hand (I flexed out of his grasp and crossed my arms over my chest) and once set his hand on my knee (I shifted out of his reach, crossing my legs even though I was not comfortably able to do so), although he was a close second. It was, without question, the fact that this class ran from seven to eight-thirty P-fucking-M on a Thursday night. Do you have any idea how tired I am by eight at night on a Thursday?

There was no way I was doing this for four weeks. I blinked hard, willing my eyes to un-blur (were they crossing?) as the lady (Joanna?) explained the four stages of labor. Apparently early was not too bad, active was bad, and transition was the place where people gave up (*I'm sorry, what?*). And we were only in Stage One.

And somehow this was funny to me—don't ask me why. I'd been crying at the drop of a hat for months; my emotions were no longer logical.

But seriously, can you imagine if you legitimately quit? If you were, like, "*Sew that shit up, Doc, I'm done. This ain't happening. Stages Two through Four can suck it.*" And I

giggled, because it was absurd and funny and the reality was too terrifying to face like this.

Except my giggles turned to more giggles, and every time I tried to stop I would think about quitting childbirth and, though logically I knew it wasn't funny, it cracked me up. Joanna (I really am eighty-five percent sure that's what she said her name was) was frowning sternly at me by now, and the other women—perfect women who looked spectacular and didn't even seem tired and would come to all these classes and would probably have those orgasmic births you read about on *Goop*—were openly glaring at me, but somehow the whole thing just made me laugh harder until I had to excuse myself for a drink like a kid with hiccups.

I calmed down and was able to go back a couple minutes later, feeling more than a little embarrassed to have dissolved into immature giggles in front of Joanna and all the perfect moms with their big rings and (probably) planned pregnancies.

“You missed Stage Two,” Will whispered when I sat down. According to the poster, Stage Two was birth.

“Well, if I forget Stage Two and the baby never comes out, you can remind me,” I whispered back. I expected him to be annoyed, but he grinned.

When we walked out a half hour later, Will reached for my hand and I adjusted my purse, my hands remaining on the strap. I'd already been really forward, would I have to repeat my disinterest every time?

“I'm so tired. I'm going to keel over and die if we have to go to all four of these.”

Surprisingly, Will shrugged. “Yeah, I thought it was stupid. It seemed like we should go just because that's what you do, but I'm okay with never going back.”

“Seriously?” I asked, too tired for a happy dance, but considering one anyway.

“Yeah. Let's tell people we finished the class, though.”

I looked over at him, trying to decide if he was serious or not, but it didn't matter, because I would lie and tell people I was certified to teach that stupid class if it meant never having to go again.

We didn't talk much on the ride home; just a little idle chit-chat, and I texted Milo as we pulled up.

Drea: Just getting home

Drea: You coming over?

Milo: Sure 1 minute

I swung the door open once the car came to a stop, looking back at Will. "Sorry I lost my shit back there. I hope I didn't embarrass you."

Will shook his head. "Nah. We're good. Let me walk you in."

"That's silly—" I began to protest, but Will was already gesturing for me to get out and following behind me.

If he tried to score a kiss, I swore I would punch my baby-daddy.

And so he walked me to my door. I turned the key and opened the door to the vestibule. "I'm in," I verified as the door swung open.

"Go ahead. I'll just make sure you get up alright."

The urge to tell him to fuck all the way off was enough to make me bite my tongue. "*He's trying to be nice, Dre,*" I reminded myself, but I still wanted to point out that I successfully navigated my apartment stairs on the daily without incident. Instead I gave him an irritable look and began the slow tromp up my stairs, turning the key and letting myself in. "Okay, I'm all the way in. You feel okay about that or you need to come help me untie my shoes?"

He poked his head around the staircase, frowning. "Weren't you wearing sandals?" he asked.

I sighed in exasperation. "Yes. I wasn't serious. I'm good."

“Right, yeah. I’m heading out. See you Drea,” he said suddenly, moving fast out the front door. So weird. I shrugged and headed into the apartment, setting my keys into their dish and wandering into the kitchen. I was reaching into the pantry for an apple when I heard a gentle *woof* outside.

Reggie. I smiled, walking to my seldom used front windows, which overlooked the courtyard from their spot on the far end of my living room. Peeking out, I expected to see Milo approaching, letting Reggie take a bathroom break before coming in.

And Reggie *was* peeing.

But the rest of the scene threw me.

Because Milo was deep in conversation with Will. I couldn’t see Will’s face, only Milo’s. He was frowning, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his shorts. He had the look of a man who was *trying* to look casual, when in reality I could see the tensed muscles of his arms while his jaw ticked.

My heart jumped in my chest. What the hell was Will saying to him? I rushed across the room, around the couch, and to my door—all of fifteen feet, but so slow—and swung it open, but Milo was already walking in downstairs. Alone.

“Hey,” I said, and Milo looked up, surprised. Reggie clicked up the stairs ahead of his master, nosing at my hand. Milo, on the other hand, was taking forever to traverse the nine stairs. “I’m glad you’re here. I wanted to talk to you,” I said.

His eyes lifted to meet mine and I saw emotion there, but I couldn’t tell what. Hurt? Sadness? Anxiety? I wasn’t sure, but it wasn’t a happy look. “Me too,” he replied quietly.

I didn’t move from my spot at the door until he was with me, at which point I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled up on tiptoe to kiss him. There was one instant when I swore he pulled away, then he laced his arms around my waist. Pulling my body flush against his, he dropped his head until our lips met. His kiss was soft, lips sweet, and I vaguely wondered what he’d eaten last. Milo wasn’t a big sweets eater.

His arms tightened, pulling me impossibly closer, and he deepened the kiss until the rest of the world disappeared. There was only Milo's arms and Milo's lips and Milo's summery scent—complete with a hint of licorice—to fill my senses. For that moment, my whole world was Milo, and it was wonderful.

Now I had to tell him the truth about what I wanted. “You want to come in?” I asked, noticing Reggie had already wandered past us and into the apartment.

Milo's grasp didn't loosen at all. “In a minute.” He sighed as his forehead fell forward onto mine.

If I just said *I love you* right now, would he say it back?

“Milo, I don't want to break up,” I began.

“But it's the right thing to do,” he said as if he were finishing my sentence, his voice resigned.

My throat tightened. “Is that what you want?”

He shook his head. “We both know I shouldn't get in the way of a man being with his baby.”

I would never keep Will from the baby. I felt like I should say something, but I didn't have the words. Keeping things short-term had been my idea, but only because I'd been avoiding this exact moment.

He continued. “This—us—is amazing, but as a man, sometimes I have to make hard decisions, and this is one of them. It's wrong for me to interfere—to get in the way of the life Polpetta could have.”

In an instant, rage coursed through my veins. I threw my hands up in the air with enough force to loosen Milo's hold on me, then began to pace the small room, rubbing my forehead as I tried to comprehend what he was saying. “What the fuck kind of sexist nonsense is this? You think *I'm* not thinking about what's best for *my* baby?” My hands clutched possessively at my belly.

Milo didn't want to be with me and *Milo* thought I wasn't capable of making the right decisions for my daughter. And it

was bad enough that I worried I couldn't handle it, but if Milo already thought I was a fuck-up? I rubbed a hand over my face, tears threatening. "You're an asshole," I said, my voice trembling.

"Dre, that's not what I'm saying," he protested, but I didn't want to hear any more of what he was saying. Not tonight. Whatever he and Will had been talking about outside—my competence as a mother?—I couldn't hear about it.

"Go home, Milo."

For a minute he only stared at me, unwilling to take my command or ignore it, and I widened my eyes in a *right-fucking-now* expression. Milo clicked once and Reggie popped up, padding to his owner. I was tempted to ask to keep the dog tonight—I badly wanted to bury my face in his long gray hair and sob—but I didn't. Instead I stood, hands resting on my stomach, and glared at man and dog until they walked out and I clicked the lock.

203 DAYS POST-OVULATION

Drea: I'm really sick. Can't make it in today

Matty: Is it the baby? Are you ok?

Drea: Baby's fine. Just throwing up

The phone rang, and I swiped to answer Matty's call. "I've literally seen you vomit twenty-five different ways now. Tell me there's nothing else going on."

"There's nothing else going on," I repeated mechanically. I was a terrible liar, but maybe if I just kept every emotion out of it I would sound suitably sick.

"Bullshit," Matty said.

Or maybe not.

"You were going to say bullshit no matter what I said," I complained.

"That's because you're lying. Tell me."

Choices: double-down or fess up?

"I don't want to talk about it," I mumbled.

Matty made a little noise on the other end of the phone that let me know she was considering my request, although I knew from experience she was being polite and would likely demand details anyway. "Okay," she said finally.

I wasn't expecting that. "Okay?"

"Okay," she repeated slowly. "Take today. Hannah's fast, she can cover your work, and I can handle the Wyman set-up

on my own; I was mostly bringing you for fun.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“But,” she continued (not at all quietly), “you have to show up tomorrow, because we need you. If you aren’t fit for setup, I’ll figure something out, but you have to be there, okay?”

I nodded, feeling tears welling again, then remembered she couldn’t see my nod. “Yeah,” I agreed.

Her voice softened. “You don’t have to tell us, but you know I’m always ready to glitter bomb Will or Milo or both. And the same company who does glitter bombs offers an *Eat a Bag of Dicks* service. They’ll mail them a bag of gummy dicks. I’ve just been waiting for the opportunity...” her voice trailed off and I laughed.

“Okay. Tomorrow,” I agreed.

204 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I hadn't heard from Milo, and I hadn't tried to reach him either. I didn't want to be desperate, but it took everything in me not to text him. Beg him.

I want you.

I need you.

I love you.

There is only you.

And Polpetta, who came with a side of Will. So, I guess there wasn't only him, badly as I may've wanted it.

I sighed, jamming my phone back into my purse and staring out the window at the city flashing by below. It was a pretty ride, even squished in with a zillion other humans (many of whom were selfish turds, but oh well). Good thing about being pregnant was that on any given day at least one non-turd would offer me their seat.

I stood as my stop approached, squeezed through the crowd to get closer to the doors (*Chicago is next. Doors open on the right at Chicago*), and shot a glare at a man whose hand grazed my butt, since I was pretty sure it wasn't accidental. The train came to a stop and I stepped out amongst the masses, the doors already dinging as I made it through (*This is Chicago. This is a Brown Line train. Doors closing*). I straightened the purse on my shoulder and headed down the long series of steps to the street below, following it the short

distance to the shop, where I saw Matty almost immediately through the window.

“Hey!” she said brightly, giving me the once over as I walked in.

“What?” I asked, looking down at myself. I’d done myself up just like usual this morning, but I’d probably forgotten something since I was thinking about Milo the whole time.

“Nothing,” Matty said. “You look perfect. Everything alright?”

I snorted, a wry smile I couldn’t suppress coming up my face. “My life’s a shitshow, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Matty looked appropriately chagrined. “Yeah, sorry. One question—Will or Milo?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Both? It’s a long story.”

Matty’s eyes lit up. “Well, you are in luck, because this wedding is all the way up in Wilmette,” she explained, referring to a suburb far up on the North Shore, guaranteeing a long drive together.

“More like you’re in luck,” I muttered sarcastically, following her to the back where the staff was assembling.

Elizabeth looked at me seriously as I approached, her head tilting to one side. “Matilda said you were sick. How are you, honey?” she asked, setting the back of her hand on my forehead in a way that was both useless and entirely maternal. It made me miss my mom.

“I’m okay, Elizabeth. Thank you for asking.”

“Good. Don’t hesitate to take time if you need it, okay Andrea?”

“I will, Elizabeth,” I lied. I couldn’t take any more days off. I needed the money.

Elizabeth frowned as if she knew I was lying. “Matty said you’ve had a lot of morning sickness,” she said, and I noted she was now calling Matty by her nickname, a sure sign Elizabeth was talking casually. Where business was involved,

she always called Matty by her given name. It was one of her idiosyncrasies, like expecting our hair to be pulled back.

“I have,” I acknowledged, “but I’ve kind of gotten used to that. Now I’m going crazy because Polpetta digs her little toes into my ribs.” I pressed into my side where the baby was always resting. “It feels tingly right here, all the time, like this little chunk of ribs fell asleep.”

“What’s that you called the baby?” Elizabeth asked, a smile on her questioning face. It didn’t escape me this was probably the most Elizabeth and I had ever talked about anything other than flowers.

“Oh, Polpetta? It means meatball, more or less,” I explained.

Elizabeth frowned, then smiled. “You’re not...sticking with it?” she asked cautiously.

I laughed. “No, God no. I just haven’t picked a name yet.”

“I’m sure you’ll pick a lovely one,” she said, then turned abruptly to begin her morning meeting, leaving me still thinking of names. I’d been playing around with this for weeks, and I’d come no closer to a decision.

Elizabeth’s talk was like most weekends, going over clients, assigning work, then bustling away to do business. I walked back to my table, grabbing the order I was working on and looking it over. A voice drew me out of my thoughts. “I worked like a machine yesterday so you wouldn’t have to worry about anything.” I looked up at Hannah, who leaned both elbows on my table, grinning.

“Thanks, Han.”

“How are you?”

Miserable, I thought, but I hadn’t spoken in reply yet when Hannah continued.

“It’s Milo, right?”

I frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“Only Milo could screw you up enough to miss work, Drea. You hardly ever take off.”

I chewed on one corner of my lip. “He thinks I should be with Will.”

“Did you tell him how you feel?” she asked, leaning in closer.

I nodded for her to follow me and we headed into the chiller to collect flowers. “I tried, but it’s hard to get *I love you* out when you’re being dumped.”

Hannah paused, holding a ranunculus stem. “You love him?”

I sighed. “I thought so. He told me he had to “make the hard decisions as a man,” and I belong with Will.”

“He said that?” Her disgusted face expressed exactly how I felt about it, too.

“Yep. *Hard decisions as a man.*”

“So you two broke up?”

“No, not exactly. After he said that sexist shit I told him he needed to leave, and I haven’t talked with him since.”

She smiled softly. “That’s terrible. It’s surprising, but maybe this thing with Milo wasn’t meant to be after all. You might have to move on.”

I made a face. I was trying, but it was harder than it sounded.

FOUR HOURS LATER, I was repeating the story to Matty while she drove the van up north. “So, what were they talking about?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Will and Milo. Did you find out what they were talking about?”

Oh. My. God.

Why had I never asked that question? What *were* Milo and Will talking about? Me, obviously, but what and why? “No. Jesus. I hadn’t even thought about it since...” I didn’t want to say “the breakup.” Those words felt too final.

Matty took a bite of the apple she held. “You’ve gotta ask,” she said matter-of-factly around her bite.

She was right, but who to ask—Milo or Will? I sighed, frustration mounting. “Why is this so hard?” I whined. Matty cocked an eyebrow at me. “I wasn’t supposed to get accidentally pregnant, Matty. I was supposed to date Will and break up with Will and date Milo and have a baby at some responsible time when I had money and an apartment with a second bedroom and a partner who was crazy in love with me.” I sighed, letting my head drop back against the headrest, relieved that, at the very least, I could vent to Matty and she would never judge me. “I was so responsible, and this wasn’t supposed to happen. We used a condom every time, dammit. Aren’t condoms supposed to be foolproof?”

Matty shrugged. “It is fucked up. I mean, I use condoms all the time, and you’ve got me thinking.”

“Yeah? You wanna think? Listen to what I found the other day.” I did a quick search on the internet for the *Planned Parenthood* flier I’d seen a few days ago. “It says here forty percent of men report using a condom wrong within the last *three months*. Another fifteen percent took it off, and an unknown amount are claiming “faulty condom” when, in fact, they never put one on in the first place. Why the fuck are we leaving men responsible for this?”

Matty scowled. “They’re responsible for almost nothing, for fuck’s sake. You’re walking around throwing up every five minutes and I have a heavy flow day today that’s liable to kill me from the blood loss. No man could make it through a single heavy flow day, let alone the horror show pregnancy appears to be.”

“I get that, I do,” I said with a sigh, “but maybe if I’d been responsible for it, I wouldn’t be pregnant.” I looked back

down at the phone, mostly because I felt uncomfortable showing any sort of regret. You sure couldn't say that shit after the baby was born, but was it still okay now?

“She’s going to be great,” Matty assured me.

“Thanks,” I murmured, but it was damn hard to mean it.

209 DAYS POST-OVULATION

“I ’m not going,” I said flatly as I swung the door open.

Will shot me a wry look and held up a brown paper bag. “You think I don’t know that? I brought you dinner from Franco’s.”

I considered telling Will to leave. I really did, but then I ruled in favor of letting him come in. I was going to have to get along with him for the sake of our daughter, and he was my best shot at figuring out what had been said to Milo. The fact that he brought dinner from one of my favorite Italian spots was not a deciding factor. I swear.

Will walked past me where I held the door and led the way to my kitchen. I followed him and reached for the plates while he began to unload the bag. I could smell the garlic bread already, but I felt a bit queasy. “I got spaghetti with regular meatballs instead of turkey, because you’re anemic, right?”

“I am,” I admitted, remembering Milo bringing home my steak for the same reason. We’d made love that night—slowly on our sides—and I’d turned my face up to look into Milo’s eyes, which were warm and intoxicating, while he’d held my hip, his kisses long and drugging—

“Drea?”

I snapped out of my memory, my eyes wide and guilty as I refocused on Will, who was holding up a foil package and looking at me questioningly. “Sorry, yeah. Go ahead.”

“Garlic bread,” he said as he set the item on the counter, and I reached for it. “And chicken cacciatore because it’s your favorite.”

My stomach turned in the instant he said the word, and my hand landed on the top of the large swell where my stomach belonged as I felt a surge of nausea. The smell of the cacciatore had masked the chicken, but I smelled it now. I put up a hand, backing out of the kitchen. “Throw it out, Will.”

“What?” He was looking at me like I was crazy.

My throat flexed, and I knew if I gagged it’d be over. I tried not to breathe. “I can’t—I can’t—no chicken,” I choked out, running to the bathroom.

“Okay. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’ll take it out back.” One of the best things about this apartment was that the manager, Carlo, brought the trash from a metal can outside my backdoor to the dumpster daily. Today, though, the back-porch garbage wasn’t going to cut it. I took a few fortifying breaths in the bathroom, calming my stomach, then leaned back into the hall. “You have to take it to the dumpster,” I said.

“Drea, come on. I got rid of it.”

I shook my head adamantly. I swore I could still smell it. “The dumpster, Will. It’s going to make me sick.”

He sighed, but I heard the screen door swing as he walked out, then the scrape of the metal back-porch garbage can. I walked back to my bedroom, sitting on my bed and taking deep breaths.

And then I heard it.

“Hey.”

It was Milo’s voice, low and musical, on the sidewalk outside my open bedroom window, but not talking to me, I knew. I felt a surge of jealousy, wondering if there was another woman he was talking to.

“Hey,” Will’s voice replied coolly. So, not a woman. I froze in place on my bed, out of sight from the window, straining to hear every word.

“You had birthing class?” Milo asked.

“No, I just brought Drea dinner,” Will answered, his tone smug, and I resisted the urge to say something through the window. “I didn’t know she didn’t like chicken.”

“Yeah. Makes her sick.” Milo’s voice sounded so sad, and I wanted to hold him.

I wanted to be held *by* him.

Will grunted in response but didn’t say more, and Milo continued, “How is she?”

“She’s fine. I can take care of her, like I said before.”

Milo’s small noise suggested he wasn’t so sure. “Good. Take care of her then, because if—” His voice was cut off by what sounded like a growl of frustration before he spoke again, sounding like he was talking through clenched teeth. “Because Dre and the baby? They deserve everything.”

The men must not’ve had any parting words, because the screen door banged a moment later, making me jump. I walked calmly into the kitchen, my arms crossed over my chest. “Thank you for throwing it away. Sorry you wasted the money.”

“Don’t apologize,” Will replied with a casual smile. “Let’s eat the spaghetti and meatballs.”

I picked up our plates and the garlic bread, letting Will collect the spaghetti. We sat on the couch and he served up my pasta. I was already deep into the garlic bread (Oh my God, if you ever have the chance to go to Franco’s, get the garlic bread).

For a while we chewed in silence.

“I saw you ran into Milo last week. What did you two talk about?” I asked finally, as if I were making pleasant conversation.

Every so often Will and I have these interactions where I think, “*I bet he’s a good lawyer.*” This was one of those times. He gave the littlest tell—no more than a slight widening of his

eyes—and then his face relaxed right back into casual ease. *Fake* casual ease. “Not much. I like his dog. He mentioned it?”

I was aiming my expression toward the same casual ease, but I’m pretty sure it looked something a bit more like suspicion bordering on hostility. “No. We haven’t had the opportunity to talk.” As in, he hadn’t called and I still had enough dignity not to call him, but I didn’t want Will knowing that.

Will scooted closer. Much closer, like into-my-personal-space closer, setting a hand on my forearm. Despite his sudden proximity, the gesture felt friendly rather than intimate, so I didn’t immediately pull away. “I’m sorry if I complicated... whatever was going on there.”

He sounded sincere, but I didn’t believe him. I leaned back as if I were just resting on the couch, regaining my bubble in the process. “Thanks,” I replied flatly. “It’s fine.”

“Right,” he said, nodding. “It ran its course. I know how it is.”

It took all my strength to swallow down a skeptical snort. “I’ll take a half meatball, extra gravy,” I said, fully aware Will had sidestepped the Milo question without much in the way of an answer. I sure didn’t believe they’d stood outside talking about Reggie last week, and I knew for a fact they hadn’t today.

Will scooped spaghetti onto the plate and topped it with a half meatball and a large dollop of sauce, then sprinkled parmesan over the entire thing, just the way I liked it. He passed it to me where I sat back on the couch, then leaned over his own plate, his forearms resting on his thighs. I set the plate on my rounded stomach, using it like a table.

Sticking a forkful of pasta in his mouth, Will glanced back at me, chuckling at my position. “You wanna watch a movie?” he asked.

I knew things with Milo were over. I knew Milo thought I should be with Will, and my mom thought I should be with Will, and probably the whole world thought I should be with

Will, but it wasn't what I wanted. Even if that meant I was alone. "I feel like you're forgetting the reason I don't like childbirth classes," I said.

Will smiled, his dark eyes alight with humor. "I assumed it was because the other women asked nonstop questions."

My eyes widened. "Oh my God, right? What was up with them?"

Will tilted his head to one side, raising his voice an octave. "Um, if the baby farts, will I fart?" he asked, and I laughed hard enough I nearly spilled my pasta.

"Okay," I gasped, still catching my breath, "them too, but mostly it was about how late the class went. I've gotta sleep, man."

His lips twisted into a regretful smile. "I'll head out after dinner."

My lips began to form the words, "*No rush*," out of habit, but I stopped myself, curling them in and biting down to trap the words. We ate quietly for a while.

"Have you been thinking about names?" Will asked.

"Yeah, but nothing seems right. What are you thinking?"

"What about Lucinda?"

My nose curled. "You want to name our baby after your mother?" Will was a handsome man, but his mom was under five feet tall, dark and round and a bit hairy. It was hard for me to separate the visual from the name in my head.

"I love my ma," he replied with a shrug, and I shot him an exaggerated eye roll. I couldn't suppress my grin, though, and he grinned back. "Listen," he began, and I heard the subtle shift in his voice—he was worried I wasn't going to like what he was going to say next—"you got everything you need? I can help you out, if you need."

My initial reaction was to say something sarcastic, or maybe rude, but I bit my tongue, knowing he was just trying to help. "I think I'm okay, but thanks," I replied quietly.

He reached out to touch my knee where it was curled under my body, a few inches from where Polpetta was putting on a drum solo, although Will didn't know that. The touch was, again, not overtly sexual, and I didn't move away. "I read about stuff we'll need a lot of, and I set up repeat deliveries of diapers and wipes and formula and something called butt paste." He curled his nose and I smiled, reaching for his hand.

He was surprised by my touch, so I spoke quickly as I lifted it off my knee. "Wanna feel her?" I set Will's hand onto my stomach where the baby was pounding away and watched his face light up.

"I've never..." he began, but he didn't need to finish. He'd hadn't touched my belly—not since it'd grown, at least, and not like this. I knew that, and I appreciated he didn't assume he had the right to touch me so intimately without my permission (could someone please notify all old ladies in elevators, who seemed to feel perfectly at ease groping a stranger's midsection?). "She's really strong, eh?" He focused his attention down at the expanse of blue shirt. "Are you going to play soccer like your dad, strong girl?" There was kicking in reply, and based on Will's grin, I'm pretty sure he took it as an affirmative. Looking back up at me, he said, "Thanks." Then his eyes shifted back to his hand, squeezing lightly. "I should go. Good night, Lucinda." He laughed as he hopped up and out of my reach before I could slap him playfully.

"Stop that. We're not naming her Lucinda." I set down my plate and attempted to stand up to walk him out.

Will laughed. "This is sad to watch. Here." He extended a hand and lifted me up to standing, keeping his hold on me until I stood only inches from him. *This* was an intimate touch, even if it was only our hands, and I flexed my grip open in an effort to drop it. "I can take care of you," he murmured into my ear, and I'm sure if the right man had said it would've felt romantic, but Will was not the right man, and I didn't need to be taken care of.

"I know that. Thanks for dinner. I'll call you," I said, my voice kind but detached, the way I might talk to a client at Whittaker.

Will swallowed hard and nodded, swinging the door open and walking out, shooting me one last handsome smile as he walked down my stairs.

Smiling back, I closed the door and twisted the lock with a sigh, wishing it were Milo I was saying goodnight to.

231 DAYS POST-OVULATION

This day was forever long. It wasn't even late—only three—but I was miserable. I had a headache and the August heat had my fingers swollen up. I lay the last of the boutonnieres in their boxes, well buffeted by tissue paper, then sat down at my stool, rubbing my head. I never knew how much I loved ibuprofen until it was taken away. Acetaminophen was a load of crap.

“You okay?” Matty asked, and I looked up to find her standing over me, concern etching her pretty features.

“I'm fine. I just have a headache and I don't feel good.” I sighed, pushing myself up to standing. “But I always feel like I'm going to throw up.”

Matty was still squinting at me. “I think you should go home.”

I shook my head, one eyebrow winging up. “Don't be ridiculous. I'm fine. You know I'd never let the clients recognize I'm miserable, Matt.”

She squinted, her mouth turned down at one side. “It's not that. You look...off.”

I assumed “*off*” was a euphemism for something much less complementary, and I touched my face as if I might be able to feel the deformity she clearly saw.

“Go home and rest,” she repeated.

“Matty—” I protested, but she shook her head, cutting me off.

“I’m telling you this as your boss,” she added curtly. Matty had never once referred to herself as my boss, although there was no question she was. She’d many times referred to her mother as such. I stared at her, perplexed. “I’m worried about you,” she said, her voice softening as she began to type into her phone. “I think you should see a doctor.”

“I’m sorry. What?” She had to have lost her mind today.

She held the phone towards me, but flipped it back too fast for me to figure out what she was looking at. “This says headache and nausea could be preeclampsia.”

I shook my head in disbelief, reaching for her phone, but she shifted out of my reach. “You’re insane,” I replied. “I’m nauseous, like, twenty-three hours a day and I have headaches all the time. I don’t have preeclampsia. My blood pressure is fine.”

She looked back down at her screen, then up at me, her eyes widening meaningfully. “You’ve been grabbing your belly all day. Bet you have stomach pains.”

Okay, this was true, but I thought I might be having Braxton Hicks. I’d just this week been introduced to something called crotch lightning, which was decidedly less thrilling than the name would lead you to believe.

“And...your face,” Matty said delicately, and my hand shot up to touch my cheek once more.

“What about my face?”

“It looks bigger. So do your hands, Drea. This says you should go to the hospital.”

“I’m not going to the hospital, Matty. I’m fine.”

Hannah, probably noticing our conversation, slipped off her headphones and walked over from her station. She looked concerned, but concern was her default face. Hannah was just a nicer person than most. “What’s up?”

Matty spoke before I could. “Drea has preeclampsia and won’t go to the hospital.”

I gave an exaggerated eye roll/shrug combo. “According to Dr. Matty.”

Matty handed Hannah her phone. “Drea has pain, swelling, nausea, and a headache.”

Hannah had looked slightly concerned before, but now her eyes widened as she looked back and forth between me and the phone screen. “Drea. This is serious. At the very least you need to call your doctor.” When I didn’t immediately pull out my phone, her brow dropped sternly. “Seriously.” Reluctantly, I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the contacts. “And Will. You should call Will,” Hannah added.

Matty shot Hannah a look which clearly said, *Don’t mention Will yet*. She was right. Calling Will to take me to the emergency room was off the table.

“I’m calling the doctor. Not Will,” I grumbled. “Not yet.”

“That’s fine. I’ll take you,” Matty said, her voice broaching no argument.

I argued anyway. “You have the Sofer bat mitzvah.”

Matty shrugged. “Mom’ll do it.”

“I can’t ask her to do that.”

“Call,” she said firmly.

HOSPITALS SUCK, and I’d been at this one for over three hours. Matty, ever the trooper, was chatting my ear off, attempting to keep me distracted. Honestly, I just wanted to sleep. So far, the hospital visit had been uneventful. I’d had a bunch of blood taken and had sat around in a hospital bed waiting for results. I thanked God I had *somewhat* decent insurance and tried not to think about the fact I’d still have to pay at least four hundred dollars for this trip. “Anyway, I decided not to go on another date with him,” Matty said, and I realized I’d lost track of what she was saying. I gulped and was trying to think of what to say that would not give away that fact when the doctor

walked back into the curtained little room. I sat up a little straighter, waiting to hear.

“Hello, Drea,” he said warmly, looking at me over the chart he held. “Liver and kidneys look good. Your platelet count was fine and we didn’t find protein in the urine,” he announced.

I glanced at Matty, but she looked as lost as I felt. “What’s that mean?”

He smiled again. “Don’t know. It means you don’t have preeclampsia yet, at least. You might have gestational hypertension, so we’re going to send you home tonight and I want you to come back to the office tomorrow.”

“I have to work,” I said automatically.

“You’re not working,” Matty replied instantly.

“I’d have to agree with your friend. We need to see you again to rule out anything more serious.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

“Great. Call the desk at eight tomorrow morning and we’ll get you in early. Sound good?”

“Sure,” I answered dispassionately.

“In the meantime, take it easy. No strenuous workouts or heavy lifting.”

I snorted humorlessly. No problem there. I didn’t intend to do either of those things. “Sure,” I agreed once more.

232 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I convinced Matty not to take off work for my doctor's appointment on the sole condition I use a ride share to get to the doctor's office. I knew Matty couldn't afford to miss a Saturday, especially with me out, and getting a car seemed fair since I didn't particularly feel like walking to and from the train anyway.

My eyes scanned the courtyard as they had everyday since my breakup with Milo. If I was realistic, it was probably the same scan I'd been making since I moved in here a few years ago. My eyes had always craved the sight of Milo.

Quickly evident, though, was the fact Milo wasn't around. Not now and not in the past week, at least. Not that I was stalking him or anything, but when your front window looks out into the courtyard where he walks his dog four times a day, it's reasonable to catch sight of him every so often, and I hadn't.

I got into the black sub-compact that waited for me at the curb and buckled the belt around my sizable middle. I never used to buckle up in cabs, but now I had constant visions of crashing and hurting the baby I couldn't seem to shake, so I put on the damn seatbelt.

It turns out there wasn't much to learn from the doctor. He confirmed that, yes, I did have high blood pressure, but no, I didn't have any other indicators of preeclampsia, meaning I had gestational hypertension. He called it by that name and

some acronym interchangeably, but I couldn't seem to remember the letters.

"What does it mean?" I asked. "Is the baby alright? Will I have to deliver early?"

He smiled gently, leaning his arms on his thighs and rolling a touch closer to where I sat. "It means you're going to need appointments every four days so we can check for changes. The baby should be fine, and you'll probably be able to carry to full term, but if any complications arise we'll be ready to move quickly. Here's what you need to do." He sat up straighter and I mirrored his posture, listening carefully. "I'm putting you on modified bed rest," he said, sliding his pad of paper nearer.

My eyebrows raised. I couldn't *be* on bed rest. I lived alone. I debated telling him there was no one to take care of me on bed rest, but he continued talking before I could.

"*Modified* bed rest doesn't mean stay in bed all day. You can move around—even leave the house sometimes—but I don't want you doing anything strenuous. No work, no exercise, no laundry or walking the dog. When you're watching TV, elevate your feet. If you see any extreme swelling of your lower extremities or any swelling of your face or hands at all I want you to call me and we'll meet at the hospital. The back desk will schedule your appointments for every four days to monitor your blood pressure and bloodwork. Do you have any questions?"

So many questions. Who in the hell was going to do my laundry? I exhaled slowly. "No."

"Okay. If you do, don't hesitate to call, okay?" He stood and I nodded numbly.

234 DAYS POST-OVULATION

My due date was one month away, and as bored as I already was hanging out and watching TV, I didn't want that month to move any quicker. My time on the couch had given me plenty of opportunity to think, and it was clear to me I was going to be a terrible mother and this whole thing was a big mistake.

My phone rang and I reached for it, seeing Matty's number before I swiped. "Hey."

"How are you, Drea?" she asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"I'm fine. I've started watching the show *Bones*. Have you ever seen *Bones*?"

"No. I think my mom used to watch it," she replied. "Hey, Hannah and I want to come over. That okay?"

I looked around me. The good news was the place couldn't really get very messy when you couldn't move around or do much. There were dishes in the sink, but it was otherwise clean. "Sure. If you want. I'm boring, though."

"When was the last time you showered?" she asked.

I shrugged, but she couldn't see me. "Today. There was nothing else to do. You know, I could come to your place—or Hannah's—I'm allowed to go out."

"Yeah, but you're not allowed to walk to the L and car shares are expensive. Besides, we're already on our way."

“Alright. Fine. If you want.” It wasn’t like anyone could say no to Matty once she had an idea she liked.

“I want.”

“Alright. I’ll unlock the door,” I replied, then set the phone down next to me and resumed watching *Bones*.

The buzzer rang only fifteen minutes later. I stood and hit the button, swinging the door open and looking down at the vestibule, where Matty, Hannah, and a strange man were entering, all laden with boxes. “Who’s this?” I asked quietly as all three filed past me and into the apartment.

Matty glanced back at the stranger. “This is Sam. He’s our Lyft driver.”

“Your Lyft driver is in my house?” I asked, shooting her an expression I hoped read, *And are we afraid he’s going to murder us all?*

“Sam’s great, and we have one more trip with stuff. Be right back.”

I opened my mouth to ask what in the hell was happening, but all three were filing back out my front door before I could ask any questions. A moment later, all three returned, this time with gifts. “What the hell is happening?”

“Thank you Sam,” Matty said, pulling out some cash and handing it to him. She waited until the door closed downstairs, then she turned to me, grinning and holding out a gift. I took it from her hands, the question still on my face. “We’re throwing you a shower. Don’t worry. Hannah and I are setting everything up. People will be here at four.” She cocked her head at me. “I was worried you’d look a hot mess, but you look good. Probably change your clothes, though.”

I blinked at her, and Hannah walked into the room, smiling widely. “A shower?” I asked. “Who—who’s coming at four?”

Hannah’s eyes scrunched in thought. “Your mom and Will’s mom—”

“And my mom,” Matty interjected.

“Yep. Elizabeth and Bitty and Adelaide and Julia. Plus your cousin Stephanie. I think that’s it. Is that it?”

“No. There are one or two aunts from her side and one from Will’s,” Matty added.

“It’s not too big. We didn’t think you’d want big. Are you disappointed?” Hannah asked.

“No,” I said, but my voice sounded distracted and faraway, even to me, so I repeated myself more firmly. “No. You guys, this is really sweet.”

“Good. Now sit down and let us decorate,” Matty commanded, and I sat down and watched them decorate around me.

THE SHOWER WAS book-themed and pretty, with pages from classic books in delicate frames and stuffed animal characters all around and flowers—of course, flowers—and I bit my lip to keep from crying as I looked around. “This is amazing,” I whispered.

“It kinda is,” Matty agreed with a self-satisfied grin. “I might take a few pictures for the website.” Hannah swatted at her.

“Thank you both so much.” I was losing the battle against tears. Dammit. When would I go back to my normal not-crying-at-the-drop-of-a-hat self?

The three of us turned to the door at the sound of the buzzer, and I began to heave-ho my giant body up out of the chair.

“Sit,” Hannah scolded, frowning at me. “We’ve got everything.”

I sat back down and Matty swung my door open, revealing guest after guest, and I’d never tell them that every ring of the buzzer made my stupid heart leap, hoping it would be Milo.

Not that I knew what I'd say to him if he did show up. He had unceremoniously dumped me, after all.

Hannah bustled around and set out food and gave everyone little quizzes while Matty schmoozed, allowing me to sit still and chat with whoever sat down near me.

"How're you feeling?" Mom asked as she sat next to me. "This was really nice of Matty and Hannah."

"I'm good and it was," I agreed.

"I met Lucinda. She's lovely." You could always count on Mom to like fellow Italian mothers.

"She's nice," I agreed, looking across the room at the woman, currently gobbling down a cheesecake. I felt a shot of jealousy and wondered if anyone would bring me some cheesecake or if I'd have to ask.

"How're things with you and Will?" she asked, and I glanced in her direction to gauge her level of interest, trying to figure out where it ranged on a scale from simmering to inferno.

Blazing.

"Things are the same, Ma."

"And with Milo?"

"Also the same," I said flatly. Mom knew about the breakup, although I'd glossed over the details.

Mom sighed. "Being a single mom is hard," she warned, as if this were reason enough to settle down. Here's betting she would've taken Will's terrible "insurance plan" proposal.

"So's marriage. I'd rather go it with someone I love," I replied dryly.

"Alright." She stood. "I won't bother you on your shower day." She touched my cheek. "I just love you."

"I know that."

"And I want everything in the world to be easy for you."

I laughed. "Unlikely."

“I know, but it’s still what moms want. You’ll see,” she added with a wink.

I hated the phrase “*You’ll see,*” which was frequently wielded by smug older ladies, often with that damn wink.

I rolled my eyes. “Indeed,” I replied, and she laughed as she walked away. Mom had a really musical laugh I’d always loved, not unlike Milo.

And there I was thinking about Milo again.

Will’s mom had just plopped down next to me and set her hand on my belly (entirely uninvited) when Matty called everyone to attention. “Thank you all for being here. We’re going to go over our quiz answers and then Drea is going to open gifts. Please keep eating, there’s still so much food. She’s eating for two, not twenty-seven, so we don’t want to leave her this many leftovers.” There was a chuckle from the crowd. Matty could charm anyone. “Alright, let’s go over these answers.”

I knew exactly three of the book excerpts on the list, so I tuned out as Hannah began reading off answers, lest I think too hard about what kind of failure as a mother knows no children’s literature.

It’s kind of weird to have everyone stare at you while you open gifts, but that’s the main event at a baby shower, so I swallowed hard and put on my best client-smile while I held up each onesie and burp cloth and outfit, trying to look like each excited me more than the last, rather than scared the ever-living shit out of me.

When I was finally done, Hannah handed me a list for thank you’s and Matty and Mom carried everything into my room while expressly forbidding me from setting it all up. “Okay, okay,” I agreed. Honestly, I was too tired to even consider doing it tonight, so it didn’t really matter.

“You look tired,” Mom said, cupping my cheek with one soft palm.

“I am,” I admitted. “God knows why. I just sit here all day.” As if on cue, four or five of the women—aunts and

cousins—came to say goodbye. “Thank you all so much,” I said. I continued to stand, saying thank you and goodbye to everyone, until I closed the door on Mom and Lucinda and just Hannah and Matty remained. They were packing up food. “You guys,” I said, walking into the kitchen. “This was amazing. I can’t thank you enough.

Hannah paused to wrap her arms around me. “You’re welcome,” she said as Matty joined the hug, pinning my arms to my side.

“I think everything is packed up. I’m taking these.” Matty said, grinning and holding up a bag of Doritos.

“All you,” I replied. “Do you guys want more?”

“Nope. We brought extra so you wouldn’t have to cook for a while.”

Christ, they’d thought of everything.

“Alright, we’ll stop by later this week,” Hannah said, pulling on her purse. I heard her words, but my eyes were drawn to the window by a small woof. I hadn’t heard Reggie in weeks.

“Go talk to him,” Matty suggested.

My nose curled. “No. I’m good.”

Matty made a throat noise I couldn’t identify, but Hannah nodded. “I get it,” she said.

I walked them to the door and flipped the lock behind them before falling onto the couch tiredly and putting my feet up. Time for some Netflix.

A minute later, Hannah and Matty knocked again. I glanced around, wondering what they’d forgotten. I should just make them a key. The knock came again, and I sighed, shifting my feet off the pillow and pushing myself up. “I’m coming.”

The apartment wasn’t big, and my hand was on the lock by the time the voice responded. “God, don’t get up, Dre.”

Milo. I let out a long breath, my hand hovering over the doorknob.

“Dre?” His voice was tight. Worried. I flipped the lock, opening the door but holding the handle, not inviting him in. Reggie nosed at my free hand and I scratched his thick skull. “Dre,” Milo repeated, but this time the word came out in a relieved sigh.

“Milo,” I replied coolly.

“Matty told me about your blood pressure and bedrest. Are you okay?”

Dammit, Matty.

“I’m fine.”

“And the...” He nodded toward my middle. “The baby’s...”

“She’s fine.”

“Can I come in?” he asked quietly. Even Reggie was still obediently waiting outside the door.

“I need to rest, Milo.”

“I know. Let me help.” His face looked tortured, and I couldn’t help but feel badly for him.

I made a face, my nose curling as my lips pursed in distaste. “I don’t want that.” Because as much as I wanted Milo, I didn’t want this. I began to edge the door closed, but his hand lay solidly on the oak.

“I’m sorry. Please don’t shut the door.”

I paused, intrigued even though I shouldn’t have been.

“I’m so sorry. So sorry,” he repeated.

I wanted to tell him not to be sorry, but he *should* be sorry, right? His fingers floated up as if to reach for me, but he pulled back, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Please talk to me, Dre.”

I stepped back, allowing him entry. Reggie pushed past and sniffed around the floor for party scraps. Still, Milo didn’t

enter.

“Tell me you forgive me.” His voice was hoarse, and I worried he wouldn’t be able to do his work the way it sounded now.

“For what?”

He frowned sadly, his dark eyes aching. “For hurting you. For not being there when you were sick. For not taking care of you.”

Great, more *being a man* shit. “It’s not your job to take care of me,” I said.

He inhaled, slow and deep, as if he might disagree. “We’ve been friends for the better part of a decade. I don’t want to lose all that.”

After everything that had happened, everything he’d said from the very beginning, he wanted to go back to normal.

The idea of normal felt like someone trying to saw my body in two.

How could I tell him it was impossible? That I’d taken all the love I felt for him and unleashed it? That I’d let it run wild and now it couldn’t be reined back in? I could never again look at Milo without remembering how it felt to have the man stare into my eyes or skim his fingers along my flesh. How could I tell him that my chest used to hurt when he’d look at me, because it seemed impossible to fit all those feelings into one ribcage, and now the pain had turned so acute I thought I might split open?

How could I say any of those things?

I gave a tiny shake of my head.

No.

The look of raw pain in his eyes made me want to reconsider, but instead I just looked away.

Milo made a clicking sound that drew Reggie to him, and he reached out to me, his fingers only brushing over mine before he thought better of the gesture. “I’m here for you,” he

said softly. “Always. If you change your mind for even a minute.”

“I know that,” I replied, looking down at Reggie’s eyes, which glowed a golden-brown not unlike his owner’s. The dog’s mouth fell open in a dog-smile, his tongue sticking out one side lazily.

239 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I shuffled across the apartment, opening the door and looking down. It had taken me three days to realize—I only became aware when my mom came to visit—but now I knew to check. Every morning, like clockwork, the bag was out there, filled with Coke and ramen and beef sticks and sometimes even candy.

Today was different. Inside the bag was a my insulated lunch box, which I loaned him months ago, and inside of *it* sat an assortment of plastic containers. A note sat on top.

I made dinner last night as a practice run for a dinner party I'm having next Friday. You should come.

First, though, you have to tell me if any of this is good. I made your salad without bleu cheese—judge accordingly. Everything else should be safe for you to eat. It's a poultry-free menu, since I hope you'll be there.

—Milo

My fingers traced his name longingly. I shouldn't miss him as much as I did, but I couldn't help it. I'd had plenty of relationships that had ended before—relationships that had been both long and good—but I'd never once felt this aching loss. Day and night it burned in my chest like a hole I couldn't fill.

Of course, to my displeasure, it was often accompanied by the more literal burn of reflux as this baby became gigantic and pressed my helpless organs into submission.

Hungry, I took Milo's package to the kitchen and unloaded it. There was some sort of salad that was likely to be disappointing without the cheese, a golden soup I thought might be squash, a big chunk of bread, and some sort of pork tenderloin. All of it was still warm, wrapped in one of those belts you can freeze or microwave and strap to your back. Not bothering to put it all on plates, I stacked the containers onto a tray and took it all to the TV, restarting an episode of *Bones*. I could only eat about a third of what he'd packed, but it was undeniably delicious.

Drea: It's all really good. I love the soup

It only took moments for a text to ding on my screen.

Milo: Perfect

Milo: So you'll come on Friday

I certainly hadn't said that.

Milo: You must be sick of cooking

This was entirely true. I longed for takeout, but I was trying to save money. I'd eaten more of Milo's ramen drop-offs than I cared to admit, not because I felt sick, but because I was too damn tired to cook.

Drea: I'll think about it

Milo: Bring anyone. I just want to see you.

Did he know how that line affected me the first time? Probably. Milo himself had told me how obvious it was that I'd wanted him.

I picked up my phone.

"I'm just grabbing a coffee. What's up? Want me to bring you dinner later?" Matty asked. "Oh, hold on," she said suddenly. I waited while she ordered a latte in the background, then her voice returned. "Okay. Are you there?"

“I’m here. I just ate, but it’s early, and I wouldn’t turn down dinner later.”

“Done and done. I’ll see what Han is up to. Maybe we can have sushi. I’ll tell her the pregnant woman demands it.”

“Sushi’s great, but I’ll eat anything.”

“Well, don’t tell *her* that,” Matty chastised with a laugh. “I’m trying to guilt her, here.”

“I really appreciate dinner, but it’s not why I called.”

“Oh, sorry. I just assumed you were bored. What’s up? Are you in labor?”

This time I laughed. “No. I haven’t even dropped yet, and the doctor said he didn’t see any thinning or dilation.”

“No idea what that means, but I take it to mean the baby’s not moving.”

“More or less, yes.”

“Then what’s up?” Matty asked.

“I wanted to know if you had any plans this Friday?”

“You want to go out?” Matty’s voice was filled with excitement.

“Not exactly. Milo invited us for another dinner party.”

She made a sound like a purr in the back of her throat. It made my lip curl. “I haven’t seen Kesean in a while.”

“I don’t know if he’ll be there—”

“But you know Milo will be,” Matty interrupted.

“Obviously, yes.”

“Count me in, Drea. You want me to ask Hannah?”

“Do you think she’ll want to come?” I asked, surprised.

“Not at all, but it’s nice to ask.”

“I’ll call and ask her,” I said.

“Sounds good. I’ll be by tonight. If you’re calling Hannah now, ask her about dinner, too. She already left for the day.”

“Sure. I’ll see you later.”

“Text me with your food choice,” she added quickly.

“Will do. Talk later,” I said, hanging up. I dialed Hannah next.

“Hey, you! Are you in labor?”

“This is a thing everyone is going to ask from now on, isn’t it?”

Hannah laughed. “Probably, yes. Does that mean you’re *not* in labor?”

“Nope. Just wanted to know if you were free for dinner.”

“Yes, definitely. Did you talk to Matty?”

“Yeah, she’s in.”

“Does that mean we’re eating sushi?” Hannah asked with a sweet chuckle. It would annoy me if they were always trying to order food I didn’t like, but apparently Hannah was too nice to care.

“She’d like sushi, yes.”

“But not you?”

I laughed. “I think I’m supposed to tell you it’s all I’m craving, but honestly, I’d like a burger.”

“I didn’t think you liked burgers,” Hannah said.

I shrugged, but she couldn’t see me. “I don’t, and they’re terrible for the environment, so I never eat them, but suddenly I really want one.”

“I know a really good burger place,” Hannah said.

“Do you think Matty’ll mind?” I asked tentatively.

“You’re pregnant. You get to pick,” Hannah assured me.

“Okay,” I said reluctantly. I couldn’t recall ever seeing Matty eat a burger.

“I’ll call and tell her,” Hannah offered.

“Thank you,” I sighed. “But there’s one other thing,” I rushed to add when I felt Hannah gearing to hang up.

“What’s up?”

“Milo is having a dinner party on Friday. I was wondering if you wanted to come?”

“You’re going to Milo’s dinner party?” she asked, the shock on her voice not at all concealed.

“I was thinking about it,” I replied hesitantly, although her response, unlike Matty’s, had me rethinking things.

Hannah must’ve heard the anxiety in my voice, because she began backpedaling. “No, no. I think that’s good. You should.”

“Are you going to come, then?”

Hannah made a little noise in her throat, caught in a new conundrum of being supportive while still not wanting to come. “Sure. Yeah. I’ll come.”

I couldn’t help but grin, and I was glad Hannah couldn’t see it. “Really? You sure, Han?”

“Definitely,” she said in a way that didn’t sound so definite.

“Great. Okay. Burgers for dinner and dinner party Friday.”

“Yep,” Hannah agreed. “I’ll see you later tonight. I’ll call Matty about food.”

“Thank you.”

I twirled the phone in my fingers, not sure I was ready to text Milo. Finally I turned the screen back to me.

Drea: Is it ok if Matty and Hannah come Friday

The reply was faster than I would’ve thought possible.

Milo: Yes

Milo: Of course

Ellipses scrolled for another minute, but then disappeared, and I felt a surge of disappointment.

246 DAYS POST-OVULATION

Hannah looked uncomfortable.

It was easier to think about Hannah's discomfort than my own, so I was focused on cheering her up. I smiled as she smoothed down her dress for the millionth time. It was a maxi-dress, so no smoothing was required, but it seemed to make her feel better. "You look great," I said, not for the first time. Matty cocked her head, evaluating Hannah more critically. I wasn't sure what Matty thought—it was never something we'd discuss. Hannah was so pretty, but, looking at her, I still wanted to pluck the hell out of her eyebrow.

"Turn around," Matty directed, and Hannah obliged, allowing Matt to turn her mass of hair into a pretty messy-braid.

"That looks nice, Hannah." I glanced down at myself. I couldn't see my toes past my oversized belly. "I, on the other hand, look ridiculous."

"You look cute," Hannah protested. It was unconvincing at best. I looked back down at my striped dress, which was a skin-tight, to-the-knee dress I'd ordered online and was now reconsidering.

"I like that dress," Matty agreed—her approval meant more, since she wasn't so nice. "It's hot."

"Too hot?" I asked. I didn't want to seem desperate.

"No such thing," Matty said coolly, spinning Hannah back around.

“You look good,” Hannah confirmed in a way that was clearly meant to be a final assessment.

“Thanks,” I said, swallowing hard and tucking my hair behind my ears. My loose, un-styled hair. In my time dating Milo he’d seen me with all sorts of fancy up-dos for work, and every night he’d delighted in letting my hair down, burying his fingers and his face in it. The memory made my chest squeeze painfully.

“Do you want help?” Hannah asked, grimacing down at where I sat attempting to pull on a pair of Converse. She crouched to pull my shoes on for me.

“Why don’t you just wear sandals?” Matty asked.

My lips twisted, trying to think of an answer I was willing to share that wasn’t exactly the truth. The truth was vanity. I wanted to wear Converse because that’s what I would normally wear with a dress like this, and I didn’t want to have to put on sandals just because my feet were a little swollen. I didn’t want my feet to *be* a little swollen, and I certainly didn’t want to show up at Milo’s perfect party with his perfect friends looking a pregnant mess. I wanted to look like Kate Middleton or some actress—like I had people to take care of me and put me together so I always gave the impression that carrying a new, eight-pound organ was easy. And I guess I kind of *did* have people now, because I wasn’t putting on my own shoes. “I don’t want to wear sandals,” was all I said, and my voice sounded defensive to my own ear. But Matty dropped it.

It was neither cold nor wet as we made this trip to Milo’s, but we still took the sidewalk that led around the edge of the courtyard to his side of the building. I hit the button and the door buzzed in reply, allowing us into the building. “You alright?” Matty whispered as we entered.

“Yeah. Do I not look alright?” All forward motion ceased as I waited for Matty’s response.

A step beyond me, she turned back and assessed me critically. “You’re good,” she replied finally, giving a quick nod and then beginning to climb the stairs. Hannah smoothed her skirt again.

Matty walked through the unlocked door as if she owned the place. A few months ago, I'd felt as comfortable in this space as my own. I'd made love in front of the fire, curled up in blankets on the couch, and sat at the dining table for countless meals, but now I felt out of place.

On the couch were a few faces I recognized, but couldn't put names to. Kesean was also there, and Matty's eyes fell on him quickly. Apparently the two of them had been out a few times (and slept together, of course) before Kesean had to do a six-week work stint in L.A. and they had fizzled out. I knew she was still interested, but I was a little surprised to see the heat in his eyes when they landed on Matty. He leapt up from where he was sitting and crossed to us.

"Hello ladies," Kesean said, although his eyes barely flicked away from Matty's.

"Hi, Kesean." My voice seemed to pull him from whatever spell he'd fallen into, and his eyes shifted my way. "This is our friend, Hannah."

"Nice to meet you," Hannah said as Kesean smiled in her direction.

"You too," he replied before letting his eyes drift back to Matty. "It's nice to see you again, too," he said quietly.

"Han, you want to come with me? There're drinks in the kitchen," I offered, wanting to give Matty and Kesean a little space.

"Sure," she said, and I shot her a smile because all her answers were so clipped and nervous. I led the way into the kitchen, my heart thundering in my chest.

Milo was preparing a drink at his bar cart when we entered, giving me a few seconds to take him in before he looked at me. Even facing away from me, I felt his magnetic pull, and I couldn't draw my eyes away from his shoulders or his arms or the way his blonde curls were pushed back from his face. He was beautiful.

"Hi, Drea!" A cheery voice tugged me out of my gawking, and I turned to see gorgeous Sylvia at the counter stools once

more. Milo looked over his shoulder, his eyes finding me, and it took every ounce of my willpower to look away from his gaze and answer Sylvia.

“Hi, Sylvia. This is my friend Hannah.”

Hannah was a lot of things. She was a bit shy, a bit awkward, a bit put off by wealth, but *rarely* intimidated by other women. It was kind of amazing. “Nice to meet you,” she said, sliding into the seat next to Sylvia and gesturing for me to take the last empty seat. I didn’t want to sit. It was too far out of Milo’s reach, and even though the idea of him wrapping me up in his arms and kissing the hell out of me was crazy right now, I wanted it too badly to dismiss outright.

“Dre.” He exhaled my name on a single breath, like maybe he’d been holding his breath up till this point. God knew I was.

“Hey, Milo.” I blinked at him, wanting him close—closer. “I brought Hannah,” I said.

Like being snapped out of a trance, Milo’s eyes popped over to Hannah and he smiled widely. “I see that. I’m glad you could come.”

“Thanks for inviting me,” she replied.

“How’s Polpetta?” he asked, his gaze drifting back to me, his eyes serious.

“Who’s Polpetta?” Sylvia asked.

“That’s Drea’s nickname for the baby. She almost never shares the real name, but I bet I can get her to,” Matty said as she walked into the kitchen, Kesean trailing behind. “Hi, Milo,” she added.

“Hey, Matty.” His attention snapped back to me immediately. “You picked a name?”

I couldn’t help the way my lips curved into a slight smile. I had *not* picked a name, but ever since watching her mother’s uncomfortable reaction to the name *Polpetta*, this was Matty’s favorite game. She’d announce I’d picked a name, then I was supposed to share a really strange or out there or awful name,

and then we'd delight in people trying their damndest to pretend they liked it. At first I told her tricking people was horrible, but I'm not going to lie, the game was growing on me.

Avoiding Matty's assertion, I replied to Milo's previous question instead. "Polpetta is good, and she's craving that squash soup real hard, so I hope you made a lot."

"It's easy. I'll make a batch for you this week."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

I'd almost forgotten four other people were in the room when Matty spoke again. "Are you going to tell us the name?"

I sighed. "She only wants me to share because she doesn't like it." This was part of the set up. We'd found that when Matty poked a little fun, people felt compelled to defend my name choices. Honestly, it was a nice reminder people were good and kind. Except maybe Matty and me. We were probably assholes for enjoying this.

"Tell them," Matty prompted. Milo was looking at me curiously as he poured the soup from its pot into a tureen. I had no name in mind, but Milo's antique tureen reminded me of one my great-grandmother had.

"Fannie," I said. "Fannie Moretti Benedetto."

Even Matty was shocked into a brief silence by that, and she stared wide-eyed at me along with everyone else except Hannah, whose lips twisted as she either cringed or fought a smile.

"Is that short for something?" Matty asked finally, forgetting she was supposed to already know.

For my great-grandmother it had been the English nickname for her very Italian Fiametta, but that didn't matter right now. "Nope. Just Fannie."

"I think it's pretty," Sylvia said, and I gave her some credit. It really wasn't especially pretty.

“Benedetto?” Milo asked.

That was his takeaway?

I shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. I’ve actually been leaning toward Benedetto-Moretti if we do, but I haven’t talked to Will about names since he suggested Lucinda.”

“Now *that’s* pretty,” Sylvia interjected. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s not terrible, but I’m not naming the baby after his mom.”

“Everything’s ready. Can you take this, Kesean?” Milo handed the soup tureen over.

“I can help,” Hannah offered, and Milo gave food to both Matty and Hannah, who carried it away into the dining room.

“You have a drink, right Sylvia?” Milo asked, looking at her meaningfully.

“Yep. I’m going to go find a seat,” she said, excusing herself. I hopped up behind her, but Milo stopped me with a hand on my wrist.

“You want a Coke?”

“I’d love one.”

He hadn’t let go of my wrist. “You’re not naming the baby after your great-grandma.” I couldn’t help the swell of feeling that came with the realization he remembered I had a Great Grandma Fannie. “What was that all about?” Milo asked.

“Just a silly thing Matty likes to do.” I shrugged. “I make up bad names so nice people feel compelled to defend them.” I rolled my lips between my teeth guiltily. “It sounds terrible when I say it out loud.”

This time he shrugged. “Fannie is not my favorite. Are you with Will?”

That was a left turn out of nowhere. “Dating him? No.”

Milo nodded. “Why not?”

Because I’m in love with you.

What was I supposed to say?

“I told you before. I’m not going to be with anyone just because I got pregnant.”

“Right,” he murmured. “Are you ready for dinner?”

I RAN my piece of bread over the edge of my bowl, taking one final bite of squash soup. It was that good. Like, maybe the new thing I’d eat everyday until this baby came.

“Does the baby move a lot?”

I looked up at the question, which had been posed by John, Milo’s very attractive friend, who was here today with a completely different man than last time. This man was Claude. I didn’t remember the last guy’s name. “She does, yeah. She’s not right now, but she usually perks up after I eat, so probably pretty soon. Did you want to feel?” I asked, my eyebrows lifted in genuine invitation.

John’s expression was a mix of intrigue and terror that made me smile. “Maybe?” he said, posing it as a question that made Claude laugh and give an exaggerated eye roll.

“Is she more or less active with different foods?” Sylvia asked. “When my sister was pregnant, my nephew became a little soccer player whenever my sister ate spicy foods.”

I shrugged. “Not that I’ve noticed. She’s active sometimes and quiet others. I haven’t noticed any patterns.”

“Singing,” Milo said softly, and my eyes darted to him.

Singing. I rarely sang, and I tried not to think about all the times Milo had crouched near my belly, singing sweet songs to Polpetta.

“You are kidding me,” John said, emphasizing each word as if they were their own sentences. “Claude is an opera singer.”

“Really?” Hannah asked, her eyes wide. “That’s so cool.”

“You’ve got to sing for her, Claude,” John said.

Claude turned a pinkish hue. “No one’s asking for that, Johnny.”

“You absolutely should,” Hannah said, because Hannah suddenly had opinions about strange men singing opera to my belly.

“He’s phenomenal,” John assured us, as if my hesitation might be due to holding out for a better opera singer.

“Don’t you want to see if she’ll move?” Hannah asked excitedly. I noticed Matty was sitting back watching this, looking a touch like the Cheshire cat.

I looked at Claude, who looked every bit as uncomfortable as I felt. I tried to be reassuring, but I doubt the expression came together. “If you want. It could be cool,” I said unconvincingly.

“Yes, you have to,” Sylvia said, clapping her hands together once. “Come stand by me, Drea.”

I glanced back at Milo, wondering if he’d save me, but he only shot me a wink and an apologetic look. I stood and walked over to where Claude sat, and Claude stood so we faced each other. He lifted his hands, asking permission to put them on my rounded stomach.

Shit was awkward.

I felt Milo’s body before I’d even realized he’d moved, the hard planes of his chest against my back, his arms around my body and resting on my stomach. I didn’t intend to lean back into him, but my body relaxed into his familiarity. “I’ll feel and see if it works,” Milo said, and a kick came almost instantly. I shifted his right hand forward a little so it rested where the kick had come.

I hadn’t asked for or even wanted this crazy scenario, but Claude was really freaking good at singing, and I let my body lean into Milo, closing my eyes as Claude began to sing “Ave Maria.” I’d heard the song a hundred times in my life, but his voice was spectacular, seeming to float out of him and fill the room. When he got quiet in the middle, I could scarcely

breathe, and Polpetta was rolling around under Milo's warm palms, probably visible to the whole table.

When the singing stopped the table erupted into applause, but I still had my eyes closed, leaning into Milo's strong frame as he held me tight and dipped his face close to my temple. "She definitely moved," he murmured into my ear.

"Mmm hmm," I agreed.

"I missed you," he added.

I opened my mouth to reply, but John—dammit John!—beat me to it. "Did the baby move? I swore I could see it from out here."

"Me too!" Kesean declared.

"She absolutely did. I think she did a cartwheel," Milo said, letting go of me and stepping away. "That was crazy."

For a minute I was still standing in the same place, missing the feel of Milo's body against mine, then I snapped out of it. "It really was. Claude, I may make you sing again later," I said.

255 DAYS POST-OVULATION

I swung the door open, grabbing the bag on the floor outside.

It'd been nine days since Milo's party, and food had been outside my door every day since. Mostly it had been squash soup and thick crusty bread, which you would never find me complaining about. I smiled as I saw another jar in this bag.

Drea: You can knock

Drea: I'd let you in

It was impulsive, but you couldn't take back a text once it was out in the world. I held my phone, looking at the screen anxiously, reading and rereading my text and wishing I could take it back.

Especially when he didn't answer.

Because he didn't answer then or fifteen minutes later or forty minutes after that. I was busy picturing myself moving to a whole different apartment complex just so I would never have to face Milo again when there was a knock at the door.

Only people who lived in the building had keys to the downstairs door, and my heart hammered in my chest as I hauled myself up. I hadn't wanted to get my hopes up, but there he was in my peephole, his forehead knitted. The anxious part of me worried he wanted to let me down face-to-face, but I swung the door open anyway.

Milo held up a jarful of yellow soup. "Tomorrow's food. I thought I'd bring it by now." He grinned sheepishly.

“Um, well, come in,” I said, shifting out of the way to let him through the door. Still, he hung back, leaning against the doorframe.

“I’ve missed you, Dre.”

“Come in, Milo,” I repeated.

“I can’t,” he said, and I stared at him, incredulous.

“Okay,” I said slowly. I wanted Milo here—so badly—but not like this.

“I’m selfish, Dre,” he said, and I made an impatient face, stifling an eye roll. I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I didn’t really want to stand here and be rejected. He reached out and pinched a lock of my hair between his fingers, smoothing down the brown strands. “Do you love Will?” he asked.

“Of course not. I’ve told you that already. I’ve told *him* that already.”

“Do you love *me*?”

Now there was a question that caught me off guard. My eyes widened and I swallowed hard.

“Because I love you.”

I opened my mouth to scream, “*Yes, of course, I love you so much,*” but nothing came out. I could picture throwing myself into his arms, but my body wasn’t moving.

“I’m supposed to do the right thing and let you be with Will, but I’m so goddamn selfish, Dre. *I want you—I need you.* I waited all these years for you only to find out you were more amazing than I ever imagined, and now I’m too damn selfish to give you up—too damn greedy to let you be with anyone else. You are *mine*, Andrea; I’m more sure of it than I’ve ever been of anything in my life.”

“Oh,” I breathed out, still feeling paralyzed, my brain screaming at me to say more.

Milo’s mouth dropped open and he clenched his eyes closed, giving a little shake of his head. “I’m sorry, Dre. I’m

gonna go. Call if you need anything. I have more soup. I'm happy to drop it off."

He turned away from the door and I seriously thought I was stuck—frozen—and he was going to walk away. "Milo —"

He turned back to look at me, his beautiful face etched with pain.

"I need you," I whispered.

"What?" he asked, although I suspected he heard me.

I inhaled, bringing my voice to full volume. "I love you, and I miss you, and I really want to sit, so please don't leave. I'm not allowed to chase you, but I will."

He shook his head, eating up the two stairs that separated us in a single step, catching my face between his hands. For a single second, his lips hovered while his eyes searched mine, then I leaned forward and closed the distance between us, kissing him solidly.

"I'D BE FINE," I murmured into his neck, kissing my way down a taut tendon that stretched its length.

"No, you wouldn't," he replied, his fingers flexing on my hips, pulling me tighter against his body until I could feel the erection that throbbed at my stomach. I reached for it, but he pushed my hands away. "No. We're going to lay down—you on your left side—and I'm going to hold you. That's it, do you understand?" It was past midnight and I was tired, so I didn't fight him too hard. Instead, I laid down on my left side and let him climb in opposite me, tucking me in close against him. "I love you," he whispered in my ear, looking down at me. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here when you went to the hospital. I should've been with you."

"You had no way of knowing."

“I won’t go back to L.A. until after the baby. I can get more work around here. I just like the sun.”

I didn’t want him to be gone. I needed him here. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated over and over, laying a line of messy kisses across one arm to the other.

I giggled. “I forgive you. Now stop.”

“Last one, because I want you to know I’m selfish, and I’m sorry for it.” He kissed me again, deeper this time, resting his head against mine when finally our lips parted. “I remember you were wearing black pants and a gray shirt.”

“Huh?” I asked, letting my unfocused eyes drift back and forth, until instead of two, Milo had four eyes.

A soft smile curled his lips. “I told you I remembered your green apron, but you were wearing black pants and a skin-tight gray shirt and you had your hair all messy on top of your head. I don’t know if it was messy on purpose or by accident.”

“It was a style,” I replied with a shrug, remembering creating the messy bun with a practiced mushroom-maneuver.

“You’ve always been gorgeous, Dre, but it was your smile that got me—still does. It was so big and happy and you threw a glance in my direction and then tossed yourself into Dom’s arms and you kissed him. I was supposed to look away—I knew that—but I wanted to see more of you.”

An invisible blush heated my face. I could vividly remember sneaking a peek at Milo—hoping he was thinking the kiss was sexy.

“You would come over to watch movies on Dom’s bed or study with him, and I thought, “*Shit, why does that turd get Drea?*””

I choked on the laugh that escaped me. “He was *your* friend.”

Milo looked serious. “He was my *roommate*. We stayed friends because I wasn’t ready for you to be completely gone from my life.”

“Milo...”

His face crumpled. “I know. Dre, there have been a thousand little decisions, and every time there was a choice, I chose to stay close to you, and I want you to understand that, because I can’t be with you now without being totally honest with you—not with the baby coming. If you’re creeped out or whatever, I want you to have the opportunity to walk away.”

My fingers slid up his jaw. He’d shaven today, I was sure, but his skin was already rough with stubble under my fingertips. I swiped my thumb over his lips, delighting in the fullness that flexed under my touch. “I did the same thing.”

He only blinked at me, but I felt his fingers flex on my hips.

“Time after time, choice after choice, right down to this apartment, I wanted to stay close to you.”

“Really?” He pulled me in tighter, so that my round belly was flush to him.

I grinned. “You’re still a creeper, but I’ve always loved you, Milo.”

His kiss was crushing, his fingers squeezing my hips until I was sure they’d bruise, and I was gasping for breath when his lips left mine. “I love you more,” he choked out, but the second I could breathe again I wished to drown in his kiss once more, and I swallowed his words in the press of my lips.

260 DAYS POST-OVULATION

“**S**picier,” I said, handing him back the spoon.

“Seriously?” he asked, raising his brow.

My lips curled in one corner. “Or we could have sex. That can trigger labor.”

He snagged me with a single arm, pulling me in close to his body so he could look down at my face. “You know that’s not safe. After the baby.”

“*Weeks* after the baby,” I lamented, and Milo grinned.

“Yeah, weeks after the baby, but I’ll be around, Dre—as long as you’ll let me.”

I fisted my hands into his T-shirt, attempting to pull him closer, but failing to thanks to my oversized belly. I’d been prepared to say something funny or sarcastic or generally lighthearted, but looking up at him, I felt a familiar surge of anxiety. “Are you sure this is what you want, Milo?”

His arm was still tight around my waist as he walked forward, backing me into the counter and finding the curve of my belly with his free hand. “I didn’t know I loved you.” He said this as if it were a complete statement, and my eyes narrowed in confusion, waiting for more. “I knew I liked you—I definitely knew I wanted you—but I didn’t realize I loved you until we were together. And then one day it was like someone hit me over the head with it. I like you more than... anyone. I want to be with you day and night because you’re so goddamn smart and funny and sometimes you drive me

fucking crazy and I *still* want to see you, and I thought, “*Holy shit, Milo, that’s love.*””

I laughed. “Love is wanting to see the person who annoys you?” I joked, but he only smiled in return.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I just know about loving you, Dre. And the baby.” He shook his head, his brow knitting. “I know it doesn’t make sense—I know I’m *not* her dad, but part of me feels like it—and I always thought that would be terrifying—and it is—but it’s also exciting. Some part of me I didn’t know existed desperately wants to hold her and sing to her and see all the beautiful features I love most in you on her tiny face. I wasn’t sure I would ever fall in love, and I didn’t think I’d ever want kids, and yet here I am, madly in love with my best friend and excited beyond reason to be part of her baby’s life.”

I swallowed hard. It was beautiful—exactly the kind of thing knocked-up ladies everywhere wanted to hear, right?—but I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t have to fuck it up, just a little. “She might look like Will, Milo,” I said, because if that was a dealbreaker in this “happy-family” scenario Milo was posing, I needed to know before, not after.

“I realize that.”

“And?” I prompted.

Milo’s eyes went wide, his lips curling into a grin that I found really sexy (although the doctor’s orgasm ban had left me a mess of untended desire and pretty much everything looked sexy lately). “And what? Will I love the baby less because she looks like Will Benedetto?” he asked.

Saying it while smiling made it sound like a dumb question, but it wasn’t. It was serious and possible, and I needed to know. “Yes,” I replied simply. Milo’s hands dropped, and I stiffened, praying he wouldn’t get angry. He didn’t. Instead, he dropped to one knee in front of me. “Milo,” I whispered, my eyes going wide.

He took my hand, looking up at me. “Andrea, I’m not asking you to marry me.”

Oh.

I bit my lip, not sure what to say, and his grin deepened. “Because I don’t have a ring, and damn if I’m not going to put something truly special on you, Dre.”

I opened my mouth to protest—did the ring really matter?—but he spoke again before I could.

“But I want to ask you, Dre—I want to ask and you can say yes or no—can I be part of this baby’s life? Do you want forever with me like I want it with you?”

He was still kneeling, looking up at me, awaiting an answer. “I’m naming her Aria, because she loves when you sing to her,” I said. “She loves your voice—I love your voice.” He was still kneeling. “I want forever,” I said, nodding.

He stood, capturing my face between two large hands and kissing me until I was out of breath. “Aria,” he whispered, his breath a fan over my lips. “It’s beautiful.”

EPILOGUE

I closed my eyes, smiling at the sweet sound of his voice as it floated into the kitchen from the baby's room, then finished wrapping the tureen in newspaper and slipped it into the open box. There was nothing I loved quite as much as watching Milo sing Aria to sleep, and I crept down the hallway. "How's she doing?" I asked softly as I reached the nursery, leaning on the doorframe as Milo lowered the baby into her crib. There were a thousand things I needed to get done while Aria napped, but I couldn't help but look at the two of them together.

"She's out," he said, running one large finger over her eyebrow before turning to look at me. "We have time for a quickie," he offered with a grin, closing the distance between us and cupping my ass in his palms.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "We're already flouting tradition by seeing each other the day of the wedding. I can't even imagine what terrible luck would befall us if I let you have your way with me."

Milo walked forward, still cupping my ass as he steered us out of the baby's room, letting go only to shut the door. "Bullshit," he said, his voice low. "You're not worried about luck. Just time and noise."

I shrugged, acknowledging the truth in his statement. "I have to get everything together for tonight. We have to leave for this party after Aria wakes up and we're moving across the

country in three days. She has to sleep long enough for me to get shit done.”

“I’ll be quick,” he said, spinning me so my chest pressed against the wall and his body was solid at my back. It was sexy as hell.

I could hear my own panting breath when I whispered my reply. “If she wakes up, I’ll murder you.”

“I’m not the loud one,” he whispered in my ear as he pulled down my leggings and underwear, his fingers settling between my legs in a slow tease that had me widening my stance. “Are you ready to be extra quiet? Whoever makes the most noise is responsible for the baby when she wakes up.”

I answered him with silence, rolling my hips back and letting my ass rub the front of his pants, and he groaned under his breath. He used one hand to press gently on my lower back and the other to pull my shoulder upright, arching me like a bow, waiting for him.

“Fuck, you’re wet, Dre.”

“I want you,” I murmured. He filled me in a single stroke, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from crying out in surprise or moaning my appreciation. I pushed back into him instead, eliciting a low groan he couldn’t stifle. I grinned, setting my flat palms on the wall. “Hard,” I added, and Milo began to pound me, the only sound the slapping of our bodies as they met. His fingers found my clit and I was done for. I clenched my teeth hard on my tongue and my body tensed into a series of violent, orgasmic tremors.

But I stayed quiet.

Milo finished only moments after me with a low grunt, pressing me fully into the wall and kissing my neck. “You’re amazing.”

If you’re counting, Milo’s AOE remains a solid 1.5 after a year together, and it will forever annoy Matty that I’ll never tell her.

“You too, but you still have to finish packing the dishes. I’m going to make sure we have everything ready for tonight,”

I said, looking at him over one shoulder. He gave me a quick slap to the ass that made me squeak and then he stood tall, rebuttoning his pants.

“Deal,” he replied, capturing my face between his palms and kissing me deeply.

When we planned the party tonight, we had no idea we’d be moving days later, but surprises happened, and we rolled with them.

Despite his best efforts, Milo still needed to go to L.A. now and again. He’d spent about six weeks there in the year since Aria was born. I hated when he had to go, but she and I got by, usually with a little extra help from Will.

Milo being gone was a small price to pay. Honestly, I never would’ve taken Aria away from her father. Milo was an amazing father to her, but I knew her bond with Will would always be special. It was in her blood, as proven by the DNA test she took as an itty bitty baby.

Fortunately, help came in an unexpected place when Lucinda Benedetto announced her plans to retire to Arizona to be near her sister. A few months after that, Will invited Milo, Aria, and me to dinner and proposed we all move to L.A.

I’d been shell-shocked, but Milo seemed completely unfazed. “What about your family?” I asked when we got home.

“It doesn’t have to be forever,” he said simply. “And besides, Sam and Kelly can afford to come out when they want, just like we can afford to fly out to my mom and Ashton in Springfield or your mom in back here. Hell, maybe your mom would want to move out there.”

“What about Whittaker?” I asked.

Milo cupped my cheek gently. “You only work there a few times a month to help with weddings. They’ll be fine, and Hannah and Matty can visit us.”

“Or I could visit them,” I added reluctantly.

“Very true. The work I could get out there, Dre...” He trailed off, but I knew he’d turned down work doing an animated series because he didn’t want to be gone too long.

“And the weather is kind of amazing,” I said. Milo smiled, picking me up around the thighs and spinning me.

Things happened faster than I planned. I’d figured Aria’s first birthday would be a relatively small gathering, but once we knew it would also be a final goodbye to everyone in the whole damn Midwest, it grew. First into a going-away party, and then when I realized we could book the Theater on the Lake, into a surprise wedding.

I assumed Milo would think the idea of surprising our loved ones with a wedding in the middle of our daughter’s first birthday party would be strange, but he’d loved the idea, and once we both agreed, things just started to fall in place. We agreed to tell only three people. One was Will, since blindsiding him with a wedding during his daughter’s birthday seemed wildly inappropriate. Milo and I agreed if Will felt uncomfortable, we’d bail on the idea, but we hadn’t needed to worry. Over the past year, Will had been pretty honest about the fact he loved his daughter a hell of a lot more than he loved me. That’s not to say we didn’t get along—we did—but I think he secretly remained very glad I turned down his proposal. I’ve been clear from the beginning—I can be a handful. Had Aria never existed, Will and I probably would’ve broken up in the next two months and never seen each other again.

But Aria did exist, and now Will was offering to act as an officiant to Milo and me. A year ago I might’ve thought it was a batshit idea, and yet, now, it kind of made sense.

With Will’s blessing, I reached out to the only other people on Earth who were currently aware Aria’s first birthday party was going to morph into a wedding—Matty and Hannah—my two best friends, and the most qualified women I could think of to help. They were already familiar with all things wedding, and they’d thrown a pretty damn impressive surprise baby shower.

I lay the two garment bags on top of each other along with a pretty little gown for Aria. It was burgundy, the exact color of my favorite anemone flower, with a body of toile and a flowered top. It was the most beautiful dress I'd ever seen, and looking at it made my heart squeeze thinking about Whittaker Floral in a way that was bittersweet. One bag held everyone's shoes, one bag held all the supplies we'd need. It was all packed and ready. I made a final bag that was an overnight for Aria, who'd be sleeping at her daddy's house.

I wandered into the kitchen, where Milo had made impressive progress. I grabbed a glass, wrapping it in newspaper. "Everything's ready."

"Are *you* ready?"

I shot him a playfully affronted look. "Of course I'm ready, and there's no backing out now, Milo Maddox, so you better be ready, too."

Setting his wrapped glass in the box, he rounded the island and lifted me up onto the counter between two boxes. Even with me up higher he had to lean in to even our heights. "I've known for almost ten years you were the perfect woman for me. I wasted most of that time not telling you how I felt, but believe me when I say I'll never make that mistake again. I love you, Dre."

I scrunched my nose. "Are these your vows? You're not supposed to tell me yet."

"No. I saved the good stuff for my vows." He cupped a hand around the back of my neck. "First I'm going to tell them about how you used to drool over me when we were young."

"Are you serious?" I asked, frowning. Milo grinned in reply.

"Then I thought I'd fast forward to how you had to run out of one of the best steakhouses in Chicago because you heard the word *chicken*."

"I had morning sickness."

"Or how you sprayed air freshener in my mouth while I slept."

I grinned, realizing that, at least, he was kidding. “That’s just an indictment of your breath,” I answered smartly.

“And, of course, I can’t leave out how you peed your pants every time you threw up.”

I slapped his chest, laughing. “I told you that in confidence.”

“And now the world shall know,” he said grandly.

“I’m marrying a monster,” I lamented, tilting my head to allow him better access to kiss my neck.

“God I love hearing you say that,” he growled, and my brow furrowed in confusion.

“You love when I call you a monster?”

“I love when you talk about marrying me. I love knowing later tonight you’ll be mine and I’ll be yours. Officially and forever.” He stopped kissing to look at me earnestly, and my heart did a flip in my chest.

“Officially and forever,” I echoed, and he captured my lips in a kiss that was interrupted by the babble of a baby on the monitor.

“Your turn,” Milo whispered, breath hot on my neck, shooting me a wink as he lifted me down off the counter.

I raised an eyebrow at him skeptically. “Try again, buddy. I was completely silent and you were moaning and groaning up a storm back there. Deal’s a deal. Your turn.”

Milo grinned, pulling me close and laying a soft kiss just under my ear. “Rematch later?”

“You know how competitive I am. I’ll beat you every time,” I replied.

“I can live with that,” he said, and the warmth from his breath tickled down my neck, but in the same moment, Aria let out a melodic string of chatter and Milo stood tall, grinning. “Aria awaits.”

I picked up the last of the glasses and set them in the box, pulling a long strip of tape to seal it closed as the sound of a

baby's giggle and the familiar first notes of "Caro Mio Ben" floated across the apartment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophia Sabbioni has been a lover of romance since she first picked up a romance novel in middle school, but it was decades before she discovered how much she enjoyed crafting the stories herself. Sophia lives with her husband, two children, and a dog who would appreciate it if she never left the couch. She has long since given up the hope of having one of those tidy Instagram-ready houses, preferring to spend her time writing novels that are a little steamy, a lot funny, and always have a happy ending.

Find Sophia on Instagram [@sophiasabbioni](#) or see the many inspirations for characters and settings on Pinterest [@sophiasabbioni](#)

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ALSO BY SOPHIA SABBIONI

Whittaker Floral Novels:



Forget Me Not

This wasn't supposed to be happening. I was calm, composed, professional Matty Whittaker. I was an ass-kicker. I handled tough clients and impossible vendors and the man on the bus who called me "sweet tits." I should be able to handle Finn Ryan.

Matty Whittaker prides herself on being chic, confident, and in control. As head of her mother's company, Whittaker Floral, she manages high society weddings and multi-million-dollar events on a daily basis, and she is unflappable. That is, until her high school crush, Finnegan Ryan, walks through Whittaker's doors hoping to land free flowers for the class reunion. His sudden appearance leaves Matty feeling transported back ten years, to a time when she was no more than an awkward outsider pining after a boy who barely knew she existed.

Finn Ryan had never gotten to know Matty Whittaker, the girl whose locker was next to his throughout high school, but he is pretty sure he remembers her. Or so he thinks. Walking through the doors of Whittaker Floral a decade later he is wholly unprepared for the heart-stoppingly beautiful woman he finds, and even less prepared for how hard he will fall for her.

But winning her over, and earning her trust, proves difficult, because Matty hasn't forgotten what it feels like to be an outsider, and she's not quite ready to hand her heart over to Finn.

Forget Me Not is a stand-alone novel from the Whittaker Floral Series with plenty of laughs and heat.

Other books by Sophia Sabbioni:

